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Women, Periodicals, and Print Culture in Britain, 1830s-1900s

Edited by Alexis Easley, Clare Gill, and Beth Rodgers, 2019

Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press

580 pp., ISBN 978 1 4744 3390 7

As the editors boldly claim in their introduction to this latest volume in the Edinburgh History of Women's Periodical Culture in Britain, "[t]he rise of the woman journalist during the Victorian period was ... one of the most striking cultural developments in modern history" (5). The essays they have gathered provide compelling evidence of the pervasiveness of print media in the lives of Victorian women and illustrate in rich, historical detail the depth and variety of their engagements with it. Although it will be the work of women writers that will be of particular interest to readers of this journal, Alexis Easley, Clare Gill, and Beth Rodgers wisely adopt an expansive definition of their remit, taking Victorian women's print media "to include newspapers and periodicals directed at female readerships, as well as those aspects of the 'general' press that were produced by and/or for women" (4). While the dedicated women's press is the subject of focused investigation – in essays by Teja Varma Pusapati on the *English Woman's Journal* or Beth Rodgers on the *Girl's Realm*, for example – attention to women's contributions within the broader, male-dominated network of the British press provides a more thorough and complex picture of their involvement and achievements in Victorian journalism – for example, in Joanne Shattock's comparative analysis of the careers of Margaret Oliphant, Mary Howitt and Eliza Meteyard writing for "mainstream publications on a range of subjects far beyond those often assumed to be the preserve of women journalists in the period" (307); Katherine Malone's illuminating study of the representation of women's work in the weekly *Leisure Hour* in the 1850s; or Fionnuala Dillane's fascinating account of the gender politics of the letters pages in the *Pall Mall Gazette* of the 1860s.

The editors begin their introduction with an overview of the expansion of women's print media in the nineteenth century, paying due regard to the pioneering recovery work of scholars like Margaret Beetham and Sally Mitchell, and noting the emergence of important research on key genres that were popular with female readerships (the domestic magazine, girl's magazine and those associated with particular causes or movements). They outline the barriers to female participation in the press together with the increase in professional opportunities throughout the century, aiming to reveal the practical and ideological complexities women faced, as well as confronting the forms of exclusion – on the basis of race, class or sexual orientation, for example – that resulted from privileging the perspectives of white, middle-class women. Seeking to break "new ground in terms of subject matter, theoretical approach, and methodology" (4), the collection amply fulfils its ambition.

It explores neglected work by renowned women journalists like Margaret Oliphant (Valerie Sanders's fine analysis of Oliphant's "armchair commentaries" for the *St James's Gazette* and the *Spectator*, for example), together with the writing of lesser-known figures – like the radical Carlisle poet, Mary Smith (Florence S. Boos examines her letters to the *Carlisle Journal* between 1867 and her death in 1889); or the extraordinary craft of the wood-engraver, Clemence Housman (Lorraine Janzen Kooistra provides an astute case study of her career working for the *Illustrated London News* and the *Graphic*, recovering the "unseen labour" of this profession and the impact that new technologies of reproduction at the end of the century had upon it). Hidden editorial work is uncovered (Marianne Van Remoortel reveals the significant roles of Isabella Beeton, Matilda Brown and Louise Goubaud in the development of the *Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* and its offshoot *Myra's Journal of*

Dress and Fashion) and marginalised periodical genres, like the “women’s column” and its variants, are examined: Claire Furlong considers the health advice contributed by “The Matron” to *Cassell’s Illustrated Family Paper* and the “Family Advice” column in the *Family Herald*; Deborah Mutch analyses the relationship between column inches and gender politics in the women’s columns in two socialist periodicals in the 1890s – the *Labour Leader* and the *Clarion*; while Gerry Beegan compares the spatial marginalisation of the “Ladies Page” in three titles from the Ingram stable – the *Illustrated London News*, *Sketch* and *Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News* – with the centrality afforded to women in the *Lady’s Pictorial* in the 1880s and 90s. Indeed, the attention given to visual culture and changing print technologies throughout the period – of illustrated journalism in particular, and of the periodical page in general – is an especially welcome feature of the volume. Archival research, close analysis of case studies and synoptic accounts of a title’s format and contents or of the work of an individual journalist are the principal methodologies employed throughout, with “distant reading” methods less well represented, but figuring in essays by Bob Nicolson on representations of the “American Girl” in Victorian print culture and Lindsay Lawrence on the publication of women poets in *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* from 1827-35.

The thirty-five essays in the collection are grouped into six sections: “(Re)Imagining Domestic Life”, “Constructing Modern Girls and Young Women”, “Women and Visual Culture”, “Making Space for Women” “Constructing Women Readers and Writers” and “Intervening in Political Debates”. Some of these categories will seem more definitive than others to readers navigating the volume. Lawrence’s account of the “literary space” sought by women poets in *Blackwood’s* in “Constructing Women Readers and Writers” could equally well fit into “Making Space for Women”, for example. But the concept of periodical “space” usefully underlines the important connection between material and ideological formations in the Victorian press. Cross-referencing across the collection is minimal, the editors instead providing an introduction to each section which summarises the essays that follow and identifies common threads or highlights the differing ways in which each speaks to the section theme. This approach helps to ensure the coherence of the volume (and no doubt the task of having contributors in dialogue with one another across the collection would have made an already enormous editing task even more difficult to manage). But it means, for example, that the connection between the discussions of Florence Fenwick Miller’s journalism in the essays by Beegan, Linda Hughes (on Amy Levy’s strategic placement of her poetry in selected newspapers of the 1880s) and Gemma Outen (on *Wings* and the *Woman’s Signal*, two late-Victorian women’s temperance periodicals) will only be found by happening to read all three (the index only has an entry for the latter).

Notwithstanding such reservations, the volume undoubtedly makes a substantial contribution not only to women’s literary history and research in Victorian periodicals and newspapers, but to scholarship on the long nineteenth century. It defines the field as it currently stands and points the way to further research. The editors can rightly claim that these essays have moved “beyond expected periodical titles, geographical locations, and scholarly assumptions” to “reveal the complexity of women’s participation with print media and the diversity of their contributions as authors, readers, editors, journalists, correspondents, engravers, and illustrators” (2). The contributions of those exceptional Victorian women who worked in journalistic roles that were otherwise the exclusive preserve of men in the period – as foreign correspondents (Emily Crawford) or, later, special correspondents (Elizabeth Banks or Lady Florence Dixie) – is one area not considered here that requires further study. But this collection will be essential reading for anyone wanting to undertake such research.

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