

THE UNIVERSITY OF MISSOURI BULLETIN
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T. C. MORELOCK, *Editor*

Local Government and the Press

Address Delivered at the Twentieth Annual Journalism Week at the
University of Missouri, May 5-11, 1929, by Marlen E. Pew,
Editor of Editor and Publisher, New York City



ISSUED FOUR TIMES MONTHLY; ENTERED AS SECOND-CLASS MATTER AT THE
POSTOFFICE AT COLUMBIA, MISSOURI—2,500

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OCTOBER 21, 1929

 *HIS ADDRESS, delivered as a part of the annual Journalism Week exercises, in May, 1929, was the first of a course established to perpetuate in the free press of America the spirit of Don Mellett, who was assassinated July 16, 1926, by enemies made in his crusade against vice, corruption, and lawlessness permitted by the city government of Canton, Ohio. The Don Mellett Memorial Lectureship was founded by a committee headed by James Melvin Lee, director of the Department of Journalism, New York University. Each year, at some designated place in the United States, a lecture will be delivered in the presence of newspaper men by a person selected by the committee.*



Don R. Mellett

Local Government and the Press

We come here to consider, in the light of nearly three years of contemplation, the classic martyrdom of our beloved brother, Don R. Mellett, to reverence his sublimely noble character, to exalt his supreme act of civic devotion, to pay humble tribute to a name which glorifies our generation in journalism and will endure as an inspiration to our craft while the free press lives.

But we come here not as mourners laying wreaths at a bier, though our hearts still are sore, but rather as judges to appraise the quality of the sacrifice and determine if we may what, if anything, Don Mellett bought with his life blood.

We shall inquire again into the circumstances of the savage assassination of this young editor, shot in the back, in the presence of his young wife and their brood of four little children, dying with a smile on his lips in the shadow of his home, July 16, 1926. The bullet which cut off the life of Don Mellett in his thirty-fifth year, the summit of his usefulness and the prime of his loving responsibility to family, church and state, was fired, as the world now knows, by a dope shaken racketeer in the dollar pay of a coterie of rum-soaked grafters, bootleggers, underworld habitues whose relations and depraved business were scandalously interlocked with the official affairs of the city of Canton, Ohio. Don Mellett was deliberately done to death in a state which provides electrocution as the penalty for premeditated murder, but neither the immediate assassin nor the unbelievably merciless conspirators behind the assassin has paid the capital price, although Ohio has executed eight men since July, 1926. Four of the murderers are in Ohio State Penitentiary, two for life and two for twenty years. Former Chief of Police S. A. Lengel, the editor's arch enemy, was convicted and sentenced for life, but obtained a new trial and was acquitted by a jury that accepted the direction of the presiding judge to find Lengel not guilty. The present effort of Lengel to gain reinstatement to the Canton police force, which Mellett declared he disgraced, is still pending. That may or may not succeed. If, and when it does happen, I want those who are in my presence to remember that in the bitter crusade of the *Canton News*, directed by Don Mellett, for municipal reform which would purge the community of the vilest and meanest forms of corruption, Lengel stubbornly resisted every step of the way and, when the editor lay dead, this brutally cynical police official told a *New York Times* reporter that Mellett was "insincere," that his fight for civic righteousness was but a blind for sordid venality—"his motive was to get circulation for the newspaper!"

I might recount more of the surface facts, as they are relevant to an analysis of the question whether Don Mellett died in vain. His crusade was directed at a city government which allowed a social cesspool, called tenderloin, or,

more modernly, "the jungle," to spread insidious poison in a community made up largely of industrial workers, the prostitution of the lowest human types being associated with traffic in smuggled liquor and narcotic drugs, thieving, high-jacking, bootlegging, grafting, with frequent violent crimes as a natural concomitant, all more or less winked and blinked by the city's paid guardians of the law, a ring of local, state and federal public officials. Mellett knew, as you and I know, from experience as newspaper men, that such a foul condition could not thrive in an American city except as it was officially protected and that such protection inevitably meant graft. He knew what you and I know, that one and only one remedy is available to the people of a democracy in such circumstances—pitiless publicity of the facts, without fear or favor.

I can tell you tonight, because I have seen it with my own eyes within a fortnight, that Canton is still, this minute, cursed by a tenderloin—a loathsome well-identified district of vice and crime where the scarlet woman plies her trade, where the illicit liquor traffic continues and where dope may or may not be sold. I am told that the federal authorities (not local police) have latterly fairly well stopped the narcotic traffic. The mayor of Canton is C. C. Curtis, elected by the people since the death of Mellett, although he had previously been removed from the mayor's office by the governor of Ohio as a result of an exposure in the *Canton News* of graft and corruption at City Hall; his brother, E. E. Curtis, who was director of public safety during the former regime of Mayor Curtis, organized the Canton underworld and exacted a toll of graft from all of its vicious activities and, when exposed by the *News*, was arrested, convicted and sentenced to the penitentiary. I ask you to ponder the fact that Mayor Curtis is back on the job today at City Hall, the people's choice, as a result of a campaign of such demagoguery as would give any intelligent or patriotic citizen mental cramps.

These are some of the dark, the heart-breaking surface facts which tend to answer our question whether the sacrifice has been in any way compensated, but there are other matters which afford some relief—at least, I am desperately clinging to them to avoid pessimism. I am informed by Canton friends, who are in a position to know, that while the tangible results are few and thin, there has been in Canton a noticeable growth of civic consciousness among more intelligent people. They are proud of the handsome office that former Governor Cox has built for his *Canton News*, really a monument to Don Mellett whose life-size image on canvas hangs in the library, with the certificate of the Pulitzer gold medal reward acknowledging his civic devotion. Canton people, of a type, seem increasingly aware of the benefaction of Don Mellett's tragic campaign. They discuss it in churches, at clubs and fraternity meetings in appreciative terms. More and more they resent political developments which flout Don's idealism. They seem less concerned about upholding a false pretense of city spotlessness, yet it must be said that the polyglot industrial popu-

lation, or in considerable numbers, remains only faintly conscious, if at all, that a good man died for them.

Two years ago I stopped writing in *Editor & Publisher* about Canton as particularly specifying the conditions which Don Mellett sought to correct. It was but an accident that Canton was the scene of his martyrdom. It might have been any one of scores of American cities, for the elements of leperous vice protected by avaricious public officials are by no means limited to one community, or state, or indeed the country. This combination of lawlessness, official graft, public inertia or indifference, a Don Mellett and a crusading newspaper, dropped down in any one of a hundred cities today would in all likelihood, produce all the effects that were reported from Canton, including the assassination.

Therefore, if you please, let us think of these matters as constituting an American problem, a phase of the delirium of a civilization intent on committing itself body and soul to sordid commercialism, with brazen hypocritical reactions toward the spiritual elements of life.

I have taken as the subject of this discourse "Local Government and the Press," because I think of the Mellett case in its relation to problems which involve the bulk of the American people in the boundaries of their cities and towns. There are in the United States some 15,000 incorporated communities and of the number some 1500 are of sufficient size to sustain one or more daily newspapers. Those of us who constantly study the affairs of journalism sometimes overlook the prime fact that the major function of the newspaper is local as distinguished from state, national, or foreign. The contents of the average well-edited newspaper, both for editorial and advertising, is approximately two-thirds local to one-third general. So the American daily is, and primarily should be, an instrument of local interest and concern. We may feel ourselves citizens of the world, give allegiance to the nation as the fatherland, but the home town we justly regard with something of the affection due to a mother. She provides the roof and clothes that shelter us, food to sustain life, work for our hands to do. Local institutions so intimately concern human welfare that they become near and dear to normal men and women. The street where we make a home and find our neighbor friends, the shops where we select the fruits of our toil, the schools where our children first lisp the rules of conduct, churches where we bare our soul in the Divine Presence, places of entertainment and refinement, the city hall, the courthouse, the policeman on the beat, the fireman guarding by day and night, the street sweeper, the transportation line, the parks and all the conveniences of water power, fuel and sanitation, the cemetery which finally claims all alike—these are features of the town which become so intermingled with our daily lives that they are as of our bone and tissue. Civic pride normally starts at home. The chain which we call Americanism is forged of city, town and hamlet links.

I hold that the throbbing heart of any American community is its good, honest, public-service local newspaper. And I say that the best editor is one who, like Don Mellett, is first concerned with the affairs of good local government, civic righteousness, common health, equal opportunity, prosperity and happiness. The good editor, from instinct, stands and will fight for right wherever the battleground may be, wholly devoted to the welfare of readers and reckless of the penalties which heartless, thoughtless and often powerful elements proverbially exact of the truth-teller. If you will excuse a personal allusion, I shall remark that I have some justification in telling other editors to fight for civic causes, reckless of personal considerations. I wear a few scars. I have been jailed, chased, insulted, bullyragged, cheated, conspired against, snubbed and knocked about a bit here and there, and for the most part have liked it, for jails did not hold, crooks did not win, nobody ever collected a dollar for alleged libel and conspiracies always reacted on the conspirators. Public service editors never lack for a bed or board, or sympathetic and understanding friends, though it sometimes occurs that those whom they most ardently depend on for support are missing when gales are blowing fiercest.

We gain an estimate of the harried life of the good local editor by considering just a few of the social and economic developments which are prominent in the news of the day—conditions which were leading factors in the struggle of Don Mellett. I do not wish to submerge you too deep in the gloom that sometimes find its way into my mind, but it seems necessary to my present mission to explore some of these conditions. In doing so I trust you will bear in mind that I acknowledge and value the higher social and economic forces in our country—the brave and serene people who do live decently, think honestly, act intelligently and serve patriotically.

Let us consider the man in the street of an industrial community—the individual to whom the Don Melletts address their daily news messages. In his personal capacity I conceive that the man in the street recognizes the acts within an ethical code. Each caters, in his stumbling human way, to a standard of right. It seems a fair assumption that all men have honest motives—at least I have never known one, no matter how low, who did not show some evidence of love and truth and honor. Essentially there is an individual appreciation of right, as distinguished from wrong. But great evils exist. Sometimes the whole social scheme seems to be out of hand. I do not think you will protest the assertion that, whatever may be the cause, a blight of apathy, which I shall not hesitate to characterize as mass moral degeneration, has spread over the country in the post-war age. Many of the old ethical landmarks seem lost in a murk of venality. I wonder if in all the world there is a nation so money-minded as our own. It has produced some mysterious effects, strange in social psychology. Moral standards that the average individual pretends to and usually does respect, even reverence, appear to be lost on the crowd. Your town, and mine,

will countenance, long endure and even make sport of collective evils which the self-respecting citizen would not for an instant tolerate in his own home or in his own life. Why was it, I ask, that decent, God-fearing, intelligent men and women of Canton were blind to Don Mellett's vital truth? They need have spent but an hour to prove to their satisfaction that a sewer of vice and crime polluted the city, and they could have deduced, without any editor's prompting, that such lawlessness could not persist if the police were vigilant and honest.

Was the truth that Don Mellett poured out, day after day, repulsive enough to impel the clergy, trusted with local morals, to thunder reform from the pulpits? No! Did the local Bar Association catch fire? No! Did the County Medical Association, realizing the perils to public health that breed in the brothel, pass resolutions? No! Did women's organizations, sensing the horror of a harvest of wild oats sown by youth in its blind abandon, pat Don Mellett on the back? No! Did the Civil Service Commission get excited lest public officials violate their oaths and betray the trusting public? No, but one, Price Jansen, chairman of the commission, said he did not propose to be dragged by Mellett into an "undignified" (greatly alarmed about his dignity, please observe!)—into an undignified discussion of the public business with an editor who printed scandal—a "blackguarding muckraker," to use that gentleman's own fancy terms. Did the Chamber of Commerce, the organized business men of the community, particularly the advertisers, go in a body to the office of the *News* and shake Don by the right hand of fellowship and say: "Boy, the success of Canton, or any other city, primarily depends on the safety, health and nobility of its citizens, and we commend your brave fight and stand with you for a thorough house-cleaning." No, that did not happen, and there were local advertisers, I dare say, who withheld their patronage on the ridiculously specious theory that Don's plain truth was somehow hurting business, as if corruption of the brand he unearthed was not calculated to corrode the very pillars of the civic institution which upholds the business as well as the social structure. Did any organization or social group in any united way offer its support? No! I have learned of none. The backing that Don got, and it was excellent, came from persons who, from individual sense of ethics, from personal conscientious scruples, realized the editor was right and honest and followed his crusade with sympathy and interest.

I dare say that a very small percentage of Canton people personally indulge in liquor, dope, adultery, theft or graft, but as a group they stood for months silently by while Don battled for decency, many a trifle amused, some perhaps a little ashamed, a large number doubtless secretly calling Don a fool for risking himself—a cowardly crowd, brutally cold, amazingly disinterested in affairs that might any day bring tragedy, shame, or loathsome disease to any Canton hearthstone. Can you explain why civic groups turn so contemptuously away from those who, like Mellett, come to them with fresh visions of human

happiness and desirable pursuits? Why is the inspired soul compelled to risk so much? Why is the crowd so content with things as they are?

At the end of his career of more than forty years as prime minister of Great Britain, William E. Gladstone said he had never known a government, including his own, which had acted on strict principles of righteousness and honor. One of Woodrow Wilson's greatest contributions to thought in his day, in my view, was his declaration that moral ideals are as necessary to the state as to the individual. The local press can do no better than apply the Wilsonian principle to local government where it is most sorely needed in our time. The editor's business, as I see it, is to plan the organization, and ceaselessly urge the adoption of forms of government which will actually make public officials responsible to the electorate, and which stimulate in voters a real and personal appreciation of the power and dignity of the polling booth franchise.

Uppermost in the mind of the good local editor is a sense of responsibility, a fact ignored by some of the wisest critics of journalism, that the newspaper alone stands between the citizen and a corrupt exploiter when government fails. He knows that the printed word is the most active influence in a community to stir the conscience of public men and baffle or correct evils. The other day I heard President Hoover tell a thousand newspaper men, gathered in New York, that the "press is almost final in its potency to arouse the interest and consciousness of our people." His estimate is true. Public opinion, our sovereign, is in the keeping of the good local editor. He knows what will happen if his vigilance is relaxed. That the fairest institutions may crumble. That public officials may sell out the people. That legal authorities may go in partnership with crooks. That outwardly respectable business men may erect flimsy buildings which fall and kill, overload ships until they sink at sea, work women and little children long hours at starvation pay, evade taxes, gamble with money held in trust, fix a jury, parade indecency on the stage or in literature, advertise falsely, sand the sugar, enter into conspiracies to restrain trade, blacklist honest men, exploit schools with partisan propaganda, elbow their way into any conceivable public institution and dominate it for personal profit. The good local editor sees all, knows all and prints what he can prove that the people, with no opportunity to observe for themselves, may know and act accordingly.

There are important constructive sides to his work. Through his paper he must lead. He must know how to organize public opinion for good objects. In this reference I think I should mention as a prime requisite the editor's duty to convince readers that there is no greater folly than reverence of men in public office merely to conserve outward forms of politeness. The so-called sanctity of government is a popular myth—only good governments may be sacred. And this thing of keeping up a "good name" for an evil institution is a shallow pretense. The way to drive out evil is to openly discuss it. A good, intelligent motherly woman in New York today faces a felon's fate because

she wrote a pamphlet for the guidance of her own sons which, because of its vital truth, got into the mails, circulated by the thousands by religious, medical and educational institutions, seeking to tell boys what they ought to know about some of life's most intimate affairs. Ponder, if you can, the depth of ingratitude, ignorance and perversion of a legal institution which would pillory that noble woman as the writer of unmailable indecency. Only newspaper men can save her from criminal branding and take it from me, they will do it! Two intelligent men, innocent of the crime of which they were convicted on framed-up evidence, named Mooney and Billings, are withering in a California prison, as I speak, sentenced for life, and for thirteen years held out of pure and simple malice of big business and allied politics, though the judge who sentenced them and every one of the living jurors who convicted them has since petitioned the governor's pardon, because each now knows that the conviction was a monstrous miscarriage of justice. Yet the unspeakably brutal collective people of California remain blind, thoughtless, apathetic, though perhaps not a dozen of them as individuals would so cruelly and mercilessly treat a dog or cat. If you want to know the facts about that case, write to Fremont Older, editor of the San Francisco Call-Post. He is the Don Mellett of that part of the country and you can trust him for the facts. I might go on with scores of specifications, but you also read newspapers. My question to you is, Why is it that these ghastly injustices do not arouse our people as they do the people of many foreign countries and why is it that our mob is satisfied to let such infamy ride on the brainless excuse that the persons involved are "radical," meaning that they are different from the common herd in that their altruism is active?

There is a curious name for what happened at Canton and is occurring in many industrial cities. No one knows who coined it, but in less than a dozen years we have come to identify its meaning as one of the most sinister phases of the money-minded age. The word is "racket." It means a conspiracy of low characters, parasites and greedy monsters, to prey on general society, plundering their way to easy gain and the alleged joys of such affluence. The racket is well known in New York, Chicago, Cleveland, Detroit and other industrial communities. It became an established American evil when rum-running was organized on a national scale. So successful were its operations that high pressure business began to look upon it with envy and presently adopted its ruthless code for certain forms of urban commerce. A racket, to be effective, requires first a brigand leader; second, a gang of gunmen and toughs called racketeers; third, the protection of public officials who share the swag or from stupidity or cowardice do not resist; and fourth, a commission, or assignment as it were, from some branch of commerce.

In Chicago we have seen this startling perversion most plainly. The nation has stood as if awe-struck by its terrorism, impudent contempt of law, barbarous destruction of human life and property, arrogant assumption of

political power. Don Mellett may not have been conscious of it, but he was really fighting a racket—the booze, dope and commercialized vice racket of the city where McKinley conducted his campaign for the presidency under the spreading elms of one of the prettiest avenues in America.

The appalling fact to me, in regard to the racket, is that organized business of a type and organized labor of a type, have so readily accepted its criminal code. Consider, if you will, high-pressure trade competition, driven to financial success by underworld mercenaries, armed with torch, machine gun, bomb, brass knuckles, whip, poison gas, speeding through the streets in high-powered motor cars, fiendish assassins for the candy trade, fish peddling, drug trade, automobile garage business, the building industry, meat business, labor unions—and the merciful God knows what else. The reign of terror that has followed in the wake of these criminal conspiracies is familiar to the newspaper reading public. But why is it, if as a nation we have not suffered moral degeneration, the racket is so generally regarded as something which, while very shocking, is nothing which concerns respectable people or respectable trade? The truth is that the racket has been accepted as a part of our industrial life. To a type of sensual commercialist, the racketeer is a hero. It is a question where the methods of the racket start and leave off in politics and business. Newspaper reporters now write police items in the idiom of the racket calling bombs “pineapples,” prisons “cans,” police officials “bulls,” jail sentences “bits,” prospects “fall guys,” non-union men “finks,” strong-arm men “gorillas,” a thousand dollar bill a “grand,” and the victimized public as “yaps” and “boobs.” No petty larceny thieves, no skulking pickpockets these men—they are out for big plunder which buys cars “half-a-block long,” pays a hundred dollars for a prize-fight seat, maintains a “love-nest,” patronizes night clubs and all such glittering junk of the sensualist.

President Hoover told us, three weeks ago, that 9000 human beings are lawlessly killed every year in the United States and at least fifty times as many robberies in proportion to population are committed in the United States as in Great Britain and three times as many burglaries. He said “life and property are relatively more unsafe in the United States than in any other civilized country of the world.” He wisely called upon the press for heroic efforts to meet this situation, quite in contrast to the weak-hearted critics who would have our newspapers suppress this news on the principle of the ostrich with its head in the sands. These were fourteen homicides in Canton and immediate vicinity during the first nine weeks of the present year. Criminals we have had with us always, the tide of violence rising to its present alarming proportions; but, I confess that, when it became clear to me that labor unions, commercial organizations, and public officials, from a member of a president’s cabinet and the head of a mighty industrial corporation down to the common little grafter gathering the toll of a tenderloin, were using the methods of the racket, all in frenzied lust of quick and unearned wealth, the old prophecy that our worship

of the golden calf was destined to carry us to ruin began to take on realistic meaning in my mind.

The racketeer asks why he should be content with the honest wages of toil when honest toil no longer is respected and when men in high places, educated and outwardly polite, do not scruple to flout ethics and scoff the common rules of the social order to "get theirs." The sneaky little politician can justify his petty graft by reading of big graft in any edition of any newspaper. The little crook sees the big grafters go unwhipped of justice. Their philosophy is that possession of great wealth justifies anything—including murder—and not without some practical reason, I here submit. So the little gangster, substituting force for wit, emulates the conspicuous examples that are constantly set before him in terms of romance and we have the racket, and Don Mellett was but one of many who has died contesting it.

We do not have to be told that it is the spirit and the fact of graft that is the root of practically every major evil of the day. Show me a scandal in public life and I will show you graft, meaning the brazen sale of public rights and powers for individual profits. With wearisome, humdrum regularity graft is reported day by day, until our eyes become blurred and our minds can no longer be startled. As individuals we still complain of graft, but as a collective body we recognize it as an entrenched system in public life and many accept it as justifiable until it becomes too noisome. The surging demand for the unearned dollar to provide pleasure and ease is the leading passion of the day among millions.

For my part I have never been able to find where the line can be drawn between political graft and treason. I know how law has made one a terror and the other a joke, but I refer to the similarity of the dictionary meaning of the terms. Treason is an overt act of betrayal, treachery or breach of allegiance or obedience, toward the sovereign, or the government, and can be committed against a state as well as against the United States. Is the actual theft of public property, by a sworn officer of the state, no overt betrayal, no breach of allegiance, no disobedience of the oath of office? Of course it is, but of the thousands of bills that have ground their way through the legislatures and Congress in the current year, I will venture to say, without investigation, that not one was calculated to make official graft the high crime against government that it surely is.

But I have little faith in legislation to correct the major matters of which I complain. The hope lies in a rebirth of civic consciousness and a realignment of moral standards. That calls for education and moral leadership. As regards good local government the key is in the hand of the able editor of the public-service local newspaper. He is clever enough to devise means of reform suited to his community. Our business is to back him up! His first obligation is to organize public opinion in favor of progressive causes and efficient methods.

His second work is to find the right kind of men to serve in public office. I might mention here that in recent years some 400 cities in America have adopted the sensible plan of operating their municipal business through city managers that are well paid. They have selected a few of the best citizens, all beyond the reach of graft temptation, and drafted them to act as boards of directors, sometimes without pay. When there are one or two really intelligent, genuinely patriotic and progressive men on the board, the scheme seems to work wonders. In such cities, at least, you do not hear the demagogue arousing public prejudices with talk about the tariff, poor old Abe Lincoln or religious bigotry or intolerance, when the real issue is the widening of streets, building of a park, construction of a sewage disposal plant, or the appointment of a police force capable of wiping out, in a single night, a jungle such as still curses Canton and many other towns.

A very great need, as I see it, is for editors to stop being buffaloes by the legal profession. It is an urgent requirement of good government to find the right sort of timber for judicial officers and certainly that of public prosecutor. Show me a good prosecutor, serenely above partisan politics and graft, real or prospective, and I will show you a community that is safe to live in. One or two honest and able judges and a prosecutor who knows his business and cannot be bought and a city is reasonably safe from repeating Canton's inestimably expensive mistakes. In such a city there is no dread of the racketeer, nor fear of the crime which breeds in brothels, nor shame following exposure of graft and the corruption it spreads, nor intimidation to still the voice of the truth-teller. The United States still has the best system of collective living that has been devised by man in the age-long quest. The problem of the day is not to gain freedom, but to use it.

In summation I surely cannot say that I believe Don Mellett's martyrdom was in vain, though the sacrifice was terrible and though the tangible results seem vague. The very fact that we are here thinking and talking of these things means something. Culture turns on a slow wheel. Even the pure tenets of Christianity are weirdly confused with the insensate lusts of the average mortal in his daily life, but we do not believe the crucifixion of Jesus Christ was in vain. Forces of the spirit work their marvels in ways that are beyond our comprehension, touching objects which we do not see, finding their way even into hearts of stone. It is as incredible that Don Mellett's self-sacrifice, dying that others might live, will fail to cast its radiance upon striving millions as that the morning summer sun shall fail to awaken the sleeping earth, open the petals of the nodding flowers and scatter the miasmatic mists of darkness. This is the measure of our faith.

THE
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Edited by

T. C. MORELOCK

Associate Professor of Journalism

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- No. 55. "Local Government and the Press," a lecture on Don R. Mellett, by Marlen E. Pew.
- No. 56. "News, Its Scope and Limitations," addresses delivered at the twentieth annual Journalism Week at the University of Missouri, May 5-11, 1929.
- No. 57. "Journalism and Diplomacy," addresses delivered by Mr. Katsuji Debuchi and Senor Don Manuel C. Tellez.