

MY PAPER CHASE

Thomson
INSISTENCE
ON INDEPENDENCE

1981

mucking up his pages. Yet he came round in the end. I signed Michael Parkinson as a sports columnist (Parky was not yet a TV celebrity) and cut a deal with the renowned yachtsman Francis Chichester. He'd announced he was going to attempt sailing single-handed the twenty-eight thousand miles to Australia and back, following the romantic and dangerous path of the famous clippers. We gave him a marvelous send-off on the Review Front with a profile written by Philip Norman, last seen earlier in these pages reporting pop concerts for the *Northern Echo*. He'd become a staff writer on the magazine, having won a writing contest set by Godfrey Smith. The Chichester signing turned out to provide an exciting yearlong series with regular dispatches (exclusive to the *Sunday Times* of course), and the whole world was absorbed when he set out from Australia to brave the perils of Cape Horn. It was the start of the *Sunday Times* in adventure journalism.

I was tense at Hamilton's first Tuesday conference after the launch of the new sports pages. There was bound to be criticism. I just hoped it was specific so I could try to grapple with it. Leonard Russell knocked his pipe on an ash stand and spoke before anyone else: "Damned good sports pages this week." Whatever anyone was about to say, Russell's endorsement was enough; a quiet murmur of assent, and we were off on other topics. All that was required was for England to win the World Cup, which it did in July against Germany. The following week Hamilton announced I was to be managing editor.

A few weeks later Hamilton made a dramatic announcement. The separate companies of Lord Thomson's profitable *Sunday Times* and Lord Astor's loss-making daily *Times* had agreed to merge into the new Times Newspapers company, 85 percent of whose stock would be owned by the Thomson Organization.

The Rolls-Royce of Fleet Street

"The main obstacle to the merger," said Lord Thomson, "had undoubtedly been me. I don't think Lord Astor could stomach the idea of giving control of his paper to a roughneck Canadian." Thomson volunteered to give up the chairmanship, though he remained the principal risk taker. He said he calculated that the ample profits of the *Sunday Times* would cover losses by the *Times*—£285,000 that year—but if the company moved into loss, he and his son pledged their private fortune. And he reiterated his promise that neither the organization nor any individual Thomson would ever interfere with editorial policy.

The merger was approved by the government's Monopolies Commission in December 1966. Both William Haley at the *Times* and Denis Hamilton at the *Sunday Times* relinquished their editorships, Haley to become the first-year chairman of Times Newspapers, Hamilton to become editor in chief of both papers. Both promised the commission they would not attempt to impose identical policies on the new editors of the *Times* and *Sunday Times*.

Rees-Mogg was clearly destined for the *Times*. I had no great expectations I would be high on the list to succeed Hamilton at the *Sunday Times*, and I was surprised when Mark Boxer remarked casually, "You'd have been a candidate for editor, you know, but you're considered too left-wing." I'd originated several big features, led an Insight investigation of a crooked car insurance company, revamped sports, and overseen news, but I'd been on the paper for only a year, managing editor for only three months, and there were several senior contenders. The clear favorite was the foreign editor Frank Giles, an unruffled administrator who was also an accomplished linguist and writer. He'd been labor leader Ernest Bevin's private secretary at the Foreign Office and knew many world leaders.

After Giles it turned out the rivals for the *Sunday Times*

MY PAPER CHASE

chair were fewer than I'd expected. Godfrey Smith made it clear he had no ambitions to edit the paper. Michael Cudlipp and Anthony Vice were privately earmarked for the *Times*; Ron Hall, Mark Boxer, and Nicholas Tomalin were, it seems, judged not to have sufficient experience setting political and economic policy. This left two older formidable front-runners inside the building—Giles and Pat Murphy, the Thomson group's editorial director—and one powerful outsider, Charles Wintour. The volcanic Randolph Churchill was hoarse in his incessant and often drunken private lobbying of Hamilton and Thomson for the appointment of Wintour, the acerbically clever editor of the excellent *Evening Standard* (and the father of American *Vogue's* future editor Anna Wintour).

In the week the decisions were made, Hamilton took Giles to dinner at Prime Minister Harold Wilson's official weekend residence, Chequers, along with Lord Thomson, William Rees-Mogg, and the paper's political correspondent, James Margach. They didn't get to bed until 3:00 a.m. because Wilson reminisced for hours. Only later, when it was announced that Rees-Mogg had been appointed editor of the *Times*, did it occur to Giles that he and Rees-Mogg had both been eyed as top prospects and that, for some reason, Hamilton changed his mind about giving him the editorship of the *Sunday Times*. Or it could have been that Frank's eye drooped mid-Wilson. Roy Thomson had told Hamilton that he preferred my "north country cheek" to Frank's more polished style (an assessment I was to learn about only years later).

All I knew was that on a Friday, Hamilton summoned me to his office and asked for a brief, to be delivered on Monday, on how I would develop the paper. I was so nervous typing it at home, I filled a whole wastebasket with crumpled false starts. (In those days every second thought meant retyping the whole thing.) Hamilton said nothing about the report I gave

The Rolls-Royce of Fleet Street

him on Monday, but the following day he sent me over to the *Times* offices to see Sir William Haley. Though we both had got serious ink on our hands at the *Manchester Evening News*, this was my first meeting with the editor who his subordinates at Reuters and the BBC had said was the only man in London with two glass eyes. Haley was warm enough, but not in the mood to reminisce about his days in Manchester. His rectitude during the interview was focused on how, if I were made editor, I would resist any pressures or temptations in the conduct of the paper to promote Thomson's commercial interests in magazines, holiday travel, book companies, and directories.

Two days later I was wheeled into the grand boardroom of the *Times* at Printing House Square for scrutiny by the full board of the new Times Newspapers. I sat isolated in a chair facing twelve solemn directors around a long walnut table, with intimidating oil portraits on the walls. In addition to the chairman, editor in chief, and general manager, the board included three Thomson nominees (one of them Kenneth Thomson, Roy's son), two Astor nominees, and four independent "national directors."

"How independent will you be as editor?"

"I'm certain that the judgment of the Monopolies Commission was correct. I shall be completely independent. Unless I was certain of this, I would not be prepared to accept the job."

"What is your attitude to the Thomson commercial interests?"

"The same as my attitude to any other commercial interests."

"Even if it is news adverse to the Thomson interests, say in travel?"

"If there is any news in it, we will print it."

The directors spent a full hour examining my halo as someone who would embrace and defend the freedoms defined in the Monopolies Commission report—not to sell out to

MY PAPER CHASE

Mammon or twist the news for a political agenda. Looking back at the commitments they demanded, I can't help but wonder at how much journalism has changed.

I was confirmed as Hamilton's successor.

Frank Giles, for his part, accepted the deputy editorship. He was forty-eight; I was ten years younger. Often, talking to colleagues when I was out of earshot, he got into the habit of referring to me as "the young master." I didn't mind. It was good-humored; he was incapable of malice, and for the next fourteen years he was an engaging and steadfast deputy.

On the last Saturday of his editorship in January 1967, Hamilton, in his immaculately tailored suit, looked down from the steps leading to the composing room floor where shirtsleeves subs scurried about with galley proofs and page plans. "I'm handing you a Rolls-Royce," he said. It was true. His *Sunday Times* purred. I was determined to match his dedication to quality, though constitutionally incapable of achieving it in his inimitable style. He was a master delegator; I was a meddler. He was reticent; I wasn't. But we shared the same high hopes of what journalism might achieve. At my back in the years to come, I could always hear the Boy Scout in Denis Hamilton asking, as he'd frequently done when I was managing editor, "Have you done your good deed for today, Harold?"