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'A History Of North Regional Broadcasting' - EDWARD WILKINSON

(Interview 27 Notes)

Trevor

Hill I think that **Edward Wilkinson** must surely have a unique role in the History of North regional broadcasting, in so far as he arrived pre-war, was the **Programme Director** during most of the war, then spent a further twenty years in the service of the region before retirement.

But to begin at the beginning, tell me something about your childhood and what first took you into the glamorous pre-war world of 'the Theatre'!

Ted

Wilkinson (Does so, mentioning where he was born; his schooling - and how he decided to become an actor; his first stage appearance in Cheltenham, at the old Opera House theatre, then how, in 1935, he got the job of **Variety Producer** with the BBC in Belfast)

Trevor And two years later, in 1937, you moved to North Region as Drama producer. By then, of course, the radio play in North regional broadcasting had been very firmly established by **James R. Gregson**. He was also a 'man of the theatre'.

Ted (to mention, please, that Gregson had been manager of the Theatre Royal, Huddersfield, before starting an industrial theatre in a perambulator factory, and at a later date, becoming one of the pioneers of the Civic Theatre in Leeds)

Trevor The original BBC Drama Repertory Company in London was disbanded in 1931, listeners having become 'tired of hearing their voices', - but Dick went ahead and founded the **Yorkshire Radio Players** who, from the 'Radio Times', were going strong from 1934 onwards. The cast lists give such names as **Philip Robinson** - one of our wartime Overseas announcers and later, in charge of Radio Outside Broadcasts in the North, Dick's wife, **Florence**, and **Jane Tann**.

And I see that your work as a drama producer was sometimes heard on a National basis; as, for example, your production of '**The Good Companions**'.

Ted (To talk about it please. You had James Gregson in the lead part as 'Jess Oakroyd', **Norman Partridge**, a former leading member of **Sir Frank Benson's** company, Eileen Draycott - and two beginners who, in the ensuing years, weren't to do too badly - **Wilfred Pickles** and **Violet Carson**. That went out on 20th March, 1938. Please mention here the very first radio play production you did - and the date if possible)

Trevor Besides Dick Gregson, who were the other Regional producers of Radio Drama when you joined North region ?

Ted (to mention - and, perhaps, to talk about **Jan Bussell** and **Geoffrey Bridson**, - both former heads of Radio Drama in the North Region, **Robin Whitworth**, **Francis Dillon**, **David Ormerod**, **Cecil McGivern**,and any others who did radio drama, - also whether Cecil's productions were done from Newcastle - or whether Leeds, by 1937 when you joined, had already become established as the main regional center for radio drama in the North).

Trevor Your 'North Regional Director'; - and the first to be given that title, was **Edward Liveing** who took up the post in 1925 and was to leave in 1937. What sort of man was he - and who succeeded him ?

Ted (Replies - and to talk about, **Archie Harding**, and **John Coatman**, please, and the way in which both encouraged and promoted regional programmes in particular - also, that Bridson and Harding did much to establish the 'Radio Feature' during your own time in Manchester. Here, you may also like to talk about **John Salt**, bringing the story up to 1939).

Trevor What about the pre-war radio actors ?

Ted (May like to mention a few here with whom he worked, especially **Frank Nicholls**, Wilfred taking over some of his type of role when Frank's health began to fail).

Trevor What were your first impressions of working for the BBC in the North region ?

Ted (Replies)

Trevor At what point were you made the **Programme Director**?

Ted (Replies - and here you may like to mention some of the preparations which had been made in the event of War ; how **Pat McGlyn** the Manchester Commissionaire took on the task of training staff as members of the Home Guard; some of the plans for sending London departments to the Regions; how the **BBC Drama Department** , under **Val Gielgud** , came to settle in Manchester for a spell, where the Repertory Company was re-formed with such well-known wartime drama voices as **Gladys Young, Philip Wade, Laidman Browne, Ivan Sampson, Valentine Dyall** and (?) **James McKechnie**.

How, on September 3rd 1939, Manchester like the other regions opened their 'war station' Orders - to discover that Regional broadcasting had ceased, and that at 8.15pm that September day, the '**BBC Home Service**' went on the air for the first time.

Nan Macdonald's 'Childrens Hour' and a concert by the BBC Northern Orchestra were heard nationally within those first few hours of wartime broadcasting).

Trevor Those are magical names. By the time I started doing 'Effects' for plays those artists were in; - that was in 1942, both the Drama and the Features departments were back in London. But as you will remember, Laidman Browne often returned to Manchester after the war to play the role of the villainous 'von Stalhein' in our '**Biggles**' serials, whilst **Ivan Sampson** was 'Colonel de Salis' in Nan's '**Bunkle**' plays.

I remember some three years of wartime broadcasting from London; what was it like in Manchester ?

Ted (Replies - may like to refer particularly to the severe winters of 1940 and 1941 and of trying to do many of the Outside broadcast under frightful conditions and difficulties).

Trevor Does any one programme or broadcast event stand out to you during your wartime years as Programme Director in the North region ?

Ted (Replies - may like to recall several)

Trevor Much of the BBC's war effort was to bolster morale. You had **Richard North** as your head of Variety.

Ted (To talk about '**Kingpins of Comedy**'; .. Wilfred Pickles and Jack Train in a series of sketches entitled, '**Two's A Crowd**' which was broadcast on the '**Forces Programme**', and Geoffrey Bridson's out-and-out propaganda programmes, '**Billy Welcome**', which toured factories and canteens and which also featured Wilfred.

'**Music While You Work**' and other wartime Outside broadcasts were in the capable hands of **Victor Smythe**).

Trevor We come to the end of the war and in January 1946, a former Yorkshire journalist, named **Bob Stead** comes out of the Navy - and straight into the BBC as 'Senior Talks producer'. By this time, **John Salt** was back from America with his wife, **Olive Shapley** and you were now the North's Assistant Head of programmes.

Two years later, because of John's ill health, Bob is made the Head of Programmes.

Ted (to comment as freely as he wishes on this, please)

Trevor I know several of the Manchester staff, in particular, thought this to be far too hasty.

Ted (To comment further if he so wishes)

Trevor Was it in any way as a result of that appointment that you left us at a later date in order to move up to Newcastle as the BBC's man-in-charge there ?

Ted (To comment, please)

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Trevor You succeeded **J.C. Clarke** in looking after the BBC's interests in the North East. What were your views on arrival, and what did you manage to alter and to achieve within your first few years there ?

Ted (to reply - may like to mention some of the staff and then, to talk about the Programme output for the North East; for the region; and for National consumption).

Trevor Individually we find the right BBC people in the right sort of jobs - so far as each of us is concerned. And if they happen to be holders of posts in fairly high places, then things happen because of those contacts. Who deserves the proverbial 'pedestals' in your experience?

Ted (to talk about his working relationships with **Peter Florence**, as Head of Administration (Engineering ?), **Kenneth Adam**, as Director of Television - (was Kenneth still in Manchester when you arrived in 1937?), **Hugh Carleton Greene**, during his term of office as Director General, and **Basil Nicholls** during the period he was Director of Sound broadcasting.

Since you also list **Denis Morris**, who was Head of Programmes, Midlands from 1948 - 1955, and **Andrew Stewart** who was the Programme Director in Scotland from 1940-1945, perhaps you would like to make mention of them at this juncture. The Scottish Regional Director was **Melville Dinwiddie**)

Trevor Having been at the Region's headquarters for many years before moving to Newcastle, what, in general, were working relations with Manchester like for most of the time ?

Ted (Replies - if there were any, may like to mention the difficulties - but also the fact that the North East enjoyed the freedom and editorial control of programmes which went out on its own transmitter)

Trevor Besides being in at the beginning of Television in the North East, you also were in at the start of **Local Radio** during your career in Newcastle. How did you view that operation .?

Ted (Replies)

Trevor Any regrets ?

Ted (Replies)

Trevor And you're not sorry that you forsook a promising early career as an actor for a life with the BBC ?

Ted (using your own quote)

"I knew nothing at all about broadcasting when I joined in 1937. I retired in 1964 with an enormous regard for the BBC after 30 years service. It was the sort of work I would gladly have done for nothing !"

.....(Interview 27 - August, 1990).