Book Review

Mark Sheehan, Deakin University

Public Relations and the Making of Modern Britain – Stephen Tallents and the Birth of a Progressive Media Profession (2012)

Scott Anthony
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As many writers now debate the use of public relations as a descriptor or nomenclature of the profession one is left to ponder what might have been had Sir Stephen Tallents’ term projector been adopted – leaving the practitioners of today as projectionists.

Tallents’ ideas and views of what became PR are well documented in Scott Anthony’s book Public Relations and the Making of Modern Britain – Stephen Tallents and the Birth of a Progressive Media Profession (2012). Anthony writes that previous opinions by some early UK PR academics that the practice of public relations was an American innovation largely ignores the great body of work that Tallents and others (Pick, Grieson, Gervas Huxley etc.) did in the interwar years in Britain.

This book argues that Tallents and others developed a unique British version of public relations – or as Tallents referred to his expertise: projection, salesmanship, publicity, intelligence and propaganda. This
British version of PR according to Anthony had its origin in the Civil Service, the sector in which Tallents spent his entire working life. Furthermore, Anthony attributes a singular national characteristic to the development of public relations:

The ‘Britishness’ of public relations reflected the pioneers’ roots in the public sector. Having worked alongside businessmen and trade unionists during the War, they contrasted the lack of transparency and ‘shoddy carelessness’ of the private sector with the openness of government.

Although given the rise of censorship and the obfuscatory military leadership in WWI it is reasonable to query whether government openness existed at this time.

Tallents and, importantly, the people he surrounded himself with in his professional life (Anthony tells us little of his personal life) saw PR as a social movement. Anthony contrasts the patriotic Tallents’ alignment of PR to public administration as an ‘ongoing infinite process of social development’ compared to the cynical Bernays’ ‘conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organised habits and opinions of the masses [and] the executive arm of the invisible government’.

The book caries no detail of Tallents’ privileged upbringing at Harrow and Balliol. There is little detail of his early working life at the Board of Trade. We are told of his good fortune in securing useful contacts at this time through his work with William Beveridge (of the Beveridge Report fame) and his influence in establishing the Labour Exchanges (employment agencies), where he was to gain first-hand experiences brokering creative compromises between employers, trade unionists, local councillors, social workers and educationists, as he answered complaints, promoted the exchanges on speaking tours and administered National Insurance contributions (unemployment) – it is this background Anthony states would influence Tallents and the British version of PR.

Invalided out of the War as a commissioned officer in 1916, he went to work at the Ministry of Food assisting in the introduction of food rationing. This policy required public consent and in so doing the Ministry demanded not only a media program but also communication initiatives including a Consumer Council, where the issues of the citizens were heard – the ‘fairness’ of rationing was regarded as a success of WWI. This successful campaign by the Ministry established a belief in the Civil Service that ‘good publicity was an integral part of good administration’.
In the immediate post-war period, Tallents secured diplomatic work and drew up the boundaries that established the nations of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, later was appointed Governor of Riga, and then worked in Ireland during the preparation for partition of that nation. This ambassadorial experience according to Anthony ‘would inform the rise of public relations in Britain’ and shape the ‘strategic and research driven conception of public relations’ developed by Tallents and others.

The book then breaks into chapters focusing on Tallents’ career growth in public relations. Firstly at the Empire Marketing Board (EMB), where he expounded that ‘public relations needed to be understood as a series of overlapping co-operative processes rather than just the simple propagation of a message’ (p. 30). The role of the EMB was to make the Brits ‘Empire conscious consumers’. The EMB poster series not only asked consumers to purchase Empire products but, according to another author, encouraged them ‘to see the Empire as an ethical concern’*. Although it was a Marketing Board, Tallents surprisingly made no effort to define marketing in his tenure at the EMB; rather, he began to articulate his notion of public relations as a communication system that was innovative and reactive to organisational practice. Tallents’ use of art (particularly posters), cinema and documentaries lead to the development of his manifesto of public relations, the *Projection of England* (the book includes a reprint of this influential pamphlet). His posited view in the *Projection of England* of ‘film, radio, poster and exhibition as the sextant and compass which would manoeuvre citizenship over the new (democratic) distances’ indicates a vision of the potential of public relations. Tallents was knighted in 1932 for his work at the EMB, and as this organisation wound down he was recruited to join the UK Post Office (GPO) as Controller of Public relations tasked with developing ‘a programme of public diplomacy’.

His brief tenure at the GPO (1933–35) was viewed ambiguously, although it cemented his place as the UK’s number one PR practitioner and, on joining the BBC in 1935, Anthony stated his reputation was at its zenith. Once again his legacy at the BBC had mixed reviews. His prescient use of research as his chief tool to inform PR policies notwithstanding, it was later judged that the ‘Programme Division (of the BBC) felt ... that it was becoming more and more the servant of public relations’. His work from 1936 and in WWII at the shadow Ministry of Information saw once again a conflict, echoed in the chapter title ‘The limits of public relations’. He saw out the reminder of WWII in the Ministry of Town and Country Planning in charge of its public relations. Here Tallents combined his philosophy of underpinning PR with ‘education and cultural exchange’ and repeated his EMB strategies of allying progress with the aims of his organisation.
His post-war work was largely concerned with the 1951 Festival of Britain and Tallents' key role in establishing the Institute of Public Relations, of which he served as inaugural president in 1951. Anthony describes his work at the Festival as the 'triumph of the Tallents tradition' because it successfully employed the thoughts laid out in his 1932 manifesto. Ironically it was the post-war programs of the Atlee government that saw an end to his tradition and Anthony concludes the book with a succinct explanation of why this occurred.

This book is a very welcome addition to the scholarship of public relations history, especially for those researching its development in nations of the former British Empire. It is interesting for those particular researchers to note that Sir Stephen Tallents was the midwife of a practice of public relations that is more closely aligned with activism than corporatism. He was an original thinker who had a vision for public relations and, due to the times and circumstances, was able to successfully implement it. His success also lay in the unique characteristic observed by his acolyte Gervas Huxley* … ‘where Tallents was exceptional was that he was a civil servant with an imagination completely unfettered by red tape’.

* Horton, M. (2012). Empire Marketing Board Posters, Manchester: Manchester Art Gallery.

^ Huxley, G. (1970). Both Hands – An Autobiography, London: Chatto & Windus.