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NEWSPAPER RIVALRY IN NEWCASTLE UPON TYNE 1876-1919: ‘DICKY BIRDS’ AND ‘GOLDEN CIRCLES’*

Abstract: Newspaper children’s columns first appeared in the 1870s. However, they have been largely overlooked by academic studies of education, children’s literature and the newspaper Press. This latter resource has provided rich veins of material for scholars looking for affirmation of contemporary events. The ‘miscellaneous’ contents of this source, and particularly that of the provincial weeklies, have been largely ignored. This study analyses the development of children’s columns in two weekly newspapers, the Newcastle Weekly Chronicle and the Northern Weekly Leader. Both of these newspapers launched societies attached to their children’s columns, the ‘Dicky Bird Society’, which ran until 1940 and the ‘Golden Circle’, which ceased in 1919. During their existence, these two societies enrolled nearly half a million members, who were then engaged in activities ranging from charitable collections to nature conservation work. Such numbers support the argument that children’s columns were a vital element of the popular Press and were more than simply miscellaneous features. These features played a vital commercial role for their respective titles in their adversarial circulation battles by creating a community of readers at an early age.

Keywords: Newspaper; Newcastle upon Tyne; children; Dicky Bird Society; Newcastle Weekly Chronicle; Northern Weekly Leader
The nineteenth-century Press played a central role in the lives of individuals, providing knowledge of the outside world and thus shaping their opinions.[1] It therefore follows that this Press has long held a fascination for scholars, and this valuable source has been repeatedly picked over in the search for political comment or to relate the growth and emergent complexities of this media.[2] Despite many studies that tend to tread this familiar territory, one particular sector of the newspaper Press, the weekly newspaper and its diverse content, has been virtually ignored. This neglect has led to concerns, for as Graham Law has pointed out ‘the weekly news-miscellanies, whether provincial or metropolitan, have generally been treated as derivative, trivial or ephemeral by mainstream newspaper history where political coverage in the daily has generally been given priority’.[3] One of these provincial weeklies was the *Newcastle Weekly Chronicle* [NWC], which has been the subject of quite detailed academic review owing to its late-nineteenth-century Radical proprietor and editor.[4] Yet, as a demonstration of Law’s argument, a similar Newcastle newspaper, the *Northern Weekly Leader* [NWL], has received attention only for its ownership and political allegiances.[5]

Founded in 1862, the *NWC* was the weekly edition of the *Newcastle Daily Chronicle*. The new title quickly gained a reputation for quality journalism and distinctive content. This was largely due to the efforts of two individuals. The owner of the *Newcastle Chronicle* was the Liberal MP Joseph Cowen (1829-1900), who was determined his paper should be ‘The Times of the North’. To realise this intention, in 1864, Cowen installed the radical journalist William Edwin Adams (1832-1906) as editor, who quickly overhauled the ‘two penny publication of no particular account’
by introducing a raft of new and popular features.[6] By 1871, *NWC* readers could look forward to ninety-six different articles and features, including serialised fiction, prize essays, local gossip, and radical political opinion, as well the usual local, national, and international news.[7]

Such diverse content led to recognition at both home and abroad. In 1894, Kendall Robinson eulogised in the trade periodical, the *Book and News Trade Gazette*;

wherever English is spoken, no matter how remote may be part of the world, the *Newcastle Weekly Chronicle* is known, looked for, and read; and indeed in respect of circulation, perhaps no weekly paper published outside of London touches it.[8]

Such praise was not misplaced. The *Open Court*, an intellectual Chicago journal, simply thought the Newcastle paper to be the ‘best paper in the world’. [9] This admiring praise was well earned, as Adams continually created innovative features for his paper to compete in the ruthless business of newspaper production, as editors balanced the need to appeal to a broad readership with innovation.[10]

Any novel feature obviously meant new readers, and these included women. Owen Ashton, in his biography of Adams, credits him with founding one of the first ‘Ladies’ Columns’ in 1880, although this acclaim is misplaced. In the 1860s, the *Manchester Weekly Times* hosted a ‘Ladies’ Column’. This gave dance instruction, fashion guidance and beauty advice, and by 1880, a number of other provincial newspapers hosted similar features.[11] However, what is possibly more plausible is
that Adams introduced the first continuous children’s column in a nineteenth-century British newspaper. This first appeared on 7 October 1876.[12] Other provincial newspapers slowly followed and eighty-five newspaper titles, in the period 1876 to 1914, have been found to have published children’s columns of some description.[13] Some of these titles were rivals to the NWC in Newcastle, including the NWL, whose children’s column appeared in 1886, apparently as a direct competitor to the NWC’s effort.[14] By comparing and contrasting the development of the two children’s columns in the NWC and NWL, this paper will demonstrate how these seemingly ‘miscellaneous’ features, were in fact integral to the bitter rivalry that existed in the newspaper Press.[15]

The NWC’s ‘Children’s Corner’ seemed to be an imaginative move to capture the family reader. However, the creation of this column now appears to be tardy, given evidence suggesting there was a demonstrable demand for such a feature long before the 1870s. Memoirs of nineteenth-century individuals recall how they sought out any sort of cheap or free reading material to advance their reading skills. This invariably meant a reliance on newspapers, which were widely available and seemingly easily scrounged. George Elson, a London chimney ‘climbing boy’ born in 1833, recorded how he ‘longed for means of learning’ and trawled public houses seeking newspapers.[16] His choice of paper vastly expanded after the gradual abolition of the ‘taxes on knowledge’ by 1861. Allied with technological advances in printing techniques, communication and transport there then followed an explosion in the number of titles produced.[17] This post-taxation era has been regarded as a ‘golden age’ for the provincial Press, as the dominance of the London Press was rolled back
only for it to spring back with the rise of the half-penny dailies, such as the *Daily Mail*, by 1914.[18]

At the time, educationalists believed that this rapid increase in the availability of cheap newspapers was having a markedly positive effect on the education of the working classes. As a measure of this, the 1862 the *Revised Code* of education guidelines included the provision that the more advanced pupils should be able to read or transcribe a ‘short ordinary paragraph in a newspaper or other modern narrative’.[19] Schools followed this edict. In 1866, the master of the St Nicholas National School for Boys in Newcastle recorded that he ‘gave Standard VI a piece of dictation out a speech in the *Newcastle Daily Express*’. [20] An examination of the *Express* shows it relied heavily on political ad-verbatim reporting, typical of the age. The pupils might have read the ‘Speech of Emperor Napoleon’, browsed ‘Where the Poor Live in Newcastle’ and the foxhunting reports, whilst the more curious examined an account of skulls and bones found in a cave.[21] Although children in another North-East school read the more visually pleasing *Illustrated London News*, the dense reams of text to be found in the majority of mid-Victorian newspapers, including the *Express* had little to appeal directly to schoolchildren.[22] Newspapers were not the only ephemeral reading matter available to children. Since the beginning of the nineteenth century, there had been a steadily growing children’s magazine Press. This was largely religious and heavily didactic at first, but from the 1850s, this Press rapidly expanded as it slowly dawned on publishers that children were a profitable market.[23]
Therefore, there was a potential gap in the market for newspaper proprietors. This was not filled until the *Belfast News-Letter*’s ‘Corner for Children’ in August 1873. At one-third of a column in length, this feature consisted of a replicated article from the *Child’s Paper* detailing the development of coral, and ran for just one week.[24] The *NWC*’s ‘Children’s Corner’ was a much more substantial affair. This two-columned feature provided stories, puzzles, and articles. These mirrored the content of some of the more wholesome magazines. However, the remit of the *NWC* was much more ambitious. Instead of preaching at children, which much of the periodicals tended to do, Adams wanted to enter into a dialogue with his young readers.

To do this, Adams assumed the pseudonym of Uncle Toby as their avuncular leader and created the ‘Dicky Bird Society’ [DBS] to inculcate in children a more appreciative mindset towards animals and birds. Uncle Toby repeatedly encouraged his young charges to provide bird food and desist from bird nesting. Members had to commit themselves to keep to the following pledge:

I promise to be kind to all living things, to protect to the utmost of my power, to feed the birds in the winter time, and never to take or destroy a nest. I also promise to get as many boys and girls as possible to join the Dicky Bird Society.[25]

Uncle Toby called for young readers to write to him with their letters and drawings for publication. Like many of the *NWC*’s features, this was immediately popular. In just five years, 50,000 children had enrolled and the DBS column was full of children’s letters telling how they fed the birds. The success of this venture was
partly because membership was free. Adams made a conscious effort to ‘attract the Street Arabs of London, Newcastle, Liverpool and Manchester’. Whether any ‘Arabs’ enrolled is unknown, but the DBS certainly attracted membership from the poorer working classes. One letter began, ‘please excuse me for a stamp, because I am in the Gateshead Union Workhouse’.

There were obviously financial benefits for such an enterprise in an era of intense rivalry between newspapers and this column has been regarded as part of the drive to make the *NWC* a ‘family newspaper and magazine in one’. It would appear that even before the creation of the DBS, Adams was well on the way to reaching this objective, as the *NWC*’s circulation multiplied. By 1875, it was above the 45,000 figure. Adams was certainly not the only editor to recognise the importance of capturing a ‘family’ of readers. When the *Leeds Mercury* launched its supplement in 1879, replete with a children’s column, it claimed to ‘provide for the reading public of Yorkshire a first class family and general newspaper… We shall pay particular attention to the interests of families of the working classes’.

The *Leeds Mercury* did not host a children’s society, but similar societies to the DBS, promoting benevolence towards animals and birds, sprang up elsewhere in the weekly Press. Uncle George of the *Stockport Advertiser* credited the DBS when he formed his Band of Kindness in 1882, Dainty Davie ran the Dundee *People’s Journal*, Captain Trim led the Sheffield *Weekly Telegraph’s* Kind Hearted Brigade and Portsmouth children could join a League of Love. This rush to provide children’s societies with humanitarian objectives needs some explanation. First, the late nineteenth century marked the creation of child protection agencies, which reflected
the increasing concern for the physical and mental degeneration of the population. Juvenile delinquency had become an established public concern by the mid nineteenth century, and this anxiety had reached a crescendo by the turn of the twentieth century.

Secondly, the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals [RSPCA] had constantly made the link between the poor treatment of animals and the unruly behaviour of children, repeating the opinion that such delinquents could be reformed if only there was a system of educating the child on kindness towards animals.[32] To this end, RSPCA supporters founded one of the first children’s animal welfare societies, the Band of Mercy, in 1875. Under the auspices of the RSPCA, this movement grew and by 1889, over 540 Bands were in existence across the British Empire with 113,000 members.[33] These ‘nature protection’ societies were launched into an increasingly receptive field for children’s movements. Boy’s clubs, temperance Bands of Hope and the newly created Boys’ Brigade provided dedicated publications, and entertainment, often for the cost of a few pennies and in return required the child to undertake a personal pledge.[34]

Although Adams explained to his young readers that the DBS was launched to combat cruelty towards birds, why he chose 1876 to begin this enterprise is difficult to assess. A number of factors may have prompted him. It was not coincidental that earlier that year the RSPCA had praised the foundation of the first Band of Mercy in its widely circulated periodical, Animal World. This stressed the need for similar societies to educate children on kindness towards animals.[35] There is no evidence confirming Adams had a formal connection with this Society in Newcastle in the 1870s.[36] Instead, we must assume that his motivation was his deep personal convictions regarding animal cruelty. He recalled how these had been crystallised
when, as a child, he protested to his friends when he witnessed them tearing apart fledgling birds they found when out birdnesting.[37] The DBS was not Adams’ only foray into education or environmentalism. He was a leading advocate for Newcastle’s public library and the city’s Leazes Park.[38] The creation of the DBS was therefore an ideal opportunity to combine personal beliefs and continue his social campaigns.

As a campaigning editor, Adams was also following a well-worn path, down which mid-nineteenth-century Liberal newspaper had often trodden by, for example, taking up causes for municipal improvement and reform.[39] Reflecting on the educational work of the DBS, Adams later recalled, ‘when I first commenced the “Corner”, I did so under the impression that an ordinary newspaper would form an excellent medium for reaching the young’. By widening the audience for his paper, Adams was sure this would lead to ‘the making of wise heads, and generous and kind hearts’ and ensured it offered a regular supply of wholesome reading. This would help to combat, what Adams regarded was the insidious effects of the juvenile ‘penny dreadful’ Press and the ‘vulgar sensationalism’ of the contemporary newspaper Press.[40]

The success of the DBS had a local impact and other Newcastle newspapers moved to copy their rival, although not immediately. It was not until 1879 that *Newcastle Courant* responded with its ‘Young Folk’s Column’, but this was initially quite distinct from the style employed by the *NWC*. A far more ‘intellectual’ approach is apparent, with taxing conundrums, moralistic fables, chess puzzles and French dictation exercises. Perhaps realising this fare would hardly attract young readers, a ‘Young Folks Humane Society’ was added in 1882, although this was a brief venture, lasting just twelve months. Thereafter, the *Newcastle Courant’s* efforts varied considerably and mostly consisted of a children’s column with no club attached.[41]
More substantive was the response of the newly launched NWL. This was founded in South Shields, in 1884, as the Gladstonian Liberal riposte to the Newcastle Chronicle’s estrangement from the party over the ‘Eastern Question’. A year later, production moved to Newcastle, ownership transferred to the coal magnate and Liberal MP James Joicey (1846–1936) and a morning daily edition, the Newcastle Daily Leader, introduced. James Annand (1843-1906) edited both newspapers, and it is clear where he gained the idea of introducing a children’s column. Annand had previously edited the Newcastle Daily Chronicle, but left in 1877 after clashing with Cowen over the Eastern Question. The launch of the Liberal NWL in 1884 was a direct assault on the Chronicle’s political territory that was further squeezed by the launch of the Daily Leader. The NWC fought back with an increased number of pages and a new ‘Literary Supplement’. This was met by the Leader’s restyled Weekly edition in 1886, which introduced its ‘Home Circle’ children’s society, as part of its ‘Children’s Hour’ column under the tutelage of ‘Cousin Paul’. Like the DBS, the Home Circle carried exhortations to feed the birds and printed its members’ letters, but also had much wider objectives than just bird conservation. Its rules insisted upon obedience, respect, and good manners. Illustrative of its desire to usurp its rival, it quickly published a four sided ‘Children’s Supplement’ to promote the work of the Circle. These direct assaults on the Newcastle newspaper markets had a terminal effect on the Northern Daily Express. Caught in the crossfire of the Chronicle and the Leader, the oldest daily paper in England was too weak to respond to these innovations in content and it folded in 1886.[42]

Such fierce competition played out in the arena of their children’s columns was not unusual. In the rural Tynedale town of Hexham, two other newspapers battled
for supremacy. The Hexham Courant first appeared in 1864 and was followed in 1868 by the Hexham Herald. The spoiling nature of the Press led the Hexham Courant to produce a bi-weekly edition just three days before the Herald appeared.[43] An extension of this circulation battle was the introduction by the Hexham Courant in 1881 of its Paul Boythorne’s Children’s Society. Twenty-three months later, the Herald responded with their ‘Sister Mercy’ children’s column. Both newspapers then strove to promote anti-cruelty messages and print their young readers’ letters. The Hexham Courant’s society petered out by 1887, leaving it reliant on replicated articles from children’s magazines to keep pace with the Herald. It was certainly not coincidental that both columns ceased in 1892, the Hexham Courant outlasting its rival by three weeks.[44]

The DBS portrayed itself as a worthy institution, but this was not enough to convince all children to join it. A particular problem was the enrolment of boys, as some thought it to be a ‘childish’ association. As John Tosh has pointed out, the virtue of ‘manliness’ was constantly ‘elaborated, reiterated, contested and adapted – by preachers, schoolmasters and novelists’. [45] In this highly charged masculine climate, it is easy to see why the appellation ‘Dicky Bird Society’, which hardly exuded manly credentials, failed to engage some boys, especially those raised in tough colliery villages. Some members therefore suggested a name change to ‘Bird Defender Society’ in order to overcome this obstacle. Uncle Toby balloted his membership, who responded with an overwhelming defence of the original title, reasoning that a renaming would cause confusion.[46] The NWL also suffered an identity problem, announcing that another newspaper intended to adopt the ‘Home Circle’ name for its children’s column. In 1887, the short-lived Tyneside Echo launched its own ‘Home
Circle’ for its young readers. News of this feature had presumably prompted Cousin Paul to seek another name for his society. Once again a ballot was held, illustrating the principle both society leaders instilled in their members that it was ‘their’ society. The name ‘Golden Circle’ was chosen to reflect the society’s ‘golden rules’. [47]

This new identity appeared to revitalise the NWL’s society and by 1890, 33,000 members had been recruited, although this lagged way behind the DBS, which was now receiving accolades from esteemed journals, including the Review of Reviews. [48] The Golden Circle constantly played catch up with the DBS, and in an attempt to secure greater recognition, in 1887, Cousin Paul boasted that ‘Children’s Corners are now as common as any other regular features in a weekly newspaper…most of them running under titles that I devised’. [49] This claim to originality was spurious as the Golden Circle replicated many of the DBS’s innovations. Energetic DBS members, and especially those who recruited large numbers of members, were rewarded with appointments as ‘officers’ of the society. Boys were made ‘captains’, whilst girls were decorated as ‘companions’. Notably, loyal Circle members were then uplifted to ‘companions of the Golden Circle’. [50] The DBS sent out ‘recruiting sheets’ to members and schools to enrol batches of children. Again, the Golden Circle followed. Schemes of this nature, which rewarded members, naturally attracted an element of fraud from children chasing rewards of prizes for their efforts. Duplicity was rooted out and Uncle Toby warned his members ‘get a few names, get them genuine and get them often’. [51] It is highly likely that children were members of both newspaper clubs, since both the DBS and the Golden Circle recruited from the same Gateshead school in 1887. [52] Whether parents read
both the *Leader* and *NWC* is unknown, but it is possible given that both publications ostensibly took a Liberal stance.

Both societies focused primarily on creating a more benevolent disposition towards wildlife. Their leaders repeatedly urged members to feed the birds, desist from egg collecting, and curtail any instances of cruelty they encountered. Furthermore, they also broached some of the wider concerns of the conservation movement including the feather millinery industry, caged bird traders and pigeon trap shooting. Children enthusiastically engaged with these campaigns and wrote eagerly to both societies describing how they fed the birds, destroyed bird traps and intervened to prevent cruelty.[53] Although the newspapers carried this running debate, there is no evidence to confirm that the societies influenced the growing raft of bird protection legislation.[54]

More demonstrable of the work of the societies were the annual charitable collections both societies organised. Charitable collections were a common trait of the children’s magazine *Press* and were partly an extension of an editor’s objectives to ‘inculcate a charitable awareness among middle class children’.[55] Although this was probably true, we can also view this philanthropy as a means of easing middle-class consciences as the gulf between them and the poor became ever wider. Such appeals were extremely successful. The DBS launched its Christmas appeal in 1888 for unwanted toys and games for distribution to destitute children in workhouses and hospitals. Donations poured in. The 1889 appeal led to 13,500 gifts distributed and 30,000 people visiting the ‘toy exhibition’ to view the display of donations.[56] Not to be outdone, in 1890 the Golden Circle also issued an appeal for children’s toys. A
year later, it extended its charitable work and a ‘cot fund’ was begun to pay for a children’s hospital bed.[57]

The DBS did not respond to this extension of philanthropic work and simply plugged away at its annual Christmas appeal. This dogmatic approach appeared to be successful. By 1913, Uncle Toby bragged that his society had distributed 272,700 gifts since the appeal’s inception.[58] Yet, it is noticeable that the number of donations was tailing off each year. This was probably because public offerings were being diluted by the Golden Circle’s Christmas appeal. In an attempt at one-upmanship, Uncle Paul jibbed that the Circle’s 1904 ‘Toy Exhibition’ was the only one where any entertainment was held, observing that ‘only last week an exhibition took place and at a reasonable hour all was packed up and despatched. No tea or amusement was given’.[59] The Circle’s altruistic work widened and it began amassing a ‘Charity Fund’ that distributed hardship payments to the needy, such as the 7s. 6d. given to the ‘delicate…Mrs S., unable to work and [whose] husband has been in the Gateshead Union Hospital’.[60]

Despite this widening of the Golden Circle’s charitable work, and the claim in 1910 that the NWL had the ‘largest sale of any weekly published in the North East Counties’, it was the DBS which remained the more popular society, recruiting at four times the rate of its rival in the early 1900s (Fig. 1).[61]
As a measure of the continuing popularity of the DBS, it was also able to engender huge public support. In 1894, to celebrate the club enrolling 250,000 members, a day of festivities was held. Admired by 100,000 spectators, 10,000 members marched through Newcastle city centre, and then a crowd of 30-40,000 enjoyed the day’s entertainment on the Town Moor.[62] The Golden Circle was growing in confidence and it too was organising social events for its members. These included annual concerts at Newcastle Town Hall in 1890, which it hoped would develop a ‘musical culture amongst children’ and a choral society, although again these appeared to have been imitations of a DBS concert held in 1889.[63] The rivalry continued, and it was perhaps no coincidence the DBS resurrected its rambling club in 1897, the same year that the Golden Circle began a series of summer picnics.[64]
During this battle for supremacy, both newspapers underwent significant change. William Adams retired due to ill health in 1898 and his son Ernest Welles Adams (1866-1946) assumed both editorship of the *NWC* and the mantle of Uncle Toby. The new Uncle Toby had a long apprenticeship as DBS leader, being one of the first recruits to the society in 1876.[65] The Golden Circle’s host paper had been struggling financially for some time, partly because its pro-Boer stance during the South African War, which caused it to lose valuable advertising revenue crucially at a time when Newcastle had an overcrowded newspaper market. As a result, Joicey sold the *Leader* to Arthur Pearson in 1903, and the *Daily Leader* ceased. Readers were informed they should switch their allegiance to the *North Mail*, Pearson’s new daily newspaper. During this upheaval, the *NWL* survived, albeit under new management.[66] These changes caused little visible disruption to both societies, and instead appeared to have an invigorating effect on the Golden Circle that began distancing itself from merely being a poor imitation of the DBS. The Circle moved away from its original roots as a children’s society to one which also embraced adults, whose letters began to fill the society’s pages. Never one to miss an opportunity to sneer at the DBS, Cousin Paul declared in 1908 that his Circle was ‘more than only a corner to which children write about dicky birds, we have grown up members and hosts of outside friends who take the honest interest in the doings of my cousins’.[67] Indicative of this new zest for work was the ‘beehive’, formed in 1905, for members to assist with the gathering and making of gifts for its annual toy appeals. Literary and debating societies followed, as did the Ashington Golden Circle United Football Club.[68]
In broadening its audience, the Golden Circle overextended itself. In an acrimonious series of admonishments in 1912, Cousin Paul had to deal with complaints about unruly behaviour at a Circle supper in Ryton, which led to serious vandalism of the venue.[69] Such poor behaviour was at a social event was not rare, as youths also disrupted Band of Hope Sunday school meetings to relieve the boredom of these sometimes-staid events.[70] Further problems hit the Golden Circle’s social events. The Circle had been at pains to prohibit dancing at its functions, as these were ostensibly for ‘social friendliness’ and small children. This was flagrantly flouted, forcing the society to issue tickets embossed with ‘no dancing’ as tickets previously issued had been later inscribed with ‘dancing allowed’. This came to a head in late 1912. Cousin Paul cancelled all the social events as they had been ‘marred by the utmost disorder’. It is noteworthy that the success of the 1912 Golden Circle Christmas Toy display was measured not on the number of donations, but because everyone behaved well, indicating the level and fear of disruptive behaviour.[71] One reason why Uncle Paul objected so strongly to dancing was that contemporary youth organisations constantly strove to impose strict rules on sex segregation, as adolescence was believed to be a deeply impressionable stage of life. Control by officialdom, was thought imperative in order to protect vulnerable individuals from ‘the seductive power of sexual instincts’.[72] Despite the strict rules, these social events were clearly very popular. Recalling his Edwardian childhood, Basil Peacock observed that Bible classes organised for teenage children attracted attendees merely because they offered an opportunity to meet members of the opposite sex.[73] Likewise, some individuals joined the Golden Circle simply to take advantage of social events and bent the rules to meet their own needs, caring little for the true objectives of the society. This abuse of middle-class philanthropic endeavours was
synonymous with events offered elsewhere to the working class. Such gatherings were very popular, not for their redemptive or didactical value, but instead because they offered the working class benefits otherwise unobtainable elsewhere.[74]

The DBS had also provided social evenings, but as these were limited to its child members, they tended to be more decorous occasions, such as Sunday letter writing sessions. Despite this seemingly sedate progress by the DBS, which continued to restrict membership to children, recruitment continued and by 1914, 366,000 members had enrolled. The Golden Circle and its host of counter attractions mustered just 90,000 members.[75] Tellingly, the DBS had a far more prestigious profile than the Golden Circle, and this may account for its enduring appeal. In common with other children’s movements, such as the Boys’ Brigade, the DBS appointed honorary members, a ploy that the Golden Circle, for once, did not, or possibly could not, copy. Some Press societies, such as that organised by the *Berwick Journal*, contented themselves with recruiting local dignitaries, but the DBS was able to attract much higher profile personalities. These included Lord Tennyson, Baden-Powell and Robert Louis Stevenson, who all agreed to become honorary members.[76] Uncle Toby even invited Florence Nightingale to join. She expressed her pleasure at being invited to do ‘something’ for the Society. Adams assured her that her endorsement would ‘materially increase the already deep interest taken in the DBS’.[77]

Despite the various differences between the two societies, they had one common denominator. They both eagerly published their members’ correspondence. In some weeks, the DBS received over 200 letters, whilst Golden Circle letters regularly filled a whole page. Many letters were received in batches from schools,
suggesting that newspapers continued to be used as educational aides by schools. This was long after the use of a newspaper as an official educational tool had been removed by the New Code of Regulations in 1880 which required scholars to be tested by texts selected by the inspector.[78] From the newspaper’s perspective, the many letters were an easy way of filling their pages with largely flattering, and of course free copy. However, newspapers also offered proactive educational work. Regular essay competitions dwelt upon the need for good behaviour and, especially in the case of the DBS, closely followed its conservationist agenda. Members accordingly submitted compositions on ‘Why We Should Be Kind to All Living Things’ and ‘Bird Millinery: Why We Should Oppose It’. The overriding interest in natural history as a respectable and learned pastime also meant that instructive articles filled the columns of both societies, with the Golden Circle appointing a ‘Professor’ who urged members to go out and study nature.[79]

The onset of war in 1914 led to an immediate reduction in the size of both papers, and had the effect of reducing the DBS to just a single column, although the Golden Circle continued to fill whole pages of the NWL.[80] The Circle also re-launched its social evenings and gave way on its dancing prohibition at these events, which were now marketed as adult-only affairs. Further proof that the Golden Circle was moving even further away from its original roots, was that many of its recruits were now soldiers who regularly corresponded. A ‘Role of Honour’ of serving members was installed and updated to record war casualties. Among the serving soldiers was Cousin Paul, alias C. Herschell, who joined the Royal Garrison Artillery in 1915 and left ‘Cousin Pauline’ to run his column. The DBS was similarly affected.
Uncle Toby (Ernest Adams) revealed that his own son had been maimed in the fighting. [81]

Both societies played a positive role during the hostilities. The DBS administered an ‘Uncle Toby Sock Fund’ which collected funds for soldier’s socks and carried appeals from soldiers for letters, whilst the Golden Circle set up a Wounded Soldier and Sailor Fund. [82] Conservation work appeared limited to the DBS, with continued missives against egg collecting, although bird feeding was curtailed when food shortages led to restrictions on animal feed. Those who continued to feed wild birds faced prosecution. [83] Members continued to write, but both leaders had to guard against the Defence of the Realm Act being infringed and reminded members about the sensitive content of their correspondence. This occasionally led to letters being censored. Uncle Toby regretted that ‘a part of Mildred Dixon’s letter has to be omitted because of allusions to certain things which must not be mentioned at present in the columns of a newspaper’. [84]

Despite the war, recruiting by both societies continued. Whilst the Golden Circle ostensibly seemed the more popular society given the mass of letters it received and the clamour for its social nights, a mere 682 members enrolled in the period 1914-1919. In contrast, the DBS recruited 8,963 members, although many were schoolchildren recruited in batches by schools. However, the Golden Circle had greater worries than low levels of recruitment. Its host paper changed hands again. The *Newcastle Chronicle*’s owner, Colonel Joseph Cowen, bought the Mail and Leader Company in January 1917. Because of continued paper shortages and its increasing cost, the *NWL* was reduced to just six pages in 1918. Virtually all hard
news coverage disappeared, leaving the paper reliant on its ladies’ feature, fictional stories, a theatre column, and the Golden Circle, which was the title’s only redeeming facet. Cowen’s papers suffered from staff shortages and this may have impacted on the shrinking NWL, as another Cowen paper, the Evening Mail, was suspended for the remainder of the war. It is noticeable that these changes were wrought on the papers newly acquired by Cowen. Production of his Chronicle titles continued uninterrupted.[85]

Cowen had a cluttered stable of newspapers, with two Saturday weeklies offering similar fare, although the content of the NWC was far superior to that of the NWL. Already some amalgamation had taken place, with the Daily Chronicle and North Mail merging and the final nail in the NWL’s coffin was the decision by Cowen to launch the first Sunday paper in the North-East, the Sunday Sun in August 1919. The final Golden Circle column ran on 27 December 1919, with no notice from the NWL that it was to cease production, although Cousin Pauline observed, ‘while the Circle may cease to exist as an organisation under the auspices of the Mail and Leader Ltd, it will continue to live on in your hearts’. Letters of regret told of defiant members vowing to continue their local meetings.[86]

The DBS thus outlived its rival, but although the 400,000 membership barrier was broken in 1921, barely 11,600 members enrolled during the society’s remaining years, despite constant appeals for recruits. Even this respected society was struggling, but this was hardly surprising. Children now had many more leisure attractions, such as the cinema and its Saturday matinees, and radio, with its devoted ‘Children’s Hour’ programme, to indulge their spare time.[87] To capture the thrill of this media, new
forms of Press societies, reflecting modernity, were launched. These quickly overtook the once innovative DBS, whose NWC host, like other weeklies, was struggling under pressure from the now dominating ‘popular’ dailies.[88] The Newcastle Evening Chronicle founded its Gloops Club in 1929 with rules similar to those of the DBS. Unlike the DBS, authored by Uncle Toby, ‘Gloopers’ were led and could meet the very ‘real’ radio personality, ‘Uncle Nick’. Within eight months, the club enrolled 100,000 members.[89] In contrast, the DBS had changed little since its launch in 1876. Its masthead remained unaltered and it had lost much of its environmental campaigning zeal that had personified its earlier years. To be fair, many of its conservationist objectives, namely the prohibition of trap pigeon shooting, bird trapping and the import of plumage for the millinery trade had been outlawed by legislation. Egg-collecting had theoretically been reined in by laws protecting breeding birds, although repeated appeals to boys not to collect suggest that many blithely carried on.[90] However, despite the many appeals for letters and enrolment, it would seem that children regarded the DBS as an anachronistic institution. It was probably not before time that it ceased on 21 December 1940 when the NWC was forced by wartime economic pressures to halt production. In his last message to his members, Uncle Toby hoped they would ‘keep the pledge they took on joining the Society’.[91]

The members of these societies were not members in the true sense. They paid no subscriptions and were simply lists of mainly children who agreed to a pledge, but we should not underestimate the work and influence of both of these societies. As the DBS, and to a lesser extent, the Golden Circle, promoted humanitarian objectives, at the very least both societies introduced contemporary conservation campaigns to a
broader public sphere and affected public opinion to some degree. In shifting such mindsets, William Adams was convinced that ‘cruelty has come to be considered not only wrong, but cowardly. Even hardened men and women are beginning to be ashamed of brutal misdoings’. [92] Providing food for birds was evidently a very popular activity undertaken by thousands of children, who must have saved the lives of countless birds during harsh winters. Similarly, the altruistic Christmas collections of both societies made the lives of thousands of children a little more bearable. Such work by DBS members could only create a ‘bond of sympathy between the children of different classes of society’ thought the *Review of Reviews* in 1890. [93]

This charitable work was undoubtedly important, but it should not detract from the underlying commercial motive for promoting these societies. This was to widen the circulation of the host newspaper and to ensure it did not lose ground to its rivals. Indeed, in 1889 the opinion of the satirical *Dart* periodical of a children’s ‘Order of Kindness’ initiated by the Birmingham *Daily Times* was that ‘the circulation of the Tory evening paper must have profited by this movement – a copy of a similar scheme carried out for many years by the *Newcastle Weekly Chronicle*. [94] These societies played a pivotal commercial role for both *NWC* and *NWL* in allowing them to broaden their readership by making their publications family-friendly, heightening their public profile and at the same time capturing the next generation of readers. It is telling that once Pearson had taken control of the *NWL* in 1903, the Golden Circle was retained and its activities broadened. Commercial considerations aside, these were popular features amongst newspaper readers, and not just children. A survey of all *NWC* readers in 1904 voted the DBS as the most popular feature in the entire newspaper. [95] The membership rolls indicate that these societies significantly
touched the lives of many thousands of Newcastle children and their parents, who also attended social functions, collected or received charitable gifts, wrote letters or essays, or simply read the weekly columns at the behest of Uncle Toby or Cousin Paul.

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6 Ashton, W.E. Adams, pp. 102, 127.

7 Milne, Newspapers of Northumberland and Durham, pp. 65-69.


12 NWC, 7 Oct. 1876.


14 NWL, 6 Feb. 1886.

15 Newspaper children’s columns have been virtually ignored by scholars and especially by those who specialise in children’s literature. The only works to consider these features in any measure are Ashton’s biography of Adams and a study by Peter Mohr of the Band of Kindness that had its roots in the Stockport Advertiser. This latter analysis reflects upon the philanthropic work of the society rather than its origins as a children’s column. Ashton, W.E. Adams, passim; P. D. Mohr, ‘Philanthropy and the crippled child: the Band of Kindness and the Crippled Children’s Help Society in Manchester and Salford 1882-1948’ (unpub M.Sc. thesis, Manchester Univ., 1991); Peter D. Mohr, ‘Gilbert Kirlew and the Development of Crippled Children’s Societies in Victorian Manchester and Salford’, Manchester Regional History Review, 6 (1992), 42-48.

16 George Elson, The Last of the Climbing Boys (1900), p. 16.


Tyne & Wear Archive Service, 53/71, Logbook of St Nicholas’ National School for Boys 1863-1937, 23 Mar. 1866. The ‘Newcastle Daily Express’ does not exist. We must assume the master was referring to the Northern Daily Express.

Northern Daily Express, 23 and 24 Mar. 1866.


Belfast News-Letter, 26 Aug. 1873. An extensive search of one hundred other weekly newspaper titles has shown the Belfast News-Letter to be the only title to have pre-dated the NWC’s ‘Children’s Corner’, although given the gargantuan scale of this source this is by no means an exhaustive search.


NWC, 11 Aug. 1877; 9 Apr. 1881.

Ibid., 29 Dec. 1900.


Leeds Mercury, 4 Jan. 1879.


RSPCA, Annual Report 1851, pp. 47-49.

Animal World, VII/78 (1 Mar. 1876), 40; NWC, 6 Jul. 1889.


36 NCL/LS, L179.3 Annual Reports of the Newcastle Branch of the Royal Society for the Protection of Animals 1873-1883.


46 NWC, 17 Mar. 1877; 26 Jan. and 16 Feb. 1878. Although DBS correspondence indicates that boys may have had qualms about joining, this is not borne out by an analysis of membership. In February 1880, 1,239 members joined. By the forenames, it is possible to exactly identify the gender of 535 of these members, of which 49 per cent were male. *NWC*, 7, 14, 21 and 28 Feb. 1880.

47 *Tyneside Echo*, 8 Jan. 1887; *NWL*, 13 Nov. 1886.

48 *NWL*, 1 Jan. 1890; ‘Work for the Children to Do’, *Review of Reviews*, II/12 (Dec. 1890), 570-72.

49 *NWL*, 5 Mar. 1887.

50 NWC, 8 Sept. 1877; *NWL*, 13 Nov. 1886.

51 NWC, 12 May 1877; *NWL*, 23 Mar. 1889.

52 NCL/LS/L179.3 Dicky Bird Society (Register of Members); *NWL*, 7 May 1887.

A valuable summary of contemporary animal and bird protection legislation is offered by J.E.G. De
Montgomery, ‘State Protection of Animals at Home and Abroad’, *Law Quarterly Review*, 18 (1902),
31-48.

Diana Dixon, ‘Children and the Press 1866-1914’, in *The Press in English Society from the


*NWL*, 1 Feb. 1890.

*NWC*, 27 Dec. 1913.


*NWL*, 6 Jan. 1912.

The *Newspaper Press Directory and Advertiser’s Guide. Containing Full Particulars Relative to
Each Journal Published in the United Kingdom and the British Isles* (1910), p. 191.

*NWC*, 4 Aug. 1894; *Animal’s Friend*, 1 (1894-95), 80.

The *NWL* was quick to highlight the success of its musical treats. Nine-year-old Maria Hall, a
performer at an 1894 event, went on to study music in London in 1900. *NWC*, 28 Sept. 1889; *Newcastle
Daily Leader*, 14 Apr. 1890; *NWL*, 13 Jan. 1900.

171.


*NWL*, 12 Sept. 1908.

Ibid., 2 Dec. 1905; 4 Dec. 1909; 3 Feb. 1912.

Ibid., 3 Feb. 1912.

Stephen Humphries, *Hooligans or Rebels? An Oral History of Working-Class Childhood and Youth

*NWL*, 4 May, 2 Nov., 30 Nov. and 28 Dec. 1912.

Humphries, *Hooligans or Rebels*, pp. 135-36.


Peter Bailey, ‘“Will the Real Bill Banks Please Stand Up?” Towards a Role Analysis of Mid-
By this time, both societies also faced local competition from rival societies hosted by the Auckland Chronicle and Northern Weekly Gazette that had membership levels in excess of 100,000 each. Auckland Chronicle, 1 Jan. 1914; Northern Weekly Gazette, 3 Jan. 1914.


NWC, 20 Dec. 1884; 16 Dec. 1905; NWL, 7 Mar. 1908; Education Department, New Code of Regulations 1880, Cd. 2512 (1880), p. 11.


NWL, 6 Feb., 24 Apr. and 10 Jul. 1915; NWC, 2 Mar. 1918.

NWC, 26 Sept. 1914; 19 Jan. 1918; NWL, 4 Mar. 1916.

NWC, 6 May 1916; 27 Apr. 1918; Hugh S. Gladstone, Birds and the War (1919), pp. 69-70.

NWL, 1 Apr. 1916; NWC, 19 Aug. 1916.

NWL, 4 May 1918; Plouman, thesis, pp. 42-43.


NWC, 17 May 1924; E.S. Turner, All Heaven in a Rage (1992), pp. 299-306.

The newspaper made a brief reprise from in the late 1940s to 1953 and although Uncle Toby reappeared there was no DBS feature. NWC, 21 Dec. 1940; 29 Mar. 1947; 4 Apr. 1953.

NWC, 11 Jun. 1898.

‘Work for the Children to Do’, Review of Reviews, II/12 (Dec. 1890), 571.

The Dart, 25 Jan. 1889.

NWC, 4 Jun. 1904.