~~Sex~~ Religion Sells! The Preacher, the Journalist and the Novel

Helena Goodwyn

Abstract

The American minister Charles Monroe Sheldon published the "runaway bestseller" *In His Steps "What Would Jesus Do?"* in 1896. The initial, and stupendous, popularity of Sheldon's social gospel novel has not yet been scrutinised in relation to its historical antecedents. By 1899 the weekly *Outlook* remarked on the transatlantic cross-over of the book, stating: "wherever one went in London, whether on trains or buses, in bookstores or shops, [one] found people talking about *In His Steps*." In that same year W. T. Stead reissued his non-fiction book *If Christ Came to Chicago*, which had first been published in Chicago in 1894, two years before Sheldon's sermon-story. The 1899 title page declared: "The Precursor of 'In His Steps'/ If Christ came to Chicago!... /What Would Jesus Do?" Stead's non-fiction book sold well on both sides of the Atlantic, before and after Sheldon's novel was published. So, was this simply a marketing stunt designed to attract more readers? Or did Stead's new title register deeper concerns about the relationship between fiction, journalism, and the social gospel movement? Investigating the somewhat vexed relationship between these two texts, this article traces the transatlantic roots of *In His Steps*. Comparing the afterlife of the novel with its immediate non-fiction ancestor, I explore the synergetic, if at times uncomfortable, relationship that developed between the social gospel movement and the periodical press at the end of the nineteenth century.

Keywords

social gospel; new journalism; W. T. Stead; Charles Monroe Sheldon; *If Christ Came to Chicago*; *What Would Jesus Do?*; transatlantic; scissors-and-paste; popular fiction; copyright

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~~Sex~~ Religion Sells! The Preacher, the Journalist and the Novel

Helena Goodwyn

Early in Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* our heroine, Catherine Morland, and her new friend, Isabella, discuss their love of the Gothic novel. Isabella asks how Catherine's reading of *The Mysteries of Udolpho* is progressing and provides her with a list of "ten or twelve more of the same … *Castle of Wolfenbach, Clermont, Mysterious Warnings, Necromancer of the Black Forest, Midnight Bell, Orphan of the Rhine,* and *Horrid Mysteries*." Catherine responds delightedly to Isabella's list "'…but are they all horrid, are you sure they are all horrid?'" (Austen [1817] 2015: 20).

Much scholarship has been devoted to the ways in which *Northanger Abbey* celebrates and lampoons the Gothic novel. The genre has proven so resilient, and culturally pervasive, that today's readers cannot miss the themes and tropes Austen lovingly satirises in her depiction of a young woman led astray by her "horrid" reading habits. A genre that has not proven as resilient, and so requires us to imagine an extended period when it was hugely popular, is the social gospel text. For a considerable time, variously agreed by scholars to span approximately 1870–1945, a surfeit of novels, short stories, poems, and non-fiction works appeared which addressed the idea of Christ visiting a modern city or how to live in the modern world "as Christ."[1]

During the 1890s in particular, but also in the immediate decades before and after, Isabella could have reeled off a list of social gospel texts just as extensive as the list of Gothic novels she gives to Catherine, containing titles such as Albion W. Tourgée's *Murvale Eastman, Christian Socialist* (1891), W. T. Stead's *If Christ Came to Chicago* (1894), M. W. Howard's *If Christ Came to Congress* (1894), Isaac G. Reed's *From Heaven to New York* (1894), Edward E. Hale's *If Jesus Came to Boston* (1895), Elizabeth Stuart Phelps's *A Singular Life* (1895), Olla P. Toph's *Lazarus* (1895), Charles Monroe Sheldon's *In His Steps "What Would Jesus Do?"* (1896), Stuart Phelps's *The Supply at Saint Agatha's* (1896), and Cortland Myers's *Would Christ Belong to a Labor Union?* (1900). And just as the Gothic novel has well-recognised markers, so too does the social gospel text, including, but not limited to: a romance plot (if fiction); the advocation of workers' rights, regulation of wages, hours and working conditions; moments of divine revelation; a plea for the protection of women and children from

[1] I follow Daniel T. Rodgers and others here in broadly identifying this as the period where the social gospel was on the rise and then at its most popular (1998: 3). Erin A. Smith writes that "between 1886 and 1914 roughly three or four social gospel novels appeared each year" (2007: 194).

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predatory labour and social practices; and a focus on human suffering. Indeed, had Isabella been delineating a list of social gospel texts such as this one, Catherine might have asked "but do they all feature suffering, are you sure there's lots of suffering?"[2]

Perhaps the ultimate and uniting impetus of the social gospel, therefore, is summed up succinctly by Gregory Jackson as a critique of organised Christianity's "social complacency in the face of human want" – or, in other words, suffering (2009: 175). Kristian Quistgaard Steensen and Kaspar Villadsen further explain: "social gospel advocates cautioned that soulless consumption, ruthless competition and class warfare were rising in industrial cities" and "contested the ideas of social Darwinists, who advanced a competition-based doctrine of human progress," instead "insisting that human misery could be ameliorated through social reform and cooperation based on Christian ethics" (2020: n.p.). Jackson highlights *the* key passage from the Bible for the social gospeller hoping to rouse a modern audience from their apathy, Matthew 25:35-40 (KJV):

> For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.

The idea of Christ appearing incognito in a modern context as "a stranger, a beggar, a starving child, or a social outcast" was the imaginative spark for much social gospel writing and for the audiences who bought these texts in such large numbers.[3] It drew connections in the minds of journalists, novelists, and other writers with the idea of the "undercover investigation as an engine of social intervention," a form of journalistic reportage that had become popular, in Britain at least, as early as 1866 (Jackson 2009: 182).[4] The conclusion of this Bible passage, that many social gospel texts attempted to dramatise, was Christ's assertion: "inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me" (Matthew 25:40, KJV). This sentiment becomes a regular refrain in works such as Stead's *If Christ Came*, which uses the phrase "the least of these my brethren," and variations on it, as many as fifteen times throughout the text (1894c: 6, 42, 96, 133-4, 135-6, 169, 262-3, 339, 345, 393). Jackson demonstrates just how ubiquitous this maxim became, partly because of the popularity of the American poet James Russell Lowell's poem, "A Parable" which itself was a reimagining of this passage from Matthew.[5]

Inspiring both religious and secular texts about the suffering of urban populations, Lowell's poem began to serve almost as a key to indicate to the reader that the text they were

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[2] These markers distinguish the social gospel from other texts addressing religion and religious purpose, of which there were many produced in the nineteenth century. See, for example, R. M. Schieder (1965), Mark Knight and Emma Mason (2007), and Elizabeth Ludlow (2020).

[3] In America Sheldon's novels sold more than eight million, *Black Rock* (1898) by Ralph Connor sold over half a million copies, Harold Bell Wright's *The Shepherd of the Hills* (1907) sold 1.2 million and *The Calling of Dan Matthews* (1909) sold just shy of a million (Ferré 1998: 9-10).

[4] I refer here to James Greenwood's 1866 articles, "A Night in a Workhouse," published under the pseudonym "Amateur Casual" in the *Pall Mall Gazette*. The social gospel also sits within the genre of, or adjacent to, the "life of Jesus" text, which included non-fiction and fictional works and was popular from the mid-nineteenth century into the twentieth, see Jackson (2009: 173).

[5] Establishing a first publication date for "A Parable" is complicated by Lowell having published more than one poem with this title. According to George Willis Cooke's bibliography of Lowell (1906), it was first published in the *Anti-Slavery Standard* in May 1848, and then in the volume *Poems* in 1849.

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about to encounter would be a social gospel one. It featured as a preface to those by Stead, Howard, and Hale, as well as Jacob Riis's *How the Other Half Lives* (1890) and Jack London's *People of the Abyss* (1903) (Jackson 2009: 182-3). What the use of Lowell's poem illustrates – across texts addressing different countries and cities, written in different styles and formats – is how the social gospel operated and proliferated via a set of shared transatlantic reference points, or, to put it another way, was driven by a relatively high degree of referent replication and imaginative borrowing between texts.[6] As Candy Gunther Brown explains: "rules for evaluating evangelical texts differed from the standards of secular literature. New publications gained entrance to the canon if they shared certain marks of membership" (2004: 7). We might think of the inclusion of Lowell's "A Parable" in a text's opening pages as one of these markers. In this way the social gospel text had more in common with the journalism of the period in so far as excerption, replication of ideas, reuse of previous publications, and other variations of copying were deemed far more acceptable than they were in works of secular fiction.

This article focuses on the relationship between two aforementioned texts that share more than a few similarities: *If Christ Came to Chicago: A Plea for the Union of All Who Love in the Service of All Who Suffer*, composed by the British journalist and editor W. T. Stead after his first visit to America in 1893, and *In His Steps "What Would Jesus Do?"* published by the American minister Charles Monroe Sheldon in 1896. The former is a piece of journalism and the latter a novel. Both texts sold well, particularly in America and Britain, but *In His Steps* was a phenomenon. It has been variously described as "the best-selling novel of the nineteenth century" (Jackson 2009: 158), "a runaway bestseller, second only to the Bible" (Warner Bowden 1993: 489), and "one of the best-known stories of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries" (Gutjahr 2016: 1101). To these rather incredible statements we might add that Sheldon's novel was, and is, in many ways, *the* quintessential social gospel novel, arriving at the apogee of the movement's ubiquity in the 1890s. Estimates of the novel's sales vary from eight million (Ferré 1988: 9) to "tens of millions" (Miller 1988: 9), although it is difficult to establish even approximate figures because of the copyright issues Sheldon's novel was immediately met with upon publication.

Steensen and Villadsen regard the 1870s to the 1920s as the "heydays [sic] of the social gospel" (2020: n.p.), but the 1890s was the decade in which the volume of social gospel traffic really peaked, allowing Sheldon to draw cumulatively on a large number of influences, relying on some more heavily than others, to create a text that has since been deemed "theologically sloppy and literarily forgettable" (Miller 1988: 69). In spite of, or perhaps even because of this fact, it became an "immensely powerful" text "for communities of non-literary readers" (Smith 2007: 215). *In His Steps* would go on to be translated into at least twenty languages and adapted in various ways, including presentations on stage and screen (Elzey 1975: 466) and re-mediation as a comic book (Smith 2007: 220). It was, for a short period, one of the most talked about texts in the Western world, but its long-term legacy has proved to be minimal. Stead's *If Christ Came,* on the other hand, did what any self-respecting social-gospel text set out to do: it produced a real civic organisation in the form of a Federation that "accomplished many civic reforms in the years between 1893 and 1916 and still exists today" (Scott Smith 1990: 193). And yet, in the years immediately following Sheldon's novel's enormous sales, the success of his sermon-story appeared to be a bigger coup for the social gospel movement than Stead's more modest publishing triumph and foundation of a civic federation. Notices published in the press alerting readers to the many editions of Sheldon's sermon-novel often celebrated

[6] See Goodwyn (2018b) for Stead, Sheldon, and the transatlantic nature of the social gospel movement.

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Sheldon's plain speaking and ability to attract his audience's sympathies, but sympathy was not the goal of the social gospel.[7] Some publications did note the resemblance between *In His Steps* and Stead's *If Christ Came,* cementing their relationship in print. One article, entitled "In His Steps: A Prairie Fire in Literature," published in the *Daily News* in 1899, told readers that *In His Steps* could "best be described by its resemblances and its differences in relation to other famous works," and that "the root idea of it is the same as that of Mr. Stead's 'If Christ Came to Chicago'" (1899: 8).[8]

Exploring the somewhat vexed relationship between these two texts, this article will trace the transatlantic roots of *In His Steps*, connecting the novel with its immediate antecedent by looking in detail at the ways in which *In His Steps* owes much of its success to not only the content of *If Christ Came*, but also the circumstances surrounding its production. My contention is that Sheldon's novel benefitted from the collective ethos of the social gospel which allowed him to dramatise much of what he saw in Stead's non-fiction work, without facing the normal repercussions that such blatant replication of ideas would have incurred. That those who belonged to the movement believed in the widest possible dissemination of their message, in order "to strengthen" – in the words of Stead – a "dawning consciousness of the reality of the citizen Christ,", meant that the reworking or the reimagining of other texts within the movement was, to a certain extent, fair game (1894c: xi). Referring to the wider evangelical movement, Gunther Brown argues: "evangelicals assumed that texts did not belong to their authors but to the Christian community, and members of this community could appropriate any printed matter for particular purposes. This understanding of texts contributed to the fluidity of the canon and the disregard of copyright" (2004: 8). After all, one could argue that nothing the social gospel had to say was "new," and that the message it was trying to promote came ultimately from the Bible and Christ's teachings in the first place. As I will go on to demonstrate, despite Stead and Sheldon's outward belief in and support of the social gospel movement, which would have them and their respective writings serve as conduits for a higher purpose, neither author much enjoyed the conversion of their beliefs from principle into practice.

Neither a Borrower nor a Lender Be: W. T. Stead's *If Christ Came to Chicago*

In 1890 Stead launched his periodical *The Review of Reviews* with grand ambitions. *The Review* was ostensibly a sixpenny, monthly, scissors-and-paste magazine, and modelled, to some degree, on the American illustrated magazines such as *Scribner's* (which became *The Century Magazine*) and partly on the format of his collaborator George Newnes's successful periodical *Tit-Bits*.[9] The "Programme" of the magazine, as set out in its inaugural January 1890 issue, declared that, in a market flooded with periodicals, *The Review* was situating itself, not as a "rival, but rather an index and a guide to all those already in existence" (Stead 1890a: 14). *The Review*, as Stead saw it, would function as a cultural sieve, or reader's digest, to aid the busy modern woman or man in navigating the increasingly crowded world of print media. The periodical sat, therefore, as part of a broader trend in the latter half of the nineteenth and early twentieth century towards scissors-and-paste journalism, with reprinting and recontextualising the work of others as its core purpose.

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[7] See press notices such as "New Books" in *Dundee Courier* (1898).

[8] See Arthur John (1981).

[9] Newnes would quickly leave *The Review* and the editorial control and voice became solely Stead's, see Jackson (2001). Catherine Feely defines "scissors and paste journalism" as "the widespread practice of excerpting from or recycling of articles from other publications" (2009: 561).

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However, in "To All English-Speaking Folk," the opening address to the reader which directly followed the "Programme," Stead revealed another aspiration for his periodical: to make *The Review* an organ of organised Christian activity, as well as a disseminator of culture across international boundaries. The first paragraph pronounces:

> There exists at this moment no institution which even aspires to be to the English-speaking world what the Catholic Church in its prime was to the intelligence of Christendom. To call attention to the need for such an institution, adjusted, of course, to the altered circumstances of the New Era, to enlist the co-operation of all those who will work towards the creation of some such common centre for the inter-communication of ideas, and the universal diffusion of the ascertained results of human experience in a form accessible to all men, are the ultimate objects for which this Review has been established.
>
> (Stead 1890b: 15)

In this paragraph we see a striking likeness to the subtitle of *If Christ Came*: *A Plea for the Union of All Who Love in the Service of All Who Suffer.* In fact, the two publications were, to Stead's mind, part of the same larger project, so much so, that in part five of *If Christ Came* he reproduced "To All English-Speaking Folk" to inform American audiences of his "central conception of the Civic Church" and to encourage the creation of "associations or federations" for public good (Stead 1894c: 330, 334).[10]

To further his aim for *The Review* to be "the great social nexus" (cited in Robertson Scott 1952: 152), Stead set up *The American Review of Reviews* in 1891 and *The Australasian Review of Reviews* in 1892, cementing the magazine's transatlantic significance and creating new connections with the Antipodes.[11] As the editors for these sister publications Stead chose the Methodist Reverend, W. H. Fitchett for Australasia, and the academic and "progressivist" Albert Shaw for America.[12] Once the American branch of *The Review* had been established, it became the "best-known of the Anglo-American journals" (Baylen 1964: 419). Stead's selection of Shaw as editor for the American edition is significant to this discussion of the social gospel as Shaw was a former student of Richard Ely: founder of the American Economic Association and the Christian Social Union. Ely is regularly cited as one of the most important voices in the American social gospel movement along with Washington Gladden and Walter Rauschenbusch (Boyer 1871: 61; Smith 2007: 194). These connections and influences reinforced Stead's goals of putting in place a transatlantic network of associations that he hoped would lead to a new era of Anglo-American unity inspired by the rhetoric of the social gospel. That both his appointed editors were religious men with belief systems that advocated active participation in society as a duty of their faith was also in keeping with his aims of founding an international Civic Church.[13]

When Stead left England for Chicago in the winter of 1893 his investment in the ideas associated with the social gospel movement had been fomenting in his writings for some time. Stead had been preparing his readers for his trip to America and the publication of *If Christ*

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[10] It was typical of Stead, as a journalist, to reuse his own copy in multiple publications. In ghostwriting Charles Booth's *In Darkest England and the Way Out* Stead recycled his editorial articles published in *The Pall Mall Gazette* promoting *The Bitter Cry of Outcast London* pamphlet (Goodwyn 2018b).

[11] See Meg Tasker for more on *The Australasian Review of Reviews*. She refers to Stead's launch of the magazine as in keeping with his "characteristic blend of commercial enterprise and political idealism" (2004: 112).

[12] For more on Albert Shaw, see Lloyd J. Graybar's intellectual biography (1974).

[13] It is worth noting though, as Joseph O. Baylen does, that Shaw did not lend Stead's Chicago campaign support in the pages of the *American Review of Reviews* (1964: 427-8).

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Came in the pages of *The Review* with lengthy articles such as "The Chronicles of the Civic Church," which was a recurring feature (1893a; 1893c), "The World's Parliament of Religions" (1893b), "Count Tolstoi's Condemnation of the Churches" (1894a), and "My First Visit to America" (1894b). These articles, addressing an international audience, combined with his writings in the daily press on both sides of the Atlantic, public speaking engagements, and involvement in the genesis of several organisations whilst in America, amount to an attempt to situate *If Christ Came* at the centre of a Stead-led mission that would see him positioned as one of the major contributors to both the social gospel and wider debates about progressive politics in an increasingly globalised world.[14]

If Christ Came was just one element of Stead's social-gospel scheme. In Chicago, he prepared for its publication with several public meetings on the same topic in order to stimulate public interest and awareness.[15] In keeping with his knowledge of the social gospel, and his desire to insert himself firmly within its oeuvre, Stead first engaged an American publisher rather than a British one, using unionised American labour to print the first edition. Little is known about Stead's relationship with his American publishers, and it is difficult to hypothesise how Laird & Lee became involved in the project, except that, at this point, they were the third largest publishing house in Chicago, and had a reputation for being a friend to the labour unions. In the preface to the British 1894 edition Stead explained:

> Seventy thousand copies of this volume were ordered in America before a single copy was issued from the press in Chicago. Owing to my refusal to allow any but Union labour to be employed in producing the book, the binders were at first unable to cope with the demand. But as I did not think that 'If Christ Came to Chicago' He would go to sweat shops for His printing, the public had to wait till the Union binderies overtook the demand.
>
> (1894c: v)

Part of the mission of the social gospel was to inculcate an understanding of it as a wholesale lifestyle revolution, reminding readers at every opportunity that even in business dealings, or perhaps especially in business dealings, a true commitment to the social gospel would require one to ask: what would He do?

Stead's impressive sales figures on the American side of the Atlantic can be partly attributed to Laird & Lee's understanding of an emerging field of consumers – the railway station market. The rapidly expanding public transportation system gave publishers unprecedented access to a concentrated cross-section of society, with a variety of reading tastes. One of Laird & Lee's most recent prior publications, containing many photographic reproductions from the World's Fair: Columbian Exposition (which ran for six months in 1893), was an ideal railway-stand text and sold 300,000 copies (Leibmann 1980: 178). The opulence and technological mastery displayed at the World's Fair attracted many tourists. But, if the World's Fair was regarded as the best of "progress" and a celebration of civilisation's advancement, on both sides of the Atlantic, there was another kind of tourist who preferred to visualise the worst, and the shame, of civilisation's failures. With a view to catering to such interest, in a sensationalist move worthy of the father of new journalism, Stead attached to the beginning of his book a visually arresting map of the Levee district of

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[14] In the first issue of *The Review* Stead considers the "shrinkage of the world" (1890b: 17).

[15] At one meeting, reported on in the local press, Stead gave a controversial speech to the Chicago Women's Club in which he claimed women of Chicago Society were the most "disreputable" women in the city as they were "self-indulgent" (Whyte 1925: vol.2: 52).

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Chicago that detailed the location of brothels, saloons, and pawn brokers (figure 1).[16] Of course, it may have been part of Laird & Lee's publishing strategy, rather than Stead's, to include the map in the opening pages of *If Christ Came.* Either way, this map, colour-coded to highlight different areas of vice in the city's main crime district, was subsequently subject to criticism for its potential to encourage pursuit of the vices it purported to correct.

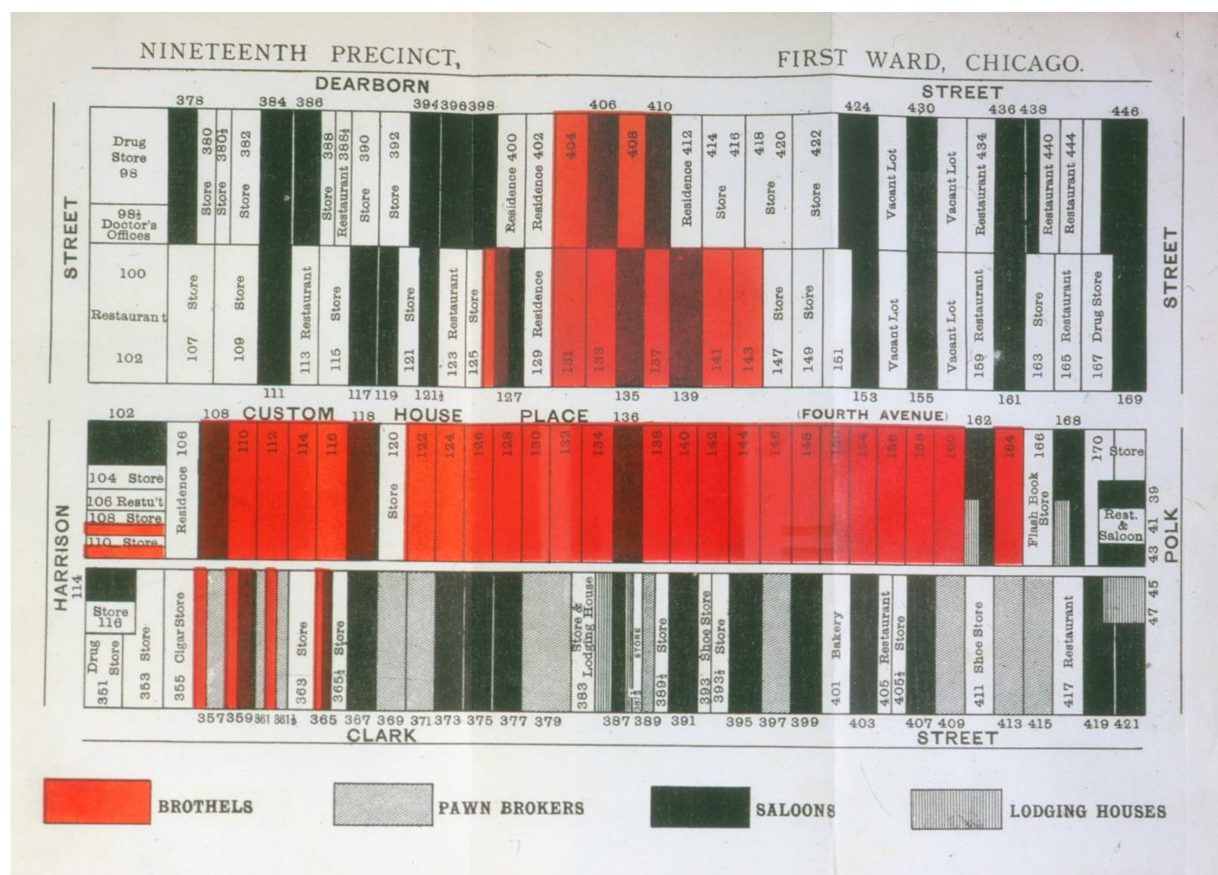

Figure 1. A colour-coded map of the Levee district located on the Near South Side of Chicago. Brothels, saloons, and pawnbrokers are highlighted. An appendix to the text gave the addresses, proprietors, and owners of the highlighted properties.
(Reproduced courtesy of the Newberry Library, Chicago.)

It is not difficult to imagine that in America's second largest city, and a centre of international business and tourism, such a map might be put to more than one use, which is why *The Chicago Tribune* referred to *If Christ Came* as "…a class of literature which is denominated obscene … a directory of sin"; *The Chicago Despatch*, in an even more damning notice, wrote of Stead as an "ex-convict, charlatan, an advertiser of filth and vice, a man whose sole claim to notoriety is the crimes he has committed against law and morality, and who holds his place in the public estimation through false pretences …" (cited in Stead 1894e: 277-8). These press notices are reminiscent of the controversy caused by a previous crusade of Stead's, "The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon," which was his contribution to

[16] Scholarly accounts of new journalism in late-Victorian Britain invariably reference Matthew Arnold's essay for the *Nineteenth Century* in which he defined Stead's style of journalism as "full of ability, novelty, variety, sensation, sympathy" and "generous instincts" … but ultimately "feather-brained" (1887: 638-9). For discussion of Stead as the "father of New Journalism," see Goodwyn (2018a).

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the campaign to repeal the Contagious Diseases Act, and which included Stead's dramatisation of the claim that children could be bought for sex on the streets of London.[17] Perhaps, therefore, Stead was working on the assumption that "there's no such thing as bad publicity," and so he created a set of localised conditions that ensured his book caused a stir in Chicago. However, despite his careful stage-management of the text to ensure it was seen as consonant with the wider aims of the social gospel movement, Stead was not immune to accusations of pecuniary motives. In an explanatory article published in *The Review* in May 1894, Stead attempted to impress upon his reader a sense that there was no self-interest, or preconceived ambition, in his publication of *If Christ Came*, except, of course, to promote the idea of the social gospel, and his brainchild, the Civic Church. Similar accusations had been levelled at Dickens on his publication of *American Notes,* which he too claimed to have had no intention of writing before his first visit to America ([1842] 1913: 210).

Stead, like Dickens, and many other British and Irish authors, had engaged in writing a sensational and critical account of what he witnessed on his first visit to the United States, relying on codes of Old-World wisdom to position such criticism as constructive. Laurel Brake argues that Stead's visit to America was, in part, one of "financial" motivation, and that the reason for including him in a lineage with other "Old World" commentators like Trollope, Dickens, Wilde and Arnold is because they all used their "experiences [in America] to generate income and copy" (2013: 175). What is at stake in such an assertion is the context in which we read the texts that resulted from these visits. If the texts are framed in the way Brake suggests, then they are entertainment; if not, then they have more credibility as instruments of social reform. For Stead it was particularly crucial to establish that his intention was not to generate copy and income. However, it does seem improbable that the prolific journalist would venture to the country of his imagination without the intent to publish something about the experience. Thus, he had to work especially hard to defend its legitimacy.

In Stead's explanation of *If Christ Came,* he devoted a section headed "why I wrote the book" to fending off imputations of pecuniary design. Stead informs his reader:

> The general impression that I went to Chicago to write a book, and that the book I have written was intended to show up Chicago, is entirely unfounded. I had no intention of writing anything but a description of the *Chicago Herald* newspaper office, and my book was not intended, and is in no sense written, as a sensational exposure of the seamy side of a great city.
>
> (1894d: 509)

Stead adds that he is grateful to those of his American critics who had been expecting "a new and more horrible 'Maiden Tribute'," because their disappointment at the "commonplace" nature of his "tale" lends validity to the book and its assertions of corruption and vice as endemic to a city that, despite such problems, he remains convinced should be "the new capital of the New World" (509). Employing another new journalism, investigative technique – insistence upon "true" reportage and truth-seeking as motivation – Stead stated:

> What the public outside Chicago wants to know is whether or not in this book of mine I have told the truth, whether I have stated facts as they are, or whether I have exaggerated them out of all likeness to the original; in one word, whether this picture of Chicago is true or false.
>
> (509)

[17] For more on the "Maiden Tribute," see Walkowitz (1992), Kaplan (2012), and Wendelin (2012).

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Stead repeated that his book was an "honest attempt" to help Chicago progress and live up to the idea of a visit from Christ (509) but perhaps one reason why Stead had to defend himself so vigorously was because his style of writing, the so-called new journalism, did, regularly, meet with accusations of exaggeration and embellishment. Gary Scott Smith describes *If Christ Came* as "impressionistic and anecdotal" (1990: 196) and contrasts Stead's writing against more sober publications like the Hull House Report, published a year later.[18] The new journalism was often sensational, highly personal in perspective, descriptive, and passionate, seeking to provoke strong emotional responses, like fiction. This was because the new journalism did not simply wish to record, or report – which its many detractors would suggest was the primary function of journalism.

Journalists who wrote in this style (termed 'muckraking' on the American side of the ocean) saw it as their mission to inspire their readers to action. Stead's declaration was tonally similar to his American contemporary Lincoln Steffens' justification of his collection of journalistic exposés, *The Shame of the Cities.* Steffens tells his reader:

> if I was never complete, I never exaggerated. Every one of those articles was an understatement, … and the proof thereof is that while each article seemed to astonish other cities, it disappointed the city which was its subject. … This is all very unscientific, but then, I am not a scientist. I am a journalist. I did not gather with indifference all the facts and arrange them patiently for permanent preservation and laboratory analysis. I did not want to preserve, I wanted to destroy the facts. My purpose was no more scientific than the spirit of my investigation and reports; it was, as I said above, to see if the shameful facts, spread out in all their shame, would not burn through our civic shamelessness and set fire to American pride. That was the journalism of it. I wanted to move and to convince.
>
> (1904: 17-18)

In their attempts to shame and shake their readers out of an apathy of self-interest through highly descriptive, emotive writing, both Steffens and Stead were then forced to defend the "truth," "facts," and "honesty" of their publications. Unlike the religious tracts and pamphlets of the mid-century that called for social change in the wake of mass irreligion, these *fin-de-siècle* social gospel texts focused on a sense of the civic. A glance at the contents page of *If Christ Came* indicates to a reader that this is an ambitious attempt to study a cross-section of all aspects of public life including government, law enforcement, prisons, criminals, prostitutes, the rich, the poor, and the homeless. Kenan Heise, a prolific historian of Chicago and its environs, writes in his introduction to an edition of *If Christ Came* that "few, if any reporters, writers, photographers, or novelists have ever captured the soul of Chicago as Stead did" (1990: n.p.).

Because Stead had spent years reading and studying literature and journalism, from both sides of the Atlantic, he had developed a style that appropriated elements from his British predecessors in their criticisms of the United States, and from his American contemporaries in their assessments of its triumphs and failures. Steffens's *The Shame of the Cities* took as its main focus political corruption, an issue that Stead engages with, at length, throughout *If Christ Came*. Riis's *How the Other Half Lives*, published in 1890 (the same year as Stead and William Booth's *In Darkest England and the Way Out*), was a study of the slum conditions of tenement housing, and Henry Demarest Lloyd's *Wealth against Commonwealth*, published in the same year as *If Christ Came*, tackled the monopolies operated by big business through an attack on the Standard Oil Company. Stead engaged with the same topics as Riis and Lloyd in *If Christ*

[18] For more on Hull House, see Addams (1910).

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Came, of which Heise writes: "a century later, much of [Stead's] descriptions are still accurate, his analysis valid" (1990: n.p.). *If Christ Came*, and the American muckraking works of Steffens, Riis, and others, were descendants of earlier anxious treatises that bore witness to the increased industrialisation and urbanisation of the period, such as Henry Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor*, which began as a series of articles that were collected into a book in 1851. But in the final decade of the century, the works of Stead and others took on that paradoxical mix of scepticism and optimism that has come to be associated with *fin-de-siècle* writing. Moreover, they were hybrid texts that patched together multiple genres, styles, and modes of argument. *If Christ Came* was a typical example of Stead's writing technique which melded fact, anecdote, impassioned speechifying, sensational descriptions, interview, and criticism. It strove to be taken seriously from both a secular and a religious perspective, building on his previous success of balancing these two often diametrically opposed outlooks in promoting such reformist pamphlets as *The Bitter Cry of Outcast London* (1883) and ghostwriting the Salvation Army treatise *In Darkest England and the Way Out* (1890) (Goodwyn 2018b). His fascination with and study of American journalism also enabled Stead to produce a text that was infinitely better received than those of many of his more famous and, in Britain at least, respected contemporaries, such as Arnold and Dickens. Of all the Old-World judgements passed on the New, it is indicative of Stead's ability to appeal to an audience in both nations that his study of Chicago sold many copies on both sides of the Atlantic, and produced real change through the formation of the Civic Federation of Chicago, set up after a meeting Stead held at the city's Music Hall. *If Christ Came* mixed damning critique with religiously inspired utopian optimism, and thus captured the imaginations of many, including a congregationalist minister from Wellsville, New York: Charles Monroe Sheldon.

"Great poets imitate and improve, whereas small ones steal and spoil": Charles Monroe Sheldon's *In His Steps "What Would Jesus Do?"*[19]

In the winter of 1896 Sheldon wrote the "sermon story" *In His Steps* and read it aloud, "a chapter at a time, to his Sunday evening congregation in the Central Congregational Church, Topeka, Kansas."[20] It was printed as a serial by the religious periodical *The Advance*, based in Chicago, and then published as a single text in "book form" (Sheldon [1896] 1897: 6). Just as Stead's *If Christ Came* was a hybrid text that took its style and content from a range of sources whilst maintaining a defence of itself as "fact," so too was Sheldon's a hybrid "sermon-novel" that, he protested, he had not set out to write as some great and aesthetically sophisticated work of fiction. Like the new journalist Stead, or muckraker Steffens, for Sheldon "a successful work, … was one that transformed the world by eliciting powerful emotions, changing people's hearts and minds" (Smith 2007: 201). Sheldon's 1897 description of his sermon-story's journey to print is reminiscent of Stead's preface to the Chicago edition of *If Christ Came* in which he explains to his reader that he had not originally intended to write it, and that he had merely meant for the proceedings of a Conference (held by Stead in November 1893 at the Chicago Central Music Hall) to be printed (1894c: viii). Both Sheldon and Stead invoke a sense of the fated, or preordained, in their descriptions of how a verbal presentation became, or was meant to become, recorded in an ephemeral form, before developing into a more permanent artefact.

[19] This quotation which has subsequently taken on many variations, attributed to multiple writers and artists, is taken from a June 1892 article by W. H. Davenport Adams entitled "Imitators and Plagiarists" in *The Gentleman's Magazine*.

[20] See Erin A. Smith (2007) for a useful plot summary of Sheldon's novel.

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In "The Ethics of Some Publishers," an article printed in *The Christian Century* in September 1933, Sheldon explains that three publishers rejected his sermon-novel before the editor of *The Advance* agreed to put out a "ten cent paper edition of one thousand copies", a run which swiftly sold out and was followed by "five thousand copies," and then "five thousand more" (1933: 1206). At this point, Sheldon narrates, "it was discovered that the original copyright was defective" and so "within a year sixteen different publishers in America" had produced editions of *In His Steps*. Two years later the reader is told the "English publishers began" to publish it also as there was "no international copyright" because *The Advance* "never thought of it." (1208). The repeated refrain is that Sheldon saw no remuneration from the vast majority of the publishers of *In His Steps,* and where a rare publisher did acknowledge him, it was tokenistic at best. Sheldon declares himself to be "not complaining … only stating some facts," but the choice of title for the piece is telling, as is Sheldon's use of the term "ethics" throughout the article (1208). Without explicitly saying so he indicts publishers from around the world for profiting from his labour without compensating him for his creative work. Whilst Sheldon's complaint is legitimate, the astronomical sales figures of his novel were in large part due to the defective copyright, which allowed publishers to produce a variety of editions, some costing as little as "one penny apiece" (1208). Had Sheldon sought to take control of the narrative surrounding the phenomenal sales of *In His Steps* he might have professed to have waived his claim to copyright altogether. After all, this would have been more in keeping with the social gospel's ethos of mass dissemination in the hopes of conversion. Instead, this somewhat strange article is, in one sense, a less-than-subtle boast about all the different languages the sermon-story had been translated into – including Russian and Japanese – and a demonstration for the reader of the global reach of Sheldon's story. And yet, with every new edition mentioned, Sheldon reminds his reader "Never had a cent from them" (1207).

In the English 1899 edition of *If Christ Came*, Stead considers the influence of his book on Sheldon's *In His Steps:*

> When I published my book about Chicago five years ago, I said:–
>
> "The suggestion 'If Christ came' seems to me destined to be the watchword of a revival of Civic religion, the signs of which are not lacking either in the American Republic or in the British Empire."
>
> The extraordinary, nay, the unprecedented sale of Mr. Sheldon's story, 'In His Steps', and its related volumes … would seem to indicate that I was not mistaken in my expectation.
>
> The Sheldonian books, which have been so greedily bought up and so eagerly discussed, are one and all variations upon the note which I sounded in "If Christ Came to Chicago!" The only difference is that Mr. Sheldon dealt with the subject as a novelist, whereas I was compelled to confine myself to a record of the actual facts of the city's life as I found them in the year of the World's Fair.
>
> One hundred and fifty thousand copies of my book on Chicago were sold in Britain and America, but it has been for some time out of print.
>
> ... "In His Steps", alike in its diagnosis of the disease and in the remedy which it prescribes, might have been written for the express purpose of popularising the teaching of "If Christ Came to Chicago."
>
> (Stead 1899: 1)

Stead is clearly somewhat perplexed by the astounding popularity of Sheldon's novel in comparison to his own text, which was by then "out of print." He sees *In His Steps* as a direct descendent of *If Christ Came* and so, in reissuing a British edition of his Chicago critique, Stead merges the two titles to form:

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The Precursor of 'In His Steps.'
If Christ came to Chicago!...
What Would Jesus Do?

(1899: title page)

That Sheldon produced a text in support of what Stead calls a "revival of civic religion" as a novelist rather than as a journalist is, Stead allows, the only real difference between the two texts, otherwise it is as if *In His Steps* was written with the "express purpose of popularising the teachings of *If Christ Came to Chicago*." In *If Christ Came* Stead set out, in some detail, a proposal for a newspaper run in the name of Christ and in his image. The motto of the paper, he suggested, would be "I will Thy will." The chapter in which this proposal is outlined was entitled "The Watchmen of the City" – referring to the editors of the Chicago press. It largely reproduced the speech Stead gave at the Central Music Hall at the beginning of his stay in the city (Stead 1894c: 325). Due to his ambition to popularise his social gospel creed on both sides of the Atlantic, in both speech and subsequent chapter Stead revisited ideas that would have been familiar to his British audience, or at least those familiar with his article "Government by Journalism" (1886). In Sheldon's novel, the Raymond *Daily News* editor, Edward Norman, commits to running his newspaper "strictly on Christian principles" as a result of a pledge to live "In His Steps" (1897: 31). Following Stead's real-world scheme for a social gospel newspaper, and Sheldon's dramatisation of that scheme, Sheldon was asked, in March 1900, to guest edit the *Topeka Daily Capital* in Kansas for a week "as Jesus would" (Smith 2007: 207). According to a timeline of the newspaper's history published on its website in 2003, the *Capital-Journal* (renamed in 1981), saw the circulation of the newspaper rise from 12,000 to 387,000 during Sheldon's tenure.[21] Of the "Jesus Newspaper" experiment Erin Smith explains that "Sheldon wove together editorial copy and news, so that the 'take-home message' for action in the world was readily apparent to even the dimmest of readers" (2007: 207). This was a leaf straight out of Stead's editorial playbook in *The Review* and in his ability to find divine providence in all manner of earthly and unlikely incidents in Chicago.[22]

Sheldon's experiment in running a daily newspaper only had to last for its much-advertised week, which, as Smith has demonstrated, was "a media circus" (207-8). "Sheldon week," as it was known, "was announced in huge block letters on the front page of the *Topeka Daily Capital* on January 23" and "without Sheldon's knowledge, the *Capital*'s owner … hired undercover press agent Auguste Babize to publicise Sheldon's week of editing the Jesus newspaper" (207). Just as Stead had primed the audience of *The Review* and countless other readers via the press coverage of his stay in Chicago, Babize "advertised Sheldon in some way" "almost every day between the January 23 announcement" and "the first Sheldon edition on March 13":

> Every clergyman in Kansas received a letter from the *Capital* announcing the experiment and urging the recipient to subscribe and interest his congregants in the great experiment. Christian Endeavor Societies (an interdenominational Protestant youth group of over three million members worldwide) were hired as de facto subscription agents, having been promised that for every twenty-five-cent subscription they sold, they could keep a dime for their local society.
> (207-8)

[21] Michael Ray Smith confirms these figures (2002: 2).

[22] Almost every section of *If Christ Came to Chicago* includes Stead searching for, and finding, the religious in the profane. See, for example, the chapter 'Whiskey and Politics' in which Stead recounts the manipulation of a little girl by a Democratic Party scout as 'a religio – a real religion – or the linking together of man to man' (Stead 1894c: 45-6).

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In "The Ethics of Some Publishers" Sheldon does not mention this extraordinary episode, which Michael Ray Smith tells us made the publisher of the *Topeka Daily Capital*, Frederick O. Popenoe, $20,000 (2002: 2). Its omission from Sheldon's 1933 article is odd given that the essay could otherwise be deemed little more than an itemised list of all the publishers who Sheldon thinks have taken advantage of him. Instead, Sheldon's lament reaches its fever pitch in his claim that "so many other people" have "appropriated" *In His Steps* as theirs he sometimes "wonders" if he really wrote it after all (1933: 1208). The irony of this statement from Sheldon seems particularly rich, especially as Sheldon's biographer, Timothy Miller, makes the bold claim that "Sheldon Week" was "the best-publicized experiment of the entire social gospel era" (1988: 103), and, as I have argued here, it owed its conception to Stead.

Conclusion

In 1899, the same year that Stead published his British edition of *If Christ Came* with its hybrid title page: "In His Steps: If Christ came to Chicago!...What Would Jesus Do?", G. L. Mackenzie published *Brimstone Ballads* including the poem "If Christ Came to London" (1899: 9-10).[23] The volume was introduced by well-known secularist and freethinker George William Foote, indicating to a potential reader – if they were in any doubt beforehand – that these ballads would be of the satirical kind in their delivery of "fire and brimstone." What the appearance of Mackenzie's collection shows us – and the inclusion of his poem "If Christ Came to London" is a prime example of this – is that the "If Christ Came" motif had become so ubiquitous as to be ripe for ribaldry. Like the Gothic a century before, the social gospel genre, and in particular Stead's *If Christ* formulation, was sufficiently omnipresent as to provoke parody. This is just one piece of evidence that demonstrates both the success of the social gospel at the turn of the century and its formulaic nature. The huge sales of Sheldon's novel, the healthy sales of Stead's non-fiction work, and the "real world" activities provoked by each text provide further assurance to the modern-day reader that the social gospel was popular with novelists, ministers and journalists alike, because of its capacity to be adapted to whatever that particular person was trying to "sell." In 1899, *The Daily Mail* reported that *In His Steps* "must be credited with having influenced the guardians' election in Bethnal Green" (cited in *Blackburn Standard* 1899: 9). We learn that the Rev. J. E. Watts-Ditchfield, Vicar of St. James the Less, stood in the election because of his reading of Sheldon's novel and that "hundreds and hundreds of working men" in East London had read it (9).

As I have sought to elucidate, the social gospel relied on a shared frame of transatlantic referents and borrowings between texts that mirrored certain aspects of the new journalism and its related practice of scissors-and-paste. Sheldon and Stead both abided by the general "rules" of the social gospel in the content of their respective texts: advocating for workers' rights; including moments of divine revelation; pleading for the protection of women and children from predatory labour and social practices; and focusing on human suffering (as Sheldon's text was a novel, it also included a romance plot). Both Sheldon and Stead provided transatlantic literary references as the impetus for their respective texts. Stead declared the American poet Lowell to be the inspiration for his "original conception of Christ coming to Chicago" (Stead 1894c: 14), and Sheldon was motivated to conduct the research that led to *In His Steps* by reading the British novelist Mrs. Humphry Ward's 1888 novel *Robert Elsmere* (Smith 2007: 195). Both Stead and Sheldon had backgrounds in journalism and shared a desire to synthesise,

[23] My thanks to Clare Stainthorp for providing me with this reference.

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popularise, and evangelise.[24] And yet, they were each surprised by their unhappiness in the face of the unexpected ways in which their respective texts reached mass audiences. Stead found the truly biblical scale of the sales of Sheldon's novelisation of *If Christ Came* mildly bruising to his ego, and Sheldon could not conceal feeling hard-done-by when contemplating the royalties he might have earned from his novel's global success.

Stead's imperative "Be a Christ!" answers (although it precedes) the catchphrase coined by Sheldon, "what would Jesus do?" – a slogan that remains powerful.[25] Texts such as *If Christ Came* and *In His Steps* were at the heart of what Daniel T. Rodgers has called "an intense, transnational traffic in reform ideas" at the turn of the century when social commentators were looking backwards and forwards to anticipate the civic citizen of the future (1998: 3). This traffic was not just of ideas but of rhetorical style and delivery and owed much of its success to the tools of Stead's school of new journalism that flourished in Britain in the 1880s. These were the very tools that Stead had borrowed in his admiration of the America periodical press of the 1860s, revealing yet another layer of the transatlantic ebb and flow of influence that enabled the social gospel movement to transmit so readily around the world and on such a significant scale.

List of Figures

Figure 1. A colour-coded map of the Levee district located on the Near South Side of Chicago. Brothels, saloons, and pawnbrokers are highlighted. An appendix to the text gave the addresses, proprietors, and owners of the highlighted properties. (Reproduced courtesy of the Newberry Library, Chicago.)

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[24] Sheldon began his career writing for *Youth's Companion* amongst other publications and in later life turned, like Stead, to creating compendiums such as *The Everyday Bible* which was a pre-cursor to the *Reader's Digest Bible*.

[25] Jennifer Harvey (2012) discusses the mid-1990s resurgence of the phrase. See also, Lippy and Tranby (2013).

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