

Exhibition Review

The Art of Persuasion: Posters of the Empire Marketing Board, 1926-1933. NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF CANADA. Mounted at the National Archives of Canada, Ottawa. 18 May — 10 August 1990. No published catalogue.

In the inter-war period of this century the British Empire reached its greatest extent, as can be seen on a map of the world dotted with patches of red which is part of this exhibition. Yet in the twenties, at home, a series of short-lived Labour and Conservative governments faced economic recession and labour unrest. L.A. Amery at the Colonial Office, who had created the Dominion Office in 1925, set up the Empire Marketing Board in 1926 as an attempt to improve British economic prospects.

The initiatives of the E.M.B. amounted to a fully realized propaganda campaign of great sophistication as well as research and development assistance. The posters, directed primarily at the British public through displays in public places, presented a vision of grandeur: a stable, lush, vigorous Empire which was a fascinating illusion in the context of the times.

The National Archives' collection of E.M.B. posters contains wonderful examples of some of the leading trends in commercial art during the period. Under the art direction of Frank Pick, works by such innovative British artists as E. McKnight Kauffer were produced. Canadian Charles Goldhammer and Barnard Lintott submitted designs or were commissioned to do so.

Close to a dozen full-scale works are shown in this exhibition. The multi-paneled posters are of particular interest. Harold Sandys Williamson's "John Bull, Sons and Daughters" depicts prosperous shoppers purchasing Empire and British produce in a well-stocked store. In the centre, John Bull is seen as a round, Dickensian figure in a top hat. The clutter of bold type throughout the panels is an interesting modernist touch. Another set, "Empire Carriers are Empire Builders," makes similar use of a flat decorative style with pastel colours and silhouetted figures. In contrast, Clive Gardiner's "Empire Buying Means Busy Factories" adopts elements of futurism in which geometric shapes, a highly stylized rhythmic movement of figures and bold reds, oranges and black dominate. "Empire Buyers are Empire Builders" simplifies supply and demand to a few idealized figures and slogans.

These beautiful images call attention away from the fact that conditions in the Empire after World War I were extremely complex. Britain was supervising League of Nations

mandates in the Middle East while propping up nominally independent monarchies in Egypt and Iraq. Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and Canada were self-governing dominions, the latter two rather anti-imperialist. In 1922 the Irish Free State was established and the country plunged into civil war. The appropriateness of self-government for India was being fitfully debated, while attempts to develop East Africa were of questionable success. The E.M.B. posters were not, of course, created to address general questions about the Empire; but because their message was so powerful, one is compelled to ask, "Was the British Empire really like this?" There is something of a gap between reality and image.

The National Archives of Canada exhibition, *The Art of Persuasion*, is an excellent introduction to the vision of Empire designed by L.S. Amery. As well as large works, it includes mini-posters, advertisements, photographs of produce exhibits and illustrations of the original display settings for the major posters. Textual documents from the Government Archives and Manuscript Divisions include correspondence from Canada's representative on the E.M.B. The Board's research and development work is documented by several booklets on aspects of marketing.

The posters are well-spaced to give the five-part format its full impact. They are so vibrant that the necessary low lighting does not detract. Unfortunately, the design of the overall space results in some of the explanatory captions appearing quite far from the posters so that valuable notes could be missed. The illustrated brochure accompanying the exhibition contains useful supplementary information on the Board and although a catalogue is not provided, additional information is available in Stephen Constantine's *Buy and Build: The Advertising Posters of the Empire Marketing Board* (London, 1986).

In the period of transition from Empire to Commonwealth, which coincided with great changes in the graphic arts as well, it is interesting to note how history and illustration came together in a world-wide campaign of which Canada was part. In the long run, the optimism of the Empire Marketing Board seems justified; the Commonwealth today does attempt to promote the kind of partnership suggested by the E.M.B. artists. Yet other legacies of the period, such as the aftermath of the British presence in Ireland and Palestine, are still awaiting visionaries to solve what seem to be impossible problems.

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