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Dale E. Zacher. *The Scripps Newspapers Go to War, 1914-18.* Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008. x + 285 pp. $45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-252-03158-8.

Reviewed by Jon Bekken (Albright College)

Published on Jhistory (January, 2010)

Commissioned by Donna Harrington-Lueker (Salve Regina University)

Scripps and the Drumbeat to War

Although the Scripps media empire today is in sorry shape–its fabled wire service a caricature of its former self and most of its newspapers closed–it was at the height of its influence during World War I. Launched as a string of crusading, politically independent populist newspapers, the Scripps concern threw its weight behind Woodrow Wilsonâs two presidential campaigns as part of a broader effort to claim the leadership role founder E. W. Scripps believed the chain had earned. But the political influence it sought did not really materialize, and Scrippsâs editors felt increasingly constrained by their support for the administration. The effort to have the Scripps papers speak with a single voice antagonized editors; the hopes Scripps had that the Wilson administration would launch a new progressivism were dashed; and the Scripps concern soon retreated from its broader social vision to focus on strengthening its profitability.

Dale E. Zacher, an assistant professor at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock, examines this pivotal period in the Scripps concernâs history, adding to our understanding of the internal dynamics of what was one of the countryâs first newspaper chains. Zacher has worked extensively with the Scripps archives and related archival collections, though given his subject it might have been helpful to look more directly at how the chainâs newspapers actually performed on the ground. (The chain did track local papersâ use of its material, but such secondary accounts are inevitably filtered through the agendas of the parties generating them–and, as Zacher documents, many people were vying for power in the Scripps concern during this period.) The result is a richly detailed study of the Scripps organizationâs internal struggles (unlike other chains, the concern was loosely organized as three networks of newspapers in which editors often held ownership stakes), and of the obstacles the concernâs unusual structure posed to any attempt to wield national political influence. In any event, the Wilson administration appears to have believed the chainâs influence was far less potent than Scripps believed.

Another significant theme of the book is Scrippsâs persistent and controversial efforts to keep his two surviving sons out of the war, even as his papers editorially supported universal conscription. Scripps sought to justify this by claiming his sons were essential employees whose work was vital to the war effort, pushing the youngest son, Bob, into a position of editorial responsibility for which he was ill-prepared in an apparent effort to make this claim more credible. This effort placed Scrippsâs editors in an awkward position, embarrassed the sons, and aggravated tensions within the concernâs fragmented leadership. However, Zacher argues, Scripps genuinely believed that family control was essential to maintain his newspapersâ progressive ethos and working-class orientation, and that his youngest son was far more likely to continue that legacy.

The Scripps concern was always a mass of contradictions. Scripps sought to run his newspapers on the cheap, offering his crusading journalism with smaller staffs than

most of his competitors. His newspapers were rarely the dominant newspaper in their market, in large part because of this cheapness. They relied on strong features and other syndicated material from Scrippsâs Newspaper Enterprise Association to make up for thinner local news sections, and on a crusading populist tone to attract working- and middle-class audiences alienated by the conservatism of the dominant dailies and the sensationalism of the Hearst papers, with which Scripps competed in a few markets. This approach initially led to substantial profits, but it relegated most of the Scripps papers to secondary status and thus left them poorly situated to survive the pressures toward consolidation that were on the horizon.

Many scholars have overstated the Scripps concernâs progressivism, in part because of a tendency to overlook the Progressive Era backdrop that led even staunchly conservative newspapers to advocate policies that today would be condemned as socialistic. Zacherâs research helps balance this assessment. As the country emerged from World War I, for example, the Scripps July 1919 editorial conference rejected a motion to adopt an editorial stance advocating the release of the countryâs many political prisoners (something Scripps had been pressing for in personal communications with figures in the Wilson administration), narrowly passing a weaker resolution only after one of his sons argued that keeping Socialist leader E. V. Debs in prison was building support for the socialists. Ultimately, that conference issued a program that seemed progressive on its face, but which it had no intention of aggressively advocating. âThe warâs stresses had weakened and nearly killedâ President Wilson, Zacher concludes. âTo some extent, the war had the same effect on the progressive editorial policies of the Scripps newspapersâ (p. 223).

Stylistically, the book can be a bit of a slog. Too many chapters end with a recapitulation of what they have established and the chronological organizational approach (seven chapters for five years) results in a good deal of thematic overlap. A thematic approach might have served the material better, especially as the periodization seems a bit arbitrary.

We have seen in recent years a resurgence of scholarly research into the Scripps concern. Zacher makes a modest but useful contribution to this literature, offering a detailed examination of what proved a pivotal era in the concernâs development. The concern that emerged from the grand experiment in political influence Zacher examines was more profitable (at least in the short to medium term), but far less ambitious. The Scripps concern would never again aspire to the sort of national influence and power it sought in the World War I era and generally would be far more leery of editorial crusades.

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Citation: Jon Bekken. Review of Zacher, Dale E., *The Scripps Newspapers Go to War, 1914-18.* Jhistory, H-Net Reviews. January, 2010.

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