

# *Broadcasting Britishness during the Second World War: Radio and the British World*

By SIMON J. POTTER\*

This essay considers the role of radio broadcasting in appealing to and reinforcing Britannic sentiment during the Second World War, and thus mobilising a united imperial war effort. Radio played on the bonds of sentiment in a particularly powerful fashion, because it addressed listeners intimately and with a sense of authenticity, and allowed rapid, regular, and direct communication with audiences over long distances. Imperial broadcasting structures established during the 1920s and 1930s were repurposed for war, under the leadership of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), but bringing in broadcasters (and state information and propaganda agencies) all around the British world. Many different producers, writers, artists, and experts helped broadcast Britishness during this period, appealing to Britannic sentiment in a wide variety of ways. Often they linked Britishness with liberty, democracy, and equality, even if this flew in the face of the realities of empire. The British connection was presented as a living and vital force, bringing people together despite divisions of race. Broadcasters also made a powerful appeal to ideas about a common history and set of traditions. The essay suggests that such themes offered a significant means of harnessing Britannic sentiment to the needs of war.

## I

Over the past two decades, new historical research has helped us better to understand the manifold connections that helped create a ‘British world’. Developing and disintegrating over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, this transnational entity comprised Britain, its settler colonies or ‘dominions’ in Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa, and the many communities elsewhere whose members identified themselves as British. The ties that bound the British world together were political, economic, demographic, and military. Yet it was a sentimental idea of Britannic community that provided perhaps the most fundamental and lasting support for the British connection. A world-spanning British identity drew on ideas about shared culture, history, language, and (for some) a belief in a common racial interest and destiny. This felt sense of community largely transcended differences between regions and political parties, and was sometimes also able to overcome divisions of class, religion, and race (albeit in an extremely patchy and incomplete fashion). Britannic sentiment endured well after the other connecting forces that bound the British world together had effectively dissipated, and its

---

\* University of Bristol

ghost continues to haunt Britain in the era of Brexit.<sup>1</sup>

How can historians get to grips with this vast, intangible realm of sentiment? This short essay uses archival evidence relating to radio broadcasting during the Second World War as a route into the subject, and to suggest some core themes. Historians are often ‘deaf’ to the role that radio has played in the past, and tend to neglect radio as a source for social and cultural history in favour of the more easily accessible print media.<sup>2</sup> The essay argues that thinking about wartime broadcasting provides a novel approach to understanding the interaction of contemporary understandings of British identity with the pressing realities of a united, successful, and final imperial war effort. It shows how contemporaries sought to draw on ideas about a shared history of resistance to foreign aggression, and appeal to common ideals of liberty, to bind the inhabitants of the British world together in the face of Fascism. Viewed from the perspective of today, attempts to claim a positive link between empire, resistance, and liberty might seem strange, perverse, and distasteful. However, this was not how contemporaries responded during the Second World War: if its pervasiveness is anything to go by, then this appeal must have resonated with audiences to a considerable degree.

During the Second World War, radio disseminated the information and propaganda required to win consent for a vital, complex imperial war effort.<sup>3</sup> Ideas about British identity were certainly deployed on the airwaves for official and instrumental purposes. Yet Britannic sentiment cannot be viewed simply as a tool of propaganda. Those seeking to mobilise Britishness in the cause of war had to work with, accommodate, and exploit deep-rooted and long-lived ideas and assumptions about the origins and nature of that community. Moreover, wartime propaganda was organised in a decentralised fashion in the British world: authority was shared among different governments around the empire, and with state propaganda agencies working in a variety of loose relationships with a range of semi-state and largely autonomous organisations, including broadcasters. This meant that individual producers, writers, and artists were often able to work with some autonomy as they interpreted the nature of British sentiment and its connection with the war effort. There was not one simple, official propaganda line to toe.

For historians of Britannic sentiment, radio should also be of particular interest because it possesses certain distinctive characteristics as a medium, which rendered it a particularly powerful means of conveying ideas about British identity during a period of global conflict. Compared with other media of mass communication, the appeal of radio was unusually intimate, speaking to individuals or families in their own homes, and to service personnel in camps and on the frontline around the world. Although a mass medium (with nine million households in Britain possessing a listener licence by 1939 and with similarly high levels of access in most parts of the British world), radio could seem to speak to listeners on a personal level, and thus appeal particularly effectively to sentimental connections. Contemporaries also prized the authenticity of radio, its ability to present listeners with a live connection, and to provide the sounds of real people and of genuine events as they happened.<sup>4</sup> Finally, thanks to the development of long-distance short-wave transmission

---

<sup>1</sup> For a brief, recent overview of the historiography of the British World see Potter, *British Imperial History*, pp. 98-104. Key collections of essays on the subject include Bridge and Fedorowich (eds), *The British World*; Buckner and Francis (eds), *Rediscovering the British World*; Buckner and Francis (eds), *Canada and the British World*; and Darien-Smith, Grimshaw, and Macintyre (eds), *Britishness Abroad*.

<sup>2</sup> See Scales, *Radio and the Politics of Sound*, pp. 7-8.

<sup>3</sup> Jackson, *The British Empire and the Second World War*; Grey, ‘War and the British World’; Jeffery, ‘The Second World War’.

<sup>4</sup> Scannell, *Radio, Television and Modern Life*, pp. 58-74.

## Broadcasting Britishness during the Second World War

and reception technologies during the 1920s and 1930s, radio made possible instantaneous communication over vast distances. During the First World War, news could certainly travel fast, but was still subject to the vagaries of the disruption of the telegraph system, and was also limited by the carrying capacity of that system.<sup>5</sup> In the Second World War, by contrast, radio could bring up-to-date news to audiences around the British world, direct from the heart of the empire and from the battlefield, many times each day.

### II

During the 1920s and 1930s the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) developed for itself a significant role as a promoter of Britannic and imperial sentiment at home in Britain, and overseas in the colonies and dominions. Through its programmes it encouraged listeners to think of themselves as members of a world-spanning Britannic community. Overseas, the BBC's key tool was the Empire Service, established in 1932 and providing the foundation for the BBC's wartime Overseas Services and, eventually, for the BBC World Service. During the 1930s, the BBC also began to ship programmes recorded on disc, known as transcriptions, to other broadcasters around the empire. The inter-war period also saw the establishment of many different broadcasting services and stations around the British empire: those run as public authorities often developed close (if not always harmonious) links with the BBC. The Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC), the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC), New Zealand's National Broadcasting Service (NBS) and National Commercial Broadcasting Service (NCBS), and All India Radio went on to play crucial roles in mobilising radio during the Second World War.

Broadcasters also worked closely with official information and propaganda agencies during the conflict, such as Britain's Ministry of Information (MoI). Direct state funding, under the supervision of the Foreign Office, allowed the BBC's Overseas Services to expand, serving more overseas listeners with better programmes, including material in languages other than English. To serve the special requirements of audiences in different parts of the empire, the BBC drew on teams of Australian, Canadian, New Zealand, South African, and Indian producers, commentators, and artists. These people were gathered together by the BBC in Britain and at the seat of war to create an aural representation of the idea of a combined imperial military effort. Many of the programmes broadcast by the BBC on short-wave were picked up by stations around the British world and 're-broadcast' on medium-wave frequencies that could reach a greater number of listeners. Exchanges of pre-recorded programmes on disc also increased massively during the war, particularly with the creation of the London Transcriptions Service, run by the BBC but subsidised and partly directed by the British government. Public broadcasters in the dominions meanwhile also produced their own information and propaganda programmes, for domestic and overseas audiences. They provided programmes for other broadcasters, notably the BBC, and began to establish their own short-wave services (or to assist state-run short-wave services), allowing them directly to reach listeners overseas.<sup>6</sup>

In presenting listeners with programmes about the British empire, public broadcasters did not rely entirely upon the expertise of their own programme planners and producers. They

---

<sup>5</sup> Potter, *News and the British World*, pp. 186-210.

<sup>6</sup> For more on these issues see Potter, *Broadcasting Empire* and Potter, 'The Colonisation of the BBC'. On the BBC and the Second World War, particularly in terms of domestic British broadcasting, see Hajkowski, 'The BBC, the Empire, and the Second World War' and Nicholas, "'Brushing Up Your Empire'".

also employed or sought assistance from external writers, academic advisers, speakers, artists, and critics. Many of these contributors were deeply committed to the idea of Britannic unity. Even some who were not so convinced still allowed their sense of patriotic duty, or their commitment to fighting Fascism, to overcome their scruples about British imperialism. George Orwell, for example, was drawn into mediating war and empire despite his significant doubts about the morality of British overseas rule.<sup>7</sup>

Individuals also worked to broadcast empire in other ways. The raw material for programmes travelled around the British world in unprocessed form, with flows of written information, publications, and scripts crossing the empire's internal borders to provide the basic content for broadcasts. A good example of how such material could be used for radio were the talks prepared in New Zealand by Joan Wood, an Englishwoman married to the professor of history at Victoria College, Wellington. In her broadcast sessions, Wood made frequent reference to 'home front' conditions and initiatives in Britain, Canada, and Australia, and sometimes also the USA. She illustrated her talks with references to published accounts of new policies and austerity measures overseas, providing comparisons with New Zealand conditions and initiatives and suggestions for borrowing ideas from abroad.<sup>8</sup>

Speakers and entertainers could also travel around the empire in person: artists as diverse in their appeal as Gracie Fields and Noël Coward visited Australia and New Zealand during the war, broadcasting to boost morale and raise funds for the war effort. Coward, a famous British playwright, actor, and performer, undertook considerable propaganda work during the war, including tours of America, the Middle East, South Africa, Burma, India, Australia, and New Zealand.<sup>9</sup> In his broadcasts in Australia and New Zealand, subsequently published in Britain, Coward, a fierce patriot, was keen to stress the continuing vitality of the Britannic connection.<sup>10</sup>

### III

This essay now turns to consider some of the key themes and approaches deployed by those broadcasting Britishness during the Second World War. Notably, in encouraging individuals and communities to make the sacrifices necessary to win the war, in Britain and around the empire, propagandists paid great attention to the theme of a common, voluntary commitment to a struggle for shared values of democracy and equality.<sup>11</sup> The empire was presented as a force for increasing economic welfare and political self-government for all those under its rule. Unity was emphasised, even in the face of evidence of discrimination, protest, and disintegration.<sup>12</sup> This involved presenting listeners with what was undeniably a particular, partial, and politically-charged account of the empire's past, as well as of its present and future. Yet the pervasiveness of these themes suggests that they were deemed to have considerable appeal to Britannic sentiment.

At the outset of the war, the British MoI was keen to emphasise the theme of growing self-determination within the empire. The aim was to defend Britain's colonial record against any comparison with the expansionist policies of Nazi Germany. The Ministry

---

<sup>7</sup> Fleay and Sanders, 'Looking into the Abyss'.

<sup>8</sup> HL, MS-1122, Joan Wood, scripts of radio talks.

<sup>9</sup> Aldgate and Richards, *Britain Can Take It*, p. 188.

<sup>10</sup> Coward, *Australia Visited*.

<sup>11</sup> For the broader context see Rose, *Which People's War?*.

<sup>12</sup> Webster, *Englishness and Empire*, pp. 6-7, 19-54.

## Broadcasting Britishness during the Second World War

sought to stress that the British empire was an ‘association of free and equal partners’, united in a common war effort against a Nazi ‘slave Empire’. To achieve this goal, officials at the MoI argued that existing British public attitudes would have to be modified. Older ideas about the relationship between homeland and dependencies would have to be dispelled, and propagandists would need actively to combat anti-imperial prejudices that had arisen ‘owing to ignorance of the evolution which has transformed British Imperialism’.<sup>13</sup>

Outside Britain, similar themes were also developed by broadcasters in the dominions, such as William Macmahon Ball, a Melbourne politics lecturer and the wartime controller of Australia’s short-wave broadcasting services. Ball was a regular Australian contributor to BBC programmes, and was invited at one stage to run the BBC’s Pacific Service.<sup>14</sup> In his Dominion Commentary talks for the BBC’s National Service, Ball explained to British audiences that although the nature of the imperial connection between Britain and Australia had changed during the interwar years, and aggressive, belligerent jingoism had abated, an enduring sentimental connection remained. In the wake of the fall of France, Ball argued for example that

[Although] Australians today do not generally get worked up about the Empire as an Empire in the way they used to twenty years ago... it has been very striking how in these last weeks Australians have shown the depth of their devotion to England and all England means.<sup>15</sup>

He stressed that superficial disagreements between governments in Britain and Australia should not be allowed to distract attention from Australian loyalty: such squabbles were ‘just the sort of mutual criticism to be expected inside any family whose members have any individuality’.<sup>16</sup> Ball took care to emphasise that, while the bonds of empire did not act in quite the same way as in earlier decades, they still linked Britain and Australia together into a single community.

Leonard Brockington, a Welsh-born Canadian barrister, renowned public speaker, former CBC chairman, and special advisor to the Canadian Prime Minister Mackenzie King, made similar points as he toured the wartime British world and broadcast a series of talks along his way. Appointed advisor to the British MoI in 1942, the following year Brockington visited Australia and New Zealand on behalf of the Ministry, accompanied by Bob Bowman, formerly of the CBC’s Overseas Unit.<sup>17</sup> In his talks, Brockington reported on the work of Australians stationed in Britain, Canada, the US, and the Pacific Islands, but also described wartime Britain, which he argued was becoming a more democratic and equal society.<sup>18</sup> Britain and the empire, he insisted, were no longer dominated by Blimpish

---

<sup>13</sup> BBC WAC, R34/953, Ministry of Information memorandum, ‘Policy Committee – Empire Publicity Campaign – Paper for discussion on Tuesday, 1st October, 1940’.

<sup>14</sup> On the Australian short-wave service see Vickery, ‘Telling Australia’s Story to the World’, ch. 5; Hilvert, *Blue Pencil Warriors*; and, more generally, Hodge, *Radio Wars*. For Ball’s relationship with the BBC see NLA, Ball papers, box 1, folder 6, R. A. Rendall to Ball, 27 Oct. 1941 and copy of Ball to C. Connor [sic], 15 Oct. 1941. See also NAA NSW, SP1558/2, box 81, file ‘Dominion Commentary’ Programme for BBC, 1939-40.

<sup>15</sup> NLA, Ball papers, box 1, folder 6, script for ‘Dominion Commentary’, 15 July 1940.

<sup>16</sup> NLA, Ball papers, box 1, folder 6, Script for ‘Dominion Commentary’, 4 Nov. 1940.

<sup>17</sup> NAA ACT, ‘Visit to Australia – L. W. Brockington’, SP112/1, control symbol 353/2/63. See also NAA ACT, SP112/1, control symbol M98, ‘Brockington, L.W., visit of’.

<sup>18</sup> NAA NSW, SP300/1, box 11, Leonard Brockington, ‘National Talk’, 20 Feb. [1943] and ‘Talk by L.W. Brockington’, 5 Mar. [1943].

'icles with monocles'; similarly, the British Commonwealth was made up of 'millions of decent God-fearing, home-loving, generous and just people, who have no desire to dominate anyone, or to deny any man, whatever his colour or race, justice and an equality of opportunity'.<sup>19</sup> All this clearly harmonised with broader BBC (and MoI) wartime policies of portraying Britain as a progressive rather than a hierarchical society, and the empire as a means of improving the welfare of all its subjects.<sup>20</sup> Brockington helped project ideas about a 'people's war' and a 'people's empire' to the dominions. In a talk heard by radio listeners in Britain, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, Brockington stressed that all members of a multi-racial British world were fighting together for liberty and against racialism. He spoke of his own mixed English and Welsh heritage, as an example of the coming together of different peoples under the aegis of Britishness, and argued that historic cooperation between diverse groups in Britain was mirrored in other parts of the Commonwealth.

I have stood among Canadians of Norman blood and speech patiently guarding the southern shores of England; I have heard General Smuts salute an Empire that once tried to destroy him, an Empire, which for the sake of humanity, [he] helped so violently to save, so wisely to guide. I have sat in the houses of the Maori listening to the reading of letters from Maori soldiers, telling their mothers wistfully of the English countryside, and of their pride in equal British brotherhood.<sup>21</sup>

Brockington was 'broadcasting to us all about us all'.<sup>22</sup>

Another broadcaster who provided the BBC with despatches aimed at explaining the Australian war effort to British audiences, and at reassuring them of Australian loyalty, was the journalist Chester Wilmot.<sup>23</sup> Wilmot had already broadcast for the BBC before the war, and subsequently worked closely with BBC colleagues while covering the work of the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) in the Middle East: some of his reports were carried by the BBC during this period. Returning to Australia (after having fallen out with the Australian high command and being sent home from New Guinea), Wilmot broadcast for the BBC on Australian affairs.<sup>24</sup> Here, he made good use of his knowledge of British requirements and conditions, taking care to explain the Australian war effort in ways that British audiences could understand and empathise with. Discussing coal strikes in Australia in 1942, Wilmot emphasised that while it might seem

strange to you people at home that with the enemy at our gates, there is still trouble with strikers in Australia... I think it's true that people here are not yet roused as much as you were after Dunkirk, but you must remember that the Japanese are still as far from Sydney

---

<sup>19</sup> NAA NSW, SP300/1, box 11, 'National Talk by Mr. L. W. Brockington, K.C.', 26 Mar. 1943.

<sup>20</sup> Nicholas, "'Brushing Up Your Empire', 215. Hajkowski, 'The BBC and the Second World War', 136.

<sup>21</sup> NAA NSW, SP300/1, box 11, Leonard Brockington, 'Calling Australia', 20 June 1943.

<sup>22</sup> SLNSW, ML MSS 6275/11, E. T. Fisk papers, file – 'Brockington, Mr. L. W.', Sir Ronald Cross to E. T. Fisk, 18 Feb. 1943. See also NAA NSW, SP300/1, box 11, 'Talk by Mr. L.W. Brockington K.C., to be radio-telephoned to BBC', 23 March 1943 and 'Talk for the BBC by Mr. L. W. Brockington K.C.', 27 April [1943]. See also *Sydney Morning Herald*, 12 April and 11 May 1943. Brockington's Canadian broadcasts were also heard by, and would have been partly aimed at, audiences in the USA.

<sup>23</sup> For more on Wilmot see, most recently, McDonald with Brune, *Valiant for Truth* (Sydney, 2016).

<sup>24</sup> NLA, Ball papers, box 4, folder 29, Chester Wilmot to Ball, 28 Feb. 1941. NLA, Chester and Edith Wilmot papers, series 1, folder 48, Wilmot to T. W. Bearup, 4 July 1941; Lawrence Cecil to Bearup, 17 Nov. 1940, 28 Nov. 1940, and 4 May 1941; and Bearup to Wilmot, 11 Dec. 1941.

## Broadcasting Britishness during the Second World War

as Athens is from London.<sup>25</sup>

Wilmot could be quite critical, for example when discussing the failure of the British and Americans properly to define Allied war aims, and the dangers of ignoring supply problems as Australian troops advanced in New Guinea.<sup>26</sup> This probably acted to balance and thus make palatable the propagandistic elements of Wilmot's broadcasts. He was certainly deemed a success by the BBC, which invited him to join its team of war correspondents covering the Normandy campaign, and later appointed him special correspondent at the Nuremberg trials.

### IV

In his broadcasts, Wilmot emphasised how the enduring sentimental connections between Britain and Australia were rooted in a common military history. 'Australian soldiers of two generations have fought and died [in the Middle East] side by side with their British, New Zealand, South African and Indian comrades.'<sup>27</sup> Like other contemporaries, he did not present interwar and wartime changes in the constitutional and diplomatic relationship between Britain and Australia as marking a revolutionary departure from past patterns. Instead, they were interpreted as natural outgrowths of a long-term trend towards liberty and self-government, a shared heritage. As long as this tendency was not blocked, then increasing autonomy could only strengthen the underlying sentimental connections upon which the empire's existence depended.

Indeed, imperial history was seen by both the MoI and the Colonial Office as playing an important role in the broader propaganda war, and many academic imperial historians were drawn into the world of broadcasting, to advise and provide suitable programme material.<sup>28</sup> However, it was not only academics and policy-makers who sought to put the imperial and British past on air. Writers of popular entertainment and children's programmes also engaged with historical themes to strengthen appeals to Britannic sentiment. Using the proceeds from her sales of radio scripts in Australia to the ABC, the writer Nancy Phelan left Sydney for London in September 1938, eager to get to England before the anticipated outbreak of hostilities. An Anglophile, she described herself as a 'lover of London': for her, 'London was poetry, history, romance, mists and bare trees, lamplight on wet pavements, daffodil buds in the square... Nothing was disappointing, nothing discouraged me, I didn't care that the British lived on starch and Brussels sprouts.' However, elsewhere in her writings she did show more of an awareness of the realities of working-class life in Britain.<sup>29</sup> After casual work in London and the Midlands, she married and had a child, and moved to Devon to escape the Blitz.<sup>30</sup> During and after the war, she wrote a number of radio scripts for the ABC and the BBC, generally aimed at children and women. Many of

---

<sup>25</sup> NAA NSW, series SP300/4, control symbol 140, 'Commentary for BBC – by Chester Wilmot – relayed by radiophone', 11 Apr. 1942.

<sup>26</sup> NAA NSW, series SP300/4, control symbol 168, 'B.B.C. News Despatch no. 14 – by Chester Wilmot – Relayed from Melbourne', 16 July 1942. NAA NSW, series SP300/4, control symbol 187, 'National News Commentary – B.B.C. News Despatch – by Chester Wilmot', 8 Oct. 1942.

<sup>27</sup> NAA NSW, series SP300/4, control symbol 162, 'B.B.C. News Despatch No. 12 – By Chester Wilmot', 3 July 1942.

<sup>28</sup> Potter, 'What did you do in the War, Professor?'

<sup>29</sup> SLNSW, Nancy Phelan papers, box 2, Script of talk entitled 'London Night', n.d.

<sup>30</sup> SLNSW, Phelan papers, box 32, unpublished typescript MSS of 'Friendly natives: an English memoir', n.d. Phelan, *Swift Foot of Time*, pp. 5, 13. Phelan, *Kingdom by the Sea*.

her children's programmes were historical dramas, fictionalising episodes in the lives of figures such as Bonnie Prince Charlie, Lady Jane Grey and Charles II. In these plays, she drew on her knowledge of the dialect, accents, and way of life of the 'amazingly primitive' people of the west of England.<sup>31</sup> A script for a radio serial, *Sons of Devon*, dramatizing the exploits of Sir Francis Drake at the time of the Spanish Armada, included the following exchange, representative of her writing:

1st Man – 'Ast 'eard noos Giles?

2nd Man – Ah. T'be praaperr bad. Yes my. 'Tes said they Spaniards is coomin'... Us 'ave now 'awp to fight they – us got naw arms nor naught.

3rd Man – Tes trew, but us mun never let they conquer we. Naw! Not likey. They foreigners mun not set foot on my fields ef I dies fightin' they.<sup>32</sup>

Such local colour provided an interesting and presumably comprehensible backdrop for adventure stories aimed at British and Australian audiences. Indeed, the Spanish Armada proved a resonant historical event at a time when Britain once again seemed to face invasion. After the war, In 1947, Phelan wrote a play called *Drake's Drum* for the BBC's *Children's Hour*. Set at the time of Dunkirk, the play drew comparisons between the Armada and Hitler's threatened landings. In the play, a young boy goes to bed worried that England is 'beat', but is assured by his father that 'We haven't even started yet.' His grandmother promises that Francis Drake will return to save England: the play then moves into a dramatised account of Drake's defeat of the Spanish. Returning to the present day, the boy's father goes off to help with the evacuation of the troops from Dunkirk. His grandmother concludes that Britain doesn't need Drake after all: 'We've got Churchill, haven't we?... He's our Drake.'<sup>33</sup>

Phelan's scripts re-packaged British historical events in a way that would speak to contemporary audiences of British and Australian children. She mediated these histories in such a way as to justify and support Britain's war effort and the British empire. In *The Royal Leopard*, as in many of her radio plays, Phelan sought to bring history alive by juxtaposing past and present, and by having a young child travel through time. The first episode of the series opens in a house in Sydney, where a Professor Jones is having breakfast with his young family, after having sat up late into the night finishing a lecture on Edward III. His son, John, tells him that he has recently been studying Edward and the Black Prince: 'Our history teacher said they were no better than a lot of murderers. Worse than the Germans.' The Professor tells John that this is an 'interesting inaccuracy' perpetrated by the boy's history teacher, Mr Snodge, a 'weedy, anemic, spotty-faced, long-haired Conscientious Objector'. John responds to his father that 'Everyone knows you're good at history and all that – but the whole thing with you is that you're an Imperialist and you only write history in a way that butters up England and the Empire and never gives the other persons side at all'. To which the Professor replies: 'A true historian never butters up anyone – his own or anyone else's country. He tells the truth.' He argues that one has to judge the Black Prince by the standards of his time: 'Prince Edward's barbarous habits seem to have upset your Mr Snodge with his delicate sensibilities, although if we put him beside a Nazi Storm Trooper he appears as meek and humble as a nun.' This debate on the philosophy of history is terminated somewhat prematurely when the Professor sends John

<sup>31</sup> SLNSW, Phelan papers, box 27, script of talk with J. Denton, 2BL, n.d..

<sup>32</sup> SLNSW, Phelan papers, box 26, script for 'Sons of Devon', episode 10, n.d..

<sup>33</sup> SLNSW, Phelan papers, box 26, script for 'Drake's Drum', n.d..

## Broadcasting Britishness during the Second World War

to his room. However, it is resumed when, in his dreams, John is visited by a succession of historical characters, who relate the life of the Black Prince and predict the horrors of future war.<sup>34</sup>

### V

By drawing on voices from around the British world, wartime broadcasters created an echo of a combined imperial war effort. The diverse peoples of the empire, British and non-British, were presented as working together towards common goals of liberty and economic improvement. Ideas about the composite nature of the British imperial community, combining a wide range of different groups under the umbrella of a single entity, were used to underpin claims about the effectiveness of imperial cooperation more generally. Attempts to appeal to Britannic sentiment often also involved the deployment of claims about the British and imperial past. The British world was presented as sharing a history, a usable past which could help justify and motivate the imperial war effort.

It is of course difficult to gauge how far the images projected by wartime broadcasts reflected wider responses to the war, or popular attitudes towards the empire. There is not space in a short essay such as this to consider the (admittedly scant) evidence that survives concerning audience responses. In a wider study of British identities during the Second World War, Sonya O. Rose has presented the BBC as one of the key organisations seeking to promote a united national response to the war in Britain. She concludes that while the achievement of a single, core British national identity proved elusive, a united war effort was nevertheless, to a significant effect, secured.<sup>35</sup> Similar ambiguity surrounds the question of how far the BBC succeeded in generating popular knowledge or enthusiasm for the empire in Britain during the war: historians cannot agree on an answer.<sup>36</sup> However, when it comes to the issue of Britannic sentiment in the British world, we might be more confident in hazarding a conclusion. Given the range and extent of broadcasting about the shared history and traditions of liberty and cooperation that, it was claimed, sustained the British world, it would be difficult to conclude that such ideas bore no relation to wider popular beliefs in this period. Certainly, some contemporaries drew attention to broader public apathy or hostility towards empire (a constant theme throughout the twentieth century). Yet such resistance to empire more generally did not necessarily translate into a rejection of Britannic sentiment, of the sense of a world-spanning British community. As a result, by emphasising the significance of Britannic sentiment, broadcasters surely did help listeners around the British world comprehend and support the war effort as an imperial one.

### References

- Aldgate, Anthony, and Richards, Jeffrey, *Britain Can Take It* (Edinburgh, 2nd edition, 1994 [1986]).  
BBC WAC, BBC Written Archives Centre, Caversham Park, Reading.  
Bridge, Carl and Fedorowich, Kent (eds), *The British world: diaspora, culture, identity* (London, 2003), also available as a special number of the *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 2:31 (May 2003).  
Buckner, Phillip and Francis, R. Douglas (eds), *Rediscovering the British World* (Calgary, 2005).

<sup>34</sup> SLNSW, Phelan papers, box 26, script for 'Royal Leopard', episode 1, n.d..

<sup>35</sup> Rose, *Which People's War?*

<sup>36</sup> Here, contrast Hajkowski, 'The BBC, the Empire, and the Second World War' with Nicholas, "'Brushing up your Empire"'.

SIMON J. POTTER

- Buckner, Phillip and Francis, R. Douglas (eds), *Canada and the British World: culture, migration, and identity* (Vancouver, 2005).
- Coward, Noël, *Australia Visited 1940* (London, 1941).
- Darien-Smith, Kate, Grimshaw, Patricia, and Macintyre, Stuart (eds), *Britishness Abroad: transnational movements and imperial cultures* (Melbourne, 2007).
- Fleay, C., and Sanders, M.L., 'Looking into the Abyss: George Orwell at the BBC', *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 24, no. 3 (July 1989), 503-518.
- Grey, Jeffrey, 'War and the British World in the Twentieth Century' in Buckner and Francis (eds) *Rediscovering the British World*.
- Hajkowski, Thomas, 'The BBC, the Empire, and the Second World War, 1939-1945', *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, vol. 22, no. 2 (June 2002).
- Hilvert, John, *Blue Pencil Warriors: censorship and propaganda in World War II* (St Lucia, Queensland, 1984).
- HL, Hocken Library, Dunedin.
- Hodge, Errol, *Radio Wars: truth, propaganda and the struggle for Radio Australia* (Cambridge, 1995).
- Jackson, Ashley, *The British Empire and the Second World War* (London, 2006).
- Jeffery, Keith, 'The Second World War' in Judith M. Brown and Wm. Roger Louis (eds.) *The Oxford History of the British Empire Volume IV: the twentieth century* (Oxford, 1999).
- McDonald, Neil, with Brune, Peter, *Valiant for Truth: the life of Chester Wilmot, war correspondent* (Sydney, 2016).
- NAA ACT, National Archives of Australia, ACT branch.
- NAA NSW, National Archives of Australia, New South Wales branch.
- Nicholas, Siân, "'Brushing Up Your Empire: dominion and colonial propaganda on the BBC's Home Services, 1939-45' in Bridge and Fedorowich (eds.), *The British World*.
- NLA, National Library of Australia, Canberra.
- Phelan, Nancy, *The Swift Foot of Time: an Australian in England, 1938-45* (Melbourne, 1983).
- Phelan, Nancy, *A Kingdom by the Sea* (Sydney, 1969).
- Potter, Simon J., *News and the British World: the emergence of an imperial press system, 1876-1922* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2003).
- Potter, Simon J., 'What did you do in the War, Professor? Imperial history and propaganda, 1939-1945' in Robert J. Blyth and Keith Jeffery (eds), *The British Empire and its Contested Pasts* (Irish Historical Studies XXVI, 2009).
- Potter, Simon J., *Broadcasting Empire: the BBC and the British world, 1922-1970* (Oxford, 2012).
- Potter, Simon J., 'The Colonisation of the BBC: diasporic Britons at the BBC External Services, c. 1932-1956' in Marie Gillespie and Alban Webb (eds) *Diasporas and Diplomacies: cosmopolitan contact zones at the BBC World Service, 1932-2012* (London and New York, 2012).
- Potter, Simon J., *British Imperial History* (Palgrave, 2015).
- Rose, Sonya O., *Which People's War? National identity and citizenship in wartime Britain, 1939-1945* (Oxford, 2003).
- Scales, Rebecca P., *Radio and the Politics of Sound in Interwar France, 1921-1939* (Cambridge, 2016).
- Scannell, Paddy, *Radio, Television and Modern Life: a phenomenological approach* (Oxford, 1996), 58-74.
- SLNSW, State Library of New South Wales, Mitchell Library, Sydney.
- Sydney Morning Herald*.
- Vickery, Edward Louis, 'Telling Australia's Story to the World: the Department of Information, 1939-1950' (Unpublished Australian National University D.Phil. Thesis, 2003).
- Webster, Wendy, *Englishness and Empire, 1939-1965* (Oxford, 2005).