

Chris R. and Jason Peacey Kyle. *Breaking News: Renaissance Journalism and the Birth of the Newspaper*. Washington, DC: Folger Shakespeare Lib, 2009. xiv + 144 pp. \$29.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-295-98873-3.



Reviewed by Charlotte C. Smith

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Commissioned by Susan R. Boettcher

Newspapers are widely acknowledged as an important primary resource for historians. Though in terms of how they are assembled and disseminated they differ significantly from broadsheets and early news pamphlets, the need for knowledge, whether about war, famine, politics, gossip, or plague, remains the same. The catalogue to the Folger Shakespeare library exhibition, *Breaking News: Renaissance Journalism and the Birth of the Newspaper*, considers the origins and early forms of news media. It is appropriate that one of the major repositories of early modern historical sources for the twenty-first-century historian provides the items chosen for this exhibition on the many and varied ways and formats of conveying news. The items chosen give good background and depth, to show the many ways in which news was conveyed to the early modern audience.

This catalogue highlights a selection of the broad collection of the Folger Shakespeare Library and particularly the large holdings of early modern English newspapers, pamphlets, and let-

ters. *Breaking News* highlights the substantial number of newssheet illustrations featured in the exhibition. With its strong link to a specific collection, the catalogue differs from other works on early English newspapers, such as *News, Newspapers, and Society in Early Modern Britain* (1999), edited by Joad Raymond. This catalogue is made up of a series of essays without illustrations, investigating the impact and importance of newspapers in early modern England, rather than the works themselves. In highlighting significant parts of a major collection, *Breaking News* shares many similarities with Sheila O'Connell's *The Popular Print in England* (1999). However its focus is more narrow, looking specifically at newssheets, whilst O'Connell's work considers popular print within the history of England during the early modern period and the similarities between news and governmental messages.

Although *Breaking News* begins with a background on printed newssheets in continental Europe, it quickly shifts focus onto the transfer of news from the continent to England and the birth

of the English newssheet. The book is essentially a study of the evolution of the printed newssheet in the seventeenth century to a more regular news-letter/newspaper, including the "coronto," or the first format of printed newspapers in England. It also considers the presentation of news within this new medium and the people who produced the papers, including early journalists, printers, and publishers, as well as their backgrounds and their relationship to the news. It also includes other important aspects of news production such as innovations in technology and formatting. The glossary at the back of the work contains many technical and political terms important to the advent of English newssheets and newspapers. This includes a list of notable figures within early newspaper history such as politicians, booksellers, and printers, as well as some of the earliest known journalists.

The one criticism of this catalogue and exhibition is that it might have been broadened in order to consider contemporary trends in continental Europe, rather than just the printing scene and politics in England during the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries. Furthermore, this particular exhibition does not set out to be comparative, though the reader learns about news reporting in continental Europe and further afield, including the European continent and "Arabia," and translations and publications of news from these areas are also considered. However, the main purpose of the catalogue remains as an introduction to the early English newspaper holdings of the collections at the Folger Shakespeare Library. It is also an excellent background to sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English political and social history and a broad survey of the types of print produced at this time.

This work also considers the role of government in the dissemination of news and information in terms of legislation and control, including parliamentary acts and censorship, as well as political uses of media, the free press, and the news-

paper in the political sphere. The exhibition included a significant part of the body of works dealing with specific historical events. Examples are the English Civil War, elections, and the rise of Puritanism. The catalogue also considers other forms of news transfer such as several letters from the Folger collections, which show how news and gossip were conveyed prior to the newspaper, or in a more intimate or personal manner. Conversely, crime and disorder stories illustrate the spread of news through early gossip and current events. The catalogue discusses the promotion of newspapers and advertisements with the use of advertising space, though the emphasis remains on news stories and their display.

The inclusion of the title pages and illustrations within the catalogue adds to the reader's knowledge of the ways in which events were reported and conveyed to audiences. These have been carefully selected to showcase some of the most important texts and images from the exhibition. Significant among these is the 1684 illustration of the Trial of Charles I, which took place in January 1649. This depicts not only those taking part in the trial, but also the audience, which included several reporters. This is juxtaposed within the catalogue to a contemporary 1648 pamphlet on the "Tryal of the King." Although these two works were published over thirty years apart, they indicate the importance of journalism and reporting in conveying the news of this event.

As a detailed exploration of early English newspapers and sources of news *Breaking News* provides a richness of sources and makes a valuable contribution to English cultural history. This wonderful catalogue serves as an introductory or background resource for some of the most important early modern news sheets and pamphlets in the Folger Shakespeare Library, especially as it concentrates on a small portion of this vast collection. Its main appeal would be as an introduction for scholars of the history of print, the history of news, and British history. The catalogue is beauti-

fully produced with wonderful images and texts and provides a fascinating glimpse of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England, including the early reportage of important political and social events of the time; it would appeal to a broader audience.

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