

Introduction

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When William Stead died on the maiden voyage of the *Titanic* in April 1912 at the age of 63, he was the most famous Englishman on board. He was one of the inventors of the modern tabloid. His advocacy of ‘government by journalism’ helped launch military campaigns. His exposé of child prostitution raised the age of consent to sixteen, yet his investigative journalism got him thrown in jail. A mass of contradictions and a crucial figure in the history of the British press, Stead was a towering presence in the cultural life of late-Victorian and Edwardian society. Stead’s achievements were commemorated variously on the centenary of his death in 2012, from the laying of a wreath on the memorial on the Embankment in London to books, articles, seminars, and broadcasts. Among them was a conference at the British Library and a book published later in the year, both entitled *W. T. Stead: Newspaper Revolutionary*.¹ Their subtitle reflected the Stead-related holdings in Colindale, the British Library’s Newspaper Library. But Stead’s revolutionary activities were not confined to the newspaper press; he had a genius for all forms of print media. The Stead archive of printed materials goes well beyond daily newspapers, to include annuals, quarterly and monthly periodicals, and, as part of his publishing ventures, series of various frequencies, including weekly.

This issue of *19* represents the breadth of Stead’s achievements. The third instalment in our reflection on Stead and his legacy, it will be followed by a series of ‘Stead Lectures’ to be held in the British Library later this year, which will address the contemporary as well as the historical press. This issue of *19* probes the perception that Stead is ‘a mass of contradictions’ by tracing connections between different aspects of his life and career.

While the print archive shows that ‘Newspaper Revolutionary’ misrepresents the diversity of Stead’s work as author, publisher, and proprietor, not to mention as spiritualist, activist, husband, and father, he continued to think of himself as a journalist first, even after leaving the *Pall Mall Gazette* and newspaper journalism in 1889.² However, academic edited collections, conferences, and journals are forms of miscellany, presenting a range of content *around* a theme, and despite the way that we foregrounded journalism, contributors and speakers responded to the diversity of Stead’s career, and the articles that follow here are no exception. Journalism, whether linked to the newspaper or

not, remains a common theme, but another is how Stead did and was many other things while conceiving and presenting himself as a journalist. Scholarly genres such as chapters, papers, and articles provide multiple accounts of Stead and his various activities. As contributions to miscellanies they necessarily multiply Steads, making it difficult to reconcile them with one another. Yet this approach is justified for Stead, whose energy and enthusiasm meant that his influence and impact were widespread. Stead's unpredictability, after all, was part of his appeal as his contemporaries wondered what he would do next.

Three thematic sections follow, which are not exhaustive, or even the most important aspects of Stead's life and career. Stead's nose for news and print media generally are matched by his willingness to travel, lecture, harangue, and negotiate, qualities rooted in his Congregational upbringing in the home of a minister. The quality of Stead's achievements may be gauged by these activities as well as his journalism skills. We are not trying to resolve Stead's 'mass of contradictions', but rather to understand why they arise.

I

The Commercial and the Campaigning

Analysing Stead's contradictions often reveals both consistency and motives, but these are not always easy to untangle. Stéphanie Prévost, in her article on Stead and the Eastern Question, quotes Emile Dillon, who described Stead as 'human, impulsive and optimistic'.³ Stead was certainly all those things, but throughout his career he was accused of obsessing about his own pet topics, or deliberately choosing sensational subjects (and describing them sensationally) to drive up circulation. Editors such as Hearst or Pulitzer might call these tactics good journalism, but his critics suspected he was cynical and manipulative, generating notoriety for his own, often commercial ends. Sometimes accusations of sensationalism were joined by accusations that Stead had become personally obsessed with his subject, particularly when he wrote about sex. The aftermath of the Maiden Tribute series in the *Pall Mall Gazette* in 1885 demonstrates this most starkly, as Stead's central involvement in the investigation and the London daily that published it made him an easy target for those who claimed he was indulging his own prurient interests as well as generating sensational copy that would sell papers.

Nonetheless, he *was* jailed, and eventually sacked as a result of this investigation and campaign, so if he readily deployed sensation to attract readers and sell papers, he was also prepared to risk his reputation and legal prosecution. As Prévost demonstrates, he employed this dual approach of a sensational topic and style earlier in his career: as editor of the *Northern Echo*, his ‘Bulgarian atrocities’ campaign to alter government indifference to the fate of Christians in Eastern Europe in 1876 resulted in his first major journalistic success and propelled him to national attention.

Stead’s critics were often quick to accuse him of hypocrisy because of his commercial interest in his publications, yet he frequently found his activism at odds with his need to keep his publications afloat. As Graham Law and Matthew Sterenberg note in their article on Old and New Journalism, Stead’s understanding of journalism conflated democracy with the market. Stead believed that because his various campaigns were unimpeachably good causes, they would receive support from his readers, which would in turn sustain his publications. Stead was adept at using publications to cohere communities that could effect social change. However, while the projects generated activity (and copy) from his readers, they did not always generate the requisite income to sustain them, often forcing Stead to adapt, curtail, or abandon them as circumstances demanded. Tom Lockwood, in his article on the Penny Poets (1896), situates Stead’s series in this broader mode, presenting it as a mixture of the ‘commercial and the campaigning’. Later spawning other series (the Penny Popular Novels and Books for the Bairns), his ‘Masterpiece Library’ offered readers access to ‘the cream of the literature of the world’.⁴ The Penny Poets series stemmed from a strategy that informed previous projects: the *Review of Reviews*, for instance, was explicitly intended ‘to make the best thoughts of the best writers in our periodicals universally accessible’; and *Borderland* set out to democratize ‘the study of the spook’.⁵ Stead was invested in the importance of high culture but, as a result of his own northern, Nonconformist, liberal roots, he believed that it should be opened to all — for a modest price, of course. That Stead never adequately solved the problem of how to fund his various projects suggests his critics were wrong about his motives; yet his appetite for publicity made him one of the most innovative journalists of his day.

II

Mediated Presence

Stead famously endorsed personality in journalism and wielded his own relentlessly.⁶ Stead was everywhere in his publications, whether this was as proprietor, publisher, or editor; the author of articles or the figure that was written about; mediating the excerpts that filled the *Review of Reviews* and *Borderland*; in the paratexts of the Penny Poets and his other publishing ventures, where he commonly addressed his readers; or as the often implied author of any number of unsigned articles. Stead's notion of personality was therefore complex, encompassing both a specific individual and a textual representation, an actor and a brand. In their article on Stead and the Women's movement, Lucy Delap and Maria DiCenzo map some of the contradictions that emerged in the spaces between Stead the representation, Stead the journalist, and the Stead the man. As they make clear, Stead offered individual women real support, providing advice, financial assistance, and, most importantly, jobs on equal terms with men. He also supported a range of women's causes in his publications, often providing much needed publicity. Yet Stead's engagements with the Woman Question were often couched in the language of chivalry, a paternalistic mode of representation that enforced gendered norms. He also tended to adopt a flirtatious tone with his female friends, basing his relationships on a heterosexual dynamic that elided the power relations between them. Stead could be a powerful ally, but it was not always clear which Stead one was dealing with.

Stead's understanding of personality in journalism was not far removed from his understanding of Spiritualism. As Paul Horn notes in his article on Stead and Henry James, Stead's notion of the 'spirit body' was an etheric version of the self that divorced personality from the body and permitted its survival after death. This meant that the dead lived on in a detectable network that might be accessed through a living medium. Stead's prolific activity among the living was only possible because of the network of men and women with whom he worked. Always alive to the capital of publicity, this was a network he acknowledged frequently; nonetheless, he ensured that their voices were always subordinate to, if not directly subsumed by, his own. Stead's colleagues, in effect, had to learn to channel Stead, dispersing his presence; however, when he came to channel the voices of others, he had difficulty with the required passivity. In Sarah Crofton's account of Julia's Bureau, Stead's (news) agency for contacting the dead, she explains how Stead

managed Julia's spirit presence, both at the bureau and in print. It was commonly accepted that medium and spirit control could affect communications from the other side but, as Stead himself noted, 'my spook writes Steadese'.⁷ He had a profound understanding of media and mediumship and knew that mediation might lead to appropriation or possession. As Delap and DiCenzo write, Stead 'knew how to generate and employ symbols and, perhaps appropriately, became one himself'. Stead exploited his mediated presence, but in doing so made it available for others.

III

Heroes and Villains

One of the places where Stead was most consistent was in his treatment of those he liked and those he did not. Marysa Demoor's paper reflects on the *Daily Mail's* remark in its headline on the sinking of the *Titanic* that Stead was 'the friend of kings'. Tracing Stead's representations of the Congo over two 'Character Sketches' — one of H. M. Stanley, the journalist and explorer, in 1890, and the other of King Leopold II in 1903 — Demoor accounts for Stead's animosity for Leopold and its surreptitious origins in both his conception of Empire and what he saw as Leopold's personal failings. Many of Stead's public feuds stemmed from what he felt was hypocrisy in public life, usually (but not always) because of sexual infidelity. The same sexual politics that underpinned his chivalric attitude to women also determined how he treated men. His persecution of Charles Dilke, for instance, was prompted because he believed his involvement in the Crawford divorce case rendered him unfit for office.⁸ His attitude to Leopold was no different: unlike Victoria, female, widowed, and loyal, Leopold had, apparently, left his wife for a prostitute, and so could not serve as imperial figurehead. Leopold was also connected to the death of one of Stead's heroes, General Gordon. Because Stead held his heroes to such high standards, it was those who died early that proved most satisfactory. As Demoor explains, after Leopold had died in 1909 Stead revealed the existence of a plan where Leopold was offered Sudan in exchange for helping Gordon at Khartoum. Stead could blame Leopold, one of his stock villains, to further lionize one of his genuine heroes.

For somebody as skilled as Stead at exploiting a public persona, he retained a rigid Nonconformist approach to the way that others presented themselves. When considering

Stead's own life it is important not to make a similar mistake. Stead insisted on absolute identity between public and private life, yet he knew that he existed as a form of distributed presence, a discourse, as 'Steadese'. Stead was highly mobile, travelling to Russia, Oberammergau, and Turkey (twice) in his final years, but both his journalism and occult interests offered the possibility of a different kind of mobilization, allowing him immediate contact with like-minded co-workers around the world.⁹ As John Durham Peters has pointed out, Stead's death on the *Titanic* is in some ways appropriate.¹⁰ Drowned in the act of 'passing over', Stead's death can be read as a triumph of media over message. Coverage of the sinking of the *Titanic* was not confined to news reports, but in the heyday of illustrated papers (an aspect of print that Stead ingeniously adapted) visual representations of the ship were prominent and frequent. Tom Gretton's article on press illustrations of the stricken *Titanic* offers a case study of the work that goes into the mediation of images and the temporal complexities that different kinds of media over time involve. In tracing the influence of Géricault's *Raft* (1819) on illustrations of the *Titanic*, a graphic form of influence of the dead can be seen, persisting, spiritlike, through different media.

Together, these eight articles suggest a number of different Steads. He is journalist (and theorist of journalism), activist, publisher, spiritualist, educator, and networker extraordinaire. Linking these is Stead the mediator, a person who channelled the words (and work) of others in order to distribute his own presence. Stead the man cannot be separated from Stead the persona: corporate, disembodied, and mobile. If he appears contradictory to us, it is because he was a super-active figure, whose life, persona, and ideas changed radically over and in time. Unlike his various discursive heroes and heroines, Stead was not coherent, but 'a mass of contradictions'. Untangling these is the key to both Stead's life and his legacy, one hundred and one years on.

¹ *W. T. Stead: Newspaper Revolutionary*, ed. by Laurel Brake and others (London: British Library, 2012).

² Apart from his two failed attempts to launch the *Daily Paper* in 1893 and 1904. See Laurel Brake, 'Who is "We"?': The "Daily Paper" Projects and the Journalism Manifestos of W. T. Stead', in *Marketing the Author: Authorial Personae, Narrative Selves and Self-Fashioning, 1880–1930*, ed. by Marysa Demoor (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2004), pp. 54–72.

³ 'Dr. E. J. Dillon: W. T. Stead As He Appeared to One Who Was Often his Antagonist', *Review of Reviews*, May 1912, pp. 483–86 (p. 484).

⁴ ‘The Masterpiece Library — Preliminary Announcement’, *Review of Reviews*, April 1895, p. 386.

⁵ W. T. Stead, ‘Programme’, *Review of Reviews*, January 1890, p. 14; ‘Seeking Counsel of the Wise’, *Borderland*, July 1893, p. 7. See also Justin Sausman, ‘The Democratisation of the Spook: W. T. Stead and the Invention of Public Occultism’, in *W. T. Stead: Newspaper Revolutionary*, ed. by Brake and others, pp. 149–65.

⁶ For the most well-known of Stead’s endorsement of personality, see ‘The Future of Journalism’, *Contemporary Review*, November 1886, pp. 663–79 (p. 663).

⁷ W. T. Stead, ‘My Experience in Automatic Writing’, *Borderland*, July 1893, p. 40.

⁸ See, for instance, Judith R. Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London* (London: Virago, 1992), p. 126; Roy Jenkins, *Sir Charles Dilke: A Victorian Tragedy* (London: Fontana, 1968), pp. 234–301.

⁹ For more on the connections between Stead’s occult interests and his journalism see Roger Luckhurst, ‘W. T. Stead’s Occult Economies’, in *Culture and Science in the Nineteenth-Century Media*, ed. by Louise Henson and others (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), pp. 125–35.

¹⁰ John Durham Peters, ‘Discourse Network 1912’, in *W. T. Stead: Newspaper Revolutionary*, ed. by Brake and others, pp. 166–80.