



## City Research Online

### City, University of London Institutional Repository

---

**Citation:** Lonsdale, S. (2012). We Agreed that women were a nuisance in the office anyway: The portrayal of women journalists in early twentieth-century British fiction. *Journalism Studies*, 14(4), pp. 461-475. doi: 10.1080/1461670X.2012.718572

This is the accepted version of the paper.

This version of the publication may differ from the final published version.

---

**Permanent repository link:** <https://openaccess.city.ac.uk/id/eprint/4648/>

**Link to published version:** <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2012.718572>

**Copyright:** City Research Online aims to make research outputs of City, University of London available to a wider audience. Copyright and Moral Rights remain with the author(s) and/or copyright holders. URLs from City Research Online may be freely distributed and linked to.

**Reuse:** Copies of full items can be used for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge. Provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way.

---

---

---

City Research Online:

<http://openaccess.city.ac.uk/>

[publications@city.ac.uk](mailto:publications@city.ac.uk)

---

“WE AGREED THAT WOMEN WERE A NUISANCE IN THE OFFICE, ANYWAY”

The portrayal of women journalists in early twentieth century British fiction.

### **Sarah Lonsdale**

*The growing numbers of women journalists entering the profession in the early twentieth century provoked mixed reactions from contemporary novelists. Responses evolved from cheering on a doughty pioneer to questioning whether women’s presence in the mass print media was helping reform the status of women or reinforcing gender stereotypes. Little is known about the personal struggles of women journalists in the early years of the popular press. In the absence of plentiful data the study of novels and short stories, many of them semi-autobiographical and written by men and women working in the early twentieth century newspaper industry, combined with analysis of previously un-studied memoirs and early guides for women journalists illuminate the obstacles – and opportunities – experienced by these pioneers.*

KEYWORDS twentieth century; fiction; gender; journalism; press; women

### **Introduction**

The entry of women into journalism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries follows a similar pattern to that of other white collar professions: a few determined, pioneering women found their way into newsrooms but they faced multiple obstacles, notably a lack of educational opportunities, the prevailing view that the woman’s place was in the home, and fierce resistance from a largely male workforce (Beddoe 1989, 48-88; Holloway 2005). Onslow (2000) has drawn a detailed portrait of Victorian women journalists, yet little is known of the first female journalists and reporters who swapped freelancing from home for Fleet Street newsrooms in the early days of the mass circulation press. The Newspaper Press Directory for 1897 indicates that by the turn of the century every London paper had at least one female writer on its staff (Hall 1978, 96). This reflection in the *Englishwoman’s Review*, from a man returning after thirty years abroad may however be more wishful thinking than factual:

In these days there is hardly an occupation, or even a profession, into which a girl may not aspire to enter... There are women newspaper reporters almost as numerous as men... (“An Old Oriental” 1904, 151-153)

“Lady writers” who worked from home and contributed essays, short stories and opinion pieces to the nineteenth and early twentieth century periodical press and the burgeoning women’s magazine market, were certainly numerous, but are difficult to quantify. Onslow (2000, 12) suggests that periodical and magazine journalism relied heavily on women contributors from the mid nineteenth century onwards, quoting a claim by nineteenth century journalist Barbara Bodichon that two thirds of contributors to the *Chambers Edinburgh Journal* were female. Women also regularly worked under a male pseudonym, so official figures will always underestimate precise numbers (Kent 2009, 11-14). Even Mrs Pearl Craigie, the first President of the Society of Woman Journalists, founded with 200 members in 1894, wrote under the pseudonym of John Oliver Hobbes (12, 14)<sup>1</sup>.

According to Census figures for England and Wales, in 1861 around 145 females and 1,525 males described themselves as journalists; by 1901, the number of women journalists had risen to 1,249, around 9 per cent of the total and by 1931, that figure had risen further to 3,213, around 17 per cent. By 1961, the proportion of female journalists stood at just over 20

per cent.<sup>2</sup> The reasons for this lengthy period of stagnation in women's participation in journalism at a time of rising news consumption and expansion of the BBC include the introduction of the Marriage Bar at the BBC in 1932 and, in other news organisations without a formal Marriage Bar the convention that a woman journalist would leave work after marriage because the antisocial hours were contrary to the demands of a wife and mother (Murphy 2011, 3; Hall 1978 322 - 324). Gopsill and Neale (2007, 39 – 40) note that during this period the National Union of Journalists pursued discriminatory policies including suppressing female wages and imposing limits on the number of females accepted onto training schemes. Despite women being a minority in early twentieth century journalism, the profession offered wider access than others. While women made up just over 50 per cent of teachers and 30 per cent of nurses in 1931, they made up less than 1 per cent of architects and lawyers, 2 per cent of dentists and about 7 per cent of doctors (Beddoe 1989, 77-78). In effect then, journalism presented opportunities for educated women, as well as obstacles – a theme that also emerges in fiction of the time.

The novelist Arnold Bennett, editor of the weekly paper *Woman* from 1893, identified a market for his *Journalism for Women: a practical guide* ([1897] 2011) amongst the contributors he met in his work. In the guide Bennett blames women's poor journalism skills on their lack of education, complaining that women had a cavalier attitude to the rules of punctuation and grammar (Bennett, 2011, 8). While the Education Act of 1870 provided for both sexes' elementary education, Beddoe (1989) argues that the emphasis on domestic science disadvantaged young girls who enjoyed fewer hours of academic learning than boys (Beddoe, 1989, 37-39). Although middle class girls did transfer to academic secondary schools, again, until the end of the 1930s, Holloway points out: "the goal for most middle class girls was marriage" and their studies were structured accordingly (Holloway 2005, 36). The unsuccessful experiment of the *Daily Mirror*, launched in November 1903 with initially female-only writers (Griffiths 2006, 143) only confirmed for many in the industry how unsuited women were to newspaper journalism. Comic episodes from the women-only era became the stuff of Fleet Street folklore, such as when a male sub-editor had to gently remind a woman working on the foreign pages that the Paris correspondent's article should not be headlined "Our French Letter," rather "Yesterday in Paris" (Ferris 1971, 120-121). By the outbreak of the Second World War, apart from a few high profile women such as Shiela Grant Duff and Rebecca West<sup>3</sup> most British women journalists were confined to features departments or women's pages or were often precariously freelance. This compares to the American "newspaperwoman" who, following on from the high-profile "stunt girl" of the late nineteenth century, became "one of the most recognisable popular images of the woman writer in America" (Lutes 2006, 2); although even "American... women reporters have been easier to find on screen than in actual newsrooms" (161). Even Grant Duff, the courageous *Observer* correspondent who reported the Nazi takeover of the Saar in January 1935 – and helped prominent anti-Nazis to escape at considerable personal risk - (Grant Duff 1982, 84) - was dismissed out of hand by *Times* editor Geoffrey Dawson when she applied for a job. "He explained to me at once that it was quite impossible for a woman to work on the editorial side of a newspaper ... If on the other hand, I was going to Paris anyway, perhaps I would like to send them some fashion notes" (66-67). Women were also denied the traditional route into mainstream journalism by provincial newspaper editors who were either afraid of, or unwilling to, recruit girls into apprenticeship schemes.<sup>4</sup> The journalist Mary Stott who began her career in 1926 recalls in her memoirs her early struggles for advancement at the *Co-operative News*: "The job of editing the *Co-operative News*... was NOT offered to me for the specific reason, I was told by the editor... that it would not do to have a woman" (Stott 1985, 199). The difficulty of asserting oneself in an overwhelmingly male preserve, and, once

inside fighting against being pigeon-holed into feature-writing is a constant theme in fiction portraying woman journalists of the period. Semi-autobiographical novels by women engaged in journalism suggest that over a period of more than half a century, for women wanting to write for the newspaper press, the feeling of being an unwelcome “outsider” barely changed<sup>5</sup>. In Ella Hepworth Dixon’s *The Story of a Modern Woman* ([1894] 2011), protagonist Mary Erle, sitting nervously waiting for an interview with the editor of *The Fan* realises she is an outsider in the clubby male world of newspapers at the end of the nineteenth century:

Ten minutes, fifteen minutes, twenty minutes went slowly by. The murmur of voices, the baritone laughter in the next room continued to be audible. At last, when Mary had finally made up her mind to go, the door was flung open and a young man with a high colour stumbled out. ‘Ta ta old chap, thanks awfully. See you in the club tonight,’ and, bestowing on Mary a prolonged stare, he disappeared down the long glass corridor (Hepworth Dixon 2011, 45).

In Monica Dickens’s *My Turn to Make the Tea* ([1951] 1962), Poppy, although a better reporter than her male colleagues is never given serious assignments. She interferes with the printing of the paper in order to remove a story that, if published, would ruin a friend’s career. Poppy resigns, meeting the editor halfway up the stairs as he is coming down to sack her:

It made quite a friendly transaction, and we agreed that women were a nuisance in an office, anyway...(Dickens 1962, 222).

By the early 1920s enough young women were enrolling in the London University’s Journalism course for the lecturers to see fit to invite Evelyn Isitt (1925), of the *Manchester Guardian* to give a talk on “The work of a woman general reporter”. By 1936, Emilie Peacocke, a pioneer woman journalist, and by now “Editor of the Woman’s Department of the *Daily Telegraph*” saw positive signs everywhere that women journalists were being given as many opportunities as men:

What a chance for the women [sic] journalist who realises the market value of the march of events as seen through a woman’s eyes. Old-fashioned feminists may deplore this attitude, but the story as seen by a woman, let them remember, is not only wanted, it may be a fine piece of journalistic work... (Peacocke, 1936, 4)<sup>6</sup>

## Deviants

Hall (1978, 6) characterises the women who entered the profession during the early years of mass newspaper production with reference to social science theories of “deviance” similar to that used to describe female politicians (eg Currell 1974). By choosing journalism, they were diverging both from the accepted role of the middle class woman as home maker, and were also diverging from acceptable female professions of nursing and teaching. Certainly early twentieth century fictional female reporters deviate from the norm in a surprising number of ways. Tommy, of Jerome K Jerome’s novel *Tommy and Co* ([1904] 2011) is at first mistaken for a boy and is treated like one through her teenage years; she out-scoops the rest of Fleet Street by nimbly climbing into a moving train to interview a foreign prince. Christina Stanton, the heroine of Cecil Hunt’s *Paddy for News* (1933) is given the masculine nickname “Paddy”, as if this is the only way she can be accepted into the newsroom of the *Sentinel*<sup>7</sup>. Nowhere in the novel is it explained how she came to acquire such a nickname – both diminutive and possibly derogatory - that has no relation to her real name. Katherine

Halstead in Philip Gibbs's novel *The Street of Adventure* (1909) is an unnatural woman in that she chooses a career in Fleet Street over marriage and babies:

'I pray God there may be babies,' said Frank

'No,' said Katherine, 'not on £120 a year. I am not cut out for it.' (Gibbs 1909, 314)<sup>8</sup>

Daisy Simpson in Rose Macaulay's *Keeping up Appearances* (1928) is a social transgressor, a lower middle class woman who dares to stray into the intellectual upper middle class household of the Folyots; Mabel Warren in Graham Greene's *Stamboul Train* (1932) is a sexual deviant, a tweed-wearing predatory lesbian who despite her masculine characteristics is nicknamed "Dizzy" by her male colleagues; Helen Pratt in Christopher Isherwood's *Mr Norris Changes Trains* (1935) talks like a man and can drink anyone under the table. Perhaps the most pronounced deviant is "Henry Beechtree", the protagonist of Rose Macaulay's *Mystery at Geneva* (1922), correspondent of the *British Bolshevik* covering a League of Nations assembly in Geneva. Henry, "pale and melancholy... of middle height, slim" (Macaulay 1922, 1) is only unmasked as Miss Montana in the last few pages of the novel. "Henry" is thrilled to be covering such a major international event and knows a woman journalist would not be able to break out of her stereotyped role in the features pages.

Helen Pratt of Christopher Isherwood's Berlin novel *Mr Norris Changes Trains* ([1935] 1977) appears feminine, yet – in ironic opposition to the effeminate male narrator Bradshaw – is as "hard as nails":

She was a pretty, fair-haired fragile-looking girl, hard as nails, who had been educated at the University of London and took Sex seriously... (Isherwood 1977, 38)

Her language is direct, her speech reflecting the brisk, tight sentences of news copy: "Fired crooked. Nearly blew his eye out. Bled like a pig." (Isherwood 1977, 187). She is however an astute political observer, correctly predicting the outcome of the German presidential election in March 1932 (Isherwood 1977, 92). She is also a fearless reporter, coming into her own after the Nazis gain power in 1933, although her methods of obtaining information are occasionally hard-hearted:

Not even Goering could silence Helen Pratt. She had decided to investigate the atrocities [against Jews and Communists] on her own account. Morning, noon and night, she nosed around the city, ferreting out the victims or their relations, cross-examining them for details (Isherwood 1977, 180)

This mixture of approval and doubt about Helen's tactics are a good reflection of Isherwood's attitudes towards journalists at the time. Isherwood enjoyed journalists' company and spent time dining with the foreign press corps, including Norman Ebbutt in a small Italian restaurant in Berlin (Isherwood 1976, 96- 97). By 1933, British newspapers had begun reporting the threat to the Jews posed by Hitler, with the *Daily Express* and *Daily Mirror* being the most outspoken.<sup>9</sup> As a writer, Isherwood seems to have felt it was his duty to report on Nazi brutality, and in his autobiography he admits he failed in this task: "What inhibited him? His principles? His inertia? Neither is an excuse" (Isherwood 1976, 94-5). Helen Pratt however is triumphantly expelled from Germany following a series of "scalding articles... to hear her talk, you might have thought she had spent the last two months hiding in Dr Goebbels' writing desk or under Hitler's bed." (Isherwood 1977, 185) Isherwood gives Helen more journalistic nous than he possessed himself, and in portraying her as brave as

well as ambitious reveals his admiration for some of the journalists he associated with in Berlin.

### **Ambivalent or Unsympathetic Portrayals**

Isherwood's guarded sympathy however is unusual in thirties representations. The sexless Geraldine Smithers, "virginal" Home Page editor of the *Sunday Mail* in *Public Faces* ([1932] 1960) by Harold Nicolson is clumsy and incompetent. Correspondents and advertisers ignore her specifications for lengths of copy, deadlines or size of display. Her actions and emotions are negative and joyless: "Miss Smithers nodded... a dismissive, rather virginal nod... Miss Smithers sighed irritably... Miss Smithers loathed that side of her functions..." (Nicolson 1960, 218 - 219). When the French courier Boursicaut thinks to himself "They were so strange, these ladies of the press" (Nicolson 1960, 218) it is clearly the view of the author who spent eighteen unhappy months on the *London Standard* before leaving to write the novel:

I have been thinking during the last few days about my book [*Public Faces*]. I have now had three good months of quarantine, and feel that I have at last got the poison of journalism out of my system. I can now settle down to write a book. (Nicolson 1966, 116)

Critics associated the arrival of women with the disintegration of values in the press. This, for example from an article in the *Spectator* by essayist and critic St John Ervine: "...Articles by, and about women prevail in these papers and editors, without any embarrassment will print 'powerful articles' by young ladies not long enlarged from school on the reform of Marriage or the reorganization of sex or the overhaul of religion..." (Ervine 1930, 836-7). Ervine may have read Rose Macaulay's *Keeping Up Appearances* - he quotes her in his article - but he ignores the novel's ironic and poignant take on the dilemma of the single woman who must earn a living. As a woman, the novel's protagonist Daisy Simpson is confined to writing sentimental pot boiler novels and newspaper articles about "Women" and is trapped, because of her sex in this frivolous journalistic cul de sac:

Why would they not let her write about inhuman things, about books, about religions, about places, about the world at large, about things of which intelligent persons had heard? 'A subject for you, Miss Simpson: Can Women Have Genius? You might make something good of that, I think...' (Macaulay [1928]1986, 22)

Daisy is representative of women journalists of the day, trapped in the features departments and women's pages, pigeon-holed into writing about 'What Women Want.' Macaulay herself suffered from this pigeon-holing, despite being a distinguished novelist, as she describes in her 1925 essay "What the Public Wants":

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.' I rang him up and gave him a suitable reply... Shortly afterwards another editor inquired if I would write on 'Should Clever Women Marry?' (Macaulay 1925, 213)<sup>10</sup>

Even the respected journalist and writer Winifred Holtby, when writing for the mainstream press was given typecast articles to write such as a request from the *News Chronicle* for a topical article entitled "A Woman Looks at the News" (Berry and Bishop 1985, 25). Daisy Simpson is the embodiment of the complex attitude felt by the increasing numbers of educated women needing to earn a living towards the press: they needed the

income that freelance journalism provided, yet they were frustrated in what they were allowed to write about and very often wrote for newspapers and magazines that took an anti feminist stance overall. Briganti and Mezei (2006) note that magazines like *Good Housekeeping* energetically promoted the “return to home” theme, recommending women, who may have worked during the First World War, now retreat back behind their front doors and make their homes cocoons of domesticity for their men-folk. However these magazines provided both a voice and an income for some of the inter-war period’s most original, outspoken and feminist writers, including Vera Brittain, Storm Jameson, Rose Macaulay and even Virginia Woolf (Briganti and Mezei 2006, 4 -6). Daisy Simpson’s response to these stresses is a personality that fractures into three different characters: Daphne, the smart middle class girl about town, Daisy the woman journalist and Marjorie the popular novelist.

Graham Greene’s Mabel Warren of his early novel *Stamboul Train* ([1932] 2001) is, despite her tough exterior, also trapped by her gender although Greene is less sympathetic than Macaulay. At Cologne Station, when she is first introduced, she muses on her role at her paper, the *Clarion*: “When you want sob-stuff, send Dizzy Mabel” (Greene 2001, 35). She is anything but “Dizzy” – she is fearless and writes exemplary copy - yet “Dizzy” is the term all her male colleagues have given her. Like Daisy, Mabel also yearns to get out of human interest stories and celebrity interviews and write “straight” news. This desire to be taken seriously as a journalist motivates her predatory hunting of incognito Socialist exile Dr Czinner, eventually to his death, through the course of the novel. She presents herself in the *Clarion* as a man: “Our correspondent pointed out... ‘You have a wonderful knowledge of the female heart, Mr Savory,’ he said” (96), my emphasis. She wears a masculine signet ring (194) and, according to an old photograph she evidently had longer, more feminine hair at one time (211). To get on as a reporter, Mabel has transformed herself into a man. This theme of women journalists suppressing and even switching their gender is taken up in the successful American films *Smart Blonde* (1937) about wise-cracking girl reporter Torchy Blane and the more famous *His Girl Friday* (1940). In both films the female journalists describe themselves as a “newspaperman”.<sup>11</sup> Greene wrote *Stamboul Train* while still working for *The Times*, where as sub-editor his task was “removing the clichés of reporters” (Greene [1971] 1972, 129), although his memories of working by the fire in the sub-editors’ room and observing the mysterious movements of foreign correspondents such as Vladimir Poliakov were happy ones (131). This mixture of pleasure and contempt goes to the heart of Greene’s attitude to Mabel. Her newspaper copy is crisp, her composition rapid and incisive; her activities often blend with those of a spy; however she has paid a high personal price for gaining a toe-hold in this masculine world; there is also a typical Greene fear of the dominant female in her portrayal. She is permanently drunk (Greene 2001, 34; 194). She also gives off odours, mostly of alcohol, but also of “cheap powder” (45); she is associated with the “gross bouquets” of a field of cabbages that fills the compartment with a “smell of gas”(68) as she subjects a victim to a gruelling interview. The image is reminiscent of W H Auden’s “Beethameer” poem attacking proprietors Beaverbrook and Rothermere in *The Orators* ([1932] 1977), with the newspaper “nagging at our nostrils with its nasty news” (Auden 1977, 86) and reinforces the idea of reporters as invasive and uninvited.

### **Opportunities, Obstacles and Freelancing**

For late nineteenth and early twentieth century middle class women, having to work for a living was usually only undertaken out of necessity by spinsters whose families could not afford to keep them, or widows whose husbands had not made provision for them (Holloway 2007, 9, 37). The note of desperation in the “literary women’s” resigned acceptance of



rejection is portrayed cruelly in Stephen McKenna's novel *Sonia* (1917). Here the narrator is referring to 1908 when he has just launched a weekly paper, *Peace*:

On the Monday after our first issue, Bouverie Street looked like the Out-Patients' entrance to a hospital...faded women, no longer young, with shabby boots and carefully mended gloves, who brought me sentimental and curiously invertebrate 'middle' articles – and seemed pathetically unsurprised by the rejection of their dog-eared manuscripts. (McKenna 1917, 245)

Similarly the “third-rate lionesses” who gather, in “tumbled gowns” at London's “dubious journalistic gatherings” (Wyllarde [1906] 1914, 36) in Dolf Wyllarde's *The Pathway of the Pioneer* present an unfortunate picture<sup>12</sup>. Despite these portrayals, for women who had to earn a living, journalism offered reasonable pay and more flexibility than alternatives such as governessing (Onslow, 2000). Early twentieth century fictions by women engaged in journalism and portraying the female reporter explore a world of work, bed-sits, and boarding houses much earlier than the prevailing convention that places this genre in the post-WW2 writings of Margaret Drabble and Muriel Spark (eg Humble 2001) and as such are an important resource for exploring early attitudes towards women's economic independence. Their gender, however was always an obstacle. Magda Burke, possibly the first female sports reporter in British fiction, is not allowed a seat at the Lords' press enclosure because “the authorities at Lord's do not give seats to women reporters on small papers” (Wyllarde 1914, 233). For all their shabbiness the women journalists, the “pioneers” of the novel, are proud to pay their own rent and buy their own clothes even though they wear dark colours all year round because “office and writing-desk soil them in an hour” (41). The memoirs of one turn-of-the-century woman journalist reveal that, after her husband's death journalism paid for her home and her sons' education: “I thank the Press from my heart. It served me well and largely educated my sons” (Alec-Tweedie 1932, 117). Although when, after fifteen “years of grind”, she “still shudders at the recollection of working against time to get some particular article ready for the ‘printer's devil’ who would call at 10.00pm to take it off to the machines” (62). Journalism also offered excitement for women and released them from the confines of the home; the “rush and scurry” that so captivates Katherine Halstead in Philip Gibbs's *The Street of Adventure* (1909) means she will never be able to settle down to domesticity. Magda Burke in *The Pathway of the Pioneer*, walking down Fleet Street to deliver one of her first articles is thrilled:

Of being the tiniest particle in that great living force...from the incalculable staff of the *Times* to the short paragraphist in some trivial penny weekly there is the electric sense of being behind the scenes in the world's drama, of *knowing how the machinery works* (Wyllarde, 1914, 36, my emphasis).

For the journalist Stella Hammond in the short story “The Eleventh Hour” (1917) in the middlebrow magazine *The Quiver*, the financial independence afforded by journalism has allowed her a “room of her own...a quiet room” (Woolf [1929] 2004, 61) so essential for the woman writer. And although it is a tiny cramped flat under the eaves of an apartment block, and although she mostly “did for herself” (Bretherton 1917, 885), the freedom the open window of her flat represents contrasts with the confines of the family home. On a summer's night she can climb out onto the roof and roam freely. As in other stories featuring women journalists, Stella is a transgressor – but this might help her career:

I suppose...the law-abiding person might say: 'Thou shalt not walk upon thy neighbour's roof at night!' But here I might get a column or two by getting arrested for attempted burglary! (Bretherton, 1917, 885)

Stella combines a masculine independence with femininity. She has "strong little hands" (887) and knows how to cock a revolver thus preventing a would-be suicide. Real-life journalist Alison Settle, the third editor of *Vogue* magazine (1926-1935) recalls being a reporter during the First World War, displaying precisely the same attributes of femininity and a bravery that puts her male hairdresser to shame:

I do recall in the First War having my hair done at Mr Gerard in Victoria Street, and the sirens went off when my hair was wet. I got up and said, "Would you mind lending me a towel? I've got to get back to the office immediately." "We're going to the cellar," he said. "I can't because I'm a reporter on the *Mirror* and shall be wanted." (quoted in Hall 1978, 184)

For Eleanor Denbigh, the heroine of Adeline Sergeant's *The Work of Oliver Byrd* (1902) her first cheque for 30 shillings for an article in the *Phonograph* represents an escape from her mother's plans for her:

Nothing would seem so utterly ludicrous to Lady Frances as the refusal of a good offer of marriage. And the girl, bound as she was by the traditions of her life, had not hitherto seen a way out for herself. But now she thought she saw a way (Sergeant, 1902, 10)

Whereas the professions of medicine and law required staff to be present at the place of work, journalism has always had a major difference: the opportunities for freelancing. Holloway (2005, 37) argues that along with taking in needlework, the undertaking of literary work was one unobtrusive way Victorian ladies could earn money. A female contributor to writer Frances Low's 1904 advice booklet *Press Work for Women* encourages: "I do my work when and how I like, the sole condition being that my copy shall be good and punctually delivered. When I see the tyranny to which governesses and nurses are obliged to submit, I count it a great gain that in journalism the woman is entirely her own mistress" (Low 1904, 83)<sup>13</sup>. After the decline of the Victorian periodical press, work was provided by the burgeoning magazine market. In the immediate period following the end of the First World War the launch of several women's magazines such as *Good Housekeeping* (1922), *Modern Woman* (1925) and *Woman's Journal* (1927) required a larger body of female journalists to contribute to them (Briganti and Mezei 2006, 4 – 6). In 1920 Lady Rhondda founded *Time and Tide*, the feminist literary review, which gave work to many women writers and journalists including Winifred Holtby, Vera Brittain, Rebecca West and Rose Macaulay. However Hall points out that "serious" journals were often not able to pay contributors enough for them to survive on (Hall 1978, 93) and if women relied on their journalism for a living they needed to write for more consumer-oriented titles. The novelist Storm Jameson for example wrote articles titled "The Drama of Ideas since Ibsen" and "Modern Dramatists" for small circulation journal *The Egoist* and articles titled "Bored Wives" and "The Best Wife I know" for Rothermere's *Evening News* (Birkett 2009, 413 – 414). Jameson's own fictional writer Hervey Russell in her autobiographical novel *Company Parade* ([1934] 1982) is frank about her reasons for writing an article that "dripped with sentiment" for the mass market *Daily Post*: "It was ten guineas" (Jameson 1982, 317). Daisy Simpson's exasperation at the inanity of some of the articles she has to write is matched by that of Deirdre Carne who has to write an article on "Should Widows Re-Marry?" in Rachel Ferguson's *The Brontes Went to*

*Woolworths* ([1931] 2009, 56)<sup>14</sup>. However with a widowed mother and two younger sisters to support, (“I am the man of the family now” (24)) Deirdre has no choice.

### **Betrayers of their Sex**

It could be argued that changing models of press production and ownership exercised a profound change in the role of the journalist, from the Victorian disseminator of ideas and knowledge to the twentieth century servant of an industry reliant on advertising and consumerism. For women still mainly excluded from the serious news and leader pages, this change was even more profound. A study of Parliamentary reporting, *The Reporter's Gallery* (1913), notes: “two classes who follow the newspaper calling in London are excluded from the Reporter's Gallery [in the House of Commons] – women journalists and the representatives of the foreign press” (Macdonagh 1913, 10). Pioneering nineteenth century writers such as Harriet Martineau, Clementina Black and Eliza Cook had exposed wife beating, sweated labour and argued for women's equality in the periodical press (Onslow 2000, 159 – 182). In Adeline Sergeant's *The Work of Oliver Byrd* (1902), the heroine Eleanor Denbigh writes campaigning articles about “the condition of children in certain London slums; and she had gathered together a mass of facts and details... which was becoming very useful to the statisticians and philanthropists of her time” (Sergeant 1902, 224)<sup>15</sup>. Eleanor is a journalist in the Harriet Martineau mould, however women novelists would become progressively more critical of their journalist “sisters”, particularly after the First World War when, often confined to women's magazines or the newspaper women's page they had to write on domestic or beauty-focussed topics. Articles in the *Daily Mail's* feature pages of the early twentieth century, for example, discuss “hat fashions”, “beautiful frocks and handsome wraps” and “what it costs to be a beauty” although also occasional discussion pieces on “sex differences”. Even upmarket papers such as the *Observer* and *Telegraph* confined women's interests to narrow ones of fashion, beauty and domestic matters. White (1970) argues that after the turn of the twentieth century women's magazines increasingly relied on advertising revenue and thus concentrated on articles which reinforced the gender stereotype of women, offering advice on issues such as child-rearing, dealing with servants, and the latest fashion and electrical items – advertisements for which complemented the editorial copy (White 1970, 79-115). Journalist Frances Low bemoans the fall in standards that she perceived in women's journalism as early as 1904, in her *Press Work for Women*:

Feminine journalism and the typical feminine journalist respectively represent work ... which no one with any sense of the dignity and responsibility of journalism can regard without regret and even a feeling of just anger (Low, 1904, 89)

White however points out that twentieth century magazines which strayed from the realms of fashion, gossip and domestic advice, such as the *Woman Citizen*, “for women who have intellectual, industrial or public interests” failed commercially (White 1970, 90). Thus the growing numbers of women journalists tended to reinforce, rather than reform the status of women, leading feminists to question how far women journalists have advanced the equality agenda<sup>16</sup>. This view has recently been challenged by Adrian Bingham (2004) who argues that as well as stereotyping women, “popular [inter-war] newspapers portrayed female achievers in a variety of spheres and sometimes carried powerful ‘feminist’ messages” such as reports of the first woman barrister or JP (Bingham 2004, 10). It is of course difficult, due to the lack of by-lines, to identify which of these “achiever” stories were written by women journalists and contemporary feminist commentators questioned whether this singling out of feminine achievement was such a good thing. Labour MP Ellen Wilkinson, for example: “women doing startling new things fill the papers until one begins to wonder if men are doing

anything at all" (*Daily Mail* 19 May 1931, 10). Rose Macaulay, through "Henry Beechtree" expresses the view:

Strangest of all, women are, inherently and with no activities on their part, News, in a way that men are not (Macaulay 1922, 167)

The fact is most inter-war novelists portrayed women journalists as struggling in vain to break out of "women's interest" articles. The only exception is Cecil Hunt's *Paddy for News* (1933) which idealises the "plucky" girl crime reporter – although Paddy's news editor tells her: "Cook's handling the straight news story, you take the feminine angle" (Hunt 1933, 19) and as soon as Paddy becomes pregnant, to everyone's relief she resigns her job. Deirdre Carne in *The Brontes Went to Woolworths*, forced through economic necessity to write journalism, accepts commissions to write gender-stereotyping articles about the "modern girl" even though she hates writing them (Ferguson 2009, 12). When she asks her editor if she can write an article on a Judge she has taken an eccentric interest in he spurns the idea of a woman doing a male reporter's job: "'But why, why?' He fretted, 'You can't report the cases, Henderson and Cato do those... By the way I'd like you to so us something bright on 'Is the Bank Holiday Girl Naughty?'" (Ferguson 2009, 17). Deirdre accepts the lowly commission, although as well as asking her editor for a pencil and paper, she also asks for "a rather large basin" (17) evidently to be sick in.

Rose Macaulay, although broadly supportive of the popular press nevertheless clearly had reservations in a number of spheres, including the woman journalist. Despite her sympathy for Daisy Simpson's plight, there is, in *Keeping Up Appearances*, implicit criticism of a girl who despite not liking being pigeon-holed, does nothing to challenge her editors' attitude. Macaulay's later depiction of the beautician and columnist for *Woman* magazine Madame Josef in the later novel *Going Abroad* (1934) is a damning parody:

Madame Josef sat in the lounge of the Hotel Miramar, writing her weekly column on 'How to be Beautiful'... Take two eggs, ten days old, break together... beat with a whisk for half an hour until they clear. Drop into them five grains of alum, a teaspoonful of rose water, a tablespoon of Lotion Josef... it will impart a wonderful fresh bloom and take away that tired, sagging look that is every woman's worst foe. (Macaulay 1934, 89)

Josef's role is to undermine women until they feel obliged to purchase expensive beauty products: "Now let me deal with those ugly rolls of fat. Only expert roller-massage or electric vibrations can cure them, but these treatments now are delightfully economical..." (Macaulay 1934, 93). This is very different to Macaulay's attitude in her First World War novel *Non-combatants and Others* ([1916] 2010) when women's magazines offer readers useful tips on dressmaking and what to do with leftovers. Similarly in the short story "Cupid Wields a Pen" (Maxwell, 1917) in *The Quiver*, journalist and writer Cynthia Braithwaite discusses the bitterness of home-coming wounded soldiers and their unfair treatment of former sweethearts in newspapers and magazines, which prompt an outpouring of repressed emotions from correspondents. "No grief in the world becomes unbearable if it can be talked about," comments the narrator approvingly (492). This correspondence mirrors the response war-time *Daily Mail* women's page editor Mrs Charles Peel received to her ration recipes. In her memoirs she notes she and her team received and replied to millions of letters requesting recipes during the War (Peel 1933, 222). While the press was widely derided after the First World War for over-optimistic war reporting and fomenting jingoism (eg Ponsonby 1928, Farrar, 1998) the women's press appears to have provided a valuable and now overlooked

beneficial public sphere in which wives, mothers and sweethearts shared fears and domestic survival tips.

Macaulay's growing disappointment with the popular press through the inter-war years reflects a major concern for writers that instead of turning "a merely literate democracy into an enquiring and cultured" one (Evans, 1930) the popular press had become an industry churning out mass-produced "literary pemmican" (Escott, 1917). Stevie Smith shares Macaulay's disappointment when writing about the inside workings of women's magazines in her *Novel on Yellow Paper* ([1936] 1969). Narrator Pompey Casmilus who works for a magazine publishing magnate recalls an occasion when a young girl writes in to the paper asking for advice about how to attract a man at her tennis club. The answer: "arrange to play the last set with him, and then linger hopefully and perhaps he will see you home" disturbs Pompey for advising the girl to adopt such a passive role: "I do not think it is at all good advice...there is also that White Girl that Whistler painted, very wan she is now. She is lingering now but not hopefully..." (Smith 1969, 147-148). *Novel on Yellow Paper* is about the power of language: both to trap and circumscribe as does the language of the women's magazines in whose production the heroine is implicated and also, in poetry and literature, to liberate, beyond the bounds of the material and the humdrum. Pompey's unfortunate – and later rejected - fiancé Freddy represents a "little home...their radiogram, their famous washing-up machine" (Smith 1969, 242-3) that the magazines she works for tell their readers to aspire to. The novel is the culmination of a steady deterioration of approval towards fictional women journalists through the first four decades of the twentieth century. Initially novelists cheer on – and closely identify with - the brave, if unusual, pioneers but after the First World War they adopt an increasingly critical stance, and are keen to emphasise the difference between the journalist who panders to consumerism and gender stereotypes and the novelist, who sets the mind free. While there are always evidential questions even over semi-autobiographical fictions there is little doubt about the image of the woman journalist writers sought to promote in these influential novels, many running into several editions. There is however, even in critical portrayals, sympathy for her plight and the fictional characters' regular disguising of their femininity pre-dates by a century modern studies of women working in newsrooms (eg Ross, 2001) where women report having to become more "macho" to overcome feelings of being an "interloper". Fictional portrayals today have deteriorated further with women journalists, in British fiction at least no more than two dimensional stereotypes such as sexually humiliated and humiliating Susan Street in Julie Burchill's *Ambition* (1989), the mendacious Rita Skeeter in J K Rowling's *Harry Potter* novels (1999 - 2007), or the scheming Mary Much in A N Wilson's *My Name is Legion* (2004). Admittedly their male counterparts fare only a little better after the Edwardian period when liberal novelists invested much hope in the workforce of the new popular press (Lonsdale 2011); however few male fictional journalists are as negatively or crudely portrayed as female ones. Prejudices against women journalists appear to stem from deeply entrenched attitudes towards the "Killer Bimbos of Fleet Street" (Carter, Branston and Allan 1998, 2; Ross 2001, Chambers, Steiner and Fleming 2004). The comparative treatments meted out to Rebekah Brooks, who was compared to a witch following her appearance at the Leveson Inquiry and Andy Coulson who has so far escaped similar personal, if not professional attack are a case in point.

## References

"An Old Oriental." 1904. "The Woman at Work." *Englishwoman's Review*. 35 (3): 151-3.

Auden, W H. 1977. *The English Auden*. London: Faber and Faber.

- Beddoe, Deirdre. 1989. *Back to Home and Duty: Women between the Wars 1918 – 1939*. London: Pandora.
- Bennett, Arnold. 2011. *Journalism for Women: a practical Guide*. Quedgeley: Dodo Press.
- Berry, Paul and Alan Bishop. 1985. *Testament of a Generation: the journalism of Vera Brittain and Winifred Holtby*. London: Virago.
- Birkett, Jennifer. 2009. *Margaret Storm Jameson: A Life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Bretherton, Eva. 1917. "The Eleventh Hour", *The Quiver* 52 (11): 885-891.
- Briganti, Chiara, and Kathy Mezei. 2006. *Domestic Modernism, the Interwar Novel and E H Young*. Andover: Ashgate.
- Bingham, Adrian. 2004. *Gender, Modernity and the Popular Press in Inter-War Britain*. Oxford: Clarendon.
- Burchill, Julie. 1989. *Ambition*. London: Corgi.
- Carter, Cynthia, Gill Branston and Stuart Allan, eds. 1998. *News, Gender, Power*. London: Routledge.
- Currell, Melville. 1974. *Political Woman*. London: Croom Helm.
- Chambers, Deborah, Linda Steiner, and Carole Fleming. 2004. *Women and Journalism*. London: Routledge.
- Dixon, Ella Hepworth. 2011. *The Story of a Modern Woman*. Memphis: General Books.
- Dixon, Ella Hepworth. 1930. *As I Knew Them*. London: Hutchinson.
- Ervine, St John. 1930. "The Future of the Press." *Spectator* (November 29): 836 – 837.
- Escott, T H S. 1917. "Old and New in the Daily Press." *Quarterly Review* 227 (451): 353 – 368.
- Evans, B Ifor. 1930. "The Rise of Modern Journalism." *Fortnightly Review* 127 (1): 233 - 240.
- Ferris, Paul. 1971. *The House of Northcliffe*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson.
- Dickens, Monica. 1962. *My Turn to Make the Tea*, London: Penguin.
- Farrar, Martin. 1998. *News from the Front*. Stroud: Sutton Publishing.
- Ferguson, Rachel. 2009. *The Brontes went to Woolworths*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Gibbs, Philip. 1909. *The Street of Adventure*. London: Heinemann.
- Gopsill, Tim and Greg Neale. 2007. *Journalists: 100 years of the NUJ*. London: Profile Books.
- Grant Duff, Shiela. 1982. *The Parting of Ways*. London: Peter Owen.
- Greene, Graham. 1971. *A Sort of Life*. London: Penguin.

- Greene, Graham. 2001. *Stamboul Train*. London: Vintage.
- Griffiths, Dennis. 2006. *Fleet Street: Five Hundred Years of the Press*. London: British Library Publications.
- Hall, Valerie. 1978. "Women in Journalism: a sociological account of the entry of women into the profession of Journalism in Great Britain until 1930." PhD diss., Essex University.
- Holloway, Gerry. 2005. *Women and Work in Britain since 1840*. London: Routledge.
- Humble, Nicola. 2001. *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel 1920s to 1950s*. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Hunt, Cecil. 1933. *Paddy for News*. London: Hodder and Stoughton.
- Hunt, Cecil. 1948. *Ink in my Veins*. London: Robert Hale
- Isherwood, Christopher. 1976. *Christopher and his Kind*. New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux.
- Isherwood, Christopher. 1977. *Mr Norris Changes Trains*. London: Triad Panther.
- Isitt, Evelyn. 1925. "The work of a Woman General Reporter." In *The Journalist in the Making* edited by Charles Baker, 154-6. London: Newspaper World Publishing.
- Jameson, Storm. 1982. *Company Parade*. London: Virago.
- Jerome, Jerome K. 2011. *Tommy and Co*. Rockville: Serenity Publishers.
- Kent, Sylvia. 2009. *The Woman Writer: the history of the Society of Women Writers and Journalists*, Stroud: History Press.
- Lonsdale, Sarah. 2011. "A Golden Interlude." *Parliamentary Affairs* 64 (2): 326 – 340.
- Low, Frances. 1904. *Press Work for Women*. London: Upcott Gill.
- Lutes, Jean Marie. 2006. *Front-Page Girls: Women Journalists in American Culture and Fiction 1880 – 1930*, Cornell University Press
- Macaulay, Rose. 2010. *Non-Combatants and Others*. London: Capuchin Classics.
- Macaulay, Rose. 1922. *Mystery at Geneva*. London: Collins.
- Macaulay, Rose. 1925. *A Casual Commentary*. London: Methuen.
- Macaulay, Rose. 1986. *Keeping up Appearances*. London: Methuen.
- Macaulay, Rose. 1934. *Going Abroad*. London: Collins.
- Macdonagh, Michael. 1913. *The Reporter's Gallery*. London: Hodder and Stoughton.
- Maxwell, Betty. 1917. "Cupid Wields a Pen" *The Quiver* 56 (6): 488 – 493.
- Mckenna, Stephen. 1917. *Sonia*. New York: George H Doran and Co.
- Murphy, Catherine. 2011. "On an Equal Footing with Men? Women and Work at the BBC 1923 – 1939". PhD diss., Goldsmiths University.

- Nicolson, Harold. 1960. *Public Faces*. New York: Popular Library.
- Nicolson, Harold. 1966. *Diaries and Letters 1930 – 39* London: Collins.
- Onslow, Barbara. 2000. *Women of the Press in Nineteenth-Century Britain*. Basingstoke: Macmillan.
- Peacocke, Emilie. 1936. *Writing for Women*. London: A and C Black.
- Peel, Mrs Charles (1933) *Life's Enchanted Cup*. London: John Lane.
- Ponsonby, Arthur. 1928. *Falsehood in Wartime*. London: George Allen and Unwin.
- Ross, Karen. 2001 "Women at work: Journalism as an en-gendered practice" *Journalism Studies* 2 (4): 531 – 544.
- Sergeant, Adeline. 1902. *The Work of Oliver Byrd*. London: James Nisbet.
- Smith, Stevie. 1969. *Novel on Yellow Paper*. London: Jonathan Cape.
- Smith, Martin. 2011. *Dearest Jean: Rose Macaulay's letters to a Cousin*. Manchester University Press.
- Stott, Mary. 1985. *Before I go*. London: Virago.
- White, Cynthia. 1970. *Women's Magazines 1693 – 1968*. London: Michael Joseph.
- Wilson, A N. 2004. *My Name is Legion*. London: Arrow Books.
- Woolf, Virginia. 2004. *A Room of One's own*. London: Penguin.
- Wyllarde, Dolf. 1914. *The Pathway of the Pioneer*. London: Methuen.

---

<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately early archives of the Society of Women Journalists, containing minutes and correspondence were lost in 'fires, floods and during several wars' (Kent 2009, 13)

<sup>2</sup> Categories vary, from 'author, editor, writer' in 1861 to 'author, editor, journalist, reporter and shorthand writer' in 1901; 'publicist' is added in 1921; Office of National Statistics

<sup>3</sup> Rebecca West began her career on the *Freewoman* in 1913; she was a freelance contributor to a wide variety of newspapers and magazines and was a successful novelist.

<sup>4</sup> Hall (1978, 321 – 326) collates letters from provincial newspapers outlining news editors' resistance to hiring 'girls'. Reasons include fears they would put male reporters off their work, a perceived lack of female interest in news and low appreciation of female literacy skills.



---

<sup>5</sup> Ella Hepworth Dixon was a leader writer on the new *Daily Mirror* and worked for the *Westminster Gazette* 1921-1926. The story of Mary Erle closely follows her own life as told in her memoirs *As I Knew Them* (1930). Monica Dickens trained as a cub reporter on the *Hertfordshire Express* in the 1940s; the newspaper is fictionalised as the *Downingham Post* in *My Turn to Make the Tea* (1951). The novel is presented as a semi-autobiographical account of her own experiences in *Chronicle of a Working Life* (2004).

<sup>6</sup> Emilie Peacocke began her career on her father's paper the *Northern Echo* in 1898 (Chambers et al, 2004, 22); she worked with Philip Gibbs on the *Tribune* 1906 - 1908 and acknowledged to being the model for Katherine Halstead in *Street of Adventure* (Hall 1978)

<sup>7</sup> Cecil Hunt was fiction editor of the *Daily Mail* 1928 – 1936 (Hunt 1948)

<sup>8</sup> Philip Gibbs was a reporter, literary editor and war correspondent. *The Street of Adventure* is based on life on the short-lived Liberal-supporting *Tribune* 1906 – 1908.

<sup>9</sup> Eg *Daily Mirror*, 28 March 1933, 5: 'Hitler threat to Jews: twenty five thousand Jews have fled Germany...'; *Daily Express*, May 25 1934: 'German Jews are facing their darkest days'.

<sup>10</sup> Macaulay, although primarily a novelist wrote prolifically for the press especially the *Telegraph*, *The Star* and *Daily Chronicle* (Smith (ed) 2011, 39)

<sup>11</sup> The film, directed by Howard Hawks is an adaptation of an earlier stage play, *Hold the Front Page* where the Hildy character is male.

<sup>12</sup> Dolf Wyllarde (1871 – 1950) trained as a journalist at Birkbeck College and was a prolific writer of popular fiction (Bloom, 2002, 131)

<sup>13</sup> Frances Low was a distinguished journalist and active member of the Women's Anti-Suffrage League (Low, 1904).

<sup>14</sup> Rachel Ferguson wrote for the *Sunday Chronicle* from the early 1920s and wrote a column for *Punch* from 1925 (online Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, <http://www.oxforddnb.com> accessed may 25 2012)

<sup>15</sup> Adeline Sergeant worked on the staff of the *People's Friend* magazine 1885 – 1887 and was a contributor until her death in 1904 (online Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, <http://oxforddnb.com> accessed 15 May 2012)

<sup>16</sup> Eg Onslow 2000, 212; Hall 1979, 13; Tanya Gold, *Guardian* 29 October 2011, 43: 'I blame the media for ignoring feminism in favour of make up'.