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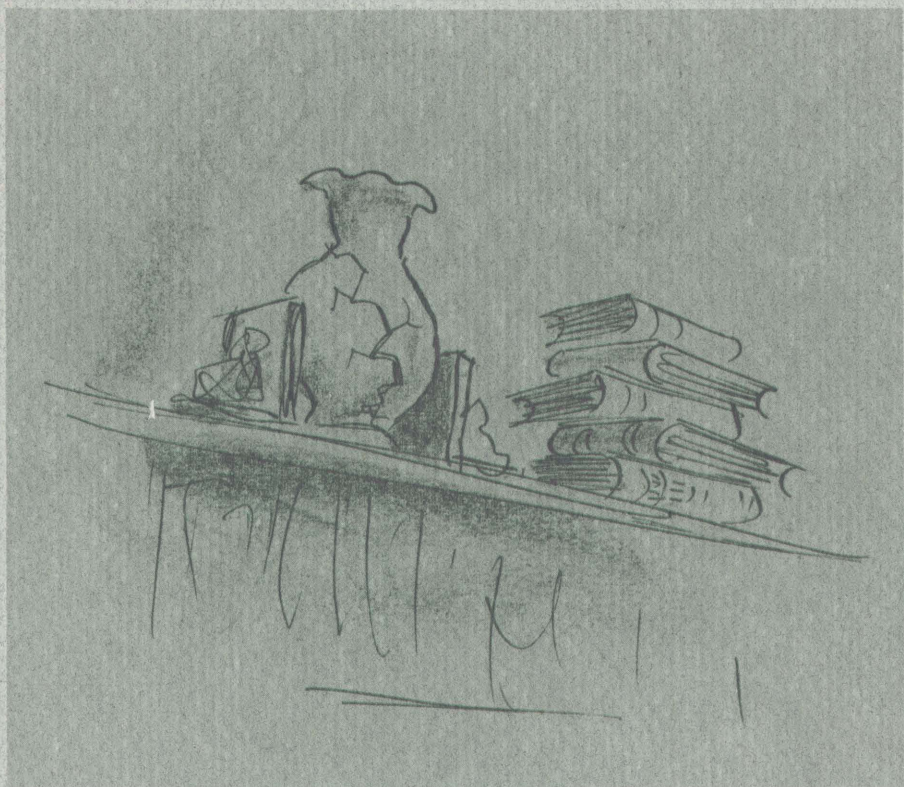
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Recommended Citation

Levenson, Leah, and Jerry Natterstad. "Granville Hicks and the Small Town." *The Courier* 20.2 (1985): 95-112.

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VOLUME XX, NUMBER 2, FALL 1985

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VOLUME XX

NUMBER TWO

FALL 1985

- The Drawings and Papers of Alan Dunn and Mary Petty at
Syracuse University
by Elisabeth Kaltenbrunner Melczer, Research Assistant,
Syracuse University Art Collections 3
- Delmore Schwartz: Two Lost Poems
by Robert Phillips, Literary Executor of the Estate
of Delmore Schwartz 43
- The "Black Dream" of Gerrit Smith, New York Abolitionist
by John R. McKivigan, Lecturer in History at
Yale University; and Madeleine Leveille, Greater
New Haven State Technical College 51
- French Literary Manuscripts at Syracuse University
by Edward Lyon, George Arents Research Library
for Special Collections 77
- "Une Amazone", a Manuscript of Alexandre Dumas père
by Paul J. Archambault, Professor of French,
Syracuse University 91
- Granville Hicks and the Small Town
by Leah Levenson; and Jerry Natterstad,
Professor of English, Framingham State College,
Massachusetts 95
- News of the Syracuse University Libraries and
the Library Associates 113

Granville Hicks and the Small Town

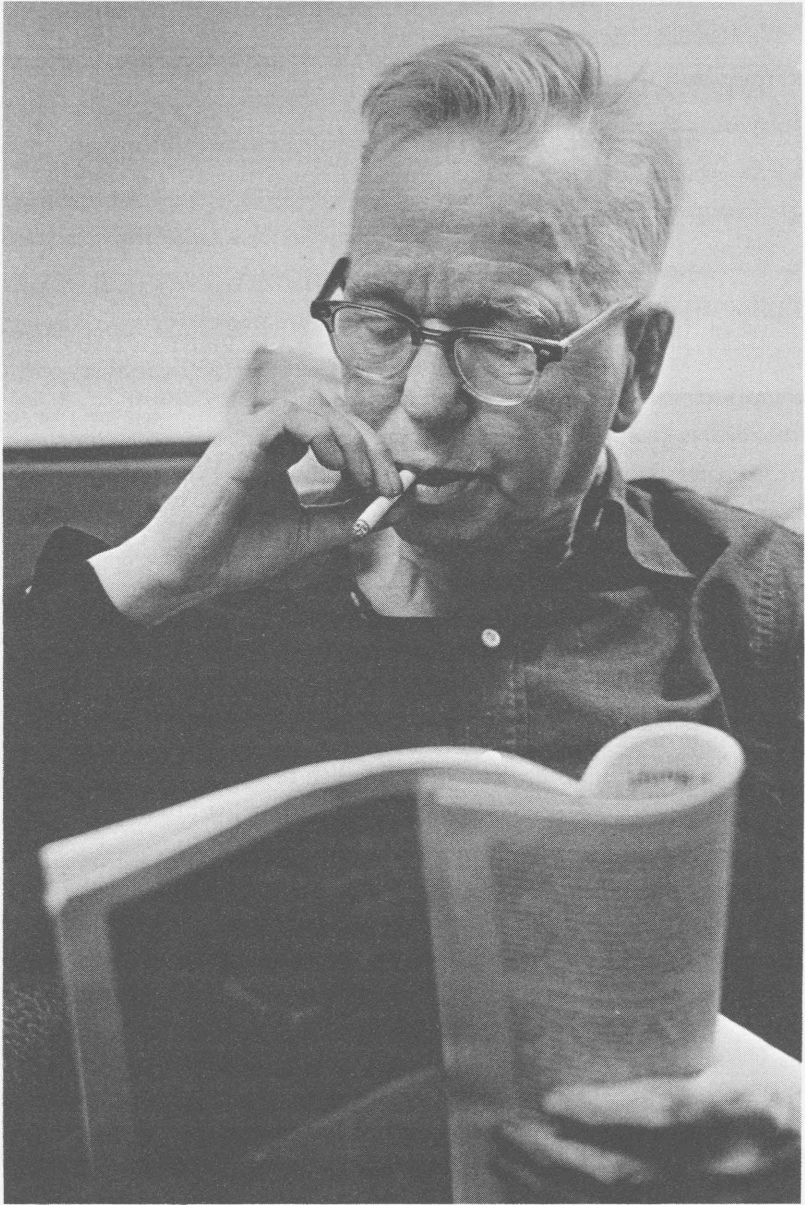
BY LEAH LEVENSON AND JERRY NATTERSTAD*

The author of hundreds of articles and reviews and more than a dozen books, including literary criticism, biography, and an autobiography, Granville Hicks was one of the most prominent American intellectuals of his time. His political odyssey, beginning in the thirties with an open and vocal commitment to Marxism and membership in the Communist party, moving through disillusionment to moderate liberalism, was similar to that of many of the distinguished intellectuals of his generation. Malcolm Cowley, Edmund Wilson, and Richard Rovere, who had been, if not party members, at least close associates, followed a similar course. For Hicks, as for many of the others, it was the 1939 Nazi-Soviet Pact that led to his break with the party; but his political maturing also owed a considerable debt to the town in which he lived—Grafton, New York.

It was 1932. Hicks was teaching English at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, New York, and renting a house in that city. His desire to own his own home, however, brought him that year to Grafton, a small country town not far from Troy.¹ Hicks thought of it as a place where he and his family could spend weekends and summers, but R.P.I. three years later in 1935 forced a change of plans. Citing its need to retrench, it refused to renew his contract as assistant professor. Hicks always believed, probably correctly, that it was his radical politics that had led to his dismissal. His views, he was convinced, did not endear him to the business interests that set the policies of the school. He had become an editor of the *New Masses*, a Communist weekly, although he did not join the Party until the

* Leah Levenson, free-lance writer, and Professor Jerry Natterstad are currently at work on a full-scale life of Granville Hicks.

1. Granville Hicks, *Part of the Truth* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1965), 101.



Granville Hicks at home (Photo: Carl L. Howard, Hicks Family Collection).

following year.² Whatever the precise reason for his departure from R.P.I., the result was that he, his wife Dorothy, and their eight-year-old daughter Stephanie joined his mother and unemployed father, who were already living in the Grafton house. The family were now full-time town residents.

At that time Grafton had a population of 633 (a figure which would grow by only a couple of hundred during the next decade). It is situated fifteen miles east of Troy in the heavily wooded hills, capped with graywacke, between the Hudson and Hoosac valleys. In its early years the town was a logging center, supplying lumber, firewood, charcoal, and tanbark to the surrounding communities; still later, after available timberland was diminished, it became a farming community where sheep were raised and some dairies established and where potatoes and oats were grown. Although the soil was grudging, the landscape was scenic and known for its some twenty-five lakes and ponds scattered among firs, oaks, maples, and white birch. By the early thirties Grafton had become a kind of poor man's resort town. A new concrete highway, built the year Hicks purchased the house and replacing the old macadam road, opened the area to the summer people and to those who merely wanted to drive through the countryside.³ Tourism never brought prosperity, however, and many of the residents were engaged only in subsistence farming. Richard Rovere, a close friend of the Hickses from the late thirties on, remembered Grafton as "a rural slum—a kind of Tobacco Road North".⁴

Located on the Taconic Trail, which stretched from Troy to Williamstown, the town center consisted of fewer than a dozen houses, well-kept but characterless, clustered around a common. Just to the west there was an abandoned store and beyond it, on one corner of the common, a tiny general store diagonally across from the Methodist church. On the north side of the green there was a Baptist church and, to the east of it, a Catholic church. On the eastern edge of the common there was a white one-room school. Even with its scattering of maples and firs, the town was not much to look at. To Hicks,

2. *Part of the Truth*, 118–19, 128–33.

3. John J. Hayden, "Town of Grafton Recognized as One of the Popular Summer Resorts in State of New York", unidentified newspaper clipping, dated 27 October 1934, in the possession of the Grafton Memorial Library.

4. Richard Rovere, *Final Reports: Personal Reflections on Politics and History in Our Time* (New York: Doubleday, 1984), 44.

though, it was “comfortable and homelike—not dignified, not impressive, certainly not beautiful, but not unattractive”.⁵

About two miles northwest of the town center, off a rutted, stony dirt road that rose steeply from the highway leading into Grafton from the west, Hicks had discovered an old, story-and-a-half clapboard farmhouse with corrugated iron roof and attached woodshed. In its simple, starkly graceful lines it seemed particularly well-suited to the landscape, blending with the angular lines of the winter maple branches that framed it. From Hicks’s first inspection of the place, which stood at an elevation of sixteen hundred feet and provided a view to the east of the Taconics rising a thousand feet higher, he was captivated. That the road leading there could turn into a winding ribbon of mud during the spring rains and could become glazed with ice or clogged with snow in the winter appeared not to diminish his enthusiasm—nor did the fact that the house, without electricity, left them dependent on wood- and oil-burning stoves for heat and was without telephone or adequate plumbing.

Though Hicks had never lived in an urban center, the small town was nonetheless a new experience for him. He had been born in Exeter, New Hampshire, had moved to Quincy, Massachusetts, a few years later, and then, when he was about eleven, to Framingham, Massachusetts. He had also lived in Cambridge while he attended Harvard and in Northampton, Massachusetts, while he taught at Smith. None of these towns, however, even remotely resembled Grafton, either in size or atmosphere.

It does not seem likely, however, that during his early association with Grafton, Hicks had his mind on social or cultural differences. He had begun to think seriously about communism in 1931, when the capitalist system seemed on the verge of collapse under the strain of the steadily worsening depression. In the autumn of that year, he and a handful of like-minded people formed a small group in Troy to study Marx’s writings, and, about the same time, his contact with the New York office of the *New Masses* began. Within three years, he was named book review editor of that publication and was already becoming established as perhaps the country’s most promising Marxist critic and as the most visible spokesperson for the thirties’ prole-

5. Granville Hicks, *Small Town* (New York: Macmillan, 1946), 3–4. All further references to *Small Town* (abbreviated ST) and to the Journal (abbreviated J and dated) appear in the text.



The Hicks's Grafton house (Photo: Hicks Family Collection).

tarian movement in literature. In the winter of 1934–35 he took the next logical step by joining a Communist unit in New York City.

As far as the townspeople were concerned, this slightly built, bespectacled man with his New England accent and scholarly air must have seemed little different from the other summer people who came and went at the changing of the seasons. Even though, from 1935 on, Stephanie was attending the one-room schoolhouse and, as a consequence, the Hickses were now members of the P.T.A., they were still considered outsiders. At the time, it seemed to Hicks that his visibility as a prominent radical was not a problem to the townspeople. It made him, he felt, something of an eccentric—a rather harmless one—for being a Communist was only a little worse than being a Democrat in that heavily Republican town. Looking back on

that period, however, he concluded that the problem had been more serious than he had realized and that the local gossip had been considerable.

In 1939 when Hicks broke with the Communist party, his relationship with the town changed. It was then that he began to involve himself deeply in Grafton life, and the town, as a consequence, took him more seriously. Hostility toward the Hickses soon developed, and pro- and anti-Hicks factions formed. Hicks was putting his heart, his time, and his energy into town affairs, but acceptance was slow in coming and perhaps in the deepest sense never came. Still, he attributed his difficulties not to his being a radical, though that certainly was a factor in this conservative area, but to his being an intellectual—a word Hicks disliked but defined as “a person who is temperamentally, as well as professionally, concerned with ideas”. (ST, p. 19n)

The various writings of Hicks during the 1940s—particularly his journals, now housed with his other papers in the George Arents Research Library at Syracuse University—give a detailed and occasionally vivid account of an intellectual’s efforts to become part of a small community and of the new insights that emerged from his experiences. To have a sense of belonging to a group had always been of great importance to him. This desire had been satisfied as a youth by church groups, during the thirties by the Communist party, and later by his participation in the affairs of Grafton.

The problem of putting down roots was complicated by the need to earn a living by writing and his duties as a manuscript reader for the Macmillan Publishing Company, based in New York City. There was plainly no way in which he could cut himself off completely from urban life nor would he have wanted to do so. Plays, concerts, visits to friends and other writers were intellectually revitalizing. Nevertheless, with extremely rare exceptions, he was happy to return to Grafton.

The exceptions did occur, of course. “The great thing about being in New York”, he wrote after one of his many trips, “is seeing people who are in the know.” (J, 10.15.43) There was Richard Rovere, his friend and protégé who was already making a reputation in New York literary circles; Malcolm Cowley, on the staff of *The New Republic*; Edith Walton, a magazine editor who was becoming known as a radio panelist. His close friends Henry and Zoe Christman, both deeply

involved with writing and publishing, gave him news of the publishing world. Hicks enjoyed taking their anecdotes and their ideas from one to another, and he enjoyed telling them Grafton stories in return. "People seem to like to hear them", he commented. "In fact, people seem glad to see me, and that makes me feel good." (J, 10.15.43) The bonds were strong, and once, after a week-long visit, he noted: "All the time I was gone I had an unusual feeling that I was fed up with Grafton, and this lasted for a day or two after my return, though it is waning now." (J, 5.22.44)

During the years between 1939 and 1942, Hicks did manage to begin to establish himself more firmly in the community and, in addition, to write two novels, articles for the *Saturday Review of Literature* and *The New Republic*, and to fulfill various speaking engagements. One of these novels, *Only One Storm*, had as its locale a small town remarkably like Grafton. Since some of the townspeople upon reading it felt they recognized unflattering portraits of themselves, its publication added to Hicks's difficulties. Coming home from the general store one day, Dorothy brought the news that the proprietor, a member of the pro-Hicks faction who had heard people criticizing *Only One Storm*, took it upon himself to ask if they had read it. Often they hadn't. Whereupon he would say, "Well, shut up then!" (J, 8.18.42)

Somewhat later, another Grafton friend surprised Hicks by saying that he had not only read *Only One Storm* but liked it. He added, however, "But for Christ's sake, you might write another one and I wouldn't like it worth a damn. What God damn difference does it make whether I like your book or not? I might like all the books a guy ever wrote and still think he was a horse's ass." (J, 8.18.42) This was the kind of remark that convinced Hicks that his neighbors had "a better grasp of human realities" than some intellectuals. "The tradition of rural shrewdness is not a myth", Hicks once wrote. (ST, p. 110)

If a time when Hicks began to feel a recognized, accepted member of the Grafton community could be set, it would probably be shortly after the attack on Pearl Harbor, when "The Defense of Grafton", as he termed it in his journal, began. (J, 1.15.42) Early in 1942 he wrote a friend: "Dottie and I are devoting practically all our time to defending Grafton. We realize that this is probably not a major objective of either the Nazis or the Japs, but it's our job, and by God



General store, Grafton, 1984 (Photo: Bettina Botti).

we're going to do it. She is co-chairman of the Grafton Defense Council, and I am chief air raid warden."⁶

The establishment of the Grafton Defense Council had not been accomplished without a hitch. Though more than a hundred attended the organizing meeting—a surprising turnout for Grafton—they were an apathetic lot. It was obvious to the Hickses from the start that the Republican boss took for granted his ability to commandeer the necessary votes to elect his choice for chairman and co-chairman of civil defense. The man he selected to endorse for chairman was a newcomer to the town, a professor teaching at Russell Sage College in Troy and someone the politician was sure he could

6. To Samuel Levenson, 13 February [1942].

control. Dorothy Hicks was elected co-chairman because of her secretarial abilities and her reputation for working hard.

When it came to the selection of a chief of the auxiliary police, however, the Hickses decided to put up a fight. Aided by the professor who had been elected chairman, they approached the man they thought would make the best candidate. He balked at first, convinced that politicians always got their way anyhow, but finally agreed to make the run. After a great deal of maneuvering, he was at last appointed with a guarantee of a free hand. Temporarily, at least, the local politicians had been defeated.

Hicks was never blind to the fact that striking a blow for democracy in Grafton was of small international significance. Nevertheless, mindful of the threat posed by both communism and fascism worldwide, he felt that an attempt to preserve and improve democratic government on the local level was at least a start—and a crucial one. At a P.T.A. meeting, for example, an attempt had been made to ban books that certain super-patriotic organizations had branded as subversive. The discussion that followed succeeded in airing the dangers of blindly following leaders who talked smoothly. This could, Hicks felt, in a small but important way serve as an object lesson.

Organizing civil defense was time-consuming, but Hicks felt it was worthwhile. As he became more deeply involved in the life of the community, however, other needs became glaringly apparent to him. The town had no library, no fire department, and the schools throughout the district were suffering from incompetent teachers and a lack of money. Free now of the heavy demands of Communist party activities, he began to explore the many areas in need of improvement and to take action.

The man who once thought he could change the world now set out to change Grafton. As he would write in his 1954 account of his experiences with communism, *Where We Came Out*:

The more you work with people, the more you realize that they are unpredictable. A few are pretty bad most of the time and a few are pretty good most of the time, but most people are always turning out to be a great deal worse and a great deal better than you expect them to be. There is so much inefficiency and irresponsibility, so much malice, so much la-

ziness, that you don't see how anything can possibly be accomplished, and yet somehow, in spite of everything, things get done. One of the old standbys does a heroic job; somebody you hadn't counted on gives a boost; waning enthusiasm suddenly revives—and you have your new school building or your fire truck or whatever it is you want.⁷

In his account of this period Hicks made it clear that his efforts were “not received with humble gratitude as the favors of superior beings”, nor were they performed “with Olympian detachment”. (ST, p. 56) Nearly every gain was won after a hard fight—a fight based on firm conviction which often generated anger on both sides. As one of his local friends bluntly put it, “Nobody has done more for this town than the Hickses, and look at the shit they have to take.” (J, 3.13.44) When Hicks was not notified of a meeting at which action was to be taken of which he disapproved, he wrote: “The lines have been drawn, and the Hickses are the issue.” He commented to a fellow Graftonite, “I'm not criticizing the town board for what they did, but I am sore at the way they did it. They're a bunch of yellowbellied fools.” He was told, “You haven't any idea how they talk behind your back.” (J, 8.14.43)

Hicks did hear a great deal of the talk indirectly. When, thanks to the Hickses, agitation began for the establishment of a free library in Grafton, it was reported to him that one of the locals, very drunk, had come into the general store one night and said, “What's all this about building a library so Hicks can store his old books? He can put 'em in my barn if he wants to get rid of 'em.” (J, 8.14.43)

As with most rumors, this one was based on a certain amount of fact. In 1943, the year Granville Hicks's father died, his mother sought to establish a library as a memorial to him, and the family planned to get the library started with books in their possession. The P.T.A. had approved the idea and passed the matter on to the town board, where it died. It was not until two years later, when the project was turned over to the Community League, that action was taken, a librarian hired, and volunteers recruited. The number of books donated and the amount of interest the opening of the library generated surprised Hicks. He was also amused, as well as annoyed, by some

7. Granville Hicks, *Where We Came Out* (New York: Viking, 1954), 249.

of the remarks passed on to him at the time. "Hicks is always thinking of ways of spending money", one of the anti-Hicks faction had said. "Look at the library." (J, 8.13.45) A friend summed the situation up this way: "I think you're a chump. You're the best educated and the smartest man in town, and you're doing more for the town than anyone else, and everybody hates your guts." (J, 8.11.45) Hicks, however, could tolerate the harsh words, for one of his goals had been reached—the town now had a library—and from its inception he and Dorothy were among the most enthusiastic and loyal volunteers for library duty.

Hicks had encountered gossip before he moved to Grafton, and it had always annoyed him. But now he was beginning to feel that interest in, and discussion of, his affairs might be preferable to the chilly impersonality of the big city. Though the gossip was often uncharitable, at least it was not indifferent. With it went something he had come to value highly: neighborliness. From the first, he had been aware of his dependency upon his closest neighbor. Mr. Agan, sixty years old when Hicks bought the house, had been born in it, was able and willing to do almost any work necessary to improve it, and all his life took a proprietary interest in it and its occupants. "Neighborliness", Hicks decided, was "the small town's transcendent virtue". (ST, p. 160) Within the older generation, and even among the younger members of the community, it was a strict code that one would not readily turn aside any request made by a neighbor in trouble.

If neighborliness was Grafton's "transcendent" virtue, prejudice, Hicks quickly found out, was its basest imperfection. Perhaps it is easier to detect racial prejudice in a small town. Certainly he was well aware of its depth in Grafton, listing incident after incident of it in his journals. When, in the mid-forties, he was giving some of his time to an interracial committee in Troy, it did not go unnoticed. Citing a newspaper item, one of the townspeople commented: "Did you see the picture of Hicks speaking to the niggers? He's a menace to the country." (J, 2.22.44)

Intolerance was not limited to blacks. It extended to Jews, homosexuals, and Catholics, and the town at one time could even boast a branch of the KKK. That prominent figures in the community had been members of it seemed to be taken for granted. When Hicks questioned one of them, no longer a member, he said that he had joined it as he would any "fraternal organization". The branch was

never against the Jews, he said, and went on to explain that the Klan was 100% American and the reason they were anti-Catholic was that Catholics were “under the domination of a foreign power”. The reason the Klan was against the Negro, he said, was that they believed in white supremacy. “Would you want your daughter to marry a Negro?” he asked. Hicks, showing a restraint he would have found difficult a few years before, said that he wouldn’t mind except that in society as it was then constituted they might be unhappy. He was pleased to see that his neighbor accepted that as a reasonable reply. (J, 8.4.44)

Perhaps the KKK branch had not been overtly against Jews, as Hicks’s informant had maintained; nevertheless, anti-Semitism was in the air. One woman informed Dorothy Hicks that Jews were all right if they kept their place. She was sure, she added, that when the boys came home from the war they would “clean things up”, and she cited the election of Lehman as governor of the state as “the greatest mistake the people of New York ever made”. (J, 7.14.43) Of the two general stores in Grafton, one was owned by Sam Salkin, commonly referred to as “the Jew”. Salkin knew this and accepted his status as an outsider.⁸ “I can talk to you”, he said to Hicks once, “because you and me—we’re different, you might say, from the rest of the people in town.” (J, 10.18.43)

Homosexuals were not spared. Referring to the sexual preference of one of the town’s leading citizens, a neighbor said: “I hate those guys.” He told Hicks, with obvious admiration, about a man he had worked with who searched out homosexuals, got them into a secluded spot, and then “beat hell out of them”. When Hicks pointed out that beating was not the answer, he was informed that the man was not interested in reform, “he just liked to paste guys like that. It was a hobby with him.” (J, 9.11.42)

As an intellectual, and a liberal one at that, Hicks was understandably distressed by the bigotry he found as well as by what often seemed absence of vision and resistance to change. But, as he saw it, at least in the small town the problems were more easily defined and the possibility of correcting them greater than in large, amorphous

8. Hicks makes one notation that is an example of prejudice against Jews in reverse. Sam Salkin, the storekeeper, once asked Hicks if Earl Browder, head of the Communist party, were Jewish, and, when he got a negative answer, said: “How did he get to be so smart?” (J, 11.14.44)



Catholic church, Grafton, 1984 (Photo: Bettina Botti).

urban centers with their faceless masses. On a radio program called *Town Meeting of the Air*, popular in the mid-forties, he debated the advantages of small-town life with Charles Jackson, author of *The Lost Weekend*, who defended living in New York City. “The problems of the big cities”, Hicks said, “can be solved only by specialists and the solutions can be put into operation only by mass propaganda. The small town’s problems can be solved by people like you and me if we are willing to make the effort.”⁹

The importance of this belief to Hicks can be traced in his 1952 novel, *There Was a Man in Our Town*, when the central character, Hicks’s persona, says of a friend:

9. “Would You Rather Live in a Small Town or a Big City?” *Bulletin of America’s Town Meeting of the Air* (New York: The Town Hall, 26 December 1946), 6.

Ellery is seeking a faith. . . . He's betting that he, with his good will and his knowledge, can make a recognizable difference in the life of this particular town. Because if he can, you see, it proves to him that society is amenable to intelligent human control, even if he and his blessed sociologists haven't quite got the hang of it.¹⁰

This sense of the significance of individual action was new and important to Hicks, and it was by no means the only fresh dimension to his outlook that he acquired, for Grafton altered his "scale of values" in numerous ways. He had, he knew, developed admiration for certain qualities that previously he had underestimated: physical strength, physical courage, manual dexterity, and most of all intelligence. "I place a higher estimate on sheer intelligence than ever before in my life", he wrote. "Knowledge—to say nothing of erudition or sophistication—seems less important, but intelligence seems more so." (ST, p. 154)

Grafton, then, had taught Hicks the value of non-intellectual attributes. It seems also to have developed in him a deep love of nature. One January morning he wrote in his journal:

When I went for the water, the stars were out—Sirius in the west, Arcturus almost overhead. . . . When I came home the mountains were sharp, and little clouds were just turning pink. I had had my second cup of coffee and was up in the study before the sun rose, and by then there was no cloud anywhere. . . . The snow glistens, and the shadows are blue. (J, 1.6.43)

As he said in his debate with Jackson, he liked the "physical setting" of his life and, when in New York City, wondered how people lived "without quietness and without clean, fresh air".¹¹

It is altogether possible, however, that Hicks would have been less content to remain in Grafton if New York City had not been so readily accessible to him by train from Albany. He understood that his life could not be lived fully in what he called "small town terms", for the

10. Granville Hicks, *There Was a Man in Our Town* (New York: Viking, 1952), 165–66.

11. "Would You Rather Live in a Small Town or a Big City?", 4.

arts flourished more prolifically in the big city. Nevertheless, as he well realized, the intellectual who was locked into the small town atmosphere need not be deprived of “the world of the mind”. He could listen to the radio (and, later, watch television), read the best periodicals, listen to good recordings, and read as many worthwhile books as he wished. (ST, p. 174)

Hicks would have admitted that any final judgment of the values of small-town living must be based on the needs of the particular individual. His own needs were not met by the impersonal life of the city. As he put it to Charles Jackson, he liked to be able to know as “human beings” the people with whom he dealt. “Our grocer isn’t just a grocer”, he said. “He’s also the collector of the school district, of which I am trustee. Our road superintendent isn’t just a man who keeps the roads in shape. He’s also a member of the fire company, as I am, and his wife is our librarian.”¹²

In the mid-forties, Hicks wrote: “I believe that small town life has values that should be preserved”; significantly, he added “if they possibly can be.” (ST, p. 207) Already he was well aware that the existence of the small town was threatened and its extinction probably inevitable. Between 1941 and 1945 a large proportion of the men and women in Grafton were working in war-related industries in Troy, Albany, and even Schenectady. After the war, many of them continued to work in the nearby cities; and, also, with the shortage of housing, city people were moving to Grafton. A new kind of small town was emerging—the suburb.

When, a few years later, Hicks wrote an article dealing with the rise of the new small-town community, he did not minimize the advantages that had come to Grafton with its changing character: economic prosperity and the sociological and psychological effects that it brought with it. Previously he could drive along the back roads in Grafton and see houses badly in need of paint and repairs, junk-filled yards, and children who looked half-starved and were shabbily dressed; now he saw television aerials on almost every roof, painted houses, neat yards, healthy-looking, clean children, and he knew the houses would be equipped with refrigerators and washing machines.¹³

The psychological effect of this new prosperity could be witnessed

12. *Ibid.*, 5.

13. Granville Hicks, “Roxborough, Post-Truman: The New Small Town Community in the Making”, *Commentary*, March 1953, 229.

in town and school meetings and at the polls. "I used to be distressed by the hangdog faces I saw, especially on the women", he wrote. "Now these same women hold their heads up, and when they have something to say, they say it."¹⁴ At the same time, he saw what was lost. Except for fresh air, more space, woods in which to take long quiet walks, and land upon which to plant a garden and grow vegetables, living in Grafton was becoming very much like living in any of the cities in the Albany metropolitan area.

What remained of rural delights was enough, apparently, for Hicks still felt that living in a small community had much to be said for it. "At least we are a long way from urban impersonality and anonymity", he wrote.¹⁵ The newcomer to Grafton, thanks in large measure to the efforts of Hicks and his wife, would find it possible to establish personal relationships in the flourishing P.T.A., the volunteer fire department, the Citizens' Council, and the Community League.

Early in September 1957, looking back over the previous year, Hicks called it one of "almost complete withdrawal from town affairs", and his feelings about it "completely mixed". (J, 9.9.57) His reaction was both understandable and typical. Years earlier, when he had been asked to be district chairman of the national war fund drive, he had been extremely pleased even though he had realized how great a demand it would make upon his time. His reaction, he felt then, emphasized his "dual personality". He wrote in his journal: "On the one hand, I want to be doing things, want to have things happening. On the other hand, I want to have time to read, listen to music, and work outdoors." (J, 10.30.43) At any rate, for a variety of reasons—health and pressure of work among them—his weekly stint in the library was now his main community activity.

In his autobiography, *Part of the Truth*, which appeared in 1965, Hicks summarized his feelings at the time of his decision to devote less time to Grafton. "Thus ended fifteen years of intensive community effort", he wrote. "Though less had been accomplished than I had dreamed of, the accomplishments were not to be laughed off."¹⁶ Neither was what Grafton had accomplished for him. The knowledge gained about small-town life had formed the basis for three novels: *Only One Storm*, *Behold Trouble*, and *There Was a Man in Our Town*; and for his non-fiction *Small Town*. Hicks felt, too, that the

14. Granville Hicks, "Roxborough, Post-Truman", *Commentary*, March 1953, 229.

15. *Ibid.*, 235.

16. *Part of the Truth*, 283.

experience had helped him to moderate a strain of intolerance, with which, incidentally, he states he had been born.¹⁷ When one examines his thirties' reviews, that intolerance is not hard to find. Reviewing the novelist Floyd Dell's autobiography, *Homecoming*, for *The Daily Worker*, Hicks said: "There is one thing about it: Dell neither takes a superior attitude towards the quasi-liberalism of his past, as some of his contemporaries do, nor attempts to set forth his particular brand of treachery as the latest, simon-pure brand of Marxism, as other contemporaries have done." And Hicks concludes: "There is no place and no excuse for Floyd Dells in the revolutionary movement today. The revolution has need of intellectuals but not of moon-calves"—a reference to Dell's 1920 novel *Moon-Calf*.¹⁸

This unequivocal, dogmatic manner disappears in the later Hicks reviews. His 1967 review of *The Lost Revolutionary: A Biography of John Reed* by Richard O'Connor and Dale Walker—a book decidedly inferior to Hicks's own biography of Reed (1936)—is indicative of the change. "When I picked up the book," Hicks wrote, "I was afraid it might be the kind of slapdash biography that could easily have been knocked together by a couple of bright journalists; but O'Connor and Walker have done a competent job of research. They have made good use of Reed's own books and of the large collection of Reed material at Harvard, and they have consulted many books by and about Reed's contemporaries." Hicks did point out, however, that the authors made "a good deal of Jack's playboy years, telling some stories whose authenticity is open to question" and showed little interest in Reed as a poet and a revolutionary, or even in poetry or revolution per se.¹⁹ Still, he would not have been so kind thirty years before. It is, of course, difficult to say to what extent this mellowing was due to Grafton, for his abandonment of the Communist party and his age no doubt played a role.

When *Part of the Truth* appeared, the literary critic Malcolm Cowley, who had known Hicks for many years, reviewed it for *The New York Times Book Review*. Speaking of the various courses that ex-Communists had taken, Cowley wrote: "Hicks chose a more reasonable and moderate course than almost any of these. He retired from

17. *Ibid.*, 301.

18. Granville Hicks, "A Retired Literary Radical: Floyd Dell's Autobiography", *The Daily Worker*, 11 October 1932.

19. Granville Hicks, "Playboy Poet to Revolutionary", *Saturday Review*, 4 November 1967, 29.

the national scene, but not—being a ‘critical liberal’, in his own phrase—from all political activity.” Cowley notes that Hicks says in one of his other books: “I decided to be active where I could test what I was doing by observable results—specifically in the small town in which I lived.” It was due in large part to Hicks, Cowley points out, that Grafton now had a firehouse, a library, and a modern school accessible to its children. “It also seems to have developed more local pride and a stronger sense of community, than is possessed by most of the surrounding villages”, Cowley noted. But, he argued, Grafton could not be considered “a beacon light for the nation”, and he could not help but regret that “for twenty years Hicks’s talent for leadership, his doggedness, and his social conscience were chiefly confined to that narrow field”.²⁰

Cowley’s regrets were shared by many of Hicks’s friends, but they were not shared by Hicks. Though Grafton had been unknown to him until he was thirty-one years old, it became what his friend, the novelist Wright Morris, called “the home place” for him, for his parents, and for his friends. The house, as Hicks correctly states, was not impressive either outside or in, but, after more than thirty years, he could still describe it warmly. “If you walk into the field on a summer day and look back at the house,” he wrote, “with lawn all around and with the gardens full of bloom, it is a handsome sight. It is handsome in the autumn, too, with the maples flashing on two sides. And for that matter it makes a pretty picture in the snow.”²¹ When, because of teaching assignments, he and Dorothy had occasion to be away from home for four or five months at a time, they were homesick and delighted to receive word of town events. Upon their happy return, they found Grafton “beautiful”.²²

“I can’t easily imagine life anywhere else”, Hicks writes at the conclusion of his autobiography. “Sitting in my study, with my books around me, with my filing cabinets close at hand, looking out on lawn and garden and fields and woods, I know that this is where I belong.”²³

20. Malcolm Cowley, “Yankee Crusader on the Left”, *The New York Times Book Review*, 1 August 1965, 1.

21. *Part of the Truth*, 305.

22. *Ibid.*, 289.

23. *Ibid.*, 306.