

# An Improper Bostonian Writ Large

Dan Wakefield

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## The Inman Diary: A Public and Private Confession

Edited by Daniel Aaron. Harvard  
University Press, two volumes,  
1985, \$50.00.

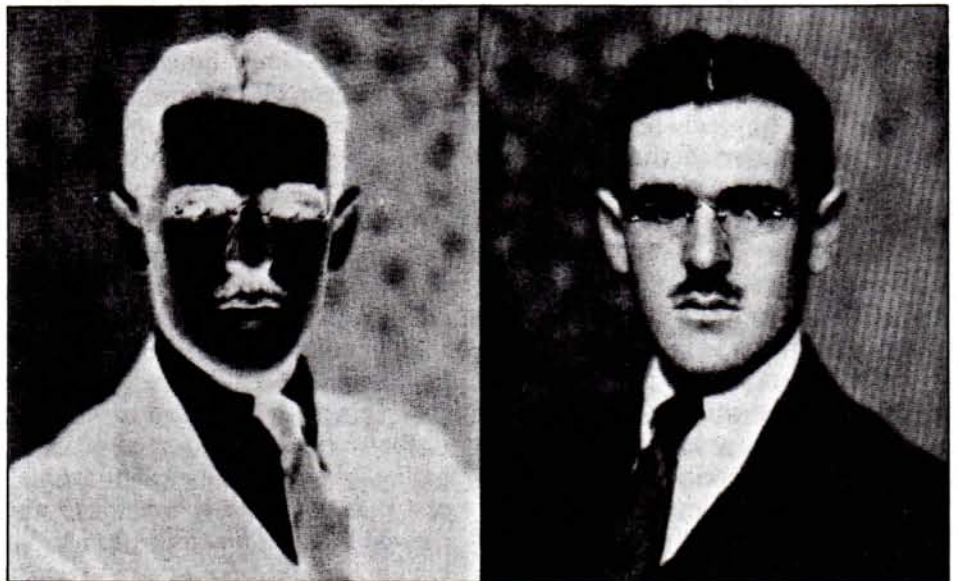
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Wanted: persons who have had interesting experiences and who can tell them interestingly to talk to an invalid, \$1 an evening. Telephone Back Bay 5553 between 9:00 and 10:30 A.M. or call Garrison Hall, Garrison Street, Boston, 7:00-8:00 P.M. Mr. or Mrs. A. C. Inman.

This ad appeared in the Help Wanted section of *The Boston Evening Transcript* on December 22, 1924, and those who responded included "a singer on the Lyceum circuit, the daughter of a Forty-Niner, an ex-editor of a country newspaper, and a prizefighter." The hired volunteers were ushered into a darkened room in a shabby-genteel Back Bay hotel and questioned about the most intimate details of their lives (Did they believe in God, love their wives or husbands, take drugs?) by Arthur Crew Inman, a neurotic, restless, reclusive, ambitious, bigoted, semi-invalid scion of a wealthy and socially prominent Atlanta family (grandfather Samuel Inman made a fortune in cotton) who hoped not only to "picture myself" but also

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"picture America" in a kind of "ultimate diary" that would someday win him fame, and in the meantime provide an "escape valve for my thoughts and emotions" and even a reason for living. ("The mainspring of my existence is the keeping of this diary.")

A little more than two decades after Inman finally succeeded in the suicide he had so often contemplated and twice before attempted, the magnum opus he gave up on trying to publish in his lifetime (Walter Lippmann had "found it hard to lay it down," but believed the subject matter too "intimate" for anything but private publication) was brought out last fall in a boxed set of two volumes (reduced to this feasible but still formidable size from ten times the amount of mater-

ial), and its author won the literary celebrity he so longed for in life and aided even after his death by a publishing subvention provided by his estate to The Harvard University Press.

Reception of the work has ranged all the way from a rave in *The New York Times Book Review* ("This is an American diary that ought to endure as long as our literature," John Gross proclaimed) to a put-down in *The New York Review of Books* ("Harvard University Press has given us the cork-lined chamber without Proust," Louis Auchincloss said in icy summation). Justin Kaplan lauded the diary as "a compelling piece of social history" in *The New Republic*, while Benjamin DeMott, in a kind of literary backlash, argued in *The New England Monthly*

that praise of Inman's "gift as a prober of lives different from his own" was "wrong-headed," and that comparison of his work to Dreiser "traduces real literary values."

The most unsavory aspect of the work for admirers and detractors alike is Inman's blatant racism and berserk enthusiasm for fascism. After citing some of those ravings, including the diarist's love of Hitler and hatred of Roosevelt ("Devoutly do I hope for the further illness and possible death of Roosevelt," Inman wrote in 1944), Louis Auchincloss commented: "I can only ponder bemusedly how his words ever persuaded Harvard that his goal as a historian had been even remotely approached."

It is not, however, as a "historian" in any conventional sense that Inman can claim attention. The editor of the work explains in its pages that the diarist's "hope of becoming an interpreter and representative of his times was absurd. He was too confined, too prejudiced, too uncritical. . . a perfect specimen of what a historian friend of mine has called the 'paranoid style' of political thinking." Inman himself referred to the diary's "contemporaneous inaccuracy of the historical perspective."

Inman's obsessive (even desperate) effort to portray himself and his times (born in 1895, he worked on the diary from 1919 to his death in 1963) more honestly and unsparingly than anyone had done before would still be unintelligible — or at least largely inaccessible — were it not for the six years of labor of his editor. If the good luck of Inman's tormented life was his attractive, long-suffering, understanding wife Evelyn (she not only tolerated but helped recruit the endless stream of teenage girls her husband questioned, entertained, and fondled in his darkened rooms, but offered to provide birth control for the few women with whom he went beyond "petting" to engage in sexual intercourse), his great posthumous fortune was in getting Daniel Aaron as the editor he had so long addressed, admonished, and instructed in his mammoth opus.

Harvard professor emeritus of English and American language and literature, author of highly regarded works of literary and intellectual history such as the classic *Writers on the Left*, and president of the Library of America (the distinguished publishing enterprise that is making available in uniform editions our national literary canon), Aaron took on a challenge that made the legendary trunk full of manuscripts that Thomas Wolfe lugged into Maxwell Perkins' office seem downright skimpy. Inman bequeathed to his editor 155 volumes containing seventeen million words.

Not only the sheer bulk of the thing was daunting, but also the dark and troubled nature of the *persona* behind it, for Aaron soon realized that he had encountered in this massive *cri de coeur* what he bluntly calls in his introduction "the classic sick soul." As he plunged ahead, Aaron found that "the vulnerable and perverse creator" of the work was also a man of "mitigating decencies and curious genius," and that the scene he created — the crowd of assorted "talkers" and "readers," helpers and doctors and friends and lovers who poured out to Inman their darkest secrets in the dim confessional netherworld of his curtained room — "abounds with life." Aaron in a sense entered that world himself, becoming a "character" in the form of the long-awaited "editor" and concluding the final volume with an abridgment of the last diaries through his own letters to one of the surviving members of Inman's inner circle.

Since the rambling, twisting work (Inman refers to it as a "thrashing snake") has no real precedent in form or content, Aaron offers the reader five different possible strategies for approaching it: as case history ("the autobiography of a warped and deeply troubled man whose aberrations call for psychiatric probing"); the story of an unreconstructed, transplanted Southerner; an overview of Boston from the 1920's to the 1960's; a "street-side" social history of America; or as a non-fiction novel.

It has the texture and flavor (though

not the conscious narrative art) of one of those nineteenth-century novels out of Russia or England — a cast larger than Tolstoy, more intrigues and injustices than Dickens, and the voice of a Dostoevsky protagonist. (Inman often sounds like the narrator of *Notes from Underground*, as when he laments in his diary "What a bruised spineless, squirming semblance of a thing I am.") Sometimes it seems more like a Vonnegut novel with a wacky anti-hero who imagines himself the editor of his own newspaper.

In the mornings Arthur Inman was driven around Boston in his Pierce Arrow or 1919 Cadillac, looking for material ("diary fodder" he called it), and from his bed the rest of the day and night he not only listened to peoples' stories but also sent his "staff" out on "assignments" like some driver-editor running the city desk from his sickbed. One night he dispatched his wife Evelyn to the Scollay Square Theatre to interview a French explorer and the nine Ubangis he had brought on tour from the Belgian Congo. When a willing but perplexed Evelyn wondered how she would get them to talk to her, Arthur suggested she pose as a reporter from an Atlanta paper, which she did, faithfully bringing home the story that was then transcribed into the diary: "There were the members of the chorus, small dark girls with velveteen jackets, powder on their own costumes. . . a dancer wearing only a small strap and painted from feet to head with bronze paint. . ."

Hedda Williams, a grocery clerk and office worker affectionately known as "Woodwork," who was one of the most faithful members of Inman's circle, asked Arthur how she could help him fill his diary now that she had already told him everything about herself. He gave her instructions that any good journalism teacher might impart to an introductory class (no doubt omitting the first and last "assignment"). "Pick up a man a day. Go through factories. Take a trip to beaches and study human nature. Find out how a depart-

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moved by his proselytizing for Islam, his vision of separate black states, or his appeals to stop smoking marijuana. His audience comes alive when he talks elliptically about guns and when he unguardedly fantasizes about beating up a white man with a stick — not just Jewish white men, but all of them.

Race always has been the great exception to America's bright vision of itself. And the problems will not disappear without a determined national effort to solve them, however much many white Americans might long for that to happen. The Civil War, the greatest paroxysm of violence in American history, was rooted in race, and there has been blood shed in our own time. I wish I could be sure there will not be more.

## Improper Bostonian

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ment store works. Go to the legislature and hear the politicians wrangle. Ask questions. Poke. Prod. Explore. Choose some Yankee and try to make a human out of him or her."

Inman loved details, and he wanted to record everything he could, like a journalistic pack rat. His wife wondered once why he wished to put in his diary an account of a flea trainer: "Well, I answered, if Mr. Farnsworth has been able to make a living for thirty years exhibiting trained fleas in the U.S., the very fact seems to me to exemplify one phase of American life and therefore pertinent to the object of this diary."

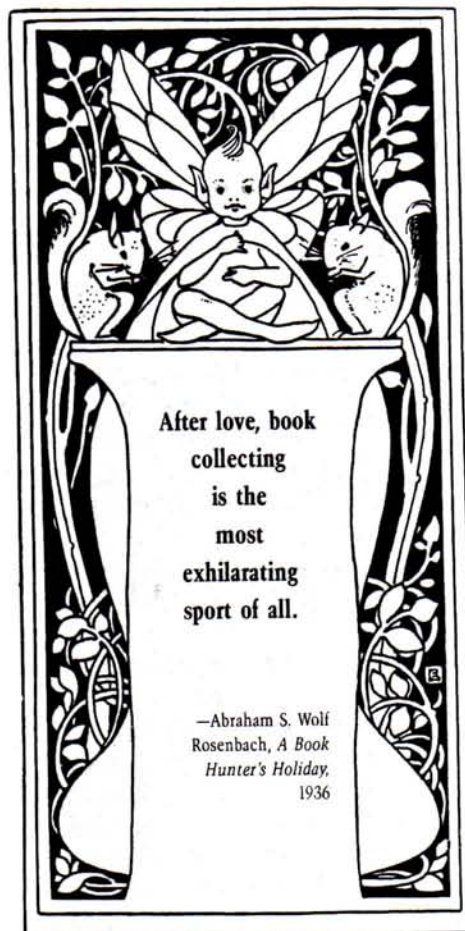
Despite his self-absorption and self-indulgence, Inman showed a genuine interest in and sympathy for "the lives of the commonplace people at my disposal," which he found far more interesting than "persons of the class into

which I was born." One of the driving ambitions he had for his diary was to preserve some account of the lives of those "ordinary" people who, he feared, "may, unless I record them, be a hundred years from now as though they never were."

In the midst of his myriad physical complaints ("pelvis pains, migraine headaches, swollen hemorrhoids, blurred vision, aching teeth, sensitivity to light and noise" is but a scattershot compendium) and his own often depressed mental condition ("Curse life. Curse myself. Curse God."), Inman had real empathy for his "characters" (Auchincloss found them "often pathetic") and saw in their struggle and confusion a striving. When he joined a correspondence club to gather more material, he felt the seventy or so "lonely hearts" letters he received "have thrown a light on the inner souls of many lonely people" and he perceived that in joining such clubs "it is as though they were fumbling for a way out of something or into something, a blindish effort toward a change of some sort."

Inman succeeds in preserving for us the essence of many of his characters — the cocky, wheeler-dealer chauffeur Eddie Simms with his proudly shined shoes; the former chorus girl Patricia Caffree who went to Hollywood, and, like many unsung women of her time, became not an actress but a waitress; the indomitable driver and gardener Edna Mercer who was running an entire candy factory at the age of fourteen before she was sent back to school; the articulate black cleaning woman Ella James whose trip to a YWCA convention showed her the shocking shallows of lip-service liberalism.

In addition to the ways of reading *The Inman Diary* that Aaron suggested, it might be taken also as a kind of supplement to the sociology texts of the times, a more personal view of grand theories and cold statistics. Reading some of these stories I was reminded of hearing a journalist I admired demand of a renowned sociologist whose book he had just read: "I believe the conclusions, but *where are*



*the faces!*" Inman gives us the faces (Hedda Williams' "green eyes with their wide, fear-gazing pupils cause you to forget cheeks, hair, all. They are unapproachable eyes, withdrawn, like those of an animal crouched ready to flee at the mouth of a cavern"), and the voices (Theresa Raleigh as a young wife telling how she gets along with the husband she first feared: "Ever since I turned the salad plate upside down on his head when he made me mad and then threw a glass of milk in his face and I stood there watching the oil and milk, the green vegetables drip down over him and he looking bewildered and surprised, all his dignity lost, I've had no awe of him.").

There are scenes preserved here that are part of our history that very little fiction or sociology I know of portrays in such excruciating detail, like the account of the abortion of the librarian Sarah Mitchell in Boston, in 1931,

when The Doctor "... ushered her into a back room at the end of the hall where were a huge desk, some chairs, and a rubber plant. He cleared the flat top of the desk, ordered her to remove her bloomers, laid her on the desk. He brought some instruments and a piece of gauze with a string tied to it. He gave her no anesthetic. . . ."

The dark and painful side of our national experience is recorded on an intimate scale, and Inman's determination to be "honest, honest, honest" gives us a disturbing account of the contortions of his own prejudiced mind. The fascinating aspect of Inman's blatant bigotry ("I hate the Jews, the English, Roosevelt, life, myself," he rants, forgetting to mention his aversion to blacks, and even "blue-eyed people") is that it so often collapses on individual encounters. He says of Ella James, the black cleaning woman: "In many expressions of her nature, Ella is more akin to me than anyone I know." He sympathizes with his Jewish friend Naomi Levitt when she and her husband are barred from buying a house in the "restricted" suburbs, and wonders at one point if he should join the Jewish faith ("the only one that made sense to me"). He continued to wrestle with the bigotry that bedeviled him: "I do not want to be influenced by racial prejudice but am. Why? It lies deeper than I can control. . . ." So it does and has for many Americans, and Inman's self-reported "case" could serve as a useful study of the illness. (Aaron observed that the virulence of Inman's bigotry rose and fell with economic conditions, as it tends to do nationally.)

In the midst of social and personal pain and confusion, real beauty sometimes breaks through these pages. Inman may not be Proust, but his own sense-stimulated memories are surely worth recording: "I verily believe I associated each experience I underwent with the smell of it. I can recall the moldy smell of Market Street in Philadelphia when I walked it on a rainy day. I can recall the ozone of electric motors on streetcars. The wet fallen-leafmat in Pennsylvania woods in win-

ter comes back to me like magic. I remember the sour oil smell of journal boxes on railway trains when men oiled them with long-spouted cans. I recall the wild ginger and the sassafras of Georgia woods. No end to my nasal recollections."

There was no end of stories for Inman, either, whether his own or others; and he gathered and recorded them like Scheherazade, till the very end. I was reminded of Joan Didion's reflection that "We tell stories in order to live." That is what Arthur Inman did, and that is what he bequeathed us in this compelling, exasperating, memorable monster of a memoir.

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## The Man Who Tried

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the paper from its beginning in 1940 until its demise in 1948.

Ingersoll's business plan was simple enough; all revenues would come from circulation and no advertising space would be sold. His audience would be the "lower middle class" and, of course, the intellectuals were thrilled at the prospect of a genuinely radical newspaper in New York. Ingersoll figured that 200,000 sales a day at a nickel a copy would allow him to make an adequate profit.

The first issue sold 450,000 copies, but within a few months circulation had declined to 31,000. The paper never became self-supporting. Hodding Carter, Jr. [NF '40], one of the original *PM* writers, analyzed its failure years afterward. "It was not the Communists (on the staff), mismanagement, or interoffice jealousies that did *PM* in so much as the 'dreary, humorless, consecrated insistence upon conformity to a fixed and condescending liberalism.' And he quoted comedian Henry Morgan's remark that a *PM* story always

began: 'My name is Minnie Moscovitz and I live on Flatbush Avenue, Brooklyn, and I think it's a shame. . . .'"

Ingersoll went into the army in 1942 after a much publicized battle with his draft board. He was promoted rapidly with the help of political friends, served on the staff of General Omar Bradley for a short time, and obtained an early discharge in 1945. He returned to *PM* which was in its death throes, had a falling-out with his patron, Marshall Field, and in 1948 said goodbye to "big-time journalism."

Worried as always about money and his life style, he found another patron, a wealthy Texas oil man, who helped him buy an interest in several small newspapers which eventually became the Ingersoll chain and provided him in his last years with an income of more than a million dollars a year. He died last March before this book was finished.

*Ralph Ingersoll* is an "authorized" biography, based in large measure on Ingersoll's recollections and on his voluminous papers. This might seem a shaky foundation for a book, especially since Ingersoll was renowned as a liar. But he always was embarrassingly candid with Hoopes, who has produced a fascinating study of a man and his times and of a newspaper that tried to do good.

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## Progeny by Print

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The printing press also spawned a myriad of related fields.

Consider: libraries, librarians, indexing and retrieval systems, paper mills, ink manufacturers, publishing firms, bookbinding, bookplates, bookends, bookmarks, and, in this century, publicity departments, book fairs, copyright laws, microfilms, microfiche,