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# A Fourth Estate idealist: Arthur Mann's Yorkshire Post and its crusade against appeasement

**Tim Luckhurst**

Newspapers rarely flatter their rivals. So when, in November 1939, the Manchester Guardian praised the Yorkshire Post, it was not entirely sincere. The praise marked the *Post's* merger with the Leeds Mercury. This, the Guardian declared, spelled death for a distinctive voice. Only then did it praise the corpse for: 'Soundness in judgement, tenacity of purpose, loyalty to principle and the courage to be unpopular... throughout the long controversy about British foreign policy which began with Mr Chamberlain's Premiership'.

Responsible for these qualities was Arthur Mann, editor of the Yorkshire Post between 1919 and 1939. An austere individual with 'penetrating observation' and 'shrewd judgment', Mann is a woefully neglected example of an editor who understood the power and importance of dissident journalism and who, in the most difficult of circumstances, did his duty brilliantly. As the internet disrupts such journalism, challenging the economic base upon which it depends, such heroes serve to remind us just how much newspapers matter.

Arthur Mann was the first of thirteen children. He attended Warwick School before joining the Western Mail as an apprentice. His first editorship was of the Birmingham Despatch between 1905 and 1912. In 1915 he was appointed editor of the London Evening Standard. His appointment at the Yorkshire Post came after the death of John Phillips, editor 1903-1919. Phillips relished leader writing. Mann delegated the work, but he gave meticulous instructions to his leader writers.

Mann was appointed a Companion of Honour for his opposition to appeasement, but such accolades tell us nothing about what the Yorkshire Post actually said about appeasement, and Arthur Mann is little remembered beyond a small band of historians. So, I set out to study his journalism and his understanding of an editor's duty. How did the editor of one of the few newspapers to challenge appeasement contest its value and purpose?

Before Chamberlain became Prime Minister in May 1937, Mann supported the League of Nations policy of collective security which Chamberlain would abandon in favour of appeasement. Mann had been sceptical about this from the moment Germany reoccupied the Rhineland in March 1936. His antipathy was reinforced by Charles Tower, his chief leader writer, and by the Yorkshire Post's man in Vienna, L. R. Murray, who had interviewed the Austrian Chancellor, Kurt Schuschnigg, after the latter had met Hitler. Murray told Mann: 'Hitler banged the table and shouted: "I shall get my way because I am ready to run the risk of war and my opponents are not"'.

Following the entry of German troops into Austria in March 1938, Arthur Mann made his newspaper a critic of the British government. In its leader on 16 March 1938, the Yorkshire Post accused ministers of uttering unrealistic words of reassurance, while 'some of the worst Jew-baiters in Germany were even then arriving in Austria'. It said the cabinet contained men, 'temperamentally unfitted to grasp the realities of the national or the international problem, and still less qualified firmly to deal with them'. This was uncompromising stuff at a time when the Daily Express, Daily Mail and The Times championed appeasement and the left press had grave doubts about any alternative.

I have studied the Yorkshire Post's opposition to appeasement during the policy's most intense phase. This began with the Anschluss in March 1938, built up to the Munich Crisis in September and ended with Nazi occupation of Czechoslovakia in March 1939. It was a time when Chamberlain, a zealous appeaser, was determined to prevent newspaper criticism of his policy. So, Arthur Mann faced stiff opposition and not only from the Prime Minister. The Yorkshire Post was a Conservative newspaper published by the Yorkshire Conservative Newspaper Company Ltd. Despite this umbilical link to the party of government, it went further in its hostility to appeasement than any other Conservative title.

### **After the Anschluss**

On 21 March 1938, immediately after the Anschluss, the Yorkshire Post warned, 'No appeasement is worth the name if the whole continent is to continue in a state of uncertainty and terror as to what act of tyranny is to come next'. On 11 April Mann turned fire on Hitler himself: 'He says that Germany has no dictator. But what else is a regime under which the free opinions of an intellectually great people are completely silenced?' Mann was playing with

fire. Chamberlain favoured emollient treatment of the Fuhrer and he had the support of Sir Neville Henderson, Britain's Ambassador to Berlin, who warned that Hitler took press criticism extremely seriously.

Henderson explained that Hitler was, 'unreasonably sensitive to newspaper, and especially British newspaper, criticism.' Arthur Mann understood the risks. Occasionally he would temper criticism with attempts to understand the new Germany. One such example appeared under the headline: 'The lighter side of Nazi Berlin'. It noted that a system of cut-price seats for 'working-class audiences', organised by the Nazis, had 'benefited the theatres quite considerably'.

But Mann's determination to fight appeasement never remained hidden for long. Two articles in June 1938 made it plain. One condemned aggression and called for a 'real league of opposition' to oppose it. The second reviewed a collection of speeches by Winston Churchill. The rebellious Churchill was a telling choice for a Conservative newspaper. The *Yorkshire Post's* reviewer observed: 'Mr Churchill makes it perfectly clear where he stands and what he wants. In a fog it is so much better to go straight in any direction than to grope in circles.'

Before the Munich Crisis, the *Yorkshire Post* was not a lone critic of appeasement. The *Liberal News Chronicle* and Labour-supporting *Daily Herald* advertised the need to oppose German ambitions. The *Manchester Guardian* recognised that the fall of Czechoslovakia would create an intolerable threat to peace. But Conservative titles found little to criticise. The *Times* believed Chamberlain could do no wrong and the *Daily Mail* and *Daily Express* believed Britain should avoid any entanglement in European affairs. The *Daily Telegraph* did not question Hitler's good faith.

Arthur Mann stood alone as the editor of a Conservative title, but no sooner had the Anschluss reinforced his scepticism than the Prime Minister and the Chairman of the *Yorkshire Conservative Newspaper Association* encouraged him to keep his opinion out of his newspaper. Neville Chamberlain met Mann on 21 March 1938. Editor encouraged Premier to be robust in his dealings with Hitler. Chamberlain said he was 'too busy to read the provincial newspapers' and exited announcing: 'I'm afraid I have an appointment at 11.15 and it is now 11.14.' Rupert Beckett wrote to his editor on 23 March, warning that he had read 'with growing concern day-by-day the Y.P. leaders devoted to foreign policy'.

Now Mann attempted reconciliation by deploying a definition of appeasement distinct from the Prime Minister's. Chamberlain's version had come to mean little more than the maintenance of peace at any price. For Mann it must mean eliminating causes of conflict while adhering to principles of democracy and justice. As spring 1938 turned into summer, the tension between these interpretations became intense, but the Yorkshire Post resisted an irrevocable break with government, party and Prime Minister.

### **The road to Munich**

Only as Chamberlain's efforts to resolve the Czech crisis stumbled towards failure did Mann move towards outright condemnation of Government policy. A leader on 29 August warned that the Nazis were 'using the Sudeten Germans as a means of disintegrating Czechoslovakia in the hope that the fatally wounded state could then be used to forward Hitler's plans for domination of Central Europe'. A week later another declared appeasement was likely 'to suggest that we could be blackmailed into paying whatever price was necessary to avoid trouble'. Yet Mann resisted a final break with Chamberlain. Nothing could be worse, he believed, 'than for dissent at home to undermine the British government's authority at this time of national peril'.

On 15 September, with the crisis approaching boiling point, Chamberlain flew to meet the Fuhrer at Berchtesgaden. Here, without Czech consent, the Prime Minister conceded the transfer of the Sudetenland to Germany. Now Mann came under intense pressure from his chairman to recognise Munich as a success for Chamberlain. Beckett wrote to his editor on 30 September insisting that the Yorkshire Post must 'loyally support this policy and cease personal criticisms which alienate Conservative opinion'.

Mann postponed comment until the House of Commons had heard Chamberlain's explanation of Munich on 3 October 1938. Now he was scathing. The terms were 'harsh and unconscionable'. Hitler had threatened war to get what he wanted and Britain had bowed to his demands. 'How is it possible that we should feel confident that a man so minded will really prove peace-minded in future?' But still Mann did not personalise the issue. The Yorkshire Post observed 'the nation remains deeply indebted to the Prime Minister for his unsparing and successful efforts to preserve the peace'.

## **Condemnation and proprietorial pressure**

If such praise was the consequence of proprietorial interference, Mann soon recovered his independence. On the twentieth anniversary of the end of the First World War, he published a leader calculated to offend the Prime Minister. It condemned appeasement and accused its architects of a 'tragic lack of conviction'. It concluded: 'We have not cared deeply enough for the things we won in 1918.' On 16 November Mann demanded a government of national unity. The Yorkshire Post acknowledged that it stood accused of 'lack of party loyalty'. Mann insisted he was advancing the best of Conservative values.

Mann was now under ferocious pressure. Beckett believed his editor was accusing Chamberlain of endangering the nation. Mann told his chairman Chamberlain was a 'commonplace politician' and the country needed 'statesmanship and leadership'. Insisting on editorial freedom, Mann suggested that Beckett should back him or sack him. The chairman declined and a truce endured until 8 December when the Yorkshire Post attacked Chamberlain personally. By 'repeatedly surrendering to force', he had 'repeatedly encouraged aggression'. His approach had invited contempt. Describing Chamberlain as 'A Prime Minister who is by nature unfitted to deal with Dictators', the Yorkshire Post explained: 'It is because we believe that Mr Chamberlain's policy is even now threatening the safety of the realm, and is likely in the near future to threaten it with danger still graver, that we are stating in some detail our case against it'. On the same page Mann published a second editorial. This insisted on the newspaper's duty to express its opinion and warned that: 'Nothing could finally harm the prestige of the Conservative Party more than that it should, for the sake of a Party advantage, continue to give blind support to a policy which is so gravely endangering national interests as a whole'.

Mann was at war with his proprietors, and Beckett responded immediately. He wrote to his editor on 8 December, insisting Mann had no right 'to publish these extreme comments against the P.M.'. Directors were 'fed up with this steady spate of personal criticism and recrimination'. Arthur Mann did not buckle. He asked the Yorkshire Conservative Newspaper Company 'whether it is in the true interests of a democratic country that honest expression of opinion by editors and experts should be stifled by newspaper proprietors who take their inspiration from interested ministers, from their agents or relatives'. Responsibility for the

editorial content of a newspaper must always reside 'with the man who is responsible for its daily conduct'. Mann further explained his principles in a leader column on 3 January 1939. The duty of a journalist 'is to help the public, not to help the statesman'. Concentration of newspaper ownership was reducing the diversity of publications upon which freedom of expression depended. Social contacts between proprietors and Ministers of the Crown were promoting self-censorship.

### **Conservative pressure**

Beyond persistent imprecations to support appeasement from his proprietors, Arthur Mann felt the pressure of Conservative expectation. The Yorkshire Post was accustomed to enjoying excellent contacts with Conservative leaders. Stanley Baldwin had consulted Mann on several occasions during his premiership as had successive chairmen of the Conservative Party. But Mann eschewed personal friendships with politicians and declined political honours lest by accepting them he might appear indebted. Rejecting Baldwin's offer of a knighthood, he explained: 'I feel that a journalist who receives a title, particularly if that title be suggested as a recognition of political services, may lessen his power to aid the cause he has at heart.' Arthur Mann was a Conservative, but, above all, he was a journalist inspired by Fourth Estate ideals. He regarded his newspaper as a servant of the public interest, not merely a commercial enterprise.

### **A sovereign editor**

In opposing appeasement, Arthur Mann performed as a sovereign editor determined to supply the public with watchdog journalism. He used his office to serve his readers and the body politic. It was his duty to scrutinise politicians and policy, so he committed to extended reporting and analysis of appeasement to help his readers hold their government to account. He was supported by loyal colleagues, prominent amongst them Charles Tower, who possessed 'an unexpurgated copy of Mein Kampf in the original German' and believed 'Hitler was a reckless megalomaniac bent on war'. But Mann alone had to liaise with his proprietors. In his determination to retain editorial authority he demonstrated his faith in Fourth Estate theory. To him this was no myth invented to glamorise a debased profession. The Yorkshire Post had a role to play in political society. Mann did not surrender to pressure, though it made him ill, instead he challenged consensus through the exercise of individual conscience.

As it grew clear that the agreement Chamberlain had negotiated at Munich was likely to fail, it became convenient for Rupert Beckett to celebrate in public the principle of editorial independence he had worked to restrict. In January 1939, he told the AGM of the Yorkshire Conservative Newspaper Association: ‘In so far as you ask me to say anything which will tie the hands of this newspaper and prevent it giving free and honest expression of its views on policy which may be vital to this country, I shall not sit here and consent to that’. Mann had won his political battle.

### **The end of appeasement**

In March 1939, Germany seized the whole of Czechoslovakia. Now Neville Chamberlain denounced Hitler’s breach of pledges and declared Britain’s determination to resist Nazism. Deterrence through rearmament replaced the delusion that Germany might be bought off with territorial concessions. Mann approved, but he took every opportunity to snipe at Chamberlain and call for a broader government. His criticism of other newspapers remained vivid too, but he could not overcome economic reality. The Yorkshire Post was haemorrhaging money.

Arthur Mann resigned in November 1939 because he could not accept the merger of his title with the Leeds Mercury. He had denounced appeasement in language so compelling that even his chairman was obliged, in the end, to offer his backing. But Mann could not accept the diminution of status implied by merger with a less prestigious stablemate. Though he lived until 1972, he would never test his ideal of editorial independence in the crucible of war.

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