

Horatio Bottomley and the making of *John Bull* Magazine (1906-14)

Professor Howard Cox
University of Worcester

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The late Victorian and Edwardian eras represented a golden age for popular magazines in Britain. Between 1880 and 1914 the estimated number of such magazine titles in circulation grew from around 1,000 to somewhere over 3,000. More significantly, it was within this period that modern mass-circulation magazines, whose titles would endure for many decades, came truly of age. By the turn of the century the sales figures attributed to the most popular magazines ran into the hundreds of thousands and in a few exceptional cases had broken through the one million per issue mark.

During the 1880s a growing urban working population thirsting for entertainment, and with enough surplus income to purchase a few non-essential items, happily parted with the single penny required to purchase a copy of George Newnes' *Tit-Bits* magazine; a perfect diversion as they commuted to and from their place of employment. Launched in 1881, Newnes' weekly publication - featuring a blend of news snippets, stories and free-to-enter competitions - provided an ideal means of escape from the toils and general boredom of everyday wage-earning life. Despite its lack of illustrations, *Tit-Bits* caught on because it offered readers an unprecedented diet of entertainment for a minimal financial outlay.

Tit-Bits arrived on Britain's bookstalls at a time when the printing and publishing houses that produced cheap weekly magazines were beginning to reap the full benefits of mass production. Steam-driven cylinder presses were undergoing rapid improvements in

productivity and now could be fed with rolls of paper produced from cheap sources of wood pulp, creating the web-fed rotary method of printing. The laborious task of typesetting was being transformed by the automated linotype system of type manufacture using molten lead to create characters and initiating the era of “hot-metal” printing. By the 1890s these transformations in the letterpress method of printing were complemented by the development of halftones, a process whereby photographs and other illustrative matter could be reproduced using a system of different sized dots to create manifold shades of grey. The raised surface of halftone blocks matched the prevailing system of text produced through the letterpress and could thus be easily integrated into a single page of type. Productivity was also increased through the further development of perfecting presses, which were capable of printing on both sides of the paper simultaneously. As the technology of publishing evolved, so did the scope for new entrants into the magazine industry.

With George Newnes leading the way, other publishers soon began to replicate his appealing formula for creating a popular periodical. One such successful imitator was C. Arthur Pearson. As a young man Pearson had been recruited to the staff of *Tit-Bits* by virtue of winning one of the magazine’s competitions, and he quickly demonstrated a natural flair in the field of publishing. Rising to become the business manager of *Tit-Bits*, Pearson eventually quit Newnes’ firm following a disagreement over his salary and went on to establish himself as an effective competitor by creating a weekly paper of his own. Launching the eponymous *Pearson’s Weekly* in 1890, Pearson developed his new title with such alacrity that its sales soon overtook those of *Tit-Bits*. By the late 1890s Pearson’s magazine was able to claim the distinction of being Britain’s first million-selling weekly periodical other than a Sunday newspaper.

Another rival who successfully muscled into the market created by Newnes was Alfred Harmsworth, one of *Tit-Bits*’ early contributors. In 1888 Harmsworth launched *Answers to Correspondents* as a similar chatty weekly providing an entertaining forum to a wide community of readers. After a hesitant beginning, *Answers* was catapulted to the same circulation status as *Tit-Bits* thanks to a simple free competition which carried the alluring prize of one pound per week for the rest of the winning entrant’s life. The establishment of *Answers* as a leading title, however, was merely the first stage for Harmsworth in pursuing

his plan to create a large scale publishing business designed to drive the maximum advantage from the printing industry's new technology. During the 1890s the dynamic and charming Alfred, along with his astute brother Harold, built a business enterprise which spanned the vertical chain of publishing back through printing, paper-making and, ultimately, the manufacture of wood pulp. Best remembered nowadays for his launch of the *Daily Mail* in 1896 - Britain's first popular daily national newspaper - Alfred Harmsworth (later Lord Northcliffe) propelled magazine publishing into the realm of big business through the idea of creating a portfolio of titles designed to keep his presses rolling at maximum efficiency. By the beginning of the twentieth century the Harmsworth brothers controlled a publishing empire within which his stable of magazine titles, now operating under the identity of Amalgamated Press and capitalised at £1 million, played a key revenue-generating role.

As the twentieth century dawned therefore, the publishing firms of George Newnes, Arthur Pearson and, particularly, the Harmsworths had all emerged as major players in Britain's magazine publishing industry. Between them, these firms created a myriad of new magazine titles that provided much of the sector's dynamic growth from the 1890s to the early 1910s. And yet, when the British government declared war on Germany and its allies in August 1914, it was a publication which had begun its life in a London apartment during 1906 that was poised to assume the mantle of Britain's top-selling weekly magazine. The apartment in question was the residence of Horatio Bottomley MP and the magazine he created, very much in his own image, carried the self-consciously patriotic title of *John Bull*.

Bottomley's career has been well documented in popular biographies by Felstead, Symons and Hyman. Employed initially in a London solicitor's office, he gained an insider's knowledge of courtroom proceedings thanks to a qualification in shorthand and an early career that was spent producing legal transcripts. This background, together with his natural gift for oratory, saw Bottomley later assume the role of a highly successful lay barrister. Meanwhile, an interest in politics underpinned his first foray into publishing via the production of news-sheets reporting on matters of local debate in Hackney. By the mid-1880s Bottomley was one of two founding partners of a sizable publishing company and by the end of that decade he had gained the contract to publish the official Hansard record of debates in Parliament. This period also witnessed Bottomley's first attempt to gain election

to Parliament as a Liberal MP: an ambition that he finally achieved in the 1906 General Election. Like many of his later business enterprises, the Hansard Publishing and Printing Union ended in a court case in which he was acquitted of conspiracy to defraud the shareholders. Thereafter, the Australian gold rush of the 1890s provided Horatio with many more opportunities to embezzle the public in his new guise as a company promoter.

Before his career as a company promoter began to crumble Bottomley made a return to publishing when, around 1902, he purchased an ailing London evening newspaper called the *Sun* and attempted – unsuccessfully as it turned out - to revive its fortunes. His strategy to reinvigorate the *Sun* involved adopting the form of journalism which had for many years been the preserve of the popular Sunday newspapers, most notably the *News of the World*. Along with the sensationalist reporting of criminal cases, which provided the mainstay of this style of newspaper, Bottomley introduced novelties which were to feature in his later publication *John Bull*. One of these was called “Sunspots” and effectively took the form of a lottery in which a small number of copies of the newspaper had “Sunspots” printed within their pages and for which the fortunate customer would receive a small prize. Since the running of any kind of lottery had been made illegal in Britain many years earlier this rudimentary marketing device was in contravention of the law and the *Sun* was eventually prosecuted and fined a trivial £25. Another feature Bottomley introduced into his newspaper was a regular column penned by himself that carried the provocative title “The World, The Flesh, and The Devil” and which provided readers with gossip on prominent figures of the political, legal and financial world.

Bottomley sold the *Sun* in 1904, as his financial circumstances deteriorated, but when *John Bull* was launched two years later both of these features from his evening newspaper were reintroduced. Almost from the outset, copies of *John Bull* carried a unique serial number and each week ten of these would be eligible for a small prize; the winning numbers being published in the following issue of the penny paper and thereby providing an incentive for readers to maintain their weekly purchase of the magazine. Equally, the opening pages of every copy of *John Bull* were devoted to the revived feature of “The World, The Flesh and The Devil” and Bottomley’s newly achieved status as a Member of Parliament gave the gossip contained therein even greater credibility. Bottomley confided in his readers in much the same way as *Private Eye*’s Lord Gnome was to do in later years, and

John Bull also incorporated satirical cartoons lampooning the politicians of the day in much the same vein as *Punch* magazine. A crucial distinction, however, was that Bottomley used his journal to promote his own political interests and as a platform for his Independent Liberal viewpoint. Naturally, he also used it to make money.

Although independently collected sales figures for British magazines before the First World War are scarce and unverifiable, there is general agreement that *John Bull* quickly gained a substantial readership. One biographer of Bottomley, Alan Hyman, claims that as early as its first anniversary in 1907 the circulation of *John Bull* had reached half a million and that by the autumn of 1912 it had grown to 1.5 million. Hyman's figures are clearly inflated in comparison with those cited by Minney in his account of *John Bull's* origins which states that the circulation of *John Bull* was approaching one million by a date that can be fixed at around the middle of 1911. More conservatively David Reed, using figures distributed by the Advertisers' Protection Society in its February 1913 Monthly Circular, states that at the end of 1912 *John Bull's* registered sales were only just breaching 400,000 per week and that the one million mark was not achieved until July 1915. Yet another opinion, drawn from McEwen's frequently-cited survey of press circulations in Britain during the First World War, gauges *John Bull's* weekly sales at about one million by the outbreak of the war. From these various estimates it seems safe to propose that by August 1914 *John Bull's* circulation was certainly in excess of three quarters of a million copies per week, placing it easily among the leading weekly periodicals in Britain. By the end of October 1914 the cover of *John Bull* was confidently boasting that the magazine's circulation was the largest of any weekly journal in the world. Be that as it may, it is clear that the readership of *John Bull* magazine was sufficiently large to provide Bottomley with an influential mouthpiece through which to promote both his financial and political interests.

Given the significant influence on domestic public opinion that has been attributed to *John Bull* during the First World War in accounts by historians such as Adrian Gregory and George Robb it is perhaps worth attempting to understand the basis of the magazine's popular appeal during its first eight years in existence. The very first issue of the magazine, dated Saturday May 12th 1906, had been very poorly produced by the London firm of printers Wertheimer, Lea & Co., and was followed by a hiatus of some weeks while Bottomley entered negotiations with a more suitable printing establishment. Wertheimer,

Lea & Co. had printed various materials for Bottomley in the past but did not have the equipment or the capacity to successfully handle the printing demands of a popular magazine. Fortunately for Bottomley, they put him in touch with the Odhams printing establishment which was seeking new business opportunities in the magazine publishing field. The Odhams firm had meandered along unremarkably since its formation in 1847 but by 1906 it had been placed largely under the control of Julius Elias (later Lord Southwood), an exceptionally dynamic individual whom Odhams had taken on initially as a clerk in the mid-1890s. Aware of Bottomley's track record in business affairs, Elias viewed the opportunity to print *John Bull* with many misgivings. He did however correctly recognise the magazine's huge potential appeal and thus the critical role that it might play in transforming the Odhams concern into one of Britain's leading publishing houses. Thus Elias reached an agreement with Bottomley and the first issue of *John Bull* printed by Odhams, namely Volume I, Number 1, was dated Saturday June 9th 1906.

The working relationship that developed between Bottomley and Elias was less than harmonious but each recognised the benefit of the collaboration in allowing *John Bull* to thrive. Displaying his business acumen, Elias exploited Bottomley's haphazard financial management of *John Bull* as a means to wrest control over the publishing as well as the printing of the weekly journal. By October 1908 the Odhams firm was taking credit in the magazine as both the printer and publisher of *John Bull*. This allowed Elias to manage the operation far more effectively and utilise some of the revenues it generated to widen its sales still further; notably by means of extensive publicity using the medium of outdoor display advertising. Posters for *John Bull* were created to highlight issues of interest across different parts of Britain in an effort to widen the geographical scope of the magazine's readership. Odhams also appointed an advertising manager to drum up further revenue from the publication of *John Bull*, although Bottomley's dubious personal reputation and his insistence on offering space to advertisers himself limited the effectiveness of the strategy for many years before the war.

Odhams' management and promotion of the magazine, and the good quality of the finished product when it left their printing works, were therefore important contributory factors in explaining the success of *John Bull* during its pre-war years. Nonetheless, it was the inherent appeal of its contents that truly brought the title into favour with such a large

readership. According to another of Bottomley's biographers, Julian Symons, the target audience of *John Bull* was both broad and well defined: "Its ideal reader a bluff beer-drinking racegoing British workman, strong in the arm although perhaps a little weak in the head, fond of the wife and kiddies but ready to go out on the spree with the boys. It was *British*, that was the dominant note always; a fearless Public Defender of the Truth, a sporting periodical". These two latter attributes of the magazine – its defence of the public interest and its close attention to sports events – were key features in promoting *John Bull's* popular appeal. In an era when gambling was heavily controlled by the state, yet few mechanisms existed to provide protection of the public against fraudulent businesses and other forms of corporate malpractice, the scope available for a populist crusading magazine was enormous.

Competitions had been a staple element of the late Victorian magazines such as *Tit Bits* and in like measure the sales of *John Bull* were certainly boosted by the offer of big prizes in return for a small outlay. Many of the competitions were based on sporting events such as horse racing and the increasingly popular spectator sport of professional association football. In the case of the latter, *John Bull* launched a competition offering prizes of £3,000 in which contestants were required to correctly predict the three matches in one week's fixtures that would feature the highest number of goals and then to forecast the exact score of each one of these games – a challenge that was effectively impossible to achieve. A later competition based on the FA Cup invited competitors in early January to predict the pairings for the two semi-finals and the score of each match, along with the score of the final itself. Not surprisingly, when a winner of one of these football competitions was announced it was greeted with wide scepticism in other quarters of the press.

Horse racing provided the magazine with another popular gambling-based hook. Off-course betting in the premises of bookmakers had been outlawed in Britain in 1853 but by the late nineteenth century this had led to the widespread practice of street betting. In 1906 a Street Betting Act passed through Parliament which significantly tightened the laws on such informally-organised gambling. These controls on bookmaking encouraged the emergence of off-shore turf accountants who accepted funds transferred to their offices telegraphically and held deposit and credit accounts on behalf of British-based clients. *John Bull* magazine provided a forum in which the services of these turf accountants could be

advertised, but Bottomley also recognised the opportunity of setting up the magazine's own horse racing sweepstakes in which the entries could be sent to an address in Switzerland. For a public starved of the opportunity to place small bets on traditional racing events, such as the Epsom Derby, these sweepstakes held tremendous popular appeal.

As well as providing solace for those among its readers who enjoyed the odd flutter, *John Bull* magazine also stepped into the breach in promoting the cause of consumer protection. In particular the magazine investigated a range of issues that affected the welfare of the less well educated members of society. The vehicle that Bottomley created for this purpose was known as the *John Bull* Exposure Bureau. Staffed by retired police officers and private investigators, the Bureau partly responded to concerns submitted by readers and partly pursued issues which were perceived to be advantageous to the magazine's financial interests. Of the causes taken up by the Exposure Bureau the most attention-grabbing was its scathing revelations regarding the activities of the Prudential Assurance Company – Britain's largest insurance company.

The anti-Prudential campaign was launched on March 25th 1911 and spread over twelve consecutive issues of the magazine. Numerous charges were laid against the Prudential, including the claim that the company deliberately engineered the lapsing of policies, and promoted the practice of fraudulent mis-selling by Special Agents who canvassed existing policy holders to take out unnecessary additional policies. Articles also pointed out that the company's agents were put under pressure to make good the non-payment of premiums among those clients for whose accounts they were responsible. In the issue of April 29th *John Bull* listed the names of over 100 Prudential agents who, it was claimed, had been driven to commit or had attempted to commit suicide. Naturally these accusations were bitterly disputed by the company and a war of pamphlets ensued from both sides. The publicity generated by the campaign against the Prudential undoubtedly raised the profile of *John Bull* but, as with many of the other investigations undertaken by the Exposure Bureau, the end result was a series of legal proceedings as the two parties each submitted claims of libel. Bottomley himself had put forward a claim of defamation in respect of statements made about him by the Prudential, in which he cited a pamphlet in which the firm defended their business practices. However, he had subsequently been forced to discontinue his action in the face of evidence mounted by the company and this

had left Bottomley personally liable for a significant amount of legal costs at a time when his overall financial position was becoming untenable.

Bottomley's growing indebtedness reached a critical point early in 1912 when he was forced to file for bankruptcy and, as a consequence, was required to give up his seat in parliament. The consequence was that Bottomley now began to use the pages of *John Bull* even more openly to campaign for a new direction in British politics. Almost as soon as he had launched the magazine he had offered readers the opportunity to subscribe to an organisation called the *John Bull* League. The essential purpose of the League was to provide Bottomley with a nationwide organisation through which to pursue his political objectives, and the League promoted a variety of activities across the leading towns and cities of Britain – ranging from whist drives to theatrical evenings – that frequently began with a rallying speech from Bottomley himself. A gala day organised by the League at the Crystal Palace in 1911 had attracted an attendance of around 20,000 enthusiastic supporters.

By now Bottomley had become quite disenchanted with the longstanding two-party Tory/Whig system that governed Britain. Faced with growing industrial strife and the emergence of the Trade Union-backed Labour Party, Bottomley campaigned for a new style of consensus administration based around the country's business leaders. Thus, once he had formally resigned from his position as a Liberal MP, Bottomley transformed the *John Bull* League into the Business Government League. A campaign was launched in *John Bull* during April 1912 and was consolidated at a rally at the Queen's Hall in London on May 11th. This was followed by a schedule of meetings up and down the country during the summer of 1912 organised by his principal accomplice Henry Houston. By the time this campaign was concluded the weekly circulation of *John Bull* was moving steadily towards one million and Bottomley was fast becoming a leading national celebrity.

There can be little doubt that the urgency with which Bottomley promoted the cause of political modernisation in Britain was intimately connected to the growing economic and military power of Germany. During 1913 *John Bull* featured much material that was hostile to the regime in Berlin even if, in broad terms, the editorial line did not overtly seek military confrontation and promoted the cause of Britain's neutrality in any armed conflict that did arise. It is, for example, well documented that following the outrage in Sarajevo the principal focus of *John Bull's* ire was the government of Serbia. Only retrospectively, after

war had been declared, did this alter to become one of unalloyed anti-German sentiment. After August 1914 Bottomley realigned the central thrust of *John Bull's* editorial content to support his newly adopted role as Britain's chief recruiting sergeant. In the issue of September 12th the magazine trumpeted *John Bull's* Great Patriotic Rally at the Royal Opera House on the following Monday evening, at which Bottomley was the principal speaker.

The combination of Bottomley's skills as an orator and opinion-maker, combined with the now-established readership of *John Bull* magazine, propelled the man and his medium into ever higher public profile during the course of the war. Bottomley's belligerence towards Germany was magnified by the editorial line in *John Bull*, making him much sought after for the purposes of recruiting young men into the forces; particularly among those sections of the male population who subscribed to his weekly publication. When in 1915 Harold Harmsworth (by now Lord Rothermere) launched the populist *Sunday Pictorial* it was Bottomley to whom he turned to provide a leading article each week. Bottomley accepted the invitation to write for the *Pictorial* only when Rothermere agreed that the by-line would acknowledge his role as editor of *John Bull*.

With his popular influence thus widened still further, Bottomley promoted two Business Government candidates against Asquith's government in by-elections during the course of 1915. He continued to write leading articles for the *Pictorial* throughout the course of the war, as its circulation climbed beyond 2.5 million. After the war, he used *John Bull* magazine to promote a scheme selling shares in government Victory Bonds, the proceeds of which he illicitly used to discharge himself from bankruptcy. This enabled him to be re-elected as an Independent candidate for South Hackney in the General Election of 1918. At this point he joined forces with Rothermere's Anti-Waste political campaign in a vain attempt to bring down Lloyd-George's Coalition government. Eventually, in 1921, he split with Rothermere in order to launch his own newspaper, the *Sunday Illustrated*, in an effort to promote his small Independent Parliamentary Party before, the following year, he was convicted on charges of fraudulent conversion relating to his Victory Bonds scheme and sentenced to seven years in prison.

Understandably, historical accounts of *John Bull* magazine have been inextricably fused with the activities of its editor Horatio Bottomley. The deep character flaws that shaped Bottomley's career, in journalism, finance and politics, find an easy reflection in the

pages of his alter-ego journal. Bottomley would do or say anything to promote his wider objectives and, during the First World War, when his political ambitions dovetailed with his high-profile recruiting campaign for the British military, virulent anti-German rhetoric was expedient in its promise of a reward in terms of influence at the centre of government. His doomed alliance with Rothermere, and his self-deluding attempt to transcend the influence of Britain's leading press lords with his own national newspaper in 1921, provided the preface to his final chapter of financial disgrace.

Bottomley's reputation may indeed be sullied beyond rehabilitation, but the history of his principal journalistic creation surely commands historical reassessment because, incontrovertibly, *John Bull's* popularity with a mass of readers made it for many years an outstanding success story. Julius Elias of Odhams shrewdly recognised the magazine's potential, and his role as the journal's publisher and business manager was instrumental in helping to achieve its high level of readership. Out on the street, however, *John Bull* lived or died by virtue of its contents, and in this respect it established a style and a blend of material that gained widespread favour among a diverse male (thus enfranchised) readership. Of all the factors that brought *John Bull* magazine to prominence in the years immediately leading up to the war, it was perhaps Bottomley's advocacy of political reform that touched the broadest common concern. The growing power of Trade Unions, and their political manifestation in the shape of an Independent Labour Party, called for a reaction that made the policies of Britain's two traditional governing parties seem dangerously obsolete. For a brief, but critical period, *John Bull* captured this agenda of political modernisation and broadcast its message of reform to a million or more voters each week. The outbreak of war altered the historical trajectory of this process of political change, and with it *John Bull's* place in Britain's socio-political history as it assumed the role of cheerleader for the military campaign against Germany. When, after 1918, the party political landscape of Britain did undergo a fundamental realignment, in many respects it resembled that vision of the future which Bottomley had promoted before the war in the pages of *John Bull*.

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