

SERIOUSLY, HE'S DOING A GRAND JOB

Greene's aim was to break the BBC's image as the home of safe, establishment broadcasting - uncontroversial and unprovocative, not only never rocking the boat but providing a set of anchors and roll bars that barely allowed it to move at all. In Greene's own words, he desired to

...Open the windows and dissipate the ivory tower stuffiness which still clung to some parts of the BBC ...encourage enterprise and the taking of risks...[and] make the BBC a place where talent of all sorts, however unconventional, was recognised and nurtured.

Z-Cars and Steptoe and Son were just the start, mere stones hurled at the Overton window. 1962 ended with a great glass-shattering sound of pure culture shock. 24th November 1962 saw the first episode of That Was the Week That Was. The BBC had now thrown away the anchors, dismantled the roll bars and were standing up in the boat and doing a jig.

With the graduation from university of the Beyond the Fringe set and their contemporaries, a new, cynical, questioning generation was taking the reins of society. Private Eye magazine had debuted in 1961 as a juvenile alternative to Punch, and was about to be bought by one of those very graduates in Peter Cook. As with most such movements, the BBC had the option of engaging with it or ignoring it. Most of Greene's predecessors would have chosen the former; Greene was definitely interested in the latter.

The story of TW3, as it came to be known for convenience, has been told and re-told, which in itself is a testament to its importance. Ned Sherrin and John Duncan brought together various luminaries and up-and-comers from the worlds of comedy, commentary and politics itself, stuck David Frost on top and left the rest up to them.

TW3's immediate effect was to grab the old idea of the BBC's impartiality by the balls and shake. It wasn't partial in and of itself - this was satire, after all, produced by people who truly understood the term, and therefore occupied the tactical centre, if not the political one. But impartiality as the BBC had seen it up until now tended to mean equivalence. There was no great set of distinctions on what to be impartial about and when, so the Corporation had tended to apply it to everything at all times.

Then Greene came along - a man who had been embedded in Germany during the rise of the Nazis, and spent the first months of the War effectively on the run from them through Western

Europe, appearing Silver Surfer-like in the countries they were about to invade until finally making it back to Britain (and fortunately breaking his streak). Having witnessed the rise of a fascist and pro-actively racist movement from one hitherto sensible nation to cover almost a whole continent, and seen what that led to, Greene had a healthy contempt and horror for oppression and racism of all kinds, and as Director-General of the BBC saw nothing in the Corporation's charter that demanded he or it treat those things as if they were acceptable in civilised society.

So they didn't. Apartheid had been the law of the land in South Africa since 1948, and had been largely reported on as merely an usual and - at worst - rather unsavoury law of another land. TW3 lampooned it as the evil it was. They did the same with the struggles of the civil rights era in America; most famously with a brutally uncompromising routine featuring Millicent Martin flanked by the Black and White Minstrels nonchalantly singing about "cutting the throats of uppity n*****s" in direct, unvarnished and uncensored language. The use of the Minstrels even turned the beams of satire onto the BBC themselves for broadcasting their show (which they continued to do for another *fifteen years*). No-one was safe from the BBC's newest baby - not even themselves.

Obviously it couldn't last. TW3 lasted barely more than a year across two series before being abruptly murdered at the end of 1963, ostensibly on the grounds that the following year was an election year. Once the voting was over, Sherrin rebuilt the format as *Not So Much A Programme*, *More a Way of Life*, again with Frost, but the momentum had gone. More importantly, it wasn't new and fresh anymore, nor was it the only game in town - TW3 imitators had begun to sprout, including an American version, and Frost eventually moved on to create his own vehicle in the *Frost Report*. The direct TW3 bloodline went extinct after one more reconfiguration (the slightly more po-faced BBC3, this time fronted by Robert Robinson), but by then its bastard children ruled the landscape.

The Black and White Minstrel Show, meanwhile, continued until 1978, a consistent ratings smash despite the constant screams of horror and protest. It took just one year off, 1969, when it was replaced with a show called *Music Music Music* that was basically the same thing without the blackface - or, as it turned out, the ratings. The point of bringing this up now is as a reminder that the BBC wasn't transformed overnight into a hip, liberal Bohemian wonderland of art and love under Greene. It was still, fundamentally, the nation's Auntie. But the windows were opened, and fresh air let in, and the 1960s were acknowledged. Of course, not everyone was happy about that.

SERIOUSLY, HE'S DOING A GRAND JOB

RULE THE WAVES (6.10)