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Introduction

- ¹ The manner in which the BBC emerged and the character which its broadcasting promptly assumed were connected to, perhaps even made possible by, a historical coincidence: on the one hand, the growth in government intervention and control which was essential for the successful prosecution of the Great War; on the other, the availability of a supremely gifted and determined young administrator, with a quite uncommon capacity for work: John Reith. Government initially struggled to impose peacetime interventionism but, following the “*compulsive fatalism*” of 1914-18¹, the habit was acquired, and acquired for good. As for Reith, guided first by a strong paternal breeze towards a career in engineering and then, by personal ambition, towards a second in politics, he found neither answered the inner call to “*use to the maximum effect the gifts [he] had, and to do the greatest good*”². Briefly becalmed in 1922 – a unique moment of stillness –, Reith listened hard for any movement in the air announcing the arrival of the supreme challenge he sought for his idling energies. And arrive it did, in the form of a job advertisement for the British Broadcasting Company³. Here was the stiff, inviting breeze into which the almost comically unqualified Reith – “*I did not know what broadcasting was*”⁴ – would now sail. And in that moment a new coincidence arose: between Reith – empire-builder if ever there was, driven by an unstoppable mission to improve and to civilise –, and Britain and its global empire: the latter delicately poised between loyalty to the mother country and a growing centrifugal urge... The aim of this article is, first, to study the character of the BBC’s first director through – mainly – his own words; next to look at a few examples of how this affected policy and programming; finally, and briefly, to set the directorial ambitions for the Corporation in their broader, unfavourable context.

The Controller

- 2 Asa Briggs' assertions – that “*Reith did not make broadcasting, but he did make the BBC*” and that he was “*a man who changed twentieth-century British history*” – encapsulate what is perhaps now the standard view of the BBC's pioneering DG⁵. There are, however, two points which can be made to nuance this.
- 3 The first can be dealt with very briefly and consists of a reminder that when Reith became General Manager of the new Company, some of the basic constitutional framework was already in place: as Briggs himself makes clear, the protracted and sometimes tetchy negotiations leading to the formation of the BBC had dealt at some length with questions of monopoly and unified control, as well as those of finance, national coverage and the need to preserve the essentially British character of the institution (for both economic and cultural reasons)⁶. The key role of government – through the Postmaster-General – was a given from the outset (often, during the period covered here, to Reith's profound distaste), as was the non-controversial nature of broadcasting and, by extension, the necessity for the BBC to be non-partisan. To remember the prior existence of some of the machinery often assimilated to Reithianism is to take nothing away from Reith's skill in operating and perfecting it, which was surely one of his major contributions⁷.
- 4 The second point requires more explanation and – again, without diminishing Reith's consummate skills as Director General – possibly invites us to adjust our assessment in relation to the widely accepted view of him. Charles Stuart, for example, who took on the daunting task of editing Reith's personal diaries, approaches Reith on the standard trajectory when he says that Reith's career at the BBC was his “*chef d'oeuvre*”, and notes his “*far-seeing originality*.” True, Stuart does concede Reith was “*a mass of contradictions*,” with his “*foibles and quirks*” (though the same could surely be said of many prominent, successful figures), but comes to rest on Reith's capacity for “*organisation and moral leadership*”⁸. Stuart is surely right to mention, too, Reith's fascination, even obsession, with *efficiency* – whether in its administrative or its engineering sense (in Reith's case, both were clearly applicable): this is not pursued any further, however. Yet the concept of efficiency is at the heart of Reith's politics, conditioning the way he organised the BBC, as well as the character of the moral leadership he exercised.
- 5 He was an engineer, by training and by temperament: one is tempted to say by his physical constitution. Reith did not simply want to work, he needed to work, to deliver himself of what was self-evidently an extraordinary natural energy: he complained often that he did not have enough to do⁹. Reith's deep and sincere religious conviction meant, in fact, that *not* to use this energy was not simply a waste, but was a rejection of God's will for him, and consequently a serious fault. Reith was a determined man: someone who had great personal determination, but also someone for whom his path, so Reith felt, was already marked out. In December 1922, after landing the job as General Manager of the British Broadcasting Company, Reith noted in his diary, “*I am profoundly thankful to God in this matter. It is all His doing*”¹⁰. The BBC would be made to Reith's own design, a vast machine whose every component was conceived to transmit that providential power, and the nature and expression of Reith's all-encompassing efficiency takes on considerable importance in relation to his management methods

and, consequently, his political stance; and in relation to the criticism frequently levelled at him for his paternalistic, even autocratic style.

- 6 Reith's mother, attending a government reception with him in 1929, was on the end of a curiously barbed remark from Nancy Astor, Reith noting that she had "*asked Mother if it was from her that I had my Mussolini traits*"¹¹. Such accusations of dictatorial management methods were to become a leitmotiv of Reith's career at the BBC¹². In July 1936, for example, during a long Commons debate on the Ullswater Report, Reith's personality is clearly a central issue. Clement Attlee (who had been a member of the committee), summing up for the Opposition, praises Reith for his qualities – "*remarkable*" and "*a man of very great strength*" – but goes on:

he has some defects of his qualities. I expressed them in a note in the report. I think that he tends to be dictatorial and a little impatient of criticism. Like many men of his great ability, he rather likes to be surrounded by "yes" men. I think that he tends to rule a little by fear¹³.

- 7 Reith, of course, kept abreast of everything that happened in Parliament and was well aware of these comments, which he summarises accurately in his memoirs¹⁴, but which, on this occasion as always, he refutes. The former Labour leader, George Lansbury, speaking in the same debate, and describing himself as "*a broadcasting fan*" is even more overtly critical, shading quickly in his comments from an accusation of "*paternalism*," to the mention of his hatred of "*dictatorships*," to the claim that he had always felt that Reith "*would have made a very excellent Hitler in this country*"¹⁵. The degree of seriousness of Lansbury's remark – as with the mentions of Mussolini – is difficult to assess today, coming as it did at a point where appeasement was still very much the official policy, with Lansbury, a moment later, himself appearing to lump Reith and Hitler into the category "*wonderful people*." Seen from our post-World War 2 perspective, Reith's own comments on Hitler, which Charles Stuart has carefully plotted¹⁶, are at the very least disconcerting. In 1933, Reith felt that British foreign policy had been "*too pro-French for years*" and that, "*the Nazis will clean things up and put Germany on the way to being a real power in Europe again*"; in July 1934 Reith writes "*I really admire the way Hitler has cleaned up what looked like an incipient revolt against him*"; in August 1936 he confirms that he has "*a great admiration for the German way of doing things*"; even in March 1939, as Czechoslovakia is occupied, Reith is able to write "*Hitler continues his magnificent efficiency*." It is difficult to gauge the true reach of these remarks and it would be easy to overplay their importance. But they cannot simply be dismissed out of a sense of reverence for Reith, or squeezed out by the weight of laudatory official history: they are, after all, the considered reaction of a man who, above all else, wanted to get things done and was convinced of his ability to get them done.
- 8 It is the mention here of efficiency, again, which lets Reith's political cat out of the bag: he often showed himself to be no friend of the democratic process if it prevented things from getting done. Workers' associations – which Reith always tried to resist at the BBC – and organised labour: these were obstacles which, if at all possible, needed to be brushed aside or, at the very least, kept at bay. In April 1922, Reith comments in his diary that workers' organisations are "*one of the greatest deterrents to the harmonious conduct of industry*"¹⁷. In 1949, in his memoirs, he sets out his view in a more considered way, but the view remains the same: "*if organisation by associations and unions removes, as it often does, all sense of moral responsibility on the part of employer or senior executives, all friendly interest and concern, something absolutely vital has been lost*"¹⁸.

- 9 Given such views, it is hardly surprising that industrial democracy was something of a limited concept within the BBC: a pronounced form of what we might today see as control freakery seems to have characterised Reith's thoughts on human resource management. Reithian efficiency, in the end, was a hybrid of military precision and promptness, coupled with the absolute conviction of the rightness, even the righteousness, of his ideas. If Reith had very early realised that "*the martial spirit*"¹⁹ was strong in him, it would nonetheless be absurd to see Reith's behaviour at the BBC, however strict he was, as genuine dictatorship. But what is obvious from his comments is that, even though he prided himself on maintaining good relations with everyone – all the way down, as he boasted, to the office boy – he had a very clear, rigid sense of hierarchy, and of his own moral and intellectual superiority over all-comers. Reith's "*overweening sense of [his] own importance*" had already struck one of his fellow officers early in the Great War, in the trenches at Armentières²⁰. Later in the war, as Reith languished in England at the end of 1917, waiting for a new posting back to the Western Front, his Brigadier-General needed to have a new ammunition store built as quickly as possible, but was not sure how this might be done. Reith had the job completed in two days, which prompted the senior officer to say, "*You are a hell of a fellah*," Reith noting to himself: "*But I knew that*"²¹. Some years later, Lord Crawford was to say that Reith suffered from "*a swelled head*"²²: one can perhaps see why. Charles Stuart also notes Reith's "*intense egocentricity*"²³, an attitude which comes through with almost comic candour at times. Faced with obstructive behaviour on the part of some of his BBC governors, Reith writes in his diary for 25 January 1927: "*What a curse it is to have outstanding comprehensive ability and intelligence, combined with a desire to use them to maximum purpose*"²⁴.
- 10 Here was an egocentricity which, at times of great frustration or impatience, was apt to mutate into an ungracious intellectual snobbery. On holiday in Cornwall with the family in 1937, Reith, in language worthy of a Victorian moralist, was aghast at the arrival in the quiet bay where he had rented a house of "*that sort whose advent automatically spreads pestilence of sight and sound*," people readily engaged, it seemed to him, in ruining the natural beauties of rural England, and whose vulgarity left the peace shattered "*by open exhaust or jazz gramophone*"²⁵. The snobbishness could become unadorned arrogance toward his fellow man (or woman), as when Reith showed his contempt for the "*routine-ruttid mind*" of the "*inconsiderable official*" who blocked his plans for a live broadcast of the Cenotaph ceremony in 1923²⁶; or his contempt for his governors when he was not able to get his own way, the chairman, Lord Clarendon, being qualified as "*a stupid ass*," criticised for being "*so weak and stupid*," or another governor, Mrs Snowden, described as a "*poisonous creature*," a "*truly terrible creature, ignorant, stupid and horrid*"²⁷. For Reith, the automatic principle to be applied was clearly "*reverentia superioris*"²⁸ and the expectation one of "*total loyalty*"²⁹.

A Beveridge for the Soul?

- 11 But all this energy, efficiency and moral superiority to what end? Even the martial Reith was not interested in command for command's sake: how could Reith, as he so ardently wished, apply his qualities "*to maximum purpose*"? Reith's answer was to come in the form of the BBC's ternary mission statement: inform, educate, entertain. Already, by April 1922, and well before Reith's appointment, education and entertainment were

to the fore in the thinking of the committee discussing plans for a British Broadcasting Company – with the emphasis arguably on the latter at that point. In a concession to the newspaper owners, however, the third element of the trinity – information – was placed more or less out of bounds by the committee: the “*broadcasting of news not already printed was to be prohibited*”³⁰. This compulsory avoidance of anything remotely controversial greatly annoyed Reith, precisely because it limited the enormous potential efficiency of the BBC; his struggle in this area – which he eventually won (though the ban was not formally lifted until 1928) – is without doubt one of his major achievements and the one which best embodies Reith’s essential contribution to the creation of a much vaunted alternative news source to newspapers.

- 12 But from his position at the head of the BBC, Reith was intent, with his deeply ingrained Presbyterian “*distrust of the frivolous*”³¹, to ensure that a properly informed public, should also be a properly educated public. If listeners were to be cured of the morally questionable urge to revert to their jazz gramophones, the BBC had to provide matter capable of elevating them into a less pestilential sphere: this required that entertainment should be strictly marshalled and fall into step behind information and education. On no account, Reith argued, was the public simply to be given what it wanted. Indeed, for Reith, what the public wanted was only what the public thought it wanted: Reith determined that the public’s true wants should be revealed to it, if necessary, in spite of itself. In 1924, Reith stressed that the “*preservation of a high moral standard is obviously of paramount importance*”, and – later – that “*Entertainment, pure and simple, quickly grows tame... If hours are to be occupied agreeably, it would be a sad reflection on human intelligence if it were contended that entertainment, in the accepted sense of the term, was the only means of doing so*”³². Doubt never clouded Reith’s purpose and broadcasting from the outset needed a “*conscious, social purpose [...] contributing consistently and cumulatively to the intellectual and moral happiness of the community*”³³.
- 13 From our own vantage point in the postmodern age, Reith’s self-elevation to the role of moral arbiter of the nation is difficult to divorce from his overarching religious beliefs and, consequently, easily assimilated to an attitude predicated on universals which many today will feel can no longer be defended. But, even for some of Reith’s contemporaries, his moral strictures could be hard to bear. Labour’s Ellen Wilkinson, for example, is credited with wryly commenting, in the summer of 1931, that “*it is unsafe to give a Scotsman any opportunity for indulging his national passion of directing other people for their own good,*” adding that Reith had “*made himself more even than the guardian of public morals. He has become the Judge of What We Ought to Want*”³⁴. Reith himself, however, felt that he was guided by “*wisdom*” in insisting on a broadcasting policy designed to give “*people what one believes they should like and will come to like*”³⁵.
- 14 The consequences for programming were non-negligible. The aim was “*a settled programme policy of elevating as well as entertaining*”³⁶. But, as we have seen, elevation was oriented towards intellectual and moral happiness of the greatest number. Devising programmes of a non-frivolous nature capable of achieving that end could mean that material which was deemed intellectually challenging or esoteric, in some sense newfangled, was likely to raise the Reithian brow: to be uplifting was not necessarily the same as being demanding. There was a strong urge to innovate in some parts of the Corporation: radio drama, particularly, was to become one of the BBC’s principal contributions to the history of broadcasting, thanks in great part to the pioneering work of Val Gielgud³⁷. But the drive to innovate could, and did, come up against more

conservative tendencies. One of the areas where this proved to be the case was in the Talks Department, responsible for a wide range of broadcasts using the spoken word. The main difficulty the department faced was that even after the granting of the Royal Charter in 1927, the Corporation was still unable to prepare its own news bulletins and required to avoid any material considered *controversial*. In essence, this was a hangover from the initial tussle between radio broadcasting and the newspaper owners: if the BBC succeeded in gaining a monopoly on broadcasting, the newspapers – fearful of potential competition from the new medium – managed to hold on to their control of anything which could be assimilated to editorial comment. Following representations from Reith, from the spring of 1928, this ban was lifted.

- 15 Hilda Matheson (1888-1940), who became first Director of Talks in 1927, took immediate advantage of this to arrange the first live debate on radio by representatives from the three leading political parties of the day. Matheson, however, although freed by government to broach controversial subjects, was to find it more difficult to escape the in-house constraints on what was considered intellectually suitable for broadcast. Matheson, directly head-hunted for the BBC by Reith himself who instantly recognised her talents, was an experienced and highly gifted former MI5 operative (recruited to that organisation, it has been said, by none other than T.E. Lawrence). After the First World War, she also worked as private secretary to Nancy Astor and, as a result, was “firmly plugged into a network of writers, intellectuals, social reformers and politicians”³⁸; not least, to the artists, critics and writers of the Bloomsbury Group, among whom her lover, Vita Sackville-West. The assets for the BBC of this intellectual pedigree were undeniable: Matheson was able to use her connections to lure high-profile, but reluctant contributors such as H.G. Wells, to broadcast his views on world peace (but, even then, only after a good dinner at the Savoy in good company – among others, the Woolfs and Julian Huxley³⁹).
- 16 The liabilities, however, also weighed heavily in the scales of the DG’s judgement. Matheson’s invitations to figures such as Vita Sackville-West, Virginia Woolf or E.M. Forster, attracted directorial attention. A line in the moral and linguistic sand was drawn when the subject was broached of Sackville-West’s husband, the Labour politician Harold Nicolson, giving a talk on Joyce’s highly experimental *Ulysses*, a talk which also contained references, deemed controversial, to the work of D. H. Lawrence. At this Reith balked: both on moral grounds and on those of the liberal, progressive language used which seemed far removed from “reasonable, calm BBC tones”⁴⁰. The relationship between such broadcasts and what were increasingly perceived as left-leaning political views, caused tension and then friction between Matheson and Reith, which may or may not have been amplified by inklings or rumours concerning Matheson’s personal life⁴¹. Both Charlotte Higgins, and Catherine Murphy underline Matheson’s quarrels with Reith: both Murphy and Higgins refer to a “hammer and tongs” argument between Reith and Matheson in June 1929; and Higgins notes that Reith’s diary entry for 6 March 1930 recorded that he was “developing a great dislike of Miss Matheson and her works”⁴²– Reith himself noted that there was “trouble brewing”⁴³. Matheson, unable to put up with the discomfort of this situation, and suspecting that she was being manoeuvred into a more subordinate role, finally resigned at the end of 1931.
- 17 Reith, the arch-traditionalist, could no longer accommodate as Director of a BBC department such an unconventional figure. True, Matheson wished her broadcast

material to be uplifting. But her purpose was clearly at odds with that of the man in charge. Reforming the listener's taste in the direction of greater individual formal awareness and appreciation was not the reform of public taste that Reith preferred – i.e. national moral consolidation rather than personal aesthetic education. Matheson was a potential rebel at the heart of the structure which Reith had so painstakingly engineered, and threatened to undermine the national energy of which he saw himself as custodian. Tinkering in the elitist, modernist margins was a distraction: it was the national good which had to be preserved and encouraged over and above any intellectual coterie of doubtful morals. Dignity, community and respectability, these were not modern: Reith's fabled impartiality meant protecting these values against all attempts at subversion, against any barbarian breach of the perimeter of his moral *civitas*. One of the clearest expositions of his position was included in a detailed memorandum of information which Reith provided for the Crawford Committee, and deserves to be quoted in full here. Broadcasting, said the memorandum:

had emerged from the first flush of scientific wonder. It had to be accepted as part of the permanent and essential machinery of civilisation. People were now turning to a more prosaic but more fruitful consideration of its potentialities as an instrument of social good. The BBC had founded a tradition of public service and of devotion to the highest interest of community and nation. There was to hand a mighty instrument to instruct and fashion public opinion; to banish ignorance and misery; to contribute richly and in many ways to the sum total of human wellbeing. The present concern of those to whom the stewardship had, by accident, been committed was that those basic ideals should be sealed and safeguarded, so that broadcasting might play its destined part.

- 18 Reith's mission statement, in tones which sound almost Gladstonian in their reforming zeal, prefigures in its breath of vision, its sense of rhetorical urgency and its hopes for national improvement, the work of that other Liberal reformer, Beveridge, who so took to heart the national good. Beveridge, arguably, was concerned above all with the national body, Reith with the nation's opinions and its well-being, its mind and soul. The BBC is on a mission to civilise, and is thus, he believes, fulfilling a destiny.

Mission unattainable

- 19 Reith's sense of his own importance could scarcely be clearer⁴⁴, and the diary and – especially – memoirs, are strewn with passages of self-congratulation and obvious pride in the many complements paid to himself and to the BBC. Yet there are also rare glimpses of a surprisingly fragile Reith: while in the United States, for example, organising the production of small arms during the Great War, he cannot quite suppress “*a feeling that I was a fraud and would sooner or later be found out*”⁴⁵. Later, this could, on occasion, become a more overt admission of personal failure: “*I have been such a ghastly mediocrity*,” he writes in November 1935, “*compared to what I wanted to be and could have been*”⁴⁶. Charles Stuart wonders why Reith “*should have persisted in asserting this demonstrable falsehood*”, and suggests that it flowed from a combination of unquenched ambition and insufficient recognition for what he had actually achieved; and Stuart is surely right to specify that Reith, ever the engineer, would have been dissatisfied that “*the output of his powerful mind and talents was being artificially held down*”⁴⁷, that he was not being used *efficiently*. For example, finding himself at arm's length from the centre of power and the decision-makers in September 1938, Reith could only groan, “*I haven't the least idea of what's happening*”⁴⁸. His dissatisfaction and frustration

could sometimes overflow into open contempt for politicians and civil servants, often honoured “without doing a hundredth part of the good I have done”⁴⁹. He had his pet hates, too: Churchill, of course – a thorn in Reith’s side from the time of the General Strike onwards⁵⁰ –; but he had apparently limitless reserves of venom for others. For example, Kingsley Wood – Postmaster General, and therefore Reith’s boss from 1931-35 – was “a little bounder,” “the little cad,” “the little crook,” “little swine,”...⁵¹ In truth, his distaste knew few bounds – “What a ridiculous waste of time Parliament is” he exclaims in March 1929⁵². Desperate at his lack of success by September 1938 in obtaining a job worthy of his talents – Cabinet minister, ambassador, Viceroy of India... – Reith railed: “It is all annoying to me as I have so much more ability than these PMs [...] I suppose it is too late for me ever to get to any position such as I should have. I ought of course to be dictator”⁵³.

- 20 Reith’s conviction that he was better placed than the politicians to administer/govern was nowhere more apparent than in respect of colonial and imperial affairs, which – he felt – were being allowed to run to ruin, and in respect of the insufficiently exploited capacity of broadcasting, in his view, to help stop this rot.
- 21 Reith was scathing about successive governments’ poor handling, as he saw it, of this policy area: particularly about what he saw as a clear downward trend in the fortunes of the empire (which he always wrote with a capital E). It was clear to him in July 1934, for example, that “England has obviously given up all idea of governing India”⁵⁴. Reith had occasion to see something of the deteriorating empire at first hand. During a week-end on Earl Stanhope’s estate at Chevening in June 1937, Reith received a “startling [...] thrilling” invitation – much to his boyish delight – to sail with the Mediterranean fleet to Gibraltar. During the brief voyage, even the Royal Navy was shown to be fallible since, during pre-arranged exercises, “something went wrong” (though later manoeuvres Reith describes as “complicated and beautiful”)⁵⁵. But it was on arrival at Gibraltar itself that Reith was struck by imperial neglect: “I had expected Gibraltar to be a show place – where innumerable visitors from foreign lands would see in what shape an outpost of the Empire was kept. I thought it shoddy and shabby and second-rate; it needed tidying-up”⁵⁶. He experienced a similar anti-climax on a cruise around the Caribbean in January 1938 at the invitation of the governor of the Bank of England, Montagu Norman. “I had been looking forward to visiting Jamaica” he writes. But, once there, Reith felt “there was neither dignity nor assurance nor efficiency; anything might happen. Erstwhile the British had possessed the art of colonial government; there was not much sign of it in Jamaica”⁵⁷. In Reith’s view, Britain’s entire foreign policy, in fact, during the 1920s and 1930s was far too timid, far too pro-French and full of missed opportunities⁵⁸: for example, in respect of Italy, he argues in April 1938, with whom an “agreement could have been made early in 1935 with European history since vastly different and hundreds of millions saved”⁵⁹. Above all, Reith felt, the consequence of all this was that Britain was in effect colluding in its own demotion in the international order. Learning in 1931 that Persia had refused to allow Imperial Airways flights to use its airspace, he was sufficiently stung to enter full reactionary/nostalgic mode: “It is really dreadful that England takes all this sort of thing lying down. It could never have happened in the old days but our foreign policy today is utterly pusillanimous... and it seems now as if any dago republic can wipe its feet on us”⁶⁰.
- 22 Reith, of course, believed he had the necessary vision to foster imperial unity and consolidate Britain’s international position; and broadcasting was the readily available means to achieve this end. Already, in the spring of 1926, he had been pondering how to take broadcasting to India, venting his frustration that there was “neither vision nor

recognition of the immense potentialities of broadcasting in this affair; no ethical or moral appreciation"⁶¹. Clearly, this moral dimension, for someone of Reith's religious convictions, was fundamental and a key component of his Gladstonian civilising mission to bring about the "amelioration and development of the social life of the native races"⁶². He was in little doubt that broadcasting from England could be used as "a consolidatory element within the Empire"⁶³. But it was the manner in which this needed to be done which underlines Reith's thinking and his (imperial) politics. Following his fact-finding mission to South Africa, for example, in the autumn of 1934 to explore how broadcasting might be structured there, his report to the South African government stresses "the need for broadcasters to be aware of their 'high commission', not to 'bend to every breeze of criticism that blows' and to be prepared to lead"⁶⁴; if Reith was fully aware of the Dominions' desire to manage their own broadcasting, he remained adamant he would pass on his commitment to an ethical, impartial approach. Because for Reith the whole question of British national projection had been badly mismanaged: this was precisely where politics met broadcasting and required all the governments of the British world to do the courageous thing. Reith tried a similar forceful tack to impress upon the Australian government the need, if one wanted a successful national broadcasting system, to resist the development of private, commercial radio stations, as he had done at the BBC. Despite Reith's advice, the development went unchecked, and when Reith enquired if the situation would be put right, the response was: "No, we haven't the guts"⁶⁵. For Reith, there was no doubt whatsoever that the necessary courage was invariably sabotaged by democratic inhibition. "It would be interesting" he mused in July 1934, following a disappointing meeting at the India Office, "to trace the development of the democracy inferiority complex in Imperial affairs, from quite small beginnings, just a few men here and there beginning to yield, and far too much lip-service prematurely to democratic methods"⁶⁶.

- 23 Reith's policy, nonetheless, scored some very notable and noble successes, and his intimation of the BBC's importance as a form of what would now be termed *soft power* was carried through into programming with, for example, the commission of many scripts during the 1930s for broadcast by African and Caribbean writers. From the very beginning, his sense of the connectivity of empire and the potential for networking was acute: it was finally realised in the launch (after "little encouragement; colossal indifference; some opposition"⁶⁷ from the government) of the Empire Service, in December 1932, and "the most spectacular success"⁶⁸ of the King's Christmas Day broadcast (with a text written by Kipling) to the empire at the end of that year, which was hailed as a triumph of technology and of cultural projection. The subsequent expansion of the service – in part due to the conclusions of the Ullswater Report (1936) – and the introduction after, from Reith's point of view, further agonising and inexplicable delay – "Projection at last!"⁶⁹ – of foreign language services from 1938, represented further victories.
- 24 And yet, Reith's attitude in his diary and memoirs suggests he was not fully conscious at the time of the extent to which the (British) world had now moved on. Most Empire Service material was, in any event, aimed at the "white population under the British flag"⁷⁰. But even here, the context of the inter-war years was ultimately to prove unreceptive and Reith's martial schemes for the colonies and dominions, first ignored by successive British governments, were then squeezed hard from above by world events, and from below by more local needs and desires. Any scheme for transforming British national projection from its earlier manifestation of a seaborne thalassocracy into its modern, ether-borne equivalent – an aerocracy? – had to face a potent mixture of inertia and

active opposition: *“For all the talk of Empire unity, the Dominions always wanted to go their own way, and control of broadcasting seemed almost to be a test case of national sovereignty”*⁷¹.

- 25 Reith’s time at the BBC, then, stretching as it did from the year in which Ireland and Egypt worked themselves free of an unwelcome British embrace, to just before the Munich crisis, meant that the golden age of British radio was subsumed within a chaotic period when the BBC’s rich development and outreach plans were frequently hampered by a financially strapped and increasingly protectionist state at home, and shadowed by growing colonial/Dominion confidence and independence abroad. There were those who were determined to fight rear-guard actions and to breathe new life into the imperial project: for example, the Empire Marketing Board, whose brief existence (1926-33) was wholly contained within this difficult period. It is clear that Reith himself fought hard to create a space in which the BBC might fulfil what he saw as a key role in that project⁷². But a growing sense of his inability to maintain full control of the Corporation, to a considerable degree because of his successful devolution of responsibility and authority to others, but also because of the fast-changing international situation, meant that a few months after leaving the BBC he felt moved to write in his diary, *“I’m not sorry to be out of the BBC as that will be so subservient to the Ministry of Information”*⁷³

Conclusion

- 26 As the BBC approaches its centenary, the Corporation has never seemed more relevant or its task more difficult. At a time when taking sides seems to have imposed itself as a bounden intellectual duty, the very idea that editorial impartiality is even possible is under constant challenge; it is the surest mark imaginable of the strength and longevity of Reith’s personal legacy, that the BBC should still believe in that possibility. The polarisation of political views and the affective division between cultural identities in Britain, so starkly visible since 2016, is nowhere more palpable than in relation to the country’s imperial legacy. There seems little doubt possible where Reith’s sympathies would lie today in the face of what he would surely see as a process of *un*-imagining the national community, and the darkly efficient commandeering of the world-wide web to achieve this. Reith was born at the zenith of British imperial power, a man to whom reverence for tradition was second nature, an Establishment figure to the core, lunching at the Athenaeum and hobnobbing with the great and the good. He was inexorably drawn to power, yet often contemptuous of those whom he considered his intellectual inferiors, and always wary, loath to make fixed alliances with them. Reith fought to maintain for the BBC its own form of splendid isolation, a position from which he might bend radio, the inter-war equivalent of the internet, to his purpose: the moral magnification of the British people and state. Reith’s ideal was, even for many of his contemporaries, clearly out of date: a world-view which, joked Attlee, *“may get as far as Edwardian, but I do not think it has got as far as Edward VIII”*⁷⁴. Reith’s empire of the air⁷⁵ contained elements of utilitarian and Arnoldian thought: Reith dreamt of bringing *“into the greatest possible number of homes everything that is best in every department of human knowledge”*⁷⁶. But his ultimate preference was for *“a Gladstone-Cromwell combination”*⁷⁷, a quasi-Victorian, religious Commonwealth.

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NOTES

1. Ronald Blythe, *The Age of Illusion: England in the Twenties and Thirties* (London, Hamish Hamilton, 1963), p. 3.
2. J.C.W. Reith, *Into the Wind* (London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1949), p. 41.
3. What Ernest Benn referred to as “the biggest job ever since the days of the creation” (*ibid.*, p. 259).
4. *Ibid.*, p. 83.
5. Asa Briggs, *The History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom. I The Birth of Broadcasting* (London, Oxford University Press, 1961), pp. 4, 135.
6. Numerous difficulties persisted, of course: the problem of financing the BBC led directly to the setting-up of the Sykes Committee in April 1923 ; or the question of protection of the British wireless trade – Reith carrying on “a tough fight on this issue to the last,” (Asa Briggs, *The History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom. I The Birth of Broadcasting* [London, Oxford University Press, 1961]) p. 195.
7. Briggs summarises (*ibid.*, p. 104): “In retrospect it is extraordinary how many of the basic issues of broadcasting were discerned, however dimly, months before Reith left engineering for broadcasting, months even before the BBC was founded”.
8. Charles Stuart, ed., *The Reith Diaries* (London, Collins, 1975), pp. 65-68.
9. For example, “I could not reconcile myself to staying on in the BBC – simply because I did not feel I should be busy enough” (*Into the Wind*, [London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1949]), p. 305.
10. Charles Stuart, ed., *The Reith Diaries* (London, Collins, 1975), p. 128. A little further on (p. 129), Reith adds, “I am trying to keep in close touch with Christ in all I do and I pray he may keep close to me. I have a great work to do.”
11. *Ibid.*, p. 52. Cf. Lord Clarendon – chairman of the governors – accusing Reith in September 1929 of “being a Mussolini” (*ibid.*, p. 149).
12. Asa Briggs’ description of Reith as exercising “forceful personal leadership” seems euphemistic in the context (*The History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom. I The Birth of Broadcasting* [London, Oxford University Press, 1961]) p. 207.
13. HC, *Hansard*, 6 July 1936, col. 975.
14. *Into the Wind* (London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1949), p. 253.
15. HC, *Hansard*, 6 July 1936, col. 911.
16. *The Reith Diaries* (London, Collins, 1975), pp. 55-57.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 84.
18. J.C.W. Reith, *Into the Wind* (London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1949), p. 272.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 15. Reith was fearless, even reckless. Badly wounded by a German sniper in October 1915 while inspecting trenches, Reith enthused on his return to the front, “Fine to be back in it all again” (*ibid.*, p. 54) and “to hear again, as the voice of a friend after absence, the flight and fall of shell” (*ibid.*, p. 72);
20. *Ibid.*, p. 49.
21. Charles Stuart, ed., *The Reith Diaries* (London, Collins, 1975), p. 73.
22. John Vincent, ed., *The Crawford Papers: The Journals of David Lindsay, Twenty-seventh Earl of Crawford and Tenth Earl of Balcarres 1871-1940 during the Years 1892-1940* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), p. 505.
23. Charles Stuart, ed., *The Reith Diaries* (London, Collins, 1975), p. 73.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 142.
25. J.C.W. Reith, *Into the Wind* (London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1949), p. 290
26. *Ibid.*, p. 95.
27. Charles Stuart, ed., *The Reith Diaries* (London, Collins, 1975), pp. 142-3.
28. J.C.W. Reith, *Into the Wind* (London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1949), p. 253.

29. Catherine Murphy, "On an Equal Footing with Men? Women and Work at the BBC, 1923-1939" (PhD dissertation, Goldsmiths College, University of London, 2011), p. 56.
30. Asa Briggs, *The History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom. I The Birth of Broadcasting* (London, Oxford University Press, 1961), p. 97, and cf. p. 130.
31. Jamie Medhurst, "Mea maxima culpa : John Reith and the Advent of Television," *Media History* (October 2018: DOI: 10.1080/13688804.2018.1530976), p. 2.
32. J.C.W. Reith, *Broadcast over Britain* (London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1924), pp. 17, 147.
33. J.C.W. Reith, *Into the Wind* (London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1949), p. 116.
34. Ronald Blythe, *The Age of Illusion: England in the Twenties and Thirties* (London, Hamish Hamilton, 1963), p. 48.
35. J.C.W. Reith, *Into the Wind* (London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1949), p. 133 (emphasis in original).
36. *Ibid.*, p. 299.
37. Briggs notes that it was in 1927, "the 'dramatic control panel' was brought into regular use, and radio drama began to develop rapidly in its own right" (*The History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom. I The Birth of Broadcasting* (London, Oxford University Press, 1961), p. 201. C.S.L. Pepler – "Discovering the art of wireless: a critical history of radio drama at the BBC, 1922-1928" (PhD thesis, Bristol University, 1988) –, devotes a chapter to the panel and all its advantages (pp. 233-66).
38. Charlotte Higgins, *This New Noise: The Extraordinary Birth and Troubled Life of the BBC* (London, Guardian Books/Faber & Faber, 2015), p. 25.
39. *Ibid.*, p. 26.
40. *Ibid.*, p. 8.
41. Peter Eckersley – the first Chief Engineer at the BBC – had already been forced out of the Corporation in 1929 following an affair with the wife of another BBC employee and divorce from his own wife, although Eckersley's son, in a letter to *The Independent*, asserts that there were other reasons for his father's departure ("My father's BBC sacking was pragmatic not moral," from Myles Eckersley, Sunday 14 March 1993 <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/letter-my-fathers-bbc-sacking-was-pragmatic-not-moral-1497575.html>). Briggs, diplomatically, simply says that Eckersley left "for domestic reasons" (*The History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom. II The Golden Age of Wireless* [London, Oxford University Press, 1965]), p. 142.
42. Charlotte Higgins, *This New Noise: The Extraordinary Birth and Troubled Life of the BBC* (London, Guardian Books/Faber & Faber, 2015), p. 32: Murphy places this entry at 4 March.
43. Catherine Murphy, *Behind the Wireless: A History of Early Women at the BBC* (London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016). These incidents are not mentioned in Charles Stuart's selections from the diaries: Matheson, in fact, does not figure at all.
44. In Andrew Boyle's kind euphemism, Reith had a "consistently lively faith in himself" (*Only the Wind Will Listen: Reith of the BBC* [London, Hutchinson and Co., 1972], p. 110).
45. J.C.W. Reith, *Into the Wind* (London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1949), p. 69.
46. *Ibid.*, p. 123. Cf. Reith's note in his diary in April 1939: "I have lost caste and gone down in the world" (Charles Stuart, ed., *The Reith Diaries* [London, Collins, 1975]), p. 227; or, "I have been trying lately to forget, as it were, that ever I had a place of influence and dignity" (*ibid.*, p. 229).
47. *Ibid.*, p. 66.
48. *Ibid.*, p. 225.
49. *Ibid.*, p. 53.
50. E.g. in November 1941, "I absolutely hate him" (*ibid.*, p. 59).
51. *Ibid.*, pp. 110, 170, 216, 230.
52. *Ibid.*, p. 101.
53. *Ibid.*, p. 225.
54. *Ibid.*, p. 330.

55. J.C.W. Reith, *Into the Wind* (London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1949), pp. 284-5.
56. *Ibid.*, p.286.
57. *Ibid.*, p. 303. Reith's breviary during the passage from England to the Caribbean was "Froude's 'West Indies'" – i.e. J.A. Froude's, *The English in The West Indies* of 1888. Needless to say, in view of Reith's imperialist credentials, there is no mention of J.J. Thomas's riposte – *Froudacity* – published the following year.
58. Reith, shortly after the outbreak of war, returns to the idea in his diary (16 October 1939) and repeats his criticism: "Diplomacy has been at a discount for years past" (Charles Stuart, ed., *The Reith Diaries* [London, Collins, 1975], p. 231).
59. *Ibid.*, p. 220. Cf. "If I had been Foreign Secretary, I could have got Musso to stay his hand in Abyssinia" (*ibid.*, p. 57)!
60. *Ibid.*, p. 71.
61. *Ibid.*, p. 330. There were technical problems holding the BBC back, but finance was the main difficulty, the Treasury refusing to have the British taxpayer finance Empire broadcasting: understandably, perhaps, in view of Britain's financial situation at the time? In fact, unfinanced experimental short wave broadcasts began at the end of 1927 (see Asa Briggs, *The History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom. II The Golden Age of Wireless* [London, Oxford University Press, 1965], pp. 372-78) and the BBC agreed to finance an Empire scheme itself at the end of 1931.
62. *Ibid.*, p. 335.
63. Charles Stuart, ed., *The Reith Diaries* (London, Collins, 1975), p. 336: though precisely what could or should be broadcast from London was still to be decided.
64. *Ibid.*, p. 335.
65. *Ibid.*, p. 336.
66. *Ibid.*, p. 331.
67. J.C.W. Reith, *Into the Wind* (London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1949), p. 278.
68. *Ibid.*, p. 169.
69. *Ibid.*, p. 290.
70. Simon J. Potter, "Webs, Networks, and Systems: Globalization and the Mass Media in the Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century British Empire," *Journal of British Studies*, 46. 3 (July 2007), pp. 621-646 (p. 640).
71. Asa Briggs, *The History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom. II The Golden Age of Wireless* (London, Oxford University Press, 1965), pp. 377-78. Cf. "For all the talk of colonial subventions in 1930, only Sierra Leone and the Gold Coast had set aside minute sums (£15) from their budgets as contributions to the Empire Service » (*ibid.*, p. 390).
72. His former Director of Talks, Hilda Matheson, in her role at the African Survey, clearly still believed in 1935, that broadcasting could be "an important Imperial asset" ("Broadcasting in Africa," *Journal of the Royal African Society*, 34. 137 [October 1935], pp. 387-390 (p. 388).
73. Charles Stuart, ed., *The Reith Diaries* (London, Collins, 1975), p. 224.
74. HC, *Hansard*, 6 July 1936, col. 975.
75. The expression is taken from David Cannadine, *Ornamentalism : How the British Saw their Empire* (London, Penguin, 2002), p. 191.
76. J.C.W. Reith, *Broadcast over Britain* (London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1924), p. 34.
77. Charles Stuart, ed., *The Reith Diaries* (London, Collins, 1975), p. 81.

ABSTRACTS

The habit of government control engendered by the Great War ensured the emergence of a public broadcasting corporation over a set of private initiatives: but, even so, this required the exceptional drive and sense of mission of John Reith. The latter's character is still credited, by many, with leading the BBC's quest for the Holy Grail of broadcasting – media impartiality: yet the Earl of Crawford felt, in 1925, that Reith had a “swelled head”. The imprint of the latter on the BBC's character and aims – balance and neutrality – seems rather to embody another fundamental principle: that of “unified control,” a paternalistic, central authority which determined what the BBC was, and what it was for... This article discusses the nature and impact of such an approach on the organisation, staffing and programming at the BBC from its beginnings to the eve of the Second World War. Ethical, even priggish, definitions of “entertainment” could collide with modernist flights of imagination, and yet the two complemented each other in a superior vision of what could be offered to audiences: both at home and throughout the empire. In respect of the latter in particular, however, was the BBC not already in denial of the gathering pace of international change, and working with an already outmoded view of Britain's capacity to control it?

Le développement de l'interventionnisme gouvernemental occasionnée par la Grande Guerre a permis l'émergence d'une corporation publique de diffusion radiophonique, au détriment des initiatives privées qui commençaient à se lancer. Qu'à cela ne tienne, pour réussir, un élément crucial fut l'engagement personnel de John Reith. Nombreux sont ceux qui estiment encore que ce fut lui qui incarna la quête pour le Saint Graal de la diffusion – l'impartialité. Le Comte Crawford, cependant, trouvait que Reith avait « la grosse tête ». En effet, le caractère et les objectifs de la BBC – équilibre, neutralité – semblent porter la marque claire de ce personnage et un autre principe fondamental : celui de la commande centralisée, une autorité paternaliste qui déterminait ce que fut la BBC et à quoi elle servait... Cet article étudie la nature et l'impact sur l'organisation – de ses débuts jusqu'à la veille de la Deuxième guerre mondiale – de cette approche, sur sa politique des ressources humaines et la conception même des émissions. Une définition moralisatrice de ce que devait être le divertissement y était concurrencée par un imaginaire libre et moderniste, les deux se rencontrant souvent dans une vision de ce qu'il était souhaitable de proposer aux auditeurs britanniques et à travers l'empire. Mais s'agissant de ce dernier, la BBC n'était-elle pas dans le déni face à l'évolution rapide de la situation internationale ? Et ne se trompait-elle pas quant à sa capacité de modifier cette situation ?

INDEX

Mots-clés: BBC, radio, Reith, efficacité, empire, mission, modernisme

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