THE FORGING

John Reith, later Major the Right Honourable Sir John Charles Walsham Reith, still later the first Baron Reith, was born on the 20th of July, 1889, in a place that couldn't sound more Scottish if it yelled its name through a mouthful of salted porridge while punching a Sassenach: Stonehaven, Kincardineshire. Out of the seven children of the Reverend Dr George Reith, he was the last, with a ten year gap between him and the sixth that left him somewhat isolated as a child. His father was a Presbyterian minister of some standing and prestige - rising to become Moderator of the Free Kirk Assembly - and was by all accounts a man of fearsome authority at home as well as at the pulpit, directing the young John's life as if to a timetable he himself had drawn up. After attending Glasgow Academy - nearby to where his father was chaplain - John was enrolled at the Gresham's Public School in faraway Norfolk, which did little to mollify his sense of isolation. He eventually survived being the only Presbyterian Scot in an institution full of farmers' sons with comedy accents via the classic method of becoming good at games. His budding six-seven frame will have come in handy here.

John had aspirations of making it to Oxbridge, but the Reverend Dr flatly refused, plucking him out of Greshams at seventeen in 1906 (precluding university altogether in favour of technical college) and manoeuvering him instead into an interminable apprenticeship in engineering with the North British Locomotive Company. What followed was several years of tedious, grinding shop work: up at 4.45 am to catch slow, noisy, bumpy tram to start work at six. Then ten hours of tedious tinkering with machinery, enlivened by brief pauses for breakfast at 8.45 and lunch at 1. Then back on the tram at 5.30 pm for home, or in Reith's case more often evening classes for a further three hours. Repeat until spirit crushed. Reith later looked back on his experience as a living nightmare:

"*..[T]he prospect of five long, weary years in shops, with bits and pieces of machinery, with the ghastly hours and the squalid circumstances – it was nauseous and unbearable. I decided to bear it; to go through with it; somehow go through with it.**

This vast resolve, tooth-grinding stoicism, stone-faced patience and willingness to endure absolutely anything for as long as it took to stop - forged in a crowded but lonely childhood among much older siblings and unknowable Norfolk farm-children - was here refined into Reith's defining characteristic: the iron will, the unshakeable self-belief, and the capacity to simply stare down the entire population of the world, no matter the circumstances, until they bent to it.

A bit of light relief was finally provided in 1914 with the outbreak of World War One. By now Reith had escaped the Glasgow railroad and was living in London, against the wishes of his father.

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Contrary to the Reverend Dr's conviction that he'd "come back with his tail between his legs", Reith, with the experience of all those grinding years behind him, had no trouble at all in finding work at Albert Dock. As it happens he wasn't there long, but only because of the outbreak of hostilities. Reith's commission in the Territorials (with the 5th Scottish Rifles) saw him packed off to the trenches of the Western Front to experience an even more nightmarishly grinding lifestyle than he had on the locomotives. At the front, his extraordinary self-possession started to border on insanity. An unshakeable confidence in one's ability to achieve almost anything is all very well in peacetime - admirable, even - but standing literally yards from the enemy but on the front lines of a war where thousands upon thousands are dying every day, actions like calmly taking a stroll along the tops of the trenches in broad daylight, or nipping off for a piss in No Man's Land can have negative effects on group morale, to say the least. Not only did both of these incidents genuinely happen, but they were recorded by Reith himself in his published war memoirs. That is how self-possessed he was: enough to do stupid, even insane, things like these, but also enough to record it for public consumption with no embarrassment whatsoever.

Inevitably, Reith (by now a Lieutenant) got himself shot in 1915, a single bullet in the cheek providing what many soldiers will have considered a golden ticket out of the trenches and into the Royal Engineers, and later the Royal Marine Engineers. By the time the war ended he was a Major, and even more convinced that he was a man of destiny. He spent a couple of years after the war back in Glasgow as General Manager of - what else - an engineering firm, before moving back to London in 1921 to work as secretary with the capital's Conservative and Unionist MPs in preparation for the following November's General Election. That campaign end up with a place in the history books as the very first time the election results were broadcast over the radio, thanks to a little startup called the British Broadcasting Company.

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