Book Reviews


This could have been a very bad book. It is a biography of one of Indiana's (and Arizona's) most notorious and controversial public figures written by a grandson who obviously loved and respected his grandfather very much. The author recognized the danger. In his preface he writes: "I had a problem. I was his grandson, and, as such, he almost always showed me his best side. Could I keep the sort of distance that an author needs from his subject? Could I write of his faults, his weaknesses? Would others tell me what he was really like?" (p. ix). For the most part, the answer to each of these questions turns out to be "yes." And the result is a rather good book, a sympathetic, yet balanced account of the life of a very interesting man.

Russell Pulliam calls his grandfather "the last of the newspaper titans." Considering the prominence of such current newspaper executives as Rupert Murdoch and Allen Neuharth, this may seem an excessive claim. But what Pulliam means is that his grandfather was the last of the old-time personal publishers like Pulitzer, Hearst, and Luce, who ruled like emperors and who viewed their publications more as tools for personal power and ideology than as simple business enterprises. He may be right. Before World War II Eugene Pulliam seemed to be developing into the typical twentieth-century newspaper chain owner. He bought dozens of newspapers all over the country, and he became a master of the arcane science of evaluating and financing newspaper properties and making them pay. But after the war, Pulliam sold most of his papers and concentrated his attention on his newspapers in two cities: Indianapolis and Phoenix. (These papers were the Indianapolis *Star* and *News* and the Arizona *Republic* and Phoenix *Gazette.*) Far from hiding in the business office, Pulliam remained an active, crusading editor until his death in 1975 at age eighty-four. Many people hated his newspapers precisely because they were so personal in an age of impersonal journalism. People denounced the front-page editorials, the one-sided news coverage, the conservative, anti-big-government ideology. But at least they always knew where the papers stood, and who was in charge.

The strengths of the book are what might be called journalistic strengths. Russell Pulliam is an experienced journalist, and
in *Publisher* he has written a good piece of journalism. Most obvious is the high quality of the interviewing. Pulliam interviewed more than 150 people and drew out of them a wealth of details, anecdotes, and insights. Pulliam also read his grandfather’s newspapers carefully and does a good job of interweaving the interview material with the material from the papers. He probably relies too much on long quotations, but in general the quotations are well chosen. Another journalistic strength is balance. Pulliam portrays his grandfather sympathetically, but he is not blind to his faults. The book describes in some detail Pulliam’s short temper, vanity, jealousy, and susceptibility to flattery, especially in his latter years. For example, in a chapter on Vietnam Russell concludes that Pulliam was simply conned by Lyndon Johnson, who knew exactly how to feed the old man’s ego.

In a sense the weaknesses of the book are journalistic as well. The anecdotal style and heavy dependence on people’s recollections make for a certain superficiality and analytical thin-
Publisher is neither a shrewd psychological biography nor an insightful scholarly history. For example, we are not fully drawn into the mind of Eugene Pulliam. The author describes Pulliam's views over the years, but his efforts to explain them are not always satisfying. Too often he simply offers very general conjectures about the influence of Pulliam's early religious training or his experience in the political turmoil of 1912. Pulliam's private life is almost completely neglected. In a chapter on Pulliam's radio business, Russell Pulliam suddenly says: "In the meantime, his family life had fallen apart" (p. 97). This is the first we have heard of it. The book also has weaknesses as political and journalism history. Pulliam began his career as a Bull Moose Progressive, and the author makes some effort to explain the substance and style of the Bull Moose movement. But in general there is little historical context of the Progressive era and no thorough grounding in the historical literature. The book is more a narrative account of political wars than an analytical political history. Similarly, the book is thin as a history of modern American journalism. Russell Pulliam tells fascinating stories about buying and selling newspapers, but he does not tell us enough about the changing nature of the newspaper business and its relationship to a changing urban environment. In short, the book lacks the kind of theoretical or analytical framework that marks the difference between good journalism and good history.

But the book is a valuable case study nonetheless. For journalism historians, it offers insights into the relationship between a newspaper and the local urban power structure. In his attitudes about local public responsibility, for example, Eugene Pulliam, the hater of big government, was a promoter of government activism. This suggests something important about the nature of the modern newspaper business. For Indiana historians, the book offers interesting accounts of famous and not-so-famous political battlers and backbiters.

In the final analysis, Eugene Pulliam will probably not be remembered as either a brilliant publisher or as an important political thinker. But he was a fascinating character who deserves a biography. And he certainly would be pleased to know that his own grandson has written a good one.