

Ally Sloper: The First Comics Superstar?

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Abstract (E): 19th century UK comics character Ally Sloper was the fictional superstar of his day. This paper explores his complex relationship with readers, and in particular the comics' use of interactive devices such as competitions. By developing a life outside the comics, in music hall theatre and via merchandising, Sloper revolutionised the rapport between consumer and product and set a template for capitalistic enterprise in the entertainment industry for the 20th and 21st centuries. Whether this made him the 'first' comics superstar per se is a subsidiary theme of the paper.

Abstract (F): Ally Sloper, un personnage de la bande dessinée anglaise du 19e siècle, était à son époque ce qu'on appellerait aujourd'hui une superstar médiatique. Le présent article analyse les rapports complexes entre ce personnage et son public. Il s'attache plus particulièrement à décrire la manière dont la bande dessinée se servait d'outils interactifs comme les concours. En développant une vie en dehors du monde de la bande dessinée, dans les music-halls et à travers des techniques de merchandising, Sloper a révolutionné le rapport entre consommateur et produit et il a créé un modèle pour les entreprises culturelles des 20e et 21e siècles. Si cette situation fait de lui ou non la "première" vedette de la bande dessinée, est ici une question secondaire.

Keywords: Ally Sloper, Competitions, marketing, Yellow Kid, music hall

Article

[\[1\]](#)



Detail from Ally Sloper: A Moral Lesson. 1873. Art: Marie Duval (probably from an idea by Charles Ross).

The extraordinary Ally Sloper appeared in British 'funny papers' and comics between 1867 and 1916 and periodically thereafter. [2] ♦ Today, few people have heard of him outside of comics scholarship: but a century ago it is no exaggeration to say that his visibility in (UK) popular culture would have been comparable to that of any blockbuster Hollywood creation. He was a Victorian hero - or anti-hero - and entered the public consciousness to the point where he set the template for a new kind of comedy. There has never been a British fictional character like him since.

My intention is not to emphasise the quality of the Sloper publications' artwork or writing, or indeed their possible interpretations: for such an analysis, please refer to the excellent article by Peter Bailey (Bailey 1983). Instead, I want to explore the less well known narrative of how the character was marketed. For it was through a combination of what we would now call synergistic marketing techniques involving a range of advertising campaigns and reader-response devices such as competitions, that the profile of the character was consolidated to become an everyday icon. So much so that he was jokingly considered 'real' by a proportion of the readership, and that he developed a life outside the comics. His fame was capitalised upon by music hall and later by the movie industry, while at the same time he became the star of less 'authorised' entertainments such as street theatre and village parades. The 'bootleg' Slopers of such events, along with unofficial merchandising, were then commented upon, and indeed sometimes (re)capitalised upon, by the Sloper papers and comics themselves.

Thus, I want to suggest that a complicated circuit of mutually promoting manifestations of Sloper was created, and further that this was the first time in history that such a circuit could have come into existence. This is because we can think of Sloper's rise as part of the same drive that led to the establishment of the mass-market leisure industries in the last decades of the 19th century - music hall, cigarette smoking, organised sports (especially football), large circulation newspapers and 'penny publications' ('dreadfuls' and their heirs), and to an extent, seaside holiday culture. Sloper - or his publications - commented upon all of these, and in some cases was intimately related to them, as we shall see. For these new industries ('new' in the sense of being 'mass') to flourish there needed to be certain preconditions, and it was only in the late Victorian and Edwardian eras that such preconditions could come together: namely, a mass working-class audience with money and time to spare, a rising level of literacy, urban growth and concentration, an efficient transport system (to reach those urban centres), and the inclination to use advertising and new technologies (especially with regard to printing). Whether Ally Sloper was the first comics character *per se* to be exploited in terms of these conditions is a subsidiary theme of the paper.

For the uninitiated: who was Sloper? He was essentially a con-man and a drunkard - the illustration shows him holding on to a lamp-post for stability - and was often drawn with a bottle sticking out of his back pocket. As his character evolved, he would become involved in all kinds of schemes, and would be joined by supporting characters, among them his wife and children and his 'good friend' Ikey Mo (sometimes 'Iky Mo'), a Jewish stereotype. His name, 'Ally Sloper', is a pun on sloping off up the alley-way to avoid the rent collector. His environment was essentially London, but as we shall see, he went on excursions to other parts of the UK and also abroad - the purpose of which was primarily to make fun of foreigners.

In terms of starting to think about how the character was promoted, it is useful to turn to the work of British historian Martin Barker, who while investigating comics of a more recent vintage built on aspects of literary theory to argue for the idea of a 'contract'. Barker states: 'A "contract" involves an agreement that a text will talk to us in ways we recognise. It will enter into a dialogue with us. And that dialogue, with its dependable elements and form, will relate to some aspect of our lives in our society.' (Barker 1989: 261) In other words, the media are only capable of exerting power over audiences to the extent that there is a 'contract' between texts and audiences, like a silent conversation, which relates to some specific aspect(s) of the audiences' social lives. Ideology is thus dialogical (an idea that is close to the work of some European scholars, notably Jan Baetens and his studies of ◆ Philippe Marion; for example, see Baetens 2001). In terms of Sloper, how the nature of this contract was first shaped by commercial factors and then by the barrelling momentum of the creation itself is most conveniently explored in chronological fashion.

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DIGESTIVE, NUTRITIOUS, SUSTAINING.
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JUDY
Gilbert Dalziel Editor

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IT ACTS LIKE MAGIC
THOUSANDS HAVE BEEN CURED
NEVER IS EQUAL
It is the only plaster that has been used by the British Army and Navy, and is the only one that has been used by the Emperor of Russia, the King of Prussia, and the Emperor of Austria.

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PERFECT PURITY. ABSOLUTELY GUARANTEED.
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THE CURE FOR RHEUMATISM COLMAN'S MUSTARD OIL.
CONCENTRATED. Sold by Chemists and Grocers.

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Lent to the Work of Clothes Co. 10, 12, 14, 16, 18, 20, 22, 24, 26, 28, 30, 32, 34, 36, 38, 40, 42, 44, 46, 48, 50, 52, 54, 56, 58, 60, 62, 64, 66, 68, 70, 72, 74, 76, 78, 80, 82, 84, 86, 88, 90, 92, 94, 96, 98, 100, 102, 104, 106, 108, 110, 112, 114, 116, 118, 120, 122, 124, 126, 128, 130, 132, 134, 136, 138, 140, 142, 144, 146, 148, 150, 152, 154, 156, 158, 160, 162, 164, 166, 168, 170, 172, 174, 176, 178, 180, 182, 184, 186, 188, 190, 192, 194, 196, 198, 200, 202, 204, 206, 208, 210, 212, 214, 216, 218, 220, 222, 224, 226, 228, 230, 232, 234, 236, 238, 240, 242, 244, 246, 248, 250, 252, 254, 256, 258, 260, 262, 264, 266, 268, 270, 272, 274, 276, 278, 280, 282, 284, 286, 288, 290, 292, 294, 296, 298, 300, 302, 304, 306, 308, 310, 312, 314, 316, 318, 320, 322, 324, 326, 328, 330, 332, 334, 336, 338, 340, 342, 344, 346, 348, 350, 352, 354, 356, 358, 360, 362, 364, 366, 368, 370, 372, 374, 376, 378, 380, 382, 384, 386, 388, 390, 392, 394, 396, 398, 400, 402, 404, 406, 408, 410, 412, 414, 416, 418, 420, 422, 424, 426, 428, 430, 432, 434, 436, 438, 440, 442, 444, 446, 448, 450, 452, 454, 456, 458, 460, 462, 464, 466, 468, 470, 472, 474, 476, 478, 480, 482, 484, 486, 488, 490, 492, 494, 496, 498, 500, 502, 504, 506, 508, 510, 512, 514, 516, 518, 520, 522, 524, 526, 528, 530, 532, 534, 536, 538, 540, 542, 544, 546, 548, 550, 552, 554, 556, 558, 560, 562, 564, 566, 568, 570, 572, 574, 576, 578, 580, 582, 584, 586, 588, 590, 592, 594, 596, 598, 600, 602, 604, 606, 608, 610, 612, 614, 616, 618, 620, 622, 624, 626, 628, 630, 632, 634, 636, 638, 640, 642, 644, 646, 648, 650, 652, 654, 656, 658, 660, 662, 664, 666, 668, 670, 672, 674, 676, 678, 680, 682, 684, 686, 688, 690, 692, 694, 696, 698, 700, 702, 704, 706, 708, 710, 712, 714, 716, 718, 720, 722, 724, 726, 728, 730, 732, 734, 736, 738, 740, 742, 744, 746, 748, 750, 752, 754, 756, 758, 760, 762, 764, 766, 768, 770, 772, 774, 776, 778, 780, 782, 784, 786, 788, 790, 792, 794, 796, 798, 800, 802, 804, 806, 808, 810, 812, 814, 816, 818, 820, 822, 824, 826, 828, 830, 832, 834, 836, 838, 840, 842, 844, 846, 848, 850, 852, 854, 856, 858, 860, 862, 864, 866, 868, 870, 872, 874, 876, 878, 880, 882, 884, 886, 888, 890, 892, 894, 896, 898, 900, 902, 904, 906, 908, 910, 912, 914, 916, 918, 920, 922, 924, 926, 928, 930, 932, 934, 936, 938, 940, 942, 944, 946, 948, 950, 952, 954, 956, 958, 960, 962, 964, 966, 968, 970, 972, 974, 976, 978, 980, 982, 984, 986, 988, 990, 992, 994, 996, 998, 1000.

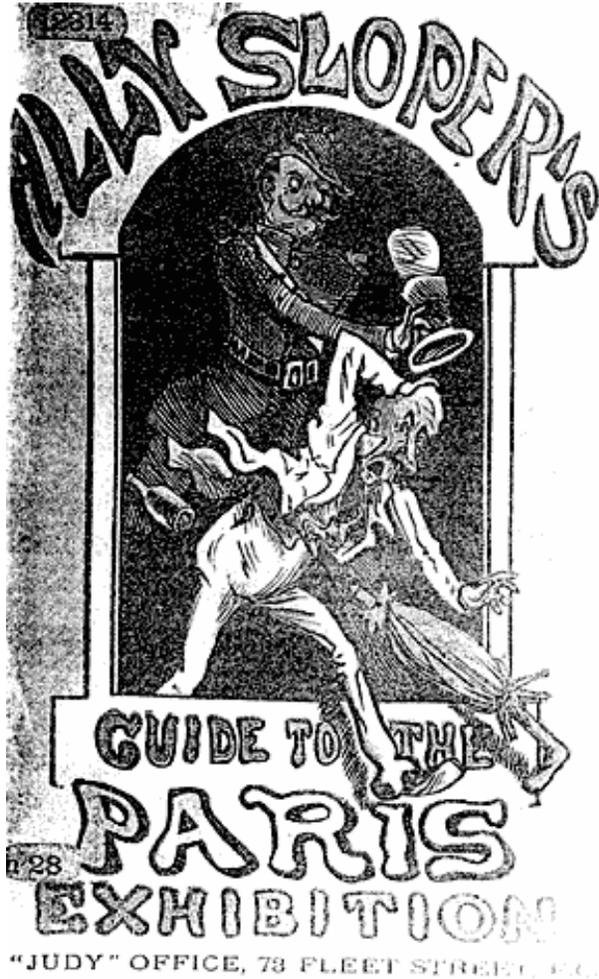
TOOTH-ACHE CURED INSTANTLY BY Bunter's Nerveine
Solely Prepared by Bunter's Nerveine. Sold by all Chemists, 10, 12, 14, 16, 18, 20, 22, 24, 26, 28, 30, 32, 34, 36, 38, 40, 42, 44, 46, 48, 50, 52, 54, 56, 58, 60, 62, 64, 66, 68, 70, 72, 74, 76, 78, 80, 82, 84, 86, 88, 90, 92, 94, 96, 98, 100, 102, 104, 106, 108, 110, 112, 114, 116, 118, 120, 122, 124, 126, 128, 130, 132, 134, 136, 138, 140, 142, 144, 146, 148, 150, 152, 154, 156, 158, 160, 162, 164, 166, 168, 170, 172, 174, 176, 178, 180, 182, 184, 186, 188, 190, 192, 194, 196, 198, 200, 202, 204, 206, 208, 210, 212, 214, 216, 218, 220, 222, 224, 226, 228, 230, 232, 234, 236, 238, 240, 242, 244, 246, 248, 250, 252, 254, 256, 258, 260, 262, 264, 266, 268, 270, 272, 274, 276, 278, 280, 282, 284, 286, 288, 290, 292, 294, 296, 298, 300, 302, 304, 306, 308, 310, 312, 314, 316, 318, 320, 322, 324, 326, 328, 330, 332, 334, 336, 338, 340, 342, 344, 346, 348, 350, 352, 354, 356, 358, 360, 362, 364, 366, 368, 370, 372, 374, 376, 378, 380, 382, 384, 386, 388, 390, 392, 394, 396, 398, 400, 402, 404, 406, 408, 410, 412, 414, 416, 418, 420, 422, 424, 426, 428, 430, 432, 434, 436, 438, 440, 442, 444, 446, 448, 450, 452, 454, 456, 458, 460, 462, 464, 466, 468, 470, 472, 474, 476, 478, 480, 482, 484, 486, 488, 490, 492, 494, 496, 498, 500, 502, 504, 506, 508, 510, 512, 514, 516, 518, 520, 522, 524, 526, 528, 530, 532, 534, 536, 538, 540, 542, 544, 546, 548, 550, 552, 554, 556, 558, 560, 562, 564, 566, 568, 570, 572, 574, 576, 578, 580, 582, 584, 586, 588, 590, 592, 594, 596, 598, 600, 602, 604, 606, 608, 610, 612, 614, 616, 618, 620, 622, 624, 626, 628, 630, 632, 634, 636, 638, 640, 642, 644, 646, 648, 650, 652, 654, 656, 658, 660, 662, 664, 666, 668, 670, 672, 674, 676, 678, 680, 682, 684, 686, 688, 690, 692, 694, 696, 698, 700, 702, 704, 706, 708, 710, 712, 714, 716, 718, 720, 722, 724, 726, 728, 730, 732, 734, 736, 738, 740, 742, 744, 746, 748, 750, 752, 754, 756, 758, 760, 762, 764, 766, 768, 770, 772, 774, 776, 778, 780, 782, 784, 786, 788, 790, 792, 794, 796, 798, 800, 802, 804, 806, 808, 810, 812, 814, 816, 818, 820, 822, 824, 826, 828, 830, 832, 834, 836, 838, 840, 842, 844, 846, 848, 850, 852, 854, 856, 858, 860, 862, 864, 866, 868, 870, 872, 874, 876, 878, 880, 882, 884, 886, 888, 890, 892, 894, 896, 898, 900, 902, 904, 906, 908, 910, 912, 914, 916, 918, 920, 922, 924, 926, 928, 930, 932, 934, 936, 938, 940, 942, 944, 946, 948, 950, 952, 954, 956, 958, 960, 962, 964, 966, 968, 970, 972, 974, 976, 978, 980, 982, 984, 986, 988, 990, 992, 994, 996, 998, 1000.

NESTLE'S FOOD FOR INFANTS AND INVALIDS.
Very nourishing and palatable. Does not curdle the stomach. INVALUABLE ALSO DURING THE PERIOD OF WEANING.
Nestle's Food is sold in 1 lb. tins and 2 lb. tins at 1s. 6d. and 2s. 6d. respectively.
N. NESTLE, 5, NEW MILK, LONDON, E.C.

FURNISH OETZMANN & CO. THROUGHOUT. 61, 69, 71, 73, 75, 77, 79, HAMPSHIRE ROAD; Near Tottenham Court Road. CATALOGUE Post-free.

Cover to *Judy*. May 4, 1892. Art/script: unknown.

Sloper's origins were in the paper illustrated here, *Judy*, in 1867, though he had appeared previously elsewhere in prototype form. [3] *Judy* was a less politically orientated companion to the more famous *Punch*, and by the time of our pictured example (1892) advertising had become a major form of revenue, to the point where it swamps everything else on the cover. Sloper was created by Charles Ross, formerly a writer of penny dreadfuls, though his wife Marie Duval soon took over cartooning duties and was certainly important in developing the character (as historian David Kunzle has shown; see Kunzle 1986). Sloper was possibly influenced by Dickens' Mr Micawber and maybe certain characters in *Punch* (e.g. the cockney 'Arry'), but soon developed his own conniving charm and became the most popular feature of the publication.

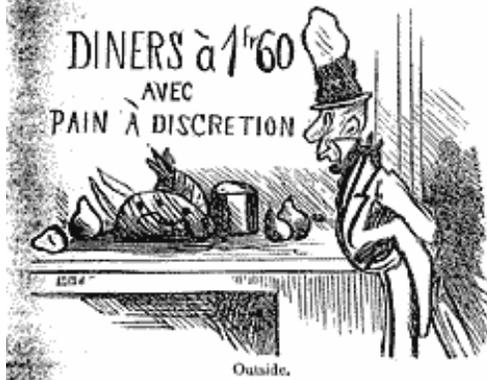


Cover to Ally Sloper's Guide to the Paris Exhibition. 1878. Art: Marie Duval (probable idea: Charles Ross).

The Sloper stories were then filleted out from *Judy* to be published discretely in collected books, a process that began in 1873 with *Ally Sloper: A Moral Lesson*. These smaller format books were responsible for consolidating Sloper's reputation as ♦ a star in his own right, and it is fair to date his cult status to around this period. The *Judy* spin-offs, none of which were as illustration/strip orientated as *A Moral Lesson*, numbered seven in all (see Gifford 1984: 39f).

One book from 1878 illustrates the possibilities for advertising. *Ally Sloper's Guide to the Paris Exhibition* (illustrated here), in part a parody of the tourist guides then popular, ♦ was the fourth of the *Judy* line. Here you can see that the cover depicts Sloper being kicked out of the Exhibition by a gendarme for bad behaviour.

Whilst Sloper grapples with the French upon the bill in the window. At last he mastered it! In plain English, the proprietor of the establishment promised



a substantial repast for thirty-two sous—a matter of one and fourpence—with as much bread as the customer chose to eat.

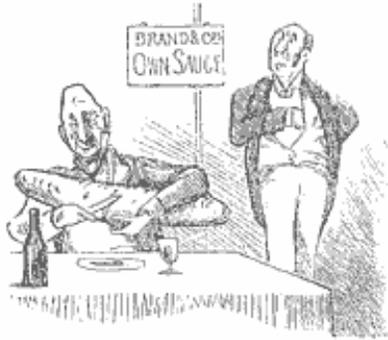
"Anyhow," said A. Sloper, "if the dishes are small sized, I can fill up with bread."

The bread was on the table ready cut, and as A. Sloper studied the *menu*, he nibbled at it abstractedly. The waiter was less absent minded. He hung around and watched that bread going, crumb by crumb. When A. Sloper reached the last crumb but one, he asked whether A. Sloper had almost made his mind up what he would begin with.

A. Sloper had, and the first dish was served to him,

Meanwhile the Dame de Comptoir began to begin to notice A. Sloper's demand for the staff of life, and having put the waiter through a brief cross-examination, bade him place an entire loaf upon A. Sloper's table. "It will make him ashamed of himself," she said.

"By Jove!" said A. Sloper to himself, "there's no



Going on at it—worse.

stint about 'em, and that's the truth, though how they do it at the price there's no saying."

He laboured on, however. The dishes came and went, and so did the bread. Meanwhile the other customers began to get up from their places and grouped themselves around, and the *patron* having been sent for, laid two more loaves upon Sloper's table with a low bow full of smothered irony.

"They're almost over-doin' it," said Sloper,

Pages from Ally Sloper's Guide to the Paris Exhibition.

Inside we have a story, told in text with illustrations, in which Sloper enters a restaurant because he thinks he can get a very cheap meal. The cost is 32 sous, but because the bread is free, Sloper goes to town and stuffs himself. The waiter brings loaf after loaf and gets increasingly disgruntled. It's a good joke, and eventually Sloper is ejected from the establishment with his tail between his legs. But if we look closely at the script that accompanies the second drawing, we can see that in the background there is an advert for 'Brand and Co's Own Sauce'. This is curious because in the first drawing the sign on the window is in French, and, after all, we are supposed to be in Paris.

BRAND & CO'S OWN SAUCE
 AN EXCELLENT RELISH FOR ALL KINDS OF SOUPS, MEATS, FISH, ENTREES, &c.
 SOLE ADDRESS: N. LITTLE'S, STAMHOPE, BY MARYLEBONE

FOREIGN STAMPS
 50 VARIETIES, 7d. Serbia, Egypt, Brazil, Cuba, &c.
 100 SCARCER VARIETIES, 1s. 7d. Finland, Moldavia, Wallachia, Bonn, Hannover, &c. New series for 1876. New Packs of Great Britain. New Packs of United States. New Packs of Great Britain. New Packs of Russia and Coloured Insects. Over 200 different Packs, and many others in Stock.
 THE ILLUSTRATED POSTAGE STAMP ALBUMS, THE IMPERIAL POSTAGE STAMP ALBUMS, THE NATIONAL GIFT ALBUMS, THE STAMP COLLECTOR'S HANDBOOK, Second Edition.
 Illustrated from Catalogues, completely revised, and full of lists of stamps are appended to several of the books. Full particulars of all the above are given in the ILLUSTRATED FOREIGN STAMP AND GIFT PUBLICATIONS, which are, in every respect, a treasury of information valuable to collectors, sent in any edition, post free on application.

STANLEY, GIBBONS, & Co., 8 Gower Street, London, W.C.

GRANT'S MORELLA CHERRY BRANDY
 The delicious product of the famed Kent Morellas.
 Supplied to Her Majesty at all the Royal Palaces.

GRANT'S MORELLA CHERRY BRANDY
 Used in place of Wine. A valuable tonic. Recommended by the Medical profession. Refreshing with soda-water.

GRANT'S MORELLA CHERRY BRANDY
 May be obtained at the Refreshment Bars of the Paris Exhibition.

Manufacturer—T. GRANT, Distillery, Maidstone.

Magic of Science. **STATIONARY SCIENTIFIC AMUSEMENTS** Brilliant Experiments.
 Endless Instructive Pastime for Evenings, Holidays, and Wet Days.
 BRISTOL, BIRMINGHAM, GLASGOW, LONDON, LEEDS, MANCHESTER, NEWCASTLE, &c.
 W. E. STATION, 111, 10, STRAND, LONDON.

MAKE YOUR OWN CHARCOAL, THE NEW CURE
 For INDIGESTION, BILIOUSNESS and LIVER COMPLAINTS, Functional Constipation, Flatulency, Rheumatism, Warts, Eruptions, and all affections of the Chest and Colon. Recipe for its preparation and use &c. &c. with a trial Box of CHARCOAL TABLETS, DOSE AND DIRECTIONS, and full and complete information, sent free on application. European Wholesale and Retail Managers, Medical Charcoal, Charing Cross, London. Dr. Hensell says: "Your Charcoal is pure, well carbonized, and being an impalpable powder, prepared with great care, is well adapted for medicinal purposes."

Advert, Ally Sloper's Guide to the Paris Exhibition.

All becomes clear, however, when we flip to the back of the publication and survey the advertisements. Sure enough, there it is at the top of the page: 'Brand and Co's Own Sauce'. The text reads: 'An excellent relish for all kinds of soups, meats, fish, entrees, etc.' You have to wonder: could this be the earliest example of a publication ♦ starring a comics character in which 'subliminal advertising' plays a role? Indeed, did the device originate in popular publishing?

There is one final twist to the story, because some time between 1870 and 1910 bottles of sauce were manufactured with Sloper's image embossed into them. They are coloured green, are about ten inches tall, and have an image of Sloper holding a bottle and jumping in the air with the legend 'Ally Sloper's Favourite Relish'. We can speculate that the sauce was very popular owing to the number of such bottles that are in circulation today in UK antique shops and on e-bay. So

far, so interesting. But look back at that second illustration for the story. Could that be a relish bottle on the table in front of Sloper? If so, perhaps we are entering the realms of product placement - and thereby a new level of marketing sophistication. [\[4\]](#)



2003 photograph of embossed bottle of sauce - 'Ally Sloper's Favourite Relish'.

Whether or not the Sloper bottle does appear in the 1878 book, the point is that the 'contract' between Sloper and his readers is being extended into areas of everyday consumerism. Direct endorsement of products by the character in his funny papers/comics from the 1873-1916 period would include offers of goods in which the manufacturer's name was not mentioned, e.g. cigars ('Ally Sloper's Torpedoes') and pills ('Sloper's Pills...cure liver complaint, headache and stomach troubles'), as well as adverts for those of named producers, e.g. bicycles, neck-ties, magic lanterns and melodeons - the latter with an image of Sloper in the advert itself ('My favourite musical instrument'). [\[5\]](#) These were products for adults - or at least, mainly teenagers and adults - and show that advertisers believed that potential purchasers would be willing to enter into the spirit of 'the game of Sloper'. In other words, he was transcending his role as a vehicle for humour and becoming associated with, in particular, the rise of leisure consumerism. Importantly, then, Sloper was developing as a 'brand', and as ever the cultural role of brands was to respond to the zeitgeist. [\[6\]](#)

By 1884, it was clearly time that Sloper had his own publication, and the historically important *Ally Sloper's Half Holiday* marked the next step in his evolution. The title was a reference to the 'half holiday' given to workers on a Saturday afternoon, and signposted the idea that the focus of the comic would be on working class leisure. (This did not necessarily mean that the readership

would be solely working class, however, as Bailey has shown; see Bailey 1983: 17 and 27). Sloper appeared on the cover in almost every issue, and the publication was therefore unusual in that it featured a continuing character (there had been recurring characters before, but never promoted with quite such gusto). [71] ♦ Published for most of its existence by the Dalziel Brothers, and edited by one Gilbert Dalziel, *ASHH* was a mix of cartoons, strips and text stories and had a galvanising effect on the way funny papers and comics were marketed and guided editorially.



Cover to *ASHH*. May 5, 1888. Art for main cartoon: *W.F. Thomas*.

In the cover reproduced here you can see that the artwork has become more intricate: the covers were now being produced by *W.F. Thomas*, while reprints of the *Duval* material were relegated to the inner pages. *Thomas* and his arguably more talented predecessor *W.G. Baxter* would be hyped by the comic, and samples of their artwork given away as prizes and 'free gifts'. This was unusual at a time when the vast majority of cartoonists laboured in anonymity (evidently the publishers believed it would be to *Sloper's* and their benefit - the *Dalziels* were well known as dealers in prints and engravings). This cover also indicates that new characters were playing a bigger role in the *Sloper* mythology - here his wife catches him leching at paintings of nudes at

the Royal Academy. (Which I suppose goes to prove that there's no such thing as a new joke - Benny Hill would have been proud.) Unlike our pictured example from *Judy* from the same period, the advertising was kept away from the cover, the better to show off its star.

But what was particularly interesting about *ASHH* for the purposes of this paper was that it extended the contract between Sloper and the readers still further. This was a deliberate policy, largely masterminded by Gilbert Dalziel (who was simultaneously the Editor of *Judy*). In the words of a retrospective of *ASHH*'s history (*ASHH*, December 23, 1922), Gilbert was '...a splendid businessman, keen, enthusiastic, brainy... and brimful of ideas for "stunts" for making his papers go...' ('Chats at "The Cheese"', p.10.) This business acumen would be increasingly in evidence as time progressed.

Thus, the endorsing of products by Sloper continued in the back pages, along with regular adverts (including for other Dalziel products such as books of prints), but towards the front of the comic a space was created for reader interaction - competitions, readers' letters, and so on. This also included the opportunity for readers to actually 'create' their own comic by way of sending in jokes, limericks, puns and sketches. If we look closely at this illustration of page two of a copy from 1904, we can see the extent of such 'stunts' and of the drive towards interactivity.



(click thumbnail to see enlarged image)

Page 2 from ASHH. Jan 2, 1904. Art/script: various.

Here we can see, in the left hand column:

*Instructions to correspondents.

*Messages to correspondents.

*Offer of £150 to 'the next of kin of any Man, Woman, Boy or Girl... who shall happen to meet with his or her death in a Railway Accident.... PROVIDED a copy of the current issue of 'Ally Sloper's Half Holiday' be found upon the Deceased...' . [Evidently this was not meant to be a

joke. *ASHH* was seen as 'railway literature' i.e. sold from railway kiosks and intended to be read between stops. Crashes were frequent - as the grotesque '11 Claims Already Paid' would indicate.]

Right hand column:

*A competition: 'A Fifty Guinea Diamond Ring' is offered to the 'handsomest actress of them all', voted upon by readers.

*'Circulation Competition'. 'A prize of five guineas will be given to the reader who induces the greatest number of people to purchase the 'Half Holiday' during the week...'

*'A shilling pocket knife...To every reader who sends us Twelve signed Coupons of this week's issue.'

*'A silver watch will be given for the best original joke.'

*'A silver watch will be given for the best funny sketch.'

*'A silver watch will be given for the best pun.'

This looks like an extravagant list. But in the period leading up to the First World War there were numerous other examples of reader rewards, including razors, tobacco jars, and clay pipes. In the early issues of *ASHH* such items were given away for free - readers merely had to send in their address or a set of cut-out coupons. But towards the end of the 19th century, as competitions became the craze of the moment, so 'free gifts' gave way to 'prizes'. The high point of this phenomenon can be dated to an article in *ASHH* for February 11 1899 entitled 'Our Prizes', which announced that thenceforward, '...prizes of some kind will be given away every week regularly...'

No doubt rivalry from other funny papers post-1890 (especially those published by The Amalgamated Press - see below) lent urgency to the craze. Usually such competitions would be on inane topics like the ones illustrated above (perhaps the most amusing was 1899's 'Sloper Potato Competition' in which a one pound prize was given 'For the tatur most like Ally'), but occasionally they would be more orientated towards current affairs, such as an example from 1902 which asked when various sieges throughout the world would end, and another from 1904 which invited readers to count the number of British battleships in an illustration - with hindsight, a poignant reference to the arms race that would contribute to the outbreak of war a decade later.

ALLY SLOPER'S HALF-HOLIDAY

COMMENCING FROM MAY 14th, 1904.

A. SLOPER, F.O.J., A.S.S., Etc., Etc.

(FRIEND OF JAPAN, ACCUMULATED SHILLING
SCHEMERE),

WILL PUT BY, IN HIS TIN MONEY BOX,

ONE SHILLING A DAY

UNTIL THE

**FALL OF
PORT ARTHUR.**

And the accumulated funds will be handed over to the Com-
petitor who correctly foretells the

DATE OF SURRENDER.

Port Arthur will fall

Name

Address

A. SLOPER, F.O.J.N.,

WILL GIVE ANOTHER

BOB A DAY

ON THE SAME CONDITIONS TILL THE

**FALL OF
VLADIVOSTOCK.**

Vladivostock will fall

Name

Address

A SLOPER, F.O.J.A,

WILL

DITTO, DITTO, DITTO

TILL THE

FALL OF HARBIN.

Harbin will fall

Name

Address

What you have to do is to fill in the Coupon, or Coupons, above,
with the date you think these places will surrender, together with
your name and address, and post them to:

ADMIRAL TOSIO SLOPER,

"THE SLOPERIES"

LONDON, E.C.

Competition, ASHH. June 4, 1904.

ARBITRATION COMPETITION.

Diplomatic relations between Powers "A" and "B" having become strained to such extent that WAR WAS DECLARED. At the next special meeting

A. SLOPER, Esq., F.O.M.,

advised the arbitrator as

Arbitrator.

which after has been duly accepted.

"ALLY SLOPER" now invites his readers to help him in his AWARD, and offers as **RECOMPENSE** the handsome sum of **£25.**

The point at issue is—

WHICH POWER HAS THE LARGEST NAVY?

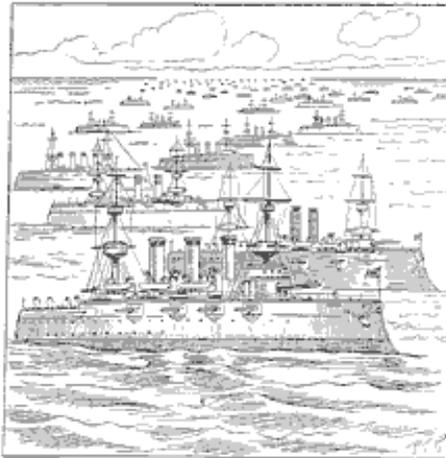
Count carefully the number of ships you can see in the lists, and also note the further advantage each has. The Competition begins with this Committee for judging ships, and will be published in the next issue of the last drawing.

The Committee will make themselves to answer any letter regarding the Competition. Should any form of protest be received, it will be dealt with as best may.

THERE ARE NO HIDDEN SHIPS. This is a Competition specially designed so that all the readers may have, irrespective of age or sex.

KEEP THIS PAGE BY YOU.

DO NOT SEND IT IN YET.



NOTE.—Each year is divided into Three Fleets, and our series has been arranged to start on drawings starting with Fleet

THE FIRST FLEET OF POWER

"A" is both in the Competition.

The Prizes will in no case be divided.

The Editors of "A" will not be responsible for any loss of drawings, and will not be held responsible for any loss of drawings.

THE FIRST FLEET OF POWER

"B" will be shown, and will be shown in the second drawing.

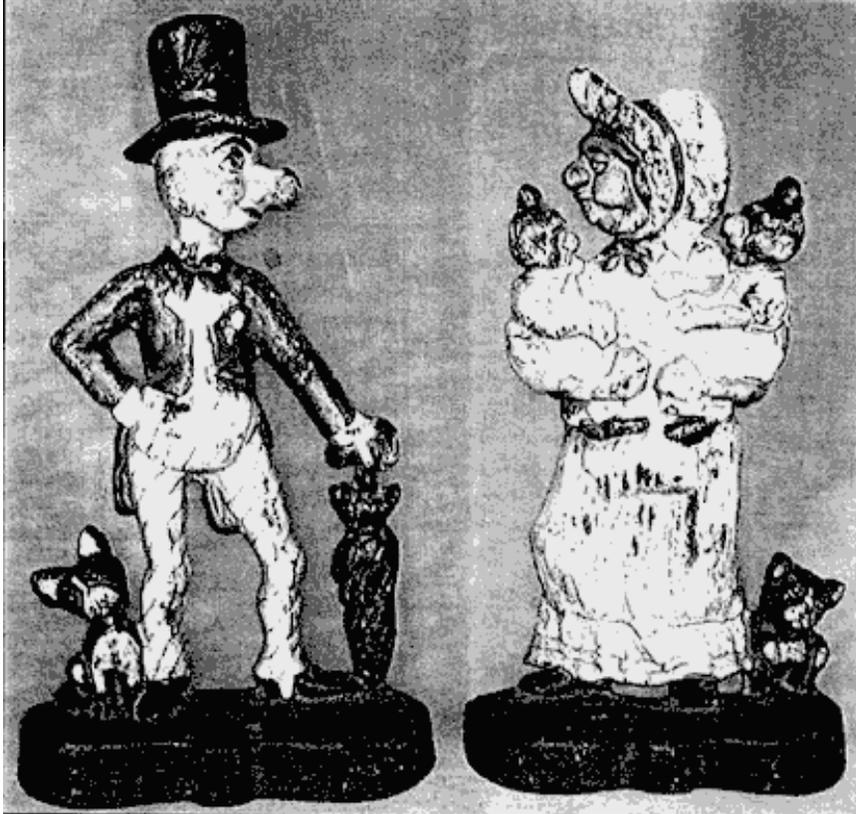
To the Reader giving the correct number of ships of the Navies of both Powers, a sum of £25 will be given, and TWENTY copies of TEN SHILLINGS will be given as well as a letter signed by the Editor of the next issue of the paper.

Name Address No. of Ships

Competition, ASHH. April 9, 1904.

It would be wrong to suggest that such schemes were unique to *ASHH*. Other publications from the period were going in a similar direction (including *Judy*), and the fad for competitions spawned at least one example devoted entirely to them (*Competitions Weekly*). It would also be erroneous to argue that the policy didn't have its occasional problems - as a 'Law Report' from *The Times* in 1909 attests: '...The action was brought by Miss Gertrude F.J. Jenkins against the proprietors and publishers of *Ally Sloper's Half Holiday* to recover damages for breach of contract... [involving] what is known as a Limerick Competition...' (Report for June 10, anon., *The Times*, June 11).

Also, it didn't take long for others not involved with *ASHH* to come up with the idea of producing 'prizes' that didn't have to be competed for. Bootleg merchandising undoubtedly originated in the *Judy* period, but reached a peak at around the turn of the century. Products never advertised in *ASHH*, for example, included paperweights, mugs, door stops, walking sticks, bits of treen, vesta cases, tie pins (sold, possibly exclusively, by Gamages store), vending machines, crested china busts, puppets, and a number of games. [8] Indeed, the comic itself sometimes made reference to the 'illicit' Sloper industry.



Cast iron door-stops in the form of Sloper and wife. c. 1880.

But in general, it is clear that the addition of competitions was a great success, and gave *ASHH* a significant lift. The lists of winners and their addresses were proof that distribution of the comic was penetrating the furthest corners of the Kingdom (thanks to the recent expansion of the railways) and even of the Empire. And the number of competition entrants was huge: *The Times* report above states that 17,621 people had entered the limerick contest - a staggering figure even by today's standards. Moreover, *ASHH* had an advantage over its rivals in the person of Sloper himself. So although in one sense the 'game of Sloper' was being extended to 'the game of *ASHH*', nevertheless he could be called upon in cartoon form to 'present' and display prizes, announce competitions, etc. (For the example of the 'fifty guinea diamond ring', given to 'the handsomest actress', as illustrated in the page above, Sloper was depicted in several subsequent issues parading the glittering piece of jewellery.) In short, when people competed for prizes, they were also competing for Ally's favours.



Detail of 'Weekly Whirligig', featuring a competition for a diamond ring, ASHH, Jan 2, 1904.

But Gilbert Dalziel had other stunts up his sleeve. Perhaps the most imaginative was the creation of a Sloper fan club. 'All you have to do is send in twelve coupons from twelve consecutive issues... you will receive a splendidly designed diploma... You can then use the letters MOSC (Member of Sloper's Club) after your name... You will also receive the Sloperian Token....' This is the first example of a club of its kind that I am aware of, and is clearly a precursor to the much better known comics clubs for titles such as *The Eagle* in the UK and Marvel comics in the US. Clearly, the sheer longevity of the character meant that it was possible to generate and sustain a devoted fan base on this level, something that no other publication from the period was in a position to consider.



'Sloper's Club', ASHH, Feb 6, 1904.

Other gimmicks were less about direct engagement with the readers than about the publication's producers expressing the imagined sentiments of those readers. So, for instance, the 'Friend of Sloper' (F.O.S.) Awards of Merit were bestowed upon people that Ally estimated were worthy of the honour. Often these would be popular music hall performers (see below), but occasionally more eminent personalities would be named. When Prime Minister Gladstone was made F.O.S., it did not need to be made explicit that this was in recognition of his reputation as 'the friend of the working class': Gladstone in turn made capital out of the award and had the certificate of merit framed and put on his wall in his Scottish home (whether this was a sincere expression of his liking for the comic, or more a political gesture - like Tony Blair shaking the hands of members of Oasis - can only be speculated upon). Similarly, there were 'Lifesaving medals', given by Sloper to members of the public who had performed outstanding acts of bravery - a surprisingly sober addition to the comic.

In summing up this main part of the paper, we can say that during the period of *ASHH*, the 'contract' that Martin Barker has written about was solidified. The idea of reader participation essentially ensured that the comic became people's 'friend' and that they would come back to buying it week after week. They invested in the comic, and it in turn gave the illusion of investing in them. The arrangement had all the appearance of being a 'dialogue' - it was the point at which, perhaps, the silent conversation became audible - and was an essential ingredient in making *ASHH*, in its own words, 'The Biggest Selling Penny Paper in the World'.

This was a lesson well learned by the publishing trade in general. Other funny papers followed suit, as we shall see in a moment, and so too did the nascent women's magazine industry. Historians of the latter have been keen to point out the emphasis on reader-generated content. *My*

Weekly, launched by DC Thomson in 1910, was conceived with 'a personal relationship' with readers in mind, and by the time of *Woman's Own*, the market leader in 1950, the rule that one fifth of the content should be reader generated had become a set formula (see Braithwaite 1995).

But before leaving this notion of the contract, it is important to note that it had political boundaries. At a basic level, these were set by the parameters of capitalistic exchange. In other words, Sloper and his comics had to confirm to a certain kind of politics in order not to offend advertisers (and to a lesser extent readers). Thus, although Sloper was 'degenerate', in the terms of the period, in the sense that he was a drunkard and a trickster, it is also made clear that he is pro-Royal, anti-the unemployed, and pro-Empire. On one cover he is seen kissing Queen Victoria's hand; on another he's dressed in policeman's garb, fighting off a mob of the unemployed (see detail illustrated). There are many other examples.



Cartoon from cover, ASHH, Feb 27, 1886. Art: W.G.Baxter.



Cartoon, *ASHH*, Jan 14, 1899. Art: unknown. A patriotic Sloper shows his support for the Boer War.

In other words, Sloper is a loyal working-class citizen, a bit rough around the edges, but not likely to revolt. This is an image of working class masculinity that became more and more prevalent in the music hall as the 19th century progressed, an area of entertainment that Sloper was intimately involved with, as we shall see, and has been interpreted as an imaginative effort to allay middle class fears of revolution (see Jones 1974). Indeed, according to Bailey the cartoonists and writers on *ASHH* were themselves middle class. This innate conservatism was certainly out of tune with the rising discontent that led to the workers' riots of 1887 and the connected spread of socialist ideas (it was the British working class, after all, that had provided the model for Marx and Engels' thinking on capital) [9].

But it served a purpose, and in terms of a modern 'Chomskian' analysis of the press, it is logical to argue that Sloper only became as famous as he did because he stayed within certain limits. [10] The advertisers had to be satisfied that this was the kind of character they could happily be associated with, and therefore the politics of the stories were never likely to stray into controversy. Sloper was both made by a certain kind of ideology, and a transmitter of that ideology. This was the underlying nature of the dialogue that Martin Barker has outlined: though how far readers negotiated the text and offered interpretations of their own can only be imagined.

All of this goes some way to explaining Sloper's fame, but perhaps not entirely his place in British culture, his 'superstar' status. For the years 1867 to 1916 were notable for the way in which he developed a life of his own. In order to explore this, the role of music hall is unavoidable. For the same forces that allowed for the rise of Sloper - ♦ a working class with growing leisure time and more income - were also responsible for the explosive expansion in the number of music halls in the period. The crossover between the two was significant from the start, and although this relationship cannot be adequately discussed here, for reasons of space (I hope to say more about it in a paper for the 2003 Berlin Comics Festival), we can begin by saying that in part it was the result of Charles Ross's plan for exploiting the character.

According to an article in a 1922 *ASHH*, referring to events of several decades previously, 'As the "only Jones" of *Judy*, Ross was one of the best-known first-nighters of his day... theatrical criticism then-a-days compared very favourably with these buttery times when the only honest criterion of a play is the box office...' It goes on to say: 'Ross himself was manager of the Surrey, Strand, and Princess's theatres, and toured several companies, including an Ally Sloper Comedy Drama, and, with our mutual friend Gus Harris, arranged for a character called "Ally Sloper" played by Victor Stevens, to be introduced into the D.L. Panto of the "Forty Thieves"...' ('Chats at "The Cheese"', anon., *ASHH*, Christmas Cattle Show Day, 1922, p.9).

Ross was thus clearly very important in recognising Sloper's crossover potential from the start. We know that music halls would vet acts in advance, so it seems fair to speculate that a 'safe brand' such as Sloper - moreover one with wide recognition among the public courtesy of his comics - would have a significant advantage (see Horrall 2001, especially pp. 1-6). Theories on the increasing political conservatism of the halls would seem to reinforce this (see above). Ross, for his part, positioned himself very cannily: he owned the copyright to Sloper until he sold it to the Dalziels, and as a theatrical (music hall) impresario could make the best use of it. ♦

But as well as these 'authorised' performances, Sloper also became the star of street theatre. For example, a variety of ventriloquist dummies and automata have survived from the period, as well as smaller puppets of Sloper plus wife which are believed to have taken over from 'Punch and Judy' in sideshows. There are also photographs of village parades in which Sloper appears, courtesy of huge papier-m♦ché heads that would fit over the heads of the paraders. (Quite possibly these heads were pantomime masks.) Clearly, much of this activity would have been amateur in nature, though it is true that professional performers from the music hall would also perform in the street as a ploy to attract punters to the regular shows. Whether these less official Slopers were any more radical in a political sense than their music hall and funny paper/comics counterparts must remain a mystery.

Thus, by 1896, in the words of one newspaper, Sloper was the most famous fictional character in the country: 'He stars in a full fifty per cent of our pantomimes and hops it with the best at sixty per cent of our fancy dress balls.' (*Brighton Society*, anon., Nov 21, 1896.) ♦ He was, in other words, an entertainment phenomenon, and as such a character that just about anybody could have a go at mimicking. The 'game of Sloper' had become a national obsession.

ALLY SLOPER'S HALF-HOLIDAY.



FASHION FANCIES. — By Miss Sloper.
County Costumes: The "Coruwall."

Cartoon, ASHH, Feb 4, 1899. Art: unknown. Tootsie Sloper models a 'fashion fancy'.

DISTINGUISHED PEOPLE INTERVIEWED BY A. SLOPER—GEORGE ROBNEY, Esq.



"I think, Frank," said A. Sloper to Mr. Dumbler, the great manager of the Pavilion, the other evening, "I'll go behind and interview George Robney." So he went. "You commenced your interview," Mr. Robney, I understood, of a highly respectable dinner's school? "Quite right, Mr. Sloper." (1) The interviewers pointed in his mind-eye the worthy lady going into conversation at the dull way the afterwards constant constant delivered himself of the participation with. "And here you were at the University of Heidelberg? Did you not do some work?" (2) "Continually. My father had, with which I grided my him for the encounter, was purchased all over." "You were, you, an undergraduate at Cambridge?" "I was." "I see that the National Science Triennial was the one upon which you set your heart?" "The National Science Triennial, yes." "Exactly." (3) Am I correctly informed that you ride to business slightly in the provinces on an elephant?" "You see." "And why not in London?" "The vicious bye-bye of the National Science Triennial." "Crack, crack, crack!" By this time A. Sloper became aware that a twilight hour was upon him. "What will you take to drink, Mr. Robney?" "You're very kind, but I never drink while I'm at work." "An excellent rule, which I too, rightly adhere to. But, if you know, I have a feeling the—order to drink, your health. Can you oblige me with the name of half-a-crown?" "A thousand thanks, at one of the bars I will purchase a glass of—'Garnet-red,' in which, rest assured, I will toast you. Farewell!" (4) Mr. Robney was bound to restrain the strains of one of his earliest songs. "He'll get it where he's gone to, now." (5) Here the eccentric gentleman was mistaken for A. Sloper found that they did not make respectful order at the "Bar," and so was compelled to go outside in search of the necessary question.

'Distinguished people interviewed by A. Sloper - George Robney, Esq.', ASHH, Aug 20, 1898. Art/script: possibly W.F. Thomas.

THE "F.O.S." PORTRAIT GALLERY.



MR. GEORGE NEWHAN, F.O.S.

"Starting his professional career at the early age of fifteen as an eccentric comedian, our hero served a useful apprenticeship on the variety boards, playing in all sorts of entertainment, and winning fame both as a negro and heavy comedian. Also found leisure to win the Boxing Competition Medal and appear three times in London Water Polo Championship Final. His on his true vocation at last as Society Conjuror and Illusionist, and is daily adding to his fame. Chiefly because he's always up to his ricks, he was created F.O.S., and the 'Sloper Award of Merit' presented to him May 21st, 1885." —*Debutant Improved.*

'The "F.O.S" Portrait Gallery', ASHH, July 30, 1898. Art/script: unknown. Features George Newman, comedian, conjurer and illusionist.

ASHH under Dalziel was crucial in feeding this obsession. The publication promoted music hall ceaselessly. Sloper was often pictured on the cover either on stage performing or in the audience, and inside would often 'interview' top performers of the time. Song sheets hymning his praise were also common - the first being given away as a supplement in 1886 - and music and lyrics for other songs increasingly occupied space in the publication itself. The 'Friend of Sloper Award of Merit' was given to magicians, singers, ventriloquists, and of course comedians. The paper would also carry listings of music hall shows and occasional reviews, and Tootsie was given a regular column to recount her adventures as a chorus girl at 'The Friv' (Frivoli Theatre). She was something of a sex symbol and fashion model, and the column was written by Ross's son. Finally, it is almost certain that routines were 'borrowed' from the comic by performers, and vice versa - though establishing which and when is near impossible.

When the fledgling cinema industry started to look for subjects at the turn of the 20th century, Sloper was a natural choice. [\[11\]](#) The music hall and comic papers gave inspiration to many of the first film comedy shorts, and although unfortunately the Sloper movies do not survive today there are records of two being released in 1898 and two in 1900 (see Barnes 1983). It is quite possible that these were screened as an 'amusement' in a music hall setting, as well as being distributed to cinemas per se. Other skits from *ASHH* may also have been purloined as the basis for film comedies, although - again - it is usually very hard to tell their origins. [\[12\]](#)

Movie stars, too, owed a debt to Sloper. Biographers of Charlie Chaplin have made much of the fact that he went on record saying that the comics he read as a child in London were the inspiration for his 'Little Tramp' character. W.C. Fields is speculated to have taken his act more directly from Sloper: Fields fancied himself as a cartoonist in the early 1900s, and travelled widely in Europe at that time. Although evidence is sketchy, Fields' stage routine from 1915 onwards featured the similarly big-nosed comedian in a top hat, and cut-away coat and collar, and carrying a cane. In the movies, Fields was an automatic choice for the role of Mr Micawber, who, as we have seen, may have been an inspiration for Sloper.



Still from the movie David Copperfield (1935), with W.C. Fields as Mr Micawber

But although Sloper's legacy lived on, the great man himself could not last. >From 1890 onwards, he was faced with heavy competition from other comic papers, and from new cartoon stars. Alfred Harmsworth, proprietor of the Amalgamated Press, decided to launch a line of comics that would sell for half the price of *ASHH*. This 'halfpenny revolution' encouraged other publishers to join the fray, and ushered in such Sloper-influenced characters as 'Weary Willie and Tired Tim' (*Illustrated Chips*), 'Nobbler and Jerry' (*Funny Cuts*) and 'The Three Lodgers' (*Larks!*) - many of whom would themselves become the stars of stage and screen.

Harmsworth's ruthlessness made him a fortune, on which he established a newspaper empire, becoming Lord Northcliffe in the process. There is evidence that at one point he tried to buy *ASHH*, but by that time he had nothing to fear (his comics were sharper and more modern-looking than *ASHH*, which remained stuck in a stylistic rut, and his cut-price tactics were ever-popular). Dalziel tried to fight back with his own half-penny Sloper spin-off (*Ally Sloper's Ha'porth*, Jan-Mar 1899), but it was to no avail. In 1916, *ASHH* ceased publication, and although it was revived fitfully thereafter never regained its former prominence.

But Harmsworth/Northcliffe had learned much from *ASHH*, and not just about what makes a funny comic. He was clearly impressed by Dalziel's marketing stunts, and especially the way that links had been made between the publication and music hall, and latterly cinema. Thus, Harmsworth developed a business strategy that exploited comics as merely one part of his empire. Other aspects, in addition to his newspapers, would come to include theatre productions, advertising, and the publication of song sheets. These could then be cross-fertilised to maximise

profits. William Randolph Hearst did much the same in the US (starting an animation company to capitalise on the strips in his papers). It is here, I would argue, that we can see the template for the policies of multimedia conglomerates today. From Ally Sloper to AOL-Time-Warner is perhaps not such a distance to travel. ♦

So, to conclude, I've called this article 'Ally Sloper: the first comics superstar?' But why 'first'? In many ways, it was a provocation (such titles look good on conference timetables). But please note that question mark at the end. For whenever you say something is 'first' it becomes a problem. For example, the idea that Ally Sloper is the earliest of anything relies on a set of criteria that may not be universally shared. Most obviously, there is an assumption that Sloper was a comics character, and by implication that the *Judy* spin-offs and *Ally Sloper's Half Holiday* were 'comics'. If a comic is something that is print based, mass-produced, stars a continuing character and contains as a significant part of its content strips and cartoons, then maybe these publications fit the bill. [\[13\]](#) But such defining characteristics are not 'givens' by any means.

Recently, for example, other definitions of a comic have taken hold that emphasise an approach rooted in aesthetics. This allows a wide range of sequential image narratives to be included - everything from Egyptian hieroglyphics through medieval emblems to modern web comics. [\[14\]](#) In Europe, some commentators have extended this idea further, seeing the continuing graphic narrative formats of the 19th century as seamlessly connected to other kinds of cultural outputs - illustrations, games, magic lantern shows, 'Punch and Judy' shows, etc. [\[15\]](#) With the rise of such competing perspectives, it has become ever more difficult for historians to reach agreement.



Detail from: 'Li Hung Chang Visits Hogan's Alley', New York World, Sept 6, 1896. Art/script: R.F. Outcault.

Nevertheless, the fact remains that the majority view among academics and serious commentators on comics up until now is that the character illustrated here, 'The Yellow Kid', from the USA, was the first comics superstar. Here is a quote from the latest in a long line of studies: 'The Yellow Kid has been accepted by several generations of comic strip historians as a pivotal creation in the history of the comics'. One of the main reasons for this is because, it goes on: 'The Yellow Kid was the first comic strip character to inspire widespread merchandising and licensing, and [to inspire] theatrical productions...' (Couch, in Varnum and Gibbons 2001: 74). [16] The problem with the assertion excerpted here (and it is an excerpt: the rest of the essay is excellent) is a very simple one: The Yellow Kid did not appear until 1894. By that time Ally Sloper had been a superstar for over 20 years. The evidence, as we have seen, is unambiguous. With due respect to the various (very valid) arguments around the definition of comics, it'd be ideal if any future reprints of such books could be modified in this small but important regard. ◆

THE CORONATION OF THE KING OF COMICS.



The Coronation of King Edward VII. has partially eclipsed an event which would, at any other time, have stirred the earth from Pole to Pole, namely, the Coronation of ALLY I., King of the Comics, which ceremony was successfully performed at Mildew Court on the same day. Special artists being laid on for the occasion, we are enabled to present ALLY THE FIRST in his Coronation robes, together with several implements of the Regalia, etc.: (1) The Signpost Standard, borne by the roof of Mildew Court. (2) The Crown and Sceptre (signboard), kindly lent by the proprietor of the establishment. (3) Alexandry, Master of the Horse, bearing the (Judson's) Gold Spur. (4) The Spur. (5) The Horse (Skunk), in his Collar. (6) Iky Moses, Esq., Master of the (ward) Robes, in his Hats of Maintenance. (7) The Coronation Spoon, pinched for the occasion by Iky Moses, Esq. (8) The Sword of State, borne by Jubilee, the King's Champion. (9) Orders of the Garter. (10) Mrs. Sloper. (11) Tootsie. (12) Aunt Greaser.

Cartoon, ASHH, October 25, 1902. Art/script: unknown.

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[1] Unlike the other papers about comics presented at the Hamburg conference, mine is less about semiotics than what we might call the sociology of comics reading. It is a work in progress, and I welcome comments from readers.

[2] The difference between a 'funny paper' and a 'comic' is a matter for some debate, as will become clear. For a full Sloper time-line, see Gifford 1984: 37-43.

[3] According to a reminiscence by 'Sloper' in the 'Gas House Opening Day', 1922, edition of *Ally Sloper's Half Holiday*, '...Ross used to say... I think it was about 1860 I wrote a book about Sloper's adventures for messrs. Ward and Lock calling him "The Great Gun", and before this introduced the character into a romance I wrote called ♦ "Dead Acres!". ...' (Anon. 'Chats at the Cheese', p.10).

[4] Accurate dating of the bottle has proved difficult. Having acquired one and shown it to several experts, agreement has not been forthcoming. However, one theory is that it could not be as early as 1878 because it has a 'seam' running top-to-bottom, which would place its date to nearer 1900.

[5] By the Nov 5, 1922 *ASHH*, Sloper and Tootsie were endorsing McKenzie motorcycles ('because it is equally suitable for either Lady or Gentleman...').

[6] Sloper also commonly advertised other Sloper publications. One cartoon from *The Eastern Question Tackled by Ally Sloper* (1878) has him attaching a banner for *Ally Sloper's Comic Kalendar* to an Egyptian pyramid.

[7] Others might include broadsheet heroes 'Tom and Jerry' (1822), and 'Brown, Jones and Robinson' in *Punch* (1850).

[8] I am indebted to Frank Nelson, a long time Sloper collector, for information on some of the odder spin-offs.

[9] Though Sloper can perhaps be read as the embodiment of Marx's 'lumpenproletariat'.

[10] Chomsky's arguments about the conservatism of the US press are best articulated in *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (co-written with Ed Herman), Vintage, 1995.

[11] It is also worth noting that Sloper had previously appeared in magic lantern shows, and as a subject for stereoview cards (with impersonators in papier mache 'panto mask' heads).

[12] Some gags are perhaps too obvious to have been 'invented' by any source in particular. For example, there is a recurring skit in the Sloper comics where either he or some other unfortunate gets squirted in the eye by a hose pipe. This same gag was repeated in US comics (notably in the first strip to star 'The Katzenjammer Kids') and in Europe, and was the subject for one of the earliest movies (in France). Other gags are less obvious. For example, one British movie short from 1898 described by Barnes (op cit) as being about a portrait sitter sticking his head through a canvas could well have had its origin in the *ASHH* strip entitled 'Pouter's Portrait' from October 16, 1886.

[13] UK historian Denis Gifford (Gifford 1984) was arguably the first to recognise the significance of Sloper to 19th century popular culture, and has written about him extensively in various histories (although he favoured *Funny Folks* as his 'first comic'). Sloper is still very often cited as 'the first comics character' by academics, commentators and librarians (e.g. the British Library catalogue).

[14] This expanded definition has been associated with American Scott McCloud in recent years, and in particular his two books *Understanding Comics* (HarperCollins, London, 1994) and *Reinventing Comics* (DC Comics, New York, 2000).

[15] For a flavour of the complexities of the debate, see the exchange between Belgian scholar Thierry Smolderen and various American and British respondents on PlatinumAgeComics@yahoogroups.com, the on-line discussion list for those interested in the origins of comics (see 'archive', circa 13/01/2003).

[16] For more detailed information on the commercialisation of the Yellow Kid, a trajectory that echoed that of Sloper fairly closely, see also Gordon 1998. For a fuller discussion of the disputed nature of the Yellow Kid as 'first', see Harvey 1996: 113-115.