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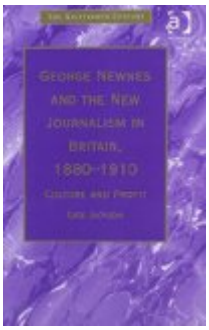

Kate Jackson. *George Newnes and the New Journalism in Britain, 1880-1910: Culture and Profit.* Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2001. 293 pp. $84.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-7546-0317-7.

Reviewed by John Jenks

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In any history of British journalism, the name George Newnes usually surfaces alongside modifying phrases such as "one of the harbingers."[1] As the founder of *Tit-Bits* (1881) he was one of the pioneers of British New Journalism--a catch all term that encompassed the shift toward a mass-circulation commercial press with an emphasis on drama, sensation, and shorter, disconnected news items.

Newnes's breakthrough made him a fortune, brought him a minor title, but left him, ultimately, as a footnote. Most historians genuflect toward Newnes, but pay more attention to the lives of his more flamboyant successors, such as Alfred Harmsworth (Lord Northcliffe, publisher of the *Daily Mail*). By contrast Kate Jackson's book, *George Newnes and the New Journalism in Britain, 1880-1910: Culture and Profit*, sets out to tell the story of Newnes's rise and consolidation of a publishing empire that developed an array of magazines and newspapers with myriad ways of relating to their readers.

Jackson undertakes an interdisciplinary work, combining the methods of literary criticism, media studies, and history to analyze Newnes's publications and their relationships to British journalism and culture. She goes far behind the usual focus on *Tit-Bits* and discusses how Newnes's other publications functioned as shapers, mirrors, and imagined communities for British culture.

Readers hoping to discover how Newnes's publications envisioned the audiences and their concerns, or how the dominant cultural anxieties and needs were exploited and addressed, will find a great deal of information here. Readers looking for information about Newnes as a journalist, publisher, or biographical subject will find a great deal less.

Jackson acknowledges that the heavy emphasis on textual analysis was partially dictated by the lack of extensive archival documentation on Newnes. The records for Newnes's company were put in deep storage during World War II and are now "impossible to locate or view" (p. 5). However, Jackson liberally mines works by contemporaries, or near-contemporaries, such as Hulda Friederichs, to help fill the gaps. (Friederichs pub-

lished *The Life of Sir George Newnes*, which was based on Newnes's own autobiographical notes, in 1911, one year after Newnes's death [p. 2].)

For historians of American journalism, this book could provide valuable comparisons, presented in an accessible way, to the turn-of-the-century American magazine revolution and its cultivation of consumer culture. It would be less useful for newspaper historians.

The book itself is divided into three main sections. After a lengthy introduction, in which Jackson outlines methodological and historiographical issues, and provides a brief biography of Newnes, she goes through early examples of the New Journalism, Newnes's development of new formats, and his exploitation of niche markets in his last decade.

She starts her march through the Newnes catalog with the path-breaking, plebeian *Tit-Bits* and *The Million*, then moves up to *The Strand*, Newnes's successful upper-middle-class magazine. She covers his political involvement in *The Westminster Gazette* and his foray into imperialism and exoticism in *The Wide World Magazine*, then finishes with his search for niche markets in *The Ladies' Field* and *The Captain*.

Newnes's methods and persona, she argues, are the threads that bind these disparate publications. And key to that was the New Journalism. For Newnes's publications, especially his early efforts, the New Journalism meant briefer stories (the tit-bit--or "tidbit," according to the Associated Press), sentimentality and drama, and a real effort to reach readers through technical innovations, promotions and contests, and a carefully calibrated public persona. Jackson argues that Newnes used the tools of New Journalism to create his publications as not only texts, but also contexts--interactive guides for people to live their lives and build communities in times of flux (p. 20). This argument has problems: Newnes was heavily involved in *Tit-Bits* and *The Strand*, but was almost an absentee owner with *The Ladies' Field* and *The Captain*. It would be safer to say that Newnes had pioneered certain developments in New Journalism, which then became general journalistic techniques that he and others continued to draw upon. Also, there could be more in this book about how other publishers might have influenced Newnes.

As mentioned above, there is comparatively little biographical material in Jackson's book, and that is generally drawn from published contemporary works. But the relevant details are as follows:

Newnes was born in 1851, the son of a Derbyshire Congregational minister, and was educated at Congregational schools and the City of London School, where he was steeped in an atmosphere of Liberalism and Christianity. At one point he considered the ministry as a career. But his first vocation was sales. He signed on as an apprentice for a haberdasher, shifted to sales, and rose quickly in the business. Here he learned the techniques of persuasion and the needs and desires of the emerging British consumer.

Earlier biographers had identified Newnes's own interest in entertaining and informative snippets of information as the inspiration for *Tit-Bits*, which he launched in Manchester in 1881 (pp. 47-48). Other accounts have given credit to his wife for suggesting he turn his scrapbook hobby into a business.[2]

After the success of his early publishing ventures he devoted time and effort to the Liberal cause and to the life of a benevolent country gentleman at his North Devon summer home. Newnes himself was an ardent Liberal, joining the Liberal Club, serving as a Liberal MP from 1885 to 1895 and from 1900 to 1910, and heavily subsidizing the Liberal *Westminster Gazette*. In the North Devon town of Lynton, the site of his country home, he donated money for a new Town Hall, a Congregational church and other civic improvements. Jackson links this country squire paternalism to his paternalistic management of his publi-

cations, going so far as to see him as an "editor-squire" (pp. 25-26).

Newnes built his fortune in the 1880s, consolidated it and diversified into other publishing ventures in the 1890s, then squandered money in the 1900s in a number of ill-judged investments (p. 27). In this last decade of his life, Newnes became less and less visible in the operations of his empire (p. 207). Jackson also mentions that bad health, a drinking problem, and a "failing mind" contributed to his problems, but gives very little additional information (p. 28). Newnes died broke in 1910.

(To help readers interested in specific publications, the rest of this review is organized by publication.)

Tit-Bits

Newnes is best known, of course, for launching the weekly penny paper *Tit-Bits* in 1881. The mythology of British journalism holds that education reform in the 1870s created armies of newly literate people, who then gravitated toward low-intensity publications such as Newnes's *Tit-Bits*. Jackson joins other authors, such as Matthew Engel, in demonstrating the hollowness of that mythology. Literacy had been rising for decades before the reform, *Tit-Bits* aimed at a lower-middle-class (and upper-working-class) readership, and the weekly actually raised the level of journalistic quality for much of the popular press, Jackson argues (pp. 54-55).

The tit-bits themselves were snippets of information, short stories, pieces of advice, jokes, correspondence, and advertisements presented in a sixteen-page weekly (p. 56). Newnes juiced up the appeal of the newspaper through a continual series of contests and promotions. One contest offered a suburban London "Tit-Bits villa" for the best short story submitted. But the best-known promotion was the Tit-Bits Insurance scheme in which the survivors of any *Tit-Bits* reader killed in a railway accident, and found with a copy of the newspaper on the body, would be given one hundred pounds. By 1891 there had been thirty-six cases.

Tit-Bits quickly found a market, selling an average of 500,000 copies a week, and spawning imitators such as *Answers* and *Pearson's Weekly*. *The Millions*, Newnes's other paper, was a minor variation of the *Tit-Bits* theme, with an added bonus of color illustrations. But when the novelty wore off and production costs mounted, Newnes shut it down (p. 84).

Jackson situates *Tit-Bits* and *The Millions* in the cultural atmosphere of late-Victorian Britain, with rising consumerism and a growing lower-middle class hungry for self-improvement and knowledge. That knowledge was presented in bite-size morsels for the *Tit-Bits* reader, with no apologies and no shame. Many of the factoids reflected the fascination with statistics, efficiency, and the paraphernalia of modern industrial life.

Both *Tit-Bits* and *The Millions* sought and found a sense of community with their readers, encouraging them to contribute items, participate in contests, and come to the newspaper for advice. Newnes used innovative advertising and promotional techniques as well. This strategy kept sales high and developed an army of "loyal Tit-Bitites" who sent in items, participated in the contests, and bought the newspaper (p. 69). Newnes also was an active and public philanthropist, further advancing *Tit-Bits*' communal cause. Jackson goes so far as to describe it as a "journalistic, discursive equivalent of a settlement house" (p. 75).

Tit Bits was the paper that made Newnes and also the one in which he was most heavily involved. His relations with the other publishing ventures were more distant.

The Strand

Tit-Bits was Newnes's foot-in-the-door of British journalism; *The Strand* was the elevator to social respectability. While *Tit-Bits* aimed at the lower-middle classes and carried Newnes to wealth, *The Strand* clearly aimed at wealthier,

higher classes and gave Newnes's publications social and cultural capital to match. In the process he created a magazine that helped define a new community of middle- and upper-class Britons, including a sizeable number scattered throughout the empire. Unlike some of his other publications it had a long shelf life; founded in 1891, it published continuously until 1950.

Unlike *Tit-Bits*, there was little interaction with the readers, and, unlike the *Westminster Gazette*, there was little Liberal reform. Instead, *The Strand* sought to reflect its target audience. As one former editor wrote, "for more than half a century it faithfully mirrored their tastes, prejudices and intellectual limitations" (p. 88). But it did so in an engaging style that, Newnes wrote, had been inspired by the American magazines *Harper's* and *Scribner's* (p. 92). Jackson also speculates that he may have been influenced the success of the British magazine *Punch*, which had developed a team of creative artists, writers, and editors who worked in a jovial collaboration (pp. 100-101).

In the midst of turn-of-the-century anxieties, *The Strand* provided reassurance and stability in its selections of role-model profiles, illustrations, and contributions (a mix of short stories and factual articles) from most of the literary middleweights of late-Victorian Britain--from Arthur Conan Doyle (the Sherlock Holmes author) to P. G. Wodehouse. Newnes used the personal tone and various New Journalism techniques, such as the character sketch and celebrity profile, to create a respectable yet reasonably exciting tone for *The Strand*. In an era of conflict between commercialism and art, *The Strand* struck a middle ground (p. 92).

Newnes was apparently involved in the management of *The Strand*, as general editor, but Jackson does not have much evidence connecting him to specific decisions or policies. True, Newnes wrote some articles and was selected as one of the magazine's feature celebrities, but he was more important for the image he projected through his involvement. "His image--traveler, public benefactor, proprietor, celebrity--was a guarantee of social and professional respectability and commercial viability" (p. 103).

Westminster Gazette

Newnes had always been a devoted Liberal, and when his party needed a newspaper in 1893 he was wealthy enough to set up and subsidize the evening daily *The Westminster Gazette*. Over his sixteen-year proprietorship, Newnes sank some 100,000 pounds into the paper, whose circulation hovered around the 20,000 mark (pp. 131-132). The readers were generally affluent, well educated, politically involved, and usually Liberals.

Newnes's involvement in *The Westminster Gazette* is usually written off as a play for political and journalistic respectability--subsidizing a high-toned serious newspaper--and the party obligation of a devoted Liberal. Writers such as Stephen Koss have generally taken that approach as they describe in detail the political importance of the Gazette and other turn-of-the-century party newspapers.[3] But Jackson argues that Newnes imbued the *Gazette* with the spirit and practices of New Journalism, putting his stamp on yet another publication.

Jackson points to *The Westminster Gazette*'s use of "the interview, the parliamentary sketch, the black-and-white illustration" as signs that the New Journalism of *Tit-Bits* and *The Strand* had been transported to the more rarefied neighborhood of Westminster (p. 134). Other characteristics, such as alliterative headlines, sporting news, literary contests, and celebrity profiles, were also signs, as was the printing of the newspaper on green-tinted paper to improve visibility (pp. 138-141). There is, however, little evidence that Newnes influenced the style of the paper other than by osmosis. He met with his editor once every two weeks and exercised the restraint of a

"constitutional monarch" in the running of the paper (p. 143).

The Wide World Magazine

Newnes founded ***The Wide World Magazine*** in April 1898, at the high-water mark of British imperialism, but the photo magazine that advertised itself with the slogan "Truth is Stranger than Fiction" was much more than a celebration of Britain^Òs world role or crude jingoism. (The specific idea for the magazine came from the flow of "true stories" overseas Britons were sending to ***The Strand***. Newnes merely spun them off into a new magazine [p. 126].) ***The Wide World Magazine*** introduced British readers to the exotic and the foreign, frequently in blatantly racist terms, through the lens of British explorers, missionaries, and military men. In this way it domesticated and managed the alien (p. 178). Jackson links ***The Wide World Magazine*** to the ideas of an imperialist universalizing discourse, in which normality is Western, European, and specifically British, as described by literary scholar Edward Said (p. 181).

Newnes had a personal interest in exploration and the exotic. He had sponsored an Antarctic expedition in 1898, invested in Australian minerals, and in 1898 had published two accounts in ***The Strand*** of his own travels. The account of his trip to Egypt is related in detail (pp. 168-171).

Newnes, of course, did not pioneer imperialistic themes in journalism and literature. There had been a long history of it (well described by Said in ***Culture and Imperialism***) and in the 1890s some of the premier exponents were writers such as Rudyard Kipling and Rider Haggard.

In addition, changes in communication technology made a publication like ***The Wide World Magazine*** a likely success. As Jackson explains, the reconceptualization of time and space, begun with the telegraph and continuing with the telephone, film, and radio, stimulated the public imagination and created a market for the accessible exoticism that was at the heart of the ***Wide World Magazine*** appeal (p. 175). Jackson goes on to link ***The Wide World Magazine*** to the modernist sentiment of "a temporally thickened present" as seen in novels such as James Joyce's ***Ulysses*** (p. 176). In ***The Wide World Magazine*** it is best expressed in the montage of the "Odds and Ends" section in which readers could examine pictures and text from around the world collected on a single page (p. 177). The frequent use of maps, with highlights for the locations of that issue's features, further heightened this sense (p. 178).

Ladies' Field

The same year Newnes founded ***The Wide World Magazine*** he also aimed at the middle-class women's market with the ***Ladies' Field***, an illustrated weekly with core interests in "fashion, etiquette and social ritual." But Newnes recognized the changing status of women and also emphasized consumerism, and the interests of the modern professional women (pp. 209-210).

Earlier magazines aimed at the middle classes had concentrated primarily on domestic concerns, but ***Ladies' Field*** sought to guide and interact with women who had money and were eager to navigate the complicated social world of the late-Victorian and Edwardian upper middle classes (p. 211). This new woman needed plenty of advice in a rapidly changing world (p. 212). But, increasingly, that advice focused not on Victorian social niceties, but new habits of consumption (p. 217). The ideal woman became a shopper.

This editorial focus reinforced the advertisements in general tone and with specific references, and led to the creation of the magazine as a seamless whole promoting a new culture of consumption (p. 217).

Overall, the ***Ladies' Field*** mixed the long-standing traditions of society journalism with the Newnesian innovations of correspondence columnists, intimate tones, competitions, heavy reliance on advertising, and the emphasis on short "titbits" of information (p. 233).

The Captain

With ***The Captain***, a monthly founded in 1899, Newnes was taking advantage of a reading trend first exploited by others. The market for juvenile fiction had been expanding sharply since the 1880s and for almost as long had been highlighting cultural anxieties about boys and young men. To Newnes's contemporaries there seemed to be plenty to be anxious about. The dominant social Darwinist ideology pointed to urban poverty, poor physical conditioning, and leisure as prime sources of racial degeneration. The answer was multi-faceted: physical training, "Muscular Christianity," and a generalized inculcation of manliness.

Youth crime was seen as one of the symptoms of this decline. Up to the 1890s, juvenile delinquency and crime were seen as class-based problems of the poor and working class. But, to complicate things, in the 1890s the idea of an in-between period--adolescence--as a distinct stage and a distinct incubator of misbehavior became popular in British cultural discourse. Even middle-class youth could be vulnerable (pp. 240-241).

Many of the youth magazines seemed to exacerbate those fears, highlighting lurid tales of violence with sensationalistic crimes and flouting of authority. The "penny dreadful" weekly magazines had been widely blamed for inciting "hooliganism" and other anti-social behavior.

While Newnes was aiming at the same age demographic, he had a different approach. ***The Captain*** would be respectable, more expensive (a sixpenny monthly) and aimed at the small public-school sector and the much larger group that sought to identify with and emulate that elite group. (Many of the letters and later reminiscences testify to the power that public-school mythology had on working-class and lower-middle-class boys.) To this end it highlighted Muscular Christianity, imperialism, and a public-school ethos of competition and good sportsmanship. Restlessness and violence would be directed outward, on the athletic field or in service of the empire, and not inward.

Key to that was the highlighting of the athlete-hero, specifically C. B. Fry, who wrote a regular column for the paper. (Newnes later spun off Fry with his own sporting magazine, imaginatively named ***C.B. Fry's Magazine***.)

The Captain^Òs stories and illustrations provided new role models for its readers--clean-minded sportsmen, muscular empire-builders, and public-school gentlemen. Articles giving career advice frequently made that explicit: "Men are wanted, and now.... when we are all imbued with the ideas of imperialism and realizing as never before that the strength and greatness of our country lie in our colonies--and now is the time to bring the lesson home" (p. 253).

Conclusion

Because much of the archival evidence relating to Newnes was either absent or inaccessible to Jackson, much of the story about the operation of Newnes's publications comes from a few near-contemporary records. A 1911 biography of Newnes by Hulda Friederichs turns up in many of the notes, as do books by those with connections to the Newnes empire, such as ***The Strand*** editor Reginald Pound and former partner W. T. Stead. This results in a picture of Newnes that is two-dimensional and still fuzzy around the edges. The reader doesn't know much more about him or his business operations than readers of earlier books.

Sometimes Jackson uses thin biographical details to support too much weight. In the introduction, Jackson links Newnes's reading of James Fennimore Cooper in the late 1850s and early 1860s to Newnes's editorial choices for ***The Wide World Magazine*** and ***The Captain*** in the early 1900s. Jackson suggests it, at least through juxtaposition (p. 21). Other links are more solid. Did his religious background keep him from developing the ***Weekly Dispatch*** as a sensationalistic newspaper (p.26)? Jackson argues that it very well may have.

Some other biographical details could have been used more skeptically. Although Newnes was clearly a generous and civic-minded man, Jackson may take too much at face value tributes by employees and residents of North Devon, where he had built his country house (pp. 22, 29).

But when she approaches the Newnes publications with the tools of textual and cultural analyses, her conclusions are more convincing. Her introduction and notes indicate that she is well-grounded in the leading works of cultural theory, and she does a strong job of providing a detailed context for each of the publications--from anxieties about male adolescents in ***The Captain*** to the shift in the reading public during the 1880s that made ***Tit-Bits*** so appealing.

Unfortunately, there are a few minor errors in the book. James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and other modern writers worked in the first quarter of the twentieth century, not in the first quarter of the nineteenth century (p. 172). Harold Spender's ***The Fire of Life*** was published in 1926, not 1859 (footnote, p. 141); Viscount Camrose did not spell his name Cambrose (p. 280), and renowned typographer Stanley Morison spelled his surname with just one r (p. 6). Finally, nearly two pages of the introduction are repeated verbatim in the conclusion (pp. 28-29, pp. 263-264). These errors do not, however, detract from the importance of this book.

Jackson's work makes a serious contribution to our knowledge of turn-of-the-century British magazine publishing and reading culture, and how these Newnes publications served their readers. There's just not as much about George Newnes. This book will be valuable to both American and British cultural historians, especially magazine historians.

Notes

[1]. Matthew Engel, ***Tickle the Public: One Hundred Years of the Popular Press*** (London: Gollancz, 1996), p. 54.

[2]. S. J. Taylor, ***The Great Outsiders: Northcliffe, Rotheremere and the Daily Mail*** (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1996), p. 11.

[3]. Stephen Koss, ***The Rise and Fall of the Political Press in Britain*** (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984).

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