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To cite this article: Kate Terkanian (2024) Translating Radio Productions into Television Programmes: The Post-War Career of BBC Writer/Producer Nesta Pain, Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television, 44:4, 710-733, DOI: [10.1080/01439685.2024.2407732](https://doi.org/10.1080/01439685.2024.2407732)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01439685.2024.2407732>



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Published online: 11 Oct 2024.



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TRANSLATING RADIO PRODUCTIONS INTO TELEVISION PROGRAMMES: THE POST-WAR CAREER OF BBC WRITER/PRODUCER NESTA PAIN

Kate Terkanian 

*When BBC Television resumed broadcasting in 1946, BBC radio still dominated the airwaves. However, within a decade, television had swiftly become the dominant medium. BBC radio producers from the Features Department were eager to try their hand at translating their audio productions into visual ones, although few were successful. BBC producer Nesta Pain ultimately remained in radio production, but she successfully translated some of her radio plays and productions into television programmes, including John Mortimer's *The Dock Brief* (1957), *A Shaft of Light* (1958), and Simon Raven's *The Move Up Country* (1961). As one of the few women, and one of the more successful BBC Features writer/producers of the 1940s and 1950s, Nesta Pain's approaches to translating her work to television and the obstacles she encountered trying to move from audio storytelling to a more visual media offers a glimpse into the difficulties radio producers faced in switching to new methods. This article discusses the successful, as well as challenging, moments she faced in attempting this transition and also explores how access to Pain's personal papers has greatly enhanced this understanding.*

Keywords: BBC Features; producers; post-war television

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Introduction

Stories about successful women, particularly in fields seen as being dominated by men, are often couched as 'hidden' histories. Whilst these stories may remain untold, the footprint of these women's careers is usually hidden in plain sight. Archival limitations that may prioritise the collection of some resources over others can play their part in marginalising women's working lives, but the historiography of industry can also be influential. This article aims to shed light on two aspects of media history that have a direct bearing on how we remember the careers of women producers. One concerns the access to archival records, and the other is how the history of the evolution of British television is told. This will be accomplished by using lens of the work experiences of British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) Features producer Nesta Pain. Part of this story is Pain's efforts to transition from radio production to television in the late 1950s, though translating some of her more successful radio Features into television programming, including *The Dock Brief* (1957), *A Shaft of Light* (1958) and *The Move Up Country* (1961). Another important element in her television productions was her collaborative ways of working, both with outside experts and with contemporary writers. This article will challenge both the idea that radio producers struggled in a visual medium and that early BBC television efforts were unimaginative. Pain's own private papers, which are accessible through the BBC Written Archive Centre, have been invaluable in understanding her creative approaches. Pain's radio work can still be accessed. Whilst her works are referred to, few scholars closely read any of her productions in either medium. Her television programmes, all studio productions, are lost, like much of early BBC television programming, leaving critical assessment of the aesthetic style of her work virtually impossible. The television canon of the period instead focuses largely on still extant productions which ultimately favours a handful of programmes and a narrow range of genres. This article will address how Pain's television efforts demonstrate how the paucity of archive materials distorts our sense of the past and undervalues once highly successful producers like Pain.

Who was Nesta Pain?

There is no way to describe Nesta Pain (1905-1995) as someone hidden from history. Her footprint is in plain sight. What has happened instead is that in telling the stories about the past, in this case the history of the BBC Features department, Pain's name, which was once featured prominently in discussing its distinguished producers, has faded from the lexicon.¹ Pain was a respected writer and producer who was well-known during her very long lifetime. When she died in 1995 just shy of her ninetieth birthday, her obituary ran in many national newspapers including the *Independent*, *The Times* and *The Guardian*.² Before joining the BBC in early 1942, she had written several plays, but her position at the BBC marked the first time she worked within an organisation. University educated, at the University of Liverpool and Oxford University, Pain would have been an attractive candidate for the BBC despite her lack of work experience.³ Pain reports that adjusting to

working with others was daunting. Along with the pressure to perform, she had to overcome inherent shyness.⁴ However, she was determined to master the tasks at hand, and she eventually found her oeuvre in producing science features. The head of Features, Laurence Gilliam, had a *laissez-faire* attitude towards managing his producers who, to a large extent, were allowed to explore and experiment with little supervision.⁵ Whilst Pain did not have a scientific background, she was curious about a variety of science-related topics. Typical for her upper-middle class background, Pain attended a prestigious boarding school in England that emphasised academic excellence. Although few women attended university in the 1920s, Pain's secondary education provided her with the knowledge needed to attend and excel in higher education.⁶ Her subsequent degree in classics from the University of Liverpool gave her the abilities to research and write, skills she fully deployed as a Features producer. Her post-war career eventually branched into legal and historical topics as well as adaptations of a variety of non-fiction and fiction topics. Pain's overarching gift was that of storytelling, often laced with sardonic humour, and these qualities helped her succeed in what was a male-dominated department.

Pain's success was not solely grounded in her own creative endeavours. She was also adept at collaborating with a wide range of individuals. Although she described herself as shy and nervous, she surprised even herself with her ability to consult with those at the top of their professions.⁷ Whilst based on stories of discovery, her scientific programmes were not straight documentaries and she used a dramatized documentary style that was used by many features producers.⁸ For her radio Feature, *The Atom Explodes*, she used the device of a party where the guests have ingested radioactive cocktails to describe the effects on humans.⁹ This storyline was interspersed with flashback sequences describing different moments in the scientific discovery process, including a bizarre domestic moment with the Curie's looking on their glowing radioactive discoveries like proud parents.¹⁰ Pain found that her position at the BBC provided entrée into consulting rooms and laboratories. She sought out experts in fields from tropical medicine to atomic energy. The natural sciences were also of interest. Her fascination with nineteenth century French entomologist Jean-Henri Fabre led her to produce a series of highly popular radio plays on spiders and insects.¹¹

Whilst Pain was a talented writer, she also collaborated directly with many professionals helping them adapt their work into radio features. This included a wide array of both fiction and non-fiction authors, including T.H. White (*The Goshawk*, 1952), Lalage Pulvertaft (*Dead Men's Embers*, 1960), William Golding (*Break My Heart*, 1961; *The Spire*, 1965), Alan Sillitoe (*The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner*, 1961), Jeremy Brooks (*Just Like Home* 1961; *Mountain Rescue*, 1961; *I'll Fight You*, 1964; *Smith as Killer*, 1964) and Christine Brooke-Rose (*A Séance at the Seminar*, 1962; *A Round of Silence*, 1962).¹² Some of her most prolific collaborations were with psychiatrist Alexander Kennedy, and authors John Mortimer and Simon Raven. John Mortimer, in particular, credited her with starting his fruitful radio, and later television career.¹³ These collaborative efforts with Kennedy, Mortimer and Raven formed the core of her activity in translating her radio programmes into television ones, and these efforts will be explored below.

This article expands on the author's previously published exploration of Pain as an entangled media producer.¹⁴ Whilst primarily known as radio producer, Pain crossed boundaries of genres and media, publishing books and magazine articles, writing plays, and, as discussed in this article, producing television programming. Cronqvist's and Hilgert's conception of entangled media histories allows for both transnational and transmedial dimensions.¹⁵ As argued previously using this framework, Pain was what Michele Hilmes has termed a 'cultural translator', moving between media and reframing her work in the process.¹⁶ Hilmes also notes that cultural translators can be an important figure who nonetheless exists in the margins of the archive. Pain fits this mould as she is present, but scattered throughout the BBC's records. It is through her private papers, which contain an unpublished autobiography, newspaper clippings and other relics of her working life, that a more coherent picture of Pain as a producer emerges. Whilst informative, the papers do not allow for a through exploration of her emotional private life that David Hendy has proposed as a way to contextualise media history. Pain's autobiography takes you through her working life and her research topics but reveals little about her private side.¹⁷ What her papers do offer is a glimpse into of her private professional life, a perspective that is often difficult to locate in the archive.

Linking radio features and post-war BBC television

When the BBC relaunched its television service in 1946 after the end of the Second World War, radio was still the dominant media – a state-of-affairs that reversed within a few short years. BBC insiders, outside writers and theatre professionals vied to secure a place in the BBC's television training courses.¹⁸ BBC Radio Features producers like Nesta Pain were keen to try their hand at television production. After Nesta Pain completed her first secondment to the Television Service in 1957, Ian Atkins, who had supervised her training, noted that she developed 'good theoretical understanding of, and a very fair practical ability in, the mechanics of the medium, but her basic approach [was] still, inevitably, often coloured by her experience of sound radio'.¹⁹ These internal assessments are all the more striking as BBC Television was staffed and managed in the 1950s by BBC insiders, individuals who had often made this transition from radio to television. One of the first television producers, Mary Adams, had started her career in the BBC in Radio Talks, and other post-war television staff such as Kenneth Adam, Cecil McGivern, Norman Collins, Leonard Cottrell and Cecil Madden were long-time BBC staff members who had also worked in radio. This piece of BBC conventional wisdom was perhaps useful in staking out authority in a new medium, but it has also spilled over into how the story of post-war television service is recounted. Studies often look to the appointment of BBC outsider Sydney Newman – a Canadian and a filmmaker – as the watershed in BBC television drama, reinforcing this dichotomy between radio and television production.²⁰ The contributions of documentarians and television's relationship to film has been consistently elevated, particularly the documentary film movement of the 1930s,²¹ and the contributions of BBC radio to television aesthetics has been acknowledged, but undervalued.²²

Whilst television is often thought of as a visual medium, it is more appropriately an audio-visual medium. Aural elements are important in setting the mood and dramatic tension of a production. In discussing the television documentary work of Denis Mitchell, Stevens and Wyver note that it was Mitchell's sensibilities to the aural elements, and his background in radio, that made his television documentaries so evocative. The use of recorded sounds, later paired with images, elicited internal emotional responses.²³ Ieuan Franklin also highlights Mitchell's use of sound, and the often unacknowledged element that sound adds to a television production.²⁴ Norman Swallow dubbed Mitchell's type of production the personal documentary, as its combination of images and sounds allowed for individual interpretation rather than a strict didactic exercise, that blurred the lines between documentary and drama.²⁵ His praise of the personal documentary could easily be labelled 'pure television', as a related pre-figuring of Philip Donnellan's praise of the wartime radio Features Department in his television documentary *Pure Radio* (1977).²⁶

As part of the Features Department, Pain excelled in both writing and producing dramatized radio documentaries. These efforts were not exactly the seemingly spontaneous efforts praised by Norman Swallow. The programmes were scripted but did make innovative use of both sounds and effects to create tension.²⁷ Whilst some scholars such as Franklin, Stevens, and Wyver have linked radio features documentary techniques and aesthetics to post-war BBC television, this is a little explored avenue of research. As noted above, Norman Swallow's still influential book *Factual Television* (1966) does discuss this link through the personal documentary.²⁸ All of these works focus on the work of Denis Mitchell and Philip Donnellan. Other works explore the dramatized style of documentary as particularly rooted in television, albeit with deep connections with radio. John Ellis suggests that stylistically television, much like radio and as opposed to film, is much more dependent on localised, time-dependent understandings and social currents. The social context of the dramatized documentary can be highly dependent on social circumstances that are lost in intervening years.²⁹ Derek Paget sees the modern docudrama as the successor to both 1930s radio features as well as film documentary, but still sees dramatized documentaries as televisual, as opposed to filmic.³⁰

Pain's television work also sits in the era before Sydney Newman became Head of Television Drama at the BBC in 1963. Her first television programme aired on ITV in 1955 and her last planned attachment to BBC television was cancelled in 1963. This era at the BBC is often thought of as rudderless and unimaginative in the wake of the rising popularity of commercial British television.³¹ The dramatic treatment of social issues associated with working-class struggles – dubbed kitchen sink dramas as the cramped working-class kitchen was often the locus of action – has been lauded as some of the best examples of 1960s television output that only emerged with the appointment of Sydney Newman as the Head of BBC TV Drama Group.³² Some scholars – Catherine Johnson, Helen Wheatly, Jonathan Bignell, John Cook and Lez Cooke to name a few – question the primacy of the social drama as it represents just one of several genres produced by both ITV and BBC television drama under ITV's *Armchair Theatre* and BBC's *Wednesday Play*.³³

Another aspect of Pain's career is her seeming invisibility in current scholarship in spite of frequent, although often fleeting, acknowledgement of her work in

academic pieces and documentaries. Donnellan's *Pure Radio* opened with a clip from one of Pain's series on insects, but the following scenes made no mention of her career. There were no interviews with Pain, who had still been producing radio programmes into the early 1970s, and a list of Italia-Prize-winning BBC Features programmes omitted her 1957 win for *The Dock Brief*. The disappearance in plain sight of a well-known female producer is reflected in Jane M. Gaines' historiographical work on women in film in the silent era. Gaines outlines how women were both there and not there, and the role academic scholarship plays in obscuring women's contribution.³⁴ Sarah Arnold also stresses that from the earliest imaginings of television that women were conceptualised as objects to view, or consumers, rather than active participants in television production, despite women's early involvement in TV's experimental phase in the 1930s.³⁵ In discussing the Women's Auxiliary Television Technical Staff at Chicago's WBKB during the 1940s, Arnold also notes the tendency to negatively reassess previously praised efforts as the staff 'professionalised' in the post-war era when the hiring of male staff was prioritised.³⁶ There are some innovative ways in which women's presence behind-the-scenes have been 'found' in the archive. For example, Badenoch and Hagedoorn have examined television documentaries depicting women working in radio, making their labour visible, and showing women working in creative roles, but without the actual programmes much meaning is lost.³⁷

The lack of existing evidence of women's creative output is problematic in both radio and television. The focus of this article is underpinned by Rachel Moseley's and Helen Wheatley's influential 2008 article on women and television archives, particularly their call to look at women programme makers.³⁸ Wheatley and Moseley, along with Collie, Irwin and Wood, later redressed this imbalance by exploring content aimed at women and teenagers.³⁹ This emphasis indirectly highlights the contributions of female producers as women's and children's programmes were often dominated by female production teams.⁴⁰ However, selection of what to preserve has been a perennial problem. Carolyn Birdsall and Erica Harrison note that the preservation of audio materials lies not only with the technical limitations and storage capacity, but also in a selection process that emphasised national and cultural significance that was determined by BBC gatekeepers.⁴¹

As Bignell and Messenger Davies suggest, the physical survival and availability of programming also has a direct impact on present-day awareness and academic assessment and use of broadcasts,⁴² and by default, this impacts on how the programme's producers are presented. Catherine Martin suggests, these archival absences and fragmentations are at issue in feminist broadcasting scholarship. However, Martin does note that women's presence can be uncovered even in a record system that priorities the male voice.⁴³ Pain is doubly sidelined as both a radio and a television professional due to the difficulty in hearing her radio programmes, and the impossibility of viewing her television work. Alongside of Pain's interest in the interiority of largely professional working lives, her programmes cannot be easily slotted into either the personal documentary or the social issues dramas, and often commit the error of being too middlebrow.⁴⁴ The survival of her personal papers provides an invaluable avenue with which her productions can be assessed.

Methodology

The sources used for this article have largely come from the BBC Written Archives Centre (BBCWAC) in Caversham. Administrative, programme, and contributor files have assisted greatly in understanding the relationship between Pain and her collaborators. The Audience Research reports have helped gauge how the BBC interpreted its internal panel's reactions to Pain's programmes, particularly the television ones. As Jennifer J. Purcell has demonstrated with the career of Mabel Constanduros, the knowledge and understanding of even famous women can be lost if their personal papers are not preserved.⁴⁵ Pain's own personal papers were deposited at the BBCWAC by her daughter. The preservation of and access to this invaluable collection provides a greater understanding of Pain's work than can be understood through the BBC's archives alone as she saved production materials – research notes, set designs, storyboards, telesnaps – items absent from BBC files. The telesnaps, small series of photos taken during broadcast, provide vital visual confirmation of how her productions were designed and would have appeared to the public. Equally valuable is Pain's unpublished autobiography which gives rich details about her approaches to her productions and her working life. Pain is also mentioned, usually fleetingly, in memoirs of BBC Features personnel, in oral history interviews, and in Philip Donnellan's *Pure Radio*, and these have been useful in understanding her work environment as well as how the memory of her work has been referenced.

The article also takes a largely textual historical approach, as suggested by John Ellis, to interpreting and understanding Pain's television work.⁴⁶ As very few of Pain's programmes are available or have been re-interpreted – the radio version of *The Dock Brief* and her production of Ray Bradbury's *There Will Come Soft Rains* are the only programmes with prolonged access – there is little scope for the type of immanent reading that Ellis suggests can happen. However, Ellis' emphasis on the social context of the programmes have bearing on this research, as reception of the subject matters of her television programmes that originally aired as radio Features may have been impacted by the time between the production dates. The use of BBC audience reports and contemporary newspaper reviews has been of great assistance in understanding the contemporary context and reception.

Translating successful radio collaborations into television programmes

When the BBC television service relaunched after the war, Pain, like many of the Features radio producers, was eager to produce television programmes.⁴⁷ She would eventually go through the BBC training programme, but only after her first television script, *Area Nine* (1955), aired on ITV's *London Playhouse*. At the end of a six-week training course in 1957, she directed *The Professor is Arrested* written by fellow Features producer Jenifer Wayne. The programme was part of a series billed as a light-hearted look at English law.⁴⁸ Shortly thereafter she was released for the first of two six-month secondments to the television service. Her first solo BBC production was her Italia-Prize-winning radio Feature of John Mortimer's *The Dock Brief*. Over the course of the next four years, she would produce six

television programmes, many based on her more successful radio productions [Table 1]. Her unpublished autobiography recounts the terrors and satisfactions in taking a script through the production process – including planning camera shots, casting, rehearsals and the final live production.⁴⁹ Even though the process was obviously stressful, she clearly relished facing the challenges and her own fears.

Inner lives: collaboration with Alexander Kennedy

Whilst many of her science programmes were based on her own research and writing, she also worked collaboratively with experts. One of her most prolific collaborations of this type was with psychiatrist Alexander Kennedy, who was often credited as Kenneth Alexander. Between 1947 and 1957, Pain and Kennedy worked together, initially as co-writers then later in a writer/producer relationship, on a series of radio programmes dealing with psychology, particularly psychological trauma, addiction, and delinquency.⁵⁰ Pain's personal papers hold extensive notes, scripts, and even some of their research conversations have been preserved. Whilst the recordings do not survive, transcriptions of the sessions are available.⁵¹ These documents are testament to the intensive working relationship between the two. During the development of a programme, Kennedy would routinely call Pain in the evenings for lengthy discussions.⁵² This fruitful working partnership was cut short by Kennedy's untimely death in 1960 when he was fifty-one years old.⁵³ Strikingly, Pain gives very little space in her autobiography to this working relationship, and instead provides a detailed explanation of the plot of one of their productions.⁵⁴

The fourteen radio programmes that Pain and Kennedy produced together were among some of her most successful features. They were frequently rebroadcast and were sought after by the BBC's transcription service which sold versions of the programmes across the globe.⁵⁵ Psychiatry was both a growing field in Britain in the interwar era through to the post-Second World War era, and a topic that made its way into popular culture including topics presented on the radio.⁵⁶ Unlike programmes produced at the BBC by Janet Quigley and Isa Benzie that were primarily about child psychology and aimed at women, particularly mothers, Pain and Kennedy addressed a general audience through evening broadcasts on both the Third Programme and the Home Service.⁵⁷ For example, although their programme *Tich* (1949) mentions parenting issues, the major emphasis of the script was on a young man's process through the juvenile system.⁵⁸

Two of Pain's and Kennedy's collaborations aired on television. A year before Pain attended the BBC television production course, her first television collaboration with Alexander Kennedy, *Area Nine* (1955), was broadcast on ITV on 24 November as part Associated-Rediffusion's *London Playhouse* series. The programme was an exploration of the consequence of surgery on the prefrontal cortex of the brain. The pair had offered the script to the BBC, but it has been declined by BBC television. Kennedy and Pain had worked on several Features about different areas of the brain, and this script was an extension of their previous radio work. The plot shares some similarities with the later production *A Shaft of Light*,

TABLE 1. Nesta Pain's television productions for BBC Television, 1957-1961.

First aired	Title	Reaction index television	Television comparisons for timeslot/genre	Radio reaction index (year)	Role
22 May 1957	The Professor is Arrested (writer: Jenifer Wayne)			N/A	Director
16 September 1957	The Dock Brief (writer: John Mortimer)	56	67	74(1957)	Producer
09 March 1958	The Invisible Armies – Part 1 (producer: Rex Tucker)	74	78 (previous 3 programmes)	82 (1945)	Writer
16 March 1958	The Invisible Armies – Part 2 (producer: Rex Tucker)			Louis Pasteur	Writer/Director
23 March 1958	The Invisible Armies – Part 3 (producer: Rex Tucker)				Writer
30 March 1958	The Invisible Armies – Part 4 (producer: Rex Tucker)				Writer
09 October 1958	A Shaft of Light (writer: Kenneth Alexander)	68	64(drama)	80(1947)	Producer
22 January 1959	Result of an Accident	63	71	Dreams	Writer/Producer
21 August 1959	Mr. Bossom's Day (writer: Edward Grierson/John Westbrook)	70	65	N/A	Producer
05 January 1960	Portrait of Man (radio title So this in Man)	44	70	82(1945)	Writer/Producer
15 June 1961	The Move Up Country (writer: Simon Raven)	69	66 (drama) 68 (dramatized documentary)	(1960)	Producer

including graphic depiction of psychological distress, but focussed much more specifically on the personality changes that occur when the prefrontal cortex, area nine, experience damage, in this instance through surgical removal of a brain tumour.⁵⁹ Whilst Pain did not direct this first television programme – her good friend Peter Cotes has that credit – *Area Nine* demonstrated her interest in television, and the BBC's apprehension about their new commercial competitor siphoning away their talented professionals. The BBC were clearly unhappy that the script had been submitted to Associated-Rediffusion, but as Pain's co-writer, Alexander Kennedy, was not a BBC employee, Pain's superiors had no leverage to stop the production. As a compromise, Pain and Kennedy were credited using a joint pseudonym, Simon Byforth.⁶⁰ Whilst Pain's contention that Kennedy had acted without her knowledge may have been sincere, there is some basis to think this disingenuous. Peter Cotes and his wife, the actress Joan Miller, who appeared in many of Pain's productions, were well known to Pain.⁶¹ *Area Nine* was also promoted as being scripted by gifted writers knowledgeable about the topic who, none-the-less, were using a pseudonym, showing that ITV was eager to capitalise on the talent and stature of Pain and Alexander represented, even in anonymous form.⁶²

The other television programme that Pain and Kennedy collaborated on aired on the BBC in 1958. *A Shaft of Light* was based on their previous radio programme *Dreams* (1947). The production was an imaginative exploration of psychosomatic illness experienced by a neurosurgeon. In both versions, a brain surgeon, John Sinforth, experiences blindness with no physical source. After reluctantly consulting a psychiatrist, Curtis Miles – Sinforth refers to him as a witch doctor – the cause of Sinforth's illness is revealed through a series of disturbing dreams that expose his anxiety about the effect of his brain surgeries on his patients and his own doubts about his competence (Figure 1). The challenge for both productions was how to conjure up and represent the nightmares in which the protagonist's anxieties reveal themselves. For the radio production, this was accomplished using music, exaggerated speech, and audio fades.⁶³ The television script was presented in a linear fashion, whereas the radio version used flashback sequences during Sinforth's visits with Miles. The television production allowed for more visual elements some of which were filmed and inserted in the live programme. Pain also effectively used surgical noises, breathing patterns and speech distortions in the television version.⁶⁴ The technique had the desired effect of conveying the dream-like state, as well as the terror of Sinforth's nightmares. One reviewer commented that the dream sequences 'preserved the atmosphere of unreality' with restraint, whilst another called them 'echoingly evocative'.⁶⁵ One review compared the dreams to Grand Guignol, a type of theatrical horror, a comparison which probably pleased Pain.⁶⁶ In addition to broadcasting, Pain was also a playwright and had written plays for Grand Guignol. The dreams and topic of psychological disturbance were deemed alarming enough that the television broadcast began with a warning that the material was not suitable for children or those of a nervous disposition.⁶⁷ Pain's experimental techniques used to depict the nightmares experienced by her lead character were clearly successful and effective in recreating the fractured interior feeling of psychological conflict.⁶⁸



Figure 1. Dream sequence from *A Shaft of Light* (1958), photo courtesy of the BBC Written Archive Centre.⁶⁹

The Viewer Report for the television production indicated that the programme was well-received and highly valued by the BBC viewing panel – achieving an above average share of viewers for the time slot and an above average Reaction Index (16%/15% and 68:64). The BBC appreciation index worked like a school marking scheme, and gave this production a high 2.1 or a B+ rating. Despite this, the viewer report put a largely negative spin on a successful production, leading with a viewer who questioned its ‘suitability’ for dramatic presentation, largely focused on the drama creating anxiety around the competency of prospective surgeons, a view also expressed in a review.⁷⁰ Whilst many of the newspaper reviews were also complimentary,⁷¹ there were some critical comments in a similar vein, including questioning the speed of recovery and the light treatment of a ‘serious’ topic.⁷² This success mirrored that of the radio production which had an astoundingly high appreciation index of 80. Interestingly, the radio production Listener Report noted no criticism of the subject matter, with the panel indicating that the tricky psychological topic had been handled skilfully.⁷³

Recruiting new talent for radio: collaboration with John Mortimer

Another close collaborator of Pain’s was John Mortimer. In the 1950s Laurence Gilliam encouraged Features producers to recruit young writers to produce for the radio.⁷⁴ With increasing pressure from television that shrank both production budgets and audience numbers, Features was searching for ways to attract a fresh, younger audience. Pain dutifully set out to recruit rising literary stars, one of whom was Mortimer. Whilst the initial contact was in 1954 or 1955, it took several years for them to collaborate on a project.⁷⁵ They would ultimately work together on nine radio productions, many of which remained popular with the public and were broadcast on multiple occasions, including *Voyage Around My Father*

and *What Shall We Tell Caroline*.⁷⁶ Their first effort, *The Dock Brief*, was a roaring success, winning the Italia Prize in 1957. Pain noted that working on *The Dock Brief* was 'one of the high spots of my working life for it was immediately clear that it was a genuine minor masterpiece – funny, original, affectionate and moving'.⁷⁷ Within four months of its original radio broadcast, the drama was translated into a television play with Pain, then on secondment to television, leading the production. Airing on 16 September 1957, this was her first solo television production. Whilst the BBC was keen to air the drama, there was less commitment on the budget. Pain recalled the resentment she felt that limited funding robbed the set of one of 'two rather charming barred windows for the scene in the cell' included in the set design (Figure 2). Overall, she was 'astonished by the degree of responsibility which the B.B.C. was willing to give a complete beginner such as [herself] in what was, after all, a difficult and technically complicated exercise'.⁷⁸

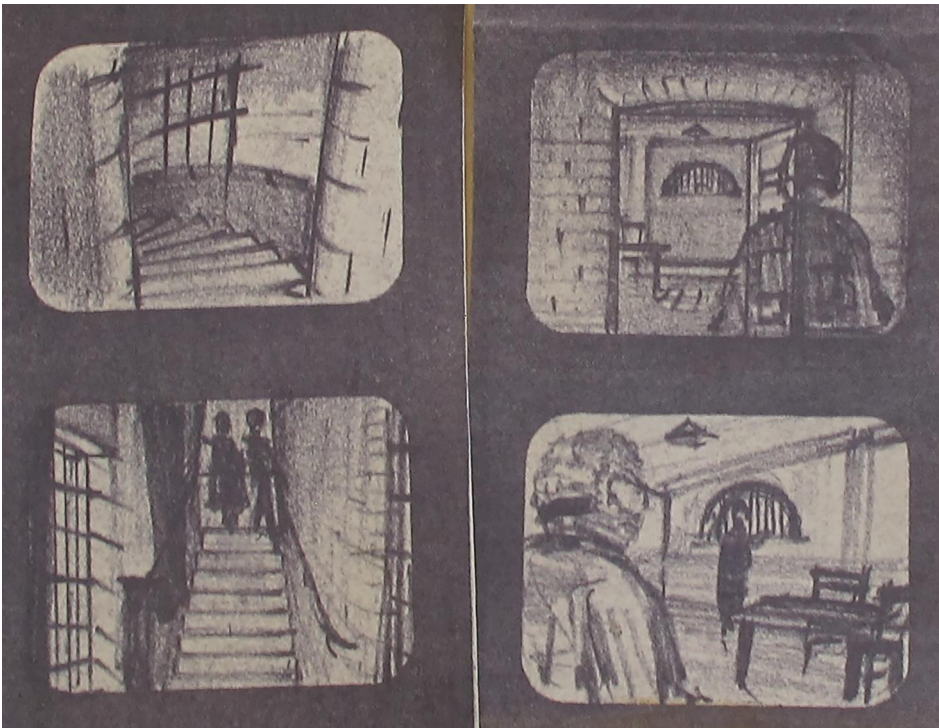


Figure 2. Storyboard, *The Dock Brief* (1957), photo courtesy of the BBC Written Archive Centre.⁷⁹

The Dock Brief, subtitled a legal fantasy, paired an unsuccessful barrister, Wilfred Morgenhall, chosen at random by a confessed murderer, Herbert Fowle, in a capital murder case – a seemingly bizarre storyline for a comedy. The lawyer's incompetence drives the plot leading to an unexpected acquittal. The teleplay, as well as the radio version, was a standard 'two-hander', with only two main characters, although the television script included a small part for the prison officer. In the radio drama, the barrister's delusions of grandeur are signalled through the use of music and voice distortion. The television drama was not

preserved, so it is difficult to know if these same devices were used, but script notations suggest this was the case.⁸⁰ The actors, Michael Hordern as the delusional Barrister and David Kossoff as the cheerful murderer, appeared in both versions, with their acting skills garnering high praise. An online review, written nearly sixty years after it aired, declared Hordern was the ‘first and best’ interpreter of the role of the barrister, and that they felt ‘lucky’ to have had the opportunity to see this ‘one-of-a-kind masterpiece’.⁸¹ *The Dock Brief* was almost immediately staged as a play, and Pain credits the production with launching Mortimer’s successful career in writing and television.⁸² A 1962 film version starring Richard Attenborough as Fowle and a miscast Peter Sellers as Morgenhall stayed largely faithful to the script.⁸³

Gilliam noted in Pain’s annual review that the television production was successful, and Mortimer’s contributor files also indicate an excitement about the play and Mortimer’s future as a television writer.⁸⁴ However, the audience report suggested a more underwhelming reception. Whilst the radio play had an above-average appreciation index at 74, the television production had a disappointing 56. Whilst this might indicate a mediocre production, the rating was more a result of a split reaction by the panel, with some declaring the piece was a ‘masterpiece’.⁸⁵ Part of this disappointment was fuelled by viewer expectations of what a television drama should be. The experimental aspects of the programme and its static environment – the entire action took place in a gaol cell – was the primary motivation for viewer discontent. There were some panel members that found the story far-fetched and unrealistic, and others who would have preferred a serious treatment of the topic, but these were balanced by those who enjoyed both the acting and the concept.⁸⁶

Critics expressed admiration for the television version with *The Listener* describing it as full of ‘irony, pathos, and comedy’ and declaring it a play that ‘lingers firmly in the mind’.⁸⁷ The reviewer in *The Times* was equally glowing over all aspects of the broadcast – from the writing, to the production, to the acting – stating that the ‘production forcibly drew attention toward the two most powerful assets of television – its ability to portray character with microscopic exactitude, and to attain drama by using language of the utmost gentleness’.⁸⁸ Perhaps the most lasting testament to the power of *The Dock Brief* was remarked on by Pain herself, as noted above, it was one of the highlights of her career. The story resonated so well with some people that it continues to be staged in many different languages and locales.

Unladylike subjects: collaboration with Simon Raven

Over the course of the next several years, Pain kept in contact with Michael Barry, then Head of Television Drama, regarding programmes she was eager to produce for television. This list included *Mr Bossom’s Day* (1959) by Edward Grierson, a programme with William Golding, a programme on Parkinson’s Law, several programmes with Alexander Kennedy on the topics of courage and brain-washing, a programme on Pasteur, Fabre, some history topics and an adaptation of

her radio play *So This is Man* (1945 (radio); 1960 (TV) as *Portrait of Man*).⁸⁹ In August 1960, she added another production to the list. This was *The Move Up Country* which had been scripted by Simon Raven. Whilst she initially thought it unsuitable for television adaptation, due to the amount of film inserts required, she realised that it could be easily accomplished in the studio with a few simple sets.⁹⁰ Elwyn Jones replied a week later, and Whilst he ended up liking the idea after some trepidation, he mused whether ‘it was quite wise to have a programme on such an essentially masculine subject produced by a woman?’.⁹¹

As part of Features’ push to recruit new writing talent to the BBC, Pain had been in contact with Simon Raven who at that point had published two novels, *Brother Cain* (1959) and *Feathers of Death* (1959). Raven’s script of *Feathers of Death* had been rejected for radio dramatization, and he seemed keen to write for broadcast.⁹² Raven was one of the authors Pain commissioned to write several dramatized documentaries about the day-to-day professions, which she called her ‘Professional Portrait’ Series.⁹³ Grierson’s *Mr Bossom’s Day* was likely part of that series as it concerned a ‘typical’ day in a legal practice. Raven wrote at least three of these for her – a look at the life of an army officer, *The Move Up Country*, and a case study of a cricketer, which would eventually become a strict drama titled *Panther Larkin* (1964), and an initially-rejected story of a custom’s officer, which most likely became *A Present from Venice*.⁹⁴ Raven’s and Pain’s relationship was much more distant and business-like than many of her other collaborative efforts. The correspondence between the two is terse. Whilst she was the commissioner, she appeared to have little influence on the direction of Raven’s storylines. She ultimately turned *Panther Larkin* over to the drama department as the script did not fit in with the tone of her series; Raven’s introduction of homosexual themes, which he offered to ‘tone down’ may also have been seen as problematic for a dramatized documentary and more appropriate for a straight drama.⁹⁵ Despite initially seeing Raven’s potential, Pain and Raven seemed to have parted ways by 1963 after producing four radio plays together – *The Move Up Country* (1960), *A Present from Venice* (1961), *The Gate of Learning* (1962) and *A Friend in Need* (1962).

The Move Up Country appeared on television in 1961 and presented the interior life of a regiment as it prepares to move camp (Figure 3).⁹⁶ The script delivers dramatic tension, but there is no story arc that needs resolution. Instead, the audience is presented with a series of personnel and logistical situations that arise on a given day. The intention was, in Raven’s words, ‘simply to convey the difficulties, both administrative and personal, of conducting a minor military operation’.⁹⁷ This included dealing with marital discord, drunken misadventures and coordinating the transfer of materials and supplies. These seemingly mundane affairs come alive and provide a compelling snapshot of life in the camp. Raven, like both Kennedy and Mortimer, drew heavily on his own personal experience in scripting the radio plays. Before becoming a novelist, Raven had started out his professional life as an army officer and he would have been privy to similar situations and discourses in that capacity.⁹⁸

Of the three television programmes produced by Nesta Pain discussed in-depth here, reception of both the radio play and the television version of *The Move Up Country* are much more difficult to judge. Although Pain’s personal papers contain

plenty of materials associated with the television production – publicity stills, tele-snaps and even technical drawings of the set – there are no newspaper clippings or other reviews of either production.⁹⁹ Researchers are left only with the television audience report as a guide. The general tone of the report was overwhelmingly positive with many across the panel enjoying the programme. Even the masculine subject was found to be engrossing for women as well as men, with a female panel member responding that it was so compelling that she interrupted her evening chores. The viewing audience was noticeably lower than either *A Shaft of Light* (16%) or *The Dock Brief* (16%), with an estimated 7% audience share, as opposed to an estimated 23% for ITV in the same time slot of 7.55 pm to 8.45 pm when it aired on Thursday, 15 June 1961. The BBC reaction index was 69 which was above average for similar drama (66) or dramatized documentary (68) programming. The only criticism seemed to reflect the nature of dramatized documentaries, in that there is no plot or neat resolution.¹⁰⁰



Figure 3. Production Still – *The Move Up Country* (1961), photo courtesy of the BBC Written Archive Centre.¹⁰¹

Assessing pain's television career (1955-1962)

In January 1963, the same month Sydney Newman became Head of BBC TV Drama Group, Nesta Pain was making administrative arrangements to spend another two months on attachment to the Television Script Department.¹⁰² In late March, a few days before the attachment was due to start on 1 April, the exchange was postponed due to 'Script Department [being] involved in a major re-organisation with Drama Group'.¹⁰³ In July, this attachment was again postponed until 'early next summer'. At the bottom of the page, the word 'cancel' was added in pencil.¹⁰⁴ By September 1963, Pain was negotiating a favourable part-time contract that would allow her to further develop her publishing and playwriting activities that she had been pursuing in her spare time, seemingly giving up on her television ambitions. Whilst the BBC did not appear interested in allowing her to work in television, they were keenly interested in preventing her from writing for commercial television. During the contract discussions, the point was raised with the suggestion that a 'clause to prohibit Mrs Pain from offering any work at any time to our television competitors' be inserted in her new part-time

contract'.¹⁰⁵ Whilst Pain did collaborate on a few BBC television scripts after 1963 – she and Mortimer adapted *Voyage Around My Father* for television in 1969 – her television career was essentially over in 1963.

One of the obvious reasons that Nesta Pain's television work is not well known is that no video recordings of them survive for evaluation. As noted above, availability is a key factor in academic engagement with, and public knowledge of, television programming history. The materials that do remain – the scripts, newspaper reviews and audience reports – suggest that the programmes covered socially potent topics in imaginative and thought-provoking ways. Whilst some of the programmes, like *The Dock Brief*, had mixed reception by the BBC audience panel, the newspaper reviews for this programme were stellar, with *The Times* calling it a masterpiece. Subsequent stagings of the programme, both on film and in the theatre, have not significantly altered over time. Overall, research indicates that Pain's adaptation of her radio work into television programming was largely successful, and she employed novel techniques honed during her radio career to convey difficult ideas and concepts.

Another aspect to consider is the type of dramatized documentary that Pain produced. In her 1958 annual review, Laurence Gilliam said that 'Mrs. Pain is devoted to the dramatized style of documentary and allergic to actuality', an assertion he repeated the following year.¹⁰⁶ This may be another reason that Pain's work has been often mentioned, but rarely discussed. The three examples given here demonstrate that Pain was intensely interested in exploring inner lives and realities of working people, but these were not anchored in kitchen-sink social realism. Whilst she had adapted Alan Sillitoe's 'The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner' for radio – the story of a poor young man in Borstal detention – and tried to interest Sillitoe in writing for radio, her scripts and adaptations tended to focus on a social class similar to her own.¹⁰⁷ In the programmes explored above, she specifically commissioned work from three individuals who mined their own professional experiences in their work. Kennedy wrote scripts based not only on psychological trauma he encountered on the job, but also explored the insecurities faced by surgeons who worked in roles similar to his own. Mortimer used his time as a barrister to provide insight into the not always successful aspects of the legal profession, but also the interdependence between barristers and their clients. Raven too interwove his own social and professional crises into the characters he created. As Andrew Hadfield suggests, Raven dealt with class, that is his own social milieu of the upper class, not the class usually explored by social realists.¹⁰⁸ Pain explored the daily struggles and successes of the middling sort in her work, particularly those stories that she chose to translate into television programmes. This emphasis on middlebrow topics may also play a part in obscuring her television productions.

Whilst David Cardiff noted that the middlebrow carried an undeserved air of bland seriousness, Pain's programmes belie this characterisation as they often covered challenging topics using elements of horror to heighten the drama.¹⁰⁹ Pain had been praised during her career for daring to explore difficult subjects in a sensitive manner by both reviewers and audiences. However, public appetites are often tied to current events. Jan Lewis has noted that wartime BBC archaeological

programmes focussed on understanding human nature when the public was experiencing the brutality of war, but that the appetite for this type of programme had faded considerably by the end of 1950s.¹¹⁰ Whilst the public was open to confronting inner turmoil covered by Pain's psychological topics and interrogating human nature, as many of her radio features did, in immediate post-war years, by the time these topics were translated for the new medium of television, they may have lost their potency for some viewers.

A final point in this examination is that, as a woman in a largely masculine environment, Nesta Pain was not seen as a competitor to rate oneself against. Rayner Heppenstall described her as one of the four women producers who would drink with them at the Stag's Head – someone 'small, fair, somewhat older but still pretty'.¹¹¹ He does not acknowledge that she was also commissioning established writers to write for the radio, declaring that he was the only Features producer to do so.¹¹² This could also be one of the reasons that Pain was only obliquely referred to in Philip Donnellan's *Pure Radio* documentary. Her male colleagues respected her work but, as a woman, she was perhaps someone they did not consider measuring themselves against, which highlights one way successful creative women can become marginalised over time. However, Nesta Pain was more than just one of the women in the room. Through her own creative talents and her collaborations with experts and writers, she produced innovative television. Contemporary reviews of her programmes reveal that her dramatized documentaries were well-respected and compelling to audiences, and that she was widely regarded in her lifetime as an accomplished professional who produced quality programmes – a legacy worthy of analysis and study.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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105. Assistant Head of Programme Contracts to EO(S), September 13, 1963; Staff Administration Officer to EO(S), October 14, 1963, BBCWAC L1/2121/2, 1942.
106. Annual Confidential Review, March 18, 1959; April 28 1960, BBCWAC L1/2121/2, 1942.
107. Letter, Sillitoe to Pain, 13 May 1962, Letters, BBCWAC S300/3/1.
108. Andrew Hadfield, “‘Colossal Snob’? The Class-Ridden World of Simon Raven’, *The Cambridge Quarterly* 51, no. 2 (2022): 85–105.
109. Cardiff, ‘Mass Middlebrow Laughter’.
110. Jan Lewis, ‘Adventures in Sound. Rhoda Power, Archaeology and BBC Schools Radio, 1941-1945’, in press.
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112. *Ibid.*, 38.

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