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The Face of The News

A REPORTER'S LIFE

By Walter Cronkite
Knopf. 384 pp. \$26.95

THE MOST revealing comment in Walter Cronkite's memoir occurs during his account of how he and his colleagues at CBS News covered the assassination of John Fitzgerald Kennedy. Readers of a certain age will recall that Cronkite came close to breaking down on camera that November afternoon in 1963; it was a lapse into pure human vulnerability that touched many Americans and doubtless had much to do with Cronkite's eventual status as "the nation's most trusted person." But this is not what Cronkite is most eager to tell us about that day. Rather, it is this: "Our flash was heard over the CBS News Bulletin slide and interrupted the soap opera 'As the World Turns.' We beat NBC onto the air by almost a minute."

This last is written not in amusement or self-mockery but in unvarnished pride: We beat the competition by one whole minute! Small wonder Cronkite calls his autobiography *A Reporter's Life*, for a reporter is what he has been, first and foremost, his entire adult life. He is now 80 years old, but he looks back on the scoops and headlines of his life with exactly the same boyish enthusiasm with which he pursued them. Over the years he rose to considerable eminence and acquired, as the eminent tend to do, a degree of pomposity, but he never lost the naive, born-yesterday quality that drives the best reporters.

The result is a curious book, part schoolboy chronicle of a life spent in zealous, single-minded pursuit of breaking news, part state memoir of a journalistic bigfoot. The first is considerably more appealing than the second. Far too much space is wasted on Cronkite's version of the prominent memoirist's stock in trade, Famous People I Have Met. Like virtually all journalists who have ventured into this genre, Cronkite does not understand—or has simply lost sight of—the essential truth that the presidents, generals and other lofty scoundrels who occasionally consort with journalists do so in pure self-interest; it is the institutions the journalists represent rather than the journalists themselves that these people court, and exploitation rather than friendship is the only business at hand. Cronkite, alas, proves no less susceptible to illusions of intimacy than others before him.

It is when he writes about such matters that Cronkite is at his least attractive: pontifical, self-congratulatory, patronizingly avuncular. These were characteristics of his television manner in the late years of his career, when he had perhaps begun to believe all that "most trusted man in America" malarkey. But he wasn't always that way. The young Walter Cronkite was an eager-beaver reporter who

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CBS NEWS PHOTO

Walter Cronkite reporting from the United Nations in 1950 (left) and in 1981 at the CBS News anchor desk

put in a long apprenticeship far from the limelight that eventually shone so brightly on him. Youth isn't always more interesting than maturity, but in Cronkite's case it most certainly is.

Cronkite was born in Kansas, moved to Texas when he was a boy, but at some level has remained a Kansas boy all his life. When he was a schoolboy in Houston, he fell under the influence of a man named Fred Birney, "a newspaperman who thought that high schools ought to have courses in journalism" and "spent a couple of days each week circulating among Houston's five high schools preaching the fundamentals of a craft he loved." He taught his acolytes not merely the nuts and bolts of news coverage but more important matters: "Every criticism, every suggestion, made clear that there was a sacred covenant between newspaper people and their readers. We journalists had to be right and we had to be fair."

Cronkite tried college, but not for long. He wanted to be out there scooping the competition, of which there was plenty in those days when every city had several newspapers and when radio was beginning, however tentatively, to enter the news business. He moved through a number of jobs in the years between the wars: as a reporter for the Houston Press, an announcer for a Kansas City radio station, a correspondent for United Press, a play-by-play broadcaster for University of Oklahoma football games, a PR man for Braniff Airways. He was ambitious, intelligent, willing to listen and to learn; by 1949, after covering the European war for United Press, he had made his way to Washington, and soon enough found himself in front of a television camera.

This was at WTOP-TV, where CBS sent him to get an evening news broadcast under way. He had "primitive equipment, no film except that which we shot locally, and a limited budget." He also had no experience with television at all, which put him on an even footing with just about everyone else in the new world of TV news. He did have one thing, though: "a gut feeling that television news

delivery ought to be as informal as possible," spoken "to that single individual in front of his set in the intimacy of his own home, not to a gathering of thousands."

From there on out it was a long uphill ride. The 1952 conventions—"a brief moment of glory in television's infancy before the politicians discovered its vast potential and set out to master it"—set him on the path to "anchor-man," a word coined at CBS and a job shaped in large measure by Cronkite himself. In that capacity he presided over CBS's coverage of civil rights, Vietnam, the '60s and the space program. Of the latter he was a shameless booster, and he remains unapologetic unto this day for his geewhizzical coverage; indeed, he goes so far as to make the outlandish claim that in this century of the Holocaust and the technological revolution, "the one event that will dominate the history books a half a millennium from now will be [man's] escape from his earthly environment and his landing on the moon."

That claim, however silly, is right in character; the speaker is not Walter Cronkite, gray eminence, but Wally Wonder, boy reporter. This side of the man produces an occasional irritating puerility such as the above, but it also serves as a steadying influence. As a consequence of his labors in television, a great deal of fame and considerable wealth came Cronkite's way. He can get complacent about this, but he frequently steps back to take a nice, self-mocking swipe at himself, and he is very much aware that "the TV industry [is] a huge building dedicated to the business of entertainment," with journalism "in an attached annex next door." He deplors the effect this has on news coverage, ranging from "docudramas" ("a dangerous cinematic form") to "sound-bite journalism." Though he pulls most of his punches when he writes about what has happened at CBS since he left the anchor's chair, he leaves no doubt that just about everything there was better in his own day. He is right. ■

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