Comparative review

Press, politics and culture in Victorian Britain

W. Sydney Robinson, *Muckraker: The Scandalous Life and Times of W. T. Stead – Britain's first investigative journalist* (Robson Press, 2012)
P. Brighton, *Original Spin: Downing Street and the Press in Victorian Britain* (I.B. Tauris, 2016)
G. Cordery and J. S. Meisel (eds.), *The Humours of Parliament: Harry Furniss' View of Late Victorian Political Culture* (Ohio State UP, 2014)
Comparative review by **Dr Ian Cawood**

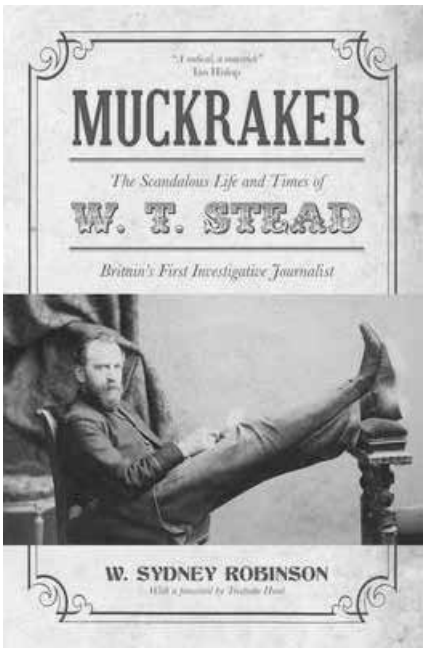
The role of the press in the political and cultural life of Victorian Britain has been the subject of ever-increasing scrutiny in recent years. This is largely because, in these days of the 'cultural turn' with its focus on the behaviours, mentalities and interactions of political life, no other source can provide such a rounded view of the priorities, the principles and the prurience of Victorian public experience. With the reduction in stamp duty on the press from 4d to 1d in 1836 and then the success of the Association for the Promotion of the Repeal of the Taxes on Knowledge in the 1850s, the national, the local, the satirical and the scurrilous press flourished throughout the second half of the nineteenth century providing a wealth of source material that has never really been fully exploited by historians.[1]

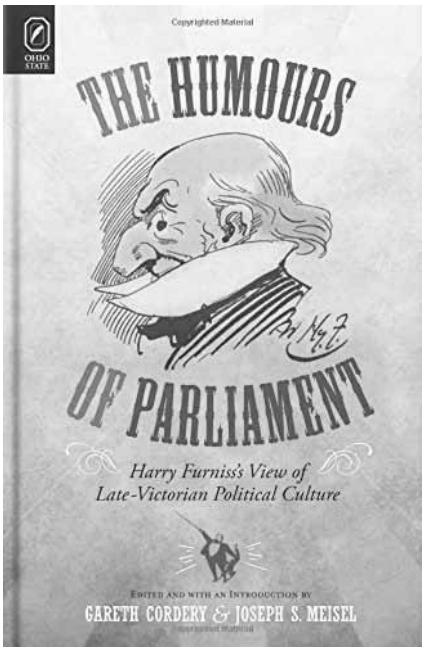
With the widespread digitising of certain sections of the press, beginning with the *Times Digital Archive* in 2003, the range of journalism available to the historian, both professional and amateur, has considerably expanded and access to this material has become immeasurably easier. There are still problems with the study of the press, of course, not least the relatively limited information as to the proprietors, the journalists and most of all the readers of the press. Although much is known about such details for the major London newspapers (and periodicals such as *Punch*), the interactions of the local, regional and 'underground' press remains largely unexplored.[2] Given that the British public tended to buy local media rather than national media (largely owing to the price), this has resulted in a rather lopsided view of the Victorian political media which only scholars such as Andrew Hobbs at the University of Central Lancashire have attempted to correct.[3]

Historians have, instead, hitherto chosen to analyse an issue that was of great concern to intellectuals and politicians in the first age of mass literacy that accompanied the introduction of compulsory elementary education in 1880. This was the coming of the 'new journalism' (as Matthew Arnold christened it), widely thought to have been imported from the US papers controlled by William Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer. This was marked, according to the pioneering historian of the topic, Joel Wiener, by a less formal tone and less rigorous reporting of the content of public speeches, which were still printed verbatim in newspapers until the First World War. Instead, the 'yellow press' (as its detractors called it) attempted to focus on the more sensational aspects of public events, to examine the effects of these events on the individual, rather than from an ethical or religious perspective and to use a more direct and simple vocabulary to engage and to keep the reader's interest. It introduced the use of interviews with leading figures of the day and investigative journalism, as well as the greater use of visuals and headlines and subheadings in articles.[4] In Britain, the single figure most closely associated with the 'new journalism' was W. T. Stead, who W. Sydney Robinson calls 'Britain's first investigative journalist' in his biography of 2012.

The biography, titled *Muckrake*r, is in some ways reminiscent of Stead's rumbustious journalism. It is excessively prurient in its fascination with Stead's sex life and apt to focus on certain scandalous incidents rather than to fully explore Stead's true political and journalistic significance. It is also far too fond of conjecture, rather than certifiable fact. But, in its defence, like Stead's work, it is highly readable, being well written, carefully structured and able to explain complex moral and legal matters with simplicity and clarity. This marks Robinson's book out from most studies of journalism of the nineteenth century – and Stead's reportage still reads fresh and vivid compared to the tedious prognostications and ponderous 'wit' of most the newspapers of the last quarter of the century. Unlike a lot of Stead's work, however, it is impeccably researched (when it isn't speculating on issues such as Stead's mental health), constantly overturning the self-aggrandising myths that Stead built around himself and the ready acceptance of these by subsequent historians. One merely needs to compare Robinson's book with the dry and lifeless text produced by the British Library to mark the anniversary of Stead's death on the Titanic in 1912, to realise how Robinson has not merely managed to portray Stead, but also to capture his essence in this book.[5] The early chapters on Stead's career as editor of the *Northern Echo* – and especially the sections on the *Pall Mall Gazette*'s famous 'Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon' articles – hum with the restless energy of a man who could be shockingly callous in pursuit of a good story, but who one can never accuse of ignoring injustice. His later career is rather less well explored, as recent historiography has attempted to re-evaluate the significance of the *Review of Reviews*, which Stead established, largely single-handedly, after the sale of the *Pall Mall Gazette*. The section on Stead's flirtation with spiritualism could certainly have benefitted from greater familiarity with the work of historians such as Richard Noakes and Roger Luckhurst who have done much to treat such 'alternative' religions with greater respect than they received from the British media at the time.

If one accepts that a 'new journalism' had emerged in the 1880s, then the three newspapers that historians have associated with this innovative approach appeared to have been remarkably liberal in their politics. T. P. O'Connor's *The Star* endorsed the fierce Nationalism of its founder-editor, W. T. Stead kept the *Pall Mall Gazette* solidly Gladstonian until its sale to Lord Astor in 1893, and thereafter George Newnes offered a friendly Liberal refuge for the *PMG*'s staff (though without Stead) in the heavily subsidised *Westminster Gazette*.[6] Certainly all three rejected the arguments put forward by Chamberlain and





Hartington in 1886 and stayed loyal to Gladstone during the Home Rule Crisis after December 1885. As James Startt has argued, however, any arbitrary distinction between 'old' and 'new' journalism is highly misleading. Established newspapers, such as the *Daily Telegraph* and *The Scotsman*, did much to imitate the less outrageous elements of the 'new' journalism in order to retain their readers, and even 'stately' papers like *The Times* underwent some substantial reforms to its presentation of the news in these years.[7] John Walter and George Buckle were forced by the £200,000 legal bill left by the Parnell Commission. to rebuild *The Times* and its reputation by combining its authoritative political focus with a slightly less pompous editorial tone and an increasingly sophisticated presentation style.[8]

The limited circulation of the pioneering titles of the 'new journalism' is indicative that they proved highly influential in the industry, but no long-term match for the established press, once the latter had learnt the lessons of how to appeal to a broader readership than hitherto. In 1887, Stead's *Pall Mall Gazette* became the first newspaper to carry a satirical cartoon and the lasting legacy of *Westminster Gazette* was to make this feature a staple item in all but the most traditional British newspapers of the twentieth century.[9] The identification of a distinctive 'new journalism' in Britain in late Victorian Britain has never really managed to reconcile the survival and flourishing of the older titles and the relatively high casualty rate among newspapers that appear to be the epitome of the 'Americanised' press. While there clearly was a gradual change in reading and writing habits in the period, most studies have been forced to conclude that these owe far more to broader changes in British society than to the evanescent fads of newspaper editors.[10] The new titles which did prosper in the later years of the century, such as the *Daily Sketch* and, later, the *Daily Mail*, did so by offering an alternative to the 'stately' media's fixation with party politics and thereby failed to have any significant effect on political behaviour in the pre-war period beyond the cultivation of apathy and indifference.[11]

Stead famously claimed that journalism rather than parliament was the better representative of the will of the people but in fact he was expertly manipulated by Gladstone to support the outcry against the Bulgarian Atrocities in 1878 and to support home rule. This difficult relationship between the 'Fourth Estate' and the executive is the central theme of Paul Brighton's study of attitudes towards the media on the part of the nineteenth century's prime ministers, which has, perhaps unwisely, been titled *Original Spin*. It is organised chronologically by the prime ministers of the century and argues that some of the less well-celebrated First Lords of the Treasury, such as Russell, Derby and Rosebery were significant in developing the role of the press in the British polity. It also attempts to debunk the myth that only Tory PMs needed to practise the 'dark arts' of media manipulation. Both Palmerston and Gladstone emerge as arch-manipulators. Even Disraeli, no mean wire-puller himself, had to admit that 'the once stern guardians of popular rights simper in the enervating atmosphere of [Palmerston's] gilded saloons' in response to Pam's sedulous courting of John Delane, the editor of *The Times*. That *The Times* had been usually referred to as 'The Thunderer' before Palmerston's premiership, due to its outspoken attacks on corruption, government incompetence and the moral failings of minister, yet remained remarkably uncritical of the government for the duration of Palmerston's occupancy of 10 Downing Street, seemed to illustrate the success of Palmerston's strategy of exchanging information for support and of rewarding pliant journalists with honours and sinecures.

Unfortunately, the focus of Brighton's text remains frustratingly narrow, mostly concentrating on the doings of the national press. There are allusions to the fecundity and influence of the local press but there is little sustained analysis. The press is depicted too frequently as the passive recipients of prime ministerial attention, which in the case of W. T. Stead stretches one's credulity too far, considering that Stead considered himself the 'uncrowned king of an educated democracy'. There is little understanding of the complex and changing relations between proprietors, editors and readers, to match those between politicians and journalists. There are also far too few examples of primary materials (which is odd, given how easy accessing Victorian journalism has become in the last ten years) and a far too frequent tendency to rely on the works of others, most noticeably Stephen Koss's two-volume text, *The Rise and Fall of the Political Press in Britain*, which is now over thirty years old. That said, Brighton's

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portrait of Lord Salisbury and his egregious bribery of such undeserving individuals as Alfred Austin, the leader writer for *The Standard*, exposes a side to the last Victorian premier which others such as Michael Bentley and David Steele have ignored. Salisbury spent far more time with Austin than anyone other than his chief agent and political fixer, 'Captain' Richard Middleton, and while Middleton was quietly rewarded with huge cheques at private Conservative dinners, Austin was given the position of Poet Laureate in succession to Tennyson despite the quality of his poetry being so terrible that even William McGonagall may have thought twice before publishing it.[12]

A far more talented, but far less rewarded and even less remembered media figure was Harry Furniss, an Irish caricaturist, who became one of the most prolific cartoonists of *Punch*'s golden age in the late nineteenth century, alongside Sir John Tenniel and Linley Sambourne. His specialism was in exaggerating particular characteristics of his subjects and depicting them in a rather disrespectful but highly animated fashion. His images of the ever-active Gladstone, vaulting around his study, chopping down saplings and carrying up the coals in *Punch* in 1892 is an irresistible portrait of the Grand Old Man's ceaseless energy that drove his colleagues, such as the lugubrious William Harcourt, to distraction. Furniss attempted to turn his thousands of illustrations into a public entertainment by transferring some of his cartoons to magic-lantern slides and writing a scripted lecture. The surviving script of his 1891 'Humours of Parliament', together with either the illustrations he used, or educated guesses taken from his portfolio or other sources, forms the basis of a new book by two pioneering US historians, Gareth Cordery and Joseph S. Meisel. There is an excellent introduction in which the editors explore the nature of political cartooning in the age of Gladstone and Chamberlain, the visual dimension of Victorian political culture, and the history of the performances that Furniss gave between 1891 and 1897 both in Britain and abroad. To give an example of the impact of his presentations, Furniss's exaggeration of the 'Gladstone collar' was so famous that the wing collar became uniquely associated with the G.O.M for the last fifteen years of his life and Furniss could merely draw a wing collar, for every reader to recognise the allusion.

Perhaps a slightly more detailed study of Furniss's personality might have helped to explain why his public performances were the exception for cartoonists rather than the rule in the period. There is a suggestion that Furniss was 'notoriously argumentative and egotistical', and when he gave a lecture on portraiture at the Birkbeck Institute in 1888, *The Times'* reviewer observed that 'everybody came in for a liberal share of downright criticism'[13] In 1890, Furniss was sued by the journalist George Sala for belittling his abilities in a lecture on the Royal Academy, and, famously, he left *Punch* in 1894 over a 'minor misunderstanding'. Perhaps a character such as Furniss was more suited to the possibilities of solo theatrical performance than the constraints of journalistic collaboration?

Ultimately one is left from these three texts with the impression that the study of political journalism in the first age of mass literacy is in good, if underdeveloped health. Different methodologies, a wide variety of sources and a sustained scholarly analysis feature in all three. Yet all three persist in focusing almost exclusively on the national media, with the exception of W. Sydney Robinson's chapters on Stead's apprenticeship at the *Northern Echo* in Newcastle. One can only hope that now the work of national journalists such as Stead, Furniss and the willing confidantes of premiers has been explored, more will be written about the hugely complex, cut-throat and strange world of the Victorian local media. Alan Lee estimates that the number of newspapers and periodicals increased from 109 in 1853 to 230 by 1913. The number of *provincial* magazines trebled between the 1860s and the 1890s.[14] In 1887, *The Journalist* noted that there were several long-lived provincial journals that rivalled the London press, such as Glasgow's *Bailie*, Liverpool's *Porcupine* (1860–1915) and Manchester's *City Lantern* (later the *City Jackdaw*) (1874–1884).[15] Most lie undisturbed in provincial public libraries, undigitised, unscanned and unread. From my readings of the *Dart*, the *Owl*, the *Town Crier* and the *Gridiron* in Birmingham, I can attest that they come far closer to revealing the political and cultural heart of the Victorian age, the cities of provincial Britain, than any more studies of *Punch* or *The Times* can manage.[16]

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1 M. Hewitt, *The Dawn of the Cheap Press in Victorian Britain: the End of the 'Taxes on Knowledge', 1849–1869* (Bloomsbury, 2013)

2 There have been more recent scholarly

investigations of the press in Britain's dominions and Empire than in its localities. See, for example, S. Potter, *News and the British World. The Emergence of an Imperial Press System* (Routledge, 2003); C. Kaul, *Reporting the Raj: The British Press and India, c.1880–1922* (Manchester University Press, 2003); and A. Griffiths, *The New Journalism, the New Imperialism and the Fiction of Empire, 1870–1900* (Palgrave, 2015).

3 A. Hobbs, 'When the provincial press was the national press (c.1836–c.1900)', *International Journal of Regional and Local Studies*, 5 (2009), pp. 16–43; A. Hobbs, 'The deleterious dominance of *The Times* in nineteenth-century historiography', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 18:4 (2013), pp. 472–497.

4 J. H. Wiener (ed.), *Papers for the Millions: The New Journalism in Britain, 1850s to 1914* (Greenwood, 1988); J. H. Wiener, *The Americanization of the British Press, 1830s–1914: Speed in the Age of Transatlantic Journalism* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

5 R. Luckhurst, L. Brake, J. Mussell, and E. King (eds.), *W. T. Stead: Newspaper Revolutionary* (British Library, 2012)

6 A. Lee, *The Origins of the Popular Press* (Croom Helm 1976), pp. 118–125; I. Sheehy, 'T. P. O'Connor and *The Star*, 1886–1890', in D. G. Boyce and A. O'Day (eds.), *Ireland in Transition, 1867–1921* (Routledge, new edn. 2004), pp. 76–91.

7 J. D. Startt, 'Good Journalism in the era of New Journalism: The British Press 1902–1914', in Wiener (ed.), *Papers for the Millions*, pp. 275–303.

8 S. Morison, *The History of The Times, Vol. 3: The Twentieth Century Test, 1884–1912* (The Office of The Times, 1947), pp. 43–89. See in particular *The Times*' innovative use of mapping to represent the electoral results of general elections in the 1890s.

9 Kate Jackson, *George Newnes and the New Journalism in Britain 1880–1910: Culture and Profit* (Routledge, 2001), pp. 131–46.

10 P. Waller, *Writers, Readers and Reputations* (Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 83–85.

11 M. Conboy, *The Language of Newspapers: Socio-Historical Perspectives* (Bloomsbury, 2010), p. 112. As Lord Salisbury famously commented on the *Daily Mail*, it was 'written by office boys for office boys': M. Hampton, *Visions of the Press in Britain, 1850–1950* (University of Illinois Press, 2004), p. 88.

12 'As hard as our beasts could pelt … Right over the rolling veldt' being only one of innumerable examples of his deathless meter: N. Russel, *Poets by Appointment: Britain's Laureates* (Blandford, 1981), p. 151.

13 *The Times*, 5 Oct. 1888.

14 See for example S. Gunn, *The Public Culture of the Victorian Middle Class: Ritual and Authority in the English Industrial City, 1840–1914* (Manchester University Press, 2000); H. Miller, 'The Problem With Punch', *Historical Research*, 82:216 (2009), pp. 285–302; A. G. Jones, 'The Dart and the Damning of the Sylvan Stream: Journalism and Political Culture in the Late-Victorian City', *Victorian Periodicals Review*, 35:1 (2002), pp. 2–17; J. K. Walton 'Porcupine', *Dictionary of Nineteenth Century Journalism*, online edition, http://c19index.chadwyck.co.uk/home.do.

15 R. R. Dodds, 'Provincial Humorous and Satirical Journals', *The Journalist*, 20 May 1887, pp. 93–94.

16 I. Cawood and C. Upton, 'Joseph Chamberlain and the Birmingham Satirical Journals, 1876–1911', in I. Cawood and C. Upton (eds.), *Joseph Chamberlain, International Statesman, National Leader and Local Icon* (Palgrave. 2016), pp. 176–210.