

The Press and the Alex McDougall strikes

(EDITOR'S NOTE: This is the 10th in a series of articles on the American Revolution for the Bicentennial year prepared by the American Antiquarian Society in cooperation with the American Newspaper Publishers Association, to be published in The Frederick News-Post through July, 1976. We urge our readers to clip and save this interesting and enlightening series.)

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Refusing to admit guilt or to post bail after being charged with libel, Alexander McDougall went off defiantly to jail Feb. 8, 1770. This fiery Patriot of New York City had been accused of writing a "seditious" broadside entitled, THE BETRAYED INHABITANTS OF THE CITY AND COLONY OF NEW YORK.

This handbill, published anonymously a few weeks earlier by James Parker, attacked the colonial assembly and Lt. Gov. Cadwallader Colden for agreeing to a generous appropriation bill for the support of British troops stationed in New York. The provincial government, torn by a number of disputing factions, had quarreled over provision bills for several years. McDougall's arrest was the latest incident in this running dispute.

The broadside in question (signed "A Son of Liberty") was an inflammatory tirade against the legislature and against the De Lancey faction — a powerful local political group in particular. It charged that the people had been betrayed. "Will you suffer your liberties to be torn from you by your own representatives?" demanded the author. The assembly, enraged by the tone of the broadside, declared it a libel and offered a reward for information about the author.

If one of the journeymen in Parker's shop had not named him as the printer, and if the seriously ill Parker had not been pressured to identify McDougall as the author of the broadside, the radical Scotchman probably wouldn't have been arrested.

As it was, Alexander McDougall became the hero of the hour. "I rejoice," he gloated. "I am the first sufferer of Liberty since the commencement of our glorious struggle.... The cause for which I suffer is capable of converting Chains into Laurels, and Transforming a Gaol (jail) into a Paradise."

McDougall thoroughly enjoyed the

"female lovers of liberty." A satirical wit asserted that McDougall was in the "paradise of Mahomet, graced with forty-five black-eyed virgins, who are continually caressing him; while those angels of light, the TRUE Sons of Liberty

are offering incense at his shrine."

The grand jury indicted McDougall for libel, but before the case came to trial the chief witness against him, James Parker, died. Unable to proceed in this action against their tormentor, the

situation. Delegations of Patriots wined and dined him in his cell. As a martyr in the cause of freedom of the press, he posed as an American John Wilkes, the Englishman who had been imprisoned for the libel in the forty-fifth number of the periodical, THE NORTH BRITON. On one occasion he received forty-five

American Revolution - No. 10

blow for freedom

exasperated assemblymen charged McDougall (now out on bail), with "High contempt" and he was arbitrarily jailed for several months.

There were large issues involved in this matter. Could freedom of the press

be suppressed in arbitrary fashion? Could critics of the government be silenced with libel suits?

Liberty of the press and libels had been debated at various times in the colonies, the most famous instance

of press

having been the Zenger trial in New York City in 1735. The acquittal of John Peter Zenger on the grounds that printing the truth was not libelous did not mean that the press was to be free to print whatever it pleased at any time thereafter.

During the Stamp Act crisis (1765-66) angry printers had played a major role in defeating this British measure, and their defiance of authority had helped to further liberate the press. But there was still the possibility, as seen in the McDougall affair, that politicians would attempt to silence hostile critics.

New York in the late 1760s was a scene of smouldering tempers. Lieutenant Governor Colden, pointing to the dangers of a free press, informed the ministry that newspapers were "denying the legislative authority of Parliament" without "the least Enquiry into the Authors or Publishers" by the courts, the council, or the assembly. Fully aware of the attitude of government leaders, the Sons of Liberty (while commemorating the repeal of the Stamp Act) drank to "The Liberty of the Press, and Disappointment to those who endeavour to subvert it."

James Parker's NEW-YORK GAZETTE asserted boldly "Speaking and writing without restraint, are the great privileges of a free people. THE LIBERTY OF THE PRESS...ought to be defended with our lives and fortunes, for neither will be worth enjoying, when freedom is destroyed by arbitrary measures." It is small wonder that Alexander McDougall went to Parker to get his broadside printed.

When the attack on free discussion of political matters finally came in New York, it was not from the crown authorities but from the outraged assembly. Whatever the source of attack, the Sons of Liberty hotly denounced the effort to silence McDougall and convict him of libel.

The failure of the case against Alexander McDougall and the eventual dismissal of the charges against him were significant episodes in the struggle for freedom of the press in America.

PANIC BUTTONS FOR CRIME SPOTTERS

NEW YORK (AP) — More than 100 residents of the Lower East Side are being armed with "panic buttons" to trigger nearby sirens and summon neighbors to the rescue in case of a crime. The devices are tiny transistor radios that, upon being pressed, send signals to receivers in nearby apartments which in turn touch off the sirens. To cover the \$5,000 cost, 135 residents paid \$10 each for their panic buttons, additional money was raised at a block party and the city is putting up \$3 for each dollar put up locally.

Cautiously optimistic police think that false alarms will be the biggest problem for the system.

THE BOSTON- AND COUNTRY

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Gazette, JOURNAL.

Foreign and Domestic.

MONDAY, MARCH 14, 1768.

Having obtained a Copy of the House of Representatives, the General Assembly, the Court, &c. &c.

Province of MASSACHUSETTS, February 21, 1768.

SIR,

THE House have taken great Office and their several ad-

As it is a subject in which they have no duty impressed with them to be necessary, that the representation declare a point, how House therefore hope freely to communicate a common concern, in glad to receive the fact of assembly on the 10th. His House have their own sentiments: Parliament is the supreme: That in all things as the supreme legi-

To the PRINTERS.

THERE is nothing so fretting and vexatious, nothing so justly TERRIBLE to tyrants, and their tools and abettors, as a FREE PRESS. The reason is obvious; namely, Because it is, as it has been very justly observ'd, in a spirited answer to a spirited speech, "the bulwark of the People's Liberties". For this reason, it is ever watched by those who are forming plans for the destruction of the peoples liberties, with an envious and malignant eye. If a villain is portrayed and held up to the public, rather than fail in the attempt to cast an odium upon the press, they will even own the character, and pronounce if a libel; for it is their absurd doctrine, the more li-bells. It is not at all surprizing, that your press is hated, and your paper branded with the name of "infamous" by

from a sentiment of the Country to his on relations motives, did in

Striving for a free press

The BOSTON GAZETTE, an old newspaper started in 1719, was published by Benjamin Edes and John Gill in the period just before the American Revolution. Edes was in league with Samuel Adams and other Patriot leaders during the dispute with the mother country. The GAZETTE bore a masthead engraved by Paul Revere and often printed vigorous protests against British policies as well as defenses of American liberties. This issue carried an article by "Populus" (Samuel Adams) on freedom of the press. Part of this article, which

was submitted in the form of a "Letter to the Editor," can be seen in the insert of the illustration. Wartime conditions forced a temporary suspension of the paper in 1775 and a temporary move to neighboring Watertown, where the paper was published from June 1775 to October 1776. Ever reminding his readers and patrons of the Revolutionary service of his newspaper and himself, Edes could not keep pace with changing times politically and journalistically. Impoverished and broken in spirit, Edes gave up publication of the Gazette in 1798. — Courtesy, American Antiquarian Society.