



HAL
open science

Immovable object, irresistible force: Reith, Churchill and BBC ‘impartiality’

Trevor Harris

► **To cite this version:**

Trevor Harris. Immovable object, irresistible force: Reith, Churchill and BBC ‘impartiality’. Mémoire(s), identité(s), marginalité(s) dans le monde occidental contemporain. Cahiers du MIMMOC, 2022, Censorship and blind spots: the BBC’s silences, 27, 10.4000/mimmoc.10148 . hal-04015810

HAL Id: hal-04015810

<https://hal.science/hal-04015810>

Submitted on 5 Jun 2023

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L’archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d’enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Immovable object, irresistible force: Reith, Churchill and BBC 'impartiality'

Trevor Harris



Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/mimmoc/10148>

DOI: [10.4000/mimmoc.10148](https://doi.org/10.4000/mimmoc.10148)

ISSN: 1951-6789

Publisher

Université de Poitiers

Brought to you by Université de Poitiers



Electronic reference

Trevor Harris, "Immovable object, irresistible force: Reith, Churchill and BBC 'impartiality'", *Mémoire(s), identité(s), marginalité(s) dans le monde occidental contemporain* [Online], 27 | 2022, Online since 24

January 2022, connection on 05 June 2023. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/mimmoc/10148> ;

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/mimmoc.10148>

This text was automatically generated on 16 February 2023.



Creative Commons - Attribution 4.0 International - CC BY 4.0

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Immovable object, irresistible force: Reith, Churchill and BBC 'impartiality'

Trevor Harris

Introduction

- 1 Winston Churchill referred to John Reith disdainfully as “that Wuthering height”,¹ disparaging Reith, who was unusually tall, and what many of those who met Reith would confirm was his craggy, rather forbidding appearance. Reith, in return, was even more direct regarding Churchill: “I absolutely hate him”.² Both men had the kind of clearly delineated public persona which made them eminently caricaturable and both were, indeed, frequently caricatured.³ It is amusing to imagine the two men side by side, for all the world like some undiscovered, music-hall duo or double act, Reith’s lean, elongated Stan Laurel, as it were, in comic contrast to Churchill’s squat and haughty Oliver Hardy. And in many ways Reith’s puritanical, tee-total self-discipline and moral resolve constitute the diametrical opposite of the hedonistic fleece of champagne, port, brandy and cigars in which Churchill stubbornly enveloped even the most serious business of state. And yet, in spite of these apparent differences the two men were, at the same time, duplicates of each other in terms of their gritty determination and deeply held opinions. Both men obviously possessed a strong personal “magnetism,” but since they were not opposite poles, but like poles, they naturally repelled each other. Reith’s fundamental Christian values and Churchill’s aristocratic sense of rank in fact imbued the two men with an identical, unrelenting drive and absolute conviction they were in the right: two tireless exponents of an unwavering paternalism; two conundrums—Reith, a broadcaster who, by his own admission, loathed the common people; Churchill, an orator with a lisp. Generating any degree of empathy or impartiality from this meeting of Providence and privilege was from the outset, perhaps, mission impossible.

- 2 The impartiality of the BBC, the Corporation's role in the British media system, has always been under more or less constant public scrutiny: many would say under constant attack, right down to the present day. From the left, George Monbiot⁴ and Tom Mills⁵ have both recently criticised what they see as "a news agenda set by media oligarchs" and the "elite consensus" at the heart of the Corporation; while, writing in *The Spectator*, Stephen Daisley has complained, from the right, that the BBC is clearly too "woke," and "fixated on issues of race and identity":⁶ a dialogue of the deaf it would seem... The customary rejoinder to the horns of the dilemma on which the BBC seems caught, is to assert that since people from both sides of the political spectrum are grumbling, then the balance must be about right. But for some "balance" seems a disengaged, passive substitute for a more forensic approach. Applying "balance", in the words of one observer, merely means that the BBC's news coverage becomes "increasingly cautious and constipated."⁷ Impartiality, in this reading, seems to have become equivalent to making only a series of negative choices. By self-censoring at the extremes, the BBC attempts, indeed claims to occupy, a neutral, centre ground. Yet one does not necessarily have to be of the left to agree with the author of another letter to the *Guardian* in recognising that the political "centre" has been moving "to the right for more than 40 years in the UK."⁸ By trying to referee the politicians, the BBC inevitably runs the risk of being accused—like any referee—of bias and/or incompetence. But the greater risk is that of shadowing the political consensus as it evolves and is displaced along the spectrum: avoiding taking up any definite position in practice often equates to using as a political base line the assumed views of the broadly conservative, those unwilling to disturb the status quo.

1. The General Strike

- 3 Quite where that line was drawn in May 1926, when Reith and Churchill collided for the first time over the issue of the General Strike, is difficult to say. Britain, via the Edwardian period, had not yet finished emerging from Victorianism; the empire was still an article of faith for many (despite Britain's recent difficulties in Ireland or Egypt). Universal male suffrage in 1918 and a first, brief, minority Labour government in 1924, both meant that the British working class was on the verge of assuming a more significant constitutional role. But this was taking place within a political culture in which "the Establishment"⁹ still felt secure. In fact, that ruling social group, however defined, had arguably succeeded in negotiating a much more dangerous obstacle a few years earlier, in 1919:¹⁰ the Spanish flu pandemic, the economic consequences of the Great War—and, to borrow Keynes' expression, the economic consequences of the peace—, mutinies among disgruntled soldiers still awaiting demobilisation from France, riots on "Red Clydeside," a police strike in Liverpool, racial confrontations in Britain's major ports, a national housing shortage...: all these combined to generate widespread protest and violence. When tanks appeared on the streets of Liverpool and *HMS Valiant* was dispatched from Gibraltar to the mouth of the Mersey, some wondered if Britain was not on the brink of a Bolshevik revolution. But the crisis passed.
- 4 The General Strike of May 1926, by comparison, was a relatively short-lived, and altogether less tense, less violent dispute. Driven principally by discontent among miners now being required by the mine-owners to work eight- instead of seven-hour shifts and accept a 13% pay cut, the strike was taken up by the TUC, the miners being

joined from 3 May by transport workers, dockers and utility workers. But nine days later—although the miners stayed out for another eight months—the General Strike was called off by the TUC. It was the BBC's role during the strike, and Reith's part in that role, which incensed Churchill. The conflict is worth dwelling on since it does clearly show that for all its obvious conservatism and ruling-class snobberies, the "Establishment" was not a monolithic structure applying a uniform set of values and prejudices, but was graduated in its approach. Churchill tended to see the strike in only black and white; Reith was determined to deliberately maintain a grey area. Churchill did not forget or forgive.

- 5 Reith's main difficulty was that as Managing Director of the British Broadcasting Company he was head of a private enterprise. Yet, as the chief executive of a company which was financed by a fee payable annually by each listener, a fee collected by the government which, further, licenced all broadcasting, Reith was also head of a publicly controlled company. The discomfort of this hybrid status was never lost on Reith: his detailed submissions to the Crawford Committee—which had reported to Parliament just two months before the outbreak of the Strike—, were expressly designed to have the BBC's status as a public service broadcaster recognised.¹¹ Reith had long been aware that the Company's origins in the private sector could leave the BBC open to the threat of American style commercialism: he was keen to defend the Company against all and any suspicion it would happen and to progressively disengage the Company from a money-making mentality. Reith was, in short, a government man, and openly flirted, whenever the opportunity arose, with political power, always keen to remain in a tight orbit close to the Prime Minister. Such behaviour was fuelled by Reith's native energy and drive, his sense of ambition compounded by the conviction that circumstances had unfairly conspired to prevent him from entering the Establishment via the normal route—an Oxbridge education. To his relief, the BBC had, unexpectedly, provided him access and enabled him to soothe his frustrations and nurture new, more flamboyant ambitions: a Cabinet post? British ambassador to the US? Viceroy of India?! Later he even fantasized about becoming Secretary-General of the new United Nations Organisation.¹² Government was duly grateful for Reith's work during the Strike: in the New Year's Honours list for 1927, he became Sir John.

2. Reith the Conservative

- 6 Reith's proximity to Prime Minister Stanley "safety first" Baldwin throughout the General Strike was the most prominent aspect of Reith's personal need to cleave to the centre of power, and the most straightforward demonstration of his fundamental conservatism. It was also something which could not fail to rile the quintessentially uncautious Churchill, increasingly distant as he was from Baldwin and what Churchill saw as Baldwin's disastrous leadership of the country and the Conservative Party. Throughout the brief strike Reith saw himself as the guardian of the Company, and the Company as the guardian of public order. Reith himself announced both the beginning and the end of the conflict, even inviting Baldwin—in order to avoid an inquisitive crowd at the BBC's premises at Savoy Hill—into his own home to make a crucial broadcast. Baldwin, Briggs confirms, "knew, liked, and trusted Reith, whose views on the strike were not dissimilar from his own".¹³ During the broadcast from Reith's home, on the evening of 8 May, Reith affirms that Baldwin asked him what he thought of the

draft speech. According to the account provided in his memoirs, Reith suggested that Baldwin end the broadcast with “something personal”. Reith proposed, “I am a man of peace. I am longing and working and praying for peace, but I will not compromise the dignity of the British Constitution.”¹⁴ With the broadcast already underway, Reith apparently became dissatisfied with the word “dignity,” and leant over Baldwin, who continued addressing the nation, removed the last page of the speech from the desk, replaced “the integrity” with “the safety and security,” then slipped the page back onto the desk. Baldwin integrated the new edit, says Reith, “almost imperceptibly”:¹⁵ there could hardly be a clearer and more deliberate assumption of the role of “right-hand man,” or a more eloquent expression of Reith’s desire to help the government. On 12 May, having received confirmation from Downing Street that the strike was over, Reith announced the end of the strike during the BBC’s second bulletin of the day from Savoy Hill, at 1 p.m. He read a message from 10 Downing Street concerning the end of the Strike, followed by another from the General Council of the TUC, and then ended by intoning the words of Blake’s “Jerusalem”: a patriotic ritual embodying his fervent loyalty to the constitution and signifying the salvation of England at the end of the crisis.¹⁶

- 7 Such behaviour on the part of the Managing Director of the BBC obviously invites descriptions such as “obsequious” or “sycophantic,” and one can easily understand why many opponents of the government caricatured the BBC during the strike as “the British Falsehood Company.” However, Reith’s deeply ingrained sense of duty, his profound and sincere Presbyterianism, his desire to be seen in the best possible light, his wish, above all, to see the BBC—which he saw as his own creation—survive and prosper, all converged to incite him to apply a broadcasting policy designed to support the Establishment view¹⁷ and help ward off a threat to the stability of the British Constitution. His own family’s Liberal sympathies did not attract Reith for long, and an unimaginative response to his attempt in March 1920 to place his services at the disposal of the Labour Party quickly diluted any enthusiasm in that direction: his “distaste for organised labour”¹⁸ only increased during his brief career managing an engineering works in Scotland. And just two years after his overture to Labour, Reith’s political ambition and his organisational energies at last found focus, but with the Conservative Party, Reith acting as personal assistant to the leader of London’s Unionist MPs, during the campaign leading to the October 1922 General Election.
- 8 Reith’s conservative political sympathies during the 1926 strike are therefore not at all surprising and his strategy was well rewarded: not only via his own knighthood, but also through the successful transformation of the Company into the Corporation, which Reith considered a great personal achievement.

3. Silencing Churchill

- 9 Why, then, would such a friend of power attempt to conserve for the Company a measure of impartiality and to exclude and durably alienate such a dyed-in-the-wool Establishment opponent of the Strike as Churchill? There are—at least—three reasons: personal dislike, pragmatic constraints, and Reithian “efficiency.”
- 10 **I)** On the first question, as already indicated, it is clear that from the very outset Reith and Churchill conceived a powerful animosity for each other, or what one of Reith’s biographers, Andrew Boyle, describes as an “extreme aversion”.¹⁹ Reith’s success in

holding off Churchill's attempts to bring the BBC to heel in 1926 obviously rankled with the future Prime Minister, feelings amplified in December 1929. In Asa Briggs' account of this new incident, Churchill approached Reith and told him he would offer the BBC £100 of his own money—equivalent to about £6,000–£7,000 today—to be allowed to broadcast to the nation on "Politics." Reith declined the offer, pointing out that the terms of the government licence granted to the BBC prevented the Corporation from taking payment. Reith followed this up in a letter to Churchill a few days later (31 December 1929), insisting that the BBC would never adopt what he referred to as "the American plan"; namely, allowing people to broadcast for cash, "irrespective of any consideration of content or balance." Churchill could not accept this and said he preferred the American approach to "present British methods of debarring public men from access to a public who wish to hear".²⁰ Fourteen months later, in February 1931, another request by Churchill to broadcast his views on India was again refused. His timing was deliberate, but—for Reith—extremely delicate. Appointed by Baldwin in November 1927, the Simon Commission on constitutional reform in India had reported in May 1930 and, against a background of Congress' rejection of its findings and a campaign of civil disobedience in India, the first, largely ineffectual, Round Table conference had just finished in London. Churchill, who had resigned from the Shadow Cabinet the previous month in protest against Baldwin's support for Macdonald's decision to offer Dominion status to India, suggested he merely wished to state "the British side of the case," but it seemed clear that he was, rather, "endeavouring to embarrass the [Liberal-backed, minority Labour] government."²¹

- 11 This *mésentente* between Churchill and Reith spluttered on through Churchill's so-called "wilderness years" into the 1940s. It is instructive—and amusing—to follow Reith's grumbling through his diaries. On 20 February 1940, Reith writes: "Churchill is a horrid fellow" and on 29 February, "How I dislike him";²² 8 May, "such a hypocrite";²³ 18 June, "Churchill made a statement in the House of Commons this afternoon. Not very good";²⁴ 4 July, "I don't think he is at all worthy of this kind of tribute from the House of Commons";²⁵ 20 August, "I listened to Churchill and thought little of him";²⁶ 4 December, "Feeling very disgusted with Churchill".²⁷ And so it goes on: Churchill is an "impostor" and a "menace", "essentially rotten", a "loathsome cad".²⁸ In December 1943 Reith boiled over: "Picture of the loathsome Churchill in the paper—makes me want to put my boot through it".²⁹
- 12 **II)** To be totally fair to Reith, however, it needs to be pointed out, placing these personal animosities on one side, that Churchill's exclusion during the General Strike was not the only one: Ramsay Macdonald, then Leader of the Opposition, was denied an opportunity to respond to Baldwin's broadcast mentioned earlier—a rejection which Macdonald and other leading members of the Labour Party took very badly. And Randall Davidson, the Archbishop of Canterbury, failed to persuade Reith to allow him to broadcast a peace appeal at the height of the strike. Reith's dilemma was real enough. The constraints of the BBC's constitution—it was *de facto* under indirect government control by virtue of the PMG's remit over all broadcasting—meant that an out-and-out attempt to be even-handed in presentation of the news would necessarily be an anti-government position. As Reith himself pointed out in the leading article which appeared on the front page of the issue of the *Radio Times* published on 21 May, "under the Emergency Regulations, the Government would have been well within their powers if they had taken over Savoy Hill," adding a little further on: "Complete impartiality during the emergency was, in the circumstances, not to be expected."³⁰

The Labour MP Ellen Wilkinson, however, was not convinced by Reith's laboured special pleading and sent an indignant, sardonic letter to the *Radio Times* the following week: "I can hear enough fairy tales in the House of Commons without paying ten shillings a year to hear more." Reith juxtaposed a reply in which he challenged Wilkinson to deny that the BBC had "said nothing that was untrue, and that no word was spoken which was likely to inflame public opinion against the strikers or to prejudice their case". On the same page of the same issue, Philip Snowden, former Labour Chancellor of the Exchequer, complained that the BBC had acted "unfairly," putting forward "one side only." Reith replied—and the point he makes to Snowden may well have been correct: "We do not believe that any other Government, even one of which Mr Snowden might be a member, would have allowed the broadcasting authority under its control greater freedom".³¹ We shall never know what a Labour government would have done in the same situation; but given Macdonald's stance on the question, Reith possibly had good grounds to make that claim.

- 13 Reith's point, then, was that a government-controlled broadcasting service could only support a viewpoint clearly opposed to the government on that government's sufferance. And going against a proclaimed state of emergency could well have been treasonable, and would definitely have left the BBC even more open to moderate members of that government. In practice, Baldwin was no doubt only too pleased to take cover behind Churchill's criticism of the BBC. Reith, in turn, clearly felt that Baldwin's judgement of where the limit lay was probably the most reliable one, and toed that line.
- 14 But this makes Reith, to reintegrate a criticism of the modern BBC quoted earlier, sound "cautious and constipated." Yet, placed back into context, it has to be conceded that the BBC's role during the strike was, in practice, a gigantic leap forward in terms of editorial independence compared to the previous three and a half years of the Company's existence. All and any "controversial" material—i.e. editorial comment on political news—had up to that point been off limits. Reith in fact used the crisis to convert what amounted to a vast political no-go area into a considerable editorial opportunity.³² Prior to the strike the BBC had had virtually no scope at all to report its own news, and none at all to gather it: both of these clamps were prised open by the events of May 1926. Afterwards, the newspaper proprietors, much to their annoyance, could not easily manage a return to the *status quo ante*. It was only in the spring of 1928, however, that the old ban was formally (but still only partially) lifted. And from March 1928 to November 1929 the BBC felt compelled to set up its own "Controversy Committee" to discuss anything likely to cause problems and thus make sure that the recent slackening of the editorial rules would not be placed in jeopardy.
- 15 **III)** Reith was himself always ready to take risks. In early 1932, as part of a series of programmes called "Hazard"—narratives about unusually adventurous undertakings—a talk by a German Zeppelin commander from the 1914-18 war prompted outrage from the British Empire Union.³³ The matter was even raised for discussion in Cabinet where it was decided that another programme in the series, which was to feature a former German U-Boat commander, Ernst Hashagen, should not go ahead. Reith insisted that it should and desperately wanted the BBC to stand its ground: but the Chairman of the Governors, J. H. Whitley, agreed, to Reith's annoyance, that the episode should be cancelled.³⁴

16 So, it would be quite wrong to assume that Reith lacked the courage to take the government on. His attitude, I would argue, stemmed more from his commitment to what he often called “efficiency” than from exclusively political considerations. True, he was conservative—extremely so on many social questions—yet, as the “Hashagen Affair” shows, not inclined to cower in the face of opposition or threats. His principal objective, however, was to get the BBC machine, as it were, working to the greatest efficiency possible in every area. In the area of news/editorials, the output of that BBC machine was frustratingly limited: Reith was well aware of this, but saw that limits had to be accepted. It was a question of using available power to the full, of getting the most which could be got out of the machine without breaking it. Reith’s scientific training joined forces here with his moral principles to generate an ardent utilitarianism with the ideal of public service at its heart. Reith was not one to confuse tactics with strategy: “Reith was politically astute enough to realise that compromises made during a General Strike in 1926 would guarantee a status quo holding out the promise of greater editorial independence from 1927 onwards.”³⁵ His utilitarian goal—to provide the greatest possible number with the greatest possible improvement—required, above all, that the BBC continue to exist in its most independent form possible. The goal of greatest utility would be served, could only be served, by keeping the Company and, after 1927, the Corporation, just out of the government's grasp. Only by accepting limits to ambitions in one area, could those in all areas be pursued the most efficiently. A tactical retreat was sometimes required to preserve the overall strategy: which was to continue to reach the greatest number possible of listeners and to provide them with the best broadcasting possible in order that they may improve as much as possible. This could only be done if the BBC machine continue to function. Complete impartiality in the General Strike was not, as we have seen, in line with Reith’s personal politics. But in any event, it was, he felt, not possible and an acceptance of the limited impartiality which Reith and the BBC were afforded by government was the most efficient, and therefore the most moral, course to follow.

Conclusion

17 In conclusion, where the long-running Reith-Churchill disagreement was concerned, Churchill, in a sense, had the last laugh when, in February 1942, he demoted and then dismissed Reith from the government to which Neville Chamberlain had appointed him Minister of Information in January 1940. But Reith very much had the last grumble, confiding to his diary when Churchill returned to power in October 1951 that the Prime Minister was “an unprincipled and unscrupulous megalomaniac” (Stuart 60), and delivering himself of a letter to “the wretched Churchill” when the ageing Prime Minister retired a few months later, in April 1955: “Here is someone who worked faithfully and well for you, but whom you broke and whose life you ruined” (Stuart 60).³⁶ It would be difficult to imagine either a more inaccurate summary of actual events, or a less gracious valediction. But there was to be no reconciliation.³⁷ Reith jealously protected the BBC’s limited, fragile, yet precious impartiality. Churchill’s attempts to circumvent this was something which Reith opposed using the most partial tactics and of which he formed an opinion from which all notion of balance was conspicuously absent.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bannon, Kevin, Dr. Letter to *The Guardian*, 11 Oct. 2020 ("BBC impartiality is under threat from all sides"), <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2020/oct/11/bbc-impartiality-is-under-threat-from-all-sides>, 29 October 2020.
- Boyle, Andrew. *Only the Wind Will Listen: Reith of the BBC*, Hutchinson and Co., 1972.
- Briggs, Asa. *The History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom. I The Birth of Broadcasting*. Oxford University Press, 1961. *II The Golden Age of Wireless*, Oxford University Press, 1965.
- Crook, Tim. *International Radio Journalism: History, Theory and Practice*. Routledge, 2002
- Daisley, Stephen. "The existential threat facing the BBC," *The Spectator*, 26 Nov. 2020, <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/the-existential-threat-facing-the-bbc>, 14 December 2020.
- Dibble, Jeremy. "Jerusalem: a history of England's hymn," *The Conversation*, 3 March 2016, <https://theconversation.com/jerusalem-a-history-of-englands-hymn-55668>. 27 June 2021
- Haley, William. "Portrait: John Reith: A Man for One Season," *The American Scholar*, vol. 45, no. 4, 1976, p. 560-64.
- History of the BBC. <https://www.bbc.com/historyofthebbc/research/editorial-independence/hashagen-affair/>.
- Mills, Tom. *The BBC: Myth of a Public Service*, Verso, 2016.
- Monbiot, George. "The biggest threat to the BBC's independence is the corporation itself." *The Guardian*, 7 Oct. 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/oct/07/bbc-independence-corporation-news-agenda-media-oligarchs>, 29 October 2020.
- Reith, J. C. W. *Into the Wind*. Hodder and Stoughton, 1949.
- Robinson, Nick. *Live from Downing Street. The Inside Story of Politics, Power and the Media*, Bantam Press, 2012, EPUB.
- Rudd, Elizabeth. Letter to *The Guardian*, 11 Oct. 2020, "BBC impartiality is under threat from all sides", <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2020/oct/11/bbc-impartiality-is-under-threat-from-all-sides>, 29 October 2020.
- Stuart, Charles. *The Reith Diaries*, Collins, 1975.
- The Radio Times*, <https://genome.ch.bbc.co.uk/issues>, 29 October 2020.
- Webb, Simon. *Britain's Year of Revolution*, Pen and Sword History, 2016.
- Whittaker, Jason. "Almost everything you know about the hymn 'Jerusalem' is wrong," *Prospect Magazine*, 26 December 2019 <https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/arts-and-books/almost-everything-you-know-about-the-hymn-jerusalem-is-wrong>, 27 June 2021.

NOTES

1. Nick Robinson, *Live from Downing Street. The Inside Story of Politics, Power and the Media*. Bantam Press, 2012, EPUB, p. 80.
2. Charles Stuart, *The Reith Diaries*, Collins, 1975, p. 59.

3. For example, the caricature by Wooping (TNA INF3/49), prominently featuring Reith's outsize bushy eyebrows; or the caricature published by *Punch* in December 1934, where Reith is depicted as a giant figure, a proprietorial elbow leaning on the summit of Broadcasting House, which is belittled, minion-like beneath him. There are so many caricatures of Churchill that he often seems to have been reduced for posterity to an emblem composed of a cigar and a V-for-victory sign.

4. "The biggest threat to the BBC's independence is the corporation itself," *The Guardian*, 7 Oct. 2020 <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/oct/07/bbc-independence-corporation-news-agenda-media-oligarchs>

5. *The BBC: Myth of a Public Service*, Verso, 2016.

6. 26 Nov. 2020, "The existential threat facing the BBC."

7. Elizabeth Rudd, letter to *The Guardian*, 11 Oct. 2020.

8. Dr Kevin Bannon, *ibid.*

9. The first use of the word in this sense according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, dates from 1923.

10. See Simon Webb, *Britain's Year of Revolution*, Pen and Sword History, 2016.

11. This was duly done in July 1926 when the Postmaster General on behalf of the Government accepted the recommendations of the committee.

12. In Charles Stuart's diplomatic, even sympathetic assessment: "he was constantly hoping, and was constantly disappointed in his hopes, for positions of greater responsibility and status" (*The Reith Diaries*. Collins, 1975, p. 58).

13. *The History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom. I The Birth of Broadcasting*, Oxford University Press, 1961, p. 361.

14. *Into the Wind*, Hodder and Stoughton, 1949, p. 111.

15. Charles Stuart, *The Reith Diaries*. Collins, 1975, p. 95. The precise degree of reliability one can accord the diary, of course, is a complex question. Personal records may appear to complement and complete the "official" record, but an element of self-justification is inevitable. Where the Strike was concerned, Briggs tends throughout to give Reith credence: "On the whole the programmes were impartial" (*The History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom. I The Birth of Broadcasting*, Oxford University Press, 1961, p. 371). Among the admirers of Reith's diaries we find William Haley (Director General from 1944 to 1952): "The Reith Diaries will remain one of the most outstanding revelations of one of the most outstanding men who played a leading part on the British scene in this century" ("Portrait: John Reith: A Man for One Season." *The American Scholar*, vol. 45, no. 4, 1976, p. 560). The combined effect of such assessments reinforces the relationship between the "official" and the "personal" in Reith's case.

16. See Charles Stuart, *The Reith Diaries*, Collins, 1975, p. 97, or Tim Crook, *International Radio Journalism: History, Theory and Practice*, Routledge, 2002, p. 75. On the history of the hymn "Jerusalem" as England's unofficial national anthem see, for example, Jason Whittaker, "Almost everything you know about the hymn 'Jerusalem' is wrong," *Prospect Magazine*, 26 December 2019 <https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/arts-and-books/almost-everything-you-know-about-the-hymn-jerusalem-is-wrong>, or Jeremy Dibble, "Jerusalem: a history of England's hymn," *The Conversation*, 3 March 2016 <https://theconversation.com/jerusalem-a-history-of-englands-hymn-55668>.

17. Should there be any doubt about Reith's Establishment credentials, it is as well to quote in full the list of honours bestowed on him: "a Knight of the Thistle, a Peer of the Realm, a Privy Counsellor, a Knight Grand Cross of the Royal Victorian Order (an honour in being the gift solely of the sovereign), a Knight Grand Cross of the British Empire, a member of the Queen's Body Guard for Scotland, twice Lord High Commissioner of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, an honorary Doctor of Civil Law of Oxford University, an honorary Doctor of Laws of

Aberdeen University, Lord Rector of Glasgow University” (William Haley, “Portrait: John Reith: A Man for One Season,” *The American Scholar*, vol. 45, no. 4, 1976, p. 561).

18. Charles Stuart, *The Reith Diaries*, Collins, 1975, p. 83.
19. Andrew Boyle, *Only the Wind Will Listen: Reith of the BBC*. Hutchinson and Co., 1972, p. 201.
20. Qtd. in Asa Briggs, *The History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom. II The Golden Age of Wireless*. Oxford University Press, 1965, p. 135.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 137.
22. Charles Stuart, *The Reith Diaries*, Collins, 1975, p. 241.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 249.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 257.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 258.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 261.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 272.
28. *Ibid.*, pp. 279, 297, 308.
29. *Ibid.*, p; 314.
30. *Radio Times*, 21 May 1926, p. 1.
31. *Radio Times*, 28 May 1926, p. 351.
32. Briggs comments that this situation “was a radical departure in broadcasting policy, as radical as the frequent supply of news” (*The History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom. I The Birth of Broadcasting*. Oxford University Press, 1961, p. 380).
33. The BEU was set up during the First World War and its main object was amply illustrated by its original name: the Anti-German Union.
34. See <https://www.bbc.com/historyofthebbc/research/editorial-independence/hashagen-affair/>
35. Tim Crook, *International Radio Journalism: History, Theory and Practice*, Routledge, 2002, p. 75.
36. Charles Stuart, *The Reith Diaries*, Collins, 1975, p.60: the degree of Reith’s self-pity here is surprising to say the least.
37. Charles Stuart sums up the enduring estrangement: “[Churchill and Reith] were plainly incompatible, being at once too alike in their domineering egotism and too widely separated in their attitudes to life, the one cheerful and hedonist, the other pessimistic and suspicious of pleasure. The fierce patriotism and determination to win the war which they shared were not enough to overcome their wider differences of temperament” (*The Reith Diaries*. Collins, 1975, 58).

ABSTRACTS

Both Churchill and Reith were convinced of the importance of their personal mission in public life. While the BBC was still a private company the two clashed during the General Strike; several other confrontations would follow. The mutual animosities generated lasted into the 1940s. Churchill’s desire to bend broadcasting to his personal political ends was countered by Reith’s staunch defence of public service broadcasting which should be as independent as possible from, and should not represent, government or specific political interests. Reith, profoundly conservative, nonetheless resisted Churchill’s own aggressive conservatism. Reith disliked and distrusted Churchill, believing that the only reliable way to protect the BBC’s fragile independence was to accept limitations to impartiality. Only in that way, Reith felt, could the

BBC continue to serve the public in the most efficient, useful way, providing the greatest possible audience with the greatest possible access to the best possible programmes.

INDEX

Keywords: Reith, Churchill, BBC, impartiality, editorial independence

AUTHOR

TREVOR HARRIS

Université Bordeaux Montaigne, CLIMAS EA 4196

Trevor Harris teaches nineteenth- and twentieth-century British political and intellectual history at the Université Bordeaux Montaigne. His main research interests are the history of the British empire, its role in the creation and the projection of Britain's national self-image, and its impact on Britain itself. Recent publications include: "John Reith and the BBC 1922-1939: Building an Empire of the Air?" *Revue française de civilisation britannique*, vol. 26, no. 1, 2021 <https://doi.org/10.4000/rfcb.7498>; editor, *Windrush (1948) and Rivers of Blood (1968): Legacy and Assessment*, London and New York: Routledge, 2020; (with Andrekos Varnava, Flinders University), "'It is quite impossible to receive them': Saving the Musa Dagh Refugees and the Imperialism of European Humanitarianism," *Journal of Modern History*, vol. 90, no. 4, 2018, p. 834-862; "The Experience of British-Argentine Volunteers 1914-18: A very colonial non-colony?" *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History*, vol. 17 no. 2, 2016 doi:10.1353/cch.2016.0036 ; "A Place to Speak the 'Language of Heaven'? Patagonia as a Land of Broken Welsh Promise", in Andrekos Varnava, editor, *Imperial Expectations and Realities. El Dorados, Utopias and Dystopias*, Manchester University Press (Studies in Imperialism), 2015, p. 125-143.