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Graft Down At City Hall? John Gunther, American Book Journalism, And Perceptions Of European Cataclysm In The 1930s

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This title looks like something of an historical hotch-potch, referring to a cute, postmodernist *bricolage* assembled to illustrate the rhetorical nature of historical 'discourse'. In fact, it is to be taken literally, that is, replete with concrete, outside referents. For the intention here is to show how 'graft down at City Hall' in the domestic American sense led - by an indirect route - to the cultivation of certain British perspectives on 1930s European politics. This was via the route of American journalistic muckraking, the baton of which, so to speak, was picked up after its heyday by John Gunther in his 'exposé of European politics in the era of the dictators.

The intention is also to do something which is not often attempted in our apparently 'interdisciplinary' times, and that is to cross between 'culture' and 'politics' in order to shed at least some *cultural* light upon our assessment of Neville Chamberlain's direct responsibility for the disaster which came about in September 1939. Many contemporaries long opposed to fascism and fascist aggression even prior to the violation of the Munich agreement earlier that year considered that Chamberlain and the Appeasers had no excuse for following the policy they did follow – and this paper will back up their argument, as opposed to the revisionists of recent years who have attempted to let Chamberlain and his ministers off the hook.

To put things in a slightly different way, the focus here is on the relationship between two seemingly disparate and separate things: on the one hand, a particular kind of American journalism, an entirely home-brewed product of internal American politics, and – on the other - the pre-war British political scene and British attitudes towards Europe in the 1930s. The background to this also has comparative constitutional ramifications which are too big a subject to deal with here but may be mentioned in passing: the fact, for example, that because of the peculiar nature of the American republican system, where – unlike the British parliamentary system - an Executive branch is not directly answerable to Congress or a State Legislature, the Executive is in some sense required to communicate with or answer directly to the people from time to time outside of elections created by fixed terms of office, and that this is done through the press and the instrument of regular press conferences. The press lobby in Washington and in state capitals has always taken its sobriquet of 'fourth estate' seriously, seeing itself as a kind of peoples' tribune ('tribune' has been the title of many an American newspaper), whose Constitutional basis is enshrined in Amendment One of the Bill of Rights specifically enumerating, amongst other things, freedom of the press. Some British readers might consider this a somewhat high-minded view of an otherwise 'grubby' calling, but it should never be overlooked in any study of American newspaper and magazine journalism – or, indeed, of radio and television journalism. This highly self-conscious political role does not seem to have been looked into by theorists and historians of American popular culture. [1]

Those who have studied British anti-fascist politics in the 1930s will, of course, be aware of the Left Book Club, founded by the publisher Victor Gollancz and presided over by Gollancz himself, Harold Laski, and John Strachey. It had 60,000 subscribers and was based on the Popular Front politics of the time, when the Comintern finally gave up its onslaught on social democracy (what it had previously labelled 'social fascism') and on Stalin's orders in 1934 – after Hitler's assumption of total power in Germany - instructed Communist Parties in Europe and America to get into bed with socialists, social democrats and liberal-leftists in a common drive against fascism. There were, in this Popular Front spirit, Allen Lane's anti-fascist sixpenny Penguin Specials, produced from the later 1930s. Not many are aware, however, of a third 1930s publishing phenomenon which is being brought to light here in historical literature for the first time: the publication by Hamish Hamilton in three editions and dozens of impressions of the book *Inside Europe*. This formed one of a number of American and American-derived contributions to the British journalistic scene and to the influencing of British public opinion in the period, a subject which has not

previously been properly researched. In some respects, *Inside Europe* may have been more significant than either the Left Book Club with all its many publications or the Penguin Specials – both of which have received extensive coverage in the literature of 1930s British culture and politics.

By way of further backgrounding, it will be worth noting that Hamish Hamilton set himself up in independent publishing in 1931 with the express intention of contributing 'something to the cause of Anglo-American understanding in the face of the growing menace of German aggression.' [2] This statement, which he himself quotes with approval in his brief foreword to a 1952 anthology [3], is significant if one recalls that Hitler and the Nazis were not in power in Germany in 1931, so that Hamilton's anti-German animus pre-dated the Third Reich by some two years. It is also significant if one recalls that reaching a closer Anglo-American understanding was not uppermost in the minds either of Stanley Baldwin or of his successor as Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain, let alone large sections of the British Left apart from the actual Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald and other relatively isolated figures like Laski. It seems the young Hamilton was not in accord with the temper of the times, though, as he was neither an original political thinker nor particularly iconoclastic, one wonders if his assumptions were not commoner then than has been accounted for. After all, the Germans had been forced into Armistice in 1918 because of the American presence on the Allied side, and there must have been more than Hamilton who drew lessons from this which had Atlanticist implications. Later in the 1930s, at the popular level, we find Gaumont British newsreels extolling America's active commitment to democracy throughout the world, its military might, and its readiness to come to Britain's need in time of peril – all of which were untrue at the time of course, but an indication of that strand in British feeling that wanted to believe it or to promote its belief. [4]

This fog of untruth, or else of censorship, which was really a kind of self-censorship, permeated the climate of the 1930s in Great Britain. Taking a particular view of the press of the period, particularly after the mid 1930s, may help us to see why a book like *Inside Europe* proved to be necessary in terms of providing at least some means of penetrating this mist with factual reportage in order to awaken public opinion to the true danger of the political situation emerging in continental Europe.

It is interesting to speculate upon whether the British of all classes got the press they deserved or whether they were being seriously cheated by that press out of a knowledge of facts which would have enabled them to reject the press they had. The *Daily Mail*, gospel in suburbia then as now, was – under Lord Rothermere – pro-German and pro-Nazi. It was the only major daily which was most obviously so. *The Times* was not stridently Appeasement, but on the whole preferred Nazis to Bolsheviks. The British press reported Nuremberg rallies and the like, and even sensationalised them, but did not report the speeches made at those rallies, nor did it comment on them.[5] Conservative papers like the *Morning Post* and the *Daily Telegraph* were entirely at odds with their own correspondents in the field who could see with their own eyes what was going on in Europe. The political tension between the reportorial side of these newspapers and the proprietorial and business sides intensified after the *Anschluss* of early 1938. Reporters were systematically censored by their own editors. [6] (Indeed, such was the climate of censorship that the British Board of Film Censors refused to licence any spy movie that had the names 'Nazi' or 'Germany' in it; which is why political spy thrillers such as Hitchcock's *The Lady Vanishes* of 1938 were entirely vague as to the nationality of the 'bad guys'.) In Nazi Germany itself, of course, the situation for foreign correspondents was none too comfortable. They were subject to blackmail, cajolery, bribery and outright intimidation by Dr Goebbels' Propaganda Ministry in its entirely successful effort to control the flow of news out of the Third Reich.[7] Meanwhile, back in Britain, BBC radio news was gagged by internal censorship and dogged by inexperience and inadequate funding. [8] And so a picture begins to emerge of a British public actually being starved of factual information on a situation that seemed to be becoming increasingly threatening. Of course, as we have already seen, the Left Book Club and Allen Lane were active in anti-fascist publishing, as was Hamilton himself, with his publications of G.T. Garratt's *Shadow of the Swastika* in 1938, Vincent Sheean's *Eleventh Hour* in 1939 and Otto Tolischus's *They Wanted War* in 1940. But outside of coverage of the Spanish Civil War, a good deal of this type of publication was polemic rather than hard news and reportage, for even if foreign correspondents could get the news out Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy and the numerous other dictatorships operating then in Europe, Fleet Street editors were required by their proprietors to spike it. With a tame BBC, Fleet Street had apparently no media rival in the news department, and so could suppress whatever it liked without fear of being scooped or superseded by a different medium. Another side to Appeasement support – direct or indirect – came from the British Left, which hated the Versailles Treaty as much as did Hitler, opposed war with anybody under any circumstances, and – at least in some of its elements – decided that America itself was turning fascist. It could not be Britain's ally, a sentiment endorsed by two Prime

Ministers, Baldwin and Chamberlain.[9] It was not until very late in the day – 1939 – that the Labour Party officially urged on the government the need to forge closer links with the United States in the interests of fighting fascism. [10] We forget just how politically isolated Winston Churchill was in those years – and he took a strongly anti-Nazi line only from 1936 onwards. A good deal of all this was founded upon sheer ignorance, a public ignorance which the press lords did nothing to combat and connived to maintain.

Back in 1931, two reporters, Drew Pearson and Robert Allen, brought out a book in America called *Washington Merry Go Round*, a racy mixture of politics and Capitol Hill gossip. It was the first time that book journalism muckraking had taken on the additionally titillating ingredients of gossip and personalities, and it sold well. As so often happens in the wake of an unexpected best seller, both its own publisher and other publishers try to find means of repeating the apparently successful formula. In this case, another publisher, Cass Canfield of Harper's in New York, thought the Pearson exposé approach would sell if trained on the governments and new dictators of Europe in what appeared to be an increasingly ominous situation. He sought a journalist who could do it as quickly as possible so as to catch the mood of the moment, and this turned out to be John Gunther. [11] Gunther, born in Chicago and a reporter posted by the *Chicago Daily News* to Vienna since 1930, was 34 years old when he agreed in early 1935 to a joint commission from Canfield in New York and Hamilton in London to produce a book in six months which would take the lid off the European scene, the book that would become *Inside Europe.* Apart from being resourceful and quick on his feet, Gunther had three main advantages: (1) he was not subject to conservative proprietorial censorship because both his publishers were liberally minded and inclined to let him write whatever he liked, provided it 'took the lid off' *something*; (2) he was not subject to the censorship and intimidation of dictators because he made quick raids into their territories and only wrote when safely back in England or the USA, with no firm plans for returning to the countries so exposed after the book was published; and (3) with 500 pages at his disposal Gunther had the space ordinary reporters only dream of. Gunther virtually invented book journalism, a form of extensive topical publication which could be revised in new editions every few months as situations altered.

He made good use of these advantages. His copy is presented as if he had actually interviewed the dictators in question, going straight to the top; or at least having gained access to those people who knew people at the top. He was parsimonious with outright opinions, relying mostly upon telling pen-portraits, on racy anecdotes and a fund of information both significant and trivial, and on incisive political analysis based on what he had found. Journalists differ from academic writers in that while the latter are encouraged to reveal their sources, the former often cannot – and this applies particularly in the area of high-level politics in which Gunther was engaged; his book should not, therefore, be looked down upon for containing few footnote references, and one simply has to take him, like all such investigative journalists, on trust.

Gunther's style is arresting in typical journalistic fashion, in the fact that he carves out a sharp and unvarnished portraiture of figures such as Hitler, with the intention – certainly in this case – of demystifying and exposing him:

> Hitler bases most decisions on intuition… His vanity is extreme, but in an odd way it is not personal. He has no peacockery. Mussolini must have given autographs, photographs, to at least several thousand admirers since 1922. Those which Hitler has bestowed on friends may be counted on the fingers of two hands. His vanity is the more effective because it expresses itself in non-personal terms. He is the vessel, the instrument, of the will of the German people, or so he pretends. Thus his famous statement, after the June 30 murders, that for twenty-four hours he had been the supreme court of Germany… His brain is small, limited, narrow and suspicious. But behind it is the lamp of passion, and this passion has such quality that it is immediately discernible and recognisable, like a diamond in the sand… Anthony Eden…was quoted as saying that he showed 'complete mastery' of foreign affairs. This is, of course, nonsense. Hitler does not know one-tenth as much about foreign affairs as, say, HR Knickerbocker…or Dorothy Thompson, or Mr Eden himself. What Eden meant was that Hitler showed unflagging mastery of *his own view* of foreign affairs. [12]

After detailing the German political situation leading to Hitler's chancellorship in 1933 and the S.A. purge of the following year, Gunther produces lightning sketches of all the leading figures in the Nazi firmament with a crisp and systematic thoroughness: Goebbels, Goering, Frick, Himmler, Hess, the chief bodyguard Brückner, Streicher, Lutze, Ley, Darré, and the generals from the then minister of war von Blomberg on down, followed by Rosenberg and Schacht. And so he proceeds, country by country: Germany, France,

Italy, England, Austria, Spain, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, Turkey, Poland and the Soviet Union. In every case he writes like the informed insider, relaying the 'low-down' from the front with an air of absolute certitude. It was to prove an irresistible style.

His only constant source of irritation was Hamilton's and Canfield's perpetual fear of libel: Hamilton had three lawyers pouring over his manuscript unknown to one another; at one point a Gunther reference to Hermann Goering's insane criminality had to be toned down, while in another instance Gunther rode over Hamilton's anxiety that Yagoda had been libelled – Yagoda being Stalin's NKVD secret police henchman masterminding the Great Purges in the Soviet Union at the time. [13] Stalin himself held no such concern for the delicacy of Yagoda's feelings – shortly after the book came out he had Yagoda shot and replaced by Yezhov, who was later also shot. It may be difficult to imagine a situation in which foreign dictators were feared for their power of being able to sue British publishers in British courts: no such constraint operated with regard more recently to Saddam Hussein and Milosevic; but this was evidently the case in cautious and in some ways innocent Britain in the 1930s, before the Holocaust (as well as revealed Soviet atrocities) subsequently set the seal of world judgment upon the dictators and their henchmen.

Proofs were closed in December 1935 and the book came out the following February to ecstatic reviews right across the board. *The Sunday Times* liked it; Harold Laski liked it. Harold Nicolson had this to say in the *Daily Telegraph*: 'I regard this book as a serious contribution to contemporary knowledge…. Fair, intelligent, balanced and well informed…It will provide the intelligent reader with exactly that sort of information on current affairs which he desires to possess and which he can acquire from no other equally readable source…I can conceive no phrase in which better to convey to readers the necessity of acquiring this book…This is one of the most educative as well as one of the most exciting books which I have read for years.' [14] Nicolson's use of the word 'educative' is interesting here. Nicolson himself was not exactly ill informed by the standards of the day; yet Gunther's exposé, so to speak, educated him – in other words, told him something new. The *Times Literary Supplement* echoed this by referring to it as 'a political Baedeker'.[15] In its first year, *Inside Europe* sold 65,000 copies in Britain, at the rate of just over 1000 a week, and this momentum kept up through the following year, also at about 1000 a week. By the end of 1938 it had gone through twenty-six impressions. Earlier that year, at the time of the Austrian *Anschluss*, Hamilton was arranging special bookshop displays for a work which had been published more than two years before – almost wholly unprecedented in the British book trade in that day or this. [16] By 1939 it had sold nearly 120,000 copies and continued to turn over throughout the Second World War. John Gunther was later told he was the best-selling American author of non-fiction in Britain since Mark Twain. [17] We should remember that this was no sixpenny Penguin Special, but a 500-page hardback retailing at 30 shillings. A pound and a half, in other words. We might compare that with the price of a standard table gramophone player of the time, which was £4, to give some indication of just how expensive the book was. The national average annual income *per capita* in this period was £200. The sales *numbers* may not be so significant as the income-group of the purchasers, who would surely have had to come largely from the middle and upper middle classes. In other words, this was a major assault upon the A-B stratum of public opinion, the most influential. In it, Gunther had clearly identified Nazism as a wholly 'revolutionary' creed whose immediate object was the conquest of all the territories in Europe containing ethnic Germans (he made only one mistake, which was Switzerland). Hitler might or might not be actually making war plans, but whatever the case, war would come because of the inherent dynamics of Nazism and the German economy. In the British section of the book, Gunther excoriated the Appeasement elements in British society, from City bankers with extensive investments in Germany to Lord Lothian's Christian Science (which apparently did not believe in the existence of 'evil'), to Tories whose hatred of Bolshevism blinded them to everything else, to newspaper proprietors, even to the Labour Party. [18]

Hamilton wrote to Gunther in 1945: 'In my opinion, INSIDE EUROPE was the most important book published during the nineteen-thirties in its effect upon opinion here and in the US. It was the first book which really opened peoples' eyes to the German menace and left no one with any excuse for ignoring the trend of events and conniving at such episodes as Munich.' [19]

We might view the Gunther achievement in the context of other American manifestations of investigative journalism in Britain particularly in the late 1930s. There was for example the British edition of *The March of Time* film news documentaries, which carried into the cinema *Time* magazine's tradition of lively comment on world events – a style which was not emulated by British documentarists.[20] Another manifestation indirectly emanating from the Henry Luce stable was the creation of *Picture Post* by Stefan

Lorant in 1938, successfully copying the photojournalist format of Luce's *Life* magazine.[21] As Malcolm Muggeridge writes: ' The American Magazine *Time*, which specialised in intimate details of persons and happenings, soon produced a London progeny; private sheets and news-letters multiplied, some cyclostyled and some printed. What Fleet Street knew and was prevented from disclosing, the *Week* [of Claud Cockburn] disclosed…By getting inside Mr John Gunther, it was possible to get inside Europe. "All Central Europe is in that man", [Hamilton's] advertisement ran.' [22] The perceived American ability to get the 'low-down' on current events, to appear to go behind the scenes, to have 'insider' information, held an appeal for evidently starved British readers and viewers.

Yet what was being manifested here was to all intents and purposes good old-fashioned American domestic crusading and exposé-type journalism of the muckraking kind. Now 'muckraking' (originally a term of disparagement coined by President Theodore Roosevelt) was born in Gilded Age America, the heyday of the plutocrats and robber barons, when in the 1890s Ida M Tarbell exposed, in a series of magazine articles, the nefarious business practices of John D Rockefeller. Perhaps its most enduring and popular book was *The Jungle,* Upton Sinclair's fifth novel of 1906, which vividly exposed the appalling practices of the Chicago meatpacking industry. Another notable exponent of muckraking was Lincoln Steffens, a magazine journalist who exposed graft and corruption in city halls up and down the country from the 1890s until well into the twentieth century.

Muckraking was also a journalistic expression of American Progressivism, a broadly-based, middle-class political impulse and ideology, with roots in both the Republican and Democratic parties, which grew up in response to the new horrors of industrial life in terms of the anti-democratic implications of plutocracy and the degrading of the physical environment, as well as to the corrupt machine politics of city halls all over the nation. In some respects it was typically middle-class in seeking to root out machine bosses and ward-heelers who for years had been the only means by which recent European immigrants in the urban centres could survive or attain some measure of power for themselves. In that sense Progressivism had its nativist tinge and was, despite its liberalist ethos, instrumental in facilitating the political take-over of American cities by conservative business interests. As a political phenomenon it flourished from the turn of the century to about the middle of World War I, but its influence went far beyond that. Progressivism suffuses the Fourteen Points of President Wilson for an international order of peace, open diplomacy and democracy; its moralistic side had a hand in creating Prohibition; it retained political strength in Congress throughout the Republican 1920s; it resurfaced in Franklin D Roosevelt's New Deal for America.

Now, muckraking sold newspapers, and while we remember William Randolph Hearst as a newspaper magnate with a movie-star mistress who inaugurated the so-called Yellow press, allegedly started the Spanish-American War and was portrayed in a movie by Orson Welles, we might also recall that one of Hearst's circulation raisers in his many papers was regular exposures of scandal among the rich, the powerful and the famous. Gunther, who, as we remember, came from Chicago, worked as a cub reporter on the *Chicago Daily News* before he went off to Europe in 1924; Chicago, of course, became the bailiwick of Al Capone, suzerain of Cicero, Illinois and the biggest bootlegger in America. It was home to the city machine of the corrupt Mayor Big Bill Thompson, only remembered nowadays for his threat to punch King George V on the nose. More detailed newspaper library research in the USA would have to tell us to what extent the muckraking ethos was alive and kicking amongst *Daily News* reporters and editors, and how deeply or otherwise the young Gunther imbibed it. We know, certainly, that it was Drew Pearson's *Washington Merry Go Round* which directly inspired the commission for what eventually became *Inside Europe.* From the flavour of the writing it looks as though Gunther went about his business inside Europe not simply as a reporter but as a latter-day *muckraker* – even if what was being raked up was oppression and power-lust rather than graft, and the chicanery was dressed in European-style ideology. Gunther's strength lay in the fact that he himself wore no European-type ideology on his sleeve; he was evidently not conservative and obviously no fascist, but neither was he perceived as a communist or even a socialist in an age which made very free with its Left-Right labelling. This disarmed the non-Leftwing readers of the *Telegraph* and the *Sunday Times* whilst at the same time embracing the likes of Harold Laski and moderate Labour intellectuals like Nicolson – both of them, of course, admittedly untypically staunch pro-Americans. Gunther comes across as a liberal of an American Progressivist kind who cannot be precisely slotted into the European spectrum. In any case, it would never occur to a typical American reporter or editor to spice up copy with outright utterances of political bias: that was a privilege reserved for syndicated columnists, not a profession Gunther ever aspired to. Gunther undoubtedly sensationalised his material to some extent; but in the process he cut his statesmen and dictators down to size, as one might reduce a crooked local mayor or public works commissioner. The British middle class and its intellectuals like Nicolson would not then have known where Gunther was coming from, but

this did not prevent their receptiveness to his approach to international affairs, which suggests rather more sides to British middle-class attitudes towards European events than Chamberlain's stress on our parochialism in his remarks about Czechoslovakia implies. Those in their tens of thousands who had read their Gunther would not have viewed it as a 'small, faraway country, of which we know nothing,' for Gunther had filled them in on the internal Czechoslovak scene more than two years before Munich. Was Hamilton right or is his letter to Gunther no more than the expression of hindsight? In view of Hamilton's early commitment to an anti-German cause which preceded the creation of the Third Reich itself, and in view of the fact that he had overseen *Inside Europe* through the press, had marketed it himself, and had witnessed its overwhelming reception, I do not think he is expressing mere hindsight in 1945. In fact I believe Appeasement studies revisionists need to take more account of the strength of bitter feeling against that policy and doctrine, which characterised not only Hamilton but those largely middle-class, political middle-of-the-roaders – some of them identifying with Gunther's non-doctrinaire approach – who hated Hitler and wanted to do something about him. This was an element whose views Gaumont British were attempting to articulate when it answered the question: how can Britain defeat fascism? by answering: with America's help.

But was Hamilton right regarding the book's effectiveness? It does not immediately appear, from the fallout of events, that he was. Yet at the same time, Britain was not altogether psychologically unprepared for war with Germany when it came, and the sweeping transformation of the country to a war footing owed at least something to the impact Gunther and others – often Americans – made on informed public opinion in Britain in the 1930s. American influence on reportage in general in the 1930s and Gunther's influence in particular played a role in hauling this country out of pacifism, defeatism, reluctance, fear, deference, and fantasy into action.

To sum up, then, my argument is that the response of, say, more than 100,000 (of probably mainly middle-class) British readers to John Gunther's exposé of European dictatorship and its bellicose intentions shows a willingness to put down thirty shillings to find out what was going on across the Channel, as well as to gain information to confirm their worst fears or to confront complacency. 120,000 copies sold (even with an additional readership over and above individual purchasers) are a drop in the ocean in *mass media* terms, but in *literati* terms this number is considerable and even historically significant.

My argument is that Chamberlain, or at any rate his advisers, cannot be let off the hook on the grounds that informed and middle-of-the-road British public opinion had no knowledge of the countries Gunther described, and no desire to gain any. The fact is that Gunther's book was the talking point of 1936 and 1937 and was well known to have been a best seller.

My argument also is that Gunther not only instigated book journalism in this country but was influential in the development of investigative 'insider' reportage here, and that this stems from an adaptation, to international affairs, of a muckraking tradition in domestic and city U.S. reporting which evolved, *pari passu*, with the civic graft and corruption it targeted. Through the example of Gunther we see how a purely domestic American phenomenon came to have an effect far outside its own location and ambience.

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Endnotes

[1] What may reflect the increased powers of the federal government in general and the Executive in particular is that regular press conferences were only instituted by Franklin Roosevelt; perhaps that is why DW Brogan devotes no chapter to the press as an arm of representative politics in his pioneering *American Political System* of 1933.

[2] F.A. Mumby, *Publishing and Bookselling. A History from the Earliest Times to the Present Day* 3rd edition (London: Cape, 1949) p. 275n.

[3] Hamish Hamilton, '*NOTE', Majority* (London: Hamilton, 1952) no page number.

[4] Peter Bell, 'Uncle Sam Prepares: President Roosevelt and the USA in British newsreels on the Eve of the World War', unpublished paper, British Association for American Studies annual conference, Keele University, April 8th, 2001.

[5] Franklin Reid Gannon, *The British Press and Germany 1936-1939* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1971) p. 2; *The History of the Times. The 150th Anniversary and Beyond 1912-1928* (London: *The Times*, 1952) pp. 1008-1009.