THE FOOLS ON THE HILL

So, after the bunting was tidied away, the engineers and techies of the old BBC Television Service were rounded up and re-congregated in Alexandra Palace, and set about starting again from where they'd left off - deliberately taking that phrase as literally as possible. Television returned on the 7th of June, 1946. Its first image was the beaming face of Jasmine Bligh, one of the original three announcers from the abortive pre-war service, two out of three of whom were back (Leslie Mitchell, in the belief that the commercial television was inevitable, had moved to America to brush up on it). "Good afternoon, everybody." she said. "How are you? Do you remember me, Jasmine Bligh?" After a twenty-minute welcome back, she then introduced the very Mickey Mouse Cartoon (Mickey's Gala Premiere) that was playing immediately before television abruptly dropped dead back in 1939. The famous opening statement "As I was saying before I was so rudely interrupted" is sadly apocryphal, but in many ways it reflects the spirit of the enterprise. Normal service had been resumed. Better, in fact: the picture, though not quite 1000 lines and stereoscopic, was better, and the daily schedule had gone up from two to three hours.

The following day saw the new service's first Outside Broadcast, of the massive parade in London's Mall and Trafalgar Square for the first anniversary (and one month) of VE Day. Viewers could watch the RAF fly past, gawp at Princess Elizabeth in an ostrich-feather hat, and admire the Prime Minister's waxed moustache as he inspected a strangely Olympic Opening Ceremony-like parade of representatives from the armed forces of almost all Allied nations (with the still-controversial omission of the Soviets, Poles and Yugoslavians, largely due to the newly-drawn Iron Curtain). The Sunday Chronicle newspaper called it the BBC's "finest two hours". This might have been underrating some of the work of the War Reporting Unit, but it was still very good for morale. The Television Department would soon need it.

Post-war austerity soon started to bite hard on the new medium. It was two years before work could even start on the first of the new transmitters, at Sutton Coldfield, and in the meantime, with only a few thousand potential viewers, the BBC could hardly justify spending too much, either money or time, on the television service. So it inevitably took it a few years to find a stable footing. It might have helped if, during this time, they could have relied on the support of the Director General, but sadly that was not to be either.

Haley didn't see television as a horrible, possibly even existential, threat as Reith had, but that was as far as it went. It wasn't as if he liked it or anything. He was much more concerned with his precious Third Programme and his cultural pyramid, on which television didn't feature at all. Even

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the Governors barely referred to the new medium except in passing/ And that attitude, from right at the top of the pyramid, unavoidably soaked into the rest of the Corporation. The Television Unit - then a mere subdivision of the Home Broadcasting Department - came to feel distinctly and inescapably like second-class citizens within the BBC's structure, the plebs to radio's patricians. The Unit became known as "the fools on the hill", sometimes affectionately, sometimes not.

The lack of support from within was particularly damaging and demoralising because by now the various other media, fearing for their own ticket sales (and existence, in some cases) had gone from suspicious to outright hostile, particularly the film and theatre industries. Movietone News, sensing (correctly) that their time was going to start winding to a close once television news was a thing, refused to allow the BBC to use any footage from their own report on the relaunch. Meanwhile, the quasi-ironic reshowing of "Mickey's Gala Premiere" would turn out to be one of the last opportunities to see the Mouse on the small screen as Disney quickly withdrew the rights, lest cinema sales be damaged. That would prove to be a pattern; before the war, entire West-End casts would happily decamp to Alexandra Palace to perform before the cameras. Now, that practice was abolished, along with any further co-operation between the theater industry at large and the BBC. As for sports - the rights weren't even available, even for the Grand National, once a camera came into the equation. Even some churches shooed the cameras away lest the pews be rendered barren. When the apocalyptic winter of 1947, and the ensuing fuel crisis, effectively murdered television transmission for a full month, the beleaguered Unit could have been forgiven for thinking that even God Himself had sided against the medium. Possibly on the advice of the now Lord Reith.

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