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The Dynamic of News in Britain During the American War: The Case of Admiral Keppel

NICHOLAS ROGERS

For many Britons the world was out of joint and the empire perilously fragmented when Admiral Augustus Keppel engaged the French off Ushant in the summer of 1778. In the fall of 1777 Britain had suffered its first serious setback against the Americans at Saratoga and in the spring of the following year France had concluded an alliance with the rebel colonists. Fearing an invasion from France and the prospect of an exhausting war on further fronts, the British hoped that Keppel might compromise French intervention into the war by scoring a quick victory against the Brest fleet. This was not to be. For four days in July, amid squally weather, the British and French fleets bobbed up and down off Ushant, unable to engage each other in a decisive manner. In terms of firing power, Augustus Keppel was roughly on equal terms with his French counterpart, the Count Louis Guillouet d'Orvilliers. Yet the rheumatic British admiral had not fought a major battle since the Seven Years' War, and had not seen active service in 12 years. Moreover, his crews were relatively inexperienced; composed of recently impressed seamen and landsmen who had little opportunity to act as a fighting unit beyond capturing a few French frigates in the Channel. Frustratingly, in the engagement off the Brittany coast, Keppel had to watch the French disable some of his men-of-war by firing into their rigging, making it difficult for him to re-form his line. By the time he was ready to engage the French, the count's fleet had slipped away.

The inconclusive battle of Ushant, or Brest as it was popularly known, might have merited a naval inquiry. In fact, it precipitated two courts martial and a major political storm over the conduct of the American war. How that storm unfolded, what role the press played in its unfolding, and what this controversy tells us about the communicative practices at play in British politics of the 1770s, form the subject of this chapter.

The importance of the press in the politics of the reign of George III is hardly a new subject. The success of the press in making parliamentary politics more accessible to the political nation by publishing the debates of the Lords and Commons is well known; and it has often been argued that the press of this era managed to emancipate itself from the sinews of patronage that sometimes made it subservient to both government and political leaders. Indeed, John Brewer has maintained that the press constituted an 'alternative structure of politics' to the oligarchic orthodoxy of Walpole and his successors.¹ Yet this capacious view of the role of the press has not gone unchallenged.

¹ John Brewer, *Party Ideology and Popular Politics at the Accession of George III* (Cambridge, 1976), pp. 139–60; see also Kathleen Wilson, *The Sense of the People. Politics, Culture and Imperialism in England*

Some historians have wondered whether the volatile growth of newspapers, in which provincial presses rose and fell at a rapid rate, really implied an expanding frontier of political literacy. Others have wondered whether the mimetic nature of the provincial press, which was often heavily dependent upon London news for its material, did not imply a very uneven development of political literacy and awareness. Perhaps it was only in the metropolis and a few provincial towns that a political constituency critical of government and independent of grandee leadership could genuinely be found.²

If eighteenth-century historians have remained cautious about linking the press to an expansive popular political culture, the same is certainly not true of those working in the seventeenth century and earlier. Here there has been a veritable emphasis upon the broadening terrain of politics, from the way in which news might change the dynamics of political time and commentary in a country hitherto dominated by oral culture and *élite* political knowledge, to the manner in which coffee houses could make everyman a politician and create a 'public sphere', a social space or realm in which something approaching a public independent of the state might be nurtured.³ Again, not all Stuart historians would agree that the seventeenth century saw a 'new conception of political and social space' in the form of public opinion; many would continue to stress the importance of county communities dominated by the gentry in which political discussion remained relatively exclusive and bounded by access to insider knowledge of the corridors of power. But the fact that there is little consensus in either the seventeenth or eighteenth centuries about the social penetration of news and its impact upon high politics invites us to revisit the question, and to bring a new specificity to how new communicative practices transformed politics in this critical era of imperial crisis and war.

From the very beginning there was intense speculation in the press about Keppel's movements and intentions as he reconnoitred between Cape Finisterre and the Scilly Islands. Much of this speculation stemmed from the extraordinary situation in which the British government found itself in the early summer of 1778. Technically speaking, Britain was not at war with France until early July, although the French alliance with America in the spring of 1778 made war virtually inevitable. What troubled Lord North's ministry and the admiralty, in particular, was the movement of the French fleets from Toulon and Brest: whether they would sail to break the British blockade of the American coast, whether they would venture to capture British sugar islands in the Caribbean, or whether they would invade Britain itself. Keppel's instructions ordered him to ensure the safe return of the homecoming merchantmen and to keep an eye out

¹ (continued) 1715–1785 (Cambridge, 1994), and Hannah Barker, *Newspapers, Politics, and Public Opinion in Late Eighteenth Century England* (Oxford, 1998).

² For a discussion of these issues, see Jeremy Black, *The British Press in the Eighteenth Century* (1987), Bob Harris, *Politics and the Rise of the Press, Britain and France 1620–1800* (London, 1996), and Hannah Barker, *Newspapers, Politics and English Society 1695–1855* (1998).

³ Steve Pincus, "'Coffee Politicians Does Create': Coffeehouses and Restoration Political Culture', *Journal of Modern History*, LXVII (1995), 807–34; Joad Raymond, 'The Newspaper, Public Opinion, and the Public Sphere in the Seventeenth Century', in *News, Newspapers, and Society in Early Modern Britain*, ed. Joad Raymond (1999), pp. 109–41; Daniel Woolf, 'News, History and the Construction of the Present in Early Modern England', in *The Politics of Information in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Brendan Dooley and Sabrina A. Baron (2001), pp. 80–118.

for movements at Brest. Keppel was unwilling to engage d'Orvilliers' fleet, however, unless he was on suitably even terms. His instructions from the admiralty allowed him to do this, but his anxieties on this matter stemmed from the political predicament in which he found himself. For although Keppel's family pedigree spoke of eminent service to country, he himself was a Rockingham whig, a political opponent of the ministry, and an admiral who had refused to serve against the American colonists on political grounds. Given the conventions of seniority that prevailed in the navy, there was little that the admiralty could do but offer him the command of the Channel fleet once France had declared her colours.⁴ Still, Keppel found himself in the awkward predicament of having two lords of the admiralty within his own fleet, Sir Hugh Palliser and Lord Mulgrave. Keppel's relations with Palliser had been strained by Palliser's appointment as lieutenant-general of marines; a position to which Keppel had aspired. His relations with Mulgrave were less personal, but Mulgrave was a political turncoat of whom he would be wary. All in all, there were good reasons why Keppel acted cautiously. He had no wish to fulfil his cousin's prophecy that he would be compromised by the ministry on political grounds.⁵

In the first month of Keppel's assignment there were high hopes that an admiral who had seen active service at Quiberon Bay and in the Caribbean might quickly resolve Britain's imperial predicament and pave the way for peace with America. 'On thee, bold Keppel, Britannia rests her anchor', mused one rhymester in the *Morning Chronicle*, 'Where you command, our foes away will scamper.'⁶ The capture of several French frigates seemed to justify this optimism, yet within weeks of venturing to sea, Keppel was back in port demanding more ships. The return prompted speculations that Keppel had been 'fettered by his orders' and that political factors were complicating his command.⁷ Opposition newspapers openly wondered whether Keppel had been set up to deflect the responsibility of an unprepared fleet from Lord Sandwich, the first lord of the admiralty. If there was one consolation from the movements of the home fleet, remarked the *General Advertiser*, it was in forcing the government's hand to prepare for war. 'We have at least blundered into a scrape with two French frigates, which from all appearances we were to have avoided', the paper reflected, 'and perhaps this little business will force our great men into a war with France'.⁸

Keppel's early leadership of the Channel fleet gave some pause for concern amongst even his own supporters, but his engagement with d'Orvilliers in the first official battle of 1778 between Britain and France proved more controversial. The rumours that spiralled from this battle ran the gamut of speculation. La Fayette informed Washington from his Boston sources that the British had been routed and Keppel and his second-in-command killed.⁹ The word that sped to the British military camp at

⁴ On his seniority, see N. A. M. Rodger, *The Insatiable Earl. A life of John Montagu, 4th Earl of Sandwich* (New York, 1994), pp. 241–3.

⁵ Revd Thomas Keppel, *The Life of Augustus Viscount Keppel* (2 vols, 1932–8), II, 3–4.

⁶ *Morning Chronicle*, 24 June 1778.

⁷ *General Evening Post*, 27–30 June, 30 June–2 July 1778.

⁸ *General Advertiser*, 1 July 1778.

⁹ *Lafayette in the Age of the American Revolution. Selected Letters and Papers 1776–1790*, ed. Stanley J. Idzerda (5 vols, Ithaca, 1979), II, 178.

Coxheath was that the battle was an unqualified success for the British. The admiral was still the 'Lord of the Ocean'.¹⁰ The truth was more complicated. With both the French and the British officially claiming victory, the press scrambled to ascertain what happened on the choppy seas off Ushant. The *Bath Chronicle* acknowledged that the reports were 'incoherent, inconsistent and contradictory',¹¹ So too, did the *Sussex Weekly Advertiser*, which was troubled that some accounts were 'artfully raised' and 'strongly fortified under the sanction of so many respectable names of men'.¹² But this did not stop editors from writing up their own narratives for a public obsessively anxious about the outcome. Some thought the action 'very obstinate', while others thought it little more than a brush. Some blamed Keppel for not pursuing the enemy more vigorously; some exonerated him because of the high seas and harsh winds off Ushant, and others, like the ministerial *Morning Post*, undermined him with irony, noting his very 'seaman-like report' of the pusillanimity of the enemy and his being willing to allow them to form a line without firing a shot.¹³ Opposition papers feared that ministerial runners were 'whispering and nodding away' Keppel's character without explicitly condemning his action, but the general frustration of the public at the indecisive battle and the subsequent indecisive search for the Brest fleet led to barbed comments in even the opposition press. 'The whole of Admiral Keppel's expedition', remarked one correspondent in the *Sussex Weekly Advertiser*, was 'a pompous parade of Nothingness'.¹⁴ As one songster put it in the 'Battle of Brest', writing in a Scottish dialect that recalled an earlier jacobite ballad on Sheriffmuir,

Some say that we wan, and some say that they wan,
And some say that nane wan at a'man
But one thing is clear, to which I will swear,
A battle there was, which I saw, man.¹⁵

Amid the innuendos and frustration it was perhaps inevitable that pointed accusations would eventually fly. There were growing signs of this in late August, when several newspapers openly disputed whether Vice-Admiral Palliser should be damned or commended for his actions at Ushant.¹⁶ It was even rumoured that Sir Hugh Palliser had fought a duel over the issue with a 'certain great naval character', presumably Keppel, although the truth was that they had simply verbally jousting as tempers frayed over the Ushant affair.¹⁷ Yet it was not until October that the disagreements among the crews as to who was responsible for the inconclusive battle openly surfaced. In a letter to the *General Advertiser*, an officer at Ushant, sometimes thought to be Keppel's

¹⁰ *Morning Chronicle*, 6 Aug. 1778.

¹¹ *Bath Chronicle*, 30 July 1778.

¹² *Sussex Weekly Advertiser*, 3 Aug. 1778.

¹³ *Morning Post*, 4 Aug. 1778; *Sussex Weekly Advertiser*, 10 Aug. 1778; *Bath Chronicle*, 6 Aug. 1778; *Northampton Mercury*, 10 Aug. 1778.

¹⁴ *Sussex Weekly Advertiser*, 28 Sept. 1778; *General Advertiser*, 12 Aug. 1778.

¹⁵ *General Advertiser*, 26 Sept. 1778.

¹⁶ *Morning Post*, 25 Aug. 1778; *General Advertiser*, 28 Aug. 1778.

¹⁷ *Morning Post*, 24 Aug. 1778; David Syrett, *The Royal Navy in European Waters during the American Revolutionary War* (Columbia, S. C., 1998), p. 48.

nephew, Lieutenant George Berkeley, accused Palliser of failing to bring his division into line when signalled to do so. As a result of his indecision, if not insubordination, the author asserted, Keppel was unable to bear down on the enemy in a decisive manner.¹⁸

Unlike Keppel, the second son of an earl and the grandson of one of William III's Dutch advisors, Palliser was not born with a silver spoon. He was a professional seaman who had worked his way up the ranks, a scion of a minor gentry family whose wealth had been squandered by a gambling heir, a man for whom honour and naval competence mattered a great deal. He could not let the letter stand and so in November, when he came to town, he asked Keppel publicly to repudiate it. Keppel refused to do so, and when Palliser ran 'very high upon his own merits' and threatened to 'lay the blame where it belonged', the admiral of the blue lost his temper and dared Palliser to make his accusations public.¹⁹ Palliser promptly did so, publishing his own account of the battle in the *Morning Post* and five other London newspapers. Palliser even challenged William Parker, the proprietor of the *General Advertiser* to publish his account as a counterpoint to the accusations against him that had been first lodged there.²⁰ In his letter Palliser recalled that in the first encounter with the French, the duke of Chartres's division had disabled many British ships without so much as a shot fired in response. In other words, Palliser implied that Keppel had manoeuvred clumsily into battle and his seamen had paid the price: as the official dispatch so clearly underlined, 133 killed and 382 men wounded. What was more, the admiral had totally underestimated the damage inflicted on the masts and rigging, and the time it would take to repair them. When Keppel signalled to his divisions to re-form the line, Palliser's ship, the *Formidable*, was too obviously damaged to comply immediately with the order. In any case, Palliser reflected, Keppel could not have been serious about engaging the enemy again on 27 July because he sent Sir Robert Harland's division away from the line while urging the 'crippled ships' to renew the attack. The charge was clear: Keppel bungled the first encounter and was really reluctant to try for another while his ships were in disarray.

By 6 November the public had been confronted with two very different explanations for the failure of Ushant. In the *General Advertiser*, the two accounts were even placed side by side so readers could contemplate their merits. Within days the battle lines were drawn. The *Morning Post* attributed Keppel's diffidence in battle to his political hostility to the government. It was predictable that Keppel 'would not do too much for the honour of a ministry he so violently opposed'.²¹ The *General Advertiser* interjected that it was Palliser who had failed to follow orders, and implied that his disinclination to do so was part of a larger conspiracy to incriminate a political opponent of the American war. In this heady atmosphere, in which charges of incompetence mingled with accusations of political malevolence, the dispute was

¹⁸ *General Advertiser*, 10 Oct. 1778; see also Syrett, *Royal Navy in European Waters*, p. 48, who presents evidence that the author might have been an officer on Palliser's own ship.

¹⁹ Keppel, *Life of Keppel*, II, 81–2.

²⁰ *Morning Post*, 5 Nov. 1778; *General Advertiser*, 6 Nov. 1778. Palliser's letter was also published in the *London Evening Post*, the *London Chronicle*, the *Morning Intelligencer*, and the *Gazetteer* and the *General Evening Post*.

²¹ *Morning Post*, 7 Nov. 1778.

predictably raised in the Commons. In the debate on naval estimates on 2 December, the admiralty critic Temple Luttrell declared that because the expense of the navy had not matched expectations there was a need to clear the air on Ushant. In his view, an inquiry was necessary to vindicate the honour of the much-maligned Admiral Keppel and to restore naval morale and bring unanimity to the fleet. This call for an inquiry prompted a sharp exchange between Keppel and Palliser on the floor of the House about the letters that had circulated in the press. It led Palliser, now incensed beyond measure, to demand a court martial of his superior officer rather than one that would clear his name. It was a request to which Lord Sandwich agreed.

The decision of the admiralty to court-martial Viscount Keppel on charges of 'misconduct and neglect of duty' raised the political tempo. It quickly drew analogies to John Byng, the admiral who was executed on the same charges for losing Minorca in 1756, a seaman who was viewed by many as a scapegoat for an unpopular and arguably incompetent administration. Although there is no evidence that the North administration doctored Keppel's dispatches in the same manner as Newcastle did in 1756, it was feared that the political malevolence of the government in 1778 was a motive for Keppel's trial. In the Commons opposition members demanded that Palliser be court-marshalled as well. In demanding fairness for Keppel, they tried to pin down just who was responsible for the decision to court-martial him in the first place. Was it simply on Palliser's prompting? Were there not bigger sharks lurking in the background? Many opposition M.P.s believed Sandwich had masterminded the attack, although they could not prove it. In the highly publicized debate in the Commons, charges of political malignancy flew thick and fast. They inevitably fuelled conspiracy theories about the government's implication in the affair. For some, Palliser was an ingrate who would divide the fleet and the nation simply to satisfy his sense of honour. For others he was a by-word for treachery, a government mole who had set up a good-hearted honourable man ready to fight for his country but not against America.²² 'Your behaviour in this last dark episode', one sailor wrote in an open letter to Palliser, 'has been a series of falsehoods, blindly goaded on by the malignancy of your heart. You have engaged in an affair which, in the end, must revert tenfold upon your own devoted head.'²³

One aspect of the court martial that was likely to redound to Palliser's disadvantage was the decision to have Keppel's court martial on land. The request was made in the house of commons by Admiral Pigot, who argued that the heat of the flagship's close quarters and the dampness of the weather would seriously impair Keppel's already flagging health. Seconded by Admiral Viscount Howe, the commander of the American fleet, Lord North and his ministry quickly consented. Already on the defensive as the war in America persisted and peace negotiations stalled, the government had no wish to alienate an already tetchy naval high command. It was a serious mistake. The decision to allow the court martial to take place in the governor's house at Portsmouth transformed the trial into a very public event. Whereas most courts martial were a matter for the armed services alone, with the public only learning of the arguments or verdict second or third-hand, the Keppel trial was about to be

²² *Public Advertiser*, 21 Dec. 1778 *General Advertiser*, 23 Dec. 1778.

²³ *General Advertiser*, 23 Dec. 1778.

turned into a public amphitheatre where the fortunes, passions and reputations of leading military politicians would be played out before a large, diverse audience. M.P.s enthusiastically travelled there by the coach-load, turning the hall of the governor's house into a second sitting of parliament. So great was the crush to attend the trial that naval officers complained that the 'populace' threatened to deprive them of a good seat.²⁴ As a result, the hall was divided into three sections, one for the naval officers, another for the nobility, and, near the door leading to the Grand Parade, a section for the 'Audience of every degree.'²⁵

For those who were unable to go, there was always the press. It was critical to the publicity of the trial. At the time of the Keppel trial the daily circulation of newspapers was in the region of 34,700. Assuming a readership of 20 people per issue, a not unreasonable readership in the light of the public debate that the trial generated, that would mean that one in six adults regularly perused the reports of Keppel's fortunes.²⁶ And this figure does not include those who listened, which in 1779 may well have included the 'mechanics' who cheered Keppel at Portsmouth and the coal heavers who were found quarrelling with sailors over the trial at a Ratcliff Highway pub.²⁷ Although historians have sometimes been sceptical of translating circulation figures into readers by some strict arithmetical formula,²⁸ partly because our knowledge of public reading is limited, there is no doubt that the press readership ran deep in 1779. One writer even described the newspaper during the trial as 'the pamphlet of the present day, seen by every eye' including middling daughters and even domestic servants.²⁹

In many ways the press had prepared the ground for the confrontation from the very beginning, keeping readers abreast with the controversies over Ushant and framing it within the larger struggle over domestic and imperial politics. As might be predicted, the metropolitan press took the lead in this endeavour, sensing that the battle between naval commanders was really a synecdoche for larger struggles within domestic politics over the conduct and necessity of the war with America. But the provincial press was not far behind. Newspapers like the *Sussex Weekly Advertiser* and the *Bath Chronicle* seem to have had their own sources of information about what was going on within the navy and were quick to record both the optimism and the despondency that flowed from Keppel's engagement with the French. Others seem to have really picked up on the story as it began to polarize along political lines in the Commons. Thus the *Derby Mercury* had relatively little to say about Ushant until mid-October, when it reported rumours from the *General Evening Post* that Keppel's predisposition for conventional naval warfare had compromised the British attack on the French fleet.³⁰ By the time Vice-Admiral Palliser had published his account of

²⁴ *General Advertiser*, 8 Jan. 1779.

²⁵ *General Evening Post*, 26–28 Jan. 1779; *Morning Chronicle*, 29 Jan. 1779.

²⁶ On newspaper circulation, see Brewer, *Party Ideology*, p. 142; Barker, *Newspapers, Politics and English Society*, pp. 46–9; J. A. Chartres, 'City and Towns: Farmers and Economic Change in the 18th Century', *Historical Research*, LXIV (1991), 149.

²⁷ *Morning Chronicle*, 13 Jan. 1779; *General Evening Post*, 25–27 Feb. 1779.

²⁸ Black, *British Press*, p. 297.

²⁹ *Morning Chronicle*, 3 Feb. 1779.

³⁰ *Derby Mercury*, 16–23 Oct. 1778.

the battle, the *Mercury* was primed for the developing controversy, reporting Palliser's letter and the subsequent discussions about the court martial in as much detail as London newspapers. The *Leeds Mercury*, by contrast, came to the controversy a little later, despite its regional familiarity with the politics of Lord Rockingham, Keppel's patron. It ignored Palliser's letter of 5 November, only drawing attention to the conflict between the two admirals once charges had been officially laid.³¹ Even so, it was very attentive to Keppel's court martial when it began in mid-January, devoting over a third of its available space to its coverage.

Coming in the wake of new styles of political reporting, Keppel's trial was actually quite unique. During the 1770s the press had broken down the walls of privilege that had surrounded parliamentary debates. These debates still had to be reconstructed from memory, for journalists were not allowed to actually take notes on debates until 1783, and so there was inevitably a certain amount of fictionalizing in their reporting, fictionalizing that was probably only constrained by the very real threat of libel and the relative accuracy of competitors.³² Even so, there is no doubt that the public became increasingly accustomed to reading debates in the newspapers, to getting a good idea of the protagonists and more than a gist of what they had said. Indeed, the importance of providing prompt accounts of parliamentary proceedings ensured that the newspaper would be the predominant medium of politics, supplanting the pamphlet as the purveyor of news and often, political commentary.

What the public demanded from the Keppel trial was prompt, accurate reporting of the trial. This the newspapers strove to deliver, although the demands for both speed and accuracy inevitably precipitated quarrels over whose account was the more authentic.³³ William Parker of the *General Advertiser* promised an 'Impartial and Authentic Intelligence' of the trial by 'Express', which essentially meant that news of each day's proceedings arrived at the *Advertiser's* offices near the Old Bailey seven hours later. He was quick to condemn his principal opponent, the Reverend Henry Bate Dudley of the *Morning Post*, for failing to live up to such standards, although few other papers in the metropolis seem to have measured up to Parker's timetable, either. Yet all newspapers were under considerable pressure to provide fairly expeditious and extensive coverage of the Portsmouth court martial, which more or less monopolized the news in late January and early February, consuming anywhere from three to ten columns of a 16-column paper, the coverage expanding as the trial drew towards a close. This was a substantial improvement over the coverage that had surrounded Byng's trial in 1757, where a major London opposition paper such as the *London Evening Post* devoted only 25 per cent of its space to the trial at its most important juncture.³⁴ Even the provincial weeklies struggled to remain as topical as possible on

³¹ See *Leeds Mercury*, 22 Dec. 1778.

³² On the rules about taking notes, see Barker, *Newspapers, Politics and English Society*, p. 79 and P.D.G. Thomas, 'The Beginning of Parliamentary Reporting in Newspapers 1768–1774', *English Historical Review*, LXXIV (1959), 623–31. On the accuracy of reporting, even after note taking was accepted, see Dror Wahrman, 'Virtual Representation, Parliamentary Reporting and Languages of Class in the 1790s', *Past and Present*, No. 136 (1992), 83–113.

³³ See *General Advertiser*, 19 Jan. 1779 for disputes between that paper and the admiralty shorthand writer, Joseph Gurney, over the court record.

³⁴ *London Evening Post*, 6–8 Jan. 1757.

the Keppel court martial. A paper like the *Northampton Mercury*, for example, was never more than three days behind in its reporting of the court martial, reserving some space for last minute inserts via London. All papers devoted extensive space to Keppel's actual defence, which literally took over papers in early February. *Jackson's Oxford Journal* printed a full extract of the defence, headlining it in bold type. The *Sussex Weekly Advertiser* had pertinent sections of it reprinted as an 'Extraordinary Half-Sheet' to be delivered gratis to its customers.³⁵

Well before Keppel began his formal defence on the twenty-first day of the trial, the prosecution's case was faltering. Prior to the trial, a letter to the king from a number of well-known naval officers, including Admiral Edward Hawke, the hero of Quiberon Bay, revealed that mainstream naval opinion was unhappy with the trial. In this open letter the officers wondered why Keppel had been suddenly charged after five months of inaction. They pondered whether 'such precipitous and recriminatory' accusations by subordinate officers action, would improve naval morale 'in one of the most critical exigencies of the public affairs' the country had encountered.³⁶ This sort of support boded well for Keppel, for matters of professional reputation were to play an important part in the trial's outcome.

Vice-Admiral Palliser also received a severe setback early in the trial. This was in relation to the log-books. As the letter which first cast aspersions on Palliser's conduct recognized, log-books were likely to be critical evidence in a court martial where opinion in the fleet was divided along political lines. At the opening of the proceedings, the court demanded custody of the log-books, much to the displeasure of Palliser, who thought they should be exhibited when the masters and captains gave their own evidence. Then the master of the *Robuste*, one of the ships within Palliser's division, refused to swear that his logbooks had not been altered. Log-books were often modified after the fact, as everyone knew, but in this context the alterations looked decidedly fishy, especially when it was disclosed that it was the captain, Alexander Hood, a supporter of the government, who had ordered the revisions. When Hood was sworn in on the seventh day of the trial, he was very defensive, suggesting that his reputation had already been traduced in public, that rumours had already been circulating that he had been arrested for disobeying orders or removed from his commission. He admitted he had altered the logbooks but said that if he erred, he erred 'innocently'. Under cross-examination he conceded that he had made the revisions when it became 'common conversation' that a court martial would ensue.³⁷

This admission severely damaged Palliser's case. Even the testimony of his own captain aboard the *Formidable*, Captain Bazeley, proved unable to dispel the bad odour that hung over Palliser's witnesses. At the beginning of his testimony, Bazeley did produce some evidence that appeared to vindicate Palliser's explanation of what happened. In his opinion Keppel had been lethargic in drawing up a line of battle and was seemingly unaware of the substantial damage that the *Formidable* had incurred from the French broadsides. In the circumstances, Bazeley opined, it had been quite

³⁵ *Sussex Weekly Advertiser*, 8 Feb. 1779; *Jackson's Oxford Journal*, 6 Feb. 1779.

³⁶ See *Bath Chronicle* 7 Jan. 1778 and London papers 3–4 days earlier.

³⁷ *Minutes of the Proceedings at a Court Martial, Assembled for the Trial of the Honourable Admiral Augustus Keppel . . . as taken by George Jackson, Esquire, Judge-Advocate of the Fleet* (1779), pp. 27–36; the alteration of the logbooks was picked up in the newspaper press, see *Bath Chronicle*, 21 Jan. 1779.

impossible for the *Formidable* to rejoin the line until its masts and rigging had been repaired. Yet Bazeley's evidence also ended on an awkward note, for he maintained that the midshipmen had incorrectly taken down the signals from Keppel, a rather crucial piece of evidence given the accusations that had flown back and forth about Palliser disobeying Keppel's orders. Furthermore, he also admitted that three critical pages had been cut from his own log-book. What he had presented to the court, he confessed, was the rough book that had been kicked around in the orlop, not the real thing.³⁸ Once again, the credibility of the prosecution's witnesses floundered in the face of what looked to be a flagrant example of tampered evidence.

The press quickly seized upon this evidence. It made good copy; it was very damaging to the prosecution's case; and it heightened the drama of the whole trial, particularly for the more paranoid members of the opposition who wanted to construct a narrative of ministerial malevolence against Keppel. As the rest of the evidence unfolded in its copious, confusing detail, as the public attempted to wrestle with nautical terms with which it was unfamiliar, even sometimes with the help of naval glossaries such as that provided by the *Public Advertiser* and the *Bath Chronicle*,³⁹ it was the tampered log-books that stuck in the public imagination. That, and the determination of Vice-Admiral John Montagu to ask every officer whether Keppel's behaviour at the battle of Ushant was conduct unbecoming a flag officer. Palliser protested against this solicitation of opinion rather than fact. So, too, did the pro-ministerial *Morning Post*. The Robin Hood Society of London even debated the issue on two occasions, thinking it an extraordinary intervention on the part of a judge.⁴⁰ But nothing deterred the royal navy from making the trial largely a question of honour. The reason was the naval hierarchy was not interested in a repeat performance of Admiral Byng, the admiral who had been unfairly victimized for losing Minorca to the French in 1756 and indeed executed under the twelfth article of war on virtually the same charges as Keppel, that is, misconduct and neglect of duty. The newspapers seem to have understood this, for references to Byng's court martial kept surfacing during the trial.⁴¹ In a way one could argue that the Byng affair was the crucial subtext of the trial. It determined that its outcome would largely rest on issues of professional credibility and reputation, not on specific judgements about a naval command in a battle where high seas and winds were known to have compromised strategy. And with tainted logbooks and professions of respect for Keppel as a long-standing flag officer, the rheumatic admiral of the blue was more or less exonerated of all charges before he even began his own defence on 30 January, the anniversary of the execution of Charles I. Charles might have been a martyr; Keppel was not about to become one.

In transcribing relatively large sections of the trial for an inquisitive public, most newspapers had little room for commentary. But three dailies did embellish their reports with letters, poems, and song, as did the long-standing opposition tri-weekly,

³⁸ *Minutes of the Proceedings*, pp. 60–2.

³⁹ *Bath Chronicle*, 21 Jan. 1779; *Public Advertiser*, 14 Jan. 1779.

⁴⁰ *London Debating Societies 1776–1799*, ed. Donna Andrew (1994), nos. 266 and 272. The Robin Hood Society began debating the issue on 25 January and continued on 8 Feb. 1779.

⁴¹ *London Evening Post*, 7–9 Jan., 26–28 Jan. 1779; *Public Advertiser*, 3 Feb. 1779.

the *London Evening Post*. The *General Advertiser* was the most virulently pro-Keppelian paper. It sought to assassinate Palliser's character, portraying him as a despicable client of Lord Sandwich, schooled in the arts of 'tyranny and treachery'. It cast the trial as more than a simple dispute between Palliser and Keppel. It was an epic struggle between tory and whig, between the 'abettors of despotism and the friends of the constitution'.⁴² As the trial unfolded, as the logbook tampering became evident, the paper re-asserted the notion that a foul ministerial plot had been uncovered.⁴³ 'It was absurd to suppose the Scottish Cabinet would suffer a Keppel to triumph', remarked 'Regulus'; 'It was their sole view in employing, to disgrace him; and for this reason a proper second in command was appointed, who might first *prevent* his success, and then *impeach* him for the want of it.'⁴⁴ A similar line was to be found in the *London Evening Post*, which predicted that Lord Sandwich would be forced to retire as a result of his devious intrigues and that his client would have to be sacrificed to placate public anger.⁴⁵

The *Morning Post*, in contrast, deplored the way in which credible evidence from Palliser had been undermined by courtroom barracking and perversions of justice. One 'by-stander' commented that it was patently obvious that Vice-Admiral Montagu did not give a 'fart for law'. Unlike the trial of Admiral Byng, where the court had refrained from soliciting opinion from officers, Montagu and company were openly pandering to naval morale by pressuring officers to puff up Keppel's dubious talents.⁴⁶ The *Public Advertiser* was also unhappy with Montagu's solicitation of opinion rather than fact from the witnesses, but it was more concerned by the way in which the trial had become a transparently partisan affair in which justice and impartiality were likely to go by the board. Before the trial the paper predicted the public would be 'crammed with bickerings between splicing and sham victory admirals, between old cashiered generals and captive ones, between hungry patriots impatient to come in and pampered placemen unwilling to turn out'.⁴⁷ The court martial seemed to bear this out. One correspondent observed that 'Party Spirit, disappointed Ambition, or private Emolument, seem to direct the Conduct of those in high Command and the Impurity of the Source has polluted every stream.' In this hyper-confrontation, it seemed that ministerial craft was matched by opposition intimations of mock-martyrdom, by sentimental 'crocodile tears and hyena sighs' for an admiral who may well not have done his job and certainly had not lived up to expectations.⁴⁸

So amid this conflicting commentary, how did the public respond to the Keppel trial? What lessons did it draw from it? Often it is very difficult to ascertain what the public may have felt about a particular issue, but in this case we are fortunate to have some quite detailed accounts of the jubilations that erupted in the wake of Keppel's acquittal. By attending to the 'language' or semiology of these jubilations – the toasts

⁴² *General Advertiser*, 17 Dec. 1778, 6, 8 Jan. 1779.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 16, 18 Jan. 1779.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 19 Jan. 1779.

⁴⁵ *London Evening Post*, 2–4 Feb. 1779.

⁴⁶ *Morning Post*, 6 Feb. 1779; see also 13 Jan. 1779.

⁴⁷ *Public Advertiser*, 12 Dec. 1778.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 8, 12, 14, 20 Jan. 1779. Some correspondents were suggesting, however, that the cause of Keppel was the cause of the public. See *ibid.*, 5 Jan. 1779.

and illuminations, in particular, and to their timing and geographical location – it is possible to gauge how fast the news travelled and how the public interpreted the verdict in the context of a divisive war against America.

Certainly the news of Keppel's acquittal travelled quickly. William Parker of the *General Advertiser* learned of the verdict within six hours so that the first round of celebrations in London occurred on the evening of the 11 February. From there the news spanned out, reaching places like Reigate on the 12th, Banbury north of Oxford on the 13th, Chesterfield on the 14th, York and Newcastle on the 15th, and Swansea on the 17th. At least one town by-passed London as the hub of information; that was Bath, where the printer and publisher of the *Bath Chronicle* hired his own courier to ride from Portsmouth, thereby learning of Keppel's acquittal early on the morning of the 12th.⁴⁹ But this was the exception rather than the rule.

Newspapers often gave the impression that the celebrations of Keppel's acquittal flowed spontaneously from the news. This was said of Faversham, Witney, Bury St Edmunds, Staines, York, Liverpool, Norwich and Dover, for example.⁵⁰ Yet some places certainly celebrated the acquittal days after the news arrived, while others had advanced warning of the likely verdict and were well prepared once the news actually arrived. Lord Rockingham gave orders for a celebratory fete at his seat at Wentworth Woodhouse as early as the eight of February, three days before the verdict. At Whitby, on the east coast, the local gentlemen organized a subscription 'in full expectation' of an acquittal a day prior to the news.⁵¹ Rapid endorsement of the verdict could be expected in towns with strong radical-whig connexions, such as Newcastle, Norwich and Worcester, but not necessarily in loyalist strongholds such as Liverpool, where the celebrations were promoted by a society of sea captains and a number of respectable clubs rather than by the corporation. In fact, the Keppelian demonstrations were often contingent upon the political will of local organizations, and where these may have been politically divided, as at Bristol, there could be a noticeable lag between the news of Keppel's acquittal and its celebration.⁵²

The newspapers not only represented the celebrations as 'spontaneous', they also emphasized their orderly, even hierarchical nature. Local dignitaries sometimes officiated at these celebrations, or clearly endorsed them by providing some libation for the crowd. At a typical jubilation, bells were rung, candles displayed, shots fired, and an effigy of Sir Hugh Palliser was given a traitor's trial and execution, before being burnt on the bonfire. What violence there was, newspapers implied, was projected upon the mock figure of the accuser, who was sometimes assailed with sticks and stones by members of the crowd, rather than upon local political opponents. No doubt the highly choreographed nature of the celebration, sometimes accompanied with a fireworks display, kept the event within orderly limits. Outside of London, no troops were

⁴⁹ *St. James's Chronicle*, 13–16 Feb. 1779; *Derby Mercury*, 12–19 Feb. 1779.

⁵⁰ *London Chronicle*, 18–20 Feb. 1779; *London Evening Post*, 20–23 Feb. 1779.

⁵¹ *London Evening Post*, 25–27 Feb., 1779; *Correspondence of Edmund Burke*, ed. Thomas W. Copeland et al. (10 vols, Cambridge, 1958–78), IV, 42.

⁵² On Bristol politics, see John Latimer, *Annals of Bristol. Eighteenth Century* (Bristol, 1893), pp 439–40; Peter Marshall, *Bristol and the American War of Independence* (Historical Association, Bristol, 1977); James E. Bradley, *Religion, Revolution and English Radicalism* (Cambridge, 1990), pp. 195–223. The lag was recognized in the *Morning Post's* account of the jubilations, see *Morning Post*, 22 Feb. 1779.

known to have intervened in these demonstrations of joy, although there are some oblique references to infractions of the law, as at Portsmouth, where a naval captain was indicted at the Hampshire assizes for inciting violence on Palliser's lodgings.⁵³ But one suspects that the accounts of the demonstrations glossed over the political frictions they may have generated, especially where members of the ministry such as Lords Sandwich and Mulgrave were burnt in effigy with Palliser. One reason for this was because the London demonstrations, which resulted in attacks upon the residences of major government ministers, had moved beyond the normal exuberance expected of such occasions, giving rise to complaints from newspapers normally sympathetic to Keppel.⁵⁴ The rioting allowed the *Morning Post*, in particular, the opportunity to expatiate upon the lawlessness that the whig 'patriots' had encouraged, if not generated; to argue, essentially, that the pandering to popularity at the trial had spawned a licentious freedom on the street in which honest people were terrified and awed into submission to the mob's will. As 'Phil Frolick' exclaimed in a letter to the *Post*, 'How glorious it is in this *land of liberty* to see every street in a blaze, by compulsion. And how delightfully sounds the loud huzza, confounded with the crush of windows.'⁵⁵

Admiral Keppel and his supporters quickly disassociated themselves from this kind of mobbish behaviour. Apart from seeking to emphasize the orderly nature of celebrations elsewhere, they also used the occasion when Keppel received the freedom of the City to reintegrate the crowd into a more sober, constitutional mode of celebration, using the parade of the City councillors and Marine Society to facilitate this process. But beyond this, they could legitimately argue that the celebrations in honour of Keppel represented the 'spirit of the people' more accurately than their opponents were prepared to admit. A thorough exploration of the reports in the press, although by no means comprehensive, reveals that the rejoicings in favour of Keppel did not simply occur in centres where radical-whig sentiment was dominant, but also in places where ministerial opinion was formidable.⁵⁶ Of the 63 parliamentary boroughs that were known to have celebrated Keppel's acquittal, no less than 27 had elected a full slate of government supporters in the general election of 1774. This included some of the admiralty boroughs, and also those of the most prominent members of the ministry. Lord North, Lord George Germain, Lord Mulgrave, the electoral manager John Robinson and predictably, the unfortunate Palliser, all had the humiliation of facing pro-Keppel jublations in their own constituencies. At Scarborough, the mob openly defied the magistrates in burning Palliser's effigy.⁵⁷

⁵³ *Manchester Mercury*, 23 Feb. 1779. On disorder in Bristol, see *Morning Post*, 22 Feb. 1779.

⁵⁴ See the letter from 'Anglicanus' in the *Morning Chronicle*, 12 Mar. 1779. That exuberance could be rough. A letter in the *Morning Post*, 17 Feb. 1779, suggested that at Bath 'the whole city was turned into a scene of confusion and riot, windows being broke, furniture destroyed, and every act of violence committed on those who did not illuminate'. In Bristol, the *Post* reported that the peace of the city was 'most outrageously broken in upon last night, by a tumultuous rabble, from the dregs of the people, carrying about the principal streets a figure [of Palliser] and insulting many peaceable citizens, men and women'. *Morning Post*, 22 Feb. 1779.

⁵⁵ *Morning Post*, 18 Feb. 1779. See also the *Post* 23 Feb. 1779, where the paper correctly accused Charles James Fox of participating in the London disorders.

⁵⁶ On the political geography of the celebrations, see Nicholas Rogers, *Crowds, Culture and Politics in Georgian Britain* (Oxford, 1998), pp. 139–142.

⁵⁷ *Ipswich Journal*, 20 Feb. 1779.

Clearly a broad swathe of the political nation sympathized with Keppel's plight, broader than those who in 1775 had been actively pro-American, which has been estimated by James Bradley to have amounted to a third of the electorate.⁵⁸ Picking up on the press reports, celebrants emphasized the perfidy of Palliser by highlighting the evidence of the log-books. Mock log-books were found under the arm of Sir Hugh's effigy; they were burnt in bonfires and shredded by the crowds; and very occasionally, the witnesses from Palliser's own division, Captains Hood and Bazeley, joined Sir Hugh on the bonfires as well.⁵⁹ In contrast, Keppel was portrayed as the injured innocent, the honest patriot, the man with genuine virtue. Because the trial was also seen as a victory for his reputation as well as for his account of the battle of Ushant, he was sometimes dubbed the 'conquering hero' however incongruous that might have seemed to more discerning spectators. In some hyperbolic accounts, Keppel was cast as a true son of Neptune, a naval commander worthy of the company of Admirals Blake, Russell, Anson, and Boscawen. At Windsor, one of the emblematical devices of the fireworks display featured Neptune presiding over the sea 'with a Scroll in his Hand, on which was transcribed Hawke and Keppel'.⁶⁰

So some members of the public were quite happy to promote Keppel to the pantheon of naval heroes, to see him as a manly admiral revitalizing Britain's martial spirit, standing up to the Gallic foe. But opinion differed as to whether Keppel had been a near-victim of a malevolent ministry as the *General Advertiser* and the *London Evening Post* had insisted. Certainly there was a general sense that Lord Sandwich had been deeply implicated in the trial. In the Commons he barely survived a motion of censure. But whether there was a deep conspiracy to destroy Keppel seemed unclear. This view was endorsed by the more militant members of the Protestant Association. Joseph Massie wrote an open letter in the press suggesting that the king was the victim of a Scottish junto that was fomenting factionalism in the navy in order to re-catholicize the country and undermine protestantism and liberty.⁶¹ A similar if less sectarian view took hold in the more radical urban centres: in London predictably, but also in towns such as Newcastle-upon-Tyne where portraits of North, Sandwich and the secretary for war, Lord George Germain, were burnt alongside effigies of Palliser and Hood.⁶² Yet outside London, Newcastle, and a few other cities, conspiracy theories do not seem to have been widely endorsed.

If there was little consensus about the nature of the involvement of the ministry in Keppel's court martial, neither was there much consensus about the political aspirations that Keppel embodied. For some, Keppel's acquittal recalled a happier era of imperial unity, a nostalgia for the days of Chatham and Wolfe.⁶³ For others, Keppel's triumph and the discrediting of the ministry opened up the prospect

⁵⁸ James E. Bradley, *Popular Politics and the American Revolution in England* (Macon, Ga., 1986).

⁵⁹ *Leeds Mercury*, 23 Feb. 1779; *York Courant*, 23 Feb. 1779; *London Evening Post*, 13–16, 16–18, 23–25 Feb. 1779; *General Evening Post*, 22–24 Feb. 1779; *Morning Chronicle*, 19 Feb. 1779.

⁶⁰ *Northampton Mercury*, 22 Feb. 1779; *Jackson's Oxford Journal*, 20 Feb. 1779; *General Advertiser*, 4 Feb. 1779.

⁶¹ *London Evening Post*, 2–4 Feb. 1779; see also the handbill 'Liberty, Law and Keppel' written by Massie in Suffolk R.O., HA 67, 46 1/255.

⁶² *London Evening Post*, 20–23 Feb. 1779; *Newcastle Chronicle*, 20 Feb. 1779.

⁶³ *York Courant*, 23 Feb. 1779.

of political reform and a possible reconciliation with America. In Bungay, Suffolk, Keppel was toasted alongside the whig lords, the London alderman, William Beckford, and John Wilkes, with hopes that Americans might achieve what they wanted 'short of independence'.⁶⁴ In London, on the occasion of Keppel's freedom, the admiral of the blue was innocuously toasted alongside the 'King and Constitution', but again there were gestures towards reconciling with America and even recognizing some form of American home rule. At the same time, support was also voiced for an independent electorate in Britain and Ireland, and for a renegotiation of Ireland's political and colonial status, just as Ireland began its own non-importation movement in protest to its trading restrictions.⁶⁵ Keppel, in other words, could be identified with radical causes, even though the admiral himself was an unabashed, aristocratic whig who believed in grandee leadership of political movements for change. In the confusion and euphoria that accompanied his acquittal, what the British public could not or were unwilling to confront was the independence of America itself despite the fact that the outspoken radicals like Richard Price and even the Rockinghamites had officially reconciled themselves to that inevitability. In the spring of 1779 American independence remained too politically contentious an issue to flag it in the Keppelian jubilations.

'All eyes are now on Portsmouth, where the trial began yesterday', wrote Horace Walpole to Horace Mann on 8 January 1779. Three weeks later he remarked, 'Suspense still. The court martial continues, and everything respectfully awaits its determination – even France and America seem to lie upon their oars till the oracle at Portsmouth has pronounced.'⁶⁶ Walpole's letters, like those of Lady Sarah Lennox, testify to the fascination that contemporaries had with the court martial of Admiral Keppel. For almost a month the political nation was transfixed by a trial where naval reputations, factious politics and plausible conspiracies were played out in the context of a flagging war with America and the very real possibility of the British empire's first dissolution. It was the newspaper, of course, that was principally responsible for bringing this event to the parlours and coffee houses of the nation, for re-enacting its speeches and cross-examinations, even relaying the reaction of the audience at the governor's house in Portsmouth as the trial unfolded. In this instance the newspapers made strenuous efforts to smooth the flow of events by prompt reporting and delivery. Unable to create a simultaneity of experience, something that would only emerge with the advent of the telegraph and its first newsworthy event, the sinking of the *Titanic*, the newspapers of 1779 were none the less able to dramatize the 'present', a segment of time between history and future, and to do so more compellingly than ever before.⁶⁷ Contemporaries knew more about the Keppel trial within a day or two than they ever had about other political trials of the eighteenth century, whether of Henry Sacheverell, Francis Atterbury, or the unfortunate Admiral Byng. The Keppel trial re-created the 'immediacy' of a parliamentary debate with its cut-and-thrust

⁶⁴ *Ipswich Journal*, 20 Feb. 1779.

⁶⁵ Corporation of London R.O., Journals of Common Council, LXVII (1779), ff. 209–12.

⁶⁶ *The Yale Edition of Horace Walpole's Correspondence*, ed. W. S. Lewis (34 vols, New Haven, 1937–70), XXXIII, 433, 435.

⁶⁷ Woolf, 'News, History and the Construction of the Present in Early Modern England', pp. 80–118.

dialogues, and it managed to garner as much attention as that other scandal of the decade, the trials of the Perreau brothers and Mrs Rudd. Like that set of trials, the Keppel court martial so absorbed the press that other vital aspects of news – the war in America, the French descent upon the British Caribbean – were temporarily marginalized.

Newspapers professed to bring their ‘intelligences’ to the ‘public’ at exorbitant expense. But what sort of ‘public’ was involved in these exercises? Was it an informed and critical public, part of the Habermasian ‘public sphere’, that realm of social life ‘in which something approaching public opinion can be formed?’⁶⁸ Or was it a public whose curiosity was titillated and vicariously satiated by a carefully packaged news, one that reduced the public to the status of passive voyeurs in a hyper-political universe? This rather cynical view of the news, fuelled perhaps from a disillusionment with the highly choreographed news coverage of today, has recently been propounded by John Sommerville, who has argued that the temporal space for a genuinely engaged public sphere was fleeting, giving way in the eighteenth century to the concept of the news as commodity.⁶⁹

The Sommervillian line is too cynical. Certainly the newspaper press of the mid-eighteenth century was interested in selling news, increasingly so as it sought to emancipate itself from aristocratic patronage and government control by attracting a broader range of readers. But the commercialization of the press did not mean that the news was totally packaged as thinly contextualized ‘entertainment’. There were times certainly when the press could be light-hearted about the news and entertain its readers with whimsical ballads and political *bon mots*. Newspapers delighted in advertising mock-accounts of the *Life and Adventures of Sir Hugh Hitchup* (Palliser) and his aptitude for ‘blowing away a topsail in a calm’. They were happy to report that ‘a double-faced sailor, bearing the cut log-book of the *Robuste* occasioned a great deal of laughter’ at an evening masquerade at the Pantheon.⁷⁰ But these lighter touches always had a political edge, and they were linked to a larger commentary about the politics of the trial. Moreover, the Keppelian affair, as represented in the press, was well, not thinly contextualized, framed by the ongoing disagreements over the American war, the future of the empire, and the political stalemate of an increasingly sclerotic electoral system. London newspapers, in particular, encouraged rather than closed off political engagement by their very explicit inter-textuality, by their constant references to arguments or letters in rival newspapers. These were available in the provinces, where coffee houses and taverns were in the habit of taking in a few London newspapers as well as their local advices. John Freeth, the proprietor of the Leicester Arms tavern in Birmingham and a supporter of Keppel, for example, had strong contacts with the London press and provided a good range of papers for his predominantly opposition-minded clients. Overton’s coffee house in New Street

⁶⁸ Jürgen Habermas, ‘The Public Sphere’, *New German Critique*, I (1979), 42. See also *idem*, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge, Mass., 1991), and Geoff Eley, ‘Re-thinking the Political: Social History and Political Culture in 18th and 19th Century Britain’, *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte*, XXI (1981), 427–57.

⁶⁹ C. John Sommerville, *The News Revolution in England. Cultural Dynamics of Daily Information* (New York, 1996).

⁷⁰ *Morning Chronicle*, 8 Feb. 1779; *General Advertiser*, 6 Jan. 1779.

even advertised a news service that included all the main London papers, delivered by express messenger by two o'clock on the following day.⁷¹

What was true of Birmingham was certainly true of other provincial centres and a strong case can be made for suggesting that the press facilitated rather than closed down the operation of a vibrant public sphere of discussion and debate in taverns, clubs, coffee houses and debating societies. So what was different about the operation of the public sphere in the 1770s as opposed to the era of the Restoration where historians have recently located its inception and volatile development? Partly, of course, it was a matter of scale. The Restoration public sphere was heavily biased towards London; the provinces were essentially backwaters even if they sported the odd coffee house. Women had little claim or opportunity to be political subjects, whereas by the 1770s, female debating societies and larger political coverage in female periodicals were catering to a more politically-informed clientele. Moreover, the density of the public sphere increased dramatically over time. London's 80-odd Restoration coffee houses numbered over 500 by the mid-century. Together with the many taverns, they housed a broad range of clubs and societies where politics could be combined with conviviality. In the wake of the court martial three societies debated the merits of the case and its political implications on five occasions.⁷² Such an event would have been unthinkable a century earlier.

But if it could be argued that the public sphere was already active and visible as early as the Restoration, what was different was the status of that public as a legitimate source of politics. Prior to the Exclusion crisis, certainly, the notion of the public as a legitimate tribunal of opinion was suspect, if not subversive. Even during the latter years of Walpole, when large portions of the political nation were alienated from his administration and when the phrase 'publick opinion' first entered political parlance, it was still a contestable notion, a real threat to the idea of parliament as a deliberative assembly.⁷³ Yet by the seventies there was a greater insistence upon the 'people' as the source of political authority and one to which parliament should be more accessible. This shift in the legitimacy of the public, something crucial to the full operation of the public sphere in the Habermasian sense of the term, was registered in the newspapers. They talked of a 'generous and deserving Public' that had a right to be informed; in open letters to Keppel they talked of how the ministry had tried to destroy his reputation 'in the Public Opinion'.⁷⁴ If the publishers were opposition-minded, they represented the jubilations that accompanied Keppel's acquittal as the 'general rejoicings of the whole kingdom' or the 'united Voice of the whole People', phrases that implied that the bulk of the public endorsed them. Some newspapers disputed this, of course. The *Gazetteer* thought the jubilations were excessive, carrying 'the exultations of Triumphant Virtue to a degree little short of madness'. But if it disparaged the celebrations, it did not disparage the notion of the

⁷¹ John Money, *Experience and Identity. Birmingham and the West Midlands 1760–1800* (Montreal, 1977), pp. 102–4.

⁷² *London Debating Societies*, ed. Andrew, nos. 276, 278, 279, 280, 283.

⁷³ J. A. W. Gunn, 'Public opinion', in *Political Innovation and Conceptual Change*, ed. Terence Ball, James Farr and Russell L. Hanson (Cambridge, 1989), pp. 250–1.

⁷⁴ *Adam's Weekly Courant*, 23 Feb. 1779; *London Evening Post*, 20–23 Feb. 1779; *Public Advertiser*, 22 Dec. 1779; *General Advertiser*, 19 Jan. 1779; *Sussex Weekly Advertiser*, 8 Feb. 1779.

public as a political arbiter, inviting the public to take a more dispassionate view of the controversy, to stand above the fray of an adversarial politics in which power and faction had unfortunately become the 'heroes of our political drama'.⁷⁵ Even the *Morning Post*, the most conservative paper of the era, upheld the legitimacy of the public voice. In the wake of the London riots of February 1779, it argued that the 'sentiments of the public at large, however much they may chance to disagree on other matters' upheld the notion of law and order. It was also quite happy to invoke John Bull, a familiar metonym of public opinion, to voice the view that the 'grandeur and dignity of the realm' depended upon a strict allegiance to monarchy not to the 'modern' crypto-republican patriotism of the Rockingham whigs. 'These are the monsters *John Bull* . . . means to watch over and hunt down, until they are scourged from out of society.'⁷⁶

The notion of 'public opinion' was therefore invoked in the press to support a variety of positions, for and against Keppel, for and against the ministry, or for a more Olympian position above the political fray. Indeed, while there have been attempts to parse the notion of 'public opinion' from the social practices that facilitated its expression, to argue that 'public opinion' is really a political invention distanced from the habitus of political discussion, there actually seems to be a close fit.⁷⁷ The decade of mass petitioning, parliamentary reporting, debating societies and burgeoning political associations was the one in which a 'public sphere' *a la* Habermas was clearly articulated.

Yet if the press made a major contribution to the making of the public sphere in its Habermasian mode, it also registered the tense and ambiguous relationship of this sphere to an older sense of the public realm; one where public memory, ritual, and ceremony intersected. Public statements of approval (or disapproval) over acts of state had long been part of the panoply of politics, and the jubilations surrounding Keppel's acquittal, with their cheering and charring of the naval hero, their ritualized and symbolic executions of his opponent, had a long genealogy in English politics. Public executions, trials and national anniversaries had always implicitly invoked an audience to legitimate its decision, and so there was an implicit legitimacy to crowd interventions – to the notion of crowds as the voice of the community. Indeed, crowd interventions both increased and became more sophisticated in the course of the eighteenth century, co-existing with new forms of associational life and more robust expressions of rational debate, the hallmarks of the Habermasian public sphere. During the Keppel crisis, then, one sees pre-modern and modern notions of publics in operation, publics that were by no means easily reconcilable either in composition or demeanour. How the press handled this predicament depended upon its partisan flavour and its overall assessment of the Keppel crisis. Papers hostile to Keppel sought to emphasize the incongruity between the two publics, the extent to which the jubilations in particular were deformations of public sentiment. Papers sympathetic to

⁷⁵ *Gazetteer*, 23 Feb. 1779.

⁷⁶ *Morning Post*, 20 Nov. 1778, 15 Feb. 1779. On the semiology of John Bull, see Miles Taylor, 'John Bull and the Iconography of Public Opinion in England c. 1712–1929', *Past and Present*, No. 134 (1992), 93–128.

⁷⁷ Dror Wahrman, 'Public Opinion, Violence and the Limits of Constitutional Politics', in *Re-Reading the Constitution*, ed. James Vernon (Cambridge, 1996), p. 110.

Keppel sought to stress their congruities, usually by stressing the orderly nature of the celebrations, their careful organization by clubs, societies or local squires, their spatial hierarchies, and their overall appeal among 'all ranks of people'. If the modern public sphere usually belonged to the middling sort and above in this decade, to those who had the opportunity and ability to peruse papers and discern political positions, the pre-modern sphere included everyone who could stake some claim, however small, to being part of the political nation. The tension between these two publics would continue into the nineteenth century. They were certainly very visible, with some interesting variations, in the Queen Caroline affair of 1820.⁷⁸ In 1779 the opposition newspapers did a reasonable job in keeping them on an even kilter. In fact, in the rapidly shifting political terrain of the 1790s, Edmund Burke, a companion to Keppel in his hour of adversity, would remember how he 'partook in the general flow of national joy that attended the justice done to his virtue'.⁷⁹ A rosy view, but one which grew more compelling in the light of the mobs of revolutionary Paris and the disconcerting planting of liberty trees in Britain.

⁷⁸ Rogers, *Crowds, Culture and Politics*, ch. 8; Wahrman 'Public Opinion', pp. 83–112.

⁷⁹ Edmund Burke, *Works* (6 vols, Oxford, 1907), VI, 76.