AN ORATOR CALLS

Wartime broadcasting soon settled into two main functions: morale and propaganda, with, of course, plenty of overlap. Ogilvie's BBC took it upon itself to commission a raft of "rousing popular songs" so as to keep the British people's spirit up - under the faulty assumption that they weren't capable of doing so for themselves. (The Corporation's almost frighteningly detached attitude to the listeners was best illustrated in a letter by Sir Richard Maconachie, head of what was then called the BBC Talks Department, to Home Service Controller Patrick Ryan:

"The difficulty of the problem is obvious, ie hammering at a theme, but without the public knowing that it is being influenced."

A statement that becomes more sinister the more you think about it.)

They also commissioned articles and radio broadcasts from various famous journalists, and these were far more popular and successful. The Postscript broadcasts of the young (34 year old) J.B. Priestley in particular became something of a national obsession as the war ceased to be phoney and came to our shores with a vengeance in the form of the Blitzkrieg and the Battle of Britain. As the sky filled with barrage balloons, then bombs, then dogfights, Priestley's trademarked Yorkshirean combination of stone-faced stoicism and deadpan wit was a comfort and inspiration to the nation, and his Postscripts provided some of the first evidence of the power of what he called "the broadcast word".

The winter of 1940 and 1941 was the darkest period of the war in more ways than one, as what seemed like all of Europe fell to, was absorbed by or joined up with the Nazis and their allies. The enemy had already commandeered the radiowaves (with the help of Peter and Dolly Eckersley) with the gloating voice of William Joyce, the broken-nosed propagandist and traitor most heavily associated with the name Lord Haw-Haw. For the first few months of the war Joyce and his chortling cohorts on Germany Calling was, horribly, one of the only sources of hard behind-enemy-lines information, and was therefore listened to through gritted teeth and tears. Priestley provided an Allied alternative that was markedly more uplifting and less interested in rubbing the listener's faces in sewage while cackling. The very first Priestley Postscript was on the subject of the Dunkirk evacuation, and he all but created the legend on the spot.

Unfortunately, that man Churchill was Prime Minister by now, and he was distinctly unimpressed by certain aspects of this demonstration of the power of the broadcast word. The parts where Priestley uplifted the spirit of the nation were fine, but as the series went

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on he became bolder and bolder in promoting his political beliefs - which is to say, staunch Northern Socialism. Citing the post-World War I pledge of the then Government to build “a land fit for heroes”, which ultimately amounted to universal suffrage and little else, Priestley started to appeal, increasingly frequently, for the same pledge with greater follow through. Over the course of the Postscript, as well as cheering the country amidst the Blitz and the Battle of Britain, and spinning the mythology of the War in real-time, Priestley introduced much of the country to the idea that everyone was equal, and to concepts such as the welfare state, then merely theoretical but actively being planned by people like Clement Attlee, Ernest Bevin and Stafford Cripps - now in the Coalition War Cabinet, and soon to be leading lights of the post-War government that made the welfare state a reality.

None of this was what Churchill wanted to hear, or any of his equally furious Conservative colleagues in the War Cabinet for that matter. And not just politicians: the sackfuls of mail the Corporation recieved started to include naked abuse about “turning the classes against each other”. Having proved the power of broadcasting, questions started being asked, even by one of Priestley’s BBC superiors in Talks Department head Sir Richard Maconachie:

“[Priestley has] definite social and political views which he puts over in his broadcasts, and through these broadcasts, is, I think, exercising an important influence on what people are thinking. These views may be admirable or otherwise, but the question which I wish to raise is one of principle, whether any single person should be given the opportunity of acquiring such an influence to the exclusion of others who differ from him merely on the ground of his merits as a broadcaster which are, of course, very great.”

Whether this principle would have occurred to Maconachie, or anyone else, had his social and political views been more in line with Churchill and his party is a moot point.

The stuff about stiff upper lips and the Germans being arseholes whose defeat was basically inevitable was, however, and kept both Priestley and the BBC from serious censure until 1941, when the Battle of Britain was finally won, the bombing died down and the tide of the war turned, and the Postscript was cancelled by Governmental fiat. Throughout the controversy, the BBC mostly kept its own collective nose clean, the personality and iconic status of Priestley looming large enough that the entire corporation was left in his shadow, and not unhappy there to be.

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