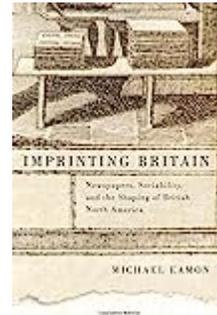




Michael Eamon. *Imprinting Britain: Newspapers, Sociability, and the Shaping of British North America.* Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2015. 288 pp. \$34.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7735-4491-8.



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Imprinting Britain provides a unique view of the role of newspapers in two eighteenth-century North American towns, Halifax and Quebec City. In this micro-study of colonies with the same ruler but without the same ethnic roots Michael Eamon scrupulously documents printer/reader interaction. He focuses on a nascent English-language press, c. 1750s-1800, which communicated British ideas to a literate colonial print community (pp. xiii, 9). And he profiles that community's members who, though diverse in occupation and political and religious belief, utilized the press to create a cohesive vision of privileged, English-speaking conduct (p. 14). Because serious engagement with the papers required time to read, think, and write letters to editors, the community was clearly an elite cadre whose definition of sociability was imposition of British behavioral norms. How local printer/editors, often with no background in journalism, abetted or, less often, resisted this imprinting and how their efforts related it to the sociability of clubs, theaters, and coffeehouses comprise the two parts of this work.

An introduction discusses the interpretations of scholars, among them Jürgen Habermas and Benedict Anderson, who have also examined the connection between reader and newspaper. Eamon concludes that nei-

ther of these analyses fits British North America, where the colonials did not seek a space separate from other institutions or a nation apart from them. This print community wanted a press that would affirm Britain as their nation and represent Britain as their space beyond the sea. If they prioritized pedagogical journalism, they realized that information and diversion would attract potential followers.

Recognizing that sociability can, depending on context, be active or passive, Eamon separates his text accordingly. *Print as Sociability* delineates in four chapters a linchpin press, one with parochial newspaper printers and readers, British regulators, and disseminators at home and abroad of useful knowledge well before that phrase became the mantra of mid-Victorian publications. *Print and Sociability* describes in three chapters a peripheral press, but one that tethered associations/clubs, theaters, and coffeehouses to the reputed guardians of deportment, the print community.

Chapter 1 concentrates on printers, whose journals the preface categorizes as more akin to British provincial than New England or London publications. The early *Halifax Gazette* (established 1752) and the *Quebec City Gazette* (launched 1764) covered mostly neighborhood

and British affairs, with a smattering of imperial and foreign information garnered from ship captains, travelers, and Boston heralds. Given this largely British news flow, it is unsurprising, as Eamon notes, that these tribunes did not appeal to French settlers. And adoption of the elite's preferences, of civic engagement rather than republicanism, social critique rather than revolution, and freedom bounded by decorum, likewise distanced printers from the Anglophonic lower class. As for their biographies, Eamon discovered that few business and fewer personal records exist. Surviving evidence indicates a commitment to a work ethic and a wide range of previous jobs, from acting to apprenticing in the trade. Whatever their pasts, printer/editors, then as now, struggled to keep their papers afloat and worried about ruinous seditious libel actions. Sensible men, they avoided the venomous words of London political journals, language undercutting journalists' respectability, and instead solicited advertising and stressed accuracy.

Complementing the first chapter, the second looks at readers. In an age that prized anonymity, Eamon found subscription lists and advertising topics more useful than letters to editors to determine audience. Drawing from multiple sources, he locates men in the government, clergy, military, and professions together with affluent farmers and perhaps less wealthy schoolteachers. Besides subscribing, folks could buy or scan sheets in coffeehouses and printers' offices, options also accessible to frontier American and isolated Irish consumers, tempting parallels for future study. Women apparently rarely subscribed, but articles about tending the sick and refraining from gossip suggest, at least to Eamon, that they were readers. He did unearth advertising proving that some First Nations and emancipated and enslaved people of color were literate yet other newspaper sections spoke about, not to them. For sophisticated palates, *The Spectator* and *The Rambler* were available and, though outdated, connected urbane colonials to British authors of quality. As for contributors, Eamon admits, they are harder to name because they are customarily uncredited.

In contrast to the early chapters, the third introduces the subject of regulation, an issue that encompassed the rights of editor and of reader as writer. While printers routinely published letters from their audience, most did not reveal their reasons for rejecting the rest. William Moore, of Quebec's *Herald*, broke with this tradition, albeit he and his colleagues tolerated, even supported press restraint when the boundary of acceptable conduct was crossed. Hence they could laud British liberties and simultaneously correct deviations from British conven-

tions, announce only genteel charitable and entertainment events, teach juveniles good manners, and scold adults about bad. But they missed the majority of the population, the illiterate and the non-English-speaking literate, whom they presumably considered the worst offenders,

Closing this section of the volume, chapter 4 centers on newspaper interest in science, from breakthrough data on the universe to sensational inventions, and on scientists, among them Benjamin Franklin and William Herschel. If less crucial for this book's case, science did expand the press community as periodicals, such as the late-century *Quebec* and *Nova Scotia* magazines, served men too busy to read books.

Shifting gears, the next chapters explain how the press helped popularize elite forms of sociability (p. 110). Eamon targets associations/clubs, theaters, and coffeehouses where men who read and digested newspapers, and printers who supplied them, were welcome. Print commentary on organizations, elucidated in detail here, sometimes contained news of similar British activity, giving these columns a transatlantic dimension that should inspire more research on comparative journalism history. Equally worth further investigation is the trend of associations to address not merely members' needs but those of the general public while maintaining fidelity to British mores.

The colonial theater is another subject that press historians have neglected although, as Eamon shows, it was certainly fertile ground for print. Advertising generated revenue, and reviews of London plays underscored the common values of colonial and British elites. With few domestic dramas, the impact of London was substantial, notably as the slow but steady move from satire to politics complicated the canon of comportment. More significant for press historians, Eamon points out that as plays invited critiques that gravitated to print, correspondents began to apply judging standards derived from theater to the newspaper itself. As important is his disclosure that newspapers in Halifax and Quebec City are singular primary sources, amply testifying to the varieties and schedules of plays and to the tastes of playgoers. This bounty contrasts sharply with these sheets' fleeting glances at the Francophonic press, glances obvious solely when politics was at stake.

The owners and patrons of coffeehouses were also principals in the print cast of characters. Imitating *The Spectator* and its heirs, printers went to pick up hard news and soft rumors, listen to ideological debates, and receive

London and local advertising commissions. But this forum, unlike the Roman, had no room for plebeians, be they First Nations, people of color, or the working poor. Snubbing such inhabitants implies that these colonial papers and their clients favored hierarchy over equality, homogeneity over diversity, order over liberty, and what sad choices they were for journalism.

This work, a title in the McGill-Queens Studies in the History of Ideas, has three appendices with extensive material on associations/clubs, theaters, and coffee-

houses; a comprehensive list of primary sources; and a twenty-eight-page bibliography of secondary ones. The volume's only flaws are its occasionally extraneous footnotes and its somewhat haphazard index. For instance, the text frequently refers to William Moore of *Quebec's Herald*, but his name is not in the index. Alternatively, less-noticed postmaster Joseph Peters has numerous citations. And the book overlooks the power of the spoken word when it still dominated circulation of news. These matters should not, however, diminish the merit of this innovative study.

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