

William Allen White and his son, William Lindsay White.

Father, Son, and Country on the Eve of War

William Allen White,
William Lindsay White, and
American Isolationism, 1940–1941

by Karen Manners Smith

By the late spring of 1940 Adolf Hitler had overrun most of Europe. Even as his threats of world domination loomed closer, Americans continued to argue about United States involvement in Europe's war. In the Midwest, where conservative and liberal opinion clashed most dramatically, the issue would cause a public disagreement between Kansas newspapermen William Allen White of Emporia and his son William Lindsay White.

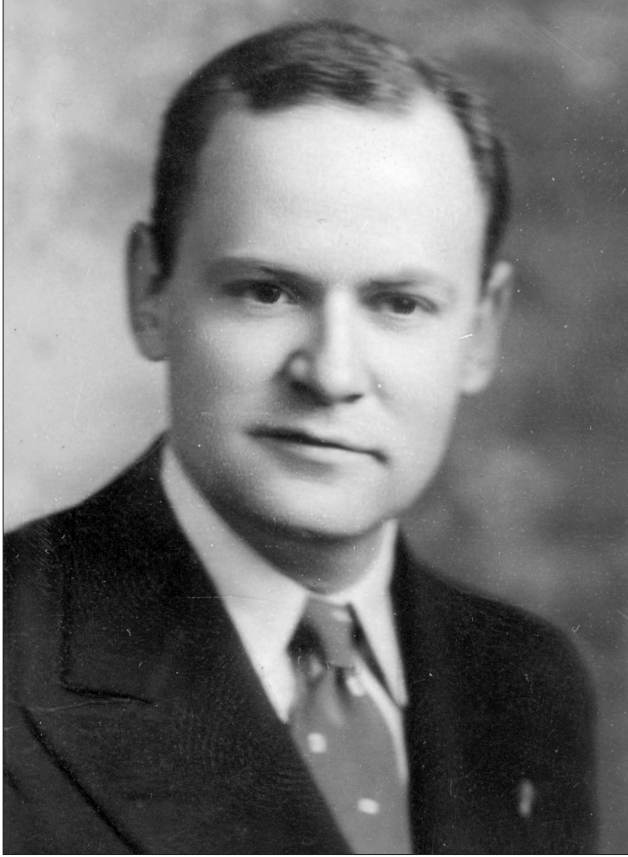
The Whites, father and son, were journalists, novelists, and opinion-makers who enjoyed an influence that transcended the regional, reaching national and international audiences. All told, their combined writing careers would span more than eighty years.

The family profession got its start in 1895 when the twenty-seven-year-old William Allen White assumed ownership of the *Emporia Daily Gazette*. The following year White was catapulted

Karen Manners Smith, an associate professor of history at Emporia State University, specializes in the history of American women and holds degrees from Brandeis University and the University of Massachusetts. Her publications include *New Paths to Power: American Women, 1890–1920* (Oxford University Press, 1994). Most recently her research interests have focused on the representation of small-town America as found in the writings of Kansas journalists William Allen White and William Lindsay White.

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William Lindsay White was known throughout his father's lifetime as "young Bill." In the 1930s, when this photograph was taken, he became co-owner of the *Emporia Gazette*, then spent one year in the Kansas legislature before striking out on his own in New York as a freelance writer and syndicated columnist.

to national attention with the publication of an anti-Populist editorial entitled "What's the Matter with Kansas?" From that time on he cultivated and maintained a distinguished national reputation as the voice of small-town America. He also functioned as a cultural interpreter, an apostle of middle-class values, and a major influence in American politics.¹ Although White wrote regularly for national journals and popular magazines, he never forgot that he had grown up in Kansas, and he chose to live there nearly all of his adult life. Central to his being were his identity as the man from Emporia and his role in representing the Midwest to the rest of the country. *Life* magazine once wrote of White: "He is the small-town boy who made good at home. To the small-town man who envies the glamour of the city, he is living assurance that small-town life may be preferable. To the city man who looks

1. Edward Gale Agran, *Too Good a Town: William Allen White, Community, and the Emerging Rhetoric of Middle America* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1998). See also William Allen White, *The Autobiography of William Allen White* (New York: Macmillan, 1946), 259, 279–83; Jean Lange Folkerts, "William Allen White: Editor and Businessman during the Reform Years, 1895–1916," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 7 (Summer 1984): 129–38; Sally Foreman Griffith, *Home Town News: William Allen White and the Emporia Gazette* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

back with nostalgia on a small-town youth, he is a living symbol of small-town simplicity and kindness and common sense."²

White ran the *Emporia Gazette* as a local paper, but he also used it as a platform for criticism, social analysis, and his own brand of politics, which oscillated between the Bull Moose progressivism he had learned from Theodore Roosevelt and the liberal Republicanism he generally espoused after World War I. White was not always comfortable with Kansas Republicans, nor they with him. He spoke his mind and frequently changed his mind, always remaining true to his own convictions and generally loyal to the party while arguing with its conservative leaders.³

William Lindsay White, known throughout his father's lifetime as "young Bill," had grown up, as his biographer says, in the shadow of his father. Born in 1900, he had attended Harvard University and then returned to Kansas, working ten years at the *Emporia Gazette*. His father made him a co-owner of the paper, and in 1931 he married a Kansas woman, Kathrine Klinkenberg. He spent one season in the Kansas legislature before striking out on his own in New York as a freelance writer and syndicated columnist. Enjoying only mixed success until 1939, he welcomed the new role as foreign correspondent that the European war offered him. And it was war journalism that brought him, at age forty, to the highest point of his career, leading to the production of his popular syndicated columns and magazine articles and the publication of a number of best-selling books, three of which later became movies.⁴

In December 1940 Bill White's upward trajectory would intersect the downward spiral of his father's wartime political activities. Unlike his father, young Bill was not trapped in outgrown partisanship. Moreover, his

2. "William Allen White of Emporia: An American Institution is 70," *Life*, February 28, 1938, 9.

3. Dated, but still quite useful, is Walter Johnson, *William Allen White's America* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1947); an example of White's impatience with the conservatives in his party is James E. Carey, "William Allen White and Dan D. Casement on Government Regulation," *Agricultural History* 33 (January 1959): 16–21.

4. E. Jay Jernigan, *William Lindsay White, 1900–1973: In the Shadow of his Father* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1997); "The *Emporia Gazette*, Family History: William Lindsay White," available at <http://emporia.com/waw/williamlwhite.html>. William Lindsay White's books that became films are *Journey for Margaret* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1941), movie released in 1942; *They Were Expendable* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1942), movie released in 1945; and *Lost Boundaries* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1948), movie released in 1949.

analysis of the U.S. position with regard to the war in Europe turned out to be more realistic than his father's. From this point on, although he would never cease to be known as William Allen White's son and eventually would run the *Emporia Gazette* himself, William Lindsay White would have a professional life and reputation of his own.

Throughout the 1930s William Allen White had found himself generally in sympathy with many New Deal programs. However, out of Republican Party loyalty, he had voted against Franklin D. Roosevelt in two elections, even supporting Kansan Alfred M. Landon in 1936, albeit not very stoutly.⁵ In 1939, after the Germans invaded Poland, White was asked to become head of the Non-Partisan Committee for Peace through Revision of the Neutrality Laws. Revising the Neutrality Laws, which dated from the mid-1930s, would make it possible for the United States to sell weapons to countries opposing Hitler's advance without completely abandoning neutrality. The Non-Partisan Committee had the full support of President Roosevelt, and White himself believed that the only chance America had to stay out of the war and remain protected against Hitler was to supply arms to the Allies in Europe. White and the committee lobbied Congress but made small progress with midwestern congressmen; nevertheless, the revisions passed.

On June 22, 1940, France fell to the Germans. England, the outpost of Europe, stood alone against the Nazi advance, expecting Hitler's armies to invade her shores at any moment. Although faced with the very real possibility that their old ally soon would be overrun by a totalitarian power, many Americans continued to oppose all forms of United States involvement in the European war. Isolationists in Congress and around the country resisted every step that appeared to bring the United States closer to a military commitment, including a Selective Service Act, the proposed sale of weapons and war materiel to England, and Roosevelt's plan to "lend" aging U.S. destroyers to the British navy. Nowhere were isolationists more intransigent than in the Midwest, home to such radically anti-interventionist groups as the America First Committee, headquartered in Chicago. Polling data in 1939 had shown less than 30 percent support for U.S.

5. John De Witt McKee, *William Allen White: Maverick on Main Street* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press 1975), 179–81.



Throughout the late 1930s William Allen White (above) maintained a policy of neutrality concerning the war in Europe and did not share his son's point of view about American involvement. In May 1940 White, along with members of the Non-Partisan Committee and other concerned citizens, founded the Committee to Defend America by Aiding the Allies (CDA). White was chosen to chair the group, which became known simply as the "White Committee." This photograph of White appeared along with those of prominent isolationists in the January 6, 1941, issue of *Time*.

entry into the conflict, and the numbers changed only slowly over the following months.⁶

Newspapers all over the country took sides. In Chicago, the isolationist *Tribune* squared off against the interventionist *Daily News*. In Iowa, where the *Des Moines Register* and the *Des Moines Tribune* generally were internationalist rather than isolationist in editorial policy, Cedar Rapids newspaperman Verne Marshall launched an advertising campaign to attract members for the "No Foreign War Committee." (William Allen White detested Marshall and his committee but was not averse to selling them advertising space in the *Gazette*.) All the Hearst papers were isolationist, while, in New York, both the *Times* and the *Herald*

6. Harold Levine and James Wechsler, *War Propaganda and the United States* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1940), 46. See also William M. Tuttle Jr., "Aid-to-the-Allies Short-of-War versus American Intervention, 1940: A Reappraisal of William Allen White's Leadership," *Journal of American History* 56 (March 1970): 840–58; John W. Partin, "The Dilemma of 'A Good, Very Good Man': Capper and Noninterventionism, 1936–1941," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 2 (Summer 1979): 86.

avored aiding the Allies, as did Henry Luce's *Time* and *Life* magazines.⁷

In Kansas, William Allen White continued to develop a position of cautious-cooperation-short-of-war. For decades he had been known throughout the country as an apostle of moderation. Almost every president since Grover Cleveland had at one time or another sought his advice. In December 1939 President Roosevelt had written to White expressing his concern about what would happen if Hitler did overrun Europe, or if Germany and Russia divided up Europe between them. In May 1940, partly in response to FDR's concerns and partly out of his own fears for the worsening world situation, White, along with members of the Non-Partisan Committee and other concerned citizens, founded another national pressure group, the Committee to Defend America by Aiding the Allies (CDA). White was chosen to chair the group, which became known simply as the "White Committee."⁸ Within a very short time the CDA had several hundred affiliates around the country. Claiming he had no particular love for the British (many Americans resented Britain for defaulting on loans after the First World War), White explained that he was urging his government to prevent the fall of Britain by selling the British the weapons they needed to resist Hitler and keep democracy alive in Europe. White was a long way from wanting the United States to declare war on Germany, although some members of his committee were pushing for it during the summer of 1940. White knew the president was not close to a declaration of war; he knew that nearly the entire Republican Party was isolationist. He also believed that the people he knew best, midwesterners, just were not ready to think about entering a war.⁹

While William Allen White was moving midwestern sentiment toward limited support of Britain, his son was in Europe covering the war for CBS radio. Young White also was writing for the North American News Alliance, a

newspaper syndicate based at the *Des Moines Register* and the *Tribune*. Broadcast from Naples, Berlin, Helsinki, Stockholm, Paris, and Amsterdam, Bill White's radio reports became increasingly anti-Nazi during the winter and spring of 1939–1940. His stories helped CBS attract huge national audiences in the United States, and his Christmas Eve broadcast from the Finnish front won the 1939 National Headliner's Club Award—the radio equivalent of the Pulitzer Prize.¹⁰ After a brief visit to the United States, where he spent many dinner hours debating with his father about U.S. entry into the war, Bill White returned to Europe, traveling to England on one of the fifty aging destroyers Roosevelt had sent to Winston Churchill in exchange for the right to establish U.S. military bases at strategic Atlantic locations in Britain's colonial empire.¹¹

Starting in October 1940 Bill White began to write syndicated columns on the "Blitz" (the nickname for the Nazis's eighteen-month aerial bombardment of London and other key British sites, which killed thousands of civilians and caused millions of dollars worth of damage). For a week White filled in for CBS's famed foreign correspondent Edward R. Murrow. He was profoundly impressed by the bravery of the Royal Air Force during the Battle of Britain (July–October 1940) and the resolute stoicism of the British people under nightly air raids. Gradually, he became convinced that England's only hope was for the United States to enter the war as soon as possible.¹²

Back in Kansas, and apparently unmoved by his son's vivid descriptions of the disaster unfolding in western Europe, Bill White's father continued to oppose full-scale U.S. participation. The elder White had only been able to bring himself to support Roosevelt's destroyer deal as long as he could be sure American ships and sailors were not going to be used to convoy the destroyers or other supplies to Britain. In November 1940 Bill wrote

10. Jernigan, *William Lindsay White*, 117.

11. Winston Churchill, *Speech to the House of Commons*, August 20, 1940, document reference ZHC2/873, Public Records Office, Kew, Richmond, Surrey, U.K., also at <http://homepage.tinet.ie/~finnegam/war/blitz.htm>

12. "In all, 18,000 tons of high explosives had been dropped on England during eight months of the Blitz. A total of 18,629 men, 16,201 women, and 5,028 children were killed along with 695 unidentified charred bodies." See <http://www.historyplace.com/worldwar2/timeline/about-blitz.htm>; see also Cecil Brown and Ralph Hyde, *Devastated London: The Bombed City Seen from a Barrage Balloon* (London: Topographical Society, 1990); Jernigan, *William Lindsay White*, 115–32.

7. Wayne S. Cole, *Roosevelt and the Isolationists, 1932–1945* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), 478; William M. Tuttle Jr., ed., "William Allen White and Verne Marshall: Two Midwestern Editors Debate Aid to the Allies versus Isolationism," *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 32 (Summer 1966): 201.

8. Cole, *Roosevelt and the Isolationists*, 366; Lise Namikas, "The Committee to Defend America and the Debate Between Internationalists and Interventionists, 1939–1941," *Historian* 61 (Summer 1999): 843–64.

9. See, for example, Partin, "The Dilemma of 'A Good, Very Good Man,'" 86.

his father: "I don't see how they [the British] can win in the long run unless we actually get in, and for our sakes, the sooner the better." His father later published the comment and a brief, brusque response in the *Gazette*, making it clear that he would not be swayed by his son's opinion: "W. L. White . . . said that the British felt that America should get into the war—a position which his father does not agree with."¹³ The dispute notwithstanding, the senior White knew what made good reading, and he continued to publish every letter and article his son sent from England.

It is a commonplace of journalistic theory that reporters often identify with their subjects. This was certainly true of the American correspondents who covered Britain during the Blitz. Aably assisted by Britain's own propaganda machine, which included the BBC and the Ministry of Information, American journalists made heroes of ordinary Britons, using stories of their valor and endurance to persuade their American audiences that the war raging in Europe was a war worth fighting—that it was, in fact, a war for the survival of the decent, common man with whom all Americans could identify. Within weeks after Blitz reporting began, the image of Briton-as-hero would supercede all previous media images of the British as effete snobs who thought themselves superior to Americans.

By mid-1940 sizeable contingents of radio broadcasters, along with Associated Press reporters and representatives of major U.S. newspapers, were stationed in London, which had become the headquarters for covering the war in Europe. Among these reporters were some of the most revered news commentators and writers of the day. Ernie Pyle (the Scripps Howard reporter from Indiana), Eric Sevareid, and Edward R. Murrow (the voice of CBS war coverage) were probably the most famous of the reporter-propagandists of World War II, but Bill White was an equally effective rhetorician. And although he was a relative newcomer to the world of war correspondence, he was an experienced journalist and adapted enthusiastically to the demands of reporting the news while ducking for cover.

13. William Lindsay White to William Allen White, November 1940, quotation in Jernigan, *William Lindsay White*, 132; William Allen White, "From W. L. White," *Emporia Gazette*, December 30, 1940.



Starting in 1939, William Lindsay White began covering the war in Europe for CBS radio. His radio reports became increasingly anti-Nazi and helped CBS attract huge national audiences in the United States.

His columns appeared nearly every day in more than fifty newspapers across the United States, including his father's *Emporia Gazette*. Many of his stories were profoundly moving and skillfully persuasive.

Bill White's strength as a propagandist for the reluctant lay in his understanding of the midwestern mind and his credentials as a native son of the Midwest. He had been raised in Emporia, and, notwithstanding his Harvard education and the eastern focus of his adult years, he proudly maintained his connection with the heartland. Like his father, he knew how to reach the people of Kansas and Nebraska, Oklahoma, Missouri, the Dakotas, Montana, Iowa, and Illinois. The message he wanted to convey to his audience in 1940 was one born of his own transformation from smug isolationist to eager interventionist. Before setting out for Europe in 1939, he had published a pair of casually isolationist articles, one in the *Survey Graphic* and the other in *The Nation*. Writing as a "son of the prairies," Bill White had discussed the midwestern drift to the right, confidently expressing his opinion that his fellow midwesterners



William Allen White (right) and his wife, Sallie, pose proudly with their son, Bill, upon the young man's return from Europe for a brief visit in 1939. Before returning to London to continue work as a foreign correspondent, young Bill spent many hours debating with his father about U.S. entry into the war.

would be extremely reluctant to help England fight another war. For one thing, they could never be persuaded to vote for aid to allies who had not yet paid their debts from the first war. Nor would any sensible midwesterner, he further argued, agree to support someone as deeply suspect as England's Neville Chamberlain. On a different issue, White naively asserted that, should Europe fall, the Nazis would find no welcome in the American Midwest, since there was "no anti-Semitism" in the Midwest to which Hitler might appeal in the event of an attempted take-over of the United States.¹⁴

In the months after those articles appeared, Bill White's experiences as a war correspondent would transform his thinking. By December 1940 he had had time to assess the seriousness of the Nazi threat, and he had come to respect the British. The man who had once spoken so easily for the people of the prairies now found himself speaking to them and trying to persuade them—and other Americans—to care about England.

14. William Lindsay White, "A Voice from Main Street, U.S.A.," *Survey Graphic* 28 (February 1939): 133–35; "The Middle-West Drifts to the Right," *The Nation* 148 (June 3, 1939): 635–38.

Bill White wrote Blitz coverage for his syndicate between October 1940 and January 1941. He also wrote six stories for *Reader's Digest* about England at war. His first dispatch gave his initial reaction to the London Blitz and would set the tone for subsequent reports. He combined vivid language and homely similes with a strong note of exasperation about the appalling waste of it all. His admiration for British toughness was clear:

On my first afternoon in London I gazed at St. Paul's high, carved altar, smacked flatter than a boarding-house pancake this morning by a number of massive stones from the great arch above, each about the size of a Shetland pony, which had been dislodged by a German bomb. . . .

The absolute, rock-bottom wholesale cost to the Nazi government of manufacturing that bomb and delivering it . . . to St. Paul's altar could not be less than \$10,000 in reichmarks. The amount of military damage it inflicted on the British Empire I would generously estimate at something less than eight Canadian cents. But it has deeply angered England.¹⁵

15. William Lindsay White, "Emporian Finds Few Scars of Nazi Bombings in England Today," *Emporia Gazette*, October 12, 1940.

Bill White produced his most powerful piece of wartime writing in a *Reader's Digest* article entitled "London Fire, 1940" which described how he spent the night of Sunday, December 29, 1940, wandering the burning streets of London during what turned out to be the worst incendiary bombing of the Blitz. Like many of those who experienced the December 29 firebombing, White felt something special about this particular night, a terrible beauty combined with a poignant sense of historical loss. The conflagration, dubbed the next day the "Second Great Fire of London," would inspire a number of correspondents, among them Ernie Pyle and the *New York Times's* Robert Post, to produce their best writing of the war.

Throughout the Blitz, German planes customarily dropped incendiaries—so-called firebombs—on the first run. Incendiaries were small, three-pound, torpedo-shaped bombs made of magnesium alloy with thermite cores. They burst into flame on impact. Once the incendiaries had lit up the blacked-out streets, the planes made a second pass and dropped heavier bombs. For some reason, on this night, the Germans dropped mostly incendiaries and fewer of the large bombs. Even a child could smother a firebomb that landed in the street; sandboxes had been placed all around the city for just that purpose; but incendiary bombs could puncture roofs and set buildings on fire from the inside, and that was how most of the damage was done that night.

It was the holiday season between Christmas and the New Year, and many of the roof spotters had taken the night off. The River Thames was so low that, despite the best efforts of firemen and volunteers, it proved impossible to pump enough water to quench all the fires. Building after building in the crooked streets of the old city of London, Fleet Street, and the financial district, went up in flames—more than ten square blocks in all. The six-centuries-old London Guildhall was destroyed, and with it the eleventh-century parchment Charter granted to the City of London by William the Conqueror. Dr. Samuel Johnson's house in Gough Square was gutted, as was his beloved pub, the Cheshire Cheese, along with the Old Bailey Courts. Five buildings of the Inner Temple—the seat of British law—went up in flames at the same time, and the Temple's Gothic library was reduced to rubble, with the loss of many of its seventy-thousand irreplaceable volumes. Eight churches built by Christopher Wren in the late seventeenth century—after the first Great Fire of London—were utterly lost, although St. Paul's Cathedral was saved by the heroic efforts of firemen and volunteers. During the worst

hours of the bombing and the fire, St. Paul's dome on Ludgate Hill stood triumphantly, providing an opportunity for press photographer Herbert Mason to take a picture that became the strongest symbol of British indomitability—aside from Churchill himself—of the entire war.¹⁶

It was natural for journalists to connect the fiery destruction of December 29, 1940, with the first Great Fire of London in 1666. That first fire had begun on September 2 (also a Sunday night), breaking out in the house of the king's baker and raging for four days. The seventeenth-century fire destroyed areas of the city that were again destroyed on December 29, 1940, but the earlier destruction included more than thirteen thousand houses. (By the mid-twentieth century few residential blocks remained in London's central city business district.)¹⁷

London's famous seventeenth-century diarist, Samuel Pepys, evacuated his house during the fire, after burying his wine and a huge Parmesan cheese in the back garden. He wrote a long account of the fire, of which the following is a fragment:

[We approached] so near the fire as we could for smoke; and all over the Thames, with one's face in the wind, you were almost burned with a shower of fire drops. . . . [We] stayed till it was dark almost and saw the fire grow; and as it grew darker, appeared more and more, and in corners and upon steeples, and between churches and houses, as far as we could see up the hill of the City, in a most horrid, malicious, bloody flame, not like the fine flame of an ordinary fire. . . . It made me weep to see it.¹⁸

Samuel Pepys was lucky: his family and his house, his goods, and even his cheese survived the fire. But thousands of others were homeless, and it took decades to rebuild the city after the first Great Fire of London.

It was the Second Great Fire of London that turned Ernie Pyle into a war correspondent. The young Scripps Howard reporter said he had gone to London during the Blitz as a tourist, but on the night of December 29, 1940, he stood on a balcony with friends, watching the city blaze,

16. *Time*, January 13, 1941, 21–22. Mason's photo appeared on the front page of the *London Daily Mail* on the morning of December 30, 1940.

17. *Ibid.*; *New York Times*, December 31, 1940.

18. Robert Latham, ed., *The Illustrated Pepys: Extracts from the "Diary"* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 122–23.



William Lindsay White witnessed the Great Fire of London of December 29, 1940, ignited by Nazi incendiary bombs which rained upon the city for hours. Building after building in the streets of the old city of London, Fleet Street, and the financial district, went up in flames. During the worst hours of the bombing and the fire, St. Paul's Cathedral, pictured here amid the chaos, remained standing triumphantly.

and was profoundly moved. They were all feeling, as Pyle put it, “a vast inner excitement.”

Into the dark shadowed spaces below us, while we watched, whole batches of incendiary bombs fell. We saw two dozen go off in two seconds. They flashed terrifically, then quickly simmered down to pinpoints of dazzling white, burning ferociously. These white pinpoints would go out one by one, as the unseen heroes of the moment smothered them with sand. But also, while we watched, other pinpoints would burn on, and soon a yellow flame would leap up from the white center. They had done their work—another building was on fire. . . .

St. Paul's was surrounded by fire, but it came through. It stood there in its enormous proportions—growing slowly clearer and clearer, the way objects take shape at dawn. It was like a picture of some miraculous figure that appears before peace—hungry soldiers on a battlefield. . . .

Later on I borrowed a tin hat and went out among the fires (walking at one point down a street that was afire on both sides, past walls that soon would be ready to fall). The thing I shall always remember above all other things in my life is the monstrous loveliness of that one single view of London

on a holiday night—London stabbed with great fires, shaken by explosions, its dark regions along the Thames sparkling with the pinpoints of white-hot bombs, all of it roofed over with a ceiling of pink that held bursting shells, balloons, flares, and the grind of vicious engines. And in yourself the excitement and anticipation and wonder in your soul that this could be happening at all. These things all went together to make the most hateful, most beautiful single scene I have ever known.¹⁹

An unidentified *New York Times* editor filed his story about the fire two days after it happened. He was impressed with the historical significance of this particular night and his article provided an important link for Americans to grasp: the loss of central London was the loss of a history shared by Americans and English alike:

Old London is irreplaceable. The district known as “The City” is more than the heart and nerve center of a world-wide empire. It is what every son of the English race sees and thinks of when he speaks of Lon-

19. David Nichols, *Ernie's War: The Best of Ernie Pyle's World War II Dispatches* (New York: Random House, 1986), 42–44.

don. So solidly is it built in the memory and tradition and literature of England that many who have never seen it know it well—the medieval courts, Gray’s Inn, St. Swithin’s Lane, the pointed spires of ancient chapels, the haunts of Johnson and Pepys, Sterne, and Dickens.

This is the London chosen by the Nazis for their latest holocaust. . . . There is no pretense that this is a conflagration of military stores, factories, or railway stations. Rather, the torch is lit in spite, a last attempt before the year ends to destroy the heart of London after the failure of four months’ effort to destroy its spirit.²⁰

Like Ernie Pyle and the *Times* reporter, CBS correspondent Edward R. Murrow found meaning in the fire that lay beyond mere destruction: he saw it as a metaphor for England’s wartime blood sacrifice. Recalling that night months later, he told Londoners: “We all remember . . . the big raid of December 29th when the city burned, and as I walked home at seven in the morning the windows in the West End were red with reflected fire, and the raindrops were like blood on the panes.”²¹

The firebombing had elicited both awe and indignation from some very seasoned journalists. It provided an opportunity to write evocative prose as well as a chance to sway Americans toward a more active sympathy for the British and their imperiled heritage. Among all the writers who covered the fire, it was William Lindsay White who exploited the metaphorical possibilities of the night to their fullest potential and who had the most pointed agenda. He was the only major American correspondent who produced a full-length article on this single, most spectacular episode of the London Blitz.

Parts of “London Fire, 1940” appeared in White’s widely syndicated North American Newspaper Alliance columns in early January 1941. The entire article was published in *Reader’s Digest* in March 1941.²² Somewhat amended, and with its pro-British sentiments intensified, “London Fire” later became a chapter in White’s best-selling memoir *Journey for Margaret* (1941), the story of Bill White’s months in London and his efforts to

adopt a Blitz orphan. In 1942 *Journey for Margaret* was made into a popular feature film, an unabashed piece of war propaganda starring Robert Young and Margaret O’Brien.

Unlike the movie, the “London Fire” article itself is completely unsentimental, but it blazes with imagery that makes a more powerful assault on the hearts and imaginations of its readers than any mere sentiment. In White’s narrative, as in the *New York Times* piece, the fire that destroys the Wren churches and London Guildhall seems to threaten the destruction of British history itself, perhaps the destruction of the whole ancestral isle. White’s story is peopled with emblematic characters: gruff, stalwart fire-fighters and air-raid wardens, a fearless Cockney taxi driver, and a beautiful, impassioned, French woman reporter, who represents the spirit of the Free French. White himself both narrates the piece and appears as a representative American. Like Ernie Pyle, White takes to the streets, wandering without restraint. Strangely exhilarated and seized with the desire to witness and record as much as he can, he runs madly between burning walls, dodges bombs, and dashes deep into the fire zone.

White’s story begins just as he emerges from a showing of Charlie Chaplin’s cinematic Hitler satire *The Great Dictator*. He notes that the sky is a lurid pink, like bad Technicolor in a Cecil B. DeMille movie. His companion is Marguerite, a stunning young French woman with red-gold hair who writes for a London newspaper and on the side produces publicity for DeGaulle’s Free French Forces. The bombing has just begun, its weird illumination also turning the River Thames pink. Incendiaries begin bouncing in the streets around them. Marguerite angrily kicks one, burning her shoe and blistering her foot. People are hurrying to avoid the rain of bombs. At ten o’clock the couple finally finds a taxi, with a nice young driver who considers it will be a great adventure to take two reporters on a tour of the fire that is beginning to blaze up around them.

They approach as close as they can to the fires, flash “Press” passes, and find themselves in the heart of the inferno. The Associated Press building—six stories tall—is ablaze and the roof has fallen in (the next day White will sell his story about the AP building to the *New York Times*). The firemen direct the taxi to the area of the worst fires, but the streets are blocked with debris and fire hoses, so they abandon the taxi and proceed on foot, taking the young taxi driver with them. The wind comes up, tearing at Marguerite’s hair and her skirts; they head to St. Paul’s and find firemen holding the blaze away from the building. The

20. *New York Times*, December 31, 1940.

21. Franklin R. Smith, *Edward R. Murrow, The War Years* (Kalamazoo, Mich.: New Issues Press, 1978), 101.

22. William Lindsay White, “London Fire, 1940,” *Reader’s Digest* 38 (March 1941): 6–14.



London Fire, 1940

By

William L. White

THE NIGHT the Nazis tried to burn London I was at a matinee of the Charlie Chaplin movie with Marguerite, who is 25 and very good-looking. She is half English and half French and speaks both languages with just a trace of accent. She used to work for the *Matin* but got out of Paris just ahead of the Nazis and came to London where she now holds a newspaper job.

The show started at 4:30 and about the beginning of reel four we heard the air-raid sirens. A notice was flashed on the screen that anyone who liked could leave and go down into the shelter but no one did. We were sitting in the balcony

By cable to *The Reader's Digest* comes this vivid firsthand account of the experiences of an American reporter on the night that fire-bombs rained on the ancient city of London.

The show was over at seven and we stepped out into the weirdest city I had ever seen. London looked like a technicolor production of *The Burning of Rome* by Cecil B. De Mille. The whole sky was pink, with splotches of bright orange on the horizon. It was so garish as to be a little bit overdramatized and in bad taste. Though long after dark, there was enough light from the sky for me to tell the tone of Marguerite's lipstick.

We were going to have dinner but first Marguerite had to drop by her office to check on a story she had written that afternoon. The whole building was empty and we

heat. Then, being reporters, we thought what a good cable story it would make. . . . And yet . . . it was sad to stand here and see it go. . . . it had been a sweet little church with perfectly balanced classical lines, like a minuet in stone.

At that point in his story White does not know that this is only one of eight Wren churches being destroyed that night. Presently, the smell of the fire envelops them, almost like incense; but, as White describes it in one of his most powerful metaphors, this is not an ordinary fire smell but rather the smell of history burning:

It was spiced with the odor of oak beams which had been put into places two hundred and fifty years ago, after the first great fire of the city of London. Tough, seasoned, mellowed old rafters and flooring hewed centuries ago, as well as the ancient records of venerable British business firms whose columns of figures supported the empire, were blended into the haunting odor we sniffed. Surely no attar of roses could ever be as expensive as this scent which you could only get by burning the city of London.²³

William Lindsay White produced his most powerful piece of wartime writing in a Reader's Digest article entitled "London Fire, 1940" (above), which described how he spent the night of Sunday, December 29, 1940, wandering the burning streets of London. Like many of those who experienced the firebombing, White felt something special about this particular night, a terrible beauty combined with a poignant sense of historical loss.

firemen gaze at the long-legged Marguerite, whose hair is the color of the fire, and White notes that he and the cab driver are proud to be with her. His eroticization of Marguerite is perfectly in keeping with longstanding British and American traditions of representing France as female and seductive, but also as heroic. Marguerite is not exactly La Liberte, but she is modern France.

Marguerite wants to check on a little Christopher Wren church she knows, nestled among office buildings. White writes:

As we got near it looked like a Christmas card picture. Someone, probably firemen, had left the front doors open and light streamed out. . . . Standing as close as the heat would permit we looked into a great furnace. The roof had come down, and broken chunks of its big glowing oak beams were spread over the red embers of the pews. From within the church came the steady rumble of a big hot fire at its peak, a noise which is deeper than a roar. . . . The heat was peeling off pieces of the ancient stone sidewalls and pillars—chunks about the size of your hand and sometimes as big as your head, clicking and knocking and rattling down on the stone floor. First, we thought how beautiful it looked in the shimmering

The three companions stop at the head of another street, watching the buildings set each other on fire, flames jumping from one to the next at intervals of no more than two minutes. Window glass showers the street, "tinkling down on the sidewalk in a steady musical drizzle." White compares the sound to a spring rain in the wheat belt back home in Kansas. But, of course, it isn't rain, and he is not in Kansas anymore. He is deliberately making the connection to his readers in the heartland.²⁴

In a nearby square they spot a line of poor people clutching ragged bedding, waiting to be directed to shelter by the fire wardens. These people are the "janitors and charwomen and others who live in this financial district because they must sweep and clean its offices . . . yet there was no grumbling and no hysteria." The wardens are

23. White, *Journey for Margaret*, 212–14. All quotations in this section from the chapter "London Fire," in White, *Journey for Margaret*, 202–29. The account in *Journey for Margaret* is in all important respects similar to the story published in *Reader's Digest*. I have chosen to quote from the book rather than the article, as the later publication represents William Lindsay White's final revision of the prose. It is slightly longer than the original and its interventionist tone is even more urgent than in the *Digest* piece published a few months earlier.

24. *Ibid.*, 221

From W. L. White

W. L. White talked on the telephone today from London to his parents. He is well. He has come out of the great London fire unscathed. He expects to return to America from Lisbon, January 15, on the Clipper.

He gave an interview to the Chicago Times this morning in which he said that the British felt that America should get into the war—a position which his father does not agree with. But it is obvious that under the terrific bombardment and strain that London has passed through the British people feel the need of help from America. But apparently the President's position that we should be the arsenal of democracy rather than to furnish soldiers has greatly cheered up the British. Mr. White is leaving all his baggage, and instead is bringing home with him a 37-pound refugee girl baby.

Emporia doctors say a baby girl weighing 37 pounds is nearly 3 years old.

In a December 30, 1940, Emporia Gazette article, William Allen White reported that he spoke by telephone with his son that same day and that Bill had "come out of the great London fire unscathed." He further reported that Bill would be returning to America on January 15 and would be bringing with him a British war orphan.

"good, sturdy Londoners, tired with work and responsibility, but with those steady British nerves we had been watching all evening."²⁵

In their last adventure of the night, a spectacular piece of folly, the American man, the French woman, and the British lad run arm in arm down a street blazing on both sides—in effect, they run through a towering tunnel of fire—toward yet another Wren church they can see in a darkened square in the distance. The fire scorches their faces as they run, sparks burn holes in White's trench coat. There is a huge roar behind them as a building they have just passed collapses into the street. There is no going back. Their safe passage through the gauntlet of fire seems to embody White's vision of the future course of the war: the Allies, with Americans as full participants, will survive and triumph, meeting some unspecified but spiritually purified goal at the end.

The night is just about over. They take Marguerite home, and White pays the cab driver and sends him off, pleased that the young man did not call him sir; pleased that he was a "damned good, brave, steady, self-respecting British boy."²⁶ For White, the boy represents the bravery of British youth and a future Britain that will be more democratic and less rigidly stratified than before the war, just as the fireman and wardens represent the English power to endure.

The next day White talks to some men he meets in the street, three Cockney fireman hosing down a smoldering basement:

"Tell me," one asks. "What does America think of all this?"

So we said something about America's sympathies being all with England.

"How soon do you think America will be in this?" asked the oldest fireman.

We had to say we didn't know.

"Do you think by spring?" he asked.

We had to say we didn't know.

"Maybe at least by summer?"

We had to say we didn't know.²⁷

Unable to make the promise the British would like to hear, Bill White is embarrassed for his country. But it is

25. *Ibid.*, 218

26. *Ibid.*, 223–25

27. *Ibid.*, 228. This scene, a rhetorical coda, does not appear in the *Reader's Digest* version of "London Fire."

very clear what he would like America to do. His vision has been clarified by the fire, and so has his message: an unequivocal support for full American intervention.

"London Fire, 1940" is only one of a number of human interest pieces about the Blitz written by American reporters right about this time, usually with the blessing and assistance—not to say the connivance—of the British war propaganda machine.²⁸ By late 1940 Winston Churchill was obsessed with bringing the United States into the war, and the British had good reason to hope that American re-

28. John Nicholas Cull, *Selling War: The British Propaganda Campaign Against American Neutrality in World War II* (Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press, 1995), 106–25.

porters' stories of the survival, wit, and valor of ordinary English people would stir American response. By coincidence, FDR's "Arsenal of Democracy" speech was broadcast throughout the United States in a fireside chat the same night as the Second Great Fire of London. A few days earlier, in a press conference, he had used a fiery metaphor to lay the groundwork for his upcoming Lend Lease proposal, asking essentially: if your neighbor's house was on fire, wouldn't you lend him your garden hose without calculating the cost up front?²⁹

Suppose my neighbor's home catches fire. . . . If he can take my garden hose and connect it up with his hydrant, I may help him to put out his fire. Now . . . I want my garden hose back after the fire is over. . . . If it goes through the fire all right, intact, without any damage to it, he gives it back to me and thanks me very much for the use of it. But suppose it gets smashed up—holes in it—during the fire, I say to him, "I was glad to lend you that hose; I see I can't use it any more, it's all smashed up." He says, "All right, I will replace it." Now, if I get a nice garden hose back, I am in pretty good shape.³⁰

Not even the most fervent American interventionist would have wished the December 29 fire on London, but the fact that it had happened, and the way it had been covered in the press, made a powerful argument for aid.

Notwithstanding all his considerable rhetorical skills, Bill White was unable to push his father to a public declaration of support for American intervention beyond Lend Lease.³¹ In fact, the elder White resigned from the White Committee on New Year's Day 1941 because radical members of the group were moving too quickly toward intervention to suit him. The circumstances of his resignation were embarrassing to him: in a less-than-guarded statement issued to protect the committee from an attack by the isolationist Scripps Howard newspapers, he had insisted that the radicals on the com-

mittee had not called for a repeal of the Neutrality Act and the convoying of supply ships by the U.S. Navy. In fact, they had done just that. White knew his people, he knew his constituency: the East and West Coasts were ready to support convoying, but the middle of the country just was not.³² White later told FDR he had resigned because of his wife's illness:

Dear Mr. President,

I just wanted to tell you that you are doing a swell job . . . the way you have really kept us out of war consciously, determinedly, wisely, with statesmanlike strategy inspires my admiration and is the reason for this letter. . . .

I suppose you know that the reason why I quit the Committee to Defend America by Aiding the Allies last December was this: Mrs. White was ill. The doctor said we had to go to the desert. I couldn't send her alone. I had to go with her. In the New York Chapter some of our dear friends, yours and mine, dear and loyal friends, favored a Committee policy that would nag you into convoys, that would needle you into the repeal of the Neutrality Law and would give the British false hopes that we would send troops early this year. I couldn't go to New York to fight them. I could have licked them in the ground they were standing on in a few weeks, but I didn't have the time. So I got out. I was sorry to do it but it was you or Mrs. White and on the whole you can take care of yourself better than she.³³

It was true that Mrs. White had been ill, and William Allen White himself also was ill. He developed pneumonia that winter, and he was to die of cancer in less than three years, but he might have continued his service to the committee, and to the president, if he had been more comfortable about U.S. involvement in England's war. Unable to declare for intervention, troubled by the prospect of American boys dying in yet another war to save Europe, the elder White removed himself from the committee and from politicking altogether. He also withdrew from the editorial conversation for several months. However, his ac-

29. Philip Knightly, *The First Casualty: From the Crimea to Vietnam: The War Correspondent as Hero, Propagandist, and Myth Maker* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975), 237–41; Cole, *Roosevelt and the Isolationists*, 411.

30. Franklin D. Roosevelt, "Proposal for Lend Lease," in *The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt, 1938–1950*, comp. Samuel P. Rosenman, 13 vols. (New York: Random House, 1969), available at <http://search2.eb.com/elections/pri/Q00117.html>

31. Jernigan, *William Lindsay White*, 135

32. William Allen White to Roy Howard, December 20, 1940, quotation in Walter Johnson, ed., *Selected Letters of William Allen White, 1899–1943* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1947), 416–17; William Allen White to Lew Douglas, December 28, 1940, *ibid.*, 419–20.

33. William Allen White to Franklin Delano Roosevelt, July 11, 1941, William Allen White Papers, Emporia State University Archives, Emporia, Kans.

tions belied his silence. He threw his support behind Wendell Willkie, the former Republican presidential candidate who had become one of FDR's most unlikely allies. To the dismay of many in his party, Willkie supported Lend Lease and publicly opposed isolationism. Willkie had made his own, much-publicized visit to war-torn London as FDR's personal representative, and by mid-1941 he was urging unlimited aid to Britain.

In addition to his public support of Willkie, White arranged for the *Emporia Gazette* to publish a variety of syndicated human interest pieces about the Blitz in addition to pieces by his son.³⁴ Although he could not, and would not, publicly repudiate the heartland's isolationists, William Allen White stepped aside and let the internationalists, and soon the interventionists, have the floor. The Committee to Defend America by Aiding the Allies continued its work throughout the first half of 1941, helping mold public opinion and influence government policy, allowing Americans to feel they might keep the United States safe while staying out of a war. Ultimately, as White had perhaps foreseen, Clark Eichelberger and other moderate internationalists on the committee lost influence. They became discouraged by interventionist pressure, by the executive order that permitted U.S. naval ships to convoy war materiel to Britain, and by the growing certainty that war could come with or without a congressional declaration.³⁵

It would take the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941 to bring the United States fully into the war and to bring an end to the discussion about isolationism, internationalism, and intervention. Up until that point,

34. William Allen White correspondence, August–September 1941, *ibid.*

35. "Until mid-1941, pressure groups like the CDA helped Americans feel they were doing something to protect their nation while remaining at peace. Internationalism brought into the public realm the prospect that America could respond to world events without actually joining the war. The CDA contributed to this process and ultimately made it easier for Roosevelt to develop his foreign policies. This is probably what the president had in mind when he asked White in late 1939 to form an organization to educate public opinion. The public certainly did begin to think about consequences of events. But once generated, public interest in foreign policy took on some life of its own, and Roosevelt was not always able to guarantee its direction." *See* Namikas, "The Committee to Defend America and the Debate Between Internationalists and Interventionists, 1939–1941," 11.



Following the war's end and the death of his father in 1944, William Lindsay White returned to Emporia to become the editor of the *Emporia Gazette*. He resided only part-time in Kansas and died in 1973.

American sympathies remained slow to stir, and the majority moved toward participation one issue and one inch at a time. But throughout 1941, as Bill White and other war correspondents returned from Europe with attitudes tempered in the Great Fire, the heartland heard, in the voices of its own native sons, an increasingly urgent chorus of pro-British, anti-isolationist propaganda.³⁶

William Allen White did not live to see the end of the war, but he foresaw its end, and he wrote of the necessity of an international organization to preserve the peace afterward. He predicted the Cold War and the power of the Soviet Union.³⁷ A political animal to the end, he had to leave the next phase of politics and journalism to his son.

[KH]

36. For example, Ben Robertson published *I Saw England* (New York: Knopf, 1941), which was excerpted in *Reader's Digest* that same year, and H. M. Tomlinson published a series of meditative essays on the destruction of London in the *Atlantic* throughout 1941. American travel writer Negley Farson wrote *Bombers Moon* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1941), to describe British stoicism and endurance during the Blitz.

37. McKee, *William Allen White: Maverick on Main Street*, 195.