Unraveling the Webs of Intimacy and Influence: Willie Morris and *Harper's* Magazine, 1967–1971

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During his tenure as editor of Harper's, *Willie Morris shaped a creative, defiant writing culture for the magazine, one that produced some radical examples of New Journalism. Was his editorial risk-taking admirable and important, or arrogant and self-indulgent?*

In 1967, thirty-two-year-old Willie Morris ascended to the position of editor-in-chief of *Harper's*, the oldest general interest magazine in the United States. During that era of the late 1960s and early 1970s, New York City's literary society embraced editors and writers that bucked the convention of reporting the news in an objective, non-participatory voice. Some of these names—Joan Didion, Norman Mailer, and Tom Wolfe—have risen to a mythical status. They are synonymous with the New Journalism movement, the literary journalists of that time. At *Harper's*, Morris tried to create a revolution in reportage and journalistic prose that was as renegade and inflammatory as what was happening in the streets. Thus, this chapter of New Journalism's history gives rise to a debate: Was Morris's editorial risk-taking admirable and important, or was it arrogant and self-indulgent? Perhaps, as the interviews and literature discussed in the following pages suggest, it was both.

At its heart, the writing culture that evolved under Morris's leadership was driven at first by a love of language, which then developed into a commitment to audacious prose that embraced the defiant ideas and spirit of the day. As Morris himself explained, he aimed to create "a magazine young and courageous enough to carry the language to its limits, to reflect the great tensions and complexities and even the madnesses of the day, to encourage the most daring and imaginative and inventive of our writers, scholars and journalists—to help give the country some feel of itself and what it is becoming."[1] According to him and his supporters, this sense of mission ultimately led to his demise as editor and to the staff walkout that followed. The story of Morris's rise and fall raises the question of whether the challenging, evocative journalism that Morris championed put him at odds with *Harper's* magazine's financial backers, or the demands of the marketplace, or both, or whether the truth came down to something more subtle and complex.

Though Morris may no longer be well remembered for his role in the New Journalism—and *Harper's* may no longer be well remembered in its role as one of the organs of the literary journalism of his day—his contributions were nevertheless important. Morris made *Harper's* a forum for such paragons as Didion, Marshall Frady, David Halberstam, and Gay Talese,[2] but perhaps his most salient contribution came through his efforts to bring aboard Norman Mailer. In order to entice Mailer to submit a story about his arrest at a 1967 Vietnam protest, Morris and executive editor Midge Decter first secured the writer a book contract.[3] The result was "The Steps of the Pentagon," which took up the entire *Harper's* March 1968 issue, and came out in book form as *The Armies of the Night*. Tom Wolfe included an excerpt in his defining collection, *The New Journalism: With an Anthology*, and in his introduction explained its

significance in linking literature with this newly emergent form: "Here was another novelist who had turned to some form of accursed journalism … and had not only revived his reputation but raised it to a point higher than it had ever been in his life."[4]

But beyond the particulars that link *Harper's* with the New Journalism that has survived in popular memory there is a far more important story: Morris's efforts at creating a culture of gutsy innovation. The Morris tenure at *Harper's* offers evidence of how writers encourage and undermine each other, how individual writing processes meet in a common space, and how shared experience leads to cultural change. Influenced by anthropologist Clifford Geertz's assertion that man is "suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun," this study defines "writing culture" as a web of intimacy and influence.[5] A close reading of the monthly issues edited by Morris, from June 1967 to April 1971, of the books and articles written by him and his inner circle, and of more than twelve hours of interview transcripts, reveal this culture.

Many *Harper's* veterans have committed to paper their memories of working with Morris at the magazine; the research in this study supplements these offerings with a series of in-depth interviews conducted in 2007 with *Harper's* staffers John Corry, Midge Decter, Larry L. King, Robert Kotlowitz, and Lewis Lapham. An annotated bibliography lists more than two thousand works about and by Morris.[6] Each opens a window into journalism history, but they have not been integrated in a way that would elucidate the evolution of the magazine's overarching writing culture. While Morris's accounts of what occurred focus on his efforts to protect writers and their work from external profit-oriented pressures, this study's interviews opened an avenue for members of his staff to offer a deeper understanding of the forces affecting them. In part, in these interviews they articulated the challenges that writers create for themselves. As Grant McCracken has instructed: "The purpose of the qualitative interview is … to gain access to the cultural categories and assumptions according to which one culture construes the world. ... It is the categories and assumptions … that matter."[7]

Previous scholarly work has justified this study's analytical methods and theoretical underpinnings. Donald Matheson's work on journalistic identity and Barbie Zelizer's theory of journalists as interpretive communities support the use of interviews and texts as avenues through which the work of writers can be explored. Matheson says journalists come to understand and interpret their work by positioning themselves within the context of a journalistic community.[8] Zelizer posits journalistic community is created through discourse, which she finds reflected in autobiographies, memoirs, and interviews.[9] These notions of community call forth the work of Max Weber, which laid the groundwork for Geertz's "webs of significance" concept in its stance that a person's actions could have meaning at the individual level, but also in reference to a larger community.[10]

Such research moves beyond the "great men" approach to media history in that it uses interviews and textual analysis to identify themes that support a greater understanding of the cultural framework in which a group of writers worked. Such a research technique also moves beyond journalism study that uses theories, for example, of framing or agenda setting, by focusing not on the positioning of journalists' work with respect to its ultimate consumption, but on the energy behind the internal processes—both individual and collective—that fueled the writers' creativity.[11]

A Common Burden of Memory
When he promoted Morris to the top editing position, the previous editor-in-chief, John

Fischer, anticipated the young editor would, like the seven editors who preceded him, "put his own stamp on the publication." Cultural divisions may have widened further than Fischer had imagined. Still, Fischer said Morris's background "might have been designed specifically for a magazine editor: i.e., it was rough, varied, and spread over a lot of landscape."[12]

Morris was a product of the public schools in his hometown of Yazoo City, Mississippi, but also Oxford University where he, like Fischer, was a Rhodes Scholar. Fischer noted that Morris graduated from the University of Texas with honors, was elected to Phi Beta Kappa and chosen as the university's outstanding senior "in spite of a journalistic war with the administration."[13] By way of introducing to *Harper's* readers the man he promoted to replace him, Fischer excerpted in the June and July 1967 issues selections from Morris's *North Toward Home*.[14] While the book chronicled "the arrival of a provincial (as he calls himself) in New York City and his first nervous ventures into its literary world," Fischer remembered Morris as "confident and resourceful" from the beginning of his *Harper's* stint in 1963.[15] Morris's steady hand, Fischer said, "surprised nobody, since he had already edited two publications—the *Daily Texan*, student newspaper of the University of Texas, and *The Texas Observer*, a statewide political and literary journal—under circumstances of remarkable turbulence and difficulty."[16]

In the *North Toward Home* selections included in *Harper's*, Morris had detailed his earlier journalistic struggles. His subsequent editorial tenure at the helm of *Harper's* demonstrates how a writer or editor can be born of one culture, in this case the *Harper's* world envisioned by John Fischer, and metamorphose into a new incarnation. From his declared pursuit of "strong and brave and evocative" writing that marked the beginning of his leadership of *Harper's* to his public letter of resignation lamenting the ownership's lack of appreciation for his artistic ideals, Morris provides the defining central character through which to trace *Harper's* foray into New Journalism.[17]

In Morris's article on integration in Yazoo City, Mississippi, the only cover story he authored while editor-in-chief, he explored his tortured relationship with issues of race in America. His story also revealed "the most terrible burden of the writer," a thread he saw running throughout the writing community:

> [T]he common burden that makes writers a fraternity in blood despite their seasonal expressions of malice, jealousy, antagonism, suspicion, rage, venom, perfidy, competition over the size of publishers' advances—that common burden is the burden of memory:
>
> It is an awesome weight, and if one isn't careful it can sometimes drive you quite mad. … a remembrance of everything in the most acute detail from one's past, together with a fine sense of the nuances of old happenings and the most painful reconsideration of old mistakes, cruelties, embarrassments, and sufferings, and all this embroidered and buttressed by one of the oldest of urges, the urge to dramatize to yourself about yourself, which is the beginning of at least part of the urge to create.[18]

The passage validates several layers of symbolic meaning at the heart of *Harper's* writing culture. Morris's own burden of memory drove his passion to confront America's racial history and evolution; his home state of Mississippi served as not only a focal point, but was

also a caricature of the legacy of inequality and injustice with which the whole country grappled. All at once, his words illustrate why he encouraged *Harper's* writers to report from their own hometowns and, by extension, how his interest in America developed. Midge Decter recalled, "If you hung around Willie, if you got serious with him, you got serious about a place called America. He had this thing: 'Go back to your hometown. Let's send everybody back to their hometowns!'"[19]

Morris's comments about writers' common burden demonstrates how he could be a part of the literati—with its jealousies, advances, and the like—but recognize that writing represented an opportunity to be so much more: Being a writer meant confronting personal discomfort, the specters that haunt people in the middle of the night. It meant taking the weight of that feeling and channeling it into words published for consumption by people who may find that a stranger's work has given a voice to their own unarticulated burdens.

In his memoir, John Corry captured a sentiment that the rest of his inner circle colleagues echoed in interviews for this research, that the product of their individual and collective efforts must truly matter:

> Willie's magazine was about something; Willie cared, and late at night, when his cherubic face turned owlish, he would say that the magazine had to matter. He pronounced it "mattuh," but the meaning was clear, and to matter meant something important— life and death and American literature and the soul of the Great Republic. To matter meant width and breadth and vision. To matter meant you cared.[20]

At a time when America had plenty of ghosts—old ones from the holds of slave ships and new ones now floating back from the jungles of Vietnam—selections like these from Morris, Decter, and Corry suggest that *Harper's* writing culture valued going deep, whether into one's self or into a shared past. The *Harper's* writers held to this mission regardless of whether the stories generated enough advertising revenue or were too long for the average attention span in a nation bedazzled by the light of television.

A Common Bond: The Visceral Love of Words

The interviews with the *Harper's* veterans make clear that, at the beginning, an intoxication with language functioned as the common glue that first bound the staffers together. Morris himself learned about "the deep dedication of the serious writer's calling, the hazards inherent in it, the long stretches of loneliness…" from watching writer William Styron and his "emotional connection with his words."[21] Accepting such challenges of the profession, though, was a simple reflection of the core truth "that a writer literally cannot live without his words."[22] Morris expounded on his literary lifeblood:

> *Words!* I was lucky to have grown up in an American place obsessed with words, even in ordinary conversation—their rhythms, sounds, nuances, words in the churches, in the baseball bleachers, on the front porches: the older people giving us as children a great gift … giving us a way to see.[23]

This love of words is not unique to the writers at *Harper's*, but it formed the fundamental

base from which their particular community developed. Larry King recalled a high-minded commitment to language as a unifying theme among the members of *Harper's* editorial circle. "He selected those of us who he thought more or less agreed with him about writing, who were clearly dedicated to writing, the use of the language, to telling our story as best we could," he said. "Willie always said, 'Get it all and get it right, tell it all and tell it right.' We were all really into the use of the language. We all really loved it."[24] Morris told King not to be afraid to use words that readers might not understand. "[Willie] said, 'You can't write down to your audience,'" King said. "I learned more about writing from [his] edits. I had opportunities to say things in a different way. How he edited those first few pieces improved my writing immensely."[25] Although King did not save any of his drafts edited by Morris, King watched how his editor combed through the drafts, paring them and shaping them in detailed ways. From that experience King learned "that I didn't have to use as many words as was my wont." King and his colleague Corry confirmed that Morris was an excellent "pencil" editor in addition to being a "real reporter."

Morris's obsession with words and how they fit together unified the staff with a sense of shared purpose, bridging the gaps in the individual writer's ideological approaches by extolling appreciation and support of craft. "He was just a sucker for a beautiful sentence," said Midge Decter, who served as executive editor during the Morris years.[26] Decter's first article under Morris's chief editorship (her third for *Harper's*) chronicled the struggle for power and satisfying sex lives in which she and her daughters were engaged as women in a male-dominated society. Not only did it represent one of the few contributions from a woman in the Morris years, it also reflected her feelings about words. She wrote, "Words constitute a kind of post amniotic fluid in which [children] grow and are both sheltered from and introduced to their surroundings."[27]

For all their similarities in literary appreciation, the way writers used their words also reflected the variations inherent in individual style. "Willie wrote prettier than I wrote—a little more flowery," King said. "Willie used a dueling sword, and I used a dagger. That's the difference the best I could put it. I told him that he made the world greener than God had made it when he wrote. He'd put a positive spin on nearly everything."[28] These individual styles sometimes came into conflict with the larger vision of what *Harper's* writing came to represent. King gave evidence of this by telling the story of an article he wrote that was rejected. Morris had asked King, a native Texan, for a piece on Dallas, "which is not a town I liked and still don't," King said. "Somehow I couldn't get my hand around that story very well and I turned in a piece that I didn't think was very good. Willie just said, 'Larry, this is not you. This is a piss-poor piece, and I'm not gonna publish this.'"[29]

In an ironic twist, once Morris asked King to make an exception to their shared appreciation for evocative journalism. *Harper's* owner John Cowles Jr. wanted Nelson Rockefeller to be president. One day, King recalled, Morris called him into his office:

> "Larry, I hate to ask you to do it, but I'm gonna ask you for the first time in my life to go in the tank for me."
>
> I said, "What do you mean?"
>
> And he said, "Well, Cowles wants a piece on Nelson Rockefeller and, need I say, he wants it to be a favorable one. I'm not gonna tell anyone else that I'm telling you this, but that's the way it's got to be and I expect you to do it that way."

> I really hated doing it, and I hated the piece. But I was never satisfied with the piece and was always sorry I agreed to do it, but Willie had always done so much for me I didn't feel like I would tell him no.[30]

Morris and his cohort were not happy with arranging words in conventional ways, and their new approaches signaled a bold departure from the carefully clipped and simplified style upheld by Fischer. Robert Kotlowitz, Morris's managing editor, identified a line between inner-circle editorial standards incubating under Morris and the old-guard sentiment when he said, "We were all pointed in the same direction, except the publishing end and some of the older editors [like] Catharine Meyer and Russell Lynes."[31] Larry King felt Morris led a definite divergence from the magazine's prior editorial voice. "[O]ld Jack Fischer … neither comforted the afflicted or afflicted the comforted. And Willie changed all that."[32] King's assertion about Fischer's editorial approach makes an interesting contrast to Fischer's own self-evaluation, presented in the Easy Chair column, which he continued to pen after handing the chief editor's title to Morris. Fischer said, "This column has kept me embroiled in almost continuous combat for the last fourteen years. … From the time George William Curtis began writing the column in 1853, it has been a running affront to the genteel and the leisured."[33]

Fischer's submission also laid out his vision of meaningful writing. He said: "A prime goal must be clarity … the simplest, most precise, and most direct words."[34] Note how this style contrasts with the sybaritic sesquipedalism employed and advocated by Morris. Fischer advocated E. B. White's "Plain Style," typified by a favored phrase of William Strunk, Jr., White's writing teacher at Cornell University: "Omit needless words."[35] That statement, through the multiple printings of Stunk and White's *The Elements of Style*, has influenced the writing culture of manifold journalistic and literary practitioners over the generations.

Fischer contrasted Plain Style with alternatives cast in a more unfavorable vein, "stylistic modes … so much easier." These included "the Murky Academic, as found in practically every doctoral dissertation, or the Rococo Breathless, typified by Tom Wolfe (the youth culture kid, not the novelist), and the Long-Winded Profound, a specialty of *The New York Review of Books*."[36] The challenge to the validity—or at least the skill—of Wolfe, considered one founding fathers of the New Journalism, a form to which the inner circle subscribed and promoted if not by name at least by style, reflects a clear division between the editorial values of Fischer and Morris, the man he handpicked to follow him as *Harper's* top editor.

During a eulogy at Morris's 1999 funeral in Mississippi, David Halberstam used the expression, "We, who were his writers…."[37] By using such a statement, Halberstam evoked the bond amongst members of the inner circle built on Morris's approach, which aimed to create "a magazine young and courageous enough to carry the language to its limits."[38] In pursuit of his ambitious brand of reporting, Morris made quick bets on informal story pitches, often made in the course of spirited barroom banter. Lewis Lapham, who as a freelancer benefited from such a bet, said: "He was a good editor in that way because he would take chances, and he loved talent. He was himself a very talented writer."[39]

"Bitter Hostility Between Art and Money"

The archive of articles published under Morris features classic New Journalism tailored to suit a style characteristic of his controversial *Harper's* leadership: first-person reporting that chronicles direct experience in the search to define a rapidly changing sense of American

identity. Examples of this style are found in King's "Confessions of a White Racist" and Morris's own paean to the integration struggles in his native Mississippi, "Yazoo… Notes on Survival."[40] Beyond that, articles published by Morris revealed internal and external conflicts within Morris himself, his editorial staff, and within the national cultural consciousness. In Morris's first year, the September 1967 issue excerpted 45,000 words of William Styron's novel, *The Confessions of Nat Turner*.[41] The piece, recalled *Harper's* writer John Corry, caused a critical backlash from black intellectuals.[42] Joseph Epstein's piece, "Homo/Hetero: A Way Out," in the September 1970 issue, condemned homosexuals to a state of "permanent niggerdom among men."[43] Soon after the article's publication, Midge Decter arrived to work one morning to find a group of men waiting with pastries and coffee. They greeted her and said, "Come on up. We're having a protest."[44] When Morris was notified about it, he refused to appear—a strategy he employed during times when a socially uncomfortable situation loomed.[45] Decter and Kotlowitz spent the day tending to the situation, which diffused after they met with protesters and discussed the piece.[46]

Morris's efforts to have *Harper's* "carry the language to its limits, to reflect the great tensions and complexities and madnesses of the day," culminated in March 1971 with Norman Mailer's "The Prisoner of Sex," an exploration of the women's liberation movement.[47] Morris often complained that the magazine management's search for profit conflicted with his editorial vision, and when he resigned after publishing "Prisoner" his public narrative focused on a battle between "the money men and the literary men [in which] as always, the money men won."[48] Mailer's article, Morris wrote in his resignation letter, "deeply disturbed the magazine's owners. Mailer is a great writer. His work matters to our civilization."[49]

Lapham's Alaska Story Foreshadows Morris's Own Plight

As a freelancer, Lewis Lapham pitched a story to Morris about Alaska's handling of a $900-million influx of oil money. Morris made Lapham a *Harper's* contributing editor on the basis of that article. When considered with respect to Morris's fate and the evolution of *Harper's* writing culture, the conclusions of Lapham's May 1970 oil piece seethe with irony.

The economic imperatives Alaskans faced in Lapham's story foreshadowed a similar situation in which Morris found himself less than a year later. Lapham discovered that Alaskans were presented with "a question not of what you want, but of what you're willing to give up…. 'You want gas in the car? Okay, you get oil on the beach.'"[50] In Morris's situation, the survival of his *Harper's* writing culture hinged on how much he was willing to compromise his leadership style to accommodate the fiscal concerns of the publishers. Morris knew he wanted a wild, open literary frontier and, in his attempt to leverage his star-level literary status to secure his vision from the executives, he sacrificed himself.

As Lapham observed the dynamic at work in Alaska, he reflected: "Maybe it is the voices that discourage me, or maybe it is the predictable transformation of the frontier. No doubt I suffer from a literary and therefore false nostalgia."[51]

In acknowledging the discomforting conflict between an economic imperative and his own "literary and therefore false nostalgia," Lapham unknowingly identifies common ground that he shared with Morris. His passage captures the philosophical underpinnings driving a man yearning for a story apart from capitalistic reality. But the sword cuts both ways: Reflecting on his state's capitulation to oil interests, an Alaskan told Lapham, "Yeah, well, that's the irony in it. We end up destroying the thing we loved."[52] In his confrontation with the economic

imperative, Morris destroyed the object of his affection, too.

After recounting how Morris had been surprised when *Harper's* owners accepted his hastily mailed resignation, managing editor Kotlowitz said Morris went "running around the office [in shock] shouting, 'They accepted it! They accepted it!' He did just what they wanted him to do. … He was naïve in many ways. He really was 32."[53] Such reflections capture a sense that his relative youth blinded Morris to the possibility that his brash, perhaps impetuous, posturing on behalf of journalistic excellence provided the owners an easy opportunity to release the weight—and cost—of such heady editorial pressure.

"An Age of Tinsel" and "A Crowd of Self-Important Pharisees"

Almost forty years after Morris's departure, the journalism community's interest in the interpersonal drama surrounding the editorial resignations continues to eclipse the actual work these journalists accomplished. For instance, when the *Columbia Journalism Review* plugged King's 2006 biography of Morris, the magazine led with the title, "What Happened in Minneapolis, Willie?" King's book runs over three hundred pages,[54] but the *CJR* excerpt focused on the contentious relations between Morris and *Harper's* owner John Cowles of Minneapolis, and the headline referenced a meeting that occurred in Minnesota prior to Morris's resignation.[55] The circumstances have been documented under which Morris resigned in the spring of 1971, inspiring all but one of the magazine's top editors to quit, but academics have not offered a scholarly treatment of this event in particular or any other detailed holistic analysis of the journalistic offerings of Morris and his crew.[56] Interpersonal vitriol highlights most of the popular coverage, most of it unflattering to Morris's eventual successor as editor-in-chief, Lewis Lapham—the last man standing in the great editorial exodus. But an insistence that commonality must exist among a writing culture's participants releases them from the isolation of historical positioning. It acknowledges that webs of intimacy and influence often evolve in separate ways, but suggests that the points of intersection are also important.

In a review of *New York Days*, Lapham distanced himself from the cult of personality that formed Morris's inner circle. "What Morris presents as a golden age I remember as an age of tinsel," Lapham wrote. "His cast of fearless prophets I remember as a crowd of self-important Pharisees."[57] In a recent interview, Lapham was asked to unpack the phrases "age of tinsel" and "crowd of self-important Pharisees." His criticism, it seems, was not specific to *Harper's*, but more focused on the 1960s in New York City. "I thought the revolutionary rhetoric of the Sixties was a pose," Lapham said. "It was a charade; a toy revolution. The journalists were just along for the ride, to make as much money as possible. I did not take them seriously. They wanted it both ways: romantic/revolutionary figures paid large sums of money for their displays of conscience."[58]

Aside from his review of *New York Days*, Lapham's other work sidesteps Morris. In *An American Album: One Hundred and Fifty Years of Harper's*, Lapham gave Morris only passing mention[59] and did not include "Yazoo… Notes on Survival," Morris's sole article submission during his chief editorship. But when asked for specific details about his direct, though limited experience, at *Harper's* under Morris's direction, Lapham's comments echo members of the inner circle. He appreciated Morris's willingness to take chances in his pursuit of literary talent. And, Lapham said, "Willie and I both agreed about good writing."[60]

Popular accounts of this time report less-than-complimentary words reserved for Lapham by

inner circle writers such as Marshall Frady, David Halberstam, and Larry King. Reflecting their sense of betrayal at Lapham's ascent in the shadow of Morris's fall, they called Lapham "spoiled" and a "pathological liar."[61] The tales make for sensational reading, usually locked in a narrative dichotomy of hero and villain. But, as many inner circle participants acknowledged, ideological divisions among the staff and Morris's notorious proclivity for heavy drinking could not be discounted in understanding the evolution and dispersal of his coterie.

To Morris, said John Corry, "the issue was not unreturned phone calls, the issue was censorship." But Corry felt "a sense of inevitability, a sense it was over" during the months before the mass resignation. "We were on pretty shaky ground," he said. "We could talk about artistic rights and freedom to publish, but the magazine belongs to the person who owns it. Willie'd been good to us and he called in the markers—never overtly, never consciously."[62]

These comments capture Corry's appreciation and allegiance to Morris, but in his reference to unreturned phone calls, Corry calls attention to the editor's habit of eschewing the more unpleasant demands associated with editorial management. Other inner circle members also noted such patterns. Decter recalled how Morris avoided the protest of readers angry about the coverage of homosexuals.[63] King mentioned how Morris would go into hiding before a new issue was published so he could avoid answering writers' questions about whose story would receive top billing for the month.[64]

In an interview, Morris's managing editor Kotlowitz summarized the greatness and vulnerability embodied in his boss:

> [Morris] was so talented, so gifted; he was so unfair to his gifts and talents so often. … He had a serious drinking problem. That's no secret. That became a problem for everybody else. Willie often didn't get in till noon and then would leave around 2:30.
>
> He had a wonderful generous spirit and personal warmth. What you sensed in what you read about him and by him reflected the man. Without his self-destructiveness, he would have been the greatest American editor of the twentieth century.[65]

However, the *Harper's* staff also suggested that beyond Morris's neglect of editorial management details, an ideological chasm formed. Later, it crystallized in such a way that polarized the former colleagues. These issues seemed to be less related to Morris. Societal unrest of the day fueled a counter-counterculture, a movement known as neo-conservatism; Midge Decter and her husband, *Commentary* editor Norman Podhoretz, were instrumental in its establishment. "Everybody drank," she said, but Decter grew fearful as "drugs took over" amongst the younger members of the literary world.[66] Watching as "some people were destroyed," Decter said that facing the drug culture while she had the responsibility of raising teenagers was "one of the things that turned us conservative. I felt the radicals were out to get my children."[67] The pressure of the "radicalized" scene "cut very close to the bone," Decter said, noting that divisions in philosophy were evident within the *Harper's* inner circle. "We were all so very different; probably we were all on the way to a political break-up. It exploded right about the time Willie lost the magazine."[68]

In a piece titled "The Politics of Style," John Corry suggested that left-leaning protesters were often defined by style, not substance.[69] Leaders of the Black Panthers and the women's liberation movement shared similar tendencies to "tantrum a lot" and "wear their oppression

like both a badge and an excuse, and they do not seem to be seriously engaged in anything other than being oppressed."[70] In response, Corry recalled Halberstam warning him "to be careful" in his approach to political and cultural criticism.

Morris was not party to such ideological divisions, Decter said, noting he did not condemn her aversion to the era's radicalism. "He was drunk on fine writing," she said. "That was uppermost with him. Willie was always wooed by a nice sentence. Not so much the politics of the era. Willie was a sucker for a writer—there are not too many editors who are. Now, there's a lot of ideology."[71]

The experience of losing "the perfect job" was heart wrenching, but it was temporary in a way that the legacy they left behind was not, Kotlowitz said. "We knew in our heart of hearts it [the work they created at *Harper's*] was very serious—it would last—that we would all be all right," he said. "We knew that, too."[72]

When Lewis Lapham opted to stay on at *Harper's*, he became lumped in with the moneymen, an enemy of the literary men of Morris's inner circle. In writing his 2006 memoir, King skewered Lapham: "'They will never say of you as they said of FDR, that you are a traitor to your class,' I hissed to Lapham. 'You saw the opportunity to cozy up to power and another rich man's spoiled son and zoomed in like a goddamned homing pigeon.'"[73]

When asked in a recent interview whether he felt his well-heeled upbringing inflamed the vitriol directed at him following his decision to remain at *Harper's*, Lapham identified a cultural bias: "Because my family was in banking and the oil business and I went to Yale, it was unthinkable I could become a writer. I was always under suspicion."[74] Lapham was critical of Morris's brand of idealism. "Willie Morris had this whole idea that there was a bitter hostility between art and money," Lapham said. "That's not necessarily true. J. P. Morgan saved *Harper's* in the 1890s. Morgan gave a $1.5 million loan and never called it. He said it [*Harper's*] was a national treasure."[75] Several scholars, however, including Exman and Winship, suggest that Morgan was no benevolent paternalist, positing the Harper family paid the price of their loan default by relinquishing control of the company.[76] But Morgan was not only the capitalist to intercede on behalf of *Harper's*, Lapham noted. In 1980, *Harper's* was rescued by the largess of Robert O. Anderson, the wildcat oil operator at the helm of the Atlantic Richfield Company who, together with the MacArthur Foundation, established the *Harper's* Magazine Foundation to ensure the magazine's survival. "I thought Willie could have worked things out with [*Harper's* owner] Cowles," Lapham said. "I thought that then. I think that now. That whole attitude: 'You're a philistine,' is wrong, romantic, fantastical."[77]

As for the reporting following the editorial exodus, Lapham said: "You can count on the media most of the time to get the story wrong. The only one to get it right was the London *Economist*."[78] *The Economist* did not embrace the polarized account of capitalism versus art; it gave Morris credit for his editorial accomplishments. It noted that "Mr. Morris's disagreement with the management of *Harper's* was all the more surprising in that his journalistic flair had made the magazine far more readable—in most people's opinion."[79] With regard to Morris's statement that the magazine's management objected to Norman Mailer's "The Prisoner of Sex," *The Economist* editorialized that "it would be a strange management that would object to an article which caused the magazine to be sold out in New York City."[80] Still, the article acknowledged the publisher's dilemma: "*Harper's* had been losing money— just how much is not clear but the amount is considerable—and the search for a scapegoat seems to have brought about the clash between the editorial side and the management."[81] *The*

Economist acknowledged that contemporary magazines focused on specific audiences "such as yachtsman or golfers" were having more luck generating advertising revenue than general interest magazines such as *Harper's*. It concluded, however: "A general slaughter of journalists hardly seems likely to help towards a solution of their problems."[82]

Lapham said his previous experience working for two journals that ceased publication—the *Saturday Evening Post* and *The Herald Tribune*—profoundly influenced his decision to stay at *Harper's* even as others resigned. Prior to their time at *Harper's*, John Corry and David Halberstam worked at *The New York Times* and Morris edited *The Texas Observer*—both publications still in print. "I was in a position unlike the other people," Lapham said, "like an old cavalry officer who had a lot of horses shot out from underneath him."[83] Other members of the editorial inner circle felt Lapham was more like a soldier who had pledged loyalty to their cause only to go absent without leave. But in the present line of inquiry, it is important to remember that when the object of inquiry shifts away from such drama, moving instead toward the foundations of writing culture, seemingly dissimilar characters return to a common table—in this case a shared appreciation for the pursuit of outstanding, long-form, New Journalistic writing. Lapham and, indeed, *Harper's* in the decades after Morris has continued to practice variations of Morris's style of editing and publishing of literary journalism. One evolutionary example occurred in an April 1975 cover story, Tom Wolfe's "The Painted Word." Later evidence appeared in a 2008 book that collected early twenty-first century versions of *Harper's* "reporting in the radical, first-person," a direct descendent of the once *au courant* New Journalism of the Morris era.[84]

Conclusion: An Influential, Fluctuating Force

Willie Morris achieved lofty success as a young writer and editor with a maverick approach to editorial leadership. He supported journalism that would excite people, even anger them, in the course of fulfilling his mission to "give the country some feel of itself and what it is becoming."[85] This research set out to ask what more could be learned about writing from a man and a magazine that had already served as the central subject for several magazine articles and books. It found that while anecdotes of New York's late 1960s literary society abounded in published material, an undercurrent that defined the life of journalists lay scattered in fragmented allusions. This study yielded a harvest of cultural artifacts that, taken together, help to shape an idea of writing culture as an influential, fluctuating force in the lives of journalists.

During interviews, when writers were asked to reflect on the cultural significance of their experience with the writing and editing process, they offered insights not previously documented or they built on previous comments in new ways. While King's affection for Morris was no secret, King earlier had not detailed his scrapped story on Dallas, Texas, or Morris's request that King write a favorable piece on presidential candidate Governor Nelson Rockefeller. Lapham's voice has never been synthesized with the voices of Morris and his inner circle to elucidate a greater understanding of the cultural environment that nurtured their journalistic development. By focusing on writing as a common bond among the writers analyzed, this research allowed Lapham—whose historical positioning had been at odds with Morris's inner circle—to express appreciation for Morris's gifts as an editor, to move beyond the drama of the editorial resignations and remember the writers' bond that first served to connect him with the magazine he served for more than thirty years.

Also, in looking to Lapham's notion of a "literary and therefore false nostalgia," this research found that the *Harper's* archive foreshadowed a dilemma that ensnared the magazine's writers—the notion that there are idyllic pastures where great verse is born, which must lie apart from the lowly troughs where those hungry for profit feed. While Lapham acknowledged a weakness for the literary perspective, his Alaska article recognized its place within a larger economic framework. Conversely, Morris rejected the economic imperative within a larger literary framework. Interviews with *Harper's* staff members suggest that this hardened sense of right and wrong may have been a reflection of youthful idealism, inflamed by the poor choices alcoholism inspires.[86] Still, this choice to take a dramatic—if not reckless—stand in support of his beliefs is part of what made Morris who he was. Regardless of whether they would have taken the same stand, the inner circle issued their resignations as a sign of solidarity with a Morris—whom they loved for all his strengths and in spite of his weaknesses. These stories suggest that writers are complicated individuals operating in complex environments; the study of writing culture offers an avenue to explore these nuanced truths.

The writing in *Harper's* reflected the influence of the larger New Journalism movement, but no other publication of the day inspired work that could be considered as an equivalent to "The Prisoner of Sex" or "Confessions of a White Racist." These articles do not represent a singular apex of New Journalism, but they do exemplify how *Harper's* broke the bonds of traditional journalistic expectations and engaged the magazine's readers in an intimate consideration of compelling cultural issues of that era. Bold and evocative writers flourished in the *Harper's* edited by Morris. He bet on unusual talent that produced journalism that otherwise would have been unsupported. In the process, a rambunctious collective of *Harper's* writers and editors liberated newswork from the bounds of impersonal predictability.[87] In addition to funding the journalistic evolution of Mailer and the inner circle members, several ancillary characters credit Morris's vision for nurturing prize-winning work. Gay Talese, for instance, said a capital infusion from *Harper's* allowed him to finish *The Kingdom and the Power*, his book-length chronicle of the legacy of *The New York Times*.[88] The ideology captured in interviews and memoirs, along with the published archive of the magazine, offers a glimpse into a writing culture that belonged to *Harper's* magazine of the Willie Morris era alone.

Linking the textual archive into the concept of writing culture allowed words committed long ago to paper to lend themselves to fresh insight about the forces that shape writers' work. Cultural anthropologists and journalism studies in the past have explored communities of writers.[89] Earlier studies offered inspiration for exploring "how journalists construct knowledge about themselves" and then create "community through discourse."[90] Now this approach has been extended to consider the evolution of a group of writers working at *Harper's* under Morris. Recognizing that academics never before asked what could be learned from Morris's concept of the "common burden of writers," this work posits that writers' ever-evolving creative drive presents a field for continued cultivation by researchers. It found that definitions of what constitutes "good writing" offer common ground for writers of similar values to come together, but that these definitions are subject to shifting politics.

Still, the oral histories reflect an understanding that the value of their shared work trumped all the drama. Robert Kotlowitz felt that he lost a valued friendship when Midge Decter's evolving political stance steered her to a take a sudden "sharp right turn and out of our lives."[91] While the hurt of being snubbed offers a lesson, he said, "It makes you weary, not a useful lesson."[92] He advocated greater perspective. Kotlowitz said he took solace in the fact that

the work he helped create at *Harper's* "was very serious—it would last—that we would all be all right."[93]

His understanding of the value of a legacy of hard work allowed Kotlowitz to emphasize the importance of following one's calling. "Do what you want to do. Don't compromise," he said. "[Compromise] will cause you to live your life in agony. It's living death."[94] This harkens another defining theme indicative of the *Harper's* writing culture of the Willie Morris years. In different words and in different ways his former colleagues all embraced the philosophy Kotlowitz articulated—they are writers committed to living and working on their own terms. Despite their differences, a central tenet of the culture that brought them together—the commitment to "strong and brave and evocative"[95] work—survived.

Among the courses Berkley Hudson teaches at the Missouri School of Journalism is one entitled The Literature of Journalism, focusing on literary journalism. Journals such as American Journalism, Journalism History, Media History, Southern Cultures, *and* Visual Communication Quarterly *have published his scholarly articles, academic essays, and reviews. For twenty-five years he worked as a magazine and newspaper journalist, including at* The Providence Journal *and the* Los Angeles Times.

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