THE LONG SHADOW

When he got the job of Director-General, Ogilvie was 45, almost shockingly young at the time for such a major role. The idea was that he would be there for some time to come, for one thing, and also that his youth and vitality would rub off on the Corporation as it entered its second decade and its horizons expanded, both geographically and technologically.

One of the reasons Reith had to go was his steadfast refusal to embrace the new artistic medium, and inevitable future of broadcasting, that was television. His disdain for the thing was already holding back the Corporation, and with it British broadcasting in general. One of Ogilvie's main duties as the new DG would be to act as midwife to the nascent BBC Television Service - as opposed to Reith's role of reluctant, disinterested doula-by-default. Hopefully he could eventually make up for time lost by the original DG's stubborn refusal to do much more than admit that television was a thing that existed.

The BBC Television Service was humming along by 1938, which in this context means it was successfully running on a daily basis, broadcasting to London and its environs. A typical day's broadcasting when Ogilvie joined the Corporation might start at noon with a talk from C. H. Middleton from the Olympia theatre about gardening; the open-mic variety show "Come and be Televised" (the original Britain's Got Talent, famous for giving Bruce Forsyth his first break); a "television visit" to such as Regent's Park Zoo or some other London landmark, purely on the basis that outside broadcasting was impressive in itself; more variety, music-hall and big bands; a film from Gaumont-British; yet more big band music; some ballroom dancing; a ten minute interlude and, to close, a short news bulletin - in audio only, simulcast from the BBC radio service, having graduated from bought-in Movietone News in March.
At this point, this nascent service was viewable by a mere 25,000 people in the London area. It was little if at all more than a fun modern novelty for the privileged, the equivalent of Google Glass, and everyone at the BBC and beyond knew it would be years, decades before it grew into any kind of national service. It was hoped that Ogilvie could be the groundskeeper to help cultivate television to this end. Despite the fact that he knew more or less nothing about television, or indeed broadcasting in general.

His predecessor didn't help. Ogilvie's first year at the BBC was largely spent wading through the bureaucratic structure Reith left behind, which was wonderfully efficient as long as it was being run by someone who really knew what he was doing. Reith, as its designer and a natural-born engineer, logistician and leader of men, obviously did. Ogilvie, an economic theorist and professional academic, was unfortunately rather lost.

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Even that might have been survivable, had Reith proved himself capable of keeping his mouth shut. The chairmanship of Imperial Airways provided him with enough of a public podium from which to constantly snipe at Ogilvie for every single move he made, or didn't make, as his successor. It had been vaguely hoped among the Board of Governors that, as a fellow Presbyterian with solid Scots roots, Reith would be reasonably well-disposed toward him. In the event, that went as far as the compliments he paid him in his memoirs - "character and personal charm, not the man for the BBC" - and certainly didn't extend to forgiving him for the crime of simply being his successor. There were times when he seemed more invested in hurling relentless criticism at Ogilvie and the Corporation than in running an airline, which was supposed to be his job by now.

It wasn't terribly helpful to Ogilvie's morale, to say the least. What he really needed was a nice smooth bedding-in period, a few years where everything was nice and boring and simple. He got the exact opposite. 1938 was a relatively quiet year as far as developments within the BBC were concerned - the World Service grew on apace, adding its first branch to broadcast in a language that wasn't English (Arabic) early in the year (technically under Reith's watch) before launching the full-fledged European Service (broadcasts in French, German, Italian and later Portugese and Spanish once the latter's Civil War was finished) in September under Ogilvie. Meanwhile, the launch shortly before World War II broke out of BBC Monitoring - the arm of the Corporation which, to this day, views and collates the world's media output. In its early days during the War, it was basically the espionage branch of the BBC; keeping tabs on foreign propaganda and gathering invaluable intelligence that the military couldn't have done. It was probably the most important legacy of Ogilvie's Director-Generalship. The fact that it got done before war broke out probably has a lot to do with its success.

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