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Review of Andrew Hobbs, ed., *The Diaries of  
Anthony Hewitson, Provincial Journalist, Volume 1:  
1865–1887*

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# Reviews

**Andrew Hobbs, ed., *The Diaries of Anthony Hewitson, Provincial Journalist, Volume 1: 1865–1887* (Open Book Publishers, 2022). 672 pp. ISBN 9781800642386**

When it comes to the historical study of newspapers and periodicals, there is no doubt that the finished product itself will always be of fascination for scholars. From analysis of its specific content and editions through to the wider exploration of its inception and demise, the publication itself offers great value to understanding the process of its construction. Nothing, however, is created in a vacuum and it is therefore a refreshing change when the opportunity comes along to consider the lived experience of an actor involved in the production of a periodical or newspaper. In Andrew Hobbs's latest book, the reader is provided with this type of valuable insight as they receive access to the personal diary of nineteenth-century English journalist, editor, and newspaper proprietor Anthony Hewitson. As a result, they are given the opportunity to explore something of the work routines, decision-making processes, and journalistic behaviours which accompanied the regular publication and dissemination of local newspapers and periodicals at this time.

It is already acknowledged that, in the British context, the provincial press has often been overlooked or given little attention in the past in many newspaper narratives and histories, particularly those focused on the nineteenth century. There has, however, been a noticeable shift in focus in recent years, aided in part by the digitization of hundreds of local newspaper titles. This increase in access has highlighted the richness and value of these sources, with many assumptions about Victorian journalism (including provincial newspapers being poor-quality facsimiles of London daily papers, or products from the capital being characteristic of all nineteenth-century newspapers) now being more frequently challenged. In *The*

*Diaries of Anthony Hewitson, Provincial Journalist, Volume 1: 1865–1887*, Hobbs argues that the growth of the provincial press meant that, by the 1860s, local newspapers would be outselling London titles for quite some time and were therefore at the heart of Victorian culture; making someone like Hewitson very much a 'representative of this era's journalists' (p. xvi). In this context, access to the diaries of such an individual means not just insights into localized reporting techniques and practices at this time but also a different perspective into how social, cultural, political, and technological changes were influencing journalistic approaches and attitudes more widely.

During a time of publishing growth and turmoil, it is actually fascinating how ordinary and, in many respects, unremarkable Hewitson's diaries are. Written between 1865 and 1887 in this first volume (with a second offering entries from 1891 to 1912 to follow), there are also some years absent, either because Hewitson did not produce a diary at that time or because there may be missing volumes. Yet their value, when Hewitson does keep them, is in their consistency and sometimes day-to-day level of detail. The Preston-born man (1836–1912) produced his first diary entry in March 1865 following the death of his three-year-old daughter Ethelind and this is followed by regular notes, sometimes daily, on his journalistic activities and working routine as reporter for the *Preston Guardian* and later editor-owner of the *Preston Chronicle*. Attending meetings and lectures, liaising with other reporters and rivals, managing his contact networks, travelling in and around Preston (or sometimes further afield) for news, dealing with his employers or employees and working

incredibly long, late hours all form part of his narrative and, even though many of his entries are short, they all help to illustrate his efforts to be successful in his career and to manage family and working life. Hewitson's quirky personal reflections (including about the 'tight shoes' he always seems to buy, the amount of alcohol he consumes, and his tendency to lose things) are interwoven with key insights into what the role of a nineteenth-century journalist entails, including how he balances working for a local paper and sharing his stories with other provincial and London publications; with Hobbs speculating that taking on too much freelance work might have been the reason he lost his job at the *Preston Guardian* in 1867 (p. 177). Hobbs's argument that the provincial press operated as a national network, with reporters acting as 'nodes' and information moving quickly around this news ecosystem, is particularly compelling when read alongside Hewitson's anecdotes (p. xxv). In this respect, the diaries are particularly useful in providing colour and bringing to life some of the practicalities of nineteenth-century journalistic endeavours.

For readers of the *Journal of European Periodical Studies*, the interest will not just be in the diaries themselves but also in how Hobbs and his team have transcribed, edited, and contextualized them to produce this volume. Hewitson's diaries are owned by Lancashire Archives (after being purchased in 2004 from the journalist's great-grandson) and are available to the public but have been reproduced in this way with the aim that they can be 'easily understood by the modern reader, and showing accurately what Hewitson actually wrote' (p. xlv). The book begins with illustrations, acknowledgements, editing methods, maps, and a thirty-page introduction. The latter provides a useful biography of Hewitson as well as details about the diaries themselves and key context about the nineteenth-century provincial press, Preston, and other important social,

political, and cultural considerations at that time. Furthermore, littered throughout the book are footnotes to provide helpful details about the information imparted in the diary entries, with readers also supported by a glossary of terms, list of people frequently mentioned, and an index at the back of the book. Hobbs has managed to successfully strike a delicate balance here between subtly helping the reader make sense of the diary entries, should they require it, but also in allowing the narrative to speak for itself without interruption. Backtracking or moving around the book is sometimes required by the reader to utilize the resources available or to connect the dots between entries but this does not detract from the experience of following Hewitson's accounts.

There are many challenges associated with reading and drawing useful information from diaries such as Hewitson's as well as in editing them. Readers should always be mindful of the writer's motivation for producing such a narrative, and how they wish to present themselves. As Hobbs argues, it is clear from Hewitson's approach that he expected and wanted the diary to be read, at least by his family (p. xx). Furthermore, diaries are not always kept in a timely manner, as Hewitson himself admitted in December 1865 when he stated that he was 'nine days behind hand with my diary' (p. 62). This can result in issues surrounding accuracy and reframing of information and it is particularly interesting to note that, in some cases, Hewitson consciously wrote with hindsight to benefit his narrative; one example of this being in July 1866 when he stated that he 'cleared expenses' on a story he wrote that day, something Hobbs explains he would only know sometime later after being paid by the papers he sent the report to (p. 101). In editing the book, Hobbs and his team also had to make the decision about whether or not to fully transcribe every aspect of Hewitson's diaries, including any words or sections crossed out which are legible. They decided that nothing should be omitted

(apart from annotations made in blue crayon which are assumed to have been made by a later reader) but indicate clearly where information has been crossed out. Given that the diaries can be viewed by the public, this seems a fair way to reproduce what readers themselves would see if they visited the archives. The motivation behind the production of the diaries, however, as well as the editing process they have undergone, are important elements for the reader to be aware of as they peruse this book and consider how it informs their own scholarly interests.

It is also important for those consulting this book to reflect on how they intend to approach reading and using it. As Hobbs quite rightly points out, the diaries should be drawn on alongside other sources, not least the newspapers which Hewitson worked on (p. xlii). This is really where the book comes into its own and provides helpful context for the content which it is ultimately discussing. One example of this comes from a diary entry of 21 May 1867, where Hewitson explained how his wife Margaret ‘had to assist a woman who was taken in labour’ while returning home from Lancaster (p. 152). Hobbs’s own footnote details how a paragraph on this story appears in the bi-weekly *Preston Guardian* the following day (pp. 152–53), while my own archival searches found its inclusion in at least seven other provincial papers between 25 May and 30 May. Yet nothing in this published paragraph reveals Hewitson as the author, or the ‘Preston lady’ involved as his wife, or how this story was uncovered in the first place. Comparing Hewitson’s entries, therefore, alongside published stories can

help the reader make sense of how his content was conceived, constructed, and produced, which, in turn, provides wider context for journalistic practices in play in the provinces in nineteenth-century Britain. Furthermore, Hobbs acknowledges that some readers may only ‘dip into the diaries’, rather than read them from cover to cover, and recognizes they can use either the index or search the digital version of the book to find what they are seeking. This is an important perspective to have on this collection of diaries because, while fascinating in its own right, it is quite long and may be used by different scholars in a variety of ways.

Overall, *The Diaries of Anthony Hewitson* reminds those studying periodicals and newspapers of the importance of exploring the lived experience of the actors behind the publications; in this case, the provincial journalist who, like thousands of other reporters, worked on and for local newspapers across nineteenth-century Britain. The strength of the diaries themselves lies in their ordinariness and regularity, as they paint a picture of what being a reporter at that time looked like on a day-to-day basis, while the book itself is well put together to help the scholar get the best of these entries. Crucially, it adds more colour and depth to a fascinating period of growth and development in the British press, as well as further demonstrating why the journalistic practices and activities of the provinces need a prominent place in these narratives.

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