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Sean Nixon. *Hard Sell: Advertising, Affluence and Transatlantic Relations, c. 1951-69.* Studies in Popular Culture Series. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016. 240 pp. $24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-78499-105-0.

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In the post-World War II decades, 1954 was an important year in Britain. It marked the final end to rationing that began in the early years of the war and continued well after its end. It also was the year that Parliament passed the Television Act, which allowed for commercial television to expand to the United Kingdom. Alongside rising incomes and purchasing power, these developments ushered in not only ânew patterns of consumptionâ but also lasting social and cultural change, as âaffluenceâ became the watchword of the day (p. 5). In *Hard Sell: Advertising, Affluence, and Transatlantic Relations, c. 1951-69*, Sean Nixon focuses on the role that advertising, particularly on television, played in these changes.

Advertising was a growing industry over the period of Nixonâs study, reaching a yearly high of 590 million pounds by the end of the 1960s. This impressive growth was fueled by the exploding consumer sector, which Nixon argues had the power âto shape the transformations in post-war domesticityâ that included the development of the âmodern housewifeâ ideal (p. 6). Yet this consumer-based ideal originated not in Britain but in the United States; thus, the heart of Nixonâs study is an examination of the nature of this transatlantic influence. Indeed, Nixon points out that American agencies sought to assert this influence directly, as the 1950s and 1960s saw them acquire thirty-two British agencies, including six out of the top ten (pp. 4, 30). One of the key American agencies that expanded into the United Kingdom as early as 1899 was J. Walter Thompson (JWT). By the end of the period of Nixonâs study, JWT had firmly established itself as a leader not just in the American advertising sector but also internationally. Specifically, the firmâs London office was one of the largest in the British industry and was one of the companyâs most profitable. One might expect to find evidence at such a large and important US-led firm of the wholesale âtransfer of knowledge and practicesâ across the Atlantic (p. 3). Such a finding would reinforce the argument that Victoria de Grazia, most notably, has made for the âAmericanizationâ of Europe in the postwar period through consumer culture (*Irresistible Empire: Americaâs Advance through Twentieth Century Europe* [2005]). On the one hand, Nixon acknowledges the âsubordinate,â or âsubaltern,â position of British advertising in relation to their American parent companies during this period (p. 4). On the other hand, Nixonâs findings and key argument demonstrate how JWT employees in the United Kingdom âadapted, hybridized, and indigenizedâ their American parent companyâs approaches (p. 3). Rather than blindly try to replicate what worked across the Atlantic, JWT London

responded to the specific circumstances at home. Indeed, the âhard sellâ approach that JWT excelled at in the United States would not work in the UK context and had to be adapted to appeal to British audiences. Thus, resisting the seemingly âirresistibleâ force of the American âhard sellâ was how British advertising became British.

*Hard Sell*âs voices include not only those of the advertising world but also consumers themselves, the press, contemporary critics, and government officials. The primary evidence for Nixonâs argument comes from several key sources, and the book is very well researched. Nixon utilized archival sources from the J. Walter Thompson Company Archives at Duke University and at the History of Advertising Trust in the United Kingdom. These sources allow him to analyze internal workings at JWT and to lay out how JWT executives in London worked to define their own approach, even when it meant pushing back against their American parent company. JWT employees in the London office understood that they faced unique challenges. While American agencies faced sociological and cultural critics of their profession, like Vance Packard and David Reisman who decried the âsocial costs of affluenceâ (p. 168), British advertising faced not only these same critics but also added concerns about national identity. Nixon argues that these British critics viewed the surge of American agencies as âan alien presenceâ that threatened âto transform the broader national culture and sensibilities of the British peopleâ (p. 37). These fears of Americanization drove JWT London executives to indigenize their approaches in the postwar period. Nixon acknowledges, however, that the New York-based parent company still had considerable sway, often exerted through regular visits by Edward Wilson, the head of the JWT International Department. Wilson was tasked with ensuring consistency among the various branches and adherence to the âThompson way,â in which JWT sought to first establish âthe factsâ in terms of what was being sold (p. 40). The âThompson wayâ was embodied in the âT-squareâ that reminded employees to always first ask: âWhat are we selling? To whom are we selling? Where are we selling? When are we selling? How are we selling?â JWT took the Thompson way seriously, and even had laminated copies produced for every employee at JWT London to keep at their desks (p. 40). Yet, while the American influence was strong throughout the 1920s and 1930s, it waned after the war. As of 1946, JWT London was staffed with solely British senior executives, many from the social elite, who worked to âemphasize the Britishness of the London officeâ in response to growing postwar anti-Americanism and the realities of continuing austerity (p. 43). JWT London especially made sure to be connected to British popular culture. For example, with its Parker Pens account, the London office used British film stars instead of the Amerian writers that JWT used in the US versions of the ads. In the 1960s, JWT London was also incorporating the British cultural trends of âSwinging Londonâ into its work that clearly differentiated it from its American parent.

While Nixon does use substantial evidence from print advertising, it is the realm of television that is key for the study. The growth of TV advertising was a defining development of 1950s and 1960s consumer culture, specifically its focus on the coveted consumer market of housewives, who remain a symbol of the era of affluence. American advertising had already shaped this image and medium by the time that commercial television arrived in the United Kingdom. Thus American developments and innovations did guide the evolution of television advertising across the Atlantic. However, Nixon uses television to further enforce his argument that British agencies did not simply parrot their American counterparts but rather used the American example to create a âdistinctive tradition of British television advertisingâ (p. 97). To demonstrate this distinction, Nixon turns to the genre of ads aimed at the mass-market housewife so typical of the period. Specifically, he examines ads that JWT London developed for its Persil washing powder and Oxo bouillon cubes accounts. For the Persil ads, the agency developed a âslice of lifeâ series centered around the figure of âMum,â while Oxo received a serial titled âLife with Katieâ that featured a young, middle-class couple named Katie and Philip. To avoid the taint of the American âhard sellâ and achieve a more British look and feel, JWT London made sure to eschew American associations in the adsâ settings, cast actors who were attractive but not too glamorous, and use a more staid, documentary verbal intonation. Nixon thus concludes that âthe images of the housewife within television advertising rendered her a distinctly British social typeâ (p. 137).

Yet, without a contrast to the American version of the mass-market housewife on television, it is difficult to see how the figure that Nixon describes was âdistinctly British.â What did a âhard sellingâ television ad aimed at the American housewife look like, and thus, how did the British version specifically differ? With the Parker Pens example, Nixon includes the American and British versions of the same ad, which clearly illustrate his point. While Nixon goes to great lengths to provide detailed descriptions and analyses of the television ads, without an accompanying American comparison, the level of specifi-

cally British indigenization is unclear. Indeed, his discussion of the gendering of the ads and the ways in which they underscored âassumptions about womenâs rolesâ and femininity were also key characteristics of American ads (p. 130).

Additionally, an area that would have been fruitful to explore in terms of depictions of gender roles is women working at British advertising firms. In a few instances, Nixon uses evidence from ad women, but he does not interrogate the role of these women themselves in shaping the gendered images they were selling. He includes a critique from *Advertiserâs Weekly* by an unnamed ad woman who decried the Persil âMumâ as an âall-too-often quite frumpish creatureâ (p. 131). By contrast, the writer heaped praises onto Oxoâs attractive, modern Katie. It would have been enlightening to analyze the reasoning for this shifting approach. Were any women on the staff at JWT London involved in creating these ads? Nixon attributes the Katie adâs success to the performance of the actress Mary Holland who was a âwarmâ and ânaturalâ contrast to the formal and dowdy Persil Mum. While Nixon provides an in-depth description of the âLife with Katieâ ads, an analysis of the behind-the-scenes decision-making process and discussion of who was responsible for those decisions would have been helpful. Similarly, chapter 5 opens with a memo from Josephine Mackay to her senior colleagues concerning the intent behind the Persil ads in 1965, but we do not hear from Mackay again until the end of the chapter for another brief insight (pp. 119, 134). What roles did women like Mackay play at JWT London in shaping the deeply gendered imagery of 1950s and 1960s advertising? Nixon discusses Betty Friedanâs classic critique of advertising for promoting the housewife-consumer as the only path toward fulfillment for women but notes that âadvertising people did not register the early American feminist critique of their practices in the 1960sâ (p. 192). Were advertising women, as well as men, resistant to feminist critiques? Or did they unsuccessfully try to push for change from within? Scholars like Jennifer Scanlon, Denise H. Sutton, and Juliann Sivulka have begun to flesh out womenâs roles in the advertising industry, but much more remains to be done, especially for the postwar period and for British industry.[1]

Another area to further investigate would be the influence of the concept of âcitizen-consumersâ that Nixon brings up in the closing paragraphs of the book. He notes that advertising professionals defended their business from critics and presented an optimistic assessment of the âconsumerist vision of the good lifeâ (p. 194). Additionally, Nixon states, âadvertising has contributed to the linking of private-sector consumption with an ethic of freedomâ (p. 195). In the American context, Lizabeth Cohen has convincingly illuminated these concepts in *A Consumersâ Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (2003) and demonstrated the role of the US government in promoting them. But further analysis of how consumption and freedom also became linked across the Atlantic in the postwar period would provide a transnational perspective to this development that is often seen as typically American.

Nixonâs *Hard Sell* is a valuable addition to the field of advertising history that brings a much-needed transatlantic analysis to the fore. While the British did open the door to American-pioneered commercial television, Nixon effectively demonstrates how they worked to make it their own. His argument against the wholesale Americanization of the British advertising industry is an essential one that demonstrates how nations within the reach of US commerce could in fact resist what has been seen as âirresistible.â

Note

[1]. Jennifer Scanlon, âAdvertising Women: The J. Walter Thompson Company Womenâs Editorial Department,â in *The Gender and Consumer Culture Reader*, ed. Jennifer Scanlon (New York: New York University Press, 2000); Denise H. Sutton, *Globalizing Ideal Beauty: How Female Copywriters of the J. Walter Thompson Advertising Agency Redefined Beauty for the Twentieth Century* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009); and Juliann Sivulka, *Ad Women: How They Impact What We Need, Want, and Buy* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2009).