ONE

Beginnings

Stapleford

Arthur Henry Mee was born in Stapleford, Nottinghamshire, on 21 July 1875. Ten kilometres south-west of Nottingham, Stapleford was in the year of his birth an unremarkable community of 2,000 inhabitants. The village economy once reliant upon agriculture had by 1851 turned towards hosiery and lace manufacture following the growth of a factory-based industry. While agriculture and coal mining remained sources of work, from the 1870s Stapleford owed a substantial growth in population to its emergence as a satellite for the lace industry in Nottingham.

In 1881 the population of Stapleford had shown a significant increase, a trend that continued following the opening of a lace factory and a new colliery on the edge of the village.[1] The population of over 3,000 in 1881 had by 1891 risen to 4,000. This prompted local historian Cornelius Brown to write, "A visitor to Stapleford after an absence of twenty years would scarcely recognise in the mass of buildings and places of business the small hosiery village that he once knew."[2]

Arthur Mee's roots lay firmly within the respectable working class. His father Henry Mee was born in the industrial town of Heanor, twelve kilometres south of Stapleford. Henry's father James Mee had spent his working life as an unskilled agricultural labourer before dying of a heart condition aged fifty. Henry Mee's mother Sarah earned a living making hosiery items on a pedal-operated machine, which, until the introduction of steam power, was a cottage industry.

In 1871, the year of his mother's death, twenty-year-old Henry Mee, his twenty-six-year-old brother James and James's wife Emma left Heanor to live in Stapleford. James Mee, who had been a coalminer, found work as a signalman on the railways but later took his family back to Heanor, where he worked as a framework knitter and then a postman. Henry Mee remained in Stapleford, lodging on Nottingham Road with a railway signalman, Alfred Charlton, and his family. He found work as an engine cleaner and was then

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employed on the Midland Railway as an engine driver. But most of his working life was spent as an engineer operating stationary steam engines inside hosiery and lace factories where they drove the machinery, shafts, pulleys and belts.

On 10 June 1872 Henry Mee married nineteen-year-old Mary Fletcher, whose well respected nonconformist family worked in lace manufacturing in Stapleford. Mary's father John Fletcher was a lace-maker and before marrying Henry, Mary and her eight brothers and sisters worked in the industry. Mary worked as a cotton lace winder, transferring yarn from bobbins into balls ready for weaving. The Mees set up home in Church Street around the corner from James Mee in Church Lane, before moving to 7 Pinfold Lane. Near the heart of the village's industrial development, they lived in a two-bedroom terraced house like many others built for a growing industrial population.

In 1881 Henry Mee's neighbours in Pinfold Lane were lace-makers, railway workers and unskilled labourers. Mary Mee's family lived close by; her widowed father John Fletcher lived at 5 Pinfold Lane with four of her brothers and sisters and at 6 Pinfold Lane was her elder brother Charles, his wife Janette and their three children. Once settled into married life, Henry and Mary Mee quickly became caught up in the responsibilities of raising a family. Between 1873 and 1881, Mary gave birth to six children. The first to arrive was a daughter, Annie (b. 1873); she was followed by Arthur, boys Ernest (b. 1878) and Herbert Fletcher (b. 1881) and two more girls in Mabel Laura (b. 1885) and Sarah Lois (b. 1887), who was always called Lois.

A Nonconformist Upbringing

Arthur Mee grew up in a family whose values and lifestyle were conditioned by the liberal politics and nonconformist commitments of Henry Mee. Campaigning for the separation of church and state and freedom of religious and civil conscience, nonconformists developed a natural affinity with liberal politics, and Henry Mee was a staunch Baptist and a steadfast liberal.

Drawn from the middle and upper working classes, artisans, shopkeepers and wage earners living and working within commercial and industrial centres formed the basis of nonconformist congregations. They prided themselves upon their individualism and reluctance to submit to the power of government agencies. They saw themselves as outsiders and, divorced from the religious and political establishment, a sense of independence shaped their identity. Nonconformists combined within their own communities; not only did they worship together, they lived and worked side by side, did business with each other and married into each other's families.[3] Life was shaped by family responsibility, hard work and a powerful sense of community.[4]

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Piety lay at the core of nonconformity; a sober and disciplined lifestyle was essential and signs of pretension, ostentation or self-indulgence were considered improper and unacceptable. Nonconformity was more than a commitment to a set of religious beliefs and it went far beyond the chapel door in providing a programme for living an ethical and moral life. Although not exclusively the province of nonconformists, the "nonconformist conscience" matured into a set of principles designed to guide personal and public behaviour.

At the heart of nonconformity was a willingness to oppose injustice and behaviour considered morally wrong. Conditioned by a reformist zeal, nonconformist social identity included a sense of historical mission and a commitment to self-improvement, individual freedom and social amelioration. Being a nonconformist meant adopting a robust commitment to public as well as private duty and nonconformists played important roles in civic life. Political action was equated with religiously inspired reform and the pursuit of social welfare and integrity in public life. With the exercise of conscience a pre-requisite, nonconformists campaigned against poverty, unemployment, prostitution, gambling and crime and had a central role in the temperance movement.[5]

Henry Mee was an earnest, uncompromising and dedicated member of the community at Stapleford Baptist Chapel. A patriarchal and serious figure, he lived his life guided by a fixed framework of religious, political and social beliefs. As well as being a member of the congregation, Henry Mee was a deacon, helping to manage the business of the chapel. Deacons were chosen because of their spiritual piety, their grasp of doctrine and their honesty, reliability and integrity. These were qualities that Henry Mee possessed in abundance and he is said to have carried out his role with "unsmiling gravity and inflexibility of purpose".[6] Along with Mary Mee's father John and her uncle William Fletcher, Henry was involved in laying a memorial stone at the new Baptist Sunday school before giving an address to a public meeting.[7]

Henry Mee was politically active and as an act of conscience objected to the 1902 Education Act and refused to pay that portion of the local rates given to education. The Act abolished local school boards and made local authorities responsible for funding schools, including denominational schools. Nationally thousands of nonconformists rejected the idea that they should pay rates towards sectarian religious teaching in denominational schools, leading to a campaign of passive resistance.[8]

John Clifford was the recognised leader of the passive resistance movement; he was a devout Baptist and an uncompromising believer in the nonconformist conscience. At age ten his poverty stricken upbringing had seen him earning a living in a Nottingham lace factory working fifteen hours a day, six days a week. It was an experience that shaped his faith

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and his crusades against poverty, inequality and injustice.[9] Clifford studied at the Baptist Academy in Leicester before in 1858 becoming pastor at Praed Street Baptist Church, London, and then in 1877 at the newly built Westbourne Park Church, where he stayed until his retirement in 1915. As a member of the Nottingham Local Preachers Association, on a Sunday afternoon in the summer of 1875, a nervous Clifford preached to Henry Mee's congregation at Stapleford Baptist Church on the subject of "faith".[10]

What Clifford described as the soul of passive resistance was opposition to an abuse of individual rights that saw religion in schools dominated by Anglican and Roman Catholic rites and dogmas.[11] Failure to pay the rates usually meant a court appearance, at which point, after registering their protest, some debtors paid up. When payment was withheld, personal goods were confiscated for auction with the money raised paying the debt.[12] On such occasions resisters would often arrive in force at auctions and sometimes, with the agreement of the auctioneer, sing hymns and make speeches before the sale began.

Henry Mee was secretary of the Nottingham passive resistance committee. On 21 April 1910, along with twenty others, he found himself at an auction of goods; he bid £9 4s 2d, the amount required for the rates plus court costs, and bought all the lots, including his own.[13] It was common practice that committee funds be used for purchase and the goods returned to their owners. While other passive resisters fell by the wayside, Henry Mee did not, and on 23 April 1923 he appeared in the Nottingham Summons Court for what he described as the twenty-first or twenty-second time for failing to pay that portion of the rates provided for education.[14] This was the context within which a young Arthur Mee grew up. It was a family and community environment in which religious faith, political and social activism sat side by side.

An Ordinary Schooling

Arthur Mee and his siblings attended the Baptist Sunday school which enjoyed the facilities of a new building opened by John Clifford in April 1884. Sunday schools were hugely popular, even among those parents who were ambiguous about religion or had no religious faith. It was not uncommon to see low levels of Sunday worship and very high levels of Sunday school attendance. Prior to the 1870 Education Act, they were places parents sent their children to receive an education in basic literacy and numeracy that may have been poorly provided in day schools.

The Sunday school was an environment in which the widely held perception that religious faith and self-improvement were inseparable formed the basis of instruction. Biblical teaching was used to forge a set of ideals, focussing upon social reform, character formation and an optimistic

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confidence in the ultimate triumph of morality and justice. Through chapel and Sunday school attendance, Arthur Mee developed an absolute belief in the Bible's teachings, as well as being instructed in the value of self-sacrifice, hard work, honesty and thrift. He was also taught a militant rejection of gambling, tobacco and alcohol, the consumption of which was claimed to be a direct route into poverty, social humiliation and destitution.

Sunday schools were not entirely about lessons for life and conscience; they were also focal points for social gatherings, discussions and lectures. August bank holiday was a traditional day of celebration in Stapleford, the highlight of which was a march through the streets by the town's nonconformist congregations. Arthur Mee and his family would almost certainly have taken part in the celebrations, which saw the streets decked with streamers, Union Jacks, banners and placards containing texts from the scriptures. In August 1880, over 1,000 children marched in a parade with the Stapleford Temperance Drum and Fife Band leading the way. The smaller children were transported in wagons decked with ribbons, evergreens and banners. There were periodic stops at designated places for the singing of hymns, following which there was a picnic in the park attended by thousands.[15] Is it too much to speculate that a nine-year-old Arthur Mee had a small part in a performance of a drama called *Joseph and his Brethren* given by children from the Baptist Sunday school on Christmas Day and Boxing Day 1884?[16]

The learning that took place in chapel and Sunday school was augmented when in 1880 five-year-old Arthur began his formal schooling. He attended Church Street Board School the year the school opened and the year in which education was made compulsory for children up to the age of ten. With the population of Stapleford increasing and school places at a premium, locally elected school boards were authorised to build and maintain elementary schools out of the public rates. The only other school in the village was St John's Church of England National School, opened in 1837, the year of Queen Victoria's coronation. National schools were under the authority of the National Society for Promoting Religious Education and the schooling offered was in accordance with the principles of the Church of England, making it an unacceptable option for Henry Mee's family.

Throughout the 1880s, William Fletcher, Arthur Mee's uncle on his mother's side, was vice-chair and chairperson of a school board that had a significant nonconformist presence. Church Street School began life hesitatingly; attendance was low, particularly among girls, children could be found wandering the village instead of in school, and discipline was poor. Following an inspection in 1882 the teaching staff was completely changed.[17] During the years Arthur Mee spent in the infant department, teachers arrived and left with alarming alacrity.

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There is no evidence of whether Mee liked or disliked his school days; what is known comes from Hammerton's biography, in which it is suggested that, while a competent student, he did not excel at anything in particular. The Victorian elementary school curriculum Mee studied was based upon the principles of working-class character formation and preparation for a life of duty, loyalty and sacrifice. Teachers came from the working class and taught a powerful dialogue of puritanical discipline and a strict and unyielding moral code. This was an education of ordinary people by ordinary people who taught the routines and habits of reliability, self-discipline, compliance and hard work required by the labour market.

During his years at Church Street School Mee was provided an education in reading, writing, comprehension, arithmetic and religious instruction, although the 1870 Education Act banned the teaching of denominational religion. In addition, singing, "drill" and object lessons involving the study of an artefact may have been added. Board Schools could, if they wished, offer classes in grammar, geography and history, for which they were awarded extra funding if, when examined, the children reached a required standard.

Mee's time at school saw him taught by George Byford, who travelled to Stapleford each day from his lodgings in Bruce Grove, Nottingham, where he lived with his eighteen-year-old brother Arthur, who worked in a furniture store. Born in Essex in 1857, Byford was a teacher from the working class; his father Eli was a coachman and servant. Byford was a committed Conservative whose political views differed markedly from those of the radical Henry Mee. Being taught by him gave Mee the chance to compare some of the uncompromising liberal principles instilled in him by his father with Byford's brand of conventional and patriotic conservatism.

Byford can be credited with ensuring that Mee left school in possession of a view of the world that added to that taught him by his father. Mee's faith in biblical narratives and his nonconformist principles remained untouched throughout his life, as did his view that conscience and character were the keys to personal success and achievement. Byford's influence saw added to this a passionate devotion to all things English and an unshakeable conviction that the British Empire was without question a universal force for good.[18]

Mee's life outside the classroom is not surprisingly shrouded in obscurity; he was, after all, an ordinary child living an unexceptional life in an unremarkable industrial village. Maisie Robson suggests that he enjoyed family life, played with his young brothers and sisters and volunteered his services as a babysitter.[19] At this point there was nothing to mark him out as in any way different or exceptional and his nonconformist surroundings ensured an orderly and regulated life of unpretentious simplicity. There was

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no reason to chronicle his journey towards adulthood and little is known of his youth other than that he was a small and frail child who grew into a slight and at times frail adult with poor eyesight, which, from a young age, saw him wear glasses.

Living in a house filled with brothers and sisters, and with cousins nearby, it is hardly likely that Mee would have become a reclusive or withdrawn child. Although sometimes shy and reserved, he was sociable, inquisitive and intensely curious about the world. Despite a strain of seriousness bred into him by his father, like his mother he came to possess a healthy sense of humour that in adult life emerged in a subtle and satirical brand of schoolboy wit and a tendency to giggle if he found something funny. Hammerton suggests that a young Mee had an unhappy experience learning to play the violin but had no interest in sport or any enthusiasm for a hobby apart from reading, where, influenced by his father, his tastes were confined to the scriptures and non-fiction.

There is nothing from Mee's letters to John Derry or from Hammerton's biography that throws light upon what this earnest boy did with any free time, apart from one exception: Hammerton writes of how Mee made profitable use of his reading and comprehension skills working for Henry Mellows, a grocer and nonconformist community leader in Stapleford. Mellows knew Mary Mee's family through her uncle William Fletcher, also a grocer and preacher with, like Mellows, a shop on Nottingham Road. Mellows had an interest in current affairs and each evening while he worked in his bakery, he employed the young Arthur Mee to read aloud the parliamentary reports published in newspapers. Hammerton suggests that it was this experience that prompted Mee's interest in politics, together with a fondness for sweets and pastries.[20]

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The Making of a Journalist

Arthur Mee's unassuming childhood in Stapleford came to an end when in 1889 Henry Mee moved his family to Nottingham. From the mid-1880s the lace industry in Stapleford had struggled against increased competition, industrial unrest, fluctuating demands and rising costs. The manufacture of lace in Stapleford was a fraction of that in Nottingham and with a strike on the Nottingham coalfield, the town experienced a depression, and a soup kitchen was opened for the unemployed and destitute. Wages were higher in Nottingham, but if Henry Mee was seeking greater security and better paid work then he may have been disappointed; to begin with, at least, he took his family into an environment similar to the one they had just left.

In 1889 Nottingham lace manufacturers were looking to reduce wages to make them more competitive; the outcome was a three-month strike by thousands of workers and factory owners threatening to move their

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businesses to surrounding villages.[21] In this environment Henry Mee managed to find work as an engineer operating a stationary steam engine in a lace factory. The family relocated to the north of the city and in 1891 were living in Manning Street, Mapperley Park. From there they moved literally around the corner into 213 Woodborough Road, and then along the road to number 237. This remained Anne Mee's home until her death in 1919 and Henry Mee's until he died in 1930.

The Mees' home was close to the Woodborough Road Baptist Chapel and it was there that the family worshipped. The chapel housed 900 and was under the direction of the Liberal Rev. G. Howard James, President of the Nottingham Sunday School Movement. Henry Mee became a deacon and later a member of the chapel directorate, and Arthur Mee and his siblings attended both chapel and Sunday school.[22] Once settled, the Mees continued to add to their family and after a nine-year gap since the birth of Herbert Mee, Wilfred (b. 1890), Harry George William (b. 1892), John Neville (b. 1895) and Arnold (b. 1897) were born; Mary Mee was forty-four when Arnold arrived.

The move to Nottingham coincided with the end of Arthur's school career. Sixteen-year-old Annie Mee was already working as a cashier and thirteen-year-old Ernest as an office boy prior to making a successful career in lace manufacturing. Arthur could have left school when he was ten but at the age of fourteen it was time to begin earning a living to help the family. The job he found was as a copyholder at the conservative *Nottingham Daily Guardian* newspaper, where he was required to read aloud newspaper copy while it was checked by the proof-reader prior to being set for printing. There is nothing to suggest that Mee was looking for a job on a newspaper, but becoming a journalist required nothing in the way of formal qualifications and was a quick route into the respectability of employment. He had a good understanding of language, punctuation and grammar and having read out the parliamentary reports for Henry Mellows, it was a job for which he could provide some evidence of aptitude and experience.

Mee proved himself conscientious, hard-working and determined to grasp any opportunity he could. He perfected two skills essential to his profession by teaching himself how to take Pitman shorthand and how to type by copying down sermons and lectures he heard in chapel.[23] Having quickly proved himself diligent, enthusiastic and eager to learn, in 1891, with the support of Howard James's connections, the sixteen-year-old Mee became an apprentice journalist on *The Nottingham Daily Express* at sixteen shillings a week.

The *Express* was a radical liberal newspaper with a focus strongly influenced by nonconformist principles. Each day, as Mee walked through the front door of its building in Upper Parliament Street, he passed under the images of liberal icons Richard Cobden, William Gladstone and John

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Bright. Mee took enthusiastically to his new career and his ambitious determination to succeed was quickly recognised by the editor John Derry, who later described their first meeting:

> When I first met him he was a copy-boy in the Readers' Department of the *Nottingham Daily Guardian*; that is, he read manuscripts to the print corrector, and when I saw him he had already absorbed much knowledge of writing, printing, punctuation, and newspaper affairs. The world was a wonderful place to him. Everything was wonderful, surprising, charming. That is the keynote to his life. A newspaper office was wonderful. How could one help learning all about it? Most of all, writing anything to be printed was wonderful. Most of it was done by reporters who took down speeches which were cut down to fit space. It was splendid to do every wonderful thing you could find anybody doing. That was Arthur Mee's feeling. So he went out and did some reporting on his own account, and he brought a most admirable condensed report of things worth reporting to me for publication in the *Nottingham Daily Express*, of which I was the editor. I accepted it. It was a thoroughly sound piece of work, fit to go straight into the printer's hand and full of good points. "Who are you?" I asked. "My name is Arthur Mee" he said, "and I am in the Readers' Department of the Guardian Office." "Then why don't you take this to the Guardian?" I asked. "Well, Sir," he explained, "the Guardian is a Tory paper and I am a Liberal, and while I am in the Guardian Office I am like Naaman bowing the knee in the House of Rimmon." Hullo, thought I, there's character and personality in this lad, and I said "Your report will appear tomorrow morning, and on Saturday you shall have seven-and-sixpence; and whenever you are at a meeting and can write a report like that, bring it in." That was Arthur Mee's first article, and in a few weeks he was apprenticed for five years to the *Nottingham Express* and was earning his own living.[24]

Mee's long working days as a young journalist were filled with reporting on the endless variety of political, religious and social life in a large provincial city. In comfort and discomfort, in rain, snow, wind and sunshine, he learned to work at all hours of the day and night, taking notes in courtrooms and political meetings and at the scenes of accidents and crimes and interviewing anybody who had a story to tell. His initiative and a willingness to become skilled in all aspects of reporting, writing and sub-editing found him subjecting an impressed Keir Hardie MP to a demanding interview which appeared in *The Nottingham Express*.[25] While learning his craft, Mee continued his education and, through a membership paid for by the paper, was a member of the Nottingham Mechanics Institute. Mechanics

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institutes were established as venues for working-class men to enjoy cultural, educational and social activities, and Mee was able to feed his mind in its classes, lectures and library and his appetite in its refreshment room.

As Mee matured as a journalist, he met three individuals who became significant in his personal and professional life. The first was John Derry, who was born in May 1854 in Donnington-le-Heath, Leicestershire, into a family of working-class artisans. In 1870, at the age of sixteen, he was a pupil teacher and, having completed his training, began a career as a schoolmaster in Camberwell, south London. In 1877 he married Sarah Jane Wilkins, also a schoolteacher, from Hugglescote, near Ashby-de-la-Zouch in Leicestershire.

In April 1877 they moved to Bourne, where Derry had been appointed headteacher of the Board School. His appointment aged twenty-three was not without controversy. There was some suggestion that a claimed relative, the Rev. William Orton, a Baptist minister in Bourne and chair of the school board, was instrumental in getting him the job.[26] Tragedy struck in April 1880 when, after three years of marriage, twenty-five-year-old Sarah Jane Derry died. Derry remained in Bourne, where, teaching in the same school, he met Rose Southwick, who, in May 1880, left to become headmistress of the Princess Road Board School in South Norwood, London. But by 1884 she was back in the north and in April married John Derry at St Andrew and St Simon Church in Leeds.

Derry was a respected and active member of the Liberal Party, engaging in charities and campaigns to relieve poverty among the working poor. Upon his election as a county councillor in January 1889, a brass band playing *See the Conquering Hero Comes* met him at Bourne Station and he was carried through the town on a wagon as part of a torch-light procession of over 1,000.[27] He was vice-president of the schoolteachers union in Lincolnshire and a committee member at the local cricket club; he took to the stage in a drama called *Poisoned* to raise funds for the Sunday school.[28] A description in *The Grantham Journal* portrayed him as a cheerful, "buoyant, breezy, and hard-working" man who took politics seriously; he was also "Big of body, broad chested, and ruddy of countenance".[29]

Derry's commitment to liberal politics saw him abandon teaching and in March 1887 he resigned as headteacher of the Board School. He was a friend of another cricket lover, Sir Arthur Priestley, the Liberal MP for Grantham who began *The Grantham Times*, and Derry went to edit it.[30] Four years later in June 1891, Derry left Lincolnshire to become editor of *The Nottingham Express* and in May 1895 left Nottingham to edit the liberal *Sheffield Daily Independent*.[31]

The Derrys were nonconformists who worshipped at Queen Street Congregational Chapel, the hub of liberal nonconformist politics in Sheffield. He was a moderate rather than radical liberal who, it has been suggested, was guided by "ardour, tolerance and principle . . . agreeably mixed".[32] In 1897 Derry became a Liberal councillor for the Burngreave

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Figure 1.
John Derry, c. 1895

Figure 2.
John "Sandy" Hammerton, c. 1920

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ward until he resigned in 1903. He was intimately involved in the politics of the Sheffield Education Committee, to which he was elected in 1900, and had a leading role in developing its structure post-1902.

Derry and Mee enjoyed a close relationship; he and Rose Derry were regular and greatly anticipated visitors to Mee's home and were figures of affection within his family. Twenty-one years his elder, Derry was more than a friend, and Mee latched on to him as a mentor and a sounding board. He listened to Derry, shared many of his views, valued his opinions and for over forty years relied upon him constantly as a contributor and sub-editor and as a calm, shrewd and trusted confidante.

Derry was replaced as editor of *The Nottingham Express* by twenty-four-year-old John Alexander Hammerton, already an experienced journalist and editor. Hammerton was born in Alexandria, Scotland, on 27 February 1871; his father manufactured clogs and sold them through shops he owned in Lancashire, Glasgow and Alexandria. When his father died of pleurisy at forty-one, three-year-old John Hammerton and his family left England to live in Glasgow in a three-room flat they shared with his grandmother.[33] At age fourteen, a reluctant Hammerton left school and began earning a living in the office of J. & G. Mossman, a Glasgow firm of stonemasons; it was a job he hated. Set on a career in journalism, Hammerton, like Mee, educated himself at evening classes, read widely, taught himself shorthand and by 1889, although not teetotal, was assistant editor on the temperance newspaper *The Reformer*. In 1893 he moved to the trade-union-sponsored

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Glasgow Daily Echo as assistant editor, followed by a short stint at the ill-fated *Bolton Evening Echo.* 1894 found him working briefly as editor of *The Blackpool Herald* before in June 1895 he became editor of *The Nottingham Daily Express*, two weeks before Mee finished his apprenticeship. Their meeting in Nottingham began a friendship that lasted nearly fifty years.

Hammerton and Mee were very different, with Hammerton claiming that "no two friends could differ more sharply in their views of life than A.M. and J.A.H.".[34] While Mee was driven by a nonconformist sense of mission, the more pragmatic Hammerton had no inner sense of calling, religious or otherwise. While Mee demonstrated an extraordinary work ethic and became consumed by forging a successful career, Hammerton was less driven. Mee found aspects of popular literature, theatre and music sometimes offensive but more often trivial, tedious and uninspiring, while Hammerton enjoyed them enormously. While Mee was fiercely teetotal, drinking water, lemonade, coffee and tea, Hammerton liked his whiskey.

Derry and Hammerton appear frequently throughout Mee's life story, as does one other more obscurely sketched figure, Ernest Arthur Bryant, known as "Ern", one of Mee's most intimate friends.[35] Born in Brixton, south London, in 1873, Bryant met Mee while working on *The Nottingham Express*. He was known as a versatile and productive journalist with a sense of humour.[36] Later in life he suffered from insomnia, neuritis and shingles, and his health was often a worry to Mee.[37] Bryant remains something of an enigma and little is known of this more or less constant presence in Mee's life.

Bryant supported himself through journalism, including writing for *The Daily Mail* and magazines such as *The Quiver*, an illustrated middle-class evangelical and temperance magazine; *Cassell's Magazine*; and the illustrated monthly *Windsor Magazine*. Exploiting the popularity of Edwardian ideas of self-improvement, in 1908 he wrote a book called *A New Self-Help*.[38] For fifty years Mee was loyal, supportive and protective of him, providing the unmarried Bryant with an income, on occasion a roof over his head, and a place within his family. On Mee's death, Bryant, who had little money of his own, was a beneficiary in his friend's will and was left the substantial sum of £1,500.

London, Marriage and Family

In 1895, nearing the completion of his apprenticeship, Mee was appointed editor of the *Nottingham Evening News,* the evening edition of the *Express*, at thirty shillings a week. Although it was a promotion, the job had little prestige attached to it; all it required was selecting from the morning's *Express* enough interesting local news to fill the evening paper's four pages. While the job offered Mee a further opportunity to develop his skills and

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although he completed the work with what was now his customary ability, efficiency and enthusiasm, he had no intention of making a career on a provincial newspaper.

Encouragement came from the worldly John Hammerton who supplemented his income by writing articles for London-based periodicals and magazines, including *Tit-Bits.* Hammerton encouraged Mee to build his reputation by writing for the penny weekly. Established in 1881, *Tit-Bits* was written for a working-class and lower-middle-class audience; it was unashamedly populist and in 1890 had a readership of 500,000 a week.[39] *Tit-Bits* owner George Newnes was amongst the first to recognise that the development of mass literacy in the closing decades of the nineteenth century had created a new audience who, ambitious for information, entertainment and self-improvement, found the contents of newspapers tedious and boring.

Tit-Bits specialised in human interest stories, romantic fiction, serials, interviews with celebrities, readers' letters, competitions and entertainment news. It appealed to a readership that had little time to spare and articles were limited to a length likely to sustain the interest of a reader travelling by train or tram. The success of *Tit-Bits* led to it being widely imitated and Newnes can be credited with making the magazine a marketing and commercial template for dozens of magazines and newspapers that followed.

Writing for *Tit-Bits* saw Mee widen and enhance his reputation, and, with him being paid sometimes as much as £20 per week, added very significantly to his bank balance. But while anxious to move to London, Mee, ever cautious where his career was concerned, later warned young journalists not to leave a job on a provincial newspaper to move to London unless a firm offer had been made.[40] In November 1896 such an offer came his way when his growing visibility within the pages of popular magazines led to Galloway Fraser, the editor of *Tit-Bits*, inviting him to London to discuss joining the staff. Mee had been offered a job working for Alfred Harmsworth at his magazine *Answers*, but accepted the offer from Fraser and at the age of twenty-one began his career as a London-based writer and journalist.

As an aspiring journalist with a burning ambition to succeed, Mee's arrival in London saw him living in the largest and wealthiest city in the world, characterised by a tireless energy, vitality and dynamism. Cosmopolitan and multi-cultural, brash and self-confident, London was at once exotic, brilliant and glamorous, shocking, contradictory and dangerous. It was a place of striking contrasts where immense wealth and abject poverty existed side by side. It was a city in which an intoxicating and diverse mixture of literary, political and social representations of what it was to be modern and innovative were fashioned and refined. As it continually re-invented itself, Ford Maddox Hueffer saw London as the "apotheosis of modern life".[41]

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In this dynamic world of pessimism and optimism, anxiety and hope, Mee turned briefly from building a career to getting married. On 6 March 1897, a few months after moving to London and the year of Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee, he married nineteen-year-old Amelia Fratson. Nothing is known of a courtship other than the claim that the two met in 1895 while they were on holiday in Skegness, a Lincolnshire seaside resort which, after the coming of the railway in 1873, became a popular destination for holidaymakers in their thousands.

Amelia, known as Amy, was born in the village of Skelton in north Yorkshire. By the time she was two, the family had moved to Melbourne in east Yorkshire where her father Charles Fratson earned a living as a joiner. A further move saw the family in East Cottingwith in Yorkshire and in July 1890, Charles Fratson, still a joiner, was adding to the family income as the landlord of the Blue Bell Inn. He was an active member of his local community, using his skills to help restore the local church and build a classroom for the Board School and joining in with the social side of village life at agricultural shows. By 1901 he had abandoned the drink trade but continued to work as a joiner and wheelwright.

Following the wedding in Wandsworth, south London, the Mees set up home at 27 Lanercost Road, Tulse Hill, in a semi-detached Victorian villa. Prior to the expansion of owner-occupied homes during the 1920s and 1930s, a majority of people from all social classes rented homes. Even if Mee had been extremely frugal it is unlikely that he would have been able to find the money it would have taken to buy a house. This is even more likely to be the case considering that the Mees began married life with a lodger, with Ernest Bryant living with them at Lanercost Road. It was in this, their first home, that Arthur and Amy Mee began their own family when on 18 August 1901 their only child Marjorie Ernestine was born.

Tulse Hill was an area of south London that experienced substantial residential development once the opening of the railway in 1868 saw it grow as a commuter suburb. Mee was able to walk each day to the station before making the short journey into the city. At a time when the occupation of the male wage earner defined a family, identifying himself as an editor in the 1901 census placed Mee firmly within the ranks of the socially reputable middle class. He was what Charles Masterman called a "suburbanite", who lived in homes each boasting "its pleasant drawing-room, its bow-window, its little front garden, its high sounding title – 'Acacia Villa,' or 'Camperdown Lodge' – attesting to unconquered human aspiration".[42]

Lanercost Road was solidly middle-class and those that rented and bought their semi-detached and detached villas there gave them names to mark out their independence, individuality and territory. In 1901 residents in Lanercost Road lived in homes called "Hillview", "Windermere", "Ashford House", "Hazelbrae", "Winbrook" and "Silverdean"; Mee's home

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at number 27 was "Redcot". Among his neighbours were those with respectable middle-class occupations, including civil servants and clerks working in local government, accountants, a mortgage broker, businessmen and a civil engineer. Several had that mark of middle-class respectability, a live-in domestic servant, although the Mees were not yet in that category.

Figure 3.
Amelia Mee, c. 1916

Now with the responsibility of a home and family, after two years working at *Tit-Bits*, twenty-six-year-old Mee decided to make himself more financially secure by taking advantage of the many offers of work that were coming his way. He opted to become a freelance journalist; although the rewards could be significant, it was not without its pressures, something that Mee noted years later when writing that being self-employed required courage, method, hard work and the ability to write about anything at any time. He suggested a salary of £500 a year was possible, made up of work for a newspaper or magazine two days each week plus writing a daily or weekly column for other publications.[43]

This was exactly how Mee organised his working life and he was in the right place at the right time. The last decade of the nineteenth century was, as H.G. Wells noted, particularly beneficial for writers, who found themselves working in an environment of opportunity and high demand.[44] Not wishing to refuse any opportunity that came his way, in April 1898 Mee became assistant editor of the weekly *Home Magazine*, a penny illustrated religious magazine published by George Newnes. Under the editorship of George Clarke, Mee was described as having been "one of 'Tit Bits'' brightest writers".[45] He also continued to write for other periodicals, including *Temple Bar* magazine, *The Young Man* and *The Young Woman,* the Newnes monthly *Strand Magazine*[46] and Alfred Harmsworth's *Answers*.

His range was impressive; he wrote about the "heroic splendour" of Robert Baden-Powell for the comic paper *Chums*[47] and a piece on the peril of cigarettes for the *Sunday School Chronicle*.[48] He wrote "The Making of Sherlock Holmes" for *The Young Man*;[49] in September 1899 he produced an article on the Baptist minister C.H. Spurgeon for the nonconformist

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Figure 4.
Amelia Mee with her sister Lena Fratson behind, c. 1899. Lena lived with the Mee's until her death and was Mee's private secretary.

magazine *The Puritan* and an article on Donizetti for the penny weekly *Great Thoughts*. In 1900 he also found time to act as the magazine editor on the forgotten daily newspaper *The Morning Herald*. In 1902 he was writing daily columns for the conservative evening newspaper *The St James Gazette*[50] and taking on the role of editing the illustrated weekly magazine *Black and White* at a salary of £500 per annum, a job he did until 1903.[51]

In addition to writing for magazines and periodicals, Mee added to a remarkable output by producing biographies of the Liberal politician Joseph Chamberlain (1900), the Conservative Prime Minister Lord Salisbury (1901) and also in 1901 a book on Edward VII.[52] A fourth book, *England's Mission by English Statesmen*, an edited collection of speeches from leading politicians, appeared in 1903 and was described by *The Spectator* magazine as "a very instructive volume".[53]

This output meant that Mee could afford a larger home and by June 1902 the family had moved to an imposing detached villa at 18 Court Road (now Elmcourt Road), a mile from Lanercost Road. It was here that the Mees were joined by Amy Mee's twenty-year-old sister Selina Fratson, known as "Lena". Lena lived as part of the Mee family for over fifty years and worked as Mee's private secretary, organising his home office, taking dictation and typing letters.

*

In 1891 Mee had been a sixteen-year-old apprentice journalist on *The Nottingham Daily Express*. Not much more than a decade later, he was married with a family, living comfortably and enjoying a reputation as an in-demand journalist of industry, ability and initiative. This was by any standards an impressive career trajectory, but in spite of his growing success and standing there was nothing to suggest that he would rise beyond the status of a man who, within the confines of his profession, was a respected and successful journalist and editor. Although always anxious to improve his knowledge and skills, Mee had shown little interest in education and schooling and none in developing a career writing for children.

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The only discernible sign of a wider sense of purpose was Mee's determination to grasp any opportunity that offered the potential for advancement. His ambition to establish himself professionally and to attain material security for his family could not be satisfied within the life of a jobbing journalist turning out well-paid but often anonymously crafted articles. Mee wanted much more; he wanted long-term professional protection working within an environment where he could give full reign to his appetites and aspirations. The campaigning voice that would become so characteristic of his writing had not yet been heard and was unlikely to be so as long as he continued to write commissioned articles for a diverse range of magazines and newspapers. Mee needed a larger stage, one that would provide him with opportunities to be influential by carrying his values, ideas and opinions to a national audience, and for that he needed Alfred Harmsworth.

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