



**Book Review -- *Debating The Issues In Colonial Newspapers:
Primary Documents On Events Of The Period,*
by David Copeland**

Reviewed by: **Colin T. Ramsey**

Abstract

A book review of *Debating the Issues in Colonial Newspapers: Primary Documents on Events of the Period*, by David Copeland (Greenwood Press, 2000, 416 pp.). Reviewed by **Colin Ramsey** (English Dept.) in *American Periodicals: A Journal of History & Criticism*. 2004;13(1):117-118.

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REVIEWS

Debating the Issues in Colonial Newspapers: Primary Documents on Events of the Period. By David Copeland. Westport: Greenwood Press, 2000. 416 pp. \$59.95.

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A major difficulty one often encounters when conducting research on early America is the necessity of spending long hours digging in the archives. Thus, David Copeland's edited collection of eighteenth-century colonial newspapers fills an important need, at least in so far as it places edited samples from a wide cross section of colonial newspapers conveniently under one cover. However, the book also has some significant limitations as a tool for scholarly research.

Debating the Issues is organized, as the title suggests, according to "issues," with each chapter devoted to a single topic of socio-political significance for eighteenth-century America. Those chapters are arranged, if loosely, according to their chronology. Thus, the scope of the materials Copeland includes is impressive, ranging from the inoculation controversy in early eighteenth-century Boston, to the Great Awakening and the Zenger trial at midcentury, to the debates prompted by the publication of *Common Sense* and the passage of the Declaration of Independence in the late 1770s.

Naturally, some chapters address issues already widely explored, such as the Boston Massacre, but others consider less well-known events. For example, the chapter devoted to the Cherokee War of 1759–1761 (well before the formal Indian Removal Act of the nineteenth century) is especially good. Indeed, Copeland moves beyond the war itself to include selections that reveal the way attitudes towards American Indians developed and changed over the course of the eighteenth century. The chapters entitled "Women's Rights" and "The Edenton Tea Party and Perceptions of Women, 1774" are similarly strong: both include selections that cover multiple points on the ideological spectrum. They wonderfully reveal the paradoxical manner in which women were both restricted from, but also inscribed within the developing "public sphere" of print culture in the eighteenth century.

But these chapters also expose some of the limitations of *Debating the Issues*. For instance, the newspaper essays that deal specifically with the actions of the North Carolina Ladies Patriotic Guild—the "Edenton Tea Party"—are, perplexingly, absent from the chapter by the same name. Copeland tells us that in October of 1774 the Guild

voted to support the action of the Boston Tea party by pledging their own boycott of tea and other British imported goods. But Copeland then notes that the criticism of the Edenton Tea Party appeared only in British newspapers. This explains their lack of inclusion in the chapter, but the materials would seem worthy of inclusion, especially in light of recent research that suggests British import publications were a major part of the colonial print marketplace.

Surprising exclusions such as the above are symptomatic of one of the inherent limitations of all collections such as this: exclusions are a necessity if the work is not to become totally unwieldy, and what does get included is often heavily abridged. Also problematic is Copeland's issue-based structure. It sometimes implies there are only "two sides" to a given issue, which tends to obscure important variations in ideological complexion. The "issue" structure likely stems from a desire to reach a wide audience with the book, as *Debating the Issues* sometimes seems designed for use in an advanced undergraduate course as much as for a scholarly resource. Each chapter, for instance, concludes with a list of "discussion questions" that are aimed clearly at an undergraduate reader.

An additional quibble: though Copeland notes that the "news" was defined differently in the eighteenth century than it is today, he sometimes forces his materials into modern "boxes." For instance, he describes Ben Franklin's early century "Silence Dogood" essays in *The New England Courant* as "being very early and rare examples of newspaper 'opinion-writing'" (xv), but he makes no mention of the *Courant's* well developed and historic practice of "opinion" writing both prior to and after Silence Dogood. That is, the "Couranteers" were writing "opinion" both before and after Franklin slid his manuscript under brother James's door. One wonders if the modern journalistic concept of the "editorial" caused Copeland to oversimplify how the eighteenth century understood "news" versus "opinion."

Thus, ultimately, Copeland's work has significant value, but also limitations. It is worth consulting if the reader seeks a quick, issue-based overview of colonial newspapers. It likewise serves as a good basic supplement to recent scholarship on the colonial print "public-sphere." However, its lack of a theoretical apparatus and its tendency to simplify to meet modern journalistic concepts limit its value as a scholarly resource. Those long trips to consult the archive will, it seems, remain on the menu for some time longer.
