

News in Early Modern Europe: Currents and Connections. Simon F. Davies and Puck Fletcher, eds.

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It may not be news to report that many early modern historians have displayed a renewed interest in the category of early modern news. Although some of that attention has focused on England's somewhat belated development of printed periodical news, the interest has recently expanded to encompass the broad news networks of early modern Europe. Some of that news circulated in manuscript letters, but since twentieth-century scholars' pursuit of the history of news tended to pursue the birth of national newspaper traditions, the role of printed news has remained a central focus for historians. With one exception, the contributors to Simon F. Davies and Puck Fletcher's *News in Early Modern Europe* maintain this focus on printed matter, mostly in England, even as they strive to expand the boundaries of news. These essays offer some new and interesting insights and draw on exciting information from across Europe. Although some of these essays are very compelling, the collection as a whole remains of uneven quality. The attempt to encompass as many kinds of news from as many periods as possible partially explains the collection's mixture of stronger and weaker contributions.

The editors of *News in Early Modern Europe* bring together twelve essays presented at a 2012 conference. They aptly distill recent developments of scholarship on early modern European news into four important strands: "a shift of focus away from the rise

of the periodical press,” a “widening of the definition of news,” a scholarly focus on the “language and rhetoric” of news reports, and an attention to the “international dimension” of early modern news, facilitated probably by scholars’ greater access to digital archives of printed news (7). While their contributors admirably offer work from the cutting edge of research on this topic, the essays and the editors do not venture a comprehensive overview of the field. Instead, as the editors acknowledge, most of the essays offer case studies. As a result, the collection can only offer fragmentary glimpses of this multifaceted subject. That readers of this collection will find themselves wanting more points to the timeliness of these interventions. This collection may not satisfy them, however.

There are several very good essays here. Nicolas Moon, for instance, offers a complex reading of early modern ballads in the final essay in the volume. Attending to these “multimedia text[s] which combined oral and print modes of dissemination and communication” (249), Moon argues that these brief carriers of news, working within English cultural conventions about providential design, also sought to ground the sensational news they carried in specific details to give them some sense of reliable authenticity. Catherine Tremain reads a different and fascinating news item, the obituary of the middling sort in English provincial newspapers of the eighteenth century, to track developments in social ideals for men and women in this period. She notices, among other things, that “piety,” an important quality for men and women in the early modern period, appears with increasing frequency among the death notices of provincial women as it becomes less frequent in men’s obituaries near the end of the century. The nexus of traits she traces over this long period does not, however, reinforce a notion of public men and domestic women, Tremain argues, since these obituaries celebrated other domestic traits in these men, including “tenderness” (194). The attention to obituaries as a form of news, one with the power to shape social mores, points to the innovative ways of getting at news in this collection.

Finally, despite these enticingly frustrating fragments, the case studies can be quite fascinating and instructive. Perhaps the best essay in the collection, Virginia Dillon’s “Transylvania in German Newspapers,” focuses on a very specific case: the Transylvanian prince György II Rákóczi’s brief invasion of Poland in 1657 and the Turks’ reconquest of Transylvania in the following year. This excellent and thoroughly documented essay draws on a very specific and limited set of events as they appeared in newspapers in German in a two-year period. Accompanied by maps, tables, and graphs that track the originating location of reports and the sorts of vocabulary used to describe the prince’s and the Turks’ actions, the essay makes a compelling argument that despite the sectarian divide at work in Rákóczi’s invasion of Poland, religious affiliation makes little difference in the reporting of events, while the actions of the Turks to retake Transylvania prompt reporters to configure competing sects as “Christian,” a “unifying characteristic” designed to create common cause against that set of foreign enemies (69). Dillon makes a fascinating contribution to the transnational exploration of the early modern construction of news.

A great variety of excellent research on the early modern construction of news has appeared in recent years. Several of the essays here contribute to our greater understanding of this phenomenon. Although its focus on case studies of mostly English printed news limits the overall value of this collection, there are some excellent essays here that will make *News in Early Modern Europe* a useful volume to peruse.

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