

Imprinting Britain: Newspaper, Sociability, and the Shaping of British North America by Michael Eamon

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Imprinting Britain

Newspaper, Sociability, and the Shaping of British North America

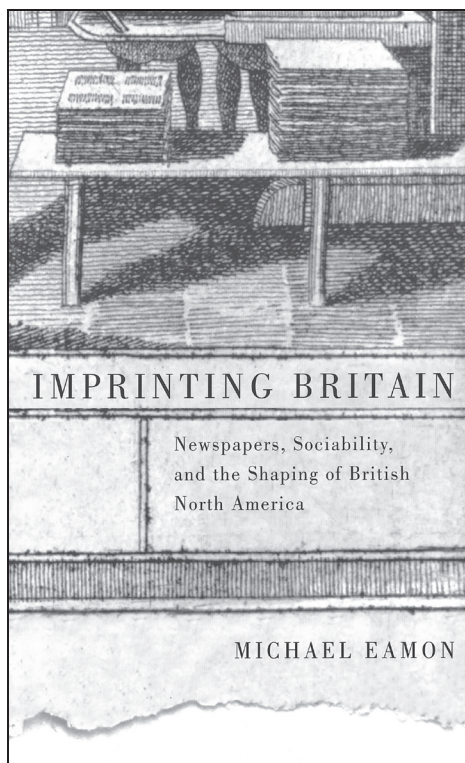
by Michael Eamon

Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2015. xvii + 263 pp. \$34.95 ISBN 978-0-7735-4490-1. (www.mqup.mcgill.ca)

Old newspapers are perhaps the most public of historic documents. They were published to communicate with a broad spectrum of readers (and listeners when read aloud). They were public in their variety of content—news, advertisements, commentary, notices, reviews, instructions, poems, anecdotes—and (thanks to editor “exchanges”) public in the geographic range of their sources. They were public in the spread of their distribution by direct sale and by post to subscribers worldwide. Plus, they were public because much of the content of their columns was voluntarily contributed by readers themselves.

Newspapers have been widely used by historians, yet comparatively few have looked at the papers themselves and the print culture they created and shaped. *Imprinting Britain* is thus a welcome volume indeed. Trent University historian and Catharine Parr Traill College principal Michael Eamon explores in fascinating detail how the English-language press, as the “social-media” (not a phrase he uses) of the day, prompted the formation of “a colonial print community” (a phrase he often uses).

Though New France had no presses, printing was essential to British North American colonial administrators. Thus in 1852, Bostonian John Bushell was imported to Halifax to become “King’s Printer.” A dozen years later, Philadelphia printers



William Brown and Thomas Gilmore were enticed to Quebec City for the same purpose. Central to their work was the weekly production of a newspaper—the *Halifax Gazette* and the *Quebec Gazette/La Gazette de Québec*. These were government-sponsored papers printed to publish, to make public, official notices, regulations, proclamations, appointments, and other news. The press was an instrument in the exercise of administrative control.

However, this view of the political power of the press, commonly held by Canadian historians, Eamon challenges as an “unbalanced and polarized picture of eighteenth century print politics.” (xvi) While by no means denying the political power of the press, he demonstrates that its full power was far more extensive. Print was central to the creating of colonial com-

munity identity, to the defining of British Canadian culture itself.

The book focuses on two cities, Halifax and Quebec, over a limited period, the latter half of the eighteenth century. Part one of the work considers “Print as Sociability.” Eamon’s examination is less on the printers—though there is a full chapter on them—and more on the readers, the British American colonists, and their habits, their traditions, their interests in science and useful knowledge. Part two, “Print and Sociability,” discusses the role of the press in strengthening voluntary associations, in promoting theatre, and in developing coffee houses as gathering places for the elite. In short, thanks to the press—especially newspapers, but also almanacs, handbills, sermons, etc.—the values of the British elite were imprinted on Canadian society. The power of the press was not simply its being employed for political control; it became an effective instrument of social control.

While totally admiring the depth and breadth of this exploration, and essentially endorsing Eamon’s conclusions, I would add two comments:

These Canadian printers were, in a sense, outsiders in their own communities. King’s Printers, despite the title, were independent entrepreneurs, caught between the

requirements of bureaucrats, the desires of advertisers, the expectations of readers, the needs of employees and the demands of creditors. Every week the columns of their papers had to be filled, if not with paid notices and ads, if not with news copied from other papers, if not with submissions of readers, if not with wise and worthy articles, nevertheless filled with words, words culled from somewhere, words penned by someone. These printers were always under pressure. The political, economic, physical and temporal realities of their businesses isolated them, preventing their participation in the sociability their printing was in process of molding. A printer-editor’s life was not a happy one.

The upper middle class sociability that was evolving, thanks to the press, was alien to all the inhabitants of the colonies who were not recent immigrants—to the Native peoples and to the francophones already deeply rooted in the land. The newspaper-reading immigrants were just that, immigrants. Their sociability was a totally British import. In contrast to what already existed in the territory, they were actively engaged in creating a distinct society.

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Thunder in the Skies *A Canadian Gunner in the Great War*

by Derek Grout

Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2015. 472 pages. \$24.99 paperback. ISBN 978-1-45973-093-9. 488 pp. \$24.99 digital download (PDF). ISBN 978-1-45973-094-6. 488 pp. \$8.99 digital download (EPUB) ISBN 978-1-45973-095-3. (www.dundurn.com)

It is fortunate for Canadian historians that a rich selection of eyewitness accounts from First World War soldiers has survived the past century, in the form of

memoirs, diaries, letters, and photographs. Each year it seems that a few more collections emerge from the nation’s cupboards and attics, either to be published or donat-