

# George Augustus Sala: *The Daily Telegraph's* Greatest Special Correspondent

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## Early Years

The young George Augustus Sala was a precocious literary talent. In 1841, at the age of 13, he wrote his first novel entitled *Jemmy Jenkins; or the Adventures of a Sweep*. The following year he produced his second extended piece of fiction, *Gerald Moreland; Or, the Forged Will* (1842). Although these works were unpublished, Sala clearly possessed a considerable literary ability and his vocabulary was enhanced by his devouring of the Penny Dreadfuls of the period, along with the 'Newgate novels' then in vogue, and newspapers like *The Times* and illustrated newspapers and journals like the *Illustrated London News* and *Punch*.

In fact it was directly due to his reading of the *Illustrated London News* and *Punch* that, despite his skill as a writer, Sala decided his career lay in the visual arts. For the rest of the 1840s he would earn his living as an apprentice to a miniature painter, an engraver, an illustrator and a scene painter. Sala also produced a series of comic panoramas that included both visual and textual detail mocking aspects of the Great Exhibition of 1851. In these panoramas Sala poked fun at foreigners, and British stereotypes of them, and he also satirised the idea of the Exhibition as being a forum for the display of British superiority over the rest of the world and for Britain's imperial pretensions.

## Making His Name: Dickens' *Household Words*, 1851–1856

But in the same year as the Great Exhibition Sala finally came to the realisation that his career lay in writing and not in the visual arts. On a night in August 1851 Sala locked himself out of his flat and was forced to wander the streets of London all night with nine pence in his pocket. He only found shelter at seven o'clock the following morning. The resulting article he wrote from this experience is constructed around his inability to find a place to sleep, the hardship of life on the streets of the capital and the subsequent social commentary this entailed. While deliberating which journal might accept the article, Sala remembered a connection he and his mother had shared with Charles Dickens. In 1837 his mother had been understudy at the St James's Theatre in *The Village Coquettes*, an operetta written by Dickens and composed by John Hullah. Madame Sala and Dickens went on to become good friends on the strength of her engagement and the nine-year-old Sala had met the great author in the Green Room.

Sala's article, entitled 'The Key of the Street', was delivered to Dickens, who accepted it for his weekly journal, *Household Words*, and Sala was astonished to receive five pounds for the work. Sala would go on to contribute 160 articles to the journal over the next five and a half years, and Dickens realised he had on his staff one of the most impressive young journalists of the day. Dickens was so impressed with 'The Key of the Street' that he believed Sala could be the writer to save the magazine from the dull and lifeless writing that was threatening to ruin it.

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The article was also highly praised by William Makepeace Thackeray. In fact Thackeray considered Sala's essay to be 'almost the best magazine paper that ever was written'.<sup>1</sup> On the strength of this essay, Dickens sent Sala out on to the streets of London and Paris to report back to the British people about his experiences. Sala's contributions over the next five and a half years included articles on gambling, pubs and inns, the backstage of a theatre, the advantages of walking over rail travel, nostalgia for things past, music, fashion, sport, hotels, open-air executions and Sunday entertainments. This ability to write on almost any subject was put to great advantage in Sala's subsequent career as a reporter for *The Daily Telegraph*.

But by 1856 Dickens was growing increasingly wary of the signs of dissipation he could see in Sala, particularly in the bohemian lifestyle he adopted while in Paris. Sala had styled himself the 'King of the Bohemians' by this time and Dickens had duly dispatched him off to Russia to report on life there in the aftermath of the Crimean War and to distance him from the late night drinking and gambling in which he was increasingly indulging. Almost by chance it seems, Dickens was anticipating Sala's future career as a Special Correspondent for *The Daily Telegraph*.

### Diversion into Novels, 1857–1863

But before he began his role as a Special Correspondent, Sala mistakenly believed that he could achieve the same kind of fame, adulation and wealth as his old mentor Dickens by writing novels. In 1857 he was in the process of serialising his first published novel in *The Illustrated Times*, a piece of 'sensational' fiction entitled *The Baddington Peerage*. Readers were attracted to *The Daily Telegraph* in its formative years because of its scandalous reports detailing famous cases such as that of the murderess Madeline Smith who poisoned her lover's cocoa with arsenic in 1857, and the Yelverton divorce trial in 1861. Sensation fiction emerged during this period of increased scandalous reportage and newspaper readership.<sup>2</sup> Sala's five novels, written between 1857 and 1863, abound with sensational

murders, bigamous marriages and disguised identities, a direct acknowledgement of his own involvement with newspaper reporting. As a reporter for *The Daily Telegraph*, Sala would have had access to dramatic news stories all ripe for inclusion in his next piece of fiction and Sala's novels demonstrate this immersion in the newspaper world with plot lines that turn on the report of a death or a marriage, and by the insertion of graphic depictions of his fellow journalist colleagues. None of his novels sold particularly well, however, and they were all a victim of Sala's endless digressions which worked favourably in his leaders for *The Daily Telegraph*, and in articles for periodicals, but were cumbersome and distracting when it came to extended works of fiction.



Portrait of George Augustus Sala, date unknown

### Joining *The Daily Telegraph*, 1857

The repeal of the newspaper stamp duty in 1855 led to a flourishing of penny daily newspapers and cheap periodicals. *The Daily Telegraph* became the first penny daily newspaper in British history that year, and by early 1856 the paper had achieved a circulation of 270,000. By the end of the decade its size had doubled from four to eight pages.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Thackeray to George Smith, 22 September 1855, *Letters and Private Papers of William Makepeace Thackeray* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press) 3: 470–71.

<sup>2</sup> John Sutherland, 'Wilkie Collins and the Origins of the Sensation Novel' in *Wilkie Collins to the Forefront: Some Reassessments*, eds Nelson Smith and R.C. Terry (New York: AMS Press, 1995) p. 78.

<sup>3</sup> Nicholas Birns, 'The Daily Telegraph' in Laurel Brake and Marysa Demoor, eds. *Dictionary of C19th Journalism* (London: British Library, 2009) p. 159.

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Sala was touted as being a potentially important part of this new venture and in 1857 he began his thirty-year association with *The Daily Telegraph* under the editorship of Edward Levy Lawson. Sala would go on to become *The Daily Telegraph's* flagship writer. As Nicholas Birn states:

'Composing many leaders and articles, he became the cynosure of the newspaper, attracting both praise for his unmistakable style and censure for a certain excessively populist mentality which some discerned in his writing.'<sup>4</sup>

*The Daily Telegraph* became noted for its 'roaring young lions', men like Sala who were creating a new journalistic style, a 'Telegraphese', that played a significant role in the history of journalism, but was held up to ridicule by its detractors. Poet and cultural critic Matthew Arnold, for instance, had singled out *The Daily Telegraph* as exemplifying middle-class philistinism and identified Sala as the chief purveyor of its demotic 'Telegraphese', a style of writing completely at odds with Arnold's ideas of culture. The newspaper had become a convenient symbol for Arnold in his 'campaign against Philistinism'.<sup>5</sup> In *Culture and Anarchy* (1869) Arnold diverted most of his irony from the newspaper to Sala and in the Preface he stated that Sala was 'the ultimate obstacle to a successful English Academy'.<sup>6</sup> Sala responded by describing Arnold as a 'shallow and conceited sciolist' who had used the term Philistine 'in order to insult writers whose minds and views were broader than his'.<sup>7</sup>

## The Role of the Special Correspondent

When Sala was sent over to America to cover the Civil War by *The Daily Telegraph* in 1863 it was to be the start of a successful career as one of a band of roving reporters. Otherwise known as 'Specials', these Special Correspondents inaugurated a new way of writing about foreign countries and foreign news, a style less romantic and historical, and more modern and realistic.

Sala would provide copy on foreign countries and cultures for the newspaper for the next twenty-five years. His initials, GAS, signed after an article or a column, became known throughout the English-speaking world and Sala came to represent the Fleet Street journalist. Building on the realistic and sensational style of his novels, and the imaginative style Dickens impressed upon him as a writer for *Household Words*, Sala's style of travel writing would be a culmination of all his previous work in different mediums. He would also either personally interview, or be in close proximity to, some of the most important figures in nineteenth-century history: Abraham Lincoln, the Pope, Emperor Napoleon III and Garibaldi. If there were critics of this new style of foreign reportage, Sala was not afraid to take them to task. In the pages of Mary Braddon's *Belgravia* magazine he would robustly defend the role of the Special Correspondent and he would draw in his nemesis Matthew Arnold to force home his point:

'His name is the Special Correspondent. You cannot live mentally without him. He is a necessity. Your newspapers would be as dull as Mr Matthew Arnold's prosings, and duller than his poetry, without the Special Correspondent's aid.'<sup>8</sup>

Sala was sent to America three times: 1863–1864, 1879 and 1885; Algeria in 1865; Belgium, Holland and Germany in 1865–66; Spain in 1866; Italy in 1866–1867; Russia in 1881; and Australia and New Zealand in 1885–1886. These travel narratives were all originally written as a series of letters for *The Daily Telegraph*, and all of the letters were subsequently published in book form, apart from those from Australasia. It was during these years of foreign reportage that Sala climbed the 'topmost rung' of the journalistic ladder, as Ralph Straus termed it, and his name and initials became famous across the world.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 159.

<sup>5</sup> Sidney M.B. Coulling, 'Matthew Arnold and *The Daily Telegraph*', *The Review of English Studies* 12, no. 46 (May, 1961): 177.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 177.

<sup>7</sup> G.A. Sala, *Rome and Venice: With Other Wanderings in Italy in 1866–7* (London: Tinsley Brothers, 1869) p. 23.

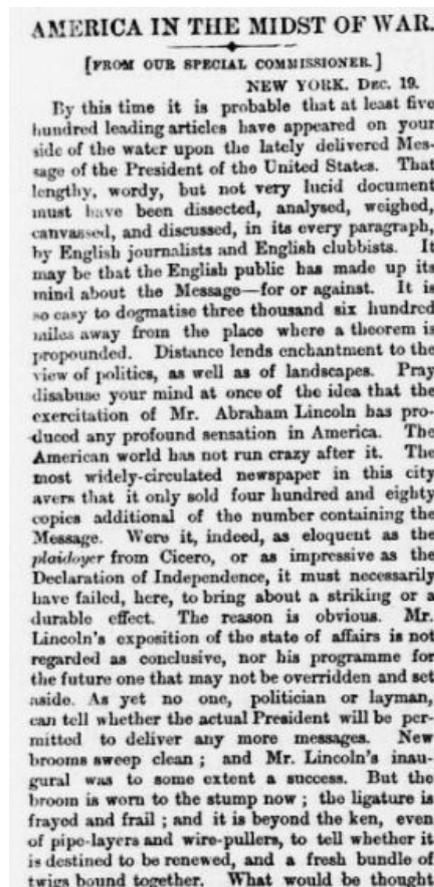
<sup>8</sup> G.A. Sala, 'The Special Correspondent', *Belgravia: A London Magazine* 4 (April 1871): 214.

<sup>9</sup> Ralph Straus, *Sala: The Portrait of an Eminent Victorian* (London: Constable and Co., 1942); Title of Chapter Fourteen, 232–51.

## Sala on Slavery

In 1856 *The Daily Telegraph* had openly championed John C. Fremont in that year's American Presidential election. Fremont was the first Presidential candidate of a major party to run on a platform in *opposition* to slavery but with the onset of more scientific and cultural racial discourse prior to the American Civil War and with the importance of the importation of cotton to the economy, *The Daily Telegraph* had, along with *The Times*, given its full support to the Confederacy and had become one of the most pro-Southern of British newspapers. Sala, who had satirised slave-owners and the institution of slavery in his illustrated panoramas, became obstinately pro-Southern and pro-slavery on his visit to America in 1863. He disregarded claims of the maltreatment of slaves and in his strongest statement on the slave system, published in *The Daily Telegraph* on 2 January 1864 just after Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, he maintained that:

'Slavery is an evil, and to a certain extent a curse: but it is not a worse evil nor a worse curse than Prostitution, than Drunkenness, than Pauperism, than the tyranny of capital over labour, or than the greed for wealth and dominion ... I believe that he [the black man] is and has been ten thousand times better off as a bond-servant in the Southern States of America than as a free negro in the North ... I believe that he is naturally inferior to the white man in mental organisation ... willing and obedient only when he fears the eye or the hand of his master ... always as lecherous as a monkey and often as savage as a Gorilla ... I believe that he must always have a 'boss' or a master of some sort over him; and I believe that in default of this master he will go to the Devil ... as he has been going in his own country, Africa, for I don't know how many thousand years.'<sup>10</sup>



'America in the Midst of War',  
*The Daily Telegraph*, 2 January 1864

## Travelling the World, 1865–1871

Five months after his first visit to America in April 1865, Sala was instructed by his employers at *The Daily Telegraph* to travel to Algeria, with a view to covering Emperor Napoleon III's journey through one of his prized African possessions. Coming so soon after his American trip, it was clear to Sala that his superiors at *The Daily Telegraph* believed he had a bright future as an overseas correspondent: 'My proprietors knew perfectly well what they were about; they wished to continue my training as a journalist, and as special correspondent.'<sup>11</sup> The published letters subsequently became his book *A Trip to Barbary* (1866).

<sup>10</sup> G.A. Sala, *My Diary in America in the Midst of War* (London: Tinsley Brothers, 1865) Vol.1 pp. 37–40.

<sup>11</sup> G.A. Sala, *Life and Adventures* Vol. II (London: Cassell & Company, 1895), p. 68.

Shortly after returning from Algeria, Sala was sent by *The Daily Telegraph* to Brussels, followed by a long Continental tour taking in Holland and Germany. The tour was to have ended at St Petersburg and Moscow and, as Sala says:

'I was making arrangements to proceed to Konigsberg, en route for St Petersburg, to see what the Tsar's capital looked like in winter, when I received a telegram containing only these words: 'Revolution. Spain. Go there at once'.<sup>12</sup>

It was to be the first in a series of terse demands made by *The Daily Telegraph*, but the Spanish expedition of 1866 was not as exciting as Sala may have expected. He recounts that:

'The revolution in Spain turned out a sorry 'fizzle'; there had been a military *Pronunciamento* against the government of Queen Isabella in one of the regiments in garrison near Madrid; but after a few courts-martial had been held ... confidence was restored and order reigned in Madrid.'<sup>13</sup>

The book resulting from this trip was entitled *From Waterloo to the Peninsula. Four Months' Hard Labour in Belgium, Holland, Germany and Spain* (1867). Sala had intended to go to Seville, Granada and Malaga but another brief despatch arrived: 'War between Italy and Austria imminent. Go to Venice'.<sup>14</sup> Sala was sent to Italy at a crucial period in the Risorgimento (1866–1867), and was to leave his readers in no doubt as to his opinions on the Austrian oppression of Italy and the country's need for immediate modernisation. His letters were published as *Rome and Venice: With Other Wanderings in Italy 1866-7*, in 1869. These constant terse demands by *The Daily Telegraph* culminated in one of Sala's favourite after-dinner anecdotes. In the second week of March 1881, while at a dinner party given by the Earl of Fife in Cavendish Square (indicating the rise in social status Sala was experiencing), a despatch arrived from Belgrave Square saying that the Tsar was dead. Sala waited ominously for the expected communication and 'sure enough, just before lunch I received the following message ... 'Please write a leading article on the price of fish at Billingsgate, and go to St Petersburg in the evening''<sup>15</sup>

## Later Years

Forced by illness into languishing at home for four years, between February 1871 and January 1875, it wasn't until 1879 that Sala wrote another travelogue. Sala would subsidise his income in this decade with leaders on foreign and domestic matters and art criticism for *The Daily Telegraph*, along with his popular 'Echoes of the Week' series in the *Illustrated London News*. But he was always drawn back to foreign travel. He journeyed to America for a second time between November 1879 and April 1880, the resulting book entitled *America Revisited* (1882), and then travelled to Southern Europe in the autumn of 1881. The published account, *A Journey Due South* (1885), was to be his last travel book to find a publisher. Although Sala in later life was hardly the 'flaming Radical' he had once been – as evidenced by a list of his correspondents in 1881, a list that included Lord Rosebery, Lady Combermere, Col. Fred Burnaby, Sir Walter Besant, the Earl of Fife, Baroness Burdett-Coutts, G.F. Watts and Sir F. Burnard – during his final visits to America and Australia he still demonstrated a curiosity and intellectual understanding of the workings of democracy in those countries, and continued to take a personal interest in the hardships endured by the working classes of London.<sup>16</sup>

Sala had therefore remained largely unaffected by the shifting class politics of *The Daily Telegraph*, which became more traditionally conservative in values by the late 1870s. In contrast to its twentieth-century associations with Conservative values, *The Daily Telegraph* was originally Whig in political outlook, especially in its liberal foreign policy. This changed, however, in the late 1870s when the paper began to support Disraeli over the Eastern question. Towards the end of his career Sala wrote:

'When I joined *The Daily Telegraph* it was a radical paper. You know what it is now; but when the paper changed its politics I was retained as a shocking example of radicalism ... I am still a reformer of '32, but I will have nothing to do with any political or party movement.'<sup>17</sup>

<sup>12</sup> G.A.Sala, *The Life and Adventures of George Augustus Sala* (London: Cassell & Co., Ltd, 1895) Vol. II, p. 71.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 72.

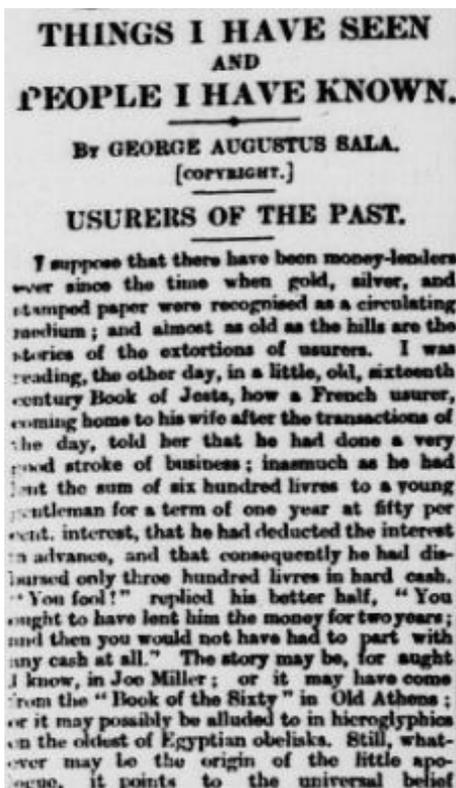
<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 86–7.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 391.

<sup>16</sup> Lord Rosebery was, like Sala, a 'bonapartomaniac and bibliomaniac' (P.D. Edwards (1997), p. 161). As Prime Minister in 1895 Rosebery regretted Sala's financial misfortunes and obtained for him a civil list pension.

<sup>17</sup> Beinecke Library Box 10.

Sala had married his first wife, a 'pretty but uneducated' girl called Harriet Hollingsworth, in 1859 and she tragically died of peritonitis while in Australia with Sala. His second marriage, in 1890 to Bessie Stannard (aged 32 and 29 years his junior), inspired his prolific output in the last five years of his life. Ambitious and driven, Bessie was determined that Sala would provide for her after his death and pushed him to write five books in these final years, including his memoirs, *The Life and Adventures of George Augustus Sala* (1894), and a guide to Brighton entitled *Brighton As I Have Known It* (1895). Along with the five books, she was instrumental in setting up a weekly penny miscellany that was to have combined the best elements of Household Words and the Welcome Guest. The first number of *Sala's Journal* duly appeared on 30 April 1892 with the epithet 'A Weekly Magazine For All' and reflected many of the changes Sala had helped bring about with its cookery sections, celebrity interviews, gossip and correspondence columns.



'Things I Have Seen and People I have Known',  
*The Daily Telegraph*, 16 September 1893

## Death and Legacy

Sala eventually found some peace and solace away from the bustle of the metropolis down by the sea in his beloved Brighton. He bought a handsome property at 2 Eastern Terrace and Lord Ronald Gower, a brother of the Duke of Sutherland, and for long years one of Sala's warmest admirers, records a visit he paid to the house at the beginning of February 1894. 'A most comfortable house', he writes, 'where, I think, it may be said that G.A. Sala is enjoying a kind of apotheosis, for, surrounded as he is by 15,000 books and collections of all sorts, he seems to be supremely happy'. But this fleeting happiness did not last long; Sala died the following year on 9 December 1895. According to his death certificate he had been suffering from liver cancer for at least six months, but the immediate cause of death was 'exhaustion'. The bohemian nights and the long and demanding journalistic days had finally caught up with him.

In April 1879, at the zenith of Sala's career, T.H.S. Escott, in an article entitled 'A Journalist of the Day' for *Time*, wrote 'The simple and unexaggerated truth is, that there is a particular style of journalism complete success in which Mr Sala can alone of living men command'. Escott believed that Sala's special talent for journalism lay in his ability to produce articles with a literary flavour, but in such a way that rather than alienate his middle-class audience – not all of whom would have had a university education – he managed to make such literary articles thoroughly readable and popular. Escott went on to claim, 'Never was there a journalist who had so thoroughly mastered the tastes and requirements of the colossal circle of readers to which he appeals'.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>18</sup> T.H.S. Escott, 'A Journalist of the Day', *Time*, April 1879, 117.

## Further Critical Reading

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- 'George Augustus Sala and the English Middle-Class View of America' 19: *Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century* 8 (Autumn, 2009) Special Issue: Transatlanticism, Identities and Exchange. [www.19.bbk.ac.uk](http://www.19.bbk.ac.uk).
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