

PAT JACKSON by Richard Adams Carey

IN 1949—the same year that Boston University became the first school to incorporate the study of public relations into its curriculum—Pat Jackson entered Kenyon College in order to learn about poetry. There he examined its nuts and bolts at the feet of such noted practitioners as Allen Tate, John Crowe Ransom, and Robert Frost. “The creation of poetry is scientific,” says Jackson, APR, explaining this enthusiasm. “And by that I mean the technical issues you have to deal with in terms of simile, metaphor, allusion, your choice of meter and form, and so on. But it’s also an art, you understand, and its subject is the entire range of human nature.

It deals with what’s really happening to people.”

Ultimately, however, poetry became a road not taken for the young Pat Jackson. There were other ways to approach what was really happening to people, and by then Jackson had already tried some of them out. At the age of 16 he was writing a weekly sports column for the *Grand Rapids Press*, a newspaper with a circulation at the time of some 75,000, and by the time he left Kenyon he had served both as a field manager for Fuller Brush and the sports publicity director for the college itself. But finally he would abandon journalism and sales—and the study of

poetry—in behalf of a calling he found also compounded of both art and science, also engrossed with what’s really happening to people.

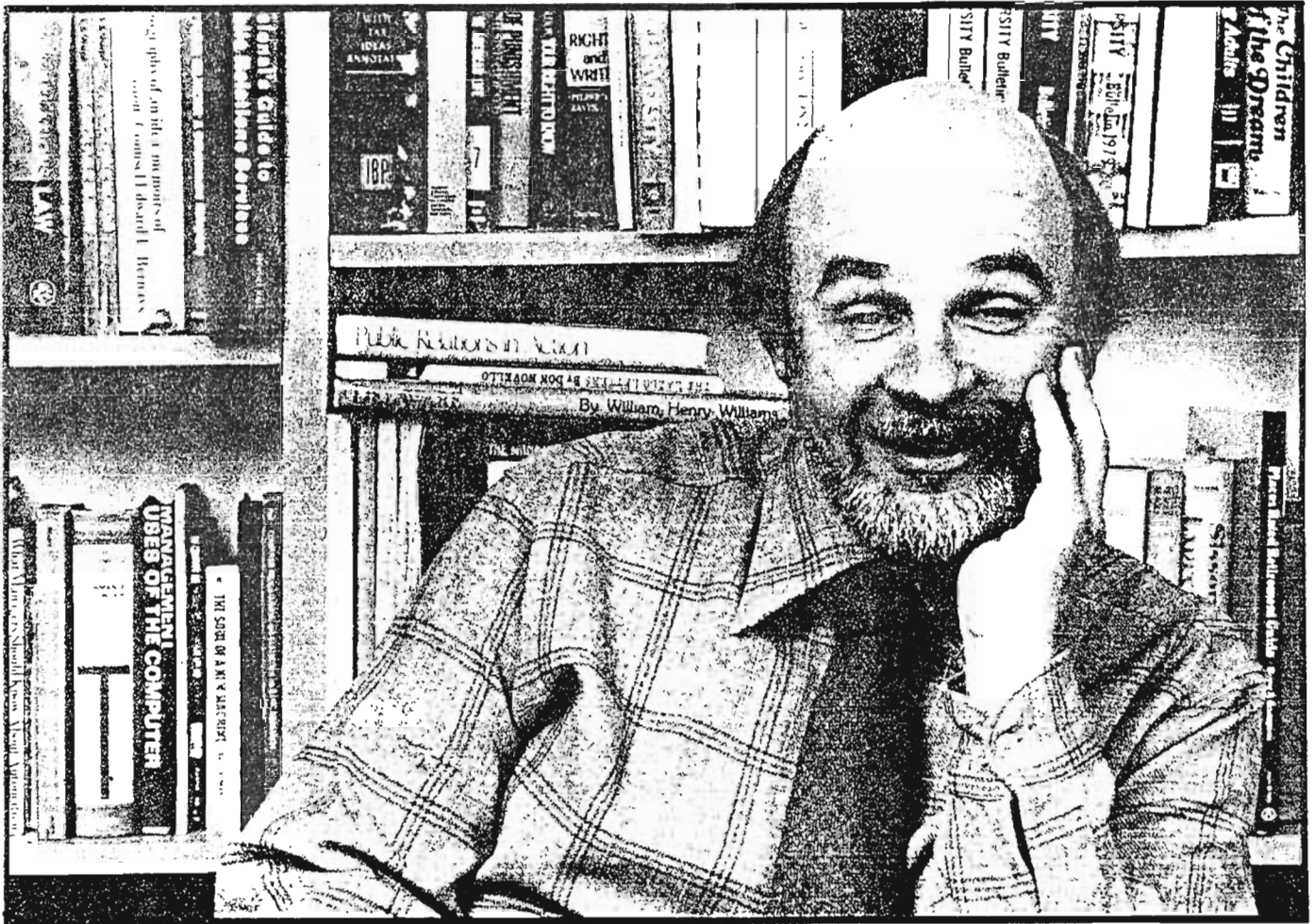
“Everything has to do with public relations,” asserts today’s editor of *pr reporter*. “Reagan and Gorbachev go to Reykjavik, and it’s part of a public relations problem. CBS and Westmoreland get into this lawsuit, but it’s not the lawsuit they’re talking about, it’s the public relations. You’ve got to understand that as soon as we had Eve as well as Adam, we had relationships, communications, reputations. It’s all part of our lives, and whether we do

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Photograph by Melanie Ewe Harocis

BEHIND THE

The newsletters that cover the field transmit more than news. They reflect the personalities and professional views of their editors. Last July, *PRJ* focused on



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Jackson

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anything about it or not, every individual has public relationships.”

We sit at a table in Sparky’s, a café in Exeter, New Hampshire. Jackson is an intense and vigorous man, and as he leans over the table, he speaks with the cadences of someone addressing a university-sized audience. There is enough of both the visionary and the street-fighter in his manner to suggest the sort that once upon a time made college deans a little squirmy. And in fact—though Jackson protests that his counseling firm has always retained clients across the whole spectrum of society—his own reputation owes much to his counseling of groups involved in the various public-interest causes that flourished during the sixties and seventies: “Environmentalism, civil rights, pacifism, civil liberties, overseas aid, saving farmland, we’ve been in on them all.”

In the pages of *pr reporter* today the

greening of America goes on. Recent pieces have focused all or in part on Chrysler’s Corporate Public Responsibility Committee, the success of employee-owned companies, and the preeminence of trust (as distinguished from credibility) in the conduct of successful public relations.

Jackson assures the waitress that everything is fine—“For the time being”—and then derides the sluggishness of American management, which “has been screwing up society for years,” and which is only now discovering that its members succeed better as facilitators—who thrive on trust—rather than autocrats. Jackson terms this a “new American revolution,” a logical outcome of the sixties, and laments that it’s happening so slowly.

But what role, precisely, does public relations—and *pr reporter*—have in all these awakenings? A crucial one, says Jackson. “Our job is to enhance discussion in the court of public opinion,” he explains, “and the genius—if we can use

that word in the generic sense—of *pr reporter* is that we try to be useful to that end. It has always been written by active practitioners in the field—not journalists or editorialists who write *about* the field—and its goal has been to provide *useful* information—strategies, research, and case studies—to others in the field. We don’t run gossip—who’s got a new client, who’s got a new job—though we might highlight a role model of some sort. Instead we try to focus on improving the practice of public relations.

“But that does *not* mean that we’re Pollyannas, and everything—gee whiz—is wonderful,” he continues. “Hell, we’ll take on the issues, but not in a holier-than-thou or critical way. We hope to be able to take people who have come into the field over the past, say, 50 years, from all different backgrounds, and—while we’re waiting for the day when you can’t come in without university training—focus them in a single direction.”

And here we touch upon another sort of revolution—one within the field itself—that Jackson awaits with a notorious impatience. "Ours is an art," he admits, "but it's an art applied to a science, or a compilation of sciences." The items in this list, like other lists, spill from his mouth in rapid-fire succession: "psychology, sociology, anthropology, management theory, communication theory, political science, my God, this *huge* body of knowledge. And this is precisely what is meant by professionalism today: an art applied to a science in such a way that the public interest takes precedence over personal gain. And if you just think about a democracy, any organization that sooner or later doesn't act in the public interest is going to get its comeuppance. So on those grounds—and others—public relations qualifies to be a profession. Just like law or medicine, it deals with something truly endemic to human life. It's rapidly rising to that challenge now—today there are 300 schools with degree programs in public relations—and in the near future we definitely will be subject to an accreditation process similar to that of doctors and lawyers."

There are those who argue that this sort of consecration removes public relations from the marketplace and places it in an atmosphere a little too rarified and theoretical for its own good. "Translation: 'We don't know the behavioral sciences,'" responds Jackson. "There are a lot of organizations still hoping that plain publicity will translate into behavior. They *seem* to resist the notion of professionalism because it takes the focus off this profitable publicity component. But if you scratch down a little bit, they're not really so opposed. They just don't want to be squeezed out entirely by the behaviorists."

The Perry-Dudley House, where *pr reporter* is published and Jackson's counseling firm is housed, is only a short walk through the rain from Sparky's. A three-story mansion built in 1810, it stands next to the site of New Hampshire's original statehouse, where some typically cantankerous Yankees declared their independence from Britain six months before the July declaration in Philadelphia. In 1971 a local bank bought the building and attempted to remove it, but a human chain of Exeter's outraged citizens prevented that. Jackson shakes his head: "Talk about bad public relations." His own firm is engaged in restoring the house.

Inside, the halls are narrow and the door-sills low. Potted plants line the panes of the high federal windows. Today is Friday, and

a portion of the *pr reporter's* staff of 12 is folding the newsletters and their supplements into towering piles and then sliding them into envelopes. One dark back room, suggestive of a monk's cell, belongs to Otto Lerbinger, APR, the publisher of *pr reporter* and the man who applies sparing amounts of ice to his editor's impetuous fire. "Otto is more conservative than I am, more inclined to stick to the verities of the field," Jackson says. "I see the glimmer of something new on the horizon, and I'm all ready to charge after it. But Otto will say, 'Let's wait a minute,' and finally he'll force me into seeing if there's any evidence behind that glimmer."

If Jackson ever chafes under that sort of restraint, it could be because his own ambitions have been fulfilled almost before they took shape. At the age of 9, the *Grand Rapids Press* put him in charge of keeping records and collecting money for all of their paper routes, as well as his own, and when he was 14 the paper's sports editor decided that young Pat was just the extra writer he needed on Saturdays. "He led me into a room, sat me down in front of a typewriter, and that's the reason I still hunt-and-peck when I type."

On scholarship at Kenyon, he promoted the school's sports programs, and he learned the gentle art of negotiation and motivation in going door-to-door for Fuller Brush. Afterwards Jackson returned to the *Grand Rapids Press* to work in its advertising department; then, at 23, he moved to West Virginia as senior manager of a newspaper in United Mine Worker country; then to the management of a "quasi-public relations firm that sold some canned programs to a general range of commercial clients, but mostly media." He founded Jackson, King & Griffith in 1956, and the firm—now under the rubric of Jackson Jackson & Wagner—has just celebrated its 30th anniversary.

When Bob Barbour, the previous editor of *pr reporter*, died in 1976, and the newsletter came up for sale, Jackson was able to leap over a number of other interested buyers largely because Eleanor Barbour saw in him several of the same values that had sustained her late husband: a commitment to the field as a profession, and an identification of public relations with the broad currents of public interest. In that same year, the firm and its new acquisition moved to rural Exeter. "I can walk out on the streets here and find out what people are thinking all across the country," says Jackson. "You can't do that in a large city."

Today Lerbinger's room is vacant; he is in England, though more frequently

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Questionnaire

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9. If you work for a public relations counseling firm, what is your firm's annual billings? If you work for an organization other than a counseling firm, how much is the annual public relations budget?
- under \$50,000 \$500,000-\$749,999
 \$50,000-\$99,999 \$750,000-\$999,999
 \$100,000-\$249,999 \$1 million or more
 \$250,000-\$499,999 don't know
10. How do you feel salaries in public relations compare with salaries in other professions? Public relations salaries are:
- much higher somewhat lower
 somewhat higher much lower
 about the same don't know
11. In what area of public relations do you work?
- community relations public affairs
 communications advertising
 corporate communications media relations
 marketing publicity
 employee relations special events
 investor relations other (Please specify.) _____
12. How many public relations professionals are there in your department or firm (excluding yourself)?
- 1-4 10-24
 5-9 25 or more
13. a) Which one of the following best describes your level of authority?
 b) Which best describes the level of authority of the person to whom you report?
- | | your level | level of
person
to whom
you report |
|----------------------------------|--------------------------|---|
| board of directors/owners | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| corporate management | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| division management | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| department management | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| project management | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| other (Please specify.)
_____ | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
14. In which state do you work? _____
15. What is the highest level of formal education you have achieved?
- graduated high school graduated college
 some college post-graduate
16. Benefits and perquisites given by your organization (Check as many as apply.):
- bonuses cost of living raises
 profit sharing club dues
 pension plans association dues
 medical coverage stock purchase plans
 dental coverage auto plans
 employee life insurance education
 employee disability coverage sabbaticals
 finders fees other (Please describe.) _____
17. Are you a member of PRSA?
 yes no
18. Are you Accredited?
 yes no
 If yes, for how long?
 less than 1 year 6-10 years
 1-5 years 10 years or more

This Questionnaire was prepared with the assistance of John C. Pollock, Ph.D., chairman of New World Decisions, Inc.
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Jackson

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he is off teaching at his field's academic cradle, Boston University. And the editor himself is often more of a spirit than a presence here, attending to a harrowing schedule of appearances that includes more than 100 speeches, seminars, and symposia a year.

These accomplish a number of things: they provide a forum for the advancement of that focus Jackson so desires for his peers; they bring him into immediate contact with thousands of practitioners who are themselves contending with the everyday confusions of working in the field; they also raise the question—one Jackson himself has written on in regard to Lee Iacocca at Chrysler—as to whether an enterprise such as *pr reporter* now has a life of its own apart from its visible and charismatic chief executive.

"Certainly it has," Jackson maintains. "First of all, I didn't start it; it was there before I came along. Second, the people I work with—like Otto, Philip Lesly, Isobel Parke—are well-known in their own right. Third, no other newsletter has the mission that *pr reporter* has. And finally, it might even do better without me.

"I have these advocate views, you understand, and I'm somewhat controversial," Jackson explains. "When I was nominated to the presidency of PRSA, for example, some corporate people were outraged, and a couple of major utilities sent representatives to our meetings just to see if I'd use the organization as a platform to air my own views. That struck me as very unprofessional, by the way; we ought to be able to expect ourselves to lay our advocacies aside, as I did at PRSA." Jackson leans against a doorjamb and laughs. "But *pr reporter* might actually do better with someone a little more moderate at the helm."

Pat Jackson's favorite poet? Not Tate or Ransom or Frost, but that controversial and immoderate preacher, John Donne. "Here he was a cleric," Jackson says, his eyes wide in admiration, "and yet he was so worldly and passionate at the same time."

Like the metaphysical poet and one-time rake, Pat Jackson is a preacher as well, drawn similarly to those tense and sinewy unions of apparent opposites: art and science, practice and theory, corporate goals and public interest, professionalism and the bottom-line.

It has to do with everything, you understand. As soon as there was Eve as well as Adam. ■

Rick Carey is a freelance writer sequestered in New Hampshire.