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Review

Howard Cox and Simon Mowatt, *Revolutions from Grub Street. A History of Magazine Publishing in Britain*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014. 263 pp. ISBN: 978-0-19-960163-9, € 44,99.

The treatment of famous English magazines in Howard Cox and Simon Mowatt's *Revolutions from Grub Street* (2014) might startle a cultural historian. Take for example their description of the 'two distinct management challenges' that Charles Knight, renowned publisher of the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge, faced in publishing the *Penny Magazine*: 'One of these was the creation of a system of distribution and selling that could provide consumers with much larger quantities of printed material; effectively an industry-wide question of vertical management. The other was the need to generate sufficient revenues in order to cover the high costs of producing a relatively high quality, low-priced magazine. This latter challenge (...) was thus, in effect, a matter linking business and corporate strategy.'

Passages like these constantly remind the reader of the ultimate goal of the authors: to write a history of British magazine companies as businesses. They want to show another side of Charles

Knight and his colleagues: a side focused on making money and being successful publishers.

The period covered in *Revolutions from Grub Street* is impressive. The authors describe the history of English magazine publishing from the Glorious Revolution to the introduction of Apple's iPad. Therefore, it is hardly surprising that the book is centred on two strong narratives. The first considers the shift of an industry physically located around Grub Street in London, to a national and, finally, international industry. Closely related to this is the cyclical history of the organisational forms of publishers: from small-scale and family-owned to a virtual national monopoly and back again. The reader can also discern a third narrative, which the authors do not explicitly mention: the growing influence of an important target audience of magazines, the female reader.

These three narratives are driven by technological innovation and social change, or 'competitive challenges' in the lingo of Cox and Mowatt. Both the invention of stereotyping in the nineteenth century and the introduction of DTP (Desktop Publishing) in the 1980s are given ample attention. On a social

level, publishers had to react to their ever-changing audience: from working women in the twenties and thirties to teenagers with money to burn in the fifties and sixties. The framing of these two important historical factors as competitive challenges enable the authors to complicate the relation between publishers, their magazines and the public. Publishers did not only have to deal with these developments on an individual basis, but also had to take the way in which their competitors handled them into account.

The focus on publishing houses as companies, geared to making profit and raising capital, leads the authors to a description of the nineteenth century as the prehistory of British magazine publishing. The industry only matured in the 1890s when it became ‘modern and capital-intensive’ and ‘dominated by increasingly vertically integrated, publicly listed corporations paying substantial dividends to their shareholders.’ This significant development necessitated scaling-up – corporate acquisition on a large scale – and resulted in the dominance of the Fleet Street press lords and their capital until the 1960s. This second narrative in the book, the cyclical history of organisational forms, results in the virtual monopoly reached by International Publishing Cooperation (IPC) in the Sixties.

An especially interesting part of the book deals with a major innovation in the use of advertising as a source of revenue. The authors show how Condé Nast, the famous publisher of *Vogue*,

succeeded in making target advertising the main source of revenue for his magazines. Two important arguments of the book, the drive for profit and the importance of female readers, eloquently blend together here.

The focus on publishing houses as capitalist companies is both interesting and refreshing. However, this strong narrative is at the same time a weakness in a book covering more than three centuries. The theoretical framework is best suited for monopolistic companies like IPC. Therefore, it is not surprising that everything before seems to be leading up to the forming of ‘the ministry of magazines’ while everything after is presented as a deviation from the norm. In sum: thinking of Charles Knight as a sort of proto-Don Draper managerial type is great fun, but it probably does not do him much justice.

To conclude, *Revolutions from Grub Street* is an interesting book for historians working in different fields. It is a fairly traditional economic history of an English industry that also provides valuable insights for many cultural historians working with magazines in the nineteenth and twentieth century. It points to an important motivation for publishers that is often forgotten: the drive for profit. Cultural historians should take notice how this important motive shaped both the content and the audience of magazines.

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