

## The House of Truth

Jeremy McCarter, **Young Radicals: In the War for American Ideals**, New York, NY: Random House, 2017, 368 pp., \$30.00 (hardcover).

Brad Snyder, **The House of Truth: A Washington Political Salon and the Foundations of American Liberalism**, New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017, 811 pp., \$34.95 (hardcover).

James Srodes, **On Dupont Circle: Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt and the Progressives Who Shaped Our World**, Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2012, 325 pp., \$16.95 (paperback).

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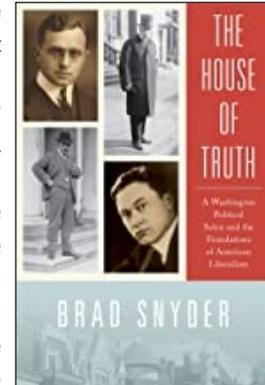
These three books share a common touchstone, memorialized by Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes as the “House of Truth.” Both a communal ideal and a brick and mortar dwelling, the large house at 1727 Nineteenth Street in the DuPont Circle neighborhood of Washington, D.C., served as a temporary residence and gathering place for some of the most prominent figures of the early 20th-century American progressive movement. For seven years, 1912–1919, it was the setting for dinners, dance parties, and spirited conversations—a salon and ersatz colloquia—where the pressing issues of the day were debated and modern political liberalism was incubated.

The story of the House of Truth is also a story of the emergence of national political journalism, analysis, and commentary. The reporters and columnists who covered national politics during the closing years of the progressive era faced challenges similar to those confronting journalists today. Long settled truths had become unmoored—undermined by propaganda and disseminated by new forms of media. Political violence was ascendant; the president was unusually hostile to the press; and dissident writers, intellectuals, and professors faced various forms of domestic repression. Walter Lippmann’s (1920/1995) classic, *Liberty and the News*, was an immediate response to that social and epistemological rupture. He contended that the crisis of Western democracy was “in an exact sense” (p. 8) a crisis in journalism because democracy cannot survive in “a community which lacks the information by which to detect lies” (p. 58). Yet, reasoned discourse across party lines was still possible in some circles and the passionate search for “disinterested” truth remained an intellectual ideal.<sup>1</sup> According to the authors of these books, that lofty ideal became a vibrant reality for a few golden years at the House of Truth.

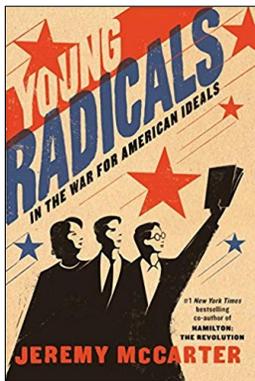
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<sup>1</sup> The term “disinterested,” which progressives frequently used during the period has lost its earlier meaning. It meant not intentionally advancing a claim on behalf of “the interests,” primarily business or politics, but could also mean special pleadings on behalf of class, religion, tribe, region, etc. It has different connotations than the term “bias” as used in everyday language today to criticize media, and seemed to imply that unbiased or value-free news is possible. To Lippmann, for example, all claims, including disinterested ones,

Brad Snyder's *The House of Truth* provides the most comprehensive account of the daily lives and activities of the residents of 1727 and their frequent guests. His work is informed by the newly available papers of Robert G. Valentine—the owner and leader of the house during its active years—who regularly corresponded with his wife about intellectual and social developments there. A tenacious researcher, Snyder devotes 200 pages to deeply informed endnotes, which reveal telling details about the ideas, personalities and relationships of the residents. A lawyer by training, Snyder is especially strong in contextualizing the close relationship and collaborative social reform efforts of Felix Frankfurter and his mentor, Louis Brandeis, on behalf of labor, free speech, due process, and industrial democracy. Other figures in Snyder's narrative are also richly drawn: the story of enigmatic sculptor, promoter, and Klan member Gutzon Borglum, who created both the Stone Mountain memorial to the Confederacy and Mount Rushmore, offers readers a fascinating account of the politics, funding schemes, aesthetics, and engineering feats of early 20th-century monument making—a subject under renewed scrutiny today. Visionary, film-flam man, crusader against government corruption, racist, and self-proclaimed patriot, Borglum can be seen as one of the forerunners of today's alt-right. Yet, he also fits, if uneasily, within Snyder's panorama of progressives.



For Jeremy McCarter and James Srodes, the House of Truth is as much a metaphor as a physical setting. McCarter focuses on the progressive ideals that were nurtured by the young radicals associated with the House. Only one of his protagonists, young Walter Lippmann, was actually a resident of 1727; all were, however, associated with the extended network of *The New Republic* magazine, where Lippmann served as one of the founding editors. For McCarter, this is primarily the story of privileged young people who dedicated themselves to serving the public good, as they saw it, and to their credit, they made concerted efforts to see beyond their own privilege. Philosophical heirs of William James, most of them initially came together ideologically to support Teddy Roosevelt's ill-fated 1912 Bull-Moose presidential campaign.

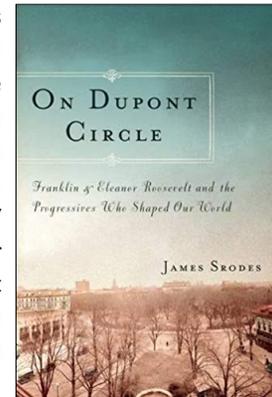


Jeremy McCarter uses each of his protagonists to represent an ascendant ideal of progressive social reform: They and their beliefs would, however, be chastened by the carnage wrought by the Great War and its disillusioning aftermath. *Young Radicals: In the War for American Ideals* is carefully researched and engagingly written; it reads like a finely plotted novel in which struggles over ideas reach epic heights. It is a tale, in McCarter's words, "about hope and what comes after hope, and despair and what comes after despair" (p. xiii)—a sensibility that he suggests should resonate with today's readers.

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were social constructs. Truth was understood as contingent, defined in probabilistic terms. Thomas Haskell (2000) discusses the shift in the term.

James Srodes' volume, *On Dupont Circle*, which predates Snyder's and McCarter's by five years, has an even looser connection to the original House of Truth. He locates his story in the DuPont Circle neighborhood more broadly, which includes not only 1727 but additionally the Foster-Lansing mansion where the Dulles family lived, as well as the presence of the young Roosevelts, Franklin and Eleanor, who were part of the neighborhood when FDR served as assistant secretary of the navy from 1913 to 1920. Srodes' timeframe is longer than the other authors', running to the eve of World War II. His book provides readers with the widest coverage of the national context in which his protagonists operated, including the economy, race relations, and religion, and it provides detailed accounts of individual indiscretions and occasional scandals.



Despite their common inspiration, then, each book illuminates different dimensions of the progressive movement and its more utilitarian successor, political liberalism. The fact that three books on the same historical subject can have such limited overlap in their casts of characters is telling. Sticking close to Nineteenth Street and the archives, Snyder covers both the famous and the forgotten. Among the former, in addition to Holmes, Brandeis, Frankfurter, Borghum, and Lippmann, are the legendary statesman Henry Stimson, who served as Secretary of War under Taft, FDR, and Truman as well as Secretary of State in the Hoover administration, and Herbert Croly, author, leading progressive theorist, and cofounder of *The New Republic*. Snyder's vivid portraits of lesser-known figures, including wives and friends of his featured players, show that some of them made essential, if publicly unacknowledged, contributions to the generative intellectual atmosphere of 1727. McCarter's young radicals include Lippmann and his college roommate, Jack Reed, the revolutionary foreign correspondent and adventurer who would be appointed a member of the revolutionary Soviet Comintern and buried with other Bolshevik heroes in the Kremlin; Max Eastman, editor of *The New Masses*; Alice Paul, intrepid women's rights activist; and Randolph Bourne, the brilliant but star-crossed young essayist. Only three of McCarter's young radicals survived the tumultuous years that he covers: Eastman, Lippmann, and Paul. Srodes focuses his attention on the famous and near famous: in addition to Frankfurter and Lippmann, the Roosevelts; Herbert Hoover; the Dulles brothers, John Foster and Allen, and their sister, Eleanor Lansing Dulles, an economist and diplomat; and William Bullitt, a scandal-prone journalist, novelist, and the first U.S. ambassador to the Soviet Union (1933–1936). Prominent figures in one volume do not, in some instances, even make the index of another. Only Frankfurter and Lippmann are assigned featured roles in all three narratives.

Representations of Lippmann vary so widely across these books that collectively they can almost serve as Rorschach tests of the authors' views of journalism, pragmatic realism, political comity, intellectual celebrity, and international affairs. Lippmann is variously characterized as quiet, shy, brilliant, arrogant, too tolerant, a social climber, a steadfast ally who could be relied on to come to the rescue of friends and associates in need, and a quixotic political ally. The Lippmann archive at Yale University and the secondary literature are so enormous that all of these attributions can be more or less justified by a quote or anecdote. Lippmann himself acknowledged the hazards of opinion writing, which requires immediate responses to rapidly changing events, and readily admitted that he revised his views when

new evidence became available. For this reason, he regarded his columns as ephemera that would (and perhaps should) be quickly forgotten. But he hoped that his books would have more lasting value. They are the corpus that he stood by and wished to be judged by. Yet, they receive limited attention in these volumes.

All three works chronicle the intellectual development of American progressive and liberal thought, despite McCarter's stirring account of Reed's revolutionary adventures in Russia. Snyder does, however, acknowledge the international perspectives that Loring Christie, who was born in Canada, and Eustace Percy, an attaché of the British ambassador, brought to the discussions at 1727. Lippmann too was an internationalist who made annual study trips abroad and drew extensively on European sources in his writings. Moreover, British social activist Graham Wallas was a foundational influence on Lippmann's thought, especially during the time period when the House of Truth served as a salon for progressive debates. Lippmann's work in Washington as a member of secret Inquiry, which was convened by Woodrow Wilson to develop a plan for the postwar reconstruction of Europe, was, by definition, global in scope. More exploration of the transatlantic cross-fertilization of social democratic ideals could further enrich chronicles of the genesis of 20th-century liberalism.

Legitimately inspired by the ambitions, ideals, and achievements of their subjects, McCarter and Snyder occasionally cast them as plaster saints. For example, Snyder extensively chronicles the close relationship of Brandeis and Frankfurter, yet he glosses over an archival find that may cast a shadow over Brandeis' reputation. Specifically Bruce Allen Murphy's *The Brandeis/Frankfurter Connection* (1982) shows that Brandeis engaged in behind-the-scenes political advocacy work while a Supreme Court Justice—paying Frankfurter over \$50,000 (more than \$850,000 today) to advance his public policy goals. Snyder does not mention the controversy in the main text, but he acknowledges it in a brief endnote by citing a dissenting article in *The New Republic*. If anyone has the knowledge and chops to definitively discredit, counter, or more broadly contextualize Murphy's claim, surely it is Snyder. By contrast, Srodes has a steady eye for human foibles, but despite his deep sourcing throughout the book, he sometimes makes bold claims about such lapses unaccompanied by citations. Only McCarter foregrounds the privileged backgrounds and social networks of his subjects. Yet, almost all the figures profiled in these books were graduates of elite Eastern universities and moved in similar social circles, the same circles from whence presidents, diplomats, and Supreme Court justices were recruited. For the journalists among them, this provided easy entitled access to elite news sources. Lippmann, for example, served as an advisor to every president from Theodore Roosevelt to Lyndon Johnson. Their access, in turn, greatly amplified the influence they exercised over the national press and public opinion. In Lippmann's case, the young radical progressive activist evolved into the embodiment of the liberal establishment by midcentury. Although he, like Reed, Croly, and Bourne, was a contrarian, this narrow system of recruitment was (and is) generally weighted toward producing more stenographers of power than radical reformers.

Faulting authors for what they do not do is, of course, easy prey. What these authors do is of enormous value individually and collectively. Because they view their subjects through the lens of intellectual history, broadly conceived, they offer perspectives on the emergence of national political journalism that are far beyond the reach of standard industry-focused journalism and media histories.

These books deeply contextualize and humanize the people, ideas, networks, and practices that evolved into what was referred to by midcentury as the “liberal consensus” of American politics—a consensus with deep fissures, which were obscured for a time by a thriving industrial economy and the bicoastal dominance of mainstream mass media. Not only are these books ambitiously researched and richly narrated, the stories they tell about struggles for justice, democratic transparency, and civic engagement have enduring relevance.

In the current political and epistemological crises when democratic ideals and institutions are under attack throughout the world, Snyder, Srodes, and McCarter demonstrate the important role that spirited, Habermasian style, discourse played in struggles to defend reason and expand the democratic covenant during the waning decades of the first American Gilded Age and in the disillusionment that followed the “war to end all wars.” Yet, these chronicles inspire as well as chasten. While social crises and loss can be fertile ground for authoritarianism, McCarter demonstrates that a chastened, but determined, democratic resolve can also emerge from the embers of what is left after hope and after despair.

### References

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