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Time Inc.

BOOKS IN REVIEW

Time Inc. biography filled with minutia

By Bill Ward

TIME INC. By Robert T. Elson. Atheneum, 1968. 500 pp.; \$10.

The story has been told over and over about how two Yale graduates, Henry Robinson Luce and Briton Hadden, founded *Time* magazine on faith, and on funds largely from Yale associates. It has become one of the legends of journalism. The story is told one more time in this "authorized" biography, or as it is subtitled, "The Intimate History of a Publishing Enterprise 1923-1941."

"Authorized" means, according to prefatory remarks, the author had complete access to the corporate records. Unfortunately, the book is about as dramatic as a visit to the archives.

Through a depression, the New Deal era and into World War II, *Time* grows, without much dramatic tension. It is an

unallayed success story, with occasional dissension among the staff (expressed mostly in memos) to relieve the pattern. It is a Horatio Alger story picked up at the point of the hero marrying the tycoon's daughter.

More fun in Fortune

There is more interest in the development of *Fortune* magazine which in its depth reporting of business and finance seems a much more pioneering venture. The concept behind and the development of *Life*, as a pioneer in pictorial journalism, also is more fascinating.

What sticks in the mind mostly are bits and pieces from memoranda from Luce to his staff (the book uses a memorandum approach). For instance, in a prospectus about *Time* (1923), Luce and Hadden declared, "People in America are, for the most part, poorly in-

formed." The reason? "Because no publication has adapted itself to the time which busy men are able to spend on simply keeping informed." Thus, *Time's* concepts of encompassing the week's news in two hours' reading time, and of developing a style to catch and hold reader interest. In seeking a style, the author suggests, Hadden had the Iliad at his right elbow.

Other Luce memos:

About the "instructive role of journalism": "Instruction does not arise from the mere publication of a fact. Instruction does not arise from the mere existence of brilliant or profound comment on the fact. Instruction arises only when something happens in a reader's head." Therefore, from the outset, *Time* sought a distinctive style.

About early criticisms that *Time* reaped its news from newspapers and rewrote it: "It takes brains and work to master all the facts dug up by the world's 10,000 journalists and to put them together in a little magazine."

About specialized journalists for *Fortune* magazine: "Of necessity, we made the discovery that it is easier to turn poets into business journalists than to turn bookkeepers into writers."

Luce at one time declared the first job of Letters to be "to do

justice" by correcting errors which have harmed people.

And so on.

The biography-history is strictly chronological. It begins with young Luce and Hadden and their ideas, Luce generally about news and Hadden about style. The author claims "their joined forces altered American journalism." After Hadden's death in 1931, *Time* seemed to be controlled by an oligarchy of top editors and managers. With the emergence of *Life* in 1936, with its ironical threat to *Time's* circulation, Luce took back stronger editorial control of the magazines. Finally, by 1941, *Time* had moved from a devotion to objective presentation of news into an attitude of occasional advocacy. For instance, Luce's support of Wendell Willkie for the Republican nomination in 1940: "I think I was influential in a small degree, in the nomination of Wendell Willkie and of Dwight Eisenhower."

Thus, *Time* moved from a role of not only informant but also conscience. That should provide a much more controversial and dynamic second biography—and perhaps more insight into the quixotic mind of Luce.

The author, Robert T. Elson, worked for 25 years for *Time Inc.*, with *Life*, *Time*, and *Fortune*.