



The Chief: The Life of William Randolph Hearst

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David Nasaw's magnificent, definitive biography of William Randolph Hearst is based on newly released private and business papers and interviews. For the first time, documentation of Hearst's interactions with Hitler, Mussolini, Churchill, and every American president from Grover Cleveland to Franklin Roosevelt, as well as with movie giants Louis B. Mayer, Jack Warner, and Irving Thalberg, completes the picture of this colossal American. Hearst, known to his staff as the Chief, was a man of prodigious appetites. By the 1930s, he controlled the largest publishing empire in the country, including twenty-eight newspapers, the Cosmopolitan Picture Studio, radio stations, and thirteen magazines. As the first practitioner of what is now known as synergy, Hearst used his media stronghold to achieve political power unprecedented in the industry. Americans followed his metamorphosis from populist to fierce opponent of Roosevelt and the New Deal, from citizen to congressman, and we are still fascinated today by the man characterized in the film classic CITIZEN KANE. In Nasaw's portrait, questions about Hearst's relationships are addressed, including those about his mistress in his Harvard days, who lived with him for ten years; his legal wife, Millicent, a former showgirl and the mother of his five sons; and Marion Davies, his companion until death. Recently discovered correspondence with the architect of Hearst's world-famous estate, San Simeon, is augmented by taped interviews with the people who worked there and witnessed Hearst's extravagant entertaining, shedding light on the private life of a very public man.

The Chief: The Life of William Randolph Hearst Details

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Tony Smith says

A Great read, this book opened my eyes and answered a lot of questions about business, racism, publishing. The Hearst Empire is still in High Gear.

Lisa says

Really excellent in-depth biography of publishing czar William Randolph Hearst (among other business ventures). There's even a chapter on "Citizen Kane" which was certainly based on Hearst, and which suffered at the box office as a result of Hearst's wrath.

I took the tour of Hearst Castle a little over 40 years ago and it was interesting to read about the many years that it took to build, furnish, and continually refurbish the estate.

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Sara says

Having been to the Hearst castle at San Simeon, I have always wanted to know more about the life of William Randolph Hearst. The inspiration for the classic film "Citizen Kane", Hearst was a wealthy publishing magnate whose knack for creating news reminds one of TMZ's Harvey Levin in today's world. Hearst could take items that on the surface might not mean much and transform them into newsworthy events. He was "a master at constructing news from nothing." Today, the Hearst empire still continues in various forms including sports, magazines, entertainment, and internet. This bio was quite good overall, but the writing style seemed rather dry at times.

Andy says

This book is a very timely read, given what is happening right now with media, Rupert Murdoch, and the interaction between media and politics. There are extraordinary, parallels between Hearst, how much media he controlled, and how he used that control to spread his political beliefs, and what is going on with Murdoch and Fox news.

If you are looking for a book that slams Hearst and the power he had acquired, then this is not the book for you. This is an easy to read, but rather scholarly book, that outlines Hearst's life, his rather impressive attachments, and his struggles. The author includes lots of references, and is very clear when the information he has might not be verifiable, or when there are areas of Hearst's life where the author was not able to collect sufficient information.

Anyone who is interested in media, how much it has influence on the national discussion, or how it impacts our national politics, really should take the time to read this book.

Now I'm off to watch Citizen Kane.....

Jaclyn says

This is a long book! I had a hard time rating this book because I went through so many ups and downs with it. I loved the first 200 pages, was semi-bored by the next 100 pages, and then it went back and forth from there. Much of why I did not like some of this book had more to do with my own political outlook which is so very different from Hearst's. Hearst is the embodiment of everything I abhor about the news media - he started it. He was the kind of man who created the news (as opposed to just reporting it), decided how the people were going to think by dictating exactly what articles and editorials would be printed, and much of what they were going to say. When there wasn't news, he made it up. There was nothing impartial about Hearst or the papers he owned - they pressed his agenda heavily. For these reasons (and the fact that politics generally bore me and he was a big politician - or tried to be), I struggled through many parts of this book.

However, that said, he was certainly a fascinating man who knew what he wanted and had a strong drive to achieve it. This was a very well researched book - I think Nasaw read the biographies and autobiographies of every person in any way associated with Hearst, positive or negative, as well as a lot of non-published material in order to write this book. I felt that this was a relatively unbiased account of Hearst's life and I think that Nasaw did a pretty good job presenting Hearst, his life and accomplishments, and his relationships honestly. After reading it, I feel I have a very good feel for who Hearst was, what made him that man, and how others felt about him. This is as complete a biography as I would imagine one to be as it seems that Nasaw read all the others for us and incorporated them into this account.

If you are interested in the history of the media (from one side of spectrum), or curious about the life of W.R. Hearst, this is a great book and I highly recommend it. However, be forewarned that it is very long and can drag in parts. Hearst lived a long life and this book covers everything from before he was born until after his death, personally and professionally. I don't think the whole book will appeal to many, but I think parts of it will appeal to most - you just have to weed through the rest to get to the parts you're most interested in.

Brian says

The Chief is a well researched and excellent addition to the life of William Randolph Hearst who built the Hearst media empire. This is not a Hearst can do no wrong type of biography and strikes a very balanced tone in assessing the Chief's successes and his failures. There is excellent research done into his family life and how those relationships played out through his parents, his wife and his mistress. His role in newspaper publishing and Hollywood is discussed and for those who had any faith left in the press it will be shattered by the time you are done with this book. The yellow journalism of the Gilded Age and the political machines that were backed by the papers is a fascinating yet scary thing to read about. Don't be put off by the daunting number of pages in the book as it is a quick read and you actually feel as though you want more information in certain areas although given the lack available it is not possible. Overall a truly excellent book and well worth the time to read.

Alex Telander says

A lot of people have been to Hearst castle; that enormous palace located on the Pacific Coast Highway a little after the quaint town of Cambria. If you've been, you know that it was built by incredibly wealthy Hearst family and primarily by William Randolph Hearst. But who is the man behind the marble halls and stairways? And if you haven't been to Hearst Castle, after reading this book, you're going to want to.

In *The Chief* the reader gets an insight into Hearst's life, from the very beginning, with his rise to riches, the glamorous parties he held at his home with celebrities, and how his life came to a close. With almost seven hundred pages of information on the life of one of the riches men in the world, as well as a thorough index and pictures throughout, this is a book that can benefit all.

Originally published on December 3rd 2001.

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Bob Perry says

Let me first say that I had never read anything about William Randolph Hearst before getting this book. I bought it because I had just read a good biography on Joseph Pulitzer and Hearst came into Pulitzer's life right as he made it big and also his health problems started. So that interested me, as did the movie *Citizen Kane*. As a 7th grader somehow I had ended up in a class called Plays, Film and Fantasy. It that class we discussed plays and films and that's the first time I heard of Orson Welles.

I have read several biographies on Orson Welles and also about the film *Citizen Kane*. So I had a natural dislike of William Randolph Hearst. Needless to say, this book was a revelation to me. To my great surprise WRH was a liberal Democrat years ahead of the Democratic party. From the time he arrived in New York City and started to build his empire he was on the side of the working man and against the Trusts that owned the water, sewer, electricity, etc...

He put his mouth where his money was by using his growing newspaper empire to express his views. This really really surprised me. I had only known about Hearst being a rich and powerful tycoon that spent too much money on art and houses. He spent a good part of his life fighting for workers rights and the poor. He made enemies in his own political party because of it. He made a run at some political positions, but his working man philosophy made his party reject him.

This is really a great book. It's easy to read and from what I've read it has the most personal information of any Hearst biography. The author is skilled at making this a fun read too. That's quite a skill for a biographer. Even if you don't have a serious interest in WRH there is so much information about other historical figures that any history buff will thoroughly enjoy this.

Two things that I found funny about WRH that I never knew were 1) he was way over his head in debt his whole life, but made people believe he was extremely rich, 2) he is one of the world's biggest hypocrites

when it mattered most in American history.

All that working man stuff and workers rights went out the window as soon as a real Democrat took the office of President and started to implement these ideas into real life. WRH wrote the whole Conservative playbook that is still used today by Republicans against Democrats to try to convince people that progressive ideas not only don't work, but are either communistic, socialist, or fascist by nature. He also created the hype around universities being over-run with liberal professors and that the United States Government was full of communists trying to destroy the American way of life.

This came so late in the book and his life that I was really surprised when it happened. Thankfully, it destroyed him personally and financially. His editorials that used to be read by most people and politicians were ignored after a couple of years of his hypocrisy. He was or felt he was a world influencer and thought he could sway Adolf Hitler and Mussolini, who he paid to write editorials for him. He was also late to the party to realizing that Hitler was a psychotic murderer with a limited education.

I highly recommend this book to anyone that loves history. WRH was famous from the late 1880's all the way into the late 1940's, so you get information on a lot of famous people along the way. The writing is superb.

David Shaffer says

An epic life length biography on William Randolph Hearst. A iron willed publisher who would use his media empire to attempt to move his agenda forward. A man who ran for many public offices, winning none but a congressional seat.

This biography focuses on his personal, public, business and political life. David Nasaw shows interest in his topic but portrays him warts and all.

A strong recommendation for another David Nasaw biography.

Frank Stein says

A grand portrait of a man who helped define his era and participated in all of its great events.

If Hearst is remembered for anything today, though, it is probably for his portrayal by Orson Welles as the dark and brooding "Citizen Kane" (1941), a tycoon obsessed with mortality and power. There are aspects of Charles Foster Kane in Hearst, as Nasaw points out, but in fact Hearst's most defining attribute was his childish jovialness, something that comes across throughout this biography.

The son of a Western mining millionaire and Senator, Hearst grew up in California bereft of worry or want, blessed with a doting mother who tried to compensate for his father's absences with constant fawning attention. The result was a perpetually joyful and confident young adult, supremely sure of himself and his position in the world. At Harvard, despite his short lineage and outlandish clothes, he bought his way into all the choicest clubs with expensive entertaining and gifts. When he dropped out, he returned to San Francisco

to buy the Examiner newspaper and showered it with money until it bested all of its competitors. He performed a similar trick in New York, where his Journal surpassed Joseph Pulitzer's World after Hearst up bought up all of Pulitzer's writers and comic strip artists. Hearst then snak money into creating some of the first color Sunday comics. No expense was too great, and Hearst always knew his money and his drive could get him through almost any difficulty. The more surprising thing is that his drive caused all this spending to bring in real returns, and his papers paid back what he put into them. He soon bought up enough newspapers in fact to have 10% of the nation's subscribers reading his words every day, 20% on Sundays when his color comics and special Sunday magazine came out.

Yet his papers were largely fodder for his political dreams. It was no secret that he wanted to be President, and he devoted much of the first 50 years of his life to that end. After a short term as congressman, he used the mouthpiece of his papers to try and become the Democratic Party's 1904 presidential candidate. A national outcry against the "radical", however, caused him to lose delegates at the convention. He moved on to a campaign for the New York mayoralty, on his own "Municipal Ownership" ticket. Despite being denounced as a demagogue and a rabble-rouser by all the respectable papers, he came within a hair's breadth of winning, and certainly only lost because of Tammany skulduggery. Another close campaign, this time for the New York governorship as a Democrat, but without crucial Democrat support, caused him to lose faith in the party entirely. His attempts to run a mechanic for President in 1908 on his "Independence League" ticket faded out, and represented his last plausible chance at real power.

Even after he should have lost hope, however, he kept trying, and in any case kept trying to wiggle his way close to the seat of power, using his papers to puff up anyone whom he thought might grant him access and a friendly ear. He would shamelessly praise any politician who invited him, even temporarily, into their inner-circle. As he turned more conservative and isolationist in his later years, he even fawned over Hitler and Mussolini, both of whom became syndicated columnists for the Hearst newspapers in the 1920s, and both of whom were very grateful for the high rates Hearst paid his writers.

There's much more here of course: such as how Hearst created some of the first movie newsreels and how he became the largest player in silent-era Hollywood. Sometimes Nasaw spends too much time dealing with all his picayune projects, and lavish spending habits, but the overall picture is a wonderful look at early 20th century America, seen through the eyes of one of its most peculiar products.

Marti says

This is a more positive portrait of Hearst than I am accustomed to, especially as I just finished Orson Welles' biography. It's easy to see why Welles (who gained fame as a director in the Federal Theater Project) hated the man because by the 1930s, Hearst completely changed course from Progressive to self appointed Communist witch hunter. He was convinced the New Deal harbored anti-American elements and printed slanderous articles to that effect almost daily for years (later, he began attacking Roosevelt personally, a mistake which almost cost him his empire).

Throughout the book I found it hard to figure out if Hearst actually believed anything he said. Was he plain crazy to attack Roosevelt the way he did, or did he simply misread the mood of the country in an attempt to aggrandize himself? One thing was clear, politicians -- even FDR -- did not want to antagonize him. He almost became Mayor of New York on a Progressive ticket (though Tammany stole the election via the use of hired goons at the polls). However, because he had amassed a large number of followers who read his papers, he was able to browbeat the machine into enacting some of his platform.

If the Chief had stayed out of politics and stuck to things he was fairly good at (newspapers, radio and film), his reputation would be better today.

Eleanor says

William Randolph Hearst is one of the more interesting historical characters. He was an enigma; a prude and yet he lived openly with his mistress for thirty-five years. As the author David Nasaw says in the beginning "he was a big man with a small voice; a shy man who was most comfortable in a crowd."

If you're interested in ridiculous amounts of money, enigmas, conglomerates, politicians, architecture, a bad spending habit, the New York night life, mistresses, Zigfield Follies, the silent film era, Hollywood, reporters, newspapers, mining and Forty-Niners, Harvard dropouts and people who were important enough to have an Orson Welles movie made about them, Hearst is the guy for you.

However, if you don't like weighty text, 600 page biographies about one person, or an endless supply of day-to-day telegrams and letters written as long as one hundred and thirty years ago, you might not enjoy this biography.

Just read Hearst's Wikipedia page, pick up "Citizen Kane" at Blockbuster and watch A&E's special on San Simeon on Netflix Instant.

Aaron Million says

This is a very well-written and thoroughly researched biography about one of the most influential - arguably the most influential - newspaper publisher ever. Nasaw spent a lot of time researching this, and you can tell as you read through the book. While some biographers focus much more on the professional or business sides of their subjects, and less on the personal one, Nasaw expertly navigates both and intertwines them - much as Hearst had them intertwined.

Nasaw details the amassing of a fortune in mining by Hearst's father, George, and how his mother, Phoebe, constantly dominated his life and meddled in it until she died, even though Hearst was well into middle age by then. Hearst was spoiled rotten - getting everything and anything that he wanted. This started in childhood and continued throughout his life except for about eight years during the Great Depression. And, even then, the reductions forced on him would have been unfathomable to 99.99% of the rest of the world.

I actually found parts of this book to be somewhat annoying - not because of the writing, but because of Hearst himself. He was just not a likeable person. Megalomaniacal, arrogant, imperial, autocratic, obdurate, war-monger when he should not have been (Spanish American War) and then an isolationist in WWI and WWII. The chapters about him continuing to buy art collections, residences, and the never-ending construction of his various castles just got to be too much for me to read about. I understand why Nasaw did this, as later on he uses it to show just how exorbitant and financially overextended Hearst had become.

Interesting chapter towards the end about the film "Citizen Kane." I wish Nasaw had analyzed the parallels and differences between the film and the real Hearst a little more. Excellent ending about the Hearst dynasty and what happened to it. Nasaw is a fine biographer and I will definitely read some more of his work.

Grade: A-

Myles says

This might as well be an authorized biography because Nasaw's overly sympathetic writing glosses over Hearst's every flaw. This dry and repetitive puff piece is utterly partial to a man who made his fortune exploiting the false promise of universal stardom and inciting inter-cultural animosity. A hedonist from birth to death, Hearst will make readers thankful that he isn't the only model for how a tycoon can act. As for David Nasaw-- well, let's just say I won't be buying his forthcoming volume on Joseph Kennedy (his fetish for lush megalomaniacs hardly entices).

Bob Schnell says

As a big fan of Orson Welles and "Citizen Kane" I thought I was long overdue in learning more about William Randolph Hearst. David Nasaw's biography "The Chief" seemed to be a highly regarded choice and I'm glad I took the time.

While the book is an extensively researched and authoritative life history of a grand American figure, only a short chapter near the end is about Kane. That's fine, as the whole story of Hearst's life, family, work and politics does an admirable job of helping the reader understand why he was much more than a very rich man with a lot of newspapers to use as a bully pulpit. The author gives us a broad and deep portrait of a man with many gifts, and an equal number of flaws, who could have achieved much more if he had only been a bit less stubborn and polemical. The same could be said of his personal life. WRH could dish out the criticism but was never able to take it. Worse yet, he didn't listen to his financial advisers when they told him to stop spending money he didn't have. That failure, along with some unpopular political views that led to boycotts of his papers, led to his downfall.

While I will still enjoy watching "Citizen Kane" I'm glad I now have a better understanding of the man who inspired it, even if the movie doesn't quite do him justice.
