

The Quintessential Outsider

In recent years, I.F. Stone became almost a cult figure. At last, the radical journalist, who was hardly ever called anything but a "gadfly," made himself entirely respectable. He did it by accomplishing a geriatric feat. At the age of 70, he set about learning ancient Greek and succeeded so well that he could read the record of Socrates' trial in the original—and write a book about it.

It was a showy accomplishment, and Izzie was extremely pleased with the effect it created. He enjoyed going to parties and turning the conversation to the Trojan War and the intrigues of the gods and dazzling people with his quotations from classical Greek poetry.

But he should not be remembered for "The Trial of Socrates," remarkable as it is. He should be remembered for a four-page flyer he wrote for 19 years. He was reporter, editor and publisher of I.F. Stone's Weekly. His wife of nearly 60 years, the incomparable Esther, who saw it as her duty to manage Izzie and enforce his dreams, was manager of circulation and production.

Happily, the best of these issues have been collected in two books, "The Haunted Fifties" and "In a Time of Torment." This is the Izzie Stone who informed a generation in trenchant prose and meticulous detail about events in Washington, who stalked hypocrisy down the corridors of power and followed to the letter Thomas à Kempis's dictum, "Fawn not upon the great."

He was your quintessential outsider.

His only access was through the printed word. He was an investigative reporter whose weapons were scissors and paste. He quoted what public officials said in public, not what they whispered on deep background, off the record or "not for attribution."

Nobody understood better than Isadore Feinstein Stone what Washington was all about. He saw it as the greatest guff factory in the world. He flatly refused to deal in this commodity. He neither bought nor sold it in all his years. Because he was self-employed, he did not have the trouble of other reporters, who envied or resented him. He knew what it was like for them:

"There are many ways to punish a reporter who gets out of line. If a big story breaks at 3 a.m., the press officer may neglect to notify him while his rivals get the story. There are as many ways to flatter and take a reporter into camp—private ways, off the record dinners with high officials . . ."

Izzie was short, curly-haired, dimpled. His manner was so ingratiating that people were taken aback by the toughness of his mind. Although skepticism was the informing principle of his approach to the Establishment, he shared one quality with his more conventional and more famous contemporary, Theodore H. White.

Neither Stone, who questioned everything, nor White, who was inclined to give a president the benefit of the doubt, was capable of a second's cynicism. They had the zest and eagerness of cub reporters, and they were hopeless romantics about their trade. Stone said, "For me . . . being a newspaperman has always seemed a perpetual crusade."

"In the darkest days of McCarthy, when I was often made to feel a pariah, I was heartened by the thought that I was preserving and carrying forward the best in America's tradition, that in my humble way I stood in a line that reached back to Jefferson."

Interestingly enough, "In a Time of Torment" includes a book review of White's "Making of the President, 1964." It reveals Stone's charm as a writer, and the rigor of his standards. He calls White "the poet laureate of American presidential campaigns . . . who showed himself almost incapable of saying a harsh word about anyone." He cites White's fulsome praise of Sen. Stuart Symington (D-Mo.), whom Stone regarded as "a leading lightweight." Writes White: "Over each subject, the same executive mind cut with the same bold stroke of action."

"A writer who can be so universally admiring need never lunch alone," Stone observes dryly.

He calls White "the master of the courtly circumlocution," who said of Nixon that he "presents too often a split image."

Adds Stone: "In plain language, it would be said that Nixon was two-faced."

But he is sympathetic to White's problems. He is like the beat reporter who has to be an insider, who has "to be circumspect about the deeper insights of which he is capable." He must not offend his sources, lest they shut him out.

Stone spent his life with his face pressed against the window. He was not wistful about it, and certainly not self-pitying. The wonder of his life and his work was that he showed so many people that outside was the place to be if you really want to know what is happening on the inside.