



Walter Hines Page at the "Atlantic monthly"

Citation

Sedgwick, Ellery. 1989. Walter Hines Page at the "Atlantic monthly." Harvard Library Bulletin XXXV (3), Fall 1987: 427-449.

Permanent link

<https://nrs.harvard.edu/URN-3:HUL.INSTREPOS:37364393>

Terms of Use

This article was downloaded from Harvard University's DASH repository, and is made available under the terms and conditions applicable to Other Posted Material, as set forth at <http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:dash.current.terms-of-use#LAA>

Share Your Story

The Harvard community has made this article openly available.
Please share how this access benefits you. [Submit a story](#).

[Accessibility](#)

Walter Hines Page at the *Atlantic Monthly*

Ellery Sedgwick

By June 1895, George Mifflin, president of Houghton Mifflin and Company, which had owned the *Atlantic Monthly* since the formation of the house in 1880, had clearly begun to think of the magazine as a "problem" requiring solution. He retained confidence in Horace Scudder, who had served diligently as chief editor of both the *Atlantic* and the trade books. And he recognized that the magazine's reputation lent prestige to the company. He knew also that the *Atlantic* both drew authors to the house and provided the best means of advertising their works to the book-buying public. In 1885, another Boston publisher, Dana Estes, had testified during Senate hearings on international copyright that "it is impossible to make the books of most American authors pay unless they are first published and acquire recognition through the columns of the magazines."¹

But the more tangible facts facing Mifflin were discouraging. *Atlantic* circulation had gradually dwindled to less than 10,000, one fifth its peak of 50,000 copies in the 1860s. And with the single exception of 1893, its ledgers had shown a loss every year for at least a decade.² The "*Atlantic* problem" was further aggravated by the depression of 1893. The 1890s also saw an explosion in the number of magazines vying for public attention. The era of what Christopher Wilson has described as "progressive publishing" and "magazines for the masses" was well under way. Entrepreneurial editor-publishers like S. S. McClure, Edward Bok, Frank Munsey, and John Brisben Walker had taken advantage of improved printing technology, a newly professionalized cadre of magazine writers, modern advertising and promotion techniques, and wider public literacy to establish periodicals appealing to a far broader readership than that of the

¹ Frank Luther Mott, *A History of American Magazines* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1957), IV, 41.

² Ellen B. Ballou, *The Building of the House* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1970), p. 437.

traditional "quality" magazines like *Harper's*, *Scribner's*, and the *Atlantic*.³ Several of the new periodicals such as *McClure's*, *Forum*, the *Review of Reviews*, *Cosmopolitan*, and *Munsey's* offered sufficient quality at ten or fifteen cents a copy to compete very successfully for both readers and authors with the established thirty-five-cent "quality" monthlies. Most of these new magazines reflected a sharp shift in public taste away from the literary and cultural miscellany that formed the core of the *Atlantic* and towards current-affairs journalism.

Neither Mifflin nor Scudder intended to try solving the "*Atlantic* problem" by direct competition with the illustrated monthlies of the progressive publishers. A radical change in editorial policy or any hint of strident commercialism would compromise the magazine's reputation and alienate its traditional, culturally conservative constituency, which demonstrated its loyalty with consistently high renewal rates.

Mifflin and Scudder knew, however, that the *Atlantic* could not afford to remain a quiet corner of genteel culture and to ignore major developments in publishing and in public taste such as the new absorption in political, economic, and social issues. It was with this knowledge that they searched for an editor to assist Scudder on both the magazine and the trade publications, to take charge when Scudder went on sabbatical, and probably to succeed to the *Atlantic* editorship. They were looking for an experienced younger editor who knew the current trends, and the logical place to find one was New York, the Mecca of progressive publishing. Mifflin and Scudder, steeped in the traditional "courtesy of the trade," were as loath to lure an editor away from another house as they were to lure authors, but a recommendation from Woodrow Wilson, a frequent contributor to the *Atlantic*, led them to Walter Hines Page, who had just resigned as editor of the polemical monthly *Forum*.

Scudder and Mifflin's choice of Page as associate editor and probable successor reflected their awareness of inevitable changes in magazine journalism represented by the new large-circulation magazines. It was also a gamble. Page's energy was obvious, but his ability to adapt his experience in New York publishing to the *Atlantic's* circumstances was not.

³ Christopher Wilson, *The Labor of Words: Literary Professionalism in the Progressive Era* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1985), pp. 40-62.

Page had been born in North Carolina in 1855 and at 20 had been awarded a prestigious scholarship to read Greek at the newly formed Johns Hopkins University. Having grown impatient with what he considered the antiquarian niceties of Greek philology, Page had become a newspaper reporter, first in St. Joseph, Missouri, later in New York and Washington. In 1883, he had returned to his native state to establish a progressive newspaper, the *State Chronicle*, that advocated Cleveland liberalism and attempted to jolt the postwar South out of its obsessive nostalgia for the past and make it think more pragmatically of its future.

The *Chronicle's* progressive spirit had undermined its commercial prospects, and when it failed in 1885, Page sought his fortunes in the more liberal publishing climate of New York, becoming assistant editor and business manager of the *Forum* under Loretus Sutton Metcalf in 1887. By 1891, the energetic and forceful Page had so convincingly demonstrated his aptitude for making the *Forum* respected and profitable that he had displaced Metcalf from the editor's chair. In eight years, Page had raised the *Forum's* circulation from negligible to 30,000 and turned a debt of \$20,000 into a profit.⁴ He had been less successful, however, in his ambitious plan to gain financial control and resigned as editor following a failed attempt to take ownership of the magazine.

Page, who was forty when he joined Houghton Mifflin, was, in the words of a later *Atlantic* editor, Ellery Sedgwick, "the incarnation of those qualities we love to call American. . . . A sort of foursquareness, bluntness, it seemed to some; an uneasy, often explosive energy; a disposition to underrate fine drawn nicenesses of all sorts; ingrained Yankee common sense, checking his vaulting enthusiasm; enormous self-confidence, impatience of failure — all of these were in him; and he was besides affectionate to a fault, devoted to his country, his family, his craft — a strong, bluff, tender man."⁵

Page's education and early interest in literature had given him a knowledge of "the best that has been thought and said." He believed, as he wrote to Woodrow Wilson, who was fifteen years later to appoint him ambassador to Great Britain, that "a man who proposes to write anything worthwhile should steep himself in the great

⁴ Ballou, *Building of the House* (note 2), p. 450.

⁵ Burton J. Hendrick, *The Life and Letters of Walter H. Page* (New York: Doubleday, Page, and Co., 1922), 1, 55-56.

English literature in order to have the genius of the race as a basis for his style and a corrective to his thought."⁶ But his temperament and Southern experience made him distrust too great a veneration for the past. His frustration with the minutiae of scholarship had led him to throw it over for journalism in which he could influence current opinion on important issues. As a young man trying to take an active part in the reconstruction of the South, he had been frustrated by what he saw as its self-defeating fixation on the past, its fatuous preference for spending its scant money and energies on memorials for the dead rather than on education and material betterment for the living. He was a progressive committed to present action and a vision of a future vastly improved by education and technology, sheer human intelligence and energy. He possessed an indefatigable progressive faith in himself and in the American nation, a faith that gave him power to achieve his ambitions and at times made him insensitive to moral complexities.

Page was also experienced in the progressive style of publishing. His background as a newspaper reporter, editor, and owner had developed his interest in current affairs and his preference for a direct, forceful writing style. As an editor of his own newspaper and later of *Forum*, he had developed an active editorial style in which he orchestrated writers' assignments and the coverage of issues. To him, a good editor was not a passive sorter of manuscripts and polisher of prose, but an "idea man" who kept his ear to the ground and determined what to cover and who would cover it.⁷ In both previous publishing jobs, he had been not only editor, but business manager as well. As a result, he knew audiences, promotion, advertising, and the necessary relationships between the business and editorial offices. Further, his work in New York had provided him with contacts among the best writers of the day.

Page was a paradoxical choice for the "apostolic succession" to the editorship of the *Atlantic*. Although born a member of the Southern planter class that the magazine had thirty years before excoriated as barbaric, witless, and medieval, he was more a modernist and a believer in social progress, less a venerator of the cultural past, than

⁶ Letter, 20 March 1899, Page Papers, Houghton Library, Harvard University (hereafter cited as Page Papers). Quotations from these and other manuscripts in the Houghton Library are by permission of the Houghton Library.

⁷ Wilson, *Labor of Words* (note 3), p. 54.

most of the New England intellectuals who edited and wrote for the *Atlantic* during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Further, although the New England culture from which the *Atlantic* derived had lost its original Emersonian faith in the social and political power of literate culture, the Southerner Page still maintained an expansive faith in that power, and insisted that culture be actively engaged in social issues.

Since Thomas Bailey Aldrich's accession to the editorship in 1880, many associated with the *Atlantic* had lapsed from an earlier social commitment and liberal idealism into an isolated cultural conservatism. The magazine had come to represent Santayana's "genteel tradition": a life of the mind — a literature, religion and moral sensibility — that was retrospective, distrustful of the present and future, sentimental, excessively refined and largely divorced from the progressive optimism and immense energies of American social organization and economic activity.⁸

Many *Atlantic* writers and readers who cared for "the best that has been thought and said" felt politically impotent and socially isolated in contemporary America. And although Horace Scudder had tried, since assuming the editorship in 1890, to maintain the magazine's leadership in cultural matters, many felt deprived even of their traditional brahmin function as transmitters of culture in a nation they perceived as increasingly dominated by plutocrats and immigrants equally indifferent to culture. As Jackson Lears demonstrates in *No Place of Grace* (New York: Pantheon, 1981), some of these custodians of culture, such as Charles Eliot Norton or Barrett Wendell, lived bitterly on pessimism, reminiscences and contempt, while others such as former *Atlantic* editor Aldrich found sustenance in a cult of literary aesthetics. Some of the more original reacted against the aridity of soulless modernism by seeking refuge in older cultural forms: Lafcadio Hearn in orientalism or Henry Adams in medievalism. A greater number, especially among women, found an alternative to modernism in a sentimental and reassuringly idealistic fiction. All of these groups in one way or another sensed their own superfluity in contemporary America and increasingly immersed themselves in a literary culture alienated from the American realities: industrialism,

⁸ George Santayana, "The Genteel Tradition in American Philosophy," *The Genteel Tradition: Nine Essays*, ed. Douglas Wilson (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1967), pp. 37-64.

urbanization, corporate capitalism, class polarization, and immigration.

The Southern progressive Page, however, retained faith in the earlier Emersonian idea that literary culture could be a vital force for social progress, rather than an alternative for those who felt disinherited from political and social power. He opposed the alienation of culture and education from social issues, and its removal to a genteel, non-utilitarian sphere. Further, he believed that those steeped in literary culture could exert a potent influence for the better if they concerned themselves not with antiquarian irrelevancies, but with the issues of their times. Accordingly, his aim in accepting the *Atlantic* position was to bridge the gap between high culture and the social, economic, and political realities of contemporary America, in Santayana's terms to reunite the two parts of the American mentality, to convince what Emerson had called the "cultivated classes" to exert their influence more actively in social issues, and to encourage the use of literary culture for social progress.

Page's letter to Scudder defining his understanding of the position reflects his self-confident ambition, his progressive concept of the editor as an "idea man," and his editorial policy of bringing literary culture to bear on current affairs:

What you want as I understand it, is editorial assistance, not routine assistance merely . . . the assistance of a man trained indeed to accurate routine . . . but who also has a broad outlook on contemporaneous life, who knows a piece of literature when he sees it in the rough, and who may sometimes know when and where to look for a piece of literature before anybody else has found it.

These things, let me say frankly, I think I could do with some measure of success.

. . . the way should be open to become, if I show the qualities that entitle me to become, one of the real forces in the institution. While there is no escape from routine work (and for the balance and discipline even of the most fertile men there ought to be no escape) I should like in whatever work I take up to have time to hold and to extend my acquaintance among men who are bringing things to pass; for in this way, I think, I can render my best service. While most men of scholarly pursuits who know the use of literary tools concern themselves with what has happened in the past, my work has been to know with as wide a horizon as possible, the directions and values of contemporary activity.⁹

⁹ Page, Letter, 20 July 1895, Houghton, Mifflin Co., Papers and Letterbooks, Houghton Library, Harvard University (hereafter cited as HM Papers; used by permission of Houghton Mifflin Company).

Thus Page served notice that he intended to bring a progressive, modern publishing style to bear on the venerable *Atlantic*. He would be an editor who engaged the magazine in current social and political issues. The focus of his editorial energies would not be to suggest stylistic revisions, but rather to implant ideas and solicit contributions. The locus of his editorial activities was not to be confined to Houghton Mifflin's editorial offices, nor to the literary clubs and salons of Boston and Cambridge, but out among politicians, journalists, educators, and industrialists, the movers and shakers of the nation.

Page's assertion that his interests lay in the application of literary talents to contemporary affairs, rather than to literature itself, further implied a radically different conception of the magazine from that held by *Atlantic* editors from James Russell Lowell to Scudder. At the founding of the magazine in 1857, Emerson had written in his journal that "great scope and illumination should be in the editor to draw from the best in the land and defy the public. . . . None should go in but pieces of permanent worth".¹⁰ Despite some forceful political commentary during the Civil War and occasionally thereafter, the *Atlantic's* editors had all felt that their highest function was to publish literature of permanent worth rather than to comment on affairs of the moment. While they were often frustrated at the scarcity of such literature, they aspired to create numbers that could be bound and read with intellectual profit ages hence.

Page felt that the purpose of a magazine, even the *Atlantic*, was entirely distinct from that of a book. Both his temperament and journalistic training made him emphasize the progressive publisher's creed of timeliness, rather than the genteel creed of timelessness. "Every magazine paper," he reminded a potential contributor, "ought to be not only a clear-cut, pointed piece of work in itself, but it ought to have as clear and definite and pertinent a present application as possible."¹¹ Page edited not for the future, but for the present. A magazine would be read and perhaps discarded before the next issue supplanted it. It should not aim primarily at permanence, but at relevance.

¹⁰ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Journals of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Susan Smith and Harrison Hayward (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1978), XIV, 167.

¹¹ Letter to John McMaster, 26 August 1896, HM Papers.

Scudder, more than any of his predecessors since Lowell, had tried to engage the *Atlantic* in major contemporary social and political issues. But throughout Page's tenure there remained a tension between Scudder's essentially traditional, genteel, literary view of the magazine's purpose and Page's progressive, journalistic view. "You and I," wrote Scudder, "ought to complement each other, your tastes and training lead you to emphasize the higher journalism, and mine make me eager to keep the magazine in the ranks of formative books that last. Each admits the worth of the other side, but nature is strong and we lean imperceptibly to one side or the other."¹²

Not only Page's idea of a magazine, but his editorial methods as well, were characterized by aggressive enterprise rather than genteel tradition and were a departure from those of previous *Atlantic* editors. The heart of his progressive editorial style was that the editor should not be a passive "gatekeeper" or polisher of style, but should actively shape the magazine. Page controlled most phases of the editorial process more actively than his predecessors. Significantly, Page's numbers did not come about through sifting the piles of manuscripts that accumulated in the *Atlantic* office at 4 Park Street. In fact, as soon as he had established himself, he relegated this task to his assistants, first Susan Francis and later William Parker. His numbers began instead in an editorial notebook in which he sketched ideas for articles and noted appropriate contributors to be solicited.

Most of Page's *Atlantic* predecessors had solicited some manuscripts, but the sphere in which they solicited had been considerably smaller and their method much more genteel. Even in the early years when the magazine drew most of its material from a small geographical and social sphere, Lowell had had to wheedle Emerson or corner Longfellow at a Dante Society meeting and extract promise of a contribution. James T. Fields had been a polished "dining editor," successfully combining his social life with his editorial duties, exploiting both his publishing contacts and his wife's literary salon for contributions. As late as the 1880s, James Osgood had held "*Atlantic* dinners" in which a large proportion of the magazine's contributors gathered socially. By 1896, however, the "circle" had outgrown these geographical and social boundaries, and Boston, rather than being the literary center, was something of a backwater to New York and points west. Further, competition from the New York magazines —

¹² Scudder, Letter to Page, 11 October 1897, Page Papers.

Harper's, *Scribner's*, *The Century*, not to mention the upstart *McClure's*, *Ladies Home Journal*, and *Cosmopolitan* — all of which paid higher author's fees, necessitated aggressive solicitation and scouting for new talent. Horace Scudder had had to look further afield than previous editors, and one of the reasons he had hired Page, who was both younger and familiar with New York, was explicitly "to search for new writers."¹³

Page, fully aware of the magazine's financial disadvantage in the competition for authors, made the intended contributor feel the full weight of his hearty and aggressive personality. Many, by the time they finished Page's letter, were undoubtedly surprised to find themselves in the unpleasant position of having to break a virtual commitment if they did not wish to write the article Page wanted. "Although it takes two," Page wrote to Woodrow Wilson, "to make an engagement and you, I believe, have never definitely given your assent, these [articles to be written] are so desirable and so excellent that we have been unable to look upon them in any other way than engagements."¹⁴ Typically Page's letters of solicitation ended with a summary of the notation he wished to put in his *Atlantic* engagement book, a reminder of when the copy was due to meet the deadline, and the characteristic salutation "Heartily Yours."

During his first two years, 1895 and 1896, Page generally conferred with Scudder in developing ideas for articles, and even after Scudder began his sabbatical in July 1897, topics were discussed in the weekly Tuesday-morning "pow-wow" of Houghton Mifflin's editorial staff. From the start, however, Page was given scope to develop his own ideas. Having noted a topic and targeted a contributor, he wrote a solicitation not only defining in considerable detail that aspect of the subject he wished treated, but also stipulating the approach to be taken and, sometimes, even suggesting the conclusions to be drawn.

One of the first major projects Page undertook in 1895 was to arrange a series on current secondary education. The general topic was probably Scudder's suggestion, but the editorial method was Page's. First, Page distributed to teachers and school administrators thousands of copies of a questionnaire on the quality of public education in their communities. Responses were then compiled, summarized and forwarded to three professional educators whom Page

¹³ Ballou, *Building of the House* (note 2), p. 450.

¹⁴ Letter, 21 November 1896, HJM Papers.

and Scudder had selected to write the articles. Page sent with these summaries a four-page description of the project and the particular aspect of it allotted to each author. This type of journalism, actively investigating the current condition of a major American institution, eliciting audience participation, and editorially shaping the solicited essays, was entirely new to the *Atlantic*.

In addition to defining specifically the topic and approach desired, Page gave even seasoned writers considerable advice about audience and style. In style, as in his choice of topics, Page clearly tried to bridge the gap between the genteel literary culture with which the *Atlantic* had been associated and the world of practical activity. Although cautious not to alienate the magazine's traditional constituency, he considered a broader audience, especially among those active in public life, necessary for both financial success and influence.

In fact, Page believed that the *Atlantic* had, or at least could have, several constituencies and that a proper balance of material and tone could satisfy them simultaneously. Page was also constantly aware that he had been hired by Mifflin to turn the *Atlantic* "trick"; he maintained close contact with the business office and was not squeamish about "popularizing" the *Atlantic*. Page believed that in order to speak to a broader audience and to be influential in contemporary national life, the magazine would have to jettison some of its traditional literary baggage. He, therefore, frequently suggested to authors that they write for an audience that was "popular but cultivated."

This audience, he suggested, would be intellectually curious but not necessarily interested in history or literature as ends in themselves. Authors must demonstrate clearly the contemporary relevance of their topics and make applications explicit. Nor should *Atlantic* authors now assume a broad familiarity with traditional literary culture. "I have a feeling," Page wrote to Owen Wister in soliciting an article on James Fenimore Cooper, "that in most writing about literature, the writer takes for granted too much knowledge on the part of his readers. It may seem absurd to say that the readers of the *Atlantic* do not know . . . about [Cooper, Emerson, Hawthorne and Bryant]. But great numbers of people are now reading them for the first time, for the *Atlantic* has young readers as well as old ones."¹⁵

¹⁵ Letter, 26 August 1896, HM Papers.

Although Mifflin himself suggested publishing an article in the original French, presuming that most of his readers knew the language and that it would give the magazine a cultivated tone, Page remonstrated with one contributor that "quotations from the Latin and Greek are not intelligible to one reader in twenty of the *Atlantic*."¹⁶ Clearly Page's intended audience was less culturally homogeneous than in the past, less limited to those for whom the knowledge of "the best that has been thought and said" was a major pursuit. He wanted to add to the magazine's traditional constituency another that was younger, less liberally educated, and more actively engaged in contemporary life.

The broader, predominantly masculine audience Page aimed for also required, as he reminded contributors, a direct and concrete style. Page practiced and advocated a more strenuous, journalistic style than previously characterized the *Atlantic*, a style emphasizing information, concrete illustration, decisive judgments and a minimum of philosophizing. "The man who would write convincingly and entertainingly of the things of our day and our time," he believed, "must write with more directness, with more clearness, with greater force."¹⁷ In both fiction and nonfiction, he instinctively sought clarity and force and correspondingly undervalued subtlety. When Henry James, whose work *Atlantic* editors from William Dean Howells to Scudder had published and praised, submitted a story titled "In the Cage," Page contemptuously dismissed it as a literary case of the emperor's new clothes. "A duller story I have never read," he fumed. "It wanders through the deep mire of affected writing and gets nowhere, tells no tale, stirs no emotion but weariness. The professional critics who mistake an indirect and round-about use of words for literary art will call it an excellent piece of work; but people who have blood in their veins will yawn and throw it down — if, indeed, they ever pick it up."¹⁸

Page preferred to exert his editorial control before rather than after the submission of the manuscript both because it was more malleable then and because he preferred to work with authors rather than with the minutiae of editing manuscripts. He did not hesitate, however, to ask a contributor to rework a piece. In suggesting revisions as in

¹⁶ Letter to Paul Shorey, 23 June 1897, HM Papers.

¹⁷ Quoted in Mott, *History of American Magazines* (note 1), IV, 13.

¹⁸ MS report 6743, quoted in Ballou, *Building of the House* (note 2), p. 456.

soliciting, Page was not timid about intruding his own ideas even with the most authoritative contributors. Page returned an accepted paper by Theodore Roosevelt on his reforms of the New York Police Department with the suggestion that the author add a conclusion stating that police reform was antecedent and fundamental to all municipal reform.¹⁹ Upon receiving a paper solicited from Booker T. Washington on his program at Tuskegee combining vocational and academic education, Page returned the manuscript asking Washington to write a conclusion "broadening the application of the principle you have worked out so as to show . . . that the principle which has made a success of Tuskegee is really the proper principle for education in the whole south without regard to race."²⁰

The impact of Page's forceful editorial presence was apparent to *Atlantic* readers within six months of his arrival in August 1895. His influence became more pronounced, however, after Scudder began his long-postponed sabbatical year in June 1897, leaving Page as sole editor. When Scudder returned in July 1898, Mifflin's designation of Page as editor-in-chief was official recognition of an accomplished fact. Scudder had requested Page's appointment because at sixty he wished to ease his own burden and felt that Page had proved his competence. But although he admired Page and perhaps recognized that his editorial style represented the magazine's future, Scudder regretted the moderate but clear shift in the *Atlantic's* character and focus.

As Ellen Ballou has demonstrated, Scudder had felt that the *Atlantic* should publish commentaries on politics and current affairs, and analyses of contemporary American life.²¹ But he did not feel that they should overshadow the fiction, history, biography, and criticism, the general literary culture, that Scudder, like his predecessors, had considered the magazine's soul. Soon after arriving in Europe, Scudder noted this shift in Page's first solo number. In September 1897, he wrote regretting that Page had given his two lead places to current affairs, lumped the fiction towards the back, and thereby "by implication made the literary character of the magazine subordinate."²² The October issue brought further evidence that Page was

¹⁹ Letter, 7 July 1897, HM Papers.

²⁰ Letter, 15 July 1896, HM Papers.

²¹ Ballou, *Building of the House* (note 2), p. 439.

²² Letter to Page, 7 September 1897, HM Papers.

making the tone of the magazine less literary, more journalistic. Again, Scudder hopefully but ineffectually chided Page:

I have often said that a magazine like the *Atlantic*, while it cannot afford to be dull, can afford to have quiet, ruminating articles. An *organ* must be made up of force, but the *Atlantic* is only in part an organ, and literature is never more true than when it is serene. Moral energy is indispensable to a magazine which is to push reforms, but I confess that two or three strong reformatory papers in a number are enough, [and] that creative and critical literature should constitute the main substance. . . .

. . . People read their magazines for pleasure, not to be knocked over by them, and I believe more and more in the doctrine of equilibrium in magazine making.²³

Page's *Atlantic* clearly reflected an evolution away from the literary and towards the "topicality" that, according to Wilson, characterized progressive journalism.²⁴

Scudder had typically begun his issues with an installment of a serial novel. Page, however, characteristically led with his weightiest article on American politics or social issues by writers like F. L. Godkin, Woodrow Wilson, or John Fiske. Frequently, Page's lead would respond directly to current political events, most notably the Spanish-American War, for which Page patriotically unfurled the flag on the *Atlantic's* cover for the first time since the end of the Civil War and himself wrote a lead editorial vigorously endorsing the American action as "a necessary act of surgery for the sake of civilization."²⁵

Page published much less literature and many more timely articles on politics, economics, and social issues than his predecessors, including Scudder. A characteristic number of Scudder's *Atlantic* had contained a serial novel installment, two stories, two short poems, perhaps four papers on literature or other cultural topics, two on history or biography, one on nature, and one on current affairs. The result was a cultural miscellany, broad-ranging but largely literary.

As Ellen Ballou argues, Scudder should be credited for publishing more articles on topics like civil service reform, monetary policy and foreign affairs than his forerunners, Fields, Howells, and Aldrich.²⁶ But papers on politics and economics were intermittent and general, seldom responding to specific current events. Much more frequently

²³ Letter, 11 October 1897, HM Papers.

²⁴ Wilson, *Labor of Words* (note 3), pp. 55-57.

²⁵ "The War with Spain and After," *Atlantic*, June 1898, 727.

²⁶ Ballou, *Building of the House* (note 2), p. 439.

Scudder's current affairs articles discussed cultural issues such as educational reform or the establishment of public libraries, museums, and parks. The essays in Scudder's *Atlantic* clearly reflect his assumption that if the *Atlantic* was to exert an influence on contemporary social life it would be mainly in the realm of culture — not politics or economics.

Page by no means shared the genteel assumption of *Atlantic* editors since Fields that the magazine's influence was limited primarily to cultural issues. He more than doubled the number of articles on current affairs, particularly on politics. Many of these articles commented on particular events and institutions and not a few advocated specific reforms.

"It was a shock to many," Frank Luther Mott notes, "when the *Atlantic Monthly*, in 1898, turned to political controversy, social reform, and the exposure of corruption in government."²⁷ In that year, Page's *Atlantic* carried articles such as John Jay Chapman's "The Capture of Government by Commercialism," Henry C. Adams's advocacy of increased federal regulation of railways, several essays calling for the extension of municipal services and the reform of municipal government in Boston and New York, Jane Addams's critique of philanthropy in "The Subtle Problems of Charity," and John S. Durham's powerful indictment of both labor unions and employers for denying black Americans the opportunity to benefit justly by their labor.

The majority of *Atlantic* articles on current affairs reflected Page's own progressive views. Page's *Atlantic* advocated a broad range of reforms, expressed confidence in the ability of an enlightened government to solve social problems, and exuded optimism about the growing economic and political power of the nation. Exactly thirty years before, Emerson had written in the *Atlantic* with a similar exuberant optimism of the immense material, intellectual, and moral potential that the American nation would realize if the "foolish and sensual millions" would recognize the leadership of the "cultivated class."²⁸ Like Emerson, like the advocates of civil service reform, and like most progressives of his era, Page had an implicit faith in the abilities of a non-hereditary, educated, and cultured elite to provide

²⁷ Mott, *History of American Magazines* (note 1), IV, 8-9.

²⁸ Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Aspects of Culture," *Atlantic Monthly*, 21 (1868), 87-95.

an enlightened leadership for American democracy and to guide the affairs of the nation impartially for the benefit of all.

After June 1898, Page commissioned numerous articles analyzing the impact of the Spanish-American War on the nation's mission, interests and international relationships. The controversial issue of American colonialism was particularly debated. Page's flaunting of the flag on the *Atlantic* cover declared the magazine's stand on the war. (It also testified to the generous editorial autonomy Mifflin granted Page, since it outraged the anti-imperialist sentiments of intellectual Boston in which Mifflin himself shared.) Following the lead of Page's two editorials, most essays endorsed the war as an inevitable and desirable fulfillment of the law of progress, according to which the influence of a decadent civilization like Spain must be displaced by that of a more vital, more technologically and morally advanced civilization like the United States. Both the articles on the war and a series on Anglo-American relations often reflected Page's own conviction that contemporary events were working out a manifest destiny for the ascendancy of English-speaking peoples.

Most of the articles morally justifying the war did warn of the dangers of colonialism. Page refused, however, to publish an article submitted by E. L. Godkin suggesting that American colonialism would result, as British colonialism had, not only in exploitation of the governed but also in political and moral corruption of the governors. Having himself declared in an editorial that the war was "A Wholesome Stimulus to Higher Politics," Page asserted that a paper with such a "hopeless tone" would strike a "false note" in the *Atlantic*. "If we cheerfully and hopefully go to work to make the best of it we shall succeed. The only thing I am afraid of," he pointedly wrote Godkin, "is the continued estrangement of the intelligent classes who criticize and predict disaster, and the men who must take those tasks in hand."²⁹ Here, as elsewhere, Page asserted his own exuberant confidence in material and moral progress in contrast with what he considered the paralyzing and backward-looking pessimism of intellectual New England. Here also, he characteristically regretted the estrangement of high culture from political action.

Page's increase of articles on politics, economics, and sociology required a reduction in the number of papers devoted to history,

²⁹ Letter, 31 January 1899, HM Papers.

biography, and literary criticism and fewer book reviews. Page's slighting of these last two categories, so central to the *Atlantic's* reputation, was a source of constant contention with Scudder. Scudder had maintained that an honest and rigorous criticism of literature was perhaps the magazine's most important cultural function. Page by contrast contemptuously dismissed most literary criticism as "mere talkee-talkee." Nor did his progressive temperament admit its beneficial effects. Despite his interest in political reform, Page, like Theodore Roosevelt condemning the "muckrakers," characteristically disliked a hypercritical dwelling on deficiencies. In a letter defending his deletion of what he considered a gratuitous "sneer" at the tastes of the American reading public, Page asserted his belief that "the present dearth in American letters is due to the abnormal development of our smart critical faculty and our lack of sympathy alike with writers and with people in the mass."³⁰

The *Atlantic* under Page continued to carry literary biography and criticism and to participate in the critical debate between literary realists and romanticists, but the quantity of criticism and book reviews was cut to a scant one-third of that during Scudder's reign. A typical Scudder issue had not only featured frequent articles on authors, but also ended with two or three substantial composite reviews of books on a particular subject. Finally, there had been the "Comments on New Books," five or six small-type pages of shorter reviews generally written by Scudder himself. Page cut book reviews from thirty pages to fewer than ten and eliminated the "Comments on New Books" entirely. By 1899, Page's numbers averaged one article on literature and frequently no book reviews at all.

Literary criticism in Page's *Atlantic* was written mainly by those who had written it for Scudder. The critical ideologies and judgments ranged broadly but were generally more conservative and genteel than the magazine's political views. On the one hand, Irving Babbitt advocated turning away from the morbid self-analysis of modern literature, back to heroic models of the classics; Paul Elmer More criticized George Meredith for not purging the emotions by lifting them above the commonplaces of ordinary life; and several writers attacked Zola and his school for dull literalism, for reducing the moral sense to a function of environment, and for an obsession with degeneracy, criminality, and madness. But on the other hand, Charles

³⁰ Letter to J. E. Chamberlin, 30 September 1896, HM Papers.

Johnston asserted that the true spirit of American literature required the accurate portrayal of contemporary life, and John Burroughs rejected Tolstoy's assertion that the aims of art should be didactically moral. William Dean Howells honored Edward Bellamy for his democratic and humane imagination. Other *Atlantic* reviewers praised Stephen Crane for the power of his *Red Badge*, Harold Frederick for his analysis of contemporary social problems, and Ellen Glasgow for dealing bravely with some morbid psychological aspects of modern life. On the whole, however, *Atlantic* criticism now, as before, tended to oppose realism, or more vehemently, naturalism in favor of "idealism." Works based on the aesthetic and social principles of naturalism, it suggested, bored rather than entertained the reader, depressed rather than inspired, indulged in excessive psychological dissection of morbid states of mind, and overemphasized society's responsibility at the expense of individual moral responsibility.

Atlantic fiction under Page reflected approximately the same range and general tendency prescribed in its literary criticism. Neither Page nor Scudder, who retained more authority in fiction than in other fields, was inherently hostile to realism. Page had, for instance, admired the force of *The Red Badge of Courage* and solicited Crane for a short serial. He rejected "The Third Violet" as uncharacteristic of Crane's best work but cordially requested a chance at another manuscript and a meeting with the author.³¹ Page, less bound by the genteel "courtesy of the trade" than Scudder, also strenuously pursued his fellow Southerner Ellen Glasgow but was unable to sway her allegiance to the house of Harper. He did, however, publish, as Scudder had before him, fiction by Sarah Orne Jewett, Charles Chesnut, Kate Chopin, Alice French, and Henry B. Fuller, all of whose works contained a measure of realism.

On the other hand, the *Atlantic* carried considerable fiction that was frankly sentimental or "idealistic" in its high-mindedness and in its reassuring distribution of rewards proportional to moral deserts. The magazine also participated liberally in the vogue of American historical fiction at the close of the century. The major serials during Page's years — *The Seats of the Mighty* and *The Battle of the Strong* by the British novelist Gilbert Parker, and Mary Johnston's *Prisoners of Hope* and *To Have and To Hold* — invoked a more or less romanticized past rather than a realistically observed present. The only serial with

³¹ Letter to Stephen Crane, 7 April 1896, HM Papers.

a contemporary setting was *Penelope's Progress*, a frothy story of the European travels of three clever, spirited young American women by Kate Douglas Wiggin (later author of *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm*), who was probably Houghton Mifflin's most popular author and certainly the *Atlantic's* best-paid contributor at rates up to \$52 per page, five times the low-average \$10.³² Significantly, fiction and poetry were the only genres in which women were represented in large numbers either as authors or as subjects, and here they came near to being the majority.

Page himself almost certainly found most of the fiction he published tedious. When Scudder left him "handicapped" with three commissioned serial novels, Page complained that "three are about two and a half too many."³³ But he was also an editorial pragmatist. Fiction was apparently Page's obeisance to both the business office and the large part of his audience that delighted in the literature of entertainment, escape, and uplift, fast-moving plots, larger-than-life characters, and "poetic justice." Scudder, wishing, as he told Henry James, to support "the permanent elements in American literature," had published *The Tragic Muse* and *The Spoils of Poynton* and won only a dwindling circulation and the groans of the business office, which characterized James's novels as "sinkers."³⁴ Scudder was chastened, and Page, who cared considerably less for either James or the permanent elements in American literature, was content to provide something attractive for readers who did not care for current events.

In an editorial observing the *Atlantic's* fortieth anniversary in November 1897, Page asserted that the aim of the editors had been and remained to render "a literary interpretation of American life."³⁵ By and large, the slice of American life represented in the *Atlantic* fiction of this period was confined to the heroic past or the drawing rooms of the "cultivated class." In the same editorial, however, Page pointed out that "political questions are, and always have been, material for good literary work."³⁶ In keeping with this assertion, Page initiated a type of non-fiction reporting that gave a far broader, less bowdlerized view of contemporary American realities and raised

³² Ballou, *Building of the House* (note 2), p. 433.

³³ Letter to Horace Scudder, 14 December 1897, Page Papers.

³⁴ Ballou, *Building of the House* (note 2), p. 448.

³⁵ Page, "Forty Years of the *Atlantic Monthly*," 80 (1897), 576.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 573.

political issues. The purpose and methods of this frequently narrative non-fiction were similar to those of literary realism: a direct, reasonably objective observation of the American social environment and an analysis of its effects on its inhabitants.

Page not only published a good deal of this sociological journalism but himself wrote a series of firsthand reports on race relations and the status of black Americans in the South. To gather material for these articles, Page toured the South in February and March of 1899. A letter he wrote to George Mifflin at this time reveals his character and journalistic interests:

I think I shall get three or four of the best articles I have ever written out of the trip. I talk with . . . young and old, — black, ginger cake, and white — from bishops and governors down to the little devils in rags. . . . I spent the evening at a great university reception where some of the finest young ladies of the town were cousins to the mulattoes I had seen in the afternoon. . . . [Two lawyers, one white and one black,] each told me his high regard for the other. But I saw the wives and the homes of each — a sight that neither of them ever saw or ever will see; and I talked with each of the women about the other. . . .

It's all a little confusing now and then. I have lost my own identity a time or two. Several times I have checked the impulse to weep by the sudden and saving thought that if [Francis] Garrison could see these things, he'd drop dead! Both the pathos and the humor of it go beyond anything in literature.³⁷

Certainly the paradoxical realities of contemporary life that Page reported in his letter went beyond anything in *Atlantic* fiction of the period. In the same letter to Mifflin written from Birmingham, Page admiringly described the young novelist Mary Johnston, whom, amidst his investigation of contemporary race relations, he successfully solicited for a new serial romance. Miss Johnston's novel temporarily "almost doubled" *Atlantic* circulation when it was serialized in 1899 as *To Have and To Hold*.³⁸ It dealt not with "the pathos and the humor" of contemporary life, but with English tobacco settlements in tidewater Virginia in the 1620s, treacherous Indians, and a flashing-eyed, raven-haired, high-born heroine who in the first installment defends her honor against the bluff, stony planter who has just purchased her as his wife for 120 pounds of tobacco. Miss Johnston in a note to Page facetiously wished him success in his talks with his

³⁷ Letter, 23 February 1899, HM Papers.

³⁸ W. B. Parker, Letter to Bliss Perry, 2 April 1900, quoted in Ballou, *Building of the House* (note 2), p. 464.

"niggers"; clearly the contemporary race relations that interested Page did not interest her as subjects for literature.³⁹

This contrast between Miss Johnston's novel and Page's journalistic investigations is emblematic of the curious split between fiction and non-fiction in the *Atlantic* at this time. Non-fiction narratives of personal experience and observation presented a much fuller and more vital panorama of contemporary American life than did the comparatively genteel fiction published in the same issues of the magazine. In fact, this reportage fulfilled, far more than *Atlantic* fiction, the controversial tenets of realism so often debated in the magazine's literary criticism. It described in detail the commonplace activities, behavior, attitudes, and environments of a broad range of American social and ethnic groups. In fact, it is easily arguable that Page's *Atlantic*, though its point of view was more narrowly Anglo-Saxon upper middle class, described a broader social cross-section of American life than is found in current issues of the *Atlantic*, or the *New Yorker*.

From 1896 to 1899, Page commissioned and published an extensive series on American ethnic groups. These included not only analyses of political, economic, and social status, but also case histories, narrative anecdotes, and extensive description. Some of these, such as Henry Childs Merwin's article on the Irish, George Bird Grinnell's on Indians, and William Leighton's on Mexican Americans, were filtered through a heavily ethnocentric, middle-class Anglo-Saxon point of view, sometimes sympathetic, sometimes antipathetic, but always assuming a superiority of race and civilization. Other accounts, however, such as W. E. B. DuBois's description of his experiences as a teacher in a black backwoods Tennessee community, Abraham Cahan's article on Russian Jews, and Jacob Riis's series of eight articles on "the tenement house blight" were more fully empathetic.

Under Page, the supposedly staid and genteel *Atlantic* did participate moderately in progressive era muckraking, the journalism of exposure and reform that Page had seen much of in New York. *Atlantic* reviewers were generally cool towards reformist fiction and commented unfavorably on the tendency of realists and naturalists to hold the social and economic environment, rather than individual moral will, responsible for the conduct of their characters. But by contrast, many non-fictional accounts of the American social envi-

³⁹ Undated letter, HM Papers.

ronment detailed its damaging effects and called explicitly for reforms. DuBois suggested that although black education should receive increased support, not illiteracy but "the Veil" of prejudice institutionalized in the Jim Crow laws was the most fundamental social and economic impediment for blacks. Cahan protested the movement towards more stringent immigration laws. Jacob Riis in his reports on tenements described in detail the devastating physical and psychological effects of that "repellent and disheartening" environment on the "starved lives" of those incarcerated in it by economic circumstances. He unequivocally blamed the absentee landlords and speculative builders motivated by "profit without conscience" and asserted that the only way to curb abuses was to create and enforce laws that placed human welfare above property rights.

In many of the *Atlantic's* larger illustrated competitors, including *Harper's*, the most popular non-fiction form was the travelogue, which typically took the reader to distant lands and emphasized the exotic, luxurious, or adventurous. By contrast, Page was interested in surveying realities of the American scene from an insider's perspective. Early in 1896, Page solicited a writer named Alvan Sanborn to visit several representative New England towns, rural and industrial, and to write a series of papers reporting at first hand on the current social and economic conditions, attitudes and manners of the inhabitants. Page engaged William Allen White to write a similar paper on small-town life in Kansas and later Roland Hartt to write on the Far West.

Despite Mifflin's liberality in allowing Page such editorial innovations as reportage on current social conditions and progressive political commentary, Page still felt his editorial ambitions constrained by the *Atlantic's* traditions, readership, and editorial organization. In July 1899, Page suddenly resigned the *Atlantic's* editorship to accept S. S. McClure's offer of a major role in the resurrection of the bankrupted House of Harper. McClure's characteristically expansive offer of "a kingdom or two" from the Harper domain must have made the editorship of a magazine with a circulation of 17,000 seem small potatoes and certainly appealed to Page's vaulting ambition.⁴⁰ But Page may have had other motives for resigning as well. First, he believed that the only financial security available to an editor was to own a portion of the publishing house. He had tried and failed to do this at the *Forum*, and now there were no prospects of significant

⁴⁰ S. S. McClure, Letter to Page, 24 June 1899, Page Papers.

ownership at Houghton Mifflin.⁴¹ Within a year of his departure from the *Atlantic*, Page was editing *The World's Work*, published by Doubleday, Page and Company.

Page's resignation was probably motivated not only by ambition and a desire for financial security, but also by an essential strain that existed between his temperament and editorial training on the one hand and the nature of the *Atlantic* and his position there on the other. In ways, Page's relation with the *Atlantic* was a paradigm of the conflicts between progressive values and ideas about publishing and the more traditional, genteel values represented by Scudder and the house of Houghton Mifflin. As he had written to Scudder on accepting the job, Page saw the magazine editor primarily as an "idea man" whose main function was to be out in the world making contacts and orchestrating coverage of important contemporary issues. Partly because Houghton Mifflin's office organization was traditional and unspecialized, and partly because Mifflin and Scudder felt that Page needed some supervision, Page had never had the scope and freedom from office routine he felt he needed to edit the magazine effectively. He expressed his frustration over this in a letter justifying his resignation to the dismayed Scudder:

If [Bliss] Perry comes . . . to edit the *Atlantic* insist on it for God's sake that he has a chance to edit the *Atlantic* to the best of his ability, for . . . I could never get a fair chance with the organization that we have here. . . .

You edited the *Atlantic* and did the book work too. In my judgment you didn't do either as well as you could have done if you had had only one to do. I have done both — in the main; and made a failure of it in comparison with what I think I could have done if I had had either task without the other.

I have been unable to make a magazine that gave me any satisfaction with the necessity of acting as executive head of the office, of doing a great correspondence pertaining to the literary department in general, and of reading book mss. to boot.

I'm fagged out, worked out, sucked dry, gone to seed, withered up. I am tired till the muscles of my mind ache because it is only after a long day of routine correspondence and book work that I have a chance at night to plan for the magazine; and I have not had time to read books so as to keep fresh and little time to meet men except by neglect of the routine. . . .⁴²

But it was not just the office-bound routine and the fragmenting of his efforts that had frustrated Page. He had also felt himself constrained by the *Atlantic's* traditions and audience. To Scudder, he

⁴¹ Hendrick, *Life and Letters of Walter H. Page* (note 5), I, 66.

⁴² Letter, 2 August 1899, HM Papers.

claimed with characteristic hyperbole that "the proper man, if he be free, can make it not only the most powerful publication in the whole world, but more powerful than all others in our country put together."⁴³ But during his editorship Page had frequently muted his progressive instinct for journalism to suit the literary traditions of the magazine and the genteel preferences of its small audience for the culture of the past rather than the issues of the present. When Page was free to establish his own magazine, *The World's Work*, it was New York based, frankly journalistic, popularly written, contained no fiction, and within a few years achieved a circulation of 100,000.⁴⁴

Despite his frustrations Page had left his mark. He had been brought in to increase circulation, and circulation had risen from about 10,000 in 1895 to more than 17,000 by 1899. Advertising revenues, which Page had encouraged and which would become increasingly crucial in supporting the *Atlantic*, had risen from around \$1,600 to \$2,500 a month.⁴⁵ The magazine was still losing money, but it had started a recovery that proved lasting. Further, Page had helped the *Atlantic* to begin a recovery from its neurasthenic preoccupation with genteel culture. Several years later, Page's successor, Bliss Perry, wrote Page that "No one who has not seen something of its inside history can appreciate how great a debt the *Atlantic* owes to you for breathing into it the breath of life. . . . If it had not been for your impatient energy in getting the magazine out of the ruts, the grass would be growing over it today."⁴⁶ Though Page had not "Forumized" the *Atlantic*, he had introduced its coverage of contemporary social and political issues. Although the *Atlantic's* traditions changed slowly, Page's progressive innovations became major elements in the magazine in the twentieth century.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ Mott, *History of American Magazines* (note 1), IV, 783.

⁴⁵ Ballou, *Building of the House* (note 2), p. 453-454.

⁴⁶ Letter, 1 February 1904, Page Papers.

CONTRIBUTORS TO THIS ISSUE

I. BERNARD COHEN is Victor S. Thomas Professor of the History of Science, *Emeritus*, Harvard University.

CARLENE E. STEPHENS is Curator, Division of Engineering and Industry, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

ELLERY SEDGWICK is Associate Professor of English at Longwood College, Farmville, Virginia.