

The Skeptic, by Terry Teachout

reviewed by [David R. Stewart](#) in the [April 5, 2003](#) issue

Most adult Americans know something about H. L. Mencken even without having read anything he wrote. They know Mencken as a prose stylist, an iconoclast, a nemesis of rubes, an irascible foe of unbridled political power or a major eyewitness and scribe of the "Scopes monkey trial." Even a half-century after his death a folksy mystique surrounds the "Sage of Baltimore." Whatever his faults and sharp edges, he garners populist esteem as someone who could be relied on to speak forcefully, fearlessly and plainly. Terry Teachout's book makes clear the energy of Mencken's writing and editing, his breathtaking industry in writing so much and so variously over so many years, and the steadfastness with which he held to his beliefs.

Yet Mencken's reputation has been under review in the decade following the unsealing of some of his private diaries. Those materials seem to dispel all doubt that he was, among other things, an anti-Semite. (Some of his writings on Germany during the 1930s had already given plenty of evidence in this regard.) Since this fine new biography is one of the first to take Mencken's measure in the light of this previously unavailable material, Teachout's most remarkable achievement might be his restraint.

It is difficult, though not impossible, for a critic like Mencken to voice his disdain and unhappiness at "the way things are in the world" without becoming a misanthrope. People whose literary lives and times overlapped in some way with Mencken's--George Bernard Shaw, E. B. White, G. K. Chesterton--each voiced an incisive critique while remaining an ally, rather than an accuser, of his fellow mortals. But Mencken did not achieve such balance.

The unrelenting tenor of invective and biliousness which sounded distinctive and even bracing early in Mencken's career became worse than tiresome by the time that career was ended by a stroke in the 1950s. His sometime ally Edmund Wilson had it right when he observed that as early as the 1930s Mencken was reduced to repeatedly "having the same emotions, stuck in the same intellectual jam, content to rage and complain without hope." Even more trenchant was Reinhold Niebuhr's

review of Mencken's *Treatise on the Gods* (1930). Niebuhr notes "the gleam of fanaticism in Mr. Mencken's eye while he inveighs against the bigotry of the priests and the stupidity of their followers."

In the loves of Mencken's personal life--women, literature and music--there seems to have been a capacity for a genuine affection and generosity of spirit which rarely made it onto the pages of his work. He lacked the capacity for self-criticism--a lack that energized him to write fearlessly and spitefully about the absurdities of others while completely overlooking the limits of his own insight. In providing advice to the ACLU prior to the Scopes trial, for example, he remarked that "getting Scopes acquitted would be worth a day's headlines in the papers, but smearing [William Jennings] Bryan would be good for a long while."

It's difficult to read *The Skeptic* without concluding that Mencken not only was monumentally wrong on some very big issues (race, Germany, government, science, Nietzsche and much more) but almost always measured human worth with the wrong yardstick. In Teachout's phrase, "He had no feeling for the darkness in the heart of man. He looked at evil and saw ignorance." To admire what he said and how he said it is a little too much like admiring a bully picking on a weak target.

An early translator and enthusiastic admirer of Nietzsche, Mencken never came close to fathoming the disconnection between Nietzsche's bleak pessimism and American optimism. This explains why Mencken's profound and personal contempt for FDR during the Second World War, for example, now seems so absurd: FDR recognized people's anxieties, cultivated their hopes and fed their capacity for endurance. In contrast the Mencken of World War II now seems little more than a music-hall Nietzsche, his lines staged and overwritten.

For all the rancor and misplaced pessimism that echo through this life, Teachout's book deserves to be strongly commended to people of faith. It is oddly instructive to see the case against faith mounted by one of the past century's celebrities of unbelief. Much good was quietly done by the common folk, many of them people of simple Christian faith, against whom Mencken endlessly ranted, calling them "rubes" and "the booboisie."