

REVIEW ARTICLE: THE LAST DAYS OF JOURNALISM?

Owen Dudley Edwards

Andrew Marr, **My Trade: A Short History of British Journalism**, London: Macmillan, 2004, 416 pp, hb, £20, ISBN 140500536X; London: Pan Macmillan, 2005, 300 pp, pb, £7.99, ISBN 0330411926.

Andrew Marr's autobiographically-peppered 'short history' must interest readers of this journal for several reasons, the first being that it is enjoyable, enlightening, and enlarging. Marr writes well, most of the time, and intends his literary quality to infect us:

And you will bring the reader though your argument with a basic sense of rhythm – short sentences punctuated by longer ones; stabbing syntax – plenty of dashes. And in defiance of teachers, many sentences starting with 'and'. But others will have 'but'. Or 'or'. Verbs being optional. (p.373)

At least his grin – long, sensitive, ruminative, conspiratorial, still schoolboy – seems as evident here and in so much more of his book as when he ponders the aesthetic probabilities of political chicanery before his TV audience. And he knows the tricky art of teaching by self-mockery:

No quotation should last longer than ten short newspaper lines. No columnist should mention another one. All right – I am indulging in self-parody. But there are not as many ways of writing a good column as there are columnists ... (p.374)

Owen Dudley Edwards is Honorary Fellow in the School of History and Classics, University of Edinburgh.

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Marr would be the first to salute the columnist who successfully breaks such rules – he singles out (p.365)

A few, a very few, columnists ... witty enough to write grippingly about almost nothing at all – the old greats like Ring Lardner and Flann O'Brien

the Irish novelist who signed his column 'Myles na gCopaleen' and who happily made mincemeat of anything including his own **Irish Times** editor's leading article printed the previous day, and even pretended to be the writer of it. (Ironically, Marr was the author of a column in the **Independent** when he was its editor.)

Marr's book is thus an indispensable career manual almost Victorian in its authority, mid-twentieth century in its brightness (he very properly quotes for his first footnote the more arid but comparably realist-optimist **Teach Yourself Journalism** (1951)). His title begins the instructive self-mockery. Even now the Victorian derisive 'he's in trade' has faint revivals, the desideratum being to avoid gainful employment by investments on wealth bled from the peasants or robbed from the monks by some provident ancestor. Journalism, in ruling circles still aristocratically-centred, was socially acceptable, provided no indication of any remuneration be acknowledged. Even when the need for money was inescapable and irrefutable, the gentleman still had his class magic:

In the bar parlour he rang the bell, and had to wait some little time for a reply to it. The only other person present was a lean man with close red hair and loose, horsey-looking clothes, who was drinking very bad whisky, but smoking a very good cigar. The whisky, of course, was the choice brand of The Champion Arms; the cigar he had probably brought with him from London. Nothing could be more different than his cynical *négligé* from the dapper dryness of the young American; but something in his pencil and open notebook, and perhaps in the expression of his alert blue eye, caused Kidd to guess, correctly, that he was a brother journalist.

'Could you do me the favour', asked Kidd, with the courtesy of his nation, 'of directing me to the Grey Cottage, where Mr Boulnois lives as I understand?'

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‘It’s a few yards down the road’, said the red-haired man, removing his cigar; ‘I shall be passing it myself in a minute, but I’m going on to Pendragon Park to try and see the fun.’

‘What is Pendragon Park?’ asked Calhoun Kidd.

‘Sir Claude Champion’s place – haven’t you come down for that, too?’ asked the other pressman, looking up. ‘You’re a journalist, aren’t you?’

‘I have come to see Mr Boulnois’, said Kidd.

‘I’ve come to see Mrs Boulnois’, replied the other. ‘But I shan’t catch her at home.’ And he laughed rather unpleasantly.

‘Are you interested in Catastrophism?’ asked the wondering Yankee.

‘I’m interested in catastrophes; and there are going to be some’, replied his companion gloomily. ‘Mine’s a filthy trade, and I never pretend it isn’t.’

With that he spat on the floor; yet somehow in the very act and instant one could realize that the man had been brought up as a gentleman.

Thus G. K. Chesterton, surely the greatest literary journalist of his day, opening the Father Brown detective story ‘The Strange Crime of John Boulnois’ (originally published July 1913, republished in **The Wisdom of Father Brown**). Marr might have given more attention to such works, although he does pay obvious tributes to Evelyn Waugh’s **Scoop** while rightly noting its origin in Waugh’s pro-Fascist reporting of the Italo-Ethiopian War (it is also a little depressing to see the number of great works Marr quotes only from anthological extracts). Chesterton has much to tell about snobbery (Marr’s first chapter is appropriately ‘The Snobs and the Soaks’), about scandal journalism (dissected ably but over-tolerantly by Marr), and about British and American contrasts.

The last category exhibits vulnerability in Marr, or, alternatively, displays the secondary virtue of showing characteristic faults of British journalism by freshly succumbing to them. Chesterton had not yet travelled in the USA in 1913, but he knew its journalism (the earliest Father Brown stories had their first magazine publication in the Philadelphia **Saturday Evening Post**). The fifth sentence of ‘Boulnois’ points out that ‘while the journalism of the States

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permits a pantomimic vulgarity long past anything English, it also shows a real excitement about the most earnest mental problems, of which English papers are innocent, or rather incapable ... articles of valuable intelligence and enthusiasm were presented with headlines apparently written by an illiterate maniac'. Marr is weak on American journalism, while he assumes he is strong on it. Both are commonplace British diseases. On p.52 he tells us that 'President Bush seemed determined to destroy Saddam, and expected to have to do so by declaring war on him'. The President of the United States may not declare war, under the Constitution: Congress declares war following a war message from the President, House and Senate voting. The British system permits declaration of war without the slightest consultation of Parliament, the American may entail considerable enquiry, perhaps even committee reports, before the final vote. In consequence, the United States prefers to avoid a declaration of war in fear of awkward Congressional questions, even though its votes to enter World Wars I and II were conclusive (six against, in the Senate in 1917, none in 1941; 20 against, in the House in 1917, one in 1941). This is not entirely without international precedent: Britain, for instance, was not at war during the battle of Waterloo, Napoleon being adjudged an international outlaw at that point, not the ruler of France (from which he had abdicated in 1814). I am, of course, being pedantic, but Marr's slip shows an indifference to the implications of the American federal system which is dangerous for the observer. Marr has yet to acquire a real grasp of British journalism on the United States, although it is a good index of British parochialism *versus* professionalism at any given time. British creative writers made much more impressive contributions to understanding America than did British journalists in the nineteenth century. W. H Russell, of **The Times**, was an exceptionally sound reporter of the American Civil War, but was fired after a year for being insufficiently pro-southern, and only occasionally wrote for **The Times** thereafter (which makes nonsense of Marr's complaint (p.331) that in the Franco-Prussian war '**The Times** ... was still relying on Russell and the old methods' since it had been in decline after it had stopped relying on him).

Marr is a splendidly uncondescending writer, either to his subjects or to his readers, although he raises a just laugh when he sees one; so he must be exempted from the law that where the British are incapable of understanding the Americans, they patronise them. Some of the greatest modern analysts of the USA have been British – Sir Denis Brogan (especially when writing as a journalist), Alistair Cooke, Godfrey Hodgson, Charles Wheeler, Marcus Cunliffe, Peter Parish – but in all cases their greatness began with a basic

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understanding of how little they did know. Marr seems vaguely to think the British media perform well on American presidential elections: they are in fact embarrassingly bad, notably in TV reporting where David Dimbleby seems to regard any knowledge of American realities as beneath a gentleman's notice. All the blather about special relationships (non-existent, except malevolently, before 1941 and frequently since then) ignores the most obvious point: that Britain is the size of Utah and that the USA must be thought of in terms of its geographical extent. Equally, the separation of powers means that the Congressional elections deserve scrutiny as close as the Presidential, which British journalists will neither do, nor realise they should do. Marr has wise words on foreign correspondents' problems with foreign editors, but while British journalistic ignorance certainly begins at home, its representatives abroad do little to show the need to understand the States as States. When a Senator or Congressman is reported or interviewed, the first thing the viewer needs to know is where he comes from, and the second is his party: British media will seldom trouble themselves even to show the name of the legislator's State. And yet such things are vital. If President Bush is being supported by a Senator from Mississippi, no surprises, if by one from Massachusetts, that is big news; equally, Bush in trouble in Massachusetts means little, Bush in trouble in Mississippi is sensational. The fundamental cause of this British indifference is of course conceit and sloth or, as Marr reminds us, the snobs and the soaks, at this point united.

Marr displays a forest of fascinating trees with sparking cartography of surrounding woods, but a book such as this must always suffer a little from its sensible structure. Weakness on the United States makes for inadequate evaluation of the U.K. where their experiences shadow one another. Thus Marr on p.78:

Some universally accepted truths are true. One of them is that modern journalism was reborn in 1896 when Alfred Harmsworth started the **Daily Mail**. Things were a little more complicated than that – some of his ideas came from the livelier papers of New York and Chicago ...

One has only to deBritify the thing to see the error. Modern journalism must have been reborn somewhat earlier if the ideas from the livelier papers were noteworthy. 1896 may indeed be the year of rebirth, but if so, its maternity ward is better located in New York, where Joseph Pulitzer of the New York **World** and William Randolph Hearst of the New York **Journal** battled one

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another for mastery of the yellow press, with results including the Spanish-American War of 1898 and the first formal entry of the United States into world power. 1883, when Pulitzer bought the **World**, may be a better date; so may 1878 when he began the St Louis **Post-Despatch**. So may 1871 when the James Gordon Bennetts' New York **Herald** pumped up the alleged disappearance of David Livingstone and then sent Stanley on the successful mission to find him. Of course Harmsworth was important, but it is meaningless to hail the reinvention of the wheel – or to rival the old Stalinist insistence USSR had invented everything. Even when Marr is giving the USA credit, as with pioneering achievements in TV, he is a little uneasy. Quite rightly he hails US TV's 'characterful frontmen in the studio ... and a chatty, direct style that was a million miles from the bland, anonymous tones of the unseen BBC newsreaders' (p.271) but lists the frontmen as 'Edward Murrow, David Brinkley, Chad Huntley', adding later (p.289) that 'the first double act started on American television with David Brinkley and Chad Huntley bringing news from Washington and New York'. 'Chad' was in fact a dubious voting device credited with falsifying the Presidential election results in Florida, under Governor Jeb Bush, to the advantage of his brother, in 2000. 'Chet', short for 'Chester', was Huntley's first name (and a common one in North America). Once again I am being pedantic, and Marr is being British.

This is a good book, and therefore any griping is simply that it might have been better, and that its author's 'trade' – British journalism – would also be better if it were more concerned to be accurate. Marr makes the last point frequently and eloquently. The extent to which Britishness has become identified with parochialism is beyond his reach; yet it is vital to his argument. One of the grandest things about Marr – exemplary beyond all other journalists known to me – is his charming modesty. (His description as to why his face was *not* appropriate for TV reporting is probably the funniest writing a face has ever received from its owner.) It would be magnificent if such elegant self-mockery characterised his brethren, and it might even aid them: Jeremy Paxman, for instance, might find a little modesty made him less vulnerable to George Galloway or to Alex Salmond (both singled out here as masters of the otherwise dead art of eloquent speech-making). British diminution of power *vis-à-vis* the US needs intelligent media recognition, which is hardly assisted by endless self-preening as to British TV being 'the best in the world'. Getting it right refers to results, not claims. As matters stand, much of UK involvement in international reportage becomes like UK involvement in international affairs and affrays – acceptance of US handouts. Marr himself points out, following Anthony Lloyd of **The Times**, how 'the

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true story of a minor operation in Afghanistan was inflated by army officers into a great success against terrorists, and faithfully reported that way by journalists who were kept in the Bagram air base and not allowed to travel independently' (p.349). Marr precedes this by declaring 'the war on terrorism has so far been a badly reported war, in which key questions like the whereabouts of Osama bin Laden were left to drift into the ether'. On this indeed he has previously indicted himself in his invaluable instructive way (pp.345-46):

As a newspaper editor in the late 1990s I remember Robert Fisk arriving in my office to relay his latest scoop interview with a little-known figure called Osama bin Laden who was then holed up in Africa. Bob had been following him and al-Qaeda very closely and believed his warnings of a wider war against America were to be taken entirely seriously. We published Fisk's work, and gave it plenty of space, but I cringe to remember my faint boredom at the time – not *more* on Osama bin Laden?
Whatnot?

This is, morally speaking, excellent and probably braver than I would be in a similar confessional situation. But it's not enough merely to admire Marr and wish there were, ethically and hermeneutically, a great many more like him. It is to ask the new questions, not merely to regret that the old ones were not pursued more forcefully. The world needs to be told not simply where bin Laden is, but how he got where he did, and for that the British media (in the absence of investigation by Americans) must ask the CIA how they first found bin Laden, when they stopped paying him, why he switched from being their ally to their enemy, what they are doing to avoid similar buildup of future enemies. Of course the CIA will lie to them, but at least the world should know that the questions are being asked. As it happens, Marr has in his immediate future examples gross as earth of what to avoid. He has replaced David Frost's breakfast programme. Frost's final interviews included one with Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld in which the British journalist left the American warlord off every possible hook. Above all, Rumsfeld was permitted to defend extralegal imprisonment without trial in Guantanamo without the slightest query as to the value of information extracted under torture. No doubt Frost was expected to provide so easy an escape route, which raises an interesting question as to why he was selected. Can it be that Rumsfeld believed the famous Frost interview with Nixon became the vessel successfully embarking Nixon on his voyage to rehabilitation? Any way you take it, the verdict on British journalism is hardly complimentary: patsy or

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accomplice. Marr must now start moving the image of the British interviewer away from that brothel.

Marr gives a disarmingly frank account of his editorship of the **Independent**, his misfortunes at the loathsome hands of David Montgomery, and his dwindling hopes of Montgomery's rival shareholder Tony O'Reilly. He is necessarily more opaque on his current master, the BBC, although in itself his report on TV as journalistic medium is full and forceful. Wise in his generation, he leaves Alastair Campbell to worsen his own reputation, apart from a few gentle rabbit-punches (p.301):

with Labour in power and beginning to feel as hostile to **Today** as the Tories had when they were in office, Alastair Campbell was describing the programme during a Downing Street briefing as cynical and sloppy, part of a 'downmarket, dumbed-down, over staffed, over-bureaucratic, ridiculous organisation'. Norman Tebbit would have been proud.

... it is a pleasing thought that Alastair Campbell might be held indirectly responsible for Gilligan being hired in the first place.

It is another pleasing thought that no Prime Minister has more signally brought the office into disrepute in its public relations than has Blair by the appointment of the foul-mouthed Campbell. Nixon concealed his tapes bearing language such as Campbell habitually employed to journalists, civil servants and legislators. It is the verbal equivalent of a gangster's hit-man. What is the value in having a public relations man leaving the media in perpetual contemplation of such an image? One may dislike Mr Blair, but one would be less likely to think of him as a gangster were it not for his employment of Mr Alastair Campbell. It is as though a hospital advertised itself by a logo of Typhoid Mary. Yet the antics of such a creature can be lethal in their effect, and even now we must worry about his longterm effect on the integrity of public broadcasting. Marr reminds us that attempts to force the BBC into subservience to dubious government activities began with the Suez crisis. He is ready to term that a greater danger than any since. Yet the present danger arises from circumstances poor Eden never envisioned. The Hutton Report can yet be made the excuse for stripping the BCC of its integrity. Mr Blair may well go down in history as the premier who outlawed non-white terrorism while facilitating the triumph of white terrorism. His contrasts between the IRA and Al-Qaeda should not deceive an infant. Even the argument that the IRA had no suicide bombers (apart from regrettable accidents) is nonsense. The IRA simply worked in a different order: it

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bombed civilians first, and committed suicide afterwards, as the cases of Bobby Sands and his comrades witness. Yet it was Mr Blair's likely victim, Northern Ireland Unionism, which provided him with the Hutton report. At the time of Lord Hutton's appointment I was told by a Northern Ireland barrister that Hutton would provide the Blair Government with a total whitewash. Examples were given me of his methods in dissolving legal proceedings unwanted by the government. Hutton emerged from the old Protestant Unionist ruling majority, which had good reason to regard its constitutional opponents as hostile to the existence of Northern Ireland, and its unconstitutional opponents as determined to destroy Northern Ireland by force. Consequently, in Lord Hutton's thinking, any support given to the enemies of the government endangers the security and even the survival of Northern Ireland. The same logic when in Britain he naturally applied to the UK as a whole, especially when mobilised on a war footing. From Mr Blair's point of view he overdid it, since the Hutton Report seemed to discredit itself in its obvious refusal to make any criticisms of the government. But while it did not conciliate the electorate, the Hutton Report can yet undermine the BBC's efforts to continue on its present level of honest journalism. We might question the honesty, but at least it is probably above 50%, and in such a judgment we clearly would have Marr with us, an honest man if ever a book could prove its author to be one. Alastair Campbell clearly wants a BBC which is far below 50% in honesty, and there is every indication that this nominal ex-servant is still the master of his former masters. It is idle to point out that Lord Hutton is no more reliable a guide on government relations to media than Alastair Campbell would be to a kindergarten teacher seeking to purify the speech of her charges. Both may claim to be acting naturally; both are lethal to the standards at stake.

Andrew Marr is our countryman, and his first book, **The Battle for Scotland** (1992) was on current Scottish politics. It is a valuable, voluble, and vigorous treatise, and one suspects many of its judgments may prove enduring. Its history is a little off from time to time. Marr tells us he read Scott's **Tales of a Grandfather**, and at times one wonders if he had read anything else, whether in repeating its mythologies (such as that Macbeth murdered Duncan) or in his version of Scott himself who (says Marr)

turned his early Jacobite rebelliousness into a gooey pastiche first of itself and then of all Scotland. Like a Caledonian Tussaud of the imagination, he resculpted the disturbing truth into a jolly, brightly painted waxwork and then led both people and monarchs past it, selling his books like

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tickets at the door. ... His waxwork of Scotland ... wore tartan and stood in a glen.

The usual prizes are offered for any novel by Scott remotely resembling the above. There is nothing in **My Trade** as ignorant or as ill-written as that (despite its assuring us that Cobbett 'had no notion of influencing Westminster directly' (p.352), a singular verdict on a parliamentary candidate of 1821 who became an MP in 1832 and kept his seat till death). **The Battle for Scotland** was naturally at its best on the press in Scotland. **My Trade** opens with some enormously enjoyable and instructive reminiscences of Marr's early years as a journalist, served on **The Scotsman**, and the book must be read and reread to relive the paper in the early 1980s. Yet its silence on the fate of his old paper is something of a faint blemish on **My Trade**. Marr has written hilariously and honestly on monarchical ownership of the press. What he has not done is to discuss middle management in its various forms of oppression, much suffered in **The Scotsman**.

The story is instructive. Lord Thomson's family lacked his interest in **The Scotsman**, but left their agents to intervene, sometimes to the great injury of the paper. A strike in the late 1980s left some very ugly scars and some strange realignments. The then editor, a Labour supporter, simply became the lackey of management, while the Arts editor, the Tory Allen Wright, proved the grand spearhead of revolt. There followed the editorship of Magnus Linklater, one of the paper's finest editors in all its history, winning back much lost prestige with the aid of some (usually judicious) rejuvenation. Then the paper was sold to the Barclay brothers, and after some delay Andrew Neil was appointed editor-in-chief. Before him the paper had proved one of the major leaders of public opinion in guiding Scotland to the winning of its own Parliament. As Marr had shown in **The Battle for Scotland**, **The Scotsman** had championed devolution when it had very few friends in its own right, back in the 1970s. Thatcher may claim credit for uniting the Scots – against herself – and turning the thin majority for devolution in 1979 to the two-thirds/three-quarters of 1997. But **The Scotsman** had channelled and focused the wide coalition, broadened and deepened it, inspired and rallied it. And now, with the Parliament in being, Neil and his masters retreated into an empty negative Toryism, ridiculing the devolution crusade and the Parliament it won, which had given the paper its identity and readership. It is doubtful if **The Scotsman** under Neil stood for the political beliefs of any Member of the Scottish Parliament, even its Tories being forced to support the body without which they would not have had a single elected representative in Scotland in

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1999-2001. What does such a paper come to mean? Marr notes certain transformations of identity, notably the **Express** newspapers, but they always had a form of Toryism. To find anything like the managerial destruction of **The Scotsman**'s principles one would have to go to the **Pall Mall Gazette**, turned from Liberal to Tory, over a century ago, and probably destroyed in the turning. It is an ominous precedent, and would well merit Marr's reflections. **The Scotsman**'s history has hitherto been written in editorships; under Mr Neil editors came and went faster than the speed of Henry VIII's later wives, and a vulgar mausoleum replaced the historic pile recalled so accurately and affectionately in **My Trade**. Perhaps Marr should give us another book, this time on the killing of his trade. The extraordinary diminution of the Scottish BBC since devolution is another part of that story, and an even more inexplicable one.

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