

Thomson

The Rolls-Royce of Fleet Street

his accent, his Savile Row clothes, his whole demeanor—enabled him to advance toward the redoubts of privilege. Absent the illusion that he was an honorary member of the ruling class, his very real native abilities might well not have carried him into a position of power with the deeply snobbish Lord (and Lady) Kemsley, even though he was a war hero. Control of the so-called quality or serious national broadsheet newspapers in Britain, circulating among the more educated, tended to be the preserve of the traditional elites, with the graduates of public schools and Oxbridge predominant. In 1965, when Hamilton was talking about my joining the *Sunday Times*, the top four positions below him were all held by Oxbridge men. Hunter Davies, who'd followed me as a Castleman at Durham and editor of *Palatinate*, was the only provincial university man to have come, via reporting in Manchester, to an envied position as the successor to Fleming writing the entertaining Atticus column. It was similar elsewhere. The *Guardian* was edited by an Oxford man, and the *Telegraph* and *Observer* were owned and edited by Oxford men. But the Canadian Roy Thomson, the son of a barber from a more open, nondeferential society, who'd appointed Hamilton on buying out Kemsley, didn't care where a man came from so long as he knew where he was going. And William Haley, who edited the *Times*, had educated himself by omnivorous reading, so perhaps there was hope for me.

The press was just one strand of British life touched by the social changes accelerated by the war. In his 1941 essay "The Lion and the Unicorn," George Orwell predicted, "This war, unless we are defeated, will wipe out most of the existing class privileges." The victory of the Labour Party five years later seemed to fulfill his dream that England would assume its "real shape" through a conscious open revolt by ordinary people "against the notion that a half-witted public-schoolboy

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is better fitted for command than an intelligent mechanic." The two most powerful and able members of Clement Attlee's 1945 cabinet, Ernest Bevin and Herbert Morrison, were uneducated working-class lads. The Butler Education Act of 1944 opened the door for secondary education for all, as I described earlier, but by the 1960s higher education was still very much a privilege. In 1959, seven years after I graduated from Durham, only 4.2 percent of the eighteen-to-twenty-one age group had become full-time university students, hardly a lightning advance on the 3.2 percent admitted in 1954 and nothing compared with the United States. Orwell had been right to protest that the working class ought not to be "branded on the tongue"—a phrase borrowed from Wyndham Lewis—their status determined more by accent than ability. He could not have foreseen how liberation from that perception would be more powerfully assisted by satire than by polemics or politics. The surreal mockeries of class in the phenomenally popular *Goon Show*, on BBC radio, inspired the satirists of *Beyond the Fringe*, leading to *Monty Python* and *Fawlty Towers*. My generation did not feel any need to affect the standard English accent of the BBC newsreaders and the dukes posing as hotel concierges. It was not that we were brave; it would just have exposed us to ridicule.

I was a beneficiary of the late-breaking waves of political, cultural, and social changes that gathered force in the mid-1960s. By 1965 the Conservative Party had fallen apart in the aftermath of the Profumo call girl scandal. The prime minister no longer was Harold Macmillan, who appointed thirty-seven Etonians to office, seven in the cabinet, and played to perfection the role of the grand English gentleman. Now it was Harold Wilson, a scholarship boy at grammar school and university, with a nondescript accent who liked to be photographed in his ordinary Gannex raincoat, taking

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every opportunity to be seen as a middle-class, middlebrow, nonconformist Little Englander.

Labour's "New Vision," epitomized by Wilson's bending the nation's ear about the white-hot technological revolution, narrowly won the 1964 general election over a Conservative Party now seen as too much under the influence of the "fuddy duddy right." It was led by Sir Alec Douglas-Home, who'd had to demote himself from being the fourteenth Earl of Home so as to be eligible to sit in the Commons as Sir Alec and succeed Macmillan. He'd been cruelly caricatured as the prime minister who did his sums with matchsticks and had been given only tepid election support in the *Sunday Times*.

The stars were thus not badly aligned for me, a young working-class non-Oxbridge graduate with a northern accent, whose political genes were suspect. Lord Thomson said of Hamilton, "He's a fellow that doesn't display himself." He was indeed very private about his origins and his war, but I believe I was lucky that Hamilton's own rise from obscurity, his well-hidden resentment of the way his father had been treated, and his command of men in battle from all walks of life combined to make him exceptionally open-minded for his time and his position.

My sense of Denis Hamilton's civic virtue, as much as his achievements with the *Sunday Times*, was a powerful attraction. His boss was more of a puzzle. Roy Thomson was plainly tightfisted, but he'd risked millions launching the first color magazine in British newspapers in 1962 and installing the machinery for bigger newspapers. Visiting Thomson House I got no sense of hair-shirt austerities. But what of his attitude toward editorial? I'd watched a number of television interviews of Thomson on his purchase of the *Sunday Times* in 1959. He was a tubby, cheerfully Pickwickian figure who blinked at the questioner from behind Coke-bottle glasses,

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occasionally twitching his neck as if his collar was too tight, as I had seen Dad do. The impression I had, reinforced later, was that he was psychologically incapable of lying or dissembling. He just blurted things out. (I'd heard that Thomson, in Egypt for negotiations to buy a failing Cairo newspaper from President Nasser, had told Nasser, "You certainly are a cunning old Jew.")

His political philosophy amounted to a few homespun pioneer principles about honesty, humility, and thrift, drawn from the life of a self-made man. He'd left school at fourteen but absorbed into his bloodstream the romances of Horatio Alger, poor boy made good. He had the conventional political opinions of the business class. The death penalty was good, socialism a sickness, government regulation bad. But enfiladed from right and left by tough interlocutors such as Randolph Churchill and Keith Waterhouse, he wouldn't be shaken from insisting that he would never impose editorial policy.

Thomson didn't disguise that he was a cultural philistine indifferent to all the arts, or that his views were not those of the chattering classes, but he didn't expect anyone to take any notice, least of all copy him. After all, he once remarked, "part of the social mission of every great newspaper is to provide a home for a large number of salaried eccentrics."

His attachment to editorial independence had deep roots, practical rather than philosophical. Failing early on—in trying to grow wheat, sell motor supplies, sell radios, sell anything—he'd learned the hard way how much expertise he needed to realize his ideas. He had his policy printed on a card he carried around for twenty-five years like an oath:

I can state with the utmost emphasis that no person or group can buy or influence editorial support from any newspaper in the Thomson group. Each paper may

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perceive this interest in its own way, and will do this without advice, counsel or guidance from the Thomson Organisation. I do not believe that a newspaper can be run properly unless its editorial columns are run freely and independently by a highly skilled and dedicated professional journalist. This is and will continue to be my policy.

He'd fish it out of his pocket when accosted by critic, favor seeker, advertiser, or politician wanting him to pressure an editor. "You wouldn't expect me to go back on my word, would ya?" he'd say, showing the person his card.

The word of Thomson and Hamilton was good enough for me. In June 1965 I accepted an invitation to become chief assistant to C. D. Hamilton, and in January 1966 I passed through the crested glass doors to start work. Hamilton's formal letter of invitation spelled out a clearer prospect of being "indisputably the key managing editor within a reasonable time," while still floating the idea of my succeeding Pat Murphy as the regional newspapers' editorial director if that didn't work out.

I left Enid and our three children — Ruth, Kate, and Mike — in Darlington while I tested the ice, traveling home on weekends aboard the midnight sleeper, with an inky third edition of the *Sunday Times* for company.

Longtime foreign manager Ian Fleming bequeathed his successors a warning of the hazards of being deceived by the editor's Tuesday conferences of department heads: "Beneath the surface friendliness, lurk all the deadly sins with the exception of gluttony and lust. Each one of us has pride in our department of the paper; many of us are covetous of the editorial chair; most are envious of the bright ideas put forward by others; anger