

The Listener

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The Wartime BBC by Stuart Hood

Asa Briggs has now told the story of the wartime BBC and of its contribution to the nation's struggle for survival. If—as we must hope—he continues with its history over the succeeding quarter of a century, this will emerge as an attempt to come to terms with peacetime broadcasting within a democratic framework and in a changing society—an effort hampered by habits of mind and institutional attitudes formed in the quite exceptional circumstances of war. The great efforts of 'six long, weary and perilous years', the consciousness of a task well done, were to make it difficult for reformers and innovators to work, because innovation could be seen as a denial of past achievement.

The problem was naturally most acute in the Overseas Services, which I joined on demobilisation in the spring of 1946. It was a curious experience. The atmosphere in Bush House was one I recognised from my last year in the Army—that of an organisation running down after a period of intense operational activity and ignorant of the imminence of the new propaganda war across the Iron Curtain in which it was so soon to be caught up. There was immense uncertainty—about goals, about future employment. Most of the famous wartime teams had broken up and their members had gone to take part in the life of their liberated or occupied countries. Men and women of great talent who had shaped broadcasting to countries allied, enemy or neutral, or who had personally commanded through the microphone great audiences listening precariously, in danger, hope or despair, had suddenly lost their roles. Some of them, on visiting the cities in which their



'Young Bill goes off'—'Picture Post' declares war. On page 586 William Hardcastle writes about British photo-journalism

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is a very useful and industrious guide, but the reader is unable to judge for himself of their real importance. The information given about conventional politics is always hopelessly incomplete and frequently misleading. Mr Gott thinks it is all somehow rigged by the United States or by 'party machines', so that it does not get any of his scholarly attention. For a work on rural insurgency, there is an extraordinary lack of geography and economics. On the less formal origin of these guerrillas, on the realities behind their depressingly uniform proclamations, on their impact on other parts of the societies in which they briefly flourished or flourish, Mr Gott has nothing illuminating to say, even when, as in the case of Peru or of Camilo Torres's impact on the Colombian Church, he might have found something favourable. Between what the guerrillas write and his own exaggerations of imperialist control such specifically Latin American nuances can hardly enter in. His conclusion: 'In other words, however scientific we try to be, the current state of our knowledge of the social processes in Latin America is not sufficiently advanced to allow us to plot with any degree of accuracy the shape of the future. It is reasonable to assume that, when the revolution comes, it will come at a time and from a quarter that is least expected.' For pseudo-expertise this equals Mr James's quotation from the Director of the Princeton Institute for Advanced Study: 'Coups and revolutions will probably be as frequent in the coming years as they have been in the eight preceding ones, and nothing guarantees that they may not be more violent.'

The first hundred pages of Mr Womack's book on Emiliano Zapata have all that the first two books lack: a sense of place, a sense of what for most of the time persuades people to prefer the known to the unknown evil, of social and political density. It shows how the villagers got along under Porfirio Diaz, what the sugar planters did and why they had to do it, just how much the villagers would put up with and how little they would at first demand, and what it was from within and from without that broke that particular system. The scene is set admirably, and it is small criticism to say that the rest of the book does not quite live up to it. Mr Womack describes the military and political evolution of Zapatismo well enough, but this inevitably leads him out of Morelos, and there, like Zapata, he is not as at home. More could have been said about Pancho Villa, perhaps more could be said for Venustiano Carranza. Zapata is also—in that at least, like Guevara—a particularly difficult hero to bring alive: some critics have complained that it is all rather too like the film, but Mr Womack finds the film 'subtle, powerful and true', and Brando's reticent *charro* may have been like the real man. The wall-eyed photographs, in Zapata's case, tell one as little as a Guevara poster. Mr Womack does not tell everything, but he tells a very great deal. Beside such a picture, how stiff Mr Gott's mountain-bound ideologues, how lonely Guevara in his jungle.

Returning of Issue by Henry Reed

Tomorrow will be your last day here. Someone is speaking:
A familiar voice, speaking again at all of us.
And beyond the windows—it is inside now, and autumn—
On a wind growing daily harsher, small things to the earth
Are turning and whirling, small. Tomorrow will be
Your last day here,

But not we hope for always. You cannot see through the windows
If they are leaves or flowers. We hope that many of you
Will be coming back for good. Silence, and stupefaction.
The coarsening wind and the things whirling upon it
Scour that rough stamping-ground where we so long
Have spent our substance,

As the trees are spending theirs. How much of mine have I spent,
Father, oh father? How sorry we are to lose you
I do not have to say, since the sergeant-major
Has said it, the RSM has said it, and the colonel
Has sent over a message to say that he also says it.
Everyone sorry to lose us,

And you, oh father, father, once sorry too. I think
I can honestly say you are one and all of you now:
Soldiers. Silence, and disbelief. A fact that will stand you
In pretty good stead in the various jobs you go back to.
I wish you the best of luck. Silence. And all of you know
You can think of us here, as *home*.

As home: a home we shall any of you welcome you back to.
Most of you have, I know, some sort of work waiting for you,
And the rest of you now being, thanks to us, fit and able,
Will be bound to find something. I begin to be in want.
Would any citizen of this country send me
Into his fields? And

Before I finalise: one thing about tomorrow
I must make perfectly clear. Tomorrow is clear already:
I saw myself once, but now am by time forbidden
To see myself so: as the man who went evil ways,
Till he determined, in time of famine, to seek
His father's home.

Autumn is later down there: it should now be the time
Of vivacious triumph in the fruitful fields.
As he approached, he ran over his speeches of sorrow,
Not less of truth for being much-rehearsed:
The last distilment from a long and inward
Discourse of heartbreak. And

The first thing you do, after first thing tomorrow morning,
Is, those that have not been previously detailed to do so,
Which I think is the case in most cases, is a systematic
Returning of issue. It is all-important
You should restore to store one of every store issued.
And in the case of two, two.

And I, as always late, shall never know that lifted fear
When the small hard-working master of those fields
Looked up. I trembled. But his heart came out to me
With a shout of compassion. And all my speech was only:
'Father, I have sinned against heaven, and am no more worthy
To be called thy son.'

But if I cried it, father, you could not hear me now,
 Where now you lie, crumpled in that small grave
 Like any withering dog. Your fields are sold and built on,
 Your lanes are filled with husks the swine reject.
 I scoop them in my hands. I have earned no more; and more
 I shall not inherit. And

A careful check will be made of every such object
 That was issued to each personnel originally,
 And checked at issue. And let me be quite implicit:
 That no accoutrements, impedimenta, fittings, or military garments
 May be taken as souvenirs. The one exception is shirts,
 And whatever you wear underneath.

These may be kept, those that wish. But the rest of the issue
 Must be returned, except who intend to rejoin
 In regular service. Silence. Which involves a simple procedure
 I will explain in a simple group to those that rejoin.
 Now, how many will that be? Silence. No one? No one at all?
 I see. Very well. I have up to now

Spoken with the utmost of mildness. I speak so still,
 But it does seem to me a bit of a bloody pity,
 A bit un-bloody-feeling, after the all
 We have bloody done for you, you should sit on your dumb bloody arses,
 Just waiting like bloody milksops till I bloody dismiss you.
 Silence, embarrassed, but silent.

And am I to break it, father, to break this silence?
 Is there no bloody *man* among you? Not one bloody single *one*?
 I will break the silence, father. Yes, sergeant, I will stay
 In a group of one. Father, be proud of me.
 Oh splendid, man! And for Christ's sake, tell them all,
 Why you are doing this.

Why am I doing this? And is it too late to say no?
 Come speak out, man: tell us, and shame these bastards.
 I hope to shame no one, sergeant, in simply wishing
 To remain a personnel. I have been such a thing before.
 It was good, and simple; and it was the best I could do.
 Here is a man, men! Silence.

Silence, indeed. How could I tell them, now,
 I have nowhere else to go? How could I say
 I have no longer gift or want; or how describe
 The inexplicable tears that filled my eyes
 When the poor sergeant said: 'After the all
 We have bloody done for you?'

Goodbye forever, father, after the all you have done for me.
 Soon I must start to forget you; but how to forget
 That reconciliation, never enacted between us,
 Which should have been ours, under the autumn sun?
 I can see it and feel it now, clearer than daylight, clearer
 For one brief moment, now,

Than even the astonished faces of my fellows,
 The sergeant's uneasy smile, the trees, the relief at choosing
 To learn once more the things I shall one day teach:
 A rhetoric instead of words; instead of a love, the use
 Of accoutrements, impedimenta, and fittings, and military garments,
 And harlots, and riotous living.

This is the last poem in a sequence of five poems called 'Lessons of War'. The first three poems in the sequence, including the well-known 'Naming of Parts', appeared in the author's book 'A Map of Verona', published in 1946, and the fourth poem was published in the 'Listener' in 1950.

Wasted Years?

The Age of Affluence, 1951-1964. Edited by Vernon Bogdanor and Robert Skidelsky. Macmillan £2 10s.

Here, in ten little essays, various political and social aspects of the period 1951-1964 are passably, if unevenly, massaged by bright young academics in the manner of the higher journalism. The highest level reached is a perceptive adequacy. There is a helpful analogy between Macmillan and De Gaulle, a thought-provoking exposé by Vernon Bogdanor of the Labour Party in opposition, a handy background map of CND, but in general, little of the illumination that distinguished much of the Penguin *Age of Austerity*. Why are these academic minds engaged on this rather routine exercise? Special insight, inevitably, is what is required from them, but even where, as in Robert Skidelsky's essay on Suez, there is a continual undercurrent of suggestion that this is about to be delivered, it is not forthcoming. The truth is there is a fashionable market for academic gloss rather than substance and books like this are designed to exploit it.

It is a missed opportunity, for the period is of real significance in British political history. It may later be seen as a watershed between one set of political polarisations and whatever set is eventually to come. Or, if none is to come, then it will be the period in which all true polarisation ended. During it the British Left became effectively bankrupt, and from this condition, for all the endeavours of the revisionists, it has still not discharged itself. The derogatory stress placed on affluence has proved an incorrect emphasis of interpretation. The real '13 wasted years', it can now be seen, were Labour's. It is in fact nearly 20 years since Denis Healey wrote that the essence of British socialism lay, 'not in its contingent analysis or techniques, but in its determination to apply moral principles to social life'. And yet British socialism has still to find a coherent political technique with which to implement this aim, in replacement of the antiquated and discredited Marxism which Healey was then discarding.

The Conservatives, rising from the ashes of Thirties capitalism, proved at least flexible and adaptable to the political circumstances which Labour had produced with their six-year tenure of office. Labour thereafter proved unable to rise to anything. Sleazy as the charms of Macmillanesque affluence might seem by the morning light of 1964, Labour, when the time came, had nothing to offer but an alternative, better-packed brand image. Now, with the normal vagaries of commercial taste, the customer has swapped brands again. It is left to the cavemen of the Unions to lurch our society clumsily closer to the notion of equality to which the Labour revisionists intellectually subscribe.

All this is a theme, outlined certainly in the best essay in this book, but requiring development on the grand scale after the manner of the political philosophers. But, as the editors themselves point out in their

Just published

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- 1 Naming of Parts
- 2 Judging Distances
- 3 Movement of Bodies
- 4 Unarmed Combat
- 5 Returning of Issue

HENRY REED

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