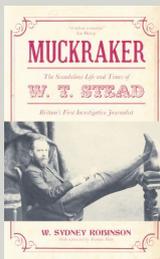




Book Reviews

Muckraker: The Scandalous Life and Times of W.T. Stead, Britain's First Investigative Journalist

W. Sydney Robinson
Publisher: The Robson Press. £20 (hardback)



Like Tony Blair, Lord Justice Leveson seems uninterested in history. He gives the impression of being surprised and shocked that leading politicians and journalists maintain close relations with each other. Ignoring the past, he fails to understand that he is dealing with just the latest manifestation of an age-old phenomenon. British politicians and journalists have always been closely associated, exploiting and manipulating one another for their own ends.

Since the nineteenth century prominent members of the fourth estate—and great press barons like Northcliffe and Rothermere who owned their papers (wielding far more power than Rupert Murdoch today)—have often congratulated themselves on getting cabinet ministers to do their bidding. None of them has applauded their own success more vigorously than W.T. Stead, the most influential journalist of the 1880s and 1890s, who is the subject of this first-rate biography. When he died aboard The Titanic a century ago, a fellow newspaperman wrote that ‘no pen in England had wielded an ascendancy comparable with Stead’s’.

He was quite convinced that on a number of occasions Gladstone had changed policy at his behest. The clearest example seemed to be the decision in 1884 to send General Gordon to the Sudan (and to his death). Nothing had been further from

Gladstone’s mind until Stead published an extraordinarily tendentious article which purported to be an interview with Gordon (who was not very keen on the idea) but was actually a clarion call for action which captured the imagination of the country. In the ‘newspaper age’, Stead had written at an earlier stage, an editor of real ability (such as himself)

ought to be regarded as ‘the uncrowned king of an educated democracy’, infinitely more important than ‘a second or third-rate Cabinet Minister’. In 1884 he proved the point to his own satisfaction. Gladstone seemed to agree. Stead, he said, was ‘as clever as the devil’ and ‘a very nasty newsman to deal with’.

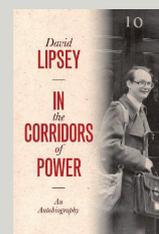
But he flattered himself too much, according to this incisive account of his career. The real instigator of the near hysterical press campaign to get Gordon to the Sudan was one of Gladstone’s most senior cabinet colleagues, Lord Hartington, then War Secretary, who two years later, in association with Joe Chamberlain, would destroy Gladstone’s first Home Rule Bill for Ireland and wreck the entire Liberal Party. Hartington and his supporters encouraged the vain journalist of great renown to take up the cause ‘to add weight to opinion...as is normal in such cases’, as one of the plotters put it. On this occasion, as on many others in our political history, the fourth estate was exploited and manipulated by the political elite. This important aspect of our political tradition needs to be more widely recognised. This book makes an important contribution to understanding it..

In one crucial respect, however, Stead really did extend the power of the press in relation to our political leaders. He was the first to shine a fierce light on their private lives, without any thought of a public interest defence, beginning with a famous

three-in-a-bed scandal in 1885 which ruined the career of another of Gladstone’s cabinet colleagues, Sir Charles Dilke. Curiously, though he was a staunch radical, he let the Tory Party off lightly, failing to exploit their embarrassing gay scandal of the late 1880s. The Prince of Wales, too, was allowed to pursue the life of a libertine largely unreported, though Stead had ample evidence about him. Having, as he himself confessed, a ‘crazy appetite’ for sex, he brought great enthusiasm to this side of his work, while convincing himself, as Victorian hypocrites so easily did, that he had a divine mission to turn Britain from its ‘evil ways into the paths of justice and truth’. That conviction inspired his most famous press campaign in 1889 when he abducted a thirteen year-old girl in order (he claimed) to highlight the widespread prevalence of child prostitution.

This is, quite simply, a marvellous book, the best I have read this year so far. Every politician and journalist should slip a copy of this slim, brilliantly written volume by a new young author into their holiday luggage this summer. Lord Justice Leveson should not leave home without it. 📖

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In the Corridors of Power: An Autobiography

David Lipsey
Publisher: Biteback.
£25

This book is a little gem. Just like its author. David ‘Pipsqueak’ Lipsey has been one of those backroom boys who shape our ends and polish our thinking, rough hew both how we politicians



may. He was a pioneer special adviser, before they went into showbiz, advising Tony Crosland in those pre-email and Blackberry days when SpAds were neither seen nor heard. He then became an elite journalist (particularly as Bagehot, the bon pensant person's Littlejohn in the *Economist*). Then he was an influential member of important commissions after Tony Blair brought back thinking as a method of policy formulation as an alternative to the autopilot of pure prejudice Mrs Thatcher preferred. Finally he ends up as a persistent Peer trying (usually vainly) to intrude sense into policy.

All these were key roles in our tribal politics of prejudice. Usually they are all unheralded and unsung, unless the SpAd has to die by his own sword to save his master's career. Yet the excitement of this book is nothing like that.

It comes because David Lipsey spills the beans on all these jobs in his honest, wry, amusing and beautifully written autobiography, revealing what went on behind the scenes. It's not a worms eye view, not even a geek's brain view (though the cover photo is of a geek-like young Lipsey, geek glasses and bags beaming geekily as he enters Number 10). It is the insights of a first-class Oxford brain of Labour sympathies into of the political history of the last 40 years.

Lipsey was lucky in his contacts, his friends and his era. He came into politics back in the days of the remorseless rise of the Oxford First when intellectuals led the parties: Oxford (Gaitskell, Healey, Crosland, Crossman), was the preparatory school for Labour, Cambridge for the Tories.

He first took a job with Giles Radice's research nursery at the GMB and was then lucky in being chosen by Tony Crosland

as his Fag-SpAd -amanuensis and soul mate and was successful in connecting his master's arrogant, eccentric, genius to the world of political reality.

Lipsey's years with Crosland were clearly his happiest, most fulfilling period. They were ended abruptly by Crosland's sad death in 1977. Then he transferred to Jim Callaghan's collection of child geniuses in the Policy Unit at number 10, "We were bright young things with too little useful work to do. [Gavyn] Davies and I were evenly matched over the chess board which frequently emerged. We would ring down to the front door enquiring if the *Evening Standard* had yet been delivered in the fantasy that the Prime Minister might at any minute demand a brief on it".

“ David Lipsey has been one of those backroom boys who shape our ends and polish our thinking ”

In 1979 the geniuses were all ejected with the Labour government. Lipsey had "started life knowing for certain that I wanted to be a politician. By the early 1980s I was certain I didn't", which may be why he didn't contest Grimsby in 1977, something which would have made both his career (and mine) very different. Instead he now went into journalism, first *New Society* then the *Times* and the *Economist*. "

Journalists were entitled to views, indeed some were paid to hold them. But blind partisan loyalty and decent journalism are not compatible. Having already a politically disabling tendency to treat facts as facts and keep an open mind, my journalism led me down a path which

increasingly diverged from the path of politics" – in other words judging from Olympian heights not the mud of the battlefield. Labour's nervous breakdown made the party less attractive so Lipsey ceased to be an activist, pursuing his social democratic principles by work on commissions, most importantly Roy Jenkins' Commission on Voting Reform, which took him into the Lords, then the Commission on Care. Neither of the reports were implemented but both were built on intelligent research.

This makes compelling reading because in each area Spaddery, Hackery, Peerery, Lipsey describes his own work, then reflects on how that field has changed (usually for the worse) in the decades since. Inevitably this ends the book on a less cheery note than the tale because, still attached to equality as Labour's basic aim, Lipsey now sees the difficulties in the way of achieving it. Still attached to reason he now sees the rise of prejudice backed by spray on evidence. Still attached to intellect as the guide to government he is dismayed by the rise of PR politics and the clamour to get on to *Today*. Like the Lords he is dismayed by the proposal to make it elective.

Hence his final reflection. Ambition dead, hope of attracting attention abated, and without the inspiring genius of Crosland to keep him on the left path to truth, Lipsey now concludes, "Politics guided by moderate ideals and governed by reason is essential to a good society. I trust that a new generation will demonstrate that this philosophy is not doomed to end in disillusion". Amen to that. 🏰

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