



## 'Two Wasted Years?'

January – March 2011

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EVEN WITHOUT KNOWING THEIR SOURCE, MILLIONS OF PEOPLE draw on Orwell. One has only to think of the perversion of Room 101 (which even the BBC persists in locating in the wrong building <sup>1</sup>) and Big Brother to recognize how Orwell has crept into the lives and language of the most ignorant, even if they don't know their sources. 'All animals are equal but some animals are more equal than others' might dimly resonate in the minds of the near-illiterate. Although to me the BBC is now in moral, cultural, and even technical decline (whatever the wonders of digital this and analogue that), it was the BBC that prompted me to become, eventually, an academic and so to enjoy a satisfying career. Although if I now find the BBC's output too often depressing and even incompetent, for many years I derived great support from the music it broadcast on Radio 3 in long hours at my desk and many years ago it introduced me to television performances of much classic drama.

What has this heritage to do with Orwell? Quite a lot I think. Although he described his time at the BBC as two wasted years <sup>2</sup> they were far from that. Orwell always deprecated his achievements. 'Failure' was writ large in his make-up – a kind of protective shield. However, Orwell's work and achievements at the BBC are worth re-assessing.

I am chary of contradicting Orwell's assessments that he did not himself later re-evaluate, but in two instances I dare to think that Orwell was wrong. His repeated assertions that he failed or could not do something or other – e.g., shoot straight – are usually wrong. They are examples of his well-attested self-deprecation. Secondly, I cannot agree that his months at the BBC were 'two wasted years'. Indeed, given the circumstances his achievements were formidable and had long-term benefits for the institution and those who tuned in to it long after he was dead.

Radio and television since Orwell's time are, obviously, very different creatures – indeed, monsters – from anything he knew. I often wonder how those to whom 24-hour wall-to-wall news, multi-channel radio and television, with facilities for time-delay, recording and replay (not to speak of websites and the internet) are the norm can conceive of the experience of radio as Orwell experienced it, or, indeed, one might say, did not experience it. Whereas I struggle to cope with the vast array of modern technology, I suspect that those to whom all that comes naturally, must struggle to conceive of a world in which there is no radio in the house, never mind a television. And a world in which even if there was a radio it might require two separate batteries, Low Tension and High Tension, with frequent visits to a garage to get the accumulator re-charged.

Until I was about 13 I very, very rarely heard a radio and did not see a television until about 1949 when I was 23, and even then, only in someone else's house. Such radio as I did hear was in my grandmother's house. Because of the need for batteries it was only sparingly used. All I recall of those days was a song which ran 'We joined the Navy to see the world / And what did we see? / We saw the sea'<sup>3</sup>. That was not why, shortly afterwards, I ended up in the Royal Navy, but perhaps the song sticks in my mind because I joined the Navy. The only time I recall hearing a radio between then and the outbreak of war was when, as a schoolboy, we were all sat down to listen to the Coronation service relayed on a radio that had been brought into the classroom.

Orwell clearly did not have a radio when he wanted to hear the news on 28 May 1940 when the British and French armies were in full retreat. At that time he was hoping that the British Expeditionary Force was 'cut to pieces sooner than capitulate'.<sup>4</sup> He had to go to a pub to hear the 9.00 o'clock news and he writes that the 'barmaid was not going to have it turned on if we had not asked her' (*Diaries*, p. 245). A year later, on 15 April 1941, he again records going to a pub to hear the 9.00 o'clock news (*Diaries*, p. 304). Although Orwell fulminates against people's 'impenetrable wall of stupidity' he then concedes that any other nation, presumably better informed, 'would have been squealing for peace long ago'. About six years later, and after his time working for the BBC, Orwell does have a radio at his flat in Canonbury Square because he tells Rayner Heppenstall that he 'had a number of people' in to listen to the broadcast of his radio adaptation of *Animal Farm* (*A Life in Letters*, 25 January 1947; p. 338). We know he had a radio at Barnhill, at least, later in his time there, because he records replacing both HT and LT batteries on 25 October 1947 (*Diaries*, p. 476).

There is an earlier reference to radio than these pub visits which throws light on its social use between the wars. When staying in Headingley with his sister Marjorie and her husband, Humphrey Dakin, during his visit to the Distressed Areas, on two occasions he joins discussion groups. The first was suggested 'by the Social Welfare people who run the unemployed occupational centre'. This was held in a room in the local public library. On a second occasion a room was used in a public house. On both occasions, the Dakins take along their portable radio and the groups listen to a radio talk. The first was on Galsworthy's *The Skin Game* and the second on 'If Plato lived today'. After the first discussion, the group resorted to a local pub for bread and cheese and beer and after the second, to the bar in the pub. Orwell describes the meetings in some detail suggesting how unusual was this experience for him (*Diaries*, p. 56). I am sure Orwell never had a television and if he ever watched a television programme he never mentions doing so. The two-way telescreen in Winston Smith's living room is a product of Orwell's imagination.

Given how slight was his experience of radio his two years of intense activity broadcasting to India is all the more remarkable. So what did Orwell do at – and for – the BBC?

Orwell started broadcasting for the BBC a few months before he joined the Corporation on 18 August 1941 as a talks assistant in the Overseas Service at a salary of £640 a year. He discussed 'The Proletarian Writer' with Desmond Hawkins on 6 December 1940 in the Home Service (roughly the equivalent of Radio 4 today). The text was printed in the BBC's excellent journal, *The Listener* (now defunct), on 19 December 1940.<sup>5</sup> On 30 April 1941 he gave the first of four broadcasts on literary criticism each of which was published in *The Listener*. They were on 'The Frontiers of Art and Propaganda', 'Tolstoy and Literature', 'The Meaning of a Poem' (a close reading of Hopkins's 'Felix Randal'), and 'Literature and Totalitarianism'.<sup>6</sup> He seems to

have been roped in to play a small role in a radio play written by a future colleague, Venu Chitale, about Parliament's abolition of slavery a week before he was appointed – perhaps he happened to be in the studio for an interview or briefing. Other parts were read by three future colleagues, the programme assistants A.L. Bakaya and Balraj Sahni, and the West Indian writer, Una Marson. Orwell's part was brief. Ironically he was cast as a slave owner. Even more ironically, and looking forward to *Animal Farm*, one of his lines was 'You low animal. We'll have the cows answering back next'.<sup>7</sup>

For the first two weeks of his employment he attended an induction course at Bedford College, University of London, then in Regent's Park, London. In this Orwell was 'colleged' as the BBC jargon put it. The course was described by a contemporary, the poet and scholar, William Empson, as 'the Liars' School'. This was a pejorative misnomer. One example might suffice to indicate how serious the course was. Orwell's copy of a previously broadcast script, *Arctic Excursion*, used for staff training, has been annotated by Orwell to draw attention to presentational techniques, for example, 'Effect before mentioning it', 'Purely time effects', 'Keep rapidly on the move in order to be able to halt presently'.<sup>8</sup> A long memorandum from Z.A. Bokhari, Orwell's immediate boss, welcomes him and outlines in considerable detail the organisation of the section and what Orwell will be involved in. One particular item was to prove very important. Bokhari says he had obtained the syllabuses of various Indian universities and was negotiating with Herbert Read 'and trying to get a team of university dons to broadcast talks based on the books prescribed or recommended for examinations in India'.<sup>9</sup> This would come to be a significant part of Orwell's work.

On 21 November 1941 the first of Orwell's weekly newsletters to India and South-East Asia was broadcast. He wrote 104 or 105 to be broadcast in English (he himself reading his scripts from 21 November 1942). Of these most were broadcast to India but 30 to Malaya and 19 to Indonesia (the latter two countries being then occupied by the Japanese). He also wrote 115 or 116 scripts for translation into Gujarati, Marathi, Bengali, Tamil and Hindustani. He worried whether these were heard so far away. Radio transmission was difficult, reception uncertain, and obviously listening-in in an occupied country very dangerous. One charming post-war report suggests that he was heard and did offer welcome encouragement. A nun in Malaya, Sister Margaret, described to a WRAC officer, Barbara Rigby, how she and the Sisters risked their lives to listen in and walked many miles to take the news to others. The nuns, she said, had been cheered by Orwell: 'we used to bless that good man'.

Orwell worked incredibly hard arranging broadcasts by others and writing scripts which he broadcast. Many were on the most mundane of topics – 'Paper is Precious', 'The Meaning of Scorched Earth', 'Britain's Rations and the Submarine War' and 'Money and Guns' – but he later began to branch out into fields which were cultural rather than overtly propagandist. Thus, on 11th August 1942 the first of six radio literary programmes was broadcast. These were entitled 'Voice' and were presented as if they were a literary magazine, with poetry readings and discussions with eminent writers such as Herbert Read, Una Marson, Mulk Raj Anand, and William Empson. On the 9 October Orwell read the first instalment of a story by five different authors, one following on from the other, each speaker composing his or her own instalment. Orwell's contribution was followed by instalments written and spoken by L.A.G. Strong, Inez Holden, Martin Armstrong, and E.M. Forster. On 2 November 1942 Orwell broadcast an Imaginary Interview with Jonathan Swift in the BBC's African Service. He also dramatised Anatole France's *Crainquebille*, Ignazio Silone's *The Fox*, H.G. Wells's 'A Slip Under the

Microscope', and *The Emperor's New Clothes* by Hans Christian Andersen, all broadcast to India.

The staff of the Indian section was tiny – chiefly its head, Bokhari, various technical assistants and secretaries, Venu Chitale and Orwell. Much of the initiation of programmes and their organisation (and even participation) fell to him assisted by a secretary. Among regular series (with a selection of their topics) were 1: Open Letters (for which he arranged and prepared speakers) to 'A Chinese Guerilla', 'A Nazi', 'A Pacifist', 'A Marxist', 'A Coloured Man', and 'A Quisling'. 2: on, for example, 'Liberty', Sir Stafford Cripps, 'Popular Novels and Public Taste', and General Timoshenko; 3: 'These Names will Live', e.g., H.G. Wells, President Roosevelt, General Sikorski, Paul Robeson, William Walton, T.S. Eliot, and Edwin Muir; 4: 'I'd Like It Explained', six programmes in the form of debates between two speakers, including 'The Press' with Michael Foot and J.L. Garvin, 'The Future of Parliament' with Harold Laski and Lord Winterton, 'Aviation', with Peter Masefield and Oliver Stewart; 5: a series on 'Japan's Threat to Asia'; 6: 'The History of Fascism'; 'Modern Aircraft' including individual talks on Bombers, Fighters, Dive Bombers and Torpedo Planes, Naval Aircraft, Gliders, and Transport Planes; and 'Books that Changed the World' including *The Koran*, *The Bible*, *The Upanishads*, *The Analects*, *The Bhagavat-Gita*, and *The New Testament*. And these series are by no means the only series in which Orwell was deeply, if not always solely, involved.

However, in many ways the most imaginative series comprised programmes involving outstanding authorities discussing literature and science. These were usually series of six programmes and many were based on Bombay and Calcutta University degree syllabuses. This was 'distance learning' long before the Open University was founded in the United Kingdom or the Deutsches Institut für Fernstudien, University of Tübingen. In February 1942 there were two broadcasts (and there may have been another four) in a first series on 'Masterpieces of English Literature'.<sup>10</sup> These were on Ruskin's *Sesame* and *Lilies* and Browning's 'Abt Vogler' both given by Herbert Read who stood in for Lord David Cecil and Edwin Muir respectively, both of whom were ill. Neither topic is one that would strike today's students – or teachers – as the most obvious way to introduce English literature to students; however, in India they were part of the syllabuses.

The following month Orwell organised the first of his science series. It was entitled 'Science and Politics' but was rather a series on the development of science – its birth, beginnings, experimental and applied characteristics, economic basis, 'Science in the USSR', and the future of science. The speakers Orwell managed to recruit were of the highest order: J.D. Bernal (two talks), James Needham, J.G. Crowther, Vere Gordon Childe, and A.C.G. Egerton. It is an indication of Orwell's fascination for science, something evident from at least his time at Eton, that science was the subject of the first full series he organised. He went on to organise four more science series and one on psychology. The titles of the series were not always strictly adhered to but their scope can be given a rough indication. Thus, 'Science and the People', May 1942, included such topics as malnutrition, soil erosion, plant and animal breeding, malaria, the house fly, and drinking water; in November 1942 a series, 'Science and the People' included talks on microfilms (by Ritchie Calder), plastics, and the dehydration of food; in July 1943 came another 'Science and the People' series with talks on sulphonamides and chemotherapy, penicillin (given by one of the team that discovered it), plasma, anaesthetics, insulin and synthetic vitamins; just before he left the BBC Orwell organised a series of talks on psychology including one on child psychology by the renowned scholar, Dr Susan Isaacs.

Calcutta and Bombay's syllabuses also gave Orwell the opportunity to arrange series of broadcasts on literature. There were seven such series in addition to the two programmes mentioned above: 'Literature Between the Wars', 'Landmarks of American Literature', 'Masterpieces of English Literature', 'Modern English Verse', 'Modern Men of Letters', and two series devoted to 'Great Dramatists'.

What is most remarkable about these programmes devoted to literature, as for those devoted to science, is the quality of the speakers Orwell managed to engage, some of them more than once. They formed a veritable roll-call of the great and famous and included, Stephen Spender ('Poetry of the Thirties'; *Howard's End*, and *An Enemy of the People*), Herbert Read (poetry of the 'new romantic movement', and *Nathaniel Hawthorne*), C.H. Waddington ('Science and Literature'), Cyril Connolly ('The Thirties'), Arthur Calder-Marshall ('Money and the Artist'), T.S. Eliot (Edgar Allan Poe, Dryden's *The Indian Emperor*, and *Ulysses*), Geoffrey Grigson (Herman Melville), V.S. Pritchett (Mark Twain and H.G. Wells), Rayner Heppenstall ('The Contemporary American Short Story'), E.M. Forster (*Julius Caesar*, and Lytton Strachey), Edmund Blunden (Thomas Hardy), David Nichol Smith (Hazlitt), George Sampson (Milton's Shorter Poems), L.A.G. Strong ('The Georgian Poets' and *Taming of the Shrew*), Lord David Cecil (T.S. Eliot), John Lehmann ('W.H. Auden and his Contemporaries'), Desmond Hawkins ('The Apocalypitics'), James Stephens (W.B. Yeats), Raymond Mortimer (*The Importance of Being Earnest*), W.J. Turner (*The Book of Job*, *Measure for Measure* and *R.U.R.*), André van Gyseghem (*The Cherry Orchard*), Ivor Brown (Robert Ardrey's *Thunder Rock*), and Harold Laski (to give a deliberately socialist twist to Galsworthy's important play, *Strife*. Orwell himself gave talks on Jack London, *Arms and the Man*, *Macbeth*, and *Lady Windermere's Fan*. Many of the names of Orwell's speakers are still, seventy years later, outstanding literary and scientific figures and it is noteworthy that several of the best spoke more than once for him.

Another important contribution Orwell made was his organisation of a series of discussions on dramatic presentation under the title, 'Let's Act It Ourselves'. These were led by the distinguished play producer, Norman Marshall, and involved Balraj Sahni and his wife, Damyanti. These bore remarkable fruit. When the Sahnis returned home they worked at first with the Indian People's Theatre touring widely and having nearly fifty new plays written for them. Damyanti, who had worked at Stratford with the Royal Shakespeare Company, died very young but her husband went on to become a famous actor and film director. When Orwell's wife, Eileen, died, Balraj wrote a touching letter to Orwell expressing their regrets but also gratitude for what he had done. Orwell also presented a series of six Indian plays, so reintroducing India's heritage to its homeland. These, given in abbreviated form, were: *Mālatī Mādhava*, *The Vision of Vasavadatta*, *The Post Office*, *The Jasmine Garland*, *The King of the Dark Chamber* and the Sanskrit, *Mrocchakatika* ('The Little Clay Cart'). When this last was presented in London forty years later it was advertised as 'a first' but it was Orwell who was first!

As if organising so many talks, with all the attendant booking arrangements and settlements of fees was not enough, Orwell also organised and edited the publication of three booklets associated with these broadcasts. On 18 November 1943 George Allen & Unwin published *Talking to India: A Selection of English Language Broadcasts to India*. The talks selected were split into two: General and Political. Among the talks and speakers were E.M. Forster ('Edward Gibbon' and 'Tolstoy's Birthday', both later being included in his *Two Cheers for Democracy* in 1951); Cedric Dover ('Paul Robeson', 'Freedom of Expression', and 'Nationalism and Beyond'); Hsiao Ch'ien ('China's Literary Revolution'); and Reginald Reynolds ('Prison Literature'). The political talks included Mulk Raj Anand ('Open Letter to a Chinese Guerrilla'); I. B. Sarin ('What

to do in an Air Raid’); R.R. Desai (‘Open Letter to a Nazi’). Orwell also reprinted five ‘Specimens of Propaganda’ (sections from his BBC Newsletters) and, perhaps surprisingly, a talk by Subhas Chandra Bose from Berlin in May 1942. (Bose was fiercely anti-British and worked for the Japanese and Germans.) The BBC, very punctiliously, paid a copyright fee of one guinea (twenty-one shillings) to the Custodian of Enemy Property for use of his work! It will be apparent that Orwell worked very hard, indeed, he overworked himself. He had little relief but did enjoy two weeks holiday at Callow End Worcestershire from 28 June to 11 July 1942, but without Eileen who could not leave her work at the Ministry of Food. His enjoyment was slightly marred by a dearth of fish – in the two weeks he caught eighteen dace, two eels and one perch – and the beer was in short supply.

Orwell also arranged with Oxford University Press (Bombay) for the publication of two of the *Calling All Students* series reproducing the talks broadcast in the series, ‘Literature Between the Wars’ and ‘Landmarks of American Literature’. The first of these was published on 29 October 1946 and the second either on that date or possibly eight days earlier. Only small numbers of pamphlets were printed: 2,500 of the first collection and 1,500 of the second. Sales of the first of these pamphlets were disappointing: 2,103 of the 2,500 were pulped in February 1949. No figures of sales for the second pamphlet have been traced but it was declared out of print on 12 December 1949.

These lengthy lists (and I have not included everything in which he was involved) can give only a fleeting impression of the enormous labour Orwell undertook at the BBC, chiefly with only a single secretary to help him. Some idea of the bureaucracy involved, from arm-twisting to booking recordings and supervising them can be gathered from the fact that most of Volumes XIII, XIV and XV of the *Complete Works* – over twelve-hundred pages – are devoted to his work at the BBC. Although Ian Angus and I travelled by train for many, many times from London to the BBC’s Written Archive Centre at Caversham searching the archive there is almost certainly material we didn’t find but of what we did it can surely be said that Orwell worked incredibly hard. But, what is Propaganda? What Culture? Was it Effective? Was it Worthwhile?

The first thing to suggest is that Orwell had a far more elevated idea of ‘propaganda’ than most of its practitioners. His news commentaries were as true as he could make them. As he pointed out, he was never required to say anything he didn’t believe. The late W.J. West gave an unfortunate impression that Orwell was hindered by censorship from saying what he wished to say. It is hardly surprising that in wartime what was broadcast was subject to its being checked by a censor. The dust-jacket of West’s Orwell: *The War Commentaries* (1985) shows Indian soldiers being led by a British Officer as they march out of camp in Egypt. Across this illustration – which has no direct link with Orwell – is printed in bold capitals CENSORED. Curiously West’s collection omits reference to 175 scripts Orwell wrote for translation into Indian languages and he fails to note a number of news commentaries that Orwell wrote in English. Further, the texts he reproduces are not ‘printed exactly as typed’ as West claims (p. 23) but replete with errors and omissions one such, for 12 September 1942, being of a whole page. West’s fixation with censorship should be set against the two occasions that Orwell refers to his texts being censored. Orwell asked Mulk Raj Anand to write a script in the series ‘The Story of Fascism’. This was on the Spanish Civil War. The censor did not pass it (Britain’s relationship with Spain was delicate at the time and the government was anxious that Spain should not actively join in the war on the side of the Nazis). Orwell thought it not worth rewriting – and then successfully negotiated a fee for Anand in the light of the work he had done.<sup>11</sup> The second instance involved a proposed talk to be written and given by Reg Reynolds (one of Orwell’s pacifist friends) on

Peter Kropotkin. One might wonder at Orwell's judgement in suggesting this topic! Orwell was quickly told (on 12 November 1943) that Kropotkin, as 'a notorious anarchist', should not be given air time. <sup>12</sup>

It is clear from Orwell's letter of resignation to Rushbrook Williams, Director of the Indian Services, 24 September 1943, that 'censorship' as West conceived it was not an issue for him. It is not even mentioned:

I am not leaving because of any disagreement with BBC policy and still less on account of any grievance. On the contrary I feel that throughout my association with the BBC I have been treated with the greatest generosity and allowed very great latitude. On no occasion have I been compelled to say on the air anything that I would not have said as a private individual. And I should like to take this opportunity of thanking you personally for the very understanding and generous attitude you have always shown towards my work. (CW, XV, p. 251)

Orwell had no inkling that he had been the subject of a fulsome annual report by the recipient of that letter some six weeks earlier. On 7 August 1943, Rushbrook Williams wrote a confidential annual report on Orwell recommending that he be awarded a £40 increase in his pay:

[Orwell/Blair] has a great facility in writing and a literary flair that makes his work distinguished . . . He supports uncomplainingly a considerable burden of poor health. This never affects his work, but occasionally strains his nerves. I have the highest opinion of his moral, as well as of his intellectual capacity. He is transparently honest, incapable of subterfuge, and, in early days, would have either been canonised – or burnt at the stake! Either fate he would have sustained with stoical courage. An unusual colleague – but a mind, and a spirit of real and distinguished worth. <sup>13</sup>

This is not, of course, to say that Orwell thought highly of the milieu of the BBC and the effectiveness of its work broadcasting to India. In his War-time Diary for 14 March 1942 he writes:

I have now been in the BBC about 6 months. Shall remain in it if the political changes I foresee come off, otherwise probably not. Its atmosphere is something halfway between a girls' school and a lunatic asylum and all we are doing at present is useless, or slightly worse than useless. Our radio strategy is even more hopeless than our military strategy. Nevertheless one rapidly becomes propaganda-minded and develops a cunning one did not previously have. <sup>14</sup>

In that Diary on 21 June he is even more brutal:

The thing that strikes one in the BBC – and it is evidently the same in various of the other departments – is not so much the moral squalor and the ultimate futility of what we are doing, as the feeling of frustration, the impossibility of getting anything done, even any successful piece of scoundrelism. Our policy is so ill-defined, the disorganisation so great, there are so many changes of plan, and the fear and hatred of intelligence are so all-pervading, that one cannot plan any sort of wireless campaign whatsoever. . . . One is constantly putting sheer rubbish on the air because of having talks which sounded too intelligent cancelled at the last moment. In addition the organisation is so overstaffed that numbers of people have almost literally nothing to do. <sup>15</sup>

One can tell from these entries how Orwell felt he was wasting his time. Laurence Brander's lengthy and detailed report on Indian Programmes of 11 January 1943, makes plain the shortcomings of the BBC's broadcasting policy towards India. It must have severely depressed Orwell. To that extent he had wasted his time and the low listening figures and poor take up of the pamphlets aimed at Indian university students showed only too plainly that Orwell's cultural impact in India was very limited. It is easy to doubt whether all the effort taken by Orwell and a few like him was worthwhile. But, I suggest, there were longer-term results – cultural results – that were immensely valuable. Balraj Sahni's letter and what he and his wife did on their return to India was one positive gain. Of more widespread influence, lasting until today, was indicated by another assessment made by Laurence Brander. In his study of Orwell, he wrote that Orwell 'was the inspiration of that rudimentary Third Programme which was sent out to the Indian student' <sup>16</sup> and that rudimentary service is still with us, somewhat bloated perhaps, as Radio Three.

Despite his criticisms of the BBC, Orwell did not cut his links with the Corporation after he had left its employ. He made an adaptation of *Animal Farm* for the new Third Programme; adapted *Little Red Riding Hood* for the Home Service Children's Hour programme; and wrote a dramatisation, *The Voyage of the 'Beagle'*, for the Home Service (another instance of Orwell's interest in science).

Perhaps of greater significance, and one easily missed, was his advocacy of spoken poetry on the BBC. Orwell brought to his work at the BBC a marked prejudice toward the kind of voices he associated with the Corporation. This animosity stems from well before his joining the Eastern Service. Writing about Dickens in 1940 he remarks that although Dickens 'is quite genuinely on the side of the poor against the rich . . . all his heroes have soft hands' and were of a type well-known in nineteenth-century English theatre as 'walking gentlemen'. Whereas a hero like Sam Weller can have a broad accent, 'the jeune premier always speaks like the equivalent of B.B.C.'. <sup>17</sup> In 'Boys' Weeklies' he remarks that the 'heroic characters all have to talk B.B.C.; they may talk Scottish or Irish or American, but no one in a star part is ever permitted to drop an aitch'. <sup>18</sup> Not only the BBC but the documentary film-makers of the time were castigated for the voices of their commentators. Thus, on 15 February 1941 he writes:

And, since films of this kind need a spoken commentary, why cannot the M[inistry] O[f] I[nformation] choose someone who speaks the English language as it is spoken in the street? Some day perhaps it will be realized that that dreadful B.B.C. voice, with its blurred vowels, antagonizes the whole English-speaking world except for a small area of southern England, and is more valuable to Hitler than a dozen new submarines. <sup>19</sup>

Orwell was not allowed to get away with this without comment. In *Time and Tide* on 1 March 1941, 'Southerner' asked whom Orwell would choose as an exponent of 'the King's English'. To be fair to the BBC, it did try to address this problem by having a North Region presenter, Wilfred Pickles, read the news in a fairly mild Yorkshire accent though less broad than when, after the war, presenting his popular comedy show, 'Have a Go'. However, after inevitable protests (and not just from southerners) the experiment was discontinued.

A couple of months later, though applauding the BBC for its veracity, he was still unhappy about the voices of its announcers: 'I believe the B.B.C., in spite of the stupidity of its foreign propaganda and the unbearable voices of its announcers, is very truthful'. <sup>20</sup> He would join the BBC four months after writing this. Approximately four months before leaving the BBC he wrote

an important essay, 'Poetry and the Microphone'. It was not published until March 1945 but its date of composition can be calculated from an internal reference to his 'Voice' broadcasts in which he presented readings of contemporary poetry. The essay is interesting for a number of reasons, one of which is that there are no references whatsoever to that 'dreadful BBC voice'. Orwell is here much more positive, suggesting what might be done to make broadcast poetry acceptable to a wider (and perhaps unsuspecting) audience. It is in this essay that he has one of his most charming assessments: 'Poetry on the air sounds like the Muses in striped trousers' but goes on, 'Nevertheless one ought not to confuse the capabilities of an instrument [i.e. broadcasting] with the use it is actually put to'.<sup>21</sup> One of his most important insights is the distinction between reading a poem over the radio waves and 'That grisly thing, a "poetry reading"'.<sup>22</sup> In a public reading, as for a lecture, there will always be some in the audience who are bored or even hostile. Reading a poem over the radio, however many people tune in, the speaker is addressing 'an audience of *one*'.<sup>23</sup> And Orwell wanted, wherever possible, for the author – the poet – to speak his own lines. Thus, 'The poet feels that he is addressing people to whom poetry means something, and it is a fact that poets who are used to broadcasting can read into the microphone with a virtuosity they would not equal if they had a visible audience in front of them'.<sup>24</sup> There is nothing here about the BBC voice that had so enraged him. He was writing from the experience of having poets read their own work in his six 'Voice' programmes. In practice it was not always possible to have poets read their own work. Thus, Herbert Read gave T.S. Eliot's 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' on 3 November 1942 in 'Voice, 4' and a BBC recording of Eliot reading his 'Journey of the Magi' on 29 December 1942 in 'Voice, 6'. Eliot is probably not everyone's ideal poetry reader although I have found the effect of his reading mesmeric. However, Orwell's purpose and practice can still, I think, teach us something about 'poetry and the microphone'. His time at the BBC was by no means wasted in this regard.

How would Orwell view the BBC today? I don't like guessing what Orwell would think today, or, as I was asked recently, how he would vote. It is dangerous – perhaps ridiculous? – to do even if one treads as delicately as King Agag – and probably as fatally. Despite much that seems to me worthy in its programming, it has become a more trivial purveyor of programmes and culture than once it was. On the other hand it is hard to disassociate that from what to me seems a decline in so much in our way of life – again, despite much that I admire and even love.

It is disappointing that news selection misses so much that is worthy of reporting and seems happy to repeat *ad nauseam*. The once much-vaunted balance seems to me to be no more. William Empson, the distinguished poet and scholar who was working in the BBC's Overseas Service at the same time as Orwell, called the induction course they both attended 'The Liars' School'. Having read the prospectus that strikes me as a serious exaggeration but today, too often it sounds as if many interviewers and presenters on BBC and ITV channels have attended an intensive 'School for Bullies'. The art of teasing out information is lost on those who would rather hammer their victims, especially if they disagree with their politics. Does one sense that the more prominent interviewers – the Naughties, Humphreyses, Snows, Paxmans and Webbs – feel that if they ran our benighted country all would be well? Alas, that would not pay them enough and would take too much of their time. Too often interviewers seem willing to impose their views, to answer the questions they themselves ask, and to try to trick those they interview – using, for example, the simple device of asking two or three questions simultaneously and inverting their order. The result can be unintentionally comic. Thus Sarah Montague on 24 May 2010 offered a variation of this technique when interviewing a man on the wholly unpolitical matter of songs used to teach historical facts. 'What was the starting point for all this? It was a

survey wasn't it?' she fired at her interviewee answering her own question without giving him a chance to respond. There are exceptions. For example, I admire Riz Lateef for that talent in teasing out answers from reluctant politicians and for a certain graciousness that too many of our self-important, self-opinionated pontificators lack.

I owe much to Orwell's 'wasted years'. As Laurence Brander said, Orwell 'was the inspiration of that rudimentary Third Programme which was sent out to the Indian student'. Rudimentary perhaps but it was hearing Nevill Coghill's version of *The Canterbury Tales* on the Third Programme that inspired me and led directly to my becoming an academic. I hope in editing his work I have made some small return to him for what he inspired in the BBC – and in me.

## Footnotes

1. The original Room 101 was not in Broadcasting House as the BBC maintains but in 55 Portland Place. It was where the Eastern Service held Committee meetings some of which Orwell attended, until the Indian Services office moved to 200 Oxford Street. The point so far as Orwell was concerned was not death by impalement or drowning or the other deathly delights he mentions but attendance at meetings which, though beloved by bureaucrats, to Orwell and anyone else engaged in creative pursuits was a fate worse than death. For evidence and further details see *A Life in Letters*, p. 197.
2. 'I have left the BBC after two wasted years' – letter to Philip Rahv, CW, XVI, 2390, 9 December 1943.
3. The song opens the film, *Follow the Fleet*, 1936, starring Fred Astaire. Ironically I was able to refresh my memory by clicking on YouTube and so see and hear Astaire sing the song.
4. The evacuation from Dunkirk was set in train by Vice-Admiral Ramsay on 27 May. He was operating from the Dynamo Room which housed electrical plant from World War 1, deep down within the cliffs of Dover, hence the name given to the evacuation: 'Operation Dynamo'.
5. Reproduced in *Orwell: The Complete Works*, volume XII, pp. 294-9; and see pp. 282-4 for the draft introduction. Hereafter referred to as CW + the volume and page numbers.
6. For the texts, see CW, XII, pp. 483-6, 491-5, 496-9, and 501-6.
7. For Orwell's lines, see CW, XII, p. 544.
8. Details of the course can be found in CW, XIII, pp. 5-9; the passages quoted are from p. 8.
9. CW, XIII, p. 11.
10. All the programmes mentioned here can be found in the *Complete Works*, Vols XIII, XIV and XV, Secker & Warburg, 1998. The series titles vary a little and these variations are not noted here.
11. CW, XIV, pp. 228-9.
12. CW, XV, pp. 302 and 306.
13. Reproduced by kind permission of the BBC Written Archive, Caversham. I first read this at the depths of the MPs' expenses scandal. Nothing could have provided a greater contrast.
14. *Diaries*, p. 322.
15. *Diaries*, p. 348. One might comment: how little has changed in the BBC and Government Departments, as I learn from personal experience: some people driven ill with overwork; many barely active.
16. Laurence Brander, *George Orwell*, 1954, pp. 8-9.
17. CW, XII, pp. 37-8.
18. CW, XII, p. 73/
19. *Complete Works*, XII, p. 390.
20. 'London Letter' dated 15 April 1941; *Partisan Review*, July-August 1941; CW, XII, 472.
21. 'Poetry and the Microphone', *Complete Works*, XVII, pp. 74-80. This quotation, p. 79.
22. XVII, p. 77.

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- 23. CW, p. 76.
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