
Renaissance and Reformation Renaissance et Réforme



Reeves, Eileen. Evening News: Optics, Astronomy, and Journalism in Early Modern Europe

Jessica Swain

Volume 39, Number 1, Winter 2016

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1087156ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v39i1.26565>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (print)

2293-7374 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Swain, J. (2016). Review of [Reeves, Eileen. Evening News: Optics, Astronomy, and Journalism in Early Modern Europe]. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 39(1), 197–199. <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v39i1.26565>

© Canadian Society for Renaissance Studies / Société canadienne d'études de la Renaissance; Pacific Northwest Renaissance Society; Toronto Renaissance and Reformation Colloquium; Victoria University Centre for Renaissance and Reformation Studies, 2016

This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

érudit

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

pluralism offered the freedom to engage with Luther as humanists—without the need to become Lutherans. Posset helpfully draws our attention to our need to rescind from seeing sharp denominational or confessional dividing lines in the ecclesial environment of the time.

This study does much to identify the complexity and so to erase simplistic caricatures of Lutherans and Catholics of that time. Readers are reminded that theologians and preachers of many stripes sought clarity on the identity of the gospel in this era; that the exploration of *Sola Scriptura* was not unique to evangelicals; that reformation was a project of great interest from the fourteenth century on; and that Luther cannot be understood apart from the late medieval Catholic context. Many of these themes are well rehearsed, but worthy of recollection as Posset draws us into the proper topic of his study: four figures who instantiate a sympathetic and engaged reading of Luther, identified in the four chapters of the work as “our Martin,” “our Apostle,” “the Saviour of Germany,” and “the most sincere Herald of evangelical truth.” Readers will also enjoy the many illustrations, wood-cuts, etc. which add to this most worthy effort to provide a fuller picture of this exciting era in the life of the Church and western culture.

ALLEN JORGENSON

Waterloo Lutheran Seminary, Wilfrid Laurier University

Reeves, Eileen.

Evening News: Optics, Astronomy, and Journalism in Early Modern Europe.

Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014. Pp. 308. ISBN 978-0-8122-4574-5 (hardcover) US\$69.95.

This book examines the acquisition and consumption of knowledge in early modern Europe, focusing on the transmission of information connected to the fields of journalism, optics, and astronomy. Pointing to the shared language, materials, transference, and function of these three fields, *Evening News* investigates the cultural anxiety surrounding access to and mediation of socio-politically and religiously charged news during the Thirty Years' War and the shift into the Copernican world system. Reeves draws on a variety of media sources from different regions in early modern Europe to demonstrate the

linkage between the roughly concurrent events of the invention of the Dutch telescope, the publication of Galileo Galilei's astronomical research, and the beginnings of journalism, such as but not limited to private letters, treaties, papal bulls, manuscript newsletters, newssheets, almanacs, plays, poems, and masques. As a text that privileges informed, critical consumers of news, the profusion of source material is a credit to the work, as the author strives to demonstrate how the transfer of such information is never neutral. Less interested in historical moments than in the transmission (and distortion) of said moments, Reeves traces how astronomical and optical revelations functioned on a metaphorical level, allowing early modern European news writers and readers to safely circulate "unsafe" news.

Structured chronologically from 1610 to the late 1630s, the six chapters each consider a point in time where journalistic reporting, astronomical discovery, and optical transmission intersect in the history or cultural imagination of early modern Europe. Emblematically, the telescope loosely ties the first three chapters together, while the fourth and fifth examine the seemingly perfect mimesis of the *camera obscura*. The sixth chapter is decidedly more terrestrial, as astronomical discoveries and imaginings are no longer the objects or generators of news but are oblique comments on the state of news itself.

Chapter 1 begins with Galileo's comparison between a lunar crater and Bohemia in *The Starry Messenger*, which Reeves suggests established a precedent to conceal criticism of contemporary circumstances via new discoveries in space. Reeves argues that Johannes Kepler builds on this form of indirect commentary in his response, *Discussion with the Starry Messenger*, specifically analogizing his solar observations that are projected onto paper with the way he utilized tabloid news in his veiled censure of the Jesuits of Prague. Galileo's finding and naming of the Medici satellites is a trajectory point for Reeves's next chapter, as she examines the Médicis regency in France. Coupling political insight and technological awareness, Reeves reads the telescope—as both an object and a metaphor of accurate farsightedness—as corresponding to the preceding rumours and actual assassination of King Henri IV of France. In order to further explore the similarities between astronomers and journalists, Reeves centres her third chapter on Galileo and Traiano Boccalini, or, more accurately, on the way their transmission of particular events (extraterrestrial and terrestrial) ended up necessarily reshaping frames of knowledge in order

to understand those events. Moving away from the telescope as a metaphor for accurate sight, chapter 4 attends to how the transcriptions of space by the *camera obscura* naturalized the difference between original and copy. The case study of Henry Wotton is engaging, particularly when Wotton's writing about the *camera obscura* leads Reeves to compare Kepler's role as objective scientist to Wotton's position as translator and ambassador. Reeves asserts that these in-between roles minimized the gap between the original and the translation, making the transmission of information appear seamless. She problematizes the fiction of objective news in chapter 5, analogizing Christoph Scheiner's and René Descartes's work with the *camera obscura* to the interpreted, produced, or censored reportage of the confessional conflict throughout Europe. In chapter 6, news itself is displaced by the movement of that news in the form of the *zeilwagen*, an ancestor to the mail-coach. Closely reading the representation of the *zeilwagen* in Ben Jonson's *News of the New World in the Moon*, Reeves reflects that the moving spectacle of the *zeilwagen* is a form of censorship, as the immediacy and gathering of news of celestial and earthly events supersedes the digestion and discussion of the information.

The immense archive Reeves draws upon in *Evening News* is a testament to meticulous scholarship, and her navigation of this network of material is captivating. Moreover, her translations help to make the early modern pan-European sources more accessible. *Evening News* explains the shared metaphors in astronomy, optics, and journalism, while also grappling to operate on a metaphorical level, as most interdisciplinary works do, by bringing disparate points together in order to generate newness. Readers who enjoy detailed close readings of interrelated fields, at times leaning towards the speculative, will find this book an engaging study into the evolution of communication and observation.

JESSICA SWAIN

McMaster University