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BBC HISTORY: MR.OLIVER WHITLEY (Recorded 15.6.82)

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BBC HISTORY

INTERVIEW BETWEEN FRANK GILLARD AND OLIVER WHITLEY: 15TH JUNE, 1982

Roll 14, 23, Take 1 — Producer: Philip Daly

F.G. — This is the history of the BBC - television history of the BBC. We're interviewing today Mr. Oliver Whitley, who was Chief Assistant to the Director-General of the BBC and then Managing Director, External Broadcasting, and we're filming on the 15th of June, 1982 at Mr. Whitley's home at Oban in Scotland.

Mr. Whitley, your first association with the BBC was almost a family affair, wasn't it, way back in 1931, and you can hardly have been twenty at that time. Tell us about it.

O.W. — I was very much the youngest of my family and my brothers and sisters had long since left home, and therefore my father and I were closer in spite of great disparity between our ages than is normal, and I shared his feelings about what he was doing more than fathers and sons ordinarily perhaps do, so I heard a lot about his early days as Chairman of the Board of Governors of the BBC, and particularly the way in which he became Chairman, invited by the Postmaster-General of that day, Mr. Lees Smith, to undertake this job and assured, without having asked for any assurance, that he needn't worry too much about this extraordinary man Sir John Reith who was Director-General at the time, because he was almost certain to be in a lunatic asylum before many months had passed. I think my father, who was a very calm person, probably took this with a pinch of salt and waited to find out, find his own impressions of this man Reith who he had only heard of in the papers, newspapers, before, and in fact almost from the very beginning they got on very easily and very well, and the, what had been a rather distressing antagonism between the previous Chairman and the Director-General became more like the kind of relationship which it should always be, one of friendly, easy cooperation.

F.G. — Do you suppose this change came about because your father subordinated himself to this egocentric chief executive?

O.W. — To a certain degree I think yes, because my father's way of doing anything ever anywhere was to be quiet and bide his time and not to throw his weight about, so that would fit in quite well with Sir John Reith, who with his outstanding virtues was egocentric, at times aggressive, determined, and complementary by and large to the characteristics of my father.

F.G. — Your father's memory was perpetuated for decades in the BBC by the legacy he left to the Corporation, this thing called the Whitley Document. What was it about, what did it say, the Whitley Document?

O.W. — It was a document which put into writing what seemed at that time to be sensible relationships between the BBC's Board of Governors and its Chief Executive, and in particular between the Chairman of the Board of Governors and the Chief Executive. I think that thing had been so unhappy under the previous régime of Lord Clarendon that it was thought it wasn't perhaps good enough to have hit upon two men,

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O.W. namely my father and Sir John Reith, who could get on well together, that it would be a good thing to put something in writing for the guidance of other Chairmen and other Director-Generals, and this document endeavoured to do that. It was, I think one might describe it as a tract for the times. It served its purpose, but with a vastly enlarged BBC and enlarged Board of Governors, twenty, thirty years elapsing between the date of the document and the time, say, of Lord Normanbrook, it needed to be revised and it was revised of course by him. When Lord Hill with his very different ideas of how to be a Chairman and wanting to be an executive Chairman turned up on the scene, this document became not merely outdated but probably to Hill an anathema I think.

F.G. It in fact conceded then a great deal of authority to the Director-General?

O.W. Yes it did. It made it quite clear that there were a number of, a number of things in the BBC into which the Board of Governors should not meddle, and said so.

F.G. And did you keep in touch with Reith down the years?

O.W. Yes, I kept in touch with him fairly regularly. When I resigned from the BBC at the end of 1941 I remember telling him that I was going - after all he had been instrumental in getting me in through what I've always regarded as one of the last pieces of unashamed paternalism in the BBC, and it seemed only courtesy to let him know that I was going out. I wrote to him from time to time during the War, he had joined the Navy himself as I had, and by a strange coincidence twice during the War, quite unexpectedly, I was confronted by this enormous figure replete in naval uniform and looking none the worse for it, once standing on top of twenty five foot of seaweed-covered jetty looking down on me, so that in a number of unpremeditated ways I kept in touch. And then after the War, particularly when Sir Hugh Greene made it his business to achieve a rapprochement between the moody, estranged Reith and the BBC of his day, I was involved in that mending of fences and saw quite a lot of him, including his appearances at the BBC's Management conferences at Uplands, which were rather extraordinary occasions in a number of ways.

F.G. Tell us how they were extraordinary.

O.W. They were extraordinary I think because, firstly because Reith at Uplands was speaking to a generation of senior members of the BBC to whom he had been simply a name - on the whole I think a name to conjure with, but a name to be rather afraid of. Did he still adhere, they would be wondering, to his Sunday policy of extreme austerity, with chamber music and religious services and none of the programmes to which we've now grown accustomed. And in other ways. But the confrontation between that generation of senior BBC staff and Reith was something that I wouldn't have missed for the worlds. I think that it would be fair to say that neither side made any compromise. There was no resolution of the dramatic difference between his outlook on broadcasting and theirs, but there was a tremendous rapport in personalities. He, his personality came across in a very big way, in spite of being quite old and a little bit deaf. He made it obvious that he knew exactly who everybody was -

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O.W. Donald Baverstock, who was sitting on his left at one stage and represented, I suppose, what might have been the most antipathetic element in the BBC at that time, was registered in the Reithian mind and he made it quite clear that he knew who Mr. Baverstock was and exactly what we were thinking about the possible clashes of attitude, and by the end of the evening, as I say, without abandoning any principles on their part, they were all eating out of his hand.

F.G. It's hard to imagine two men more different than Lord Reith and Hugh Greene. Did the rapprochement between those two last?

Roll 15, 25, Take 1

O.W. One of the extraordinary things about Reith was that he was convinced for most of his life that he'd been a failure. If you look up his entry in Who's Who you'll find enough achievements to serve for the careers of three ambitious people, but he wouldn't have this, he regarded himself, especially late in life, as a failure, and I remember, to illustrate this, one occasion at Uplands when he had had his session with the assembled staff and was going home, and as he was going out of the entrance hall through the front door into the dark he, with rather typical melodrama perhaps, said "And if there was a man with a machine gun out there and I knew it, I would walk out without hesitation". And there were other times in my meetings with him when this was illustrated again. I remember one lunch with him and Lady Reith in the House of Lords dining room where he had been describing all the things that had gone wrong, all the things that he disliked about present-day society, all his own failures, and Lady Reith caught my eye and said quietly, "A pity, isn't it?".

F.G. Yes. Well, we must move on. You made your career in the BBC and by the late thirties you were deeply involved in setting up the Monitoring Service. Tell us about that, what its job was, who the people were, where it was located, and so on.

O.W. Its job, briefly, came about because the Government recognised, as indeed of course they should, that this was going to be the first war in which there was broadcasting the world over and that broadcasting would be an important source of information when other communications channels dried up, and therefore when the war was seen to be almost inevitable earlier in the turn of 1938/39, Richard Marriott and the BBC and I were told to think about the creation of a Monitoring Service, and we went about that job, recruiting before the war began a staff of linguists, and eventually when the war did break out or just a week before it, taking them down to the BBC's centre at Evesham - Wood Norton Evesham - and gradually, in the process of trial and error over the next two years, we and others managed to create a Monitoring Service, a service listening to foreign broadcasts in dozens of different languages, each one added as Hitler invaded a new country in the world, which was very effective and recognised on all hands I think to be so.

F.G. And this led you to a clash with the new Director-General, Ogilvie.

O.W. This led to a clash with Ogilvie, yes, certainly. The reason for it was quite complicated but, in a nutshell, it was that the Government found it necessary to give instructions that the Evesham area should be evacuated by those who were using it at the time, in order that the Government, the whole central Government, might in an emergency move into it, and that emergency was potentially quite near. Therefore a new site had to be found for the Monitoring Service. Unfortunately, from the point of view of the three of us who were the senior BBC staff running

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O.W. the service, the BBC, the Corporation, went about this in a way which seemed incomprehensibly muddled to us and seemed determined that the new Monitoring centre should be at Caversham, which we believed to be an inferior reception point. There was another one a few miles away at a place called Crowsley, where we thought that reception would be not merely as good as but better than Wood Norton, and we would have been happy to move the Monitoring Service, involving a great deal of disruption anyway, to the, to a new centre at Crowsley, but the BBC's Management would not have it. We were three young men, Richard Marriott, John Shankland and myself, who perhaps at the back of our minds and bottom of our hearts felt that perhaps we should be in the forces, and therefore perhaps we were a little quicker on the trigger of resignation than we would have been in peacetime. But we got very fed up with the BBC's management, we thought they were making mistakes, that they were condemning the Monitoring Service to an inferior reception area. We made our point, it was disregarded, and we said right, we're going, and we did go. In the process of going, Sir Frederick Ogilvie came down to talk to the staff, who were very disturbed at their three bosses packing up and going, and he would not allow us to be present to hear what he said, but a Monitoring Service is nothing if it isn't good at reporting meetings and therefore we had very full reports of what he had said, and in our view he had misrepresented what our attitude was and we were angry about this, angry and disillusioned, and we resigned and left the BBC.

F.G. And you made your reasons known to the Governors?

O.W. I decided to have a final fling and wrote a memorandum saying that I thought the Director-General had behaved badly, and sent a copy to each of the members of the Board of Governors.

F.G. What was the outcome?

O.W. It didn't get through to the Board of Governors until I was, I'd long since left the BBC and was in the Navy. Two of them wrote to me saying that they were perplexed that it had not reached them sooner but they greatly admired the work done in the Monitoring Service and that they hoped I would come back after the War.

F.G. Ogilvie didn't last long and I'm sure you had a great deal to do with his departure!

O.W. I think probably that this was one of a number of muddles and unfortunate happenings which convinced the Board of Governors of that time that, excellent man though Ogilvie was in some respects, being the BBC's Director-General was not his forte, to put it as kindly as I can, and he left within three months of our own going.

F.G. And then, thank goodness, you came back after the War. How did that come about?

O.W. When I was demobilised, together with quite a large number of other young ex-servicemen, I fancied that I might be able to do something useful in personnel management. I was disillusioned fairly rapidly by failure to get in anywhere. I met Sir Benjy Nicolls quite by

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O.W. accident on the pavement in London outside the Athenaeum, who hailed me like a long lost son and said "What are you going to do?" and I said "I don't really know". He said "You must come back to the BBC"; my pride was in tatters by then and I very gladly did so.

F.G. And you spent the next ten years or so in External Broadcasting.

O.W. I spent three years seconded to the Colonial Office by the External Services but you're right, I spent ten years with the External Services, yes.

F.G. And you saw something of the whole Suez affair. Tell us about that.

O.W. Yes, I was Assistant Controller, Overseas Services at that time, and there wasn't a Controller because there was a gap between Sir Hugh Greene, as he later became, who had ceased, who had moved elsewhere, and Donald Stephenson, who had not yet taken up his post, so that as it happened the brunt fell on me. It was an exceedingly awkward and disturbing time trying to maintain the External Services, and indeed the BBC's reputation for reporting accurately all the main sides in a controversy, when the Press, the British Press, almost without exception, was hostile to the Eden Government over the Suez, over its Suez policy, so that in reporting the Press's reaction in press programmes or any other programmes you really had nothing which could be said to be giving the Government case, and I'm told this wasn't directly my responsibility, it was European rather than Overseas, but for a number of days the Government's case, because it was not articulating it itself at all, and the Press was not representing it, was really, was really made up most effectively by Maurice Latey in the BBC, so that the BBC was maintaining its balance by desperately trying to do honour to a case which was not being spoken by the Government.

26, Take 1

F.G. Then you left External Broadcasting and moved to a more central position in the BBC, you were Appointments Officer and then you were Controller, Staff Training and Administration, and among other activities you ran the management training courses at Uplands. You must have known more about the talent in the BBC than any other man in the Corporation?

O.W. Yes, I think that's true. What was immensely important to me in my next job as Chief Assistant to the Director-General was that I had a unique opportunity for getting to know senior people in the BBC in all the different Divisions of the BBC. It wasn't always that easy for somebody outside Television to know the senior staff in Television or vice versa, but I had this job which made it easy for me and that stood me in very good stead for the rest of my time in the BBC.

F.G. There you were now, Chief Assistant to the Director-General, now you were a member of Board of Management as well of course. Now the BBC had Directors looking after all the programme output departments and the Director of Administration and Finance and the Director of Engineering - what was left for the Chief Assistant to do?

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O.W. Well, what was left for the Chief Assistant to do, first of all, was anything which didn't fit organisationally neatly into the main Directorates was almost automatically put under the Chief Assistant to the Director-General, such as the policy of The Listener, the policy of Educational Broadcasting, Religious Broadcasting, and so on. In addition to that, there was a special responsibility to the Director-General for political broadcasting, political controversy, and it wouldn't be much of an exaggeration to say that any controversy or row in which the BBC was involved, particularly if it had any political content, the holder of that post would be in it up to the neck in no time at all, either taking instructions from the Director-General as to how to cope, or in the Director-General's absence coping as best he could himself, which sometimes wasn't easy because he had no formal designation as the Director-General's deputy or next of staff or anything of that nature.

F.G. And on top of that, of course, the staff who were working on these programmes were not on your strength, were they?

O.W. That's right.

F.G. They were on the strength of the various Managing Directors or Directors?

O.W. That's correct. So that in the case of Ian, the Ian Smith difficulty which has become a bit of a cause célèbre, I was having to deal on the one hand with the Chairman, Lord Normanbrook, and on the other with the Television Current Affairs people who were responsible for the programme into which Ian Smith had some expectation that he would come on that famous Friday, and to which he didn't come because the BBC in the end decided not to invite him to do so. The circumstances, briefly, were that during that week Ian Smith had made numerous appearances in BBC television and radio programmes - magazine programmes - because he was the news of the day, he was around London interviewing people and being interviewed, and the question at the end of the week was, was he to have a ~~media~~ major opportunity of expressing his attitudes about Rhodesia on top of all the little ones that he had had on that Friday, or was he not. Bearing in mind that Harold Wilson, the Prime Minister, had not had anything like these opportunities because you cannot whistle up a Prime Minister as easily as you can whistle up a peripatetic Prime Minister from a Colony or a Dominion, that the Prime Minister could not in fact utter his side of the breakdown of negotiations between these two men until the Tuesday of the following week when he would do it in Parliament, which constitutionally he should always do before he does it to any of the media, and Lord Normanbrook, under I think some pressure from Downing Street - quite understandable pressure from Downing Street - said that he thought that it should not be given to Ian Smith to have yet another. I agreed with Lord Normanbrook in my own heart as well as in the last resort having to do what I was told by the Chairman, so Ian Smith did not broadcast. The Rhodesian lobby naturally made a great fuss about this, and that was the element of the controversy. It became I think a cause célèbre because it was represented as one of the occasions when the Government of the day had brought pressure to bear on the BBC, and in this instance, though thank goodness not always, the BBC had lined up with the Government.

F.G. How did the Television Service take it?

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O.W. They weren't pleased.

F.G. Well now, you were a key figure then in the relationship between the BBC and the politicians in the Government. How did that relationship work in practice, what were the 'channels' that people were always talking about, the channels of communication between the BBC and the Government?

O.W. The famous 'usual channels' were the Whips of the three main parties, and the Chief Assistant to the Director-General had quite frequent and close contacts with the holders of these posts and any matters concerned with party political broadcasts, and with the aide-mémoire which governed for many years the opportunities given to the Government to make statements about special occasions. When Harold Macmillan returned from Bermuda after meeting Eisenhower, for example, he was invited by the BBC to speak, and it was not assumed by anybody I think, even including the Opposition of the day, that necessarily they would have an opportunity of reply. The aide-mémoire governed that kind of occasion and prescribed in some detail the circumstances in which the Opposition could or could not reply. All that kind of negotiation fell to the holder of this post.

F.G. Well you were dealing with some curious, not to say shifty characters - I'm thinking of Dick Crossman or Tony Benn or even Harold Wilson. How did you handle them?

O.W. I handled them in the only way that I can handle anybody, by saying exactly what I think, perhaps not ~~skeeling~~ scheming (?) too subtly and hoping that in the end that is the best policy. It didn't always work, it didn't work equally well because sometimes you had devious characters to deal with whose method of conducting business was not like that.

F.G. Then they would bombard you with correspondence, no doubt, how did you handle that?

O.W. Yes, and almost inevitably you could bet your wife before you left for the office after listening to the BBC's programmes for the previous evening that if there had been something derogatory said about a minister or a politician, your bell would ring in the office the following day and you would have the Chief Whip of that party asking you what on earth you thought the BBC was doing. And the battle commenced, and if you thought the BBC had made a mistake it was my belief and policy to admit it and fight it out with my colleagues. This was the situation which one most feared and least welcomed of course. If, as was more often thank goodness the case, you thought the BBC had been all right and other people were being unnecessarily touchy, then with a considerably better heart you entered the battle for your own organisation, tried to persuade them that life couldn't go on if people were so sensitive as all that.

F.G. And of course you dealt with them face to face, you dealt with them on the telephone, and no doubt you dealt with them by letter.

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O.W. Yes, you did indeed. I remember one instance where there had been a little skit in a radio programme about Holy Communion, and a constituent of the Attorney-General had written to him saying that this represented the BBC's total lack of principle, its agnostic if not atheistic Director-General, its blasphemous approach to everything precious, and so on, and please would he see that something was done about it. I formed the opinion after listening to the programme, rather to my surprise because the Holy Communion means quite a lot to me as well as to the Attorney-General, that this had been a perfectly legitimate programme, pouring some fun upon the permissive elder generation who criticised their daughter for coming back home one day smelling of wine and wafers, illustrating that it isn't always the younger generation which is the iconoclastic one, and I wrote a long letter to the Attorney-General and he accepted my explanation. That was an example of the job being rather fun and in the end successful; it wasn't always either.

Roll 17, 27, Take 1

O.W. One might have to write letters to irritated or angry people in high places or low places on an infinite variety of subjects and you never knew which they would be. I remember, for example, on one occasion the Director-General had an angry letter from the Attorney-General, one of whose constituents had complained that the BBC had broadcast a skit about the Holy Communion which was irreverent and indeed blasphemous and thoroughly unworthy of the Corporation. I thought that perhaps it was, because I also regarded the Holy Communion as something which you didn't normally make fun of, but when I read the script I realised that it was, I thought, a rather delicious little piece of radio in which the point had been made that it isn't always the older generation that is the stuffy, non-permissive one and the younger which is the iconoclastic. In this case it was two parents who were complaining in their agnostic way that their daughter had come home one day smelling of wine and wafers because she had been to Communion, and I managed to write a rather long letter I think to the Attorney-General, pointing out to him that in broadcasting you cannot have rules, that there are no subjects, there are some subjects about which you must never make any jokes, because almost anything in human life, if treated in the right way, sometimes is a matter for humorous treatment, and I'm thankful to say that when I met him at some dinner party shortly after that, he said that he had received a very civilised letter from me. One tried to write rather unconventional letters and it paid off very well very often to do so, not rather florid prose but short, challenging, often questions, not statements but questions, asking the correspondent how he would have solved a particular problem if he had had it confronting him.

F.G. That was nice, wasn't it.

28, Take 1

F.G. Let's talk now about Director-General Sir Hugh Greene. You were at his side every day and he was a towering figure in every sense - what did you make of the man?

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O.W. I think perhaps I should first say that when I look back on it I sometimes wonder how it was that we got on so well together, because we were totally dissimilar people. I regarded him as a very successful Director-General and essentially the man for the moment. He took over in the BBC when morale was definitely low. Sir William Haley and Sir Ian Jacob had a great deal to say about standards whenever the question of competition with the fairly newly established Commercial Television came up. The BBC must maintain its standards, they said, and believed deeply that this was so, and I am not really questioning that it should be so, I am only saying, suggesting that there was more to it than that. After all, the standards which are proper to a civilised society are not static, whether you like it or not they change, and they were changing, and Hugh Greene became Director-General when they had changed quite a bit from Sir William Haley, let alone Sir John Reith's day, and he represented, I think, this change, this loosening, more permissive if you want to use the word, society that was developing, and he competed with, he made the BBC, enabled the BBC to compete with commercial television highly successfully, raised its morale enormously, had a tour de force of a success with the Pilkington Committee, and I don't think that you can possibly deny that he was a good thing for the BBC.

F.G. Did you ever feel that he let you down at all or treated you unfairly while you were his Chief Assistant?

O.W. No, I never did.

F.G. And it was a stormy régime - did you ever see him lose his nerve, or was he good at taking decisions when things were pressing?

O.W. Very good. He was extremely cool and calm and determined at all times. The nearest to his acting impulsively that I ever remember was on the occasion when the announcement came through that Charles Hill was going - the Lord Hill was going to be the new Chairman of the BBC, and I think Sir Robert Lusty, who was the third person present in the Director-General's office that day with myself and Hugh Greene, has put it on record that Hugh Greene put his arm out to lift the telephone to ring up the Prime Minister, I suppose, to say that he was resigning, and I said "Don't", because I felt sure that whatever was the right thing to do, it wasn't right to do that at that moment.

F.G. And could you as Chief Assistant argue with him?

O.W. Oh yes.

F.G. Without rancour?

O.W. Not at all, no. I sometimes think that perhaps I should have argued with him more than I did, but one of the very good things about working for him was that he never resented argument, indeed I think he probably wished to have me appointed to that post, it was more or less in his gift anyway subject to the Board of Governors, because he felt that I represented attitudes which were quite different from his own and which he wouldn't understand himself.

F.G. How did you feel yourself personally about this swing away from the rigid moral attitudes that the BBC had formerly adopted?

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O.W. I was about seventy five percent of occasions when there was controversy about it I think I would be in favour of the loosening of old traditions to the more permissive free and easy attitude, because in all my inclinations I am liberal rather than conservative. There were occasions when I had a sharp intake of breath in my mind so to speak, and there were probably other occasions when human nature and the weakness of the flesh made me wish that the BBC had not done something, simply because I knew what a lot of trouble it would cause me, but I didn't really disagree with it.

F.G. But you were a dedicated Christian and Hugh Greene didn't pretend to be that. Did you find it difficult as a Christian to justify TW3, That Was The Week That Was, and some of those other rather more borderline programmes that really shook the nation?

O.W. Not really, no, no, because I don't think that there was, because I have always felt that in essence the Christian approach to life is one which is, allows a great deal of self-expression and which is essentially tolerant. I find it more difficult to reconcile Christianity with a very rigid autocratic attitude to anything, or almost anything, than I do to a permissive one.

F.G. It's much easier to be autocratic than it is to be permissive.

O.W. Yes.

F.G. Right.

Cut

[F.G. Yes, you don't want comments from me, I know (laughs). It's too bad because this is very important stuff. Never mind.]

Under copyright

Roll 18, 29, Take 1

F.G. How much were you involved in the complex Board/Executive relationships when you were Chief Assistant to D.G. Did you have personal dealings yourself with the Chairman and the Board?

O.W. I had personal dealings with the Chairman whenever the Director-General was away, which he fairly frequently was for the Commonwealth Broadcasting Union, its European equivalent, or on, simply on annual holiday. The myth that things don't happen in August and September was exploded by Hitler and it stayed exploded so that I had a lot of crisises (sic) to deal with. One of them was The War Game, and I formed the opinion gradually, and that was one of the contributory factors, that excellent person though Lord Normanbrook was, and good Chairman in many ways though he was, it simply is not good for the BBC to have as its Chairman a very senior civil servant. I don't think that any of us is capable of dissociating ourselves from that which has formed part of the main stem of our whole lives, whether we are soldiers or civil servants or whatever it may be. It's contrary to nature, I think, to be able simply because you become Chairman of the Board of Governors of the BBC to be able to throw all that off and judge an issue where this, your old affiliation is deeply involved, quite dispassionately.

F.G. Tell us a bit more about The War Game itself.

O.W. The War Game was an example I think of this because the Civil Service obviously, the Defence Ministry felt that the Government would be revealed as having taken quite inadequate precautions against the possibility of this kind of attack, and we well know that civil servants' supreme duty is to be loyal to their political head of the time and not let them appear to be made fools of, and I think they felt that this programme would do just that. So they were bound to bring pressure on the BBC through simply saying we hope very much that you will not broadcast this programme. And I think that Lord Normanbrook, as a very senior ex-civil servant, was bound to find that this weighed very heavily on his conscience. As for The War Game programme itself, I thought that, apart from a rather unwise opening exposition which could have been adapted quite easily, the guts of the programme showing the effect of nuclear attack upon Britain was so important and so true as what would be likely to happen that the BBC's overriding duty really ought to have been to broadcast it come hell or high water as a duty to the public, even if, as it might well have done, it had caused people to have bad dreams, old people listening, watching at home to exaggerate the dangers of it ever happening, or whatever. I simply thought that it was a slice of truth which ought to have been televised.

F.G. The years of Normanbrook, and before that the years of fforde, were days of relative tranquillity in terms of Board and Executive relationship and all that changed of course when Lord Hill was appointed to be Chairman of the BBC. Why was there such intense high-level antipathy to Lord Hill, and do you think the BBC was fair to him at the outset?

O.W. I think the BBC was excessively tetchy and nervous at the outset. I think that it's unfair to the BBC to expect it to have behaved with great urbanity and equanimity, after all, David Attenborough has said that it was as if Rommel had been appointed to command the Eighth Army, and that isn't a bad comment really. It was as if, it was that the head of the supreme Competitor has suddenly switched. It was a trauma for the BBC, it would have been even if Hugh Greene had not been Director-General, but looking back on it I rather wish that the BBC hadn't been so uncooperative in comparatively minor matters, complaining about the Chairman wishing to have his own office with his own furniture on a different floor and have his own secretary come in, and things of that nature. But I don't think it would have made very much difference. Hill was determined to be an Executive Chairman, and Greene could not operate indefinitely under any such thing.

F.G. Do you think that Hill gave a permanent twist to these relationships?

O.W. No, I don't. I think that in the long run it depends upon the individuals and that they, if they serve long enough in their posts, will tend to adapt the principles to their own best working relationship. If you had another intellectual ex-headmaster appointed as Chairman of the BBC like Sir Arthur fforde, it might well be that the responsibilities of the Chairman would be found quietly to contract.

F.G. And need the Hill/Greene relationship have been so very prickly?

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O.W. I think granted the two men it couldn't be otherwise.

F.G. Were you surprised then when Greene decided to go?

O.W. I wasn't surprised that he should be fed up with being Director-General any longer under Lord Hill as Chairman. I was very surprised when having said, having explained to his close associates that they shouldn't grieve or worry too much about this because as a member of the Board of Governors which he then became he would still be serving when Lord Hill retired, having said that, Greene himself retired leaving Lord Hill as the longer lasting of the two. This I found very difficult to understand.

F.G. Of course Greene went a couple of years or more before the expected time - did you feel that he was a great loss to the BBC when he went?

O.W. I didn't feel that he was a great loss when he went as he was when he went. If he had, if he had gone as he was in his prime I would certainly have felt he was a very great loss.

F.G. Then of course, you're saying really that he was, what, bored, he was burnt out, he'd spent himself?

O.W. He was tired or bored, he had already begun to part company from the job and was beginning to be a pale shadow of his, of his self in his heyday, and this was rather, this was obvious, and it was rather sad and one felt perhaps that if that was the way it was going to be, it had better end.

F.G. It's a curious throwback to the Reith position, wouldn't you say?

O.W. Reith also, for some several years before he went, was fretting because he didn't feel fully stretched, he was wanting other fields to conquer, he was wanting to do something different, that's quite true.

F.G. Well, Charles Curran of course succeeded to Hugh Greene, but the timetable was all adrift. He - do you feel that he was ready for the job when he came in?

O.W. I think he was not quite, not really ready for it, he had been very much a man behind the scenes in the centre, or a man in the External Services, and while he was an exceptionally quick picker-up of anything new that he had to do, he didn't know anything much about television. But I think he was the best man available for the job, and indeed when I was interviewed by the Board of Governors I said so.

F.G. Would you really have liked the job yourself?

O.W. I would not have, I would have done the job I think, if I had been asked to do it, which Lord Hill in his biography says I would have if I hadn't been the age I was. I would have done it with considerable misgivings, and if I had been asked whether I thought that I should do it, or Charles Curran a little older should do it, I suspect I might have well said that I thought it should be Curran, simply for

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O.W. this reason, that I think that the Director-General, whatever his other qualities, must have a very quick brain and a very retentive memory. Charles Curran had both, he reached his conclusions in a flash. I do not do that, I take quite a time to decide what it is right to do, and I doubt whether the Director-General is given enough time. I might have tried but I would have had some doubts.

F.G. What would you have done about -
[Oh well, that's all right, I'll forget the question I was going to ask you.]

Roll 19, 30, Take 1

F.G. In the Sixties, when so many changes took place in the BBC, did you feel that Hugh Greene initiated this new programme thrust, or did you feel he just let it happen?

O.W. I think it was a bit of both, I think it was rather like a plant that begins to show buds and the person who is looking after the plant can apply either a fertiliser or a weed killer. Some BBC Director-Generals might have applied a weed killer: Hugh Greene applied a fertiliser, and the plant burgeoned, and they reacted, they interacted on each other. Greene was encouraged by the success of his younger staff and they were immensely encouraged by finding a Director-General who obviously wanted them to do what they wanted to do, and I think this happens, sometimes perhaps rather unpredictably, in all important organisations as a result of a kind of meeting of minds, a kind of swelling up of a movement. The German historian philosopher Berkhardt (?) describes it, and it was there really from him that I, that I felt that Reith was perhaps the first BBC example, Britain had not had much experience of public service when he became Director-General of the BBC though it had had a little, He was the man of the moment taking his cue perhaps from the situation in British society but also giving it a tremendous lead, and together they hit it off with results that we know, and so happened again with Greene, and perhaps you can find examples in the Army which would illustrate this. In the BBC I felt that the appearance of Huw Wheldon as Managing Director, Television, was another example of this kind of uncorking of the spirit that one senses.

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F.G. A man for the times.

O.W. A man for the times, yes, good summary.

F.G. Let's talk about your final years when you went back to a line command as Managing Director of External Broadcasting. Were you glad to get away from the Chief Assistant to D.G. job?

O.W. No, not particularly. When I knew that Charles Curran was going to be Director-General I said to him "I think you will have difficulty in finding somebody to replace yourself as Managing Director, External Services" because I knew very well that the two Controllers in the External Services did not get on at all well together and that somebody who knew how to cope would be needed to sit on top of them, and I told Charles Curran that if he wanted me to go I would be quite happy to do so, and he did and I did.

F.G. And what was the state of External Broadcasting, I mean, forty years after - well, thirty five years, no, I suppose thirty years after the end of the War then - still going out in, what, forty languages?

O.W. Still going out in forty languages or thereabouts, and still in very good heart and still the immensely valuable instrument to the country that it always has been, in some disarray because Curran had got about half-way through a reorganisation which he had initiated with typical verve and thoroughness but which was not at all welcome to at least half the External Services, and then he got promotion in the middle and whoever succeeded him, in this case myself, had to cope, decide either to go ahead with it or to go back, and what on earth to do about the two warring barons who were part of the scenery in the External Services.

F.G. So what did you do actually?

O.W. By and large I decided that the reorganisation was not a good thing and went back, and I spent a great deal of the short time, three years that I had as Managing Director, External Services, in arranging with as little loss of blood as possible that the two warring barons would retire as early as they decently could and leave the scene without this long-entrenched guerrilla warfare.

F.G. And meanwhile relationships with the Foreign Office, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, were they still smooth and happy?

O.W. They were normally quite smooth in that I had an excellent man who was my opposite number in the Foreign Office, who was one of those Foreign Office civil servants who appreciated the subtle basis on which the External Services operate, their services prescribed by the Foreign Office but the content of what they broadcast in no sense dictated by it. There were occasional disruptions, such as the occasion when King Hussein of the Jordan was very angry indeed at the BBC for broadcasting so much material from the Palestine Liberation Organisation stations, and the Foreign Office rang up and asked what they thought the BBC was up to. This was because the Head of the Foreign Office was not one of those, I think, who appreciated the subtle relationship very well, and we went through every word that had been broadcast in Arabic for the past three weeks, and it was admitted in the end that we had not made any mistakes, that the trouble was that King Hussein had all the international journalists locked up in the International Hotel in Amman and unable to produce any material themselves, so the BBC couldn't broadcast anything that didn't come out.

F.G. You in your career climbed a long ladder: did you yourself drive yourself upwards, were you always applying for new posts, did you get this great range of experience through your own efforts or did it come to you?

O.W. No, in fact I never applied for a new post in the BBC because I never felt that I had really, unlike these great Director-Generals we've been talking about, I never got tired or bored with the job, I never even felt that I was doing it as well as I could when somebody said will you go and do something else, and on the whole I thought it was a good principle when that happened to say yes.

F.G. But you did have a terribly interesting, an extremely interesting BBC career.

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O.W. Yes I did.

F.G. And you can look back on it now with satisfaction I hope.

O.W. Yes. Yes. I think my father would have been intrigued and pleased that a trainee on five pounds a week had in fact made his way up to, nearly to the top.

Cut

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