The Empire Marketing Board

So far we have emphasized a number of means by which modern patterns of eating emerged in Britain. The emergence of a food trade press shows us that the retailers were using flows of information to gear up for mass consumption. The increasing availability of new products was one consequence of their better organization and the public gradually came to accept these and demand a range of processed and branded goods. A substantial proportion the raw materials for the changing diet were sourced overseas and we will now move on to consider one government initiative that sought to influence both retailers and consumers to ask for products with an Empire origin. Between 1926 and 1933 the Empire Marketing Board (EMB) was charged with this responsibility.

The Imperial Conference held in 1923 recommended increased preferences on dried fruits and wine from empire producers, as well as new preferences on canned salmon and lobster, on apples, honey and fruit juices, and a ten year guarantee of existing preferences on sugar and tobacco.[1] Under British influence, a policy also emerged in favour of an organization, based in London, to foster and coordinate greater economic unity among the dominions. There were delays, however. On the one hand, the Canadian government initially withheld its consent because they were suspicious that the new Imperial Economic Committee (IEC), 'would interfere…with the rights of the different parts of the empire to manage their own affairs and fiscal policies.'[2] On the other hand, there were two General Elections to distract British politicians and it was not until a Conservative Government was returned in late 1924 that money was committed to the IEC and its offshoot, the EMB.

In its first report in 1927, the EMB enumerated its functions as (a) publicity and education among British consumers about empire goods, (b) research to help producers throughout the empire, and (c) the promotion of schemes for the improvement of production and marketing, such as the development of trade in fruit produced in the tropical portions of the empire; the carriage of pedigree stock from the UK to the overseas parts of the empire; and various other schemes.[3] Stephen Tallents, the EMB Secretary, later reflected that at the outset he received little by way of a detailed briefing from Leo Amery, the Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs, but he was able to build a remarkably creative and energetic organization, set at a tangent to the usual stereotype of dull Whitehall bureaucracy. It was small, never larger than 120 employees, because 'the agreed policy is to work through other agencies wherever possible, and undertake as little direct work as conditions permit.'[4] This was not always possible to adhere to, however, because the use of poster art and documentary film to engage the public with the EMB's messages was a technique that was largely untried by the state in Britain, and only on a modest scale even by private enterprise.[5]

Throughout its existence, the EMB was essentially commodity-focused. Although there were some posters celebrating British manufactures and even British exports to the empire, the overwhelming emphasis was upon raw materials, especially foodstuffs, imported into Britain. One has to remember that Britain circa 1930 remained the world's largest importer of raw and processed foods and that a substantial portion of the British diet had for some time been sourced overseas.[6] Taking butter as an example, Britain

produced only 11.4 per cent of her own requirements, and imported 65.6 per cent of all of the butter in international trade.[7] Knowing that the Imperial Conference was coming up in 1932, civil servants began searching in the year or two beforehand for ways of demonstrating goodwill towards the empire. Enhancing butter sales though the efforts of the EMB seemed to be one possibility:

> 'It is of considerable importance that the UK should be in a position to offer at Ottawa to do something for dominion products other than wheat, particularly as only Canada and Australia are interested in wheat. Butter is the most promising commodity and it should be realised that, ruling out anything involving cost to the consumer or a direct subsidy, some scheme of which an extension of the activities of the EMB is an integral part, appears to be the only method of encouraging the sales of dominion butter in this country'.[8]

About 40 per cent of butter imports by value were from the dominions. Generally speaking it was cheaper and of poorer quality than Danish and other European butters, and was sold in quantity only south and west of a line called the 'butter front' (Table 3).[9] In 1931 the EMB launched a campaign to stimulate empire butter purchase in the north. Through newspaper advertising and posters but, most of all, by active canvassing of shopkeepers, they were able to make an appreciable difference (Table 4), although how long-lasting this would have been is difficult to tell because the Board was abolished shortly afterwards.

Table 3. Percentage of shops selling empire butter

	London	Bristol, South	Birmingham	Liverpool	Manchester	Yorkshire	Scotland	All

		Wales						
Only empire	9	49	4	15	2	2	10	12
Majority empire	22	32	19	12	3	4	3	13
Minority Empire	30	8	52	39	28	10	20	25
No empire	39	11	25	34	67	85	67	50

Source: EMB 1930b.

Table 4. The northern butter campaign

	Shops	Selling empire butter (per cent)	
		Before	After
Wigan	384	48.7	81.0
Warrington	234	40.2	79.0
Chorley	181	47.5	72.9
Bolton	913	34.4	72.0
Oldham	890	35.5	65.0
Bury	184	33.5	60.0
Rochdale	538	40.9	66.0
Blackburn	707	37.8	72.0
Preston	604	31.3	67.8
Total	7224	43.3	73.5

Source: NA: CO 760/22, Empire Marketing Board, Marketing Committee, Minutes and Papers, EMB/MC/57.

At first, the Board's publicity strategy was remarkably low-key.[10] Until 1931 it restricted its activities to background advertising, attempting to create an awareness of empire foodstuffs and a positive sentiment in their favour.[11] Leo Amery and Sir William Crawford, in particular, were worried about the uneven quality of many empire products and the reaction of consumers if they realised that they were being encouraged by an official body to buy sub-standard articles.[12] This was somewhat mitigated by the passing of the Merchandise Marks Act in 1926 because that enabled the stamping of goods' country of origin. Also, a new phase was ushered in by the financial crisis of 1931, which forced the Board into several changes of policy including more direct

'propaganda', such as the campaign on empire butter.[13]

The EMB was fortunate to access the fertile imaginations of Frank Pick and Sir William Crawford. Because of Pick's strong belief in the power of art, and his eighteen years of experience of commissioning posters for the London Underground, this was the principal mode of publicity that was chosen. Crawford was the head of one of the country's largest advertising agencies and is said to have been a pioneer in the 1920s of understanding consumer psychology.

Although F.L. McDougall chaired the poster sub-committee, Frank Pick was undoubtedly its inspiration.[14] According to Stephen Tallents:

> 'A small group under Pick…used to meet at night, week after week, when the ordinary office day was ended, to devise new themes, to choose the artist to which each should be entrusted, to talk over its treatment with the chosen artist and later to discuss and sometimes to criticise first his roughs and then his finished designs.'[15]

Oliver Green remarks that Pick 'rarely used posters for direct, "hard sell" advertising' but rather to cultivate 'goodwill and good understanding' between the advertiser and customer.[16] He was later described as 'the greatest patron of the arts whom this century has so far produced in England' but he was also tough, not shrinking from criticising and sometimes rejecting the work famous artists.[17]

By 1933 the Board had located specially designed poster frames at 1,700 sites in 475

towns and cities.[18] These were made of native oak and a number of other empire woods and each contained three picture posters and two, smaller letterpress posters on a particular theme.[19] Cheap 'solus' sites were preferred, at railway termini and outside factory gates, government and municipal buildings, avoiding the need to book space on ordinary, commercial hoardings.[20]

Film was probably the most celebrated means of the EMB engaging its public. Whether this had any impact at all on food consumption is debatable, but the overwhelming conclusion of film historians is that the Board had a great influence on the subsequent use of the medium for propaganda. The claim is often made that the efforts of John Grierson, in particular, were the foundation stone of the British documentary film movement that flourished long after the EMB itself had been dissolved.

Grierson's achievement as the leading light of the EMB and later the GPO film units was not so much in any specific technical or stylistic innovation, as in his ability to plan and organise. His 'Drifters', was hailed as one of the best British films produced to date.[21] Its première was on Sunday 10th November 1929 at the London Film Society.[22] A silent film, it showed the gritty reality of the lives of fishermen from Lerwick, Yarmouth and Lowestoft, not only as a means of fulfilling the EMB's aim the educate the public about food production, but also in Grierson's mind to demonstrate the exploitation of working people and so encourage the reshaping of British society.[23]

In his unpublished history of the EMB, Tallents says that he clearly remembered the

meeting to decide on film policy on 27th April 1928 in Leo Amery's room at the Dominions Office: 'I remember the gathering as vividly as any that I ever attended'. One can imagine the excitement of being involved in the development of a new medium but in truth much of the Board's use of film was mundane. Most of the 100 or so productions were short educational films and were often little more than the splicing together of fragments from various sources; the majority of loans from their library were 'interest films' made by the Canadian and other empire governments. Apart from 'Drifters', the most significant agriculture/food films produced by the EMB were 'Upstream' (1931, salmon in Scotland), 'Shadow of the Mountain' (1931, pasture experiments at Aberystwyth), 'The Country Comes to Town' (1932, milk industry), 'Oe'r Hill and Dale' (1932, sheep farming), 'Cargo from Jamaica' (1933, banana industry), and Granton Trawler (1934, fishing).

Despite the recent outpouring of academic literature on the documentary making and film theory of Grierson, the EMB's efforts were in reality modest by comparison with their competitors. The United States Department of Agriculture, for instance, supported an office of motion pictures, which by 1933 had produced over 200 films. In France a large sum of money was set aside in 1923 for the creation of a permanent Agricultural Cinema Commission to investigate new ways of using cinema in the interests of the farmer.[24] In Toronto the Ontario government were also convinced of the importance of the film from 1925 onwards.[25] Rather than volume of films, perhaps the EMB's greatest contribution was its grooming of a number of future directors, such as Stuart Legg, Arthur Elton and Basil Wright, the last of whose 'Song of Ceylon' (1933/4), about the tea industry there,

won a prize in 1935.[26]

Other forms of publicity included leafleting, public lectures, and empire-themed shopping weeks in selected towns. The EMB also regularly took space in major exhibitions around the country in order to bring empire produce to the attention of the public. A good example was the North East Coast Exhibition in Newcastle, May-October 1929, which was the largest of its kind outside London since the Great War.[27]

At one point the Board asked itself the fundamental question 'why should we buy from the empire?'.[28] The answer was a dual appeal to patriotism and self-interest. It was asserted that 'most people feel instinctively that they would rather buy from their own people…Thousands of distant empire farmers…fellow citizens of ours, often of our own blood, often indeed our own relations, are always waiting anxiously to see whether the women who go shopping in our towns and villages will buy what they have laboriously grown. If we buy what they can send us, we can help them to prosper and to develop the resources of the countries in which they live'.[29] The accompanying slogan 'Empire Buyers are Empire Builders' must have seemed insensitive in those dominions carefully cultivating their independence from the centre and it reflected the view of only a small and diminishing element of the British political establishment, whose nostalgia for imperial strength motivated their using the EMB as a rearguard action.[30] Once Leo Amery lost office in 1929, even this foundation of support was undermined.

According to Stephen Tallents, the Treasury had always wanted the EMB abolished and

conducted a 'fierce vendetta' against it.[31] As a result, 'defence played a disproportionate part in its operations'.[32] The Treasury never really accepted the rationale for its existence and its activities offended their sense of value for money. They were not alone. During the economic crisis of 1931 the Committee of National Expenditure recommended the Board's abolition and it was only saved by a General Election and by an explicit commitment given by the government only nine months before at the 1930 Imperial Conference to extend its life. The price to pay was a reduction in the Board's budget and a requirement for it to mount a government-inspired 'Buy British' campaign.

With opposition at home and a general lack of enthusiasm in the dominions, it is hardly surprising that the EMB was eventually wound up. The renegotiation of imperial trading relationships at the 1932 Ottawa conference undermined the *raison d'être* of the EMB and the National Government stated bluntly that the dominions would have to contribute if it was to continue. In retrospect, Leo Amery blamed the demise of the EMB in 1933 on Jimmy Thomas, the Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs, and Neville Chamberlain, Chancellor of the Exchequer, for their crude tactics at Ottawa and Stepehen Tallents was convinced that 'there would have been no insuperable difficulty in securing dominion support [for the continuation of the EMB] if the question had been approached with any sort of tact or common sense'.[33] Each dominion now reclaimed full control of the promotion of its products.

According to Leo Amery's memoirs, the EMB had been a 'happy ship'. He recalled that 'for those of us who played any part in all the outpouring of creative original work which

characterised the EMB it was "heaven to be alive" during those years'.[34] But on a cooler and more detached level of assessment, the EMB was an experiment in statecraft that temporarily suited the purpose of successive British governments that were in effect attempting to buy off the dissatisfaction of certain dominions with regard to the failure to deliver to them significant imperial trade preferences. It served that purpose for seven years but there was little political mileage in or enthusiasm for its continuance beyond 1933. Upon its demise, protests were muted and came mainly from a small section of what we might call 'imperial romantics' in the Conservative Party.

The achievements of the EMB need more detailed assessment than we can provide here. Certainly the combination of Grierson's artistic idealism, Pick and Crawford's experimental public relations, and Tallents' and Amery's leadership, provided a context in which creativity flourished as never before in the civil service. For the first time on a large scale, the British state explored the power of persuasion through publicity in various media. Comparatively large sums were invested in nascent fields, such as commercial art and design, documentary film-making, scientific research on agriculture and food, and publications on the food chain, and the money provided a stimulus to these activities that would not have been possible otherwise. While I shrink from some of the superlatives that have been expended on the Board as an innovator and patron, there is no doubt that it won some positive results from the process of its operations, if not so much from their content. In particular, I personally doubt that it wrung any significant or permanent change of diet or of the sourcing of foodstuffs out of the British consumer, and proving any yield from its activities was one of the Board's main problems, as its opponents

frequently pointed out.[35] Claiming increased imports of empire products was not convincing because so many factors other than publicity were at work.

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Footnotes

[1] Amery 1953, 277.

[2] Imperial Economic Conference…Report of Proceedings and Documents, *British Parliamentary Papers* 1924 (Cmd 2009), 885-86. See also Constantine 1993.

[3] NA: CO 323/962/7 The Empire Marketing Board. First Report.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Constantine 1986a

[6] Oddy 2003, 12.

[7] Denmark, New Zealand, Australia and Ireland were the main sources.

[8] NA: BT 55/47, Ottawa Economic Conference. Inter-Departmental Preparatory Committee: Document Ott.31. Fourth report. Final report on butter, p. 8.

[9] NA: BT 55/47, Ottawa Economic Conference. Inter-Departmental Preparatory Committee: Notes on Cheese, 1931.

[10] For an account that puts EMB publicity in the context of the developments of the day in propaganda and public relations, see Constantine 1986b, 200-204.

[11] NA: CO 760/22, Empire Marketing Board, Marketing Committee, Minutes and Papers, 8th July 1931.

[12] Commonwealth Institute: Tallents Papers, File 33.

[13] NA: CO 760/22, Empire Marketing Board, Marketing Committee, Minutes and Papers, 8th July 1931.

[14] NA: CO 760/26, Publicity. 1st Sub-Committee, Poster Section. Minutes and Papers, 1926-1931.

[15] Commonwealth Institute: Tallents Papers, File 33.

[16] Green 2001, 10.

[17] Nikolaus Pevsner writing in 1942, quoted by Green 2001, 15.

[18] EMB 1933, 102.

[19] Each frame was 4.2 by 2.1 metres, holding two pictorial posters each 1.5 by 1 metre, and a central letterpress poster 0.75 by 0.5 metres.

[20] NA: CO 760/22, Empire Marketing Board, Publicity Committee, EMB/PC/2.

[21] NA: CO 760/37, EMB, Film Committee, Minutes and Papers, 1927-1932, EMB/C/82, 12th December 1932. Drifters cost £2,498 to make and, despite its release coinciding with the coming of the talkies, it made enough to cover these costs within three years.

[22] NA: CO 760/37, EMB, Film Committee, Minutes and Papers, 1927-1932.

[23] Ellis 2000, 37; Aitken 1990.

[24] NA: CO 760/2, Empire Marketing Board Papers, EMB 152.

[25] NA: CO 760/2, Empire Marketing Board Papers, EMB 154.

[26] By the EMB for the Ceylon Tea Propaganda Board.

[27] NA: MAF 34/445, Empire Marketing Board Exhibitions Committee (Great Britain Section) is Agenda and Minutes of Meetings, 1927-1933.

[28] NA: CO 760/3, Empire Marketing Board Papers, EMB 247.

[29] Ibid..

[30] For more on policy at this time, see Constantine 1984.

[31] Commonwealth Institute: Tallents Papers, File 43.

[32] Ibid., File 8, Tallents to Amery, 27th June 1933.

[33] Ibid.

[34] Amery 1953, 354.

[35] Constantine 1986b, 221.