
The First Year: Reflections on the Origins of the *New York Call*

by Algernon Lee

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The editor's request that I contribute to the 13th anniversary number of *The Call* has brought back vivid memories of that first year, when it was my fortune to be one of the editorial staff.

The Call was born and lived through several months of its infancy in a shabby, old top-floor loft on Park Place. There were no private offices, nor even partitions between the various departments. The business staff occupied about one-third of the floor, at the front, while the other two-thirds housed the compositors and stereotypers. An open gallery or half-floor, with a railing at its edge and a rickety flight of wooden steps leading up to it constituted the editorial "sanctum."

The hot air and fumes of melted metal from the linotypes and stereotyping machinery came up to us from below mingled with the picturesque and forcible language which all good printers know how to use. To balance them, the summer sun beat down on the low roof, and at midday the tar sometimes melted and dripped through. When a gob of this happened to light in someone's hair there ensued a practical demonstration that editors have a latent power of vituperation little if at all inferior to that of compositors.

One of my colleagues, I remember, used to drive the rest of us to the verge of desperation by his apparent insensibility to heat, noise, and all other forms of physical discomfort. This was

Harry Smith, who was so used to being broiled by a Mexican sun that he was proof against all earthly roasting. Harry never took off his coat, and we could not decide whether most to admire or to resent the spectacle as he sat tight at his desk, hour after hour — reading copy, writing headlines, translating out of French, Spanish, German, Italian, and a few other languages, and from time to time raising his voice, not to complain about the weather, but to visit the failings of printers and proofreaders with polyglot fluency.

Up in front was good old George Gordon — huge, blue-eyed, with flame-colored hair and ruddy skin — seething with energy, brusque and often violent with his utterances, but so devoted to the job he had in hand and at heart so kind and generous that no one could resent being “bawled out.” He knew how to praise, too, and was never slow to give credit to those who worked with or under him.

Gordon is gone, and so is another of the men who helped to make our *Call* in that first year. No one who knew William Mailly can ever forget him. For my part, though it is 9 years since he drew his last breath, there is still a gap in the world — the place that he so well filled.

Already in 1908 the sickness that was to end Mailly’s career had its grip upon him, and he probably suffered more from discomfort, overwork, and anxiety than any of the others. If Will had lived twice as long he would still have died young. I never knew anyone so avid of life — so eager to know everything, to experience everything, to achieve everything. And how much he did learn and how much achieve, how intensely did he live, in the few short years after his entrance into the Socialist movement opened up to him all the vistas of literature, science, and art, and gave him the opportunity to realize himself in working for something bigger than self!

Perhaps I have said too much about the material handicaps of our early struggles to establish a workers’ newspaper, though I have not yet mentioned the extreme irregularity with which “the ghost walked” in those days. When the cashier came around we

were never quite sure whether she was going to hand out checks or offer to sell us *Call* bonds.

It was fun, after all. The very uncertainty whether *The Call* could live another week lent to the whole thing an air of adventure and gave us a sense of victory each day when the paper came from the press.

But I have exceeded my allotted space, and Billy Feigenbaum's blue pencil hovers before my mind's eye. Moreover, if I grow too lengthily reminiscent, some reader will say that Lee is getting old. If any present editor of *The Call* dares to do that, I know how to get my revenge. I have only to renew a favorite indoor sport of 1908-09. I shall go to the next meeting of the Workingmen's Cooperative Publishing Association and introduce a resolution enacting that the articles in *The Call* shall be "short and snappy."

To close then — Long life to our *Call*! And early congratulations to the boys who are getting it out for us!

Edited by Tim Davenport

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