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Book Reviews

POST-1800

Scott Anthony. *Public Relations and the Making of Modern Britain: Stephen Tallents and the Birth of a Progressive Media Profession*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012. Pp. 272. $95.00 (cloth).
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Early in his history of public relations in British media, Scott Anthony posits, in an endnote, that his "aim is not to provide British PR history with its own 'Great Man' story" (17–18). If one skipped this endnote and had no historiographical prejudice against the idea of a major figure being responsible for the birth of a discipline, it might be hard to tell the difference here. Yet the story of the career of Stephen Tallents is still easily read as Anthony would prefer it to be perceived, as "a holistic understanding of [public relations'] political, professional, organizational and personal genesis" (2).

Anthony sees public relations in Britain being born not of the political and commercial needs of the powerful to keep their public images clean, as in the United States, but of "the same liberal ideals that inspired William Beveridge and John Maynard Keynes" (1). Tallents, as an adherent to those ideals, was the first president of the Institute of Public Relations and the author of a public relations manifesto called *The Projection of England* (1932), reprinted here in full as an appendix. Anthony concentrates on Tallents because Tallents saw public relations as a means of informing the British people about the positive ways in which their government, culture, and economy intended to spend and work in their favor, and of which they should take advantage. Public relations was really one of the first signs of the coming postwar social-liberal welfare state, and Anthony would like to see Tallents recognized, like Keynes and Beveridge, as one its most important generators.

Before Tallents, public relations as a practice was largely the province of both public and private institutions themselves. The goal was merely to present benefits to British society at large in haphazard fashion. After the Great War, Tallents professionalized the field, emphasizing science, art, and benevolence as means to project the positive qualities of government, and thus an image of Britain itself, in a modern age. It was important to Tallents to distinguish

among public relations versus advertising and, especially, propaganda. The one was to promote Britain's developing democracy, diversity, and commonwealth and give a sense of pride to the British subject, whereas the other two were entirely selfish means of earning profit and manipulating public opinion.

Anthony traces Tallents's career as he made his way through government agencies with varying levels of success. Always the goal was to promote progress, not only to expose people to film, radio, aviation, agricultural products, art, and science, but also to show people how they might benefit from them economically and culturally. Beginning at the Empire Marketing Board (EMB) in the mid-1920s, Tallents was responsible for commissioning its famous posters; even while the EMB struggled to get people to "buy British Empire," its posters were being exhibited in display cases like museum pieces.

In the EMB, Tallents promoted documentary films as a means of projecting a diverse and strong national culture. John Grierson's *Drifters* (1928) and *Song of Ceylon* (1933) were particularly successful. The film unit itself survived the EMB's demise, as Grierson and Tallents moved on to the General Post Office in 1933. In between, Tallents outlined his principles for the British public relations industry by writing *The Projection of England* (1932). He called for radio, film, and other new technologies and media to embrace a prominent role in promoting a healthy national culture in the midst of the depression, partly by using such modern technology to emphasize the greatness of the British past.

Tallents's ideals would seem to make him an ideal candidate to shape the image of the BBC during the interwar period; such would not prove to be the case. John Reith himself asked Tallents to become Controller of Public Relations in 1935, then disdained every effort Tallents embarked upon to make the BBC amenable to public opinion. While Anthony notes that Tallents's priorities and activities were recognized in later years—most notably in the establishment of listener research—at the time, the imperious and bluenosed Reith could not stand him, believing the BBC should direct public opinion and not the other way around. The result, for Tallents, was a stalled career in terms of accomplishment, bouncing among the BBC, the Ministry of Information, and the Ministry of Town and Country Planning during the Second World War.

Even after the war, as the first appointed president of the Institute of Public Relations in 1948, Tallents found it oddly hard to define what he did in a newly Americanized culture and economy; "public relations" became more about market research and sculpted commercial images rather than national advocacy. The triumph of Tallents's career was still to come, however. Anthony sees the 1951 Festival of Britain as the acme of Tallents's—well—talents. The idea of public relations as the promotion of a national vision culminated in the festival's buildings, its emphasis on diversity, its representation of the technological future, and its emphasis on the benevolence of the coming welfare state. The rest of his career, however, would see more and more questioning of the role of public relations in British public life, not least by Tallents himself, who seemed bewildered by the bowdlerization of his national project.

As Anthony notes, his book was inspired by the 2004 report by the Phillis committee recommending the end of the Government Information and Communication Service, a sign that "public relations practitioners['] . . . malign influence had sunk British public life further into the gutter than ever before" (200). Considering that Anthony is now working on the career of the pioneering market researcher Mark Abrams, one might guess he is about to show us how and where the tables turned. In the meantime, he has provided historians of twentieth-century British culture with a contrary vision of public relations and how it fits into the history of social liberalism in the first half of the twentieth century.

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