

# Hoover's FBI and the Fourth Estate: The Campaign to Control the Press and the Bureau's Image

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*Heaven*, would be widely celebrated there as the first serious examination of a place he genuinely admired. It was not. Although the book was a financial success, the insult of its title—slang for a segregated theater balcony—severed many of Van Vechten's connections to Harlem and, in certain respects, to posterity.

Van Vechten would reinvent himself in the 1930s as a celebrity photographer, capturing some of the twentieth century's most iconic portraits of figures from Henri Matisse to Eartha Kitt. Connected to this documentary passion (Van Vechten neither charged for his portraits nor sold them), was his last great obsession: the creation of two major archives devoted to American music, writing, and theater for Yale and Fisk universities. Chief among his archival subjects was, naturally, himself. White deserves high praise for so thoroughly mining this mountain of material.

Whereas Bruce Kellner's 1968 biography of Van Vechten benefited from their friendship, White's emotional and temporal distance from his subject lends his project greater objectivity as well as access to more recent scholarship. His nuanced treatment of the Harlem Renaissance's multilayered racial politics, and of the Byzantine rules that once structured the lives of gay men, demonstrate his impressive command of contemporary identity politics and post-Stonewall criticism. White writes thoughtfully about what it meant for Van Vechten to negotiate his many conflicting worlds, and he is particularly deft at handling his subject's own contradictory character.

While never apologizing for Van Vechten's racial paternalism or irresponsible behavior, White makes a persuasive case for his lasting contributions to American modernism and genuine sense of conviction. Steering clear of both exposé and hagiography, he provides a portrait that—like Muray's 1925 photograph—demonstrates both Van Vechten's seriousness of purpose and his devilish sleight of hand.

*Hoover's FBI and the Fourth Estate: The Campaign to Control the Press and the Bureau's Image*, by Matthew Cecil. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2014. x, 355 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$34.95 hardcover.

Reviewer Frank Durham is associate professor in the University of Iowa's School of Journalism and Mass Communication. His research and writing have focused on critical analyses of media framing processes.

Matthew Cecil's meticulously researched and thoroughly engaging history of J. Edgar Hoover's FBI and its public relations-driven, myth-making machine should appeal to lay readers while making significant contributions to the scholarship on the topic. In approaching this sub-

ject, it would be easy to confuse an institutional history of the Federal Bureau of Investigation with a biography of the bureau's dominant figure, J. Edgar Hoover. Cecil does not, staking his claim, instead, to a key, if underlying, aspect of the bureau's history by researching its mastery of propaganda in the service of its own institution building.

The narrative begins with Hoover's role in directing the Palmer raids in 1920 four years before he was appointed by President Coolidge's attorney general, Harlan Fiske Stone, to head the new "Bureau of Investigation." But it is in Cecil's focus on the cultural meaning of media produced by the bureau's frequent manipulation of the press—and the press's role in that dynamic—that he breaks new ground.

His focus on the media's internal processes in this historical case characterizes this book as an "Iowa" project. Cecil, who earned a doctorate from the School of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Iowa, wrote his dissertation on the same topic there. (I had no interaction with him as a student.) The cultural studies approach that Cecil presents so adroitly contributes to the reader's broader understanding of the media's role as a site of powerful contests over political meaning. In its propaganda program, the bureau employed various media, including its own books, a comic strip, and, later, a popular television program. Throughout Hoover's career, the bureau also maintained a sophisticated media relations program that placed articles framing the FBI in its own terms in national conservative publications while undermining liberal outlets.

Although Cecil describes critics of the bureau's constant self-promotion, he is clear that the construction of the agency's foundational mythos owed to the complicity of journalists as well. Early on, *Washington Star* reporter and editor Neil "Rex" Collier and author Courtney Ryley Cooper teamed to construct the narrative of the FBI that would frame the agency for decades. Cecil explains, "The Collier-Cooper narrative was fully formed by late 1935: Dispassionate clinical science, not politics, corruption, or cronyism, lay at the heart of the FBI, which was led by the careful and steady Hoover. The FBI was responsible to local law enforcement and essential to the safety of all Americans" (67). He continues, "The message reflected a careful, strategic response to public concerns about centralized police power and emphasized a heroic Hoover wielding the impartial and clinical magic of science to solve unsolvable crimes" (67).

By situating the historical narrative in this context, Cecil shows how the FBI's reliance on the power of "science" reflected modernist culture following the Great War. Specifically, he makes it possible for readers to understand Hoover's use of propaganda within the cultural context

that included other pre-eminent figures such as Walter Lippmann, who wrote in favor of a science-based journalism and against the adaptation of wartime propaganda techniques for private (and, worse, *public*) purposes, and Edward Bernays, who is widely regarded as the “father of public relations.”

Within this broader theme, Cecil’s scholarship offers satisfying moments of completion. Whereas other accounts of public relations are often satisfied with the notion that Bernays actually *was* the founder of modern public relations, rather than its (and his own) greatest promoter, Cecil refers to recent research by Karen Miller Russell and Carl O. Bishop charting the origins of the field back to Ivy Lee’s career in press agency in the second half of the nineteenth century. Perhaps this is a small detail, but it explains why Hoover’s public relations effort was able to leap into action at a professional level from the start.

In the present day, when Edward Snowden’s journalistic salvo has exposed the National Security Agency for peering over every digital shoulder, *Hoover’s FBI* offers key insights into the origins of the still contentious boundaries between the members of the Fourth Estate and the modern police state that Hoover began to build 90 years ago.

For Matthew Cecil’s account of the *Des Moines Register’s* role in this story, see his article, “‘Whoa, Edgar’: The *Des Moines Register* and *Tribune*, Cowles Publications, and J. Edgar Hoover’s FBI,” in the *Annals of Iowa* 71 (Spring 2012), 111–36. — *Editor*

*The Nature of Childhood: An Environmental History of Growing Up in America since 1865*, by Pamela Riney-Kehrberg. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2014. xiv, 283 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$34.95 hardcover.

Reviewer Paula Petrik is professor of history at George Mason University. She is the coeditor of *Small Worlds: Children and Adolescents in America, 1850–1950* (1992).

Like many who live in the suburbs of a large metro area, I live in what the developer calls a “starter home,” a house with a detached garage and alley. It is the developer’s idea of a 1950s dwelling embodying all the decade’s myths and stereotypes. Located across the street from an elementary school and a block from a public swimming pool, our house sits in the middle of a young neighborhood. In fact, at one point 28 children under 10 years old lived on our block. One might guess that children would be everywhere—riding their bikes and scooters, drawing