

NORTHCLIFFE—Journalist

By R. W. POSTGATE

LORD NORTHCLIFFE—Alfred Harmsworth—has issued a pamphlet about his fellow millionaires of Fleet Street (*Newspapers and Their Millionaires*, 3d.). They have got up his nose by proposing a reduction in wages, a thing which so benevolent a capitalist cannot tolerate. "Why," he exclaims indignantly, "should not printers own Ford cars?" Why indeed? Why not every worker?

But My Lord does not enter into this question. He is more concerned, as indeed befits so high-souled a man, in defending the wages of his own workers, and in order to do that he does not shrink from exposing his colleagues. He has withdrawn from the Newspaper Proprietors' Association, and now he *only* points out that all other papers are owned by millionaires who have made their money in other trades. Further, he suggests that because of this, they are not as competent as he is to produce a paper.

When we have fully appreciated the seriousness of this terrible, earth-shaking attack, we can pause to remember that all of my lord's facts, and many more, were better stated long ago in a pamphlet of the I.L.P. Information Committee called *The Capitalist Press, or Who Pays for the Attacks on Labour?*, still obtainable.

Still, we can be thankful to him for giving some of these facts, in an inaccurate and wandering way, more publicity. He makes bad mistakes—the *Daily Herald* (which he naturally calls a very bad paper) has pulled him up already over one fairly gross one. All the same, anything that reminds the ordinary man that his news is controlled by millionaires for reasons satisfactory to them, is a good thing to have published.

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So Northcliffe will make a stand against reducing printers' wages, though he will "clout the unskilled workers" if necessary. Very interesting and curious. Why is Northcliffe holding up the war on wages in his particular industry—Northcliffe, the most dangerous enemy of British Labour?

For love of Labour? Not quite, nor yet merely from the sense of a need for a good advertisement, and a popularising of his personality after the manner of Bottomley. Northcliffe is doing it just as a pure business calculation.

He owns some hundreds of papers, of which nearly all are paying concerns. One or two are believed to lose money and to be kept on for the sake of prestige and political influence. But the whole mass of them forms an aggregation of capital which is far more lasting and can stand greater strain than any other newspaper group.

The reason why Northcliffe is keeping up printers' wages is because he knows he can pay them indefinitely with comfort. He believes a number of his smaller rivals are in very grave difficulties and he is breaking away from his usual class solidarity in the hope of pushing them down. Northcliffe actually has the serious ambition of himself controlling, with negligible exceptions, all

the London daily press. To do this he crushes or buys out, one by one, the lesser papers. He believes that just now the relatively high printers' wages (£8 on a daily) will be one of many means which will kill off easily some of his rivals. The *Globe* is dead, the *Westminster Gazette* and the *Daily Herald* very shaky, the *Daily News* nearly died last year.

When his victory is secured, he may forget about his anxiety for the printers to have Ford cars.

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Northcliffe and our old friend Bottomley (who had the former's backing for a while) are the only English journalists who through their periodicals have exercised a considerable political influence—And of the two, Northcliffe is by far the most dangerous. Bottomley was an easy-going rascal. He followed the stream and did what was most popular. Let the stream turn towards revolution, and Bottomley would have swung round with it. Why—after a little "persuasion"—*John Bull* would have welcomed a Soviet revolution with a placard:

A BUSINESS GOVERNMENT AT LAST!

There would never be any chance of playing such tricks with Northcliffe. Northcliffe is too serious and too self-important. He thinks of himself too much as an Ethel M. Dell hero—the "strong silent man." He collects relics of Napoleon and imitates the poses and phrases of the great mountebank. The famous letter (or was it telephone message?) to Clement Shorter: "Sir, You are a dirty little Jew. NORTHCLIFFE," is probably apocryphal and certainly libellous. But it is anyway the sort of thing that he might have written, modelling himself on Napoleon in small things as well as great.

He has risen to a position of power where he has been able to place nearly all his relatives and assistants in important posts. He has a large part in directing British affairs, and imagines it to be even larger. He has come to regard himself as an important statesman and he will never quit that position willingly. He would be one of the most serious opponents of a British revolution: he would probably organise a White reaction and organise it very well.

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His claim, in his new pamphlet, is to have reached his position by his talents as a

journalist, and in a sickening adulation reprinted from the *New Statesman* this claim is endorsed. (Circulation of the endorsers of the claim, probably little over 10,000). The claim is more than doubtful. He has made no notable change in the *Times*. The *Evening News* contains much less actual matter than the *Star*, and it is worse and more slovenly presented. And as for the famous *Daily Mail*! It is scarcely sub-edited at all. It has interminable wads of solid grey print, hardly broken up at all. No variation of type in the headlines, very few competent correspondents. It does not even give the news. If we compare it (as Northcliffe invites us) with the *Daily Herald*, on the mere question of the amount of genuine news, the *Herald* wins easily. Story for story, there is nearly always something considerable that the *Mail* misses. The writer of this article has compared the *Herald* with capitalist dailies every morning for some time past simply for that purpose. The only news matter on which they score is in short silly stories—generally "sexish," about women's bathing clothes, the Reverend Smut's opinion on silk stockings and sleeping out, and such stuff.

Northcliffe's main basis of success is not his journalism at all, but his undeniable business powers. The *Mail* circulates because of its magnificent circulation organisation. Everywhere you go the wretched rag is pushed before you. Every village has its copy. Every town it reaches earliest. It gets bought merely because it is so much easier to buy the *Mail* than any other paper. After all, most of the news in any paper is the same agency stuff, so why worry which paper you buy?

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Here then is the modern Napoleon. Before we leave him we must make one quotation—a pathetic one, on page 20:—

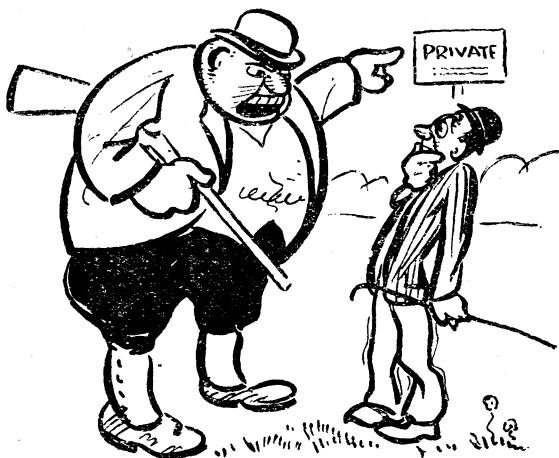
"And look at this:—One paper actually called us 'the bloody old Times.'"

Dear me!

Court and dropped

"One of the most brilliant spectacles that Buckingham Palace has ever witnessed took place last night when the first real Court since the war was held. . . . When their majesties stationed themselves on their throne to receive the brides and debutantes the scene was one that is almost impossible to describe. Vivid uniforms of practically every nation under the sun were grouped around the throne. The clash of colour under the hundreds of gleaming lights was positively dazzling."—*Daily News* (9-6-22).

"The serious position of the coalfields was considered by the National Executive of the Miners' Federation yesterday. Reports received from the various districts showed that several thousands of miners were working short time and were forced to eke out an existence by receipt of Poor Law relief. Wages in some parts of Northumberland and Lancashire were declared to have fallen to starvation level."—*Daily News* (9-6-22).



Why Bill Jones