

Hughes: A Life Out of Sight

Reviewed by Russell Sackett

The reviewer, currently a free-lance writer, covered Howard Hughes extensively as a senior editor of *Life* and a national correspondent for *Newsday*.

Long before it was considered chic, Jim Phelan was an investigative reporter, and a good one. The Saturday Evening Post, to which he was a regular contributor, was still a weekly magazine, only beginning to discover how to lose money, when he first tackled the Howard Hughes story.

Hughes, whose regard for the press even in those days was baleful, reacted with typical grace; Phelan was offered a substantial check and unlimited free travel via TWA, which Hughes owned at the time, if he would simply forget about the story. Certain other writers, not unlike certain political figures, had and have rationalized taking Hughes' money. Phelan declined, marking him among Hughes' legions as a man to be watched closely. (On two later occasions, Hughes agents would manage to obtain copies of Phelan's manuscripts before he could even get them to his publishers.)

As Hughes systematically dropped from sight, Phelan persisted, accumulating massive files and cultivating reliable sources under the most trying circumstances. He became a leading authority on the strange and powerful man whose consuming wish to be left alone would take him past eccentricity and into the grotesque, his wealth subsidizing at great cost a style of life whose wretchedness and isolation no Skid Row derelict could envy.

Unfortunately, status as a responsible authority was no great asset in the Hughes market. Secure in the knowledge that Hughes would never surface to prove them liars, many editors chose to indulge their fantasies rather than to speculate on the meager evidence. The bull market was in hypotheses that Howard Hughes was running the CIA; that Hughes was dead and the CIA was running his organization; that Hughes was rigging a Caribbean island for a takeover, Dr. No style, of the world; that Hughes was crackers in Switzerland. That sort of thing. Hughes would issue denials, but he would deny the truth also, and who would believe an invisible billionaire?

It is pleasant to be able to report that responsible reporting and Jim Phelan have prevailed, for the mo-

ment at least. With the trust and collaboration of two eye-witnesses to Howard Hughes' incredible solitude right up to the end last year, Phelan has produced the first of what promises to be an avalanche of books kicked loose by the billionaire's death and the graceless scramble for his vast estate. And it is a very good book indeed.

Hughes' surpassing achievement, Phelan argues—more impressive and successful by far than the world's largest flying boat, his movie, "Hell's

Book World

HOWARD HUGHES: The Hidden Years. By James Phelan
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Angels," his introduction of flush-riveting to airframe manufacture, or the support systems he devised for Jane Russell's anatomy—was what the author calls Hughes' "Secrecy Machine." It not only made life miserable for reporters, but enabled Hughes to dodge service of court orders, to avoid taxes and to force the whole rotten world to deal with him only through plenipotentiaries who were themselves never permitted to see him, and whom he could renounce at will.

At the heart of the Machine was a handful of purposeful and uncommunicative men to gladden the heart of an Ian Fleming. They were known as the "Palace Guard," or the "Mormon Mafia"—all but one of them were Mormons, and they took their orders from Frank William (Bill) Gay, a key Hughes executive of long standing who was also a Mormon. These men attend-Hughes' basic needs and catered to his caprices around the clock, handling his mail, filtering incoming phone calls, feeding him, giving him enemas, bathing his bedsores, running his ubiquitous movie projector—keeping the world away from him, and him from it.

Toward the end, the Machine even protected Hughes from himself, a classic science fiction climax wherein

the master is engulfed and absorbed by his own monster. During most of his last 15 years, Hughes was every bit as undernourished and pain-wracked and autistic as the evidence indicated—not dead, as a lot of experts prospered by speculating, but hardly alive in the acceptet sense either. However, Phelan's sources—Palace Guard alumni Gordon Margulis and Mell Stewart—relate touchingly how Hughes, stimulated by the emergencies prompting his series of flights from one sealed hotel room to another, from Nevada to Paradise Island to Nicaragua to Vancouver to Nicaragua to London to Freeport to Acapulco, began to renew interest in humanity and the world outside his own tightly drawn drapes. Two strangers looked at him as he escaped from Paradise Island ahead of government police—and nothing dreadful happened. He strolled into the lobby of the hotel in Vancouver under his own power and was recognized and greeted by a stranger (it turned out to be one of his own minions he hadn't seen in years). Again, life went on. He discovered a renewed zest for flying.

These outcroppings of normal behavior were perceived as dangerous by a palace guard programmed to Hughes' isolation, and, where feasible, quickly stifled. In Vancouver, Hughes suddenly admired a picture-window view of the harbor and ventured that

this might make a suitable sitting room, which he had not had in years. The guard blanched, and then stammered that passing helicopters could easily take pictures of him—"Here is your room, Mr. Hughes." And Hughes was led into yet another tiny bedroom with sealed windows; soon, he climbed back in bed and began watching a movie; life returned to abnormal.

Another dangerous onset of sociability occurred at Nicaragua, a country which, aside from poor communication facilities and earthquakes, Hughes admired very much. In a rush of gratitude, Hughes arranged a meeting with President Anastasio Somoza and U. S. Ambassador Turner Shelton. Mell Stewart is summoned from eternal standby to spend hours bathing and trimming and shaving Hughes for the meeting, which lasts nearly an hour and is marked by cordial, ungloved handshakes. It would happen once more, before Hughes fell and broke a leg in London. But after that he never again got out of bed under his own power until his death more than two years later.

In some literary quarters there has been a tendency to cite Howard Hughes as the modern apotheosis of solitude-seekers. Nonsense, says Phelan. The gap between Thoreau at pond-side, contemplating the lot of mankind, and a ravaged Howard Hughes sitting naked in a sealed hotel bedroom, flicking his attention from the umpteenth screening of "Ice Station Zebra" to the excruciating logistics of his next marathon trip to the bathroom over a fresh path of Kleenex put down to protect his feet from contamination from carpet germs, is not the difference between 19th- and 20th-century solitude, but between well and sick.

Hughes died, Phelan gently observes, "as he had lived, turned inward." His wealth was beyond comprehension, but his personal possessions "would have made only a small pile in one corner of his last darkened room."