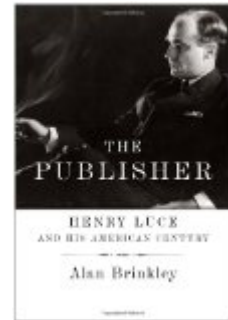


Alan Brinkley. *The Publisher: Henry Luce and His American Century*. New York: Knopf, 2010. 560 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-679-41444-5.

Reviewed by Sarah Dreller (University of Illinois at Chicago, Department of Art History)

Published on Jhistory (February, 2011)

Commissioned by Donna Harrington-Lueker



Henry R. Luce: The Personal and the Professional

In *The Publisher: Henry Luce and His American Century*, author Alan Brinkley offers a generally balanced biography of Time Inc.'s famous co-founder, Henry Robinson Luce. Brinkley begins with Luce's early life as the son of a missionary in China, appropriately ascribing Luce's lifelong idealism and sense of purpose to this period. He then discusses Luce's education, during which the core of Luce's strong belief in America's elevating role in the world matured. As Brinkley tells the story, for Luce, learning occurred not only at boarding school in China and college in the United States but also during various European stays as an adolescent which he structured toward intellectual self-enrichment. Of course, Brinkley thoroughly unpacks the various risks and sacrifices required to found *Time* in 1923, *Fortune* in 1930, and *Life* in 1936 as well as the specific contributions of Luce's gregarious friend and Time Inc. co-founder, Briton Hadden. He also devotes considerable attention to Luce's essay on "The American Century," written in 1941, as a sign of Luce's development of a public persona and his increasing tendency to view the company's magazines as opportunities to promote issues important to him. Brinkley follows this with the requisite study of Luce's aggressive, and often ineffective, advocacy in favor of closer ties with China and against the spread of communism. The end of the book encompasses the introduction of *Sports Illustrated* in 1954 and other late projects; Luce's retirement from Time Inc. in 1964 and most of his public pursuits soon thereafter; and his death in 1967. Framing the historical chapters are a very short preface, in which Brinkley describes his interest in Luce but does not really pro-

vide an overall vision for the book, and a slightly longer epilogue containing some broad remarks about Luce's impact on twentieth-century American culture and media.

Little about the book's organization will surprise readers already familiar with the outline of Luce's life. Indeed, even Brinkley's key concluding observations echo sentiments expressed in other recent publications about Luce. When evaluating Luce's role as a magazine publisher vis-à-vis his political activities, for instance, Brinkley writes: "Luce did not change the world. His most important legacy remains his role in the creation of new forms of information and communication at a moment in history when media were rapidly expanding. His magazines were always the most important of his achievements" (pp. 458-59). In substance, this agrees with James Baughman's comparison in *Henry R. Luce and the Rise of the American News Media*: "To note the limits of Luce's power and the representative nature of his opinions is not to diminish the importance of his journalism.... It is not, then, so much *what* information he conveyed as *how* he did it.... Luce and his collaborators deliberately sought to create new ways of relaying the news. And by succeeding, Luce helped to alter the profession forever." [1] Similarly, when commenting specifically on whether Time Inc.'s magazines successfully led their readers toward Luce's conception of what modern "America" ought to be, Brinkley states: "His magazines were mostly reflections of the middle-class world, not often shapers of it" (p. 457). This is essentially consistent

with Robert Herzstein's conclusion about the supposed persuasiveness of Luce's publishing empire in *Henry R. Luce: A Political Portrait of the Man Who Created the American Century* (1994): "At their best, *Time* and *Life* and *Fortune* helped the people and their leaders face the great issues of the day ... he succeeded [in helping Eisenhower get elected] in 1952, however, only because people were ready for his message, not because his media had the power to force it upon the nation." [2]

Brinkley compensates for *The Publisher's* overall predictability and rather uninspired final analysis with plenty of fresh insights into how the ebb and flow of Luce's private affairs affected him psychologically. Brinkley's meticulous citations, in particular, testify to thoughtful primary source research focused on Luce's correspondence located in an impressive array of archival collections. This is unlike Ralph Martin's *Henry and Clare: An Intimate Portrait of the Luces* (1991), for instance, which relates much of the story as a series of anecdotes or reconstructed conversations based largely on the recollections of others. Moreover, rather than quoting passages from letters out of context, as Martin often does, when evaluating the historical significance of what Luce wrote Brinkley always takes into account the nature of Luce's relationship with his intended recipients. Conflicting descriptions about a specific event or issue therefore become opportunities to understand the strategic ways Luce's mind worked. Finally, Brinkley includes many generous excerpts from Luce's letters, thus granting readers more chances than they have previously had to sense Luce's complicated internal makeup for themselves.

Brinkley succeeds at organically interweaving the personal and the public more often than not, and one of the ultimate effects is a subtle shift away from a story focused mainly on Luce's professional triumphs toward one emphasizing how the various facets of this complex man's life intersected and cross-fertilized each other. Brinkley's account is particularly insightful in the first half of the book, which roughly corresponds to the period before "The American Century." This is perhaps as it should be since Luce, like most of us, was at his most impressionable during his youth and early adulthood. Brinkley's characterization is less three-dimensional for a few chapters in the middle of *The Publisher*, where he describes Luce's increasing determination to help shape national and international policy. Here the personal and the public stratify into a more parallel geometry; dense discussion of Luce's various geopolitical stances alternate with sections about his intimate existence that often

come across as unrelated digressions. This is especially true of Brinkley's detailed portrayals of Luce's chronic philandering, which Luce himself intentionally separated from his other activities. Fortunately, the book ends by returning to a strongly interwoven narrative in which Brinkley chronicles Luce's repeated attempts to divorce his second wife alongside his withdrawal from Time Inc. and active politicking.

Brinkley also undermines the increasingly outdated "great man" approach by attending as much to Luce's failures as to his achievements. In fact, there are moments in the book—especially around Luce's inability to affect any substantive national policy change toward his beloved China—during which readers might wonder how Luce ever came to be considered so powerful. Combined with Brinkley's inclusion of more information about Luce's private existence, such treatment makes this biography seem genuinely evenhanded and comprehensive.

Historians will understand that the process of preparing a research-intensive book is inherently selective, but here an undertone of objectivity is amplified by the fact that Brinkley does not really share his own criteria for what to include or omit. In other words, he returns to certain themes at various points throughout the book, but he generally does not make readers feel as though they are being heavy-handedly guided toward a particular overall viewpoint. This will be refreshing for those who want to read *The Publisher* from beginning to end in order to construct their own ideas about Luce's impact on twentieth-century America.

Finally, this book's broad scope does not automatically mean it can be treated as a kind of quick-reference guide to Luce's life and career. This will be particularly clear to readers with very focused interests and little Luce background who may find trying to navigate by this book's chapter headings and index entries a somewhat frustrating experience. For example, although there is a chapter entitled "Time: The Weekly News-Magazine," those who want to see what Brinkley has to say about the founding of *Time* should actually start with the previous chapter, called "The Paper." This makes sense, but only if readers already know that the idea for something like *Time* evolved out of earlier publishing experiences Luce and Hadden shared. Similarly, to learn about the significant re-envisioning of all the Time Inc. magazines immediately after World War II, readers must be aware that such changes were coincident with Luce's failed China advocacy so that they recognize "Losing China" as the

correct chapter. The index is certainly a much more helpful way of finding information, but the logic governing its organization can also appear opaque. Perhaps the most representative example is the entry for “The American Century,” which directs people to a place in the book several pages before the actual essay is mentioned. This can seem like a mistake at first, but after a while readers will eventually discover that the additional pages capture the whole discussion leading toward the “The American Century” rather than just the essay itself.

At times *The Publisher* exists in dialogue with *Time*. Early on, *Time*’s editors recognized they could distinguish themselves by enlivening their stories with specifics. In coverage of an important speech, for instance, a strategically casual comment about the weather or an observation about the mood of the crowd helped readers feel more invested in the speech’s content because they could form a clearer picture of the event in their minds. Brinkley’s willingness to extend his book’s narrative deep into Luce’s personal life and his many fail-

ures serves much the same purpose; readers of *The Publisher* will come away appreciating Luce more for having imagined him as an actual complicated human being. On the other hand, with *Time* Luce helped train modern Americans to desire concisely summarized information while Brinkley seems to trust readers will put aside their hurried existences to embrace deliberate thoroughness. This attitude assumes Luce was not always quite as influential as he has sometimes been given credit for—an appropriate position for someone attempting a holistic portrait like *The Publisher*.

Notes

[1]. James Baughman, *Henry R. Luce and the Rise of the American News Media* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 5.

[2]. Robert Herzstein, *Henry R. Luce: A Political Portrait of the Man Who Created the American Century* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1994), 419.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/jhistory>

Citation: Sarah Dreller. Review of Alan Brinkley, *The Publisher: Henry Luce and His American Century*. Jhistory, H-Net Reviews. February, 2011.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=32197>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.