

## THE PROFESSION OF JOURNALISM

IN a recent book called *Fleet Street and Downing Street*, by Mr. Kennedy Jones, who was one of the driving forces behind that enormous engine of publicity known as "the Northcliffe Press," there are some candid remarks about the status and influence of modern journalism. In a series of chapters he argues that journalism has become more of a business than a profession, and, in one chapter, he states bluntly that at no previous time has the reading public been so suspicious of the "news" presented to it by English newspapers as it is to-day owing to the suppression, exaggeration or falsification of news for political reasons. I think both statements are true, at the present time, and as a journalist proud of my "profession," and of what I refuse to call my "business," I think both are lamentable.

It is a curious thing that during the past twenty-five years which have seen the evolution of the New Journalism, represented by the Northcliffe Press, with many other imitators and rivals, two opposing tendencies have been at work. The first is the gradual loss of political prestige, owing to the capture of the papers' policy by financial and wire-pulling groups, and the second is the social elevation of the journalist himself, especially in the lower ranks of the newspaper world. Both these changes have been brought about by the same pioneers, and I prophecy that there will soon be a struggle between the professional journalist and the business groups that control his work and life.

I saw the last of the old type of journalist who lingered as a rare and venerable bird. At his best he was a scholar and a gentleman who in many cases abandoned the social caste to which he belonged by birth and

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education in order to enjoy, with a certain cynical pleasure, the power which he wielded with his pen as a judge of the world's controversies, as a critic of ideas and actions, and as a dispenser of fame or infamy. By the conditions of his work, badly paid in comparison with other professions, with long hours, mostly at night, with irregular meals, and in the squalour of old Fleet Street offices, he tended to become a "Bohemian," as he loved to call himself. In his later years he was often a scruffy, dirty old gentleman, with a wide range of knowledge, and a certain intellectual arrogance which he shared with his cronies in clubs like "The Whitefriars," now most dignified, to which outsiders were seldom admitted or to which they came in a spirit of adventure.

In the lower ranks—sub-editors and reporters—there was no pretence of social respectability, or at least of middle-class superiority and elegance. Many of those men were frankly outside the social pale, much as was the old-time actor. They were miserably paid, dressed shabbily, took their meals in old-fashioned chop-houses at odd times, and were apt to get "fuddled" with a frequency that often brought them to the gutter. The reporter of those old days was not above getting his news from the servants' hall, nor of accepting a drink in the butler's pantry! At the same time he was often a man of astonishing learning in strange, out-of-the-way realms of lore, and in spite of a coarseness of language due to a Rabelaisian sense of humour and an intimate familiarity with the sinks and stews of life, he often kept a little flame of idealism in his soul, and was faithful to traditions of truth in his own calling.

When I went first to "The Street of Adventure," as I nicknamed Fleet Street, there were few of these ancients left. Their places were being rapidly taken by young men who were not in the habit of drinking

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too much, who did not need as a rule to cut whiskers off their cuffs, who were at ease in the company of any social caste, who knocked at the front-doors of life, demanded, and were granted, the front seats at all of life's peep-shows, and were found salaries that would have made the old-time editor gasp. Many of them—though not the most brilliant—were public school and university men. Most of them were well educated presentable fellows, with self-assurance and a sense of their own dignity.

The *Manchester Guardian*, under Scott and Montague, established a brilliant school of journalists that afterwards invaded and captured London, as editorial writers and sub-editors (a little academic in their attitude towards life and scornful of the "Northcliffe" methods) and the *Daily Mail* was not altogether written "by office-boys for office-boys," having on its staff such distinguished writers as G. W. Steevens, Charles Hands, Hamilton Fyfe and Filson Young, and opening its columns to every new star that appeared in the literary world, such as H. G. Wells and Arnold Bennett.

The "Special Correspondent" was a development from the old-time reporter and was, and is, a better man. At home and abroad he was always on the spot when things were happening. He was not only a descriptive writer of life's pageantry and drama (and his descriptive work, written at great speed and in difficult or dangerous conditions, was often admirable in style and vision), but he was an observer of all tendencies of thought, an interpreter of the *comedie humaine*, an essayist who modernized the tradition of Steele and Addison, and on the whole did not degrade it. Looking at the modern newspaper and comparing it with the best produced half a century ago, it is in my opinion beyond argument better in its literary style (there was nothing so frightful as the old "jour-

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nalese ”), wider in its range of interests, more closely in touch with the interests of all classes (including women who were utterly neglected), and infinitely more rapid in its publication of world-wide news. The professional journalist belongs to a higher social status than his predecessor, thereby losing some good vulgar qualities, and his calling is recognized as an intellectual career in which there are fair prizes for the successful man or woman. The journalist himself has a sense of pride in his job, in its status and in its honour. In my opinion he is entitled to rank with the other great professions like that of medicine and the Bar.

How comes it, then, that the public opinion of modern journalism is so low? Mr. Kennedy Jones has gone to the root-causes when he shows the development of the newspaper business on absolutely commercial lines (of which he approves) and points, disapprovingly, to political selection of news. In the old days newspapers were published at a relatively low cost, making a fair margin of profit on their published price and being satisfied with a steady circulation sufficient to pay working expenses with a proper interest on the capital. The editor and his staff were largely aloof from the business end of the paper, and refused any dictation from the business interests.

Nowadays the cost of production has increased enormously, and no daily paper can hold its own without immense capital and a great advertising revenue. *The Tribune* during its brief existence cost its proprietors something like £360,000, and died not because it was a bad paper, but because it was knocked out of existence by other papers with a greater power over the machinery of publicity, transport and circulation—elements which have very little to do with the intellectual merit of the reading matter. The Editor is therefore subordinate in importance to the Business

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Manager. The writing journalist is dependent upon the financial backing and success of his paper. There comes in the power of the Capitalist. Without an idea in his head beyond political interest or financial gain, he may acquire the controlling shares in a great journal, or form a group of fellow-capitalists to buy the power of its influence on behalf of a party or a leader. The paper loses its independence, and its free expression of opinion is limited to special pleading within the party lines.

That has always been the temptation of journalism, and from time to time it has succumbed to it ; but at the present day it is apparent to the masses of readers in a way that saps all their confidence. That is not due to the editorial comment which has always been, and is often violently, on party lines, but to the obvious selection, suppression and presentation of news itself in support of the paper's policy. Formerly the newspaper-reading public believed that a statement of fact, the report of a speech, the description of an event might be read as "gospel truth," and that news was undoctored and uncensored. Now they have perceived that by emphasizing some aspect of the day's news, by omitting vital details, by the arrangement of type giving prominence to one set of facts, while another is hidden away in small type or suppressed altogether, the history of the world is distorted as in a convex or a concave mirror according to the control of its news services, and is often by no means a faithful, complete, and truthful reflection of events. The military and civil censorship during the war revealed this to the public in a startling way—to a public which often knew the unpublished truth about air raids or other tragedies—and it will take years, perhaps, to win back public confidence, unless there is an immediate reform in the way of an absolutely "undoctored" press.

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This reform will have to be achieved by the professional journalist fighting the political and business control of the Press, and by a rigid insistence upon the honour of his profession and his own right to liberty of opinion. There are many now in Journalism (in the Provinces as well as in London, and perhaps more in the Provinces) who will not swerve a hair's breadth in their regard to what they believe to be the truth, and who, as special correspondents or editorial writers, will not modify or colour their accounts of history day by day. Many of them have risked or resigned their positions rather than forfeit their right to tell the truth and have suffered poverty in consequence. But as a matter of fact it is generally the journalist, stubborn in principle, who succeeds and attains power and recognition—for, after all, the public likes sincerity and is quick to recognize it, and what the public likes is not to be lightly handled by those who cater for the public. It is the sincerity of the writing men which will challenge and beat the insincerity of those who try to run the machine on falsity. If the journalist loses his liberty it will be his own fault.

After the low intellectual period of the newspaper wires during the war, when all news was under official control and when, from patriotic motives, and even wickedly sometimes, the newspapers allowed themselves (very unwisely I think) to become mere organs of propaganda, working up hatred, hushing up tragedy, killing chivalry, there are, I believe, some signs of a return to higher traditions, noticeable, for instance in the fair reports of Labour troubles published by papers antagonistic to the demands which lead to that strife, and in an honest analysis by special correspondents of the conditions prevailing in Central Europe among those who were our enemies.

There is a spirit of reform in Fleet Street here and there. Honest men are putting their heads together

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to revive in a full measure the liberties and the honours of the Press. The greatest enemy they have to encounter, after all, is not the business controller, who is there to give the public what it wants (that is the paying philosophy), but a large section of the public itself, whose taste is deplorable, whose stupidity is entrenched behind barbed wire defences and whose frivolity of mind after five years of dreadful history is shameless. A people gets the Press it deserves. . . . The journalist, as I know him, is better than his public, though the machine that he serves keeps pace with the public mind.

PHILIP GIBBS.



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THE sunshine, and the grace of falling rain,  
The fluttering daffodil, the lilt of bees,  
The blossom on the boughs of almond trees,  
The waving of the wheat upon the plain—  
And all that knows not effort, strife or strain,  
And all that bears the signature of ease :  
The plunge of ships that dance before the breeze,  
The flight across the Twilight of the crane ;  
And all that joyous is, and young, and free,  
That tastes of morning and the laughing surf ;  
The dawn, the dew, the newly turned-up turf,  
The sudden smile, the unexpressive prayer,  
The artless art, the untaught dignity—  
You speak them in the passage of an air.

MAURICE BARING.