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SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY ENGLISH NEWSBOOKS

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THE English newsbooks of the seventeenth century are immeasurably remote from the guns and butter of 1943. But these ancient, decaying octavos, some bound but crumbling into disintegration and others not even pretending to binding, offer, to even the slightest antiquarian tendencies, so beguiling and insinuating a temptation that, like Lamb's midnight darlings, their lure is virtually irresistible. To those of us frail human beings who can resist anything but temptation, here are dangerous grounds, worse than Scylla, Charybdis, and the Sirens. If he is not careful, day after day will be stolen from the righteous quest of classroom assignments and squandered on the frankly unreliable but frequently charming or spicy or even rowdy gossip of 1645 or 1686.

For these newsbooks are full of malice towards some, if not all; and there is seldom a dull moment for the reader of their pages. Unlike the sober history books solemnly issued to our soldiers for the study of our country's history, they abound in scandal, satire, personality; and though the famous figures of the century appear often, Mr. Wallace's famous "common man" is also here in plenty.

T H E
Kingdomes Intelligencer
O F

The Affairs now in agitation in *England*,
Scotland, and *Ireland*: together with
Foreign Intelligence:

To prevent False News.

Published by Authority.

From Monday Aprill 29. to Monday May 6. 1661.

Whitchall.

WE are Comanded to give notice, that his MAJESTY finds the season already so hot, that it will be neither safe nor fit, to continue his healing such as have the Kings. Evil; and therefore that his MAJESTIES good Subjects therein concern'd, would at present forbear to come to Court; Friday next (May 10.) and Wednesday (May 15.) being the last dayes that his MAJESTY intends to Deal, till the heat of the weather be allayed, and His MAJESTIES further pleasure known, whereof His good Subjects shall have timely notice.

M m

Doncaster.

All kinds and conditions of people flit through these pages; and here, if ever, one can feel that his finger is on the pulse of the England of the seventeenth century. If Mr. Walter Edmonds's theory is justifiable, that the primary requisite for a good historical novel is "a sense of the present, of the immediacy of events," here is the making of dozens of such books. Perhaps, therefore, apology for attention to these frozen dispatches of three hundred years ago is not so necessary as it might at first seem.

At any rate, the Rutgers University Library now has the beginning of a good collection of these publications. To be sure, it is very far indeed from being complete, because the field is immense. The *Cambridge Bibliography of English Literature*, which is probably reasonably thorough in its list of such books, gives the titles of roughly 250 newsbooks between 1500 and 1640, 275 between 1641 and 1659, and some 200 more between 1660 and 1700. Our holdings, contrasted with this possibility, are meager, amounting to only about 25 separate titles and a total of perhaps 500 individual numbers. A few, to be sure, seem to be unique, at least in the United States. The British Museum has holdings which by contrast are overwhelming; and some other libraries have rich collections. But thanks to our recent acquisition of a considerable number of papers, we now have a good beginning, a nucleus from which we can proceed to fill in. Often the accumulation of a sufficient foundation to make it seem worth while to continue building is half the battle. Our collection is now definitely worth working on. In current military language, we have established a bridgehead.

A brief sketch of these ephemeral publications of the seventeenth century may serve to set the Library's holdings in their proper background. Although the quest for news is as old as man (did not the Athenians on Mars' Hill crowd around St. Paul with the clamor, "What's news?"), and although it had to some extent been satisfied in Elizabethan England by a flood of ballads and frantic whoppers which approach the lurid yellow journals of the present day in their emphasis on murder, adultery, and other scandal, the modern newspaper may be said to have begun in 1641. Unlike our modern journals in being small rather than large, consisting most often of from eight to sixteen octavo pages, and always known as a "book" and never as a "paper," it at once established its position by filling a long-felt want. After the appearance of *Diurnall* [i.e. "journal," or daily]

Occurrences and *A Perfect Diurnall* in 1641 and 1642, these pamphlets soon jostled each other for places on the news-stands as do our modern picture-magazines. Like some of their modern descendants, they used their striking titles for advertising purposes, and to the modern reader who goes back to them they have a queer and amusing charm. Who can read the mere name of *The Kingdome's Intelligencer* or *Mercurius Politicus* or *Heraclitus Ridens* or *A Weekly Pacquet of Advice from Rome* or *The Pope's Harbinger* or *The Welch Mercury* without yearning for the sheet itself?

Moreover, almost any scholar with any interest in this period is sure to find, before he has turned fifty pages of any of these publications, much fascinating material on his own individual interest. Though one might suppose that all details relevant to any important subject of the time might already have been collected in some easily available monograph, this assumption is far from true. Any candidate for a doctor's degree in this period will find good thesis material in these books. For example, *Mercurius Politicus* offers amusing sidelights on the progress of Milton's monumental quarrel with Salmasius. The reader feels like a boxing fan listening at the radio while the announcer calls the punches. A correspondent at The Hague on February 6, 1651, who had been interested in Milton's *Defense of the English People* in answer to Salmasius's *Royal Defense*, and had previously inquired when it was to be published, excitedly wrote in to the editor: "I am thankfully glad of the promise *Politicus* gives us of *Salmasius* answer, which we greedily expect, and *Salmasius* himself seems to desire it; *Goliath*-like, despising all his adversaries as so many *Pigmies*." Some eleven months later, with Salmasius's retort still not in print, the same correspondent wrote that "Our *Salmasius* bites his thumbs still in silence at *Leyden*, and gives out, that he scorns to give any answer to *Milton*." There is something strangely modern about the ring of such passages; something which present-day readers may perhaps know as propaganda or the war of nerves.

One of the most interesting descriptions of this type of publication, though frankly satirical, is John Cleveland's "Character of a London Diurnal," written in 1645. Cleveland was of course a Royalist and probably felt more hospitable toward royalist newsbooks like *Mercurius Aulicus* (1643) or *Mercurius Pragmaticus* (1647) than

toward their Parliamentary opponents like *Mercurius Britannicus* (1643) or *Mercurius Politicus* (1650). In fact, he wrote two "characters" of the last-named publication in 1650.

Mercurius Britannicus was so bold that it did not hesitate to publish a "hue and cry" after King Charles in 1643 and other items which so offended public taste that their perpetrator, Marchamont Nedham, was soon sent to prison. Curiously enough, however—and again, in a very modern fashion—Nedham was out of prison before long, soon back at his old trade, and soon editing *Mercurius Politicus*. Parenthetically, it is interesting to remember that for almost a year, if not for a longer period, this last publication had been censored, or at least certified for printing, by John Milton himself. War, like misery, often makes strange bedfellows.

After the Restoration the two leading journalists were Henry Muddiman and Sir Roger L'Estrange. The former, one of the most popular journalists, was, curiously enough, a writer who did not publish his writings. Muddiman built up over a number of years a large roster of correspondents with whom he exchanged news; from what might almost be called a staff of reporters he received news from many sources, which he put together into a regular condensed report, done in longhand, to be sent to clients who were willing to pay for it. His letters, large collections of which may still be found in some libraries, correspond vaguely to the trade-letters to which many present-day business men subscribe. He also edited for some time the first newspaper which has survived till the present. Though recently devoted to mere routine government announcements, the *London Gazette*, originally the *Oxford Gazette*, was founded in 1665 and has lasted without a break down to the present era. The other leading journalist of the Restoration was Sir Roger L'Estrange. The author of innumerable books and pamphlets, he is here best known for his *Observer in Question and Answer* (1681-1687), a dialogue method of imparting information (and misinformation) prophetic of modern methods of attempting to teach us how to understand income taxes and rationing.

With the work of Defoe in the early eighteenth century, journalism, or as the seventeenth century would have spelled it, "diurnalism," took on a more businesslike aspect and came a step nearer to the present time. But since our particular interest here is in the seventeenth century, we may conveniently stop at 1700.

Elsewhere in this issue Miss Virginia S. Burnett, who has made a minute study of the Library's file of these newsbooks, gives a list of the titles and numbers in the library. It will be noticed that several of the books which have been mentioned in the brief foregoing history are here represented. Thus we have 31 numbers of the *London Gazette*, 12 of *Mercurius Politicus*, and 2 of *The Observer*. Our most generous holdings are in the group of religiously directed books of the period about 1680. Of the *Weekly Pacquet of Advice from Rome* and its many satellite and associated titles, like *The New Anti-Roman Pacquet*, *The Popish Courant*, and *The Pope's Harbinger*, we have several hundred numbers. At a time when religious antagonism between Protestants and Catholics was running high in preparation for the accession of James II to the throne and his early subsequent abdication, these newsbooks provide rich sources of political, social, and cultural history. A few examples from the Library's holdings may be given as representative illustrations.

In the category of political history there are in most of the newsbooks regular dispatches from abroad recounting how Louis XIV and the King of Poland and other continental personages are managing their affairs. But in order to save space we may confine ourselves to English history. Here we may choose passages bearing on three important events of the day: the death of Oliver Cromwell, the restoration of Charles II, and the punishment of the rebellious and defeated Roundheads.

The Gazette of September 2-9, 1658 (not the original but a reprint), which has not yet been precisely identified with any known newsbook in the usual bibliographies, gives a melancholy comment on the death of the Protector.

His most serene and renowned Highness *Oliver* Lord Protector, being after a sickness of about fourteen days (which appeared an ague in the beginning) reduced to a very low condition of body, began early this morning to draw near the gates of death, and it pleased God about three a'clock afternoon to put a period to his life, I would willingly express upon this sad occasion the deep sorrow which hath possessed the mindes of his most noble son and successor, and other dearest relations had I language sufficient. But all that I can use will fall short of the merits of that most excellent Prince.

In opposite vein is the enthusiastic thanksgiving for the happy return of Charles II in *Mercurius Publicus* for April 26-May 3, 1660. The writer acclaims Charles's "*gracious Letter and Declaration sent*

to the House of Lords . . . wherein His Majesty grants a free general Pardon to all his Subjects whatever that shall within forty days after the publishing thereof lay hold upon that grace and favor . . . excepting only such persons as shall hereafter be excepted by Parliament." An ominous exception, perhaps, but after all one which was probably unavoidable.

The miserable "excepted" victims, however, probably knew what to expect, and they certainly received it. Even their dead bodies had to be punished. The *Kingdome's Intelligencer* for January 28-February 4, 1661, describes the gruesome process of "dragging those odious Carcasses of *Oliver Cromwell*, *Henry Ireton*, and *John Bradshaw* to Tiburn." In the succeeding number is described the equally barbarous process of setting their heads on poles atop Westminster Hall.

But to take the bad taste of these experiences out of our mouths we may turn for a moment to the other form of history which is available from these sources. Three selections may give us an idea of how the seventeenth century lived when revolutions and state functions were forgotten. Kings may come and go, but clothes and food are eternal in interest.

In the same number of the *Kingdome's Intelligencer* which hales the carcasses of Cromwell and the others to Tyburn we read the following urgent advertisement:

A Cambrick-Band with a Flanders-Lace 3 nailes broad, a piece behind about the bignesse of a goate, and an iron-mould in it, was lately lost, whoever brings it to Mistress *Frances Keeble* in the lower walk of the New-Exchange, shall have 40s.

So nigh is grandeur to the dust, verily; but which is the grandeur and which the dust: Cromwell's body or the cambric band? I for one hope Mistress Keeble recovered her precious lace, for which she was prepared to pay very handsomely indeed.

In a recent column in the *Atlantic Monthly* Mr. William Henry Chamberlain recounts the lurid "Confessions of a Confirmed Chocolate-Eater." Mr. Chamberlain's melancholy vice stems originally from the discovery announced in *Mercurius Politicus*, Number 572, for June 16-23, 1659:

Chocolate, an excellent *West-India* Drink, sold in Queens-head Alley in Bishopsgate-street by a French-man who did sell it formerly in Grace-Church-street, and in *Clements* Churchyard; being the first man who did sell it in *England*. There you may have it made ready to drink, and also unmade at easie Rates, and taught the use

thereof; it being for its excellent properties so much esteemed in all places. It cures and preserves the Body of many diseases, as is to be seen by the Book, who hath it there to be sold also.

If the lyrical note here interferes slightly with such mundane considerations as grammatical construction, I am sure Mr. Chamberlain, at least, would agree that if one has to choose between chocolate and grammar, the choice is simple. One can live without grammar, but not without chocolate.

As a final example of the inside life of the seventeenth century, which Thackeray would have called the backstairs history of the time, we may consider the following advertisements from *The Kingdome's Intelligencer*, December 31-January 7, 1661. As further illustrations of the juxtaposition of grandeur and dust they follow on the heels of a long summary of acts of Parliament.

Sir Kenelm Digbies sympathetical Powder, prepared by Promethian fire, curing all green wounds that come within the compass of a remedy, as also the Tooth-ache infallibly; is to be had of Mr. *Samuel Speeds* at the Printing-press in *St. Pauls Church-yard*.

There was lately lost a Gold Tooth-pick-Case, with two Tooth-picks in it, the one silver, the other gold. At one end of the Case was a Seal with three Huntsmen's Horns; at the other end a Seal with a Stag. If any one bring it to Mr. *Herringman* a Bookseller in the lower walk of the New Exchange, he shall have twenty shillings for his pains.

The toothpick cases sound quaint and antique; but what shall we say of the marvelous sympathetic powder? Does it exist in present-day advertisements or have we outgrown these days of wonderful discovery? Were the seventeenth-century people ingenuous? Perhaps we may let our modern advertisers of cigarettes and lipstick answer the questions.

Three items call for special mention because they are not entirely what they seem. They consist of *The Gazette*, Number 432, September 2-9, 1658; *The Weekly News*, January 31, 1606; and *The English Mercurie*, July 23, 1588. All three are nineteenth-century reprints (though no word to that effect appears on them), and all have been considerably—though silently—changed from their originals.

The Gazette, already mentioned above, is actually *Mercurius Politicus* by another name and with some omissions and changes from its original. The purpose of the reprint is to make available the material in that number concerning the death of Cromwell.

The Weekely News, consisting of four large quarto pages of fine print, gives a circumstantial account of the punishment of the perpetrators of the Gunpowder Plot. It is entitled:

A Brief Discourse upon the Arraignment and Execution of the eight traytors—Digby, the two Winters, Graunt, Rookewood, Keyes, Bates, and Johnson, alias Guy Fawkes, four of which were executed in St. Paul's Churchyard, in London, upon Thursday, the 27th last, the other four in the Old Palace Yard, in Westminster, over against the Parliament House, and with a relation of the other traytors which were executed at Worcester.

This account would naturally attract an antiquary and invite reprinting. It is taken from a pamphlet of substantially the same name as this long title, though without any word about the romantically misspelled *Weekely News*.

The English Mercurie of 1588 deals with the historic event which every schoolboy associates with that year. Like the previous item, it gives four solid pages of details, taken apparently from a manuscript account preserved in the British Museum. One sentence will give the flavor:

On the 20th of this Instant Capt. *Fleming*, who had beene to cruize in the Chops of the Channell, for Discoverie, brought Advice into Plymouth, that he had descried the *Spanish Armado* neare the *Lizard*, making for the Entrance of the Channell.

Like many recent reporters' books, this is news hot off the griddle, straight from one who was close to the sources of information—or misinformation.

"I love everything that's old," says Goldsmith's Hardcastle: "old friends, old times, old manners, old books, old wine." For such a temperament, the seventeenth-century newsbooks are a temptation and a refuge, a narcotic and a door to a better understanding of people, who after all are the stuff of life.