

# A picture-perfect rogue's gallery

Review by  
DAVID HAYES

“LITERARY journalism,” in which reporters incorporate fictional techniques into factual accounts of people and events, is a style which many believe was created by the so-called New Journalists of the 1960s — Tom Wolfe, Joan Didion and Gay Talese among others. Not so. Two of the giants of literary journalism were active from the 1940s to the mid-1960s.

A.J. Liebling and Joseph Mitchell

## UP IN THE OLD HOTEL

BY JOSEPH MITCHELL

Random House, 718 pages, \$34.50

were close friends whose best work appeared in *The New Yorker*. They wrote about what that magazine referred to as “lowlife,” the rogues and rascals and working stiffs who could be found in the city’s saloons and greasy spoons and old hotels. Liebling, who died in 1963, is a journalistic legend: his many books and collections of articles have remained in print (or been reissued), and one, *The Press*, is regarded as the forerunner of modern press criticism. Mitchell, who is still alive (he’s in his eighties), is much less well known. He has published nothing in nearly 30 years and has refused to allow his five out-of-print books to be republished.

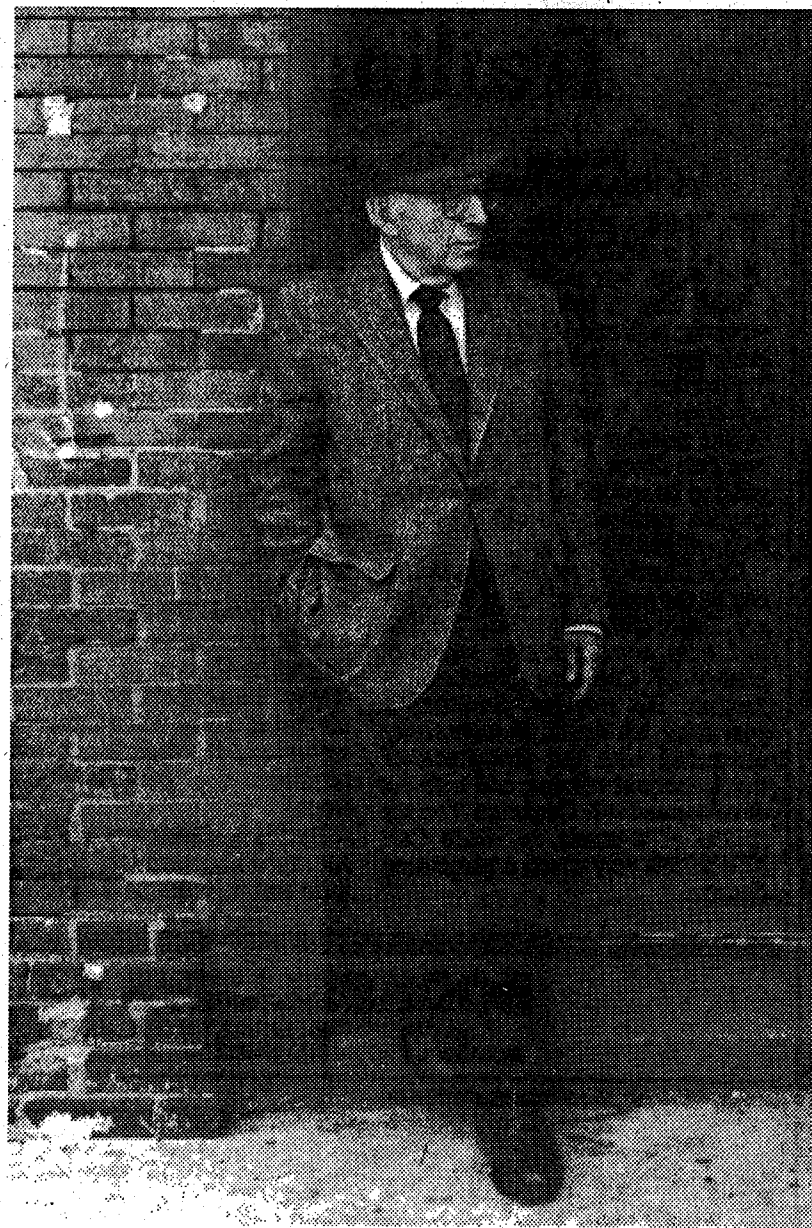
Until now. *Up in the Old Hotel* contains four complete Mitchell books — *McSorley’s Wonderful Saloon* (1943), *Old Mr. Flood* (1948), *The Bottom of the Harbour* (1960), and *Joe Gould’s Secret* (1965) — plus seven articles never before published in book form. Most of them are true stories, although a few included in *McSorley’s* are fictional, and Mitchell describes *Old Mr. Flood*, whose title character is a composite, as fiction that was solidly based on facts. (He may simply be more honest than many creative nonfiction writers today.)

Mitchell, like Liebling, is a mas-

terly stylist. His prose is graceful, vivid, vigorous and alliterative. Its effect is cumulative; he’s best appreciated when quoted at length. I read and reread this passage from the opening paragraph of a 1959 article entitled *The Rivermen* several dozen times without tiring of it:

“I often feel drawn to the Hudson River, and I have spent a lot of time through the years poking around the part of it that flows past the city. I never get tired of looking at it; it hypnotizes me. I like to look at it in mid-summer, when it is warm and dirty and drowsy, and I like to look at it in January, when it is carrying ice. I like to look at it when it is stirred up, when a northeast wind is blowing and a strong tide is running — a new-moon tide or a full-moon tide — and I like to look at it when it is slack. It is exciting to me on weekdays, when it is crowded with ocean craft, harbour craft, and river craft, but it is the river itself that draws me, and not the shipping, and I guess I like it best on Sundays when there are lulls that sometimes last as long as half an hour, during which all the way from the Battery to the George Washington Bridge, nothing moves upon it, not even a ferry, not even a tug, and it becomes as hushed and dark and secret and remote and unreal as a river in a dream.”

But much of the best writing in the book is about people — surely Bill McSorley, proprietor of McSorley’s Saloon (“the kind of person who minds his own business vigorously”); Joe Gould, a Greenwich Village eccentric whose nickname is Professor Sea Gull; Louie Morino, who runs Sloppy Louie’s restaurant; a bearded lady who is for the most part proud of her circus career; a calypso singer performing at a late-night Harlem “picnic.” Mitchell has a sharp eye for detail and he is an astute judge of character, but there is nearly always a sense of respect and affection for even his most raffish subjects, as in this description of Johnny Nickanov, a boastful gypsy con artist: “Johnny is short, pot-bellied, and jaunty. His face is round and swarthy and sprinkled with



Joseph Mitchell, an impressive stylist, has been unjustly neglected.

smallpox scars. He has high cheekbones and a flattened nose. Because of a cast in his left eye, there is always an alert, skeptical expression on his face; he looks as if he does not believe a word he hears.”

It’s hard to talk about literary journalism and not consider poetic licence. In the author’s note to *Old Mr. Flood*, Mitchell writes: “I wanted these stories to be truthful rather than factual. . . .” Throughout Mitchell’s nonfiction, quotations are rendered as soliloquies that seem to modern ears too articulate and perfectly constructed to be true. In one case, Sloppy Louie Morino is telling the story of an old lady who is a regu-

lar customer. He utters a 1,300-word quote that sparkles like a tray of gems, pauses for breath to answer a fishmonger’s question, and resumes his story for another thousand or so words. It might not match a tape-recorded transcript of Mitchell’s conversation with Sloppy Louie (had one been made), but I don’t doubt the truthfulness of the encounter, nor of Mitchell’s impressive craft.

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