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Foot, Robert William (1889-1973), business executive and broadcasting administrator, was born at 11 Beverley Road, Barnes, Surrey, on 7 June 1889 the fourth son of William Henry Foot (1855-1922), a lace manufacturer, and his wife Harriet *née* Pearson (1861-1949). After attending Winchester College (1903-07), he was an articled clerk in London, passing his final solicitors' examinations in 1913. Later that year he obtained a post with the solicitors Orr, Dignam & Co. in Calcutta. There, in October 1914, he married Phyllis Margaret Scott (1888-1952), the daughter of John Adam Scott, lace curtain merchant. In January 1915 he sailed for England and joined the Royal Field Artillery, arriving in France in June. He was injured by chlorine gas released by the British at the Battle of Loos in September 1915 and was hospitalised for two months. He was awarded the MC and the OBE (Military Division) and was mentioned in dispatches. By the end of the war he was a Staff Captain. His superior officer observed his capacity for hard work, loyalty, and a 'very good official manner' including great tactfulness (testimonial, 28 January 1919, attached to Foot's *curriculum vitae*, 8 March 1919, National Gas Archive (NT/GAL/P/L/8)). These qualities were to mark the whole of his civilian career.

In 1919 Foot joined the Gas Light and Coke Company (GL&CC). In 1920 he became the company's Solicitor, combining this with the position of Assistant Manager. The GL&CC was by far the largest gas supply company in the UK. Foot was appointed to assist its energetic manager, David Milne Watson, who was credited with rejuvenating the company after his appointment in 1903. Watson's management was notable in two respects: his pursuit of co-operation between the many independent companies of the industry and the preservation of paternalistic relations between management and employees, manual and non-manual despite a growth in the workforce to over 20,000 people. The Company had been re-organized as a co-partnership in 1909 and invested extraordinary energy and resources into employee welfare and social activities. A Sports Association was founded in 1920 bringing together a wide variety of independent clubs and associations and Foot became its Chairman in 1921. His more conventional work centred on implementing the Company's expansion including the absorption of gas companies on the outskirts of London. He was also largely responsible for the development of the London and Counties Coke Association, a domestic sales association of gas undertakings, and an export cartel of British coke producers interested in the major European markets (the 'International Coke Convention'). In implementing and

developing these mergers, ventures, associations, and cartels, Foot gained a reputation for his ability as a negotiator and as an implementer of large-scale re-organization.

Foot's marriage ended in divorce in August 1936 and shortly afterwards he married Eveline Ridge Gordon-Grahame (1904-1978), a governess, the daughter of Arthur Gordon-Grahame, a colonial civil servant, and his wife Isabel Ada.

Foot's reputation led to an invitation in November 1941 from Brendan Bracken the Minister of Information, to take a temporary post as 'General Adviser on War-Time Organisation' at the BBC. Under the BBC's 'high-minded but ineffectual' Director-General (DG) Frederick Ogilvie, internal controls on spending had become inadequate, expenditure was running substantially ahead of the Parliamentary Estimates, Treasury interventions had become frequent, and the Public Accounts Committee had begun to investigate the BBC's finances. When Ogilvie resigned in January 1942, Foot was appointed joint Director-General with Sir Cecil Graves. Foot had responsibility for management and his key reform, accepted by the Governors in

April 1942, was to abolish the Administration division, which had been separated from programme making in 1933, and to decentralise its functions, including financial control, to the BBC's divisions; small groups responsible for legal affairs, personnel management matters and so on remained at the centre. These initial plans proved too radical and in March 1943 a Finance Division was re-established. Nevertheless Foot's re-organization was generally judged a success and the BBC was enabled to continue its work without any substantial threat of external interference. Such large-scale re-organizations went hand-in-hand with an 'open-minded and co-operative' attitude to industrial relations. Foot abolished the Corporation's marriage bar for weekly-waged women in April 1942. A few months later, personnel files were purged of unauthenticated comments on personal defects. In September 1943, after Graves gave up his post through ill-health, Foot became sole Director-General and also chief executive officer, with William Haley in the newly-created post of Editor-in-Chief.

In one respect however Foot's tenure at the BBC has come under substantial and serious criticism. With the advent of war 'Jewish questions' became more salient and in particular the Corporation came under pressure to broadcast talks or other forms of output that would counter Nazi propaganda; later, in 1942 and after, it came under urgent and repeated pressures to publicize the events of the Holocaust. The response of the Corporation was timid but possibly for good reason. It was felt that to broadcast pro-Jewish material would, given the widespread anti-semitism in Britain, lead to demands for a 'right to

reply' and that it would be impossible to deny such demands. The result would be at best to make the issue more salient, at worst to heighten anti-semitism. The Corporation's policy was formalised after a discussion with a delegation from the British Board of Deputies in May 1942. Difficulties in the implementation of the policy, and the strong feelings on the part of some, like the Director of Religious Programmes, the Rev. J. W. Welch led to frequent re-considerations but it was re-confirmed by the Board on Foot's advice in November 1943. While the BBC's policy can be criticised as faint-hearted and, in the language of the time, 'defeatist', it was neither anti-Semitic nor thoughtless.

Foot left the BBC to become in May 1944 an 'independent chairman' of the Mining Association of Great Britain (MAGB), the national organization of coal owners. Foot's post was created to expedite the planning of post-war policy and to provide a direction to the association unencumbered by loyalties to particular firms or districts. Post-war planning had already started at the MAGB, precipitated by the imposition of 'dual control' of the industry in June 1942, itself the result of a crisis of output and industrial relations. Dual control immediately brought up the question, never long dormant, of a temporary or permanent nationalization of the industry. The MAGB hoped to stave off nationalization by finding a form of re-organization that would offer a credible prospect of higher productivity and better industrial relations.

Foot began by touring the coalfields where he claimed to find 'good personal relations' between managers and men. He seemed unaware of a frequency of strikes far in excess of every other major industry and which had, moreover, increased, not decreased, since the beginning of the War. This failure of perception undermined Foot's work from the beginning. His *Plan for Coal* was published in January 1945. There was to be a Central Coal Board and coal companies were to bind themselves to obey the Central Board's instructions. The Board was to pursue objectives of efficiency in general and closer integration in particular. Its mission was not profit but service to the community. There was to be 'close liaison' between 'the two sides of the industry' through a hierarchy of Joint National, District and Pit Production Committees. His proposal was essentially to establish a 'National Trust' (in the sense familiar from the USA), run in pursuit of moral rather than business objectives but without any legislation to ensure such conduct.

Foot's *Plan* was criticized within the industry as 'loose and vague' (*Colliery Guardian* 26 Jan. 1945, 112, 113), while civil servants dismissed it as 'presented in a high-sounding, bogus-moral form' (R. N. Quirk to Nott-Bower, TNA, POWE 28/108, 8 March 1945) and dependent on 'a latent capacity for altruism'

among the coal owners ‘of which few have hitherto suspected them’ (Ernest Gowers, TNA, POWE 28/108, 15 February 1945). Soon after its publication, Foot’s *Plan* was overshadowed by the report of the government’s Technical Advisory Committee (the ‘Reid’ Committee after its chair, the mining engineer Charles Carlow Reid) on the changes required to bring the coal industry to a state of efficiency, published in March. The Reid committee urged the establishment of an Authority ‘endowed by Parliament with really effective powers’ over the industry (para. 760), a policy supported by Churchill’s ‘caretaker’ Conservative administration in May 1945, and supported in the following month by the MAGB. With this the Foot *Plan* died.

Following the election in August 1945 of a Labour government committed to nationalization, Foot’s role was now to negotiate the terms of compensation and the provisions of the Coal Industry Nationalization Bill. The former were agreed remarkably quickly, by the end of January 1946. Issues concerning the precise definition of the assets to be nationalized raised more discussion and argument, as did the form in which compensation would be paid. Foot’s gifts for administration and negotiation now came to the fore. His attitude was open, businesslike, and without bitterness. He and the Ministry of Fuel and Power built up a

relationship of trust which eventually allowed a large number of minor matters to be dealt with by order, regulation, or simply by ministerial assurance, obviating the need to draft further primary legislation and to take it through Parliament. The arbitration on the global sum to be paid as compensation to the owners was announced in August 1946, and was generous (£165m).

Foot resigned the Chair of the MAGB in 1947. He was immediately appointed to its Presidency, now a largely honorary post, and he held this position until 1952 (the Association was not wound up until 1954). He had become Managing Director of the giant colliery company Powell-Duffryn Ltd in 1946. The company survived nationalization because of its shipping and engineering assets. It formed a subsidiary, Powell Duffryn Technical Services, of which Foot became Chairman. Its main work was to formulate schemes, sponsored by the UK Government, to develop the coal resources of the Commonwealth. From 1949 to 1953 he was Chairman of the Wankie Colliery Company, Ltd., of Wankie in Southern Rhodesia (Hwange, Zimbabwe). He acquired directorships at Barclays Bank in 1950 and the Bank of Australasia in 1951. By the end of 1955 he had resigned all his business posts. From 1958 to 1970 he was involved in charitable work as a member of the Court of Assistants of the Haberdashers' Company.

He died at Whitehanger nursing home, Fernhurst, Sussex on 2 April 1973.

Foot was, at least in his business and public life, a dependable follower and partner, working best when allied with someone who could supply his own deficiencies: Milne-Watson at the GL&CC and Haley at the BBC. At the MAGB he was without such a partner and his failings rather than his strengths became obvious. Only when the opposition to coal nationalization was lost did Foot's abilities as a negotiator and organizer come once again to the fore, smoothing the path into being of the National Coal Board, then one of the largest organizations ever created. It is perhaps as an unintentional but proficient midwife of the National Coal Board that he is best remembered.

Quentin Outram