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The Emergence of the Press Baron as 'literary villain' in English Letters 1909-1939

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The figure of the journalist has long been a familiar character in British literature. Dallas Liddle and Matthew Rubery chart the critical preoccupation of Victorian writers with journalists and the press, particularly after 1855 when the abolition of Stamp Duty caused a rapid increase in the volume of newspapers and periodicals in the literary marketplace.[1] For a brief period in the early twentieth century, a positive image of the modern news reporter emerged portrayed by practising or former journalists on the new mass circulation dailies eager to promote their trade[2]. Scholars have examined inter-war writers' attitudes to the popular press in some detail, particularly those of modernists including T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Virginia Woolf, and James Joyce.[3] Scholars of the 'middlebrow' have now begun to analyse previously overlooked inter-war writers' attitudes to the popular press. Often prolific contributors to newspapers these writers had a more intimate and direct relationship with the press than more economically independent 'highbrow' writers.[4] The fictional portrayal of the 'press baron' in the early twentieth century has however escaped detailed study, despite his being such a potent, feared and hated figure[5] . Keith Williams examines W. H .Auden and Christopher Isherwood's portrayal of newspaper proprietor Lord Stagmantle in their collaborative play *Ascent of F6* (1936), although more from the point of view of his threat to leftwing politics than to the artist and language[6]. Matthew Kibble examines Ezra Pound's portrayal of 'the news owners,….s/the anonymous/…….ffe…[Northcliffe]' in his Hell Canto XV, however a comprehensive survey of literary representations of the press baron figure from the early years of the popular daily press has not so far been undertaken.[7]

The new figure of the millionaire press baron in command of circulations of millions, typified by Alfred Harmsworth (later Lord Northcliffe), his brother Lord Rothermere, and Max Aitken (Later Lord Beaverbrook) emerged after Harmsworth launched the *Daily Mail* in 1896. While nineteenth-century newspaper proprietors certainly had access to politicians, their papers' circulations were limited by high cover price and low levels of literacy: in 1877 the *Telegraph* had the highest circulation in the world, with daily sales of less than 250,000, a fraction of those achieved by the halfpenny *Daily Mail* in its first few years.[8] It was the new proprietors' ability to influence the opinions of millions, including the newly literate lower middle classes, which initially made the figure of the press baron an interesting one for writers. Mark Hampton argues that Northcliffe, and Beaverbrook and Rothermere after him transformed the model of the British newspaper from the previous 'educative' and then 'representative' one of the mid and late nineteenth century to a 'market, or libertarian' one. The proprietors' answer to critics, argues Hampton, was that 'the people got the press they wanted' and that press standards would improve when educational standards did and the public demanded a better quality of newspaper.[9] From the first fictional portrayals of the new press baron, which emerged in 1909, writers reveal suspicion towards this powerful figure and experiment with the idea of how this man might alter the reading public's relationship with the written word. This essay traces the development in fiction of the press baron, from Edwardian curiosity, through writers' gradual growing suspicion in early post-First World War narratives to distinctly harsh critiques in the mid to late 1930s.

Pre-First World War portrayals

In 1909 two plays introduced a new fictional character: the immensely powerful and rich press baron.[10] Both plays, *The Earth* by James Bernard Fagan and *What the Public Wants* by

Arnold Bennett portray this new figure in British society as brutal, brilliant, recently knighted yet, strangely for one who manipulates public opinion, unable to read people's thoughts and feelings in his private relationships. In *The Earth* Sir Felix Janion is 'a man over fifty, of huge burly frame. . . His face is enormously powerful, and his mouth shuts like a steel trap... His movements are quick and resolute.'[11] In *What the Public Wants* Sir Charles Worgan similarly is, 'Brusque. Accustomed to power. With rare flashes of humour and of charm…Strong frame. Decided gestures. Age 40.'[12] That Worgan is a thinly disguised Northcliffe is made clear when the Foreign Secretary dismisses Worgan's flagship paper, the nine-year-old *Mercury* as 'written by errand boys for errand-boys', a reference to Lord Salisbury's famous put-down of the *Daily Mail* as being 'written by office boys for office boys'.[13] The stage direction for Worgan is at odds with Bennett's first impression of Northcliffe, when he sees him at a theatre on October 17 1896, recorded thus in his *Journal*:

> Harmsworth (director of 14 weeklies reaching 3,300,000 copies, and three daily papers) with the head of a poet and thinker; blond hair; quiet, acute, self-contained; a distinguished look about him. One would take him for… a contemner of popular taste and of everything that caught the public fancy.[14]

This change in Bennett's ideas about Northcliffe between 1896 and 1909 reveals much about the gradual shift in Bennett's – and other Edwardian writers' - view of the popular press, from interesting experiment in enlightening the newly literate lower classes to commercial tyrant and a threat to good taste. Bennett's diaries in the early years of the twentieth century reveal a gleeful interest in popular press coverage of high profile criminal and libel cases until a distaste for sensationalism emerges in May 1908, just before he starts work on *What the Public Wants*:

> yesterday's storm blew down two kilometres of telegraph poles on the other side of Melun. Not a word … in the Continental *Daily Mail*, of course. It was full of its third anniversary and of the horrible agonies of a man in USA who died slowly of hydrophobia. [15]

Here Bennett is questioning the news values of a newspaper that focuses on the sensationalised death of one man in America rather than the very real inconvenience suffered by thousands of people without access to the telegraph system. Early twentieth century writers refer regularly to the news values of the popular press in their fictions seen in, for example, various characters' bemused reading of headlines proclaiming a heat-wave in Virginia Woolf's novel *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), the 'interview' with a heroic cat 'conducted' by reporter Hector Puncheon in Dorothy L. Sayers' novel *Murder Must Advertise* (1934), and the celebrity-hungry 'circus in print' of J B Priestley's *Wonder Hero* (1933).

Both Bennett and Fagan were left-leaning: Bennett was briefly a Fabian and sympathised with the Liberal cause and Fagan was a political sympathiser with Shaw; he was also a supporter of Irish Home Rule.[16] Alan Lee charts the gradual political shift of the London daily press from being overwhelmingly Liberal from the 1870s to the early 1900s, to being overwhelmingly Conservative by 1910, with papers defecting to the Tories over issues such as Irish Home Rule and Tariff Reform.[17] In addition ownership, particularly after 1900 was becoming increasingly concentrated with Northcliffe adding the 'class' papers of the *Observer* and *Time*s to his empire in 1905 and 1908 respectively. By 1909 L. T. Hobhouse was complaining that the press was 'the monopoly of a few rich men'; by 1910 the combined circulations of Northcliffe's papers stood at 11 million copies a week, an unprecedented concentration of influence.[18],[19]

The plays examine how a man who pays little heed to ideas of social justice uses his newspapers' circulations to manipulate public opinion. In *The Earth* Janion uses this power to try to destroy a Liberal Cabinet Minister's Wages Bill that would end sweated labour for women and children. Janion opposes Trevena's Bill as he feels it would curtail Britain's industrial expansion:

> 'The circulation of my morning papers alone is close on four million a day; and its going to be more. I disapprove of your Bill. I'll smash it if I can.' [20]

For all the power of his four million sales however, Janion has to resort to blackmail. He threatens Trevena with evidence of his adulterous affair in order to get him to drop the legislation. He does not take into account the fact that Trevena's mistress, Lady Killone, would rather be publicly humiliated than see the Wages Bill fail. When confronted with such nobility of spirit, his words – mimicking the hack journalese of his papers – are inadequate: 'You've beaten me – this time. You're a plucky woman.' [21] In *What the Public Wants*, Sir Charles Worgan's motives are social rather than political: he wants acceptance from 'your intellectual, your superior people' who have so far snubbed him.[22]

Despite his wealth and influence, Worgan is self-conscious and insecure, relying on reassuring himself how wealthy and influential he is. Like Janion, Worgan repeats the size and reach of his empire like a mantra: 'Yes it's big – big. We own about forty different publications.'[23] Worgan is undone by his inability to distinguish between giving the public what it wants in a way that will raise standards and bring culture to the masses – the *Merchant of Venice* production he finances –and giving the public what it wants in a way that commodifies human suffering and damages individuals – the sensationalist 'Crimes of

Passion' series he runs in his *Sunday Morning News*. Bennett is here promoting his own approach to literature, which combined popularity with high literary aspirations, while attacking rampantly commercial populism on the one hand and irrelevant pretension on the other.[24] Worgan saves the historic Prince's Theatre with the *Merchant of Venice*. However to Worgan's surprise the 'highbrow' theatre-manager is not grateful. Worgan has chosen to support the *Merchant of Venice* over a new play which he does not think will attract an audience. Yet here Bennett sympathises with Worgan: his providing Shakespeare at an affordable price is seen as one of the few good things he does with his money and influence. Bennett himself had no time for the artist who fails to engage with public taste, describing such an artist as a 'conceited and impractical fool' in his literary advice manual *The Author's Craft* .[25] What Worgan, as opposed to Bennett, cannot see, is where to draw the line between cultured yet commercially successful, and commercially successful yet crass and vulgar.

Edwardian 'newspaper' novels written by practising journalists including Edgar Wallace, Philip Gibbs and Alphonse Courlander present their profession and their proprietor in a positive light .[26] The novels are a defiant response by employees of the new popular press to critics claiming it was vulgar and cheapening. The character Ferrol, for example, is proprietor-editor of *The Day* in *Daily Express* journalist Alphonse Courlander's novel, *Mightier than the Sword* (1912):

> His enemies…saw him an inhuman, incredible monster, with neither soul nor heart, grimly eager for one end – the making of money…One must see him as…all those who worked for him on *The Day* see him, eager, keen and large-hearted, a wonderful blend of sentiment and business.[27]

The author is uncritical of Ferrol's widespread influence and, unlike Fagan's portrayal of Janion, is optimistic about Ferrol's intentions. Ferrol is a master of the new form of campaigning journalism, begun by W. T. Stead on the *Pall Mall Gazette* in the 1880s and enthusiastically adopted by Northcliffe. Although the *Daily Mail* did take up genuine issues of social justice, such as the campaign for purer milk and better housing for workers, historians dismiss many of Northcliffe's campaigns as circulation-boosting 'stunts'.[28] While in Courlander's novel the control of vast circulations is a force for good, not ill, in Fagan's play, Janion's motives are treated more sceptically. When Janion's loyal sister tries to defend her brother's newspapers, her language is ambiguous:

> Looking out for sensational cases of hardship – all his papers are on the alert – his watch-dogs he calls them. Hardly a week but somewhere in the columns of *The Earth* or of *The Searchlight* or of *The Eagle*, or one of the others, you will find a harrowing story of unmerited poverty. He gives publicity, and the public gives subscriptions.[29]

The 'sensational cases' suggest that the motivation for exposing hardship is not social reform, but selling more papers. Even the names of the papers have connotations of hubris (*The Earth* is so-named because it publishes news from the entire globe), invasiveness and predation. Janion's cynicism is exposed when discussing his latest 'campaign' to improve children's education with the publication of an 'Infant Encyclopaedia' in terms of market suitability rather than a genuine desire to improve standards of literacy.

Like Courlander's Ferrol, the character of proprietor Hannibal Quain in another journalist, Keble Howard's novel *Lord London* (1913) is presented positively.[30] Hannibal, a barely disguised Northcliffe, is an energetic genius determined to provide reading matter for Board

School graduates. To this end for example, a journalist on the *Little Daily* is given the task of 'boiling down' a fiction writer's short story from 8,000 to 1,500 words.[31] Apparently unaware of how this butchering may strike producers of fiction, Howard portrays this, and the shortening of all newspaper genres from news reports to dramatic criticism - the tabloidization of news that Northcliffe pioneered - to make room for 'sufficient advertisements to make the paper a financial success' as a stroke of entrepreneurial genius:[32]

> Hannibal, as we now know, solved it by…keeping his literary matter, such as dramatic criticism and literary reviews down to the smallest possible limits…the lesson that he found hardest to teach his staff [was] the absolute necessity of boiling down every paragraph to the smallest possible limit[33]

It is this departure – the selling of words for less than they cost to produce via the subsidy of advertisement – which Cyril Connolly and others identify as a major source of criticism that writers levelled at the popular press in the inter-war years.[34] Connolly, for example, describes Fleet Street as a 'Bucket Shop which unloads words on the public for less than they are worth'.[35] After the First World War, when even the journalists who had written positive Edwardian novels about the press were embarrassed by the poor war reporting and exaggeration of German army atrocities, the fleeting 'good' proprietor is seen no more.[36]

Post-World War One

The growing power of the popular press, and the elevation to Government of the press barons and their specific roles in directing propaganda during the First World War became a major concern to writers during the inter-war years.[37] Contemporary sociologist Robert Briffault compared the plight of 'uncashable' literature at a time of paper shortages to the power of the

newspaper press with its 'unexampled circulation'.[38] In *The Press and the Organisation of Society* (1922) writer and politician Norman Angell argued that the newly commercialised press 'does not in fact guarantee freedom of discussion'.[39] Angell asserted that during the War newspaper proprietors governed England, not 'Commons or Cabinet, Church or Trade Union'.[40]

Rose Macaulay's early post-War novel *Potterism* addresses these issues. The novel is unusual amongst the mass of hyper-critical inter-war fictions featuring journalists and the press. While it does criticise popular newspapers' sensationalism, *Potterism* argues that without access to cheap and easily-readable newspapers, the lower classes would not know about important political and scientific developments.[41] Its description of how the Potter Press, which, 'like so many other presses, snubbed the militant suffragists, smiled, half approvingly on Carson's rebels, and frowned, wholly disapprovingly on the strikers'[42] rises to ascendancy follows a similar trajectory to the press of Northcliffe and Beaverbrook. Macaulay's ironic description of Percy Potter's ennoblement during the War is a comment on Lloyd George's relationship with Northcliffe and Beaverbrook:

> The Potter press surpassed itself... With energy and wholeheartedness it cheered, comforted, and stimulated the people….So glad were the Government of it that Mr Potter became, at the end of 1916, Lord Pinkerton.[43]

Many of Rose Macaulay's early novels were concerned with the influence of the press but *Potterism* is the only one to examine the role of the press baron in detail. [44] The novel is a

transitional work in the portrayal of press barons, from the warning Edwardian plays and positive pre-War novels to the later inter-war works which critique the impact of these powerful men on society and the field of literary production. Although *Potterism* addresses the impact of the popular press on the reading public, Macaulay is equally concerned about how Lord Pinkerton's University-educated children, the 'anti-Potterites', challenge their father's influence. Similarly another female novelist who portrays a press baron in her work – Storm Jameson in her trilogy *The Mirror in Darkness* (1934-6) – presents proprietor Marcel Cohen as being as concerned about his spendthrift daughter and sick wife, as he is about his business interests.[45]

However both Cohen and Potter exert a profound influence on mass reading matter. Percy Potter appeals to a public aspiring to better itself. Ascertaining, for example, that there is a 'fourpenny' public, whose brains 'could only rise with effort to the solid political and economic information and cultured literary judgements meted out by the sixpennies,' but which also avoids 'the crudities of our cheapest journals,' he produces the *Wednesday Chat,* a fourpenny weekly which rapidly reaches a circulation of millions.[46] Macaulay's view is that as long as papers seek to educate in the old Liberal model of the press as well as entertain, then they and their proprietors remain acceptable. Gideon the intellectual who has shrunk from the fight against Potterism by retreating into writing for a low-circulation literary periodical has an uncomfortable revelation on seeing a newspaper placard proclaiming: 'Light Caught Bending' (referring to Einstein's discovery).[47] Gideon admits that this revelation will be discussed in 'many a cottage, many a club, many a train', grudgingly acknowledging that the popular press has succeeded in democratising access to knowledge. Macaulay's presentation of the popular press and its proprietors in *Potterism* is defiantly optimistic and her thesis is that, for all its faults, it is better to have a popular press than not to have one at all. Her later inter-war novels and writings, particularly *Crewe Train* (1926),

Keeping Up Appearances (1928), *Going Abroad* (1934), and her unpublished play *Bunkum* (1924), display an increasingly bitter disappointment with the popular press's focus on trivia and sensationalism.[48]

Storm Jameson's trilogy examines the role the press plays in the failure of the Left to make political headway in the 1930s. Like many contemporary writers she blames the press baron, not the individual journalist who in fictions is often bullied or muzzled by his proprietor, for the malign influence of the press.[49] This attitude reflects a strand of contemporary thinking as when Geoffrey Grigson asserted in 1934 that 'Every journalist is not a rogue' but he is a 'half-marionette jerked by the newspaper industry (which is nine tenths a rogue)'.[50] As the *Mirror in Darkness* Trilogy progresses, Jameson's stance towards Cohen hardens. In *Company Parade* (1934) Cohen is described as 'handsome' with 'dark, brilliant and womanish' eyes.[51] In *Love in Winter* (1935), his eyes are: 'lustreless, protruded' and he has a 'brutal temper'.[52] This description of Cohen's eyes echoes T. S. Eliot's notorious anti-Semitic portrait of 'Bleistein with a Cigar,' (1920): 'A lustreless protrusive eye'[53] and is surprising considering Jameson's sympathy for the plight of Jews in Hitler's Germany.[54] We learn from Jameson's autobiography *Journey from the North* that up until 1933 she had a generally optimistic view of newspapers and journalists.[55] She herself had enjoyed discussing feminism and politics in two Rothermere newspapers, the *Daily Mirror* and the *Evening News,* in the late 1920s.[56] However, from 1933 as the discrepancy between what foreign correspondents told her in private and what newspapers published grew, she became increasingly disappointed with the mainstream press.[57] Jameson wrote *Love in Winter* during this period of gradual disillusionment. In the novel Cohen's *Daily Post* publishes the 'Russian letter' – a reference to the famous Zinoviev letter, published just before the October 1924 election in the *Daily Mail*[58] - knowing it is fake because he has lost money under a Labour administration

and wants a return of a Conservative Government more sympathetic to his business needs. For Jameson, passionately committed politically, this is an even worse crime than any ideologically-inspired gesture. Jennifer Birkett suggests that the slow and painful death of Cohen's wife from cancer, is a 'displaced condemnation' of Cohen's actions.[59] Cohen's attitude to 'literature' is portrayed as similarly thoughtless and equally damaging as his political meddling. He neither knows, nor cares of the consequences of his actions beyond the desire to sell more papers. Cohen hires the egregious journalist William Ridley to write 'something you're not ashamed of writing, but it will have to please a million readers'. Ridley replies: 'I'll tell you something Cohen, if Shakespeare was alive now he'd have to write prose like mine'.[60] Cohen's direction to Ridley to make readers 'stare and chuckle but once in a while don't forget the lump in the throat' summarises the approach of the popular press, which was to elevate human interest stories and 'talking points' over more serious or 'difficult' content because the public wanted it, which literary writers saw as leading to a steady lowering of standards and a threat to their market.[61]

Scholars characterise the inter-war era as a time when literary writers were seeking to define their role and audience in relation to mass consumption of reading matter.[62] It was, however, not just modernist authors who were engaged in attempts to circumscribe and decry the language of the popular press. Writers as diverse as Graham Greene, Noel Langley, Aldous Huxley, and Elizabeth Bowen all produced fictions critiquing journalistic practice and language in the 1920s and 1930s.[63] Proprietors, described by Q. D. Leavis as 'figures from an underworld that rise out of the mud for a moment's ironical contemplation', came in for specific criticism as their newspapers' growing circulations threatened to distort the literary marketplace and, through their rightwing agendas, undermined the progress of Labour.[64] Fears over the intentions of the press barons were realised when Rothermere and

Beaverbrook joined forces to launch the United Empire Party in opposition to Stanley Baldwin's Conservatives and provoked Baldwin's famous 'power without responsibility' by-election speech in March 1931. Adrian Bingham argues that the 'transformation' of the popular daily press, although begun with the launch of the *Daily Mail* in 1896, was not complete until the late 1930s, when characteristics still evident today including the sexualisation of women, the promotion of consumerism and the replacement of serious news with trivia were introduced.[65] The popular press did not just employ journalists and Beaverbrook in particular prided himself on his knack of spotting up-and-coming novelists he could patronise.[66] Serialisations by writers including H. G. Wells, P. G. Wodehouse, John Buchan, Margery Allingham and E. H. Young appeared weekly in the *Daily Mail* and *Daily Express*; still more writers including Evelyn Waugh, Rose Macaulay and Winifred Holtby, who all wrote fictions critical of the press, were paid handsomely, and relatively more generously than for their novels, to write commentary pieces and features.[67] With 'middlebrow' writers selling their comment and serial stories to newspapers at a cost to readers of between one penny and three pence per day, who would read poetry or anything conceived of as 'difficult'? William Gerhardie in his semi-autobiographical novel about his relationship with Beaverbrook, *Doom* (1928), describes the feelings of an up-and-coming writer who wants to be innovative but who is drawn into the dazzling orbit of a newspaper proprietor who has promised him patronage and publication. Like a painted marionette:

> In the glass lift he saw red patches on his cheeks. He thought that unless he steadied his thoughts he might have a stroke…he walked unsteadily on his feet past the braided commissionaire…[68]

In the novel Gerhardie, perhaps showing to his highbrow admirers (D. H. Lawrence, a critic of the popular press was a 'mentor'[69]) that he could not be 'bought', has 'Lord Ottercove' vaporised in an atomic reaction. Beaverbrook however, either reading the novel himself or being told of its contents ('Lord Ottercove' boasts of his newspapers peddling 'illusions in a world of appearances'[70]), declined to serialise it as previously promised. He thus confirmed the baron's control over artistic expression – Gerhardie had to wait another three years before a publisher took the novel on.[71]

The Auden Group contributed to inter-war debates over the press barons in W. H. Auden's famous poem, 'Beethameer Beethameer bully of Britain…' in *The Orators* (1932) and the 'Scavenger Barons' of Cecil Day Lewis' *The Magnetic Mountain* (1933).[72] By the time Auden started writing *Orators* in the Summer of 1931, he had, as was fashionable amongst the intellectual elite, taken a stance against the influence of the popular press and the authoritarian image of the proprietors Beaverbrook and Rothermere. [73] In 'Journal of an Airman', book Two of *Orators*, the pilot-poet is planning his immediate activities after his revolutionary conquest thus: '*After Victory*. Few executions except for the newspaper peers – Viscount Stuford certainly'.[74] His enemy is clearly identifiable, and follows a tradition, started by the provincial and Scottish papers referring 'to 'Beavermere and Rotherbrook' as though they were a double turn in a music hall'.[75] Auden's 'Beethameer, Beethameer, bully of Britain' has insinuated his influence, 'In kitchen, in cupboard, in club-room, in mews/In palace, in privy' and his paper nags 'at our nostrils with its nasty news.'[76] The image of Beethameer and his paper invading not only the sanctuary of the home and privy but the body too crystallises the press baron's image as the personification of 'that insistent thirties theme, the interpenetration of public and private worlds.'[77] Whereas in Rose Macaulay's *Potterism*, the availability of news in 'many a cottage, many a club, many a train' is viewed more or less

neutrally, here it is an unwanted invasion associated with vile and corrupted bodily functions: 'septic teat', 'smell', 'itching' and 'stinks'. Similarly while Percy Potter's influence is diffused through the bank of editors, news editors and journalists (including his own daughter Jane who is able to argue for women's rights in the Potter Press even though his press as a whole campaigns against women's suffrage), Beethameer has no such braking mechanism. He delivers his 'nasty news' direct to people's nostrils.

Raymond Williams describes how the language of the popular press de-legitimises 'radical or politically deviant groups: from conscientious objectors in the First World War, strikers in the General Strike of 1926, the unemployed workers movement of the 1930s.'[78] Auden's 'Newspapers against an awareness of difference'[79] has echoes of Percy Potter's campaigns against suffragettes and strikers, although Auden is as contemptuous of the public as he is of Beethameer: 'though the public you poison are pretty well dumb.'[80] This idea of the popular press in the interwar years as being a brake on progress is very different from Edwardian Liberal hopes that the press could be an agent of it. Taylor argues that much Edwardian working-class dissatisfaction with the social status quo, which led to strikes and the rise of the Labour Party, was promulgated - though maybe unwittingly - through the popular press: for the first time working class readers could observe the lives of the rich and compare their conspicuous consumption with their own straightened circumstances.[81] Despite moving ever rightwards in the first few years of the twentieth century, the *Daily Mail* as late as 1912 carried sympathetic portrayals of miners on the brink of a strike as well as leaders supporting their claims: 'The miners' desire for better wages is human and intelligible…these men who toil under such disagreeable conditions, away from the light of the sun in circumstances of continual danger'.[82] This sea-change in the politics of the popular press in a relatively short

time partly explains why the new generation of radical poets kicked against the influence of the press barons.

Auden's other newspaper peer is Lord Stagmantle in his collaborative play with Christopher Isherwood, *Ascent of F6* (1937).[83] Stagmantle is one of the four pillars of the establishment that send a party of young mountaineers to their deaths in British Imperial interests. He speaks in headlines and hack journalese but his words recall the First World War newspaper stories of German army atrocities that were later almost all found to be groundless, casting a long shadow over the credibility of the interwar press: 'British General butchers unarmed mob. Children massacred in mothers' arms.'[84] Stagmantle's words closely echo World War One newspaper reports that were later dismissed as propaganda, for example: 'Baby Bayoneted…infant callously dragged from its sick mother'; 'German soldiery chop off the arms of a baby which clung to its mother's skirts.'[85] In addition to newspaper mendacity, establishment authors' involvement in propaganda during the First World War led the new generation of poets and writers who had 'lost confidence in the authority of the written word' to attack the press, and the owners of the medium that had devalued their tools of expression.[86] Storm Jameson examined the proprietor's increasingly sinister edge in her novel *In the Second Year* (1936).[87] In this novel, which imagines Britain two years after a Fascist coup, proprietor Thomas Chamberlayn has a monopoly on information, dissenting journalists have been imprisoned and newspapers unfavourable to the regime (modelled on Hitler's early years in power) closed. Throughout the novel, newspapers are quoted: both as a narrative construct to convey information but, each time, to underline the falsehoods peddled by Chamberlayn's press. A prominent intellectual dissident, for example, is heard by the narrator who is on the telephone to him at the time, being murdered by the dictator's Special Guard. *The Times* announces the man's 'suicide' in the following day's paper.[88] In the novel writers

have either been imprisoned or exiled and there is no reference to artistic expression apart from opera, a highly stylised creative product only accessible to the governing classes. Like Stagmantle, Chamberlayn's lying press has rendered the reading public cynical and disbelieving, although terrified too. Similar to *In the Second Year*, in Evelyn Waugh's *Scoop* (1938) the reading public is fed lies and both novels warn that without access to the truth, the nation is sleep-walking towards war.[89] Waugh himself outlined his attitude towards the press in a number of non-fiction works, drawing attention to journalists' mendacity over Abyssinian news coverage in particular.[90] Like the Edwardian plays and *Potterism, Scoop* shows the newspaper industry as a 'system'. In the earlier works, the systems operate rationally, with correspondents gathering news and business managers, sub-editors and special writers all performing their functions professionally. In *Scoop* the newspaper system is shown to be divorced from reality exemplified in Mr Salter, the foreign editor who doesn't know where Reykjavik is, and 'ace' reporter Sir Jocelyn Hitchcock manufacturing his stories from a hotel bedroom. At the apex of this structure is Lord Copper who thinks he can dictate the outcome of a foreign war: 'We shall expect the first victory about the middle of July.'[91]

Although Copper evidently has a large bank of editors and journalists beneath him, unlike in *Potterism*, they don't act as a braking mechanism and have learned that dissent means the sack. In the Edwardian novels the newspaper system has no victim except, perhaps, the hard-working journalist who willingly sacrifices himself to tell stories of the people to the people: 'What a ripping story this will make for *The Day'* thinks reporter Humphrey Quain as he is crushed to death while covering a riot[92]. In 'Beethameer' and *Magnetic Mountain* the victim is the individual creative artist, the 'deviant' and the gullible public; in *Ascent of F6* the young mountaineers are sacrificed so Stagmantle can peddle his Imperialist propaganda, and in *Scoop* and *In the Second Year* the proprietor destroys faith in the written word and truth

itself. The result is Jameson's horrific vision and Waugh's absurd, meaningless society on the brink of war. This theme of the corrupting influence of the popular press is embraced by writers of the age – even though many of the authors quoted here chose to write for, and promoted their work through, the pages of the popular press.[93] However, Mass-Observation surveys of newspaper reading in the late 1930s reveal newspapers' skilfully packaged news, opinion, short stories and horoscopes were enjoyed by millions of readers who were nevertheless not blind to their papers' shortcomings. Readers were able to discern political bias and sensationalism far easier than writers like Waugh and Auden thought.[94] Northcliffe, Beaverbrook and Rothermere changed the way newspapers were written and read, with trivial subject matter, catchy headlines, short sentences and more pictures which eliminated 'the sense of strain between readers and text created by more demanding reading.'[95] Writers with literary aspirations who also worked for newspapers often struggled to adapt to this new style of writing, as Alphonse Courlander describes in his novel *Mightier than the Sword*, where new newspaper recruit Humphrey Quain, who wants to be a 'writer' after his apprenticeship as a journalist cannot master newspaper language. His mentor, old news hand Wratten, shows him how it is done: 'Don't bother about plans. Start right in with the main facts and put them at the top…tell the story in the first two paragraphs.'[96]

Writers could respond like Courlander and adapt to the new exigencies of the craft of 'popular' journalism – at the risk of damaging their style and reputation - or, they could try to define the differences between journalism and higher forms of literature.[97] Pierre Bourdieu argues that the retreat by 'highbrow' artists behind firmly delineated boundaries of what constitutes art is a 'predictable attitude' that is provoked 'more or less frequently' when the journalistic field becomes too powerful. Cultural producers, says Bourdieu, starting with those with least economic capital (such as poets and 'new' writers) act, often aggressively, to

'firmly delimit the field of endeavour to restore the borders threatened by journalistic modes of thought and action.'[98] We can see this attitude emerge, early in the First World War with Imagist Poet Richard Aldington's series of attacks on newspapers and journalists in *The Little Review* in the spring of 1915, deliberately contrasting the 'paid journalist' with the 'highbrow and longhaired' poet: 'They tell/Us we shall never sell/Our works (as if we cared).'[99] Shortly afterwards Ezra Pound's *Cantos* emerge, targeting among others, Northcliffe and his 'flies carrying news'. However, this study has also shown that some of the more sophisticated critiques of the press baron and his influence emanate from so-called 'Middlebrow' writers such as Arnold Bennett, Rose Macaulay, and Storm Jameson. These writers had greater insights into the functioning of the press 'machine' because so often they were part of it and, being less elitist than more autonomous artists, their concerns about newspaper standards were more bound-up with those of ordinary people. Rose Macaulay's detailed understanding of often bizarre editorial decision-making for example ('the literary editor of a newspaper wrote to me asking if I would write an article for his paper on 'Why I Would Not Marry a Curate') came from her experience of contributing to a range of newspapers and periodicals.[100]

The figure of the press baron fades from early post-World War Two newspaper fictions: Monica Dickens's *My Turn to Make the Tea* (1951), Graham Greene's *The Quiet American* (1955) and Michael Frayn's *Towards the End of the Morning* (1969) address more personal issues. Where proprietors do appear they are shadows of their pre-Second World War selves. Simon Birtle for example in J. B .Priestley's *The Image Men* (1968) is 'a shortish, plump man'[101] who lacks the confidence and aggression of earlier creations. One reason for this erasure of such a potent literary figure is that by the end of World War Two, along with the success of the BBC's radio coverage, newspapers had lost their monopoly on information.[102]

The baron himself had lost some of his news empire: by 1947, the three largest proprietors controlled a smaller section of the British press than ten years earlier.[103] Brendon argues that by the mid twentieth century the press baron in the likeness of a Northcliffe, Rothermere or Beaverbrook was 'virtually extinct.'[104] Brendon identifies a variety of factors for this, including the changing structure of commercial companies leading to boardroom governance rather than the lone individual at the helm; organised labour; and competition for advertising from radio and television.[105] Certainly we don't get any significantly nasty or politically meddling fictional barons until Chris Mullin's novel *A Very British Coup* (1982) and David Puttnam's film *Defence of the Realm* (1984) in which proprietor Victor Kingsbrook is prepared to see his reporters murdered to protect his commercial interests: both works emerging shortly after Rupert Murdoch took control of the jewel in the British newspaper crown, *The Times*. It will be interesting to see what writers make of the revelations that emerged during the 'Phone Hacking' scandal and the Leveson Inquiry of 2012.

Notes

[1] Dallas Liddle, 'Bakhtinian Journalization and the Mid Victorian Literary Marketplace', *Literature Compass*, 4:5 (2007), 1460–1474; Matthew Rubery, *The Novelty of Newspapers* (Oxford, 2009).

[2] Sarah Lonsdale, 'A Golden Interlude', *Parliamentary Affairs*, 64:2 (April 2011), 326-340.

[3] Eg John Carey, *The Intellectuals and the Masses* (Chicago 1992); Patrick Collier, *Modernism on Fleet Street* (Aldershot, 2006).

[4] See Jennifer Birkett, *Margaret Storm Jameson, A Life* (Oxford, 2009); Faye Hammill, *Women, Celebrity and Literary Culture between the Wars* (Austin, 2007).

[5] While some of the characters studied here have been ennobled, others are still 'Misters.' I take my definition of the 'press baron' from Colin Seymour-Ure's one in *Prime Ministers and the Media* (Oxford, 2003), p. 98: 'Part of the charm of the term may be its lack of precision. In essence it means someone who controls a media property, who takes entrepreneurial risks, who is motivated not just by profit and who runs it with a distinctive personal style.'

[6] Keith Williams, *British Writers and the Media 1930 – 45*, (Basingstoke, 1996), p. 49.

[7] Ezra Pound, *The Cantos of Ezra Pound* (London, 1987), p. 65; Matthew Kibble, 'The Betrayers of Language: Modernism and the *Daily Mail'*, *Literature & History*, 11:1 (2002), 62-80.

[8] Piers Brendon, *The Life and Death of the Press Barons* (London, 1982), p. 71.

[9] Mark Hampton, *Visions of the Press in Britain 1850 – 1950* (Illinois, 2004), p. 132.

[10] *The Earth* was first performed at the Kingsway Theatre, April 1909; *What the Public Wants* at the Aldwych Theatre May 1909.

[11] James Bernard Fagan, *The Earth* (1909; script London, 1913), p. 27.

[12] Arnold Bennett, *What the Public Wants* (1909; script London, 1910), p. 7.

[13] Bennett, *Public Wants*, p. 37.

[14] Newman Flower (ed.), *The Journals of Arnold Bennett, Volume 1 1896-1910* (London, 1932), p. 19.

[15] Flower, *Journals Arnold Bennett*, p. 291.

[16] Christopher Innes, 'Bernard Shaw and James B. Fagan, playwright and producer' *Shaw* 30 (2010).

[17] Alan Lee, *The Origins of the Popular Press in England, 1855-1914* (London, 1976), pp. 131-80.

[18] L. T. Hobhouse, 'The Contending Forces' in *English Review*, 4, (1909).

[19] Jeremy Tunstall and Michael Palmer, *Media Moguls* (London, 1991) p. 114.

[20] Fagan, *The Earth*, p. 46.

[21] Fagan, *The Earth*, p. 153.

[22] Bennett, *Public Wants*, p. 143.

[23] Bennett, *Public Wants*, pp. 2-3.

[24] See for example Linda Anderson, *Bennett, Wells and Conrad* (Basingstoke, 1988), particularly pp. 41 – 46.

[25] Arnold Bennett, *The Author's Craft*, (1914; London 1975) p. 107.

[26] See Lonsdale, op cit.

[27] Alphonse Courlander, *Mightier Than the Sword* (London, 1912), p. 21.

[28] Jean Chalaby, 'Northcliffe as Proprietor and Journalist' in Catterall, Seymour-Ure and Smith (eds) *Northcliffe's Legacy: Aspects of the British Popular Press 1896-1996* (Basingstoke, 2000) p. 36.

[29] Fagan, *The Earth*, p. 21.

[30] Keble Howard, editor of the *Sketch* and *Daily Mail* leader writer and dramatic critic 1905 – 1911 (from Keble Howard, *My Motley Life* (London, 1927)); *Lord London: A Tale of Achievement* (1913; New York, 1914).

[31] Howard, *Lord London*, p. 209.

[32] Howard, *Lord London*, pp. 234 – 240.

[33] Howard, *Lord London*, p. 235 & 238.

[34] Cyril Connolly, *Enemies of Promise* (1938; London 1979).

[35] Connolly, *Enemies*, pp. 22 – 23.

[36] Compare for example Philip Gibb's 1909 novel *Street of Adventure*, portraying likeable journalists, with his 1923 memoir *Adventures in Journalism* when he criticises journalists' behaviour during the war (London, 1909 and 1923 respectively).

[37] Beaverbrook directed the Ministry of Information and Northcliffe the Department of Enemy Propaganda.

[38] Robert Briffault, 'The Wail of Grub Street' *English Review* (June 1921) 512-516.

[39] Norman Angell, *The Press and the Organisation of Society* (Cambridge, 1922, 1933), p. 7.

[40] Angell, *Press and Organisation*, p. 9.

[41] Rose Macaulay, *Potterism* (1920; London 2008).

[42] Macaulay, *Potterism*, p. 5.

[43] Macaulay, *Potterism*, p. 21.

[44] For example, *Non-Combattants and Others* (London,1916), *What Not* (London, 1918), *Keeping Up Appearances* (London, 1928).

[45] Storm Jameson, *Company Parade* (1934; London, 1982); *Love in Winter* (1935; London, 2009); *None Turn Back* (London, 1936).

[46] Macaulay, *Potterism*, p. 177.

[47] Macaulay, *Potterism*, p. 161.

[48] Rose Macaulay, *Bunkum* 1924 (unpublished, MSS in Dame Rose Macaulay Papers ERM/5, Wren Library, Trinity College Cambridge).

[49] Eg the socialist journalist Louis Earlham in the *Mirror in Darkness.*

[50] Geoffrey Grigson, review of *The Press and the Organisation of Society* in *Scrutiny*, 1: 4 (1933) 416.

[51] Jameson, *Company Parade*, p. 53.

[52] Jameson, *Love in Winter*, p. 273.

[53] T. S. Eliot, *Selected Poems* (London, 1980), p. 34.

[54] Storm Jameson, *Journey from the North* (London, 1984), p. 320.

[55] Jameson, *Journey*, p. 318.

[56] Birkett, *Jameson,* pp. 88 – 101.

[56] Jameson, *Company*, p. 283.

[57] Jameson, *Journey*, p. 320.

[58] The letter, purportedly written by Zinoviev, president of the Communist International contained instructions to the British Labour Party to carry out 'seditious activities' (A. J. P. Taylor, *English History 1914–1945* (Oxford, 1965), pp. 219 –225).

[59] Birkett, *Jameson*, p.133.

[60] Jameson, *Company*, p. 283.

[61] See Adrian Bingham, *Gender, Modernity and the Popular Press in Inter-war Britain* (Oxford, 2004) p. 10.

[62] Eg Collier, *Modernism*, especially pp. 11-37.

[63] Graham Greene, *Stamboul Train* (1932), Noel Langley, *There's a Porpose Close Behind Us* (1936), Aldous Huxley, *Crome Yellow* (1921), Elizabeth Bowen 'Recent Photograph', (short story, 1926).

[64] Q. D. Leavis, 'Fleet Street and Pierian Roses', *Scrutiny*, 2:4 (1934) 387-393; Eg A. J. Cummings, *The Press and a Changing Civilisation* (London, 1936) p. 41.

[65] Bingham, *Gender, Modernity*, pp. 21 – 44.

[66] William Gerhardie, *Memoirs of a Polyglot* (1930; London, 1990) pp. 240 – 243.

[67] For a list of writers with stories serialised in the *Daily Mail* in the 1930s see Cecil Hunt, *Ink in My Veins* (London, 1948). Hunt was fiction editor of the *Daily Mail* 1929–1936. Evelyn Waugh records in his diary feeling 'rather elated' when commissioned to write pieces for the *Daily Mail* at £30 a time (Michael Davie (ed.) *The Diaries of Evelyn Waugh* (London, 1979), p. 309; Rose Macaulay records in a letter 'I love the *Telegraph* because it asks me to

name my own terms' (Martin Ferguson Smith (ed.), *Dearest Jean, Rose Macaulay's Letters to a Cousin* (Manchester, 2011) p. 39).

[68] William Gerhardie, *Doom*; (published as *Jazz and Jasper*, 1928, later as *Doom* London, 1974) p. 58.

[69] Gerhardie, *Memoirs,* pp. 254-255.

[70] Gerhardie, *Doom*, p. 78.

[71] Dido Davies, *William Gerhardie: A Biography* (Oxford, 1991) p. 186.

[72] W. H. Auden, *The Orators* (London, 1932; 1966); Cecil Day Lewis, *The Magnetic Mountain* (London, 1933).

[73] See particularly Carey, *The Intellectuals.*

[74] Auden, *Orators*, p. 66.

[75] James Margach, *The Abuse of Power* (London, 1978) p. 24.

[76] W. H. Auden *The English Auden* (London, 1977) p. 86.

[77] Samuel Hynes *The Auden Generation* (Oxford, 1976) p. 368.

[78] Raymond Williams 'The Press and Popular Culture' in George Boyce, James Curran, Pauline Wingate (eds) *Newspaper History: from the 17th Century to the Present Day* (London, 1978) p. 74.

[79] Auden, *Orators*, p. 62.

[80] Auden, *English Auden*, p. 86.

[81] A.J. P. Taylor, in Donald Read (ed.) *Edwardian England* (London, 1982) p. 17).

[82] *Daily Mail* 9 January 1912 p. 6.

[83] First performed February 1937. W. H. Auden, and Christopher Isherwood, *The Ascent of F6* (London, 1958).

[84] Auden and Isherwood, *Ascent*, p.20; on atrocity stories see Arthur Ponsonby, *Falsehood in Wartime* (London, 1928).

[85] *Daily Express*, 10 October 1914, p. 4; *The Times*, 28 August 1914, p. 7.

[86] See Peter Buitenhuis, *The Great War of Words: Literature as Propaganda 1914 – 18 and after* (London, 1989).

[87] Storm Jameson, *In the Second Year* (1936; Nottingham, 2004).

[88] Jameson, *Second Year*, p. 200.

[89] Evelyn Waugh, *Scoop* (1938; London, 2000).

[90] Evelyn Waugh, *Remote People* (London , 1931); *Waugh in Abyssinia* (London 1936).

[91] Waugh, *Scoop*, p. 42.

[92] Courlander, *Mightier Than*, p. 352.

[93] See note 69.

[94] Mass Observation archive, Sussex; Newspaper Reading Survey 61/1.

[95] Patricia Holland, 'The Politics of the Smile' in Carter, Branston and Allan (eds) *News, Gender and Power* (London, 1998) pp 17 – 32.

[96] Courlander, *Mightier Than* p. 102.

[97] In his *Journals*, Arnold Bennett records meeting a frustrated Courlander in 1910, who, despite being a successful journalist on the *Express*, cannot get started on a novel (Flower (ed.), *Journals Arnold Bennett*, p. 361.

[98] Pierre Bourdieu, *On Television and Journalism* (London, 1998) p. 75.

[99] Eg Richard Aldington, essay 'Poetry of Paul Fort', *Little Review*, 2:2 (1915); 'The Retort Discourteous' *Little Review*, 2: 4 (1915).

[100] Rose Macaulay, *A Casual Commentary* (London, 1925), p. 212.

[101] J. B. Priestley, *The Image Men* (1968; London, 1984), p. 163.

[102] Households with radio licenses increased from 2 million in 1927 to 9 million by 1939; Asa Briggs, *The Golden Age of Broadcasting* (Oxford, 1965) pp. 253-4.

[103] Seymour-Ure, *Prime Ministers* p. 99.

[104] Brendon, *Life and Death*, p. 1.

[105] Brendon, *Life and Death*, pp. 251-256.

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