

Unintended Consequences; BBC talks policy in the 1930s.

Hugh Chignell, Bournemouth University, UK.

Today we associate radio with the voices of celebrities, the famous, the ‘great and the good’ who occupy so much airtime. It would be wrong, however, to assume that was always the case and the project of getting famous people to the microphone, and in particular great writers, was beset with problems. By the end of the 1930s, however, partly because of the regular talks of E.M.Forster and Desmond MacCarthy, radio was associated with the voices of ‘great men’. The BBC gained legitimacy and consent from these ‘key brokers’ in society and so cultural life was increasingly enacted through radio.

There is a powerful sense in the pre-war BBC of a rapidly expanding organisation which, despite Reith’s moral and social orthodoxy and the top-down rigidity of its management, was beyond anyone’s control. There were too many talks, too much news and, in particular, too many free spirits like Matheson, Fielden, Siepmann and Dimbleby to allow the BBC to be a risk-free area. Radical and progressive voices and ideas did feature on BBC radio. Leonard Woolf’s six part series on ‘The Modern State’ in the 1931 was ‘a sustained indictment of the British government for its failure to realize democracy for its citizens at home and in the colonies abroad’. So much for the caricature of the pre-war BBC as timid and conventional.

One of the aspirations of the early BBC was to feature ‘the best which has been thought and said in the world’. This ethical mission was combined with Reith’s own ambition for radio and the BBC and so it is no surprise that the greatest and most famous writers of the day were invited to speak. But many of these men, although they were extremely famous, celebrities of their day, also held dangerously radical views. The unintended consequence of the BBC’s ambition was to give a platform to speakers who were variously socialist, communist, pacifist, atheist and almost completely at odds with Reith’s own beliefs. It has become possible to write about the relationship between the literary elite and radio because of a flurry of publication featuring some great person and their radio career.

Two particularly prominent ‘great men’ who graced the BBC’s talks schedule were H.G.Wells and George Bernard Shaw. Wells, apart from being a famous writer, was ‘perhaps the best known socialist in the world for much of the twentieth century’. In common with some other notable speakers, he was initially reluctant to speak on radio because he was not prepared to have his talks censored. He was persuaded, as so many were, by the irrepressible Hilda Matheson, and he gave his first talk, on world peace, in July 1929. Following that, Wells became a regular talker motivated partly by his desire to use radio to ‘educate the world to the dangers of fascism’ and dictatorship. Befitting his internationalism, Wells interviewed both President Roosevelt and Stalin for the BBC, following this with a talk summing up an eight part series on Russia in 1931 in which he spoke favourably about long-term economic planning. Also in 1931 he spoke on ‘What

would I do with the world' and argued for disarmament, long-term economic planning and a single world currency.

The degree to which Wells's radicalism was politely ignored by Reith and others is illustrated by the fact that, despite being a noted anti-monarchist, Wells was invited to make a special broadcast for the Coronation of George VI in 1936; he replied with the suggestions 'The advantages of a republic' or 'The deadly influence of the monarchy in British intellectual life' both of which were rejected!

George Bernard Shaw was certainly in the same league as Wells; a nobel laureate, internationally famous playwright, socialist and advocate of women's rights. Shaw personified the BBC's dilemma regarding famous speakers, a brilliant public speaker but also a man with dangerously radical views which he took particular delight in expressing. He was much more closely associated with the BBC as an institution than Wells, serving on the Spoken English Advisory Committee and chairing the committee in the 1930s, he was also a member of the BBC's General Advisory Committee.

Shaw delivered about twelve talks in all, although the BBC decided not to broadcast his speech on the occasion of his seventieth birthday in 1926, for fear that he would be too controversial. He returned regularly to the microphone because, as Conolly states: 'recognizing Shaw's brilliance as a public speaker and his ability to adapt his skills to the medium of radio, and responding to listeners' eagerness to hear him, the BBC did its best to give Shaw a voice on radio as often as possible'. But the price of his brilliance and fame was his relentless outspokenness; in 1934 in the 'Whither Britain?' series (pre-recorded but delivered live to the US) he argued that 'we... live in a dictatorship of bankers and ship-owners, with cabinet minister as their puppets and scapegoats'.

This paper will discuss the implications of the radicalism of some 1930s talks and the significance of them for the burgeoning talks culture as well as lessons to be learned from the complex relationship between Bloomsbury and the BBC.

Hugh Chignell is Associate Professor of Broadcasting History and Assistant Director of the Centre for Broadcasting History at Bournemouth University. He has published on radio history and theory including *Key Concepts in Radio Studies*, (Sage, 2009). He is currently writing a history of British radio talks, news and current affairs for Palgrave Macmillan.