

H-Net Reviews

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Richard Bernstein. *The New York Times: The Complete Front Pages, 1851-2008*. New York: Black Dog & Leventhal Publishers, 2008. Fold-out pages. 456 pp. \$60.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-57912-749-7.

Reviewed by Doug Medenhall (Abilene Christian University)

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When Dinosaurs Ruled the World

Through a historian's lens, it is tough to quantify the contribution represented by this collection of more than a century and a half of the *New York Times's* daily distillation of its best work. It is all here. The anguished reports of the assassinations of Abraham Lincoln, the Kennedys, Martin Luther King Jr., Jack Ruby. The seminal photographs: an anguished Kent State protester kneeling by a body, a suspect Viet Cong being summarily executed, a washtub full of Kool-Aid and cyanide surrounded by the bodies of the Jonestown faithful. The announcements of wars drawing to a close in 1865, 1918, 1945, and even 2003, with President George W. Bush aboard an aircraft carrier giving a thumbs up after vanquishing Saddam Hussein. It is all here. While the book contains more than three hundred full-page representations of significant front pages, this package also includes DVDs that make it possible to sift through a robust searchable database containing the full text of hundreds of thousands of stories that have appeared on page 1 since before the Civil War. This makes the resource a treasure trove for historians following virtually any topic, from medical advances to civil rights to professional sports to European diplomacy.

Through a journalism lens, it is also tough to underestimate the importance of this enduring body of work from one of the most important newspapers of 1851 and of the early twenty-first century. It is all here. The war dispatches straight from Union generals and introduced with fifteen decks of explanatory headline. The rise of

modern, bylined celebrity reporters. The transformation from pithy, sketchy breaking news stories collected from across the city's burroughs to investigative analyses collected from across a world of bureaus. It is all here, and, for example, a connoisseur of the writing of James Reston can easily find such gems as his obituary for the Red Scare: "The McCarthy debated [sic] ended as it began in a spasm of rancor and vindictiveness that will divide the Senate and the country for a long time to come" (p. 232). This makes *The Complete Front Pages* a treasure trove for journalism historians, too.

However, my personal lens is a bit different. About the time this tome was being published in 2008, I was ending a career in newspapering that dates back three decades. The last several years of that career included much handwringing about the accelerating shakiness of newspapers in general. To me, the signs of that looming demise also are all here, and they are easier to sum up. Two pieces tell the tale.

The first, chosen randomly, is a brief dispatch from September 1894, datelined Birmingham, Ala., and headlined, "TERRIBLE VENGEANCE FOR AN INSULT: Young Alabama Farmer Shot to Death by an Enraged Farmer." Here's the entire text of that story:

"Near Newsite, Tallapoosa County, this morning, James Ashley and his son Robert went into a field where Robert Cross, a young farmer, was harvesting. Robert Ashley held Cross while his father fired seven bullets into

his body.

Ashley fired as long as Cross breathed, remarking: 'I am going to shoot as long as there is breath in the scoundrel's body.'

Cross went to church with Ashley's daughter yesterday and kissed her. She reported the matter to her father, and the murder resulted.

A posse is in pursuit of the Ashleys, and, if captured, it is likely they will be lynched" (DVD).

That dramatic tale exemplifies the truth that once upon a time newspapers like the *New York Times* had a firm grip on their readers. Where else could they turn for such news? Nowhere. And would they wait with bated breath for days to learn whether the posse lynched the Ashleys? Of course. On stories major and stories minor, newspapers ruled the world.

The second piece appears prominently on the final front page selected for the book. The date is March 19, 2008. A color photograph (a mainstay on the *Times* page 1 for only the past decade) shows a dead Iraqi, sprawled in the dirt after a fight with U.S. Marines. Be-

low that compelling photo, however, no story appears. Instead, readers are directed elsewhere: to page A8 for four viewpoints on the war "five years in"; and, more to my point, to "more photographs, an interactive timeline, and fuller reminiscences in the Baghdad Bureau blog: nytimes.com/world" (p. 453). And there this tombstone-sized epitaph to the front pages of a great newspaper ends—with an admission that for the really good stuff, future readers should look beyond the printed page, even the printed front page, and into cyberspace.

There is no shame in the fact that *The New York Times: The Complete Front Pages, 1851-2008* could be retitled *When Dinosaurs Ruled the Earth*. The 157 years represented in this volume comprise an amazing run of media dominance. And even if that run has come to an end—not just shifted from newsprint to the Web—this volume represents a fascinating, useful obituary. Lovers of history and lovers of newspapers will enjoy its parade of front pages and the eighteen interspersed essays by *Times* luminaries, such as William Safire, Gene Roberts, Gail Collins, and Bill Keller.

Still, I do wish it could tell me whether the Ashleys escaped that posse.

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