"SCOUNDREL TIME"

— Lillian Hellman

on the McCarthy witch-hunts

by Tom Appleton

In a short autobiographical narrative titled *Scoundrel Time*, American playwright Lillian Hellman has given a vivid account of what it was like to be cited before the Un-American Activities Committee at the height of the McCarthy era.

Although one of the foremost political dramatists of her generation, Hellman had, until recently, remained relatively unknown outside the U.S. It took the combined acting power of Jane Fonda and Vanessa Redgrave and the film *Julia* — based on a story by Lillian Hellman — to make her name internationally famous.

There’s a photograph of Hellman in this book, showing her in 1975, when she wrote *Scoundrel Time*. This is the face of a survivor, one who’s still able to smile. The smile is much the same as that seen on an earlier picture from 1935: a good, hard, toothy smile — a thing worth rescuing across 40 years.
There’s also 40 years of work, routine and experience behind her writing. This author is past her prime; but if Scoundrel Time appears in parts to have been put together in a rather slapdash manner, it never loses the dramatist’s touch.

There are occasional echoes of Dashiell Hammett in her writing — the creator of the tough, realistic crime novel, with whom Hellman lived the better part of 30 years, until his death in 1961 — just as there are echoes of Hellman in Hammett’s work — notably Nora Charles in The Thin Man.

Hellman’s writing is generally superb, and there’s no question of her “standing in the shadow of a great husband”.

Still, Hammett had a significant influence on her life. For one thing, he had become a member of the American Communist Party “in 1937 or 1938”. Hammett believed that he was “living in a corrupt society” and that “nothing less than a revolution could wipe out the corruption”. When McCarthy’s obviously corrupt henchmen cited him before their committee in 1951, Hammett made it a point of honor not to co-operate with them, and went to jail.

After that, it was clear that, sooner or later, “McCarthy’s boys” (as Lillian Hellman calls them with undisguised contempt) would get on to her, too; political terrorism had arrived in America.

The political climate in the U.S. had changed dramatically after President Roosevelt’s death. His successor, Harry Truman, step by step, reversed all progressive social legislation and severely cut the rights of trade unions. The Marshall plan and the Truman doctrine spelt out his Cold War policies. In order to achieve such a radical change in attitude towards a former ally, the Soviet Union, Truman had to “scare hell out of the country”, as Senator Arthur Vandenberg put it at the time.

The Cold War and the fable of a communist threat were conceived with cold-blooded political cynicism, as Lillian Hellman observes: “Senators McCarthy and McCarran, Representatives Nixon (the subsequent president), Walter and Wood, all of them, were what they were: men who invented when necessary, maligned even when it wasn’t necessary. “I do not think they believed much, if anything, of what they said: the time was ripe for a new wave in America, and they seized their political chance to lead it along each day’s opportunity, spit-balling whatever and with whoever came into view. .... The anti-Red theme was easily chosen from the grab-bag, not alone because we were frightened of socialism, but chiefly, I think, to destroy the remains of Roosevelt and his sometimes advanced work ....”

After the 1946 congressional elections, which gave the Republicans their first majority in 16 years, the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) began to grow in stature. Up to then it had led a slimy, back-alley existence for about ten years, specialising in racist and anti-Semitic innuendo. Self-respecting members of Congress tried to steer clear of it.

In 1947, Truman ordered a loyalty check of all public servants, and his Attorney General slapped together a list of all
organisations he deemed undemocratic. Now the hunt was on for communists and radical democrats.

They seemed to be everywhere — even in Hollywood. The committee charged with the task of testing the ideological purity of cultural workers, found no difficulty in detecting "communist propaganda" in the movies. There was, for example, Song of Russia, a film depicting smiling Russians. And an "expert" declared that it was one of the basic communist propaganda tricks to show smiling Russians. The next thing was that scores of Hollywood actors were dragged before the committee. Lillian Hellman recalls how some of them met the test:

"Gary Cooper was asked, in a most deferential and friendly manner, if he had read much Communist propaganda in the scripts submitted to him. Cooper, as a man who had not been called upon ever to speak very much, thought that one over and said no, he didn't think he had, but then he mostly read at night. There were to be shudders as well as laughter when Charles Laughton, who had been a close friend of Bertolt Brecht, received a cable from the East German government inviting him to attend his old friend's memorial service. Mr. Laughton immediately phoned J. Edgar Hoover (the director of the F.B.I.) to say that he had received the wire, but after all that it wasn't his fault and shouldn't be counted against him."

In mid-1952 the McCarthyist hysteria would reach its peak. On February 21, the bell was rung at Lillian Hellman's door: "An over-respectable-looking Black man, a Sunday deacon, in a suit that was so correct—incorrect that it could be worn only by somebody who didn't want to be noticed, stood in the elevator, his hat politely removed. "He asked me if I was Lillian Hellman. I agreed to that and asked who he was. He handed me an envelope and said he was there to serve a subpoena from the House Un-American Activities Committee. I opened the envelope and read the subpoena. I said, 'Smart to choose a Black man for this job. You like it?' and slammed the door."

The HUAC was dangerous: under American law, any congressional committee has the right to call citizens before it and demand that they answer whatever questions it puts to them. Although this procedure has no juridical character, it differs little, in its methods and effects upon the individual, from a proper court of law.

However, under the provisions of the Fifth Amendment (to the U.S. constitution), citizens have the right to refuse an answer to a question if, by answering it, they would incriminate themselves. Those who made use of the constitutional right before HUAC were immediately branded as "Fifth Amendment Communists". Those who did not take recourse to this law and yet refused to point a finger at friends and acquaintances — as did the "Hollywood Ten" — were taken to court for "contempt of Congress" and given jail sentences.

But even accepting the shelter of the Fifth Amendment had its tricky aspects. Thus, for example, one couldn't refuse an answer to the question whether one knew President Roosevelt, as there was nothing self-incriminatory in that. But if asked whether one knew Charlie Chaplin or Dashiell Hammett, one had to refuse an answer. The committee was thus able to point the finger at individuals and cast a slur upon them on the basis of nothing more than a vague suspicion.

Lillian Hellman had no intention of becoming either stigmatised as a "Fifth Amendment Communist" or of giving information about her friends. Her lawyer, too, agreed it was time somebody took a moral stand vis-a-vis the committee. Thus she wrote.

"I am ready and willing to testify before the representatives of our Government as to my own opinions and my own actions, regardless of any risks or consequences to myself .... But to hurt innocent people whom I knew many years ago in order to save myself is, to me, inhuman and indecent and dishonorable. I cannot and will not cut my conscience to fit this year's fashion .... I was raised in an old-fashioned American tradition and there were certain homely things that were taught to me: to try to tell the truth, not to bear false witness, not to harm my neighbour, to be loyal to my country, and so on .... It is my belief that you will agree with these simple rules of human decency and will not expect me to violate the
good American tradition from which they spring ....

I am prepared to waive the privilege against self-incrimination and to tell you anything you wish to know about my views or actions if your Committee will agree to refrain from asking me to name other people. If the Committee is unwilling to give me this assurance, I will be forced to plead the privilege of the Fifth Amendment at the hearing."

Naturally, the committee refused her request (or offer) and she was obliged to appear at a hearing on May 21, 1952. "The opening questions", writes Heilman, "were standard: what was my name, where was I born, what was my occupation, what were the titles of my plays. It didn't take long to get to what really interested them: my time in Hollywood, which studios I had worked for, what periods of what years, with some mysterious emphasis on 1937. (My time in Spain, I thought, but I was wrong.) Had I met a writer called Martin Berkeley?"

This Martin Berkeley, whom she never even knew, had claimed that in his home the Hollywood chapter of the C.P.U.S.A. had been formed — and that Lillian Heilman was one of the foundation members.

Hellman: "When this nonsense was finished, Mr. Tavenner (one of the inquisitors) asked me if it was true. I said that I wanted to refer to the letter I had sent, I would like the Committee to reconsider my offer in the letter .... Mr Wood (the chairman) said that in order to clarify the record Mr. Tavenner should put into the record the correspondence between me and the Committee. Mr. Tavenner did just that, and when he had finished Rauh (Hellman's counsel) sprang to his feet, picked up a stack of mimeographed copies of my letter, and handed them out to the press section. I was puzzled by this — I hadn't noticed he had the copies — but I did notice that Rauh was looking happy.

Mr. Tavenner was upset .... Then (he) asked me if I had attended the meeting described by Berkeley, and one of the hardest things I ever did in my life was to swallow the words, 'I don't know him, and a little investigation into the time and place would have proved to you that I could not have been at the meeting he talks about.' Instead I said that I must refuse to answer the question. The 'must' in that sentence annoyed Mr. Wood — it was to annoy him again and again — and he corrected me: 'You might refuse to answer, the question is asked, do you refuse?' But in the middle of one of the questions about my past, something so remarkable happened that I am to this day convinced that the unknown gentleman who spoke had a great deal to do with the rest of my life.

A voice from the press gallery had been for at least three or four minutes louder than the other voices. (By this time, I think, the press had finished reading my letter to the Committee and were discussing it.) .... Suddenly a clear voice said, 'Thank God somebody finally had the guts to do it.' .... Wood rapped his gavel and said angrily, 'If that occurs again, I will clear the press from these chambers'. 'You do that, sir,' said the same voice.

Shortly afterwards the hearing was over. HUAC had suffered its first major defeat, even if, strictly speaking, Hellman's defiance of the committee was based on relatively narrow political grounds and succeeded by working its way around one of the more dubious legal propositions in the committee's methodology.

The HUAC hearings pursued three aims: to elicit names; to achieve defamation of individuals as "Fifth Amendment Communists" or to set in train legal procedures against them. Hellman wasn't going to name names; she had offered to speak freely about herself, and could thus not be defamed; and legal procedures couldn't be taken against her because she had been forced into taking the Fifth Amendment.

Lillian Hellman had escaped the McCarthyist inquisition — but not unscathed. Life for her had changed. Many people avoided contact with her and, worse still, she was black-listed in Hollywood which meant that she could not get employment there. A British producer eventually offered her a job — at a fifth the salary she had earned in Hollywood. But in order to travel to Britain she needed a passport and had to fight hard and long to get it, because as a rule "unfriendly" witnesses were refused passports. Civic rights and political liberty had been severely curtailed.
In spring 1954 the McCarthy era officially came to an end. The popular mood had swung against the witch-hunts. In addition, the Senator from Wisconsin, in his tireless struggle against world communism, had picked on an adversary that was several times too large for him: the U.S. army.

Before he could even begin his hearings on the alleged communist infiltration of the army, McCarthy himself was called before an investigating committee and charged with inciting government employees to commit illegal actions. The Senate censured him on two points, a rare occurrence. His political career was over. But McCarthyism was neither dead nor discredited, and many of McCarthy's co-workers (Richard Nixon as a prime example) continued to have political careers in spite of it.

The prevailing liberal view of McCarthyism (and Viet Nam, and Watergate....) seems to be that the American political system is basically sound and, given time, will rid itself of most of its political cankers. Lillian Heilman disagrees: "We were not shocked at the damage McCarthy had done, or the ruin he brought on many people .... There were many broken lives along the path the boys had bulldozed, but not so many that people needed to feel guilty if they turned their backs fast enough and told each other, as we were to do again after Watergate, that American justice will always prevail no matter how careless it seems to critical outsiders. It is not true that when the bell tolls it tolls for thee:"

Yet some, like Hellman, could not simply forget. The wounds inflicted by McCarthyism were deep, and when they had healed what hurt were the scars. Like Hammett, Hellman considered McCarthy-ism as essentially deeply immoral and judged its protagonists on moral grounds. Unlike Hammett, who converted his righteous indignation into a party-political affiliation, Hellman internalised the problem: "My belief in liberalism was mostly gone. I think I have substituted for it something private called, for want of something that should be more accurate, decency .... It is painful for a nature that can no longer accept liberalism not to be able to accept radicalism."

The judgment appears accurate not only about Hellman as an individual, but as a comment on one sector of the urbane, "civilised" intelligentsia. There are obvious political shortcomings in a "resistance" to state persecution of the individual that limits itself to an assertion of human decency. Nevertheless, the political significance of what she did cannot be measured solely by its relatively narrow legal definition. Hers was a challenge to all the sanctimonious "Cold War liberals" and ex-radicals who rationalised their way into becoming informers, using anti-communism as a justification to protect fortune and career.

Her bitterest words Lillian Hellman has kept for America's intellectuals, anti-communist or no: "I am still angry that their reason for disagreeing with McCarthy was too often his crude methods — the standards of the board of governors of a country club.... They went to too many respectable conferences that turned out not to be under respectable auspices, contributed to and published too many C.I.A. magazines .... None of them, as far as I know, has yet found it a part of conscience to admit that their Cold War anti-communism was perverted, possibly against their wishes, into the Vietnam War and then into the reign of Nixon, their unwanted but inevitable leader .... None of them, as far as I know, has stepped forward to admit a mistake."


The author of this article says: "I thought if the National Times starts printing Lillian Hellman's cooking recipes, it's time to remember where the woman's really at."