

Trashing the Telegraph

By Hal G. P. Colebatch

What is happening to Britain's greatest newspaper?

One reason Britain defeated its once-powerful home-grown Communist movement, returned Margaret Thatcher to power, temporarily reversed a long-term decline under socialist governments, and stood with Ronald Reagan and the US to end the Cold War, was the London *Daily Telegraph*.

The *Telegraph* was more than one of the really great newspapers in the world – it was a conservative paper with pride and fine writing. Some of its staff were legendary, including Thatcher Minister Lord Deedes, Thomas Utley, Auberon Waugh and Colin Welsh. The best of them were not only notable as good journalists, in the sense of being good news-hounds, and/or snappy stylists, but formidable intellects also. The leading intellectual who is also a popular journalist is a fairly well-known figure on the best continental papers, but in modern Britain has been relatively rare. The *Telegraph* proved that this did not have to be the case. On my first visit to Britain I stood outside its then imposing Fleet-Street offices, gazing up at it in awe. I cut and pasted all its leaders in my scrap-books as specimens of fine writing.

Perhaps I am looking back at it through glasses that have a slight rose-tint, but it seemed to me that by no means the least of its qualities was the impression that it would never sacrifice truth for the sake of a good story, take a shocking position simply for the sake of being shocking, or, as a rule (there were some exceptions) patronise the intelligence of its readers.

Beyond its news it had Michael Wharton, creator of the wonderful, inimitable, “Peter Simple” column, which in its great days appeared four times a week, each column a treasure-house of wit, fantasy, anger, satire or, at times, celebration: no other paper has had anything to touch it.

Who can forget Peter Simple's galaxy of characters like the trend-crazed progressive bishop Dr Spaceley-Trellis, beating ancient silver chalices into sub-machine-guns to present to anti-Western freedom fighters, or the Hampstead thinker and wealthy Stalinist crone Mrs Dutt-Pauker, still, after the collapse of communism, growing maudlin over a few relic strands of barbed-wire from the Gulag?

Of course, *The Telegraph* would not have survived as a newspaper if it had not been a *news*-paper, and its news-gathering was second to none. It was probably the first British newspaper during World War II to break substantially correct news of the Holocaust (news ridiculed by the leftist *New Statesman*). More recently, in an echo of its great days, it pulled off a great coup by being the first to expose the massive corruption on both sides of Parliament in the last days of the New Labour Government.

The old *Telegraph* had something that has almost vanished from modern mass-market newspapers: style and dignity. It held up the old British values, and it did so with pride, as something still living and important, not by way of a nostalgic last look at something already dying.

Certainly, modern Britain, with its idolisation of soccer-playing chimpanzees, crazed clergy, knighthoods for drug-raddled rock-singers, chaotic schools and murderous hospitals, progressive break-up of the union with Scotland, spreading Sharia areas and pathetic, gutted armed forces, its police who allow children to drown in shallow water because “they have not been trained to wade,” (true!) has never been in more need of the sort of values the old *Telegraph* championed. The old *Telegraph* was a banner and an inspiration.

Its unashamed Toryism put backbone and panache into British conservative thought and feeling. It showed the Tories were *not* the stupid party. This was not just a matter of politics, but of literature, art and culture generally. Being a conservative (let alone a Conservative) intellectual is a lonely life but with the *Telegraph* British conservative intellectuals could be aware they were not completely lonely freaks.

In 2004 the *Telegraph* was owned by Conrad Black. In that year, after a series of complicated manoeuvres, it was bought by the secretive and somewhat spooky brothers David and Frederick Barclay, who live in a castle on the Channel Island of Brecqhou, which they privately own. The *Telegraph* remains the biggest-selling of the British broadsheets and former broadsheets, with a daily circulation of about 840,000, well ahead of the *Times* and *Guardian*.

After the takeover, David Barclay indicated that it would be changing editorial direction. It has.

Let's have a look at the stories from a couple of days recently.

First, there's some scandal or other about football, couched in the pseudo-apocalyptic tones typical of third-rate tabloid journalism:

“This has been a disheartening week for those who love football. What a sordid picture was painted of our national game in the House of Commons this week. And the really depressing thing was how little anyone can have been surprised by what they heard.”

No, the really depressing thing is that the *Telegraph* now treats men kicking a ball about as though it was of importance. Another big story commences: “The Rolling Stones were jealous of The Beatles because all four band members could sing whereas they were solely reliant on Mick Jagger, Sir Paul McCartney has disclosed.”

Next, a few pages of vacuous “Celebrity News.” Then, a piece suggesting “Roswell 'was Soviet plot to create US panic”

This tells us “The so-called Roswell Incident of 1947 spawned conspiracy theories by the score. But now, sadly for UFO spotters, a new book offers an entirely man-made – and some would say even more bizarre – explanation, featuring two of the greatest villains of 20th century history: the Soviet dictator Josef Stalin and the infamous Nazi “Angel of Death” Dr Joseph Mengele.”

So the paper that broke the news of the Holocaust uses Mengele’s name for half-witted sensationalism, with a story which a newspaper concerned with its own credibility would not touch. If the *Telegraph* is concerned with “sordid pictures” being painted it doesn’t have to look very far. The website edition (I presume the print edition is the same) carries a large announcement, “Get your 2011 psychic readings free.” That goes nicely with Roswell and Hanger 51. Then a few days later we have “Novelist’s family sex scandal.” The novelist is JP Donleavy, now more or less forgotten, and the sex scandal concerned happened more than 30 years ago. What exactly is the point of giving this boring non-story, which represents intrusion into certain people’s private lives but is utterly without public importance, splash treatment as though it were a great international event?

You get the idea. There are detailed coverages of the worst of trash-culture, and a kind of obeisance to it and acceptance of it as normal. This is the sort of thing that creates, or at least reinforces, nihilists on one hand and jihadists on the other. This, for example, from a review of “the year’s most anticipated album” couched in what appears to be a general atmosphere of enthusiasm or approval: “2 Born This Way: Owing a debt to Madonna’s Express Yourself, the title track is a belter, blending message, melody and ass-shaking syncopation. 3 Government Hooker: The first hint of genuine weirdness: a swooning, operatic intro leads into an industrial rhythm track. More a set of slogans than a song. 4 Judas: The gospel reinterpreted as a love triangle. An Abba-like singalong chorus is sabotaged by a one-note sledgehammer of a verse. [Note the complete absence of any notion that some people might find this offensive. The lyrics are in fact totally disgusting] 5 Americano: Latino lesbian marriage anthem so madly over the top it calls to mind a Balkan gipsy techno jamboree crossed with a Busby Berkeley Broadway extravaganza.”

One Mary Riddell states in a column: “The very real fear confronting Labour is that Cameron establishes a stranglehold on power. If Miliband is to stop him, he will have to live dangerously, oppose constructively and offer a concrete basis for hopes and dreams. The choice, as for every leader of the centre-Left, is between rigour and rigor mortis.”

Then there is the story about a man who has sexual relations with cars. Not *in* cars, but *with* cars. A large story and a detailed interview (all right, we are fortunately spared some of the details). Peter Simple in his day might have written something like this as satire on our crazed times. A story about India refers to: “Churchill’s refusal to aid millions of starving Bengalis during World War II.” This is simply anti-British mythologising: the Bengal famine occurred because the war had disrupted supplies and transport and for no other reason. In any case. Churchill was not responsible for the civil administration of India, which was the responsibility of the India Office. Kipling was one of the sharpest critics of Indian bureaucracy, but Kipling’s story “William the

Conqueror” indicated that in normal times the British administration made terrific efforts in famine relief.

Writers are individuals. Only the leader represents the paper’s “official” point of view and values. But the overall atmosphere of a great paper is a distinct and definite thing. The *Telegraph* still has some good writers set almost bewilderingly alongside the junk. It still has flashes of brilliance. But flashes do not a great newspaper make. The overall cumulative deterioration is unmistakable, a kind of creeping, pervasive trashiness and nihilism, rather like the maiden aunt who lives alone wearing pearls and twin-set, and secretly tortures kittens.

The Telegraph has joined the process of coarsening and lowering culture which it once took a proud and defiant stand against.

An attack on the “Swallows and Amazons” books published recently is typical. This may seem trivial, but is sufficiently typical, symbolic and ominous (in the sense of pertaining to an omen) to be worth looking at in a little detail.

“Swallows and Amazons” were – and remain – an immensely popular set of British children’s books written mostly in the 1930s. They are, typically, sunny, innocent stories about sailing (*Swallow* and *Amazon* are the names of the children’s boats), fishing and camping. Their values, implied if not spelt out, were the old-fashioned family virtues, like courage, self-reliance and truthfulness (John, the leader of the children, is shocked by being unjustly called a liar, and the adult responsible is distressed and goes out of his way to apologise as soon as he discovers he has made a mistake).

However, according to the new *Telegraph*, after claiming the author, Arthur Ransome, was a “former Bolshevik” (He wasn’t), that:

“The characters seemed square and boring, excessively wholesome and well-bred and their adventures lacked real danger or any sense of grime.”

Isn’t the term “square” used as a derogative a little square itself now? And what is wrong with being wholesome and well-bred, exactly? “These were good, responsible children who were trusted to play on their own. They had been subjected to the civilising forces of a middle class upbringing ... I preferred to read about children who could be primitive, cruel and even murderous, ... That’s what children are really like.”

Certainly there have been a number of real cases of children committing murder in Britain recently, but should they be held up as role-models? In a typical Ransome adventure, the children rescue a kitten which has been washed off a ship and in another rescue a sheep which has become cragfast. No doubt the author of this piece would prefer them to have taken a radically different course of action.

And so it goes on at considerable length, concluding:

“As for today’s jam-smearing brats, brought up on Horrid Henry, it’s unlikely the Swallows and Amazons books will provide the necessary edginess. They are far too well-mannered.”

Again, what is wrong with teaching children to be well-mannered? Most of us know what “necessary edginess” is a euphemism for. The old *Telegraph* would not have been ashamed to advocate the values behind the Swallows and Amazons stories. This whole summary of the stories is in fact quite false. To consider a few of them briefly: *We Didn’t Mean to go to Sea* deals with children alone aboard a large yacht that drifts out to sea in a fog followed by a high wind – a real and potentially deadly emergency and a real test of character for all concerned – the gradual build-up of minor mishaps into a situation of deadly danger is beautifully done and totally realistic; *The Big Six* deals with a plot to frame some boat-builders’ children which might cost their fathers their jobs in the midst of the Depression and have the children sent to Borstal; *Coot Club* deals with petty and spiteful adults persecuting a boy who has saved a bird’s nest from them (the books had an important role in making birds’-nesting and egg-collecting unpopular with children); *Peter Duck*, a “story within a story” contrasts the children’s games of pirates - “the terror of the seas” - with an encounter with a real pirate, who they find has nothing glamorous about him but is an obsessed, murderous psychopath, and which gives some realistic insights into the hardships and danger as well as the romance of the wind-jammer sailorman’s life; *Swallowdale*, *Winter Holiday* and *Pigeon Post* give, among other things, realistic pictures of lake-district farming, charcoal-burning, etc.. The collision of romance and reality is a consistent theme in most of the books, which also teach children love of the countryside and open-air life. The fact they have been continually in print since the 1930’s says something about their quality, and they have fan-clubs all over the world (Google T.A.R.S. – The Arthur Ransome Society).

It is true that one of the characters, the girl Susan, is irritatingly and unrelievedly “sensible,” but this is necessary for the adults to plausibly trust the child characters to go off adventuring on their own (Once her fussy domesticity is nearly fatal to all – she worries about a pork-pie when their yacht is in danger of being run down by a ship). On the whole, I would say, as W. H. Auden said of *The Lord of the Rings*, “If anyone dislikes it, I will never trust their judgement on anything else.”

Commentator Melanie Phillips wrote of the *Telegraph*’s reaction to the death of Amy Winehouse:

“At the weekend, commentator India Knight wrote (after telling us all how devastated she was by the singer’s death): ‘And I loved that she was a bad girl with bad appetites: a breed that, with her passing, heads further into extinction.’

“Even given this particular consequence of a ‘bad appetite’ for drugs and alcohol - a wholly avoidable and tragic death over which she says she weeps - Ms Knight appears actually to regret that there is now one person fewer to behave in this way.

“What is this utterly perverse yearning for yet more bad behaviour and self destruction?”

A review of two artists, Dinos and Jake Chapman, by Richard Dormant, was couched in the same terms of an inversion of normal values:

“[T]hese early pieces touched on issues that weren’t much in the news then, but that are rarely out of it today ... pedophilia and the sexuality of children ... complete lack of psychological or emotional complexity.

“Naked apart from their trainers, these monstrous mutants could have been created only in a moral vacuum, a strange world where messy feelings about right and wrong no longer trouble humanity ... This moral nullity lies at the heart of the Chapmans’ art, a body of art which I believe is as original as any produced in this country in a generation ...” Just so you don’t make any mistake, this review – the exhibition is called “Bad Art for Bad People” - is full of praise and enthusiasm: “Enchanting in its way ... two of the most entertaining and consistently interesting artists working in Britain today.” He doesn’t say this is the sort of art which had made Britain today what it is, but that might be nearer the point.

Then, recently, we have an article of no less than 4,246 words – which is massive for a newspaper - about an elderly woman who writes anti-Christian novels about vampires and werewolves – somehow a kind of reflection of what the *Telegraph* itself has become. I don’t mind vampire stories and find *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* one of wittiest recent pieces of writing on TV. But that (or possibly in the halls of the Barclay Brothers’ castle) is where they belong, not taking up column after column of what was a great and serious newspaper. It seems to be part of the collapse of taste, dignity and self-respect that has affected virtually every aspect of British life.

Then there’s the rave review given to the film “The Hunger Games”, about teenagers killing one another (This is the *seventh* major story the *Telegraph* ran on it in a few days):

‘The Hunger Games is an adaptation of the first in a set of three fantasy books aimed at younger readers by Suzanne Collins, in which teenagers culled from the 12 districts of a post-Apocalyptic nation called Panem are pitted against each other in an annual, state-sponsored fight to the death ...

“Despite its well-worn ideas and themes, Gary Ross’s provocative, pulse-surgingly tense adaptation couldn’t feel fresher, or timelier.

“You can’t take your eyes off Jennifer Lawrence as the ox-hearted, mud-freckled Katniss, who volunteers as her district’s female Games contestant to save her younger sister from the draft. She’s even more compelling here than she was in the 2010 indie *Winter’s Bone*, a strikingly similar role for which she was nominated for an Oscar ... we feel every flutter of their exhilaration: the production design ... is dazzlingly odd and frequently inspired.

“Here, the contestants are groomed, styled, trained and then paraded on a fiendish burlesque of Saturday night television ... uniformly terrific supporting cast ...

hypnotically good ... capture(s) the action up close with twitchy, often hand-held camerawork: not only is it a perfect match for the punchy, urgent prose of Collins's novel, it lends the film a teenager's heart-in-mouth hyper-awareness. The screenplay ... deftly pulls together all of the novel's itchiest themes: the Faustian pact of instant celebrity; the ever-broadening gap between the have-nots and the haves; the basic human urge to confer narrative, and so meaning, on human life in all its nasty, brutish brevity.

"*The Hunger Games* is an essential science-fiction film" (I'm not sure where the "science" fits into that) "for our times; perhaps the essential science fiction film of our times. Whatever your age, it demands to be devoured. "

If this is not decadence, I don't know what is: a decadence that is being promoted and celebrated. Possibly I am making too much of a few unimportant articles, but I don't think so. There are plenty of trashy papers: there was only one *Telegraph*. This promotion of darkness and nihilism along with the trash has its effect in the long run, and it's not a good one.