INTRODUCTION

THE ILLUSTRATED LONDON NEWS AND NINETEENTH-CENTURY JAPAN

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Some years ago, I was fortunate to have access to a complete run of the nineteenth-century published issues and supplements of The Illustrated London News (ILN). All volumes carried an index, but experience soon taught that this did not guarantee complete cross-referencing to Japan-related articles and illustrations in the text. Over several months, therefore, I carried out the arduous, but fascinating task of leafing through each volume, and thereby discovering many additional references that would otherwise have escaped notice. Each volume consisted of six months’ bound issues and comprised more than 600 pages. Each page measured approximately 40 x 28 cm, and invariably contained text with very small print. It would therefore be rash to claim that of the approximate 60,000 pages viewed, all references to Japan were found. Nevertheless, I am confident that the number of omissions, if any, will prove to be small.

No serious scholar of nineteenth-century Western-Japanese relations can ignore the ILN as a resource. It was a remarkable periodical, the publishing success story of the Victorian era. The historian Arthur Bryant suggested in the newspaper’s centenary issue of 1942 that the accumulated volumes to date were ‘. . . probably the most important and comprehensive single historical document ever compiled’. Although launched at a time when the British Empire was at its height, and other nations were inevitably judged against Britain’s own social, economic, religious and military standards, the ILN newspaper was liberal and neutral in its political outlook. No doubt influenced by the proprietor’s own modest upbringing, the ILN was sympathetic to the plight of the working-class poor and, compared to other newspapers of the day, far more balanced in its coverage and representation of domestic issues and foreign affairs. In the second issue, dated 21 May 1842, the editors set the tone:

We shall be less deeply political than earnestly domestic . . . Our business will not be with the strife of party, but with what attacks or ensures the home life of the empire; with the household gods of the English people, and, above all, of the English poor; with the comforts, the enjoyments, the affections, and the liberties, that form the link of that beautiful chain which should be fashioned at one end of the cottage, at the other of the palace, and be electric with the happiness that is carried into both . . . Three essential elements of discussion with us will be the poor laws, the factory laws, and the mining system in those districts of our soil which nature has caverned with her treasures, and cruelty disfigures with its crime.

The world’s first illustrated newspaper was successfully launched on 14 May 1842. However, its immediate success did not go unnoticed and a succession of competitors, home and abroad, were spawned. These included the Pictorial Times (1843); L’Illustration (1843); the Illustrated Times (1855); Leslie’s Illustrated Paper (1855); the Penny Illustrated Paper (1861); The Graphic (1869); the Pictorial World (1874). In Britain, the Illustrated Times looked as though it would be a serious competitor, so Ingram bought the newspaper and merged it in with his own. The Graphic, with its somewhat higher-quality engravings, would become an enduring rival, though not quite commanding the same circulation. The development of half-tone printing eventually enabled popular daily newspapers like the Daily Graphic (1890) to compete. This newspaper became the first daily to include photographic illustrations and sketches.
The ILN’s publishing dominance spanned the second half of the nineteenth century – the period with which this book is concerned. Before commenting on the way in which it presented Japan, it is worth looking at how the paper started, and the driving-force behind its creation – Herbert Ingram.

BIRTH OF THE ILLUSTRATED NEWSPAPER

Herbert Ingram was born of poor parents in Boston, Lincolnshire in 1811. Within a year his father, a butcher, had died leaving an impoverished wife with the difficult task of caring for Herbert and his older sister. After leaving the local elementary school at the age of fourteen, Herbert became apprenticed to the owner of a Boston printing business. Finishing his apprenticeship at the age of twenty-one, he moved to London in 1832 where he continued to work in the printing trade for two years. It was there that he made a number of useful contacts and learned something of the operations of the newspapers in Fleet Street. The ambitious Ingram then moved north to Nottingham to set up a printing business and partnership with Nathaniel Cooke who, at around this time, became his brother-in-law. The business also sold newspapers and books.

Ingram became involved in distributing medicines, an unrelated but profitable sideline. He somehow became the sole distributor for the supposed life-prolonging Parr’s Life Pills, supposedly invented by Thomas Parr who allegedly died in 1635 at the age of 152. Due to effective, if questionable, marketing techniques Ingram made large profits and began to turn his attention to using them to help realize his dream of founding a newspaper.

Ingram noticed that the customers of his newsagent’s business had a strong appetite for London news and were particularly interested when a newspaper carried news of royalty or notorious crimes. This interest was greatly increased when it carried the occasional illustration. Ingram’s original intention seems to have been to establish a London-based, tabloid-type, illustrated newspaper, targeted for mass circulation. However, when he and Cooke moved down to London some of his friends persuaded him to focus on a more serious, broadsheet-type production.

Like most successful entrepreneurs Ingram was not afraid to take risks, and could be ruthless. He was charismatic, energetic and very ambitious with a genuine flair for marketing and a knack for gathering around him a team of talented individuals. One of these was the newspaper’s first editor, Frederick William Naylor Bayley (1808–52), who instilled a high moral tone in the very first editorial – also promising to promote art and literature. Ingram hired some of the best writers, artists and engravers. He invested in, and pioneered, new printing technologies. Crucially, he devised and implemented a brilliant launch strategy that helped to secure the newspaper’s immediate success. Coupled with this was Ingram’s awareness of how current external events could be manipulated to increase sales. In 1860, at the height of his fame, the then Liberal MP for Boston took a holiday in America with his oldest son, Herbert. Taking passage on the steamer Lady Elgin, the ship was caught in a storm on Lake Michigan and capsized. The forty-nine-year-old Ingram and his fifteen-year-old son were drowned.

LAUNCH STRATEGY

In March 1842, Ingram produced and distributed to the public a million copies of a prospectus announcing the launch of a ‘New Weekly Journal’. The newspaper would contain sixteen pages with thirty engravings and forty-eight columns of news and, at sixpence a copy (around £1.60 in current prices), would be targeted at the middle and upper classes. Ingram knew that this would make his newspaper too expensive for the working-class readers of the radical Sunday papers with their sensational crime coverage. The prospectus went on to say that the newspaper had engaged many of the best artists in every important town in England and the Continent. Thinking about retaining circulation continuity, Ingram demonstrated his marketing genius: he would offer a free gift to all subscribers who regularly purchased the newspaper for the first six months. The gift would be a grand engraved panorama of London, 91 cm high and 183 cm wide – to be known as the ‘Colosseum Print of London’.

The first issue was due out on Saturday 14 May 1842. Knowing that a fancy dress ball was scheduled to be held at Buckingham Palace on 12 May, Ingram arranged for an artist, John Gilbert, to use his imagination in working up a double-page spread of eight pictures portraying the known guests in their costume characters. Queen Victoria, for example, was to dress as her four-
teenth-century predecessor, Queen Phillipa. In addition, a disastrous fire had broken out in Hamburg on 5 May, and the news arrived in London by steamship on 10 May. Ingram immediately despatched an artist to the British Museum where a print of Hamburg was copied onto a wood block with the artist adding an imagined conflagration, plumes of smoke and watching crowds. The picture was engraved, text added and the dramatic front page for the first issue was ready to print. And that was not all: other news items included a serious railway accident near Paris; a steamboat explosion in America; criminal cases heard at the Central Court; and war in Afghanistan. There were also several pages of advertisements, notes on the Royal Academy Exhibition and illustrations of the latest Paris fashions.

When the first issue went on sale, demand was greater than expected and 26,000 copies were sold. However, its popularity continued to rise and by 1855 the weekly circulation reached 200,000. A peak of 310,000 was reached in 1863 with the issue covering the marriage of the Prince of Wales. To put these circulation figures into perspective, in 1863 popular newspapers such as the Daily News sold only 6,000 copies. The most popular daily, The Times, sold 70,000.

THE ILLUSTRATIONS

Before the arrival of the ILN, other newspapers had included illustrations from time to time. In 1838, The Observer included an engraving of Queen Victoria's coronation, and followed this up two years later with another of her wedding. The same year, The Weekly Chronicle enjoyed large sales when it published pictures over several issues of the murder of Hannah Brown and the subsequent trial. This use of pictures inspired Ingram to launch a newspaper that was illustrated as a matter of course.

At that time, illustrations were produced as woodcuts. The box tree, which is found in a number of countries, has a trunk that grows to a diameter of about 18 cm; it is close-grained, smooth and hard. Slices from the trunk would be cut, and the bark would be removed. Rectangles of around 13 cm were then cut, and the surface smoothed still further. Artists would next draw an image directly onto the block, which would then be ready for engraving. The engraver would use a sharp cutting tool to remove small pieces of wood, thus creating whites or tints between the darker lines. The text and captions were handset, letter by letter.

When whole or double-page illustrations were required, several blocks of wood would be bolted together before they were passed to the artist. When the artist was finished, the blocks would be separated again and passed to a number of engravers who would each be responsible for engraving a block. The finished blocks would then be re-bolted and in this way much time was saved. This necessarily close symbiosis between artist and craftsman often produced engravings of outstanding artistic merit. The skill and craftsmanship required of an engraver, however, is now largely forgotten and all but extinct in this age of the computer-generated image. It is necessary to look at one of these engravings through a magnifying glass to fully appreciate the time, effort and sheer artistry that went into producing these pre-photographic images. And, since newspapers have deadlines, artists and engravers would often have to work at breakneck speeds in order to meet weekly publishing schedules.

THE USE OF PHOTOGRAPHY

The first commercially viable photographic process, the daguerreotype, was introduced in 1839. Ingram had promised that loyal subscribers would receive the Colosseum Print of London and he engaged the famous photographer, Antoine Claudet, who climbed the 38 metre-high Duke of York's Column with his daguerreotype equipment. Claudet obtained a sequence of views of both north and south London. The developed plates were then laid in lines and an artist, C. F. Sargent, drew the images onto the surface of a huge woodblock consisting of some sixty boxwood pieces which had been tightly joined together. It took a large team of engravers two months to complete the largest engraving ever made. The picture was supplied with the ILN issue of 7 January 1843. It was a huge success and helped to cement the future success of the publication.

Nevertheless, the Colosseum print and woodcut engravings could not match the original realism of photography. By the late 1880s and early 1890s, however, a revolutionary process known as half tone was introduced and this enabled photographs to be reproduced directly onto paper, by using a screen of dots. The ILN employed this method for the first time in 1887. Although half tones were a dramatic improvement on existing technologies, it was not until the introduction of the
photogravure process in 1911 that sharp, clear, photographic likenesses could appear on the printed page.

THE JAPAN COVERAGE

The ILN’s coverage of Japan certainly shaped and influenced its readers’ awareness and understanding of the country and its people. The reports and images that Charles Wirgman, the paper’s resident artist and correspondent in Japan, returned to London were critical in this regard. The ILN was the world’s first illustrated newspaper, and images of Japan were still a novelty. With the immediacy and ubiquity of present-day visual media it is difficult to appreciate, more than 160 years later, the impact and effect of such pictorial representations and reports.

Although the ILN commenced publication in 1842, the first Japan-related article was not until 7 May 1853 when Commodore Perry’s expedition to Japan was generating significant interest around the world. Two years earlier, the ILN had reported on the visit of a British ship to the Ryukyu Kingdom (Okinawa), but at that time Okinawa’s status was ambiguous.

We know little of the earliest contributors on Japan. Some stories and sketches seem to have come from members of the various American and British naval expeditions to Japan, and the ILN used similar reports in later years. Others may well have been concocted in the editorial offices, based on published reports, or on personal observation of events such as an 1854 exhibition of Japanese artefacts in London. With the arrival in Japan in April 1861 of Charles Wirgman, who was already an established correspondent and artist for the paper, however, the ILN had a more regular supply of information and pictures of a country very little known in the West.

CHARLES WIRGMAN

A Sympathetic Observer

Between the years 1861 and 1887, Charles Wirgman (1832–91) was the major contributor of Japanese reports and sketches to the ILN; and as his name has become almost synonymous with Japan-related coverage in this newspaper, it is worth giving an outline of his life and career. Wirgman’s sympathetic observations of Japan and her people, contained in the entertaining and whimsical accounts he sent back to London, certainly shaped and influenced the way ordinary readers and policy makers perceived the country. It is also very likely that many Western tourists and merchants were encouraged to go to Japan as a direct result of reading Wirgman’s sometimes Arcadian depictions of life in that far-off, seemingly exotic land.

Wirgman arrived in Japan in April 1861 as a correspondent and artist for the ILN. He was immediately enchanted by the country and, apart from a few short trips to Europe and China, spent the next thirty years there until his death in Yokohama in 1891. The majority of his reports spanned the 1860s – a critical period in Japan’s history – followed by a handful in the next two decades, with a final report in 1887. He was an important eye-witness to many of the key events in Japan during a time of great political, economic and social upheaval. Wirgman also witnessed the development and modernization of a country that moved, at breakneck speed, from being an isolated, introspective and feudal society to one that had become, by the time of his death, the most important economic and military power in the Far East. No country in history had moved so far and so fast as Japan had; and Wirgman, with his thirty years’ residence, was in the ideal position to observe and comment. That he was also a very skilful artist, writer and satirist, means that Wirgman’s written and pictorial output, in the ILN and elsewhere, is of real significance when it comes to trying to understand what was happening in Japan during the second half of the nineteenth century.

Early Life

Wirgman was born in England on 31 August 1832, the eldest son of Ferdinand Charles Wirgman (1806–58) and Frances Letitia (née Brereton) (ca.1812–?). From the parish records held at the London Metropolitan Archives, it can be seen that Charles and his sister Adelaide were baptized at the Old Church, St. Pancras, London, and, although the records are a little ambiguous on this point, both appear to have been born at Timbersham Lodge, Charlwood, Surrey. His parents were married in 1830, also in the Old Church, and subsequently had children in several European countries. This, combined with the Wirgman’s spending a number of years outside the UK, makes the family tree somewhat complicated and difficult to construct. Various sources give conflicting
names and dates concerning Charles' siblings, but I have been able to confirm the following, albeit
without carrying out any further in-depth research: Charles was the oldest son and he had at least
two brothers and two sisters – Thomas Ernest (1834–1907); Theodore Blake (1848–1925);
Adelaide (1830–?) and Helen Augusta (1843–?).

According to John Clark, a noted Wirgman expert, Charles' family moved to France in 1835
where the father, Ferdinand, studied as a veterinary surgeon. It seems as though the family moved
around Europe for a number of years thereafter since Helen was born in Germany in 1843 and
Theodore in Belgium in 1848. Also, the UK census for 1851 does not seem to show any of the
immediate family members living in England. Charles' father died in 1858, but his mother was still
alive when the 1881 UK Census was taken.

Charles was certainly fluent in several European languages, and it seems that he had benefited
from a classical education in having a reasonable knowledge of Latin and Greek. He later acquired
some expertise in Chinese and Japanese – the latter to interpreter standard. Exactly where he was
educated, however, is not known. It is likely, although not certain, that he received some profes-
sional art training. Wirgman never became a great artist, but he was extremely talented - certainly
talented enough to secure the ILN position that took him to China.

**China Assignment: 1857–61**

By early 1857, Wirgman had been offered an assignment by the ILN. The issue for 18 April 1857
notes that: ‘We have received the following communication from the Artist and Correspondent
whom we have dispatched to the localities of the War with China.’ Wirgman was assigned to travel
to China in order to provide illustrated reports on the seemingly inevitable war between that coun-
try and Britain. Wirgman’s first report in the same issue, headed ‘En Route For China’, was sent
from Malta, dated 14 March. That, and subsequent issues, contained reports and illustrations of
Malta, Egypt, Suez and Aden, including Wirgman’s first report from Hong Kong on 12 May 1857.
From then, until early 1861, Wirgman followed the British forces during their various military
campaigns in China, apparently demonstrating considerable coolness under fire in more than one
dangerous situation. Many of his sketches were published in the ILN, together with a number of
reports. The ILN must have decided to send him next to Japan, because on 25 April 1861, he
landed at Nagasaki.

**Japan: 1861–91**

Wirgman’s first report from Japan is dated 19 May 1861: ‘After the recent events in Japan a few
sketches from this country may prove interesting to your readers. I shall therefore wander about in
search of the picturesque, and forward to you the most characteristic ones by every opportunity.’
He went on to give a charming description of Nagasaki, and on 1 May, set off on a five-day jour-
ney by sea to Kanagawa. But by 1 June, he was back in Nagasaki and ready to make an overland
trip to Edo (Tokyo) with the British Minister, Rutherford Alcock and his staff, together with the
Dutch Consul.

On the evening of 5 July, the day after reaching the Legation, sword-wielding Japanese assassins
attacked the building with the aim of killing Alcock. Although the attackers were driven off, it was
at the cost of the lives of several of the Japanese and British guards and Wirgman and the Legation
staff had a narrow escape. Wirgman’s report is as cool as ever, giving the impression that the expe-
rience, although awful, was one he had taken in his stride. However, in a little-known autobiogra-
phy by Sir Henry F. Woods, *Spunyarn*, published in 1924, a different version of
Wirgman’s conduct emerges. Woods, a senior naval officer visiting Japan just a few months after
the affair, wrote:

I was also told of the great struggle to keep poor Wirgman, the artist of the Illustrated
London News, who was a guest at the Legation at the time, from throwing himself into
the tank reservoir in the madness of his terror. He had been sitting in the garden, and
when the attack was made, crawled under a large bush with the idea of keeping out of
view until the fighting was over. When the arrival of the Japanese guard had put an end
to the fray, the ‘roll-call’ was made, and Wirgman did not appear. He was nowhere about
the Legation building, and so a search was made for his body in the grounds, under the
impression that he must have fallen a victim to the assassins. At last one of the searchers
espied a pair of legs sticking out from under a flowering bush, and with the exclama-
‘Oh, here is the dead body!’ began pulling at the legs to draw it out. Yells and shrieks fol-
rowned, with violent kicking of the said legs. It was in verity Wirgman’s body, but very much alive and strong with the strength of delirious fear. They got him out from under the bush by main force and still struggling to get away, unable in the terror of a cruel death that had mastered his brain, to recognize his friends and to understand that he was in their hands and in safety

The reader will note that Wirgman’s own account of proceedings is somewhat different! In defence of Wirgman, it has to be said that Woods was writing, apparently from memory, some sixty-three years after the event, and no contemporary accounts refer to Wirgman’s behaviour in such negative terms. Wirgman had faced danger already in China. However, Woods’ account does raise questions.

Much as Wirgman’s early reports of Japan tried to lay emphasis on the beauty of Japan’s landscape and the friendliness of her people, the 1860s was a time of bitter internal political struggles and a number of foreigners and prominent Japanese were murdered. Wirgman was perhaps in two minds when he was recalled to London by the ILN in March 1862. It is unclear whether he intended to return to Japan but, by May 1862, when his illustrated satirical magazine, Japan Punch, began publication, he was back in Yokohama. This magazine, which lampooned local dignitaries and life in Yokohama, was popular with the local foreign residents and appeared intermittently until March 1887.

When Wirgman returned to Japan it is possible that his ILN retainer ceased and he became a freelance journalist. However, he is still described as ‘Our Special Artist at Yokohama’, right up until 1880. It is true that his reports become less frequent from the 1870s, and he was no doubt supplementing his income with sales of Japan Punch, and the Japanese art students he took on as pupils. He may also have engaged, as John Clark has speculated, in other trading or commercial activities. Wirgman never had a monopoly on reports and illustrations of Japan used by the ILN. During the 1870s, the ILN made use of the drawings of William Simpson, who submitted material about China and Japan, and who was sometimes described as ‘Our Special Artist’. Simpson also wrote an illustrated article on hairstyles and hats in the Far East, which was published in 1894. The French artist, Félix Régamey, who also visited Japan in the 1870s, had some sketches published. From time to time, the ILN published illustrations provided by other contributors who were passing through the country – British naval officers were frequent contributors. Stories and pictures about the Japanese in Europe were presumably made up in the London office.

In 1887, Wirgman returned briefly to Europe, possibly for medical attention. When he returned to Japan in December of the same year, it seems his health was failing and there is no evidence he produced any commercial work after that date. He died at Yokohama General Hospital on 8 February 1891. His Japanese wife, Ozawa Kane, and a son survived him.

**Personality and Significance**

Wirgman was not as gifted an artist as his brother, the Victorian portrait painter Theodore Blake Wirgman, but he was nevertheless a very talented and competent amateur. He trained a number of Japanese artists in Western watercolour and portrait techniques and some of these artists, such as Goshida Yoshimatsu (1847–1915) and Takahashi Yuichi (1828–94) went on to become well-known. Visiting Western artists sought his company, when in Japan, and Wirgman seems to have acted as a conduit and introducer between Western and Japanese artists. John Clark has written at length on the significance of such contacts – both for Western and Japanese art.

His engaging personality, intelligence, and slightly eccentric behaviour gained him many friends amongst the resident foreign merchants, as well as the diplomatic corps. Amongst these were the equally eccentric Felix Beato, a famous photographer, and the scholar and diplomat, Sir Ernest Satow. It is likely that Beato, with whom Wirgman was in partnership between 1865 and 1867, was his closest friend, and he often playfully parodied the photographer as ‘Count Collodian’ in the Japan Punch. It seems that they may have fallen out, however, since Beato is not mentioned in the magazine after November 1882: departing noted residents were invariably drawn with their suitcases in hand and being waved goodbye by tearful friends; this did not happen when Beato left Japan in 1884.

Many visitors to Japan, who left written accounts of their travels, were generally complimentary about Wirgman’s character and artistic output. One exception was the impressions the amateur artist Alice Mary Rea left in her diary, now in the Yokohama Archives of History. In a diary entry for 21 December 1881, she wrote that Wirgman lived in a ‘. . . shabby little house. . .he talked a
great deal of nonsense and seemed half cracked – said he remained in Japan in order to be as far-away as possible from his relatives and regretted that he was within reach of them by telegram!' A few months earlier, however, Wirgman’s friend, Ernest Satow, now Japanese Secretary at the Legation, noted in his diary that Wirgman had come to dinner with other old friends and that it was ‘. . . quite like old times to see the former, who is by no means in his dotage, as people like to pretend’. Perhaps Wirgman played to his audience.

CONCLUSION

Wirgman contributed sketches and reports for just over twenty-five years and had a genuine affection for Japan and the Japanese. John Clark quotes from a 1876 sketchbook of the artist: ‘There are some countries one gets tired of but Japan is as fresh today as it was the first time Punch saw it.’ At the same time as Charles Wirgman was passing from the scene, perhaps the readers of the ILN were beginning to view Japan in a different light. It had certainly ceased to become the exotic and unknown location it once was. It was increasingly seen as a rapidly modernizing nation that had become the major military power in Asia. Evidence of this would manifest itself in the coming conflict of 1894–95 when Japan would inflict a crushing defeat on China.

Nevertheless, there were no doubt some readers for whom Japan was still a Wirgmanian fairy-tale land of cherry-blossoms and geishas, where everyone lived peaceful and contented lives. Any such wistful notions would have been shattered just a few years later when Japan astounded the world by comprehensively, and aggressively beating a major European power in the 1904–05 Russo-Japanese War. Coverage of that event was so extensive that it seemed to take over the whole periodical. There are more Japan-related illustrations in just those two years of conflict than in the whole of the previous fifty.

A hundred years ago the readers of the ILN would have been unsure what to make of this emergent Asian power. Has anything really changed? We have perhaps now taken for granted Japan’s metamorphosis, some twenty years or so ago, into the world’s second-largest economy. What will the future of Japan be? Perhaps some of the answers lie in her recent past – and therefore in the pages of this book.

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