

Moving Past the Myths

by Taylor Coffman

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HEARST CASTLE HAS BEEN a State Historical Monument for many years, since 1958. William Randolph Hearst died in 1951. His legacy is best conveyed by the *Historical* part of that romantic hilltop estate, which immortalizes him at San Simeon.

The post-mortem studying of the man's life began in the 1950s. It continues today. Unquestionably, what still figures as the most influential book appeared as soon as 1961. W. A. Swanberg, a freelance journalist and historian, came out with *Citizen Hearst: A Biography of William Randolph Hearst*. One of its most useful aspects is its chronology of Hearst's complex, always alluring career. The man lived to be 88, so Swanberg had plenty to recount. Other writers have followed suit, most notably David Nasaw with his award-winning biography *The Chief* (2000). He and everyone else, surely myself included, have been more beholden to Swanberg's *Citizen Hearst* than any other book. Louis Pizzitola, of *Hearst Over Hollywood* renown (2002), describes it as "artful," certainly a fitting term.

That's not to say, though, that Bill Swanberg got everything right or that he left no stone unturned. Far from it. There's no way he could have, writing as long ago as he did. It took until the late 1970s, for instance, for those of us who knew Hearst Castle well to surpass Swanberg on a crucial point. He portrayed Hearst as having gathered most of the Castle's art objects and furnishings *before* the great project began in 1919.

But it gradually became clear that Hearst had done most of his collecting *after* he got started; and in many instances his California architect, Julia Morgan, had been closely involved. Many of her records have been at the Cal Poly Library, Special Collections, since 1980. They quickly confirmed the new theory at San Simeon, first proposed in 1976—that of Hearst’s buying habits and his building efforts having been interdependent, an organic process whose immediacy and dynamism far exceeded Swanberg’s portrayal. Hearst followed a largely preconceived plan, said Swanberg, dating from well in the past. In reality, Hearst’s efforts at San Simeon were much fresher and, not infrequently, more spontaneous and changeable than that.

And yet so imbued have we devotees been with *Citizen Hearst* that, to this day, if Swanberg failed to touch on a certain detail or, especially, if he glossed over or at times too lightly explained something important, many are still left rudderless, unable or unwilling to bridge the gap. Pearl Harbor stands out above all historical events this way. No other occurrence of the 1930s or ‘40s is as prominent, as deeply profound in Hearstian terms. Where were Mr. Hearst and “the folks” (as his entourage was known) on the fateful morning of December 7, 1941?

Swanberg “wrote around” the subject, as biographers tend to do when their facts run thin. “Early in the war,” he said, Hearst “closed San Simeon and moved to Wynton for two years, winter and summer.” Swanberg didn’t say much else. Yet he gave the distinct impression that Hearst was at the Castle on that infamous Sunday.

In fact, as we now know from two richly detailed archives, Hearst, Marion Davies, and the folks had been almost exclusively at Wynton since April 1941. They were already well entrenched there, far from any foreign danger; the debacle in Hawaii obviously reinforced their current choice of that northern California estate over the Enchanted Hill on the Central Coast. Even a casual sifting of the better-known of

the two archives—the William Randolph Hearst Papers at The Bancroft Library, Berkeley—is enough to drive this key point home about Hearst’s whereabouts in 1941. However, the esteemed David Nasaw somehow overlooked it in 2000, and few appear to have caught the error or have questioned Dr. Nasaw’s commanding account.

The Bancroft, again through its Hearst Papers, also discloses in ample detail how Hearst left Wynton late in 1944 and returned to San Simeon, after an absence of more than three years and despite the persistence of World War II. Bill Swanberg didn’t deal with that part of 1944; therefore, another blind spot, another gap that too few have been willing to bridge, not trusting their native wits to guide them. Instead, the story has hung tough that Hearst didn’t return to San Simeon until the war fully ended, well into 1945.

This isn’t as glaring an error as the one regarding Pearl Harbor. But it’s quite wrong just the same, and the presence of such mistakes is a disruptive factor in the historical continuum. Add a few more to the list and the effect becomes one of confusion and uncertainty. The past makes less and less sense under these conditions. And a clouded past ultimately has less historical value—and also much less enduring appeal.

There’s a final detail from the Swanberg lexicon that has yet to gain better footing in the historical realm, an episode belonging to 1947. In this case Swanberg banked on an earlier biographer, John Tebbel. Without citing a precise date, Swanberg told of how the aged and infirm Hearst left San Simeon in that postwar year, bound for convalescence in Beverly Hills. Castle old-timers settled on May 1947 as the sad, decisive moment. But the Hearst archives indicate July 1947, fully two months later. Again, it’s nothing as critical as the details connected with Pearl Harbor, yet it’s surely a surprising point when weighed against the prevailing wisdom.

Hearst's collecting methods, his home address in December 1941, his moment of return to San Simeon late in World War II, and his tearful departure from the Castle in 1947 are minor things or major things, depending on one's narrative tastes and world view. W. A. Swanberg would almost surely have done more with these matters had further material been at hand—and had more pages been allotted by his publisher. But his tracing of Hearst's colorful life had been ably enough done, as far as that skillful author had carried it. We need to bear that in mind all these years later. And we also need to move on and reinvent history—with accuracy and firm resolve.

The author's current book projects include a regional California history, *Malibu 90265*, plus a more local subject called *North Coast Beginnings: The Early Days of Cambria and San Simeon*. Your comments or questions are welcome at taylorcoffman@aol.com.