Mr. J.M. Staniforth, caricaturist of the News of the World and the Western Mail, occupies the probably unique position of a draughtsman whose work circulates in millions of copies and is seen by many millions of people each week.

The Strand Magazine, May 1914

For 30 years, cartoons by ‘J.M.S.’ have appeared in the ‘News of the World,’ and his familiar initials are known wherever the ‘News of the World’ circulates – that is to say, throughout the world. We know from many a reader living in the outposts of Empire how keenly these cartoons have been appreciated and that many a shack and cabin in the back blocks of the world are decorated with them.

News of the World, 18 December 1921

Joseph Morewood Staniforth was born at Gloucester on 16 May 1863 to a saw repairer/cutler and his wife. Staniforth grew up in Cardiff, and left school at 15 to become a printer’s apprentice with the Western Mail. His emerging talent as an illustrator led to his transfer to the paper’s editorial team and his employment as an occasional and then a regular cartoonist, both for the Western Mail and its sister paper the Evening Express and, from 1893 onwards, for the News of the World (NOTW). Although occasionally interrupted by illness (he suffered from tuberculosis and heart problems), Staniforth’s work appeared very regularly for both the Cardiff daily and the British Sunday until his death on 17 December 1921. Many cartoons were also republished in stand-alone volumes – examples include The General Election, 1895 (1895), Cartoons of the Welsh Coal Strike (1898), Cartoons of the Boer War (two volumes, 1900, 1902) and Cartoons of the War (seven volumes,
1914–15) – and other work appeared in the form of picture postcards and illustrations for magazines, pamphlets and books.³

Contemporary appreciation of Staniforth’s talents was considerable. The polymath Thomas Henry Thomas ranked the cartoonist alongside more conventional artists Goscombe John and Christopher Williams, going on to suggest that ‘in power of instant characterisation and insight, and skill of artistic touch, he hardly cedes to that acknowledged master in this quality – the late Phil May.’⁴ Wales magazine considered Staniforth’s cartoons ‘one of the most popular features in British journalism’,⁵ and when, in 1919, the Western Mail celebrated its fiftieth anniversary, a host of contributors, including Labour MPs and trade unionists, paid their tributes to ‘Staniforth’s genius’.⁶ On his death comparisons were drawn between this ‘doyen of British cartoonists’ and (variously) Hogarth, Gillray, Leech and Tenniel. Staniforth, it was suggested, possessed ‘incomparable genius as the portrayer and critic of public men and public events’. For Prime Minister David Lloyd George, Staniforth was ‘one of the most distinguished cartoonists of his generation’, who had rendered ‘great national service’.⁷

Sir Osbert Lancaster, cartoonist of the Daily Express, once said that ‘[a] professional preoccupation with the topical is the surest passport to oblivion’,⁸ and, despite the high repute in which he was held during his lifetime, for many decades after his death J.M. Staniforth was largely forgotten. Since the 1970s, a number of biographers of Lloyd George and historians of (mainly) Wales have used the cartoons purely for illustrative purposes: that is, without discussing their intrinsic qualities and usually failing to acknowledge the identity of the cartoonist himself. Occasionally examples of Staniforth’s work have been included in anthologies of cartoons such as Frank E. Huggett’s Cartoonists at War (1981) but without any sustained assessment of his contribution.

This situation began to change with Joanne Cayford’s Ph.D. thesis on the Western Mail, and Hywel Teifi Edwards’s work on images of the Welsh collier.⁹ The first sustained evaluation of Staniforth’s artistic contribution was subsequently provided by Peter Lord, who termed ‘J.M.S.’ ‘the most important visual commentator on Welsh affairs ever to work in the country’, whose cartoons ‘reflected, perhaps more accurately than any other visual source, the diversity of Welsh life in the period’.¹⁰

If historians of Wales have slowly begun to take notice of ‘J.M.S.’, and especially of his work in the most successful Welsh daily newspaper of the period, the Western Mail, it is fair to say that his ‘British’ cartooning has been subject to comparatively meagre investigation. Timothy Benson does use a number of Staniforth’s NOTW cartoons in his The Cartoon Century, and Glenn Wilkinson, in his work on depictions of war in Edwardian newspapers, also considers the NOTW, although like many before him, he shows no interest in the identity of the cartoonist responsible for the images that he analyses.¹¹ Historians of the NOTW itself have only rarely touched upon the topic: Matthew Engel mentions the revamp of the 1890s (on which more