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Journal Item

How to cite:

Griffiths, Andrew (2017). Literary Journalism and Empire: George Warrington Steevens in Africa, 1898–1900. *Literary Journalism Studies*, 9(1) pp. 60–81.

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Version: Version of Record

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<https://ialjs.org/spring-2017-vol-9-no-1/>

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Literary Journalism and Empire: George Warrington Steevens in Africa, 1898–1900

Andrew Griffiths
Plymouth University, United Kingdom

Abstract: It has been suggested that “for a few years at the end of the nineteenth century” *Daily Mail* correspondent George Warrington Steevens (1869–1900) was “probably the best known and most eulogized, and possibly the most influential, British journalist.”¹ Descriptions of Steevens’s writing read like definitions of a nascent literary journalism. A contemporary judged that “there were never newspaper articles which read more like short stories than his.”² Steevens’s work was typical of the highly commercial, personal, and sensational British “new” journalism of the last quarter of the nineteenth century. This essay argues that it is high time that Steevens and his fellow “new” journalists are included in the history of literary journalism. However, that inclusion raises important issues about the relationship of literary journalism to power. British “new” journalism played an important role in securing public acquiescence in the aggressive imperial expansion of the last decades of the century. Historians variously refer to that phase of imperialism—in which major European powers seized territory at an unprecedented rate—as the “Scramble for Africa” or the “new imperialism.” Arguably, it was the symbiotic closeness of the relationship between empire and “new” journalism that was the newest feature of the new imperialism. While modern literary journalism often challenges entrenched ideologies and deconstructs the discourses of the powerful, it is important to acknowledge that literary journalism has also played a part in the reification of those ideologies and the construction of those discourses.

Keywords: War correspondence – Victorian print media – New Journalism – New Imperialism – British Empire

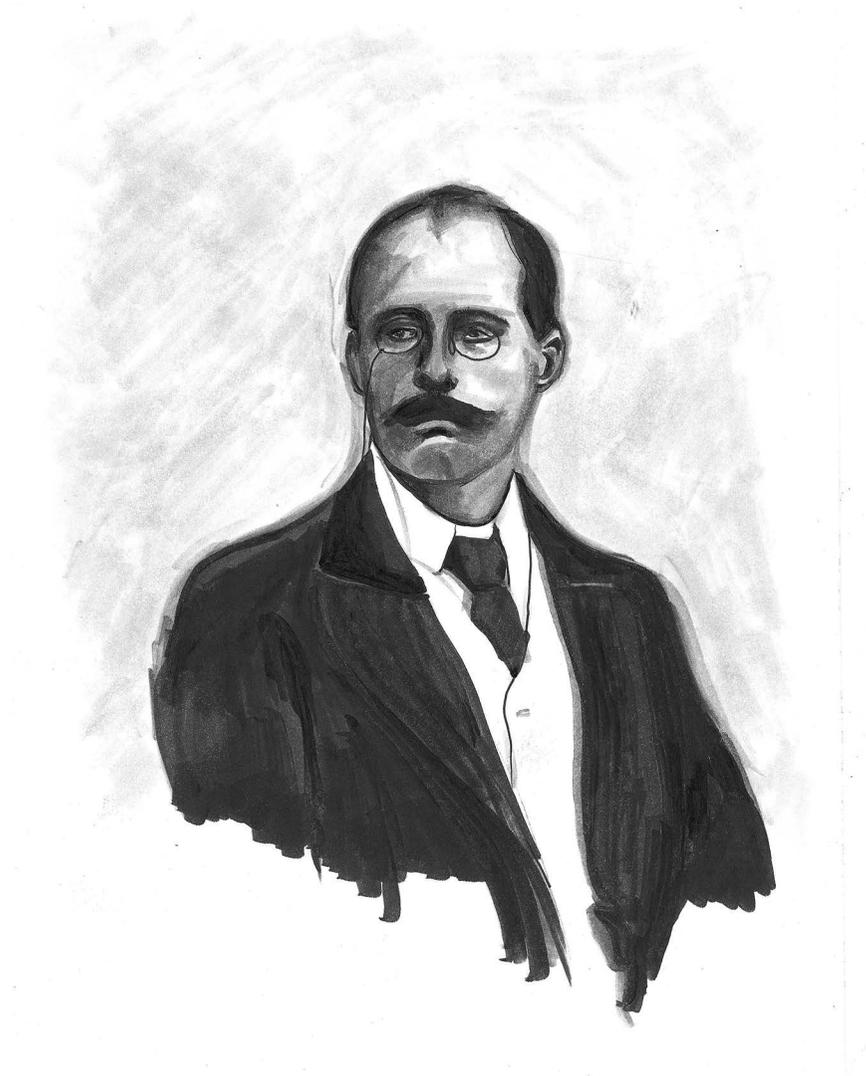


Illustration of G. W. Steevens by Karl Litz

On, December 13, 1899, at the height of the Boer War, the *Daily Mail's* star war correspondent, George Warrington Steevens, fell ill, another victim of unsanitary conditions within the besieged South African town of Ladysmith. Enteric fever was diagnosed; despite prompt treatment, it worsened. However, by early January, the crisis appeared to have passed. Steevens remained confined to his bed but was "able to attend to some of his journalistic duties."³ An attending doctor had hopes that a full recovery might not be far off. However, on January 15 Steevens suffered a relapse and died late in the afternoon. In the estimation of the Australian scholar Simon During, Steevens had been "the most famous journalist of his time."⁴ Laurence Davies has pointed out that Steevens was the most profitable author on the lists of the House of Blackwood at the time of his death.⁵ Certainly, after Steevens's death a veritable outpouring of eulogy augmented and burnished an already considerable reputation. Roger T. Stearn suggested that "for a few years at the end of the nineteenth century," Steevens was "probably the best known and most eulogized, and possibly the most influential, British journalist."⁶ Winston Churchill judged him to be "the brightest intellect yet sacrificed by this war."⁷ Even Kitchener of Khartoum, as a rule no friend to war correspondents following his armies in the field, expressed his profound regret at Steevens's passing.

Vernon Blackburn, who edited and completed Steevens's last volume, *Capetown to Ladysmith: An Unfinished Record of the South African War*, described him as an "extraordinary journalist" whose combination of "scholarship with a vigorous sense of vitality brought about a unique thing in modern journalism." Blackburn adds that "he was the pioneer, he was the inventor, of the particular method which he practised."⁸ In particular, Blackburn praises the balance in Steevens's prose of "vigour," "vividness," and "brilliance," with "sparseness," "slimness," and "austerity."⁹ Perhaps with the ease of future scholarship in mind, Blackburn collated the reflections of other writers in the final chapter of *Capetown to Ladysmith*. One of those quoted commends Steevens's "scarcely exemplified grasp and power of literary impressionism" and notes that it was Steevens's "pen that had taught us to see and comprehend India and Egypt and the reconquest of the Soudan."¹⁰ Another commentator called his style "cinematographic,"¹¹ while a third witness called by Blackburn asserts, "There never were newspaper articles that read more like short stories than his, and at the same time there never were newspaper articles that gave a more convincing impression that the thing happened as the writer described it."¹²

The glowing assessments of Steevens's contemporaries read almost as definitions of a nascent literary journalism. This is an observation of no small

importance. Steevens's writing was an important contribution to the development of the British new journalism of the late-nineteenth century.¹³ The term new journalism is usually traced to Matthew Arnold's use of it in an 1887 article for *Nineteenth Century*.¹⁴ Arnold intended the term pejoratively, commending the "ability, novelty, variety, sensation, [and] generous instincts" to be found in the new style of writing but simultaneously deploring it as "feather-brained."¹⁵ Notwithstanding Arnold's disapproval, the personal tone, accessibility, and sensationalism of the new journalism revolutionized British print culture and facilitated extraordinary commercial success. The *Daily Mail*, which employed Steevens, was the most successful of the new journals in commercial terms. Founded in 1896, it reached almost a million readers in 1901 during the second Boer War.¹⁶ Yet, despite its importance for the history of journalism in Britain, the new journalism has attracted comparatively little attention from literary journalism specialists. Isabel Soares's work has been a notable exception, exploring the work of the Portuguese counterparts to the British new journalists of the late-nineteenth century. Notably, Soares observes that the new journalism of the period might be considered a "proto-literary journalism."¹⁷ Soares's contributions are valuable; yet in exploring the links between Portugal and Britain her work underlines the absence of sustained engagement with British new journalism by academics working in the field of literary journalism. There are doubtless many reasons for this. The particular closeness of transatlantic literary culture can make it harder to identify distinct developments, for example. And, as Jenny McKay has argued, a lingering conservatism too often haunts both the literary academy and public discourse in the United Kingdom when it comes to matters journalistic.¹⁸ This article aims to redress the balance both by showing how a special correspondent like Steevens fits into the history of literary journalism and by exploring the consequences of acknowledging late-Victorian, British special correspondents as a key part of that history. For such an inclusion must have consequences. Literary journalism has challenged establishments and championed the dispossessed—but it has also served empires and reified the ideologies of the powerful.

New Journalism, New Imperialism

The role of Britain's late-Victorian new journalism in fostering support for imperial expansion may well help to account for its absence from existing histories of literary journalism. It sits uneasily, after all, with the social campaigning associated with North American literary journalism of the same period, yet it makes it all the more important that room is made in histories of the form to confront the issues it presents. Those eminent historians of

literary journalism, John Hartsock and Norman Sims, have approached the discipline as a North American form and have written its history with a distinct American accent. This is not a criticism of their work: Hartsock's seminal history of the discipline is, after all, entitled *A History of American Literary Journalism*, while Sims's *True Stories: A Century of Literary Journalism* is published in the Medill School of Journalism's Visions of the American Press series. It would be perverse to object to the limits scholars must necessarily set on their work. And, importantly, both books roam beyond the borders of the United States to acknowledge or establish a lineage of precursors to literary journalism dating back as far as the late-seventeenth and early-eighteenth century works of Aphra Behn and Daniel Defoe, taking in Boswell's biography of Samuel Johnson, Edward Ward's sketches in the *London Spy*, and Addison and Steele's work for the *Tatler* and the *Spectator*.¹⁹ Nevertheless, the emergence of British new journalism in the late-nineteenth century has yet to receive the full attention it deserves from literary journalism scholars.²⁰ Men such as Steevens, who knew the United States well after covering the 1896 presidential election for the *Daily Mail*, and William Thomas Stead, editor of the influential *Pall Mall Gazette*, developed and refined Britain's new journalism during the 1880s and 1890s, their work drawing heavily on parallel and related developments in the United States.²¹

Steevens makes an excellent case study, partly because of his own interest in the politics and culture of the United States and partly because he, of all the special correspondents working in Britain at the end of the nineteenth century and writing in the style established by the new journalism, fits most neatly within the framework of literary journalism. By way of example, Vernon Blackburn in his eulogy to Steevens drew attention to another literary-journalistic feature of Steevens's work, the use of multiple perspectives: "If you look straight out at any scene," Blackburn wrote, "you will see what all men see when they look straight out; but when you enquire curiously into all the quarters of the compass, you will see what no man ever saw when he simply looked out of his two eyes without regarding the here, there and everywhere."²² This is very much the sort of approach one would expect of the literary journalist, collapsing the distinction between subject and object by approaching an issue from every possible perspective. And yet, despite Blackburn's high praise and despite possessing an adeptness at rendering voice and personality rarely seen in the columns and volumes generated by late-Victorian war correspondents, Steevens did not quite regard the here, there, and everywhere, nor did he inquire into all the quarters of the compass. Or, perhaps more precisely, if he did engage in such truly comprehensive observation and research, he elected not to represent everything he saw from every angle.

As Roger T. Stearn has suggested of Steevens's Boer War correspondence, his reports are shaped as much by what they omit as by what they include.²³ On occasion, Steevens goes out of his way to construct absences, especially in his writing on Africa. It is important to recognize that the usually far-sighted Steevens was in no way unusual in suffering from a distinctively Anglocentric myopia when it came to matters imperial. As I have argued at greater length elsewhere, many of the characteristic features of the new journalism, including a personal tone, an accessible style, a tendency towards the sensational, and a campaigning impulse, were also the signature traits of the newspaper discourse on Britain's imperial adventures.²⁴

In Britain, the aggressive phase of formal imperialism, running from the early 1880s to the outbreak of war in Europe in 1914, which came to be known as the new imperialism, emerged in symbiotic closeness with the new journalism. As Soares has put it, "Empire fuelled the press."²⁵ One might legitimately add that the press also fuelled empire. Historian Ben Shephard's formulation neatly expresses the relationship: "In the late Victorian period journalism was to imperialism as the tick bird is to the rhino."²⁶ Arguably, this close relationship with the press was the newest feature of the new imperialism. The period in which the new journalism emerged and flourished was also the period of the so-called Scramble for Africa (a phenomenon *almost* synonymous with the new imperialism), during which the African continent was divided up among the European powers with astonishing speed. As Niall Ferguson points out, during "twenty short years after 1880, . . . ten thousand African tribal kingdoms were transformed into just forty states, of which thirty-six were under direct European control."²⁷ A newspaper press hungry for sensational news did much to secure public acquiescence in this extraordinarily rapid imperial expansion. This is the context within which Steevens's writing about Africa must be understood.

The importance of the relationship between new journalism and the new imperialism of the period from 1880 to the outbreak of war in 1914 must not be underestimated. Perhaps the newest element of Britain's remarkable expansion in that period was the extent to which the willing print media were enlisted to report and endorse imperial adventures as a part of a thrilling news narrative.²⁸ While historians have debated the extent to which British imperialism was ever truly popular, a survey of the newspapers of the period reveals the intensive coverage given to events in the empire by publications of the new style. As the *Daily Mail* managing editor Kennedy Jones argued, "We realized that one of the greatest forces, almost untapped, at the disposal of the Press was the depth and volume of public interest in Imperial questions."²⁹ London's illustrated newspapers, notably the *Graphic* and the *Illustrated Lon-*

don News, relished the frequent opportunities to provide readers with exotic images of Africa and India afforded by active imperial policy. Various commentators have noted the stylistic and tonal closeness of imperial reportage and imperial adventure fiction by men such as Henry Rider Haggard. H. John Field has identified sources comparing Steevens's writing to that of Rudyard Kipling and G. A. Henty, while he himself identifies "Haggardism" in Steevens's work.³⁰ It would be difficult to overestimate the cultural and political importance of the relationship between new journalism and new imperialism, with their productive exchange of good copy and public support.³¹ Paula Krebs has gone so far as to say that "hand in hand, the New Imperialism and the New Journalism brought Britain into the twentieth century."³² It is equally clear that the preferred literary style of reportage adopted by leading special correspondents, including Steevens, had a part to play in that relationship. Recognizing Steevens and his peers as a part of the history of literary journalism makes good scholarly sense. Doing so, however, demands that scholars of literary journalism must confront the fact that the journalism which sustained and promoted Britain's imperial expansion is an integral part of that history. The very strategies and techniques that have made literary journalism such a powerful force in challenging vested interests and established hierarchies have also made it a powerful force in the service of empire and hegemony.

Steevens and the New Journalism

For many readers of Steevens's era none of this was a problem. W. E. Henley, Steevens's friend and colleague, described his transition from academia at Oxford and Cambridge to journalism on the *Pall Mall Gazette* magnificently—and apparently without irony: "Out of a past of books and prizes and debating societies and sentimental socialism, he came into an atmosphere of wit, and scholarship, and laughter, and sound Toryism, and the practice—the right practice—of affairs."³³ For others, however, that combination of scholarship and popular journalism was more problematic. "Journalist and scholar he was, both," lamented Blackburn. "But the world was allowed to see too much of the journalist, too little of the scholar, in what he accomplished."³⁴ The latter point is one that may well be familiar from more recent debates on literary journalism. In Blackburn's article, "journalism" had not quite lost the stigma attached to the word for much of the century. The definition of the journalist was a contentious issue through the second half of the nineteenth century, with the term straining to cover a wide variety of newspaper and periodical writing. Competing notions of journalism as profession and as vocation further muddled the waters.³⁵ The commercial success of the new

journalism brought additional challenges. As Curran and Seaton explain, that commercial success had come at the expense of radical publications and dissenting voices.³⁶ For Blackburn's readers at the turn of the twentieth century, then, journalism connoted populism and sensationalism. On the one hand, the journalist/scholar binary his piece seeks to establish plays into a familiar high culture/low culture—or "old" journalism/new journalism—contest; on the other hand, it also acknowledges the political and cultural shift experienced by Steevens and described by Henley. It is notable in this context that Steevens's first journalistic post was on the *Pall Mall Gazette* which, under the editorship of W. T. Stead in the mid-1880s, had come to epitomize the new journalism. Steevens was recruited to the paper in 1893 by the new and staunchly Conservative editor Harry Cust. This combination of the Toryism identified by Henty with journalism of the new style also characterized the *Daily Mail*, which was brand new when Steevens joined the staff in 1896.³⁷ There is no question that Steevens had exchanged academic idealism for journalistic worldliness; the sentimental socialist had become a forceful imperialist *by virtue of his move into the world of the new journalism*.

Steevens was a commercial writer who understood the necessity of adapting both style and content to the requirements of his audience. As Field puts it, Steevens "produced sheafs of copy and seven books in three and one-half years on the places, events, and people that Harmsworth anticipated should matter to the *Daily Mail* reader."³⁸ For Harmsworth's anticipated readers, as Kennedy Jones well understood, empire was often what mattered most. Sidney Lee and Roger T. Stearn have judged that Steevens's "political beliefs apparently shifted to the right, and became imperialist and concerned with defence" during the early part of his career in journalism.³⁹ Publications, including a volume entitled *Naval Policy* (1896),⁴⁰ which urged the need to strengthen Britain's fleet, and an article for the pro-empire *Blackwood's Magazine*, entitled "From the New Gibbon" (1899),⁴¹ which warned Britons of the twin dangers of degeneration and imperial decline, give a strong sense of Steevens's politics in the period. Another *Blackwood's* article, "The New Humanitarianism" (1898) set out strident social Darwinist and imperialist views. In the latter piece, Steevens condemns humanitarianism, which "is throttling patriotism and common-sense and virility of individual character," and civilization, which restrains "the strong and bold."⁴² Of empire, he remarks, "The naked principle of our rule is that our way is the way that shall be walked in, let it cost what pain it may."⁴³ This should not be misinterpreted as a critical, anti-imperialist sentiment. Steevens criticizes the hypocrisy of the humanitarians who promoted a more consensual approach to imperial governance, rather than the force and violence that he saw as essential to imperialism.

This was no abstract rhetorical position, either. Steevens had experienced war and empire at first hand, corresponding from the Greco-Turkish War in 1897 (where he worked alongside Stephen Crane and Richard Harding Davis), Egypt in 1897–98, and India and the Sudan in 1898. The ideological transformation of the sentimental socialist who emerged from the dusty conclaves of university life into the adventuring journalist who reached the peak of his success with sympathetic coverage of Kitchener's spectacularly bloody victory at Omdurman in September 1898 was apparently comprehensive (though as Phillip Knightley notes, Steevens was always conscious of "the difficulty in reconciling the glories of battle with its horrors").⁴⁴ Steevens's career yoked new journalism firmly together with British imperialism.

Tension between Ideology and Reportage

The apparent contradiction in Steevens's work between openly held ideological positions and reportage that seems to be poised in the moment of observation, declining to foreclose on meaning, has troubled scholars. That tension is noted almost universally in assessments of Steevens's work. Laurence Davies notes Steevens's "moments of ambivalence," his ability to write "not only what he sees but how he sees it," and his "[immersion] in the moment's flux."⁴⁵ Davies even goes so far as to suggest that Steevens shared "a literary kinship with the innovators of his time," including Joseph Conrad, Ford Madox Ford, and Stephen Crane.⁴⁶ Yet Davies also remarks on Steevens's "power of articulating or creating cultural master-narratives" and his rigid beliefs.⁴⁷ Lee and Stearn describe Steevens's writing as too often "hurried . . . insufficiently researched, impressionistic, dogmatic, and sometimes biased."⁴⁸ Field argues that his articles were just the kind of "predigested" journalism preferred by Harmsworth,⁴⁹ with little risk that the reader would miss the editorial line, but also acknowledges clarity, sharpness, adept use of paradox, humor, and unexpected effects in Steevens's prose. It is difficult to reconcile these critical positions. That difficulty is important because it reveals the extent to which Steevens's work embodied the central challenges faced by literary journalists. His writing cannot be satisfactorily dismissed as mass-market journalism, though that is a fair description in many ways. Nor can it be safely categorized in any traditional literary genre, despite his undoubted narrative and stylistic abilities. In Steevens's writing on Africa, these tensions are compounded by the ideological context in which Steevens worked and the imperial subject matter about which he wrote.

At the time the tension was not nearly so apparent. The literary quality of Steevens's writing, and his ability to convey sharp and fresh impressions of his experience, enabled him to shape his readers' responses to the scenes

described. John Simpson has commented on Steevens's "wiry, tough and conversational" prose, "with a biting wit lying concealed in it."⁵⁰ The ability with which he gave to his readers the impression of contact with Bakhtin's "openended present" granted Steevens's work a seemingly unassailable authority.⁵¹ His immersion in the events he reported, whether a presidential election or a military campaign, helped to create a sense of verisimilitude. The very qualities that qualify Steevens's writing as a precursor to literary journalism are the qualities that made him such a successful propagandist for empire—in Lee and Stearn's judgment, one of "the most influential" of the period.⁵² It was not simply a case of literary journalism being a useful tool for empire: The relationship worked both ways. The power dynamics of empire allowed Steevens freedom to develop his style. In his African work, Steevens pursues a strategy of erasure, scraping clean the surface of the continent to permit its re-inscription with his own narrative. In three major, volume-length engagements with Africa—*Egypt in 1898*, *With Kitchener to Khartum*,⁵³ and *Capetown to Ladysmith*—Steevens offers his readers Africa-as-palimpsest. Rather than providing a voice to his African subjects, he ventriloquizes them or renders them altogether voiceless; rather than establish identity he identifies miscegenation; rather than describing the distinctive features of landscapes he renders them featureless and indistinct. By these means, Steevens created a space for his own imperial praxis, a space in which the report could become the event and in which the reader's imagination might operate untrammelled. The power dynamics of empire facilitated the development of a creative, literary-journalistic style. In turn, that style perpetuated the same power structures.

Steevens in Africa

Steevens spent two key periods in Africa, reporting from Kitchener's campaign for the re-conquest of the Sudan in 1898 and from the front line of the Boer War in 1899. Britain's involvement with Egypt and the Sudan requires some explanation. Beginning in the 1870s British interest in the region was based on financial and strategic interest in the Suez Canal, but had grown into an informal administration by the 1880s, with Egypt governed for all practical purposes by a British agent. The Sudan was Egypt's colony—a colony of a colony—and leaders there chafed under efforts to eliminate the lucrative slave trade and a punitive approach to tax collection. When in 1881 a charismatic religious leader, Mohammed Ahmed, emerged and proclaimed himself the Mahdi, or expected one, religiously inspired rebellion quickly spiralled out of control. Britain's response was indecisive, hampered by the complexities of Egyptian politics and the challenge of deploying troops to such a

remote region. The deployment of General Charles George Gordon, popularly known as “Chinese” Gordon, to evacuate threatened garrisons in 1884 was disastrous, resulting in Gordon’s death at Khartoum in early 1885 as a relief expedition fell agonizingly short of its goal. All this happened in the glare of a popular press ravenous for news.⁵⁴ Gordon’s death was presented as a national calamity. Kitchener’s meticulously prepared campaign in 1898 was widely seen as an act of vengeance. In rival correspondent Winston Churchill’s phrase, Kitchener’s campaign was “the last Act in the great Drama of Khartoum.”⁵⁵ The last act was bloody. At Omdurman on September 2, 1898, Kitchener’s Anglo-Egyptian army killed more than ten thousand of the Mahdi’s warriors for a loss to themselves of just forty-eight men.⁵⁶ Steevens’s reports are colored by the potent sense of events in Africa being a part of a wider imperial narrative. When the Boer republics sought to break away from the British Empire in 1899, there was a strong sense that this was simply a new chapter in the imperial drama, complete with the same principal characters and narrators—Kitchener, Churchill, Steevens, and others. The narrative quality of British imperialism—responsible for inspiring public enthusiasm for empire—produced and was a product of the literary journalism published by Steevens and his peers.

Some close analysis is necessary to support these claims. Rather than focus on Steevens’s descriptions of combat and of fighting men, which have been widely discussed, this analysis focuses on his engagement with African people and landscapes.⁵⁷ Steevens’s imperial values are at their most pungent in his descriptions of the African and Levantine people he encountered on his travels. Field has criticized Steevens for his “abbreviated caricatures of aliens” and argued, “A reader of Steevens is never forced to interact with the human material of his reporting because Steevens never gave him a sensitive, full rendering of impressions.”⁵⁸ There is ample justification for this in Steevens’s writing. In Egypt, the dockside laborers unloading mail sacks from his ship are described as “specimen[s] of the raw material”—the raw material of the British Empire, that is—and Steevens suggests that imperialism is justified by “Their very ugliness and stupidity.”⁵⁹ The men are rendered wholly voiceless and formless in the curt prose of Steevens’s travelogue. A stevedore becomes “a little wisp of brown ugliness” who “faded . . . to a spectre” before being “lost in the darkness of the ship.”⁶⁰ The choice of language is doubly important. The otherworldly, spectral quality of Steevens’s subject separates him irrevocably from the reader; the act of fading into darkness is a total denial of individuality. Steevens does not simply allow the figure to become lost in the bustle of the docks but instead merges him back into his physical surroundings. The man is a part of his continent, not a distinct being. These are by no means isolated instances of racial stereotyping. Elsewhere, African laborers

are “ghosts [climbing] up the gangway, more teeth gleaming devilishly out of demon faces, more dirty legs staggering into the lamplight under more mail bags.”⁶¹ Under Steevens’s undeniably literary touch, African bodies are fragmented. Parts—teeth, faces, legs—replace the whole, while dirt, darkness (presumably both literal and metaphorical) and demonism are added to the marginal, spectral qualities noted above. The stylized, impressionistic approach creates a sense of freshness and immediacy, while the symbolic potential of Steevens’s impressions stimulates the imaginative engagement of the reader. Importantly, such an approach also has the effect of rendering the reader complicit in Steevens’s judgments. We see through his eyes and are expected to share in his worldview.

Steevens’s ability to communicate a whole value system in brief descriptions is a great strength of his prose, and his ability to argue through narrative is one of the features that help identify his work as an antecedent of today’s literary journalism. In a longer passage, Steevens sketches the scene as workmen on board a barge replenish his ship’s coal bunkers on the Suez Canal. The barge nears and Steevens writes:

It seemed a great black raft, slowly warping itself nearer and nearer, and on it—what was moving?—by the Powers, they were men!

Men they were, and the raft was an enormous coal-lighter; only which was coal and which was lighter and which were men was more than anybody could say. . . . They seemed to wear shirt and drawers and a rag round the head; but, again, which was clothes and which was man? Clothes and skin were both grimed the same black with coal dust.⁶²

The lighter’s crew is consumed by the commodity they handle, indistinguishable from it. The very stuff that fuels modernity is ground into skin, clothes, and vessel alike. Once again, the non-European is figured as inhuman, scarcely recognizable, merged with their surroundings and accoutrements. The delayed decoding in the first sentence enlists readers’ participation in Steevens’s interpretation of the scene. As the lighter draws alongside, Steevens presents an increasingly dramatic scene: “Slowly and slowly, but nearer and nearer,” he writes, “howling and grinning, naked and black—till you thought the Canal must have opened and let up the sooty monster straight out of the Pit.”⁶³ So far are these men from Steevens’s Anglocentric vision of humanity that they are rendered otherworldly. Paradoxically, they are both consumed by modernity and characterized by a primal, mythic savagery. Straightforward racial commentary is linked with an ambivalent response to the imperial narrative of progress. The “howling” subjects of Steevens’s description are denied language: As Field has suggested, “surface physical traits

were made to tell all.”⁶⁴ Steevens skillfully constructs the illusion that the scene is presented to the reader in all its dynamism and immediacy.

Steevens’s ability to combine moments of ambivalence, in which meaning appears to be destabilized, with a clear ideological message is apparent elsewhere in his writing. A crisis of category is felt through Steevens’s prose. Among the clientele of what he describes as “an Arab music-hall” in Cairo, Steevens finds himself unable to satisfactorily locate and define the origins and lineages of his fellow revelers. He explains to his readers that: “The modern Egyptian is crossed, they say, between Arab and ancient Egyptian or Copt, with a dash of negroid Nubian thrown in. The faces of these people illustrated the process—yellow, copper coloured, brick-red, chocolate, brown, black.”⁶⁵

The customers against whom Steevens jostles initially confound his system of imperial taxonomy. His solution is to exclude them from it. Instead of being Egyptians, they are the varied products of a multiracial corner of the Mediterranean. The streets of Cairo provide Steevens with ample confirmation for this view. He observes Turks, Armenians, Arabs, Italians, Greeks, Syrians, and French mingling as they go about their business. Such cosmopolitanism can have only one meaning for Steevens: “there are no Egyptians, and there is no such nation as Egypt.”⁶⁶ As a result, the people of Cairo are denied a clear and stable identity. Stripped of any troublesome individual or corporate importance, they become the means by which Steevens can expound his theory of racial history, signifiers of a history from which they, as individual agents, are excluded. Imperial notions of race and identity are made compelling by Steevens’s immersion in the scenes he describes and his superficially empirical observations.

It is on the streets of Cairo that Steevens develops his racial logic to its apparently natural conclusion. Lest any particularly slow-witted reader has failed to grasp the imperial message, Steevens spies a British soldier walking through the city. The soldier, he tells us, “is the first and last thing you will see in Cairo that is all in one piece and knows its own mind.”⁶⁷ Oneness and wholeness are the privileges of the imperial Briton; Egypt is fragmented out of existence. As we are told late in the book, “Egypt is neither Europe, Asia, nor Africa: set at the corner of all three, it takes character from each, and overlays it with a filmy something of its own.”⁶⁸ The refusal to concede any more than “a filmy something” to Egyptian identity is to construct a lack, an emptiness that requires filling. On one level the lack can be supplied by British imperialism; on another it demands the imaginative intervention of the readers, rendering them complicit in the imperial project. Steevens has created a space replete with interpretive possibility and closed down that space simultaneously. A dual colonization is at work in the text, a colonization in deed and a colonization in discourse.

Description and Imperialistic Negation

While Egyptian and African identity is variously denied, diminished, or disintegrated, the landscapes of Africa are either mute witnesses to imperial intervention, dangerous and intractable wastes, or simply blank spaces awaiting delineation, definition, and description. And above all, it is description that the African landscape awaits, for the ultimate function of all this denial of identity is to produce a space in which the act of reporting becomes the central event. As Simon During has put it, this is reportage at the point where “discursive ambiguity and distanciation begin to disappear—where the report knows itself as an event.”⁶⁹ That knowingness is apparent in Steevens’s topographical writing. The townscape of Wadi Halfa, for example, is presented not as a place with inherent importance but as a space on which to record the progress of Britain’s involvement with Egypt and the Sudan. “To walk around Wadi Halfa,” muses Steevens, “is to read the whole romance of the Sudan.”⁷⁰ Not only does Steevens proceed to present a reading of the town as though it were a historical document, he also lays claim to the story it tells: “half the tale of Halfa is our own as well as Egypt’s.”⁷¹ The town is co-opted as a narrative device, establishing key themes that underpin the book. As Steevens puts it, “From the shops at Halfa the untamed Sudan is being tamed at last. It is the new system, the modern system—mind and mechanics beating muscle and shovel-head spear.”⁷² Any previous importance of Halfa is effaced; the town is simply a background onto which Steevens can project his own narrative.

That narrative is partly the narrative of British imperialism and partly Steevens’s own narrative. Perhaps predictably, the full description of Halfa has much to say about the mechanics of modernity—railways, workshops, supply depots, and the telegraph lines stretching across the desert. It is notable that the technologies that facilitated reportage are themselves the subjects of reportage. That focus on the extension of imperial infrastructure into an empty continent extends throughout *With Kitchener to Khartoum*. Distances and measurements are essential features, allowing readers to follow the progress of the campaign. Steevens gazes along the length of a railway embankment that ran “straight and purposeful as ever, so far as you could see,” through the Sudanese desert. In the far distance he perceives the tiny figure of “a white man with a spirit level.”⁷³ Survey and division are the special tasks of the imperialist. “The native,” Steevens tells us, “has no words for distance and number but ‘near’ and ‘far,’ ‘few’ and ‘many’; ‘near’ may be anything within twenty miles, while ‘many’ ranges from a hundred to a hundred thousand.”⁷⁴ The ability (or perhaps the inclination) to define, delimit, and describe territory indicates the right of the incomer over the land.

A single incident in the book illustrates the point beautifully. Steevens accompanies an advancing column, threading its way:

. . . sleepily desertward through the mimosa-thorns. After a few minutes we came, to our wonder, on to a broad flat road embanked at each side. It could hardly have been built by scorpions, and there were no other visible inhabitants. Then, at a corner, we came to a sign-post—a sign-post by all that's astounding—with “To Metemmeh” inscribed thereon. We learned afterwards that the fertile-minded Hickman Bey, finding himself and his battalion woodcutting in the neighbourhood, had used up some of his spare energy and of his men's spare muscle in making the road and setting up the sign, the only one in the Sudan. At the time the thing was like meeting an old friend after a long parting.⁷⁵

The lone signpost, on a road that ends as abruptly as it began, without reaching any destination, is freighted with symbolism. An incongruous reminder of home, it is also a statement thrust into the blank surface of the desert, a claim staked on the land. The presence of the signpost serves to emphasize the absence of anything else noteworthy to Steevens's roving eye. It also serves as an anchor for his judgments, a fragment of evidence for his imperial worldview that helps transform a personal narrative of experience into a carefully crafted piece of imperial propaganda. The power dynamics of empire allow Steevens space in which he is able to develop his individual brand of narrative journalism.

In his essay “Geography and Some Explorers,” Joseph Conrad famously lamented that the blank spaces on the map of Africa, so enticing in his youth, had been filled in by the turn of the century.⁷⁶ Steevens's response to the same problem was to cleanse the meaning from the surface of Africa in his writing. In the concluding chapter of *With Kitchener to Khartoum*, Steevens writes that “the Sudan is a God-accursed wilderness, an empty limbo of torment” before explaining that “the very charm of the land lies in its empty barbarism.”⁷⁷ He later applied the same unseeing eye to South African terrain, too. Crossing the Karoo desert early in the second Boer War, he explains to his reader, “You arrive and arrive, and once more you arrive—and once more you see the same vast nothing you are coming from.”⁷⁸ Once again it is this absence that is “the very charm” of the place—“the unfenced emptiness, the space, the freedom, the unbroken arch of the sky.”⁷⁹ Steevens's Africa is a stage for imperial endeavor, its surface unencumbered by pre-existing meaning, the arch of sky like the proscenium of a theater awaiting the imperial actor. That actor is the special correspondent who provides a vicarious experience of empire for readers in the relative comfort of their homes.

Berny Sèbe has suggested that Steevens eschews detailed geographical

description in *With Kitchener to Khartoum* in order to allow a clear focus on the serious cultural and commercial business of promoting Kitchener as an imperial hero.⁸⁰ It is, however, an older hero of empire, General Gordon, who becomes the indirect focus of Steevens's reflections after the capture of Khartoum. After the final victory at Omdurman, Steevens enters Omdurman and Khartoum. The urban landscape he records “was planless confusion,” a “threadless labyrinth.”⁸¹ A single space within the city bore the traces of order. The garden, which had been General Gordon's before his death in February 1885, was a “pathetic ruin Untrimmed, unwatered, the oranges and citrons still struggled to bear their little, hard, green knobs, as if they had been full ripe fruit. . . . Reluctantly, despairingly, Gordon's garden was dropping back to wilderness.”⁸² The scene is replete with symbolism. Like a fallen Eden, the garden has returned to wilderness in the absence of the colonizer. Note that Steevens chose to use the word “wilderness” rather than “wildness”—this is a falling back into emptiness and absence, not into a state of nature.

In an oft-quoted passage, Steevens described Kitchener as “the Sudan Machine.”⁸³ Simon During suggests that, rather than Britain's imperial foes, it is the “natural void that is the real technical challenge for the machine” in Steevens's writing.⁸⁴ On the contrary, there is nothing natural about the void described in Steevens's work; he creates it deliberately and comprehensively. As Sèbe reminds us, “commercial interest” as well as “ideological convictions” had an important role in shaping Steevens's prose.⁸⁵ An empty continent, reconstructed as an imperial theater with its inhabitants marginalized, allowed Steevens space in which to develop his own commodity—an individual style of literary journalism with the reporter at its center. It is hard to disagree with Field's argument that by interposing himself between reader and subject matter, Steevens creates for his reader “an insulating distance from alien things and people.”⁸⁶ His is a reportage that deploys literary style to suppress truth, instead constructing a mediated Africa designed for popular consumption. Efforts by some of Steevens's contemporaries (notably Sir Charles Dilke) and by more recent critics to explain away the more distasteful aspects of Steevens's work as the result of the hurried conditions under which a special correspondent necessarily worked, or as a concession to pro-imperial editors and readers, are ultimately unconvincing.⁸⁷ Indeed, such analysis misses the crucial point. Style and content cannot be separated in Steevens's work any more than the literary and the journalistic strands of his writing can be teased apart. The opportunities afforded by British imperialism permitted Steevens to develop his literary-journalistic style, while that style enabled Steevens to perpetuate the ideological constructs of imperialism in compelling fashion.

Conclusions

Should any doubt remain about Steevens's place within the history—and it might not be too bold to suggest the *canon*—of literary journalism, it may be instructive to reflect on one final anecdote. Alfred Harmsworth who, as proprietor of the *Daily Mail*, had contracted (and perhaps persuaded) Steevens to cover the war in South Africa, was sufficiently affected by his death to bestow an annual pension of £500 on Steevens's widow and to endow a scholarship fund in the writer's memory as well as eulogizing Steevens in a powerful editorial.⁸⁸ Harmsworth also visited Mrs. Steevens to express his condolences personally. However, even while the pair was lamenting Steevens's loss, in a reportedly moving encounter, the dead writer's replacement on the *Daily Mail* staff was loitering in the garden, awaiting Harmsworth's final instructions. The "ferce-looking man in khaki" waiting outside was none other than Richard Harding Davis, whose reportage on the German invasion of Belgium in 1914 has secured his own place in the mainstream of the established historical narrative of literary journalism.⁸⁹ Steevens has a clear place in the genealogy of modern literary journalism.

The importance attached to the integration of Steevens and his fellow new journalists, who narrated British imperialism in such thrilling style, into the history of literary journalism is worth restating. It is tempting to conceive of literary journalism as a form ideally adapted to expose dominant ideologies and to challenge established power structures. Isabel Soares, for example, has argued convincingly that the personal engagement inherent in literary journalism, or new journalism, enabled writers "to expose the hidden and complex factors behind the Scramble for Africa."⁹⁰ Soares's analysis is accurate, yet as this reading of Steevens's work indicates, while literary journalism certainly exposed truths about empire and deconstructed colonial discourses, it also obscured truths and (re)constructed those very same colonial discourses.

Andrew Griffiths is Associate Lecturer at Plymouth University and the Open University, UK. His research explores interconnections between journalism, imperialism, and fiction in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. He is the author of *The New Journalism, the New Imperialism, and the Fiction of Empire* (Palgrave, 2015).



Notes

- ¹ Roger T. Stearn, "G. W. Steevens and the Message of Empire," *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 17.2 (1989): 210.
- ² Vernon Blackburn, "The Last Chapter," in G. W. Steevens, *From Capetown to Ladysmith* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1900), 190.
- ³ Vernon Blackburn, "The Last Chapter," in *From Capetown to Ladysmith: An Unfinished Record of the South African War*, by G. W. Steevens; ed. Vernon Blackburn (London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1900), 155.
- ⁴ Simon During, "Writing Outside the Book," *Cultural Critique* no. 16 (Autumn 1990): 150.
- ⁵ Laurence Davies, "'Sideways Ending to It All': G. W. Steevens, Blackwood, and the *Daily Mail*," in *Print Culture and the Blackwood Tradition, 1805–1930*, ed. David Finkelstein (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), 236, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3138/j.ctt1287w01.15>.
- ⁶ Roger T. Stearn, "G. W. Steevens and the Message of Empire," *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 17, no. 2 (January 1989): 210.
- ⁷ Winston Spencer Churchill, *London to Ladysmith via Pretoria* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1900), 477.
- ⁸ Blackburn, "The Last Chapter," 156.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, 157.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 166.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, 176.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, 173.
- ¹³ For a discussion of the relationship between British new journalism and literary journalism, see Isabel Soares, "Literary Journalism's Magnetic Pull: Britain's 'New' Journalism and the Portuguese at the Fin-de-Siècle," in *Literary Journalism across the Globe: Journalistic Traditions and Transnational Influences*, eds. John S. Bak and Bill Reynolds (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2011), 118–33.
- ¹⁴ Laurel Brake and Maryssa Demoor (eds.), *Dictionary of Nineteenth-Century Journalism in Great Britain and Ireland* (London: Academia Press, 2009), 443.
- ¹⁵ Matthew Arnold, "Up to Easter," *Nineteenth Century*, May 1887, 638 (emphasis in the original).
- ¹⁶ Matthew Rubery, *The Novelty of Newspapers: Victorian Fiction after the Invention of the News* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 6.
- ¹⁷ Soares, "Literary Journalism's Magnetic Pull," 118. See also Isabel Soares, "John Bull Scrambling for Africa: A Portrait of the English at the Heyday of Empire," in *Profile Pieces: Journalism and the "Human Interest" Bias*, eds. Sue Joseph and Richard Lance Keeble (Oxford: Routledge, 2016), 137–50, and Isabel Soares, "Literary Journalism on War and Imperialism: The British Annexation of Egypt Viewed by Portuguese Eça de Queirós," in *Global Literary Journalism: Exploring the Journalistic Imagination*, eds. Richard Lance Keeble and John Tulloch, vol. 2, Mass Communication and Journalism Series, vol. 15 (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2014), 111–24.
- ¹⁸ Jenny McKay, "Reportage in the U.K.: A Hidden Genre?" in Bak and Reynolds, *Literary Journalism across the Globe*, 47–60.

¹⁹ John C. Hartsock, *A History of American Literary Journalism: The Emergence of a Modern Narrative Form* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2000), 24–25, 111–14; Norman Sims, *True Stories: A Century of Literary Journalism* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 1.

²⁰ Researchers from outside the immediate field of literary journalism have explored connections between fiction and journalism in British print culture in recent books that should be of interest to historians of literary journalism. See, for example, Doug Underwood's *Journalism and the Novel: Truth and Fiction, 1700–2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Matthew Robery's *The Novelty of Newspapers: Victorian Fiction after the Invention of the News* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Joel Wiener's *The Americanization of the British Press, 1830s–1914: Speed in the Age of Transatlantic Journalism* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); and Andrew Griffiths's *The New Journalism, the New Imperialism and the Fiction of Empire, 1870–1900* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

²¹ See Wiener, *Americanization of the British Press*, for a substantial account of transatlantic influences in the period.

²² Blackburn, "The Last Chapter," 157–58.

²³ Stearn, "Steevens and the Message of Empire," 224.

²⁴ See Griffiths, *The New Journalism, the New Imperialism*, 1–19.

²⁵ Soares, "John Bull Scrambling for Africa," 137.

²⁶ Ben Shephard, "Showbiz Imperialism: The Case of Peter Lobengula," in *Imperialism and Popular Culture*, ed. John M. Mackenzie (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986), 94.

²⁷ Niall Ferguson, *Empire: How Britain Made the Modern World* (London: Penguin, 2004), 223.

²⁸ The expansion of European empires in the period was undoubtedly remarkable. Thomas Pakenham has provided useful figures to quantify expansion within Africa in the last twenty years of the nineteenth century, of which the most striking are the acquisition of "10 million square miles of new territory and 110 million dazed new subjects." See Thomas Pakenham, *The Scramble for Africa, 1876–1912* (London: Abacus, 2003), xxiii.

²⁹ Quoted in H. John Field, *Toward a Programme of Imperial Life: The British Empire at the Turn of the Century* (Oxford: Clío Press, 1982), 156.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 153–54, 174, 140.

³¹ Public support, at least in the sense of writers lending their public voices to imperialism—though I find it hard to imagine that, as some historians have suggested, this did not translate into or reflect public support for imperialism in the broader sense. For such an argument, see Bernard Porter, *The Absent-Minded Imperialists: Empire, Society, and Culture in Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

³² Paula M. Krebs, *Gender, Race and the Writing of Empire: Public Discourse and the Boer War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 31.

³³ W. E. Henley, "Mémorial," in *Things Seen: Impressions of Men, Cities, and*

Books, by G. W. Steevens, ed. G. S. Street (Edinburgh: William Blackwood and Sons, 1900), xvii.

³⁴ Blackburn, "The Last Chapter," 156.

³⁵ For a rich discussion of journalism as a profession in the period, see Mark Hampton, "Defining Journalists in Late-nineteenth Century Britain," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 22, no. 2 (June 2005), 138–55.

³⁶ James Curran and Jean Seaton, *Power without Responsibility: The Press and Broadcasting in Britain*, 3rd ed. (London: Routledge, 1988), 30–46.

³⁷ For fuller discussion of the new journalism and the *Daily Mail* see Griffiths, *The New Journalism, the New Imperialism*, 5–10.

³⁸ Field, *Toward a Programme*, 122.

³⁹ Sidney Lee and Roger T. Stearn, "Steevens, George Warrington (1869–1900)," in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. H. C. G. Matthew and Brian Harrison (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 52:385.

⁴⁰ Lee and Stearn, 52:385. See also, G. W. Steevens, *Naval Policy with Some Account of the Warships of the Principal Powers* (London: Methuen, 1896), 267.

⁴¹ G. W. Steevens, "From the New Gibbon," in Steevens; ed. G. S. Street, *Things Seen*, 21–36.

⁴² G. W. Steevens, "The New Humanitarianism," in Steevens; ed. G. S. Street, *Things Seen*, 3, 12.

⁴³ Steevens, "The New Humanitarianism," 16.

⁴⁴ Phillip Knightley, *The First Casualty: The War Correspondent as Hero, Propagandist and Myth-Maker from the Crimea to Iraq*, updated ed. (London: André Deutsch, 2003), 57.

⁴⁵ Davies, "A Sideways Ending," 246–47.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 246.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 241, 247.

⁴⁸ Lee and Stearn, "Steevens, George Warrington," 52:385.

⁴⁹ Field, *Toward a Programme*, 189–90.

⁵⁰ John Simpson, *Unreliable Sources: How the Twentieth Century Was Reported* (Basingstoke, UK: Macmillan, 2010), 28.

⁵¹ Mikhail Bakhtin, "Epic and Novel," in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by Mikhail Bakhtin*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006), 7.

⁵² Lee and Stearn, "Steevens, George Warrington," 52:385.

⁵³ This article uses the standard spelling of Khartoum except when reproducing the title of Steevens's 1898 book, *With Kitchener to Khartoum*.

⁵⁴ For a fuller account of events in the Sudan, see Kwasi Kwarteng, *Ghosts of Empire: Britain's Legacies in the Modern World* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011), 217–30.

⁵⁵ Winston Churchill, "The War on the Nile," *Morning Post* [London], 31 August 1898, 5. For more discussion of the drama of imperial news reporting, see Richard Fulton, "The Sudan Sensation of 1898," *Victorian Periodicals Review* 42, no. 1 (Spring 2009): 37–63; and Andrew Griffiths, "Winston Churchill, the Morn-

ing Post, and the End of the Imperial Romance,” *Victorian Periodicals Review* 46, no. 2 (Summer 2013): 163–83.

⁵⁶ Pakenham, *Scramble for Africa*, 546.

⁵⁷ For analysis of Steevens’s writing about combat, see Knightley, *The First Casualty*; Griffiths, *The New Journalism, the New Imperialism*; Field, *Toward a Programme*; Davies, “A Sideways Ending.”

⁵⁸ Field, *Toward a Programme*, 161, 192–93.

⁵⁹ G. W. Steevens, *Egypt in 1898* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1898), 16.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 19–20.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁶⁴ Field, *Toward a Programme*, 166.

⁶⁵ Steevens, *Egypt in 1898*, 39.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 58.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 59.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 275.

⁶⁹ During, “Writing Outside the Book,” 141.

⁷⁰ G. W. Steevens, *With Kitchener to Khartum* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1898), 1.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 8.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 104.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 226–27.

⁷⁶ Joseph Conrad, “Geography and Some Explorers,” in *Heart of Darkness: Authoritative Text, Backgrounds and Contexts, Criticism/Joseph Conrad*, 4th ed., ed. Paul B. Armstrong (New York: Norton, 2006), 273–78.

⁷⁷ Steevens, *With Kitchener to Khartum*, 325.

⁷⁸ G. W. Steevens, “The Army Corps—Has Not Left England,” in Blackburn, *From Capetown to Ladysmith*, 12.

⁷⁹ Steevens, “The Army Corps,” 12.

⁸⁰ Berny Sèbe, *Heroic Imperialists in Africa: The Promotion of British and French Colonial Heroes, 1870–1939* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), 264–89. [Sèbe uses *Khartoum* rather than *Khartum* in his Chapter 7 title reference to Steeven’s book “George Warrington Steevens, Blackwood Publishers and the Making of *With Kitchener to Khartoum*,” 264–89, 264.]

⁸¹ Steevens, *With Kitchener to Khartum*, 300.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 315.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 46.

⁸⁴ During, “Writing Outside the Book,” 155.

⁸⁵ Sèbe, *Heroic Imperialists in Africa*, 264.

⁸⁶ Field, *Toward a Programme*, 192.

⁸⁷ Field’s chapter, “Steevens as a Careerist in the New Imperialism,” in *Toward*

a Programme of Imperial Life, 153–201, provides a good overview of this critical debate.

⁸⁸ Field, *Toward a Programme*, 182.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 198n77. See Reginald Pound and Geoffrey Harmsworth’s *Northcliffe* (London: Cassell, 1959) for a fuller account of this episode.

⁹⁰ Soares, “John Bull Scrambling for Africa,” 148.