
Reviews

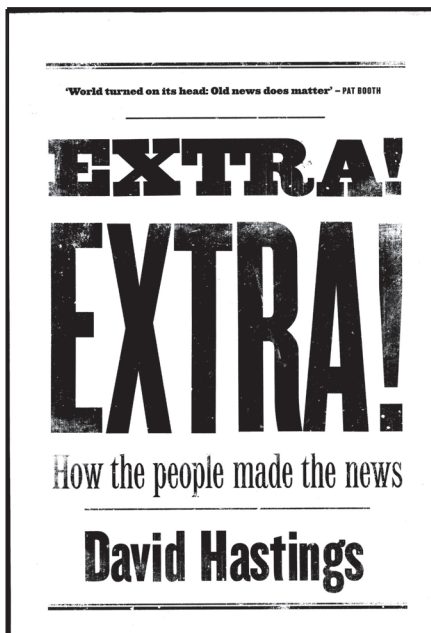
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Readers held the key to early media success

Extra! Extra! How the people made the news, by David Hastings, Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2013. 287pp. ISBN 9781869407384 (pbk)

IT HAS been many years since an author has produced a New Zealand press history that has so resolutely taken to task previous research in this field. But David Hastings has done this with his new book on the early newspaper scene in Auckland, *Extra! Extra! How the people made the news*.

Journalist and author Hastings has refuted earlier arguments by historians, such as Patrick Day, that newspapers were instruments of social control ‘devised by the ruling elite for the dual purpose of making money and exercising power through their influence on public opinion’. Rather, says Hastings, newspapers



were ‘shaped by their communities and were constantly having to adjust as social interests and standards changed’ (p. 3).

A paper’s success or failure ‘depended on its ability to provide news that interested its readers’. Hastings questions the standard narrative of the ‘corrupted ideal’ proposed by Day that early papers up to the 1860s were political and reliant on political patronage but then became commercial enterprises. With his detailed investigations of the early Auckland newspapers, in particular *New Zealander*, *Southern Cross*, *The New Zealand Herald* and *Auckland Evening Star*, Hastings contends that news was not

invented by commercialism but was the discovery that certain topics had always been interesting to readers and had commercial value when 'packaged, printed and sold'. He is talking about such topics as crime, disasters and other extraordinary events (p. 6).

Hastings has concentrated his research on the 'newspaper wars' in Auckland in the 19th century and aims to 'explain what forces and influences made the four papers what they were' (p. 8).

'The narrative that emerges calls into question some of the standard assumptions, generalisations and half-truths that have been recycled through the admittedly limited historiography on the subject,' he says (p. 9). Dutch historiographer Frank Ankersmit as long ago as 1997 lamented the overproduction of histories on every conceivable subject such that it was almost impossible for a reader to obtain a comprehensive view (Ankersmit, 1997, p. 277).

As Hastings notes, this is not the case for New Zealand's press history where scholarship in the field is rather limited, although Redmer Yska's *Truth*, in 2010, was a welcome addition. Considering the lack of interest shown by many of the country's newspapers in conserving their valuable historical records and documents it is not surprising the field is under-

researched. It is notable that even as a *Herald* journalist Hastings has not used, or been able to use, any minute books, letter books, wage books, or other 19th century company records from his employer.

Nobody seems to know where any of these records are, whether it is for the *Herald* or for the *Star*. Repeated attempts by this writer to discover what old records have been preserved have come to nought.

Sadly this is a similar story around the country, except for perhaps, Dunedin, where some of the early *Otago Daily Times* records have been deposited in the Hocken Library. Hastings would not have been able to do such a good job on the early Auckland newspaper scene if it hadn't been for the personal manuscripts of some of the major figures such as Henry Brett, David Burn, Thomson Leys et al.

Some of the 'standard narratives' that Hastings has contested in his book include the idea that papers were started solely for political purposes, that they had no interest in covering local news, that the establishment of the national press agency, the UPA, led to a uniformity of news coverage and that there was no clash of ideas because newspapers served the interests of the ruling elite (p. 9). It was never that simple, says

Hastings. Newspapers fought their battles and the prize was profit and a say in politics, but readers were the key to success or failure (p. 10).

Having laid out his argument in the introduction, Hastings then sets about proving it with his detailed and fascinating research into the early newspaper battles in Auckland starting with the birth of the *New Zealander*, which lasted for a little more than 20 years, and locked in a fierce battle with the *Southern Cross*, founded in 1843. It was this battle between these papers that Hastings claims revealed much about the 'intense commercial and political pressures that all newspapers came under as well as the overriding importance of reader interests in deciding the victor' (p. 14).

He moves on to the impact of *The New Zealand Herald* and the rise of the *Auckland Evening Star* as its major competitor.

The histories of these papers would be nothing without the men who ran or wrote for them and Hastings paints a lively picture of the men of the early Auckland press. From John Williamson to Henry Brett, Hugh Carleton to Thomson Leys, Joseph Wilson to William Berry, these men fought the battle for readership, sometimes succeeding and in the case of the *New Zealander* and *Southern Cross*, eventually failing. None of the

successful editors, claims Hastings, lost sight of the golden rule—that the 'readers held the key to victory in the newspaper wars and what they wanted most of all was news' (p. 251).

Extra! Extra! is an important book, and not before time. This is a scholarly, well researched and eminently readable book of interest to the wider public as much as to academics studying in this field. It might be the spur for others to research and write about other notable New Zealand newspapers.

However, unless the historical documents are available, such as diaries and personal papers that families have donated to research libraries, I fear the mysterious disappearance of press records will stymie any attempt.

References

- Ankersmit, F. R. (1997). In Jenkins, K. (Ed.), *The postmodern history reader*. London: Routledge, p. 277.
- Yska, R. (2010). *Truth: The rise and fall of the people's paper*. Nelson: Craig Potton Publishing.