

W.C. FIELDS:

HIS FOLLIES & FORTUNES

Rasping, boastful, incensed, and absurd, W. C. Fields' voice still echoes in the ears of millions who watched him on the old vaudeville stage, or who laughed through his movies. It can be heard again in the pages of this remarkably evocative biography.

Fields, who died on Christmas Day in 1946, was born in Philadelphia to a Cockney family and opened warfare with his father almost on sight. The old man, a vegetable hawker, got to the place where he was punctuating sentences by whacking Fields, and the boy conceded a decision by leaving home when he was eleven.

For the next few years Fields slept in a smithy, on a billiard table, and in Philadelphia's jails, which he maintained, with inverse Rotarian spirit, were the finest in the world. He kept alive by stealing, and he lived to juggle, a skill he had first observed in a Philadelphia theater and which became his life's obsession.

From the beginning his art was superb. He grew up with American vaudeville,

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raucously demanding and getting better billings. He added his famous billiard act to his juggling repertoire, he traveled abroad, he was given a good spot in Ziegfeld's *Follies*, and he began to impart his frustrated comedy to delighted audiences. At last, Mack Sennett realized that Fields was as good as the comedian had been telling the movie industry he was, and signed him to do some movie shorts. From there he went to Paramount, M-G-M, and Universal to act in, and sometimes to write, some of the greatest comedy pictures ever produced.

When Fields died, he had lived out more than six decades of a life as unlikely as that of any character he ever portrayed. He was endlessly suspicious: he opened hundreds of bank accounts under fraudulent names, usually chosen for their euphony; he was rich, and lived in constant fear of poverty; he was lonely, and abused his few friends unmercifully; in brief, he was a constant enigma. He was also one of the greatest American comedians.

Photograph of W. C. Fields as Micawber by Clarence Bull.

Photograph of W. C. Fields as Queen Victoria by Will Connell.