

Second Time Around: A classic revisited

Herald Angels

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The Miracle of Fleet Street: the Story of the Daily Herald, by George Lansbury (Labour Publishing Company, 1925, price unknown; republished by Spokesman Books, 2009, pp168, £15.00)

This is not exactly the whole story of what, in the early 1930s, was to become Britain's biggest-selling daily newspaper. Those wishing to learn about the ferocious pre-Second World War circulation battles, or the anguished slide that saw the paper metamorphose into the short-lived IPC *Sun* before being given garish new clothes and soaring away under the control of fledgling emperor Rupert Murdoch, must look elsewhere.

Having been born in 1911 as a daily strike-bulletin when London print Unions came out for a 48-hour working week, and resurrected the following year with capital of around £300 as a co-operative Labour venture, the *Herald* had been publishing consistently for only 13 years when Labour leader-to-be Lansbury recounted its trials and tribulations — there were many — on the way to relative stability.

An editorial published on October 26, 1912 told of the campaign to put the paper on a sound financial footing and how a woman had visited the House of Commons to tell Lansbury: “My husband has sent me with this message. ‘We have only saved a little, but here is £50. Do not let the *Daily Herald* die’ .” A Socialist parson presents a cheque for £150, while “another man” said: “Let the landlord go hang for his rent. I am sending it to you.” “Was there ever a daily newspaper that had such wonderful support as we are getting?” asked the editorial.

Probably not. But never before or since has there been a similar David of a newspaper struggling, against the Goliath of capitalism, on behalf of which most newsprint manufacturers later refused to supply a paper that was pro-women’s suffrage and supported both the Russian revolution and trades union strikes. Agents scoured the country to buy paper secretly.

Having been able to publish only weekly during the First World War, the *Herald* campaigned on behalf of workers both in print and with a series of rallies, another of which was planned, to support Labour and to announce that daily publication would shortly be resumed, in November 1918 at the Royal Albert Hall. Four days before the meeting, with 19,000 people having requested

tickets, the Hall management cancelled the contract, citing “demonstrations of a revolutionary nature” at previous meetings. Time for the workers of the world to unite: the Electrical Trades Union removed all the fuses from the Hall and suggested that unless permission to use it was restored the whole of Kensington might be plunged into darkness. Oh, and no trains would stop at local stations and taxi drivers would not ply for hire near the Hall. Thousands had to be turned away from the two meetings that subsequently took place.

From its very beginning the *Herald* produced challenging journalism — the headline “Women and children last!” swiftly followed the loss of the Titanic, which sank and drowned more than half the children travelling in steerage as the first issue of the paper was going to press. Observed the *Herald* of the White Star Line’s profits: “They have paid 30 per cent to their shareholders and they have sacrificed 51 per cent of the steerage children.”

Most opposition papers remained hostile to the *Herald*, and after Lansbury visited Russia in 1920, Lloyd George’s Government proclaimed it had evidence that diamonds brought to London by a Russian delegation had sold for between £40,000 and £50,000 and the “Bolshevik gold” donated to the paper. The *Herald* famously insisted that “NOT A BOND, NOT A FRANC, NOT A ROUBLE”, though confirming that £75,000 had been offered and pointing out that “if we accepted the offer from Russia (with which this country has been technically at peace since 1855...), we should have done nothing dishonourable and we should not be at all ashamed of ourselves”. Such intrigue, such drama; what a movie the early years of the *Herald* would make.

Lansbury, an MP and the chief shareholder early on, became editor by accident, pitchforking himself into the role for a nine-year tenure in 1913 after several predecessors had lurched from one calamity to another. “How many more years of life remain for me, it is impossible to say,” he wrote, “but whatever the future may be ... nothing can happen to me which will bring me more satisfaction or more joy than the memory of these great years spent in company with, and service for, the readers and friends of the *Daily Herald*.”

The paper was owned from 1922 by the TUC and the Labour Party, with Odhams Press obtaining 51 per cent in 1929. Lansbury lived to see sales top two million in 1933 and died seven years later, long before his dreams were shattered by savage decline and the beginning of the end with the 1961 Takeover by IPC, then a publishing giant dominated by Mirror Group. In republishing Lansbury’s long-neglected book — a love story encumbered only

by too much detail of political skirmishes — Spokesman has restored an important chapter of newspaper and social history.

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