

**‘No longer frock coats and top hats,
but still gentlemen’: appearances
and identities among travelling
salesmen in Britain**

Mike French
University of Glasgow

C Wright Mills, White Collar (1951)

- Importance of personality in modern society
- Can result in alienation from ‘self’

- ‘in some part, everybody has become a salesman.’
- Salesman themselves as ‘codified’ by sales training and advertising

Travelling salesmen; bagmen; commercial travellers; sales reps

- Commercial contact between wholesaler or manufacturer and either retailer or business customer
- Travelled to seek orders; display goods; collect and remit payments
- An expanding occupation from 1840s to 1930s in Britain

Features of Commercial Travelling

- Routines and uncertainties of selling
- Changing transport: foot; horse; gig; rail; motor car
- Carrying samples/baggage
- Value autonomy compared to clerks
- Hierarchy based on firm represented, seniority and distancing from 'door-to-door' selling
- Nostalgia: present always more challenging



John Johnson Collection of Printed Ephemera

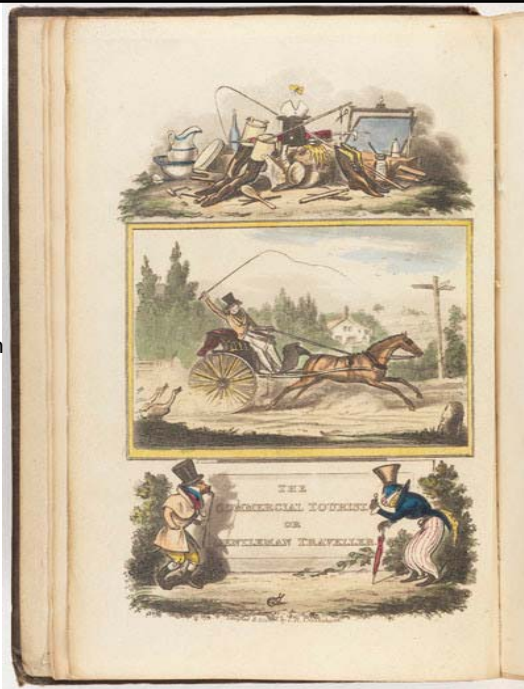
THE COMMERCIAL TRAVELLER.

Characteristics of Commercial Travellers

- Mobile: town travellers v country travellers
- Male and go on road from mid-twenties for up to sixty years
- Associational life and distinctive in commercial inns with expense accounts
- Reputations for dressing in showy style and for disreputable manners and behaviour
- Are 'managing' identities and aspects of masculinity

Hempel, 1822

The Commercial
Tourist, or, Gentleman
Traveller



Appearance of Commercial Travellers

- Missing CT in 1875
high hat; dark striped trousers & vest, black frock coat; black & white undershirt; striped socks; low shoes; black necktie; & large gilt links in the shirt
- Wills (tobacco) c1900
frock coats & silk hats; £400-£800 pa

Henry Search

- Began 1841 in drapery trade
Knee breeches, low shoes, buckles; white stockings
- Later: blue dress coat with gold buttons & white frill shirt

Interwar

- Mr Bowles, retiring drapery traveller, 1937
 - recalls older travellers' dress as top hat, morning coat, waistcoat slip & yellow gloves
 - George Orwell descriptions of travellers
 - Bowles was turned away when he first wore a lounge suit

Interwar

- Items in trade journals asserted that CTs were no longer 'gentlemen of the road' and rather than the esteemed salesmen of the past buyers were 'invaded by dozens of men lounging about smoking cigarettes, reading papers and cracking jokes'.
- May reflect seasonal trade in drapery where wholesalers often hired on short-term contracts and on commission only basis

Self-Perception

- 1945 Charlie Chatterbox column

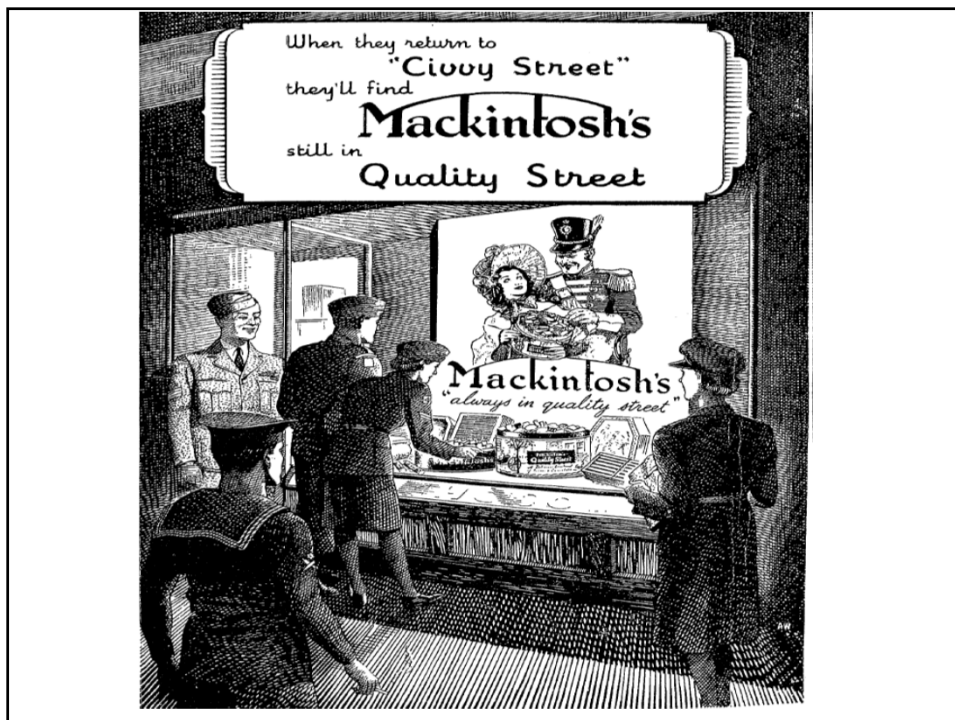
Were 'gentlemen of the road' but on way to being little more than 'touts or tricksters'

In 1940s and 1950s there was change especially in confectionery trades

Military Service

- Wartime images of masculinity were different
- Commercial travellers tend to be older and less mobile than servicemen
- Wartime impact on marriage and sexual behaviour
- Chibnall: access to pulp fiction


Are commercial travellers then less distinct?



1940s and 1950s

- Challenges to commercial functions of travellers
 - wartime zoning of sales to 1946 and rationing of supplies so more distribution than selling
 - petrol rationing restricts motoring from 1939

Confectionery News



WHEN
THE COLLAR & CHAIN
ARE REMOVED
YOU WILL BE
ABLE AGAIN TO
SPECIALISE
IN
Sharp's
Toffee
EDWARD SHARP & SONS LTD.
of MAIDSTONE, KENT
The Toffee Specialists

Post-war advert as zoning ends so can sell nationally but still supply shortages

So 1946-1949 more work of re-building connections than changing market shares

Reflections of a *Restricted Rep



**“Behind
curtain sho**

Jimmy
gives the

We're short of Chenilles
And the Damasks are done;
The Folkweaves are finished,
Cretonnes there are none.
No Slubs, Reps or Chintzes,
No glowing Brocade.
Don't ask for them, Buyers,
THEY'RE NOT BEING MADE!

Go cover the cut
With Granny's d
And Uncle Tom
Will do for the
Save all your old
From the sculler
If you must hav
Just knit 'em yo

Reflections of a Restricted Rep

The Draper's Record, 1946



**Mr. James as himself—and
on the job.**

The Spiv

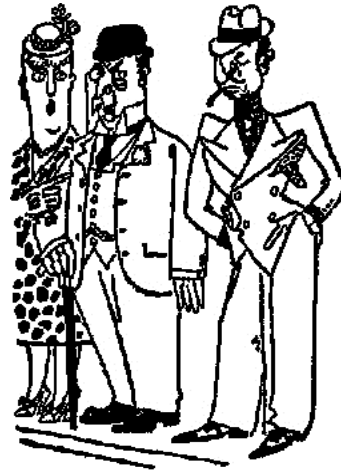
- Involvement with crime not just sharp practice
- Black market involves retailers, delivery drivers and white-collar crimes related to coupons and ration books
- Also involves general public
- Still cases of CTs convicted for theft and embezzlement, but for a time their negative image was less central to daily experience

The Spiv

- Hughes: spiv types
 - silk shirts and fifty guinea suits
 - check sports coat and flannel trousers
- Lancaster cartoon spiv: 'soft hat; whip-striped suit; 'burnt cork moustache'
- Kynaston: coat with wide lapels and padded out shoulders; big knot in tie; pencil moustache



Flash Harry (George Cole) in *The Belles of St. Trinian's*, 1954



Osbert Lancaster pocket cartoon
24 June 1947

Reprinted in Mark Roodhouse
Black Market Britain: 1939-1955

'Don't be so stuffy, Henry! I'm sure that if you asked him nicely the young man would be only too pleased to give you the name of a really GOOD tailor who doesn't worry about coupons!'

Responses

- 1953 MCCTA selling convention intended to advise on how to deal with return to competitive markets
- Advocacy of being positive; knowledgeable; and restrained in manner
- Avoid exaggeration or being pushy; don't keep hat on or smoke unless invited or gossip about other's business



The
PERMA
Sales Manager

C.H. TODD
& Sales Staff
send
GREETINGS
to all their
Trade Friends

PERCY PERMA

M.F. GARWOOD J.C. ALLWRIGHT I.P. AINSLIE C.F. BALL
(LONDON SALES)

T.H. BLAKE A. BOWLES J. BREEN H. CLARKE

H. DAVIES G.H. DAWSON J.C. GEORGESON C.E. GILL

E.R. GRAINGER C. GRIFFIN K.W. HARWOOD J.C. LAWRENCE H.W.K. MITCHELL

H.A. MITTON C.W. MORTON A.O'HANLON W.T. PACKER J. POLLOCK J.W. READING

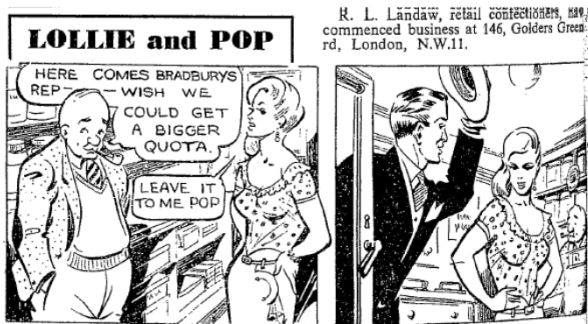
R.W. SMITH C.W. TAYLOR H. TERRY R.C. WHITE R.O. WHITE JAS. WHYTE

PERMALON LTD.
RAMILLIES BLDGS., HILL'S PLACE, OXFORD CIRCUS, LONDON, W.1.
TEL. GERRARD 5935/6

1950s salesmen

Styles of Commercial Travellers

- Lounge suit; pocket handkerchief; tie; long coat; hat
- Practical: Oscar Philips, overseas traveller in 1950s, recommended all brown suits and shirts for ease of use plus an overcoat with removable lining
- Formal dinners: black tie evening wear



Confectionery News, 1953

Persistence of the 'drummer' image?



SALESMANSHIP *Plus*

A BENJAMIN DISPLAY CASE
Must increase your Sales

SHAPE, SIZE AND INTERIOR FITMENTS
 TO SUIT YOUR OWN REQUIREMENTS
 AT COMPETITIVE PRICES

Write for illustrated brochure

N. BENJAMIN LTD.

OFFICE:
 8 Clarges St., W.1. Telephone: MAYfair 8984/6

FACTORY:
 34 Bruton Place, W.1. Telephone: MAYfair 4493

FRAME BRIEF CASE
 As supplied to
 The British Co. Ltd.
 and our own representatives

DROP FRONT CASE
 Supplied to the leading
 suit requisite man-
 ufacturers. Instant display
 of samples when lid of
 the case is opened.

RISING TRAY CASE
 Also suitable and supplied
 to toilet manufacturers.
 Two rising trays ensure that
 all samples carried are
 easily accessible.

ATTACHE STYLE
 Supplied to confectionery
 manufacturers. Most suit-
 able for the carrying of
 BULKY TINS and BOXES.

RISING TRAYS
 Supplied to biscuit and con-
 fectionery manufacturers.
 The smallest samples are
 retroactively displayed in
 this case.

Practical & subdued look

Sales Appeal
 Jan/Feb 1955

British Salesman Survey, 1960

- Older choices: bowler hat & formal suit
 OR 'rumpled & often characterless' in lounge suit
- Today's salesman: owns 5 suits (£20 +), 10 shirts and 4 pairs of shoes

Greater Change in Marketing

- TV advertising from 1955 designed to 'pull' demand for branded goods
- Gradual ending of Resale Price Maintenance
- Mergers & Acquisitions of smaller manufacturers and wholesalers
- More direct selling from head office to 'large accounts'

Confectionery

- Wartime restrictions end in 1953; sales peak in 1954
- Established agreements among firms fracture
- Disappearance of small producers and of many independent wholesalers
- Successful reps of major brands or large wholesalers; but pressures on new entrants

Modernising Selling

- Advocates of 'modern marketing' in 1950s in form of sales managers and in trade press
- Tom Sumner (Mars) in 1959 advocated using the term sales representative :
'Calling them commercial travellers merely makes them a butt for music hall comedians'

Modernising Selling

Even modernisers were often cautious

- American techniques were to be used where most appropriate rather than fully transferable
- Personality and individuality mattered

So blended new methods with an appeal to commercial travellers' individualism-more negotiated than C Wright Mills implied

Modernising Selling

- Bassett's sales director, 1956: looking for 'a decent chap with a pleasant personality'
- MCCTA PR officer, 1961 accepts some salesmen may be 'smooth-tongued & over-hearty' but argued most were friends & advisers to retailers NOT just order-takers

1962 comparison

Confectionery reps

- 'youngish man with the curly brimmed trilby, the immaculate suit, the company tie'
- Casually dressed, hat (if worn) on back of head, comes in breezily.... Makes a few wisecracks if the buyer happens to be woman'

Asserts that either can be effective depending on the client

Negotiating Change

- Association leadership in 1950s of older men with a focus on maintaining the status and autonomy of commercial travellers
- Emphasis on 'brotherhood' which generally meant not pro-union and opposed to women travellers
- Concerned about earnings; not being valued; and corporate mergers

MCCTA

- 1500 members in 1951, c10% of all confectionery travellers
- Still elements of the disreputable image though social activities were middle-class
- Anxieties over pay, status and prospects
- But cars, expenses and those with major firms fare well
- Resistance to corporate efforts to involve wives

Conclusion

- Continuities in mobility and the mix of 'drummer' v 'knight of the road'
- Gradually away from home less and appearance becomes more subdued
- Loss of status in 1940s and 1950s with other images of masculinity
- Mills' 'codifying' of sales work occurs albeit cautiously with hierarchies widening