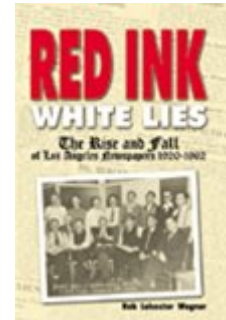


Rob Leicester Wagner. *Red Ink, White Lies: The Rise and Fall of Los Angeles Newspapers, 1920-1962.* Upland: Dragonflyer Press, 2000. 357 pp. \$19.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-944933-80-0.



Reviewed by Dane S. Claussen

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Prolific author and former newspaper editor Rob Leicester Wagner has turned his sights on the contemporaries of his grandfather, Les Wagner (a newspaperman for forty years), in telling the story of how Los Angeles grew, and its newspaper industry declined from six newspapers to two in the 1920-1960 period. Wagner is not explicit about what this book's purpose or scope are, but generally it is to tell the histories of those six newspapers, to tell something about what kind of city Los Angeles was during the period through the lens of its newspapers, and something about how today's Los Angeles got to where it is today.

Wagner's book is highly successful at communicating the type and level of competition between the newspapers, and also at how corrupt the Los Angeles city government--especially the mayor's office and the police department--was during much of the period. This volume also is quite successful in giving readers some feeling for the qualifications, skills, and personalities of many of the individual journalists and publishers; Wagner demonstrates his interest in these individuals, and his interest in readers' keeping them

all straight, by including a "Who Was Who in Los Angeles Newspapers" section in the book's rear. The book is nearly successful, surely as much as it can be, at attempting to explain why various newspapers were launched, merged, bought and sold, and folded when they were. Wagner's book also tells us something about economic and social classes, and ethnic groups during the period, the Los Angeles economy, newspaper unions, the period's crime, and advertising and subscription sales (though not enough in these two areas).

After an introduction setting the scene, the book's body opens with a chapter called "The Birth of L.A. Celebrity Journalism," which overwhelmingly is about only one celebrity, Fatty Arbuckle. But Wagner, having chosen to start his book roughly around the founding of the *Los Angeles Daily News* in 1923, here appropriately starts his journalism history in September 1921 with coverage of a death at an Arbuckle party and Wagner's argument that coverage of the Arbuckle scandal (and the murder of William Desmond Taylor on Feb. 1, 1922) forever changed the relationship between the L.A. news media and Holly-

wood. This may well have been true, but the focus on Arbuckle and Taylor in chapter 1 is odd because news media coverage of either the movie or TV industries plays almost no role in the book's remainder; Wagner's telling of the Arbuckle case also is surprisingly uninteresting, or at least it was to this reviewer.

This reviewer found more interesting chapter 2, "A Clean Penny Paper," about the hapless Cornelius Vanderbilt Jr. starting the *Daily News*. Once Vanderbilt was out of the picture, because of incompetence, in 1926, the *Daily News* was run by E. Manchester Boddy until his retirement as editor and publisher in 1952. Boddy appears throughout the book, although, strangely, the reader does not feel that he knows Boddy all that well even by the book's end beyond Boddy having been relatively competent and ethical, and then eventually eccentric or perhaps just burned out. Chapter 3, "Manchester Boddy's Crusades," is followed by chapter 4, "Mergers, Acquisitions, and Front Men." It covers William Randolph Hearst's purchase of the *Los Angeles Express* using New York's Paul Block as a front man--to keep the Ridder brothers out of Los Angeles--Block's "sale" of the *Express* to Hearst in 1931, and the merger of the *Herald* and *Express*, to become the *Herald & Express*. It immediately became the largest evening newspaper west of the Mississippi, with a circulation of 268,402, a number that would reach almost 300,000 in 1943; it merged with the *Examiner* in 1962 to become the *Los Angeles Herald-Examiner*. Chapter 5, "Spies, Vice and Bombs," covers a Red Scare, organized crime, corrupt politicians, and more, while the title of chapter 6, "The Los Angeles Newspaper Guild," is self-explanatory.

Chapter 7, "Newspaper Terrorism," covers the appalling treatment of Mexican Americans, particularly during the 1930s, and Japanese Americans, particularly during the internment of the 1940s, by both government and the Los Angeles press. Chapter 8, "Noblesse in a Rat Pack," covers

the immediate postwar period, including more on the Guild, the increased number of women journalists, the then-famous Black Dahlia murder case/story, and other major stories. Chapter 9, "Gangsters and Cops," is about precisely what the title tells you, during the 1940s and 1950s, that is. Chapter 10, "The Times' Bad Little Brother," of course covers the launch of the Los Angeles *Mirror* in 1948 and its first few years, up through about 1954; the *Mirror* was designed to fill a market niche between the *Daily News* and the *Herald & Express*, but the heart of the Chandler family, publishing the *Times* and the *Mirror*, was never really in the *Mirror*, at least not for what it required to be truly successful on its own. Chapter 11, "So Long, Judas," is primarily about the death of the *Daily News* in 1954 following a series of ownership changes; the chapter's title comes from what *Daily News* assistant city editor Jack Kennett reportedly said to *Daily News* publisher Clinton McKinnon after finding out the *Daily News* was folding and being bade goodbye by McKinnon. Chapter 12, "A Two-Newspaper Town," is about the ill-fated birth of the Los Angeles *Herald-Examiner* in 1962 when the Los Angeles *Herald & Express* merged with *The Examiner*, really leaving *The Los Angeles Times* to dominate Los Angeles journalism as the *Herald-Examiner's* circulation dropped from 730,000 to only 238,000 when it folded on November 2, 1989. This last chapter is about not only Los Angeles newspapers, but also the advent of competition, of a sort, from local television.

Books like *Red Ink*, *White Lies* often are explicitly or implicitly about some glorious, or at least some shabbily romantic, past in which journalists smoked and drank and gambled and worked too closely with the police and even faked photos, but who emerged, first and last, as the "good guys." Books like *Red Ink*, *White Lies* often suggest that the journalists of a time period might not have been the most competent or ethical professionals, but compared with the politicians who they covered and the cops they worked with, they

were practically saints. Wagner's book is different: one must say that, although a few--emphasis on the word "few"--politicians and journalists emerge from this book relatively unscathed and even credited, the vast majority do not. So Wagner's book is not one to provide lessons for the present, nor even one to make any of us grow nostalgic for the past, but--most arguably--perhaps to make us glad that neither journalism nor local politics is played any more, in nearly any U.S. city, the way they were in Los Angeles during most of the 1920-1960 period.

Although Wagner's book is the best book so far on the history of Los Angeles journalism during the 1920-1960 period, it must be noted that the book's research was not exhaustive: it is quite obvious that he has not consulted most, let alone all, scholarly and popular books and articles on the histories, during the period, of Los Angeles, *The Los Angeles Times* in particular, the Chandler family in particular, Los Angeles newspapers generally, California newspapers generally, the Newspaper Guild, news coverage of crimes and trials, and so on. In fact, Wagner's extremely heavy reliance on articles in the various newspapers, while at the same time depicting them as often incompetent, sensationalistic, and/or corrupt, suggests that the title of his book could or should be: *Red Ink, White Lies: The Rise and Fall of Los Angeles Newspapers, 1920-1962, as Told in Their Own Words*. Certainly he should not present as accurate any number of individual facts reported by one newspaper (fortunately, he avoids relying on one source more than he could have), and sometimes cannot present as necessarily accurate a fact that was agreed upon by all of the L.A. newspapers.

But overall, *Red Ink, White Lies* offers significant content for those readers interested in any one of a number of subjects: the history of Los Angeles journalism, the history of California journalism, the history of relations between politics and the news media, the history of crime coverage, the

history of newspaper mergers and acquisitions, the history of newspaper unions, or the history of how and why news media do and do not closely reflect the communities that they serve. Although this reviewer found certain chapters more interesting and more useful than others, the book's many typographical errors are surprising and eventually annoying, and the author's overwhelming reliance on frequently inaccurate or incomplete newspaper reports is troubling, more than enough areas are covered well enough to make the entire book worthwhile. Wagner's book is certainly worth more than the cover price of \$19.95.

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