

Book Review

The BBC: A Century on Air—David Hendy (New York, NY, USA: Public Affairs, Hachette Book Group, 2022, 638 pp.)

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■ **IN 2022**, a number of literary critics observed that exactly 100 years had elapsed since 1922, the year that Ezra Pound had once proclaimed as “Year one of a new era.” He was doubtless referring to the publication of T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* as well as James Joyce’s *Ulysses*. It was the year that Einstein won the Nobel Prize in physics. Not generally noted, but certainly of social importance was the entry of the BBC into the world of radio broadcasting—a major event in the shaping of culture in Great Britain.

What does BBC stand for? A trick question. Originally, it stood for the British Broadcasting Company Ltd. This was a short-lived entity created by British and American electrical companies (e.g., Marconi and Western Electric) having a presence in the United Kingdom. Note that the Marconi Company had been broadcasting concerts, for example, before the formation of the BBC in an effort to sell their hardware and receiving sets. This first BBC was licensed by the British Post Office—a natural choice since it had already control of the telephone and telegraph in the United Kingdom. A for-profit company, this first BBC derived its income from the sale of radio sets and transmitters as well as an annual license fee of 10 shillings that had to be purchased by radio owners and which was collected for the BBC by the Post Office, which kept a portion of the revenue. In 1926, the Company ended—its

assets were transferred to a noncommercial business, the British Broadcasting Corporation, a nationalized company. This organization was chartered by the Royal Crown but its freedom and constraints were not that of an American-style corporation: for example, the Postmaster General was empowered to take over or close down the BBC in times of emergency, a fact that has been a major subtext in the history of the BBC to this day. The BBC was given a monopoly over broadcasting in Britain. No one else could broadcast radio from British soil for general consumption even though stations on the continent, notably from Luxembourg, could readily be heard as far back as the earlier BBC. It was not until the 1970s that commercial radio could legally be broadcast from within the United Kingdom, although commercial television dates from somewhat earlier. The situation of broadcasting in the United States in the early 1920s was seen as a visible warning of the chaos and vulgarity of taking the commercial road. The BBC charter of 1926 stated that the BBC must develop broadcasting “to the best advantage and the national interest.” Failing that, the charter could be revoked, and the Post Office would cease collecting fees from radio set owners, thus drying up the revenue stream.

There were three important figures at the start of the BBC in 1922: Cecil Lewis, John Reith, and Arthur Burrows. All had seen World War I firsthand, a not insignificant fact in the ethos of the radio service they started. One is reminded of how the horror of

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that war must have given shape to *The Waste Land*. Although a journalist for the *Oxford Times*, Burrows had been in charge of pre-BBC experimental radio transmissions sent out by Marconi House in Britain. That station bore the call letters 2LO. During the Great War, he ran a group that secretly eavesdropped, for the British government, on German wireless messages. Cecil Lewis, a minister's son, joined the Royal Flying Corps at age 17 by lying about his age. He was awarded the Military Cross for his actions at the Battle of the Somme, which he later described vividly in his book, *Sagittarius Rising*. Haunted by the destruction and death, which he had witnessed and had helped perpetuate, he felt the need to participate in a healing culture and was won over, after the war, by a friend who had been exposed to broadcasting in the United States and who suggested that someone "artistic" like Lewis might make a contribution to the new technology of radio. Lewis then responded to an advertisement in the *Morning Post*. Among the trio of founders, the most important and best known is John Reith who was later to become Director General, a post he held until 1938. Reith is universally acknowledged as the individual most responsible for setting the initial culture that shaped BBC radio during his tenure and beyond. Reith began at the station as head with Burrows director of programs and Lewis his assistant.

Reith's face was badly scarred in battle during the Great War and Lewis had suffered a gash in his shoulder. Hendy notes that quite a number of the first employees suffered from shell shock and had experienced nervous breakdowns. An institution, like the BBC, which might promote collective happiness had great appeal after the war both to the first generation of employees and their listeners. Reith was a Scottish minister's son, which must have shaped his thinking and by implication the broadcasting service. Forming his philosophy was a book influential in his parents' generation as well as his own: Mathew Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy*, a best-seller that appeared in 1869: a Victorian-era agenda of "high culture," which Arnold contrasts with the culture then present—one of Philistines and toiling masses. Arnold was promoting and reifying "the best that has been thought and said." His stated goal was "to make all men live in an atmosphere of sweetness and light." The book is sometimes seen as part of the efforts of Victorian reformers to create libraries, parks, and public entertainment. He enjoined his readers to carry others along in the march to perfection.

With Reith seeking to promote this culture within the BBC, one sees the likelihood of trouble. Everyone who owned a radio was obliged to pay an annual license fee. Suppose, having paid the fee, one does not like the entertainment emitting from the set and wonders if this is the "best that has been thought and said." The BBC established its own symphony orchestra with its roots dating to 1922; its repertoire was classical. Imagine someone who favored jazz or show tunes switching on her wireless, hearing Bach, realizing that she was paying the musicians through her licensing fee, and knowing that unless she listened to a station from the Continent, she would not hear her favorites on the radio. Lectures and poetry recitals might have earned the same disdain. And there were those intellectuals who damned the BBC for its efforts at spreading what they perceived as middlebrow culture. Virginia Woolf was at odds "with the whole Reithian project." She was disdainful of the goal to bring about "a general intelligence and a higher culture," believing that serious art must be segregated from "the vulgarities of common taste."

This dogged clash of cultures was not pacified until the outbreak of World War II. Up until this time, the BBC was broadcasting from a number of locations on short and long waves and calling itself "the home service." Alas, some portion of the population found it dull, and out of sheer perversity and the pursuit of novelty tuned in German radio. Seeing this, the Germans launched nine English language programs a day. They also gave voice to Lord Haw Haw (William Joyce), a Brit who spewed out pro-Nazi propaganda. In response, the BBC in 1940 offered an alternative to the Home Service. Known at first as the Forces Program, its ostensible purpose was to serve members of the Armed Forces—its philosophy, as a purveyor of comedy, popular music, quiz shows, and variety, was far removed from Reith's thinking—he had left the station two years before. When the war ended, this became the Light Programme and was as readily available to Britons as the Home Service. In 1967, this Light Program was split into Radio 1, consisting of popular music and Radio 2, "easy listening." Radio 3 offers to this day the sort of material Reith would have favored: classical music, lectures "high" culture. The original home service morphed into nonmusical material, quiz shows, and plays. These changes were motivated, in large part, by the appearance of popular pirate radio stations, which broadcast from ocean ships and which were beyond

the jurisdiction of the British government. One wonders how much of what goes out now on all of BBC radio, to use Arnold's words, reflects the "best that had been thought and said." In searching for vestiges of Reith's dream still on the air, one should also try BBC Radio 4 characterized by "humane upper brow seriousness." Dating from 1967, today one can hear, for example, a dramatization of Proust's, *In Search of Lost Time*. Recently, the BBC launched Radio 5, which has the mix of sports and news found on many American AM stations, but without the commercials.

One major element lacking in Hendy's book is his complete disregard for any technical material about BBC broadcasting. For example, when did the BBC start broadcasting on FM and was the program material used in this technology the same as on AM or was it designed to take advantage of the better fidelity of FM? Did people flock to stores to buy FM radios? The license fee was collected by the Post Office. How was it enforced? In the 1920s, radio sets were simple enough so that you might build your own. How would the Post Office know if you had such a set? There is no information about this. The author speaks of BBC stations, outside of London, located in Manchester, Birmingham, and Glasgow. One wonders what frequencies they used and it is never clear how much their material closely followed that emanating from the BBC headquarters in London. There is even mention in passing a "long wave" service of the BBC, but one never learns what frequency it used or why it existed, and whether it still broadcasts. In fact, I learned elsewhere that Radio 4 does use long waves, at 198 kHz. But why? Do many people in the United Kingdom have radios that will operate at such a low frequency?

The BBC was once famous for its World Service, which went out on short waves in numerous languages to most of the world. It began in 1932 and is now virtually gone, having been replaced by the World Wide Web. A history of the BBC should tell us more than Hendy does about the World Service, for example, languages used, frequencies, power, and how it was financed.

Besides the contentious matter of the content of its culture, the BBC has faced conflict over most of its history over the matter of freedom of expression, especially as applied to politics. The original Charter of the Corporation, which lasted until 2007, specifies 12 Governors including the Chairman. They are all appointed by the Secretary of State, a political office.

This has created friction between the Government and the BBC during political crises. An early one occurred during the General Strike of 1927, when nearly 2 million Britons, many of them coal miners, but also railroad and newspaper workers went out on strike for higher wages. As there were no newspapers available, a burden fell on the BBC to deliver the news and it increased its number of newscasts. The government, and notably Winston Churchill, who was Chancellor of the Exchequer, demanded and were mostly successful in having the BBC broadcast only antistrike material. The Archbishop of Canterbury was also prevented from giving a talk sympathetic to the strikers. Such friction existed as recently as the Falklands War when Prime Minister Thatcher condemned the BBC for its failure to aggressively promote the British cause to her liking.

Just as it was natural for the Post Office to assume responsibility for radio it was to assume the same role for British television as the technology emerged in the 1920s and 1930s. The BBC's involvement with television is nearly as old as it is with radio. In 1929, it allowed John Logie Baird the use of a transmitter on the roof of Selfridge's Department store for him to carry out his early TV experiments. Baird's system used a mechanically rotating scanning disk to sample an image (projected on the disk) and create electrical impulses which could be encoded on an electromagnetic wave, broadcast, and then decoded to form an image at a receiver. Although this scanning disk TV did work, it proved to be greatly inferior to electronic scanning with a cathode ray tube, which did not evolve until the 1930s and is still the basis for TV cameras. In 1929, only a few affluent people with TV sets could watch Baird's imperfect images. Baird was British, whereas the electronic system came from an Italian, Marconi, and EMI in the United States, and this may have helped Baird in Britain. However, in 1935, the BBC compromised and decided to set up regular services using both the Baird technique as well as electronic scanning. It was only in 1937 that the BBC was allowed by the Post Office to pull the plug on Baird. Television did close completely on 1 September 1939, with the start of the war. Just two years earlier, an estimated 10,000 people watched the coronation of King George VI on television.

An Englishman would have to be well into middle age or beyond to remember when the license fee to own a radio was ended—1971. The TV license fee continues to this day and is not cheap at £126.50.

Commercial television, called ITV meaning “independent television” began in Britain in 1955 during the administration of Winston Churchill, a proponent of free enterprise. The first ad was for toothpaste. Surprisingly, commercial radio did not emerge until later—1973—partly as a response to the popularity of offshore pirate radio stations which did indeed carry commercials.

In the past two decades, most of the British public has been subscribing to TV cable and streaming services, for example, Netflix and Apple TV. Since one has the choice of buying or not buying them, then in fairness should not a Brit be given the same choice as regards the BBC: make paying for the BBC by set owners a matter of personal decision. Hendy describes an interesting experiment, in 2015, regarding this question: a number of households claiming that the BBC was poor value for money were allowed to cancel their BBC service and cease paying their license fee. This canceled not only their BBC radio reception, and broadcast TV, but also an online transmission of BBC TV. After two weeks of this arrangement, two-thirds of the former BBC consumers had changed their minds and wanted reconnection—they had “felt detached from national life.” In 2020, it was still the case that over 91% of U.K. households were using some service of the BBC. Also in

2020, ironically, COVID-19 proved a boon to the BBC. In their quest for information about a national crisis, people turned to their national broadcaster—it carried the aura of authenticity. In addition, the BBC provided homeschooling to children whose schools had been shut down.

PERHAPS, IF REITH were alive he would take some comfort in seeing that the BBC was still capable of bringing, in his own words, “the best of everything into the greatest number of homes.” Hendy has provided us with a broad cultural history, but for those curious about the technical side of the BBC there is little to be found. ■

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