



BRITISH RADIO DRAMA, 1945-63

Hugh Chignell

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For Sue

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A NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

I refer in this book to the Drama Department and the Features Department of the BBC. Elsewhere I refer to Drama and Features and the capital D and F indicate that this is a reference to a department. I also refer to drama and features, with lower case d and f, and these are references to a genre of radio output.

INTRODUCTION

Any history of British radio in the twentieth century must acknowledge the importance of radio drama and especially in the period after the end of the Second World War up to the early 1960s. This is particularly interesting in terms of radio drama output partly because a number of celebrated writers wrote specifically for radio, including Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter, and also because of the artistic freedom granted by the BBC's cultural network,¹ the Third Programme, launched in September 1946. There is a case for calling this period of time, from 1945 to 1963, the 'golden age' of radio drama; admittedly this is a slightly speculative shorthand but it captures a truth about the period when radio was still a dominant cultural medium and before television drama began to attract the best writers and producers.

As this book will show, there are a variety of radio dramas, including plays written for the stage, novels adapted for radio and, far less common, plays written specifically for radio. Adaptations from novels often took the form of serials, whereas stage adaptations tended to be single broadcasts, often running for well over an hour or in two parts over two hours. Dramas written specifically for radio, a phenomenon which became the norm in the 1960s, were relatively rare but as these emerged in the early 1950s they revealed some of the most interesting writing for radio which, as will be explained in later chapters, often directly addressed the idea of 'sound drama' or what Neil Verma has called 'the theatre of the mind'.² This book will mainly be about dramas written specifically for radio because they were so often the most interesting and innovative although I have also included some very important and apparently successful stage adaptations and also the occasional adaptation from a novel. My emphasis on plays written for radio reflects Mary James's 'hypothesis that the original play written for radio had the potential to be a specialized form of poetic drama, "poetic drama of the air"'.³

What is missing, among the many things missing in this inevitably selective book, is the genre of popular drama and especially popular drama series including *Frontline Family*, *The Archers* and *Mrs Dale's Diary*, which are all in their own way highly significant and deserving of critical analysis and their own written histories as Heidi Svømmekjær has demonstrated in her account of the very early Danish 'soap opera' *The Hansen Family*.⁴ My justification for excluding popular forms of radio drama is not derived from the quality or significance of

the different types but is more to do with an interest in the extremely innovative and experimental work of some writers and producers at a time when the BBC gave all the appearance of being very conservative and cautious. This is perhaps not a very compelling argument, and it will no doubt leave some readers feeling I have omitted examples of interesting and important work, including not only the serial but almost all of the drama output of the Light Programme and most of the Home Service as well. However, in the chapters which follow, the extraordinary artistic creativity of a small group of writers, producers and script editors will show itself to be worthy of close attention.

Having narrowed the scope of this book to a certain type of drama, either written for radio or adapted from the stage or novel, I should add that some of this output was produced by the BBC's Drama Department, but some of it was made in Features Department. The division of Drama from Features at the end of the war (as will be discussed in Chapter 2) resulted in the production of dramas in both departments, but, confusingly, some of the programmes made in Features Department were called 'features'. So, to take one example, the 1946 production of Louis MacNeice's *The Dark Tower*⁵ although clearly a drama was in fact referred to as a 'feature' because it was made by Features Department. The radio feature is a combination of factually based content with creative, often musical or poetic, elements. This places features somewhere between drama and documentary, and the genre remains an important part of contemporary creative radio and audio, but Features Department also made radio dramas with no factual content, like *The Dark Tower*, and so they are included here.

The period of time covered by this book, from the end of the Second World War to 1963, requires some justification. The late 1940s and early 1950s witnessed the production of some extraordinary and ambitious dramas mainly by Features Department (including *The Dark Tower* as well as *In Parenthesis*⁶ and *The Ascent of F6*⁷) and so the period after 1945 is important even though very few recordings still exist from that time. The 1950s themselves could easily be called a 'golden age' of radio drama as Beckett, Pinter and, the prolific, Giles Cooper among others were writing for the medium. The early 1960s was also a productive time but 1963 serves as a useful cut-off date as the long-serving head of Radio Drama, Val Gielgud, retired in that year and handed his baton over to a very different man indeed, Martin Esslin. What followed was, arguably, the decline of radio drama as television drama became increasingly confident and successful, a view expressed most forcefully by the radio critic David Wade who stated that 'by 1966 radio was deep in the depression induced by the runaway success of television, at which time it was even forecast that sound broadcasting was finished'.⁸

The choice of dramas discussed here is also heavily influenced by the very limited availability of recordings of historic British radio dramas. This is not the place to address the complex and frustrating situation regarding the inaccessibility of old radio programmes. I leave that to Ian Wittington who includes a forthright statement of the situation at the end of his analysis of

literary radio studies: 'A great deal [of radio material] remains unreleased, accessible only through in-person listening at the British Library in London.'⁹ He adds that 'significant foundational work must be done to bring these documents to a wider audience, whether through the publication of scripts, the release of audio recordings, or through newer, digital models of archival presentation that combine audio and textual information.'¹⁰ There is a twofold problem for the radio historian here because not only are existing recordings rare or difficult to access but the selection process for retaining them in the BBC Sound Archive was skewed towards well-known writers. As a result, even radio dramas that were well thought of at the time were either not archived or subsequently destroyed. A notable example of this is the important radio dramatist Rhys Adrian, whose early work is largely missing. In one of the most important books about radio drama, Donald McWhinnie's influential *The Art of Radio*,¹¹ there are detailed accounts of production and aesthetics issues in relation to a number of radio dramas, including Giles Cooper's *Without the Grail*, Rhys Adrian's *The Passionate Thinker* and James Forsyth's *The Pier*, but I was unable to access any recordings of these dramas despite their prominence.

The consequence of this scarcity of recordings is that the history of the genre is skewed. The fairly comprehensive literature on Beckett's radio output is surely partly to do with the fact that all of his radio work is available in an admittedly rare CD box set. One solution may be to read the scripts, many of which are available in the BBC's Written Archives Centre. The problem with that approach is that it fundamentally denies the sonic quality of sound drama and removes from hearing the performance of actors, the use of music and sound effects. I have not included dramas which I have not been able to hear (with a few exceptions)¹² and that has significantly limited the range of programmes that could be examined here¹³ although I believe and hope that what could be heard still represents a fascinating and useful record of the genre.¹⁴

Media historians seem to be presented with a particularly diverse range of sources, including written and audiovisual material, as well as burgeoning digital resources for interpreting and identifying historic programming. As a result this study of post-war radio is based not only on listening to old programmes but also on a variety of published sources, document archives in the United Kingdom and the United States, interviews, access to BBC oral histories and recently developed databases. As new resources become available, the media historian can find themselves standing on rapidly shifting terrain and this can directly influence the research journey. A good example of this is the relatively recent online resource *The Listener Historical Archive*¹⁵ which gives the researcher access to the entire published output of what was in effect, from 1929 to 1991, the BBC's 'house magazine'. This is an extremely important resource for anyone interested in the history of radio drama as the weekly publication included sometimes very perceptive reviews of broadcast dramas. I had been used to consulting the bound back copies of *The Listener*, a very slow and cumbersome process, so when I gained online access to the archive

I changed my methodology and used these programme reviews far more systematically as the following chapters will reveal. This book makes extensive use of *The Listener* as a source of information about radio dramas but especially as an indicator of critical responses at the time in the articles titled ‘The Critic on the Hearth’.

Perhaps the most important online development for media historians has been the BBC Genome,¹⁶ a database which currently contains basic programme information on all programmes listed in the *Radio Times* from 1923 to 2009. There can be little doubt that the Genome has not only made some research activities significantly easier and quicker but also changed the stories told about the past. The ability to see at a glance, to take just one example, all of the dramas written for radio by Giles Cooper, has not only greatly speeded up the research process but also revealed far more clearly the diversity of his writing for the three radio networks and for television and how that distribution varied over time (as discussed in Chapter 6). Similarly, those individuals working for the BBC who have been neglected now have their contribution revealed in considerable detail. So the exceptionally multi-talented Features producer Nesta Pain was, before the launch of the Genome, a largely ignored and seriously underestimated woman but is now revealed as a prolific writer and producer of features and dramas on both radio and television.¹⁷

Interviews with former radio producers have been used sparingly, partly because the period covered ended over fifty years ago, but despite the challenges of trying to recall what might have happened in a different era, both Michael Bakewell and John Tydeman provided invaluable information and observations about the past. A new resource now becoming accessible to researchers is the archive of BBC oral histories which were conducted with selected members of BBC staff when they left the organization; in some cases, the interviews lasted several hours.¹⁸ Despite the institutional flavour of these recordings, the tendency for interviewees to put a gloss on their careers and the occasional lack of sensitivity and understanding of the interviewers, they can provide extremely valuable insights. In the case of historic radio drama, the interviews with the influential 1950s’ script editor Barbara Bray and with the head of Radio Drama, Val Gielgud, contain some of the emotional dimension of their work which would otherwise be missing. So, Barbara Bray’s deep affection for Samuel Beckett and Val Gielgud’s contempt for popular forms of drama are far more vivid in the interviews than on the printed page.

The first port of call for historians of the BBC has traditionally been the Written Archives Centre where the memoranda, meeting minutes and other institutional papers can be found. An over-reliance on this one source, however, can result in an institutional history as is probably the case in Asa Briggs’s five-volume history of British broadcasting.¹⁹ David Hendy’s magisterial history of Radio Four²⁰ also draws heavily on BBC paper archives, but that is successfully leavened by the use of interviews and detailed discussion of individual programmes. I know from experience that searching the BBC archives can

reveal hidden treasures which shine the most incandescent light on the past; my earlier work on BBC current affairs programmes drew heavily on the minutes of the Radio Weekly Programme Review Board, a truly remarkable record of attitudes to programming in the 1970s. But for various reasons the record of discussion within the post-war Radio Drama department is incomplete and superficial. The exception to this is the wonderfully detailed record of the BBC's dealings with, and discussion about, Samuel Beckett as will be shown in Chapter 5 where much of the analysis of Beckett's radio career is based on BBC archives. Much can be discovered about the largely forgotten radio dramatist Giles Cooper, who is the subject of Chapter 6, from listening to the available recordings of his plays and in addition for this study I consulted his private papers at the University of Columbia which include a comprehensive collection of scripts, some of which were not performed, as well as very revealing notebooks (or 'workbooks') which include early writing influenced by his experience of the Second World War.

As this book is about distinct literary and aesthetic artefacts, dramas written and performed at a particular moment in time and broadcast using varieties of transmission and reception technology, the programmes themselves, existing today as digitized recordings, are the foundation upon which this book is built. Theoretically, if sometimes not actually, the analysis here is derived from listening to historic radio: that has usually been the starting point for the research, and hopefully it has created a sense that this is a study which puts the programmes first. However, the act of listening to radio dramas made over half a century ago is problematic. It is an activity radically different from the experience of the listener to, say, Michael Bakewell's 1959 production of Ionesco's *Rhinoceros* at home one evening tuned into the Third Programme on VHF frequency using a non-portable valve radio set. The researcher's experience is mediated by having to hear this drama at the British Library in St Pancras, London, using headphones in a listening booth booked weeks previously following a request to the library's listening service to get a copy of the programme from the BBC Sound Archive. The researcher's engagement with the drama is of course slightly perverse, an experience in which the strangeness of the material is emphasized; the drama is heard separated from its context, from the voices and culture and concerns of the time. Post-war radio dramas sound strikingly unfamiliar and 'other'; we struggle to connect emotionally with them and instead resort to an analysis which, though worthwhile, is fundamentally different from the response of the intended listener. Attempts to de-individualize listening by forming public-listening events or 'gatherings' have been successful, most notably in the UK as pioneered by the collective, In the Dark.²¹ This approach brings together a diversity of listeners to an appointment to listen perhaps in the way envisaged by Bull and Back: 'The kind of listening we envision is not straightforward, not self-evident – it is not easy listening. Rather, we have to work toward what

might be called agile listening and this involves attuning our ears to listen again to the multiple layers of meaning potentially embedded in the same sound.²²

A final component of the research described here concerns the materiality of the media. This is an often neglected aspect of traditional radio studies but one which is gaining traction as researchers take a serious interest in the material means of production and consumption. The physical limits of the radio studio and the often poor quality of sound transmission directly influenced the listening experience as did the immobility of the valve radio set, the precursor to the portable transistor radio. This concern with the materiality of the media, for example, the type of paper used for newspapers,²³ the deficiencies of Long Wave and Short Wave radio transmission, and the cost of commercially available tape recording machines, are all examples of the way the physical attributes of the media influence what is made and how it is consumed. I have attempted, briefly, in Chapter 4 to address the materiality of radio broadcasting and listening because these factors clearly influenced the experience of hearing radio drama and as a result the nature of the drama that was made. In addition, the introduction of sound recording in the 1950s to allow rebroadcasts and the ability to edit dramas before transmission was clearly an important and influential development, and this is discussed later. We are fortunate that some very early, including pre-war, dramas were recorded in the era before magnetic tape and this has made it possible to hear a small but very significant sample of immediate post-war drama. Domestic tape recorders only became affordable in the late 1950s but the consequence of that was the beginning of off-air recording including the recording of dramas, and I will speculate about this in Chapter 4.

I have already explained that this is not a book about popular radio drama, despite the significance of that genre. There are additional parts of the radio drama story that I have not addressed and that should be clarified here. Inevitably I do make aesthetic judgements about individual radio dramas, and my focus on particular broadcasts is influenced by those judgements, but I have tried not to allow this to be a subjective analysis where my likes and dislikes take centre stage. Where possible I have searched for more objective criteria than my own personal opinion and in particular whether a drama seems to be innovative or influential. The consequence of this is that I do not subscribe to the idea of a radio ‘canon,’ although I do think it is a rather interesting and stimulating challenge to wonder what might be ‘in’ and what is not. Clearly, for example, Louis MacNeice’s 1946 radio feature (and drama) *The Dark Tower* would be part of any radio canon, but why? Not, I think, because as Frances Gray claims that it is MacNeice’s ‘best play’ nor that he ‘succeeds brilliantly’²⁴ nor that this is a ‘masterpiece’ but rather because this was such an influential radio drama which made a generation of future writers realize the potential of the genre. In addition, the lost dramas of Rhys Adrian which cannot be discussed in any depth here cannot be part of any radio drama canon simply because they no longer exist in audio form.

Also missing from this account is any systematic discussion of radio actors, and I have rarely recorded the names of actors in the list of programmes discussed at the end of this book. Actors were of course important to both writers and producers, and Nesta Pain's association with Michael Hordern and the influence of the Irish actor Patrick Magee on Samuel Beckett are both important examples but largely for reasons of space I have not explored this theme in any depth. Similarly I have considered the experience of listeners and especially in relation to the technology of radio receivers, but I have chosen not to examine the radio audience in terms of size or by looking at the BBC Listener reports. Given that many of the dramas were broadcast on the Third Programme they would have been heard by audiences so small that they were scarcely measurable and any attempts at quantitative analysis would be unproductive.

Some explanation is needed here, at the end of this introduction, to explain why radio drama is important and to suggest that there is something of special significance about the 'golden age' which might provide ideas about the future direction of the genre. I would like to claim that a close reading of radio dramas in what might be called the 'long 1950s' provides new ideas and examples for radio production today, more of that in the conclusion. For an understanding of the specificity of radio drama it is helpful to turn to the literature on radio drama, including that written in the 1950s and much more recent contributions. Neil Verma proposes an 'aesthetic history' of radio, one where the programmes themselves take centre stage and I am happy to follow him in that ambition. Moreover he points out that around the middle of the twentieth century, radio drama in America was not only a 'theatre of the mind' but also 'that as American broadcasters built a theatre *in* the mind, radio drama necessarily became a theatre *about* the mind, in an era in which that concept was a site of extraordinary contest'.²⁵ This appreciation of radio drama as having a unique capacity to understand and reveal psychological states was one identified fifty years earlier by arguably the most important radio drama producer of the post-war era Donald McWhinnie who wrote the following: 'Perhaps the most potent quality of the spoken word in close focus – not projected artificially to several hundred people – is its power to communicate secret states of mind, the inner world and private vision of the speaker.'²⁶ He describes the way actors whisper into the listener's mind and 'invades the listener's own solitude, recreates the illusion inside his own head'.²⁷ Thinking about the dramas that are discussed in this book, although some do contain action and plot, they are mainly concerned with states of mind; that is particularly true of Giles Cooper about whom McWhinnie wrote the following: 'Using every shorthand device of imaginative radio, Cooper paints vividly, with a blend of farce and bitter irony, a man's life, his aspirations, hopes, frustrations, failures.'²⁸ Ian Whittington also identifies an 'aesthetic turn' in radio studies citing the innovative work of Shawn Van Cour who called for renewed attention to the formal aspects of radio broadcasting, which would include 'analysis of narrative structure and broadcast genres,

methods of spatial and temporal representation, styles of vocal performance, and experiential qualities of radio listening.’²⁹

What follows is, therefore, a book which is influenced by the aesthetic turn and also by the proposition that mid-century radio drama revealed the inner world of its listeners. Another influential idea which has produced some of the most persuasive and insightful writing on radio is the importance of the relationship between the literary (and theatrical) world and radio, sometimes called ‘literary radio studies’ and often led by scholars of modernity. One of the most adept at drawing together the literary world with the complexities of the BBC is Todd Avery in his influential *Radio Modernism*.³⁰ For Avery, and for another modernist, Debra Rae Cohen, the ‘intermedial’ connection between radio and literature is fundamental to an understanding of mid-twentieth-century radio.³¹ European scholars have stressed the importance of looking at the way different media intersect and encouraged a move away from ‘monomedial’ approaches. Marie Cronqvist and Christoph Hilgert’s articulation of ‘entangled media histories’³² includes an emphasis on multimedial approaches to media history and the attempt is made here to understand the connection between literature, theatre and radio.

What follows is some necessary context about post-war Britain, a cultural history which provides just enough information to make sense of the creative world inhabited by writers and producers of radio drama. Then, a brief account of the post-war BBC and in particular some of the individual producers and script editors whose vision and commitment to radio drama made it possible for writers to use the medium of radio to tell the story of how post-war and cold war Britain was experienced.

Notes

- 1 The term ‘network’ is used by the BBC to refer to its different radio stations which at the time were the Home Service, the Light Programme and the Third Programme. The nature of these networks and in particular the very influential launch of the Third Programme in 1946 is explained in Chapter 2.
- 2 Neil Verma, *Theatre of the Mind, Imagination, Aesthetics and American Radio Drama* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2012).
- 3 Mary James, ‘British radio drama: A critical analysis of its development as a distinctive aesthetic form’ (PhD diss., University of Hertfordshire, 1994).
- 4 Heidi Svømmekjær, ‘*The Hansen Family* and strategies of relevance in the Danish Broadcasting Corporation 1925–50’ (PhD diss., Roskilde University, 2014).
- 5 *The Dark Tower*, 21 January 1946. BBC Home Service. All radio drama broadcasts mentioned in the text are included in a list of programmes with broadcast details in the appendix.
- 6 *In Parenthesis*, 19 November 1946. BBC Third Programme.
- 7 *The Ascent of F6*, 22 August 1950. BBC Third Programme.

- 8 David Wade, 'Popular radio drama', in *Radio Drama*, ed. Peter Lewis (London: Longmann, 1981), 95.
- 9 Ian Whittington, 'Radio studies and twentieth-century literature: Ethics, aesthetics, and remediation', *Literature Compass* 11, no. 9 (2014): 634–8.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Donald McWhinnie, *The Art of Radio* (London: Faber and Faber, 1959).
- 12 For example, I read the script of Cooper's *Without the Grail* and some other Cooper scripts and also Rhys Adrian's *A Nice Clean Sheet of Paper*.
- 13 The importance of hearing dramas is discussed in Elke Huwiler, 'Storytelling by sound: A theoretical frame for radio drama and for radio drama analysis', *The Radio Journal – International Studies in Broadcast and Audio Media*, 3, no. 1 (2005): 45–59.
- 14 Radio historians vary considerably in their use of recordings for research. I have listened to slightly less than fifty dramas for this book, whereas Verma in *Theatre of the Mind* states that he 'selected approximately six thousand broadcasts to study' (p. 231) adding that 'recordings were obtained commercially from the Old Time Radio Catalog'. This contrasts with Svømmekjær's study of *The Hansen Family* which is almost entirely based on reading scripts although she did manage to listen to a part of just one episode.
- 15 www.gale.com/uk/c/the-listener-historical-archive
- 16 <https://genome.ch.bbc.co.uk/>
- 17 Kate Terkanian and Hugh Chignell, 'Nesta Pain, the entangled producer', *Media History*, 2019 (forthcoming).
- 18 The AHRC-funded BBC Connected Histories' project's primary aim is to digitize and bring into the public realm the BBC's collection of over 600 recorded oral history interviews with key members of its staff.
- 19 Asa Briggs, *The History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom*, 5 volumes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).
- 20 David Hendy, *Life on Air: A History of Radio Four* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).
- 21 In the Dark was established by the producer and cultural activist Nina Garthwaite. She has referred to 'gathered' listening as opposed to 'collective' listening which allows the experience to retain its essential individuality while benefitting from the gathered wisdom of the group. Some of the analysis in this book is derived from ideas expressed at listening events held at the British Library.
- 22 Michael Bull and Les Back (eds), *The Auditory Culture Reader* (Oxford: Berg, 2003), 3.
- 23 My interest in the materiality of the media is largely the result of being part of the Entangled Media Histories (EMHIS) network led by Patrik Lundell and more recently, Marie Cronqvist at the University of Lund. One of the network members, Johan Jarlbrink, has shown how the transition from rag-based to pulp-based paper in the eighteenth century changed the nature of newspaper conservation and use. Johan Jarlbrink, *Informations- och avfallshantering i papperstidningens tidevarv* [trans: Information and waste management in the age of the newspaper] (Lund: Mediehistoriskt arkiv, 2018).
- 24 Frances Gray, 'The nature of radio drama', in *Radio Drama*, ed. Lewis, 53–4.
- 25 Verma, *Theatre of the Mind*, 3.
- 26 McWhinnie, *The Art of Radio*, 57.