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# MICHAEL HARRIS 1938–2022

Tom O'Malley\*

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Michael Harris, known to many as a founding editor of *Media History* and an historian of both the eighteenth-century newspaper press and of the book trade, died in December 2022. He is greatly missed by all who worked with him, his many friends and, especially his beloved partner Judy Edwards.

Michael was born in 1938 in Croydon, and educated at Seaford College in West Sussex, where he developed an abiding interest in cricket. After graduating from Trinity College, Dublin, and spending time in South Carolina, USA, presenting programmes about English history for educational radio, he returned to London. He began work on a PhD about the press in the eighteenth century, which he completed in 1974.<sup>1</sup> In 1966, after a period working at University College London, he began lecturing in the evenings for the Department of Extra Mural Studies of London University and, in 1970, was appointed to a permanent post in the Department as a Lecturer in History. In 1988<sup>2</sup> the Department, later the Centre, of Extra Mural Studies was integrated into Birkbeck College. Michael became Reader in the History of London and remained at Birkbeck until his retirement in 2004.

In the 1950s and 1960s, newspaper and periodical history was an important area of research, but nonetheless was very underdeveloped. Michael was one of number of academics, working across disciplinary boundaries who helped turn newspaper and periodical history into a mainstream area of historical study.<sup>3</sup> During the 1970s, he published important articles on newspaper distribution in Queen Anne's reign,<sup>4</sup> and on the management of the London Press in the early eighteenth century.<sup>5</sup>

In 1974 the Acton Society, a Trust set up in 1948 to sponsor research on social and economic issues and which saw history as an important part of its mission, established a Press Group, in response to the setting up of the Royal Commission on the Press (1974–1977). The Group provided a forum in which issues surrounding the press could be discussed. Michael was part of this Group and was involved with two of its important publications on press history. He contributed a chapter on the 'The structure, ownership and control of the Press: 1620-1780' to the seminal collection on *Newspaper History* edited by George Boyce, James Curran and Pauline Wingate.<sup>6</sup> It remains a model of compression, detail, and clarity in the service of historical exposition. In 1981, again under the auspices

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of the Acton Society, he and the late press historian Alan Lee organised a conference on press history from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries. After Alan's untimely death later that year, Michael saw the proceedings through to publication in 1986.<sup>7</sup> During these years Michael and Virginia Berridge convened a regular seminar on Media History at the Institute of Historical Research in London, providing a much needed forum for research and discussion. It ran for a number of years, until it was superseded by a new seminar with a more explicit focus on film.

Michael's monograph, *London Newspapers in the Age of Walpole*, was the product of many years of meticulous work on the newspaper business of the 1720s and 1730s. He used detailed research, in an impressive range of sources, to construct a picture of the London press at a pivotal moment in newspaper history. Unlike many previous studies which concentrated on aspects of newspaper history, his approach was more holistic. The book covers, distribution, finances, ownership, printers, journalists, the press and politics, political control and newspaper content. It broke new ground by seeing newspapers as complex artefacts, embedded in rich economic, social and political contexts, arguing that 'by the mid-century the London Press had been subsumed into the commercial structure of the book trade'.<sup>8</sup> The book remains widely cited.

He continued to write and research in the history of the book trade and the press. In the first issue of *Media History*, he combined two of his passions, newspaper history and cricket, in an article which explored the interaction between readers and papers, commercialism and the wider public sphere. He demonstrated with elegance and force that news was a complex, socially and historically specific commodity.<sup>9</sup> He returned to the important issue of serial publication and the public sphere in the seventeenth century in a stimulating contribution to *Parliamentary History*, where he explored 'the sometimes sluggish, sometimes active connexions between news and parliament within the enigmatic public sphere'.<sup>10</sup> His 2009 lecture to the Royal Society, on the innovative and important seventeenth-century publisher, John Houghton, continued his exploration of the complexities of news publications in the early modern period.<sup>11</sup>

Underlying this work on newspapers and on the wider book trade was an interest in anything that was published in serial form and in the way serial publication shaped both the content and the material forms of print. He had a strong interest in all kinds of cheaply available printed texts and sympathy for the people, often outsiders, in the book trade, who were involved in their production and distribution.

He was co-founder, with the late Robin Myers, of the Annual Conferences on Book Trade History. He co-organised these with Robin Myers and Giles Mandelbrote, as well as other scholars in the field. Over the years he presented 19 papers at these conferences, covering a wide range of topics, built often around his knowledge of seventeenth and eighteenth-century newspapers. They included papers on London street booksellers, the use of printed advertising, the experiences of a 'flying stationer', the 'alternative book trade' (literary piracy), printers' diseases, shipwrecks and, separately, trials as printed genres. Others were on newspapers themselves, journalism as a profession and the collection of newspapers by the British Museum in the nineteenth century, as well as on the book trade from the perspective of London topography. In November 2022, Michael addressed the 43rd of these Conferences about his work on book trade networks using case studies of the Nutt and Gosling families in the seventeenth and eighteenth

centuries. These Conferences stimulated a stream of annual publications on topics relating to book and print history over a period of 40 years—a considerable achievement by any measure. Thirteen of Michael's papers have appeared in the series to date.<sup>12</sup>

His work on the Book Trade Conferences ran parallel with a decade's long interest in collecting and preserving antiquarian books. It was a passion first ignited in 1959 when he acquired from a street barrow salesman, just off O'Connell Bridge in Dublin, Volume II of Robert Dodsley's *Environs of London* (1762) for the princely sum of sixpence. It was, he later wrote, 'the beginning of my erratic engagement with the book as object'. He was a regular attendee at the Fairs organised by the Provincial Booksellers Fairs Association, and over the years assembled an truly impressive collection of books that lined the walls of the home he shared with Judy.

Another area where he exerted considerable influence was in promoting the fields of newspaper, periodical and latterly media history. In 1984, along with a small group of colleagues, he started producing the *Journal of Newspaper and Periodical History*. It sprung, as he put it, from 'a clear sense that some sort of focus was needed for the dispersed work in media history'. His aim was to 'place the emphasis on the primary forms of serial print, the newspaper and the periodical'.<sup>13</sup> He never claimed this was solely his work. But few would doubt his importance in initiating and sustaining the project.

In the early 1990s, the *Journal* became, *Studies in Newspaper and Periodical History*. Michael invited me and Mark Turner to assist him in getting these annual volumes to press. It was at a time, which seems so distant now, before technology had turned hard copy into digital form, and peer reviewing systems were done by letter and email, not through labyrinthine, centralised computerised systems. We used to go to his room at Birkbeck, piled high with books and papers and plan the process of moving from submissions to publication. Latterly, we talked about what would succeed *Studies*. In the end we fixed on the idea of *Media History*. We wanted to foster interdisciplinary research on the role of the media in historical change, across time and space. We also wanted it to cover developments in communications from at least the sixteenth century, viewing them as central to historical processes, and in so doing retain a firm grounding in empirical research. Michael oversaw the contract negotiations with our publisher. We received enthusiastic support from colleagues across the globe and launched *Media History* at a conference hosted by the University of Westminster in 1998.

Michael played a key role in all three of these publications as initiator, organiser, networker, thinker and writer. He was at the centre of the development of *Media History*, which soon went from two to four issues a year, and gained a solid, international presence. Michael was always there to ensure that the *Journal* never lost touch with its commitment to work on the Early Modern period, and to disciplined argument and scholarship.

To have produced academic work that has stood the tests of excellence and time is a considerable achievement in itself. But in addition he helped to develop a whole field of study. This he did through his work setting up and running the *Journal of Newspaper and Periodical History*, *Studies in Newspaper and Periodical History* and *Media History* and, for over 40 years, the co-organisation of regular conferences and publications on book trade history.

Most importantly Michael was a kind, thoughtful and supportive colleague. He was a compassionate man, with a gift for friendship. He helped many younger colleagues with

their scholarly development. He had a dry, self-deprecating, sense of humour. His contribution to historical studies was considerable, as a scholar, a teacher, and an academic enabler, someone who made things happen. Above all, he was a good friend and will be deeply missed.

### Notes

1. Harris, "The London Newspaper."
2. *Department of Extra-Mural Studies*.
3. O'Malley, "History, Historians."
4. Harris, "Newspaper Distribution."
5. Harris, "The Management of the London Press."
6. Harris, "The Structure."
7. Harris and Lee, editors, *The Press in English Society from the Seventeenth to Nineteenth Centuries*.
8. Harris, *London Newspapers in the Age of Walpole*, 81.
9. Harris, "Sport."
10. Harris, "Parliament," 62.
11. Harris, "The Information Business."
12. The British Library Catalogue lists 30 titles of collections edited by Michael with Myers and Mandelbrote. They range from Myers and Harris, *Development of the English Book Trade*, in 1981, to, Harris and Mandelbrote, *Publishing* in 2012. See also their more recent *Lives in Book History* from 2022.
13. Harris, "No Going Back," 144.

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