CONTENTS

FOREWORD

I am amazed that, one hundred years after his death aboard the *Titanic*, this is the first biography of the truly extraordinary W. T. Stead. *Muckraker* is a 'warts-and-all' account of the life of arguably the most important journalist of all time. Many biographers have wanted to write about him before, and his contemporary relevance cannot be denied, but for some reason no one ever has.

The father of the modern tabloid newspaper, Stead was certainly no saint but if journalists ever wanted a beatified patron he would have some claim to the title. Daring and reckless; public-spirited and generous – these were the fundamentals of the man. If he went too far on occasion, he at least made sure that others went far enough. He understood that to get at the truth you sometimes have to be 'conscientiously unscrupulous', as George Bernard Shaw once put it. Stead was a master of this art.

Imprisoned for abducting a child in the course of exposing the vicious sex trade that existed in Victorian London, Stead realised, as few before him had, that governments are powerless to resist the co-ordinated voice of the public – when harnessed by a newspaper – to help put an end to such evils. His achievements, ranging from increasing government spending on the military to helping clear London's appalling slums, are impressive by any standard; but, as this well-written biography suggests, he undoubtedly went too far on occasion and had a tendency to exaggerate his influence. Like some in his profession today, he was also liable to forget that newspaper editors are not, generally, supposed to make the news, but to write it.

Allegations of corrupt practices in today's modern media, involving the *News of the World* and others, have brought this

once great national institution into disrepute. At the time of writing it is unclear what the repercussions of Lord Justice Leveson's grand inquiry will be, but it seems that nothing will be the same on 'Fleet Street' again. The danger could be that we lose what has traditionally been a valuable part of our national life. Whatever their excesses, the 'red-tops' have often spoken for the powerless, the oppressed and the marginalised. Without them we will all be the poorer.

The story of W. T. Stead is both inspiring and tragic, and I hope that this book contributes to a renewed interest in his truly scandalous life and times.

Tristram Hunt
House of Commons, 2012

PREFACE

When it was revealed in the summer of 2011 that the mobile phone of a murdered schoolgirl had been hacked by a detective employed by the *News of the World*, tabloid journalism hit an historic low. After years of righteously denouncing the shortcomings of others, its oldest and most recognised title lost credibility and collapsed within a week. For once it was the respectable broadsheets which bayed for blood and claimed to speak for the nation. In the *Financial Times* the historian and former newspaper editor Sir Max Hastings decried his 'red-top' brethren as 'wild beasts', while Polly Toynbee, writing in *The Guardian*, cheered: 'Rejoice! Roll on the tumbrils as another News Corp head rolls…'[1] No words were too strong for the scummy underbelly of Fleet Street.

A hundred and thirty years before this crisis, a far more debatable breach of the law was committed by the father of investigative journalism: William Thomas Stead (pronounced 'sted'). Appalled by the prevalence of juvenile prostitution in Victorian London, Stead took it upon himself to 'purchase' a thirteen-year-old child and convey her to a West End brothel to help raise a public outcry. His sensational series of articles, published in a forebear of the *Evening Standard* under the lurid headline 'The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon', stirred up a controversy scarcely equalled in the history of journalism. While his supporters, including such respected figures as Cardinal Henry Edward Manning and the pioneers of the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, believed Stead to have struck a blow for good, most of his contemporaries denounced him as a monster and a pornographer. To this day, opinion remains divided.

The sensation was characteristic of a man who, ever since

becoming a newspaper editor at the age of twenty-one, saw it as his duty to thrust inconvenient truths in the face of a reluctant public. He was the boldest, most hated 'muckraker' British journalism had ever known. At a time when newspapers contained little besides dry accounts of parliamentary debates and solemn law reports, Stead burst onto the scene with a vigorous, plain-speaking style and a far from sanitised vision of reality. He was imprisoned once and prosecuted frequently for his 'stunts' – and he bore his punishments gladly. It was not dishonourable, in his eyes, to be denounced by the Prime Minister of the day, William Gladstone, as the man who had 'done more harm to journalism than any other individual ever known'. Stead was equally indifferent to personal attack from the era's most acclaimed novelist, George Meredith, who cast him, in an unpublished work, as a filthy newspaper 'Hercules':

> ... [w]hen [Stead] came out from the [Augean] stable, well pleased with the success of his labours, he saw with astonishment that all men turned away from him. At first he could not understand it... Why this cold shoulder? And then poor Hercules discovered that he stank.[2]

Yet, while pioneering the 'dark arts' of investigative journalism and becoming a master of tabloid sensationalism, Stead was also a devout Christian and a strict moralist. This rare combination of attributes served Stead well in his long career as a scandalmonger and reformer. Through his selective deployment of pious horror and righteous indignation, he transformed himself from a poor and uneducated wild 'barbarian of the north' into one of the most powerful people in the country.

Overbearing but also touchingly naive in his egotism, Stead believed newspapers to be the 'only Bible which millions read' and regarded his own position accordingly. His tabloid evangelism won him the grudging respect of many subscribers, including the moralist John Ruskin ('a constant and often grieved reader'), who

exempted Stead from his blanket denunciation of the press as so many 'square leagues of dirtily-printed falsehood'.[3]

In the light of his contemporary relevance, it is surprising that Stead is not more widely acknowledged as a maker of modern Britain. This may be partly explained by the fact that journalistic reputations are almost necessarily short-lived. But in his editorship of a great London newspaper, and his later involvement in a bewildering array of international projects, Stead was more than simply a journalist. He viewed himself as a sort of king, who 'filled the whole country with his voice'.[4] Yet, for reasons this book strives to elucidate, many of his closest friends and admirers wilfully allowed his memory to fade. It was not through laziness or disrespect that it took over a decade for an 'official', family approved account of Stead's life to appear after his death on board the *Titanic*. No fewer than six eminent contemporary writers, and several since, planned to undertake the task, but it seems they were deterred by unwanted discoveries or the objections of the Stead family. A hundred years after his death, these issues are less likely to cause pain and controversy.

The main factual source for Stead's life remains the standard biography by Frederic Whyte (1925). Although too long for modern tastes (two bulky volumes) and excessively laudatory, it contains facts and documents that have not survived elsewhere. I have relied on this source heavily in places. By far the best account of Stead's life, however, can still be found in the relevant chapters of *Life and Death of a Newspaper* (1952) by Stead's gifted sub-editor at the *Pall Mall Gazette*, James Robertson Scott. This veteran of old Fleet Street, who survived well into the 1960s, was the first of Stead's friends openly to admit that the crusading editor had been an improbable guardian of public morality. As well as keeping detailed notes about his sex life, Stead privately considered himself to be the reincarnated spirit of Charles II, the bogeyman of the Puritans. These facts should take little away from Stead's reputation as a journalist. His polemics may have been all the more effective for the fact that he was often, like Shakespeare's Caliban (for whom he felt 'deep sympathy'), 'raging at his reflection'.[5]

A complex subject of this kind presents an obvious temptation to his biographer: to 'unmask' Stead as brutally and unsparingly as he so loved to do in the case of others. This should be resisted. After all, a more self-satisfied Puritan than Stead would surely not have left such a large quantity of 'incriminating' evidence about his private life in the hands of his literary executors. Even after the substantial holocaust of papers which followed the completion of Whyte's authorised account, many of these documents remain extant. It is to Stead's credit that he would not have wished for any of them to be consciously omitted: 'His first instruction to his biographer,' an acquaintance once said, 'would be to be bold and again bold and always bold.'[6] I have attempted to abide by this wise maxim.

I would also like to acknowledge my debt to Professor J. O. Baylen, late of the University of Georgia. Between 1951 and his death in 2009, he published a staggering array of articles and pamphlets about Stead, all of the highest calibre. To his unrivalled scholarship have been added useful studies by Raymond Schults (1972) and Grace Eckley (2007), but the field remains open for the *magnum opus* that a figure of Stead's significance should command.

Although the present volume is hopefully a step in that direction, no single biography of Stead could ever encompass the man in his entirety. As his acquaintance the second Viscount Esher (1852–1930) so rightly observed, Stead simply had 'too many aspects' to be laid to rest in one book alone.[7] Some might feel that my quest for Stead should have included a more detailed examination of his extraordinary circle of friends, which included, at one time or another, two Tsars of Russia, King Edward VII, Cecil Rhodes, Andrew Carnegie and a galaxy of prominent literary figures and society 'beauties'. The decision to keep these connections within reasonable bounds derives largely from my belief that Stead was, at heart, a loner.

I am grateful to the staff and benefactors of several institutions: notably Churchill College, Cambridge; the British Library; the Bodleian Library; the National Library of Scotland; the National Archives of Scotland; the Parliamentary Archives; the London

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W. Sydney Robinson
14 March 2012

CHAPTER 1

QUEER BILL, 1849–63

[T]hat uncharitable Philistine bringing-up of yours ... if [only] you had been taken to the pantomime when you were six...
George Bernard Shaw to W. T. S. (August 1904)

Shortly before midnight on Sunday 14 April 1912, a stout, prematurely aged gentleman with crystal-blue eyes and a shaggy grey beard appeared on the foredeck of the *Titanic*. 'What do they say is the trouble?' he innocently enquired. No one seemed to know. 'Well, I guess it's nothing serious; I'm going back to my cabin to read'.[8] These were the last recorded words of William Thomas Stead, the famous investigative journalist who, thirty years previously, had shocked the world by purchasing a thirteen-year-old girl on the streets of Victorian London. Two hours later he would be plunged into the icy waters of the Atlantic Ocean, never to be seen again.

It was a bizarre end for a man who had made his name smiting 'the powers of darkness in high places' on behalf of the 'disinherited and outcast of the world'. The magnificent ship, legendary in its vast scale, luxury and exclusivity, represented everything he had campaigned against during his long career. Yet to contemporaries there was a grim logic to the tragedy. Not only had a great journalist been lost in one of the most incredible news stories of all time; a paradoxical man had died in fittingly incongruous circumstances. Puritan and sex fanatic, Little Englander and Imperialist, 'saint' and criminal convict, Liberal and Russophile, 'Pope' and clairvoyant: it was somehow apt that W. T. Stead had last been seen turning the pages of a penny Bible in the first-class reading room of the world's most expensive cruise liner.

It was this strange combination of grandeur and quaint humility

that made – and makes – Stead one of the most intriguing figures of his era. At the height of his fame he thought nothing of breakfasting with a Prime Minister or lecturing an emperor, but he dressed and spoke uncouthly, and even his staunchest admirers often wondered why, despite an undoubtedly striking appearance, he was not 'more beautiful to look at'.[9] For his intermittent contributor and adversary, George Bernard Shaw, the explanation was simple: Stead was an 'outrageously excessive' individual, crippled by the lasting effects of an 'uncharitable' and 'Philistine' Protestant upbringing. If Stead resented these cutting epithets, he certainly did not overlook the significance of his childhood. Even in his most exalted periods of worldly success, when he likened himself to 'an uncrowned king' and the 'father confessor' of mankind, he never entirely escaped the shadow of the Old Manse at Embleton, deep in the heart of rural Northumberland, where he was born on 5 July 1849.

His father, the Reverend William Stead, had arrived here in the winter of 1845 to be installed as the minister of the village's austere Presbyterian church. By background and training he belonged to a slightly less severe Nonconformist sect, the Congregationalists, but his staunch conservatism and fondness for the gloomy prophesies of Hosea, particularly concerning adulterers and idolaters, rendered him entirely suited to his position as eagle-eyed shepherd of his flock. After some years as apprentice to a cutler in his native Sheffield, he had worked by tireless reading and study to amass a store of knowledge that would have graced an Oxbridge-educated Anglican vicar. This was useful. Too poor to send his six children to school, he taught them at home and lived long enough to see the survivors of their pinched childhood succeed in a variety of occupations. 'Oh! My dear, my patient, long-suffering father!' his son eulogised in 1884. 'How utterly inadequate are my poor words to express in merest outline the debt I owe to you... To your fundamental virtues and capacities ... to your education and example, to your encouragement and inspiration, I owe under God and my mother all that I have, all that I can do'.[10] It was no blind filial outburst. In many ways Stead's extraordinary career is best

understood as a long attempt to attain the impossible ideals instilled in him by this brilliant, high-minded Nonconformist parson.

The minister's marriage in 1846 to Isabella Jobson would have consequences well beyond the confines of Embleton. She was the sprightly young daughter of a local farmer who had made a small fortune buying up land cheaply during the Napoleonic wars. The value of her inheritance was substantially diminished by the repeal of the Corn Laws in the year of her marriage, but Isabella proved to be a 'sweetening and liberalizing influence' on her husband's less sanguine temperament, and brought with her an enthusiasm for art and literature unusual in their community.[11] These interests she bequeathed to her son, as well as a deeply held conviction that man must always uphold the rights of woman. A favourite memory of Stead's was of his mother leading a local campaign against the government's controversial Contagious Diseases Acts, which required prostitutes living in garrison towns to undergo mandatory medical examination. Stead later wrote:

> It was one of the subjects on which I have always been quite mad. I am ready to allow anybody to discuss anything in any newspaper that I edit: they may deny the existence of God, or of the soul, they may blaspheme the angels and all the saints, they may maintain that I am the latest authentic incarnation of the devil; but the thing I have never allowed them to do was to say a word in favour of the C. D. Acts, or of any extension of the system which makes a woman the chattel and slave of the administration for the purpose of ministering to the passions of men.[12]

This was curious. Not only was Stead known, on occasion, to explode with rage about atheistic submissions, he also had a 'saving vein of Rabelaisianism' to his character.[13] Women who knew him only through his thundering attacks on immorality in articles such as 'Should Scandals in High Life Be Hushed Up?' and 'The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon' were invariably shocked by his unreserved flirtatiousness. Yet Stead somehow managed to

keep this aspect of his personality unknown to the outside world. Even today, the judgement of his acquaintance, the sexologist Havelock Ellis, that 'his self-control kept him in the narrow path' is largely accepted, notwithstanding the insightful rider that 'in his interests and emotions he was anything but a Puritan'. The first of these claims does not entirely stand up to the evidence. But Ellis was surely correct in supposing that Stead's 'repressed sexuality was ... the motive force of many of his activities'.[14] This is not hard to reconcile with Stead's acceptance that his often fanatical crusaderism on behalf of women stemmed from a deep regard for his mother. 'I have a prejudice in favour of mothers,' he used to tell critics between heavy drags on a cigarette, 'having myself been born of one, a fact which, I am afraid, you think unduly colours the whole of my thinking.'[15]

Such sentiments were underscored by the family's fervent religiosity, which Stead claims to have differed from conventional Christianity in its emphasis on the equality of the sexes. Yet for all its seeming modernity, the family's piety was almost wilfully antiquated. Like the seventeenth-century Puritans described by Lord Macaulay, they were not satisfied to catch 'occasional glimpses of the Deity through an obscuring veil', but preferred to 'commune with him face to face'. Implicit reliance on God would remain Stead's mantra throughout his life. 'That,' he would often say when confronted with some difficulty, 'I leave to the Senior Partner' – as he styled the Almighty. Such unselfconscious faith also stemmed from his beloved mother. On her deathbed in 1875 she told her husband not to hurry in gathering the children to her side, as 'Jesus is preparing a place for me' and would not call her to heaven 'until it is quite ready'.[16] This was the origin of Stead's lifelong faith that he was constantly guided by an unerring hand.

Their home for most of these years was not at Embleton, but Howdon, a small mining town a few miles to the east of Newcastle. The minister was strangely drawn here by the fact that the previous incumbent had been dismissed from office for 'ungodly' conduct, almost certainly involving drunkenness and debauchery. Not even

the most exacting member of the congregation would be able to find fault with the new incumbent. For over thirty years his pulpit quaked under the force of such characteristic utterances as:

> [W]hen you and I meet at the throne of God and the Judge says: 'Stead, did you warn that man?' I shall say: 'Yes, September 1874, first Sabbath...'

But his son never warmed to the town. He would later remember it as 'that grimy spot, befouled and bemired, poisoned by chemical fumes and darkened by the smoke of innumerable chimneys … Howdon-on-Tyne'.[17]

The family home was a squat cottage situated at the foot of the town's great basalt hill, with views of the 'roar and the flame' of Palmers Steel Works across the Tyne. At first the future editor had only one playmate: an older sister called Mary Isabella or 'Isie' (1847–1918), on whom he doted. Other siblings soon followed, but only John Edward (1851–1923), Francis Herbert (1857–1928) and Sarah Annie (1857–96) survived into adulthood. A bubbly, fun-loving younger brother called Joe was carried off by cholera aged fifteen, much to the family's grief. Yet it was the diseases of society that particularly weighed on the minister. For this reason, he kept a watchful eye over his children and had them protected from idle callers by a fierce dog that stalked the garden like an ecclesiastical Cerberus.

This provided the backdrop for the children's intensive schooling, which began each day at six in the morning and lasted almost until nightfall. The curriculum was highly ambitious. It included Latin and Hebrew as well as French and German, although Stead would never become particularly expert in any foreign language. The influence of the outside world was kept to a minimum, and the amusements of their neighbours were roundly castigated. The theatre was 'the devil's chapel', cards were 'the devil's Prayer Book' and novels 'a kind of devil's Bible'. Only the hours of prayer and occasional walking expeditions suspended the constant grind of the Rev. Stead's pedagogy.

The Sabbath was the sole day when these strictures were relaxed. But any notion of Sunday as a holiday would be misleading. As well as attending chapel and ministering to the needs of the Sunday school, the children were required to reproduce independent summaries of their father's lengthy sermons before partaking of a modest Sunday lunch. This exercise, however, proved excellent training for the future editor. When he came to pioneer the newspaper interview at the *Pall Mall Gazette* thirty years later, Stead boasted a memory so well-trained that all note-taking was superfluous. Unlike his brother Herbert, who went up to university and enjoyed a more conventional career in journalism, Stead never entirely succeeded in mastering shorthand.

But all this lay in the future. What immediately concerned Stead was his first great discovery – his ardent love of girls. It is impossible to say when exactly this developed, but, as is often the case with highly pressurised boys shut off from female company yet devoted to their mothers, he was precocious. Before he was even a teenager he had developed a 'very intense awareness of my own sinfulness', and required maternal reassurance before putting out the oil lamp in the little room he shared with his sister. The first object of his passion, however, was a picture-book illustration of Queen Elizabeth I. The Virgin Queen was an unlikely first love, yet Stead was besotted. 'I remember distinctly feeling about her,' he later mused, 'exactly what you would feel about a woman with whom you are in love… You are greatly interested to hear everything about her that you can; you believe that she is the peerless of all women; and you regard all her enemies as enemies of the human race, who ought to be exterminated.' Stead was accordingly much gratified by the fate of her cousin. 'To this day,' he wrote as a fully grown newspaper editor, 'I have never been able quite to get over the feeling of exultation that Mary Queen of Scots had her head cut off.'[18]

It was not long before Stead began to notice living specimens as well. 'The love affairs I had between 1861 and 1871 were numerous,' he recalled happily. Yet, as Stead was the first to admit, these 'affairs'

were almost entirely one-sided. 'It was thought in the village that I was a little "daft",' he confessed, 'and the girls did not care to receive the attentions of a suitor who was more or less looked down upon and ridiculed by local public opinion.' Known as 'queer Bill', Stead developed several of the eccentricities that would characterise his maturity. He invariably preferred, for example, both as boy and man, to run everywhere rather than walk. When he first arrived in London in 1880, he casually told his unlikely mentor, the cagey, old-maidish man of letters John Morley: 'If I felt cold any day I would not hesitate at running as hard as I could from one end of Pall Mall to the other.' Stead noted 'with some amusement' the bewildered expression that inevitably ensued. Like the little girls of Howdon, Morley would discover that his deputy had a fund of energy that would spasmodically explode much as a 'mainspring uncoils when it has been wound too tight'. So it was to be always.

The first girl to be swept up in his whirls of amorousness was young Lizzie, whom Stead vividly recalls coming to play with his older sister in a 'little dimity apron, which was rather stiff'. Stead remembered the apron 'because the first time I kissed her I had a battle with it'. In the course of a rare break from study, the eight-year-old conspired with Mary Isie to pin the girl down so that he could land a kiss on her lips, a feat he pulled off 'in spite of vigorous scratches'. It is not clear how long this violent embrace lasted, but he never forgot it: her name was prominent in his curious list of 'Girls, Howdon', which he treasured in old age.

A few years later, Stead became aware of Lydia. 'She was the belle of the village, and all the boys were crazy over her,' he wrote. 'Alas! She was two years older than I was, and when you are eleven, two years is a lot.' This did not stop the young Stead from tracing her footprints through the snow; an occupation which left him 'inexpressibly happy'. Nothing and nobody was allowed to taint this sweet, innocent girl – not, at least, if he could not. This led to a much-discussed tussle with another boy, who appears to have been equally captivated by Lydia's charms. Stead's clerical biographer, the Rev. Benjamin Waugh, reconstructs the story to illustrate the

editor's irreproachable knight-errantry, but this was certainly not the full story. 'Like most historians,' the hero privately reflected, 'he ignores that very vital consideration, precise truth, in order to make it appear that my battle was on behalf of her modesty or from general devotion to ideal virtue, whereas it was really inspired by a very devoted love for the girl herself.' Luckily for Stead, the matter never reached the ears of his father. Like his son, the Rev. Stead was prone to beating his children for their misdemeanours.[19]

From this environment Stead was sent away at the end of 1861 to a private Congregationalist academy, Silcoates School in Wakefield. The twelve-year-old must have been an odd figure, strutting around the playground of that humble school, asking the more or less conventional boys if they too conversed with the Almighty. By his own reckoning the school was 'not distinctly religious'. That would soon change. Encouraged by one or two other pupils who were equally 'under deep conviction of sin', Stead worked up a 'Revival' in the school. The letters he wrote to his family at the time give a delightful picture of his profound earnestness. 'Now my dear sister,' he wrote in one, 'unless you have already given your heart to God, give it to Him now.' 'My dear Mary Isie,' he continued, 'turn, oh turn, why will ye die, have you any objection to come to Him who is altogether lovely? Oh that I could love him more… Oh how great the danger is and how many walk on with their eyes shut to hell, oh that awful place.' After a dozen more lines of this frenzied plea, Stead closes abruptly: 'Now my dear sister I must bid you good-bye. Give my love to Mrs Bell and all the children. I hope Mama is in perfect health.'[20]

The older boys at Silcoates were not amused by these entreaties. Stead's son Henry recounts that his father used to be 'pulled across the playground on his back by the hair of his head' for his zeal in the cause of evangelical religion. Yet for Stead these attentions were all part of the fun. On other occasions he would complain of being ignored. '[H]ow I walked long with them and talked with them,' lamented Stead to his mother, 'and apparently they took no notice at all [but] when another boy [said] just two or three words to them

they would burst out crying and in a few minutes they would find peace.'[21] A religious revival was all very well, but it was best if he was its leader. Even fifty years later, at the time of his death, an Old Silcoatian felt it necessary to write to the *British Weekly* to clarify that the excitement was in fact 'fired by a boy called Waite'.[22]

The same writer agreed that while Stead was 'not especially proficient in any department of work or play ... his pluck was magnificent'. This was consistent with Stead's own self-estimation as a muscular Christian and a sportsman. 'I went [there],' he explained, '...full of romantic idolatry of Scott and Byron, [but left] when I was fourteen, crazy about cricket and cricketers'.[23] Such reminiscences were no doubt intended to reinforce the editor's self-image as a successful autodidact, owing little to his teachers, but his time at school was actually a very significant stage in his intellectual development. It was here, among the Congregationalists – 'the heirs of Cromwell' – that the young man immersed himself in the heavy volumes of the Lord Protector's letters and speeches edited by Thomas Carlyle. This was to have a great bearing on his future career. 'When I read the *Pall Mall Gazette*,' his often alarmed friend, Cardinal Manning, would say, 'it seems to me as if Cromwell had come to life'.[24] This was one of Stead's most cherished anecdotes: a tribute to his restless two years at the obscure Nonconformist academy.

It would be some time before Stead would become familiar with such exalted personages as cardinals and monarchs, not to mention the other alleged *bête noire* of the Puritans – sex. But by the standards of his class and time, he had already reached maturity when he left Silcoates in 1863. Perhaps with more money or greater inclination he might have been able to stay on and even go up to university. His future business partner, Sir George Newnes, who was two years junior to him at the school, would succeed in moving from Silcoates to study alongside a future Prime Minister, H. H. Asquith, at the City of London School. But this was not to be Stead's destiny. Even following his father into the dissenting church, for which he was evidently suited, was discouraged. No

doubt his mother made him aware of the improvidence of attempting to marry and raise a family on a modest clerical salary.

So, with a heavy heart, Stead put aside childish things and found himself a position in a counting-house in Newcastle. It was to be the only job outside journalism he would ever have – or desire.

CHAPTER 2

TO BE AN EDITOR!

I was intensely ambitious, with a personal ambition that led me to wish to make a name for myself and to be great and famous.
W. T. S., 'Autobiographical Fragment' (1893)

The world into which Stead emerged, aged fourteen, was hardly a suitable environment for a sheltered youth of his disposition. Each day, with his lunch lovingly tucked into his knapsack by his mother, Stead ventured into some of the most depraved backstreets in England. It could not be helped, for his workplace, Carr & Co., merchants of 27 Broad Chare, was situated in the midst of one of Newcastle's most notorious districts: the Quayside. According to a celebrated local antiquarian, Eneas Mackenzie, the very alleyway through which Stead passed each morning on his way from Manors Railway Station was thronged at all hours by 'very dangerous, though not very tempting females', who solicited trade from idle clerks and wearied sailors. Stead did not expand on Mackenzie's theme of their relative desirability, but would never forget these 'wretched ruins of humanity, women stamped and crushed into devils by society'.[25] One feels that he was both fascinated and disillusioned.

Stead was kept in line by his genial employer, Charles Septimus Smith, who was almost certainly a friend of the family. After his parents, this man was the greatest influence in Stead's early life. He took his work seriously, was intensely devout and aspired to be 'useful' in the community; he went on to become an alderman. In Stead he recognised a man after his own heart, and once made an extravagant gift to him of a considerable sum of money and a silver watch, which Stead wore on a chain all his life. More importantly,

as the Russian vice-consul in Newcastle, he bestowed to Stead a lasting sympathy for all things Russian, which inoculated the young man against the Slavophobe prejudice of the times.

Though Stead would sometimes contrast, with apparent bitterness, his adolescence with those of his 'more favoured contemporaries' who were then beginning their public-school careers, he appears to have greatly enjoyed his time as a clerk. His hours were apparently shorter than was customary, leaving him free to devote the long evenings to earnest self-improvement. This was probably an exaggeration, but there is no doubt that Stead was a regular visitor to the Mechanics' Institute library on Blackett Street, which did not usually close its doors until 10pm during the week. The library had been founded by the city's mercantile elite in the 1820s with the commendable intention of placing 'general knowledge within the reach of the humblest individual of the community' – an ideal greatly appreciated by the young Stead. For only six shillings a year he had access to the world's knowledge and was able, so he claims, to make serious inroads into subjects as weighty and diverse as ancient history, science, comparative religion, geography and music. Although it was somewhat ironic in the light of his later career, Stead evidently benefited from the Board's strict prohibition of any 'books of mere amusement or ... modern works in which fiction and fact are so strangely blended'.[26] By nature, Stead's tastes were never uniformly highbrow.

Yet Stead was always careful to nurture the legend that he had been a precocious youth, unusually godly, intelligent and industrious. He claims, for instance, that after continuing his studies a little further, he had seriously contemplated writing 'the whole history of the Puritan Movement' from 'where Froude left off the History of England and Macaulay began it'.[27] Stead's efforts in this direction got no further than a modest essay on Oliver Cromwell, for which he received, aged fifteen, a guinea from the editor of the *Boy's Own Magazine*. In more candid moments, the youth admitted to more mundane interests: poring over 'reports of cricket-matches and novels'. These temptations, as Stead viewed

them, were exceeded by an unlikely fascination with horses and horse-racing. Characteristically, although Stead boasted of becoming 'familiarised with all the prize horses' and getting 'tremendously excited about the winners', he never allowed himself to succumb to the 'betting mania'.[28]

This paradox – Stead's obvious liking for the things which he denied himself – was illustrated even more forcibly a few years later when he fell madly in love with an actress. Abiding by his father's solemn warning to eschew the theatre, Stead did not enter a building containing a functioning stage until he was in his fifties – and in that case it was principally to denounce it for promoting levity. Yet when he heard that a beautiful young woman was playing Ophelia in *Hamlet* at the city's theatre (he had fallen in love with this character, as he had Queen Elizabeth, straight off the page), he was almost overcome with excitement. To the obvious amusement of his fellow clerks, Stead wanted to know everything about the woman who was playing the role, and even went so far as to carry her portrait about in his breast-pocket 'for a couple of years'. More disturbingly, Stead took to 'haunt[ing] the square in which she lived', in the hope of seeing his 'idol' at the window. Such behaviour would lead Stead to reflect, with obvious self-knowledge, that youth was, indeed, 'a rare self-torturer'.[29]

But Stead did not always lust after the unobtainable. At the age of eighteen he claims to have had 'one of the most useful love affairs' of his life. It was with a woman ten years his senior, the sister of the village doctor, who passed an otherwise uneventful summer in Howdon. For once his attentions were not unappreciated. 'She was the first woman outside my own family,' recollected Stead, 'who ever said a civil word to me.' He told her that he loved her and gleefully turned the pages of her music book while she sang Scottish airs at the piano. But after 'some months of very delicious experience', during which Stead was 'allowed to make love to her' (i.e. to cuddle her), she returned to her native Edinburgh to be married to a young naval officer to whom she had been engaged. Stead was devastated: 'I felt as if the sun had gone down in mid-heaven.' But

he kept up a voluminous correspondence with the woman until, at length, she seems to have ceased to answer his letters.[30]

Such tender experiences hardly foreshadowed Stead's career as, so *The Times* sneered, the 'self-elected guardian of morals'. Yet Stead always had an inkling that this was his true calling. He once told his doubtless proud father that he wanted God to give him a 'big whip' in order to 'go round the world and whip the wicked out of it'. The Rev. Stead, who had some legitimate concerns about his son's desire to become a journalist, reflected that he knew of only one instrument that could wield such a power: a newspaper. Consciously or not, he was echoing the words of Thomas Carlyle, who, forty years previously, had wondered if the journalist of the future would not be an iconoclastic mendicant friar who 'settles himself in every village, and builds a pulpit, which he calls Newspaper'. Stead grew to be a passionate disciple of this ideal but, typically, claims not to have learned it from Carlyle (who famously changed his views), but from James Russell Lowell, the obscure American humorist and poet. This author's 'Pious Editor's Creed' was a great inspiration to Stead, despite the fact that it was almost certainly intended as satire. It depicts the perfect newspaper as

> a Bible which needs no translation, and which no priestcraft can shut and clasp from the laity – the open volume of the world, upon which, with a pen of sunshine or destroying fire, the inspired Present is even now writing the annals of God![31]

By the time that Stead read these magnificent lines, he must have already come into contact with a newspaper in the Mechanics' Institute newsroom which at least attempted to conform to its lofty standard: the *Newcastle Daily Chronicle*, owned and edited by the popular local entrepreneur Joseph Cowen. Cowen had purchased the paper in 1859 and instantly brought to Newcastle a flavour of the highly personal journalism that had been pioneered by Horace Greeley in the United States. Like Greeley, whose inspired editorship of the *New York Tribune* between 1841 and 1872 brought him

within sight of the White House, Cowen made it his duty not merely to serve up the events of the previous day, but to agitate, educate and enthuse his readers with the force of his character. His journalistic achievements were impressive: as well as mobilising a band of Newcastle volunteers to fight alongside his friend Giuseppe Garibaldi in the Italian War of Independence, he was also party to an attempt on the life of the French Emperor, Louis Napoleon III. Through his editorial columns he became a daily presence in the lives of the population, whom he presumed to instruct for their betterment.

This was exactly the kind of journalism which Stead himself would develop on an even grander scale. Yet, strangely, Stead denied Cowen as an influence – he could not abide the man's 'arrogant domination'. Not even the unsurpassed Greeley received the recognition that he deserved. Implausibly, Stead credited the more stolid *Spectator*, edited at the time by a heterodox theologian called Richard Hutton, as the originator of his lifelong romance with newspapers. He never forgot his first encounter with that publication. Before he had even read three pages, he claims to have discovered 'an entirely new thing': 'a man with strong convictions, speaking with unconventional earnestness and perfect simplicity exactly what he thought of the public questions of the day'.[32] From that moment, Stead traced his desire to become an editor.

But how to realise that ambition? Stead possessed none of the usual prerequisites of editorship. He had not been to university, had few family connections, no capital and was politically insignificant. He had not even reached the age of majority. But Stead persevered and even managed to turn some of his apparent failings to his advantage. Unlike so many aspiring journalists, he did not attempt to write upon topics about which he had only a superficial grasp. Instead, he made it his model always to write directly from experience.

It was, then, perhaps unsurprising that Stead's first noteworthy contribution to appear in the columns of a newspaper concerned what he saw around him in Broad Chare. In an attempt to put his

Christian values into practice, Stead had given an overcoat, a Bible and some money to one of the vagrants who assembled outside his office on payday. But after directing this man to a local doss-house and being 'very friendly and brotherly to him', Stead was mortified when the recipient took flight, leaving behind nothing but his Bible. Appalled and betrayed, Stead immediately penned a powerful attack on indiscriminate alms-giving, which he forwarded to every newspaper editor in the north-east.

Stead's article appeared on the morning of 7 February 1870, in the pages of a journal recently founded in the neighbouring town of Darlington, the *Northern Echo*. It suggested both Stead's huge potential as a publicist as well as his lifelong hypersensitivity. 'Conventional charity,' he thundered, did not produce 'good, but evil – curses instead of blessings; it debases instead of ennobling, and it is the fruitful parent of vice, indolence, ignorance, falsehood, and crime.' Accordingly, those who solicited such aid were said to be

> dirty, vicious, drunken, and deceitful. Their capital is impudence and lying. They are a curse to the country, a terror to society, and the despair of social reformers. They rear children like themselves; they form the recruiting ground for our criminal army; they are increasing daily; and why? Because they find begging pays better than working.

Hardly anything of this kind had appeared in a newspaper before. Although not exactly 'well-written', it was easily digestible, and carried a clear and righteous message. For better or for worse, this would become the keynote of Stead's style – a foretaste of the tabloid journalism of the future.

Stead had good reason to be pleased with his handiwork. But he caused considerable annoyance to some distinguished citizens of Newcastle by sending them cuttings of his article as a means of rousing them to action. Aside from being thought excessively brash and presumptous, this was a grave breach of the convention that all

journalistic contributions were supposed to be anonymous. Such niceties would not survive the advent of 'W. T. S.'.

According to Stead, the result of his article was instantaneous: a mendicant society was established to ensure that the unemployed of Newcastle were properly monitored. This was surely an embellishment, coloured by Stead's subsequent achievements as a crusading journalist, but it is true that a society of this kind gradually came into being, and that Charles Septimus Smith was recruited as its general secretary. Stead, who promised to write any speeches that might be required, had his first, delightful taste of importance. It would become an addiction.

The editor of the *Northern Echo*, Jonathan Copleston, was a man of relatively limited ability, but he instantly recognised Stead's usefulness. 'If you do write again,' he wrote, '*and will allow me to use your mind*, I shall be gratified.' It was a backhanded remark, made considerably worse by his refusal to offer Stead any remuneration for his articles, which were nevertheless accepted, week after week, over the course of the following nine months. Although Stead was greatly piqued by this at the time, he later claimed not to have been put off or embittered in the least. In an essay for the benefit of aspiring journalists written at the height of his fame, Stead realistically observed that newcomers to the profession must humbly accept the fact that they will be unpaid throughout their long, hard years of dreary 'apprenticeship'.[33]

Unbeknown to Stead, his entrance into the world of journalism coincided with a serious dispute between Copleston and his acting proprietor, John Hyslop Bell. It may have resulted from the editor's lack of piety, for what precipitated the row appears to have been a contribution entitled 'Christianity and Democracy', which Bell, though apparently not Copleston, had thought worthy of commendation. After a heated debate, Bell wondered if he should offer the editor's chair to the unknown contributor. The contributor, of course, was Stead. If local legend is to be believed, Bell immediately journeyed up to Newcastle to make enquires. On reaching the Stead family home he was informed by the perplexed

minister that there had been some mistake – he had never submitted anything for publication in the *Northern Echo* in his life. Then the truth dawned on him. 'Oh,' he stammered, 'it is Willie you are seeking. He is in the field playing cricket.' The would-be editor was a young man of only twenty-one.[34]

Bell was obviously startled by this revelation, but he saw no reason why Stead's youth should be an impediment. He already had several experienced journalists on his staff and proposed to recruit a skilled sub-editor, Mark Fooks of the *Northern Daily Express*, to act as Stead's mentor. In order to prepare him for the challenge which lay ahead, Bell allowed Stead to take some preliminary lessons in newspaper editing from Copleston, who by this time had decided that he would like to emigrate to the United States. Subsequently Bell advised Stead to visit another man who, with a similar background to his own, had also been given command of a newspaper in his early twenties. This was Wemyss Reid of the *Leeds Mercury*.[35]

Reid was neither an elderly nor a stuffy editor, but he immediately felt himself to be 'one of the old fogeys of the Press' when Stead arrived in his office late one evening in the summer of 1871. 'For hour after hour,' he recalls, the 'ugly duckling ... talked with an ardour and a freshness which delighted me.' If Stead had come in the guise of a pupil he 'very quickly reversed our positions, and lectured me for my own good on questions of journalistic usage which I thought I had settled for myself a dozen years before I had met him'. Stead, clearly enjoying one of his first visits to a newspaper office, went on to outline his journalistic ideal: a paper that would expose injustices, reform morals and topple errant regimes. 'I see you think I am crazy,' he beamed at one stage. Reid did not entirely demur: 'If you were ever to get your way,' he said, 'you would make the Press a wonderful thing, no doubt; but you would make the Pressman the best-hated creature in the universe.' And so the conversation went on until dawn, when Stead shot up 'with an air of bewilderment' and declared: 'Why, it is daylight! I never sat up till daylight in my life before.'

Reid's memory may have been adversely affected by his subsequent dislike of Stead and his methods, but there is no doubt that the young man was exceedingly full of his ideas. In a diary fragment, scribbled just before setting out to take up his position at Darlington, Stead spoke his mind no less unblushingly:

> To be an editor! ... to think, write & speak for thousands... It is the position of a viceroy... But ... God calls ... and now points ... *to the only true throne in England, the Editor's chair, and offers me the real sceptre... Am I not God's chosen ... to be his soldier against wrong?*[36]

Stead was obviously desperate to make a start. But, as was forever to be the case, he felt it incumbent on him to make a great profession of humility. In a toe-curling letter to the Congregationalist minister of Darlington, the Rev. Henry Kendall, Stead, Cromwell-like, outpoured his worries. Would it be right to accept a position which involved 'Sunday work'? And although Stead had recently asked (unsuccessfully) if Bell would increase his proposed salary from £150 to £180, he emphasised that he was not in the least motivated by the prospect of material gain. If anything, he proudly alleged, the editorship of the *Northern Echo* would entail a sacrifice. His 'governor', Smith, had offered to double his wages to match Bell's offer 'rather than lose me'.

Stead needed no words of encouragement from Kendall. His mind was firmly made up: he saw before him a 'glorious opportunity of attacking the Devil'.[37]