Humanitarian Journalism: The Career of Lady Isabella Somerset

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‘The life of English village children stands always in our minds in painful contrast to the pent-up dreary life of the child born and bred in our crowded cities. With special pity do we think of those little ones who go forth from our workhouses and workhouse schools with so little that is bright to help them on the weary journey of life with all its uphill struggles. For the sake of such as these I seek your indulgence for my little work.’

So began Lady Isabella Somerset’s preface to *Our Village Life*, a colour-illustrated book of poetry for children published to raise money to support her home for workhouse girls. Writing for Somerset, a woman of wealth and privilege, did not offer the means to earn a living or achieve literary fame. Rather, she made a name for herself in print for the ‘sake of such as these’, a literary voice that increasingly came to define her own subjectivity as a writer, editor, and political activist.

This chapter explores the humanitarian journalism of Lady Isabella Somerset. Best known as editor of the *Woman’s Signal* in the early 1890s, her career as a writer spanned a period that witnessed the growth of women-led reform campaigns. Somerset made a profession of social advocacy during a time when humanitarianism was serious business particularly for women. Temperance, suffrage, and human rights campaigns on behalf of oppressed minorities in the Near East earned her a reputation as a social crusader who championed women’s causes. Somerset’s activist programme found commonalities in the causes of women’s oppression at home and abroad, casting the problem of drunkenness, prostitution, a disenfranchised female electorate, and women living under a despotic state in the Ottoman Empire all as symptoms of a distressed humanity. She connected these distinct causes by forging an identity as a voice for the voiceless through her journalism. An independent income, a mouthpiece in the form of the *Woman’s Signal*, and
a network of influential supporters placed her at the centre of an emerging culture of women-led human rights advocacy that shaped her understanding of self and the meaning of literary notoriety.

Somerset used her role as a patron of social and humanitarian causes to build a reputation as a serious journalist and advocate. Her literary identity was thus intertwined with her role as social activist. The chapter begins by briefly placing Somerset’s career as journalist, essayist, and advocate in the larger context of the Victorian humanitarian movement. I then compare her humanitarian journalism in the advocacy and mainstream presses. Finally, I take a look at one of her lesser known campaigns on behalf of Christian minorities persecuted in the Ottoman Empire. Here Somerset’s journalism takes centre stage in the columns, opinion pieces, and charitable appeals that she wrote for the Woman’s Signal. The network that she forged in her various campaigns reveals a web of supporters that included readers in England, the United States, and throughout the British Empire. Somerset’s work appeared at an important intersection in the literary marketplace where the need to create a sustainable business model for her advocacy journal the Signal met the demands of a well-informed constituency of readers who wanted journalism with a higher purpose.

Balancing these demands at the dawn of the New Journalism offered new possibilities and pitfalls for the humanitarian journalist. How Somerset negotiated these demands as a writer reveals as much about the changing profession of journalism as it does about the status of the woman writer. Remembered today primarily for her feminism, Somerset’s journalism reveals how concerns over women’s rights found articulation in a broader commitment to human rights. In the pages of the press she fashioned an identity as a humanitarian and social advocate that burnished her reputation among contemporaries as a formidable literary crusader.

The development and expansion of women’s presence in journalism in Britain coincided with a rapidly changing periodical market. New journalistic practices and technical innovations developed during the 1870s and 1880s translated into dramatic structural changes for the periodical press during the 1890s. Developed first in America, ‘Yellow Journalism’, as it came to be referred to by its critics, thrived on the publishing of sensational narratives of heroism, scandal, and, in the case of the Spanish–American war, political propaganda. Photographs replaced less sophisticated woodcuts as bold headlines competed for readers’ attention. Most notable was the wide application of advanced mechanical printing techniques in printing shops in the latter years of the century that made it possible to print periodicals cheaply and quickly. Advertisers utilized this new medium as a space to hawk their wares as the periodical became a site of economic exchange. This new journalistic license to print dramatic stories as news, along with new printing techniques and applications, ultimately transformed newspapers and periodicals into commodities with