

Seeking to Understand the World

Literary Journalism of Vincent Sheean

Anish Dave

Georgia Southwestern State University

Series in Literary Studies



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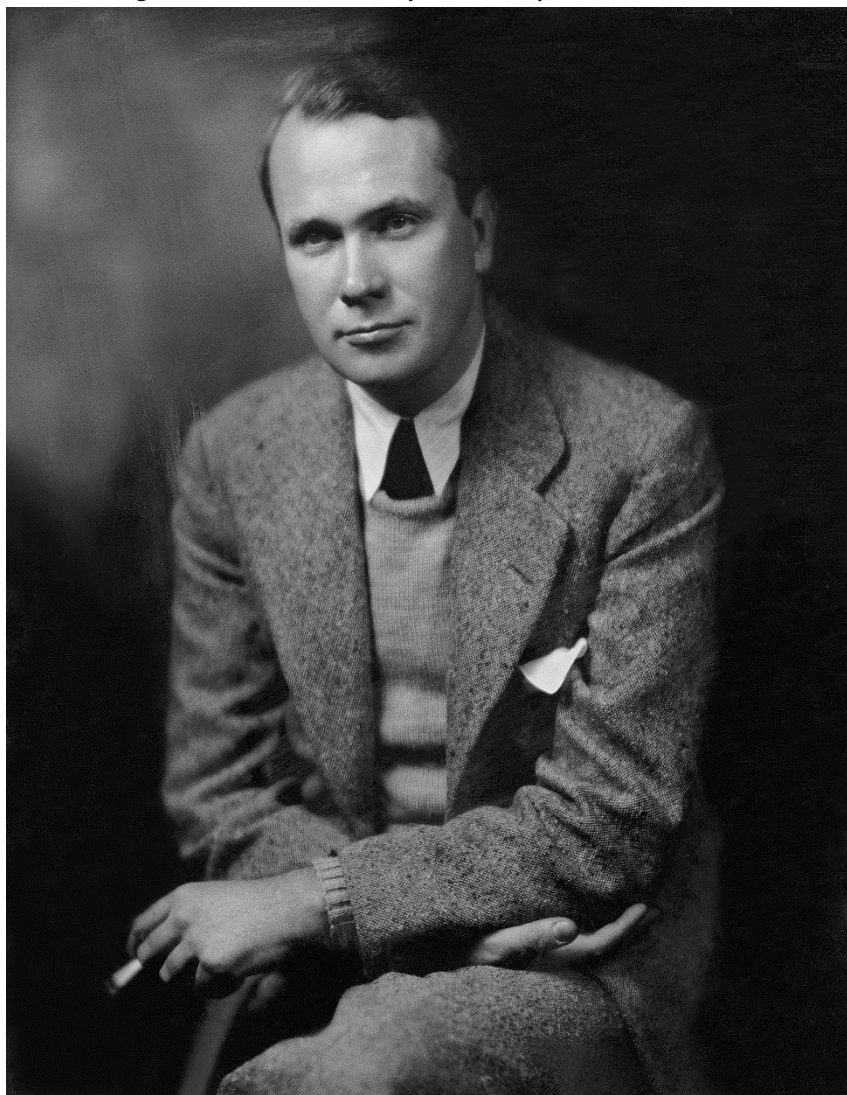
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For my daughter, Tara

Fig. 0.1: Vincent Sheean, *Vanity Fair*, January 1, 1934, Portrait



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The nonfiction writer's goal is to enlarge our understanding of the world.

– Sonja Merljak Zdovc,

“Željko Kozinc, the Subversive Reporter: Literary Journalism in Slovenia,” *Literary Journalism across the Globe: Journalistic Traditions and Transnational Influences* (Eds. John S. Bak and Bill Reynolds)

Stories emphasize travel, foreign languages, a sense of looking outward, and a struggle to understand the human condition.

– John S. Bak,

“Introduction,” *Literary Journalism across the Globe: Journalistic Traditions and Transnational Influences* (Eds. John S. Bak and Bill Reynolds)

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Foreword

Douglas Unger

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In order to keep literature alive and thriving, one of the projects of any new generation of scholars must be to study the past for omissions and exclusions from literary history. Books and writers are often overlooked or forgotten. Those deemed relevant or topical for a present era should be reassessed, possibly leading to resurrections of interest and new inclusions in a canon. Renewed interest in Vincent Sheean and the origins of the genre he pioneered—memoir journalism—which opened up possibilities for “immersion journalism”, “saturation reporting” and “new journalism” that followed later is long overdue. Writer-scholar Anish Dave in this study of Vincent Sheean presents a strong case for a thoughtful reassessment of Sheean and his career, with a focus on how his major works of the early to mid-20th century conform to and in some ways helped to invent what literary scholars and teachers now define as established conventions of journalistic writing.

Using close reading and structural analysis, Dave presents Sheean’s writing within theoretical genre paradigms established by scholars Jack Hart, Kendall Haven, Marie-Laure Ryan and others. He contextualizes Sheean’s best-selling, breakthrough work, *Personal History* (1935), alongside John Reed’s *Ten Days That Shook The World* (1919), which preceded it and John Hersey’s *Hiroshima* (1946) that followed; both became models for succeeding generations of writers. Sheean’s memoir was published with comparable impact and relevance. Dave appraises Sheean also through citing recent studies by scholars Nancy F. Cott, Deborah Cohen, John Maxwell Hamilton, as well as selected commentaries on journalism as a form and what it does best by later 20th century and contemporary writers Tom Wolfe, Ted Conover, Vivian Gornick, and others. Considered within an overview of the history of literary journalism, the intention of Dave’s scholarship is to establish Vincent Sheean’s credentials as a writer worthy of closer study for what his work can teach and to justify restoring his place in this history.

As a young foreign correspondent in the 1920s, Vincent Sheean secured a position with *The Chicago Tribune* and joined a youthful wave of soon-to-be-famous writer-journalists in Europe that included John Gunther, Dorothy Thompson, William Shirer, and Eric Sevareid (as well as Ernest Hemingway, Malcolm Cowley, and writers of the so-called “lost generation”). Rules for

journalism of that era demanded unflinching objectivity, strictly enforced by the *Tribune's* notoriously demanding editors. Sheean often introduced opinion into his journalism, and he was let go from the *Tribune* for unclear reasons. He turned to freelance assignments, following his personal credo, "my own job in my own way" (Hamilton, John Maxwell, *Columbia Journalism Review*, July-August 2008), contributing to *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Harper's*, *The New Republic*, *Century*, and other noteworthy magazines and newspapers. As the post-Great War world divided along ever more dangerous rifts defined by fascism, communism, monarchy and democracy, soon to explode into renewed cataclysm and war, Sheean would be there, following his instincts to pursue stories. As Dave points out consistently in this study, for Sheean, this meant full immersion as both witness to and participant in stories with an artistic dedication to keep improving his craft. Anish Dave earned his M.F.A. in Creative Writing and Ph.D. in Rhetoric and Professional Communication. He applies his skills to close reading of the narrative techniques in Sheean's books, like a jeweler taking apart clocks. *Seeking to Understand the World: Literary Journalism of Vincent Sheean* offers a detailed analysis of Sheean's craft, tracing his methods of achieving story cohesion, dramatic story structures, varying levels of narrator presence, character descriptions, imagery, symbolism, subjective writing, and personal empathy for the people he writes about, all experiments Sheean was trying out that have since become well-established literary nonfiction conventions.

Early in his career, Vincent Sheean made two perilous journeys into a war zone in Morocco to cover the anti-colonialist Riffi rebellion against the Spanish. The Riffi rebels were commanded by Berber leader Abd el-Krim, with whom he secured two exclusive interviews. His first-person account of this dangerous reporting resulted in a work of memoir journalism, *An American Among the Riffi* (1926). This book's modest success propelled Sheean to become more peripatetic as he innovated a style of writing that combined objective reporting, personal story and opinion as he traveled across the globe. He interviewed Spanish dictator Primo de Rivera, covered the rise of Mussolini, the installation of the Shah of Iran, clashes between Zionists and Arabs in Palestine under inept British rule. He wrote about Chiang Kai-shek's early Nationalist victories and his harsh opposition to the Communist wing of the Kuomintang. In China, he met fellow journalist Rayna Prohme. Though she was married, Sheean fell in love, a "love resolved into the largest terms," as Dave cites from a description of their relationship in *Personal History*. Sheean followed her to Russia to cover the 10th anniversary of the Russian Revolution and the founding of the Soviet Union, where Prohme died suddenly, apparently of encephalitis. This personal tragedy moved Sheean to devote his life even more so to pursuing refined language and heightened craft in his writing that defined the literary as he understood it, building on his uses of descriptions, dialogue, and scene-building techniques more expected of novels.

His breakthrough work, *Personal History* (1935), narrates his travels, stories, and informed judgments of world events with a tragic love story at its heart. It launched as a best-seller and won the inaugural National Book Award for biography. The book would be the source for the screenplay adaptation and movie “Foreign Correspondent” directed by Alfred Hitchcock (1940). Among the many accolades for *Personal History*, Dave cites praise by 1930s literary luminaries Malcolm Cowley and Mary McCarthy, and for its “remarkable achievement in synthesis.” As Dave suggests, this synthesis shows Sheean to be a pioneer in what Vivian Gornick describes as “the merger between narrator and subject” (cited from Gornick’s seminal text for teachers of literary nonfiction, *The Situation and The Story: The Art of Personal Narrative*). One key to the success of this merger is to maintain a strong focus on the subject as more important than the first-person narrator to avoid solipsism. Sheean’s successful exploration of memoir journalism established a new genre for his generation. Dave cites *Saturday Review of Literature* founder and co-editor Henry Seidel Canby on the impact, “a dozen other ex-correspondents have followed his lead,” and news reporter Kenneth Stewart, Sheean’s contemporary, “Vincent Sheean awakened us as newspapermen to the long view.” Books influenced by *Personal History* or modeled after it began appearing, including *On My Own*, by Mary Knight, *Inside Europe* by John Gunther, and *Berlin Diaries* by William Shirer, among a wave of many others.

Vincent Sheean would write and publish at least 27 books, a body of work that spans varying forms of the journalistic memoir, biography, and novels, plus 3 book-length literary translations along with hundreds of articles, news reports, interviews, and commentaries. As a foreign correspondent, he reported on the Spanish Civil War, accompanying Ernest Hemingway and photographer Robert Capa to observe the last gasps of the tragic republican fight against fascism. He was there for Hitler’s annexation of Austria and correctly judged the folly of the Munich agreement, then stood by on the banks of the Thames as Nazi bombers devastated London. His books warned the world of the dangers of fascism, and he took strong criticism for suggesting closer foreign policy accommodations with the Soviet Union. During the 1930s and 40s, Sheean seemed to arrive just in time as important stories happened, following an uncanny sixth sense about when, where, and how he could immerse himself and bear witness.

Guided by a close-reading model suggested by Barbara Lounsberry’s *The Art of Fact: Contemporary Artists of Nonfiction*, Anish Dave selects from Sheean’s body of work five books he deems important for their contributions to memoir-journalism’s capacity for expressing topical information, fact-based commentary, and personal experiences that provide readers informed windows into stories. These five works are analyzed for what they reveal and teach us about Sheean’s writing techniques and creative process: *Personal History* (1935), *Not Peace but*

a Sword (1939), *Between the Thunder and the Sun* (1943), *Lead, Kindly Light* (1949), and *Nehru: The Years of Power* (1960). The story of how Sheean came to write *Lead, Kindly Light* is the most uncanny for his urgent premonition, announced to several acquaintances that he felt certain Mahatma Gandhi would be assassinated. Dave states: “The book, Sheean’s personal homage to Gandhi, contains an outstanding story involving Sheean’s conversations with Mahatma Gandhi two days before his assassination, which Sheean witnessed...” Dave goes on to describe how Sheean’s reaction to this historic event and loss, followed by his traveling on the train carrying the Mahatma’s ashes to the holy rivers of Allahabad presents its readers with a transformative, symbolic experience meant to convey the essence of Gandhi’s parting message calling for unity, peace, and kindness for the world.

Vincent Sheean’s homage to Gandhi, *Lead, Kindly Light*, is his only work available in print at the time of this writing, which feels like a glaring omission from literary history. Since most of Sheean’s major works are in the public domain, it seems high time that a university press or an archive press should begin a long overdue process of selected reprints or, at the very least, republications in new digital editions. Whether or not that worthy project happens for the sake of preserving history, Anish Dave’s *Seeking to Understand the World: Literary Journalism of Vincent Sheean* makes its own significant contribution to the ongoing life and relevance of Sheean’s books for a new generation of readers, scholars, and students of creative writing and journalism. This study should remind us also what it means to write news of the world through a lived experience that seeks to discover and express our common humanity.

Douglas Unger is the author of four novels, including *Leaving the Land*, a finalist for the Pulitzer, and *Voices from Silence*, as well as *Looking for War and Other Stories*. His fifth novel, *Dream City*, will be published in 2024. He is co-founder of the Creative Writing International program at UNLV, where he teaches. He also serves on the Executive Board of Words Without Borders, the nonprofit organization and web publication for world literature in translation.

Preface

In this book, I analyze five journalistic, nonfiction books by Vincent Sheean, an American foreign reporter who was prominent from the late 1930s to 1950s. These books are *Personal History* (1935), *Not Peace but a Sword* (1939), *Between the Thunder and the Sun* (1943), *Lead, Kindly Light* (1949), and *Nehru: The Years of Power* (1960). Vincent Sheean was an important practitioner of literary journalism, as I show in this book. His comprehensive books using literary techniques and crafted writing, along with professional and perceptive journalism, make him a noteworthy author for scholars and students of literary journalism.

My interest in Vincent Sheean was sparked about two years ago when I chanced upon his chapter—from his *Lead, Kindly Light*—on Mahatma Gandhi's assassination. Shortly thereafter, I saw a call for books on literary studies by Vernon Press. A category in the call, literary journalism, caught my attention and I immediately remembered Sheean's chapter. As I read more about Vincent Sheean and literary journalism, it seemed to me that they belonged together. Journalism has always interested me, and I have always found it to be one of the most important professions. Literary journalism combined journalism with writing, my academic discipline.

This book is intended for students and scholars of journalism and nonfiction. They will gain from it an appreciation of how the form of literary journalism was practiced by an able journalist called Vincent Sheean, and why their association was significant for the profession of journalism.

The book's larger role lies in showing why the genre of literary journalism deserves greater attention from scholars of journalism and nonfiction. Literary journalism, such as Sheean's, enhances our understanding of the world, which is so crucial in our technology-immersed times.

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