

Book Reviews



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***The Edinburgh History of the British and Irish Press, Volume 1, Beginnings and Consolidation 1640-1800*, edited by Nicholas Brownlees, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 2023, 730 pp.**

The Edinburgh History of the British and Irish Press: Beginnings and Consolidation, 1640-1800 edited by Nicholas Brownlees, is part of a three-volume series (Volume 2, *Expansion and Evolution, 1800-1900*; Volume 3, *Competition and Disruption, 1900-2017*) edited by Martin Conboy and David Finkelstein for Edinburgh University Press.

The series, as suggested by the title, aims to provide an overview of the developments of the British and Irish press across four centuries, and it does so through a rich combination of long and short chapters and in-depth case studies, stretching over 2,200 pages. Overall, the series offers an impressive mixture of methodological approaches, themes, and research questions thanks to the contribution of over 100 scholars.

Each volume tackles inquiries concerning the history of newspapers and periodicals within the broader framework of social, political, cultural, and technological history, which necessitate an interdisciplinary approach. In this inaugural Volume, which is the subject of this review, the editor has assembled a team of experts spanning not only Britain and Ireland but also three different continents who have offered contributions amounting to twenty-seven chapters and twenty-three case studies. The diversity of scholars involved is outstanding in geography, disciplines, backgrounds, and career stages, ranging from postdoctoral researchers to Emeriti professors.

In addition to attesting to Nicholas Brownlees' continuous ability to bring new voices to the field, Volume 1 clearly cements the editor's groundbreaking work in media history, and particularly early modern British media history. Brownlees' contribution is not limited to the colossal editorial enterprise and the rich Introduction to the Volume, but spreads over three co-authored chapters (One, Eight, Sixteen) that centre on linguistic and semantic issues related to early modern news media in the British context.

The helpful Introduction (pp. 1-27) begins with defining why, despite pre-existing demand for print news, the year 1640 has been set as starting date: the 1640s saw a rise in weekly news pamphlets containing both foreign and domestic news due to the relaxation of censorship amidst pre-Civil War tensions, which resulted in innovative publication practices that emerged during that time. The following pages take the reader on a journey through a rich historical contextualisation, describing significant shifts in the press, highlighting key events such as the emergence of Sunday newspapers with the founding of the *Observer* in 1791; the politicisation of the press in response to events in revolutionary France during the 1790s; the rise of radical press, foreshadowing later movements in the 1830s. The evolution of

the periodical press outlined in the Introduction fundamentally rejects a simplistic Whig interpretation of its history: it counters the celebration of a linear progression towards an objective, democratic press by proposing, rather, a factual analysis of its development. This approach demonstrates how – despite not necessarily embodying democratic principles – the press served as a populariser of ideas, news, and goods, reaching readers across England, Wales, Scotland, Ireland, the United States, India, and the Caribbean, becoming gradually more accessible, with publications reaching a broader audience and covering a wide range of content.

In addition to the historical contextualisation, the Introduction outlines the overall structure of the Volume, detailing core chapters covering various aspects of the press business and providing a brief overview of the case studies that detail examinations of specific individuals, newspaper titles, and other press-related phenomena to provide further depth and focus. In the final part of the Introduction, Brownless proceeds to analyse five significant years and periods into the overall evolution of the press between 1640 and 1800.

Chapters One to Five set the stage of the entire Volume by offering insights on production and distribution processes, legal frameworks, readers and their demographics, and the evolving identities of news writers and journalists. Chapter One (*Business of the Press*, pp. 28-49) by Brownlees and Finkelstein explores the business objectives and commercial dynamics that influenced the British and Irish press, which moved from a supplementary income source to a lucrative commercial venture, albeit with uneven distribution of profits among publishers, printers, editors, and writers. Chapter Two (*Production and Distribution*, pp. 53-66) by Helen S. Williams examines printing technologies, including advancements in the supply trades such as type, paper, and ink, and the distribution of printed materials. It also explores the organisation of work within print shops and the early development of trade associations across the British Isles. Chapter Three (*Legal Contexts*, pp. 77-100) by Geoff Kemp and Jason McElligott delves into the legal frameworks within which the press operated in Britain and Ireland from 1641 to 1800, exploring a broad spectrum of legal conditions, recognising that both the presence and absence of certain laws could significantly impact press freedom. Chapter Four (*Readers and Readerships*, pp. 101-121) by Sophie H. Jones examines both individual readers and broader readerships, emphasising that the rapid expansion of both national and local printed press was facilitated by the expiration and non-renewal of the Licensing Act in 1695. Chapter Five (*From News Writers to Journalists*, pp. 129-143) by Conboy fur-

ther explores the transition from strict censorship to a period of relative freedom during the Civil War.

The remaining chapters have the fundamental role of exploring aspects concerning the creation, dissemination, and reception of not only periodical news publications but also other specialised forms of the press – including periodical essays, literary and review journalism, and medical journals – and of raising questions about readers and readerships, women's involvement in the print trade, and the role of news in public discourse. Chapter Six (*From Manuscript to Print*, pp. 148-165) by Rachael Scarborough King examines the close relationship between manuscript and printed news and explores how correspondence networks served as the foundation for news dissemination, revealing the practical aspects of news transmission and the development of methods for verifying news authenticity. Chapter Seven (*Newsbooks to Newspapers*, pp. 170-187) by Yann Ryan provides an overview of the evolution of the physical characteristics – such as format, layout, and illustrations – of printed periodical news in Britain and Ireland from 1620 to the early 18th century. Chapter Eight (*The Evolving Language of the Press*, pp. 195-214) by Brownlees and Birte Bös explores the language characteristics of periodical print news, tracing its evolution from the concise pamphlets of the 1640s to the diverse British and Irish newspapers of the 18th century. Chapter Nine (*News, Debate, and the Public Sphere*, pp. 220-234) by Pat Rogers aims to answer the complex question of how the British press contributed to the circulation of information in the wider public arena. Chapter Ten (*Irish Periodical News*, pp. 239-254) by Toby Barnard explores the Irish context, sustaining that the publication of newspapers and journals in Ireland was delayed due to a relatively small and scattered population, low levels of literacy, meagre incomes, and linguistic disunity. Chapter Eleven (*The Scottish Press*, pp. 268-279) by Rhona Brown, Chapter Twelve (*The Market for the News in Scotland*, pp. 285-307) by Stephen W. Brown, and Chapter Thirteen (*Scottish Press: News Transmission and Networks*, pp. 313-335) by Mark G. Spencer all deal with the Scottish context, examining the emergence and evolution of the Scottish periodical press from the mid-seventeenth century to the eighteenth century. Through various case studies, they illustrate how newspapers and magazines became central to daily life and discussions in Scotland during the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the kind of audiences and professions they catered to, and the transmission and networks between Scotland and America. Chapter Fourteen (*Wales and the News*, pp. 344-363) by Sarah Ward Clavier delves into Wales and its connection with the news media through

a historiographical approach. Chapter Fifteen (*European Exchanges, Networks and Contexts*, pp. 364-383) by Brendan Dooley contributes to the recent scholarship on news networks including not only comparisons between the press histories of Britain and neighbouring states but also between the history of printed newspapers and older media forms. Chapter Sixteen (*Translation and the Press*, pp. 384-405) by Mairi McLaughlin and Brownlees investigates the extent and importance of translation, the translators themselves, and the strategies they employed, along with their underlying reasons. Chapter Seventeen (*Women and the Eighteenth-century Print Trade*, pp. 406-418) by Rebecca Shapiro explores the significant roles women played in the printing industry during the eighteenth century, particularly in relation to newspapers. Chapter Eighteen (*The Medical Press*, pp. 423-439) by Irma Taavitsainen dissects the establishment of important new channels in the field of the medical press, paying particular attention to genre developments. Chapter Nineteen (*Commenting and Reflecting on the News*, pp. 451-468) by Edward Taylor explores the concept of 'comment' in the early modern period, delving into the evolving patterns of commentary in the serial press. Chapter Twenty (*Newspapers and War*, pp. 472-489) by Nicole Greenspan examines how newspapers influenced the coverage of war and how wartime conditions affected the circulation and presentation of news. Chapter Twenty-One (*Crime and Trial Reporting*, pp. 493-507) by Elisabetta Cecconi explores crime and trial reports, emphasising how the presentation of information helped create early instances of moral panic among individuals with limited firsthand exposure to crime. Chapter Twenty-Two (*Literary and Review Journalism*, pp. 511-526) by Hye-Joon Yoon investigates a novel form of journalism emerging in the thriving print market of eighteenth-century Britain, dedicated exclusively to informing readers about newly released publications. Chapter Twenty-Three (*Press and Politics in the Seventeenth Century*, pp. 529-537) by Lena Liapi focuses on the role of newspapers in shaping public opinion, the importance of print in the 'news revolution', and the tendency to predominantly focus on England rather than Britain when studying the development of the periodical press. Chapter Twenty-Four (*Religion and the Seventeenth-century Press*, pp. 546-560) by Katie McKee and Ward Clavier examines the historical research on the intersection of religion and news, exploring the variety of sources accessible to researchers. Chapter Twenty-Five (*Runaway Announcements and Narratives of the Enslaved*, pp. 564-574) by John W. Cairns investigates the awareness in British press of the presence in their island home of enslaved men and women of Afri-

can, Indian and other ethnicities and of enslavement in the colonies and elsewhere around the world, with particular attention to runaway announcements. Chapter Twenty-Six (*The Press in Literature and Drama*, pp. 575-585) by Michael Palmer explores the intersection between newspapers and literature, shedding light of key figures of the media, editorial, and book markets. Chapter Twenty-Seven (*Informational Abundance and Material Absence in the Digitised Early Modern Press*, pp. 586-599) by Paul Gooding discusses the conflict arising from the wealth of information available in digitised early modern press on one side and the restricted ways in which digital collections can be used on the other.

In addition to this wealth of long and short chapters – which could, at times, use more consistency in their structure – the Volume is enriched by paratextual elements: a high-quality set of illustrations, helpfully listed on page X; a timeline of key press and periodical events (pp. 604-622); a state-of-the-art bibliography made up of over 800 entries (pp. 623-677); and an Index (pp. 678-692).

Overall, this Volume has many merits and will impact the field in terms of research innovation, methodological approaches, and educational relevance.

One of the key achievements of the combination of the twenty-seven chapters and twenty-three case studies is, undoubtedly, their interdisciplinary and collaborative nature: this Volume demonstrates that the collaboration of news historians with linguists, book historians, and scholars of Literature, Law, Information Studies, Politics, Communications, Philology can not only be productive but is instrumental for advancing the field and our understanding of the development of media across time and space.

The contribution of linguists and experts of the English language in particular delivers one of the most persuasive and fruitful lines of inquiries of the Volume: the role and patterns of the language of news media in the pre-modern world, an aspect that has been generally overlooked by scholarship thus far in framing the production, circulation, and reception of early modern news.

Particular praise goes to the editor for giving visibility to underrepresented collections, institutions, and researchers that are not usually in the front line of academic research, by including contributors from non-Higher Education sectors. This is also reflected in the practice of including contributions *a quattro mani*, which should be commended, encouraged, and further embraced across the Humanities.

The benefits of an interdisciplinary and cross-sectoral approach are also evident in the exploration of the (nearly untapped) potential of digital methods and digitised collections: some of the chapters (Seven, Sixteen,

Twenty, Twenty-Seven) and the case studies (5, 12, 23) included in the Volume serve as a strong case for policy making around digitising cultural heritage collections, demonstrating the benefits of broadening access to sources and of maximising the resources that went into the digitalisation by providing evidence of the usefulness of digitised collections for research.

Ultimately, owing to the capacity of the contributions to provide both comprehensive coverage and nuanced analysis, Volume 1 has a high pedagogical value: it lends itself aptly to inclusion within the curricula of university courses in History, Linguistics, Literature, and English departments.

Volume 1 fulfills its promise of delivering a comprehensive examination of the beginning of the history of the British and Irish press. Its meticulous research and innovative approach make it a valuable addition to the scholarly literature on pre-modern news media, while offering a model for future interdisciplinary and cross-sectoral research in the Humanities and beyond.

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