Freshest Advices
FRESHEST ADVICES

Early Provincial Newspapers in England

By R. M. Wiles

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"It must . . . be confessed, that these things have their use, and are, besides, vehicles of much amusement. . . .

—Crabbe, "To the Reader,"
_The Newspaper_ (1785)
When Princess Anne was crowned Queen of her several realms in 1702, there were only two provincial newspapers in England to report the coronation; when, two generations later, another Archbishop placed the crown on the head of George III, there were local weekly newspapers in twenty-nine English towns. It is the purpose of this book to give an account of that interesting development in English journalism, and to confute the common assumption that early provincial newspapers were wretched little smutchy sheets containing only borrowed reports and notices of runaway apprentices.

For such a study as this the only “primary sources” are the original issues of the newspapers themselves and any surviving contemporary records which have a bearing on the early efforts to give English readers not living in London a regular budget of freshest advices, foreign and domestic. The sheer bulk of the material is enormous, and it is understandable that in examining such vast quantities of matter one’s notes become voluminous. Excision of non-essentials has been the chief difficulty in dealing with so complex a subject, but if details have kept thrusting themselves in for their own sake instead of for the legitimate purpose of establishing perspective, perhaps some of those details have helped to redeem the following chapters from unconscionable dullness.
My search for original issues of early country newspapers began precisely thirty years ago, when I went as a graduate student from Harvard to explore the British Museum, the Bodleian, the Devon and Exeter Institution, and other haunts of scholars. During the past decade, I have revisited the great libraries of the United Kingdom and North America, and I have examined literally tons of early newspapers now to be found in those repositories and in the local libraries, museums, and newspaper offices of sixty English towns. These visits have taken me from the Yale University Library in New Haven, Connecticut, to the Black Gate in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, from the Morrab Gardens in Penzance to the Vicarage at Mottram-in-Longdendale, Cheshire.

In all this searching and finding I have been immeasurably assisted and encouraged by a host of librarians, newspaper officials, university people, archivists, curators of museums, and private owners of early newspapers. To name them individually would be to fill two pages of this Preface; the list would reveal inadequately the extent both of my indebtedness and of my gratitude. Their help was so graciously offered that it would be presumptuous to suppose I could pay my debt by naming them in a formal schedule of acknowledgments. Among them are men of authority in newspaper offices in Chester, Coventry, Reading, Salisbury, and Stamford, the general manager of an engineering firm in Kendal, the treasurer of an ancient Sussex town, the administrative head of a printing firm in Nottingham, a former mayor of the City of York, the chancellor of a great minster, a member of the B.B.C. staff, a retired professor who lives in Cornwall, the curator of books and manuscripts in the greatest Shakespeare library in North America, and scores of librarians in places as far apart as Charlottesville in Virginia and Whitehaven in Cumberland. I remember with happiness all their names and their acts of kindly assistance.

Yet to impose total anonymity upon these numerous
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PREFACE

nors of McMaster University for a year’s leave of absence, which gave me leisure to gather material for this book, and to the Canada Council for a senior fellowship, which not only added distinction to my project but kept me supplied with food and ink while I set about it.

I am happy to record here my sincere appreciation of the editorial procedures of Weldon A. Kefauver, Director of the Ohio State University Press, and of Thomas E. Sheahan, the Editor. Their tactful patience has been infinitely reassuring; their standards of typography are responsible for whatever is attractive in the format of this book.

By a pleasing convention one may in this rather public fashion thank one’s wife for her helpful forbearance during the crucial prenatal months of a coming book. My wife has shown a devotion far beyond the call of duty by engaging in that virtuous exercise quaintly called holding the tongue. If there is praise for this book it will be owing to Olwen’s three thousand hours of silence.

R. M. W.

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Note on the Dating of Early Newspapers

Until September, 1752, the printers of newspapers in England, like the writers of letters, often, but not invariably, changed the year date on 25 March instead of on 1 January. For that reason it is necessary to check the date of any newspaper printed in England during the first fifty-two years of the eighteenth century if that date falls within the eighty-three (in leap years, eighty-four) days from 1 January to 24 March inclusive. Checking the dates of newspapers is very simple, for there are usually two unmistakable guides: if the serial numbers of two papers dated 19 March 1734 and 26 March 1735 are consecutive, it is clear that the papers appeared just one week apart; even without serial numbers, the day of the week is a sure guide, for if a paper is dated Monday, February 3, 1734, one can be sure that it belongs to 1735, since 3 February was a Sunday in 1734 but fell on Monday in 1735. The volume number is also helpful, if a new volume began in January.

In this book and in the Register (Appendix C), all dates are given according to the pattern which includes January, February, and March within the same calendar year as the April which followed immediately. Thus the issue of the Oxford Gazette: and Reading Mercury, number 16 is dated "Monday, March 3, 1745," but (a) from
the serial number in relation to those that precede and follow, (b) from the day of the week, and (c) from news of the rebels printed in the paper itself, it is perfectly obvious that the year is 1746, and in this work the issue is silently dated 3 March 1746. Some eighteenth-century printers recognized the possibility of confusion and put in the date line such a form as “Monday, February 22, 1747-8,” or “Thursday, February 10, 1714-15,” or “Friday, January 25, 1723.” Such dates are in this book given as “Monday, 22 February 1748,” “Thursday, 10 February 1715,” and “Friday, 25 January 1723.”

The millions of people who use English every day have different ways of writing dates, and each of us is ready to support his own favorite mode by invoking logical principles, sometimes heatedly, always ineffectually. Some like the cryptic form “6: 12: 47.” Others find “6: XII: 47” perfectly obvious. Many write “October 15th, 1963,” or “October 15, 1963.” Just as many save a comma and write “15th October 1963,” or “15 October 1963.” In the text of this book the form “15 October 1740” is used, with a further reduction in the Register, where brevity and clarity are combined in the form “15 Oct 1740.”

One other simplification should be pointed out. Some printers of newspapers gave the most explicit information in their date lines. The Manchester Journal, number 22, for instance, has in its date line “From TUESDAY August the 17th, to TUESDAY August the 24th, 1736.” Cataloguers often give only one of the two dates but sometimes quite unaccountably select the earlier of the two instead of the later, which was obviously the nominal, if not actual, date of publication. In this book only the second date is given, even where the interval between successive issues was regularly less than a full week. Thus the Maidstone Mercury, number 25, which has in its date line “From MONDAY MAY 24. to THURSDAY MAY 27. 1725,” is here dated simply 27 May 1725.
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