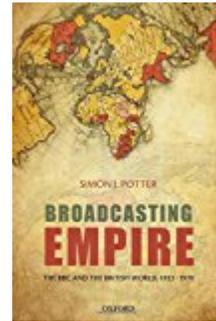




**Simon James Potter.** *Broadcasting Empire: The BBC and the British World, 1922-1970.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012. 261 pp. \$125.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-956896-3.



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## How the British Broadcasting Corporation Shaped an Empire

Since its debut on November 14, 1922, the British Broadcasting Corporation has held an esteemed place in the hearts of English-speaking broadcasters. The BBC's commitment to a public broadcasting model that emphasizes quality and impartiality stands in stark contrast to many commercial broadcasters around the world. Their philosophies make the BBC an admired and valuable contributor to modern broadcast production. The organization's path to its current place in the media landscape, however, has not always been smooth.

Many books explore the British Broadcasting Corporation's history, but Simon Potter has produced what may be among the most defining efforts to document the BBC's past, particularly its influence on other broadcasting entities within the British Empire. With impressive detail, Potter explores behind-the-scenes efforts by BBC executives to create a global radio—and later television—power by influencing fledgling broadcast industries around the British Commonwealth and in dominion nations like Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, and Canada.

As with all new radio systems in the 1920s, those who launched the British Broadcasting Corporation sought to determine what it could and should be. Potter explains how BBC leaders debated the value of a public broadcasting model versus a commercial one, ultimately embracing the former. The BBC was seen as a means by which British culture could be promoted and preserved, an essential value to the middle- and upper-class men who led the new network. But the launch of the BBC was more than just a foray into the radio age. Early on, BBC managers recognized the power of radio to unite countries in the empire. Radio offered not only a unique outreach opportunity but a powerful propaganda tool that could promote imperial ideals, particularly among the commonwealth's white populations.

Central figures are skillfully developed in Potter's work, providing one of the book's primary strengths: well-crafted biographical profiles of the characters that add a sense of authenticity and drama to what could otherwise be dry historical prose. By painting vivid portraits of people like Sir John Reith, the British Broadcast-

ing Corporation's first director general, and H. P. Brown, who led emerging radio efforts in Australia, conflicts and struggles to define early radio come to life. Reith saw the BBC as an antidote to what he believed was the cultural decay of the era. He believed such power should be exported to countries with British connections. Brown, on the other hand, frequently resisted Reith lest he have too much influence over Australia's evolving radio structure.

It was not just Australia where conflict occurred. A central theme of Potter's book focuses on the growing pains experienced by the BBC as it tried to export its ideals and its programs. Quite often, broadcasters in Australia and Canada chose not to rebroadcast BBC content. That thwarted many of the BBC's empire-building ambitions. Indeed, early on, the dominions were not unlike children coming of age and trying to find themselves. In the shadow of an overbearing BBC parent, some countries, like New Zealand, often acquiesced and did what was expected. Others, like Canada, were akin to rebellious teenagers fighting back hard against home office expectations. With the United States right next door, Canadian broadcasters struggled to ensure they had options should a commercial broadcasting system be needed to compete with America's powerful entertainment offerings.

The 1950s produced more conflict, especially when commercial broadcasting systems became necessary to fund television's growth in Great Britain and the commonwealth. The effort by dominions to maintain national identities through broadcasting and the clashes it produced with the BBC remain a central part of the book right up to where it ends in 1970. Yet there were moments when imperial broadcasters came together in a spirit of cooperation that made radio and television stronger throughout the commonwealth. World War II provided an opportunity for the BBC to "convince audiences around the empire that they were part of a single great collaborative venture" (p. 124). The war forced broadcasters with ties to the United Kingdom to work together, ultimately making commonwealth broadcasting stronger. Additionally, royal events like the abdication of King Edward VIII in 1936, the death of King George VI in 1952, and the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II in 1953 tugged at patriotic heartstrings around the empire. Coverage of the monarchy ensured that broadcasters had

large audiences, which made everyone happy.

The British Broadcasting Corporation eventually developed greater respect for broadcasters not only in Australia, New Zealand, and Canada, but also in African and Asian nations of the commonwealth. By the 1960s, under the leadership of director general Hugh Carlton Greene, the BBC embraced a more direct approach to competing with commercial rivals. Even for Canadians, who had grown ambivalent about their British roots, a connection to the BBC remained. Events like the annual Commonwealth Broadcasting Conference allowed nations of the empire to feel valued by London, which spoke to the real progress that had been made in forging relationships. Indeed, Potter effectively maps out the evolution of the British Broadcasting Corporation from a near-dictatorial entity to a leader of commonwealth partners.

The book's level of detail, although largely beneficial, can be overwhelming in some passages, especially when exploring technical obstacles faced by the BBC. Furthermore, while Potter does a fine job introducing the people who played a role in the network's early days, there are times when it can be difficult to keep track of the sheer number of secondary players. Lastly, even though it is not central to Potter's effort, there are times when greater acknowledgement of the audience, as opposed to broadcasting executives, could have added valuable context to help the reader understand important events and why certain decisions were made.

Even today, the BBC struggles to maintain its public broadcasting model amid threats of commercial competition. Potter demonstrates that this has been, in fact, a component of the BBC landscape since day one. In many ways, modern-day challenges are no different from ones broadcasters faced more than half a century ago. The case of the British Broadcasting Corporation, as portrayed by Potter, hints that the more things change, the more they stay the same. That is, after all, the remarkable thing about studying history: one realizes that there are few new problems. Most, if not all, of the major challenges facing current journalists and media organizations have been experienced by those who came before. By studying the successes and failures of the BBC's development in the twentieth century, modern broadcasters may find a valuable road map to help them maneuver twenty-first-century dilemmas.

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