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John Langdon Heaton

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About this Person

Born: 1860 in New York, United States

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Heaton, John Langdon (Jan. 29, 1860 - Feb. 21, 1935), newspaper editor and writer, was born in Canton, N. Y., only son and second among the three children of Ira Willmarth Heaton, a farmer and surveyor, and his wife, Lucinda Langdon, both of whom had New England backgrounds. He attended the public schools at Canton and the St. Lawrence University, in his home city, from which he was graduated in 1880, having served as ranking editor of his college annual. His scholastic record brought him election as a charter alumnus member when the St. Lawrence chapter of Phi Beta Kappa was established in 1899. During the academic year 1880-81 he taught in the grammar school of Rutgers University, New Brunswick, N. J., and then began his career in journalism as an editorial writer on the *Brooklyn Daily Times*. In 1892 he went to Providence, R. I., to start the *Providence Daily News*, but the venture soon failed. After some time spent abroad he joined the staff of the *New York Daily Recorder*. He was stirred by the crusading news and editorial campaigns of Joseph Pulitzer [q.v.], then electrifying New York, and after the *Recorder* suspended publication, he became in 1899 a writer for Pulitzer's *World*. His first assignment was on the Sunday staff, but in 1900 George Cary Eggleston [q.v.] retired from the editorial page and Heaton was chosen for his place. Winning Pulitzer's confidence and esteem, he soon achieved a permanent seat among the *World's* brilliant editorial writers and might well have succeeded William H. Merrill as editor of the page except that Pulitzer had made up his mind to obtain a younger man whose services he might expect to have for a longer time. The search for such a person ended with the selection in 1904 of Frank I. Cobb [q.v.] of the *Detroit Free Press*, with whom Heaton shared responsibilities until Cobb was made editor after Pulitzer's death. When Cobb was away, as in the absence earlier of Merrill, Heaton served as editor. In 1929, by which time Walter Lippmann had become editor, Heaton received the formal title of associate editor, which he held until the *World* ceased publication, Feb. 27, 1931.

Although he necessarily wrote on many other subjects, Heaton became a specialist in local matters, such as city and state politics, municipal government, transit, public welfare, and health and milk control. "He was known for the lucidity of his writing, and his ability to translate the most abstruse material into simple terms readily understood by the average newspaper reader" (*Editor & Publisher*, Mar. 2, 1935). Pulitzer admired in addition to Heaton's clarity, his "style of courtesy and absence of violent language" (Seitz, *post*, p. 292). But he could be as strong as he was lucid and in many of the *World's* battles after the turn of the century, Heaton was Pulitzer's vigorous mouthpiece. For many years he spent Sundays at the *World* office in charge of the editorial writing for the Monday-morning editions. "As eminent men have a way of dying on Sunday" (Heaton's self-prepared obituary, *New York Times*, Feb. 22, 1935), he wrote the *World's* appraisals of many important persons, including William Jennings Bryan and Pulitzer himself. In 1905 New York State Senator Armstrong, in charge of the insurance investigation for which the *World* had fought, asked Heaton to recommend a chief counsel for the committee. Heaton declined to make a selection, but he did approve the suggestion of Charles Evans Hughes, whose work in that capacity soon made him a public figure. In 1911 Heaton urged Edward M. Shepard [q.v.], independent Democrat, to stand for United States senator in order to prevent election by the New York legislature of Tammany's choice, standpatter William F. (Blue-Eyed Billy) Sheehan. "You cannot be elected," Heaton told Shepard; "you can add to a creditable career of public service by blocking Mr. Sheehan" (*Editor & Publisher*, Mar. 2, 1935, p. 52). Shepard followed Heaton's counsel; James A. O'Gorman was elected and in the attendant battle a young independent Democratic legislator named Franklin D. Roosevelt came to the fore.

Heaton made the detailed study and report on facilities for education in journalism on which Pulitzer founded the Columbia University School of Journalism. When the school was opened he became a life member of the advisory board, representing the *World*, and he was instrumental in the selection of Talcott Williams [q.v.] as its first director. Among Heaton's half-dozen books are two which belong on any list of outstanding volumes in the field of American journalism: *The Story of a Page: Thirty Years of Public Service and Public Discussion in the Editorial Columns of The New York World* (1913) and *Cobb of The World--A Leader in Liberalism* (1924), a collection of his colleague's "editorial articles and public addresses." Early in 1932 he issued a small book on presidential politics and

personalities entitled *Tough Luck--Hoover Again!*, in which he severely criticized the current national Republican administration and called Franklin D. Roosevelt, then governor of New York, "the logical contender." His other publications were: *The Story of Vermont* (1889); *Stories of Napoleon* (1895); *The Quilting Bee* (1896), poems; and *The Book of Lies* (1896). He wrote the article on Frank I. Cobb for the *Encyclopædia of the Social Sciences* (vol. III, 1930). His wife, Eliza Osborn Putnam of Danvers, Mass., whom he married in 1882, died in 1919 after a successful career of her own in journalism and writing, which included publication of *By-Paths in Sicily*. Their son, James Putnam Heaton, an only child, died in 1926.

The oldest member of the editorial-page staff in both years and length of service, Heaton was devoted to the *World* until its end, which was a blow that he never overcame. He collapsed in the office on the last dramatic night of publication. For some time he continued to go to the *World* dome where he had been so long a policy shaper and leader writer. But he was soon stricken with Parkinson's disease and his nervous condition grew progressively worse over several years until he died in his seventy-sixth year at his home in Brooklyn. His body was taken to his birthplace for burial near his beloved St. Lawrence University. He was a striking figure of a man, tall, large, and in his later years crowned with heavy white hair and having a long snowy mustache. He illustrates probably as well as any one in American daily journalism the case of the anonymous editorial writer who, working in the name of his newspaper without personal identification, frequently determines the course of public affairs.

FURTHER READINGS:

[Several months before his death, Heaton prepared his own obituary which was quoted by newspapers generally at the time of his death. For other sources see: *Who's Who in America*, 1934-35; *Editor & Publisher*, Mar. 2, 1935; *N. Y. Times* and *N. Y. Herald Tribune*, Feb. 22, 1935; D. C. Seitz, *Joseph Pulitzer: His Life and Letters* (1924); J. W. Barrett, *Joseph Pulitzer and His World* (1941); M. S. Black, ed., *Sixty Years of Saint Lawrence* (1916). Information as to certain facts about the family was supplied by Richard C. Ellsworth, Canton, N. Y.

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