Simultaneously dismal, yet hopeful: the write places in history

Rachel Matthews
The History of the Provincial Press in England. Bloomsbury Academic: New York; London, 2017; 241 pp.: £23.99. ISBN: 9781441162304

Constance Bantman and Ana Claudia Suriana da Silva (eds)
The Foreign Political Press in Nineteenth Century London. Bloomsbury Academic: New York; London, 2017; 232 pp.: £85.00. ISBN: 9781474258494

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The differences in subject matter between Rachel Matthews's *The History of the Provincial Press in England* and *The Foreign Political Press in Nineteenth Century London*, edited by Constance Bantman and Ana Claudia Suriana da Silva, are evident in their titles. Yet there is a common theme in their filling the gaps in the scholarly history of the press in Britain. There are several accounts about national and individual regional newspapers in the UK (though not enough given that for long periods of their history they have been the most influential two-way conduit of information between authority and the public), but the literature on the provincial press as a whole and over a sustainable period is lacking, while the journalism of exiles in Britain is neglected generally and, in some respects frequently un-noticed. These books fill a lacuna in the literature and both are timely. Matthews's book is published at a point when death notices are being written about local newspapers and even the most optimistic observer acknowledges that the landscape of provincial journalism is going to be radically altered over the next decade. What it will look like, or if the rebuilding will be near completion by 2030, is entrenched in conjecture. In short, no-one knows. There is similar confusion about Britain's position with Europe and the rest of the world after the 2016 Referendum on membership of the European Union, so Bantman and Da Silva's book, harking back to time when Britain accepted political refugees without exception, provides a pertinent reminder of more liberal, if no less turbulent, times.

Unlike national newspapers in Britain, the provincial press was largely spared the more extravagant proprietorial excesses of the likes of Lords Beaverbrook and Rothermere, but that is not to say there were no powerful or intriguing characters and Matthews's book includes several. John

Alfred Spender, for example, who had scant reason for optimism when he found himself in charge of the *Eastern Morning News*. Aged 24, the little experience he had of journalism had been gleaned from being the secretary to William Saunders, the owner of two newspapers and the Central News Agency, and from a five-month stint as a leader writer for the London evening newspaper *The Echo*. He was inexperienced and the newspaper he was about to edit had grown apart from its readership and was losing money. It is a scenario being played out in numerous modern local and provincial newspapers trying to find a business model that works as readers and advertisers gravitate towards the internet, but Spender is not a callow, insufficiently-rewarded and under-resourced editor of today. He took over the Hull-based *Eastern Morning* News in October 1886 and he restored it to profitability by concentrating on local causes, in his own words, he 'plunged head over heels into the local dock and railway struggles' (p. 85).

Spender, who would become a celebrated editor of the *Westminster Gazette,* discovered that success lay in focusing not on switching the newspaper's political allegiances as he had little scope in that direction in any case since Saunders, the owner of the *Eastern Morning News*, was his uncle and a campaigning Liberal - but on commentating on issues that were important to the people of Hull. It is a focus that still has a pertinence now and the day this review was written the *Hull Daily Mail*, a successor to the *Morning News*, included a report on its web page about six trains to King Cross being cancelled after a fire on a train led to up to 70 passengers needing to be evacuated. News of the docks, like the number of those employed in Humberside's traditional industrial base, had dwindled to very little.

Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose could have been a sub-head to Matthews's book. The author's quest, she writes, was to find the golden age of local newspapers when reporters would uphold local democracy by holding local councils, courts and businesses to account. This Camelot proved elusive, however, and instead of this high point she discovered an industry that has been just that: 'An industry, focused on profit, for which the "public interest" was little more than a stance to add legitimacy to its economic intent' (p. x). The book puts these business models at its heart, tracing the development of local journalism from a principal purpose as purveyors of commercial news for merchants and traders to the present, when financial survival is a key driver. The author identifies six distinct stages: the newspaper as an opportunistic and entrepreneurial creation; the characterisation of local newspapers as the fourth estate; the impact of New Journalism; the growth of chain control; the marketization of newspapers; and the impact of digital technology. Perhaps because the author, who was a local journalist for 15 years, has personal experience of the latter phases, these are covered with most authority. She wrote: 'We worked longer and longer hours, with fewer and fewer staff, but such was our professional pride we were

driven to produce the best paper we could' (p. x). The wages are low too, which also chimes with the past because the book notes that the position of the journalist in the 1800s was a lowly one, with salaries poor compared to other professions. Editors were paid on a par to clerks and, in the provinces, reporters, like today, earned less than bricklayers.

The focus on profit has required increasingly stronger lenses since the days when the share price of Johnston Press rose 4p to 210p on the news that it had bought 65 regional titles, including the paper claiming to be the oldest in Britain, the *Stamford Mercury*, from Emap for £221m. This was as recently as 1996 when profits for newspaper proprietors were heading for margins as much as 40 per cent; 21 years later the *Mercury* and 12 other newspapers of Johnston's East Anglian division were sold for £17m and in mid-2018 the Johnston share price hovered around 8p. In a book rich with statistics, these are not the most alarming figures for people who believe the closure of newspapers threatens local democracy. Matthews's book has several stark sets of numbers that include the charting of a decline in circulation of leading titles. The *Wolverhampton Express and Star* shrank from 217,739 copies sold daily in 1995 to 158,130 ten years later and then plummeted to 40,119 in 2014. The corresponding figures for the *Liverpool Echo* are: 168,748, 130,145 and 41,489 and the *Yorkshire Post*: 106,794, 68,737, and 32,256. Given these statistics, there is little mystery as why the prevailing discourse surrounding the provincial press has been that of crisis, but the darkest prognosis came from the Culture, Media and Sport Committee that in 2009 predicted a cull of 50 per cent of local titles within five years. In reality only around 100 disappeared by 2014 from a total of 1,300.

So is the future unremittingly dark? Matthews, maybe clinging to the hopes that she took into the regional newspaper industry, posits that the current upheaval could be another stage in Darwinian evolution for survival. She describes the outlook as 'simultaneously dismal, yet hopeful' (p. 206), citing the independently owned Tindle Newspaper Group that has expanded the number of titles it publishes and the substantial online presence of many titles including the 140,959 who were browsing the *Manchester Evening News* daily in 2013. The interest in local news has not declined, she argues, and the failure is that of the corporatized provincial news industry rather than that of journalism. She also points to the hyper-local news sites, of which the organisation called Talk About Local counted 704 (and rising) in May 2018.

Matthews's apt summary - simultaneously dismal and hopeful - could also be applied to the hundreds of journalists who ended in London after being exiled from their own countries in the long Nineteenth Century from the Napoleonic Wars to the start of the First World War. Most literature on the Victorian and Edwardian press in Britain has a domestic focus and the contributions of expat

or immigrant journalists have remained largely unexplored. This is a surprising omission because for 120 years these newspapers and periodicals frequently provided platforms for isolated dissident voices against the establishment in Europe and further afield, while also acting as channels of communication for disparate groups scattered around the globe. Bantman and Da Silva's book, which takes a social, political, cultural and editorial perspective, is a welcome start towards chronicling their work.

It resonates with events today, too. As Bernard Porter noted in his 1979 book *The Refugee Question in Mid-Victorian Britain,* no refugee who came to the country between 1823 and 1909 was denied entry or expelled, which could hardly be in greater contrast to contemporary times when a Home Secretary has had to resign as part of the aftermath of the Windrush Scandal. Indeed, post the 1848 revolutions, London must have been one of the most politically diverse cities in the world as exiles from uprisings in Italy, France, Germany and other refugees from the Springtime of the Peoples arrived to form communities eager to champion ideas and mould new identities. The city, which offered the technical printing skills and the infrastructure for distribution, became the transnational political hub throughout the expanded century. For example, between 1855 and 1917 almost 50 different periodicals were printed in London and the surrounding area, and this figure was for Russian-language publications alone.

These communities frequently gathered round a geographical area so that Somers Town became home to Spanish Liberals, Clerkenwell and Soho for the Italians, Fitzrovia and Soho for the French and Tottenham Court Road and Fitzrovia for the Germans, and it is to the credit of the British government's confidence that these individuals, many considered dangerous in their own countries, were largely left alone to preach everything up to and including revolution. In 1899 Emma Goldman, an anarchist political activist, wrote that Britain was a 'haven for refugees from all lands' (p. 145), suggesting that exiles could pursue their agenda 'without hindrance' (p. 145). This was not strictly correct - the German Johann Most spent a year in prison after celebrating the assassination of the Russian tsar Alexander II in the 1881 – but is an indicator of the sense of freedom many exiles enjoyed in the British capital.

Which is not to say that British society as a whole welcomed the immigrants with a total lack of rancour. Just as the narrative of the 2016 Referendum frequently referred to fears that cheap foreign workers were taking British jobs, there were also deep concerns in the Nineteenth Century. Daniel Laqua's chapter on anarchist German newspapers noted that the *Londoner Volks-Zeitung* included an article in December 1887 in which it marked the 'widely held view among the English that unemployment in all sectors is largely attributable to foreign immigrants who, through their low

wage demands, make it impossible for British workers to compete' (p. 146). The *Londoner Freie Presse* also reported:

> From all sides, in the daily and weekly press, in the music halls and churches, in temperance meetings and pubs, great efforts are made to tell the English proletariat that it is the "bloody Germans" who are to blame for the misery of the English workers (p. 145).

As Laqua pointed out, this, allied to antagonism between German radicals and the British labour movement, formed a prism through which anti-German feeling spread among the working classes in the build-up to the First World War.

Inevitably, some exile groups are excluded, but nevertheless this book is a sweeping work that also includes Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, Russian, South American and Indian immigrants, who were forced from their countries because of their political agitation. These would come in waves as the political situation at home changed, most notably the French, whose exiles included Republicans, Bonapartists and Anarchists coming and going depending on the flavour of the government in Paris and in marked contrast to the Royalist and aristocratic communities at the start of the period. At no time was the tide more changeable than in the three years from 1848 when French politics bitterly polarized and leading politicians and journalists such as Louis Blanc and Marc Caussidière rubbed shoulders with French journalists and agitators, exiled either voluntarily or by force, on the streets of London.

It is, of course, the individuals who add energy to the bald facts regarding the numerous publications, welcome though they are, and this book provides helpful biographies of the displaced journalists at its end. Dadabhai Naoroji, the 'Grand Old Man of India' (p. 202), for example, who arrived in Britain in 1855, contributed to the *Journal of the East India Association*, and campaigned for a form of self-determination for the sub-continent. After co-founding the Indian National Congress in 1885 he stood unsuccessfully for the Liberal Party for Holborn a year later, prompting the Prime Minister Lord Salisbury to remark that no constituency was ready to elect a 'black man' (p. 182). In 1892 he campaigned successfully in Central Finsbury, however, becoming the first Indian British MP. If his was a fairly predictable political journey, you could not accuse Olivia Rossetti of the same. Most of the journalists in the book are male, but she was an exception in many ways. Related to artists Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Ford Maddox Brown, she founded the newspaper *The Torch* at 16 with her 12-year-old sister Helen and her 14-year-old brother Gabriel Arthur. At first the newspaper was closely associated with Russian emigrees but in 1894 it switched allegiance to Italian activists and declared itself to be 'anarchist', 'communist' and 'revolutionist' (p. 118). Moving to Italy, Olivia worked as a an interpreter at international conferences and for the League of Nations in the 1920s and 1930s before completing an ideological *volte-face* by supporting Mussolini's Fascists and

the Italian invasion of Abyssinia. You might have abhorred her politics, but she would have made an interesting dinner guest.

Britain as a whole is a multi-cultural society and the capital remains a centre for the international media and a place where the press from all over the world is produced, sold and read. It remains so partly because of liberal attitudes towards censorship and migration and, at a time when the latter is increasingly being called into question, Bantman and Da Silva's insightful book is an important reminder of times when less strident attitudes prevailed. The editors acknowledge that this book leaves gaps in the story of immigrant journalists and it is to be hoped that this will act as a spur for further scholarly work on the newspapers, books and journals produced by foreign journalists in London and further afield in Britain. The times are uncertain politically, and, in terms of local and provincial journalism, financially. Matthews's highly readable book could mark a low water mark in a period of change for local media or provide an eloquent obituary, but one certainty is that it adds to the story of the press in the UK, complementing accounts on the UK's national media by scholars like Curran, Seaton, Conboy and Williams. It will provide a good starting point for any study of local journalism in Britain