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# The Bomb That Hersey Dropped

HISTORY was made when the atom bomb was dropped in Hiroshima, and journalistic history when the American magazine "The New Yorker" devoted the whole of one issue to John Hersey's 30,000-word report of the event. Few happenings in the world of journalism have excited so much public interest; and the action of "The New Yorker" was to some extent paralleled by "The New Zealand Herald," Auckland, in presenting a special supplement containing the "New Yorker" article. Hersey's "Report on Hiroshima" was also broadcast in its entirety in the U.S.A., and later by the BBC and was heard in New Zealand.

The background story of how Hersey came to write his article, of how "The New Yorker" came to treat it in the way they did, and of its impact on the reading public is told here by ALISTAIR COOKE, BBC correspondent in New York.

TO its devotees *The New Yorker* is a unique weekly magazine of social satire, superior criticism, and, above all, funny cartoons that represent the best work of America's top comic draughtsmen. In the past few years it has become a cliché to remark that its regular feature, "The Talk of the Town," is the parent of a modern conversational

style in writing that has many imitators and no equal. Until Thursday, September 5, 1946, all this constituted *The New Yorker's* main claim to fame.

On that morning *The New Yorker's* subscribers as usual admired the cover (a decorative take-off on holiday-makers); thumbed through the listings of Manhattan's music, movies, night club offerings; folded the paper back comfortably at "The Talk of the Town" to enjoy the clean melancholy satire of Mr. White as he surveyed our cockeyed world from a window on Forty-Third Street. However, for the first time in twenty-one years, Mr. White was missing. There was no "Talk of the Town." Evidently the weekly feature known as "A Reporter at Large" had been set up in the wrong place—on the first page. The puzzled reader now turned one page and another and another. The "reported" story went on and on. Vanished were the high-priced blondes of Peter Arno, the insanities of George Price's glandular families, the twittering clubwomen of Helen Hokinson. Gone, too, were the theatre notes, the sports column, the priestly lectures on books by Edmund Wilson—everything that records the few certainties of a New Yorker's life in an uncertain world. Page after page of this one story, something about a bombing, till at the end of thirty thousand breathless words was the barely explanatory signature—John Hersey.

How this phenomenon imposed itself on the breakfast tables and the consciences, first of New Yorkers, then of the Western world, is now one of the classics of journalistic history.

### Expert on the Far East

It started normally enough with *The New Yorker's* editors calling in John Hersey last autumn to map out an assignment they had for him in China. He had become in the last six of his precocious thirty-two years the most celebrated of *Time* magazine's experts on the Far East. He began with the advantage of being born there, in Tientsin, China, to Roscoe and Grace Hersey, American missionaries. He spoke Chinese before he knew any English, but he was brought back to the United States at 10, and a thorough American boyhood quickly compensated for any Oriental advantages. He went in time to Yale and spent a year, in the mid-thirties, at Clare College, Cambridge. Back in America he achieved the only ambition that interested him and joined the staff of *Time*.

Two years later he got his first big assignment, to do a survey of American relations in the Far East. He talked with Chiang Kai Shek, with Matsuo, and with the General who led the campaign



HAROLD ROSS  
His Magazine came of age

on Bataan. Three years later he remembered the General and decided to write *Men on Bataan*. It is worth noting now as a foretaste of the thing he has done best; namely, the re-creation of the everyday life of people he didn't know in a place where he had never been. Though he was never in Bataan, he went after his picture of the imprisoned men much as Humphrey Bogart reconstructs a murder in one of Raymond Chandler's grisly movies. He dived into *Time's* library of newspaper clippings, he tracked down relatives, handled mementoes, old baseball bats, and talked to the corner druggist. From this vigorous back-tracking he wrote vividly of men dead before he ever heard of them.

### A Balance Redressed

When he sat in *The New Yorker's* office last fall, he had no particular thoughts about the atom bomb, none—that is—that belonged to John Hersey more than to several hundred million other apprehensive souls. But while they were discussing the China assignment, one of the editors confessed to a disappointment in the general coverage of the atom bomb. Every paper in the United States, he argued, had printed vast essays on atomic physics, had explained in articles and diagrams what it felt like to be a neutron slowly approaching a nucleus. But nobody had described what it felt like to be a human being exposed to the swift approach of the bomb itself. Hersey agreed to try and redress the balance.

He went to Hiroshima with no special privileges over and above the credentials of a war correspondent. He mooched around the ruined city, visited a hospital, and eventually went through their records of discharged patients, from whom he finally picked out a dozen or more. Then he went off to track them down. He got an interpreter, narrowed the selection and then spent a month with his chosen six—a Japanese minister, a factory office girl, a doctor, a tailor's war widow, a staff physician of the Red Cross Hospital, and a German Catholic priest. In memory he coaxed

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