NONFICTION REVIEW: A once powerful, now forgotten, newswoman

Article by: GLENN C. ALTSCHULER, Special to the Star Tribune
Updated: September 20, 2011 - 7:32 PM

In a lengthy profile that appeared in Collier's magazine in 1946, Dickson Hartwell claimed that Eleanor "Cissy" Patterson, the owner of the "raucous" Washington Times-Herald, which had the largest circulation of any newspaper in the nation's capital, was "probably the most powerful woman in America." And, Hartwell added, "perhaps the most hated."

Patterson was the scion of America's royal family of journalism. Her grandfather, Joseph Medill, and her father, Robert Patterson, had made the Chicago Tribune one of the nation's most influential newspapers. Her brother, Joseph Patterson, turned the New York Daily News into the country's most popular tabloid. Once rock-ribbed Republicans, some Pattersons, including Cissy, flirted with the New Deal in the 1930s, but all of them turned against President Franklin Roosevelt when he reneged on his promise not to send American boys into foreign wars. Their dailies, some said, were the most influential isolationist platforms in the United States.

In "Newspaper Titan: The Infamous Life and Monumental Times of Cissy Patterson" (Alfred A. Knopf, 696 pages, $37.50), freelance writer Amanda Smith sets Patterson's turbulent personal and professional life in the context of her relationships and rivalries with members of her family. Impressively researched and massively detailed, her biography, alas, is overwritten, repetitious and, like the Washington Times-Herald, awash in titillating insider gossip.

Smith devotes pages and pages to Patterson's misalliance with and divorce from the appalling Count Josef Gizycka, the kidnapping of her daughter, a loveless marriage to Elmer Schlesinger and dozens of sexual dalliances by various and sundry relatives. She even includes an account of the custody dispute over the son of the current wife of the former husband (columnist and radio personality Drew Pearson) of Felicia Gizycka, Cissy's estranged daughter.
Smith does not demonstrate that Patterson was a substantive, significant or innovative force in the newspaper business. The Times-Herald's success, she indicates, was based on gossip, comic strips, women's features, giveaways, photo spreads, *ad hominem* attacks and "an unflagging and unapologetic anti-Roosevelt, anti-war message" that was borrowed (sometimes word-for-word) from articles and editorials in the Tribune and the Daily News.

In the early 1940s, Smith suggests, Patterson's erratic behavior gave rise to rumors of alcoholism, drug abuse and mental illness. After Patterson died, alone and under mysterious circumstances, on July 23 or 24, 1948, the Times-Herald, which had been fashioned in her own image, went into a protracted and permanent decline. Sold to the Chicago Tribune after an unsuccessful challenge to her will, the paper was acquired in 1954 by the Washington Post. By the turn of the 21st century, Smith acknowledges, Patterson (and her 18-year stint as an editor and publisher) had been "largely forgotten." Nothing in "Newspaper Titan" is likely to change history's judgment of her.

Glenn C. Altschuler is the Thomas and Dorothy Litwin Professor of American Studies at Cornell University.