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The Illustrated London News Historical Archive, 1842-2003

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If the debut of the *Illustrated London News* (*ILN*) in May 1842 signalled ?a revolution in journalism and news reporting?, as the introduction to this remarkable on-line collection [2] contends, there can be little doubt that an equally revolutionary transformation has occurred over the course of the last 15 years with the development, expansion, and refinement of the digital archive, an electronic convulsion that is in the process of altering radically both the practice and the object of periodicals research. As a graduate student in the early 1990s writing a dissertation on national identity and word-image interplay in the first decade of the *ILN* , I spent the better part of my time and effort poring over the massive, bi-annually bound issues of the original newspaper that sat in enticing neglect on the shelves of my university library, a nearly-complete and well-preserved run that would have been a common enough acquisition for scholarly institutions across Britain and North America in years gone by. By necessity, the manner of my scrutiny was desultory, overwhelmed as I was by the sheer amount of printed material, by the seemingly unconstrained exuberance of the paper?s pictorial and textual coverage. I was further hampered by the lack of rationally organized indexes to the vast majority of the 21 volumes I had committed myself to mastering, each comprising 500?800 pages of densely-columned news and high-quality woodcuts ? an enterprise in unguided, delighted absorption that brought me as close to a direct experience of Edmund Burke?s magnitudinal sublime as any subsequent encounters with *residuum Victoriana*. In recent years those once readily-accessible volumes have been making their way into the protective custody of special collections, away from the greasy hands, unscrupulous lacerators, and uncontrolled atmospheres of the comparatively public stacks they occupied until their historical and cultural value was properly appreciated.

If the tactile pleasures and attendant intellectual bewilderments derived from handling the bound *ILN* are now lost to a majority of undergraduates and library flâneurs, the loss is arguably more than made up for by this new online archive, which offers users immediate access to the entire run (161 years) of the *ILN*. As its

Gale/Cengage Learning creators advertise, ?each page has been digitally reproduced in full colour and every article and caption is full-text searchable with hit-term highlighting and links to corresponding illustrations?. Given that the archive contains more than 7000 issues, some 260,000 pages, and in excess of 1.5 million colour facsimile images, this is no vain boast. Just as the *ILN* was in many respects a first ? the world?s first regularly illustrated weekly, the first periodical to employ special war correspondents and illustrators, the first to publish colour supplements ? so this archive is the first to make this groundbreaking newspaper a globally searchable (?easy ... digital format?; ?convenient 24/7 access?) and hence meaningfully *contextualized* resource. Thanks to the technical wonders of search highlighting, the keen student uninitiated in either media theory or 19th-century social and cultural history can spend an hour online with the *ILN* archive and make more informed narrative and pictorial connections than the experienced researcher of yore could hope to uncover in days of readerly labour. As Patrick Leary, founder of the wonderfully commodious Victoria Research Web puts it in his blurb for the *ILN* HA, ?digitization holds out the promise of at last unlocking the incomparable riches of this uniquely influential newspaper for researchers everywhere to explore?. The early, revolutionary nature of the now-defunct *ILN* finds its ideal expression in the evolving praxis of the digital revolution; ?researchers everywhere? can come to an expeditious apprehension of the paper?s unprecedented multi-media format and the extraordinary scope of its reportage with, as they say, a click of the button.

Well, of course it?s not quite that simple. The sweeping democratic promise heralded by Leary is checked somewhat by the fact that the *ILN* archive is not available to individual subscribers ?at this stage?. Its current users will need to log on via their institutional host, although Gale/Cengage anticipates a pay-per-view service in the future, presumably something along the lines of the existing agreement that allows archive surfers to download and purchase *ILN* images for commercial purposes from the conveniently-highlighted Mary Evans Picture Library. Once on the *ILN*?s home page, readers are introduced to the periodical as ?a pictorial chronicle of Britain and the world ... without parallel?. Its digitization frees researchers from having to travel to a library holding paper copies and removes the ?frustration of encountering damaged issues of the paper?. Certainly the high quality of the archive?s reproductions ? of full pages, of individual engravings, and increasingly common as the 20th century advanced, of photographs ? is striking, making negotiation of the site an ocular gratification. The advanced browse feature allows researchers to scan by issue, special issue, supplement, or contributor index, and both images and articles can be effortlessly disseminated for educational purposes as downloadable pdfs and e-mailable links. A notepad option and the capacity to save searches across sessions allows users to personalize their time online, and the list of other handy search features is a study in contemporary digital amenities: basic search; ?fuzzy? (low, medium, high) search; advanced search by index types (article title, keyword, entire document, caption, contributor, record number); browse by issue, special issue, or contributor; citation generation; and search saves with the Gale named user account.

For the curious amateur coming to the archive without a clear idea of where to start, the site offers some useful advice about categories central to the *ILN*?s identity and reputation. Royalty, sport, fashion, transport, disasters, travel, the arts, exploration, politics, war, science and technology ? all are covered in detail and will reward the topic-specific searcher with a wealth of pictorial and textual substance. (Prospective users will be interested to learn from the archive?s sample keyword search page that the top three hits aside from countries and continents are ?hair? [3632], ?steam? [916], and ?motor show? [648]. The next three runners-up are ?dress? [575], ?fashion? [478], and ?industry? [410]. ?Telegraph? earns sixth position with 397 results. The newspaper was obviously and strenuously marketed toward both sexes, a fact not directly addressed in the archive?s introductory materials.) Both the dilettante and the serious historian will benefit from perusing the site?s recommended topics related to the various precedents and innovations for which the *ILN* was justifiably celebrated in the Victorian era. The 1855 Christmas issue, for example, contained the first colour pictures ever printed in a British newspaper. In turn, the *ILN* reported on the first steam omnibus, the first letterbox in London, and was the first paper to cover the laying of the transatlantic cable with a series of fine engravings produced from the drawings of a special artist travelling aboard the Great Eastern. Other notable events of the 19th century that provided the *ILN* with an opportunity to boost sales through detailed pictorial coverage and to cement its prestige as a truly international publication include the French

Revolution of 1848, the Great Exhibition of 1851, the Duke of Wellington?s funeral in 1852, the Paris International Exhibition of 1867, and the 1896 conflict in the Transvaal. Grand public affairs and happenings such as these typically resulted in the *ILN* producing special issues, some *gratis* but most at extra cost to supplement its normal 16-page format and bump up already impressive profit margins: the archive allows for specialized searches of all of these issues, with titles such as ?Napoleon: Visit to England? (1855), ?Imperial Russia: Her Power and her Progress? (1914), ?Munich Crisis? (1938), ?Royal Visit to Canada and to the USA? (1957), and ?Wedding of Prince Charles and Lady Diana Spencer? (1981).

Given the richness of its content, the quality of its illustrations, and the calibre of its writers ? Charles Dickens, Robert Louis Stevenson, Thomas Hardy, Rudyard Kipling, Henry James, and Agatha Christie were all contributors ? it is little wonder that the *ILN* is here vaunted as ?a unique resource for social, cultural and political history?, an unrivalled treasury that will ?support studies in media history, Victorian history, 19th-century history, family history and local history?. With these quite accurate claims, however, the archive actively promotes an understanding of the *ILN* as an untroubled information mine standing by for extraction. Rather than situating the newspaper within what Brian Maidment 20 years ago called the ?generic issues specific to periodicals ? the complex mediations ... of editorial policy, wood engraving technique, readership definition, sales figures, distribution patterns and finance? (1) the site?s inventors relegate such critical matters to the as-yet underdeveloped ?Research Tools? link, which contains two excellent but brief essays on the *ILN*?s early history by none other than Leary and Maidment.

The former?s piece impresses upon today?s reader the ?electric, transforming? impact the *ILN*?s ?combination of *news* with *images*? would have made on the early Victorians. Leary recounts in detail the story of Herbert Ingram, one-time printer and hawker of quack medicine, who was inspired by the success of the *Weekly Chronicle*?s pictorial coverage of the Greenacre murder trial in 1837 to start up a topical, respectable newspaper that would, in the words of its first number, ?keep continually before the eye of the world a living and moving panorama of all its actions and influences?. Selling a phenomenal 26,000 copies, this issue portended the tremendous success that met the *ILN* in its first decades: the paper sold 100,000 copies in the week the Great Exhibition opened, thanks to its lavish advocacy in the preceding months of Joseph Paxton?s design for what quickly became known as the Crystal Palace. In 1862, under the editorship of Charles Mackay and in response to its coverage of the Prince of Wales? wedding, the *ILN* was selling 300,000 copies a week. Leary provides a good sense of the complexities and scale of a paper that relied on a huge stable of artists, correspondents, and columnists, both in-house and under contract throughout the world, to produce the large numbers of wood engravings and articles required by an illustrated weekly, and concludes his essay with an astute observation that Maidment fleshes out more fully: ?Never a simple ?reflection? of its times or of public attitudes, the paper was deeply involved in shaping both?.

Maidment opens his article by noting the happy synergies that occurred between emergent mass-print technologies and rapidly-evolving readers? markets that enabled the appearance of the *ILN*. Wood engraving post-Bewick, ?as a relief method of print making, where the white areas were cut away from the surface of a box-wood block and the image thus printed off the remaining inked surface of the block?, had a number of inestimable advantages over other methods of illustrative mass reproduction: wood blocks could sustain many thousands of imprints without degradation; they were quickly and relatively cheaply produced, if also labour intensive; and they could be neatly combined with text on steam presses, to the point that the illustrations ?writhe about the page or else dominate and bully the surrounding text into compressed and unexpected columnular shapes?. Maidment?s exposition on the early 19th-century history of wood engraving as not only a ?didactic and decorative medium? but also as a seemingly ?unproblematic and triumphantly naturalistic? form of visual representation with increasingly broad appeal is particularly illuminating. Priced at 6d., the *ILN*?s popularity as a purveyor of highly finished and profuse engravings was nevertheless largely limited to members of the sophisticated, distinctly respectable classes who could afford so expensive a paper. As Maidment emphasizes, the *ILN*?s claims to imagistic truth and accuracy must be balanced by a recognition of the paper?s pictorial reliance on other, established aesthetic modes: melodrama and caricature are as much a part of the *ILN*?s repertoire as gritty social realism: ?the wood engravings in the *ILN* do not inevitably disclose themselves as naturalistic in method or reportage in mode ?they need to be

read in all their variety?.

Maidment?s and Leary?s articles could be helpfully supplemented with a bibliography of scholarly and historical works directly concerning the *ILN*, and perhaps with extracts from some of them. My own *Dynamics of the Pictured Page: Representing the Nation in the Illustrated London News* (1998) comes to mind, as does Christopher Hibbert?s *The Illustrated London News: Social History of Victorian Britain* (1975) and Gerry Beegan?s more recent *The Mass Image: A Social History of Photomechanical Reproduction in Victorian London* (2008).(2) Mason Jackson, who worked as an engraver for the *ILN*, published a useful book on *The Pictorial Press: Its Origin and Progress* in 1885 that could be reproduced in whole or part by the *ILN* archive without any copyright hassles. Inclusion of such background materials would add to the comprehensiveness of an already outstanding digital resource.

Notes

1. B. E. Maidment, ?Victorian Periodicals and Academic Research?, in *Investigating Victorian Journalism*, ed. Laurel Brake, Aled Jones and Lionel Madden (London, 1990), p. 144.Back to (1)
2. Peter Sinnema, *Dynamics of the Pictured Page: Representing the Nation in the Illustrated London News* (Brookfield, VT, 1998); Christopher Hibbert, *The Illustrated London News: Social History of Victorian Britain* (London, 1975); Gerry Beegan, *The Mass Image: A Social History of Photomechanical Reproduction in Victorian London* (London, 2008).Back to (2)

The editors are happy to accept this review and do not wish to comment further.

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