

Spanning the Atlantic: Documenting the Roots of U.K. and U.S. Literary Journalism Traditions

Literary Journalism in British and American Prose: An Historical Overview

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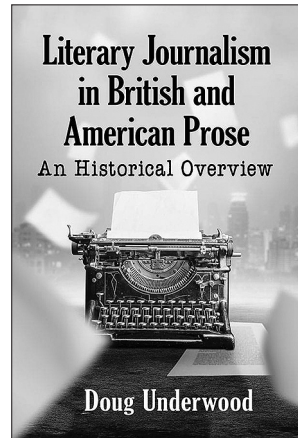
Building on his previous studies, *Journalism and the Novel: Truth and Fiction, 1700–2000* (2008) and *The Undeclared War between Journalism and Fiction* (2013), Doug Underwood here provides a massively detailed overview of the interlocking histories of literary journalism in the United States and the United Kingdom. As he comments: “American journalistic practices grew out of the press traditions of British colonialism, and the two traditions have been in ‘dialogue,’ so to speak, ever since the two nations parted ways” (4).

Underwood is indeed brilliant in dissecting the continuities between U.S. and U.K. literature and journalism. For instance, he observes:

One can see the British influences within the movement in the U.S. toward high art modernism illustrated early on in a figure like Poe, with his great admiration of the practices of the early 19th century British literary periodicals. . . .

. . . Ironically, Poe disdained virtually every aspect of the popular American publications of his time—the over-praised novel, the periodical article written to a “recherche” formula, the narratives of peril in cheap fiction and newspaper accounts—all the while borrowing from them in the creation of his own feverish tales of the isolated, the hyper-sensitive, and the criminally possessed personality. (84)

Underwood argues that the “inferiority complex of other American writers toward their British counterparts, combined with their contempt for some of their fellow American figures, [to make] canon considerations slow to take off on American soil. The first U.S. writers to be treated as canonical” included Washington Irving, Thomas Cooper, and William Cullen Bryant, who were later to be joined by Edgar Allan Poe, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Henry David Thoreau, Walt Whitman, and Herman Melville “. . . most of whom had at least dabbled in journalism).” Thus, in the early twentieth century, a few U.S. literary journalists



“came to be taken seriously” in the United Kingdom and throughout Europe, such as Poe, Mark Twain, Bret Harte, Upton Sinclair, Erskine Caldwell, and Raymond Chandler, with Theodore Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie* (1900) seen as a major advancement in the representation of women in fiction (85).

The depth and originality of the research is phenomenal. Take, for instance, the appendices. The first is a seemingly endless list of literary journalists (with their dominant styles of writing noted alongside their names), from Edward Abbey through Ada Leveson to Israel Zangwill and Jason Zengerle (201–29). I counted to 400 and was only at F. J. Furnivall (though D. H. Lawrence, who wrote for a range of popular newspapers towards the end of his life to earn much-needed money, is missed). Appendix 2.1 (231–36) features another enormous list covering literary journalists and their work that appears in anthologies—from Adams, Henry, *The Education of Henry Adams*, 1907; through to Wright, Richard, *Native Son*, 1940; *Black Boy*, 1945; *Eight Men*, 1961. A third appendix (237–45) lists literary journalists and their selected works in chronological order—starting with Sir Philip Sidney, *The Defence of Poesy*, 1579, but with only five from the year 2000 and beyond, ending with Elizabeth Kolbert, *The Sixth Extinction*, 2014. In addition, the Notes (247–263) provide further references and information.

Debates over the definition of literary journalism seem never ending. It is perhaps not surprising that Underwood’s lists are so long because he argues that the canon should be expanded to incorporate more narrative and discursive writing by authors with a background in journalism while suggesting that the opportunities literary journalism has offered women, minorities, and other marginalized groups need to be highlighted more. He thus includes book reviewing and the critical essay as forms of literary journalism. Book reviewing, he suggests, “for much of the past 150 years,” has been “treated as a step-child of the novel . . . and often cut out of the inheritance of the cultural acclaim lavished upon fiction writing since the mid-19th century” (18).

In his introduction, Underwood highlights the way in which many literary journalists up to the mid-1900s looked down on their journalism as a form of literature. John Stuart Mill was typical of many intellectuals who condemned journalism as a debased form of literature (and yet he wrote 450 articles for newspapers and magazines in his career). Underwood writes, “This attitude has been disputed in recent decades by historically, diversity, and feminist-oriented scholars who have revived interest in journalism, both ‘high’ and ‘popular,’ and have questioned the notion that journalism by once uncelebrated newspaper and periodical writers of the past should be dismissed as of lesser critical importance” (9).

Many of Underwood’s observations on individual writers and journals throughout the text are both concise and insightful. He notes that Joseph Addison, co-editor with Richard Steele of the *Tatler* and *Spectator* newspapers from 1709 to 1712, “was admired for the grace of his writing and the accessibility of his language” (25). But those journals, Underwood adds, were a mix of “gossip and social commentary, political satire, essays about manners and conduct, short narratives (often invented), innuendo and caricature, reprinted material, and reams of contributions from readers”—rather than news (31).

On the radical, trade-union based, unstamped (and therefore illegal), Chartist-supporting press of the first half of the nineteenth century—which was, in fact, far more popular than such establishment press as *The Times*—Underwood devotes only a few sentences and thus underplays their importance. Journals such as the *Poor Man's Guardian*, edited by Henry Hetherington (Underwood wrongly calls him Harrington), William Cobbett's *Two Penny Trash*, Feargus O'Connor's the *Northern Star*, and Charles K. Knight's the *Penny Magazine*, combined “jocular and picturesque writing, travel chronicles, and crime-driven narratives” along with “social protest themes packaged around class conflict and sensationalized entertainment formats, but soon found their political aims challenged by the ‘light news’ and consumer-oriented model of the conglomerate newspapers” (157–58).

By the mid-nineteenth century, literary journalism in Britain tended to be seen as the discursive essay. Cultural and political critiques were produced for general circulation publications of literary and political commentary by such figures as William Hazlitt, Charles Lamb, Thomas De Quincey, Samuel Johnson, Leigh Hunt, Thomas Carlyle, John Stuart Mill, Lord Macaulay, George Henry Lewes—and women, including George Eliot (Mary Ann Evans), Eliza Haywood, Charlotte Lennox, Frances Brooke, Mary Wollstonecraft, Christian Isobel Johnstone, Caroline Norton, Harriet Martineau, Margaret Oliphant, and others (10). In the United States during the same period, Margaret Fuller, James Russell Lowell, Henry David Thoreau, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr., and Edward Everett Hale produced a literary counterpoint to the growth of the Penny Press—as in James Gordon Bennett's *New York Herald*. But Horace Greeley, editor of the popular *New-York Tribune*, did attempt to promote “practitioners of fine and spiritualized writing” (11).

Chapter 4 is devoted to women, minorities, and other groups usually excluded from the traditional English-language canon. Among the women Underwood highlights are Susanne Haswell Rowson, Lydia Maria Child, Fanny Fern, Rebecca Harding Davis, Lillie Devereux Blake, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Ida Wells-Barnett, Victoria Earle Matthews, Zora Neale Hurston, and Sui Sin Far (Edith Maude Eaton) in the United States, and Christian Isobel Johnstone, Caroline Norton, Margaret Oliphant, Emily Faithfull, Mary Elizabeth Braddon, Dinah Mulock Craik, and Ellen Wood in the British Isles (90).

While covering African American literary journalists, Underwood stresses the ways they used the press and literature in their campaigns against oppression and for social justice. He highlights Frederick Douglass, who founded two newspapers, the *North Star* in 1847 and *Frederick Douglass' Paper* in 1851, in the face of considerable hostility (91).

The section on women journalists is also full of important insights. For instance, before the mid-1800s, women authors usually avoided signed authorship—to avoid male criticism and the stereotyping that accompanied publication by women—even in journals for and by women. Christian Isobel Johnstone became the first paid woman editor of a major periodical when she took over the running of *Tait's Edinburgh Magazine* in 1834, and yet pretended that owner William Tait was the “real editor” (94). In the United Kingdom, women's journals covered the major social, political,

and economic issues of the day and included the *Monthly Packet*, *English Woman's Journal*, the *Victoria Magazine*, the *Woman's World*, and the *Woman's Signal*. Underwood credits Eliza Cook, editor of *Eliza Cook's Journal*, with having “pioneered” the woman’s journal as “a forum for home life and self-improvement advice more than politics or public affairs, . . . her magazine . . . filled with jaunty articles about weddings, home furnishings, politeness in women’s language, reading material for families, and advice to mothers and children” (96).

A section on minority and LGBTQ journalists as critics and literary figures offers fascinating insights on a range of figures, including Richard Wright, W. E. B. DuBois, George Samuel Schuyler, and James Baldwin. This leads to a discussion of the legacy of Oscar Wilde: “Undaunted by his critics, Wilde filled out his public profile by becoming a fixture on the literary reviewing scene.” But he “found himself devastated, isolated, and forlorn when his literary dramatics were cut short by his sodomy trial in 1895, and his conviction and imprisonment served as a warning to Forster, Munro, and others to watch carefully what they divulged in their writings about their personal lives” (119).

Chapter 5, “The Ascendance of the Novelist and the Accommodation of the Professional Critic,” takes in Daniel Defoe, Jonathan Swift, Samuel Johnson, Henry Fielding, Tobias Smollett, and Dorothy Richardson. On the later work of Graham Greene, George Orwell, Aldous Huxley, Rebecca West, and Virginia Woolf, Underwood comments astutely:

Whether they felt good about this or not, fictional and non-fictional activities typically operated in an interconnected fashion throughout their careers, and their production of what came to be deemed literary journalism often cannot be fully disentangled from their activities as novelists, poets, and/or dramatists. (127)

But by the end of the 1800s, the novel, he argues, had come to be associated with “art” while journalism—even in its “high” critical, discursive forms—was “a notch below in prestige” (129).

A section titled Art and Artifice explores the ways in which sensational novels, romance writing, the narrative techniques of the industrialized newspaper marketplace, and W. T. Stead’s *New Journalism* intertwined. Many of the sensational novels, for instance, such as Charlotte Yonge’s *The Trial* (1863) were loosely based on reports in the Victorian press “revolving around false identities, social disguises, treachery[, murder,] and intrigues” (137). On the U.S. scene, Underwood argues that the tensions between the tradition of “fakery and fudging” alongside the professional rhetoric over objectivity “laid the foundations” for the *New Journalism* revolt of the 1960s and the iconoclastic reporting of Terry Southern, Hunter S. Thompson, and Michael Herr (139).

Another important section looking at the crucial role of humor in news and in British and U.S. storytelling discusses G. K. Chesterton, P. G. Wodehouse, and Evelyn Waugh in the United Kingdom (though Orwell is sadly ignored) and Washington Irving, James Kirke Paulding, and Nathaniel Hawthorne in the United States. On Twain, Underwood writes, his “populist and journalistic roots can be seen in the

way that he wove into his literature elements from what he had learned as a village humorist on his brother's hometown newspaper" (165). A later period of U.S. humor features Ring Lardner, E. B. White, Langston Hughes, James Thurber, Charles Bukowski, and Molly Ivins (166).

Chapter 7 examines the rise of university scholars such as George Saintsbury, F. R. Leavis and his wife Q. D. Leavis, Frank Kermode, Terry Eagleton, Richard Hoggart, Karl Miller, and Raymond Williams in the United Kingdom; Thomas Bailey, George Woodberry, Brander Matthews, Richard Watson Gilder and, more recently, Edward Said and Cornel West in the United States. Among the women listed are Judith Butler, Adrienne Rich, Elaine Showalter, Hélène Cixous, and Camille Paglia. Underwood argues that "the adoption of the peer review system in universities for publishing scholarly materials . . . had a major impact upon the declining role and stature of the literary critic writing for commercial publications" (174).

It is no surprise then that journalists—typically preferring to trust the "marketplace of ideas" and resistant to limitations upon freedom of expression—often have watched the growth of scholarly specialization with suspicion and protested that the plain-spoken language of the journalist-critic has been replaced with the in-group terminology of collegial fellow specialists. (175)

A former political and investigative reporter for the *Seattle Times*, the Washington Bureau of Gannett News, and the *Lansing State Journal*, Underwood is, without a doubt, a lover of lists. Hardly a page goes by without a list—of writers, books, topics, laws enacted—appearing. At best this can be highly informative—and perhaps inspire the reader to do more research into a relatively unknown journalist, just mentioned *en passant*—but it can often be exhausting.

Moreover, there are serious problems with the coverage of journalism training in the United Kingdom. Underwood says, "Even today journalism as an independent program of professional study is most prevalent at regional and polytechnic institutions in the U.K. where practical training is emphasized rather than research or scholarship about journalism" (81). But there are no polytechnics in the United Kingdom, these having been converted into universities by an Act of Parliament in 1992. Journalism undergraduate programs throughout the country must mix theoretical studies with practical assignments in order to fulfill the requirements of the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), while the growth of master's and PhD journalism programs shows the increasing importance given to research.

But these are minor quibbles. Underwood has produced a work of mammoth scholarship that should remain the seminal text in the field for many years.