STRIKING THE BALANCE (I)

Over the next couple of years, the Company went from strength to strength. New relay stations from Aberdeen to Plymouth provided radio coverage for almost the entire nation by the end of 1925, and the staff roster gradually increased from the initial complement of four, Reith included, to 658. 1926 would be one of, if not the most important years in the BBC's history, and for multiple reasons.

For one thing, it was the year that the original broadcasting licence drawn up for the then-theoretical British Broadcasting Company finally expired. Now was definitely not the time to piss off the Government. There was, however, little anxiety at the outset of the year about whether or not the licence would be renewed, as the BBC headed into its final year as an unqualified success. The Company was making cash and bringing culture and information into the homes of thousands for whom it had previously been inaccessible.

By this point, Reith was a towering figure figuratively as well as literally. Within the BBC itself, his was the one and only will. More than that, his was increasingly the only personality. The Company was being shaped in the image of a giant, almost pathologically self-assured Presbyterian. The phrase "educate, inform, entertain" wasn't original to Reith - it was coined by one of his American equivalents, David Sarnoff - but he made it a way of life, carved it into the Company's central nervous system, until it became synonymous with himself. Reithianism: to educate, inform and entertain, in descending order of importance and with a yawning chasm between those last two. Entertainment was a means to an end, a way of smuggling in the educating and/or informing content. It was never to be considered an end in itself. Pure entertainment, with nothing enriching mixed in, was tantamount to prostitution. Reith was taught the meaning of power as a child by watching his father declaiming from the pulpit. He saw the power he now wielded, the newly created power of broadcasting which he had been tasked with taming, in the same terms. To Reith, the radio was the pulpit of the 20th Century.

He started 1926 by introducing the infamous announcer's dress code. After all, the singers, musicians and actors were usually performing in full evening dress. It was just poor form, even borderline disrespectful, if the announcers weren't doing the same. The mere fact that no amount of starch could render a tuxedo audible from a few feet away, let alone over radio waves, was of course irrelevant. This was about principle - Reith's principles, which were unquestionably and automatically also those of the Company.

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In mid-January, the BBC faced its first major controversy, after Father Ronald Knox pre-empted (and indeed inspired) Orson Welles' War of the Worlds by twelve years with a broadcast that depicted full-blown revolution on the streets of London. A program of live music from the Savoy Hotel was swiftly interrupted by the hotel's destruction with trench mortars. The workers of London proceeded to tear London apart while Knox provided an appalled running commentary on the flattening of the Houses of Parliament and gutting of its clock tower, and ultimately the lynching from a lamp-post of the fictional "Minister for Traffic". In an time and place when drama was melodrama the artifice of fiction was usually explicit, such realism (admittedly in the depiction of an over-the-top satirical scenario) was a recipe for trouble, especially when events conspired to make it seem disturbingly plausible. There wasn't a revolution in London that evening, but there was a heavy snowfall that made the newspapers - the primary and, even with the proto-BBC, practically sole source of hard news information - inaccessible for a few days. There was a minor panic outside of the capital when people genuinely weren't sure whether it was real or not.

The other thing that made it seem plausible was the seething tensions between the newly Unionising working-classes - coal miners in particular - and the Government, which were to boil over in the spring into the nine-day General Strike. From the 3rd to the 12 of May 1926, 1.7 million workers walked out, embattled coal miners and Trade Union Congress members in solidarity, who thanks to the machinations of the pit bosses were suffering the pointy end of World War One's impact on the coal industry. This was arguably the first truly massive, historical event of the BBC's lifetime - the first test of this whole new news medium.

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