

# ALLY SLOPER – FRIEND OF MAN

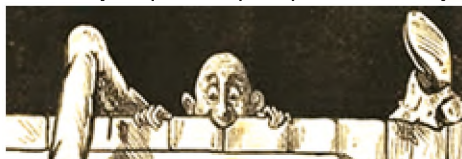
Dick Moore

Alexander 'Ally' Sloper FOM was the madcap fictional character who appeared in British serialised comics between 1867 and 1916.<sup>1</sup> He was created by Charles Henry Ross, the author of many 'penny dreadfuls' (the equivalent of 'dime novels' in the US). His wife (Isabelle) Émilie de Tessier, using the name Marie Duval, was the artist and eventually took over the entire cartoon.



While there may have been some earlier prototypes, Ally was first published in the satirical magazine *Judy* in 1867. He is a balding, bulbous-nosed, spindly-legged man, wearing a battered stovepipe hat, who became not only a famous cartoon character but also the first recurring cartoon character. He was named for a slang term of the Victorian period which described the insolvent tenant who would go 'sloping-off' down the alley (hence an 'alley sloper') to avoid the rent collector.

While one is never sure where cartoonists get their character ideas, people have speculated that the creation of Ally Sloper was perhaps influenced by Dickens' Mr Micawber and possibly other characters in *Punch* magazine. Nevertheless, he soon developed his own conniving charm, becoming the publication's most popular feature.<sup>2</sup>



He is thought to have significantly influenced the later comic character of Charlie Chaplin's tramp and particularly W.C. Fields (left) whose own image and stage persona often paralleled those of the bumbling Ally.



Ally was a scruffy, vulgar, gin-swilling loafer who dominated popular culture in Victorian and Edwardian Britain. In short, he was essentially a con-man and a drunkard, with numerous illustrations showing him holding on to a lamppost for stability. While originally that despicable drunkard, he morphed into a more likeable character, becoming involved in all kinds of schemes, and was joined by supporting characters, including his wife Mrs Sloper and children – son Alexander Jnr and daughter Tootsie. Also included in this close group was his good friend Ikey Mo (Isaac Moses), a Jewish stereotype.

Ally was an eternal optimist whose imagination was matched only by his incompetence. He would cook up various dubious schemes for doing things, or making easy money, which inevitably fell through, leaving him no wiser (Fig.1).

A pro-royalty and pro-Empire working-class patriot, he was comfortably acceptable to his publishers and advertisers, as well as his target readership. This was perhaps the secret of his success; he was mildly subversive, but not a danger to the establishment. He ultimately became a national hero (Fig. 2).

Charles Ross sold the rights to Ally Sloper to Gilbert Dalziel, *Judy's* publisher, who in May 1884 launched *Ally Sloper's Half Holiday* (Saturday afternoon was a 'half holiday' for workers by this time), an eight-page weekly publication which ran until September 1916 with a brief revival in the 1920s. Dalziel billed



1. Ally's street cleaning scheme, 1891



2. In national hero mode, 1887



3. Cover of Ally Sloper's Half Holiday, October 1892

*Ally Sloper's Half Holiday* (ASHH) as being "a selection – side-splitting, sentimental and serious – for the benefit of old boys, young boys, odd boys generally, and even girls"<sup>3</sup> and all for a penny (Fig. 3). Ally Sloper became the first comic character to have his own magazine.

Under Dalziel and with the artwork by W.G. Baxter (then W. Fletcher Thomas, who developed the more likeable Ally, when Baxter died in 1888) his fame as hero or anti-hero was certainly exploited in that most modern of ways – by canny marketing and promoting the character as what we would think of today as a 'brand'. To encourage reader interaction and participation there were many competitions, readers' letters, etc. For 12 coupons from consecutive issues you could join the fan club, possibly the first of its kind, and become a MOSFC – Member of Sloper's Fan Club. You also received "a splendidly designed diploma" and other promotional items.

Various products and spin-offs – both official and undoubtedly bootlegged – included mugs, games, toys, paperweights, puppets, cast-iron doorstops in the form of Ally and his wife, and a sauce marketed as 'Ally Sloper's Favourite Relish' (Fig. 4).<sup>4</sup> There was even a patent medicine – Sloper's Pills – that claimed to cure headaches and stomach troubles. One strategy was to offer a form of railway life insurance to anyone who purchased the serial and died in a train accident, but payment required that a current copy of ASHH be found on the body. On 2 January 1904 the paper reported that 11 claims for the £150 had been paid (see also top of Fig. 3).<sup>5</sup> While Ally Sloper was at the peak of his popularity, joke awards, known as the Friends of Sloper (FOS) Awards of Merit, were issued to topical figures who made the news for unusual achievements, such as Prime Minister Gladstone for being 'the friend of the working class' and Scott of the Antarctic for heroic exploration.



4. Ally Sloper products. The bottle once contained the relish advertised which was also possibly 'placed' in an illustration in the Guide to the Paris Exhibition



5. Ally Sloper's magic lantern show, 1889

The caption reads: "Interesting experiments with the magic lantern brought a pleasant evening to a close with many of the teetotalers in the crowd joining the 'Unsweetened Brigade', a club started by Ally. In the flask is London water as shown in the projected slide."

Over the years Ally had many adventures that thrilled his fans, such as this one that has been captured in the wonderful set of lantern slides shown on the next page, *Ally Sloper's Adventure in a Snowball*.

## ALLY SLOPER AND THE MAGIC LANTERN

There is no maker's name or indication of date of publication on my slides. In the Gwen Sebus Collection, there is a different set of this story, in colour, but again with no maker's mark. In Gwen's set Ally is portrayed more as a proper gentleman, no longer showing the bulbous nose and tattered clothing (Fig. 6). In Lucerna two sets of this story are listed, one by Bamforth (1883-1888) and the other by T.J. and W.F. Piggott (in or before 1905). The set in the Gwen Sebus collection may be the one by Piggott.



8. Slide of a typical Ally Sloper image. Perhaps he's saying: "Oh, my goodness, its teatime – must head back to the Mrs for a little sip of something."

danger as Ally as they ducked and dived around the fighting soldiers, concentrating on driving their vehicles instead of defending themselves with guns."<sup>6</sup>

By 1896, in the words of the *Brighton Society* newspaper (21 November 1896) 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."

Ally Sloper even put on a magic lantern show (Fig. 5). While he disdained the idea of drinking water, he saw its one possible value in the dilution of strong spirits and implied, in a way, that this was

useful. The caption reads: "Interesting experiments with the magic lantern brought a pleasant evening to a close with many of the teetotalers in the crowd joining the 'Unsweetened Brigade', a club started by Ally. In the flask is London water as shown in the projected slide."

Over the years Ally had many adventures that thrilled his fans, such as this one that has been captured in the wonderful set of lantern slides shown on the next page, *Ally Sloper's Adventure in a Snowball*.



6. Slide 1 from a different set of the Ally Sloper 'snowball' story (courtesy Gwen Sebus)

In addition to this story, Ally Sloper was a popular subject for other comic lantern slides, including, among others, a long nose slip with dog on the end (Fig. 7) and a series of slides showing him on his 'half holidays'. Lucerna lists nine individual Sloper comic slides, unfortunately without images, but does include four slide images from a set *The Seasons* by an unknown maker, from the Philip and Rosemary Banham Collection. These images appear to be the same as covers of *ASHH* magazine, including a snowball fight.

When I first obtained the slides all I knew was that they were about Ally Sloper. In learning about Ally I found the reading for the story in the MLS Slide Readings Library on the website.<sup>7</sup> The author and date are unknown and the reading is in poetic form. Ally is standing in the snow because he has a bright idea that he does not want to lose. Compared to the joviality of the historic Ally Sloper character it seemed to me that this reading was a little harsher and more moralistic, referring to the children as urchins who were rude, dirty vagabonds with vile intent, to be dealt with when he got out of the snowball. It also ended with a moral: "That people often kill themselves, endeavouring to live" – a less than comical ending for one of the most famous comic characters of that time. After researching Ally's history, I decided to develop a script that would more reflect his humorous character and antics, as well as those that of the children around him. An abridged version of this is given with the slides overleaf.



7. Comic depiction with dog

## NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Bruce Peel Special Collections Library, University of Alberta, Canada, Ally Sloper Web Exhibit ([www.exhibits.library.ualberta.ca/streetprint\\_sloper/index.php](http://www.exhibits.library.ualberta.ca/streetprint_sloper/index.php))
2. Roger Sabin, 'Ally Sloper: The First Comics Superstar?', *Image & Narrative*, October 2003, ([www.imageandnarrative.be/inarchive/graphicnovel/rogersabin.htm](http://www.imageandnarrative.be/inarchive/graphicnovel/rogersabin.htm))
3. Blog, *The Oldie*, 20 September 2019 ([www.theoldie.co.uk/blog/who-was-ally-sloper](http://www.theoldie.co.uk/blog/who-was-ally-sloper))
4. Entry for Ally Sloper, *Don Markstein's Toonopedia* ([www.toonopedia.com/sloper.htm](http://www.toonopedia.com/sloper.htm))
5. Roger Sabin, op. cit.
6. 'Ally Sloper's Calvary', [www.devonheritage.org/stentiford/Issue\\_47/Article1/05Nov1Art3.htm](http://www.devonheritage.org/stentiford/Issue_47/Article1/05Nov1Art3.htm)
7. Magic Lantern Society Slide Readings Library, *Adventure of Ally Sloper in a Snowball* (90337)

## ALLY SLOPER'S ADVENTURE IN A SNOWBALL

Once upon a time there lived in the Meads of London an odd little man named Ally Sloper. He was surely the character of the neighborhood. He was always adorned with the same tall hat, crumpled at the top, with brims turned up at the side; seemingly one size too small and precariously perched upon his roundish bald head. His tailed jacket, a little short, and showing the buttons for his braces, had sleeves so long that the cuffs had to be rolled.

His tight-fitting britches tucked into his rolled down black boots, accentuated his pot belly and bowed legs. Complete with a huge bulbous nose and bushy eyebrows, his appearance was like that of a buffoonish cartoon character. The residents of the Meads referred to him as 'Squire Sloper – the Lord of the Meads'.

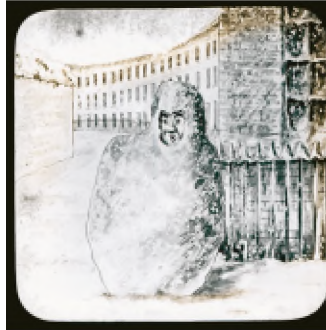
He was a kindly gentleman, but could never decide what to do, or when to do it, or even how to do it. He would take hours to make even the smallest decision and many times never make one at all.



1. This snowy day was no different from any other, as he stood on the street corner not knowing whether to cross to the other side or to stay where he was. In all the years he lived here, he had never been able to make the decision to cross that street. He scratched his head.



2. As he stayed in the same spot debating this dilemma, the snow began to fall, at first gently and then a little faster. It began to cover the ground and fence, to pile up on his hat, legs and umbrella. Yet he stood there not being able to decide what to do.



3. The heavy snow kept coming down faster and faster. It built up all around him, and on him. Soon he was covered from head to foot. All you could see of Squire Sloper was his round face, big nose, dark bushy eyebrows, and his mouth – open as if ready to say something.



4. When the snow finally stopped Squire Sloper was nowhere to be seen. The children came out with shovels and brooms to earn money clearing pavements. To their wonderment, they spotted this stupendous pile of snow. What was it? They called Annie over to see.



5. The curious children could not leave this 'thing' alone. The boys convinced Annie to help them and, gathering on one side, began to push this giant snowball so they could roll it into the street. They pushed and pushed, now on their knees despite the cold and wet.



6. And move it did. Over it tipped with a resounding thud and, to their amazement, the top of a tall hat popped out. They knew that hat well – but however did the Lord of Meads' hat get inside the snowball?



7. With no clear answer, they went on pushing the snowball across the street so it wouldn't block the traffic. Then, to their further amazement, an umbrella popped out – the one the Squire looked at while he scratched his head, and tried to make a decision.



8. Pulling the umbrella out took quite a tug as Ally Sloper was hanging onto it. The boys danced around the pile of snow tugging at the broly and pulling it apart. "It's Squire Sloper's, it's Squire Sloper's," they chanted "but where is the Squire – the Lord of the Meads?"



9. Just then two black boots popped out at the bottom of the snowball. With these new objects taking their attention, they dropped the remains of what used to be a gentlemen's fine umbrella. With mouths wide open, they stopped their singing and just stared at these strange new protrusions.



10. They stopped for only a minute or two, for you could see the twinkle in their eyes as they thought of more mischief. As Annie held the remains of Squire Sloper's bumbershoot in her hand, the boys tugged at the boots with all their might. They pulled and pulled until ...



11. ... they each had one. With the Squire's feet, in their striped stockings, now sticking out of one end of the snowball, and his hat at the other, the boys put on a boot each and sang "Squire Ally Sloper, Squire Ally Sloper, here are your boots, now where is the Squire – Lord of the Meads?" Annie joined in.



12. Finally, with an involuntary shiver, Ally Sloper suddenly broke free of the snow. He lay there in stupefied amazement. Realising where he was, he kicked his feet in the air with joy. For Squire Ally Sloper this was a great day – he had finally made it across the street without having come to a decision.