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**CULTURE**

**Historicist: The News of Toronto**

Part one of a two-part look at a nearly forgotten Toronto newspaper.

BY **JAMIE BRADBURN**



**THE JOURNALISTIC COWBOY.**

Cartoon of E.E. Sheppard by J.W. Bengough, *Grip*, December 15, 1883.

Among Toronto's highly competitive newspapers of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the *News* seems like the most forgotten of the bunch. Unlike its elder sibling the *Mail*, its name didn't linger on through corporate mergers. While forceful personalities were involved on its editorial side, it lacked an enduring, strong-willed proprietor like [George Brown](#) of the *Globe*, [John Ross Robertson](#) of the *Telegram*, or [William Findlay Maclean](#) of the *World*. Despite respectable circulation figures, it never drew enough ad money to produce profits. Its most enduring, if inadvertent, legacy was to provoke the creation of one of Toronto's media giants.

A paper that was published for nearly 40 years in a crowded market has to have a few interesting stories behind it.



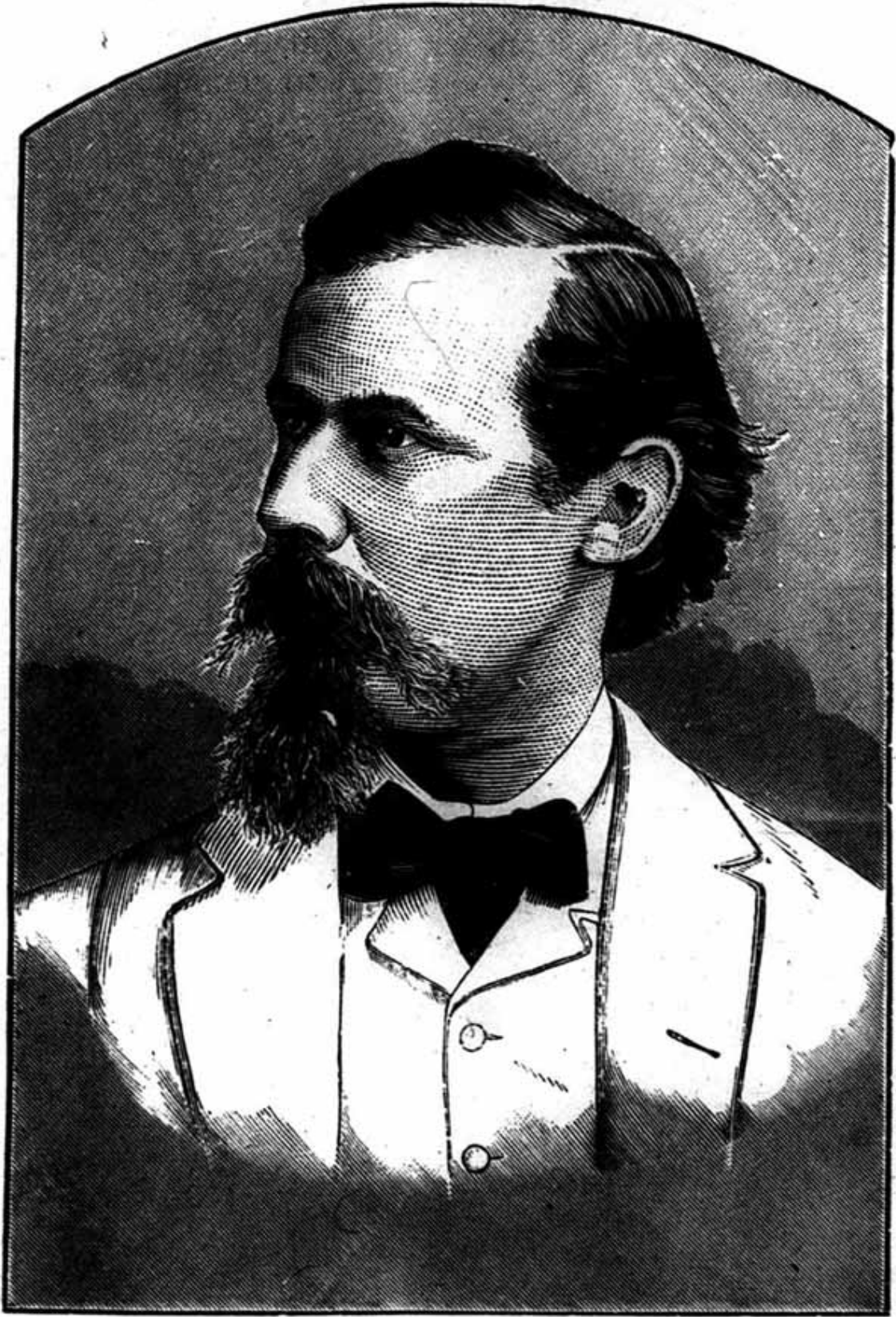


*Telegram*) and figured they could use another outlet for their profitable newsprint business. The *News's* opening editorial promised that its writers would be required to “practice the virtue of condensation” as “verbosity, like procrastination, is a thief of time.” Politically, the *News* would provide “cordial but independent support” to Sir John A. Macdonald’s Conservative government by publishing appropriate praise or criticism. “Our conception of independence,” it was noted, “is not realized by standing in the middle of the street and throwing mud in alternate handfuls at the passers-by upon either side.”

After two unprofitable years, the Riordons determined some mud-flinging was necessary. To bring colour to the *News*, they hired [Edmund Ernest Sheppard](#), better known as E.E., to run the paper. Born in St. Thomas in 1855, Sheppard’s iconoclastic personality was a reaction to his stern clergyman father. Sheppard briefly studied medicine in West Virginia before setting out for the borderlands of Texas, where he reputedly worked as a cowboy and stagecoach driver. This period had a long-lasting effect on Sheppard’s sartorial sense: later compared in appearance to [Buffalo Bill Cody](#), Sheppard wore a mustache and goatee, Spanish leather riding boots, string ties, and a black slouch hat. He likely also picked up tastes for liquor, chewing tobacco, and salty language before returning to Canada to enter the newspaper trade in 1878. Hector Charlesworth, whose journalism career began under Sheppard’s watch, described him as a dreamer, a schemer, and “the most unique mingling of likeable and offensive traits that I have ever known.”

Sheppard caught the Riordons’ attention after joining the *Mail* as a writer in 1882. The following year, they told Sheppard that if he assumed the mortgage on the *News's* new home at 106 Yonge Street, he would be named editor and proprietor. The cowboy didn’t take long to make his presence felt on the printed page. “The policy to be advocated by the *News* is built from the ground up, not the sky down,” began his inaugural editorial on November 26, 1883. Henceforth, the *News* was devoted to “democratic” principles, specifically advocating for the public election of public offices ranging from dog catcher to governor-general. The paper also advocated ending tax exemptions, complete separation of church and state, and a clearer definition of federal and provincial powers. The editorial concluded “This is not Socialism; this is not Communism; this is not Nihilism; this is not annexation; it is simple democracy and common sense.”





Portrait of E.E. Sheppard, *Canadian Bookman*, June 1888.

Under Sheppard and assistant editor Phillips Thompson, the *News* revelled in annoying the political establishment, which they felt was too aristocratic. They hoped to incite fresh opposition to the political and cultural assumptions that ran through late Victorian Canadian society. Writer John Charles Dent, under the alias of “Ranger,” penned a weekly column titled “Letters to Eminent Persons” which reviewed the accomplishments of significant political and religious figures. The second instalment, published on December 8, 1883, targeted [Charles Tupper](#), who had recently been named High Commissioner to Great Britain. The piece was loaded with innuendo about past affairs with married women, especially one who died soon after their reputed fling ended. Tupper was portrayed as “an inordinately selfish and unprincipled man” whose political career lacked substance. Such character assassination angered establishment figures like [Goldwin Smith](#), who described the *News* as a “gang of libellers” consisting of “mendacious” journalists, “malignant” secularists, and socialists dedicated to inciting class hatred. As the *News* increased its attacks on the ruling class, it was treated like a pariah at society events—after taking on Governor-General [Lord Lansdowne](#), a *News* reporter was ejected from a ball held during the royal representative’s visit to Toronto in 1884.

Which was fine, since the *News* aimed to appeal to a working class readership. Printed on pink paper, said to be favoured by boys for kite-making, the *News* was filled with sensationalized stories from around the city and the world. According to historian Paul Rutherford, the paper had a strong eye for any tale involving bigamy, freaks of nature, graft, lynching, and “any and every American vice.” Rutherford found that Sheppard “dramatically altered the ordinary editorial style: pungent language, many capital letters, imaginative punctuation, one- or two-sentence paragraphs, all to win the lowbrow reader who was frightened by an array of learned commentary.” Gossipy columns came and went. Lengthy investigative series like the 18-part “Toronto by Gaslight” allowed the paper to depict the human costs of the city’s industrialization. Staffers like Thompson had strong ties to the [Knights of Labor](#), which was devoted to improving working conditions. The paper was filled with labour items, and tended to favour workers confronting their bosses. Sheppard ran in the 1887 federal election as an independent labour candidate in West Toronto, but lost by 547 votes.



A SCENE ON GEORGE STREET,

Illustration of riots during lockout of Toronto Street Railway workers. *The News*, March 13, 1886.

The *News's* sympathies toward labour were highly apparent in March 1886 when the [Toronto Street Railway](#) (TSR) locked out employees who attempted to form a union. When replacement streetcar operators tried to restore service, they were blocked by a mob sympathetic to those locked out, resulting in three days of violence. While the *Globe* attempted to provide a balanced account of the chaotic situation, the *News* cast TSR owner [Frank Smith](#) as an anti-union reactionary who fought "the solid and determined public opinion of the citizens of Toronto" and the employees as heroes for pursuing their right to organize. The paper provided moment-by-moment descriptions of the riots, accompanied by whimsical illustrations. Editorials urged the city to take over the TSR and provide public transit as a municipal service, effectively recommending the creation of a TTC-style agency 35 years before it achieved reality.

While Sheppard championed the working class, he loathed French Canadians. "If Quebec is always to pose as the beggar in the dominion soup kitchen," noted an 1885 editorial, "she must be defranchised as a vagrant. If she is to be a traitor in our wars, a thief in our treasury, a conspirator in our Canadian household, she had better go out. She is no use in Confederation." During the Northwest Rebellion that year, Thompson refused to write editorials condemning Louis Riel, which led to bloodthirsty rants penned by Sheppard about the "half-breed dog." Following Riel's capture, the *News* opined that "he ought to be hanged or shot...and it wouldn't grieve us much if he got it both ways." Sheppard also belonged to the only-good-Indian-is-a-dead-Indian school of thought, as he proposed every member of every band that took part in the rebellion should be hanged, while remaining aboriginals would be placed in a separate territory.

It was coverage of the rebellion that led to Sheppard's downfall. During the summer of 1885, writer Louis Kribs was told that the 65th Battalion of Rifles, a French Canadian unit based in Montreal, had slacked off and shown cowardice on the battlefield. Kribs, who Hector Charlesworth described as a kindly man who, while never intending malice on anyone, was "never a model of discretion," wrote an article which reputedly was printed



before Sheppard read it. Commanding officer Lieutenant-Colonel [Joseph-Aldric Ouimet](#) quickly filed a libel suit against Sheppard. At the time, libel cases were tried in the home city of the plaintiff, so Sheppard avoided going anywhere near Montreal. Secret exits were created in the *News* building for hasty escapes if Quebec legal officials attempted to corner him. Sheppard was also aided by Toronto legal officials disinclined to aid their Quebec counterparts—[Magistrate George Denison](#) conveniently took his lunch or absented himself whenever asked to help nab Sheppard. The soap opera carried on for two years, until Sheppard voluntarily surrendered and paid a \$500 fine.

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**EDMUND E. SHEPPARD, Proprietor,**

Advertisement, the *News*, June 2, 1884.

Drawing out the libel suit depleted Sheppard's finances, which caused him to fall behind on his mortgage payments to the Riordon family. Around the same time, the *Mail* [broke its longstanding ties with the Conservatives](#) and promoted itself as a politically independent journal. The Riordons began to feel embarrassed about being associated with a paper that constantly attacked Quebec, since that didn't help their other businesses build sales in *la belle province*. Despite a healthy circulation, the controversies surrounding the *News* didn't help ad sales. Thanks to all of these factors, Sheppard was forced to turn the operation of the *News* back to the Riordons on November 23, 1887. Within a month, Sheppard published the first issue of a new weekly paper, *Saturday Night*. To avoid further libel suits, he promised that "nothing shall appear in these columns which will alienate a friend or cause either anger or pain," offering up a good-natured take on human weaknesses instead (though he continued to savage French Canada). Sheppard ran *Saturday Night* until health issues prompted a move to California in 1906.

Following Sheppard's departure, the *News* maintained its everyman tone but caused less controversy among the establishment. Where the labour-friendly paper ran into trouble was with its printing staff. When new typesetting equipment was installed in 1892 that made it possible for one worker to set as much type as three had by hand, disputes quickly arose over compensation rates. There were also questions about the jurisdiction of the Toronto Typographical Union over new printing technologies. While *News* management wanted to pay based on the amount of paper printed, the printers demanded a flat wage of \$14 per week. On October 24, 1892, the printers voted to strike if a list of demands to be presented to the *News* weren't met. When they went to work the next morning, they found themselves locked out, with dismissal notices nailed on the door. Timing wasn't great, as an economic downturn had meant that for every printer working in Toronto, two weren't. The *News* quickly recruited scab printers and continued to publish without missing an issue.

The striking printers' next move forever altered the city's newspaper landscape.