

The Press and General Review

THE FOURTH ESTATE.

Contributions towards a History of Newspapers and of the Liberty of the Press. By F. R. Hunt.

This popular lust for news, may it not safely be affirmed to consist of two of the mightiest elements of our national decay? What should so naturally accompany and succeed a national fever (for with us the newspaper is no less) than a proportioned national debility? Our greatest political danger lies where it is, by most of us, the least suspected—namely, in our self-induced weakness and apathy that, ere long, may be apt to seek the evil which now we profess chiefly to abhor. The powerlessness of governments, consequent upon the enervated state of those who ought to constitute the most worthy portion of the governed, confers upon ultra-democracy that false semblance of vigor which induces the most of us to worship material strength wherever we find it. Earnestness is not, as is commonly supposed, the thing that is now popularly admired. It is power, or the pretence and semblance of power, before which we at present bow down, utterly careless as to whether it be of the Devil or of God. We are therefore in a fair way to lose our freedom, not so much by a series of exhausting blazings-forth of Democracy as, miserable *dada*, by a deliberate recurrence to despotism as a good thing.

Thanks, however, to the force of newspaper teaching mainly, the loss here contemplated would not be by any means so great as it might have been under happier preceding circumstances. Our "liberties" are at present very vaguely defined affairs in the minds of the most of us; and in the minds of many who entertain ideas of some positiveness upon the subject it has become a question whether the particular liberties that are most talked about are any longer worth maintaining. Religious liberty with the majority, means liberty to be irreligious, and the common notion of civil liberty seems to be, that people shall be allowed to be as vile as they like, provided they do not interfere with the same privilege in others.

The prodigious spread of a very superficial knowledge, through the means chiefly of the newspaper press, has called into existence another class of phenomena, which, if they are less ominous than the foregoing, are considerably more absurd. We mean the spasmodic efforts which this generation has made, and is still actively engaged in making, to stand upon its own legs, and to be "original"—efforts which have led those who are or fancy themselves to be the "spirits of the age," into the queer notion that all "conventionalities," as such, are baseless, and to be abandoned as soon as possible; whereas, on the contrary, there is a very strong probability in favour of any particular custom of manners, or habit of thought, that, upon examination of its forgotten grounds, it will be found to be just and necessary. What will the "spirits of the age" do should "originality" itself become "conventional," as is likely enough if our young men "go ahead" much longer at their present rate?

Another evil, more deep than obvious, of the extent to which newspapers are read by the people, is the result upon them of the publication of religious controversies. We will not dwell upon the manifest injury inflicted upon national religion by the mere knowledge of the divisions by which it is afflicted—a scandal which, of all others, perhaps, is the most fatal to the weak brethren, we will only direct attention to the habits of religious study which arise among seriously disposed, but not religious persons. When they desire to make themselves acquainted with the elements of chemistry, mathematics, and the like, they do not begin with controversies on the nature of the ammoniacal combinations, or discussions of relative merits of the fluxional methods of Newton and Leibnitz; they study accredited elementary text-books; but, chiefly, as we expect, of the conceited infatuation of their minds by newspapers appeals to their judgment upon religious points that are totally beyond their powers of judgment, they begin their theological course, not with the Bible and the simplest and most authoritative elucidations thereof, but with a plunge, quite at random, into controversies on baptismal regeneration, the doctrines of election and reprobation, the procession of the Holy Spirit, &c., making themselves thoroughly conversant with the denials of all Christian truths, before they have once read or considered any simple and fair statement of them.

It would be vain, however, here to attempt even an enumeration of the immediate evils, which are the price to be paid for the future and ultimate results of the newspaper press upon civilization. If we assert that almost all the peculiar evils of our latest civilization are, in part, chargeable upon that source, the reader will not hold us guilty of a paradoxical or exaggerated statement, when he calls to mind the fact, that the newspaper press has constituted by very much the most mighty of the powers engaged in giving form to that quite peculiar phase of civilization which has arisen entirely since the Revolution of 1649,—exactly the date of the first appearance of newspapers in such numbers as to constitute a recognizable element of our national life.

Far be it from us to question the excellence

of the ultimate results intended by heaven in all great movements or events, but equally removed from our hearts by the folly of a large class of our modern optimists, who refuse to regard evil as evil, provided that future good shall come of it. It would not have much consoled a wise Roman, in the Empire's latter days, to consider that his once noble but then fast rotting State, might operate, in times to come, as manure, admirable for the nourishment of a world wide crop of alien civilizations. Nor is the sorrow with which we contemplate the present and imminent evils, resulting, and about to result, from the prodigious and ungovernable power of a teacher, necessarily ignoring all knowledge besides that which will render its teaching popular, much diminished by the reflection, that the destruction thus operating at the core of our national life, may, nay must, further the advent of that last consummation, when it will be seen by all that the good which God extracts from evil does in no way relieve the guilt of evil-doers.

In justification of the foregoing remarks, we observed at the outset, that the laudations commonly bestowed by the newspaper press upon itself are less frequently false than they are egregiously one-sided. There are, however, two or three widely circulated affirmations upon the subject which we beg to contradict flatly. Mr. Hunt repeats a common thought when he says, that the newspaper "is a mental camera, which throws a picture of the whole world upon a single sheet of paper." The newspaper is no such thing; the picture given by it may, in general terms, be affirmed to be a very partial and distorted, and, in most respects, false representation of that in the world which is least worth the representing. The wicked, the noisy, and the shallow, make the chief figures in it. The truest, the most energetic activities find no record. A good man might die of sheer despair if he were ignorant enough to believe that the newspaper fairly represented the world around him.

Another preposterous error is the supposition that the newspaper is by its nature an instructor. The newspaper may, by many accidents, become such to certain of its readers; but, by its nature, it is not their instructor, it is their representative. Each of these two offices we take to be wholly incompatible with the existence, in any primary sense, of the other.

The kind of discredit which applies to newspapers generally, from the fact of their being, for the most part, almost avowedly the organs of party, needs not to be urged by us. The style in which they are often managed, however, is a thing less commonly known and considered, though not less worthy of remark. A couple of amusing anecdotes of the prosperous days of the "Courier," may serve to relieve the gravity of these introductory considerations and also to conclude them. The following is from a letter of Daniel Stuart, the proprietor.

"At this time a struggle was going on, whether the Regent should be a Whig or a Tory, and important letters were passing between his Royal Highness and Mr. Percival. At midnight George Spurrett, the porter who slept in the "Courier" Office, was knocked up; a splendid carriage and splendid liveries at the door; a portly elegant man, elegantly dressed, wrapped up in a cloak, presented himself, and inquired for Mr. Stuart; for, as I was abused in the newspapers as the conductor of the "Courier," the merit of which belonged wholly to Mr. Street, I was the person inquired for by strangers. George said Stuart lived out of town; but Mr. Street, the editor, lived on the Adelphi Terrace. A packet was delivered to George, and he was enjoined to give it speedily to Mr. Street, as it was of great importance. This was a copy of the correspondence between the Prince of Wales and Mr. Percival. To be sure of its being genuine, Mr. Street went immediately to Mr. Percival to inquire. On seeing it Mr. Percival started back, and exclaimed, 'this is done to ruin me with the prince!' If it appears in the "Courier" nothing will persuade him that I did not publish it as an appeal to the public against him! It must not be published!" "No," said Mr. Street, "it is a very good article for the paper, and what will partner Stuart say if he hears of my suppressing it?" "Well," said Mr. Percival, who held it fast, "some news shall be sent you as an equivalent." Accordingly, an official despatch of the taking of the Island of Bandy, in the East Indies, was sent the same day, and was published in the "Courier" before it appeared in the London "Gazette." I knew nothing of this till the evening, when I dined with Street at Kilburn, where we had a hearty laugh at these occurrences."

The "Judge" described in the following words of Mr. Hunt is a very amusing individual of a very common species.—

"A great feature of the Courier was its second editions. These, during those days of excitement, the public were never allowed to forget. Men with horns ran down the streets, making a 'most hideous music,' and shouting between each blast, 'News, news, great news, Courier—Courier, great news, great news,—second edition.'" Two or three strong lunged fellows would at times be within hearing at once, and no one could avoid noticing the fact. The stock of papers each carried with him usually found a

ready sale, and then the office was resorted to for more. A story has been told to show these second editions were sometimes made. The editor must have a second edition, and news must be found to make it. The account of Bellingham's murderous act was, of course, a great card for the papers. Thousands upon thousands had been issued with all that could be got together, but the public appetite being satisfied the demand fell; when suddenly the town was disturbed by the horns, and voices, and the hurrying feet of the newspapers, who belabored out. "Third edition, third edition—Courier, Courier—Bellingham, Bellingham—late news, late news." The papers were sold rapidly, and on went the successful hawkers to find new customers. As the third edition was greedily searched for the additional intelligence, each reader was gratified with the important paragraph—"We stop the press to announce, that the sanguinary villain, Bellingham, has refused to be shaved!"

Let us now take a rapid glance at the principal events detailed in Mr. Hunt's "Contributions towards a History of Newspapers and of the Liberty of the Press."

When the reign of James the first was drawing to a close; when Ben Johnson was poet laureate, and the personal friends of Shakspeare were lamenting his then recent death; when Cromwell was trading as a brewer at Huntingdon; when Milton was a youth of sixteen, trying his pen at Latin verse, and Hampden a quiet country gentleman in Buckinghamshire, the first English newspaper was published in London. Prior to this time many pamphlets and sheets headed by the word "News" had appeared, but they consisted generally of isolated accounts of some notable incidents, a great battle, the burning of a mansion, or the spread of an epidemic, and were irregularly issued; whereas "The Weekly News," as its name indicates, appeared at regular and stated intervals. Its projectors were Nathaniel Butter, Nicholas Bourne, Thomas Archer, Nathaniel Newberry, William Sheffard, Bartholomew Downes, and Edward Alde. Nathaniel Butter, however, seems to have been the principal author, the rest having been subordinate writers, or merely publishers. Butter claims the merit neither of striking originality of plan nor literary genius. All that he did was to produce a certain limited amount of regular news, and to persevere boldly in his purpose. Commencing in 1622, his name is found in connexion with newspapers as late as 1640.

Some years before the appearance of the "Weekly News," Butter had been a news writer or writer of news to private country gentlemen; for it was customary with such as could afford this luxury to have people in their employ to furnish them with intelligence from London. It at length occurred to Butter that he might extend his business, and make it more lucrative, by printing his sheets; and with this view he started his first paper on the 23d of May 1622. Like most projectors he gained little more than the honor of his invention, leaving the harvest of his profit to his successors. His papers were laughed at by wits, and ill-supported by the public. From Ben Jonson's comedy of "The Staple News," wherein the novel speculation is bitterly ridiculed, we probably discover the temper in which Butter's productions were generally regarded; and it would seem, from this and other sources of contemporary information, that the father of journalists must have been endowed with no common resolution to continue his purpose in the face of the storm of railery, and in spite of the yet more distressing indifference by which his efforts continued to be acknowledged. The four places to which the Editor, in Ben Johnson's comedy, is supposed to send emissaries for the purpose of gathering news, are the Court, Old St Paul's Cathedral,—where citizens are spoken of as walking the aisles and discussing their own and other people's affairs,—the Exchange, and lastly, Westminster Hall, spots which would afford little profit to the news-seeker of the present day. We find, however, that at the period in question, the middle aisle of St Paul's supplied, not only news, but a news-writer, who came forth from a band of "broken ancient lieutenants," &c., who had served in the wars in the low countries, and now "quaintly met in the Cathedral to talk over their exploits."

The first French newspaper appeared ten years after Butter's "Weekly News." It was published under the immediate patronage of Louis the Fourteenth, and under the direction of Theophrastus Renaudot, a medical man.—Its title was "La Gazette de France." Some writers have tried to prove that other nations had established newspapers before either France or England, but it seems now to be a clearly established fact, that Nathaniel Butter was the true inventor of them. The names of papers referred to, as anterior to the "Weekly News," all prove to be those of irregular pamphlets, such as we have already described as existing in England previous to the year 1622. The Greeks and Romans may have had issues of this kind, and certainly had written public proclamations of recent events; but no regularly numbered and continuous paper can be produced to take from Butter the honor of his invention. Innumerable writers have been misled by Mr. Chalmers, who, in the Life of Ruddiman, enters upon the subject of journalism and the origin

of newspapers. He states the first newspaper to have been "The English Mercurie," which was published in 1588, and thus ascribes "to the sagacity of Elizabeth and wisdom of Burleigh" the honor that is due to Butter. This error was first corrected by the learned bibliographer Mr. Watts, of the British Museum, who pointed out the comparative modernness of the paper and type of the "English Mercurie," and in other ways fully proved the supposed antiquity to be a glaring forgery.

The following extract from his "Letter to Antonio Panizzi, Esq., &c., of the British Museum," will interest our readers, not many of whom are likely to have seen that curious piece of bibliographical research.

"Mr. Nichols, who, in 1794, had transferred the substance of Mr. Chalmers' statement to the pages of the Gentleman's Magazine, afterwards incorporated it, with an encomium on the sagacity of the discoverer, in the elaborate account of early newspapers drawn up by himself, with the assistance of the Rev. Samuel Ayscough, and forming part of the fourth volume of his literary anecdotes. Mr. D'Israeli, who, in the early editions of his Curiosities of Literature, had given an article on the origin of newspapers, in which no allusion was made to the English Mercury, inserted an account of the alleged discovery, in subsequent editions, almost in the words of Chalmers. An independent account, not taken from the Life of Ruddiman, but evidently from a fresh examination of the Mercury itself, appeared in the 'Concise History of Ancient Institutions, &c.,' abridged and translated from Professor Beckmann, with various important additions, published at London in two volumes, in 1823. From these authorities, it is no wonder the information found its way into the Encyclopedias and other compilations of a similar nature. It is given in the Encyclopedias Londinensis, the Metropolitana, the new edition of the Britannica, and the British Cyclopaedia, under the head of Newspapers. The 'Conversations Lexikon' of Brockhaus, and the 'Neuestes Conversations Lexikon' of Wigand, mention it in the article Zeitung; the 'Dictionnaire de la Lecture,' under the head Gazetier; the great Russian 'Encyklopedicheskii Leksikon,' under that of Gazeta. It appears in the 'Encyclopaedia Americana' published at New York, and in the new edition of that work with alterations and improvements now publishing at Glasgow. In miscellaneous works or origins and inventions it has generally found a place. Even the circulation given to the statement by these channels is, however, inferior in all probability to that it has obtained by means of newspapers and miscellaneous periodicals, such as Hone's Year-Book, the Saturday Magazine, Chambers' Edinburgh Journal, &c., &c. For the last thirty or forty years it has formed a regular standard article of curious information, and by constant repetition, in and out of season, has been familiar to almost every delectatory reader throughout the kingdom.

"There could hardly, in fact, be any circumstance in literary history apparently established on a firmer foundation than this. A statement originally made by a respectable authority, and repeated by so many others, was supported by reference to a document preserved, not in a private library or one difficult of access, but in the most public, the most easily accessible, the most universally frequented collection in the capital. Any doubt or suspicion that might arise could be confirmed or dispelled at once by applying for the volume, which was daily within call of hundreds of literary men both English and Foreign.

"This document, on which for nearly half a century so important a statement has rested undisturbed and unchallenged, is, however, in reality, of so very questionable a character, that to see it was to suspect it, to examine it was to detect. On the fourth instant I was induced to refer to the 'English Mercurie,' by a consideration respecting it suggested in the article 'Armada,' in the Penny Cyclopaedia. It is there pointed out, 'that as the Nos. of the Mercury in the Museum are marked as Nos. 50, 51, and 54, in the corner of the margin, we are to conclude that such publications had occasionally been resorted to at critical times much anterior to the event of the Spanish Armada.' It struck me that the marginal numbers referred to might be merely added in manuscript in order to facilitate reference. On the book being brought, I had not examined it two minutes, before, to my surprise, I was forced to conclude that the whole was a forgery. I handed it to Mr. Jones, my colleague in the library of the Museum, and he immediately arrived at a similar conclusion. At that instant, you, my dear Sir, came up, and I put the volume into your hands, with an inquiry whether you thought that the printing was executed in 1588. After a moment's examination, you unhesitatingly declared it impossible. I pointed out the other marks of unauthenticity that I had detected, your hasty inspection supplied still others, and the unaccountably successful imposition of fifty years was shattered to fragments in five minutes.—Not a single individual of many who have since examined the 'English Mercurie,' has imagined that the date of 1588 could at all be supported."