

The *Cotton Factory Times*, 1885–1937

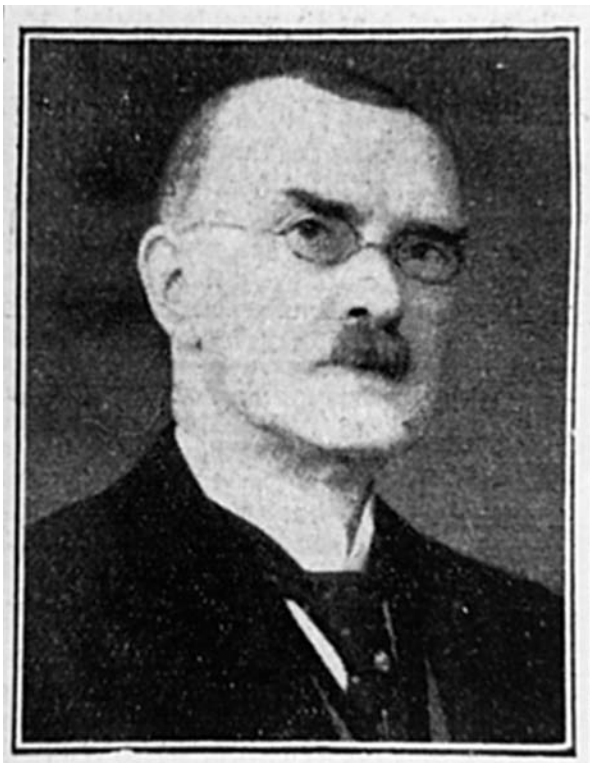
Eddie Cass

The *Cotton Factory Times* was founded by John Andrew, proprietor of the Ashton Reporter group of newspapers, in 1885 as a weekly newspaper for the Lancashire cotton operatives. The paper was launched with the help of the cotton unions, and, in particular, with the support of the Amalgamated Association of Operative Cotton Spinners whose officers included James Mawdsley, Secretary of the Amalgamation since 1878, and Thomas Ashton, Secretary of the Oldham Provincial Association and President of the Amalgamation. In the early years of the new weekly, Mawdsley and Ashton were key figures and provided much of the cotton union content of the paper.¹ The whole of the front page of the paper was given over to news of the union and to cotton union politics in general. Whilst he was alive, Mawdsley, himself, probably wrote most of the front page but after his death in 1902, it is likely that the task was assumed by Sam Taylor who became the paper's editor in 1903. Whilst the spinners played a dominant role in the life of the *Cotton Factory Times* (*CFT*), the weavers and the card-room workers were not ignored and their representatives, those of the weavers in particular, contributed to the paper's content as well as helping in the essential task of generating sales. It was this close relationship between the owners of the paper and the cotton unions, together with the extensive coverage of cotton matters in general which led historians of the industry to see the *CFT* as a union newspaper and to rely on it as a major resource when writing histories of the cotton industry and of its unions.² However, John Andrew had a somewhat different view of the role of his new weekly. In the foundation issue of the paper, he stated that 'The *Cotton Factory Times* will be found to be one of the best family newspapers in the kingdom.'³ This assertion was repeated regularly in the columns of the paper.

That the *CFT* was more than just a union paper was recognised by Mary Ashraf who described it as a 'literary periodical'.⁴ Unfortunately however, Ashraf did not substantiate her assertion or develop the point. It is only recently that any attempt has been made to analyse the contents of the paper and use some of the wide range of material which the paper carried in an attempt to understand its more general

appeal.⁵ Throughout the life of the *CFT*, the paper had a humour column. The structure and content of the column changed over the years as anonymous jokes used as fillers gave way to features by such writers as Sam Fitton and Alan Clarke under his many *noms de plume*; but it was from 1907 to 1933 when the paper carried its best loved column, 'Mirth in the Mill', made up of contributions from its readers, that the paper played its most significant role in the provision of mill humour. Similarly, it was the readership which provided most of the content of the poetry column which was a feature from 1885 until 1907 when it gave way to a childrens' column. It is now impossible to identify most of these non-professional poets although the *CFT* did provide an outlet for the English language poems of Robert Jones Derfel, a leading member of the Manchester Welsh community and a well known, and important, writer of poems and socialist pamphlets in Welsh. His English contributions to the columns of the *CFT* however, are still scarcely known in Wales.⁶ When the paper was launched, John Andrew promised the reader 'short stories', and short stories the reader had in the majority of issues. In the early years they seem to have been taken from American newspapers; this period gave way to a few years when they were written by authors such as Jack London, Arnold Bennett and E. Nesbit but in the years from 1917 to

Sam Taylor,
editor of the
*Cotton Factory
Times* 1903–33
(*CFT*, 18 January
1835)



1932 the short story was the principal literary mode used by non professional or semi professional writers, or at least by those writers who chose to avoid dialect, thus providing an important outlet for a section of its readership.

Whilst this broad literary content of the paper on its leisure pages was always a significant part of the enjoyment of the *CFT*, I have argued elsewhere that it was the serial fiction content which was of pre-eminent importance to the Lancashire readership.⁷ It is not possible to show direct causal links, but it can be shown that the highest sales figures for the *CFT* occur in the years in which the serial fiction content was at the highest. Moreover, it is in the publication

of serial fiction that John Andrew was to continue the innovative tradition established by his father in law, Edward Hobson, senior, who founded the *Ashton Weekly Reporter* in 1855, soon after the repeal of the newspaper taxes was announced.

Newspaper Fiction

Alan Lee suggests that the principal reason for introducing serialised fiction into provincial newspapers was to increase their 'entertainment' content.⁸ This would accord with the self image of many northern weekly papers including the *CFT* which described itself as 'The Finest Family and Commercial Newspaper'.⁹ There can be no



doubt about the popularity of the novel pages. No newspaper proprietor would devote as much space as that taken up by fiction in the *CFT* if it was not seen to be an aid to circulation:

John Andrew,
founder of the
*Cotton Factory
Times*

We know in some detail how serial novels were read, especially if they were popular. The paper would come in, perhaps an early edition on Friday evening, and people would grab it and turn to the serial page.¹⁰

There are similar memories from readers of the *CFT* such as this letter from J. R. Emmett at the time of the paper's 50th anniversary in 1935. At that time Emmett was Secretary of the Accrington Weavers:

I remember when I was a two-loom weaver there was considerable excitement in the mill about a new story, 'Hard Times' which was then appearing in the 'C.F.T.' My parents, being weavers, had been readers of the paper from its inception, and every Friday there used to be a friendly scramble as to who should have the first chance of looking at the paper. Naturally, among the younger people, the tale was the most important and interesting feature.¹¹

This might not be an accurate description of every Lancashire operative's home on a Friday evening but the selling power of the serial is clear. As Donaldson points out, it was a common ploy in

Scotland for newspaper proprietors to give away returned copies of a paper containing the first chapters of a new novel in the hope that readers would be so entranced with what they read that they would then purchase the next issues.¹²

The Hobson family, and the *Ashton Weekly Reporter* (AR), played a major role in developing the newspaper serial in Lancashire papers, a role which has so far been completely overshadowed by the presumed primacy of the Tillotson family of Bolton: ‘... the emergence of the serialised novel in the ordinary press ... began in 1871 in the Tillotsons’ weekly *Bolton Journal and Guardian*’.¹³ However, ten years earlier the AR had published a long short story, serialised over three issues from 6 July to 20 July 1861. This was ‘The Two Wills: Reminiscences of an Ex-attorney’s Clerk’ by S. C. Dukinfield.¹⁴ The story appears to have been commissioned by the paper as the heading of each chapter states that it was ‘Written for the Reporter’. This fact, whilst raising questions about who within the firm commissioned the story, does provide an insight into an innovative newspaper family’s approach to the content of their productions.¹⁵ Thereafter, serials were an important part of the leisure section of the AR until 1917 when news of local war casualties began to take precedence. Similarly with the *CFT*, the serial novel, almost invariably written by a professional writer, was the pre-eminent literary mode until the paper shortage during the First World War forced a reduction in the size of the paper. Until this time, the *CFT* published episodes of at least two and often three serials in each issue; as one serial was closing and another starting this could rise to episodes of four serials in an issue.

Serial Fiction in the *Cotton Factory Times*

In addition to its general role in the provision of serial novels, the *CFT*’s role in Lancashire newspaper fiction was important for two specific reasons. It continued to present its readers with the novels of David Pae, an author first introduced to Lancashire readers by Edward Hobson in the pages of the AR in 1863. Indeed, it is possible that Hobson was responsible for publishing this prolific author of newspaper serial fiction for the first time in any English newspaper.¹⁶ Secondly, the *CFT* was influential in the development of ‘factory fiction’ as a genre.

David Pae, born in 1828, was a Scot from a professional background who worked in the Edinburgh book, theatre and newspaper world.¹⁷ For a short time, he was the editor of the *Dunfermline Press* but in 1863 John Leng, recognising where his talents lay, gave him an exclusive contract to write serial fiction for the *Dundee Advertiser* group. From that time until his death in 1884, Pae wrote some 40 or more novels.

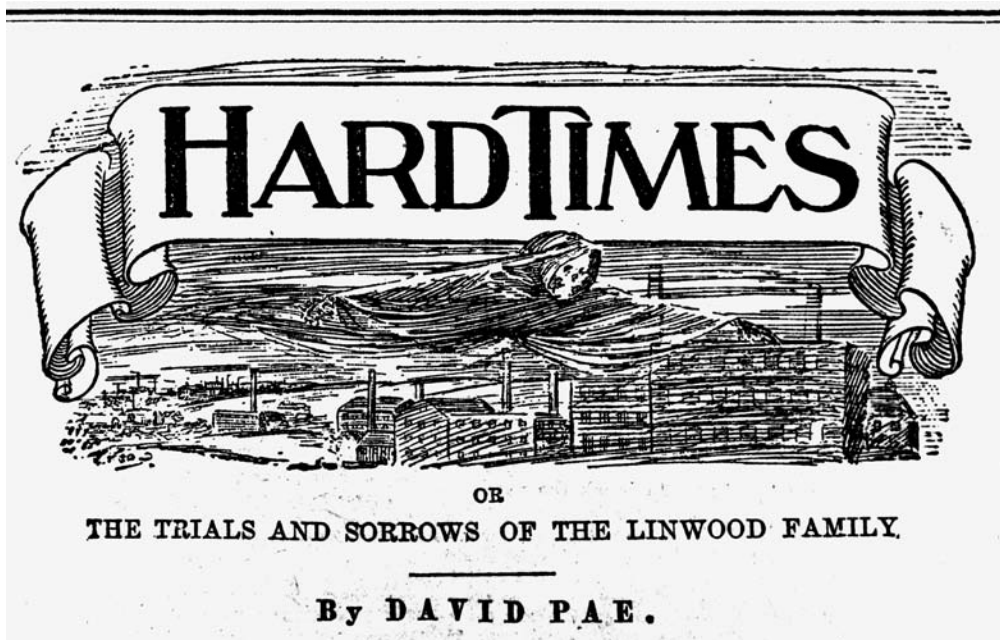
Andrew Stewart, Pae's colleague, friend, and obituarist, produced a list of these novels.¹⁸ It is impossible to be certain that this is a definitive list as most of Pae's novels were published anonymously. The majority of these fictions were first published in the pages of Leng's *People's Journal* or the *People's Friend*. The latter publication was a weekly fiction paper primarily produced for a working class, female readership in Scotland. Pae became editor of the paper in 1870 and remained editor until his death in 1884. Pae's serials were extensively syndicated and novels were not always published with the same titles in the various newspapers in which they appeared, which adds to the difficulty in compiling a full list of titles. In spite of the complexity of defining his total output, it has been suggested that Pae was one of the most widely read of all late Victorian novelists:

As for eminent names, thus (in another letter) writes Mr. Quail: 'William Black, James Payn, Walter Besant, and even Miss Braddon (whom we find fairly popular), cannot hold up a candle to David Pae.'¹⁹

Of his 40 novels, more than half were serialised in the pages of either the *AR* or the *CFT*, some of them in both and, rarely, on more than one occasion.

The first of Pae's fictions to be published in the *AR* was 'Very Hard Times; or, The Trials and Sorrows of the Linwood Family', which appeared from June to December of 1863; it was followed by a further 22 serials published between 1863 and 1886. The novel was an immediate success, probably in view of the fact that it was set in Manchester and, although primarily a melodrama, it dealt, in part, with the poverty associated with the cotton famine of the early 1860s. It was a subject matter which must have appealed to a local readership who would have been very aware of some of the background detail. It was this serial which Andrew chose to aid the launch of his new paper in 1885. Once again, the story was a success as was shown above. 'Hard Times' was serialised again in 1913, possibly in an attempt to stem a slide in sales, and it was the tale which was used on the fiction pages when the *CFT* was virtually re-launched in 1933 under the editorship of James Haslam.²⁰ Despite the continued popularity of this story, the re-launch was a failure and the paper closed in 1937.²¹

Most of the serialised fiction published in the *CFT* was identical in form and content to the novels being published in other newspapers, largely romances, silver-fork fictions and melodramas. It was written by authors such as William Le Queux, Dora Russell and Mrs Southworth and was either bought in from syndication agencies or taken from American newspapers. Andrew was, in effect, competing in the market place with other newspaper proprietors but often



Hard Times; or, The Trials and Sorrows of the Linwood Family, by David Pae, which originally appeared in the *Ashton Weekly Reporter* from June to December 1863

providing a greater quantity of fiction than was usual in most local periodicals. Andrew did, however, identify one niche market, that for the 'factory novel'. The genre can be divided into two main types. In the first, there is a missing son or daughter of a wealthy father in the central role, characters who are obviously recognised for what they really are before the end of the story. In the second, the heroine is a mill-girl who marries the factory owner after a series of trials and tribulations. Both the *AR* and the *CFT* ran these stories frequently, particularly the *CFT*, where some 25 per cent of all the novels serialised fall into this category. Whilst it is possible to see such a ratio as accidental, a more deliberate policy is likely. In America, similar novels were known eponymously as 'Laura Jean Libbeys' and were equally popular with a similar readership to that of the *CFT*. Four of Libbey's tales were serialized in the paper in the 1890s. The genre also became popular in the Edwardian period in books with a Lancashire setting written by such minor authors as H. Escott Inman, J. W. Kneeshaw and Caroline Masters.

Most of the writers published by the *CFT* appeared only once or twice. Three authors, however, appeared much more frequently and could be described as 'house novelists': Joe Burgess, who had six novels serialised, R. T. Casson, eighteen novels and Allen Clarke, six. 80 per cent of the output of these three novelists was 'factory fiction'. Such a high proportion might reflect the particular interests of the three writers but given the initial popularity of David Pae's 'Hard Times', a

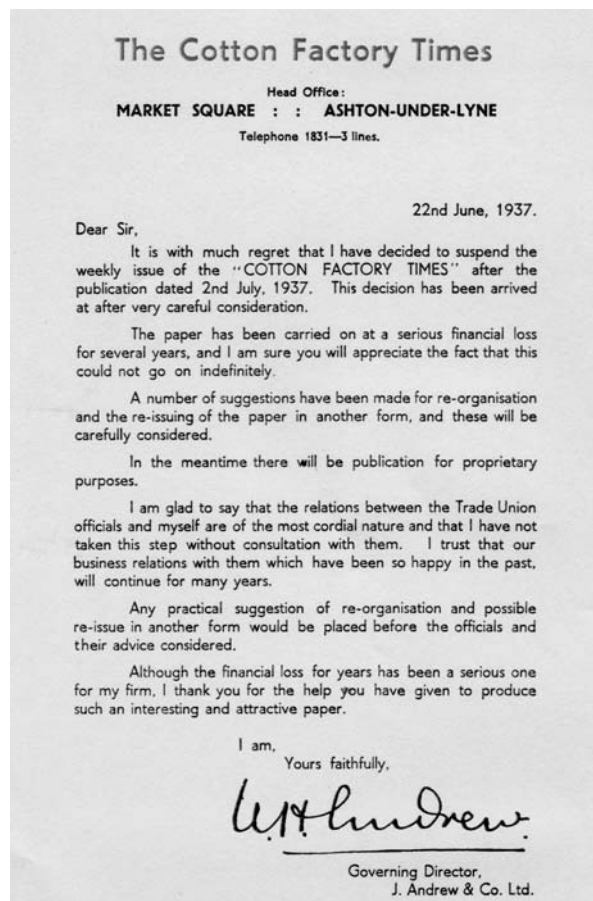
more conscious view of the *CFT*'s market by Andrew is a strong possibility. This argument is supported to some extent by the fact that of Casson's novels in the *CFT*, nearly 70 per cent were 'factory novels' whereas in the *AR*, where he was also serialised, only 25 per cent fall in this category. It would seem that Andrew *did* identify the importance of this genre of fiction for the readers of his new paper and set out to supply it in some quantity. He was, however, careful to ensure that it was relevant to the presumed readership of the paper. During the 1890s, J. Monk Foster wrote four stories in the *AR*. All were about coal mining in Lancashire. None of these novels was transferred to the cotton operatives' paper where only one of Foster's stories appeared and that was set in a textile factory. Andrew's control of the 'architecture' of the *CFT* clearly encompassed the nature of the fictions which the paper published, as well as ensuring that serial fiction in general was a key part of the leisure section of the paper.

The *Cotton Factory Times* was indubitably an influential paper within the cotton industry of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In 1906, Thomas Ashton, one of the cotton spinners' leaders who was involved in the launch of the paper could write:

Speaking with forty years' experience as a worker in the cause of Trade Unionism, I can, without hesitation, conscientiously declare that 'The Cotton Factory Times' has been instrumental in doing more good towards building up trades unionism among Textile Workers than any other movement started in their interest.²²

The paper was read not just by the operatives but by their employers who commented on what was written in the *CFT* in their own paper, the *Textile Mercury*, founded in 1889, largely because of the success of the operatives' weekly. The paper remains an essential resource

Circular
announcing the
imminent
closure of the
*Cotton Factory
Times*, UTFWA
correspondence,
Oldham Local
Studies Library,
TU 3/3/27



for historians of the industry. Nevertheless, we have the testimony of readers as to the place played in their leisure time by the reading matter in the *CFT*; we have the evidence that circulation was at its highest when the paper carried its extensive serial fiction. Furthermore, as the paper continued its seemingly inexorable decline in sales from the early years of the twentieth century, the temporary reversals coincided with the repeat serialisation of Pae's 'Hard Times' although there was also a lift in sales when Lancashire textile activity expanded briefly in the years after the Great War. We have to recognize that Andrew wanted a family newspaper and whilst he was prepared to give up the front page to the cotton unions, he kept tight control on the largest section of the paper and he, and later his sons, provided their operative readers with the best value in novel reading of any weekly Lancashire newspaper of the time.

Notes

1. For a detailed history of the launch of the *Cotton Factory Times* (*CFT*) and the roles of Mawdsley and Ashton, see E. F. Cass, *The Cotton Factory Times, 1885–1937. A Family Newspaper and the Lancashire Cotton Community* (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Lancaster), 1996, chap. 2.
2. See for example, K. Burgess, *The Origins of British Industrial Relations: The Nineteenth Century Experience* (London, 1975); A. Fowler, *Lancashire Cotton Operatives and Work, 1900–1950: A Social History of the Lancashire Cotton Operatives in the Twentieth Century* (Aldershot, 2003); A. and L. Fowler, *The History of the Nelson Weavers Association* (Nelson, n.d. [1985?]); A. Fowler and T. Wyke, *The Barefoot Aristocrats: A History of the Amalgamated Association of Operative Cotton Spinners* (Littleborough, 1987); J. L. White, *The Limits of Trade Union Militancy: The Lancashire Textile Workers, 1910–1914* (Westport, CT, 1978).
3. *CFT*, 16 Jan. 1885.
4. P. M. Ashraf, *Introduction to Working Class Literature in Great Britain*, Part 1 (Berlin, 1978), p. 51.
5. E. Cass, 'Factory fiction in the *Cotton Factory Times*', *Manchester Region History Review*, 8, 1994, pp. 32–43. E. F. Cass, *The Cotton Factory Times*; A. Fowler and T. Wyke, 'Tickling Lancashire's Funny Bone: The Cartoons of Sam Fitton', *Transactions of the Lancashire and Cheshire Antiquarian Society*, 89, 1995; P. Joyce, *Visions of the People: Industrial England and the Question of Class* (Cambridge, 1991); P. Joyce, *Democratic Subjects: The Self and the Social in Nineteenth-Century England* (Cambridge, 1994).
6. E. Cass, 'Robert Jones Derfel: A Welsh Poet in the *Cotton Factory Times*', *Llafur*, 7:1, 1996, pp. 53–67.
7. E. F. Cass, *The Cotton Factory Times*.

8. A. J. Lee, *The Origins of the Popular Press in England, 1855–1914* (London, 1976), p. 129.
9. See, for example, *The Newspaper Press Directory and Advertisers' Guide* (London, 1909), p. 491.
10. W. Donaldson, *Popular Literature in Victorian Scotland: Language, Fiction and the Press* (Aberdeen, 1986), p. 86.
11. *CFT*, 18 Jan. 1935.
12. Donaldson, *Popular Literature*, p. 97.
13. Lee, *The Origins of the Popular Press*, p. 129.
14. The manuscript *Ashton Reporter* Index, Stalybridge Acc. 2543, in an entry for 6 July 1861, states that 'The Two Wills, story of the late strike' had commenced publication. This index appears to have been written retrospectively, and the story does not relate to the Stalybridge dispute of 1861 despite the implications.
15. Given their Chartist past, the Hobson family must have been aware of the serials which appeared in the Chartist Press of the 1840s; see I. Haywood (ed.), *The Literature of Struggle: An Anthology of Chartist Fiction* (Aldershot, 1995), *passim*; and G. Klaus, *The Literature of Labour: Two Hundred Years of Working Class Writing* (Brighton, 1985), pp. 46–61.
16. G. Law, *Serializing Fiction in the Victorian Press* (Basingstoke, 2000), p. 59.
17. For details of Pae's life and career, see Donaldson, *Popular Literature*, pp. 77–99.
18. Donaldson, *Popular Literature*, pp. 163–4.
19. W. Westall, 'Newspaper fiction', in *Lipincott's Magazine*, 45, 1890, p. 81.
20. The title was also published by the firm in book form, twice, in 1886 from the *CFT*'s standing type.
21. For details of the decline and closure of the *CFT*, see E. Cass, A. Fowler and T. Wyke, 'The remarkable rise and long decline of the *Cotton Factory Times*', *Media History*, 4:3, 1998, pp. 141–60.
22. T. Ashton, *Wages and other Movements, etc., in the Oldham Province, from 1868 to 1906* (Oldham, privately published, 1906), pp. 42–3.