

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Thomas Hajkowski. *The BBC and National Identity in Britain, 1922-53*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010. xii + 252 pp. \$89.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7190-7944-3.

Reviewed by Eugenia M. Palmegiano (St. Peter's College)

Published on Jhistory (February, 2012)

Commissioned by Heidi Tworek



The BBC Sponsors “Britishness”

The study of media, like Janus, typically has two faces. One looks at what public communication says; the other looks at what public communication is. The first envisions media as an important repository for research on another topic; the second envisions media as a topic worthy of research. As a consequence of this bifurcation, scholarship tends to polarize media at the cultural periphery or center. *The BBC and National Identity in Britain, 1922-53* goes a long way in reconciling these perspectives. By focusing on BBC attempts to harmonize seemingly contradictory perceptions of being British to form a coherent national identity, the book demonstrates that media can be source and subject.

Penning for the series *Studies in Popular Culture*, Thomas Hajkowski proposes to show how the BBC promoted “Britishness,” an identity series editor Jeffrey Richards describes as “inclusive and pluralistic” (p. ix). Moving from the Corporation’s early days to the arrival of television and commercial radio, Hajkowski theorizes that the BBC cultivated Britishness by airing homogeneous and heterogeneous material. Broadcasts about empire and monarchy hyped commonality and those on Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland, compatible variations. Proving success in spinning Britishness on radio requires attention to BBC and its audiences, not evenly served here. Hajkowski acknowledges the difficulties in accurately measuring listeners’ responses, given the un-

certainty in tracking reactions of individuals. Hence, he makes an effort to support his case quantitatively from the numbers available and qualitatively from listeners’ letters. His thrust, however, is top down. Announcing early that “[t]his book takes programs, not policy, as its subject” (p. 4), he details them at length, setting them in context by utilizing *Radio Times* and *The Listener*. Fortunately, loyalty to this methodology does not restrict his commentary on policy. Resting on a solid foundation of BBC written archives, personnel writings and speeches, and an impressive array of recent investigations, the volume’s seven chapters reveal how Corporation and government decisions, from scheduling to content, impacted the marketing of Britishness.

Preceding the evidentiary trailblazing, an introduction reviews at some length current historiography on identity, traces briefly BBC development from the 1920s to the 1950s, summarizes chapter themes, and concludes, as does every chapter, with endnotes that facilitate easy access to references. Especially helpful in the introduction is a discussion of how media shape national identity, wherein Hajkowski credits Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* (1986) and Paul Ward’s *Britishness Since 1870* (2004) for highlighting its fluidity and flexibility.

Thereafter, two chapters assess BBC imperial pro-

gramming, from 1923 to 1939 and from 1939 to 1953. Opening with an analysis of “new imperial history” (p. 20), Hajkowski next confirms how family, education, and social rank predisposed key BBC men, from original general manager John Reith forward, to construct the empire. For them, it was a symbol of unity representing their version of the best British values and institutions. To legitimize this rendering of Britishness for its sundry audiences, the BBC featured instructional segments and entertaining sagas. Initially, talks emphasized the respectability of an empire acquired by trade and colonialism rather than conquest; stories, which listeners purportedly preferred, starred supposed heroes, among them Charles Gordon and Herbert Kitchener. Hajkowski observes that men of this ilk typified what the BBC deemed “typical British characteristics,” such as “courage, perseverance, and governing genius” (p. 24). Nevertheless, as he realizes, this profile of Britishness was a hard sell from 1939 to 1953. In those years empire as emblematic of British unity had to contend with indigenous resistance, social democracy, imperial dismemberment, working-class apathy, and a public apparently more interested in American culture than imperial dominance. Still he reckons that BBC staff members succeeded in linking the empire to great power status, which they presumed would perpetuate pride in being British.

Hajkowski’s chapter on monarchy likens its BBC presentation to an umbrella of Britishness over peoples within and beyond the kingdom. The Corporation script, he premises, tied monarchy to empire by elucidating additional traits of Britishness. The empire, according to the BBC, was a single family headed by royals who imbued it with tradition and cohesion. Thus, the BBC expected that covering spectacles, from weddings at home to tours overseas, and lobbying kings to do Christmas broadcasts would bolster familial Britishness near and far. Indeed one might postulate that the roots of the global media frenzy surrounding the royals in the last three decades begins with BBC reporting of the coronation of Elizabeth II with which this chapter finishes.

Subsequent chapters turn the tables by centering on BBC regional services in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. Maintaining that they have not garnered much historical scrutiny, Hajkowski earmarks them as crucial in nurturing another aspect of Britishness: cultural but complementary diversity. He posits that exposure to some local programming allowed listeners to see themselves as Scots or Welsh and to commence as Ulsterites within a British frame. Yet he admits that London always controlled the purse and sometimes the entire schedule,

notably in World War II. Further, Corporation leadership reputedly had little sympathy for anything smelling of political separatism in Scotland and Wales.

The chapters on Scotland and Wales display similarities and differences. The chapter on the Scottish Regional Programme discloses that, with a healthy portion of 1930s evening time, the many Scots on staff cobbled together a lineup suitable for urban and country residents. Programming on folk culture aimed to reinforce Scottish identity and that on Scots’ imperial contributions, to underscore Britishness. But World War II ended regional service, irritating Scots when London trimmed air hours and announcers used “English” for “British” battle actions. Though a minor complaint during the Blitz, it perhaps portends the postwar independence movement, which signals the ultimate failure of the BBC to persuade an already complex society of the merits of Britishness. The chapter on Wales reminds readers that from 1932 to 1937 it had no BBC region but shared the West with part of England, leaving northerners to news from Manchester and Liverpool. Even when BBC Wales was born in 1937, weaving a Welsh identity was no easy task because language, custom, and economy divided the country. Wales, as Scotland, lost its region temporarily during World War II and resumed advancing cultural nationalism post-1945.

Northern Ireland is another matter. Here, Hajkowski offers his most solid argument on the nexus between the BBC Regions and Britishness. His evidence clearly indicates that the Corporation did not merely strengthen Britishness but invented an Ulster identity. Confronted by inhabitants divided by religion, the BBC seems to have exercised more discretion about faith in the interwar era than after 1945. Hajkowski does not fully explore the implications of an interwar Catholic South evolving from home rule to independence, with the potential therein for expansion in the North. Rather, he addresses how the threat of a neutral Eire during World War II aided the BBC campaign to forge a Northern pseudo-Irishness, an identity supplemented by a large dose of sectarianism following victory. If, as Hajkowski suggests, the BBC triumphed in creating Ulster, then its later nightmare may have advantaged Scottish and Welsh dreams of devolution more than any BBC broadcast.

Hajkowski asserts that by 1957 television had undermined the BBC as an authority on Britishness. The Corporation, nonetheless, continues in the twenty-first century to spread this notion. By affording listeners the opportunity to experience British and Commonwealth

events simultaneously, it sustains for many across the planet a sense of shared heritage, embodied in a multi-cultural entity complete with a monarchial head. More significant, by endorsing dual cultural identities, the BBC remains an opponent of the parochial insularity so pandemic now. Much BBC rhetoric of Britishness smacks

of mythmaking, but this identity, like most others, is acquired and alienable. By calling attention to the BBC as recorder of and player in the game of the past, Hajkowski has verified that media belong in the big leagues of both historical documentation and social institution.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/jhistory>

Citation: Eugenia M. Palmegiano. Review of Hajkowski, Thomas, *The BBC and National Identity in Britain, 1922-53*. Jhistory, H-Net Reviews. February, 2012.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=35197>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.