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## **More Light or Heat? A Spiritual Look at the Life of W. T. Stead**

**W. T. Stead: Nonconformist and Newspaper Prophet**, by Stewart J. Brown, Oxford:

Oxford University Press, 2019, xv + 226 pages, £30 (hardback), ISBN 978 0 19 883253 9

When navigating the deep waters of W. T. Stead (1849-1912) it is best to have clarity of mission: a lens through which you approach the journalist who knew himself to be a changeable, tempestuous force and personality. Stewart J. Brown's *W. T. Stead: Nonconformist and Newspaper Prophet* has that clarity, and its publication in the Oxford University Press 'Spiritual Lives' series, edited by Timothy Larsen, is indicative of that fact. Brown's religious biography is a welcome and vital addition to our study of one of the nineteenth century's most intriguing and paradoxical figures. The series itself, so far, is eclectic, featuring work on Christina Rossetti, John Stuart Mill, Woodrow Wilson, and Leonard Woolf. Again, being in this company rather suits Stead, who appeared as comfortable conversing with autocrats such as Tsar Alexander III, as with the socialist artist William Morris, or professed agnostics like the liberal MP John Morley, and even outspoken atheists like activist-writer Annie Besant.

Brown's expertise as an historian of modern Christianity allows us to better understand the religious impetus of Stead's beliefs and influence, as well as the importance of several key figures in his life whose spiritual impact on the direction of Stead's career have previously lacked the proper prominence that Brown's book duly gives them. In particular, Henry Edward Cardinal Manning, Canon Henry Parry Liddon, and Olga Novikoff (née Kirieff), are shown to be vitally significant to Stead's evolving conception of his faith as well as to his ability to gain access to powerful people. His long-standing friendship, entanglement, and political entente with the Russian agent, Novikoff, is presented in a

thoughtful style, that does not shy away from the most sensational aspects of their relationship, but manages to keep sight of the wider implications of their various collaborations. Similarly, Cardinal Manning's presiding role as the most important of Stead's living, spiritual heroes is well-wrought. Both Canon Liddon and Cardinal Manning—nearly 20 years and 41 years Stead's senior, respectively—gave regular counsel and their patience to the much younger, Nonconformist, maverick-journalist. The ability of both men to save Stead from himself, at times, and to 'curb his pugnacious impetuosity', was a skill not to be underestimated and a relief to many in Stead's life.<sup>1</sup>

The biography sets out to ask if, in keeping a tight focus on Stead and his Christianity, we can finally find some continuity in the journalist and editor's many outputs and projects, including: his two stints as a newspaper editor at the *Northern Echo* and *Pall Mall Gazette*; his editorship of the *Review of Reviews*; and in his later interests in the occult and pacificism? The cause is a noble one, as were, Stead believed, many of his activities and writings, but ultimately the answer is no. Brown instead builds a sophisticated and, at times, sad narrative, that highlights the failures of Stead's life, as well as his triumphs: the jubilation from which never seemed to last long enough for the febrile journalist most famously labelled 'featherbrained' by Matthew Arnold.<sup>2</sup> What Brown's spiritual biography brilliantly elucidates, as does any work that truly captures the essence of W. T. Stead, is that he resists attempts to find a continuity of purpose in his written works and in his actions. His excitable nature and irregular worldview has led the scales of history to teeter precariously between those who see Stead's diverse interventions in the 'progress of the world' as having caused more harm than good, and those who cautiously, or sometimes enthusiastically, portray him

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph O. Baylen, 'Cardinal Manning and W. T. Stead: Notes of an Unpublished Interview', *The Catholic Historical Review*, 48.4 (1963), 498-507.

<sup>2</sup> Matthew Arnold, 'Up to Easter', *The Nineteenth Century*, 21.123 (1887), 629-643.

as having achieved more light than heat.<sup>3</sup> Brown's eloquent but even-handed approach to the *Pall Mall Gazette's* most notorious editor falls into the cautiously celebratory camp and he charts the ebb and flow of Stead's fortunes with skilled expression.

In his capacity as a biographer Brown does not bring his considerable knowledge of the history of Western Christianity to bear on Stead's often pietistic prose, and arguably a biography is not the place for such analysis. However, further study of Stead's most consistent objective, to modernise and popularise the language of Christianity, is needed, and Brown's book reminds us of that fact. Stead's attempts to revamp and reenergise Christianity through the use of legal, political, and business lexicon, especially, are worthy of further research and evaluation: the most obvious example of this facet of Stead's idiosyncrasy being his designation of God as the 'Senior Partner', and himself as a 'very junior' partner.<sup>4</sup>

One of Stead's more urgent desires was to synthesise: languages (he was a proponent of Esperanto), religious creeds, literary styles, countries, texts, social issues – the list goes on. His *Daily Paper* scheme, a twice-failed dream, included a call for an English Bible, in which the Prophets would be represented by Sir Thomas More's *Utopia*; John Milton's *Areopagitica*; some of Latimer's sermons; selections from *The Spectator* and passages from Edmund Burke and Jonathan Swift. John Locke, Thomas Hobbes and George Berkeley possibly don't make the cut, but Adam Smith, and more hesitantly Richard Cobden, do. John Stuart Mill's *The Subjection of Women* and *On Liberty* are considered necessary as are extracts from Thomas Carlyle, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Giuseppe Mazzini 'although he was Italian' (which, as dispensations go, is fairly quintessential Stead).<sup>5</sup> Then, 'we have the poets to pillage': Chaucer, Shakespeare, Spenser, Dryden, Pope, Gray, Wordsworth,

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<sup>3</sup> 'The Progress of the World' was the opening feature of each issue of the *Review of Reviews* which Stead launched, with George Newnes, in 1890.

<sup>4</sup> W. T. Stead, 'A Narrative of Facts', in *The Welsh Revival* by W. T. Stead and G. Campbell Morgan (Boston: Pilgrim Press, 1905) pp.1-75; p.56; p.10.

<sup>5</sup> Presumably Emerson's 'Englishness' needs no justification as Stead's view was that Britain and America should never have been twain.

Coleridge, Byron, Shelley, Keats, Tennyson, the Brownings, Ebenezer Elliott, and perhaps surprisingly, Swinburne, are Stead's choices for his Biblically-inspired canon. 'I think it would be possible to get all that into the space of an Old Testament, or, at any rate, of the Old Testament and the New' wrote Stead, 'it would come to be a companion to the Bible in every English home'.<sup>6</sup> Brown's estimation of this synthesising tendency in Stead agrees with the assessment of many of his nineteenth-century contemporaries who viewed him as lacking in education, critical abilities, and a healthy sense of scepticism. Such charges may well contain truth, and indeed some more so than others, but it is no coincidence that many sons and daughters of the manse, trained from a young age in oration, scripture, and the importance of moral works, were drawn to careers in journalism in the nineteenth century.

Brown's careful study joins a growing list of book-length works on Stead, including several biographies, critical and otherwise: Grace Eckley's 2007 *Maiden Tribute: A Life of W. T. Stead*, Edith K. Harper's *Stead, the Man: Personal Reminiscences* (1918), Victor G. Pierce Jones' *Saint or Sensationalist? The Story of W. T. Stead* (1988), W. Sydney Robinson's *Muckraker: The Scandalous Life and Times of W. T. Stead* (2013), Raymond L. Schultz' *Crusader in Babylon: W. T. Stead and the Pall Mall Gazette* (1972), Estelle Stead's *My Father* (1913), and Frederic Whyte's *Life of W. T. Stead* (1925). These accounts are all biographical in their approach to some degree and range from the deeply personal, to the popular, and the scholarly. The flurry of activity inspired by the centenary of Stead's death also gave rise to a special issue of *19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century* (2013), and an edited collection *W. T. Stead: Newspaper Revolutionary* (2012) published by the British Library. There are, too, many articles and book chapters that deal with the legacy of Stead's compelling presence and journalistic panache—too many to list here. What must be mentioned, however, is the debt that any researcher proceeding to work

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<sup>6</sup> W. T. Stead, 'Wanted, An English Bible!' *The Daily Paper*, 1.1, 4 October 1893, pp. 25-27; p.26.

on the editor who saw his position in journalism as leader of a ‘great secular or civic church and democratic university’ owes to the work of renowned Stead scholar Joseph O. Baylen, whose own biography of Stead may still yet see its way to publication. Brown concludes his biography with the assessment that: ‘For all [Stead’s] human weaknesses and errors, his writing conveyed a deep and abiding empathy for others, a sensitivity to human suffering, and a capacity to grow in understanding’ (201) and with this we must be inclined to agree.

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**Notes on contributors:**

Helena Goodwyn is Vice-Chancellor’s Senior Research Fellow at Northumbria University. She is currently working on a monograph entitled *The Americanization of W. T. Stead*.