

‘No one pretends he was faultless’: W. T. Stead and the Women’s Movement

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I

Introduction

Mr. Stead’s frankness is the frankness of friendship. He is the Sir Galahad, the King Arthur whose chivalry is beyond question, for it has extended to something more than opening the drawing-room door for a well-dressed woman [...]. He dared to touch a great evil of our time, and for reward, had to undergo a month’s imprisonment.¹

Of the many men recognized for their contributions to women’s emancipation, the effusive and affectionate tributes to W. T. Stead, throughout his life, suggest he occupied a special role for a wide range of feminists and reformers at the time. Writing about Stead in the *Vote* in 1911, Mary O. Kennedy claimed:

There are few men who have had the courage to voice opinions contrary to those of a large number of their sex in the way that Mr. Stead has done in the past. A great chivalry towards women has influenced much of the work of his public life, and he has stood the test of a storm of hostile criticism and imprisonment to vindicate his views.²

Male supporters of the women’s movement have frequently adopted a language of chivalry, which, as Ben Griffin has argued, allowed them to endorse women’s rights without abandoning normative forms of masculinity.³ Stead, like many male suffragists, found himself able to support women’s cause by framing it within this language. When he died, constitutionalist and militant voices in the suffrage press were unanimous in their expressions of praise and gratitude for his moral and practical support for women’s rights. It was clear he had proven his steadfastness in the cause of ‘The Independence of Woman’ and his reputation seemed to transcend the otherwise competing or conflicting positions and approaches that characterized a variety of women’s reform campaigns in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.⁴ His ability to evoke such praise from quite different individuals and organizations may be attributed to what Millicent Fawcett referred to as his ‘very many-sided character’, and to what made him, according to Henry Scott Holland, a ‘most lovable man’ who ‘did not belong to anybody’.⁵ By tracing both public and private reactions to him, in the feminist press and in his personal correspondence with prominent women at the time, we find many Steads. His oft-noted

‘chivalry’ won hearts, and his ‘frankness’ and pragmatism won minds. Stead *did* and *was* many things, not all of them consistent. But this also meant that his heroism and outspokenness could be claimed in different ways. By the time of his death in 1912, women activists had shaped their representations of Stead to serve a range of rhetorical and political purposes.

Stead wrote about and commented on the emancipation of women and on specific campaigns in his writings throughout his career, but little attention has been paid to what those actively involved in the women’s movement had to say about him, or to him. The tributes to Stead in the suffrage press at the time of his death in 1912 offer important insights into what he had come to represent for those engaged in the long-standing struggle for enfranchisement and women’s rights more generally. The obituaries found in papers such as the *Common Cause*, *Votes for Women*, and the *Vote* differed in significant ways from the tributes written by men in periodicals such as the *Contemporary Review* and the *New Age* that focused primarily on Stead’s character and his career as an editor and journalist. Almost thirty years after the journalistic triumph of the ‘Maiden Tribute’, Stead was still remembered most vividly by suffragists for his ‘heroic’ role in the passing of the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885. The obituary in *Votes for Women* named it his ‘greatest achievement’ and the circumstances of the ‘Maiden Tribute’ articles emerge as foremost in all the pieces devoted to him in the suffrage press. The episode marked the beginning of his public support for the rights of *all* women. Fawcett recalled:

I do not think I ever heard his name till everybody heard it in 1885, when all London — and, indeed, all the world — rang with the shameless and cruel traffic for immoral purposes in little children, exposed for the first time in the *Pall Mall Gazette*.⁶

Stead’s acts and the punishment he endured for them had such lasting impact because of their dramatic quality and his ability to generate powerful symbols that resonated for different groups. The fact that he could ‘stir’, ‘rouse’, and ‘awaken’ public opinion and conscience was of immense value to those who had tried and failed to do so through more ordinary measures. Stead served as a model and vindication for those who were willing to employ sensational and unorthodox methods.

The suffrage papers were united in their warm and generous praise of, and gratitude for, this ‘crusader’ and ‘stalwart friend’ of women, even though his heroism was invoked in different ways. For his friend and fellow purity campaigner, Millicent Fawcett,

Stead was a ‘moral’ hero. In her tribute in the *Common Cause* (official organ of the constitutionalist National Union of Women’s Suffrage Societies (NUWSS)), she claimed that his name would hold an honoured place in the history of the reform of moral ideas. What made Stead exemplary, according to Fawcett, was his commitment to ‘protect and shelter the weak’ and to ‘right that which is wrong with all his might’ (‘In Memoriam’, p. 37). Stead’s moral framing of the white slave trade reinforced Fawcett’s own investment in moral reform and the ‘ideal of womanhood’ — her writing is shot through with the language of ‘shame’, ‘evil’, ‘innocence’, and ‘morality’, not unlike Stead’s own language in his sentencing statement where he invoked ‘the battle for womanhood, the battle for purity, the battle for the protection of young girls’.⁷ Fawcett had spoken out publicly in his defence when he was criticized and imprisoned for the ‘Maiden Tribute’ articles in 1885.⁸ In addition to the cover photograph of Stead, and Fawcett’s ‘In Memoriam’ in the 25 April 1912 issue of *Common Cause* (Fig. 1), the paper ran follow-up coverage in subsequent weeks, most of which was designed to mobilize support for the 1912 Criminal Law Amendment Bill. Stead became the leverage its advocates used, arguing that passing the bill would be a fitting memorial to the man to whose ‘efforts and sufferings the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885 was mainly due’.⁹

Votes for Women (official organ of the militant Women’s Social and Political Union (WSPU)) offered less overall coverage of Stead himself. There is a small item in the opening news section which claims that ‘he was always throughout his life the champion of the rights of women and believed in their human, social, and political equality with men’, highlighting his recognition of figures like Mrs Wolstenholme Elmy and Annie Kenney (whom he had hailed as ‘a modern Joan of Arc’).¹⁰ His status for the militant movement becomes clearer in a brief article later in the same issue which describes him as ‘not only one of the earliest supporters of the WSPU in London’, but also as someone who ‘himself fought a brave fight on behalf of women’. The remainder of the article foregrounds the story of his prison treatment as being of great interest to suffragists at the present stage of the movement and quotes a substantial part of Stead’s ‘My First Imprisonment’ published in the *Pall Mall Gazette* in 1886.¹¹ Tellingly, there is no commentary, and the account of his prison experience (that is, his ability to conduct his work, and to receive gifts and visitors, etc.) is left to speak for itself, placed opposite letters from readers on the same page detailing the treatment of female suffragist prisoners and the refusal to grant them political status. The paper had used the example of Stead’s



Fig. 1: Common Cause, 25 April 1912, p. 53.

treatment as a political prisoner earlier in 1909 and returned to the theme in June 1912. Like the NUWSS, the WSPU also supported the Criminal Law Amendment Bill and ran follow-up coverage in the weeks following Stead's death. The cover cartoon for 3 May 1912 features a suffragette asking for the key to open the prison door labeled 'white slave problem' and Asquith and Lloyd George, dressed as gaolers, hold the keys (Fig. 2). Asquith holds several keys to the door (including one labeled 'chivalry'), but the real key (labelled 'votes for women') is held by Lloyd George. Even though the WSPU endorsed the idea that passing the bill would be a fitting tribute to Stead, the cartoon indicates that the real key to change lay in women's rights, not men's chivalry.

"Votes for Women," May 3, 1912. Registered at the G.P.O. as a Newspaper.

VOTES FOR WOMEN

VOL. V. (New Series), No. 217. FRIDAY, MAY 3, 1912. Price 1d. Weekly (1/12)

SET THE WHITE SLAVES FREE!

GABLER ASQUITH: "We don't seem to have the right key."
GABLER L.L. & G. GEORGE: "I've got another, but don't let's try it."
W.S.P.U. (speaking to the top in the hand of Asquith): "THAT'S the only key: VOTES FOR WOMEN."
IF YOU CAN?"

BOTH GAOLERS: "The answer is in the negative!"

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In the brave women who are fighting for freedom, to the noble women who all down the ages have led that flying and leaping forward to this day without ceasing it: to all women all over the world, of whatever race, or creed, or calling, whether they be with us or against us in this fight, we dedicate this paper.

THE OUTLOOK.

The trial of Mrs. Fawcett and Mr. and Mrs. Patrick Lawrence has been postponed until Wednesday, May 31. This decision was reached by the Court on Wednesday last, when Mr. Justice Coleridge, upon the application of the Crown, requested for the third time that Mrs. Fawcett's health was not such as to enable her properly to appear for defence. At the same time, the Court stated that the first application for postponement was made on April 16, when a doctor's certificate as to Mrs. Fawcett's condition was presented. The application was opposed by the Prosecution, who also called medical testimony, and it was reported by Mr. Justice Coleridge. The application was refused on Friday last, when the evidence of other medical men was produced. It was again opposed by the Prosecution and rejected. A final application was made on Wednesday last, with all the defendants present in Court, at this occasion the Attorney-General appeared in person, and said he would no longer offer opposition, but he wished to be assured that the defendants would be satisfied with a postponement of one fortnight. Mr. Justice Coleridge said under these circumstances he would order the trial to be put off.

A Success Method.

Our readers will learn with satisfaction that this success—the only one compatible with elementary notions of humanity and true justice—is at last to be adopted. But they will naturally wonder why the Government took such a tortuous method to this end. Having learned Mrs. Fawcett's health in prison, why did not the Government do the straight thing and allow the adjournment when first applied for, instead of persisting in delay and then finally appealing to the request only when she was brought into Court? Such evasive behaviour attempts to suggest that perhaps their own consciences rather than those of humanity prompted their final decision. Our readers will be interested to learn that in the trial itself Mrs. Fawcett Lawrence will be defended by Mr. The Hon. and Mr. Meic, while Mr. Fawcett and Mr. Patrick Lawrence will conduct their own case.

The Franchise Reform Bill.

Twelve last week questions were put in the House of Commons with reference to the proposed Government Franchise Bill, and on both occasions reply was made. After we go to press Mr. Philip Snowden will again ask the Prime Minister whether the Government intend to carry a Franchise Bill through all its stages this Session; and the value of Mr. Asquith's reply will depend, from our point of view, mainly upon whether a further question be put as to the nature of the proposed franchise measure. The introduction of a Modified Franchise Bill, in this or any other Session, will be taken by the Women's Social and Political Union to be an act of direct hostility to the suffrage movement, and will be regarded by them as an indication of militant action. Nothing but a Government measure, giving women the vote on equal terms with men, will be accepted by the Union; and the proposal to introduce any other measure who have not demanded any such measure, while the franchise question carried on by women all over the country is ignored, will be as pronounced an insult to women as to be seen when the Prime Minister has made his government, last November, and will be ample justification for any action that the women of the country might think fit to take.

Shipwreck Specified.

The National Conference of Public Health have been the Imperial Parliament itself, judging by the

Fig. 2: Votes for Women, 3 May 1912.

The *Vote*, official organ of the Women's Freedom League (another militant organization) offered more coverage of reactions to the sinking of the *Titanic* than the other papers did. Stead was warmly remembered by Charlotte Despard in her leader, which was followed by an article that celebrates him as 'the man who crusaded ceaselessly and unwearingly against injustice', with an emphasis on his role as a 'staunch friend' of the suffrage cause in the early days of the Militant Movement:

His support of the Suffrage Movement arose from a deep conviction of the value of woman in the world, and of the need of her co-operation with men in the cause of progress. He set an excellent example to editors and other employers in securing the service of women and in his belief in equal pay for equal work.¹²

Along with these practical considerations, the tribute in the *Vote* also recalls his 'vigorous crusading against the White Slave Trade' and the imprisonment he endured as a result. While Stead's prison experience had a particular relevance for militant suffragists who used it to legitimate their own unorthodox tactics and sacrifices for a cause, it resonated for non-militants as well. Fawcett's biographer, David Rubenstein, notes her concern with Stead's comfort while in prison, quoting a letter to Mrs Stead in which Fawcett describes his character as that of 'the hero saint who in every age of the world's history has been picked out for special persecution & misrepresentation'.¹³

What stands out in all of these tributes by women activists, despite differences in emphases, is the focus on Stead's self-sacrifice (as proof of conviction and genuine support), which is used to reinforce or validate their own claims and strategies. Stead appealed to (and fought for) an abstract or idealized concept of *womanhood* as well as for *women* in practical and material terms, bridging 'difference' and 'equality' approaches to feminism. He could refer to 'Woman' with a capital 'W' and might state 'I have always felt that women were nearer to God than men are' in one breath, while in another offer sound strategic advice to young women trying to make a living as journalists, or to seasoned activists lobbying the government for voting rights.¹⁴ The abstract and the material merge in his celebration of the life of Mrs Booth whose most distinctive contribution, he claimed, was 'the utilization of womanhood outside the domestic sphere, and the general recognition of the capacity of women in all kinds of public work'.¹⁵ Occasionally he could even use the stereotypical concept of womanhood strategically to expose reactionary thinking, as he did in his tribute to Florence Nightingale. He established her as the 'supreme type of feminine woman' who was widely held to embody

the ‘ideal of womanhood’, only to enumerate all the qualities that made her the epitome of what anti-suffragists claimed was unwomanly, namely that she was an educated, strong-minded spinster who belonged to the Shrieking Sisterhood and supported woman’s suffrage.¹⁶ Stead played with the codes to rhetorical advantage.

Nonetheless, activists of the women’s movement displayed a shrewd sense of Stead’s and their own respective contributions. The tributes to Stead reveal a tension between the high-blown rhetoric of chivalry and a more realistic assessment of women’s own hard work in effecting change. While his influential championing of causes was deeply appreciated, reformers never lost sight of the practical aims of the wider women’s movement and how much they could eventually achieve on their own, particularly with the parliamentary franchise. Even in the context of an obituary, Fawcett seized the opportunity to criticize the government for stalling the current White Slave Traffic bill, arguing that ‘it needs behind it the electoral force which it would receive if women had votes’ (‘W. T. Stead’, p. 611). She had articulated the link between women’s rights and addressing ‘social evils’ at the time of the ‘Maiden Tribute’ furore, when she identified the conditions of the white slave trade as rooted in the ‘economical and political subjection of women’ (‘Speech or Silence’, p. 330). As late as 1936, Alison Neilans, Secretary of the Association for Moral and Social Hygiene, and former member of the Women’s Freedom League, in a survey of changes in sex morality, invoked Stead as ‘the man who is, rightly, and most frequently, mentioned in connection with the protection of girls’. But how she qualified his contribution is noteworthy:

There can be no doubt that the inspiration which brought about the work of Mr. Benjamin Scott’s London Committee and the chivalrous intervention of Mr. W. T. Stead came from leaders of the women’s movement. This is obvious in reading the many documents and pamphlets issued at the time, and during his trial Stead spoke, with emotion, of his debt to Josephine Butler. It is, therefore, right to rank this advance as one of the achievements of that movement, but it would be base ingratitude not to pay tribute to the men who did so much to help it and, in this instance, to the man who rescued it from a hopeless impasse.¹⁷

It was Stead’s ability to sensationalize which proved valuable in the public sphere. He was a powerful and charismatic ally, but as Neilans was at pains to point out, the initiatives he aided had been built slowly by others and the larger goal no doubt was to ensure conditions that made chivalry unnecessary.

The coverage of Stead's death in the suffrage press and later suggests that the Criminal Law Amendment bills bookended his illustrious career in the eyes of women reformers. In 1885, he was able to take hold of something built up slowly through the efforts of campaigners and to make it news — to help propel the bill through parliament. A kind of symmetry was achieved by the fact that Stead's death gave the final push to the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1912. The suffrage press was in agreement with Fawcett that 'a strengthening of the law for the protection of women and girls' would be a fitting tribute to Stead and that his 'tragic end would stir Parliament once more to action'.¹⁸ He knew how to generate and employ symbols and, perhaps appropriately, became one himself.

II

Private Correspondence

Much of the same warmth that can be read into the memorials to Stead at his death in 1912 also emerges in his personal correspondence. He had a reputation as a benefactor of individual women who sought to work in journalism or printing. He employed and lent money to Annie E. Holdsworth, for example, a novelist and editor who went on to edit the *Woman's Signal*. She noted in a private letter to Stead that 'you are the only person who has ever given me a hand up the hill in difficulty'.¹⁹ When attempting to found a new national, the *Daily Paper*, in 1904, Stead had employed women to sell and distribute the paper. This support for women's employment was welcomed by Christabel Pankhurst, and she predicted that Stead's paper 'will be a great force on our side. Hitherto, the Press has done more harm than good. Even the papers not actually opposed boycott the Women's Suffrage movement.'²⁰ Pankhurst also recognized Stead's capacity to publicize her cause, and gave him advance notice of her controversial application to study law at London's Lincoln's Inn in 1904.

Stead sustained prolonged and significant relationships with women of varying politics who were heavily involved in the women's movement. The correspondences that resulted can reveal the nuances of his relationship to suffrage and the women's movement, and, in particular, the fault lines and tensions that were hinted at in the public record. Stead's relationship with Annie Besant was a significant early collaboration, starting in the 1880s. Both shared concerns over the rights of women workers, and women's sexual

vulnerability. Both saw their journalism in populist terms — Besant talked of herself and Stead as being at the service of ‘the people’. They also shared an interest in spiritualism and religion, and became close friends. In her letters, Besant addressed Stead as ‘Sir Galahad’, and signed herself ‘St George’.²¹ Her tone towards Stead was playful, almost flirtatious, and this is borne out in Stead’s public acknowledgement that flirting was an appropriate vehicle for men to adopt towards women. He claimed in a 1904 interview for the *World of Dress*, conducted by Maud Churton Braby:

It’s one of my theories [...] that nothing so adds to the innocent gaiety of the world as harmless flirtatiousness. [...] I always get on splendidly with women. Shall I tell you why? The whole secret of getting on well with women is to be absolutely faithful to one’s wife. Yes, and to be so entirely innocent in your relations with women all your life that you can meet them on terms of absolute equality and friendship — just as one can another man.²²

Flirting did not, however, allow for a maturing of the relationship, and there were clearly tensions between Stead and Besant. Though Stead’s power to publicize was welcomed in the tributes paid at his death, it also made for difficulties. Besant was irritated by Stead’s occasional failure to respond as a friend, rather than as a professional editor, and wrote in 1888: ‘I am not grateful for your formal “many thanks for your kind letter”, in return for a letter that was really meant to be friendly and not formal.’²³ Later that same year, after another spat, she wrote: ‘If you had been to me less exquisitely gentle and sympathetic, if you had been at all hard or contemptuous, I am afraid you would have driven me into a somewhat dangerous frame of mind.’ But she reflected that Stead’s good qualities had dispelled her anger, and ended the letter ‘Goodnight, my Rex’.²⁴ Stead was clearly capable of inspiring great affection among women writers and activists, who valued his opinion.

There is, however, a hint of a paternalistic or dominant role in much of Stead’s correspondence with women. He exchanged many letters with ‘New Woman’ novelist Sarah Grand, and seemed to act towards her as a fatherly advisor. She wrote to him in 1894: ‘Your kind letter [...] found me in the midst of many perplexities, and cleared the air like the coming of a strong and confident person when one is feeling weak.’ Grand also addressed him fondly as ‘my dear old grumbler’.²⁵ Another correspondent, the poet S. Gertrude Ford, addressed Stead as ‘Lion Heart’, and signed her letters ‘Your grateful little Mouse-friend’.²⁶ The playful relationships did not always seem to be on a basis of ‘absolute equality’, despite Stead’s claims. Elizabeth Robins, the American suffrage activist, actor, and supporter of militancy, corresponded repeatedly with Stead in the

1890s. She signed herself ‘Hedda’, the Ibsen character she had famously portrayed. She valued Stead’s opinion on her books, as well as his capacity to publicize them, and addressed him as ‘Kind Friend’ and ‘Dearest Prophet’. As Annie Besant had discovered, however, Stead sometimes turned away from acting as a personal friend, and became the busy editor and professional publicist. Robins wrote to Stead in anger in 1898 claiming that he had misjudged one of her books by failing to read it himself: ‘Seriously, my dear Mr Stead; I think I ought to *try* at least to dissuade you from darkening counsel by taking some of the idle and ludicrously superficial comments of overworked underlings of the press.’ But she continued to admire what she termed ‘that side of you that the world has little knowledge of’.²⁷

The multifaceted nature of Stead crops up in much of his correspondence, and led to some confusion over his beliefs. Stead’s correspondence with the vocal anti-feminist Arabella Kenealy after the publication of her 1899 book, *A Semi-Detached Marriage*, suggests Stead’s willingness to conciliate and publicize opposed conceptions of women’s role. Kenealy made no secret of her beliefs. She wrote to Stead:

I think women should not shout and wave their arms so belligerently [...]. I see now homes deserted, childcare regarded as a nuisance, husbands as without sympathy or companionship — the while their womankind are [...] playing hockey, or declaiming about ‘rights’ on platforms or in clubs, or at tea parties and social functions.²⁸

Despite the seeming conflict between their sentiments, Stead had publicized her book, and Kenealy wrote to him noting that ‘it was most kind of you to give me such a nice notice in the *Review of Reviews*’. She asked Stead to call on her when next in London, because she felt that their correspondence was very vivid: ‘there has been such a zap in it.’²⁹

The contradictions of Stead’s character were explored most explicitly by novelist and activist Olive Schreiner. Though Schreiner had a very formidable reputation as the author of what was often referred to as ‘the feminist bible’, her 1912 polemic *Woman and Labour*, she was reluctant to commit herself to a definable cause. She wrote in 1912: ‘I have never been able to bind myself to any one section of any great world movement, like socialism or the woman, it seems to fetter me.’³⁰ She was always a mercurial, opinionated figure, perhaps similar to Stead in her determination to belong to no one. Schreiner was living peripatetically between Britain and South Africa during the more than twenty years of her correspondence with Stead and clearly relied on him to publicize her writings. She talked of waiting for the *Review of Reviews* to come out with ‘a painful intensity of

interest'. Their relationship was often warm and appreciative, dating back to Stead's 'Maiden Tribute' controversy. Schreiner wrote to Stead in 1891: 'I shall never forget the stand you made for women eight years ago when my heart first went out to you.'³¹

However, there were limits to Stead's moral tolerance that Schreiner found irritating. She found his analysis of sexual morality simplistic, intransigent, or unreflective about women's sexual choices. Schreiner wrote in 1891:

How is it that that great wide heart of yours cannot be a little more merciful [...]. The glory of your nature is its width. All people seem so narrowly limited in their sympathies, not you; therefore I hate to see a limitation in you anywhere.³²

In particular, it was some high-profile adultery scandals that seemed to show Stead's intransigence. She commented acidly in an 1896 letter to Stead:

You refer to that woman as the man's 'mistress'. But there is nothing to imply that the man supported her, and no woman can rightly be called a mistress and still less a prostitute, unless she sells her body in return for gain.³³

Stead's accusations of vice were based on a conventional morality that Schreiner sought to problematize:

To me the purity of a sex relation between a man and a woman lies finally in the fact that it is not a matter of material considerations. That is nearly the only point in the woman question on which you never seem to see clearly.

She elaborated further in a long letter to Stead the following year, in which she talked of the priority of the mental unity that should underlie marriage, and which allowed her to accept quite unconventional domestic arrangements — this was something on which, she feared, Stead failed to 'go to the root of the matter'.³⁴

III

Moral Reform and Feminine Agency

Schreiner's criticism may have been due to Stead's tendency towards overblown and abstract moralizing about poorly defined entities such as 'Womanhood'. In a eulogy given at a Stead memorial service, one speaker noted that

one of [Stead's] supreme aims in life was to lift [woman] to her true plane in life, and to kindle within her a sense of the greatness of her responsibility and of the need there was for the whole-hearted dedication of her powers to the welfare of mankind.³⁵

Stead, then, was seen by admirers as committed to instilling race-responsibility in women, described in a fashion that sometimes seemed to trivialize women's agency and self-fashioning. After his death, there was a tone among the eulogies to Stead within the purity press that must have made other feminists uneasy. In 1913, a regular male contributor to the penny weekly paper the *Awakener* remembered Stead, and asked the readership rhetorically: 'When is the Champion of Woman coming? To Woman as she is to-day. Beset by a thousand foes [...]. When is the convincing power of a man's strong personality coming to the front to right the wrongs of decades?'³⁶ Stead might have distanced himself from this kind of unfortunate rhetoric, and he was careful in some notes written for the *Review of Reviews* in the final weeks of his life to assert that

what the women should do it is for the women to decide. Far be it for a mere man to arrogate to himself the right to direct the political strategy of politicians who are at least as capable of framing their own policy as any politicians in Parliament.³⁷

However, he went on to give his own opinions as to what should be done, and the 'Sir Galahad' role, saviour of the women's movement, or womanhood in general, was sometimes irresistible to him.

Schreiner later confided in another friend that during one meeting she had had with Stead in London, she had 'attacked him so violently for what I considered all his shortcomings as Editor of the P.M.G. [*Pall Mall Gazette*], that I thought he would never forgive me'. Schreiner was, however, always ready to reclaim the relationship, and claimed that the violence of her attack was the 'truest sign of friendship'. She continued to refer to him, slightly patronizingly, though with warmth, as 'dear old Stead' up to his death, and they continued to share with each other advance copies of articles and reviews. Nonetheless, she speculated that there were two Steads, the journalist and her personal friend; her letters to Stead always tried to bring out the qualities in him that she did admire.³⁸

Nonetheless, Schreiner found that Stead's instincts were not to be relied upon; her correspondence is full of cajoling and flattery in a relationship that was unpredictable. She was always willing to suspect that his desire to produce sensational journalism, or his busy career, might outweigh his good judgement or personal commitment to causes. In 1890 she suspected that what she had taken to be a personal relationship might actually be managed by a secretary: 'Your last two letters don't seem like you. Perhaps it is only their

being in type but it seems to me as if some one else had written them.’³⁹ She was extremely cross when Stead failed to respect her anonymity in an article published in the *Review of Reviews* in 1891. Stead clearly sought the cachet of Schreiner’s literary reputation, and despite Schreiner’s choice of writing anonymously, introduced her article to his readers as easily identifiable as ‘the handiwork of the woman of genius who gave us “The Story of an African Farm”’. Schreiner noted in response to a friend that ‘I’m really going to kill him this time!!’⁴⁰ One of her subsequent letters to Stead insisted: ‘Don’t quote anything out of my letter because it was written for you only.’ Another letter reminded him pointedly: ‘Before I make any assertion in any print whatsoever, I must have all my facts [...] distinct & marshalled.’⁴¹ Stead seemed too liberal with the truth, and too committed to sensational exposés, for Schreiner’s liking.

These private correspondences point to a deeper feminist ambivalence over Stead, and suggest that we might usefully imagine three Steads at play in his relationship with feminist activists. The chivalrous Stead was clearly a long-standing and deeply felt element, evidenced by the financial, emotional, and professional support he gave to women and the women’s movement. The endearments and playful nicknames of the letters suggest that Stead’s relationships were treasured friendships, despite the tensions of occasional paternalism on his part, or doubts about the value of chivalry to women. However, on occasion, Stead the intimate friend gave way to another Stead, the unprincipled journalist and editor, keen to gain notoriety for his publications even at the expense of a contributor’s wishes. Finally, the correspondence with Schreiner also reveals the intransigent moralist Stead, whose commitment in his public writing to normative concepts of ‘the Race’, ‘Womanhood’, and ‘Mankind’ was likely to lead to a judgemental tone, and away from respect for individual agency and choice.

IV

Conclusions

Stead’s mercurial nature and incompatible qualities may have made him a difficult figure for feminists to interact with. The tensions that emerged through private exchanges were sometimes acknowledged in public: Millicent Fawcett’s obituary for Stead in the *Contemporary Review* noted with honesty that ‘no one pretends he was faultless’. Nonetheless, Fawcett concluded, ‘he had a great and generous heart, a boundless and

intense vitality, and the spontaneous desire everywhere and always to protect and cherish the weak' ('W. T. Stead', p. 609). To many of his collaborators, Stead seemed unreliable, swinging between progressive tolerance and censorious moralizing. His commitment to publicity and the needs of the press sometimes made for an apparent lack of principle and this is illustrated well by the last of the causes he was to embrace.

When Stead died, he was on his way to address a meeting of the Men and Religion Forward Movement (MRFM) in New York, on the topic of 'World's Peace'.⁴² This was a movement that was critical of the influence of women in religion, and explicitly excluded them from its meetings.⁴³ Stead himself described it as a 'remarkable' movement. He gave it no clear endorsement, but seemed enthusiastic about the movement's ability to mobilize very large numbers of men in a religious cause. He clearly found the movement compelling, and was willing to overlook the misogyny of elements of its approach. Stead's tolerance of a self-consciously 'masculinist' cause and his involvement in its movement, though abruptly curtailed by his death in 1912, is suggestive of how his methods and moral commitments could be used in ways both warmly supportive of, and hostile to, the women's movement.

After his death, Stead was eulogized at a memorial service held in New York by the MRFM not as chivalrous, but as 'ardent, fanatical in righteousness, prophetic, absolutely fearless', and held up as a model for Christian manliness.⁴⁴ This seems a curious choice for the MRFM, which had eschewed emotionalism and sensationalism — rhetorical modes in which Stead excelled. Instead, the MRFM preferred to use what they saw as manly methods — calm, rational, and businesslike argument. Stead's own high-blown, emotional rhetoric and the sensational new journalism would not have been welcome.

Feminist and suffragist activists had long celebrated the chivalrous and practical support men offered their cause. In Stead's memorial service in Westminster Chapel in 1912, the speaker, Dr Clifford, claimed: 'No movement that gave promise of help to woman called in vain for his chivalry and devotion.'⁴⁵ But male chivalry towards women had always proved a double-edged sword, and the sinking of the *Titanic* was a prompt for a strong critique of chivalry in the feminist and suffrage press.⁴⁶ In that context, chivalry was seen as an inadequate male impulse, compared to women's more determined commitment to save all lives. To be eulogized as a chivalrous man in 1912 was no clear endorsement of feminist worth. Nonetheless, chivalry was part of Stead's showmanship

and perhaps feminists accepted and even celebrated his particular brand of it because the more outrageous instances could be forgiven: and, more importantly, because he also put his money where his mouth was when it counted. His very inconsistencies meant he could be claimed in different ways by competing voices or tendencies in and outside the women's movement. For feminists, he represented a highly adaptable public figure or 'brand', used to endorse everything from moral purity to suffrage militancy. Despite the tensions that accompanied publicity tactics and Stead's sponsorship of women's causes, his relationship with the women's movement illustrates, ultimately, a strategic reciprocity between feminist activists and the press.

¹ 'Mr. Stead on Women Journalists', *Woman's Herald*, 1 October 1892, p. 3.

² Mary O. Kennedy, 'Mr. W. T. Stead on the Emancipation of Woman', *Vote*, 4 March 1911, p. 225.

³ Ben Griffin notes too that chivalric masculinity was a flexible discourse that was also adopted by male opponents of women's campaigns for the vote, employment and child custody rights, and property reform. See Ben Griffin, *The Politics of Gender in Victorian Britain: Masculinity, Political Culture and the Struggle for Women's Rights* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 185–86. On the uses of chivalry by male suffragists, see Sandra Stanley Holton, 'Manliness and Militancy: The Political Protest of Male Suffragists and the Gendering of the "Suffragette" identity', in *The Men's Share?: Masculinities, Male Support and Women's Suffrage in Britain, 1890–1920*, ed. by Angela John and Claire Eustance (London: Routledge, 1997) pp. 110–34; Angela John, 'Between the Cause and the Courts: The Curious Case of Cecil Chapman', in *A Suffrage Reader: Charting Directions in British Suffrage History*, ed. by Claire Eustance, Joan Ryan, and Laura Ugolini (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 2000), pp. 145–61.

⁴ The phrase 'The Independence of Woman' derives from 'The Gospel According to the Pall Mall Gazette' where it appears second in a list of the ten outstanding items reproduced by Frederic Whyte in Appendix I. See Frederic Whyte, *The Life of W. T. Stead*, 2 vols (New York: Garland, 1971), II, 321. According to Stead's gospel, 'Woman, no longer the mere ancillary of man, to be petted or enslaved at his will, is to have as independent a voice in the disposal of her life as he. No longer are careers to be closed to the talents of one-half of the race. The course must be open to all, and woman herself must decide, after full experiment, what best suits her genius, and how best she can develop her faculties.'

⁵ Millicent Fawcett, 'In Memoriam', *Common Cause*, 25 April 1912, p. 37. Henry Scott Holland, 'W. T. Stead', *Contemporary Review*, May 1912, pp. 611–13 (p. 613).

⁶ Millicent Garrett Fawcett, 'W. T. Stead', *Contemporary Review*, May 1912, pp. 609–11 (p. 609).

⁷ Stead's closing statement is reproduced on the *W. T. Stead Resource Site*

<<http://www.attackingthedevil.co.uk/pmg/tribute/armstrong/bailey/steadclose.php>> [accessed 4 April 2013].

⁸ Millicent Garrett Fawcett, 'Speech or Silence', *Contemporary Review*, September 1885, pp. 326–31.

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- ⁹ ‘The Criminal Law Amendment (White Slave Traffic) Bill’, *Common Cause*, 2 May 1912, p. 53.
- ¹⁰ ‘Mr. W. T. Stead’, *Votes for Women*, 26 April 1912, p. 466.
- ¹¹ ‘Mr. Stead’s Prison Treatment’, *Votes for Women*, 26 April 1912, p. 476.
- ¹² ‘William Thomas Stead: Crusader’, *Vote*, 27 April 1912, p. 29.
- ¹³ David Rubenstein, *A Different World for Women: The Life of Millicent Fawcett* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1991), p. 86.
- ¹⁴ The first remarks are reported by Mary O. Kennedy in ‘Mr. W. T. Stead on the Emancipation of Woman’, *Vote*, 4 March 1911, p. 225. Examples of Stead’s practical advice can be found in an article such as ‘Young Women and Journalism’, *Young Woman*, October 1892, pp. 12–14.
- ¹⁵ William Thomas Stead, *Life of Mrs. Booth: The Founder of the Salvation Army* (New York: Revell, 1900; repr. Bibliolife), p. 86.
- ¹⁶ ‘Florence Nightingale’, *Review of Reviews*, September 1910, pp. 222–23 (repr. in *W. T. Stead Resource Site* <<http://www.attackingthediabol.co.uk/reviews/nightingale.php>> [accessed 4 April 2013]).
- ¹⁷ Alison Neilans, ‘Changes in Sex Morality’, in *Our Freedom and Its Results*, ed. by Ray Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1936), pp. 173–220 (p. 198).
- ¹⁸ ‘A Memorial to Mr. Stead’, *Votes for Women*, 3 May 1912, p. 482.
- ¹⁹ Annie E. Holdsworth to Stead (4 January 1892), Papers of William T. Stead, Churchill Archives Centre (CAC), Churchill College, Cambridge, STED 1/40.
- ²⁰ Christabel Pankhurst to Stead (2 February 1904), CAC, STED 1/59.
- ²¹ Annie Besant to Stead (15 February 1888), CAC, STED 1/6.
- ²² Maud Churton Braby, ‘Stead at Fifty-Five: A Woman’s Portrait’, *World of Dress*, 1904 (repr. in Whyte, II, 268).
- ²³ Besant to Stead (13 February 1888), CAC, STED 1/6.
- ²⁴ Besant to Stead (1 April 1888), CAC, STED 1/6.
- ²⁵ Sarah Grand to Stead (17 January 1894; 19 May 1901), CAC, STED 1/33.
- ²⁶ S. Gertrude Ford to Stead (7 November 1911), CAC, STED 1/26.
- ²⁷ Elizabeth Robins to Stead (31 December 1898; 10 November [1904 or 1905?]), CAC, STED 1/61.
- ²⁸ Arabella Kenealy to Stead (23 April [1899?]), CAC, STED 1/44.
- ²⁹ Kenealy to Stead (16 April [1899?]), CAC, STED 1/44.
- ³⁰ Olive Schreiner to William Philip (‘Will’) Schreiner (21 April 1912), UCT Manuscripts & Archives, Olive Schreiner Letters Project Transcription (OSLPT).
- ³¹ Schreiner to Stead (1891), NLSA Cape Town, Special Collections, OSLPT.
- ³² Schreiner to Stead (31 March 1891), National Archives Depot (NAD), Pretoria, OSLPT.
- ³³ Schreiner to Stead (25 March 1895), NLSA Cape Town, Special Collections, OSLPT.
- ³⁴ Schreiner to Stead (10 January 1896), NAD, Pretoria, OSLPT.
- ³⁵ ‘The World Pays its Tribute’, *Review of Reviews*, May 1912, pp. 473–94 (p. 491).
- ³⁶ Giverne Sieveking, [possibly Lancelot Sieveking?] ‘The Power of the Individual’, *Awakener*, 26 April 1913, p. 6.

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- ³⁷ Stead, unpublished notes quoted after his death in the *Vote*, 27 April 1912, p. 30.
- ³⁸ Schreiner to Isie Smuts née Krige (12 February 1904), NAD, Pretoria, OSLPT.
- ³⁹ Schreiner to Stead (March 1890), NAD, Pretoria, OSLPT.
- ⁴⁰ Schreiner to Mary Sauer née Cloete (8 August 1891), NLSA Cape Town, Special Collections, OSLPT.
- ⁴¹ Schreiner to Stead (January 1897; 20 September 1896), NAD, Pretoria, OSLPT.
- ⁴² Stead, 'The Progress of the World', *Review of Reviews*, April 1912, pp. 337–50 (p. 350) (repr. in Whyte, II, 312–13).
- ⁴³ Evelyn Kirkley, 'Is it Manly to be Christian?: The Debate in Victorian and Modern America', in *Redeeming Men: Religion and Masculinities*, ed. by Stephen B. Boyd and others (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996) pp. 80–88; Gail Bederman, "'The Women Have Had Charge of the Church Work Long Enough": The Men and Religion Forward Movement of 1911–1912 and the Masculinization of Middle-Class Protestantism', *American Quarterly*, 41 (1989), 432–65.
- ⁴⁴ 'William T. Stead, "One who Dared to be Christian"', *Christian Work and Evangelist*, 27 April 1912, pp. 531–32, quoted in G. S. Smith, *The Search for Social Salvation: Social Christianity and America, 1880–1925* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2000), p. 82.
- ⁴⁵ 'The World Pays its Tribute', p. 491.
- ⁴⁶ Lucy Delap, "'Thus Does Man Prove his Fitness to Be the Master of Things": Shipwrecks, Chivalry and Masculinities in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Britain', *Cultural and Social History*, 3 (2006), 45–74.