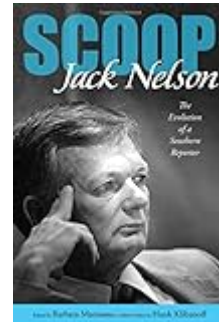


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Jack Nelson. *Scoop: The Evolution of a Southern Reporter.* Edited by Barbara Matu-sow. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2013. Illustrations. xiv + 188 pp. \$26.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-61703-658-3.



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A Life in Investigative Reporting

In the days before the Watergate scandal during the Nixon administration, investigative reporting was unorganized and largely underappreciated by the journalism profession and the public alike. Journalists like Jack Nelson and Clark Mollenhoff fell into it by inclination, and others worked at it only sporadically as stories arose. But Mollenhoff, who worked for Cowles Media beginning in the 1950s, and Nelson, who found his footing in journalism about a decade later, set an example for investigative journalists who followed. By the time Watergate emerged in the mid-1970s, Mollenhoff had moved on to column writing and teaching, but Nelson's career was in its ascendancy.

Nelson built a distinguished record of investigative reporting for the *Atlanta Constitution* and, later, the *Los Angeles Times*. His specialty was local government corruption and misuse of power. His trademark was a briefcase full of sworn affidavits, which he routinely collected from sources to back up their sensational accusations against powerful local officials. Nelson wrote that his personal makeup attuned him to investigative reporting.

He claimed that he never saw gray, only black and white, good and evil. He said he did not spend much time reflecting on what he was doing—he just did what seemed to come naturally.

Nelson attracted the attention of the *LA Times* because of a series of investigations he did for the *Atlanta Constitution*. Only twenty-eight years old, Nelson exposed a lottery ring in Atlanta, to the embarrassment of Mayor William Hartsfield and his close friend Ralph McGill, the venerable editor of the *Constitution*, and gained statewide attention by revealing protected gambling and prostitution in Liberty County, Georgia, outside Camp Stuart, that led to the indictment of forty or fifty people, including local officials. He also exposed gambling and prostitution that preyed on students in Athens, Georgia, at the University of Georgia. His work caught the attention of the national media when he exposed scandalous conditions at the Milledgeville State Hospital, where, among other serious problems, a nurse was performing surgeries on patients.

Scoop: The Evolution of a Southern Reporter is Nelson's abbreviated memoir. He died in 2009 before he could finish the book. His wife, the accomplished journalist and author Barbara Matusow, edited the manuscript and ushered the book into publication.

The "evolution" in the book's subtitle refers to Nelson's slow acceptance of the importance of the civil rights movement, which he later called the greatest story of the twentieth century. While a reporter for the *Constitution*, he gave little attention to the civil rights movement, which was fine with his editors, who wanted to ignore the movement as much as they could. But even southern newspapers could not ignore the story when the U.S. Supreme Court issued its 1957 Little Rock school desegregation decision and protestors and federal troops began amassing around that city's high school. Nelson's editor sent him to Little Rock. Still, at that point, the civil rights movement remained only an interruption to Nelson's relentless pursuit of political corruption in Georgia.

A Nieman Fellowship allowed him time to reflect on the race issue as he took social psychology and history courses at Harvard University. He came to the conclusion that segregation in the South was not only unworkable, but also wrong. He returned to Georgia committed to covering desegregation and the civil rights protests. The call from the *LA Times* provided him a national platform from which to do so. The *Times* hired him to be its roving southern reporter with the express purpose of getting journalistic purchase on the civil rights story. He tackled the story with characteristic tenacity and courage. His civil rights coverage for the *Times* was some of the best produced by the reporters working the story across the South. He confronted racist officials, state troopers, and the Ku Klux Klan (KKK).

Throughout his investigations, Nelson routinely cooperated with the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and some local law officials who were not involved in the corruption that he was investigating. Mollenhoff had done the same. But before Nelson left the South for the *LA Times* Washington bureau, he discovered how com-

promising that can be. In 1967, a local chapter of the KKK in Jackson, Mississippi, terrorized the city by dynamiting temples and other buildings associated with the local Jewish population. When police ambushed and killed a Klansman and his girlfriend in Meridian, Mississippi, before they could plant a bomb at a local Jewish leader's home, law officials said that an informant had tipped them off. Nelson, through his own informants, found out that the local office of the FBI had coerced two men to convince the Klansman to plant the bomb and consequently to lure him into the ambush. Moreover, the men were paid bounty money donated by the Jewish community in Jackson. As Nelson worked on the story, his loyalties understandably split between his friends in the FBI, his sources in the Jewish community, and his journalistic responsibilities.

Because of Nelson's death before he could finish writing the book, his memoir necessarily ends abruptly after he describes the acrimony FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover had for him following the Jackson, Mississippi, stories. His colleague from the *LA Times* Washington bureau, Richard T. Cooper, helps by adding an epilogue to provide some insight into Nelson's career during the 1970s and discusses Nelson's contributions to the founding of The Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press.

Like most memoirs published by investigative reporters, *Scoop* suffers some from being a chronicle of war stories rather than a book with solid analysis. But war stories can be helpful to researchers wanting to tell the history of journalism or the story of investigative journalism. Moral philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre writes that practitioners should use the lives and careers of excellent practitioners who came before them for guidance in respect to values, norms, and skills of the practice. Budding journalists could do worse than to look to Nelson as an example of one of the best from the practice of investigative reporting. This book will help anyone better understand journalism during the mid-twentieth century, investigative journalism in general, and the relationship between journalism and the civil rights movement.

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