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The Media's Embellisher-in-Chief

A newsman with a Godlike baritone who was a star in every medium—and also made stuff up, Edward Kosner reviews 'The Voice of America: Lowell Thomas and the Invention of 20th-Century Journalism' by Mitchell Stephens.



T.E. Lawrence and Lowell Thomas in Aqaba, ca. 1918. PHOTO: JAMES A. CANNAVINO LIBRARY, MARIST COLLEGE

By Edward Kosner
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Among the celebrated people in America in the 1920s and '30s were Franklin Roosevelt, Charlie Chaplin, Babe Ruth, Shirley Temple, Jack Dempsey, Clark Gable, Bing Crosby—and Lowell Thomas. All those names still resonate—except Thomas, for decades the “Voice of God” in network newscasting, now a curious footnote in the frisky history of American journalism.

In his heyday, Thomas (1892-1981) was almost impossible to miss. He sold out huge concert halls with his exotic travelogues—the first mixed-media shows, dressed up with music, hand-tinted slides and quick snatches of film, some of which he shot himself from airplanes. His nightly radio newscasts often drew more listeners than “Amos 'n' Andy,” the most popular show in America. His narrator's voice on Fox Movietone News boomed out in jammed newsreel theaters before television took over. And when NBC started the first commercial TV station, W2XBS in New York, Thomas made the first newscast, from the World's Fair in 1939, and the next year was the host of the first regularly scheduled program, a 15-minute news show.

The wonder of it all—or perhaps the explanation—is that Lowell Thomas, in the early days of his career and later in his double-barreled memoirs, elaborated and embroidered his stories and simply made stuff up. He was, in old-school newspaper argot, a “pipe artist.” He made millions by entertaining millions and often informing them in the bargain.

THE VOICE OF AMERICA
By Mitchell Stephens
St. Martin's, 328 pages, \$26.99

Now Mitchell Stephens, an accomplished chronicler of journalism, has resurrected Thomas from what might be considered well-earned obscurity. And it's fair to ask if the subtitle of his biography, “The Voice of America: Lowell Thomas and the Invention of 20th-Century Journalism,” is a sly wink at its

subject's penchant for making a good story even better.

Thomas's industrious ancestor had come to America in the 17th century, and he seems to have been born on the make. The son of a doctor obsessed with self-improvement and an attentive mother, Thomas grew up in a honky-tonk gold-rush town on the western slope of Pikes Peak in Colorado. His father drilled him in elocution, and at 9 he stood on long lines twice to shake hands with and chat up the touring Vice President Teddy Roosevelt. By 19, he was the editor of his hometown paper, the Victor Record, writing headlines like “Mayor's Nephew Shot in Love Nest.” (The youth was shot, all right, but turned out not to be related to the mayor.) Thomas quickly picked up two degrees at the University of Denver, then headed off to Chicago for law school.

But even before enrolling, he got a job on the Chicago Daily Journal, sitting next to Ben Hecht, the roistering epitome of the harum-scarum Chicago newspapering he later conected into “The Front Page.” Whether under Hecht's tutelage or not, Thomas soon fit right in. Within a year, the Journal splashed his “exclusive” interview with a supposedly insane young heiress who was being held captive by her family after chasing her new husband with a knife and threatening suicide. The heiress was real enough; the interview wasn't. There was a stink, but Thomas survived. In his spare time, he took law classes and taught public speaking to his fellow students. He was 21.

By the time he was 25, Mr. Stephens recounts, Thomas had studied for a Ph.D. and joined the faculty at Princeton and twice traveled to Alaska and the Yukon, returning with slides and film for lectures. Then he decided to cover World War I—raising \$900,000 in today's money from a group of Chicago investors with the sales pitch that his stories and illustrated lectures would build support for the war effort.

In Europe with his cameraman, Thomas heard that the British had captured Jerusalem and sped there. One day he spotted a diminutive Englishman resplendent in Arab garb walking on the street and stopped to chat. It was Maj. T.E. Lawrence—and before long Thomas would turn Lawrence and himself into international stars.

It's unclear who was the greater fabulist, but their talents were plainly congruent. Ben Hecht wrote later that Thomas had “half invent[ed] the British hero, Lawrence of Arabia.” Lawrence's battalion of biographers still argue about the role that the “hero” actually played in the Arab revolt against the Turks, who were allied with the Germans in the war. Did he really blow up trains, hold off a whole Turkish division with a machine gun in one battle and, later, lead the Arabs in from the desert to capture Aqaba on the Red Sea?

Thomas went to Arabia to rejoin Lawrence after Aqaba and listened to his stories. He saw no action but staged some movies and still shots of Lawrence in full regalia. Not much of any of his war “reporting” was ever published, but Thomas turned his Lawrence material into a series of sensational mixed-media lectures in London, America and Australia that were seen by two million people and proved a bonanza. A few years afterward, he published “With Lawrence in Arabia,” his first best seller. Lawrence, Thomas and Thomas's young wife, Fran, became great chums, but later Lawrence grew embittered at Thomas for transforming him from a man into a legend.

As much as Thomas made Lawrence, Lawrence made Thomas. Over the next half-century, Lawrence's Boswell became the biggest name in news. His mellifluous baritone so commanding that Americans fell silent at their dinner tables or in their parlors for 15 minutes when his show came on at 6:45. Thomas traveled the world obsessively, seeking out exotic—and sometimes dangerous—destinations. He was a fearless flyer in the days when there was plenty to fear. With a skilled ghost writer ever at hand, he published more than 50 books and countless magazine articles.

Mr. Stephens has read piles of Thomas scripts and listened to endless hours of his broadcasts. Despite his early proclivities, Thomas, he writes, handled the news with easy objectivity. He could still tune up a human-interest story, but on the big issues of his prime—the Depression and World War II—Thomas played it down the middle.

This was remarkable, because Thomas lived in a conservative Republican bubble. His longtime radio sponsor—in an age when sponsors, not broadcasters, produced the programs—was the Sun Oil Co., ruled by the ultra-conservative Pew family. He palled around with Herbert Hoover and Thomas E. Dewey, Dale Carnegie and Dr. Norman Vincent Peale. In 1949, he was making the equivalent of \$5 million a year from CBS alone. He lived like a Protestant pasha on an estate on Quaker Hill in exurban Pawling, N.Y., where he was a control freak avant la lettre, developing the area and parceling out house lots to friends.

He coached Dewey on speaking technique for his presidential campaigns against FDR in 1944 and Harry Truman in 1948, and the Pews pressured him to get behind Dewey in his races. But, as Mr. Stephens documents, Thomas never tipped his hand on air. Edward R. Murrow, who never hid his own liberal politics, bought a house on Quaker Hill and played golf with Thomas. But Thomas never really won Murrow's respect. “Lowell wasn't a real journalist to Ed,” said Frank Stanton, the longtime president of CBS, “just a story teller.”

Thomas never made his mark on television the way he had on radio. But he stayed busy—in business and otherwise. He helped pioneer Cinerama, the three-projector, wide-screen movie process that some thought would save the movies from TV. He bought into a small television station in Albany, N.Y., that grew into Cap Cities, the media empire sold to Disney in 1996 for \$19 billion. In his late 50s, he trekked over the Himalayas to Tibet, then closed to foreigners, and met the boy Dalai Lama. On the way down, he went off his pony and broke his leg in eight places. Having exhausted the other continents, he journeyed to Antarctica. When his wife of five decades began to fail, he took up with a 40-year-old woman—“We had a remarkable sex life,” she testified—and married her when he was 84 and she 49.

Lucky to the end, Thomas died peacefully in his sleep at 89 in 1981. Two days later, CBS telecast a prime-time tribute to him led by Walter Cronkite. “That Lowell had an exceptional life was impossible to dispute,” writes Mr. Stephens. “The significance of his work was harder for these CBS newsmen to pin down.” Eric Sevareid had the last word. “As a journalist,” concluded Sevareid, “he was kind of a wandering minstrel in prose.”

—Mr. Kosner is the author of “It's News to Me,” a memoir of his career as the editor of Newsweek, New York, Esquire and the New York Daily News.

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