what I love about newspapers is their etaoin shrdl

By The Unreliable Narrator

In the beginning – before the chapbooks and non-stop news cycle, the tabloids and Twitter – there was the word of mouth. In Scotland, town-criers shouldered the responsibility of sharing news among the local community, banging the clap to alert the townsfolk to new bylaws, official proclamations, or the arrival of fresh herring.

While the advent of printed news in the eighteenth century was likely an unhappy prospect for those seeking a career in bellowing 'Oyez! Oyez!' across the town square, there were clear upsides, too. Newspapers crossed geographical boundaries and became a connecting force between communities: a tool to inform, inspire and persuade.

Since the introduction of print media to Scottish society, questions of national identity have been explored across the pages, with contemporary presses following a long tradition of debating constitutional change. Some of the earliest media outlets, such as the *Edinburgh Courant* and *Scots Postman*, were founded following the Treaty of the Union in 1707. Their pages absorbed the constitutional turmoil of the era, offering a platform through which to promote civic and parliamentary reform campaigns.

It’s a scene surely familiar to us. In recent years, Scotland’s media outlets have hotly debated the question of Scottish independence – the Whys, the Wherefores, the Hows, and the How Nos too. Indeed, from *Caledonian Mercury* to *Bella Caledonia*, the Scottish press has sought to shape the political and national character of its readers, performing a civic role by providing an important space for democratic debate.

While the way in which the media is used to construct our constitutional identity remains seemingly unchanged, our consumption of the news has transformed over recent decades. Indeed, the call of ‘Stop press!’ – whereby the printers heave their machines to a grinding halt to correct an error or insert Very Recent and Significant News into their publication – seems, like the bawling of the town crier, a thing of the past. The digitisation of the media means that errors can be – in theory – quickly rectified (although not always before an article of questionable research has been retweeted once, twice, thirty thousand times). And what counts as significant news anymore? – learning as we do each day more about the rapidly shrinking icebergs, our burning planet and, of course, the plague times.

It will likely come as no surprise that recent studies show that relentlessly doomscrolling the 24-hour news feed contributes to our ever-rising anxiety levels. Remember, then: if you thought ‘Stop Press!’ was hollered here at *Bottle Imp* HQ in early 2021 and somebody forgot to shout ‘Start!’ again, the prolonged pause was, of course, for the health of the reader – to offer respite from their heady over-consumption of Scottish Literature. (In all seriousness, the impact of Covid-19 disrupted the regular whirr of the Bottle Imp machine, but normal service is henceforth resumed – hopefully you will agree that this issue was worth the wait.)

So, to the issue – and first, to the women. The media persists across the globe as a male-dominated industry, and despite the history of Scottish journalism being marked by the achievements of pioneering women, often they go unrecognised. Introducing us to one little-known groundbreaker of the Scottish press, Valentina Bold opens this issue with ‘**A Restless Intellect: Florence Dixie (1855–1905)**’ and explores the life of the war correspondent, campaigning journalist, and prolific author. In ‘**The Curious Case of Jessie M. King(s)**’, Charlotte Lauder and Karen Mailley-Watt delve into the worlds of two trailblazers who left an indelible mark on the Scottish press: King the journalist, the ‘lady correspondent’ who challenged the chauvinist attitudes of the Dundee media industry in the late

nineteenth century, and King the avant-garde artist, who carved out an international reputation among publishers as one of Britain's leading illustrators.

Following this, the linguistic Scottishness of one of our most beloved media figures is scrutinised by Anne Guenther in '**"We Never Get Ony Fun Here!" The Scottish Comic Strip *Oor Wullie***'. In '**Walter Scott, the Voiceless and *Blackwood's* Highland Gothic**', Oliver Robinson-Sivyet examines the author's ecological call to arms in *Blackwood's Magazine*. 2021 marks Scott's 250th birthday and so it's a double bill for Sir Walter, with Arianna Granata exploring his contemporary legacy in Italy in '**The Reception of Walter Scott in Italy after 1945**'.

Finally, if COP26 has whetted your appetite for ecologically-driven fiction, Tracy Patrick considers the necessary intertwining of domestic storylines and environmental issues in '**You Don't Know What You've Got Till It's Gone: Ecofiction and Social Realism**'. We also have a big backlog of our regular **book reviews**, too.

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