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GROWTH & CHANGE  
IN THE EARLY  
ENGLISH PRESS

Richmond P. Bond

LAWRENCE  
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*Since I am among friends,*

I do not feel it is necessary to apologize for beginning with a few definitions—definitions which are not easy to make or pleasant but which are necessary to a fruitful critical discussion and an accurate historical study of the press in its early years or its more mature decades. Here, as is so often the case, there is the temptation to use interchangeable terms, which are pertinent to a rich style but can produce a morass instead of a precise analysis. Librarians who know their business care about the distinctions which accompany definitions, but librarians are an abandoned lot, abandoned to the cause of procuring, describing, promoting, and preserving reading matter in all its media. Professors, at least the "happy few," also care about exact terms, but most of us cannot be counted on because we are behind the times, or in an effort to catch up have embraced impressionistic judgments which change with each wind and rain of what is somehow called the New Criticism.

The foremost and simplest definition concerns the newspaper and the periodical. To the general public the newspaper is a bundle of large printed pages appearing each morning or afternoon on the porch or in the shrubbery, and the periodical is a somewhat thicker group of pages not in hard covers arriving by mail or accessible in a drug store or a supermarket. This latter type generally answers to the name of magazine. Actually these two kinds of publications have several characteristics in common—they are both serials with usually a definite frequency and an indefinite duration; they have a date and a number printed in each issue; they are published with specific titles which are subject to change but generally remain constant. What then is the important difference between newspapers and periodicals? It lies in the con-

tent, in the extent to which the matter is current. The newspaper of course has very much that is timely; the periodical has but little of what we call news of the moment. The terms *serial* and *journal* are more generic, and I shall so use them to include both the newspaper and the periodical. It is as simple as that—to start with.

But now the confusion begins when each of these two general types extends its normal boundaries and includes matter usually associated with the other. For example, your paper of news this morning probably has a bridge column and a small collection of queries and answers supplied by one of two sisters who are among the most widely read and influential citizens of this nation. Those features were not prepared this week or last, and contain nothing that would not be equally appropriate next week or next month. Nor is the astrologer's nonsense really timely despite his reliance on his devotee's time of birth. Other departments of counsel and inspiration are often "canned" without a true claim to being current. And there are the odd things which are called "comics" and frequently are comical in a way not intended; however, I hasten to say we must not laugh too hard at these strips, for they will be the material on which historians will build some of their estimates of our peculiar culture. And, to make it all the more muddled, some of our most powerful weekly journals of news at times include essays on men and books and art forms born hundreds of years ago as well as those current. There is, indeed, a considerable overlapping nowadays in the periodic press, and without real damage. Purity of type in serials is largely dead or dormant. Perhaps one of the most profitable mixtures of journalistic forms appears each Sunday in five pounds of a well-printed paper: the *New York Times* once a week includes its regular supply of news and a

tremendous load of advertisements and also three separate sections—a magazine and a book review and a historical review of the week, none of which is a prescribed part of the usual issue of a standard newspaper.

As to the growth and change in the early press of the British Isles before 1800, we must make and take a warning which should apply also to English journalism since the eighteenth century, and to American journalism as well or even more. It is often said and believed by the ingenuous that growth and change are laws of life and thus are beneficent and need no further questioning. Certainly growth and change do seem essential in the animal and vegetable kingdoms, but for human activities and institutions we could at least ask if bigger really means better, if all or even most changes in relations are beneficial, and if a "law of life" be not a concept a bit too dogmatic when a "way of life" may be nearer the factual truth and the philosophical truth as well. We are a credulous nation susceptible to catch phrases, phrases which catch our minds and hold on.

The English periodical did not reach any real prominence until the 1660s or have real literary significance until the eighties, so our first notice here must go to the newspaper. The first year of the English newspaper, 1622, had one newspaper. In the next twenty years there were less than twenty different journals. During the 1640s the annual total widened sharply as well as the tone of these controversial papers, until Cromwellian restrictions cut down journalistic publication. And as a matter of royal principle the Restoration in 1660 continued the managing of news and the censoring of comment, so that for each of certain several years of the reign of the second Charles only three papers were in operation. The inglorious days of the second James brought

no relief from official Licensing, but finally in 1695 Parliament refused to renew the Regulation of Printing Act, and thereafter the roll of serial publications—both newspapers and periodicals—surely and slowly grew with each year of the eighteenth century. In 1711, the year the *Spectator* commenced its immortal life, there were sixty-six journals in the British Isles, in 1750 ninety, in 1775 one hundred forty, and in 1800 two hundred sixty-five. This is growth in plenty, a gradual increment after the political circumstances became more stable and the reading public itself grew in reading ability and prosperity. In all there were approximately twenty-five hundred journals, one kind and another, by the end of the eighteenth century, of which many have come to us in only one copy of one issue or none at all, and a few have not been recorded in any standard list, and many have not survived in a complete file. What we call the newspaper is the most numerous in such a catalogue, and among periodicals the essay journal and the magazine are probably next in number, though estimates are only careful guesses inasmuch as it would not be possible to classify clearly all the known titles even if they were available.

Coincident with this numerical expansion was the geographic. From the beginning the overwhelming center of journalism in all its kinds was the sprawling Thameside city between the Tower and the Abbey and beyond. Actually in this activity London has been dominant in England as New York has never been in America. To be sure, journalism prospered in Edinburgh and in Dublin but not nearly so much as in London. Nevertheless, the English provinces had by 1800 about three hundred journals, mostly newspapers, and the various Scotch and Irish towns a good number. So we see that in the

English cities and towns and in Caledonia and Hibernia, despite the power of the great metropolis, the press expanded to a considerable degree. The most revealing figure is the total for the crag-bound Celtic country of Wales, which had two papers, both in Welsh, before 1800, an average of one journal for ninety years.

Before we proceed, I should remind you of two large aspects of the expansion of serial publication. First, the freedom of the press, and second, its format. I have mentioned the formal licensing system, which died at the close of the seventeenth century, but other methods of control remained or were developed, such as government publication of news, subsidization, and use of the courts to deal with dangerous papers. Thus the expiration of licensing did not open the press to full freedom, and a mighty handicap to growth and power began in 1712 with the famous and infamous Stamp Tax, which was levied on numerous and varied articles. Probably for political reasons newspapers and pamphlets were chosen to bear a heavy burden, and a tax was placed on the advertisements in every issue and on each copy of a paper. The publisher was forced to buy stamped paper (and a handsome stamp it was, too) at the rate of a halfpenny for a journal printed on a half sheet, and so on up. This amounted in many cases to a fifty per cent tax and thus was a heavy blow to the expanding press, and at times a mortal stroke. But this tax went on and on, and was augmented and augmented, until the tax on a copy of a paper rivalled its cost of manufacture. At the time of the American Revolution the tax was twopence for a two-page newspaper, and that was not the end of the increase. This so-called "tax on knowledge" lasted until the mid-nineteenth century. Such a burden of course made a

strong obstruction, but the press continued in a growth all the more impressive.

As to format, we shall mention only the most obvious—size. The first newsbooks or news pamphlets or newspapers were slight things, about seven or eight inches by six, and so for the most part remained until the half-sheet folio of the *London Gazette* in the 1660s. The folio, with a number of inevitable exceptions, stayed the favorite format of the newspaper but slowly advanced from the eleven-by-seven inch dimension of the late seventeenth century to the eighteen-by-twelve of the late eighteenth. And larger newspapers naturally provided more letterpress. Many of the periodicals likewise preferred the folio size, from the half-sheet of the *Tatler* and the *Spectator* to the six-page *Rambler*. The review and the magazine generally were quartos, smaller than the folio in height and breadth but greater in girth. As a result of these physical habits the more literary and historical periodicals are nowadays easier to handle and store than the newspapers, and also to keep clean.

Titles have had their own ways and byways. The largest vogue in this territory was that of the *Mercurius* in the seventeenth century, the name of the Roman god of tidings followed by a qualifying adjective; the favorites were the *Mercurius Britannicus* and *Mercurius Politicus* and *Mercurius Pragmaticus* and so on. There were combinations of Latin noun and adjective made only once, such as *Mercurius Infernus*, *Mediterraneus*, *Morbicus*, *Nullus*, *Phanaticus*, *Somniosus*, and *Verax*. For the present assembly there were the *Mercurius Academicus* and *Mercurius Librarius*, and for this lecturer we have the *Mercurius Carolinus*. This fashion reigned among royalists and Parliamentarians and survived the return of the exiled but anointed monarch. Here was the junction of

unity and variety to the point of monotony. In the next century we find what we could expect—that many papers, especially newspapers, were named for their city or town of origin and some for their founders. And often journals stated time or frequency with the words *Morning*, *Evening*, *Daily*, *Quotidian*, *Weekly*, *Monthly*, even *Annual*. Very occasionally the price was included—*Penny Post*, *Halfpenny London Journal*, *London Farthing Post*. Frequently such terms as *New* and *True* and *Universal* gave the reader a sense of confidence. A large number of titles used and reused the words *Advertiser*, *Chronicle*, *Courant*, *Diurnall*, *Intelligence*, *Journal*, *Magazine*, *News*, *Occurrences*, *Post*, and *Review*. On the whole there was much less initiative than imitation in the forming of a title—too seldom do we see a title that is fresh and suggestive and indicative, for editors and publishers had in the mass small originality or conscience, and indeed this same reliance on well established or irrelevant titles has all along been a characteristic of the English press, and the Continental, and the American.

There were various oddities and antics in this great mass of titles and subtitles which in one case may illustrate a robustness and in another a throe of desperation. For examples, the *Weekly Remembrancer* of 1702 in its struggle to be remembered had four different full titles in six issues; the *Weekly Comedy* ran for ten Wednesdays in 1699 and was reprinted in the form of a play four years later called *The Humours of a Coffee-House*; after four more years this latter title was revived for seven numbers of a periodical and then became the *Weekly Comedy; or, the Humours of a Coffee-House*. Defoe's long, great, important journal enjoyed six different complete titles built on the term *Review*. The official paper of the government in the 1660s had two titles, the *Mercurius*

*Publicus* on Monday and the *Parliamentary Intelligencer* on Thursday, which were the partisan descendants of other twins, the *Mercurius Politicus* and *Publick Intelligencer*; this must have been a most interesting phenomenon—two journals of different titles appearing once a week on different days with considerable duplication. Another dichotomy was that of Nathaniel Mist, who in 1716 founded the *Weekly Journal*; some years later he renamed it *Mist's Weekly Journal*, and then when he had political troubles in a burst of genius he changed that title to *Fog's Weekly Journal*. The great *Times* of London did not begin its very lengthy and very distinguished career under that perfect name—in 1785 it was born as the *Daily Universal Register*, and in 1788 *Times* became the main title and in several months the sole title we have today.

As to the many men and few women who edited the newspapers and periodicals and wrote for them, we find a striking development as we go from the seventeenth century to the eighteenth. In the earlier era there were a number of journalists capable and clever, but virtually no literary figures of note became allied to the periodic press, perhaps because very few literary journals were then in being and the popular press still lacked enough dignity and renown. But in the first portion of the following century three of its five great writers—Defoe, Steele, Addison—became the leaders in the evolution and enhancement of the periodical, and the other two—Swift and Pope—had lesser connections with the press. In later years the roll of eminent authors is long, from Fielding, to Johnson, to Coleridge. And throughout the eighteenth century there lived many able and honest but not famous writers who conducted journals and contributed to them. Many others as always had strong monetary motives, and

many had small ability and less honesty. With the extension of excellent authorship the prestige of the periodical and the newspaper quite naturally increased. Also the reading public grew as the complete public grew. With more readers at hand more journals were published to satisfy their desire, and more papers prompted more readers as well as more reading by the established readers.

The reprinting of periodicals, not of newspapers, has given a considerable opportunity to publishers and readers. The seventeenth century produced almost nothing considered worth such a second glance, but the great merit and reputation of the *Tatler* and the *Spectator* very properly resulted in one of the largest records of reprinting in the history of all kinds of publication. In fact, the reprinting of both these essay sheets began even before they had ceased to appear in ephemeral form. The *Tatler* and the *Spectator* in sets of several volumes were published alone or in combination with each other or with other essay papers at a fairly regular pace for a century and thereafter in large numbers. We can have no doubt that the purchase of many sets was animated by the genteel desires of gentlemen in name or in deed to acquire handsome, fashionable furniture, and such volumes in their elegant calf or morocco bindings did indeed look fine on the shelves of any home, and still do. Here again we parenthetically add that the titles are interesting: the eminent *Tatler* carried that humorous word on its original half-sheets, but in its early reprints *Tatler* appeared as the running head and *The Lucubrations of Isaac Bickerstaff, Esq.* became the title on the title page. The journal preeminent among literary periodicals also had an attractive title—*The Spectator*—which has frequently been appropriated. A perfect choice of the title *Spectator* was made for the paper issued by the

prison of Southern Michigan, a far better choice than the two other famous journals by Steele and Addison would have been, the *Tatler* and the *Guardian*. Other essay journals were often included in collections of British Essayists or Classics from the 1790s through the 1820s, very readable periodicals like the *Rambler*, *Connoisseur*, *Adventurer*, and *World*. All of these reprints of essays displaying both style and substance must have accounted for a total of millions of pages. Moreover, several celebrated series of essays appeared first in journals and then were reprinted separately and often—for example, Johnson's "Idler" essays in the *Universal Chronicle*, Goldsmith's "Chinese Letters" in the *Public Ledger* renamed in book form *The Citizen of the World*, and the letters by the still unknown Junius in the *Public Advertiser*.

Let us now see in what way the various types of papers changed in their progress up, down, and out. The newspaper effected its chief change in content by widening its scope to include more and more material with no immediacy of the moment and by extending its range of current coverage. For literary students the changes in the periodical before the close of the eighteenth century have more interest. The type with the foremost literary merit is, manifestly, the essay journal, led by the incomparable works of Steele and Addison and well sustained by a number of superior papers and also adopted with tertiary value by many others often in blessedly brief runs. The substance of the best of these periodicals was morals, manners, and literature, with politics for the politicians professional and amateur. But gradually the essay was for the most part absorbed into the newspaper and the magazine, frequently in letters written by the editor as pseudo-correspondent. This decline of the essay journal in favor of media which were more miscellaneous and

therefore more attractive to varied tastes became perhaps the most significant change in the periodic press during the eighteenth century.

The magazine was the beneficiary of the talent which had been given to the essay journal and of the large popularity it achieved, but its own history includes a new method and the alteration of that change. The so-called magazine began with the *Gentleman's Journal* in the 1690s if we define this type as a journal of diverse forms and contents. This miscellany had some worthy followers, but the term "magazine" was first used for a periodical in 1731, when the *Gentleman's Magazine* started its very long and influential life. Edward Cave, the begetter, used the name of Sylvanus Urban, a pseudonym of impartial ubiquity. In his introduction he explained this new product—he notes that a good many journals were being scattered about, so that many things of intelligence and amusement were being lost to deserving readers. Then he says, "This Consideration has induced several *Gentlemen* to promote a Monthly Collection, to treasure up, as in a *Magazine*, the most remarkable Pieces on the Subjects abovemention'd, or at least impartial Abridgments thereof, as a Method much better calculated to preserve those Things that are curious, than that of transcribing." He proceeded to fill the first half of each issue with extracts of the essays that had appeared in the leading journals during the preceding month. The rest of the issue included poetry, a monthly intelligence, several articles, lists of casualties, maritime disasters, deaths, marriages, promotions, preferments, prices of stocks and goods, as well as foreign advices and a catalogue of new books—in short, a monthly register of information which could serve many different classes of readers. This kind of journal was, to be sure, a col-

lection of miscellaneous data, but it had first the purpose of storing up the current discussions on timely topics for the man who preferred such a handy digest to the chaos of consulting the increasingly numerous papers. Such a sensible procedure and such a wide compilation had a good success if we can trust the testimony of reprints and imitations. The *London Magazine* followed the popular pattern the next year, and the *Universal Magazine* and *Scots Magazine* a few years later. There were a great many magazines for a great many years; they enlarged the kinds of contents, added illustrations, and became less and less derivative. This tendency away from the abridgement of current papers toward original essays became a major change during the massive growth of the magazine. It held to the practice of including a miscellaneous substance but subordinated the practice of storing up and preserving, which had been the original idea that had given the name to the type. Thus the "magazine" was in time no longer completely a magazine by its own definition. At present when the word appears in serial titles, it means almost anything. We are a loose people in the use of our language and seem indifferent to its opportunities for precision, and our journalists find it easy to follow the people in their preference for a winding way.

Another prominent type of early periodical is the dreariest, the review of books. This sort of journal started late in the seventeenth century and grew with the strength of sterility. Even the titles were stolid, like *Works of the Learned* and *History of Learning*. Such monthlies and quarterlies selected recent or roughly recent tomes for presentation of content with little or no assessment of value or effort at invitation or charm of phrase. The works chosen for this serialized solemnity were books written by learned men for men not quite so

learned who wished to be somewhat informed on theology, philosophy, science, and the like. It all resembled a competition in pedantry, and the general reader who needed guidance in worthy, interesting, but not ponderous reading matter was left with no journal to help him. In fact, the English public had to wait until the mid-century to get reviewing journals, like the *Monthly Review* and the *Critical Review*, which by altering the purpose of reviewing presented books to the intelligent but not professional reader. Then more and more such organs displaced the long dim summaries which did not review at all in our later sense of the term.

There were several other kinds of periodicals that had spectacular success and then went into a decline, perhaps to the point of departure. One of these types was the question-and-answer paper, invented by the dexterous John Dunton and kept mobile for five years at the close of the seventeenth century. His journal was the *Athenian Mercury*, which devoted itself to printing queries and replying to them. Dunton gathered a small team of savants to furnish answers to any questions people might submit, and submit them they did—questions on science, theology, morality, Biblical problems, and all sorts of miscellaneous matters.

What's the reason that some Men have no Beards? [I, 3]

Whence proceeds weeping and laughing for the same Cause? [I, 3]

Suppose *Lazarus* had an Estate, and bequeathed it to his Friends, whether ought he or the Legatees to enjoy it after he was rais'd from the Dead? [I, 5]

Is the Soul Subject to Passion? [I, 8]

Why can an Owl see better by Night than by Day? [I, 10]

Whether a *Woman* may be *believed* when she says she'll *never marry*? [I, 13]

Why are Angels painted in Petticoats? [II, 14]

In what quarter of the Year begun the World in, whether in Spring, Summer, Autumn, or Winter? [II, 18]

Whether it's better to lose the Sight or Hearing? [II, 18]

The answers often went as far as current knowledge allowed, often used more space than fact, and occasionally gave rejoinders more pert than pertinent.

Whether 'tis lawful for a Man to beat his Wife?

The affirmative would be very disobliging to that Sex, without adding any more to it, therefore we ought to be as cautious and tender as may be in asserting such an ill natur'd Position. [I, 1]

What sort of Creatures the *World in the Moon* may be supposed to be inhabited by? Whether they are governed by revealed Laws as we are, and whether they have bodies like ours, and what sort of Nourishment or Life they have?

We won't be so uncivil to the Gentleman who sends this Question, as to call him a *Lunatick one*, . . . All we shall say, is that the Question makes a little too much haste, and supposes on faster than any *probability can follow it*. [I, 7]

Whether a *publick* or *private Courtship* is the best?

A *Private* is the more *safe* as well as the more *pleasant*. [I, 13]

How long do you intend to continue your *Athenian Project*, since some one or other may always be putting in some *Nice and Curious Questions*?

As long as such Questions shall be put in, and perhaps a little longer, we having some *Three thousand* upon the File already, expecting their several *Answers*.  
[II, 17]

Dunton's journal turned into such a triumph that the title word *Mercury* came to mean a paper of this ilk. A later journal contemporary with the *Tatler* and called the *British Apollo* (another good title with a debt to antiquity) filled more than half its four pages with queries and notes in prose and doggerel; thereafter this vogue virtually disappeared. But be it said that the question-answer journal advanced the cause of printing letters from the public and also provided a superb source book on the intellectual history of its period.

Another vigorous vogue was that of the dialogue sheet, which was started in 1681 by a paper called *Heraclitus Ridens* and by Roger L'Estrange's *Observer*, each of which suffered and enjoyed much imitation. The central doctrine in these periodicals was usually partisan, with the dogma promulgated in a mono-dialogue. Here again we have a type of journal wherewith to study history for two or three decades, and that's about the weight of its value.

History is helped also by the historical summary, like the *Annals of Queen Anne* and the *Annual Register*, for which Burke wrote regularly. And the history of science is recorded in the *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society*, the scientific journal founded during the Restoration apparently for a permanent reign. (It is convenient to remember that this journal and the *London Gazette*, now the periodical and the newspaper of longest continuous life, were both established the same year, 1665, the year also of England's last visitation of the

Black Death.) Very minor types of periodicals remain to furnish even more variety—the papers mainly printing music or poetry or fiction or letters or Characters, as well as mercantile and linguistic journals. In all these, the titles are too few to suggest much evolution or revolution.

What is the sum of our chronicle of growth and change during almost two centuries of the English press? The newspaper was altered from newsbook to controversial pamphlet to factual account of events, and it grew greatly in numbers as well as in substance and influence. Of the periodicals the essay journal, despite or because of its independent contributions to literature, was eventually adopted and adapted by the newspaper and the magazine. The magazine itself at first had the nature of a miscellany, was then used as the repository of derived material, later became more original, but always remained motley. The journal of reviews moved from its dismal role of informing the erudite to a function more general, popular, attractive, useful. The question-answer paper and the pseudo-dialogue sheet both had short strong careers more valuable historically than intrinsically. The register of current events from weekly to annual had a positive value to conscientious citizens and still serves its purpose well. The scientific journal had a similar value for its professions. The result of it all was some stagnation and obsolescence, some development propitious and eclectic, some movements from one medium to another. A sum, as usual, of the plus and the minus and the zero.

To say it another way, our rapid summary of the early press has shown that growth brings change and change stimulates growth in titles, places of issuance, editors and authors, format and length, and the major and minor types of journals. Newspapers and periodicals before

1800 elected to follow various cycles and fashions, perpetrated multitudes of deadly dull pages and enlivened manifold awkward hours, brought a tremendous deal of instruction to countless readers and often mixed it with the saving salt of amusement. These journals all have some sort of historical interest in the history of civilization, and many of them offer a rich measure of literary merit. They give convenient and useful matter for tons of term papers, honors essays, master's theses, doctoral dissertations, professorial articles, and scholarly volumes, not to say days or nights of sophisticated conversation.

Let us conclude this hour of one-sided conversation with a few remarks bibliographic in a field which is relatively new and proper for fresh scholarly research. The chief handicap in some kinds of investigation among these hundreds of papers is the rarity and condition of many pertinent issues; the papers are of course best seen in the flesh, but files and single issues on film and photostat are available. We have bibliographies of the whole area and of several of the best collections and of special topics. We have already a number of careful editions and substantial studies of a literary and historical character, besides many articles and notes on pertinent topics; these contributions naturally divide themselves into several classes of expertness. But there is no adequate general history of the English periodical or of the newspaper for the full reach of the era, perhaps because we have not yet analyzed sufficiently to warrant syntheses. And, oddly enough, there is no really competent history of the advertising in newspapers and periodicals. There remain to be explored and reported numerous journals and groups of journals, many editors and authors and booksellers, and a large number of subjects relating to circulation and financing, the reading-writing-buying public, the modes

and influences that were crude, subtle, or effective, and the interesting techniques, devices, forms, types, and styles of presentation. For instance, there are the editorial masks, the procedures of editing and collaboration, the uses of the letter and the Character, of fiction and poems, and of the essay, all of which should command the enthusiastic combination of the historical point of view and the critical sense.

The roots are here of most of modern journalism, which has the advantage of automatic reproduction, instantaneous communication, and huge financial support but too often also the disadvantages of shoddy education, careless writing, and a twisted sense of values. Speaking as an academic colleague who believes that the past can improve the present and that the periodic press is a marvelous medium, I should recommend that the descendants of the first ages of the paper of news and the journal of comment, learning, and diversion must still recognize the wit of Steele, the elegance of Addison, the sense of Defoe, the honesty of Fielding, the humor of Goldsmith, the vigor of Johnson, and the general Augustan devotion to reason as wise qualities and achievements to be studied and honored. A journalism that knows not its own ancestors neglects one ally which would help to win the vast merciless battle of Time.

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