

The *ILN* Celebrities and Gossip Columns by Prof. Sally Mitchell

Introduction

Although newspapers in 1800 often published rumours and even slander, early Victorian journals seldom mentioned the private lives of notable people. Gossip returned around midcentury in columns of light news but - at least in the Illustrated London News - nothing in the way of sensation or scandal. "Gossip" in these columns meant informal writing about persons and social incidents, mixed with odd bits of information and amusing if critical commentary on current events. Naming artists, singers, actors, and the socially prominent called attention to their concerts, exhibitions, books, and charitable causes. The *ILN* columnists were experienced professional journalists with wide connections in London's political and artistic world, broad general interests, and a varied fund of miscellaneous information. Although columns were generally anonymous in the early years, signature (at least by initials or pseudonym) became usual after the mid-1870s.

Professor Sally Mitchell teaches in the English Department and the Women's Studies Program at Temple University, Philadelphia

Town Talk and Table Talk

The first Illustrated London News gossip column was published on 16 March 1850 under the name Angus B. Reach and carried his initials through 15 November 1851. A working journalist since his early twenties, Reach also wrote amusing books and served on the staff of *Punch*. The column of 4 May 1850 [HN3100024681] displays his typical form. Whether discussing politics, describing May Day's folk customs and its contemporary escapades, considering William Wordsworth's reputation (the poet laureate had died on 23 April) or satirizing the new painters who used the initials PRB, Reach gently skewers his subjects and offers his own opinions in language that is humorous but never mean. After November 1851 the column disappeared for almost two years before returning from October 1853 to April 1860 with the subtitle "on Literature, Art, &c." Although unsigned, it was chiefly written by Peter Cunningham, known for his 1849 *Hand-Book of London*, a groundbreaking historical and literary guide. Cunningham's antiquarian interests supplied anecdotes and odd facts to help fill the column.

Echoes of the Week

This column, which ran (with interruptions) for 25 years, first appeared on 4 January 1862. Although initially not signed, it was known to be written by George Augustus Sala, who contributed to Charles Dickens's *Household Words* and dozens of other journals. From June 1857 he regularly wrote leaders and special correspondence for the *Daily Telegraph*. Sala had worked as a theatrical scene painter; his mother was a singer; and he seemed to know everything and everyone in the bohemian world. Sala name-dropped artists, singers, actors, writers, politicians, explorers, royalty, social leaders, and well-known people from the US, Spain, France and elsewhere. He also provided commentary on manners, language, fads and slang; indeed, Sala's columns provide rich plunder for connoisseurs of odd facts as well as expressing the flavor of metropolitan London. On 4 February 1865 [HN3100066361] he introduced the habit of writing in the first person - as "I" rather than with the editorial "we" - which became a distinctive hallmark of subsequent columnists.

In his first column on 4 January 1862 [HN3100057793] Sala defines gossip and establishes his voice: chatty, genial, and wide-ranging in both content and language. He covers the growing demand for newspapers and magazines, describes a French article about English racing, mentions women's election to a royal society (which lets him joke about a woman becoming a "fellow" but also publicizes women's achievements), values ordinary people's mourning for Prince Albert (who had died on 14 December), praises a new poem by Mrs. Norton, depicts the clothing (trousers!) worn by an Indian woman at a state ceremony, considers lectures as

entertainment (mentioning a dozen authors), and jokes about an advertisement for Iceland moss cocoa – most of which provide an opportunity both for humor (often generated by unexpected language) and for information or commentary.

Because of Sala's work for other journals, especially his foreign correspondence, the column was sometimes written by others and then suspended after 30 March 1867. On 3 October 1874 it returned with the signature "G.A.S." (although there would be further gaps). After it expanded to a full page on 5 June 1880 Sala's anecdotes grew longer, his language relaxed, and the names he could use multiplied. On 28 January 1882 [[HN3100107544]] he mentions 22 living people, summarizing the New York Herald's "delicious details" about Oscar Wilde in New York, mentioning Algernon Swinburne's "fine piece of poetic frenzy" about the persecution of Jews in Russia, and demonstrating his interest in social issues as well as Society by praising an evening college for women workers and describing holiday celebrations at the Victoria Hospital for Sick Children. No columns were published between late December 1884 and late March 1886, when Sala was on a round-the-world lecture tour. After the final appearance of his initials on 21 May 1887 the title "Echoes of the Week" ceased to appear in the *ILN*.

During Sala's longest absence, between 6 April 1867 and 31 January 1874, there was a similar column under two separate titles: "Nothing in the Papers" (1867-1872) and "By The Way" (1873-74). Although not named, the principal writer was Shirley Brooks, another versatile general journalist and long-time member of the Punch staff. From mid-summer 1884 until June 1886, the title "Our Note Book" was used for an unsigned collection of short paragraphs about general news. The title reappeared in January 1888, now signed by James Payn, and the column took the form under which it ran for the next 80 years, see 'The *ILN* and Our Note Book' by Dr Julia Stapleton

The Ladies' Column

As women's magazines (and the advertising they attracted) grew economically valuable, the *ILN* began on 6 March 1886 to run its first regular Ladies' Column. The contributor's identity guaranteed an extraordinary range of tart opinions on topics interesting to women. Florence Fenwick Miller had medical training, served from 1877 through 1885 as an elected member of the London School Board (which gave her an insider's view of politics), produced a weekly "Lady's Letter" for provincial papers, and would later edit the weekly *Woman's Signal*. Her distinctive mix of fashion, gossip, news, social commentary and feminist argument lasted for 32 years. The column of 14 June 1890 [[HN3100457361]], for example, starts with London at the height of the social season, describes the most stylish hats and dresses, mentions shopkeepers convicted for selling margarine at the price of butter, and reports that W.E. Gladstone (four times Prime Minister) told an education commission it was shameful for women students to have no share in the wealth of Oxford and Cambridge men's colleges. Its conclusion points out Gladstone's personal reasons for supporting women's education.

Over the years various signatures were used: Filomena, Florence Fenwick-Miller, Mrs. Fenwick-Miller, and F.F.M. From 16 November 1896 the column became the Ladies' Page and began with an illustrated essay on Dress signed with a pseudonym (first Paulina Pry, later Sibyl), followed by social and political notes bearing one of Fenwick-Miller's signatures. Then on 16 July 1898 the entire Ladies Page became a single piece signed Filomena. Her column for 27 June 1908 [[HN3100544743]] indicates other changes that arrived with the turn of the century. The social season paragraph includes what we would now call gossip by suggesting evidence for a rumored royal wedding (although the marriage did not take place). The final two paragraphs name (or "puff") specific shops - shops with display advertisements in the same issue. And one advantage of pseudonyms appears in a paragraph about the suffrage processions of 13 and 21 June. Its final sentence names one of the first suffragettes to serve a prison term: Filomena's daughter Irene Miller.

Conducting Searches

To discover what interested London at a particular time, use a column title as a keyword and restrict the dates as appropriate. For major social events, the keywords London Season often provide illustrations. Upper Ten Thousand in an entire document search leads to other material about the high society. Keyword searches on Personal and Personalities find articles that may have illustrations. To trace fads, slang and new technologies use an entire document search for words such as masher, bloomer, telephone, bicycle, cocaine, socialist, woman suffrage or women's suffrage.

An entire document search is also needed for people. The following examples show how names were used before the late twentieth century. The actress (and sometime mistress of the Prince of Wales) Lillie Langtry is always Mrs. Langtry. The name yields more than 220 hits including a Pears' Soap advertisement on 15 March 1884 [[HN3100448046]]. And although the *ILN* carefully avoided scandal, the front cover for 13 December 1902 [[HN3100474109]] has an illustration showing both Edward VII (the former Prince of Wales) in the royal box and Mrs. Langtry on stage, which must have elicited a knowing smile from some readers. As the example demonstrates, women usually (although not always) retain the name under which their public reputation was made regardless of subsequent marriage or divorce. Mary Braddon is either M.E. Braddon or Miss Braddon and never Mrs. Maxwell. Mrs. Humphry Ward and Mrs. Henry Wood were professionally known under a husband's name. Actress Fanny Kemble is usually Miss Kemble (socially correct for an eldest sister). A younger sister, such as the singer Miss Adelaide Kemble, is given her forename as well. Women of other nationalities (through either birth or marriage) have the appropriate title: Madame Bodichon, Mdlle. Adelina Patti, and so forth. Men need only first name and last name: Wilkie Collins, Sherlock Holmes, Conan Doyle, James Whistler (without McNeill), Henry Irving. Tennyson finds the poet both as Alfred Tennyson and, after December 1883, as Lord Tennyson. Edwin Landseer does not need his title. Oscar Wilde yields dozens of mentions and also picks up his wife; Lady Wilde, however, locates his mother, the Irish nationalist who wrote under the pseudonym "Speranza."

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