

# H-Net Reviews

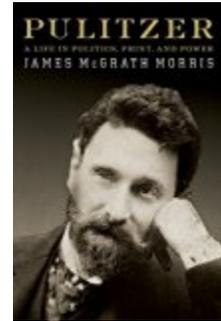
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

James McGrath Morris. *Pulitzer: A Life in Politics, Print, and Power*. New York: Harper, 2010. 576 pp. \$29.99 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-06-079869-7.

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## The Man Whose Name Is Synonymous with Journalism's Top Prize

Joseph Pulitzer is one of the commanding presences in American journalism history. U.S. mass communication historians include him among the nation's most significant reporters, columnists, editors, and owners—along with the likes of James and Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Paine, Benjamin Franklin Bache, Horace Greeley, James Gordon Bennett, William Randolph Hearst, H. L. Mencken, Edward R. Murrow, Walter Lippmann, Walter Cronkite, Carl Bernstein and Robert Woodward, Rupert Murdoch, and Ted Turner, among others. While most on this list are known for a specific contribution to American journalism (Bennett, for example, for making crime reporting a staple of news reporting or Turner for the twenty-four-hour-a-day news broadcast), Pulitzer, as author James McGrath Morris notes, is best known for the prize that bears his name. And that is a shame because Pulitzer was an outstanding reporter, editor, and publisher.

In his engaging biography, Morris portrays a man who achieved fame, fortune, and influence. It is the story of an immigrant who began his journalism career in St. Louis right after the Civil War and eventually published one of the two most powerful newspapers in the country. What makes this biography work so well is how thoroughly Morris develops Pulitzer's early years. A multi-lingual Jew born in Mako, Hungary, on the eve of the great nineteenth-century revolutions in Europe, Pulitzer came to the United States as a teenager in the latter stages of the Civil War after his merchant father died, the family business went bankrupt, and his mother remarried. The

journey from Hungarian teenager to American journalist had its challenges. First, he survived a six-week voyage from Europe to New York. Then he lied about his age (he was only seventeen and needed to be at least eighteen to serve) and joined the Union army cavalry in August 1864 as a substitute for a farmer from Greene County, New York. Pulitzer received two hundred dollars as a substitute. He served in Major General Carl Schurz's Lincoln unit. (Schurz would also end up in journalism after the war, first in Detroit and then in St. Louis.)

When the war ended, Pulitzer moved to St. Louis but at first could find only menial jobs. However, one of those led to his break in journalism. That came when he began working for the *Westliche Post* (Western Post), a German-language newspaper in St. Louis owned and edited by Schurz. Louis Willich, the city editor of the newspaper, had noticed that Pulitzer was the diligent secretary for the German immigrant aid society in St. Louis. He had knack for interesting tidbits that he obtained from the recently arrived Germans looking for jobs. Willich was so "impressed with Pulitzer's news sense" that he offered Pulitzer a job with the newspaper (p. 36). Pulitzer served as one of two reporters for the paper, going about town digging up information. He worked long hours and soon learned that journalism was not as glamorous as he thought when he took the job. Still, he excelled at reporting and gained a reputation for asking penetrating questions of his sources. He also covered everything he could, worked tirelessly, and targeted the county's corrupt government.

Politics were central to St. Louis journalism of that era, as Schurz was elected to the U.S. Senate in 1869. In this environment, Pulitzer would find a serendipitous opportunity to enter political life. A seat in the Missouri legislature came open, and Pulitzer received the nomination when he temporarily left the room during the Republican caucus. Even though it was a Democratic district, Pulitzer hammered his opponent from his forum as a newspaperman and won the election by sixty-two votes. During the run-up to the election, Pulitzer constantly harped on his opponent's alleged sympathy for the South and the fact that he did not actually live in the district he would represent. Actually, Pulitzer was living a lie himself. He was only twenty-three years old and needed to be two years older to run for the legislature. Fortunately for the Republican, the Democratic newspapers in St. Louis had no reporter of his enterprise or perspicacity to discover this significant fact.

Fortunately, too, Pulitzer did not have to run against the Democrats' top choice for the nomination, Stilson Hutchins, who also was editor of the *St. Louis Times*. Indeed, Hutchins had served as Dennis A. Mahony's top editor in Dubuque, Iowa, during the Civil War when Mahony became one of the leading martyrs to heavy-handed civil rights constraints by the Lincoln administration. (Mahony spent nearly three months in a Washington DC jail while he unsuccessfully ran for Congress; after the war, he and Hutchins moved to St. Louis to start the *Times*.) The great irony was that Hutchins, a conservative Democrat and eventually the founder of the *Washington Post*, and Pulitzer, a moderate-to-radical Republican, developed a friendship because of their mutual respect of one another as journalists. A political contest between the two would have been uncomfortable for both.

This would not be Pulitzer's last political contest. After failing to win a congressional seat against railroad tycoon Thomas Allen in Missouri, he would later earn a spot in the U.S. House of Representatives as a Democrat from New York. (He had switched parties in 1874 when he found that the Republicans were running inferior men and were no longer committed to the principles

that had been so attractive to Pulitzer when he came to America.) By the time he won his seat in Congress he was editor of the *New York World*, bold and brassy headlines and all, and he had become a prominent player in Democratic politics nationally.

A former journalist and teacher, author Morris shows not only a strong capacity for detail from his tireless research but also some very nice touches as a writer. For example, when Morris depicts Pulitzer's native Mako, approximately 125 miles from Budapest, and its ethnic and religious divisions, he writes: "Members of each faith lived in distinct neighborhoods that divided the town like wedges of a pie, each piece anchored by a place of worship" (p. 11). Then there are the tidbits about Pulitzer's life. One of those is the fact that he had a phobia for funerals because there were so many deaths in his family in his early years, including that of his father, Fulop Pulitzer, at the age of forty-seven. Joseph Pulitzer refused to attend even the funerals of his lone surviving brother (Albert) and his mother (Elize), and he had an obsession about health and hygiene for his entire adult life.

On the research end, the main benefit that Morris had over previous biographers was the manuscript of a 1909 memoir by Pulitzer's brother, Albert, who founded the *New York Morning Herald* (which targeted women as readers). Albert's memoir had been in the possession of his granddaughter in Paris, and Morris got access to it in 2005. This helped develop the section on Joseph Pulitzer's life in Hungary and the early years of the two brothers in the United States. For example, one nugget from Albert's memoir that Morris tells is a story about how the young Joseph Pulitzer, who had a bad temper, drove a tutor from a room because he gave a mathematics lesson instead of telling war stories. The author believes this anecdote is a family legend, but he does note that a childhood friend also claimed Pulitzer beat a teacher. Yet while Pulitzer struggled with formal education from either teachers or tutors, he did develop a fondness for reading. It is this kind of small item about Pulitzer's life that Morris captures so well in this, the latest in a half dozen biographies of the newspaper publisher.

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