H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**Michael Kammen**. *The Lively Arts: Gilbert Seldes and the Transformation of Cultural Criticism in the United States.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1996. x + 495 pp. $35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-509868-6.

**Reviewed by** Christopher Berkeley (Independent Scholar, Boston, Massachusetts)
**Published on** H-PCAACA (April, 1997)

How does a historian write a biography of an intellectual whose writings at the beginning of his career helped establish *The Wasteland* and *Ulysees* in the modernist canon, and at the end wrote a favorable review of *The Beverly Hillbillies* in *TV Guide*? Michael Kammen, one of the most gifted and prolific historians of the last quarter century, shows in this richly detailed and appreciative biography that Gilbert Seldes' intellectual journey from Joyce to Jethro is not as strange as it seems at first glance.

Seldes (1893-1969) occupies a unique niche in the intellectual and cultural history of twentieth-century America. While best known as the first "highbrow" intellectual to treat popular culture as a serious subject for cultural criticism, his career also included: stints as managing editor of one of the most famous "little magazines" of the 1920s, *The Dial*, a theatrical producer, a radio writer and producer, the first director of programming for CBS television, and as Dean of the Annenberg School of Communications. Perhaps Seldes himself describes best his engagement across the spectrum of twentieth-century cultural life when he recalled a few years before his death, "One of the charming evenings of my life was when I came home and found two letters–one from T.S. Eliot and the other from Paul Whiteman." Other figures as diverse as Picasso, Van Wyck Brooks, Edmund Wilson, Hemingway, Edward R. Murrow, Jimmy Durante, Jack Benny, Charlie Chaplin, Dos Passos, and Fitzgerald were Seldes' friends and sometimes adversaries.

Kammen's is a conventional, even old-fashioned, biography. After giving brief accounts of Seldes' upbringing in the communitarian Alliance, New Jersey, and education at Harvard College, Kammen focuses almost exclusively on Seldes' public life and writings. After graduation in 1914, Seldes became a journalist, but, unlike his famous younger brother George, this phase of his career lasted just until after the First World War. More attracted by literature and the theater than to politics, Seldes soon moved on to criticism. A critical turn in his career came when an old Harvard classmate offered him a position editing *The Dial*. The position fit Seldes' interests perfectly; *The Dial* not only was modernist in its literary outlook, but enthusiastic about popular entertainment as well. This experience provided the background for Seldes' most famous work, *The Seven Lively Arts*, published in 1924. In it, Seldes not only included essays on the theater (along the lines of Heywood Broun or Alexander Woolcott, although disagreeing with them often), but film and comic strips as well.

After *The Seven Lively Arts* established his reputation as an important critic, Seldes published widely: he became a regular film critic for *The New Republic*, a columnist for the New York *Evening Journal* and *The Saturday Evening Post*, and wrote books of criticism and on American history and current events, and contributed articles to nearly every high- and middle-brow magazine of the time. As if his writing did not keep him busy enough, he also adapted and staged a highly successful (in financial terms) *Lysistrata* in 1930. In 1939 he collaborated with Benny Goodman, Walt Disney, and Agnes Demille in producing a jazz version of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, called *Swingin' the Dream*, with an interracial cast that included Louis Armstrong, "Moms" Mabley, Butterfly McQueen, and Billy Bailey.

Another turning point in Seldes' career came in 1937 when he became Director of Programming for CBS Television. He produced some radio scripts during the war, but CBS let him go in 1945. Nevertheless, Seldes attention as a media critic shifted from film and radio to television, a shift exemplified in *The Public Arts*, his last major work, published in 1956. With his career in its waning phase, Seldes accepted the deanship of the newly established Annenberg School of Communications (founded by Walter Annenberg, whose *TV Guide* published a number of Seldes' reviews) in 1959, retiring from the post in 1963.

Kammen covers this variegated terrain sure-footedly, relying on Seldes' published writings, manuscript collec-

tions of his many friends and colleagues, and a private collection of papers held by the Seldes family. Kammen is so well grounded in his source material, however, that he often slights the larger intellectual and cultural context influencing–and influenced by–Seldes' writing. For example, while Kammen ably portrays Seldes' work on *The Dial* and the magazine's position *vis a vis* other literary magazines of the 1920s, he does not discuss the tensions inherent in Seldes and his *Dial* colleagues' simultaneous embrace of literary modernism and popular entertainments. Likewise, Kammen leaves unexplored Seldes' liberal (for their time) racial views, with his opinion that "nothing the negro offers can matter" to civilization. How Seldes could write such a line while being a noted jazz enthusiast cries out for examination.

This dissatisfaction is minor, however, as it deals with what the book is not rather than what it is. It would be unfair to demand that Kammen (in a book already 400 pages long) trace out all the influences acting upon Seldes and, in turn, the influence he exercized in his many fields of endeavor. Kammen himself seems to sense that the work defining Seldes' place in twentieth-century intellectual and cultural history is incomplete. Rather than ending his book with a grand summation, Kammen quotes at length from an obituary, and notes that Seldes was both an "engaging" and "vulnerable" cultural critic. Gilbert Seldes will no doubt attract more attention from scholars because of this book, and Kammen has provided an invaluable starting point for them.

Copyright (c) 1997 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

**Citation:** Christopher Berkeley. Review of Kammen, Michael, *The Lively Arts: Gilbert Seldes and the Transformation of Cultural Criticism in the United States.* H-PCAACA, H-Net Reviews. April, 1997.
**URL:** http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=920

Copyright © 1997 by H-Net and the Popular Culture and the American Culture Associations, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact P.C. Rollins at Rollins@osuunx.ucc.okstate.edu or the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.