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Partner:	The Connected Histories of the BBC research project was led by the University of Sussex, 2017-2022, funded by the AHRC.
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FILE NUMBER/TITLE R 143 / 114 / 1.  
CHARLES STEPMANN

SIGNED C. Kennedy

DATE 12 / 1 / 2016

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MANAGEMENT REGISTRY

THIS SCRIPT WAS TYPED FROM A TELEDIPHONE RECORDING, NOT COPIED FROM AN ORIGINAL SCRIPT. BECAUSE OF THE RISK OF MISHEARING AND THE DIFFICULTY IN SOME CASES OF IDENTIFYING SPEAKERS INDIVIDUALLY THE BBC CANNOT VOUCH FOR ITS COMPLETE ACCURACY.

RECORDING SERVICES RADIO  
Tape Transcript by Audio Overload

RECORDING DATE: 7th March 1978                      TIME:                      STUDIO:  
PLAYBACK DATE:    TIME:                      RECORDING CHANNEL:  
TRANSMISSION DATE:                                        TIME:                      RADIO CHANNEL:

TITLE:                      ORAL HISTORY OF THE BBC

CHARLES SIEPMANN INTERVIEWED BY HARMON GRISEWOOD

CONFIDENTIAL

GRISEWOOD:                      Would you tell us Charles, what were you doing before you joined the BBC which led you to look for a post in the Corporation ?

SIEPMANN:                      I was in jail. I had the luck to get into the Prison Service under a man who, I think, will be remembered as one of the great prison reformers, <sup>my</sup> Alec Patterson, and he was about to try and reform, it ~~He~~ <sup>and</sup> ~~begin~~ <sup>started</sup> with the Borstal system. He got eight young men ~~just down from Oxford~~ <sup>with</sup> as innocent and idealist as I was to move in and undertake the reforms that he had in mind. ~~And~~ <sup>And</sup> this was my first experience of crime and <sup>to</sup> ~~(by visiting~~ <sup>to</sup> ~~the homes of all my boys)~~ my first experience of what slum life was. And it made an appalling impression on me.

GRISEWOOD:                      You were how old about then ?

SIEPMANN:                      I was 19, ~~this was 1924~~, I was 25 years old, (yes) And then I was given a job, <sup>which</sup> ~~this brings a link to~~ <sup>my subsequent work in</sup> the BBC, Alec said reform the educational system, ~~25 years old, and well~~ That's a long story and fascinating story in itself but it doesn't belong here but it did involve me in ... concerning myself with the education of these boys. (Yes I see). Well this went on for four years and at the end of four years I concluded that I simply couldn't spend the rest of my life patching damaged goods. The trouble with these boys was not in Borstal ~~it was far too late, it lay in~~ those homes that I had seen and the squalor with their lives, at least in

2.

part, nobody knows the origins of crime to this day but it was no accident that there were no public schoolboys in Borstal and I was restive and felt that I had to do something. and This was 1927 and lo and behold a thing called the British Broadcasting Corporation came into being.

GRISEWOOD: That was in 1926 wasn't it after (yes) Crawford, yes I see.

SIEPMANN: And I thought well this is where I'd like to throw my weight and through a friend/Sir George Gaiter/who figures in my later broadcasting history/he approached Reith on my behalf and it so happened that they were then, they had just started the Adult Education Department, so called, under a man called R.S. Lambert who needed an assistant and I applied and that's the background to my coming.

GRISEWOOD: And that was your first job then being assistant in the Adult Education Department, Is that what it was called ?

SIEPMANN: That's what it was called.

GRISEWOOD: Yes I see, well now how did that job develop, what did you actually do there/you and Lambert ?

SIEPMANN: Well, Lambert had been a lecturer a WEA lecturer and he came in to see what broadcasting could do to further the interests of adult education in this country. He moved onto become Editor of the Listener in 1929 when I took charge. (I see you then became the Head of it) ?

SIEPMANN: That's right and what we did and it really was quite an achievement in its time, we started the Listener Group Movement. This amounted to, we put on broadcasts, at 7, 7.30, 8 o'clock at night, a series of educational programmes which we hoped people would listen to in terms of the general public but also in terms of the organisation of discussion groups to follow up on the broadcasts. And there followed a very elaborate organisation to recruit discussion groups all over the country, education officers were appointed/I think in five regions, of course The Midlands, North, Scotland, West and so on and the radio discussion group movement grew by 1930 that's in only three years from the start to a movement of over a thousand discussion groups formed and operating in parson's homes or churches or whatnot all over the country.

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GRISEWOOD: How did you keep in touch with these groups, it's something quite unknown in broadcasting now in the BBC broadcasting now.

SIEPMANN: Yes this is now a dead letter.

GRISEWOOD: Absolutely/ but how did you keep at that time in touch with these thousand groups/ I mean/ this is very early days in the BBC ... ?

SIEPMANN: Well/ through these education officers, they (~~I see~~) they were our field officers in effect (yes) they (yes) went around and organised these people (yes) and kept in touch with them and kept reporting back to me on their problems and so on. (yes) And by 1930 this had become a really significant development in education/ and partly as a protection against Reith I organised a thing called Central Council for Broadcast Adult Education and this was on a large body of about 20 or 30 people representative of the WEA and all the other organisations across the country and I think I had the shrewdness to ~~///~~ get support for myself by having on that Council Sir George Gaiter, my friend/ and as Chairman of the Council was William Temple/ then Archbishop of York/ who'd long been associated with the WEA movement.

GRISEWOOD: Yes you've used a very important and interesting phrase there, protection against Reith, can you illuminate what the necessity was for protection against Reith.

SIEPMANN: Well this was the curious thing about Reith, or one of them. He gave us ~~as~~ with School Broadcasting, Reith put a lot of money and a great deal of support behind us. He believed in education and gave us very full support. But he couldn't take the somewhat progressive policies that I was developing, I with my Borstal experience had become obsessed with the fact that the elite education of English Public Schools just wasn't good enough these days/ ~~and~~ broadcasting was a medium of ~~the~~ people and that we had to broaden the whole scope of education in terms of the needs of the semi-literate and the under privileged.

GRISEWOOD: And you were handling social questions in these.....

SIEPMANN: That was one of the key things, I was concerned that broadcasting should become the medium by which people became/ of/ a world they were living in, exposed to the realities/ as illustrated by broadcast series that we did later, one on housing, one on unemployment, ~~I'd like to come~~

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back to both of those incidentally, (yes), so that we were on... I was concerned that the BBC being a new institution and a new means of education that we should be on the cutting edge of contemporary problems and contemporary life and the whole emphasis was, was precisely on that.

GRISEWOOD: And Reith was nervous of this was he ?

SIEPMANN: He was very nervous of this.

GRISEWOOD: Why ? Or why do you think he was, what, what, what made him nervous about it, I mean on the face of it, it was a good thing to do ?

SIEPMANN: I think one of the things was that I have no documentary evidence of this but I think he was under continuous pressure from the Board of Governors who in those days were a very conservative crowd. (yes) And word got back to them that we were doing these dangerous programmes about, you don't talk about contemporary life after all that's very subversive. And I think there was pressure there, I know from what was subsequently told me that there was pressure from the Conservative Party, aggravated by the fact that in the course of doing what I was trying to doing, trying to do I was introducing people to broadcasting and giving them a national audience who were, from the Conservative Party's point of view, far from respectable. I heard, Harmon, years afterwards from a former colleague of mine in the BBC, (yes) that when I was kicked upstairs after my heydays, (yes we'll come onto that) this was at the request of the Conservative Party on the grounds that I was a Communist.

GRISEWOOD: A Communist ! Gracious me, that really is going rather far.

SIEPMANN: The evidence on my being a Communist focussed on though not confined to the fact that I had put Harold Lasky on the air. (I see) And in 1934 this was a really subversive act, it's fascinating (yes) that history has moved that far that the fact of giving an audience to Harold Lasky was regarded as a Communist conspiracy.

GRISEWOOD: This of course is going on somewhere into, into the future after the move to Portland Place, well, thinking still about the Savoy Hill formative years, Now I've heard it said that during those formative years before the move to Portland Place that the BBC had a hard time of it making itself a respectable organisation. Did your work play some part in respectabilising the BBC and gaining it that sort of recognition would you say ?

5.

1. /Cap SIEPMANN: Oh very much so, <sup>P</sup> people have quite forgotten the fact that  
has seen /s until the early '30s broadcasting by the sophisticated, the educated world /  
L, L, had no respectability in terms of /shall we say/ the standards of Oxford and  
/d /b Cambridge Dons. (yes I see). And Hilda Mathieson ...

/b GRISEWOOD: She was what, what was Hilda Mathieson ... sorry to interrupt  
you, what was she at that time ?

5 ● design SIEPMANN: She was Director of Talks. (I see yes) I became in two  
years Director of Adult Education (yes) and both of us shared common interests  
incidentally in the development of the broadcast word (yes) and also in  
the business of securing people who would come before the microphone and  
also to talk through this vulgar medium. (yes I see) and it was a  
long battle (breaking of ground) it really was, getting people, well,  
8 /Vita Hilda for instance ultimately got people like Harold Nicholson and Peter  
Sackville West (yes) and Bernard Shaw and H.G. Wells, well I think I got him  
first, but the business of going to those people (yes) and persuading them  
Las so much /to come before the microphone, people have quite forgotten that we  
were not a respectable cultural organisation in the context of the times.

L, L, GRISEWOOD: Yes, yes I do see that. Now that would be all very pleasing  
L people /s to Reith /wouldn't it /because he would have been delighted at you getting  
these, or one would imagine so /because all this would enhance the Corporation.

● SIEPMANN: That is one of the reasons why I think he was at the back  
of both of us in the development of the spoken word in broadcasting.

L, GRISEWOOD: I see /but with some reservations on what you might call  
the political (yes) side (yes). Well that's very clear. Now before we  
go onto Portland Place and the move here and your becoming Director of  
Talks, is there anything else you'd like to say about the Savoy Hill period  
as one might call it, before 1932.

L, SIEPMANN: I don't know how many of us there were then /but after  
L( L, all by current standards /what /are there now 24,000 people in television alone  
12 L) or something; /we were almost a small family of people.

GRISEWOOD: So you all knew each other very well ?

SIEPMANN: We all knew each other pretty well, although even then



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8 L. well we were all desperately busy (yes) I didn't know the people in the entertainment world beyond hobnobbing with them. We stuck to our last and were very much confined to the work that we were doing. But my memories of Savoy Hill are relatively vague except that ... no/come to think of it, after all the whole growth of adult education to its climax in 1930 was Savoy Hill days, the building of the Adult Education Dept., was entirely a Savoy Hill proposition.

/en GRISEWOOD: Was Lionel Fielding a colleague of yours at that time ?

SIEPMANN: A colleague of mine indirect .. not in my department he was Hilda's....

GRISEWOOD: I see he was the Talks side.

SIEPMANN: He was the Talks side.

GRISEWOOD: Was Tony Rendall in the picture in those days or not ?

/. SIEPMANN: Tony Rendall came in as my assistant/as I had come in as Lambert's (yes) when I moved up to become Director of Talks...

GRISEWOOD: Ah this is at Portland Place.

SIEPMANN: Tony took over the Adult Education Dept.

GRISEWOOD: Well let's move onto Portland Place in the year 1932. There was a reorganisation soon after the move wasn't there, and you became Head of what was called the Talks Branch wasn't it ?

/I /erson's SIEPMANN: It was a big reorganisation, It resulted from Hilda Mathison's resignation.

GRISEWOOD: Can you tell us something about that, it's just alluded to in the printed literature, no more.

/. SIEPMANN: Well Hilda was a fascinating person, she had been Lady Astor's secretary, Reith relied very much on her social and political connexions / again to bring respectability to the BBC in which she was very influential indeed. She had great imagination and great drive but she had the elements of an intréguer in her and some of her methods were not approved of by Reith

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and what the ultimate crisis was all about I have frankly forgotten, but what it resulted in was that Reith then reorganised the old structure of the Corporation (I see). Roger Eckersley had been the Head of the whole programme output (including Talks?) including everything (I see) music, entertainment, Talks, Education, the whole lot.

GRISEWOOD: Controller of Programmes you might say.

SIEPMANN: Controller of Programmes (yes). Roger at this time was as I say in charge of the whole business and I think Reith had become aware of his total ineptitude in terms of our side of the work. Roger was a sweet man we were very good friends and he was a dear but he was really totally uneducated, I think his qualifications for the BBC was that he had been secretary of a golf club and he was in conventional terms uneducated, illiterate and really quite out of place in what was now a very developing side of broadcasting (yes). So Reith reorganised the whole upper echelons of the BBC (I see) by dividing the output of programmes between Roger who maintained his control over entertainment and music and the whole spoken word came over to me (ah) the Hilda Mathisen's Talks Dept., my old Adult Education Dept., the News and the Schools (ah yes) all came together, quite naturally I think in terms of their common strands and I became what was called Director of Talks - Asa Briggs gets this all wrong in his book by confusing the title of Hilda with my subsequent title (yes) she had been a department head I now became a branch head and went on to the control board.

GRISEWOOD: What was control board ?

SIEPMANN: Well the Control Board was the .. the top six people in the BBC, the Chief Engineer, the Chief Accountant, Goldsmith the Administrator, Gladstone Murray the public relations man, Roger Eckersley and I and the Control Board was Reith's Advisory Council.

GRISEWOOD: Directors we'd call them now, Board of Management I suppose yes.

SIEPMANN: Board of Management (yes) that's what we constituted (I see) yes) and we met weekly with Reith...

GRISEWOOD: Under Reith's chairmanship ?

SIEPMANN: Under Reith's chairmanship (yes) to discuss all the problems

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of policy that arise in any department and we .. well Reith took our advice or didn't but...

/i  
/n  
GRISEWOOD: That's what I wanted to ask you about .. it could be that you were a collective body deciding as a cabinet or it could be that you were virtually an advisory body to him as the Chief Executive who then did what he wanted to do, now which was it really ?

SIEPMANN: Oh the latter.

GRISEWOOD: It was the latter definitely ?

SIEPMANN: Oh Reith always had the reins in his hands .

/c  
GRISEWOOD: I see and made that quite clear to you, you were ....giving your views and giving your advice and so on and he would take that .....

SIEPMANN: And from there on he took the decisions and ....

GRISEWOOD: Would he tell you at the time that he disagreed with you about this and was going to do something else or did he just consult you and then keep his own counsel and take his own decisions afterwards ....

L. Kap  
SIEPMANN: No on the whole he would listen to the discussion and give his judgement on it and we had a fair idea what he was going to do about it. But broadly speaking, I don't think it was a very effective organisation. In terms of organisation I think it was perfectly sound but in terms of ... certainly in terms of power Reith was the man who made the decisions.

GRISEWOOD: Was not part of the re-organisation that you as an output chief should be relieved from the administrative side of things so that there were executives working to an administrative branch of the BBC or a wing of the BBC, wasn't that part of it ?

/u  
SIEPMANN: Well in one sense yes, the financial aspects of our budget and so on were handled by an administrative person (yes) Rose-Troop I think was the man we had but .. in terms of policy that was all on my side (yes) (I see) I had complete control of policy.

GRISEWOOD: Yes and and ~~and~~ the staff and as to the recruitment of staff because you did create a very ... brilliant staff the tradition of which lasted

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beyond your time really right into Mary Somerville's time and the time that I held that post. You were left alone to choose these people yourself were you or or.. how did that work, or did you have a board of selection ...

1. /Cap 1.  
/a 1.  
SIEPMANN: Well that's part of the whole story of the development of those years, initially yes, I made my appointments, Reith had no knowledge of Adult Education, Hilda <sup>likewise</sup> made her appointments, but after I went on the Control Board things began to change. Now the conservative forces began to operate very early on, almost from the day I went on to the Control Board.

GRISEWOOD: Oh I see as early as that.

SIEPMANN: And bit by bit I had people foisted on me whom I would never have chosen.

GRISEWOOD: Members of the staff you mean, members of your own staff ?

SIEPMANN: Members of my own staff.

GRISEWOOD: Were they really.

1. 1.  
SIEPMANN: Reith for instance instructed me to go down to Cambridge and interview a man called George Barnes who was then I think with the Oxford University Press.

GRISEWOOD: Uh huh...Cambridge University Press. Yes Yes.

1. 8 /Cap  
/.  
SIEPMANN: .... As a talks assistant. (I see). And I duly went down and I duly saw George and he didn't seem to me to be a likely character for what I was looking for ~~which was~~ <sup>w</sup> what I was looking for was drive and imagination, George was solid, sound and rather conservative and I would never have chosen him. But Reith put the pressure on. After that the next one that I can remember .. was .. and this was disastrous, this was the appointment of Coatman, John Coatman.

GRISEWOOD: Oh that was something, did Reith intervene in that appointment then ?

SIEPMANN: Reith foisted Coatman on me without even giving me a chance to protest. (I see) And it's another example I think of these conservative

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forces that I think were far more sinister in their effects on the BBC than anybody has ever realised. Who was John Coatman to take charge of the News Services of the BBC? He'd been a North West Frontier Policeman in India. He had no experience of journalism, he was in every sense unqualified for that job but he was regarded as a sound conservative man.

GRISEWOOD: Was this consciously a kind of counter-balance to your own reputation of being ... liberal and having socialist connections and so on? (yes) This was quite deliberately so. (Quite deliberately). Was it made clear to you by Reith that this was what he was going to do or how did Reith express his misgivings to you, or did he not express them?

SIEPMANN: About my progressive outlook? (yes) Well when I was first appointed to the Control Board, when I became Director of Talks (yes) Reith had sent for me (yes) and said that I am going to appoint you Director of Talks (yes) and it went on for a long time. (this interview) this interview and when it had gone on past the hour I can remember saying to Reith - and I think this is a revelation of the man - "Sir John I have the impression from what you said to me that you don't really trust me". And Reith's reply, I think only Reith could have made it was - "I don't trust you and I don't distrust you".

GRISEWOOD: What on earth were you to make of that?

SIEPMANN: And for an appointment of this fantastic responsibility (yes) thrust on me (yes) I was set back on my heels and my first reaction was I will not accept, I simply won't take the job. (yes) Well Reith havered a little on that and then I got ... I got angry and obstinate, my first impulse was to say to Hell with this, I won't touch the job, what a relationship this, what a compliment to a man who is now being appointed to the most important job in the BBC. And then I got obstinate and I decided I'll take it but I want to give you the evidence that you have in me a man who'll give you such loyalty as you could ask from no other. And I'll take this job only on one condition, two conditions - first that I have immediate access to you, over the telephone, at any time that I'm involved in a problem that I must consult you about.

GRISEWOOD: And what were those problems that you did consult him about?

SIEPMANN: Oh every kind of problem, problems of policy, later developing

into problems like my great quarrel with Churchill.

GRISEWOOD: I want to hear about that.

SIEPMANN: Political questions and broad questions of policy. And internal problems of staff ~~and the other~~ ~~not only direct access on the telephone but~~ <sup>M</sup> my other request was ~~am~~ I (again to prove my loyalty to you) I'm making no move without consulting you and I want a weekly conference with you to discuss the whole question of policy that I'm concerned with. ~~This~~, I think we used to meet about 3 o'clock on a Wednesday, and every week I'd go down and bring all my problems before him, lay them before him and there was nothing concealed at all, I played straight with Reith.

GRISEWOOD: On your side ?

SIEPMANN: On my side.

GRISEWOOD: But what about his side ? Did he ... was he quite open with you about his own misgivings or doubts or fears, if he'd had representations for instance from the Conservative Party, as no doubt he did, did he pass those on to you or did he ... conceal them or conceal the detail of them, was he frank in other words on his side ?

SIEPMANN: Well he was frank in the sense that he would put his objections particularly on the Adult Education side and all these Lasky's and people who were coming into the BBC (yes) and we would argue the toss. And some of the arguments went on for a very long time, which again is another aspect of Reith that I think is worth mentioning, <sup>as</sup> ~~it's~~ a facet of his extraordinary personality. (yes). The man had indefatigable, unbelievable industry (I see) and set an example of that in the BBC that I think really made a deep impression. <sup>Cap</sup> boy, did we work! I was fanatically devoted, I believed that broadcasting was the greatest miracle in human history, and to this day I believe that, and still people don't recognise the fact that something had happened in the world that was quite extraordinary - now for the first time in human history everything that any man had ever written down on paper, every note of music that had ever (been) composed was now universally available. <sup>What you might call</sup> ~~parking my reputation~~ This was "The New Age of Cultural Communism". And I believed that. <sup>But back to Reith's indefatigable quality.</sup> ~~Reith did not believe that~~ and I wish I could remember the occasion of this, there was one day when we started at three and by five we were getting nowhere and Reith said we must get on with this

go back and pack your bag and ~~come out and~~ we'll talk it out at home.

And I went home with him, I think to Beaconsfield where he lived then

or sometime, we arrived about suppertime and I was introduced to Lady Reith she passed out of the picture, he made no acknowledgement of her existence, we talked all through dinner, we talked after dinner and at three o'clock in the morning, twelve hours later, I said to Reith "Sir John, I hear what you say but I'm not taking it in, I'm going to bed". And Reith was as fresh as a daisy, you could not tire that man.

GRISEWOOD: I see, yes, yes, but did you, on that occasion whatever the issue may have been, did you on your side feel well now, at any rate we have concluded this matter or did you still feel somewhat in a fog as to what ultimately decided ?

SIEPMANN: No by and large, we thrashed things out ... it went either my way or his way but .. no he was open and I think in a certain sense he liked the fact that I was I think the only person who stood up to him. Now look at Reith's appointments, this is another facet of his character. By the end of my time at the BBC I formed a little ritual, as I entered the BBC and looked up at the statue, I raised my hat in deference to the miracle of an organisation of such size and significance could survive the internal incompetence and the mediocrity of staff that was operating there. Now I think this has to be put at Reith's feet and responsibility.

GRISEWOOD: Including the mediocrity ... mediocrity ?

SIEPMANN: He chose men of unbelievable mediocrity to surround him.

GRISEWOOD: Why was that ?

SIEPMANN: I think because he liked 'yesmen'.

GRISEWOOD: But not you, you were no yes man.

SIEPMANN: No I was not a yesman and I think in a paradoxical way he kind of liked it, there was one person (yes) at least who was not afraid of him (I see) who fought it out (yes). But Roger Eckersley for instance ex-golf club secretary, Graves - a sweet man and a very upright man, I have a very great respect for Graves. Or take Admiral Carpendale, the original controller of the BBC, in those terms he was Deputy Director General you might say, one of the stupidest men I think I've ever met in my life,

*an* *!!* a really stupid man - ~~Admiral~~ <sup>well</sup> ~~however~~ <sup>well</sup> ~~Carpendale~~ <sup>who</sup> J.C. Stobart ~~in the~~  
<sup>early</sup> ~~old~~ days ~~who~~ was in charge of, ~~in charge~~ of education, a lazy conservative  
 man of great mediocrity although he wrote I think two books about ...

GRISEWOOD: The Glory that was Greece....

SIEPMANN: And the Grandeur that was Rome, that's right.

GRISEWOOD: Rather potboiley but ...

SIEPMANN: Well let me think of others like that.

GRISEWOOD: Well Roger Eckersley himself whom you mentioned.

SIEPMANN: Eckersley, Cecil Graves ...

GRISEWOOD: Nicholls, what about him ?

SIEPMANN: ~~Well there again in terms of ...~~ Nicholls was no fool (no but)  
 I think he got a first at Oxford, he had a mind but again a lazy man (yes)  
 and utterly without imagination (yes) ~~Anything~~ imaginative he turned down  
 automatically as though it was of no interest. And here was a man who was  
 supposed to be a leader, this was the astonishing thing, an organisation that  
 needed leadership in the new world of opportunities was staffed by people  
 of largely great mediocrity of mind and a curious lack of imaginative interest ..  
 enterprise.

GRISEWOOD: He could have had the first raters I suppose, Reith, if he'd  
 really been after them because.....

SIEPMANN: Well now, Harmon, ~~this, this,~~ let's be fair and let's put  
 this into historical perspective. ~~This after all,~~ <sup>N</sup> now we're talking about  
 we go back to the early '20s, (yes) Reith having run for five years the  
 preliminary experiment as it were ...

GRISEWOOD: The company do you mean ?

SIEPMANN: The company (yes) now becomes Director General of the BBC,  
*W* who was Reith ? The child of a Scottish manse, a man educated in engineering  
 a man who never lost his regret ~~through his life~~ that he hadn't been at Oxford,  
 one of the great sorrows of his life, it really plagued him, a man with no



social connections whatsoever, suddenly here he is Director General of the BBC and remember - the BBC was not respectable. So he had a recruiting problem, in that it was not something that young men at Oxford/Cambridge jumped after as a great career in prospect/as it later became. ~~And there was,~~ So here he was a man without social connections, without adequate educational background as he felt in a time when broadcasting was not respectable. (Did he) How did he look around, where did he find these people, I don't know but who was he to look around, he knew nobody.

GRISEWOOD: I was going to ask, did he did he seek to repair these commissions in himself, these lacks, these defects in himself did he consciously grow in the job in that sort of way ?

SIEPMANN: Well I certainly think he did, I think Hilda Mathieson's appointment was a wonderful example of how Reith looked for somebody who had social connections, who was educated, who did know a literary and cultural world/and he brought her in and she was a, oh was she a stand-by in that connection.

GRISEWOOD: And you too in exactly the same way.

SIEPMANN: And I too in the same way, we brought the connective aspects of the business in to bolster Reith's total absence of these attributes at all.

GRISEWOOD: And yet he was suspicious of the direction in which you and Hilda Mathieson wanted to, to push the policy, he was suspicious of that.

SIEPMANN: Yes but here again the man was a paradox. Reith I think was a very big man, not only in size but in personality he was, he was a big man, I don't think he was a great man (yes) and I think the distinction is very important. (yes). But in a certain sense I think he was also a frightened man. He knew the power of this medium and I think something in him told him that you'd better go slow with this business, this is a revolutionary instrument (yes) and I think he sensed that (yes) and that was partly the basis of his resistance to the progressive policies that both Hilda and I <sup>me</sup> were pushing very hard indeed and we were both pushers let's say that.

GRISEWOOD: Looking at ~~it with~~ <sup>it with</sup> this element of/hindsight, Charles, it seems to such an observer as myself, that what you were doing really was fulfilling the requirement of impartiality which was then laid upon the BBC

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and the conservative element, <sup>the</sup> and the Conservative Party, but not only the Party, the conservative element in the country, was, was very strongly pulling upon the other oar, I mean you to some extent were corrective of the very strong forces of conservatism, thus fulfilling the orthodoxy of impartiality. How did Reith see that, how did - or rather why did he not see that you were really doing the work of impartiality for him, by correcting this other influence ?

SIEPMANN: I think in part because he was not, to the extent that I was, socially conscious. (yes I see). I don't think he had what I had, a very, very sensitive social conscience (yes) and my sense of balance was to redress the ultra-conservatism (yes) or the culture of that time and my God, it's hard to think what England was like even in 1932 (yes).

*that was* SIEPMANN: That I think was one fact, and that combined I think with the pressures of work consistently quite clearly put on him by Members of the Board of Governors and by Members of the Conservative Party (yes) in their warnings that this whole theory, my theory of balance was subversive in the sense that it was disruptive of the old Conservative clique....

GRISEWOOD: The Establishment, people have called it later, that was really what you wanted to, to correct wasn't it (that's right) the ascendancy of these establishment figures.

SIEPMANN: My aim was to make broadcasting the great medium of social consciousness in this country, in terms of making people aware of the realities of contemporary life and contemporary problems and that was subversive in the context of the 'Conservative Mind'.

GRISEWOOD: Would it be fair to say that Reith was partly a divided man in this sense, that he was partly in support of your endeavours because they, well they produced prestige for the BBC and partly fearful of them, was it true to say that he was divided in that way ?

SIEPMANN: He was a divided man, he was a Jekyll and Hyde in some respects (yes) and in that respect particularly. Because as I say he did give us very great support.

GRISEWOOD: Not in the end did he ?

SIEPMANN: Well not in the end no (we'll come onto that) but in the formative years. (In the formative years he did?) He did I mean after all

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he did create, well I created for him but he allowed me to create the Adult Education Movement, he allowed Hilda Matheson to bring all kinds of people in (yes) he fought the Governors on behalf of the old business of censorship you know (yes I see) on the, do you remember or was it before your time, the great scandal of the submarine commander, the German submarine commander ?

GRISEWOOD: It was before my time but I remember about it yes.

SIEPMANN: Well this was ~~one of our~~, this was the only time in my twelve years in the BBC where Government moved in on us.

GRISEWOOD: I see what was that ?

SIEPMANN: The Government and the <sup>ma</sup>postmaster general have always kept their hands off the BBC, I think very loyally and properly. But on this occasion they moved in and that it should have been on such a trivial issue makes it almost absurd. We found a German submarine commander who had sunk a British ship and taken the captain prisoner and we invited them to come back fourteen years after the war, to meet each other <sup>again</sup> for the first time and talk about the old days. (yes) And some old Conservative thought ~~this~~ <sup>it</sup> was disgraceful that a Boche should be allowed to talk on the BBC (no!) and he went and he took this as far as the Cabinet. (no!) and it was <sup>by</sup> while the Cabinet <sup>that</sup> whether it was the Prime Minister or not, the BBC was informed that ~~this~~ <sup>it</sup> would be a very grave error of responsibility to do this. (Very seriously ?) The Board yielded but Reith stood out. ( did he ?) Yes he did indeed. Reith said then I stand back, I will not partake in this decision.

GRISEWOOD: I see that's very creditable of him.

SIEPMANN: It was creditable, ~~and he was again, this, this was a considerable man,~~ on the whole field of controversy Reith pushed and pushed. In the early days of the BBC we were not allowed (banned wasn't it ?) to have controversy (yes) or to discuss anything, <sup>but</sup> and Reith pushed <sup>on and on, and it was his</sup> and he was the formative influence that gave us, in about 1930, for the first time, ~~we were~~ <sup>the right</sup> allowed to have open discussions between people on controversial questions. And Reith was the, <sup>was</sup> the power behind that drive.

GRISEWOOD: And political broadcasting too, did he not seek further liberties there than the politicians were readily willing to grant ?

SIEPMANN: He did indeed, and he was responsible for the compromise, in the end, <sup>over</sup> with party political talks, (yes yes) but on that front Reith was a pioneer and a fighter, he really was good.

GRISEWOOD: And to that extent you and he saw eye to eye (that's right) you were a real partnership (yes) you, you, he supported you and you, you felt his leadership was good. (yes). But then there was this contrary side to him, represented .. take a particular case represented by the, the choice of this man Coatman, John Coatman who you've mentioned. Under you he was, under you to be responsible for the News side of your department. Now what happened then, Coatman seemed to have made off on his own in some direction - but he was your subordinate, or was that never quite clear ?

SIEPMANN: No it was very clear indeed, he was responsible to me and I instituted with him the same practice that I had with Reith, I asked Coatman to come to me for a weekly conference to discuss the problems of the News Dept., and its growth and development. (yes) And he used to come in his surly way, resenting it deeply, he couldn't stand being my subordinate and became in the end absolutely insubordinate to the point at which I took it to the Board of Governors.

GRISEWOOD: Did you, in person, you appeared there did you ?

SIEPMANN: I appeared, this was the only time I ever took my case to the Board of Governors.

GRISEWOOD: Who was the chairman then ? (I've forgotten) Nevermind, you went there to the Board, yeah ?

SIEPMANN: And I put my story and it was ... it was a closed case, it was a case of absolute defiance, the man simply wouldn't take orders from me. (yes) And I said it's a case of Coatman or me, I simply cannot carry on in this position with an insubordinate junior. (yes) Well, Coatman having been brought in for the purposes that he was, the Board was reluctant to yield on this. (ah) And compromised in terms that (I shall never forget the phrase) I was sent for and told that Coatman would not be fired but he would be very severely animadverted (oh no). So Coatman continued and in another two years he was hived off from (you) from me yeah.

GRISEWOOD: He got his own way in other words ?

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SIEPMANN: He got his own way.

GRISEWOOD: He continued regardless of this animadversion in his, in his, well insubordination to you and his determination to get his own way is that it ?

SIEPMANN: He did/and succeeded.

GRISEWOOD: And succeeded. Now how was that very notable secession communicated to you by Reith, did he say to you regretfully I've decided to allow Coatman to ... how was all this done ? Because it's a very important thing.

SIEPMANN: Now this again was another side of Reith, he was devious. He never confronted me and told me, I received a memorandum I think (yes) of a reorganisation (oh no )/the same thing happened when I was kicked upstairs (yes) what happened? did Reith send for me ? I had been his first lieutenant for seven years and I'd had these weekly conferences, I was closer to Reith than anybody in the Corporation, now I'm to be dismissed. And did Reith send for me ? No. He sent Nicholls who was then a junior to me to tell me that I was in effect fired. And from that moment on to the end of his time at the BBC I never saw Reith again, he never dared face me.

GRISEWOOD: Can you remember the date of this Charles ?

SIEPMANN: '35.

GRISEWOOD: You ceased then to be Director of Talks, that was the message that Nicholls brought to you was it ? (that's right) How was this put to you for what reasons, what reasons were given for this momentous ...

SIEPMANN: No reason at all, the simple fact that I was not, my services would be discontinued and I was going to be appointed Director of Regional Relations, which I was for a year or a year and a half or two years. (Did this...) it still ...it still hurts.

GRISEWOOD: Well I'm sure it must. It's an astonishing thing.

SIEPMANN: It was an act of real cowardice on Reith's part. (yes I see) The way he handled it and the fact that he never dared see me again. Until I met him again after the war/but that's another story.

GRISEWOOD: And even when you left the BBC at the end of his... when he left the BBC because he left before you, did he not seek you out and say goodbye to you in any way affectionately or anything ?

SIEPMANN: Nicholls message that I was no longer Director of Talks was the end of my relations with Reith, ~~I never saw him again.~~

*check this spelling / Dawny*  
GRISEWOOD: Whilst you were Director of Talks another figure that's mentioned in the Histories appeared on the scenes, Colmel Dorney. Now how did he come to be appointed and what was his appointment and his relations with you ?

*Dawny*  
SIEPMANN: Well you might say that it's the next step in ... the Conservative plot. Dorney was brought in, over me and over Roger.

GRISEWOOD: As a sort of Controller of Programmes, in effect an overall ?

SIEPMANN: An overall Controller of Programmes. (I see) To cushion the shocks for Reith and to have a man whose whole responsibility in effect, (I don't think Reith cared about Eckersley) it was to keep me under control.

GRISEWOOD: Were you told about that before it happened ?

*Dawny*  
SIEPMANN: No, it happened. *Dawny* And Dorney came, and I remember going down to him and I made him the same pledge I made to Reith, I said - let there be no doubt that any decisions of mine that I make on this very delicate front will be brought to you <sup>for</sup> in full discussion before I make them.  
*Dawny*  
Dorney was a very sweet man. A simple soldier, again remarkable in the context of the true requirements of the BBC, a totally uneducated man, a simple man and a very decent man (yes) and my pledge to bring him all my problems before I made my decisions I think was contributory at least to the ultimate demise of poor Alan Dorney in terms of the perplexities and problems that it raised for him. He was utterly at sea in the world that I was concerned with, he was not politically educated, he was not culturally educated and the questions that I raised with him ~~were,~~ were Greek to him, I can still remember the rather bewildered look on his face as we discussed these things, ~~he had,~~ He had no competence in the field at all, except to keep me under control lest I go wild again.

GRISEWOOD: And how did he set about doing that if he did it at all ?

SIEPMANN: He didn't do it at all.

GRISEWOOD: That's rather to his credit (I think it was) or was it that he just didn't know how to do it ?

SIEPMANN: I think he just didn't know, I never saw a man so bewildered by the questions that were raised for him.

GRISEWOOD: So to that extent he was really a failure from Reith's point of view as a monitor of you as a person, to keep you on the straight and narrow path, Dorney really didn't do that, you just went on doing ....

SIEPMANN: Oh I think he was in every sense a total cipher, I think he made no contribution of any kind at all.

GRISEWOOD: Did Reith signify to you that this was a failure, did he have to re-assert his own authority over you ?

SIEPMANN: No because by this time you see my connections with Reith were broken by Dorney (I see yes, yes) now I no longer had my weekly talks with Reith (you were answerable to Dorney) I went to Dorney yes (I follow) he was fobbing off his problems with me on, on Dorney.

GRISEWOOD: Did this make things easier for you or not, or did it make no difference really, you just went on doing the things you believed right and persuing the policies you'd created ?

SIEPMANN: Well, <sup>2</sup>Harmon, I don't frankly remember (no) I don't remember the extent to which Dorney stopped me doing things, (no no) but by this time it was getting very difficult to do things because the BBC was moving into that terrible phase of innocuous policy that made (yes) that aftermath that terrible period of years up to ~~the end~~, the beginning of the war when the BBC was itself a cipher on my front, the talks ceased to be interesting

GRISEWOOD: Because it had been disarmed by various forces is that ... ?

SIEPMANN: Yes, then Sir Richard Maconochie came in and he became...

GRISEWOOD: That was after you ceased to be Director of Talks (yes) whilst

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you were, was it in the ~~Dorney~~ period that there was trouble with Churchill or a row with Churchill ?

SIEPMANN: No that was before ~~Dorney~~.

GRISEWOOD: Can you tell us something about that ?

SIEPMANN: Well it was interesting, my first contact with Churchill, I'd never seen him or heard him, <sup>Part</sup> of my policy, as I've told you, was to throw the searchlight of broadcasting on contemporary problems (yes) and <sup>with</sup> a certain sense of the war coming up <sup>one</sup> of the things I wanted to do was to get people aware of the world problems of Great Britain at that time. And one of them was India, <sup>already</sup> there were the Ghandi troubles and I organised a series of 12 broadcasts on the subject of India. Four of them historical and (yes) <sup>the</sup> balanced division between the Hindu and Mohomedan <sup>and</sup> Vice <sup>roy</sup> Roy and so on, <sup>and</sup> this was the time when I first made the acquaintance of Lord Lloyd who had given a talk as ex Governor of Madras in the series. (yes) Out of the blue comes a letter to Reith from Winston Churchill protesting in his Churchillian terms at having been excluded from the series. (oh) Well <sup>heads</sup> we all scratched our set and <sup>asked ourselves</sup> watched <sup>what</sup> were Churchill's claims <sup>a place in</sup> to a series of 12 programmes on India (yes) <sup>he'd</sup> been an officer in the Army out there but he <sup>had</sup> <sup>hand in</sup> no policy <sup>decision</sup> at all. And Reith sent the letter up to me and I wrote the reply, <sup>this</sup> was a perfectly modest reply indicating <sup>this</sup> was the structure of the series and <sup>I</sup> didn't see that Churchill <sup>... or if</sup> Churchill <sup>were included,</sup> half a dozen others would have to be admitted to the series (quite) <sup>and</sup> Churchill was furious (was he ?) and I think it aggravated his hatred of the BBC by a very large measure.

GRISEWOOD: Did he get at you personally over this ?

SIEPMANN: Well I got into it indirectly. Lord Lloyd was a very great friend of Churchill's (yes) and I had become acquainted with him by his contribution to the series and I think he took a liking to me as I took a liking to him, <sup>H</sup> he was a very nice man. And he called me up one day and said look <sup>this</sup> hassle with Churchill is really rather childish and surely it's unnecessary, <sup>why</sup> won't you come to lunch and meet Churchill and see if we can get things ironed out. So I went round to Lord Lloyd's house, <sup>There</sup> was Churchill standing by the fire, cigar in his mouth, already three or four cocktails down, I think, and at first very glowering and dour <sup>but</sup> gradually, what with the assistance of good wine and good talk Churchill began to thaw.



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And by the end he became very friendly with me and I think he went to the length of asking me if I'd go down and see him <sup>at</sup> ~~and~~ - what was it - (Chartwell?) Chartwell (yes yes) <sup>anyhow</sup> the great reconciliation <sup>scene</sup> ~~dream~~ was realised (yes I see) <sup>and</sup> I've <sup>Labels</sup> had some correspondence with the man whose <sup>hey</sup> written Churchill's life .. (yes) the seven volumes (yes) because he came across my correspondence and gave me copies, which I was very glad to have (yes) of Churchill's <sup>Letters</sup> because <sup>later</sup> we were able to introduce him into a series, <sup>to the BBC</sup> though he was never reconciled <sup>me</sup>, I saw to it that Churchill's voice was heard because, there again, the Conservative Party, <sup>comes in</sup> He was <sup>for them</sup> persona non grata and they give him no help-in fact they almost obstructed his appearances on the BBC. (I see) But well there's just a little episode ...

GRISEWOOD: Yes an important one. Can you tell us of some of your other discoveries if one might call them that when you were Director of Talks, <sup>?</sup> Wasn't Alastair, Alastair Cooke one <sup>of them</sup> of your, because in your time, (-I,I) you found Alastair?

SIEPMANN: I created Alastair Cooke, if I may say so. (well) It's an interesting story - again curious story and beautifully illustrative of the elements of chance in life and how they enter into, into life itself. We had in those days a film critic who did a weekly broadcast on films. <sup>And</sup> he was Oliver Baldwin, Stanley Baldwin's son. <sup>And</sup> he was a pain in the neck he was an awful nuisance to me and got me into endless trouble ... the film industry were up against him and so on and I eventually fired him. <sup>And</sup> in those days <sup>one of</sup> our recruiting methods <sup>was</sup> were, to put an advertisement in the Times, BBC Film Critic Wanted, <sup>qualifications looked for</sup> applications ... and all the rest of the business, and the applications started flowing in and we began to prepare our shortlist, when there came a cable from Boston Massachusetts which I'm ashamed to say in those days I'd hardly heard of. <sup>It read</sup> And it went - "If you will put me on shortlist will return for interview, signed Alastair Cooke" <sup>?</sup> Well, I'd never heard of Alastair Cooke but I thought a man who is prepared to pay his fare across the Atlantic on the chance of getting a job must have something to him, and I had nothing to lose. So I wired back - "On shortlist come". <sup>And</sup> about ten days later arrives Alastair Cooke, Lionel Fielding <sup>en</sup> interviews him and then brings him up to me to see. And into the room marches this, to my intense surprise, young man of about 23. He was a Commonwealth Fellow at Harvard, just down from Cambridge, brash, self-confident fluent, enthusiastic, in love with the film .. and in ten minutes I said the job is yours. Now how did Alastair Cooke hear about the appointment <sup>?</sup> <sup>comes in</sup> and here's where the elements of chance in life <sup>work</sup>. The Boston Globe had a half inch filler space and, presumably because <sup>of</sup> Oliver was <sup>Stanley</sup> Baldwin's son, they put my advertisement into this half inch space in the advertising

columns of the Boston Globe <sup>normally</sup> and Alastair who does not look at advertisements <sup>spotted</sup> somehow <sup>one</sup> struck this <sup>thing</sup> and that was the beginning of Alastair Cooke's <sup>broadcasting</sup> career. But for that <sup>squib</sup> scrib in the Boston Globe <sup>though</sup> Alastair would have had a distinguished career anyway but <sup>it might not</sup> he would <sup>in</sup> not have been broadcasting. (Fascinating Charles) Isn't that fascinating? (yes it is) The origins of one of the most brilliant broadcasters?

GRISEWOOD: Yes, yes, was it in your time that he became associated with ...the American scene as a broadcaster?

SIEPMANN: Well he had been a Commonwealth Fellow and fell in love with America and fell in love with an American girl and married her, came over here for whatever it was, <sup>for</sup> (two years) <sup>he</sup> <sup>as</sup> was our film critic, <sup>and</sup> we became very close friends, I by this time was acquiring great interest in America and was reading it up and so on and I kept Alastair on the air fairly steadily then in a series, I <sup>had</sup> made him do a series of programmes on America, if not two, series and I don't know whether I was responsible, (I don't think I was) <sup>for his</sup> I think <sup>first</sup> Letter from America was subsequent.

GRISEWOOD: Yes but it grew out of this association (yes) that you've described. Wasn't <sup>Vernon</sup> Leonard Bartlett one of your discoveries, <sup>as</sup> you might say?

SIEPMANN: No, not mine (that was later) no that was Hilda Mathieson, (that was) she got him in.

GRISEWOOD: I see, but you very much continued him and he was a controversial figure to some extent was he not I mean he was ...

SIEPMANN: Yes, he represented the same old problem <sup>about</sup> of controversy and fair-mindedness. (yes) <sup>And</sup> I think with some reason it was argued that one man covering the League of Nations <sup>and</sup> <sup>as</sup> he was and again regarded by the conservatives as too liberal, altogether, that it was not right that one man <sup>Cover the League of Nations</sup> should do it, that there should be two or .. or a balanced group of correspondents, and eventually Bartlett had to, <sup>had</sup> had to give up.

GRISEWOOD: I see under pressure of that sort.

SIEPMANN: Yes. No I got H.G. Wells on the air (yes) and (Lasky you mentioned) Lasky and Bernard Shaw. (I see) The contrast between Bernard Shaw and Wells is worth recording. I went <sup>to</sup> in fear and trembling to see the great Shaw down at his place on the Embankment. After all I was a young man

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*I, a young man of 33 and nervous and shy at that*  
of 33 and I was to interview and engage Bernard Shaw and I sat in fear and  
trembling <sup>when</sup> and through the door comes the great man. And in five minutes  
who was the figure of interest - I <sup>and my ideas,</sup> not he. <sup>his interest,</sup> the manners of  
that man, the exquisite courtesy with which he treated me is something  
I shall never forget. <sup>Almost at once</sup> I was the point of interest, my ideas on this and that  
and a <sup>particularly my</sup> fascinated interest in broadcasting and my dreams for it and so on.  
(I see) This was Shaw. And he was the only person we ever had whom we  
didn't have to teach a lesson about, what I'd like to talk about sometime,  
the art of broadcasting. He was a natural. (Was he?) Wells, I went  
to see, and I thought <sup>and</sup> I made a big <sup>case for his consenting to broadcast. These</sup> build up, <sup>still</sup> this, you see, were <sup>our institutional</sup> still the  
formative years when we <sup>still</sup> had to create <sup>our institutional</sup> respectability and I'd <sup>prepared</sup> conceived a  
magnificent presentation of the endless possibilities of broadcasting. <sup>and</sup>  
Wells heard me out, and his only reply was - "How much money shall I get?"

GRISEWOOD: Charles what was the fee that was normal at that time,  
(the standard fee was ten guineas) and what in fact did Wells get?

SIEPMANN: And the wretched Wells got a hundred!

GRISEWOOD: My goodness that was ...

SIEPMANN: Simple bribery. But we got him .. he wasn't very good.  
Shaw was wonderful.

GRISEWOOD: And became quite a broadcaster ....

SIEPMANN: He was like Alastair, he was a natural pro. He understood  
what I called <sup>the</sup> the new language of broadcasting without being told anything  
about it. I can remember watching him, in the studio, <sup>T</sup> there was the written  
page from which he was reading, reading as though he was thinking it. He  
would, ~~he would~~ pause as though feeling for the right word, <sup>for all that</sup> there it was,  
slap on the page, <sup>but</sup> he, he had this gift of ~~the~~, of the actor, <sup>he</sup> (Would you..) <sup>gift</sup>  
and <sup>of simulated</sup> gave a spontaneity to ~~it~~.

GRISEWOOD: A spontaneity to it, would you describe that as a phrase  
that I've heard you use, the new language of broadcasting, what was that ..  
(well you see) it was a creation of yours really.

SIEPMANN: Well, Hilda and I thought very much alike on this thing. We  
both conceived that broadcasting is in fact a new art, unlike lecturing or  
conversation or <sup>reading aloud</sup> anything, involving the problem of talking to people in their

homes and recognising what is very easily obscured, the fact that you're not in fact talking to millions <sup>but</sup> you're talking to millions of individuals in a domestic private situation, <sup>so</sup> so that the whole tone and style of language of your communication had to be personal, intimate, natural, spontaneous. At the same time we couldn't trust our people to face the terrors of a microphone which were utterly new to them and maintain spontaneity without a script, so that so far from purposes of censorship the script which we always insisted on was an insurance policy against the man breaking down before the microphone. And we evolved this theory that what you've got to do <sup>in</sup> is the broadcast talks, the new language of broadcasting, involves in effect a double artifice, that you had to achieve by ingenuity. You had to write down on the written page a script that was not literary, that was not meant to be read and in fact the proof of it was that in those early days many of the broadcasts that got published in the Listener read very badly, they weren't written for the <sup>the one</sup> ~~... they didn't have the smoothness, or continuity and so on~~ <sup>printed page</sup> (that print requires) that was required. So first you've got to write it down as though it were speech and then you've got to read it as though you were talking spontaneously. <sup>So</sup> It was a double artifice involving quite a feat, which involved not only <sup>an artificial</sup> the script but then rehearsal. <sup>of its delivery. For even if you</sup> You surmounted the problem of writing the right kind of script <sup>remains - in often extensive rehearsal.</sup> now the problem of delivering that script. <sup>And we would rehearse people</sup> and say look now that's the wrong intonation, that does not sound simultaneous <sup>It was in rehearsal that</sup> and I made a discovery there that has always interested me. I have never met a human being who, hearing his voice for the first time, isn't shocked. The last recourse with an obstinate pupil, whom you are trying to get to <sup>read</sup> ~~read~~ this page naturally <sup>off a printed page, was to say call</sup> was okay let's stop, call up the engineers and say would you play that back. When the man hears himself doing it, the hands go up. <sup>I yield:</sup> "I agree my God I couldn't believe that I sounded like that".

Well this, as I <sup>call it</sup> say, the double artifice, we developed to a point of ~~great~~ great finesse. <sup>Some of our pupils</sup> and people became pros, Harold Nicholson, for example, (yes) became a natural broadcaster, <sup>as did</sup> Alastair, Shaw above all, <sup>rather than</sup> as I say, his artifices were beautiful to watch. But I remain <sup>a</sup> convinced that it's something that's been lost in broadcasting to ~~some~~ large extent. I think that we did better with our double artifice and the required script than many a talk <sup>that</sup> I hear today.

GRISEWOOD: Can you think of others who were naturals in the sort of way that you're describing, was Vita good in this way, Vita Sackville West ?

SIEPMANN: Vita Sackville West was good.

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GRISEWOOD: She was on books wasn't she ?

SIEPMANN: Yes. The one exception to the rule was dear old Walter <sup>ford</sup> Davies, <sup>talks</sup> Foundations of Music. (oh yes tremendous) <sup>now</sup> Those were spontaneous <sup>stories</sup> because he had to do illustrations as well. (Yes he illustrated them at the piano didn't he ?) Yes .. but that was different ...

GRISEWOOD: Yes but still it bears out something of what you're saying doesn't it because it was neither...

SIEPMANN: Oh a great one I can remember, probably not even a name to you, <sup>was</sup> John McMurray ..(yes certainly a name to me) ~~He~~ was a ~~man~~ (rather) <sup>later</sup> he ~~became~~ a philosopher, a professor of philosophy at Edinburgh University

GRISEWOOD: But I never knew he was a broadcaster at all.

SIEPMANN: Well hark back to the Adult Education days, (I see) ~~He~~ did a series of 12 programmes which again were 'subversive' because of (yes) the title Freedom in the Modern World. (Oh I see yes) ~~Now that was~~ I ~~mean~~, I think it's documented in Asa Briggs somewhere that some Conservative said "There's the proof that the BBC is ... subversive". But he gave a broadcast series, 12 programmes as part of our thing, ~~we~~ used to produce pamphlets with questions for discussion and summaries of the talks and so on, ~~but~~ for these discussion groups <sup>throughout</sup> in the country. And John McMurray's <sup>series</sup> created a minor cultural revolution, those talks were heard and the pamphlets were bought by tens of thousands. He had an extraordinary gift of very quiet communication and he was a good pupil, he really learned and was ready to be rehearsed in ... his scripts.

GRISEWOOD: By a staff that was how big Charles ? You had under you what 20 producers, 30, less ?

SIEPMANN: <sup>Two</sup> ~~One~~ assistant,

GRISEWOOD: Good ...this was in the very early days.

SIEPMANN: This was from 1927 to 1932 and I went on the Control Board. I was <sup>initially</sup> single handed in the Adult Education Dept., in developing the whole organisational side of things ...

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GRISEWOOD: And these techniques that you're describing ?

SIEPMANN: <sup>yes,</sup> These techniques and of thinking up every single programme that was broadcast, <sup>First Mary Adams + then</sup> Tony Rendall came in as my assistant, very late, just before I became Director of Talks. (I see) And this was characteristic, (I see) <sup>It's</sup> this was incredible ..what a <sup>small</sup> group of us were able to do in those days.

GRISEWOOD: But in the heyday of the Talks Dept., in Broadcasting House what sort of staff did you have there, you had Lionel Fielding <sup>en</sup> as your assistant ?

SIEPMANN: You mean when I was Director of Talks ? (Yes) <sup>No.</sup> Lionel Fielding <sup>en</sup> succeeded Hilda Mathieson as Head of Talks Dept. <sup>(We're back in Asa Briggs' confusion of the Talks Department & the later Talks Branch.)</sup>

GRISEWOOD: I see that was just only one of your departments wasn't <sup>en</sup> it ?

SIEPMANN: <sup>Yes.</sup> And I don't think there were more than <sup>4/5</sup> ~~3/4~~ people in the Talks Dept.

GRISEWOOD: I see as small as that (oh yes) and this was in the time that you're describing this visit to Churchill (that's right) and visit to Wells and so on. Just these <sup>4/5</sup> ~~3/4~~ people that's all ?

SIEPMANN: Just these <sup>4/5</sup> people and as I say single handed until Tony Rendall developing the whole of this, organising the whole of that Adult Education movement.

GRISEWOOD: What system did you have for meetings with the staff, putting up ideas to you, was it, was it a planned institutionalised thing with a lot of written memoranda or was it really rather personal ?

SIEPMANN: Oh it was very personal indeed, I don't remember whether we had regular department talks (yes yes) but there was great encouragement to everybody to come up with ideas (yes) or ...

GRISEWOOD: And you were accessible to the staff, at all times were you, I mean they just came into see you and talk about things ?

SIEPMANN: Well not quite like that. <sup>In the Talks Branch days</sup> they would talk to Lionel and then Lionel would bring them to me. <sup>And the same with the other departments - News, Schools + Adult Education</sup>

GRISEWOOD: Yes yes of course because you had all the other side of it too.

SIEPMANN: Everything was <sup>departmentally</sup> so small that it was all in terms of (yes) personal exchanges and (yes) pooling of ideas of one sort or another.

GRISEWOOD: Yes, yes I understand. Well Charles is there anything more before we leave Talks and your leaving that post for the next post you held, is there anything more you would like to say about the Talks Dept, leave Reith on one side we'll go back to that, but is there anything more you want to say about Talks ?

SIEPMANN: No I don't think so. I've given the picture of the problem (we covered the ground) of how to get people onto the air at all (yes) how to make them broadcast as professional broadcasters (yes) and no I think that tells the story pretty well.

GRISEWOOD: And who succeeded you and took on after you left Talks ?

SIEPMANN: Oh Heavens, I don't remember.

GRISEWOOD: Oh there was a sort of, kind of nobody at that time, there was an interregnum even, it was sort of...

SIEPMANN: I think there was a kind of interregnum.

GRISEWOOD: Yes it went down the hill very badly didn't it ?

SIEPMANN: Until Sir Richard Maconachie came along (yes a figure) which was an odd appointment.

GRISEWOOD: Yes, yes from outside having had a previous career but you became when you left Talks, Director of Regional Relations, now what did that mean ?

SIEPMANN: You may well ask. In those days, where are we now, we're now 1935 (yes 1935) ...the Regions (and again this emphasises what I've said before) the Regional Directors were a bunch of unbelievable mediocrities. Some of them quite uneducated men and with very, very little outlet for programme services, and a great deal of resentment in the Regions of the monopoly of Broadcasting House, the parochialism of London.

And Reith was aware of this, in fact it was quite broadly known, and I think as a stop-gap for me, <sup>he</sup> put me into this position of Director Regional Regional Relations which in effect involved my touring the regions (~~getting to know these people~~) getting to know these people, talking to all members of the staff, finding out what their problems were, hearing their <sup>beefs</sup> ~~grievances and their problems~~, and I came back and wrote a long report which I think was instrumental, <sup>in achieving</sup> ~~this was the watershed of the~~ <sup>first real</sup> recognition of regional broadcasting as a contribution to broadcasting as a whole (I see). The report on the whole was well accepted, Graves backed it very strongly.

GRISEWOOD: Graves being CP at the time? (I think so) Yes, yes, he backed it I see.

SIEPMANN: Nicholls as usual opposing it, but it had, I think, a very marked effect. <sup>1. 1/2 cap</sup> From there on out, <sup>it</sup> the status and the contributions of the regions <sup>was</sup> ~~was~~ raised to a new level and I think that report was in fact the occasion for the changes, the details of which I've quite forgotten now, but ~~it did involve~~, <sup>on</sup> I think I continued, after writing the report, for about a year as Director Regional <sup>of</sup> Relations which involved, ~~at least~~, I think it was monthly conferences with all the regional directors, ~~they would come up and ...~~ (I see that started again) that started again, I chaired those meetings and (yes) they had now a regular voice...

GRISEWOOD: And helped to encourage them and bring them into the body of the kirk you might say, whereas (yes) before they were really rather Cinderellas were they?

SIEPMANN: Oh they were ~~they were~~ really rather poor relations.

GRISEWOOD: Yes I see that was your work as, as DRR, issued in this report. And that lasted what, two years something of that sort? (Under 2 years) Under two years.

SIEPMANN: I can't remember when I went on to be DPP. 1937 was it?

GRISEWOOD: An enjoyable post to you personally, I suppose you must have felt so regretful at leaving, well the very great position you'd had, you must have felt it rather, small potatoes?

SIEPMANN: Well it was absolutely appalling (appalling) the hurt of the way it was done was heavily with me at the time (yes).



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And the sudden descent to fussing around the squabble of regional directors and their things was a (small beer) oh the anticlimax was something frightful.

GRISEWOOD: Did you have any friends, sympathisers in the BBC who really felt with you over this, your former staff I'm sure.

SIEPMANN: I think the whole of my staff.

GRISEWOOD: Yes they must have done because they had no leadership, they were just left without, yes. Must have been a very unhappy time for you. Then you became Director of Programme Planning, was that right? (That's right). Now what did that mean, what job was that?

SIEPMANN: Well that was the designing of the programmes on the two wavelengths. (National & Regional?) National and Regional.

GRISEWOOD: You planned the programmes (that's right) and this was the first time we met, I can remember that of course very well. Now who were you working to there, as DPP you worked to the Controller of Programmes, I suppose? (Nicholls) Nicholls by then was Controller of Programmes?

SIEPMANN: I think so. (Yes that was it) Anyhow he was the person I wrote my memorandum to (yes) Lyndsey Wellington was his assistant in those days (yes) so I suppose he was Controller of Programmes.

GRISEWOOD: Is it true .. this was a position of some power, or became so under your hands perhaps because you did really choose the programmes didn't you?

SIEPMANN: Well to a very limited extent. (To a very limited extent?) It was a jigsaw puzzle really basically (yes yes) it was, it provided for virtually no creative (no) opportunities (no) I mean I couldn't suggest programmes. It was a question of fitting in the offerings from the Talks Dept., the Entertainment Dept., the programmes, the Music and creating the jigsaw puzzle, a reasonable balance and alternation of this and that.

GRISEWOOD: No outlets for the sort of creativity (absolutely) yourself that you had exercised up to then before the..... DRR.

SIEPMANN: No I felt utter frustration.

GRISEWOOD: Utter frustration yes. We're coming onto the .. last years

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of Reith's Director Generalship. And .. you were Director of Programme Planning all through those last years and at the time he left, were you not ? (That's right). Did he, when he did leave, say goodbye to you or, I got the impression a little earlier on that you didn't actually see him at that time, he didn't in fact say "Good-bye" or anything of that kind to you ?

SIEPMANN: Far from it. (Far from it ?) On the day when Nicholls came to tell me that I was no longer Director of Talks all communication with Reith ceased. As far as I can remember I never had an interview with him again in my <sup>BBC</sup> days, perhaps he might have called me in on my report on the regions, but certainly in my ~~days of my~~ last two years in the BBC as Director of Programme Planning, the first of which was presumably still under Reith, when did he leave ?

GRISEWOOD: '38 I think.

SIEPMANN: '38, yes. In those days I had no contact with him at all. As Director of Programme Planning I worked to Nicholls, Reith never consulted me, saw me socially or officially, left the BBC without a word of goodbye, and I never met Reith again until I came over in, I think, 195..no 1968, (I see) to interview him for a series of television programmes I was then doing in America.

GRISEWOOD: How did he receive you ?

SIEPMANN: That again I think perhaps throws light on the man, the element of vanity and the element of never forgetting a grudge, I'd last seen him, shall we say, in 1936, this is now <sup>32</sup>18 years on (yes). I wrote to him to ask him if he would allow me to conduct an hour's interview with him on his views of broadcasting and the history of broadcasting in Britain, because this was a series on the history of broadcasting in America and in the forefront I wanted the great contrast with the BBC. And we agreed to meet for lunch somewhere on Kingsway I think, <sup>before</sup> we went to the ITA studios. I think or something, and in walks ~~us~~ that 'Wuthering Height', as Churchill called him, (yes) who after <sup>32</sup>18 years seemed to me to have changed not one jot or tittle. (No really). A little greyer, <sup>but otherwise</sup> exactly the same. We shook hands, <sup>and</sup> I said let's have a drink before lunch. We went, <sup>in</sup> ordered the drinks, and Reith's first words to me after <sup>32</sup>18 years were "Siepmann, at a time when I was in some difficulties with a committee of the House of Commons, a testimonial of loyalty by members of the staff was prepared to which there

were I think, several hundred signatures. I noticed that you and Lionel Fieldon<sup>e</sup> were conspicuous by your absence on that list. (Good gracious). The first words in <sup>36</sup>18 years. Can you explain, he <sup>said</sup> says, I said yes, I can explain very simply, <sup>v</sup>We didn't sign, we both agreed, ~~we didn't sign~~ because we thought it was silly. If you needed any measure of my loyalty to you you had it in the record of my relations to you, I felt not at all called upon to sign some lunatic circular, it just was plain silly.

GRISEWOOD What did he say to that ?

STIEPMANN: I can't remember, <sup>Oh</sup> yes, then he took me up ... he didn't <sup>even</sup> know the English language ~~ever~~ very well and he took me up mistakenly on <sup>the</sup> point, I think at that point I said, "~~I don't~~, I am quite sure that no one ever owed you a loyalty such as I gave you". And he said "Owed". I said well, you don't understand the English language ~~that oh yes I owed you a loyalty like of which none of your people did.~~ <sup>Let that pass.</sup>

GRISEWOOD But he showed you no marked cordiality that really a very old colleague and a person who really did a great deal for him, you did that, he showed no recognition of that ... ?

STIEPMANN: No recognition of that, <sup>that</sup> except after the interview he wrote me a letter in which for the first time in our relations<sup>h</sup> he addressed me as "Dear Charles". And in which he wrote to say that ... after the broadcast he felt rather bad about the fact that he had made no tribute to my distinguished services to broadcasting. To which I replied, "Dear Sir John, it's kind of you to have written but that would after all have been quite irrelevant to the subject of our discussion." And after all let us remember it was you who dropped the pilot". And I'm glad to have had that last word with him.

GRISEWOOD: And that was the last word really ?

STIEPMANN: That was the last word we ever had. He was a strange man.

GRISEWOOD: Yes he was a strange man, that you illuminated as certainly I've never heard anyone else do it. I ... it was a very awkward time after he left, I imagine, for all the staff, wondering who on earth would succeed him. You never thought that you would perhaps or did you ?

SIEPMANN: Oh My God No ! No I was right down the drain.

GRISEWOOD: I see yes. Did it seem to the staff that an outsider would certainly be chosen not anybody from the BBC ?

SIEPMANN: I don't remember much about the gossip at the time, I think there were speculations that perhaps Graves might become Director General.

GRISEWOOD: We haven't said very much about Graves, you, you'd, you liked him didn't you as a person ? (I liked him) Yes and thought he was a straight man.

SIEPMANN: He was an absolutely upright man (yes) and he was very fair-minded (yes). <sup>But</sup> again, imaginatively he served no use at all. <sup>But</sup> as an administrator Graves was, I think, an honest and a decent man.

GRISEWOOD: And when Ogilvy was appointed Graves was his second in command really was he ?

SIEPMANN: Was he, I don't remember ?

GRISEWOOD: What was your feelings, Ogilvy being appointed from after all an academic world, you might have felt oh well here's somebody who's an educator, this ...

SIEPMANN: And a liberal, relatively.

GRISEWOOD: You felt pleased at the appointment or ... ?

SIEPMANN: Yes I seem to remember having high hopes of Ogilvy as being at last an educated man in a real position to make decisions.

GRISEWOOD: Did he appreciate you and your past record and see in you somebody who had been - well very badly treated in over some years before he came on the scene.

SIEPMANN: Well he appeared to, I had no direct official contact with him but I was so miserable and so bored (yes) (to use Reith's own phrase, "I felt I was <sup>not</sup> being stretched" (yes) that I went to Ogilvy and said frankly "I'm restless and I have such a belief in this medium that I think it/s revolutionary powers are still grossly under-estimated, and if an opportunity

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occurs I would love some function that would give me scope for at least putting up some ideas." (Yes) And I think it was perhaps typical of Ogilvy, he was a very sweet man, had great charm but I think in <sup>as</sup> terms of an administrator he was essentially a <sup>weak man</sup> coward. I think he, with me (and I think probably this was illustrative of his general policy) it was the policy of putting you off with soft words (yes). He gave me the impression that he had a very important job waiting for me but it waited and waited and waited and I think Fabius Cunctator was his mentor in the sense that I think he handled things by avoiding decision by deferment.

GRISEWOOD: And he lost you in ....in the process.

SIEPMANN: <sup>Yes.</sup> And this went on and on and on until I got this invitation to go to Harvard and took it down to him. <sup>when he</sup> expressed great distress and confusion, begged me not to leave but <sup>the die</sup> that I was cast, because by this time I really had lost all faith that there was anything up and coming for me (yes yes). <sup>But</sup> that was my only contact with him (yes).

GRISEWOOD: And you accepted this post in Harvard and just left, that was what it came to yes. What were your feelings, if you can describe them at leaving the BBC? Regret, and relief in equal proportions or... ?

SIEPMANN: Both in very high proportion, <sup>Deep</sup> regret, because I retained then, as to this day, as I approach my eightieth year, an unfulfilled dream, a dream of what broadcasting, always could have been and might still become. But a dream that, <sup>as</sup> from my observation from the sidelines of a professor, has progressively faded over the last 20 years, <sup>So</sup> far from seeing broadcasting as, oh a regenerative force in ~~terms~~ of the world, I think I regard broadcasting, and particularly television, as one of the most sinister and corruptive influences in modern culture.

GRISEWOOD: That's a very ... frightful thing for you to feel and to say since you started ....

SIEPMANN: That's the measure of my regret about leaving ...(a very deep).. an instrument that I believed in and still believe in today to that extent. Relief, of course, <sup>at the</sup> with marvellous prospects of an appointment at Harvard. I mean, my father had raised me to a reverence for professors only <sup>at</sup> this side of the God-head, and to think that I was going to become a professor at Harvard University was beyond my wildest <sup>dreams</sup> dreams, <sup>is</sup> subsequently modified by first

hand experience of professors about whom I can tell you much that is perhaps best left unsaid, but great elation at the prospect of ~~in a~~ <sup>d</sup> ~~sense~~ new worlds to conquer. Because the Americans have grasped, even then, in a rudimentary sense what we've never learned in this country, that broadcasting as a force, both in education and as a cultural force is worth academic study. And they pioneered what we <sup>ve</sup> really never developed in this country <sup>very far</sup> at all, a new kind of scholarship, Communications research, it was called (I see) an effort to discover what broadcasting is doing to people.

GRISEWOOD: And did that have a real effect in the United States on the broadcasters ?

SIEPMANN: Initially yes, and for a curious reason, Broadcasting research, like all research, needs money. The money came initially in America to a man called Paul Lazarsfeld<sup>y</sup> who is the pioneer of broadcasting research in the world, I think, <sup>At</sup> from the Columbia Broadcasting System, Frank Stanton, the President, was something of a scholar and was interested particularly in research, and he funded Lazarsfeld's<sup>y</sup> earliest studies and was I think in some sense guided by some of his discoveries about audiences and audience reactions and so on, and a number of fascinating reports and research studies were brought out in America. <sup>I</sup> and this was the world I now moved into, at least a double world. Conant, the President of Harvard wanted me to explore, through Harvard, the possibilities of furtherance of higher education through broadcasting on one side, and on the other to .. go further into this enquiry as to how the very nature of Man and his circumstances is affected by the instrument, which, after all, the research itself divulged to be an influence that monopolised the leisure life of millions. I think the earliest research showed that the average American family had their television set on for five and a half hours a day. - The question was well what's happening, what's happening to people. And I think we're still very derelict ...

GRISEWOOD: Here in this country ?

SIEPMANN: Here in this country as in the world because CBS, since CBS got so rich it didn't give a damn' about research, research itself has fallen on evil days and (has it) is not extensive now. But when you enquire into a question like for instance, what has been the effect (one book has been written about it, in fact several but one book in particular)

what has been the effect upon people of the recurrent incidence of violence on the air - has it affected the crime figures - has it, in a sense, blunted peoples' sensibilities? I believe it has. I believe the much-touted exposure of the Vietnam War by these very realistic and horrible pictures of the sufferings of the forces, ~~has~~ produced a quite opposite effect. I believe that, by watching the television and seeing the Vietnam War at work people, became removed from life, they became spectators, life itself, the reality of that war became a spectator show, you sat in your armchair and you watched it and this, I believe, introduced, as I believe also, though no one can prove this, this terrible factor of violence particularly in American programmes, has induced a fatal confusion between realism and reality. Life as it is, is portrayed for us, but the realities of what life is has been thereby obscured. Let me give you an example. I'm not saying that this is cause and effect, but it's not uninteresting that just about the time, well doesn't matter about the time, some years ago an appalling crime was committed in New York. A girl was stabbed several times as she passed through one of the New York squares. This was observed by a number of people who watched from their windows as this occurred. Not one person went to the rescue of that girl. Not one person called the police. Not one person took any action of any kind. Now I think this is symptomatic.. I would surmise that this is a modern development that has at <sup>a</sup> least direct relationship to this insulation of experience that occurs by becoming the observer of the scene. This is one of the reasons why I fear that broadcasting is becoming a corrosive and corruptive force.

Another, I think, is that - and again only a psychologist could measure this if it's measureable - I think that in terms of the protection of our sanity and our own sense of judgement .. we're in a very difficult situation resulting from the fact that broadcasting particularly, but the mass media altogether, have provided a continuous bombardment on our sensibilities and our awareness, our capacity to hear and know, so much in excess of what we can take in, that again the self-protective instincts of man have induced an insulation, that we protect ourselves against this bombardment by cutting ourselves off. We hear too much news, we hear too much crime, the excess of the impact of the outward world has induced an inward confusion and self-protection that I think is conducive to what I think is in some ways characteristic of our time, certainly in the Western World, a general indifference to participant concern. We are spectators, we don't really give a damn', precisely because we simply cannot take in and certainly in terms of sensibility, cannot stand the amount of horror and brutality and so on that is induced for us.

This whole world is a speculative world of theory in which I think enormous research is needed to identify the extent to which the advent of the age of mass communication, so far from realising my initial dream of cultural communism and the ~~the~~ ability of all to enter into the heritage of mankind in terms of learning and insight, has become a danger to the maintenance, ultimately, of our essential sanity.

Now these are thoughts deriving from my years, 30 years of watching from the sidelines of a professorship, and I think of another (reverting to the other aspect of my job at Harvard) this business of education. Is broadcasting any longer in any really deep sense an educative force. Here I have to record a conclusion that makes me sad in terms of my background and my original loyalties. If you ask me where is broadcasting, and television specifically in the lead today in this world, (if you'd asked me that question anytime in the last 30 years I'd have said it's the BBC.) I don't believe that anymore. And it's the more tragic and the more paradoxical <sup>for</sup> of the fact that it derives from a peculiar inversion of circumstances. The very excesses and vulgarities of commercial broadcasting in America produce their own anti-bodies <sup>now</sup> and there ~~is~~ developed in the early thirties when I first went to Harvard the first grouping toward a counterveiling force in terms of the growth of what then was called educational broadcasting, it was in its infancy when I first watched it, but it has grown by leaps and bounds in America as I think a positive reaction to the debasing vulgarity of commercial television.

While at the same time in Great Britain an exactly opposite development has occurred. With the advent of commercial television in England, the BBC for the first time was put into competition with vulgarity in effect. And human beings being what they are, the notion that the BBC could take its stand on catering to a minority and being proud of doing so, was inevitably drawn into this damnable competitive business of the ratings. I don't believe there's a person in the BBC today who is not influenced by the fact that - well how are we doing over against commercial broadcasting? I've observed during my visits (and I've been back here seven years now, every year) ~~I've observed~~ what I would say is an almost steady decline in the general quality of BBC TV. Every year there seems to me less and less to watch. These days, in terms of preference, apart from professional interest, I listen to the radio. Radio is still magnificent, I think, relatively speaking in terms of its general services to the listener, as a cultural force. Music is still pre-eminent.



Intelligent talks and discussions are still here, radio plays survive, ~~They've~~ disappeared in America. Television I find less and less though much, still to watch that is of this nature, a positive, educative, cultural force.

Where do I find it, then, if the BBC has now lost out, partly by virtue of its competition with the commercial broadcasters, I find it, ironically and paradoxically, in Public Broadcasting, so-called, in America today.

This is now acquiring, (it is of network proportions) it is nationwide in its services, ~~it is gathering~~ audiences by the hundreds of thousands, ~~It~~ can't rival the ratings of NBC and CBS yet, but it is a very considerable social force. ~~And though~~ ~~It~~ is true, of course, that Public Broadcasting in America owes a tremendous debt to the BBC, ~~(the number of programmes it has stolen from the BBC... oh I mean bought,~~ I'm not ~~...no,~~ that it has taken from the BBC has been a very significant contribution to the quality of broadcasting in the America.,

Nevertheless, that apart, I would say that today I find more to watch on Public Broadcasting in America, <sup>television</sup> that is worthwhile in the broadest cultural sense than I find on the BBC today and I find that very sad.

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