

Picture Post -- Essay for Encyclopaedia of Twentieth Century Photography

Launched in the late 1930s, against the backdrop of the Munich crisis and World War II looming, *Picture Post* was, for nearly 20 years, a clarion of social and political conscience, the barometer of British life and encapsulated all that was quintessentially "English". But more than this the magazine, home to some of the greatest photographic talent of the first half of the 20th century, was to influence and shape British photojournalism for the next 50 years.

Financed by barrister-cum-publisher Edward Hulton, the editorial genius behind *Picture Post* was that of Hungarian Stefan Lorant. A former cameraman and film director Lorant had, by 1930, risen to become the chief editor of *Muenchner Illustrierte Presse*, one of several pioneering picture led magazines that emerged in Europe, and Germany in particular, during the 1920s. These evolved, taking advantage of advances in printing processes, to introduce a newly literate mass audience to the candid style of photography arising from modern small-format cameras such as the Ermanox and Leica. Lorant was a master in the new style of layout, the picture essay format, a narrative arrangement of images suggestive of the feel of cinema.

Following a period in "protective custody" in 1933 Lorant, like many artists, writers and photographers, escaped Nazi Germany. He arrived in London in 1934, with his manuscript *I Was Hitler's Prisoner* and by 1937 had launched his innovative pocket journal *Lilliput*. Hulton bought the magazine and employed Lorant to produce a new picture-led publication based on Lorant's earlier groundbreaking format *Weekly Illustrated* for Odhams Press.

On 1 October 1938 *Hulton's National Weekly - Picture Post* was born. The magazine addressed the issues of the day in terms the man in the street could understand. The first issue focused not on the politicians behind closed doors of 10 Downing Street but the people waiting anxiously outside for news that could plunge the country into war. The magazine also exhibited clear political convictions. In the third issue Lorant published a photomontage by John Heartfield called "The Happy Elephants," a biting satirical comment on Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain's pledge of "Peace in our time." It was this strong use of imagery to put across complex social and political messages, coupled with Lorant's remarkable gift for layout that set the tone. From the very first issue the British public wholeheartedly embraced the magazine. It outstripped its initial print run of 750,000 to peak in the summer of 1939 at a circulation of 1.7 million though read by half the population.

Photographers Kurt Hutton (Kurt Huebschmann) and Felix H. Man (Hans Bauman,) whom Lorant had worked with in Germany, dominated the early years. Lorant also introduced the work of other Europeans, such as Erich Salomon, Brassai, Umbo and Martin Munckasi. These in turn influenced a new generation of British photographers, including Haywood Magee, Leonard McCombe and Bert Hardy whose name became synonymous with *Picture Post*. Hardy's picture essays of life in the Gorbals, Glasgow and Elephant and Castle, London have become classics and his reportage of the London Blitz amongst the finest ever taken, so much so he was the first photographer to be credited in the magazine.

In 1940, with invasion looking imminent, Lorant booked passage for America. His assistant editor Tom Hopkinson took control continuing Lorant's strong editorial lead. Under Hopkinson's guidance photographers and writers developed a close working relationship. Macdonald Hastings, James Cameron, Kenneth Allsop, Fyfe Robertson, Robert Kee and other talented journalists all worked under the unique direction to "put the picture first." The magazine continued to champion the issues of the day, covering the war at home and abroad, with essays such as *Life on a Destroyer* by Humphrey Spender and *Road to Victory* by Leonard McCombe. But also looking to a brighter future with plans for a better Britain, addressing issues of education, housing and the Welfare State discussed by such luminaries as J. B. Priestley and Julian Huxley. Always lighthearted, good humour pervaded the pages with stories like Bill Brandt's essay *A Day in the life of a Barmaid*. No subject was too grand or too commonplace and Lorant's dictate to "appeal to the common man, the worker and the intelligentsia" remained intact.

In 1950 Bert Hardy and journalist James Cameron covered the conflict in Korea. Hardy's pictures of the Inchon landings won him the Encyclopaedia Britannica Award in 1951. However twice Hopkinson was prevented from publishing their shocking story of ill treatment of South Korean political prisoners: the piece would be highly damaging to the United Nations and Hulton was on the verge of receiving a knighthood. It was one of several behind the scenes confrontations with Hulton whose Conservative stance was increasingly at odds with *Picture Post's* more liberal conscience and Hopkinson was finally sacked.

Initially there was no appreciable difference in the magazine. It continued to attract talented writers and photographers like John Chillingworth, noted for his moving series of picture essays of children in post-war Korea and Japan, and Carl Sutton, inventor of the action-sequence camera. Both worked their way up through the darkrooms under the direction of the renowned and fearsome Edith Kay. Thurston Hopkins covered a rich variety of subjects but always strove and succeeded in showing the human condition. Rare for the period were the women staffers including Elizabeth Chat, Merlyn Severn and Grace Robertson, whose essay *Mother's Day Off* exemplified her sensitive and thoughtful portrayal of people and events.

However a succession of editors slowly eroded the social voice and conscience of the magazine. There had always been space for cheesecake but it increased to the detriment of more serious articles, and a tide of advertising also began to swamp the pages. Slowly the once loyal public faded away and on 1 June 1957 the magazine finally folded.

On *Picture Post's* youthful demise Hopkinson observed, "I think it just lost its sense of direction and wandered off into the fog..." Lorant was more blunt, "Picture Post died because it became dull and boring. It offered no new ideas." However its influence on British photojournalism is undoubted and was soon felt in other areas. Photographers Frank Pocklington and Charles "Slim" Hewitt and journalists Trevor Philpot and Fyfe Robertson were among those who went on to work in the new medium of television and helped transform the style of current affairs broadcasting in the way *Picture Post* had transformed magazine publishing.

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