

A.J. LIEBLING'S WORLD WAR II WRITINGS¹REVIEWED BY MITCHELL MCNAYLOR²

On 9 July 1944, A.J. Liebling, reporter for *The New Yorker* attached to the Allied Expeditionary Force in Normandy, received word that troops of the VIII Corps would soon go into battle near La Haye.³ Having just settled down to dinner with a few of his fellow correspondents, Liebling decided that, "it would be callous to tell the G-2 we were cutting his battle in order to eat *sole bonne femme* and *tournedos Choron*. We decided, therefore, to attend the battle, but not until after lunch, when we would be in a better frame of mind for it."⁴ Liebling's articles provide a look at how an articulate, esoterically educated man covered the European war for what was arguably the most sophisticated weekly publication in America during the early 1940s. Throughout his wartime writings an inimitable style emerged, as he used gastronomic references, literary allusions, and humor to describe the war against Nazi Germany.

Liebling's World War II journalism is now available in a handsome volume published by the Library of America. This edition contains three books: *The Road Back to Paris*, *Mollie and Other War Pieces*, and *Normandy Revisited*. Also included are some of Liebling's previously uncollected pieces, along with selections from his work on the French Resistance, *The Republic of Silence*. Anyone interested in military history, or in seeing how journalists covered the military in years past, will find much of interest in this volume.

Reading Liebling, one should keep in mind that he wrote not for a daily paper, but that he wrote feature articles for *The New Yorker*, a fact which helps to explain the character of much of his writing. Working as a feature writer, rather than as a news reporter, gave Liebling the

¹ A.J. LIEBLING, WORLD WAR II WRITINGS (Pete Hamill ed., The Library of America 2008).

² J.D., 2007, University of Florida Levin College of Law; M.A., 1998, The Ohio State University; B.A., 1996, Louisiana State University. Parts of this review were presented as a paper at the 2002 Society for Military History Annual Conference. The author would like to thank Professor John F. Guilmartin, Jr. and Lieutenant Colonel Robert L. Bateman for their encouragement with this project.

³ LIEBLING, *supra* note 1, at 896.

⁴ *Id.* at 897.

freedom to indulge in writing more discursive examinations of wartime scenes. With the exception of his letters from France that usually appeared weekly, Liebling had no regular deadline. Freed from the need to cover breaking news, he focused on scenes from life in Paris during the *drôle de guerre*, from soldierly life and, after the Normandy landings, on scenes of French life. Liebling was under far less pressure for speed and could indulge his own interests more than many other correspondents. Hints of this contrast appear in his work. During the North Africa campaign, Liebling shared a hotel room in Algiers with Dave Brown, then covering the war for Reuters. Liebling commented: “Living with a spot-news man during a big news period is a great luxury for a magazine correspondent, because the spot-news fellow has to keep up with the hour-to-hour situation and file frequent news bulletins. The magazine writer keeps posted without any exertion.”⁵

Born in 1904, Liebling spent most of his early life, with occasional trips to Europe, in New York City.⁶ Expelled from Dartmouth for cutting chapel too often, he eventually took a degree from Columbia in 1925.⁷ Fired from the *New York Times* for comically altering sports stories, Liebling then took a year off to visit Paris, ostensibly to take classes at the Sorbonne.⁸ He introduced himself to French cuisine, French women, and French medieval literature.⁹

After working on a number of newspapers, Liebling started writing for *The New Yorker* in 1935.¹⁰ He had a penchant for local color pieces of New York low life, an interest he would later adapt to his wartime reporting. In the foreword to *Mollie and Other War Pieces* Liebling commented that “the wars were the central theme of my life from October 1939, until the end of 1944, and sometimes I feel a deplorable nostalgia for them.”¹¹ One would not expect an overweight New York journalist, plagued by recurring attacks of gout, to be an effective war

⁵ *Id.* at 229.

⁶ *Id.* at 995–97.

⁷ *Id.* at 996.

⁸ *Id.* at 996–97.

⁹ See also A.J. LIEBLING, *BETWEEN MEALS: AN APPETITE FOR PARIS* (Simon & Schuster, 1962), in which Liebling discusses his affinity for all three.

¹⁰ LIEBLING, *supra* note 1, at 997. Boasting a staff of writers such as Janet Flanner, Robert Benchley, and James Thurber, throughout the war *The New Yorker* would carry articles by such talented authors as Mollie Panter-Downes, Walter Bernstein, Rebecca West, and John Hersey. Indeed, in 1946 editor Harold Ross would devote an entire issue to Hersey’s *Hiroshima*.

¹¹ *Id.* at 313.

correspondent, although he did adopt an exercise regime in advance of the Normandy campaign.¹² Yet Liebling managed to cover the war up front; one of only a very few journalists to cover the earliest landings on D-Day,¹³ he went on to accompany General Jacques Philippe LeClerc's Deuxième Division Blindée into Paris.¹⁴ After the war, he published two other works dealing with his wartime experiences: *The Republic of Silence*¹⁵ and *Normandy Revisited*.¹⁶ The former combined some of Liebling's articles on the French Resistance with a large selection of writings by members of the Resistance; in the latter, Liebling wrote of a return trip to Normandy and of his memories of 1944 and other visits there.

Throughout his career, Liebling excelled at using descriptions of food to evoke a mood. The following passage is particularly notable for the way Liebling uses a meal to describe the mood of the incomprehensible French defeat in 1940:

We had Mediterranean rouget burned in brandy over twigs of fennel. Although all three of us knew the war was lost, we could not believe it. The rouget tasted too much as good rouget always had; the black-browed proprietor was too normally solicitous; even in the full bosom and strong legs of the waitress there was the assurance that this life in Paris would never end. Faith in France was now purely a *mystique*; a good dinner was our profane communion.¹⁷

Similarly, Liebling would, in *The Road Back to Paris*, use a dinner as a means for tracing how Americans adjusted to life in peacetime America after fleeing the fall of France. Describing lunch, and the ogling of a young woman ice skating, in New York with his fellow correspondent Dick Boyer, shortly after Boyer's return from wartime Europe, Liebling offered, in microcosm, the process of readjustment to civilian life that

¹² GARDNER BOTSFORD, *A LIFE OF PRIVILEGE, MOSTLY 199* (2003).

¹³ LIEBLING, *supra* note 1, at 457–96.

¹⁴ *Id.* at 522–27.

¹⁵ *Id.* at 1000.

¹⁶ *Id.* at 1002.

¹⁷ *Id.* at 84. These passages offer just a hint of how much Liebling loved to eat; fellow *The New Yorker* writer Brendan Gill noted that “the pleasure he took in gormandizing was obviously identical to the pleasure other people took in listening to a Chopin nocturne.” BRENDAN GILL, *HERE AT THE NEW YORKER* 322 (1975).

takes place in such circumstances. With the oysters, Boyer railed at how Americans took no serious interest in the war; by the time the lobster Thermidor arrived, Boyer took more interest in the ice skater than in the war.¹⁸ World affairs fade from the mind when they seem an ocean away and when pleasant distractions appear far more immediate.

The introduction of a well-timed literary or historical allusion also helped to shape Liebling's style. An excerpt from *The Road Back to Paris* set in the North African campaign helps to illustrate this facet of Liebling's writing. For much of the campaign, Liebling attached himself to forward airbases; while he did not see infantry combat, he did talk to infantry veterans. He quoted these words of an infantry captain from Virginia: "People down in my part of the country talk about battles as if they were some kind of fine antique, like old lace," he said. "I always used to daydream about them as a kid. But my God, if I'd known a battle was like this—." The next line shows the Liebling touch, using a literary allusion to reinforce the sentiments expressed by the Soldier and to introduce a note of wistful irony: "It reminded me of Stendhal writing in his diary: 'All my life I have longed to be loved by a woman who was melancholy, thin and an actress. Now I have been, and I am not happy.'" ¹⁹

Sent to Paris in the fall of 1939 to cover the war,²⁰ his reports from Paris during the *drôle de guerre* often featured non-military events in France, including descriptions of horse racing²¹ and of two pimps sitting in a whorehouse discussing the war.²² Liebling remained in Paris until forced to flee in the face of the German invasion. Liebling hitched a ride out of Paris with Waverley Root, who "had an old Citroën with a motor that made a noise like anti-aircraft fire and was responsible for a few minor panics during our journey, but it stood up through the constant starting and stopping on the one vehicle-choked road the military authorities permitted civilians to travel south on."²³ Root wrote for the Paris edition of the *Chicago Tribune* and later became famous for his book *The Food of France*.²⁴ Oddly enough, the two authors who would become America's leading gastronomy writers fled Paris in the same car.

¹⁸ *Id.* at 117–19.

¹⁹ *Id.* at 288.

²⁰ *Id.* at 20.

²¹ *Id.* at 584.

²² *Id.* at 40.

²³ *Id.* at 98–99.

²⁴ WAVERLEY ROOT, *THE FOOD OF FRANCE* (1958).

Three days after arriving in Tours, Liebling, Root, and the French government fled to Bordeaux.²⁵ From there Liebling proceeded on to Lisbon, then back to America.²⁶

Until his return to Europe in July 1941, Liebling's writing suffered; he felt uncomfortable in isolationist America, and wrote little.²⁷ By mid-1941 he had returned to England expecting to cover a German invasion. After Hitler invaded the Soviet Union, Liebling decided to return to America.²⁸ In late November 1941, Liebling boarded a Norwegian tanker destined for Baton Rouge, Louisiana to return to America and to have a chance to cover the Battle of the Atlantic.²⁹ Near the end of his voyage Liebling wisely disembarked at New Orleans, home of such temples of gastronomy as Antoine's, and then headed back to New York.³⁰ He described this trip in one of his more famous pieces, "Westbound Tanker," first published in *The New Yorker*, then as a chapter in *The Road Back to Paris*. Much of the article tells of Liebling's gradually drawing closer to the crew, a group of men full worthy of one of his New York City local color pieces. About halfway across the Atlantic the British escort vessels left to join an eastbound convoy and the tanker remained unescorted until a force of Canadian destroyers arrived the next morning. One of the crew members sought to reassure Liebling: "There were never enough vessels for convoy duty, Bull said, but luckily there never seemed to be enough submarines, either. The Battle of the Atlantic sounded imposing, but it was rather like a football game with five men on a side."³¹ In this particular instance, luck and timing saved Liebling from a more awful encounter with the Battle of the Atlantic. The German Navy responded to the war with America by sending more U-Boats to sea to prey on American shipping, at that time still unorganized into convoys, but the decision to deploy more U-Boats and it took some time for them to sail into areas of

²⁵ LIEBLING, *supra* note 1, at 104–05.

²⁶ *Id.* at 110–13.

²⁷ According to biographer Raymond Sokolov, "Faced with such unreasoning apathy, Liebling didn't know what to do. His work record for the year following his return from France shows this concretely. He wrote only eight articles, a career low." RAYMOND SOKOLOV, WAYWARD REPORTER: THE LIFE OF A.J. LIEBLING 141 (1980).

²⁸ LIEBLING, *supra* note 1, at 124.

²⁹ *Id.* at 170–208.

³⁰ *Id.* at 206–08. Despite suffering damage during Hurricane Katrina, Antoine's is still open for business at 713 Saint Louis St., New Orleans, Louisiana. See also www.antoines.com (last visited July 15, 2008).

³¹ LIEBLING, *supra* note 1, at 201.

the Atlantic where they might attack American ships. Liebling had returned safely to the United States before the full onslaught of U-Boats began to impact American shipping. An observer more familiar with the overall course of the war and writing from the perspective of history, Winston Churchill, termed the end of 1941 and the first half of 1942 “The U-Boats Paradise.”³²

After spending several months covering the U.S. Army in the North African campaign, Liebling sought a way to cover the Allied invasion of France. Finding a way to go ashore as an Army correspondent on D-Day proved beyond Liebling’s reach.³³ He did, however, manage to attach himself to a landing craft and went into Normandy with the Navy.³⁴ His three part series “Cross-Channel Trip” told of his experiences during the invasion.³⁵ On an LCIL (Landing Craft, Infantry, Large) on D-Day Liebling was in a position to appreciate the intensity of the combat. Two striking images emerge from his articles; he spoke of going forward while the ship was under fire, to “the well deck, which was sticky with a mixture of blood and condensed milk. Soldiers had left cases of rations lying all about the ship, and a fragment of the shell that hit the boys had torn into a carton of cans of milk.”³⁶ Later, discussing the evacuation of the wounded, he described “a Coastguardsman [who] reached up for the bottom of one basket so that he could steady it on its way up. At least a quart of blood ran down on him, covering his tin hat, his upturned face, and his blue overalls. He stood motionless for an instant, as if he didn’t know what happened, seeing the world through a film of red because he wore eyeglasses and blood had covered the lenses.”³⁷ Years later, in *Mollie and Other War Pieces*, he noted of the last quotation that “this was me. It seemed more reserved at the time to do it this way—a news story in which the writer said *he* was bathed in blood would have made me distrust it, if I had been a reader.”³⁸ He remained aboard ship and did not visit the beach until D-Day plus three.³⁹ After a brief stay ashore he returned to the LCIL and thence to England, to write his story and wire it to *The New Yorker*.⁴⁰

³² WINSTON S. CHURCHILL, *THE HINGE OF FATE* 108–32 (1950).

³³ LIEBLING, *supra* note 1, at 825.

³⁴ *Id.* at 827.

³⁵ *Id.* at 457–96.

³⁶ *Id.* at 476.

³⁷ *Id.* at 477.

³⁸ *Id.*

³⁹ *Id.* at 487.

⁴⁰ *Id.* at 493–95.

Soon Liebling managed to catch up with the Allied army in Normandy.⁴¹ While most of his articles deal with French rural life during the Allied invasion of Normandy, Liebling did witness combat, although he did not often directly describe it in print. In the final days of the drive on Paris, Liebling attached himself to General Leclerc's Free French troops and followed them into Paris.⁴² Unfortunately, Liebling did not publish his account of the Liberation of Paris until years after the war, in his book *Normandy Revisited*, ostensibly a chronicle of a postwar trip through the region. This was the closest that Liebling came to writing war memoirs. In many ways, the work tells little about combat or military experience and the structure of the work appears artificial and convoluted, for it follows no linear path through Liebling's wartime experiences, but wanders back and forth between the war and Liebling's visit to Normandy ten years later. That artifice greatly adds to the charm of *Normandy Revisited*.⁴³ For instance, in the span of six pages, Liebling discusses the condition of a pack of basset hounds that he encountered in 1944, depressed from the occupation when their masters could not secure ammunition for a hunt, and their reaction to U.S. Army food: "They scorned K rations. They might be down, but they weren't as flat as all that."⁴⁴ Recounting his attempts to visit the "Chateau of the Mournful Hounds" years later, Liebling turns to a long digression about the town of Vire, which he visited in his youth.⁴⁵ Discouraging on Vire stirs a recollection of a meal that he enjoyed there, which included, among other things, *rillettes*, *jambon cru de pays*, *andouilles*, salt herring, *tripes à la mode de Caen*, steaks, soufflée potatoes, cheese, a whole pheasant,

⁴¹ *Id.* at 497.

⁴² *Id.* at 936–37, 960–71.

⁴³ Raymond Sokolov, after seeing a first edition of the work, noted a subtitle that appeared only on the dust jacket of that edition: "A Sentimental Journey." Unsure of whether that was a late addition by the publisher or an invention of Liebling's, Sokolov rightly points to a correlation between Liebling's work and *A Sentimental Journey Through France and Italy* by Laurence Sterne:

The perversely digressionary pace was, in any case, a tribute to Sterne's manner and, more generally, it reproduced the feel of all the early books of reportage Liebling admired, books in which the difficulty of travel and its slowness created a leisurely setting and as justification for extended authorial observation on the passing scene.

SOKOLOV, *supra* note 27, at 293. This edition of *Normandy Revisited* does not reproduce the Sentimental Journey subtitle that so intrigued Sokolov.

⁴⁴ LIEBLING, *supra* note 1, at 907.

⁴⁵ *Id.* at 908.

and an Armagnac chaser.⁴⁶ All of this makes for delightful and amusing reading, but those seeking action along the lines of Ernst Jünger's *Storm of Steel* should look elsewhere.⁴⁷

After the Liberation, Liebling "remained in Paris, to report on political things, while my young friend David Lardner, who had come over for the purpose, relieved me as correspondent of the *New Yorker* with the armies."⁴⁸ Shortly afterward, Lardner was killed at Aachen when his jeep ran over a land mine. Liebling stayed to write one more article, on German atrocities at Comblanchien in November 1944.⁴⁹ After completing the article he left for New York; he later commented, "I never came back to the war. Before I could feel sufficiently ashamed for that, it was over."⁵⁰

An obvious affection for and admiration of the French Resistance emerged in an edited volume of Resistance literature that Liebling compiled just after the war, entitled *The Republic of Silence*. That work, of which only the "Argument" and "In Lieu of an Epilogue" are reproduced in the current volume, presents a number of pieces by Resistance writers, introduced and with comments by Liebling interspersed throughout the text. In the early pages of the book, Liebling made clear that he was not working on an academic volume: "I am not a student of Resistance literature; candidates for the degree of doctor of philosophy will have their crack at it later."⁵¹ The book that emerges offers an interesting introduction to the literature. This volume represents a rare instance of Liebling writing about events not observed firsthand, although much of the work is an attempt to get primary sources in front of the English-speaking reader. Liebling claimed that "men seldom write as ingenuously ten years after the event as when they are in its grip . . . so I have a high esteem for history that may be picked out of accounts as contemporary as these, like the sweet meat from the claws of the lobster."⁵² This interest in Resistance literature had developed during the war. In April 1944, Liebling published "Notes from the Kidnap House," a short article on underground newspapers published in

⁴⁶ *Id.* at 912–13.

⁴⁷ ERNST JÜNGER, *STORM OF STEEL* (Michael Hoffman trans., Penguin Books 2004) (1922).

⁴⁸ LIEBLING, *supra* note 1, at 541.

⁴⁹ *Id.*

⁵⁰ *Id.*

⁵¹ *Id.* at 737.

⁵² *Id.* at 739.

France.⁵³ After commenting on the bewildering political spectrum covered by such journals, Liebling shifted to a topic he found more interesting: food. When discussing French farmers who worked to deliver food to the Resistance, Liebling addressed attempts to circumvent official inspectors sent to supervise the harvests: “Some of the inspectors, of course, are ‘reasonable,’ shutting their eyes to all discrepancies, since they are at heart as anti-Boche as anybody else. Others, not ‘reasonable,’ are mobbed or ambushed and beaten up with farm implements.”⁵⁴

One last article on the European war, surprisingly absent from the present anthology, deserves attention as it combines both Liebling’s interest in the war and his press criticism. In the spring of 1945, Liebling began to write the “Wayward Press” column for *The New Yorker*, resurrecting it as the column had not been written since Robert Benchley abandoned it several years before.⁵⁵ Liebling praised Edward Kennedy for breaking the story of the German surrender at Reims before SHAEF (Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force) press agents had wanted it released, and railed against the fact that only three journalists had been admitted to the ceremony. It disgusted Liebling that

correspondents may send no news, even though it is verified and vital to an American understanding of what is happening, unless it is “authorized” by some army political officer . . . or rather, in the last analysis, the censors’ Army superiors—will decide what is true and accurate or false and misleading, and what is calculated to injure the morale of Allied forces.”⁵⁶

Unfortunately, for his reputation since the war, Liebling never achieved the popularity of another great World War II correspondent, Ernie Pyle.⁵⁷ Since Pyle wrote a weekly column, like Liebling he did not have to report breaking news and chose to focus on scenes from daily

⁵³ *Id.* at 653–71.

⁵⁴ A.J. Liebling, *Notes From the Kidnap House - II*, THE NEW YORKER, Apr. 22, 1944, at 50. The Library of America anthology reproduces only parts I and III of this originally three-part article.

⁵⁵ LIEBLING, *supra* note 1, at 999. For more on Benchley, see ROBERT BENCHLEY, MY TEN YEARS IN A QUANDARY AND HOW THEY GREW (1936).

⁵⁶ A.J. Liebling, *The A.P. Surrender*, THE NEW YORKER, May 19, 1945, at 60.

⁵⁷ For more about Pyle, see also JAMES TOBIN, ERNIE PYLE’S WAR (1997).

life.⁵⁸ Both men wrote of the experience of the common Soldier and vividly captured the boredom of daily life, along with moments of extreme violence and terror. Pyle, however, staked out the infantry as his special preserve and became especially adept at empathetically describing the experiences of combat infantrymen without becoming too brutal for audiences in America. Liebling lacked that focus and drifted from merchant seamen to combat infantrymen to French civilians. He retained, however, an essential, idiosyncratic style no matter what his subject. The two men wrote in radically different styles; Liebling's ironic, allusive writing had little in common with Pyle's touching, although painfully homespun, prose.


Liebling's journalism stands out for an eclectic literary sensibility, more reminiscent of Laurence Sterne than of Ernest Hemingway. Much of what Liebling wrote, however, remains a very individualistic contribution to journalism. That contribution is, thanks to the Library of America, once again readily available for interested readers. The rare talent for combining gastronomic references, literary allusions, and acute military observations, and expressing them in an inimitable style, remains Liebling's trademark. His writing style, with its great humor and panache, remains his most significant contribution to the journalism of the Second World War and makes his writing a treat to read.

⁵⁸ LIEBLING, *supra* note 1, at 752. See also Liebling's own thoughts on Pyle, recorded in a book review reproduced in the present volume, at 751–58.

By Order of the Secretary of the Army:

GEORGE W. CASEY, JR.
General, United States Army
Chief of Staff

Official:

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Joyce E. Morrow".

JOYCE E. MORROW
Administrative Assistant to the
Secretary of the Army
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