

INTRODUCTION

Every year in the United States more than 60,000 books are published in the English language, along with millions of articles in literally thousands of periodicals. How does one “access” (in the current jargon) this relentless torrent of new knowledge? The Internet helps, but it hardly suffices. For most students and scholars, it is still necessary to turn to those unpretentious instruments of research known as bibliographies.

We live in a Golden Age of Bibliography, as a quick trip to an academic library will demonstrate. Go to the Reference Room, and there you will find an ever-increasing array of bibliographic finding aids on nearly every subject imaginable. Only rarely, though, will these volumes be devoted to the works of a single human being. And for good reason: very few people write enough—and enough that is worthwhile—to warrant the labor of a formal compilation.

In the bibliography at hand we have a luminous exception to this rule. For more than fifty years now, William F. Buckley Jr. has been a buoyant presence in American public life. Editor, debater, columnist, lecturer, television host, he has been a peerless and indefatigable champion of the conservative cause. His persona, vocabulary, and voice must be among the most recognizable in the entire Western world.

Throughout these decades Buckley has been a prolific practitioner of the written as well as the spoken word. Just how prolific, William Meehan’s bibliography makes astonishingly clear. Consider a few statistics gleaned from the pages that follow. Between 1951 and the end of the year 2000, William F. Buckley Jr. wrote and published: 34 nonfiction books; 15 books of fiction; 81 book reviews; 56 introductions, prefaces, and forewords to other people’s books; 222 obituary essays; more than 800 editorials, articles, and remarks in *National Review*; more than 350 articles in periodicals other than *National Review*; and more than 4000 syndicated newspaper columns at the rate of two or three per week.

Nor is this all that he has committed to paper. For years he received hundreds of letters a week and answered them. By now he may well have composed more correspondence than any American who has ever lived. At Yale University, where his papers are deposited, his *unpublished* files (mostly incoming and outgoing correspondence) comprise nearly a thousand hefty boxes.

The magnitude of Buckley’s writing achievement becomes even more astounding when we remember its context. In the past five decades Buckley has scarcely been a cloistered wordsmith. His daily writing has occurred in the midst of myriad grueling responsibilities, including: editing a national opinion magazine; hosting the longest-running show in the history of public television (1429 separate programs in 33 years); and lecturing on the public platform from coast to coast (at the rate of seventy or more lectures a year for years). Not to mention such “minor” diversions along the way as running for mayor of New York City; serving on the U.S. delegation to the United Nations; attending to family and business interests; playing a musical instrument at a near-professional level of competence; and sailing across the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans on his yachts.

How has he done it? Obviously Buckley is a rapid and ready writer, a fact to which I myself can attest. In the mid-1970s I had an appointment to see him at *National Review*’s headquarters in New York. As it happened, Bill was running a bit late that day. When the appointed hour arrived, he leaned out of his office and said: “I have a column to write. See you in twenty minutes.”

At that point Buckley was still using a typewriter for his compositions. But within a decade or so he had become an aficionado of computers, as I again can attest. About a dozen years ago, during a telephone conversation, he suddenly asked me whether I was using a personal computer for my own writing. No, I admitted. He was amazed. “George!” he exclaimed. “The computer is the greatest invention since—the pencil!”

But innate verbal virtuosity and the wonders of word processing cannot begin to explain Buckley’s prodigious literary output. He was, after all, churning out a stream of polished prose long before word processors were invented. Closer to the crux of the matter, I think, is something else:

despite the frenetic condition of “overdrive” that has characterized his lifestyle since youth, Buckley is a writer of extraordinary discipline. As Dr. Meehan observes in his preface, in thirty-nine years of writing a twice- and thrice-weekly newspaper column (that’s thirty-nine *years*), Buckley has missed his filing deadline exactly four times. In each instance it was because of illness. It is a feat fit for inclusion in the *Guinness Book of World Records*. One wonders whether he somewhere discovered and took to heart the aphorism of the Victorian novelist Anthony Trollope: “There is no greater human bliss than twelve hours of work, and only six hours in which to do it.”

Yet even self-discipline cannot entirely account for Buckley’s productivity as a writer—certainly not if the word “discipline” evokes an image of doggedness and strain. Buckley’s workload may be heavy and importunate, but his resultant prose is neither labored nor dull. His is not the compulsive writing of a workaholic. Indeed, one does not sense while reading it that its author is at work at all.

And here, I think, we reach the essence of the issue. Vice President Richard Cheney recently remarked that you do not experience stress in what you love to do. Perhaps this is Buckley’s secret also. If—as someone has said—Toryism is enjoyment, then Bill Buckley is the quintessential Tory.

But of course it is not just Buckley’s productivity that we celebrate in this comprehensive bibliography. It is the substance and distinctive style of his written work. And this leads us to the fundamental premise of the volume that Dr. Meehan has assembled: namely, that the contents therein deserve to be consulted—not just now, not just for a season, but on into the indefinite future. A bibliography, by its very nature, affirms that its contents are *not* ephemeral, that they are and will be worth reading for a long time to come.

For three reasons Buckley’s oeuvre merits such an affirmation. First, his career has almost precisely coincided with two of the most fateful dramas in the history of Western civilization: the struggle against totalitarian Communism abroad and the concurrent struggle to bolster the foundations of liberty at home. For half a century these have been the overarching issues of our public discourse and the defining themes of Buckley’s own writings. It has been an ideological age in which words and ideas have supremely mattered. To these great debates Buckley has memorably contributed. He has done so, moreover, not as an aloof and solitary observer but as a paladin of organized conservatism: as a preeminent voice, that is, for millions of Americans. When the history of the second half of the twentieth century is written, wise scholars will study his writings as an invaluable guide to the intellectual life of our times.

Secondly, Buckley’s commentaries will survive because they encompass much more than the epiphenomena of politics. In his fifty-plus years in the public arena, the most diverse subjects have engaged his curiosity: religion, music, literature, art, philosophy, pedagogy, language, sailing—in a word, the vast cultural matrix out of which our political life evolves. Like his friend and near-contemporary Tom Wolfe, Buckley is a penetrating critic of our peculiar manners and morals. Long after the political minutiae of yesteryear fade from memory, we will, I predict, continue to be fascinated by Buckley’s observations on the way we lived then.

Above all, Buckley’s works are destined to endure because their enduring subject is people and because their author is a person of singular joie de vivre. If Buckley, like a latter-day Walter Lippmann, had spent the past fifty years declaiming loftily about Issues of the Day, his prose would eventually be forgotten, save by a historian or two. But Buckley has not primarily been a policy analyst or abstract theorist. He has been, rather, a cheerful controversialist and, in the process, a collector of an incredible gallery of friends. Even his political antagonists are his friends.

Eventually historians of our era will want to understand not only the weighty issues we debated but the character and personality of the debaters. To Buckley they will turn happily for insight. For not only has he known and befriended most of the principals; he has studied and written about them, with a keenness and vivifying wit that will long be savored.

Nowhere is his gift for personal portraiture better displayed than in the 222 obituary essays that Dr. Meehan has catalogued—appraisals composed under acute time pressure and often amidst feelings of personal loss. A very interesting book could be compiled from these columns. I hope that Bill finds the time someday to do so.

For now, however, we shall be content with the several thousand literary works that he *has* created—and with the knowledge that he continues to produce and plan still more. Because of William Meehan's efforts high school students, college students, graduate students, teachers, professors, and others now have an excellent entrée into the life and times of a remarkable American.

To Dr. Meehan, then, we give our thanks for a meticulous and timely piece of scholarship. And to William F. Buckley Jr., still active in his mid-seventies, we offer our gratitude and the whispered words: "Write on!"

— GEORGE H. NASH