

## The Early Days of Literary Journalism— A Tale of Sims, Eason, and Connery

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Nineteen eighty-four. It was a very good year. That's when my doctoral dissertation was officially "posted," although I had finished it in 1982 while on the faculty at the University of Idaho, my first full-time teaching position. It was the year Norman Sims's *The Literary Journalists* was published. And it was the year David Eason's highly influential article, "The New Journalism and the Image-World: Two Modes of Organizing Experience," ran in the first issue of *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*. (Eason later revised it, with the title "The New Journalism and the Image-World," as a chapter in *Literary Journalism in the Twentieth Century*.)<sup>1</sup>

Sims's *The Literary Journalists* was important because it essentially called into existence or at least branded an emerging writing form, and Eason's piece was also critical because it demonstrated the meaning-making nature of literary journalism as well as its limitations. As John Pauly has pointed out, Eason went a step further and used insights from literary criticism and phenomenology to question our confidence in journalists' ability to serve as independent, authoritative reporters of reality, even when using more in-depth methods. Nevertheless, it was becoming clear that what was being called literary journalism could be identified by common characteristics, which Sims noted in his book's introduction, and it was slowly becoming evident as well that literary journalism wasn't simply reporting with pretty writing. Rather, it had substance and style and was therefore worth the read.

The title of my doctoral dissertation was a bit cumbersome, as often is the case with dissertation titles: "Fusing Fictional Technique and Journalistic Fact: Literary Journalism in the 1890s Newspaper."<sup>2</sup> I was essentially making a case that the so-called "New Journalism" of the 1970s was part of a tradition of reporting with a literary purpose, and I was tracing it back to the 1890s. I focused on four writers: Stephen Crane, Richard Harding Davis, Julian Ralph, and Hutchins Hapgood. The dissertation contained no mention of either Sims or Eason. Yet for a while, Sims, Eason, and Connery were the three constants in this emerging field of writing and study.

In those days, research dealing with literary journalism was presented at the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (AEJMC)<sup>3</sup> meetings, specifically at sessions of AEJMC's Qualitative Studies (QS) division; if you crunched numbers, you'd present in the Quantitative Studies division sessions. Quite often, those judging papers had neither an understanding of nor a knowledge of literary journalism. Conference papers in the QS Division could be on just about any topic, including media ethics, for instance, or gender and media. If the research was largely historical, it might even be best suited for the AEJMC's History Division, though once again the paper judges probably would not have a solid grasp of literary journalism, even if the history of the form was the topic. That lack of knowledge and understanding was often quite evident in a judge's comments.

In 1983, the AEJMC held its annual conference at Oregon State University. That's when I first met Norman Sims. He was presenting his take on literary journalism by discussing a few of its contemporary practitioners. Afterward, I introduced myself, and we had a short, pleasant exchange.

In 1988, AEJMC was meeting in Portland, Oregon. My friend John Pauly, who was then on the faculty at the University of Tulsa, before going to Marquette University, told me there was someone I should meet, and he introduced me to Eason, who at that time was on the faculty at the University of Utah. Pauly was right. It was clear to me that Eason and Sims were almost outliers, interested in and advocating for a type of journalism that had a literary purpose but not a huge number of supporters (although Sims's book would become a hot item).

I was presenting parts of my dissertation at the occasional conference, but publishing was a challenge. The part on Hutchins Hapgood was published in the journal *Journalism History*,<sup>4</sup> while a piece on Julian Ralph was published in *American Journalism: A Journal of Media History*.<sup>5</sup>

Eason eventually ended up at Middle Tennessee State University, just south of Nashville, where he oversaw a master's program and codirected an annual conference of journalism scholars and practitioners. Sims and Pauly, who had been in graduate school together at the University of Illinois and had a long-standing friendship, were regulars, and I was invited as well. The conferences were always stimulating, but just as rich were the conversations outside of sessions among a handful of literary journalism's fellow travelers. After the conference had ended on Saturday morning, we'd hang out in Nashville, and the conversation continued.

The participants in that conversation would come and go, often being those who might dabble a bit and go on to another scholarly interest. But in those early days, Sims, Eason, and I, with the occasional broader view coming

from Pauly, continued to try to explain literary journalism to "outsiders" who were eternally puzzled and might ask, "Isn't that just magazine writing?" Or, "Didn't Tom Wolfe invent that?"

So, a central question arose: Where was literary journalism's home, the place where it belonged, where it could continue to grow and develop?

Most importantly, who might publish the research, and where else might it be presented? Those history journals certainly weren't interested in current literary journalism. Sims's work was appearing in books, and he and I found a relatively receptive audience one year at the annual meeting of the American Journalism Historians Association. But, again, it was "history."

Another year, Sims, Pauly, and I were presenting on literary journalism at the annual meeting of the American Studies Association in New York City. We sat in on a few sessions and were pleased to hear the discussion and questions that followed those presentations. We were excited for our session, looking forward to the feedback and discussion. Alas, one person showed up for our session. We invited him—Michael Robertson, a Crane scholar who would become active in literary journalism—to join us in the bar.

In those early days, Sims, Eason, and I seemed to be howling at the moon, with an occasional "wolf" from Pauly. But, of course, all that changed, not the least due to the founding, growth, and development of the International Association for Literary Journalism Studies, begun in France in 2006, as well the birth of the association's journal in 2009. No more howling at the moon. And Sims, Eason, and I could watch it all grow.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Eason, "The New Journalism and the Image-World," 51–65. See also Eason, "The New Journalism and the Image-World," in *Literary Journalism in the Twentieth Century*, 191–205.

<sup>2</sup> Connery, "Fusing Fictional Technique and Journalistic Fact."

<sup>3</sup> Formerly the Association for Education in Journalism (AEJ), the name was changed in 1982 to the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (AEJMC). Folkerts, "History of Journalism Education," 260.

<sup>4</sup> Connery, "Hutchins Hapgood," 2–9.

<sup>5</sup> Connery, "Julian Ralph," 165–73.