FLEET STREET : THE PLACE AND THE CONCEPT

Since this might seem an unlikely subject for me to choose I must start with a brief explanatory background. In my career as a professional educationist I came to know many representatives of Fleet Street, often in my frequent role as a speaker at national conferences, often as a result of being asked to comment on current developments in schools. Over a period of time I found that, contrary to some assumptions, the most senior of the Fleet Street journalists could be relied upon for fair reporting; and, in turn, they took me into their confidence about the anxieties and the concerns of the national media. One, above all, showed such a particular interest in my views on education that, in due course, we married. Hence, you will see that my interest in Fleet Street has a personal element.

The Street itself remains a remarkable thoroughfare, redolent with history and named, as we all know in the City, after the Fleet River, diverted underground since 1765. It was, of course, among many other things, the home territory of Samuel Johnson and the scene of the ignominious escape back to Westminster of Charles I after he had failed to unearth the famous five rebel members of Parliament from the Common Council's protection.

In medieval times the area was ecclesiastical, with the clergy living in great houses. In the 18th century someone called it 'A wonder street' which may have been partly due to the vast number of taverns to be found there or, at number 189, Mrs. Salmon's waxwork museum. 'I offer,' she said '140 figures big as life'. They sustained her until her death at the age of 90. But the Street was not a wondrous place to everyone. William Shenstone, the writer, noted in 1743: 'London is really dangerous at this time. The pickpockets, formerly content with mere filching, make no scruple to knock people down with bludgeons in Fleet Street and the Strand.'

It was in 1500 that Wynkyn de Worde, a printer brought to this country from Alsace by Caxton, set up a printing office at the sign of the Swan, on the south side of the street, opposite Shoe Lane. He specialised in cheaply produced books. Thus did print come to Fleet Street. So, too, came the beginning of controversy - for book printing was then a risky business and those involved might, at any moment, be arraigned before the Privy Council for 'printing such books as were thought to be unlawful.' And 'unlawful' meant whatever the authorities wanted it to mean at any given time. If it meant awfully unlawful a book was likely to be burned, as was Cranmer's *Recantation*.

Books were just the beginning of printed information centred upon Fleet Street - and, in this context, we must include the closely adjoining streets since there was to develop what might be thought of as a specialised neighbourhood. After books came news-sheets. As early as 1666 there was a two-page sheet of news and small advertisements called the *London Gazette*.

And may I here interpolate a fact that will not be unknown to members of this honourable Association but which has often been dismissed as fiction by many other people. Fleet Street had a kind of poor cousin, if I can put it that way, close to St. Giles' Church, in Cripplegate. There was, in fact, a real Grub Street, running from Chiswell Street, in the north, to Fore Street, in the south. It was, wrote the late Margaret Lane, 'an early and extremely impoverished sort of Fleet Street.' By 1829 those of its inhabitants who were not among the distressed hacks or penny-a-liners had had enough of being tarred with its brush and successfully petitioned to have the place re-named Milton Street.

To return to my chosen ground: there is no clear, single indication as to why Fleet Street became a national Press centre. Yet there were two likely reasons: firstly, Fleet Street itself was the important western entrance to the City, and an immediate link with the seat of royalty and, subsequently, with Parliament at Westminster - and surely it was an indication of earliest prestige that up to the middle of the 15th century it was one of only two paved streets in the City. The other was Thames Street.

The second reason for Fleet Street's concern with news was most probably its closeness to the centre of trade and commerce, to what was to become the financial City. With trade, and especially overseas trade, came gossip, came news. In the taverns and later, of course, in the coffee houses, news speedily changed hands. And most of what appeared in the earliest newspapers was news from abroad; home news was originally a largely unknown quantity. It was, even then, regarded as essential to know, as soon as possible, what the Continental Europeans were up to. Much later Oliver Goldsmith summed up his own, maybe slightly jaundiced view of how pioneer Fleet Street investigators went about their work. 'They collect their materials,' he wrote, 'from the oracle of a coffee-house, who gathered them from a beau at a gambling table, who pillaged his knowledge from a great man's porter, who had his information from the great man's gentleman - who invented the whole story for his own amusement the night before.'

The first regular Fleet Street newspapers began to make their appearance in the 18th century. The so-called Father of the English Newspaper, Edward Mallett, founded the *Daily Courant*, first issue dated March 11th 1702 and this, too, consisted entirely of foreign news. It started as a single sheet, printed on one side only. Mallett had his press at the Ludgate end of the Street. The first daily evening paper, *The Star*, appeared at the Temple Bar end in 1788. Its title was to survive into the Nineteen-Seventies. Soon Fleet Street was bustling with newspapers - *Morning Post, Morning Advertiser, The Daily Telegraph* and many more. They swarmed across the Street, into Bouverie Street and the adjoining courts and alleys. On December 20th 1820 there appeared from Number 11 Johnson Court the first issue of the brash and scurrilous *John Bull*, which might possibly be taken to bear some comparison with the more reckless of the modern tabloids. It quickly achieved record sales. But, for all his material success, the proprietor, William Shackell, was a surprisingly shy man. He preferred anonymity and officially registered one of his compositors as the paper's owner. *The Daily News* was brash and rash in a different manner. Its political pundit wrote sixteen hundred of its influential editorials. She was Miss Harriet Martineau - and that was before women's pages were ever thought of.

Fleet Street, we learn from contemporary accounts, looked and sounded like a place that was at the heart of a thriving industry, suffering traffic gridlocks even with its 18th and 19th century vehicles. At election times, we are told, people mobbed the kerbside newspaper sellers. Yet, up until the Eighteen-Twenties, Fleet Street produced its papers - even its *John Bull* - mainly for the educated classes. *The Times,* which had its being in Printing House Square, a former monastery, just beyond the Street but still of it (in a superior kind of way) printed the worst of London's murder cases and sex crimes in Latin.

It was from *The Times* that the rest of Fleet Street learned the first of the lessons that were to last until the Nineteen-Eighties - that behind the information industry, born of the City, were acute and continuing tensions between owners and employees. In 1813 John Walter, owner of *The Times*, purchased the first double printing presses to be operated by steam. The production workers, who feared the loss of jobs, immediately protested and Walter had to smuggle the machinery into the plant in bits and in the strictest secrecy. His plan succeeded and at 6 a.m. on November 29th 1814 the new presses began to turn and Walter simultaneously announced: '*The Times* is already printed by steam.' As I shall note in due course, some 172 years later Fleet Street was mesmerised by a not dissimilar operation.

Fleet Street was on the brink of acquiring a double identity. To City residents, to the City Corporation, it was an ever burgeoning public thoroughfare with, as in its past, some of the best taverns and ale-houses in the capital. But increasingly, the two words were taken to indicate what would become a unique concept in Britain - a national newspaper Press eventually acquiring a higher proportion of readers than any other country in the world. People in Britain knew more about the events of their time than most other people, despite the specially British dictum (not always unjustified) that 'you can't believe everything you read in the newspapers.' Hence the term Fleet Street could be used in the complimentary, or disparaging, sense as occasion or individual taste required.

Not unexpectedly there is argument among historians as to when one should date the beginning of the modern era of Fleet Street. Since I rather approve of the proposition that if you are going to state a case it helps to state it precisely, I select 4 p.m. on August 30th 1894. That was the time and date, so usefully recorded for posterity, when Alfred Harmsworth and his brother, Harold, acquired the then decrepit London *Evening News* for a total of £25,000. At 1.20 a.m., on Monday, May 4th 1896, in the basement of premises at 2 Carmelite Street, just around the corner from the Street proper, printing presses leapt into clattering life and the nation saw its first edition of the *Daily Mail*.

Its news columns reported the war in Bulawayo and an editorial condemned the authorities for their introduction of what it called the 'exquisite nonsense' of imposing a three-miles-an-hour speed limit on that new fangled but highly promising invention, the motor car. If the *Evening News* is taken as a tentative harbinger of things to come, the *Daily Mail* represents the signpost that was to point Fleet Street into the heart of public affairs, politics and the national consciousness.

Alfred Harmsworth, of course, became Lord Northcliffe, the first and most brilliant of all those who came to be known as Fleet Street barons. It is not too much to claim, I believe, that initially through him Fleet Street began to change the course of our national history. A newly emerging literate society could afford his ha'penny a day *Daily Mail* and could understand its clear, simple language and its air of excitement. Northcliffe ensured that there were features designed to appeal to women whose long struggle out of the confines of the boudoir and the kitchen was showing signs of its early awakening.

As a result of the development of a national Press, British newspaper readers were better informed about the proceedings of their parliament than the people of any other nation. Some years earlier Lord Macaulay, the historian, observed the Press gallery at Westminster and coined the phrase 'The Fourth Estate.' And how typically British that until comparatively modern times journalists reporting on Parliament were behaving unlawfully - or, at least, they were in breach of Parliamentary privilege. As recently as the late Nineteen-Forties two journalists were arraigned before the Bar of the House and an M.P. expelled because of an article that had appeared in an obscure Fleet Street journalists' trade journal. In general, however, M.P.'s did what Lord Nelson and a few others down the ages have found it expedient to do - they turned a blind eye.

Fleet Street - both the place and the industry - successfully survived the Twentieth Century's two world wars. Fire and destruction came close during the Blitz of the second war but, somehow, papers were published on most days. And official censorship, whose rigidity did so much to distort the public view of events between 1914 and 1918, generally succeeded in balancing the need for information and the maintenance of national security.

After the second world war Fleet Street began to demonstrate the unpleasant face of trades unionism. Over the years the power of the manual unions had advanced to a point where both national and local leaders virtually controlled newspaper production. Senior shop stewards - known in the trade as Fathers of Chapels (harking back to Caxton's time) - recruited the work force and allocated workers to their respective posts - for example, in the foundry, where printing plates were moulded, and on the printing presses themselves.

The whole system operated according to what were quite openly acknowledged as Old Spanish Customs. Many of the men were nightly casual workers, co-operating together in the form of an unofficial cartel. So a foreman, for instance, might sign on, for full pay, three men to man a printing press where two would have sufficed. The third man would be sent off to the pub or back home and, on a subsequent night, he would work while his colleagues had their free nights - all at company expense.

On top of that lightning strikes, over the most trivial grievances, were regular features of Fleet Street life. Almost every month thousands of newspaper copies were lost. *Daily Mirror* production stopped one night because the printers objected to the tone of an editorial column.

Ironically, right up until the Nineteen-Eighties most Fleet Street newspapers were using basic production techniques almost one hundred years old. Type was set by the antiquated so-called hot-metal system, time-wasting, dirty, labour-intensive and hugely expensive. Production costs, estimated to be somewhere in the region of sixty per cent above an achievable norm meant that all newspapers operated on a financial knife edge and two - *The News Chronicle* and *The Star* - were forced to close. In a concerted attempt to challenge the unions, *The Times*, then owned by Lord Thomson, was shut down for a whole year.

Long before all this happened computerised type-setting and the earliest forms of modern technology had been developed and were alive and well in several parts of the world, notably Scandinavia. The results showed vastly improved production in all departments and a huge saving in costs. What Fleet Street desperately needed was a bold warrior to ride into the fray with sword drawn and hack away the dead wood. 'Send for Errol Flynn!' cried an exasperated junior executive, drinking things over in El Vino's, the journalists' favourite watering hole. What the Street in fact got was Rupert Murdoch.

This is not the place to enter into an extensive biography of Mr. Murdoch - suffice to say that he was born an Australian, son of a newspaper proprietor, developed a combined newspaper and television empire in this country and became an American citizen after discovering that he could not otherwise create further media empires in the United States. It was he, almost single-handedly, who devised the operating plan that would change the nature of Fleet Street.

What he did was both revolutionary and daring and - if I may use a strictly non-academic term - cheeky. In the first instance he, quite literally, smuggled the new computer-age equipment into a site he had acquired just over our borders in Docklands. In the preparatory stages coaches with obscured windows carried technicians and journalists through Fleet Street and on to Wapping. And, almost like a modern version of that famous clerihew about Christopher Wren, he put it about that if anyone asked after Mr. Murdoch they were to be told that he was planning a London area morning paper.

His biggest problem would be persuading the trade unions to agree to the adoption by their members of the new technology and the abandonment of the old hot-metal system.

This was the essence of the 'cheekiness' of his plan. He moved the negotiations in a manner designed to encourage the unions to do something which until then had normally always been their most favoured tactic in Fleet Street - to strike. This time it was, for them, a fatal move. Instead of the traditional response - capitulation by the employer - Mr. Murdoch took the totally unprecedented course of dismissing all the union members for breach of contract.

The immediate aftermath was unpleasant. Thousands of protestors surrounded what had become known as Fortress Wapping - the Murdoch plant was ringed with coils of razor wire - and many fought pitched battles with the police. Delivery vans taking Murdoch papers to the wholesalers and to some of the newsagents were attacked.

Up to that time no Fleet Street management had ever won a crucial dispute with the unions. But this was not a case of the beginning of the end - it was the end of the beginning. Fleet Street as an industry was changed, certainly for ever, and what had been a remarkably protected and insular society now took its first tentative steps into the hitherto unknown world of open competition.

The Murdoch revolution had two immediate effects. It sent other newspapers scurrying off to buy the new technology - and to cope with phenomena previously unknown to the Street - I refer, of course, to profits. And secondly, and sadly in my view, it also sent them, one by one, scurrying off to new sites away beyond the Street. In retrospect, one of the extraordinary features of that event is the speed with which it appeared to happen. Harold Evans, a former editor of *The Times*, summed it up rather neatly: 'Fleet Street was scooped by its own funeral. Everybody was still at lunch, it seems, when the whole colourful caravan of proprietors, editors and gossip columnists were re-directed to dockland and other addresses throbbing with glamour and excitement.'

No-one has yet had time to analyse the full effects of the demise of Fleet Street's internationally-famous industry. But almost to a man and woman the moves to other locations are deprecated by the journalists.

Gone are those happy days when someone who had scored over his rivals could take time to tour the hostelries and be seen in all his glory in the Cheshire Cheese, the King and Keys, and, most notably, in El Vino's. In Kensington or even on the other side of Blackfriars Bridge it is not so easy for a writer to be, as the late Brian Redhead put it, 'a legend in his own lunchtime.'

But all will not be lost to we citizens who regard every City street as an indispensable part of a total and very special pattern. The term 'Fleet Street' it seems will continue to be used as a kind of shorthand reference to the printed section of the communications media. After all, the old Fleet Street, if I may put it that way, laid itself out to be the stamping ground of an astonishing British enterprise. In its own, although not always obvious way, it made a remarkable contribution to our form of democracy. I salute it.

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31.05.94