The Projection of Britain
For
my family & friends
THE PROJECTION OF BRITAIN

British overseas publicity and propaganda
1919—1939

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Preface

This book is a pioneering study of a little-known aspect of British foreign policy between the wars. Essentially, it is an examination of the peacetime origins and early development of what are today loosely termed Britain’s Overseas Information Services. Accordingly, the book traces the work of the Foreign Office News Department and its important press office, the commercial propaganda conducted by such organisations as the Empire Marketing Board, the Travel Association and the Industrial Publicity Unit, the foundation and rapid expansion of the British Council, and the origins of the BBC’s World and External services. It is not, however, designed to provide a definitive history of Britain’s world-wide propaganda activities during the twenty years of peace that followed the First World War. Nor does this book aspire to be comprehensive in its treatment of the issues it does examine. Rather, it is intended to be a preliminary investigation into those official and semi-official organisations which were established to ‘project’ Britain abroad, the reasons for their creation, and the peculiar features which characterised such work.

Despite considerable scholarly interest in this subject during the inter-war period itself, historians, at least in the United Kingdom, have only recently begun to appreciate the importance of studying propaganda and its impact upon public opinion as part of our understanding of the twentieth century. There is still a long way to go before the subject earns the credibility its significance deserves. Few textbooks or general historical surveys dealing with the period devote more than a brief mention to the British government’s activities in this direction, and even then it is usually in the context of the First and Second World Wars. Recent research into the subject has not unnaturally tended to concentrate upon the more blatant examples of state propaganda, either in the hands of the totalitarian regimes or its use in time of war. Though inevitable — and desirable —
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this concentration has tended to reinforce the general, if inaccurate, impression that Britain did not conduct such an unpleasant activity in peacetime and that it was simply one of the necessary evils of war. Apart from introductory sections in books such as Marjorie Ogilvy-Webb’s The Government Explains (1965), Sir Robert Marrett’s Through the Back Door: An Inside View of Britain’s Overseas Information Services (1968), Sir Fife Clark’s The Central Office of Information (1970), and J. B. Black’s Organising the Propaganda Instrument: The British Experience (1973), little work has yet been done on Britain’s inter-war propaganda, and still less with the benefit of documentary material now available at the Public Record Office at Kew. This book is intended to help fill this gap.

Because it attempts to break fresh ground, the book enjoys a large degree of freedom in its approach and analysis, for this is not a subject on which there are widely held views and interpretations to either modify or refute. This must not be taken to imply that the book deals with a somewhat esoteric subject that was confined to the lower echelons of officialdom, even if it did tend to operate ‘on the edge of diplomacy’ on a day-to-day basis. Indeed, as will be seen, the question of overseas propaganda occupied a proportion of the time of every Foreign Secretary during the period under review, although admittedly some, most notably Arthur Henderson (1929–31) and Anthony Eden (1936–8), gave the subject more sympathetic consideration than did others. This may have been due as much to force of circumstance as it was to the result of personal interest, because, generally speaking, propaganda was not an activity with which British officials felt comfortable.

On the other hand, much of the text is unavoidably devoted to an account of the organisations involved, although every attempt has been made to avoid the appearance of a straightforward administrative history. It has also been considered necessary to rely heavily upon quotations by the principal characters involved, to see the story through their eyes, because Foreign Office officials are not usually credited with an appreciation of many of the issues examined here. Moreover, strict limitations have been imposed upon the scope of the work, not least because of the twenty-year period which it attempts to cover. The book deals only with official and semi-official publicity and propaganda conducted abroad. It has not been possible to examine other than in passing certain related sub-
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jects such as domestic and imperial propaganda, and the important question of censorship. That the Foreign Office had to give due consider-ation, in propaganda as in other matters, to all parts of the world from Europe to the Far East is not always explicitly apparent from the text. And whereas every attempt has been made to place the propaganda conducted by the Foreign Office or under its auspices within the broader context of that conducted not only by other government departments but also by other countries, much re-search nonetheless remains to be done in this field.

The approach is historical, although any study of propaganda admittedly requires some appreciation of sociological methodology as well as an understanding of psychology and political science. But my chief purpose has been to tell a story which has not been fully told before, and I hope, to paraphrase J. R. R. Tolkien, that this tale will grow in the telling until it becomes a history of British peacetime propaganda overseas between the wars and includes glimpses of history that preceded it.

I have found it virtually impossible to give a consecutive account of Britain’s involvement in such work during the inter-war period, because of the many and diverse origins from which it developed. Reference to those origins where they pre-date the end of the First World War is made in the opening pages of each chapter, but a chronological spinal cord has been abandoned in favour of a thematic treatment. This approach can often involve a simplification, and sometimes even a falsification, of the subject, because, however convenient it might be for the historian to isolate the different themes, those officials who had to deal with such matters (particularly at the higher levels) were unable to do so but rather had to consider develop-ments in relation to each other. Every attempt has therefore been made to relate the various themes examined here not only to each other but also to much wider issues.

The book is divided into three sections. British overseas propa-ganda was organised not by reference to individual media — press, radio, film — but to its variable forms: political, commercial and cultural propaganda. At the hub of all Britain’s official activities abroad between 1919 and 1939 lay the News Department of the Foreign Office. Part One describes the work of this department, which can be loosely described as political propaganda, and also introduces the leading Foreign Office exponents of increased British
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involvement in such work. Part Two is divided into two chapters which deal with commercial and cultural propaganda respectively, but it might also be said to examine the theory and practice of what came to be known as ‘the projection of England’. Like Part One, this section examines its themes within a broad but distinct chronological framework. The mistake of many contemporaries was to assume that commercial and cultural propaganda were two entirely separate types of activity when, in fact, they were mutually complementary. Although commercial and cultural propaganda have been examined in separate chapters, this vital point must be borne in mind, as indeed must the fact that the underlying aim of both forms of activity was ultimately political.

This became much more apparent during the years from 1935 to 1939. Part Three of the book, which deals with the period of the peacetime machinery’s most rapid expansion, is divided into three chapters, each of which deals with a specific development within the broader context of the growing political significance of commercial and cultural propaganda. In effect, this third section examines the transition of the ‘projection of Britain’ into that process which became known as psychological rearmament as the prospect of fighting another war became a distinct possibility. The final chapter, which deals mainly with the preparations for the conduct of propaganda in the event of another war, is slightly anomalous in that it does not deal with Britain’s peacetime propaganda activities but has been included because it throws some new light on the preparations, which anyway had serious implications for those organisations already in existence.

It is notoriously difficult to assess the impact of propaganda, particularly when it is directed to foreign audiences. Although some attempt has been made to draw conclusions at the end of each chapter and at the end of the book, the commentaries are designed more to provoke further discussion and research than to provide the reader with any categorical solutions to complex problems.

Finally, a word about the title of the book. Just as Sir Stephen Talents, who made famous the phrase ‘the projection of England’ after publishing a pamphlet with that title in 1932, made no apologies to the Scots, the Welsh or the Irish, because, he wrote, ‘they may be counted on to take their full share in the study and practice of the new art’ for which he pleaded, so also do I make no apologies for
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adapting his phrase for my purposes, because, without Tallents and people like him who were prepared to convert unfashionable theory into unpopular practice, this book would never have been made possible.
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Needless to say, all errors of fact and judgement are mine, and
mine alone.
Abbreviations

ABC  Arabic Broadcasting Committee
APA  All Peoples Association
BBC  British Broadcasting Corporation
BC  British Council papers
BFI  British Film Institute
BIF  British Industries Fair
BLI  British Library of Information
BT  Board of Trade
CAB  Cabinet Office papers
CBPA  Committee for the Co-ordination of British Publicity Abroad
CID  Committee of Imperial Defence
DOT  Department of Overseas Trade
EH  Electra House
EMB  Empire Marketing Board
FBI  Federation of British Industries
FO  Foreign Office
GPO  General Post Office
Hansard  Parliamentary Debates (Commons)
HMG  His Majesty’s Government
INF  Information papers
OEPEC  Overseas Emergency Publicity Expenditure Committee
PID  Political Intelligence Department
PREM  Prime Minister’s Office papers
PWE  Political Warfare Executive
RAF  Royal Air Force
SIS  Secret Intelligence Service
SOE  Special Operations Executive
T  Treasury papers