

**THE REAL LORD NORTHCLIFFE:  
SOME PERSONAL  
RECOLLECTIONS OF A PRIVATE  
SECRETARY 1902-1922**

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The real lord Northcliffe: Some Personal Recollections of a Private Secretary 1902-1922 by  
Louise Owen

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**LOUISE OWEN**

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**VISCOUNT NORTHCLIFFE**

A snapshot taken by the author at Mentone, March, 1919

UNIV. OF  
THE REAL CALIFORNIA  
**LORD NORTHCLIFFE**

**Some Personal Recollections  
of a Private Secretary  
1902-1922**

**BY  
LOUISE OWEN**

**CASELL AND COMPANY, LTD**  
**London, New York, Toronto and Melbourne**  
**1922**

**DEDICATED**  
**TO**  
**THE PUBLIC**  
**whom he loved**

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## THE REAL LORD NORTHCLIFFE

It is an impertinence for me to attempt a pen picture of my Chief, Lord Northcliffe. No one person could do justice to that marvellous personality, even in several volumes. More able pens than mine have written, and will write, of his great achievements. All I attempt is to take the great public, whom he loved so dearly, into my confidence, and let them see him as I knew him, as a human person with many faults, but very small ones compared to his wonderful generous nature, and charming characteristics.

In March, 1902, I applied to him for the post of private secretary. It was presumptuous of me, as I was untrained, but my only excuse was, that having been brought up in the atmosphere of newspapers, the paper and ink had penetrated to my very bones.



## *The Real Lord Northcliffe*

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My mother died when I was a small child. My father died before my school days should have ended, and I was faced with the problem of earning my living, in addition to having the care of two younger sisters. I think all people have a natural talent for some one thing. I knew mine was for clothes. Without being taught I could design, cut out and make any garment, make it so that not even the sharp eyes of my friends could detect the amateur hand. I was tempting Providence by not utilizing this gift, but my heart wasn't in it. Even in my poorest days I parted with my spare pennies to buy newspapers. I hated to feel after my father's death that I was drifting away from the core of things.

✓ My first impression of Alfred Harmsworth was his kindness, and soft cultivated voice. I can see him now, standing by the fireplace with his elbow on the mantelpiece. He was particularly handsome, fresh and wholesome looking, tall, broad-shouldered, with a finely shaped massive head, covered with thick, smooth, cendré coloured hair, one lock of which fell over the left side of his forehead. His face was clean-shaven, and I noticed his chiselled features, finely shaped nose, determined mouth, and strong square jaw. His grey eyes were

## *The Real Lord Northcliffe*

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kind but penetrating, and he fired off questions at me in a simple direct manner. It was his lack of affectation, and snobbishness, that impressed me most at that momentous interview.

His room at Carmelite House was luxuriously furnished—more like a library in a country mansion—nothing of the stereotyped office here, with hard chairs upholstered in leather, ordinary desks, and linoleum-covered floors. I noticed the thick carpet into which my feet sank as I walked, the soft green velvet curtains, the photographs of his dear father and mother on his desk, the bookcases reaching from floor to ceiling filled with richly bound volumes; but what attracted my attention most were the masses of beautiful flowers. He saw me glance at them.

“I spend a number of my working hours in this room, so I like to surround myself with beautiful things, and the flowers give me great joy. I have them sent up from my country house twice a week.”

He was almost feminine in his anxiety that I should be comfortable and at ease. He pulled up an armchair for me, and placed it in front of the roaring fire. He talked, not as if I were a stranger applying for a post, but as a friend

## *The Real Lord Northcliffe*

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and equal. He explained how he needed someone almost to anticipate what he wanted done, someone who would make his interests her interests, who could interview for him, go through his correspondence and sift the wheat from the chaff, who would watch his newspapers and discover the weaknesses of one or the other, who would not keep an eye on the clock—meaning no fixed hours. All this appealed to me. Why, I thought, this is my dream fulfilled. Yes, I can do all that. But with fear and trembling I blurted out: "My shorthand and typewriting are a bit weak—I have been working at them for three months, but have no confidence."

"Don't be nervous, you will have plenty of work, and with practice you will improve," he replied. "I don't want a mere machine; I want somebody with tact, judgment and imagination."

As I am Irish, I said I had all these!

"You will start on Monday then."

I had realized by now that Alfred Harmsworth was no ordinary man. Even the office boy who ushered me in was dressed in an Eton suit, but in spite of this unusual atmosphere, his extremely simple and natural manner dominated his surroundings.