The “Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon” crusade, a series of four articles published in London’s *Pall Mall Gazette* in July 1885, was the most notorious of the numerous journalistic investigations of the dark side of Victorian Britain. Written by the paper’s editor, W. T. Stead, the reports were designed to expose the prevalence of child prostitution in the heart of empire: countless girls, he claimed, were being sacrificed to the insatiable “London Minotaur” in a horror far worse than those recalled in myths of ancient Greece. Stead described this underground trade in considerable detail, explaining how often unsuspecting girls were lured to their “ruin,” and interviewing brothel-keepers, procurers, and their victims to reveal all sides of the practice. Stead’s most daring tactic was to relay how he had been able to buy, with little difficulty, a thirteen-year-old girl for £5. The series inevitably provoked a national uproar. While some newsagents refused to stock what they regarded as an “obscene” publication, there were riots outside the paper’s offices as vendors fought to get hold of extra copies. Thousands of unofficial reprints circulated around London, and the stories were spread around Europe and the United States. The matter was raised in Parliament, where the revelations increased pressure on politicians to pass the Criminal Law Amendment Bill, a measure then being debated that sought to raise the age of consent from thirteen to sixteen. Stead himself was eventually prosecuted for his part in the purchase of the young girl, Eliza Armstrong, and he served three months in Holloway Prison. He was unbowed on release, convinced of his rectitude in ending what he saw as a “conspiracy of silence” surrounding the subject. The eventual passage of the new legislation, which also increased police powers over brothels, seemed to testify to the power of his crusading journalism.

This controversy has been explored by scholars many times, from a variety of different perspectives; it is also frequently brought up in media treatments of the Victorian period.[1] The mythology of the “Modern Babylon” lives on in both popular and academic circles. Perhaps surprisingly, though, this is the first time that the articles have been reprinted in their entirety in monograph form. Carefully edited and annotated by Anthony E. Simpson, professor emeritus at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York, the volume includes not only the four reports of Stead’s “Secret Commission” but also much of the surrounding text, including letters of response, coverage of the parliamentary discussions, and legal commentaries about the attempts to suppress these editions of the *Pall Mall Gazette*. Almost one hundred notes explain obscure references and identify individuals, and errors in the text are corrected. Simpson also provides a substantial introduction that sets out the social and legal context to the crusade. He outlines in detail the laws relating to prostitution and brothel-keeping, assesses the campaign for reform, and discusses the significance of the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885. Simpson’s interpretations are not particularly innovative, but he does a good job of summarizing the extensive historiography on these issues.
Perhaps the main weakness of the scholarly material is the lack of attention paid to the articles as a form of journalism. Stead’s reportage can only be fully understood with an appreciation of the contemporary newspaper environment, but little information is provided about the Pall Mall Gazette or the way in which its editor seemed to personify what Matthew Arnold would soon describe as the “new journalism.” There has been some excellent work, notably by Judith Walkowitz, on the ways in which Stead drew on the traditions of melodrama to provide sensational narratives of sexual danger, and it is a shame that Simpson does not reflect more on this dimension of the articles. The “Maiden Tribute” series did much to encourage the acceptance of new styles of commercialized journalism, and it had a long lasting influence on Fleet Street. Any student of twentieth-century popular journalism will recognize many of the rhetorical techniques employed by Stead. It would also have been useful to have some reproductions of the text as it appeared in the Pall Mall Gazette to obtain an impression of the material reality of the newspapers that were passed around so avidly on the streets of London, but the book is sadly without illustrations.

For those wishing merely to get a flavor of the “Maiden Tribute” series, the full text of the articles is available online on a Web site (http://www.attackingthedevil.co.uk/) with plenty of other useful resources on Stead. For those wishing to study this episode in more depth, however, the introduction, annotations, and extra primary material make this volume a worthwhile read. And, despite the fact that, as Simpson points out, “Stead’s prose is sometimes careless, even sloppy, and frequently repetitive,” the articles themselves are a compelling read (p. 43). Readers who have dipped into the voluminous literature on this topic may well feel that there is little to be gained by seeking out the original articles, but they are sufficiently rich in social detail and so revealing of the late Victorian mind-set that they remain of great value. They made such an impact on contemporary opinion, moreover, that they must be regarded as being among the key texts of the period, and it is to be welcomed that a scholarly edition is now available.

Note

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