

This essay now turns to consider some of the key themes and approaches deployed by those broadcasting Britishness during the Second World War. Notably, in encouraging individuals and communities to make the sacrifices necessary to win the war, in Britain and around the empire, propagandists paid great attention to the theme of a common, voluntary commitment to a struggle for shared values of democracy and equality.¹¹ The empire was presented as a force for increasing economic welfare and political self-government for all those under its rule. Unity was emphasised, even in the face of evidence of discrimination, protest, and disintegration.¹² This involved presenting listeners with what was undeniably a particular, partial, and politically-charged account of the empire's past, as well as of its present and future. Yet the pervasiveness of these themes suggests that they were deemed to have considerable appeal to Britannic sentiment.

At the outset of the war, the British MoI was keen to emphasise the theme of growing self-determination within the empire. The aim was to defend Britain's colonial record against any comparison with the expansionist policies of Nazi Germany. The Ministry

⁷ Fleay and Sanders, 'Looking into the Abyss'.

⁸ HL, MS-1122, Joan Wood, scripts of radio talks.

⁹ Aldgate and Richards, *Britain Can Take It*, p. 188.

¹⁰ Coward, *Australia Visited*.

¹¹ For the broader context see Rose, *Which People's War?*

¹² Webster, *Englishness and Empire*, pp. 6-7, 19-54.

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sought to stress that the British empire was an 'association of free and equal partners', united in a common war effort against a Nazi 'slave Empire'. To achieve this goal, officials at the MoI argued that existing British public attitudes would have to be modified. Older ideas about the relationship between homeland and dependencies would have to be dispelled, and propagandists would need actively to combat anti-imperial prejudices that had arisen 'owing to ignorance of the evolution which has transformed British Imperialism'.¹³

Outside Britain, similar themes were also developed by broadcasters in the dominions, such as William Macmahon Ball, a Melbourne politics lecturer and the wartime controller of Australia's short-wave broadcasting services. Ball was a regular Australian contributor to BBC programmes, and was invited at one stage to run the BBC's Pacific Service.¹⁴ In his Dominion Commentary talks for the BBC's National Service, Ball explained to British audiences that although the nature of the imperial connection between Britain and Australia had changed during the interwar years, and aggressive, belligerent jingoism had abated, an enduring sentimental connection remained. In the wake of the fall of France, Ball argued for example that

[Although] Australians today do not generally get worked up about the Empire as an Empire in the way they used to twenty years ago... it has been very striking how in these last weeks Australians have shown the depth of their devotion to England and all England means.¹⁵

He stressed that superficial disagreements between governments in Britain and Australia should not be allowed to distract attention from Australian loyalty: such squabbles were 'just the sort of mutual criticism to be expected inside any family whose members have any individuality'.¹⁶ Ball took care to emphasise that, while the bonds of empire did not act in quite the same way as in earlier decades, they still linked Britain and Australia together into a single community.

Leonard Brockington, a Welsh-born Canadian barrister, renowned public speaker, former CBC chairman, and special advisor to the Canadian Prime Minister Mackenzie King, made similar points as he toured the wartime British world and broadcast a series of talks along his way. Appointed advisor to the British MoI in 1942, the following year Brockington visited Australia and New Zealand on behalf of the Ministry, accompanied by Bob Bowman, formerly of the CBC's Overseas Unit.¹⁷ In his talks, Brockington reported on the work of Australians stationed in Britain, Canada, the US, and the Pacific Islands, but also described wartime Britain, which he argued was becoming a more democratic and equal society.¹⁸ Britain and the empire, he insisted, were no longer dominated by Blimpish

¹³ BBC WAC, R34/953, Ministry of Information memorandum, 'Policy Committee – Empire Publicity Campaign – Paper for discussion on Tuesday, 1st October, 1940'.

¹⁴ On the Australian short-wave service see Vickery, 'Telling Australia's Story to the World', ch. 5; Hilvert, *Blue Pencil Warriors*; and, more generally, Hodge, *Radio Wars*. For Ball's relationship with the BBC see NLA, Ball papers, box 1, folder 6, R. A. Rendall to Ball, 27 Oct. 1941 and copy of Ball to C. Connor [sic], 15 Oct. 1941. See also NAA NSW, SP1558/2, box 81, file 'Dominion Commentary' Programme for BBC, 1939-40.

¹⁵ NLA, Ball papers, box 1, folder 6, script for 'Dominion Commentary', 15 July 1940.

¹⁶ NLA, Ball papers, box 1, folder 6, Script for 'Dominion Commentary', 4 Nov. 1940.

¹⁷ NAA ACT, 'Visit to Australia – L. W. Brockington', SP112/1, control symbol 353/2/63. See also NAA ACT, SP112/1, control symbol M98, 'Brockington, L. W., visit of'.

¹⁸ NAA NSW, SP300/1, box 11, Leonard Brockington, 'National Talk', 20 Feb. [1943] and 'Talk by L. W. Brockington', 5 Mar. [1943].

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'icicles with monocles'; similarly, the British Commonwealth was made up of 'millions of decent God-fearing, home-loving, generous and just people, who have no desire to dominate anyone, or to deny any man, whatever his colour or race, justice and an equality of opportunity'.¹⁹ All this clearly harmonised with broader BBC (and MoI) wartime policies of portraying Britain as a progressive rather than a hierarchical society, and the empire as a means of improving the welfare of all its subjects.²⁰ Brockington helped project ideas about a 'people's war' and a 'people's empire' to the dominions. In a talk heard by radio listeners in Britain, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, Brockington stressed that all members of a multi-racial British world were fighting together for liberty and against racialism. He spoke of his own mixed English and Welsh heritage, as an example of the coming together of different peoples under the aegis of Britishness, and argued that historic cooperation between diverse groups in Britain was mirrored in other parts of the Commonwealth.

I have stood among Canadians of Norman blood and speech patiently guarding the southern shores of England; I have heard General Smuts salute an Empire that once tried to destroy him, an Empire, which for the sake of humanity, [he] helped so violently to save, so wisely to guide. I have sat in the houses of the Maori listening to the reading of letters from Maori soldiers, telling their mothers wistfully of the English countryside, and of their pride in equal British brotherhood.²¹

Brockington was 'broadcasting to us all about us all'.²²

Another broadcaster who provided the BBC with despatches aimed at explaining the Australian war effort to British audiences, and at reassuring them of Australian loyalty, was the journalist Chester Wilmot.²³ Wilmot had already broadcast for the BBC before the war, and subsequently worked closely with BBC colleagues while covering the work of the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) in the Middle East: some of his reports were carried by the BBC during this period. Returning to Australia (after having fallen out with the Australian high command and being sent home from New Guinea), Wilmot broadcast for the BBC on Australian affairs.²⁴ Here, he made good use of his knowledge of British requirements and conditions, taking care to explain the Australian war effort in ways that British audiences could understand and empathise with. Discussing coal strikes in Australia in 1942, Wilmot emphasised that while it might seem

strange to you people at home that with the enemy at our gates, there is still trouble with strikers in Australia... I think it's true that people here are not yet roused as much as you were after Dunkirk, but you must remember that the Japanese are still as far from Sydney

¹⁹ NAA NSW, SP300/1, box 11, 'National Talk by Mr. L. W. Brockington, K.C.', 26 Mar. 1943.

²⁰ Nicholas, 'Brushing Up Your Empire', 215. Hajkowski, 'The BBC and the Second World War', 136.

²¹ NAA NSW, SP300/1, box 11, Leonard Brockington, 'Calling Australia', 20 June 1943.

²² SLNSW, ML MSS 6275/11, E. T. Fisk papers, file – 'Brockington, Mr. L. W', Sir Ronald Cross to E. T. Fisk, 18 Feb. 1943. See also NAA NSW, SP300/1, box 11, 'Talk by Mr. L.W. Brockington K.C., to be radio-telephoned to BBC', 23 March 1943 and 'Talk for the BBC by Mr. L. W. Brockington K.C.', 27 April [1943]. See also *Sydney Morning Herald*, 12 April and 11 May 1943. Brockington's Canadian broadcasts were also heard by, and would have been partly aimed at, audiences in the USA.

²³ For more on Wilmot see, most recently, McDonald with Brune, *Valiant for Truth* (Sydney, 2016).

²⁴ NLA, Ball papers, box 4, folder 29, Chester Wilmot to Ball, 28 Feb. 1941. NLA, Chester and Edith Wilmot papers, series 1, folder 48, Wilmot to T. W. Bearup, 4 July 1941; Lawrence Cecil to Bearup, 17 Nov. 1940, 28 Nov. 1940, and 4 May 1941; and Bearup to Wilmot, 11 Dec. 1941.

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as Athens is from London.²⁵

Wilmot could be quite critical, for example when discussing the failure of the British and Americans properly to define Allied war aims, and the dangers of ignoring supply problems as Australian troops advanced in New Guinea.²⁶ This probably acted to balance and thus make palatable the propagandistic elements of Wilmot's broadcasts. He was certainly deemed a success by the BBC, which invited him to join its team of war correspondents covering the Normandy campaign, and later appointed him special correspondent at the Nuremberg trials.

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In his broadcasts, Wilmot emphasised how the enduring sentimental connections between Britain and Australia were rooted in a common military history. 'Australian soldiers of two generations have fought and died [in the Middle East] side by side with their British, New Zealand, South African and Indian comrades.'²⁷ Like other contemporaries, he did not present interwar and wartime changes in the constitutional and diplomatic relationship between Britain and Australia as marking a revolutionary departure from past patterns. Instead, they were interpreted as natural outgrowths of a long-term trend towards liberty and self-government, a shared heritage. As long as this tendency was not blocked, then increasing autonomy could only strengthen the underlying sentimental connections upon which the empire's existence depended.

Indeed, imperial history was seen by both the MoI and the Colonial Office as playing an important role in the broader propaganda war, and many academic imperial historians were drawn into the world of broadcasting, to advise and provide suitable programme material.²⁸ However, it was not only academics and policy-makers who sought to put the imperial and British past on air. Writers of popular entertainment and children's programmes also engaged with historical themes to strengthen appeals to Britannic sentiment. Using the proceeds from her sales of radio scripts in Australia to the ABC, the writer Nancy Phelan left Sydney for London in September 1938, eager to get to England before the anticipated outbreak of hostilities. An Anglophile, she described herself as a 'lover of London': for her, 'London was poetry, history, romance, mists and bare trees, lamplight on wet pavements, daffodil buds in the square... Nothing was disappointing, nothing discouraged me, I didn't care that the British lived on starch and Brussels sprouts.' However, elsewhere in her writings she did show more of an awareness of the realities of working-class life in Britain.²⁹ After casual work in London and the Midlands, she married and had a child, and moved to Devon to escape the Blitz.³⁰ During and after the war, she wrote a number of radio scripts for the ABC and the BBC, generally aimed at children and women. Many of

²⁵ NAA NSW, series SP300/4, control symbol 140, 'Commentary for BBC – by Chester Wilmot – relayed by radiophone', 11 Apr. 1942.

²⁶ NAA NSW, series SP300/4, control symbol 168, 'B.B.C. News Despatch no. 14 – by Chester Wilmot – Relayed from Melbourne', 16 July 1942. NAA NSW, series SP300/4, control symbol 187, 'National News Commentary – B.B.C. News Despatch – by Chester Wilmot', 8 Oct. 1942.

²⁷ NAA NSW, series SP300/4, control symbol 162, 'B.B.C. News Despatch No. 12 – By Chester Wilmot', 3 July 1942.

²⁸ Potter, 'What did you do in the War, Professor?'

²⁹ SLNSW, Nancy Phelan papers, box 2, Script of talk entitled 'London Night', n.d..

³⁰ SLNSW, Phelan papers, box 32, unpublished typescript MSS of 'Friendly natives: an English memoir', n.d.. Phelan, *Swift Foot of Time*, pp. 5, 13. Phelan, *Kingdom by the Sea*.

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her children's programmes were historical dramas, fictionalising episodes in the lives of figures such as Bonnie Prince Charlie, Lady Jane Grey and Charles II. In these plays, she drew on her knowledge of the dialect, accents, and way of life of the 'amazingly primitive' people of the west of England.³¹ A script for a radio serial, *Sons of Devon*, dramatizing the exploits of Sir Francis Drake at the time of the Spanish Armada, included the following exchange, representative of her writing:

1st Man – 'Ast 'eard noos Giles?

2nd Man – Ah. T'be praaperr bad. Yes my. 'Tes said they Spaniards is coomin'... Us 'ave now 'awp to fight they – us got naw arms nor naught.

3rd Man – Tes trew, but us mun never let they conquer we. Naw! Not likey. They foreigners mun not set foot on my fields ef I dies fightin' they.³²

Such local colour provided an interesting and presumably comprehensible backdrop for adventure stories aimed at British and Australian audiences. Indeed, the Spanish Armada proved a resonant historical event at a time when Britain once again seemed to face invasion. After the war, in 1947, Phelan wrote a play called *Drake's Drum* for the BBC's *Children's Hour*. Set at the time of Dunkirk, the play drew comparisons between the Armada and Hitler's threatened landings. In the play, a young boy goes to bed worried that England is 'beat', but is assured by his father that 'We haven't even started yet.' His grandmother promises that Francis Drake will return to save England: the play then moves into a dramatised account of Drake's defeat of the Spanish. Returning to the present day, the boy's father goes off to help with the evacuation of the troops from Dunkirk. His grandmother concludes that Britain doesn't need Drake after all: 'We've got Churchill, haven't we?... He's our Drake.'³³

Phelan's scripts re-packaged British historical events in a way that would speak to contemporary audiences of British and Australian children. She mediated these histories in such a way as to justify and support Britain's war effort and the British empire. In *The Royal Leopard*, as in many of her radio plays, Phelan sought to bring history alive by juxtaposing past and present, and by having a young child travel through time. The first episode of the series opens in a house in Sydney, where a Professor Jones is having breakfast with his young family, after having sat up late into the night finishing a lecture on Edward III. His son, John, tells him that he has recently been studying Edward and the Black Prince: 'Our history teacher said they were no better than a lot of murderers. Worse than the Germans.' The Professor tells John that this is an 'interesting inaccuracy' perpetrated by the boy's history teacher, Mr Snodge, a 'weedy, anemic, spotty-faced, long-haired Conscientious Objector'. John responds to his father that 'Everyone knows you're good at history and all that – but the whole thing with you is that you're an Imperialist and you only write history in a way that butters up England and the Empire and never gives the other persons side at all'. To which the Professor replies: 'A true historian never butters up anyone – his own or anyone else's country. He tells the truth.' He argues that one has to judge the Black Prince by the standards of his time: 'Prince Edward's barbarous habits seem to have upset your Mr Snodge with his delicate sensibilities, although if we put him beside a Nazi Storm Trooper he appears as meek and humble as a nun.' This debate on the philosophy of history is terminated somewhat prematurely when the Professor sends John

³¹ SLNSW, Phelan papers, box 27, script of talk with J. Denton, 2BL, n.d..

³² SLNSW, Phelan papers, box 26, script for 'Sons of Devon', episode 10, n.d..

³³ SLNSW, Phelan papers, box 26, script for 'Drake's Drum', n.d..

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to his room. However, it is resumed when, in his dreams, John is visited by a succession of historical characters, who relate the life of the Black Prince and predict the horrors of future war.³⁴

V

By drawing on voices from around the British world, wartime broadcasters created an echo of a combined imperial war effort. The diverse peoples of the empire, British and non-British, were presented as working together towards common goals of liberty and economic improvement. Ideas about the composite nature of the British imperial community, combining a wide range of different groups under the umbrella of a single entity, were used to underpin claims about the effectiveness of imperial cooperation more generally. Attempts to appeal to Britannic sentiment often also involved the deployment of claims about the British and imperial past. The British world was presented as sharing a history, a usable past which could help justify and motivate the imperial war effort.

It is of course difficult to gauge how far the images projected by wartime broadcasts reflected wider responses to the war, or popular attitudes towards the empire. There is not space in a short essay such as this to consider the (admittedly scant) evidence that survives concerning audience responses. In a wider study of British identities during the Second World War, Sonya O. Rose has presented the BBC as one of the key organisations seeking to promote a united national response to the war in Britain. She concludes that while the achievement of a single, core British national identity proved elusive, a united war effort was nevertheless, to a significant effect, secured.³⁵ Similar ambiguity surrounds the question of how far the BBC succeeded in generating popular knowledge or enthusiasm for the empire in Britain during the war: historians cannot agree on an answer.³⁶ However, when it comes to the issue of Britannic sentiment in the British world, we might be more confident in hazarding a conclusion. Given the range and extent of broadcasting about the shared history and traditions of liberty and cooperation that, it was claimed, sustained the British world, it would be difficult to conclude that such ideas bore no relation to wider popular beliefs in this period. Certainly, some contemporaries drew attention to broader public apathy or hostility towards empire (a constant theme throughout the twentieth century). Yet such resistance to empire more generally did not necessarily translate into a rejection of Britannic sentiment, of the sense of a world-spanning British community. As a result, by emphasising the significance of Britannic sentiment, broadcasters surely did help listeners around the British world comprehend and support the war effort as an imperial one.

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³⁴ SLNSW, Phelan papers, box 26, script for 'Royal Leopard', episode 1, n.d..

³⁵ Rose, *Which People's War?*

³⁶ Here, contrast Hajkowski, 'The BBC, the Empire, and the Second World War' with Nicholas, "'Brushing up your Empire"'.