The Illustrated London News: 1933-1940

At some time in 1992, or just before, the Ikeda Bunko (http://www.hankyu-bunka.or.jp/about/pdf/leaflet.pdf) acquired issues of the Illustrated London News *for the periods April 1933 - March 1935, and July 1936 - December 1940. As a recently arrived member of staff at nearby Kyoto University I was asked to write a short piece for the library record, to be translated into Japanese. I have lost my copy of the journal so cannot give a precise citation.*

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Publishing, more than most lines of business, seems to throw up moguls and family dynasties, Murrays and Scribners. Book publishers are rarely as colourful as their colleagues in periodicals. But, through an accident of custom, it is their names that survive, stamped in gilt on the spines of innumerable volumes, while Beaverbrook, even Northcliffe himself, gossip stars in their own times, are now historical figures known only to the curious. Some families, and not the least interesting, were never well known, and are now barely remembered at all. Who, if asked, would name the Ingrams of Boston, Lincolnshire, as a significant press family? Yet they are responsible for the most remarkable pictorial newspaper in British publishing history, *The Illustrated London News*. The historian Arthur Bryant remarked that "its 118 folio volumes covering Victoria's reign [are] probably the most important and comprehensive single historical document ever compiled".[1] One need not take this quite without qualification. Bryant was far from objective, being a regular contributor, and his essay appeared in the centenary number. Doubtless there is a tinge of wartime patriotism as well. But the judgment is not without substance. He might have added that this achievement is a monument to three generations of one family.

Herbert Ingram moved to London in the early 1840s, from Nottingham, where he was a printer and newsagent, with the intention of founding a paper whose pages would be less forbidding than the narrow columns of dense type common at the time. Quite simply he proposed to engage the best draughtsman and engravers to illustrate the news. A group of friends, John Gilbert, and Henry Vizetelly amongst them, were persuaded to provide the necessary financial support, and the first issue of sixteen pages carrying thirty-two woodcuts appeared on the 14th of May 1842. It

[1] Arthur Bryant, "Our Notebook", *ILN*, 16 May 1942, p. 567.

cost 6d, a considerable sum, but was immediately successful, perhaps because Ingram had cunningly decided that his first issue should consist almost entirely of depictions of a "medieval" ball at the court, with special attention being paid to the fashions displayed by the Queen and the other great ladies of London society. Within a year the circulation had risen from twenty to sixty-thousand, and by 1856, when Herbert was elected MP for his home town, it had reached two hundred-thousand. Amongst his contributors he had succeeded in recruiting the draughtsmen Birket Foster, Alfred Crowquill, John Leech, Hablot K. Browne (Phiz), George Cruikshank, and Harrison Weir. It was, as the paper liked to say of itself, in every sense the "first" illustrated newspaper.

After Herbert Ingram's death - he was drowned, with his fifteen-year old son, in an accident on Lake Michigan - in 1860, the paper was administered by his wife, and then in 1872 passed into the hands of his remaining children, William, the elder, and Charles. William Ingram had trained in applied science at Trinity College, Cambridge, graduating with a first, and also as a lawyer. His interests were broad. He travelled, collected, studied ornithology, and pursued the sport of kings. The paper had brought wealth, and respectability to the Ingrams. William was elected MP for Boston in 1874, and was created a baronet in 1892. But his gentlemanly lifestyle did not mean that he neglected the paper, and it was during his administration that "process" engraving replaced wood blocks, and the Walter rotary press was adapted for the printing of pictures, an innovation which greatly increased the speed at which events were reported. He also took a great interest in the quality of the reporting of wars and disasters, a feature which was to become a hallmark of the paper. Sir William was succeeded on his retirement by his brother, who continued as managing director until 1931, and in 1900 his second son Bruce became editor at the age of 23, immediately making his mark by supervising the adaptation of the Rembrandt Intaglio process for magazine printing, a technique known as rotary photogravure. With the exception of three years service in the First War, for which he was decorated with a Military Cross, Bruce Ingram was editor for the next sixty years,[2] during which time his paper adopted photography as the principle method of illustration, and, perhaps unfortunately, became fully institutionalized as a regular and normalizing feature of English life. Unfortunately, because the period was anything but regular or normal; indeed it contained, as Bryant said when reviewing the *Illustrated London News*'s coverage of the century up to 1942, "the four most revolutionary decades of human history". The problem is familiar to us today, when we watch immaculately coiffured and tailored television presenters delivering

[2] See his "Personal Reminiscences after Sixty Years as Editor", *ILN*, 2 Jan. 1960.

the most terrifying news, their faces expressionless, except perhaps for a flicker of sober concern when reporting some particularly extraordinary outrage, or a broad smile when introducing anodyne comic relief. An unruffled technique, or flawless standard of production, seems to neutralize the most emotionally corrosive fact. Furthermore, the excellence of the reporting ensures that we receive the news in minute increments day by day, rather than installments separated by substantial intervals, and we respond rather like the frog that sits undisturbed in a pan of water while it is slowly raised to boiling point.

But this does not at all diminish the value of the *ILN* as an historical source. Indeed it enables the historian to undergo, however imperfectly, a simulacrum of the gradual development of a period's history, much as it was experienced by contemporaries. A reader in the Ikeda Bunko can now follow world events from 1933 to 1941 as they crept up on the British people, and all but overwhelmed them, and will perhaps more adequately understand what, in the rapid overviews of written histories, so often seems a puzzling inactivity in the face of the obvious threat of Hitler, depicted with excellent photographs of theatrical rallies, or indeed of the growth of Japanese power. Japan, incidentally, is one of the major subjects of this period. After a while a reader turns to each weekly issue expecting further news of the Imperial Army and its activities almost as if it were a gruesome military soap opera.

The volumes are most important as a document of a period of British society which, despite being authoritatively termed a "low and dishonest decade" by its poet, W. H. Auden, is perhaps the last time that English history was, or ever will be, a major part of global history. But they are also an invaluable photographic record of that outside world, a picture library to be raided (though not, of course, to be reproduced without permission) should you want something on the Spanish War, a photograph of the Saar plebiscite,[3] or a picture of Freud fleeing Europe.[4] Nor are the disasters always political. New aeroplanes of gigantic proportions are extensively reported on their maiden flights as technological miracles, and then some months later as heaps of blackened steel smouldering on a hillside. Of murders, and other unphotogenic subjects, there is very little, but if a gasometer exploded destroying a small town you may be sure that someone from the *ILN* will have visited the site to record it for your ghoulish delight. But the coverage is so thorough that many readers even today, even Japanese readers, may find, as I did, that some kind of personal connection unexpectedly interrupts their objective scoptophilia. While in

[3] *ILN*, 19 Jan. 1935.
[4] *ILN*, 11 June 1938.

Cambridge earlier this summer, leafing over the pages of the issue for the 8th of June 1935 (an issue that the Ikeda Bunko's collection sadly lacks), I came across a double spread depicting the rubble that remained of Quetta, a city in Baluchistan, shortly after being struck by an earthquake on the 2nd. My grandfather, an officer in the Royal Artillery, was stationed there at the time, and both he and my grandmother were dug out alive after several days, saved, somewhat improbably, from the weight of the wreckage by a wardrobe that had fallen across them as they slept. I derived some kind of melancholy pleasure in studying the tattered streets which were once part of their daily life, and later formed the back cloth to an indelible memory described to grandchildren with offhand humour.

Catastrophe succeeds disaster in the *ILN* as if they were homilies in an ascetic sermon on the vanity of human wishes. They deepen the increasingly dark shadow of the coming war, and both are startlingly counterpointed by features on the so-called "lighter side" of life. One month you will be studying a full page photograph of Nazi police questioning an aged and obviously terrified 'German Jew', the next assessing the pivot and follow-through of the golfing prince, later Edward VIII.[5] There is Manchuria, but there is also "body-line bowling", and because of the moronic neutrality of the journalistic camera neither appears to be more urgent or threatening than the other. It is a befuddling mixture, but students of history must develop a strong head for the absurd.

[5] See issues for 15 Apr. 1933, and 20 May 1933.