

Jamie Medhurst, *The Early Years of Television and the BBC* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press), pp. x + 200, 14 illus., ISBN 978 0 7486 3786 7 (hb), £85.

In 1938, the journalist Garry Allighan made a scathing comment about the BBC hierarchy's lack of enthusiasm for television. It was, he stated, a 'new limb that had been forcibly engrafted' upon it. It is this premise (p. 169) that Jamie Medhurst sets out to challenge in his hugely engaging and compellingly written new book on the history of the BBC and early television. Drawing widely on the archives of the BBC, including the special collections of Cecil Madden and Sydney Mosely, two key players in the story, it starts in the mid-1920s with a gripping saga of hubris (Baird and his company), caution (the BBC), coupled with hopes of economic and national pride (the government, the GPO and the press). By 1935, with the medium now fully embraced by the BBC, the focus of the book moves to a close scrutiny of the development of its service which, when it was launched on 2 November 1936, was the first regular high-definition service in the world.

Metcalfe is aware that he has entered an arena of plenty, in terms of previous histories of early television and is respectful of what has gone before. He situates his book firmly in the 'institutional history' camp (p. 2). As he states, his focus is the relationship the BBC had with television and how it responded to and, ultimately, embraced it. John Logie Baird has a central role; his belief in the new medium and his continual pressure on the BBC, largely backed by the government and the GPO and abetted by his supporters including the ferret-like Mosely, irked the BBC and pushed it to move more quickly than it might have.

A central feature of *The Early Years of Television and the BBC* is its careful combining of not just BBC documentation, but the associated files of the Baird Television Company and Marconi-EMI, the other main player in the story. The GPO, as the licensee, was also heavily involved and as Metcalfe shows, often acted as mediator. While these sources predominantly inform the first four main chapters of the book, the final two, which move the locus to North London, additionally draw on the BBC's oral

history collections and the archives of the Alexandra Palace Television Society, using personal testimony to add depth and colour. An extra joy is the wonderful selection of photographs which reveal the emerging technology in action.

While Chapter Two introduces Baird's captivating experiments in 'seeing by wireless' (p. 19) which began in 1923, it wasn't until June 1927 that television was first officially mentioned by the BBC. Chapter Three brilliantly evokes the Corporation's anxieties, particularly the scathing attitude of the BBC's Chief Engineer, Peter Eckersley, who insisted that the inadequacies of the 30-line system, coupled with the exorbitant price of a receiving set, meant that the BBC would be reckless to get involved. But pressure was mounting. At a time when other countries were experimenting with television - most notably America - it became imperative that a British-based company, supported by the BBC, should win the race. Metcalfe sums up the period from the early 1920s, until the start of the BBC's 'experimental' service in 1929, as one of 'great creativity, innovation, hostility, hyperbole and innovation' (p. 52); a time when the focus was on the scientific and technological aspects of the new medium, rather than what a television service might look like. The latter, then, is what is fleshed out in the ensuing pages of the book.

On 30 September 1929, the first programme of a rudimentary television service, provided by Baird, but transmitted by the BBC, was broadcast. Chapter Four considers the BBC's often grudging engagement with this project, while also capturing its excitement, particularly the joint production of *The Man with the Flower in His Mouth*. Metcalfe is clear, however, about the BBC's growing awareness of its pivotal role, if this new form of broadcasting was to get underway. By 1931 it was accepted that the time had come to decide, 'whether to co-operate wholeheartedly with the Baird system or see it disappear for lack of funds and opportunity' (p. 68). The former was agreed.

Chapter Five, which considers the years 1932-35, begins in the August when the first programme on the BBC's 30-line service was aired, using the latest Baird equipment. It was prepared by Eustace Robb, the BBC's first television producer. The thrill and energy of these broadcasts is wonderfully conjured up and Metcalfe leaves no doubt that the Baird system had improved. But lurking in the wings was EMI; the system they were developing in their Surrey laboratories being notably superior. Because the company was partly owned by RCA, Baird called foul, and it was tainted as American. Metcalfe then shows how 'political considerations' (p. 90) i.e., Britishness, delayed attempts by the BBC to work with this competitor.

Alexandra Palace is the location for the final two chapters, which unpick the behind-the-scenes pressures, determinations and negotiations which would see saw the regular Television Service launched in November 1936. The BBC initially provided facilities for both Baird and EMI to transmit and, while the story of their rivalry is well known, Metcalf digs deep into the archival sources to elaborate on Baird's failure and EMI's success. The new service was not without detractors and the book does not shy away from exposing internal frictions, for example, the Television Department might not be easily controlled or that Sound Broadcasting might suffer. The role of John Reith is also explored with Metcalf revealing a more nuanced understanding of a man who is widely seen as detesting the new medium.

As Metcalfe acknowledges, *The Early Years of Television and the BBC*, took many years to come to fruition (p. v). The benefits of maturing insights, as well as rigorous research, make it a worthy addition to the ever-growing historiography of the Corporation. (978 words)

Dr Kate Murphy
Visiting Fellow, Bournemouth University