

***Radio Modernisms. Features, Cultures and the BBC*, Edited by Aasiya Lodhi and Amanda Wrigley (2020) Routledge**

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2022 marks 100 years of British public service radio broadcasting. A series of special events, social engagement projects and publications are drawing attention to this significant milestone in the history of the BBC: a cultural institution which cut its teeth when literary modernism was trending in the arts challenging grand narratives, mass media were on the rise and a second world war was around the corner.<sup>i</sup> A century on and the BBC could be facing a radical overhaul,<sup>ii</sup> hence *Radio Modernisms* is a must-read for the wealth of historical details and critical perspectives it provides on how artistic and innovative outputs emerge in response to disruptions in everyday life and international politics.

The book began life as a special issue of *Media History*, a collection of papers curated by Aasiya Lodhi and Amanda Wrigley presented originally in May 2016 at a one-day conference in the British Library. This interdisciplinary event highlighted radio's strengths as an art form, both aural and literary, and demonstrated how histories of creative programme-making reflect early BBC politics and production practices. The authors' contributions take the reader on a kaleidoscopic journey through the development of the BBC's features department between the 1920s and 1960s. The corporate mission was to inform, entertain and educate society by introducing the listeners to high-brow content. Progressive intellectuals writing at the time, like James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, Ezra Pound and Dylan Thomas were attracted to the new aural medium of radio: the disembodiedness of voices, and the shifting registers of sounds. They were inspired to play with form and format, exploring the role of sound, music and voices, especially marginalised voices, to frolic amid the ether, albeit not with as much abandon as they would have liked. We discern from the various narratives in *Radio Modernisms* how the processes of institutionalisation harnessed but, at times, hindered radiophonic ingenuity and freedoms of cultural expression.

Multiple perspectives and theoretical lenses are applied here, including ethnicity, gender, and transnationalism. An abundance of writers, producers and feature titles are named, script extracts and listener comments shared. At this time of reflection, looking back over the lifetime of the BBC, these chapters prompt us to hold the corporation to account over questions of diversity, equality and inclusion. There is only a single chapter which directly grapples with the BBC's questionable past where this is concerned, yet the subtexts of the others chime in to remind us of the enduring need to ensure that listeners in every community should hear themselves reflected on-air (Moynan, 2018).

In the Introduction, Lodhi and Wrigley emphasise the distinctiveness of early BBC features. Historian Kate Lacey then thoughtfully highlights how "the modernist aesthetic" of such content, "the fragmentary and the fluid, the dissonant and the distracted", translated into what she refers to as the "vernacular" of printed radio schedules (Lodhi and Wrigley, 2020, p.8).<sup>iii</sup> Todd Avery expertly

presents short extracts from a number of features by the likes of Ireland's Tyrone Guthrie and Virginia Woolf and argues that the BBC provided a space for aesthetic experimentation which inspired "an emerging radio mindfulness" (ibid., p.27).

In chapter 4, Alex Goody delves into the British Library archives for propaganda features made during the Second World War, such as *The Shadow of the Swastika*, and shares intriguing script extracts and audience feedback. She explains the affective power of radio and debates its use for disseminating government information. Leonie Thomas' ultimately disturbing chapter recounts how talented Jamaican poet, presenter/producer Una Marson's experience of intersectional discrimination in the BBC contributed to her burnout and mental illness. Acknowledging both the UK as colonial power and the BBC's role in media imperialism, we are shown how Marson's poetic voice diversified to represent West Indian culture, incorporating local Caribbean language and rhythms, as she settled into the London studios having been recruited following the rebrand of the Overseas Service.

Lodhi's chapter artfully considers the patchwork style of post-war features written and produced by the Irish poet, Louis MacNeice. With evocative extracts and listener feedback, she explores his imaginative approach to radio travelogues, and points out how diplomatically he framed what he witnessed in India and Pakistan during partition. Alexandra Lawrie then focuses on listener reactions to some of the more challenging modernist radio programmes broadcast in the 1940s and 1950s. Her fascinating case studies include a programme on the work of Virginia Woolf, devised as a conversation between two men, interspersed with quotes dropped in by an actress. Lawrie concludes that the audience responded better when given explanation and fair warning in advance of such modernist content.

In E. Charlotte Stevens and John Wyver's chapter, we learn how the aesthetics of modernist radio were translated into television features, specifically in the early poetic films of Denis Mitchell and Philip Donnellan. Their imaginative approaches to programme-making, inspired by the political intent to highlight experiences of the marginalised working classes, involved creating multi-layered soundtracks foregrounding their subjects' voices with music and audio effects.

Wrigley's chapter completes the collage with her exploration of how radio features lived on beyond their broadcast through remediation into print and other media formats like stage plays or operas and television productions. She cites the British Library's provision of access to literary radio features through listening events as well as to the archives of magazines, pamphlets and other publications and she calls for more scholarly collaboration between institutions and disciplines.

The book ends with an Afterword by David Hendy, author of *The BBC: A People's History* (2022). He welcomes this collection as a successful cross-disciplinary pairing and appreciates what he calls a "fertile tangle of montage, polyphony, contrapuntalism, disjuncture, multiple time-frames." (Lodhi and Wrigley, 2020, p.126). He identifies the modernist urge to "give 'voice', imaginatively, to otherwise inexpressible feelings and sensations" (ibid., p.127) and recommends further study of more lowbrow, ordinary everyday outputs of mainstream radio.

This beautifully written book is a pleasant read yet insightful and thought-provoking. If the tantalising descriptions and excerpts create the desire to listen for yourself, the British Library's Sound Archive is the place to start; the ongoing digitisation programme has made more content available in this centenary year.<sup>iv</sup> *Radio Modernisms* is an exemplar of interdisciplinary collaboration. May it inspire further explorations of innovative radio/audio feature production across different sites of BBC operations as well as other broadcasters and podcasters around the world.

## References:

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Moylan, K. 2018. 'Accented radio: Articulations of British Caribbean experience and identity in UK community radio'. *Global Media and Communication*. 2018;14(3):283-299.  
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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.ukri.org/blog/broadcasting-britain-the-bbc-at-100/> accessed 27 June 2022

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/explainers-51376255> accessed 27 June 2022

<sup>iii</sup> All page numbers cited are from the ebook version

<sup>iv</sup> <https://www.bl.uk/collection-guides/radio-broadcast-recordings> accessed 27 June 2022