

**A HISTORY OF ENGLISH
JOURNALISM
TO THE FOUNDATION OF
THE GAZETTE**

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A History of English Journalism to the Foundation of the Gazette by J. B. Williams

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J. B. WILLIAMS

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WITH ILLUSTRATIONS

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PREFACE.

WITH very few exceptions all the seventeenth-century periodicals are to be found in the British Museum library, which contains collections of them unique in their completeness. Apart from the general collection at the Museum, the seventeenth-century periodicals are divided into two great subdivisions, the Burney Collection and the Thomason Collection. For the early period up to 1641, and from the Restoration of King Charles II. in the month of May, 1660, to the end of the century, the Burney Collection must be relied on.

Charles Burney, D.D., prebendary of Lincoln and chaplain to the King, was born on 4th December, 1757, and died on 28th December, 1817. He was one of the most distinguished classical critics of his day, and devoted the later years of his life to the accumulation of a large and valuable library, which was purchased at his death by the Houses of Parliament for £13,500 and deposited in the British Museum. The collection of newsbooks and newspapers referred to, which formed part of this, commences with a "relation" of news dated 1603, and extends far beyond the period covered in this book.

George Thomason, who died in the year 1666, was a bookseller who carried on business at the sign of the Rose and Crown in St. Paul's Churchyard. On seeing the number of pamphlets which were pouring from the press at the outbreak of the great Rebellion, the idea occurred to him that a complete collection of these would be valuable for future ages. In the year 1641, therefore, he secured copies of all that he could obtain which had appeared previously to that date, and thenceforward collected copies of every tract, broadside, book or newsbook which appeared, whether licensed or surreptitiously, until the year 1662. As he obtained each book or pamphlet he dated it with the day of its appearance, occasionally adding manuscript notes of his own, and even went so far as to add to his pamphlets handbills scattered about the streets. The result is a collection which has no equal of its kind in the world, for it contains a mass of fugitive and ephemeral literature, much of which would otherwise have perished. A complete catalogue of his collection in chronological order has been recently (1908) printed, prefaced with an excellent account of Thomason by Dr. G. K. Fortescue, Keeper of the Printed Books at the British Museum, who also relates the story of the vicissitudes the collection underwent and the means Thomason adopted for its secret preservation until the Restoration. It was ultimately bought by George III. for the absurd sum of £300 and presented to the British Museum in 1762. It is now generally recognised that it is in fact priceless. Thomason died a poor man.

For the periodicals which appeared between 1641 and the Restoration therefore the Thomason Collection is unrivalled. About half a dozen periodicals only (and these—with the exception of one French periodical—of the most ephemeral nature) seem to have escaped Thomason's net. A few first numbers of newsbooks, chiefly Royalist, and therefore secretly printed and furtively sold, also escaped him, but on the whole the present writer has come to the conclusion, that his collection up to the month of March, 1660, but not later, is fairly complete, and that the last number of each periodical in his collection is almost invariably the latest which appeared. A comparison with the contents of other libraries has borne out this conclusion; therefore in the catalogue of periodicals in the appendix the date of each last number in the Thomason Collection has been adopted as marking the date of extinction of the periodical in question. Of the numerous counterfeits of the Royalist Mercuries which appeared, notably *Pragmaticus*, and *Melancholicus*, a good many are to be found in the Burney Collection which are not in Thomason's. There are, however, very little means of identifying these, beyond the difference of the matter which they contain and the style of the writers.

The titles of periodicals which appeared between November, 1641 and October, 1655 number about 320, and at first sight it would seem to be a hopeless task to attempt to ascertain the names of their writers, more especially as in all but a few cases they seem to have valued their anonymity; but on closer

analysis it will be seen, that of this list, 81 appeared only once, 49 lasted for a period of over six months, and only 33 for over a year. The remainder—190—did not extend beyond a few numbers in each case, and the vast majority were either suppressed or failed to find popular support. Changes in the titles account for a yet further reduction, and thus the writers of periodicals of real importance are reduced to a comparatively small band. The task of ascertaining who these writers were, and of collecting all available information about them, has been both lengthy and arduous, owing to the number of periodicals to be examined ; and, if the present writer has not invariably succeeded as thoroughly as he could have wished, he trusts that he has presented a sufficiently accurate account to enable his readers to judge the old news-book authors and their periodicals at their true worth. Their value as historical evidence depends very much on the characters of their writers. Much of the harsh criticism directed against them by contemporaries was due to defective intelligence, the corrupt system of licensing, or the even more shameful official press. The liberty of the press was closely connected with liberty in religious matters, and it is noteworthy that in both, toleration appeared simultaneously. Freedom from the tutelage of an official licenser was not obtained until the year 1695, and before the attainment of that freedom this book ends.

The editors of the *Nineteenth Century and After* and of the *English Historical Review* have kindly given permission to incorporate in this book the substance of articles recently printed in those reviews.

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