

# ‘In on the ground floor’: Women and the early BBC television service, 1932–1939

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Critical Studies in Television:  
The International Journal of  
Television Studies  
2022, Vol. 17(3) 240–253  
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DOI: 10.1177/17496020221103461

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## Abstract

This is a working paper on women and the early BBC television service, prior to September 1939. It considers women in four main areas of work: in production roles, in secretarial/clerical support work, in Makeup and Wardrobe, and as on-screen announcers. Apart from the latter two, which were developed especially for television, it shows a clear link with radio practices, particularly the possibility of women moving through the ranks. The paper argues that, had there not been a seven year hiatus for the Second World War, women would have reached elevated positions in the television service much sooner.

## Keywords

Women, BBC, television, interwar, employment, production

On 4 January 1937, the BBC’s Controller of Administration, Basil Nicolls, added a note to the bottom of a memo about the radio Talks Assistant Mary Adams. It read, ‘Agreed that Mrs Adams should go to Television’ ([BBC WAC L2/5/1, 1937](#)). The BBC had launched its ‘high definition’ television service on 2 November 1936, to great national excitement, from its new studios at Alexandra Palace in North London. Although transmissions only reached a few thousand viewers in the surrounding area, the notion of broadcasting pictures as well as sound had captured the public imagination. For the BBC, it also meant the staffing of a whole new department. Adams had joined the BBC in 1930, to work on its ‘spoken word’ radio output, firstly in Adult Education and then in the Talks Department.

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Her new job as a Television Producer would build on her broad experience of making radio programmes but it would also create many fresh challenges as she grappled with unfamiliar technologies, a more dynamic work-culture and a visual element that she was unaccustomed to.

This working paper is about the role of women in the very early BBC television service, 1932-39, prior to a 7-year closure necessitated by the Second World War. One of its contentions is that, while there was certainly much that was novel in Television, in terms of employment practices, the experiences of those who worked at Alexandra Palace continued to be very similar to those who worked in the wider BBC. As well as briefly charting the role of Mary Adams, the first - and only - woman in pre-war British television with the title 'Producer', it will reflect on the staff of the newly established Make-up and Wardrobe Department, headed by Mary Allan; the two widely publicised hostess-announcers, Jasmine Bligh and Elizabeth Cowell and the programme *Picture Page* (1936-1939 and 1946-1952) which included several women within its team. A further area of discussion is the frequently under-acknowledged female clerical/secretarial employees without whom the television service could not have functioned. This paper will reveal how women such as these, who were designated as clerks and shorthand typists, often performed duties that were much more akin to production roles. A key supposition is that, had the service not been suspended in September 1939, many women who were establishing new careers at Alexandra Palace prior to the Second World War, would have reached elevated positions in Television by the mid-1940s (Murphy, 2016a).

Until very recently, apart from mentions of Bligh and Cowell, little has been published about women in the pre-Second World War BBC television service. The many books that consider the history of early BBC TV might reference Mary Adams, such as Briggs (1965: 621), but beyond that, it is very much a history of men. This has now been rectified with Sarah Arnold's *Gender and Early Television* (2021) which considers the BBC, alongside American broadcasting organisations, in the period 1850-1950. Adams, Allan, Bligh and Cowell all feature in Arnold's book and the intention here is to augment, rather than to replicate, her investigations.

As with many studies of early television, Arnold begins her analysis of BBC women's roles in 1936, the year of the first transmissions from Alexandra Palace. In fact, women were involved in BBC television from the very start of its experimental service, in 1932. The complexities of the development of British television, dating back to the early 1920s, have been widely explored by the likes of Swift (1950), Norman (1984), Burns (1986) Aldridge (2012) and Medhurst (2021). The BBC had broadcast its first demonstration television programmes in 1929 and by August 1932 was ready to start an experimental 30-line service, using the Baird system. The producer appointed to oversee this was Eustace Robb, who joined as an 'Assistant' on 14 July 1932 (the term 'Producer' was rarely used by the BBC at this time.) Two months later, on 19 September, Robb was joined by Jean Bartlett.

## **The first woman BBC television 'producer' – Jean Bartlett**

Bartlett had arrived at the BBC in October 1928 as a shorthand typist. Like many women she had begun her BBC career in the General Office, in a temporary capacity, and once her

capabilities were assessed, was quickly moved to more a more permanent secretarial position; in her case this was with the Publications Department. There is no staff file for Bartlett, the only known BBC record of her is the Salary Information files ([BBC WAC R62/100/1-3, Salary Information Records, 1923-1939](#)), which show her gaining above average wage rises, an indication of a high level of competence (she started in a waged capacity). It seems likely that she had been to university; according to her future husband Tony Bridgewater, his own scholarship came from his 'association with a well-educated wife' ([Miall, 1997](#)). When Bartlett moved to Television in January 1933, her title was still Shorthand Typist. However, within 4 months she was promoted to a salaried role as an Assistant - so the same designation as Robb. This was a position she would hold until her contract was 'terminated' in November 1934. The reason for her leaving the BBC was her marriage to Bridgewater, one of the Senior Maintenance Engineers for the experimental television service. Bridgewater would go on to have a significant career in television, at Alexandra Palace and beyond.

The only references to Jean Bartlett's work that have so far been uncovered are from the periodical *Television* (later *Television and Short-Wave World*). The October 1934 issue ([1934a](#)) included the tantalising details: 'For 3 weeks, while Eustace Robb has been abroad, programmes have been directed by Jean Bartlett, the assistant producer, and although no ambitious production has been attempted, programmes have sustained the usual high standard of variety and finish.' The December 1934 issue ([1934b](#)), which announced her marriage to Bridgewater and her exit from the BBC, added a hope 'that she will find time to visit the studio. In the producer's absence she has presented many successful programmes and we shall miss the feminine touch which has been invaluable in matters of costume and make-up'. The references to costume and make-up are significant as, from 1936, this would become a pivotal department in the new television service, as we shall see.

After her departure, Bartlett evidently remained a keen supporter of television and someone whose knowledge and experience was respected. In August 1935 she contributed a full-page piece to *Television and Short-Wave World* (440) headed 'What will they Televisé? A speculative article by Jean Bartlett, BA, who was lately assistant producer of the BBC television programmes [sic]'. Amongst her conjectures were that televised entertainment would demand 'quality rather than quantity' and that, if resources were not squandered throughout the day 'the television service will be something very big'. The launch of the BBC's public television service in November 1936 was matched by a new 'Television Supplement' in *Radio Times*, the BBC's highly popular weekly listings magazine. The Supplement for 4 June 1937 included an article by a 'viewer' – Jean Bartlett – about the experience of watching television ([Radio Times, 1937: 3](#)) There was no indication in the page-long article that Bartlett had been a producer, or indeed had any previous connection with the BBC, nor that the 'we' she wrote about included her BBC-engineer husband. Rather, she explained that her household were 'enthusiastic amateurs in the old days of thirty-line television' and that they were therefore 'very excited at the prospect of seeing a larger, steadier and brighter picture'. Mark Aldridge has written of Bartlett's perceptive comments in the *Radio Times* article, which praised, for instance, the televising of ballet because of the 'wonderful sense of space' ([2012: 156](#)) that

was conveyed, but which criticised Shakespeare (even when two cameras were used) and also 'Talks', because of their static nature.

### **Shorthand typists/clerks as 'producers' and 'administrators'**

Jean Bartlett was not the only woman to work on the experimental service from 1932; a shorthand typist had also been allocated to Eustace Robb, a Miss Peacock. Eveline Peacock is another elusive BBC woman. The few glimpses of her that we have suggest that, as with many of those with the designation 'shorthand typist', she acted in a much wider capacity, in this case as a production assistant and even, at times, as a producer. Norman (1984: 84) included an extract from Robb's personal notebooks from around 1934 which described a rehearsal for a Russian Ballet for which there were issues with costumes. He wrote 'Miss Peacock rushes out between office hours for gloves and bonnet'. *Television and Short-Wave World* (1935: 577) is more specific about her production role. Reflecting on the final experimental transmission, which had taken place on 11 September 1935, it noted that Robb was 'taking his first real holiday in 3 years'. The transmission was therefore 'in the care of Mr D. R. Campbell [Senior Maintenance Engineer] and Miss Peacock'.

In 1935, Peacock moved to Alexandra Palace as secretary to the Television Productions Manager, Donald Munro and she remained with the television service until its closedown in September 1939. She was amongst the earliest BBC staff to move to the North London studios, a transfer which had caused her some anxiety. In an August 1935 memo to Miss Freeman, the Women's Staff Administrator (Freeman and her team had responsibility for all the female waged secretarial and clerical staff), Peacock described the tortuous journey from Dollis Hill which could take up to 2 hours each way (BBC WAC3 R13/436/1a, 1936). As the chief carer of an aging mother, she was unable to move closer to Alexandra Palace, she explained, however she was reluctant to forfeit the opportunity to work in Television, because she enjoyed it so much:

I have been with Television for three and a half years now, and when the time came to decide whether or not I would like to continue, I agreed to transfer to Alexandra Palace, although you gave me the option of remaining at Broadcasting House. While realising that the journey would be a very arduous one, I preferred not to ask to transfer to another Department, as I was extremely interested in my job.

Frustratingly, there is scant indication as to what Peacock's job at Alexandra Palace involved. The only hint is a reference in the staff journal *Ariel* (1937: 20), which depicted how, in her work for Munro, she was 'required to be 'a hustler' and everybody's friend'. There is every likelihood, however, that if the television service had not been suspended in 1939 Peacock, would have risen through the ranks to a more senior position, very possibly as a producer. It is not known what Peacock's role was during the Second World War, but by 1947 she was a Producer - in radio - in the European Productions Department.

A shorthand typist who did go on to hold a significant role in BBC TV, was Joan Gilbert. In early 1938, she joined the team who made the television programme

*Picture Page*, returning after the war as its Producer/Editorial Assistant and then, in 1949, as its Editor. Gilbert's move to Television is a good example of how the processes of radio were transferred to television. She had joined the BBC in June 1933 starting, like Jean Bartlett, as a typist in the General Office. By the close of that year, she had begun to work for the Variety Department, as secretary (though designated shorthand typist) to AW Hanson. Hanson would become the key producer of the highly popular Saturday night Radio show *In Town Tonight* (1933-1960) with its assortment of celebrity and topical guests. Cecil Madden was briefly part of the production team in 1934, and it was Madden who would reimagine the programme for television as *Picture Page*: 'a visualised version of radio's *In Town Tonight*' (Norman, 1984: 143). Gilbert's role, as part of the small *In Town Tonight* team at Broadcasting House, had been an important one. Not only did she support Hanson in his work but for almost 3 months in 1935, had produced the programme in his absence (he was on sick leave). This involved 'choosing items, editing and sometimes re-writing scripts, writing announcements, panel instructions, microphone interviewing, etc.' (BBC WAC L1/166/4, 1936). Gilbert's abilities were noted by Madden, who would become Editor of *Picture Page* and Programme Organiser for Television, as well as by Gerald Cock, who headed the Television Department. When her move to Alexandra Palace was confirmed in early 1938, Cock was thrilled (BBC WAC L1/166/4 (a), 1938):

Miss Gilbert was an invaluable member of the "In Town Tonight" staff, and in my view would be of great assistance to us on our topical and "Picture Page" programmes. I think she ought to be given a job attached to Mr Madden to specialise in this work. Her experience and talents lend themselves particularly to this form of activity.

Although designated as a 'clerk', Gilbert's new role in Television was predominantly as a 'scout'. *Picture Page* followed the system used by *In Town Tonight*, whereby well-connected freelancers were paid three guineas a time to source guests for the show. Madden explained the hopes he had for Gilbert when she first arrived on the programme (BBC WAC L1/166/4 (b), 1938a):

If she proves adaptable to vision problems, and creative, I would frankly like the option of using her as a Staff scout to investigate, go outside and carry through individual items emanating from this office, which I now have to farm out to outside scouts. This would prove an immediate saving of money for the Corporation on each programme and ultimately would possibly also relieve me by sub-editorial work.

Even though Gilbert would quickly be referred to as the 'sub-editor'/assistant editor of the programme, she remained a clerk. This lack of recognition for a substantial role was also applicable to Eve Moir, Madden's secretary. A memo from October 1937 reveals his desperation for a second shorthand typist (this was Moir's actual designation) because of the immense workload that was already on Moir's shoulders. Questioning the usefulness of the new Assistant Producer in Television, Royston Morley, Madden stressed that, in terms of 'an assistant to help me with programme building and coordination generally,

Morley is not really suited to this which is being most adequately handled by Miss Moir'. His praise for Moir continued ([BBC WAC R13/426/2, 1937](#)):

she assists me in programme building, knows all my views and plans for programme balance, orchestral hours, her training being invaluable in this respect. Suggests ideas and artists to producers based on our knowledge of what is available, coordinates and fixes changes generally in contact with producers and Television Production Manager's office, issues all programme details and corrections ... The general telephone calls alone are sufficient to keep an average Secretary fully occupied.

In October 1938 there was a suggestion by Miss Freeman that, in recognition of their responsibilities, both Joan Gilbert and Eve Moir should be called 'Junior Assistants', something that, apparently, was already in place for 'one or two weekly-paid men and women' ([BBC WAC L1/166/4 \(c\), 1938b](#)). This was declined, however, because several other clerks at Alexandra Palace were 'doing equally responsible work' and so would necessitate a change in designation for them as well ([BBC WAC L1/166/4 \(d\), 1938](#)). Clearly, many of the secretarial and clerical women who worked for the early service were carrying out production roles and so, potentially, could have reached more senior television grades.

Intriguingly, it seems that Una Marson, the first black woman radio producer at the BBC, might also have had a more prominent role on *Picture Page*, if war had not ensued. According to her biographer, Delia Jarrett-Macauley (1998: 144–5), Marson had been recruited by Madden as a programme 'scout'. Jarrett-Macauley draws on an undated memoir of Marson entitled 'Television Remembered', in which she wrote of how she was introduced to Madden after she was spotted at the 1939 RadiOlympia exhibition; an annual promotional event which, that year, was scheduled to run from 23 August–2 September. The two then met at Alexandra Palace, with Marson offered freelance work on *Picture Page*. The agreement was that she would use her contacts with colonial networks to find suitable interviewees, to draft short scripts and to ensure that her guests reached the studios safely and on time. Undoubtedly Marson must have spent time in the BBC television studios, which she vividly described, but the timeline casts doubt on how many guests she would ultimately have brought to Alexandra Palace, if any. The last pre-war transmission of *Picture Page* was on 31 August 1939, the day before the television service shut down.

A final example of a woman employed in a secretarial/clerical capacity at Alexandra Palace, who may well have moved on to a more significant role, is Joan Vickery. Vickery had joined the BBC in June 1929, as a shorthand typist in Outside Broadcasts, being promoted to a 'clerk' in the Executive section of the Department in April 1933 (the 'Executive' was the interface between programme makers and administrators). In May 1935, she arranged to meet with Miss Freeman to discuss the possibility of a transfer to Television; her manager Leonard Schuster was being moved to Alexandra Palace and she was keen to accompany him. In her report of the meeting ([BBC WACR13/426/1a \(a\), 1935a](#)), Freeman outlined Vickery's acknowledgment that, to begin with, there might not be a job similar to her present one. She was quite prepared, however 'to start as Mr

Schuster's secretary in the hope that an opportunity will occur at a later date for her to be given a more executive post'. Freeman conceded that 'Miss Vickery's going would be a great loss to O.B. Department', however she could not help feeling that, 'it will only be a comparatively short time before Television will need girls of her calibre and I feel it only fair that she should be in "on the ground floor"'.

Miss Freeman was right; Joan Vickery's transfer was delayed by several months because, 'She certainly can't be spared at present'. ([BBC WACR13/426/1a \(b\), 1935b](#)). However, on 28 October 1935, she was confirmed as a clerk in the Television Executive. Vickery's role at Alexandra Palace was predominantly to supervise the female clerical and secretarial staff, so in many ways a deputy role to Freeman's. In February 1937, she was promoted to a salaried position as an 'Assistant'. The generous pay rises that she received prior to September 1939 signal that she excelled in the role, however, there is no reference to Vickery in the post-war television service, so it is not possible to ascertain where her BBC career then led.

Vickery, Moir, Gilbert and Peacock and are all good examples of those in clerk/secretary roles at the BBC whose actual job was far more creative and responsible than the designated title would suggest. What was the situation for women coming into a completely new department, Television Makeup and Wardrobe?

## **The new 'profession' of makeup and wardrobe**

Amongst the staffing issues that Vickery is likely to have been involved with while at Alexandra Palace were the conditions of service for three new wardrobe women. They were part of a small but busy team under the management of Mary Allan, the Television Makeup and Wardrobe Assistant (later Manager). A series of memos from April and May 1938 between Freeman, Douglas Clarke (the General Executive Officer) and Schuster, the Television Executive, reveal them to be grappling with the novelty of the situation. It was the first time that the BBC had employed wardrobe staff, so how much should Mrs Hearnshaw, Mrs Goodship and Miss Edwards be paid? Mrs Hearnshaw was the most experienced, a well-trained needlewoman who was able to cut and fit and who had previously worked at 'Dickins and Jones, Worth's, and Mary Grey of Brook Street' ([BBC WACR13/426/2, 1938](#)). Mrs Goodship had no dress-making experience, but was a competent machinist, her knowledge of sewing and machine work learnt while making gas masks and grenades in the First World War. Miss Edwards, by far the youngest of the three, was a skilled needlewoman and at the point that the memos were written, her work at Alexandra Palace was as a dresser. After discussions that involved the Great Marlborough Street Labour Exchange, and in consultation with Mary Allan, it was ultimately agreed that Mrs Hearnshaw would receive £3 a week and Mrs Goodship and Miss Edwards, £2.5s. These would have been reasonably good rates of pay for the time.

The negotiations over the wardrobe women throw a spotlight on the establishment of a new section at the BBC. Makeup and Wardrobe were crucial aspects of television because people's faces and general appearance were vital to the success of any show. As Sarah Arnold (2021: 85) has noted, although there were similarities with film and stage, 'television necessitated a new set of practices'. As we have seen from the descriptions of

the experimental service, Jean Bartlett had been praised for her familiarity with costume and makeup while Eveline Peacock had been despatched in search of hat and gloves. Who applied the cosmetics in those very early years is not known, but images exist of actors sporting heavy-lined eyes and lips in green or blue, to ensure that their features were prominent. Allan, however, who had previously worked as a makeup artist in film production, dismissed this necessity as no longer true (*Radio Times*, 1937). At Alexandra Palace, Allan's team would ultimately consist of the three needlewomen/dressers along with at least four Assistants: Pamela Hide, Jeanne Bradnock, Isabel Winthrope and Elsie Lambert - although it is not certain if these appointments were concurrent. And there was promotion within the team. By April 1939, Bradnock was Assistant Makeup Manager while Winthrope was Assistant Manager for Wardrobe.

Female-staffed departments headed by a woman were not uncommon at the BBC (Murphy, 2016b: 53–68). At Broadcasting House, these included the Telephone Exchange, the Duplicating Office, the Registry and the General Office, all areas that employed clerical/secretarial staff. Likewise, Makeup and Wardrobe was considered to be a female area of work, however the high status of the new Television Department was noticeably different - and at odds with the film industry which saw Makeup, in particular, as the domain of men (Bell, 2021). As Arnold has observed, Mary Allan was presented as a highly skilled professional and there were frequent articles about her in the technical press. One of the examples that Arnold uses (2021: 86) is a 1936 edition of *Wireless World* which hailed her appointment as, 'of considerable technical interest for the task of securing a correct balance of shade at the television transmitter is tantamount to that of balancing musical instruments in a sound broadcast'. Allan also made reference to this topic in a two-page 1937 *Radio Times* (1937: 4–5) article about her work, explaining that, 'My usual procedure is to watch the screen during the rehearsals, and I find it very necessary to attend these, for then I am able to compare notes with the engineers and watch the balance of light and shade, which is of great importance in making a first-class 'picture'.

These technical aspects of the role were confirmed by Isabel Winthrope, who joined Allan's team in November 1937. Winthrope was one of those interviewed by Bruce Norman for his book *Here's Looking at You* (1984) which drew on the memories of those who had worked in the pre-war television service at Alexandra Palace. Her recollections were of long working-hours in cramped conditions, with ingenuity a key watchword as budgets were low and costumes sparse, a situation akin to the film industry. In her book *Movie Workers: The Women who Made British Cinema*, Melanie Bell uses the term 'resourcefulness as creativity' (2021: 8) to emphasise the vital role played by women who worked in costume and wardrobe.

For Winthrope, the main joys of working in Television were the people that you met and the importance of the job. She too described the process of rehearsals (Norman, 1984: 186):

We had to sit in front of a little monitoring screen in the studio – in the most cluttered studios you've ever seen. And we made notes about what changes we might need to make in the dresses and what shades of make-up to use. The actors weren't usually made-up during



rehearsal. Mr Campbell, the lighting expert, would often come over and tell us that such and such an artist and such and such a camera would have to be especially dark or especially light.

The buzz and excitement of the Makeup and Wardrobe section at Alexandra Palace was regularly celebrated in the press, Mary Allan's role being particularly highlighted. What happened following the outbreak of war is uncertain. Of the team, only two would be re-employed in the post-war television service. In the 1947 staff list, Jeanne Bradnock - who was deployed during the war to the BBC Monitoring Service at Wood Norton - is listed as Makeup and Wardrobe Manager. Mrs EM Hearnshaw is also included in the staff list, as Wardrobe Mistress.

### **Women as television announcers**

In her 1937 *Radio Times* article, Mary Allan had written enthusiastically about another part of her work, 'clothes!'. This entailed not only the period and character costumes for the cast of theatrical productions, but also 'the selection of frocks and day suits' for the two female announcers Elizabeth Cowell and Jasmine Bligh. As Allan explained, 'The announcers are a decided contrast to each other, so it is important that the clothes worn by them should emphasise this' (1937: 5). Bligh and Cowell are the two most well-known women in pre-war British television and much has been written about the recruitment and media exposure of the 'blonde' (Bligh) and the 'brunette' (Cowell). Arnold (2021: 73) references the television critic Kenneth Bailey who in turn drew on his knowledge of the motivation of Gerald Cock, the Director of Television, to reveal that a deliberate decision was made in 1935 to employ women announcers who would bring 'warmth' and 'glamour' to the small screen, so enticing the viewer.

As Arnold shows, the selection criteria for the two female posts, for which more than 700 applications were received, were very different to that of the lone male announcer. Whereas he was required to have a cheerful voice, to be well-proportioned and to have no prominent features, they were to have good looks, personality and be perfectly pitched (2021: 73). He was to act as 'a point of identification' for the audience; they were to be 'largely ornamental' (2021: 74). Arnold exposes the contradictions of a role that was on the one hand progressive - putting women firmly in the public sphere - but also culturally conservative, with the female announcers expected to 'reflect qualities such as feminine passivity, discipline, charm and deference' (2021: 76).

The BBC's employment of women as television announcers was in stark contrast to their exclusion as announcers on radio. Although a handful of women did work as occasional programme announcers on the BBC's local and regional networks, they were considered unsuitable for the national service because they lacked the necessary gravitas. The female voice was not considered appropriate to deliver the all-important news bulletins, weather reports, fat stock prices, SOS messages, football results and so on that, along with the announcing of programmes, were central to the job. As has been written about elsewhere (Murphy 2016b: 241-45), for the BBC, its male announcers - speaking at the microphone in full evening-dress - were viewed as the personification of the organisation. They represented its professionalism, its dignity, its authority. The BBC had

‘experimented’ with a female announcer; on 28 July 1933, Sheila Borrett made her first wireless appearance as part of the central announcing team. Yet, although male colleagues were positive and encouraging towards her, in October 1933 she was dropped from the role. According to a BBC statement which explained why she had been axed, there had been more than 10,000 letters of complaint, 90% of which were from women. Following the removal of Borrett, no other women were employed as announcers on the BBC’s national service, until the Second World War.

In light of the BBC’s attitude towards women announcers on radio, it is intriguing to speculate why they were deemed appropriate for television. As Arnold has indicated, Jasmine Bligh and Elizabeth Cowell were largely considered to be decorative, indeed they were often called hostess-announcers. Even for its male announcer, Leslie Mitchell, the role was largely that of a compere; no items of gravity or bespoke news bulletins were broadcast in the few hours each day that television programmes were transmitted (the television service used Gaumont and Movietone newsreels instead). Arnold (2021: 79–81) has written of the vacuousness of the two women’s roles, with little opportunity to be anything other than attractive to the eye, however, according to an account by Bligh’s daughter, Sarah Johnson (2017), she was able to inject at least some personality and verve. This included conducting studio-based interviews as well as a range of outside broadcasts that encompassed, for example, being rescued from a ‘burning’ building as part of a demonstration of modern firefighting methods; participating in a dare-devil stunt in the sidecar of a motorcycle; and live broadcasting from an airborne ‘autogiro’, a cross between a helicopter and a small plane.

Alongside Bligh and Cowell, a third woman frequently appeared on screen in the early years of BBC television. This was Joan Miller, a young Canadian actress, who posed as the ‘Switchboard Girl’, an imagined role that introduced the interviewees for *Picture Page*. *Picture Page* was broadcast once a week throughout the pre-war years (apart from a few short breaks), with two live transmissions – one in the afternoon and one in the evening, hence the necessity for a robust and hard-working team, as discussed earlier. For Bruce Norman (1984: 144) ‘the device of the switchboard was brilliant in its simplicity’ and gave the programme its identity. In her interview for Norman’s book, Miller claimed that she gave Cecil Madden the idea in a comedy sketch that she wrote for him in 1934. Madden remembers it differently describing in his memoir (2017: loc 693/700) how he ‘devised a method of continuity, a telephone switchboard with an electronic screen’. Notwithstanding its provenance, by the close of the service in September 1939, 262 editions of *Picture Page* had been broadcast.

## Mary Adams, ‘senior’ producer

Joan Miller’s name may have featured heavily in *Radio Times*, but so also does that of Mary Adams. From almost the first day that she joined BBC Television as a Producer, on 1 January 1937, her mark upon talks programmes is apparent. It seems almost certain that she had been brought in to replace Cecil Lewis, a long-serving member of the Corporation, who had initially been given the role of overseeing television talks (according to the BBC Programme Index, Lewis’s final programme credit was 16 January 1937).

Adams, who had given birth to a daughter in September 1936, had recently completed her maternity leave. Keen to get back to work, she had unsuccessfully applied for the post of Director of Talks in Radio. Because of this, it appears to have been viewed as judicious to move her to a new area of the BBC (Murphy, 2016b: 181–86).

Arnold (2021: 82–84; 88–92) has devoted many pages of *Gender and Early Television* to Mary Adams and the breadth of her Talks programmes, which included history, architecture, gardening, art and home affairs. Arnold also explores how, as was the case with Mary Allan, newspapers and periodicals of the time, when writing about the new BBC television service, emphasised Adams' professionalism, creativity and skill. In fact, Mary Adams was the most senior of the BBC's television producers, not only in terms of age and experience, but also in terms of pay (Murphy, 2016b: 186). Her salary in January 1937 was £800 per annum, far more than the young men newly recruited to the service – Royston Morley, for instance, was on £260 while George More O'Ferrall earned £400. Adams even earned more than Cecil Madden. These large pay differentiations were due to Adams having negotiated a high starting salary when she joined the BBC in 1930, whereas those who were new to the BBC were placed on the lower rungs of the salary grades.

As Arnold has rightly stressed, Adams' value to BBC television was also linked to her impressive contacts book which brought the likes of John Betjeman, Hugh Walpole, Walter Gropius and Sir Raymond Unwin to Alexander Palace (Murphy, 2016c). Adams, who was married to the maverick Conservative MP Vyvyan Adams, had previously drawn on her extensive social networks for her radio work. However, her television talks were not all grand affairs. She continued to produce the more run-of-the-mill, domestic output that had been initiated by Cecil Lewis, such as *Friends from the Zoo* (1936–1939) with David Seth-Smith and *In Your Garden* (1936–1938) with CH Middleton as well as producing cookery demonstrations by the famed French chef, Marcel Boulestin. Adams also nurtured a highly creative partnership with her friend the illustrator Pearl Binder whose sketches, live on air, added a fresh visual dimension to her programmes.

A sample week from May 1939 exemplifies the diversity and expanse of Adams's talks and reveals a variety of visual techniques that were employed to bring them to life. *Radio Times* (1939a: 14) billed the programme *Salute to America* (1939), which was broadcast on the evening of Monday 8 May, as one in which 'the contemporary American scene will be described in speech and picture' with contributors that included Sir Frederick Whyte, Director of the English-Speaking Union, the film critic Cedric Belfrage and the writers JB Priestley and Susan Ertz. On Tuesday 9 May, the afternoon programme *Looking for a House* (1939) featured Pearl Binder describing the trials and tribulations of house-hunting 'by means of light-hearted drawings' (*Radio Times*, 1939b: 17). The evening of Wednesday 10 May saw the distinguished American architect Frank Lloyd Wright discuss his work through films and models (*Frank Lloyd Wright*, 1939). *Foundations of Cookery* (1939) with Marcel Boulestin, a regular Friday feature that involved demonstrations, was broadcast twice on 12 May, at 3.10p.m. and 9.20p.m. while a brand-new series of six history talks *Rough Island Story* (1939) began on Monday 15 May. A collaboration between 'The Hon. Harold Nicolson, C.M.G. M.P'. and the radical cartoonist JF Horabin, *Radio Times* (1939c: 14) elucidated that it provided in 'maps, pictures, and film' an

outline of British history, with the first programme describing what the successive invasions of ‘Celts, Romans, Saxons, Danes, and Normans contributed to our population’. The last mention of Mary Adams in *Radio Times* (1939d: 18) was for the final episode of the series, which was broadcast on Wednesday 26 July 1939.

Mary Adams was to have a busy war. In December 1939, she was transferred to the Ministry of Information as Director of Home Intelligence Information before returning to work for BBC Radio in May 1941. When the television service returned in June 1946, she was already in place as a Senior Producer. In April 1948 she was promoted to Head of Television Talks and in January 1953 she rose to be Assistant to the Controller, TV. She retired in March 1958 at the age of 60. Adams was one of a number of women who made their mark at Alexandra Palace in the late 1940s and 1950s, others include Grace Wyndham Goldie in Current Affairs; Frida Lingstrom and Ursula Eason in Children’s Programmes; Nancy Thomas in science and arts; Doreen Stephens in the Women’s Programme Unit and Joanna Spicer in Programme Planning. As this article has shown, there were also a small handful of pre-war women who resumed prominent positions: Joan Gilbert and Jeanne Bradnock as well as Jasmine Bligh, who returned briefly as an announcer.

The war, however, had severed the link between the clerical/secretarial women who evidently had been doing television production work, and their chance to achieve accredited production roles. During the war these women, like all those who worked for Television, were deployed elsewhere, either to war work or to other parts of the BBC. Many would have returned to radio production jobs, bringing with them fresh practices and ideas yet still comfortable in an environment that, institutionally, remained very similar to television. We will never know how the BBC television service might have evolved without the seven year interruption, but it seems likely that there would certainly have been greater scope for women to excel.

### **Declaration of conflicting interests**

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### **Funding**

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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