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A Golden Interlude:

The representation of journalists in early Twentieth Century British Literature

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Abstract:

This article examines fictional representations of journalists and journalism from Guy Thorne's Edwardian bestseller When it Was Dark (1903) through to novels of the interwar years. It examines

how literature about journalism and journalists addresses contemporary issues such as the march of technology; the relationship between politics and the press at a time when the franchise was extending; the increasing 'mediation' of politics and anxieties about the growth of sensational journalism. Of particular note is the dramatic change in the character of the journalist in these years, from democracy-defending Fourth Estate hero to cynical hack. It concludes that First World War press 'failings,' the ennoblement of press barons, the growing power of a mass medium and the evaporation of social idealism after the war combined to destroy the once heroic image.

That the literature of any historical period 'reflects contemporary life and reveals its spirit' is by now an accepted convention.¹ An examination of early Twentieth Century British fiction, written at a time of enormous changes in newspaper reading and the relationship between politics and the press can therefore be a fruitful area of research for academics and contemporary practitioners alike. For example, press historians today accept that during the First World War journalists were overly eager in submitting to self-censorship resulting in wildly optimistic despatches from the Front, when the lists of casualties, printed daily, often in the same newspapers, gave a very different picture.² However the effects of news coverage of the War on the reading public and the literary and political classes can be better understood in the novels, plays and poems of the time.

H G Wells's autobiographical Wartime novel *Mr Britling Sees it Through* for example, traces a *Times* leader writer's journey from optimism to despair between 1914 and 1915.³ His response to the famous 'Amiens Despatch' of August 30 1914 changes him at one stroke from privileged newspaper 'insider' to helpless consumer of news:

'And then came the Sunday of *The Times* telegram, which spoke of a 'retreating and a broken army'...Mr Britling was stunned. He went to his study and stared helplessly at maps.' (p.140)

Rose Macaulay's novel of the same year, *Non-Combatants and Others* reveals the effects of jingoistic and upbeat newspaper headlines on the home front⁴. The heroine Alix, whose cousin has returned from the trenches horribly wounded and mentally shattered, is buffeted by the evening newspaper headlines, by turns alarming and unbelievably reassuring. Once an eager newspaper reader, she tries to ignore the nagging headlines:

'Special. War Extra. British driven back...' The cries, the placards, were like lost ships tossed lightly on the top of wild waters. They would soon sink, if one did not listen or look...' (p.63)

This article will examine how journalists and journalism were depicted during the Edwardian and Georgian periods, when the role of the reporter as defender – and sometimes even saviour – of democracy and civilisation became established as an accepted literary motif. A major theme of these novels is the faith, in the early years of mass newspaper circulation, in the popular press to inform and enlighten a growing and increasingly literate electorate. In works where journalism and politics come into close quarters, the prevailing view is that journalists are there to defend the people against corrupt politicians, or to be wise counsellors to political leaders, or to play the role of mediator between power and the people with an impeccably straight bat.

After the outbreak of World War One, these characteristics shift abruptly; this shift is sustained in the Twenties and Thirties as widespread anxieties about the power and role of the Press appear to become confirmed. Journalists are seen not just as a threat to democracy, but to the very foundations of language and intellect. Ezra Pound places journalists, 'those who lied for hire...perverters of language' in his *Hell Cantos* (1924); D H Lawrence describes the 'unspeakable baseness of the press' in his 1923 novel *Kangaroo* and Graham Greene, in his early novel *Stamboul Train* (1932), presents us with the ghastly gin-soaked, cynical reporter, Mabel Warren.

An attempt will be made to identify and account for these changes, many of which form the basis of the accepted character of the fictional reporter to this day. In another article in this journal, Nick

Randall describes how crusading investigative journalists in the mould of Woodward and Bernstein are the exception in contemporary film and television portrayals and argues most modern fictional journalists are more hypocritical and corrupt than the politicians they are trying to expose. Indeed earlier representations such as the despicable Quintus Slide in Trollope's *The Prime Minister* (1876) and the cynical, ambitious Jasper Milvain 'of the facile pen' in George Gissing's *New Grub Street* (1891) – their very names suggest a moral turpitude - indicate an anxiety that appears to be lacking for a brief period in the late Victorian and early Edwardian era⁵.

THE LAUNCH of Alfred Harmsworth's halfpenny *Daily Mail* in 1896 some historians of the press argue⁶ was the single most important change in the British press since the abolition of stamp duty in 1855 and ushered in the era of mass newspaper readership. In 1887 the *Telegraph* claimed the largest circulation of any newspaper in the world, at close to 250,000 copies a day. By 1902 the *Daily Mail* was selling 1.2 million copies a day. By 1918 the total circulation of the national dailies stood at over three million.⁷ The burgeoning industry provided employment opportunities to literate young men of modest means. In the 1891 Census, 8269 people described themselves as belonging to the occupation category 'authors, editors, journalists, reporters, shorthand writers'. By 1901 this figure had risen to 10,663 and by 1911, to nearly 14,000.⁸

All the major pre-WW1 works examined here, Guy Thorne's *When it was Dark* (1903)⁹, Philip Gibbs's *Street of Adventure*, (1909)¹⁰, C E Montague's *A Hind Let Loose* (1910)¹¹, Alphonse Courlander's *Mightier than the Sword* (1912)¹², Kipling's short story *The Village that Voted the Earth was Flat*¹³ and PG Wodehouse's *Psmith Journalist* published as a serial in *The Captain* magazine in 1909/10 and in book form in 1915¹⁴ are 'children' of the Harmsworth era, and are a commentary on the new power of the press in the early days of mass circulation. The authors were familiar with the new world of popular journalism: Guy Thorne (pen name of Cyril Ranger Gull) was a prolific journalist, for a while on the staff of the *Daily Mail*¹⁵; Philip Gibbs was literary editor of the *Daily Mail* in 1902 and subsequently worked as a reporter, and then editor on other London papers including *The Daily*

Express, *Daily Chronicle* and *The Tribune*¹⁶. C E Montague had worked both as reporter and assistant editor on the *Manchester Guardian* from 1890; Courlander was a reporter on the *Daily Express*¹⁷, Kipling worked as a journalist in India from the age of sixteen to twenty three¹⁸ and Wodehouse began his writing career as a freelance in 1902, contributing fiction and journalism to several London titles before he became fully established as a novelist.¹⁹

Other novels in this period not directly about journalism, but with reference to the press, particularly its relationship to politics and government include Katherine Cecil Thurston's novel of mistaken identity *John Chilcote MP* (1906), Edgar Wallace's thriller *The Four Just Men* (1905), H G Wells's political novel *The New Machiavelli* (1911) and G K Chesterton's dystopian whimsy *The Napoleon of Notting Hill* (1904)²⁰. In *The Four Just Men*, while the police and politicians are flapping ineffectively about the threat to the life of the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs by a mysterious terror group, Smith, the brilliant young reporter on the *Megaphone* has the bright idea of carrying a police report in French and Spanish too. His hunch that the group may be part-foreign is correct and helps towards foiling the plan. Lakeley, the editor of the Tory-supporting *St George's Gazette* in *John Chilcote MP* is a wise and respected man, whose judgement on coming politicians is reliably sound. Although politicians are slightly fearful of him, Lakeley also comes across as fair and scrupulously professional. In *The Napoleon of Notting Hill*, the King appoints himself Special War correspondent of the *Court Journal*, yet this action is not seen as a threat to free speech. In his copy the King blames himself for the civil war raging between the residents of Notting Hill and other West London boroughs and the only threat he poses is to decent language: 'on the morning of the declaration of war, a vast number of little boys (or cherubs of the gutter as we pressmen say)...'(p.195). While *The New Machiavelli* is more circumspect – protagonist Dick Remington observes the 'doubtful reception of doubtful victories' (p.100) by newspaper readers during the Boer War, there is still a belief that controversial new political ideas can be intelligently circulated to the reading public through both the 'class' and the 'popular' press (The *Daily Telephone* and the *Dial* in the novel clearly pseudonyms

for the *Daily Telegraph* and the *Mail*). Later, when his scandalous affair becomes public, Remington does admit to wanting to kick Keyhole, editor of the rag *Peepshow* into the gutter, but his real fear is of society politicians the Booles who are ‘*organising scandal*’ (p.337) not through the press but through the drawing rooms and clubs of London. Ultimately, Remington rejects the public world of both journalism and politics for love – although this rejection is ambiguous as the novel is in fact a public attempt to set the record straight. Stephen McKenna’s political novel, *Sonia*, paints a darker portrait of Fleet Street (‘bluff red-faced men with husky voices swept me off my feet with their eloquence and were sent to report by-elections in the provinces – which in two cases I found them doing with a wealth of local colour in the upstairs room of the White Friars Tavern’ (p.245))²¹.

However although this particular episode in the novel pre-dates the War, the novel was written after the outbreak of War and published in 1917 and really belongs to the despairing wartime literature that I discuss later in the article.

Sociologists such as L T Hobhouse have identified a wave of Edwardian social idealism during the early years of the Twentieth Century, particularly after the Liberal victory of 1906, when, ‘There was room for high thinking and lofty ideals’ (Stephen McKenna, *Sonia*, p.185). The power of journalism to enlighten the public and act as an ‘independent channel between government and the governed’ was part of this optimism.²² Contemporary commentator T H S Escott writes in his paean to the trade, *Masters of English Journalism* (1911): ‘There is...no abuse or evil in the everyday life of his readers which his [the journalist’s] pen has not helped to rectify or remove, no miscarriage of justice his comments on which had failed to awake popular echoes of demand of the scandal’s termination...’²³ Many Edwardian Liberals were optimistic about the role of the press in educating an increasingly literate public, following successive Education Acts of the 1870s and 80s. Edward Dicey, journalist and writer, writes in the *Fortnightly Review* in 1905 that ‘it is pleasing to me to notice that scientific discourses, reports of new inventions and descriptions of novel manufacturing processes find ready access into the columns of our halfpenny press.’²⁴ Here Dicey is countering the put-

downs such as Lord Salisbury's famous dismissal of the *Daily Mail* as 'made by office boys for office boys.' In a 1930 article in the *Fortnightly Review*, the literary scholar B Ifor Evans writes that for a brief period there was chance that mass education could give England the gift of an 'enquiring and cultured' democracy, if the press had grasped the opportunity.²⁵ The article describes the state of the press at the time of Delane, the celebrated editor of the *Times* who died in 1879, as 'a small, circumscribed world... the sphere of the men who governed.' Yet meanwhile, 'Outside those well-lighted windows behind which Delane gossiped and dined... there stood a vast mass of men and women whom the Education Act had endowed with a power to read but who could find nothing in contemporary journalism that they could understand...' (pp233-234) Evans concludes however that the press took the wrong path and by 1930 he could argue that the sensationalist and advertising-driven press had helped produce a 'merely literate democracy.'

Many of the Edwardian novelists see their mission as explaining and celebrating the workings of Fleet Street, where 'History day by day is written' (*Street of Adventure*, p.49). These novels celebrate the new technology such as the rotary printing machine, which increased the speed of production from six thousand copies an hour to 30,000²⁶. The increasing use of typewriters over pen and ink, faster telecommunications and the use of photographs over line drawings are all also referred to in these works. In *When it was Dark* Guy Thorne describes in exact detail, the editor of the *Wire's* up-to-date communications system, with a vulcanite handle, ivory switches and 'the receiver and transmitter of a portable telephone.' Fleet Street, where the nightly rumble of the printing presses was a symbol of a new, mighty power, was a vibrant, exciting place to work. In Gibbs's *The Street of Adventure* young Frank Luttrell is employed to write bright news for the thousands of elementary school graduates who had just learned to read – but who weren't interested in lengthy verbatim reports of political speeches in the 'serious' papers: 'He had to write a sketch of a Christmas party ...A week later he described the Fancy Dress Ball at the Mansion House, where the children of the well-to-do showed off...he was called upon to take a party of men and women across the Channel and back to test an alleged cure for sea sickness...'²⁷

The reporters of these novels are heroes: in *The Street of Adventure* Brandon, the crime reporter prevents a miscarriage of justice; Edmund Grattan, the foreign correspondent comforts dying soldiers on the battlefields of South Africa and Margaret Hubbard, one of the first 'lady' journalists, was sacked 'for refusing to puff a poisonous wretch who called herself a 'beauty doctor' and who spent large sums in advertisements...' (P.120). In Courlander's *Mightier than the Sword* Wratten, the leading 'descriptive writer' on *The Day* dies of pneumonia after refusing to leave the scene of a mining disaster in case he should miss some extra details. The hero, Humphrey Quain dies on the last page, beaten to death in a French wine growers' riot as he tries to get to the heart of the story he is covering. These journalists are heroes because they are telling the story of the people: the common soldiers, the miners, the workers and are not simply repeating verbatim the speeches of the ruling classes. This ideal won't last long – at Trades Union Congress in 1920 National Union of Journalist members are vilified by other speakers as having been bought 'to be used against members of their own class.'²⁸ In Wodehouse's *Psmith Journalist*, the young hero takes over a dreary New York paper with the view of turning it 'red-hot' (p.32). Above all the paper 'must be the guardian of the People's rights. We must be a searchlight, showing up the dark spot in the souls of those who would endeavour in any way to do the PEOPLE in the eye.'(p.33) A target: tenement block slums and their pitiless owner, is found. Psmith and his sidekick Billy Windsor then risk all to expose the low life gangsters who force the poor of New York to live in such squalor.

Harold Spence, the journalist in *When it was Dark* uses his investigative skills to uncover the truth behind a plot to 'fake' the discovery of a second burial of Jesus, which threatens to undermine the entire basis of Christianity by calling into question the Resurrection story. Spence's skills to seek out, find and communicate the truth save the world from anarchy, religious wars and unending darkness. Earlier in the novel, when Spence at first thinks he has stumbled across the scoop of the century – that Joseph of Arimathea had taken Jesus's body from the Garden of Gethsemane, to be reburied – he goes straight to the editor of his paper, *The Wire*. Editor Ommaney does the responsible thing.

Instead of publishing, Ommaney tells the Prime Minister; German Emperor Kaiser Wilhelm is also informed. Edwardian editors and journalists did not need to be overseen by a Press Council – their moral compass and sense of responsibility were regulation enough. In an age still characterised by the public meeting, the doom and hysteria is communicated in church halls as much as it is in the press.

BY THE start of the Twentieth Century the relationship between the mainstream press and political parties, although still close, had begun to loosen, thanks to the advertising revenue brought in by large circulations. A J P Taylor notes in his *English History 1914 – 45* that Harmsworth, later Lord Northcliffe, in freeing papers from political control thanks to advertising revenue, gave England the ‘rare gift of a free press.’²⁹ Curran acknowledges that some historians describe this period as ‘the golden age of journalism’ – a brief gap between the loosening of political control and the tightening of commercial control³⁰. Novels of this period reveal the subtle balance between political influence on the one hand, and the need to please advertisers on the other. *The Liberal* in *The Street of Adventure* is loosely based on the short-lived *Tribune* (1906 – 1908), of which Gibbs had been literary editor. When the proprietor declares he wants to sell the paper, Liberal politicians become extremely agitated at a potential loss of support in the press. Members of Government are seen visiting the newspaper offices and having late night talks with the editor and proprietor but all of these come to nought, due to the ruinous cost of running a modern newspaper although others may be tempted with the promise of a peerage.

Not only were papers becoming independent of direct political control, but how they reported politics was changing. Matthew (1987) describes how the *Daily Mail* ‘packaged’ political speeches, previously published verbatim, to suit the reading habits of a new class of reader.³¹ Other papers followed the *Mail’s* successful lead with the result that it was journalists, not politicians, who decided what words of wisdom the public should read. This is wryly commented upon by Bertrand

Oakleigh, the world-weary uncle of narrator George Oakleigh in Stephen McKenna's political novel *Sonia*. In a bid to puncture his nephew's zeal for reform, he tells him that as an MP there is very little he can do to change the world. 'If you want things done, you'd better go to Fleet Street...a group of papers that get into every hand in the country...that's worth a year of perorations...' (p.180).

Although Lawrence (2006) argues that the public political meeting did not decline steeply until after the First World War, through the early Twentieth Century an increasing proportion of voters would receive their views through the pages of a newspaper rather than at a public meeting³². This shift in the power of mediation between politicians and the public is treated in fiction as a source of pride by journalists. Psmith declares he will expose the corrupt politicians behind the tenement scandal – 'for *Cosy Moments* cannot be muzzled' (p.58). In a more satirical vein, in *The Four Just Men*, Charles Garret, the *Megaphone's* 'star reporter' whistles the tune of a popular song:

'By kind permission of the *Megaphone*

Summer comes when Spring has gone

And the world goes spinning on.

By permission of the *Daily Megaphone*.' (p.127)

In *The New Machiavelli*, renegade MP Dick Remington works 'very carefully' to get the editors of the *Daily Telephone* and *Dial* to publish his ideas on 'State help for Mothers' (p.301) and is only given 'unprecedented space' in the Liberal papers because their editors hope it will be 'rope to hang myself' (p.325). His editorship of the political *Blue Weekly* which was 'shaping an increasingly influential body of opinion' (p.326) was one of the reasons why the Conservatives found him so valuable an asset.

THE FEAR that in the wrong hand the press may become a threat, not an asset to democracy is raised in pre First World War fiction. C E Montague's *A Hind Let Loose* (1910), deals with the new responsibility of the press in an age of mass readership. The novel is based in a fictional northern city, Halland and revolves around two papers, the Tory-controlled *Warder* and the Liberal-controlled

Stalwart, both penny papers, and their inadequate editors Brumby and Pinn. The story is set against a backdrop of imminent change due to the launch of a new halfpenny, *The Paper*, by a local entrepreneur, Roads, who has made his fortune in racing tips and is not beholden to any political party. The new paper, 'undoubtedly gave you a more poignant first sense of the appalling or intoxicating character of yesterday than any of the older journals offered for double the money.' (P.163). Roads takes full advantage of new technology to feed his readers' appetite for news: 'The lusts of New York and the homicides of California enriched for the first time the sacred home life of English families at their next morning's breakfast.' (P.163 – 164).

The message of *A Hind Let Loose*: that the Press has a potent dark side which could, in the wrong hands, be a power for evil, is amplified in Kipling's short story *The Village that Voted the Earth Was Flat*. The story tells what happens when a Liberal MP and magistrate, Sir Thomas Ingell, unfairly passes judgement on a newspaper proprietor, an ambitious young editor, and music hall magnate Bat Masquerier – the media moguls of their day. The proprietor's papers are used to report that Ingell's villagers have voted unanimously that the earth is flat. In the final scene, the House of Commons is adjourned when MPs are overcome with hilarity while singing 'The Village that Voted the Earth is Flat' song and Ingell is destroyed. *The Village...* is high farce but is also a warning about the new power of the press and what it can do when combined with the mass of public opinion, here represented in Masquerier and his crowded music halls.

Kipling's relationship with journalism was complex. He enjoyed friendships with H A Gwynne of the *Morning Post* and Ralph Blumenfeld of the *Daily Express*; he was friends with Max Aitken (later Lord Beaverbrook) for a number of years and was a regular contributor to the *Morning Post* and *The Times*. Yet he was well aware of the ability of powerful owners to manipulate their papers and his own dealings with the Press when he acquired his 'celebrity' status were not always happy. The journalists in *The Village...* are not the villains, however: they are merely agents of a wild, retributive

justice meted out upon a politician who abuses British justice. Yet Kipling has apprehended the shift in relationship between power and the press that has been brought about by massive circulations but the implications of which had yet to be fully explored. He did not have to wait long for a test for the new press – within weeks of finishing *The Village...*, the First World War had begun.

SIEGFRIED SASSOON'S 1917 poem *Fight to a Finish* fantasises how soldiers returning from the War run the grunting and squealing 'Yellow Pressmen' through with their bayonets³³. One of Sassoon's most violent poems, it sums up the sense of betrayal that men in the trenches felt, both towards the political class ('And with my trusty bombers went/To clear those Junkers out of Parliament') and towards the Press, which was seen as having been complicit in painting a sanitised account of life in the trenches for the public back home. Enright (1961) explains that while ordinary soldiers felt their stories were not being reported, the poets in the trenches felt a duty to correct false impressions.³⁴

The reputation of journalists and the press suffered a blow from which they struggled to recover for decades. This damage was due to a combination of journalistic failings in reporting the war and the ennoblement of Press Barons by Lloyd George, which undermined the independence of the press. Farrar (1998)³⁵ details how losses were re-told as victories to a gullible public back home on a systematic basis. British Newspapers were readily available to soldiers in France and memoirs such as Siegfried Sassoon's *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer* (1930) and Robert Graves's *Goodbye to all That* (1929) reveal how they felt betrayed by the lack of honest war reporting in the British press. Max Plowman's *Letters* perhaps reveal this sense of betrayal most succinctly: 'The newspapers on the war are nauseating...whether the general censorship is to blame or not I don't know but it's all unreal – the horror and the terror and the misery are all 'written down' or covered with sham heroics by cheap journalism.'³⁶

As early as 1916, Robert Graves was writing shocking accounts of the death and suffering he encountered. His poem *A Dead Boche* shows he has had enough of idealised images of War.³⁷ The poem is addressed not to his fellow soldiers, but to the public back home and is aimed at shattering notions of the war as being a glorious clash between good and evil. The image of the 'sodden green' soldier is like a close up photograph and is enormously shocking. Johnston (1964)³⁸ argues that the poem is meant to have a 'curative' effect, to shatter complacent and unreal notions of what the War was like. In this poem the press is not explicitly mentioned but as early as December 1915 soldier-poets were accusing the Press either of distorting the truth or whipping the British public into a jingoistic frenzy.³⁹

While there were early attempts by individual journalists to report the truth – the famous 'Amiens Despatch' by Arthur Moore which appeared in the *Sunday Times* on August 30 1914 referring to 'terrible losses' is not the only example – war correspondents saw it as their duty to censor their reports, highlighting the good and glossing over the bad.⁴⁰ This was nothing new: previous conflicts involving British troops had been heavily censored and reported in a gung-ho way too. Beaumont (2005) describes how during the sieges of Mafeking, Ladysmith and Kimberley British correspondents built up a 'myth of British endurance in appalling circumstances in which the very best characteristics, typical of the British at bay.'⁴¹ This then was the established method of reporting war, since the turn of the century – a method referred to in *A Hind Let Loose*: 'Thence would the war correspondent post, at Brumby's bidding, over land and ocean without rest, bent to sweeten the sacred home life of the *Warder's* readers with all the heroic pleasures of war, unalloyed by groin wounds or enteric.'⁴² Fussell (1975) describes how the British Expeditionary Force's desperate efforts to get to the Belgian sea ports in early November 1914 were reported using the same journalistic formula as used to describe Edwardian and Georgian adventurers' exploits. 'This time it was 'The Race to the Sea...Rehabilitated and applied to these new events, the phrase had the advantage of a familiar, sportsmanlike, Explorer Club overtone, suggesting that what was happening

was not too distant from playing games, running races and competing in a thoroughly decent way.' (p.9)⁴³ It is certainly true that correspondents' despatches were heavily censored by military intelligence officers - many of them, including C E Montague, former journalists themselves. However Lovelace (1978) notes that there were only a handful of prosecutions of editors under the new Defence of the Realm Act – and no editors or journalists were imprisoned after successful prosecution.⁴⁴

Trenches newspapers like *The Wipers Times* mocked the war correspondents: William Beach Thomas of the *Daily Mail* was dubbed Teech Bomas; Hilaire Belloc as 'Bellary Helloc'.⁴⁵ Their inadequacy is expressed in Siegfried Sassoon's poem *Editorial Impressions*⁴⁶: 'He seemed so certain "all was going well,"/As he discussed the glorious time he'd had/While visiting the trenches./"One can tell/You've gathered big impressions!" grinned the lad/Who'd been severely wounded in the back.../"I hope I've caught the feeling of 'the Line'/'And the amazing spirit of the troops.../By Jove those flying lads of ours are fine!'" The callous journalist is more interested in whether he has used the right similes in his piece than the soldier's injury; the journalist has failed in his duty to report conditions in the trenches: he concentrates not on the young wounded soldier on the ground, but the antics of the planes safe in the sky above him. His is averting his gaze from where it should be keenly focused. Also: 'wounded in the back' is significant - not by the Germans, but by his military masters and the press back home. This idea of the 'Enemy to the Rear' is explored by Fussell: 'The visiting of violent and if possible painful death upon the complacent patriotic, uncomprehending, fatuous civilians at home was a favourite fantasy indulged by the troops.' (p.86)⁴⁷ After the war, correspondents attempted to explain their actions in France, aware that the Press had sunk into low esteem. Gibbs (1923) claims that it was a 'patriotic desire to ...avoid any criticism or controversy which might hamper the military chiefs or demoralise the nation' that was the driving force behind the war reporters' shortcomings.⁴⁸

The *Daily Mail* is the target of the most savage anti press poem of the war, written by Wilfred Owen in September 1918, *Smile Smile Smile*: 'Head to limp head the sunk-eyed wounded scanned/Yesterday's *Mail*: the casualties (typed small)/And (large) Vast Booty from our latest Haul./Also they read of Cheap Homes, not yet planned...' Although the poem lacks the violence of Sassoon's *Fight to a Finish*, it is far more devastating in its effect, accusing the Press not only of distorting the truth about the war, but encouraging its continuation. The feelings of the soldiers are a warning of the social unrest that is to come in the following years. The 'Nation' may be safe and whole but it will be divided in another, more damaging way. The soldiers' ironic smiles are snapped by the press photographers and published in the papers, stupidly misinterpreted by the readers back home as smiles of happiness at the thought of cheap homes. But the soldiers have nothing but disdain for hollow Government promises, the propagandists of the press, and the gullible readers in Britain.

Wartime novels express the point of view of non-combatants: fearful of the news, anxious to hear from their loved ones, needing, but not entirely trusting the press. H G Wells's Mr Britling stops writing his upbeat leaders: with his own son in jeopardy he cannot bear to be part of the upbeat news industry; the women in Rose Macaulay's *Non-combatants and Others* retreat from hard news to the cosy safety of recipes and clothing patterns of *Home Chat*. George Oakleigh in Stephen McKenna's *Sonia* recoils at the press excesses of the War and begs the 'Unborn' of tomorrow to 'curb its press or educate itself into independence of it' (p.445). There seems to be a pivotal moment during the War when earlier Edwardian confidence in the press to be a power for good evaporates completely. D H Lawrence identifies it as the winter of 1915/16 when the '...the genuine debasement began, the unspeakable baseness of the press and the public voice, the reign of that bloated ignominy, *John Bull*...' ⁴⁹ Other commentators give surprisingly similar timing. ⁵⁰

Journalists failing in the task of reporting this great conflict is only half the story however: many newspaper proprietors and editors did extremely well out of the war, taking up posts in Lloyd George's government: Beaverbrook, who had taken full control of the *Daily Express* in 1915⁵¹ was made Minister of Information in February 1918; Rothermere, Lord Northcliffe's brother and proprietor of the *Sunday Pictorial* became President of the Air Council and Northcliffe was made Director of the Department of Propaganda in Enemy Countries. The rise of the Press Baron becomes a recurring theme in interwar literature, from the intelligent dissection of the problem in Rose Macaulay's 1920 novel *Potterism* to the aggressive attacks from the Auden group of poets: 'Beethameer, Beethameer, bully of Britain, /With your face as fat as a farmer's bum...' ⁵² Those vague fears, expressed before the War by Kipling and Montague seemed to have come true and, as commentator St John Ervine wrote in 1930: 'Newspaper proprietors now openly aspire to rule the nation and request Prime Ministers to wait in attendance upon them.'⁵³ By the 1930s the combined circulations of the Beaverbrook and Rothermere press had reached nearly four million and were now a genuine threat to democratically elected politicians⁵⁴. The fear of the Press becoming too powerful, or the Press and Government becoming too close, is a source of deep anxiety to interwar writers. Aldous Huxley makes the Press nothing more than an arm of Government, situated in Propaganda House in *Brave New World* (1932) while in Storm Jameson's trilogy *Mirror in Darkness* (1932-1934) proprietor Marcel Cohen collaborates with the sinister forces of capitalism to help bring down the Labour Government by publishing the 'Russian' [Zinoviev] letter in his newspaper. One of the few decent fictional journalists of the time, Sancroft in Ellen Wilkinson's political thriller *The Division Bell Mystery* (1932) may be a loyal friend to Parliamentary Under-Secretary Robert West, but he's a pretty hopeless journalist. A politician herself, Wilkinson presents us with the politician's idealised view of a reporter: first to tell his MP friend the news but willing to suppress stories from the paper. Sancroft remarks ruefully: 'I don't ask for confidences. You know where to find me if you want me. But I'll just bring you my little scraps of news and lay them at your feet like a good dog.'⁵⁵

Claud Cockburn notes in his autobiography *In Time of Trouble* that in 1932 the time was ripe for him to establish his irreverent political weekly, *The Week*⁵⁶.

‘It was [an] exhilarating [time] because the smug smog in which the press of that time enveloped the political realities of the moment was even thicker than I had anticipated, and thus offered even better conditions for the conduct of my experiment.’

The question we need to ask is whether Ellen Wilkinson approved of this idea of Press as lap dog to the political classes. It must be remembered that the story of the *Division Bell* is set during a Conservative administration. In one of the few scenes to take place outside the House of Commons, Robert West takes a taxi through London and passes a demonstration by the working classes over the price of bread. He muses ‘A bread march was not like England.’ (*Division Bell* p.110) This scene is telling. A Socialist, Wilkinson was appalled by the plight of the working classes at this time of mass unemployment. My reading of this scene is that while the journalists and politicians are focussed on the death of a capitalist banker inside the House, the real story is happening outside. But they barely notice. Sancroft is a poor journalist not simply because he is part of the smug smog but because he is missing the real story of the early thirties.

Conclusion

Sadly there is not enough space here to discuss at length the other threats that, in the eyes of interwar writers, the popular press posed to society. These are wide ranging and complex and include the debasement of language, the homogenising effects of mass culture and, as another war became imminent, once again sensationalist and censored reporting. There is also a ‘class’ bias with predominantly upper middle class writers either sniping at the lower class hacks (Greene, Waugh and Auden) and others (Rose Macaulay, Storm Jameson, Winifred Holtby) exposing the snobbish bewilderment of a ruling class now required to rub shoulders with, and be written about, its social

inferiors. Young Cary Folyot in Rose Macaulay's *Keeping Up Appearances* (1928) expresses her bafflement at her parents' attitude to the 'Fourth Estate': 'You told it nothing, and you disbelieved very nearly all it told you. In fact you offered it no kind of encouragement, except that, rather illogically as it might seem, you regularly bought it, or some specimens of it; you encouraged it thus far, which was perhaps odd.' Holloway (1961) notes that a feature of post-1918 literature is the idea that what is most dear and precious, 'survives within a perimeter of threatening violence, deeply feared and half understood'⁵⁷. The newspaper, which is never 'without its shriek of agony from someone' (Virginia Woolf, 1920) is part of this menacing violence surrounding the individual⁵⁸.

The portrayal of journalism 'heroes' in Edwardian literature then, seems to be a short-lived literary 'blip.' Optimism in what a genuinely democratic press could do for the nation turned quickly to disenchantment. This missed opportunity was nothing short of a 'tragedy', argues B Lfor Evans. The new press promised 'more news, more foreign intelligence' but instead brought 'the most trivial human anecdote' and leaders on the future of the motor car.⁵⁹ Of course we can debate whether that reputation is wholly justified – Mass Observation studies of the 1930s reveal readers relished their police court stories and lives of the Hollywood film stars and only a few viewed papers as unreliable and sensationalist – although the fear of clamouring headlines heralding another war was, in 1938, palpable. Nor were 'class' papers in decline. Political and Economic Planning (PEP)'s wide ranging *Report on the British Press* of 1938 concluded that actually reading habits of the British were becoming more refined, with 'class' newspapers selling seven times as many copies as they had done in the Nineteenth Century.⁶⁰ The more serious accusation, that for a while Rothermere and Beaverbrook and their enormous circulations posed a threat to the democratic system – giving rise the Baldwin's famous 'power without responsibility' quote does however stand up to scrutiny and accounts for much of the negative portrayals in the literature of the 20s and 30s.

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- ¹ AJP Taylor, *English History 1914 – 1945* Clarendon Press, 1965, p180
- ² Eg Lovelace, Colin, 'British press censorship during the First World War' in Boyce, Curran and Wingate (eds) *Newspaper History from the 17th Century to the Present Day*, London, Constable, 1978 and Farrar, Martin, *News from the Front*, Stroud, Sutton Publishing, 1998
- ³ Wells, H G, *Mr Britling Sees it Through*, Macmillan, 1916
- ⁴ Macaulay, Rose, *Non-Combatants and Others*, John Murray, 1916
- ⁵ For a discussion of mid-Victorian literary representations, see Liddle, Dallas, 'Bakhtinian Journalization and the mid-Victorian Literary Marketplace,' *Literature Compass*, 4/5 (2007): 1460-1474
- ⁶ Eg C. Seymour-Ure, 'Northcliffe's Legacy' in *Northcliffe's Legacy, aspects of the British Popular Press 1896 – 1996*, P. Catterall, C. Seymour-Ure and A. Smith (eds), Macmillan Press, 2000
- ⁷ The Structure, Ownership and Control of the Press 1914- 76 by Graham Murdock and Peter Golding in *Newspaper History*, *ibid.*
- ⁸ Office of National Statistics
- ⁹ Published by Greening
- ¹⁰ Published initially by Heinemann's in 1909, then re-issued in 1923 by Hutchinson and Co.
- ¹¹ Published by Methuen
- ¹² Published by T Fisher Unwin
- ¹³ Published by Macmillan and Co
- ¹⁴ Published in London by A and C Black
- ¹⁵ Oxford Dictionary of National Biography
- ¹⁶ Philip Gibbs, *Adventures in Journalism*, Heinemann, 1923
- ¹⁷ There is a reference to Courlander in Gibbs's autobiography *Adventures in Journalism*, starting on p. 145: 'One comrade ... was a brilliant young Jew named Alphonse Courlander...his best book – really fine – was a novel on Fleet Street called *Mightier than the Sword ...*'
- ¹⁸ See '*Something of Myself*' by Rudyard Kipling, Macmillan and Co, 1937; pp37-76
- ¹⁹ See '*Over Seventy*' by PG Wodehouse (Herbert Jenkins, London, 1957); pp28-39
- ²⁰ *John Chilcote MP* originally published in Blackwoods Magazine, 1904 and later in book form by William Blackwood, 1906; *The Four Just Men* first published 1905 by the Tallis Press; my edition Oxford Popular Fiction, 1995; *The New Machiavelli* first published 1911 by the Bodley Head; my edition Penguin Books 1946; *Napoleon of Notting Hill* published John Lane, 1904.
- ²¹ McKenna, Stephen, *Sonia: Between Two Worlds*, Methuen, 1917
- ²² See for example Curran, James, 'The press as an agency of social control' in *Newspaper History* *ibid*
- ²³ T Fisher Unwin, p.349
- ²⁴ Dicey, Edward, 'Old and New Journalism' *Fortnightly Review*, Vol 77, 1905, pp904-918
- ²⁵ Ifor Evans, B, 'The Rise of Modern Journalism', *Fortnightly Review*, February 1930, pp233-40
- ²⁶ Spender, J A, *ibid*

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- ²⁷ *The Street of Adventure*, p. 114
- ²⁸ *The Journalist*, October 1920, NUJ archives
- ²⁹ OUP 1965, p.187
- ³⁰ Curran, James, *ibid*, p.53
- ³¹ 'Rhetoric and Politics in Great Britain 1860 – 1950' by H C G Matthew in Waller, PJ, *Politics and Social Change in Modern Britain*, Sussex, Harvester Press, 1987
- ³² 'The Transformation of British Public Politics after the First World War' by Jon Lawrence, in *Past and Present*, Number 190, February 2006, pp185-216
- ³³ Written in the second half of 1917, published in the collection *Counter Attack* in July 1918
- ³⁴ Enright, D J, 'The Literature of the First World War' in Ford, Boris (ed) *The Pelican Guide to English Literature*, volume 7, Penguin Books, 1961
- ³⁵ Farrar, M, *News from the Front*, Sutton Publishing, 1998
- ³⁶ Plowman D (ed), *Bridge to the Future: Letters of Max Plowman*, Andrew Dakes, 1944
- ³⁷ Published in the collection *Fairies and Fusiliers* published by Heinemann November 1917
- ³⁸ Johnston, J *English Poetry of the First World War* Princeton University Press, 1964
- ³⁹ Eg Edward Thomas, *This is no case of Petty Right and Wrong* Published in *Six Poems*, 1916
- ⁴⁰ See for example Gibbs, P *Adventures in Journalism*, *ibid* pp230-231
- ⁴¹ Beaumont, J 'The British Press during the South African War' in M. Connelly and D. Welch (eds) *War and the Media: Reportage and Propaganda 1900 – 2003*, I B Tauris, 2005
- ⁴² *A Hind Let Loose*, *ibid*, p.19
- ⁴³ Fussell, P *The Great War and Modern Memory*, OUP, 1975
- ⁴⁴ Lovelace, C, 'British Press Censorship during the First World War' *Newspaper History*, *ibid*, pp307-319, 1978
- ⁴⁵ As quoted in Fussell, *ibid*, p.28
- ⁴⁶ From *Counter Attack*, 1918
- ⁴⁷ Fussell, P *ibid*
- ⁴⁸ Gibbs, P *ibid*, p.230
- ⁴⁹ Lawrence, D H, *Kangaroo*, London, Martin Secker, 1923; my edition, Collins Publishers Australia, 1989; p 250
- ⁵⁰ See for example, Escott, T H 'Old and New in the Daily Press', article in *Quarterly Review*, April 1917, pp 353-368 where he describes the fall of journalism from an 'honourable profession' to a business producing 'literary pemmican'. He puts the date of the turnaround at late 1916.
- ⁵¹ Griffiths, D, *Fleet Street: Five Hundred Years of the Press*, British Library Publications, 2006, p.182
- ⁵² Auden, WH, *The Orators*, Faber and Faber, 1932
- ⁵³ Ervine, St John 'The Future of the Press II' *Spectator*, November 29 1930, pp836-837
- ⁵⁴ Gardiner, Juliet, *The Thirties: An Intimate History*, Harper Press, 2010, p 110
- ⁵⁵ Wilkinson, Ellen, *The Division Bell Mystery*, Harrap and Co, 1932, p.230
- ⁵⁶ Cockburn, Claud, *In Time of Trouble*, Rupert Hart-Davis, 1957
- ⁵⁷ Holloway, John, 'The Literary Scene' in Ford, Boris (ed) *ibid*, p.74
- ⁵⁸ Woolf, Virginia, *A Writer's Diary*, Triad Grafton, 1953, p.49
- ⁵⁹ Ifor Evans, B, *ibid* February 1930, p239
- ⁶⁰ PEP, *Report on the British Press*, 1938, p.157