COMPANY MAN

It didn’t take long for Reith to find some sort of context for his new position: he was the heir to William Caxton, creator of the printing press. A whole new way for humans to communicate with one another had been created, and he was at its vanguard. The Caxton comparison occurred to him on his first day of work after his introductory dialogue with William Noble. As he related:

*'"We're leaving it all to you. You'll be reporting at our monthly meetings and we'll see how you're getting on." Leaving it all to me. I thought of what that "it" involved. He misunderstood my silence. "That's all right, isn't it?" Quite all right.'"***

The Broadcasting Committee were a collection of businessmen. Their interest was in the profits to be made from this all-new concept of sound transmission, much more than in the infrastructure behind it. Fortunately for them, any such infrastructure had yet to be conceptualised, and they could quite easily and even reasonably park the whole responsibility with a single managing director. Just like Caxton when he industrialised the printed word, Reith had to basically invent a new concept out of thin air - the concept of the BBC. Or at least a prototype of it.

No problem for Reith, who had made it this far already by first assuming his ability to succeed, if not excel, in any given scenario, and then sweating blood to prove himself right. Being put in absolute charge of the building and maintaining of the BBC was daunting but perfect. Once Postmaster General Neville Chamberlain issued the Company its broadcasting licence - the final legal piece of the puzzle - Reith was off and running.

Immediately he was faced with a multitude of issues he’d never heard of before: Marconi patents, copyright law, performing rights - all being yelled about into his face simultaneously by dozens of associations and unions of performers, manufacturers, writers, composers, music publishers and the like. At the same time, he had to invent dozens of new jobs almost from scratch: radio announcers, transmission engineers, a whole new kind of news reporter.

And then there were various events that needed covering, at least to Reith’s mind. The Royal Opera House let their microphones in, but they were the exception. There was a Royal Wedding in the spring; Albert, Duke of York to Elizabeth Bowes-Lyon (who would come to be better known as King George VI and the Queen Mother respectively). Though Albert, as the King’s second son, wasn’t the biggest name in the Royal family at the time - he would be, one day, but almost by mistake - this wedding was a fairly seminal one as Bowes-Lyon was a commoner. Not that she wasn’t twice as posh as anyone you’ll ever meet, but she wasn’t a member of a Royal Family -

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Albert wanted to marry her because, by all accounts, he genuinely loved her as a person - and that made this wedding unusual and quite modern. So naturally the opportunity to make it even more modern by turning it into the first such event broadcast on British radio - albeit recorded rather than live - was too big for Reith to turn down. Herbert Edward Ryle, the Dean of Westminster, granted him and the BBC permission to record the service, but unfortunately his chapter disagreed and what turned out to be the future King's nuptials went unrecorded.

Reith also wanted to record the ceremony of the Cenotaph that November, but once again he and his BBC were rebuffed. As a consolation prize, the Lord Mayor of London allowed him and the Company to broadcast speeches from the annual banquet that same month. He was even invited to attend in person, but turned it down when he saw the seating plans placed him in some anonymous corner a long way from the Right Honourable Lord Mayor himself.

Another question for Reith to solve was promoting the schedules - after letting the people of Britain know that there was such a thing as a regular radio service in the first place, of course. That, like almost all the BBC's teething problems, was solved personally by Reith himself with the words "The Radio Times". He even coined the name. But even establishing the Bradshaw of Broadcasting took genuine struggle on Reith's part. The newspapers' opinions on the BBC - up to this point the sole media in the country - veered from wary to outright hostile, and the idea of them setting up their own print publication horrified them. As if it wasn't enough to run a whole new form of media to replace print, this upstart BBC was now hedging its bets and muscling into their territory anyway. Unbelievable. They insisted the only moral model for promoting the BBC's schedules was as paid advertising in their own publications. Gordon Selfridge invited the Company to print their schedules inside the regular Selfridge's adverts in the Pall Mall Gazette.

Whatever Selfridge or the newspapers expected, it probably wasn't for the presence of the BBC schedules to boost the Gazette's circulation by an impressive degree and thereby finally convince Reith to launch The Radio Times. The magazine was finally launched in September and became a colossal success, selling out its initial print run of 285,000 - fairly impressive now, a remarkable achievement in 1923 - and bringing in such vast profits it probably single-handedly ensured the BBC's survival for and even past its initial licence period. The Committee - or the BBC Board, as they were by now - were duly impressed, and suggested rewarding Reith for coming up with the idea by offering him a share of the Radio Times spoils - which would have essentially amounted to a quadrupling of his salary. But John Reith was as solid a Presbyterian as anyone who ever lived, and perfectly aware of the narrowness of the needle's eye.

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“*...[T]he trade had put me in office; expected me to look out for them; there was a moral responsibility to them. I would have thought it hardly proper to accept the money."*

And so he turned down the fattest paycheck he would ever see, ensuring that the growing Company would keep as much of the Radio Times revenue as possible. Work, to John Reith, was its own reward. After all, back at the railyard, it almost had to be.

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