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SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

Speaking at an anniversary dinner of the Newspaper Press Fund in 1878, Lord Salisbury described the special correspondent as one who ‘seems to be forced to combine in himself the power of a first-class steeple-chaser with the power of the most brilliant writer – the most wonderful physical endurance with the most remarkable mental vigour’. The term itself, like its cognates ‘special commissioner’, ‘occasional correspondent’ and ‘own correspondent’, was used imprecisely throughout the nineteenth century, but it generally described someone working upon a particular assignment whose despatches were typically presented in a series of letters in successive issues of the newspaper (Brown 1985). The role of special correspondent emerged as more complex divisions of labour appeared in the processes of newspaper production by the middle of the nineteenth century, with greater differentiation of tasks and occupations and the development of clearer boundaries between advertising, news and editorial content. Although a distinction between ‘our special’ and ‘our own’ in the by-line of a letter or despatch was not consistently observed, their roles were different. As an essay on the various departments of a newspaper office in *Once a Week* explained in 1863, the foreign correspondent was based in one location, charged with keeping the public at home abreast of political affairs transpiring elsewhere and was usually designated as ‘our own correspondent’ in Paris, Berlin or Rome, as the case may be; ‘our special correspondent’, in contrast, was a roving reporter who was despatched ‘on very extraordinary occasions’ to ‘aid “Our Own”’: ‘Like the staff of plenipotentiaries in the diplomatic world, this *corps de reserve* is seldom drawn upon. A royal visit of any moment, the trial trip of a war-ship constructed on a new principle, any grand or exciting event about to take place at home or abroad, would warrant the despatch of a “special”, and like Lord Clyde or Sir Charles Napier, they are ready to set out at a moment’s notice.’

While the employment of foreign correspondents for major metropolitan dailies like the *Times* dates from the early nineteenth century, and Henry Mayhew’s reports on London labour and the London poor for the *Morning Chronicle* in 1849-50 carried the by-line ‘From our special correspondent’, the peculiar role of the special as a roving journalist sent out to report upon particular events really begins in the 1850s, with the famous Crimean War reports of William Howard Russell for the *Times*. Russell’s despatches from the front were gripping, eye-witness accounts that brought the war home to British readers and galvanized public opposition to the Government’s mishandling of it. His narratives of spectacle, heroism and suffering established him as the *Times*’s leading ‘special’, and he was subsequently sent to cover the Indian Mutiny in 1857, the American Civil War in 1861-2, the Austro-Prussian war in 1866 and the Franco-Prussian war of 1870-71.

Reporting from the seat of war was undoubtedly the assignment that most tested the special correspondent’s mettle. But when no war was afoot, specials had to turn their hand to cover all manner of events in any location at home or abroad as required by their newspaper. Their versatility was key and at least equal in fame to Russell on this score from the 1860s onwards was George Augustus Sala: ‘the chief of travelled specials’, as he was later described. Sala’s potential as a ‘travelling correspondent’ was

first demonstrated in 1856-7 when Dickens sent him to St Petersburg to obtain material for a series of papers on Russian life and manners for *Household Words*. Sala's colourful, descriptive style, cultivated as a contributor to Dickens's journal, flourished when he began work as a special for the fledgling *Daily Telegraph* in 1857. Although he reported on a number of wars, including the American, Austro-Italian and Franco-Prussian wars, special correspondents were also required, as he wrote in 1871, to 'be Jack of all trades, and master of all – that are journalistic': 'to "do" funerals as well as weddings, state-banquets, Volunteer reviews, Great Exhibitions, remarkable trials, christenings, coronations, ship-launches, agricultural shows, royal progresses, picture-shows, first-stone layings, horse-races and hangings'. Other notable specials of the day included Archibald Forbes and Henry Morton Stanley.

While not all of the journalists who worked as specials became so famous in this role as Russell, Sala, Forbes or Stanley, what distinguished their correspondence was its mobility, versatility and descriptive power: an ability to observe and seize upon events wherever they happened, rendering them for the press in sufficiently graphic prose so as to transport readers through vivid eye-witness accounts. These qualities were also features of the New Journalism – a development famously criticised by Matthew Arnold in 1887 as part of a commercially driven press deploying sensational reportage to sell newspapers. For its proponents, 'special correspondence' was a new technology – like the railroad or the telegraph, with both of which it was closely associated – that brought the world closer, shrinking space and time and conveying readers to distant places. However, as use of the telegraph spread from the 1870s, the speed with which the 'latest intelligence' could be relayed increasingly trumped the discursive elaboration and picturesque reporting of events that had been the hallmark of the special correspondent's letter from the 1850s. The advent of photojournalism at the end of the century would eventually make such loquacious 'word-painting' redundant.

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Sources: Baker 1890, Brown 1985, Grant 1871, King 1863, Hatton 1882, Mathews 1957, *ODNB*, Sala 1871.