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Crusader in Chains

Written by *Robin Esser*

Published by *Palatino*

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CRUSADERS IN CHAINS

By
Robin Esser

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Palatino Publishing

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Also by Robin Esser:

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To my family.

DAILY EXPRESS

2am: 'We'll walk now'

MAN IS ON THE MOON

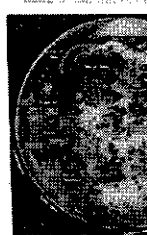


DATELINE:
Sea of Tranquility

LATEST

TWO hours after landing on the moon, the Apollo 11 crew have reported that they would step on to the lunar surface of Tranquility.

Armstrong, in Houston, Texas, reported: "I'm very glad to report you on moon."



And the Russian robot is just 10 miles up

The Apollo 11 crew, consisting of Neil Armstrong, Michael Collins, and Buzz Aldrin, have reported that they would step on to the lunar surface of Tranquility. The crew is currently in orbit around the Moon, and the Lunar Module is being lowered to the surface. The crew is expected to land on the Moon in the Sea of Tranquility area.

Within limit

The crew is expected to land on the Moon in the Sea of Tranquility area. The crew is currently in orbit around the Moon, and the Lunar Module is being lowered to the surface. The crew is expected to land on the Moon in the Sea of Tranquility area.



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EXTRA

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Continued on Page 2

Historic Page One – July 21, 1969

INTRODUCTION

I have been in journalism one way or another for some 60 years. I have been a reporter, gossip columnist, feature writer, foreign correspondent, features editor and an editor, including being in charge of one of the nation's biggest Sunday newspapers, an editorial executive and later executive managing editor of the *Daily Mail*. I have clocked up more than fifty years in Fleet Street, which is, I suppose, something of a record. I am a Fellow of the Society of Editors which has Press freedom as its first objective. The way journalists work and the way newspapers are now produced have gone through a seismic change in that time and I have charted those changes while recalling some of the highlights of my career.

When Lord Beaverbrook, who was a Canadian, bought the *Daily Express* and founded the *Sunday Express* he adopted the Crusader as the newspaper's logo. He bought his papers, as he famously remarked, for 'propaganda not profit'. In 1951, as a protest at Parliament's neglect of the old Empire and Imperial free trade and the growing interest in trade and political ties with Europe, he put the Crusader into chains. It was a perceptive move which is echoed today by Britain's troubles with the EU.

All newspapers, from serious broadsheets to red top 'populars' have their own crusades. All newspapers are in chains today as the State becomes

more and more powerful and impatient of criticism and endeavours to extend its control over the media. Is this what our democracy now deserves? The democracy that was held up to the world as a model?

No, but it is what we are threatened with. The Press in this country has never enjoyed the freedom bestowed upon the American Press with the First Amendment, which guarantees freedom of the media. Instead in modern times Parliament has steadily chipped away at media freedom with legislation designed to put a chilling effect on investigative journalism and the exposure of those who either misuse public money or abuse their positions of trust in the public eye.

I am thinking of the arrival of CFAs (Conditional Fee Agreements) – the no-win-no-fee arrangements that have escalated the costs of contesting libel actions into millions of pounds; the draconian libel laws themselves, which only now have been the subject of some well overdue reform; Contempt of Court; the Data Protection Act; the Bribery Act; the Harassment Act; the Terrorism Act, among others. And the arrival by the back door of a privacy law based on several judges' views of the Human Rights Act which was introduced to the statute book by Labour.

During the last twenty years the Press has been harried by politicians with inquiry after inquiry into its ethics and practices and it is now regulated and 'self-regulated' to such an extent it is only half-free.

The life blood of local papers reporting local news to inform their communities about what is going on in their name is being blocked. The national papers, struggling to make a profit in the digital age, are emasculated. There are actually strong voices in this country, following the Leveson Inquiry, that are calling for ultimate statutory control of the Press – a promise once made by Labour's Harriet Harman. They deserve a Robert Mugabe in charge of Britain.

Following Leveson's recommendations the laws that protect journalists' sources are to be weakened so that information acquired confidentially can now be seized by police. And Leveson's self-preserving and outrageous recommendation that whistle-blowers should report their misgivings only to the organisation that is running the abuses and never to the media, guarantees that scandals will more rarely be exposed and heralds the possible end of investigative journalism which protects the public by telling them how their money is being spent – or more often misspent.

In the time I have been a Fleet Street journalist the Press has gone through two revolutions. When I started as a reporter there was no such thing as a Press Complaints Commission (PCC). There was no standards code such as there is today – the Editors' Code of Practice. There were no Select Committees prying into matters they did not fully understand; no judicial inquiries. I cannot imagine the Lord Beaverbrook I knew being asked to appear before such a body and then being asked about his children

– as Lord Rothermere was by Leveson. I am still not clear what Lord R's children have to do with the ethics of the Press, particularly as he has often proclaimed his belief in the independence of his editors and never interferes in editorial matters.

Admittedly the atmosphere in Fleet Street in my early days was pretty cavalier. Reporters sent on jobs were expected to get the story. The odd foot would go in the door of someone who was not inclined to co-operate. The public had nobody to whom they could complain – except the editor of the paper the reporters represented. On the other hand there were fewer paparazzi as the markets those itinerant photographers mostly depend upon are the magazines in the United States and in Europe. Some people were upset – not a lot of 'ordinary' people, as the Press does not write about them a great deal – preferring to feature those who are already known to the public.

Bribery? I doubt it was necessary for Percy Hoskins, the great crime reporter of the *Daily Express* in the fifties, to bribe a policeman. He was friendly with most of them. The only story I recall about Percy and the use of alcohol was when he mistakenly fed his canary some cognac and the bird fell off its perch.

The same goes for Chapman Pincher, the greatest post war security-busting journalist of Fleet Street, who knew more about spies than MI5 and MI6 put together and regularly dined with the heads of both organisations. The wine may have been expensive

but it did not flow in buckets. What a reporter! I remember, from my brief stay in the War Office getting ready for the Suez Operation as a national serviceman, seeing stickers on the phones reading BE CAREFUL WHAT YOU SAY. CHAPMAN PINCHER MAY BE LISTENING.

Not, I think, an early example of phone hacking. Mobiles had not then been invented and the technology for listening-in was basic, although the local postmistress could ear-wig on any conversation that was put through her manual exchange.

The systems we reporters used and the hot metal process by which the newspapers were printed were primitive compared with today. I used to carry four pennies – the price of a local call – in my pocket to use in a telephone box and I could make a reverse charge call to the office to dictate my copy... usually to a rather cynical but rapid touch typist whose favourite and not very encouraging phrase was 'Is there much more of this?'

Indeed there was one memorable occasion when Robin Stafford, the *Daily Express* man in Athens, who had been thrown out of the country by the military junta which had started a successful coup, managed to sneak back in to Greece. Through a contact at the central telephone exchange and hidden in a cupboard he got a line through to the *Express*. In those days copy-takers who specialised in taking overseas correspondents' copy came to work in the afternoons so, as it was the morning, the foreign desk put him through to a 'home news' copy taker.

He had never heard of Robin Stafford.

'What's your name?'

'Stafford.'

'How do you spell it?'

'For f***s sake get on with it! I'm crouched in a cupboard in Greece.'

'Don't talk to me like that!' roared the copy-taker as he slammed the phone down. It was several days before Stafford could contact the office again.

Today a lap-top, a mobile phone or one of a number of digital hand-held instruments would have given him instant access to the office from anywhere in the world.

I used to have a Post Office bank book in my pocket in case I had to stay overnight in a hotel. Then I could nip out in the morning and draw enough cash to settle the bill. No credit cards then – not even a cheque guarantee card although I always carried a cheque book too.

In the mid-fifties the printed word was all-powerful. Today, the internet, social media such as Twitter and Facebook and TV all dominate. Ironically, as the influence of newspapers has extended far beyond the boundaries of their physical printed circulations through online presence, the independence of those newspapers in this country has been hedged in by new legislation, eroding the freedom of the press to an alarming extent. Our precious democracy itself is in danger on a local, regional, and national level. Few people realise that the Labour Government, almost as its last act in

2010, brought in a law, the Bribery Act, which could – and, given the impact on Members of Parliament, probably would – have prevented the *Telegraph* publishing their MPs' expenses exposé – or at the very least put the editor at serious risk of being dragged into court and thrown into jail. Knowing the calibre of the then editor, Tony Gallagher, I have no doubt he would have taken those risks, but probably at some personal cost.

Then the phone hacking scandal at the *News of the World* hit the headlines – not as a result of a police investigation (which Leveson showed had been woefully inadequate although, with curious logic, he decided it was pursued with 'integrity') but due to the efforts of an investigative journalist on the *Guardian*.

The most sensational allegation was that the *News of the World* had deleted murder victim Millie Dowler's messages on her mobile phone, giving her family the false hope that she was still alive. In fact the police later said this was not true and that the messages had been deleted automatically by her phone provider.

The *Guardian*, which had printed the story, later corrected it – but on page 32 even though it had been on their front page. Thus the correction was hardly noticed by anyone, but the damage had been done and in the wake of the furore the Prime Minister saw his chance.

Because David Cameron had rashly and, against much advice, appointed Andy Coulson, former *News*

of the World editor, as his head of communications at Number Ten, he took the cynical course of appointing a judicial inquiry into the whole of Press ethics in order to take attention away from his own mistake.

At huge expense to the tax-payer and to the media industry itself the Leveson Inquiry probed the wildest of allegations and listened to a self-obsessed troupe of over-theatrical celebrities moaning about the 'intrusion' they had suffered while building up their not inconsiderable fortunes with the help of the publicity they had received from the very newspapers about which they were now complaining. The Inquiry was assisted by a panel of assessors, not one of whom had ever served on a popular best-selling newspaper. It also managed to bite back at its instigator – exposing the Prime Minister's cosy relationship with News International, Rupert Murdoch and his chief executive at News International, Rebekah Brooks.

Had there ever previously been such excruciating communication between a newspaper executive (Rebekah) and a leading politician (Cameron) as her e-mail 'We are in this together. Yes you Cam'? Has a prime minister of Great Britain ever had three close friends involved in a criminal trial? Has any prime minister ridden a police horse given to a media executive?

The whole Inquiry was set up on a deliberate lie – 'that the public has lost faith in the PCC'. No evidence whatsoever has backed this suggestion

which was swallowed wholesale by Leveson. There was no indication that the readers had lost faith in the way in which newspapers were 'regulated'. No sign they had stopped reading and enjoying the Press; no sign they had ceased to buy newspapers.

More likely a majority had never heard of the PCC and those who had, and used it, were, according to professional independent surveys, largely happy with the service they received.

We now know that, although Leveson was aware of the much wider use of phone hacking by lawyers, insurance companies and the police themselves, he chose to limit his inquiry to his brief of investigating the ethics of the Press. How very judge-like!

Against the enormous changes for newspapers I have outlined my professional life, which has been enlivened by a succession of lucky chances, and the story has a setting that readers may find has an historical significance.

Of course, the end of that story is yet to come. Will news still be printed on pulped trees in another fifty years? Will the police continue to arrest journalists for doing their job? Will the State finally succeed in silencing its rumbustious critics? Will politicians be allowed to fiddle their expenses at the public's cost?

I need a crystal ball to answer those questions. But if newspapers go entirely online and global what will be the point of regulation which applies only to this country?

Already *Mail Online*, now the world's most-read newspaper on the web, is being pushed to obey British regulation even though it has an American home page and the majority of its readers are Americans.

BEGINNINGS

It all began when I was about nine or ten and stopped wanting to drive a train or a fire engine when I grew up. I discovered our neighbours in Dewsbury, West Yorkshire, were the parents of Harold Keeble – then a Fleet Street giant on Lord Beaverbrook's mighty *Daily Express*. Although I had not met him and was not to do so for some years Harold's proud mother's stories about her son convinced me that I wanted to be a newspaper man too.

I started a newsletter called the *Northfields Gazette*, after the street in which we lived and persuaded my mother to be its 'printer' and manager and reproduce the copies she and I delivered to doubtless unappreciative neighbours, giving the latest on the local council's plans to tarmac our un-adopted private road and remove the barrier at its end, along with snippets on the growing of produce in the allotments on the other side of our street.

With the true arrogance and ignorance of childhood I promised my mother, who was a remarkably clever woman, that I would one day edit her favourite newspaper – then the great *Sunday Express*.

Nearly forty years or so later I did. Alas she was no longer alive but I think she would have looked down with pleasure that my promise had come to

pass and I always think how lucky I was to have been born to such a woman.

Our neighbours heard that I wanted to be a journalist and Mrs Keeble told me: 'Harold will help you.'

That was the second piece of luck. Harold certainly did – in more ways than one. The first time was when, at the age of sixteen, I went down to London to ask him for his advice on pursuing my chosen career. Ordered by his mother to see me he met me in the hall of the prestigious art-deco building in Fleet Street with its silver snakes winding up the steps to the lifts, its murals, its Epstein bust of Beaverbrook, and its forbidding black glass. The 'Black Lubyanka' was how it was known

I knew Harold had joined the local paper, the *Dewsbury Reporter*, straight from school as an apprentice and I wanted to know if that was the best route for me or if I should try to get to university. The masters at the Wheelwright Grammar School in Dewsbury – to which Harold had gone and where I was then – had suggested I might make Leeds university or, if I worked very hard, maybe Manchester.

'If you can get to Oxford or Cambridge,' Harold told me on my visit to London, 'you will make contacts there that will last you your life. If you can't, don't bother with the other places. Just get a job with the local paper and learn your trade as I did.'

It was some of the best advice I ever had. I returned to Dewsbury and the Wheelwright

Grammar School determined to go to Oxford. The headmaster was dismissive of my ambition and the school declined to help. They thought I had no chance and it had been several years since any pupil from my school had got to Oxbridge.

I researched the matter myself and found that the Oxford colleges ran entrance exams, one set for each cluster of two or three colleges. These exams did not need your school to enter you for them. I discovered I could apply myself. I put in for three separate clusters and spent some very nervous but exciting days staying down in Oxford and doing my best.

Eventually two colleges – Hertford and Wadham -- offered me a place. I chose Wadham because its then Warden was the prominent classics scholar and wit Sir Maurice Bowra. I think in retrospect that the college was eager to leaven the usual public schoolboy entrants with a few lads from grammar schools to show how democratic they were. If that was so I, a green and callow youth from the West Riding of Yorkshire, was the beneficiary.

I had not been at Oxford for many weeks when I fell in with some fellow students who had decided that Oxford needed a university newspaper. Astonishingly, although Cambridge had *Varsity*, Oxford had no newspaper, only student magazines. So this group, Clive Labovitch, Michael Heseltine and Earl White, bought a small literary magazine called *Cherwell* and re-launched it as a newspaper. I was its first news editor and its first editor was an undergraduate from Brasenose College called Mike

Pike, who later had a distinguished career in the Foreign Office, was knighted and became Her Majesty's Ambassador to Vietnam.

Clive and Earl were given some very sound advice on the distribution of *Cherwell* by a young Australian undergraduate called Rupert Murdoch but he had to return home as his father had died that year. Rupert was succeeded as our circulation man by John Heyman who went on to become Elizabeth Taylor's agent and whose favourite warm-up party trick was to open the metal crown stoppers of beer bottles between his teeth.

My first challenge when I was made editor was to repulse the invasion of Cambridge's newspaper *Varsity* with its 'Oxford edition'. *Varsity* was edited then by Michael Winner, who became the successful film maker and controversial food critic. We simply printed a Cambridge edition and rushed it over to the Other Place.

Like the two freebies in London fifty years later we came to the joint conclusion that the competition was too expensive to last.

Luck again played its part in my first story to hit the nationals. Several fire engines came steaming past College, sirens blaring, and I jumped on my bike and followed them. The Clarendon Laboratory was on fire. As this was where the early research on splitting the atom was carried out and there were fears of radio activity I found the nearest telephone box, inserted my four copper pennies and dictated the story to most of the major newspapers.