

The Eagle

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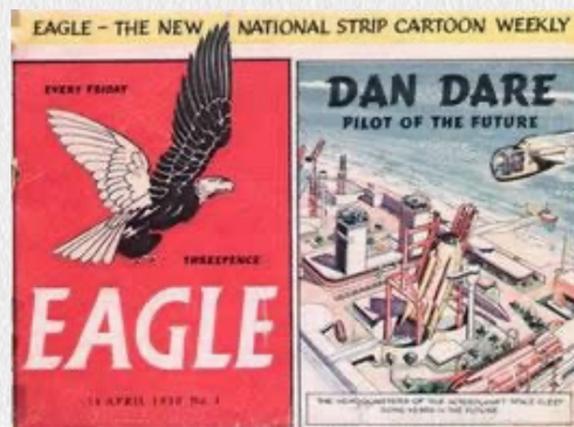
Eagle was a high-quality magazine for boys in the 1950s. It came into being through the collaboration of an impoverished Vicar from Southport in Lancashire and a student at Southport College of Art. The Vicar of St James's Church, Birkdale, the Rev. Marcus Morris, had transformed his parish magazine from a 4-page leaflet into a shiny Christian publication employing a young Frank Hampson to provide illustrations, cartoons and eye-catching front covers.

A children's section in *The Anvil* set Marcus thinking about the possibility of producing a Christian adventure story magazine for boys to counteract the grisly American comics widely available in the 1940s. Between them, Marcus and Frank first produced strip cartoon hero Lex Christian, a tough fighting parson in the East End of London who, after a series of vicissitudes, morphed into Dan Dare, Pilot of the Future.

Frank proved to be a genius with the strip cartoon format and was soon working on a dummy for a magazine. Marcus was paying Frank out of his stipend so it became vital to find a publisher. On the brink of bankruptcy, Marcus took the train to London and Fleet Street. Publisher after publisher turned him down until he knocked on the door of Hulton Press, publisher of *Picture Post*, *Farmers Weekly*, *Lilliput*, *Housewife* and others. A number of these publications were in the doldrums, the company needed a major boost and the management team of John Pearce and Ronnie Dickenson had the courage to gamble on an unknown provincial parson.

By November 1949 Marcus, Frank and the team of artists and writers they had assembled were on Hulton's payroll and the most pressing of Marcus's debts had been paid off; but the creators of *Eagle* were not given any royalties or copyright – Marcus was too naïve, and too relieved to have avoided bankruptcy and defrocking, to argue the point.

The first issue of *Eagle* appeared on Friday, 14th April 1950. A team of artists and writers had been assembled, a studio in Southport found;



1950's Magazine Mastheads

Marcus spent his weeks in Fleet Street, returning north at weekends to write sermons and conduct services. A printer who could cope with eight pages of full colour and a million copies a week was found – Bemrose in Liverpool designed and built the ten-bank rotary press in 12 weeks.

The publicity machine was also huge – a team of Humber Hawk motorcars, with large papier maché eagles on the roof, toured the country distributing tokens; national press advertising was aimed at parents rather than

children and copies of the first issue were sent out to schools, clergy, youth clubs, the Scout movement – most of the institutions responsible for the care of children.

A million copies had been ordered – 900,000 were printed, and very few were left over. This was the beginning of a decade in which a whole generation of boys (and girls) were offered good, clean fun with educational overtones. Readers were enthralled by the adventures of Dan Dare, Pilot of the Future, of PC49, Riders of the Range, Tommy Walls and Luck of the Legion. Captain

Pugwash began his career in *Eagle*; the misadventures of his stable mate Harris Tweed, and Thelwell's Chicko kept readers chuckling. Small boys

were fascinated by the cutaway drawings and by the often dangerous assignments of *Eagle's* Special Investigator. The religious and moral framework was strong but not overstated; the life stories of saints,

missionaries and explorers were amongst the most popular features and the MUGS scheme encouraged good citizenship, as did membership of the *Eagle* Club with 200,000 members.

Sales of *Eagle* continued in the hundreds of thousands. In due course, *Eagle* was joined by *Girl* (though many girls preferred *Eagle*), *Swift* for boys and girls under 8, with *Robin* for the very youngest readers. All successful in their day, but never quite reaching the heights of *Eagle's* popularity.

It all started to go wrong in March 1959, when Hulton Press was taken over by Odhams Press. Relationships between the Hulton/*Eagle* stalwarts and the new thrusting management of Odhams did not prosper. Marcus left the company in September to go to the National Magazine Company; Frank stayed, unhappily, until the summer of '61, Odhams having been taken over by the Mirror Group in March. From then on, *Eagle* degenerated into a comic. In '63 it was merged with *Swift*; *Girl* and *Robin* then disappeared and in April

