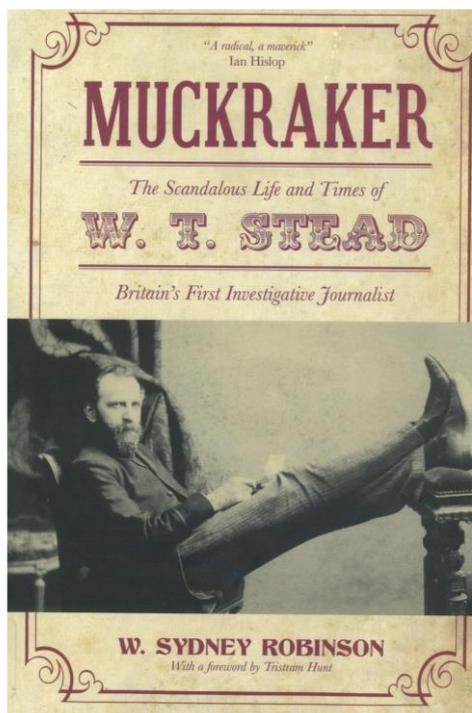


Muckraker: The Scandalous Life and Times of W.T.Stead, Britain's First Investigative Journalist

by **W. Sydney Robinson**

2012



January 2020 marks the 150th Anniversary of the first edition of The Northern Echo. W.T.Stead was its chief editor from 1870 to 1880, during which period he was in fact Britain's youngest ever newspaper editor.

William Stead was born in Embleton, Northumberland in 1849 and died on the 15th April 1912, being one of the 68% of passengers who did not survive the sinking of the Titanic (he was on his way to give a lecture tour in America). He was the son of a Congregationalist Minister and a crusading mother. The non-conformity of both seem to have been a powerful influence. One campaign his mother was involved in and that made a huge impression on the young Stead, was to fight the 'Contagious Diseases Act' – this was the enforced medical examination of prostitutes in Garrison towns. It was a cause he put his weight behind in 1876 while at the 'Echo', though it took a full ten years before the act was repealed.

The biography devotes 25 pages to the 'Northern Echo' years. In some ways Stead's position was an apprenticeship; in others, he seems to have taken to the role fully formed, ready, in his own words, 'to think, write and speak for thousands'. In those days the paper consisted of tiny type on four Broadsheet pages. A day's work would begin in the late afternoon and go through to the early hours. In pioneering moves, the price of the paper was just one halfpenny, and Darlington's railway connections were exploited in order to increase circulation. But Stead was not much enamoured of the town and left for London at the end of the decade with the intention not to return to the North, but to increase his fame and fortune in the capital, where he was to take the helm of London's most influential evening paper, the 'Pall Mall Gazette'.

It was at this point in his career that he launched his in/famous 'Maiden Tribute' campaign. In order to publicise the evils of child prostitution he literally purchased a thirteen-year-old girl - an object lesson in whether means can justify ends. The transaction was enacted and proved a point but at great cost to the child herself, her family and his own reputation, because of the murky tactics used to bring it about. In fact, Stead went to prison for three months for abduction. Not being short on self-belief, he was unashamed and unrepentant. For thirty years he made a point of wearing his prison uniform to work on the anniversary of his conviction. When the age of consent was raised from 13 to 16 in 1885, he hailed it as a consequence of the age of 'new journalism'.

In some ways the episode encapsulates the whole conundrum about Stead. No doubt he was passionate about the issues he involved himself in – but the danger is that if you go a-muckraking, to reveal horrific practices to provoke reform, you run the risk of getting your hands dirty. Robinson points out another paradox: Stead was merciless in his attempt to uncover hypocrisy, fearless in the exposure of politicians, even royals, and yet, he calls him a 'repressed toady'. As soon as the opportunity arose to join the Establishment, Stead seized it with alacrity.

In later life, Stead became generally discredited and even an embarrassment. He overestimated his influence, lost money on mad schemes and became obsessed with spiritualism. Even so, when he died, the obituaries lamented the loss of 'a man of devastating sincerity and rigid principle'. Robinson sums him up like this: 'He twisted facts, invented stories, lied, betrayed confidences; but always with a genuine desire to reform the world.' The cover of the book quotes Ian Hislop's assessment of him as 'a radical, a maverick.' Reading this book might help you to make up your own mind....