



Astrology and the Popular Press: English Almanacs, 1500-1800

Bernard Stuart Capp

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Apart from the Bible, almanacs were the most influential and widely dispersed form of literature in Tudor and Stuart England. At their zenith in the later seventeenth century, they sold at a rate of 400,000 copies a year. They were read by many people who read little else, and the works of Shakespeare and Jonson, among others, have numerous references to them. Professor Capp's fascinating book (Faber, 1979) is the first to study their history in depth. It is full of vivid detail, and shows clearly how relevant they were to almost every aspect of life, social, intellectual, religious, political. As well as being a powerful force in revolutionary times, they played a central part in spreading scientific progress and medical learning, and in the development of popular journalism and printing. Possessing some of the characteristics of both pocket encyclopaedia and sermon, they conveyed information and/or moral commentary on such diverse topics as attitudes to rich and poor, agriculture, gardening, weights and measures, food, drink, sex, sleep, dress, bodily cleanliness, games, fairs, holidays, the weather, the state of the roads, posts, freemasonry, omens, witchcraft, will-making and even the sale of wives - in addition to making dramatic astrological prophecies about the likelihood of plague, famine and war in the year ahead.

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