

The BBC and national identity in Britain, 1922-53

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There is an argument for saying that there have been two particularly welcome developments in recent works of broadcasting history. The first of these is an increased attention to the role of radio and television in the creation and reproduction of national identity. In the US, for example, the work of Michele Hilmes and Susan Douglas in their different ways show how American culture and identity was fashioned by that great 20th-century invention, radio. More cautiously I would suggest that the place of the programme itself in historical writing has become more prominent. Institutional histories have given way to more closely observed accounts which include the actual stuff of broadcasting, radio and television programmes. This latter development has been greatly influenced by the increased availability of radio and television archives. It is, therefore, unsurprising but extremely welcome that Thomas Hajkowski's meticulously researched account of the early BBC includes both of these developments and the result is a book which is very much in tune with contemporary scholarship. The detailed description of programmes and policies produce a compelling argument for the BBC's role in forging a sense of national identity through the promotion of the monarchy and the empire. He challenges the orthodox view that in the period 1922 to 1939 local and regional programming was stifled and argues instead that the BBC promoted a multinational Britishness which he details in separate chapters on Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Hajkowski presents the archive detail, mainly from the BBC's own Written Archives Centre at Caversham, in an attractively fluent style and does not shun from challenging what he sees as the 'standard histories' of broadcasting at the time (p. 3). By that he means Asa Briggs' formidable *History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom*; Scannell and Cardiff's *Social History of British Broadcasting* and to a lesser extent Sian Nicholas' too often neglected *The Echo of War*.⁽¹⁾ It is with a certain amount of revisionist enthusiasm that Hajkowski seeks to correct what he sees as the errors of the standard literature and in particular the tendency to overstate the centralising nature of the BBC in its first few decades.

Any early broadcasting historian is presented by the challenge of how to write about a subject which has in one sense disappeared. The reality is that very few recordings of pre-1939 radio exist and although the famous broadcasts of men like Churchill and J. B. Priestley can still be heard there is precious little to listen to from before the mid 1950s. The solution for the pioneers of the subject has been to use the internal documents of the BBC, the minutes of meetings and the endless memoranda between staff, as the main primary source. The result of this is the now familiar criticism that, to take one example, Asa Briggs has provided us with a 'top-down, institutional history of the BBC' (p. 9). It is certainly true that actual programmes get fairly short shrift in Briggs and to an extent the same is true of Scannell and Cardiff. In the latter's influential chapter on 'Forms of Talk' most of the writing concerns policy decisions about radio talks with only one substantial quotation from a programme transcript. Similarly, David Hendy's magisterial *Life on Air* ⁽²⁾, a history of BBC Radio Four, makes much more extensive use of BBC internal documents (and especially the minutes of the radio Review Board) than of individual programmes. Hajkowski employs a different approach, 'This book takes programs [sic], not policy, as its subject' (p. 4).⁽³⁾ That was a bold decision which produced some wonderful programme detail and the descriptions of *Brush Up Your Empire* or *Gordon of Khartoum*, to take just two examples, is revelatory and adds significantly to the value of the book.

Using these detailed descriptions of programmes, Hajkowski is able to argue with some conviction that the theme of empire was a dominant one in the pre-war BBC. The repeated attention to the empire was used to express and reinforce British national identity by praising imperial values and telling imperial tales. He acknowledges the influence of 'New Imperial History' ⁽⁴⁾ with its emphasis on the way that British culture and domestic institutions were influenced by empire. So, for example, programmes like the eight-part serialisation of A. E. W. Mason's *The Four Feathers* served to present imperialist values of heroism, courage and perseverance together with the 'governing genius' of the British to the domestic radio listener. It was also men with imperial pasts who put these programmes on the radio, including John Coatman at News and Sir Richard Maconachie at Talks. The success of the empire programmes (including *Life Among the Native Tribes*, *Africa: The Dark Continent* and the alarmingly titled, *Africa Shrieks*) was due to the licence they gave to celebrate the colourful and exotic; as *Africa Shrieks* announced, it was 'a burlesque of the jungle talkie ... crammed full of tigers, pythons, Masai ...' (p. 33). There is a wonderful account of the 1935

feature *Gordon of Khartoum* which uses quotations from the programme to very great effect. The listener would have heard that Gordon surveyed the Nile with ‘his light blue eyes, eyes lit with a defiant purpose. Eyes like blue diamonds’ (p. 37). Gordon was lauded for his sacrifice, his heroism, superiority and his manhood. Similarly the famous producer Laurence Gilliam’s *Kitchener* depicted the imperial hero as a man who stood ‘several inches over six feet, straight as a lance and looks out imperiously above most men’s heads, slender but firmly knit, he seems built for tireless steel-wire endurance’ (p. 40).

During the war the empire was an important source of support for the war effort. Programmes like *In It Together* praised the part played by ‘commonwealth’ troops and used Australian presenters among others. The arrival of America in the war stimulated an appetite for programmes about or by the new ally but the BBC continued to promote an interest in the empire. Working-class ignorance of both the white dominions and the largely non-white colonies was felt to be widespread and a cause for concern. It was this suspicion which led the Head of Talks, Maconachie, to devise *Brush Up Your Empire*, a programme featuring audience participation. Hajkowski provides an example of audience involvement in the form of a letter, ‘Mrs Sanders of Bedworth asks – how old is the Taj Mahal?’ Such was radio in a world before Wikipedia! These are compelling chapters on the centrality of empire in the early BBC and its role in the creation of a particularly hierarchical and traditional sense of British identity. It is interesting to read that there was a tension between the more progressive and egalitarian post-war notion of a multiracial Commonwealth promoted by some, more serious, BBC programmes and the more crudely imperialist light entertainment output which drew on a romantic, exotic and racist imperialism; for example in the 1946 radio adaptation of *King Solomon’s Mines*.

Hajkowski’s discussion of the importance of the monarchy to the BBC is more familiar. The key early royal broadcasts (1924 Wembley Empire Exhibition, 1932 George V’s Christmas broadcast, the coronation of George VI) all contributed to ‘the most vital function of the British monarchy [...] to serve as a symbol of an inclusive British identity’ (p. 84). Although there is a similar account of the BBC and the monarchy in Scannell and Cardiff, Hajkowski adds intriguing detail on the ‘coronation week’ preceding the coronation of George VI. There was a raft of programmes celebrating the event, of different genres, including the programmes made in the regions, as the *Radio Times* stated, ‘the Scottish programme, like programmes from the other regions, will express the unity of the British people’ (p. 89). The theme of a ‘multinational’ monarchy with different regions responding in nationally specific ways to the monarchy is persuasively described in the book. So for example in *People and Places in the Scottish Scene* ‘Mrs McHaggis and wee Mickie come to London for the coronation’ (p. 89). Here the Scottishness of the loyalty served to affirm both the unity and the diversity of British national identity. In 1947 there was a royal tour of South Africa giving the BBC the opportunity to dwell on its two obsessions, monarchy and empire. This was done with great enthusiasm. Radio coverage of the tour emphasised the spectacular and the exotic. The great radio producer, D. G. Bridson’s description of the Zulu dance, *Ngoma Umkosi*, captures something of the tone, ‘their bodies bare to the waist, their necks festooned with white and coloured intricacies of beadwork, their loins gay with beaded aprons’ (p. 98). Few would question the powerful unifying influence of the British monarchy but I did wonder if Hajkowski overstated this and missed the divisiveness felt by some at this archaic institution. Royal weddings may indeed provide a powerful sense of inclusiveness but can just as easily alienate the minority.

It is in the account given of regional broadcasting that Hajkowski is at his most pugnacious. The British Broadcasting Company (precursor to the corporation launched in 1927) consisted of a number of local stations (nine by 1925) with 2LO in London providing additional metropolitan-based output. By the early 1930s the local services had been replaced by five regional services and the National Programme transmitted from the high-power transmitter at Daventry. At the beginning of the war the regional services were suspended and the Home Service was launched as a centralised national station. This is where Hajkowski detects some errors in the available histories. Briggs was wrong, he argues, to overstate the organic and ‘genuine’ quality of the early BBC local stations in the 1920s and Scannell and Cardiff were also wrong to describe the North region’s ‘brief golden years before the war’ (p. 111). The decline of regional broadcasting has been overstated because of a failure to ‘focus on what the regional broadcasters were actually doing, and

the programs they were making...' (p. 112). He accepts that there were 'centralisers' in the BBC who really only valued London programming (Roger Eckersley, Charles Siepmann and Val Gielgud) but at the same time there was a big increase in regional staff in the 1930s and Siepmann himself became a great advocate of regional broadcasting. It was true that the regions were suspended during the war but that did not stop programme production, only regional transmission. Furthermore the Home Service carried regional content, for example in the programme *In Britain Now*, a popular magazine made by the West region. Hajkowski also argues that after the war there was something of a 'golden age' of regional programming with West region's *Any Questions* and Midland's *The Archers* (both still going strong). For the BBC national British identity was something inherently diverse; it incorporated not only the nations of the United Kingdom but also different regional identities (the West, Midlands and North).

It is in the chapters devoted to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, that Hajkowski fully develops the argument that the BBC positively celebrated British diversity. Once again the argument is a compelling one with impressive programme detail. So the chapter on the BBC's Scottish service shows how a programme like *Frae a' the Airts* represented Scottish folk culture from 1928. The account of BBC Scotland's St Andrew's Day programmes is particularly interesting and includes the responses to the coverage back in London. This is a very positive view of BBC Scotland which 'did not represent Scottishness in a caricatured, one-dimensional way' (p. 135). Similarly, the chapter which follows on Wales presents a good news story about the diversity and effectiveness of regional programming. The representation of Welshness was complex combining the rather artificial romanticism of 'wild Wales' and the Welsh rebel Owain Glyndwr together with the more modern character of the coal miner. The latter was depicted as almost the epitome of Welshness and 'the BBC used the coal valleys to represent Wales' (p. 176). In the war the miner's status was if anything enhanced as their important and dangerous lives came to reflect the danger faced by the British people. There is a very useful examination of Welsh radio drama including *The Proud Valley* (1940) and the more famous *How Green Was My Valley*, both of which were very successful adaptations from the screen originals. The importance of the Welsh language is clearly shown; in 1948 60 per cent of BBC Wales spoken word output was in Welsh and there can be little doubt that the BBC played an important part in the preservation of the language.

A much less optimistic and encouraging story is told about the BBC in Northern Ireland. Unionism is central to Hajkowski's account of the BBC and nowhere did this mean more than in Northern Ireland where to be a unionist also meant to be Protestant and to be a citizen of Ulster. The story told here is of a gradual hardening of the BBC's position up to and after the war; increasingly positive to the Protestant community and its traditions and negative to Catholic nationalism. After initial reluctance to allow the more extreme forms of unionism a voice the BBC position changed after the war, for example by acknowledging the 12th of July celebrations which commemorated the great Protestant victory at the Battle of the Boyne. In 1953 BBC Northern Ireland broadcast for the first time a running commentary of an Orange parade. Hajkowski details the internal wrangles over Edward Carson, the first leader of the Ulster Volunteer force and an 'Orange icon' (p. 225). An early attempt to make a radio feature about Carson in 1940 were rejected as was a further attempt in 1949. Pressure for these programmes came from within BBC Northern Ireland and reflected the grip that unionism had on the corporation. Another aspect of the BBC's anti-Catholic and pro-Protestant bias was seen in the increased use of 'Ulster' to describe Northern Ireland. So *Ulster Sport* and *Arts in Ulster* and what Hajkowski calls 'the "Ulsterization" of St Patrick's Day' (p. 214) contributed to this definition of the north in terms explicitly associated with Protestant unionism; 'BBC Northern Ireland reinforced the unionist community's British identity and helped to build a complementary Ulster identity that could be employed to differentiate Northern Ireland from the south' (p. 227).

There can be little doubt that this will be a very influential and I do hope widely read book on early broadcasting. Inevitably there are omissions which are worth mentioning but which probably do not make this a significantly lesser contribution. Other scholars have noted the important contribution of women to the early BBC and the lack of Hilda Matheson, Mary Somerville, Janet Quigley, Olive Shapley and others created a rather overly masculine version of the corporation. Another omission was the absence of attention paid to the North region's specifically *radical* and innovative tradition with its focus on working class life.[\(5\)](#)

This was a regionalism which had a distinct political character, and indeed that tradition continues to exert influence today in programmes like Radio Four's *File on Four* but gets insufficient attention here. Given the BBC's current partial move to Manchester, perhaps this would have been an addition with contemporary relevance.

Although there is a boldness in Hajkowski's writing which blows the refreshing winds of revisionist history, there is I believe an error in his celebration (I can think of no other word) of regionalism. At the heart of his reassessment of, for example, Welsh broadcasting is the assertion that the relentless focus on Welsh scenery, Welsh folk song, language, dress, poetry and so on is evidence of more than just a caricature. For example, Hajkowski states that the radio drama, *The Proud Valley* 'constructs a powerful and vivid sense of Welshness centred on the mining village, the family, and the Eisteddfod, danger, camaraderie, and song' (p. 188). I wonder, however, if there might be something naive in that enthusiastic response? He has shown convincingly how the BBC stereotyped and patronised Zulu dancers in South Africa and other subjugated peoples of the empire but cannot the same be said of BBC representations of the singing Welsh, the brave Scots and the plucky Irish? Hajkowski's tendency to make rather over ambitious claims is at its most worrying in the conclusion. Here we read, for example, that by the 1950s the BBC had 'abandoned what remained of its Reithian principles' (p. 234) I would point to the resurgence of Reithianism in BBC radio in the 1970s (fully documented in Hendy's *Life on Air*) as evidence of the inaccuracy of that claim. The grander statement that the BBC was the central site for the production of national identity is cogently argued but I wonder if a book which *only* considers broadcasting can make such a claim? Other institutions and events played their part and these would need at least acknowledgement before asserting the centrality of radio.

These criticisms aside there can be little doubt that the small but growing band of broadcasting historians will welcome this important book. Thomas Hajkowski has made a significant contribution to our understanding of the interplay between programming and the broader theme of nation building. His long hours in the archives have produced a book which will surely feature on cultural history reading lists for a very long time.

Notes

1. Asa Briggs, *The History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom. Volumes 1-3* (Oxford, 1961–1970); Paddy Scannell and David Cardiff, *A Social History of. British Broadcasting. Volume 1, 1922-1939* (Oxford, 1991); Sian Nicholas, *The Echo of War: Home Front Propaganda and the Wartime BBC, 1939-45* (Manchester, 1996).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. David Hendy, *Life On Air: A History of Radio Four* (Oxford, 2008).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Although this is a history of British broadcasting published in Britain the American form of 'progam' and 'license fee' is used throughout.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. See in particular the work of John M. MacKenzie (as author and editor); *Popular Imperialism and the Military, 1850-1950; Imperialism and the Natural World; Imperialism and Popular Culture; Propaganda and Empire*, all Manchester University Press.[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Scannell and Cardiff.[Back to \(5\)](#)

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