

**Women and the Media: Feminism and Femininity in Britain,**  
**1900 to the Present**

**From *Women's Hour* to *Other Women's Lives*: BBC talks for women and the women who made them, 1923-1939**

**Abstract**

Women listeners were the key daytime audience for the BBC during the inter-war years. Within months of the BBC's formation, talks aimed specifically at women were an integral part of the daily schedules; the first regular series for women, *Women's Hour* (not to be confused with today's *Woman's Hour*) began in May 1923. Although rarely overtly feminist, these talks of the 1920s and 1930s aimed to empower women as mothers, citizens and home-makers. Prior to the Second World War, four women Talks Assistants had responsibility for their programming: Ella Fitzgerald, Elise Sprott, Margery Wace and Janet Quigley. In addition, Hilda Matheson, the BBC's first Director of Talks, 1927-1932, played a pivotal part in expanding and broadening this gendered output. This chapter will consider the roles of these five women and how their understanding of the audience, their personal style and particular interests were reflected in the programmes they made.

**Introduction**

At approximately 5pm on 2 May 1923, an elegantly-dressed woman was gestured towards a microphone in the first purpose-built studio of the fledgling BBC. Princess Alice, the Duchess of Athlone, had been invited officially to open *Women's Hour* (not to be confused with today's *Woman's Hour*).<sup>1</sup> Her inaugural talk on 'The Adoption of Babies' would have been heard by an audience of several thousand listening-in on their 'cat's whiskers', an early wireless technology (Moore 1988). The British Broadcasting Company, under the leadership of John Reith and now six months old, had recently moved to its new premises at Savoy Hill, next to London's Savoy Hotel. Here, and later from 1932 at Broadcasting House,

hundreds of eminent women, and men, would take part in the BBC's impressive range of talks aimed at its ever-expanding female audience. And the audience did grow exponentially. There is no gender breakdown but listener figures grew from around 150,000 in January 1923 to nine million by January 1927, when the British Broadcasting Corporation was created by Royal Charter. At the outbreak of the Second World War, the figure was approaching thirty four million (Pegg 1983, 7).

The Duchess of Athlone was not alone in the Savoy Hill studio on 2 May; her inaugural talk was coupled with that of the famous couturier Lady Duff Gordon who spoke on 'Fashions'. This mix of the worthy and light-hearted; of domesticity, social issues and escapism would provide the blueprint for women's programming in the inter-war years. *Women's Hour's* producer (or Talks Assistant as the role was designated in the 1920s and 30s) was Mrs Ella Fitzgerald, a former Fleet Street journalist. Fitzgerald, recruited to the BBC in April 1923, was the first of four female Talks Assistants responsible for women's programmes prior to the Second World War. She, and her successors Elise Sprott, Margery Wace and Janet Quigley, shaped the content and style of these broadcasts which were broadened and embedded into the morning schedules during the regime of Hilda Matheson, the first Director of Talks 1927-1932. As salaried BBC staff, all five women were ostensibly treated as equals to their male colleagues, in terms of promotion and pay. The Corporation was unusually enlightened in terms of the employment of women in the inter-war years (Murphy 2011). Even its marriage bar, introduced in 1932, was negotiable, if the woman concerned was viewed as valuable to the BBC.

Talks were to be a mainstay of radio in the inter-war years. With production techniques rudimentary, a scripted and rehearsed 'live' talk was the cheapest and most straightforward way to deliver the spoken word. Talks were central to the Reithian ethos of public service broadcasting; an "instrument of democratic enlightenment" that could both inform and educate the British people (Scannell and Cardiff 1991, 13). The importance of the early BBC

talk has been widely explored by Asa Briggs in his expansive history of the BBC and by Paddy Scannell and David Cardiff in their authoritative social history of British broadcasting (Briggs 1961, 1965; Scannell and Cardiff 1991). Only recently, however, have talks aimed at women in the 1920s and 1930s come under scrutiny. Michael Bailey has contended that the BBC's gendered broadcasts, with their focus on women's civic and domestic responsibilities, propelled the female audience towards a routine of ordered housewifery and childrearing (Bailey 2009). Maggie Andrews has examined how the public role of wireless, as it entered the private domain of the home, offered women listeners a range of 'expert' domestic viewpoints as they were in turn addressed as consumers, managers and homemakers (Andrews 2012). Issues of gendered broadcasting in the inter-war years have similarly been investigated in the USA, Germany, Australia and Sweden (Hilmes 1997; Lacey 1996; Johnson 1988; Norberg 1998).

This chapter takes an alternative perspective; rather than view women's talks through the lens of the listener or broadcaster, it considers these programmes from the viewpoint of the women who made them. This is an approach favoured by David Hendy who has argued for biography to be re-appraised as a valued tool in media history, enriching our understanding of the BBC by exploring the backgrounds and motivations of employees (Hendy 2012). Fitzgerald, Sprott, Wace and Quigley were largely autonomous. Unlike the prestigious evening talks, daytime talks aimed at female listeners were not a high priority for the BBC thus those producing these programmes did not face the same managerial scrutiny as others in the Talks Department. However, although they were empowered to address female listeners in what they believed were their best interests, the position was an onerous one. Whereas in newspapers and magazines, women could pick and choose what to read, wireless generally offered a single choice.<sup>2</sup> With an audience that encompassed women of all ages and social classes; married and unmarried; homemaker and employee; in town and countryside; providing a programme that would appeal to all was an almost impossible task. Rather, the breadth of women's talks reflected what each producer considered would best

meet the needs of her audience; whether a talk on electricity, a farmhouse recipe or revelations of a mill girl's life. As Director of Talks, Hilda Matheson considerably expanded their range and complexity.

The BBC was born into an era of rapid change for women; their status had risen with the extension of the vote in 1918, (albeit only to those aged over 30) and, under the 1919 Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act, the opening up of the professions (Lewis 1984; Banks 1993; Beddoe 1989; Nicholson 2007). Young women, with their short hair and increasingly short skirts, were on the ascendant; flocking into the workplace, looking for fun and anticipating a very different future from that of their mothers (Alexander 1995). But barriers persisted in education and employment, most noticeably in the proliferation of marriage bars, and a married woman's place remained firmly in the home (Dyhouse 1995; Oram 1996; Giles 2004; Cowman and Jackson 2005). It was this captive daytime audience that talks aimed at women predominantly addressed. By examining the processes by which these talks came to air, new light can be shone onto the lives and expectations of both the women who listened, and of those who made them.

### **Ella Fitzgerald**

Little is known of Fitzgerald prior to her recruitment to the BBC apart from her place of birth, Dutch Guinea, and occasional references to Fleet Street (*Ariel*, April 1936, October 1937). It is probable that her maturity, she was thirty five when she arrived at Savoy Hill, and her excellent contacts made her a good choice to oversee *Women's Hour*, with its requirements for two speakers on varied topics, six days a week. To address the diversity of her audience, Fitzgerald introduced regular broadcasts on, for example, cookery, poultry keeping, infant care, beauty and bridge and "shamelessly" exploited former newspaper colleagues, several of whom broadcast without fees, "just for the novel experience" (*Prospero*, June 1969).

Edith Shackleton of the *Evening Standard* was one such contributor, making her first appearance on the programme in October 1923 when she gave a talk on journalism (*Radio Times*, 19 October 1923). With the job market for women expanding, careers were a particular focus of Fitzgerald's, the earlier talks on how to become a house decorator or hairdresser giving way to less common female professions such as solicitor, x-ray operator, optician, welfare worker and analytical chemist. This proliferation of career opportunities for women was similarly reflected in an explosion of employment advice books, many written by outspoken feminists (Brittain 1928; Eyles 1930; Strachey 1935; Cole 1936). Marion Cran, whose gardening talks made her one of the BBC's most popular broadcasters of the inter-war years, first appeared on *Women's Hour* in August 1923, confirming the growing acceptance of women as horticulturalists (Horwood 2010). Fitzgerald herself gave two talks each week including an early consumer item, 'In and Out of the Shops' for which she used her lunch-hour to gather material (*Prospero*, June 1969). Reflecting on her time producing *Women's Hour*, Fitzgerald was palpably proud that the MPs Nancy Astor, Margaret Wintringham and Ellen Wilkinson had graced the airwaves. The three were amongst the first women to take their seats in the House of Commons following the Parliament (Qualification of Women Act) 1918 which enabled women to stand as MPs.

In December 1923 a change was introduced to the way *Women's Hour* was run; a National Women's Advisory Committee (NWAC) was established to offer guidance to the programme, one of a number of advisory committees established by the early BBC to give it more credibility (WAC: R16/219: National Women's Advisory Committee (NWAC) 1924-1925). Seven eminent individuals were invited to sit on the NWAC, each signifying an area of women's lives the BBC deemed important to reflect. They were Lady Denman (Chairman of the National Federation of Women's Institutes), Margaret Bondfield (MP), Lilian Braithwaite, (actress), Dr Elizabeth Sloan Chesser (physician), Mrs Violet Cambridge (Honorary Secretary of the Women's Amateur Athletic Association), Mrs Hardman Earle (Ministry of Food and Public Kitchens, First World War) and Evelyn Gates (Editor-in Chief, *The Women's*

*Yearbook*). Within weeks of its first meeting, and with Fitzgerald in attendance, two significant decisions were made; firstly to hold a plebiscite of listeners' views and secondly to abolish the *Women's Hour* name.

The plebiscite was Fitzgerald's suggestion. Two members of the NWAC appeared on *Women's Hour* on 2 February 1924 to establish at what time women could most easily listen and which subjects were preferred. Mrs Hardman Earle put forward the case for "practical talks on topics relating to the welfare of the home"; Miss Evelyn Gates supported the argument "that women looked to the wireless as a potential means of brightening their leisure hours" (*Radio Times*, 17 October 1924, article written by Fitzgerald). These viewpoints encapsulated a thorny dilemma about programming for women: should it focus on domesticity or provide escapism, taking women out of the home? In her *Radio Times* article, Fitzgerald described how the plebiscite had galvanised the listener, with seventy five per cent of responses imploring the programme, "to abandon at once and for ever" all talks on domestic subjects.<sup>3</sup>

Is it to be wondered at then that for "the cure of constipation" we substituted a tour of Constantinople, that talks on the English country-side replaced those on the stocking of the kitchen cupboard! That instead of a series of talks on diets, we have debates on topical questions, that addresses on careers and hobbies have succeeded those on calories and how to dye the bathroom curtains?

As a result of the plebiscite, domestic subjects were reduced from a quarter to one third of the output, with new items introduced such as book reviews, travel talks and profiles of historical women (NWAC Minutes, 30 April 1924).

Ironically, by the time Fitzgerald wrote her *Radio Times* article in October 1924, *Women's Hour* had ceased to exist. At the February meeting of the NAWC there was unanimous agreement to abolish the name (NWAC Minutes, 20 February 1924). No reason was given as to why it caused such offence but a dislike of special treatment for women was part of the on-going feminist debate of the early 1920s. Divergent views were expressed by women's groups such as the National Union of Societies for Equal Citizenship (NUSEC) and the Six

Point Group, centring on whether women should seek first to identify themselves as citizens rather than as women (Banks 1993; Law 1997). As a result of the NAWC decision, from 24 March 1924, *Women's Hour* was no longer listed in the schedules. Instead, from 4pm, "two talks of general interest but with particular appeal to women" were interlarded with the afternoon concert (NWAC Minutes, 30 April 1924). The NWAC met only one further time, on 12 December 1924. In September 1925 it was disbanded, by which time only one talk of interest to women was being broadcast. It appears that by getting rid of the title, the focus on women's issues was reduced, resulting in the demise of the NAWC and fewer programmes for women. In 1990, *Woman's Hour* campaigned to save its name for just this reason (Feldman 2000).

Fitzgerald's responsibilities may have diminished, but she continued to offer an array of female-related daytime talks such as 'Choosing a School'; 'Psychology and the Shop Assistant' and 'A Woman in the Wild – Tiger Shooting' (*Radio Times*, 18 May 1925; 20 September 1925; 19 February 1926). Two of her regular broadcasters became so popular their talks were published as books: *My Part of the Country* by 'A Bonnet Laird' and Mrs C Romanne-James' *O Toyo Writes Home*. In November 1926, Fitzgerald's three-and-a-half year association with talks for women came to an abrupt end when she was transferred to the new position of Assistant on *World Radio*, a foreign-programme supplement to *Radio Times*. Fitzgerald would go on to become Assistant Editor in 1928, retiring as Overseas Press Officer in 1947. Her move to *World Radio* came within weeks of Hilda Matheson's arrival at the BBC who, in January 1927, began her tenure as the BBC's first Director of Talks. One of Matheson's first tasks was to replace Fitzgerald and she appeared keen to appoint a new Talks Assistant who could cover a larger field of work (WAC: R13/419/1, October 1926, Organisation of Talks Department). In the event, Elise Sprott, an established member of the Department, assumed the role, which was to create a tension between the two women and influence the direction of women's talks.

### **Hilda Matheson and Elise Sprott**

Hilda Matheson was invited to the BBC by John Reith, coaxed away from her job as Political Secretary to Nancy Astor MP (Hunter 1994; Carney 1999). An Oxford graduate, Matheson was a brilliant intellectual who is credited with the transformation of BBC Talks (Scannell and Cardiff 1991; Avery 2006). Now aged thirty-eight, she moved on the fringes of the Bloomsbury set and introduced to the airwaves the likes of HG Wells, Harold Nicolson and Virginia Woolf. In late 1928, the novelist Vita Sackville-West was invited to broadcast and a two-year love affair with Matheson ensued.

Elise Sprott could not have been more different. She joined the full-time staff as a Talks Assistant in January 1925. Already an experienced broadcaster, she had regularly worked with Fitzgerald, giving her first talk, on European travel, in June 1924. Sprott originated from Cumberland and her fulsome pre-BBC career included motor engineering, volunteering as a nurse in the First World War and working for Herbert Hoover's Children's Relief Fund (*News Chronicle*, 29 July 1939). Unlike Matheson, she had not been to university, which was to exacerbate problems between the two women. Prior to taking on responsibility for women's talks, Sprott had worked on the Department's broader output which included religious services, charitable appeals and the monthly Boy Scout and Boys' Brigade bulletins (WAC:R13/419/1, Organisation of Talks Department, October 1926).

There is little direct evidence that Matheson and Sprott had an uncongenial relationship. However, in her letters to Sackville-West, Matheson shared her dream of finding a "frightfully intelligent young woman of robust and excellent judgement" (Matheson to Sackville-West, 28 January 1929). Sprott (nick-named 'Sprottie') did not fit the bill; a year older than Matheson, she was neither modern nor intellectual and appears to have been politically naïve. Matheson on the other hand, was sophisticated, urbane and undoubtedly progressive in her views. Sprott and Matheson took very different approaches to women's programming. While Sprott was a supporter of the domestic, Matheson was committed to widening the output, in

particular enlightening women as citizens and, like many of her contemporaries, was an enthusiastic advocate of adult education.<sup>4</sup> The first indication of Matheson's desire to extend the scope of women's talks came in January 1927. Within days of becoming Director of Talks, the afternoons were revitalised with a schedule of programmes made in conjunction with the National Federation of Women's Institutes, including series on 'Citizenship in Practice', 'Health and Common Sense' and 'Village Life in Other Lands.'

A further experiment was initiated in January 1927; a weekly *Household Talk*. This was overseen by Sprott and was almost certainly her idea (WAC: R13/419/1: Talks Section Duties, October 1927). The scope of *Household Talks* was modest but practical. The first few weeks included talks on decorating a small flat, making a lampshade and luncheon and pancake recipes; by the close of the year the series was encompassing modern methods of washing clothes and warm winter drinks. Sprott ensured the talks were given by appropriate experts including Mrs Cottington Taylor, the Director of the Good Housekeeping Institute and Mrs Clifton Reynolds, an expert in household appliances whose own home was "equipped with every modern convenience and labour-saving device" (*Radio Times*, 2 September 1927). *Household Talks* proved immensely popular and at the request of listeners, from 24 August 1928, merited a designated page in *Radio Times* with Sprott as point of liaison.

Sprott's enthusiasm for household talks was intense and it is doubtful that, without her input, Matheson would have given them the same priority. In her book *Broadcasting*, Matheson emphasised the huge value of such talks but also made clear her commitment to talks that were "outside the common round of household drudgery" (Matheson 1933). In 1928, the vote was extended to all adult women; those over the age of twenty-one were now officially citizens. Matheson was eager to inform and educate these newly enfranchised young women about their civic responsibilities, introducing series such as *A Woman's Day* broadcast from November 1928. Here a female councillor, juror, magistrate and MP, amongst others, described their work and distinguished speakers included Margaret

Bondfield MP, Dame Katherine Furse and Evelyn Emmett of the London County Council. In the run up to the 1929 election, the first at which all adult women could vote, the evening series *Questions for Women Voters* included discussions on equal pay, the marriage bar and whether boys and girls should have the same education.

In many ways, Sprott and Matheson complimented each other. While the BBC had an important role to play informing women about the wider world, it was a fact that the majority of daytime listeners were domestically orientated. Sprott and Matheson represented these two different needs. Sprott also conceived the idea of involving the listeners themselves in *Household Talks*, suggesting to Matheson that they contribute recipes and household hints, which would be professionally read-out, and for which they would be paid a small fee (WAC: R51/239, 7 July 1928, Scheme for Special Series of Listeners' Contributions to Household Talks). An appeal for Listeners' Contributions in *Radio Times* solicited more than 1,300 entries (*Radio Times*, 24 August 1928; 21 September 1928). *A Listener's Household Talk* was first broadcast on 24 September 1928 and continued monthly thereafter, possibly the earliest example of listener input at the BBC. In October 1928, bolstered by the success of Listeners' Contributions, Sprott approached Matheson with a new venture; a daily rather than a weekly household talk (WAC: R51/239, 2 October 1928, Sprott to Matheson). The logical time for the new programme, she believed, would be 10.45am, "when housewives are about their work and ... early enough not to interfere with the shopping".

Discussions about the best time for women's talks had dogged the BBC since the earliest editions of *Women's Hour* and would continue throughout the 1920s and 1930s. The issue was never resolved because of the variance in women's listening habits linked not only to personal preference but also to age, social class, domicile and marital status. Nevertheless, on 7 January 1929 at 10.45am, the experiment of *Morning Talks* began, soon to become a mainstay of the inter-war schedules. Although Sprott suggested this significant change to women's programming, Matheson had a strong input in the final content. Sprott had

proposed somewhat mundane topics, for example talks on the principles of cooking, household art and domestic law (WAC: R51/239, 3 October 1928, Sprott to Matheson). While many of these ideas were realised, when *Morning Talks* came to air, far bolder series were also scheduled, initiated by Matheson. These included the feminist writer Ray Strachey's weekly *Woman's Commentary* on social affairs and *The Week in Parliament*, a vehicle through which women MP's spoke of the workings of Westminster. Nancy Astor made the first broadcast on 6 November 1929 and the series still exists on BBC Radio 4 today, as *The Week in Westminster*.

Sprott instigated a further series aimed at homemakers, *Housewives News* (WAC: R51/241: Housewives News, 10 October 1930, Sprott to Matheson). The five-minute weekly consumer bulletin came to air in September 1931 and was both produced and presented by Sprott. However, by this time Sprott had been moved out of the Talks Department to other duties and Matheson herself was to resign shortly afterwards, ostensibly over disagreements with Reith about the direction of Talks (Carney 1991, 71-83). There is a lack of clarity about Sprott's departure but it was undoubtedly linked to the arrival of Oxford graduate, Margery Wace. Matheson had finally found her "robust young woman" who joined the Talks Department in September 1930 initially as an assistant to Sprott (WAC: R51/646: Women's Programmes, undated document c.1931). In June 1931, the Control Board (Reith's inner circle of top managers) reported the ousting of Miss Sprott by Miss Wace, "a more efficient junior" (WAC: R3/3/7: Control Board Minutes, 30 June 1931). It was agreed that Sprott should be transferred to the newly created position of Women's Press Representative, with responsibility for publicity in connection with women's interests. Sprott would make a great success of her new job, travelling the length and breadth of the country to promote BBC women and women's programmes. She retired in 1945, as Head of Lecture Section.

## Margery Wace

Twenty-five year old Margery Wace was Matheson's perfect appointee. Not only was she Oxbridge educated but, prior to her arrival at the BBC, had been secretary to the Oxford branch of the League of Nations and to the classicist and internationalist, Professor Gilbert Murray. Unlike cheerful 'Sprottie', who could be unsophisticated in her dealings with contributors, Wace was earnest and politically astute. For the first eighteen months she worked directly to Matheson, who retained her interest in women's talks. However, after Matheson left the BBC in early 1932, Charles Siepmann, the new Director of Talks, handed over full responsibility for *Morning Talks* to Wace. Now able to impart her own vision, she refocused on the domestic but in a manner she believed would both empower women and benefit wider society. Writing in *Radio Times* in 1935, Wace stressed her conviction that the mother in the home was crucial to social cohesion:

The nation's health, both physical and mental, is in the housewife's hands. By her skill and knowledge she must often make a very small sum provide adequate food; by sharing her family's interests, and by keeping her mind alert, she must provide a happy atmosphere in the home. We want to help her (*Radio Times*, 1 November 1935).

Child and maternal welfare were topics of serious political discussion throughout the inter-war years (Lewis 1990) and Wace's series *A Doctor to a Mother* can be viewed as part of this wider debate. It also demonstrates her verve, conviction and fresh approach to *Morning Talks*. Writing to Siepmann in early 1932 she suggested new arrangements for the BBC's child welfare talks which were "potentially among the most important in the programme, capable, in time, of a real and lasting effect on the nation's health" (WAC: R51/75, 26 January 1932, Wace to Siepmann). Wace insisted that, because of this, not only should the most authoritative material be obtained but also the best speakers. She urged a change in the way they were chosen maintaining that, rather than depending on doctors in administrative positions, GPs should be used because, not only did they have personal experience with child patients, but also used less jargon. *A Doctor to a Mother* aired from October 1932 and was soon augmented by other Friday morning series on child and

maternal health such as *Common Sense and the Child* and *The Mother's Health*. In planning these programmes, Wace showed meticulous care. For example, in January 1934, for a series on the health of the school child, she wrote to the Matron-in-Chief of the London County Council requesting a meeting to discuss the problems facing school nurses (WAC: R51/75, 30 January 1934, Wace to Matron-in-Chief, County Hall). Wace wanted her child welfare talks to tackle difficult issues such as stammering, shyness and obstinacy as well as more established subjects such as baby care (WAC: R51/239, 7 April 1932, Wace to Quigley). The Friday morning talks by doctors continued up until the Second World War. Hilda Jennings and Winifred Gill, in their 1939 report on listening habits in Bristol, made specific reference to these talks which they believed had a positive effect on the working-class housewives who listened (Jennings and Gill 1939). Michael Bailey has argued that these talks empowered women, according them a new role as medical auxiliaries (Bailey 2009).

Another series initiated by Wace was *How I Keep House* in which housewives themselves spoke about their domestic routine (Andrews 2012, 46-50). In September 1934, *Radio Pictorial* ran an article headlined 'The Housewife's Friend' in which they wrote excitedly about Wace's journey around the country to meet potential contributors, "So far, her search has taken her to Norfolk to see a farm worker's wife, to Scotland to visit a fisherman's and to Reigate to visit a policeman's home" (*Radio Pictorial*, 21 September 1934). The series was also enthusiastically previewed in *Radio Times* (*Radio Times*, 17 August 1936). Wace was not the first BBC producer to use 'real' people as contributors, but this was the first time the device was used on *Morning Talks*.

To find her contributors, Margery Wace had indeed been conscientious. She approached organisations as diverse as the Amalgamated Union of Building Trade Workers and the Ministry of Agriculture. Writing to the General Secretary of the National Union of Railwaymen, Wace indicated that, in order to fit the series, the railwayman's wife she was

seeking should have young children, family earnings of not more than £2 a week and the reputation of being a good housewife (WAC: R51/240, 30 October 1934, Wace to Marchback). The notes sent to potential speakers indicate the specific and personal nature of the talks. The women were asked exactly to describe what they spent their housekeeping on as well as the daily routine of their lives. The essence of the series was that the women should be working-class housewives, so by definition not used to public speaking. Wace therefore oversaw their scripts and before each broadcast, the individual woman was extensively rehearsed. As Maggie Andrews has indicated, giving a voice to ordinary women, rather than experts, was a bold departure for the BBC and the series was well received (Andrews 2012, 49). A congratulatory letter from a Scottish miner's wife recounted that, despite running a home for nearly nineteen years, the talks had taught her many useful hints (WAC: R51/240, 5 October 1934, Letter from Mrs M Henry).

Wace's output was prodigious; in 1935 the six talks she produced each week were acknowledged to be the most in the Department. The other Talks Assistant, all male, were responsible for, on average, four talks series a year (WAC: R13/408/2, General Talks Department document, 28 February 1935). Possibly because of her proven value to the BBC, in the summer of 1936 Wace was moved to the expanding Empire Talks Department, where she was promoted to Empire Talks Director in 1938. In 1944, now married to a BBC colleague, she would die tragically young, shortly after the birth of their first child (obituary, *The Times*, 13 January 1944). One of her final acts as *Morning Talks* producer was to organise, with Elise Sprott, the BBC's Women's Conference. Held at Broadcasting House in April 1936, it was hosted by Sir Stephen Tallents, the newly appointed Controller of Public Relations and was attended by almost four hundred women representing more than sixty different organisations including the Women's Freedom League, the Electrical Association for Women, the Central Committee on Women's Training and Employment, the Mother's Union, the Women's Co-operative Guild and the Over Thirty Association. The Conference had as its focus *Morning Talks*, in particular the content and the timing of programmes

(WAC: R44/86/1: Women's Conference 1936). Thus, the issues that had exercised the NAWC were still of concern to the BBC twelve years on. Although the Women's Conference was viewed positively, the outcome was indecisive, indicating the impossibility of pleasing the diaspora of women, who had vastly differing tastes and daily routines.

### **Janet Quigley**

The replacement for Margery Wace was Janet Quigley. Quigley, an Oxford graduate like Matheson and Wace, had a varied working life before the BBC which included publishing, bookselling and a stint in the Publicity Department of the Empire Marketing Board (WAC: L1/784/1, Janet Quigley staff file). She was recruited to the BBC in 1930 as an Assistant in the Foreign Department where her main responsibility was American relays i.e. arranging simultaneous broadcasts from the USA.<sup>5</sup> Highly regarded by BBC managers, Quigley was thirty-four when she joined the Talks Department in August 1936.

Like Wace, Quigley's main duty was to supervise *Morning Talks*. In this she maintained the high standards and professionalism of her predecessor but with a lighter touch. While she retained the Friday morning series on child wellbeing, which she acknowledged were of real service to listeners, she introduced new programmes such as *Tea Time Talks* and *Five o' Clock* aimed at the family "sitting round the tea table, waiting to be entertained" (*Radio Times*, 25 September 1936). Quigley's distinct approach is apparent from an illuminating sequence of memos dating from November 1936, soon after her arrival in the department. These reveal Quigley's personal crusade to give air-time to 'The Beauty Racket', a subject she felt passionate about. As Carol Dyhouse has identified, the use of cosmetics was much debated in the inter-war years (Dyhouse 2010, 64-68). Because this was a controversial topic, Quigley needed the go-ahead from the Director of Talks, temporarily JM Rose-Troup (Siepmann had been sideways moved in October 1935). In her initial memo, she stated that if she had a mission in life it was "to save people, and particularly badly-off-women from the tyranny of advertising", claiming that beauty advertisements were "the most pernicious of all"

(WAC: R51/397/1: Talks Policy, 9 November 1936, Quigley to Rose-Troup). Quigley was particularly incensed that women of all ages were either being conned into spending large sums of money they could ill-afford on products with doubtful benefits or believed they were doomed because they were unable to purchase the new face powder or anti-wrinkle cream. Her series, in contrast, would show women how they could keep, “skin, hair and hands in good condition and also indulge in moderate cosmetics for ten shillings a year!”

Rose-Troup was impressed but because of the contentious nature of the series felt duty bound to approach the Controller of Programmes, Cecil Graves (17 November 1936, Rose-Troup to Graves). Graves’ response was curt. Having discussed the idea at Programme Committee, there was concern that the fury of the manufactures would be raised if the BBC were seen to be suggesting that women could make themselves beautiful by soap and water alone. In addition, from the point of view of *Radio Times* advertisements, which included beauty products, it would be difficult (19 November 1936, Graves to Rose-Troup). Quigley was not to be deterred. In July 1937, she re-presented her ‘considerably modified’ ideas to Sir Richard Maconachie, the new Director of Talks, assuring him that she was no longer “burning with indignation at recent revelations of the ramp behind the beauty trade!” She hoped that an occasional series of talks on the care of the skin, hands and hair might be included in the autumn *Five o’ Clock*, a new “more feminine” edition (6 July 1937, Quigley to Maconachie). Maconachie again proposed the series to Graves, citing as his excuse “the quenching of Miss Quigley’s spirit” (14 July 1937, Maconachie to Graves). That Quigley’s programme finally went ahead is confirmed in *Radio Times*. The listings for 21 October 1937 include a *Tea Time Talk*: ‘Making the Most of your Looks.’

Quigley introduced a plethora of other new series including six talks on *Careers* in collaboration with Ray Strachey of the Women’s Employment Federation and a long-running series *Other Women’s Lives*. Amongst the eclectic mix of speakers were Mrs Edward Harvey who ran a general store in a working class district of Liverpool; the film critic Winifred

Holmes; Agnes Smith, a 'doffer' in a cotton factory and Olga Collett, the Supervisor of Female Staff at ICI.<sup>6</sup> One series that aroused particular interest was *Mistress and Maid*. The 'servant problem' remained a worry for the middle-classes throughout the inter-war years (Light 2007; Delap 2011) and the subject had been reflected twice before on the BBC ('The Domestic Service Problem', Autumn 1924; 'The Future of Domestic Service', Spring 1930). Quigley's series, broadcast in early 1938, was the BBC's most extensive exploration of the issue with sixteen different viewpoints aired in twelve programmes. Like previous series, there was no debate as to whether servitude was intrinsically wrong; rather, as an article in *The Listener* explained, the different speakers expressed views on why they thought the servant shortage had arisen and how best the situation might be dealt with, highlighting issues of status, flexibility and pay (*The Listener*, 23 February 1938). Quigley was satisfied the subject had been given a thorough airing; her report indicated particular pleasure that, in many households, mistress and maid had listened and discussed the talks together (WAC: R51/397/2, 29 April 1938, Janet Quigley Quarterly Reports). The correspondence had also been impassioned, as Quigley explained, "We have been hailed, on the one side, as the courageous spokesmen of a maligned and inarticulate class, and, on the other, accused – usually by contented servants – of stirring up unnecessary trouble".

During her years in charge of *Morning Talks*, Quigley further developed programmes for women. While maintaining a number of long-running series such as the doctors' talks to mothers, she also placed greater emphasis on programmes for younger and more modern women. 'For the Young Housewife' was praised for its 'up-to-datedness'; her talks on beauty and simple cosmetics introduced a sparkle previously missing (*Radio Times*, 29 October 1937). Quigley continued her expansive interest in women's talks into the Second World War, producing many key programmes, including *The Kitchen Front* (Nicholas 1996). Later she would become a trailblazing editor of *Woman's Hour* (Skoog 2010 and in this volume), retiring in 1961 as Assistant Head, Talks.

## **Conclusion**

The BBC broadcast an impressive range of women's talks during the 1920s and 1930s. The topics selected, the speakers used, the production values exhibited were invariably those of the individual woman producer concerned. With its enlightened attitude towards the employment of female staff, the BBC provided an environment where these women could thrive; they were trusted and respected and, provided they didn't stray into areas of controversy, they were largely left alone. Although seldom light-hearted, talks for women fitted the Reithian principles of the BBC: to inform, educate and entertain. They addressed their daytime audience essentially as home-makers and mothers, offering insights on issues of health, domesticity and citizenship, but also providing stimulation and escapism. As Hilda Matheson noted, radio offered women, "a preparatory course to help them to catch up, to feel less at a disadvantage, to keep abreast of wider interests" (Matheson 1933, 189-90). Ella Fitzgerald, Elise Sprott, Hilda Matheson (in her role as a producer of women's talks), Margery Wace and Janet Quigley all had a strong sense of their listeners and were dedicated to producing talks they believed would enhance women's lives. The diversity of the audience meant that there was certainly dissatisfaction with the talks that were offered, but for many, they were a lifeline to the outside world as a letter to *Radio Times* confirms. Commenting on Ray Strachey's *A Woman's Commentary* in February 1929, a listener from Manchester wrote:

Such talks come as a god-send to women bursting with mental energy, yet who must stay close to work-a-day household duties. To one, at least, the task of cleaning a kitchen went down a little better whilst listening to the intelligent observations of an intelligent woman.

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<sup>1</sup> *Women's Hour* was one of a trilogy of programmes that included *Children's Hour* and *Men's Hour*. *Men's Hour* was short lived, its final broadcast was 9 October 1923.

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<sup>2</sup> At some points in the schedule there would have been an alternative, broadcast from a provincial or regional BBC station.

<sup>3</sup> Fitzgerald's interpretation of the figures was inaccurate: 57% had voted against domestic topics i.e. 187 out of 326 letters received (NWAC Minutes, 20 February 1924).

<sup>4</sup> For example, Matheson was Secretary of the Joint Committee of Inquiry into Broadcasting and Adult Education, chaired by Sir Henry Hadow, 1926-1928 (WAC: R14/145/Education: Adult Education).

<sup>5</sup> Quigley was suggested to the BBC by her flatmate and former Oxford University friend Isa Benzie, who became the BBC's Foreign Director in 1933.

<sup>6</sup> Olga Collett would become the BBC's first female Outside Commentator, in 1937.