



Andrew Hobbs, *A Fleet Street in Every Town: The Provincial Press in England, 1855-1900*.
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Reviewed by **Katie Holdway**

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Any study tracing nineteenth-century reception histories must find a way to avoid two problems. The first is the temptation to be selective, in order to draw patterns from heterogenous or contradictory reader testimonies. The second is the problem of overgeneralisation, when a dearth of evidence means that firm conclusions seem elusive. In his refreshingly clear reappraisal of the role and development of the local press in the second half of the nineteenth century, Andrew Hobbs deftly avoids both these potential dangers by placing the reader centre stage. Refusing to evoke the ‘implied reader’ or the ‘reading community’ in unsubstantiated ways, Hobbs shows instead that these terms too often act as obfuscating placeholders. In so doing, Hobbs “acknowledge[s] the power of the reader, individually and as a community, to shape the text and to use it in their own way, whilst also identifying some of the inequalities in power between reader and publisher” (7).

This approach means that Hobbs synthesises a significant body of neglected material pertaining to the provincial press. Using Preston and its neighbouring regions as case studies, he examines the only known diary of a nineteenth-century journalist, Anthony Hewitson; offers a fresh analysis of local oral histories to reveal the ways readers represented their reading experiences as part of wider narratives of cultural memory; and reveals patterns of reading across local publications through extensive archival work and data that digitisation efforts have only recently rendered retrievable. The book develops work by Hannah Barker (2000) and adds to that of Rachel Matthews (2017), departing from their respective foci on the politics and

economics of the provincial press, and considering instead what an analysis of ‘real’ readers can reveal about networked reading communities and “the national structure of the local press” (9). This approach does not only lead Hobbs to conclude that the local paper had “a greater influence on Victorian culture than any other type of print” (4), but also unequivocally discredits the long-standing hierarchy of form that has prioritised a study of the London papers, based on the anachronous conflation of the “national press” with the “metropolitan press” (385).

Rather than dismissing the task of identifying readers and reading habits as too difficult, Hobbs instead shows the complex patterns that can be revealed by asking very simple questions. The first chapter inverts the often nebulous idea of the ‘implied reader’, arguing that “the reading habits of real-life historical readers are only surprising because literary scholars have traditionally worked backwards, deducing an imaginary ‘implied reader’ from the text” (43). Taking the opposite approach, Hobbs uses the testimony of individual readers wherever possible. Even when testimonies are scarce, Hobbs’s diagram (63) – which subdivides readers according to the proximity of their relationship to the local paper, thereby distinguishing “the majority of readers” from “active readers” and journalists – is particularly useful, offering a means of acknowledging the heterogeneity of newspaper readers and nuancing the idea of an ‘imagined community’ even when individuals are unknown.

In Chapter 2, Hobbs discusses “reading places”, arguing that “we need to know *where* the local newspaper was read to understand *how* it was read, because the same texts take on different meanings in different places” (67). To address this question, he switches to an engaging narrative approach, walking his own readers around Preston in 1855, 1875 and 1900. While at this early stage of the book the myriad of places, publications and reading individuals analysed significantly enriches the research, their numerousness can be slightly overwhelming. Given the number of illustrations and tables which elsewhere significantly aid understanding, a simple map or glossary of the places and people mentioned in these chapters would have helped significantly. In Chapter 3, Hobbs moves to a focus on reading rhythms, revealing a “disconnect between the linear, historical time of newspaper content, with its claims of advance, progression and change, and the cyclical, repetitive habits of historical newspaper readers” (112). By avoiding the conflation of publishing rhythms with reading preferences, Hobbs shows instead that the two often worked in opposite directions.

Chapters 4 and 5 are some of the book’s richest and most informative due to their analysis of Anthony Hewitson’s diaries, and many periodical historians will also benefit from Hobbs’s forthcoming edited edition of the diaries.¹ Hobbs’s mapping of Hewitson’s train crash story is particularly fascinating, tracing the account from a spontaneous moment of news-gathering to its distribution to papers across the country (167-72). It is in these chapters that Hobbs turns in an extensive way to the production of the local press as a whole, before returning to the question of “who read what?” in Chapter 6. The advantage of this approach is clear: Hobbs’s reading of the national networks and systems of the local press is always inflected by the evidence of real local readers.

Chapter 7 introduces another pivotal argument, marshalling various sources to re-appraise the question of how newspapers created a sense of place in their pages. Hobbs acknowledges that “media history is beginning to adopt the ‘spatial turn’”, as more scholars begin to consider the intersection between the local press, geographical place, and identity (13). However, Hobbs links this widely-discussed idea to his vision of the local press as a powerful

¹ See also Hobbs’s website: Hobbs, Andrew. *The Hewitson Diaries*. <https://hewitsondiaries.wordpress.com/>

national network and system by suggesting that “distinctiveness and sense of place are not necessarily threatened by connections to other places, or by the globalisation of the international telegraph system; the local and the global are not opposites, they are ‘entangled’ with each other” (31). This chapter therefore uses the local press to posit ways in which ‘the spatial turn’ and print mobilities research might profitably come together. Hobbs’s focus on the interplay between spatial rootedness and spatial mobility also leads him to revise our understanding of the way external communities were “othered” by the local press, which he argues was “less common [...] than one might expect, even in football coverage” (292). Hobbs argues instead that although internal conflict between groups within a locality was common, local papers used a more subtle approach to define themselves against other communities, such as “editing out undesirable aspects of the town” (293). This discussion leads effectively into Chapter 8 (dialect writing) and Chapter 9 (the reporting of association football), which also deal with the local paper’s modes of defining its community in relation to others. Hobbs’s final chapter “How Readers Used the Local Paper” works as an index to the book, drawing out central threads from the previous chapters and providing a particularly compelling discussion of the importance of analysing letters to the editor (rather than oft-researched leader columns) as evidence of readers’ perspectives (362).

This book is not only rich in its arguments but extraordinarily generous in its methodological transparency. Chapter 6 is most noteworthy in this respect, with tables and graphs meticulously charting the fluctuating popularity of various local publications in dozens of reading locations, offering data that a periodical historian might pore over for hours. Coupled with the book’s open access format and Hobbs’s candid sharing of the limitations of his sources, this approach really feels like research sharing. In addition, Hobbs clearly signposts the potential for future research throughout, stressing especially the need for more work on the literature of the local paper (279) and on the provincial press and book production (208). Starting with the reader and understanding the local press as a national phenomenon, this book persuasively negates the idea that we can never really know how readers responded to the local press, providing compelling and well-substantiated answers to precisely this question.

Works Cited

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