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## The BBC and the Shaping of British Identity from 1922 to 1945

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# The BBC and the Shaping of British Identity from 1922 to 1945

## **Abstract**

There are few institutions in British history that have had such a massive role in shaping the daily lives of British citizens as the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). Although the BBC is only about eighty years old, an infant compared to an institution like the British monarchy, its contributions to national identity are practically unparalleled in the twentieth century. The scope of the Corporation in terms of its influence on British life is hard to imagine in a United States with multiple competing and politically-aimed networks. Robin Aitkin, a former BBC reporter and journalist says, “For many it is an ever-present companion: from breakfast-time to bedtime, from childhood through to old age, there it is telling us about ourselves and the wider world, amusing and entertaining us.” Aitkin captures the dual nature of the BBC in that it both reflects the conditions and needs of the time while also exercising influence over the future of British society. The BBC’s ability to educate, inform, and entertain from its beginnings in 1922 to the end of the Second World War in 1945 is of special interest because these pivotal years helped redefine what it means to be British in modern society. [*excerpt*]

## **Keywords**

British Broadcasting Corporation, Robin Aitkin, news media, British Identity, John Reith

# *“The BBC and the Shaping of British Identity from 1922 to 1945”*

Mallory Huard

There are few institutions in British history that have had such a massive role in shaping the daily lives of British citizens as the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). Although the BBC is only about eighty years old, an infant compared to an institution like the British monarchy, its contributions to national identity are practically unparalleled in the twentieth century. The scope of the Corporation in terms of its influence on British life is hard to imagine in a United States with multiple competing and politically-aimed networks. Robin Aitkin, a former BBC reporter and journalist says, “For many it is an ever-present companion: from breakfast-time to bedtime, from childhood through to old age, there it is telling us about ourselves and the wider world, amusing and entertaining us.”<sup>1</sup> Aitkin captures the dual nature of the BBC in that it both reflects the conditions and needs of the time while also exercising influence over the future of British society. The BBC’s ability to educate, inform, and entertain from its beginnings in 1922 to the end of the Second World War in 1945 is of special interest because these pivotal years helped redefine what it means to be British in modern society.

In 1922, six leading wireless manufacturers and several smaller companies in Great Britain merged to form the British Broadcasting Company (also BBC). With governmental protection from foreign competition, it was, though not explicitly, a monopoly. John Reith, a WWI veteran and Scottish engineer, applied for and accepted the position of general manager of the BBC without even fully understanding what broadcasting was.<sup>2</sup> From the beginning Reith

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<sup>1</sup> Robin Aitkin, *Can We Trust the BBC?* (New York: Cromwell Press, 2007), 1.

<sup>2</sup> Andrew Crisell, *An Introductory History to British Broadcasting* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 13-14.

saw broadcasting as a form of public service, believing in its value for showing the “best” variety the nation had to offer. Classical music was played frequently along with educational programs for both children and adults. With the unemployment rate near eighteen percent in 1921 and never falling below ten percent in the 1920s, the radio became a cheap source of entertainment for jobless citizens who lacked activity in their daily lives.<sup>3</sup> One way to entertain was to bring the theatre to the radio through the reading of plays. Although George Bernard Shaw, the Irish playwright, contested that his play *Man and Superman* was broadcasted without his permission on December 1, 1923, he grew to have a long relationship with the BBC. He read his one-act play *O, Flaherty V.C.* less than a year later on the network.<sup>4</sup> Then, in May 1926, the BBC proved its broadcasting abilities during the General Strike. The Trades Union Congress (TUC) called on industrial and transportation workers to strike in support the miners who demanded better conditions and wages. With many of the country’s services facing limited mobility, the BBC was able to report the strike while many print sources were sidelined.<sup>5</sup> In order to gain the support of the people while balancing its attitude towards the government, the BBC needed to remain neutral as well as universal. For this reason, the BBC stressed a varied yet balanced broadcasting schedule. By appealing to all segments of British society, Reith argued, the BBC would create one audience, rather than one that appealed solely to specific groups.<sup>6</sup> The BBC became an institution of trust. While some still believed that the company was a biased news source, the radio itself became appreciated for its ability to transmit information with great speed. Although

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<sup>3</sup> Unemployment statistics from: Ellis Wasson, *A History of Modern Britain: 1714 to the Present* (Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2010), 256.

<sup>4</sup> L.W. Conolly, *Bernard Shaw and the BBC* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, Inc., 2009), 3-4.

<sup>5</sup> Crisell, *An Introductory History to British Broadcasting*, 18.

<sup>6</sup> Adrian Johns, *Death of a Pirate: British Radio and the Making of the Information Age* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2011), 28.

the great majority of broadcasts were made from London, the widespread listenership throughout the nation meant a culture based increasingly on similar experiences.

On January 1, 1927, the British Broadcasting Company became the British Broadcasting Corporation and under a Royal Charter, Sir John Reith (he was knighted in December of 1926) was the director-general working with a board of governors. While the goals of the BBC remained mostly the same, its broadcasting came under the regulations of the government. During the next five years the Corporation underwent swift expansion, moving its headquarters to the Broadcasting House in Portland Palace, an affluent street in central London. The move was representative of the Corporation's establishment as a national institution.<sup>7</sup> A company that started out with 31 employees grew to have 773, a number that would climb into the thousands during the 1930s.<sup>8</sup> Although the BBC strived to represent that which was British, some criticized the Corporation as being undemocratic and elitist. These accusations were complicated. In terms of being democratic, the BBC did its best to provide all its listeners with what they wanted, but in catering to the needs of everyone, it was confronted with the various preferences of its listeners. To appeal simply to the majority, however, would be also undemocratic because minorities would be ignored. It was impossible to please all listeners at all times. Accusations of elitist tendencies sprung from attempting to broadcast the "best," because the definition of the "best" varied among listeners and class. This debate is best seen through the clash between classical and popular music.

Technological developments and a challenging economy in the interwar period led to dramatic changes in the way music was produced, marketed, and consumed. New musical styles created divisions within society by categorizing the music into high brow, middle brow, and low

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<sup>7</sup> Crisell, *An Introductory History to British Broadcasting*, 22.; and Jennifer Doctor, *The BBC and Ultra-Modern Music: 1922-1936: Shaping a Nation's Tastes* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 20.

<sup>8</sup> Doctor, *The BBC and Ultra-Modern Music*, 19.

brow.<sup>9</sup> Assigning types of music to social hierarchy was a complicated issue that forced the BBC to consider and occasionally defend its musical selections. The majority of the music that the BBC played was classical, with composers like Bach and Beethoven, because it was what the Corporation considered “best.” However, fans of popular music claimed that the BBC played that type of music because it was what the upper-levels of society listened to. In a circular argument, the BBC defended its practice by saying that the highest levels of society enjoyed this music *because* it was the best. Furthermore, the BBC and Reith believed that by offering the “best” music to all classes, it was performing its duty as a public service because it allowed the lower classes an opportunity to hear music (and other cultural programs) that they might not otherwise be exposed to because of socioeconomic limitations.<sup>10</sup> Reith wrote in his book that “...it is better to over-estimate the mentality of the public than to under-estimate it.”<sup>11</sup> Despite accusations of elitism and Reith’s dedication to “the best,” the BBC did respond to popular tastes. For example, W.W. Burnham, a member of the Board of Directors moved to adopt a policy that between 8pm and 10pm that the broadcasts were free of talking and oriented towards a mass audience.<sup>12</sup> Although his suggestion for lighter entertainment was rejected during the early years of the BBC, by the 1930s radios were entering more and more homes and pressure for this type of entertainment increased. The BBC not only reflected society by showcasing class tensions through the debate between elitism and democracy, it also influenced the British people by providing a unified experience due to the sheer number of citizens listening to the radio.

The BBC served a greater purpose than to inform and entertain because it also played a role in remedying social problems. Michael Bailey uses the term “enforced leisure” to describe

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>10</sup> Crisell, *An Introductory History to British Broadcasting*, 29.

<sup>11</sup> Excerpt from John Reith’s *Broadcast over Britain* quoted in: Doctor, *The BBC and Ultra-Modern Music*, 28.

<sup>12</sup> Doctor, *The BBC and Ultra-Modern Music*, 29.

the influence of broadcasting on the unemployed, who had an excess of spare time. The General Strike, mentioned previously, did little to ameliorate the rampant unemployment in Britain during the 1920s. Although this “leisure” time was not a choice, there was a choice in how this time was approached and spent. Dedicated to public improvement, the BBC saw this problem as one that needed a plan of action.<sup>13</sup> The first step was to establish “listening groups” in which the unemployed would gather to listen to radio sets financed by the Radio Manufacturer’s Association and the Carnegie Trust among other groups. The BBC also worked with other groups in the adult education movement like the British Institute of Adult Education and the Workers’ Education Association. The goal of these programs was to teach the unemployed how to think about their condition by encouraging exemplary and productive behavior during their time of leisure.<sup>14</sup> Talks on unemployment were also common during the 1930s. The BBC reported on efforts to relieve unemployment and tried to stimulate further advances to help the unemployed. “Compassionate talks” about dealing with the stresses of unemployment were also common. S.P.B. Mais, a public schoolmaster and writer, was the broadcaster for a weekly series called *SOS* that described volunteer efforts to aid the unemployed and discouraged ostracizing them from mainstream society.<sup>15</sup> The simultaneous effort to encourage middle classes in volunteerism and the unemployed in productive recreation had the further goal of bringing British people closer together in “a tie of human sympathy.”<sup>16</sup> The government was better able to assess the needs of the public and operate more effectively because of this dialog between the classes and the powers in charge. The BBC facilitated the discussion that allowed previously silenced voices to be heard.

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<sup>13</sup> Michael Bailey, "Broadcasting and the Problem of Enforced Leisure during the 1930s," *Leisure Studies* 26, no. 4 (October 2007): 463-477, *Academic Search Premier*, EBSCOhost, (accessed April 14, 2011), 467.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 468.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 469.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 470.

In addition to bringing the people together in times of crisis, the BBC brought the British together in times of mourning as well. As King George V's health was failing, the Corporation was able to update the public immediately, unlike newspapers. Upon the King's death in 1936, John Reith himself delivered the news and the broadcast of the royal funeral that followed. When the new king, Edward VIII, abdicated less than a year later the BBC was there to broadcast his statement.<sup>17</sup> From unemployment to royalty, the BBC truly addressed every corner of British society.

In the first half of the twentieth century, the British Isles were not all that defined Britishness. The British Empire was still a crucial part of the British economy, politics, and culture during the interwar period and the BBC broadcasts reflected this. In December of 1932, the BBC launched the Empire Service program aimed towards white Britons throughout the nation's territories and dominions. The goal was to garner sentiment for the Mother Country and prevent the propaganda of rising European totalitarian states from permeating Britain's support system.<sup>18</sup> Radio was perhaps the strongest medium of international propaganda at the time. The BBC's Empire Service worked to establish a sense of Britishness outside the national borders, particularly among ex-patriots living in the dominions. Global communication was difficult and complex especially when dealing with varied time zones and different wireless capabilities. Early in the years of the Service, broadcasts were largely nostalgic portrayals of a strong Britain dominated by its capital city. For example, the Empire Service would broadcast programs focused on the bustling streets of London for settlers in New Zealand who missed their former

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<sup>17</sup> Crisell, *An Introductory History to British Broadcasting*, 27.

<sup>18</sup> Emma Robertson, "'I Get a Real Kick Out of Big Ben': BBC Versions of Britishness on the Empire and General Overseas Service, 1932-1948." *Historical Journal of Film, Radio & Television* 28, no. 4 (October 2008): 459-473. *Academic Search Premier*, EBSCOhost (accessed April 13, 2011), 459-60.



home. The chimes of Big Ben were in high demand.<sup>19</sup> By 1935, the Empire Service was broadcasting in several languages, partially to combat the propaganda of Hitler and Mussolini.<sup>20</sup> The broadcasts also became increasingly decentralized, moving away from a London-dominated society. This reflected the diverse nature of British identity.

The effectiveness of the BBC's strategies is debatable considering the changing relationships between Britain and her white dominions. Simon Potter argues that the Service had relatively little success in drawing together the British diaspora as indicated by the relatively indifferent responses in Canada, New Zealand, and Australia. In spite of the feat of broadcasting over thousands of miles, the overseas reception of British broadcasts was sometimes less than enthusiastic. In 1932 the Canadian Radio Broadcasting Commission (CRBC) was established and modeled to a degree after the BBC, but relations between the two were sometimes tense.<sup>21</sup> The Empire Service was often received in poor quality and the two struggled to come to an agreement on how to improve the broadcasts. In 1936 the CRBC became the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation and saw itself as increasingly independent, so it separated from the BBC. The CBC desired broadcasts geared towards its own interests, rather than the typical London-oriented representation of Britishness. Companies in Australia and New Zealand also expressed different interests and more serious problems with the quality of reception. The failure of the BBC to understand the real interests of its overseas listeners combined with a lack of resources led to disagreements.<sup>22</sup> Increasing political and economic autonomy of the dominions also strained the relations with the British Broadcasting Corporation's efforts in the 1930s. It

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 463.

<sup>20</sup> Andrew Crisell, *An Introductory History to British Broadcasting* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 23.

<sup>21</sup> Simon J. Potter, "Who Listened when London called? Reactions to the BBC Empire Service in Canada, Australia and New Zealand, 1932-1939," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio & Television* 28, no. 4 (October 2008): 475-487, *Academic Search Premier*, EBSCOhost (accessed April 13, 2011), 476.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 483.

appeared that Great Britain's influence on its empire was not as dominant as it had once been. While the experimentation of the Empire Service was a developmental step towards an international audience, the BBC fell short of its goals in the 1930s. The next decade would tell a different story.

While the BBC flourished during the first two decades of its existence within Europe, it was not until World War II (1939-45) that it really took hold in the British Empire and the world beyond. The nature of this success was multi-dimensional. The role of the BBC expanded after the outbreak of war due to the necessity of broadcasting war news and generating morale and patriotism among the people. Between 1939 and 1945 employment at the BBC increased from 4,000 to 11,000.<sup>23</sup> Because WWII was a battle between ideologies as well as a physical battle, promoting the British cause was crucial and radio was able to do it in a way that print could not. The portrayal of the strength of the Empire was important in generating pro-British sentiment. By praising the loyalty of the Empire, audiences at home felt greater assurance. *Dominion Commentary* was a program that featured various speakers from throughout the dominions discussing the war effort. Programs like *Palm and Pine* and *In It Together* took a slightly less formal tone but also demonstrated their dedication to the cause.<sup>24</sup> The BBC also demonstrated an ability to react and adjust its policies. For example, when the United States entered the war in 1941, the BBC worked to create a balanced opinion about the American forces. The Corporation emphasized that this new ally would be the key to victory, but was careful not to downplay the power of the British Empire. American popular culture was becoming increasingly available in England and it was important to separate America from the Empire because, while it was an ally,

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<sup>23</sup> Crisell, *An Introductory History to British Broadcasting*, 54.

<sup>24</sup> Thomas Hajkowski, "The BBC, the Empire, and the Second World War, 1939-1945," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio & Television* 22, no. 2 (June 2002): 135-155, *Academic Search Premier*, EBSCOhost (accessed April 13, 2011), 140.

it was also foreign. To avoid Americanization, the BBC focused programs on the Imperial efforts because they believed that the Empire still represented “the best in British character.”<sup>25</sup> These programs reasserted the power of Great Britain in order to muster the support of its citizens and distinguish itself among its allies.

British radio played an important part in resistance movements throughout Europe, especially in France. It was through the BBC that Charles de Gaulle made one of the most famous and important speeches in French history in his “Appel aux Français” on June 18, 1940 as the French fell under German occupation. De Gaulle’s goal in this speech, and one made four days later, was to instill a sense of pride and hope in the French people and to mount a French Resistance. His dazzling speech was also practical, encouraging workers of all types to join him in Britain.<sup>26</sup> Soldiers and sailors were among the first to join him in the movement that became known as the Free French. While there were different groups of London French with opinions about the Vichy Regime in France, it is de Gaulle who is remembered today as the leader of the French Resistance. The French Resistance played a dangerous, yet critical role during WWII and by giving voice to De Gaulle, the BBC facilitated the necessary communication between the movement’s leader and the people. The BBC was an essential medium in international resistance to the Axis powers as the conflict devoured the globe.

As the war progressed and the BBC expanded, it sent correspondents into the middle of the action with the formation of the War Reporting Unit (WRU).<sup>27</sup> The war correspondent was a new position and the selection of these individuals for the dangerous profession was important.

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<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 143.

<sup>26</sup> Michael Stenton, *Radio London and Resistance in Occupied Europe: British Political Warfare 1939-1943* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 125.

<sup>27</sup> Brian P.D. Hannon, “Creating The Correspondent: How The BBC Reached The Frontline In The Second World War,” *Historical Journal of Film, Radio & Television* 28, no. 2 (June 2008): 175-194, *Academic Search Premier*, EBSCOhost (accessed April 14, 2011), 175.

The need to place men throughout two war fronts led to the recruitment of new and able-bodied reporters. These people needed the skill to report what was happening as it was happening. It was not as simple as reading a script, like the broadcasters of the '20s and '30s.<sup>28</sup> They were sent to the frontlines to record the sounds of war. They gave an honest portrayal of the war; not one consumed by nationalistic propaganda. The war broadcasts required testing and training not only for the correspondents but also for the new technologies and techniques. Thus, the BBC engaged and connected the home front with the battle lines during the war through several innovations in the world of broadcasting. It demonstrated its ability to adapt to the needs of the time and of the people.

The pressures of total war also led to the BBC's recognition of the working class's importance to the war effort. It was these classes that worked in factories which produced materials vital to British success in the war.<sup>29</sup> The war effort was about a nation working together and the BBC both reflected and encouraged a unity, despite the diversity of British experiences during World War II. Few people can forget the determined spirit of Winston Churchill when he proclaimed that the Battle of Britain would be the "finest hour" of the British Empire and Commonwealth.<sup>30</sup> It was a turning point in history when the voice of a country's leader could enter the homes of the average family on a massive scale. Although the British continued to be concerned with hierarchy and class, the radio helped to narrow social gaps and to create a Britain based on universal experiences. The support of the British people of all classes was integral to the success in war, and victory in WWII defined Britain's position in the world in the years to follow.

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<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 179.

<sup>29</sup> Hajkowski, "The BBC, the Empire, and the Second World War, 1939–1945," 144.

<sup>30</sup> Ellis Wasson, *A History of Modern Britain: 1714 to the Present*. (Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2010), 274.

The British Broadcasting Corporation was at the center of the most important events in British history from its creation in 1922 to the end of World War II in 1945. It reflected and projected British identity in the twentieth century and continued to do so after 1945 as well. The impressive rate at which the BBC became an established national institution derives from by its crucial role in British society during its formative years. From domestic issues and national events to the role of the Empire and the traumatic experience of WWII, the BBC covered nearly every aspect of British culture. In Robert Coll's book *The Identity of England*, he claims that the BBC is a member of the "national family."<sup>31</sup> Although the BBC reports throughout the world through multiple media, it is a uniquely British institution.

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<sup>31</sup> Robert Colls, *The Identity of England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 60.