THE CANDIDATE

Even after all that effort, the BBC had still not yet been born. Merely conceived, and now it was gestating. The original BBC was formed in April 1922, but not yet registered. Everything had to be sorted out before it could go live as a company. Which stations it was taking on, for instance. 2LO and 2ZY survived, but 2MT was dropped, rationalised out of existence before such a term had even been coined. Shortly after those two went national, the nascent BBC set up 5IT from Birmingham and started drawing up plans for a future national network.

They also had to put together a backroom staff, including a board of directors consisting of the managing director or equivalent of each of the Big Six companies, overseen by a hand-picked establishment man to act as Chairman. For this role they picked the right honourable Lord Gainford of Durham, or Jack Pease as he had once been known, a former Liberal politician who served under Asquith in multiple cabinet positions, including a year as Postmaster General. His job was to be in charge of the board of directors, guardian against inter-company bickering, ultimate stop for bucks, wielder of absolute authority when necessary. But he wasn't tasked with actually running the company on a day-to-day basis, overseeing the stations themselves, their transmission and their content, getting involved with the actual business of broadcasting. That was to be the responsibility of the Managing Director. And for that role, the nascent BBC needed an outsider, and even more of one than captain of industry and former Treasury Secretary Gainford. So threw the net as wide as they possibly could by advertising the role in national newspapers. One of these was the Morning Post, the paper taken by the young John Reith.

With the 1922 election now won for the Conservatives (albeit at a loss and with a new party in opposition), Reith was at something of a loose end. He considered going into politics, encouraged by both Austen Chamberlain and Lloyd George, but that wouldn't have been as fun as managing a company. While kicking his heels in Tory HQ, he spotted a job advertisement in the Morning Post: a managing director was needed at some new London-based broadcasting company. Reith didn't know the first thing about broadcasting, had no idea how a radio worked and had no conception of what the job would ultimately involve, but that didn't matter to the hyper-self-possessed Scotsman: he believed himself to have the credentials necessary to run any company in any field. He may even have been right. It still behoved him to do a touch more research than he did.

It was only after he'd posted his application letter that he looked up the board members in Who's Who and discovered that the committee was chaired by Sir William Noble - like himself, a proud, straight-backed Aberdonian. If only he'd known before he wrote the letter, he could have dropped numerous references to his own windswept porridge-eating upbringing and ancestry in the shadow

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of the Mounth, and thereby found a way, even subliminally, into the chairman's favour. Nothing if not pragmatic, Reith actively fished his application letter out of the mailbox and wrote and mailed another, this time making careful reference to his childhood in Glorious Aberdeen, or near it at least.

Whether or not the fetishisation of the granite city actually made a difference is, naturally, impossible to say, but whether due to his CV or his origins or both, Reith was called in for an interview. Naturally, he did little or no preparation for that either. As he explained with his usual remarkable candour:

'They didn't ask me many questions and some they did I didn't know the meaning of. The fact is I hadn't the remotest idea as to what broadcasting was. I hadn't troubled to find out. If I had tried I should probably have found difficulty in discovering anyone who knew.'

What he did still possess was that forceful personality and unshakable faith in himself, second only to his faith in God. He might not know anything about this newfangled broadcasting thing, but he knew how to run a company, and believed himself capable of running just about anything from a cornershop up to all three of her Majesty's armed forces at once. The technical details he could learn on the job.

The Broadcasting committee clearly agreed with him, because less than 24 hours after the interview they contacted Reith to offer him the role of Managing Director. The final piece of the puzzle was put in place at last, and on Monday the first of January 1923, the BBC - in its original incarnation as the British Broadcasting Company - was finally born. Reith being Reith, he was already at work from 9am on Saturday the 30th of December, drawing up his backroom staff, replacing various top-hatted majors with people he already knew and trusted and making sure he was surrounded by people who actually knew anything at all about broadcasting.

John Reith was in place to become one of the most important individuals of the twentieth century, almost entirely by chance.

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