

**“ON AN EQUAL FOOTING WITH MEN?”  
WOMEN AND WORK AT THE BBC, 1923-1939**

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## **Declaration of Authorship**

I, Catherine Murphy, hereby declare that all the material contained in this thesis is my own work.

## Abstract

This thesis is a study of women's employment in the BBC during the 1920s and 1930s and poses the questions – what was the BBC like as a place for women to work, and how equal were they? While there has been wide research into a variety of aspects of the BBC during the inter-war years, to date there has been only cursory consideration of the role of women in the Company/Corporation. The BBC is a particularly significant organisation to study because women worked at all levels, apart from the very top; as charwomen and kitchen hands; as secretaries and clerical staff; as drama producers, advertising representatives and Children's Hour Organisers. Prior to the Second World War, three women, Hilda Matheson, Mary Somerville and Isa Benzie, attained Director status. The BBC viewed itself as a progressive employer, one that supported equal promotion prospects and equal pay. However, understated sexual discrimination was commonplace and in 1932, a Marriage Bar was introduced. The practice of marriage bars was widespread in the inter-war years yet the BBC was never fully committed to its bar and 'exceptional' married women and women judged to be useful to the Corporation continued to be employed and retained. This study considers the many different experiences of women and work at the BBC: married and single, waged and the salaried, young and old; graduate and non-graduate. As well as positioning itself within the historiography of the BBC, this thesis is the first to offer a detailed analysis of women's employment in a large inter-war institution, one in which women's experience of work was largely positive. It thus broadens both our understanding of the BBC and also offers new insights into women's working lives in the 1920s and 1930s.

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## Glossary

AWKS – Association of Women Clerks and Secretaries

CCSB – Central Council for School Broadcasting

DG – Director General

EEO – Engineering Establishment Officer

GO – General Office

GPO – General Post Office

LTS – London Telephone Exchange

NFWI – National Federation of Women’s Institutes

NUCAW - National Union of Clerks and Administrative Workers

NUSEC – National Union of Societies for Equal Citizenship

PBX – Private Branch Exchange

WAC – Written Archives Centre

WEF – Women’s Employment Federation

WSA – Women’s Staff Administrator (Initially, this BBC position was designated Women’s Staff Supervisor, but I have chosen to use WSA throughout, to avoid confusion)

# Introduction

This thesis is the outcome of a fascination with women who worked in the BBC stretching back more than twenty years. In 1990, The Women's Press/Livewire published *Firsts: British Women Achievers*, a book I'd written for teenagers. The book was a labour of love for me, written in snatched moments away from my day-job as a BBC researcher and during my first pregnancy. In *Firsts* I introduced readers to Hilda Matheson, the first woman Head of Department at the BBC in 1926 and Mary Somerville, the first woman radio producer in 1925 - two women who have come to dominate my PhD research. On both counts it turns out I was wrong: Hilda Matheson's five year tenure as Director of Talks commenced in 1927 while Mary Somerville was preceded by two doughty female programme makers, Ella Fitzgerald and Elise Sprott. So little was then known about BBC women that these were easy mistakes to make.

In 1993, I joined *Woman's Hour* as a producer, where I was able to indulge my passion for women's history overseeing features, interviews and discussions about every conceivable aspect of women's past lives. Imagine my pleasure when, in 2000, I was handed a letter from Michael Carney, informing the programme that he had written a biography of Hilda Matheson, the perfect excuse for a biographical feature about her. Carney's book included snippets from love letters that Matheson had written to Vita Sackville-West, with whom she'd had a love affair during her time at the BBC. I became entranced by Matheson, so clear and concise at work, yet so crazily and candidly in love. The opportunity to learn more about Matheson came in 2002. I had been successful in gaining a place on the Women's Development Initiative, a BBC scheme designed to get more women into management posts. It was an intensive 18-month course that culminated in a personal project; my idea was to learn more about the history of women in the BBC. Ultimately I was given a three-month attachment to research and write a report, *The Secret History of Women in the BBC*.

The report covered the whole time span of the BBC from its foundation in 1922 to the present day. However, it was the early years that most captivated me. As I

scoured the files at the Written Archive Centre (WAC) at Caversham, I was struck by the extraordinary presence of women in the BBC of the 1920s and 1930s and their obvious significance. Not only were Matheson, Somerville, and a third woman Isa Benzie, department heads, but women also ran libraries, sold advertising space, auditioned variety stars and produced science programmes. Women were the backbone of the organisation, answering telephones, typing news bulletins, cataloguing gramophone records and scheduling diaries; without women buildings wouldn't have been cleaned nor meals served. Women were everywhere: at the staff dance, on the netball court and in the restaurant queue; their shingled hair, smart clothes and lipstick smiles adorned many a page of the staff magazine *Ariel*.

My curiosity was most aroused by the files on the BBC's policy towards married women which revealed the Corporation's introduction of a marriage bar in 1932.<sup>1</sup> Marriage bars were an inter-war convention but it was unusual to find such detailed documentation about the practice. The BBC bar wasn't a full bar, BBC management were keen to retain the services of exceptional women while compassionate circumstances were also taken into consideration. This pragmatic and paternalistic approach to married women staff was evident in the documentation of the BBC Marriage Tribunal where female staff who intended to marry could present a case for retention.<sup>2</sup> It wasn't only management attitudes that were revealed in these memos and minutes; here, exposed was women's passion for their work, their efficiency and loyalty and their determination that they could both run a career and a home.

The BBC women I encountered at the WAC captured my imagination and planted the seed for this thesis. I wanted to know more about their inter-war lives: who they were, why they chose to come to the BBC and why they loved their jobs. This thesis goes further though and places the employment of women in the BBC into the context of the times. It poses many questions – why did the BBC employ so many women? How similar was women's experience of work at the BBC to that of women in other professions and office-based organisations of the 1920s

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<sup>1</sup> R49/371/1-3: Staff Policy: Married Women Policy, 1928–1945

<sup>2</sup> R49/372: Staff Policy: Married Women Policy: Tribunals, 1934–1937

and 1930s? How far did the BBC's position as a metropolitan, post-First World War, post-suffrage industry influence its attitudes towards women and employment? How equal was men and women's work?

It is surprising that not more is known today about the BBC's first women employees, especially when their presence at Broadcasting House was well documented in the contemporary press. Take, for example, the opening paragraph of a July 1934 article headlined, '9am at Broadcasting House':

The morning sun shines up Regent Street on the gleaming white façade of Broadcasting House.... The BBC clock points to the hour of nine... A stream of smiling young women glides through the great bronze doors. Here they come...the secretaries, girl typists, girl bookkeepers, the waitresses... the telephonists.<sup>3</sup>

Or this, from March 1933, with the caption, 'Women in Wireless':

Few spheres offer more varied scope for women than broadcasting. Amid the hive of industry that is known through the length and breadth of the land as Broadcasting House, women play a far larger and more important part than is generally known. Quite a number of them are university trained, many of them hold university degrees, and all are devoting a tireless energy to the task of assisting to make the wheels of broadcasting go smoothly.<sup>4</sup>

These *Evening News* and *Daily Despatch* articles touch on several of the issues this thesis will explore: the diversity of women who came to work at the BBC both as waged and salaried workers; the scope and range of jobs available to women at the BBC and the excitement and vitality of employment within a pioneering new industry. They also hint at the progressive nature of the Corporation, a trait that would distinguish it from many workplaces in the inter-war years. Both articles are from the 1930s and there is undoubtedly far more documentation for this period than for the first decade when the BBC was based at Magnate House and Savoy Hill. The nine years (1923-1932) spent first in two rooms as guests of the General Electric Company in Kingsway, and then of the Institution of Electrical Engineers in ramshackle offices on the Thames next to the

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<sup>3</sup> *Evening News*, July 27<sup>th</sup> 1934

<sup>4</sup> *Daily Despatch*, March 2<sup>nd</sup> 1933

Savoy Hotel, was the period that saw the greatest advances for BBC women. This was the era when, for example, the notion of equality of opportunity was promulgated (1926), when women first achieved 'Director' status (1927) and when paid maternity leave was introduced (1928).

Women's employment at the BBC does not lack archival resources, the BBC Written Archives Centre houses hundreds of policy documents relating to female staff during the 1920s and 1930s. However, women rarely feature in the major histories of the BBC.<sup>5</sup> Asa Briggs, the Corporation's official biographer, devoted two volumes of his *History of Broadcasting in the UK* to the inter-war years.<sup>6</sup> While Briggs' acknowledged the importance of Hilda Matheson and Mary Somerville, the "key part" other women played in the daily running of the organisation is dismissed in a single paragraph.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, Paddy Scannell and David Cardiff's expansive social history of the inter-war BBC, while effusive about Matheson and the Manchester-based documentary maker Olive Shapley, makes scant reference to other women who worked at the BBC during this time.<sup>8</sup>

Neither do BBC women feature in the burgeoning historiography of women's employment in Britain in the inter-war years.<sup>9</sup> Most of the studies of women's work during this period concentrate on the difficulties women faced in the workplace for example segregation, lower pay and limited chances for

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<sup>5</sup> As Jeff Hearn points out, most books and treatises on the UK's leading institutions are about men, even though they are not specified as such, Men in the Public Eye: The Construction and Deconstruction of Public Men and Public Patriarchies (London: Routledge, 1992) pp.27-28. This point was also made by Michael Roper and John Tosh, eds., Manful Assertions: Masculinities in Britain since 1800 (London: Routledge, 1991) p.3

<sup>6</sup> Asa Briggs, The Birth of Broadcasting, The History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom vol. 1 (London: Oxford University Press, 1961); Asa Briggs, The Golden Age of Broadcasting, The History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom, vol. 2 (London Oxford University Press, 1965)

<sup>7</sup> Briggs, The Golden Age of Broadcasting pp.457-458

<sup>8</sup> Paddy Scannell and David Cardiff, A Social History of British Broadcasting, 1922-1939 (London: Basil Blackwood, 1991). Studies have been made of women's contribution to early broadcasting in other countries, see for example Michele Hilmes, Radio Voices: American Broadcasting, 1922-1952 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997); Kate Lacey, Feminine Frequencies: Gender, German Radio, and the Public Sphere, 1923-1945 (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1996); Lesley Johnson, The Unseen Voice: A Cultural Study of Early Australian Radio (London: Routledge, 1988)

<sup>9</sup> Helen Jones and Juliet Gardiner mention the BBC briefly. Helen Jones, Women in British Public Life 1914-50 (Harlow: Pearson Education Limited, 2000) p.52; Juliet Gardiner, The Thirties: An Intimate History (London: Harper Press, 2010) pp.553-554

promotion.<sup>10</sup> While these practices were certainly discernible at the BBC in the 1920s and 1930s, the ethos was broadly one of fairness, hence women's experience of work was different. By throwing the spotlight on a new industry, the BBC, our understanding of women's work at this time thus becomes more nuanced.

To understand women's role in the BBC in the 1920s and 1930s, we need to appreciate the general history of the Company/Corporation and throughout this thesis reference will be made to the wider BBC context.<sup>11</sup> Chapter One focuses on the structure and hierarchy of the British Broadcasting Company which was established in December 1922 to promote and co-ordinate radio output in the UK, financed by a licence fee.<sup>12</sup> On January 1<sup>st</sup> 1927, the BBC was reconstituted as the British Broadcasting Corporation, its remit to public service broadcasting enshrined by royal charter.<sup>13</sup> The BBC grew exponentially during the inter-war years, from four employees in December 1922 to 4,200 at the outbreak of the Second World War. John Reith, first as General Manager, then as Managing Director and finally as Director General, was to be pivotal to the character and direction of the organisation throughout this time. Under Sir John's leadership (he was knighted in 1927) the BBC underwent many changes of management, evolving from a haphazard and experimental new company to a highly centralised and professional institution. Reith's role within the BBC, and in particular his attitude towards women, peppers this thesis and is explored, in particular, in Chapter One. He looked to employ staff, whether male or female, who were loyal, hard-working and dedicated to the ethos of public service which he instituted.<sup>14</sup> However, as we will discover, the rapid change from pioneering

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<sup>10</sup> See for example Jane Lewis, Women in England 1870-1950: Sexual Divisions and Social Change (Brighton: Wheatsheaf Books, 1984); Miriam Glucksmann, Women Assemble: Women Workers and the New Industries in Inter-War Britain (London: Routledge, 1990); Gregory Anderson, ed., The White Blouse Revolution: Female Office Workers since 1870 (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988)

<sup>11</sup> Unlike the USA, where women were known to have dabbled in wireless as amateurs, there is little evidence of British women participating in the pre-BBC development of radio. For a discussion of American women's role see Hilmes, *op.cit.*, pp.132-136

<sup>12</sup> For a detailed history of the foundation of the BBC see Briggs, The Birth of Broadcasting pp.94-142

<sup>13</sup> For staff, the change from Company to Corporation was largely symbolic. There was so little discernible difference that BBC announcers had to be reminded not to refer to the Company inadvertently on air. Briggs, Golden Age of Broadcasting *op.cit.*, p.3

<sup>14</sup> John Reith, Broadcast over Britain (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1924) pp.17-39

company to established bureaucracy created a confusion of identity for the BBC that both prided itself on being modern yet wanted the trappings of convention and respectability.<sup>15</sup>

The British Broadcasting Company was established at a time of great optimism in Britain. Despite the post-war slump and economic downturn, there was hope that new organisations such as the League of Nations, new politics such as socialism and new technologies such as electricity would help create a better world. The Company quickly established itself as a British institution, operating at both a regional and national level. Within months the BBC was offering a wide range of programmes: music, drama, news, sports, comedy, talks, children's, and within two years more than one million licences had been sold.<sup>16</sup> By 1927 this figure had risen to more than two million and at the outbreak of the Second World War, licence holders were in excess of nine million, indicating that out of a population of 44 million, most had access to the BBC.<sup>17</sup> During the inter-war years the BBC became the social and cultural conduit for the nation, bringing programmes as diverse as political debates, dance band concerts and poetry readings into the home. For the first time, the majority of British citizens could be party to major events such as the FA Cup Final, the Lord Mayor's Banquet and the King's Christmas Message, the immediacy of radio ensuring the scoring of goals, the Prime Minister's address and royal words of comfort were moments that were shared. As well as national output produced centrally by Head Office in London, the BBC also operated a raft of provincial/ regional stations which ensured an element of localism to its programmes.<sup>18</sup> By 1935, 85% of the population had a choice of two programmes, one National and one Regional.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Memoranda refer to the BBC being 'modern' for example R49/371/1: Staff Policy: Married Women Policy File: File 1 1928-1935, Goldsmith to Carpendale, August 26th 1932

<sup>16</sup> Year ending December 31st 1924, 1,129,578 licences had been issued. Mark Pegg, Broadcasting and Society 1918-1939 (London: Croom Helm, 1983) p.7. Reith estimated the average number of listeners per licence was five: "though for any special occasion an infinitely greater number can gather". Reith, op.cit., p.80

<sup>17</sup> Exact figures for licence holders were 2,178,259 for January 1<sup>st</sup> 1927, when the Corporation came into being; in September 1939, the figure was 9,082,666. Briggs, The Golden Age of Broadcasting pp.253-254. Briggs estimated that by 1935, BBC coverage reached 98% of the population.

<sup>18</sup> The BBC was originally run provincially, with London Station the most important of the nine initial stations. The others were Manchester, Birmingham, Glasgow, Newcastle, Cardiff, Belfast, Aberdeen and Bournemouth. The Regional Scheme, which began its slow introduction from July



This thesis, though, is not about BBC programmes, it is about the organisation behind the programmes. The Company was founded four years after women had gained the vote and three years after the Sex (Disqualification) Removal Act opened the professions to women.<sup>20</sup> Thus by 1931, small but growing numbers of female chartered accountants, lawyers and dentists had joined an estimated 180,000 women teachers, 120,000 nurses, 70,000 civil women servants and 1,200 women doctors in the established professions.<sup>21</sup> It was thus a time of great optimism and opportunity for educated women, and the BBC tapped into this new resource. Reith's first appointment in January 1923 was his personal secretary, Isabel Shields. A graduate of Girton, she joined the company's tiny London staff who, for the first few months, worked from Magnate House prior to its move to the more suitable surroundings of Savoy Hill.<sup>22</sup> In early 1932, when the Corporation decamped to the gleaming, modernistic environs of Broadcasting House, women made up around 400 of the 1,300 established employees.<sup>23</sup> At the outbreak of the Second World War, 1,362 women were employed by the Corporation, almost a third of the total staff of 4,233.<sup>24</sup>

It is no coincidence that the majority of the BBC's staff were London-based.<sup>25</sup> After the First World War, the metropolis became the centre of Britain's

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1927, divided the country into seven regions: London Regional, Midlands, West, North, Wales, Northern Ireland, and Scotland.

<sup>19</sup> Briggs, op.cit., p.253. The development of simultaneous broadcasting from 1924 meant that provincial/regional programmes could also be transmitted nationally.

<sup>20</sup> In 1918 the vote had been extended to include women over 30 who fulfilled a property-owning qualification. Women were fully enfranchised in 1928. The Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act, 1919 had major flaws especially in regard to married women's employment, as will be discussed in Chapter Three. The Civil Service, the Armed Forces, the Church, the Stock Exchange were all exempt from the Act.

<sup>21</sup> Figure from, Ray Strachey, Careers and Openings for Women: A Survey of Women's Employment and a Guide for Those Seeking Work (London: Faber and Faber, 1935) p.85; Deirdre Beddoe, Back to Home and Duty: Women between the Wars 1918 - 1939 (London: Pandora, 1989) p.82

<sup>22</sup> Technically Isabel Shields was not a graduate. Cambridge didn't award full degrees to women until 1948.

<sup>23</sup> R49/697:Staff Policy Staff: Statistics Tables, 1922-1943

<sup>24</sup> The 1939 figures come from the Establishment Chart for July 1<sup>st</sup> 1939, R/49/178/16: Staff Policy: Establishment. The 1932 figures have been approximated from my breakdown of staffing for 1934, using the first available Staff List. The numbers include those in the Regional offices where the BBC also employed large groups of technical, administrative and creative people.

<sup>25</sup> 3,040 at Head Office compared to 1,193 in the Regions.

economic growth and home to countless new industries.<sup>26</sup> Young women workers were the chief beneficiaries of the move towards mass-market consumerism in the inter-war years; they worked on the assembly lines of factories that produced radios, electric irons and pre-packaged cakes; they were shop girls in the grand Oxford Street department stores; they typed, filed and did the bookkeeping in a myriad of small offices that sprung up to service the new businesses.<sup>27</sup> In the 1920s and 1930s, the office girl with bobbed or shingled hair, earning perhaps £2 a week, dressed in fashionable clothes with her lipstick-defined mouth, became one of the symbols of modernity.<sup>28</sup> Middle-class young women also now expected to join their working class sisters in the labour force, looking for work that was appropriate and respectable. Chapter One considers the attraction of the BBC to women employees, many of whom had come to London to attend a secretarial training college; living in hostels or shared flats, travelling to work by bus or tube enjoying their leisure time at dances, the cinema and in London's café society.

Britain was excessively class conscious in the inter-war years and the BBC encapsulated the attitudes and aspirations that prevailed.<sup>29</sup> Working-class women and men worked as cleaners, kitchen hands and house staff. All other waged positions required a good level of training and/or experience and there was an expectation that the BBC's office-based employees would be educated at least to School Certificate level.<sup>30</sup> In consequence, those from upper-working class/lower-middle class backgrounds predominated in weekly-paid clerical, secretarial and technical roles. While those from highly educated and wealthy backgrounds dominated the salaried staff, the rapid growth of the organisation

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<sup>26</sup> See Sally Alexander, "A New Civilisation? London Surveyed 1928-1940s," History Workshop Journal 64 (2007) pp.297-316

<sup>27</sup> See Selina Todd, Young Women, Work and the Family in England 1918-1950 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) pp.1-2, 6-7; Glucksmann, op.cit., pp.1-5

<sup>28</sup> Mary Agnes Hamilton, pp. 253-157 in, Ray Strachey, ed., Our Freedom and its Results by Five Women (London: Hogarth Press, 1936). Young working women as a symbol of modernity is also discussed in Adrian Bingham, Gender, Modernity, and the Popular Press in Inter-War Britain (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004) pp.64-65; Hackney, Fiona, "They Opened Up a Whole New World": Feminism, Modernity and the Feminine Imagination in Women's Magazines, 1919-1930 (PhD., London, 2011) pp, 180, 197-198

<sup>29</sup> For a comprehensive analysis of social class at this time see Ross McKibbin, Classes and Cultures: England 1918-1951 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998)

<sup>30</sup> The School Certificate was taken at 16, and involved staying on for two years beyond the leaving age of 14. Unless a scholarship had been gained, this would have involved fees.

meant that there were real prospects for progression from the lower grades, as this thesis will show. This was important, because it was in the salaried grades that the BBC's ethos of equality was most apparent.

In 1931, Hilda Matheson, the BBC's Director of Talks, suggested that the open-mindedness of the Corporation was due to the BBC being "a post-war institution with a largely post-war staff."<sup>31</sup> This forward-looking philosophy was in line with other post-war developments in Britain such as the increased advocacy of democracy and social welfare. One of the themes that will emerge throughout this thesis is the visible difference between the BBC and the older, established professions to which many women were drawn in the inter-war years. As a pioneering organisation that, in effect, created a new profession, the BBC displayed little of the entrenched and embittered attitudes towards professional women that Alison Oram, Meta Zimmeck, Helen Glew and Kaarin Michaelsen discerned in their studies of women teachers, Civil Servants and doctors.<sup>32</sup>

The BBC was undeniably male-dominated but for the salaried, it had a stated commitment to equality of opportunity. For example, in a memorandum from April 1926, Reith laid out his views on the employment of female salaried staff, emphasising their equal standing and responsibilities. "The class of women we are now employing", he made clear, "...is such that they should rank on the same footing as men."<sup>33</sup> The BBC's enlightened approach was underlined in 1928 when the employment of married women working with equal status was confirmed.<sup>34</sup> From the start, the BBC operated a non-gendered grading system for salaried staff who, in principle, were offered equal pay and equal promotional opportunities: practices which would have been music to the ears of women teachers and civil servants campaigning for parity with men. The BBC's ethos of

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<sup>31</sup> The Women's Leader and Common Cause, January 2nd 1931, 'Women and Broadcasting'

<sup>32</sup> Alison Oram, Women Teachers and Feminist Politics 1900 - 1939 (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996); Helen Glew, "Women's Employment in the General Post Office, 1914-1939," (PhD., London, 2009); Meta Zimmeck, "Strategies and Stratagems for the Employment of Women in the British Civil Service 1919-1939," Historical Journal 27.4 (1984); Kaarin Michaelsen, "Union Is Strength': The Medical Women's Federation and Politics of Professionalism, 1917-30," Women and Work Culture: Britain C1850-1950, eds. Krista Cowman, and Louise A. Jackson (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005)

<sup>33</sup> R49/940: Staff Policy: Women Assistants 1926, Reith to All Station Directors, April 30<sup>th</sup> 1926

<sup>34</sup> R49/371/1: Staff Policy: Married Women Policy: File 1, 1928-1935, Goldsmith to Reith, November 27<sup>th</sup> 1928

equality appears to have existed at a handful of other forward-looking organisations in the inter-war years, such as the John Lewis Partnership and the London School of Economics.<sup>35</sup> However, as will be revealed, in reality most BBC women did not fare as well as their male counterparts.

The practicalities of female employment at the BBC is addressed in Chapters Two and Four where consideration is given first to the waged and secondly, to the salaried women staff. In January 1935 the *Brighton Herald's* regular series "Careers for Women" included a feature on how to obtain work at the BBC:

...The means to join the staff are as various as are the people employed. Entrance is not ensured by the possession of a university degree, nor by becoming a member of any particular training centre... Whatever work you feel called upon to do for this completely fascinating institution, you must have attained an exceptionally high standard before a committee will consider your application. Nor without personality, will you impress that committee favourably...<sup>36</sup>

The unknown reporter touched on the ambiguous nature of the Corporation's recruitment practices; there were no set entry requirements. Ambiguity is also apparent in the BBC's system of promotion and pay which was often dependent upon the whim of management, as will be explored. The BBC operated two distinct grading systems for pay and promotion, one for waged staff, another for salaried staff and there were also attitudinal differences towards the lower paid clerical, secretarial and house staff and the 'officer' staff, whose higher status entitled them to improved conditions of service.<sup>37</sup> For those who were waged, a clear distinction was made between men and women's work, for example in engineering and secretarial posts. This sexual division of labour was manifest in the role of the Women's Staff Administrator (WSA) who oversaw the BBC's ever-expanding female clerical and secretarial staff, the numbers of which increased to more than 700 by 1939. The WSA was a well-paid, powerful

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<sup>35</sup> Judy Faraday, "A Kind of Superior Hobby: Women Managers in the John Lewis Partnership 1918-1950". (M.Phil., University of Wolverhampton, 2009); Ralf Dahrendorf, *A History of the London School of Economics and Political Science, 1895-1995*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995) pp.113-114, 235-237

<sup>36</sup> *Brighton Herald*, January 19<sup>th</sup> 1935. Careers for Women: No 17: "In the BBC – Ministry of All Talents"

<sup>37</sup> The term "officer class" was used to describe monthly-paid employees. R49/31/1:Staff Policy Appointments Procedure 1925–39, Report on Recruitment of Staff, 8th February 1934

position in the BBC that had parallels in other organisations in the 1920s and 1930s, and is investigated more fully in Chapter Two. Many salaried women were also clustered in areas that were viewed as appropriate to their innate natures, such as women's talks, School Broadcasting and *Children's Hour*. Gender stereotyping and job segregation were endemic in industry between the wars, however Chapters Two and Four will argue that at the BBC, the demarcations were less clear-cut.<sup>38</sup>

As a post-war industry, the BBC was certainly forward-looking. However, its commitment to equality was far from uniform and while the rhetoric may have been that of fairness, sexual discrimination was widespread, as will become clear. For example, the muddled nature of the BBC marriage bar, implemented from 1932, exposes the incongruity of a restrictive practice in a progressive institution. Chapter Three examines the implications of a policy that attempted to differentiate between those women the Corporation wanted to retain and those it was happy to lose, for example no salaried women were ever required to resign. The records of the BBC's Marriage Tribunal, with its complicated criteria for retention, reveal both entrenched and contradictory views about the nature of women's domestic responsibilities and the value of women's work. The BBC Marriage Bar wasn't formally rescinded until 1944, even though it was identified as "the only subject on which there is a justifiable feeling of discontent among the women staff".<sup>39</sup> The fact that only thirteen women were forced to resign during the application of the bar is evidence of the Corporation's ambivalence towards this ill-construed policy.

Chapter Five appraises the careers of three women who held Director level positions at the BBC in the inter-war years. Hilda Matheson, Mary Somerville

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<sup>38</sup> For discussions on sex-typing and segregation in office work see Sylvia Walby, *Patriarchy at Work: Patriarchal and Capitalist Relations in Employment* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1986) pp.153-155; Lewis, *Women in England 1870-1950* op.cit., p. 162; Jane Lewis, "Women Clerical Workers in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries," *The White Blouse Revolution*, ed. Gregory Anderson (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988) pp. 38-39; Harriet Bradley, *Men's Work, Women's Work: A Sociological History of the Sexual Division of Labour in Employment* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989) p.223; Catherine Hakim, *Key Issues in Women's Work: Female Heterogeneity and the Polarisation of Women's Employment* (London: Athlone, 1996) p.76

<sup>39</sup> Married Women Policy File 2, Freeman to Pym, March 9<sup>th</sup> 1937

and Isa Benzie became respectively Director of Talks, Director of School Broadcasting and Foreign Director. Their BBC lives differed greatly and highlight divergent ways in which a woman could reach a senior post. Matheson, a mature woman in her late thirties, was head-hunted by Reith, leaving her job as Political Secretary to Nancy Astor to take up the helm of Talks in 1927, the most controversial area of broadcasting. She considerably broadened both their scope and presentation introducing challenging topics delivered by eminent women and men. Her resignation in 1932 was symptomatic of the battle between low-brow/high-brow broadcasting that was then raging at the BBC. Mary Somerville impressed Reith while she was still a student and joined the BBC's fledgling School Broadcasting department fresh from Oxford in 1925. Her passion and vision for education transformed broadcasts to schools and she became Director of School Broadcasting in 1931. By now a married woman and a mother, Somerville continued to develop the service well into the 1940s. Isa Benzie is a prime example of an able woman rising through the ranks. She took a secretarial course after Oxford and joined the BBC as a weekly-paid secretary in the Foreign Department in 1927. Her astuteness, linguistic prowess and grasp of policy saw her rise to be an Assistant in the department and when her boss retired in 1933, she took over his position as Foreign Director. Benzie retired on marriage in 1938.

All three women are indicative of those who came to the BBC and forged careers in unique areas of work. The Company/Corporation created a plethora of jobs that existed nowhere else, as Hilda Matheson stressed in her 1933 book *Broadcasting*, the BBC created many “new professions.”<sup>40</sup> Whether it was the producer Mary Hope Allen’s innovative – and shocking - radio feature, ‘The Plague Year’ or Mary Candler’s pioneering work in radio copyright, in the early years women grabbed opportunities for development and advancement.<sup>41</sup> However, the professionalisation of the BBC was ultimately to work against

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<sup>40</sup> Hilda Matheson, *Broadcasting* (London: Thornton Butterworth Ltd, 1933) pp. 45-48

<sup>41</sup> Maurice Gorham, Art Editor of the *Radio Times*, wrote of how Mary Hope Allen’s programme about the Plague had undoubtedly startled the public. Maurice Gorham, *Sound and Fury* (London: Percival Marshall, 1948) p.35. Mary Candler was credited with much of the initial work on how copyright laws applied to radio. L1/799/1: Mary Candler Staff File, Confidential Reports 1929-1939

women.<sup>42</sup> As Chapter Five will show, from the mid 1930s, no woman was promoted or recruited to a Director level post. One of the reasons was the ease with which the BBC could now attract eminent men as employees, for example Sir Stephen Tallents joined the Corporation in 1935, while the internal ranks were brimful of ambitious, young male graduates jostling to get on.<sup>43</sup>

Women and men were enticed to the BBC by the opportunities and possibilities it offered, but also by a sense of public service; that one could be involved in an area of work that might change people's lives for the better. As early as 1924, Reith had made public his belief that broadcasting could create an informed democracy, enabling men and women to take an interest in an array of issues from which they had previously been excluded.<sup>44</sup> This notion of the benefits to society of adult education and self improvement was characteristic of the inter-war years, made possible in part by improved post-war working conditions that created more opportunities for leisure.<sup>45</sup> To work at the BBC was to be part of an organisation committed to bringing both enlightenment and entertainment into the home.

The BBC also offered good prospects and good conditions of service for all staff, whether a copy-typist or a section head. Reith was both paternalistic and committed to staff welfare and from early on the BBC introduced paid holidays, a pension scheme and, at Broadcasting House, a subsidised restaurant and on-site medical services. Reith also founded the BBC Club in 1925 which offered an array of social activities. Reith was fundamental to the structure and hierarchy of the BBC and through his Board of Control, which he established in 1924, created a framework for centralised management. As the BBC grew, it became increasingly bureaucratic and, with the majority of women in support roles, this thesis considers how this affected working practices across the Corporation.

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<sup>42</sup> In his 1938 work on Britain's public corporations, which included the BBC, the academic Lincoln Gordon was clear that broadcasting "could claim the title 'profession'". Lincoln Gordon, The Public Corporation in Great Britain (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1938) p. 196

<sup>43</sup> Sir Stephen Tallents was enticed to the BBC as Controller, Public Relations in 1935. Previously he had developed this role at the GPO.

<sup>44</sup> Reith, Broadcast over Britain See for example pp.18, 19, 35

<sup>45</sup> See for example Sally Alexander's account of the New Survey of London Life and Labour (1928-1935) which showed Londoners as readers, gardeners, 'listeners-in', dancers, travellers and attendees at adult education classes. Op.cit., pp.297-298

This thesis, then, makes an important contribution to our understanding of female employment in the inter-war years. It is the first detailed investigation into women's work in a large institution and explores women's work at all levels from lavatory attendant to library head. At the start of 1923, the BBC was a tiny, impulsive, experimental Company, little known outside amateur circles; by 1939 it was a ponderous, self-important Corporation but one that touched every citizen in the UK. Women played a vital part both in its creation and its development. The BBC was always male dominated; it conformed to many of the employment conventions of the day such as the sex-typing of work, lower pay for women and, from 1932, a marriage bar, nevertheless, its ethos, particularly for salaried staff, was one of equality of opportunity. Women could and did rise to positions of considerable importance; they were valued and respected, loyal and hardworking. There was a shared sense of aspiration and purpose in the early BBC, as Richard Lambert, Editor of *The Listener* professed, the feeling was of adventure, progress and public service, "You felt it a privilege to be 'in' at the birth of such a mighty experiment."<sup>46</sup>

## Sources

### Sources: BBC

The predominant source for this thesis is the BBC's Written Archives Centre (WAC). Hundreds of thousands of meticulously filed documents have been retained by the Corporation at its purpose built centre on the outskirts of Reading; an impressive number concerned with the BBC's early years. These include, for example, the comprehensive account of the implementation of the Corporation's Marriage Bar and the operation of its Marriage Tribunal which are used extensively in Chapter Three. Another important source has been the Salary Information Files, three leather-bound volumes, with photographs, that record the salary increments and career details of 830 of the BBC's monthly-paid staff. Completed in 1939, these have been widely drawn on for career profiles and for

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<sup>46</sup> Richard Lambert, *Ariel and All His Quality* (London: Gollanz, 1940) pp.43-44



the comparisons they enable between male and female employees.<sup>47</sup> Everyday work routines are also reflected in a number of gender-specific files, for example on Women Clerical Staff in the Music Department or the Women's Interest Section in Publicity.<sup>48</sup> Documents on recruitment, appointment boards, salaries and grades, while not exclusively about female staff, contain many gendered references as do the more general Departmental and Policy files. Important records about the role of women have certainly been misplaced (for example the file 'Television: Women Staff' is missing), and it is impossible to know whether other vital information could be either lost or buried in unseen documents.<sup>49</sup> Similarly, in such a large organisation as the BBC, omissions and mistakes in recording details of staff would certainly have been made which means some inaccuracies are inevitable. Nevertheless, the scores of files perused for this thesis have provided a strong framework on which to build my arguments.

Documents from the 1930s are far more prevalent in the WAC than those of the 1920s. This reflects two things: the establishment of the Registry in 1927 with a remit that included the retention and classification of policy files, and the founding of the Written Archive in 1932, which indicates the Corporation's awareness of its own history. It is immediately apparent that many more files date from this time. The Registry Supervisor, Agnes Mills, and the BBC's first archivist, Kathleen Edwin are examples of women holding significant posts in the BBC. In fact all the sections of the BBC connected with the retention of information were founded and headed by women; the Library by Florence Milnes, the Sound Archive by Marie Slocombe, and the Photographic Library by Kathleen Lines, all women who had long and distinguished careers with the BBC.<sup>50</sup> One of the characteristics of women's employment at the BBC, as will be explored, was the possibility of carving out new and specialist areas of work.

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<sup>47</sup> R62/100/1-3: Salary Information (staff) 1923-1939. The files include details of 702 men and 128 women.

<sup>48</sup> R13/250:Departmental: Music Department: Women Clerical 1931-1936; R44/619: Publicity: Women's Interest Section Reports, 1931-1938

<sup>49</sup> T31/219: Television: Women Staff 1932-1940

<sup>50</sup> Agnes Mills resigned on marriage in 1944; Kathleen Lines retired as Head of Display Section in 1947; Florence Milnes retired as Head Librarian in 1958; Marie Slocombe retired in 1972.

Agnes Mills and Florence Milnes are amongst the handful of early women employees whose personal staff files have been retained in the WAC. Out of the 128 salaried women who worked in the BBC in the inter-war years (as recorded in the Salary Information Files), the files of eighteen were made available to me.<sup>51</sup> The tattered green folders contain a wealth of information including details of each woman's education and past employment, her confidential annual reports and dozens, if not scores, of memoranda on, for example, achievements, promotional prospects or over-work. Access to these files has proved crucial in building up knowledge of these individuals and their working lives, most of whom have few biographical references elsewhere. However, for several key women, most notably Hilda Matheson, personal files have not been kept. It is not clear why some files were retained and others destroyed, though longevity of service seems to be a factor.

The BBC's extensive collection of press cuttings, dating back to 1924, is housed at the WAC. These include many articles about BBC women, especially from 1931 onwards when Elise Sprott, as the BBC's Women's Press Representative, worked full-time to ensure the Corporation's female staff were prominent in the public eye. The BBC's own periodical *Radio Times*, which dates from September, 1923 is another useful source. Although the focus is usually the broadcaster, behind-the-scenes snippets provide glimpses of programme makers and support staff. For instance in October 1937, a column by Isa Benzie, Foreign Director, sets out her plans for 'Autumn Broadcasts from Abroad'.<sup>52</sup>

In June 1936, the BBC published the first edition of its internal staff periodical *Ariel*. *Ariel* was a high-quality quarterly journal produced, edited and managed by staff, very different from the earlier duplicated BBC newssheets, *The Saveloy* and *The Heterodyne*.<sup>53</sup> *Ariel* included a wide range of articles such as Head Office and Regional news; details of individual achievements; notices of arrivals, departures and marriages; a letters page; extensive coverage of the BBC Club with

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<sup>51</sup> The BBC has a policy of not allowing access to personal files until 100 years after the individual's birth. Even so, I was allowed to see most of those relevant to my research.

<sup>52</sup> *Radio Times*, October 8<sup>th</sup> 1937

<sup>53</sup> There were two issues of *The Saveloy*, in May 1928 and Easter 1930. *The Heterodyne* was first published in May 1930 and incorporated the BBC Club Bulletin.

its many sporting activities and, in each pre-war edition, “Department by Department” a tour of BBC offices with vignettes of individual staff members. This, in particular, paints a vibrant portrait of life in Broadcasting House in the mid 1930s: who sat next to who, what they did, their hobbies and their indulgences. The Management and Editorial Boards, however, included only one woman, the Librarian Florence Milnes, and the tenor of *Ariel* is unquestionably male; the long pages of editorial that prefaced each edition written by Gordon Stowell, the Editor-in-Chief, could sound patronising with, for instance, details about whether a women staff member was blonde or brunette. Nevertheless, its wealth of personal stories and memories of work in the early British Broadcasting Company, many provided by long-serving BBC women, make *Ariel* an indispensable source.

Photographs were an essential component of *Ariel* and, beginning with the first issue, a series of ‘Ariel Portraits’ were commissioned which included women as diverse as Ursula Eason, Northern Ireland’s Children’s Hour Organiser, Miss Gibson a Senior Duplicating Operator and Mrs Starkey, the Matron. Although the settings are staged, the pictures provide an immediate impression of the individual; their age, their clothes, their style, their class. The BBC’s online photographic library also includes pictures of BBC women with many gems from Savoy Hill such as Cecil Dixon, the BBC’s first female Accompanist, (Cecil is the correct spelling of her name), hosting an audition; women in the Registry sorting mail and the female chorus of the BBC Amateur Dramatic Society. Through these photographs the BBC as a workplace comes to life. [See Figs 1.1-1.3, p.28]

Reith’s Diaries, held at the WAC, have been used by many researchers of early BBC history but never with regard to his relationships with BBC women.<sup>54</sup> The densely re-typed entries relevant to this period are an eye-opener into the character of the BBC’s Director General and show him to be impatient, cantankerous and bombastic, with occasional outbursts of passion or joy. He was impressed by diligence, loyalty and success and angered by pettiness, ineptitude and falsehood. BBC women glide in and out of the thousands of methodically

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<sup>54</sup> A volume of extracts was published in 1975. Charles Stuart, ed., The Reith Diaries (London: Collins, 1975)



Fig 1.1: Cecil Dixon playing piano for an audition, Savoy Hill, c.1927



Fig 1.2: BBC Amateur Dramatics Club Chorus, Savoy Hill, c.1930



Fig 1.3: The Registry: Sorting Mail Savoy Hill, c.1930

written diary entries; being interviewed for a job; sharing tea at his country home and being commended for good work, while the frequent references to his personal secretaries provides ample evidence of their crucial supporting role. As Chapter One will show, the diaries reveal Reith to be usually respectful towards, sometimes baffled by and often admiring of, his female staff.<sup>55</sup>

Contemporary biographies of the BBC are a powerful source of background detail and opinion, complementing Reith's diaries and the documents held in the WAC. Arthur Burrows and Cecil Lewis, two of the original four employees, both wrote books about the first two years of the BBC. Although few women are specifically named, the energy and excitement of daily life as everyone pitched-in to secure the success of the new company is obvious and have been widely used for Chapter One. Reith's *Broadcast over Britain* also published in 1924, is crucial for the light it throws on the BBC's developing ethos and demonstrates that within months Reith was characterising wireless as a public utility of immense social and cultural significance with the potential to educate and enlighten as well as to entertain.<sup>56</sup> It also shows him as a man of resolute courage and determination, battling with theatre impresarios, newspaper editors and concert hall owners, all of whom feared the new medium, to ensure that British men and women gained access to the best information and programmes. Reith was aware that the success of the BBC depended on "the staff who are chosen to carry out the great responsibilities which the service involves".<sup>57</sup> This is a theme he returned to in his autobiography, *Into the Wind*, where the importance of loyal and motivated employees, driven by their commitment to public service broadcasting, was acknowledged and emphasised.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> For example: "Staff dance given by the Social Club in Australia House. ...The girls looked very nice and we all stayed until 11." *Reith Diaries*, March 13<sup>th</sup> 1925

<sup>56</sup> Reith, *Broadcast over Britain* pp.17-19

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p.35

<sup>58</sup> John Reith, *Into the Wind* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1949) p.139

Shortly after these three early books appeared, a moratorium was imposed by Reith on books written by serving BBC employees which wasn't lifted until the late 1930s. Instead, colourful books about the workings of Broadcasting House were written by outsiders. Sidney Moseley, a well-respected broadcasting critic, included in his memoir candid insider knowledge of the Corporation with word portraits of both Hilda Matheson and Mary Somerville.<sup>59</sup> Matheson's own book *Broadcasting* was published in 1933, much to Reith's disgust, eighteen months after her resignation from the BBC.<sup>60</sup> Here she vividly explored not only the intensive development of wireless but its profound impact on the listening public and her belief that the ultimate responsibility of the broadcaster was to create an informed democracy. The female listener also featured prominently; for Matheson it was "difficult to exaggerate what broadcasting has done and is doing for women", foregrounding her own role in promoting women's programming at the BBC.<sup>61</sup> However, there is little in her book about women's work within the BBC, neither does she reflect personally on her own time with the Corporation.

Matheson's book is very different in tone to the many autobiographies published during the 40s, 50s and 60s.<sup>62</sup> Written by creative rather than administrative BBC men, these adopt a similarly informal yet critical style in which they describe the intricacies of their BBC careers. The books dwell in particular on the authors' relationships with Reith and their nostalgia for the chaos of Savoy Hill compared with the bureaucracy and staidness of Broadcasting House. Several elaborate on the roles of Matheson and Somerville, who were acknowledged as key BBC figures; nearly all wax lyrical about their secretaries without whom, the writers' claim, they could not have functioned. Mary Agnes Hamilton, a Governor of the

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<sup>59</sup> S.A. Moseley, *Broadcasting in My Time* (London: Richard Cowan, 1935); Stuart Chesmore, *Behind the Microphone* (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd, 1935)

<sup>60</sup> Matheson, op.cit.; Reith commented: "learned that HAL Fisher has commissioned Miss Matheson to write a book about broadcasting for the Home University Library. This is monstrous." *Reith Diaries*, February 19<sup>th</sup> 1932

<sup>61</sup> Matheson, op.cit., p. 188

<sup>62</sup> Lambert, *Ariel and All His Quality*; Paul Bloomfield, *B.B.C.* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1941); Peter Eckersley, *The Power Behind the Microphone* (London: The Scientific Bookclub, 1942); Roger Eckersley, *The B.B.C. And All That* (London: Sampson Low, Marston and Co. Ltd., 1946); Val Gielgud, *Years of the Locust* (London: Nicholson and Watson, 1947); Gorham, *Sound and Fury*, Eric Maschwitz, *No Chip on My Shoulder* (London: Herbert Jenkins Ltd, 1957), Stuart Hibberd, *"This - Is London..."* (London: Macdonald and Evans, 1950); Freddy Grisewood, *My Story of the B.B.C.* (London: Odhams, 1959), Lionel Fielden, *The Natural Bent* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1960)

BBC from 1932-1937, is the only woman to have written a contemporary memoir that alludes to her connection with the Corporation. In *Remembering my Good Friends*, Hamilton concentrated on her close and productive relationship with Reith, but writes little specifically about women.<sup>63</sup> This is surprising, as Hamilton was a frequent commentator on women's lives in the inter-war years.<sup>64</sup> Olive Shapley was the first BBC woman to write a personal memoir, but not until the 1990s. Her frank biography, published in 1996, pulled no punches in its descriptions of the inter-war BBC in which she looked back to her recruitment to the Corporation in 1934 and confessed to a secret abortion within weeks of her arrival.<sup>65</sup> Shapley's BBC career would ultimately span four decades. Prior to the Second World War she was based in Manchester and the insights she gives into a frenetic daily life, first as Children's Hour Organiser and then as a pioneering features producer, add significantly to our understanding both of the extent of responsibility given to BBC women in the 1930s and also to the role played by those working in the Regions.

The most remarkable source used for this thesis is Hilda Matheson's letters to Vita Sackville-West, written in 1928 and 1929 during their intense love affair. When the relationship began Matheson had been Talks Director for two years. The letters, which were loaned to me by Juliet Nicolson, Vita's granddaughter, show the minutiae of Matheson's daily life at the BBC as she grappled with nervous politicians, lively Afghans, hopeless manuscripts and absentee broadcasters.<sup>66</sup> They also reveal a woman utterly in love and it is hard to read them without feeling oneself to be trespassing into areas of Matheson's psyche that she never intended to be made public. However, alongside the florid words they provide a fulsome account of her frantic working days at the BBC and reveal a complex social and private life. The letters, which run to more than 800 pages,

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<sup>63</sup> Hamilton does make fleeting reference to the female staff, "who were on the same salary as men; Hilde (sic) Matheson, as Talks director, and Isa Benzie as Foreign director, rose to the very top, and more than held their places." Mary Agnes Hamilton, *Remembering My Good Friends* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1944) p.283

<sup>64</sup> For example, she contributed to *Our Freedom and Its Results* op.cit.; Mary A Hamilton, *Women at Work: A Brief Introduction to Trade Unionism for Women* (London: Routledge, 1941)

<sup>65</sup> Olive Shapley, *Broadcasting: A Life* (London: Scarlet Press, 1996) pp.39-40

<sup>66</sup> *Hilda Matheson Letters*, January 22<sup>nd</sup> 1929, January 3<sup>rd</sup> 1929, January 28<sup>th</sup> 1929, December 31<sup>st</sup> 1928

are bold in their forthright descriptions of BBC colleagues and expose the complexities of the Corporation's hierarchies and policies.

The personal recollections of Dorothy Torry (née Singer) who joined the BBC in 1936, shortly before her twentieth birthday, have also provided valuable information.<sup>67</sup> To my knowledge, she is the last surviving woman member of staff from this period. Miss Singer was placed as a junior secretary to Reith, whom she came to adore, and in her face-to-face interview with me she recalled the excitement of the Director General's domain. Hilary Cope Morgan, who joined the BBC as a shorthand typist in 1939, was also interviewed.<sup>68</sup> Although frail, she answered questions about her first recollections of the Corporation. Both women described their lives prior to their arrival at the BBC and with few such details available, these observations have been helpful.

The BBC's own oral history project 'The Oral History of the BBC', dating from the 1970s, is a collection of interviews recorded with key staff either as they left the Corporation, or retrospectively. A small number are with women who joined the BBC in the late 1930s. Clare Lawson Dick, who became the first woman Controller of Radio Four in 1975; Mary Lewis, promoted to Head of Pay Policy in 1970 and Elizabeth Barker, who reached the position of Programme Editor (Current Affairs) External Broadcasting in 1969, all joined the BBC as waged secretarial/clerical staff. Their forthright memories of the nature of their first jobs, the prestige of employment at Broadcasting House and the petty rules that abounded are illuminating. Also in the collection are the blunt recollections of Janet Adam Smith, the critic and scholar, who was a member of the BBC's established staff from 1928-1935.<sup>69</sup>

One further source has been available to me on an almost daily basis, Broadcasting House itself. Passing through the imposing brass doors on the Ground Floor, I've often imagined how it would have been in the 1930s when the House Supervisor, Mr Chilman, stood watchfully at the Reception Desk, flanked

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<sup>67</sup> Interview with Dorothy Torry conducted by Kate Murphy, June 28<sup>th</sup> 2006

<sup>68</sup> Interview with Hilary Cope Morgan conducted by Elizabeth McDowell, BBC Pensioner Visitor, November 11<sup>th</sup> 2006. Miss Cope Morgan has subsequently died, in 2008.

<sup>69</sup> Janet Adam Smith was ultimately Assistant Editor of *The Listener*



by the immaculate floral displays provided by Mrs Webbsmith, the BBC's florist. To the best of my knowledge, *Woman's Hour's* current fifth floor office was then home to the Talks Department.<sup>70</sup> This spatial understanding has added an extra dimension to the thesis, making it possible to visualise the activities of the BBC at this time.

I've also had the rare privilege of seeing Savoy Hill as it would have been in the days when it was occupied by the BBC. At the close of 2010, Savoy Mansions, where the BBC was based, were stripped bare in preparation for refurbishment. As a guest of the IET (formerly the Institution of Electrical Engineers) I was able to visit the building on two occasions; the original layout of the six floors starkly evident.<sup>71</sup> For instance, on the fourth floor it was possible to envisage the office space where Hilda Matheson held meetings, the participants sitting on the floor around her fire and to see the window, described by Maurice Gorham in his memoir, through which he would climb to terrify his *Radio Times* assistant Miss Bryant as she worked on the journal layout.<sup>72</sup> The rapid growth of the BBC in those first years meant that space was always at a premium, studios were constantly being adapted and built, sections and departments amalgamated and moved. Hence to see the building in the raw gave me a new understanding of the chaotic, impromptu, collaborative characteristics of Savoy Hill; a feature of the affectionate memories of those early days.

### Sources: Women's Employment

This thesis places women's employment at the BBC within the context of women's work in the 1920s and 1930s and as such, has drawn widely on both contemporary books and recent studies on the subject. For salaried women, the most relevant investigations have been those of Alison Oram and Helen Glew whose detailed research into teaching and the GPO have proved both analogous

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<sup>70</sup> Ariel, December 1937, Department by Department: Talks Department

<sup>71</sup> I was greatly assisted by the detailed floor plans Brian Hennessey included in his book, The Emergence of Broadcasting in Britain (Lymington: Southerleigh, 2005)

<sup>72</sup> Hilda Matheson Letters, January 28<sup>th</sup> 1929; Gorham, op.cit., p.31

and divergent.<sup>73</sup> Female teachers and civil servants displayed a pride and commitment to their careers similar to that of salaried women in the BBC. However, as has already been touched upon, Oram and Glew's focus was the discrimination women teachers and civil servants faced in terms of equal pay, marital status and promotional prospects which led to impassioned political campaigning. Carol Dyhouse, in her study of women academics, found similar frustrations, echoed by Kaarin Michaelsen in her investigation of female medics.<sup>74</sup> This exploration of the BBC acts as a counterpoint to these politicised professions, offering a glimpse into a workplace where women did not see their lives as blighted by discrimination and so did not sense the need to associate. In one respect, this has proved limiting. Whereas the records of, for instance, the National Union of Women Teachers or the National Association of Women Civil Servants offer a rich resource of personal testament, and were widely drawn on by Oram and Glew, nothing similar exists for the BBC.

The many studies of waged women's work in the inter-war years have offered valuable context but, to date, nothing has been published specifically on either female house staff or secretarial/clerical workers in a large, post-war institution. Kay Sanderson's interviews with women Civil Service clerks and Teresa Davy's study of female shorthand typists in London in the 1920s and 1930s have provided important insights into status, pay and promotional opportunities.<sup>75</sup> These were the same young women, from predominantly lower-middle class backgrounds, who might have found waged work at BBC. The practical experience of house staff such as kitchen workers and charwomen in the inter-war years is also largely absent from secondary sources and has been pieced together from a variety of contemporary sources.

Contemporary literature on women's work rarely mentions the BBC however books written in the 1920s and 1930s about general female employment offer

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<sup>73</sup> Oram, op.cit; Glew, op.cit

<sup>74</sup> Dyhouse, op.cit.; Michaelsen, op.cit. The British Federation of University Women and the Medical Women's Federation, like the National Union of Women Teachers and the National Association of Women Civil Servants, were highly active in the 1920s and 1930.

<sup>75</sup> Kay Sanderson, "Women Civil Service Clerks 1925-1939"; Teresa Davy, "Shorthand Typists in London 1900 -1939," *Our Work, Our Lives, Our Words: Women's History and Women's Work*, eds. Leonore Davidoff and Belinda Westover (London: Macmillan Education, 1986)

crucial comparisons. The feminists Ray Strachey, Vera Brittain and Winifred Holtby wrote widely on this subject and the inter-war years also witnessed an abundance of career advice books for women and girls.<sup>76</sup> Strachey's own advice book, *Careers and Openings for Women* meticulously detailed the entrance requirements, pay and prospects of more than fifty occupations; those of, for instance, librarianship, secretarial work, catering and advertising directly relevant to the BBC. *Careers and Openings for Women* also included a long preamble focussing on the rewards, but also the difficulties women faced in the workplace, a theme also reflected in Vera Brittain's 1928 book, *Women's Work in Modern England*. Brittain drew attention to many new professional opportunities for women such as aviation, photography and scientific work but, like Strachey, she underlined the under-valuation of women in many areas of waged work, for example the notion that it was 'incidental', and the problems of marriage and dependents.<sup>77</sup> In *Women and Changing Civilisation* published in 1934, Winifred Holtby included a chapter on the rights of women to work, a page of which applauds the entry of women into new occupations like oceanography, stock-broking and the CID.<sup>78</sup> However, again the focus is principally on the limitations and discrimination faced by the waged.

While Strachey, Brittain and Holtby highlighted problems women faced in the workplace they also acknowledged that there were exceptions. Brittain wrote that the best opportunities for women were provided by "new businesses and professions capable of alteration and expansion, rather than by older and more circumscribed vocations with a long tradition of masculine authority", i.e. organisations like the BBC.<sup>79</sup> It is surprising, therefore, that the particular circumstances of the BBC were not more widely noted in the writings of the three women, especially as they all had direct links with the Corporation; Strachey as a

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<sup>76</sup> Mainstream career books frequently reinforced gender stereotypes. See Jones op.cit. p.49

<sup>77</sup> For example Vera Brittain, *Women's Work in Modern England* (London: Noel Douglas, 1928); Vera Brittain, *Lady into Woman: A History of Women from Victoria to Elizabeth II* (London: Andrew Dakers Ltd, 1953)

<sup>78</sup> Winifred Holtby, *Women and a Changing Civilisation* (London: Lane and Bodley Head, 1934) pp.71-91. Holtby erroneously refers to Mary Agnes Hamilton as a Director of the BBC, she was in fact a BBC Governor, p.83. Brittain and Holtby also frequently referred to women's work in the many articles they published in newspapers and journals during this time.

<sup>79</sup> Brittain, op.cit., p.40. See also, for example, Strachey, *Careers and Openings for Women*, op.cit., pp.69-70; Holtby, op.cit., pp.71, 83, 86

critic and seasoned broadcaster, Brittain as an occasional giver of talks and Holtby as a regular contributor to *Radio Times*. It has been one of the frustrations of research for this thesis that so little was written by contemporary women about women's work at the BBC.

Strachey's silence on the subject is even more surprising when one considers her links with the BBC in her capacity as Secretary of the Women's Employment Federation (WEF), a further source for this thesis. Set up in 1933, WEF sought to increase the number of women in the professions both by building co-operation with employers and working alongside organisations that either promoted training or represented working women. The list of affiliates is impressive and included university appointment boards, women's professional societies, secretarial training colleges and employers such as the John Lewis Partnership and the BBC. Although only a handful of successful BBC placements were made, the Corporation's membership of WEF provides evidence that it was prepared to use a variety of outside bodies to recruit able women.

The BBC itself is a source for women's employment in the inter-war years.<sup>80</sup> For example, *Women's Hour*, broadcast during the early 1920s, included dozens of talks by professional women, encompassing jobs as varied as analytical chemist, barrister, tea room manager, dentist, auctioneer and athletics organiser.<sup>81</sup> Broader questions of women's employment were also addressed on the BBC, for example, in the autumn of 1928, the series *Questions for Women Voters*, devised by Hilda Matheson, included debates on 'Should Women be Paid as Much as Men?' and 'Should Married Women Work?'. These were important issues for feminist campaigning groups, the BBC's commitment to impartiality ensuring that both sides of the argument were heard.<sup>82</sup> In the late 1930s, as Secretary of WEF, Ray

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<sup>80</sup> Strachey's broadcasting included 'A Women's Commentary', a digest of political news she presented from 1929 at the invitation of Hilda Matheson.

<sup>81</sup> *Women's Hour* was broadcast between May 1923 and March 1924.

<sup>82</sup> 'Should Women be Paid as much as Men?' was broadcast on October 9<sup>th</sup> 1928. It was an "informal discussion" between Ellen Wilkinson M.P. and William Thoday, ex-President of the London School Masters' Association. 'Should Married Women Work?' was broadcast on October 23<sup>rd</sup> 1928. The protagonists were Dame Beatrix Lyall, of the L.C.C. "who will put the reasons why, in her view, married women should not take up paid employment" and Mrs. E.D. Simon, "who will maintain that women should be free to choose for themselves." Sheena Simon, a Manchester councillor, had successfully led the campaign against the City Council's marriage bar.

Strachey acted as a consultant on a six-part BBC series *Careers for Girls*.<sup>83</sup> The careers selected - nursing, physical training, domestic science, dressmaking, secretarial work and the Civil Service - reveal a narrowing of horizons for women compared to the 1920s, a situation mirrored at the BBC.

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Women broadcasters like Ray Strachey were employed on contract and as such their contribution to the BBC falls outside the parameters of this thesis. This was also the case for scores of other women associated with the BBC, for example those in the BBC Symphony Orchestra, who were selected by blind audition and led by a woman, Marie Wilson. Olga Collett, the BBC's first woman commentator who won accolades for her visual descriptions and Sheila Borrett, the first woman announcer who aroused loathing for her rendition of the news, are just two of the many women whose experiences and contribution to the BBC are still waiting to be told. Similarly, the vast area of BBC women as programme makers, particularly of programmes aimed at the female listener, has proved too large to include within these chapters. These are all areas that would benefit from further research.

In line with the major studies of the early BBC, this thesis stops at the outbreak of the Second World War; Briggs, Scannell and Cardiff and Pegg all end their respective volumes in 1939. The 1920s and 30s were the period when the BBC was formed and consolidated, it was a unique time in its history that saw it develop from a tiny Company of four to a monolithic broadcasting organisation employing more than four thousand. The BBC's function during the war was very different; its vital role on the home front as the provider of news and the upholder of morale, and its key international responsibilities have always merited separate attention. The Second World War wrought great changes for the Corporation's women: their promotions in the absence of male colleagues; their employment as female engineers, their role as broadcasters; their attendance at the BBC's own Secretarial Training School; their jobs as 24-hour monitors which

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<sup>83</sup> The series "Careers for Girls" ran on Saturday afternoons from 1<sup>st</sup> April 1939. It was made with the cooperation of the WEF. Strachey provided introductory commentary.

prompted the establishment of a BBC crèche: material enough to make a separate study in itself.

The ensuing chapters place women at the heart of the BBC, viewing the organisation through a lens different to that of previous research. By studying women's working lives, we can see more clearly how the BBC of the inter-war years functioned. This thesis is also a study of a pioneering post-First World War industry and as such offers insights into how new ideas of fairness, social welfare and public service shaped attitudes towards staff and the way the BBC grew and changed. Chapter One picks up on these themes, giving an overall picture of the BBC as a place of employment in the 1920s and 1930s and considers why women and men chose, or were chosen, to work there.

#### Note on Text

Rather than include lengthy biographical details within the text, I have provided Short Biographies of key BBC staff, both male and female, in Appendix One. Here also are brief details of the eighteen women whose personal staff files have been used.

# Chapter One: "... a democracy of young pioneers..."<sup>1</sup>

## The BBC as a Place to Work

### Introduction

Fourteen years ago I walked into a two-room office in Magnate House. It belonged to a company concerned with broadcasting. I saw Major Anderson, who asked a few questions, and then said "You'll do. Can you start now?" I had been working for a firm of accountants who held that a woman's place was the home so very thrilling this new job seemed. And even more exciting it turned out!<sup>2</sup>

Lilian Taylor's description of her arrival at Magnate House in February 1923 encapsulates the informality and thrill of work for the pioneering BBC. It also hints at an approach to women she perceived was different from the norm. Miss Taylor's career would be typical of many BBC women in the inter-war years: starting as a £2.15s a week Programmes Clerk, she was quickly promoted until, by April 1939, she was an Assistant in the General Savings Accounts Department on a salary of £400 a year. This was generous pay at a time when it was considered "quite an achievement" for even a highly qualified woman to earn £250 a year.<sup>3</sup> Why women like Lilian Taylor came to work at the BBC, and how they were treated by the Company/ Corporation, is what this chapter aims to explore. It will argue that the BBC, as a new and modern industry, introduced work practices that set it apart from other employers of the inter-war years. However, it will also show that BBC management retained many traditional and stereotypical attitudes towards women.

Lilian Taylor was one of the BBC's earliest recruits; when she joined in 1923, broadcasting was virtually unknown in Britain outside the realm of military communication or amateur hobby. Even John Reith by his own admission, hadn't known what the term meant when he was appointed to the post of General

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<sup>1</sup> Cecil Lewis, *Broadcasting from Within* (London: George Newnes Limited, 1924) p.37

<sup>2</sup> *Ariel*, April 1937. Major Anderson was BBC Secretary.

<sup>3</sup> Ray Strachey, *Careers and Openings for Women: A Survey of Women's Employment and a Guide for Those Seeking Work* (London: Faber and Faber, 1935) p.70

Manager of the British Broadcasting Company in December 1922.<sup>4</sup> The Company had been established by the major wireless manufacturers, under government direction, as a way of advancing the sale of radios and ensuring regulation of output. The Post Office had watched with concern the chaos in the United States where the development of unregulated broadcasting had meant a proliferation of radio stations, funded by the makers of wirelesses and advertising. To stave off similar mayhem in the UK, funding was to be provided by a licence fee.<sup>5</sup> Reith was given free rein to develop the BBC in the way he saw fit. Recruited alongside him were three other men: Arthur Burrows, Director of Programmes and Cecil Lewis, Assistant Director of Programmes, who had both worked in experimental wireless, and Company Secretary Major Anderson, about who little is known.

Because it was a new organisation, the BBC had no set practices. Its structure, its methods of recruitment and its policies on pay and promotion were largely constructed on the hoof. John Reith played a major part in the establishment of these procedures; as Briggs observed, “Reith did not make broadcasting, but he did make the BBC.”<sup>6</sup> Described as the “father of the family”, Reith’s belief in welfare and his strong sense of paternalism brought to the BBC a loyalty to staff and a commitment to good conditions of service while his belief in rewarding dedication and good work ensured that able men and women were valued and encouraged to achieve.<sup>7</sup> Reith’s role, character and relationships are a theme of this chapter, as are the structuring of departments and hierarchical adjustments he imposed. The emergence of centralised control and an increasingly complex management system would gradually make the BBC a less dynamic and more ponderous place to work.

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<sup>4</sup> Reith Diary, December 14<sup>th</sup> 1922, shows him to be, “completely mystified as to what it was all about.” For the history of broadcasting and founding of the BBC see Asa Briggs, The Birth of Broadcasting, The History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom vol. 1, 5 vols. (London: Oxford University Press, 1961) pp.3-142 Also Brian Hennessy, The Emergence of Broadcasting in Britain (Lympstone: Southerleigh, 2005)

<sup>5</sup> The original licence fee was 10s, with half going to the BBC. The BBC was to be answerable to the Post-Master General and had eight directors, one each from Britain’s six largest radio companies with two others representing the smaller concerns. The ‘Big Six’ were Marconi, Metropolitan-Vickers, Western Electric, Radio Communication, General Electric and British Thomson-Houston.

<sup>6</sup> Briggs, op.cit., p.4

<sup>7</sup> Freddy Grisewood, My Story of the B.B.C. (London: Odhams, 1959) p.47



“Pandemonium reigned!” was how Cecil Lewis described the BBC’s first days.<sup>8</sup> From mid-March 1923 until April 1932, the British Broadcasting Company was located at No. 2 Savoy Hill. However, for the first ten weeks, the BBC’s home was Magnate House in Kingsway in a one-roomed office, with a tiny adjoining ‘cubicle’ for Reith.<sup>9</sup> Eventually a staff of around thirty worked here and accounts of these initial days provide a picture of vibrancy and chaos. During these first few weeks the BBC established the roots of a broadcasting schedule that included orchestral concerts, piano recitals, talks and debates, a General News Bulletin, *Children’s Hour* and live opera from Covent Garden.<sup>10</sup> This meant that speakers needed to be booked, musicians rehearsed, scripts typed, contracts organised, wages paid and technical hurdles overcome. Arthur Burrows joked that as the work and staff increased a time arrived “when literally it became necessary to place one’s hat on the top of one’s walking-stick against a wall in order to find room for it.”<sup>11</sup> Cecil Lewis described Magnate House as a place where, “The telephones never stopped ringing, the typewriters never stopped clicking, the duplicating machines duplicated for dear life”, all of these operated by women.<sup>12</sup> One of the typists was Mrs Esmond who had migrated from Marconi, a founding company of the BBC, another was Dorothy Knight who joined “with a personal recommendation to Mr John Reith” and who confirmed that in those early pioneer days “everybody was expected to take a hand with everything,”<sup>13</sup>

Lilian Taylor, whose surprise at her appointment opened this chapter, captured the informality of the early BBC in her *Ariel* interview where she described the Company as “growing like a young giant”. Asked whether any incidents stayed in her memory, she roared with laughter:

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<sup>8</sup> Lewis, *Broadcasting from Within* p.27

<sup>9</sup> The room was loaned by the General Electric Company, one of founding companies of the BBC. Reith recorded his first day in the office as December 30<sup>th</sup> 1922.

<sup>10</sup> BBC Programme Content, 1922-1926. For the first two months, programmes were broadcast from 5.00 pm to 10.00 pm. In March 1923, a morning concert was added. The hours of broadcasting were gradually extended.

<sup>11</sup> Arthur Burrows, *The Story of Broadcasting* (London: Cassell and Company Ltd, 1924) p.79

<sup>12</sup> Lewis, op.cit., p.27

<sup>13</sup> Mrs Esmond retired in March 1938, suggesting she was in her mid forties when she arrived at the BBC; ‘Portrait of the Month: Dorothy Knight’, *Ariel* July 1958. It is not known who had personally recommended Miss Knight to Reith.

Life was one long series of incidents. We had so little money for programmes that all arrangements were more or less uncertain. Not infrequently we would hear from a performer only an hour or so before he or she was to broadcast that “they were very sorry but...” That meant thinking quickly and grabbing the ‘phone and going on grabbing the ‘phone until someone *was* found.<sup>14</sup>

The young BBC clearly operated in an ad hoc fashion; there was no job security and the prospect of promotions and pensions would have been an act of faith. To have entered an office job with an uncertain future was a gamble for all those who joined the BBC in the early days of Magnate House and Savoy Hill. Miss May, recruited in April 1923 to set up the telephone exchange at Savoy Hill, recalled how her friends “thought she was crazy” to leave a good job at the General Electric Company to take up the position for the BBC.<sup>15</sup> The excitement of working for Britain’s first broadcasting company appears to have been a key attraction to new staff, coupled with a desire to be of public service. As Richard Lambert, the future Editor of *The Listener*, explained:

It was in this ambitious spirit that the BBC grew; and so long as it lasted, there was no limit to the devotion of employees of the BBC, many of whom gave their whole time and thought, in leisure as well as at the office, to the furtherance of the service.<sup>16</sup>

This chapter will argue that this spirit of enthrallment and dedication imbued a strong sense of egalitarianism in the early BBC; a notion that everyone was in it together, working for the common good. Thus even the lowliest clerk and secretary believed they were doing an important job. Reading the memoirs and memories of those who worked at the BBC during this time, one is struck both by their zeal and their sense of the BBC as a community.<sup>17</sup> Nostalgia for the “Savoy Hill Days” is palpable; here in ramshackle offices on the Thames, staff worked in an environment of constant change as ever more employees needed to be accommodated and ever more studios built. Roger Eckersley, who took on

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<sup>14</sup> *Ariel*, April 1937

<sup>15</sup> *Prospero*, June 1984. *Prospero* is the journal for BBC retired staff.

<sup>16</sup> Richard Lambert, *Ariel and All His Quality* (London: Gollanz, 1940) pp.43-44

<sup>17</sup> See for example, Peter Eckersley, *The Power Behind the Microphone* (London: The Scientific Bookclub, 1942); Roger Eckersley, *The B.B.C. And All That* (London: Sampson Low, Marston and Co. Ltd., 1946); Val Gielgud, *Years of the Locust* (London: Nicholson and Watson, 1947); Eric Maschwitz, *No Chip on My Shoulder* (London: Herbert Jenkins Ltd, 1957); Lambert, *Ariel and All His Quality*; Maurice Gorham, *Sound and Fury* (London: Percival Marshall, 1948)

responsibility for Outside Broadcasts in 1924, recalled the “charming, undepartmental spirit of the place.”<sup>18</sup> Maurice Gorham, who joined the staff of *Radio Times* in July 1926, when staff numbers had reached 700, recollected how it was still small enough for everybody to know each other.<sup>19</sup> Although the possibility of knowing all one’s colleagues diminished as the Corporation grew, the pages of *Ariel* still portray the BBC in the mid and late 1930s, with a staff of more than 3,000, as a place where friendships were forged, social lives shared and fellow workers respected.

While Magnate House and Savoy Hill were marked by amateur enthusiasm, Broadcasting House in Portland Place, which opened in April 1932, personified the growing self-assurance and authority of the BBC. Eric Maschwitz, the BBC’s first Variety Director, described how its “brand-new coat-of-arms, a house-flag fluttering from its latticed mask, and a Latin inscription” overawed the humble suitors waiting in the hall.<sup>20</sup> It was an impressive, modernist structure with twenty two studios (the interior of one, the Talks Studio, designed by a woman, Mrs Dorothy Trotter), a Concert Hall, dressing rooms, restaurants, lounges, libraries, store rooms, cloakrooms and scores of offices.<sup>21</sup> As Val Gielgud, the Director of Drama, noted, “It typified, in steel and concrete, and its central studio-tower of non-conductive bricks, a new *professionalism* [Gielgud’s italics].”<sup>22</sup> The situation of Broadcasting House, in the little developed area of the West End to the north of Oxford Street, had caused initial concern; Lambert pointed out how the BBC was isolated from most of its natural contacts in Whitehall, Clubland, Theatreland and Bloomsbury.<sup>23</sup> Reith disliked the building, and by the time staff moved in, it was already too small, necessitating many departments to be housed in out-buildings.<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless, Broadcasting House was soon attracting a plethora of visitors to its doors.

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<sup>18</sup> Eckersley, *The B.B.C. And All That* pp.57,58

<sup>19</sup> Gorham, op.cit., p.16. Staff numbers were estimated at 727 as of June 30<sup>th</sup> 1926. R49/697: Staff Policy: Staff: Statistics Tables 1922-1943

<sup>20</sup> Maschwitz, op.cit., p.70

<sup>21</sup> Dorothy Warren Trotter was a qualified architect.

<sup>22</sup> Gielgud, op.cit., p.90

<sup>23</sup> Lambert, op.cit., p.146

<sup>24</sup> In his autobiography, Reith wrote, “I was not happy about the new Broadcasting House but had not urged my own view against that of others”. *Into the Wind* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1949) p.158

The BBC had quickly become an intrinsic part of national culture; as Scannell and Cardiff observed in their social history of British broadcasting, it synthesised and reflected elements of nationhood such as sports, musical and artistic heritage, monarchy and the land.<sup>25</sup> It also created new styles of output, some like *The Week in Westminster*, *Housewives' News* and *Other Women's Lives* aimed predominantly at a female audience. As wireless entered the home, those who broadcast became nationally known figures; as radio stars they provided good copy for newspapers, so even those without a wireless would have become familiar with the band leaders, variety performers and singers who thronged to the airwaves. Women like Mabel Constanduros, Marian Cran and Mary Agnes Hamilton became household names.<sup>26</sup> In consequence, the impression developed that those who worked at the BBC were somehow touched by glamour, akin in some respects to those who worked in the film industry. Richard Lambert recalled how even the holder of a minor post at Savoy Hill became the object of respect among relatives, neighbours and chance acquaintances.<sup>27</sup> The cachet of the BBC was an added attraction to the men and women who came to work for the Corporation.

The reasons why women and men chose to work at the BBC changed over the seventeen years 1923-1939. At first it attracted those who were prepared for adventure and unpredictability; then was added glamour and prestige and finally, a more sober professionalism. It also appealed to an older, more skilled workforce, women and men with education and experience as well as verve. While public service was important, it was the status the job conferred, the chance to excel and the congenial working environment that seem to have been the greatest attractions. By the standards of the day, the BBC offered good conditions of service, as will be revealed. Once new recruits had completed a three-month probationary period and were confirmed as established staff, they were entitled to

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<sup>25</sup> Paddy Scannell and David Cardiff, *A Social History of British Broadcasting, 1922-1939* (London: Basil Blackwood, 1991) p.277

<sup>26</sup> Mabel Constanduros was renowned for her impersonations, developing the character 'Mrs Buggins'; Marian Cran was radio's first gardening expert; Mary Agnes Hamilton presented book programmes.

<sup>27</sup> Lambert, op.cit., p.44

a range of benefits including a generous holiday allowance and membership of the BBC Pension Scheme.

John Reith was proud of his commitment to staff welfare and his paternalism, to which he dedicated a short section of his autobiography, *Into the Wind*.<sup>28</sup> It was Reith's vision of broadcasting and management that created and sustained the BBC throughout the inter-war years. "I had set a criterion of dignity in the earliest days", he wrote, "in the visible shop front; in the shop front of the announcers' work, in the publications of the Corporation; in its every activity."<sup>29</sup> This chapter, then, explores the practicalities of Reith's penetrative vision and what it meant for the women and men who worked for the BBC; its hierarchy and structure, the nature of its work and its attractions. It also considers Reith's relationship with women and how far it was his attitudes and beliefs that created an environment where they could thrive. Overall, it will show the tensions that existed in a BBC that was on the one hand innovative and progressive and on the other traditional and bureaucratic, and in particular what this meant for women.

## Structures and Hierarchies

From four employees in December 1922, the BBC grew to a towering institution of 4,233 established staff by July 1939.<sup>30</sup> As has been described, the early development of the Company was impulsive and largely unplanned and Reith's diaries tell of a constant stream of meetings with potential employees as he tried to build up his team.<sup>31</sup> The most significant early appointee was Charles Carpendale, who joined as Reith's deputy in July 1923. Carpendale, a Rear-Admiral, was one of a number of military men recruited to the early BBC; his "quarterdeck manner" and no-nonsense style reassuring to Reith.<sup>32</sup> Reith, who was thirty-three when he took on the BBC job, preferred senior executives who

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<sup>28</sup> Reith headed the section 'Paternalism v paternalism. He quoted the OED description of paternalism as "government as by a father; the claim or attempt to supply the needs or to regulate the life of a nation of community in the same way as a father does those of his children." Reith, *op.cit.*, p.272

<sup>29</sup> Reith, *op.cit.*, p.250

<sup>30</sup> R149/178/16: Staff Policy: Establishment July 1<sup>st</sup> 1939

<sup>31</sup> See for example, *Reith Diaries*, February 15<sup>th</sup> 1923, "A succession of appointments all day...Saw Douglas Smith, Herd, Graham and McQueen."

<sup>32</sup> Gorham, *op.cit.*, p.14

were similar to himself, i.e. mature men with military backgrounds. These were the types of men he had grown up with, whom he understood and felt comfortable with. Reith was ambivalent about young university men, on the one hand appreciating their intellect and creativity, on the other feeling threatened by his own lack of an elite education.<sup>33</sup> It wasn't until the late 1920s that young graduates predominated amongst the senior staff.

As staff numbers grew, new structures of management were introduced. Reith believed in centralised control and in early 1924, with employee numbers nearing 200, he established his Control Board, the inner-circle of his most trusted colleagues. These were Charles Carpendale (known as Controller); Peter Eckersley, Chief Engineer; Arthur Burrows, Director of Programmes and Guy Rice, BBC Secretary.<sup>34</sup> The Control Board was the executive decision-making body of the BBC which met weekly throughout the 1920s and 1930s to discuss issues that ranged from alternative wavelengths and the staffing of *Children's Hour*, to international broadcasting meetings and the use of critics on programmes.<sup>35</sup> From late 1926, the Control Board's key directives were circulated as Internal Instructions which cascaded directions on, for example the standardisation of forms, the rates of travelling allowances or the necessity for staff to disclose relationships with prospective candidates.<sup>36</sup> Reith reconstituted his Control Board many times, as new departments, new divisions and new heads were created.<sup>37</sup> [See Appendix 2, for Control Board membership, 1924-1939]

In 1926, the Control Board was formalised with five Assistant Controllers working alongside Reith and his deputy, Carpendale. In 1933, with the BBC now

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<sup>33</sup> This was a disappointment discussed with the Prime Minister, Ramsey Macdonald. Reith recorded, "an interesting conversation about Etonian benefits and so on, I having said how much I regretted not having been at a real school and Varsity." Reith Diaries, February 1<sup>st</sup> 1928

<sup>34</sup> The Control Board met for the first time on January 14<sup>th</sup> 1924. Rice had replaced Anderson in early 1924.

<sup>35</sup> R3/3/1-14: Control Board Minutes, November 12<sup>th</sup> 1929, January 5<sup>th</sup> 1927, December 9<sup>th</sup> 1928, February 2<sup>nd</sup> 1926

<sup>36</sup> Internal Instruction No.59, December 9<sup>th</sup> 1927; Internal Instruction No.170, November 19<sup>th</sup> 1931; Internal Instruction No. 335, December 4<sup>th</sup> 1935. Internal Instructions date from October 21<sup>st</sup> 1926.

<sup>37</sup> One of the most perplexing aspects of researching the early BBC is the proliferation of complicated titles assumed by senior staff, even Reith acknowledged that this could appear 'Gilbertian', (as in 'Gilbert and Sullivan'). Reith, op.cit., p.249. Penelope Fitzgerald had fun with Corporation titles in her novel *Human Voices*, set in the BBC during the Second World War. Penelope Fitzgerald, Human Voices (London: William Collins and Son, 1980)

employing more than 1,500 staff, a major structural change was introduced with the bifurcation of control into Production and Administration, with two Controllers and eight heads of large departments making up the Control Board. When this proved to be unwieldy it was replaced by a new divisional structure in 1936; decision-making and policy was now in the hands of Reith, Carpendale and four divisional Controllers representing Administration, Programmes, Public Relations and Finance. This structure was maintained by Frederick Ogilvie when he took over as Director General in 1938 and was still in operation at the outbreak of the Second World War.

Reith's diaries show that he frequently lunched and dined with members of his Control Board, all men he had hand-picked, but at no time was a woman considered. This is not surprising, despite great strides towards women's emancipation following the First World War, few women reached positions of power. For example, female MPs first entered the House of Commons in 1919, however there were never more than 15 women MPs at any one time in the inter-war years and only one, Margaret Bondfield, reached the position of Minister, as Minister of Labour in 1929, under the short-lived Labour Government.<sup>38</sup> Women might reach significant positions in appropriate spheres, such as Alice Head, the Managing Director of *Good Housekeeping* or Hilda Martindale, Director of Women Establishments at the Treasury but, as Mary Agnes Hamilton noted, in business and the professions, the share of the "plums" going to women was small:

The possibility of a woman's holding down a big job simply does not occur to those making higher appointments when the time comes. Prejudice is always, and often, sincerely denied, the habit of thinking of competence in male terms adheres.<sup>39</sup>

A case in point is Reith's recruitment of Colonel Alan Dawnay to the position of Controller (Production) in 1933; it never entered his head to appoint a woman. Having decided on the Production/Administration split for the Corporation, Reith needed to find a Controller (Production) to complement Carpendale as Controller

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<sup>38</sup> For a discussion on early women MPs see Helen Jones, Women in British Public Life 1914-50 (Harlow: Pearson Education Limited, 2000) pp.138-150

<sup>39</sup> Mary A Hamilton, Women at Work: A Brief Introduction to Trade Unionism for Women (London: Routledge, 1941) p.153

(Administration). This was in effect a second Deputy and with no obvious internal candidate, Reith consulted a range of eminent men from the Archbishop of Canterbury to Ernest Barker, Professor of Political Science at Cambridge, in his quest to find someone suitable for this 'big appointment'.<sup>40</sup> As his desperation grew he picked the brains of Sir Herbert Creedy at the War Office and Lord Eustace Percy, formerly President of the Board of Education, amongst others, all men Reith had come into contact with through the BBC.<sup>41</sup> In the event, he settled on an old Etonian Colonel Alan Dawnay for the post. Dawnay was not a success and returned to the army after two years but his appointment was indicative of BBC attitudes towards senior executive staff; women were never in the frame. Chapter Five addresses the issue of women in top jobs at the BBC and shows that, although three reached Director level, they neither put themselves forward for, nor were independently considered for, an executive management post. There was a natural limit to how far women could progress at the BBC which, in line with the times, neither men, nor women, perceived as breakable.

Reith and his Control Board did not have complete autonomy in the running of the BBC. As General Manager/Managing Director of the British Broadcasting Company, Reith was accountable to a Board of Directors. Until it was wound-up at the close of 1926, the Board let him get on with the job, rubber-stamping his resolutions. However, the royal charter which instituted the British Broadcasting Corporation in January 1927, made provision for five Governors, each to serve for five years, who expected much deeper involvement, frequently to Reith's great frustration.<sup>42</sup> Four women served as governors in the inter-war years out of a total of sixteen: the socialist and political activist Ethel Snowden (1927-1932); the novelist and Labour politician Mary Agnes Hamilton (1933-1937); the churchwoman and Conservative activist Caroline Bridgeman (1936-1939) and the penal reformer and educationalist Margery Fry (1938-1939).<sup>43</sup> Although the

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<sup>40</sup> From Reith's Diary as quoted in Ian McIntyre, The Expense of Glory: A Life of John Reith (London: Harper Collins, 1993) p.207

<sup>41</sup> Reith was disappointed no-one outstanding had come forward and uncertain about appointing Dawnay. Reith Diaries, May 26<sup>th</sup> 1933

<sup>42</sup> For Reith's relationship with his Board of Governors see Asa Briggs, Governing the B.B.C. (London: BBC, 1979)

<sup>43</sup> Reith's diaries bristle with antagonism towards Ethel Snowden, whom he found particularly meddlesome. He described her as a "truly terrible creature, ignorant, stupid and horrid." Reith Diaries, March 9<sup>th</sup> 1927. Mary Agnes Hamilton, on the other hand, was one of the governors



Board of Governors were important for their strategic role, for example policies such as the BBC's Marriage Bar needed to be approved by them, Reith and his Control Board retained overall responsibility for the day-to-day running of the organisation.

While the Control Board was important as the meeting place for those in positions of command, the authority of the BBC was exercised by the Controllers in their individual capacity; the decisions agreed upon filtering down through various divisional/departmental/section heads. Conversely, questions and issues raised by subordinates were passed up the management chain for approval. One only has to look at a BBC memo that required an answer or clarification to see how many layers of management it passed through. The larger the BBC grew, the slower and more ponderous the decision-making process became. This could cause frustration, especially for those working in creative areas of the BBC, as the memoirs of Fielden, Lambert and Gorham attest.<sup>44</sup> A good example is a series of memos from the Talks Assistant, Janet Quigley, in November 1936.

Quigley was keen to produce a series called *The Beauty Racket* which would expose the tyranny of beauty advertisements and how they hood-winked women.<sup>45</sup> She addressed her idea to the then Director of Talks, Rose-Troup who in turn referred the issue to the Controller of Programmes, Cecil Graves, asking if there were any objections.<sup>46</sup> Graves was of the opinion that it might cause a conflict of interest with *Radio Times*, who often ran such adverts, and the idea was dropped.<sup>47</sup> Quigley was not to be defeated and the following year she suggested a 'considerably modified' beauty series to the new Director of Talks, Richard Maconachie.<sup>48</sup> In his referral to Graves, Maconachie asked for the idea to be reconsidered partly for "the quenching of Miss Quigley's missionary spirit".<sup>49</sup>

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Reith worked most closely with. When she joined the Board, he noted that "he was sure Mrs Hamilton would bring a livelier and more critical intelligence to bear.... So she did". Reith, op.cit., p.173. Little is known about his relationship with Caroline Bridgeman or Margery Fry.

<sup>44</sup> Lionel Fielden, *The Natural Bent* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1960); Lambert, op.cit.; Gorham, op.cit.

<sup>45</sup> R51/397/1a: Talks: Talks Policy 1930-March 1938, Quigley to Rose-Troup, November 9<sup>th</sup> 1936

<sup>46</sup> Same file, Rose-Troup to Graves, November 17<sup>th</sup> 1936

<sup>47</sup> Same file, Graves to Rose-Troup, November 19<sup>th</sup> 1936

<sup>48</sup> Same file, Quigley to Maconachie, July 6<sup>th</sup> 1937

<sup>49</sup> Same file, Maconachie to Graves, July 14<sup>th</sup> 1937

Graves scrawled ‘All right’ at the bottom of the memo but added that there should be “no pandering to the fair sex who like to dye their hair, make their nails hideous and generally obscure their natural beauty by paint and other atrocities!” Graves was an ex-military man who, like Carpendale, exhibited old-fashioned views about women. Quigley’s modest series *Making the Most of your Looks* was finally broadcast in October 1937.<sup>50</sup>

Relatively few BBC staff were employed, like Quigley, directly in the programme-making process, rather finance, public relations, technology and internal administration swept up the largest numbers. Salaries needed to be paid, typewriter ribbons procured, sheet-music filed, press releases issued, contracts drawn up, these were the day-to-day jobs of the BBC and the daily working lives of the individuals responsible for these tasks, mostly women, were dependent on their relationship with their direct boss. It was the individual manager who set the workload, who was affable or strict, who wrote the annual Confidential Report. Chapters Two and Four consider the importance of this rapport which could influence promotion and pay. As will be further explored, line-managers were themselves in the hands of those above them in the hierarchy.

The role of Administration was particularly pertinent to the employment of women at the BBC because this was the department/division that was responsible for all staffing issues. The BBC’s Heads of Administration, including the Women’s Staff Administrator (WSA), agreed salary grades, issued directives on Saturday working and implemented the marriage bar. Often derided for petty regulations (for example *Ariel* reported with glee on the “great paper clip” war of 1938), it was the expansion of administration that in many ways boosted opportunities for women in the BBC.<sup>51</sup> Increased bureaucracy, with its adherent increase in paperwork, generated more duplicating, more filing and more typing, all work for women, as we will see.

Most BBC women were too busy with their everyday jobs to give much thought to the structure and hierarchy of the BBC, but the way the Company/ Corporation

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<sup>50</sup> Radio Times, October 21<sup>st</sup> 1937 lists the series as a 4.45pm *Tea Time Talk*.

<sup>51</sup> Internal Instruction No. 408 forbade the use of paper clips except for mail. Ariel, March 1938

was configured and run had a profound impact on the way they were perceived and managed. John Reith devised the master plan and the chapter now considers his relationships with BBC women.

## John Reith and BBC Women

John Reith was born in July 1889 in the small Scottish town of Stonehaven, the youngest, by ten years, of six children.<sup>52</sup> His father was a church minister and steeped in the Presbyterian faith, Reith believed from an early age that he was different from others and called by God for high office.<sup>53</sup> At fourteen, Reith was sent away to boarding school, Gresham's in Norfolk. He had hoped to go to Oxford or Cambridge but his family steered him instead towards an engineering career where his aptitude to inspire and organise staff soon became apparent.<sup>54</sup> Called up for war-service in November 1914, his time at the Front was cut short by a bullet wound to his cheek, from which he carried a permanent scar.<sup>55</sup> This war wound and his great height, he was 6ft 6ins tall, made him an imposing figure.

After his retirement from active military service, Reith embarked on a succession of jobs including work for a US arms factory and at the Ministry of Munitions before accepting, in 1920, the position of General Manager at the Beardmore engineering works at Coatbridge in Scotland. Here he introduced a new regime including a time-clock and outside-work activities such as concerts, football matches and lectures; innovations which improved productivity.<sup>56</sup> Thus, by the age of thirty, Reith was already acting on his belief in a disciplined, loyal workforce, cared for by a benevolent employer. Frustrated by a lack of appreciation of his efforts, Reith resigned from Beardmore's in January 1922.

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<sup>52</sup> For this potted biography I have drawn extensively on: McIntyre, The Expense of Glory

<sup>53</sup> Andrew Boyle, Only the Wind Will Listen: Reith of the B.B.C. (London: Hutchinson, 1972) pp.73, 121. In a radio interview Reith stated, "Merely that one felt somehow or another, arrogance if you like, or some sort of conceit, that I had qualities at that age seventeen and a half that ought to enable me to do something in the world", Reith Remembered. BBC Sound Archive No: 87181, broadcast June 21<sup>st</sup> 1989

<sup>54</sup> For example, at the civil engineering firm Pearson where he began work in 1914, he was quickly given responsibility for a group of skilled men. Boyle, *op.cit.*, p.55

<sup>55</sup> He served with the Fifth Scottish Rifles and then with the Royal Engineers.

<sup>56</sup> McIntyre, *op.cit.*, p.99

After several months drifting, in October 1922 an advertisement for the post of General Manager of the British Broadcasting Company caught his eye in a morning newspaper and he applied for the job.<sup>57</sup>

The minutiae of Reith's life and BBC career can be found in his extensive diaries, which he started writing in 1911 when he was twenty-two, and which offer a startling insight into his character and relationships. The most powerful and enduring association was with his mother, Ada, for whom he assumed responsibility following his father's death in 1919. Her photograph always had pride of place on Reith's desk at the BBC and when she died in 1935, he was consumed by guilt and grief. His relationship with his father, on the other hand, was one of awe and a constant search for approval.<sup>58</sup> Reith had few close friends although as a young man he developed a passionate, obsessive alliance with a local boy who was seven years his junior, and which would continue to haunt him throughout his years at the BBC.<sup>59</sup> His courtship of Muriel Odhams, whom he met in 1917 when she was a member of the Women's Legion, was awkward and unromantic.<sup>60</sup> They married in 1921, their son Christopher was born in 1928, their daughter Marista in 1933.<sup>61</sup> For Reith there was no question that his wife would give up paid work; hers was the domestic domain, caring for their children, sorting out servants, entertaining guests, awaiting her husband's return at any time of night or day. Reith's ability to view BBC women in a different light implies a clear division in his mind between the private and the public.

There is little in Reith's background or character to suggest he would take an enlightened attitude towards women; he had attended boarding school, served in the army and worked in engineering, all male-dominated environments. Reith was not intrinsically a modern man, his family background was traditional and

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<sup>57</sup> After he'd posted his application, Reith noticed the Chairman of the BBC was Sir William Noble, an Aberdonian. He retrieved the letter and added a note to the effect that Noble probably knew Reith's family. McIntyre, *op.cit.*, p.114

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.2, 24

<sup>59</sup> McIntyre makes a detailed analysis of his relationships with Charlie Bowser, see in particular pp.21-85

<sup>60</sup> McIntyre, *op.cit.*, pp. 82-89

<sup>61</sup> In 2006, Reith's daughter, Marista Leishman, published a biography of her father in which she portrayed him as a deeply troubled man, a workaholic who dedicated his life to the BBC. Marista Leishman, *My Father: Reith of the B.B.C.* (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 2006)

conservative.<sup>62</sup> However, confronted by the enormity of broadcasting, he became aware that he needed to harness the best available staff and if this included women, he was prepared to employ them. When a woman proved herself to be loyal and able, he was willing to support and promote her. This positive approach was encapsulated in a 1926 directive about the Company's need to ensure equality of opportunity for salaried women staff.<sup>63</sup>

It is worth analysing this memorandum in more detail to reveal the opinions within it Reith expressed. Headed 'Women Assistants' it was sent to the Station Directors at all the BBC's provincial headquarters in April 1926. From late 1923, all local stations had been required to appoint "one good woman of personality, education and standing", to oversee their children's and women's programmes.<sup>64</sup> By 1926, Reith had come to believe that a broader view needed to be taken of the Women Assistants' responsibilities. In the memo, he forcefully expressed his belief that titles such as Chief Aunt or Woman Organiser should be abandoned, because of the limited impression of duties they portrayed. Rather, women should be referred to as Assistants, as men were, and be given equal authority to sign for the Station Director where necessary. The class of women they were now employing "or ought to be employing", Reith emphasised, was such that they should rank on the same footing as men and be as eligible as men for promotion. Again, he was clear that although a large part of their activities were in connection with women and children this did not warrant inequality, as the efficient planning and conduct of these programmes was as important as any other. Looking to their broader responsibilities, Reith declared that there was "no reason actually why a woman should not be a Station Director", although he acknowledged it would be "extraordinarily difficult to find one suitable."<sup>65</sup>

The memo provides clear evidence that, at Assistant level at least, Reith believed men and women in the BBC should have equal opportunities. This applied, in particular, to the highly-educated women who were applying to the BBC by the mid-1920s. The fact that duties associated with women and children were not

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<sup>62</sup> Reith's draconian attitudes towards alcohol and divorce would become the stuff of legends.

<sup>63</sup> R49/940: Staff Policy: Women Assistants 1926. Reith to All Station Directors, April 30<sup>th</sup> 1926

<sup>64</sup> CO9: BBCo. Station Directors Meeting: Minutes: 1923-1927, December 11<sup>th</sup> 1923

<sup>65</sup> Staff Policy: Women Assistants 1926, op.cit.

seen to be inferior is also important because, as will unfold, women were often selected for this type of work. Reith's doubt that a suitably qualified female Station Director could be found is again interesting as within months of this directive Hilda Matheson was appointed Director of Talks, a position considered to be of equal if not higher status.<sup>66</sup> The 1926 memo established, on paper at least, the ethos of sexual equality at the BBC. We can't know for certain Reith's motivation but it appears to be one of fairness; if men and women were doing the same or similar work, they should be held in equal regard and be equally rewarded. The fact that, in reality, BBC women were often treated unequally was due largely to its methods of recruitment, promotion and pay, as will be revealed.

Although Reith believed that able women should have the same prospects as able men, it didn't mean he necessarily felt comfortable in their presence. His diaries describe a number of occasions when he was baffled by encounters with BBC women, for example in 1926 Reith noted a meeting with a "weird creature, Miss Mackenzie", who was wanted for a position in Cardiff.<sup>67</sup> The following year he was similarly uncertain about Miss Mills, "a rather weird individual" who was to be the 'central filing girl'.<sup>68</sup> This was Agnes Mills, the serious-minded Oxford graduate recruited to establish the Registry. Reith's unease about women was captured by Richard Lambert, the Editor of *The Listener*, who offered an insight into the Director General's approach towards senior female staff.

Sir John's attitude towards women officials in broadcasting seemed to oscillate between nervousness and sympathy. When they gained access to his presence, he found it hard to refuse them their specific requests; but afterwards, in the light of other considerations, he might find it necessary to minimise what was conceded, with a Knoxian impatience at "the monstrous regiment of women".<sup>69</sup>

Reith's hesitant attitude towards women is evident here, however there is little to support Lambert's view that they were viewed as a "monstrous regiment".

Reith's frustrations and irritations with senior BBC men are well documented in

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<sup>66</sup> Matheson was recruited on £600 a year, a higher salary than the Station Directors at Bournemouth, Hull, Dundee, Sheffield, Swansea and Liverpool who all earned £500 or less.

<sup>67</sup> *Reith Diaries*, April 29<sup>th</sup> 1926, November 28<sup>th</sup> 1926. Margaret Mackenzie was appointed as an Assistant on a salary of £350. She worked as a press officer in Cardiff.

<sup>68</sup> *Reith Diaries*, September 22<sup>nd</sup> 1927

<sup>69</sup> Lambert, *op.cit.*, p.69

his diaries; similar sentiments directed against BBC women are rare.<sup>70</sup> Chapter Five explores Reith's relationships with the BBC's three most senior women, Hilda Matheson, Mary Somerville and Isa Benzie, who all rose to the level of Director. Here he seemed to have adopted an avuncular rapport, especially in connection with Somerville and Benzie who both joined the BBC fresh from university. Reith's relationship with Matheson, although it descended into hostility and dislike, began as one of friendship and mutual respect.

Reith certainly took pleasure in the company of BBC women he considered to be loyal and undemanding, in particular those he helped to appoint. This included Somerville and Benzie and also, for instance Kathleen Lines and Olive May. Thus Miss May, who ran the telephone exchange, remembered Reith joining her for cocoa after-hours at Savoy Hill, and he made a point of attending the Christmas celebrations of Kathleen Lines, whom Reith had initially hoped would be his own secretary, and who went on to set up and run the Photographic Library.<sup>71</sup> Reith especially enjoyed the personal attention women gave him which included a dedicated switchboard operator and a private waitress, Mrs Swales, who prepared his cups of tea and who looked after him "in a most maternal way."<sup>72</sup> Reith was happiest either being looked after by or looking after women. He found it much harder to work with them collaboratively.

Without a doubt the closest relationships Reith developed at the BBC, whether male or female, were with his personal secretaries. His diaries show that he found them easy to talk to, their constant charm and dedication far more palatable and soothing than the "stupid", "feeble" and "childish" behaviour he deplored in many of the men around him. In her personal testimony, Dorothy Torry who, as Miss Singer, worked in the Director General's office from 1936, confirmed that Reith talked to his secretaries and discussed issues with them, "so we were all in it, you know, in every decision made."<sup>73</sup> Reith's biographer, Ian McIntyre, was struck by the significant role played by his secretaries, describing them as a "succession of

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<sup>70</sup> Reith was not averse to writing damning comments about women, as his hostile references to the BBC Governor Ethel Snowden show.

<sup>71</sup> Reith Diaries, December 23<sup>rd</sup> 1930, December 21<sup>st</sup> 1932, December 20<sup>th</sup> 1933

<sup>72</sup> Dorothy Torry Interview, June 28<sup>th</sup> 2006

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

remarkable women who would serve, organise, advise, cosset, mother and occasionally bully Reith throughout his BBC career and beyond it.”<sup>74</sup> McIntyre applauded their resilience, their loyalty and the friendship that developed between themselves and Reith, traits that are immediately apparent.

During his sixteen years at the BBC, Reith built intense relationships with three personal secretaries: Isabel Shields, Elizabeth Nash and Jo Stanley.<sup>75</sup> His diaries indicate an almost fatherly relationship with them: taking them to dinner and to the cinema; bringing them back presents from his holidays; popping in for evening coffee at their flats.<sup>76</sup> Following Isabel Shields announcement in 1927 that she was getting married, Reith agreed to visit her future father-in-law, the Bishop of Bradford, just to please her.<sup>77</sup> In return, his secretaries indulged him; they bought him flowers, they entertained his mother when she was in London, they telephoned him with gossip while he was away.<sup>78</sup> The volume of BBC work frequently required their staying after-hours, and they often toiled alongside Reith in the evenings or at weekends. For instance, in January 1926, as Reith pulled together the final papers for the Crawford Committee he noted in his diary “Miss Shields and Miss Nash were both at the house working on evidence.”<sup>79</sup>

Reith’s expectation of total loyalty meant that he was uncertain how to react to his secretaries’ resignations. On Isabel Shields’ final day in the office, Reith took her to dinner at the Mayfair and on to a BBC dance, noting in his diary that he was “sorry that Miss Shields has gone, having had her for over five years and very strenuous ones at that. She has given loyal and devoted service.”<sup>80</sup> Miss Shields was to meet up with her new husband in Paraguay and Reith went to Liverpool

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<sup>74</sup> McIntyre, op.cit., p.120

<sup>75</sup> Initially, Isabel Shields worked alone however during 1925 the complexities of the Managing Director’s job necessitated a second secretary, Elizabeth Nash, and in December 1927, a third ‘assistant secretary’ was recruited, Jo Stanley. Reith noted, “Saw a Miss Stanley, whom Miss Shields and Miss Nash are foisting on me as an assistant secretary.” Reith Diaries, December 6<sup>th</sup> 1927

<sup>76</sup> See for example Reith Diaries, February 1<sup>st</sup> 1923, April 18<sup>th</sup> 1927, August 31<sup>st</sup> 1934, April 25<sup>th</sup> 1938

<sup>77</sup> Reith Diaries, January 19<sup>th</sup> 1928

<sup>78</sup> See for example Reith Diaries July 20<sup>th</sup> 1926, July 11<sup>th</sup> 1927, August 25<sup>th</sup> 1928

<sup>79</sup> Reith Diaries, January 31<sup>st</sup> 1926. The Crawford Committee was one of three government committees that investigated broadcasting during the inter-war years. The others were the Sykes Committee, which reported in 1923, and the Ullswater Committee, which reported in 1935.

<sup>80</sup> Reith Diaries, February 29<sup>th</sup> 1928



Street Station to see her off where they formally shook hands, commenting that although he had obviously not wanted to embrace, she had kissed him on the cheek.<sup>81</sup> Elizabeth Nash's decision to resign in 1936 was taken less kindly. After three months Grace Leave, she had decided she needed more of a life of her own with fewer responsibilities. In his diary entry Reith commented "of course she realises that she's not acting very kindly to the BBC or by me."<sup>82</sup> Reith was surprised, however, at his reaction to her last day:

I really felt very sad at N's departure.... I've had her for 12 years next month, 8 years as fine secretary and such a close association in every way – no secrets of any sort, personal or official, can't end without a real pang. I hadn't realised it until now.

Jo Stanley, who had worked in the Director General's Office for nine years in a more junior capacity, took over as senior secretary for Reith's final two years. Her working life became so entwined with Reith that when he left the BBC in 1938 to become Managing Director of Imperial Airways, she chose to go with him. It was Jo Stanley who shared Reith's final act at the BBC, the symbolic closing-down at midnight of the Droitwich Transmitter; she also drafted his final message to BBC staff.<sup>83</sup>

Dorothy Torry, (Miss Singer), who worked with Reith in a junior capacity from 1936 spoke of John Reith as the passion of her life.<sup>84</sup> The first job he asked her to do was to glue cuttings and pictures from newspapers into a scrapbook. She stuck them in any-old-how which made Reith absolutely furious and he insisted she do it all again. "And of course that taught me the most marvellous lesson at a very early age really. If you do a thing, do it properly." On his final day at the BBC, in June 1938, Reith wrote in his diary that he had kissed Miss Singer.<sup>85</sup> Dorothy Torry recalled that she was looking out of the window, with her back to the room, tears pouring down her face when he suddenly grasped her and kissed her tears

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<sup>81</sup> Reith Diaries, March 23<sup>rd</sup> 1928

<sup>82</sup> Reith Diaries, July 6<sup>th</sup> 1936

<sup>83</sup> McIntyre, op.cit., p.242

<sup>84</sup> Dorothy Torry Interview, op.cit.

<sup>85</sup> Reith Diaries, June 30<sup>th</sup> 1938

away.<sup>86</sup> Miss Singer, along with Jo Stanley, followed Reith to his new job at Imperial Airways.

John Reith's close association with his secretaries was not replicated in his attitude towards other female staff. In general he showed more ambivalence. As we have seen, on the one hand he enjoyed feeling gentlemanly towards them, on the other he found them intimidating and confusing. This dual approach is also discernible in other top male officials. For example Reith's deputy, Carpendale, was also uncertain about BBC women; he appreciated their value to the Company/ Corporation but he could be patronising, referring to even the most senior women as 'girls'.<sup>87</sup> Men like Reith and Carpendale, older, ex military personnel whose education and working lives prior to the BBC had been in the company of men, found it awkward to work with women as equals.<sup>88</sup> This was true of many in the top echelons of the Corporation. On the other hand, the young men who flocked to the BBC from the late 1920s began their working lives in a post-suffrage atmosphere and so were more accepting of women. Salaried staff often worked side by side at the BBC, perhaps even to a female boss. For the BBC's waged workers clearer distinctions were made in the type of work seen as appropriate for men and women, to which the chapter now turns.

## Women's Work/Men's Work

A visitor to the First Floor of Broadcasting House in the mid 1930s would have been struck by the clear delineation between men and women's work. Here, the west side was taken up by the General Office where dozens of female typists, sitting in rows, copied scripts, addressed envelopes and acknowledged applications for jobs. The east side was home to the Registry where, apart from office boys, the all-female staff catalogued BBC documents, filed listener correspondence and ear-marked mail for departments and individuals. The adjoining Post Room, on the other hand, was staffed only by men. This

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<sup>86</sup> E-mail conversation with Dorothy Torry, March 15<sup>th</sup> 2010

<sup>87</sup> For example, Carpendale referred to Isa Benzie, the Foreign Director, as a 'girl'. L1/1049/2: Isa Benzie Staff File, July 22<sup>nd</sup> 1937

<sup>88</sup> For a discussion on women as 'other' in the workplace; see Rosabeth Moss Kanter, Men and Women of the Corporation (New York: Basic Books, 1977) pp.206-229

exclusivity continued in the basement, where only waitresses were employed to serve in the restaurant and on the eighth floor, where the Control Room was home to all-male engineers.

As Sylvia Walby, Jane Lewis and others have shown, waged women's employment in the inter-war years was shaped by sex-typing and segregation.<sup>89</sup> Women were seen to be fitted to certain types of work, often routine, usually lower paid, and in areas where their feminine and maternal natures could best be utilised. The GPO, for example, was excessively segregated.<sup>90</sup> Even in professions such as teaching, which had as one of its appeals the similarity between men and women's work, there were only limited positions where the sexes worked side by side.<sup>91</sup> Therefore in its adoption of sex-typing and segregation for waged staff, the BBC was following the convention and cultural expectations of the times.

At the BBC, waged women's work included telephony, duplicating and filing whereas waged men predominated in equipment, publications distribution and engineering. Thus, work that involved heavy lifting was designated male as were jobs that required technical prowess. Engineering as a career for women was still in its infancy in the inter-war years and the BBC employed no women in this capacity prior to the Second World War.<sup>92</sup> Amongst the BBC's salaried staff there was less sex-stereotyping; assistants, in particular did work that was interchangeable. However, female assistants were more likely to work in programme areas that were deemed to benefit from a feminine touch such as Schools, *Children's Hour* and Women's Talks, while areas of programming viewed as masculine, such as News, Light Entertainment and Sport had

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<sup>89</sup> Sylvia Walby, *Patriarchy at Work: Patriarchal and Capitalist Relations in Employment* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1986); Jane Lewis, *Women in England 1870-1950: Sexual Divisions and Social Change* (Brighton: Wheatsheaf Books, 1984); Catherine Hakim, *Key Issues in Women's Work: Female Heterogeneity and the Polarisation of Women's Employment* (London: Athlone, 1996); Harriet Bradley, *Men's Work, Women's Work: A Sociological History of the Sexual Division of Labour in Employment* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989); Albert J Mills and Peta Tancred, eds., *Gendering Organizational Analysis* (Newbury Park: Sage, 1992)

<sup>90</sup> See Helen Glew, "Women's Employment in the General Post Office, 1914-1939," (PhD., London, 2009)

<sup>91</sup> Alison Oram, *Women Teachers and Feminist Politics 1900 - 1939* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996) pp.80-81

<sup>92</sup> During the Second World War more than 900 women were successfully trained as BBC engineers.

predominantly male staff. The more detailed analysis of sex-typing and segregation in Chapters Two and Four considers the implications of these separate areas of work in the BBC which resulted in varying systems of recruitment, different promotional paths and distinct management structures. The most obvious manifestation of separate spheres of work at the BBC was the existence of the senior positions of Women's Staff Administrator (WSA) and Engineering Establishment Officer (EEO), both posts with responsibility for a large, single-sex staff. The WSA was introduced in 1923, to oversee all female office staff; the EEO was established in 1935 to oversee the specific needs of male engineers.<sup>93</sup>

There were four women-only offices in the BBC: the Telephone Exchange, the Duplicating Office, the General Office and the Registry. While a significant number of waged female staff worked in these woman-only environments, proportionally more worked in mixed offices. Thus at the BBC, even if a woman was performing a different task to a man, often in a support role, she became part of that intrinsic office culture, an important member of the team. The frequent memoranda from managers expressing their dependence on, and gratitude towards, 'isolated' women typists and clerks is evidence of the vital nature of their work and how indispensable to an individual office they became.<sup>94</sup> There may well have been individual managers who were ill-mannered or bullies but, as Chapter Two will appraise, the evidence suggests that most female secretarial/clerical staff were dealt with respectfully.

The BBC offered an environment for women and men who, if not actually working alongside, were constantly interacting and were generally courteous towards each other. Even the most senior BBC man, cocooned in his carpeted office, came into contact with many individual women each day, which was certainly not the case for some senior men in the Civil Service with their male secretaries and often exclusively male offices and departments.<sup>95</sup> The BBC was a post-war industry filled with women. In the main they were metropolitan young

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<sup>93</sup> Peter Florence was appointed Engineering Establishment Officer in 1935.

<sup>94</sup> 'Isolated' secretarial staff were those who worked in individual offices, rather than the General Office. See Chapter Two p.92

<sup>95</sup> Alix Kilroy described herself as an object of curiosity when she joined the Board of Trade as an Assistant Principal in 1925. Alix Meynell, Public Servant, Private Women: An Autobiography (Victor Gollanz, 1984) pp.84-86

women, eager to earn money to enjoy themselves; sharing bed-sits, going to dances, buying off-the-peg clothes. But the BBC also recruited older women, which, as will now be shown, was unusual at a time when many employers preferred to take on girls.

## Youth v Maturity

In January 1935, Isabel Mallinson, the BBC's first Cashier, was due to retire. However her value to the BBC was such that she was invited to stay on past her sixtieth birthday; she was sixty-three when she retired in 1938.<sup>96</sup> The BBC was perceived as a pioneering, youthful organisation and while this was an image it was happy to promote, this belies the fact that many employees were older. Selina Todd, in her study of the employment of working-class young women during this period, used as her cut-off the age of twenty-four, because this was the average age of first marriage, thus anyone aged twenty-five or over was deemed 'adult'.<sup>97</sup> Using this criterion, many women who came to the BBC were mature. Amongst the women recruited in the BBC's first year it is known that Caroline Banks, the Women's Staff Supervisor was twenty-seven, Cecil Dixon, the Accompanist, was thirty and Ella Fitzgerald, the producer of *Women's Hour*, was thirty-seven. It is difficult to know whether older women were attracted to the BBC because they felt their services would be more valued but it may have provided an opportunity to leave a dead-end job for one that appreciated their skills and offered potentially better pay, more attractive conditions of service and the prospect of promotion. Mature women were also appointed to senior posts, Hilda Matheson was thirty-eight when she was recruited to the BBC and there are other examples of women joining in their thirties who had already held responsible jobs.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Salary Information Files

<sup>97</sup> Selina Todd, *Young Women, Work and the Family in England 1918-1950* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) pp.1, 19-20

<sup>98</sup> For example the Adult Education Assistant Mary Adams; the Children's Hour Organiser Christine Orr and the Head of Photographs Kathleen Lines were respectively 32, 38 and 36 when they joined the BBC.

Waged women's employment in the inter-war years was characterised by youth and statistically young women were by far the largest component of the female labour force.<sup>99</sup> The BBC certainly recruited large numbers of young women, however because there was an expectation that they would already have experience or training, the average age that waged women joined the Corporation was twenty-two with few recruited before the age of eighteen.<sup>100</sup> As already noted, even the youngest women had passed the School Certificate and most had worked in a secretarial/clerical capacity before their arrival at the BBC. This was very different to the Civil Service, for example, which recruited Junior Clerks, Writing Assistants and Clerical Assistants by examination, between the ages of 15-18.<sup>101</sup>

As Chapter Three makes clear, most women left the workforce on marriage, either by choice or enforcement, which meant the majority of older women professionals and office workers in the 1920s and 30s, including those at the BBC, were spinsters.<sup>102</sup> There were also a large number of 'surplus' women unable to marry because of the high male casualty rate of the First World War.<sup>103</sup> The feminist writer Ray Strachey stressed the potential grimness of the working lives of women aged over thirty who needed to earn their own living, citing low wages, paltry savings for a pension and the constant fear of being replaced by younger workers.<sup>104</sup> The BBC, however, took a pragmatic approach towards the employment of spinsters many of whom had long careers and ultimately retired on a generous pension. At the BBC longevity of service was rewarded with a ten-

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<sup>99</sup> The 1921 Census showed women aged between 15 and 24 comprised 63% of those in paid employment; in 1931, it was 69%. Many employers preferred young female workers who were prepared to accept lower wages, on routine tasks, in jobs with few promotional prospects. For a discussion on the causes and effects of this see: Lewis, Women in England 1870-1950 ; Deirdre Beddoe, Back to Home and Duty, op.cit.; Gerry Holloway, Women and Work in Britain since 1840 (London: Routledge, 2005)

<sup>100</sup> See Chapter Two pp.95-96

<sup>101</sup> Strachey, Careers and Openings for Women p.217

<sup>102</sup> Many working-class married women continued to work; nearly all the BBC's charwomen were older married women.

<sup>103</sup> It was estimated that there were two million 'surplus' women after the war. See Virginia Nicholson, Singled Out: How Two Million Women Survived without Men after the First World War (London: Viking, 2007)

<sup>104</sup> Ray Strachey, ed., Our Freedom and Its Results by Five Women (London: Hogarth Press, 1936) p.145. Organisations such as the Over-Thirty Association, established in 1934 and the National Spinsters' Pension Association, established in 1935, campaigned specifically for improved working conditions for older unmarried women.

year bonus and *Ariel* in April 1937 listed 102 women who had been with the BBC for a decade or more, around 12% of the female staff, most of whom were spinsters.<sup>105</sup> Many women remained with the Corporation for the duration of their working lives for example, in the summer of 1953 *Ariel* bade farewell to six women recruited in the 1920s and 1930s, five of whom were unmarried.<sup>106</sup>

There are occasional documents in the archive, however, which suggest concern that the BBC's image might be adversely affected by the employment of older women. For example, a memo from 1938 shows the Catering Manager's unease about waitresses where the "inevitable march of time" had caused girls who had originally been selected for their general attractiveness as well as their ability, to become "old and haggard in their appearance" as well as slower in their duties.<sup>107</sup> Again, a realisation that the BBC's marriage bar might create the "compulsory spinster", caused reflection on the part of Basil Nicolls, the Director of Internal Administration. Was the object of the marriage bar, he pondered, "to avoid having old or oldish women on the staff?" When it came to spinsters, he continued, "We are virtually faced with their services to the age of retirement."<sup>108</sup> The suggestion here was that older women might be less attractive employees. While references such as these are rare in BBC documents, they confirm the derogatory way in which spinsters and older women were often viewed during this period.<sup>109</sup>

There is at least one incident of a BBC woman lying about her age, indicating an anxiety on her part about the treatment of older women. In 1937, Gwen Williams, who had been employed on a contract basis as an Accompanist for many years, was appointed to the permanent staff of the BBC. It was agreed she would be a good Coach, her value to the BBC seen in the salary she was offered; £450 a year was more than that paid to her male colleagues.<sup>110</sup> Miss Williams was required to

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<sup>105</sup> *Ariel*, April 1937 'Ten Years' Hard'. There were 802 female staff recorded in December 1936

<sup>106</sup> *Ariel*, Summer 1953

<sup>107</sup> R49/73/1: Catering Staff, Conditions of Service, Wade to Pym, September 8<sup>th</sup> 1938

<sup>108</sup> R49/372: Staff Policy: Married Women Policy: Tribunals 1934-1937, Nicolls to Carpendale, March 6<sup>th</sup> 1935

<sup>109</sup> Katherine Holden, *The Shadow of Marriage: Singleness in England, 1914-60* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007) pp.4, 7, 40-41

<sup>110</sup> L1/454: Gwendoline Williams Staff File, Dewar to Lubbock, December 4<sup>th</sup> 1936

fill in a staff record form and wrote her year of birth as 1893, making her forty-four years old. In fact, she was five years older, a detail only revealed in 1953 when she came to retire and her birth certificate was required to verify her pension. A perfunctory note indicates the embarrassment this caused.<sup>111</sup> It is not known why Gwen Williams felt the need to lie about her age. It is doubtful that having offered her a job, the BBC would have rescinded it, if her true age had been known. A more likely explanation is that she believed attitudes towards her might become less positive, and it also had the effect of keeping her in work until she was sixty-five.

The BBC's appointment of Gwen Williams endorses the view that it took a largely positive approach to the employment of older women, who were seen to benefit the BBC with their maturity and experience. The predominant new recruit, though, was a young woman, trained, experienced and eager to work at the BBC. She would have been well turned-out with neat hair, a hat, stockings and gloves, the clothes she wore defining her as a modern working woman.

### High Heels v Low Heels

A photograph of Head Office staff taken on the steps of Savoy Hill in November 1924 shows ranks of men in suit-and-tie, some wearing spats, and a scattering of smartly dressed women most with bobbed hair, several with long strings of beads.<sup>112</sup> What one chose to wear to work was important; it wasn't only a reflection of personal taste and style, it also reflected the ethos of the work environment. It is clear that in the early years of the BBC, staff wore clothes that demonstrated a strong sense of respectability; later was added the notion of glamour.

In her study of glamour and feminism, Carol Dyhouse linked the idea of being glamorous not only with artifice and sophisticated allure but also with the new

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<sup>111</sup> Same file, December 11<sup>th</sup> 1952

<sup>112</sup> As illustrated in Briggs, The Birth of Broadcasting p.225. In November 1924, the Head Office staff would have been around 150.



technologies of the early twentieth century such as the silver screen and the fast car.<sup>113</sup> This left the BBC in an ambiguous position. On the one hand it was undoubtedly a new technology and was certainly linked with celebrity; *Radio Times* was not averse to publishing glamorous pictures of wireless personalities. On the other hand, as the BBC matured, it was determined to project an image of seriousness and decorum appropriate for an organisation committed to public service.

Certainly, dress was one of the areas watched over by the Women's Staff Administrator (WSA). Clare Lawson Dick, who started as a filing clerk in 1935, recalled how "anyone who came without stockings on a hot day would be spoken to at once."<sup>114</sup> Mary Lewis, a checking clerk in Duplicating in the late 1930s remembered that "ladies were expected to wear hats and gloves in coming to work."<sup>115</sup> Dorothy Torry, who became one of Reith's junior secretaries in 1936, was appreciative of the advice she got from the WSA's office about how she should do her hair and make herself look respectable.<sup>116</sup> There was an expectation that women would be well turned out, and this applied to both the weekly-waged and monthly-salaried staff. A photograph of a cheerful group of charwomen leaving Broadcasting House in 1934 shows them to be smartly dressed; many in decorous hats and calf-length coats, all in polished Mary-Jane shoes, at least one sporting a fur wrap. [See Fig 5.1 p.119]

In their manners and dress, women staff represented the dual image of the BBC; a serious organisation dedicated to public service that was also touched with modernity and glamour. For example, in August 1937, a *Daily Express* staff reporter, hiding in a nearby doorway, watched the BBC secretaries, "chosen for their looks as well as their efficiency", as they came out of Broadcasting House. Commenting on their appearance he noted that, "most of them wear two-piece suits and felt Homburgs and flat shoes, all very good and very plain".<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Carol Dyhouse, *Glamour: Women, History, Feminism* (London: Zed Books, 2010) pp.1,10

<sup>114</sup> *The Oral History of the BBC*: Clare Lawson Dick interview, March 30th 1979. A memo from 1933 made clear that, even in a heat-wave, female staff would be required to wear stockings. R49/677: Staff Miscellany: Administration A-Z, Clarke to Nicolls, April 12<sup>th</sup> 1933

<sup>115</sup> *The Oral History of the BBC*: Mary Lewis interview, December 13<sup>th</sup> 1978

<sup>116</sup> *Dorothy Torry interview*, op.cit.

<sup>117</sup> *Daily Express*, August 6th 1937

However, Maurice Gorham, who arrived in 1926 as a *Radio Times* Assistant, was captivated by what he saw as the glamour of many women:

Even in Savoy Hill the BBC secretaries were beginning to bloom, though they reached their full flower in the early days of Broadcasting House... It was a great sight to see them going out at lunch-time through that glossy entrance-hall, high-heeled, sheer-stockinged, beautifully made-up, clutching their furs around them, talking disdainfully in clear, high voices. The surprising thing about them was that so many of them were keen on their jobs.<sup>118</sup>

Gorham, who confessed to shocking his superiors by wearing flannel trousers and a red tie when he joined the Corporation, voiced the often-held view that a glamorous woman could not be serious about her work. Whilst stereotypical, it was a view pertinent to the BBC and one that appears to have been adhered to by many women staff, in particular those who were monthly-paid. Photographs unquestionably show that those who were waged were more likely to dress glamorously - and wear make-up.

The *Daily Express* reporter, in his secret account of BBC secretaries, noted that not one left the building with a cigarette, “and there was only an odd one with too much make-up on her face.”<sup>119</sup> As Carol Dyhouse has shown, the use of cosmetics in the inter-war years was a quick and easy way to create glamour but whether, and how, women should use them was a moot point.<sup>120</sup> Although its use had gained credence by the mid 1930s, many older women and men (like the BBC’s Cecil Graves, as we have seen) continued to view make-up as unrespectable, hence the notice taken of their use by BBC women.<sup>121</sup> This was not a view shared by the BBC Governor Mary Agnes Hamilton, who saw the contemporary young woman’s mouth “exceedingly well defined in scarlet” as the symbol of a generation who had grown up accepting female emancipation as the norm.<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> Gorham, op.cit., p.23

<sup>119</sup> *Daily Express*, August 6th 1937

<sup>120</sup> Dyhouse, op.cit., pp.64-65

<sup>121</sup> Sally Alexander has written about the use of cosmetics as a symbol of a young woman’s defiance in the inter-war years. *Becoming a Woman and Other Essays in 19th and 20th Century Feminist History* (New York: New York University Press, 1995) pp.219-224

<sup>122</sup> Mary Agnes Hamilton in Strachey, ed., *Our Freedom and Its Results* pp.233, 239

That many of the BBC's women wore cosmetics is apparent from a four-page spread of unnamed clerical and secretarial staff in *Ariel* in December 1937. Headlined 'Is there a BBC Type of Feminine Beauty?' the portraits of twenty-nine waged female employees reveal that most have plucked eyebrows and use lipstick, a few even have exquisitely made-up eyes.<sup>123</sup> [See Fig 2.1 p.68] However, the notion that to be taken seriously career-wise, women shouldn't use cosmetics is suggested by an earlier *Ariel* photographic feature. The pictures of nine of the BBC's most senior secretaries show them all to be fresh-faced.<sup>124</sup> [See Fig 2.2 p.68] Salaried women staff's dislike of cosmetics is evident from snapshots in the Salary Information Files; few are adorned in any way. This was true also of elite women staff, for example the only embellishment Hilda Matheson appears to have used was powder.<sup>125</sup> The one senior female staff member who appears regularly to have used cosmetics was Isa Benzie, the Foreign Director. The fact that most of the BBC's salaried women chose not to wear make-up suggests that it was viewed as frivolous and unbecoming in a woman who held a higher status job.

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<sup>123</sup> *Ariel*, December 1937

<sup>124</sup> *Ariel*, October 1937

<sup>125</sup> Hilda Matheson Letters, December 20<sup>th</sup> 1928



Fig 2.1: Is There a BBC Type of Beauty? *Ariel*, December 1937



Fig 2.2: Faces You Should Know: Nine Secretaries, *Ariel*, October 1937

Whether to wear cosmetics or not was not an issue for BBC men, here dress was more about authority and the dress-code remained largely dark suit and tie although, as the 1920s progressed, spats and pin-stripes gave way to the more up-to-date lounge suit. Photographs of senior men in *Ariel* in the late 1930s show almost all attired in formal jacket and tie. The exception was creative men, those who worked, for example, as producers and executives in *Variety* or *Drama*. Here, Gorham observed, the trend was towards “high-necked sweaters, corduroy trousers and spongy shoes.”<sup>126</sup> The BBC also had a policy of appointing ex-military men as House staff, for example as commissionaires and receptionists. They were encouraged to wear uniform and medals which gave to those entering Savoy Hill/Broadcasting House an immediate impression of propriety and discipline and also evoked memories of war and the glorious dead.

BBC women wore clothes that reflected their self-assurance but also defined their status.<sup>127</sup> For some it was a sober pullover and skirt, for others a floral frock, for still others a stole or a fur. The glamour and prestige of work at the BBC, coupled with a requirement for decorum, established a mode of dress that was formal yet feminine. Women were expected to be well turned out. Reith made no comment about what staff should wear, the only area where he intervened was in the attire of announcers who, as the embodiment of the BBC, were expected from 1924 to wear full evening dress. A key area where Reith had a direct impact on staff was in the provision of welfare.

## Perks, Clubs and Associations

In May 1936, Mrs Dubarry, one of the Restaurant Supervisors at Broadcasting House was awarded a grant of £10 towards the cost of her daughter’s illness.<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> Gorham, op.cit., p.16

<sup>127</sup> Sally Alexander also wrote about the importance of dress in asserting a woman’s femininity and self-esteem. Alexander, op.cit., pp.213-215

<sup>128</sup> R3/3/11: Control Board Minutes, 1936, May 26th 1936

Like all staff she was eligible to apply to the BBC's Benevolent Fund for financial help in situations of ill health, bereavement and other personal matters. Reith believed strongly in staff welfare which was a strategy increasingly popular within large companies in the inter-war years who used the 'extras' of clubs, pensions, subsidised catering and so on, to encourage loyalty amongst employees and to undermine potential trade union activity.<sup>129</sup> At a time when paid holidays were largely in the gift of the employer, the BBC offered a generous allowance; as early as 1925, all office-based staff who had been with the Company for more than nine months were entitled to three weeks annual leave, house staff to two weeks and charwomen to a week.<sup>130</sup> Hours of work were also limited to eight hours a day and in 1936, half-day working on Saturdays was abandoned.<sup>131</sup> As early as 1925, Reith had established a pension scheme for staff and in February 1933 this Provident Fund was incorporated into the London Life Pension Scheme. Membership of the scheme was compulsory for all non-manual staff and optional for manual staff, the BBC matching the equivalent five per cent of salary (or optional seven and a half per cent) that was contributed by staff. Long-service was also rewarded with a ten-year bonus and, for some senior employees, Grace Leave.<sup>132</sup> In addition, while the sick leave allowance was officially four weeks a year, staff with good service who were ill for longer periods, were treated more kindly, with individual cases considered on merit.<sup>133</sup>

When Broadcasting House opened in May 1932, Reith assembled the 700 Head Office staff in the Concert Hall where he reiterated that one of his main purposes was "the health and happiness of each one of you".<sup>134</sup> The iconic building offered many new comforts for example it was air-conditioned and boasted an on-site Matron, Mrs Starkey, who worked from a state-of-the-art medical room. There

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<sup>129</sup> See for example Arthur J. McIvor, A History of Work in Britain, 1880-1950 (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001) pp.98-99.

<sup>130</sup> The first Holidays with Pay Act was passed in 1938. R49/323/1:Staff Policy: Leave: Annual 1925-1939.

<sup>131</sup> In summer, working hours were 9.30-5.30, in winter 9.30-6.00.

<sup>132</sup> This was three-months leave, with a financial grant, that was offered to 'creatives' who used time away travelling to regenerate and get fresh ideas. Maurice Gorham devotes a whole chapter of his memoir to his 'Grace Term' in Havana and the USA. Gorham, op.cit., pp.71-79

<sup>133</sup> The practice was commented on in an article on Welfare Arrangements at the BBC in Nursing Times, April 28<sup>th</sup> 1934.

<sup>134</sup> Quoted in Asa Briggs, The Golden Age of Broadcasting, The History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom, vol. 2 (London Oxford University Press, 1965) p.465

were also two large subsidised restaurants, one providing waitress service for up to 210 people at a time, the other a ‘cold’ service and the provision of snacks.<sup>135</sup> Afternoon tea was also an important ritual and was usually taken at one’s desk. Dorothy Torry described the thrill, once a week, of Fuller’s cake being served from a tea trolley.<sup>136</sup> Even in the cramped environment of Savoy Hill, tea, coffee and basic catering facilities were available.

In 1925, seven years before the move to Broadcasting House, Reith established the BBC Club. Ruth Cockerton, who began her BBC career as a shorthand typist in 1924, remembered how Studio No.1 at Savoy Hill was used for “Miss Osborne’s physical drill class” and how swimming galas were held at the Lambeth Baths “with Captain Peter Eckersley pirouetting on the top board.”<sup>137</sup> From simplistic beginnings, the Club was expanded in 1929 to include a purpose-built sports ground and Club House with extensive facilities at Motspur Park in Surrey, “so complete in every respect – from plunge bath to parquet floor”.<sup>138</sup> The BBC Club Bulletin, first published in January 1930, listed not only a wide range of sporting activities but also an Amateur Dramatics Society and a Debating Society. By June 1930, 400 of the 700 Head Office staff were club members.<sup>139</sup> “Healthy interdepartmental and individual competition” was promoted with senior management encouraged to take part.<sup>140</sup> For example, in August 1930, Hilda Matheson, President of the Hockey Section, presented the winners with a Silver Challenge Cup while in November 1930, the BBC Governor Lady Snowden attended a Club Dance.<sup>141</sup> Separate Clubs were also established at all the BBC’s Regional offices.

The 1930s in particular witnessed a growing interest in health and outdoor pursuits with organisations such as the Youth Hostel Association and the

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<sup>135</sup> Wilfred Goatman, *By-Ways of the B.B.C.* (London P.S. King and Son, Ltd 1938) p.49. During one month in 1938, 22,000 morning refreshments, 15,000 lunches, 8,000 evening meals, and 2,000 meals during the night had been served.

<sup>136</sup> Dorothy Torry interview, op.cit.

<sup>137</sup> *Ariel*, June 1938

<sup>138</sup> *BBC Club Bulletin*, January 1930. Motspur Park was opened in June 1929.

<sup>139</sup> *The Heterodyne*, June 1930

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>141</sup> *The Heterodyne*, August 1930, November 1930

Women's League of Health and Beauty attracting large memberships.<sup>142</sup> The BBC Club tapped into this popularity with its profusion of sports clubs. While many were single-sex, women were ranked alongside men in motoring, rifle shooting and table-tennis and played alongside men in chess and bridge. The Midland Region even developed a Mixed Hockey team.<sup>143</sup> BBC teams also played outside fixtures, with the Ladies Netball Club competing against, for instance, Lloyds Bank, Southern Railway and WH Smith, while the Ladies Hockey Team took on Battersea Polytechnic and the Ministry of Labour II.

Reith was adamant that, because conditions of service at the BBC were considered to be good, employees did not want or need a staff association. The issue of a staff association had first been raised by the BBC governor Ethel Snowden in 1930, which resulted in an investigation of if and how other comparable organisations ran such bodies.<sup>144</sup> Reith, however, with the backing of his senior managers, provided ample evidence that staff were content and did not require representation.<sup>145</sup> This view was not unfounded; staff were fiercely loyal to both Reith and to the BBC. In March 1934, for example, during a particularly ugly press campaign that claimed mass staff discontent, Lilian Taylor (who opened the chapter), now an Accounts Clerk, organised a petition that expressed disgust at the newspaper allegations and asserted commitment to the BBC; 800 signed, almost half the staff.<sup>146</sup>

The situation with regards to a BBC staff association changed in March 1936. This was when the Ullswater Report was published, with its recommendation that facilities for a representative organisation for BBC staff should be granted if staff wished it.<sup>147</sup> The Ullswater Committee was a government committee set up to consider the BBC's Charter which, after ten years, was due for renewal on December 31<sup>st</sup> 1936.<sup>148</sup> The Report coincided with a government review, set up

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<sup>142</sup> Juliet Gardiner, *The Thirties: An Intimate History* (London: Harper Press, 2010) pp. 602-603, 522-523

<sup>143</sup> *Ariel*, June 1936

<sup>144</sup> WAC: R/1/1: Board of Governors Minutes: 1927-1930, May 4<sup>th</sup> 1930

<sup>145</sup> R1/66/2: Board of Governors. DG's Reports and Papers, May-Dec 1930, Proposed Staff Association Reports, May 28th 1930

<sup>146</sup> Briggs, *The Golden Age of Broadcasting* pp. 454-456

<sup>147</sup> Briggs, *op.cit.*, p.500

<sup>148</sup> For a detailed discussion on the Ullswater Committee see Briggs, pp.476-513



in the wake of the notorious Lambert v Levita court case, which had exposed BBC management's inept treatment of a member of staff.<sup>149</sup> Reith took the directive about a staff association seriously and instructed his new Director of Staff Administration, William St John Pym, to commence investigations into how this might work.<sup>150</sup> Pym made extensive inquiries into how other companies and organisations operated their staff associations. However, his report published in 1937, showed that there was still little enthusiasm amongst BBC staff.<sup>151</sup> Pym concurred this was probably because the issue had become bound up with the principle of a vote of confidence in management, rather than a being rejection of a staff association per se. When, in November 1938, a ballot was held asking staff if they were in favour of establishing a Joint Council, of the 80% who voted, 77% were in favour.<sup>152</sup> Negotiations about the establishment of the BBC Staff Association took many months and, delayed by the outbreak of the Second World War, the first meeting wasn't until April 1941. In the event, the Association records show that issues specifically relating to women were rarely discussed: the only issue that caused any debate was the employment of women engineers, both men and women being anxious about their status and permanency.<sup>153</sup>

Members of the BBC were not barred from joining unions during the inter-war years.<sup>154</sup> A few areas were highly unionised for example large numbers of engineers were members of the Amalgamated Engineering Union while newsroom workers might be members of the National Union of Journalists, both

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<sup>149</sup> Richard Lambert, Editor of *The Listener*, took an action for slander against Sir Cecil Levita who had questioned his ability to do his job properly. The BBC panicked, and rather than support Lambert, tried to get him to drop the case, which subsequently became a cause celebre in the press. Lambert won and the BBC was impelled by government committee to scrutinise its working practices towards staff. See also Briggs pp.472-473

<sup>150</sup> Pym made extensive inquiries into how other companies and organisations operated their staff associations, for example the L.C.C., the Treasury, and the Gas Light and Coke Company. R49/12: Staff Policy: Director of Staff Administration Report 1936-1940, November 1936

<sup>151</sup> Briggs, op.cit., p.513

<sup>152</sup> Following Pym's report, the Board of Governors requested advice from a small Treasury committee who suggested a Joint Council on the lines of a Whitely Council. Briggs, op.cit., p.514

<sup>153</sup> For example, there was concern about women engineers replacing men. R/49/662: Staff Association General Bulletins, December 1941, Women Operators

<sup>154</sup> Similarly at the John Lewis Partnership, staff weren't prevented from joining trade unions but John Spedan Lewis believed that the conditions of service offered by the Partnership made this unnecessary. Judy Faraday, "A Kind of Superior Hobby: Women Managers in the John Lewis Partnership 1918-1950," (M.Phil., University of Wolverhampton, 2009) pp.105-106

male-dominated areas of work.<sup>155</sup> In general, unionisation within the Corporation was low; Richard Lambert, editor of *The Listener*, believed this was because staff in the 1920s and 30s were “too middle-class to welcome trade-union notions”.<sup>156</sup> However, being middle-class did not preclude women from joining unions; as Alison Oram and Helen Glew have shown, high numbers of women teachers and Civil Service clerks were unionised at this time. Rather it was because there were no key issues at the BBC, such as enshrined unequal pay or the compulsion to resign on marriage, about which salaried women felt impassioned enough to unite.<sup>157</sup> In addition, the bulk of the BBC’s waged women staff were office workers, a group notoriously difficult to unionise in the inter-war years, mainly because most worked in small and disparate establishments. In 1939, the Association of Women Clerks and Secretaries (known as AWKS), the main union for women office workers, could boast only 2,500 members nationally.<sup>158</sup>

AWKS attempt to gain a foothold at the BBC was not a success. In March 1936, following the Ullswater Report and its recommendations for a staff association, Anne Godwin, Organising Secretary of AWKS, wrote to the BBC with a request that their literature be distributed amongst women staff.<sup>159</sup> She subsequently met with Miss Freeman, the Women’s Staff Administrator, who reported the interview to Basil Nicolls, the Controller (Administration). Freeman informed Nicolls that Godwin had asked for assurances that BBC women who joined AWKS would not be looked upon with disfavour; Godwin also wanted to know if there would be objections to a woman member of staff, who was already a member of AWKS, canvassing for membership.<sup>160</sup> Although Freeman and Nicolls expressed no objection to these actions, if done with discretion, the tone of their memos leaves

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<sup>155</sup> R49/850: Trades Unions: Amalgamated Engineering Union, 1935 to 1952; R49/871: Trades Unions, National Union of Journalists

<sup>156</sup> Lambert, op.cit., p.159. Female membership of trade unions remained low in the inter-war year, never reaching more than 19% of total membership. Lewis, op.cit., p.169

<sup>157</sup> Helen Glew showed that 80% of female post office were members of the Association of Post Office Women Clerks in 1921. Glew, op.cit., p.192. In 1929, 83% of women teachers were members of NUT. Oram, op.cit., p.226

<sup>158</sup> Hamilton, *Women at Work*, p.144

<sup>159</sup> R49/857: Staff Policy Trade Unions: Association of Women Clerks and Secretaries: 1936–1938: 1938, Godwin to Reith. March 23<sup>rd</sup> 1936. Anne Godwin (1897-1992) was to become one of the leading women in the trade union movement. She was TUC President, 1961-1962, created a D.B.E in 1962 and served as a BBC governor from 1962-1968.

<sup>160</sup> Same file, Freeman to Nicolls, May 5<sup>th</sup> 1936. This is a rare reference to a BBC woman being a union member.

no doubt that they were worried AWKS could become a nuisance.<sup>161</sup> There was therefore outrage when it was discovered that, through the ‘filching’ of a staff list, a leaflet entitled “Why the BBC Women Staff Should Organise” had been posted to all female employees.<sup>162</sup> In a letter about the incident to Dame Meriel Talbot, a trustee of AWKS, Nicolls explained:

Of course we have every sympathy for the Association’s work on behalf of underpaid typists working in bad conditions, but the very knowledge that they are doing good work in this direction makes one wonder why they should waste their time on us.<sup>163</sup>

Despite Godwin’s assertions that it was accepted practice for trade unions to make contact with potential members this way, the BBC considered the actions of AWKS to be underhand and official future correspondence with the union was broken off.<sup>164</sup> As an extra precaution, in March 1937, a letter was sent to all BBC women staff informing them that the actions of AWKS were without the approval of the Corporation.<sup>165</sup> This didn’t prevent AWKS organising a recruitment meeting in December 1937, however Miss Freeman reported that it was “very poorly attended”, confirming low interest amongst BBC women staff.<sup>166</sup>

The BBC’s treatment of AWKS stands in stark contrast to the sympathetic hearing given to the National Union of Clerks and Administrative Workers (NUCAW). In February 1938, Herbert Elvin, NUCAW’s General Secretary, met with Basil Nicolls to discuss the possibility of his union’s leaflets being distributed at the BBC; Nicolls agreed they could.<sup>167</sup> Nicolls’ record of the interview was one of joviality and male banter; Miss Godwin was discussed with Elvin expressing the opinion that she was a “troublesome person”, to which Nicolls concurred. At a subsequent meeting between Elvin and Douglas Clarke, the BBC’s General Establishment Officer, AWKS and Miss Godwin were again discussed in

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<sup>161</sup> Same file, June 4<sup>th</sup> 1936, June 16<sup>th</sup> 1936

<sup>162</sup> Same File, Undated document headed Notes on the Present Situation in Regard to Trade Unions, January 1937

<sup>163</sup> Same file, Nicolls to Dame Meriel Talbot, February 10<sup>th</sup> 1937. Dame Meriel Talbot was a member of the BBC’s General Advisory Committee.

<sup>164</sup> Same file, Nicolls to Godwin, February 17<sup>th</sup> 1937

<sup>165</sup> Same file, Pym to All Women Staff, March 9<sup>th</sup> 1937

<sup>166</sup> Same file, Freeman to Pym, December 17<sup>th</sup> 1937

<sup>167</sup> R49/859: Staff Policy Trade Unions: Clerical and Administrative Workers Union: 1938-1940. Report by Nicolls of an interview with Elvin, February 16<sup>th</sup> 1938

unflattering terms.<sup>168</sup> The implication here was that a woman union official could not be trusted in the same way as a man.<sup>169</sup> However, ultimately the BBC had to agree to fair-play. When Anne Godwin learned that NUCAW were to be given access to BBC staff, she again requested access to female employees. The Control Board Minutes for May 1938 report reluctant agreement, the facilities given to the one trade union making refusal to the other impossible.<sup>170</sup> Membership of trade unions, however, remained very low and only a handful of BBC women appear to have joined AWKS.

## Conclusion

The inter-war BBC was a good place to work. From its haphazard origins to its image as “the prim official with a black hat and rolled umbrella” the BBC attracted bright, dedicated men and women; proud to be part of an organisation that reached into the heart of Britain.<sup>171</sup> At its helm was John Reith, “the benevolent, if strict, father” whose vision of public service broadcasting imbued the BBC with a sense of purpose and duty.<sup>172</sup> Reith created a management framework that reflected his belief in central control; no matter how large the Corporation grew, ultimate responsibility remained in the hands of the few men at the top. As a small organisation in the mid-1920s, the decision-making process was relatively quick, but as the BBC grew and the number of management layers proliferated, the necessity for approval from the top meant the running of the Corporation became increasingly cumbersome. In many ways the increased bureaucratisation of the BBC favoured the employment of women; they were the ones who typed the memos, duplicated the forms and filed the paperwork. These were waged women and here the BBC conformed to the customary sex-typing of jobs prevalent in the inter-war years. The Duplicating Department, Registry, Telephone Exchange and General Office, all-female offices, witnessed rapid expansion. The BBC offered both a congenial work environment and also the

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<sup>168</sup> Same file, Clarke to Nicolls, April 13<sup>th</sup> 1938

<sup>169</sup> Sarah Boston hints at friction between the NUCAW and AWKS in her history of women and trade unions. Sarah Boston, *Women Workers and the Trade Union Movement* (London: Denis Poynter, 1980) p.142. AWKS amalgamated with NUCAW in 1941.

<sup>170</sup> Control Board Minutes, 1938, May 24<sup>th</sup> 1938

<sup>171</sup> Gorham, op.cit., p.11

<sup>172</sup> Grisewood, op.cit., p.79

potential for promotion to the salaried grades, where men and women frequently worked side-by-side. .

People chose to work at the BBC for a variety of reasons. It was undoubtedly an exciting and prestigious place to be; as wireless took hold the BBC became the voice of the nation and attracted increasingly eminent people through its doors. As a member of staff, you might catch a glimpse of, or even get to work with, a film star, a sporting personality or a statesman. For many, public service was the enticement, the desire to be part of an organisation that could change and influence people's lives. As Cecil Lewis explained, the appeal of the BBC was the "opportunity to take part in the life of the nation, to hear great men speak of their country's affairs, to become a witness of all that is said and done".<sup>173</sup> The conditions of employment were also good; women's pay was above average for the times and perks like the BBC Club offered opportunities for socialising and recreation that generated bonhomie.

The BBC displayed attitudes towards women that were at the same time forward-looking and traditional. As a pioneering new industry with no history of antagonism towards women it developed practices of fairness; women were ostensibly to be equals with men. However, the men at the top, mostly older ex-military men, retained a conventional mind-set towards women who were never considered for senior executive posts. Reith was a difficult and complex man and his personal relationships with staff were often awkward. This was particularly apparent in his dealings with women; on the one hand he venerated them and accepted his dependence on them, as he did with his secretaries; on the other he found them confusing and unsettling. On the whole, however, he was always gentlemanly towards them.

In the 1920s and 1930s, women flocked to the BBC. Confidentially dressed and self-assured, they included mature, experienced older women as well as the contemporary young women Mary Agnes Hamilton described as having "the face,

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<sup>173</sup> Lewis, *op.cit.*, p.175

the brains, the general equipment” to make the best out of life.<sup>174</sup> It was these young women who were recruited to the BBC’s waged staff as bookkeepers, clerks and shorthand typists, their experience of working for the Company/Corporation is the subject of Chapter Two.

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<sup>174</sup> Mary Agnes Hamilton, Five Women, pp.233-239

## Chapter Two: “Could she Rise from the Ranks...?”

### Waged Women at the BBC

#### Introduction

Poor Perfect Miss Fisk!

Priscilla Fisk aspired to be  
The perfect private secretary.  
Her heels were low, her morals high,  
She'd gained (upon the umpteenth try)  
A third-class Honours Maths degree  
Most toothsome to the BBC.  
Impressed by this, Miss Freeman then  
Took Miss Fisk on, at two pounds ten.

Priscilla quickly made her mark  
By turning up at Motspur Park.<sup>175</sup>  
She studied carefully what to do  
For marriage, mumps and transfer, too.  
Intent on soaring higher and higher  
She learnt the rules in case of fire.  
Past history she took to heart,  
And kept her private life – apart.

Priscilla's punctuality  
Was noticed by the BBC.  
When April came, as you'll surmise,  
They gave Miss Fisk a five-bob rise.  
Alas, in self-conceit deficient,

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<sup>175</sup> Motspur Park was the BBC's sports ground.

She thought her present pay sufficient!  
They argued with Miss Fisk in vain –  
The increment came back again!

Now, don't let's beat about the bush –  
Why did Priscilla get the push?  
She grew too good to take a *bisque*<sup>176</sup>  
For fear her boss should miss Miss Fisk.  
So here's the moral to my tale:  
This caused Priscilla Fisk to fail –  
*No man of sense in any section*  
*Could stand such feminine perfection!*

Joyce Morgan<sup>177</sup>, *The Listener*, April 1938

Joyce Morgan's impish poem highlights many of the issues that this chapter aims to address: who the BBC's waged women were, what they did, how much they earned and how they were perceived. It will argue that the BBC provided a congenial working environment for its female waged staff with good pay, good prospects and good working conditions. It will demonstrate that, as a new industry with new employment opportunities, waged women who came to work at the BBC were advantaged by the latest technologies and considerations for welfare. As Chapter One has shown, the BBC conformed to the customary sexual division of labour in its employment of waged staff; apart from rare exceptions it was only women who worked as typists, secretaries, telephonists or chums. However, jobs which were open to both women and men, for example waged assistants or clerks, were on the same pay scales and there were also opportunities for promotion to the salaried grades

The imaginary Priscilla Fisk was in many ways the paragon of the BBC's waged woman; educated, respectable, hard working, neat and tidy. There were many

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<sup>176</sup> *Bisque* leave was two days grace-leave granted to BBC staff in lieu of emergencies and disinclination to come to work.

<sup>177</sup> Joyce Morgan was secretary to the Editor of *The Listener*.



women with these qualities at the BBC, although few, if any, got ‘the push’ as Miss Fisk did. Rather, Joyce Morgan’s tongue-in-cheek finale to her poem is a snipe at those she believed took themselves too seriously, a product of the bureaucratisation of the BBC. The vast majority of the Company/Corporation’s waged staff were established i.e. they had successfully completed a three-month probationary period and once on the established staff, it was rare for an individual to be dismissed.<sup>178</sup>

Although Priscilla Fisk characterised many of the attributes of the archetypal BBC secretary she was also unrepresentative. Few of the BBC’s female waged staff had been to university and a secretarial training was a compulsory requirement for those not already versed in shorthand and typing. Nor was it likely that Miss Fisk would have been designated a ‘secretary’, let alone a ‘private secretary’ especially if her pay was a meagre £2.10. For most of the inter-war years the BBC made a clear distinction between the low-paid/low graded shorthand typist and the well-paid/high-graded secretary, the importance of this differentiation in seniority an area that this chapter will explore. The fact that Miss Fisk’s boss felt threatened by her perfection poses a further question that this chapter aims to address: the relationship between a waged woman and her manager. While this was usually a male superior, the inter-war BBC also provides an opportunity to observe this relationship with a female boss.

In February 1936, the *Manchester Daily Despatch* reported an interview with Ray Strachey of the Women’s Employment Federation in which she declared that “clerical work was an unsatisfactory and dead-end job for women and girls”. Mrs Strachey therefore advised girls to avoid this type of work as much as possible.<sup>179</sup> The focus here was the young woman who left school without a proper education or training to whom office work, with its lure of independence and a wage, at first seemed eminently attractive.<sup>180</sup> Strachey warned, however, that the young woman

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<sup>178</sup> There is no way of knowing how many individuals failed their probationary period or how many were on un-established contracts, but there is every indication that these numbers were low.

<sup>179</sup> Women’s Library, Women’s Employment Federation: 6/WEF/17/1-6, Press Cuttings, 1934-1947, *Manchester Daily Despatch*, February 15<sup>th</sup> 1936

<sup>180</sup> See Sally Alexander, *Becoming a Woman and Other Essays in 19th and 20th Century Feminist History* (New York: New York University Press, 1995) pp.207-213

could quickly get stuck, with no chance of bettering herself or promotion.<sup>181</sup> To be bored, poorly dressed and constantly hungry, living off a bun and a cup of tea, was a common experience for many female office workers in the inter-war years, where wages were often around £1 a week.<sup>182</sup> Strachey was not completely dismissive of office jobs; she was optimistic that for those who were trained and talented, there were exciting possibilities for high wages and interesting, challenging work.<sup>183</sup> As this chapter will show, the BBC was one of workplaces that Strachey would have described as an ‘exceptional’ place for waged women to work.<sup>184</sup>

In 1931, the BBC employed around 200 female secretarial/clerical staff; by 1939 this had risen to more than 600. As we saw in the Introduction and Chapter One, these were skilled and experienced women, most of whom had reached adulthood in the post-suffrage era. Many, like Dorothy Torry and Hilary Cope Morgan, whose oral histories inform this chapter, had come to London specifically to attend secretarial training school and to find work (see below pp.97-98). The BBC’s central London location meant easy access for those living in the hostels and bed-sits of Bloomsbury and Kensington. While some of the BBC’s waged secretaries and clerks were evidently middle-class others came from lower middle-class/upper working class backgrounds. There are no direct references to the social class of the BBC women themselves, but documents relating to the Corporation’s marriage bar show the occupation of husbands/husbands-to-be included accountant, army subaltern, school teacher, osteopath and transport foreman, all skilled jobs.<sup>185</sup>

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<sup>181</sup> Ray Strachey, Careers and Openings for Women: A Survey of Women's Employment and a Guide for Those Seeking Work (London: Faber and Faber, 1935) pp.101-102, 115-117

<sup>182</sup> Virginia Nicholson, Singled Out: How Two Million Women Survived without Men after the First World War (London: Viking, 2007) pp.114-115

<sup>183</sup> Strachey op.cit., pp.137-138. This viewpoint was also shared by Vera Brittain, Women's Work in Modern England (London: Noel Douglas, 1928) p.51-52. Virginia Nicholson also wrote about the reassurance of a good clerical job. Nicholson, op.cit., pp.112-113

<sup>184</sup> Strachey op.cit., p.118. By ‘exceptional’ Strachey was referring to offices where there were prospects for advancement, where pay could rise above £3 a week and where women beyond marital age were not discriminated against.

<sup>185</sup> R49/372: Staff Policy: Married Women Policy: Tribunals 1934-1937. Information compiled from various Minutes. Miss Freeman, the WSA, also stated that the BBC’s clerical/secretarial women generally married ‘black-coated’ workers. R49/371/1: Staff Policy: Married Women Policy File: File 1 1928–1935, undated memo from Miss Freeman probably written in 1937/38.

All female secretarial/clerical staff were interviewed by the BBC's Women's Staff Administrator (WSA); as we saw in Joyce Morgan's poem, in Priscilla Fisk's case it was Miss Freeman whom she had impressed. Many large businesses and organisations in the inter-war years employed women staff administrators to oversee female staff and the pivotal function of the WSA within the BBC is a focus of this chapter. Miss Banks and Miss Freeman, the two women who held this role during the inter-war years, not only recruited secretarial/clerical staff but oversaw their placements, their wellbeing and, for many, their wage rises. The WSA's base was the General Office, where the majority of secretarial staff began their BBC lives. As we shall see, the General Office not only created a pool of efficient female secretarial employees but also provided a means of inculcating them with the BBC's practices and ethos. The WSA set the tone for the BBC's waged women, insisting on high standards of behaviour. For instance, the 'Instructions to Women Clerical Staff' published in 1937 made clear that, "Strict punctuality in the morning and on the return from lunch must be observed."<sup>186</sup>

Women secretarial/clerical staff were the largest group of female employees in the BBC and encompassed shorthand and copy typists, secretaries, clerks, duplicating assistants and telephonists.<sup>187</sup> As the Company/ Corporation grew so did the need for increased administrative support. Not only were there more memos to type, more contracts to scrutinise and more copyright issues to sort out but there was an ever-expanding need for bookkeepers in the Accounts Office, checking clerks in the Duplicating Section and secretaries in the School Broadcasting Department. In addition, the growing number of managers necessitated more personal secretarial assistance. Thus the BBC's female secretarial/clerical staff benefited from the growing bureaucratisation of the BBC. As numbers grew, ever more complex grading systems were introduced to differentiate between the various jobs and levels of work [See Appendix 3 for Grade and Wage charts]. Waged staff who performed well were entitled to an annual increment and the possibility of promotion to a higher grade. This meant potential earnings of £4 or £5 a week

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<sup>186</sup> 'Instructions to Women Clerical Staff', issued by Miss Freeman, July 6<sup>th</sup> 1937

<sup>187</sup> BBC Staff List, 1934, shows 210 shorthand typists, 35 secretaries, 24 copying typists, 71 female clerks, 24 telephonists, 15 duplicating operators, 1 female book-keeper, 1 female cheque-writer and 1 office girl.

were within the reach of many BBC women, at a time when £3 a week was seen as a good wage.<sup>188</sup>

In contrast to the secretarial/clerical staff, the BBC employed a second group of waged workers: house staff. Encompassing jobs such as charwoman, waitress and kitchen worker, these were overwhelmingly working-class employees; many were married, some, though not all, were on hourly rates of pay. Their recruitment, pay and conditions of service came within the domain of the House Supervisor, Mr Chilman, although their welfare was a concern of the WSA. House staff were an important component of any large institution and were vital to the smooth running of the BBC. These were the women who kept the workplace clean, who staffed the female cloakrooms and who provided the essential meals and cups of tea. The BBC's reputation as a good employer extended to its female house staff who were offered fair rates of pay, reasonable hours of work and, where appropriate, perks such as free uniforms and laundry. While the BBC's office-based staff were courteous towards house staff, there is little evidence of social interaction, although house staff were entitled to use the same entrances and to eat in the canteen, something "pretty well unheard of" before the Second World War.<sup>189</sup>

This thesis is the first to make a detailed analysis of waged woman's work in a large company in the 1920s and 30s. To date, there has been little research into the day-to-day employment of either secretarial/clerical or house staff.<sup>190</sup> Recent studies of women who worked in office environments, such as Helen Glew's investigation into the GPO's female clerical staff in the inter-war years, have concentrated on unequal conditions of service rather than daily working lives.<sup>191</sup> The focus of Selina Todd's exhaustive research into young women workers in the

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<sup>188</sup> Strachey, Careers and Openings for Women p.117

<sup>189</sup> Oral History of the BBC: Interview with Mary Lewis, March 2<sup>nd</sup> 1978.

<sup>190</sup> For example Selina Todd's research into young working-class women workers of the inter-war years devotes only two specific pages to office work. Selina Todd, Young Women, Work and the Family in England 1918-1950 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) pp 41-43. Teresa Davy "Women Shorthand Typists in London 1900-1939"; Kay Sanderson, "Women Civil Service Clerks 1925-1939", in Our Work, Our Lives, Our Words: Women's History and Women's Work, eds. Leonore Davidoff and Belinda Westover (London: Macmillan Education, 1986). For a general overview of women's clerical work during this period see Gregory Anderson, ed., The White Blouse Revolution: Female Office Workers since 1870 (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988)

<sup>191</sup> Helen Glew, Women's Employment in the General Post Office, 1914-1939 (PhD., London, 2009)

inter-war years was the working-class, whose experience of employment was very different to most women who came to the BBC.<sup>192</sup>

The chapter is divided into two sections firstly secretarial/clerical women and secondly female house staff, although, because of limited documentation, this section is necessarily far smaller. It opens with an exploration of the role of the Women's Staff Administrator and how this compared to similar positions in other inter-war companies and institutions. The important function of the General Office is also discussed. The chapter then moves on to recruitment and assesses how waged women came to work at the BBC. The daily working lives of those employed in the specific roles of shorthand typist/secretary, telephonist/duplicating operator and clerk/waged assistant are then considered. The chapter then turns to a brief assessment of the role of house staff, looking in turn at charwomen and those employed as kitchen hands/waitresses. Throughout, comparisons have been made with other inter-war companies and organisations. We start by considering the position of Women's Staff Administrator and the role played by the General office in the inter-war BBC.

## Secretarial/Clerical Women at the BBC

### The Women's Staff Administrator/General Office

“She Rules the Roost in Broadcasting House”; “she’s behind the girls behind the programmes!”; “Miss Freeman is the woman in the BBC whose shrewd judgement in selecting women staff has helped towards women’s success in wireless”<sup>193</sup> As these newspaper headlines attest, Miss Freeman, the Women's Staff Administrator (WSA) was pivotal to the employment of secretarial/clerical women staff at the BBC. [See Fig. 3.1 p.86] The position was introduced in the first weeks of the BBC, in February 1923, when Caroline Banks, as Women's Staff Supervisor, was appointed to oversee the General Office at Magnate House.

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<sup>192</sup> Todd, op.cit.

<sup>193</sup> Daily Express, August 31<sup>st</sup> 1935, Daily Mirror, January 11<sup>th</sup> 1936, Morning Post, May 18<sup>th</sup> 1936



Fig 3.1: Miss Freeman, Women's Staff Supervisor  
Broadcasting House, c.1934



Fig 3.2: General Office, Broadcasting House, c.1932

From almost the start, Reith thus handed over responsibility for women clerical staff to a designated female manager. Two women were to hold this position before the Second World War, Miss Banks from 1923-1931 and Miss Freeman from 1931-1942.<sup>194</sup>

The employment of a senior woman to oversee a large female staff, especially in terms of welfare, was not uncommon in the inter-war years; the Bank of England, Lever Brothers, Boots and Sainsbury's all had women staff supervisors.<sup>195</sup> Mrs Olga Collett, who in the 1930s was contracted by the BBC to give a number of morning and afternoon talks, held this position at ICI. Speaking on the radio in 1937 about her job, Collett described her responsibility for the care and control of 650 women as "a blend of mother, schoolmistress, employers' representative and Hand of Fate, with a rather terrifying power to influence and decide the course of so many young lives.", a description that could equally be applied to the BBC's Miss Freeman.<sup>196</sup> The position of woman supervisor was largely the legacy of the feminisation of clerical work. When women first entered offices as clerks and secretaries in the late nineteenth century, it was seen as prudent for them to be accommodated separately from men. Not only were they physically segregated but they were usually employed on specific tasks considered suitable for women.<sup>197</sup> In consequence, organisations such as banks and the Civil Service developed the role of the female supervisor to oversee women-only offices and areas of work.<sup>198</sup>

We don't know why Reith decided it would be pertinent to recruit a Women's Staff Supervisor in 1923; we do know that it was considered to be an important job because Caroline Banks was interviewed by three senior managers: John

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<sup>194</sup> Miss Freeman was superseded by Gladys Burlton in 1942, who was certainly still in post in 1945.

<sup>195</sup> For example, the Superintendent of Women Clerks at the Bank of England dealt with "discipline and all feminine matters including dress, medical affairs, report cards, resignations and marriage gratuities." Elizabeth Hennessy, A Domestic History of the Bank of England, 1930-1960 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992) p.328

<sup>196</sup> *Other Women's Lives* broadcast May 29<sup>th</sup> 1937

<sup>197</sup> See for example, Anderson, op.cit. pp.36, 58-63

<sup>198</sup> The position also existed in industry. See for example Miriam Glucksmann, Women Assemble: Women Workers and the New Industries in Inter-War Britain (London: Routledge, 1990) p.108; Clare Wightman, More Than Munitions: Women, Work and the Engineering Industries 1900-1950 (Longman, 1999) p.155

Reith, Peter Eckersley (Chief Engineer) and Major Anderson, (BBC Secretary).<sup>199</sup> Little is known of Miss Banks background apart from her age, twenty six, and that she lived with other career women in Russell Square.<sup>200</sup> Nor is it known whether she had supervised female staff before. What is certain is that she was initially employed to oversee a dozen female staff; when she left on marriage in 1931, she was responsible for around 200 women. Her income had also risen considerably. From a weekly wage of £3.5s, she was promoted to the salaried staff in April 1925 on £260 a year. By her resignation on marriage in 1931 this had risen to £425 per annum.<sup>201</sup>

When Caroline Banks retired to be married in 1931, Reith wrote a heartfelt valedictory in the staff journal *The Heterodyne*.<sup>202</sup> Here, he described her work as the selection, training and promotion of the women clerical staff with responsibility for the conditions and efficiency of their work. He stressed however that “even with such a category we have by no means completely covered the ground nor defined her influence”. Miss Banks, continued Reith, had the “satisfaction of knowing that she has made a material contribution – in directions apt to be overlooked, but which cannot be overlooked without trouble – to the establishment of the BBC”. It is difficult to be completely confident about Caroline Bank’s duties as they were never explicitly written down and general administrative documentation for this early period is paltry. However, from existing memos we know she interviewed and appointed women staff, she made decisions about their placements, she sanctioned their wedding leave and oversaw their annual reports.<sup>203</sup> As part of the Administrative team she worked closely with the Assistant Controller, Valentine Goldsmith and, from 1928, with the Personnel Executive, Douglas Clarke, both of whom were responsible for general staffing issues. Clarke, in particular, oversaw the recruitment of male clerical staff.

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<sup>199</sup> *Prospero*, December 1967. *Prospero* was the periodical for retired BBC staff.

<sup>200</sup> Brian Hennessy, *The Emergence of Broadcasting in Britain* (Lymington: Southerleigh, 2005) p.237

<sup>201</sup> Salary Information Files. Caroline Banks, now Mrs. Caroline Towler, was to return to the BBC in 1933.

<sup>202</sup> *The Heterodyne*, March 1931

<sup>203</sup> Janet Adam Smith, who would become Assistant Editor of *The Listener*, recalled her first meeting with Miss Banks in 1928 describing her as “a very, very nice person”. Oral History of the BBC, interview with Janet Adam Smith, August 1<sup>st</sup> 1979



Much more is known about the work of Miss Banks' replacement, Miss Freeman.<sup>204</sup> Freeman had initially joined the BBC in 1924, aged twenty-four, as secretary to Valentine Goldsmith, the Assistant Controller. According to *The Heterodyne* she resigned in 1927 when "the Call O' the Wild" prompted a move to Canada.<sup>205</sup> In the absence of a staff file, we don't know why she left the BBC nor why she returned in 1931, but the fact that she had once worked as a BBC secretary and had risen through the ranks was important as she both understood the issues affecting those in her charge and encouraged able women to follow her example and seek promotion. Miss Freeman, like Miss Banks, was originally designated Women's Staff Supervisor however, in 1933, following Reith's bifurcation of the BBC into Production and Administration, the position was re-named Women's Staff Administrator. According to an organisational chart, this placed her under the management of Douglas Clarke, who was re-designated Establishment Officer who in turn reported to Basil Nicolls, the new Director of Internal Administration.<sup>206</sup> The title WSA did not confer higher status rather it formalised Freeman's position in the administrative hierarchy.

Freeman's starting salary in April 1931 was £325 per annum. By April 1939 it had risen to £720 making her one of the highest paid women in the BBC. Miss Freeman was arguably the most powerful women on the staff because her decisions had repercussions for hundreds of BBC employees; in 1939 there were 630 female secretarial/clerical staff. Chapter Five hints that the role was not awarded 'Director' status because of its association with women's work (See p.238). Despite the lack of senior executive status, the WSA worked closely with scores of BBC managers who employed weekly-paid women staff; even the Engineering Department, in its administrative role, utilised female secretaries. Concerns about new postings, transfers, competences or ill-health were all

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<sup>204</sup> Miss Freeman's Christian name has also long been a mystery. I found it only once and by chance on a staff photograph, where she signed her name Gwyneth Freeman. R76/3: Central Services: Staff Photos c1936

<sup>205</sup> *The Heterodyne*, April 1931

<sup>206</sup> Asa Briggs, *The Golden Age of Broadcasting*, The History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom, vol. 2 (London Oxford University Press, 1965), Appendix 2: BBC Outline of Organisation October 1933. Valentine Goldsmith was moved to a new position, Director of Information and Publicity

discussed with the WSA. Freeman was also consulted on general issues that affected women house staff and monthly-paid staff, for example, she sat on the appointment boards for female salaried posts and was party to discussions on charwomen's maternity pay. Miss Freeman was also central to the workings of the BBC marriage bar, as Chapter Three will explore.

In 1935, the *Daily Express* portrayed Miss Freeman grappling with the problem of how to assist those who were moving to new offices at Alexandra Palace, as she poured over train and bus time-tables to advise them on their journeys.<sup>207</sup> Here also was described the twice yearly gathering in the Council Chamber where she met with all female secretarial/clerical staff at Head Office to hear their difficulties, grumbles or suggestions.<sup>208</sup> As well as caring for her BBC 'girls', Miss Freeman was outward looking and made links with her counterparts in America and in other UK-based organisations such as Miss Stretton at the Bank of England and Olga Collett at ICI.<sup>209</sup> It was very probably Miss Freeman who encouraged the BBC to become a member of the Women's Employment Federation (WEF) in 1935 and she developed a good working relationship with the Federation's Secretary, Ray Strachey.<sup>210</sup> These contacts suggest a degree of informed cooperation amongst high-status administrative women.

The WSA's domain was the General Office. Most women recruited to the BBC as secretarial staff started here, a custom dating back to the early days of Savoy Hill. In many ways, the BBC's General Office could be described as a 'typing pool' although the term was not widely used in the inter-war years. The housing of secretarial staff in one place was a response to the Taylorite management notions of time-saving and efficiency that were becoming common in the 1920s and 30s.<sup>211</sup> The BBC's General Office was unquestionably a means of ensuring the maximum effectiveness from the women who worked there. The logic of accommodating all the BBC's typists together was explained at Control Board in

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<sup>207</sup> Alexandra Palace was where the new Television Service was based

<sup>208</sup> *Daily Express*, August 31<sup>st</sup> 1935

<sup>209</sup> R49/371/2: Staff Policy: Married Women Policy, File 2, 1936–July 1939, Freeman to Pym, November 2nd 1937; 13th July 1937

<sup>210</sup> Women's Library: WEF Archive: 6/WEF/487: Executive Minutes 1933-1937, May 9<sup>th</sup> 1935

<sup>211</sup> Fiona McNally, *Women for Hire: A Study of the Female Office Worker* (London: Macmillan, 1979) p.79

1926 when the rule, “insisting upon all typists being in the General Office” was maintained, only to be excepted in rare cases, “in order to avoid waste of typists’ time when non-employed in their particular section.”<sup>212</sup> This convention, that typists should be based in the General Office, continued throughout the inter-war years and memos often refer to section staff being based there, for example, in 1936 *Ariel* mentioned a Miss Lily Hemmings who worked in the Press Department “but whose type-writer is still in the G.O.”.<sup>213</sup>

The General Office also provided a means of assessing new staff; many women spent their three-month probationary period here during which time their skills and aptitudes were observed. The WSA then decided whether an individual should remain in the General Office or be directed to a new role. The General Office also offered a way of training secretarial staff in the specific practices of the BBC. As a rapidly expanding organisation, it was important to have uniformity between different departments and divisions; by learning set secretarial procedures, these could then be applied throughout the BBC. The journalist and novelist Ethel Mannin, who worked as a shorthand typist just prior to the 1920s, described the horror of the “American system of one large general office” where one had to be on one’s best behaviour all day and gossip wasn’t allowed.<sup>214</sup> The General Office at the BBC was likely to have been run on similarly strict lines.

At Savoy Hill, the General Office was moved several times as new space was acquired.<sup>215</sup> We don’t know if Miss Banks had separate accommodation but it is likely that, as female staff numbers rose, she merited a designated room to deal with confidential issues. In April 1932, soon after Miss Freeman’s appointment, the BBC moved to Broadcasting House where the General Office was purpose-built. Here Miss Freeman had a green-and-cream cubicle where she worked in private.<sup>216</sup> There is no description of the General Office at Savoy Hill but at Broadcasting House it took up the whole west side of the First Floor. [See Fig 3.2

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<sup>212</sup> R3/3/2: Control Board Minutes: 1926, June 30<sup>th</sup> 1926

<sup>213</sup> *Ariel*, September 1936. Miss Hemmings’ job was to type the daily programme schedule for the newspapers.

<sup>214</sup> Ethel Mannin, *All Experience* (London: Jarrolds, 1932) p.64

<sup>215</sup> Floor plans of Savoy Hill, devised by Brian Hennessy, show the General Office moved many times. Hennessy, *op.cit.*, pp.395-413

<sup>216</sup> *Good Housekeeping*, August 1935

p.86] A description from 1938 evoked a room of about fifty girls, their desks divided into two groups of orderly rows. Careful consideration had been given to the conditions under which the typists worked; the ceiling was specially soundproofed; complaints of bad lighting or faulty ventilation were few and a break was allowed for morning coffee with afternoon tea being served at desks.<sup>217</sup>

The duties of the General Office staff included typing talks, play scripts and news bulletins and addressing the thousands of envelopes needed to acknowledge applications for jobs. The office also provided a pool of secretarial cover when an “isolated” girl was temporarily away, i.e. a short-hand typist who worked in a smaller, departmental office.<sup>218</sup> Dorothy Torry, in her oral history interview with me, remembered very little of her first day at the BBC in 1936 except that she was directed to the General Office:

We all went into the General Office, and we were taught about the BBC and the charter and impartiality and the ethos generally, you see. And then we were farmed out to anybody who wanted extra secretarial help, to various departments, and quite early on I was sent up to the D.G.’s office, and John Reith said “keep her”. So that was how I started.<sup>219</sup>

Hilary Cope Morgan also began her BBC career in the General Office in 1939, an experience she described as “hell!”<sup>220</sup> In her oral history interview, she recalled being asked to type news scripts using eleven carbon papers, something she hadn’t been taught correctly to do. At first she was hopeless, managing only two sheets at a time but she soon learned the BBC way.

Hilary Cope Morgan’s description of the General Office is one of strict rules and high expectations, reflecting the BBC of the 1930s with its increased regulations and bureaucracy. Miss Freeman’s ‘Instructions to Women Clerical Staff’ issued

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<sup>217</sup> Wilfred Goatman, *By-Ways of the B.B.C.* (London P.S. King and Son, Ltd 1938) p. 25. Conditions at the BBC were not typical. In 1937, Joan Beauchamp described how the non-regulation of office conditions meant many women were forced to work in overcrowded, badly lit offices often damp and vermin infested. Joan Beauchamp, *Women Who Work* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1937) pp.58, 61

<sup>218</sup> Goatman, *op.cit.*, p.26

<sup>219</sup> Interview with Dorothy Torry conducted by Kate Murphy, June 28<sup>th</sup> 2006

<sup>220</sup> Interview with Hilary Cope Morgan conducted by Elizabeth McDowell, BBC Pensioner Visitor, November 11<sup>th</sup> 2006

in 1937 are a clear example of this.<sup>221</sup> The Instructions, as well as including meticulous details of where to use full stops and commas, how type-writer ribbons should be requisitioned and the procedure for posting letters, also included information on punctuality, raffles (they were not allowed) and which lavatories all but the most senior women staff were obliged to use. Chapter One considered the importance of decorum in dress for women staff and this was extended to other aspects of behaviour. For instance, Clare Lawson Dick who started as a filing clerk in 1935, recalled how a girl was reprimanded by the WSA for walking through the door of a popular coffee shop near the BBC, without standing back to allow a more senior secretary to go through first.<sup>222</sup> The WSA's control over behaviour extended to other personal matters as demonstrated by the attitude towards boyfriends. One newspaper article commented that they were not allowed to wait in the building. "If you want to see the boy-friends of the BBC girls – then look in the shadows of the doorways of the church over the way and of Queen's Hall. That's where the beaux lurk."<sup>223</sup>

By 1937 Freeman had her own staff of four including an Assistant, a Junior Assistant, a General Office Supervisor and a personal secretary. The Matron was also part of the WSA's team. In addition to Head Office in London, women staff supervisors were employed in the major regional centres. For example, from March 1936, Florence Johnson was designated Chief Clerk and Women Supervisor for Bristol.<sup>224</sup> In June 1936 *Ariel* described Daisy Haverfield in the Edinburgh office as "Chief Clerk, Supervisor of Women Staff and Manageress of the Canteen".<sup>225</sup>

The Women's Staff Administrator played a prominent role in the lives of all the BBC's female secretarial and clerical staff. She encapsulated the sexual division of labour at the BBC and the belief that women had specific employment needs, necessitating a distinct female line of command. At no point in the inter-war years was the role questioned, differentiating it from the top echelons of the Civil

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<sup>221</sup> 'Instructions to Women Clerical Staff', op.cit.

<sup>222</sup> *Oral History of the BBC*, Clare Lawson Dick interview, March 30th 1979

<sup>223</sup> *Radio Pictorial*, April 8<sup>th</sup> 1938

<sup>224</sup> Salary Information Files

<sup>225</sup> *Ariel*, June 1936

Service. When Hilda Martindale reluctantly assumed the role of Director of Women Establishments in 1933, she made clear her belief that “men's and women's establishment problems were not as different as to require separate treatment”.<sup>226</sup> In her autobiography, Martindale described how she used her position to push for equal opportunities, insisting on her retirement that the post be discontinued, and her successor Myra Curtis was designated Assistant Secretary, a role interchangeable with men.<sup>227</sup> Admittedly, Martindale had notional responsibility for 77,000 women, as opposed to the hundreds in Freeman’s charge; however, it demonstrates that there was a divergence of views about the need to differentiate between men and women’s work. While the BBC adopted many modern employment practices, it maintained the fundamental principal that, for waged women, the control of a female administrator was essential.

One of the most important jobs performed by the WSA was recruitment. The BBC was keen to employ the best staff it could and it was the WSA who oversaw the appointment of all the BBC’s female secretarial and clerical staff.

## Recruitment

In April 1938, *Radio Pictorial* ran a two-page spread, purportedly written by a £3.10s-a-week BBC typist, where she described how she came to work at the BBC.<sup>228</sup> Before joining the Corporation, the unnamed typist explained, she’d had “two decent commercial jobs”, as an office junior and as a secretary in a shipping office. When a slump in the shipping world made her job precarious, she looked for another, seeing the BBC position advertised in the “smalls”. Aware of the need to look smart for her interview, she chose to spend £4 of her last savings on a “neat grey costume and a pair of 8s 11d stockings - the most I’d ever paid for

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<sup>226</sup> The Treasury role of Director of Women Establishments had been established in 1920, under Maud Lawrence. Hilda Martindale was a former Deputy Chief Inspector of Factories. Hilda Martindale, *From One Generation to Another 1839-1944. A Book of Memoirs* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1944) p.188

<sup>227</sup> *Ibid* p.197

<sup>228</sup> *Radio Pictorial*, April 8<sup>th</sup> 1938. The article included an explanation that it was against BBC rules for employees to write about their jobs without permission, “but we have received this interesting account, written by a responsible radio journalist, as told to him in various interviews and conversations, which we publish for undoubted interest.”

stockings till then.” It was a wise decision as the impression she made was good. Questions asked by the staff committee included details of her school, her examinations, her shorthand speed and her family life, although they didn’t ask for references. “After all”, she surmised, “Some 2,000 secretaries have already been chosen and they get to know how to sum up a girl.”

It is probable the ‘unnamed typist’ was amongst the first young women to join the BBC under a new secretarial recruitment scheme, introduced experimentally in 1937, whereby advertisements were placed twice-yearly in the London and main provincial papers. Selected applicants were interviewed by an Appointments Board that included the WSA or her Deputy.<sup>229</sup> A waiting-list of suitable candidates was then drawn up to be offered jobs when they arose. Prior to this, however, the BBC had no fixed method of appointing secretarial and clerical staff. Unlike the Civil Service, with its age-specific entry examinations for female clerks and typists, the BBC used a variety of ad hoc ways to fill vacancies. The earliest recruits were almost certainly engaged through word of mouth, a method gradually augmented by casual applications and by recommendations to the WSA from secretarial training establishments and employment bureaus. Male clerical staff were similarly recruited, with the exception that the BBC Establishment Officer maintained links with forces organisations such as the British Legion and the Guards' Employment Society rather than secretarial colleges.

*Radio Pictorial's* ‘un-named typist’ had held two commercial positions prior to her BBC appointment, confirming the Corporation’s preference for experienced secretarial staff. A subsequent *Radio Pictorial* article made clear that, “Girls over twenty, with good experience in a previous job, are preferred... to girls of 18 or 19 straight from training school.”<sup>230</sup> Confirmation of this can be found in an analysis of the age of recruitment to the BBC of fifty-nine women who left to be married between January 1938 and April 1939; their average age of joining the Corporation was twenty-two with few recruited before the age of eighteen.<sup>231</sup> The

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<sup>229</sup> R49/561/1: Staff Policy: Recruitment of Staff 1929–1941, Recruitment of Women Clerical Staff, November 10<sup>th</sup> 1936

<sup>230</sup> *Radio Pictorial*, August 11<sup>th</sup> 1939

<sup>231</sup> These figures are derived from the 59 weekly-paid women staff who left the BBC for marriage between January 1938 and April 1939. Married Women Policy: 2. op.cit., April 28th 1939. Two

BBC could pick and choose its female staff because it was a desirable place to work, and many applicants had impressive backgrounds. For example, according to *Ariel*, Mary Campbell, a filing clerk with responsibility for the Registry in Edinburgh, had spent three years at the National Library of Scotland prior to her arrival at the BBC while Nancy Lyons, a clerk in the Press Department had previously worked in a solicitor's office.<sup>232</sup> Similarly, three secretaries in the Programme Department in Birmingham, Dorothy Ryland, Elsie Lewis and Margaret Hock (who spoke four languages), had respectively taught elocution and games to a class of forty-eight children; held the fort for a stockbroker, and carried out secretarial work at Studley Agricultural College.<sup>233</sup> With little documentation about BBC women recruits, we don't know how typical these women were but it is clear that many secretarial and clerical women arrived at the BBC with wide previous experience. Certainly eight of the nine women who came to the BBC as waged (as seen in the 18 personal staff files) had previous work experience, in jobs as varied as a clerk/typist for the London County Council Stores Department and a manageress of a Cabling Department in a shipping agency.<sup>234</sup>

While the BBC preferred experienced staff, all secretarial recruits were required to have a good general education coupled with a high standard of shorthand and typing.<sup>235</sup> This meant the BBC relied heavily on secretarial training colleges, which proliferated in the inter-war years. In her careers advice book, Ray Strachey was adamant that parents should be very careful when selecting such a school for their daughter; reputable establishments were costly and would only have been available to girls who came from well-to-do homes.<sup>236</sup> For instance, an advertisement for Miss Kerr Sanders Secretarial Training College was aimed at, "well educated girls wishing to qualify for the higher branches of the secretarial profession".<sup>237</sup> The BBC was in touch with many of the top training concerns in

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of the women were under 18 when they started, the youngest being four weeks short of her 17th birthday. Twelve others were aged under 20. The oldest new recruit was 29, with five aged 27.

<sup>232</sup> *Ariel* June 1936

<sup>233</sup> *Ariel*, December 1936

<sup>234</sup> See Short Biographies, Appendix 1

<sup>235</sup> This was 120 words-per-minute shorthand and 60 words-per-minute typing, for which they were given a test.

<sup>236</sup> Strachey, op.cit., p.141

<sup>237</sup> Central Employment Bureau for Women and Careers Association, Careers and Professional Training: A Guide to Professions and Occupations for Educated Women and Girls (London: The



London included Kensington College, St James Secretarial College and the Triangle Secretarial College along with agencies run by well regarded individuals such as Mrs Hoster, Miss Kerr Sanders and Dilys Ajax.<sup>238</sup>

This chapter has drawn on two oral history interviews, those of Dorothy Torry and Hilary Cope Morgan, whose testimonies provide a rare glimpse into the backgrounds of two young women who joined the BBC in a secretarial capacity at this time.<sup>239</sup> Dorothy Torry (nee Singer) was born in 1916, the middle of three sisters, and was brought up in Lincolnshire where her father worked as a water engineer. Aged nine she was sent to King Edward the Seventh Grammar School in Louth as a boarder, along with her sisters. At seventeen she took her higher school certificate and then “fed to the teeth with school” she decided on a secretarial career. Kensington College in London was chosen from brochures sent to the school, her parents making the selection because it was residential. It was a different career path from her sisters: the elder took Classics at Bedford College and became a teacher; the younger joined the Civil Service as an Executive.

The course at Kensington College lasted twelve months and included shorthand typing, book-keeping, “a bit of French” ending with an examination. Miss Singer did well and was invited to stay on and teach for a few months. Then, after a “ghastly” stint as a secretary to an author she decided to write to the BBC. She was invited for an interview, though her recollections about this are vague, and was offered a job on £2.10s a week. Miss Singer joined the BBC in the spring of 1936 when she was nineteen.

Hilary Cope Morgan was born in 1919. Her father was a mining engineer who was away in Nigeria for most of her childhood and, as an only child, she was sent to a boarding school in Southwold in 1930 when she was eleven. She didn't

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Women's Employment Publishing Company Ltd, 1931) p. xvi. Miss Kerr Saunders' "thorough and practical" training included, "English shorthand, typewriting, filing, indexing, correspondence, précis writing, with additional lectures on "Committee Procedure, Banking, Stock Exchange, and Income Tax Matters."

<sup>238</sup> R49/31/1 Staff Policy Appointments Procedure 1925-39: Report on Recruitment of Staff.

Ernest Barker to John Reith, February 8<sup>th</sup> 1934. Several of these secretarial training schools were affiliated to the Women's Employment Federation. See Strachey pp.258-259

<sup>239</sup> Dorothy Torry interview/ Hilary Cope Morgan interview op.cit. These were the only women I was able to trace who had joined the BBC before the Second World War.

seriously consider going to university, the school didn't encourage it and she was aware that her parents would have struggled to pay the fees. Instead, Miss Cope Morgan came to London and studied at Miss Kerr-Sanders' secretarial school while living with her grandmother. It was Miss Kerr Sanders who arranged her interview with the BBC at which she was questioned about her interests and background and asked whether she had played hockey or lacrosse at school. She remembers wearing a hat, stockings and gloves, as decreed by Miss Kerr Sanders and believed she was taken on because she had good references. Hilary Cope Morgan joined the BBC on May 1<sup>st</sup> 1939, aged twenty.

Neither Dorothy Torry nor Hilary Cope Morgan had chosen to go to university, however we know that a small number of the BBC's weekly-paid recruits were graduates. No documents specify which BBC staff had attended university, but there are sufficient references to know that they were a real presence.<sup>240</sup> For example, in November 1935, eight "university girls" were employed on Registry work.<sup>241</sup> Similarly, *Ariel* for June 1936 informed its readers that eight of Edinburgh's secretarial staff were graduates. The President of the Women's Employment Federation (WEF), Grace Hadow, was aware that for some graduates, starting a career in a secretarial capacity could be a positive choice: "Not all university girls who take jobs as shorthand typists will have to spend the rest of their lives taking down letters. I know of many girls who deliberately seek these jobs as a stepping-stone to something better."<sup>242</sup> Certainly for the likes of Isa Benzie, an Oxford graduate who became the BBC's Foreign Director, a start as a BBC secretary did not have a detrimental effect. Similarly, Oxford-educated Elizabeth Barker joined as a clerk in 1934; becoming Head of European Talks and English Service in 1964, while Mary Lewis, a graduate of Westfield College, started as a Duplicating clerk in 1938. Lewis rose to be Head of Pay Policy in 1970.

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<sup>240</sup> Four of the eighteen women whose personal files are in the WAC, were graduates who started as waged staff.

<sup>241</sup> R13/399: Departmental: Secretariat: Registry Staff 1936-1958, Freeman to Reith, November 12<sup>th</sup> 1935

<sup>242</sup> Press Association interview, January 25<sup>th</sup> 1934

In 1934, Ernest Barker and DB Mair produced their BBC Staffing Report, (the Report's focus was the salaried staff. See Chapter Four pp.202-203).<sup>243</sup> Of interest here are the concerns raised about Cambridge and Oxford Universities being approached with regards to weekly-paid posts i.e. "candidates whose natural entry is to the monthly-paid staff." Barker and Mair warned that an increased number of university women in these waged jobs "might deprive the other weekly-paid women of all chance of promotion to the monthly-paid staff."<sup>244</sup> This was also a concern of Ray Strachey who advised that the most prized secretarial posts tended to go to those who had gone to university.<sup>245</sup> However, Miss Freeman was adamant that this was not the case at the BBC:

I do not think there is any fear of the non-University weekly-paid staff being deprived of promotion on account of the intake of University women on to the junior staff. The whole thing boils down to this that in recruiting secretarial staff the fact that a girl has a degree is a very secondary consideration; she has to have many more qualifications besides.<sup>246</sup>

Miss Freeman made clear that in nine out of ten cases, recruits from universities were quite unfitted for secretarial work, but it was "worth interviewing the ten to get the one."<sup>247</sup>

Thus we can see that in its recruitment of waged secretarial/clerical staff the BBC looked to employ educated, trained and often experienced staff. While a number of graduates came to the BBC this way, a university education was not a primary consideration. Many women, graduate and non-graduate alike, joined the BBC after completing a secretarial training course and we now turn to the daily working lives of women who came to the BBC as secretaries and typists, telephonists and duplicating operators, and waged clerks and assistants, starting with the most prominent; those who worked in a secretarial capacity.

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<sup>243</sup> Report on Recruitment of Staff 1934, op.cit.

<sup>244</sup> Same memo

<sup>245</sup> Strachey, op.cit., p.138

<sup>246</sup> R/49/561/1: Recruitment of Women Clerical Staff, Freeman to Nicolls, March 16<sup>th</sup> 1934

<sup>247</sup> Same memo

## Daily Working Lives

### Secretaries and Shorthand Typists

Of all female employees, the BBC secretary captured the imagination of the press and prompted the most effusive tributes in the memoirs of BBC men. Paul Bloomfield, who in the late 1930s worked as an Assistant in many different BBC departments, portrayed his secretaries as “the most handsome, hefty, level-headed types of the Englishwoman I have known”.<sup>248</sup> Roger Eckersley, who ran the Programmes Department before becoming Director of Entertainment in 1934, gushed about his “perfect secretary” Miss Jockel. In his autobiography he personally thanked her “for the crises through which she has held my hand, for her tact with unwanted visitors, and for her technique in rescuing me from callers who would not leave.”<sup>249</sup> Hilda Matheson’s letters to Vita Sackville-West frequently referred to her “faithful” secretary, Miss Barry; marvelling at her perspicacity, welcoming her providential return after a bout of illness and praising her ability for “taking things in hand and calming her [Hilda] down”.<sup>250</sup> The BBC secretary thus played a crucial role in the smooth running of the BBC’s multifarious departments.

Matheson and Eckersley may have been correct in referring to Miss Barry and Miss Jockel as “secretaries”, however most secretarial staff at the BBC were designated “shorthand typists”. The Company/Corporation was very clear in the distinction made between shorthand typist and secretary using the latter to denote seniority, both for the woman concerned and her manager. This was an important differentiation in a hierarchical organisation like the BBC. Thus, in the 1934 Staff List, thirty five women were designated ‘secretary’ compared with 201 ‘shorthand typists’.<sup>251</sup> In many instances a shorthand typist was effectively a secretary, but if her boss was not a senior executive she could not officially be referred to as such.

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<sup>248</sup> Paul Bloomfield, *B.B.C.* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1941) p.109

<sup>249</sup> Roger Eckersley, *The B.B.C. and All That* (London: Sampson Low, Marston and Co. Ltd., 1946) p.135

<sup>250</sup> *Hilda Matheson Letters*, February 12<sup>th</sup> 1929, January 15<sup>th</sup> 1929, January 4<sup>th</sup> 1929, January 27<sup>th</sup> 1929

<sup>251</sup> Miss Barry is designated ‘secretary’ in the 1934 Staff List.

This is clearly seen in the 1937 Staff List. The top official in each department had a personal secretary; senior managers a designated shorthand typist; while for those in more junior management positions, the shorthand typist might be shared. Secretaries were graded more highly than shorthand typists and usually earned higher wages. The handful who worked for the Director General, his Deputy Carpendale and, later, the Controllers were included in the salaried grades.

There were no set starting rates for copy typists, shorthand typists or secretaries at the BBC; the wage was dependent on the individual woman's age and experience. There was wide variation, with some entering the BBC on £2 a week and others on £3.15s, although the most common starting pay was £3.<sup>252</sup> The BBC operated an increasingly complex grading system for weekly-paid staff, but the potential to earn generously was available to all secretarial staff who rose through the grades.<sup>253</sup> This becomes apparent when the wages paid by the BBC and the Civil Service are compared. In 1920, a new female grade of Clerk/Shorthand Typist was created by the Civil Service with wage rates of £2.00 to £3.12s per week.<sup>254</sup> At the BBC, on the other hand, a shorthand typist in 1927 earned between £2.10s to £3.15s a week; by 1935, this had risen to £3-£4 weekly. BBC secretaries could earn considerably more.<sup>255</sup>

Many BBC shorthand typists, and certainly all who were designated copy typists, spent the bulk of their day at the typewriter. Fast, accurate typing was essential to the BBC; as a broadcasting organisation, a publisher and a growing bureaucracy the written word was at its very core in scripts, in publicity material and in memoranda. Typing was the primary function of those who worked at the ranked

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<sup>252</sup> Salary Information Files

<sup>253</sup> It's not known when a grading system was introduced but by January 1927, BBC staff were categorised into eight grades: Grades A to D were salaried grades, while E to H comprised the waged female secretarial/clerical staff. Each band denoted a different type of work, a different rate of pay and a different 'roof'. Those who performed well received an annual increment and, once at the top of the grade, there was the possibility of promotion to the next. By 1929, employee numbers had grown to such an extent that two distinct grading systems were introduced, with the letter 'W' (standing for weekly) used to differentiate between those who were weekly and monthly paid. Initially there were five waged grades, 'EW' (lowest) to 'AW' (highest). By 1939, four sub-grades had been added. At this time, wages ranged from £2 a week for office girls, up to £6 a week for senior secretaries and senior clerks in the AxW Grade. See Appendix 3.

<sup>254</sup> Strachey, *op.cit.*, p.217

<sup>255</sup> R49/227/1: Staff Policy: Grades And Salaries – Grades 'D' and Weekly Paid Staff, Grading of Women Clerical Staff, April 19<sup>th</sup> 1937. BBC copytypists earned less, between £2 and £3.10s.

desks in the General Office. Confusion developed when a shorthand typist was allocated to an individual office and took on far wider duties. Beatrice Hart, for example, a shorthand typist in Supplementary Publications, worked also on printing, block-making and editorial routine.<sup>256</sup> In 1937, Miss Freeman, admitted that the designation “isolated shorthand typist” was a misnomer as “all these girls are referred to – quite naturally – as secretaries.”<sup>257</sup> The 1937 Salary Review clarified the situation, specifying that all ‘isolated’ shorthand typists, i.e. those working to a personal boss, would be re-designated secretaries, a truer reflection of their role.<sup>258</sup> However, the BBC was clear that while there might be a change of name, it didn’t bring with it any rise in pay. Rather, it was hoped the new designation would “do away with the present dissatisfaction caused by the existing “hierarchy” system.” Salaried secretaries would in future be called “senior secretaries”.<sup>259</sup> In this way we can see that the term ‘secretary’ denoted a level of personal service in the BBC of the 1920s and 1930s. This was clearly a more specialised job than that of the shorthand typist and copy typist working in the General Office.

Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, the definition of a secretary remained unclear.<sup>260</sup> It did not appear as an occupational term in either the Census for 1921 or 1931.<sup>261</sup> Joan Beauchamp, in her 1937 analysis of female office workers, included only clerks and typists.<sup>262</sup> In the Civil Service the designation ‘Secretary’ was conferred solely on high ranking officials, almost exclusively men; it was not a term used to describe women typists or clerical staff. Recent studies of women office workers of the 20s and 30s make few references to secretaries; Sylvia Walby, Jane Lewis and Harriet Bradley, for example, make no

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<sup>256</sup> L1/1698/1: Beatrice Hart Staff File, Confidential Report, 1929

<sup>257</sup> R49/607: Salary Review: Women Staff (Head Office) 1937-1938, Freeman to Clarke, December 6<sup>th</sup> 1937

<sup>258</sup> R3/3/12: Control Board Minutes 1937, December 21<sup>st</sup> 1937

<sup>259</sup> R49/607: Salary Review: Women Staff (Head Office) 1937-1938, Women Staff (Head Office), Freeman to Clarke, December 6<sup>th</sup> 1937

<sup>260</sup> The secretary was certainly not the “pretty young thing”, the “chic charming receptionist”, the sex object; making coffee, answering phones that she was by the early 1970s. Mary Kathleen Benet, *Secretary* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1972) p.8

<sup>261</sup> The 1921 Census defined ‘clerks’ as an occupational group. The 1931 Census grouped together clerks and typists.

<sup>262</sup> Beauchamp, op.cit., pp.56-62

use of the word.<sup>263</sup> Teresa Davy found in her study of shorthand typists that the distinction between shorthand typist and secretary was marginal. At training college both learnt to answer the telephone, dress correctly and be quiet and supportive rather than assertive.<sup>264</sup> However, for the women themselves the distinction was pertinent; as Lockwood quoted “every shorthand typist would prefer to be called a secretary.”<sup>265</sup>

We have already been introduced to Miss Jockel “the attractive young woman of about twenty” who had become Roger Eckersley’s secretary (not shorthand typist) in 1924. Eckersley held several top executive jobs in the 1920s and 1930s, as Outside Broadcast Director, Director of Programmes and ultimately Director of Entertainment. He described how Miss Jockel had:

...stayed with me through fair or foul, thick or thin, for twenty long years.... She must know more to my discredit than any one else, and our partnership or "marriage" as master and secretary lasted longer than any other like combination in the Corporation.<sup>266</sup>

Eckersley’s reference to his “marriage” is significant. Later studies into secretary/boss relationships openly explore this metaphor.<sup>267</sup> While secretaries in the BBC in the 1920s and 1930s displayed some facets of ‘office wife’ there were also maternal elements to their interactions, clearly seen in a series of *Radio Pictorial* interviews with BBC secretaries in 1936.<sup>268</sup>

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<sup>263</sup> Sylvia Walby, Patriarchy at Work: Patriarchal and Capitalist Relations in Employment (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1986); Jane Lewis, Women in England 1870-1950: Sexual Divisions and Social Change (Brighton: Wheatsheaf Books, 1984); Harriet Bradley, Men’s Work, Women’s Work: A Sociological History of the Sexual Division of Labour in Employment (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989)

<sup>264</sup> Davy, op.cit., pp.133, 129

<sup>265</sup> David Lockwood, The Blackcoated Worker (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1958) p.80. As quoted in Office Magazine, October 1955

<sup>266</sup> Eckersley, op.cit., p..57

<sup>267</sup> Kathleen Benet described the secretary as the ‘substitute wife’, carrying out what she defined as household duties in the office. Benet, op.cit., p.70. Rosabeth Moss Kanter, in her 1977 study of large American corporations, used the term ‘office wife,’ stressing also the serious emotional bonds that could develop between the secretary and her boss, Men and Women of the Corporation (New York: Basic Books, 1977) p.89

<sup>268</sup> The reality of shorthand typist-as-secretary is revealed in the 1937 Staff List, where four of the women were designated shorthand typists, rather than secretaries.

For six consecutive weeks the daily working lives of seven BBC women (two were joint secretaries) were candidly revealed, the motherly relationship with their managers' manifest. Dorothy Knight described her boss, Eric Maschwitz, the Variety Director as being, "utterly careless of himself in every way". She told of her horror at realising she had let him leave the office on a cold day without his heavy Ulster coat, his scarf and his hat.<sup>269</sup> Pamela Argent was secretary to two BBC variety producers. One of them, Bryan Michie, was an "uncared-for-bachelor". If she didn't remind him, she claimed, "he would always forget to send his things to the laundry and I make him swear solemnly that he will not put on anything not previously aired..."<sup>270</sup> Cynthia Pughe undertook to be the memory of Val Gielgud, the Director of Drama, even phoning him at home if he needed to be in the office early, to make sure he was awake.<sup>271</sup> Dorothy Harrison and Ada Julian described themselves as "the girls who 'direct' Henry Hall and tell him whether he is coming or going. If we didn't he frequently wouldn't know."<sup>272</sup>

These insights re-enforce the vital function the secretary played in the life of her BBC boss. Maurice Gorham, as Editor of *Radio Times*, expressed his luck when it was necessary to liaise with the secretary rather than her producer, in his quest for information about forthcoming programmes: "they were clever... did the work of two men... not only was it more pleasant, but she would probably know more too."<sup>273</sup> Hilda Matheson frequently voiced her reliance on her secretary in her letters to Vita Sackville-West, as Miss Barry dealt with Reith, replied to correspondence and rang round publishers for books to review.<sup>274</sup> Matheson's relationship with her secretary appears to be more personal than was the case with a male manager. For instance, Matheson was deeply concerned for Barry's welfare when her relationship with a BBC announcer was jeopardised by his transfer to Belfast.<sup>275</sup> Miss Barry also appears to have been aware, and supportive, of Matheson's relationship with Vita, 'beaming' when asked how

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<sup>269</sup> Radio Pictorial, January 17<sup>th</sup> 1936

<sup>270</sup> Radio Pictorial, February 14<sup>th</sup> 1936

<sup>271</sup> Radio Pictorial, February 7<sup>th</sup> 1936

<sup>272</sup> Radio Pictorial, January 31<sup>st</sup> 1936. Henry Hall was one of the UK's foremost bandleaders.

<sup>273</sup> Maurice Gorham, Sound and Fury (London: Percival Marshall, 1948) p.23

<sup>274</sup> Hilda Matheson Diaries, February 12<sup>th</sup> 1929, December 28<sup>th</sup> 1928, May 22<sup>nd</sup> 1929

<sup>275</sup> Hilda Matheson Diaries, February 22<sup>nd</sup> 1929. This was Derek McCulloch, whom Miss Barry married in 1931. She left the BBC at the same time.



she'd guessed that Matheson was staying at Sissinghurst and going "quite pink" when Vita personally sent her lupins.<sup>276</sup>

In their studies of office work, Gregory Anderson and Teresa Davy both indicated that the status of the secretary depended on the status of her boss; if the boss was demoted she would suffer a similar fate.<sup>277</sup> However, at the BBC, apart from rare cases, the secretary stayed with the job. Richard Lambert described how, on moving from Adult Education work to the editorship of *The Listener*, he handed over his existing secretary and acquired a new one.<sup>278</sup> In 1938, in the wake of a departmental re-shuffle, one newspaper passed comment on this "strange" BBC practice: "Over the weekend more than one producer is lamenting the transfer to another department of a secretary who had learned "to read my thoughts before I thought them."<sup>279</sup>

It was only the most senior executives who had the privilege of retaining their secretaries. In 1934, Cecil Graves, the Empire Services Director, was so desperate to keep his personal secretary, Greta Hope Simpson, that he wrote pleading letters to the WSA, Miss Freeman, to this effect.<sup>280</sup> It was Graves who, as the new Controller, (Programmes), pushed for Controllers' secretaries to be promoted to the salaried grades. Graves was aware that his dependence on Miss Hope Simpson and his reluctance to lose her was potentially holding back her career.<sup>281</sup> Roger Eckersley made the point that he was one of those privileged to have the same secretary for the bulk of his BBC career. It was Miss Jockel who, after more than two decades, left Eckersley. In 1945 she had "deservedly got a promotion," becoming an administrative assistant in his department.<sup>282</sup> When Reith left the BBC, his secretary Jo Stanley went with him. Similarly, when

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<sup>276</sup> *Hilda Matheson Diaries* January 15<sup>th</sup> 1929, May 27<sup>th</sup> 1929. Sissinghurst was Vita's Kent home.

<sup>277</sup> Anderson, *op.cit.*, pp.21-22; Davy, *op.cit.*, p.133

<sup>278</sup> Richard Lambert, *Ariel and All His Quality* (London: Gollanz, 1940) p.96

<sup>279</sup> *Yorkshire Telegraph and Star*, October 12<sup>th</sup> 1938

<sup>280</sup> L1/1699/1: Margaret Hope Simpson Staff File 1, Graves to Freeman, December 12<sup>th</sup> 1924, December 18<sup>th</sup> 1934

<sup>281</sup> Same file, December 12<sup>th</sup> 1934. See also Chapter Four p.230

<sup>282</sup> Eckersley, *op.cit.*, p.125

Ogilvie arrived as Reith's successor, his personal secretary Miss Jameson accompanied him.<sup>283</sup>

While the BBC's secretarial staff were mostly female, there were exceptions. For example, amongst those listed as working in the General Office in 1937 were two night stenographers, both men.<sup>284</sup> Although it was not illegal for women clerical workers to do night work, protectionist legislation forbade the employment of women at night in many industries and the BBC may have been influenced by these laws; a 1934 memo hints at this. Writing to Ralph Wade, the Assistant Director of Internal Administration, about the employment of night stenographers in the News Department, Miss Freeman reminded him that, "it was agreed some considerable time ago that it was bad practice to employ girls in the evening after they had been working all day".<sup>285</sup> Perhaps because of the unsociable hours, the two male shorthand typists employed in the General Office were paid £5 a week, considerably more than their female colleagues.<sup>286</sup> However, this was not typical of the BBC who, as a rule, paid male typists on similar rates to women.<sup>287</sup>

The BBC was not alone in employing small numbers of male typists; Hilda Martindale noted that it might be necessary for the Civil Service to employ men in this capacity "in a few special departmental situations" i.e. departments with all male staffs.<sup>288</sup> This was mirrored at the BBC; while male typists were occasionally employed in Regional offices, most were employed in areas of work that were either predominantly, or exclusively male.<sup>289</sup> Thus men worked as

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<sup>283</sup> Many of the secretaries Davy interviewed chose to remain with their bosses rather than seek advancement, because of the close relationship they had built up. Davy, op.cit., p.135

<sup>284</sup> BBC Staff List, 1937

<sup>285</sup> R13/280: Departmental: News Division: Weekly Staff 1931-1938 Freeman to Wade, July 12th 1934

<sup>286</sup> H.F Rose had been recruited as a night shorthand typist in March 1933 earning £5 a week. In April 1937, he became monthly paid, on a salary of £325. Rose was joined in May 1937, by A.J. Lee, whose starting salary was £300. By April 1939 their salaries had risen to £365 and £340 respectively.

<sup>287</sup> Salary Information Files

<sup>288</sup> Hilda Martindale, Women Servants of the State, 1870-1938 (London: Allen and Unwin, 1938) p.91. This was specified in the report of the Reorganisation Committee of 1920.

<sup>289</sup> William Goatman, who wrote the 1938 guide to Broadcasting House, had started as a BBC typist. He joined the BBC's Swansea office as a 12.6d-a-week 'Boy' in 1924 and in 1927 was promoted to Junior Typist, presumably when he reached eighteen. He worked in this capacity for four years, before moving to London in 1931. By 1939, Goatman was an Assistant in Overseas Intelligence earning £450 a year.

typists in the Advertising and Engineering Equipment Departments. The BBC's nine transmitting stations also utilised only male shorthand typists. The transmitting stations were by definition in isolated parts of the country and with their all-male staffs, it was seen as inappropriate to employ women.<sup>290</sup> These all-male places of work also utilised male telephonists but, as we shall now see, the job of BBC telephonist was predominantly one for women, as was that of duplicating operator.

### Telephonists and Duplicating Operators

Telephones and duplicating machines were, as much as typewriters, a symbol of the modern twentieth century office. Mechanisation was well under way by the 1920s; in his book on clerical workers, Klingender marvelled that in 1927, ninety seven separate firms were members of the Office Appliance Trades Association.<sup>291</sup> At the BBC it was women who operated these new technologies, in line with the convention of the 1920s and 1930s which saw routine office work as appropriate female employment.<sup>292</sup> The telephone and duplicating machine feature in the recollections of BBC staff: even at Magnate House, Cecil Lewis, the Assistant Director of Programmes, stressed how they both never stopped ringing or duplicating.<sup>293</sup> Ruth Cockerton, looking back to the mid 1920s, recalled the roneo machine "which ground out memos and things in a room where people hung their hats and coats."<sup>294</sup> The operator of the lone BBC machine at Savoy Hill in the early 1920s was a 'girl'; in 1938, the Duplicating Section at Broadcasting House employed twenty seven female operatives.<sup>295</sup> The BBC telephone exchange saw a similar expansion; from one operator in 1923, by 1938 it had a staff of twenty five. Since the first exchanges had begun operating in the

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<sup>290</sup> The 1937 Staff List shows that catering and cleaning at the Transmission stations was also done by men. The exception was Bournemouth which employed a female cleaner, Mrs Cross.

<sup>291</sup> F. E. Klingender, The Condition of Clerical Labour in England (London: Martin Lawrence Ltd., 1935) p.64

<sup>292</sup> Anderson, op.cit., pp.17-18

<sup>293</sup> Cecil Lewis, Broadcasting from Within (London: George Newnes Limited, 1924) p.27

<sup>294</sup> Ariel, June 1938

<sup>295</sup> Goatman, op.cit., p.29



Fig 4.1: Miss Gibson, Senior Duplicating Operator. Broadcasting House, *Ariel*, April 1938



Fig 4.2: Telephonists, with Mrs Rouse, Supervisor, Broadcasting House, c.1937

1880s, telephonists had been women.<sup>296</sup> By 1921, the Post Office employed 26,000 female telephonists and the GPO would become the main recruiting ground for the BBC.

Amongst Reith's first appointments in 1923 was that of switchboard operator. Olive May was personally interviewed by Miss Banks, the Women's Staff Supervisor, and Reith, who stressed the importance of the job. The switchboard was the first point of contact between the outsider and the BBC and, as such, it was vital that all callers were dealt with intelligently, efficiently and courteously.<sup>297</sup> Miss May was recruited in March 1923 specifically to open the PBX switchboard [Private Branch Exchange] at Savoy Hill.<sup>298</sup> The space was cramped, the hours of work long, (including weekends), with no overtime pay expected. She was soon joined by a second switchboard operator and together they covered extensive shifts, starting at 9am and finishing late, often not until 10.30pm. Despite the intensity of the work, Miss May relished her time at Savoy Hill, especially the amity that developed between her and Reith. As will be touched on in Chapter Three, Reith was devastated when she left to marry Cecil Bottle, a BBC engineer from Leeds. On her retirement on marriage in 1928, Reith recorded in his diary, "Mrs Bottle, senior telephonist since 1923 departing today. I gave her a silver inkstand and went along to see her presents. She has been beyond praise in every way and I regret her going very much."<sup>299</sup>

In 1931, Mrs Bottle was invited to return to the BBC for twelve months, to oversee the development of the telephone exchange at Broadcasting House.<sup>300</sup> When it opened in 1932, six switchboard positions were installed; by 1938, this had been extended to twelve.<sup>301</sup> Not only did the twenty three operators, working in shifts, deal with an average of 11,000 calls each day but their job also entailed memorising the details of 650 internal extensions and the frequent movements of

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<sup>296</sup> McNally, op.cit., p 5. The use of women as GPO telephonists was a legacy of telegraphy, where the experiment of employing female staff had first taken place. Martindale, op.cit., pp.16-17

<sup>297</sup> Reith Remembered, broadcast June 21<sup>st</sup> 1989. Sound Archive No: 87181

<sup>298</sup> Prospero, June 1984. Cecil Bottle confirmed his wife had worked for GEC, being turned over to the BBC on March 17<sup>th</sup> 1923, Prospero, June 1968

<sup>299</sup> Reith Diaries, January 27<sup>th</sup> 1928

<sup>300</sup> Prospero, June 1985, Olive Bottle Obituary

<sup>301</sup> Goatman, op.cit., pp.32-33

staff. A photograph from this time shows a row of women telephonists dressed in neat white blouses and dark skirts, their female supervisor, in a smart floral dress, standing over them.<sup>302</sup> [See Fig. 4.2 p.108]

Reith maintained a close relationship with the switchboard; Dorothy Torry, who worked in his office from 1936, remembered how a senior telephonist was employed to deal personally with Reith and how he made a friend of her. “They knew each other and their wants and dislikes and the way they spoke. He felt he couldn’t really manage with someone different.”<sup>303</sup> This sense of a personal connection with the BBC’s telephonists extended to other senior staff. In 1946, Roger Eckersley looked back nostalgically to earlier days when “the girls in our telephone exchange used to know us all - I still feel hurt when a girl asks me to repeat my name.”<sup>304</sup> The telephone exchange thus epitomised the familial ethos of the Corporation in the inter-war years.

According to a *Radio Pictorial* article in September 1939, the “Hello Girls” of the BBC needed long-term experience in a Post Office exchange before they could be considered for a position with the Corporation.<sup>305</sup> As with other secretarial/ clerical staff, the BBC expected telephonists to arrive already trained. A series of documents from 1937/1938 offer an insight into the comparative workings of the telephone exchanges at the BBC, Selfridges, Lever Brothers, Midland Bank and Harrods. Miss Freeman, the WSA, was keen to place BBC telephonists on a higher grade but in order to do so she needed to convince the Director of Staff Administration that this was in line with rates of pay outside.<sup>306</sup> Accordingly, information about age, experience, pay and working conditions was requested from a number of companies. For the BBC, Mrs Rouse, the PBX Supervisor, clarified that the approximate starting age and wage for BBC telephonists was twenty-four on a rate of £3 a week. Four years LTS (London Telephone Service) experience was required and while languages weren’t essential, they were an

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<sup>302</sup> Goatman, op.cit., p.33

<sup>303</sup> Dorothy Torry interview op.cit.

<sup>304</sup> Eckersley op.cit., p.66

<sup>305</sup> *Radio Pictorial*, September 8<sup>th</sup> 1939

<sup>306</sup> R49/237/1: Staff Policy: Grades and Salaries: Telephonists 1937-1946, Freeman to Wade, March 22<sup>nd</sup> 1937. Miss Freeman believed telephonists should be graded BW rather than CW, see Appendix 3: Weekly Grades and Salaries

asset. BBC telephonists worked an alternate weekly shift pattern while Sunday and Bank Holiday duties were compensated for by extra time off rather than overtime pay. In line with other weekly-paid BBC staff, telephonists received three weeks annual leave.<sup>307</sup>

Four companies responded to Freeman's request for information which show wide variations. Midland Bank recruited inexperienced girls at seventeen, paying them £1.10s a week, although experienced staff could earn up to £4.15s. Hours were similar to the BBC at 40 hours a week, and for those who stayed with the Bank for twenty years, four weeks holiday could be accrued. Harrods, on the other hand, recruited older women, between the ages of twenty-five and thirty; hours were longer (49.5 hours per week), pay lower (starting at £2.10s rising to £3) and holidays shorter (two weeks). Maximum salaries were £3.15s (Lever Brothers); £3 (Harrods) and £2.15s (Selfridges). At this time, Post Office telephonists earned a maximum salary of £3 a week.<sup>308</sup> The BBC's pay and conditions of service were, in consequence, shown to be as good as, if not better than, other telephone exchanges and as a result, Miss Freeman did not get her wish for re-grading.<sup>309</sup>

However, it wasn't only the pay that made the BBC an attractive place to work, it was the prestige of the job. As Reith had originally told Miss May, switchboard operators dealt with people from all walks of life and the nature of BBC work would have entailed daily contact with dignitaries and celebrities. For those who worked in the Duplicating Section, daily life was less glamorous, but the busy office was a vital hub of the BBC. Wilfrid Goatman, writing about the office in 1938, joked that it was quite unoriginal to say life at the BBC was largely a matter of forms.<sup>310</sup> The duplication of forms was a major function of the Duplicating Section and Goatman relished listing the thousands of specially formulated index cards, internal memorandum sheets and analytical record proforma that were printed every day, smirking that the Section Supervisor had even designed a form

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<sup>307</sup> Same file, Rouse to Freeman, January 4<sup>th</sup> 1938

<sup>308</sup> Dorothy Evans, *Women and the Civil Service* (London: Pitman, 1934) p.82

<sup>309</sup> R49/231/1: Staff Policy: Grades and Salaries. Notes on the Method by which the April Salary Revision is Conducted, 1938

<sup>310</sup> Goatman, op.cit., p.28

for the requisitioning of forms. While this may seem amusing a large bureaucracy, such as the BBC, needed a uniformity of paperwork to function efficiently. The Duplicating Section not only produced forms, it was also responsible for the copying of play-scripts, minutes of meetings, press releases and announcer's duty sheets along with daily menus and studio allocations, all of which might be subject to last minute change.<sup>311</sup>

Duplicating was not a job singled out by either Ray Strachey or Joan Beauchamp in their studies of women's work in the 1930s so it is difficult to compare the BBC's duplicating staff with others doing similar work, however conditions of service were in line with all BBC weekly-paid secretarial/ clerical staff with operatives placed in two grades earning up to £3.10s a week.<sup>312</sup> Under the management of a Supervisor and Assistant Supervisor, were two clerks, seven stencil typists, fourteen operators, two office girls and three 'boys'.<sup>313</sup>

In 1938 Mary Lewis, a graduate of Westfield College, joined the Duplicating Section as a checking clerk. Years later, on her retirement as Head of Pay Policy, she was interviewed for the Oral History of the BBC and her recollections are illuminating.<sup>314</sup> Miss Lewis had taken a secretarial training course after university but failed the Corporation's shorthand test hence her decision to accept the job as a temporary checking clerk. Although the Duplicating Supervisor, Miss Hills, enforced rigid discipline such as controlling the hours at which staff could go to the lavatory, Mary Lewis described an atmosphere of friendship within the office. She also emphasised the interesting and worthwhile end-product and especially

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<sup>311</sup> Everywoman, February 1935 included an article on the "Silent Women of the BBC" which included a paragraph on the Duplicating Department. Described as "a most important department" with Miss Hills as principal, it was the BBC printing works. "Here time sheets, press notices, and programme schedules are handled, and artists' scripts issued in duplicated form. There is a staff of twenty four girls who confine themselves to multigraphing machines which ooze forth thousands of copies daily."

<sup>312</sup> Roneo and Multigraph operators were graded 'C3W' earning up to £3.10s weekly, Junior Duplicating Machine Operators were graded 'DW' earning up to £3 a week.

<sup>313</sup> BBC Staff List, 1937. While the 'Office Girl' is a rarity in BBC documents, the position of 'Boy' was common; 222 'Boys' were listed as working at the BBC in 1939. This was an established position within the Corporation for selected youths who had left school at fourteen. They were encouraged to attend evening classes and, it was hoped, would qualify for junior clerical positions in the Corporation when their employment was terminated at eighteen. R49/227/: Grades and Salaries, Grades "D" and Weekly Paid Staff, Memorandum on the Employment of Boys, April 28<sup>th</sup> 1937

<sup>314</sup> Mary Lewis interview, op.cit.



welcomed the chance to be party to the confidential papers that were processed by the section in the run up to the Second World War. Part of her job, she explained, was to check that circulars, scripts and documents produced by the Section were of a correct standard.

Mary Lewis did not specify if, as a clerk in the department, she was expected to wear a uniform but it is known that all the BBC's female duplicating operators wore a floral overall, shown to its full glory in an *Ariel* photograph from 1938. [Fig. 4.1 p.108] Here Miss Gibson, a senior duplicating officer, stands proudly in a distinctive flower-pattern robe, her job in the BBC apparent to all. There is no way of knowing whether the female duplicating staff enjoyed this differentiation, but the covering would have protected their day-clothes from ink.

Neither do we know if specialist experience or training was required of the BBC's female duplicating staff and it may be that a lower level of education was accepted. The section appears to have been unique in its employment of "office girls" as we have seen two were recorded as working in the section in 1937. Aged fourteen or fifteen, the girls would have been too young to have gained any qualifications and may well have come from working-class households. This was unusual at the BBC, where most female office staff were educated at least to School Certificate level.

Telephony and duplicating were specialist jobs, and there is no indication that any women who worked in these sections of the BBC were ever considered for promotion or transference to other areas of work. Mrs Rouse, the PBX supervisor, Miss Hills, the Duplicating Supervisor and Miss Armstrong, the Assistant Duplicating Supervisor (all salaried positions by 1939), had risen through the ranks of their particular section. These were sections where only women worked (apart from 'Boys') and female supervision was seen as essential. Two areas of waged work were performed equally by both men and women at the BBC, that of clerk and waged assistant.<sup>315</sup>

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<sup>315</sup> Small numbers of male and female bookkeepers and cheque-writers were also employed, but little is known about these roles.

## Clerks and Waged Assistants

As Chapter Four will show, the ‘Assistant’ was the most common position for those on a BBC salary and only small numbers of weekly-paid assistants were employed.<sup>316</sup> Nearly all, both women and men, worked in the BBC’s Public Relations Department/ Division, for example on *Radio Times*, in Publicity or in Information services such as libraries. There is little information on what the duties of a waged assistant were or how they differed from those of salaried assistant, whose work was broad-brushed. We know that, at Savoy Hill, as waged-assistants, Miss Bryant ordered the blocks for *Radio Times* while Florence Milnes acquired the first books for the Library.<sup>317</sup> It is noticeable, however, that after 1927 few waged staff were recruited to this role which suggests the position was ultimately defined as salaried; both Miss Bryant and Miss Milnes were quickly promoted to the monthly-paid.

The BBC employed far larger numbers of clerks; in 1934, for example, 86 male and 68 female clerks worked for the Corporation.<sup>318</sup> The role of the BBC clerk is also seldom described; there are scant references in newspaper articles presumably because the work did not have the glamour or interest that typists, telephonists or even duplicating operatives did. There are occasional inadvertent references to clerical work in memos. For example, one woman clerk who worked briefly in Programme Finance, from 1926-1928, was Lilian Taylor (who we met in Chapter One). Amongst her responsibilities was the maintenance of a card index of Artists who were booked by the Music, Production and Talks Sections; she recorded details of their fees. This ensured that the appropriate payment was made for each subsequent booking of that Artist, regardless of which Section employed them. Miss Taylor also prepared the Artists Expenses Sheets, making certain they had been paid.<sup>319</sup> In 1937 Miss Wallage, a clerk in Premises and Standing Charges, was described as being personally responsible for

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<sup>316</sup> Salary Information Files show that twelve women and twelve men, who were subsequently salaried, had initially worked as waged assistants, with pay levels that were roughly equal.<sup>316</sup>

<sup>317</sup> Gorham, op.cit., p.31; *The Library World*, March 1959

<sup>318</sup> Staff Information Files

<sup>319</sup> R13/305: Programme Contracts Department Establishment 1927-1945, Reorganisation of the System of Booking Artists, Crutwell to Eckersley, January 31<sup>st</sup> 1927

the accounts and statistics connected with the Post Office lines used for Outside Broadcasts; work that was “specialised and of a somewhat unattractive type”.<sup>320</sup>

Alice Wright, one of the women whose file has been retained at the WAC, was designated both a clerk, and an assistant, in her time as a waged employee, with no perceptible difference in duties between the two. Wright, who was originally from Somerset, had studied piano at the Metropolitan Academy and worked as a bank clerk for Cox’s Bank before her arrival at the BBC in April 1923.<sup>321</sup>

Alongside Frank Hook, the Music Librarian, she helped set up the Music Library, a section in which she remained for her entire thirty-nine year career. One of the ‘oldest servants’ of the Company/Corporation, the fourteen years she spent as weekly-paid reveal her as a hard-working woman, of “sterling character” with “zeal and ability”, her main responsibility being the acquiring, cataloguing and loaning of sheet music.<sup>322</sup> Despite her obvious value to the Music Library, Miss Wright’s elevation to the salaried ranks took a considerable time (see Chapter Four p.193). This was principally because of the hesitancy of senior managers, as we shall see in Chapter Four, when the process of promotion from the weekly-waged to the monthly-paid is discussed in detail.

The Corporation’s waged clerks and assistants, whether male or female, were employed in the same BBC grades and payment bands, which was unusual for the times.<sup>323</sup> However, there are suggestions that men were viewed as more valuable to the Corporation. For example, a memo from the Programme Correspondence Section in 1934 pointed out that “it was a waste of a man’s ability” to keep him on routine, simple work such as answering easy enquiries, copying talks statistics and checking dance band correspondence.<sup>324</sup> Rather, it was suggested that a Miss Grieves should be taken out of the General Office and made responsible for the

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<sup>320</sup> Married Women Policy: Tribunals, op.cit., Tribunal held on June 2nd 1937

<sup>321</sup> Miss Wright was ‘Portrait of the Month’, *Ariel*, April 1957. She told how she was “actually going to Canada and was waiting for her passage to come through when a friend prompted her to write to the BBC. She did so, was called to an interview on the Thursday before Easter, and asked if she could come at once.”

<sup>322</sup> L1/7291/1: Alice Wright Staff File, Confidential Reports, 1933, 1935

<sup>323</sup> Salary Information Files show six women and twenty men began their BBC careers as waged clerks; their wage rates are recorded and reveal broadly equal pay. This is confirmed by grading charts for 1935, which show that male clerks were on the same grades and wages as female clerks.

<sup>324</sup> R13/395 Departmental: Secretariat: Programme Correspondence: Women Clerical, Freeston to Programme Services Executive, June 8<sup>th</sup> 1934

work “as described as suitable for a woman.” This request was strongly supported by Nicolls, the Director of Internal Administration who commented:

I have felt for some time that material is being wasted through the men having to devote so much time to dealing with simple enquiries and routine work which could be done so easily by someone like Miss Grieves.<sup>325</sup>

It is difficult precisely to compare the work of the BBC’s male and female clerks as they rarely worked side by side. Women clerks were employed in the Registry, Programme Finance and Salaries, and the Gramophone and Music Executives. Male clerks worked chiefly in four BBC areas: Accounts, Catering, Equipment and Publications.<sup>326</sup> While a small number of clerical jobs were interchangeable, in most instances there appears to have been a specific decision to employ either a male or female clerk. In the Advertising Department, the Publications Department and the Post Room, all predominantly male departments, clerks were men. In the Duplicating Department, the Registry, Schools, Office Administration and Programme Administration, only female clerks were employed. All except the latter were predominantly female-dominated offices. Only two small departments employed equal numbers of male and female clerks: Staff Records and Display. Staff Records was part of the Staff Administration department which included a significant number of senior women amongst its managers. The Display section was headed by a woman manager, Kathleen Lines. This suggests that while male bosses had a preference for working with male clerks, female managers were more open to working with a mixed staff.

Although the job of BBC clerk or waged assistant might not have captivated the outside world, within the Corporation these were respected positions; reports and memoranda that refer to women in these roles invariably stress their hard work and dedication. These were also positions from which individuals could aspire to become salaried. The Programme Finance clerk Lilian Taylor, for example, joined the ranks of the monthly-paid in 1928, following her transference to the Salaries department. Promotion from the weekly-waged to the monthly-paid

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<sup>325</sup> Same memo, handwritten note at bottom from Nicolls

<sup>326</sup> BBC Staff Lists 1934, 1937

grades was a possibility for the BBC's female secretarial/clerical staff; it was rarely an option for women employed as house staff

## Women House Staff

An organisation as large as the BBC required an army of service staff to maintain it. Offices and studios needed to be cleaned, heating and lighting maintained, deliveries received and meals prepared and served. These jobs were held predominantly by working-class employees many of whom, in keeping with the custom of the time, were older, married women. Although the WSA was party to the welfare and conditions of service of the BBC's female house staff (for example Miss Freeman advised on policies on the employment of married waitresses and charwomen's maternity leave) their recruitment and day-to-day working lives were the responsibility of the House Superintendent. In the inter-war BBC this position was held by Mr Chilman, an ex-military man, recruited to the post in 1924.<sup>327</sup> While Savoy Hill required a small team of liftmen, receptionists, porters, kitchen staff and cleaners by 1939, Chilman's empire at Broadcasting House encompassed many hundreds of workers. Jobs were sex-typed: commissaries, studio attendants, kitchen porters and store staff were positions held exclusively by men; women were employed as lavatory attendants, kitchen cashiers and counter-hands as well as waitresses and charwomen. A rare job that was open to both women and men was that of chef.<sup>328</sup>

House staff had different conditions of service from office-based staff; for those on a weekly-wage, holiday leave was two weeks rather than three while hourly-paid charwomen receiving a week's annual leave each year. There is little evidence of mobility amongst the BBC's female house staff and promotion was limited to that of Supervisor/Assistant Supervisor. In this the BBC was in line with the convention of the time; Miriam Glucksmann has shown how few female factory workers became charge-hands, forewomen or supervisors, most stayed in the same grade for their entire working life.<sup>329</sup> While waitresses, morning

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<sup>327</sup> Chilman's initial salary was £260. By 1937 he was earning £740 a year.

<sup>328</sup> BBC Staff List, 1937

<sup>329</sup> Glucksmann, Women Assemble p.111, 202-203

cleaners and cloakroom attendants might be treated courteously by their BBC colleagues, there was no expectation they could ever join the clerical staff. Nor is there evidence of female house staff changing jobs. This was not necessarily the case for young men. ‘Pages’, who started at fourteen, could potentially rise through the ranks, an example being WC Hopkins who joined in this capacity in 1927 (earning 15s a week) and who then graduated to Junior Clerk, Buying Assistant and ultimately, in 1938, a Buyer on £300 a year.<sup>330</sup>

By far the largest group of house staff were charwomen and their role at the BBC merits further discussion.

### Charwomen and Cleaners

A photograph in the BBC’s archives, already referred to in Chapter One, depicts around two dozen charwomen leaving Broadcasting House at the end of their shift.<sup>331</sup> [Fig. 5.1 p.119] The original photograph, presumably supplied by Kathleen Lines of the Photographic Department, appeared in *Radio Pictorial* in 1934, where the women were referred to as “a happy band of cleaners”.<sup>332</sup> And they do look both happy, and respectable. To be a charlady at the BBC was a sought after position. The pay was good, the hours of work fair and, attached to the job was glamour and cachet. Its Central London location would also have enabled the women to get to work easily for their 7am start; they may even have lived nearby. A news snippet from a later *Radio Pictorial* confided that three thousand women were on the waiting list for work at the BBC, with many having been on the list for more than a year.<sup>333</sup> In 1936, Mr Chilman confirmed he had a waiting list of 2,000 compiled from individual applications from women and from recommendations from Governors, members of the staff and “all sorts of eminent people in all walks of life.” When vacancies for charwomen occurred, Chilman made clear, interviews were in strict order of application. At that time he was

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<sup>330</sup> Salary Information Files

<sup>331</sup> See p.65

<sup>332</sup> *Radio Pictorial*, March 28<sup>th</sup> 1934

<sup>333</sup> *Radio Pictorial*, April 23<sup>rd</sup> 1937



Fig 5.1: Charwomen leaving Broadcasting House, c.1934



Fig 5.2: Catering Department, Broadcasting House, c.1932

dealing with women who had applied in January 1935.<sup>334</sup>

A hint of the duties of the BBC's charwomen is given in a 1935 *Radio Pictorial* article which calculated that each day they polished 107 mirrors, filled 131 soap bottles and used 500 gallons of soap. The reporter fanaticised about sauntering into Broadcasting House when the charwomen arrived, seeing their names ticked off in a huge ledger and then dispersing to their duties. Some were mothers, some were grandmothers, some were war widows, he claimed. "It does not signify. All that matters is – the power in the elbow."<sup>335</sup>

Charwomen were a respected group of BBC workers and were one of the largest all-female staffs employed by the BBC. Establishment figures for July 1939 show there were 214 charwomen working in London and 86 in the Regions.<sup>336</sup> As the numbers on the waiting list indicate, the BBC was seen as a good employer, confirmed further by longevity of service. The Winter 1948 edition of *Ariel* congratulated Mrs E. Simpson, a Charwoman in Edinburgh and Mrs G. Aylward, a Ladies Room Attendant in London, on the completion of twenty-one years service.<sup>337</sup> In 1954, Mrs Mary Leonard, a Senior Cleaner in Belfast was applauded for her thirty years with the BBC.<sup>338</sup> In June 1937, *Ariel* commemorated the ten years service of Broadcasting House's Forewoman Cleaner and three Assistant Forewoman Cleaners, all married women who had started work at the BBC (it would have then been based at Savoy Hill) on the same day in November 1926.<sup>339</sup> The fact that the four senior women had worked together for a decade suggests a high level of camaraderie between them.

The vast majority of the BBC's charwomen were married. At a time when married women's employment was discouraged, cleaning and charring were the most acceptable way to bring extra income into the working-class home. In 1937, out

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<sup>334</sup> R49/56/1: Recruitment of Staff: File 1, Chilman to Clarke, November 26<sup>th</sup> 1936

<sup>335</sup> *Radio Pictorial*, June 28th 1935

<sup>336</sup> R/49/178/16: Staff Policy: Establishments: July 1<sup>st</sup> 1939

<sup>337</sup> *Ariel*, Winter 1948/49

<sup>338</sup> *Ariel*, Autumn 1954

<sup>339</sup> *Ariel*, June 1937. It is almost certain that *Ariel* mistakenly used the term 'cleaner'; rather, these were charwomen.



of 83 charwomen employed at the Regional offices, 73 were married.<sup>340</sup> Ray Strachey estimated that in 1931 there were 39,000 married women aged between thirty-five and fifty-five who earned money through casual domestic work, charring and office cleaning.<sup>341</sup> Clementina Black, in her investigation into married women's work, contended that charring was only entered into when exceptional circumstances, such as a husband's low earnings or irregular income coupled with a large family, forced a woman to do so.<sup>342</sup> Although the amount wasn't specified, paltry wages were the norm, Black believed, in a market where a growing number of women were forced to char to make ends meet. Writing in 1932, Sylvia Anthony estimated the normal rate for London charwoman was 9d to 1s an hour.<sup>343</sup> Details of the wages paid to BBC charwomen are not readily forthcoming however in May 1937, Mrs G. Saunders was retired from service owing to ill health. According to the Minutes of the Control Board she was paid £39, purportedly a year's wages. This would have made her earnings 15s a week for two-and-a-half hours work each morning, well above the rate suggested by Anthony.<sup>344</sup>

That charwomen were viewed differently from other female staff is clear from the deliberations on the marriage bar: they were exempt from the start.<sup>345</sup> Nicolls, the Director of Internal Administration, made clear this was because they were "traditionally married women". In June 1938, it was decided that, at the discretion of the Corporation, charwomen could be granted maternity leave.<sup>346</sup> This would officially be without pay, instead there would be an ex gratia payment equivalent to four weeks wages. The following year the practice was formalised with eligibility being clarified as a minimum of one year's service, a good report and the declared intention of continuing with the Corporation after the birth. However Pym, the new Director of Staff Administration, was not unduly worried

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<sup>340</sup> BBC Staff List, 1937

<sup>341</sup> Strachey, op.cit., p.148

<sup>342</sup> Clementina Black, Married Women's Work (London: G. Bell, 1915) p.108

<sup>343</sup> Sylvia Anthony, Women's Place in Industry and Home (London: George Routledge and sons Ltd., 1932) p.27

<sup>344</sup> R3/3/12: Control Board Minutes, 1937

<sup>345</sup> Married Women Policy File 1, op.cit., Goldsmith to All Regional Directors, October 20<sup>th</sup> 1932

<sup>346</sup> R49/326/1: Staff Policy Leave: Maternity and Grants 1938-46, Clarke to Regional Directors, June 7<sup>th</sup> 1938

if the woman concerned did not return, as the payment of four weeks wages “need not be regarded as a frightful extravagance.”<sup>347</sup>

There are no extant documents that show the conditions of service of BBC charwomen in the inter-war years but Pym’s directive suggests that they were well treated. Neither is it clear whether charwomen were eligible to join the BBC Pension Scheme. However, correspondence with the Bank of England in 1939 included details of their charwomen’s eligibility to a pension after ten years service which suggests the BBC was considering the implementation of a similar scheme.<sup>348</sup>

### Catering Staff

Reminiscing on her time at the Corporation, the former BBC accompanist-turned-music star, Jean Melville, posed the question,

Do you know the two women to whom I think I was the most deeply grateful during my time at the BBC? They were Mrs Dubarry and the late Mrs Hudson – and their job was a very simple but important one. They have looked after the BBC canteen since Savoy Hill days.”<sup>349</sup>

The BBC’s restaurants and canteens were significant places for BBC staff. Not only were they a crucial part of the Corporation’s welfare provision but they were an attractive place to meet and share BBC news and gossip. In 1938 the eighty-six day-staff employed in the restaurant worked three different shifts, providing thousands of meals each week.<sup>350</sup> When Wilfred Goatman toured the restaurant for his guidebook to Broadcasting House, he proudly depicted the state-of-the-art kitchen with its “four electric ovens, two large grills, pastry oven, steamer, four fryers, a large electric carver and refrigeration plant.”<sup>351</sup> Following Taylorite principles of efficiency, the design of the kitchen was such that unnecessary movement of staff was reduced to a minimum.

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<sup>347</sup> Same file, Pym to Nicolls, July 19<sup>th</sup> 1939

<sup>348</sup> This being payable at 1/75 of their salary for each year of service with a minimum of £26 per annum.

<sup>349</sup> Radio Pictorial, June 25th 1937, ‘BBC from the Inside’ by Jean Melville

<sup>350</sup> Goatman, By-Ways of the B.B.C. p.49

<sup>351</sup> Ibid.

At the BBC, kitchen and restaurant staff came within the catering section of the House staff. [Fig. 5.2 p.119] In 1937, under the supervision of A.E. Mason, were three chefs, two second chefs, two assistant chefs, a commis chef, a patissiere and a cook-chargehand. All were women, except for one of the chefs and an additional night chef. To be a cook or a chef in the inter-war years would have entailed training, either at college or on-the-job. In her careers guide, Ray Strachey mentioned the availability of full-time courses at Domestic Science Colleges and private cookery schools along with day and evening classes at Polytechnics and other further education colleges. Salaries for non-resident cooks, Strachey estimated, averaged £100 to £150 per annum, with kitchen superintendents possibly earning as much as £220.<sup>352</sup> It's not known how the BBC's chefs and cooks were trained. It is known that in 1939, Mrs Broughton, the fifty-two year old Head Chef at Broadcasting House, earned the highest wage of all the catering staff, an exceptional £5.18s 9d. She was also graded AW, the top grade for a weekly-paid member of the house staff.

Waitresses were the largest single group of BBC catering staff. Wilfrid Goatman was pleased to discover "a little room where the waitresses have their meals in comfort and are themselves waited upon by a girl employed solely for that purpose."<sup>353</sup> This pleasant portrait appears to be unusual. Writing in 1937, Joan Beauchamp described the miserable working conditions of a waitress in one of the largest teashop firms, earning 19s 6d per week plus commission averaging around 5s 6d. The work was tiring, the changing room "an old cellar, damp and horrible and far too small", if a girl felt ill, there was nowhere else to sit down.<sup>354</sup> Beaumont interviewed two kitchen hands, one earning 18s per week the other 17s 6d and described the "cruel work – scrubbing, washing up, scrubbing."<sup>355</sup> Glucksmann, in her investigation of women working for J. Lyons, highlighted the very low pay and the ruthless management style exercised in the Corner Houses which could lead to instant dismissal for flouting one of the many petty rules.<sup>356</sup>

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<sup>352</sup> Strachey, Careers and Openings for Women pp.217-218

<sup>353</sup> Goatman, op.cit., p.51

<sup>354</sup> Beauchamp, op.cit., p.49

<sup>355</sup> Ibid., p.50

<sup>356</sup> Glucksmann, op.cit., pp.129-130

An Inquiry into the Catering Trade which had been set up by the Ministry of Labour in 1929 confirmed that hours were long and wages low.<sup>357</sup>

At the BBC, a model letter of appointment c1938 shows the terms of employment for a waitress which included a starting wage of £1.10s per week and free meals during hours of duty.<sup>358</sup> Discussions in 1938 on whether the BBC should abide by the 1913 Shops Act (they did) show that waitresses were eligible to three weeks holiday a year, two weeks more than the statutory minimum.<sup>359</sup> Questioned as to whether a sufficiently good wage was being paid to attract “a decent class of girl”, Ralph Wade, the Director of Office Administration, was adamant they were; the BBC paid 30s a week as compared to the 27s 6d paid by Lyons.<sup>360</sup> In addition, BBC girls had meals of better quality and quantity, were provided with uniforms, including shoes and stockings, and were offered free laundry.<sup>361</sup> There was camaraderie too, as *Ariel* reported in June 1936:

If your tea at Broadcasting House and Maida Vale tasted salty in the afternoon on Monday, May 18 it must have been because all the girls of the kitchen and restaurant staff had had a day out at Margate the day before, in charge of Mrs Cox and Mrs Dubarry. They filled two charabancs arriving there at midday for a blow-out in a big hotel....<sup>362</sup>

Kitchen staff appear to have had a higher status than waitresses. A memo from 1933 indicates that the former might be considered for the BBC pension scheme whereas waitresses “should not be eligible in any circumstances.”<sup>363</sup> Why this was the case is not specified but was probably linked to the high turnover of waitresses whose average length of service at the BBC was three years. Routh placed waitresses in category 6 of the Census i.e. semi-skilled workers as opposed to unskilled charwomen. The BBC appears to have viewed waitresses similarly.

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<sup>357</sup> Strachey, op.cit., p.112

<sup>358</sup> Other terms were termination of notice with a week’s notice on either side and no wages payable during absence, unless the Corporation decided otherwise. R49/73/1: Staff Policy: Catering Staff: Rates of Pay and Conditions of Service 1937-September 1942, Catering Manager, Letter of Appointment. Filed with documents from 1938

<sup>359</sup> Same file: Catering Manager’s Statement: March 10<sup>th</sup> 1938

<sup>360</sup> According to Routh the average wage for a waitress in 1924 was £113. No change was assumed for 1935. Routh, op.cit., p.95

<sup>361</sup> R49/73/1, op.cit., Wade to Nicolls, January 11<sup>th</sup> 1934

<sup>362</sup> *Ariel*, June 1936

<sup>363</sup> R49/74: Staff Policy: Catering Staff: Wages 1933 - September 1941, Clarke to Wade, September 20<sup>th</sup> 1933

Under the terms of its marriage bar they were not to be exempt, like charwomen, rather they were to be dealt with as general married women “but with rather more elasticity in view of the difference in the economic conditions.”<sup>364</sup>

In 1936, the Catering Manager explained how kitchen vacancies were filled from applications from girls who lived in the vicinity.<sup>365</sup> Restaurant supervisors and waitresses were recruited by direct application, by recommendation and from applicants supplied by the Women’s branch of the Great Marlborough Street employment exchange. The Head of the Women’s Branch at the exchange kept in touch, suggesting “any likely candidates she comes across from time to time.” It is not known how these recruitment methods compared with other organisations, but it was probably similar.

The BBC’s catering staff, as with all house staff, were expected to reflect the respectability of the BBC. The charwomen’s smart appearance and the orderliness of the waitress in her laundered uniform were in line with an organisation that wanted to project probity and decorum, the BBC was keen to employ “a decent class of girl”.<sup>366</sup> Although the status of house staff was lower than that of the BBC’s office-based employees, those with long service were viewed as part of the BBC family, for example, their photographs and signatures were included in the book commemorating Ten Years Service which would have involved a congratulatory meeting with Reith. Although it has not been possible to make direct comparisons with wages and conditions of service at other comparable organisations, all the indications are that, at the BBC, these were certainly fair and very probably above average for the times.

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<sup>364</sup> Married Women Policy File 1, op.cit., Nicolls to Wade, June 16<sup>th</sup> 1933

<sup>365</sup> R49/56/1: Recruitment of Staff: 1929-1941: File 1, Catering Manager to Clarke, November 26<sup>th</sup> 1936

<sup>366</sup> Catering Staff: Wages 1933-1941, op.cit., Wade to Nicolls, January 11<sup>th</sup> 1934

## Conclusion

When Dorothy Singer joined the BBC as a shorthand typist in 1936 she was thrilled to start work on £2.10s a week which she declared was “rather large and a lot more than most people.”<sup>367</sup> Clare Lawson Dick was similarly “delighted” to be offered £2.15s when she came to the Corporation in 1935 as a Registry Clerk.<sup>368</sup> Misses Singer and Lawson Dick were bright, educated young women, keen to earn a decent wage and experience independent living in London. This chapter has argued that for waged women like these, work at the BBC was a largely positive experience. It was an attractive and prestigious place to work, rates of pay and conditions of service were comparatively good, female staff were largely respected and, for those in secretarial/ clerical roles with ambition, promotion was a possibility.

Nevertheless, the BBC conformed to many of the employment stereotypes of the period and most of the work carried out by waged women was gender specific, with defined grades and rates of pay. The role of the Women’s Staff Administrator, with the remit to oversee the female secretarial/clerical staff, was echoed in many other inter-war workplaces and confirms that these jobs were seen to necessitate a separate line of control. Miss Banks and Miss Freeman, the two women who held the position of WSA at the BBC, recruited, trained and allocated the weekly-paid women staff; they dealt with the women’s personal problems, they discussed irritations with their line-managers, they ensured conformity in the way letters were addressed and postage stamps used. Their domain, the General Office, was the starting place for new secretarial recruits who, although already trained and often experienced, might still spend up to three-months being inculcated into the workings of the BBC.

Shorthand typists and secretaries were crucial to the BBC with typists performing a fundamental job. The position of personal secretary was also pivotal. In a role that would now be termed a ‘PA’, these women managed their managers;

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<sup>367</sup> Dorothy Torry interview op.cit.

<sup>368</sup> Clare Lawson Dick interview, op.cit.

organising them, caring for them and often advising and commenting on the work. Clerks and waged assistants also performed a crucial job, whether filing important documents in the Registry or working on the layout of *Radio Times*. The rapid expansion of the BBC and the constant need for initiative and ideas gave scope for bright and ambitious shorthand typists, secretaries, clerks and waged assistants to extend the scope of their employment; many gained salaried status and a small but significant number rose to senior posts.

As the UK's foremost media industry, the BBC's telephonists provided an essential service. Communication was at the heart of the Company/Corporation which depended on dealings not only with the-great-and-the-good but also with members of the public. Telephonists provided the interface between outsiders and those who worked at the BBC. The development of the PBX reflected both the growing importance of the BBC and the Company/Corporation's desire to project an efficient, modern image. From a single operator in basic conditions in early 1923, it had expanded, by 1939 into a state-of-the-art exchange with two supervisors and two dozen uniformed staff. The good pay and conditions of service indicate the BBC's desire to recruit and retain the best staff. The Duplicating Section also provided a vital service to the BBC, its ramshackle development from a single machine at Savoy Hill to a modern, well-staffed, disciplined office in Broadcasting House was in keeping with the BBC's growing bureaucratisation.

Office work in the inter-war years was frequently derided as grim, mundane and dead-end; Ray Strachey, in particular, warned of the perils of this. At the BBC, while the actual job of a BBC copy typist or duplicating operator might be monotonous, the work environment was far from dull. Scripts, announcers' duty sheets and publicity material had an intrinsic interest and much was confidential. Page two of the 'Instructions to Women Clerical Staff' included a clause about leakage of information and the dangers of passing on office gossip.<sup>369</sup> Mary Lewis, for example, described her fascination in the pre-war confidential documents that came before the duplicating office. Production secretaries,

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<sup>369</sup> 'Instructions to Women Clerical Staff', op.cit.

telephonists and waitresses would certainly have been in direct contact with celebrities and prominent public figures; others might be passed in Reception areas or in the lifts.

By the standards of the day, the BBC's female house staff were well treated. However, the majority earned lower wages than other women in the Company/ Corporation and promotion and mobility were rare, and then only within the confines of the house staff hierarchy, perhaps to supervisor or forewoman. There is little evidence that the BBC's manual staff mixed socially with their office-based colleagues. While the BBC Club, for example, had no ruling against manual workers being members, there is little indication that they joined or, indeed, would have been welcomed.

For a significant number of waged women, work at the BBC was a temporary affair. Clare Lawson Dick recalled how she never expected to stay for long; she simply collected her weekly wage and reserved her energy for going out in the evenings.<sup>370</sup> For many women, a comfortable few years, earning a good wage in a congenial environment was more than satisfactory; promotion to a more challenging job was not something they desired. No records were kept of the numbers of female secretarial/clerical staff recruited by the BBC, neither are there any official figures on length of service or resignations, however, marriage appears to be the main reason why women left the BBC. Initially, weekly-paid women could choose to remain on the staff, but from 1932, they were the main casualties of the BBC marriage bar, as will now be examined.

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<sup>370</sup> Clare Lawson Dick interview, *op.cit.*



## Chapter Three: "...Only an exceptional woman..."

### Married Women and Work at the BBC

#### Introduction

In February 1930, the *BBC Club Bulletin* announced the 'triumphant' launch of the BBC Debating Society. The subject of the inaugural debate? "That in their opinion women should resign their posts on Marriage".<sup>1</sup> There is no record of who took part in the debate or which side won but it demonstrates that the issue of whether married women should work was a hot topic for BBC staff. In 1930, the Corporation did not operate a marriage bar; two years later, in October 1932, the BBC Governors approved the introduction of one. Marriage bars were one of the most invidious discriminatory practices of the inter-war years operating in the civil service, in teaching and in banking. They were also commonplace in large companies; for example Great Western Railway, Lever Brothers, Marconi and ICI all had bars. This chapter asks why, for its first ten years, the BBC bucked convention and openly employed married women and why, in 1932, it introduced a marriage bar which was not abolished until 1944.

The implementation of the BBC marriage bar was never straightforward and this chapter will contend that it was instituted by the Corporation as a symbol of conformity rather than for any deep held conviction that married women should not work. To enforce a marriage bar, the BBC had to negotiate the contradiction of being a 'modern' organisation with a restrictive practice. This was uncomfortable for BBC management and during the period the bar was in force there was continual ambiguity and uncertainty about its necessity and efficacy. A key theme of the chapter will be the numerous ways the BBC circumvented the bar to allow married women, who were viewed as valuable to the Corporation, to continue working.

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<sup>1</sup> BBC Club Bulletin, February 1930

From 1934 to 1937, the BBC operated a Marriage Tribunal where women could put forward a case to remain on the staff after marriage. Its deliberations provide a rich insight into contemporary viewpoints on married women and work. The five criteria used by the Tribunal to differentiate between desirable and undesirable women included loyalty, efficiency and indispensability along with career-mindedness and an ability to balance married life with office work. In addition, compassionate circumstances were taken into consideration, revealing the deep paternalism of the BBC. In the three and a half years that it functioned, the Tribunal heard the cases of twenty-nine individual women and dismissed thirteen of them, all of whom were waged employees. Most BBC women, however, chose to resign on marriage which suggests an unspoken convention amongst female staff that a married woman did not work.

The reasons for marriage bars and their impact on women and society were widely discussed throughout the 1920s and 1930s and form a section of this chapter. The BBC itself contributed to the debate with, for example, Hilda Matheson's 1928 programme "Should Married Women Work?"<sup>2</sup> The convention was for women to resign on marriage; areas of work such as the Stage or the Lancashire cotton mills, which retained women after marriage, were pinpointed as exceptions. While it might be acceptable for an actress to continue her profession or for a poor woman to attempt the 'double burden' i.e. to supplement the family income by charring or dressmaking, custom dictated that a respectable married woman's focus was her home and not the workplace.<sup>3</sup> Although most married women accepted their primary role was homemaking, a small but significant minority decried the practice. Many educated professional women, such as teachers and civil servants, were politically active and the rights of married women to earn became a clarion call for feminists in the 1920s and 30s.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Radio Times, October 12<sup>th</sup> 1928. The programme was part of the 'Questions for Women Voters' series instigated by Hilda Matheson. Dame Beatrix Lyall of the LCC put the case against married women's work while Mrs E.D. Simon, "one of the leading speakers in the Liberal Party and a strong and consistent feminist" maintained that women should be free to choose for themselves.

<sup>3</sup> Jane Lewis, Women in England 1870-1950: Sexual Divisions and Social Change (Brighton: Wheatsheaf Books, 1984) pp.55-62

<sup>4</sup> The right of married women to work was a focus for feminist campaigning groups such as the Six Point Group and the Open Door Council; for trade unions such as the National Union of Women Teachers and the Council of Women Civil Servants and for individuals such as Vera Brittain and Ray Strachey.

While the wider context of marriage bars in the inter-war years has been discussed by historians such as Jane Lewis, Helen Jones and Gerry Holloway there have been, to date, few comprehensive studies of the circumstances surrounding married women's work in business or the professions.<sup>5</sup> There are three exceptions. Alison Oram revealed the devastating personal impact of marriage bars on women teachers which led to impassioned political campaigning amongst those who were unionised.<sup>6</sup> This was paralleled in the Civil Service, as Helen Glew has shown in her investigation into the marriage bar in the GPO.<sup>7</sup> Here, as with teachers, the marriage bar forced a choice between matrimony and a career. Judy Faraday's study of women managers in the John Lewis Partnership provides an interesting counterpoint. John Spedan Lewis positively recruited married women managers, particularly in the 1920s, believing them to be more loyal and to better understand the needs of customers.<sup>8</sup> Unlike the John Lewis Partnership, the BBC was never pro-active in its recruitment of married women staff but neither did it dismiss out-of-hand married women's work, as was the case for most teachers and civil servants. As will be revealed, the BBC took a practical approach.

This chapter draws extensively on four files of BBC policy documents that relate specifically to the employment of married women in the Corporation.<sup>9</sup> The two that cover the pre-war years 1928-1939 are especially revealing in the details they reveal about why the marriage bar was introduced and how the Corporation

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<sup>5</sup> Lewis, op.cit; Helen Jones, Women in British Public Life 1914-50 (Harlow: Pearson Education Limited, 2000); Gerry Holloway, Women and Work in Britain since 1840 (London: Routledge, 2005). See also Leonore Davidoff and Belinda Westover, eds., Our Work, Our Lives, Our Words: Women's History and Women's Work (London Macmillan Education, 1986); Miriam Glucksmann, Women Assemble: Women Workers and the New Industries in Inter-War Britain (London: Routledge, 1990)

<sup>6</sup> Alison Oram, Women Teachers and Feminist Politics 1900 - 1939 (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996)

<sup>7</sup> Helen Glew, Women's Employment in the General Post Office, 1914-1939, (PhD., London, 2009). Meta Zimmeck also included information about the marriage bar in her study of women civil servants in the inter-war years. "Strategies and Stratagems for the Employment of Women in the British Civil Service 1919-1939," Historical Journal 27.4 (1984) pp.903-904, 922-923

<sup>8</sup> Judy Faraday, A Kind of Superior Hobby: Women Managers in the John Lewis Partnership 1918-1950, (M.Phil., University of Wolverhampton, 2009)

<sup>9</sup> The files are R49/371/1: Staff Policy: Married Women Policy 1, 1928-1935 (MWP:1); R49/371/2: Married Women Policy 2, 1936-July 1939 (MWP:2); R49/371/3: Married Women Policy 3, August 1939-1946 (MWP:3); R49/372: Married Women Policy: Tribunals 1934-1937 (MWPT).

grappled with the many anomalies that arose. The third, which encompasses the Second World War, while technically outside the parameters of this thesis, is important for its revelations on why the bar was abandoned in 1944. A fourth file uncovers the workings of the BBC's Marriage Tribunal, which operated from 1934-1937. As with all business archives, there are questions about what has, and hasn't, been retained. Certainly some documents are missing, for example the minutes of the first two cases heard by the Marriage Tribunal. In the absence of a staff association or forum, it has been very difficult to ascertain the views of BBC women themselves. The staff journals are also very quiet on this issue so it has been hard to discover the extent of unrest, if any, that the marriage bar caused. Reith made occasional references to married women in his diaries which provide a further glimpse into management attitudes.

The chapter begins with an overview of the BBC's approach towards married women prior to 1931, when the first discussions on the employment of married women emerge. It argues that for the first eight years the BBC, as a modern post-war industry, took a largely positive attitude to their employment. The chapter then moves to a general summary of the marriage bar in the inter-war years before considering, in turn, the deliberations that surrounded the introduction of the BBC's marriage bar, the impact of its execution and the workings of the Marriage Tribunal. Here, the BBC will be shown to be ambivalent but ultimately pragmatic about its implementation. This is followed by an investigation into the position of married women in the BBC post 1932, which shows how the bar was frequently digressed to enable their continued employment and recruitment. Finally, it considers the ending of the BBC marriage bar and what this tells us about the BBC's changed attitude towards married women. Overall, the chapter contemplates how far the BBC's marriage bar reflected inter-war ideology towards the employment of married women.

### The BBC: Before the Marriage Bar

In 1928, Valentine Goldsmith, the Assistant Controller with responsibility for Administration, sent a memo to Reith in which he clarified the BBC's position

with regard to the employment of married women. “The principle of women working with equal status is accepted”, he wrote, “The principle of married women so working is also accepted.”<sup>10</sup> In 1931, the convention was praised by Hilda Matheson, the BBC’s Director of Talks:

As regards women on the staff, the BBC has set an example which is not always to be found among public bodies. Women are not compelled to resign at marriage.... while married women are not debarred from applying for posts.<sup>11</sup>

Prior to 1928, no official document states that married women were eligible to work at the BBC, it was accepted practice. Nor is there any indication as to why the BBC adopted the custom. As an innovative post-war Company undergoing fast and haphazard growth, questions as to a woman’s marital status appear not to have been a recruitment priority; rather decisions were made on aptitude and whether an individual was likely to be an asset to the BBC. It is even possible that the early BBC took a positive decision to employ married women, seeing them as emblematic of the Company/Corporation’s modernity.

In 1932, as part of the deliberations surrounding the introduction of the marriage bar, BBC management carried out an audit of married female staff.<sup>12</sup> This showed that out of an approximate female staff of 400, thirty-one married women were employed by the Corporation, both at Head Office and in the Regions.<sup>13</sup> They were in jobs as varied as Multigraph operator, telephonist, registry clerk, shorthand typist and secretary. While some had married since joining the BBC, others had been married when they became staff, including two mothers. No information is given as to when these women joined the BBC, so it is not possible to see if fewer married women were employed as the Corporation matured.

Although married women were entitled to work at the BBC there was an informal practise of resignation on marriage, as illustrated by the staff magazines which

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<sup>10</sup> MWP:1, Goldsmith to Reith, November 27<sup>th</sup> 1928

<sup>11</sup> Women’s Leader, January 2nd 1931, “Women and Broadcasting”

<sup>12</sup> MWP:1, October 25th 1932: Brief Report on Married Women at Present Working for the Corporation.

<sup>13</sup> In 1932 there were approximately 1,200 staff. The ratio of female to male staff was generally around one third.

frequently celebrated weddings and engagements. For example, in May 1928, *The Saveloy* (the original staff newsletter) informed its readers that Isabel Shields, Reith's personal secretary, had left to be married. Of the eight other women whose matrimony was announced (four of whom were engaged to BBC colleagues) only two had elected to stay with the Corporation. The approaching marriage and retirement of Miss Johnson, secretary to the Manchester Station Director, was described as a 'disaster looming ahead'.<sup>14</sup> This suggests that management were often frustrated that marriage led to resignation. Certainly Reith recorded his sadness that his secretary, Miss Shields, had gone. He noted in his diary her loyal and devoted service over five "very strenuous" years.<sup>15</sup>

Reith's regret at losing valuable female staff is most pronounced in the case of Olive May, the Telephone Supervisor at Savoy Hill. The announcement of her engagement in January 1928 to Cecil Bottle, an engineer in Leeds, prompted an angry reaction. On hearing the news, Reith telephoned Peter Eckersley, the Chief Engineer, and demanded that he take disciplinary action against Bottle for getting betrothed to his "star operator". It was left to Lady Reith to telephone Miss May the next day to apologise. She explained that Sir John thought "everybody should put the BBC first."<sup>16</sup> Mrs Bottle's treachery was forgiven by Reith; he gave her a silver inkstand as a parting gift, commenting that she had been "beyond praise in every way and I regret her going very much".<sup>17</sup> In 1931, as we learnt in Chapter Two, she was invited to return to the BBC for twelve months, to help with the move of the telephone exchange from Savoy Hill to Broadcasting House.<sup>18</sup>

The Civil Service, the closest organisation in structure and workplace custom to the BBC, offered a gratuity to women who left on marriage, in lieu of pension. The BBC on the other hand, operated a system of Wedding Present and Wedding Leave which was granted equally to both male and female staff. The Wedding Present was a gift of between £5 to £10 for weekly-paid staff (depending on length of service) and one-thirtieth of annual salary for those who were monthly-

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<sup>14</sup> *The Saveloy*, May 1928

<sup>15</sup> *Reith Diaries*, February 29<sup>th</sup> 1928

<sup>16</sup> *Reith Remembered*, BBC Sound Archive Ref no. 87181, broadcast June 21<sup>st</sup> 1989

<sup>17</sup> *Reith Diaries*, January 27<sup>th</sup> 1928

<sup>18</sup> *Prospero*, June 1984. Article by Olive Bottle

paid.<sup>19</sup> Wedding Leave was an extra week's holiday for the honeymoon. In addition, any member of staff who resigned from the BBC, and who had paid into the pension scheme, was entitled to receive a refund of their contributions plus interest. As a result, women who resigned on marriage were financially compensated. However, there were no specific incentives for women to leave the BBC on marriage. Those who opted to remain on the staff were, like men, equally eligible for marriage benefits and equally entitled to a refund of pension contributions if they chose to leave at a later date.

In autumn 1928, the BBC was confronted with one of the realities of employing married women staff, maternity. Mary Somerville, the de facto Head of Schools Broadcasting, was one of those whose future marriage was announced in the May 1928 edition of *The Saveloy*; her engagement to the journalist R. P. Brown meriting a cartoon with the caption: "Happy Mr Peter Brown".<sup>20</sup> In November 1928, following her wedding, Somerville announced she was pregnant. Reith made no mention of Somerville's engagement or marriage in his diary but her impending motherhood did warrant comment. On November 22<sup>nd</sup> he wrote: "Carpendale and wife to tea. We talked about Miss Somerville who is going to have a baby and wants to stay at work."<sup>21</sup>

Mary Somerville's desire to retain her job prompted the BBC to clarify its position with regard to the employment of married women and forced it to begin urgent discussions about its attitude towards maternity. There was no precedent within the Corporation because it was rare for a middle-class woman to be pregnant while at work. Maternity leave was not unknown in the UK, for example the John Lewis Partnership allowed extended unpaid leave with contributions towards financial hardship being underwritten.<sup>22</sup> The 1891 Factory Act had obliged working-class women to take a month off after childbirth.<sup>23</sup> The UK had not, however, adopted the International Labour Organisation's provision for six weeks maternity leave nor had the government agreed, post-war, to provide

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<sup>19</sup> MWP:1, Goldsmith to Salaries Clerk, August 25<sup>th</sup> 1927

<sup>20</sup> *The Saveloy*, May 1928

<sup>21</sup> *Reith Diaries*, November 22<sup>nd</sup> 1928. Carpendale was Reith's deputy.

<sup>22</sup> Faraday, op.cit., p.83

<sup>23</sup> Lewis, op.cit., p.34

financial support after childbirth through National Health Insurance.<sup>24</sup> The widespread existence of marriage bars in the 1920s and 1930s, and the custom to leave the workforce before children were born, precluded the possibility of maternity leave in most occupations and professions.

In November 1928, shortly after Somerville's pregnancy was announced, Valentine Goldsmith, in his capacity as Head of Administration, sent a memo to Reith headlined "Female Staff – Maternity".<sup>25</sup> The opening sentence revealed his concerns: "The question of whether female staff may be allowed to retain their positions when about to become mothers requires decision." Goldsmith was clear that because the BBC accepted the employment of married women, "it is not only against public policy it is also illogical to rule that motherhood entails dismissal." With this principle established, Goldsmith then elaborated on what he believed was the best way to deal with the issue; it could either be regarded as national service, for which absence on special leave was allowed, or as a lengthy illness.<sup>26</sup>

For Goldsmith, the simplest way was to treat maternity leave as sick leave. He recommended that the BBC adopt a scheme of four months on full pay and up to a further four months on half pay.<sup>27</sup> Before this was offered, however, the BBC would need to be satisfied that the woman's circumstances left her free to resume full-time work. To guard against a change of mind, the woman concerned would have to sign a statement promising to repay the money if she did not return. There would be no guarantee that she could go back to her previous position and, while maternity leave could be considered once or twice in a long service:

It is reasonable to assume that a woman who is going to have a family of three or more must attend only to it, and give up thought of competing in the wage-earning field on equal terms, and be dependent only on her husband.

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> MWP:1, Goldsmith to Reith, November 27<sup>th</sup> 1928

<sup>26</sup> Same memo

<sup>27</sup> Goldsmith appears to have been guided in this by the custom of the London County Council which, according to a hand-written note in the margin, operated a system of 8 weeks full/9 weeks' half pay. This is somewhat confusing, as the LCC enforced a strict marriage bar. However, a note in Mary Somerville's file indicates that this was the LCC situation prior to 1923 when the bar was introduced. L2/195/1 Mary Somerville Personal File, Carpendale to Goldsmith, December 7<sup>th</sup>(?) 1928



Goldsmith concluded:

Looking at the matter as a whole, I feel that any large corporation or commercial organization should take this risk rather than assume a 19th century attitude in the present circumstances of women's employment.<sup>28</sup>

The BBC accordingly situated itself as a progressive institution, in contrast to long-standing professions such as the Civil Service and banking, where attitudes towards married women staff were negative and entrenched.

A series of memos in early December 1928 about the specifics of Mary Somerville's case reveal that she was anxious to know if she could retain her job. Reith was not to decide the matter on his own, it was to be referred to the Board of Governors with the recommendation that, as long as the BBC was satisfied that her work and health were not suffering, Somerville's services would be retained. During her "illness" she was to receive three months leave on full-pay and up to three months on half-pay. When the subject was discussed by the Board of Governors, the principle of maternity leave was agreed although it was felt undesirable to prescribe fixed regulations for women who became mothers, individual cases being considered on merit.<sup>29</sup> This meant that although maternity leave was to be offered, it was to be discretionary rather than a right. Mary Somerville began her maternity leave in May 1929 returning to the BBC, initially on a part-time basis, in October 1929. The following April she was awarded an above-average pay rise indicating that her pregnancy and ensuing absence had not adversely affected her standing at work.

The BBC's view of itself as pioneering in its attitude towards Mary Somerville and maternity is illustrated in a letter from Hilda Matheson to Vita Sackville-West in May 1929. Somerville, newly on maternity leave, had become seriously ill with tubercular pleurisy and there was concern about how this might affect the imminent baby. Matheson, who had just learned of her friend and colleague's illness, wrote, "It will be sad if all the plans for making her a spectacular

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<sup>28</sup> MWP:1, Goldsmith to Reith, November 27th 1928

<sup>29</sup> R/1/1:Board of Governors Minutes 1927-1930, December 12th 1928

vindication of the success of keeping on your job and baby don't come off – poor Maisie.”<sup>30</sup>

It can therefore be seen that, prior to the implementation of its marriage bar in 1932, the BBC was positive in its approach towards the employment of married female staff. This was confirmed in 1928 when the Corporation introduced maternity leave. While most women elected to resign on marriage, those who chose to remain on the staff were not penalised in any way; in fact there was often sadness and frustration that valued women, such as Miss May and Miss Johnson, opted to leave. To assess how progressive the early BBC was in its attitude towards married women, we need to understand the broader context of marriage bars in the inter-war years, to which this chapter now moves.

### The Marriage Bar in the Inter-War Years: Overview

The origins of inter-war attitudes towards married women's work go back to the late nineteenth century when middle-class women first entered the workforce. As Jane Lewis, Elizabeth Roberts and others have shown, arguments about whether working-class married women should work were already pervasive, based on economic considerations, for example the primacy of the male breadwinner, and social considerations such as a woman's duty of care to her husband and child.<sup>31</sup> In 1876, the Post Office introduced the first formal marriage bar in the UK. Educated women were newly recruited to the service and there was concern that continuity of employment would be compromised by motherhood.<sup>32</sup> By the outbreak of the First World War, marriage bars had become commonplace in occupations such as the civil service, banking and teaching. Edith Morley, Professor of English Language at Reading University was certain that they were loathed by many women. In her 1914 book, *Women Workers in Seven Professions*, she observed:

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<sup>30</sup> Hilda Matheson Letters, May 14<sup>th</sup> 1929

<sup>31</sup> Lewis, *op.cit* pp.45, 49-50; Elizabeth Roberts, Women's Work 1840-1940 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988) pp. 14-16. See also Sheila Lewenhak, Women and Trade Unions: An Outline History of Women in the British Trade Union Movement (London: Ernest Benn Ltd, 1977) pp.41, 94

<sup>32</sup> For a discussion on the introduction of the marriage bar in the GPO see Glew, *op.cit.*, pp.119-122

Wherever the subject of the employment of married women is mentioned... there is adverse comment on the economically unsound, unjust and racially dangerous tendency in many salaried professions to enforce upon women resignation on marriage.<sup>33</sup>

The issues highlighted by Morley: the waste of highly educated, well-trained and experienced workers; the unfairness of celibacy being a condition of female employment and concerns that professional women would choose their career over child-bearing, so affecting the calibre of the race, continued to be pertinent in the 1920s and 1930s.

During the First World War many marriage bars were relaxed or lifted, although by the early 1920s they had not only been reinstated but were becoming more widespread. This was partly for economic reasons, for example the ‘Geddes Axe’ of 1922, with its severe cuts to local authority budgets, prompted the sacking of many married women employees and the imposition of bars, especially for female teachers.<sup>34</sup> It had been anticipated that the Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act of 1919 would end the practice of marriage bars. Section One clearly stated:

A person shall not be disqualified by sex or marriage from the exercise of any public function, or from being appointed to or holding any civil or judicial office or post, or from entering or assuming or carrying on any civil profession or vocation.

However, during its passage through parliament the Civil Service successfully negotiated for Proviso A, which made them an exception, other exemptions being the Armed Forces, the Church and the Stock Exchange. When tested in law it became apparent that while the Act might enable married women to work, it did not *entitle* them to do so.<sup>35</sup>

The failure of the Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act to protect married women was challenged in parliament. In 1927, Sir Robert Newman introduced a Private Member’s Bill sponsored by the National Union of Societies for Equal

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<sup>33</sup> Edith Morley, Women Workers in Seven Professions (London: George Routledge and Sons, 1914) p.xv

<sup>34</sup> Oram, *op.cit.*, p.26

<sup>35</sup> Glew, *op.cit.*, pp.125-126

Citizenship (NUSEC).<sup>36</sup> Those in favour of removing the marriage bar stressed the lack of evidence that a woman became less efficient on marriage; that a married woman was mature enough to decide for herself if she wanted to work; that it made no economic sense to lose the services of trained women and that working-class married women were not generally sacked. Against the removal of the bar were arguments that married women usually became pregnant so would either have to leave or have long absences; that a married woman's heart was with her home and family and that the birth rate would fall amongst 'desirable' women.<sup>37</sup> The opponents of the Bill won and there were no further attempts to challenge marriage bars in parliament during the inter-war years.

This lack of parliamentary success did not mean the right of married women to work was not vigorously defended during the 1920s and 1930s. In 1928, activists forced Manchester City Council to rescind their marriage bar and a similar success was achieved with the London County Council (LCC) in 1935. The minutes of the feminist campaigning groups the Open Door Council and the Six Point Group, show how they worked with the National Union of Women Teachers to pressurise the council to end the bar.<sup>38</sup> Other women's groups such as the NUSEC, the National Council of Women, the Women's Freedom League and the St Joan's Political and Social Alliance all supported the right of married women to work. In 1934, as we shall see, they joined together with a host of women's trade unions and other interest groups, to lead the Campaign for the Right of the Married Women to Earn.

Thus the inter-war years witnessed fervent discussion on married women and work which encapsulated social, cultural, political and economic arguments. That married women worked was unarguable.<sup>39</sup> Whether married women *should* work was a different matter. It was custom rather than authorized enforcement that led

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<sup>36</sup> For a more detailed analysis of the introduction of the Bill see Olive Banks, The Politics of British Feminism, 1918 - 1970 (Aldershot: Edward Elgar, 1993) p.55

<sup>37</sup> See Jones, *op.cit.*, p.53; also Glew, *op.cit.*, pp.130-131

<sup>38</sup> These minutes are held at the Women's Library. Six Point Group: 5SPG/B/01-5, AGM'S and Annual Reports 1931-1935; Open Door Council: 5ODC/A/05, Annual Reports

<sup>39</sup> The census for 1921 showed 8.8% of married women were in employment; for 1931 the figure was 9.7%, although this was certainly an underestimation. Jane Lewis records the census figures for married women differently, at 14% in 1911, 14% in 1921 and 16% in 1931. Lewis, *op.cit.*, p.152

most women to leave paid work when they married; it was not deemed practical for a respectable woman to attempt both to work and run a home. There might also be a sense of shame that her husband could not keep her. The subject of married women's work was constantly in the public eye. As Fiona Hackney has shown, the topic was often discussed in women's magazines in the 1920s and 1930s, where lively and opposing viewpoints were offered.<sup>40</sup> Newspapers were also vociferous, frequently supporting the conviction that a married woman's place was in the home. In August 1933, for instance, when the press got a whiff of the BBC's marriage bar (see below p.154), the *Glasgow Evening Citizen* bellowed:

How can a woman possibly do justice to her home and to her family if she has to devote her attention to another job? Equally, how can she fulfil her obligation to her employer if her mind is preoccupied, as it must be, with domestic affairs? No more than a man can a woman serve two masters.<sup>41</sup>

Domesticity as a criterion was used to enforce the marriage bar legally. For example, in 1925, a challenge to the bar was brought by a female teacher in Dorset. When the case of *Short v Poole Corporation* went to appeal, the Corporation, who won, maintained that "the duty of married women was primarily to look after her domestic concerns, and they regarded it as impossible for her to do so and to act effectively and satisfactorily as a teacher at the same time."<sup>42</sup> In 1960, a contributor to the BBC's *Woman's Hour* programme remembered her young working life in the 1920s. She recalled:

...there was little hope of combining marriage and career. Plenty of women were out of jobs, and many employers dismissed their female staff as soon as a wedding ring appeared. You were either a single woman doing (or looking for) a paid job, or a married woman running a home.<sup>43</sup>

If social attitudes placed wives and mothers in the home, the economic climate of the inter-war years also militated against married women in the workplace. In the

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<sup>40</sup>Hackney, Fiona, *"They Opened Up a Whole New World": Feminism, Modernity and the Feminine Imagination in Women's Magazines, 1919-1930* (PhD., London, 2011) pp. 208-213

<sup>41</sup> *Glasgow Evening Citizen*, August 31<sup>st</sup> 1933

<sup>42</sup> As quoted by Erna Reiss "Changes in the Law" in *Five Women, Our Freedom and Its Results*, ed. Ray Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1936) p.99

<sup>43</sup> "Cold Comfort or Commonsense?" a talk by Frances Gomm, *Woman's Hour*, May 30<sup>th</sup> 1960

early 1930s especially, anger was directed at married women workers who were seen to be taking jobs away from single women as well as unemployed men. Even the socialist and feminist Margaret Cole acknowledged the “very real fear” among men if married women were allowed or encouraged to go on earning or holding down jobs, a fear shared by their wives.<sup>44</sup> One of the objections to the BBC’s appointment of Mrs Sheila Borrett as its first, short-lived, female announcer in July 1933 was the fact that she was married and so depriving a man of the position.<sup>45</sup>

While many middle-class women, with their training and career aspirations, were opposed to marriage bars others were positive about them. Some single women, who had chosen a career over marriage, saw in their application less competition for rare promotional opportunities.<sup>46</sup> Others were resentful that married women workers might potentially deprive them of jobs altogether.<sup>47</sup> Resignation on marriage could also prompt a marriage gratuity, something of particular importance to the less well-off. When, in January 1930, nearly 7,000 lower grade female clerks in the Civil Service were asked if they favoured the abolition of the marriage bar, if it meant the end of the marriage gratuity, only 138 women voted in favour. This caused Winifred Holtby to remark:

Who are the girls who voted for the marriage bar? Nine out of ten swing daily to their offices in suburban trains and trams and buses, carrying in their suitcases a powder-puff and a love-story or ‘Home Chat’.... They think that if only they could marry all would be well.<sup>48</sup>

The ‘meanwhile attitude’ of young women, filling in time before they married, was bemoaned by feminist campaigners, in particular Ray Strachey, and was seen

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<sup>44</sup> Margaret Cole, Marriage: Past and Present (London: Dent and Sons, 1938) p.202

<sup>45</sup> The Leader, April 2<sup>nd</sup> 1935

<sup>46</sup> Jones, op.cit., p.155

<sup>47</sup> See for example Davidoff and Westover, eds., Our Work, Our Lives, Our Words: Women's History and Women's Work pp.18, 142

<sup>48</sup> “The Wearer and the Shoe”, Manchester Guardian January 31<sup>st</sup> 1930, from Paul Berry and Alan Bishop, eds., Testament of a Generation: The Journalism of Vera Brittain and Winifred Holtby (London: Virago, 1985) p.65

as one of the stumbling blocks to women's professional advancement.<sup>49</sup> Writing in the *Manchester Guardian* Vera Brittain lamented:

the belief that 'business' is the chief concern of a man's life but personal relationships the main interest of a woman's, and that marriage is the be-all and end-all of her existence – a belief translated when women began to enter professions in large numbers into the theory that their work was only a 'meantime' occupation between school and marriage, and need be neither carefully studied nor adequately paid."<sup>50</sup>

Marriage bars had a fundamental effect on women's experience of work and the perception of women's work in the inter-war years. As highlighted by Brittain, the belief that women would leave the workforce on marriage gave little incentive for training. As early as 1920, Barbara Drake had pointed out the damaging impact this had on apprenticeships for girls and young women, coining the phrase "mortality by marriage".<sup>51</sup> Brittain also wrote of the detrimental effects on women's pay. As Samuel Cohn has argued and Helen Glew has verified, the high-turnover of female staff in the GPO was seen as an economically advantageous because it ensured a constant flow of fresh and cheap new recruits.<sup>52</sup> This was also true of other areas of work.<sup>53</sup> In her *Manchester Guardian* article, Brittain emphasised a further result of marriage bars, their enforced celibacy. This was a particular problem for teachers and civil servants who were forced to choose between marriage and a career.<sup>54</sup>

Like the early BBC, there was a sizeable group of employers who did not enforce marriage bars. Miriam Glucksmann's research into women factory workers in the inter-war years revealed that EMI, (incidentally one of the leading manufacturers of wireless sets), did not operate a marriage bar, and neither was there a bar at

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<sup>49</sup> Ray Strachey, Careers and Openings for Women: A Survey of Women's Employment and a Guide for Those Seeking Work (London: Faber and Faber, 1935) pp.52-54

<sup>50</sup> Vera Brittain, Manchester Guardian, September 27<sup>th</sup> 1928, quoted in Berry and Bishop, op.cit., pp.125-126

<sup>51</sup> Barbara Drake, Women in Trade Unions (Labour Research Department, 1920) pp.190, 232

<sup>52</sup> Samuel Cohn, The Process of Occupational Sex-Typing. The Feminisation of Clerical Labour in Great Britain (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1985) pp.94 -105; Glew, op.cit., p.127

<sup>53</sup> Selina Todd concurs that marriage bars were economically motivated. Selina Todd, Young Women, Employment and the Family in Inter-war England, (PhD., Sussex, 2003) p.51

<sup>54</sup> Oram, op.cit., p.47. According to the 1921 and 1931 Census, around 85% of women teachers were unmarried. Glew, op.cit., pp.135-136

Hoover.<sup>55</sup> The London School of Economics took a positive approach towards the employment of married women to the extent that William Beveridge, the Director of the LSE from 1919, introduced a system of child benefit for his staff in 1925.<sup>56</sup> Women academics, unlike schoolteachers, were rarely subject to a bar; in 1933, a survey by the British Federation of University Women estimated that there were at least 100 married women working in British universities.<sup>57</sup> A key exception was Liverpool University which, in 1933, introduced a bar, the repercussions of which will be discussed in greater detail shortly.<sup>58</sup> While women medics who were employed by local or public authorities might face marriage bars, women GPs did not, and were often able successfully to juggle work with family life. The legal profession, opened to women following the 1919 Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act, did not operate a marriage bar. Helena Normanton, the UK's first female barrister, took the issue of her marriage a stage further and successfully campaigned to keep her maiden name.<sup>59</sup>

Those with creative careers in the inter-war years were also largely protected from marriage bars which, in part, may explain the BBC's initial progressive attitude. As Ray Strachey noted, when it came to the arts, "women musicians, painters, actresses and writers may marry as much as they please, and do in fact marry without abandoning their careers."<sup>60</sup> Similarly, there was an acceptance of married women working in journalism and advertising, for example the membership list of the Women's Provisional Club for 1936 included Mrs Ethel Wood, Director of the advertising agency Samson Clark Co.; Mrs Hilary Blair-Fish, Editor of *Nursing Times*, and Mrs Emilie Peacocke, Editor of the Woman's Department at *The Daily Telegraph*.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Glucksmann, op.cit., pp.117, 140

<sup>56</sup> William Beveridge, The London School of Economics and Its Problems 1919-1937 (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1960) p.46

<sup>57</sup> University of Liverpool: Margaret Miller Papers: P822/1, Undated memorandum to the Council of Liverpool University but adjacent to documents dated November 1933

<sup>58</sup> There may have been individual cases. Carol Dyhouse records that of Elsie Phare who was sacked from Southampton University College when she married. Carol Dyhouse, No Distinction of Sex? Women in British Universities, 1870-1939 (London: UCL Press, 1995) p.162

<sup>59</sup> See for example a letter in the files of Margaret Miller, October 11th 1932, Cicely Leadley-Brown to Margaret Miller

<sup>60</sup> Strachey, Careers and Openings for Women p.61

<sup>61</sup> Women's Library, Women's Provisional Club, 5/WPV/3/1, Membership records, September 1936



Neither did all businesses shun married women. As has been mentioned, John Spedan Lewis, who inaugurated the pioneering John Lewis Partnership in 1928, made it clear that where a married woman was the best candidate, she would be given the job.<sup>62</sup> He believed a married person, whether male or female, was a more desirable Partner because it made him or her more industrious and stable.<sup>63</sup> In 1939, Ray Strachey, in her role as Secretary of the Women's Employment Federation (of which Mrs Spedan Lewis was a Committee Member) waxed positively about Vickers Armstrong who were looking to recruit women graduates for their Aeronautical Stress Department. "Women", Strachey stressed, "were employed in all departments....and there was no marriage bar."<sup>64</sup>

Evidently, the issue of the employment of married women in the inter-war years was highly contentious. Economic, social and cultural arguments were used to both prove and disprove a married woman's fitness for paid work. The BBC, for its first eight years, chose to abide by the principle that married women had equal status. They were not debarred from applying for posts neither were they compelled to resign. By 1931, this attitude had begun to change. The deliberations surrounding the employment of married women at the BBC were documented and retained which has made it possible, for the first time, to see how and why an inter-war marriage bar was introduced.

### The BBC: Marriage Bar Deliberations

There is no single explanation as to why, in the early 1930s, the BBC changed its attitude towards the employment of married women. The reasons appear, rather, to be partly economic, partly social, partly personal and partly to do with the BBC's changing perception of itself. By 1931, the Depression had taken a deep hold in the UK and, with millions out of work, discussions about married women's employment were heightened. This was true at the BBC where, as will be shown, economic considerations were coupled with new concerns about

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<sup>62</sup> The Gazette, July 27<sup>th</sup> 1929, "The Employment of Married Women"

<sup>63</sup> The Gazette, June 4<sup>th</sup> 1927, Chairman's Review of the Selling Staff at Oxford Street

<sup>64</sup> Women's Library, Women's Employment Federation: 488 6/WEF/488-4, Advisory Department's Committee Minutes and Correspondence 1938-40, June 29<sup>th</sup> 1939

women's motivation for work. In addition, by 1931, the Corporation was a highly regarded national institution with senior management increasingly confident of their place within the establishment. Marriage bars were seen to be part of the prevailing cultural orthodoxy; a BBC marriage bar would accordingly add to the Corporation's sense of conformity and respectability.

The first inklings of an alteration in the BBC's attitude towards married women came in early 1931 when there was a "tentative" discussion on the Employment of Married Women at the weekly Control Board meeting.<sup>65</sup> As a result, Miss Banks, then Women's Staff Supervisor, was asked to furnish a nominal report.<sup>66</sup> The issue of married women working was discussed twice more at Control Board during 1931. In September, in the light of rising unemployment, the focus was on whether women whose husbands were in work should be refused BBC posts and whether the list of married women on the staff should be scrutinised, with a view to changes. It was reported that "the feeling was against the latter and in favour of the former."<sup>67</sup> At a December meeting, the discussion moved on to the treatment of women on the staff who married in the future and to whether they should be allowed to remain, "views on both sides were expressed."<sup>68</sup> It was decided that Valentine Goldsmith, the Assistant Controller with responsibility for Administration, would investigate practices in other firms and report back.

Douglas Clarke, Goldsmith's assistant, carried out these investigations. In September 1932, he reported to Goldsmith that he had held long interviews with the relevant officers at the London Life Association, the Ministry of Labour, Imperial Chemical Industries, the Prudential Assurance Co., the National Provincial Bank, the LCC, Marconi Co. and the Underground Railways of London.<sup>69</sup> Clarke also sought corroboration on the issue from the Civil Service. With the exception of the Underground Railways of London, all the companies terminated their women staff on marriage, giving as their reasons "principally the labour market", but most also expressed the personal view that married women

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<sup>65</sup> R3/3/7:Control Board Minutes, February 5<sup>th</sup> 1931

<sup>66</sup> There is no record of the report

<sup>67</sup> Control Board Minutes, September 22<sup>nd</sup> 1931

<sup>68</sup> Control Board Minutes, December 15<sup>th</sup> 1931

<sup>69</sup> MWP:1, Clarke to Goldsmith, September 23<sup>rd</sup> 1932

“could not well carry on a business and run a home”. Clarke then analysed the pros and cons of employing married women. On the pro-side:

Women presumably have the right to live as they think fit, and may, therefore, seek employment or remain in employment after marriage.

Women remaining on the staff after marriage will presumably obtain an experience and balance lacking in certain single women. They will also be more stable members of the staff, as they will not have the restless outlook of so many girls who are contemplating marriage.

On the other hand:

With the labour market in its present condition it is unfair for married women who are supported by their husbands to compete against unmarried women, who must earn a living.

It would seem impossible for a married woman to work in business and at the same time maintain a reasonable home for her husband and her family. It would seem that either her work in business must suffer, or her health, or her husband, or her children. Here again, through being in business, she may not have children, which might be bad for the community and herself.

Clarke’s report clearly showed that the rights and wrongs of employing married women encompassed social, cultural and economic concerns. He ended the report by determining that the arguments against retention outweighed those for retention though he concurred that it was “a most difficult matter to decide upon.”<sup>70</sup>

Economic concerns had already become pertinent to the BBC as shown by a memo to the BBC’s Regional Directors in May 1932. Clarke informed them that, while there was no definite alteration to the Corporation’s policy with regard to the employment of married women, they were now working to the principle that vacancies would be filled by unmarried women or widows, “rather than married women whose husbands are in employment.”<sup>71</sup> Three months later, in a private memo to Goldsmith, Clarke reiterated the rationale that “in view of the existing state of unemployment and other reasons, women are discouraged as far as

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<sup>70</sup> Same document

<sup>71</sup> MWP:1, Goldsmith to Regional Directors, May 16th 1932

possible from remaining with us after their marriage.<sup>72</sup> Miss Freeman also recalled that the employment situation had been a prompt. Looking back, in 1938, on the circumstances leading up to the marriage bar she recalled:

In 1931 the depression was at its worst and in discussing the matter with Mr Goldsmith recently, we agreed that any decisions we reached in regard to the retention or otherwise of married women on the staff was largely governed by the economic and social conditions existing at that time.<sup>73</sup>

Thus economic considerations informed the Corporation's initial discussions on married women's work. However, documents from 1932 show that this was not the prime reason for the BBC marriage bar; rather it was a perceived difference in attitude by the BBC's married women towards their work that become the overriding rationale for its introduction.

In August 1932, a series of emotive memos from Clarke and Goldsmith underlined a changed outlook towards married female staff. The spark was a reconsideration of the BBC's system of Marriage Leave. It was discovered that the system was being abused with the week's honeymoon leave being taken, not at the point of the wedding itself, but at a time convenient to the individual. The leave was also being assumed as a right, rather than as a reward for good service, its original intent. Clarke, who was the first to raise the issue with Goldsmith, was angered by what he saw as attempts by some women to play the system; to take Marriage Leave even though they knew they would leave the BBC soon afterwards. As he explained:

In certain cases women who wish to remain after marriage intend to stay on indefinitely.... In other cases, girls wish to remain in the service for a short period only after they are married, in order to add to their means. They are thus making a convenience of the Corporation and in certain cases causing inconvenience to us.<sup>74</sup>

Clarke informed Goldsmith that, with Miss Freeman's agreement, he had come to believe that the extra week's leave should not be given to women who intended to

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<sup>72</sup> MWP:1, Clarke to Goldsmith, August 16th 1932

<sup>73</sup> MWP:1, undated and unsigned memo. Judging by its content and personal nature, I have no doubt that it was written by Miss Freeman. It is placed with documents from 1938.

<sup>74</sup> MWP:1, Clarke to Goldsmith, August 16th 1932

resign from the BBC soon after their marriage. Clarke and Freeman focussed their frustrations upon one woman, Miss R., who was seen to have taken particular advantage of the system. Her work with the BBC had “not been in any way noteworthy”, and they would be “rather glad to replace her”. Clarke’s memo to Goldsmith thus raised two important issues: women’s intention to stay at the BBC after marriage and their aptitude. It begged the question: should those considered to be inadequate in their work have the right to stay?

Goldsmith’s response is telling. He both supported Clarke and Freeman in their desire to tighten up Marriage Leave and elaborated on Clarke’s distinction between women’s motivation for work:

The first [class of woman are] those who intend to marry and remain in the ranks of women workers permanently ... i.e. they regard themselves equally with their husbands, as workers, and not as domestic partners in the marriage..... The second class consists of those who have no intention of being women workers save for their financial needs during a temporary period of getting a home together, whose outlook is different and whose mind is not here but in their homes.<sup>75</sup>

It was hence in the interests of the BBC to differentiate between these two classes of women. As Goldsmith reasoned, Miss Freeman would have refused Miss R’s continuation of work after marriage had she been free to do so but, “Our marriage rules bereft her of this freedom”.<sup>76</sup>

We can see, therefore, that the introduction of the BBC’s marriage bar was ignited by a particular case. This is confirmed by Miss Freeman who in 1938 recalled that, “[it] was, as far as I recollect, the case that made me first query the Corporation’s policy with regard to the automatic retention of women staff after marriage.”<sup>77</sup> Indeed, when the introduction of the bar was promulgated to women staff it was made clear that “certain cases” had led the BBC to reconsider its position.<sup>78</sup> Thus abuse of the system appears to have been a major trigger for the

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<sup>75</sup> MWP:1, Goldsmith to Carpendale? August 26th 1932. It is not completely clear who this was addressed to.

<sup>76</sup> Same document

<sup>77</sup> MWP:1: Freeman, undated and unsigned memo, op.cit.

<sup>78</sup> MWP:1, BBC Marriage Bar Statement, August 15<sup>th</sup> 1933

BBC marriage bar, a bar which would enable the retention of desirable women while allowing the Corporation to get rid of certain women it didn't like. In her 1938 memo Miss Freeman was unambiguous that this was a factor:

...sometimes the girl in question was not particularly efficient and we were glad of the chance to get rid of her. In fact by not allowing automatic retention after marriage we were enabled to dispense with some of the less satisfactory employees whose work was not so poor as to justify dismissal.<sup>79</sup>

As well as pinpointing the two classes of women he believed were employed by the BBC, Goldsmith's August 1932 memo also highlighted a further consideration for the Corporation; how its reputation as a progressive organisation might be affected by the introduction of a bar. In the memo he pointed out that:

The D.G. would like to discourage married women workers, but we have hesitated to change our rule in any way because in women's papers our outlook has been upheld as a good one facing modern facts, and any change would have immediate outside notice and be widely commented upon.

This suggests a dilemma for the BBC. On the one hand management were mindful of the impact a marriage bar might have on the perception of the BBC as progressive. On the other hand, Clarke's discussions with the likes of ICI, the National Provincial Bank and the Civil Service show that the Corporation were also keen to conform to the practices of other upstanding organisations.

The BBC's deliberations on married women's work thus included economic, social and personal considerations. The effects of unemployment caused by the Depression triggered the initial discussions on the introduction of a bar. However, it was the perceived realities of married women's motivation for work and their intention to stay at the BBC which provided the greatest prompt, enough to override anxieties about any negative impact the bar might have on the Corporation's standing. This chapter now turns to the practicalities of the introduction of the bar and the impact it had on women staff and the wider BBC community.

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<sup>79</sup> MWP:1: Freeman, undated and unsigned memo, op.cit.

## The Introduction of the BBC Marriage Bar

On October 27th 1932, the Board of Governors were presented with papers from Reith and his executive management team on the changed attitude towards the retention of married women on the staff. The minutes of Governors' meetings do not record the discussion that took place; there is a simple bullet point: "Retention of married women on the staff discussed and the Board's general opinion noted by the Director General."<sup>80</sup> What had been decided was that married women would no longer be recruited and that, in future, only 'exceptional' women who married could remain on the staff.

In preparation for the Board of Governor's meeting, Miss Freeman, as Women's Staff Supervisor, held private discussions with all but the most senior married women at Head Office to ascertain the circumstances of their married lives.<sup>81</sup> A page of her report is missing but details remain of eighteen women on the London staff. Of these eight were shorthand/copy typists, four were telephone/Multigraph operators, four were clerks and two were secretaries. We can only speculate what questions were asked, but two of the women informed Freeman that they intended to leave the BBC imminently. Of the remaining sixteen, all but one of the women cited financial necessity as their reason for working. Almost all would "gladly leave" if it were possible.<sup>82</sup> Five of the husbands were in precarious employment; six earned low wages and five of the couples had dependents – either children, aging parents or other family members to support. Only one woman, Miss King, queried the accepted sentiment that married women should ideally not be working.<sup>83</sup> Why BBC management requested these details is not known, but no married woman already on the staff was subsequently required to resign.

A few days before the Board of Governors met to discuss the marriage bar there was worrying news for the BBC; feminist campaigners appeared to have learnt of the Corporation's plans for change. The Director of School Broadcasting, Mary

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<sup>80</sup> R/1/1: Board of Governors Minutes, October 27<sup>th</sup> 1932

<sup>81</sup> MWP:1, October 25th 1932. Brief Report on Married Women at Present Working for the Corporation

<sup>82</sup> By May 1939, at least nine of these women had left the BBC.

<sup>83</sup> Miss King (Mrs Saunders) was secretary to the Editor of the *Radio Times*.

Somerville, who as the most senior member of the female staff was involved in the discussions around the application of the bar, informed Douglas Clarke that the “Suffragette element of the women’s organisations” were seeking a test case on the grounds that it was illegal to force a woman to resign on marriage. Should the Corporation come to a decision that women should either be dismissed or required to resign, Somerville thought it likely that the test case would be the BBC.<sup>84</sup>

Clarke raised the subject with Goldsmith on October 21st 1932, coincidentally the same day that the Women’s Freedom League were hosting a conference at Caxton Hall on the Position of Married Women.<sup>85</sup> It is not known if the BBC was discussed at the meeting, which was a precursor to the highly active and high profile Campaign for the Right of the Married Women to Earn. However, in the event it was Liverpool University, not the BBC, that became the focus of the campaign (see below pp.155-156).

The BBC was jittery. Fearful of unfavourable press reports and, worse, of the possibility of being made a test case, it did not want attention drawn to the changes that were being made. Hence, in November 1932, any press that got whiff of the Corporation’s plans were to be told that, “Any statement which you may have seen that the Corporation has decided to terminate the services of married women on its staff is incorrect.”<sup>86</sup> Technically, this was true. No decision had been taken to remove women who were already married. One of the ways the Corporation avoided scrutiny was through its decision not to incorporate the new ruling into the Staff Agreement or the Standing Instructions, so there was no ‘official’ policy change, just an adaptation of practice.<sup>87</sup> Throughout the winter of 1932 and spring of 1933, Goldsmith, Clarke and Freeman thrashed out the wording of the statement that would be sent to women staff about the new ruling. Mary Somerville was involved in the final deliberations, as was Basil

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<sup>84</sup> MWP:1, Clarke to Goldsmith, October 21<sup>st</sup> 1932. How these organisations had learned of the BBC’s new policy is not known.

<sup>85</sup> Women’s Library, Women’s Freedom League: 2/WFL01–15 National Executive Committee Meeting, October 22<sup>nd</sup> 1932. Groups such as the Open Door Council and the Six Point League attended the conference.

<sup>86</sup> MWP:1, Miss Cockerton to Freeman, November 3<sup>rd</sup> 1932

<sup>87</sup> MWP:1, Clarke to Goldsmith, October 21<sup>st</sup> 1932



Nicolls who, in April 1933 (as a result of Reith's bifurcation of the BBC into Programmes and Administration), replaced Goldsmith as the senior official with responsibility for staffing matters. Nicolls was to be known as Director of Internal Administration.<sup>88</sup>

On August 15th 1933, Nicolls' 'Statement to Women Staff' was delivered to all female employees at Head Office and in the Regions.<sup>89</sup> [For the full Statement, see Appendix 4] They were informed that, while there was to be no definite bar, in future the retention of married women was to be regarded as exceptional and dependent upon the circumstances of individual cases. In coming to this decision, the Corporation had:

...largely been guided by a belief that only an exceptional woman, with adequate material resources, can perform her duties satisfactorily as a whole-time servant of the Corporation, while attempting to fulfil the cares and responsibilities of a young family.

The BBC was clear that it would be improper to lay down a rule "which might be interpreted as discouraging childbearing" but at the same time, the Corporation needed to safeguard its own interests. In future, where a case was regarded as exceptional, the member of staff would retain her position and, if and when necessary, provision would be made for maternity leave. However, the Corporation retained the right to terminate the woman's services on the grounds of ill health or inefficiency if this was deemed necessary or desirable.

A class element to the bar was immediately apparent. Firstly, management were quick to point out that only women with sufficient finances could consider the possibility of both working and caring for a family. Secondly, the BBC's charwomen were to be exempt as were female lavatory and cloakroom attendants.

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<sup>88</sup> The Programme/Administrative split saw Administration coming under the control of Admiral Carpendale, now designated Controller (Administration). Goldsmith was moved to a new department, becoming Director of Business Relations. The restructuring of the Corporation also saw Douglas Clarke re-designated Establishment Officer, in 1935, he became General Establishment Officer.

<sup>89</sup> MWP:1, August 15<sup>th</sup> 1933: Statement to Women Staff

This was because “women of the type employed in these posts are traditionally married.”<sup>90</sup>

Unfortunately for the BBC, its ‘Statement to Women Staff’ was leaked to the press. Despite strenuous efforts by the Corporation to discover the source, the individual was never identified.<sup>91</sup> One of the most interesting features of the ensuing newspaper articles is how differently – and how wrongly – they chose to interpret the story. *The Evening News* claimed that the “Resign-on-Marriage” rule” had been relaxed.<sup>92</sup> The well-known columnist Collie Knox, writing in the *Daily Mail* declared that, “BBC Girls May Marry”.<sup>93</sup> The *Glasgow Evening Citizen* took the BBC to task for permitting married women to stay on, citing the view that it was impossible to successfully manage both work and home and pointing out that the women concerned would be taking jobs from the unemployed.<sup>94</sup>

Only the *Daily Mirror* got the story broadly correct, covering the issue with both a full-page article and an editorial.<sup>95</sup> Under the headline “BBC Dictatorship: Married Women’s Rights”, the barrister and political activist Helena Normanton was invited to express her concerns. Her opening statement pulled no punches:

The enormous staff now employed by the BBC is naturally deeply concerned to know whether the women in its service enjoy the same right to live normal family lives as other British women, or whether some policy of more or less compulsory celibacy is on its way.

She continued:

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<sup>90</sup> MWP:2, January 26<sup>th</sup> 1938, unattributed hand-written note at foot of memo. The signature, dated February 1<sup>st</sup>, appears to be that of Miss Freeman who wrote: “The principle appears to have been tacitly accepted, since women of the type employed in these posts are traditionally married.”

<sup>91</sup> There is little evidence of political activity amongst BBC staff, so it would have been a rare individual.

<sup>92</sup> *Evening News*, August 28<sup>th</sup> 1933

<sup>93</sup> *Daily Mail*, August 29<sup>th</sup> 1933

<sup>94</sup> *The Glasgow Evening Citizen*, August 31<sup>st</sup> 1933

<sup>95</sup> Reith was horrified by the coverage noting in his diary that, “the “Daily Mirror” rag had a great stunt about our attitude to married women. A gross misrepresentation of the facts.” *Reith Diaries*, August 28<sup>th</sup> 1933

Fair play is such a jewel that it would make us all very uneasy to feel that there is any possibility of one rule... for the highly-placed woman, and another and harsher for the stenographer or translator.

Normanton thus pinpointed a key feature of the BBC bar, that it favoured the salaried over the waged. There then followed a long article expounding Normanton's views on the right of married women to work, which she passionately supported. She concluded, "What we are beginning to need very badly is a Hands-Off-Marriage Movement, BBC Included!"<sup>96</sup>

Considering Helena Normanton's sharp criticism of the BBC marriage bar, it is surprising that this knowledge failed to filter into the Campaign for the Right of the Married Woman to Earn, which was then at the peak of its activity and with which Normanton was involved.<sup>97</sup> As already alluded to, it was Liverpool University rather than the BBC which had become the focus of the campaign. Like the BBC, Liverpool University, with no previous history of antagonism towards married women, had introduced a marriage bar in February 1933.<sup>98</sup> It was instigated by the Vice-Chancellor, Hector Hetherington, who had come to believe that marriage involved greater responsibility for women "not only because of the expectation of children but because the burden of social adjustment and responsibilities fell more heavily on them."<sup>99</sup> The bar was directed in particular at Dr Margaret Miller who, despite being one of the most eminent academics at the university, was informed that as a result of her marriage in the summer of 1932 her contract would not be renewed.<sup>100</sup>

Miller was politically active. She was President of the University of Liverpool Lecturers' Association and a member of the Executive Committee of the

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<sup>96</sup> The Daily Mirror, August 28<sup>th</sup> 1933

<sup>97</sup> Margaret Miller Papers: D384/2/83-112. Letters dated June 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> between Normanton and Florence McFarlane of the Six Point Group.

<sup>98</sup> For an analysis of Liverpool University's marriage bar and its links with the Campaign for the Married Women to Earn see Jennifer Bhatt, Margaret Miller and the Campaign for the Right of the Married Woman to Earn, (M.Phil., Leicester, 1995)

<sup>99</sup> Margaret Miller Papers: University of Liverpool, P822/1: Resolutions, Reports and Correspondence, Counsel's Opinions etc re: Women's Appointments on Marriage. March 13<sup>th</sup> 1933, Report of meeting of women lecturers with Hetherington

<sup>100</sup> Documents suggest Miller was viewed as difficult and challenging to the male hierarchy, her dismissal in part due to a strained relationship that had developed between her and two senior male colleagues. See for example, Margaret Miller Papers, December 11th 1932, letter to Mrs. Adami from Margaret Miller

Liverpool Association of University Teachers. As soon as she became aware of her situation, she began to rally people to her cause. In January 1933, the British Federation of University Women passed a resolution deploring the proposed actions of the University of Liverpool. By April, Miller was in correspondence with the Six Point Group, the Women's Freedom League and the St Joan's Political and Social Alliance. All sent resolutions to the University in her support. Eminent individuals also took an interest in Miller's case including Eleanor Rathbone, Winifred Holtby and Beatrice Webb. In the summer of 1933, as the campaign gathered momentum, Helena Normanton wrote an article in *Good Housekeeping* entitled "Liverpool University and Married Women" focusing on the case of Dr Margaret Miller.<sup>101</sup>

Miller's case led to the formation of the Campaign for the Right of the Married Women to Earn, which was supported by all the major feminist organisations as well as many professional women's associations. The Mass Meeting at Central Hall, Westminster on November 14<sup>th</sup> 1933 attracted three thousand women and was addressed by, amongst others, Nancy Astor MP and Rebecca West.<sup>102</sup> In her speech, Mrs Pethick-Lawrence, President of the Women's Freedom League, did mention the BBC, but not in connection with its marriage bar, which went unobserved. Rather she commented on their recent appointment, and quick dismissal, of a woman announcer.<sup>103</sup> The Mass Meeting received blanket coverage in the press and prompted Liverpool University to reconsider its position. Following extensive lobbying, six months later, in March 1934, it was announced that the marriage bar at the University was being abolished.<sup>104</sup> It is interesting to speculate how the BBC might have reacted if the Mass Meeting had made it the focus of their campaign, bearing in mind how quickly Liverpool

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<sup>101</sup> *Good Housekeeping*, July 1933, "Hitler and the Nazi Policy - Liverpool University and Married Women" by Helena Normanton

<sup>102</sup> Groups that attended included the Association of Assistant Mistresses, the Association of Women Clerks and Secretaries, the National Union of Women Teachers and the National Association of Women Civil Servants. Other affiliated groups included the National Women's Citizen's Association; the Fabian Society Women's Group, the Soroptimist Club; the Association for Moral and Social Hygiene and the YWCA.

<sup>103</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, November 15<sup>th</sup> 1933. Mrs Sheila Borrett, the BBC's first woman announcer in July 1933, was removed after three months because of thousands of complaints, mainly from women listeners.

<sup>104</sup> *Margaret Miller Papers*: The University of Liverpool: Memorandum to Special Purposes Committee, March 14<sup>th</sup> 1934. Employment of Married Women. Frustratingly for Margaret Miller, it was too late for her position to be saved.

University backed down. It is surprising that the BBC marriage bar managed to dodge the attention of the Campaign for the Right of the Married Woman to Earn, especially as Helena Normanton had specifically placed the Corporation's plans in the public domain. The BBC however did avoid the campaign's spotlight and so was not put in the awkward position of having to defend itself in the face of intense feminist scrutiny.

By the autumn of 1933, the BBC marriage bar was securely in place, with female employees informed of its parameters. As we have seen, the 'Statement to Women Staff' specified that "the retention of women after marriage should, in future, be regarded as exceptional and dependent upon the circumstances of individual cases." The knotty problem BBC management now had to tackle was how to decide which women would be exempt from the bar.

### The BBC Marriage Tribunal

On May 12<sup>th</sup> 1933, Reith met to discuss the issue of the retention of married women staff with Mary Somerville, Miss Freeman and the BBC governor, Mary Agnes Hamilton, an event of sufficient import to merit an entry in his diary.<sup>105</sup> In her record of the meeting Mary Somerville noted that the notion of 'exceptional' women had been discussed but the term was deliberately left undefined. It was agreed it should denote the special value of the experience of the employee to the Corporation; the employee's general level of efficiency and the likelihood of their having enough character to take on the "double job". Whether a prospective wife or husband had dependents was also to be taken into account. It was further decided that in the event of a woman member of staff "desiring to know whether she would be regarded as an exceptional case" a small tribunal, consisting of three senior administrative executives and two impartial members of staff, would consider her circumstances.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> Reith Diaries, May 12<sup>th</sup> 1933

<sup>106</sup> MWP:1, Undated memo from Somerville to Nicolls. We don't know how long after the meeting Mary Somerville wrote these recollections.

It seems probable that the BBC's Marriage Tribunal was inspired in part by a procedure that existed within the Civil Service. In 1931, the Report of the Royal Commission on the Civil Service (the Tomlin Commission) had been published. One of the areas considered by the Commission was the retirement of female civil servants on marriage. While it was agreed the marriage bar should be retained, the Commission identified a difference in attitude towards the higher and lower grades of Civil Service women, indicating that, "a considerable body of opinion" was in favour of treating the higher grades differently.<sup>107</sup> It was therefore decided that an exceptional woman could be retained on marriage if it was deemed in the public interest, individual cases going before the Treasury.<sup>108</sup> Mary Agnes Hamilton had been a member of the Royal Commission which produced the report, so would have been aware of this ruling.<sup>109</sup> According to Basil Nicolls, it was Hamilton who mooted the idea of the BBC Tribunal.<sup>110</sup>

Early discussions about the criteria to be used by the Marriage Tribunal show cases were to be considered under three headings: indispensability, compassionate circumstances and long service and good conduct. Nicolls explained what these criteria would entail.<sup>111</sup> Indispensability referred to the applicant's special experience and/or the difficulty of replacing her. He used Mary Somerville as an illustration; although long married, if her case were to come up afresh, it would almost certainly be held that her special experience in school broadcasting was of great value and made her very difficult to replace. He also pointed out that since the members of the staff with the most valuable experience were likely to be the most highly paid, it was inevitable that exceptions to the rule should mainly occur among the senior staff. The main considerations for compassionate circumstances were to be the means of the prospective husband and the care of aged parents or other family members suffering from a serious illness.

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<sup>107</sup> Glew, *op.cit.*, p.127

<sup>108</sup> Between 1934 and 1938, eight women in the Administrative Grades were retained on marriage. Hilda Martindale, *Women Servants of the State, 1870-1938* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1938) p.156

<sup>109</sup> Mary Agnes Hamilton, *Remembering My Good Friends* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1944) p.264

<sup>110</sup> MWP:1, undated memo from early 1934, signed Nicolls

<sup>111</sup> Same document

By the time the first case was heard by the BBC Marriage Tribunal on December 28<sup>th</sup> 1933, a points system had been introduced and two extra criteria added.<sup>112</sup>

The five criteria were:

- 1) Special value of experience, making replacement difficult or undesirable. (Maximum 100 points)
- 2) Compassionate Circumstances. (Maximum 50 points)
- 3) Long Service and General Efficiency. (Maximum 50 points)
- 4) Character as bearing on the strain of combining married life with office work. (Maximum 50 points)
- 5) Intention of making a career in the BBC. (Maximum 50 points)<sup>113</sup>

Unless there were conflicts of interest, the Tribunal was to be made up of the Director of Internal Administration (Nicolls); the Establishment Officer (Clarke); the Women's Staff Administrator (Freeman) and two independent assessors, one male, one female. These would be senior staff with at least five years service and from a different division from the woman whose case was being heard. Aware that the independent assessors might have a personal stance on the marriage bar, at the beginning of each meeting it was considered necessary:

...for the Chairman to warn the members that the Tribunal has been summoned to interpret a definite policy and that their opinions should not be guided by their views on that policy as such, e.g. a woman member who was entirely opposed to the policy might and should rightly vote for not retaining an applicant.<sup>114</sup>

It was thus acknowledged that senior BBC staff might hold strong views on the marriage bar.

The Marriage Tribunal documentation makes engrossing reading, both the minutes of the hearings themselves and the behind-the-scenes discussions. The scrutiny given to the minutiae of the women's lives is unsettling; it is hard to imagine the personal life of a male employee being probed in the same way. The

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<sup>112</sup> The records of this particular case are not available

<sup>113</sup> MWPT, Tribunal Minutes 30th January 1934, and all subsequent tribunals

<sup>114</sup> Same documents

woman concerned was not herself present at the Tribunal; rather documents were submitted from her managers and from Miss Freeman, who spoke to each individual beforehand to garner the particular details of her case. Later memos use courtroom language, referring to Freeman as the ‘advocate’, the panel as the ‘jury’ and the woman whose case was being heard by the Tribunal as the ‘victim’ or the ‘accused’. Whether the woman should be represented by a friend or colleague caused some reflection and was agreed in principle in March 1937, shortly before the ‘experiment’ of the Tribunal came to an end.<sup>115</sup>

Looking through the twenty-nine cases – three of which came before the tribunal twice - one is instantly struck by the arbitrary nature of the scoring system. For example at 97 out of 100, Lilian Lord, a clerk in the Supplementary Publications Department scored highest for indispensability. This was over and above Barbara Burnham, the acclaimed drama producer and Mary Allan, the celebrated Television Make-up and Wardrobe Assistant. Winifred Baker, who virtually ran the North Region orchestra, was awarded only 70 points in this category, despite glowing reports. Looking back on the bar in November 1937, Pym conceded:

Of course no one is indispensable, but indispensability can be described as a situation where the enforcing of the "ban" would be cutting off our nose to spite our face; it was held to mean much more than the mere inconvenience of finding and training a successor.<sup>116</sup>

Subjectivity was even more of an issue when it came to, ‘Character as bearing on the strain of combining married life with office work’. For this, the panel were in the hands of Miss Freeman who directed them with comments such as, “WSA said that she considered that Miss X was a level-headed sort of girl and not the kind to give way under the strain” and “WSA pointed out that Miss Y was a girl of the class that regarded it as natural to have to work for a living, and that there was no doubt that she would have no difficulty in running her home in addition to her work.”<sup>117</sup> While most women who came before the tribunal were considered capable of combining home life and office work, a handful were not. For

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<sup>115</sup> MWPT, Pym to Freeman, March 23rd 1937

<sup>116</sup> MWP:2, November 5th 1937: Note on Policy in regard to Married Women, Prepared for Board of Governors meeting

<sup>117</sup> Tribunals, January 16<sup>th</sup> 1935, May 11<sup>th</sup> 1936. For data protection reasons many women in this chapter are not referred to by name.



example, Freeman was clear that: “Miss Z’s health record is not good and WSA expressed doubt as to whether she would find it easy to combine married life with her work here.”<sup>118</sup>

These considerations emphasise the expectation in the 1930s that women were the home-makers. If a married woman worked, it was she who had to negotiate the double-burden of two jobs. The reason why the vast majority of BBC women were viewed as capable of doing both was either their fortitude or their ability to pay for domestic help. Many ran their own flats; the drama producer Barbara Burnham already employed a housekeeper. For others, it was felt that the fact of being married would lessen the domestic burden. Thus it was noted that one woman, a Studio Executive Clerk, “has for some years had domestic responsibility in her own home and it appears that that is likely to be lessened rather than increased when she sets up house with her husband”, while for a secretary in the Office Administration Department “marriage would ease the situation by enabling her to employ a servant.”<sup>119</sup> For yet another, the burden would be eased because she would no longer have sole care of her widowed mother.<sup>120</sup> These cases show that for the majority of BBC women, it was considered eminently possible to both work and run a marital home provided there was adequate domestic support. In none of the BBC documentation is there any suggestion that husbands might share the domestic chores.

“Long Service and General Efficiency” and “Intention of Making a Career in the BBC” were the most straightforward criteria to address. Of the ten women who applied to the Tribunal with less than four-and-a-half year’s service only one was retained, Mary Allan, who had been appointed specifically to run the Television Make-up and Wardrobe Department. Similarly, all those who had been awarded their ten-year bonus, whether salaried or waged, received unanimous votes for retention, which suggests that loyalty was an important consideration for the BBC. Fifteen women voiced their intention of remaining with the Corporation even if their husbands had sufficient finances to support them, only two of whom

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<sup>118</sup> Tribunal, March 5<sup>th</sup> 1937

<sup>119</sup> Tribunals, 25<sup>th</sup> February 1937, August 5<sup>th</sup> 1936

<sup>120</sup> Tribunal, January 19<sup>th</sup> 1937

were subsequently required to resign. This indicates that the BBC was impressed by women who displayed commitment to their careers. *Radio Pictorial* applauded the “intelligence and humanity” of the BBC’s matrimonial rules, which were “never more plainly vindicated” than in the case of the drama producer Barbara Burnham.

It is one thing to engage a married woman whose husband can support her while single girls as well qualified are seeking the same job. It is another to dismiss a woman whose temperament and long training fit her for the almost unique position which she occupies, just because she wants to marry.<sup>121</sup>

The criterion that caused the most soul-searching for the Tribunal was ‘Compassionate Grounds’. Nearly all the women provided evidence that their prospective husbands were not earning enough to “keep two people in any degree of comfort.”<sup>122</sup> One was a ballet dancer whose income was subject to perpetual fluctuations, another, an osteopath in a new practice; a third was an “architect in the LCC with a salary of approximately £3 a week, with prospects of a slow increase”.<sup>123</sup> Others included a carpenter, a transport foreman and a stoker in the Navy. For many women, and their fiancés, there were financial dependents; an elderly father, widowed mothers, younger siblings who were students or in precarious jobs. One applicant was “suffering from a disease which did not at present affect her efficiency, but was such that her doctor had strongly urged her to get married as the best method of affecting a cure.”<sup>124</sup> The BBC’s attention to these considerations reveals its paternalism and reiterates its reluctance to introduce a blanket bar.

One of the most vociferous arguments against marriage bars in the inter-war years was the enforced celibacy they imposed. For feminists the issue was human rights, for others it was seen as wrong to deny a woman who wanted a career the pinnacle of womanhood i.e. marriage and family life. A memorandum from March 1935 shows the BBC grappling with the issue. Two women failed at the

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<sup>121</sup> *Radio Pictorial*, June 10th 1938. “BBC’s Ace Woman Producer”

<sup>122</sup> Tribunal, July 17<sup>th</sup> 1937. NB some Tribunals heard more than one case.

<sup>123</sup> Tribunals, July 17<sup>th</sup> 1937, May 5<sup>th</sup> 1935, May 11<sup>th</sup> 1936

<sup>124</sup> Tribunal, July 17<sup>th</sup> 1934

Marriage Tribunal in 1934. Both chose to remain on the staff rather than marry and the following year reapplied, the financial circumstances of their prospective husbands having worsened. In his weighing up of their second appearance, Nicolls was clear that under the ruling as laid down by the governors, they should not be kept on. However, he acknowledged that, “Here we are up against the very difficult policy question of our action preventing early marriages.” For one of the two women, the choice was to marry and be permanently extremely hard up, to stay on unmarried, or to take the risk and leave, hoping to find suitable work elsewhere. The second woman’s situation was more serious in the eyes of the BBC. She was already thirty-five and:

One might say that at her age her chance of marrying is a relatively poor one and by staying on unmarried she is running something of a risk of never getting married, and yet the compassionate circumstances are such that she cannot get married unless she is able to earn her own living and support certain dependants.

For Nicolls the central question was:

Looking at the matter from the narrow point of view, are we better served in the long run by Miss X or Miss Y as an embittered, because compulsory, spinster, or by her as a contented married woman allowed to remain on the staff?<sup>125</sup>

It was agreed both women could stay.

By the mid 1930s, the concept of the embittered spinster had entered common parlance.<sup>126</sup> Alison Oram’s study of women teachers highlighted the contradiction of enforced spinsterhood in a climate that was increasingly coming to see it as ‘unnatural’ in a pedagogic environment. The *Times Educational Supplement* reflected viewpoints that children should be taught by women who had the widest experience rather than twisted, unnatural, unmarried women.<sup>127</sup> In November 1936, in the light of these arguments, the BBC took the significant

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<sup>125</sup> MWPT, March 6<sup>th</sup> 1935, Nicolls to Carpendale

<sup>126</sup> See for example Holden, Katherine, *The Shadow of Marriage. Singleness in England, 1914-1960* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007) pp.15-16

<sup>127</sup> *Times Educational Supplement*, July 20<sup>th</sup> 1935, pp.257-258. Quoted in Oram, op.cit., p.186

decision to relax the marriage bar in relation to the recruitment of married women to salaried positions on *Children's Hour* and in School Broadcasting.<sup>128</sup>

Another worry raised by forcing women to postpone matrimony was the possibility of a secret marriage or, worse still, compelling a couple to 'live in sin'. Speaking at the Mass Meeting for the Right of the Married Woman to Earn in 1933, Nancy Astor declared that, because of marriage bars "thousands of women nowadays are secretly married, or, worse still, living with the men they ought to be married to".<sup>129</sup> Earlier in the year, Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence had raised similar concerns, "Men and women faced with this bar in future will not refrain from falling in love, but they will refrain from marriage, with excessively bad results for themselves and for the community."<sup>130</sup> Oram and Glucksmann uncovered cases of teachers and assembly-line workers who hid their wedding rings to keep their marriages secret.<sup>131</sup> Documents in the BBC archive also re-enforce anecdotal evidence that secret marriages were not uncommon. A letter from the LCC to the BBC in 1937 reported that, "There were one or two cases of women who were found to have got married secretly and they were sacked."<sup>132</sup> Again in 1937, a letter from the London Passenger Transport Board acknowledged that many marriages took place but were not reported. The BBC itself was not immune to the problem. In a note to Pym, Freeman stated that: "at different times, three women have been dismissed when it was found that they were married."<sup>133</sup>

The BBC's Marriage Tribunal highlights a further paradox, that it was seen as appropriate to dismiss a woman from the Corporation if it was felt she could easily get a job elsewhere. For example, coming before the Tribunal in 1935 was a woman who "primarily deriving her special value from BBC experience" would find it difficult to get external work, unlike Miss B who, with her foreign language

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<sup>128</sup> MWP:2, Clarke to Freeman, November 3<sup>rd</sup> 1936

<sup>129</sup> Daily Mail, November 15<sup>th</sup> 1933

<sup>130</sup> Speech at the Annual Conference of the Women's Freedom League, as quoted in The Star, April 29<sup>th</sup> 1933

<sup>131</sup> Oram, op.cit., p.56; Glucksmann, op.cit., p.223

<sup>132</sup> MWP:2, Message from W.H. Young, LCC, July 29<sup>th</sup> 1937

<sup>133</sup> MWP:2, Freeman to Pym, October 7<sup>th</sup> 1938

qualifications, “ought to be able to get a job outside fairly easily”.<sup>134</sup> Miss Freeman was palpably relieved that newly married BBC girls found work away from the Corporation, “which often fits in well with their domestic arrangements”, and often with help from Freeman herself.<sup>135</sup> This reinforces the view that BBC management were not opposed to married women’s work per se. It also shows that, in line with the Corporation’s paternalism, reassurance was needed that women who left to be married, or who were forced to resign, would be cared for elsewhere.

While Reith kept a distant eye on the Marriage Tribunal, the BBC Governor Mary Agnes Hamilton played an active role. It had, after all, been her idea. Because of her interest in its proceedings, a special deal was arranged whereby she was sent the minutes of all the Tribunal meetings, though she turned down the chance to officially give her view.<sup>136</sup> In September 1935, Reith clarified to Carpendale that Hamilton was sent the reports, “so that she might have an opportunity of urging more lenient treatment, or reconsideration”.<sup>137</sup>

Why Hamilton, with her feminist leanings, supported the BBC’s marriage bar is puzzling. Prior to her appointment as a BBC Governor, she had served as Labour MP for Blackburn 1929-1931; the official Labour Party line was against marriage bars, although a significant minority of members were in favour of them.<sup>138</sup>

Perhaps Hamilton’s support for the BBC bar was a result of her passionate trade unionism; in Parliament she had frequently attacked her party’s failure to solve the unemployment crisis. However, Hamilton would certainly have known all the arguments against marriage bars. She was a good friend of Ray Strachey; they met in 1930 during the Royal Commission on the Civil Service of which Hamilton was a member.<sup>139</sup> Strachey, who was known to be in favour of the rights

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<sup>134</sup> MWPT, Nicolls to Carpendale, August 7<sup>th</sup> 1935

<sup>135</sup> MWP:2, Freeman to Pym, October 7<sup>th</sup> 1938

<sup>136</sup> MWP:2, Undated, Somerville to Nicolls, c. July 1933

<sup>137</sup> MWP:2, Reith to Nicolls, September 26<sup>th</sup> 1935

<sup>138</sup> For a discussion on Labour Party attitudes to married women’s work see Pamela Graves, Labour Women: Women in British Working Class Politics 1918-1939 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994) pp.126-131

<sup>139</sup> Hamilton, op.cit., pp.263 -264

of married women to earn, attended the meetings regularly and was called to give evidence.<sup>140</sup>

Hamilton's ambivalence about married women's work is apparent in her 1941 book *Women at Work*.<sup>141</sup> Here she described what she saw as the two polarised views on the subject, "that are hardly capable of reconciliation without some drastic change in the structure of society as we have it to-day."<sup>142</sup> On one side stood those who held, "that marriage and even child-bearing, while important both to the woman concerned and to society, should nevertheless be regarded as incidental to, and not revolutionary of the life of woman." The other school of thought stressed that for women, "...in ninety per cent of cases, marriage is a career, and both an absorbing and worthwhile career."<sup>143</sup> For Hamilton, the first view idealised work, the second idealised the home. Only when women came together and organised, Hamilton believed, could the conditions for a fair society, with equal opportunities and real choice, be created.

In June 1937, Mary Agnes Hamilton suggested the BBC might be better served if it operated its marriage bar on similar lines to the Civil Service i.e. only women above a certain grade or salary could be considered for retention.<sup>144</sup> It is not clear why Hamilton had come to this decision but it may have been due to her frustration with the Tribunal which she was increasingly coming to see as ineffective.<sup>145</sup> If the BBC tightened its bar, it would mean that the Marriage Tribunal would no longer be needed and from July 1937 it was suspended pending discussions on its future.

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<sup>140</sup> Hamilton also supported Strachey's Women's Employment Federation, becoming vice-chairman of the organisation in 1935. Women's Library, Women's Employment Federation: 6/WEF/487, Executive Minutes, January 30<sup>th</sup> 1935

<sup>141</sup> Mary A Hamilton, *Women at Work: A Brief Introduction to Trade Unionism for Women* (London: Routledge, 1941) pp.5-6

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, p.164

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, p.168

<sup>144</sup> MWP:2, Carpendale to Pym, June 30<sup>th</sup> 1937

<sup>145</sup> For example she was frustrated that, on two occasions, the decision of the Tribunal to retain two women was subsequently over-ruled by senior management. On the first occasion she protested, "It seems that where a Tribunal finds unanimously, its report should stand, otherwise the procedure lacks reality." MWPT, Pym to Nicolls, 3rd March 1937

The Marriage Tribunal was not judged a success. It was work intensive for BBC management; it put those women who chose to have their cases heard before it under immense strain and it was relatively ineffectual. In the three and a half years the Tribunal operated only thirteen of the twenty- nine individual women whose cases were considered, had their services terminated.<sup>146</sup> Figures requested by Douglas Clarke show that, in the period July 1934 to July 1937 (when the Tribunal was functioning), 79 women had chosen to resign on marriage, a yearly average of 4.5% of the total female staff.<sup>147</sup> Miss Freeman was non-committal as to whether the marriage bar had increased resignations, commenting that no woman who had left to get married had indicated whether she would have stayed on if there were no bar.<sup>148</sup> Nicolls was less circumspect. Now Controller (Administration) he claimed:

...undoubtedly [the policy had] been the cause of many girls deciding to give up work on marriage, who would probably have stayed on, without it being financially necessary for them to do so: in fact the most remarkable point has been the fewness of the applications.<sup>149</sup>

It is impossible to know if Nicolls was correct in his assessment that the marriage bar had increased resignations because there are no comparable figures. However, it is likely that antipathy towards “non exceptional” married women working for the Corporation would have encouraged many to leave.

In October 1937, the Deputy Director General, Carpendale added his weight to the demise of the Tribunal. He sent a note to members of the Control Board questioning its efficacy and observing that difficulties were, “inherent in any procedure where compassionate circumstances and considerations other than the intrinsic needs of the service are admitted as a ground for making exceptions to a general rule”.<sup>150</sup> Carpendale suggested that the BBC adopt a scheme whereby the marriage bar was absolute for all staff below Grade ‘C’, (Grades A, B and C were the top three salaried grades). Those senior staff who wished to remain would

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<sup>146</sup> The final case was heard on July 16<sup>th</sup> 1937. Three women appealed to the tribunal twice.

<sup>147</sup> MWP:2, Staff Records to Clarke, July 16<sup>th</sup> 1937

<sup>148</sup> MWP:2, Freeman to Pym, October 7<sup>th</sup> 1938

<sup>149</sup> MWP:2, Note on Policy in regard to Married Women. Prepared by Nicolls for Lady Bridgman, June 1936

<sup>150</sup> R3/3/12: Control Board Minutes, October 25<sup>th</sup> 1937. Note on Proposed Marriage Bar

have their credentials reviewed by himself, Pym and the woman's Divisional Controller.<sup>151</sup>

This change was agreed at Control Board on November 3rd and formalised by the Board of Governors the following week.<sup>152</sup> These new arrangements would, "bring the Corporation's practice into conformity with that of the Civil Service."<sup>153</sup> On November 16<sup>th</sup> 1937, women staff were told of the decision to abandon the Marriage Tribunal and tighten the bar. In September 1938, the new ruling was incorporated into the Staff Regulations with the official promulgation being circulated in October 1938. The first paragraph of Section 5 read:

The BBC employs married women in exceptional cases only, and in dealing with the applications for retention on the staff after marriage adopts as its sole criterion the actual requirements of the service.

Thus the BBC changed its marriage bar ostensibly to one stripped of all other criteria for retention than the needs of the Corporation. The impact of the tightening of the bar will be considered shortly as will Pym and Freeman's growing belief that the bar should be abolished. First, consideration is given to the position of those married women who remained at the BBC after the bar was introduced and the continued recruitment of married women in the face of restrictions.

### Married Women at the BBC Post-1932

Married women retained as BBC staff carried on working as normal and continued to gain increments and promotions. For instance, Alice Wright, who married in 1935, was promoted to Deputy Music Librarian in 1937. Most used their maiden names: of the thirty-two married women listed as working at the BBC in February 1937, twenty-two were 'Miss', so there was little indication that

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<sup>151</sup> Grade C was a senior grade for monthly-paid staff, commanding a salary in the vicinity of £400-£600.

<sup>152</sup> R1/5/1/: Board of Governors Minutes: Minutes 1936-1937, November 10<sup>th</sup> 1937

<sup>153</sup> MWP:2, Pym to All Women Staff, November 17<sup>th</sup> 1937



their marital status had changed.<sup>154</sup> Nearly all those referred to as “Mrs” were women who had married prior to the introduction of the bar.

A small but significant number of women subsequently resigned, very possibly to start a family. Writing to Pym in October 1938, Freeman stated that five of the sixteen women who had passed the Tribunal had left; in addition two women had requested maternity leave.<sup>155</sup> The two were Mary Adams, the senior talks producer and Mrs Benham, a clerk in Programme Finances. While nothing is known of Benham, details of Mary Adams’ maternity leave can be found in her staff file.<sup>156</sup> The wife of the Conservative MP Vyvyan Adams, Mary Adams joined the BBC as an Adult Education Assistant in 1930. At the time her pregnancy was announced in April 1936, Adams was working part-time due to ill health and there was a suggestion that she might want to continue in this capacity after the baby was born “if she does not wish to retire altogether”.<sup>157</sup> Adams, however, was certain that she would want to return to work full-time.<sup>158</sup> In September, the staff magazine *Ariel* trumpeted, “September 1<sup>st</sup> – born to Mrs Adams of Talks, a baby girl.”<sup>159</sup>

On September 28<sup>th</sup> 1936, four weeks after the birth of her daughter, Mary Adams wrote an effusive letter to Reith.<sup>160</sup> Explaining that she was finally out of the clutches of her doctor, she thanked him for the lovely flowers and the welcome they gave to Sally, “who is already in my uncritical eyes, quite adorable.” Motherhood, Adams enthused, was very satisfactory, “Already I feel a new creature, riding on ardour and responsibility – and considering how best I can justify my existence to my daughter.” Bearing in mind this new sense of purpose she informed Reith that she felt “more and not less fitted for a position of responsibility”. In consequence, she was keen to apply for the position of Director of Talks which had recently been advertised. Even today, to put oneself

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<sup>154</sup> MWP:2, February 1937

<sup>155</sup> MWP:2, Freeman to Pym October 7th 1938

<sup>156</sup> There are no details of Mrs Benham’s maternity leave but her case for retention on the staff came before the Marriage Tribunal in April 1937.

<sup>157</sup> L2/5/1: Mary Adams Staff File 1 (MASF:1), April 20<sup>th</sup> 1936 unclear who written by/to

<sup>158</sup> MASF:1, Reith to Carpendale and Graves, April 21<sup>st</sup> 1936

<sup>159</sup> *Ariel*, September 1936

<sup>160</sup> MASF:1, Adams to Reith, September 28th 1936

forward for such a major promotion a month after giving birth would be viewed as unusual. How much more so in 1936, but Reith hardly batted an eye and agreed to her application going forward. However, he ended his letter with a query, "...are you quite certain that you wish to live a double life, or are wise or right in doing so?"<sup>161</sup>

Mary Adams was adamant that she could do both. Although interviewed, she failed to become Director of Talks; the job went to the one-time diplomat Sir Richard Maconachie. Instead, Adams transferred to the new Television Service in January 1937 becoming the first woman television producer. Mary Adams was clearly a woman prepared to juggle both work and family but she earned a good salary, £800 a year; her politician husband was also wealthy, so a housekeeper, and probably a nanny, would have been employed. This was also the case for Mary Somerville. As we shall see in Chapter Five, Somerville was dependent on her housekeeper, Mrs Bishop.<sup>162</sup>

Although Mary Somerville had a child, she was not necessarily sympathetic to other married women on the staff who planned to become mothers. In 1933, soon after the BBC marriage bar was introduced, Somerville made clear that a married woman who intended to have a child and subsequently leave the BBC had an altered status to other members of staff because she could no longer be regarded as permanent.<sup>163</sup> In a confidential document about staffing in the Schools Department, Somerville highlighted the position of a half-time assistant, Miss Simond.<sup>164</sup> Describing Simond as the 'drudge' of the department (but one with specialist knowledge that could not be done away with), Somerville confided:

She is, as you know, married and wants to have a child. While she cannot, because of financial commitments of her husband's, have a child without contributing to its support, she would certainly not come into the category of women whom the Corporation would regard as exceptional under the recent decision about married women staff. This means that she will

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<sup>161</sup> MASF:1, Reith to Adams, October 5th 1936

<sup>162</sup> Radio Pictorial, October 4<sup>th</sup> 1935. See p.257

<sup>163</sup> R13/216/1: Departmental: Home Division: Schools Broadcasting Department: 1932-35. Document written June 1st 1933, headed 'Schools Department Staff'.

<sup>164</sup> Miss Simond worked half-time for the Schools Department and half-time for the Spoken English Committee.

ultimately leave in order to have children, and she cannot therefore be regarded as a permanent member of the Department in the sense of which the other staff are so regarded.

Somerville's condescending attitude towards Miss Simond is palpable. Simond was married before the marriage bar was introduced, so could not be forced to resign. However Somerville viewed Simond's desire to have children, and so leave the Corporation, as proof that she was not fully committed to the BBC. Miss Simond left the BBC the following year, her departure possibly hastened by Somerville's negative stance towards her.<sup>165</sup>

One of the supposedly clear principles of the BBC marriage bar was that married women would no longer be recruited to the Corporation. Only female employees who were already married or who had passed the Marriage Tribunal were entitled to work for the BBC. Nevertheless, despite this principle a number of married women were subsequently employed by the Corporation. For instance, in the summer of 1933 Reith personally sanctioned the return of Mrs Caroline Towler to the BBC. As Miss Banks, she had been Women's Staff Supervisor, Miss Freeman's predecessor. She had resigned on marriage in 1931 but her naval officer husband had become unemployed and she appealed to Reith to be allowed back.<sup>166</sup> Even though she was now mother to two young children, including a four-month old baby daughter, Mrs Towler was found a position as Night Hostess, a salaried job that involved meeting and greeting the evening's broadcasters. An article about her new role in *The Evening News* assured its readers that her children would not be missing her much "for her duties do not start until 6.30pm. They finish at 11pm."<sup>167</sup> Thus the BBC was prepared to break the rules when it suited them.

While there appears never to have been a problem with the employment of divorced women at the BBC, the employment of married women who were separated from their husbands was raised as an issue in November 1936.<sup>168</sup> Miss

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<sup>165</sup> Simond left on August 31<sup>st</sup> 1934. Salary Information Files

<sup>166</sup> *Reith Diaries*, June 9<sup>th</sup> 1933, "Miss Banks to see me, in a very bad way."

<sup>167</sup> *Evening News*, August 26<sup>th</sup> 1933

<sup>168</sup> In February 1937, three divorced women were listed on the BBC staff. MWP:2, Pym to Carpendale, February 26<sup>th</sup> 1937

Freeman was of the opinion that women without a deed of separation could be employed, providing they were self-supporting, however, she was over-ruled by Pym who was clear that it should only be legal separation.<sup>169</sup> In fact, the following year Mary Allan (the Make-Up and Wardrobe Assistant) was recruited to the staff, even though she was not legally separated, her value to the BBC being greater than the principle extolled. The issue of separated and divorced women had become a cause of much deliberation in the Civil Service. In the GPO only those women who were not viewed as the guilty party had a chance of re-admission while for separated women, the level of financial support the woman received from her estranged husband was taken into consideration.<sup>170</sup> At the BBC, as was the case with many practicalities of its marriage bar, allowances were made where it benefited the Corporation.

Whether the BBC's temporary female staff should be covered by the marriage bar was a further area of indecision. Many occupations and industries which imposed marriage bars made exceptions for casual labour such as holiday cover or seasonal work.<sup>171</sup> Married teachers were often deemed acceptable for supply work and the Post Office also employed married women as temporary staff during busy times.<sup>172</sup> The BBC followed this convention and used temporary agency staff to cover sick leave, holiday leave and periods between appointments. That these were unavoidably married women was confirmed by Miss Redfern, the General Office Supervisor:

I feel it is only fair to point out that nearly all the Temporary Staff we get from agencies are married women, although they invariably come to us as "Miss X". I am told it is almost impossible to get unmarried girls to do temporary work as, owing to the shortage of the market at the present time, they are snapped up immediately for permanencies.<sup>173</sup>

Many of these agency women had previously worked at the BBC and were seen as particularly valuable because they understood the workings of the Corporation

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<sup>169</sup> MWP:2, Clarke to Pym, November 12<sup>th</sup> 1936

<sup>170</sup> Glew op.cit., pp.150-156

<sup>171</sup> Peak Frean, for example, which enforced a strict marriage bar for permanent employees, welcomed the return of married women during times of peak production, Glucksmann, op.cit., pp.107-108

<sup>172</sup> Oram, op.cit., pp.69-70; Glew, op.cit., pp.161-163

<sup>173</sup> MWP:2, Clarke to Freeman, February 8<sup>th</sup> 1937

and were reliable and trustworthy. However, from early 1937, BBC supervisors found that they were increasingly in conflict with the Administration Division over their use of married women staff in a temporary capacity, especially when contracts were for lengthy periods of time. To ensure that the marriage bar wasn't being breached by the back door, it was agreed in June 1937 that these women could be employed only for a maximum of six-months at a time and for no more than eight months in any given year.<sup>174</sup> This was a practical settlement which reflected Freeman, Clarke and Pym's awareness of the need to use married women staff in these circumstances.

We can see, therefore, that ways were found to circumvent the bar on the recruitment of married women staff when it was judged expedient to do so. As Women's Staff Administrator, it was Miss Freeman who had the closest dealings with these women and it was Freeman who, in 1937, voiced the first concerns about the marriage bar, as will now be discussed.

## The Abolition of the BBC Marriage Bar

Miss Freeman had initially supported both the marriage bar and the Marriage Tribunal, indeed, she had been pivotal to their introduction. Whereas in September 1935, she was of the opinion that the Tribunal had not been tried over a sufficiently long period to know whether it was worth the time and trouble, by March 1937 she had changed her mind.<sup>175</sup> She told the Director of Staff Administration, Pym, that she would now "welcome an experiment on the other side, namely the definite lifting of the bar". Freeman gave two reasons for her new opinion. Firstly, the shortage of good secretarial workers and secondly, because it was "the only subject on which there is a justifiable feeling of discontent among the women staff."<sup>176</sup>

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<sup>174</sup> MWP:2, Extract from Mrs Winship's file, June 4<sup>th</sup> 1937

<sup>175</sup> MWP:2, Freeman to Pym, March 9<sup>th</sup> 1937

<sup>176</sup> Same file. Pym responded with the information that Nicolls did not consider it "an appropriate time to raise the general question of the marriage bar".

Notwithstanding Miss Freeman's viewpoint on staff dissatisfaction, there is scant evidence from BBC women themselves about their attitude to the marriage bar. Without a staff association of any kind there was no place for views to be expressed and no means for opinions to be recorded. Nevertheless, BBC women appear to have been insufficiently angered to protest, even when given the opportunity. In December 1937, all BBC women were invited to attend a meeting organised by the Association of Women Clerks and Secretaries, a flyer for which specifically stated that up for discussion was the issue of the marriage bar.<sup>177</sup> As was alluded to in Chapter One, Freeman reported to Pym that the meeting was poorly attended.<sup>178</sup>

There is one extant reference from a woman staff member, writing against the bar. In October 1937, *Ariel* included in its editorial a short piece on the marriage bar which indicated that the "Tribunal" was to be abolished and which approved the Civil Service practice that was to replace it. This particular edition of *Ariel* experimented with a 'Guest Editress', Miss Joyce Morgan, secretary to the Editor of *The Listener*.<sup>179</sup> Miss Morgan was encouraged to add her viewpoint to any article that caught her eye and she chose to comment on the planned changes to the marriage bar rules. She wrote against the new scheme as one that "seems squarely to hit the very people whom one would suppose any "marriage scheme" would aim at assisting". These were the women who, for economic reasons, needed to go on working. It caused Miss Morgan to describe the Civil Service practice that was under consideration by the BBC as the "marriage discouragement scheme".<sup>180</sup>

The introduction of the Civil Service style scheme and the future of the Marriage Tribunal were due to be discussed by the Control Board at their November 3rd meeting. The day before the meeting, Freeman reiterated her view that the bar should be abolished. In a memo to Pym, in which she tellingly referred to the BBC's marriage bar as a "semi-bar", she gave her rationale.

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<sup>177</sup> R49/857: Staff Policy Trade Unions: AWCS 1936-1938

<sup>178</sup> Same file, Freeman to Pym, December 17<sup>th</sup> 1937

<sup>179</sup> Joyce Morgan also wrote the poem which opened Chapter Two.

<sup>180</sup> *Ariel*, October 1937

I can give no very definite reason for this change of opinion but have watched the situation over a long period and also discussed the question with my opposite numbers, in various organisations both here and in America. I feel sorry that it is not possible for Nicolls [Controller (Administration)] and you to “abolish the rule”, which would seem to me more in line with the Corporation’s policy regarding all other women staff matters.<sup>181</sup>

Thus Freeman had come to the view that not only was the marriage bar causing discontent, but it was also out of step with the BBC’s professed standpoint as an equal opportunities employer. Pym was also now converted to the removal of the BBC marriage bar. Handwritten at the foot of Miss Freeman’s November 2nd memo is a note from Pym to Nicolls:

I would like to see the ban abolished. I think it probably does more harm than good, but I understood you did not regard this as practicable at present.<sup>182</sup>

Despite the misgivings of Pym and Freeman, the Control Board advised the Board of Governors to tighten the rule rather than abolish it.<sup>183</sup> However, the governors were themselves divided on the issue. At their meeting on November 10th 1937, Mary Agnes Hamilton was one of two governors who spoke against the rule, although it is not known why she had changed her mind.<sup>184</sup> Ultimately the vote went in favour of the Control Board and the marriage bar thus became more restrictive; brought “into line with the Civil Service on all points”.

Given the ambiguity and controversy surrounding the marriage bar it seems surprising that the Corporation chose to continue with it. However, the overriding reason appears to have been that tightening the bar was a simpler option than abandoning it; at the time senior management were overwhelmed with more pressing concerns. In 1937, the BBC had to deal with the retirement of Carpendale and the appointment of a new Deputy Director General (the post went

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<sup>181</sup> MWP:2, Freeman. to Pym, November 2<sup>nd</sup> 1937

<sup>182</sup> Same document

<sup>183</sup> MWP:2, Note on Proposed Marriage Bar. Prepared for the Board of Governors, November 5th 1937

<sup>184</sup> R1/5/1/ Board of Governor’s Minutes 1936–1937, November 10<sup>th</sup> 1937. Sir Ian Fraser also wanted the rule abolished. HAL Fisher, Dr J.J. Mallon and C.H.G. Millis were in favour of retaining only senior women. The views of the other two governors (Viscountess Bridgman and RC Norman) are not recorded.

to Cecil Graves); the expansion of the television service; the Coronation of George VI and continuing discussions on the possibilities of war. In addition, in September 1937, came the first inklings that Reith might be considered for the Chairmanship of Imperial Airways. Hence to consider the abolition of the marriage bar was not a high priority.

Although the BBC marriage bar had been tightened, there is ample evidence that it continued to be flouted. During 1938, the eight-month rule introduced for temporary staff was waived for married women telephonists who were considered essential to the new telephone enquiry service.<sup>185</sup> It was agreed that married women wardrobe assistants could be employed in television as “it is a normal custom for them to get outside employment”.<sup>186</sup> Following an impassioned flurry of memos from the Catering Manager, married women waitresses also became eligible for work at the BBC.<sup>187</sup> This was later extended to all women catering staff.<sup>188</sup> In October 1938, Pym suggested to Lochhead (who had replaced Nicolls as Controller (Administration) in April 1938), that there should be a less rigid interpretation of the rule and the re-introduction of an element of compassion for women currently on the BBC staff. Pym also emphasised that the “right policy” was the removal of the bar.<sup>189</sup>

Attached to Pym’s memo to Lochhead was a report from Ray Strachey. In the summer of 1938 Miss Freeman, in her quest for ammunition against the BBC bar, had contacted Mrs Strachey asking for information about marriage bars in the UK. Strachey, who was then on holiday, responded with a long handwritten letter in which she informed Freeman that the subject was “exceedingly tangled and every kind of variety of practice can be found”.<sup>190</sup> Strachey went on to list occupations that did and did not require women to resign, ending with an expression of her own belief “that the only just solution is to keep all employments open. Leave the women themselves to decide which to do.” Pym had seen in Strachey’s document

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<sup>185</sup> MWP:2, Freeman to Clarke, April 27<sup>th</sup> 1938

<sup>186</sup> MWP:2, Pym to Clarke, March 1<sup>st</sup> 1938

<sup>187</sup> MWP:2, Clarke to Wade, October 12<sup>th</sup> 1938

<sup>188</sup> MWP:2, Pym to Wade, November 2<sup>nd</sup> 1938

<sup>189</sup> MWP:2, Pym to Lochhead, October 3<sup>rd</sup> 1938

<sup>190</sup> MWP:2, Strachey to Freeman, July 20<sup>th</sup> 1938



another weapon in his armoury against the bar, although it failed to convince Lochhead.

John Reith left the BBC in June 1938 to take up his new post as Chairman of Imperial Airways. His replacement, Frederick Ogilvie, while not seeing the marriage bar as a priority was prepared to reconsider the issue and, in October 1938, invited Pym to furnish him with a report.<sup>191</sup> The paucity of documents relating to the BBC marriage bar in early 1939 suggest this process was not speedy. In May 1939, Pym wrote to the Treasury to ascertain what view the Civil Service would take if the BBC Governors decided to remove the bar. The Treasury's response was that it certainly hoped the BBC would not remove the bar "as it would provide opponents of the bar with a very useful brickbat."<sup>192</sup> Pym was not prepared to humour the Treasury and demanded of Lochhead, "whether or not in this highly controversial question we should be guided by Civil Service practice."<sup>193</sup> "No action now" was Lochhead's scrawled response, but he intimated that the Director General would be prepared to review the subject in October 1939.

At the end of August 1939, Miss Freeman sought clarification as to whether, in the event of war breaking out, there were any special instructions for women who decided to marry.<sup>194</sup> Pym's response was clear; the marriage bar would be relaxed, but only for women in Categories A and B, i.e. those women who continued to work for the Corporation. If a woman from Category C applied, "her application would be automatically rejected".<sup>195</sup> Category C women were those who had been seconded to areas of work outside the BBC.<sup>196</sup> On October 2<sup>nd</sup> 1939, the new ruling was promulgated to women staff, who were informed that, should they be eligible to marry during the war, they would be required to resign at the ending of hostilities.<sup>197</sup>

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<sup>191</sup> MWP:2, Graves to Lochhead, October 12<sup>th</sup> 1938

<sup>192</sup> MWP:2, Pym to Lochhead, May 24<sup>th</sup> 1939

<sup>193</sup> Ibid.

<sup>194</sup> MWP:3, Women's Executive to Freeman, August 25<sup>th</sup> 1939

<sup>195</sup> MWP:3, Pym to Freeman, August 30<sup>th</sup> 1939

<sup>196</sup> This was in the interests of the War, by direction of or with the approval of the Corporation.

<sup>197</sup> MWP:3, Pym to all Women on the Permanent and Auxiliary Staff.: Wartime Staff Administration: Instruction No. 8:Employment of Married Women, October 2<sup>nd</sup> 1939

In September 1941, Miss Freeman was redeployed as Staff Welfare Officer.<sup>198</sup> Her replacement Gladys Burlton, with the new title Women's Establishment Officer, was to drive through the abolition of the BBC marriage bar. Burlton's BBC file has not been retained, but it is certain that she was the same Gladys Burlton who had forged a highly successful career as a staffing consultant.<sup>199</sup> It is unclear how Burlton came to be at the BBC, but once she had found her feet, she began to agitate for the removal of the bar. In the first instance, she was adamant that it should be removed for women in Category C, resolute that there was no good reason to discriminate against those who continued their service outside the BBC.<sup>200</sup> Ogilvie had resigned as Director General in January 1942, to be replaced by a diarchy of Robert Foot and Cecil Graves and it was to Foot that Burlton now appealed. Foot, however, was not minded to end the bar for women in Category C.

Infuriated, Burlton took the opportunity to raise the whole principle of married women's employment and on April 14<sup>th</sup> 1942 she submitted a six-page critique of the Corporation's marriage bar.<sup>201</sup> This included a history of the BBC bar; a digest of practice outside the Corporation and an analysis of theories behind the marriage bar. Having looked back through the extensive documentation on the BBC bar, Burlton was of the opinion that the policy of "forcing women staff to resign on marriage" had been followed regardless of "the re-iterated advice of those best qualified to judge." No argument, she stressed, was recorded in the files against the consistently expressed view of Mr Pym and Miss Freeman that the bar should be abolished, "But somehow the right moment never came." Burlton was also scathing of the BBC's decision to follow Civil Service practice,

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<sup>198</sup> Miss Freeman's card index file shows that she resigned on April 30<sup>th</sup> 1943, aged forty-two. In brackets under her name is written 'Mrs Ivin' indicating that she had married.

<sup>199</sup> Amongst Burlton's admirers was John Spedan Lewis whom she had impressed with her immense knowledge of sales and staffing issues during a short stint at Peter Jones in 1923. Burlton had also established the highly profitable Burlton Staff Agency and Burlton Institute and written several books. An occasional broadcaster on the BBC, in September 1936 she had taken part in a debate on equal pay. Dorothy Evans of the National Association of Women Civil Servants spoke in favour of equal pay, Gladys Burlton spoke against. No transcript exists of the debate so it is not known on what grounds.

<sup>200</sup> MWP:3, Burlton to Pym, February 11<sup>th</sup> 1942

<sup>201</sup> MWP:3, Burlton to Cameron, (Deputy Director of Staff Administration), April 17<sup>th</sup> 1942

commenting, “The Corporation should surely be in everything as good as the best employer. This is clearly its general policy.”<sup>202</sup>

Burlton identified two of the major contradictions of the BBC marriage bar: that it functioned despite many aspects of it being disliked by managers and its regressive nature in an institution that saw itself as enlightened in its attitudes towards staff. In her exposition of the theories behind marriage bars, Burlton took the domestic argument, the financial argument and the efficiency argument in turn, producing a stark indictment of BBC policy. In considering the domestic argument, she contested:

It is open to question whether any employer, however wise, is better fitted to decide the question of whether any individual woman should stay than the woman herself. The attitude seems impossible to reconcile with any common-sense view. The assumption seems to be that a girl who has always proved herself a level-headed, capable person, fit to hold a responsible position, loses all her sense immediately she marries and becomes incapable of judging how to conduct her life.

The financial argument was dismissed thus:

The principle behind this argument is that no-one should be allowed to work who does not “need” to do so.... It follows that no-one (man or woman) with sufficient private means should be allowed to follow a profession.

As to the efficiency argument, Burlton declared: “The idea that married women are as a class less efficient than unmarried women is demonstrably untrue.” She went on to expound her view that marriage bars forced women into secretive relationships or worse, to repression. She concluded in a passionate flourish:

Why should we class marriage with misdemeanour, inefficiency, ill health and old age as a reason for dismissing a woman from her employment? Why should a married woman who has devoted the whole of her single life to mastering a profession be debarred from continuing to practise it? This is surely a grave infringement of the rights of women in a democratic country.<sup>203</sup>

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<sup>202</sup> Same memo

<sup>203</sup> Same memo

Gladys Burlton's impassioned document had an immediate effect. Two weeks later, on April 29th 1942, in direct response to Burlton's arguments, Foot agreed to rescind the ruling governing women in Category C.<sup>204</sup> It was also agreed by Beadle, the current Controller (Administration), that the whole question of the employment of married women would be revived after the hostilities were over.<sup>205</sup> The following year, in November 1943, Foot expressed the view that after the war, bars imposed by individual employers were no longer likely to be effective, married women so terminated would simply seek work elsewhere. His inclination was, therefore, that after the War, the BBC bar should be removed.<sup>206</sup> In the event, the decision came earlier, although there is no clear indication as to why the decision was brought forward. On September 21<sup>st</sup> 1944, the Board of Governors agreed that the marriage bar should not be re-imposed after the war.<sup>207</sup>

## Conclusion

Gladys Burlton's analysis of the inefficiencies and contradictions of the BBC marriage bar exposed the Corporation's unease with its policy: it was never convinced that married women shouldn't work. Whereas the inter-war narrative of the marriage bar in professions such as teaching and the civil service was predominantly that of women's battle to overturn it, at the BBC it was the story of the Corporation's justification in applying it. The underlining problem for BBC management was their empathy with married women's need and desire to work, both for financial reasons and for fulfilment of a career. By retaining married women staff, the BBC accepted that it was possible to "serve two masters"; to work efficiently and run a home.<sup>208</sup> By offering maternity leave, it extended the principle to mothers. If a woman had adequate domestic support and help with caring for her child, they too could continue as effective employees.<sup>209</sup> Mary Somerville and Mary Adams, in 1939 the two most senior woman at the BBC,

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<sup>204</sup> MWP:3, Pym to Burlton, April 29<sup>th</sup> 1942

<sup>205</sup> MWP:3, Beadle to Foot, April 28<sup>th</sup> 1942

<sup>206</sup> MWP:3, Pym to Ashbridge, September 12<sup>th</sup> 1944

<sup>207</sup> MWP:3, Clerk to the Board to Pym, September 22<sup>nd</sup> 1944

<sup>208</sup> Glasgow Evening Citizen, August 31<sup>st</sup> 1933

<sup>209</sup> Although the BBC retained the proviso that if a woman's work was seen to suffer, her position would be reconsidered.

bore witness to this. The Corporation was therefore trying to enforce a policy with which it did not fully concur.

The BBC was conscious of its image in the inter-war years, as a modern post-war organisation which expounded equal opportunities for women. It was not “a nineteenth century institution”, like the banks or the Civil Service, neither did it have entrenched discriminatory policies or a culture where hostility towards women was condoned. On the other hand as the inter-war years progressed, the Corporation wanted to be viewed as part of the establishment. This, then, was the dilemma for the BBC; how to retain its forward-looking image while at the same time introducing a regressive policy, the marriage bar. The BBC’s awkwardness is revealed by the initial attempts to keep details of its change in regulation out of the public domain. It was terrified at the prospect of being made a test-case and the negative publicity that this might unleash.

In many ways the Civil Service provided the benchmark for the BBC. It was partly to align itself with the Civil Service that the marriage bar had been introduced in the first place. The Marriage Tribunal was almost certainly a response to the Tomlin Report which made provision for exceptional women in the Civil Service to have their case for marriage decided by the Treasury. The tightening of the BBC bar in late 1937 was on Civil Service lines, with no BBC woman under salary Grade C eligible to remain on the staff.

The BBC marriage bar certainly operated in favour of salaried staff. For three and a half years the Marriage Tribunal wrestled with the arguments of dual-income, efficiency and a women’s ability to run both a family and a job; always it was the lower grade women who were penalised. Goldsmith described the two classes of married women who worked at the BBC; those who wanted to make a career with the Corporation and those looking for short-term financial gain while getting their home together.<sup>210</sup> This was in many ways a truism; the majority of female staff left voluntarily on marriage and most of the weekly-paid staff who came before the tribunal confirmed that they would consider leaving once their circumstances

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<sup>210</sup> MWP:1, Goldsmith to Carpendale? August 26<sup>th</sup> 1932

had improved. Yet the BBC marriage bar was more than just a method of encouraging less committed women to leave. As Miss Freeman freely admitted, the marriage bar could provide a way “to dispense with some of the less satisfactory employees.”<sup>211</sup> However, in reality, this only ever applied to a handful of women staff. Ultimately Freeman became uncomfortable with this approach, citing it as the only major cause of discontent amongst female staff.

There is little evidence that BBC women were sufficiently angered by the marriage bar to actively campaign against it, as was the case with female civil servants and teachers. The lack of unionisation at the BBC may be partly responsible for this; if BBC women had belonged to a staff association they may have found their voice. However, an attempt by the Association of Women Clerks and Secretaries to get BBC women to protest over the issue failed to garner support. This may reflect the fact that, at the BBC, most women chose to resign. Figures for the three years July 1934 – July 1937 reveal that, while eighty-two women resigned voluntarily on marriage, only sixteen applied to the Tribunal to remain.<sup>212</sup> As Nicolls remarked, he was surprised by the small numbers of women who challenged the bar. Whereas it was the professional woman teacher and civil servant who were most vocal in their opposition to the marriage bar, at the BBC these women were always eligible to remain. In April 1939, seventeen of the BBC’s eighty-six salaried female staff were married.

The BBC marriage bar exposed the Corporation’s differing attitude towards its female employees. There was not a blanket rule that weekly-waged women had to resign on marriage, nevertheless, these women were far more likely to have left the BBC or been dismissed. No monthly-paid woman was ever required to resign, and it is to the working lives of salaried women to which we now turn.

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<sup>211</sup> MWP:1, Undated memo from 1938, op.cit.

<sup>212</sup> MWP:2, Freeman. to Pym, July 13<sup>th</sup> 1937

## Chapter Four: "... New and Important Careers..."

### Salaried Women at the BBC<sup>1</sup>

#### Introduction

I confess that when I was first confronted by these models of modern efficiency, a large proportion of them university-trained, others who are chartered accountants or who held administrative posts during the War, I was scared.

So claimed the *Woman's Own* journalist who took her readers 'behind the scenes' to meet the 'Women at the BBC' in January 1933. Her article included brief descriptions of the work of, amongst others, Mrs Fitzgerald, the Assistant Editor of *World Radio*; Mrs Lines, who provided photographs and illustrations "demanded by journalists the world over"; Miss Milnes, the head librarian and Miss Glasby, who adapted plays for broadcasting "and has written some herself."<sup>2</sup> This effervescent report is typical of the celebratory tone of newspaper and magazine articles written about the BBC's salaried women in the 1930s and it is their careers that this chapter will explore.<sup>3</sup>

*Woman's Own* identified only a smattering of the jobs performed by senior BBC women. In fact, salaried women staff occupied positions as varied as Telephone Supervisor, Publication Accounts Cashier, Furniture Buyer and Matron. Almost half were 'Assistants', a non-gendered position that encompassed an extraordinary range of jobs from programme maker and photographic supplier to make-up artist and exhibition organiser. In addition, the most senior clerks and secretaries were also monthly-paid. Thus, salaried status embraced those in administrative posts, in creative roles and in supervisory positions. It was also a reward for responsibility and longevity of service. Waged staff who reached the roof of their

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<sup>1</sup> *Evening News*, June 30th 1936, 'The Women of the BBC' by Elise Sprott

<sup>2</sup> *Woman's Own*, January 21<sup>st</sup> 1933

<sup>3</sup> Other articles include: 'Important Women of the BBC's Big House', *The Evening News*, November 30<sup>th</sup> 1934; 'The Women at Broadcasting House' *Good Housekeeping*, August 1935; 'The Women who Rule the Air Waves' *Radio Times*, November 12<sup>th</sup> 1937

grade, usually £5 a week (the equivalent of £260 a year), could be considered for transference to the salaried grades if their managers agreed.

The BBC always employed a large salaried staff. The thirty-one employees who moved from Magnate House to Savoy Hill in March 1923 included at least twelve who were monthly-paid. In July 1939, 43% of the BBC's 4,435 employees were salaried, of whom 6% were women. However, this figure includes large numbers of engineers, all of whom were men, whom the BBC did not categorise as routine salaried staff. If they are removed from the figures, 14.4% of salaried staff in 1939 were female. Routine engineers were also omitted from the Salary Information Files which contain details of 830 employees who held or had held monthly-paid positions in the BBC prior to the Second World War of whom 128 were women, 15.5% of the total. Without comparable figures in similar organisations, it's not certain whether the BBC had higher numbers of women in senior post but there is little evidence that other large companies or institutions appointed or promoted women to the same extent.<sup>4</sup> The Civil Service, the profession with which the BBC was most often compared, had a combined proportion of female administrative, executive and higher clerical officers of 5.8%.<sup>5</sup>

Writing in 1934, the BBC's Director of Internal Administration, Basil Nicolls, described the Corporation's salaried staff as its "officer" class.<sup>6</sup> The BBC made a clear distinction between those who earned weekly wages and those who were paid monthly and two separate grading systems operated. This differentiation was instituted from the start and was a common practice for businesses and organisations in the inter-war years, including the Civil Service. Being salaried rather than weekly-waged was of great significance to BBC staff. The most pertinent demarcation was the method of being paid; wages were collected

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<sup>4</sup> The John Lewis Partnership, which actively recruited and fast-tracked female graduates and married women in the 1920s and early 1930s, is one exception. See Judy Faraday, [A Kind of Superior Hobby: Women Managers in the John Lewis Partnership 1918-1950](#) (M.Phil., University of Wolverhampton, 2009)

<sup>5</sup> Guy Routh, [Occupation and Pay in Great Britain, 1906-1960](#) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965) p.24. This figure is for 1931.

<sup>6</sup> R49/31/1: Staff Policy Appointments Procedure 1925-39 File 1. Report on Recruitment of Staff, 8th February 1934. Submission by Nicolls



weekly, salaries were deposited monthly into a bank account.<sup>7</sup> Miss Freeman, the Women's Staff Administrator (WSA), received memos from waged women pleading to be remunerated by cheque so that they could avoid the ignominy of the weekly queue at the cashier's window, but this delineation was fiercely maintained. Salaries also rose far more quickly because the standard yearly increment was much higher for the salaried than for the waged. For waged staff, the annual pay rise was between 2s 6d and 5s with a few receiving perhaps 10s or £1. For salaried staff the lowest increment was £10, rising to £100 annually for those on salaries of £1,000 or more. [See Grades and Salaries Chart, p.221] In addition, to be salaried meant enhanced prospects for career development. It was possible to rise from Grade E (lowest) to Grade A (highest), where a few rare salaries were in excess of £3,000.

Apart from better pay and career prospects, the BBC's salaried employees also benefited from improved conditions of service, in particular one month's rather than one week's notice was required on either side. Senior women also had their own cloakrooms and private toilet facilities.<sup>8</sup> To have one's name added to the third floor lavatory list was a cause for celebration.<sup>9</sup> In addition, a further distinction was made for staff who earned £500 or more and, according to the Staff Information Files, thirty high-earning women were included within this upper salary bracket.<sup>10</sup> [See Appendix 5] Perks for top earners included First Class Rail travel, an expense account and four rather than three weeks annual

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<sup>7</sup> Personal files include details of bank accounts women opened on promotion to the salaried grades, for example Mary Temple Candler, Beatrice Hart and Margaret Hope Simpson.

<sup>8</sup> 'Instructions to Women Clerical Staff', issued by Miss Freeman, July 6<sup>th</sup> 1937

<sup>9</sup> "As you will become a Controller's Secretary on 1st October you may hang your hats and coats upstairs! You will now find your name on the list of women staff in the third floor lavatory.", Miss Freeman to Miss George, Miss Hope Simpson, Miss Osborne, Miss Shawyer, September 29<sup>th</sup> 1935. Margaret Hope Simpson Personal File

<sup>10</sup> In the UK generally, £500 was viewed as a demarcation of status. The sociologist Philip Massey suggested that, on £500 a year, a family could expect all the "appurtenances" of a middle-class life-style. Philip Massey, 'The Expenditure of 1,360 British Middle-Class Households in 1938-1939' as quoted in Ross McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures: England 1918-1951* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) p.61. Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* imagined £500 a year as the magical figure that would bestow on a woman the financial independence to do what she wanted; "food, clothing, housing" would be hers forever, as was the "power to contemplate." Virginia Woolf, *Oxford World's Classics: A Room of One's Own* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1929/2000) pp.49, 139. Writing in 1929, Woolf supposed that there must be some two thousand women in Britain capable of earning over £500 a year and this was true of four BBC women at that time.

leave.<sup>11</sup> Maurice Gorham, Editor of *Radio Times*, described the ‘caste’ system he believed existed at Savoy Hill, with distinctions shown by the colour of the carpet “blue for seniors, with mahogany furniture: the rest had grey hairline and oak” and the way you got your tea “juniors a cup and saucer, seniors a pot on a tray.”<sup>12</sup> Whether this differentiation was extended to all monthly-paid staff is not clear but being salaried was clearly advantageous.

Virginia Woolf, in *Three Guineas*, emphasised £250 as a good salary for a woman.<sup>13</sup> It was considered to be the minimum necessary for a middle-class life-style in the inter-war years.<sup>14</sup> The vast majority of salaried positions in the BBC commanded a rate of £260 or above, however, the Corporation didn’t pay excessive salaries for the times. Reith expected staff to be motivated by their duty to public service, not for high pay.<sup>15</sup> In comparison with barristers, doctors, dentists and civil servants, most senior BBC male employees earned modestly.<sup>16</sup> Out of 537 salaried men working for the Corporation in 1939, only 209 earned more than £600. BBC women’s salaries, on the other hand, compared well to those in the most common professions for women in the inter-war years. In 1934, the Junior Executive grades of the Civil Service, where most salaried women were clustered, offered in the region of £152-£396 per year.<sup>17</sup> Routh estimated that in 1936, the average woman teacher’s salary was £265 per annum.<sup>18</sup> Nurses earned far lower, in 1937 the maximum salary paid by a local authority hospital was £63.17 a year.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> See for example, L2/190/1:Charles Siepmann Staff File, Reith to Goldsmith, June 5<sup>th</sup> 1928

<sup>12</sup> Maurice Gorham, *Sound and Fury* (London: Percival Marshall, 1948) p.30

<sup>13</sup> Virginia Woolf, *Three Guineas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1938/2000) p.217

<sup>14</sup> McKibbin, *op.cit.*, p.44

<sup>15</sup> Asa Briggs, *The Golden Age of Broadcasting*, The History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom, vol. 2 (London Oxford University Press, 1965) p 414. An article in the *Sunday Chronicle* from 1934 headlined “Niggardly BBC”, claimed that there was growing dissatisfaction amongst staff at “the surprisingly meagre salaries in relation to the importance of their duties.” *Sunday Chronicle*, November 4<sup>th</sup> 1934

<sup>16</sup> According to Guy Routh, for the years 1935-7, the average annual salary for male barristers and doctors was £1,000, dentists earned on average £676 and chemists £512. In the Civil Service a Principal averaged £509, a Librarian £735 and a Senior Medical Officer £1,023, *Occupation and Pay in Great Britain, 1906-1960* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965) pp.64-70

<sup>17</sup> Ray Strachey, *Careers and Openings for Women: A Survey of Women’s Employment and a Guide for Those Seeking Work* (London: Faber and Faber, 1935) p.216; Dorothy Evans, *Women and the Civil Service* (London: Pitman, 1934) p.133. In 1934, 744 women were employed in the Civil Service Executive Grades.

<sup>18</sup> Routh, *op.cit.*, p.69

<sup>19</sup> Brian Abel-Smith, *A History of the Nursing Profession* (London: Heinemann, 1960) p.276

While some salaried positions in the BBC were comparable to those outside the Corporation, for example Matron, Librarian, Press Officer or Cashier others were novel, developed specifically for the new medium of broadcasting. This could be an advantage to women who were willing and able to take on new opportunities and responsibilities when they arose. The BBC's exponential growth meant an increasing number of staff assumed senior positions. This was particularly pertinent in the 1920's when the BBC's basic structure was taking shape, hence the potential for rapid promotion for those who had the requisite skills. Women like Florence Milnes and Kathleen Lines grasped the opportunity to develop their own sections, the Library and the Photographic Section respectively. Either could have become the domain of men.

In her introduction to a special 'Women's Broadcasting Number' of *Radio Times* in 1934 the BBC Governor, Mary Agnes Hamilton, claimed that in broadcasting, as in politics, "men and women work on a genuine basis of equal and common concern"<sup>20</sup> There was certainly a perception of equality; the Corporation's salaried women viewed themselves as having equal ability to their male colleagues and all were united by a sense of public service and being part of the BBC. These were women who had largely reached adulthood after the First World War, who were at the forefront of the post-suffrage generation. The staff files used for this thesis show that most of the women were born in the twentieth century. [See Appendix One: Short Biographies] All eighteen women were high school educated, ten were university graduates; they were bright, independent, serious-minded career women.

The BBC differed from the traditional professions where it was unusual for young female entrants to have had previous work or life experience: women teachers took up posts straight from training college or university; the Executive Class of the Civil Service specified that female applicants should be aged 18-19.<sup>21</sup> All but three of the eighteen BBC women had worked prior to their arrival at the Corporation: Janet Quigley for the Empire Marketing Board; Dorothy Isherwood

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<sup>20</sup> *Radio Times*, November 16th 1934, 'Women's Broadcasting Number'

<sup>21</sup> Strachey, op.cit., p.216

as Assistant Librarian at Newnham College; Margaret Hope Simpson as secretary for Bedford College for Women, and Olive Shapley as a WEA lecturer and trainee nursery teacher at the Rachel Macmillan School.<sup>22</sup> Of the eighteen, only five were originally from London, the rest had migrated to the capital, attracted by greater opportunities for work and professional advancement. Little is known about the women's lives away from the BBC, but several shared flats, for instance a 1926 letter from a Shepherd's Bush estate agent shows that Florence Milnes (Librarian) and Florence Minns (Variety Auditioner) were, "desirous of renting a flat... at a rental of £100 per annum." The BBC's response to the request for a reference was, "they should prove desirable tenants in every way."<sup>23</sup> Isa Benzie and Janet Quigley also lived together, in Marylebone.<sup>24</sup>

Fifteen of the eighteen women remained with the BBC until retirement, showing a striking longevity of service. Two resigned because of marital commitments, only one, the accompanist and arranger Doris Arnold, left the BBC early; after twenty-five years her contract was terminated.<sup>25</sup> We can't know how typical this long service was, the paucity of personal files held at the Written Archives Centre suggests that those of women who left the BBC early were not kept, but it does indicate the loyalty and dedication of those who stayed with the BBC. Certainly nine of the women had married and several had children, highlighting their commitment to their jobs. Conversely, the careers of BBC salaried men are notable for their abruptness. Out of sixteen of the BBC's most senior men, only five remained with the BBC until retirement (one, Valentine Goldsmith, died in service); the rest had BBC careers that often spanned just a few years. [See Appendix One: Short Biographies] This suggests that for many salaried men the BBC was viewed as an interlude, a stepping-stone to another career.

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<sup>22</sup> The John Lewis Partnership also made a point of employing older, experienced women. Under the Learnership Scheme, introduced in 1918, women from the theatre, the arts and even archaeology were enticed to work at the store where their diverse backgrounds were seen as an enhancement to the sales team. Faraday, *op.cit.*, pp.31-33, 51-52

<sup>23</sup> L1/705/1: Florence Milnes Staff File, Ryland Jones to Goldsmith, November 2<sup>nd</sup> 1926; Goldsmith to Ryland Jones, November 3<sup>rd</sup> 1926

<sup>24</sup> L1/784/1: Janet Quigley Staff File, Atkinson to Carpendale, December 18<sup>th</sup> 1929

<sup>25</sup> It was felt that her out-of-date musical style and lack of enthusiasm for the job meant her 'period of usefulness in the Variety Department' had come to an end. L1/15/1: Doris Arnold Staff File, Director General, Doris Arnold Appeal, June 18th 1951

There is evidence that the BBC's salaried women worked harder than their male counterparts. Hilda Matheson wrote of her assistants Lionel Fielden and Joseph Ackerley, as "my leisurely young men lounging at their desks".<sup>26</sup> The two were also lacklustre about work that didn't interest them; Matheson described Fielden as "being very naughty about poetry readings because he is bored with them and forgets to see about copyright and things".<sup>27</sup> These are traits it is hard to imagine being directed at the BBC's salaried woman, all the evidence from personal files suggests they were highly diligent with a tendency, rather, to overwork.<sup>28</sup> As Mary Agnes Hamilton pointed out in *Our Freedom and its Results*, "a woman has got in some way to be rather better than the comparable male to get herself regarded as his equal".<sup>29</sup> Certainly Alison Oram, in her study of women teachers, described the belief that women were more conscientious and professionally committed than men.<sup>30</sup> Alix Kilroy, one of the first women to be recruited directly to the Administrative Grades of the Civil Service, in 1925, was so keen to be treated as "one of them" that she suspected she unsexed herself.<sup>31</sup>

Salaried women civil servants and teachers may have viewed themselves as equal, if not better than, the men they worked with. Nevertheless, apart from a handful of women in the top Civil Service grades, they faced overt discrimination.<sup>32</sup> Following the First World War, lower pay for women teachers and civil servants was legally enforced and the marriage bar tightened. Aggregation, which would have improved women's promotional chances in the Civil Service, was also slow to be introduced, while women teachers faced fierce competition from men for promotions in mixed-sex schools.<sup>33</sup> Women in the medical profession were also angered by the closure of training places to women after the First World War and

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<sup>26</sup> Hilda Matheson Letters, May 1<sup>st</sup> 1929

<sup>27</sup> Hilda Matheson Letters, January 15<sup>th</sup> 1929

<sup>28</sup> See for example, L1/1698/1:Beatrice Hart Staff File, Broadbent to Wade, September 9<sup>th</sup> 1933. In Miss Hart's case, over-work led to illness.

<sup>29</sup> Hamilton, "Changes in Social Life" in Ray Strachey, ed., Our Freedom and Its Results by Five Women (London: Hogarth Press, 1936) p.264

<sup>30</sup> Alison Oram, Women Teachers and Feminist Politics 1900 - 1939 (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996) p.84

<sup>31</sup> Alix Meynell, Public Servant, Private Women: An Autobiography (Victor Gollanz, 1984) p.86

<sup>32</sup> See Oram, op.cit; Helen Glew, Women's Employment in the General Post Office, 1914-1939, (PhD., London, 2009); Meta Zimmeck, Strategies and Stratagems for the Employment of Women in the British Civil Service 1919-1939 (Historical Journal 27.4: 1984)

<sup>33</sup> Glew, op.cit. pp.52-66; Oram, op.cit., p.84

what they perceived as inequitable working condition.<sup>34</sup> The BBC, as a new industry, had no history of inequality towards women indeed, as we have seen, it positioned itself as a progressive organisation where salaried women were on an equal footing with men.<sup>35</sup> Mary Agnes Hamilton voiced her view that, at the BBC, women and men worked as equals. Hilda Matheson also professed her belief that “equal pay for equal work” was on the whole respected”.<sup>36</sup> However, as we will see, one of the great inconsistencies of the inter-war BBC was its outward impression of sexual equality which belied the fact that many of its salaried women were disadvantaged when it came to recruitment, promotion and pay.

This chapter, then, considers the nature of salaried work at the BBC and how far it differed for women and men. Three areas of work have been selected for closer scrutiny: Children’s Hour Organiser, Advertising Representative and Talks Assistant; all positions that took advantage of ‘a woman’s point of view’.<sup>37</sup> It also addresses issues of mobility, promotion and pay and shows that in all three areas there was subtle sexual discrimination. The chapter does not include the BBC’s three most senior salaried women staff, who held Director-level posts, the careers of Mary Somerville, Hilda Matheson and Isa Benzie, are considered separately, in Chapter Five.

We begin, however, with an investigation into the BBC’s recruitment of salaried women staff. In her 1936 guide *Careers for our Daughters*, Dorothy Winifred Hughes enthused about the university and secondary school girls who had “qualified for executive responsibility” at the BBC.<sup>38</sup> She waxed lyrical about three women, in particular, who had started as secretaries and others who used

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<sup>34</sup> Kaarin Michaelsen, "Union Is Strength': The Medical Women's Federation and Politics of Professionalism, 1917-30," *Women and Work Culture: Britain C1850-1950*, ed. Krista Cowman, and Louise A. Jackson (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005) pp.162, 166, 169

<sup>35</sup> Reith specifically used this term in April 1926.

<sup>36</sup> *Women’s Leader and Common Cause*, January 2<sup>nd</sup> 1931, ‘Women and Broadcasting’ by Hilda Matheson

<sup>37</sup> For a discussion on social maternalism in the inter-war years see Jane Lewis, *The Politics of Motherhood: Child and Maternal Welfare in England 1900-1939* (London: Croom Helm, 1990) pp. 89-102. Fiona Hackney has written about the importance of ‘the woman’s point of view’ to advertisers and magazine editors in the inter-war years. “They Opened Up a Whole New World”: *Feminism, Modernity and the Feminine Imagination in Women's Magazines, 1919-1930*. (PhD., London, 2011) pp.58-59, 72, 80

<sup>38</sup> D.W. Hughes, *Careers for Our Daughters* (London: A&C Black, 1936) pp.289-291

their training as musicians or as a drama student to move into lucrative and important positions within the Corporation. “These are a few examples of many one could give,” Hughes explained, “but they suffice to show that responsible work in broadcasting can be approached through many doors if one has talent and initiative.”<sup>39</sup> Hughes was right; there were many ways in which a woman could become a salaried member of the BBC. It could be through word-of-mouth or recommendation from a friend, by response to an advertisement or via a university appointments board or the Women’s Employment Federation. Similarly, it could be by promotion from within and just over half of all the BBC’s monthly-paid women began their careers on a weekly wage.

## BECOMING SALARIED STAFF

### Recruitment from within the BBC

In 1937 Beatrice Hart, a weekly-paid secretary in the Supplementary Publications Department, was recommended by her line-manager for promotion to the monthly-paid grades. This was endorsed by the head of department, who agreed that “the stage has been reached when Miss Hart should be graded as a junior assistant.” Miss Hart was one of sixty-eight women (out of the 128 women listed in the Salary Information Files) who began their BBC careers as waged staff. For the brightest and most ambitious women, those who from the start showed themselves to be capable of greater responsibilities, the route to monthly-pay was quick and easy. Thus, it took just two years for Caroline Banks’ key role as Women’s Staff Supervisor to be recognised with salaried status, her earnings rising from £3.5s a week in February 1923, to £260 per annum in April 1925. Similarly, Florence Milnes’ initiative to start the BBC library saw her promoted from a £3.10s a week Information Assistant in January 1925 to being ‘In Charge Library’ on a salary of £280 a year, in April 1927. For others the process to salaried status was painfully slow. Beatrice Hart had to wait ten years to reach the salaried grades; as we saw in Chapter Two, for Alice Wright the process took fourteen.

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p.290

It is not clear how or why weekly-paid individuals were considered suitable for higher status jobs within the BBC. Each year, usually in February, BBC managers provided details about the performance of their staff which included recommendations for re-grading and increments. From 1929, this was formalised as the annual Confidential Report, with pay and grade rises implemented each April. For some, the fact of reaching £5 a week, the ‘roof’ for most weekly-waged positions (and the equivalent of £260 a year), seems to have prompted a re-designation of role, with an accompanying move to the salaried grades. For others whose wage rose to £5 a week, there might be a switch to monthly-pay but with no change of title. Still others, who earned £5, remained on weekly-wages as was the case with Alice Wright. It’s not known how many women continued on their £5 ‘roof’ without ever gaining a salaried position, as only those who were promoted to the monthly-paid grades were recorded in the Salary Information Files.

In the case of Alice Wright, we can see from her personal file that the problem lay not with her direct manager, the Music Librarian, who for many years advocated her promotion to the salaried grades but with his seniors and this highlights a key problem of internal recruitment to senior grades at the BBC; the lack of uniformity. Promotion to salaried positions was largely at the whim of the manager, or managers, concerned. If he, or she, was resistant to raising the status of an individual or reluctant to increase their pay, they could remain in a modest position for many years, even if they were known to be a valuable worker. On the other hand, a supportive BBC manager might rapidly progress a waged-employee, as was the case with Isa Benzie, as we shall see in Chapter Five.

There were also a number of ‘rags-to-riches’ success stories at the BBC, as mirrored in the popular books and films of the day. To have a meteoric career-rise was not unheard of in the 20s and 30s, as Elsie Lang claimed in her book *British Women in the Twentieth Century*, “the majority of the great business women today have climbed into positions of £1,000 a year and even more by



means of shorthand and typing.”<sup>40</sup> A case in point is Doris Arnold who joined the BBC as a shorthand typist in 1926. She’d left the Tiffin School in South London at sixteen and had subsequently worked in the Salaries Office at Peter Jones and in the Stores Department at the LCC. At the BBC, aged twenty-two, she was set to work in ‘Stores’ earning £2.5s a week, being transferred to the Music Department the following year. Arnold was a skilled pianist and in 1928 her ability to play was noticed by her manager.<sup>41</sup> In his request that Arnold be given a trial as a BBC Accompanist, Ralph Wade, the Administrative Executive, explained:

It is not so much that A.C. [Assistant Controller, Goldsmith] has any definite reasons for thinking her suitable as his wish that all steps should be taken to enable a junior member of the staff to advance, if warranted on merit.<sup>42</sup>

Doris Arnold proved to be an exceptional accompanist and went on to forge a highly successful career in the Variety Department as a music assistant and an arranger, becoming a *Radio Pictorial* cover star.<sup>43</sup> She was the first woman on the BBC to produce and present her own radio show, *The Melody is There*, in 1937, now earning a salary of £580 a year.

A second woman, Mary Hope Allen, was also propelled into the public limelight. In 1927, aged twenty-eight, she was recruited as a £3.10s a-week cataloguer in the Play Library. Prior to joining the BBC, Allen had attended the Slade School of Art and had worked as Editorial Secretary to the *Westminster Gazette* and *The Queen* as well as doing occasional freelance work as a copy writer and drama critic.<sup>44</sup> Allen was quickly frustrated by her BBC work and in January 1928 her manager, aware that she might leave, warned his superior that “it would be a pity to lose somebody who could be so useful to us.”<sup>45</sup> A spirited correspondence

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<sup>40</sup> Elsie M. Lang, *British Women in the Twentieth Century* (London: T. Werner Laurie Ltd, 1929) p.259

<sup>41</sup> *Radio Pictorial*, January 10th 1936, June 25th 1937; *Radio Times*, November 12th 1937

<sup>42</sup> L1/15/1: Doris Arnold Staff File 1, 1926-195, Wade to Graves, April 2<sup>nd</sup> 1928. Cecil Graves was then Assistant Controller, Programmes

<sup>43</sup> Arnold featured regularly in *Radio Pictorial*; she was ‘The Girl on the Cover’ in January 1936. *Radio Pictorial*, January 10<sup>th</sup> 1936

<sup>44</sup> L1/659/1: Mary Hope Allen Staff File 1, Allen to Nicolls, October 17<sup>th</sup> 1933

<sup>45</sup> L1/659/2: Mary Hope Allen Staff File 2, Jeffrey to Eckersley, January 4<sup>th</sup> 1928

about Miss Allen's future ensued but nothing changed.<sup>46</sup> Frustrated by the impasse, and keen to try her hand at creative work, Allen made an appointment to see Reith.

Sir John listened, slightly amused, as I tried to impress him with my programme ideas. He tried to catch me out for an hour, and then said 'if you hadn't come to see me, I wouldn't have given you the job [as a writer for Children's Hour], but you have convinced me.'<sup>47</sup>

The move propelled Allen into creative work on which she was quick to build and she went on to become a renowned BBC drama producer.<sup>48</sup> In 1939, Allen's salary was £620.

Doris Arnold and Mary Hope Allen's experience of promotion show the BBC was alert to the creative potential of its junior staff. Other promotions reveal that bright young women with excellent secretarial/clerical skills were also rewarded. For example, in 1935, Joan Vickery was keen to transfer to the fledgling Television Department prompting Miss Freeman, the Women's Staff Administrator, to point out to Douglas Clarke, the Establishment Officer, that the Department would soon need "girls of her calibre and I feel it only fair that she should be in "on the ground floor"". <sup>49</sup> Gerald Beadle, the Entertainment Executive, echoed Freeman's opinion. "I do not want to do anything to stand in the way of Miss Vickery's advancement, because I think she deserves it."<sup>50</sup> Vickery started her BBC career in 1929 as a £2.15s shorthand typist in the Outside Broadcasting Department and had been promoted to a £4 a-week clerk in 1933. When Vickery moved to Alexandra Palace, Miss Freeman asked that she should become supervisor of Television's women staff, such were her apparent abilities.<sup>51</sup> By 1937, Vickery had been promoted to the BBC's salaried grades. Other weekly-paid secretarial/clerical women who moved to significant posts include Winifred Baker, who ran the Manchester Orchestra; Marjorie Redman

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<sup>46</sup> Same file, e.g. Gielgud to Graves, January 8<sup>th</sup> 1929; Graves to Wade, February 7<sup>th</sup> 1929

<sup>47</sup> The Times, April 9<sup>th</sup> 2001, Mary Hope Allen obituary

<sup>48</sup> Mary Hope Allen challenged the BBC on her low salary. See below p.223

<sup>49</sup> R13/426/1: Television Department: Women Staff 1932-1937. Freeman to Clarke, May 10<sup>th</sup> 1935

<sup>50</sup> Same file, Beadle to Clarke, May 14<sup>th</sup> 1935. In fact, Beadle requested that Miss Vickery's departure be delayed because of staffing shortages in his department. This was over-ruled.

<sup>51</sup> Same file, Freeman to Clarke, September 20<sup>th</sup> 1935

who moved from typist in Education to Sub-Editor on *The Listener* and Evelyn Shepherd who was promoted from clerk to Furniture Buyer.

Chapter Two discussed the limited possibilities of promotion for women from waged to salaried positions in the inter-wars years, so the fact that this option was open to women at the BBC was unusual. Women workers in factories, shops and offices were given little scope for progression. An exception was the Civil Service where young women who joined the Manipulative Grades as weekly-paid Writing Assistants or as Typists were eligible to enter the examination for the salaried Clerical Grade.<sup>52</sup> According to Dorothy Evans, roughly a quarter of all vacancies in the Clerical Grades were reserved for low-grade women and men. However, Evans emphasised the competitive nature of the examination, the over-achievement of men and the many years it took to reach an appropriate level to apply for promotion to the Clerical Grades, “a really good writing assistant” could be considered for promotion after seven years service.<sup>53</sup> GPO records show for some women it took twenty years or more to gain promotion.<sup>54</sup>

According to the Salary Information files, many more salaried women than salaried men began their BBC careers as weekly-paid; 53% compared with 8.5%.<sup>55</sup> A major reason was women’s dominance in secretarial/clerical positions. As Chapter Two revealed, proportionally far fewer men were employed in these posts, rather the majority of waged male staff were engineers.<sup>56</sup> But these figures also suggest other considerations were at play; that the BBC was less prepared to recruit women directly to “officer class” posts and that the women themselves believed they were less able, choosing instead to work their way up. Although some young women might be bursting with self-confidence, Winifred Holtby and Vera Brittain both wrote of the debilitating effect of the ‘inferiority complex’ of others.<sup>57</sup> This is perhaps not surprising at a time when higher education was still

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<sup>52</sup> Evans, op.cit., pp.81-93

<sup>53</sup> Ibid. pp.84-85. Glew, op.cit., p.48

<sup>54</sup> Glew, ibid.

<sup>55</sup> These figures don’t include large numbers of waged men who were engineers. They had distinct career paths into the salaried grades.

<sup>56</sup> We don’t know the proportion of salaried engineers who began their BBC careers as weekly paid.

<sup>57</sup> See for example Winifred Holtby, *Women and a Changing Civilisation* (London: Lane and Bodley Head, 1934) pp.97-105; Vera Brittain, ‘The Whole Duty of Women’, *Time and Tide*,

hard fought for. In the 1930s, there was still anxiety among feminists that it was brothers, rather than sisters, who were given opportunities to go to university.<sup>58</sup> At the BBC it was the graduate brothers who were recruited directly to the salaried staff, their non-graduate sisters might have to be content, initially, with the weekly-paid grades.

The BBC kept no breakdown of figures on graduate employment so it is impossible to know which of the staff had been to university, but at least seven salaried women who joined as weekly-paid were graduates.<sup>59</sup> Reith appears to have viewed an apprenticeship in the lower grades as character building for some highly educated young women, especially the daughters of acquaintances. Three Oxford graduates, who would have significant careers in the Corporation, came to the BBC this way. Isa Benzie, whose career is considered in detail in Chapter Five, arrived as a £3 a week secretary in 1927. She was the daughter of Lieutenant Colonel Benzie who served in the Scottish Rifles with Reith in the First World War. Janet Adam Smith, who joined as a £3.10 a week Information Assistant in 1928, was the daughter of George Adam Smith, the Principal of Aberdeen University, a family friend of Reith's of many years standing. Elizabeth Barker, who was "highly honoured" to be given a £3.5s a week job as a clerk/shorthand typist in late 1934, was the daughter of Ernest Barker whom Reith had come to know when he was commissioned by the BBC Governors to survey staff appointments in early 1934.<sup>60</sup> Both Ernest Barker and Lt. Col. Benzie personally contacted Reith about prospects for their daughters. Reith's reply to Benzie's letter is revealing:

We do periodically take on girls of this type, that is University graduates and people with considerable educational qualifications. There are not many appointments of this kind, but when there is one we usually find it very difficult to get just what we want. There are of course every now and

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February 23<sup>rd</sup> 1928, in Paul Berry and Alan Bishop, eds., Testament of a Generation: The Journalism of Vera Brittain and Winifred Holtby (London: Virago, 1985) pp.120-123

<sup>58</sup> See for example Mary Agnes Hamilton in Strachey, ed., Our Freedom and Its Results pp.253-254; Vera Brittain in Berry and Bishop, op.cit., pp.121-122, 126. As late as 1939, only 23% of university students were female, Carol Dyhouse, No Distinction of Sex? Women in British Universities, 1870-1939 (London: UCL Press, 1995) p.7

<sup>59</sup> The seven women were Isa Benzie, Cecelia Reeves, Mary Lewis, Elizabeth Barker, Janet Adam Smith, Dorothy Isherwood and Margaret Hope Simpson.

<sup>60</sup> Oral History of the BBC, Elizabeth Barker interview, May 9<sup>th</sup> 1983

then vacancies for secretaries and people of that order. They begin in the General Office as ordinary shorthand-typists and if they have special ability very quickly work their way up.<sup>61</sup>

Benzie, Adam Smith and Barker were all rapidly promoted to salaried position, their aptitude quickly apparent.<sup>62</sup> Many more graduate women were, however, appointed directly to the salaried grades.

### Recruitment from Outside the BBC

Sixty women were recruited directly to the ranks of the BBC's monthly-paid staff in the 1920s and 1930s, just under half (47%) of the salaried women detailed in the Salary Information Files. This compares starkly with the 91.5% of men who were appointed directly to salaried grades.<sup>63</sup> There are several explanations for this. One reason, as has been mentioned, was women's reluctance to put themselves forward for salaried posts; young men, especially those who came from privileged backgrounds, exuded an air of entitlement to the influential jobs they quickly held at the BBC.<sup>64</sup> A second reason is the rapid growth of the BBC which generated an almost insatiable demand for programme makers, administrators, press office staff, technicians and so on. The quickest and easiest way to find these people was through personal contacts and on the whole, men suggested men. The 'old-boys' network', was significant in an organisation with no formal entry requirements.<sup>65</sup> A third reason was the oblivion to women that characterised the upper echelons of management in the inter-war years. Like many institutions, the BBC just didn't think of women when it was recruiting to these posts.<sup>66</sup> Although women might be considered if they put themselves forward or were suggested for BBC employment, the person who came most readily to mind was male. As Mary Agnes Hamilton pointed out, it didn't occur

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<sup>61</sup> L1/1049/2: Isa Benzie Personal File, Reith to Benzie, June 8<sup>th</sup> 1927

<sup>62</sup> Benzie became Foreign Director in 1933; Adam Smith, Sub Editor of *The Listener* in 1930; Elizabeth Barker; Assistant to the News Librarian in 1938.

<sup>63</sup> Of the 702 men included in the Salary Information Files only 60 had joined as weekly-paid staff.

<sup>64</sup> The memoirs of Val Gielgud, Eric Maschwitz and Lance Sieveking make this immediately apparent.

<sup>65</sup> For a discussion on the 'old boys' network' in the inter-war years see, Krista Cowman and Louise Jackson, (eds) *Women and Work Culture in Britain C1850 - 1950* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005) p.15

<sup>66</sup> Virginia Woolf noted men's propensity to appoint men. Woolf, *Three Guineas* pp.217-231

to men when contemplating such issues “that they were doing anything out of the way.”<sup>67</sup>

The lack of formal entry requirements set the BBC apart from other professions which required examinations to be sat or certification to be produced, instead, the BBC recruited from all walks of life. A Control Board Statement from 1930 detailed the uncommon and individualistic nature of the Corporation’s salaried employees who came as administrative and business people, musicians, dramatists, educationalists, novelists, journalists and artists and “some who might have been dilettanti had they not found their metier” in the BBC.<sup>68</sup> In his autobiography, Reith recalled what he looked for in potential staff:

One had to find men and women not just good enough for the immediate responsibilities of this or that post but for what it would be some years ahead.... The requirement was for men and women who wanted to be in the BBC and nowhere else; who realised its potentialities and were moved and minded to share in their achievement; who realised also how exacting the labours would be.<sup>69</sup>

In the 1920s and early 1930s, the BBC recruited external salaried staff in three major ways: from amongst those who wrote to the Company/Corporation; through word of mouth and by commendation (advertisements were not widely used before the mid-1930s). Peter Eckersley, the BBC’s first Chief Engineer, had been encouraged to write to Reith in January 1923 by one of the BBC’s Board of Directors when the original appointee declined to take up his post.<sup>70</sup> Reith recognised Eckersley’s potential and immediately took him on. Peter Eckersley’s brother, Roger, a failed chicken farmer, is unapologetic that it was through his sibling that he joined the BBC as Programme Organiser in 1924.<sup>71</sup> When Val Gielgud, the BBC’s venerable Director of Drama, looked back on his long career

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<sup>67</sup> Strachey, ed., Our Freedom and Its Results p.257

<sup>68</sup> R1/66/2: Director General Reports May-December 1930, Joint Memorandum by Control Board, May 27<sup>th</sup> 1930. This document, prepared for Governors, was to demonstrate that the BBC’s ‘peculiar’ staffing arrangements made a Staff Association untenable.

<sup>69</sup> John Reith, Into the Wind (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1949) p.139

<sup>70</sup> Peter Eckersley, The Power Behind the Microphone (London: The Scientific Bookclub, 1942) p.46. The person who suggested Eckersley write to the BBC was Basil Binyon, one of the Directors of the new Company.

<sup>71</sup> Roger Eckersley, The B.B.C. and All That (London: Sampson Low, Marston and Co. Ltd., 1946) pp.46-47

from the vantage point of 1947, he declared his support for “nepotism and favouritism.”<sup>72</sup> He believed, correctly, that his own appointment to the BBC in 1928 was due to the insistence of two close friends, Lance Sieveking, a high-powered BBC Talks Assistant and Eric Maschwitz, then Editor of *Radio Times*.<sup>73</sup>

Personal connections were similarly important for the recruitment of salaried women. For instance, memoranda show how Isa Benzie, in 1930 an Assistant in the Foreign Department, suggested her flatmate, Janet Quigley, as the perfect colleague.<sup>74</sup> In 1933, the Children’s Hour Organiser, Ursula Eason, was recommended by her cousin, the Variety Producer, CH Brewer.<sup>75</sup> Daughters of Reith’s acquaintances might also find favour in monthly-paid posts. In January 1933 Reith recorded in his diary, “Sir Samuel Instone to see me about a job for his daughter”<sup>76</sup> Anna Instone, an alumna of the Royal Academy of Music, joined the permanent staff in December 1933 as a £260 a year Assistant in the Recorded Programmes Department.<sup>77</sup>

In the early years of the BBC most salaried staff, whether at Head Office or in the provinces, were interviewed and approved personally by John Reith, and his diaries describe an endless stream of meetings with potential employees. As he stressed, “I saw practically every man and woman recommended for posts of any recognisable responsibility; and the interviews were not superficial”.<sup>78</sup> While most of his interviewees were men, the diaries record a handful with women. For instance, in March 1924 he met Kathleen Lines who was recruited as a salaried secretary to the Director of Education and who would soon become Head of the Photographic Department.<sup>79</sup> In 1926 Reith noted two meetings; one with Miss Mackenzie, selected as the Woman Assistant for Cardiff and another with Miss

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<sup>72</sup> Val Gielgud, *Years of the Locust* (London: Nicholson and Watson, 1947) p.46

<sup>73</sup> Gielgud wrote, “Lance Sieveking urged my intelligence upon Roger Eckersley, at that time Director of Programmes. Eric Maschwitz murmured of my merits into the ear of Gladstone Murray, Director of Public Relations.” *Ibid.*, p.67. Sieveking jested that in 1926 he was getting “bright young men on to our staff at the rate of about one a week”. S61: Special Collections: Autobiographical Sketches of Lance Sieveking, p.50.

<sup>74</sup> L1/784/1: Janet Quigley Staff File, Anderson (Foreign Director) to Carpendale, 18th December 1929

<sup>75</sup> L1/2142/1: Ursula Eason Staff File

<sup>76</sup> *Reith Diaries*, January 19<sup>th</sup> 1933

<sup>77</sup> See Short Biographies, Appendix 1

<sup>78</sup> Reith, *op.cit.*, p.139

<sup>79</sup> *Reith Diaries*, March 15<sup>th</sup> 1924

Moncrieff who was to hold a similar post in Glasgow.<sup>80</sup> Both had been recruited by the Station Director in their locality and were subsequently approved by Reith.<sup>81</sup> Olive Shapley, who joined the BBC in 1934 as Children's Hour Organiser for Manchester, described her meeting with the Director General as "hardly... a relaxed conversation".<sup>82</sup> Fortunately, she was confirmed in post.

Shapley's mother had seen the job of Northern Children's Hour Organiser advertised in the *Daily Telegraph*. Prior to the mid-1930s the BBC rarely used public advertisements, unless the job was of a particularly specialised nature. Reith remained doubtful about this method of recruitment, as he made clear in a 1935 memo to his Deputy, Carpendale:

I never think that the best men are to be obtained by advertising.... After all, our duty is surely more to the business than to those who happened to answer an advertisement; our duty therefore to get the best man however we may come upon him.<sup>83</sup>

There was a belief that routine salaried posts could more easily be filled by recommendation or from the many hopeful candidates who wrote speculatively to the Corporation every year. If the BBC should advertise, there was concern that the glamour ascribed to the organisation could result in hundreds, if not thousands, of applications, all of which would have to be scrutinised and sorted.<sup>84</sup> The BBC was also reluctant to specify the qualities and training it required of potential recruits. Vyrnwy Biscoe's *Careers for Women* published in 1932 included a terse statement from the Corporation, an attempt to dispel "the general misconception of the nature of the work with the BBC".<sup>85</sup> Except for secretarial posts, it noted, there was "no specialised course of training which can be specified". While vacancies in other branches of the Corporation occurred

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<sup>80</sup> Reith Diaries, April 29<sup>th</sup> 1926, November 28<sup>th</sup> 1926. Margaret Mackenzie was appointed as an Assistant on a salary of £350. She later worked as a Press Officer in Cardiff. Miss C Scott Moncrieff was also appointed as an Assistant on a salary of £350, she left in 1929.

<sup>81</sup> All appointments to established positions were subject to three months approval, hence Reith's meetings with Mackenzie and Moncrieff.

<sup>82</sup> Olive Shapley, Broadcasting: A Life (London: Scarlet Press, 1996)pp.37-38

<sup>83</sup> R13/216/1: Departmental: Home Division: Schools Broadcasting Department: 1932-35, Reith to Carpendale, May 25<sup>th</sup> 1935

<sup>84</sup> R49/31/1: Report on Recruitment of Staff 1934 by D.B. Mair and Ernest Barker. Ernest Barker was Professor of Social Science at Cambridge. D.B Mair was a retired Civil Service Commissioner.

<sup>85</sup> Vyrnwy Biscoe, 300 Careers for Women (London: Lovat Dickson Ltd., 1932) p.44



somewhat infrequently, the statement continued, they were as a rule filled by candidates with some specialised experience and knowledge. The statement concluded “Consequently no particulars can be given. This applies as much to men as it does to women.”

The unstructured and informal manner of BBC recruitment became a concern to the Board of Governors. In 1933 they commissioned an independent report into the procedure from D.B. Mair and Ernest Barker which was submitted to Reith in February 1934.<sup>86</sup> The report was positive and concluded that the BBC made an “honest endeavour” to appoint the best candidate. Having been given “all possible facilities for their investigation” Mair and Barker also noted that there was a good proportion of women to men on the staff.<sup>87</sup> They described the BBC as standing “half way between a great commercial concern and a public authority” by which they meant that it combined the elasticity of appointments of a business with the responsibilities of a public authority, hence its mixed methods of recruitment. Whichever way candidates were selected, Mair and Baker concluded, they were judged on their merit. They had found no sign that “the influence or the standing of the recommender gives any advantage”. They also dismissed the idea of the introduction of a Civil Service-style examination, which was seen as inappropriate because of the creative nature of the BBC’s work. Ultimately Mair and Baker made two key recommendations. Firstly, that the BBC should introduce a system of Appointment Boards and secondly that advertisements should be more widely used.

The 1934 Report on the Recruitment of Staff raised several pertinent issues regarding women. Firstly, the use of advertisements was seen as especially important to reach the full potential of female applicants. This was because:

... as things are at present, women qualified for a particular post are in general so few and so scattered that they can only be effectively reached by public advertisement.

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<sup>86</sup> Report on Recruitment of Staff 1934, op.cit.

<sup>87</sup> The report was compiled with assistance from Reith, Nicolls (Director of Internal Administration), Ashbridge (Chief Engineer), Miss Freeman (Women’s Staff Administrator) and Mary Somerville, the senior woman on the staff.

Mair and Baker recognised that the Corporation's ad hoc recruitment methods disadvantaged women who were not even aware they could apply. Secondly, it was recommended that when it was not necessary that the appointee should be a man, advertisements should state that women were eligible. This exposed the BBC's predilection for appointing men to the most senior posts.<sup>88</sup> Thirdly, Mair and Baker raised concerns that if the intake of university women increased, this might decrease the chances of non-graduates being promoted to the monthly-paid staff.<sup>89</sup> The influx of women of broad experience from the waged to the salaried staff was therefore seen in a positive light.

One result of the Report on the Recruitment of Staff was the introduction, from May 1934, of a formal system of Appointment Boards, instituted predominantly for monthly-paid posts, with candidates interviewed by a panel of usually three senior staff.<sup>90</sup> However the new system did not favour women and recruitment to salaried posts remained weighted towards men. Appointment Board interviews were carefully minuted until February 1939; the bias towards men immediately apparent.<sup>91</sup> Of the 272 selection panels between May 1934 and February 1939, 221 had all-male shortlists; ten had all-female shortlists, while forty-two had mixed shortlists.

The Appointment Boards which interviewed solely women candidates were for jobs that were specified as female and included three regional Children's Hour Organisers, a Make-up and Wardrobe Assistant and an Assistant to the Women's Staff Administrator.<sup>92</sup> The forty-two jobs for which both men and women were jointly interviewed included Education Officers, Correspondence Assistants, Sub-Editors and Assistants in the Schools Broadcast Department, all areas of work

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<sup>88</sup> In 1939, a junior staff member, Miss Parsons, drew attention to the fact that some advertised BBC jobs were not open to female staff. As a result, a list was drawn up of all vacancies between February 6th 1939 and April 12<sup>th</sup> 1939 for which women had not been asked to apply. These were the Editor and Deputy Editor of *The Listener*; the European Public Relations Officer; the Assistant Director of Office Administration; the Empire Programme Organiser; the Glasgow Director, the Outside Broadcast Manager and the position of Television Studio Manager. A later memo conceded that there were occasionally vacancies for which women were not wanted. R49/739: Staff Vacancies 1932-54, Pym to Nicolls, April 28<sup>th</sup> 1939

<sup>89</sup> Miss Freeman was adamant that this was not an issue. See Chapter Two, p.99

<sup>90</sup> See R49/27/1-3: Appointment Boards: Minutes, November 1934–February 1939

<sup>91</sup> It is not possible to know how comprehensive the Appointment Board Minutes books are.

<sup>92</sup> Others were Television Announcer and Hostess, Art Assistant to *The Listener*, Secretary to the Director of Talks and Assistant Registry Supervisor.

where women had already made inroads. Of these forty-two posts, nine went to women including four who saw off fierce competition from men. These included Miss Jenkins, who was the only woman amongst nine hopefuls for the post of Information Assistant in Cardiff and Miss Cheseldine who was chosen over six men as an Advertising Representative.<sup>93</sup> Evidently, there were occasions when a woman was preferred.

Roger Eckersley, the Director of Programmes, who chaired “literally hundreds” of Appointment Boards, reminisced in his BBC memoir about an interview that involved an attractive young woman he knew, whom he had advised to “have a shot” at a job. He was not part of the preliminary weeding-out process, but he did sit on the final two Boards, where he gave no sign of knowing the girl and attempted to be at his most official. Asked what she was interested in “outside making herself look pretty and playing games... she turned her large blue eyes reproachfully on me, and said, "Oh! Roger!" much to the amusement of the selectors.” The job she was being interviewed for is not specified, but she “passed on to victory”.<sup>94</sup> Whether Eckersley’s obvious acquaintance with the young woman influenced the final decision of the Board is impossible to know, but it does illustrate the gendered nature of the questioning. Twenty-one women were ultimately recruited to the BBC via an Appointment Board.

In his submission to the Mair and Baker Report on the Recruitment of Staff, Basil Nicolls, the Director of Staff Administration, mentioned the Women’s Staff Administrator’s links with universities which included Oxford and Cambridge, London, Birmingham, Liverpool, Edinburgh and Aberdeen.<sup>95</sup> By the 1930s, the Corporation was keen to tempt young female graduates to the staff, as was the case with university men. However, the eighteen personal files used for this chapter show that only one woman joined the salaried staff directly from university, Mary Somerville. Six other women graduates had all worked prior to their arrival at the Corporation. The BBC instituted one method of recruitment to specifically locate female salaried staff. In May 1935, the Corporation became

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<sup>93</sup> R49/27/1-3: Appointment Board Minutes, June 13<sup>th</sup> 1935; 21<sup>st</sup> March 1938

<sup>94</sup> Roger Eckersley, *op.cit.*, p.72

<sup>95</sup> R1/69/3 Board of Governors. DG’s Reports And Papers Oct–Dec 1933, 8th November 1933: Notes on Procedure in Regard to Staff Appointments for submission to Barker and Mair

affiliated to the Women's Employment Federation (WEF), an organisation founded in 1933 under the Secretaryship of Ray Strachey.<sup>96</sup> The WEF operated as a clearing-house for employers, linking them with a variety of agencies including schools, universities, women's professional societies and training colleges. The WEF minutes show that on at least two occasions they were approached by the BBC with requests for assistance in securing senior female staff.<sup>97</sup> One of them was for an Assistant Registry Supervisor.

### The Recruitment of an Assistant Registry Supervisor

An illuminating example of the process of recruitment can be found in the Registry documents for 1936.<sup>98</sup> Agnes Mills, the Registry Supervisor, needed an Assistant. A job description was scrawled by Miss Mills and after much deliberation over wording, the post was duly advertised in the press.<sup>99</sup> It was displayed on the staff noticeboard, it was sent to the Women's Appointment Boards of fifteen universities and was dispatched to Mrs Strachey at the WEF who was asked to inform the BBC of any persons on her books whom she might consider suitable.<sup>100</sup>

The advertisement specified that applicants should be female and aged between 25-35. Salary would be according to qualifications, which should include a librarian's training and experience, a university education and the ability to control staff. Clarification of duties was included in a letter to the Librarian at the University of Birmingham who was informed that the job entailed the supervision of a staff of thirty who were engaged in recording and distributing incoming mail and indexing and filing correspondence from internal departments. The person

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<sup>96</sup> Women's Library, Women's Employment Federation: 6/WEF/487, Executive Minutes 1933-1937, May 9<sup>th</sup> 1935

<sup>97</sup> For example, WEF: Exec Minutes op.cit., June 13<sup>th</sup> 1935, October 8<sup>th</sup> 1936. In the former case three applicants had been put forward, the result unknown; in the latter, the suggested candidate, while not short-listed for an Assistant Talks Director post at the BBC, had been appointed instead to the BBC Staff Reserve on an initial salary of £300.

<sup>98</sup> R13/399: Departmental: Secretariat: Registry Staff 1936-1958

<sup>99</sup> *The Times*, *Daily Telegraph*, *Manchester Guardian* and *The Scotsman* on March 25<sup>th</sup> and 26<sup>th</sup>; *Time and Tide*, March 27<sup>th</sup> and *The Listener*, April 1<sup>st</sup>

<sup>100</sup> Departmental: Secretariat: Registry Staff, op.cit., Freeman to Clarke, March 23<sup>rd</sup> 1936. The universities were Oxford, Cambridge, London, Leeds, Reading, Birmingham, Bristol, Manchester, St Andrews, Durham, Sheffield, Glasgow, Aberdeen, Edinburgh and the University of Wales, Cardiff. Clark to Strachey, March 23<sup>rd</sup> 1936

chosen should be tactful in her dealings with staff and it was likely that the starting salary would not be less than £4.10s per week.<sup>101</sup> In the event, there were 147 external and three internal applicants for the post.<sup>102</sup> Eighteen women were invited to two Appointment Boards which took place at Broadcasting House on April 22nd and 23rd 1936.<sup>103</sup> However, despite the extensive shortlist, no appointment was made.<sup>104</sup>

Miss Freeman, the WSA, was concerned as to why no suitable candidates had applied and the secretaries of the Cambridge University Women's Appointments Board, the University of London Appointments Board and the WEF were approached and asked to express their opinions on the matter. Both Miss Young (Cambridge) and Miss Rand (London) thought the advertisement had not given enough information about the Registry or specified that experience in a similar post was desirable.<sup>105</sup> Miss Rand did not believe the salary was an issue while Mrs Strachey "was of the opinion that a higher starting salary would have resulted in more applications and from applicants with experience in Registry work." She could think of several possible candidates if the starting salary was in the region of £5 to £6 per week.

A week later, Miss Mills, for whom "the whole matter is now becoming urgent", informed Miss Freeman that she had spoken to Douglas Clarke, the General Establishment Officer, who agreed that Mrs Strachey and the Oxford and Cambridge Women's Appointment Boards should be asked if they could suggest appropriate candidates. A further five potential candidates were interviewed but again no appointment was made. An appeal to the Director of Staff Administration, Pym, confirmed the decision that none of the candidates should be considered. A handwritten note at the bottom suggested that a Miss Grandy, who had recently applied for the post of Statistician, might be suitable. This was

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<sup>101</sup> Same file, Freeman to Bonser, March 27<sup>th</sup> 1936

<sup>102</sup> Same file, Clarke to Mills, March 27<sup>th</sup> 1936

<sup>103</sup> The Selection Committee consisted of the General Establishment Officer, Douglas Clarke; the Women's Staff Administrator, Miss Freeman; Mr G.C. Dailey of the Office Administration Department and Miss Mills.

<sup>104</sup> R49/27/1: Appointment Boards: Minutes File 1, Minutes of Appointment Board, April 22<sup>nd</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup> 1936

<sup>105</sup> Departmental: Secretariat: Registry Staff, op.cit., Cockle to Freeman, April 30<sup>th</sup> 1936

agreed and Miss Grandy joined the Registry as Assistant Supervisor on June 29th 1936 on a salary of £260.<sup>106</sup>

The complexity of this recruitment process is breathtaking but it does indicate the BBC's willingness to engage with outside agencies in the appointment of women staff. It also suggests that the Corporation genuinely wanted to find the best person for the job and was prepared to put time and effort into the process. We don't know how Miss Grandy fared in her new position but she joined dozens of salaried women who were giving their all to the organisation, and we now consider their day-to-day working lives.

## DAILY WORKING LIVES

Salaried work at the BBC included creative, administrative and supervisory jobs, with women well represented in all three areas. The most striking aspect of salaried work, for both women and men, was its range. It is difficult to think of another profession or organisation in the inter-war years that offered such a diversity of roles. The eighty-six salaried women working for the Corporation in 1939 had sixty-three different job titles.<sup>107</sup> In the opening paragraph of this chapter we saw the fascination of the Press with the variety of jobs held by BBC women. Others who were lauded in the newspapers include the drama producer Barbara Burnham who won praise for her productions which included 'The Seagull', 'Goodbye Mr Chips', 'The Trojan Women', and 'Murder in the Cathedral'.<sup>108</sup> Elise Sprott, the Women's Press Representative, was feted for her talks and lectures as well as her responsibility for "all the publicity that goes out to papers from the feminine angle".<sup>109</sup> The Talks Assistant Margery Wace was dubbed "the housewife's friend" by *Radio Pictorial*, who commended her "knack of finding those who have something worth saying".<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Salary Information Files

<sup>107</sup> Salary Information Files

<sup>108</sup> *Radio Pictorial*, July 17<sup>th</sup> 1936; *Radio Times*, November 12<sup>th</sup> 1937

<sup>109</sup> *Daily Despatch*, December 5<sup>th</sup> 1934

<sup>110</sup> *Radio Pictorial*, June 15<sup>th</sup> 1934, September 21st 1934

The majority of the BBC's salaried female staff were in less public posts for example as Orchestral Secretary, General Office Supervisor or News Librarian. Many women worked independently, as Staff Accompanist in Birmingham or Night Hostess in London, for instance.<sup>111</sup> These two positions could equally have been held by men, for example, prior to Caroline Towler's appointment as Night Hostess, the BBC employed a Night Host to look after evening visitors.<sup>112</sup> Positions such as Public Relations Officer, Clerk, Sub-Editor and Cashier were also open to both women and men. In February 1930, a report at Control Board stated that the vacant position of Sub Editor in the News Section could be filled by either a man or a woman "and had been offered to Miss Powell of Cardiff, who was very desirous of coming to London."<sup>113</sup>

More than half the BBC's salaried women were Assistants, a non-gendered job that encompassed an array of roles.<sup>114</sup> Introduced in 1923, the role signified a position of responsibility within a department and was applied to men and women alike. It was not a management role but it usually entitled the individual to secretarial/ clerical/ technical support. Amongst the areas where women and men were employed as Assistants were Drama Contracts, *Radio Times*, Listener Research, the Music Library, the Talks Department and the Exhibitions Section. Salaries varied hugely; at recruitment level, the job was graded 'D' (with a suggested starting salary of £260 a year) although it was possible to rise to Grade B and a salary of £1,000 per annum.<sup>115</sup>

It is difficult to define the duties of an Assistant as they were so diverse; the seventy-six women denoted as such were employed in thirty-six differing roles. For instance, Florence Minns, an Assistant in Music Contracts, made arrangements for Variety programmes, negotiated contracts and sorted out rehearsals. She was also responsible for the auditioning and booking of artistes

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<sup>111</sup> In 1939 they earned respectively: Mrs Ablethorpe £400, Miss Jenkins £425, Mrs Towler, £300

<sup>112</sup> RH Brand left in 1930.

<sup>113</sup> R3/3/6: Control Board Minutes, February 11<sup>th</sup> 1930

<sup>114</sup> Out of the 128 women listed in the Salary Information File, 72 had been Assistants at some point in their BBC career, 56%. Almost 50% of men were or had been assistants.

<sup>115</sup> In 1939 the highest paid female Assistant was Miss McQueen, an Assistant in Schools whose annual salary was £645. The lowest paid was Miss Beardshaw, Assistant to the Women's Staff Administrator who earned £280 per annum.

and in 1939 commanded a salary of £475. Her influential role in deciding the fate of potential radio stars, which she had perfected since 1924, was commended by the press. The *Daily Express* described the “tall, handsome, dark, commanding and for those that don’t know her, rather frightening”, ‘Mike’ Minns as one of the BBC’s “important women”.<sup>116</sup> Marjorie Scott-Johnston was one of successive Assistants “of good educational qualifications” who worked with Richard Lambert, the Editor of *The Listener*, under whose direction:

...she ransacked the print shops and the print departments of the British and Victoria and Albert Museums, pestered picture agencies... devoured the resources of the London Library, scoured the continental papers and collected files of likely pictures and photographs from all parts of the world.<sup>117</sup>

As the role of Assistant testifies, segregation and sex-typing of work for monthly-paid women was far less apparent than for the BBC’s waged staff.

The main areas of work from which salaried women were excluded were those that demanded technical knowledge such as Studio Assistant and Balance and Control; engineering was also exclusively male. A 1937 chart detailing the pay and career progression of fifty-nine salaried women, shows only seven were in jobs that had not previously been held by men.<sup>118</sup> Of these, six were identified as “Essentially a Woman’s Job”: i.e. those in charge of the Registry and Duplicating sections, the Women’s Staff Administrator and her Assistant, the Matron and the Women’s Press Representative.<sup>119</sup> That these were designated women’s jobs is not surprising; the Registry and Duplicating sections employed only female staff (apart from ‘Boys’) whilst the other roles were gender-specific by their very titles.

Although few salaried jobs were defined as specifically male or female, the BBC was keen to utilise women in areas that would benefit from “a woman’s point of

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<sup>116</sup> *Daily Express*, August 31st 1935

<sup>117</sup> Richard Lambert, *Ariel and All His Quality* (London: Gollanz, 1940) pp.136-137

<sup>118</sup> Staff Policy: Grades and Salaries, Monthly (Except Grade ‘D’), op.cit.

<sup>119</sup> The one job that hadn’t previously been held by a man, but which wasn’t considered ‘Essentially a Woman’s Job’ was Make-up and Wardrobe Manager for Television. It’s not clear if this was an oversight.



view". This was a common consideration in the inter-war years, particularly in advertising and journalism, where insights into women's lives were seen to be commercially advantageous.<sup>120</sup> At the BBC, an understanding of women, and children, was seen as a valuable asset; as Reith made clear in 1926, the fact that an Assistants' activities were in connection with women or children did not warrant inequality, as these areas of programming were as important as any other.<sup>121</sup> Three areas of salaried work have been pinpointed for closer scrutiny, Children's Hour Organiser, Advertising Representative and Talks Assistant, all jobs that benefited from a woman's input, as will now be explored.

### Children Hour Organiser

*Children's Hour* was one of the first regular programmes on the BBC, broadcast from December 1922.<sup>122</sup> Aired between 5.15 and 6.00pm, six days a week, it was locally produced and attracted a large audience of children and their parents, particularly mothers.<sup>123</sup> The earliest programmes were amateur affairs put together by the station 'Uncles'. These were senior male executives, for example in London, Cecil Lewis as Uncle Caractacus and Arthur Burrows as Uncle Arthur quickly became beloved by audiences.<sup>124</sup> Towards the end of 1923, it was decided these pantomime appearances were not the best use of high-ranking male managers and as a result, each provincial station was instructed to appoint "one good woman of personality, education and standing" to supervise programmes for children, and women.<sup>125</sup> Dorothea Barcroft in Birmingham, Ruby Barlow in Nottingham and Kathleen Garscadden in Edinburgh were amongst those recruited, all three spent many years with the BBC.<sup>126</sup> From the mid-1920s, apart from in London, *Children's Hour* became the preserve of women staff. This was an era

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<sup>120</sup> See Fiona Hackney, op.cit.

<sup>121</sup> Staff Policy: Women Assistants 1926, op.cit

<sup>122</sup> The history of Children's Hour is told in Wallace Grevatt, B.B.C. Children's Hour: A Celebration of Those Magical Years (Lewes: The Book Guild, 1988). See also Asa Briggs, The Birth of Broadcasting, The History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom vol. 1 (London: Oxford University Press, 1961) pp.253-254, 258-262

<sup>123</sup> The timing of the programme varied during the period, but this was the most usual time slot.

<sup>124</sup> Grevatt, op.cit., pp.21-26. Lewis was Assistant Director of Programmes; Burrows was Director of Programmes.

<sup>125</sup> CO9: BBCo Station Directors Meeting: Minutes: 1923-1927, December 11<sup>th</sup> 1923.

<sup>126</sup> Dorothea Barcroft resigned in 1935, Kathleen Garscadden in 1929, Ruby Barlow in 1928.

when women's maternal role as protectors and educators of children was constantly venerated; that female Assistants were considered best suited for this area of BBC work is not unexpected.<sup>127</sup>

The women's designation as 'Assistant' is significant. This implied they were also available to work in other areas of broadcasting where necessary, reflecting the small and versatile staffing of the Provincial/Regional stations. From the mid-1930s, with more stable Regional staffs, the specific post of Children's Hour Organiser was created. One of the earliest women to be appointed was Olive Shapley who took up her post in Manchester in 1934 on £260 a year. [See Fig. 6.1 p.211] In her autobiography she vividly recreated the frenetic nature of the job which included overseeing at least two full-length plays a week, negotiating musical items with the BBC Northern Orchestra, organising monthly children's auditions as well as producing competitions, poetry readings and broadcast talks.<sup>128</sup> In June 1935, Ruth Field, Children's Hour Organiser for the Midland Region, recorded "A Day in My Life" for *Radio Pictorial*.<sup>129</sup> [Fig. 6.2 p.211] This revealed her to be a graduate of Somerville College who lived at home with her family. The particular day's work began with a perusal of the morning's letters, supplied by her secretary. She then variously discussed a manuscript of a story to be read on the programme; organised an audition; attended a conference about plays; mused over a story with another writer and prepared for that evening's broadcast at 5.15pm, which she rehearsed. It was Ruth Field who welcomed the listeners and ultimately said "Good Night Children" at 6 o'clock.

*Children's Hour* in London was the exception to the policy of recruiting an all-female staff. While women such as Geraldine Elliot, Eve Russell and Barbara Sleight worked on the programme as Assistants, they were managed by men, first CE Hodge and then Alan Howland and John Kettlewell. In 1933, the legendary Derek McCulloch was appointed London Children's Hour Organiser. In 1935 he was promoted to Director of *Children's Hour* on a salary of £700 a year, rising to

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<sup>127</sup> See for example Jane Lewis, *The Politics of Motherhood: Child and Maternal Welfare in England 1900-1939* (London: Croom Helm, 1990) pp. 89-102; Oram, *op.cit.*, pp.17-21

<sup>128</sup> Shapley, *op.cit.*, pp.40-45

<sup>129</sup> *Radio Pictorial*, June 21<sup>st</sup> 1935



Fig 6.1: Olive Shapley,  
Northern Children's Hour Organiser, c.1938



Fig 6.2: Ruth Field,  
Midland Children's Hour Organiser, c.1938

£1,000 by 1939. May Jenkin, his second-in-command, earned £600 in 1939. It is not clear why Head Office continued to appoint men to London's *Children's Hour*. There was a supervisory element to the position, with a remit to oversee both the London staff and to some extent, those in the regions but this doesn't explain why women were not deemed appropriate. In all probability, the long association of the London *Children's Hour* with senior men defined it as a post for male managers and the tradition subsequently continued.

For a salaried BBC woman, the position of Children's Hour Organiser was an attractive one. It was a largely autonomous role offering a good salary, good prospects for advancement and was often the most senior post held by women in the Regions. In an era of social maternalism, the BBC viewed the job as ideal for educated women who were best placed to understand the needs of children. It was seen as an important job: Christine Orr, recruited as Children's Hour Organiser for Edinburgh in 1936, was able to command the sizable starting salary of £500.<sup>130</sup> Orr was one of many Children's Hour Organisers who was promoted, becoming a Talks Assistant in 1940.<sup>131</sup> Others who went on to distinguished BBC careers include Ruth Field who became a Producer in Schools Broadcasting retiring in 1962; Olive Shapley who went on to pioneer radio features before becoming the presenter of *Woman's Hour* in 1949 and Ursula Eason, Children's Hour Organiser in Northern Ireland from 1933, who would become Assistant Head of Northern Ireland Programmes in 1949 and ultimately Assistant Head of BBC Children's Programmes, before her retirement in 1970.

### Advertising Representative

The launch of *Radio Times* in 1923, followed by the introduction of two new BBC periodicals, *World Radio* in 1926 and *The Listener* in 1929, necessitated the employment of staff to sell advertising space. The nucleus of an advertising department was established at Savoy Hill in 1926; a Miss K Lewis, listed in the staff list for that year as earning £300 for 'propaganda', probably denotes

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<sup>130</sup> See below p.223. Orr was a graduate of Somerville, her previous experience as a novelist, dramatist and editor of a Scottish children's magazine made her the ideal candidate. L1/328/1 Christine Orr Staff File, Letter of Application, October 7<sup>th</sup> 1936

<sup>131</sup> Orr resigned in 1945 because of family issues. Orr to Dinwiddie, October 27<sup>th</sup> 1945

advertising. In June 1929, Hilda Prance was appointed to the newly established post of Advertising Canvasser, along with three men. [Fig. 7.1 p.214] Greenhow, Relph and Scott had all left the BBC within five months, Miss Prance, however, remained with the Corporation and became a stalwart of the department until her death in-service in 1937.<sup>132</sup>

From the early twentieth century, educated women had taken to the new profession of advertising with alacrity.<sup>133</sup> In 1923, the Women's Advertising Club of London was established with fifty top women executives becoming members.<sup>134</sup> Florence Sangster, a President of the Club, enthused about the multi-faceted nature of the profession and its attraction to women from a variety of disciplines.<sup>135</sup> *Ariel's* obituary to Hilda Prance revealed her to be an educated woman (she had attended Cheltenham Ladies' College) who, after the war, had joined the advertising staff of George Newnes. Newnes was the publisher of *Radio Times* and Miss Prance had asked for a transfer to the publication. There are limited references to Prance's work at the BBC but the Advertising Bonus List for 1930 reveals her salary, £375, as the third highest in the department.<sup>136</sup> The list also shows that out of a staff of nine canvassers, eight of whom were men, Prance was one of only four to be paid a full bonus and was described as a splendid worker who got excellent results.<sup>137</sup>

According to *Ariel*, the BBC's Advertising Department functioned like a businessman's club and only male typists were used, this was because "the work would be too strenuous and the air (occasionally) too blue" for women to deal with.<sup>138</sup> In consequence, any woman who worked in the Department would have been isolated, without even female secretarial and clerical support. According to

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<sup>132</sup> Greenhow, Relph and Scott were appointed on salaries of £312, £400 and £400 respectively. Miss Prance was appointed on a salary of £300. She died suddenly, from bronchial pneumonia, in January 1937, her salary now £475.

<sup>133</sup> The Association of Advertising Women had been set up in 1910. For a discussion on women as advertisers in the inter-war years see Fiona Hackney, *op.cit.*, pp.72-80

<sup>134</sup> Kate Murphy, *Firsts: The Livewire Book of British Women Achievers* (London: The Women's Press, 1990, revised 2001) pp.38-39

<sup>135</sup> Margaret Cole, ed., *The Road to Success: Twenty Essays on the Choice of a Career for Women* (London: Methuen and Co, 1936) p.201. Sangster was Managing Director of W.S. Crawford Ltd.

<sup>136</sup> R49/10/1: Staff Policy: Advertising Department: Grades and Bonus System 1929-1937

<sup>137</sup> Same document

<sup>138</sup> *Ariel*, June 1936



Fig 7.1: Hilda Prance,  
Advertising Department, c.1933



Fig 7.2: Mrs Carvell,  
Advertising Department, c.1933



Fig 7.3: Miss Cheseldine,  
Advertising Department, c.1938

a memo from September 1933, Prance was responsible for the advertisements that represented women's interests.<sup>139</sup> It is not certain whether she was employed only on areas of work that were designated female, but this was a large part of her job, her knowledge of the women's market was seen to be advantageous. Her high earnings indicate that soliciting advertisements aimed at women was not seen in a lesser light but was viewed as strategically important. In March 1933, a second woman Advertising Canvasser, Mrs Carvell, was recruited to the Department, "with the idea of strengthening the canvassing of women's advertising interests in our publications".<sup>140</sup> [Fig. 7.2 p.214] Carvell's appointment was soon bearing fruit, "with an expectation that orders would increase for the coming season".<sup>141</sup> Little is known about Miss Cheseldine, who was selected as an Advertising Representative above six men in 1938, but the presence of women in the Department remained unusual.<sup>142</sup>

At the BBC, the role of Advertising Canvasser/Representative was essentially a job for men, as *Ariel* specified. Evidently for Hilda Prance, the fact of being associated with women's issues did not devalue her and she earned more than many of her male colleagues. She was highly regarded and on her death in 1937 was the longest serving member of the team. Prance's obituary in *Ariel* offers a glance into her private life; she was an ardent motorist and owned a motorcycle; she was a country lover, an enthusiastic gardener who spent much of her spare time in her cottage garden at Bourne End. Miss Prance's photograph shows an old-fashioned woman (her hair is in a bun) dressed in jacket, collar and tie, which *Ariel* described as her 'duty clothes'. Interestingly, a photograph of her replacement, Miss Cheseldine, also shows a young woman sporting a shirt and tie. [Fig.7.3 p.214] This choice of distinctively masculine clothes suggests that Prance and Cheseldine assumed something of a male persona.<sup>143</sup> They may have

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<sup>139</sup> R13/321: Public Relations Division: Publications: Advertising Department, 1928-1939, Goldsmith (Director of Business Relations) to Carpendale, September 6<sup>th</sup> 1933

<sup>140</sup> Carvell was designated Advertising Representative.

<sup>141</sup> R13/32, Judson (Advertising Manager) to Gladstone Murray, August 18<sup>th</sup> 1933. Carvell was initially placed on a weekly wage, however by 1939 she was earning £360 a year.

<sup>142</sup> Appointment Board, March 21<sup>st</sup> 1938. Cheseldine's starting salary was £300.

<sup>143</sup> This was not uncommon in the inter-war years. See for example Alison Oram, "Her Husband Was a Woman!" *Women's Gender-Crossing in Modern British Popular Culture* (London: Routledge, 2007)

felt this increased their acceptability in an area of work that was still pioneering for women and which, at the BBC, was dominated by men.

### Talks Assistant

The role of Talks Assistant was not by definition a female role, there were many men who, alongside female colleagues like Mary Adams, produced dozens of general talks that were broadcast each week by the BBC. However, from almost the beginning, talks aimed at women were a key part of the daily broadcast schedule. These were produced by a succession of female Talks Assistants and here we can clearly see the impact of women on output.<sup>144</sup> The four women responsible for women's programming in the 1920s and 1930s displayed empathy, knowledge and a genuine desire to inform, educate and entertain the women listeners who formed the bulk of the day-time audience.

Ella Fitzgerald, a former Fleet Street journalist, oversaw *Women's Hour* which, in its brief life (from May 1923-March 1924) introduced a cornucopia of speakers and topics to an afternoon audience.<sup>145</sup> [Fig. 8.1 p.217] Talks on domesticity such as cookery, poultry keeping and shopping went side-by-side with talks on social issues such as how local government affected the home, day nurseries and the servant problem. Fitzgerald was also keen to reflect the growth of career opportunities for women with practitioners such as house decorators, solicitors, welfare workers and analytical chemists explaining their work. A listener plebiscite in early 1924 made clear that the programme should "abandon at once and for ever" all talks on domestic subjects.<sup>146</sup> As a result, Fitzgerald claimed to have substituted a tour of Constantinople for "the cure of constipation" and talks on the English country-side replaced "those on the stocking of the

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<sup>144</sup> Today the role would be that of producer, a title rarely used before the Second World War.

<sup>145</sup> In December 1923, a Women's Advisory Committee was established to oversee *Women's Hour* and women's programming on the BBC. Its members were Lady Gertrude Denman, Chairman of the National Federation of Women's Institutes; Margaret Bondfield MP, Lilian Braithwaite, actress; Dr Elizabeth Sloan Chesser, physician; Mrs Violet Cambridge, Honorary Secretary of the Women's Amateur Athletic Association; Mrs Hardman Earle, who had worked for the Ministry of Food and Public Kitchens during WWI and Miss Evelyn Gates, Editor-in Chief, *The Women's Yearbook*.

<sup>146</sup> Radio Times, October 17th 1924. This is from an article about 'Women's Hour' written by Ella Fitzgerald.





Fig 8.1: Ella Fitzgerald,  
Talks Assistant, c.1930



Fig 8.2: Elise Sprott,  
Talks Assistant, c.1930



Fig 8.3: Margery Wace,  
Talks Assistant, c.1934



Fig 8.4: Janet Quigley,  
Talks Assistant, c.1934

kitchen cupboard!” The title *Women’s Hour* was dropped in March 1924 but talks aimed at women continued, most afternoons, under Fitzgerald’s guidance.<sup>147</sup>

In 1926, Mrs Fitzgerald was transferred to the BBC periodical *World Radio*. She was replaced as Talks Assistant by the broadcaster and veteran charity volunteer, Elise Sprott, who championed several new series: *Morning Talks*, *Household Talks*, and *Housewives’ News*. [Fig 8.2 p.217] For *Household Talks*, Sprott ensured appropriate experts were used including Mrs Cottington Taylor, the Director of the Good Housekeeping Institute and Mrs Clifton Reynolds, an expert in household appliances whose own home was “equipped with every modern convenience and labour-saving device.”<sup>148</sup> *Housewives’ News* was a “weekly bulletin of things in season” to help women take advantage of market supply.<sup>149</sup> Sprott’s championing of domesticity resulted in a dedicated page in *Radio Times* from 1928, on which she liaised, and she also gathered material for a compilation BBC book of the most popular *Household Talks*, which sold more than 15,000 copies in three months.<sup>150</sup>

Hilda Matheson, as Director of Talks, was Sprott’s manager and there is evidence that the two did not get on (see Chapter Five pp.263-264). Miss Sprott was sidelined, becoming Women’s Press Representative, and her replacement, Margery Wace, took over responsibility for women’s talks in 1931. [Fig. 8.3 p.217] Wace, who had previously worked for the League of Nations, developed *Morning Talks* to reflect her own beliefs and interests. For example, she initiated Friday morning child welfare talks which were to become a fixture in the schedules continuing up to the Second World War.<sup>151</sup> She also developed the series *How I Keep House*

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<sup>147</sup> At the fourth meeting of the Women’s Advisory Committee, members voted unanimously that the title *Women’s Hour* be abolished, R16/219: Advisory Committees: Women’s Advisory Committee 1924-1925, February 20<sup>th</sup> 1924. The programme was replaced by “talks of general interest but with particular appeal to women” Women’s Advisory Committee Minutes, April 30<sup>th</sup> 1924

<sup>148</sup> *Radio Times*, September 2<sup>nd</sup> 1927

<sup>149</sup> R51/241 Talks: Housewives News October 1930-December 1939, Sprott to Matheson, October 10<sup>th</sup> 1930

<sup>150</sup> Same file, Sprott to Matheson, October 2<sup>nd</sup> 1928. *B.B.C. Household Talks* (London: The British Broadcasting Corporation, 1928)

<sup>151</sup> In their 1939 report on listening habits in Bristol, Hilda Jennings and Winifred Gill made specific reference to the talks which they believed had a positive effect on the working-class housewives who listened, “The Doctors’ talks on Friday mornings were... said to be helpful practically, especially by mothers of young children, many of whom have, of course, become more

which brought to the microphone housewives from all over the UK to discuss the minutiae of their daily lives.<sup>152</sup> Her search for contributors took her “to Norfolk to see a farm worker’s wife, to Scotland to visit a fisherman’s and to Reigate to visit a policeman’s home”.<sup>153</sup> In 1936, Margery Wace was one of the organisers of the BBC’s Women’s Conference which was attended by almost four hundred women, representing more than sixty different organisations.<sup>154</sup> Their brief, to discuss the timing and content of the *Morning Talks*, left no doubt that these talks were widely appreciated.

Margery Wace moved to Empire Talks in 1936, to be replaced by Janet Quigley. Quigley, who was to champion women’s programming during the Second World War, brought her own style to *Morning Talks* and created many new afternoon programmes. [Fig. 8.4 p.217] Amongst her prodigious output was the twelve-part series *Mistress and Maid* which gave listeners sixteen different viewpoints of ‘the servant problem’ from the one-maid household to the Ministry of Labour.<sup>155</sup> The resultant correspondence impassionedly hailed the BBC on the one hand, “as the courageous spokesmen of a maligned and inarticulate class” and, on the other, “accused [the BBC], usually by contented servants, of stirring up unnecessary trouble”.<sup>156</sup> Janet Quigley also worked with Ray Strachey of the Women’s Employment Federation on the series *Careers for Women*, and pioneered the Saturday afternoon talk *Other Women’s Lives* where women from all walks of life discussed their working day.<sup>157</sup> Quigley also lightened the schedules with talks on fashion and skin-care, as we learnt in Chapter One.<sup>158</sup>

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open-minded and ready to seek advice as a result of the teaching of Mothercraft in the Infant Welfare Centres.” Broadcasting in Everyday Life: A Survey of the Social Effects of the Coming of Broadcasting (London: BBC, 1939) p.17.

<sup>152</sup> *How I Keep House* was broadcast in the Autumn of 1934.

<sup>153</sup> *Radio Pictorial*, September 21st 1934

<sup>154</sup> R44/86/1: Publicity: Conferences: Women’s Conference 1936. The conference was held in the Concert Hall of Broadcasting House on April 24<sup>th</sup> 1936. Groups invited included the Women’s Freedom League, the Electrical Association for Women, the Central Committee on Women’s Training and Employment, the Mother’s Union, the Women’s Co-operative Guild and the Six Point Group.

<sup>155</sup> *Mistress and Maid* was broadcast Spring, 1938

<sup>156</sup> R51/397/2: Talks: Talks Policy April-November 1938, Quigley to Maconachie, April 29<sup>th</sup> 1938

<sup>157</sup> *Careers for Women* was broadcast in April 1939, *Other Women’s Lives* from the Spring of 1937

<sup>158</sup> As we learned in Chapter One, beginning in November 1936 there is an illuminating sequence of memos from Quigley about a potential *Five o’ Clock* series on *The Beauty Racket*. R51/397/1a: Talks: Talks Policy 1930-March 1938, Quigley to Maconachie, November 9<sup>th</sup> 1936. See Chapter One pp.49-50

Janet Quigley and Margery Wace did not work exclusively on programmes for women, they also contributed to the general output of the Talks Department.<sup>159</sup> However, it was only on rare occasions that male Talks Assistants were required to assist on women's programming. The breadth and depth of this output was left almost exclusively in the hands of the four women with support from their manager. Thus we can see that women were valued for the additional skills they could bring to the Talks Assistant job. Ella Fitzgerald was the trailblazer for women's programming and although unable to prevent the loss of *Women's Hour*, continued to target the BBC's female audience in her subsequent talks.<sup>160</sup> While it is arguable that Elise Sprott was marginalised, the programmes she initiated were significant ones. Wace and Quigley were amongst the first producers to put 'real people' on air, drawing on the BBC's female audience to provide content and gravity for their programmes.

We can see that whether as Children's Hour Organisers, Advertising Representatives or Talks Assistants, salaried women unquestionably made a significant contribution to the output of the BBC. They believed they were doing important work, their contribution to the Corporation equal to that of their male colleagues. However, in reality, when it came to promotion, mobility and pay many of the BBC's salaried women were treated less well than men, a subject we shall now address.

## PROMOTION, MOBILITY AND PAY

In December 1934, Olive Shapley spent her first day as North Regional Children's Hour Organiser. As she sat in the studio on her first day watching a BBC colleague play a tune on a tin whistle she thought "...they can't be going to pay me £250 a year for doing this."<sup>161</sup> In fact, Shapley's starting salary is

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<sup>159</sup> For example, Wace assisted on a range of general evening health talks such as *The Doctor and the Public* broadcast from during the autumn of 1932 and the series *Food for Health* on which she worked with the Talks Assistant Mary Adams in the summer of 1935. Quigley worked with Guy Burgess on the series *Towards National Health* broadcast in the Spring and Summer of 1937.

<sup>160</sup> Women's Advisory Committee 1924-1925, op.cit.

<sup>161</sup> Shapley, op.cit., p.34

recorded as £260 a year and her job, as we have seen, would be far more arduous than supervising music, but she was delighted, at the age of twenty four, to be earning so well.

Olive Shapley was to be graded 'D', the usual starting grade for externally recruited salaried staff. Unlike teaching and the Civil Service, the BBC did not operate separate salary scales for women and men. All BBC salaried staff were graded E (lowest) to A (highest) and those who showed a satisfactory level of work were awarded a yearly salary increment. Salary ranges did not change markedly during the inter-war years, a chart from 1927, which reflected back to 1925, shows a very similar range to those of 1935 and 1939.<sup>162</sup> The grades, jobs, numbers in post and annual increments in 1939 were as follows:

**CHART 1: GRADES AND SALARIES, MONTHLY-PAID, 1939**

<u>Grade</u>	<u>Roof</u>	<u>Increment</u>	<u>Women</u>	<u>Men</u>	<u>Job</u>
A	£1000 up	£100	1	58	Heads of Departments, Regional, Directors, Chief Editors
B	£1000	£50	1	49	Regional Musical Directors, Programme Directors, Regional Executives
B1	£800	£50	8	101	Senior Assistants
C	£600	£25	28	191	Assistants
D	£400	£20	36	120	Junior Assistants
E	£300	£10	12	18	Bookkeepers and Clerical Staff <sup>163</sup>

<sup>162</sup> R1/63/:Board of Governors. DG's Reports and Papers, January 1927, Outline of Organisation.: Salaries and Wages

<sup>163</sup> These figures are derived from two sources: the Salary Information Files and R49/231/1: Staff Policy: Grades and Salaries: Monthly (Except Grade 'D') 1927-1939. Document prepared for Ullswater Committee, undated but c1935. The Salary Information files contain many anomalies with individuals being graded higher than their salary would suggest, so while this is not a completely accurate representation of grading, it is proportionally correct.

The above chart shows that, just prior to the Second World War, women made up 56% of Grades D and E compared to 25% of men. For those on Grade C, the proportion was more equal, 35.5% of men compared to 32% women. For the highest grades, B1, B and A, there were far fewer women, 11.5% compared to 39% of men. It is obvious from these figures that women were over-represented in the lower grades of the salaried staff. A lower grade denoted a lower salary and is a key reason why BBC women were frequently paid less than men. There is a proviso: the BBC was still a young organisation in the late 1930s with large numbers of employees at the beginning of their careers. Many women who joined at this time attained significant positions after the Second World War. These include Cecelia Reeves who became Paris Representative in 1947; Mary Lewis who became Head of Pay Policy in 1970 and Claire Lawson Dick, who became Controller of Radio Four in 1975.<sup>164</sup> Sixteen of the eighteen women whose personal files have been used for this chapter were still with the BBC in the 1950s and beyond; all achieved Grade B, or above prior to their retirement, many earning salaries well in excess of £1,000 a year.<sup>165</sup> *Ariel* in the 1950s and 1960s also commemorated the retirement of many women who had assumed senior positions during this period; therefore promotion to the top salaried grades was possible, only at a slower pace than the majority of their male colleagues.

At the BBC, all salaries were assigned individually which resulted in huge variations between staff, men and women alike. Even today, women are acknowledged as less good at salary negotiation than men. In the 1920s and 1930s, women were new to business and the professions and inexperienced as negotiators; this meant they might be timid in asking for a rise, or even unaware that salary levels could be discussed. In consequence, many BBC women, like Olive Shapley, accepted the salaries they were offered, thrilled to get a good job.<sup>166</sup> A few women did negotiate more generous settlements: Mary Somerville,

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<sup>164</sup> Cecelia Reeves was with the BBC from 1933-1967; Mary Lewis from 1938-1976; Clare Lawson Dick from 1935-1976.

<sup>165</sup> Agnes Mills and Christine Orr left the BBC in 1943 and 1946 respectively. See Short Biographies, Appendix 1

<sup>166</sup> In *Our Freedom and Its Results*, Ray Strachey commented that the task itself appeared to absorb able women who were not active in demanding increases of pay and status. It was an observable fact, she commented, that women were apt to be “tame, timid and biddable employees”. Strachey, op.cit., p.164

the Director of School Broadcasting; the Adult Education Officer/Talks Assistant, Mary Adams, and the Children's Hour Organiser, Christine Orr all successfully bargained for higher starting pay.<sup>167</sup> Mary Adams had originally asked for £800 a year, in line with her earnings as a Cambridge academic but she accepted instead £600 a year, with £50 a year annual increments. This was more than was paid to the four other talks assistants, all male, who worked in the Adult Education department in 1930.<sup>168</sup> Christine Orr refused to take less than £500 a year as a starting salary because her earnings as a free-lance journalist, prior to her arrival at the Corporation in 1936, were in the region of £600 a year. Such a high starting salary was unheard of for a Children's Hour Organiser (most started on £260 per annum), but £500 was accepted by the BBC.<sup>169</sup>

Other women negotiated from within the BBC. For instance, Doris Arnold, the accompanist and musical arranger, negotiated an above average salary rise in 1933.<sup>170</sup> However, Florence Milnes, the BBC Librarian, failed in her bid for a substantial raise in 1929.<sup>171</sup> The Features and Drama Assistant, Mary Hope Allen had a tortured battle to secure her £500 a year salary. Allen was the only woman in the BBC's experimental Research Section, which pioneered new ways of making features and drama. In April 1930, she earned £280 while her three colleagues Lance Sieveking, Archie Harding and E.J. King Bull earned respectively £800, £500 and £400. In March 1931 she wrote to Reith complaining that her salary had only accumulated "dribble by dribble" and stating that her financial ambition was "to earn as much as the smallest salaried man in my section."<sup>172</sup> After much management deliberation, in which it was emphatically denied that women were treated differently from men, she received a salary rise of £100.

Mary Hope Allen was consistently paid less than her male colleagues, despite glowing reviews of her work. Another undervalued woman was Olive Shapley

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<sup>167</sup> For Mary Somerville's negotiations, see Chapter Five, pp.253-255

<sup>168</sup> L2/5/1: Mary Adams Staff File 1, Goldsmith to Siepmann, February 24<sup>th</sup> 1931

<sup>169</sup> L1/328/1: Christine Orr Staff File, Orr to Dinwiddie, October 7<sup>th</sup> 1936; Orr to Pym, November 13<sup>th</sup> 1936

<sup>170</sup> L1/15/2: Doris Arnold Staff File, Beadle to Clarke, October 11<sup>th</sup> 1933

<sup>171</sup> L1/705/1: Florence Milnes Persona File, note from Miss Freeman, April 3<sup>rd</sup> 1929

<sup>172</sup> Mary Hope Allen Staff File, op.cit, Undated letter from Allen to Reith, c. March 1931

who, in 1939 earned £425.<sup>173</sup> This was substantially less than her colleague Geoffrey Bridson who earned £700.<sup>174</sup> Bridson and Shapley both worked in Manchester and had gained renown for their pioneering work in the new field of social documentary. Their personal files show that both were regarded as exceptional within the BBC. Reading between the lines however, it becomes obvious that Bridson was paid more because his market value was higher; there were fears that he might leave the BBC for films, if they did not make it worthwhile for him to stay.<sup>175</sup> Olive Shapley, on the other hand, did not have the same currency; as has been alluded to, she was overwhelmed by the good fortune of her job at the BBC. There are no indications that Shapley ever felt dissatisfied with her pay, and this acceptance of women's lower earnings, both by the individual and their managers, is a further reason why BBC women, in reality, often earned less than men.

Equal pay was a politically contentious issue in the inter-war years and a focus for feminist writers like Strachey, Brittain and Holtby.<sup>176</sup> It was a demand of feminist campaigning groups and professional women's trade unions, with women teachers and Civil Servants at the forefront of the struggle. In the Clerical/ Executive grades of the Civil Service, although starting salaries were the same, the rate of increase for women was less and female Civil Servants ultimately earned three-quarters or four-fifths the salary of their male colleagues.<sup>177</sup> The Burnham Salary Scales for teachers also specified that women should earn 80% that of men.<sup>178</sup> The Civil Service resisted equal pay on four main grounds: that women were less efficient workers; that resignation on marriage made them less committed; that as single women they didn't have dependents to support and that they had an

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<sup>173</sup> See Shapley's memoir. Shapley, Broadcasting: A Life Also Paddy Scannell and David Cardiff, A Social History of British Broadcasting, 1922-1939 (London: Basil Blackwood, 1991) pp.344-349.

<sup>174</sup> L1/1,783/1: Olive Shapley Staff File. Later in 1939 it was recognised by management that Shapley was unfairly paid and she was offered a re-grading and a £90 rise. Pym to Nicolls, June 8<sup>th</sup> 1939

<sup>175</sup> L1/1821/1: Geoffrey Bridson Staff File, Confidential Report 1938

<sup>176</sup> See for example, Winifred Holtby 'Fear and the Woman who Earns', News Chronicle March 9<sup>th</sup> 1934; Vera Brittain, 'Women still wait for Equality', Daily Herald, March 26<sup>th</sup> 1938. Both quoted in Berry and Bishop, op.cit., pp.81-83; 144-46. Strachey, Careers and Openings for Women pp.69-76

<sup>177</sup> Glew, op.cit., p.89

<sup>178</sup> Oram, op.cit., p.25



intrinsically lower market value.<sup>179</sup> For teachers, it was women's status as spinsters that drove the principal of lower salaries; because they were unmarried they didn't need a family wage. Similarly, the fact that they resigned on marriage meant shorter service which merited lower pay.<sup>180</sup>

BBC managers believed they offered women equal pay. In fact, a close scrutiny of the Salary Information Files exposes the reality of unequal pay. This was not universal, some women earned similarly to their colleagues; very occasionally, like Mary Adams, they earned more, but on the whole the BBC's salaried were paid less than men for comparable work.<sup>181</sup>

The main cause of women's unequal pay at the BBC was starting salaries. As has been discussed, more than half the Corporation's monthly-paid female staff began their careers as weekly-paid compared with less than one in ten men. This had a profound effect on earnings as annual increments for waged staff were tiny, just a few shillings, compared to an average of £20 or more paid to salaried staff.

Women who were recruited directly to monthly-paid salaries were again more likely to be appointed on lower rates than men. For example, the most common entry point for monthly-paid staff was as an Assistant which had an arbitrary entry salary of £260. However, the Salary Information Files indicate that 66% of men compared to 28% of women were recruited on a higher rate. Just one woman, Hilda Matheson, was offered a starting salary of £500 or more, compared with 18% of male Assistants, eight being tempted to the BBC on pay packets of £800 or more. The BBC's incremental system meant that a woman who started on a smaller salary found it very difficult to catch up with her male colleague, unless she consistently received an above-average annual pay rise or was promoted to a more senior post.

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<sup>179</sup> Glew, *op.cit.*, pp.98-113

<sup>180</sup> Oram, *op.cit.*, p.50

<sup>181</sup> As a television producer, Mary Adams earned far more than her male colleagues. In 1937, she earned £800. Royston Morley, Eric Crozier and George More O'Ferrall, young men who would go on to have important television careers, earned considerably less. Morley and Crozier, both Assistant Producers earned £260 in January 1937; More O'Ferrall, a Producer like Adams, earned £400. The discrepancy can largely be explained by the three men being new recruits to the BBC, all having joined in 1936, presumably with little previous experience. Writing, Adams' Annual Report in 1937, her manager, Gerald Cock, stated that her salary of £800 was "seriously out of proportion" with others in the department. Nevertheless, Adams was still given a pay rise. Mary Adams Staff File, *op.cit.*, Confidential Report First Quarter 1938

The Corporation's policy of linking starting pay for senior appointments to previous salaries also militated against women; men were likely to have earned more.<sup>182</sup> This was acknowledged during the Salary Review of November 1938. A memo from the Director of Staff Administration, Pym, to the Controller (Administration), Lochhead states:

We shall have to reconsider our policy in regard to the payment of women. At present theoretically we make the same payment to a woman as to a man for comparable work. Since however in fixing starting salaries we have regard to outside market value, women tend in practice to start lower in our salary scales than men and in fact age for age we are generally paying them less.<sup>183</sup>

A third reason why women often received lower salaries was the nature of the work. Many of the BBC's salaried women were involved in creative positions where it was very difficult to make direct objective comparisons between staff. The women themselves received variable salaries dependent not only on their output but on other criteria such as their qualifications and length of service. Heads of department would have been aware of salary differences amongst their team and these were sometimes addressed, but often a laissez-faire approach was taken. The fact that it was known that women outside the BBC generally received lower pay than men may have made male bosses less concerned to raise the salaries of their female staff.

In 1944, Pym submitted a document on Equal Pay to William Haley, the new Director General of the BBC. While Pym was adamant that there were no posts in the Corporation in which different rates of pay were assigned to men and women for equal work, he did concede that in posts where the grade varied according to calibre, it did occasionally happen:

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<sup>182</sup> Mary Somerville also believed the system was unfair for men. Writing to Reith in April 1937, she railed at the unjustness of seeing two new male schools assistants appointed to her department on vastly differing salaries, although they would be doing the same work. Not only was one offered more because of his past salary, he had also proved to be a more astute negotiator. R13/216/2: Departmental: Home Division: Schools Broadcasting Department: 1936-40, Somerville to Reith, April 21st 1937

<sup>183</sup> R49/605: Staff Policy: Staff Review: Standardisation of Salaries 1938-39, Pym to Nicolls, November 11<sup>th</sup> 1938

...that a woman will be put into the lower grade rather than the higher, or take longer to obtain her promotion, simply because she is a woman and not because her particular qualifications or performance in the post are below that of a man.

Pym stressed that management were alive to this possibility and kept a look out for such cases, which were seldom clear-cut.<sup>184</sup> Haley reiterated the Corporation's commitment to equal pay in his submission to the Royal Commission on Equal Pay in 1945. He explained that the reason why the highest posts were held by men was due to the inception and rapid expansion of the BBC, coupled with the limited sources of recruitment "which the training and experience of women, as compared with those of men, have hitherto made available."<sup>185</sup> Haley thus confirmed that during the inter-war years, salaried women had been restricted both by the circumstances of their education and experience and by the process of recruitment adopted by the BBC.

The restrictions identified by Haley also had a detrimental effect on women's mobility and promotion prospects within the BBC. Reith's 1926 directive to Station Directors on Women Assistants made clear that men and women were entitled to the same promotional opportunities, thus the principal of salaried women moving through the ranks was clearly acknowledged.<sup>186</sup> However, BBC women were generally not promoted as quickly or as highly as men. Unlike professions such as teaching or the Civil Service, the BBC had no set paths for promotion. While an Assistant Duplicating Supervisor might aspire to be Duplicating Supervisor, there were few positions in the BBC that had formalised senior roles. Rather, longevity of service, increased experience and good performance saw an individual rise through their grade until they reached the 'roof', at which point they could be considered for promotion. This meant that subjectivity rather than a defined principle was key to the process.

There is evidence that whereas BBC management viewed senior men in terms of a career path with the Company/Corporation, this was not the case for women.

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<sup>184</sup> R49/177: Staff Policy: Equal Pay for Men and Women, 1943-1943, Pym to Haley, May 16<sup>th</sup> 1944

<sup>185</sup> Same File, Haley to Royal Commission on Equal Pay, February 9th 1945

<sup>186</sup> R49/940: Staff Policy: Women Assistants 1926. Reith to All Station Directors, April 30<sup>th</sup> 1926

BBC men were actively earmarked for promotion, their ambition naturally assumed. The fact that they were also seen to be geographically more mobile than women was also advantageous to their careers. For example, the position of Station Director, which was never held by a woman, was seen as a stepping stone towards future management responsibility at Head Office.<sup>187</sup> In 1932, it was agreed at Control Board that an endeavour should be made “to get a half a dozen first-class men who would be posted in various changing places in Head Office and the provinces to learn the business.”<sup>188</sup> It is not certain whether this agreement was put into practice but it demonstrates how the BBC specifically looked to create high-flying career opportunities for men; men who, as has been touched on, arrived at the BBC overflowing with confidence and bravado.

Men were also far more likely to be fast-tracked by the BBC as the careers of Val Gielgud and Eric Maschwitz demonstrate.<sup>189</sup> The two men had both attended public school and Oxbridge, had dabbled in various aspects of publishing, journalism and the stage prior to their arrival at the BBC and were quickly identified by the BBC as ‘creatives’. Maschwitz joined in April 1926 as an Assistant in the Outside Broadcast Department on a salary of £325. In December 1926, he was moved to *Radio Times* to assist the Editor, Walter Fuller. Nine months later, following the sudden death of Fuller, Maschwitz took over the editor’s role on a salary of £700. In 1933, the prestigious job of Director of Variety was created to which Maschwitz was appointed on £1600. When he retired in 1937, his salary had reached £1,900. Gielgud, a friend of Maschwitz, was appointed as his Assistant in May 1928 on a salary of £450. Within eight months he had been promoted to Programme Director, earning £700 a year. In 1933, in the same departmental reshuffle that saw Maschwitz promoted to Variety Director, Gielgud became Director of Drama, a prestigious new job which saw his salary rise to £1,250. In 1939 he earned £1750. No BBC woman had a similarly meteoric career; as we shall see in Chapter Five, that of Mary Somerville, who

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<sup>187</sup> For example, Nicolls, Controller (Administration) and Clarke, General Establishment Officer had been Station Directors.

<sup>188</sup> R3/3/8: Control Board Minutes, November 15th 1932

<sup>189</sup> Gielgud, op.cit.; Eric Maschwitz, No Chip on My Shoulder (London: Herbert Jenkins Ltd, 1957)

earned £1,500 a year in 1939 as Director of School Broadcasting, was far more measured.

Personal files show that most BBC women were content with their salaries and their opportunities for advancement. Annual reports reveal hard work and commitment with only rare examples of frustration with their positions. It was often a manager who championed their pay rise or promotion to a higher grade.<sup>190</sup> On the other hand, there is little evidence that women were keen to move into other areas of work or into new and challenging roles. A case in point is that of Margaret Hope Simpson. A graduate of Newnham, Miss Hope Simpson was appointed by Hilda Matheson as her personal secretary in May 1931, on a weekly wage of £3.10s. Following Matheson's resignation, Hope Simpson became secretary to Cecil Graves, then Empire Services Director. She remained Graves' secretary as he was promoted through the BBC; becoming indispensable to him and sharing in his work.<sup>191</sup> In 1934, Graves acknowledged the fact that she was a "first class girl" who should be a salaried Assistant, but he was loath to let her go.<sup>192</sup> When Graves became Controller (Programmes) in 1935 it was partly at his insistence that the four Controllers' secretaries, including Hope Simpson, were promoted to the monthly-paid grades in April 1936. Hope Simpson remained with Graves during his time as Deputy Director General from 1938, and as Joint Director General in 1942. Only when Graves left the BBC in 1943 did Miss Hope Simpson chose to put herself forward as an Assistant. On her retirement in 1964 she was a senior figure in the Overseas Programme Planning Department on a salary of £2,795.

Career paths for salaried men and women in the BBC were very different. The majority of salaried women had linear careers i.e. once monthly-paid they remained broadly in the same department and often in the same role for the remainder of their time with the Corporation. Of the 128 women included in the Salary Information Files only nineteen had worked in more than one area of work

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<sup>190</sup> See for example, Mary Temple Candler Staff File, Clarke to Nicolls, 25th April 1934. Clarke wrote "her present position is anomalous and calls very definitely for re-grading. Miss Candler herself has not suggested it, but I would myself suggest that she is, under existing circumstances, definitely underpaid."

<sup>191</sup> L1/1699/1: Margaret Hope Simpson Staff File, for example Confidential Reports, 1934, 1935

<sup>192</sup> Same file, Graves to Freeman, December 12<sup>th</sup> 1934

during the inter-war years and only a handful in more than two. Salaried men, on the other hand, were frequently moved between departments. Their exposure to more diverse work experiences, along with the adherent pay rises they received each time they took on a new role, were amongst the factors that benefited their salaries and careers at the BBC.

The BBC was not unaware of limitations in opportunities for women's advancement. For example, in 1929 it was specifically noted at Control Board that there was a tendency to consider men over women for promotion. As a result Goldsmith, the Assistant Controller, discussed "the desirability of considering women candidates for promotion to executive positions", pointing out that he had several names of women who would be suitable.<sup>193</sup> There is no evidence, however, of any woman being chosen over a man for an executive position at this time. Indeed, throughout the inter-war years it was rare for a woman to be preferred to a man. Personal files reveal the Pianist and Coach Gwen Williams as one of only two BBC woman actively favoured over a male colleague.<sup>194</sup> The other was Mary Candler, as a revealing series of memos shows.

Mary Candler joined the Copyright Section as a shorthand typist in 1928. She quickly proved herself to be irreplaceable, taking on duties far beyond the remit of her job. Her Confidential Report for 1931 included a request from her manager, Dick Howgill, that she be re-graded as she was "definitely in the Assistant category".<sup>195</sup> Shortly afterwards, a discussion ensued about who should be No. 2 in the Copyright Section, Miss Candler or another man, Scott Proctor. Howgill expressed great surprise that the Controller, Carpendale, would consider Miss Candler to be suitable. In a note to Carpendale, he commented "I had thought that you would not entertain the idea of a woman."<sup>196</sup> As neither Candler nor Scott Proctor had specific musical knowledge, Candler's greater experience meant it was she who got the job, although she maintained her £5 weekly wage. It was made clear that, should a suitably qualified man be found, he would be placed

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<sup>193</sup> R3/3/5: Control Board Minutes, March 26th 1929

<sup>194</sup> L1/454, Gwendoline Williams Staff File, Note from Mark Lubbock, Music Director, December 4<sup>th</sup> 1936

<sup>195</sup> Same file, Confidential Report 1931

<sup>196</sup> Same file, Carpendale to Howgill, April 10<sup>th</sup> 1931. Handwritten note by Howgill.

above her. In the meantime, “Miss Candler should get her chance”.<sup>197</sup> In April 1933, having performed the job well, Candler was promoted to the salaried grades on £280 a year.

However, in June 1933, Hamilton Marr, a barrister with musical expertise was appointed to the Section. Although Marr was to be Candler’s senior, he had no knowledge of copyright, a subject she was expected to teach him. Candler was justifiably perturbed by this, especially as she imagined him to be earning £400 (she was correct) whereas the roof of her Grade, ‘E’ was £300. In a meeting with the Establishment Officer, Douglas Clarke, in which her attitude was “in general excellent and entirely reasonable” she requested that her maximum salary should be raised to be at least equal to his starting salary.<sup>198</sup> The following year, her salary rose from £280 to £300, the roof for her grade, which prompted Candler again to request that she be re-graded.<sup>199</sup> In this she was supported by her manager, Howgill, who confirmed that her qualifications and expertise were greater than those of Marr.<sup>200</sup> Although Candler was recognised as the “main spring of the section”, she was not re-graded ‘D’ until 1936, rising to Grade ‘C’, (with a salary roof of £600) in 1937, the same grade as Marr.<sup>201</sup> When Marr left the Corporation in 1939, Candler’s obvious superiority saw her assume the position of Head of Copyright Section the following year. In 1942 she rose to be Copyright Director, in 1948 she became Head of Copyright, a position she held until her retirement in 1959.

Mary Candler’s case highlights the BBC’s confusion and ambivalence towards the pay and promotion of women. Initially selected in preference to a man for the No. 2 position in the department, once Hamilton Marr was appointed her superior, even though she was known to be a better worker, it took several years for Candler’s pay and grading to be adjusted. Despite Candler’s justifiable frustration at her treatment, there is no indication that she discussed the issue with her female colleagues; salaries and grading were a personal matter at the BBC. As far as we

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<sup>197</sup> Same document

<sup>198</sup> Same file, Clarke to Nicolls, August 1<sup>st</sup> 1933

<sup>199</sup> Same file, Candler to Howgill, March 21<sup>st</sup> 1934

<sup>200</sup> Same file, Howgill to Nicolls, April 6<sup>th</sup> 1934

<sup>201</sup> Same file, Confidential Report, 1936, 1937. In April 1939, Candler earned £450, Marr £580

know, no salaried woman at the BBC was a member of a trade union, neither was there a staff association where irritations could be shared. Unlike their counterparts in teaching, the Civil Service and the medical profession, the Corporation's salaried women never felt angry enough to protest. The most likely reason is that sexual inequality was largely unspoken at the BBC, it was private and hidden. BBC women did not identify themselves as female workers with a shared grievance; rather they identified themselves with BBC men, as public servants involved with the crucial job of broadcasting. In their work they viewed themselves as equal even though, behind the scenes, many were not.

## CONCLUSION

The BBC's salaried women worked in a wide variety of jobs in positions that were broadly viewed to be equal to those of men. They were bright, motivated women in the vanguard of the post-suffrage generation. The rapid expansion of the Company/ Corporation in the inter-war years meant that there were opportunities for women to grasp the initiative and develop new areas of work, be it as a Librarian, a Press Representative or a Talks Assistant. Confidential Reports show women to be confident, conscientious employees, praised for their hard work, loyalty and creativity. The BBC was constantly in the public eye and the employment of women was applauded by the press, their prominence in unusual areas of work and in well-paid roles played to the image of the BBC as a progressive, forward-looking organisation.

However, as this chapter has shown, while there was an outward impression of modernity and equality, in reality BBC women faced unspoken discrimination in recruitment, promotion and pay. Salaried posts were frequently filled by personal recommendation and whether these were university friends, the relatives of acquaintances or nominated outsiders, it gave an advantage to men. Men also benefited from having more dynamic BBC careers, they were encouraged to move between departments; each new position offering not only a salary rise but wider experience, indispensable to those aspiring to reach the top. Salaried women, on the other hand, often remained in the same job for their entire career, gradually



working their way up. Personal files show they rarely put themselves forward for promotions nor were they earmarked by their managers for significant new posts. A few women changed direction, but rarely more than once.

Women's salaries were negatively affected by the BBC practice of linking starting pay to previous earnings and many were subsequently disadvantaged by lower annual increments. Just over half the Corporation's salaried women had been promoted from weekly-paid positions which meant they started on the bottom rung of the salary ladder. Although a handful of women negotiated improved salaries and grading, most accepted the pay and conditions offered by the BBC. By inter-war standards, these were good; many BBC women earned more than £300 a year, a salary identified by Margaret Cole, as "doing very well indeed."<sup>202</sup> BBC women certainly earned as well as, if not better than, women teachers and Civil Servants.

There is little evidence of open disgruntlement amongst the BBC's salaried women; if there was frustration about pay, it was dealt with at a private level. Lower salaries for women were not universal; while many earned less than men, others achieved parity with their male counterparts; a few, like Gwen Williams and Mary Adams, earned more. In the teaching profession and Civil Service, unequal pay was enshrined in law. In addition, unlike teaching and the Civil Service, there was no requirement for the BBC's salaried women to resign on marriage. Even after the introduction of the Corporation's marriage bar in 1932, monthly-paid female staff, as exceptional workers, continued to be exempt. The BBC, as a new organisation, had no history of antipathy towards women as was the case in the established profession. Thus, although sexual discrimination existed at the BBC, it was not overt.

The BBC's salaried women made a notable contribution to the Company/Corporation; they ran the libraries, they supervised the essential filing and duplicating offices, they oversaw copyright and created some of the BBC's most popular programmes. The BBC's unique position as the first broadcasting

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<sup>202</sup> Margaret Cole, Marriage: Past and Present (London: Dent and Sons, 1938) p.153

industry, with the novelty of creating what would become a British institution from scratch, gave exceptional opportunities for women. They were able to progress to positions of seniority, influencing the development of the Corporation and contributing to its cultural growth. Three salaried women rose to the position of Director, and the final chapter considers the careers of Mary Somerville, Hilda Matheson and Isa Benzie.

## Chapter Five: “Women who Rule at the BBC”<sup>1</sup>

### Three Directors

#### Introduction

In September 1959, Mary Agnes Hamilton, the former BBC Governor, wrote a letter to *The Times*. Where, she queried, were the women in top BBC jobs?

Since the days of Hilda Matheson, Mary Somerville ... and Isa Benzie, women have not appeared in director posts.....<sup>2</sup>

This final chapter focuses on the careers of these three BBC women and asks how and why they were able to attain high paid, high status management posts in the inter-war Corporation. Matheson was Director of Talks from 1927-1932, a time when the broadcasting of the spoken word was at its most controversial. Mary Somerville assumed the title Director of School Broadcasting in 1931, a service she had virtually created and would continue to lead until 1947. Isa Benzie, Foreign Director from 1933-1938, became a public face of the BBC in its international relations. The BBC hierarchy treated the three women with approval and respect and ostensibly as equals. However, the unspoken sexual discrimination that operated elsewhere in the BBC was also directed at women in the upper echelons of the Corporation, as this chapter will show.

The three women shared similarities: all were Oxford graduates; all became associated with a particular area of work at the BBC; all were in jobs that could equally have been held by a man and all were of Scottish decent. However, in other ways, their BBC careers were very different. Hilda Matheson was headhunted by Reith, coming to the BBC in 1926 as a mature and experienced 38-year old woman. She assumed the challenging and exposed position of Director of Talks soon after her arrival. Somerville more or less invited herself to the BBC as

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<sup>1</sup> *Answers*, October 5th 1935

<sup>2</sup> *The Times*, September 17<sup>th</sup> 1959. In her letter to *The Times*, Hamilton included Mary Adams amongst those who had held director posts. This was an error; Adams applied for the position of Talks Director in 1936, but was unsuccessful. In 1948, however, she became Head of TV Talks.



Fig 9.1: Mary Somerville,  
Director of School Broadcasting, c.1933



Fig 9.2: Hilda Matheson,  
Director of Talks, c.1929



Fig 9.3: Isa Benzie,  
Foreign Director, c.1936

a young graduate in 1925. She greatly impressed Reith with her vigour and intelligence and was one of only a handful of early women to be recruited directly to the salaried grades. Isa Benzie, the daughter of an acquaintance of Reith, started as a secretary in 1927, in what would become the Foreign Department. She worked her way up and, on the retirement of her boss, took over his role as Foreign Director in 1933. The Foreign Department was a small department and Benzie never had the status of Matheson or Somerville. Nevertheless, her designation 'Director', allows us to explore the varied nature of this role at the BBC and, in particular, what it meant when it was held by a woman.

The title 'Director' was generally applied to heads of departments and those who managed the BBC's provincial/regional stations. It is arguable that two other BBC women, who were not designated 'Director', held management roles in the inter-war years that were at least as complex. Miss Freeman, as Women's Staff Administrator, was responsible for hundreds of female clerical staff as well as an administrative team of four.<sup>3</sup> Kathleen Lines, the Head of the Photographic Section, certainly had a salaried team of five, as well as supervising others in waged roles.<sup>4</sup> Richard Lambert, the editor of *The Listener*, was sure that the treatment of Mrs Lines was discriminatory:

Large, well administered, self-supporting as the section was, it would long ago have been elevated to the deserved dignity of a Department had not the fact that it is largely staffed by women given the Corporation an opportunity of maintaining its prejudice against what John Knox called 'the monstrous regiment.'<sup>5</sup>

We can't know if Lambert's assertion about Kathleen Lines was true or not because of the confused nature of the BBC's management structure, but he nevertheless sensed an injustice.

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<sup>3</sup> Freeman's status was such that she was included alongside Somerville and Benzie in the *Ariel* series 'Faces you Should Know', *Ariel*, April 1936

<sup>4</sup> According to the Salary Information Files, in 1939 the salaried staff were: Miss Scott Johnson, £380, Miss Cockerton, £425, Miss Maddick, £500. Two men, Glemser and Kecling earned £680 and £400 respectively. Details of waged staff are not available.

<sup>5</sup> Richard Lambert, *Ariel and All His Quality* (London: Gollanz, 1940) p.137

In her 1959 letter to *The Times*, Mary Agnes Hamilton went on to say that, in its lack of women directors, “the BBC lags far behind the Civil Service”. The suggestion here is that in the 1920s and 1930s, the BBC was more progressive. In fact, a number of high-powered women held very senior positions in the Civil Service during this time.<sup>6</sup> Alix Kilroy, one of the first women to enter the Administrative Grades of the Civil Service in 1925, noted in her memoir that she was always treated with complete fairness and equality, describing the Civil Service as being at the forefront of equality of opportunities for university women between the wars.<sup>7</sup> This may have been true for the women at the very top; the inter-war years were exceptional times for exceptional women providing new opportunities in, for example, public service, the arts, the humanities and business. The BBC was part of this trend. Women like Alice Head, reputedly the highest paid woman in Britain, rose to be Managing Director and Editor of *Good Housekeeping* in 1924.<sup>8</sup> The City stockbroker Beatrice ‘Gordon’ Holmes, launched her own financial company in 1921 which in 1929 employed 140 staff and, at its height, earned her a staggering £4,000-£5,000 a year.<sup>9</sup> Eileen Power, who was appointed Professor of Economic History at the LSE in 1931, was the driving force behind the subject’s expansion in the inter-war years.<sup>10</sup> In 1932, Power was on a salary scale of £1,000-1,250.<sup>11</sup>

For many high-flying women of this period, there was an assumption that they would be treated as equals with the men around them. It is conspicuous how rarely issues of gender surface in the BBC documents used for this chapter. Somerville, Matheson and Benzie had the same expectations placed upon them as if they were men and they responded as equals. In his 1932 novel, *Public Places*,

<sup>6</sup> Dorothy Evans identified four top-salaried women in the Civil Servants in 1934: an Assistant Secretary in the Department of Health for Scotland earning £1,353; a Senior Commissioner with the Board of Control, salary range £1,353-£1,641; a Chief Woman Inspector with the Board of Education earning £1,153 and the Director of Women Establishments, earning an undisclosed salary. Seventeen other women held positions of Principal Officer or above. Dorothy Evans, *Women and the Civil Service* (London: Pitman, 1934) pp.151-158

<sup>7</sup> Alix Meynell, *Public Servant, Private Women: An Autobiography* (Victor Gollanz, 1984) pp.100, 129. At the level of Principal and above, women and men were on the same pay scales.

<sup>8</sup> Alice Head, *It Could Never Have Happened* (Kingswood Surrey: The Windmill Press, 1939). Head was reputedly the highest paid woman in Britain.

<sup>9</sup> Gordon Holmes, *In Love with Life: A Pioneer Career Woman's Story* (London: Hollis & Carter Ltd., 1944) p.7, 109

<sup>10</sup> Maxine Berg, *A Woman in History: Eileen Power, 1889-1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) pp.148-155

<sup>11</sup> LSE/Minutes/13/8: Salaries Committee Minute Book, 1931-32

Harold Nicolson portrayed the character of Jane Campbell (said to be based on Hilda Matheson) in this light.<sup>12</sup> The fictional Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs was “a graduate of Lady Margaret Hall... the modern woman, emancipated... talking as man to man.”<sup>13</sup> This was similar to the experiences of women like Professor Eileen Power, Beatrice Gordon Holmes and Alix Kilroy, the first woman to be promoted to the position of Principal in the Board of Trade. Kilroy and Holmes both noted how initial reactions of surprise to a woman holding their job, quickly became working relationships of equality and respect once their capabilities became known.<sup>14</sup> Power claimed never to have discerned any difference of treatment between herself and her male colleagues; her biographer, Maxine Berg would disagree. Berg pointed out that Power faced several limitations: she was paid less than her male colleagues, she was not put on any professorial appointment committees nor did she sit on any government enquiries or commissions.<sup>15</sup>

There is no evidence that either Matheson or Somerville were sidelined in this way although Benzie may have been marginalised at international meetings when her Divisional Director was present.<sup>16</sup> Somerville’s salary of £1,500 in 1939 would have placed her amongst the highest earning women in the UK, nevertheless, this was still lower than many of her male counterparts.<sup>17</sup> At £1050 per annum in 1931, Matheson, too, earned less than many of the men she worked alongside.<sup>18</sup> Benzie’s £900 a year placed her within the lowest third of BBC Directors’ salaries in 1937.<sup>19</sup> However, for women of the inter-war years, these were exceptional rates of pay. Matheson was delighted with what she earned, writing to her lover Vita Sackville-West in 1929:

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<sup>12</sup> Matheson’s biographer, Michael Carney is certain that this was the case. Michael Carney, Stoker: The Biography of Hilda Matheson O.B.E., 1888-1940 (Llangynog: Michael Carney, 1999) p.18

<sup>13</sup> Harold Nicolson, Public Faces (London: Penguin Books, 1932) p.80

<sup>14</sup> Meynell, op.cit., p.129; Holmes, op.cit., pp.82-84. Holmes was debarred from membership of the London Stock Exchange which refused entry to women until 1973.

<sup>15</sup> Berg, op.cit., p.181

<sup>16</sup> R3/3/11: Control Board Minutes, 14th January 1936. See also below pp.277-278

<sup>17</sup> Salary Information Files

<sup>18</sup> Same source

<sup>19</sup> Same source

My BBC pays me a fat screw, £900 a year, which is more than almost any other woman I know gets and quite out of the way generous. I mean as women's pay goes it's more than many women get in responsible civil service jobs I know.<sup>20</sup>

Isa Benzie never complained about her salary, only Mary Somerville raised the issue of unfair pay as we will see.

It is notable that Somerville, Matheson and Benzie never showed any inclination to progress to a more senior management role rather they gained sufficient satisfaction from doing their jobs well. Neither was the desire for more money or prestige a prime motivator. How far these characteristics were typical of women in elite management posts in the inter-war years is difficult to say because there has been no detailed research in this area. It is striking, however, how closely the experiences of these three elite BBC women matched those of the women investigated in the 1971 book *Women in Top Jobs*.<sup>21</sup> This was the first comprehensive study of women managers in the UK based on extensive interviews with senior employees in the BBC, the Civil Service and two large companies. The key findings revealed that women in senior management roles were more likely to have horizontal rather than vertical career ambitions; they were less likely to be interested in empire building, office politics or administration; they were less likely to be forceful and competitive both in their own jobs and in promoting their own careers; they were more self-conscious, more meticulous to detail and more reluctant to delegate and they were seen to adopt an informal, personal, expressive style of management or professional approach.<sup>22</sup> In all these areas the three women under investigation here would concur. This suggests that the style of management adopted by women in the 1970s was already apparent in those who had attained elite positions in the BBC in inter-war years.

One of the senior male business managers interviewed for the 1971 research claimed that women had done themselves a great deal of harm in the inter-war

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<sup>20</sup> Hilda Matheson letters. (HML), January 12<sup>th</sup> 1929

<sup>21</sup> Michael Fogarty, *Women in Top Jobs: Four Studies in Achievement* (London Allen & Unwin, 1971). The research was carried out by PEP, Political and Economic Planning.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* pp.14-16



years: “They were real martinets, some of them”, he maintained, “They subordinated their womanly instincts and tried to start exactly where men started.”<sup>23</sup> This could not be said of Somerville, Matheson or Benzie, all of whom were fiercely feminine. This was apparent in their dress, Matheson’s letters in particular refer to her love of pampering herself and her enjoyment of clothes, “My new powder puff is on my dressing table and the adorable jersey is over the chair”<sup>24</sup> A photograph of Mary Somerville from 1935 shows her to be chic in a slim-line black ankle length dress, with fur stole.<sup>25</sup> Alix Kilroy, at the Board of Trade, observed that her appearance may have had an impact on the way she was perceived. She was a stylish, modern young woman, rather than a ‘blue-stocking’ which she believed made her less threatening.<sup>26</sup> Alice Head, the Editor and Managing Director of *Good Housekeeping* could imagine nothing “more unpleasant or foolish” than a woman executive who was “fantastic or grotesque in dress”.<sup>27</sup> Eileen Power was also well-known for her beautiful outfits. Thus, in the back-biting top echelons of the BBC, and in other similar places of work, to have been perceived as a gentler, more feminine woman may have been an advantage.

The era of the BBC woman Director was short-lived. Following Isa Benzie’s promotion to Foreign Director in 1933, no further woman gained this status in the BBC prior to the Second World War.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, as Mary Agnes Hamilton alluded to in her 1959 letter to *The Times*, by the late 1950s, the BBC had no woman in a director-level position.<sup>29</sup> This is significant because it pinpoints the earlier inter-war years as a particularly fertile time for women’s advancement especially in new areas of work such as broadcasting. Maxine Berg noted that the LSE, an institution which, like the BBC, took a progressive approach to the employment of

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p.41

<sup>24</sup> *HML*, December 20<sup>th</sup> 1928

<sup>25</sup> *Radio Pictorial*, October 4<sup>th</sup> 1935

<sup>26</sup> Meynell, *op.cit.*, p.129

<sup>27</sup> Head, *op.cit.*, pp.196-197

<sup>28</sup> Even during the Second World War with its opportunities for advancement, only a handful of women were promoted to Director status. Ursula Eason became Acting Programme Director for Northern Ireland in December 1939; Margery Wace became Empire Talks Director in 1941 and Anna Instone became Assistant Gramophone Director in 1942.

<sup>29</sup> In 1959, four women were Department Heads: Anna Instone, Head of Gramophone Programmes; Joanna Spicer, Head of Programme Planning, Television; Johnny Bradnock, Head of Make-up and Wardrobe; Marian Scott, Head of Secretarial Training School.

women, also experienced retrenchment after the Second World War.<sup>30</sup> Berg cites reasons such as the growth of institutional constraints, more rigid hierarchies and increasing professionalisation and departmentalisation. These developments were also visible at the BBC where, by the mid 1930s, the BBC had cultivated a sufficient number of home-grown male staff to supply most of its executive needs. When it was necessary or expedient to advertise jobs externally they attracted a huge volume of interest, for instance the position of Director of Talks in 1936 elicited more than 1,000 applicants, almost exclusively from men.<sup>31</sup>

This chapter has drawn on a variety of sources most importantly letters from Hilda Matheson and the personal files of Mary Somerville and Isa Benzie. Somerville and Benzie's staff files, which survive in the BBC archive, only give brief glimpses into their private lives and interior worlds; rather the corporate nature of their careers is fore-grounded: their recruitment, their pay rises, the management negotiations that surrounded them. In contrast, Hilda Matheson has no staff file, instead her BBC career is drawn largely from her private correspondence with Vita Sackville-West in late 1928 and early 1929. Hence, the analysis of Matheson's career is richer in personal detail but more sparing of corporate facts. All three women warrant an entry in the New Oxford Dictionary of National Biography.<sup>32</sup>

This chapter, then, throws new light on the working lives of the BBC's three most senior women; women who had very different career paths and whose relationships with their managers also differed considerably. It demonstrates the BBC's largely positive attitude towards high-flying women in the inter-war years and the equality and respect which they received. It also pinpoints the tensions and subtle sexual discrimination that was apparent in an organisation run by traditionally-minded men. The chapter is arranged chronologically, by the date

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<sup>30</sup> Berg, *op.cit.*, pp.180, 258-259

<sup>31</sup> Daily Express, October 1st 1936. "Yesterday was the last day for applications for the £1200 post of Talks Director at the BBC. Just over 1,000 people applied for it, among them several women. I think it unlikely that the post will be given to a woman." The position went to Sir Richard Maconachie who had served as British Minister to Kabul, 1930-1936.

<sup>32</sup> Their respective entries in the online Oxford Dictionary of National Biography (DNB) are: Mary Somerville by Grace Wyndham Goldie, entry no: 36192; Hilda Matheson by Fred Hunter, entry no: 49198; Isa Benzie by Paul Donovan, entry no: 65410.

the women joined the BBC, starting with Mary Somerville who was appointed in 1925.

### MARY SOMERVILLE (1897 – 1963)

In 1939, Mary Somerville, Director of School Broadcasting, was the most senior woman on the BBC staff. She had joined the Company fourteen years previously and her BBC career would span four decades. After twenty-two years in School Broadcasting, Somerville chose to move to Talks in 1947, becoming Assistant Controller. When she retired in December 1955, Somerville was Controller of Talks, the first woman to reach Controller status in the BBC.<sup>33</sup> Somerville was a highly intelligent, fervently driven woman with a passion for both education and broadcasting, “a very live wire”.<sup>34</sup> She transformed broadcasting to schools, changing it from a little-valued novelty to a highly respected and widely accessed medium. Somerville was also, unusually for the times, a married woman and a mother.

Mary Somerville’s significance to the BBC has been widely acknowledged in the Corporation’s historiography. Briggs made clear that she was the most powerful personality in the history of school broadcasting.<sup>35</sup> She was frequently venerated in the press and also featured in the memoirs of BBC men. Roger Eckersley, who headed the BBC’s Programmes Department from 1924-1934 and was Somerville’s boss for many years, explained how school broadcasting was organised, administered and stimulated by her “to whom all praise is due”.<sup>36</sup> Richard Lambert, recruited as an Education Assistant in 1927 before becoming Editor of *The Listener*, described the “enterprising and self-possessed Mary

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<sup>33</sup> The next woman to reach Controller status in the BBC was Clare Lawson Dick who became Controller, Radio Four in 1975. Joanne Spicer became Assistant Controller, Planning (Television) in 1963.

<sup>34</sup> L2/195/1: Mary Somerville Staff File 1 (MSSF:1), 1925-1935, Eckersley to Reith, December 1<sup>st</sup> 1926

<sup>35</sup> Asa Briggs, *The Golden Age of Broadcasting*, The History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom, Vol. 2 (London, Oxford University Press, 1965) p.186. Briggs devotes forty pages to her work.

<sup>36</sup> Roger Eckersley, *The B.B.C. and All That* (London: Sampson Low, Marston and Co. Ltd., 1946) pp.159-160

Somerville” as “one of the outstanding personalities in British Broadcasting”.<sup>37</sup>

The following biographical sketch of Mary Somerville, while defining her career and role at the BBC, is the first to consider the implications of her position as the most senior woman in the Corporation and to assess if, and how, her gender impacted on her work.

Mary Somerville, like John Reith, was the daughter of a Scottish Reverend. She was born in New Zealand in 1897, but returned to Scotland as a child. Her father was chairman of a Scottish school board and friend to many educationalists so Somerville was raised in a pedagogic environment.<sup>38</sup> Although she attended Selkirk High School, much of her education took place at home because of ill health; she was diabetic. In 1921, when she was twenty-four, Somerville was accepted at Somerville College, Oxford, to study English Literature. While at Oxford, in the spring of 1924, she heard her first radio broadcast, “by chance”; she was visiting a country schoolhouse where, along with the schoolmistress and three pupils, she shared two pairs of earphones to listen to a BBC talk on music by Sir Walford Davies.<sup>39</sup> It was an early trial broadcast for schools and Somerville wrote of the profound effect it had on all five listeners. The impact was “tremendous”, they were “exalted” and Somerville realised then “what this brave new medium of communication might mean for schools.”<sup>40</sup>

It is not quite clear how this new found interest in broadcasting transmuted to her joining the early BBC. We know that she had a meeting with Reith in April 1924, soon after the Walford Davies broadcast, because he recorded in his diary a visit from “a very clever and self-confident young lady”, recommended by a mutual friend.<sup>41</sup> In his obituary to Somerville, Reith recalled how she had “in effect told me that she was joining the BBC, and the sooner the better”.<sup>42</sup> Somerville’s drive, directness and self-confidence would be vital to her success, but on this occasion

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<sup>37</sup> Lambert, op.cit., p.54.

<sup>38</sup> Details from DNB, op.cit.

<sup>39</sup> Broadcast April 4<sup>th</sup> 1924. Sir Walford Davies would become one of the BBC’s most popular broadcasters.

<sup>40</sup> Mary Somerville, "How School Broadcasting Began," School Broadcasting in Britain, ed. Richard Palmer (London: British Broadcasting Corporation, 1947) p.9

<sup>41</sup> Reith Diaries, April 11<sup>th</sup> 1924. In his diary entry Reith named Jeffcott but I have been unable to ascertain who he was.

<sup>42</sup> The Times, September 6<sup>th</sup> 1963

Reith advised her to return to Oxford to finish her degree.<sup>43</sup> Shortly before her Finals, in February 1925, Somerville wrote to Reith proposing that she join the BBC as an Assistant to the Director of Education, J.C. Stobart.<sup>44</sup> Stobart was keen on the idea: Somerville was expected to get a First; she had good contacts with the literary world; she had an attractive voice and the growth of school work meant she would be an asset to his department.<sup>45</sup> After some deliberations, to be expanded upon shortly, Somerville joined the BBC in July 1925.

When Somerville arrived at Savoy Hill, broadcasts to schools were rudimentary.<sup>46</sup> Stobart, a former member of the Board of Education's Inspectorate, had been persuaded to join the BBC as Director of Education in August 1924. In October 1924 he launched the first official series of talks to schools; five week-day lessons at 3.15pm.<sup>47</sup> This format, which was still functioning when Mary Somerville arrived, consisted of a range of half-hour talks on, for example, Dickens, British Plants or Music which were given by experts, such as Sir Walford Davies, and by BBC staff. Somerville herself was soon broadcasting (hence Stobart's reference to her attractive voice), excelling in literary topics such as Modern Poetry, Shakespeare's Heroines and English Composition. As well as giving talks, Somerville quickly assumed other duties. According to a list of departmental responsibilities, by 1926 she was overseeing all transmissions to schools; suggesting subjects and lecturers; testing voices; advising new speakers on broadcast techniques; overseeing studios; planning teaching notes; conducting correspondence with teachers and educationists; visiting schools; and preparing articles for educational papers.<sup>48</sup> In this way, Somerville became indispensable to the day-to-day running of the BBC's Education Section.

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> MSSF:1, Somerville to Reith, February 24th 1925

<sup>45</sup> MSSF:1, Stobart to Carpendale, March 4th 1925. Somerville's literary connections included Robert Graves, Robert Bridges, Sir Edmund Gosse, George Moore and Lord Haldane, Guardian, September 2<sup>nd</sup> 1963; News Chronicle, January 16<sup>th</sup> 1936. The *News Chronicle* article hints that to enter broadcasting she gave up a promising literary career, her early short stories being "acclaimed by discriminating critics."

<sup>46</sup> For a more detailed history of school broadcasting see Briggs, op.cit., pp.185-218; Somerville "How School Broadcasting Began", op.cit.

<sup>47</sup> Experimental broadcasting to schools began in early 1924. R16/357: Education, School Broadcasting Memos and Reports 1923-1930, Broadcasting to Schools, undated document

<sup>48</sup> R13/419/1/ Departmental: Talks Division: Talks Department 1923-1929 October 1926: Duties, Talks Section

However, the Education Section faced a very real problem; few schools were listening. There were a number of reasons for this. For a start, schools were severely hampered by the amateurishness of most wireless equipment.<sup>49</sup> The talks themselves were also not engaging enough and some feared that broadcasting might supplant teaching. Finally, there was unease about the BBC's potential to influence the educational agenda. In 1924, 220 schools were listening to school broadcasts; by 1927 this had risen to around 3,000.<sup>50</sup>

The turning point in school broadcasting came in 1928 when the report of the Kent Experiment was published.<sup>51</sup> Mary Somerville was heavily involved in this project which entailed the study of school broadcasting from the point of view of those receiving rather than transmitting the programmes. The Carnegie Trust, in collaboration with the local education authority, had agreed to fund good quality receiving equipment for selected schools in Kent.<sup>52</sup> Somerville, who was seconded to the Experiment for eight months in 1927, visited the chosen schools to watch lessons and to talk to teachers and pupils about their experience of school broadcasts. This was a transformative moment in Somerville's career. It quickly became clear to her that the BBC's programmes were failing because both the producers and the broadcasters were unaware of how children learnt. They used too many complex words; they went too fast; they patronised, in effect, they failed to captivate and inspire.<sup>53</sup> Commenting about the Kent Experiment in 1954, Somerville recalled:

I found poor, patient children sitting in rooms being bored. Back I came at the gallop to do something about it. It wasn't that the programmes were bad.... But they were not produced or given by people who knew children in their bones.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> See for example Radio Times, June 13<sup>th</sup> 1924, "...recent experiments have shown that it may be a great boon to schools if for a short period each week the living voice of some eminent scholar can be transmitted into the classroom... Perfection is still far off. Apparatus is often home-made and amateurish."

<sup>50</sup> Broadcasting to Schools, undated document c.1931, op.cit.

<sup>51</sup> For specific details on the Kent Report see Briggs, op.cit., pp.190-195

<sup>52</sup> The Carnegie Trust, founded in 1913, had a strong educational remit. Kent was chosen partly because it had a range of urban, rural and semi-rural schools.

<sup>53</sup> Somerville, "How School Broadcasting Began," op.cit., pp.12-13

<sup>54</sup> Rough Notes for Co-ordinating Committee Discussion, October 1954, as quoted in Briggs, op.cit., p.195

As Hilda Matheson would also quickly realise, talks needed to be specifically written for broadcast. When it came to schools, careful scripting and editing was even more important if the hearts and minds of teachers and pupils were to be won over to the new medium.

The Kent Report was ultimately positive about the value of school broadcasts both to school children and teachers however it indicated many areas for improvement, especially in the way programmes were delivered. As a result, Somerville developed a range of new techniques, and introduced new speakers, to ensure the requirements of her particular audience were met. For example, one of her discoveries was Rhoda Power who broadcast the first of her legendary history series in early 1928.<sup>55</sup> In these programmes, as well as enthralling school children with the vigour of her personally-told stories, Power developed dramatic historical re-enactments in which colleagues, such as Mary Somerville, played characters from the past. Somerville also encouraged the use of travelling recording vans and introduced new styles of broadcasting such as Ann Driver's *Music and Movement*, the first to be aimed at infants.<sup>56</sup> Sir Walford Davis and the physiologist Professor Winifred Cullis both found themselves at the receiving end of Somerville's determination to improve broadcasting performance. Prior to her first talk, Cullis was taken by Somerville to watch a school audience listening to a programme, "the result of which ... she made haste to revise her own talk entirely, for she had forgotten how small one is at eleven."<sup>57</sup> Sir Walford Davies was provided with a "watchdog", his description of the observer employed to comment on his delivery.<sup>58</sup>

A second development from the Kent experiment was the expansion of support materials. While some pamphlets had been made available to schools as early as September 1926, Somerville oversaw an increase in the quality and range of published material; 233,000 pamphlets were issued in 1927.<sup>59</sup> A third development was an attempt to improve wireless reception in schools by offering

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<sup>55</sup> *Boys and Girls of Other Days* was broadcast weekly from January 17<sup>th</sup> 1928. Rhoda Power was Professor Eileen Power's sister, see below pp.257-258

<sup>56</sup> *Music and Movement* was first broadcast on September 28<sup>th</sup> 1934.

<sup>57</sup> *Good Housekeeping*, August 1935

<sup>58</sup> Somerville, "How School Broadcasting Began," op.cit., p.12

<sup>59</sup> Briggs, op.cit., p.195

assistance from specially trained BBC Education Engineers, a system initially overseen by Somerville.<sup>60</sup> The most significant development, however, was the inauguration of the Central Council for School Broadcasting (CCSB) of which Mary Somerville was to be Secretary. By the time the CCSB first met in February 1929, Somerville had become de facto Head of School Broadcasting. Stobart, whose health was poor, had increasingly taken a back seat and Somerville was his natural successor.

The CCSB had been established to secure links between the BBC and outside bodies such as the Board of Education, Local Education Authorities and individual teachers.<sup>61</sup> Chaired by the eminent historian, politician and educationalist H.A.L. Fisher, the CCSB presided over a series of Programme Sub-Committees: History, English Literature, Geography, Modern Languages, Music and Science. Each sub-committee, the majority of whose members were teachers and specialists, helped to draft the syllabus for school broadcasting in their subject area for the coming year. They also advised on the commissioning of scripts, edited educational pamphlets and recommended potential speakers. A vital link between the Programme Sub-Committees and the School Broadcasting Department was the BBC Education Assistant. The Kent Experiment made Somerville aware of the need for the BBC to employ former teachers in this capacity and a specially recruited BBC Assistant sat as secretary to each of the sub-committees. This direct link between the staff of the Schools Department and the CCSB ensured the BBC, under the direction of Mary Somerville, was able to implement the Committee's recommendations.

In 1924, two fifteen minute schools talks had been broadcast daily during term-time. By 1929 this had been extended to one hour between 2.30-3.30pm. In 1935, two hours of schools programmes might be available (the daily schedules varied), for example on Wednesday May 21<sup>st</sup> 1935, listeners could tune into Nature Study, Junior Music, Early Stages in French and Recent Scientific Research. The output of the Schools Department was phenomenal although there

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<sup>60</sup> R16/537: Education: School Broadcasting Memos and Reports 1923-1930, Somerville to Local Education Authorities, July 22nd 1930

<sup>61</sup> Prior to the establishment of the CCSB, the BBC had maintained a Central Educational Advisory Committee but its membership was small and its influence marginal.



was the compensation of down-time during school holidays. Somerville negotiated the perk of extra leave for her salaried staff during these periods, in order to bring the Schools Department more in line with school terms.<sup>62</sup>

As the number of school talks increased, so did Mary Somerville's workload.<sup>63</sup> In a memo to the Director of Talks, Charles Siepmann, in August 1933, Somerville outlined a "rough sketch" of her programme of work, the extent of which is breath-taking.<sup>64</sup> The three-pages of closely-typed notes included, amongst normal office routine: visiting schools; summarising the annual teachers' criticism of programmes; translating the recommendations of the Programme and Pamphlet Committee; reviewing the activities of the Education Engineers and drafting the reports of Programme Sub-Committees. This was without a raft of extra duties such as attending conferences, meetings and official inquiries. In all issues to do with School Broadcasting, Somerville had become the face and representative of the BBC. She constantly battled for extra money for her department, for example there were attempts to persuade the Board of Education to fund wireless equipment in schools but with no success.<sup>65</sup> The pressures on Somerville were immense and in September 1934, she collapsed from stress.

Mary Somerville was to be on Sickness Leave from the BBC until March 1935. On her return it was decided that one of the ways her workload, and that of her department staff, could become more manageable, was by restructuring the CCSB. Somerville put forward a proposal to create a new, autonomous public body, separate from the BBC which would have its own Secretary. Senior management agreed and in November 1935, A.C. Cameron took on his new duties as CCSB Secretary, Cameron, formerly Director of Education for Oxford, was to earn £1,500 a year. Somerville, whose role as Secretary had been in addition to her BBC work, was then earning £1,100, a clear example of the market value of a

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<sup>62</sup> R13/216/2: Departmental: Home Division: School Broadcasting Department, File 2 1936-1940. When Somerville tried to get the privilege extended to her secretaries, she was rebuffed. Pym to Nicolls, December 1<sup>st</sup> 1936. Lambert was incredulous about this privilege, which was unknown in other departments. Lambert, *op.cit.*, p.54

<sup>63</sup> By the summer of 1933, there were regular schools broadcast from 2.30pm to 4.00pm each week day, although there were frequent alterations to the schedule.

<sup>64</sup> R49/611/1: Staff Policy Schools Broadcasting, Somerville to Siepmann, August 26<sup>th</sup> 1933

<sup>65</sup> Briggs, *op.cit.*, pp.201, 206

man being greater than that of a woman. Somerville continued to attend CCSB meetings as a BBC official, but she was freed from a huge volume of work. As a result of the change, her Assistants were also able to devote more time to their BBC duties.

In October 1935, Mary Somerville contributed a 'BBC Diary' to *Radio Pictorial* which provides an illuminating insight into her work at this time. [Fig. 10, p.251] This particular day started with a phone call from her secretary, Miss Scott, reminding her to be at the office early to read through a memorandum on next year's programme commitments. The rest of the day was a whirl of meetings and telephone conversations peppered with broadcast listening, script reading and a visit to an infant school in the East End. Lunch and dinner both involved hosting academics which meant talking 'shop' from 8am until 11pm. This was an occupational hazard for Somerville. Because of her need continually to make and maintain contacts, she had won the concession to entertain in her own home, at the BBC's expense; she could claim 7/6d per guest.<sup>66</sup> This was especially important to Somerville who, by the mid 1930s, was in effect a single mother with a husband who lived abroad.

By 1937, Somerville's salaried team at Head Office amounted to ten: six men and four women, mostly designated Assistants. Between them, they oversaw twenty-seven different educational courses which included tailored talks for infants, juniors and seniors. All were carefully prepared with extensive support materials. By 1939, the number of schools listening to the broadcasts had reached almost 10,000. Throughout the late 1930s, Somerville continued to demand better resources and in June 1939, the staffing situation became so dire that she threatened to resign.<sup>67</sup> Before the situation had been fully resolved, however, the war had started which involved Somerville and the Schools Department in major shifts, both of location and programmes.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> MSSF:2, Nicolls to Carpendale, May 25<sup>th</sup> 1934

<sup>67</sup> MSSF:2, Clarke to Pym, with hand-written additions by Rose Troup, June 7<sup>th</sup> 1939

<sup>68</sup> Asa Briggs, *The War of Words*, *The History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom*, vol. 3 (London: Oxford University Press, 1970) pp.105-106, 636-637

# My B.B.C. Diary

Share a day at the B.B.C. with Miss MARY SOMERVILLE, O.B.E., who gives extracts from her diary to GODFREY WINN.

**6 A.M.**—Knock, knock—knock, knock—knock, knock. Enter Timothy, radiant. Can it really be seven already? "I've counted the strikes Mummy. . . . So he leaps upon my bed. Look out, Timothy, you scowder! How much do you think you weigh?—he's a full stone too heavy for a six-year-old, and half a head too tall, this "neglected child" of a working mother. Now for an earnest conversation. But no, my watch says—sold again! "Timothy! (sternly, for he mustn't get away with it) back to bed, my lad. Not another chirp until 7."

**7 a.m.**—A moment later (to me) a century to Timothy—the same scene, with variations. The Bish says (the Bish being my beloved, long-enduring, undefeatable housekeeper) the Bish says—"you've got people to dinner to-day and work after." "Will you come home early, Mummy, to see me?" Theoretically, yes, for one must have a breathing space sometime, but I dare not answer directly in case, as nearly always in this year of specially rapid development in my work, I get back in time only to dress—and perhaps make the sauces. I fall back upon platitudes. "One day, Timothy, you'll be glad to have your mother out of the way sometimes." Timothy ponders over this, in disbelieving silence for a few minutes, before returning to the attack. "How many pennies will you make in the office to-day, Mummy? I need new bumpers for my train. The shilling kind don't stop my big engine, and the other kind is twelve and sixpence, and if I wait till next birthday my engine will be spoilt. (A new idea strikes him). There's a letter from Daddy, I think. May I have the stamp, please?" Bumpers for Timothy, husband in the Balkans, toy trains and trains on humpy Balkan railways. . . . my eyelids are just closing again when

**7.15 a.m.**—Coffee arrives. Conversation is resumed until Tim is called to his breakfast, when I turn to the papers. It is three years now since I had any other moment in my day for reading them. Headmaster writes—"NO ROBOT TEACHERS FOR MY SCHOOL. School Broadcasting no royal road towards knowledge." Now here is true sapience if you like! What a godsend we are to these Headmasters hard up for a Speech Day Aunt Sally! A fig for them and their a priori reasoning, their faulty logic, their total lack of information as to our limitations of aim, our careful definition of the field over which broadcasting has value for the school. All the good minds of our time recognise the vital significance of our work in relation to State-provided education. So long as we don't try to do what the school can reasonably be expected to do for itself we can bring a tremendous amount to the school that is significant, both for teachers and for children. . . .

## MARY SOMERVILLE

By descent and upbringing a Scot, though she happened to be born in New Zealand. Most of her childhood spent in the Scottish borders. Her education was interrupted by War work. Went to Somerville College, Oxford in 1921, and while still up there was provisionally appointed by Sir John Reith to assist in the development of School broadcasting.

Joined the B.B.C. in 1925, by which time she had already gained microphone experience by assisting Mr. Stobart over the broadcasts of poetry in the school programmes.

Married in 1928—but prefers inside the building to be taken for a spinster!—to Mr. R. P. Brown, "Morning Post" correspondent in Belgrade, and her son, Timothy, was born in 1929.

Hobbies are writing short stories of Scottish life (one of which was selected for the "Best Short Stories" of 1927), water-colour sketching and cooking.

Was recently awarded the O.B.E. for her services to broadcasting.



All ready for the day's work, Miss Somerville faces the morning with a smile. "I've counted the strikes, Mummy," says Timothy (photo on left)

But this burst of righteous indignation is a bad start to what, if I remember rightly, will be the very dickens of a day! Let's see, what's the news from Abyssinia? . . .

**8 a.m.**—The telephone starts. My secretary, Miss Scott, to remind me to be at the office early this morning, as I must read through that special memorandum on next year's programme commitments to be ready in a finished state at 9.30 without fail.

**8.5 a.m.**—The calls continue, including one to invite me to the ballet this evening, and one from Mr. R., an Inspector of Schools from the north, asking for an interview in the course of the day. To the first I answer reluctantly—"Oh, how I wish I could; I see that they are doing Petrouska and Le Beau Danube, two of my favourites." Alas, I have already got people dining here, a posse of history professors to work out next year's course. . . . to the second I suggest, in the end, that he should come and lunch with me although, as I get out of bed to have my bath, I can't help my heart sinking a little to think that it means talking "shop" from now till 11 at night without intermission. . . .

**8.30 a.m.**—Begin the bath and dress, giving Mrs. Bishop instructions through the door about lunch and dinner. "Mr. R.'s coming to lunch." "Oh, the big gentleman. Well, mum, that won't be enough; he needs something solid, that gentleman." The menu is rearranged, and I'll try to get back in time to make the sauces, I call out over my shoulder, as I hurry back to my bedroom.

**8.50 a.m.**—Why haven't they brought the car round? Dash . . . it's the day for the oil being changed in the sump (What is a sump?) "But tell them, Bish, I must have it outside the B.B.C. at 11. I've got to go to a school miles away, in Limehouse, or somewhere . . ."

Continued on page 31

Fig 10: 'My BBC Diary'; by Mary Somerville, Radio Pictorial, October 11<sup>th</sup> 1935

Mary Somerville was a shining example of home-grown BBC success which was rewarded with an OBE in 1935. Her value to the BBC was summed up in Reith's obituary to her in 1963, "I wonder what this eager, restless, determined, irresistible pioneer, prince among men, and hero, is doing now."<sup>69</sup> Reith's description of Somerville is revealing; especially his perception of her role in the BBC as masculine. His personal respect and affection for her is also palpable.

Somerville's relationship with Reith was one of the reasons for her success at the BBC. From their first meeting in 1924, when she was a twenty-six year old undergraduate, he had seen in her the same zeal for public service broadcasting and commitment to education that he possessed. Reith's fondness for Somerville is conspicuous in his diary entries. Unlike senior male executives, about whom he frequently wrote damning entries, Reith never expressed any anger or frustration towards her. They often lunched and dined together; he personally congratulated her on her work and she was invited to visit him and his family at his country home, Harrias House.<sup>70</sup> Somerville's friendship with Reith also meant that she had privileged access to him; Lambert recalled somewhat dryly that she could see the 'D.G.' at any reasonable time.<sup>71</sup> It is arguable that it was Somerville's close relationship with Reith, coupled with his high regard for her, which won her the privilege of maternity leave in 1929; he was keen for her to remain with the Corporation (see Chapter Three, pp.135-138).

Mary Somerville's rapport with the all-male Control Board and her peers in senior management, nearly all of whom were men, is harder to discern. Along with Hilda Matheson she was invited to the Control Board Tea, a routine instituted in 1930, whereby senior staff members were summoned to a broader executive gathering at least once a week.<sup>72</sup> However, unlike Matheson, Somerville left no record of what she thought about the men she worked alongside, or at least nothing is discernable from her personal files. Somerville was ambitious but not ruthlessly go-getting; she was not part of the "fantastic atmosphere of ambition,

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<sup>69</sup> The Times, September 6<sup>th</sup> 1963

<sup>70</sup> Reith Diaries, for example February 15<sup>th</sup> 1927, January 22<sup>nd</sup> 1930, December 12<sup>th</sup> 1933, May 29<sup>th</sup> 1936

<sup>71</sup> Lambert, op.cit., p.54

<sup>72</sup> R3/3/10: Control Board Minutes, January 7<sup>th</sup> 1930

suspicion and intrigue” that Maurice Gorham, the Editor of the *Radio Times*, described at Savoy Hill.<sup>73</sup> While the men around her might have jostled for higher positions, Somerville was content to dedicate herself, firmly and calmly, to improving and expanding School Broadcasting. Lambert’s description of her swimming round the Director of Education, Stobart, “like a swan round a carp” is an apt one.<sup>74</sup> Mary Somerville was both resolute and stately; she was also very feminine in appearance. As we have learnt, photographs show her usually to be dressed simply, but elegantly, in black. A newspaper report from 1938 captured the striking impression Miss Somerville made:

Under a coat of black Persian lamb, she wore a plain high-necked black dress with a bolero jacket, the severity relieved only by a silver necklet; her high-crowned broad-rimmed black hat was without any trimming. The only touch of colour was her green-and-black velvet cravate.<sup>75</sup>

There is no suggestion that Somerville viewed herself as inferior or unequal to her male colleagues. Nor is there any indication that she was seen this way.

However, her salary tells a rather different story, especially as she rose through the ranks.

When Somerville joined the BBC’s permanent staff in October 1925, she had insisted on £400 a year, a high wage for an Assistant. The following September, now aware of her value to the BBC, she asked for a rise and although Stobart, the Director of Education, believed £500 a year was justified, this was disputed by his superior, Eckersley.<sup>76</sup> Roger Eckersley, the Director of Programmes stated that £400 “was a very reasonable salary for a girl of her years”, (she was now twenty eight) and pointed out that it was more than was earned by her male colleagues.<sup>77</sup> Somerville was an impassioned negotiator and although offered a £50 rise by

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<sup>73</sup> Maurice Gorham, *Sound and Fury* (London: Percival Marshall, 1948) p.17

<sup>74</sup> Lambert, *op.cit.*, p.54

<sup>75</sup> *Nottingham Evening News*, January 4th 1938. Report on Mary Somerville as a guest at the Nottingham and Nottinghamshire Branch of the National Council of Women.

<sup>76</sup> MSSF:1, Stobart to Goldsmith, September 13<sup>th</sup> 1926

<sup>77</sup> MSSF:1, Eckersley to Goldsmith, September 13<sup>th</sup> 1926. It has not been possible to ascertain the salaries of her direct contemporaries but in 1927, as Education Assistants, George Dixon earned £200; Derek McCulloch earned £350 and, arriving in 1928, Tony Rendall earned £280. Figures from Salary Information Files.

Eckersley, she threatened to resign.<sup>78</sup> Following a personal meeting with Reith, she was offered a compromise: a £50 bonus for past work and permission to do occasional talks and lectures to supplement her income, a privilege extended to few staff.<sup>79</sup> Her salary was raised to £500 in April 1927. This demonstrates not only Somerville's ability to get what she wanted but the BBC's desire to retain her services, as she was performing vital work.

Somerville's personal file shows that her salary then became a point of tension. She had married in July 1928; her original intention to leave the BBC prompting a bonus of £100 in lieu of a salary increase. However, she changed her mind, and in September, her request to stay in School Broadcasting was accepted. The Kent Report had been published and this may have determined management's view in her favour. In April 1929, her salary was raised to £600 and, at the request of Reith, her grade raised to 'B', this despite the fact that she was about to take maternity leave.<sup>80</sup> Following her return to the BBC after the birth of her son, Somerville's salary rose to £750 in January 1930.<sup>81</sup>

Although Somerville was initially content with this, it came to her notice that Charles Siepmann, who had joined the Adult Education Section in 1927 as an Assistant, was now earning significantly more than her. This was a result of his promotion to Head of Adult Education in late 1928. Somerville believed Siepmann's higher earnings were unfair and demanded a rise, as her "duties and responsibilities [were] in every way parallel".<sup>82</sup> In the management discussions that ensued, it was agreed that Somerville and Siepmann's duties and responsibilities were the same although the controversial and delicate nature of Adult Education talks were deemed to merit Siepmann's higher remuneration.<sup>83</sup> In 1931, when Mary Somerville formally assumed the title Director of School Broadcasting, she received a £100 rise and was re-graded 'A', the top salary

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<sup>78</sup> MSSF:1 Somerville to Reith, November 11th 1926

<sup>79</sup> MSSF:1 Eckersley to Reith, December 1st 1926

<sup>80</sup> MSSF:1, Confidential Report, February 1929. For a discussion on Somerville's maternity leave, see Chapter Three, pp.135-138

<sup>81</sup> MSSF: 1, Confidential Report February 1930. Somerville was acknowledged as "virtually Schools Director"

<sup>82</sup> MSSF:1, Goldsmith to Eckersley and Carpendale, February 28th 1930

<sup>83</sup> MSSF:1, Graves to Eckersley, March 6<sup>th</sup> 1930

grade. However, Siepmann continued to earn proportionally far more. Ultimately, management were forced to admit that they had been unfair to Somerville, noting:

I must say that we have shown some weakness in the matter in that we have not handed things out to her as to the men, but have waited for her to complain and prove her case<sup>84</sup>

Somerville never expressed the view that the inequalities in her salary were due to her gender. However, the discrepancies began at the point she was negotiating maternity leave, a time when she would have had more pressing concerns than to challenge a rise in Siepmann's earnings, if indeed she had been aware of this. Once the pay gap had emerged, it was allowed to continue until Somerville demanded redress. Even then, it never completely closed and, with Siepmann's promotion to Talks Director in 1932, it widened considerably.<sup>85</sup>

As well as salary concerns, Somerville also faced problems of over-work. This was endemic in an organisation where funding constraints meant an increase in staff had to be pleaded for. In the School Broadcasting Department there was the added difficulty that specialist staff with knowledge of education were not necessarily adept at office routine, which meant that Somerville had to take on extra responsibilities.<sup>86</sup> Clearly she found it difficult to delegate.<sup>87</sup> Mary Somerville had first raised the issue of over-work in late 1933 when she requested a period of Grace Leave<sup>88</sup> While management would have liked to offer this, it became quickly evident that Somerville could not be released from her duties as there was no-one suitable to deputise for her.<sup>89</sup> Eventually, as has been mentioned, the strain of work coupled with financial worries, became too much and in September 1934 she collapsed, forced to take six months leave.<sup>90</sup> At

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<sup>84</sup> MSSF:1, undated, unsigned but most probably some time in 1933

<sup>85</sup> In 1933, Siepmann earned £1700 to Somerville's £950.

<sup>86</sup> See for example R13/216/1: Departmental: Home Division: Schools Broadcasting Department: 1932-35, document written June 1<sup>st</sup> 1933, headed 'Schools Department Staff'

<sup>87</sup> Inability to delegate was a female management trait identified in Women in Top Jobs, op.cit., pp.117-118

<sup>88</sup> Grace Leave was three-months paid leave for creative staff.

<sup>89</sup> 'Schools Department Staff', op.cit., Nicolls to Reith, January 19<sup>th</sup> 1934

<sup>90</sup> Somerville's financial difficulties appear to have been the result of lease problems. MSSF:1, Somerville to Reith, December 14<sup>th</sup> 1933

Reith's insistence, Somerville received full pay during this time, as well as a £50 Benevolent Fund grant to assist with medical fees and a holiday abroad, testament to her value.<sup>91</sup> On Somerville's return, a future crisis was averted by the restructuring of the CCBC, as described above, and by some improvements in staffing arrangements.

It is known that her Somerville's marriage to Ralph Penton Brown, the *Morning Post* correspondent in Belgrade, was not a success.<sup>92</sup> The 'BBC Diary' that she contributed to *Radio Pictorial* in October 1935, as well as portraying her day at the office, also offered a glimpse into her home life, where she lived apart from her husband. Mrs Bishop, Somerville's "beloved, long-enduring, undefeatable" housekeeper, ran the house and helped care for six-year-old Timothy whom Somerville described, tongue-in-cheek, as "the 'neglected child' of a working mother." Another job of Mrs Bishop's was to prepare the meals although Somerville was quick to point out that she tried to get back in time to make the sauces. She was also eager to spend as much time as she could with Timothy, on this occasion managing to arrive home by 6.30pm to play Meccano and bathe him. The diary is an ebullient mix of frantic BBC work and pleasurable domesticity made possible by the cherished Mrs Bishop, who almost certainly lived-in.

Somerville was rare in being a working woman with a young child who was at the peak of her game.<sup>93</sup> The *Radio Pictorial* diary presented her both as a top-class executive and a devoted mother. Somerville was at pains to make clear that, although it was a struggle, there was no tension between the two. This was important at a time when, as Chapter Three has shown, middle-class married women were not encouraged to earn. The BBC's Marriage Tribunal was explicit in its criteria that, in order to keep her job, a woman must be able to successfully

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<sup>91</sup> MSSF:1, Clarke to Nicolls, October 8<sup>th</sup> 1934

<sup>92</sup> A memo from 1934 states that Miss Somerville's husband lived in the Balkans and did not contribute anything to the household expenses. MSSF:1, Nicolls to Carpendale, July 30<sup>th</sup> 1934,

<sup>93</sup> It is hard to think of many examples. Sarah Lewis, the wife of John Spedan Lewis, continued to work for the John Lewis Partnership, as a Director of Peter Jones and Deputy Director of the Partnership, while raising three young children. Other senior professional women who were mothers and who worked included the haematologist Janet Vaughan and the crystallographer, Kathleen Lonsdale.



manage both work and home. Somerville, who was involved in the introduction of the BBC Marriage Bar, appears to have been in agreement with this general rule. She supported the principal that married women should resign unless there were extenuating circumstances or the individual concerned was exceptional. In consequence, as was observed in Chapter Three, she was particularly harsh on a married woman member of her own department.<sup>94</sup>

Mary Somerville was not always easy to work with. In his unpublished memoir, Lance Sieveking who, worked alongside Somerville in the Education Department in the mid 1920s, recalled that “she was as much feared as she was loved. It was said of her that she never went anywhere without creating consternation, havoc, a sensation or a precedent.”<sup>95</sup> She had a strong dislike, for instance, for Herbert Milliken, a Schools Executive, whose personal file bristles with antipathy and frustration towards her.<sup>96</sup> Somerville considered him to be a fool. She also developed a strained relationship with Professor Eileen Power who made regular school broadcasts in the mid 1930s.

Eileen Power’s links with the BBC School Broadcasting Department date back to the late 1920s, when she collaborated with her sister Rhoda on history talks. Beginning with *Boys and Girls of the Middle Ages* in September 1927; Eileen Power provided the historical background and worked on the accompanying pamphlets. In 1934, she broadcast the first of her own *World History* series aimed at senior schools. The programmes worked well and in January 1936, Mary Somerville decided that, for the Autumn season, she wanted a further series aimed at younger children, one that used more dramatic interludes and that would place Britain centre stage.<sup>97</sup> Power, who was a passionate advocate of international history, was horrified by what she saw as an attempt to compromise her global viewpoint. She also didn’t believe that world history could or should be taught to junior schools this way and she refused to collaborate. The clash between Power and Somerville worsened in June when Power complained of the inappropriate

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<sup>94</sup> This was Miss Simond (Mrs MacLaren). See Chapter Three, pp.170-171

<sup>95</sup> S61: Special Collections: Autobiographical Sketches of Lance Sieveking, p.43

<sup>96</sup> L1/305/2: Herbert Milliken Staff File, e.g. Nicolls conversation with Milliken, June 12<sup>th</sup> 1934

<sup>97</sup> Berg, *op.cit.*, pp.232-233

use of militaristic photos in the pamphlet that accompanied her Summer series.<sup>98</sup> Somerville remained adamant that *Stories from World History*, the new series for juniors, would go ahead and with Power unwilling to participate, she was dropped and other broadcasters used instead.<sup>99</sup> The confrontation between Somerville and Power illustrates the high-mindedness and self-assurance of the two women who both passionately believed they were doing the right thing for their audiences.

Mary Somerville was the only woman before the Second World War to sustain, long-term, a senior management position in the BBC. She was retained despite her marriage and motherhood, evidence of her value to the Corporation and proof that it was possible for a woman to both care for a family and hold a high-powered job. Somerville is an example of a woman who carved out her own career at the BBC. Her passion and commitment to school broadcasting set the agenda for the inter-war years and drove the expansion of the department. In consequence, her ascent to Director was a foregone conclusion. It could be said that the reason she was able to attain the position was because of customary views on education, which saw it as an appropriate female domain. However, the majority of Somerville's senior staff were male and the mantle of her predecessor, Stobart, could just as easily been passed to a man. Her importance to the BBC was encapsulated in her *Times* obituary which stated: "She pondered, she pioneered, she fought authority and convinced sceptics; she triumphed."<sup>100</sup>

### HILDA MATHESON (1888-1940)

"I am happier than anyone could believe possible", wrote Hilda Matheson in June 1929, "I have an ideal job and a very good screw and nice people to work with".<sup>101</sup> Matheson, the BBC's Director of Talks from 1927-1932, is the most celebrated woman of the early Corporation. She is credited with the transformation of BBC Talks by increasing their breadth and professionalism; by bringing in a range of distinguished speakers; by introducing internationalism and

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid., pp.233-234

<sup>99</sup> *Stories from World History* was broadcast from September 23<sup>rd</sup> 1936. One of the presenters was Mary Beggs, a lecturer at Goldsmiths College.

<sup>100</sup> The Times, September 6<sup>th</sup> 1963

<sup>101</sup> HML, June 11<sup>th</sup> 1929

by pioneering news and political debates. Her resignation epitomised a key dilemma facing the BBC in the early 1930s, whether output should be about the edification of the listener or popular choice.<sup>102</sup> Matheson has been widely written about; the major BBC histories of the inter-war years, those of Briggs and Scannell and Cardiff, leave no doubt as to her significance.<sup>103</sup> Michael Carney's insightful biography vividly portrays her hectic BBC life and her later battles with the BBC hierarchy.<sup>104</sup> In this biographical sketch the focus is a closer scrutiny of BBC documents and the love letters she wrote to Vita Sackville-West.<sup>105</sup> The letters cover a nine-month period from mid December 1928, and provide an intense insight into both Matheson's character and work at the BBC.<sup>106</sup>

Hilda Matheson, like Reith, was born to Scottish parents in the manse of a Presbyterian church where her father was Minister; however the parish was not in Scotland, it was Putney, South London.<sup>107</sup> At fourteen, Matheson was sent to St Felix, a girls' boarding school in Southwold. Aged twenty, with her father re-located to Oxford, she became a Home Student at Oxford University, where she studied History. Matheson was a bright, cultured, physically active young woman and her first job on leaving University was as part-time secretary to H.A.L. Fisher, newly appointed editor of the Home University Library. His wife Lettice Fisher had been one of Matheson's tutors and she had become a close friend of the couple. Her next job was as an assistant at the Ashmolean Museum, a position cut short by the outbreak of the First World War. During the war, Matheson worked

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<sup>102</sup> See for example Carney, *op.cit.*, pp.71-74

<sup>103</sup> Briggs, *op.cit.*, especially pp.124-127, 141-143; Paddy Scannell and David Cardiff, *A Social History of British Broadcasting, 1922-1939* (London: Basil Blackwood, 1991), especially pp.153-162. Matheson is also the focus of Fred Hunter, "Hilda Matheson and the B.B.C. 1926-1940," *This Working Day World: Women's Lives and Cultures in Britain*, ed. Sybil Oldfield (London: Taylor & Francis, 1994). She also features heavily in Victoria Glendinning's biography of Vita, and Jane Wellesley's biography of The Wellingtons. For many years, Matheson lived with Dorothy Wellesley. Victoria Glendinning, *Vita: The Life of Vita Sackville-West* (London: Penguin, 1983); Jane Wellesley, *Wellington: A Journey through My Family* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2008)

<sup>104</sup> Carney, *Stoker*

<sup>105</sup> There are 115 envelopes in all, some containing several letters, with letters running to as many as 13 pages. In total, Matheson wrote around 1,000 pages. Michael Carney drew on the letters for his biography of Matheson as did Victoria Glendinning for her biography of Vita.

<sup>106</sup> Hilda Matheson and Vita Sackville-West's love affair began on December 10<sup>th</sup> 1928, following a broadcast discussion on 'The Position of Women Today' between Vita and Hugh Walpole. The most intensive period of letter writing was between December 20<sup>th</sup> 1928 and March 1<sup>st</sup> 1929, when Vita was in Berlin.

<sup>107</sup> The biographical details for this chapter come from New Oxford DNB by Fred Hunter, entry 49198 and Carney, *op.cit.*

as a secretary to a V.A.D. Detachment; as a clerk in the War Office and, from August 1916, in the Registry of the Special Intelligence Directorate (the precursor to MI5). After the war, she worked briefly as secretary to Philip Kerr (later Lord Lothian) before becoming, in 1919, Political Secretary to Nancy Astor, newly elected as MP for Plymouth (Sutton). Through Nancy Astor, Matheson came into contact with individuals prominent both in the political and cultural life of the country. In consequence, when Matheson joined the BBC in 1926 she was mature, well-known, and highly experienced.

The consensus has been that Hilda Matheson was first introduced to Reith at an ‘At-Home’ given by Nancy Astor.<sup>108</sup> However, Reith’s diary records that they first met in May 1924, at the recommendation of Mary Somerville.<sup>109</sup> Reith appears to have been impressed by both Matheson’s abilities and the entrée that she might give the BBC to London’s political and cultural circles. He was keen to recruit her and finally enticed her to join the Company in September 1926 on a salary of £600.<sup>110</sup> Matheson’s initial job, as an Assistant in Education, might sound unprepossessing but in 1926 the BBC’s Education Department was responsible not only for schools and adult education but also for talks, news, religion and *Children’s Hour*. Matheson joined at a propitious moment, Reith was in the process of reorganisation and a separate Talks Department was being formed. It is widely held that Reith had earmarked Matheson as his Director of Talks, a post she assumed when the new departmental structure was introduced in January 1927.<sup>111</sup> In fact Matheson wrote to Vita that it was the Director of Programmes, Roger Eckersley’s idea.<sup>112</sup> Eckersley, her manager, remained a

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<sup>108</sup> See for example *Meta Matheson in the Hogarth Press Tribute to Matheson*. Various Authors, *Hilda Matheson* (Letchworth: The Hogarth Press, 1941) p.11. This was a commemorative volume published shortly after Matheson’s death. Meta Matheson was Hilda’s mother.

<sup>109</sup> *Reith Diaries*, May 27<sup>th</sup> 1924. There is no other information about how Somerville and Matheson were known to each other.

<sup>110</sup> See for example *Reith Diaries*, 26<sup>th</sup> March 1926, “Saw Miss H Matheson whom I think should be in the BBC somewhere.” Nancy Astor wrote of how she had to persuade Matheson to take the BBC job. Various Authors, *Hilda Matheson* op.cit., pp.15-16.

<sup>111</sup> While Stobart retained responsibility for Schools and Adult Education, Matheson became Director of a separate Talks Section.

<sup>112</sup> *HML*, February 6<sup>th</sup> 1929. This is supported by Matheson’s contemporary Lance Sieveking who, according to his unpublished autobiography, had initially been offered the post of Director of Talks only to have this rescinded in Matheson’s favour. S6: Special Collections: Autobiographical Sketches of Lance Sieveking, p. 49. Sieveking is the only BBC man to be dismissive of Matheson in his memoir, describing her as a “busy little governess of a woman”. Sieveking left the Talks Department in 1928 to join the Programme Research Department.

great supporter until the difficulties of the early 1930s led to friction and her ultimate resignation.<sup>113</sup>

Matheson took on the job of Director of Talks with alacrity. The section she inherited was bland, timid and amateurish; she created a department that was vibrant, challenging and professional. For Matheson, broadcasting was about “enlarging the frontiers of human interest... widening personal experience and shrinking the earth’s surface”; it was also about expanding democracy and fitting men and women “for the complicated world of tomorrow”.<sup>114</sup> Surviving memos from Matheson to her superiors, notably Reith and Eckersley, show her commitment to extending the scope of talks and bringing in the best speakers.<sup>115</sup> In 1927 a fledgling News Section was set up within the department, a response to the more flexible approach to news reporting instigated by the first BBC Charter.<sup>116</sup> Matheson was in charge when the ban on controversial broadcasting was lifted in March 1928 which enabled the development of opinion pieces and more radical programming. For instance, in early 1928 listeners were introduced to Vernon Bartlett’s *The Way of the World*, the first international series on the BBC. Amongst Matheson’s final letters to Vita were descriptions of broadcasts from the League of Nations Assembly in Geneva, the first time this had been attempted.<sup>117</sup> Matheson also broadened the range of literary and critical talks and revolutionised the way broadcast talks were given, insisting on careful scripting, lengthy rehearsal and tailored delivery.<sup>118</sup>

Matheson’s approach to Talks reflected her liberal and progressive viewpoint. Although her letters to Vita give no indication of her political persuasion, Matheson was part of London’s cultural and intellectual elite. Her close friends

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<sup>113</sup> Matheson was held in high regard by others she managed. Richard Lambert, who joined the BBC in 1927 as an Assistant with responsibility for Adult Education talks, claimed that if it hadn’t been for Matheson, he would never have accepted the job. Under her leadership, he believed, the Talks Department entered a ‘golden age’. Lambert, op.cit., p.63. Lionel Fielden described her as “one of those people who are made of pure gold all the way through”. Lionel Fielden, *The Natural Bent* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1960) p.114

<sup>114</sup> Hilda Matheson, *Broadcasting* (London: Thornton Butterworth Ltd, 1933) pp.14, 16

<sup>115</sup> See for example, Talks file R51/118/1: Debates and Discussions

<sup>116</sup> For an analysis of the significance of the News Section see Scannell and Cardiff, op.cit., pp.113-116; Hunter, op.cit., p.171

<sup>117</sup> Various Authors, *Hilda Matheson*, op.cit., pp.22-26; *HML*, September 3<sup>rd</sup> 1929

<sup>118</sup> See for example Matheson, *Broadcasting* pp.71-77

included not only the Astors but high-powered professional women such as Marjorie Graves, Janet Vaughan and Dame Rachel Crowdy. Graves was a historian and Conservative member of Holborn Borough Council, Vaughan was at the beginning of her career as a haematologist and radiobiologist, Crowdy headed the social questions section of the League of Nations. Through Vita, Matheson would meet others: the novelist Hugh Walpole, the composer Ethel Smyth and the poet Dorothy Wellesley. There is no evidence that Matheson had been active in the suffrage campaign nor did she view herself as a feminist – in one letter to Vita, she wrote dispassionately of ‘Feminists’ as a political grouping – but she undoubtedly believed that women, as citizens, should have equality.<sup>119</sup> This is evident from her strengthening of the BBC’s women’s programming.

Since the demise of *Women’s Hour* in 1924, afternoon talks for women had been marginalised in the schedules. From the moment Matheson assumed the position of Director of Talks, she introduced a range of output to cater for the large female audience known to listen-in during the day.<sup>120</sup> Much was domestic in nature, for example *Housewives Talks* which were first broadcast in January 1927 and elements of *Morning Talks* which began in January 1929. However there were also series that addressed women as citizens; this was particularly pertinent following the extension of the franchise to all British adult women in 1918. *The Week In Westminster* was specifically devised to educate newly enfranchised women about the workings of parliament and was presented by women MPs; *What we Pay the Rates For*, presented by Mrs HAL (Lettice) Fisher, informed listeners about the ways and means of local government; *A Woman’s Commentary* was a weekly personal talk, given by Ray Strachey, on social and political developments. Evening schedules were also enlivened by women speakers and by female-orientated programmes such as the series *Questions for Women Voters* broadcast in the run-up to the 1929 elections. Matheson called upon her friends and acquaintances to broadcast, including Lettice Fisher, Rachel Crowdy and Vita Sackville-West.

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<sup>119</sup> *HML*, January 16<sup>th</sup> 1929

<sup>120</sup> There is a huge body of evidence to support the high daytime listenership of women see for example *Radio Times*, November 30<sup>th</sup> 1923, ‘Wireless and Women, the New Angel in the House’ by Ella Fitzgerald; September 5<sup>th</sup> 1924, ‘Women and Wireless’ by Robert Magill; January 1<sup>st</sup> 1926, ‘What Women Listeners Gain’ by Lady Alexander.

Matheson was also a passionate advocate of adult education. She was secretary to the Hadow Committee, the Joint Enquiry into Broadcasting and Adult Education, set up in October 1926 to investigate how the BBC might best expand this output.<sup>121</sup> One of the outcomes of the Committee was dedicated programme time for the National Federation of Women's Institutes and from January 1927, in collaboration with Matheson, dozens of adult-education talks aimed at the NFWI membership, were broadcast.<sup>122</sup> These examples only scratch the surface of Matheson's contribution to women's programming and her commitment to her female audience. In her 1933 book *Broadcasting*, Matheson wrote about the importance of these talks:

It is difficult to exaggerate what broadcasting has done and is doing for women... Women listeners stand to gain from the whole range of programmes... But broadcasting can give them also, as it were, a preparatory course to help them to catch up, to feel less at a disadvantage, to keep abreast of wider interests.

To realise her programmes for women, Hilda Matheson's was helped by a female Assistant, Elise Sprott, one of the Talks Assistants discussed in Chapter Four.<sup>123</sup> Miss Sprott was already in the department when Matheson arrived and although a dogged worker, she did not inspire and their relationship was strained. Nevertheless, Sprott had the initial ideas for *Household Talks* and *Morning Talks*, both of which became particularly successful programme strands. The reason for Sprott and Matheson's incompatibility appears to be one of temperament. Photographs show Sprott, who was a year older than Matheson, to be old-fashioned and ill-dressed, very different from Matheson's cultured sophistication.<sup>124</sup> Elise Sprott had not been to university and the fact that she was not an intellectual appears also to have been an issue. Matheson's letters to Vita reveal a desperate quest for an assistant who ideally would be "a frightfully

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<sup>121</sup> For a brief history of the Hadow Committee see: R14/145/1a: Education: Adult Education: Papers and Reports: 1924-1934 undated document 'Diary of Events', an overview of Adult Education Talks, 1923-1938

<sup>122</sup> See for example R14/88: Education: Adult: NFWI 1928-1943

<sup>123</sup> Chapter Four, p.218

<sup>124</sup> Sprott is named only once in Matheson's letters to Vita as "Fat Miss Sprott". [HML](#), June 11<sup>th</sup> 1929

intelligent young woman of robust and excellent judgement".<sup>125</sup> Vita suggested that Girton and Somerville College be approached and eventually, in September 1930, Margery Wace, an Oxford graduate, joined the department as a Talks Assistant, almost certainly at Matheson's behest.<sup>126</sup> Perhaps because of the arrival of Wace, the tensions in the department worsened and following an undisclosed 'incident' that involved Sprott and Matheson, Miss Sprott was moved to a new job, as Women's Press Representative, in June 1931.<sup>127</sup>

We know little of Matheson's working relationship with Margery Wace, as Wace's staff file was not retained, however Matheson's relationship with her male assistants was both dynamic and indulgent. Her letters to Vita could hardly be more effusive about her personal appointees, Joe Ackerley and Lionel Fielden, both young men of high intellectual ability.<sup>128</sup> In his memoir, Fielden wrote how initially he was uncertain that he could work under a woman, but he soon changed his mind commenting:

Hilda was never preoccupied by power, never lectured, never laid down the law. She ran her department on a loose rein, encouraging, helping, sympathising and yet keeping herself firmly in the saddle.<sup>129</sup>

Thus Matheson engaged and inspired those around her with a relaxed and supportive management style. Even Elise Sprott's output was emboldened.

Matheson was deeply committed to her job; in *Broadcasting* she wrote how broadcasters were never off duty and could never rest, being always on the look out for new ideas.<sup>130</sup> Her letters to Vita reveal this fertility of mind. Matheson rarely ceased working whether it was reading manuscripts at home late into the night, rummaging through Vita's bookshelves for inspiration for poetry readings

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<sup>125</sup> HML, January 28<sup>th</sup> 1929

<sup>126</sup> HML, February 9<sup>th</sup>, February 16<sup>th</sup>

<sup>127</sup> R3/3/11: Control Board Minutes, June 30<sup>th</sup> 1931; Reith Diaries, end of June 1929, date not specific

<sup>128</sup> "Lionel and Joe are dears", "Lionel and Joe have been very sweet to me..." HML, January 14<sup>th</sup>, January 21<sup>st</sup> 1929. Fielden was recruited in October 1927, Ackerley in May 1928. Matheson had also inherited Bill Brennan, of whom she was also fond. Ackerley would go on to be Literary Editor of *The Listener*; Fielden to be Controller of Broadcasting in India.

<sup>129</sup> Fielden, *op.cit.*, p.114

<sup>130</sup> Matheson, Broadcasting, *op.cit.*, pp.51-52



or courting politicians at lunch engagements.<sup>131</sup> She also socialised with her boss, Roger Eckersley, who had become a close friend, and with Mary Somerville.<sup>132</sup> Matheson did belong to a club, the Albermarle, but rarely used it.<sup>133</sup> Her later membership of the Women's Provisional Club lasted little longer than a year.<sup>134</sup> In this she differed to senior BBC men for whom the club was vital for networking.<sup>135</sup> Like Somerville, Matheson maintained and built her contacts through intimate lunches, dinners and at house parties.

Matheson developed an intensely personal relationship with the BBC. In her letters to Vita it was "my BBC", her office was capitalised as 'MY OFFICE', the male assistants she worked with, 'my young men'.<sup>136</sup> She also wrote warmly of her secretary Miss Barry.<sup>137</sup> Matheson's deep personal attachment to people and places extended to her home in Kensington which she shared with her "Sumner Place Family", Marjorie Maxse and Dorothy Spencer<sup>138</sup> Here, Matheson had her own bedroom and sitting room with meals provided by a housekeeper, Susan.<sup>139</sup> It was not unusual for unmarried professional women to live together in the inter-war years, for instance, Eileen Power lived for a time with Karin Costelloe, Ray Strachey's sister; Vera Brittain and Winifred Holtby shared several flats while Alix Kilroy, who forged a career as one of the most senior women in the Civil Service in the inter-war years, lived with her sister Mona, a Chief Buyer at John

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<sup>131</sup> For example, HML, January 6<sup>th</sup> 1929, January 16<sup>th</sup> 1929, January 5<sup>th</sup> 1929

<sup>132</sup> The letters make a number of references to Somerville. For example, Matheson went to two parties at Somerville's new house in St John's Wood, HML, February 2<sup>nd</sup> 1929, May 8<sup>th</sup> 1929

<sup>133</sup> HML, December 12<sup>th</sup> 1928. Matheson claimed she went to her club once every six months or less. Control Board Minutes indicate the BBC paid her membership of the Albemarle, July 8<sup>th</sup> 1927.

<sup>134</sup> The Women's Provisional Club was founded in 1924 to serve high-flying business and professional women. Women's Library, 5/WPV/3/1: Women's Provisional Club: Executive Committee Minutes, March 29<sup>th</sup> 1931, May 31<sup>st</sup> 1932. Isa Benzie was also nominated as a member but her election was cancelled because of her lack of response, Executive Committee Minutes September 14<sup>th</sup> 1936, January 25<sup>th</sup> 1937

<sup>135</sup> Control Board Minutes often report the payment of subscription fees for Clubs.

<sup>136</sup> For example HML, January 12<sup>th</sup> 1929, January 23<sup>rd</sup> 1929, December 12<sup>th</sup> 1928, February 10<sup>th</sup> 1929

<sup>137</sup> See also Chapter Two, p.100

<sup>138</sup> Dame Marjorie Maxse (1891–1975) was the first administrator of the Women's Unionist Organisation, the women's wing of the Conservative Party. I can find no biographical details of Dorothy Spencer but Matheson wrote that she had had a classical education. HML, December 28<sup>th</sup> 1928

<sup>139</sup> They operated a diary system whereby the house-mates could either request other guests to be at dinner or ask that they have the house alone. Spenser had drawn a "prickly barbed wire entanglement" around the date that Vita was to return. HML, February 15<sup>th</sup> 1929

Lewis.<sup>140</sup> Although Matheson mused to Vita about buying her own flat, which she could afford, she enjoyed the company and emotional support of her house-mates.<sup>141</sup> This appears to have been of particular importance to Matheson who spent most of her time at work in a male environment.

Matheson's working day varied enormously. It might be a series of long meetings: for instance a Programme Board, a board to discuss controversy, a meeting with all the Station Directors (December 21<sup>st</sup> 1928) or it could be a succession of interviews with potential speakers: an Afghan, a docker, a man from the Royal Horticultural Society, four bridge players, a man from the music department to discuss combining poetry and music (January 3<sup>rd</sup> 1929). Matheson was not beyond using her influence to further her friends; her letters to Vita leave no doubt that she openly manipulated her lover's appointment as the BBC's fortnightly reviewer of new novels, axing Mary Agnes Hamilton in the process.<sup>142</sup> Matheson hoped to "screw" around £300 a year "out of the old misers" for Vita, although she made clear that it was Vita's prestige and beautiful voice that merited the appointment.<sup>143</sup> The love affair with Vita enhanced Matheson's confidence at work, she knew Reith would disapprove and she enjoyed the frisson it added to her daily life.<sup>144</sup> Hilda Matheson was known to be unconventional, Roger Eckersley wrote that she was the only person in the BBC to bring a dog into the office and get away with it.<sup>145</sup> Matheson also told Vita how she liked to conduct meetings on the floor round her fire "which shocks the great who may come in terribly". How far these peccadilloes were indulged because she was a woman is difficult to say, but she enjoyed being different.

Of all radio output in the inter-war years, Talks caused the most apprehension for management because of the potential for controversy or offence. Roger Eckersley confessed that this was the most vulnerable and difficult side of his work as

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<sup>140</sup> Berg, op.cit., p.141. Vera Brittain, Testament of Friendship (London: Fontana, 1940) pp.113, 274; Meynell, op.cit., pp.105, 159. See also Virginia Nicholson, Singled Out: How Two Million Women Survived without Men after the First World War (London: Viking, 2007) pp.151-157

<sup>141</sup> HML, February 2<sup>nd</sup> 1929

<sup>142</sup> See for example HML, January 15<sup>th</sup> 1929, January 23<sup>rd</sup> 1929, January 24<sup>th</sup> 1929, February 9<sup>th</sup> 1929, February 17<sup>th</sup> 1929

<sup>143</sup> HML, January 20<sup>th</sup> 1929

<sup>144</sup> HML, January 3<sup>rd</sup> 1929

<sup>145</sup> Eckersley, op.cit., p.100. The dog, a spaniel, had been a gift from Vita.

Director of Programmes.<sup>146</sup> As Talks Director, Matheson had to tread a fine line between what she described as the “highly tendentious or the intolerably dull.”<sup>147</sup> There is no doubt that Hilda Matheson often showed great bravado, for instance, in January 1929 she arranged the first live debate to involve all three political parties, on the De-Rating Bill.<sup>148</sup> Reith and Carpendale were jittery; Carpendale, in particular “got cold feet” but Matheson was reassuring and eventually had him “wriggling on a pin”.<sup>149</sup> On the night of the debate itself, she rushed back to “calm an agitated DG” but in the event it was a great success “seventy minutes of it and it honestly wasn’t dull.”<sup>150</sup> In some high-pressured situations, however, Matheson could lack self-confidence as her letters to Vita testify.<sup>151</sup> When she was worried, she doubted herself and became defensive, apprehensive that her gender might be seen as partly to blame. She feared that she would be viewed as “an unbalanced female unsuited to big jobs.”<sup>152</sup> Matheson’s response was the opposite to that of her manager Roger Eckersley who indicated in his memoir that although he had always been “uneasily conscious of my limitations on the talks and educational side”, he always tried to hide it.<sup>153</sup> This suggests that senior male managers at the BBC felt compelled to shun vulnerability; indeed Reith’s diaries show that this was a characteristic he abhorred.

In June 1929, Matheson reported her first major disagreement with Reith and Eckersley over the direction of Talks. She described to Vita an hour and a half’s argument, “hammer and tongs” on controversial subjects and thence to the future development of Talks.<sup>154</sup> Reith expressed anxiety that Matheson was straying too far into controversial ground; Matheson scorned Reith’s opinions as those of someone ill-informed and little-read. Eckersley warned Matheson that she was getting a name for “unreasonable truculence” which caused her to rail to Vita that

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<sup>146</sup> Eckersley dreaded “the accidental passing of some statement with deep political or other implications which should have been blue pencilled and for which I should be responsible.” Eckersley, op.cit., pp.156, 124

<sup>147</sup> Matheson, Broadcasting op.cit., p.93

<sup>148</sup> The De-Rating Act was intended to encourage agriculture and industry, by freeing them from a portion of the rates.

<sup>149</sup> HML, January 5<sup>th</sup> 1929, January 15<sup>th</sup> 1929

<sup>150</sup> HML, January 22<sup>nd</sup> 1929

<sup>151</sup> For example, she decried her “damned thin-skinnedness”, HML, January 6<sup>th</sup> 1929

<sup>152</sup> HML, February 20<sup>th</sup> 1929

<sup>153</sup> Eckersley, op.cit. p.137

<sup>154</sup> HML June 20<sup>th</sup> 1929. Reith commented in his diary: “Saw Eckersley and Miss Matheson about her work and there is trouble brewing there.” Reith Diaries, June 20<sup>th</sup> 1929

they were “always so damned ready to say to any woman who disagrees with them that it is unreasonable and shows a lack of balance.”<sup>155</sup>

Although Matheson’s disagreement with Eckersley and Reith was quickly patched-up she became convinced that there were plans to undermine her position.<sup>156</sup> She was justified in her concerns; in October 1929 Adult Education Talks, under Charles Siepmann, were absorbed into the Talks Department, with Siepmann continuing to head his section and becoming second-in-command to Matheson. Siepmann, who had joined the BBC in 1927 as an Education Assistant, had initially been viewed by Matheson as “a nice boy” but promoted to the position of a rival, their relationship faltered.<sup>157</sup> At the same time as Siepmann’s promotion, Matheson lost control of ‘Topicality’ i.e. Outside Broadcasts and News, which became separate departments. Topicality was an area she particularly relished and this was a further blow. In early 1931 there was another reorganisation, this time a separation of Talks and Adult Education, with Siepmann attaining equal status with Matheson.<sup>158</sup> Matheson was seen to be undermined and her self-confidence again plummeted. This coincided with the end of her relationship with Vita who had begun a new love affair with Evelyn Irons.<sup>159</sup>

It was ultimately Matheson’s relationship with Reith that was to be her undoing. Once weakened, she was unable to stand up to him and lost his respect. At first their relationship was congenial, she had been specifically recruited by him and Reith’s diaries mention many shared social occasions, for example in October 1926, soon after her arrival, he recorded, “Miss Matheson has joined us and is doing well”.<sup>160</sup> However, the entry for March 4<sup>th</sup> 1930, recorded that he was

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<sup>155</sup> HML, June 22<sup>nd</sup> 1929

<sup>156</sup> HML, June 28<sup>th</sup> 1929

<sup>157</sup> HML, February 10<sup>th</sup> 1929, June 28<sup>th</sup> 1929, July 3<sup>rd</sup> 1929

<sup>158</sup> Matheson was Director of Talks (General); Siepmann, Director of Adult Education (Talks); Mary Somerville, Director of Schools (Talks).

<sup>159</sup> Evelyn Irons was the Woman’s Page Editor of the *Daily Mail*. She had come to interview Vita on March 6<sup>th</sup> 1931. Glendinning, op.cit., pp.238-239

<sup>160</sup> Reith Diaries, October 29<sup>th</sup> 1926. On, March 1<sup>st</sup> 1927, Reith recorded a lunch with Miss Matheson and Ernest Barker; on October 13<sup>th</sup> 1928, he went to Peaslake in Surrey with Miss Matheson to meet her family.

“developing a great dislike for Miss Matheson and all her works”.<sup>161</sup> The final straw for Matheson came in the autumn of 1931 when Reith and Eckersley attempted to water-down her series *The New Spirit in Literature* presented by Vita’s husband, Harold Nicolson. Nicolson was told he could not mention Lawrence and Joyce; he threatened to pull out, pointing out the ludicrous nature of a programme on modern literature without reference to these two defining authors. Although a compromise was reached, Matheson felt unable to support the decision that there would be no allusion to *Ulysses*.<sup>162</sup> On October 12<sup>th</sup> 1931 she tendered her resignation to the BBC.<sup>163</sup>

News of Matheson’s resignation reached the press in early December 1931 with much speculation as to the reasons for her departure. The *Manchester Guardian* hazarded the guess that it was because of differences of opinion between two opposing schools of thought “one in favour of the intellectual type of talk and the other desiring a more popular note in the selection of talk topics and speakers.”<sup>164</sup> The *Evening News* described the difficulties of her job, trying to appease those who saw talks as trivial and dreary with others who were offended by anything controversial.<sup>165</sup> The headline in the *News Chronicle*, “A Woman’s Duel with the BBC” summed up the paper’s opinion that it was her struggle with a management of men which had led to her resignation. However, there is little to support its view that Miss Matheson “had pressed her views from a feminine standpoint in the face of overwhelming masculine opposition.”<sup>166</sup> She was undoubtedly isolated in a man’s world and when things went well, little heed was given to her gender. When things went wrong, on the other hand, the fact that she was ‘different’ appears to have added to the tensions.<sup>167</sup>

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<sup>161</sup> *Reith Diaries*, March 4<sup>th</sup> 1930

<sup>162</sup> Michael Carney drew extensively on Harold Nicolson’s diaries for his understanding of Matheson’s resignation from the BBC. Carney, op.cit., pp.71-74

<sup>163</sup> *Reith Diaries*, November 1931 (no date) Reith recorded receiving Matheson’s resignation: “It is her own fault that things have got to this pass, but she was quite mad about it.”

<sup>164</sup> *Manchester Guardian*, December 4<sup>th</sup> 1931

<sup>165</sup> *Evening News*, December 3<sup>rd</sup> 1931

<sup>166</sup> *News Chronicle*, December 3<sup>rd</sup> 1931

<sup>167</sup> Rosabeth Moss Kanter identified this as a factor that negatively affected women managers in the 1970s. *Men and Women of the Corporation* (New York: Basic Books, 1977) p.214

Briggs explained the reasons for Hilda Matheson's resignation as partly personal and partly because of the changing political climate, which viewed the BBC as increasingly left-wing.<sup>168</sup> A Conservative Government had been returned with a large majority in 1931 and there was growing criticism of the Corporation in the right-wing press. As early as 1929, Matheson was writing to Vita about attacks on the BBC in the *Daily Mail*.<sup>169</sup> Whether Matheson actively promoted a 'left-wing' agenda has been widely debated. Scannell and Cardiff point out how, by their very nature, talks involving the main cultural thinkers of the day would be progressive.<sup>170</sup> Lionel Fielden admitted that he and Hilda attended a good many parties where intellectuals gathered; hobnobbing with 'progressives', he claimed, was seen as tantamount to being a 'Red'.<sup>171</sup> However, there is no evidence that Matheson was a supporter of the Labour Party, indeed many of her closest friends were Conservative Party activists. Nevertheless, with hostility from both press and parliament, Reith was anxious to stamp on what he perceived as left-wing bias in Talks. Matheson was identified with this and Reith was glad to see her go. Charles Siepmann replaced her as Talks Director in January 1932.

Michael Carney, in his biography of Matheson, stressed that men who lost faith with Reith were not forced to resign, rather they were ignored or moved to a different job. The implication here is that Matheson was edged out because she was a woman.<sup>172</sup> It is true that there was less scope for her to be side-lined and it is difficult to think of another position in the BBC to which she could have been assigned. But Hilda Matheson resigned over principles. She was prohibited from carrying out her job in the way that she wanted to do it. According to Lionel Fielden nine members of the Talks Department, including himself, were prepared to resign over her treatment, but she persuaded them otherwise.<sup>173</sup> Had Matheson been a man, she may not have felt compelled to leave the BBC; differences of opinion might have been tempered at the Club or over lunch. It is also true that Matheson never saw herself as part of the rat-race to the top of the BBC; she was not one of the senior managers pushing for power. This may have prompted her

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<sup>168</sup> Briggs, op.cit., p.141

<sup>169</sup> *HML*, December 20<sup>th</sup> 1928, December 27<sup>th</sup> 1928

<sup>170</sup> Scannell and Cardiff, op.cit., p.155

<sup>171</sup> Fielden, op.cit., pp.115-116

<sup>172</sup> Carney, op.cit., p.79

<sup>173</sup> Fielden, op.cit., p.117

to resign rather than compromise. We can only speculate as to where she might have ended up in the BBC hierarchy had she remained.

Matheson's legacy was immense, under her tenure both the prestige and the output of the Talks Department was transformed. Her expansion of programmes for women and the increase in the number of women broadcasters showed a greater awareness of, and commitment to, the BBC's female audience.

Matheson's position as a Director, however, was more fraught than was the case for Somerville and Benzie because the position she held was one of constant scrutiny and exposure. The post of Talks Director was particularly tough; radio talks were the most scrutinised programmes on the BBC, criticised for being both high-brow and low-brow, or for having a left or right-wing bias. Matheson had to negotiate a path between these opposing views, whilst at the same time enhancing and expanding the output. Her successor Charles Siepmann was similarly censured, which suggests that Matheson's difficulties and the criticisms levelled against her were due to her outlook and the nature of the job rather than her gender.<sup>174</sup>

Following her resignation, Matheson maintained her links with broadcasting first as a radio critic for *The Observer* and *Weekend Review*, then as the author of *Broadcasting*, the first book to be written about the process of making radio, and ultimately as Director of the Joint Broadcasting Committee, a government-funded venture set up in 1939 which arranged for material about Britain to be broadcast by foreign radio stations.<sup>175</sup> Matheson had by then diagnosed with Graves Disease and did not survive an operation to remove part of her thyroid gland; she died on October 30th 1940. At the time of her death she had lived with the poet Dorothy Wellesley for eight years.

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<sup>174</sup> See Scannell and Cardiff, *op.cit.*, pp.153-159.

<sup>175</sup> For a discussion on Matheson's career after the BBC, see Carney, *op.cit.*, pp.85-137

## ISA BENZIE (1902-1988)

Isa Benzie is the least known and least documented of the three women under consideration here. Benzie had two distinct BBC careers. Prior to the Second World War she worked in the Foreign Department, serving as Foreign Director from 1933-1938. Her post-war career was as a radio producer during which time she became the doyenne of health broadcasting and instrumental in establishing the *Today* programme in 1957.<sup>176</sup> On her retirement in 1964, earning £2,835 a year, she was one of the few women in the Corporation graded 'A1'. Benzie was an Oxford graduate, like Matheson and Somerville, but one who chose to start her BBC career in a secretarial capacity. She is thus a prime example of a woman who was promoted through the ranks. Benzie was less troublesome and less vocal than her two older colleagues, her department was far smaller and neither did she garner the same management esteem; nevertheless, she held a significant position in the Corporation in the 1930s.

Isa Benzie, like Somerville and Matheson, was of Scottish decent, born in Glasgow in 1902. Her father was a chartered accountant and she was educated at Laurel Bank School in the city, as well as at a variety of private and convent establishments in Belfast and Southern Ireland. In 1922, she took a place at Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford where she studied Modern Languages, majoring in German. She excelled at games and her popularity and gusto is evident in her selection as College Secretary, Head Student and President of the Junior Common Room. While at university she spent time studying in both Germany and France and, after she graduated in 1926, continued her love of languages, teaching herself Spanish and Dutch. She also took a secretarial course at Pitman's College.

During the First World War her father, Lt Colonel Robert Marr Benzie, served in the same army division as Reith, and it was through her father that Isa Benzie first

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<sup>176</sup> Biographical details from: L1/1049/2: Isa Benzie Staff File 2, (IBSF:2) Staff Record, July 24<sup>th</sup> 1935; DNB; Paul Donovan, All Our Today's: Forty Years of Radio 4's 'Today' Programme (London: Jonathan Cape, 1997)



came to the attention of the BBC.<sup>177</sup> In June 1927 Robert Benzie wrote to Reith, at Isa's behest, informing his former comrade that she was "a young lady of considerable character and ability."<sup>178</sup> He went on to sing the praises of his daughter: her great linguistic ability, her musical prowess and the fact that she was currently training herself in shorthand and typing. She was keen to come to the BBC, he stressed, to do 'useful work', in particular something that would involve languages. He enclosed glowing testimonials from her College tutors and concluded his letter with an exasperated stab at the young men who worked in his own office, wishing that they had "half the industry and perseverance she possesses". In her father's eyes, Isa Benzie was clever and linguistic; her education and her ambition a sign of her modernity.

Reith's response to his old friend was positive. There were, he explained, periodically opportunities for girls like Isa, university graduates and people with considerable educational qualifications, but these were rare. Another possible approach was as a shorthand typist; girls who were especially able could very quickly work their way up.<sup>179</sup> No opportunity was immediately forthcoming but that autumn, Major C.F. Atkinson, the BBC's Foreign Liaison Officer, was in need of a new secretary. Isa Benzie was duly seen by Miss Banks, the Women's Staff Supervisor, who liked her, and by Reith's deputy, Carpendale, who thought her rather young and shy. In spite of Carpendale's reservations, she was offered a three month trial in the Foreign Department, starting in December 1927.<sup>180</sup> Her wages were £3 a week.

The Foreign Department's role in the BBC was to maintain close and regular contact with broadcasting organisations in other countries. The global explosion in broadcasting in the 1920s and 1930s made it vital for the BBC to be fully informed of all international developments and the Department acted as a clearinghouse for all foreign activities. Benzie quickly proved herself to be one of the girls identified by Reith as having "special ability"; her temperament and

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<sup>177</sup> Reith and Lt Col Benzie had kept in touch. In early 1924, for example, they sat next to each other at the 5<sup>th</sup> Scottish Rifles annual reunion dinner. *Reith Diaries*, January 22<sup>nd</sup> 1924

<sup>178</sup> IBSF:2, Colonel Benzie to Reith, June 6<sup>th</sup> 1927

<sup>179</sup> IBSF:2, Reith to Colonel Benzie, June 8<sup>th</sup> 1927

<sup>180</sup> IBSF: 2, Atkinson to Goldsmith, November 29th 1927

skills were perfect for the job and she was soon deputising for Atkinson, her boss, who had been re-designated Foreign Director in April 1928. Atkinson was impressed by Benzie; in October 1928, he pressed for a salary increase, on the grounds that she often deputised for him.<sup>181</sup> In March 1929, he remarked on her mental maturity, her high degree of initiative, her capacity for negotiating and her keen eye for policy implications in letters and minutes.<sup>182</sup> Atkinson requested that her wage be raised to £5, the roof of the clerical grades, a hefty increase of £1.10s a week. The following year, now in effect, “the Executive of her Department”, Benzie was promoted to the monthly-paid staff and Assistant grade on £300 a year.<sup>183</sup>

Apart from managing the office, a key area of Isa Benzie’s work was the organisation of relays from the Continent i.e. the broadcasting of overseas programmes on the BBC. This was a complex process which involved negotiating for the items themselves, sorting out the timings of transmission, the publicity materials, the copyright and so on. Benzie’s Annual Report for January 1933 highlighted the success of a European tour in which she had negotiated a series of open relays from Germany and Austria. This was, her boss Atkinson emphasised:

...a liaison which involved tact and command of an intricate situation, and I know from what foreign colleagues have said to me since that she created an excellent impression, besides in fact succeeding in the purposes of her tour.

In addition to her relay work, Benzie also entertained European callers, liaised with European broadcasters and frequently deputised for Atkinson when he was away.<sup>184</sup> She also provided an information service for Vernon Bartlett who presented the popular weekly BBC talks series *The Way of the World*.

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<sup>181</sup> IBSF:2, Wade to Carpendale, October 28<sup>th</sup> 1928. It was turned down on the grounds that secretaries were expected to deputise when their principals were on leave.

<sup>182</sup> IBSF:2, Atkinson to ?? (unclear), March 6<sup>th</sup> 1929

<sup>183</sup> IBSF:2, Confidential Report, 1930. The term ‘executive’ refers to Benzie’s administrative role.

<sup>184</sup> IBSF:2, Atkinson to Goldsmith, February 6<sup>th</sup> 1933

In December 1932, the BBC's Empire Service was inaugurated with its remit to broadcast English language programmes to places as far flung as India, Canada and Australia. Although the Foreign Department maintained its distinctive role liaising with overseas broadcasters, it was deemed prudent to bring it within the new and larger Empire and Foreign Services Department under a new head, Cecil Graves. In the absence of a personal file for Atkinson, it is not known whether this was the reason he resigned as Foreign Director in April 1933. However it was a golden opportunity for Benzie who, aged thirty-one, assumed his role. This is the strongest example in the inter-war BBC of a woman being promoted to high office because she was in the right place at the right time. Benzie's promotion was facilitated by Atkinson who had always made a point of championing her; drawing to the attention of his managers' her skills and attributes.<sup>185</sup>

If the post of Foreign Director had been filled either by advertisement or by transference from another area of the Corporation, it would almost certainly have gone to a man. In the BBC of the 1930s, no woman was ever directly appointed to an executive post. As Foreign Director, Benzie's salary was to be £500 a year. Although this was a considerable rise for Benzie, whose annual earnings jumped by £150, it was markedly less than the £1250 Atkinson had commanded.<sup>186</sup> Benzie's salary would become the subject of some debate, as will be shown.

To be Foreign Director was both a daunting and prestigious position which involved negotiating at the highest level. The BBC Standing Instructions listed amongst the duties of the post: the collection, communication and record of incoming foreign information; executive dealings with foreign and international press, radio organisations and cultural movements; dealings with the public on foreign and international matters and the provision for foreign courtesies i.e. entertaining foreign dignitaries.<sup>187</sup> The job also entailed being across all foreign links initiated by other BBC departments, for example in music and education, and the Foreign Director was also called upon to represent the Corporation at

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<sup>185</sup> Atkinson's role encapsulated the 'office uncle' identified in 'Women in Top Jobs', Fogarty, *op.cit.*, p.61

<sup>186</sup> Atkinson had joined the BBC in 1925 on £450 a year. His salary in 1927, when Benzie started, was already £800.

<sup>187</sup> BBC Standing Instructions: Foreign Department

International Broadcast Meetings which frequently took place abroad. In May 1936, the *Morning Post* marvelled at Benzie's ability to "ring up New York, Sydney, Calcutta or Cape Town as casually as you and I call a taxi".<sup>188</sup> The same month *Wireless* magazine ran a feature on her, describing Benzie's work as "a job that would intimidate many a man."<sup>189</sup> In April 1937, *Ariel* reported on the complex negotiations the Foreign Department had been involved with in connection with the George VI's Coronation, a relay of which was being taken "by practically every country in the world."<sup>190</sup>

It is not known whether, as a result of her new-found status, Benzie made any adjustments to her personal life. It appears she continued to share her London flat with her colleague Janet Quigley whom Benzie had introduced to the BBC.<sup>191</sup> Quigley, an Assistant in the Foreign Department, was responsible for all American links. The fact that Benzie had become her boss didn't seem to affect adversely their relationship. Benzie's friendship with Reith also continued. As the daughter of an acquaintance, Reith took a paternalistic interest in her, for instance she joined him and his family for Christmas dinner in December 1929.<sup>192</sup> In the 1930s, Reith and Isa Benzie lunched together and she also visited Harrias House, Reith's Beaconsfield home.<sup>193</sup> Benzie was an arresting-looking young woman; a photograph in *Ariel* from 1937 shows her with dramatically short hair and an exquisitely made-up face.<sup>194</sup> However, apart from a few snippets of personal details, very little is known about the character of this "pale, remote, intellectual" who the *Daily Express* described in 1937 as "the most important woman" of the BBC.<sup>195</sup>

Like Somerville and Matheson, Isa Benzie gave her all to the Corporation. In August 1935 she complained that she was working on average fourteen hours a day. It was the only way she could complete even the basics of her job, she

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<sup>188</sup> *Morning Post*, May 18<sup>th</sup> 1936

<sup>189</sup> *Wireless Magazine*, May 1936

<sup>190</sup> *Ariel*, April 1937

<sup>191</sup> At Benzie's suggestion, Quigley had joined the Foreign Department as an Assistant in 1930. L1/784/1: Janet Quigley Staff File, Atkinson to Carpendale, December 18th 1929.

<sup>192</sup> *Reith Diaries*, December 25<sup>th</sup> 1929

<sup>193</sup> *Reith Diaries*, see for example, July 14<sup>th</sup> 1933, May 23<sup>rd</sup> 1934, April 23<sup>rd</sup> 1937

<sup>194</sup> *Ariel*, September 1937. Earlier staff photographs shows Benzie with a chignon.

<sup>195</sup> *Daily Express*, June 22<sup>nd</sup> 1937

protested, and gave her little time for what she termed “constructive work or initiation.”<sup>196</sup> She was often in correspondence with senior executives over low staffing levels and in September 1935 was finally successful in acquiring a second Assistant, Richard Marriot, which increased the full-time staff of the department to four.<sup>197</sup> The appointment of Marriot raises an interesting point, why it was considered necessary for the new Assistant to be a man. In her plea for a second Assistant, Benzie had specified “he”, that “he should be young, adaptable and presentable”, with, “ability to get on by himself”.<sup>198</sup> Cecil Graves, the Empire Service Director was “definitely anxious that the job should be given to a man”, a point on which Miss Benzie concurred.<sup>199</sup> The reason may be simple. With Janet Quigley already in place as an Assistant and a female secretary, the only man working in the department in 1935 was the Foreign Executive, J.M.G. Best.<sup>200</sup> One more woman might have lowered the department’s status. However, according to *Ariel*, in 1937, the Department now had a staff of eight, six of whom were female.<sup>201</sup> These included Miss Benzie’s “personal clerk” Norah Wadsley, and two further departmental secretaries.

Benzie functioned in a masculine world. At the BBC, the senior executives she worked with were all men: Cecil Graves as Empire Service Director, Lindsay Wellington as Director of Programme Planning and Basil Nicolls as Director of Internal Administration. She made frequent trips to Europe as one of the BBC’s representative at the UIR, (the Union Internationale de Radiophone), again a male dominated organisation.<sup>202</sup> At one point, Reith queried whether Miss Benzie should be given the same status accorded to Graves by the UIR, the implication being that, as Foreign Director and as a woman, she was of lower rank.<sup>203</sup> It is possible, however, that as a rare female, Benzie garnered more attention when she

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<sup>196</sup> R13/206: Departmental: Foreign Department, 1935-1938, Benzie to Beadle (Empire and Foreign Executive), August 27<sup>th</sup> 1935

<sup>197</sup> Richard Marriot joined Janet Quigley as an Assistant. Benzie had a personal secretary and also the full-time use of a short-hand typist in the General Office.

<sup>198</sup> Departmental: Foreign Department, op.cit., Benzie to Beadle, August 27<sup>th</sup> 1935

<sup>199</sup> Same file, Beadle to Nicolls, September 4<sup>th</sup> 1935

<sup>200</sup> Following the Production/Administration split of 1933, all departments had an Executive, who acted as the liaison between Production and Administration.

<sup>201</sup> *Ariel*, April 1937

<sup>202</sup> See for example, R3/3/11: Control Board Minutes, 1936: 14th January 1936, June 17th 1936, September 7th 1936

<sup>203</sup> Control Board Minutes, 14th January 1936

was abroad and in consequence was treated with greater courtesy. Part of Benzie's job was to greet foreign dignitaries, again at this level they would almost always have been men. In this sense, the BBC appears to have been happy that one of its most important international ambassadors was a woman. Perhaps it even added a certain cachet to an organisation that was keen to be seen as innovative to the wider world.

Benzie's work in the Foreign Department was applauded by her seniors. A testimonial from 1945 recalled her rapid promotion to Foreign Director was a result of her "intelligence, wide knowledge and executive ability."<sup>204</sup> In April 1936, Nicolls, now Controller (Administration), announced that Benzie was to be given equal status with other Heads of Department in the Programme Division, however, an interesting situation had arisen over Isa Benzie's salary. Because of the BBC's system of linking pay to the individual rather than the job, (as Chapter Four has shown), Benzie had assumed the position of Foreign Director on a very low rate. While her manager, Graves, was satisfied to offer her annual increments of £50, which was in keeping with £500 a year, Nicolls, in his capacity as head of staff administration, was adamant that her salary should be raised significantly and for three years in a row, a rise of £100 was authorised. This was seen as more in line with the responsibilities of the job and in keeping with the role of a department head.<sup>205</sup> Benzie herself appears to have been unaware of these negotiations and there is no indication that she was personally unhappy about her remuneration. She was more typical of those at the BBC, especially women, who didn't feel it appropriate to discuss their level of pay. In 1937, on the recommendation of her seniors, she received a further financial boost. She was to be re-graded 'A' which meant not only enhanced status, but a new salary roof of at least £1,250.<sup>206</sup>

However, Benzie's promotion in June 1937 coincided with the announcement of her engagement. Unlike Mary Somerville, who opted to work as a married

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<sup>204</sup> IBSF: 1, Acting Administrative Assistant (Talks) to Administrative Officer (Talks), December 7<sup>th</sup> 1945

<sup>205</sup> ISBF:1, Confidential Reports 1934, 1935, 1936. In 1936, the ten other department heads in the division earned at least £1000, with Val Gielgud earning £1,550 in Drama and John Coatman £1600 in News. Mary Somerville earned £1,200.

<sup>206</sup> IBSF:1, Pym to Benzie, June 2nd 1937

woman, Benzie was “clear in her mind” that she did not want to lead “the double life that some girls do”.<sup>207</sup> On September 2<sup>nd</sup> 1937 she married John Royston Morley, ten years her junior, one of the thrusting young producers in the new Television Department.<sup>208</sup> The event merited reports in several newspapers, where comment was made on the fact that it was a morning wedding and so allowed Isa Benzie to return to work after lunch and that only two witnesses attended, one of whom was Janet Quigley.<sup>209</sup> Benzie formally resigned on January 3<sup>rd</sup> 1938. *The Times* reported that she was given a farewell luncheon and presentation attended by Reith, Carpendale and the four Controllers, amongst many others.<sup>210</sup> Following Benzie’s resignation, the appointment of a replacement was held up by the proposed re-organisation of Foreign and Empire Broadcasting. In the event, the position of Foreign Director was abolished. Marriot, one of Benzie’s Assistants, resumed the title Foreign Liaison Officer in the newly amalgamated Home Intelligence Department.

It is interesting to speculate whether it was Isa Benzie’s resignation that prompted a re-structuring of the department. In her four years in the post she had maintained if not raised its status, bringing it to a level with other department heads.<sup>211</sup> Her personal style and diplomatic skills, as evidenced in her Annual Reports, had given the job added prestige. Without her, the position became one of routine, reflected in her successor’s title and lower salary.<sup>212</sup> Once the Empire Service was in place, the Foreign Department had in many ways become an anomaly, kept alive by Benzie’s dedication and tremendously hard work. With Benzie’s retirement, the post ceased to be viable.

In her pre-war career, Isa Benzie represented the secretary-made-good. In many ways her rise through the ranks was the result of circumstance, she was the right

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<sup>207</sup> IBSF:2, Un-named memo to Nicolls/ Pym, June 7th 1937

<sup>208</sup> Reith was unimpressed by Morley. Meeting him for the first time shortly after the wedding he described him as “a dilettante sort of youth, presumably brainy.” *Reith Diaries*, May 5th 1938. The marriage was not a success.

<sup>209</sup> *Daily Sketch*, September 3<sup>rd</sup> 1937; *Daily Express*, September 3<sup>rd</sup> 1937; *Radio Pictorial*, September 17<sup>th</sup> 1937

<sup>210</sup> *The Times*, January 5<sup>th</sup> 1938

<sup>211</sup> It has been difficult to ascertain where in the hierarchy the Foreign Director sat, Briggs’s organisational charts are unclear. Briggs, op.cit., Appendix 2

<sup>212</sup> Marriot’s salary was raised from £400 to £650.

person, in the right place, at the right time. There is no indication in Benzie's personal file that she was a pushy person and she made few demands on her managers, rather it was management who identified her skills and pushed for her promotions and for her salary to be increased. Although she undoubtedly had flair, she was not so large a personality as Matheson or Somerville and so made less impact on the BBC. The post of Foreign Director was also less high-powered than those of School Broadcasting Director or Talks Director. Nevertheless, the importance of her role should not be underestimated; good foreign relations were vital to the inter-war BBC. Benzie was often lauded in newspaper articles as one of those women who held a significant job.<sup>213</sup> When she resigned in 1938 there was a genuine sadness at the loss of a woman of her abilities.<sup>214</sup>

## **CONCLUSION**

This chapter has shown how BBC women of the 1920s and 1930s were able to hold positions of considerable authority and responsibility. Somerville, Matheson and Benzie were treated largely as equals and with esteem in jobs which could as easily have been filled by men. The timing is significant; the nature of the early BBC made it possible for women who were seen as exceptional to attain the position of Director. By the mid 1930s, these posts were either filled from outside the Corporation or from the ranks of ambitious young men zigzagging their way through the BBC hierarchy. Mary Somerville was the only woman to survive as a Director, and ultimately as a Controller, into the post-war era.

Opportunity was the hallmark of all three women; none applied for a Director post, rather it was thrust upon them. Once in the role, their conduct and ability meant they commanded respect and were able to grow and develop their departments. The BBC was happy for the three women to act as ambassadors and be a public face of the Corporation. In all three jobs, the women met with high ranking individuals and it may have been that the BBC enjoyed the extra cachet that an eminent woman brought to the post. It would have been seen as modern,

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<sup>213</sup> See for example: Morning Post, September 6<sup>th</sup> 1934; Answers, October 5<sup>th</sup> 1935; Manchester Guardian, March 3<sup>rd</sup> 1936; Express and Star, September 4<sup>th</sup> 1936

<sup>214</sup> After the birth of her daughter in 1938 Benzie worked from 1939-1942 for the Ministry of Information. In 1943 she returned to the BBC as a Talks Producer.



and perhaps unexpected, that a woman should be in charge. Although the status and pay of the three women may not have matched that of the highest earning BBC men, Mary Somerville's salary of £1,500 in 1939 was rare for a woman in the inter-war years and would have placed her amongst the most highly paid females in the UK.

In the inter-war years elite women became more visible, as the scores of eminent women who broadcast on the BBC bears witness to. However, the rise of women to senior positions was still viewed as a novelty; newspapers and magazine editors enjoyed tantalizing their readers with the varied jobs top women held and the huge salaries they could earn.<sup>215</sup> The memoirs of women who rose to the top at this time, for example the Civil Service Principal, Alix Kilroy and the wealthy stockbroker Gordon Holmes, indicate that initial astonishment at their status became acceptance once their abilities were known. Thus men, who had never entertained the idea of working with women, were prepared to knuckle-down and act approvingly. This was a similar situation to the BBC, where traditionally minded members of the Control Board endorsed the work of Somerville, Matheson and Benzie. Those newer to the BBC had grown up with women, so there was less surprise that they should hold important jobs. Winifred Holtby's assertion that "men find it beneath their dignity to take orders from a woman" was not so easily evident at the BBC where a limited culture of men working for women managers had developed.<sup>216</sup> Somerville, Matheson and Benzie were not seen as threats to the male hierarchy because they didn't take part in the jostling for high management positions endemic in the inter-war Corporation. In this way it was easier for them to form positive relationships with those around them. Less is known about Isa Benzie's style of management, but Mary Somerville and Hilda Matheson were decidedly informal and personal in the way they dealt with their teams.

The women's relationship with Reith was also important to their status at the BBC. Mary Somerville was undoubtedly viewed as a protégé, and Reith followed

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<sup>215</sup> The Star, 19<sup>th</sup> November 1937

<sup>216</sup> Winifred Holtby, 'The Man Colleague', Manchester Guardian, 24th May 1929 as quoted in Paul Berry and Alan Bishop, eds., Testament of a Generation: The Journalism of Vera Brittain and Winifred Holtby (London: Virago, 1985) p.60

and supported her career from the beginning. In this way, she was able to win privileges for her team, and access to the 'DG' when she wanted. Matheson was the only woman to have been head-hunted by Reith, and at first their relationship was positive. It was only when rifts developed in their views about the nature of Talks that matters deteriorated. Isa Benzie was the daughter of one of Reith's army colleague, and here the relationship was more paternal. She and Reith kept in touch throughout her career, even to the point of Reith agreeing to meet her future husband. One final point to note is that all the women were of Scottish decent. This may well have enhanced their relationship with Reith who retained a strong affinity with his homeland and who relished the company of those from a similar background.

The BBC benefited from its employment of women in top jobs. Somerville, Matheson and Benzie were able to maintain their high-ranking, high-paid positions because of their proven ability. The fact that they were women may have heightened their value to the BBC, as a manifestation of the Corporation's modernity. There is little evidence that the women were viewed as unequal to their male colleagues; they may have been disadvantaged in terms of salary but this was not surprising at a time when women conventionally earned less than men. Thus, the BBC of the inter-war years provided an environment where it was possible for elite women to thrive. However, from the mid 1930s, no woman was appointed Director; increased professionalism and a more rigid hierarchy meant the BBC now looked to men to fill these management posts. As Mary Agnes Hamilton pointed out in 1959, at that time there were no women at Director level in the BBC. It now remains to be investigated why the BBC largely retained its antipathy towards women in top jobs after the Second World War.

## CONCLUSION

When, two decades ago, I first became intrigued by BBC women, my interest was pioneers. Hilda Matheson and Mary Somerville stood out as shining examples of women who had risen to significant posts in the Corporation in the inter-war years. Ten years later, when I first read Asa Briggs' history of the BBC, I was pleased to find a paragraph that focused on other exceptional BBC women, with a tantalising nod to individuals such as Elise Sprott, Florence Milnes and Kathleen Lines. Briggs also made fleeting reference to the key part women in general played in the daily running of the organisation; that they were employed at many levels and in greater numbers than in comparable organisations.<sup>1</sup> In the almost fifty years since *The Golden Age of Broadcasting* was published these references to BBC women have remained largely unexplored. My subsequent wide research into women who worked in the BBC in the 1920s and 1930s has revealed a history far deeper than the success of a few trailblazers; it has shown a BBC that was vibrant with women at all levels bar the very top, to whom it offered good employment practices and, certainly for some, a culture of opportunity and a climate of equality. Waged women were the backbone of the BBC: as shorthand typists, clerks and kitchen hands they provided vital support services. Salaried women, in jobs as diverse as Talks Assistants, Advertising Canvassers and Press Officers, ensured women's voices and interests were represented in the output of the BBC.

For the title of the thesis, I quoted from Reith's 1926 directive on the employment of salaried women staff in which he stated they should be, "on an equal footing with men". However, the picture that has emerged of the BBC in the inter-war years is less clear cut. The ethos might have been one of sexual equality but in practice this was often not the case. In many ways this reflects a situation that is still evident in the workplace today, where glass ceilings, more limited promotional opportunities and lower pay for women are still widespread. The

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<sup>1</sup> Asa Briggs, *The Birth of Broadcasting*, The History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom vol. 1, (London: Oxford University Press, 1961); Asa Briggs, *The Golden Age of Broadcasting*, The History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom, vol. 2 (London Oxford University Press, 1965) pp.457-458

years after the First World War were an exceptional time for women; in a post-suffrage climate and with greater educational and employment opportunities, they flooded into the workforce. The chic young office girl became an image of modernity in newspapers, advertisements and the cinema. Employers, mainly men, had to adjust to this changed demographic. In long-established professions such as teaching and medicine, there is evidence of increased antagonism towards women; the National Association of Schoolmasters, for instance, sought to re-impose gender boundaries, while medical schools such as St Mary's ended its policy of accepting female students.<sup>2</sup> Under the 1921 Reorganisation Report, the Administrative Class examinations of the Civil Service were to be opened to women, however elsewhere in the service, separate promotional chains and pay differentials remained.<sup>3</sup>

As a new industry, established in 1922, the BBC was in a position to create employment practices rather than renegotiate them. Little was set in stone, rather the Company evolved and at the start, the evolution involved women who, like their male colleagues, were "having a go at any kind of job".<sup>4</sup> These were modern young women like Caroline Banks, the Women's Staff Supervisor, who lived with other career girls in Russell Square, and Olive May who left the security of work at the General Electric Company to set up the switchboard at Savoy Hill.<sup>5</sup> This sense of working together in a spirit of experiment and adventure imbued BBC staff with the notion of equality, as Cecil Lewis, the Assistant Director of Programmes, enthused it was a "democracy of young pioneers".<sup>6</sup> This post-war sense of new possibilities was vital to the development of the BBC, but so was the character and ethos of John Reith. Appointed General Manager of the British Broadcasting Company in 1922, as Sir John, he became Director General of the British Broadcasting Corporation in 1927. Reith wrote about the "criterion of

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<sup>2</sup> Alison Oram, Women Teachers and Feminist Politics 1900 - 1939 (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996) p.77; Kaarin Michaelsen, "Union Is Strength: The Medical Women's Federation and Politics of Professionalism, 1917-30," Women and Work Culture: Britain C1850-1950, ed. Krista Cowman and Louise Jackson (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005) p.169

<sup>3</sup> Dorothy Evans, Women and the Civil Service (London: Pitman, 1934) pp.33-43

<sup>4</sup> Recollections of Winifred Boustead, filing clerk, Magnate House in early 1923. Prospero, December 1968

<sup>5</sup> Brian Hennessy, The Emergence of Broadcasting in Britain (Lymington: Southerleigh, 2005) p.237; Prospero, June 1984

<sup>6</sup> Cecil Lewis, Broadcasting from Within (London: George Newnes Limited, 1924) p.37

dignity” he set at the BBC and evidence points towards a culture of mutual respect between women and men.<sup>7</sup> However, Reith was not intrinsically a modern man; his schooling and early working life as an engineer before the First World War and his experience of military service, were largely in all-male environments. The control of the BBC always remained in the hands of men; it never entered Reith’s head that it should be otherwise. Nevertheless, in the everyday running of the organisation, Reith believed that able women and men should receive fair treatment. It was the salaried rather than the waged who were the beneficiaries of this notion of equality.

The inter-war years were, in particular, an era of heightened opportunities for educated women. The Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act of 1919, by opening the professions to women, accepted their eligibility for specialist work. With the franchise extended to all adult women in 1928, their citizenship was confirmed. Universities, in particular women’s colleges, inculcated a sense of possibility and worth into their female students and the majority, who moved into teaching and the civil service, did so with a belief in their own capacities. As Oram and Glew have shown, while there might have been deep frustration and anger with the discriminatory policies that they encountered, women teachers and those in the Executive/Administrative grades in the Civil Servants were deeply committed to their jobs and felt equal to their male colleagues. In fact, it was the knowledge of their equal merit, and perhaps even superiority in their jobs, that made unequal pay and resignation on marriage so unacceptable.

At the BBC, monthly-paid women and men were employed on ostensibly the same grades, the same salaries and with the same promotional opportunities. Thus there was a perception of sexual equality amongst salaried staff. However, because salaries were decided on an individual basis, there was wide disparity and women were often paid less. Nevertheless, discrepancies could be broached with management, for instance Mary Candler and Mary Hope Allen both raised the subject of lower pay with their superiors and the issue was addressed. Unlike their counterparts in teaching and the civil service, the BBC’s salaried women

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<sup>7</sup> John Reith, Into the Wind (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1949) p.250

were not faced with indissoluble discriminatory policies. While there might be frustrations, in the main BBC women felt valued and relished the opportunities working for the Corporation conferred. Whether it was Ursula Eason's much heralded decision to broadcast the Christmas edition of Northern Ireland *Children's Hour* from a ward in the Belfast Hospital for Sick Children; praise for Agnes Mills' improvements to the Registry or satisfaction at Dorothy Isherwood's overhaul of the Gramophone Department's indexing system, women were acknowledged to be performing good work.<sup>8</sup> Confidential reports and memos make few references to gender; salaried women were viewed as employees and judged as such by their superiors.

No salaried woman was ever required to resign from the Corporation, the BBC's marriage bar made explicit exemption for those whose work was viewed as exceptional. The BBC's unique marriage bar documentation provides a valuable insight into the introduction and application of a bar in the inter-war years. Here, in the Minutes of the Marriage Tribunal and the memos about implementation, are discerned many of the arguments surrounding the imposition and retention of bars at this time: married women holding jobs that should have gone to unemployed women and men; a married woman's duty to her husband and children; the impossibility that a married woman could carry out efficiently the double burden of work and home. Yet the application of the BBC bar demonstrated that, in effect, these lines of reasoning were fundamentally flawed. It made good economic sense to retain a valued employee; the benefit to the BBC of a dedicated, hardworking married woman was never in doubt. That a married woman could successfully care for her home and family while continuing to work at the Corporation was also accepted, providing she had sufficient domestic help. This might be a paid servant, a mother-in-law or the woman herself but, importantly, it was seen as a workable solution and not dismissed out-of-hand. Women teachers and civil servants would have welcomed a dialogue along similar lines. In 1939, the BBC's three highest paid female employees were married; two were mothers, confirming that the Corporation had no prejudice

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<sup>8</sup> *Radio Pictorial*, December 18<sup>th</sup> 1936; L1/306/1: Agnes Mills Staff File 1: Confidential Report February 1930; R13/296/Departmental: Programme Division: Gramophone Department Women Clerical 1933-1944, Fletcher to Rose Troup, February 17<sup>th</sup> 1938

against the employment of high-powered, high-status married women staff. However, for those in the lower grades the expectation was still one of resignation on marriage.

During the deliberations leading up to the introduction of the BBC marriage bar in 1932, two distinct classes of married women had been identified: those who were committed to a long-term career with the Corporation and those for whom work after marriage was a temporary expedient. This was a reality of the inter-war years when the ideal for many women was to retire as a housewife. The expectation that paid work was a short-term interlude between leaving education and setting up the marital home was decried by feminists as the cause of inequalities, nevertheless, for many BBC women, work was not the be-all and end-all of life. These were the women, “whose mind is not here [in the BBC] but in their homes.”<sup>9</sup> At the BBC, large numbers of female staff would have accepted this view. However, the introduction of the BBC marriage bar must have been a blow to those women who, while not set on a life-long career, wanted to continue to earn after marriage. Its introduction would also have been anathema to feminists and other women workers campaigning for the removal of all marriage bars. The BBC’s attempt to slip in its marriage bar as a change of practice rather than a full-blown ban shows that it was mindful of these views and keen to avoid the campaigners’ spotlight.

The two classes of married women pinpointed by the BBC were not necessarily defined by wage or salary; there was an acceptance that there were some weekly-paid staff who “regard themselves equally with their husbands, as workers, and not as domestic partners in the marriage.”<sup>10</sup> However, it was acknowledged by BBC management that the criteria of the Marriage Tribunal naturally favoured those in the senior grades. Thus, the impact of the marriage bar was felt far more keenly amongst the BBC’s waged women.

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<sup>9</sup> Married Women Policy File 1, Goldsmith to Carpendale? (unclear) August 26th 1932

<sup>10</sup> Married Women Policy File 1, Goldsmith to Carpendale, August 26th 1932. Four women were specifically named: Mary Somerville and Mary Adams were salaried; Mrs Waterman and Miss Jockel (Mrs Pinch) were waged.

The Corporation's favouritism towards salaried women has been a theme of this thesis however, by the standards of the inter-war years, the BBC's weekly-paid female staff were well treated. There is no doubt that for many women office workers in the 1920s and 1930s, life was grim. The actual offices themselves might be dank with few modern facilities; pay, while sufficient for a young school-leaver of fourteen, rarely rose above £3 even after many years service and opportunities for promotion were slight. Stories of dismal lodgings, hunger and boredom were rife. Ray Strachey and Vera Brittain warned of the dangers of these dead-end jobs, reiterating the widely-held belief that women's work was temporary as the reason for degrading working conditions.

The experience of waged women office workers at the BBC was very different; it was one of the places Strachey would have held up as an 'exceptional' place to work.<sup>11</sup> Reith's belief in employee welfare meant that the BBC's office-based staff were privy to a range of benefits from subsidised meals and comfortable, purpose built premises (at least from 1932), to the facilities of the BBC Club, of which the waged were the greatest beneficiaries. The BBC certainly offered its waged female clerks, typists and telephonists better rates of pay than many comparable organisations such as the Civil Service. This was partly because female office staff who came to the BBC were already trained and/or experienced. If they weren't amongst the fortunate who were educated to at least School Certificate level prior to finding work or training, they were amongst the diligent who had studied at evening classes, honing their secretarial and clerical techniques.

House staff were also well-served at the BBC. References to women who worked as waitresses, kitchen-hands and cleaners in the inter-war years are largely bleak. The BBC, on the other hand, offered a fair wage, paid holidays and a congenial working environment. Although conditions of service weren't as generous as those offered to office-based employees, the BBC's house staff did benefit from the familial ethos of the Company/Corporation and loyalty was rewarded. The fact that there were hundreds on the waiting list to become charwomen is

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<sup>11</sup> Ray Strachey, Careers and Openings for Women: A Survey of Women's Employment and a Guide for Those Seeking Work (London: Faber and Faber, 1935) p.118



indicative of the BBC's appeal as a place to work, especially for those who lived close by.

Employment as house staff, like all waged work at the BBC, conformed largely to the customary sexual division of labour. Waged men, on the whole, worked as commissionaires, technicians and in areas of work that needed physical strength such as equipment and distribution. Conversely, waged women answered the telephones, filed documents in the Registry and ubiquitously made and served the tea. The ranked desks of typists in the BBC's General Office would have been duplicated in many large companies throughout the UK. There is no evidence that the BBC's waged women and men complained about these defined roles, it was accepted practice.

The sex-typing of women's work at the BBC was personified in the role of the Women's Staff Administrator who oversaw all female secretarial and clerical workers. This was a common position in inter-war workplaces that employed large, waged, female staffs. At the BBC, first Miss Banks and then Miss Freeman appointed, allocated and kept an eye on, what would become an army of women workers. Once new recruits were inducted in the methods of the BBC, usually via the General Office, standards remained high and discipline was enforced. Although there were gripes that boyfriends couldn't wait in Reception or stockings abandoned on hot days, the BBC remained an appealing place for young women to work, one that was touched with prestige and glamour.

There was also always the chance that celebrity might beckon; a BBC shorthand typist could become a high-paid producer and Variety star, as Doris Arnold bore testimony to. Although rare, this "office boy to Director General" attitude was seen to be encouraging to staff and set the BBC apart from other inter-war institutions.<sup>12</sup> The rapid nature of the BBC's expansion, from four employees in December 1922 to 4,200 in September 1939, and the wide range of jobs on offer meant that there was a real chance of promotion for those who sought it. Thus Evelyn Shepherd, a £1 a week clerk would eventually earn £320 per annum as a

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<sup>12</sup> L1/15/1: Doris Arnold personal file, 1926-1951, Gielgud to Eckersley, September 1<sup>st</sup> 1930, comment by Carpendale

Furniture Buyer while Ruth Cockerton, who initially earned £3.15s a week as a shorthand typist, rose to be a £425 a year Assistant in the Photograph Section. For those who were bright and dynamic, there were real opportunities and women who came to Magnet House/Savoy Hill in the 1920s were part of the creation of the BBC. Secretaries like Kathleen Lines and Florence Minns could grasp the initiative and start the photo library (Lines) or prove their worth as a talent spotter (Minns); a young graduate like Mary Somerville could change the way School Broadcasting was produced and perceived – and rise to be its head.

However, by the mid 1930s, with the British Broadcasting Corporation ensconced at Broadcasting House and with a rigid male Control Board in place, women's progression slowed down. Whereas in 1926, Hilda Matheson could be head-hunted by Reith and given the job of Director of Talks and, in 1931, Mary Somerville confirmed as Director of School Broadcasting, after 1933, when Isa Benzie became Foreign Director, no other woman in the inter-war BBC reached the status of Director. In fact, after Matheson, no woman was recruited directly to a senior BBC post until the 1950s when Doreen Stephens became Editor, Women's Programmes, Television in 1953 and it was to be another thirty years before the next.<sup>13</sup> In the war-years and beyond, BBC women reached elite positions only through internal promotion, by proving themselves to be worthy of the job, and then only occasionally.

During the 1920s, the impetus of the BBC had moved from amateur innovation and experimentation to professionalism. By the mid 1930s, the Corporation was a highly desirable place to work where an advertisement for a salaried job could attract hundreds of applicants.<sup>14</sup> This was a development that favoured men; as Barker and Mair indicated in their 1934 report into BBC recruitment, women were less likely to know about these jobs or feel able to apply for them.<sup>15</sup> The minutes of Appointment Boards, introduced in the wake of Barker and Mair's report, show that in the five years from 1934, all-male shortlists accounted for

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<sup>13</sup> Patricia Hodgson was recruited to the BBC as Deputy Secretary in 1983.

<sup>14</sup> For example, there were more than 1,000 applications for the position of Director of Talks in 1936, only a handful of whom were women. *Daily Express*, October 1st 1936

<sup>15</sup> R49/31/1:Report on Recruitment of Staff 1934 by D.B. Mair and Ernest Barker

81%.<sup>16</sup> Women were still recruited and promoted to salaried jobs in the Corporation, but with the choice of so many men, their ascendancy to management positions waned. Eminent academics and former politicians, like Professor John Coatman (appointed Head of News, 1934) or Sir Richard Maconachie (appointed Director of Talks, 1936) accepted senior executive BBC posts while elsewhere male graduates jostled for departmental supremacy.

As the Corporation grew, as well as a move towards professionalism there was also increased bureaucratisation. This was a point of contention for many creative men who railed against the “stuffed-shirt” BBC in their memoirs.<sup>17</sup> However for waged women, an expansion in paper-work and support services had a generative effect, providing many more roles for female secretarial/clerical staff and opportunities for promotion in, for instance, libraries, telephony, finance and publicity.

Whatever ones role in the inter-war BBC, there was a sense of privilege and public service; that everyone was working together towards the national good. This notion of community, reflected for example in the staff journal *Ariel*, meant that BBC women identified themselves as BBC staff, rather than women staff. In the GPO with its predominantly segregated offices, and in teaching, where the majority of grammar school teachers worked in single-sex schools, thousands joined single-sex trade unions where they were united in protests against discriminatory practices. Women in the BBC were not organised in any way, for most of the inter-war years they shunned trade unions, only uniting with their male colleagues to vote in favour of a BBC Staff Association in 1938. This disinclination to associate suggests that BBC employees, both women and men, were broadly content with their working lives.

This study of the inter-war BBC has shown women to be at the heart of the organisation. It may have been male-dominated, unspoken discrimination may have been rife but in their day-to-day lives women felt they were doing a valuable

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<sup>16</sup> R49/27/1-3: Appointment Boards, 1934-1939

<sup>17</sup> For instance, Maurice Gorham entitled a chapter of his book “The Stuffed Shirt Era”. Maurice Gorham, *Sound and Fury* (London: Percival Marshall, 1948) pp.51-61

job. From the waitress clearing the cup of a vaudeville star to the roneo operator printing the announcer's time-table to the copyright assistant successfully sorting an issue of poetry rights, women "oiled the wheels" of the BBC.<sup>18</sup> Those in more prominent positions were celebrated in the press, they merited column inches in the *Radio Times* and although few became household names they were acknowledged as vital components to the development and running of the BBC. Whether waged or salaried, single or married, young or old, the BBC of the 1920s and 1930s was an attractive place for women to work.

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<sup>18</sup> Daily Dispatch, December 5th 1934, "Women who Oil Radio's Wheels" by Ruth Maschwitz

## Appendix 1: Short Biographies

### BBC Men

Arthur Burrows (dates unknown)

BBC Career: Director of Programmes, 1922-1925. Resigned to become Secretary of the International Broadcasting Union, based in Geneva.

Education: Unknown.

Military Service: Worked for Marconi, training wireless operators to interpret enemy messages and propaganda.

Pre-BBC Career: Burrows was an amateur wireless enthusiast and by 1918, was acknowledged as a wireless visionary. After the War, he became Press Officer for Marconi and was key to the establishment and operation of Marconi's pioneering radio station, 2LO, in 1922.

Cecil Lewis (1898-1997)

BBC Career: Assistant Director, Programmes, 1922-1926; Part-time Talks Assistant 1934-1935; Producer, Outside Broadcasts, TV, 1936. Resigned.

Education: Oundle School.

Military Service: Pilot with Royal Flying Corps, rose to rank of Captain at age 18.

Pre-BBC Career: Lewis had worked briefly for the wireless consortium Metropolitan Vickers.

Peter Eckersley (1892-1963)

BBC Career: BBC Chief Engineer, 1923-1929. Resigned.

Education: Bedales School; Manchester Municipal College of Technology.

Military Service: Served with Royal Flying Corps rose to rank of Captain.

Pre-BBC Career: Prior to his arrival at the BBC in January 1923, Eckersley was head of Marconi's experimental wireless section.

Val Gielgud (1900-1981)

BBC Career: Assistant, *Radio Times*, 1928-1929; Director Productions, 1929-1933; Director Drama, 1933-1936; Director Features and Drama 1936-1949. Resigned.

Education: Rugby School and Trinity College, Oxford.

Pre-BBC Career: A nephew of Ellen Terry and brother of actor John, Val Gielgud dabbled in writing and the theatre before being tempted to the BBC by his friend Eric Maschwitz, in 1928.

Lance Sieveking (1896-1972)

BBC Career: Assistant, Talks, 1926-1928; Assistant, Research 1928-1931; Producer, Drama 1931-1938. Seconded to Canadian Broadcasting Company.

Education: home tutored; St Catherine's Cambridge, but failed English tripos.

Military Service: Served with the Royal Naval Air Service, rose to rank of Captain.

Pre-BBC Career: Worked for the Inland Revenue Department as an Assistant Inspector of Taxes for Sussex. From 1924-25 he was a *Daily Express* Reporter.

Basil Nicolls (1893-1965)

BBC Career: Station Director, Manchester, 1924-1925; Station Director, London 1926-1927; General Editor, Publications, 1927-1933; Director of Internal Administration, 1933-1935; Controller (Administration), 1935-1937; Controller (Programmes), 1937-1944; Senior Controller, Management, 1944-1948; Director of Broadcasting 1948-1952; Acting Director General 1952-1953. Retired.

Education: Wellington College; Christ Church College, Oxford

Military Service: Served in Gallipoli, Mesopotamia, India and Afghanistan, rose to rank of Major.

Pre-BBC Career: Worked in India as Secretary, United Steel Corporation of Asia.

William St John Pym (1889-?)

BBC Career: Director of Staff Administration, 1936-1944; Head of Staff Administration 1944-1949. Retired.

Education: Rossall School; Trinity College, Cambridge

Military Service: Served in the Army in France, invalided and seconded to War Cabinet Staff.

Pre-BBC Career: Pym had been a Fellow and Tutor at Trinity College and, for ten years, an HM Inspector of Schools becoming Chief Inspector of Schools for the LCC in 1934.

Charles Carpendale (1874-1968)

BBC Career: Controller, 1923-1933; Controller (Administration), 1933-1935; Deputy Director General, 1935-1938. Retired. Knighted 1932.

Education/Military Service: Schooling unknown but served with the Navy.

Pre-BBC Career: Carpendale joined the Royal Navy in 1887, rising to be Vice Admiral.

Douglas Clarke (1899-?)

BBC Career: Assistant, Programmes Department 1924-1926; Interim Station Director, Belfast 1926; Station Liaison Officer, 1926-1928; Personnel Executive, 1928-1933; Establishment Officer, 1933-1935; General Establishment Officer, 1935-1941; Director of Programme Administration, 1941-1942; Appointments Officer, 1942-1957; Special Duties, 1957-1961. Retired.

Education: Tonbridge School; Pembroke College, Cambridge but cut short by War.

Military Service: Joined the Grenadier Guards in 1917.

Pre-BBC Career: Two years apprenticeship to Metropolitan Vickers as an Outside Erection Trainee.

Valentine Goldsmith (1886-1944)

BBC Career: Assistant Station Director, Manchester, 1924; Assistant to Company Secretary, 1924-1926; Assistant Controller (Administration), 1926-1933; Acting Director of Internal Publications, 1933-1935; General Manager, Publications, 1935-1944. Died.

Education: Unknown.

Military Service, Unknown – Royal Navy?

Pre-BBC Career: Unknown but had certainly spent many years in the business side of the Royal Navy.

Roger Eckersley (1885-1955)

BBC Career: Organiser, Outside Broadcasts, 1924-1927; Director of Programmes, 1927-1934; Director of Entertainment, 1935; Assistant Controller (Programmes) 1936; Director of Regional Relations, 1937; Assistant Controller (Regions), 1938-1939; Chief Censor, 1941-1945. Retired.

Education: Charterhouse School. He was Peter Eckersley's elder brother.

Military Service: Worked in Foreign Office.

Pre-BBC Career: Ran a golf club and farmed chickens.

Charles Siepmann (1899-?)

BBC Career: Assistant, Education, 1927-1928; Head of Adult Education, 1928-1932; Director of Talks, 1932-1935; Regional Director, 1935-1936; Director of Programme Planning, 1936-1939. Resigned to take up a post at Harvard.

Education: Unknown but almost certainly a university graduate (his father was the scholar Otto Siepmann).

Military Service: Unknown, if any.

Pre-BBC Career: Worked on the staff of HM Borstal Institution, Rochester.

Richard Lambert (1894-1981)

BBC Career: Assistant, Adult Education, 1927-1928; Editor, *The Listener*, 1928-1939. Resigned.

Education Repton; Wadham College, Oxford.

Military Service: Served with Friends' Ambulance Unit.

Pre-BBC Career: Included working for *The Economist* and being a lecturer/ staff tutor for Tutorial Classes at both Sheffield University and London University.

Eric Maschwitz (1901-1969)

BBC Career: Assistant, Outside Broadcasts/*Radio Times*, 1926-1927; Editor, *Radio Times*, 1927-1933; Director, *Variety* 1933-1937. Resigned.

Education: Repton; Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge.

Pre-BBC Career: Edited a variety of Hutchinson journals.

Lionel Fielden (1896-1974)

BBC Career: Assistant Talks, 1927-1929; Assistant Adult Education, 1929-1932; Assistant General Talks, 1932-1934; Assistant Director Talks, 1934-1935.

Resigned 1935 to be Controller of Broadcasting in India.

Education: Eton; Brasenose College, Oxford.

Military Service: Served with Royal Garrison Artillery, rose to rank of Captain.

Pre-BBC Career: Worked for the League of Nations Secretariat and as a representative of the High Commission for Refugees.

Cecil Graves (1892-1957)

BBC Career: Member of programme staff, 1926-1927; Assistant Director of Programmes, 1927-1932; Empire Service Director, 1932-1935; Controller (Programmes), 1935-1938; Deputy Director General, 1938-1942; Joint Director General, 1942-1943. Retired. Knighted 1939.

Education: Gresham's School; Sandhurst.

Military Service: With British Expeditionary Force, taken prisoner.

Pre-BBC Career: As Captain Graves, served on General Staff, War Office 1919-1925.

## **BBC Women**

### **Information from 18 Staff Files**

Mary Adams (1898–1984)

BBC Career: Adult Education Officer, Home Counties, 1930-1933; Part-time Talks Assistant, 1934-1937; Producer, Television (1937-1939); Seconded to MOI; Producer Features, 1941-1943; Producer, North American Service, 1943-1946; Senior Producer, Television, 1946-48; Head of Television Talks, 1948-1953; Assistant Controller, Television 1953-1958. Retired.

Education: Godolphin School, Salisbury; University College, Cardiff; Newnham College Cambridge.

Pre-BBC Career: Lecturer in biology at Cambridge University; WEA lecturer; gave a series of Talks on the BBC in 1928 on 'Heredity'.

Mary Hope Allen (1898-2001)

BBC Career: Cataloguer, Play Library, 1927-1928; Assistant, Programme Research, 1929-1933; Producer, Drama, 1934-1958. Retired.

Education: Downe House, Berkshire; Slade School of Art, London.

Pre-BBC Career: Secretary to Naomi Royd Smith; Assistant and Theatre Critic, *The Westminster Gazette*.

Doris Arnold (1904-1969)

BBC Career: Shorthand Typist, Stores/Administration/Accounts/Music, 1926-1928; Accompanist, 1928-1933; Assistant, Variety, 1933-1938;

Producer/Arranger/ Accompanist, 1938-1951. Resigned.

Education: Tiffin School, London.

Pre-BBC Career: Clerk/Secretary, LCC Stores Department; Assistant to Chief Pay Clerk, Peter Jones. Studied piano from age six.

Isa Benzie (1904-1988)

BBC Career: Secretary, Foreign Department, 1927-1930; Assistant, Foreign Department, 1930-1933; Foreign Director, 1933-1938; Resigned on Marriage; Producer, Talks Department, 1943-1964. Retired.

Education: Laurel Bank School, Glasgow; Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford; Pitman's College.

Pre-BBC Career: Came to BBC from secretarial college.

Mary Temple Candler (1904-?)

BBC Career: Shorthand Typist, Programmes 1925-1928; Shorthand Typist, Copyright, 1928-1933; Assistant, Copyright, 1933-1940; Head of Copyright, 1940-1959. Retired.

Education: St Margaret's School, Hertfordshire; UCL (one year); Kensington Secretarial College.

Pre-BBC Career: Came to BBC from Kensington College.



Ursula Eason (1910-1993)

BBC Career: Northern Ireland Children's Hour Organiser, 1933-1939; Acting Programme Director, Belfast, 1939-1945; Assistant Programme Director, Belfast, 1945-1952; Producer, Children's Television 1953-1955; Assistant Head, Children's Television, 1955-1970. Retired.

Education: Streatham High School; University College London; Marlborough Gate Secretarial College.

Pre-BBC Career: Secretary to Assistant Manager, Times Book Club

Beatrice Hart (1903-?)

BBC Career: Shorthand Typist, Drama 1926-1928; Shorthand Typist, Publications, 1928-1933; Secretary, Supplementary Publications, 1933-1936; Assistant, Supplementary Publications, 1936-1964. Retired.

Education: Stamford High School; Kensington Secretarial College.

Pre-BBC Career: Twelve months work in business offices.

Anna Instone (1912-1978)

BBC Career: Assistant, Recorded Programmes, 1933-1934; Assistant, Gramophone Programmes 1934-1937; Assistant, Music, 1937-1942; Assistant Gramophone Director, 1942-1947; Gramophone Director, 1947-1953; Head of Gramophone Programmes, 1953-1972. Retired.

Education: Camden House, Bedfordshire; Royal Academy of Music, London.

Pre-BBC Career: Came to BBC from College

Margaret Hope Simpson (1903-?)

BBC Career: Secretary to Hilda Matheson, Director of Talks, 1931; Secretary to Cecil Graves, Director Empire Service, 1932-1935/ Controller (Programmes) 1935-1938/ Deputy Director General 1938-1942/ Joint Director General 1942-1943. Assistant, Overseas Programme Planning, 1943-1964. Retired.

Education: Harrogate College; Newnham College Cambridge.

Pre BBC Career: Secretary to Miss Pate, Cambridge; Secretary to her father, then Vice Chairman of the Refugee Settlement Commission; part-time work for Elizabeth Robbins; Secretary, Bedford College for Women.

Dorothy Isherwood (1906-?)

BBC Career: Index Clerk, General Office 1934-1937; Index Assistant, Studio Executive, 1937-1939; War Work with WRNS 1939-1946; Recruitment and Transfer Clerk, 1946-1966. Retired.

Education: Pendleton High School for Girls, Manchester; Newnham College, Cambridge.

Pre-BBC Career: Indexer, League of Nations; Assistant Librarian, Newnham College; Library Assistant, Vassar College.

Agnes Mills (1898-?)

BBC Career: Head of Registry, 1927-1943. Resigned on marriage.

Education: Manchester High School; St Hilda's College, Oxford.

Pre-BBC Career: Secretarial training; Secretary to Chief of Police, Dublin Castle; Secretary to St Hughes College, Oxford; Secretary to Dr Crichlow.

Florence Milnes (1893-1966)

BBC Career: Assistant, Information, 1925-1927; Head of Library, 1927-1958. Retired.

Education: FCJ Convent, Liverpool.

Pre-BBC Career: Worked for Ministry of Munitions in WWI.

Christine Orr (1899-?)

BBC Career: Children's Hour Organiser, Edinburgh, 1937-1945. Resigned to care for her husband and invalid mother.

Education: St George's High School, Edinburgh; Somerville College, Oxford.

Pre-BBC Career: Writer, novelist, editor of 'Greatheart', Church of Scotland's monthly magazine for children.

Janet Quigley (1902-1987)

BBC Career: Assistant, Foreign Department, 1930-1936; Assistant, Talks Department, 1936-1944; Producer, Talks Department, 1944-1945; Resigned on marriage; Editor, Woman's Hour, 1950-1956; Chief Assistant, Talks, 1956-1960; Assistant Head, Talks, 1960-1962. Retired.

Education: Richmond Lodge, Belfast; Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford.

Pre-BBC Career: Journalism and publishing; bookselling; Publicity Department, Empire Marketing Board.

Olive Shapley (1910-1999)

BBC Career: Northern Children's Hour Organiser, 1934-1937; Assistant Producer, Manchester, 1937-1939. Resigned on marriage. North American Service, Actuality Assistant 1941-1943; Resigned, had three children; Presenter, Woman's Hour, 1949-50; various presenting jobs on BBC TV and radio until final retirement from broadcasting in 1973.

Education: Mary Datchelor Girls' School, London; St Hugh's College, Oxford.

Pre-BBC Career: WEA lecturer; Rachel Macmillan Nursery Training College.

Mary Somerville (1907-1963)

BBC Career: Assistant, Education, 1925-1931; Director School Broadcasting, 1931-1947; Assistant Controller, Talks, 1947-1950; Acting Controller, Talks, 1950; Controller, Talks, 1950-1955. Retired.

Education: Selkirk High School; Somerville College, Oxford.

Pre-BBC Career: Came straight to BBC from university.

Gwen Williams (1888-?)

BBC Career: Accompanist (on contract) 1929-1937; Accompanist, Variety, 1937; Pianist and Coach, 1937-1952. Retired

Education: High School, Stockport.

Pre-BBC Career: Travelling in Far East.

Alice Wright (1899-?)

BBC Career: Assistant, Music Library, 1923-1933; Clerk, Music Library, 1933-1937; Deputy Music Librarian, 1937-1962. Retired.

Education: St Andrews High School, Somerset; Pitman's School.

Pre-BBC Career: Bank Clerk for Cox's Bank; Manageress of Cabling Department at Cox's Shipping Agency.

## **Other Key BBC Woman**

Ella Fitzgerald (1888-?)

BBC Career: Assistant, Programmes, 1924-1927; Assistant, World Radio, 1927-1928; Assistant Editor, *World Radio*, 1928-1939; Retired as Overseas Press Officer, 1947

Pre BBC Career: Journalist

Miss GM (Gwyneth) Freeman (1900-?)

BBC Career: Secretary, Administration, (including VH Goldsmith) 1924-1927; Resigned; Women's Staff Supervisor/Women's Staff Administrator, 1931-1941; Staff Welfare Officer, 1941-1943. Resigned on marriage.

Kathleen Lines (1887-?)

BBC Career: Secretary to Stobart, Director of Education, 1924-1925; Head of Photographic/Display Section, 1925-1947. Retired

Education: Grew up in Dutch Guiana; Studied accountancy.

Pre-BBC Career: Art School Manager; worked on a pineapple farm in Australia; headed WWI Munitions Department; worked as a chartered accountant.

Hilda Matheson (1888-1940)

BBC Career: Assistant, Education, 1926; Director of Talks, 1927-1932. Resigned.

Education: St Felix School, Southwold; Home Student, Oxford University.

Military Service: Secretary to a V.A.D. Detachment; clerk in the War Office; Intelligencer Officer, Registry of the Special Intelligence Directorate.

Pre-BBC Career: Part-time Secretary, Home University Library; Assistant at the Ashmolean Museum; Secretary to Philip Kerr; Political Secretary to Nancy Astor.

Elise Sprott (1885-1961)

BBC Career: Regular broadcaster on women's programmes 1924-1925; Assistant, Talks, 1925-1931; Press Officer, Women's Interests from 1931. Retired, 1945 as Head of Section, Lecture and Women's Interests.

Education: Unknown

Military Service: Worked for Ministry of Shipping.

Pre-BBC Career: Born in Cumbria. Joined VAD in 1908; motor engineer; after WWI, worked for the American Administration European Children's Relief Fund under Herbert Hoover.

Margery Wace (1904-1944)

BBC Career: Assistant, Talks, 1930-1936; Assistant, Empire Talks, 1936-1937; Organiser, Empire Talks, 1937-1941; Empire Talks Director, 1941-1944. Died, shortly after birth of her daughter.

Education: St Hugh's College, Oxford.

Pre-BBC Career: Secretary to Professor Gilbert Murray and also to the Oxford Branch of the League of Nations Union.

## **APPENDIX 2: CONTROL BOARD 1924-1939**

### **Control Board 1924**

John Reith  
Charles Carpendale, Controller  
Peter Eckersley, Chief Engineer  
Arthur Burrows, Director of Programmes  
Guy Rice, Secretary

### **Control Board 1926**

John Reith  
Charles Carpendale, Controller  
Valentine Goldsmith, Assistant Controller  
William Gladstone Murray, Assistant Controller (Information)  
Roger Eckersley, Assistant Controller (Programmes)  
Thomas Lochhead, Assistant Controller (Finance)  
Peter Eckersley, Assistant Controller (Engineering)

### **Control Board 1933**

John Reith  
Charles Carpendale, Controller (Administration)  
Charles Dawnay, Controller (Programmes)  
Valentine Goldsmith, Director Business Relations  
Basil Nicolls, Director Internal Administration  
Roger Eckersley, Director Programmes  
Charles Siepmann, Director Talks  
Cecil Graves, Director Empire and Foreign Service  
William Gladstone Murray, Director Information and Publications  
Thomas Lochhead, Director Finance  
Noel Ashbridge, Director Engineering

### **Control Board 1936**

John Reith  
Charles Carpendale, Deputy Director General  
Basil Nicolls, Controller (Administration)  
Cecil Graves, Controller (Programmes)  
Sir Stephen Tallents, Controller (Public Relations)  
Noel Ashbridge Controller (Engineering)

### **Control Board 1939**

Frederick Ogilvie  
Cecil Graves, Deputy Director General  
Basil Nicolls, Controller (Programmes)  
Thomas Lochhead, Controller (Administration)  
Sir Stephen Tallents, Controller (Public Relations)  
Noel Ashbridge Controller (Engineering)

## APPENDIX 3: GRADES AND WAGES WEEKLY-PAID

### Grades and Wages for Weekly-Paid Secretarial/Clerical Staff, 1927, 1937

#### Grades for Waged Women Secretarial/Clerical Staff: January 1927 <sup>1</sup>

<u>Grade</u>	<u>Wage Rates</u>	<u>Designation</u>
E:	£3.10s to £4.15s -	Secretaries and Assistants
F:	£2.10s to £3.15s -	Shorthand Typists and Junior Assistants
G:	£2.5s to £3.15s -	Copying Typists, Filing Assistants, Telephonists
H:	£1 to £2 -	Juniors

#### Grades for Waged Women Secretarial/Clerical Staff: April 1937 <sup>2</sup>

<u>Grade</u>	<u>Maximum</u>	<u>Standard Increase</u>	<u>Appointment</u>
AxW	£6	5s	Senior Secretaries and Clerks
A1W	£5	5s	Senior Secretaries and Clerks
A2W	£4.10s	5s	Mostly promotions from BW on confidential work
BW	£4.10s	5s	Secretaries to Departmental Heads and some Clerks
C1W	£4	5s	“Isolated” Shorthand typists and some Registry Clerks
C2W	£3.15s	5s	Shorthand Typists, Registry Clerks and Telephonists
C3W	£3.10s	5s	High grade Copying Typists, Stencil Typists, Multigraph and Roneo Operators
DW	£3	2/6d	Routine Registry Clerks, Copying Typists and Junior Duplicating Machine Operators
EW	£2	2/6d	Office girls of Duplicating Section

<sup>1</sup> R1/63/1: Board of Governors. DG's Reports and Papers Jan-Dec 1927. Outline of Organisation, January 1927

<sup>2</sup> R49/227/1: Staff Policy: Grades and Salaries - Grades 'D' and Weekly Paid Staff

## **APPENDIX 4: MARRIAGE BAR STATEMENT**

### **BBC Marriage Bar Statement: 15<sup>th</sup> August 1933**<sup>3</sup>

Prior to October 1932, the Corporation made no general ruling regarding the retention of women staff after marriage. At that date, certain cases were considered which led the Board of Governors to decide that, while no definite bar should be set up against the employment of married women on the staff of the Corporation, the retention of women after marriage should, in future, be regarded as exceptional and dependent upon the circumstances of individual cases.

In coming to a decision in this matter, the Corporation has largely been guided by a belief that only an exceptional woman, with adequate material resources, can perform her duties satisfactorily as a whole-time servant of the Corporation, while attempting to fulfil the cares and responsibilities of a young family.

It is obviously improper that the Corporation should lay down any rule which might be interpreted as discouraging childbearing. At the same time, the Corporation is bound to take steps to safeguard its own interests, and it is considered best that the decision whether or not a case is to be treated as an exception should be made at the time of notification of a desire to marry.

In future, where a case is regarded as exceptional, the member of staff will retain her position and the Corporation will be prepared to make provision if and when necessary for maternity leave, on the strict understanding, however, that should it at any time subsequently seem necessary or desirable to the Corporation to terminate the services of such a member of the staff on the grounds of ill health or inefficiency the Corporation shall be at liberty to do so.

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<sup>3</sup> R49/371/1: Staff Policy Married Women Policy File 1, 1928-1935

## APPENDIX 5: BBC WOMEN WHO EARNED £500 OR MORE

### From Salary Information Files: As at April 1<sup>st</sup> 1939<sup>4</sup>

<u>Name</u>	<u>Position, 1939</u>	<u>Start date/Salary</u>	<u>1939 Salary</u>
Vera M. Hills	In-Charge, Duplicating	17.3.24 / £3	£500
Miss L.G. Maddick	Assistant, Photographs	22.10.34 / £312	£500
Gwen Williams	Pianist and Coach, Music	18.7.37 / £450	£500
Mary Allan	Television Make-Up and Wardrobe Manager	9.2.37 / £380	£520
Evelyn Gibbs	Assistant, Schools	1.10.36 / £400	£520
Florence Milnes	In-Charge, Library	26.1.25 / £3.10s	£525
Miss AM Playle	Assistant to Editor, The Listener	19.1.25 / £3	£530
Christine Orr	Children's Hour Organiser, Edinburgh	19.1.37 / £500	£550
Cecil Dixon,	Accompanist, Music	7.1.23 / £150	£600
Elizabeth Jenkin	Children's Hour Executive	4.7.27 / £250	£600
Margaret Mackenzie	Press Officer, Bristol	22.7.26 / £350	£600
Miss A.M.P. Mills	In-Charge, Registry	12.8.27 / £275	£600
Elise Sprott	Assistant, Press (Women's Interests)	29.1.25 / £3.15s	£600
Mary Hope Allen	Assistant, Features and Drama	14.6.27 / £3.10s	£620
Janet Quigley	Assistant, Talks	17.2.30 / £260	£620
Dr Edith McQueen	Assistant, Schools	19.9.30 / £375	£645
Doris Arnold	Accompanist & Arranger, Variety	9.2.26 / £2.5s	£660
Ella Fitzgerald	Assistant Editor, World Radio	7.4.23 / £208	£680
Miss G. M. Freeman	Women's Staff Administrator	27.4.31 / £325	£720
Kathleen Lines	In-Charge, Photographs	7.4.24 / £200	£720
Margery Wace	Empire Talks Organiser	8.9.30 / £250	£750
Barbara Burnham	Features and Drama Producer	1.4.36 / £550	£800
Mary Adams	Producer, Television	5.5.30 / £650	£900
Mary Somerville	Director, Schools Broadcasting	13.7.25 / £240	£1,500
<u>Left Staff:</u>			
Olive Schill	Assistant, Manchester	17.9.28 / £260	£500 (Resigned 31.5.35)
Jo Stanley	Secretary to DG and Governors	2.1.28 / £3.10s	£500 (Resigned 1.4.38)
Janet Adam-Smith	Assistant Editor, The Listener	5.5.30 / £3.10s	£550 (Resigned 10.4.35)
Elizabeth Nash	Secretary to DG and Governors	29.9.24 / £3.10s	£600 (Resigned 1.9.36)
Isa Benzie	Foreign Director	12.12.29 / £3	£900 (Resigned 3.1.38)
Hilda Matheson	Talks Director	13.9.26 / £600	£1050 (Resigned 3.3.32)

<sup>4</sup> Data from: R62/100/ 1-3: Salary Information (Staff) Files 1923-1939

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R51/239: Household Talks, 1929-1947  
R51/240: Housekeeping, 1934  
R51/241: Housewives News, 1930-1939  
R51/397: Talks policy, 1930-1954  
R51/482: General, 1923-1948  
R51/646: Women's Programmes, 1936-1938

R62/100/1-3: Salary Information Files (including photographs) 1923-1939  
R62/101/1: Salary Information (Control Board)

S61: Special Collections: Autobiographical Sketches of Lance Sieveking  
S341/5/1: Special Collections: Olive Shapley: Autobiography, BBC Career, Interview

#### Staff Files: Women

L2/5/1-3: Mary Adams  
L1/659/1-2: Mary Hope Allen  
L1/15/1: Doris Arnold  
L1/1049/1-2: Isa Benzie  
L1/799/1: Mary Candler  
L1/2142/1-2: Ursula Eason  
L1/1698/1: Beatrice Hart  
L1/2160/1: Anna Instone  
L1/1654/1-2: Dorothy Isherwood  
L1/306/1-2: Agnes Mills  
L1/705/1: Florence Milnes  
L1/328/1: Christine Orr  
L1/784/1: Janet Quigley  
L1/1783/1: Olive Shapley  
L1/1699/1: Margaret Hope Simpson  
L2/195/1-3: Mary Somerville

L1/454/1: Gwendoline Williams  
L1/729/1: Alice Wright

**Staff Files: Men**

L1/1132/1: Douglas Clarke  
L1/144: Lionel Fielden  
L1/172: Valentine Goldsmith  
L1/305/2: Herbert Milliken  
L1/391/1: Lance Sieveking  
L1/2337/1: Ralph Wade  
L2/156: Basil Nicolls  
L2/173/1: William St John Pym  
L2/190/1-2: Charles Siepmann

**Oral History of the BBC**

Clare Lawson Dick, interviewed March 30<sup>th</sup> 1979  
Janet Adam Smith, interviewed August 1<sup>st</sup> 1979  
Mary Lewis, interviewed December 12<sup>th</sup> 1978  
Elizabeth Barker, interviewed May 9<sup>th</sup> 1983

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6/WEF/487: Exec. Minutes, 1933-1939  
6/WEF/488-4: Advisory Department's Committee Minutes and Correspondence, 1938-40  
6/WEF/489/3: Papers for AGM's  
6/WEF/17/1-6: Box No: 216: Press Cuttings, 1934-1947

Six Point Group:

5SPG/B/01-5: AGM'S and Annual Reports, 1931-1935  
5SPG/A/1-9: Executive Committee Minutes and Papers

Open Door Council:

5ODC/A/05: Annual Reports, 1926-1938  
5/ODC/D13: The Married Woman: Is She a Person?

Women's Freedom League:

2/WFL01-15: National Executive Committee, 1929-1936

Women's Provisional Club

5/WPV/3/1: Officers and Committee Members, 1924-1939

**Liverpool University: Margaret Miller Papers**

D384/1/1/1: Scraps  
D384/1/1/2: Loose Press Cuttings  
D384/1/2/2: D384/1/2/4; D384/1/2/5; D384/1/2/8-20 -Related Material  
D384/1/2/1-23: Correspondence, 1931-1932  
D384/2/24-60: Correspondence, 1933  
D384/2/61-82: Correspondence, 1933  
D384/2/83-112: Correspondence, 1933

D384/2/113-147: Correspondence, 1933  
D384/2/148-182: Correspondence, 1934 – 35  
Resolutions, Reports and Correspondence, Counsel's Opinions etc Re: Women's  
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Herald, Sunday Chronicle, Sunday Referee, Strand Magazine, Good  
Housekeeping, Women's Pictorial, Women's Own, Wireless Constructor,  
Wireless World, Popular Wireless, Radio Pictorial

**Oral History Interviews**

Dorothy Torry interviewed by Kate Murphy, June 28th 2006  
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