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Review of David Finkelstein, ed., *The Edinburgh
History of the British and Irish Press: Expansion and
Evolution, 1800–1900*

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Reviews

David Finkelstein, ed., *The Edinburgh History of the British and Irish Press: Expansion and Evolution, 1800–1900* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020). 872 pp. ISBN 9781474424882

Edited by David Finkelstein, the second volume of *The Edinburgh History of the British and Irish Press: Expansion and Evolution, 1800–1900* depicts nineteenth-century British and Irish print culture as a living machine — a flexible and adaptive organism that is equal parts culture and technology. In the introduction, Finkelstein emphasizes how interdisciplinarity, interconnection, and an expansive view of ‘the press’ distinguishes this volume from other studies of nineteenth-century print culture. The essays throughout explore the expansion and evolution of the press, analyzing how technology, economics, politics, and culture shaped and were in turn shaped by the British and Irish press. *The Edinburgh History of the British and Irish Press: Expansion and Evolution, 1800–1900* describes the press’s development into a far-flung and diverse web of information, a robust cultural technology that initiated present-day media practices. This emphasis on network and connectivity functions as the book’s conceptual endoskeleton, providing structure across the breadth of material covered in the volume.

Expansion and Evolution, 1800–1900 is divided into six thematic parts — Part I: Press and Periodical Economics, Part II: Production and Distribution, Part III: Readership and Distribution, Part IV: Identities and Communities, Part V: Legal Frameworks, and Part VI: Themed Chapters. The first five parts are considerably shorter than the much lengthier Part VI. The miscellany of Part VI, which makes up the bulk of the volume, is somewhat cumbersome. However, throughout the volume, the chapters and case studies provide detailed analyses of the connections between political, social, technological,

and economic developments in the nineteenth-century British and Irish press. Chapters tackle broader areas of interest, such as Joanne Shattock’s ‘Cultural Agents and Contexts: The Professionalization of Journalism’. Case studies accompany several chapters throughout the volume, providing deeper dives into the broader chapter’s more specific elements. James Thompson’s chapter on ‘The Political Press’ is accompanied by three separate case studies, each exploring the contributions of particular individuals or periodicals involved in the political press.

Although the individual chapters cover various aspects of the British and Irish press, the contributors throughout the volume elucidate their topic without neglecting their interconnection with the multiple elements that affected the nineteenth-century press. Cultural trends and social problems are not immune to economic or technological developments. Throughout the volume, the essays demonstrate a sophisticated analysis of the many threads that influenced, for example, the evolution of illustrations in periodicals over the century. In Rose Roberto’s essay on ‘The Evolution of Image-Making Industries and the Mid-to Late Victorian Press’, technological developments such as wood engraving and the advent of photography receive as much attention as the effect of the ‘taxes on knowledge’ of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century on the illustrated press. By attending to details such as the artistic commitments of individual illustrators and larger-scale issues such as the appeal of illustrated papers for a growing literate audience, Roberto demonstrates that the role of images in the British and Irish press was a complex, multilayered process that

combined aesthetics, science, economics, and politics.

This emphasis on connectivity weaves throughout the volume, providing readers with a broad, global impression of the British and Irish press's development throughout the nineteenth century. I use the word global here in two senses, both in that readers are encouraged to trace the influence of the press across the nineteenth-century globe, particularly in chapters on the press in Continental Europe or the colonies, but also in that the more one reads of the volume, the greater the sense that the nineteenth-century press was an ecosystem which cannot be understood by isolating its individual parts. Perhaps that is the volume's most significant contribution to the study of the press. This ecological view of the British and Irish press suggests a particular analytical framework that allows readers to focus on specifics without losing sight of the bigger picture. Readers gain a sense of the organic development of the British and Irish press, and the volume allows readers to choose a zoomed-out perspective and then zero in on one subject for deeper analysis.

Expansion and Evolution provides information on various aspects of the nineteenth-century press while continually exploring the far-reaching connections which led to the dynamic expansion and evolution which characterized the nineteenth century. Individual chapters introduce new students of nineteenth-century print to a comprehensive overview of subjects from the evolution of printing technology to the importance of W. H. Smith to distribution in Britain and

Ireland. Additionally, the volume provides an impression of the state of nineteenth-century periodical studies. Both seminal and new scholarship receive equal attention throughout the volume, and the conclusions of many of the chapters point to new directions for the field or invite further scholarship. With their in-depth analysis of more specialized subjects, the case studies are much like short scholarly essays. In both content and methodology, these case studies will appeal to periodical studies researchers. While the volume is divided into thematic parts, as noted above, the case studies and their parent chapters provide a more intuitive grouping for readers looking to navigate this hefty volume.

The nineteenth century looms conceptually large as a symbol of rampant growth. From the sprawl of railways across continents to the global spread of diseases like cholera and the Spanish flu to the revolutionary ideas that proliferated like wildfires, the concept of expansion now seems almost synonymous with the nineteenth century. Bringing together the technological and the human aspects of print culture, *The Edinburgh History of the British and Irish Press* depicts a press that is always both organic and industrial. This volume, as Finkelstein's introduction underscores, not only highlights the expansion and evolution inherent in nineteenth-century British and Irish publishing, but it also reflects the evolution of periodical studies and invites further expansive scholarship.

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