

THE ILLUSTRATED LONDON NEWS

Towards a Picture of Meritocracy Individual, National and Civilisational Domains

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A Talent for Research Project

Research Context and Gap

Scholarship on meritocracy has overwhelmingly attended to its neoliberal formations (Littler 2017; Sandel 2020), leaving Victorian antecedents underexamined. Yet it is precisely in the mid-Victorian period that the ideological architecture of meritocracy was most actively being constructed: the illustrated press, reaching mass audiences through the combined force of wood engraving and steam-powered printing, played a constitutive role in producing the values, character typologies, and social imaginaries through which merit was naturalised as the legitimate basis of social order.

By leveraging medial affordances of the illustrated press, the *Illustrated London News*, the world's first successful, regular, illustrated weekly journal, constructed a vision of the world which aligned with its educated middle- and upper-class educated readership. By focussing on the *ILN*, this study contributes to the MERLIT project's historical exploration of meritocratic narratives across a range of media and genres. More specifically, it reads the 19th-century periodical press as constitutive for such narratives in the Victorian era.

Research Question

How and in what registers does the *ILN* construct and naturalise narratives of merit and achievement by leveraging the formal and media affordances of seriality, visuality, image-text dynamics (Mitchell 1994; Wolf 2014; Levine 2015)?

“an unprecedented theatre for the showcasing of commodities and for the advertising of national prestige.” (Sinnema 2019)



The Great Exhibition of 1851 The Site of Three Converging Domains

The first international exposition, held at the purpose-built Crystal Palace in Hyde Park, London, which assembled industrial and artistic products from over forty nations, attracting six million visitors across five months.

Individual Domain

Narratives of the “self-made” man in biographies of “enterprising” men of industry, commerce, and law

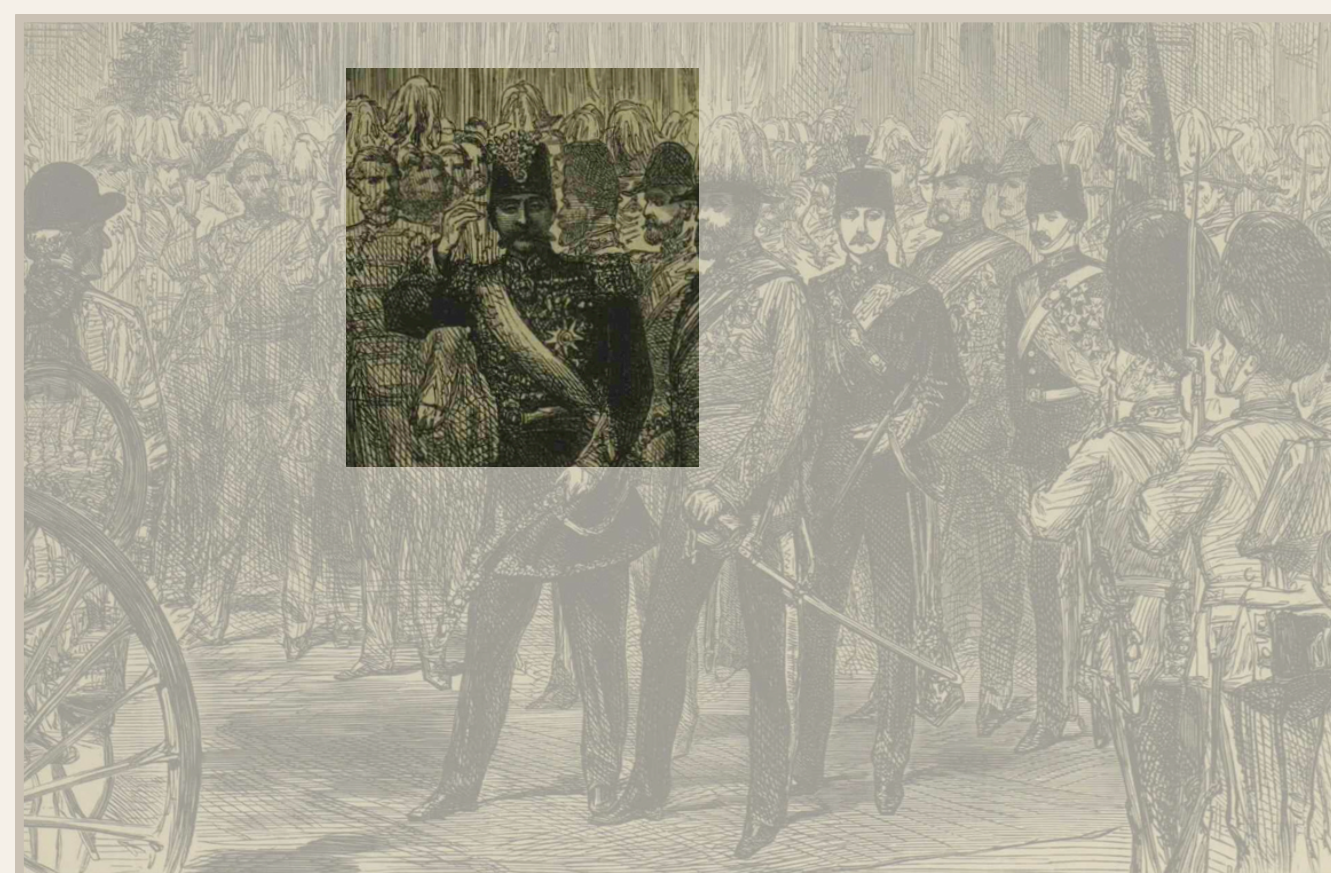
Civilisational Domain

The colonial and the paracolonial world embedded and naturalised within the journal's civilisational hierarchy.

“This age is that of the working and thinking man, as distinguished from the age of the fighting and unreasoning man.” (*ILN*, 3 May 1851)

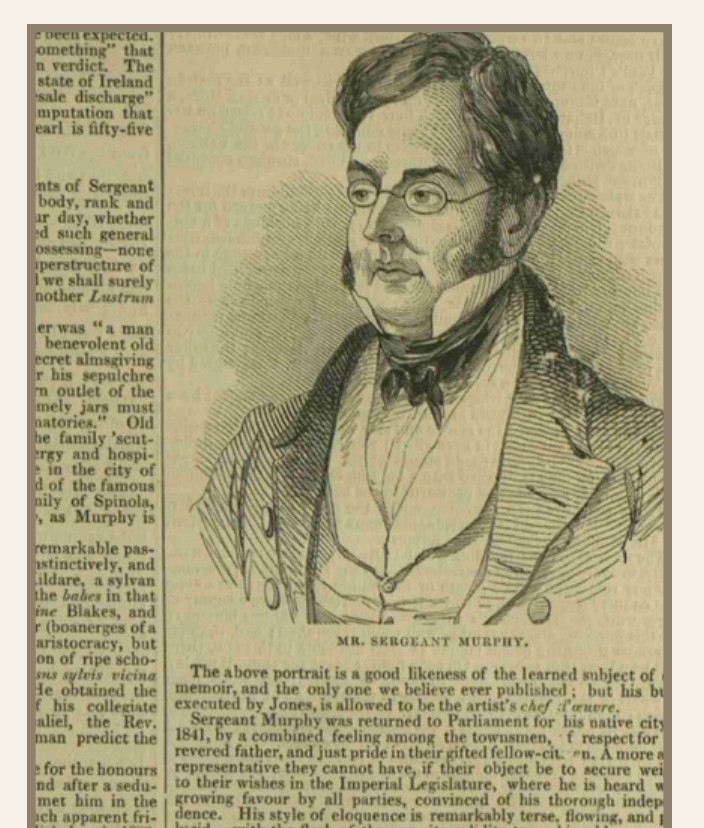
National Domain

A celebration of England, as the “achieving society,” and London, the lively and orderly metropolis of the Empire.



From the coverage of the Nasir al-Din, the Persian Shah to England (1873), through whose gaze, the *ILN* constructs an illustrated narrative of England's national accomplishment.

“Mr. Paxton, like most other men of note, is 'self-made' ... raised from the humblest of rank of the honest working men of his country.”



Preliminary Observations

In the *ILN*, merit, progress, and achievement are not merely reflected but actively produced through the serial form and the interaction of image-text, positioning its middle-class readership as the inheritors of a world in which technological advancement, individual enterprise, and national superiority appear not as contested ideological constructions but as self-evident realities, their naturalness guaranteed by the journal's representational choices and confirmed by the reader who finds in its pages a world already aligned with what they assume the world to be.

About the Project

This project is part of a MERLIT-associated “Talent for Research” traineeship:

Trainee: Mehran Ghandi
Supervisor: Prof. Dr. Eva Ulrike Pirker

MERLIT Meritocracy and Literature:
Transcultural Approaches to Hegemonic Forms

An ERC-funded project at Vrije Universiteit Brussel investigating how meritocratic narratives operate as hegemonic forms across five centuries of Anglophone writing.



*This poster uses elements of the *ILN*'s page design and miscellaneous nature.