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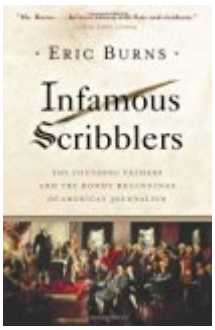

Eric Burns. *Infamous Scribblers: The Founding Fathers and the Rowdy Beginnings of American Journalism.* New York: PublicAffairs, 2007. pp. cm. $15.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-58648-428-6.

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Published on Jhistory (September, 2006)

Attacks in the newspaper outraged President George Washington, who was "tired to the marrow" of being "buffited in the public prints by a set of infamous scribblers" (p. 256). Thus, today's modern presidents are experiencing nothing new when harshly attacked by the modern press. The current media cacophony of screaming charges and counter-charges has a precedent as old as the nation, according to Eric Burns, the author of *Infamous Scribblers: The Founding Fathers and the Rowdy Beginnings of American Journalism*. The raucous "journalism" we see practiced today on cable television "news" shows and in Internet forums is only new because of the high-tech media that carry it, not because of the harshness of the attacks or even the content of the charges. Burns also suggests that sensationalism itself has roots as old as American newspapers themselves.

In a delightful writing style, Burns describes in some detail the partisan bickering published in the newspapers of British colonial America, the Revolutionary era, and the early Republic. He includes colorful excerpts from newspapers from three hundred years ago, giving the reader remarkable insight into the politics and journalism of the day. For example, he writes that James Franklin's *New England Courant* proved that heated conflict sells, quoting specifically from the attack on Cotton Mather's smallpox prevention plan. In August 1721, the *Courant* dismissed inoculation as "the practice of Greek old women" that would cause "Ulcers in the Viscera or Bowels, Groin, and other glandulous Parts, Loss of the Use of their Limbs, Swellings, &c. occasioning Death" (p. 58). Burns writes that the success of the newspaper, published by Benjamin Franklin's older brother, was "the first indication that controversy would almost always outsell moderation on the American newsstand, that accuracy would seldom be a match for zestful falsehood" (p. 60).

There are times when Burns, the media critic for Fox News Channel, would be better served by a more complete grasp of both the history and the historiography of his topic. For example, he notes several times that an important story was not the newspaper's "lead" story (pp. 136, 218), yet colonial newspaper editors had not yet discovered the idea of a lead story, nor were their newspapers

ordered in what today we consider a logical fashion, with the most important news at the top. The slow process of hand printing required adding stories that came in later to the back on the issue, regardless of importance.[1] Burns criticizes the writing in these papers by seemingly comparing it to today's standards and at times notes bad spelling when that was the norm. (Standardized spelling had not yet been established.) Another example is when he states that Thomas Paine's ***Common Sense*** sold half a million issues (p. 209), without any note of historians' debate over that number. While Paine claimed extraordinary sales numbers, many copies were given away, and modern historians have adjusted the numbers downward.[2] This is one of many times that Burns relies on a secondary source that is perhaps not the best authority on a topic.

The book is also marred by a number of annoying errors. In discussing the Stamp Act, Burns writes that "George Washington, at the time [spring 1765] engaged in battle against the French and Indians, warned that 'the Stamp Act engrosses the conversation of the speculative part of the colonies, who look upon this unconstitutional method of taxation as a direful attack upon their liberties and loudly exclaim against the violation'" (pp. 124-125). As Burns notes, the Stamp Act was passed in the spring of 1765, yet Washington retired from the military in 1758, to return only with the Revolution. The Seven Years' War, or French and Indian War as Burns calls it, ended in 1763, before the Stamp Act was even proposed.

Burns also misses some important points made by historians who have written about the newspapers of this period. David Copeland has already addressed the idea that sensationalism began early in American newspapers.[3] Jeffrey Pasley has previously noted that newspapers of the early Republic were raucously politically partisan and that the editors were often party activists, a nuance underplayed by Burns.[4] Another nuance not recognized here is that, for the most part, the early colonial newspapers were not the scandal sheets Burns writes about, but often attempted to avoid controversy. As Benjamin Franklin wrote, he "refus'd to print such things as might do real Injury to any Person."[5] Franklin also noted that while he supported press freedom, that did not go so far as allowing personal libel. Published opinion should be allowed "as far as by it, he [the author] does not hurt or control the Right of another."[6] As Stephen Botein noted, colonial printers were primarily businessmen trying to sell to all comers, and avoiding controversy was good for business. For the most part, partisanship did not develop until the Revolutionary controversy was well under way, and neutrality became unpatriotic and printers were forced to take a side.[7] Burns's argument would have benefited from the ideas of these historians.

Despite these flaws, ***Infamous Scribblers*** is an interesting and useful read. It is a bit more serious and intellectual than a purely popular history, yet does not quite meet the standards of a scholarly study; there is too much dependence on secondary sources and too many important works ignored for that. But for neophytes, it is a pleasurable introduction to the world of early American newspapers and such characters as John Campbell, John Fenno, Philip Freneau, James Thomson Callender, Benjamin Franklin, and Franklin's older brother, James. For more serious researchers, it could be a source for approach and content, but only if read with critical care.

Notes

[1]. Hannah Barker, ***Newspapers, Politics and English Society, 1695-1855*** (Harlow: Longman, 2000), p. 44.

[2]. See, for example, Thomas Slaughter in his introduction to Thomas Paine, ***Common Sense and Related Writings*** (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2001), pp. 29-33, where he questions Paine's estimate of 150,000 copies sold in America in 1776, reducing that to a probably 35,000-50,000 copies. On the other hand, Rodger Streitmatter, in ***Mighti-***

er than the Sword: How the News Media Have Shaped American History (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1997), p. 16, claims that "more than 150,000 copies of *Common Sense* were sold within three months." The real numbers are quite debatable.

[3]. David A. Copeland, *Colonial American Newspapers: Character and Content* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1997), pp. 181-190.

[4]. Jeffrey L. Pasley, *"The Tyranny Of Printers": Newspaper Politics in the Early American Republic* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2001).

[5]. Benjamin Franklin, "An Apology for Printers," first printed in the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, June 10, 1731, accessed online at http://www.uark.edu/depts/comminfo/cambridge/apology.html.

[6]. Silence Dogood, [B. Franklin] number 8 of his pseudonymous letters, in *The New England Courant*, July 9, 1722, p. 1.

[7]. Stephen Botein, *"Meer Mechanics" and an Open Press: The Business and Political Strategies of Colonial American Printers*, vol. 9 of *Perspectives in American History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), pp. 127-225.