

Creating Links between British and American Broadcasters in the 1930s

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My research project centers on the links that the Rockefeller Foundation created and supported between British and American artists and institutions in the field of broadcasting. Though much of the groundwork here has been admirably laid by William Buxton¹ and Brett Gary², my week in the archives allowed me to bring out the British element, notably in the initiatives undertaken by John Marshall, a long-time program officer in the Humanities Division of the Rockefeller Foundation. I focused on three aspects of this work: fellowships provided to allow American broadcasters to study at the BBC and British broadcasters to visit and study in the United States; the support that the Rockefeller Foundation and members of the Rockefeller family provided to station W1XAL in Boston; and the project headed by Archibald MacLeish at the Library of Congress from 1939 to 1941. A thread that ties all three of these projects together, besides the work of John Marshall, is the career of Charles Siepmann, a BBC executive who came to the US under Rockefeller Foundation auspices and was involved in all three arenas (and several more as well). Another significant figure is John Grierson, the British documentarist

who advised on some of these projects. My tentative conclusion is that Marshall's cultivation of links with British broadcasting had an enormous impact on the shape and direction of radio in the United States, and that this influence lingers significantly today.

In terms of trans-Atlantic fellowships, I was able to expand the list of fellows I knew about to include several more. Among those whose Rockefeller-funded training at the BBC contributed significantly to American broadcasting were Harold McCarty, Lester Ward Parker, Loring B. Andrew, Philip H. Cohen, Lloyd Free, Arthur Northwood, and Jeanette Sayre Smith. British scholars and artists involved in the study and practice of broadcasting in the US include Siepmann, Grierson, Rudolf Arnheim, Arthur Lloyd-Jones, and Thomas Baird. Other Americans received fellowships to study in the US and were influenced by Marshall's agenda. Aside from setting up these exchanges, it became clear to me what a central role Marshall played in cultivating key personnel at the BBC, from Sir John Reith, its Director-General, down to the producer level. The basis for the strong pattern of program exchange and co-production with the BBC that would later form such a central aspect of American educational radio and television was first established in the 1930s by John Marshall and the Rockefeller Foundation.

In terms of station W1XAL and the World Wide Broadcasting Foundation, Marshall makes it clear in his officer's diary that he had initially conceived of this station as his primary exemplar of what an American public service broadcaster might accomplish. Though wartime events – in the course of which W1XAL (later called WRUL) was virtually taken over first by British Intelligence, then the US Office of War Information – resulted in disillusionment with the station, it nonetheless contributed vitally to the development of radio in the United States.

The Library of Congress project holds immense interest for me, as I believe it was here that the art of the sound documentary reached its highest point in American radio, again

significantly influenced by developments in Great Britain. A corresponding collection of records and recordings exists at the Library, which I hope to explore in the near future. Though, once again, the events of World War II disrupted the project and limited its impact, when placed in conjunction with documentary efforts in Britain, the accomplishments of this group – advised, at Marshall’s behest, by both Siepmann and Grierson – take on new significance.

Overall, inserting the actions of John Marshall, David H. Stevens (director of the RF’s Humanities Division), and the Rockefeller Foundation into the history of broadcasting in the US fills an enormous gap in the existing historical literature, and helps to provide a missing link between the development of the humanities more generally and the field of radio, especially in the 1930s and 1940s. I will be using this research in a book-length work on the history of interaction between British and American broadcasting, still in progress but with a winter 2009 completion anticipated. I also hope to develop a new project in the history of the sound documentary/drama that will draw heavily on this material.

I greatly appreciate the opportunity to visit the Rockefeller Archive and the expert assistance of its archivists and staff.

ENDNOTES:

¹ See, for example,

Buxton, William J., editor. *Patronizing the Public: American Philanthropy's Transformation of Culture, Communication and the Humanities*. Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2009.

and such articles as,

Buxton, William J. "From Radio Research to Communications Intelligence: Rockefeller Philanthropy, Communications Specialists, and the American Policy Community." In *The Political Influence of Ideas: Policy Communities and the Social Sciences*, edited by Alain-G. Gagnon and Stephen Brooks. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Publishing Group, 1994, pp. 187-209.

And also,

Buxton, William J. "Rockefeller Philanthropy and Communications, 1935-1939." In *The Development of the Social Sciences in the United States and Canada: The Role of Philanthropy*, edited by Theresa Richardson and Donald Fisher. Stamford, Connecticut: Ablex Publishing Corporation, 1999, pp. 177-192.

² Gary, Brett. *The Nervous Liberals: Propaganda Anxieties from World War I to the Cold War*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1999.