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New Media in Transition in the Early Nineteenth Century

British Writers, Popular Literature and New Media Innovation, 1820 – 45. Alexis Easley (ed.). Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2024. 336pp.

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<1>Alexis Easley's edited collected *British Writers, Popular Literature and New Media Innovation, 1820 – 45* examines developments in media during the transitional years between the Romantic and Victorian eras, specifically 1820 to 1845. While these years occupy a liminal space in terms of periodization, a narrative emerges when a media history perspective is employed. In her introduction to the collection, Easley describes an "efflorescence of print culture" that emerges during this span of time, observing that "[t]he early nineteenth century was a period of new media innovation – an era that produced a wide variety of book, periodical and newspaper formats that were available to larger and more diversified reading publics than ever before" (1).

<2>The rise of popular literature, educational movements, industrialization, and technological advancements in printing and papermaking all contribute to this rapid and widespread development in media. As such, Easley defines the period of 1820-1845 as a "crucial era" in the rise of the modern press, one defined by competition and innovation (1). Press and book trades expanded considerably during this period as these advancements led to lower prices for print media, which "produced a sense of 'unruly' plentitude" (2). This rise of "mass media," which Easley defines as "a periodical and newspaper print culture aimed at a broad audience in the tens and hundreds of thousands," was the result of an ever-growing reading public across Britain (5).

<3>The twelve chapters that comprise *British Writers, Popular Literature and New Media Innovation* each function as a case study in the scholarly field of print media. The chapters draw attention to a wide range of authors, editors, and publishers, both canonical (including William Hazlitt, Felicia Hemans, Elizabeth Barrett Browning,

and Letitia Elizabeth Landon) and neglected (including Dinah Mulock Craik, Mary Howitt, and Charles Knight) in current scholarship to show how they contributed to the rise of mass media in the early nineteenth century.

<4>Concepts of celebrity appear in multiple chapters, thereby highlighting the connection between mass media and fame. In Chapter 2, Chris Haffendon explains, “With the growth of the reading public and the expansion of print culture enabled by technological developments, a new type of public visibility emerged, one that produced novel emotive relations between readers and celebrities” (40). His chapter situates William Hazlitt’s *The Spirit of the Age* (1825) within the proliferation of celebrity portraiture in print and visual media and makes connections to other celebrities of the nineteenth century, including Lord Byron. Chapter 3 also examines concepts of celebrity and fame. In it, Elizabeth Howard examines the canonical poets Letitia Elizabeth Landon’s and Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s tributes to Felicia Hemans after her death in May 1835. Elegies such as the ones written by Landon and Barrett Browning “helped to shape popular conceptions of professional authorship and authorial fame in a time of literary transition” (61). Like Haffendon, Howard considers how print culture enabled authors to create a celebrity image through various publications. Chapter 9 focuses on women’s paths to literary fame as Helena Goodwyn investigates Dinah Mulock Craik’s rise as a female author. Haffendon, Howard, and Goodwyn take different approaches to their considerations of celebrity and fame, but their chapters all center around how innovations in print culture intertwine with these figures and their written works.

<5>In Chapters 4, 5, and 6, Brian Maidment, Linda K. Hughes, and Richard Salmon focus on developments in illustration, visual storytelling, and advertising in print media, respectively. Maidment examines multimodal forms that bring together text and illustrations, showing how they encourage reader interaction, specifically leading to a redefinition of graphic humor in the period. Hughes focuses on how combinations of woodcut illustrations and poetry in children’s literature cause a shift from religious didacticism to entertainment and joy. Salmon focuses on a different aspect of visual storytelling – advertising – and considers how it influences broader political and cultural criticism. These chapters are rife with nineteenth-century illustrations from periodicals and children’s books and demonstrate a wide breadth of archival research.

<6>Chapters 7 and 8 diverge from this emphasis on illustration and visual storytelling, focusing instead on the adaptation and rise of domestic periodicals. In Chapter 7, Jennie Batchelor considers the fluidity of the periodical form as she examines the adaptability of *The Lady Magazine* during the early decades of the

nineteenth century, a periodical that Batchelor describes as “a truly innovative publication that cultivated a large audience of readers” (157). In Chapter 8, Caley Ehnes examines the proliferation of family periodicals and popular poetry by analyzing *Chambers’s Edinburgh Journal*, which republished original poetry and reprinted verses, focusing specifically on its reprintings of Hemans’s and Landon’s poetry. Both chapters focus on the intersection of gender and periodicals as they consider how these serial publications developed and grew in popularity throughout the century.

<7>Other chapters consider how readers interact with print media and their intersection with political and cultural anxieties of the period. In Chapter 10, Sofia Prado Huggins examines footnotes and other paratextual material in issues of *The Anti-Slavery Reporter* and how they established Britain as the center of the international abolitionist movement. Huggins focuses on the way in which nineteenth-century readers interacted with the abolitionist materials in the *Reporter*, arguing that “[h]owever and wherever they read this issue, nineteenth-century readers experienced *The Anti-Slavery Reporter* both *in space* and *as space* that existed in their hands as ink and paper and in their minds as a forum for the exchange of ideas” (224). In Chapter 11, Sara L. Maurer also considers the “space” of printed material but focuses more on issues of class by examining the dissemination of tracts, books, and other printed forms associated with middle-class visits to homes of the poor. Maurer defines “charitable visiting” as “a methodical coordination of multiple genres of print and physical encounters designed for collecting information, efficiently distributing aid, and above all creating and sustaining channels of communication between the urban middle classes and their low-income neighbors” (245). As such, this practice brought print media into a specific space – that of lower-income households – for the purpose of charity.

<8>The chapters that bookend the collection emphasize how new print forms emerge during this period to accommodate the needs of a large, diversified reading public. The collection begins with Mark W. Turner’s chapter exploring forms of “extractive miscellaneity” in the early Victorian period (19). Such miscellaneity becomes increasingly more common as serial formats expand, and it “contains what otherwise would appear to be serially infinite, offering us a reassuring and apparently stable selection of all that we might read or know” (21). Turner’s chapter allows the book to open with an expansive consideration of seriality and print culture and focuses on its seeming endlessness. In contrast, the final chapter of the book focuses on a specific type of periodical, thereby demonstrating how niche publications arise throughout the period as printing expands. In chapter 12, Françoise Baillet examines an overlooked type of trade journal. Baillet’s

examination of *The Compositors' Chronicle*, a periodical focused on all aspects of the composers' trade, reveals the social and political anxieties of the time in which it was published, thereby demonstrating how even niche publications can provide broader historical information to scholars.

<9>In addition to the twelve chapters' attention to the changes in print culture and the rise of mass media throughout the early nineteenth century, they also underscore how twenty-first-century technologies have enabled access to these texts. Digitization, keyword searches, and distant-reading technologies allow scholars to research a wide range of texts and conduct large-scale research projects that may otherwise be inaccessible or intensely time-consuming. Easley explains how "Increased accessibility to rare books and periodicals in recent years has altered our understanding of early Victorian print culture" (6). The type of expansive research that allows scholars to discern broad patterns in reprinting conducted by Turner in the book's first chapter would be difficult, if not impossible, to conduct without these twenty-first-century technologies. This collection bridges literary analysis, book history, archival studies, and digital humanities. It elucidates the literary and cultural history of the nineteenth century and demonstrates to its readers how they can conduct similar research.

<10>Easley provides an interdisciplinary overview of nineteenth-century media studies and brings together case studies with varying arguments. She does an admirable job in her introduction of establishing a historical overview of the rise of popular literature in the early nineteenth century and demonstrating how this rise is enabled by advancements in print culture. Each of the twelve chapters provides nuanced information about media studies, making them useful independently and as a collection. *British Writers, Popular Literature and New Media Innovation* is particularly useful to specialists in print media who want to get a more in-depth understanding of the field and to learn about technologies that enable such research.