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Militant cynicism: Rethinking *Private Eye* in postwar Britain, ca. 1960–80

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Abstract

This article seeks to rethink the nature and significance of the fortnightly magazine *Private Eye* during its first two decades. Existing accounts have interpreted it almost exclusively through the lens of the “satire boom” (1961–63), and suggest that, in the final analysis, the magazine neither desired nor advanced any substantial critique of the political status quo. Besides neglecting its investigative facets, among other elements, these readings make the mistake of seeking to frame the significance of the magazine in conventional ideological terms. This article puts these neglected elements back into the picture and argues that the magazine is best understood as enacting a militant form of the kind of cynicism—at once outrageous and morally outraged—analyzed by Peter Sloterdijk and Michel Foucault, and other scholars in their wake. This provides a much more satisfying account of the many facets of *Private Eye* as these evolved during the 1960s and 1970s, including its affinities with various currents in postwar journalism and countercultural expression. Above all, it allows us to recast the politics of *Private Eye* as a form of moral protest that was expressed in the assumption of an intrinsically antagonistic relation toward “politics” and authority per se.

No other current affairs magazine in postwar or contemporary British history has enjoyed as much popularity, or garnered as much notoriety, as *Private Eye*. Established in 1961 amid the so-called “satire boom,” and now in its seventh decade, the *Eye*’s general formula has remained much the same since the mid-1960s, when it began offering a unique mix of satirical comedy and cartoons, leaked stories and elite gossip, and individual pieces of investigative journalism. It could not have endured in this fashion had it not enjoyed such good sales. Although its circulation fluctuated during the early 1960s, it stabilized at roughly 50,000 for the rest of the decade, before climbing to 100,000 in the mid-1970s. By the 1980s circulation had reached 150,000, dwarfing that of conventional current affairs magazines such as the *New Statesman* and *The Spectator*.¹ It presently stands at an impressive 230,000 and throughout seems to have attracted an unusually diverse, politically eclectic readership, from City traders to left-wing activists.² At the same time, no other magazine has been sued for libel quite so many times (at least ninety-two cases between the mid-1960s and mid-1990s) and none has helped to break as many major national scandals. The Profumo affair (1963) is one instance, but others, in a long and varied roll call, include the collapse of Ronan Point

¹ Patrick Marnham, *The Private Eye Story* (London, 1982), 167–75.

² Marnham, *Private Eye Story*, 185–86.

tower block (1968), the corrupt business dealings of architect John Poulson (1970–72), Cabinet minister Cecil Parkinson’s extramarital “lovechild” (1983), and the Bristol hospital heart scandal (1994).³ Journalistic celebrations of the *Eye*’s status as a peculiar British “institution” first emerged in the late 1970s and have appeared ever since.⁴ For anything remotely resembling the *Eye*, one still has to look across the Channel, to France’s much older *Le Canard enchaîné*.

Much of “the *Eye* story” has been thoroughly documented in a medley of insider accounts, biographies of key players, and popular histories.⁵ We have some especially rich accounts of its genesis during the “boom” years of 1961–63, as it emerged alongside three other iconic ventures: the touring revue *Beyond the Fringe*, the Soho-based Establishment nightclub, and the BBC sketch show *That Was the Week that Was* (TW3).⁶ But how should we make sense of *Private Eye*—what, in short, is it an expression of, politically and culturally? It is this interpretive question that the following article seeks to answer afresh, reappraising not only the appropriate contexts in which to understand the development of its peculiar economy of content, but also what this amounts to as a form of critique.

This question has certainly not escaped scholarly attention, even if the literature is somewhat scattered and accounts that deal solely with *Private Eye* surprisingly few.⁷ What unites this literature is two-fold. First, an almost exclusive concern to understand the magazine through the lens of satire, and the history and legacy of the “satire boom” in particular; and second, a concern to understand the political qualities of *Private Eye* in conventional ideological-instrumental terms, according to an axis of left-right, progressive-conservative agency. The overall assessment runs as follows: while the *Eye* was born of a novel readiness to mock the values, institutions, and leading figures of the British state, and has achieved some success in doing so ever since the early 1960s, it was, and remains, a critical failure, ultimately enacting a (small “c”) conservative function. Colin Seymour-Ure set the interpretive mold as long ago as 1974, when he cast *Private Eye* as the archetypal “Fool” of British politics, akin to a court jester.⁸ His point was that “the Fool” mocks only the human frailties of “the King” (i.e., “the Westminster system”) rather than the system itself, thus allowing for the periodic, cathartic release of critical energy in the form of laughter while leaving the essential structures of power intact. This reading has been amplified by Sharon Lockyer. In the only account that takes seriously the *Eye*’s investigative output, she argues that by so thoroughly highlighting the transgressions of the governing elites it has served only to reinforce, rather than question, “established norms and standards in society”—the very opposite of “alternative.”⁹ Historians who have situated the *Eye* within the broader sweep

³ All are detailed in Adam McQueen, ed., *The 60 Yearbook: Six Decades of Jokes and Journalism* (London, 2021).

⁴ For example, James Cameron, “It Is The Eye That Hears,” *Sunday Telegraph*, 18 February 1979, 37–47.

⁵ See especially Richard Ingrams, ed., *The Life and Times of Private Eye, 1961–1971* (London, 1971); Marnham, *Private Eye Story*; Peter McKay, *Inside Private Eye* (London, 1986); Harry Thompson, *Richard Ingrams: Lord of the Gnomes* (London, 1994).

⁶ Humphrey Carpenter, *That Was Satire That Was: The Satire Boom of the 1960s* (London, 2000).

⁷ Focused accounts extend only to Colin Seymour-Ure, “*Private Eye: The Politics of the Fool*,” in his *The Political Impact of the Mass Media* (London, 1974), ch. 9; Sharon Lockyer, “An Eye to Offensiveness: The Discourse of Offence and Censure in *Private Eye*” (PhD diss., Loughborough University, 2001); and Sharon Lockyer, “A Two-Pronged Attack? Exploring *Private Eye*’s Satirical Humour and Investigative Reporting,” *Journalism Studies* 7, no. 5 (2006): 765–81. Numerous accounts dwell on its emergence as part of the “satire boom.” See especially Robert Hewison, *Too Much: Art and Society in the Sixties, 1960–75* (Methuen, 1986), 28, 34; Stephen Wagg, “You’ve Never Had It So Silly: The Politics of British Satirical Comedy, from *Beyond the Fringe* to *Spitting Image*,” in *Come on Down? Popular Media Culture in Post-War Britain*, ed. Dominic Strinati and Stephen Wagg (London, 1992), 254–84; Stephen Wagg, “Comedy, Politics and Permissiveness: The ‘Satire Boom’ and its Inheritance,” *Contemporary Politics* 8, no. 4 (2002): 319–34; Dominic Sandbrook, *Never Had It So Good: A History of Britain from Suez to the Beatles* (London, 2006), 570–79; Andrew Marr, *A History of Modern Britain* (London, 2007), 220–24; Steven Fielding, *A State of Play: British Politics on Screen, Stage and Page, from Anthony Trollope to The Thick of It* (London, 2014), 132–33.

⁸ Seymour-Ure, “*Private Eye*.”

⁹ Lockyer, “A Two-Pronged Attack?,” 771–75.

of postwar culture have advanced similar conservative assessments. Stephen Wagg has even suggested that the best way to understand the magazine and its many satirical siblings and avatars—among them *Monty Python's Flying Circus* (1969–74) and *Spitting Image* (1984–96)—is as a symptom of the merging of politics and public relations, and the gradual, “postmodern” collapse of emancipatory projects that seek to fundamentally challenge the status quo.¹⁰ As historians have noted, it is no coincidence that most of its founding contributors enjoyed a public school-Oxbridge education.

These accounts offer a powerful corrective to the sense of celebration (and self-congratulation) that pervades much of the popular literature on the *Eye*. Attributing to it certain conservative qualities is also considerably more useful than some of the other ideological terms that have been used to characterize the *Eye* over the years, among them “socialist,” “anarchist,” and even “fascist.”¹¹ Yet the argument that we should, in the final analysis, regard the *Eye* as engaged in a kind of conservative complicity with “the Establishment” is problematic. The problems lie not only in the neglect of its investigative work and other informational facets, and how these relate to broader developments in the press and postwar culture. There are conceptual problems, too. First, though the existing literature is at its best when historicizing the *Eye's* novel satirical ambitions, the authors fail to clarify what they understand to be the political possibilities of satire, either at the time or more generally. The assumption seems to be that satire should be a vehicle of progressive (left-wing) moral critique, but as scholars of the genre have long suggested, what distinguishes satire is precisely its political versatility and its antipathy toward programmatic politics or even political consistency per se.¹² Second, while the *Eye* was, and still is, fiercely moralistic, it also has a long history of seeking to cause offense, pushing at the boundaries of acceptable free speech by publishing a mixture of borderline obscene, leaked, suppressed, and libel-baiting content. It is not at all clear that this complex mixture of content, at once moralizing and morally offensive, is best captured by attributing to it conservative qualities, or indeed any conventional (left-right) political qualities at all. The *Eye* was, and remains, in many ways, deeply un-conservative.

What follows focuses on the first two crucial decades of *Private Eye*, when it established its reputation, consolidated its readership, and pioneered its distinctive brand of content. It offers a more expansive context in which to understand its genesis and development and offers an alternative interpretation of the nature and significance of the magazine. The argument is that the *Eye* enacted a uniquely manifold form of *cynicism*—a militant or radical cynicism, powered by a principled urge to debunk public life in all its facets, through a variety of means (satirical and non-satirical), and without fear of the consequences. In doing so it draws on an understanding of cynicism that is now the subject of an extensive body of interdisciplinary scholarship, all of which seeks to encourage a richer, more heterogeneous understanding of what it is and how it functions politically and culturally.¹³ To date, only one work in this mold has directly addressed the period under consideration here, Kieran Curran's *Cynicism in British Postwar Culture*, which examines the “cynic sensibility” of various artists, ranging from the writer Philip Larkin and playwright John Osborne to musicians such as John Lennon, the Sex Pistols, and the Smiths.¹⁴ It is not yet a field with any clear historical

¹⁰ Wagg, “You’ve Never Had It So Silly,” 261–65; Wagg, “Comedy, Politics and Permissiveness.”

¹¹ Thompson, *Richard Ingrams*, 211–15; “Evil Eye,” *The Listener*, 6 May 1976.

¹² Arthur Pollard, *Satire* (London, 1970); Jonathan Greenberg, *The Cambridge Introduction to Satire* (Cambridge, 2019), 11–17.

¹³ William Chaloupka, *Everybody Knows: Cynicism in America* (Minneapolis, 1999); Ian Cutler, *Cynicism, from Diogenes to Dilbert* (London, 2005); David Mazella, *The Making of Modern Cynicism* (Charlottesville, 2007); Benjamin Schreier, *The Power of Negative Thinking: Cynicism and the History of Modern American Literature* (Charlottesville, 2009); Sharon A. Stanley, *The French Enlightenment and the Emergence of Modern Cynicism* (Cambridge, 2012); Rebecca Higgie, “Kynical Dogs and Cynical Masters: Contemporary Satire, Politics and Truth-Telling,” *Humor* 27, no. 2 (2014): 183–201; and Ansgar Allen, *Cynicism* (London, 2020).

¹⁴ Kieran Curran, *Cynicism in British Post-War Culture: Ignorance, Dust and Disease* (Basingstoke, 2015).

coordinates or historiography, certainly not in relation to Britain. Nonetheless, what unites these works is a desire to enrich and complicate our understanding of what the term “cynicism” encompasses and the kind of agency at stake. Current, if historically recent, usage generally understands it as a nihilistic form of an otherwise welcome skepticism.¹⁵ This is cynicism as the gateway to apathy and the very opposite of civic idealism: cynicism, that is, as a kind of ultra-skepticism, so severe and so ready to impute base motivations to all those in public life, that it dissolves trust not just in those who occupy positions of power but in all those who propose to do things differently.

This does indeed capture one of the key contemporary definitions of cynicism—crudely, the belief in the generality of self-interest—and as the literature suggests, this meaning became dominant over the course of the twentieth century, amid growing concerns in Britain (and the United States) about declining levels of public trust in government.¹⁶ Yet, as today’s dictionaries still register, cynicism also refers to something more engaged, complex, and ethically demanding: the ancient tradition of Cynic philosophy associated with the legendary figure of Diogenes, from which the term derives. Inspired by Peter Sloterdijk’s *Critique of Cynical Reason* and Michel Foucault’s later work on the classical ethics of Cynic truth-telling (*parrhēsia*), it is this variant that revisionist scholars of cynicism argue can still be seen at work in new and evolving forms amid the ascendancy of the more familiar, ultra-skeptical kind described above.¹⁷ This kind of cynicism—or “kynicism,” as Sloterdijk calls it—is not entirely distinct and can easily mix with the former. It specifically plays on the prejudices, deceptions, and ambitions that animate the government of human affairs, likewise challenging the “official” line that these elements play only a marginal role. It also eschews theoretical abstractions in favor of a focus on the topical, immediate, and personal. A crucial difference, however, is its general ethos as a form of critique. Not only is it rude and aggressive, rather than dismissive and cool: it “snarls,” rather than “sneers.” It is also engaged and disruptive, oriented toward rather than away from civic life. Its methodology, too, is different. Although it is observational and empirical, it is also theatrical and comedic, embracing satirical forms of expression. But in whatever mode, it works by confusing “the high” and “the low,” reminding those who are politically and culturally powerful of their lowly human status, while exhibiting a capacity for both plebeian simplicity and rarefied sophistication. A final difference is the kind of subject that guarantees its authentic expression. Whereas the first kind of cynicism might be articulated by those engaged in official, respectable modes of public argument, this variant requires the maintenance of a marginal, oppositional lifestyle, and a readiness to take risks and cause offense. It is both fiercely independent and idealistic—outrageous but also morally outraged.

This is a crude sketch, aspects of which will be elaborated below; but in sum, the argument is that *Private Eye* is best read as a peculiar expression of this more vibrant, engaged form of cynicism, which, in what follows, following Curran’s example, will be referred to as such—as “cynicism.” One interpretive benefit is that it allows for a better, more rounded appreciation of *all* the *Eye*’s various parts, both contextually, in terms of their emergence, and critically, in terms of how they functioned together toward the same (cynical) end. As we shall see, while we can, and should, read it in satirical terms, as part of the “boom,” its legacies, and so on, we also need to appreciate its affinities with various novel currents in postwar journalism and countercultural expression. Crucially, reading it cynically in this way also has consequences for how we conceive of the politics of the *Eye*

¹⁵ As in, for instance, Colin Crouch, *Post-Democracy* (Cambridge, 2004) and Colin Hay, *Why We Hate Politics* (Cambridge, 2007), but countless texts note its growing prevalence in this sense. For a similar understanding of cynicism, albeit developed from a more philosophical perspective, see Timothy Bewes, *Cynicism and Postmodernity* (London, 1997).

¹⁶ Cynicism has a fiendishly complex genealogy, but this meaning can be traced back to the Enlightenment. See especially Mazella, *Making of Modern Cynicism* and Stanley, *French Enlightenment*.

¹⁷ Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, trans. Michael Eldred (London, 1988); Michel Foucault, *The Courage of Truth: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1983–84*, ed. Frédéric Gros, trans. Graham Burchell (Basingstoke, 2011).

and means we can resist the standard interpretive reflex that it must, in the final analysis, occupy some position on the conventional, left-right ideological spectrum. What this reading suggests is that this politics is best conceived in *relational* terms: that is to say, in the assumption of a deliberately antagonistic relation toward “politics” and public authority per se, as enacted in a combination of searching moral severity and egregious moral offensiveness. To read *Private Eye* otherwise is to obscure how it has cynically pulled in both directions at once, and in a way that is by no means reducible to a kind of critically compromised conservatism. If anything, it is more akin to a form of protest or dissidence. This point, too, is subject to elaboration below and returned to in the conclusion, but the article begins by reconsidering the genesis and development of *Private Eye* in the 1960s.

Beyond the “Boom”

To the extent that satire constitutes one mode among others of cynical expression, the “boom” of the early 1960s is clearly important to the reading advanced here. *Private Eye* would emerge as the sole survivor of the “boom,” which was effectively over by 1964, when *Beyond the Fringe* closed, but while it lasted the *Eye* participated fully in the two key aspects highlighted by scholars.¹⁸ One of these is the elite nature of the educational networks from which the leading writers and performers emerged. Richard Ingrams, who served as editor between 1963 and 1986, was the son of a merchant banker and attended Oxford University. Paul Foot, who contributed regularly between 1965 and 1972, and occasionally thereafter, was born into a prestigious West Country political family: his uncle was Michael Foot, then a leading backbench Labour MP. Foot, too, attended Oxford, where he collaborated with Ingrams on the undergraduate magazine, *Parson's Pleasure*; both contributed to another student magazine, *Mesopotamia*. Peter Cook, who contributed to the *Eye* from the early 1960s, when he also became its principal owner, was the son of a colonial civil servant and attended Cambridge University. Christopher Booker, *Private Eye's* first editor (1961–63) and another Cambridge graduate, along with Ingrams, Foot, and Willie Rushton (who provided many of the early illustrations), all went to Shrewsbury public school. Of the early core contributors, only Barry Fantoni was from a working-class background.

The other key aspect is the shared satirical ethos that emerged, rooted in a novel enthusiasm for attacking the so-called “Establishment,” and forged in the creative connections facilitated by the networks noted above. Cook, for example, was a leading player in the Cambridge-based group behind *Beyond the Fringe* and also co-owned the Establishment nightclub; Booker, Rushton, and Ingrams helped to script *TW3*, which made its debut on the BBC in November 1962. Cook's vicious, drawing caricatures of Harold Macmillan in *Beyond the Fringe* are often held to be exemplary of the new style of satire, but the examples are legion.¹⁹ For its part, the *Eye* mocked Macmillan six times on its cover prior to his resignation in 1963, on one occasion asking “What's Macmillan Like in Bed?” The answer was revealed inside, alongside a picture of Macmillan sat up in bed: “Much like everyone else, old cock!”²⁰ The monarchy, armed forces, judiciary, and Church of England were all gleefully satirized; so too sensitive issues such as the possibility of nuclear conflict. However sophisticated or not—and there was much that was deliberately vulgar—this was content that broke free of the patrician (“Reithian”) broadcasting conventions of earlier decades and probed existing boundaries governing the political uses of print. As historians have argued, it was a freshly provocative form of satire made up of a number of distinctive postwar elements: generational frustration with conservative social norms; a diffuse, “post-Suez” consciousness of imperial decline and disorientation regarding Britain's place in the world; and a new sense of comic license derived from the *Goon Show* (1951–60) and exposure to a new breed

¹⁸ See the works at note 7, and especially Carpenter, *That Was Satire That Was*.

¹⁹ Seymour-Ure, *Political Impact*, 240; Sandbrook, *Never Had It So Good*, 574; Marr, *History of Modern Britain*, 222.

²⁰ *Private Eye* [hereafter PE], 5 October 1962.

of US satirists such as Tom Lehrer, Mort Sahl, and Lenny Bruce, as well as Harvey Kurtzman, founder of *MAD* magazine.²¹

The cynicism of *Private Eye* no doubt operated in the more expansive satirical space opened up at this juncture by the “boom,” the limits of which it pushed further as time progressed. This was in keeping, perhaps, with the broader cultural entrenchment of the kind of satire it had helped to pioneer, as key figures moved on to other projects and new satirists entered the fray. But scholars have been much too ready to seize on this entrenchment, as well as the *Eye*’s largely upper middle-class (“public school boy”) authorship, as evidence of an enduring, underlying conservatism. That *Private Eye*, as we shall see below, heaped as much derision on Labour governments as on Conservative ones after 1964 is precisely the point, and is entirely consistent with its lively cynicism toward all things party-political and much else besides. Crucially, it is also in keeping with what these same accounts—principally because few engage with the *Eye*’s content beyond the “boom” years—neglect so badly: the eclectic array of political passions and sources of inspiration that animated this cynicism. As the scholarship discussed above suggests, cynicism, even if it eschews any overarching moral system, is intensely moralistic: a kind of sublimated idealism that pinpoints the failures and absurdities of public life, not by adhering to normal conventions of public discourse, which are part of the problem for cynics, but by using all sorts of alternative and offensive means, satire among them.²² To be sure, this precludes contributing to technocratic, policy-based discussions, as well as more abstract forms of ideological critique, but this in itself is not incompatible with the capacity to articulate crucial truths about public life.

Certainly some of the contributors might be described as conservative, but their conservatism was of a peculiar type, recalling, if anything, the heterodox Toryism of writers such as G. K. Chesterton and Evelyn Waugh.²³ Though initially a Liberal, Booker fits this mold, as does Auberon Waugh (Evelyn’s son), who joined the *Eye* in 1970 to contribute *HP Sauce* and then his *Diary* from 1972.²⁴ Both were anti-socialist, aggressively so in Waugh’s case, and both were critical of the corporatist compromises of the Conservative party during the 1960s and 1970s. Each also developed their own particular passions. Waugh was a fierce opponent of the death penalty and a principled pacifist, and went on to become a vocal critic of Britain’s involvement in the Nigerian civil war (1967–70).²⁵ Booker was consistently hostile to contemporary art, architecture, and popular music, culminating in his attempt to debunk the cultural achievements of the 1950s and 1960s—*The Neophiliacs*, published in 1969—and later leading award-winning campaigns against urban redevelopment in the 1970s.²⁶

Other core contributors, however, were to the left of Booker and Waugh. Ingrams and Rushton were sympathetic to the Labour party, at least until it went into office in 1964; and Ingrams was a keen admirer of the early nineteenth-century radical, William Cobbett, writing about him in the 1970s (and beyond).²⁷ Others again were part of the non-parliamentary left. Christopher Logue, who compiled the *True Stories* feature from 1962

²¹ See the works at note 7, but also Stuart Ward, “‘No Nation Could Be Broker’: The Satire Boom and the Demise of Britain’s World Role,” in *British Culture and the End of Empire*, ed. Stuart Ward (Manchester, 2001), 91–110, and Carpenter, *That Was Satire That Was*, Part One, for a fuller survey.

²² See the works at note 13, but especially Chaloupka, *Everybody Knows*, 202–10, and Stanley, *French Enlightenment*, 195–202.

²³ Recent reassessments include Christos Hadjiyiannis, *Conservative Modernists: Literature and Tory Politics in Britain, 1900–1920* (Cambridge, 2018) and Bernhard Dietz, *Neo-Tories: The Revolt of British Conservatives against Democracy and Political Modernity (1929–1939)*, trans. Ian Copestake (London, 2019).

²⁴ Marnham, *Private Eye Story*, 72–74, 79–82.

²⁵ Auberon Waugh and Suzanne Cronjé, *Biafra: Britain’s Shame* (London, 1969); Auberon Waugh, *Will this Do? The First Fifty Years of Auberon Waugh* (London, 1991).

²⁶ Christopher Booker, *The Neophiliacs: A Study of the Revolution in English Life in the Fifties and Sixties* (London, 1969). In the early 1970s he and colleague Benny Gray were named IPC Campaigning Journalist of the Year for 1973 for their work opposing the redevelopment of parts of Camden.

²⁷ Thompson, *Richard Ingrams*, 127–28; Richard Ingrams, ed., *Cobbett’s Country Book: An Anthology of William Cobbett’s Writings on Country Matters* (London, 1974); Richard Ingrams, *The Life and Adventures of William Cobbett* (London, 2005).

and Pseud's Corner from 1965, campaigned for nuclear disarmament as a member of Bertrand Russell's Committee of 100. As an accomplished poet, he was also involved in various countercultural interventions, including the Wholly Communion poetry "happening" at the Royal Albert Hall in 1965 that featured the US poet Allen Ginsburg.²⁸ Foot, meanwhile, was a committed socialist, having joined the Trotskyite group, the International Socialists, in 1962 while working as a trainee journalist at Glasgow's *Daily Record*. In 1968, shortly after taking up a full-time role at *Private Eye*, he published a damning, book-length assessment of Harold Wilson.²⁹ Though he would continue to contribute thereafter, he left the *Eye* in 1972 to join the *Socialist Worker*, where he became editor in 1974, and he was clearly comfortable popularizing Marxist analyses of British society.³⁰

With the exception of Cook and Fantoni, who were, it seems, largely free of any principled commitments beyond that of free artistic expression, none of the *Eye's* core contributors was politically disengaged. Quite the contrary—and it is precisely these varied commitments and ideals that powered its cynical critique of conventional party-politics and the conduct of public life. At the same time, the existing scholarship has neglected *Private Eye's* debts to an older generation of writers, all of whom exhibited a cynic sensibility as understood here. One key inspiration, certainly for Ingrams and Cook, was John Morton and his By the Way column, which appeared under the name Beachcomber in the *Daily Express* from 1924 to 1975. Morton was an idiosyncratic Tory—he was a close friend of the Tory radical Hilaire Belloc—and he specialized in mocking Britain's elites through his own cast of surreal characters and farcical scenarios (e.g., Mr. Justice Cocklecarrot).³¹ As Ingrams suggested in 1974, writing as the editor of a collection of his work, the absurdist qualities of Beachcomber's writings almost wrenched them free of any topical sphere of reference, making for a kind of comic satire that could also be read as "pure nonsense."³² Yet his work also betrayed a deep-rooted distrust of authority in all its forms.

The other two key figures were Malcolm Muggeridge and Claud Cockburn, both of whom established their careers in the 1930s. In Muggeridge's case, this was through a variety of journalistic postings and books, marking the start of a long career that saw him gravitate from the left—he briefly lived in the Soviet Union in 1932–33—toward a position of no firm political commitments (though he did turn to Catholicism in the late 1960s).³³ Instead, he developed a contrarian persona and a taste for satire, scathing punditry, and controversy. Among many other pursuits, he edited *Punch* in the mid-1950s, and in 1957 famously caused a public outcry by attacking the British "cult of royalty." Booker and Ingrams cited him as a crucial early influence and mentor, and in 1964 "the Guru," as they called him, was invited to guest edit an edition of *Private Eye*.³⁴ Still more important was Cockburn. He, too, was a journalist and writer, and initially worked as a foreign correspondent of the *Times*. In 1932, he joined the Communist Party and began setting up the *Week*, which immediately established his reputation as a troublemaker and brought him to the attention of MI5.³⁵ Published between 1933 and 1941, it was sold only to subscribers and was a short, scruffy publication, normally appearing as six sides of three buff-colored foolscap sheets. Its initial publicity described it as a "new form of news and information service" that specialized in "events not mentioned in newspapers."³⁶ In practice, this meant a

²⁸ Jeremy Noel-Tod, "Logue, (John) Christopher," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/104487>.

²⁹ Paul Foot, *The Politics of Harold Wilson* (London, 1968).

³⁰ For example, Paul Foot, *Why You Should Be a Socialist: The Case for a New Socialist Party* (London, 1977).

³¹ Dietz, *Neo-Tories*, 222.

³² Richard Ingrams, ed., *Beachcomber: The Works of J. B. Morton* (Exeter, 1974), 21–22.

³³ Ian Hunter, *Malcolm Muggeridge: A Life* (Vancouver, 1980).

³⁴ Ingrams, ed., *Life and Times*, 20; *PE*, 7 August 1964.

³⁵ Patricia Cockburn, *The Years of the Week* (London, 1969).

³⁶ From a one-page promotional advert, c. mid-1933, enclosed at the start of the collection in the Bodleian Library, Oxford, that begins with *The Week*, 12 July 1933.

diet of insider knowledge and speculation, secured through Cockburn's many contacts at home and abroad, regarding rifts in the Cabinet, overseas scandals, diplomatic relations, and suspect movements in the financial markets. Only rarely did the *Week* editorialize, but it did have a voice of its own, commonly publishing titbits of information under ironic straplines, and it reflected Cockburn's own politics. A committed anti-fascist, one of his contributions to the movement was to popularize (and perhaps coin) the phrase "the Cliveden set" to describe the elite pro-appeasement lobby of the late 1930s.³⁷ Like Muggeridge, Cockburn also guest-edited *Private Eye*, doing so in 1963, though in his case it kickstarted a long-term relationship as a columnist, which lasted until 1981, when he passed away.³⁸

The Eye's Satire: "Cheeky" Cynicism

The point of the above discussion is twofold: first, that these varied commitments and inspirations attest to the *Eye's* distinctive genealogy as a key player in the "satire boom"; and second, that they were crucial in terms of forging its uniquely syncretic mode of cynical, print-based exposure—its combination of a variety of literary and visual forms and journalistic elements in the service of spotlighting the idiocies and corruptions of public life. Of course, the commercial popularity the *Eye* would go on to enjoy was rooted in deeper political and cultural shifts, beyond the immediate ones that informed the "boom." As Steven Fielding has argued, while "populist" forms of antipathy toward the elites and two-party dominance were never far from the surface of British culture during the 1940s and 1950s, they were given freer and more overt expression during the 1960s and 1970s, reflecting a variety of developments.³⁹ Among these were a seemingly relentless succession of economic crises that neither major party seemed able to resolve (e.g., sterling crises; trade union militancy), the growing role of public relations expertise in politics, and disenchantment with the Wilson governments and the fragmentation of the left. A self-consciously "alternative comedy" scene, punk-ish in spirit and loosely aligned with the radical left, would eventually emerge in the late 1970s and blossom in the 1980s. But this was preceded by a series of popular cultural interventions that were quite explicit in expressing a sense of disenchantment with the workings of mainstream politics. Dennis Potter's BBC drama *Vote Vote Vote for Nigel Barton* (1965) and the film *The Rise and Rise of Michael Rimmer* (1970) are among the more pungent examples, both of them critiquing the PR-driven superficiality of the two main parties.⁴⁰

Yet although the *Eye* clearly resonated in this broader fashion, it remained a peculiar enterprise, advancing a peculiarly militant cynicism. This is true of its overtly satirical content, which, after Sloterdijk, we might say formed the most straightforwardly "cheeky" and comedic expression of this cynicism, as distinct from, if not opposed to, as we shall see, its more journalistic forms.⁴¹ This is also what links the magazine to a rich history of satirical critique. From the start the *Eye* used all the techniques that had existed since at least the early eighteenth century and the writings of Swift, Defoe, and Pope: aesthetic detachment of author, fantasy and fable, and simplification and caricature, all of which might combine with wit, parody, obscenity, and irony.⁴² To be sure, exploiting, as it does, the ironic gap between the professed ideals of the powerful and their grubby, flawed reality, satire certainly lends itself to cynical forms of attack. But as scholars have suggested, the relation between the two is highly variable and is also a contingent matter of how satire is used (i.e., the range

³⁷ Norman Rose, *The Cliveden Set* (London, 2010), ch. 7.

³⁸ *PE*, 9 August 1963.

³⁹ Steven Fielding, "A Mirror for England? Cinematic Representations of Politicians and Party Politics, circa 1944–1964," *Journal of British Studies* 47, no. 1 (2008): 107–28; Fielding, *State of Play*, ch. 5.

⁴⁰ Fielding, *State of Play*, 137–38, 144–45.

⁴¹ Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, ch. 5.

⁴² Paddy Bullard, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Eighteenth-Century Satire* (Oxford, 2019); Greenberg, *Cambridge Introduction*, chs 1 and 2.

of targets), with what intensity (i.e., levels of aggression), and the degree to which it is detached from a sense of ideological or institutional affiliation—and in all these respects the *Eye* was unusually radical.⁴³

This is partly what set the *Eye* apart from its nearest print-based satirical rival, the long-standing *Punch*. Then selling upward of 100,000 copies per issue, *Punch*'s content was decidedly more restrained and playful, something partly informed, as the *Eye* pointed out in the 1964 issue edited by Muggeridge, by the desire not to offend its advertisers.⁴⁴ The *Eye*, by contrast, had no such scruples or constraints. Advertising revenues were meagre and, as the main owner from early on, Cook seems to have exercised nothing in the way of editorial censure, only encouragement and creative input. Above all, it was more satirically rigorous, not only in targeting all the major parties, but also in employing a range of techniques. The way it targeted prime ministers and opposition leaders is one example. Some of this was entirely light and playful, as in the use of nicknames. In 1965, Edward Heath became Grocer on account of his unusual enthusiasm for the European Common Market; in 1966, amid another sterling crisis, Harold Wilson became Wilsundra after the Sri Lankan fraudster, Emil Savundra, whose insurance company went spectacularly bankrupt that same year. But the *Eye* also deployed more carefully crafted, fantastical features by way of capturing something like the ambience of the flaws that defined the leaders of the main parties. Between 1970 and 1974, Heath was presented as the petulant managing director of the supermarket chain Heathco, constantly battling against his unionized staff. The perspective of prime ministerial spouses was used to similar effect. In 1965, Ingrams and John Wells began their popular “Mrs Wilson’s Diary”—a stage and TV version followed—gently satirizing Wilson’s image-consciousness, his difficult relations with Cabinet ministers, and the contrast between his taste for grand, Kennedy-esque rhetoric and his more downbeat, suburban lifestyle (e.g., his apparent fondness for HP Sauce).⁴⁵ After the Conservative election victory in 1979, another Ingrams-Wells collaboration—the “Dear Bill” series—began. Consisting of fictional correspondence between Denis Thatcher and his golf-club friend Bill, it satirized the chauvinism and boorishness of Home Counties, *Telegraph*-reading Tories, presenting them as the ugly moral underbelly of Thatcherism.⁴⁶

The same kind of satirical thoroughness, however, characterized all its political coverage, not least the scandals that erupted now and then. It lampooned the Vassal (1962–63) and Profumo affairs (1963) under Macmillan with just as much satirical gusto as it did Wilson’s “slag heap” (1974) and “lavender list” scandals (1976), and the long-running Jeremy Thorpe-Norman Scott saga (1976–79). Policies, too, were roundly attacked. A striking example is the way both Labour and the Conservatives made concessions to racist anti-immigrant feeling. James Callaghan’s 1968 Commonwealth Immigrants Act, which effectively prevented Kenyan Asians with British passports from entering the country, prompted the *Eye* to publish a *Times*-style obituary announcing the death of the Labour party.⁴⁷ Enoch Powell’s “Rivers of Blood” speech of the same year was greeted with similar derision.⁴⁸ Other sensitive issues subject to cross-party satire included the administration of Rhodesian sanctions and the policing of Northern Ireland, and there was always much in the *Eye* that chimed with the agenda of an emergent New Left and a variety of fringe socialist organizations—but these, too, were satirized. The campus and street protests of 1968 were

⁴³ For example, Curran, *Cynicism in British Post-War Culture*, ch. 5; Higgie, “Kynical Dogs and Cynical Masters.”

⁴⁴ *PE*, 7 August 1964. The most detailed account of *Punch* during the twentieth century remains R. G. G. Price, *A History of Punch* (London, 1957). If anything, *Punch* reserved its most severe satire for foreign leaders and countries, rather than domestic politics.

⁴⁵ As with various features, this resulted in spin-off publications: Richard Ingrams and John Wells, *Mrs Wilson’s Diary* (London, 1965), and Richard Ingrams and John Wells, *Mrs Wilson’s Diary* (London, 1975).

⁴⁶ Richard Ingrams and John Wells, *The Best of Dear Bill* (London, 1986).

⁴⁷ *PE*, 15 March 1968.

⁴⁸ In May 1968, Powell featured on the cover as “The Ape who Widdled on Prince Philip,” with the caption: “Bloody Greek immigrant! Next time I’ll pull my finger out and smear his face with it.” *PE*, 10 May 1968.

mocked, as were the publicity-seeking antics of leading figures such as Tariq Ali. From 1971, a column was given over to Dave Spart, General Secretary of the National Amalgamated Union of Sixth Form Operatives and Allied Trades, as a means of satirizing left-wing activism and its kneejerk rhetoric of systemic oppression. In a typical outburst, Spart hailed the February 1974 election as evidence that British “parliamentary democracy” was “just the tool of international capitalism and the capitalist media such as the BBC, which is riddled with the apparatus of totalitarian censorship.”⁴⁹

In this way, the *Eye’s* satire was at once politically engaged and politically detached, embodying a cynical ethos that deliberately eschewed any kind of ideological grounding. The same kind of relation obtained elsewhere. No institution was spared—the judiciary, civil service, the BBC, trade unions, and the royal family were all regularly lampooned—just as all manifestations of high culture and avant-garde art were ridiculed. Especially crucial to the *Eye’s* independence, given its print-based nature, was its satirical depiction of the mainstream press and the fierce commercial pressures that defined it. From 1964, readers were reminded of the contrast with the culture of Fleet Street in every issue via an ironic message from the *Eye’s* fictional owner, Lord Gnome, a deliberately pathetic caricature of a tactless, Tory-supporting press baron whose entrepreneurial ambitions and desire for public influence were consistently thwarted by his “cretinous staff.” The distorting lens of partisan bias was a consistent target, as was the malign influence of proprietors and chairmen. The shifting ambitions of Lord Beaverbrook and Cecil King were regularly lampooned in the early years, followed by Rupert (“Dirty Digger”) Murdoch from the late 1960s, after he had acquired the *News of the World* and *The Sun*, and ensured that both adopted an editorial formula he had pioneered in Australia based on combining right-wing populism and sexual titillation. “Go Home Dirty Digger!” ran the headline of one spoof tabloid feature in 1969, urging him to take his “filth” with him, in a satirical play on the casual xenophobia Murdoch titles now exploited commercially.⁵⁰ Parodies ranging from one to four pages frequently appeared, mocking, among other things, the crass sensationalism of the tabloids and the pompous seriousness of the broadsheets, as well as editorial incompetence (as in the case of “the Grauniad”).

The critical intent of this satire is obvious enough: to protest against the idiocy, vanity, prejudice, corruption, and hypocrisy that pervaded British public life. But the point is that the *Eye* enacted it with unrivalled rigor and range, across the political, institutional, and cultural spectrums, and that it was this, rather than its use of satire per se, that defined its cynicism. The only challenge to its status in this respect briefly emerged in 1967 in the shape of the countercultural magazine *Oz*, which pointedly satirized the *Eye* in its first edition; but *Oz’s* satirical ambitions faded after six issues, as it became more absorbed by aesthetic and libertarian politics (we return below to the *Eye’s* affinities with the alternative press).⁵¹ To be sure, for some of the *Eye’s* contributors the satire no doubt afforded an opportunity to unleash their elite education in ways that were at once fun and learned. Booker especially seems to have enjoyed playing the contrarian, as in his *Pillars of Society* feature of the mid-1960s that offered satirical takedowns of respected political and cultural figures (e.g., Kingsley Amis, Tony Benn). We might even say it offered them the chance to indulge their own elitist prejudices, for the *Eye’s* satire was also fiercely anti-populist, mocking not just the man-of-the-people touches of politicians (e.g., Wilson’s mac-wearing and pipe-smoking), but popular culture and tastes. Created by Cook in 1964, the *Turds*, a pop group fronted by Spiggy Topes, took aim at the youth culture of the time, while the wartime generation were targeted via satirical attacks on the “cult of Churchill” and the obsession with Hitler. Popular prejudices, too, were mocked: in 1968, amid the controversy regarding

⁴⁹ *PE*, 22 February 1974.

⁵⁰ *PE*, 12 September 1969.

⁵¹ *Oz London*, February 1967, 9–12; Jonathon Green, *All Dressed Up: The Sixties and the Counterculture* (London, 1999), 355–56.

Callaghan's immigration bill and Powell's speech, the *Eye* presented a selection of spoof letters from Gnome's postbag, all of which began "I'm no racist, but ..."⁵² Yet the same class-based points might be made of the much safer satire of *Punch* and obscures what made that of the *Eye* so distinctively cynical: its relative aggression and thoroughness, which extended indeed to mocking many of its allies and former collaborators (e.g., Jonathan Miller, David Frost, and Bernard Levin).

The Eye's Journalism: "Dirty" Cynicism

The same kind of critical thoroughness characterized the *Eye*'s journalism and its publication of stories ignored by the mainstream press. After Sloterdijk once more, we might distinguish these elements as forming the "dirty," more empirically grounded, realist facets of its cynicism, which complemented the "cheeky" expressions examined above through the presentation of uncomfortable facts and ugly, insider knowledge.⁵³ In terms of personnel, the key figure is Cockburn, who was brought on board by Ingrams in 1963 to develop precisely this kind of content.⁵⁴ It quickly developed into two principal forms. One of these, which came to occupy the front pages of the magazine, consisted of informational vignettes that sought to expose all sorts of vices on the part of the powerful: hypocrisy, incompetence, greed, duplicity, and so on. The first home for this type of content was the *Eye*'s Colour Section, which debuted in 1964, and more specialized sections followed. In the City by "Slicker" appeared in 1969, with a focus on the business community and financial markets; In the Courts debuted in 1971, authored by "Justinian Forthemoney"; and HP Sauce (named after Wilson's favorite condiment), which, after it was relinquished by Waugh in 1973, provided a space for more factually rooted Westminster stories. All were based on information relayed by a growing cohort of contacts.⁵⁵ Some passed on information via discreet meetings; others via fortnightly lunches at a pub located near the *Eye*'s Soho offices, the Coach and Horses. Either way, by the late 1960s, the *Eye* was in receipt of information from a variety of anonymous sources: MPs, ministers, journalists, police officers, barristers, civil servants, and City businessmen.

Meanwhile, the back pages of the magazine became the principal home for stories which, though they may have begun with a tipoff or leak, were then developed via investigative inquiry. Foot was especially important in embedding this particular variant of "dirty" exposure. Having contributed on a part-time basis from 1965, he joined full-time in 1967, when he was given his own regular, three-page Footnotes feature. After his departure in 1972 for *Socialist Worker*, the back pages were taken up by stories appearing under Notes and Business News, as well as the established In the City feature, as authored by Patrick Marnham, Martin Tomkinson, and Michael ("Slicker") Gillard.

In developing these facets, the *Eye* participated in some crucial shifts in postwar journalistic practice and print culture. These were born of much the same antipathy toward the elites that made the *Eye*'s satire so resonant, though they have been entirely neglected in the existing historiography. Some were evident in the media at large. Investigative journalism underwent its own "boom" in the 1960s, before enjoying its heyday, according to some, in the 1970s.⁵⁶ The *Sunday Times*'s Insight team began work in 1963, while programs with an investigative remit appeared on television, notably Granada's *World in Action* (1963). Official secrecy, too, was increasingly challenged. As Christopher Moran has argued, compared to their interwar predecessors, postwar journalists had fewer scruples about "grooming" official contacts and antagonizing the D-Notice system (as in the many scoops of the *Daily*

⁵² PE, 10 May 1968.

⁵³ Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 104–05, 193–94.

⁵⁴ Ingrams, ed., *Life and Times*, 11–14, 21.

⁵⁵ Marnham, *Private Eye Story*, 113; Ingrams, ed., *Life and Times*, 21.

⁵⁶ Alan Doig, *Corruption and Misconduct in Contemporary British Politics* (London, 1984), 301–05.

Express's renown intelligence correspondent, Chapman Pincher, in the 1950s and 1960s).⁵⁷ The *Eye's* work, however, also complemented developments pioneered on the margins of the mainstream media, including the work of a new generation of left-leaning journalists, such as Andrew Roth, Richard West, and Anthony Sampson, keen to expose the shady workings of the elites. Roth's work especially, as showcased in his *Business Background of MPs* series (1959–72), was a clear precursor to the kind of resourceful fact-grubbing that characterized the *Eye's* investigations. (Roth in fact was briefly part of the *Eye's* writing team in 1963–64, while West later authored pieces for the *Eye* criticizing the Vietnam war.⁵⁸) Similar again to the *Eye's* spirit of disruptive exposure were the local papers that formed part of an emergent, community-based “radical” press. They first appeared in the late 1960s and numbered over sixty by 1975.⁵⁹ Espousing a variety of cooperative ideals, all sought to provide an alternative source of information to the commercial regional press; and some of them, notably the *Liverpool Free Press* (1971–77), *Rochdale's Alternative Paper* (1971–81), and South Wales's *Rebecca* (1972–80) and *Alarm* (1976–80), were especially concerned to uncover corruption among councilors.⁶⁰

Part of what distinguished the *Eye* was that it brought these varied threads of journalistic practice together, concentrating them into a distinctively cynical form of exposure. It was different from both the mainstream press, where investigative stories or bits of leaked information sat amid coverage that assumed the moral seriousness of politicians, and the local radical press, where there was a clear sense of (left-wing) ideological affiliation, however varied. The *Eye* indeed was relentless in seizing on any and every titbit of damaging information about public figures. Some of the stories that appeared in the front sections simply aimed to puncture someone's moral authority, as in stories that recalled historic facts about public figures that jarred with current opinions or positions. In 1965 the commentator Peregrine Worsthorne published a piece in the *Telegraph* urging the Tories to adopt a firmly anti-immigrant line at the next election. The *Eye* responded by gleefully noting that the “filthy Walloon” had himself descended from Belgian immigrants only one generation ago.⁶¹ Other pieces, by contrast, by noting possible conflicts of interest, raised the more serious specter of corrupt decision-making. In 1970 it reported that the Conservative housing and local government minister, Peter Walker, had overruled one of his own inspectors and granted planning permission for a new Whitbread brewery on some highly prized greenbelt land between Preston and Blackburn: a controversial decision, but then, as the *Eye* reported, Whitbread had donated more than £20,000 to the Conservative party in 1968.⁶²

Singly, perhaps, none of the short items was necessarily devastating; but that was not the point, which was to work via accumulation and repetition to construct an alternative picture of public life—corrupt, chaotic, hypocritical, and so on—to that supplied in the mainstream press and outwardly projected by figures of authority. No other publication matched its coverage in this respect. The Colour Section, from where the above two examples are drawn, was the most miscellaneous, but it was also the principal home for inside stories regarding the press, such as why particular stories had been spiked, infighting among staff, and instances of proprietorial pressure. In the Courts, meanwhile, typically highlighted police incompetence, the exorbitant fees charged by barristers, and the whimsical nature of judicial rulings; In the City, the mercenary tactics, excessive salaries, and rank bad practice that animated the worlds of commerce and finance; and HP Sauce, disgruntlement and plotting among backbench MPs. One result was the development of a cast of public figures, who, as the *Eye* liked to remind its readers, passed its stringently low threshold of questionable

⁵⁷ Christopher Moran, *Classified: Secrecy and the State in Modern Britain* (Cambridge, 2013), Part II.

⁵⁸ Andrew Roth, *The Business Background of MPs* (London, 1959); Marnham, *Private Eye Story*, 145–46.

⁵⁹ Minority Press Group, *Here is the Other News: Challenges to the Local Commercial Press* (London, 1980), 9–10.

⁶⁰ In 1978, a self-styled “bibliography” of this press included the *Eye* among the titles. Ruth Sandys and Brenda Harris (comps), *The Alternative and Underground Press in Britain during 1976* (London, 1978).

⁶¹ *PE*, 22 January 1965.

⁶² *PE*, 11 September 1970.

behavior on a regular basis. Among the most notable of these during the 1970s was Reginald Maudling, the prominent Conservative MP and one-time Chancellor of the Exchequer (1962–64) and Home Secretary (1970–72). Beginning in 1969 the *Eye* published a slew of stories about his business associations with the American fraudster Jerome Hoffman and the corrupt architect John Poulson (eventually jailed in 1974), pursuing him right until a parliamentary inquiry into his (and two other MPs’) conduct in 1976–77.⁶³ Others included MPs such as Jeffrey Archer, Michael Heseltine, Edward du Cann, and Jonathan Aitken, and businessmen such as “Tiny” Rowlands, Jim Slater, Eric Miller, and Robert Maxwell.

These stories were not satirical in style or form, of course. Yet they existed only a few pages (or glances) away from this type of material, furnishing it with a good dose of dirty, factual legitimacy. At the same time, a sense of cynical kinship and stylistic consistency with the *Eye*’s satire was achieved through the deliberate use of ironic section names (e.g., the Colour Section, which was always limited to black-and-white type) and fantastical authors (e.g., “Justinian Forthemoney”), as well as commentary riddled with sarcastic asides and expressions of feigned surprise—all elements that echoed Cockburn’s the *Week*. The back-page investigative stories featured the same cynical embellishments, but they were also longer, denser pieces, and were by far the most respected aspect of the *Eye*’s output, at least according to conventional journalistic standards. Gillard’s work as “Slicker” developed a reputation as a must-read feature among City professionals, while Foot’s work was frequently lauded: in 1973, he received Granada’s “What the Papers Say” Journalist of the Year award for his stories in the *Eye*.⁶⁴ The *Eye* even received plaudits from official quarters. In 1975, following a formal invitation to submit evidence, Ingrams dispatched a bulky dossier of stories to the Royal Commission on Standards in Public Life, chaired by Lord Salmon, that had been convened the previous year in the wake of the Poulson scandal.⁶⁵ The Commission’s subsequent report specifically praised *Private Eye* for bringing to light corruption among public servants, contrasting its journalistic activism with the caution routinely exercised by the police in investigating allegations.⁶⁶

The impact of its investigative stories might be measured in other ways. Beyond the discomfort the stories must surely have caused, they also seem to have prompted occasional panic at the very highest levels of government, as records in the National Archives attest. In 1971, among other instances, two stories by Foot regarding the chairman of the National Coal Board, Lord Robens—and more specifically, contracts given by the Board to firms with which Robens’s son was associated—led to awkward questions in Parliament and a secret inquiry by the QC, Michael Kerr.⁶⁷ The *Eye* was also the first to cover a number of stories that would develop into major scandals, as the mainstream press belatedly grasped their significance. The outstanding instance is the sprawling Poulson scandal that encompassed dozens of local authorities and scores of actors, both Conservative and Labour. It eventually led to the imprisonment of leading Labour figures from the Northeast, T. Dan Smith and Andrew Cunningham, and helped to pave the way for the introduction of a register of interests for MPs in 1975.⁶⁸ The *Eye* first reported on aspects of Poulson’s affairs in April 1970, fully two years before the national press showed any interest.⁶⁹ Many other

⁶³ Maudling indeed appeared three times on the cover during the 1970s and was also the subject of a book-length exposé. Michael Gillard, *A Little Pot of Money: The Story of Reginald Maudling and the Real Estate Fund of America* (London, 1974).

⁶⁴ Marnham, *Private Eye Story*, 134–37.

⁶⁵ The National Archives [hereafter TNA], “Miscellaneous extracts from *Private Eye* [February 1975],” HO 241/99.

⁶⁶ *Royal Commission on Standards of Conduct in Public Life*, Cmnd. 6524 (1976), 23, 199.

⁶⁷ TNA, “Nationalised Boards: Merger of Dowty Group and Bonsor Engineering: Allegations against Lord Robens, Chairman of National Coal Board, made in ‘*Private Eye*’ [July 1970–July 1973],” PREM 15/1784.

⁶⁸ On the spectacular complexity of the scandal, see Raymond Fitzwalter and Dan Taylor, *Web of Corruption: The Full Story of John Poulson and T. Dan Smith* (London, 1981).

⁶⁹ The article in question, entitled the “Slicker of Wakefield,” appeared in *PE*, 24 April 1970 and was prompted by an earlier piece in the *Bradford Telegraph and Argus*.

stories fit this “first” mold: British Petroleum’s clandestine commercial strategy during the Biafran conflict in Nigeria; attempts to cover up the pollution caused by Rio Tinto Zinc’s Avonmouth smelter in the early 1970s; and the questionable financial and moral integrity of the Bank of Credit and Commerce International in the late 1970s.⁷⁰

It is the minor, now forgotten, stories, however, that best attest to the *Eye*’s appetite for human vices and the editorial license given to Foot and his successors to roam across all walks of public life in the hunt for hypocrisy, greed, and prejudice. As in the Colour Section, the *Eye*’s investigative material was especially focused on exposing conflicts of interest, even if they did not necessarily entail any criminal or even regulatory wrongdoing. The aim was simply to exercise a kind of cynical vigilance laced with jibes and putdowns. Two examples from 1971 stand for many. In March, it published a two-page report—“Tied up in Notts”—on a decision by Nottingham Council to grant planning permission to build on the site of a former dog-racing stadium, focusing on how the decision was implicated in the interests of various local businessmen and councilors.⁷¹ In July, having undertaken research at Companies House, it detailed the Cabinet ministers who had exploited ambiguities regarding ministerial standards and retained substantial shareholdings, among them Heseltine, Francis Pym, and Lord Jellicoe (“Government’s Stocks”).⁷² At the same time, the *Eye*’s investigations scoured both the upper and lower echelons of the state in search of complicity, lies, and injustice. It routinely raised questions, for instance, about the collusion of senior ministers and officials in ugly practices. In 1966 it published the first of many stories about the manufacture of biological weapons (specifically pneumonic plague) at the Ministry of Defence’s laboratories in Porton Down;⁷³ during the early 1970s it detailed examples of government misinformation regarding the conflict in Northern Ireland and its recycling by the mainstream press;⁷⁴ in the mid-1970s it wrote about the failure of the Department of Trade and Industry to conduct a full-scale inquiry into Jim Slater’s bankrupt business empire.⁷⁵ Just as pungent were the many stories about miscarriages of justice and the experience of marginalized groups at the hands of magistrates, police officers, immigration officials, and even the NHS. In 1967 it detailed the painful story of a black nurse from Guyana who, despite boasting impeccable credentials, was turned down for a job at St George’s Hospital, London—one of hundreds of stories concerning systemic, micro-abuses of power.⁷⁶

Cynic Free Speech

The combination of the two forms of cynical critique examined above—the “cheeky”—satirical and “dirty”—empirical—was certainly a distinguishing feature of the *Eye*, even if distinct echoes of both forms could be found elsewhere. The difference is the intensity with which they were pursued and the refusal to entertain any kind of party-political or ideological leanings while doing so. The same is true of a final aspect of the *Eye* that needs to be considered: the way it deliberately eschewed any sense of moral respectability or restraint, of the sort that, as far as the *Eye* was concerned, politicians, the mainstream press, and all those in authority so hypocritically laid claim to. Instead, it cultivated quite the opposite kind of persona, one that was reckless and abusive, anarchic, and degenerate. Of course, the elements examined above contributed to this, but these were embellished by, and embedded in, a variety of further journalistic, literary, and aesthetic elements that deliberately pushed at the boundaries of acceptable free speech and the norms of good taste, common sense, and restraint that defined it. As Sloterdijk and Foucault have suggested, in its

⁷⁰ For a summary of its many successes, see Marnham, *Private Eye Story*, ch. 7.

⁷¹ *PE*, 26 March 1971.

⁷² *PE*, 2 July 1971.

⁷³ *PE*, 2 September 1966.

⁷⁴ For example, *PE*, 12 May 1967; 4 August 1967; 10 September 1971; 16 June 1972; 11 August 1972.

⁷⁵ For example, *PE*, 1 October 1976; 18 March 1977.

⁷⁶ *PE*, 24 November 1967.

ostentatious forms, modern cynicism both distantly echoes the shameless antics of Diogenes and shares something of the taste for confrontation that animates avant-garde art.⁷⁷ The point is to ensure that the form of critique matches its content: that offensive, scandalous truths are delivered in an offensive, scandalous fashion. In the case of the *Eye*, this meant representing the cruel, laughable, chaotic, and grubby nature of public life in a way that partook of these very same qualities. And this was achieved by more than satire alone, extending to the wider repertoire of features it comprised and its overall aesthetic-literary ethos.

This, too, was part of broader postwar developments in print culture, in particular the emergence of magazines that were at once self-consciously youthful and irreverent, and “new” and stylistically innovative. The signature styles that developed were many, from the photographic “cool” of *Man about Town* (1952–68) and the cartoonish anarchy of US-based *MAD* magazine (1952–) to the garish psychedelia and surrealism of the countercultural “underground” press that briefly flourished from the mid-1960s, notably *IT* (*International Times*, 1966–73) and *Oz* (1967–73).⁷⁸ To be sure, the *Eye* was alone in focusing so intently on conventional party-politics and figures of authority, but there are evident stylistic affinities. This is most of all the case with the underground press, which, in its promotion of novel forms of sexual, artistic, and political expression, was also, like the *Eye*, concerned to antagonize conventional attitudes and mores.⁷⁹ Indeed, it did so with much to aggravate: as historians have suggested, beyond the young and outside of metropolitan centers, more liberal and “permissive” attitudes were slow to develop, and in any case provoked a strong conservative backlash.⁸⁰ Crucially, the underground press, like the *Eye*, also sought to distinguish itself from the mainstream press through a deliberately brash and confrontational mixture of visual and literary elements. For all that the *Eye* satirized the contemporary desire for aesthetic novelty and stylistic distinction, it partook of this culture nonetheless and shared various features with countercultural publications, cultivating the same grubby, carnivalesque ambience.

The manifestations of this are many. One is simply the *Eye*’s eccentric, “cut-and-paste” appearance, which mixed text with cartoon graphics, large pictorial features, and vulgar comic strips (e.g., Barry Humphries’s Barry Mackenzie strip that detailed the exploits of a dissolute Australian “on tour” in Britain). Notable artists who appeared in the *Eye*, besides in-house Ruston and Fantoni, included Gerald Scarfe and Ralph Steadman, both of whom specialized in vicious satirical portraits of the powerful. Like *Oz* especially, the *Eye* also dabbled in gratuitous nudity, though in the *Eye*’s case this was often supplemented by tacky wordplay and innuendo as part of its efforts to satirize the tabloid press. There are scores of examples from the covers alone. In 1968, a picture of John Lennon and Yoko Ono, naked, appeared on the cover replete with obscured genitalia: “It’s no good, officer,” read one of the captions. “It won’t stand up in court.” In 1975, amid the party-leadership battle that would see Thatcher emerge as victor, the face of Edward Heath was superimposed on the body of a naked woman, with the caption, “If it’s a woman you want, I’m your man.”⁸¹ A final feature it shared with the underground press was a taste for the surreal and content whose precise meaning was obscure. Although the satirical intent of characters such as the journalist Lunchtime O’Booze was clear enough, others were less so, as in one of Cook’s Beachcomber-style inventions, Sir Basil Nardly-Stoads, Chief Rammer of a secret sect dedicated to extreme silliness. Waugh’s *Diary*, which peppered accounts of entirely fictional events with egregious invective directed against politicians, was similarly indulgent. The

⁷⁷ Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, ch. 13; Foucault, *Courage of Truth*, 187–89.

⁷⁸ For a useful overview see Andrew Calcutt, “Magazine Pioneers: Form and Content in 1960s and 1970s Radicalism,” in *Routledge Companion to British Media History*, ed. Martin Conboy et al. (London, 2015), 309–19.

⁷⁹ Nigel Fountain, *Underground: The London Alternative Press, 1966–1974* (London, 1985).

⁸⁰ Dominic Sandbrook, *White Heat: Britain in the Sixties* (London, 2015), ch. 23; Callum G. Brown, *The Battle for Christian Britain: Sex, Humanists and Secularisation* (Cambridge, 2019); Marcus Collins, *The Beatles and Sixties Britain* (Cambridge, 2020), ch. 1.

⁸¹ *PE*, 25 October 1968; 7 February 1975.

most experimental instance of this kind of content, however, is Logue's True Stories feature. This exhibited a more poetic sense of the absurd, presenting a medley of stories culled from newspapers around the globe that were by turns tragic, salutary, ironic, or just plain odd. It made for a kind of one-page cabinet of miniature, real-life fables, as if the world was perfectly adept at satirizing itself.⁸²

One result was that the *Eye* attracted much the same derogatory epithets as the likes of *Oz* and *IT*, even if, unlike the latter, it was never prosecuted under the obscenity laws: that is to say, "corrupt," "filthy," "vile."⁸³ As early as 1963, the *Eye* featured on the front page of the right-wing *New Daily*, where it was described as a "vicious attack on the nation's moral standards and our way of life."⁸⁴ It was subject to much the same treatment, too, at the hands of distributors and retailers. W. H. Smith and John Menzies refused to sell the *Eye*, forcing it to establish its own distribution network, and it was briefly banned in Australia and South Africa, the latter on account of its anti-apartheid content.⁸⁵ Once more, however, the *Eye* was a distinctively cynical practitioner of this particular aspect of postwar print culture. Most obviously, it remained entirely aloof from the various radical-libertarian ideologies that informed the underground press. Indeed, it satirized the counterculture with the same intensity as it did the Conservative and Labour parties.⁸⁶ At the same time, its coverage of conventional party-politics and public life was distinguished by forms of provocation and abuse that had no parallel in the underground press, even if they shared a similar spirit of aesthetic-moral aggravation. Put another way, its ideological detachment from the counterculture was the flipside of a far more disruptive relationship to mainstream politics and culture.

This was variously expressed and extended to occasional electoral stunts. Both Rushton and Waugh stood as parliamentary candidates: the former as the Death to the Tories candidate in the 1963 by-election held to facilitate Alec Douglas-Home's assumption of the prime ministership (in protest at the Conservatives' contempt for democracy); Waugh for the Dog Lovers Party against Jeremy Thorpe in the 1979 general election (in protest at the latter's lack of honesty about an affair that involved the clumsy assassination of a dog). Particular features, too, specialized in deliberately offensive material, notably Grovel. This began life in 1970 and was soon taken over by tabloid gossip columnists Nigel Dempster and Peter McKay, who used it as a space for stories deemed too fatuous and vulgar for inclusion in their own papers, the *Daily Mail* and *Sunday Express* respectively. Even some *Eye* staff found it hard to stomach: in early 1975 alone it reported that Roddy Llewellyn, a former escort of Princess Margaret, had suffered a nervous breakdown and that the Cabinet minister Denis Healey had had a cyst removed from his right testicle.⁸⁷ Ingrams's defense was that the gossip concerned only the wealthy and powerful, later citing Cobbett to the effect that the private lives of all who sought public office and acclaim were legitimate objects of scrutiny.⁸⁸ But it was also an exercise in cynical provocation, pushing at the boundaries of good taste while simultaneously satirizing the casual cruelty of the tabloid press and the way it exploited a popular, if puerile, interest in the lives of the famous.⁸⁹ Grovel always signed off on an ironic note, with a cheerful "Pip pip!," and is best read as forming something like the "dirty"-empirical analogue to the gratuitous nudity and borderline nonsense noted above.

⁸² Christopher Logue, *Christopher Logue's Bumper Book of True Stories* (London, 1980).

⁸³ Hewison, *Too Much*, 170–75; Lockyer, "An Eye to Offensiveness," ch. 6.

⁸⁴ *The New Daily*, 28 August 1963.

⁸⁵ Marnham, *Private Eye Story*, 171–73; Thompson, *Richard Ingrams*, 167.

⁸⁶ For example, *PE*, 18 August 1967; 30 June 1972.

⁸⁷ *PE*, 18 April 1975; 2 May 1975.

⁸⁸ Richard Ingrams, "People Who Complain about Public Figures being Hounded by the Press Usually have Something to Hide. Haven't They?," *Observer Review*, 10 August 1997, 2.

⁸⁹ On the growing popularity of celebrity gossip, see Adrian Bingham, *Family Newspapers? Sex, Private Life, and the British Popular Press, 1918–1978* (Oxford, 2009), ch. 7.

What most distinguished the *Eye*, however, was a consistent commitment to pushing the limits of people's tolerance of defamation and embracing the risks this entailed in terms of libel actions. This was complex and contentious legal territory. British laws on defamation had been reviewed in the 1940s and were reviewed again during the early 1970s by the Faulks Committee; and it was widely argued, if not necessarily widely accepted, that the laws imposed de facto limits on free speech, whether through their inconsistent application, the extraordinary costs of contesting writs and appealing verdicts, or the way they rendered distributors liable.⁹⁰ This was certainly Ingrams's view and he quickly became something of an expert on defamation, appearing with Foot before the Faulks Committee in 1972 and publishing on the matter at the time.⁹¹ But refusing to be intimidated by the risk of legal action was also intrinsic to the *Eye*'s cynical ethos of scurrilous exposure and the kind of uncomfortable picture of public life it sought to generate. As Ingrams was advised early on, given the nature of its content, there was always the chance that someone would take exception to a factual error or a particular line of satirical abuse and launch an action. And so, ultimately, it proved—but what for some was a mark of dishonor was, precisely because of this, a core part of the *Eye*'s cynical integrity: its “scandalous” virtue and independence, to borrow from Foucault.⁹²

Actions were threatened or launched from the start. In 1971, Ingrams estimated that the *Eye* had been sued by about fifty individuals and had paid out nearly £50,000; more would follow in the next decade, and in 1980 alone some £100,000 was incurred in costs and damages.⁹³ These actions were by far the main reason for the appearance of the *Eye* in the mainstream press and the key reason, too, why it attracted so much negative comment. It was not averse, for instance, to openly goading individuals—ministers, MPs, suspect criminals, and so on—into taking libel action, or mocking them for not doing so, or publicizing what was at stake. A striking instance is the decision to make known the identity of the Kray twins in August 1964. Although the *Daily Mirror* and *Daily Express*, partly in fear, had refrained from naming the pair, they had still run sensational stories about the Krays' violent activities, creating considerable alarm in East London. The *Eye* joked that it was not “anxious to be sued for libel [or] to have its knee caps blown off,” but the point was a serious one. Noting how the names were widely discussed in Fleet Street circles, it went on: “PRIVATE EYE considers this situation both farcical and intolerable. Either the charges are true, in which case the newspaper should have the guts to publish them, whatever the risk of libel action. Or they are untrue, in which case they should stop scaring the people with this horror movie of London”—the names then followed.⁹⁴ Likewise, its Colour Section reported rumors about possible actions coming its way and shared any libel threats it had received. The most sensational example is its decision to name Sir Anthony Blunt as the “fourth” Soviet agent in the Cambridge ring (after Burgess, Maclean, and Philby) in November 1979. The *Eye* was aware of the libel risks, which were potentially ruinous, and in September it wrote about the threat it had received from Blunt's lawyer; but it went ahead and the story was quickly confirmed by an official statement in the Commons by Thatcher, followed by a blizzard of front-page press stories.⁹⁵

The flipside of this was that *Private Eye* had to issue apologies, sign restrictive agreements, and pay out hefty sums in judge-imposed damages or out-of-court settlements. For all that the *Eye* struck out, many struck back, often successfully.⁹⁶ Yet this was not without further

⁹⁰ Paul Mitchell, *The Making of the Modern Law of Defamation* (Oxford, 2005), ch. 5; *Report of the Committee on Defamation*, Cmnd. 5909 (1975).

⁹¹ TNA, “Lord Chancellor's Department: Committee on Defamation. Memoranda, *Private Eye* [February–June 1972],” LCO 13/85. A chapter by Ingrams appeared alongside other critiques of existing libel laws in Michael Rubinstein, ed., *Wicked, Wicked Libels* (London, 1972).

⁹² Foucault, *Courage of Truth*, 233–34.

⁹³ Ingrams, ed., *Life and Times*, 11; Marnham, *Private Eye Story*, 110–11.

⁹⁴ *PE*, 12 June 1964.

⁹⁵ *PE*, 28 September 1979; 9 November 1979. For example, *Times*, 16 November 1979; *Guardian*, 16 November 1979.

⁹⁶ A useful overview is Richard Ingrams, *Goldenballs!* (London, 1979), 1–7.

counterblows from the *Eye* on the basis that those abused deserved it or that a particular story was in essence accurate. This assumed various forms, from questioning judicial decisions and republicizing aspects of a story that were correct, to further satirical goading and staging fundraising campaigns in cases where the financial consequences were potentially catastrophic. The latter especially presented opportunities to revel in notoriety and were conducted with typical exuberance. The template was set in 1966 when, following an action by Lord Russell that cost £8,000, Cook organized a fundraising event at London's Phoenix theatre. Readers were also invited to make donations and Lord Gnome ironically commented on developments in his opening column. A similar "Gnomefam" appeal was launched in 1969 (following an action by two journalists on the *People*) and a "Ballsoff fund" in 1971 (in relation to an action by the *Observer's* Nora Beloff). The biggest campaign, however, was the "Goldenballs fund" of 1976–77, launched following an unusually aggressive campaign by James Goldsmith that involved the issuing of three criminal (rather than the usual civil) writs for defamation (thus meaning the possibility of imprisonment); eighty writs against forty of the *Eye's* distributors and retailers; plus a medley of court appearances, appeals, and injunctions.⁹⁷ The case was eventually settled out of court, but no opportunity was lost to niggle and provoke in what became the subject of rolling coverage, in which the *Eye* mocked judicial disagreements, further exposed Goldsmith's business activities, and satirized the plight it was in. "My great organ, which has weathered so many storms in the past," wrote Gnome in August 1976, seeking to reassure readers, "will not, I am sure, be deflected from its course, let alone be destroyed by the present little difficulties."⁹⁸

Conclusion

In time, and especially after the replacement of Ingrams as editor in 1986, when Ian Hislop took over, *Private Eye* would become a slicker, longer publication. Grovel ceased and nudity disappeared from the front covers. Other unpleasant features also ended, such as the homophobic innuendo it had often indulged in (which no amount of satirical license should excuse). But none of this fundamentally altered its essential qualities and the *Eye* continued, as it still does today, to push its peculiar brand of cynicism, as expressed through the signature mix of elements it developed during the formative period considered here: satirical comedy and cartoonish graphics, grubby informational vignettes, and investigative pieces, all of them designed, in some way, to antagonize those in authority and highlight a litany of human vices. This is precisely why *Private Eye* demands some kind of political reading. But to suggest that it should be seen, in the final analysis, as a kind of (small "c") conservative enterprise, whether by design or not, is far from the mark. The argument here, however, is not simply that existing readings have overlooked the straightforwardly critical nature of some of its content, notably the investigative stories, or that they have overlooked some crucial contexts in which we should situate its development. The point is that they misunderstand the kind of agency at stake by seeking to make sense of it, ultimately, in instrumental-ideological terms (i.e., whether it advances a cause, program, or party situated on the left-right axis), in keeping with conventional political historiography. Other works, notably on political comedy, often fall into the same trap.⁹⁹ To suggest instead that *Private Eye* performed a particular kind of cynical critique, one that recalls the original (classical) meaning of the term, is one way of breaking out of this kind of framing—but what, then, is at stake here? Two points might be made in conclusion.

The first is that this is an essentially disruptive form of agency, one that announces a refusal to abide by conventional norms of political conduct and rationality. It is, in short,

⁹⁷ Marnham, *Private Eye Story*, 160–66; Ingrams, *Goldenballs!*

⁹⁸ *PE*, 6 August 1976.

⁹⁹ For a critique of this way of appraising political comedy see James Brassett, *The Ironic State: British Comedy and the Everyday Politics of Globalisation* (Bristol, 2021).

a form of protest or dissent. Histories of modern British politics have become much more attuned to the question of apathy (e.g., non-voting) in recent decades, and we might think of this as its counterpart *and* opposite—opposite simply because it is active: a matter of intervening in, rather than withdrawing from, the political field and public sphere.¹⁰⁰ *Private Eye* constitutes a peculiarly militant, and of course print-based, instance of this, but it bears affinities with a range of interventions that, however punctual or more considered, embody the same kind of cynical ethos. The examples are many, ranging from the spontaneous heckle at a public meeting and the use of protest candidatures in elections to the satirical cartoons of mainstream newspapers and the disruptive actions and stunts that have come to define campaigns of civil disobedience (e.g., roadblocks, sit-ins, offensive placards). Of course, these tactics *might* be part of more ideological campaigns or outlooks, but their effectiveness or rationality need not be reduced to this kind of calculus. They are better understood on their own terms: as forms of disruption that aim to register a positive act of refusal and non-compliance.

The second point is that, for all its varied manifestations, it is nonetheless possible to discern a consistent morality at work. It is not simply a matter of style. As Sloterdijk and others in his wake have suggested, cynicism of this type proposes an alternative morality of political conduct, drawing its legitimacy from the disjuncture between the professed ideals and intentions of those who govern, on the one hand, and the way they lead their lives and the outcomes of their policies, on the other.¹⁰¹ It says, in effect, that our political conduct is no less moral, or even rational, when it reflects and embodies just this ironic gap, and all the laughter and despair, anger, and outrage it generates. Once again, *Private Eye* is a peculiarly intense, print-based example of this, but the elision of form and content—the illumination of this gap in acts that also embody the way power is otherwise than professed: chaotic, laughable, compromised, reckless, abusive—is a distinguishing feature of all cynic expression. The objection, of course, might still be made that cynicism remains only a negative kind of agency, feeding off the failures of those who govern while also failing, for its part, to offer any alternatives of its own (i.e., ideological diagnoses, sensible policies). Yet this is to overlook precisely what cynicism thrives on and that undercuts the moral basis of any such dismissals: simply, the endemic nature of the failures it insistently highlights which seem only to repeat themselves again and again (i.e., hypocrisy, incompetence, corruption, and lies on the part of the powerful). This is another reason why it needs to be understood on its own cynical terms. This is also, surely, the principal reason for the remarkable longevity and success of *Private Eye*.

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¹⁰⁰ For example, Kevin Jefferys, *Politics and the People: A History of British Democracy since 1918* (London, 2007); Jonathan Moss et al., “Golden Age, Apathy or Stealth? Democratic Engagement in Britain, 1945–1950,” *Contemporary British History* 30, no. 4 (2016): 441–62.

¹⁰¹ Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, ch. 5; and especially Chaloupka, *Everybody Knows*, 174–83.

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