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# National Endowment for the Arts: News Articles (1980): Article 05

Michael Straight

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The Arts Reporting Service Business and Editorial Office:
P.O. Box 190
Silver Spring, Maryland 2090
Phone: (301) 585-856
Editor/Publisher: Charles Christopher Mark

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## Top Story

### Book Review

***Twigs for an Eagle's Nest: Reflections on the National Endowment for the Arts***
or
***Twigs for an Eagle's Nest: Government and the Arts 1965-1978***
by Michael Straight
Devon Press: Berkeley, New York: 1979
$5.95 181 pages

The last line of the book long promised by Michael Straight, former Deputy Chairman of the N.E.A., is the best line: "It meant first of all freeing myself from envy and regret." Apparently, he hasn't lost envy & regret in the process of writing this terribly uneven account of the Nancy Hanks years. The Roger Stevens years and the Liv Biddle months are thrown in for bad measure against the good measure of his tenure. I must say at the beginning of this review that I viewed the launching of the NEA from a tenuous perch in the pilot-house and consequently have an extremely intimate memory of the period. I'm also probably prejudiced about those times, as Michael is about his own years of service. However, I can't remember Michael being involved in the formation of the NEA in person, or in any other way. I checked with Roger Stevens, who was involved as far back as 1961 with the Kennedy Administration, and he has no recollection. As for the Biddle months, I happen to know Michael has had no contact. Further, none of the definite, broad statements about either the Stevens or Biddle regimes are documented in any way; no footnotes, no references to official documents, nothing but inaccurate, sweeping statements that diminish the defenseless and do not do credit to the author.

Yet, he calls his first chapter "Present at the Creation." He devotes the first four paragraphs of the chapter to the struggles of Presidents Truman and Kennedy to begin the legislative process which would lead to federal support for the arts. He fails to mention the massive resistance in the Congress from the conservatives, which included at that time a Senator Nixon and a Cong. Gerald Ford.

In the fifth paragraph Michael describes how President Johnson managed to succeed where others failed. "President Johnson sent the bill creating the (National) Council (On the Arts) back to the Congress. There it gathered dust until Howard Smith, Chairman of the House Rules Committee, was satisfied that a companion bill creating an arts endowment would be forsaken by its sponsors. They gave in as they had to in the end and in August 1964 the Council was created. It was given all of $50,000 to carry it through the remainder of the fiscal year. It was to have been given $150,000 but somewhere in the legislative shuffle, the sum of $100,000 was mislaid."

I was working with Roger Stevens in the White House at the time and Liv Biddle was the "arts" aide to Sen. Pell on the Hill. None of us recall Straight's version. The facts are that Roger Stevens found a wedge to pry the bill out from under Chairman Smith, hold the vote until the last minute before the Democratic Convention of 1964 with Cong. Frank Thompson's help, and then push it through. The Eastern liberal Republican members were the key votes. Abe Fortas helped with sound advice.

Further, it wasn't $100,000 that was mislaid in the shuffle, it was the phrase "per annum" in the bill signed by President Johnson. We were given $50,000 forever instead of one year; when it was gone the Council was without future monies. It was therefore imperative that an Endowment be created at once.

It would be a simple matter to go on and point out any number of errors of fact concerning the Straight memory of the early years, but it would be only historically interesting. For instance, he implies that Roger Stevens spent a lot of money starting new and unneeded institutions. He says five theatres were expensively established and none of them survive today. The facts are that three theatres were funded with Office of Education money primarily, only two of which were new institutions. Already established was the Trinity Square Company in Providence, R.I., which was given the impetus to succeed until this very moment. Another was the Inner City Cultural Center which is still successful in Los Angeles, though it no longer receives OE money. The third theatre survived for several years in New Orleans under Stewart Vaughn, but it is now defunct. The book is sprinkled with such errors.

The facts are that Michael Straight had nothing at all to do with the passage of legislation creating either the National Council on the Arts, the NEA, or the NEH, or the early days of the agencies, He has grossly mis-stated and by implication maligned the people who gave generously of their efforts and lives to see those bills through to success, and the agencies begun on a high level of effectiveness. He owes an apology to President Johnson, Larry O'Brien, Roger Stevens, Liv Biddle, Sen. Claibourne Pell, Rep. Frank Thompson, and many members of the early National Council, to name a few. He is entitled to an opinion, but not to a distortion of the facts.

Perhaps I should stop here and quote a favorable review to balance my rather negative reaction. The only other opinion available to me is one provided by the publisher. It's John Blaine's quote as used by Devon Press: "It's wonderful! The stories are so funny and masterfully told . . . Your book will be a delight to many -your honesty, wit, and thoughtfulness will be an inspiration."

And in many ways Blaine is right, in my opinion. Michael is a marvelous

writer and a superb and subtle storyteller. But he is no scholar, and in this book at least seems to have no viewpoint. For example, he writes a long essay about how he and Nancy Hanks avoided political pressure from all sides and how important it is for the arts to remain free of all political interference. However, earlier in the book he has written a skillfully subtle essay about a piece of sculpture President Nixon disliked. The work of art was called "Adam" and it was located within sight of the White House on the grounds of the Corcoran Gallery of Art. Nixon wanted it removed. Michael and Nancy Hanks conspired with the National Park Service to deceive the artist and the Corcoran, and the taxpayers for that matter, and have the piece moved to a location out of Mr. Nixon's line of vision. This was surrendering to political pressure of the most direct kind.

At one point the book sums up Roger Stevens' regime as creating "new organizations and institutions which would 'look to government for guidance and for predominant support.'" He contrasts this attitude with Nancy Hanks who "believed that the central purpose of government funding for the arts was to generate more support from private sources." The summation of the Stevens attitude is totally mistaken. Stevens never had an appropriation which allowed for the creation of expensive organizations or institutions. New institutions were established because they were needed to funnel money to some areas of the arts, or to gather information about the art form. None of them were large, or costly, except the American Film Institute.

On the other hand, it is certainly true that Nancy Hanks believed in support through private money with an assist from government. That's why she opposed the increase in state funding from the NEA by her silence, and why the NEA never offered a program to the cities which had commissions for the arts. The Hanks-Straight term resisted decentralization of the arts and believed in aid to the large institutions. They ignored the cities when they said they could raise more private money if given an incentive from the NEA, but embraced programs which stimulated more money for the larger institutions. This set up a power struggle between the Chairman and the states and communities which is still not resolved.

Michael Straight admits some sin in this matter. He writes: "The rhetoric of 'partnership' was frequently employed, by myself among others, the reality of shared power was usually withheld." However, he sees the states as representing mediocrity and the NEA as the champion of artistic quality. As the states grew more resentful over programs conceived by the NEA and thrust on them to administer, but without control, the lines hardened. And then, along came the community arts agencies.

"By that time, city and community arts agencies were also demanding greater participation in the formulation of Endowment policies. The larger arts organizations, in turn, were becoming fearful that the Endowment might surrender too much authority to state and local agencies. The Endowment itself had spent a great deal of time and money in reassessing its administrative relationships. It seemed plain that while decentralization remained a sound concept in principle, in practice it might become a by-product of many conflicting pressures." (p. 94-95)

This was the attitude. Dollars granted to the states and communities didn't end up in the treasuries of the large museums and orchestras. It was a perfectly defensible cultural policy which could be administered openly. I just never understood why it wasn't openly stated. In private, everyone's lips were about as sealed as a fourteen year old after her first date, but no one ever said "we believe in helping major institutions first, states second, and communities not at all."

And certainly Straight shouldn't make such statements as he does on page 67: "The need to carry out the cultural premise of the American Revolution; to see to it that the majority is capable of shouldering the responsibilities that in the past centuries were entrusted to elites." Apparently, this "shouldering" is not to begin with grassroots community agencies, or even bodies appointed within the sovereign states.

The vehemence with which I've pointed out the sins of omission and commission might possibly give one the impression the book isn't worth reading. Not true. Several essays are beautifully thought through and skillfully written. Some chapters are merely anecdotes which are amusing, or charming, or insightful. They are not always insightful as Michael wants them to be, but interesting none the less.

"When Four-Letter Words are Dirty" is an essay in defense of censorship and involving Congress. The ethical values of the author and the Chairman of the NEA come through clearly in favor of pragmatism; and a worthwhile project was killed when devotion to literature would have merely demanded some reform of approach.

The truly good chapters are "Can There Be a Democratic Culture?", a really brilliant piece of scholarship; "Twigs for an Eagle's Nest": is a documented essay that comes to a hasty conclusion which sounds contrived. "The Lunatic, the Lover, and the Poet" is about the arts and education and has some interesting literary and experiential anecdotes. "A City in the Form of a Palace" is a well done plea for urban esthetics. "Live From Lincoln Center" is a bit simple but full of facts that stimulate thinking.

The book as a whole? Certainly worth reading for the writing and the insights it provides, both positive and negative. If I sound overly critical, which I probably am, it's because I don't like to see history re-written with flat dogmatic statements that have no basis in fact or even informed opinion. I especially don't like it when it's by someone who writes with the subtlety and elan of Michael Straight. You must read it, but read it with the mind's eyebrow raised.

## What I Did On My Summer Vacation

**First stop, Chicago.** I visited the Chicago Art Institute, the Field Museum of Natural History and the Chicago Institute of Contemporary Art. All but one were impressive. The Art Inst. continues to grow and show better than ever. The Field Museum is one of the most tastefully presented museums in the world with art and artifact exhibited with exquisite taste. So catholic is the collection that it could be a synthesis of all the best at the Smithsonian.

The Chicago ICA is in a new building off Michigan Boulevard. I was there a few days after President Carter ordered thermostats set at 78 degrees and nearly froze to death, but that is not the reason for disappointment. The permanent collection is small and inconsequential and the temporary exhibition somewhat monotonous, but that's not the reason, either. It was that I suddenly found myself questioning the need for the institution itself. Should we have a museum devoted to only the latest in art styles in a society where such trends turn and twist each year or two? Shouldn't the