Censorship and Magic Tricks in Inter-War Britain

Lisa Z. Sigel
Censure et tours de passe-passe dans la Grande-Bretagne de l’entre-deux guerres

Prof. Lisa Z. Sigel
(DePaul University, Chicago, Illinois, États-Unis)

Abstract
This paper demonstrates that between World War One and World War Two, the British state censored a variety of media including books, magazines, postcards, and films as well as engaging in public trials of obscene books that generated enormous publicity. Despite all of this, the British state denied that it censored and was largely successful at concealing its own practices. This paper documents the ways that the British state concealed the mechanisms of censorship and considers why these strategies became necessary when in previous decades the state had censored as a matter of course.

Résumé
Cet article démontre qu’entre la Première et la Seconde Guerre mondiale, l’état britannique a, d’une part, censuré une variété de médias tels que les livres, la presse, les cartes postales et le cinéma et, d’autre part, engagé des procédures judiciaires concernant des livres jugés obscènes, lesquelles ont eu un retentissement considérable. Malgré tout, l’État britannique a refusé d’admettre qu’il pratiquait la censure et il réussit en grande partie à masquer ses pratiques. Cet article analyse comment l’État britannique a masqué les mécanismes de la censure et pourquoi ces stratégies devinrent nécessaires alors que lors des décennies antérieures cette censure semblait aller de soi.
Censorship and Magic Tricks in Inter-War Britain

Prof. Lisa Z. Sigel
(DePaul University, Chicago, Illinois, USA)


Despite public bannings and private trials, the British government continually denied that it censored in the inter-war years. It dissembled so loudly and so often that even George Orwell, that most prescient of observers, accepted the government’s claims:

The press has some justified grievances, but on the whole the Government has behaved well and has been surprisingly tolerant of minority opinions. The sinister fact about literary censorship in England is that it is largely voluntary.

To see voluntary censorship as the dominant form, however, is to ignore the broader pattern of state action. Between World War One and World War Two, the British state censored books, prints, magazines, postcards, and films; it opened the mails and seized property; it arrested and prosecuted individuals; and it guillotined and burned objects as will be shown below. It also engaged in very public trials of obscene books that generated enormous publicity.

1 A related version of this paper has been published under the title of “Censorship in Inter-War Britain: Obscenity, Spectacle, and the Workings of the Liberal State,” in the Journal of Social History 45, no. 1, Fall 2011: 61-83.


3 The works in question came out in 1922, 1928 and 1928, respectively, and all were quickly banned in Britain. The process of legalizing them began in America. Judge John Woolsey decided that Ulysses was not obscene in 1933, his decision was upheld in 1934, and a British edition was published in 1936; The Well of Loneliness was published in America and France despite the ban in Britain, and then legally published in Britain in 1949; and Lady Chatterley’s Lover was legally published in Britain in 1960, though pirated versions from France circulated throughout the inter-war years. See Walter Kendrick, The Secret Museum, New York: Viking, 1987, 182-186.
Such patterns of state action were not only widely acknowledged, they were expected. James Joyce argued that he “ought to be given the Nobel Prize for Peace” for uniting “Puritans, English Imperialists, Irish Republicans, [and] Catholics” against *Ulysses*. Radclyffe Hall had her lover read aloud Oscar Wilde’s *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* to her before the publication of *The Well of Loneliness*. David Herbert Lawrence wrote three versions of *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* in preparation for the battle, each more explicit than the last.

Against these patterns of state action, the state somehow maintained its liberal credentials. This paper suggests that the government performed not one but three great magic tricks that allowed the practice of censorship to ‘disappear’. The first magic trick involved a grammatical sleight of hand so that “censor” became a proper noun rather than a transitive verb. The government could then deny the existence of such an individual — the censor — while routinely suppressing the publication and distribution of works that it deemed immoral or obscene. The second magic trick was an act of ventriloquism and involved getting others — like the London Public Morality Council — to speak in the government’s place. The third trick was the simplest but also the most effective magic trick: misdirection. By training a spotlight upon the noble battles between Art and Morality, the government shifted public attention away from the systematic censorship that happened on a daily basis. This paper documents these magic tricks as a way to illuminate state policy and it considers why these strategies became necessary when in previous decades the state had censored as a matter of course.

The Background to Inter-War Policies

Despite a long and well-documented history of censorship, the Home Office developed the curious position after the Great War that it did not censor because it did not have a censor. According to the Home Office, censorship necessitated a positive program of approval rather than a negative campaign of repression. Since there was no equivalent of the Lord Chamberlain to approve books, there could be no censorship. To bolster this argument, the Home Secretary stated in a *Times* interview that

---


if there was censorship, then there would have to be a certificate indicating that the “book was fit to be sold” and that all books would need to be read by the censor to get that certificate. Because too many books were printed each year for one person to read them and because there was no such certificate, there was no censorship nor could there be.\(^7\)

This position flew in the face of its own history: the British government had censored plays and theater, publishers and booksellers since the nineteenth century, the press and the mails during the Great War, and film before, during, and after the war.

Throughout the nineteenth century, the government prosecuted writers, publishers, and booksellers for obscene and seditious libel under the Vagrancy Act of 1824 and then the Obscene Publications Act, widely known as Lord Campbell’s Act, in 1857.\(^8\) The Post Office (Protection) Act of 1884 furthered the opportunity to attack obscenity by making it illegal to send obscene and indecent articles through the mail. Not only was new policy passed, but its enforcement grew more effective throughout the nineteenth century. The formation of a professional police force allowed the government rather than individuals to bring printers and publishers to trial and bear the costs, although voluntary societies continued to entrap booksellers well into the 1880s. The government’s commitment to wiping out obscenity was so successful that most pornographers had fled to the continent by the 1880s. Offshore production did not end the problem; pornographers continued to sell obscenity to the public using the mails and the government continued to fight obscenity using warrants to arrest packages from pornographers. By 1898 the government began to confiscate letters to dealers as well.\(^9\) By the beginning of the twentieth century, the state had in its armory a wide variety of weapons to attack obscene and seditious libel and it had effectively been using these powers for decades.\(^10\) The state had effective mechanisms in place even though they were reactive, \textit{ad hoc}, and dispersed.

Stage censorship was even more effective. The State Licensing Act of 1737 allowed the Lord Chamberlain broad powers to censor all plays as “he shall think fit.”\(^11\) His powers were consolidated under the Theatres

---

\(^7\) The National Archives, Public Records Office; hereafter shortened to TNA: PRO, HO45/15139 “The Times,” 6 March, 1929.


\(^9\) TNA: PRO, HO 45/9752/A59329 “The Stoppage of Letters to or from Dealers in Obscene Matter,” 1898.

\(^10\) The ways that the state used obscene libel laws had become quite notorious by the 1880s. The English publisher Henry Vizetelly was tried for the translation and publication of Emile Zola’s works. He was fined and imprisoned in spite of ill health and he died four and a half years after his release having never regained his health or spirit. See W. Kendrick, \textit{op. cit.}, 67; Edward de Grazia, \textit{Girls Lean Back Everywhere: The Law of Obscenity and the Assault on Genius}, New York: Random House, 1992, 42.

\(^11\) Quoted in Nicholas de Jongh, \textit{Politics, Prudery, and Perversions: The Censorship of the English
Act of 1843 that allowed him to censor at will. Formal censorship was augmented by self-censorship because producers, playwrights, and actors knew that the Lord Chamberlain would read all materials before a production would be approved and that going forward with a questionable production could lead to financial disaster. As Nicholas de Jongh argues, the most conservative elements of society in the inter-war years — a defensive aristocracy, a superannuated armed service, and the previous generation’s theater establishment — decided what could be seen on the stage. Through most of the twentieth century, the Lord Chamberlain’s office routinely censored references to homosexuality, immoral women, sex, public officials and politics among other issues, making the British stage, according to Nicholas de Jongh, “a reactionary, unintellectual outpost of Europe.”

The Great War extended censorship to the everyday life of the populace. The Defence of the Realm Act (DORA), passed on August 8, 1914, just days after the outbreak of war, systematized control over the press, the mails, and the populace. DORA made Germans and Austrians living in Britain into “internal enemies” and interned or deported them, or restricted their movements; DORA outlawed carrier-pigeon keeping without a permit, it enabled the government to limit the hours of pub operations to increase worker efficiency; it allowed the government to seize property as necessary; it allowed the government to prohibit the publication of materials that would aid the enemy and allowed the government to prosecute individuals for denouncing the war. At the front, censorship went even deeper. Diaries were banned. Soldiers’ letters home were read and blue-penned. External censorship mutated into internal censorship as soldiers used cliché after cliché to avoid the intrusion of the censor. Between concern for the recipient of the letter and concern for defending the letter from intrusion, soldiers learned to say little or nothing at all, a style Paul Fussell labels British phlegm. He argues that Form A. 2042, commonly known as the “Whizz Bang” or “Quick Firer”, a post card that allowed soldiers at the front to send a note home by crossing off what did not apply, styled their relationship to language. One could cross off “I am quite well” leaving as an option that “I have been admitted into hospital (sick / wounded) and am going on well” or “and to be discharged soon.” Clearly, the state expanded its control over the populace and the press.


12 Ibidem, xv.


The development of cinema created an additional need for censorship. Although the Cinematograph Act of 1909 gave local authorities some control over cinema on safety grounds, the 1912 formation of the British Board of Film Censors (BBFC) placed a much greater restraint over the films themselves. The BBFC was composed of a Chief Censor, appointed by the Home Office, and Board members appointed by the film industry and approved by the Home Office. During the war, the BBFC began to deepen the terms of unacceptability to include security grounds, including images that might scare the public about the war, industrial relations, and disparaging Britain’s allies as well as images of God, moral concerns, controversial politics, mistreatment of Indians, excessive blood and marital unhappiness and it continued these stringent censorship policies after the war. The BBFC continued throughout the 1920s and 1930s to ban some films, including Sergei Eisenstein’s Battleship Potemkin, on political grounds, and Tom Ricketts’s Damaged Goods, a film about the effects of venereal disease, on moral grounds. Throughout the period, the Film Board made it clear that it would not allow any films through that aroused controversy. Thus, the British government contributed to film censorship from shortly after the film industry organized as an industry. However, in public statements, the Home Office put such film censorship into a separate category much like it did with obscenity, refusing to acknowledge that a Home Office appointed film censor was a censor at all. When the House debated censorship and the restriction of liberty in 1938, Geoffrey le Mesurier Mander, M.P., scoffed at the apparent separation between the state and BBFC. “It is an unofficial body, and it is extremely convenient that that should be so, because, of course, the Government can say, ‘They have nothing to do with us; they can do anything they like.’” The policy of self-censorship proved so successful that a member of the Home Office, commenting on the 1935 confidential report from a subcommittee on film censorship, stated that “trade censorship by the Board of Film Censors is indefensible in principle, but is working better and better and should not be abolished.”

The curiosity during the inter-war years is not that the government indicted obscene articles, opened and seized the mails, banned theatrical productions, and restricted films. All of these were continuations of previously established policies of suppression. Instead, the oddity is that

---


the government kept arguing that it did not censor. The Home Secretary, Sir William Joynson-Hicks (a.k.a. Jix), positioned himself against censorship because it would interfere with the freedoms of a liberal society: “It is essential that in anything I or the police do in this matter should not be considered as fettering the rights in any way whatever of a man and woman to write what the spirit moves them to write.”

While in the nineteenth century and during the Great War, censorship — whether of seditious, treasonous, libelous materials (for pornography was seized under obscene libel laws) — happened as a matter of course, during the inter-war period, the government argued for freedom of the press even as it censored.

Magic Trick One: Definitions and Practices

Between the wars, the British government denied censorship by taking the narrowest possible definition available of the term; the state began to refer to censorship as a person, and then denied his existence. While the government might not have an official literary censor, it still did everything that a censor would do, including evaluating, outlawing, tagging, destroying, arresting, fining, and imprisoning. If pushed, it might admit that the Lord Chancellor censored theater; if prodded, it might concede that the Film Board functioned under government approval and had a Home Office appointed Chief Censor, but it did not admit that it curtailed the freedom of the press and it did not admit that it systematically censored the mails.

To avoid accusations of censorship and to prevent admitting that it inspected, opened, and seized the mail from and to private individuals, the state developed a strange language for its actions. It put out “warrants” for letters and packages and “arrested” them. This allowed the government to watch private correspondence fairly closely. A 1928 report discussed a case involving J. Severn of Canterbury in which “his correspondence was watched over a period of about 9 months, during which 60 letters were examined.” Despite being cautioned by the Chief Constable, Severn sent a number of obscene short stories to a customer, for which he was fined £10 and £2 for costs or faced two months imprisonment. Another man died in a workhouse after being harassed by the police and Home Office for over two years. In 1926, 1927, and 1928, the state arrested 2,387 packets, 1,472 packets, and 461 packets respectively under Home Office regulations and another 201, 41, and 48 packets under Post Office regulations during the same years. These arrests concerned materials sent to Britain. Home Office warrants

19 TNA: PRO, HO 45/15139 “The Times,” 6 March, 1929.
stopped an additional 586, 477, and 383 packets sent from Britain in 1926, 1927, and 1928 respectively.\footnote{Idem.}

The government knew that it censored; this was not a case of one department not knowing what another did. The Home Office worked closely with Customs and the Postal Office. All three offices also received opinions about various works from the Attorney General’s Office and the Director of Public Prosecutions. The Home Office also directed the Metropolitan Police Department about illegal works and the police responded with the details of relevant cases. The Foreign Office, on direction from the Home Office, worked with foreign governments about changing the laws abroad to hinder the passage of illegal works into Britain and also worked with the League of Nations. Clearly, the policy of censorship was systematic. Thus, in Britain proper, the administration began a coordinated campaign against obscenity that was then taken to the empire and to international law by the early 1920s.\footnote{TNA: PRO, CO 323/960/7, League of Nations. “Accession of His Britannic Majesty for Certain British Dependencies to the International Convention for the Suppression of the Circulaiton of and Traffic in Obscene Publications, Geneva, September 12, 1923,” 18 November, 1926.}

Together, relevant offices knew that certain books were outlawed, that certain types of magazines raised alarms, and that certain authors were under suspicion.\footnote{TNA: PRO, CUST 49/2334. A. Maxwell, “Confidential,” 8/4/1938. For example, while the government said that certain magazines were not banned, they were held to be “obscene and ordered to be destroyed.” In particular, four classes of magazines were particularly suspicious: French illustrated magazines, cheap American magazines, miscellaneous, and whipping stories.}

The extent of the traffic was regularly reported to the League of Nations. The 1935/36 summary mentioned that in Britain legal proceedings occurred for sixty cases and resulted in the imposition of sentences ranging from five shilling fines to three months imprisonment and two months hard labor for obscenity. The Post Office seized 733 packets while Customs seized 397 and an unnamed office, probably the police, cautioned thirty-one people. This downplays the role that the government had, however, because Customs also seized “260 books, 119 photographs, 125 postcards, 142 prints, and upwards of 20,000 magazines. In several hundred cases, attempts to obtain indecent matter through the post were frustrated, and 248 people were warned.” Additional cases spanned the globe: nine cases in Ceylon, six offenses in Hong Kong, four cases in Mauritius, four cases in Singapore, and one in Tanganyika.\footnote{TNA: PRO, CO 323/1432/1, League of Nations, Advisory Committee on Social Questions. “Summary of Annual Reports for 1935/36, prepared by the Secretariat,” (Geneva, February 28\textsuperscript{th}, 1937). Official no.: C. 138M.87, 18-19.} Two years later, the grinding case by case toll continues: in the United...
Kingdom, seventy-eight cases were prosecuted for traffic in obscenity; two bookstore owners were each fined £75 with costs of an additional £12 12s for exposing obscene books and prints, a club-owner was fined £25 with £5 5s costs for selling an obscene postcard, three people received six weeks hard labor for obscene photographs and pamphlets, a man received two months hard labor for exposing obscene books, etc. etc.. In Burma, ninety-five seizures were made of books, pictures, picture books, and an obscene letter. In Ceylon, the government prosecuted two cases; in Singapore, the government prosecuted another two cases. Even at the height of World War II, when Britain surely had other issues to worry about, the case by case attacks on obscenity continued. While few other areas of the world reported to the League in 1944, the U.K., India, Ireland, and nineteen other British colonies bothered to do so. Despite the war, obscenity loomed and prosecutions continued.

The dry parlance of case law camouflages the arbitrary nature of law and punishment. In 1911 after the suspicion that obscene “brass finger rings are being sold, or have been recently sold, in Basutoland, to the natives” the Resident Commissioner’s Office asked for new obscenity laws modeled after those in Cape Town, South Africa. During the drafting process, the fines went up from £20 to £100, the terms of imprisonment from six months to one year, and the lashes — changed from cane strokes — increased to twenty four. In Cape Town, the following year, the fines went up to £250 and the terms of imprisonment increased to two years. Rhodesian officials immediately looked to augment the severity of their punishments. The drastic shifts from £20 to £100 to £250 and six months to two years imprisonment demonstrates something about government policy rather than anything about the severity of the problem; government policy might be arbitrary, but that did not preclude it from being brutal, expansive, and grinding.

The seizure of works was so routine that the physical destruction of them was set into policy. Both Customs and the Postal Office would send copies to repositories of record including the British Museum, Bodleian Library, University Library Cambridge, National Library Scotland, and Trinity College Dublin. Copies were also sent to the City of London Police, the Director of Public Prosecutions, and the Home Office so that these departments would have copies for future reference. Once

27 TNA: PRO, DO 119/865, Resident Commissioner’s Office, 15 July, 1911.
28 TNA: PRO, DO 119/865, Office of the Minister of Justice, Cape Town, 6 February, 1912.
confiscated materials had aided in both suppression and preservation, the rest of the run became subject to symbolic and real destruction. To forestall the “possibilities of temptation” especially in cases where the police had confiscated “large quantities of something for which it would be easy to get high prices in certain markets,”29 seized books that could be shoved into a furnace were immolated, while larger runs were destroyed by means of “guillotine machinery”.30 The auto da fé and the guillotine seemed aimed at obliteration rather than mere suppression.

Despite the systematic censorship of books and magazines, the British government held firm to the stance that this was not censorship. In a note from Whitehall to the Chief Constables regarding a confidential list of titles whose further circulation should be prevented, the Home Office made clear that this was not censorship but something else entirely:

> Neither the Secretary of State nor the Police have any power to prohibit the circulation of any publication and […] it is therefore important to avoid giving the impression that the Home Office or the Police are acting in any way as censors, or have any power to ‘ban’ a book.31

Although the Home Office continually stated that these practices did not constitute censorship, they resulted in systematic warrants, seizures, lists, confiscations, and book burnings, practices that seem far more emblematic of censorship than approving books for publication might be.

**Magic Trick Two: Extra-Official Organizations**

Although numerous government offices censored, the government thought that a bit more censorship could only help. To add an additional fillip of censorship, it encouraged booksellers to censor themselves. This policy came directly from WWI when the government encouraged each paper and publisher first to self-censor and then to subject themselves to official censorship. The editor of the *Daily Chronicle* recognized the utility of this policy when he wrote:

> While I recognise that the liberty of the press must be restricted during the war so as to withhold all information from the enemy without misleading our own people, I consider that the present censorship system is anomalous and unequal in its application. It would be preferable to make every editor his own censor, acting under regulations drawn up under the Defence of the Realm Act.32

---

30 TNA: PRO, MEPO 3/383, Bicknel to Howgrave-Graham, reply, n.d.
32 TNA: PRO, HO 45/10795/303412, Mr. Robert Donald, Source 7c.
In continuing the policy established under DORA, the government forced self-censorship on booksellers so each bookseller became his or her own guarantor of morality.

Since the early 1900s, the Home Office had begun to ask for and received warrants for the mail to and from printers and publishers who worked abroad. The government seized correspondence and publications throughout the 1920s and 1930s. The government even kept a list of both warranted and unindicted publishers. Furthermore, the British government agreed to furnish the French government with a list of indecent works. Complaints by the French government about British confiscations in 1927 led to formal negotiations in the Home Office during which Customs and the Home Office agreed that a list of indecent and obscene books could be forwarded to the French government. In October of 1929, a conference between British and French representatives clarified the policy. Clearly, there was a list and an agreement about the existence of a list. By 1929, the British government clarified that “a list of periodicals was attached to the list of books furnished to the French.”

Despite this extensive history of ‘list keeping’ the government refused to acknowledge the existence of such lists. In September of 1928, a Home Office circular admitted to it: “at present I do not think the H.O. list should be published or circulated to the trade…” The Home Office met with Mr. W. J. Magenis, the Secretary of the Associated Booksellers of Great Britain and Ireland. Mr. Magenis sought a list of works that would not be allowed in Britain on the basis of obscenity. He said that “his members dislike dealing in objectionable books” and that he sought the list of censored books that would help them avoid the selling of such works. Mr. Magenis brought with him the American lists and offered the Home Office a chance to copy it. (Some of the books were previously unknown to the British government, although the list did include the familiar — Joyce’s *Ulysses*, Marie Stopes’s *Married Love*, and Boccacio’s *Decameron*). The Home Office replied that “[it] could not give him such a list and that [it] neither exercised nor attempted to exercise anything of the nature of censorship.” However, the official did go on to ask “whether it would be of any value […] to report to him confidentially for his own information the names of any books about which [the Home Office] had received complaints…”

The reason for the denial of a list becomes clear in 1930 when, after the usual disavowals, the Home Office finally got to the point:

---

33 TNA: PRO, CUST 49/1638, 84-85.
35 TNA: PRO, HO 45/15139, n. d.
The S. Of S. is not a censor and does not need any consultative body in these matters — other than his legal advisors. The analogy of the censorship of the stage is quite beside the point. What he would like would be some kind of private censorship set up by the publishers themselves, if they would do it.36

By denying the list, the government was trying to get the booksellers to create their own (possibly more extensive) list of censorable items. By 1938, the joint efforts of Customs, the Home Office, the Foreign Office, and the Chief Constable made booksellers uncomfortable enough to censor themselves; in essence, government policies foisted the job onto booksellers so that the press promoted government policies rather than press freedom.

When the Lord Chief Justice found W. H. Smith liable for distributing magazines that contravened the law, even if the firm did not realize the magazine did so, the Wholesale Newsagents’ Association formed a “joint censorship committee”. Together, the membership in the Association represented 90% of the wholesale trade and “practically all the reputable distributors” in the nation. The Director of Public Prosecutions agreed to exchange relevant information with the censorship committee about obscene publications and all relevant parties decided that all that was left to do was figure out how to put pressure on the remaining 10% of booksellers, like Soloway and Swann, who remained in the trade that the rest renounced.37 Booksellers and the government had joined forces to stamp out the unrespectable minority. The evolution of the secret list forced the booksellers to join the government or pay for their failures in judgment at Customs. This practice of shifting responsibility allowed the British government to get beyond such pesky details as the legality of secret agreements, of sub rosa pressure groups, and of individuals’ rights. Thus, George Orwell was both right and wrong when he spoke of the self-censorship of the British press. He was right that it happened, but he was wrong to blame it on intellectual cowardice alone; clearly, it came as a result of government policy.

Booksellers were not the only group that the government encouraged, however. Why support only one sub rosa group, if two could work more effectively? Getting booksellers to control themselves and each other could limit the supply and circulation of suspect works but would not necessarily transform consumer demand. To achieve this end, the Home Office was willing to work with private organizations to stamp out immorality in the populace. The London Public Morality Council (LPMC) was far more conservative than members of the Home Office, being willing to take matters of morality to the lunatic fringe. In a 1916

case of public campaigning, the Council, for example, tried to clean up public areas from soldiers who were canoodling with their girlfriends, while adding “most of the acts of indecency on Hampstead Heath are committed in places under bushes and trees and can be seen only by those who are on the look out for them.” No one was willing to back such efforts to end public indecency during wartime, nor was there much backing for cutting down the bushes because “this would spoil the heath.”

The LPMC had the great strength of being neither particularly rigid, nor particularly clear. As a private organization, it could play fast and loose with legal codes and it was composed of zealots who could operate without public recourse. Even the Home Office recognized this problem when it said that the group “would be stronger if it had more distinguished names and a smaller number of people who are open to the suspicion of being cranks. The Secretary (Mr. Tyrer) is earnest and energetic though not overburdened by intelligence.” This was clearly an asset, for as the note continues, “he has always been willing to help the Home Office in every possible way and to accept advice from us.”

The Council could function as a general dogsbody for the Home Office: able to assume the public face for censorship, ready to follow directions, and only bridled by the problem of too much earnestness. The Home Office in 1929 labeled the LPMC “a well-intentioned body, but it or its advisers are rather muddle-headed.”

To make sure that the London Public Morality Council did not go overlooked, the Home Office in receiving a deputation from the LPMC stated that “a certain amount of publicity is likely to do good, and if the Press are not present a summary of the proceedings could perhaps be issued.” The LPMC wanted to create a separate law for the distribution of obscenities to minors, but the Home Office worried that the timing and public opinion would go against any new laws. Still, “even though their methods are not always well-directed, it would be a pity to discourage them altogether.”

38 TNA: PRO, HO 45/10526/141896, 30/11/1916.
39 TNA: PRO, HO 45/15139, S. of S. A Note Prepared, Tuesday 5, 6/3/1929.
41 TNA: PRO, HO 45/13296, 12/71929, S. W. H, “Minutes.”
42 TNA: PRO, HO 45/13296, Director of Public Prosecutions. See also London Public Morality Council, Minutes, 12/7/1929. Allison Wee demonstrates a growing distance and condescension between the Home Office and the LPMC after 1929. She shows that the suppression of The Well of Loneliness acted as a “shot of adrenaline” to the LPMC who tried to push the Home Office for greater reforms and who grew increasingly tiresome to public officials. Allison Wee, op. cit., chapter 6.
The government advised the organization about how it could best stem obscenity and indecency. In 1930, the LPMC was interested in strengthening the laws against obscene literature; the Home Office believed the laws quite adequate and preferred to keep matters of censorship quiet, rather than invoke greater debate. The Home Office wanted the LPMC to bolster public opinion because “the only satisfactory safeguard against demoralizing books is an active and vigilant public opinion, and without this official action is rendered impossible.” 43 By making the LPMC the deputy for public censorship, the Home Office could charge them with stirring up public opinion but still use them as whipping boys if the public rejected their brand of Victorian morality. As a private organization, the LPMC could only be subject to lack of interest or ridicule if denounced; such organizations came and went with generational regularity and no great consequences. Opinions about public officials, however, could have great consequences and Jix’s meddling in literary affairs had the capacity to arouse the public. The Home Office made the possible consequences for the LPMC quite clear: “You might make yourselves unpopular for a time but I’m sure your backs are broad enough to bear the kind of ridicule which might be cast at you under certain circumstances.” 44 While this might make them appear as patsies for the British state, the Home Office showed a willingness to sacrifice the LPMC if necessary.

**Magic Trick Three: Misdirection**

Perhaps the biggest magic trick of all was the British government’s ability to create a chaotic policy that mesmerized the public into focusing on issues of literary merit. By making statements that advocated freedom of expression at the same time that it continued to suppress publications, the government created a purposefully arbitrary and disorienting atmosphere that denied and endorsed censorship simultaneously. Jix’s administration is the most famous for this and Jix seems to have enjoyed making statements guaranteed to inflame the intellectual community like the following: “There are also those whose doctrine of freedom of literary expression goes as far as to claim the right to print and publish anything however vile.” 45 Inflammatory statements like this received responses from leading intellectuals like George Bernard Shaw, H. G. Wells, T. S. Eliot, E. M. Forster, Virginia Woolf, and Lytton Strachey, all of whom

43 TNA: PRO, HO 45/15139 “The Times,” 6 March, 1929.
44 TNA: PRO, HO 144/14042, Bishop of London, Minutes, 24 March, 1930.
45 TNA: PRO, HO 45/15139, “The Times,” 6 March, 1929.
began to write, speak, and/or sign their names to statements that addressed issues of literary merit and the importance of free speech.  

Despite the Home Secretary’s statements that attacking obscenity was not censorship, many literary scholars believe that the administration “ran an unofficial but state-sponsored system of censorship,” one that was expanded by Jix but not ended with his demise. However, to see only the very public raids on the literary elite would further lead us astray because it would ignore the prosaic work of censorship that had engaged the Post Office, Customs, and the Home Office for decades. That is, focusing on the margins where art meets obscenity — as many have done — leads us into some interesting battles with great public personas. Indeed, D. H. Lawrence came down firmly in favor of censorship; he just did not believe it should apply to him:

But even I would censor genuine pornography, rigorously. It would not be very difficult. In the first place, genuine pornography is almost always underworld, it doesn’t come into the open. In the second, you can recognize it by the insult it offers, invariably, to sex, and to the human spirit.

Lawrence then writes the definition of pornography that has since been quoted endlessly, “Pornography is the attempt to insult sex, to do dirt on it.” Victor Gollancz, in an article in *Time and Tide* in which he defended Radclyffe Hall’s *Well of Loneliness* agreed on the necessity of censorship. He suggested that “any genuine form of ‘censorship’ must be prevented at any cost” but that “there should be machinery under which published matter, if clearly pornography, can be ordered to be destroyed…” The problem, according to these people, did not come from the practice of censorship per se, but from the particular application of it.

It would be no accident if we entered into these battles about whether or not the British government censored and which author wrote pornography and which wrote literature. We would only be entering into the most obvious and effective magic trick, the classic ploy of misdirection. The government set up the trick very clearly by creating confusions and pointing them out to scholars and intellectuals. In a *Times* article from March 1929, Jix stated that “it was not the decent author who caused trouble. The well-known author whose name was a household word throughout the Empire was all on the side of decency.” The Home Office marginalia alongside a similar remark from the *Daily Telegraph*

---


49 TNA: PRO, HO 45/15139, Victor Gollancz, “Banning: A Publisher’s View on Censorship,” in *Time and Tide*, 22 March, 1929, 323.
received a terse “could not agree;” apparently the well-known author did cause trouble after all. Jix continued his discussion of his anti-censorship stance:

Such authors were not worried in the least by the idea of the Home Secretary exercising a literary censorship. I am doing nothing of the kind [...] I am not a literary censor. I have no qualifications for the post. My duty is to see that the law is carried out, and when the law says definitely obscenities and indecencies are not permitted in the land, it is my duty to carry out that law.30

Thus, the government, convoluted, contradictory, and status-conscious, explains that censorship both did and did not happen during the inter-war period, and that well-known authors should not worry, unless they were trouble-makers, in which case perhaps they should. In making these statements, Jix makes it almost impossible for scholars to overlook the discrepancies and to try to make sense of the convoluted policy. If scholars perhaps managed to overlook these inconsistencies, they would still be sidetracked by the specific cases and files of well-known literary figures.

These examinations tend to lead investigators away from general policy and force them to spend their energies salvaging the reputations of authors from the whiff of nastiness that the government’s brand of confusion bestowed. The practice of salvage began in the inter-war years. As Paul Vanderham shows, Ezra Pound, foreign editor of The Little Review, was the first censor of Joyce’s Ulysses. Pound advocated judicious pruning as a way to circumvent legal censorship by the state. Pound cut and failed; the state still censored on the grounds of obscenity. Later scholars have also attempted to save Joyce from the charge of indecency: as Katherine Mullin explains, “Richard Ellman’s monumental biography presents Joyce as an embattled literary hero, fighting against poverty, illness, and meddling censors armed only with genius, self-belief, and a coterie of like-minded Modernist friends.”51 Alan Travis characterizes the censorship of Ulysses as “banning one of the greatest literary works of the twentieth century,” and describes Sir Archibald Bodkin, Director of Public Prosecutions, as the man “responsible for driving James Joyce’s Irish masterpiece underground for more than a decade.”52 Other writers also became subject to salvage operations: Dr. Paul Kearns, Barrister of the Middle Temple and Lecturer in Law defended D. H. Lawrence’s bona fides as late as 1997:

Lawrence very much resented legal hounding. This is unsurprising. A man of culture such as Lawrence would not expect the intrusion of the hostile mechanism of legal prosecution

50 TNA: PRO, HO 45/15139 “The Times,” 6 March, 1929.
51 K. Mullin, op. cit, 3.
when he is evidently a creator of fine literature rather than an anonymous merchant of pornography.\textsuperscript{53}

While generations of scholars have assisted Lawrence, Joyce, Hall and others in saving their reputations from the taint of pornography — much to the benefit of all involved — the debates themselves worked to force the press to censor each other and themselves, to force free speech defenders against free speech acts, and to salvage one reputation and style of sexuality at the expense of savaging another.

This final magic trick created a spectacle between matched combatants while the daily grind continued behind the curtain. Everyone seems in agreement that Joyce was smarter than Jix. Even hagiographies of Jix point towards his good humor and sincerity rather than his intellect. As H. A. Taylor characterized him in his official biography:

You might not agree with Jix but you always knew where he stood. There were cleverer men, perhaps, but extreme cleverness is not at a premium among the representatives of the British people...\textsuperscript{54}

If Joyce was equal in terms of intellect, Hall was equal in terms of station. Jix was a self-made man who opened his own law firm to make money and then married into his position. Radclyffe Hall, in contrast, was quite wealthy and well situated; she traveled and lived in style off the wealth she inherited from her father.\textsuperscript{55} Her houses, cars, servants, furs, travels, and jewels did not begin to deplete her fortune.\textsuperscript{56} Jix and D. H. Lawrence even enjoyed a back and forth in print over the nature of obscenity and the necessity of censorship. The friction between the two created what some have considered Lawrence’s finest essay writing “Pornography and Obscenity”; Jix’s “Do we need a censor?” in contrast has not entered into the ranks of must-reads on obscenity law.\textsuperscript{57} Regardless, the ability to publish the essays in paired editions by the same press clearly articulates the matched quality of the combatants.


\textsuperscript{57} D. H. Lawrence, \textit{Pornography and Obscenity}, London: Faber and Faber, 1929; Viscount Brentford, William Joynson-Hicks, “Do We Need a Censor?” London: Faber and Faber, 1929.
When the government took on Joyce, Hall, and Lawrence during the inter-war years in a series of widely publicized trials, none were broken by the proceedings; books were burned and accusations of perversity hurled about but no hard labor ensued. Instead, the government carefully plotted out its credentials as a liberal society through due process, thorough debate, and open proceedings. Furthermore, these proceedings allowed government officials to demonstrate that censorship happened neither easily, nor comfortably; instead, the very public trials allowed officials to show that they defended the liberties of freeborn Englishmen, including freedom of press and opinion, through rigorous debate and testing. At the moment when liberalism was under siege from both the political right and the political left, presenting the government as steadfastly liberal could reassure all concerned about the distinctive strengths of the British way.

With stresses to the political spectrum from both right and left, classical political liberalism, including freedom of speech, expression, and press, became central to Britain’s political identity. The inter-war years caught between left and right abroad and at home made politics as usual seem remarkably fragile. In this political landscape beset by internal divisions, the rights of Britons became touchstones of British political strength. By arguing about censorship openly and publicly, the government appeared to be working slowly, carefully, and judiciously; against the backdrop of the 1920s and 1930s, that in and of itself would be enough to distinguish the state from its international rivals and internal detractors. Furthermore, the supposed transparency of government would appear to save it from the skullduggery of both right and left. To all appearances, then, liberalism worked.

But sleights of hand allow appearances to deceive and the magic tricks worked rather than liberalism. The government misdirected debates about free speech towards great debates and debates of the great, the government shopped out unpopular policies to extra-governmental agencies, and the government redefined censorship within the narrowest and most fragmented definition to avoid saying it censored. Despite the rhetoric, censorship ground on. Nonetheless, the British state successfully hid its own practices and by doing so, it set the parameters of discussions about both liberalism and censorship for generations.

---

58 The touchstones of British political traditions were themselves changing. As Jon Lawrence demonstrates in his fascinating study of public politics, the demands for free speech only developed during the period; previously, shouting, jostling, and mobbing a candidate was a matter of course and calls for free speech were seen as a sign of weakness. See Jon Lawrence, “The Transformation of British Public Politics after the First World War,” Past & Present 190, 2006: 188; Malcolm Pearce and Geoffrey Stewart, British Political History: Democracy and Decline, second edition, London and New York, 1996.
Bibliography

Primary Sources
BRENTFORD Viscount William Joynson-Hicks, “Do We Need a Censor?” London: Faber and Faber, 1929.


PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES, Commons, vol. 342, no. 22, 1938, 1273.

The NATIONAL ARCHIVES, Public Records Office papers:


TNA: PRO, CUST 49/1638, 84-85.


TNA: PRO, DO 119/865, Resident Commissioner’s Office, 15 July, 1911.

TNA: PRO, DO 119/865, Office of the Minister of Justice, Cape Town, 6 February, 1912.

TNA: PRO, HO 45/9752/A59329 “The Stoppage of Letters to or from Dealers in Obscene Matter,” 1898.

TNA: PRO, HO 45/10526/141896, 30/11/1916.

TNA: PRO, HO 45/10795/303412, Mr. Robert Donald, Source 7c.

TNA: PRO, HO 45/13296, 12/71929, S. W. H, “Minutes.”

TNA: PRO, HO 45/13296, Director of Public Prosecutions. See also London Public Morality Council, Minutes, 12/7/1929.

TNA: PRO, HO 45/15139, n. d.


TNA: PRO, HO 45/15139 “The Times,” 6 March, 1929.

TNA: PRO, HO 45/15139, S. of S. A Note Prepared, Tuesday 5, 6/3/1929.

TNA: PRO, HO 45/15139, 6/3/1929.
TNA: PRO, HO 45/15139, Victor Gollancz, “Banning: A Publisher’s View on Censorship,” in *Time and Tide*, 22 March, 1929, 323.


TNA: PRO, HO 144/14041, “Minutes,” 4/12/30.


TNA: PRO, HO 144/14042, Bishop of London, Minutes, 24 March, 1930.


TNA: PRO, MEPO 3/383, Bicknel to Howgrave-Graham, reply, n.d.

**Secondary Sources**


