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Laurent Curelly, *An Anatomy of an English Radical Newspaper: The Moderate* (1648-9)

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Laurent Curelly, *An Anatomy of an English Radical Newspaper: The Moderate* (1648-9) (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017), 267 p, ISBN 978-1-4438-86555-0

- 1 Laurent Curelly's title is a tribute to the many *Anatomies* that were published in the early seventeenth century—not least to Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*: the preface to the fifth edition lends an introductory quote that reveals and derides the contemporary crave for news. *An Anatomy of an English Radical Newspaper: The Moderate (1648-9)* indeed “dissects” [4] the 66 issues of *The Moderate* that were published between June 1648 and September 1649. The author further resorts to the metaphor of forensics in his introduction: “this book will look at *The Moderate* as an organ that is made up of cells (or news items) and relates to a body (its political, social, cultural and commercial environment)” [6]. In his short and to-the-point introduction, Curelly provides a short history of how newsheets became fashionable reading in seventeenth-century England, after the imported model of Dutch corantos that fuelled religious and political controversy from the 1620s onward. The turmoil of Stuart England was propitious to the development of public interest in periodicals narrating the latest developments of the mounting tensions between King and Parliament. If several historians (like Joseph Frank and Joad Raymond) have addressed the big picture of the rise to prominence, and influence, of the press in seventeenth-century England, Curelly sets out on the mission of carrying out a microscopic examination of *The Moderate*. Joad Raymond drew on Habermas and his idea that the press was part and parcel of the rise of the middling classes and capitalism, while Jason McElligott broached the royalist print that vindicated the established order. Though these monographs and a few others did mention *The Moderate* in passing, no comprehensive study had analysed the contents of this newsheet in so much detail yet. *An Anatomy of an English Radical Newspaper* is organised in six main chapters. The author first examines “*The Moderate* and the Civil War Press” to account for the creation of the newspaper and its existence in a highly competitive news environment. The next chapters focus on a type of “cell” of the press organ, starting with “Editorials” in chapter 2 and “Petitions” in chapter 3. Chapter 4 addresses “Foreign News”, chapter 5 “News Reports from England, Scotland and

Ireland”, with a special focus on newsletters. Eventually Chapter 6 sheds light on “Domestic News: Main News and Advertisements”, this time to the exclusion of newsletters.

- 2 Chapter One (“*The Moderate* and the Civil War Press”) opens on a reminder of the main events which studded the years 1648 and 1649 and which provided newssheets with an endless source of (sometimes sensationalised) news and editorial comments. These catered to readers supporting the monarchy (such newsbooks were often called “*Mercuries*”) as well as to supporters of Parliament. Curelly lays particular emphasis on the fact that newssheets were “commercial products” [9] and that competition was as fierce in the seventeenth century as it is now. Such issues as circulation and profits featured high among editors’ concerns. How *The Moderate* developed strategies to stand out in this competitive environment is an essential dimension of this first chapter—and indeed of the whole book. Seventeenth-century readers “could choose from a wide array of periodicals that expressed various opinions” [10], but editorial stances were more often than not commanded by commercial interest rather than by the editors’ ideological convictions only. Five main parliamentary papers had been on the news market since 1642. Some kept clear of religious matters while others adopted distinctively Presbyterian or anti-Presbyterian stances. Their support to the Levellers’ cause also differed. *The Moderate Intelligencer*, whose title and layout was initially pillaged by *The Moderate*’s editor, was a rather “middle-of-the-road”, “non-controversial” paper [12]. Curelly convincingly contends that the editorial stance chosen by *The Moderate* was at least partly part of a broader gambit to gain competitive edge against more lukewarm papers. Its radical stance made it more appealing to the Army and its supporters. Unlike *The Moderate Intelligencer* whose editor is well-identified as John Dillingham, Curelly shows how it is difficult to ascribe *The Moderate* to any specific author. Many contemporary and later writings pointed an accusing finger to Gilbert Mabbott who was the State Licensor then, and had proven sympathetic to the Levellers’ cause by licensing their pamphlets. He never clearly claimed authorship for *The Moderate*, perhaps for commercial reasons too as his lowly birth might have deterred potential readers. All in all, it appears that the editor’s strategy was successful as *The Moderate* went to print for about thirteen months whilst in most cases, counterfeit newspapers did not produce more than one issue.
- 3 Chapter Two examines “Editorials” as the first essential cells that made up *The Moderate*. Including editorials was not novel, and both royalist and parliamentary newsbooks did so, even though they tended to be less frequent than in *The Moderate*. According to Curelly, *The Moderate*’s editorials “have become benchmarks of Civil War radicalism” [32]. In the newssheet, they tended to be more articulate than those published in *Mercuries*, and to provide genuine added value. Publishing editorials also proved an efficient way of mimicking the layout of *The Moderate Intelligencer* in an attempt to steal some of its readership away to *The Moderate*. Editorials are addressed under three heads: “Presbyterians v. Independents” (in August and September 1648), “The People v. the King” (from late September 1648 to February 1649), and “Levellers v. Commonwealth” (from January 1649 to the end of May 1649). There are overlaps between them as opposition to the King was to be found throughout and support to the Levellers’ *Agreement of the People* was also frequently expressed. Each time, *The Moderate* sided with the more popular and/or the more radical party. Distrust of the Presbyterian party particularly emerged after the publication of *The Solemn League and Covenant* that allegedly robbed the people of the “only true Covenant – a bond of divine

nature between God and his people” [37]. Opposition between the people and the king drew a lot on the Levellers’ rhetoric and denunciation of Charles I’s French sympathies, as well as of his tyrannical tendencies. This legitimised a Rule of *Salus Populi Suprema Lex* and *The Moderate*’s editorials promoted the Independents’ and the Levellers’ views. The newspaper aimed at providing education for the people to help it break free from its voluntary servitude. The Leveller motif of the Norman Yoke was a frequent *topos* of parliamentary newssheets, especially of *The Moderate*. Though the following chapters are dedicated to other cells like petitions or newssheets, Curelly never fails to show how these pieces too were skilfully editorialised by the author.

- 4 Chapter 3 provides ample evidence of this as the minute study of petitions printed in the pages of *The Moderate* further demonstrates that the editor was a proponent of radical views. An introductory reminder insists that petitioning Parliament was a “common political practice” [71] and that historians such as Jason Peacey and David Zaret have demonstrated that as printing developed, petitions turned into a separate genre that contributed to shaping public opinion. Deciding whether any specific petition should be printed at all, or whether only excerpts were to be rendered available was essentially an editorial choice. In a highly competitive news market, it was also a commercial decision: offering one’s readers a full text rather than excerpts or a summary was also a way of gaining competitive edge and attracting a larger readership. Curelly first details “army petitions” before turning to “Leveller petitions”, even though he also shows how their concerns overlapped. Twelve army petitions “presented to Lieutenant-General Lord Fairfax by officers and the rank and file” [72] were published in the last months of 1648. They offer topical details about the army’s reactions to such burning issues as the debates surrounding the Treaty of Newport, or reveal the soldiers’ grievances (often connected to the payment of arrears) as well as the army’s aspiration for a new institutional settlement. These texts were often inspired by *The Agreement of the People* that had been adopted by the Levellers during the Putney Debates in 1647, or by the *Army Remonstrance* of June 1647. The major institutional change that petitioners aspired to was a shift to a “contract-based form of government replacing royal absolutism” [74]. The second of these documents was too long to be printed out in full, but Curelly once again sheds light onto the different ways in which rival newssheets included parts of it, especially contrasting the strategy of *The Moderate* with that of *The Moderate Intelligencer*. The former devoted several issues to parts of *The Remonstrance* or petitions that drew on its contents, and mostly on its claim for popular sovereignty. As *The Moderate* most likely addressed readers in the Army, these petitions contributed to boost its sales, while diffusing demands for radical political and institutional changes. Later army petitions published in 1649 “blended traditional Army grievances (...) with Leveller demands” [77]. Leveller petitions fall into three categories: petitions with Leveller motifs, those penned by Levellers, and, especially when the leading figures of the movement were awaiting trial, petitions defending the Levellers. In September 1648, *The Moderate* printed *The Large Petition* in full, while others only published the main headlines, summaries of, or allusions to this text in their own columns. This seminal petition was later used as a model by many other petitioners as it blended institutional demands (about politics or religion) and “typical Army claims” [81], with an introductory preamble. On 26 February 1649, Lilburne, the famous Leveller leader, presented his *Englands New Chains Discovered* to Parliament, which was reprinted in full in the pages of *The Moderate*. This book demanded that the Rump Parliament should adopt the Levellers’ *Agreement of the People*

to strengthen the power of a truly representative Parliament over an appointed Council of State. Publishing it was therefore potentially subversive, even more so as in the same issue of *The Moderate* were printed Lilburne's address to Parliament and a supportive editorial. Indeed, it was "the only paper that was overtly critical of the Commonwealth oligarchy as embodied by the Council of State" [87]. After the arrest of Leveller leaders in late March 1648, *The Moderate* published several petitions supporting their release from the Tower and their freedom of speech. The paper published several of these, and even once added the Speaker's answer to the petitioners with an editorial comment questioning the validity of the Speaker's arguments. Other newsbooks were much more cautious in their editorialising policy. The wives of imprisoned Levellers also wrote petitions in defence of their husbands, and Currelly highlights the novelty of these petitions that did not focus on their private problems but grappled with collective political and institutional questions. They vindicated their action with cultural references that pervaded the Leveller movement such as the example of biblical heroines or the alleged freedom of women in Anglo-Saxon times, while displaying all the attributes of female modesty and virtue. Most newsbooks printed at least passages from the women's first petition (23 April 1649), though not in full, and often with sarcastic comments. *The Moderate* was the only one to publish the second petition in full (5 May 1649). Not only did this text bring forth the claims of women as a political group, but it also asserted that they had been created equal with men, and were therefore entitled to the same political rights (such as petitioning). They even used the same wording as their husbands in their attacks on the Rump. Though *The Moderate* did not add editorial comments, the mere choice of publishing this document was "an act of defiance against the Commonwealth" [95]. What is also significant is that *The Moderate* did not insert disclaimers next to pieces critical of Cromwell's new regime, which led some historians to describe the newssheet as "the organ of the Leveller party" though Currelly demonstrates why this view should at least be qualified.

- 5 Chapter Four addresses the inclusion of foreign news in *The Moderate*. Seventeenth-century newssheets already had correspondents in key places, especially in Europe, who provided them with newsletters. They also relied on news dispatch from major European commercial hubs. News from various countries was translated and circulated via commercial or diplomatic channels. *The Moderate Intelligencer* occasionally inserted foreign news in its pages, but such items became much more frequent after Charles I's trial once there were fewer spectacular events at home. It mostly drew on "the Dutch post" and "the French post" [98]. *The Moderate* published international news in its first couple of issues, at least partly "to cover up the forgery from which it originated" [99] as it had adopted the layout of *The Moderate Intelligencer*. As the second civil war raged, though, no foreign news was printed for three months at the end of 1648. It also corresponded to a change in the format of the newssheet that temporarily passed from twelve to eight pages. Six monographs have been published since 2009 that provide recent analyses of European news networks in the early modern period. Currelly shows how the way these networks were organised also shaped the newspapers' layout as it "followed the canonical linear order of manuscript newsletters as was imposed by postal routes" [101]. International comparisons reveal that *The Moderate Intelligencer* and *The Moderate* organised their foreign news columns in ways similar to Théophraste Renaudot's contemporary *Gazette*. And though the editor of *The Moderate* was careful of mimicking *The Moderate Intelligencer*, the latter was much more thorough in his reporting of foreign news. Though foreign news came from across Europe, the main

source of material was from France, especially during the Fronde era. As a radical newsbook siding with the people against Charles I's tyranny, it comes as no surprise that *The Moderate* should have related the French rebellion even though it targeted Cardinal Mazarin more than the regent or King Louis XIV himself. As Currelly points out, "The Fronde offered [*The Moderate's*] editor the opportunity to highlight the parallels between two peoples breaking free from the bondage they were in" [113]. Besides, "The news from France allowed him to post-rationalise the New Model Army's efforts to resist tyrannical rule, which culminated in the purge of Westminster Parliament" [116]. *The Moderate* went to great lengths to publish accounts from France whenever possible and despite the scarcity of news that filtered during the most troubled times. There too, the editor decidedly sided with the people against their accusers. Mazarinades were even printed in the winter of 1649, possibly as an anti-monarchical gesture.

- 6 Chapter Five delves into news reports from England, Scotland and Ireland. The novelty of the 1640s was that printing domestic news no longer was illegal as it had been in the 1620s and 1630s. After publishing mere accounts of parliamentary proceedings, newspapers turned to more "substantial weekly servings of domestic news fare" [123]. Currelly insists that news from the three kingdoms was by no means uniform and that "it defies monolithic interpretative strategies" [127]. As a newspaper destined to Army readers, *The Moderate* related the various stages in the civil wars, paying special attention to sieges. It is unclear whether *The Moderate* derived its information about the eleven-week siege of Colchester (from June to September 1648) from a correspondent or thanks to soldiers' letters. It is quite likely that the newspaper did send a correspondent to the nine-month siege of Pontefract in Yorkshire that also began in June 1648. Commercial concerns are visible in the way the editor sometimes peppered the news with sensationalism to meet the competition of other newspapers like the *Mercurius Militaris* that also targeted the Army. News from Scotland was rare until 1649 and came either through Edinburgh or through cities in the North of England like Newcastle or Berwick. Much news was provided by letters addressed to MPs, which makes it difficult to interpret their authors or even their perspectives, even though it is possible to identify the authors' social background—often as merchants opposing the king, and as Englishmen spreading prejudiced comments against the Scots. The conflict opposing the Engagers to Cromwell's troops, and the uprisings it provoked in the south of Scotland were reported, as were the complex debates over the acknowledgement of *The Solemn League and Covenant* by Charles I in 1648 and by Charles II after February 1649. As with news from England, *The Moderate* sided with Cromwell's troops and opposing the Engager Army and showed distrust of Presbyterians. Leveller motifs even resurfaced in some letters. As for Ireland, it was mostly covered after the king's execution, especially during Cromwell's campaign in the summer of 1649. Only seven pieces originated from Ireland while the rest was written in England, though it was based on accounts (mostly found in letters) from Ireland. There too, sieges proved valuable material for newssheets. That of Drogheda, and its subsequent fall in September featured in two issues of *The Moderate* and on one occasion, the letter provided the customary vision of providential history, ascribing the victory of Cromwell's army to God's will. It makes for an interesting editorial choice as it published letters supportive of the army, but also of Cromwell. Currelly shows how difficult it is to make sense of the sometimes contradictory letters that were published about the Irish question: either it stemmed from a deliberate editorial choice of

providing an exact depiction of Ireland's complicated situation in 1649 and/or catering to soldiers on both sides of the conflict; or it just proved interesting material that was worth printing. Yet, the analysis of news from the three kingdoms allowed Curelly to conclude that "a dominant voice may be heard in it, one that expressed support of the New Model Army at large and of soldiers in particular" [158].

- 7 Chapter Six is entitled "Domestic News: Main News and Advertisement." *The Moderate*, like other contemporary newspapers, did not seem to have a definite editorial line when it came to deciding whether or not to print or mention a given Act of Parliament. On the other hand, the advertisements published in the weekly can provide today's readers with an insight into the editor's commitments, even though they were also, and perhaps primarily, a source of income for a modern newspaper. Book advertisements are the most enlightening ones: they addressed divinity, politics, social issues and sciences but the first two categories largely dominated the rest. Besides, the mere fact that books were advertised testifies to the "development of literacy" and "the availability of affordable books" [166]. What stands out is that most books about divinity and politics showed overlapping concerns and more often than not, well fitted in the pages of *The Moderate* for their defence of Leveller ideas. As far as domestic news is concerned, *The Moderate* adopted a different, more radical stance, than the original *Moderate Intelligencer* in its defence of the people, especially when it came to reporting on the Treaty of Newport. Also *The Moderate* alone expressed its approval of Pride's Purge on 6 Dec. 1648. The king's trial also featured high among the important pieces of domestic news that found their way into the pages of the weekly. Curelly hints at the way other papers reported these same events to highlight how divisive these events were. They also inflamed public opinion and curiosity, so much so that providing detailed, sometimes verbatim accounts, of the events was yet again a way of enhancing a paper's competitive edge. This approach enables him to beef up the traditional contention that "Mabbott authored *The Moderate*" because he was a "fierce opponent of monarchy" and that "the report on the King's trial dovetailed with his anti-kingly editorials" [187]. Later in 1649 *The Moderate* was the only newsbook that sympathetically reported on the Levellers' and even on the Diggers' activities rather than relying on official propaganda.
- 8 Curelly does indeed propose a very thorough dissection of each cell within *The Moderate*, thus making clear how it was "an organ" in the troubled context of the years 1648 and 1649. Rather than an organ of the Leveller party as it had been described in earlier historical accounts, *The Moderate* was "a radical newsbook" that "relentlessly defended the people against those it regarded as its oppressors" [201]. The long quotations enable twenty-first century readers to catch a glimpse of how the news mattered to the readers of *The Moderate*. It is also an effective way of enabling them to look over his shoulder, as it were, and to partake in the dissection operation. In his introduction, Curelly states that his "aim is not to construct yet another historical narrative of the period, but rather to try and apprehend the essence of this newspaper" [5]. *An Anatomy of an English Radical Newspaper* is indeed first and foremost an in-depth analysis of this specific weekly newssheet. Yet readers whose interest lies in the history of the press, or even of the radical press, in general, will find all the necessary insights into the historical context to make sense of *The Moderate* against the complex backdrop of England at the height of the second civil war. Those familiar with these events will even more fully enjoy analyses of the way petitions or newsletters were editorialised. The bibliography is organised in three chapters ("History of the Civil Wars and the

international context”, “Political theory, radical politics and radical religion”, and “News, print and censorship”), which contributes to making it easy for readers to satisfy their curiosity in one or the other of these fields. All in all, the author succeeds in demonstrating that *The Moderate*’s editor upheld principles opposing all tyrannies—whether the would-be absolutism of Charles I, or Cromwell’s own brand of republicanism—while closely monitoring its readers’ interest, and hence its commercial success in the cutthroat competition of seventeenth-century press.

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