

*Extra! Extra!: How The People Made The News*

By David Hastings.

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Reviewed by Ian F. Grant

I'm not sure whether to be disappointed or delighted with David Hastings' *Extra! Extra!: How The People Made The News*. I could possibly be excused some disappointment that, after I have spent several years researching the history of New Zealand newspapers, we have come to similar conclusions different to a number widely accepted about our early press. But he got the news out first!

However, I am delighted that a fellow newspaperman, although one with vastly more experience, has found in New Zealand's early newspaper history a great deal of pertinent information overlooked by observers with a purely academic background.

David Hastings, until recently deputy editor of the *New Zealand Herald* and editor of the award-winning *Weekend Herald*, authored an earlier book, *Over the Mountains of the Sea: Life on the Migrant Ships*, in 1996.

He has now written an excellent book that seamlessly combines scholarship with a feel for the dynamics of newsgathering and the reading public's insatiable curiosity about human frailty. We might talk about a 'celebrity culture' today, but the earliest newspapers were also enthusiastic gatherers and disseminators of gossip about people and their lives.

Hastings has bucked the conventional wisdom in several important areas. For example, it has been widely believed that the primary purpose of early New Zealand newspapers was to promote the political careers of owners/editors or their backers rather than achieve profitability, which was not considered important. Consequently, very little attention has been paid to the economic viability of early newspapers and the vital importance of the advertising in them.

Writing about the 1840s and 1850s, Patrick Day argued, in *The Making of the New Zealand Press* that 'Profitability was seldom available for New Zealand newspapers and they were managed principally in terms of political considerations' (4). Ruth Butterworth has expressed a similar view, in 'The Media' chapter in Novitz/Willmott's *Culture and Identity*: 'During the 1870s the newspaper solely as a political vehicle for the advancement of its owner's ambitions disappeared ....' (143). Some papers were launched to push individual or group political agendas, but this practice was not as widespread or predominant as Day, Butterworth and others have suggested.

Hastings makes the related points that most early editor/printers brought their trade with them to New Zealand, the newspapers they established providing for them, their families and staff. A number of them, bolstered by job printing and stationery sales, made a satisfactory living. Advertising, far more important to the readers in fledgling communities than it is to today's consumers, was vital to the survival of their newspapers.

Political involvement was most often the by-product of the business of producing a newspaper. As newspapers were the only forum for political debate, it was inevitable that editors and owners, as they became known in their communities, were encouraged to enter politics, usually at the local or provincial level.

Hastings' book is cleverly conceived because it is a microcosm of the first six decades of the New Zealand newspaper industry. It encompasses the struggles of the early press with government, much more intense in Auckland than further south; two major battles for supremacy in the morning market by significant newspapers; the emergence of evening newspapers; an epic morning versus evening dailies contest; the importance of the telegraph; key technological advances and some of the major newspaper personalities of the period.

*Extra! Extra!* gives considerable space to the rise, success and eventual fall of the morning *New Zealander* and the *Southern Cross* and their owners and editors. There was no secret about the political motives behind William Brown's funding of the *Southern Cross* but the *New Zealander's* John Williamson was an experienced printer who saw a commercial opportunity. Ultimately, the 20 year long contest that exhausted them both was fought on commercial rather than ideological grounds. As Hastings says: 'The history of the *New Zealander* .... undermines another dubious generalization about the early colonial press, namely that papers were published primarily for political purposes in support of a developing upper class without the need to make profits' (p.15). He also writes: 'A paper had to make money to survive and this was always so. Even the *Southern Cross* attempted to make money in the 1840s and 1850s despite its overtly political objectives' (247).

The other great newspaper war in nineteenth-century Auckland between Henry Brett's *Star* and the *NZ Herald* demonstrates the crucial importance of advertising revenue as the costs of staffing and operating dailies with expensive new technology made newspapers substantial commercial enterprises. 'Not only did many fail for want of capital,' Hastings writes, 'but when the *Herald* and the *Cross* merged at the end of 1876, the advertisers were a significant force pushing them together' (247).

A constant theme in Hastings book is the primacy of news. As he writes:

A paper's success or failure depended on its ability to provide news that interested its readers, whether it was of sensational events such as the Poverty Bay massacre or mundane information such as market prices, shipping movements, petty crime, concerts, political debates and so on (3).

Publications that simply expounded the views of their owners were effectively political pamphlets and did not satisfy the essential reason people bought newspapers. Papers that supplied a satisfactory mix of relevant news and information were read in sufficient numbers to attract advertising on a regular basis. Self evident though this may seem, more academically-based newspaper histories have often overlooked the obvious in their attempt to fit theoretical frameworks.

Hastings takes issue with the view, expressed by Butterworth and others, that early newspapers were instruments of social control which influenced public opinion. Largely because of uncritical acceptance of this, rather than evidence that successful newspapers actually provided what their readers wanted, Hastings says that 'historians have tended to underestimate the value of newspapers as historical documents which, for all their shortcomings, can tell us much about the societies from which they emerged and with which they were intimately connected' (3). Amen to that.

The book includes absorbing chapters on the decades long battle for readers and advertising between the morning *NZ Herald* and *Evening Star* (later *Auckland Evening Star* and *Auckland Star*). While the *Herald*, run by W. C. Wilson and then Henry Horton, was as

conservative as Henry Brett's *Star* was liberal, the success of the newspapers owed far more to the journalistic skills of their owners and editors, including Robert Creighton, George Reed, David Burn, Hugh Carleton, Thomas Leys and William Berry, than to political stances.

As a seasoned newspaperman, David Hastings spices his story with pen portraits of colourful characters and stories about the papers' attempts, successful and otherwise, to be first with the news. Or how, in the case of the 'Rollicking Rams', when the *Evening Star* mistakenly named someone as member of a gang of young drunks, there were fisticuffs at the newspaper office. There are also perceptive chapters on how the newspapers reported Māori-Pākehā relations, responded to the strengthening women's movement, and, in a chapter titled 'Bullies, bluffers and blackmailers' how the libel laws of the day disadvantaged the press.

With a book so well researched and written, it is probably churlish to quibble over details. But as a student of New Zealand political cartoons, I was struck by the mention of cartoonist William Blomfield's response to the February 1886 story that had Auckland abuzz. In his 'Chasing a Whale' chapter, Hastings details the attempts of the *Star*, led by proprietor Brett, and *Herald* editor William Berry to be first to confirm reports of a wreck upside down off North Cape. It is an excellent example of the effort papers took to beat the opposition – even though, in this case, the presumed shipwreck turned out to be a dead whale. The cartoon in the *Observer* is attributed to Blomfield, but was drawn a year before he joined the weekly, is not in his distinctive, loose style and carried what appear to be 'W.B.' initials rather than his 'Blo' signature. Confusing certainly, but, if not the work of Blomfield, it is possible the stiff, rather clumsy cartoon was done by William Sylvester Pulford, an artist as well as one-time *Observer* business manager, and nephew of George Cruikshank, the prominent English cartoonist. An additional flourish to the signature 'P' could make it look like a 'B'.

In his introduction, David Hastings notes: 'The narrative that emerges calls into question some of the standard assumptions, generalizations and half-truths that have been recycled through the admittedly limited historiography on the subject' (9). His book is a very creditable beginning to providing a truer picture of the early decades in the history of New Zealand's newspapers.