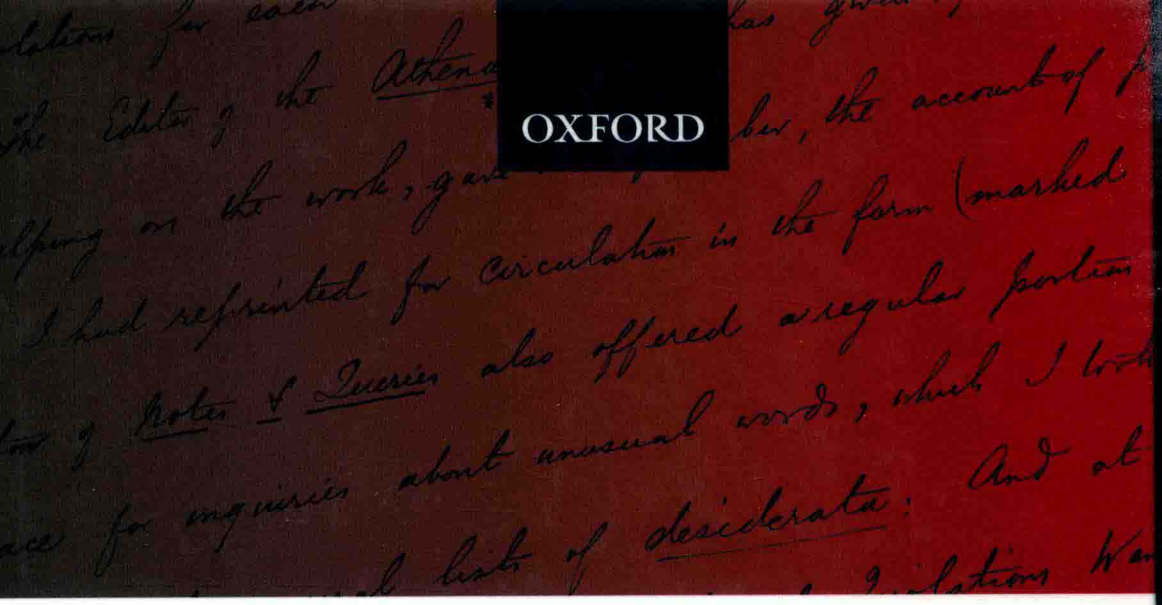
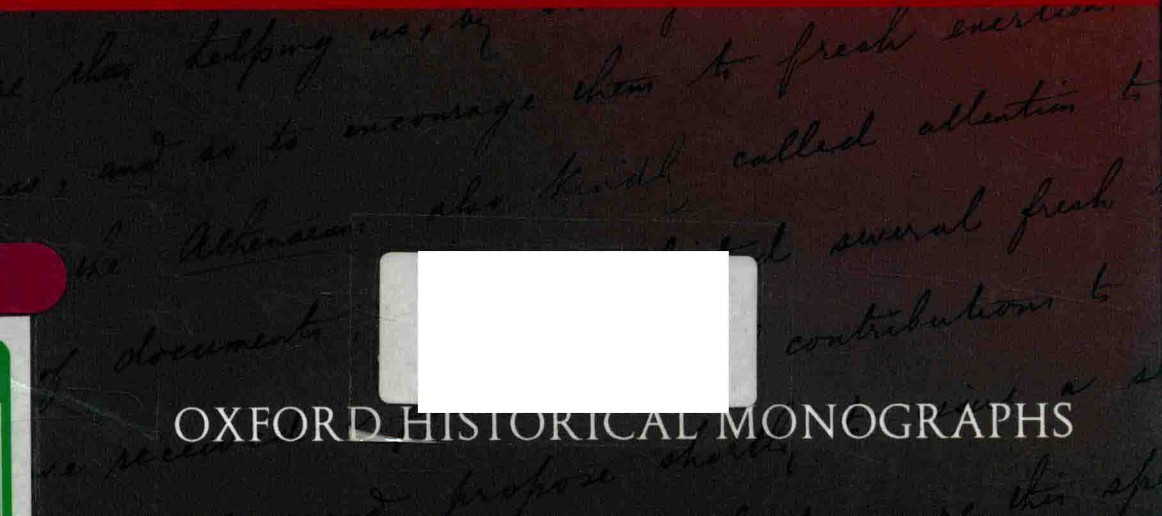


OXFORD

GENDER, MODERNITY, AND THE POPULAR PRESS IN INTER-WAR BRITAIN

ADRIAN BINGHAM



OXFORD HISTORICAL MONOGRAPHS

Gender, Modernity, and the Popular Press in Inter-War Britain

ADRIAN BINGHAM

CLARENDON PRESS · OXFORD

This book has been printed digitally and produced in a standard specification in order to ensure its continuing availability

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Great Clarendon Street, Oxford OX2 6DP

Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford.
It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship,
and education by publishing worldwide in

Oxford New York

Auckland Cape Town Dar es Salaam Hong Kong Karachi
Kuala Lumpur Madrid Melbourne Mexico City Nairobi
New Delhi Shanghai Taipei Toronto

With offices in

Argentina Austria Brazil Chile Czech Republic France Greece
Guatemala Hungary Italy Japan South Korea Poland Portugal
Singapore Switzerland Thailand Turkey Ukraine Vietnam

Oxford is a registered trade mark of Oxford University Press
in the UK and in certain other countries

Published in the United States
by Oxford University Press Inc., New York

Reprinted 2007

ISBN 978-0-19-927247-1

OXFORD HISTORICAL MONOGRAPHS

EDITORS

In memory of A. H. Dean

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank first and foremost my D.Phil. supervisor and Advising Editor, Janet Howarth. Her unfailing encouragement and perceptive advice have been of vital assistance throughout the period of researching and writing this book. She has read through countless draft chapters, and has always helped me to clarify my ideas and sharpen my arguments.

I would also like to thank my examiners, Pat Thane and John Davis, for their constructive comments on the thesis on which this book is based. I subsequently joined Pat at the Centre for Contemporary British History, and she has continued to offer me invaluable guidance. Philip Waller, Ross McKibbin, Jose Harris, John Stevenson, and Lesley Hall have also made useful suggestions on various parts of this book. I am very grateful to my family for always being interested in my work, and to Stephen Lucking for his generosity during my time in London. Jane and Jon Legg, Andre Katz, Rachel Mackie, Steve Dilley, Rhian Roberts, Graham Knight, Peter Smith, and Ellen Hughes have all helped far more than they probably realize, while Felicity Hay's love and support have ensured my happiness throughout the years spent on this project.

The publication of this book has been assisted by grants from the Scouloudi Foundation in association with the Institute of Historical Research, and the Isobel Thornley Bequest Fund to the University of London. I would also like to express my gratitude to the Arts and Humanities Research Board, the Leverhulme Trust, and the British Academy for funding my research.

I would like to thank the British Library, Atlantic Syndication (acting for Associated Newspapers), News International, Express Newspapers, Mirror Newspapers, and Harvey Nichols for permission to reproduce those images for which they hold the copyright. The illustrations were supplied by the British Library Newspaper Library at Colindale, and the Centre for Cartoons and Caricature, University of Kent, Canterbury.

This book is dedicated to my grandad, A. H. Dean.

A.B.

London
January 2004

CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

Introduction

> A new chapter of the world's history is beginning. It is for us to write it and we can write only the thoughts we have within us, draw only the figure and image of ourselves.
>
> (*Daily Mirror*, editorial, 12 November 1918)

It is a platitude for journalists to claim that they write the first draft of history. Yet when it comes to preparing later drafts, historians have, in fact, generally been reluctant to examine the press for insights into the past. This book seeks to demonstrate the value of popular newspapers as a historical source by using them to explore the attitudes and identities of inter-war Britain, and in particular the reshaping of femininity and masculinity. The two decades after the Armistice of November 1918 were of major significance in the making of twentieth-century gender identities, as women and men came to terms with the upheavals of the Great War, the arrival of democracy, and rapid social change. These were also the years during which national daily newspapers became part of everyday life, read by a majority of the population. What follows is an analysis of how popular newspapers, in the process of reporting on this post-war world, discussed and debated male and female behaviour and contributed to the evolution of ideas of gender.

Historical and Historiographical Context

The events of the First World War posed a conspicuous challenge to conventional views about male and female roles in society. With men transferring to the front lines in their thousands after August 1914, many women were presented with unprecedented responsibilities and opportunities, and those who moved into previously 'male' spheres in factories and offices on the home front, or joined the newly formed women's military services, received considerable publicity. Their wartime efforts provided an unforgettable testimony to female abilities and powerfully reinforced the arguments of those seeking to improve the position of women. Certain concessions were made before the end of the

conflict: in February 1918 most women over 30 were granted the vote, and thus the long campaign for citizenship was finally rewarded. This enfranchisement, and the opening up of some professions and public positions in 1919, further punctured the already leaky doctrine of 'separate spheres', which suggested that women should be concerned above all with home and family: now it was no longer possible to deny women's interests in politics and public life. But it was not only notions of femininity that were challenged by the war. Those ideals of honour, glory, and patriotism that were so important to pre-war conceptions of manliness were also severely tested by the bloodshed of the trenches. The sheer scale of human suffering and waste in a slow-moving war of attrition went far beyond anything described in the boys' adventure stories of the valiant British empire-builders. The manly 'stiff upper lip' was woefully inadequate amidst the unparalleled horrors and brutalities of modern warfare. Whereas women had surpassed conventional femininity, many men discovered how difficult it was to live up to the heroic masculinity described in imperial histories and fiction.

If the war offered the most obvious challenge to established notions of gender, there were also several social, cultural, and economic trends that were making a more subtle, but no less significant, impact on relations between the sexes in this period. These include, in no particular order of importance, the stagnation of the staple export industries and the emergence of mass, structural unemployment; the maturing of the 'consumer society', in the form of a major expansion in branded goods for personal or family consumption, and an associated massive increase in branded advertising; rapid suburbanization and the extension of home ownership; the growth of the leisure and entertainment 'industries', and the rise in particular of cinema, radio, and mass sport; and intellectual shifts in the understanding of personal and sexual character, especially the popularization of psychoanalysis and sexology. All of these developments influenced, in their own ways, social values and gender roles; together, they combined to produce a recognizably 'modern' society in which many of the central features of the twentieth century were present.[1] The fact that this

[1] Ever since Paul Fussell argued in 1975 that the events of the Great War were responsible for the diffusion of a 'modern', ironic, 'form of understanding', there has been an ongoing debate about the 'modernity' of this period: P. Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975); for a contrary view, see J. Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). In recent years, historians of Britain have examined a broad range of 'discourses of modernity': see M. Daunton and B. Reiger (eds.), *Meanings of Modernity: Britain from the Late-Victorian Era to World War II* (Oxford: Berg, 2001), and for the later period, B. Conekin, F. Mort, and C. Waters (eds.), *Moments of Modernity: Reconstructing Britain, 1945–1964* (London: Rivers Oram Press, 1999). As Daunton and Reiger point out, scholars have used the terms 'modern' and 'modernity' in a wide variety of contexts with different meanings, and there is no generally accepted definition of either. The most

period is often regarded as one of relative retreat by the feminist movement should not be allowed to overshadow its importance in the evolution of femininity and masculinity.

The popular national daily press provides an excellent means of obtaining some insight into the way these changes affected gender identities. Daily newspapers were one of the most successful products of the inter-war period: circulation doubled in the twenty years after 1918, and by 1939 some two-thirds of the population regularly saw a daily paper.[2] They were no longer regarded as 'luxuries': when calculating a budget suitable to cover the 'necessaries of a healthy life' in 1936, Joseph Rowntree included a weekly allowance of seven pence to buy newspapers.[3] Now that the pre-eminence of the provincial press had been broken, and with radio broadcasting in its infancy for most of the period (television was still in its experimental stages), the national daily newspaper was perhaps the most important channel of information about contemporary life. Publicists certainly regarded the daily newspaper as 'a more powerful medium of advertisement than any other', while the research organization Political and Economic Planning (PEP) declared the press to be 'the principal agenda-making body for the everyday conversation of the ordinary man and woman about public affairs'.[4]

Constantly striving to maximize circulation, editors and journalists developed a template for the popular newspaper from which there has been little substantial deviation since. The popular paper of the late 1930s arguably looks closer to the paper of today than it did to that of 1914. While on one level manufacturing an ephemeral, daily publication, in a deeper sense these Fleet Street journalists were forging a long-lasting cultural product. At the same time, the leading newspaper proprietors, the so-called 'press barons', such as Lords Northcliffe, Rothermere, and Beaverbrook, had a higher profile than ever before or since, and unashamedly involved themselves in political

productive approach, therefore, is to investigate what contemporaries themselves understood by modernity 'through close readings within specific locales and venues' (Daunton and Reiger (eds.), *Meanings of Modernity*, Introduction, 3–4). That is the approach taken in this book.

[2] Major G. Harrison, with F. C. Mitchell and M. A. Abrams, *The Home Market* (London: G. Allen & Unwin, 1939), ch. 21; A. P. Wadsworth, 'Newspaper Circulations 1800–1954', *Transactions of the Manchester Statistical Society*, Session 1954–5 (1955); R. Williams, *The Long Revolution* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965), 195–236; C. Seymour-Ure, 'The Press and the Party System between the Wars', in G. Peele and C. Cook (eds.), *The Politics of Reappraisal* (London: Macmillan, 1975), 233–9; T. Jeffery and K. McClelland, 'A World Fit to Live In: The *Daily Mail* and the Middle Classes 1918–39', in J. Curran, A. Smith, and P. Wingate (eds.), *Impacts and Influences: Essays on Media Power in the Twentieth Century* (London: Methuen, 1987), 28–39.

[3] A. Davies, *Leisure, Gender and Poverty: Working-Class Culture in Salford and Manchester* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1992), 26.

[4] G. Russell, *Advertisement Writing* (London: Ernest Benn, 1927), 67; Political and Economic Planning (PEP), *Report on the British Press* (London, 1938), 33.

intrigue. Even if their claims of power and influence seem exaggerated in retrospect, few contemporaries thought so. In March 1931 Stanley Baldwin had to deliver one of his most famous speeches—accusing Beaverbrook and Rothermere of seeking 'power without responsibility—the prerogative of the harlot throughout the ages'—to derail the press-led Empire Free Trade campaign that threatened his leadership of the Conservative Party.[5] And while ministers worried about the political impact of popular newspapers, literary critics and social commentators debated their cultural repercussions. The national daily newspaper, with its circulation now counted in millions rather than thousands, came to symbolize the new 'mass society' and all that it brought in its wake. Understanding its significance seemed to be an urgent cultural imperative, and observers as diverse as the Leavises, Aldous Huxley, George Orwell, and Evelyn Waugh contributed to the discussions on the subject.[6] But the 'golden age' of the press would not last for much longer after 1939. Although circulations continued to rise for another decade, newsprint restrictions soon severely reduced the size of newspapers; in the longer term, radio and television combined gradually to weaken the hold of the press.

Despite the importance of the popular press, however, gender historians have made relatively little use of it in their studies of inter-war culture.[7] This is all the more surprising considering the impressive amount of work on other cultural forms in this period. Women's magazines, popular literature, films, and medical texts have all received a considerable amount of attention, as have party literature, feminist periodicals, and political rhetoric.[8] These studies are

[5] K. Middlemiss and J. Barnes, *Baldwin: A Biography* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1969), 600.

[6] K. Williams, *British Writers and the Media 1930–45* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996), esp. 48–61.

[7] Alison Light noted in 1991 the need for a gendered analysis of the inter-war newspaper, and this gap has yet to be filled: A. Light, *Forever England: Feminism, Literature and Conservatism between the Wars* (London: Routledge, 1991), 246 n. 19.

[8] On women's magazines, see C. White, *Women's Magazines 1693–1968* (London: Michael Joseph, 1970); R. Ballaster, M. Beetham, E. Frazer, and S. Hebron, *Women's Worlds: Ideology, Femininity and the Woman's Magazine* (London: Macmillan, 1991); M. Beetham, *A Magazine of her Own? Domesticity and Desire in the Woman's Magazine 1800–1914* (London: Routledge, 1996); J. Greenfield and C. Reid, 'Women's Magazines and the Commercial Orchestration of Femininity in the 1930s: Evidence from *Woman's Own*', *Media History*, 4/2 (1998), 161–74; on popular literature, see N. Beauman, *A Very Great Profession: The Woman's Novel 1914–39* (London: Virago, 1983); B. Melman, *Women and the Popular Imagination in the Twenties: Flappers and Nymphs* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988); Light, *Forever England*. On films, see M. Rosen, *Popcorn Venus: Women, Movies and the American Dream* (New York: Coward, McCann & Geoghegan, 1973); J. Stacey, *Star Gazing: Hollywood Cinema and Female Spectatorship* (London: Routledge, 1994); J. Fink and K. Holden, 'Pictures from the Margin of Marriage: Representations of Spinsters and Single Mothers in the Mid-Victorian Novel, Inter-War Hollywood Melodrama and British Film of the 1950s and 1960s', *Gender and History*, 11/2 (July 1999), 233–55. On medical texts, see J. Weeks, *Sex, Politics and Society: The Regulation of Sex since 1800* (London: Longman, 1981), chs. 8, 10, 11; S. Jeffreys, *The Spinster and her Enemies: Feminism and Sexuality 1880–1930* (London: Pandora, 1985), chs. 8 and 9; S. Kent, *Making Peace: The Reconstruction of Gender in Inter-War Britain* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), ch. 5. On party literature, feminist

all illuminating on the state of gender discourse at this time, but still do not obviate the desirability of a separate investigation of the press. In terms of audience size (of both sexes), cultural significance, and the sheer diversity of material covered—from party politics to cosmetics and sport—the national newspaper is difficult to rival.

Perhaps one of the main reasons for the relative lack of interest in the press is the assumption made by gender historians that its content is fairly predictable. Two of the most widely known examples of press activity in these years—the *Daily Mail*'s vigorous opposition to the 'flapper vote' in 1927–8, and the rise of the same paper's Ideal Home Exhibition—both seem to suggest that the press simply championed domesticity and opposed single women trying to break out of their 'separate sphere'. This is certainly the impression that one receives from most of the work that has been published on the press. Billie Melman, who has produced the most substantial gendered analysis of the *Mail* and the *Express* so far in the first chapter of her book *Women and the Popular Imagination in the Twenties*, and whose research is often quoted by others,[9] argues that 'From the beginning of 1919 the contemporary young woman was criticised on every conceivable ground. Her appearance was derided, her manners were deplored and her newly-gained freedom was regarded with suspicion.' In this 'welter of misogyny', she continues, there was frequently an 'extraordinarily aggressive tone of utterance'.[10] Other observations on the press tend to follow a similar pattern. Dale Spender has claimed that 'the established and male-controlled press worked to censor the demands and activities of women',[11] while Deirdre Beddoe asserts that

> In the inter-war years only one desirable image was held up to women by all the mainstream media agencies—that of housewife and mother. This single role model was presented to women to follow and all other alternatives were presented as wholly undesirable. Realising this central fact is the key to understanding every other aspect of women's lives in Britain in the 1920s and 1930s.[12]

periodicals, and political rhetoric, see e.g. D. Spender (ed.), *Time and Tide Wait for No Man* (London: Pandora, 1984); B. Harrison, *Prudent Revolutionaries: Portraits of British Feminists between the Wars* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987); J. Alberti, *Beyond Suffrage: Feminists in War and Peace 1914–28* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989); M. Pugh, *Women and the Women's Movement 1914–59* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992); P. M. Graves, *Labour Women: Women in British Working-Class Politics 1918–39* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); D. Jarvis, 'Mrs Maggs and Betty: The Conservative Appeal to Women Voters in the 1920s', *Twentieth Century British History*, 5/2 (1994), 129–52; C. Law, *Suffrage and Power: The Women's Movement 1918–28* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1997).

[9] See e.g. Pugh, *Women and the Women's Movement*, 77–9; J. Alberti, '"A Symbol and a Key": The Suffrage Movement in Britain 1918–28', in J. Purvis and S. S. Holton (eds.), *Votes for Women* (London: Routledge, 2000), 273–4.

[10] Melman, *Women and the Popular Imagination*, 17–18.

[11] Spender, *Time and Tide*, 4.

[12] D. Beddoe, *Back to Home and Duty: Women between the Wars 1918–39* (London: Pandora, 1989), 8.

More recent work reinforces this interpretation of the press. Cheryl Law notes that 'newspapers were full of articles establishing marriage as the pinnacle of fulfilment for women and thereby alternately ridiculing or patronising the single woman', while Sue Bruley agrees that single women were 'vilified' as 'useless members of society'.[13] In general, the emphasis of the press on domesticity and motherhood is usually regarded as part of a concerted effort to reassert 'traditional' gender boundaries after the 'blurring' experienced during the First World War.[14]

Only those whose primary focus of study is the press itself, rather than gender or women, have diverged from this line. Dan LeMahieu, in his study of mass communications in the inter-war period, points out that from its foundation in 1896 the *Daily Mail* actively sought to attract female readers and that its women's pages 'did provide a forum . . . where the self-esteem of women might be enhanced'.[15] Tom Jeffery and Keith McClelland, in their article on the politics of the *Daily Mail*, use market research data to demonstrate the *Mail*'s success in attracting female readers, and observe that the paper was 'full of appeals' to middle-class women.[16] Meanwhile, Patricia Holland, writing from a media studies perspective, has drawn attention to the 'feminization' of the press in the early twentieth century, arguing that this opened up an important new democratic space for women.[17] None of these insights have been followed up by a detailed gendered investigation of the inter-war press, but they do reaffirm the need to delve further than present stereotypes of gender historians.

Yet this study is more than just an attempt to plug a historiographical gap, important though that task is. There is a further intellectual reason for choosing the popular national daily press to explore gender identities. Few, if any, cultural forms contain as diverse a range of material as the newspaper. Inside the covers of the morning newspaper one found reports on not only high politics but also housewifery, on football as well as foreign affairs, on both court cases and the latest fashions. By using newspapers as source material, it is possible to explore a wide range of images and debates, to see how a variety of dif-

[13] Law, *Suffrage and Power*, 205; S. Bruley, *Women in Britain since 1900* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999), 62.

[14] For clear expressions of this interpretation, see M. R. Higonnet, J. Jenson, S. Michel, and M. C. Weitz (eds.), *Behind the Lines: Gender and the Two World Wars* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), Introduction; Kent, *Making Peace*, Introduction, chs. 5–6.

[15] D. LeMahieu, *A Culture for Democracy: Mass Communication and the Cultivated Mind in Britain between the Wars* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 43.

[16] Jeffrey and McClelland, 'A World Fit to Live In', 50.

[17] P. Holland, 'The Politics of the Smile', in C. Carter, G. Branston, and S. Allen (eds.), *News, Gender and Power* (London: Routledge, 1998), 21.

ferent gendered discourses interacted, interlinked, and contrasted. This is important because femininity and masculinity are complex and fragmented identities, shaped by a multitude of different influences. Too many works on gender concentrate only on one particular theme or stereotype—for example, the 'masculine woman' or the housewife—without exploring how the meaning and impact of these representations were altered when placed alongside other material and contrasting images. Billie Melman, for example, gives a rather misleading impression of the gender discourse of the *Mail* and the *Express* by not only focusing solely on the young single woman, the 'flapper' of the 1920s, but also reproducing almost exclusively hostile comments about her.[18] From her reading it appears as if the popular press was entirely dominated by a deep-seated fear and dislike of the 'surplus' woman, who threatened the basis of political and social stability. In fact, this was only one thread of a much more complex and nuanced pattern, a pattern that can only be appreciated by standing back and observing how all the strands properly weave together. Many other newspaper articles (including several in the very same issues as the hostile comments reproduced by Melman) celebrated the 'modern young woman' and encouraged her to grasp her new opportunities; at the same time, anxieties about modernity were contained by more traditional images of women, as prudent housewives or beautiful companions. Similarly, some works have exaggerated the conservatism of the inter-war period by concentrating solely on the articulation of domesticity and consumerism in the media, without exploring other contemporary perceptions about modernity that significantly influenced attitudes to women. A wide-ranging approach is, of course, just as necessary for the study of masculinity. Disturbing images of shell-shocked soldiers must not be allowed to obscure features venerating manly sportsmen and heroic explorers, or vice versa. This book is an attempt to survey the traditional as well as the modern and new, the areas of consensus as well as of conflict, the sports columns and the women's pages as well as the political articles and editorials.

The final reason that makes the daily press a compelling source lies in its position at the boundary of politics and popular culture. As Amanda Vickery has recently pointed out, historians should beware of defining the 'political' too narrowly.[19] This investigation allows gendered political rhetoric to be placed alongside, and considered in relation to, apparently non-political

[18] L. L. Behling's similar study of American culture *The Masculine Woman in America 1890–1935* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001) has similar limitations.

[19] A. Vickery (ed.), *Women, Privilege and Power: British Politics, 1750 to the Present* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2001).

constructions: the domestic 'chancellor of the exchequer' of the political columns alongside the 'prudent housewife' of the woman's page, for example. Political imagery inevitably gains or loses potency according to the way in which it resonates with broader, 'non-political' attitudes. The press is also a useful arena in which to examine the possible disjuncture between the political efficacy of the 'feminist' movement, and the more general acceptance of 'feminist' ideas in popular culture. Too often the success of 'feminism' is judged in terms of its legislative fruits or the numbers of people mobilized as avowed supporters. It is just as important to trace its impact in the wider debates of popular discourse—to uncover, for example, general attitudes to the working woman or the female politician—and to determine the extent to which what were at one time regarded as 'feminist attitudes' gradually became more commonly accepted.

The Press and Society

One of the defining features of my research has been a desire to take popular newspapers seriously, on their own terms. Popular newspapers then, as now, did not seek to perform the same functions as the deeply political 'minority'[20] newspapers, nor were they written for the same audience; therefore they should not be measured according to the same yardstick. There is no reason to dismiss as unimportant the content of these papers merely because the emphasis was on brightness rather than on analytical depth and detail. Yet such attitudes have often marred historical investigations of the press. Franklin Reid Gannon, for example, examining the press's assessment of the German threat in the 1930s, argues that it 'would be ludicrous to devote as much space or attention to Lord Beaverbrook's or Lord Rothermere's few unsophisticated and obsessive ideas as to the development of important ideas and attitudes in the columns and offices of the quality newspapers'.[21] Why should such a study be 'ludicrous'? Millions of people read the *Mail* and the *Express*—and Neville Chamberlain, for one, was very concerned about the content of what they were reading.[22] The war that eventually broke out after the failure of 'appeasement' relied on the service

[20] This term is not an ideal label for newspapers such as *The Times* and the *Telegraph*, but I find it preferable, because it is more neutral, than the other usual labels: 'quality', 'class', or 'traditional' press. The popular papers in this study, except the *Mirror*, were broadsheets in this period, so the modern broadsheet–tabloid distinction is not appropriate.

[21] F. Gannon, *The British Press and Germany, 1936–39* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), p. vii.

[22] As can be seen by his careful 'management' of the press during these years: R. Cockett, *The Twilight of Truth: Chamberlain, Appeasement and the Manipulation of the Press* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1989).

of British men and women from across society, and it is impossible to understand their support, especially after the horrors of the First World War, without some knowledge of how the international crisis had been presented in the media.

Nor do I accept the argument that the popular newspapers were merely the ideological tools of entrenched class interests. This interpretation has a long lineage, and has been most recently restated by Jean Chalaby. She claims that 'the press, under the influences of market forces, has essentially become a magic mirror journalists hold to society, with the effect of keeping the popular classes, in particular, in a state of ecstasy and to deny them knowledge about the world and knowledge about their position in the world'.[23] This viewpoint undoubtedly offers some important insights. Powerful interests in society, including the owners of consumer industries, certainly had (and have) a privileged access to the press. The *Daily Herald* in the 1920s, for example, often struggled to secure advertising as a result of its uncompromising left-wing views and its working-class readership; the *Daily Worker* in the 1930s was similarly disadvantaged. An ethos of consumerism permeated the press, sometimes at the expense of engagement with the realities of readers' lives. The contention that the press emphasis on personalities and 'human interest' had the effect of obscuring underlying social structures and inequalities also has some force.[24] Feminists, as I will suggest in Chapter 4, often found it difficult to overcome the reluctance of popular newspapers to discuss 'abstract' or 'theoretical' questions.

Nevertheless, the 'magic mirror' argument exaggerates the coercive power of the media and underestimates the intelligence of the readership. Proprietors, managers, and journalists on popular newspapers were all very conscious that they had to interest their audience sufficiently to persuade them to part with their money. They could not operate in isolation from the demands of their readers. Even before the arrival of market research surveys in the late 1920s, editors and proprietors sought to discover 'what the public wanted'; Northcliffe spied on readers in parks and on trains, and asked almost anyone he came across their opinions about the *Mail*. Newspapers were not necessities of life, and the

[23] J. Chalaby, *The Invention of Journalism* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998), 5. Radicals of the 19th century made similar comments. In 1807, for example, William Cobbett declared that 'The English Press, instead of enlightening, does, as far as it has Power, keep the People in Ignorance': cited in T. O'Malley and C. Soley, *Regulating the Press* (London: Pluto Press, 2000), 26. In the 20th century a more sophisticated version of this argument was developed by Theodor Adorno and the Frankfurt school in their writings on the 'Culture Industry'.

[24] J. Curran, A. Douglas, and G. Whannel, 'The Political Economy of the Human Interest Story', in A. Smith (ed.), *Newspapers and Democracy: International Essays on a Changing Medium* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1980).