

### *Origin of Newspapers*

WE are indebted to the Italians for the idea of newspapers. The title of their *gazettas* was perhaps derived from *gazzera*, a magpie or chatterer; or more probably from a farthing coin, peculiar to the city of Venice, called *gazetta*, which was the common price of the newspapers. Another etymologist is for deriving it from the Latin *gaza*, which would colloquially lengthen into *gazetta*, and signify a little treasury of news. The Spanish derive it from the Latin *gaza*, and likewise their *gazatero* and our *gazetteer* for a writer of the *gazette*, and, what is peculiar to themselves, *gazetista*, for a lover of the *gazette*.

Newspapers then took their birth in that principal land of modern politicians, Italy, and under the government of that aristocratical republic, Venice. The first paper was a Venetian one, and only monthly: but it was merely the newspaper of the government. Other governments afterwards adopted the Venetian plan of a newspaper, with the Venetian name; from a solitary government gazette, an inundation of newspapers has burst upon us.

Mr. George Chalmers, in his life of Ruddiman, gives a curious particular of these Venetian gazettes. "A jealous government did not allow a *printed* newspaper: and the Venetian *gazetta* continued long after the invention

of printing to the close of the sixteenth century, and even to our own days, to be distributed in *manuscript*." In the Magliabechian library at Florence are thirty volumes of Venetian gazettas all in manuscript.

Those who first wrote newspapers were called by the Italians *menanti*; because, says Vossius, they intended commonly by these loose papers to spread about defamatory reflections, and were therefore prohibited in Italy by Gregory XIII. by a particular bull, under the name of *menantes*, from the Latin *minantes*, threatening. Menage, however, derives it from the Italian *menare*, which signifies to lead at large, or spread afar.

Mr. Chalmers discovers in England the first newspaper. It may gratify national pride, says he, to be told that mankind are indebted to the wisdom of Elizabeth and the prudence of Burleigh for the first newspaper. The epoch of the Spanish Armada is also the epoch of a genuine newspaper. In the British Museum are several newspapers which were printed while the Spanish fleet was in the English Channel during the year 1588. It was a wise policy to prevent, during a moment of general anxiety, the danger of false reports, by publishing real information. The earliest newspaper is entitled "The English Mercurie," which by *authority* "was

imprinted at London by her highnesses printer, 1588." These were, however, but extraordinary gazettes, not regularly published. In this obscure origin they were skilfully directed by the policy of that great statesman Burleigh, who, to inflame the national feeling, gives an extract of a letter from Madrid which speaks of putting the queen to death, and the instruments of torture on board the Spanish fleet.

Mr. Chalmers has exultingly taken down these patriarchal newspapers, covered with the dust of two centuries.

The first newspaper in the collection of the British Museum is marked No. 50, and is in Roman, not in black letter. It contains the usual articles of news like the London Gazette of the present day. In that curious paper, there are news dated from Whitehall, on the 23rd July, 1588. Under the date of July 26 there is the following notice: "Yesterday the Scots ambassador being introduced to Sir Francis Walsingham, had a private audience of her majesty, to whom he delivered a letter from the king his master; containing the most cordial assurances of his resolution to adhere to her majesty's interests, and to those of the Protestant religion. And it may not here be improper to take notice of a wise and

spiritual saying of this young prince (he was twenty-two) to the queen's minister at his court, viz. That all the favour he did expect from the Spaniards was the courtesy of Polypheme to Ulysses, *to be the last devoured.*" Mr. Chalmers defies the gazetteer of the present day to give a more decorous account of the introduction of a foreign minister. The aptness of King James's classical saying carried it from the newspaper into history. I must add, that in respect to his *wit* no man has been more injured than this monarch. More pointed sentences are recorded of James I. than perhaps of any prince; and yet, such is the delusion of that medium by which the popular eye sees things in this world, that he is usually considered as a mere royal pedant. I have entered more largely on this subject in an "Inquiry of the literary and political character of James I."

From one of these "Mercuries," Mr. Chalmers has given some advertisements of books, which run much like those of the present times, and exhibit a picture of the literature of those days. All these publications were "imprinted and sold" by the queen's printers, Field and Baker.

1st. An admonition to the people of England,  
wherein are answered the slanderous untruths

reproachfully uttered by *Mar-prelate*, and others of his brood, against the bishops and chief of the clergy.\*

2ndly. The copy of a letter sent to Don Bernardin Mendoza, ambassador in France, for the king of Spain; declaring the state of England, &c. The second edition.

3rdly. An exact journal of all passages at the siege of Bergen-op-Zoom. By an eye-witness.

4thly. Father Parson's coat well dusted; or short and pithy animadversions on that infamous fardle of abuse and falsities, entitled *Leicester's Commonwealth*.†

5thly. *Elizabetha Triumphans*, an heroic poem by James Aske; with a declaration how her excellence was entertained at the royal course at Tilbury, and of the overthrow of the Spanish fleet.

Periodical papers seem first to have been more generally used by the English, during the civil wars of the usurper Cromwell, to disseminate amongst the people the sentiments of loyalty or rebellion, according as

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\* I have written the history of the *Mar-prelate* faction, in "Quarrels of Authors," which our historians appear not to have known. The materials were suppressed by government, and not preserved even in our national depositories.

† A curious secret history of the Earl of Leicester, by the Jesuit Parson.

their authors were disposed. *Peter Heylin*, in the preface to his *Cosmography*, mentions, that "the affairs of each town of war were better presented to the reader in the *Weekly News-books*." Hence we find some papers entitled News from Hull, Truths from York, Warranted Tidings from Ireland, &c. We find also "The Scots' Dove" opposed to "The Parliament Kite," or "The Secret Owl."—Keener animosities produced keener titles: "Heraclitus ridens" found an antagonist in "Democritus ridens," and "The Weekly Discoverer" was shortly met by "The Discoverer stript naked." "Mercurius Britannicus" was grappled by "Mercurius Mastix, faithfully lashing all Scouts, Mercuries, Posts, Spies, and others." Under all these names papers had appeared, but a Mercury was the prevailing title of these "News-Books," and the principles of the writer were generally shown by the additional epithet. We find an alarming number of these Mercuries, which, were the story not too long to tell, might excite some laughter; they present us with a very curious picture of those singular times.

Devoted to political purposes, they soon became a public nuisance by serving as receptacles of party malice, and echoing to the furthest ends of the kingdom the insolent voice of all factions. They set the minds of men more at variance, inflamed their tempers to a

greater fierceness, and gave a keener edge to the sharpness of civil discord.

Such works will always find adventurers adapted to their scurrilous purposes, who neither want at times either talents, or boldness, or wit, or argument. A vast crowd issued from the press, and are now to be found in a few private collections. They form a race of authors unknown to most readers of these times: the names of some of their chiefs, however, have just reached us, and in the minor chronicle of domestic literature I rank three notable heroes; Marchamont Needham, Sir John Birkenhead, and Sir Roger L'Estrange.

*Marchamont Needham*, the great patriarch of newspaper writers, was a man of versatile talents and more versatile politics; a bold adventurer, and most successful, because the most profligate of his tribe. We find an ample account of him in Anthony Wood. From college he came to London; was an usher in Merchant Tailors' school; then an tinder clerk in Gray's Inn; at length studied physic and practised chemistry; and finally he was a captain, and in the words of honest Anthony, "siding with the rout and scum of the people, he made them weekly sport by railing at all that was noble, in his *Intelligence*, called *Mercurius Britannicus*, wherein his endeavours were to sacrifice the fame of some lord,

or any person of quality, and of the king himself, to the beast with many heads." He soon became popular, and was known under the name of Captain Needham of Gray's Inn; and whatever he now wrote was deemed oracular. But whether from a slight imprisonment for aspersing Charles I. or some pique with his own party, he requested an audience on his knees with the king, reconciled himself to his majesty, and showed himself a violent royalist in his "*Mercurius Pragmaticus*," and galled the presbyterians with his wit and quips. Some time after, when the popular party prevailed, he was still further enlightened, and was got over by President Bradshaw, as easily as by Charles I. Our Mercurial writer became once more a virulent presbyterian, and lashed the royalists outrageously in his "*Mercurius Politicus*;" at length on the return of Charles II. being now conscious, says our friend Anthony, that he might be in danger of the halter, once more he is said to have fled into Holland, waiting for an act of oblivion. For money given to a hungry courtier, Needham obtained his pardon under the great seal. He latterly practised as a physician among his party, but lived universally hated by the royalists, and now only committed harmless treasons with the College of Physicians, on whom he poured all that gall and vinegar which the govern-

ment had suppressed from flowing through its natural channel.

The royalists were not without their Needham in the prompt activity of Sir John Birkenhead. In buffoonery, keenness, and boldness, having been frequently imprisoned, he was not inferior nor was he at times less an adventurer. His "Mercurius Aulicus" was devoted to the court, then at Oxford. But he was the fertile parent of numerous political pamphlets, which appear to abound in banter, wit, and satire. He had a promptness to seize on every temporary circumstance, and a facility in execution. His "Paul's Church Yard" is a bantering pamphlet, containing fictitious titles of books and acts of parliament, reflecting on the mad reformers of these times. One of his poems is entitled "The Jolt," being written on the Protector having fallen off his own coach-box: Cromwell had received a present from the German Count Oldenburgh, of six German horses, and attempted to drive them himself in Hyde Park, when this great political Phaëton met the accident, of which Sir John Birkenhead was not slow to comprehend the benefit, and hints how unfortunately for the country it turned out! Sir John was during the dominion of Cromwell an author by profession. After various imprisonments for his majesty's cause, says the

venerable historian of English literature, already quoted, "he lived by his wits, in helping young gentlemen out at dead lifts in making poems, songs, and epistles on and to their mistresses; as also in translating, and other petite employments." He lived however after the Restoration to become one of the masters of requests, with a salary of 3000*l.* a year. But he showed the baseness of his spirit (says Anthony), by slighting those who had been his benefactors in his necessities.

Sir *Roger L'Estrange* among his rivals was esteemed as the most perfect model of political writing. The temper of the man was factious, and the compositions of the author seem to us coarse, yet I suspect they contain much idiomatic expression. His *Æsop's Fables* are a curious specimen of familiar style. Queen Mary showed a due contempt of him after the Revolution, by this anagram:

*Roger L'Estrange,  
Lye strange Roger!*

Such were the three patriarchs of newspapers. De Saint Foix, in his curious *Essais historiques sur Paris*, gives the origin of newspapers to France. Renaudot, a physician at Paris, to amuse his patients was a great collector of news; and he found by these means that he

was more sought after than his more learned brethren. But as the seasons were not always sickly, and he had many hours not occupied by his patients, he reflected, after several years of assiduity given up to this singular employment, that he might turn it to a better account, by giving every week to his patients, who in this case were the public at large, some fugitive sheets which should contain the news of various countries. He obtained a privilege for this purpose in 1632.

At the Restoration the proceedings of parliament were interdicted to be published, unless by authority; and the first daily paper after the Revolution took the popular title of “The Orange Intelligencer.”

In the reign of Queen *Anne*, there was but one daily paper: the others were weekly. Some attempted to introduce literary subjects, and others topics of a more general speculation. Sir *Richard Steele* formed the plan of his *Tatler*. He designed it to embrace the three provinces, of manners and morals, of literature, and of politics. The public were to be conducted insensibly into so different a track from that to which they had been hitherto accustomed. Hence politics were admitted into his paper. But it remained for the chaster genius, of *Addison* to banish this painful topic from his elegant pages. The writer in polite letters felt himself degraded by sink-

ing into the diurnal narrator of political events, which so frequently originate in rumours and party fiction. From this time, newspapers and periodical literature became distinct works—at present, there seems to be an attempt to revive this union; it is a retrograde step for the independent dignity of literature.