Review: Catherine Waters, *Special Correspondence and the Newspaper Press in Victorian Print Culture, 1850-1886* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 236pp. ISBN 978-3-030-03860-1, £59.99.

FRANÇOISE BAILLET

'[…] IN THE FURY of the fight, there is sure to be in the thick of everything an Englishman with a note-book, whose only object is to see and know'.[1] When Leopold, Duke of Albany, addressed the 1882 Press Fund Dinner in these terms, the usual presence of a reporter "in the fury of the fight" had already become one of the main fixtures of modern press coverage. The mid-Victorian era had indeed brought a dramatic change in British journalistic forms and practices. In the context of an increased competition between major newspapers, the gathering and distribution of news, national and international, had become a thriving business. Transformed by the repeal of the so-called "taxes on knowledge", the introduction of new technologies, and the growth of capital investment, newspapers promoted new strategies to capture the attention of what had become a mass readership. Among these new practices was the development of the role of the 'Special Correspondent' which Catherine Waters investigates in *Special Correspondence and the Newspaper Press in Victorian Print Culture, 1850-1886*, a 236-page volume recently published by Palgrave Macmillan (2019). A renowned literary and media scholar, Waters is the author of several articles on this scantily researched subject which she initially approached through her work on Dickens's *Household Words*.[2] In this study, which includes extracts from four of these articles, the function of the special correspondent is examined through the voice and experience of three first-generation 'specials': William Howard Russell (1820-1907), first dedicated war correspondent for the *Times,* George Augustus Sala (1828-1895), influential reporter for the *Daily Telegraph* from 1857, and Archibald Forbes (1838-1900), chronicler of the Franco-Prussian War for the *Morning Advertiser* and author of dispatches from India and Africa for the *Daily*

[1] 'The Duke of Albany on the Newspaper Press', *Daily News*, 26 June 1882, p.3. Cited in Catherine Waters, *Special Correspondence and the Newspaper Press in Victorian Print Culture, 1850-1886* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019) p. 220.

[2] Catherine Waters is the author of *Dickens and the Politics of the Family* (1997) and *Commodity Culture in Dickens's Household Words* (2008).

News. Waters' aim, as expressed in her documented introduction, is to 'examine the stories told by individual specials while at the same time considering how they contributed to, and were shaped by, broader developments in the newspaper and periodical press of the second half of the nineteenth century'.[3] Concentrating on the three decades between 1850 and 1886, a key period which saw the introduction of electric telegraphy, Waters organises her study around five areas covered by the ' specials' – 'Armchair Travel', 'Technology and Innovation', 'War Correspondence', ' Home News' and 'Reporting Royalty' – while the last chapter focuses on their 'self-performance on the lecture circuit'.[4]

The ambiguous status of special correspondence, a liminal form 'occupying an uneasy boundary between objective reportage and imaginary storytelling' is defined in Chapter 2.[5] In an age when the expansion of railways improved access to events, Waters explains, reporters were able to 'eclipse the limits imposed by space and time', articulating 'a new aesthetic of contemporaneity and presence'.[6] Relying on a large and thoroughly explored corpus of primary sources, many of them dispatches sent by Sala as he travelled through America, Algeria, Venice and Vienna in 1865-66, Waters stresses the performative dimension of this new genre intended to 'transport readers imaginatively to the scene described'.[7] Sala's texts, she demonstrates, are the site of a complex interplay of the verbal and the visual, a hybrid and hyphenated 'word-painting ' form brimming with 'colour, texture, light and movement'.[8]

But 'doing the graphic' was not only an art, it was also, Waters contends, a new media technology 'blur[ring] the boundary between human and machine'.[9] Mainly based on narratives of the 1859 trial trip of the *Great Eastern* and the 1865 Atlantic Telegraph Cable Expedition by the reporters of the *Times, Daily Telegraph, Daily News, Morning Chronicle* and *Morning Post*, Chapter 3 ('Technology and Innovation') explores the formal and technical problems associated with special correspondence at a time when the introduction of electric telegraphy significantly altered the nature of

[3] Waters, p. 12.

[4] Ibid., p. 25.

[5] Ibid., p. 31.

[6] Ibid., p. 19, 10.

[7] Ibid., p. 10.

[8] Ibid., p. 55.

[9] Ibid., p. 24.

international news coverage. Reuters, established in 1851, had been the first agency to conduct a centralized 'wire service', collecting and distributing international news across Britain.[10] As special correspondent for the *Times,* which had only reluctantly subscribed to the agency's service in 1858, William H. Russell acutely felt the difficulty of competing with instantly transmitted telegraphic news. His 'Diary of a Cable', a daily chronicle of events on board the *Great Eastern*, later republished together with twenty-six sketches by Robert Dudley, reflects this 'shifting relationship between old and new media'.[11] Waters very convincingly analyses Russell's 'artful repetitions and animated, anthropomorphic descriptions' as a response to the competition represented by the expansion of electric telegraphy, and the subsequent loss of influence for a reporter who had made his reputation through his graphic narratives of the Crimean War (1853-56).[12]

These narratives are the subject of the strongest chapter of the book, 'War Correspondence', which suggests a seminal reflection on the constitution of war as spectacle. Waters' argument is mainly centred on the reports written by Russell while in Crimea and on the many British accounts of the Franco-Prussian War (1870-71), some of which were simultaneously 'praised for their immediacy and authenticity, and yet at the same time derided for their sensationalism, stylistic excesses, and blurring of the boundary between fact and fiction'.[13] The *Saturday Review*, for instance, devoted in 1870 a column to the function of the special correspondent, questioning the authenticity of some of the reports.[14] Replacing these issues within a context in which the leading newspapers were defined by their ability to acquire scoops, Waters shows that some journalists, Archibald Forbes in particular, wrote their reports in advance, based on war plans acquired through diplomatic contacts, thus abandoning 'the ethic of eye-witnessing'.[15] Beyond the lack of reliability of such narratives, Waters remarks,

[10] Richard R. John and Jonathan Silberstein-Loeb, *Making News. The Political Economy of Journalism in Britain and America from the Glorious Revolution to the Internet*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015) p. 111.

[11] Waters, p. 85.

[12] Ibid., p. 81.

[13] Ibid., p. 101.

[14] 'The Special Correspondent', *Saturday Review*, 10 September 1870, pp. 325-6 (p. 326).

[15] Waters, p. 119.

other problems emerged, like the progressive abandon of the practice of journalist anonymity and a subsequent narcissistic turn towards personality.[16]

In an age of growing sensationalism, when cultural artefacts deployed a variety of shock and suspense effects, the special correspondent, Waters observes in Chapter 5, was commissioned to develop a technology of presence based on distinctive effects. Among them are Henry Mayhew's voice transcriptions as part of his reports on London labour and the London poor for the *Morning Chronicle* (1849-50). Later published as a volume (1851), these texts 'carried the by-line "From Our Correspondent" thus suggesting that [Mayhew] could be regarded as one of the specials'.[17] Similarly, the ' London Horrors' series published in the *Morning Post* in 1861 and written by John Hollingshead, depicted metropolitan paupers in dramatic terms. Sala's description of the first private hanging (1868) allows Waters to highlight another of the controversies raised by special correspondence. The *Saturday Review* complained, she explains, that the vivid descriptions of the prisoner at the gallows published in the *Daily News* contradicted the provisions of the Capital Punishment Amendment Act 1868, which had put an end to public executions. There again, a question of ethics was raised concerning this new technology in relation to the broader media landscape.

The last chapters of the volume, in which Waters examines reportage on royalty (Chapter 6) and the lecture circuits of some specials (Chapter 7), confirm both the considerable advances generated by the development of special correspondence in terms of efficiency and modernity, and the issues brought up by these very developments. Chapter 6 argues that while the blurring of generic distinctions between news reporting, travel writing and personal stories was instrumental in the popularisation of the modern daily newspaper, the lack of independence of the 'specials ' was consistently deplored by some commentators. During the Prince of Wales's Tour of India, in 1875-76, Russell's status as 'an embedded journalist' within the Prince's suit was criticized by the *Athenaeum* which remarked that the *Times*'s correspondent had ' very seldom indulged in the slashing comments on political and social affairs, of which, had he been writing as a journalist, his temperament would have led him to give us so many'.[18] The last chapter, 'Celebrity Specials on the Lecture Circuit', shows how such

[16] Ibid., p. 117.

[17] Ibid., p. 132.

[18] Ibid., p. 177 & p. 186.

first-generation specials as Russell, Forbes and Sala capitalised on the popular appeal of their columns to confirm their celebrity.[19] The success of these tours, Waters writes, resulted from their ability to reproduce in their lectures 'the special correspondent's unique capacity to transport readers imaginatively through his graphic reportage'.[20]

After a short conclusion stressing the legacy of special correspondence to this day, Waters' well written, convincingly argued and well-illustrated book ends on a useful index providing a clear and searchable list of the persons, places, and sources mentioned throughout the volume. The (surprising) lack of a bibliography in such a meticulous volume somewhat limits its utility for academic research, even if Waters' copious and thorough footnotes are highly informative. All in all, and in the true spirit of special correspondence, this scholarly and enjoyable book successfully merges journalistic, literary and political history in what is undoubtedly a major contribution to the field of Victorian print culture.

❖ ❖ ❖

BIOGRAPHY: Françoise Baillet is a Professor of British History and Visual Studies at Caen Normandie University, France. Her research generally addresses the Victorian illustrated press as a discursive and ideological construct and, over the past few years, has mainly focused on aestheticized renderings of working-class life in *The Illustrated London News* and *The Graphic*. Her current project concerns the *Punch* archive at the British Library, and in particular the Bradbury & Evans financial papers (ledgers and manuscripts).

CONTACT: francoise.baillet@unicaen.fr

[19] Ibid., p. 191.

[20] Ibid., p. 197.