

A Hundred Years

CP Scott

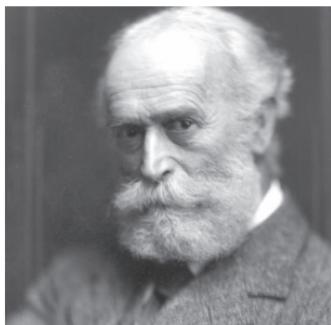
May 5 1921

Foreword by Liz Forgan

Chair of the Scott Trust

THE
SCOTT
TRUST

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GUARDIAN MEDIA GROUP



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Foreword

Liz Forgan

In times of great change, it is especially important that some things stay the same.

In May 1921, the great Manchester Guardian editor CP Scott wrote a leading article to mark the centenary of the paper. CP's much quoted essay has, in the words of one commentator, "endured as the ultimate statement of values for a free press". The article, published under the headline "A Hundred Years", is still recognised around the world as the blueprint for independent journalism.

CP used the centenary leader to set out the values he thought should inform journalism and the running of a newspaper business. Though we have to reinterpret them for the modern age, these values remain unchanged and undiluted as the guiding principles of our journalism and our company.

The article is filled with now-famous assertions: that "comment is free, but facts are sacred"; that newspapers have "a moral as well as a material existence"; that "the voice of opponents no less than that of friends has a right to be heard". CP talks about the need for "honesty, cleanness [now interpreted as integrity], courage, fairness, a sense of duty to the reader and the community". These words, written nearly a century ago, still resonate with meaning. They articulate standards that everyone working for the company – not just journalists – is still expected to meet today.

The Scott family put its fortune into trust to preserve the Guardian, its independence and its editorial values "faithful to its liberal tradition". That fortune was the basis of what is now Guardian Media Group, of which the Scott Trust is the sole shareholder. Profits from the commercial group guarantee the future of the Guardian and the independence of its editors who, on appointment, are instructed by the Trust simply to carry on the paper "as heretofore".

But what do these injunctions really mean? There is no universally agreed definition of liberalism, for example. On the face of it, “as heretofore” is similarly ambiguous. Alan Rusbridger, editor-in-chief of Guardian News & Media, gives this answer: “It’s not about preserving the Guardian in aspic. It’s about honouring the paper’s journalistic, ethical and progressive values while reinterpreting them for the present day.”

CP himself celebrated the constantly changing nature of the newspaper business, and saw “developments”, “growth” and “fresh accomplishment” as essential for “a paper that is really alive”.

He believed the most fertile conditions for such growth were created through a close and collaborative relationship between the business and editorial sides of the newspaper operation.

CP embodied this principle; he was a journalist, but as the Guardian’s owner as well as editor he was also a Manchester businessman. He believed, of course, that a newspaper should fulfil “a higher function” than merely making a profit, that it should educate, influence and inform, but he also believed in sound financial management. To CP, a newspaper was “much more than a business”, but a business nonetheless. “[A newspaper] is a business, like any other,” he wrote, “and has to pay in the material sense in order to live.” CP knew that idealism must be accompanied by commercial effectiveness; that editorial freedom comes at a price.

This philosophy is reflected in the contemporary statement of the Scott Trust’s core purpose: “To secure the financial and editorial independence of the Guardian in perpetuity: as a quality national newspaper without party affiliation; remaining faithful to its liberal tradition; as a profit-seeking enterprise managed in an efficient and cost-effective manner.”

In other words, the twin protectors of our heritage and values are a fierce commitment to editorial independence and rigorous business management. The second part is uncomfortable for some people, but equally important for the Guardian’s long-term security. Just as the Scott Trust is dedicated to maintaining and promoting the Guardian as an independent voice, so it will always require it to be run as a profit-seeking, efficient and cost-effective business.

All serious newspaper companies now recognise that they cannot survive as print-only publishers. If we are to be successful multimedia publishers and serve our growing international audience, we have to move away from the familiar routines of the past. The move from Farringdon Road to Kings Place is a wonderful opportunity to do just that, but there are, of course, dissenting voices (this is the Guardian, after all) who argue that such change is contrary to “the Scott tradition”. So it’s worth remembering this: the Scott Trust exists to sustain the Guardian’s journalism, not to preserve the status quo.

A commitment to liberal journalism means creating the conditions for brave, compassionate, often radical and always independent reporting that traces its origins back to John Edward Taylor, who founded the Guardian in 1821 to “zealously enforce the principles of civil and religious Liberty” and “warmly advocate the cause of Reform.”

In the digital age, with its profound changes to the meaning and nature of journalism, the way we interpret and apply the values we are so determined to protect will be one of our greatest tests. What do our traditions mean in today’s world? In response to a request from the Scott Trust, Alan Rusbridger drew up the following statement of purpose:

“The Scott Trust exists to preserve the Guardian and its journalistic traditions in perpetuity. It also has a declared purpose to promote freedom of the press and liberal journalism at home and abroad. CP Scott wanted the Guardian to be a liberal paper ‘worthy of its power and duty’. The character of Scott Trust journalism depends on its independence of ownership, behaviour and belief. Our journalists should be fierce in their protection of that independence.

“In the absence of a proprietor, our journalists’ main relationships are with other colleagues and with readers, viewers or listeners. There should be a high premium on transparency, collaboration and open discussion.

“Scott Trust journalists need not share a narrow set of political beliefs but should be conscious of and share the Trust’s general purpose and inheritance. At the same time, we should allow plurality of opinion, believing that diversity is good for the deliberative process

of democracy. The papers should promote minority views as well as mainstream argument and should encourage dissent.

“All our journalists should operate to high ethical standards in searching for the ‘unclouded face of truth’, including the prompt admission of error. Editors should strive to differentiate factual reporting from commentary. Our journalists should argue the causes of free speech and freedom of information – at home and abroad. We should behave fairly and allow our opponents, as well as our friends, a voice.”

Ultimately, though, such definitions can only ever be partial. What we stand for is more felt than written or spoken. As CP said, “character is a subtle affair ... it is the slow deposit of past actions and ideals.”

CP Scott would barely recognise the form and dimensions of today’s Guardian, nor could he have imagined that through its website it would one day reach millions of people across the globe. He would, however, immediately recognise the spirit that inhabits both the Guardian and the Observer – Britain’s oldest Sunday paper with its own strong traditions and distinctive voice, and which joined the Group in 1993. And at the heart of Guardian Unlimited he would find his very words at the head of its global blog, Comment is Free.

In all of them he would see, reinterpreted for a new century, the love of open debate, the sense of responsibility to the community, the striving to distinguish between fact and opinion, and, above all, the passion for independent, truthful journalism which also shines from every line of his celebrated essay and is the special heritage of the Scott Trust.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Liz Forgan'. The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large initial 'L' and a stylized 'F'.

Liz Forgan DBE
Chair of the Scott Trust

A Hundred Years

CP Scott, May 5 1921

A hundred years is a long time; it is a long time even in the life of a newspaper, and to look back on it is to take in not only a vast development in the thing itself, but a great slice in the life of the nation, in the progress and adjustment of the world. In the general development the newspaper, as an institution, has played its part, and no small part, and the particular newspaper with which I personally am concerned has also played its part, it is to be hoped, not without some usefulness. I have had my share in it for a little more than fifty years; I have been its responsible editor for only a few months short of its last half-century; I remember vividly its fiftieth birthday; I now have the happiness to share in the celebration of its hundredth. I can therefore speak of it with a certain intimacy of acquaintance. I have myself been part of it and entered into its inner courts. That is perhaps a reason why, on this occasion, I should write in my own name, as in some sort a spectator, rather than in the name of the paper as a member of its working staff.

In all living things there must be a certain unity, a principle of vitality and growth. It is so with a newspaper, and the more complete and clear this unity the more vigorous and fruitful the growth. I ask myself what the paper stood for when first I knew it, what it has stood for since and stands for now. A newspaper has two sides to it. It is a business, like any other, and has to pay in the material sense in order to live. But it is much more than a business; it is an institution; it reflects and it influences the life of a whole community; it may affect even wider destinies. It is, in its way, an instrument of government. It plays on the minds and consciences of men. It may educate, stimulate, assist, or it may do the opposite. It has, therefore, a moral as well as a material existence, and its character and influence are in the main determined by the balance of these two forces. It may make profit or power its first object, or it may conceive itself as fulfilling a higher and more exacting function.

I think I may honestly say that, from the day of its foundation, there has not been much doubt as to which way the balance tipped so far as regards the conduct of the paper whose fine tradition I inherited and which I have had the honour to serve through all my working life. Had it not been so, personally I could not have served it. Character is a subtle affair, and has many shades and sides to it. It is not a thing to be much talked about, but rather to be felt. It is the slow deposit of past actions and ideals. It is for each man his most precious possession, and so it is for that latest growth of time the newspaper. Fundamentally it implies honesty, cleanness, courage, fairness, a sense of duty to the reader and the community. A newspaper is of necessity something of a monopoly, and its first duty is to shun the temptations of monopoly. Its primary office is the gathering of news. At the peril of its soul it must see that the supply is not tainted. Neither in what it gives, nor in what it does not give, nor in the mode of presentation must the unclouded face of truth suffer wrong. Comment is free, but facts are sacred. "Propaganda", so called, by this means is hateful. The voice of opponents no less than that of friends has a right to be heard. Comment also is justly subject to a self-imposed restraint. It is well to be frank; it is even better to be fair. This is an ideal. Achievement in such matters is hardly given to man. Perhaps none of us can attain to it in the desirable measure. We can but try, ask pardon for shortcomings, and there leave the matter.

But, granted a sufficiency of grace, to what further conquests may we look, what purpose serve, what tasks envisage? It is a large question, and cannot be fully answered. We are faced with a new and enormous power and a growing one. Whither is the young giant tending? What gifts does he bring? How will he exercise his privilege and powers? What influence will he exercise on the minds of men and on our public life? It cannot be pretended that an assured and entirely satisfactory answer can be given to such questions. Experience is in some respects disquieting. The development has not been all in the direction which we should most desire.

One of the virtues, perhaps almost the chief virtue, of a newspaper is its independence. Whatever its position or character, at least it should have a soul of its own. But the tendency of newspapers, as of other businesses, in these days is towards amalgamation.

In proportion as the function of a newspaper has developed and its organisation expanded, so have its costs increased. The smaller newspapers have had a hard struggle; many of them have disappeared. In their place we have great organisations controlling a whole series of publications of various kinds and even of differing or opposing politics. The process may be inevitable, but clearly there are drawbacks. As organisation grows personality may tend to disappear. It is much to control one newspaper well; it is perhaps beyond the reach of any man, or any body of men, to control half a dozen with equal success. It is possible to exaggerate the danger, for the public is not undiscerning. It recognises the authentic voices of conscience and conviction when it finds them, and it has a shrewd intuition of what to accept and what to discount.

This is a matter which in the end must settle itself, and those who cherish the older ideal of a newspaper need not be dismayed. They have only to make their papers good enough in order to win, as well as to merit, success, and the resources of a newspaper are not wholly measured in pounds, shillings, and pence. Of course the thing can only be done by competence all round and by that spirit of cooperation right through the working staff which only a common ideal can inspire.

There are people who think you can run a newspaper about as easily as you can poke a fire, and that knowledge, training, and aptitude are superfluous endowments. There have even been experiments on this assumption, and they have not met with success. There must be competence, to start with, on the business side, just as there must be in any large undertaking, but it is a mistake to suppose that the business side of a paper should dominate, as sometimes happens, not without distressing consequences. A newspaper to be of value should be a unity, and every part of it should equally understand and respond to the purposes and ideals which animate it. Between its two sides there should be a happy marriage, and editor and business manager should march hand in hand, the first, be it well understood, just an inch or two in advance. Of the staff much the same thing may be said. They should be a friendly company. They need not, of course, agree on every point, but they should share in the general purpose and inheritance. A paper is built up upon their common and successive labours, and their work should never be task work, never merely dictated. They should be like a racing

boat's crew, pulling well together, each man doing his best because he likes it, and with a common and glorious goal.

That is the path of self-respect and pleasure; it is also the path of success. And what a work it is! How multiform, how responsive to every need and every incident of life! What illimitable possibilities of achievement and of excellence! People talk of "journalese" as though a journalist were of necessity a pretentious and sloppy writer; he may be, on the contrary, and very often is, one of the best in the world. At least he should not be content to be much less. And then the developments. Every year, almost every day, may see growth and fresh accomplishment, and with a paper that is really alive, it not only may, but does. Let anyone take a file of this paper, or for that matter any one of half a dozen other papers, and compare its whole make-up and leading features today with what they were five years ago, ten years ago, twenty years ago, and he will realise how large has been the growth, how considerable the achievement. And this is what makes the work of a newspaper worthy and interesting. It has so many sides, it touches life at so many points, at every one there is such possibility of improvement and excellence. To the man, whatever his place on the paper, whether on the editorial, or business, or even what may be regarded as the mechanical side – this also vitally important in its place – nothing should satisfy short of the best, and the best must always seem a little ahead of the actual. It is here that ability counts and that character counts, and it is on these that a newspaper, like every great undertaking, if it is to be worthy of its power and duty, must rely.

The Scott Trust

A unique form of media ownership

The Scott Trust is the sole owner of Guardian Media Group plc (GMG), parent organisation of the Guardian.

It was formed in 1936 to safeguard the values and journalistic freedom of the Guardian – the legacy of its editor of more than 50 years, CP Scott.

The Trust’s core purpose is to secure the financial and editorial independence of the Guardian in perpetuity, while its subsidiary aim is to promote liberal journalism and freedom of the press in the UK and abroad. It requires that the Guardian “remains faithful to its liberal tradition” and is run “as a profit-seeking enterprise managed in an efficient and cost-effective manner”.

The Trust takes no financial return on its investment: all of GMG’s profits are reinvested to support the core purpose. So, unlike other media companies, GMG does not seek profit for the financial benefit of a proprietor or shareholders. Instead, it seeks profit to sustain journalism that is free from commercial or political interference, and to uphold the values laid down by CP Scott. Part of the Trust’s present-day role is to ensure that these values are upheld throughout GMG.

To learn more, visit the Scott Trust section of the GMG website, where you will find a short film about the Trust and information about its history, purpose and present-day role.

www.gmgplc.co.uk/ScottTrust



CP Scott as the people of Manchester were used to seeing him: on his bicycle

