

# ‘New and important careers’: how women excelled at the BBC, 1923–1939

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## Abstract

From its beginnings in 1923, the BBC employed a sizeable female workforce. The majority were in support roles as typists, secretaries and clerks but, during the 1920s and 1930s, a significant number held important posts. As a modern industry, the BBC took a largely progressive approach towards the ‘career women’ on its staff, many of whom were in jobs that were developed specifically for the new medium of broadcasting. Women worked as drama producers, advertising representatives and Children’s Hour Organisers. They were talent spotters, press officers and documentary makers. Three women attained Director status while others held significant administrative positions. This article considers in what ways it was the modernity and novelty of broadcasting, combined with changing employment possibilities and attitudes towards women evident after the First World War, that combined to create the conditions in which they could excel.

## Keywords

BBC, employment, history, interwar, radio, women

## Introduction

In the conclusion to her chapter on women in the BBC in *Women in Top Jobs*, the sociologist Isobel Allen queried ‘whether women had done as well in the BBC as might be expected’ (Fogarty et al., 1971: 214). She pointed out that most of the very senior women were about to retire with no obvious female successors. ‘There is certainly no reason to imagine’, she continued, ‘that anything like the situation in the early 1930s, when almost half the departmental heads in the BBC were women, could be repeated in the near future’ (Fogarty et al., 1971: 214). Although Allen overstated the situation, many women had risen to important positions in the interwar BBC. This article will contend that a number of distinctive circumstances facilitated a progressive approach in this period: a combination of the BBC’s newness, its pioneering spirit and its modernity, which intersected with expanding educational and employment opportunities for middle-class women in the aftermath of the First World War. The BBC’s independence from state control and its commitment to public service rather than commercialism is also important. The seeds of change which would gradually

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dilute the role of women are also discernible in this period. Bureaucratisation, professionalisation and a move towards conformity would increasingly masculinise the BBC, creating the discriminatory circumstances fully evident by the 1970s.

The BBC of the 1920s and 1930s was uncommon in its treatment of women (see Murphy, 2016). Three women attained Director status: Hilda Matheson headed the Talks Department (1927–1932), Mary Somerville the School Broadcasting Department (1931–1947), and Isa Benzie the Foreign Department (1933–1938). Among programme makers, Mary Hope Allen, Rhoda Power, Margery Wace, Janet Quigley and Mary Adams carved out areas of expertise in features, school broadcasts, women's talks and science. BBC women also held significant posts in, for example, the press office and photographic library; as accompanists and advertising representatives; on *World Radio* and *Radio Times*. One woman, Doris Arnold, rose from typist in the Stores Department to acclaimed variety star and is hailed as the first woman DJ (Murphy, 2014b). Others pinpointed for their contribution to the BBC include Olive Shapley, an originator of the social documentary, who mastered the complexities of the outside broadcast van to bring the voices of Northerners to the airwaves (Scannell and Cardiff, 1991); Barbara Burnham, a ground-breaking drama producer and adapter who, for example, worked with James Hilton to bring his novels *Goodbye Mr Chips* and *Lost Horizon* to the wider public; and Janet Adam Smith, Assistant Editor of *The Listener*, who enticed modernist poets such as WH Auden and Stephen Spender to its pages.

Hilda Matheson and Mary Somerville were pivotal to the development of the BBC. Matheson is widely credited for the transformation of Talks, both by making it acceptable for the British elite to broadcast, but also by recognising the importance of production, and that the spoken word required new tools to make it palatable to a listening public (Avery, 2006; Carney, 1999; Chignell, 2011). Mary Somerville is acknowledged as the pioneer of School Broadcasting, professionalising it, broadening it, enhancing it. Through her Secretaryship of the Central Council for School Broadcasting, she also ensured it was rooted within the wider British educational establishment (Briggs, 1965; Palmer, 1947).

Broadcasting had burst onto the world stage in the 1920s, and wireless networks were quickly established in many countries. As Michelle Hilmes (1997), Donna Halper (2001), Kate Lacey (1996), Lesley Johnson (1988) and others have shown, women were an intrinsic part of this new media industry, predominantly linked to the output aimed at the large daytime female audience. In the United States, where expansion was driven by commercial interests, women were initially employed in a broad variety of roles such as programme director (Halper, 2001). Some, like Gwen Wagner, Judith Waller and Bertha Brainard, rose to positions of considerable responsibility (Hilmes, 1997). In Germany, where wireless operated under state control, women were integral to the *Frauenfunk*, the women's radio services (Lacey, 1996). In Australia, with its mix of commercial and public service broadcasting, women had responsibility for the women's sessions that proliferated in the 1930s (Griffen-Foley, 2009).

To date, studies of women in the early BBC have largely focussed on the programmes they made rather than the employment practices that underpinned their work (Andrews, 2012; Bailey, 2009; Carney, 1999; Hunter, 1994). Similarly, most studies of women's employment in interwar Britain have concentrated on traditional occupations with an emphasis on endemic discrimination (Cowman and Jackson, 2005; Glew, 2016; Holloway, 2005; Oram, 1996, among many others). This article takes a different approach. By placing women's work at the BBC within the wider paradigm of women's employment in this period, a clearer picture of their role emerges. This is not to say that BBC women did not face sexual prejudice. Hidden iniquities in pay and promotional prospects were widespread, as they still are today. As Mike Savage and Anne Witz (1992) revealed in their analysis of the gendering of organisations, historically senior women were widely disadvantaged, 'channelled into positions demanding a high level of expertise but generally little real

power' (pp. 57–58). In the interwar BBC, no woman was ever considered for the Control Board, the innermost executive team, but then it was not until 1990 that a woman was first admitted to the Management Board. However, for those in the BBC salaried grades in the 1920s and 1930s, the ethos was broadly one of equality with women playing a crucial role both in terms of broadcast output and in the ways in which the Company/Corporation was externally perceived. Women also held significant administrative posts.

## The early BBC

The British Broadcasting Company had been established at the close of 1922 with John Reith at its head (Briggs, 1961). In 1927, it was reconstituted as the British Broadcasting Corporation, its public service broadcasting remit enshrined by Royal Charter (Briggs, 1965). From four members of staff in 1922, by the outbreak of the Second World War this had risen to more than 4000 (a third of them women); listenership had also expanded exponentially to include almost the whole British population by 1939 (Pegg, 1983). Reith, although a complex and difficult man, was also a visionary with a conviction that broadcasting should be a public service for the public good (Reith, 1924). His belief that wireless could play an important role in the creation of an informed democracy permeated the interwar BBC (McIntyre, 1993). In his autobiography, *Into the Wind*, published 11 years after his resignation, Reith (1949) recalled what he had looked for in potential staff:

One had to find men and women not just good enough for the immediate responsibilities of this or that post but for what it would be some years ahead ... The requirement was for men and women who wanted to be in the BBC and nowhere else; who realised its potentialities and were moved and minded to share in their [sic] achievement; who realised also how exacting the labours would be. (p. 139)

This impression of the BBC in the interwar years as a demanding but inspiring place to work, one driven by the notion of public service and where the future was uncertain, is an apt one. Wireless technology was in its infancy, and those who joined the fledgling company would have had little notion of the potential of the new medium. As their memoirs attest (Burrows, 1924; Eckersley, 1941; Lewis, 1924), there was 'no limit to the devotion of employees' (Lambert, 1940: 44), working hand-to-mouth, enthused by the novelty and excitement of broadcasting. Reith's reference to both men and women is significant; one of the reasons why some women did so well at the BBC was his support for them. The modernity of the BBC is also important. As a new industry, broadcasting started without the entrenched prejudices and inequalities that were evident in the prevailing professions open to middle-class women in Britain at this time, such as teaching and the Civil Service (Glew, 2016; Oram, 1996). As Mary Agnes Hamilton (1934), a Governor of the BBC (1932–1937) claimed, 'men and women work on a genuine basis of equal and common concern' (p. 533). At the BBC, salaried women were employed on the same pay scales as men and all earned above £250 a year, considered to be the minimum necessary for a middle-class lifestyle (McKibbin, 1998). Many women earned far more, reaching Virginia Woolf's (1929) imagined £500 a year and beyond. Mary Somerville was the highest paid BBC woman prior to the Second World War. In 1939, she earned £1500 per annum, though this needs to be tempered by the higher salaries of her fellow male Directors who earned in the region of £1700.

## Women and work in interwar Britain

The early 1920s, when the BBC was born, was a time of new possibilities for British women in terms of employment (Beddoe, 1989; Nicholson, 2007). Working-class girls were increasingly

finding jobs in shops and offices and on the assembly lines of factories – making wirelesses perhaps (Glucksmann, 1990; Todd, 2005). For the middle classes, outside the established role of teacher, nurse and Civil Servant, a range of new careers was emerging. The 1919 Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act had unlocked the doors to occupations such as law, accountancy and civil engineering, and there were also new openings in areas such as advertising, the arts and business. Much was ‘modern’, and the svelte young working woman would become one of the symbols of modernity, popularised in the press and on screen (Bingham, 2004; Dyhouse, 2010; Hackney, 2011). As a new technology and a new industry, broadcasting was part of this rapidly changing world, hailed by *Strand Magazine* as the ‘ultra-modern, up-to-date profession’ (Price, 1933: 26).

BBC women were among a small band of largely middle-class female employees who, in the 1920s and 1930s, benefitted from this climate of modernity and possibility. The British press were captivated by pioneering women and frequently wrote about them, and the BBC was part of this novelty. For instance, the *London Evening News* carried an article headlined, ‘The Women of the BBC’, which trumpeted how many had ‘made for themselves new and important careers, and helped to build up the reputation which British broadcasting holds in the world at large’ (Sprott, 1936: n.p.). *Radio Pictorial* included an expansive feature about the Corporation’s ‘Women who Matter’, revealing how, in every department, jobs were performed by women, ‘some of them calling for essentially feminine qualities of tact and adaptability, others that place women and men on an equal footing’ (Trent, 1935: 5). These women would almost certainly have been salaried, and it is important to make a distinction between the BBC’s waged and salaried staff. Social class and status dominated British life at this time (McKibbin, 1998) and was reflected at the BBC with its two classes of employees: the weekly paid ‘junior’ and the monthly paid ‘senior’. Most women were in waged secretarial and clerical roles but whereas much office-based work for women in the interwar years was ‘dead-end’, a fact bemoaned by feminists (Brittain, 1928; Holtby, 1934; Strachey, 1935), at the BBC there was the possibility of promotion to the senior grades.

The BBC’s senior women were also largely exempt from one of the most invidious forms of sexual discrimination in interwar Britain – the marriage bar. Although a bar was introduced by the BBC in 1932, ‘exceptional’ women were never required to resign, based on criteria such as loyalty, efficiency, indispensability, career-mindedness and an ability to balance office and married life (for a discussion on the interwar marriage bar and the BBC, see Murphy, 2014a). The requirement to leave work because of marriage was widely enforced in the Civil Service, teaching, nursing and banking as well as in many large companies; the only chance of a career was to remain single. Being a housewife was the cultural norm (Giles, 2004; Lewis, 1984). At the BBC, not only did married women continue to work, but a few, like Mary Somerville and Mary Adams, had children. The BBC was a rare interwar employer that offered maternity leave, introduced in the wake of Somerville’s pregnancy in 1928.

It was the newer professions, like the BBC, which were the most progressive. As the feminist Vera Brittain (1928) wrote, ‘Where no traditions and few precedents have been established, the energy which is too often spent in combatting prejudice in the ancient fields may be applied directly to the work on hand’ (p. 58). Mary Field, a British film maker, described how, within her industry, ‘a girl may start as a secretary and finish as a director’ (Hughes, 1936: 289). The advertising executive Florence Sangster was unambiguous that her field ‘was open equally to men and women’, explaining further that, ‘what counts is the trained mind, the creative imagination, the detached yet sympathetic point of view’ (Cole, 1936: 210).

## Getting a job at the BBC

Like many creative industries, the early BBC functioned to a large extent on networks. There were no set qualifications or set recruitment procedures for getting a job, at least not until 1934

when advertisements and Appointment Boards were routinely introduced for salaried posts. Word of mouth appears to have been a common way of securing a BBC position, the 'old school tie' being particularly potent (Annan, 1985). Being known to or recommended by friends, relatives or acquaintances was also key: Lionel Fielden (1960), Maurice Gorham (1948), Eric Maschwitz (1957), Roger Eckersley (1946) and Val Gielgud (1947), for example, are unabashed about this in their memoirs. Women also came to the BBC this way. Cecil Dixon, the BBC's first Accompanist, was tempted to the BBC in 1923 by Stanton Jeffries, then starting the music department (the two had met at the Royal College of Music), while the Children's Hour Organiser, Ursula Eason, was championed for the post by her cousin, the Variety Producer, Charles Brewer, in 1933. Oxford University also seems to have been a common thread; for instance, Isa Benzie shared a flat with her former student friend Janet Quigley and pushed for her appointment to the Foreign Department in 1930. And, it was Mary Somerville who initially recommended Hilda Matheson to John Reith in 1924, although how the two Oxford-educated women were known to each other is not clear.

The ad hoc nature of recruitment, and the uncertain nature of early broadcasting, may have facilitated women's advancement. As Maurice Gorham (1948) noted, the Company had been staffed before most people took wireless seriously, recruiting in a hurry to meet rapid expansion, and some men who 'got in on the ground floor were not capable of growing with their jobs' (p. 18). Similarly, the lack of assurance about career progression may have been off-putting. *Strand Magazine* pointed out the BBC's 'Bright Young Men' had little hope of bettering themselves, claiming that this was one of the reasons why so many left the Corporation (Price, 1933). These circumstances suggest that some women who came to the fledgling BBC may have been of a higher calibre than the men they worked alongside, particularly those women who had been to university. At a time when less than 2% of the population went to university, only a fifth of whom were female, it was still comparatively rare for women to have had this chance (Dyhouse, 2006). It was not until the later 1920s and into the 1930s that serious-minded young male graduates began to come to the BBC in large numbers (Gorham, 1948). It is important to stress, however, that, like most institutions at the time, when recruiting to executive posts from outside the BBC, women were almost never considered; Hilda Matheson was the only woman in the interwar years to be appointed directly to a senior post. All other career women at the BBC worked their way up the ranks.

## The importance of a salaried post

According to BBC files, 702 men and 128 women held salaried positions in the interwar years (BBC, 1939). Significantly, less than a tenth of these men (8.5%) had started in waged roles compared to more than half the women (53%). Among these women were graduates or those who had attended other higher education establishments such as art school, drama school or music college. For a well-educated young woman to enter a job at a junior level was commonplace at this time, a situation almost unheard of for a similarly qualified young man (Holtby, 1934). At the BBC, these bright, confident young women were then in a position to grab opportunities, often with the support of their boss. It took Oxford-educated Isa Benzie just 6 years from arriving as a waged secretary in the Foreign Department in 1927 to becoming its head in 1933, on the resignation of her manager, Major CF Atkinson. As Foreign Director, he had seen her potential and more or less trained her as his deputy. Mary Hope Allen's boss, aware that she was dissatisfied with her job as a weekly paid play cataloguer, warned his superior that 'it would be a pity to lose somebody who could be so useful to us' (BBC, 1928). An alumna of the Slade School of Art, as well as a former freelance journalist and drama critic, Allen had been promoted within a year to a creative, and salaried, role; by 1934, Allen was a fully fledged drama producer.

In her quest for promotion, Allen had made an appointment to see John Reith, frustrated with the slow response of her managers. 'Slightly amused', during the hour she spent trying to impress him with her programme ideas, eventually Reith was convinced, agreeing she should have a production job (*The Times*, 2001: 11). How far Reith fostered the ethos of equality at the BBC is hard to say. Evidently, in 1926, it was he who called for the broadening of the status of Women Assistants, recruited to the provincial stations to oversee the local women's and children's output. The class of women being employed, he insisted, 'was such that they should rank on the same footing as men' (BBC, 1926). Reith was an unusual champion of women given his pre-BBC life was spent almost exclusively in the company of men – at public school, in the army, in engineering (McIntyre, 1993). Perhaps it was because he found women puzzling that he was less critical of them. While his diaries bristle with antagonism towards the men he felt had let him down, the only woman continually on the receiving end of his vindictive pen was the BBC Governor Viscountess Ethel Snowden, who was not on the staff (Stuart, 1975). Reith demanded loyalty, something that women were more likely to offer. Whereas men might view their BBC jobs as temporary, a stepping-stone within their wider working lives, women were much less likely to view their employment paths this way. Unless they left to be married, many would spend their entire career with the Corporation. Hilda Matheson's dramatic resignation in 1932 was out of character for a BBC woman.

Matheson resigned partly over a disagreement with Reith about the nature of talks, which she feared were being dumbed down (Carney, 1999; Hunter, 1994). Her commitment to 'uplift' is evident in her BBC work and also in her book *Broadcasting* (Matheson, 1933) which reiterated her belief in radio's primacy in the creation of an informed democracy. Mary Somerville was also driven by the educationally enriching potential of broadcasting. From their first meeting in April 1924, Reith was struck by this 'very clever and self-confident young lady', seeing in her the same fervour for public service and educational broadcasting that he possessed (BBC, 1924). The public service ethos of the BBC seems to have benefited women. According to Hilmes (1997), by the later 1930s, women working in the radio industry in the United States were largely confined to women's, children's, educational and public service concerns, one reason being the growing power of advertising agencies. The non-commercial nature of the BBC meant it was less cutthroat; women were rarely in competition with men, which assisted the fostering of an environment of equality.

## Non-gendered roles

The non-gendering of roles was another reason why women did well at the early BBC. A chart from 1937, detailing the pay and career progression of 59 salaried women, shows that only 7 were in jobs that had not previously been held by men (BBC, 1937). Most employment in the interwar years was either gender-specific or segregated; it was unusual for women and men to work side-by-side. It was also rare for a woman to manage men, but at the BBC this was a reality. Hilda Matheson had several young men in her charge. Lionel Fielden (1948) wrote of how, initially, he thought it would be 'strange, perhaps impossible' to work under a woman, but 'Hilda drew my admiration, respect and affection almost instantly' (p. 114). Following her decision to leave the BBC, he was one of nine people in the Talks Department who threatened to resign over her treatment (p. 117). Other women who managed men were Mary Somerville in School Broadcasting, Isa Benzie in the Foreign Department, and Margery Wace in Empire Talks.

More than half of the BBC's salaried women were, or had been, Assistants, a non-gendered job that encompassed an array of roles. Being an Assistant signified a position of responsibility within a department and was emblematic of the impromptu nature of early broadcasting which was, as yet, an unspecified profession. Areas of the BBC where both women and men were employed as Assistants included Talks, Schools, Publications, Copyright, Photographs, Music Contracts and the

Exhibitions Section. It is difficult to define the duties as they were so diverse; the 76 women denoted as Assistants in the Salary Information Files were employed in 36 different roles. For instance, Marjorie Scott-Johnston, an Assistant in the Photographic Section, worked under the direction of Richard Lambert (1940), the Editor of *The Listener*, for whom she

ransacked the print shops and the print departments of the British and Victoria and Albert Museums, pestered picture agencies ... devoured the resources of the London Library, scoured the continental papers and collected files of likely pictures and photographs from all parts of the world. (pp. 136–137)

Florence Minns, an Assistant in Music Contracts, made arrangements for Variety programmes, negotiated contracts and sorted out rehearsals. She was also responsible for the auditioning and booking of artistes. The *Daily Express* described the ‘tall, handsome, dark, commanding and for those that don’t know her, rather frightening’, Miss Minns as one of the BBC’s ‘important women’ (Long, 1935: n.p.).

Florence Minns, who joined the BBC in 1924, grew her own job and this was a further trait of the early BBC, the possibility to create your own area of professional expertise. So, Florence Milnes, recruited as an Assistant in Information in 1925, would start the Reference Library while Kathleen Lines, who joined as a secretary in 1924, established the Photographic Section. Both would remain with the Corporation until they retired. Minns, Milnes and Lines were older women when they came to the BBC, already in their 30s (considered at this time to be middle-aged), with life experience rather than academic qualifications. In an era when mature, single women often faced discrimination in the workplace (Holden, 2007), the BBC appears to have embraced their knowledge and capabilities.

## Women’s and children’s programmes

Ella Fitzgerald and Elise Sprott, also non-graduate older women, were recruited to programme making roles in 1924 and 1925 respectively. Their area of responsibility was predominantly the talks aimed at women, starting with the short-lived *Women’s Hour* in 1923 and consolidated as *Morning Talks* in 1929. As Reith made clear in his 1926 statement on Women Assistants, those connected with this output did not warrant inequality, as ‘efficient planning and conduct of these programmes was as important as any other’ (BBC, 1926). Women’s and children’s programming at the BBC appears not to have been the female ghetto it was in other countries (Halper, 2001; Hilmes, 1997; Lacey, 1996). The four successive producers of BBC women’s talks all moved on to broader roles. Fitzgerald was transferred to the journal *World Radio* in 1926, becoming Assistant Editor in 1928. Sprott was reassigned to the Publicity Department as Women’s Press Representative in 1931. Margery Wace, who took over from Sprott, would move to Empire Talks in 1936, becoming Empire Talks Organiser in 1938. Her replacement on *Morning Talks*, Janet Quigley, while continuing to develop talks for women, also worked on the broader Talks Department output. Series such as *Men Talking* and *Towards National Health* were produced alongside men, and saw her work equally respected.

*Children’s Hour*, a BBC staple since 1922, similarly provided a stepping-off point for women, particularly those recruited to the post of Children’s Hour Organiser in the 1930s, possibly because of the resourcefulness it required and the diversity of skills it entailed. Ruth Field, for instance, became a Producer in School Broadcasting in 1936, and Christine Orr, a Talks Assistant in 1940. For others, it launched distinguished long-term BBC careers. Olive Shapley (1996), who was recruited to the North Region’s *Children’s Hour* in 1934, went on to pioneer social documentaries in the later 1930s, develop talks programmes from America during the Second World War and

become a presenter of *Woman's Hour* in 1949. Ursula Eason, Children's Hour Organiser for Northern Ireland from 1933, was promoted to Acting Programme Director during the war and Assistant Head of Northern Ireland Programmes in 1949. Ultimately, she became Assistant Head of BBC Children's Programmes in 1955.

Many women at the BBC would continue to do well. Mary Somerville, for example, was appointed Controller of Talks in 1950, the first woman to reach Controller level. Longevity of service meant that others who achieved moderately in the interwar years had, by their retirement in the 1940s and 1950s, risen to well-paid management positions: Janet Quigley, as Assistant Head (Talks); Mary Candler, as Head of Copyright; and, Mary Adams, as Assistant to Controller, Television. The circumstances of the Second World War also favoured women's mobility; Elizabeth Barker, Margery Wace and Clare Lawson Dick, for instance, were all promoted to senior roles. As an area of study, women's employment practices at the BBC during the Second World War and into the 1950s and 1960s remain under-researched; the focus is predominantly women's programming (Irwin, 2013; Skoog, 2014). However, it is apparent that, after the war, women were less likely to be promoted to significant posts and that, proportionally, the number of women holding senior roles became fewer (Murphy, 2002). In 1959, in a letter to *The Times*, Mary Agnes Hamilton (1959: 11) queried the lack of BBC women in higher jobs, pointing out that it now lagged behind the Civil Service; *Women in Top Jobs*, published in 1971, exposed the extent of this sparsity.

## Conclusion

Changes that would hinder women's advancement were already discernible within the BBC of the mid-1930s; already fewer women were being promoted to substantial posts. This was partly because the professionalisation of the BBC made it a more attractive place for men to work. Competition grew fiercer and Appointment Boards, introduced in 1934, appear to have favoured male recruits. As the BBC expanded, it steadily became less interested in being viewed as pioneering and progressive; it wanted the trappings of conformity rather than the cachet of modernity. It increasingly identified itself with the Civil Service, but, ironically, as the Civil Service became more fair-minded towards women, the BBC became less so (Fogarty et al., 1971). Nevertheless, the early years of the BBC remained a fertile time for salaried women. By no means all had glittering careers, however, the unique circumstances of the 1920s and 1930s enabled a small but significant number to excel.

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