

# H-Net Reviews

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Paula McDowell. *The Invention of the Oral: Print Commerce and Fugitive Voices in Eighteenth-Century Britain*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017. xiv+353 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-226-45696-6.

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## Responding to Print

“We must read what the world reads at the moment. It has been maintained that this superfoetation, this teeming of the press in modern times, is prejudicial to good literature, because it obliges us to read so much of what is of inferior value, in order to be in the fashion; so that better works are neglected for want of time, because a man will have more gratification of his vanity in conversation, from having read modern books, than from having read the best works of antiquity. But it must be considered, that we have now more knowledge generally diffused; and our ladies read now, which is a great extension.”[1]

Over dinner at Allan Ramsay’s on April 29, 1778, Samuel Johnson was taking part in a more general debate about the impact of print. This is a debate that Paula McDowell probes in her excellent and important book. Newspaper readership developed after the lapse of the Licensing Act in 1695. The annual sale of newspapers in England was about 2.5 million in 1713, 7.3 million in 1750, 12.6 million in 1775, and 16 million in 1801. Such expansion was not restricted to England. There were 57 German newspapers published in 1701, 94 in 1750, 126 in 1775 and 186 in 1789. In Europe, the press both increased in circulation and number of titles in countries where it was already established, such as France and the United Provinces, and spread to other states. A characteristic feature of most newspapers was the centrality of commercial purpose. In particular, advertising played a

crucial role in Britain. In contrast, advertising was less central to the French press of the period.

McDowell draws attention to the extent to which the democratization offered by print created unease. In an original fashion, she focuses on changing attitudes to oral opinion and transmission. Doing so enables her to discuss both the period as a whole and also the conceptual, methodological, and historiographical issues involved in the dialogues between oral and literate societies. This then is an important contribution to cultural studies. It is also a finely tuned one, able to discern important nuances. For example, McDowell suggests, at the close of a significant contribution of John “Orator” Henley, that public debating societies were an outgrowth of new fora for Dissenting worship. In an argument of more general applicability, Henley’s “Oratory” is seen as an aspect of the degree to which religious institutions played an important role in the formation of the “secular” public sphere that we associate with modernity. The religious dimension also plays a part in McDowell’s chapter on Jonathan Swift’s *Tale of a Tub*, in which the power of the oral delivery of Dissenting preachers is discussed.

The book is certainly interesting on the religious dimension, although far less attention is devoted to the political. The extent to which the critique of print culture could have a Tory tinge would repay more attention. This Tory tinge was at once anti-Whig and, more subtly, part of the process by which, as a Whig oligarchy was consol-

idated, it gained a Tory inflection, in some cases a strong one. Newspaper consideration of the subject would also repay study. Instead, McDowell moves to counterpoint urban milieux to the new interest in the Scottish Highlands in the 1760s. Ossian, in turn, is followed by Johnson's visit in 1773, a topic about which it is not easy to be original. McDowell suggests that, by the end of the century, communications technologies were seen as part of a stadial development of human societies. This

provides her with a link to modern debates about technological change in what, throughout, is an invigorating book. Hopefully, in future studies, she can give due weight to political contexts, which include reference to classical demagoguery.

Note

[1]. James Boswell, *The Life of Samuel Johnson, LL.D.*, vol. 7 (London: Jonn Murray, 1835), 188.

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