Arts & Humanities

The Columbian Who Invented Eustace Tilley

Corey Ford 1923CC and the birth of *The New Yorker*.

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Ford: Historic Images; cover: Condé Nast

Harold Ross, an editor at the satirical magazine *Judge*, wanted to start his own humor weekly. He knew all the wits and wags of 1920s New York and was able to wangle from them a small bundle of parodies, reviews, cartoons, and gossip. What he needed next was a cover. His art editor, Rea Irvin, rendered an image based on an engraving of a nineteenth-century French dandy: a man in an absurdly high collar

and black top hat, applying his monocle to a butterfly. Ross approved, and on February 21, 1925, the first edition of *The New Yorker* hit the stands, thirty-two pages of highbrow drollery bound by two staples.

Sales were slow in the first few months, and there were holes in the book where ads should have been. To plug the gaps, Ross turned to Corey Ford 1923CC, a young parodist and *New Yorker* contributor. Ford's task was to divulge, over the course of twenty issues, the secrets of *The New Yorker*'s elaborate production process.

Ford's column, titled "The Making of a Magazine," was the perfect showcase for his powers of farcical invention. He identified the top-hatted man on the cover of the first edition as one Eustace Tilley, the ubiquitous genius of the sprawling *New Yorker* empire.

Among his countless duties, Mr. Tilley was field supervisor of the magazine's twenty-nine-million-acre paper forest; general manager of squid ticklers (tickling being the method by which ink for the magazine was extracted from moody cephalopods in *The New Yorker*'s deep-sea squid farm); and, not least, general manager of circulation morale. Ford further revealed that the first issue of *The New Yorker* was "printed in pencil in 1847" and that Mr. Tilley, in 1893, wanting to build a village for the magazine's thousands of employees, purchased Manhattan Island. "After some thought," Ford writes, "Mr. Tilley decided to call it New York, a clever combination of the first seven letters of the name of this magazine."

Ford's path to *The New Yorker* ran straight through Morningside Heights. A New Yorker himself, Ford entered Columbia in 1919, on the brink of a decade awash in "smart" magazines, bathtub gin, and the ripostes of the Algonquin Round Table. In his sophomore year, he became editor of the *Jester*, the undergrad humor mag, in which he promptly established his iconoclasm by calling President Nicholas Murray Butler 1882CC, 1884GSAS "a jackass." As a senior, he wrote the book and lyrics for the 1923 Varsity Show, *Half Moon Inn*. That same year, when the Alumni Federation (now the CAA) offered a prize for a Columbia fight song, Ford reworked the lyrics of the show's final chorus. His winning entry, "Roar, Lion, Roar," is sung on campus to this day.

For a young writer seeking his fortune in the big city, the Roaring Twenties were magical. Ford went to plays and parties and picture shows, wrote bits and books, and trawled the newsstands for the latest gems from Ring Lardner, Robert Benchley,

and Dorothy Parker. And when the roar had died down and the hangover began, Ford kept typing. Through the 1930s and ’40s, he wrote for *Vanity Fair*, *Collier’s,* and *The Saturday Evening Post* and became increasingly devoted to outdoor life. In 1952 he moved to the woods of Hanover, New Hampshire, where he wrote a regular column for *Field & Stream* about a group of fictional Vermont sportsmen.

In the end, Ford authored some thirty books and more than five hundred magazine pieces. But he saved his best for last: shortly after his death in 1969, at age sixty-seven, *Field & Stream* published Ford’s masterpiece — not a playful nugget of urbane satire but a plaintive, poignant short story called “The Road to Tinkhamtown,” about a dying man and his beloved hunting dog.

Like Eustace Tilley, Ford was a lifelong bachelor. He had no children, save perhaps for Mr. Tilley, who, along with *The New Yorker*, turns one hundred in February. Time hasn’t slowed him. The squid farm may have dried up, and top hats may not yet have returned to fashion, but Mr. Tilley, or a variation on him, still appears each year on the cover of the magazine’s anniversary issue. Happy birthday, sir.

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