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## FRESHEST ADVICES, FOREIGN AND DOMESTICK

Like most other Canadians I spend much of my spare time in reading newspapers, but I differ in preferring newspapers that are out of date. I like them best if they are at least two hundred years old. What stimulates me in reading the *Worcester Postman* of 1720 or the *Leeds Intelligencer* of 1757 is the sense of being taken over the chasm of years separating then from now, of being brought close to the day-by-day life of people who lived and died long ago but who still seem very much alive because their tastes and interests are so amply revealed in those folded half-sheets of hand-made paper. Newspapers two centuries old seem to have the curious power of preserving the *ethos* of their era. The "Freshest Advices Foreign and Domestick" in London and provincial papers of 1757 have lost their original force as "intelligence" but have somehow acquired an imaginative appeal which a 1957 newspaper cannot possibly have until the middle of the twenty-second century.

It is this imaginative appeal, unintended by the men who wrote them and printed them, that for me makes out-of-date journals fascinating. The history books tell me all there is to know about the Duke of Marlborough's victories on the Continent. I enjoy a more direct participation in the excitement when I read in the *Bristol Post-Boy* for the week ending August 12, 1704, a dispatch dated at Whitehall two days earlier beginning, "This Afternoon arrived an Express with a Letter from his Grace the Duke of Marlborough to my Lady Duchess written on Horseback with a Lead Pencil." Then follows the text of the great Duke's message, right from the tumult of a battle which historians do not hesitate to call one of the most memorable in the history of the world:

> I have not Time to say any more than to beg of you to present my Humble Duty to the Queen, and to let Her Majesty know, That Her Army has had a glorious Victory. Monsieur Tallard and two other Generals are in my Coach. . . . The Bearer my Aid-de-Camp, Colonel Parkes, will give Her Majesty an Account of what has passed.

Similarly the contemporary news stories of "the '45," the court-martial of Admiral Byng, the earliest performances at the Three Choirs Festival, the beating to death of John Waller in the pillory, and the violent

opposition offered here and there to John Wesley's preaching make those events seem very real and close at hand.

Undoubtedly the scarcity of these early newspapers adds zest to my reading of them. They are hard to come by, and the current market prices are indicative of their rarity. When Thomas Gent took over the *York Journal* in 1724 the price per copy was two pence. When I examined the only extant copy of that paper dated December 15, 1730, I found that by 1957 the price had become fifteen hundred times higher, for the London dealer who showed it to me was offering it, along with one other single issue, for £25.

The fact that these early papers have thus far been left practically unnoticed by historians gives me a delectable sense of exploring uncharted realms—not realms of gold, certainly, but realms where one finds plenty of the common clay which is humanity. Dickens found that clay in London; Hardy preferred what he found in rustic "Wessex." My love of London past and present no man can challenge, but in my search for the essential Englishman and his ways I have found him easier to get at when I have looked for him outside the metropolis. Perhaps that is because so many Englishmen did not live in London. In the eighteenth century London's influence was mighty; but even if one leaves out Edinburgh and Dublin, there were in the British Isles many other centres of life and commerce and culture. It was the ebullient vitality of life in these provincial towns that made me decide to leave the Londoner and his newspapers for later study and to turn at once to the townsmen of Bath, Chester, Nottingham, and half a hundred other communities many miles from London, each having its own local newspaper before George III ascended the throne. During the reigns of Queen Anne and the first two Georges there sprang up about 125 different newspapers in these towns. Most of them were issued once a week and followed the pattern of the London papers.

The search for surviving files of these papers is really exciting, particularly when one tries to find papers which are supposed to have disappeared completely, or are believed to have survived in one or two single issues only. There is in the Kendal Public Library a whole year's run (1732) of Thomas Cotton's *Kendal Weekly Courant*, and the local historians are convinced that this paper came to an end before Thomas Ashburner started the *Kendal Weekly Mercury* in 1735; but after a long and persistent search, I found under a showcase in the Kendal Museum an issue of Cotton's paper dated August 14, 1736, which proves that there *were* two printing presses and two newspapers in that small Westmorland town during 1735 and 1736.

Several other papers have been preserved by a narrow margin of chance. A set of the *Sussex Weekly Advertiser* was presented to the Public Library at Brighton by a man who found them some years ago being used by a local butcher to wrap chops in. A file of *Adam's Weekly Courant* in the Chester Public Library must at one time have been on the counter of a fruiterer's shop, for many of the sheets are wrinkled and badly stained with black currants. Some of the currants are still stuck to the paper. Barely escaping complete extinction are the *Norwich Journal*, No. 401 of which (dated June 2, 1753) is in the Public Library at Norwich, and *Farley's Exeter Weekly Journal*, No. 33 of which, issued December 11, 1741, is at the Yale University Library. No other issues of either paper are known to be in existence now. The *Oxford Flying Weekly Journal, and Cirencester Gazette* has survived in three issues, one of which is a very frail remnant found sixty years ago pasted on the inside of an old trunk in Oxfordshire. Only a few months ago there came to light in the library of All Souls College, Oxford, a unique file of Manchester's earliest newspaper, but no one knows what was in the first 290 issues. Odd issues and short runs of the *Gloucester Journal* are accessible in various libraries, but the only complete file from 1722 onwards was until recently in the hands of a private owner in London. When I visited the Gloucester Public Library last year, I learned that the owner had bequeathed the whole file to his son, a solicitor in Hong Kong, and that the solicitor had been murdered just three days before my visit to Gloucester! It gave me a certain sense of relief to learn that all the bound volumes of the *Journal* had been left in the custody of the Gloucester Public Library, and I was able to arrange for the complete set, to the end of 1760, to be microfilmed. Will the two newspapers once published in Lincoln ever come to light? Will any files of the Eton and Coventry papers be discovered to replace those destroyed by enemy action in the last war? Will anyone in this century ever see even a single issue of the first newspapers printed in Liverpool, Newcastle, Shrewsbury, Stamford, Yarmouth, Yeovil? The search continues.

Meanwhile there are literally *tons* of early newspapers safely housed in a hundred libraries on both sides of the Atlantic. In the long runs one can easily trace the changes that came about in size, price, and contents as the century moved on. The earliest country newspapers in England were either single half-sheets about 7 or 8 inches by 11 or 12 inches in size, printed in two columns, or else they were printed and folded as twelve small single-column pages, each about 6 or 7 inches by 8 or 10 inches. They sold for a penny or three half-pence. Eventually these little twelve-

page booklets and single half-sheets gave way to what was for many years the standard format in most towns: a large single half-sheet, folded to make four pages of three columns each, the size of the pages varying from 10 by 14 to 12 by 17 inches. Each half-sheet bore an impressed red half-penny stamp, and the price was usually twopence, at least until 1757, when an additional half-penny tax was imposed. The paper was usually good, and most of the surviving copies have been unaffected by the passing of two or two and a half centuries. The type was in some papers old and battered, but newspapers printed in the period 1720-1760 can usually be read with less eye-strain than those of the following century—with less, indeed, than the front page of to-day's most dignified London daily. At first glance there is a certain quaintness about their appearance, with their old-time spellings, their lavish use of italics, their tall s's, and their lack of illustrations and headlines (except in the advertisements). The startling strangeness of some words—"diftance," "ftill," "fituation," and "fubfifted," for example—soon wears off when one's eye recognizes that what looks like "f" is really not "f" at all, and the "Ruffians" turn out to be "Russians" after all.

Next to their unfamiliar size and appearance, the newspapers two centuries old are most interestingly different from our own in their advertisements. Nine-tenths of these announce farms "to be lett"; books, spinets, milch asses, fir trees, and other commodities for sale; runaway wives and apprentices earnestly sought after; and forthcoming performances of music or drama. More remarkable are those offering something unusual: the sight of a two-ton unicorn (*alias* rhinoceros), wax-works with pipe-organ accompaniment, a "moving picture" machine, a "Travelling Post-Chaise that goes 50 Miles in a Day without Horses," a celebrated fire-eater who received great encouragement in Cambridge, and a competition in back-sword play—"No Heads to be deemed broke unless the Blood runs an Inch." It is mildly amusing to find a poet's ancestor offering five guineas reward for information about the person who "on Monday last at Brighthelmston did cut off, or otherwise deprive of his Tail, a Hound, belonging to Bish Shelley, Esq." And there is a surprising aggressiveness in the request of a teen-aged university student for news of an approaching vacancy in any Derbyshire vicarage worth £150 or £200 a year; it would suit the expectant young gentleman best if the incumbent about to retire or expire were "upwards of Sixty, or in a declining State."

Most entertaining to modern readers are the paid notices of remedies designed to keep clergymen and others from declining too soon. If these medical concoctions were as efficacious as their high-sounding names

suggest, wonderful cures must have been brought about by Dr. Hamilton' Worm-destroying Sugar Plumbs, Bateman's Golden Spirits of Scurvy Grass, the Transcendent Restrictive Electuary, and Dr. Lowther's Anti epileptic Nervous Powders. If your teeth were falling out, you need only begin to use Dr. Ratcliff's True Specifick Tincture, which "gives im mediate Ease in the most violent and tormenting Pain, . . . makes the foulest Teeth most beautifully White, assuredly fastens those that are loose, and infallibly preserves the Teeth from growing rotten . . . . " If you were bothered with the itch, you simply applied to the affected part the "innocent and most wholesome Ointment" prepared by an anonymous gentlewoman who, "purely out of Christian Compassion," communicated the recipe to a friend before passing into the itchless hereafter. Most country dealers, including the printers of newspapers, sold an amazing mixture which was said not only to relieve "Scorbutick Humours" but "almost [!] cures all other chronick diseases . . . occasioned by indigestion and flatulent crudities in the stomach and bowels." It was declared to be "wonderfully cordial and restorative, strengthens and enlivens the whole machine, and as soon as taken, makes the patient pleasantly lightsome, brisk, and vigorous to admiration."

But not all the advertisements were ridiculous. There is something very practical and downright in the advertisements offering various services: Andrew Cook "destroys Buggs"; Robert Law makes "all Sorts of Machines for crooked and deformed Limbs"; Carew Davis is "official Pumper of all the Bath Waters" in Gloucester; Francis Midon will teach anybody to speak French with "a correct and natural Pronunciation . . . in a Fortnight", and is versatile enough also to deliver "Philosophical Lectures upon Air"; Thomas Aubone offers for immediate sale the unexpended provisions of two whaling ships just back from a long cruise off Greenland—the very thing for parish officers in search of cheap victuals for the poorhouse!

It is to the columns of news rather than to paid notices that one turns to find out what the average Englishman living in the provinces found most interesting to read about. Almost every local paper before 1760 had practically all of its news space filled with material copied straight from the London papers. The motto of the *Salisbury Journal* was *e pluribus unum*, one out of many. This phrase, which has since acquired a very familiar ring in North America, could be applied to every one of the country newspapers, for they all regularly took their "freshest advices, foreign and domestick" from the *London Gazette*, the *Whitehall Evening-Post*, Stanley's Letter, and at least four or five other printed or written

papers. Under such headings as "Tuesday's Post" or "Saturday's Post" the foreign dispatches were given first, then the London news, followed by a separate section headed "Country News" and perhaps one marked "Plantation News." Any local news is likely to be found in small type thrust in after the lists of bankrupts and current prices, though by the middle of the century some papers had as much as a full column of local and regional news, usually printed on the third page. Unlike their London brethren, the provincial editors for the most part tried to preserve strict neutrality in political matters, and few of them deserved the playful taunt of Samuel Johnson, who in his thirtieth *Idler* essay quoted Sir Henry Wotton's definition of an ambassador—"a man of virtue sent abroad to tell lies for the advantage of his country"—and added his own definition of a news writer—"a man without virtue who writes at home for his own profit." On the contrary, some of the provincial editors were men of extraordinary virtue, and there are notable examples of editorial courage. Andrew Brice of Exeter, for instance, suffered in health and purse because he dared to expose unconscionable irregularities in the treatment of prisoners in the local "gaol."

Certainly there were honest efforts to provide the subscribers with all the varied matter which the word "journalism" now implies. When P. Darby of Halifax, Yorkshire, issued the prospectus of his *Union Journal; or, Halifax Advertiser* in December, 1758, he set forth what newspaper men had by that time come to regard as the essentials. Besides news collected from the best London papers, augmented by communications from his own agents in the capital city, Darby promised to list the current imports and exports at Liverpool and the prices of grain at the Halifax market. There were to be other departments as well:

> As every one is desirous to know the Occurrences of his own Neighbourhood, Care will be taken to publish every remarkable Event, in this and other adjoining Parishes, a Number of Gentlemen having engag'd to supply the Printer with Intelligence of this Sort . . . . Promotions, Births, Marriages, Deaths, Ships taken, &c. will be rang'd in a regular Manner . . . . Strokes of Wit and Humour will sometimes be admitted, . . . and occasional Letters . . . .

Darby's paper established an up-to-date pattern of comprehensiveness and modernity. The pabulum provided by twentieth-century newspapers is not very different.

There was one respect in which neither Darby nor his fellow journalists were able to move ahead of their century. That was the difficult business of printing the news while it was still *new*. The gap in time between the event and the newspaper report of it is understandable if the

dispatches must travel by courier over bad roads and stormy seas from Paris, Vienna, or the Hague. It is also not surprising that news from across the Atlantic was much older than the local ale by the time it circulated in English towns. Among the "Fresh Advices from America" in the *Western Flying-Post; or, Sherborne and Yeovil Mercury* on January 5, 1756, was a dispatch dated at Boston twelve weeks earlier:

> Boston, Oct. 13. Last Week the several Carpenters who went from hence to Oswego returned here, having, as we understood, completed the building of the several armed Vessels, designed for the Security of the Lake Ontario, in about 28 days from the Cutting of the Trees.

It took three times as long for the news to reach West Country readers in England as it had taken to cut down the trees and build the ships.

Delayed though it was, however, such news was still exciting to families in the old land, for it was news from friends and kinsfolk in the far-away New World. It is easy to imagine the feelings with which English people would read the following "Extract of a Letter from an Officer at Fort Cumberland, in Nova Scotia, dated April 28," printed in *Eyres's Weekly Journal, or, the Warrington Advertiser* on July 13, 1756:

> As for news I have only to let you know, that on Monday last a number of Indians (supposed to be large) advanced towards fort Monckton, garrisoned by Capt. Hill, with 70 regulars, and killed nine; and the next day paid us a visit, and had the Impudence to send some of their number to this side Tantamar creek early in the morning, and killed one of the regulars, and took or killed one Noah Williams of Taunton, a young lad of our troops, belonging to captain Gilbert's company. I am fearful he is killed, as we have found the body of the regular stript naked, and scalped, and the lad's coat; this has set us in an alarm, and we are preparing to send a large body to Gaspereau to-morrow.

Equally stirring must have been the first reports of the capture of Louisburg, Indian raids near Boston, a skirmish at Fort George, a hurricane in Jamaica. Even reports of less momentous events and circumstances would be read with interest—things like the account of the abundance of lobsters at Halifax, and the report of an ardent Philadelphia Quaker's smashing of his deceased wife's china ware as "a publick Testimony against the Vanity of Tea-drinking."

News of happenings at home should have been reported with no more delay than resulted from the fact that a whole week's news had to accumulate between one issue and the next. Prompt transmission of news was especially desirable if anything unusual happened in the region. The *Sherborne Mercury*, which regularly carried news from Wells, Taunton, and other towns of the area, had in its issue for May 6, 1740, this account of an execution in a nearby village:

> On Saturday last, about Five o'clock in the Morning, was executed at Ivelchester in the County of Somerset, Mrs. Branch and her Daughter, for the cruel Murder of their Servant-Girl at Hammington, near Philip's Norton in the same County .... Their being executed so early was a great Disappointment to the Country People, who about Nine o'Clock in the Morning throng'd thither in Multitudes; such a vast Concourse of People from all the neighbouring Towns and Villages round has not ever been known on the like Occasion.

Some years earlier, readers of the *Gloucester Journal* must have wished they had been present to witness a most rare spectacle, when four persons condemned at the Worcester assizes were hanged. There was an unexpected hitch in the proceedings. According to the issue of August 20, 1722, this is what happened:

> ... Soon after they were turn'd off, some Person, who had been desir'd by Blackwell to do so, pull'd him by the Legs with such Force, that he pull'd him down. When he was put into the Cart again, he was speechless, but coming to himself a little after, he spoke again to the People, and was turn'd off a 2d time.

The resilient Blackwell must have been a favourite topic of conversation for many a day.

Perhaps nothing is more symptomatic of the times than the newspaper editors' treatment of death. Fatalities were reported in the eighteenth-century papers with great gusto. If there is no story about a man biting a dog, there is at least one good story (in the *Derby Mercury* of November 4, 1743) of a cat that bit a cobbler, the immediate consequence being the death of both cat and cobbler. Many papers regularly printed "bills of mortality," which indicate the varied forms of more ordinary deaths. From the list published in the Nottingham *Weekly Courant* on February 6, 1717, one observes that during the third week of January, in addition to unfortunates who drank themselves to death or were killed by falling off waggons, Londoners died from forty-two different ailments. "Headmouldshot," "Hooping-Cough," and "Surfeit" each reduced the population by one; more devastating were "Imposthume", "Rising of the Lights", and "Thrush." The real killers in those days were convulsions, dropsy, "Griping in the Guts," smallpox, teeth, and "Tissick." Together these carried off four hundred London citizens in one week.

It is in the news stories, rather than in the vital statistics or the advertisements of funeral biscuits and mourning suits, that one encounters, in one sense or another, the true spirit of the times. The second issue of the *Gloucester Journal* (April 16, 1722) conceals nothing but the name of the victim in its report of a drowning accident:

On Sunday the 8 Instant was taken up in the Severn, near Readstone, a Gentleman of Bartlow, who was drowned about three Weeks Since in the Manner following: coming from Kidderminster a little in Drink, he resolutely propos'd to ride thro' the Severn, and accordingly Swam over to the other Side, but giving his Horse a sudden Check, as he was getting up the Bank, turn'd him quite round, and swam back towards the other Side, when the Tide came sudainly so very Strong, that he was cast from his Horse.

Two years later the *Gloucester Journal* dated June 1, 1724, contained part of a letter in which the Rev. Mr. Durel of Jesus College, Oxford, reported that he and a friend had been shocked to find the body of another clergyman on the road near Oxford: "We found his Body still hot, and try'd immediately to bleed him, but to no purpose, he being already quite dead." Bodies did not have to be "hot," however, to get into the news. This is what readers of the *Weekly Courant* saw as their only piece of Nottingham news in the issue of January 20, 1725/26:

We have had here a greater Flood (occasion'd by the great Quantity of Snow which lately fell in these Parts) than has been known in any Man's Age. It has done great Damage to the Bridge which crosses the River Trent .... We hear of several Persons that have been found dead in the Fields, particularly an old Woman, at Hoe Hill near Plumtree, who used to Travel the Country, almost eaten away by the Crows, supposed to have been lost in the Snow ....

There was indeed no limit to the disclosure of sickening details, whether the incident reported was a particularly ugly instance of body snatching in Kelso in 1725, or a rowdy attack on the decorated hearse in a funeral procession at Bristol in 1737, or the death in 1741 of a Wiltshire man who "having been very much accustom'd to eat Dog's Flesh and other disagreeable Things, did undertake to eat a Mole and a Frog." The mole produced no internal disturbances; what caused James Silcock's death, apparently, was that he was so unobservant as to swallow a toad instead of a frog.

Whatever the theme, there was nothing "dead" about the local news in the English country newspapers of two centuries ago, for the times they represent were simply crammed with vitality. Swift and Gay and Hogarth and Fielding recorded the life, the art, the thinking of their age; but something of this was done also by that large company of journalists, most of them anonymous, who were the purveyors of "the freshest advices, foreign and domestick," in all parts of England. Until the scattered files of provincial papers are examined, one can have no idea how much they have to tell us about life in the reigns of Queen Anne and the first two Georges. The writer of the *Union Journal* in Halifax, Yorkshire, declared in 1758 that if the subscribers would preserve their copies, the files of the

*Union Journal* and other news journals of the period would "both now, and hereafter, be consider'd as a valuable History of the present Time." We are only now beginning to realize how right he was. As George Crabbe later in the century grudgingly admitted, "These things have their use; and are, besides, vehicles of much amusement." If their record seems often to be a record of trivialities, they are the trivialities of everyday life in the very towns from which many of the settlers came who hunted, fished, fought Indians, cleared land, and established families in British North America in those remote days before Canada became a nation.