

W. T. Stead: Nonconformist and Newspaper Prophet. By Stewart J. Brown. Oxford University Press, 2019. 256 Pages. \$40.00 cloth; ebook available.

Considering his quite remarkable life, including an enormous influence on modern journalism, a widespread celebrity-like reputation in his native England, relationships with many of the most prominent figures of his time across a broad range of fields, and the controversy that he stirred throughout a long public career, it's quite surprising that W. T. Stead (1849–1912) is relatively unknown in America. Admirers of Stead might want to soften this observation by pointing out that there is a monument to him in Central Park in New York City. Stewart Brown's biography of Stead, written as part of the *Spiritual Lives* series published by Oxford University Press, should make a significant contribution to raising the level of Stead's profile in the United States.

Brown offers a fairly straightforward, detailed, objective, chronological account of Stead's eventful and often controversy-ridden life. Stead saw his role as a journalist in prophetic terms that derived from his nonconformist Protestant background. As such, he brought a religious reformer's zeal to all of the issues that he engaged with, and he engaged in many as he seemingly jumped from one crusade to another during the course of a career that spanned four decades.

At various stages in his life, always in his role as an activist journalist, Stead carried out a series of journalistic crusades, often bringing widespread public recognition, sometimes in terms of praise and occasionally in terms of ridicule. Brown documents, in careful detail and with ample references, Stead's campaigns to address the issues of child prostitution, persecution of Bulgarian Christians, urban poverty, the Irish independence movement, Theosophy, Spiritualism, and world peace—to name only a few of the issues that Stead pursued with an aggressive and advocacy-oriented form of journalism that, at least on a national scale, was fairly new to the British public. In the course of his crusades, Stead encountered many notable figures of his time, including the likes of Leo Tolstoy, General Charles Gordon, Annie Besant, Arthur Conan Doyle, William Randolph Hearst, and many leading political figures.

Given the fullness of Stead's professional life, there is indeed much to cover in a short biography, and Brown does so in a clear, organized style with ample attention to detail, while at the same time not losing sight of the overarching theme behind Stead's career, namely his self-conscious sense of being called to a divine mission to improve the human race.

As a biography, Brown has produced a comprehensive and readable account of a complex and multi-faceted life which, one might argue, deserves to be known on a much wider scale. What's missing however, is a sense of who the human being was behind this frenetic activity. The *what* of Stead's life, in terms of public activity, is carefully documented, but some readers may be disappointed at the lack of attention paid to

the person *behind* this activity. Relatively little consideration is given to Stead's personal life other than recounting factual information, and there is no attempt to explore the inner world of what must have been a fascinating and complicated psyche. Just as some biographies go too far in venturing into the territory of purely speculative psychoanalytic musings that are little more than best guesses disguised as penetrating psychological insights, Brown's portrait of Stead seems to go into the opposite direction, shying away from any effort to explain the inner workings of this remarkably complex character. Brown also refrains from offering much in the way of an assessment of the impact of this remarkable figure—how he was perceived by contemporaries, how the perception of Stead changed over the years, and what, if any, has been his lasting impact on journalism.

Each of these concerns is illustrated by the rather abrupt ending of the book. After devoting much attention to detailed accounts of Stead's various journalistic projects, Brown covers his death—as a passenger on the *Titanic*—in a single paragraph, the final paragraph of the book. Surely the end of such a full and eventful life, including its impact on family, friends, the field of journalism, and the nation as a whole, merits greater consideration than it is afforded here. That shortcoming notwithstanding, *W. T. Stead* is nonetheless a welcome contribution toward increasing the public profile of a remarkable figure in British journalism.

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The King of Confidence: A Tale of Utopian Dreamers, Frontier Schemers, True Believers, False Prophets, and the Murder of an American Monarch. By Miles Harvey. Little, Brown and Company, 2020. 416 pages. \$29.00 cloth; ebook available.

Miles Harvey's *The King of Confidence* is a retelling of the life and times of James Jesse Strang (1813–1856) and his self-proclaimed Mormon kingdom on an island in the middle of Lake Michigan during the nineteenth century. Strang was one of several claimants to the mantle of Joseph Smith Jr., founder of the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-Day Saints, in the wake of the prophet's murder in 1844. Strang, an immensely ambitious character, apparently had little exposure to Mormonism before his visit to Nauvoo, Illinois, shortly before Smith's demise. However, by dint of his charisma and a suspiciously timely letter from the prophet himself naming him successor, Strang managed to convince a small group of Mormons to follow him, first to Voree, Wisconsin, and then to the isolation of Beaver Island. Along the way, Strang bolstered his prophetic credentials by locating his own set of