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Writing on the Move

Albert Londres and Investigative Journalism

European Connections

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Peter Lang

Preview

JOURNAUX – ne pouvoir s'en passer mais tonner contre
Flaubert[1]

One of the many striking photos of Albert Londres shows him dressed in a dark suit with a stiff collar and sporting a splendid fedora. He is standing, elegantly poised alongside a snazzy open tourer which is partly trapped in desert sands. His left hand grips a spade. He did indeed spend his journalistic life digging. Exhuming information by hook or by crook, unearthing abusive practices in all walks of life and across the globe, and digging his readers, of his time or ours, tellingly in the ribs with his challenging finds. And always with a good eye and nose for stylishness.

As roving reporter, Albert Londres lived and wrote for a major part of his life on the move; he garnered his material primarily on the hoof. And yet his most recurrent area of enquiry was closed spaces. His wide-ranging reportages on civil and military penitentiaries; on mental institutions across France; on brothels in Argentina; on the economic slave-trade in the Middle East and in Central Africa (pearl-diving, and road and railway construction); on the convict cyclists ('les forçats de la route') on home territory in the Tour de France; on Gabriele D'Annunzio in his besieged enclave in Fiume; on the atrocious condition of poor Jews in Europe's ghettos; on alien cultures and the end-stopped stereotypes attached to them in Japan, China, and India by Westerners, and the semi-alien cultures in French Indochina; on the chaotic stumblings and deprivations of the isolated early Soviet Russia; on the stand-off collusion between government and terrorists in post-Great War Bulgaria – all of these involved Londres in worming his way into closed societies in the lengthy effort to understand and report on them. His despatches in the First World War, also, entailed his marking time in often stalemate situations on the Western Front or in the Balkans. He

1 Gustave Flaubert: *Dictionnaire des idées reçues,* in *Bouvard et Pécuchet*. Ed. Jacques Suffel. Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1966, p.364.

travelled, in short, to grasp enclosure. Variously, in all these contexts, he investigated trade in its multifarious forms: the exploitation, the abuse, and the wanton wastage of human lives in war, commerce, or social organisation: slavery, prostitution, or the oppression of patients' sick minds.

As a result, this book will move between imprisonment and movement – what Yves Le Bohec calls Londres's 'fuite en avant obligée'.[2] In addition to the many instances of physical repressions, it will focus on the congealed mind-sets that humans set up around and against fellow creatures. As an extension, it will study and evaluate the clichés about and within journalistic practice and discourse, including those of Londres himself. Humour, and in particular the revising and twisting of clichés, will be seen as Londres's own brand of irony (he was habitually ironic about the many ironies of existence). Thus his rhetoric and style will be a crucial focus in the totalising study of the Londres phenomenon. He exploits humour in its several modes in order to persuade readers to take his news and views seriously. The poetic elements, both in his young-adult verse and in his mature journalism (especially in what is partly a prose-poem celebrating the exotic hexagonal microcosm of Marseilles), of lyricism, imagery and hyperbole will be viewed as indispensable partners in the various escape-routes of this writer so often thwarted by stasis: the ways in which he modifies, and reacts against, the recurrently appalling universes that he faithfully records. By writing much of the time peripatetically, Londres escaped some if not all of the constraints, impediments and paralyses of the property-owning class of petty bourgeoisie that he took off from.

I set Londres in the context of his times (the historical dimension) and in the world-context of the freemasonry of special correspondents (the sociological, professional dimension) for whom his byline remains a byword and a yardstick. Though many critics, fellow journalists and Internet publicists mention his name reverentially, too few have analysed and judged his writings closely. I would like readers to share with me in this closer reading. Like Gide and Raymond Queneau, I believe that lazy readers should not be encouraged to indulge in their favourite inoccupation. To that end, throughout this book, when I talk of the wider

2 Yves Le Bohec: *Les Mythes professionnels des journalistes: l'état des lieux en France*. Paris: L'Harmattan, 2000, p.163.

world around or beyond Londres, I frequently leave analogies, comparisons or contrasts to the reader. I want her/him to think more widely than Londres, as he did.

My own more specifically personal investment in wanting and needing to write this book dates back over six decades to my primary school. An unsmiling Scottish teacher, who looked to our unpractised eyes about seventy-five, once commented on a short piece of mine, a description of someone we knew that we all had to write: 'You'll be a journalist, my lad'. I had used the phrase – God knows where I picked it up – of 'gimlet eyes' for an aged neighbour. That is now no doubt a dated cliché; to me it was fresh-minted, though I did not know how to pronounce it. Ever since, some significant part of me has wanted to write in journalistic mode: snappy, to the point, amusing. Depending on my editors, I have suffered, and benefited, from this urge.

I have been at times a guttersnipe or a hack academic. Since that childhood, I have written books on various authors who all practised journalism to greater or lesser extents. Jules Vallès, Louis Guilloux and Paul Nizan all supported themselves, for segments of their lives, by journalism. Georges Darien edited three periodicals and contributed to other journals. At a bohemian stage, Raymond Queneau asked his newspaper readers: 'Connaissez-vous Paris?' My books on language matters (*Puns,* and *Clichés and Coinages*) concerned themselves frequently with journalistic aspects of style and rhetoric.

One particular driving-force of this book will be a continuous effort to rehabilitate the very dubious status of journalists, for I am convinced that the best of them, of whom Londres is an outstanding example, do much of the indispensable leg-work for later, sedentary historians. They deal, courageously and innovatively, with history-in-the-making. One way to measure the status of journalism will be to track the shifting borderline, the similarities and differences, between it and literature, and a major subdivision of the latter, committed literature. Politics in a special sense – political correctness – must also be confronted.

As one journalistic commentator wrote: 'All news is views […] There is no fundamentally non-ideological, apolitical, non-partisan, news gathering and reporting system'. Many of us, naturally, confuse news with facts, which should be indisputable and value-free. Whereas French, when it seeks to characterise investigative journalism, favours surgical imagery (probing, or cauterising, a wound), Anglo-American usage pre-

fers the scatological or rustic: muck-raking. French does house 'fouille-merde',[3] shit-stirrer, and various journalists, including Zola, have been likened to dung-beetles ('bousiers'), literal or metaphorical. There is also 'déterreur de scandales', which puts the stress on the disentombing of the buried. In his reportages, Albert Londres wielded an instrument more ponderous than the scalpel but less primitive than the pitchfork. His own chosen metaphor is passably brutal, in this his most often quoted declaration: 'Mon métier n'est pas de faire plaisir ni de faire tort. Il est de porter le fer dans la plaie. Il y a trop de malheur dans le vaste monde pour qu'on se permette de s'asseoir'.[4] This rejection of comfortable ensconcement and the readiness to plunge into painful areas typify his approach to his job.

For Pierre Bonardi, 'Albert Londres a été le type même du voyageur baudelairien':

> Mais les vrais voyageurs sont ceux-là qui partent
> Pour partir, coeurs légers, sembables aux ballons,
> De leur fatalité jamais ils ne s'écartent
> Et, sans savoir pourquoi, disent toujours: Allons![5]

Londres's own version was that he was one of 'ceux qui aiment le voyage pour le voyage, le nouveau pour le nouveau, même si le pays qu'on verra demain ne vaut pas celui de la veille'. More specifically: 'Le reportage n'est qu'une façon de satisfaire mon vice' [i.e. travel], and 'J'aime moins le décor que le mouvement'.[6] He dressed 'internationally', in the separate accessories bought at stop-overs across the world.[7] He travelled not only for his own delight, or because for his raw material he must, but also on behalf of his readers. As well as eye-opening infor-

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3 In a letter from André Gill to Jules Vallès, between 15 and 22 February 1880, cited in Gérard Delfau (ed.): *Jules Vallès, l'exil à Londres*. Paris: Bordas, 1971, p.334.

4 Quoted in an unpublished article by his daughter Florise: 'A la mémoire d'Albert Londres vichyssois-journaliste'. See Pierre Assouline: *Albert Londres: vie et mort d'un grand reporter*. Paris: Gallimard, 1990, p.157.

5 Pierre Bonardi: 'Routes et relais d'Albert Londres, voyageur baudelairien'. *La Tribune des Nations,* 29 November 1934. Reprinted in Londres: *Le Juif errant est arrivé*. Ed. Francis Lacassin. Paris: Union Générale d'Editions, 1975, p.264.

6 Quoted in Francis Ambrière: 'Au Pays des grands reporters, Albert Londres'. *Gringoire,* 19 July 1929. [Reprinted ibid., pp.289, 286, 289].

7 Bonardi: 'Routes et relais d'Albert Londres', p.265.

mation and pungently expressed opinions, his accounts offered readers exoticism. They could in reading him live by proxy, enjoy escapism.

He wrote on the move in the sense that, at least in note form, this practice was the unavoidable first stage. Then he sometimes wrote up on the move, on the high seas during the voyage home: the only time in a generally frantic existence he had for peaceful reflection. As a roving reporter, except for investigations into France's mental hospitals, the Tour de France and his celebration of Marseilles, after the First World War on the Western Front he played away, in eastern and southern Europe, the Middle East, Soviet Russia, the Far East, Africa and South America. His protracted absences from France helped to shore up his immunity to the world of values, in its more mercenary and backbiting aspects, practised in the metropolitan press. He thus missed much of the in-house politicking, the corruption and the venality which were endemic in the press of his day, and are still periodically in ours. The financial scandals frequently resulted from the manipulation of French newspapers by foreign governments and business interests.

As most of his reports were sent home from abroad, there was inevitably always a certain distance between despatcher and receivers. His reportages were often like messages in a bottle launched with no more than hope in the heart from various desert or densely populated islands. His fieldwork often took several months. Today, of course, instantaneous transmission of news reports and television pictures of events as they happen mean that journalists rarely have to describe the scene, and in fact often merely duplicate the images in a kind of otiose underlining ('As you can see…'). Londres was a globetrotter, 'un journaliste au long cours', a reporter at large. He favoured leg-work, which of course never ruled out conveyances, animal or mechanical, and was never an armchair or archive journalist. Though not noticeably a sufferer from claustrophobia, he certainly experienced agoraphilia. He had itchy feet and ants in his pants.

Despite his aversion from encumbering paraphernalia or from bourgeois décor when back home after his long trips away, Londres treasured, until he lost them or they fell apart, a travel-rug (a kind of worry-blanket for the man who retained in adulthood the child he had naturally started out as being) and a pigskin suitcase. He could not swim, drive a car, or speak more than a smattering of English. In a basic sense, he was not equipped to be, by analogy with 'médecins sans

frontières', a 'reporter sans frontières', though he always enjoyed himself in 'jeux sans frontières'. As for modes of transport, when all else failed or when it seemed the best way to get the feel of a place or a situation, he strolled or yomped. A stock and clumsily repetitive view is that 'les journalistes sont d'abord des "papillons de l'événement", rebondissant facilement d'un événement sur l'autre, mais avec le défaut complémentaire d'aborder les sujets au gré de l'actualité, un événement chassant l'autre'.[8] By reason of his long stays wherever he ventured, Londres was never that kind of butterfly. If he parachuted in, he generally stayed longer than present-day reporters or their bosses could afford.

Though a salaried staff correspondent in effect in his working life, Londres acted to a large extent as if he were a freelance. He operated in an age when men (always men) in positions of power were readier to be interviewed face to face than they are today, when they did not yet robotically skulk behind a praetorian guard of PR people and other doctors of spin. No doubt, briefings, press conferences and so on have been around a long time, but person-to-person questioning was still easier in his day. Nevertheless, though gifted with patience and stamina, Londres would regularly run up against stonewalling tactics, temporising, incommunicative spokespersons: immovable objects with a very different time-scale and set of priorities from his, and against which he beat his head in vain. The fact that he spent long sessions trying to break down artifices of self-preservation, and yet had to keep on supplying despatches to his home base, meant that his writing contains much padding and other vamping, as in all our existential strategies. Yet the bonus is that he gives us, if *we* are patient, a sense of duration, of things and time being dragged out. Life is not all purple patches, everyone knows, and sound-bites can be toothless.

Londres never subscribed to the cant argument that journalists should present the facts and let the reading public make up its own mind. He knew what his function was: to tell a pointed story. If, then, readers voted with their feet, he accepted this disappointment as part of the rules of the game. He could not, honestly, believe in freedom and deny it to

8 Dominique Wolton: 'Les Journalistes entre l'opinion publique et les hommes politiques', in Marc Martin (ed.): *Histoire et Médias.* Paris: Albin Michel, 1991, p.211.

his readers. He knew, and hoped that his readers did too, that freedom entails the clash of contrary opinions. He could not have been further away from the viewpoint of Richard Salent of CBS News, who stressed the need to cover stories 'from nobody's point of view'.[9] As with 'seeing things' (observing/hallucinating), 'making news' secretes two opposing meanings; recording actuality, and fabricating it. Like any journalist worth his or her salt, Londres does both, the second especially in the artfully composed dialogues he devises after the real-time interviews. Nor does he make any pretence of keeping himself coyly out of the picture. After all, the very word 'journal' in French does double duty: a public news-sheet, and a private diary. Londres was registering himself as well as history in the making.

The resulting admixture of personal and collective has been accurately caught in Denis Ruellan's useful concept of 'le flou': 'La vraie – la seule – richesse du regard journalistique sur les sociétés, voire sur l'histoire, c'est son imprécision, son imprévisibilité, son inconsistance parfois, son adaptabilité surtout: c'est *le professionalisme du flou*'.[10] This 'flou' is to be found in the statutes of professional deontology. Ruellan uses the term in a predominantly meliorative sense. Indeed, the best journalists do escape the rigor mortis to which other colleagues more orthodoxly formed are vulnerable. Journalism has been generally one of the most amateurish of professions. Or, to put it more charitably and possibly more accurately, it has always been a trade you learn on the job, *in medias res*. Though not formally trained, this apparent lone wolf, this solo operator Albert Londres in fact consorted very gladly with other correspondents, French, Italian, English, American. He responded to elective affinities.

'I am always,' wrote the BBC foreign correspondent John Simpson, 'trying to get to places where I'm not wanted, and convincing people to do things they don't want; it's like selling double-glazing'.[11] Such is the rock-bottom experience of the investigative reporter. Like

9 Quoted in Susan Carruthers: *The Media at War*. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000, p.17.

10 Denis Ruellan: *Le Professionalisme du flou: Identité et savoir-faire des journalistes français*. Presses Universitaires de Grenoble, 1993, pp.29–30 (my italics).

11 John Simpson: *Strange Places, Questionable People*. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998, p.3.

all effective examples of the breed, Londres was expert at the deviousness it takes to gain access to forbidding or forbidden milieux, yet by all accounts his character was very much of a piece: frank, firm, and generally compassionate. But there was more to him than that. For Francis de Tessin,

> cet observateur attentif dont l'apparent nonchaloir cache une tactique d'inquisition philosophique […] ne se contente pas d'amasser des impressions ou des documents. *Chacune de ses enquêtes est une campagne.* Il captive ses lecteurs. Il les entraîne. Il les oblige, tout en les amusant parfois par son esprit endiablé, à réfléchir sur les grands problèmes du jour.[12]

A snake-charmer, then, but also a great awakener, and never just *un journaliste de salon* or *en chambre*.

Though many governments throughout history have condemned pressmen as enemies of the state, many journalists have argued, on the contrary, and have proved in practice, that properly informed press coverage can be measurably helpful in, for example, assisting the police with their enquiries, running criminals to earth, uncovering plots against public order, or blowing the gaff on occulted injustices. Above all, Londres knew in his bones that, as Robert de Jouvenel maintained, 'un bon journaliste doit savoir s'étonner'.[13] Whatever the temptations to cynicism resulting from witnessing humankind at its worst, the true journalist needs to keep intact this sense of wonderment at the very variousness and quiddity of what we all get up to. How different, indeed, from us readers or from other kinds of newspapermen is the investigative reporter? One view is that

> the investigative reporter is like any other kind of reporter, only more so, more inquisitive, more skeptical, more resourceful and imaginative in knowing where to look for facts, more ingenious in circumventing obstacles, more indefatigable in the pursuit of facts and able to endure drudgery and discomfort.[14]

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12 Quoted from *Le Petit Niçois* of 4 May 1927, in Paul Mousset: *Albert Londres, l'aventure du grand reportage*. Paris: Grasset, 1970, p.247 (author's italics).

13 Robert de Jouvenel: *Le Journalisme en vingt leçons*. Paris: Payot, 1920, p.77.

14 Curtis D. MacDougall: *Interpretive Reporting*. New York: Macmillan, 1982, p.227.

Another commentator ups the ante: 'Every good investigative reporter has to be slightly mad. Not only must he manifest the customary skills and characteristics of a journalist, he must do so to excess, and be ever ready to attempt the impossible'.[15]

Such extremism (at least of language) operates, however, in an in-between position. The press is an intermediate zone, somewhere (variably) between literature and everyday discourse (gossip, rumour, opinionating). In addition, it is part-way between literature and politics: inventive like the former, and parasitical like the latter. The journalist, him- or her-self, is a shuttler between the actors and the sufferers of history. The journalist is closer to instant history than the vast majority of readers. 'Newspapers have a double life. On the one hand, they date more quickly than milk and stale more quickly than bread. On the other hand […], they provide a fascinating dipstick into history'.[16] The American novelist Nicholson Baker has long fought to save newspapers from being junked by libraries, including national ones. As the veteran Alistair Cooke said, 'there is less difference than the intelligentsia would have us believe between the daily grind of the "serious" novelist or biographer in his cloister and the reporter filing his daily dispatch with the wind of the world in his face'.[17] Sartre puts a similar view rather more ponderously:

> Le reportage fait partie des genres littéraires et il peut devenir un des plus importants d'entre eux. La capacité de saisir intuitivement et instantanément les significations, l'habileté à regrouper celles-ci pour offrir au lecteur des ensembles synthétiques immédiatement déchiffrables sont les qualités les plus nécessaires au reporter.[18]

In much present-day journalism, the emphasis on house-style and rewriting militates against overt militancy, or individualism itself. In addition, long practice in journalistic discourse can lead to meretricious devices, dishonest short-cuts, cheapness of effects, unsubstantiated innuendoes, as well as advantages such as sharp focus, dramatic tension and

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15 James H. Dygert: *The Investigative Journalist: Folk Heroes of a New Era.* Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1976, p.146.

16 *Guardian* editorial on the day it inaugurated its archives, 8 June 2002, p.8.

17 Quoted ibid. From Cooke's introduction to the *Bedside Guardian* of 1959.

18 Jean-Paul Sartre: *Situations 2*. Paris: Gallimard, 1948, p.30.

immediacy. As in life, so with Londres: we have to accept the rough with the smooth. When Londres started his habit of constructing books from his newspaper articles, he believed that in this way people who had not read them the first time round would still have a chance of reading them in a book available to all (who could afford it). No doubt this was a recycling operation, opportunistic, milking a body of material for all it was worth, but, more importantly, such a practice shows how much of a literary journalist he was. He wanted to last.

To generalise: most studies of journalism both parochialise and globalise. Albert Londres tends to be assigned the niche of grandfather of French investigative journalism. While he liked fame, and wanted ever more, it was not at any price – especially not at the price of false, exaggerated, or congealed estimation. We need to see him in his various contexts, yet avoid, if humanly possible, stereotyping him. If, on the other hand, I individualise him overmuch, will I say anything of more general validity? The danger lies in turning an idiosyncratic person into a star, an exception, a *monstre sacré.*

Some clichés, and there are very many current or surviving from the earliest days of the press, are energising. The image of the lone-wolf, crusading journalist can invigorate both reporters themselves and the reading public they may on occasion rouse from torpor. One enduring commonplace holds that the French and Anglo-American styles of journalism differ in that the latter is primarily preoccupied with gathering facts, and the former with stylish summations, a kind of sub-literature. Much of the widespread mistrust of pressmen recalls that accorded to politicians. Both sets are credited, in this perspective, with more individual influence than they actually enjoy; and the modus operandi of both is dismissed as manipulative and fishy. In films, on the contrary, the roving reporter is often portrayed as a modern avatar of the knight-errant, rescuing citizens in distress and taking the lid off corruption or other threats to the common weal. Such a stereotype consorts quite happily with a certain raffishness: booze, womanising. Such folklore (fakelore, *fauxclore*) – the French version has a useful connotation of closure – gives rise to classic jokes such as: 'Don't tell my mother I'm a journalist. She thinks I play the piano in a brothel'. Some seek not only to homogenise and belittle the press, but even to terminate it, as the CIA charmingly put it, with extreme prejudice. All in all, 'le journaliste […] n'a jamais eu très bonne presse', or, more

accurately, enjoys a dubious status.[19] Balzac, at his most pugnaciously reactionary, twisted Voltaire's famous maxim: 'Si Dieu n'existait pas il faudrait l'inventer' to 'Si la presse n'existait pas, il faudrait ne pas l'inventer'.[20] The great social historian, the Jack Horner of world literature, should have been the last one to talk of publicists as nefarious. The rotund and orotund Balzac was the pot calling the kettle burnt arse. It is less surprising that Louis Veuillot, far more reactionary again and notably hostile to the free press, should have spoken of newspapers as whores: 'Divertir convenablement les lecteurs distingués des feuilles de joie'.[21] Whores de combat?

The myth of Albert Londres, that is: the unexamined reality, is a kind of shorthand, like 'Hoover' for vacuum-cleaner. For many, he is *the* roving reporter. This book will, in the name of even-handedness, also examine *his* clichés, in the areas of racism, colonialism, Eurocentrism, and sexism.

Why is Londres, virtually alone of all the French *grands reporters* of the twentieth century, the only one whose published journalism is still widely available?[22] He and his valued colleagues were all of them what Philip Knightley called 'professional observers at the peep show of misery'.[23] For a long time, and in some quarters still, journalists in France have been typified as intellectuals, whereas nobody in England, least of all newpapermen, is so esteemed. I will try, unlike the doctor with his rubber hammer, to prevent knee-jerk responses. I hope that, as with a good journalist, the information on Londres and journalism that I have scissored-and-pasted from multiple sources, especially for the biographical elements of this book, will pass muster. After all, I could hardly time-travel back into the past in order to doorstep witnesses.

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19 Jean-François Lacan et al.: *Les Journalistes*. Paris: Syros, 1994, p.8.

20 Voltaire: *Epitres*: 'A l'auteur des Trois Impostures'; and Balzac: *Monographie de la presse parisienne.* Paris: Aubry, 1943 [1843], p. 193.

21 Louis Veuillot: *Les Odeurs de Paris*. Paris: Crès, n.d. [1867], p. 81.

22 And not journalists, equally famous in their and his day, such as Edouard Helsey, Henri Béraud, Louis Roubaud, Ludovic Naudeau, or Andrée Viollis, all of whom will crop up in these pages.

23 Philip Knightley: *The First Casualty: From the Crimea to Vietnam: The War Correspondent as Hero, Propagandist and Myth Maker*. London: André Deutsch, 1975, p.44.

As a bridge to the first chapter proper, I want to ask the rhetorical question (are there, at bottom, any other kinds?): apart from the (not always inevitable) process of growing up, of travelling far and wide, of seeing and surviving countless horrors, of experiencing personal tragedy (the loss of his young wife), what else moved Albert Londres beyond the rather vaporous, undistinguished early self and apprentice writings?