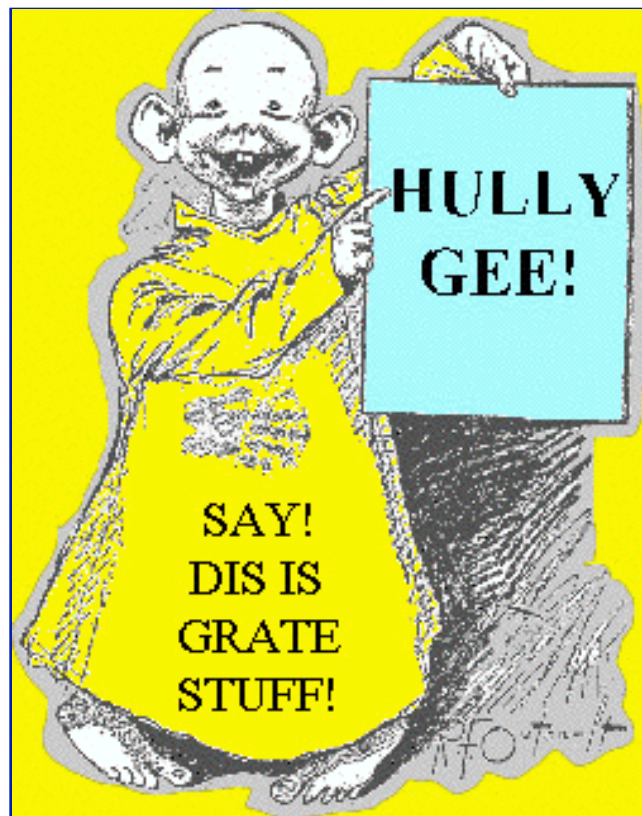


AMERICAN HUMAN RIGHTS REPORTING BORN IN YELLOW PROSE



The cartoon character known as "[The Yellow Kid](#)," as developed by [R. F. Outcault](#), symbolized competing mass circulation dailies associated with [Yellow Journalism](#). See [Journalism and the Spanish American War](#)



*James Creelman: foreign correspondent
In China; In Cuba*

By Frederic A. Moritz

*"How happy is he born and taught
Who serveth not another's will.
Whose armor is his honest thought
And simple truth his utmost skill.
That man is freed from servile bonds
Or hope to rise or fear to fall -
Lord of himself, though not of lands.
And having nothing, yet hath all."*

-Sir Henry Wooton

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**["MOTHER" OF HUMAN RIGHTS REPORTING
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WHY A "YELLOW PRESS" COVERED RIGHTS ABUSES

Today it seems almost "noble."

But the now respectable international reporting on human rights abuses began with the journalism of sensation -- amidst accusations of fabrication and exaggeration.

With a certain "macho" twist.

In the mass circulation newspaper age of the 1890's, the foreign correspondent had emerged as a celebrity, especially in the "[yellow journalism](#)."

A "dashing" foreign correspondent could seize the public imagination in an age when it was still widely believed that heroic individuals could shape history.

If willing to risk disease, accident, or ambush, the enterprising correspondent might report back on military massacres, persecution of minorities, and other atrocities thought to violate the norms of the civilized world.

The fast cable, the modern printing press, and the growth of literate city populations meant dramatic or sensational foreign reporting could boost newspaper sales, stir popular

opinion, and influence governments.

Newspapers made "stars" of their of their most colorful foreign correspondents as publishers prominently displaying their pictures and accounts.

Like the soldier or tropical explorer, a correspondent was credited with the courage to sacrifice his life if necessary for the benefit of his civilizing mission. Noted a profile of James Creelman, the "father" of human rights reporting, in London's Review of Reviews, October 1, 1898:

"(The foreign correspondent) .. must ever be at the post of danger, for that is also the point of observation...For the sake of the public at home they must take every precaution to preserve that human camera from hurt, yet in order to fix their lens on the objects to be seen they must continually expose it to imminent peril of destruction."

James Creelman without qualms considered himself a "yellow journalist." He saw the yellow press as a positive, civilizing force helping to shape public events. In his memoirs he noted on the period before the war with Spain:

"It may be that a desire to sell their newspapers influenced some of the yellow editors, just as a desire to gain votes inspired some of the political orators. But that was not the chief motive; for if ever any agency was thrilled by the consciousness of its moral responsibility, it was yellow journalism in the never-to-be-forgotten months before the outbreak of hostilities..." (See Creelman, James, On the Great Highway, Lothrop Publishing Company, Boston, 1901, Chapter 9, p.176.)

SENSATION SETS THE STAGE FOR "TRUTH?"

This sensationalized tone set the stage for foreign correspondents to spotlight the violent. A correspondent who succeeded could become a "star" with a personal and much coveted personal byline, and even prominent line drawings of his face, with headlines proclaiming his courage and accomplishments.

The reporters who practiced yellow journalism might vary in their accuracy and motivations. The desire for stardom and promotion might tempt a sloppy reporter to go with exaggerated rumors - or even fabricate news. It could also push a capable, motivated reporter to really dig, interview, and travel for a headline catching story. Under extreme competition writers often chose drama and sensation to get notice, a byline, a front page spot, or simply to keep a job.

The massive headlines written in the home office also could be far more sensational than the actual reports. Indeed dispatches could be edited and shaped in the home office to magnify the sensational.

Magnifying these tendencies was the large number of newspapers competing for readership at a time when papers had come into their own as instruments of mass information. Competition among papers, including a desire to reach out to a growing number of readers who were not wealthy, meant an emphasis on entertainment, drama, and emotion.

For example in 1895 New York had eight morning and seven evening general circulation dailies and at least twice as many weeklies (Charles H. Brown, The Correspondents' War, p.11). Newspapers highly dependent on newsboy or newsstand sales needed massive catching headlines and an often black and white viewpoint to really catch a buyer's eye.

CREELMAN SCOOPS: AN OVERVIEW

In August of 1897 the journal Our Day described James Creelman as "the most famous newspaper correspondent in America."

The 49 year old Canadian-born journalist was basking in the afterglow of major "scoops" for the "yellow press," in Europe, Asia, and Central America, first for the Pulitzer and

later the Hearst chains. (For a brief biography by a distant cousin, John E. Creelman, click [here](#).)

Creelman had won fame and international controversy by reporting the [massacre](#) of Chinese civilians by Japanese soldiers at Port Arthur, China in 1894. Critics accused him of exaggeration, of lacking balance, but his moral and journalistic stance found no need for neutrality.

In 1896 -- while still working for Pulitzer's The World -- Creelman added coverage of domestic politics to his fame. He trekked 20,000 miles through the United States to write more than 600 columns for The World -- analyzing and predicting the vote in every state as it was to be cast in the presidential election. He spent the last six weeks of the campaign with candidate William Jennings Bryan, eating and sleeping in Bryan's private railroad car.

Creelman had gained national attention with vivid and detailed articles reporting [summary executions of civilians](#) by Spanish soldiers fighting Cuban revolutionaries in the late 1890's. Creelman's writing on this subject, first for Pulitzer and then for Hearst, helped stimulate the anti-Spanish feeling which led to the Spanish-American war of 1898.

In [Chapter 9](#) of his 1901 reminiscences [On The Great Highway](#) Creelman reported Hearst's memorable response to artist Frederic Remington, bored with his assignment in Cuba: "You furnish the pictures and I'll furnish the war." While years later Hearst strongly denied he ever said such a thing, the quote is still attributed to him and was paraphrased to great affect in Orson Well's movie Citizen Kane.

CREELMAN: NO PRETENSE TOWARD BALANCE

Creelman made no pretense toward objective, balanced reporting, to avoid becoming "part of the story." The language was often emotional, containing what today would be called "editorializing," which included his own thoughts, emotions, or even actions. Willis Abbott, once a journalist for Hearst and in the 1920's editor of The Christian Science Monitor maintained that Creelman's egotism "often impelled that very enterprising writer to put so much of

himself into an interview or a story that the real subject of the article was utterly obscured. (Willis Abbott, Watching The World Go By, p. 208).

A good example of Creelman's editorializing, emotion stirring style is this passage from his first brief dispatch in The World reporting the massacre of Chinese civilians by Japanese soldiers at Port Arthur, China in 1894.

"The defenseless and unarmed inhabitants were butchered in their houses and their bodies unspeakably mutilated. There was an unrestrained reign of murder which continued for three days. The whole town was plundered with appalling atrocities. It was the first stain upon Japanese civilization. The Japanese in this instance relapsed into barbarism." (December 12, 1894, The World, p.1)

On several occasions Creelman abandoned the notion of the journalist as observer to become an active part of the story.

When covering Cuba some three years after Port Arthur, he personally appealed to the Spanish commander Valeriano Weyler y Nicolau to investigate after filing a dispatch to The World concluding Spanish troops were executing non-combatants without trial.

Creelman, like other journalists of the time, prided himself on activism, becoming a "part of the story." In his memoirs he describes how he personally helped lead an American charge against Spanish forces at El Caney when he returned to Cuba to cover the Spanish-American war in 1898.



The Assault on El Caney

But it was an earlier scoop which shook both Western and Asian governments and catapulted Creelman into journalistic renown. Creelman became a correspondent "hero" for reporting on [three days of massacre](#) of more than 2000 Chinese civilians by Japanese troops at the Manchurian city of Port Arthur in November 1894. His reporting expressed Victorian era yellow journalism concepts of how foreign correspondents might act as international "watchdogs" to enforce standards of "civilized," Western-style, humane warfare.

(For Creelman's account of the massacre in his memoirs see [On the Great Highway](#), Lothrop Publishing Company, Boston, 1901, [Chapter 5](#).)

Creelman's now forgotten "scoop" shook governments in Asia, America, and Europe, helped establish American overseas journalism as a rival to more established European media - and demonstrated the power of yellow journalism as a force which could rally public opinion in such a way that politicians and governments felt they had to respond.

Partly as a reaction to the massacre at Port Arthur, Japan moved to improve its image overseas by carefully controlling its troops during the 1900 intervention against China's Boxer rebellion and by avoiding atrocities against Russian troops during the Russo-Japanese War of 1904. The events Creelman reported foreshadowed Japanese atrocities against Chinese and others during World War II.

A key player in New York "yellow journalism" was Joseph Pulitzer's The World. In addition to reader-grabbing sensational features on crime, accidents, fashion, executions, and lifestyles of both rich and poor, it embarked on numerous campaigns against fraud and corruption, picturing itself as a paper to both be read by "the people" and to crusade for "the people." In October 1895, about the same time the Cuban rebellion was picking up steam, William Randolph Hearst, bought the New York Journal and set out to challenge Pulitzer's World. Coverage of Cuba quickly became a competitive arena between the two. For examinations of America on the eve of the empire it created after the Spanish-American war, click [here](#).

The two yellow papers went for large headlines and large headlines on the front page, often on sensational accounts of crime, but also on matters affecting civic welfare. They hoped to increase their circulation by moving beyond a narrow, respectable, and abstract focus on city and national politics. Prominently displayed articles dealt murder of women in the streets, crimes of passion, domestic violence, insanity, and suicides, as well as probes into corruption and other matters affecting health and safety. Articles on misers dressing up in women's clothes, detailed accounts of executions and graphic drawings portraying the grisliest of crimes were designed to make the papers anything but boring. Reporters such as Nelly Bly became media stars by such daring stunts as climbing a flag pole or living in an insane asylum by pretending to be mad. The acts of reporters themselves became major news events, with line drawings of reporters and their exploits prominently displayed in the papers.

CREELMAN: THE RIGHT PLACE AT THE RIGHT TIME

James Creelman gained his short lived fame through persistence, zeal, enterprise, and a tolerance for the most rugged travel conditions. He was known for his strongly independent streak. He could also be emotional, nervous and egotistical, sometimes smoking as many as 30 cigars a day.

Creelman was sometimes accused of putting too much of himself into a story (See Willis Abbott, Watching The World

Go By, p 208). According to one account, his later boss William Randolph Hearst explained Creelman's appetite for any assignment this way " ..He thinks that the very fact of the job being given him means it's a task of surprising importance, else it would not have been given to so great a man as he...Creelman finds any assignment is dignified by being given him. That's why he's so useful." (See Willis Abbott, Watching The World Go By, p 208).

Creelman was the right person at the right time. By the late 1890's, in the age of the mass circulation newspaper, the foreign correspondent had emerged as a celebrity in his own right. Newspapers boasted of their dashing foreign correspondents as they sought to boost their circulations. Like the soldier a correspondent was credited with the courage to sacrifice his life if necessary for the benefit of others: in this case his newspaper and its readers.

The emphasis on being a sometimes heroic eyewitness seized public imagination. It also reinforced the potential "watchdog" function of the foreign correspondent who might be in a unique position to report back accounts of military massacres, persecution of minorities, and other atrocities thought to violate the norms of the civilized world. The correspondent as "man on horseback" could flash the spotlight of civilization on brutalities which seemed to violate the spirit of the modern age.

The adventurous correspondent could startle foreign offices, fuel public scandal or protest - and even change the course of world events. The foreign correspondent took on a few of the traits of the "man on horseback," in an age when history was still often believed to be shaped by individuals. The heroic traits of boldness, self-reliance, and perseverance were especially important at a time when physical danger, disease and very little direct contact with the home office were fact of life as an eyewitness to history charted course by steamship, carriage, and horseback.

The August 1897 Our Day profile of James Creelman (p.1) describes this mystique of the foreign correspondent in a characteristically purple way, "The newspaper correspondent of today is the modern counterpart of the mighty hunter of old...Strength of brain, instead of body, has become the *sine qua non* of the modern Nimrod...But the home of the correspondent is still where the greatest and

fiercest animals roam. His business it is to hover over the snarling mobs, the prowling boodlers, the hissing, forked-fanged trusts, the coyote bark of the jingoes, and the terrible battles of the lions and bears whose ferocity is concealed by robes of purple."

CREELMAN: THIRTY SEVEN YEARS OF JOURNALISM

James Creelman was born in Montreal, Canada Nov. 12, 1859, the the son of Matthew Creelman, a boiler inspector. Creelman attended Montreal's Royal Arthur primary school prior to leaving home for New York in 1872.

In New York, Creelman attracted the attention and patronage of the prominent theologian DeWitt Talmage with whom he studied at the Lay Theological College. Republican Party boss Roscoe Conking tutored him in the law. Creelman's move into journalism began when the Reverend William Muhlenburg counseled the young man and found him his first employment in the print shop of the Episcopalian Church newspaper Church and State.

During a later stint in the print shop of the Brooklyn Eagle, editor Thomas Kinsella discouraged Creelman from becoming a poet. Undaunted in his determination to become a writer, Creelman joined James Gordon Bennett Jr.'s New York Herald as a reporter in 1876.

Creelman's career took a step up in winter 1878 when Captain Paul Boynton arrived in New York with his pneumatic life-saving suit. The young reporter was assigned to test the device and, with Captain Boynton, put on a suit to jump into the ice-filled bay and the Battery and float down through the Narrows. After being rescued from the waters, Creelman wrote an account of the adventure which created a sensation. Among other assignments The Herald sent him to investigate the death of General Custer. Creelman interviewed Sitting Bull and the other Indian chiefs who took part in the massacre. He then was sent to Kentucky to investigate the Hatfield-McCoy feud.

By 1887, Creelman was editing the Sunday Herald while writing editorials for the daily Herald. In 1889, James Gordon Bennett Jr. ordered Creelman to take charge of the

floundering London edition of the Herald. Failing to salvage the paper, he took up duties with the Paris *Herald* during the following year.

While writing for the Paris Herald, Creelman developed as an interview journalist with a preference for difficult and allusive subjects. He secured interviews with, among others, Louis Kossuth and Leo Tolstoy. He was the first English speaking non-Catholic reporter to interview the Pope, Leo VIII. During this period, Creelman also investigated the Mafia for his paper and the United States Department of State.

In 1893, Creelman left the Herald and worked briefly for Illustrated American and Cosmopolitan magazines, attempting unsuccessfully to establish a London edition for the latter publication.

Joseph Pulitzer's New York World hired Creelman in 1894 by to cover hostilities between Japan and China. Accompanying the Japanese Army, he reported on the aftermath of hostilities at Pyongyang, the Yalu River naval engagement and interviewed the King of Korea. At one point, Creelman disappeared and was reported beheaded by the Chinese. However, it was Creelman's coverage of the battle of Port Arthur and his claim of atrocities committed by Japanese soldiers, with whom he initially sympathized, that gained him substantial attention. Though his story was supported by Pulitzer and subsequently verified by fellow journalist Julian Ralph and others, Creelman's graphic account of widespread slaughter was initially disbelieved and roundly denounced by many American newspapers, including The Herald.

In 1896 Spanish authorities expelled him from Cuba after a stay of less than a month when his dispatches to The World spotlighted abuses in the system of concentration camps instituted by General Valeriano Weyler y Nicolau. In 1898 Creelman was back in Cuba to cover the Spanish-American War, this time for William Randolph Hearst's New York Journal. In the accepted patriotic style of that day's journalism, he helped lead an American charge against Spanish forces at El Caney - and while recovering from his wounds was interviewed by his boss Hearst for a front page story in the New York Journal.

After publishing his book of reminiscences [On The Great Highway](#) in 1901 and a novel [Eagle Blood](#) in 1902, Creelman returned to the employment of Joseph Pulitzer where he remained until 1906 when he joined [Pearson's Magazine](#) as Associate Editor. There he specialized in feature interview/profiles on individuals as diverse as Edison, Roosevelt, Taft and President Diaz of Mexico. The Diaz interview (which Creelman subsequently turned into the 1912 book [Diaz, Master of Mexico](#)) has been credited with contributing to events leading to the Mexican Revolution.

PROCLAIMING AN INDEPENDENT SPIRIT

In 1911 a close friend, New York Mayor William J. Gaynor, appointed Creelman to the Presidency of the City's Civil Service Commission. His eighteen month tenure in that position was followed by brief stint on the City's School Board. True to character, he resigned both positions, disillusioned by his lack of independence and his inability to introduce needed reforms. When resigning on December 30, 1912 from the Presidency of the Civil Service Commission, Creelman left this poem by Sir Henry Wooton on his desk:

*How happy is he born and taught
Who serveth not another's will.
Whose armor is his honest thought
And simple truth his utmost skill.
That man is freed from servile bonds
Or hope to rise or fear to fall -
Lord of himself, though not of lands.
And having nothing, yet hath all.*

January 1913 saw Creelman's return to active journalism as Associate Editor of the [New York Evening Mail](#).

THE PRICE PAID

Creelman paid a price in health for his journalism exploits. In extracts from [The Creelman Book](#) (Alice Creelman's Diary and Family Album), Creelman's wife Alice wrote on

December 20, 1905:

"This dreadful illness has been caused by over-smoking and work. James has by inheritance a very unusual nervous temperament and for years, since his boyhood, he has strained himself in his newspaper work, living at a terrible tension and under the exciting conditions of newspaper life and all the time he has been smoking constantly.

"Always a cigar. Whenever he wished to concentrate his thoughts and to write earnestly he would light his cigar and smoke one after another until he was smoking thirty cigars a day. He bought a light quality of tobacco so he could smoke more without feeling it too much, but he has wrecked his heart and his nervous system....Dr. John Girdner says he has nicotine poisoning in the extreme degree, that his heart is a classic "smoker's heart" and that the Diabetic and other kidney trouble has been induced by the irregularity of the heart action. He has now been cut off tobacco and is feeling it terribly.

"The doctor advised him to 'taper off,' smoking only ten a day, instead of thirty, but he says he must have all or nothing and has given it up entirely. He is so nervous we can hardly live. It is pitiful. He cannot write or work - we must go away at once to seek diversion and distraction - we can do nothing else."

Creelman succumbed to kidney disease in Berlin on February 12, 1915 - after sailing for Europe January 2, 1915 to cover World War I for the New York American. An era of journalism had long ago died. Yet a century after Creelman's reporting emerged on the world stage, human rights journalism has fully bloomed.



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