

Andrew Pettegree, *The Invention of News: How the World Came to Know About Itself* (London: Yale University Press, 2014), ISBN: 978-0300179088, £12.99

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, historians have begun to re-examine print culture and its role in the development of early modern Europe. More recently, this movement has also started to explore the developing news culture of the period – somewhat sparked by diplomatic and religious tensions during the Italian Wars of the late fifteenth century. On this subject, Andrew Pettegree offers his work, *The Invention of News*. Working chronologically backwards from Joad Raymond’s groundbreaking research on the historiography of British News in the early and middle seventeenth century, Pettegree’s work on the Europe-wide news phenomenon provides an alternative path through which to study news culture at large during the early modern period.¹

Though not altogether different from his other works on the printed book, this volume attempts to track the development of the European news market between 1400 and 1800.² More specifically, in Pettegree’s words, *The Invention of News* is meant to follow ‘the development of a commercial news market from the medieval period – when news was the prerogative of political elites – to a point four hundred years later when it was beginning to play a decisive role in popular politics (p.2).² Within his overall purpose lies Pettegree’s unique thesis that news in general should be viewed more as a ‘commercial commodity’ than an influencer of the public and was made so by merchants that ‘were both the principal consumers of news and its most reliable suppliers’ (pp.2-3). Moreover, Pettegree suggests that the news market was in fact a more conservatively run enterprise where success was tied much more to personal trust than speed or accuracy of the news. In other words, the growth in popularity of local and international news induced far less upheaval than is typically assumed.

¹ One of Raymond’s many helpful works is Joad Raymond (ed.), *The Oxford History of Popular Print Culture: Volume One: Cheap Print in Britain and Ireland to 1660* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

² For example, Andrew Pettegree, *The Book in the Renaissance* (London: Yale University Press, 2010).

It is clear that Pettegree's work is meant to provide an accessible and readable account of the origins of modern news culture; this is particularly visible through the author's anecdotal style and use of endnotes to remove cumbersome additions to the text. Naturally then, Pettegree interacts with a less complex set of sources than one would typically expect from a historian of his stature. Nevertheless, his breadth of reading is astounding; Pettegree's particular genius in this book is his ability to unite treads of important historiography into one larger argument. Ultimately, the *Invention of News* is more of a collection of stories that the author frames in order to draw an implicit conclusion than a formal historical argument. Historians expecting a more forensic approach to the evidence will be disappointed, although the author's deficiencies in this area are intentional, thereby offering readers a pleasing narrative style and enhancing the book's accessibility.

Pettegree divides his text into three main sections to cover the vast swath of ground he hopes to address: The Beginnings of News Publication, Mercury Rising, and Enlightenment. In the first section, the author finds the beginning of news in the ancient period with chronicles of kings and epic war literature. Pettegree then moves quickly through the chronicle literature of the Middle Ages to the twelfth century. He also highlights Bernard of Clairvaux's network of letters, arguing that through his example and monastics like him, historians can detect the earliest news networks built by Church correspondence and personal letters (p.3). Interestingly, Pettegree argues that it was in Italy where news found its most suitable market – among the shrewd merchants of the Mediterranean coast. He even notes how these merchants moved the news market into an era of 'systematic commercialisation' otherwise unheard of in European culture (p.5). The early reports from Italian businessmen, called *avvisi*, soon caught the interest of European monarchs and opened up the news business to new avenues.

In Pettegree's second section, he details the rising demand for news and the nature of the business itself. The author shares numerous narratives from the more innovative members of the

news community; particularly, he outlines the Taxis family in Italy and their patronage by influential local families. Indeed, Pettegree claims that the endeavours of the Taxis family 'is one of the great unsung achievements of European civilisation' (p.168). Furthermore, Pettegree demonstrates the experimental nature of Continental newspapers during the early seventeenth century (p.207). Overall, the major contribution from the author's second section is his observation that the growth in news was not due to a technological advance, but 'an organizational shift' that made this period exceptional (p.167). Finally, Pettegree's concluding section traces the development of news as a popular business – one that affected public opinion and was governed by the demands of an interested readership. Ultimately, the author's contributions in this section are unoriginal, except for the strong distinction he makes between news in its infancy and its later stages of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

In summary, this book should be commended for its breadth, though not always for its depth. Over the course of his work, the author attempts to engage actively with a popular as well as scholarly audience, with varying degrees of success. Pettegree's work shines in his analysis of the growth and development of news culture in its early stages. Additionally, he collects and summarizes the work of other scholars in order to spare the popular reader from the minutia, and the historian from working through foreign language historiography. Although the author delves deeply into a few key concepts, his ambitious project leaves some chronological and geographical periods in his proposed range scantily covered. Moreover, his technique of gathering compelling narratives to make a wider point leaves the critical historian with no way to verify the accuracy and connectedness of Pettegree's content. Other than these few misgivings, Pettegree's book serves as an interesting study and highlights potential areas for future research in the fields of news and print history. Surely *The Invention of News* is a welcome addition to the field of early modern news culture.

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