

JACOB'S LADDER

So as the sixties became visible on the horizon, the modern world finally started to penetrate the BBC. The Fourteen-Day rule was history, the Toddler's Truce (an hour-long closedown at 6pm so little children can be put to bed) was scrapped. Television didn't need to adjust to society's rules anymore; it was enough a part of it that society would have to start accommodating it instead. The imperial era of the box in the corner of the room had begun.

Undoubtedly, this state of affairs was partly due to the creation of the commercial channel and the introduction of a choice of viewer. But credit is also due to Ian Jacob, the first leader of the BBC to be truly enthusiastic about the relatively new medium. The runner-up for the Director-Generalship upon Haley's departure had turned out to be George Barnes, one of the architects of the Third Programme and by then Director of Television. Despite holding that position, however, he had very little taste for visual broadcasting, to the extent that the regional controllers subordinate to him threatened to resign en masse if he were chosen for DG. Had he been appointed regardless, it's unlikely the television coverage of the Coronation would have been as extensive, celebrated or influential as in reality.

Jacob was due to turn sixty on the 27th of September 1959, not quite retirement age but a nice round number to leave on. He chose to depart the BBC along with the fifties themselves, handing over power on the 31st of December 1959. In contrast to the struggle to replace Haley that had got him the job, his own replacement more or less chose himself. For the first time - Cecil Graves notwithstanding - a Director General had risen through the ranks at the BBC itself. As predicted, if not preordained by his stint as Head of Administration, Hugh Carleton Greene became the seventh man to lead the Corporation at the stroke of midnight on January 1st, 1960 in as smooth a transition as Ian Jacob could manage.

While not one of the best-known Directors-General, and certainly overshadowed by his successor, Jacob was one of relatively few (especially in peacetime) to demonstrably leave the Corporation in a better state to which he found it. John Reith never liked him - partly because of his closeness with Churchill, partly because of his insistence on treating the job as a job and not, as he himself had, a calling. As a military man, Jacob was highly practically minded; he organised the BBC carefully and methodically, with as little fuss and bother as possible. He bloody well got on with it, in other words, and with a lifetime in the military hierarchy - including having a Field-Marshal for a father - he wasn't inherently impressed, let alone intimidated, by the likes of Reith. When Jacob's portrait went up in Broadcasting House, the BBC's father responded that "if his picture was in the Council Room, I would like mine to come out of it". He should have swallowed his pride: his relations with Jacob were positively cordial compared to what he went through with his successor.

As for Jacob, he was appointed Knight Grand Cross of the Order of the British Empire on the day of his departure from the BBC. He stepped down from the presidency of the European Broadcasting Union a few months later. Most of the rest of his life was spent in military consultation and local politics. He was a Suffolk county councillor for two stints between 1960 and 1977 and its deputy lieutenant between 1964 and 1968.

His most prominent work post-Corporation, and the one he himself considered the most important of his life, was the epic 1963 Report on the Central Organisation of Defence, co-authored with Lord Ismay, which led to the rationalisation and reform of the British armed forces and its bureaucracy into the shape it holds to this day. He died in 1993 at 93 - making him the longest-lived Director General to date.