

Books of The Times

Pinning Down a Force in 20th-Century History

By JOAN KONNER

We have a choice: to remember William S. Paley as the television tycoon lionized by the media throughout his life, or to remember him as portrayed in Sally Bedell Smith's new biography, "In All His Glory." The two portraits are not the same, and it remains to be seen which has the greater power — the biographer or the press.

Ms. Smith has actually written three books in one, and no wonder! Such a force as Mr. Paley, such a personal and professional history, is at least a mini-series, to borrow a television term, if not a weekly drama. The Ewings of "Dallas" have nothing on the Paleys when it comes to power, wealth, business intrigue, family troubles and sex — complete with stunning sets in magnificent locations, a fabulous cast of supporting characters, and the context of American media history.

The Smith trilogy comprises Paley the brilliant entrepreneur; Paley the broadcaster and programmer, and Paley the social impresario, each with its chapters and subthemes, like the history of CBS. Ms. Smith has researched and written each of those stories in impressive and colorful detail, and she has managed to weave them together into one coherent and compelling story. With skillful precision, Ms. Smith nails Mr. Paley to the cross of his inner contradictions: Paley the radio visionary versus the Paley who was shortsighted about the new medium of television; the perfectionist executive versus the absentee playboy; the innovator and initiator versus the purloiner of other's ideas; the shrewd calculator and the impulsive actor; the social climber and the high-society magnate; the committed husband and the philandering lover; the generous friend and the emotionally bankrupt parent; the architect and the censor of the best broadcast news organization that ever was, and the definer and destroyer of quality in mass communications.

An accomplished and tenacious reporter, Ms. Smith assumed the role of a one-woman truth squad, intent on setting the Paley record straight. With a parade of witnesses and testimony, again and again she contradicts previously accepted versions of old stories, and drawing on hundreds of hours of interviews from Mr. Paley's business associates, family members and social acquaintances, she adds juicy new episodes and anecdotes to the odyssey. Her reporting includes a few scoops from Paley intimates who have remained silent until now and from others identified simply as confidential sources (in an

Joan Konner is dean of the Columbia Graduate School of Journalism and a former producer in network and public television.

In All His Glory

The Life of William S. Paley, the Legendary Tycoon, and His Brilliant Circle

By Sally Bedell Smith
782 pages. Illustrated. Simon & Schuster.
\$29.95.



The New York Times, 1986

William S. Paley

extensive appendix of unnumbered, hard-to-follow footnotes). In the end, we emerge with a portrait of a man whose life we may find fascinating, but a man who was hard to admire, no less to like or love.

The book captures the full sweep of an exceptional individual who touched and influenced almost every aspect of American life in our time. Ms. Smith begins by placing her subject in the broad context of late 19th-century Russian Jewish immigration,

The many Paleys: entrepreneur, broadcaster, social impresario.

and she gives Mr. Paley's obsessive hunger for economic and social ascent a deeper sympathy than his obvious climbing might otherwise evoke. She finds the roots of his insecurity and desperate need for acceptance in high WASP social circles in the early rejection of the Paley family by Philadelphia's German Jewish establishment. His mother's deep social disappointment led the 19-year-old Billy to say, "I'm going to New York, and I'll not only make lots of money, I'll marry a Vanderbilt." So he did, literally and metaphorically.

"In All His Glory" is filled with effective, precisely realized physical descriptions of newly decorated

apartments, pedigreed knickknacks and collectible masterworks, including the members of the "brilliant circle" with which Mr. Paley surrounded himself. The book is at its best in describing, through anecdote, choice quotes and clear narrative, the fascinating relationships and contrasts between Mr. Paley and the other key architects of the age: David Sarnoff, the rival broadcasting pioneer; the brilliant CBS president Frank N. Stanton; the genius inventor Peter Goldmark; and the singular broadcast journalist Edward R. Murrow. To those are added the rest of the cast who helped make Mr. Paley and CBS great, including both of his wives, first the intellectually curious Dorothy Hearst Hirshon, and then Barbara Cushing Mortimer, known as Babe, a trend-setter in matters of taste.

Ms. Smith repeatedly exposes the inconsistent nature of the values Mr. Paley brought to broadcasting, contrasting his image of quality and integrity with the esthetic, ethical and journalistic compromises he made in his drive to acquire "lots of money." The story concludes where Mr. Paley's life ended a few weeks ago, at the age of 89: still checking in at his CBS office, receiving guests in his New York apartment, ill and forgetful off and on, resuming, despite past difficulties, relationships with his children, always missing Babe, who died in 1978, but continuing to delight, dally and party with a passing parade of attractive young women. Quality gossip, especially if you're interested in sex.

Observing the scale of Mr. Paley's career and accomplishments, one cannot help but revive that old question: does the man make the times, or do the times make the man? Certainly there was the coincidence of Mr. Paley's life and the emergence of the technology that created a new electronic media business that was particularly suited to his natural talents. The high cost of research, development and risk, both in technology and programming, forced a union of commerce and art that has yet to settle into a peaceful marriage. Where would television be without vision,

ideas, taste and talent supported by the blunt club of business? A programmer was a new character in search of an author until Mr. Paley came along and in the peculiar alchemy of the business, converted it into gold.

Ms. Smith's book burns away the rosy mist of corporate press releases and memorial homilies that surrounds the late chairman's public image, particularly the notion of Mr. Paley as some sort of patron saint of journalism. For this we owe Ms. Smith a debt of gratitude, or we might have been left with the image of Mr. Paley created by his ever-present flackery. But then think of the pictures of the world we might never have seen, the number of journalists and entertainers we might never have met, the characters that might not have been created, the laughs and songs we might not have enjoyed. Imagine a world without Paddy Chayevsky, Norman Lear, Edward R. Murrow, Lucille Ball, "M*A*S*H." and "Captain Kangaroo." Imagine a world without this global emblem of freedom of thought and the press, which operated, for a time at least, with the resources, public interest and taste to demonstrate what a network can be at its best.

That is the choice: which matters more, the poet or the poem? The press covered the poem, the world that Mr. Paley created. Ms. Smith takes to account the poet. Of course, in a case of such power and influence, we wish both — the poet and the poem — were more inspired, more noble. But where exists that more perfect world? If anywhere, it lies only in the realm of possibility that is network television and, finally, the essential Paley legacy. It remains to be seen what his professional heirs make of it.