



Paul Arblaster, ***From Ghent to Aix: How They brought the News in the Habsburg Netherlands, 1550-1700*** (The Handpress World 27; Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2014, 376 pp., ISBN 978 90 04 27647 5).

It is rather remarkable that until recently, there was no thorough monograph on the subject of newspapers and their publishers in the Habsburg Netherlands, even though the Antwerp printer-publisher Abraham Verhoeven, with his *Nieuwe Tijdinghen* (1620-1629), was one of the pioneers of the genre. Thus far, researchers have had to make do with smaller, out-dated studies, such as the well-known article by Theo Luykx, and some contributions regarding specific papers. A comprehensive work in which the development of the periodical press in the Southern Netherlands is analysed in detail, was missing. Unquestionably, Paul Arblaster's intention to fill this lacuna is to his great merit.

Arblaster sets three major goals in his work. First, he wants to reveal the actual development of the printing of newspapers in the Southern Netherlands. He traces what series were printed where and by whom, and he situates the publishers and their work in the (international) political context in which they operated. The author's second goal is to assess the significance and influence of these newspapers, by trying to recapture the (largely oral) culture of news exchange within which they appeared. His third concern is the broader European dimension of the subject matter, and Arblaster attempts to locate the developments in the Habsburg Netherlands within the context of the European news system as a whole.

These three main points are dealt with throughout the six chapters that constitute the volume, the structure of which is chronological, with a number of recurring thematic approaches. In the first two chapters, Arblaster discusses the political, legal and urban contexts within which the printer-publishers were able to pursue their activities in the Habsburg Netherlands. He examines the place this region held in the international postal traffic and discusses both the contents of Southern Netherlands pamphlets, and the extent to which they were distributed around 1600. This constituted the culture of news printing with which the first newspaper publisher of the Habsburg Netherlands, Abraham Verhoeven, was familiar. Chapters 3 and 4 are devoted to both him and his *Nieuwe Tijdinghen*. Arblaster discusses his origins and training, the intellectual context in which he worked, and the sources he had at his disposal. On the basis of a comparison of

international news in the *Tijdinghen* in 1623 and similar publications from other countries, Arblaster delineates a series of Verhoeven's editorial decisions. It turns out that the information that appeared in the newspapers was fairly similar, and this finding also applies to other test years discussed later in the volume. There are some differences, mainly as the result of confessional variations or dynastic loyalties, but in general the West European audience was provided with the same coverage of major public affairs. In this way, Arblaster demonstrates the greatest story of 1623 was Prince Charles' journey to Spain that same year. The 'Spanish Match' was clearly a hot topic throughout Europe. Verhoeven, however, did differ from his international colleagues on editorial techniques: he was the inventor of the front-page headline and the newspaper illustration, and he did not shy away from polemics. The fifth chapter deals with Verhoeven's successors in Antwerp and elsewhere (Verdussen, Binnart, Breyghel) until the mid-seventeenth century. In the sixth and final chapter, Arblaster focuses on Pierre Hugonet, whose *Relations Véritables* was so clearly a courtly propaganda newspaper that Arblaster refers to it as 'the official gazette of the Brussels court' (220).

Arblaster paints a rich picture of the current-affairs publishing in the Habsburg Netherlands, evoking a world of zealous editor-journalists who competed with each other for the favour of both the public and the government. However, while their relationships with the religious and political authorities are frequently discussed, how the (central) government acted towards the newspapers and their publishers (e.g. with respect to the granting of patents), is not given any systematic treatment in this work. Arblaster occasionally raises the issue, but with varying degrees of success. For example, the reasoning that the author develops on pages 114-116 to explain why the Council of Brabant seemed to distance itself from Verhoeven in 1629, is subject to discussion. Arblaster suspects a political move by the central government and sees it as an 'orchestrated attempt [...] to bring the publication of news under more direct government control' (114). However, his assumptions with regards to the change in personnel among the upper echelons of the Southern Netherlands government that would support this line of reasoning is less than convincing as an explanation. Moreover, the author makes several errors in interpreting various political decisions – such as those in connection with Spinola and Aytona. It is clear that Verhoeven began experiencing difficulties around 1629, and that this had consequences for his business, but why this should be so remains unanswered. Indeed, the book does not do justice to the interplay between local, regional and central authorities regarding the printing press. Yet perhaps there simply was no systematic government policy regarding these issues in the seventeenth century, as Arblaster seems to suggest (172).

The author has also gone to a great deal of trouble to trace the changing content of the Southern Netherlands newspapers, consulting a few thousand surviving copies to that end. In his content analysis, Arblaster constantly includes the social and political conditions in his argument, situates the publisher-publicists in the context in which they worked, and sometimes provides concrete information regarding the political situations

and developments (see, for example, pages 172-183). However, I do not think that he has made sufficient use of a series of recent publications on the seventeenth-century Southern Netherlands (Esteban Estringana, Vermeir, Lesaffer). Some useful master's theses on the Southern Netherlands pamphlet literature have also escaped his attention (Jan Verhulst 1999, An Temmerman 2004), as has the thesis of Sarah Tavernier regarding the Bruges newspaper publisher Nicolaes Breyghel (2001). The latter study would certainly be of use in filling out the section in the book devoted to Breyghel (188-191). It is also regrettable that in his content comparison of the *Relations Véritables* with, among others, *La Gazette*, he has not made use of Stéphane Haffemayer's *L'information dans la France du XVIIe siècle: La gazette de Renaudot de 1647 à 1663* (Paris 2002). This underutilization of scientific literature from the last fifteen years appears to be a general problem in this volume.

Nevertheless, the book's lingering impression is that this is a very rich study, written by an author with a thorough knowledge of the complex world of the Early Modern newsgathering and distribution, even if he does not answer all of the potential questions arising from the subject matter. Yet it will not become a standard reference work for anyone searching for information on certain aspects of the seventeenth-century Southern Netherlands press; some of the key players in this story and their newspapers are only partially covered. That being said, Arblaster does sketch a very vivid image of which printed news series rolled off the Habsburg Netherlands' presses, the processes of production and dissemination, and what interests were involved. He has thus opened our eyes to a world that was previously only glimpsed.

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