Conservative Politics, Revolutionary Fiction, and the Constructed Reader in Victorian Penny Paper *Pearson's Weekly*

Adam Baldwin

Abstract
The penny paper *Pearson's Weekly* was one of several that emerged in the 1880s and 1890s. These papers offered readers short general interest articles, a letters page, and often sensational fiction. In this article I examine some contemporary responses to the late-Victorian penny press, mapping them onto *Pearson's Weekly*'s own editorial construction of the reader. I then go on to look at a scientific romance serialised in the paper during 1893, George Griffith's *The Angel of the Revolution*, whose radical revolutionary politics and socialist new world order seem at odds with the paper's editorial tone. After reading the novel's apparent radicalism alongside the contents of *Pearson's Weekly,* I conclude that *The Angel of the Revolution*'s utopian new world is rooted in the 1890s society from which it has emerged, ultimately endorsing the socially conservative nature of the paper.

Keywords
Pearson's Weekly; George Griffith; Penny papers; scientific romance; future-war

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Adam Baldwin

Introduction

The 1880s and 1890s saw a proliferation of new penny papers, the most popular of which were such titles as *Tit-Bits*, established in 1881, *Answers to Correspondents* from 1888, *Pearson's Weekly* from 1890, and *Black and White* from 1891. These papers fulfilled a need, identified by *Tit-Bits* founder and proprietor George Newnes, for short general interest articles and short fiction, all easily digestible pieces culled from other publications. It was to be a "production of all that is most interesting in books, periodicals, and newspapers" as it was "impossible for any man at the busy time of the present [1881] to even glance at any large number of the immense variety of books and papers which have gone on accumulating until now their number is fabulous" (Newnes, quoted in Menke 2014: 559). The *Dictionary of Nineteenth-Century Journalism* (DNCJ) identifies the target audience of *Tit-Bits* and the penny papers more generally as "largely composed of readers from the working and middle classes," a claim explored as part of this article (Crone 2009: 125).

Pearson promised from the very first issue of his *Pearson's Weekly* that "no word or suggestion will ever appear that is capable of giving offence to the most fastidious" ("With the Editor's Compliments" 1890: 1). This comment sets out Pearson's attempt to create a seemingly apolitical paper, one that carefully avoided references to the emergent socio-political trends of the 1890s. There are, for instance, very few direct references to women's rights, universal suffrage (only 40% of men had the vote at this time, and no women), or the rise of alternative political models such as socialism or anarchism. However, as my examination of the contents and tone of the paper reveals, *Pearson*'s outwardly apolitical stance masked its essentially socially conservative politics.

During 1893 Pearson published its first piece of original serial fiction, George Griffith's foundational scientific romance *The Angel of the Revolution*. It was published anonymously from 21 January 1893 to 14 October 1893 before being issued as a single volume by Tower Publishing, with the author credited, in late 1893 (see Moskowitz 1974, Baldwin 2024). Pearson made this move, taking a gamble on his staff writer Griffith, in order to cash in on the

success of *Black and White*'s 1892 future-war serial *The Great War of England, 1892* (a multi-authored piece detailing an increasingly violent and cataclysmic war). Griffith's *The Angel of the Revolution* also tells of a cataclysmic war, this time set in 1903, that engulfs the world, and the emergence of a group, calling themselves the Brotherhood, as saviours and self-appointed leaders of a new world from the ruins of war.[1] The Brotherhood abolish war and use their air-ships to police the globe and impose their utopian socialist new world order based on the banning of war, the abolition of private land ownership, and high taxation on unearned income (i.e. income from stocks and bonds).

This article focuses on *Pearson's Weekly* (1890–1939) and its presentation of *The Angel of the Revolution* during 1893. After looking at the penny press of the 1880s and 1890s and contemporary responses to it, I attempt to identify the paper's reader, as imagined and constructed by owner and founder C. Arthur Pearson (1866–1921) and his editorial team, by looking at the articles and advertising carried in the early 1890s, with a focus on 1893. I then explore Griffith's hugely popular serial novel, seeking to understand how an apparently radical socialist utopian novel sits within this essentially conservative weekly paper, showing how the novel, and the paper that published it, reflects the interests and hopes of the inferred reader, whilst also tempering their social aspirations.

Pearson's Weekly and the Late-Victorian Penny Paper

Although *Tit-Bits* has received some critical attention, particularly work by Kate Jackson (2001) and Richard Menke (2014), *Pearson's Weekly* remains comparatively unstudied. Graham Law's *Serializing Fiction in the Victorian Press* (2000) gives *Pearson's Weekly* barely more than a glance, entirely ignoring the varied and popular literature it carried. More recently, *The Routledge Handbook to Nineteenth-Century Periodicals and Newspapers* (ed. King, Easley, Morton: 2016) provides an excellent overview of the periodical press of the nineteenth century but has a curious blind spot when it comes to the penny papers of the 1880s and 1890s: *Pearson's Weekly* is not mentioned at all, with only *Tit-Bits* discussed, and then in no great detail. This seems like an extraordinary oversight of a publication that regularly sold half a million copies per week; the *Evening News* reported that by 1892 sales of *Pearson's Weekly* stood at around "three hundred thousand … a very respectable circulation for a two-year-old paper," and that in 1894 circulation was closer to half a million (Tantalus 1894: 1). The entry on Cyril Arthur Pearson in the DNCJ mentions *Pearson's Weekly* (although it does not go as far as giving the paper its own entry), and goes some way to correcting this oversight, but it remains an underexplored publication (Easley 2009: 485-5).

The emergence of the popular weekly penny press in a publishing world that included long-established, serious, and more expensive, publications as daily newspapers such as *The Times* (since 1785) and *The Manchester Guardian* (1821), or monthly journals such as *The Athenaeum* (1828) or *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* (1817), was viewed with a mixture of alarm, amusement, and disapproval by some contemporary commentators. George Gissing's 1891 novel, *New Grub Street*, parodies *Tit-Bits* in its presentation of a new weekly paper, *Chit-Chat*, proposed by one of the characters as a money-making exercise. He describes his target audience as "the quarter-educated … incapable of sustained attention" and suggesting that the paper would provide "something to occupy them in trains and on buses and trams" (Gissing,

[1] This role is enabled by the Brotherhood's sole possession of a unique technology, heavier-than-air flight, called air-ships in the novel, which they use to defeat the warring factions. Steven McLean (2014) and Steven Mollmann (2015) explore the use of air-ships as a new approach in future-war writing and early science fiction.

New Grub Street [1891] 1968: 496). Kelly Mays notes that Arthur Conan Doyle, whose popular Sherlock Holmes stories appeared in upmarket six-penny monthly, the *Strand Magazine*, was equally dubious as to the value of the penny papers: "*Tit-Bits* and its many imitators [i.e., *Pearson's Weekly*] deliberately aimed at the audience created by the 1870 Education Act, readers 'who were not sufficiently educated to study the deepest and thickest volumes'" (Mays 2005: 23).[2]

The dismissive attitudes of these contemporary commentators continued into the twentieth century. In his 1957 *The English Common Reader*, Richard Altick suggests that the reader of *Pearson's Weekly*, or any of the other penny papers, wanted "reading matter whose chief function was to keep their eyes busy while their brains took a rest … nothing which required sustained attention on the part of their readers, let alone concentration" ([1957] 1998: 363-4). He continues later: "shrewd editors exploited the expanding market for penny periodicals, variety, simplicity, and brevity were the rule. The common reader's diet was measured out in paragraphs or, at the most, a few pages of thin gruel" (369). Altick's comments, along with those of Gissing and Conan Doyle, position the reader as a passive consumer of whatever the penny papers offered, only fit to be exploited by avaricious editors. Although the short articles and generally light fiction as selected by the editors of these weekly papers seem to bear out these assumptions, the existence of long serials such as *The Angel of the Revolution*, and the editorial engagement with the reader through letters pages and the active encouragement for readers to send in their own article indicates a more sophisticated readership than these comments imply.

Pearson's Weekly's mixture of articles, competitions, letters pages, handy household tips, poetry, stories and jokes was a model shared with its inspiration, *Tit-Bits,* and its rivals *Black and White* and *Answers to Correspondents* (Pearson had worked for *Tit-Bits* for five years before striking out on his own). The paper itself was roughly the same size as a modern tabloid newspaper, each regular issue having twenty pages, sixteen black on white, unillustrated (except for the adverts) with the outer wrap of the paper forming four pages of advertising, and printed on a distinctive red background. There were Summer and Christmas double issues of around thirty-eight pages, starting with the Christmas 1892 issue.[3] *Pearson's Weekly* was popular from the outset; the first issue from July 1890 sold 250,000 copies, and by 1897 weekly sales 'surpassed one million' (Crone 2009: 485). *Tit-Bits* "reached an average circulation of 500,000 copies a week" from soon after its founding in 1881 (Varga 2009: 630). *Answers to Correspondents* was similarly successful: "[w]ithin four years of its first issue, circulation was over a million copies a week" (Humphreys 2009: 20). *Pearson's Weekly* sought to separate itself from the competition in part through its title, a proprietorial name which echoed the name of the respectable and long-established *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine,* and its claim that it offered "a higher tone than currently exists in the class of literature to which it belongs" ("With the Editor's Compliments" 1890: 1).

It is difficult to know precisely how many people would have read a single copy, as it is likely that copies would be passed around family and friends. A competition run by *Answers to Correspondents* provides a possible glimpse into how many people read a single copy of a

[2] Conan Doyle was not above publishing in the penny press; his short story, 'A Straggler of '15', about a survivor of the Battle of Waterloo, was published in *Black and White* on 21 March 1891.

[3] The paper used was of poor quality, and the ink printing was not always clear. For this article I have relied on the scanned copies available at the British Newspaper Archive, which are of variable quality due to the age and condition of many of the papers, although we are fortunate to have a surprisingly complete run of this disposable and ephemeral paper available from the inaugural issue in July 1890 to December 1913.

penny paper. The competition was to guess the value of the holdings of the Bank of England on a given date, offering a prize of £1 a week to the winner. It had 718,000 contestants, and the sales went from around 52,000 per week to 200,000 the following week (Humphreys 2009: 19-20, Brendan 1980: 16). Application to a competition does not necessarily equate with readership, but the figure implies that a paper or magazine of the 1890s would potentially have been shared with up to three or four others.

Editorial Construction of the Reader

Although undoubtedly successful, as the sales figures show, it is difficult to know *who* read *Pearson's Weekly* with any certainty. As Simon Eliot has observed, the lack of primary evidence is a major hurdle: "The act of reading, unless it is a highly unusual one … does not leave any historical evidence behind it" (2012: 41). Even the 32,000 entry *Reading Experience Database* has no references to *Pearson's Weekly*.[4] Graham Law comments that, "[t]o imagine, then, that it is possible to fully understand the experiences of the millions of readers of syndicated fiction in the nineteenth century … is to enter the realm of fantasy" (2000: 126). Law offers a possible solution:

> Fortunately, however, the Victorian newspapers themselves offer a wealth of circumstantial evidence concerning the qualitative nature of their readership which is available to a more informal mode of inquiry. An underlying assumption here is that newspapers, both generically and individually, must be seen to create as much as to discover their readership.
>
> (2000: 126)

Following Law's suggestion, and in lieu of readily available reader testimony, this section will look at the contents of *Pearson's Weekly* and at the paper's interaction with its readership, in an attempt to identify the likely (or at least the editorially constructed) reader. An early unnamed editor stated that *Pearson's Weekly* was attempting to be "just what the average person wants to read" (quoted in Jeremy 1984: 575). By looking at the articles chosen, an image of the reader as imagined by Pearson and his team begins to emerge. Pearson's previous experience at *Tit-Bits* would have enabled him to identify a readership he felt he could supply, or exploit, more efficiently than the older paper.

Kate Jackson notes that the competitions in *Tit-Bits* offered prizes and payments to readers for articles "expressed in guineas, a fact which implied a class of reader in possession of a salary (middle class or professional) as opposed to a wage (always expressed in pounds, shilling, and pence)" (Jackson 2001: 57). *Pearson's Weekly* copied *Tit-Bits* in using similar prize values and phraseology, such as the "*prize of a guinea* to the lady reader who proves herself to have the longest hair" ("What Can We Tell You" 1892: 736, italics in the original) or the cheque for two guineas sent to a reader for their article, published in the occasional column "Holiday Haunts," on Wicklow Hills and Dublin ("Holiday Haunts" 1892: 798). It can therefore be assumed, with reasonable confidence, that *Pearson's Weekly*'s target audience were upper-working-class and lower-middle-class.

From its very first issue, *Pearson's Weekly* relied on the railway for its both readers and its distribution. The editors made the claim that "[i]t has been calculated that at least half the adult population of these islands travels a greater or lesser distance by railway every day"

[4] There are just three references to *Tit-Bits*, all dismissive, as if the commentators were somehow embarrassed to be associated with such a low-brow publication (UK RED 'Tit-Bits').

("Railway Rights and Wrongs" 1893: 332).[5] B. R. Mitchell puts the number of railway passengers carried during 1893 at 849.5 million, that is around 16.3 million passengers per week (1962: 226). This annual passenger figure is not broken down into journey type, i.e. travel to work, travel for pleasure, shopping, school, and so on. Nevertheless, it is an extraordinary number of passengers carried, slightly higher than the working population as drawn from the 1891 census. These figures for rail travel indicate a large audience for reading matter and go some way to explaining the huge sales figures achieved by *Pearson's Weekly* and its rivals.

In a bid to attract this railway commuter audience, *Pearson's Weekly* offered a railway insurance scheme, an idea brought with him when Pearson left *Tit-Bits* to set up his own paper (see Bridget Griffen-Foley, 2004: 535). Each issue of *Pearson's Weekly* in the 1890s carried the promise that "[o]ne Thousand Pounds will be paid to … the next of kin of any person killed by an accident occurring within the United Kingdom to a Railway Train in which he or she may be travelling" ("Advertisement" 1891: 424). The sole condition was that the victim must have on their person at the time of the accident "[e]ither a copy of the current number of *Pearson's Weekly*, or the page of such copy containing this notice" (424). As well as appealing to the rail traveller, this offer would have aimed to reduce the sharing of the paper amongst a number of people.

Although, it is difficult to know exactly which outlets and locations sold *Pearson's Weekly*, as records for small outlets have mostly vanished, it is certain that railway station bookstall operator W. H. Smith, who had outlets across the country at this time, stocked *Pearson's Weekly* from the outset. The *Evening News* in October 1894 reported that: "Smith and Son's stalls fairly groaned beneath the weight of the red journal" (a reference to the red coloured wrap that covered every issue) (Tantalus 1894: 1). Leah Price notes that:

> W. H. Smith, the booksellers … pioneered the distribution of printed matter along the fifteen thousand miles of track laid between 1840 and 1870 – first by channelling newspapers and other periodicals outward from London, then by opening bookstalls in railway stations (starting in 1848 and rising to over a thousand branches by the turn of the century).
>
> (2012: 51)

The late-nineteenth-century success of W. H. Smith is rooted in this emerging market for something to read on the train (see Taunton 2009: 170-2).

The daily commute provided the temporal and physical space for reading, as well as the necessity of reading to escape the boredom entailed in travelling the same few miles of line every (working) day for months, or even years. Adam Roberts observes that the railways "generated new tranches of leisure. As they waited on platforms, or as they sat in the swaying carriages for the lengths of their journeys, passengers passed the time by reading" (2019: 37). Conditions on some trains could be crowded, and the size of *Pearson's Weekly* was ideal for train travel in crowded carriages, providing a shield against others, a private space for the reader to hide behind if desired.[6] Writing in 1902, H. G. Wells also identifies a link between reading and the third-class commuter:

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[5] This seems like quite a claim, as the total working force of England, Scotland and Wales in 1891 was around 14.5 million (Mitchell 1962: 60), just under half the population of 33.03 million (6). I have been unable to ascertain where Pearson found this calculation.

[6] Wolfgang Schivelbusch suggests that the purchase of reading material from a railway bookstall was a defence against the tedium of travel in a busy carriage (1986: 66-71). Edmund King has observed that newspapers "could also be used as social signalling devices—subtle hints to other travellers that a reader did not want to be disturbed" (2016).

> To make the railway train a perfect symbol of our times, it should be presented as uncomfortably full in the third class—a few passengers standing—and everybody reading the current number either of the *Daily Mail*, *Pearson's Weekly*, *Answers*, *Tit-Bits*, or whatever Greatest Novel of the Century happened to be going.
>
> (Wells 1902: 15)

Despite this apparently disparaging description, Wells's *The Invisible Man*, a "best pennyworth of sound literature" ("With the Editor's Compliments" 1890: 1) by any standards, was published in an abridged form by *Pearson's Weekly* during 1897.[7]

American journalist and essayist Agnes Repplier wrote in 1892 of the commuters she saw when visiting Britain that: "[t]he clerks and artisans, shopgirls, dressmakers, and milliners, who pour into London every morning by the early trains, have, each and every one, a choice specimen of penny fiction with which to beguile the short journey" (1891: 209). According to Repplier these commuters form part of a "huge body of readers who meddle not with Ruskin, nor with Browning, nor with Herbert Spencer, who have no acquaintance with George Eliot" (1891: 217). Repplier's list provides a clue to the reading habits of this crucial commuter audience at the moment of commuting, although it fails to consider what reading may be pursued by this audience at other times.

Mary Hammond notes that the design and layout of the penny papers was ideal for the commuter, adopting "a fragmentary form … extracts from novels, articles, stories and gossip seldom more than a page in length. This was ideally suited to the fragmentary attention span of the urban dweller and especially the train traveller" (2006: 78). Similarly, Paul Raphael Rooney's exploration of railway reading observes that: "the 1880s penny weekly miscellanies like *Tit-Bits* and the sixpenny monthly magazines like the *Strand* that materialised in the 1890s … were textually and materially encoded in a style especially likely to find favour with commuters and travellers" (2018: 85). The differing lengths of articles, a couple of hundred words for a short piece, up to 6,000 words for a short story or chapter, allowed the reader to choose what to read, when and where, enabling the reader to be his or her own editor, selecting those parts of the paper most suitable to circumstance. It is not necessarily the short attention span assumed by Altick, but more an indication of short journey times and busy lives, with reading snatched at convenient moments.

Although commuters were a clear target audience, *Pearson*'s editors also pursued a more domestic reader. From the first issue onwards a weekly page, "Home Notes," was aimed specifically at the female reader, with recipes and household tips. With an emphasis on thrift, readers are told that "A Joint of Meat may be kept sweet many days longer than usual if wrapped in a fine cloth wrung out of vinegar and placed in a draft of air" ("Home Notes" 1893a: 430), or offered a recipe for a "Cheap Pork Pie" ("Home Notes" 1893b: 206) and guidance on "How to Remove Rust from Brass" (206). Other regular columns include "Football Notes," and "All Sorts and Conditions of Men," a mild gossip column that liked to inform readers that "[t]he Duchess of York is said to be very fond of swimming" 1893b: 214), or that "King Charles of Roumania [sic] is one of the most popular monarchs in the world" 1893a: 774). Similar comments, tips and observations can be found across *Pearson's Weekly* throughout the 1890s.

A weekly series, part article, part interview, entitled "Workers and their Work," was somewhat more substantial, generally covering most of a three-column page, around 2,500

[7] The 2005 Penguin Classics edition of *The Invisible Man* discusses the differences in various versions of Wells's novel, noting that some editions were based on the serialised version, and missed an Epilogue not included in *Pearson's Weekly*, commenting that the "Pearson texts contain many small stylistic improvements, probably inserted at proof stage" (Sawyer 2005: xxviii)

words. The articles did not cover the tradesman, artisan or clerk's jobs of the imagined reader, but focused on people with more unusual jobs, such as "Model Game Farmer J. Montague C. Robb" ("Workers and their Work" 1892b: 183), or public figures such as "Mr G. Bartley, MP and founder of the National Penny Bank" ("Workers and their Work" 1893b: 759), the "Right Honourable Charles Wentworth Dilke: Author and Statesman" ("Workers and their Work" 1893c: 775), and "Sir Charles Russell: Attorney General and Sportsman" ("Workers and their Work" 1893a: 423) The inventor Hiram Maxim was interviewed in *Pearson's Weekly* ("Workers and their Work" 1892a: 55), quite possibly by staff writer George Griffith, who was inspired by Maxim's experiments in flight when writing *The Angel of the Revolution* (see Moskowitz 1974). The subjects of these articles align with those of the gossip column: the editors believed that their readers wished to read about the ruling and land-owning classes.

Pearson encouraged interaction from his readers, chiefly in the form of a weekly letters page, "Questions Worth Answering," as well as paying readers for articles, such as the occasional column, "Holiday Haunts." Letters were answered by readers of the paper who were invited to supply answers to questions printed at the bottom of the correspondence page. The questions chosen for publication leaned towards general interest, and they display a curiosity about the world beyond the one of daily work. For instance, the 14 October 1893 issue has questions such as "[i]s there any beast of prey which is invariably friendly to man?" to which the answer was given as cheetahs and pumas, or "[w]hich flowering plants have the most curious modes of existence?" with carnivorous plants and saprophytes suggested as candidates ("Questions Worth Answering" 1893b: 196). A few have a somewhat military aspect. The question, "[w]hich arm of military service, cavalry, infantry or artillery, will probably be found the most efficient in the next war?" was answered in January 1893 as "infantry" due to their use of the "quick-firing machine gun" ("Questions Worth Answering" 1893a: 420).

Another intriguing source beyond the letters printed on the "Questions Worth Answering" page is those reader's letters published in response to a particular call for reader interaction. As a guide to the nature of the *Pearson's Weekly* reader they must be treated with caution, but their selection by the editorial team at least indicates their expectational bias. An 1895 competition "to test the ingenuity of our readers in disposing of their weekly copies of *P.W."* provides a potential insight into a broad range of readers ("'Ingenious' Readers" 1895: 269). Respondents included a clergyman who "is in the habit of presenting his copy of *P.W.* to the first couple he marries every week," a shop-keeper, who converted his copies into sun blinds for his shop, and a picture-frame maker who "pasted the cover on the back of every picture which he frames" ("'Ingenious' Readers" 1895: 269). One respondent used her edition as coverings for her perambulator, and another converted them into tea-cosies. As odd as this last one is, the editorial team is taken aback by the reader who converts old issues into socks: "[t]hey are comfortable, according to his testimony, but methinks the more ancient kind of sock is preferable" ("'Ingenious' Readers" 1895: 269). The readerly demographic reflected in these respondents may include, but evidently extends beyond, the daily commuting clerk or shopgirl.

Pearson's Weekly was, at least outwardly, apolitical, but some reader questions appeared in the letters page that indicate the underlying socially-conservative editorial tone. The most politically radical comment in *Pearson's Weekly* in the early 1890s that I have located was initiated by a reader asking, "[i]s Party Government the best Possible Form of Democracy?" It was answered by another reader with a definite "No. The existence of parties is utterly opposed to and subversive of the essential and avowed aims of democracy" ("Questions Worth Answering" 1895: 292). Although this answer came from a reader, not an editor, it was presumably chosen from various replies by the editorial team to fit with the paper's stance on such questions. In September 1894, just as the serialisation of Griffith's sequel to *The Angel of the Revolution*, *The Syren of the Skies* was concluding, a question was

printed in *Pearson's Weekly*'s letters and queries page, enquiring about the likely distribution of British political parties some twenty-five years on. The reply proposes a National or Constitutional Party "which will probably be strong enough to save the country from the Socialistic Democracy into which it is now fast drifting" ("Questions Worth Answering" 1894: 132). The anonymous respondent goes on to predict that: "'government by counting noses' may be expected to give a preponderance of power to the Socialist Party, which may bring it into disastrous collision with those fundamental principles of human society and human nature which decline to be regulated by Act of Parliament" ("Questions Worth Answering" 1894: 132). An unusual reference to women's rights appears in June 1892, citing a case from 1832 of a woman, a Miss Mary Smith, demanding equal rights before the law. This short article avoids directly commenting on her political stance, but concludes that "Surely Mary Smith, who could state her case so cogently and reasonably, should be regarded as the pioneer of the movement of the equality of sexes" ("An Early Advocate of Women's Rights" 1892: 723). Not perhaps a ringing endorsement of her stance, but more positive than negative. The major socio-political issues of the day – universal suffrage, differences between the parliamentary parties, or the rise of the unions (surely of importance to the lower-middle-class readers perceived as the *Pearson's Weekly* audience) – are otherwise mostly avoided, printing nothing to potentially offend anyone of a strong political leaning, or to persuade someone to adopt such a leaning.

Advertising played a large role in *Pearson's Magazine*, providing much of its revenue. It covered four full pages of the paper in a surrounding wrap, and spilt over into the main pages. The advertising carried indicates the expected readership, and the repeat of the same or similar adverts across multiple issues implies the assumption must have been broadly accurate. Such advertising included staples of late-Victorian advertising as Fry's cocoa, Vinolia soap, and Singer sewing machines, along with adverts for smoking materials, the usual array of cure-alls and hair treatments, as well as cycles, pens, and pocket handkerchiefs (see Fig. 1. see also Loeb 1994, Yeandle 2018).

Figure 1: Pearson's Weekly, 25 July 1891 (British Newspaper Archive online)[8]

[8] As mentioned in an earlier footnote, scans of *Pearson's Weekly* are of variable quality, with some pages entirely unreadable. The example here is included to give a sense of the advertising layout of the

Looking at both the January and October 1893 issues that book-ended *The Angel of the Revolution*, advertising carried by each is broadly as follows:

Women's health	2
Men's health (inc. fitness)	2
Ladies and children's clothing	3
Men's clothing	3
Women's beauty	3
Hobbies (e.g. music, smoking, watches)	6
Household inc. food and cleaning products	7
General medicines	11

Advertising often has an emphasis on thrift, with clothing being marketed as being at "less than ordinary prices," or even at "such low prices that most ladies would refuse to make the frocks for the money even if the materials were provided free" ("Advertisement" 1893b: ii). Gentlemen were offered suits "with prices to suit both rich man and poor man" ("Advertisement" 1893b: ii). Purchasers of a 19-shilling watch were invited to compare it to a £3 watch, promising "No Old-Fashioned Extravagant Prices" ("Advertisement" 1893c: iii). Other than adverts for musical instruments and tuition, there were no advertisements for improving your station in life – no self-help courses, no evening classes, no colleges. Advertising was aimed at allowing the reader of *Pearson's Weekly* to maintain a comfortable existence within their salary band and class; advertising that aspired to social mobility is absent.

The discouragement of self-advancement in the readership appears actively pursued by an oddly phrased competition launched in 1894 for articles sent in by readers on why the businesses they attempted to run failed. It was won by a Mr Norris of Putney, for whom the £10.10s prize money may not have entirely compensated for the loss of several hundred pounds in a retail business he had bought in the Midlands. He proposes that "my experiences may act as a warning and deterrent to other young men thinking of launching out on their own account" ("Why I failed in Business" 1894: 295). The article is presented as a warning of the pitfalls to avoid for the budding entrepreneur, but its very existence as a competition for failure indicates an implicit philosophy promoted by *Pearson's Weekly* that the lower- and lower-middle classes should not attempt to better themselves and should remain clerks or shopgirls. This competition was run alongside one for "Why I Succeeded in Business," the winner of which also received "Ten Guineas" ("Why I Succeeded in Business" 1894: 279), but it is interesting that the editorial team saw fit to publish on, and equally reward, a failed business.

paper, and we are fortunate that the scanning of the paper for the British Newspaper Archive has had the foresight to include the advertising pages.

The ongoing British imperialist and colonialist mission is mentioned in articles and letters, but always in a positive light. The Christmas 1892 issue has an article on Christmas in South Africa focusing on the experience of the white colonisers, referring to the "well-to-do inhabitants of Cape Colony" and the "wealthier classes" ("Christmas in South Africa" 1892: 32) The 28 January 1893 issue carried an article purporting to relate a siege in 1885 during the 3rd Anglo-Burmese War (7-29 November 1885), the "third of those fierce and devastating struggles between the British forces and the wild tribes of Burmah [sic]" ("A Heroine of the Burmese War" 1893: 434). An unnamed British held town is besieged by the Burmese forces, and Colonel Mathews, his troops, and the town residents, all starved of food and water, consider surrender: "but we need expect little mercy at the hands of these dusky-skinned scoundrels if we give ourselves into their power" (434). The British are portrayed as noble and self-sacrificing, with a Marion MacHardy sacrificing herself as a decoy, allowing the British to access the well outside the town to get the water they so badly needed; in contrast, the Burmese are "wild" and "scoundrels" (434).

Through the articles and letters selected for publication, *Pearson's Weekly* implicitly supports the social and political status quo. Readers may read about the upper middle-classes and above, including the aristocracy, in the paper in the form of fiction or (very mild) gossip, but they are not invited to participate with, aspire to, or make judgement upon them. Articles on the empire are uniformly positive about British involvement in overseas territories and colonies. Curiosity is encouraged, but of the general interest type. Advertising, with its emphasis on thrift and value, is aimed at the poorer reader, enabling them to live as comfortably as they can within their existing means. The *Pearson's Weekly* reader is constituted by the paper as a materialist consumer, a product and subject of a burgeoning capitalism, looking to make their lives more interesting and comfortable through the possession of items such as bicycles, pianos, or cameras, but always from within their limited means. The urban nature of the reader is reflected in advertising and articles – there is no advertising for country products, such as walking boots, fishing equipment, or hunting rifles. Rural imagery is restricted to possible holiday destinations, or the location for fiction (although much of that is also urban in setting), and is not presented as a home environment. That *Pearson's Weekly* was so popular testifies to its success in its construction of and assumptions about its reader, their needs and desires.

A Revolutionary Story

The inclusion of fiction was integral to *Pearson's Weekly*'s promise, from the first issue, to provide "a sound pennyworth of literature" ("With the Editor's Compliments" 1890: 1). The fiction carried mixed the comic with the sentimental and sensational, replete with high emotional stakes, deadly consequences, and ensuing moral lessons. For two years the paper presented only short stories designed to be read in one sitting, such as the moral warning of "A Bad Lot" (1891: 3), or the sentimental story, "The Strangest Love Story Ever Told" (1891: 18). A move into serial fiction gambled that the reader would be sufficiently enthralled to buy the next issue, as well as creating the desire for ongoing purchases. The first, running 4 June 1892 to 28 January 1893, was *For the Term of His Natural Life* by Marcus Clarke. This was not an original piece, having been first published successfully in *The Australian Journal* between 1870 and 1872, therefore a reasonably safe experiment for Pearson. The first original serial fiction commissioned and published by *Pearson's Weekly* was George Griffith's 1893 scientific romance *The Angel of the Revolution*, and was popular enough to have a sequel produced in 1894, *The Syren of the Skies*. These are both long novels, taking many weeks to publish, with several characters for the reader to follow and remember.

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THE ANGEL OF THE REVOLUTION.

A TALE OF THE COMING TERROR.

CHAPTER LVIII. (continued)

CHAPTER LIX.

ALONE AGAINST THE WORLD.

A new story by that very popular author, Henry Herman, begins next week. But "The Angel of the Revolution" will run with it for some little time.

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Figure 2: An instalment of George Griffith's "The Angel of the Revolution," 5 August 1893 (British Newspaper Archive online)

The Angel of the Revolution often covered two pages of the paper, about 6,000 words, (fig. 2 shows one page of some 3,000 words) contrasting with *For the Term of his Natural Life* which covered one page per week. A serial story of this length required a commitment from the reader, and relied on their ability to recall events from previous long instalments as the weeks went past, although a short recap was generally provided as a memory jogger. This undermines Altick's dismissive remark that readers of penny papers required, "nothing which required sustained attention on the part of their readers" ([1957] 1998: 364) It did, they could, and the readers came back week after week for more of this long and sometimes complex story.

With their promise of "giving the best pennyworth of sound literature" in mind, early in 1894 *Pearson's Weekly* polled their readers on how they felt about the serial novels in the paper. The editorial team published the results in April 1894:

> My sincerest thanks are owing to the thousands and thousands of readers who … response[d] to my request … the ballot was a very one-sided affair. For every twenty readers who would rather see the space occupied in some other way, there are 120 who would not have the serials discontinued on any account.
>
> ("What You Want to Know, Ask P. W." 1894: 608)

In particular, the popularity of George Griffith's *The Angel of the Revolution* is made clear:

> One correspondent who voted for the suppression of serial stories gave a rather quaint reason for doing so. He seemed to think that as long as they were of such enticing interest as *The Angel of the Revolution* and *The Syren of the Skies* the wives were so anxious to secure the paper that the wretched husbands did not get a chance of reading it … The obvious remedy is to buy two. George

> Griffith … seems to have converted hundreds of my correspondents into habitual readers of serial stories, whereas they were previously inclined to skip them over.
>
> (608)

Part way through its run, *Pearson' Weekly* boasted that "'The Angel of the Revolution' is a unique story. Imitations of it are already beginning to appear. By this time next year there will have been a dozen of them. That's the penalty of success" ("Advertisement" 1893a: 42. See Moskowitz 1974, Stableford 1985, and Baldwin 2024 for an overview of imitators of *The Angel of the Revolution*).

The Angel of the Revolution briefly ran alongside *For the Term of his Natural Life* until 28 January 1893, after which no new serial was started until *Woman, the Mystery: A Story of Three Revolutions* by Henry Herman began its run in the 12 August 1893 issue, ending on 16 December that year, a considerably shorter run than *The Angel of the Revolution*. Although Herman's novel focuses on historical revolutions, starting with Paris in 1848, not revolutions of the future as Griffith's did, both titles sharing the word "revolution" seems more than a coincidence. Short stories were carried during *The Angel of the Revolution*'s run, such as "Putting Down a Carpet," a broadly comic anonymous story of misadventure in the 15 July 1893 issue, or "A Baby Walking Machine," again anonymous, which relates a father's attempt to build a steam-powered 'man' to help walk the baby for him from 1 April 1893, but nothing on the scale or ambition of *The Angel of the Revolution*. Even H. G. Well's *The Invisible Man*, published in *Pearson's Weekly* from 12 June to 7 August 1897, rarely covered more than a page and a half.

The Angel of the Revolution is in the tradition of future-war novels, a trend initiated by George Chesney's *The Battle of Dorking* (1871). This genre remained popular right up to the outbreak of the First World War, and inspired many new genres, including the spy novel and the scientific romance (see Baldwin 2024 and Clarke 1992). Griffith's novel was directly inspired by *Black and White*'s future-war story "The Great War of England, 1892" (see above). *The Angel of the Revolution* stands out for its use of a then futuristic technology, the heavier-than-air airships, making it an early example of scientific romance. These are used to bombard and intimidate the warring armies of the earth from the sky in a manner almost unprecedented in fiction from this period.

As well as being a future-war novel, *The Angel of the Revolution* has a strong utopian element. As the novel closes, the Brotherhood take control of the world and impose their New World Order, a socialist utopia based on the abolition of personal land-ownership. The Brotherhood declare that "the soil of each country was … to be the sole inalienable property of the State," that "all private incomes derived from the rent of land were declared illegal and so forfeit," and that all "incomes unearned by productive work of hand or brain were subjected to a progressive tax, which reached fifty per cent. when the income amounted to £10,000 a year" (Griffith 1893a :205) Further, war is banned and the possession of weapons capable of waging war is outlawed. This ban is policed by the Brotherhood, who exempt themselves from these laws, using their heavily-armed air-ships to maintain their control. These changes, extended in the sequel *The Syren of the Skies* to a global railway network, one which is "entirely free [of charge] … Easy and rapid transport being considered an absolute necessity of a high state of civilisation" (Griffith 1894c: 409). All these changes would be likely to appeal to the *Pearson's Weekly* target audience: no more high rents, free train journeys to work, the reduction of power in the land-owning and stock-owning classes, and the promise of a lasting global peace.

The utopianism of *The Angel of the Revolution* aligns it with a resurgence of interest in the last three decades of the nineteenth century in utopian literature. Notable examples include Edward Bulwer-Lytton's *The Coming Race* (1871), Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward:*

2000-1887 (1888), and William Morris's response to Bellamy, *News from Nowhere* (1890). Each of these writers uses the utopian form to comment on contemporary society and suggest alternatives that they believe are preferable. Matthew Beaumont's *The Spectre of Utopia* (2012) identifies politico-economic upheavals as being behind this renewed interest in utopianism and utopian literature during the late nineteenth century. He suggests that following a series of economic recessions from the 1870s onwards, "[t]he working-class movement, increasingly guided by the socialist parties proliferating in Europe, was inspired to an unprecedented extent by visions of a post-capitalist society" (Beaumont 2012: 12). Beaumont claims that "there can be no doubt that by the early 1890s, mainly because of its impact on the socialist movement, [the utopian text] had already acquired a significant working and lower-middle class audience in Britain" (140). Readers of *Pearson's Weekly* were in part formed of this "significant working and lower-middle class audience." But as utopianism as an idea is not a subject discussed or covered in the letters or articles pages of *Pearson's Weekly*, its appearance in the novel stands out as radical and daring.

Given the existence of the "Home Notes" column and the regular advertising for female clothes and beauty products, it is fitting that a woman features heavily in *The Angel of the Revolution*. The 'Angel' of the title is Natasha, the daughter of Natas, the leader of the Brotherhood. In one remarkable sequence Natasha is faced with an unwanted suitor, the leader of the Brotherhood's American Inner Circle, Michael Roburoff. Just as the Brotherhood's forces are about to emerge onto the world stage, Roburoff threatens to withdraw his support from Natas's mission unless he is presented with Natasha as his bride. Natas sends Natasha to meet with Roburoff in America. Natas has provided her with sealed orders, directing her to open them only as she is about to meet with Roburoff. On entering the chamber, Natasha opens the orders and reads the following statement from Natas:

> Michael Roburoff, late chief of the American Section of the Brotherhood. When you joined the Order, you took an oath to obey the directions of its chiefs to the death, and you acknowledged that death would be the just penalty of perjury. My orders to you were to complete the arrangements for bringing the American Section into action when you received the signal to do so. Instead of doing that, you have sought to bargain with me for the price of its allegiance. That is treachery, and the penalty of treachery is death. Natas.
>
> (Griffith 1893b: 25)

Natasha asks Brotherhood member Alan Tremayne if the sentence is to be carried out immediately and he confirms this. She then adds her own condemnation, shifting the context from political revenge and punishment to personal revenge:

> You have asked for a bride, Michael Roburoff, and she has come to you, and I can promise you that you shall sleep soundly in her embrace. Your bride is Death, and I have chosen to bring her to you with my own hand, that all here may see how the daughter of Natas can avenge an insult to her womanhood.
>
> (25)

Natasha then pulls a pistol from her pocket and calmly shoots Roburoff in the head, an extraordinary action for the time, and one for which Natasha is subject to no retribution or chastisement. But, as remarkable as this is, a woman who shoots a man down in cold blood and is not punished for it, Natasha operates only with the consent of the men around her: her father and Alan Tremayne.

On close reading, *The Angel of the Revolution* reveals itself to be firmly rooted in British imperialist assumptions and conservative societal attitudes. The Brotherhood are white

Europeans and Americans and this echoes the contemporary dominance of white male Anglo-Saxon imperialism. The war is global, but the story follows the war in Europe leading to the eventual siege of London by an aggressive Franco-Russian alliance. The siege is lifted by the Brotherhood's intervention, a move which signals their appearance as the prime power in the world more generally.

Whilst the war rages in Europe, a Moslem army, led by a Sultan Mohammed Reshad, has taken "Northern Africa and Southern Asia" (Griffith 1893c: 205) The Brotherhood, victorious in Europe and America turn their attention to the usurpers of previously British lands, especially India. Their air-ships and dirigibles outmatch the Moslem army, who "brave as lions and simple as children … with one accord … flung away their weapons and raised their hands in supplication to the sky" (Griffith 1893a: 205). The Moslem army is both othered and defeated, much as the Burmese besiegers were in the *Pearson's Weekly* article from 1893.

The characters of *The Angel of the Revolution* that make up the Brotherhood are drawn not from the upper-working and lower-middle classes of *Pearson's Weekly*'s readership, but from the upper-middle and upper classes. The inventor of the air-ship, Richard Arnold reads an article in his paper that refers to a Lord Alanmere: "Why that must be the Lord Alanmere who was at Trinity in my time, or rather Viscount Tremayne, as he was then" (Griffith 1893a: 441). Brotherhood member Maurice Colston, at a chance meeting with Arnold tells him "Your speech tells me that we are socially equals," and later describes himself as "an idler, a dilettante, and a good deal else that is pleasant and utterly useless … without having done anything to deserve it beyond having managed to be born the son of my father" (Griffith, 1893a: 442). Arnold and Colston, along with Tremayne, form the inner circle of the Brotherhood that effectively rules the world at the end of the novel – the upper-middle and upper classes remain the ruling classes, an echo of the political reality of late-Victorian Britain and its empire.

The closing lines of the novel have Natasha restored to a socially acceptable domestic role, married to Arnold and "with a black-eyed, six-week's-old baby nestling in her bosom … her own loveliness softened and etherealised by the sacred grace of motherhood" (Griffith, 1893c: 205). She greets her husband, "Welcome, my lord! … Does the King come in peace?" (205). Arnold is not a king but is a high-ranking member of the Brotherhood council that now rules the world, but Natasha's use of the word, and her recasting as a mother, domesticate this potentially subversive woman; the "Angel of the Revolution" has been safely transformed into the Angel of the House.

The sequel novel *The Syren of the Skies* also features a strong central female lead, Olga Romanoff. Olga rebels against the peaceful world order established at the close of the first novel, wishing to restore herself as Tsarina of a Russian feudal empire (see Bulfin 2023). Olga fails to conform to male-imposed societal expectations, and so naturally she is defeated and dies somewhat melodramatically, clutching the body of a man she mistakenly believes is her lover, following a devastating comet strike on the planet (Griffith, 1894b: 42).

Griffith's apparently radical new world reveals itself, on close reading, to be remarkably similar to the existing British imperialist model of self-governing colonies and protectorates who owe allegiance to the British crown, such as Australia and Canada, and directly ruled lands such as India. The post-war world under the Brotherhood has a federation of Britain, America, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, the English-speaking countries, ruled directly by the Brotherhood, a fantasy of a Greater Britain, a popular concept at the time (see Bell 2007). The rest of the world is left to be self-governing, but ultimately accountable to the Brotherhood for actions taken in respect of their own populations and neighbouring countries. This world is created, ruled, and enforced by an undemocratic, self-appointed group. The world order imposed, however fair and equable it may appear, is their world order, one which takes no account of any opposing views. The Brotherhood's victory is gained by force of arms,

superior weaponry and technology, in the shape of their air-ships. This continues the tradition of Western nineteenth-century imperialists taking over the globe, imposing their concept of government through sheer force of arms against the ill-prepared and under-armed inhabitants of Africa, India, Australia, and so many other lands.

Pearson's Weekly offered its readers an extraordinary tale in *The Angel of the Revolution*, one whose politically radical socialist stance initially appears at odds with the paper's socially conservative editorial tone. But despite all the apparent radicalism of the novel, the world created at its close is still run by an elite drawn from the upper-middle and upper classes, and their rule is imposed and enforced by the threat of violence and superior arms. The upper-working and lower middle-class audience the paper is aimed at do not feature in the novel. Their lot may be bettered by the abolition of private property ownership, and free rail travel would have a particular appeal for many readers, but there is no scope for social mobility in Griffith's new world. Griffith was a staff writer for *Pearson's Weekly*, before becoming their star author, so it is likely that Griffith tacitly agreed with the editorial stance, and this is borne out by his other novels, which become ever more socially conservative over time (see Moskowitz 1974, Stableford 1985, and Baldwin 2024). *The Angel of the Revolution* is an exciting read, often breathlessly so, with extraordinary new technology, and vast cataclysmic battles. But the novel and the paper remain socially conservative, encouraging the "clerks and artisans, shopgirls, dressmakers, and milliners" (Repplier 1891: 209) to remain in their allocated social station.

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