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Daily Life in Georgian England as Reported in the Gentleman's Magazine

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Samuel Johnson once remarked that Edward Cave, founder and first editor of the *Gentleman's Magazine* in 1731, 'never looked out of the window but with a view to the Gentleman's Magazine.' (1) This view encompassed the diversity of Georgian life, politics and culture. It captivated Cave's readers and established the magazine as the leading periodical of its day. The *Gentleman's Magazine* is an inexhaustible mine of information for scholars of eighteenth century life and, in this rich anthology of articles from its first century of publication, Professor de Montluzin draws on her unique knowledge of the magazine to provide an indispensable companion to this vast emporium for Hanoverian history.

Cave's vision was a monthly magazine (arguably the first to merit the name) that would provide its readers with a monthly almanack of useful information. Professor de Montluzin shows us that its contents ranged from foreign and domestic news, agricultural prices, letters and critical essays, to original poetry, mortality tables, lists of bankruptcies, births, marriages, deaths, military, civil and ecclesiastical promotions and titles of new publications. Although the title page proudly announced Cave as the printer of the magazine, he disguised his editorship under the fictitious persona of 'Sylvanus Urban', a name encapsulating the

magazine's appeal to both city and provincial readers. Although his successors, (David Henry from Cave's death in 1754 until 1778 and John Nichols, 1778 until 1826) subtly modified his plan, they maintained the editorial pseudonym and the philosophy of editorial integrity that was the foundation of the magazine's success.

The army of contributors who served the magazine often followed Cave's example, by writing anonymously or cloaking themselves in a pseudonym. Professor de Montluzin's indefatigable work to identify these writers and chart the network of interests that linked Sylvanus Urban's readership will be familiar to scholars through her publications in *Studies in Bibliography* and her invaluable database to contributors, uniting and supplementing the pioneering achievements of Professor James Kuist and a host of other scholars, that is accessible through the website of the Bibliographical Society of the University of Virginia (<http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/bsuva> [2]). In so doing she has turned every page of the magazine many times and this book is a (naturally) subjective anthology of the most typical and arresting articles from its first century of publication.

The book's arrangement will appeal to both scholars and the non-specialist. An Introduction, tracing the course of the magazine's editorial history, impact upon its readers and summarising research upon attributions of authorship is followed by nine chapters of extracts illustrating particular topics. Each chapter - Crime and Punishment, Medicine, Science Natural History and Archaeology, Preaching the Gospel, The Debates of the Senate of Lilliput, News from America, The French Revolution, Riots Radicalism and Reform and Literary Judgements, is introduced by a summary of the relevance of that topic to both contemporary and modern readers. Further brief introductions place each extract in context. The whole is supported by helpful footnotes, a useful bibliography and a selection of plates that emphasise the role played by the magazine in disseminating news and the latest scientific and antiquarian discoveries.

Cave's journalistic skills enabled him to boost sales with sensational stories and by pushing the boundaries of political reporting. Professor de Montluzin demonstrates clearly how Cave's vivid accounts of crimes and punishments would have scandalised and fascinated his contemporaries as much as they horrify and stimulate historians today. The hanging, drawing and quartering of Tim Croneen for murder (GM 1,1731, p. 26) and the trial of George Baggerly of Leicestershire for mutilating his wife (GM 7, 1737, pp. 250-1) are grotesque examples of eighteenth century brutality and the almost tabloid treatment awarded to Elizabeth Brownrigg's sadistic cruelty to her female apprentices in 1767 shows that Sylvanus Urban continued to offer salacious crimes to his readers long after Cave's death in 1754. The extracts selected by Professor de Montluzin show how the Gentleman's Magazine is a major source for law, order and social conscience that complements the primary source material found in quarter session and assize records.

Cave's reporting of parliamentary debates was equally daring. Although still illegal in 1732, some news sheets risked censure by reconstructing speeches from notes taken by visitors to the gallery or 'leaked' texts from Members themselves. Cave included one of these reports in July 1732 and, from August, it was his leading article, often formed by his team of writers from notes they had taken themselves in the public gallery. When the House of Commons attempted to further restrict this reporting in 1738, Sylvanus Urban retaliated by changing the title of the reports to 'Debates in the Senate of Lilliput' and veiling the names of MPs in pseudonyms and anagrams easily decipherable by his readers. Though many of these reports were prepared during the 1730s by William Guthrie and Thomas Birch, it was Samuel Johnson, solely responsible for them from late 1740 to early 1743, who assured their success. He later admitted that that he often composed the speeches 'in a garret in Exeter Street' from notes communicated to him by Cave and others who had actually heard the debates. Boswell's remark to Sir George Staunton that Johnson 'always took care to put Sir Robert Walpole in the wrong' is illustrated here by Johnson's 'Debate in the Senate of Lilliput' that reported the fall of 'Sir Rub. Walelup' in 1742 (GM 12, 1742, pp. 344, 466-71 and 507-11).

Though later editors were less brazen in their political coverage,(2) the magazine is an important source for the riots and disturbances that occasionally erupted in Georgian England. Agricultural enclosures, excise taxes, turnpikes, high prices, religious sectarianism and the growing clamour for parliamentary reform all sparked violence that was experienced by the magazine's readership both at first hand and, vicariously,

through the magazine. However, while the accounts of events such as the Priestley Riots against Birmingham nonconformists (1791), the Peterloo Massacre (1819) and Bristol's riots for parliamentary reform (1831) contain detailed accounts of the violence, Professor de Montluzin shows us that Sylvanus Urban was not always even-handed in his reporting. The account of Peterloo is as contemptuous of Henry Hunt and his female followers as it is blind to the excesses of the hussars. Generally, however, the magazine's editorship was careful to tread the middle way between extremes of popular opinion, anxious not to lose readers or inflame political authority. As deputy to John Wilkes in the City ward of Farringdon Without, a prominent liveryman and printer of the *Journals of the Lords* and *Votes of the Commons*, John Nichols, editor of the magazine during many of these upheavals, was mindful of his responsibilities. His own account of the anarchy that gripped London during the Gordon riots of 1780 (GM 50, 1780, pp. 266-8) was based on his observation of the violence which can be further traced in his surviving personal correspondence.⁽³⁾ Later, during the controversy caused by the return to London of Queen Caroline for the coronation of George IV in 1820, he urged his son, then a co-editor of the magazine, to 'Take particular care that nothing escapes or issues from [the magazine's printing office in] Parliament Street.' He suggested that any reports they included should give only the names of the witnesses and use an introduction written by himself.⁽⁴⁾

The view from Cave's window was not limited to domestic politics. His coverage of events in America and France is an important gauge of English opinion. Both Cave and his successor, David Henry, were personally interested in the American colonies, and included descriptions of indigenous wildlife alongside political reports, details of the suppression of slave revolts and the visit of Chief Tomochichi of the Creek Nation to the court of George II. Henry's friendship with Benjamin Franklin may explain the magazine's fair treatment of the grievances of the colonists and respectful chronicling of the nation's early history. Examples here include the magazine's report of General Oglethorpe's treaty with the Creek Nation (GM 3, 1733, p. 384), two views of slavery in the Colonies (GM 7, 1737, pp. 58 and 187), a report of the fire that consumed most of Charleston, Carolina, in 1740 (GM 11, 1741, p. 55) and the obituary of George Washington (GM 70-i, 1800, pp. 84). Professor de Montluzin includes John Wesley's missionary activity among the Chickasaws (GM 7, 1737, pp. 318-9) and Benjamin Franklin's experiments with lightning rods (GM 20, 1750, pp. 208 and GM 22, 1752, pp. 560-61) in her chapters relating to Preaching the Gospel and Science, Natural History and Archaeology respectively. The *Gentleman's Magazine* also gave much space to the French Revolution. Although, initially, British observers were flattered that France's Constituent Assembly sought to introduce a constitution closely modelled on their own, Sylvanus Urban quickly realised the potential for bloodshed. Warning notes were sounded in the magazine's 'Preface' as early as 1791, soon after John Nichols assumed editorial control, and throughout the revolutionary period the magazine stoutly defended British 'Religion, Manners, Literature and the Arts'. The extracts selected by Professor de Montluzin provide a harrowing narrative of the last days of the French monarchy and, in the obituary of Robespierre (GM 64-i, 1794, pp. 862-3) we are given a superb assassination by skilful penmanship of a wily lawyer who, through diligence and political acumen became the feared director of the Terror only to die on the guillotine with his jaw hanging loose after he had failed to shoot himself properly in the head.

Political coverage was, however, only part of the rich diet offered by Sylvanus Urban to his readership. The magazine's coverage of discoveries in medicine and science reflected the readership's preoccupation with health and manufacturing in the same way that its emphasis on historical essays, reviews of new publications and obituaries of eminent persons testified to the growing appetite of Mr Urban's audience for news of cultural life of Georgian England. With a circulation by the end of the eighteenth century of some 4,450 copies a month, the magazine played a central part in disseminating contributors' opinions and provides today's scholars with a compendious source for eighteenth century life.

The pages of the *Gentleman's Magazine*, like the letters and papers of the families who read it, are littered with reports of illness and the cures resorted to by doctors and patients. Ignorant of the role of germs in spreading infection, they relied on barbaric and almost magical remedies. Although the century witnessed widespread disease and fearful mortality levels, it also saw exciting medical discoveries in addition to social improvements and regulation by county authorities of the care of the sick. Professor de Montluzin's chapter

on medicine is one of the largest in this anthology and is guaranteed to tempt the growing number of medical historians to plunder this rich mine of medical detail. Individual case studies, such as that of William Jones from Bedfordshire who contracted rabies from a mad dog (GM 5, 1735, p. 386) are joined by detailed descriptions of analyses of London Mortality Lists and the pioneering work of Edward Jenner in vaccination against smallpox. It is not always easy reading: the descriptions of cataract surgery by a knife rather than scissors with its accompanying plate (GM 24, 1754, p.325) and the accidental burning to death of Miss Seddon of Aldersgate Street (GM 69-i, 1799, p. 261) are not for the squeamish. However, reports of the copious quantities of dropsical liquid tapped from widow Haggard of Shrivvenham, Berkshire (GM 2, 1732, p. 585), an 'infallible' cure for the Bloody Flux (dysentery) (GM 6, 1736, p. 622), and use of 'Russia castor', derived from dried follicles from the foreskins of Russian beavers, to treat nervous fits (GM 22, 1752, pp. 495-97) vividly capture the wonderful diversity of eighteenth century medicine. Local and family historians are becoming increasingly interested in the health of our eighteenth century ancestors: Professor de Montluzin ably demonstrates that the *Gentleman's Magazine* is a rich but neglected source for further study in this field, complementing the letters, diaries and household remedies found in many family collections.

Sylvanus Urban's audience was as fascinated by science as antiquity and the pages of the magazine are full of accounts of eclipses, reports of natural disasters and archaeological discoveries. Much space was also given to natural history and the voyages of Captain Cook in the South Seas. But Professor de Montluzin also shows that the readership could be as credulous as they were sophisticated. In 1737 the 'Historical Chronicle' department of the magazine reported the capture of a merman near Exeter (GM 7, 1737, p. 703) and there was a long debate as to where swallows might disappear to in the winter. The account of Lunardi's balloon ascent in 1784 (GM 54-ii, 1784, p711) vividly captures the scepticism, excitement and fear of the crowds gathering to witness the event. Throughout the century the excavations at Herculaneum captured the public imagination throughout Europe and were regularly reported by the *Gentleman's Magazine*. The extracts given here (GM 13, 1743, pp. 472, 586-7; GM 19, 1749, pp. 31-2), recording the undisciplined dispersal of numerous artefacts will make modern archaeologists cringe but they testify to the eighteenth century's fascination for antiquities and the 'curious'.

Literature, antiquities and biography became a fundamental feature of the *Gentleman's Magazine* after the arrival of John Nichols as editor and printer in 1778. Although Nichols largely maintained the successful formula that he had inherited, in building upon modifications that had begun under Cave he ensured the magazine's survival long into the following century and enriched its usefulness to historians today. The move away from reprinted articles digested by an editorial team had begun during Cave's lifetime and continued under David Henry. Increasingly, articles were contributed by a readership willing to forego payment in return for publication of their work. Nichols encouraged his readers to supply letters, essays, poems, illustrations and short notices to an extent not seen before. His office in Red Lion Passage, Fleet Street, became the focus of a huge correspondence between Sylvanus Urban and an enormous contributing readership.⁽⁵⁾ In 1783 he doubled the length of the magazine to allow more space for essays on historical subjects and reviews of books in place of simple lists of new publications. Not all of his readers were convinced by this change: Owen Manning (1721-1801), the Saxon scholar and Surrey antiquary, grumbled that he saw little reason to fill his shelves with similar fodder at twice the rate;⁽⁶⁾ but Nichols had brought with him a great many literary and antiquarian connections that enabled the magazine to flourish, more than ever before, as a place for scholarly debate. By opening the pages of the magazine to the increasingly literary public, Nichols inextricably linked Sylvanus Urban to the network of amateur writers, antiquaries, book clubs, and debating, scientific and philosophical societies that flourished in the late eighteenth century. Sylvanus Urban allowed his myriad correspondents in town and country to have their say in the clamour of debate about ideas, culture and taste and this is nowhere more apparent than in the reviews of literature that Professor de Montluzin has selected for her chapter on Literary Judgements. Though Mr Urban's literary editors (John Hawkesworth 1744-1773, John Duncombe 1773-1786 and Richard Gough (1786-1809) could be capricious in their choice of items for review, often ignoring works by Wordsworth, Blake or Scott in favour of works that now seem ephemeral to the modern reader, the works that they did notice reflect their preoccupation with the moral, political and religious sentiments of the authors themselves. Faced with revolution in France and the growing radical movement at home Sylvanus Urban assured his readers that

nothing subversive or offensive would appear in his pages. Simultaneously, however, his correspondents often criticised the growing taste for 'popular' literature. The review of Edward Mangin's *Essay on Light Reading, as it may be supposed to influence Moral Conduct and Literary Taste* (GM 78-ii, 1808, pp.914-6) lamenting the corrupting influence on women of modern novels, ably demonstrates the magazine's value as a source for gender history.

This theme is found again in 'Remarks on the Life of Mrs Godwin' by 'Philalethes' (GM 68-i, 1798, pp. 186-7). Mary Wollstonecraft's agnostic and radical ideas offended contemporaries as much as her campaign to educate women and her relationship with William Godwin challenged traditional morals. Despite his conservatism, however, Sylvanus Urban's obituary of Mary Wollstonecraft is a model of impartiality and sympathetic assessment of the very human failings of this 'woman of uncommon talents' (GM 67-ii, 1797, p894). It is significant that this memoir was written by John Nichols himself, for it was in this department of the magazine that he bequeathed so much to later historians. Under Nichols the magazine's lists of deaths became literary obituaries that fed the eighteenth century appetite for biography and anecdotes and formed a 'body of biography' that continues to provide scholars with a basic tool for research. In the preface to the centenary volume of the magazine in 1830, Sylvanus Urban noted with pride that there was 'scarcely an eminent individual of this Country' about whom some information could not be obtained and 'not a literary person of the eighteenth or nineteenth century whose life could properly be written without a reference to [these] volumes'.⁽⁷⁾ The contributors to the *Dictionary of National Biography* at the close of the nineteenth century clearly agreed, for the CD-ROM version of this work cites the *Gentleman's Magazine* as a source some 7000 times. But it was not just the lions of literature that were celebrated: readers submitted memoirs of friends and relatives to Sylvanus Urban in such numbers that details of a huge range of individuals will be found in the magazine and, in 1821, Nichols was obliged to beg them to be a little more discriminating.⁽⁸⁾ The joy that Nichols clearly derived from preserving these anecdotes led John Walcot to satirize him as a 'death-hunter' but, in selecting his extraordinary obituary of William Lewis of Beaumaris (GM 63-ii, 1793, p1215), Professor de Montluzin shows us that local and family historians owe Nichols an enormous debt.⁽⁹⁾

Lorraine de Montluzin is not the first to compile an anthology of the *Gentleman's Magazine*. Edward Gibbon, who described Nichols as 'the last, or one of the last, of the learned printers of Europe',⁽¹⁰⁾ urged him to print an edition of the most useful and curious articles, but he had no leisure for this and the task was left to John Walker of Oxford to edit *A Selection of Curious Articles from the Gentleman's Magazine* between 1809 and 1811 in four volumes (London, 1814). At the end of the nineteenth century George Lawrence Gomme produced his valuable, but increasingly scarce, multi-volume *Gentleman's Magazine Library*. Professor de Montluzin's authoritative introduction to the magazine and hugely enjoyable selection from Sylvanus Urban's panoramic view of Georgian England will be an essential addition to both libraries and archives. We can only hope that its undoubted success will prompt an enterprising publisher to issue the complete run of this important periodical on CD-ROM.

Notes

1. G. B. Hill and L. F. Powell, eds., *Boswell's Life of Johnson* vol. 4, (1934) p. 409.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. In 1821 John Bowyer Nichols even questioned the value of such extended parliamentary reports. In a letter to his father, John Nichols, now in private hands, he complained that the length of parliamentary debates was now so great that it was impossible to do them justice in the scanty limits of the magazine. Although a considerable portion of the volume was devoted to them, he wondered how many people actually read them or would refer to them in future: after all, the coverage was 'much fuller and better' in the daily press. Nichols Family Records volume 13, fo. 12. Nichols Archive Database reference: NAD4071.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. For details of the accumulation, arrangement and dispersal of the Nichols archive see J Pooley, 'The Papers of the Nichols Family and Business: New Discoveries and the Work of the Nichols Archive Project' *The Library* Seventh Series, 2 No 1 (March 2001), 10-52.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. John Nichols to John Bowyer Nichols, 10 Oct 1820, in Nichols Family Records vol. 12, fo. 190,

NAD3207.[Back to \(4\)](#)

5. For a summary list of some 51 public collections and ten private collections of Nichols papers, many of which include correspondence relating to the Gentleman's Magazine, see Appendixes 2 and 3 of J Pooley, 'The Papers of the Nichols Family and Business: New Discoveries and the Work of the Nichols Archive Project' *The Library*, Seventh Series, 2 No 1 (March 2001), 40-50.[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Owen Manning to Richard Gough, 6 Feb 1783, Bodleian Library, Oxford, MS. Gough Gen. Top. 43. fo. 151.[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. Gentleman's Magazine 100-i, 1830, p. iv.[Back to \(7\)](#)
8. General Index to the Gentleman's Magazine (1821), 3, p. lxxi.[Back to \(8\)](#)
9. 'A Benevolent Epistle to Sylvanus Urban, Alias Master John Nichols, Printer, Common-councilman of Farringdon Ward, and Censore-general of Literature' John Walcot, *The Works of Peter Pindar* (London, 1794).[Back to \(9\)](#)
10. Edward Gibbon to John Nichols, 24 Feb 1792, printed in John Nichols, *Literary Anecdotes of the Eighteenth Century* 8 (1814), pp. 557-560.[Back to \(10\)](#)

Other reviews:

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[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/1978>

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