‘New Liberalism and the Edwardian Public Sphere: Norman Angell and Angellism Reconsidered’ represents an attempt to reassess the publicity efforts of the Edwardian foreign policy dissenter, Norman Angell. Contrary to traditional interpretations, Ryan Vieira argues that Angell should be interpreted, not as a failed peace activist, but rather as an intellectual and, ultimately, as one aspect of the period’s ‘new liberalism’ and liberal revival.
In 1909, a journalist for the Daily Mail named Ralph Lane published, under the penname Norman Angell, a pamphlet entitled Europe’s Optical Illusion which, a year later, was expanded into a book entitled The Great Illusion: A Study of the Relation of Military Power in Nations to their Economic and Social Advantage. In these writings, Angell argued that a war between Germany and Britain would be irrational because the rapid means of communication and the extension of credit had made these countries economically interdependent. Between 1910 and 1913 Angell’s book sold more than two million copies and was eventually translated into twenty-five languages. Moreover, the book inspired the formation of clubs and societies on an international scale dedicated to interrogating its ideas. In the four years before the First World War, Angell’s work stimulated substantial public political discussion causing one author in the Pall Mall Magazine to claim that: ‘The Great Illusion has taken its place among the few books that have stirred the minds of men and the obscure author of the modest pamphlet has become the leader of a new school of thought.’

To his contemporaries, Angell was judged in terms of his ability to stimulate public discussion. He was judged, in other words, as a ‘public intellectual,’ and, given the immense public currency that his work achieved, he was viewed overwhelmingly as a success. Despite this, however, most historians have represented him as a failed peace activist. This historiography has, for the most part, distinguished between the public currency of Angell’s ideas (the extent and consistency of their presence in public political discussion) and their political effect (the extent to which they had an impact on political practice) and, on this basis, has concluded that Angell was politically ineffective. In part this stems from Angell’s own autobiography, where he noted that ‘in drawing any lesson’ from his Great Illusion experience ‘one should distinguish sharply between the publishing success and the political failure … the book provoked discussion all over Europe and America … yet its argument failed to influence policies to any visible extent.’ Contrary to Angell’s assertion, the present paper contends that it is misleading to think of Angell as a ‘political failure’. By arguing that Angell was a new liberal and ‘public intellectual’, it suggests that the line between publicity and politics is not as sharp as Angell and his chroniclers would have us believe.

Angell’s political identity was largely based on the ideals set out by John Stuart Mill in On Liberty. ‘If there is any one book which explains a man’s intellectual life’, Angell noted, ‘the fact that at twelve I read and was entranced and entered a new world as a result of reading Mill’s On Liberty explains most of my subsequent intellectual life.’ As is well known, Mill upheld openness of debate and individual judgment as the foundation of rationality in politics, and thus it should not be surprising that Angell believed that the basis of liberal democracy was robust debate in an open public sphere: ‘[I]n a sphere without sound democracy without sound individual judgment … That skill cannot possibly be developed save by the habit of free tolerant discussion.’ The issue for Angell was not simply the volume of public debate, but rather its tone. ‘The question is not whether we discuss public policy’ Angell wrote, ‘we do it in any case endlessly, noisily, raucously, passionately. The question is whether we are to carry on
the discussion with some regard to evidence, some sense of responsibility to truth and sound judgment; or with disregard of those things in favor of indulgence in atavistic emotion.' Angell believed that if political discussion always maintained ‘the temper of reasonableness, toleration of contrary opinion, the attitude of enquiry and the open mind’ political communities could avoid ‘senseless panics which so often in politics lead us into disastrous courses.’ The problem for Angell, however, was that public political discussion in his contemporary period appeared to be anything but rational.

In his now largely forgotten 1903 book, *Patriotism Under Three Flags: A Plea for Rationalism in Politics*, Angell noted that the turn of the century had brought with it a general shift in the mood of the public:

> While it is true that the Victorian era, as much in England as in America, reflects on the whole a contrary spirit – the predominance of a reasoned effort towards well-being, rather than a satisfaction – the recent events analyzed here would show that these forces of rationalism have spent themselves, and that sentiment is once more coming to occupy the first place in public policy.

According to Angell, this shift in the public temper was most obvious in the growing ‘impatience of discussion’ that characterised the discursive practices of Edwardian political debate. In Angell’s view, it seemed as though his contemporaries were possessed of a general unwillingness to critically interrogate the axioms of political thought. In 1905, when Angell was hired by Alfred Harmsworth (later Lord Northcliffe) to manage the operations of the Parisian English language newspaper the *Daily Mail*, this view was confirmed.

As one of Harmsworth’s high-ranking employees, Angell became included in the newspaper baron’s circle and was exposed to some of the most powerful and influential men in British political culture. Through contact with these men, Angell quickly became aware of some of the ideas dominating British political discussion, particularly as it related to foreign affairs. Here he found a widespread, unquestioning attachment to an outdated political language in which war was conceived of as either inevitable or economically beneficial. Later, in his autobiography, he commented:

> I was quickly to find that these men, many of whom had great influence in politics and journalism, and public life generally, all accepted as truths so self-evident as not to be worthy of discussion certain axiomatic premises which were, I soon became convinced, either dangerous half-truths or complete and utter fallacies.

Angell was terrified by the political dogmatism that characterised public debate in the Northcliffe crowd, and this became his primary motivation for writing what became *The Great Illusion*: ‘… the fears I felt were deep and real and *The Great Illusion* was born of them.’

In 1909 Angell self-published *Europe’s Optical Illusion* and, once published, he used his contacts in the press to secure favorable reviews. Angell’s most fruitful press contact was Percy Parker, then owner of *Public Opinion*, who believed that *Europe’s Optical Illusion* would become ‘the book which had the greatest effect on the thought of man and on his ultimate social well-being.’ Parker devoted a great deal of time and energy to helping Angell promote his ideas. Through reviews in *Public Opinion*, Angell’s thesis was introduced to a large and politically important audience. One letter sent from Angell to Parker lists the distribution of 2,034 copies of *Public Opinion*, which contained a review of Angell’s work. Of these 175 were sent to English newspapers, 94 to American newspapers, 667 to the House of Commons, 611 to the House of Lords, and 487 to American Congressmen. Similarly, a separate letter indicates that Parker had distributed favorable reviews to 30,000 businessmen. With the help of media contacts such as Parker, Angell’s political pamphlet was becoming exceedingly popular. Indeed, it was also not long before Angell was being approached by ‘half the publishers in London’ to expand his pamphlet
into a book.20 He accepted the offer of the William Heinemann publishing firm, and late in 1910 *The Great Illusion* appeared.

With a deteriorating international situation Angell’s arguments were deeply plugged in to the concerns and anxieties of the Edwardians. It is therefore not surprising that *The Great Illusion* attracted the attention, praise and scorn, of some of Europe and North America’s most important public men. Among these was Angell’s then boss Northcliffe, who had originally, ‘pooh-pooed the idea’ that Angell’s thesis ‘could hold water or … affect politics practically’, but by the end of 1910 had become convinced that ‘in a cheap edition [{em The Great Illusion}] could run into a million.’21 Northcliffe threw himself into the Great Illusion campaign, providing Angell with funding and giving him space in the Daily Mail to engage the critics of his book and to ‘push home its thesis’.22 Late in 1911, the Daily Mail provided Angell with an important point of entry into the Edwardian public sphere.

Northcliffe’s decision to give Angell space in the Daily Mail proved timely. Following the Franco-German dispute in Morocco, the question of the financial impact of international conflict became increasingly topical and the debate over Angell’s thesis gained further momentum.23 Using the columns of the Daily Mail, Angell engaged the panicked ‘collective mind’ in critically rational public debate. Here he expressed and elaborated on his ideas, while also listening and responding to his critics.24 Angell’s columns in the Mail seem to have impacted the tone and character of public political debate. One correspondent wrote to the Mail’s editor in December 1910, claiming that Angell’s ideas were ‘filtering down in all quarters’ and that he had been one of the first public men to whom Angell mailed copies of *Europe’s Optical Illusion*, and he was thoroughly impressed with the pamphlet.25 Esher would become even more supportive of Angell’s work when he witnessed discussions of Angell’s thesis in Desart’s sub-committee for the Committee of Imperial Defense.26 In fact, Esher became so intrigued by Angell’s work that he was able to convince the philosophically minded former Conservative Prime Minister Arthur Balfour and the wealthy industrialist Richard Garton to join Angell and himself in forming the Garton Foundation for Promoting the Study of International Polity.

The Garton Foundation was arguably the most important organisation in the growth of Norman Angellism. Its aim, according to the Memorandum of Association, was ‘[t]o promote and develop the science of International Polity and economics as indicated in the published writings of Mr. Norman Angell, and for the purpose aforesaid to organise and federate those who may become interested in the said science …’27 ‘It was for the discussion of this thesis, and for its examination by theoretical students, and by practical men of business, that the Garton Foundation was instituted,’ wrote Esher in 1912.28 In other words, the Garton Foundation hoped to ‘bring before the mind of the European public the significance of a few simple, ascertainable, tangible facts … and to encourage their discussion.’29 More important for our purposes, however, was the methodology through which this aim was pursued. The Foundation used existing spaces for debate and created new discursive spaces in order to publicise Angell’s work.

Throughout 1912 Angell lectured at various, often prestigious institutions throughout Britain.30 In addition to this the Garton Foundation also created new spaces for debate, such as the monthly periodical *War and Peace: A Norman Angell Monthly* and the many discussion groups that were formed throughout Britain. In both venues Norman Angell, the Garton Foundation, and those who participated in the discussion showed themselves to be welcoming of criticism and concerned primarily with the opened-ended analysis of political questions. More doctrinaire attitudes were seen as problematic and contrary to the spirit of the movement. As B. N. Langdon-Davies, then an important Garton organiser, told an audience at the Leeds Norman Angell League on 17 April 1914:

> The dangers to avoid in the conduct of a movement such as ours are many. I propose to run briefly through a few which have occurred to me. Petulance, the attitude of impatience towards those who are obsessed with the old views, is most disadvantageous. So also is pedantry, the irritating way of seeming to regard ourselves as alone possessing the true doctrines and the dangerous habit of asserting dogmatically as facts many things which are really only tendencies.31

The Garton Foundation was strictly non-partisan and attached to Angell’s principle that ‘The Right of Free Speech is an empty thing unless it is accompanied with a sense of the obligation to listen to the other fellow.’32 Thus by 1914, Angell could write: ‘the educative policy of the Garton Foundation is one which can equally be supported and approved by the soldier, the Navy League man, the Universal Service man, or the naval economist and the Quaker.’33

The admission of fallibility on the part of Norman Angell and...
his Garton colleagues became a cornerstone of the political identity that Angell and his followers constructed. As Angell wrote to a reader in 1911, ‘so far from declining to listen to my opponents, they are just the people whom I listen to most carefully.’43 Similarly, when another reader wrote to Angell claiming that he had found flaws in The Great Illusion, Angell responded: ‘[c]ertainly I shall be delighted to have you indicate the errors which have crept into my book. I am only too well aware that having but very incomplete leisure, many imperfections have been allowed to pass, and I shall be grateful to have some of them indicated.’44 Again in his autobiography he reiterated the importance of accepting and considering criticisms:

In the case of any person whose judgment is really deserving of confidence, how has it become so? Because he has kept his mind open to criticism of his opinions and conduct … The steady habit of correcting and completing his own opinion by collating it with those of others, so far from causing doubt and hesitation in carrying it into practice, is the only stable foundation for a just reliance on it.45

Though Angell vigorously promoted his work, he clearly did not see himself as propagandist but rather a creator of public discussion. As one reviewer in Everybody’s Magazine noted: ‘Mr. Angell has a mind like an edged blade, but he uses it like a scientist, and not like a crusader. He is not a propagandist, he is an elucidator.’46

Angell pushed for a reciprocal dialogue to become the dominant characteristic of the new discursive spaces that were founded in the wake of The Great Illusion. Upon the founding of the Manchester University War and Peace Society, Angell wrote in an open letter to its members: ‘[s]uch a club should include men of as diverse opinions as possible – quite as much those interested in the machinery of warfare, as those interested mainly in the bearing of these matters on social progress.’47 Angell believed that such an ideologically diverse membership would only increase the quality of debate that occurred within the society:

If the circle includes a certain number generally hostile to pacific conceptions, so much the better. They will, by their points of interrogation act as a stimulus to the investigation of the rest, while on their side they will certainly benefit by a better understanding of factors, which even from the purely military point of view can no longer be neglected.48

This attitude was also evident in the Garton Foundation’s monthly periodical, War and Peace. As the lead writer put it in the inaugural number: ‘That failure of understanding which we call war … is a natural and necessary outcome of certain beliefs and misconceptions which can only be corrected by those intellectual processes that have marked all advance in understanding – contact and discussion.’ Therefore the purpose of the journal was ‘[t]o impress the significance of just those facts which are the most relevant and essential in this problem, to do what we can to keep them before public attention and to encourage their discussion.’49 For this reason, War and Peace aimed to remain ‘strictly non-partisan’ and published pieces both by Angell’s supporters and his critics.50 The resulting effect was such that War and Peace became a sphere of critical discussion based on the mutual give and take of open-ended debate.

The tremendous growth of Norman Angellism was not limited by Britain’s shores. By June 1913, The Great Illusion had sold 11,000 copies in Germany, 21,000 copies in France, and 15,000 copies in Italy.51 Moreover, Angell had received supportive letters from the King of Italy, the Emperor of Germany, and the Prince Consort of Sweden. Angell’s work also developed a tremendous public currency in Canada, where his book had gone through six editions by 1914.52 The character of Norman Angellism in Canada can be seen through an examination of the University of Toronto International Polity Club, founded on 23 October 1913. Within one year this organisation had 250 formal members, it attracted several high profile speakers, it held meetings with attendance figures over 300, and it caused Angell to refer to Toronto as ‘the intellectual centre of the Dominion.’53 By 11 April 1914, Toronto’s Star reported the club to be ‘… thoroughly alive.’54 Despite its success, this organisation has received scholarly attention within neither the historiography surrounding Angellism nor that of the Canadian peace movement. This is problematic not simply because of the organisation’s popularity, but because the University of Toronto Club was a model of the inclusiveness that characterised the discursive spaces which Angell had created.

In the way of the clubs and societies in Britain, the University of Toronto International Polity Club firmly adhered to a language of inclusion and a spirit of inquiry. Its formal objects were:

To encourage the study of international relations; to discuss problems relating to armed aggression; to consider means of settling international disputes without war; to stimulate a sympathetic appreciation of the character, problems and intellectual currents of other nations; and to cooperate for the furthering of these aims with similar organisations in other universities.55

The Club was not a peace organisation per se, but rather was aimed at anyone interested in international issues.56 According to its manifesto, the club was based ‘first and foremost, on individual breadth of view’ and was the product of no ‘clique, nor of any single college.’57 This point was reiterated by the organisation’s second president, C. R. Young, who in 1915 defined the club as ‘… an association of eager enquirers, of thinkers, of men trained to think clearly and without prejudice.’58 The hope of the club was that ‘by its broad and open-minded interest in every phase of internationalism … it could form student opinion and send forth from the University men and women trained to think clearly and without prejudice.’59

In membership, the Club was highly diverse. In terms of gender, fully half of the 300 who attended the inaugural meeting were female, nearly half of its 250 members in 1914 were female undergraduates, and from 1915 to 1916 women made up more than half of its executive. Additionally, membership in the club was not just limited to students, but open to the general public, and the club actively encouraged membership from people of different cultures and political points of

Angell pushed for a reciprocal dialogue to become the dominant characteristic of the new discursive spaces that were founded in the wake of The Great Illusion.
view. According to its manifesto the single requirement for membership was, ‘sincerity of conviction or honesty of doubt.’ As Gilbert Jackson, Vice President of the club, told a Toronto Star reporter, ‘[w]e exist for the purpose of thought and discussion … We think that the subject of war and peace is one that interests most people, and we try to study it from all points of view, getting opinions of men of all types of mind … We number among our members Imperialists, Liberals, and Conservatives, Socialists and Individualists.’ In light of this it is clear that as a discursive space the club was characterised by a language of inclusion and a spirit of inquiry.

Although Angell’s Great Illusion campaign did not stop what became the First World War, it did undoubtedly raise both the quantity and quality of public political discussion, not only at home but abroad as well. As one author in Canadian Magazine wrote: ‘Napoleon made the world tremble; Norman Angell has done even more, he has made the world think.’ It is here that Angell’s political significance emerges. By opening up spaces for free-wheeling and critical public debate Angell became implicated in the reinvigoration of British liberalism that had been called for by ‘new liberal’ thinkers and authors such as L. T. Hobhouse and J. A. Hobson. The recent work of historian Christopher Mauriello has demonstrated that much of new liberalism’s political identity was built on the idea of a rational public sphere: that is, a public sphere defined by the free use of independent reason. This idea, Mauriello has shown, led the new liberals to place a high degree of significance on the role of ‘public intellectuals; men of letters like Goethe or Mill who were equally committed to ‘mixing with mankind … guiding their counsels, undertaking their service, and getting something accomplished for the obvious good of the world or the village.’

Angell was the public intellectual in action and he was thus part of the revival of deliberative politics that the new liberal thinkers had envisioned. Indeed, as I have tried to show, this was primarily how he understood his work: not as peace activism but as the reassertion of rationalism in public political debate. If it is by the standard of the ‘public intellectual’, and not by that of the peace activist, that we are to assess Angell, then it ceases to be sensible for us to claim that there existed a division between his publishing success and political failure. In fact, it is Angell’s immense public currency and the character of the debate which he created that made him politically significant. Moreover, given Angell’s popularity both at home and abroad, it seems that he should be ranked among the most significant new liberals of the Edwardian period.

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This was primarily how he understood his work: not as peace activism but as the reassertion of rationalism in public political debate.

1 This paper will not detail all of the arguments of The Great Illusion as these are available in a great deal of the existing literature. Here I will allude to Angell’s arguments only when necessary and only insofar as they apply to the general argument of the present thesis. For a detailed summary of Angell’s arguments see Paul David Hines, ‘Norman Angell Peace Movement, 1911–1915’ (Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Ball State University, Muncie, Indiana, 1964), Chapter 1.


3 It is worth noting that such clubs and societies were not limited to the English-speaking world. Organisations such as Verband fur Internationale Verständung und Student Verein became closely associated with the Norman Angell peace movement. For a discussion of Angell’s connection with German student organisations see: Hines, ‘Norman Angell Peace Movement, 1911–1915’, pp. 105–110; Philip Dale Supina, ‘The Norman Angell Peace Campaign in Germany’, Journal of Peace Research, 9, No. 2 (1972), pp. 161–164.

4 The William Ready Division of Archives and Special Collections, McMaster University (hereafter WRAC), Norman Angell Collection, Box 3 Clippings File, The Great Illusion, Pall Mall Magazine, January 1911.


7 Norman Angell, Reminiscences of Sir Norman Angell, Columbia University Oral History Collection, part 1, No. 8, p. 11.

8 Bull State University (hereafter BSU), Norman Angell Collection, Box 46, ‘Power’.

9 Angell, After All, p. 145.


12 Included in this set were J. L. Garvin, Leo Maxse, Kennedy Jones, and Lord Roberts. Moreover, an interesting fact which McNeal’s dissertation brings to light is that in the months when Angell was finishing Europe’s Optical Illusion he was working in close quarters with George Saunders and William Fullerton – two of the most anti-German of all of The Times’ foreign correspondents. ‘At the very least, both Saunders and Fullerton provided him with a constant reminder of the anti-German feeling that he attempted to counteract in the book.’ Hugh Peter Gaiteskell McNeal, ‘Making War Expensive and Peace Cheap: The Emergence of New Liberal Internationalism in Anglo-American Thought, 1897–1914’, (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University, 2000), p. 119.

13 Angell, After All, p. 138.

14 Ibid, p. 141.


17 WRAC, Norman Angell Collection, Box 1, Percy Parker to Norman Angell, 26 January 1911.

18 WRAC, Norman Angell Collection, Box 1, Percy Parker to Norman Angell.
was invited by Arthur Balfour to become War Secretary. In 1905, he became a permanent member on the Committee of Imperial Defence. For a more detailed biography see Peter Fraser, Lord Esher: A Political Biography (Hart-Davis MacGibbon, 1973).

Angell, Reminiscences, p. 106.

In January 1910, he wrote a supportive and encouraging letter to Angell: 'I hate flattery, but I am not flattering when I urge you to push home your main thesis. Your book could be as epoch making as Seeley's Expansion of England, or Mahan's Sea Power. It is sent forth at the right psychological moment and wants to be followed up if you have time and drive.' BSU, Norman Angell Collection, Box 7, Reginald Esher to Norman Angell, 11 January 1910. This letter had a great impact on Angell who later said it was largely Esher's support of 'Europe's Optical Illusion' which was responsible for the pamphlet's expansion into a book. As he wrote to Esher: 'I think, in a sense, you are responsible for the book, because if it had not been for your kind encouragement given to the pamphlet on which it is based I am not sure that it would have been written.' For his support Angell dedicated his 1914 book The Foundations of International Polity to Esher. BSU, Norman Angell Collection, Box 7, Norman Angell to Reginald Esher, 30 October 1910.

In a speech at Cambridge University Esher commented on witnessing these talks: 'I have had the opportunity of listening to very confidential inquirers into, and discussions of, the economic effects upon our trade, commerce and finance on the outbreak of a European war in which we ourselves might be engaged. This inquiry extended over many months, and many of the wealthiest and most influential men of business from the cities of the United Kingdom were called to give evidence before whose whose duty it was to conclude the report. I am sure that very few, if any, of those eminent witnesses had read his book, but by some mysterious process the virus of Norman Angell was working in their minds, for one after the other, these magnates of commerce and of finance, corroborated by their fears and anticipations, the doctrine of The Great Illusion.' BSU, Norman Angell Collection, Box 29, 'Viscount Esher's Speech at Cambridge University'.

WRAC, Norman Angell Collection, Box 7, 'Memorandum of Association', Garton Foundation Members Agreement, clause 1, article 1.

BSU, Norman Angell Collection, Box 29, author unknown, 'A Note on the Organization of the Garton Foundation', 1912.


A few British organisations that Angell spoke at under the auspices of the Garton Foundation included: the British Chamber of Commerce (Paris), the Chatham Club (London), the South Place Institute (London), the Pioneer Club (London), the Midland Institute (Birmingham), the National Liberal Club (London), the Glasgow Liberal Club, the Leeds Chamber of Commerce, the Liberal Colonial Club, and the United Service Institution. BSU, Norman Angell Collection, Box 29, John Hilton, 'Report for 1912'; 'Overseas Dominions: Mr. Norman Angell and the Use of Armies', The Times, 9 October 1913, p. 35.

BSU, Norman Angell Collection, Box 29, B. Langdon Davies, 'Dangers to be Avoided', in Leeds Norman Angell League Conference.

BSU, Norman Angell Collection, Box 29, B. Langdon Davies, 'Free Speech'.

Angell, 'The International Polity Movement', p. 211.

WRAC, Norman Angell Collection, Box 1, Norman Angell to R. Walton, 28 April 1911.

BSU, Norman Angell Collection, Box 4, Norman Angell to Thomas Carter, 1 November 1911.


Everybody's Magazine, May 1911, reproduced in, WRAC, Norman Angell Collection, Box 6, The Work of Norman Angell by his Contemporaries: A Selection of Reviews and Articles Reproduced and Bound up, Issued Privately for Personal Friends and Some Students, p. 8.

BSU, Norman Angell Collection, [JX695A22], Norman Angell, 'An Open Letter to the Manchester University War and Peace Society'.

Ibid.

About Ourselves', War and Peace, 1, no. 1, October 1913, p. 1.


Supina 'Norman Angell and the Years of Illusion', p. 132.


For membership figures see Polity Club Serves Noteworthy Ends, Star (Toronto), 11 April 1914, p. 10c. Speakers to the club in its first year included John Lewis (editor of the Toronto Star), G. E. Jackson (Cambridge Lecturer in Economics), J. A. Macdonald (editor of the Toronto Globe), Sir John Wilson (Canadian correspondent to the London Times), Alfred Noyes (English poet), and N. W. Rowell (leader of Ontario's provincial Liberal Party): BSU, Norman Angell Collection, Box 29, 'Memo for Norman Angell', 15 February 1914. The club's first meeting filled the newly built YMCA's auditorium achieving an attendance of 300: 'New