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Visions of the Press in Britain, 1850–1950 by Mark Hampton [Review]

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MARK HAMPTON. *Visions of the Press in Britain, 1850–1950*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004. Pp. ix+218. \$35.00 (cloth).

British historians are fortunate enough to be able to draw on the resource of a vast and complex collection of newspapers from the Victorian to the modern era. Yet as Mark Hampton points out, few historians critically analyze the context of the British media from which we draw so thoroughly. *Visions of the Press in Britain* provides an overarching view of the British press over a hundred years, giving readers a balanced account of the transition between the Victorian and the modern press. Hampton's work attempts to draw out the meaning of the press at different historical moments by placing the press within its political and cultural context.

While Hampton's text is unique in breaching the two centuries, press history writ large is no longer the neglected field he suggests. Laurel Brake's *Encounters in the Victorian Press* (2004), Chris Horrie's *Tabloid Nation: From the Birth of the Daily Mirror to the Death of the Tabloid* (2003), and Roy Greenslade's *Press Gang: How Newspapers Make Profits from Propaganda* (2003) demonstrate that press history is certainly enjoying a new vogue. The gap is not a lack of attention to the press, however, but a lack of integration into mainstream historians' projects. Works such as Hampton's go beyond narrative histories of particular

papers and pose intellectual questions about franchise expansion, literary and reading trends, and elite perceptions of the “masses.”

The text focuses on the perspectives of the British elites, including journalists, the government, the press barons, and the educated reading public. Rather than focus exclusively on the structure and content of the papers themselves, Hampton examines the public debate over the role of the media through pamphlets, articles, books, government investigations, and personal reflections.

Hampton wisely recognized that a focus on the elites does not provide the full story and that an examination of the response from the readers themselves should be developed in another work. Following Stuart Hall’s division between dominant and popular culture, he acknowledges that “the popular classes were not passive objects of study but active readers and letter writers. Popular tastes could shape newspaper content, and readers of all classes could approach the press with scepticism” (6). Rather than the final word, Hampton presents his work as a beginning; it is left to other historians to trace the changing experiences of people’s consumption of and relationship to the press.

The text ostensibly begins in 1850, yet Hampton situates his subject within a longer history of the nineteenth-century British press. The development of the press is presented as both dependant on and a reflection of an emergent democracy. He traces the changing laws, systems of taxation, and readership demographics of British newspapers. Hampton posits that it is possible to understand the meaning of the press by tracing the tension between two disparate models, which interacted throughout the century in question. The first model, the “educational ideal,” posits the press as a means to improving and enlightening society. At its best, this model verges on the utopian with the press steering society toward enlightenment and democracy; at its worst, the educational ideal smacks of the paternalism of the elites. The second model, the “representative ideal,” conceives of the press as a reflection of the will of the people. Before universal suffrage, this model had revolutionary overtones for representing the underrepresented; in the modern era, it tends toward pandering to the lowest form of entertainment. In bringing forward the two models, Hampton attempts to counter earlier historians’ claims that the press enjoyed high ideals in the mid-Victorian golden age before succumbing to commercialization and profit seeking. According to Hampton, the two models coexisted and transformed one another throughout the period. Neither model was without faults, nor was there a simple triumph of one vision over the other.

The four following chapters outline the emergence of the two models and their specific contexts. Hampton argues that in the mid-nineteenth century, champions of the press were idealistic about the potential for the press to educate and usher the people into the democratic public sphere. The educational ideal, however, was quickly challenged by the birth of “New Journalism” and its tendency toward news rather than opinion. As the franchise was further expanded in the late nineteenth century, the economic uncertainty and a new style of popular journalism made the educational model seem out of date. The representational ideal served the interest not only of the press barons, but libertarian or market views of public access to knowledge. The predominance of the representational ideal in the late nineteenth century is set against the context of the press as a reflection of the new mass electorate. While Hampton attempts to counteract the idea that one model quickly overcame the other by providing caveats to his arguments, in the last chapter those caveats outweigh any other evidence, and it seems that only a crude vision of the representational ideal remained. It is difficult to interpret his picture of the 1950s and beyond as anything less than the destruction of both ideals. While Hampton complicates the idea of an idealistic Victorian press corrupted by the mass age, he does not contradict the ultimate decline of the press.

Hampton cannot help ending on a rather bleak note. The representative ideal may have been revolutionary when it attempted to speak for those who had no vote, but he admits it “risks becoming a mere legitimising charade in today’s commercial environment” (178). Hampton wisely only provides glimpses of the period after the Second World War, because

new forms of media transformed that landscape of information, and it would be impossible to study the press without any mention of radio, television, and new media sources after 1950.

This text is an accessible resource for those with no background in press history and should prove a useful model for debate among experts in the field. Hopefully Hampton's book and other recent work on press history will inspire a greater appreciation for, and debates about, the complexities of the British press.

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