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The *Illustrated London News* and Disasters

Kristine Moruzi

University of Alberta

Various source media, *Illustrated London News* Historical Archive 1842-2003



Introduction

The first number of *The Illustrated London News* on 14 May 1842 reflects the newspaper's initial, and longstanding, dedication to the illustrated coverage of devastating events from around the world. The Fire of Hamburg began on 5 May, and the *ILN* felt it was sufficiently newsworthy to merit an illustration on the first page of its first number, and also included a detailed description of the fire on page two. As Patrick Leary notes, this illustration was based on a cityscape of Hamburg from the British Library, to which flames and smoke were added. Moreover, the eyewitness detail comes from other sources, including a correspondent from *The Times*, and contains descriptions of the fire's progress through the city and the devastation that ensued. In its early days, the *ILN* used the resources available to them to create content, including existing illustrations that could be modified and transformed into woodcuts, and extracts from other periodicals. The incorporation of extracted material was a common practice at the time, and lax copyright laws meant that no permission was needed and no compensation was paid for the use of these materials.

Coverage

Searching on the key word "disaster" in the *ILN* provides valuable evidence of what reporters and editors of the time considered disastrous. A preliminary search on "disaster" in full text produces more than 6500 results between 1842 and 2003, while the same search in keywords produces over 950 results. Yet even these impressive results do not reflect the full scope of the *ILN*'s coverage. A robust search

would necessarily include a variety of search terms since the fire of Hamburg, for example, is never referred to as a disaster, with reporters and correspondents using the term "devastation" instead. Nonetheless, a specific search on "railway disaster" or "colliery disaster" pulls up many results, primarily from the nineteenth century, and demonstrates how the types of disastrous events shifted as technology and safety measures improved. At the same time, as new technologies were introduced (such as aircraft), new types of disasters occurred. The twentieth century sees an increase in air disasters, for example, and a decline in the number of the mining tragedies.

Illustrations

The disaster coverage that the *ILN* provided was often highly visual. Front-page illustrations, and later photographs, of these disastrous events were intended to attract readers. In its opening "Address", the *ILN* trumpeted its wood engravings as providing the public with "the very form and presence of events as they transpire". The degree to which these illustrations were fabricated is open to debate. As Brian Maidment explains, illustrations of international events where reporters were unlikely to have been present were more prone to invention. Nonetheless, the *ILN* often insisted that its illustrations were "based on a sketch" that was done at the time of the disaster.

Disasters illustrated on the front page included the "Great Disaster in the Channel" in 1873, the "Railway Disaster at Doncaster" in 1887, the "Military Disaster in Manipore" in 1891, and the "Disastrous Colliery Explosion" in 1892, to name but

a few. An intriguing and much more light-hearted example appears on the front page of the 21 February 1948 number, which includes a half-page photograph showing two dogs in parachutes jumping out of a plane and a smaller photo of dog-parachutists in a transport aircraft. The accompanying article discusses the role of Huskies in helping to rescue persons stranded by aircraft crashes in locations where air rescue is impossible. While the illustrations are generally designed to reflect the reality of the disaster, on other occasions they are intended to pique the public's interest.

The R101 Disaster

A major air disaster that received extensive coverage in the *ILN* was the 5 October 1930 crash of the "great British airship", the R101. On 11 October, the newspaper published a Special Number that celebrated the British engineering accomplishment while mourning the loss of life when the ship crashed in France *en route* to Egypt and India and was destroyed by fire. The *ILN* called the crash the "greatest disaster in the history of aviation" and the front-page photograph is a stark image of the skeleton of the ship with most of its fabric burnt away. The extensive collection of photographs and illustrations provides details of the engineering feat, honours the team of aeronautical experts who perished in the crash, and surveys the wreckage.

Clearly, the *ILN* felt that its reading public was interested in disasters, and it provided extensive coverage of major events like railway, mining, and aircraft accidents, as well as natural disasters like

floods, earthquakes, and fires. At the same time, however, the coverage of disasters like the crash of the R101 was not merely opportunism designed to attract new readers. The newspaper had already demonstrated its interest in the technological marvel of the airship with its coverage of the successful return of an earlier model, the R100, from Canada (23 August 1930) and a discussion of how the R101 would "dock" in Egypt and India (4 October 1930).

Reporting Disasters – A Case Study of the Titanic

While the disasters covered in the pages of the *ILN* emphasize the newspaper's topicality and the currency of the magazine, its weekly format and the timing of its publication meant that it sometimes had to scramble for content at the last minute. For example, the 20 April 1912 edition is ostensibly a "Special Number" dealing with the 14 April sinking of the *RMS Titanic*, but the only reference to the tragedy is a front-page photo of a giant iceberg "akin to that which caused the sinking of the 'Titanic'" and a short excerpt discussing the possibility of detecting icebergs by measuring sea temperature. The *ILN*'s much more exhaustive coverage of the disaster appeared the following week.

Because of the timing of the publication, the *ILN* was able to provide more extensive coverage of the disaster in its 27 April 1912 number, which contains numerous photographs, illustrations, and text that emphasize a variety of different aspects of the tragedy. The double-page illustration, "Looking at the book of the lost and at news of the sea-tragedy: At Lloyd's", highlights the role of the world-famous marine insurance underwriter and

provides a brief history of the firm. In G.K. Chesterton's regular feature, "Our Notebook," he uses the shipwreck as an analogy for modern society, in which "[o]ur whole civilisation is indeed very like the *Titanic*; alike in its power and its impotence, its security and its insecurity". The *ILN* also included a page of photographs of some passengers, both "saved and lost", as well as brief descriptions of these notable men and women. It drew attention to the technical aspects of the shipwreck, such as "The 'Titanic's' Boats: Were They Too Far from the Water?", which includes a full-page illustration of the ship indicating the distance the lifeboats were lowered to the water. The number of lifeboats also came in for criticism in W.B. Robinson's full-page illustration of "Boats Carried and Boats Needed to Save All: Vital Figures", which identified a number of different ocean-liners, the number of lifeboats required to save all the passengers and crew, and the number of lifeboats they actually carry. The newspaper celebrated the heroes of the tragedy, including photographs of the Cunard ship "Carpathia" that responded to the emergency and of the musicians who continued to perform as the *Titanic* was sinking.

National and International Disasters

The *ILN* focused on both national and international disasters, although understandably there was a predominant interest in local events. Some local events were evidently so well known that the *ILN* provided little in the way of direct coverage. For example, the 1902 disaster at Ibrox Park in Glasgow, where 25 fans were killed and another 517 injured when the stands collapsed after a night of heavy rain, resulted in a front-page illustration on 12 April 1902 with a caption, but no article to accompany the image. A brief mention of the

"appalling disaster" at Glasgow, with casualties equal to those in the contested action in the Transvaal of the Second Boer War, is the only other reference to the tragedy. At least some disasters, then, were so well known that the *ILN* could capitalize on the popular response to the tragedy by including an illustration. While other newspapers such as *The Times* covered the details of the disaster more extensively, including publishing the names of the dead, the *ILN* was able to provide yet another perspective through its use of illustrations.

In addition to these well-known, local disasters, events from far and wide also received the attention of the *ILN*. Two Canadian bridge disasters, the 1907 collapse of the Quebec Bridge and the 1958 collapse of the new Second Narrows Bridge in Vancouver, both merited illustrations and articles in the *ILN*. In America, floods, fires, and railway disasters were also of interest. Closer to home, disasters on the European continent, and especially France, received special attention. The French colliery disaster of 1906, for example, is described as the "greatest colliery disaster on record" with at least 1150 miners losing their lives. Given the frequency of mining accidents in England, this event must have struck a strong chord with British readers.

The importance placed by *The Illustrated London News* on illustrating national and international disasters provides a vital site for understanding the past. We can see shifts in the types of events that were deemed disastrous as well as how technological advances and increasingly safer work environments

lessened the dangers of certain occupations. By examining the disasters that merited coverage alongside the volume of contextual material included within the pages of the *ILN*, we can begin to better understand both the importance of and the reader's familiarity with the disaster. Not only does this archive give us more visual and textual information about disasters with which we are already familiar, it also provides us with a view of other, less well-known events that reporters of the day felt were disasters in their own right.

Highlights

The Wreck of the "Flying Welshman," October 3: The Scene Immediately after the Accident

By 1904, the *ILN* was regularly using photographs. A double-page spread of the wreck of the "Flying Welshman" contains four photos of the debris. This front-page illustration conveys the chaos and confusion immediately following the crash despite the fact that the sketch artist was unlikely to have been present at that time.

The Greatest Disaster in the History of Aviation: The Torn and Twisted Skeleton of "R 101": An Aerial View of the Wreck on a Hillside near Beauvais

The crash of the British airship R101 in France was a major event in 1930, both because of the *ILN*'s interest in the progress of airship development and because of the loss of life.

Taken at the Moment of the Aeroplane Disaster in Which the French Minister of War Was Killed and the Premier Was Injured: Cinematograph Views of the Accident from Its Beginning to Its End

The illustration of the airplane crash using fifteen stills from a cinematographic camera is an innovative use of technology.

The Military Disaster in Manipore, on the Southern Frontier of Assam, British Indian Empire and An Indian Military Disaster

The illustrations of Manipore men on the front page would have been fascinating and exotic to a nineteenth-century reader, especially when combined with an article entitled "An Indian Military Disaster". References to British military failures are uncommon in the *ILN*.

Paris Flooding As Seen By Our Special Artist

Although the front-page illustration of this 5 February 1910 number is of the Brighton Express accident, much of the remainder of this issue discusses the terrible flooding of Paris. This document is one of many illustrations and photographs of the rising waters that were used to visually convey the extent of the disaster.

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