

## *Ben Brierley's Journal*

*Margaret Beetham*

The new and young, away with them  
 To fire and crucifixion!  
 For London or Jerusalem  
 Were always of conviction  
 That no good thing can come to hand,  
 Or beautiful or witty,  
 From Nazareth or Sunderland  
 Or any heathen city.<sup>1</sup>

The power of Grub Street and the metropolitan publishing scene shaped periodical publishing in Britain in the second half of the nineteenth century. Readers in Manchester – as in Sunderland – mostly read publications emanating from London.<sup>2</sup> Journalists, writers and publishers who wanted to make their way in the world aspired to the imperial metropolis. It was in Manchester that the publisher Newnes launched *Tit-Bits*, the cheap weekly which pioneered the New Journalism of the 1880s and 1890s, but he rapidly moved to London. Baxter, the cartoonist, began working on the Manchester periodical *Comus* (which became *Momus*) but moved to London where he created Ally Sloper, the most famous of working class caricature figures. The writer Mrs Linnaeus Banks began by publishing poems in Manchester periodicals under her maiden name of Varley but moved to London after her marriage, and from there wrote her novels set in the north-west including the best-known, *The Manchester Man*.<sup>3</sup> Important exceptions to this metropolitan drift were the local newspapers which flourished after the repeal of the taxes on print in mid-century. These developed a particular local print culture which still flourishes in publications like *The Manchester Evening News*. However, the vast growth in late-nineteenth century Britain of a weekly and monthly periodical press catering for a new mass readership was largely London-based and metropolitan in outlook.

The appearance in a quintessentially metropolitan publication, *The Cornhill*, of the verse with which I began, with its playful reworking of the biblical question ‘Can any good come out of Nazareth?’, suggests, however, at least the possibility of something good, if not something prophetic, emerging from the despised provincial cities.

The dominance of London has masked the existence of a local periodical press in the late-nineteenth century which was extraordinarily vigorous with nearly 200 new publications launched in the city of Manchester during the period 1860 to 1900. These periodicals not only provide evidence of a vigorous and distinctive local literary culture, they played a crucial role in the making of that culture. They fed in and out of other forms of print; serialised fiction, penny pamphlets and collections of poems. They were the nursery for local talent and published by well-established local publisher/proprietors, notably Abel and John Heywood. Writers for these journals were drawn from a local intelligentsia centred round the Manchester Literary Club with a strong interest in local history, local antiquities and local dialect. Members included self-improved artisans like Ben Brierley as well as

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**FRONT COVER OF BEN BRIERLEY'S JOURNAL, 12 JANUARY 1878**

Front cover of Ben Brierley's Journal, 12 January 1878

middle class clergy, school teachers, and journalists. The periodical press was thus part of a network of social and cultural institutions in which a set of local identities were articulated and explored.

In this brief paper I want to argue that a key element of that network and one of the most long-lasting of the local magazines, *Ben Brierley's Journal*, represented a sophisticated and determinedly local intervention into the London-dominated publishing world of the late nineteenth century. Despite the fact that Ben Brierley, the eponymous editor of the magazine, launched it in the wake of his own failed attempt to break into the London literary scene, this journal was not a weak imitation of a London publication.<sup>4</sup> It addressed the question of a local identity and local literature in a complex way. Locally produced and read locally, this periodical created a space in which regional identities were negotiated through a range of literary and rhetorical strategies.

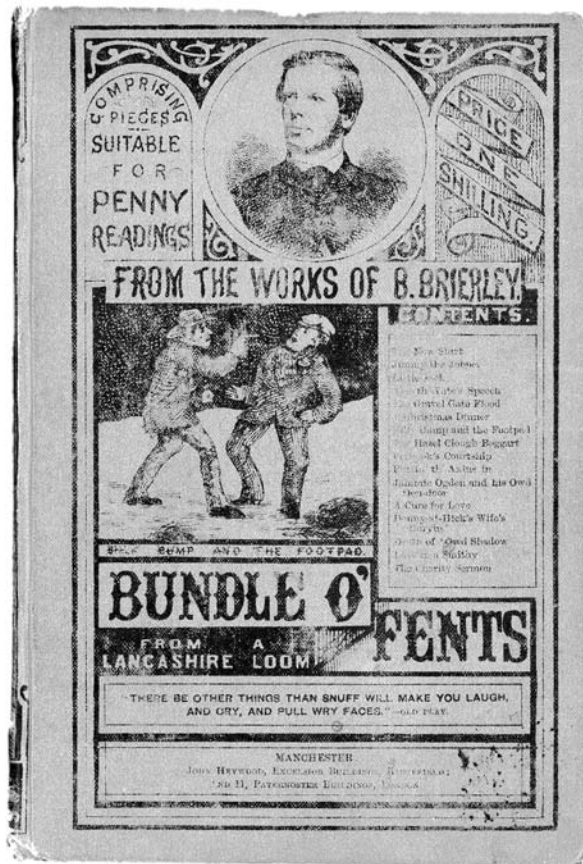
By the 1860s Manchester was no longer seen, nor saw itself, as it had been in the 1840s, in the vanguard of the industrial revolution and a by-word for grim living conditions, class conflict and radical political activity. Therefore, a new kind of regional identity was emerging, marked by continuities with and discontinuities from the earlier period. The struggle to create stories, histories and representations of regional history entered a new phase.<sup>5</sup> Just as Gaskell, Dickens, Disraeli and others had grappled with literary representations of Manchester in the earlier period, so now writers sought to do so in the very different world of mid- to late-Victorian Britain. Mrs Linnaeus Banks' novel *The Manchester Man*, which I have already mentioned, was well received as one such attempt. A review of the novel in *Ben Brierley's Journal* praised its depictions of Manchester life, which, the reviewer argued, could not have been drawn by any other than a 'Manchester lady'.<sup>6</sup> However, the novel was a product of the metropolitan publishing world to which Isabella Banks had moved in 1847. It was serialised in *Cassell's Magazine* in 1875 and appeared in three-volume form in 1876 before finally being reissued in a cheap series of reprints by the Manchester publishing house of Abel Heywood. Its characterisation of the Manchester Man as the self-made entrepreneur, the epitome of Samuel Smiles' self help, secured a particular kind of identity as typical of the region (pre-figured perhaps in Elizabeth Gaskell's Thornton, the self-made manufacturer of *North and South*). However, unlike Gaskell, Mrs Banks described a Manchester where local geography and history, even the history of radical movements like Peterloo, were subsumed into the progress of the industrious individual. Crucially, the progress of the orphan boy Jabez Clegg was a progress which involved losing his dialect speech, that crucial signifier of both class

and locality. The local here was both recognised and denied in this shift in language.<sup>7</sup>

By contrast, the identity of the Manchester man negotiated through the pages of *Ben Brierley's Journal* was not only produced locally for local reading but was, I argue, a far more complex and sophisticated representation than Banks'. The reasons for this are partly those inherent in the periodical form. Because the magazine is essentially fragmented and fractured in terms of authorial voice and genre, it can encompass complexity and even contradiction which other genres cannot. Because it comes out over time and must engage its readers over time, encouraging them to continue to buy but also inviting them to write in as contributors, it involves negotiations between producers and readers not available even to the author of a serialised novel. However, there were also particular reasons why this journal at this moment in Manchester's history offered an important space for the creation of local identities over the time span of its run.

That run was long in relation to periodical publishing at local or even national level. *Ben Brierley's Journal of Literature, Science and Art, for the Promotion of Good-Will and Good Fellowship Everywhere* was launched from 118 Deansgate, Manchester as a two-penny monthly in April 1869. In December, after claiming a circulation of 18,000, the format changed from small folio to quarto size. It continued to flourish and became a penny weekly five years later in June 1874. In 1876 Abel Heywood and Son bought the *Journal* and continued to publish it. It reverted to monthly publication and a New Series began in 1879. The *Journal* ceased publication in 1891 when its founder, editor and driving force, Ben Brierley, was too ill to continue. So identified was he with the periodical which bore his name, that the publisher decided that it would be impossible to continue without him.<sup>8</sup> The central role of Brierley in the *Journal* was crucial to its success and to its particular flavour.

At the time he established the *Journal* with his brother-in-law Frith, Brierley was already well known as a local writer and poet, particularly in dialect, who contributed to a range of local papers including *The Cotton Factory Times* and *The Manchester Magazine*. Having left school early to work, first as a bobbin winder and then a hand-loom weaver, Brierley represented two important types of the Lancashire working class: the hand-loom weaver, whose displacement by machinery and factory work had come to symbolise the industrialising of labour, and the self-educated artisan, 'bent on self-improvement, [for whom] difficulties are only obstacles to be surmounted'.<sup>9</sup> As secretary of a mutual improvement society, and later Failsworth Mechanics' Institute, Brierley gradually made his way into journalism, first through occasional pieces and then through



Front cover of  
*A Bundle O'  
Fents: From A  
Lancashire Loom*  
by Ben Brierley,  
1881

copies sold weekly in the mid-1870s, with 11,500 of the special pantomime issue, are impossible to verify, as are all claims for circulation from this period.<sup>13</sup> However, Brierley offered to open his books to advertisers and since part of the success of his *Journal* was apparently its ability to bring in advertising, the claims are probably reliable. Like all cheap periodicals at this time, each copy almost certainly had multiple readers. Thus the *Journal* had a wide local readership, though its sales almost certainly did not match those of the almanacs and two-penny dialogues, which I return to below.

There are no records of the *Journal's* finances so we can only speculate on the reasons for its comparative success. Though Brierley's name and reputation were crucial aspects of that success, advertising and price were also important. Much of the advertising seems to have been local and success here was due in the first instance to Frith, who went into the business with him and had experience as an advertising manager for a local publisher.<sup>14</sup> The price, too, made this an attractive buy. Even at two pence, the *Journal* was relatively cheap. It is clear from reading the *Journal* that Brierley kept it cheap not only through

sub-editorship of the *Oldham Times*.<sup>10</sup> By the time he launched the *Journal* Brierley was established as a member of the local intellectual elite and a founder member of the Manchester Literary Club.<sup>11</sup> Unlike most aspiring writers from the working class, he had escaped the poverty of factory work and was able to make a living by writing.<sup>12</sup> However, in his writing he continued to identify with, and draw on, his own experience of working class life. In particular, unlike the heroes of self-improving romance, he maintained that self-improvement and a commitment to dialect were compatible, indeed crucially linked.

Claims that the *Journal* had the largest circulation of any magazine in Manchester in the 1870s were frequently made, but the figures of 15,000 copies per issue after seven months and 10,000

advertising but also by recycling material, by writing a substantial proportion of each number himself, by including local aspirant writers who did not expect professional levels of payment, and by the well known journalistic device of scissors and paste, that is, copying from other print sources.<sup>15</sup> Another element in the success of the *Journal* was the exploitation of spin-offs, some of which followed well developed publishing routes, for example the production of a Christmas Annual. Then, as the annual summer visit to Blackpool or Morecambe Bay began to be established, there was the Seaside Annual. These were advertised in and drew attention to the *Journal*.<sup>16</sup> Heywood also produced two-penny pamphlets of the articles by Ab' o' th' Yate and a volume edition of the serialised Dictionary, which I discuss below.

Also, the public clearly liked the particular mix which Brierley offered them. The 12 pages he promised and continued to deliver drew on well established magazine publishing practices. In launching his New Series, Brierley claimed that the *Journal* offered 'an addition to Northern Literature' in which 'the novelist, the essayist, the poet, the savant and the antiquarian have each contributed their quota of instruction and amusement.'<sup>17</sup> As this suggests, the diet offered was of fiction – sometimes serialised but often in short story form – poetry, articles, book and periodical reviews (headlined in New Journalistic style 'Looks into Books' and 'Peeps into Periodicals'), jokes, snippets and extracts from other publications together with woodcut illustrations. Unusually perhaps, serialisation included serialised drama. The first few numbers of the *Journal* serialised Brierley's own play, 'The Lancashire Weaver Lad'.

Though the word 'science' followed literature in the title, the *Journal's* commitment to its readers' self-improvement did not include extended discussion on scientific topics as had, for example, the *Manchester Magazine*, which had adopted a more didactic tone. By contrast *Ben Brierley's Journal* stressed entertainment above instruction. Self-improvement was more often exemplified in potted biographies of working men than by reproducing scientific papers.<sup>18</sup> The *Journal* excluded party politics and was not allied with any specific religious grouping or sect. Brierley's account of his dialect alter ego, who represented the spirit of the *Journal*, was that 'i' politics he's a Liberal Conservative Radical ... i' religion he's an anythingarian', and this non-partisan position, delivered with self-deprecating humour, was characteristic of the *Journal* and part of its attraction.

Though the particular mix of ingredients may look like many other mid- to late-Victorian miscellanies, in *Ben Brierley's Journal* they were given a determinedly local flavour. This took several forms. Brierley himself claimed that materials for the magazine was always selected

first on their 'general merits; in the second place by the local interest attached to them; and in the third place by special, apart from local, interest.'<sup>19</sup> Thus stories and poems were often set in places which Lancashire readers would recognise. Sometimes the setting was purely incidental but more often it was crucial. Articles were often on local people, places or had some local connection.

Secondly, Brierley actively sought and encouraged local writers. Some of these were already established like Elijah Ridings, who contributed a couple of articles on 'The Objects of Literature' to the opening number.<sup>20</sup> But some were unknowns, working men and women, to whom Brierley offered the chance of publication. Fanny Forrester's poetry, for example, was introduced to readers in the March 1870 number as 'the production of a girl of 18 working at a dye works in Pendleton.'<sup>21</sup> Brierley continued to publish her work and encouraged readers to write to him with contributions for the magazine, though he also published harsh comments on offerings rejected as 'not up to our standard'.

Brierley never explicitly gave his definition of 'local'. Editorial comments tended to define the magazine as 'Northern' but this was a very different definition of 'Northern' from that of such periodicals as *Country Words; A North of England Magazine of Literature, Science and Art*, which was launched just before Brierley's *Journal* in 1866. Here the definition of 'Northern' suggested the rural north, an association explicitly invoked in Eliza Cook's opening poem.<sup>22</sup> Though nostalgia for a lost past represented by the countryside recurs as a theme, particularly in some of the poetry in Brierley's *Journal*, the local in his *Journal* was defined geographically in terms of urban Manchester with its satellite townships, and linguistically in terms of the dialect community.

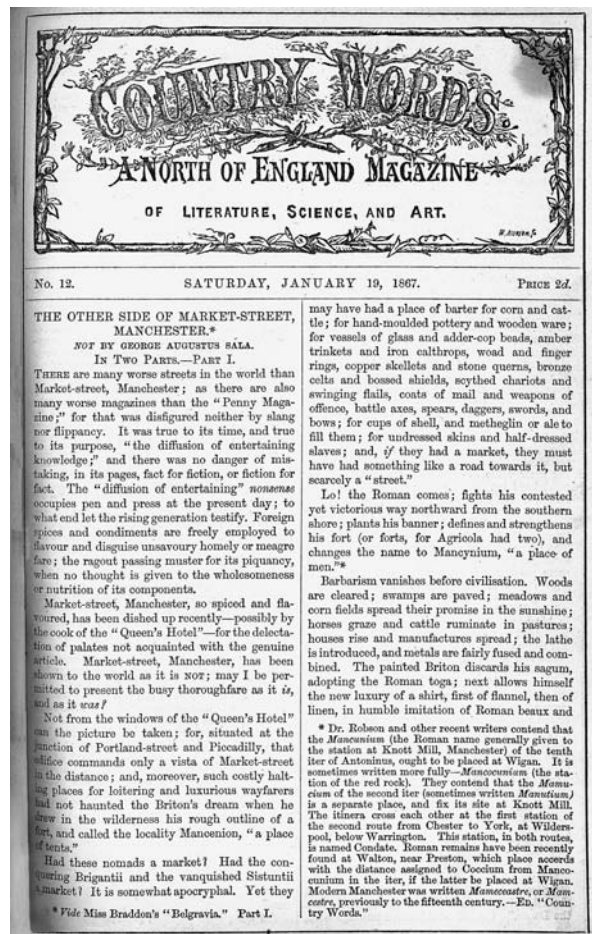
This stress on dialect writing, which brought together associations of locale and of class, was, I would argue, the most important characteristic of the *Journal*. Reviews and articles tended to be in Standard English, as was much – though not all – the poetry. Fanny Forrester, for example, though she almost certainly spoke the dialect, wrote in Standard English and in a well managed but conservative verse form. The novels and short stories which were written in Standard English often included dialogue in dialect. As well as the typical magazine mixture of genres and authorial voice, therefore, this *Journal* mixed Standard and dialect forms of English. In this respect it was, of course, not unique.

However, in *Ben Brierley's Journal* this mix was dramatically enacted in the double persona of the editor. As Ben Brierley, he wrote mainly in standard English – at least in prose. However, he developed an alternative dialect-speaking persona in the character called Ab-o'th'

Yate. The regular monologues written in the persona of Ab came to define the *Journal* and were its most distinctive and popular feature. Ab in his home at 'Walmsley Fowt' with Sal, 'th'owd rib' represented ordinary Lancashire folk. His persona was serio-comic, domestic, and committed to what in Lancashire were described as 'gradely' virtues, that is, virtues of good-fellowship, a sense of what was fitting, and domestic wisdom. He represented Brierley's imagined readers, the character they were invited to sympathise, if not identify, with.

Through the monologues of Ab-o'th' Yate, Brierley created for his readers what Benedict Anderson has called 'an imagined community'. He gave them identity as members of a Lancashire working class who were removed from the first hardships of the industrial revolution but still defined themselves in relation to that history.<sup>23</sup> In Ab-o'th' Yate Brierley celebrated the culture of ordinary Lancashire life. Ab visited Knott Mill fair, the 'Tobanical [sic] Gardens', the pantomime, the crowning of the May Queen (put back to June because it was so cold in May!), all of these rendered as rich aspects of the ordinary.<sup>24</sup> Above all, he celebrated dialogue as an appropriate, subtle, flexible form of language which enabled the writer to explore the particularities of Lancashire life in ways Standard English could not. The word 'gradely', for example, needed a whole phrase or more to render its meaning and then it lost the particular flavour of the Lancashire term. Brierley developed this idea in 'Ab-o'th' Yate's Dictionary, or Walmsley Faowt Skoomester. Put together by th' help of Fause Juddie', serialised in the *New Series Journal* from 1879. This gave definitions for both dialect and Standard English words in terms of Ab's own life and that of his Lancashire readership. In this Dictionary, which Heywood later reprinted, Brierley produced a serio-comic addition to the various dialect dictionaries beginning to appear and which were part of that national

Title page of  
*Country Words*,  
19 January 1867



upsurge of interest in dialect writing, folk song and local history in which Lancashire played an important part.<sup>25</sup>

It is significant that the dialect persona of Brierley was thoroughly masculine. His wife, th'owd rib, is praised but never allowed a direct voice. When women wrote in the *Journal* they tended to write in Standard English and of course the well known dialect poets were all men (Laycock, Bamford, Waugh and Brierley himself). The masculinisation of the regional persona seems to me important but needs to be understood as in a close but complex relationship with elements of class.

The meaning of dialect in the *Journal* is not at all straightforward and Brierley produced quite contradictory defences, sometimes defining dialect as the true voice of the people, sometimes explaining that it is a device to lift his hearers out of their barbarism by starting where they are and gradually elevating them into an appreciation of literature. This contradiction is only one of the complexities which construct the meaning of dialect in this and other late-nineteenth-century publications. Perhaps the most important of these complexities lay in the relationship of oral to literary in dialect writing. Dialect above all claimed to be the voice – literally – of the people, an essentially oral language. No discussion of *Ben Brierley's Journal* is complete without some account of the literal way in which Brierley enacted this understanding. Like Dickens, Brierley loved the public acting out of his writings. He developed a pattern of public readings from the *Journal* in which he dramatised the character of Ab. These readings not only created publicity for the *Journal*, they provided an important sales point for copies of the *Journal* and its spin-offs and in turn created new publishing opportunities as Abel Heywood published print versions of the readings. Brierley claimed that it was his public readings from the *Journal* which gave him such an advantage over his competitors.<sup>26</sup> In crossing over from the editor of a magazine to giving popular readings, Brierley was bringing together the publishing traditions of popular print with that other important tradition of working class culture which stretched from the penny gaffe to the music hall. Above all he asserted the oral nature of dialect.

Yet, the complexities of the relationship between the literary and the oral in relation to dialect writing should not blind us to the central fact that such writing was a literary device. Nor should the implicit argument that dialect was more authentic, more truly 'the voice of the people', blind us to the fact that Brierley was bi-lingual, moving between dialect and standard English, as did many of his contemporaries. For Brierley being a Lancashire man meant being a true Englishman and these two identities were held together, just as the dialect and Standard English writing appeared side by side on the

same page of the *Journal*. As Patrick Joyce has argued, what we have in *Ben Brierley's Journal* is a complex, rich and sometimes contradictory set of literary identities which are proudly local even though they are not exclusively so.<sup>27</sup> However, Joyce and others, I think, have underestimated the importance of the periodical in the creation of those identities. The peculiar nature of the periodical, its heterogeneity, the way it can bring and hold together very different genres, voices, and kinds of writing made it an ideal medium in which the continuities and discontinuities of a Manchester/Lancashire identity could be made. In *Ben Brierley's Journal*, metropolitan and local, Standard English and dialect, nostalgia for the past and a commitment to progress, all circulated together to create a local culture and a set of local identities for the late-Victorian period.

### Notes

1. '“The Metropolitan Editor's Song” By a Provincial Aspirant', *Cornhill Magazine*, NS 1 (1883), pp. 645–6.
2. J. H. Nodal and A. Heywood, 'Newspapers and magazines: their circulation in Manchester', *Manchester Literary Club Papers*, 2 (1876), pp. 33–56.
3. H. Friedericks, *The Life of Sir George Newnes* (1911), p. 82; F. Leary, *History of the Manchester Periodical Press*, unpublished MS in Manchester Central Reference Library Archives, p. 476.
4. Details of Brierley's biography can be found in *Evening Chronicle*, 23 Nov. 1910; J. R. Swann, *Lancashire Authors* (St Anne's on Sea, 1924), pp. 46–47; *Manchester Weekly Times*, 24 Jan. 1896.
5. Patrick Joyce's *Visions of the People: Industrial England and the Question of Class, 1840–1914* (Cambridge, 1991) offers a reading of this process.
6. *Ben Brierley's Journal* (hereafter *BBJ*), 2 July 1881, p. 212.
7. See T. Thomas, 'The Working Class in Fiction' in A. Kidd and K. W. Roberts (eds), *City, Class and Culture: Studies of Cultural Production and Social Policy in Victorian Manchester* (Manchester, 1985), p. 201.
8. Leary p. 325–6; see also *BBJ*, NS 13, p. 413.
9. Swann, *Lancashire Authors*, p. 45.
10. *Ibid*; *Manchester Evening Chronicle*, 23 Nov. 1910, article on Ben Brierley by F. Swindell.
11. J. H. Swann, *Manchester Literary Club: Some Notes on its History, 1862–1908*, p. 8.
12. Although even Brierley eventually relied on a public subscription. See endnote 10.
13. 'Notice: A few Facts for Advertisers', *BBJ*, Sept. 1875, unnumbered.
14. Leary, p. 326.
15. *BBJ*, 15 Jun. 1869, p. 23. Brierley admitted that he used this method when local offerings were in short supply.

16. See, for example, *BBJ*, NS 2 (1878), 2 Mar. 1868.
17. *BBJ*, NS 1 (1879), Preface, unnumbered page.
18. For example, the account of the mathematical genius 'Jack o' Ben's, in *BBJ*, NS 1 (1879), pp. 10–11. Interestingly this was reproduced from *Notes and Queries* demonstrating Brierley's recycling of material.
19. *BBJ*, 2 (1870), p. 120.
20. *BBJ*, 1 (1869), p. 1.
21. *BBJ*, 1 (March 1870), p. 4.
22. E. Cook, 'Country words', in *Country Words*, 1 (1866), p. 1.
23. B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (London, 1983), *passim*.
24. *BBJ*, 1 (1870), pp. 66–70; *BBJ*, NS 1 (1879), p. 188; *BBJ*, NS 2 (1880), p. 125.
25. I have discussed this more fully in '“Healthy reading”: the periodical press in late Victorian Manchester', in Kidd and Roberts, *City, Class and Culture*; pp. 167–192.
26. 'A few facts for Advertisers', *BBJ*, 16 (Mar. 1875), unpaginated.
27. Joyce, *Visions of the People*.