

The Freeman: Ideas on Liberty

BY PAUL L. POIROT

Henry Hazlitt (1894–1993), on the hundredth anniversary of his birth, most deservedly was designated “journalist of the century.” He also was the last survivor of the founding trustees of the Foundation for Economic Education. The fortnightly magazine *The Freeman* began publication in 1950 with Hazlitt and John Chamberlain (1903–1995) as co-editors. Hazlitt continued writing for the magazine after it became the Foundation’s monthly journal of ideas on liberty in January 1956. John Chamberlain, until shortly before his death in 1995, contributed a lead book review each month. So it is fitting and proper that these two giants of liberty, along with Leonard Read, be commemorated in this story of *The Freeman*, published continuously since 1950, and by FEE since 1956.

As a biweekly “subscription” magazine in the early 1950s, *The Freeman* was operating at a loss of about \$100,000 annually. In order to save it, several of the trustees, also serving on the Board of FEE—Henry Hazlitt, Leo Wolman, Claude Robinson, and Lawrence Fertig—brought Leonard Read into the picture. With enthusiasm and self-assurance and the support of his board, he offered to purchase the magazine.

For a year and a half *The Freeman* appeared monthly in an 8" x 11" format under the editorship of Frank Chodorov. The circulation rose from 14,000 to 24,000 in that first year in Irvington, but there continued to be heavy losses for the “subscription” magazine.

At a special meeting of the trustees in November 1955, *The Freeman* was merged with FEE’s *Ideas on Lib-*

erty journal. The mailing lists were combined, and in January 1956, in a new digest size with 64 pages, the first issue of *The Freeman: Ideas on Liberty* appeared. It has been published regularly since that time, offered to all FEE donors and others who want it in the expectation that most of them will want to help cover expenses with donations to FEE.



Paul L. Poirot

The Freeman is the oldest and most widely circulating periodical devoted to the study of free societies. One of the principles of freedom Leonard Read brought into the Foundation was a primary emphasis on ideas rather than personalities. No name-calling or blanket condemnation of persons and organizations but a clear, non-technical explanation of the ideas underlying the free market and limited government. Among students of liberty, the teaching would be by example and without coercion, all learning and acceptance strictly voluntary.

So *The Freeman* at FEE became primarily an attractive presentation of the ideas and principles of freedom more than a news report of U.S. and international economic and political affairs. Leonard Read’s ideal role for government was to police the market to keep it open, and to protect private property, leaving individuals otherwise free to do anything that’s peaceful.

For the economics of freedom, Read, FEE, and *The Freeman* relied heavily upon the Austrian School writ-

Paul Poirot served as managing editor of The Freeman from its acquisition by FEE in 1956 until his retirement in 1987. He also served as secretary of FEE’s board. This article first appeared in the May 1996 issue of The Freeman.

ings and teachings of Dr. Ludwig von Mises. In 1938, Hazlitt introduced Mises to American audiences in a *New York Times* review of the book *Socialism*—“the most devastating analysis of the system ever written.”

When Mises moved from Europe to New York City in 1940, he became a close friend of Hazlitt, of Leonard Read, and of the Foundation. Among the followers of Mises are outstanding professors such as Hans Sennholz and Israel Kirzner and a host of their students whose works also have graced *The Freeman*.

Leonard Read was the author most frequently seen in *The Freeman*, though his name appeared on the masthead not as editor but as President of FEE. The managing editor, of course was free to accept—or reject—the President’s offerings. Roughly half of the articles and reviews in a typical issue would have been written by the staff of FEE, a few on some special topic by commission, and others chosen from the many free-lance submissions. Now and then an entire monthly issue might be devoted to a single topic, various authors each offering his or her special expertise, but never invited or encouraged by the editor to present opposing views. Now and then, and sometimes without alerting the editor, an astute Henry Hazlitt or Hans Sennholz or Clarence Carson would start a topic that simply had to be continued in the following issue and eventually might run to a dozen or more chapters of a book.

Many of *The Freeman* authors over the years have been distinguished academicians in their respective fields of economics, law, philosophy, political science, banking, medicine, and other disciplines. But their common mark of distinction has been the capacity to express their ideas and explanations not in the jargons of their trades but in the clear language of the layman. These experts from the academy have shared the pages of the journal with other experts from any and every walk of life, perhaps a housewife, a lawyer, a merchant, and yes, probably a thief, since there have been articles by prisoners.

The editor’s guide for acceptance was the clear evidence of the author’s understanding and capacity to shed special light on one or another facet of liberty. Not that editors made no mistakes. But never was there an editorial view that one “good turn,” or explanation, deserves equal space or time for the contrary opinion. Financial support of the Foundation is not for the

purpose of airing opinions counter to freedom.

I had joined the staff of FEE in 1949 and served as managing editor from 1956 until my retirement in 1987. Other members of the Foundation staff, in addition to contributing articles, were often consulted about manuscripts under consideration.

The scholarly Reverend Edmund Opitz served as book review editor and stood always at hand to lend moral and spiritual guidance. He also had a firm understanding of economic issues.

Mrs. Bettina Bien Greaves was well schooled in “the gospel according to Mises,” helping to look for “leaks” in any article. She also was the expert expected, and willing, to research any questionable fact or opinion.

W. M. Curtiss saw to business and financial affairs to cover authors’ fees, printing bills, and other costs of *The Freeman*. He also had the time and wisdom to help decide which articles seemed best.

The Post-Read Era

Robert Anderson gave up college teaching to rejoin the staff as business manager when Curtiss retired. Like Curtiss, Bob found time now and then to draft an article, always excellent. After Leonard Read’s death in 1983, Bob was there to help hold the standard during a succession of presidents until Dr. Sennholz agreed to assume that position. But perhaps the outstanding contribution Bob Anderson made to *The Freeman* was to bring Beth (Herbener) Hoffman aboard as production editor. Eventually she became managing editor, with guest editors . . . helping to compile each issue. . . .


Aside from the memory banks of a Beth or a Bettina, there has been no cumulative index of topics covered in the pages of *The Freeman*. But the value of those back issues as a reference shelf is not to be denied. This is why numerous readers over the years have spoken with pride of their monthly files, or annual bound volumes, or both. The reader fortunate enough to have accumulated a complete set since 1956 now possesses a total of 485 issues, or more than 30,000 pages or over 14 million words of text skillfully crafted into essays by more than 1,400 different authors explaining the many aspects of freedom.

Dr. Clarence Carson [deceased 2003] is one of those who has written articles in a series in *The Freeman*. Early

on, he offered *The American Tradition* with chapters on constitutionalism, republican government, federalism, individualism, equality, rights and responsibilities, voluntarism, free trade, internationalism, virtue and morality, and so on. In a sense, his list covered the subjects most often tackled in *The Freeman*. In a later series, he described *The Flight from Reality*, the departure from tradition, beginning in the mind of the reformer—the intellectual turn—then emerging as the domestication of socialism, capturing and remaking the hearts of men, and finally manifesting as a political flight.

In more recent years, especially at the nudging of Dr. Sennholz, FEE has published a regular series of *Freeman* “classic” books. Each volume is devoted to a given subject and draws from the wealth of knowledge contained in some forty years of *The Freeman*. Having started with

The Freedom Philosophy, the series contains books covering a wide range of ideas, including: the moral foundations of capitalism, political interventionism, individual spirit, free trade and world peace, the formation and function of market pricing, money, inflation, banking, private property rights, taxation, conservation of resources, education, medical care, agriculture, unionism, crime, and more.

The Freeman since 1950 consistently and continuously has stood against the fallacies and clichés of politics, not by bitter denunciation, but by reasoned and attractive explanations of the better way of limited government, private ownership, voluntary exchange, moral behavior, and self-improvement. The golden rule of the marketplace is that the person who gains most is one who best serves others. 

THE 50th FREEMAN

“The ideas of liberty are compelling, but they must have a platform from which they can reach the public effectively. For fifty years *The Freeman* has been uniquely effective in taking the freedom philosophy to millions of people. As important as this role was in the last half century, the challenges facing liberty today mean that such a role will be even more important in the coming years. All of us at the Institute for Justice join in sending congratulations and best wishes to *The Freeman* and FEE.

—Chip Mellor
President, Institute for Justice