

## *Broadcasting Britishness during the Second World War: Radio and the British World*

By SIMON J. POTTER\*

This essay considers the role of radio broadcasting in appealing to and reinforcing Britannic sentiment during the Second World War, and thus mobilising a united imperial war effort. Radio played on the bonds of sentiment in a particularly powerful fashion, because it addressed listeners intimately and with a sense of authenticity, and allowed rapid, regular, and direct communication with audiences over long distances. Imperial broadcasting structures established during the 1920s and 1930s were repurposed for war, under the leadership of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), but bringing in broadcasters (and state information and propaganda agencies) all around the British world. Many different producers, writers, artists, and experts helped broadcast Britishness during this period, appealing to Britannic sentiment in a wide variety of ways. Often they linked Britishness with liberty, democracy, and equality, even if this flew in the face of the realities of empire. The British connection was presented as a living and vital force, bringing people together despite divisions of race. Broadcasters also made a powerful appeal to ideas about a common history and set of traditions. The essay suggests that such themes offered a significant means of harnessing Britannic sentiment to the needs of war.

### I

Over the past two decades, new historical research has helped us better to understand the manifold connections that helped create a 'British world'. Developing and disintegrating over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, this transnational entity comprised Britain, its settler colonies or 'dominions' in Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa, and the many communities elsewhere whose members identified themselves as British. The ties that bound the British world together were political, economic, demographic, and military. Yet it was a sentimental idea of Britannic community that provided perhaps the most fundamental and lasting support for the British connection. A world-spanning British identity drew on ideas about shared culture, history, language, and (for some) a belief in a common racial interest and destiny. This felt sense of community largely transcended differences between regions and political parties, and was sometimes also able to overcome divisions of class, religion, and race (albeit in an extremely patchy and incomplete fashion). Britannic sentiment endured well after the other connecting forces that bound the British world together had effectively dissipated, and its

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\* University of Bristol

ghost continues to haunt Britain in the era of Brexit.<sup>1</sup>

How can historians get to grips with this vast, intangible realm of sentiment? This short essay uses archival evidence relating to radio broadcasting during the Second World War as a route into the subject, and to suggest some core themes. Historians are often 'deaf' to the role that radio has played in the past, and tend to neglect radio as a source for social and cultural history in favour of the more easily accessible print media.<sup>2</sup> The essay argues that thinking about wartime broadcasting provides a novel approach to understanding the interaction of contemporary understandings of British identity with the pressing realities of a united, successful, and final imperial war effort. It shows how contemporaries sought to draw on ideas about a shared history of resistance to foreign aggression, and appeal to common ideals of liberty, to bind the inhabitants of the British world together in the face of Fascism. Viewed from the perspective of today, attempts to claim a positive link between empire, resistance, and liberty might seem strange, perverse, and distasteful. However, this was not how contemporaries responded during the Second World War: if its pervasiveness is anything to go by, then this appeal must have resonated with audiences to a considerable degree.

During the Second World War, radio disseminated the information and propaganda required to win consent for a vital, complex imperial war effort.<sup>3</sup> Ideas about British identity were certainly deployed on the airwaves for official and instrumental purposes. Yet Britannic sentiment cannot be viewed simply as a tool of propaganda. Those seeking to mobilise Britishness in the cause of war had to work with, accommodate, and exploit deep-rooted and long-lived ideas and assumptions about the origins and nature of that community. Moreover, wartime propaganda was organised in a decentralised fashion in the British world: authority was shared among different governments around the empire, and with state propaganda agencies working in a variety of loose relationships with a range of semi-state and largely autonomous organisations, including broadcasters. This meant that individual producers, writers, and artists were often able to work with some autonomy as they interpreted the nature of British sentiment and its connection with the war effort. There was not one simple, official propaganda line to toe.

For historians of Britannic sentiment, radio should also be of particular interest because it possesses certain distinctive characteristics as a medium, which rendered it a particularly powerful means of conveying ideas about British identity during a period of global conflict. Compared with other media of mass communication, the appeal of radio was unusually intimate, speaking to individuals or families in their own homes, and to service personnel in camps and on the frontline around the world. Although a mass medium (with nine million households in Britain possessing a listener licence by 1939 and with similarly high levels of access in most parts of the British world), radio could seem to speak to listeners on a personal level, and thus appeal particularly effectively to sentimental connections. Contemporaries also prized the authenticity of radio, its ability to present listeners with a live connection, and to provide the sounds of real people and of genuine events as they happened.<sup>4</sup> Finally, thanks to the development of long-distance short-wave transmission

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<sup>1</sup> For a brief, recent overview of the historiography of the British World see Potter, *British Imperial History*, pp. 98-104. Key collections of essays on the subject include Bridge and Fedorowich (eds), *The British World*; Buckner and Francis (eds), *Rediscovering the British World*; Buckner and Francis (eds), *Canada and the British World*; and Darien-Smith, Grimshaw, and Macintyre (eds), *Britishness Abroad*.

<sup>2</sup> See Scales, *Radio and the Politics of Sound*, pp. 7-8.

<sup>3</sup> Jackson, *The British Empire and the Second World War*; Grey, 'War and the British World'; Jeffery, 'The Second World War'.

<sup>4</sup> Scannell, *Radio, Television and Modern Life*, pp. 58-74.

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and reception technologies during the 1920s and 1930s, radio made possible instantaneous communication over vast distances. During the First World War, news could certainly travel fast, but was still subject to the vagaries of the disruption of the telegraph system, and was also limited by the carrying capacity of that system.<sup>5</sup> In the Second World War, by contrast, radio could bring up-to-date news to audiences around the British world, direct from the heart of the empire and from the battlefield, many times each day.

### II

During the 1920s and 1930s the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) developed for itself a significant role as a promoter of Britannic and imperial sentiment at home in Britain, and overseas in the colonies and dominions. Through its programmes it encouraged listeners to think of themselves as members of a world-spanning Britannic community. Overseas, the BBC's key tool was the Empire Service, established in 1932 and providing the foundation for the BBC's wartime Overseas Services and, eventually, for the BBC World Service. During the 1930s, the BBC also began to ship programmes recorded on disc, known as transcriptions, to other broadcasters around the empire. The inter-war period also saw the establishment of many different broadcasting services and stations around the British empire: those run as public authorities often developed close (if not always harmonious) links with the BBC. The Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC), the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC), New Zealand's National Broadcasting Service (NBS) and National Commercial Broadcasting Service (NCBS), and All India Radio went on to play crucial roles in mobilising radio during the Second World War.

Broadcasters also worked closely with official information and propaganda agencies during the conflict, such as Britain's Ministry of Information (MoI). Direct state funding, under the supervision of the Foreign Office, allowed the BBC's Overseas Services to expand, serving more overseas listeners with better programmes, including material in languages other than English. To serve the special requirements of audiences in different parts of the empire, the BBC drew on teams of Australian, Canadian, New Zealand, South African, and Indian producers, commentators, and artists. These people were gathered together by the BBC in Britain and at the seat of war to create an aural representation of the idea of a combined imperial military effort. Many of the programmes broadcast by the BBC on short-wave were picked up by stations around the British world and 're-broadcast' on medium-wave frequencies that could reach a greater number of listeners. Exchanges of pre-recorded programmes on disc also increased massively during the war, particularly with the creation of the London Transcriptions Service, run by the BBC but subsidised and partly directed by the British government. Public broadcasters in the dominions meanwhile also produced their own information and propaganda programmes, for domestic and overseas audiences. They provided programmes for other broadcasters, notably the BBC, and began to establish their own short-wave services (or to assist state-run short-wave services), allowing them directly to reach listeners overseas.<sup>6</sup>

In presenting listeners with programmes about the British empire, public broadcasters did not rely entirely upon the expertise of their own programme planners and producers. They

<sup>5</sup> Potter, *News and the British World*, pp. 186-210.

<sup>6</sup> For more on these issues see Potter, *Broadcasting Empire* and Potter, 'The Colonisation of the BBC'. On the BBC and the Second World War, particularly in terms of domestic British broadcasting, see Hajkowski, 'The BBC, the Empire, and the Second World War' and Nicholas, "'Brushing Up Your Empire'".

also employed or sought assistance from external writers, academic advisers, speakers, artists, and critics. Many of these contributors were deeply committed to the idea of Britannic unity. Even some who were not so convinced still allowed their sense of patriotic duty, or their commitment to fighting Fascism, to overcome their scruples about British imperialism. George Orwell, for example, was drawn into mediating war and empire despite his significant doubts about the morality of British overseas rule.<sup>7</sup>

Individuals also worked to broadcast empire in other ways. The raw material for programmes travelled around the British world in unprocessed form, with flows of written information, publications, and scripts crossing the empire's internal borders to provide the basic content for broadcasts. A good example of how such material could be used for radio were the talks prepared in New Zealand by Joan Wood, an Englishwoman married to the professor of history at Victoria College, Wellington. In her broadcast sessions, Wood made frequent reference to 'home front' conditions and initiatives in Britain, Canada, and Australia, and sometimes also the USA. She illustrated her talks with references to published accounts of new policies and austerity measures overseas, providing comparisons with New Zealand conditions and initiatives and suggestions for borrowing ideas from abroad.<sup>8</sup>

Speakers and entertainers could also travel around the empire in person: artists as diverse in their appeal as Gracie Fields and Noël Coward visited Australia and New Zealand during the war, broadcasting to boost morale and raise funds for the war effort. Coward, a famous British playwright, actor, and performer, undertook considerable propaganda work during the war, including tours of America, the Middle East, South Africa, Burma, India, Australia, and New Zealand.<sup>9</sup> In his broadcasts in Australia and New Zealand, subsequently published in Britain, Coward, a fierce patriot, was keen to stress the continuing vitality of the Britannic connection.<sup>10</sup>

### III

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.<sup>11</sup> 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.<sup>12</sup> 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

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<sup>7</sup> Fleay and Sanders, 'Looking into the Abyss'.

<sup>8</sup> HL, MS-1122, Joan Wood, scripts of radio talks.

<sup>9</sup> Aldgate and Richards, *Britain Can Take It*, p. 188.

<sup>10</sup> Coward, *Australia Visited*.

<sup>11</sup> For the broader context see Rose, *Which People's War?*.

<sup>12</sup> Webster, *Englishness and Empire*, pp. 6-7, 19-54.