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# The *Illustrated London News* and 'Our Note Book'

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## Introduction

The history of 'Our Note Book' is closely bound up with the history of the Ingram family who were central to the foundation and management of *The Illustrated London News* for well over a century. Self-effacing to a fault, they generally allowed their eminent contributors to speak for themselves. This was often at the expense of the editor's independence in the few decades when editors were appointed from outside the family (for example, Clement Shorter, who was editor from 1891 until 1900).

## The Ingrams and 'Our Note Book'

Our Note Book was introduced in July 1884 by the proprietor and editor Sir William James Ingram (1847-1924). It took the form of a series of miscellaneous thoughts on the week's events and on topical issues of the day. In its early days the column was anonymous, although presumably it was written by Ingram himself. It was maintained as such until June 1886 when there was a brief hiatus in its publication. Our Note Book returned in January 1888, this time written by a regular writer. Henceforth, it became the flagship page of *The Illustrated London News* for the best part of a century. It replaced the editorial page and, until as late as 1969, even took the place of a Table of Contents in introducing readers to each issue.

The column's heyday coincided with Sir Bruce Ingram's (1877-1963) long tenure as editor of the paper, from 1900 to 1963. During this period Our Note Book became a major platform for cultural celebration and cultural critique in about equal measure; also, it increasingly assumed essay form. Ingram summarised the Note

Book's character in a letter to G.K. Chesterton (1874-1936) in 1905, inviting him to become its next author: it was, he said, 'a very light discussion on matters of the moment, ... treated without political bias.' By 'political bias', Ingram clearly meant overt *party* political bias. On the rare occasions when he felt that the authors of Our Note Book had overstepped the mark, he merely added a note emphasising that their views did not necessarily reflect those of the journal. As the longest-serving writer of the column, Arthur Bryant (1899-1985), recalled on Ingram's death, Ingram extended a generous 'tolerance and liberty' to trusted contributors. It was very generous indeed.

## Contributors

Stability and continuity were bywords for *The Illustrated London News*, and this applied as much to the contributors of Our Note Book as to all other aspects of the journal. There were only four authors of the column in the century between 1888, when it ceased to be anonymous, and 1985, when it was discontinued. All four authors died in post. The first was James Payn (1830-1898), novelist and journal editor who was a close friend of Charles Dickens. Of all the authors of Our Note Book, Payn adhered most closely to Bruce Ingram's description of the column in his letter to Chesterton. On his death, the baton passed to Louis Frederic Austin (1852-1905), leader-writer, dramatic critic, and reviewer for *The Daily Chronicle*.

## Louis Frederic Austin

Austin's tenure of the column coincided with the Boer War, and he did not hesitate to bring to the column his staunch imperialist sympathies and robust defence of

the military authorities. His scorn for small nationalities, from the Boers in South Africa to those living in the maelstrom of Eastern Europe at the beginning of the twentieth century, was accompanied by a good deal of hubris concerning England and the British Empire. Austin was given a free hand, partly, no doubt, because Ingram shared his strong patriotic pride and sense of the need for supporting the wars in which Britain engaged; both concerns had always been central to the spirit of the paper. But he was by no means wedded to the gung-ho imperialist variety of patriotism that was characteristic of Austin's columns, especially once the war had ended. In approaching Chesterton as Austin's successor, Ingram turned to the opposite end of Edwardian patriotism.

### G.K. Chesterton

Chesterton was a notable 'Little Englander' who had made his name as a journalist with the leading Liberal daily *The Daily News*. That paper had been outspoken in its criticism of the Boer War, and Chesterton had devoted many of his weekly columns to excoriating imperialism in general and the British Empire in particular. At the heart of his thought was a vision of patriotism that was focused on local rather than metropolitan, ancient rather than modern ties. He used *Our Note Book* to vilify the pretentiousness and chicanery of literary and political cliques respectively. The populism that fuelled these critiques was ubiquitous throughout his columns. It was in evidence, for example, in his identity of 'the people of England' with navies, porters and crossing sweepers rather than those who occupied positions higher up the social scale; in his attack on attempts to manipulate what he regarded as popular patriotism and popular religion

through state education; and in his paean to the celebration of Christmas against the sneers of secularists. How some of this went down with the various elites who formed the bulk of the readership of *The Illustrated London News* we shall never know. What is certain is that Chesterton was extremely proud of his connection with *The Illustrated London News*, a newspaper that had been a staple of his boyhood; also, that he retained the full confidence of Ingram although, hard as it is to believe, they never met. Apart from several periods of absence when he was either ill or travelling, Chesterton kept up his weekly column until his death in 1936.

### Arthur Bryant and the last phase of 'Our Note Book'

When Chesterton fell ill shortly before his death in 1936, his column was written by Arthur Bryant, then a young historian and Conservative Party activist. On Chesterton's death Bryant was invited to become his successor. As with Chesterton, *The Illustrated London News* had assumed a prominent role in his boyhood; he read back numbers in large leather-bound volumes on the floor of his home in the grounds of Buckingham Palace. The son of a leading courtier, Bryant reverted to the imperialism that had fired Austin's columns. But Bryant's admiration for the English people regardless of their imperial achievements often mirrored that of Chesterton, whose poetry and prose had influenced him in his youth. The difference was that, unlike Chesterton, he included elites as well as the people in his projection of the English nation. He was to remain at the column for the next forty-nine years until his death in 1985.

The first half of Bryant's tenure coincided with the approach to World War II, the War itself, and its aftermath. The Churchillian tone of his patriotism sustained large numbers of readers through the trials of Dunkirk, the Battle of Britain, the Blitz, and the early stages of the Cold War. More recently, in the light of wider historical evidence, his patriotism has attracted much controversy, tied as it was to support for appeasement in the years leading up to the War and peace initiatives with Germany in 1939-40. In *Our Note Book*, Bryant defended the re-occupation of the Rhineland, the *Anschluss*, the Munich Agreement, and the occupation of the Sudetenland. His concern to soften hostility to Hitler contrasted markedly with Chesterton's condemnation of Nazism through the same column just before his death. Bryant's use of *The Illustrated London News* for pro-appeasement purposes has been explored most fully and judiciously by Reba Soffer in *History, Historians and Conservatism in Britain and America* (Oxford University Press, 2008). Certainly, the complex nature of his patriotism that led him to admire Hitler while shrinking from any Fascist solution to Britain's problems in the late-1930s is well in evidence in his columns.

But Bryant, like the paper itself, lost readers from the 1960s onwards as Britain became less deferential and as his particular ideal of Englishness-cum-Britishness became less resonant. While during the Second World War he had actively supported the Beveridge plan for Britain, he became increasingly critical of the welfare state and what he perceived as the cult of officialdom; in his view, both were out of sync with an historic and timeless national character that valued rugged independence, however malignant such a trait had

become in the nineteenth century. The increasing loss of interest in national history also worried him, something that he expressed regularly in *Our Note Book*. Bryant felt keenly the death of Ingram in 1963 and the qualities he had carried forward from the Victorian era. From 1967, *Our Note Book* slipped back in the order of presentation to several pages inside the paper, a gesture to a readership that no longer hungered for the kind of public moralism centred on the English-British nation that Bryant had consistently provided. Bryant was retained as the writer of *Our Note Book* until his death in 1985, when the column ceased to exist. It was replaced for a short time by a new column entitled 'London Note Book' written by a different author for each issue. But the *Note Book's* time had clearly passed.

## Conclusion

*Our Note Book* offers a unique insight into some of the major concerns and controversies that engaged the public in Britain for a century. The responses of the authors of the column could be idiosyncratic; but they certainly made an impression, often positive, as we know from the substantial volume of mail from readers that survives in Bryant's personal papers at King's College London. For researchers interested in the shaping of public opinion by influential commentators, this is an invaluable resource.

## Highlights

### **Our Note Book, 6 July 1901**

This article by L.F. Austin emphasises his staunch support for the Boer War and defence of the camps

(later termed concentration camps) into which Boer refugees were herded. The malefactor in Austin's view was not Britain but Paul Kruger, President of the Transvaal. Austin portrayed Kruger as a servant of Dutch imperialism aided by 'sentimentalists' in Britain, not least the journalist W.D. Stead, who once knew better.

#### **Our Note Book, 30 May 1908**

This article by G.K. Chesterton well illustrates his defence of popular patriotism against attempts by elites to manipulate it in favour of imperialism. His dismissal of the recently founded 'Empire Day' as a 'jerry built jubilee' must have been particularly wounding to enthusiasts of empire among his readers.

#### **Our Note Book, 25 May 1912**

This article by G.K. Chesterton is a reflective essay written on the occasion of the seventieth anniversary of *The Illustrated London News*. Chesterton not only emphasises the importance of the paper in his own boyhood; he also defends its value for understanding the recent past against the 'modern' habit of despising the past generally.

#### **Our Note Book, 13 April 1940**

This article by Arthur Bryant gives thanks for English 'philistinism' as an effective safeguard against the 'romantic longings' that had brought Hitler to power in Germany. The piece stands in clear contrast to some of his pro-Nazi columns in the years leading up to the

Second World War, although these were not wholly unqualified.

#### **Our Note Book, 3 July 1948**

This article by Arthur Bryant expresses his concern that the critiques of individualism by Ruskin and Carlyle in the nineteenth century had proved counterproductive. Liberty was now enslaved not by mammon but by a 'dead abstraction, the omnipotent state'. The article emphasises how enthusiasm for welfare reform could quickly become dissipated as the state assumed a new supremacy in all walks of life.

#### **Keywords**

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