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The Journal of the **Alliance of Literary Societies**

*Volume 1, 2007*

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**Editors:**

**Linda J Curry  
R M Healey**

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# Henry Reed and the BBC

Linda J Curry

Henry Reed (1914 – 1986), poet, translator, playwright and critic. Principally known for one of the most anthologised 'war' poems ever, 'Naming of Parts', and his brilliantly witty series of Hilda Tablet plays, written for the BBC's Third Programme.

Henry began his working life as a freelance journalist, supplementing his income by reviewing, literary criticism and writing verse for magazines and journals like *The New Statesman* and *The Listener*. During World War II, he was conscripted into the Army. With ill health and a natural linguistic ability, he was subsequently transferred to Bletchley Park to work as a cryptographer in the Italian and Japanese sections. The fellow intellectuals he was to mix with there would lead him into working for the BBC after the War.

The freelance nature of Henry's writings had suited him, as he was naturally lazy and hated writing to deadlines. He was also a perfectionist, never being satisfied with his work, and constantly returning to it to make changes.

As a child, Henry had been brought up in the oral tradition of story telling by his mother and he had always felt that the only true way to appreciate poetry was to hear it read aloud. So, Henry was very attracted to the idea of writing for radio, little realising

the pressures that he would be under in writing to deadlines and with strict text lengths.

The BBC were desperate to recruit critics for their Talks Programmes and, in the summer of 1945, Henry was approached. Having passed the obligatory voice test, Henry was commissioned to work for the BBC's Third Programme (the intellectual arm of BBC radio introduced after the War), firstly as a critic but later for his poetry and playwriting skills.

Henry might have had the right voice for the BBC, and was undoubtedly extremely talented, but he lacked diplomacy, and he loved to shock. This did not go down well with his new employers.

His first regular feature on the Third was as a member of the Sunday lunchtime panel on *The Critics*, but it did not last long. At the time, he had a column in *The New Statesman*, 'Radio Notes', and he decided that he would write a scathing piece on the standard of guest critics recruited for the programme. It was a truthful comment but it got him removed from the Sunday slot.

The first of Henry's poems to be broadcast on radio was *Philoctetes*. This had already been drafted for publishing in *New Writing and Daylight*, and the editor was so impressed by it that he passed it over to his chums at the BBC. Henry was asked to revise it for a regular fifteen minute slot, *New Poems*, on the Home Service, which he did. However, just over a week before the broadcast he was asked to cut 'about twelve lines' from the 138 line poem.

On *New Poems*, each poem was introduced with a brief explanation of its 'point', and then the programme finished with a summary. To introduce and read two poems in fifteen minutes required exact

timing, and a 12-line saving could be a considerable one, regardless of the aesthetic effect on the poem. The only alternative to cutting lines was to fade out the end of the poem, but this could be even more detrimental. Henry found it impossible to block edit the poem and offered up a selection of odd lines for removal. He asked if the introduction could be cut instead but the Home Service was catering for a mass audience and insisted that an attempt had to be made to ease access when broadcasting 'contemporary verse'. So the poem had to be cut instead!

With pieces written for radio, timing was everything. This had a particular effect on poetry. With plays, they could be split up and longer slots allowed. (Although playwright's fees were based on the length of time in performance; so a longer piece obviously cost more.) However, with verse, the slots were much shorter and the timing had to be more exact.

It was all very last minute as well. A decision on the amount of verse to be cut could only be made at rehearsal as it would depend on the speed with which the speaker read the script. The final decision always lay with the BBC, never the writer, whether it was cutting an item to make it fit into a fixed time slot or excising lines which it felt could be offensive to its audience or the Controllers.

However, the cuts experienced by Henry's poetry were as nothing compared to those inflicted on his Hilda Tablet plays. They were merely a matter of convenience, timetabling. The cuts to the plays were heavy censorship.

Henry was a writer of contrasts, of duality. He was also openly gay, and sex and sexuality pervaded his work. (*Naming of Parts* appeared to be a cynical look

at army drill but in fact was really a lesson in masturbation! Henry roared with laughter when he discovered that it had become part of the National Curriculum.)

The first of the Hilda Tablet plays, *A Very Great Man Indeed*, was recorded just over three weeks before it was due to be broadcast. At the time, the Controller of the Third Programme was away on holiday but, on his return, questions of taste were raised. The Head of Features and the Producer did not wish to make any cuts, but the Controller and the Head of Presentation and Publicity felt that cuts were vital to ensure the decency of the broadcast.

The main character of the play was Herbert Reeve (Henry's dig at Herbert Read, a fellow writer for whom he was often mistaken). He was a biographer who was researching the life of the dead Richard Shewin 'the poet's novelist' – a phrase which no one seemed to understand the meaning of, but which raised the listener's expectations of his work. However, the language of Shewin's poetry recited in the play was bawdy and puerile, and his novels were pretentious. He was elevated by the other characters in the play for their own purposes. The bawdiness was an essential part of the play, and added to the humour. However, the BBC of the 1950s had to be very careful not to give offence.

The manuscripts in the BBC archives and the recording in the National Sound Archives show the extent of the cuts made. Most of these were not detrimental to the play, but some were.

One of these major cuts relates to a scene where the intense and rather prim Reeve had been sent by Stephen Shewin to interview two of his brother's 'acquaintances', the Misses Burkley. The scene



included a discussion of Shewin's modesty, or rather lack of it, by the two ladies, describing him as 'an all-the-lights-on man' who had bought Betty her cheval mirror which could be 'put in different positions'. It is at this point that Shewin's reason for visiting them became apparent: they were prostitutes. With this passage cut from the broadcast, the humour of Reeve's predicament was lost.

When a new production was suggested in 1961, the Producer asked if this mutilated scene could be restored but his request was denied. It was still felt to be too improper.

When the collection of Hilda Tablet plays was published in book form by the BBC in 1971, Henry's preface mentioned the censorship and declared that he had restored the excised passages, but he only included part of the scene with the Misses Burkley.

Neither did he restore a large 'extract' from Shewin's novel *The Head and the Heart* where Reeve was musing on Hilda Tablet's statement that the character Madelaine was modelled on her. In the scripted scene, the hero sat at a bar fantasising about two women: the virginal Madelaine and the rampant Isobel. The scene was highly sexually charged and it is not surprising that it was not passed for broadcast, but it must have been removed at the last minute, as it did not appear on the BBC's list for excision. The inclusion of the scene in the book would have added to the development of Hilda's character. She was a lesbian: her relationship with her companion Elsa being reputedly based on that of Benjamin Britten and Peter Pears.

In the book preface, Reed had also said that he would only restore those cuts made by the BBC on the grounds of taste, ignoring those made in the

interests of time, but he was obviously selective in this, with sexual and political references alike.

The Lady Blackie scene was a particularly problematic one. In the course of his quest for biographical material, Reeve visited Lady Blackie who spent the whole interview listing her past dinner guests and their partiality to alcohol. The reference to 'Winston and Ramsey MacDonald' was excluded from both the broadcast and the book, but Lady Blackie's indignation at having to collect the hearing aid that Aneurin Bevin had offered her – a humorous reflection on upper class (and Henry's) attitudes to the new NHS – was only excluded from the book.

Henry was a little more cautious when he wrote the second in the series, *The Private Life of Hilda Tablet*. No significant cuts had to be made to the script and the BBC did not notice (until after the broadcast) that, in the scene where Hilda emerged from the bath in Reeve's presence 'full frontal nudity was heard on radio for the first time'. By this time, however, Elizabeth Lutyens had decided that Hilda had been based on her and was threatening to sue Henry. However, legal proceedings were dismissed when it was decided that she did not have a case.

Having escaped too much censorship with the second in the series, Henry's confidence was growing with number three, *A Hedge Backwards*.

The gap between the recording and transmission of *A Very Great Man Indeed* had been enough to allow time for cuts to be made and the play re-recorded. However, the time lapse with the third play was much reduced. As usual, Henry was late in delivering his script. Rehearsals took place over a five day period, with the play recorded on the final day and transmitted the day after that.

On the morning of the recording, the BBC panicked. They had only just noticed that the Shewin play within the play had a homosexual theme. Following on from the success of the previous two plays, *A Hedge Backwards* had been particularly recommended to the Governors by the Controller of the Third Programme, and it was their reaction that was feared, not the listeners'. It was too late for Henry to rewrite the Shewin extracts, and to delete them entirely would have completely destroyed the play. The only alternative was to cut out as much of the offending prose as possible.

Excisions included: a scene between two male lovers who turned out to be brothers (incest); a reference to pubic hair; a reference to Mark Antony being portrayed in Hilda's opera as a 'big butch queer'; a collection of pornographic pictures; 'piss'; reference to gonorrhoea and buggery in male public schools; 'fornication'; and the 'English keeper of a Chinese brothel' was changed to 'English keeper of a Japanese tea house'. There was also reference to an unpublished work of Shewin's which dealt with a 'Certain subject' which it would be impossible to have performed (a homosexual act) and this, like most of the rest was also cut from the book.

Douglas Cleverdon, who had produced the Hilda Tablets, continued to fight the BBC over the major cuts, arguing that they were detrimental to the plays, but he could not win. The line was firmly drawn that the decision to censor was founded on firm principles. The response was that homosexuality was seen as an 'abnormality' and it was not to be the butt of humour. It was also an illegal practice, and the BBC had to protect itself.

Henry was censored by the BBC in different ways. He was removed from *The Critics* for being too

outspoken and for fear of hindering their recruitment of guest speakers. His poetry was cut in order to fit a tight broadcasting schedule. His Hilda Tablet plays were cut in manuscript and then further at the point of recording – for fear of political backlash on the Corporation. Although some cuts were restored in the printed book, a number were not, and the excised passages only now exist in the manuscript archives. The book was printed by the BBC and presumably they still exercised control over the text.

Like any publisher exerting pressure for fear of court action, the Corporation had to ensure that material was suitable for broadcasting. It managed to pick up on the more blatantly shocking language and ideas in the Hilda Tablets but the broadcast *Lessons of the War* series of poems were much more subtle in their duality of meaning and they slipped past the censor without detriment.

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The Walter Allen Collection

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**R M Healey** cuts through the romantic/classical divide by belonging to societies devoted to Charles Lamb *and* Wyndham Lewis. He is completing a PhD at the University of Leiden and his sixth book, a critical biography of Geoffrey Grigson, is due out soon.

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**Nicholas Reed** is an historian who specialises in art history and archaeology, on which he writes and lectures. He was Founder Chairman of the Friends of Shakespeare's Globe in 1985, and Founder Chairman of the Edith Nesbit Society in 1996. He is also Chairman of the ALS.

**Trevor Reynolds** is a member of the Tolkien Society and has spent twelve years on their committee. In real life, he is the Collections Registrar at English Heritage.

**Dr Ann Ridler** is a retired higher education administrator whose interest since 1975 has been George Borrow. She has edited the George Borrow Bulletin since it was established in 1991, and has been Chairman of the George Borrow Society since 1997

**Tony Ring** is the compiler of the 600,000 word, eight volume Millennium Wodehouse Concordance, which provides information about the characters and much else in all Wodehouse's fiction. He also wrote *You Simply Hit Them With an Axe*, about Wodehouse's tax problems, has contributed articles to many other books and journals, and spoken on Wodehouse in six countries. Until 2006, he edited *Wooster Sauce*, the journal of The P G Wodehouse Society (UK).

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