

How Clifford Irving Sold

By Stephen Isaacs

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NEW YORK, Jan. 29 —

Suppose you are a book publisher. Further, suppose one of your authors offers you a crack at one of the publishing coups of all time.

The coup, you are assured, will be the 100 per cent, bona fide autobiography of Howard R. Hughes, the most secretive and perhaps the most fascinating man in the world.

You have your doubts.

After all, this author has always been one of your, well . . . your more flaky authors, a bit of an adventurer, a promiser of big things, who always delivers too late, who always tries to nudge a bit more in advance royalties.

After all, every other author and journalist in the world wants to get at the reclusive Hughes. Maybe it's just another promise.

But, because you want the coup — if it's there to be had — you humor him, you say we'll go along if it's real.

Soon, you start finding out it's not just talk. Corroboration starts flowing in. The author is calling you from this place and that, saying he's meeting Hughes. And, the next thing you know, he has documented prof, letters from the man himself.

The excitement of the impending coup overwhelms your customary caution. Since you want to believe it, you talk yourself into believing it.

And you get had.

This, apparently, is what has happened to the McGraw-Hill Book Co., a publishing house noted for its integrity, a house known for its high-priced and authoritative technical publications. — and for the "autobiography" of Howard R. Hughes.

Early Questions

On Dec. 7, 1971, when McGraw-Hill announced hurriedly that it was publishing Hughes' own life story, this reporter asked Donald

McGraw-Hill His

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Latest Project

Wilson, corporate vice president of Time, Inc. (which was, for \$250,000, to run three excerpts of the book in its Life magazine), how he was so sure that this was the real item.

"Oh, we're absolutely positive" Wilson confided. "Look, we're dealing with people like McGraw-Hill. And, you know, we're not exactly a movie magazine. This is Time, Inc., and McGraw-Hill talking. We've checked this thing out. We have proof."

He seemed offended, as did Al Leventhal, vice president of McGraw-Hill's book division, that anyone would have the temerity to question the veracity of one of their undertakings.

They had all become true

believers, because they had wanted desperately to believe.

Because they wanted the coup, neither of the publishing firms did any checking into the author's claims. They wanted the coup so badly that they feared, as the author warned them, that they might lose what they had if they probed too far.

All they had for corroboration was 999 pages of what the author, Clifford Irving, said was a transcript of 100 hours of tapings he had with Hughes, Irving's travel and expense receipts, several letters purported to be in Hughes' hand, and two cancelled checks, totaling

\$600,000, with the endorsement of H. R. Hughes on the backs.

They checked the handwriting with one graphology firm, and it said the writing was Hughes'.

That was all. No pictures of Hughes. No nothing. Irving said the man forbade that.

Garry Valk, Life's publisher, was not even told details of the project. Several days after the announcement, he told this reporter that "I was afraid I might blurt out something at a party. So I told Ralph (Ralph Graves, Life's managing editor) not to even tell me what he was doing."

Irving had them sewn up.

Manuscript Convincing

He had also provided them with a whale of a manuscript.

Graves will say in an article to be published in Life's issue on sale Monday that "I was skeptical about anything involving Howard Hughes" but was convinced by those 999 pages of transcript.

"It was marvelous stuff," his article says. "Outspoken, full of rich and outrageous anecdotes, as well as detailed accounts of Hughes' youth, his movie-making, his career in aviation, his business affairs, his private life, his opinions and crotchets.

"He explained why he phoned people on business matters in the middle of the night (he kept strange hours anyway, and it caught them at their weakest moment).

"He explained his philosophy of business negotiation (one man always plays lion, one man plays donkey, and it is always better to be the lion and eat the donkey).

"He told business yarns ranging from high finance in TWA (Trans World Airlines) to the time a high-ranking corporate friend was caught swiping a box of cookies from the supermarket. Even the boring parts were persuasive: Howard Hughes has always been fascinated by the minutiae of aircraft design and performance, and the transcript had lots of it. I think we had all sat down to read with hope but with severe doubts. We finished with the conviction that these 1,000 pages of talk were authentic."

From - that moment,

Graves and his assistant managing editor, David Maness, were certain they had Hughes' life story, and they planned to syndicate excerpts abroad, as well as publish three 10,000-word segments in Life, along with Irving's own story of how he got Hughes' cooperation.

They did not, however, show the manuscript to their own Frank McCulloch, head of the Time-Life news service in New York. McCulloch, a tough, highly respected newsman, was one of the last journalists known to have interviewed Howard Hughes—back in 1957.

Expert Was Sure

When McCulloch did read the book, it was only after the Howard Hughes he knew had talked to him over the telephone on Dec. 14 and told him the autobiography was a fake.

Even after McCulloch was told that, and was given the manuscript, he was sure the manuscript was authentic.

But he and Graves then undertook an investigation to find out if Irving had been telling the truth about how he got the information for the book.

On Jan. 20, Graves and McCulloch grilled Irving for four hours. Irving stuck to his story.

Thursday night, Irving finally told McCulloch that the two McGraw-Hill checks made out to H. R. Hughes and another for \$50,000 that he had purchased to the order of H. R. Hughes, had been deposited by his wife, Edith, in a Swiss bank, and the money later withdrawn by her.

With Irving's credibility now somewhat in question, there remains, of course, how he got the material—a

question still very much unanswered.

It began a year ago, when Irving called his editor at McGraw Hill, Robert Stewart, to ask Stewart whether he could tell Howard Hughes, supposedly the real Howard Hughes, that McGraw-Hill was his publisher.

He told Stewart that he had sent Hughes a copy of his last book, "Fake," (which McGraw-Hill published in 1969) and that Hughes had written him a letter praising

his sympathetic handling of the subject of the book, Elmyre de Hory, an alleged art forger Irving had met on the Spanish island where he lives.

More Letters

Irving told Stewart that, furthermore, Hughes had written him two more letters, both in January, and he thought he might be able to talk Hughes into collaborating on a biography. Stewart, after conferring with Leventhal, told Irving to go ahead.

Soon thereafter, Stewart and Leventhal started getting calls from Irving from various places where, Irving told them, he was meeting with Hughes.

Last March, Irving appeared in New York bearing a book contract between him and Howard R. Hughes, signed by him and Howard R. Hughes, and dated March 4.

McGraw-Hill could not do any checking, however. Irving insisted that Hughes had told him he would back out of the project if that were done—that Irving had to guarantee complete secrecy.

Leventhal, anxious to preserve the coup, complied.

On March 23, Irving got McGraw-Hill to sign a contract with him for the Hughes book for \$500,000 in advance royalties. Irving was paid \$100,000 of that three weeks later.

The Selling Game

McGraw-Hill then immediately went to work selling.

It confided its coup to

Dell Publishing Co. and contracted with it (for several hundred thousand dollars) for paperback rights, and with the Book-of-the-Month Club for book club rights.



Clifford Irving, right, with an unidentified man, interviewed in New York Friday. Associated Press

'Mrs. Irving' Calls Bank

ZURICH, Switzerland, Jan. 29 (AP)—A woman who identified herself as Mrs. Clifford Irving, wife of the American writer, has telephoned Swiss police to say that she withdrew the \$650,000 intended for Howard Hughes from a Zurich bank account, investigators announced today.

Zurich District Attorney Dr. Petre Veleff said the caller from New York Friday night said she was ready to come to Zurich next week to answer questions concerning the case.

The woman who withdrew the money from a Swiss credit bank account here is wanted on several counts of fraud, according to an international warrant issued six days ago. The warrant was made out after a criminal complaint was filed by Mc-

Graw-Hill Inc., the New York publishers of a disputed Hughes book authored by Irving. They said they had paid the money to Hughes.

The district attorney said the woman told police Irving had made a statement to American investigators saying she had opened the account.

A Swiss police request for confirmation radioed Friday night to the Washington bureau of Interpol, the international police organization, drew only the answer that the Irvings would be questioned in New York on Monday, Veleff said.

Meanwhile, in Majorca Richard Suskind, a researcher employed by Irving, said he and Irving met at a Florida motel last June

with a man he is convinced was Hughes.

Suskind said Hughes "offered me a prune and we talked for a minute or two about one thing and another." Suskind said he reported this in an affidavit to the New York State Supreme Court.

Suskind, in a telephone interview from his home in Majorca, said he had never seen Hughes before the meeting in the motel and had seen "just his photos." He added that he was in the room with the recluse industrialist about two minutes.

Asked if he thought Irving's purported autobiography of Hughes was authentic, Suskind replied: "Absolutely." The researcher said the Florida meeting took place on June 12, 1971.