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“Famished for News Pictures”: Mason Jackson, The *Illustrated London News* and the Pictorial Spirit

Jennifer Tucker

The origins of pictorial journalism are frequently traced to the 1880s and 1890s, years of fundamental photographic and printing innovations and the rise of “New Journalism.” But for contemporary observers, the late nineteenth century was not the beginning of the era, but, instead, the high watermark of three hundred years of progress in the art of news pictures: a process that began with illustrated broadsheets and culminated with the birth, in 1842, of the world’s first illustrated weekly newspaper, the *Illustrated London News*.¹

The founder of the *Illustrated London News*, Herbert Ingram (1811–60), was a news vendor in the East Midlands who, after noticing that more copies of the *Observer* and *Weekly Chronicle* sold when they contained engravings, decided to start a paper whose “chief attraction” was “its pictures.”² The *Illustrated London News* rapidly gained a large mass readership relative to many other British papers but, perhaps even more significantly, altered the way news was defined and consumed. By the 1890s illustrated newspapers were established in many countries: at least five in Paris, one in St. Petersburg, six in New York, three in Australia, two in Warsaw, one in Mexico, one in Rio de Janeiro, and two in Montreal.

Few participants in the forces rapidly transforming the late-Victorian news picture business spoke with more knowledge about the changes of “pictorial journalism” in England than the engraver whose ideas are the subject of this essay: the artist, editor, and journalist, Mason Jackson (1819–1903). From 1860 to 1890, Jackson, a wood engraver by training, held the prestigious position of second art editor of the *Illustrated London News*.³

In 1885 Jackson wrote and published a book, *The Pictorial Press: Its Origin and Progress*, an illustrated history of the intellectual origins and development of modern pictorial journalism from the English Civil War to the *Illustrated London News*. Contained within its pages were reproductions of more than 150 historical news pictures from private libraries and print collections. *The Pictorial Press* remains a unique historical source about the practice and theories of news pictures in the nineteenth century. This essay considers Jackson’s ideas in the light of historical understandings about the complex relations

between fine art, popular journalism, historical narrative, and visual display in the world that the Victorians made, showing how Jackson believed that illustrated news was about activating a meaningful history: not just delivering news pictures to the public to satisfy their transient curiosity, but, instead, catering to a primal impulse that Jackson referred to frequently in his writings as a “Pictorial Taste Universal.”⁴

By the time his book was published, Jackson had served as art editor of the *ILN* for nearly a quarter century, having participated—both as a contributing artist and as an editor—in its rapid rise to the position of the world’s leading purveyor of news pictures.⁵ “When the history of our own age comes to be written,” Jackson predicted, “the pictorial newspapers will form an inexhaustible storehouse for the historian.” As Jackson noted, the preface to the first volume of the *Illustrated London News* spoke to the value and interest of the work to future historians: “What would Sir Walter Scott or any of the great writers of modern times have given—whether for the purposes of fiction or history, or political example of disquisition—for any museum-preserved volume such as we have here enshrined?”

The life of the times—the signs of its taste and intelligence—its public monuments and public men—its festivals—institutions—amusements—discoveries . . . what *must* be all these but treasures of truth, that would have lain hidden in Time’s tomb . . . but for the enduring and resuscitating powers of art.⁶

Jackson traced a historical passage from the era of rough woodcuts to the sophistication of wood engraved news images. Long before the initiation of regular newspapers in England, there existed small tracts, irregularly published—some adorned with engravings on the title pages. Although drawings sometimes were made depicting battles and sieges, these early news illustrations tended, he noted, to be either “works of pure imagination” or woodcuts that were re-used multiple times to depict different events.⁷ An exception to the general practice of using woodcuts was a pamphlet containing eight pages of illustrations, all etched on copper, representing the execution for treason of the Earl of Stafford in 1641.⁸ Revising the widespread contemporary dating of the time that the first caricatures had appeared to the eighteenth century, he retorted that caricatures were of “frequent occurrence” during the English Civil War, adding that graphic satire rose dramatically around this time, especially in relation to religious matters.⁹ *Mercurius Civicus*, founded in 1643, and “therefore entitled to be ranked as the first illustrated newspaper,” frequently reproduced illustrations: mostly wood engraved portraits although, he noted that, reflecting contemporary artistic practice, “sometimes the same woodcut is used to represent more than one person.”¹⁰

Miscellany characterized the emerging news picture genre. Popular topics included shipwrecks, murders, a “great fire—a remarkable murder—a fatal balloon ascent”—events that were “unusual or interesting: these were the subjects seized upon at the moment” to gratify the appetite for visual immediacy in journalism. Wars continued to be a staple subject: “the food on which picture newspapers thrive best has been abundantly supplied.”¹¹

Yet, despite the evident powerful “public craving” or “appetite” for news pictures, Jackson noted that illustrated journalism took a long time to manifest itself in the early seventeenth century.¹² It was sixteen years after the founding of the *Weekly News* in 1622, for example, that it published its first copper engraving in 1638 (of a fire on an island). During the Restoration, several illustrated broadsides of news were published, including a copper-plate engraving purported to be the appearance of the Old Bailey Court at the trial of the Regicides in 1660, which paired two images, the execution of Charles I and of the regicides.¹³ But despite such examples, Jackson noted that very little pictorial journalism was done, even

less of which was regarded as “news.” Interested in how categories of genre were starting to evolve and be defined, he suggested that the pictorial content of early newspapers was more of a satirical and humorous kind, making it hard to tell whether what was reported was “truth or fiction.”¹⁴

Jackson’s history of pictorial journalism described how, while the numbers of periodical papers published in England rose rapidly after official censorship of newspapers ceased in 1695, the art of news pictures lagged: “The art of wood-engraving, the readiest and least expensive method of illustration, was now in the lowest possible condition.” For that reason, primarily, he said, “the newspapers at the end of the seventeenth century contain scarcely any illustrations.”¹⁵ Visible in a myriad of small visual acts—the insertion into a newspaper of a map of a place where a war was raged or of a diagram of a city plan, or of the use of copper engravings for “enlivening the pages of the early newspapers”—the idea of illustrating current events had “already taken root” long before the establishment of regular newspapers.¹⁶

According to Jackson, the *Grub Street Journal*, published during the 1730s, was the first historical example of a newspaper employing the expensive process of copper-plate engraving for semi-regular illustrations, and for printing the plate in the body of its pages.¹⁷ Subsequently, *The Daily Post*, launched in 1740, provided a further example of a *daily* paper attempting to illustrate current events. Jackson cited it as an example of “the tendency of newspapers, in times of excitement, to call on the artist’s pencil to aid the writer’s pen.”¹⁸ Inventorying famous firsts in the history of illustrated journalism (and drawing perhaps upon the motifs of chronologically organized picture albums), he then gave the example of “The view of Fort Fouras” [1758], published in *Owen’s Weekly Chronicle*, as “the earliest attempt I have seen in a newspaper to give a pictorial representation of a place in connexion with news.”¹⁹ “Naval and military officers in all parts of the world” were among the most valued correspondents of the modern illustrated newspapers,” he added, because they sometimes supplied newspapers (as they did their family and friends) with their eyewitness sketches.²⁰

Novel values were being crafted, along with the new images. Jackson especially credited the *Observer*, *Bell’s Life in London*, and the *Weekly Chronicle* as the first newspapers “to direct attention as being the main supporters of the pictorial spirit until it culminated in the *Illustrated London News*.”²¹ The *Observer* (which, in 1885, was the oldest existing weekly newspaper) was the first newspaper to use the restored art of wood engraving—“reawakening,” like a fairy tale, a “dormant idea.”²² Jackson especially credited the pioneering wood engraver and famous illustrator of natural history books, Thomas Bewick, for teaching the restored art to a new generation of engravers. This was especially true at the *Observer*. Already a model for other newspapers, with its rough woodcuts of the Cato Street Conspiracy (1820), and its lush engravings on a large scale of the 1821 coronation of King George IV, the *Observer* was “the pioneer of modern illustrated journalism.”²³ With its published engravings of balloon ascents, views of the new Houses of Parliament, and “repulsive” criminal records (a favorite subject), moreover, the *Weekly Chronicle*, first published in September 1836, established news pictures as a visual genre of tremendous miscellany.²⁴

All of this prepared the ground for the debut of the *ILN*. The *Illustrated London News* was recognized immediately as a “bold undertaking.” On 14 May 1842, in the first issue of the newspaper, readers were treated to the picture, “View of the Conflagration of the City of Hamburg,” a picture that was “historically significant,” stated Jackson, as “marking an epoch in the history of the Pictorial Press.”²⁵ The picture shows spectators watching the fire from the safety of the opposite shores, witnessing events from a safe distance—much in fact like news readers, who were positioned to view the prints of topical news in far away places. The attempted assassination of Queen Victoria was the most important “news of the hour” covered by the *ILN* that summer.²⁶

The *ILN* differed from previous publications that had featured illustrations. With sixteen pages covered with thirty-two woodcuts, large and small, accompanying forty-eight columns of news, it was unlike anything readers had ever encountered before. As historian Brian Maidment has noted, the *ILN* introduced many innovations in periodical illustration, making the wood engraving “larger, more highly finished, and more profuse than any previous publication.”²⁷ Noting how the images “writhe” about the page (“shape shifting” and “bullying” the text), Maidment calls attention to the centrality of the pictures as *news*. Expensive, but priced at a point that many among the wealthier middle classes could still afford, by 1863 the magazine was selling 300,000 per week. (For the marriage of Prince of Wales, an unprecedented 930,000 copies of the paper were sold.)²⁸ The character of subjects depicted was multifarious: illustrations of police reports mingled with images of the ballet, a public dinner, a horserace, a boat launch, sketches of Chartist riots, and a new series of “Parliamentary Portraits,” of Disraeli and other politicians.²⁹ As Julia Munro shows, from the outset there were ties between the *ILN* and the development of photography. In just the third issue of the periodical, 28 May 1842, for example, the *Illustrated London News* published reactions from other periodicals to *ILN*’s large-scale engraving of the London cityscape, based on a series of daguerreotypes by Antoine Claudet.³⁰

Jackson remarked that the “London citizen” might drink coffee and read about “what is happening on every side of the inhabited earth.”³¹ However, this rapid gathering of information from around the globe, made possible by the telegraph, put the pictorial press at a disadvantage, because by the time a picture was made, the subject was no longer fresh. The pictorial press, Jackson noted, would suffer from this disadvantage until some method was invented of sending pictures by electricity—for “by the time it can publish sketches of interesting events in far distant countries the freshness of the news is gone, and the public mind is occupied with later occurrences.” “Until some method is invented of sending sketches by electricity,” he added, “the pictorial press must endure this disadvantage, but in the meantime it spares no pains to overtake the march of events.”³²

This production of “a modern pictorial newspaper,” as it came to be described, was accomplished by a reorganization of labor and capital on a large scale.³³ The *ILN*’s headquarters at 198 Strand was a large, open space where literary and artistic aspirants came to test their ideas before the editor.³⁴ The large and diverse staff of the *ILN* included, for example, paper makers, ink makers, wood draughtsmen, engravers, electrotypers, roller makers, machine men, and warehousemen.

An invention that, for excitement, rivaled other innovations in periodical illustration was that of the “special artist”, who was depicted in several engravings published in the *ILN* over the years, shown risking life and limb in order to “overtake the march of events.”³⁵ Fulfilling a role said to have commenced with the Crimean War, the special artists had a rapid way of working to make the sketch, using what Jackson described as a kind of “pictorial shorthand.”³⁶ Special artists were active: “Now he is up in a balloon, now down in a coal-mine; now shooting tigers in India, now deer-stalking in the Highlands.”³⁷ One artist wrote a letter to Jackson detailing how he had rolled his sketches into pills to disguise them. Jackson told the story of a French correspondent of the *ILN* who supplied sketches to the *ILN* during the Prussian siege of Paris by photographing sketches and sending them by balloon outside the city to London.³⁸

With the next two figures, Jackson gave the example of the adaptation of a rapid sketch in the engraving of the surrender of Sedan, published in the *ILN* on 17 September 1870. While both sketches depict the surrender, they reveal characteristically different stages and values of visual documentation in the field: the sketch and the finished engraving. The sketch, reproduced in Fig. 2.15a, was probably taken “under fire.”³⁹ The dynamism of the scene—cannonball projectiles, explosions, a soldier waving a

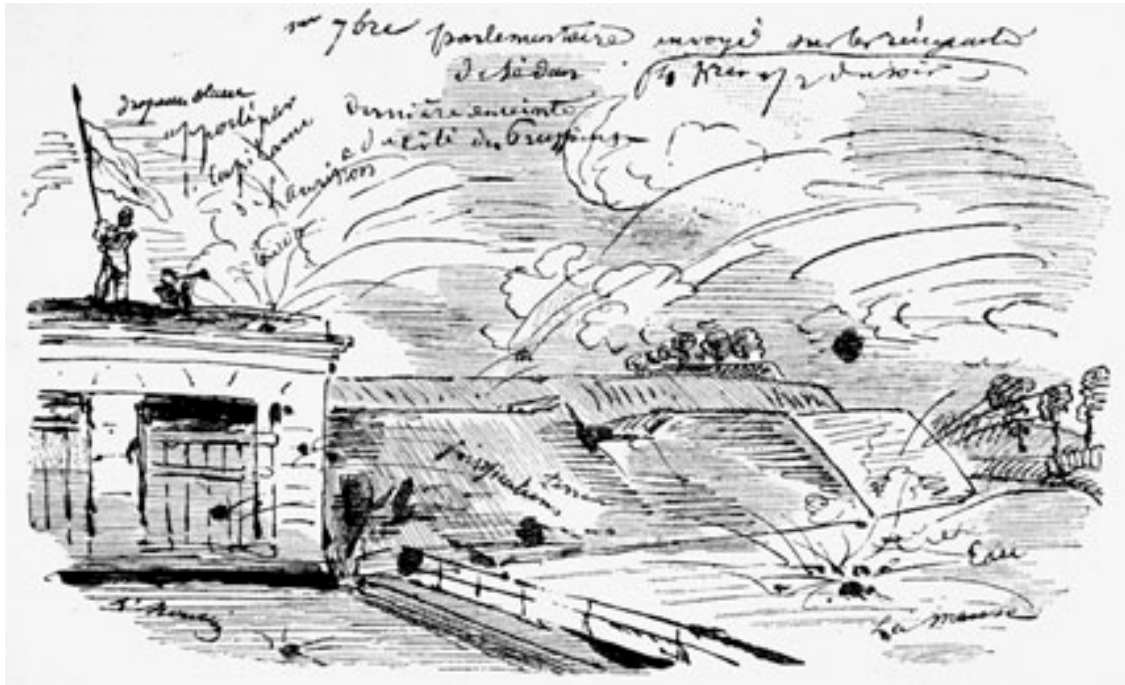


Figure 2.15a Facsimile of a rapid sketch of surrender of Sedan, around 2 September 1870, by a French “special artist” during the Franco-Prussian War when French emperor, Napoleon III, was taken prisoner with 100,000 of his troops. The sketch, Jackson noted, was probably “taken under fire.” From Mason Jackson, *The Pictorial Press: Its Origin and Progress* (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1885), p. 320.

flag of surrender atop a building, a trumpeter—is captured in the rapid rough sketch, as field notes annotate the physical and human landscape. Like the copy of the engraving beside it, the sketch appears to have been signed, though the name is illegible. For the engraving based on the artist’s sketch (Fig. 2.15b), the engraver took as the “cream or heart of the sketch” an officer waving a white flag over the gate of Sedan attended by a trumpeter, while the rest of the sketch (“comparatively unimportant”) was left out. Unlike in the sketch, the engraving focuses the energy of the scene in the figure of the soldier in the center, waving a flag whose motion and color reinforces transit of white clouds in the background.

Jackson wrote, of this image, that he published it in order to “show the reader the way in which hurried sketches are sometimes adapted to the purposes of a newspaper without at all impairing their original truth”—in this case, presumably, the documentation of defeat.⁴⁰ But the example is more interesting in showing Jackson’s efforts to demonstrate how visual *evidence* was constructed. Despite the prevalence of war as a subject for news pictures, Jackson noted that unprecedented sales of the newspaper throughout the “peaceful display” of the Great Exhibition of 1851 at Crystal Palace showed the world that the “arts of peace” were “more attractive than the excitement of war.”⁴¹ But whatever the subject, for Jackson and many of his peers in the illustrated news business, news pictures had become “as necessary to our daily life as bread itself.”⁴²



Figure 2.15b “The War: The Surrender of Sedan,” published on front cover of *Illustrated London News*, 17 September 1870, p. 285, for story entitled, “Illustrations of the War.” The fact that the sketch had been “rapidly engraved,” wrote Jackson, did not impair its “original truth.” From Mason Jackson, *The Pictorial Press: Its Origin and Progress* (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1885), p. 320.

In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Jürgen Habermas was “severely negative” about the type of discourse enabled by modern capitalism and media, and argued that the expanded public sphere lost its critical quality as “[t]he techniques of the cartoon, news picture, and human-interest story” developed and rendered citizens as spectators and consumers.⁴³ Today, the value of news images as knowledge is often called in question. For Jackson and many of his contemporaries during the nineteenth century, however, a different theory of news picture prevailed. For him, the illustrated news was the product of the “working of an impulse or instinct which existed even before the days of newspapers.”⁴⁴ This “pictorial spirit” was an independent, active force or agent, operating through but also outside of history. His claim was that “the pictures speak a universal language,” and that no teaching was necessary.⁴⁵ He described “pictorial spirit” as a trans-historical force that he argued was seen both in prehistoric times, and in childhood experience of delight in picture-books. For Jackson and other news picture artists and editors, the “love of pictures” was an important and widely overlooked agent not only of historical change, but also “as an exponent of public opinion.” The printing press, on this reading, did not usher in the love of pictures; it gave it a “wide field for development.”⁴⁶ His story about the “public appetite” for news, particularly illustrated news, helps us understand how, through news pictures, papers became the “food of conversation.”⁴⁷

Notes

- 1 For history of the *Illustrated London News*, see esp. Christopher Hibbert, *The Illustrated London News’ Social History of Victorian Britain* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1975); Graham Law, *Indexes to Fiction in The Illustrated London News (1842–1901) and the Graphic, (1869–1901)*, Victorian Fiction Research Unit, University of Queensland, 2001; Peter Sinnema, *Dynamics of the Pictured Page: Representing the Nation in The Illustrated London News* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1998); and Patrick Leary, “A Brief History of the *Illustrated London News*,” <http://gale.cengage.co.uk/images/PatrickLeary.pdf>.
- 2 Mason Jackson, *The Pictorial Press: Its Origin and Progress* (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1885): 284.
- 3 By 1836, Jackson was well enough trained that he helped with the engraving of Richard Seymour’s design for the monthly parts of *Pickwick Papers*. For more on Jackson and the *Illustrated London News*, see esp. Tim Barringer, *Men at Work: Art and Labour in Victorian Britain* (Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, 2005)
- 4 Mason Jackson, *The Pictorial Press*: 1
- 5 Mason Jackson, *The Pictorial Press*: 302.
- 6 Mason Jackson, *The Pictorial Press*: 296–7.
- 7 Mason Jackson, *The Pictorial Press*: 43.
- 8 Mason Jackson, *The Pictorial Press*: 53.
- 9 Mason Jackson, *The Pictorial Press*: 64–9.
- 10 Mason Jackson, *The Pictorial Press*: 121.
- 11 Quoted in Mason Jackson, *The Pictorial Press*: 176, 304. For more on the emergent genre of news pictures, see Brian Maidment, *Reading Popular Prints, 1790–1870* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996).
- 12 Mason Jackson, *The Pictorial Press*: 7.
- 13 Mason Jackson, *The Pictorial Press*: 165.
- 14 Mason Jackson, *The Pictorial Press*: 173.
- 15 Mason Jackson, *The Pictorial Press*: 179.
- 16 Mason Jackson, *The Pictorial Press*: 6.

- 17 Mason Jackson, *The Pictorial Press*: 194.
- 18 Mason Jackson, *The Pictorial Press*: 196.
- 19 Mason Jackson, *The Pictorial Press*: 205.
- 20 Mason Jackson, *The Pictorial Press*: 205. An example of a penny paper doing the same thing at the same time was the *Penny London Post*, which in 1748–9 gave an engraving about a fireworks display.
- 21 Mason Jackson, *The Pictorial Press*: 225.
- 22 Mason Jackson, *The Pictorial Press*: 220.
- 23 Mason Jackson, *The Pictorial Press*: 219.
- 24 “Certainly nothing more repulsive ever figured in the pages of an illustrated newspaper than some of the woodcuts published by the *Weekly Chronicle*.” Quoted in Mason Jackson, *The Pictorial Press*: 264.
- 25 Mason Jackson, *The Pictorial Press*: 286.
- 26 Mason Jackson, *The Pictorial Press*: 293.
- 27 Brian Maidment, “Representing the Victorians—Illustration and the *ILN*.” <http://gale.cengage.co.uk/images/BrianMaidment1.pdf> (accessed 7 January 2014).
- 28 Mason Jackson, *The Pictorial Press*: 305.
- 29 A few illustrated police reports were to have formed “part of the attractions of the paper,” but evidently selected with a “view to provoke merriment rather than to indulge a morbid taste for criminal records” (287–8).
- 30 Julia F. Munro, “The *ILN* and Photography.” <http://www.gale.cengage.co.uk/iln>
- 31 Mason Jackson, *The Pictorial Press*: 326.
- 32 Mason Jackson, *The Pictorial Press*: 327–8.
- 33 Mason Jackson, *The Pictorial Press*: 315.
- 34 Mason Jackson, *The Pictorial Press*: 305.
- 35 Mason Jackson, *The Pictorial Press*: 354.
- 36 Mason Jackson, *The Pictorial Press*: 317, 330–8.
- 37 Mason Jackson, *The Pictorial Press*: 328.
- 38 Mason Jackson, *The Pictorial Press*: 338.
- 39 Mason Jackson, *The Pictorial Press*: 320.
- 40 Mason Jackson, *The Pictorial Press*: 320.
- 41 Mason Jackson, *The Pictorial Press*: 303.
- 42 Mason Jackson, *The Pictorial Press*: 2.
- 43 David Lemmings, ed. *Crime, Courtrooms and the Public Sphere in Britain, 1700–1850* (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2012): 18.
- 44 Mason Jackson, *The Pictorial Press*: 5.
- 45 Mason Jackson, *The Pictorial Press*: 1.
- 46 Mason Jackson, *The Pictorial Press*: 1.
- 47 Mason Jackson, *The Pictorial Press*: 5.