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'The BBC and the value of women's labour, 1930–1950: Isa Benzie and Joanna Spicer'

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ABSTRACT

BBC administrative and personnel documents often refer to the 'value' that an employee brought to the organisation, both positive and negative. While not inherently gender-based, these evaluations could have a gendered dimension. Specifically, the introduction of a Marriage Bar in 1932 established the notion of the 'exceptional' woman who was worthy of keeping her job with 'special value' part of the criteria for retention. This paper considers 'value' in the context of two 'exceptional' women—Isa Benzie and Joanna Spicer—from the mid-1930s to 1950, encompassing their years at the BBC and also with the Ministry of Information (MOI)'s Broadcasting Division during the Second World War. Benzie, who achieved the status of BBC Foreign Director in 1933, held a senior role at the MOI before returning to the BBC in 1943 in a lower capacity as a Talks Producer. Joanna Spicer, a former Selfridges' administrator, became frustrated with her more junior MOI post and moved to the BBC's Overseas Department in 1941, motivated by the prospect of better pay and career prospects. The wartime and post-war experiences of Benzie and Spicer encapsulate a host of gendered issues including professional status, pay grades, job titles and advancement.

KEYWORDS

Women; BBC; Second World War; employment

Performance in professional roles is often judged not just on the skills that individuals possess, but also on gendered assumptions of innate abilities, with women's 'characteristics' being under-valued. The careers of Isa Benzie (1902-1988) and Joanna Spicer (1906-1992) provide a lens to explore the value of women's work at the BBC from the mid-1930s to 1950. Both women would have substantial careers with the BBC, but with very different trajectories. Benzie had two BBC 'careers'. The first was prior to the Second World War when she would rise to be the Corporation's Foreign Director. The second was from 1943, when she returned to the BBC after four years with the Ministry of Information (MOI), to a significantly lower position as a Talks producer. Joanna Spicer, who was employed as a junior to Benzie at the MOI, moved to the BBC in 1941 as

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Empire Executive. This was a more highly paid job than Benzie's producer post and the two women's post-war careers would take them in very different directions. The period under discussion here was thus a time of great change for both women, reflected in perceptions of their value. Benzie and Spicer serve as examples of how women navigated administrative and production roles in the clubby atmosphere of an increasingly professionalised BBC. Their successes, and failures, are emblematic of how the growing professionalisation of the BBC fed into perceptions of a woman's value, allowing only small numbers of determined women with special qualities to succeed. By tracing their professional lives from the MOI to the BBC, this article examines how issues of professionalism, pay grades, job titles and promotion were impacted by gendered ideals of their value to the Corporation.

Women, value and creative industries

Women's value in the creative industries has become a topic of discussion in recent years. Melanie Bell, in her 2021 book *Movie Workers: The Women who Made British Cinema*, opens her introduction with a statement about how value was attached to women's film production work not only by the industry, but also by society and film history.¹ She argues that because women's skills were assumed to be innate, they were not viewed as skilled workers and so their labour was devalued.² Sarah Arnold reiterates this point in her history of women in early television; because women's work was either effectively invisible or seen as feminised they were considered to be less productive, and so had lower value.³ These tendencies were certainly manifest in the early BBC in terms of the sex segregation of posts with most women employed in lower-paid clerical and secretarial roles.⁴

The early BBC, however, is more complicated than this binary. Founded in 1922, it displayed a more progressive attitude towards women than many other organisations at this time; for example, it employed married women and, for those who were salaried, ostensibly offered equal pay.⁵ There were also greater opportunities for women to advance through the ranks.⁶ Women held significant posts: Hilda Matheson became Director of Talks in 1927, Mary Somerville became Director of School Broadcasting in 1931 and Isa Benzie became Foreign Director in 1933. Women were valued for the specific skills that they brought to the BBC: Hilda Matheson for her intellectual abilities and impressive contacts; Mary Somerville for her understanding of how children learnt through wireless; Isa Benzie for her linguistic and organisational expertise.⁷ Unsurprisingly, women were valued for the knowledge and experience they brought to women's programming. As Kristin Skoog noted in her exploration of the early *Woman's Hour* programme, Janet Quigley, who became editor in 1950, was viewed as 'invaluable' by the BBC because of the nine years (1936-1945) she had previously spent overseeing women's output.⁸ Other academics have also specifically referenced women's value in the BBC. Writing about Australian women working for the Corporation in the 1930s and 1940s, Jeannine Baker observed how Peggie Broadhead, a producer in Schools Broadcasting, and Muriel Howlett, a producer in External Services, were both valued for their dominion backgrounds.⁹ Laura Carter, in her exploration of Rhoda Power's role within educational broadcasting, comments that she was valued 'as an educational expert, but not as an intellectual', highlighting the complexities of unpicking the meaning of value in an institutional context.¹⁰

In 1933, women's value at the BBC was specifically commodified in the wake of the establishment of a marriage bar and the subsequent creation of a Marriage Tribunal.¹¹ In many ways, the introduction of a marriage bar in 1932 was an indication of the BBC's hunger to be seen as a professional establishment as marriage bars were commonplace within many professions in the interwar era. However, the BBC marriage bar was not a full bar, the Corporation wanted to retain the services of women who were deemed crucial to the running of the organisation. Hence the founding of a Marriage Tribunal where a woman's value could be judged, and where the notion of the 'exceptional' woman was introduced. Amongst the key criteria used to assess a woman's value to the BBC, and her exceptionality, were her indispensability, her loyalty, her efficiency and her career-mindedness, qualities equated with professionalism.

That the BBC was grappling with notions of professionalism at this time is not unexpected. As Heidi Egginton and Zoë Thomas discuss in their introductory chapter to *Pre-carious Professionals: Gender, Identities and Social Change in Modern Britain*, in new organisations concepts of what it meant to be professional were not firmly established, and the idea of the appropriate employee was not yet set.¹² They draw on the work of the historian Joan Thirsk who identified how young professions which start with a culture of equality, move towards male control as their structure becomes formalised.¹³ The linkages between professionalisation, masculinity and patriarchy, and the subsequent evaluation—often devaluation—of female staff, have also been explored by the sociologists Anne Witz and Jane Acker. In *Professions and Patriarchy*, Witz discusses how professions are defined, establish inclusionary/ exclusionary strategies and become closed, and the role that gender plays in the process.¹⁴ She highlights how the definition phase, which she calls demarcation, is essential in subordinating women's place in a profession. Acker notes how organisational structures obscure the challenges women face within institutions, as idealised employee attributes are coded for values that conform to masculine benchmarks.¹⁵

These traits were evident in the evolving BBC. As broadcasting developed from its experimental stage, it increasingly became identified as a good profession and a growing number of young male graduates clamoured to join. In 1934, formal appointment boards for salaried posts were introduced, largely moving the Corporation away from ad hoc selections that were often based on contacts. As the pre-Second World War Appointment Board minutes show, with women now directly competing with men, their chances of gaining a foothold decreased.¹⁶ Women also had to negotiate a BBC culture that was underpinned by the concept of the 'old boys' network' which meant there was an automatic favouring of men who shared similar backgrounds and education, particularly in terms of promotion.¹⁷ Women who reached senior positions in the BBC tended to be isolated and there is also ample evidence to show that the majority had linear careers, becoming expert in a particular field, rather than emulating the zig-zag careers of men that took them to the top.¹⁸ It was this expertise—and professionalism—that became central to women's success. As they created and developed new areas of broadcasting, be it in talks, education or women's programming, for example, they gained status and respect, and their value grew. Also, they were rarely in direct competition with men as they gained promotions within their own areas of work.¹⁹

Yet, although the BBC valued women's expertise and professionalism, their salaries were likely to be lower than men's, their progression through the salaried grades

slower and the upper echelons of management remained outside their reach. For example, while the BBC's claim that it offered equal pay was true in as much as there was only one salary scale, women were far more likely to start on lower earnings than men, which could then have a long-term impact on their income. The BBC recognised this incongruity in 1938. During a standardisation of salaries, it was acknowledged that, because women's starting salaries related to their market value when they joined, "age for age" they were generally paid less'.²⁰ This realisation was reiterated in 1945 when the BBC was preparing its submission for the Royal Commission on Equal Pay. The Director of Staff Administration wrote that it could happen that a woman was, 'put into the lower grade rather than the higher, or take longer to obtain her promotion, simply because she is a woman and not because her particular qualifications or performance in the post are below that of a man'.²¹ As will be detailed, this pay differential was apparent for both Benzie and Spicer. Although they were certainly viewed as skilled, in terms of remuneration, their value to the Corporation was perceived differently to that of their male colleagues.

Introducing Isa Benzie and Joanna Spicer

Four years apart in age, Isa Benzie and Joanna Spicer share many commonalities in their personal and professional lives. As will be discussed, they were both privately educated and attended the University of Oxford: Benzie graduated from Lady Margaret Hall in 1926; Spicer from Somerville in 1927. Both had influential contacts which smoothed their recruitment to the BBC. For Benzie this was a personal connection between her father and the BBC's first Director General, John Reith; in Spicer's case she received a recommendation from Margery Fry, former Principal of Somerville College and a BBC Governor. Both started working for the government in 1939 and worked under Lindsay Wellington when he was head of the Broadcasting Division at the MOI. Both had married in 1937 and had a child in 1938, and were juggling their family lives with important, demanding jobs during the war.

Both women had commanding personalities and were described by colleagues (in today's language) as workaholics.²² All accounts of Spicer paint her as a quiet but tough negotiator, who strove to get the most out of limited budgets.²³ From her first contact with the BBC, it is apparent that she was striking and confident. Her first interviewer was wowed by her appearance and thought her stylish and poised enough to be seeking an on-air role. The report from the BBC training school indicated she was a 'charming person'.²⁴ While routinely earning high praise for her work ethic, Spicer also received criticism for not delegating tasks and for having 'difficulty in winning trust and getting on with those by whom she is not trusted'.²⁵ Images of Benzie show her also to be stylish, and she was similarly criticised for her sometimes prickly character, but only in her post-war BBC career. During her years with the Foreign Department, memos and confidential reports show almost universal praise; words such as tact, clear-headed, shrewd, reliable abound.²⁶ As a Talks producer things were very different; while there was commendation for Benzie's output, she was referred to as intolerant, quarrelsome and temperamental.²⁷

Yet, despite sharing many similarities, the two women differed in their BBC career trajectories. While Benzie had reached a high level in the BBC before the war, on her return

in 1943, she assumed a far more limited role. In contrast, Spicer's career advanced in the post-war era, primarily through her influential role in BBC television planning from the 1950s. However, as is demonstrated here, in the immediate post-war era, Spicer struggled to push herself forward.

The primary sources consulted for the article are the institutional records of the BBC. These records include personnel, programme and policy files. The personnel files, in particular, with their internal memos and annual reviews, provide vivid insights into the BBC's valuation of Benzie's and Spicer's contributions to the organisation. These records are central to the telling of their stories as little has been published about them, particularly during the period under discussion here, apart from Kate Murphy's exploration of Benzie's pre-war BBC career and Kate Terkanian's inclusion of a short section on Spicer's wartime career in her PhD.²⁸ Spicer does feature in Leonard Miall's *Inside the BBC*, but in a small chapter of just over five pages.²⁹ More significantly, because of her status at the close of her career, in 1984 Spicer was considered important enough to warrant an interview for the BBC's oral history project. This is now publicly available on *The Connected Histories of the BBC* oral history website.³⁰ Spicer is mentioned within other interviews in this collection, but usually fleetingly with only the broadcasters Peter Dimmock and Esther Rantzen and the administrator John Drummond discussing her in any detail.³¹

This article does not cover the entirety of Benzie's and Spicer's careers at the BBC rather it concentrates on their broadcasting work with the MOI during the Second World War and their different experiences of the BBC in the immediate post-war 1940s. This was the period when both women established the roles that would take them forward into the ensuing decades (Benzie retired in 1964, Spicer in 1973). It starts with Isa Benzie, who joined the BBC in the interwar years, and then weaves together the lives of the two women, as their careers intersected and then diverged. The focus is on their perceived value at both the MOI and the BBC, and the changing nature of professional status throughout the 1940s.

Isa Benzie in the pre-war BBC

Isa Donald Benzie was born in Glasgow in 1904, one of three daughters of a chartered accountant. After completing her 'Highers' at Laurel Bank School, she went to Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford in 1922, graduating with Honours in German in 1926. During her time at university, she travelled widely in Europe and was evidently an accomplished linguist. Like many female graduates at this time, she took a typing course to improve her chances of employment, and it was in a secretarial capacity that she joined the BBC in December 1927.³² Her arrival at the BBC was prompted by a connection between her father and John Reith. Lieutenant Colonel Robert Marr Benzie had served alongside Reith during the First World War in the Fifth Scottish Rifles, and he had written to his former comrade extolling the virtues of his daughter.³³ Benzie was placed in what was to become the Foreign Department as secretary to the department's head Major C.F. Atkinson. The department was responsible for all BBC dealings with overseas broadcasters, so an important—and ever-expanding—place to work, and one that played well to Benzie's experience and expertise. As an Oxford graduate, if Benzie had been a man, she would certainly have been appointed



Figure 1. Isa Benzie, 1936. Courtesy of BBC Photo Archive.

to the salaried ranks, probably as an Assistant on circa £300 per annum (pa). Instead, her status and pay—a starting wage of £3 a week—reflected the lower value commonly placed on women at this time (Figure 1).

Atkinson became quickly aware of Benzie's capabilities, which he nurtured. Less than a year into the job she was deputising for him and within eighteen months she was earning £5 a week, the top wage for her secretarial grade.³⁴ Yet, despite agreeing with Atkinson's assessment of Benzie as 'really a first class assistant', and acknowledging that she acted as his 'substitute', BBC managers continually declined to promote her to the salaried grades.³⁵ Her value was finally recognised in April 1930, when she became an Assistant on £300 pa, though in the lowest grade (Grade D) where she remained for three years. In January 1933 evidently frustrated by the continuing failure to acknowledge Benzie's

role, Atkinson prepared a lengthy document clearly outlining her value and requesting a hefty salary increase to £600 pa.³⁶ He likened her to a woman entering the teaching profession, 'which is perhaps the only definite career to go by in the case of women', where she could 'reasonably expect to reach a headmistress-ship of the £1,000 a year class'. As a result of Atkinson's intervention, Benzie was promoted to Grade C on £500 pa.

As these negotiations were happening, a dramatic change took place—Atkinson resigned with Benzie the clear choice to replace him. To move from a waged position to head of department in just over three years was unprecedented in the BBC. As Foreign Director, Benzie now had full oversight of all the BBC's interactions with overseas broadcasters—those that fell outside the scope of the Empire Service which had been launched in 1932. One of her roles was to attend the meetings of the prestigious International Broadcasting Union where she was the only woman member. Benzie was also pivotal to discussions, for example, about the BBC's representation at the 1936 Berlin Olympics and the international coverage of the 1937 Coronation of George VI.³⁷

As part of the larger Empire and Foreign Service Department, Benzie had joined a senior management team that was exclusively male. There was one other female head of department at this time, Mary Somerville in School Broadcasting, but the two women would have rarely crossed paths. Benzie evidently relished her new status. Her correspondence exudes confidence, and she was highly respected in her role. As her line-manager Lindsay Wellington wrote in her April 1936 annual confidential report:

I have long relied on her knowledge, diplomacy and great personal ability for guidance in matters affecting broadcasting outside this country. I can say, too, that I know that she has done invaluable work throughout the past year.³⁸

However, despite her evident value, Benzie's grade and salary remained lower than all other department heads, all of whom were on Grade A or above. Benzie started the role on £500 pa in Grade C whereas Atkinson on his resignation as Foreign Secretary earned £1,250 pa.

There is nothing in Benzie's files to indicate that she ever asked for a pay rise. She appears to have been satisfied with her earnings which would have been considered very good for a woman. Rather it was her managers who, each year, requested an above-average rise, because 'Miss Benzie's salary is much too low for her responsibilities'; a fact that made them uncomfortable.³⁹ In April 1936 she was promoted to Grade B and finally, in June 1937, to Grade A. However, this re-grading coincided with the announcement that she planned to leave the BBC as she was to be married. As an 'exceptional' woman, there was no requirement that Benzie should resign; it was her choice. However, in order not to inconvenience the Corporation, she agreed to stay on until January 1938.⁴⁰ Two months later, in March 1938, a divisional restructuring was announced and the Foreign Department ceased to exist.⁴¹ With Benzie gone, it was subsumed into the new Overseas Department and her assistant, Richard Marriot, took on the lesser role of Foreign Liaison Officer. Benzie's salary on leaving the BBC was £900 pa; a figure that would have significance in her later career.

Joanna Spicer's pre-war career

While Isa Benzie forged her post-Oxford career at the BBC, Joanna Spicer chose a different path. Spicer started life as Joan Ravenscroft Gibbon in St Albans, the daughter

of a General Post Office telegraph engineer. Although hers was a family of modest means, she attended the prestigious St Paul's Girl's School in London and from there was awarded a scholarship to Somerville College, Oxford in 1924.⁴² In the twelve years between leaving university in 1927 and joining the Ministry of Information 1939, Spicer had a scattered employment history. She received a teaching certificate in 1928 but never appears to have worked as a teacher.⁴³ Instead, she worked for a few years at Somerville College as secretary to the Oxford University Women's Appointment Board, putting her in close contact with the Principal of Somerville, Margery Fry, who served as a BBC Governor from 1937 to 1938. By 1934 Spicer was working at Selfridges for Gordon Selfridge Junior as a staff administrator which included supervising both female and male staff.⁴⁴ In between her time as secretary and her role at Selfridges, Spicer had married Reginald Spiller in 1930 who subsequently divorced her in 1935, naming Robert Spicer as co-respondent.⁴⁵ Robert Spicer's wife also obtained a divorce from him in 1935.⁴⁶ Joanna and Robert Spicer subsequently married in 1937, and their only child together was born in 1938.

After the birth of her son in 1938, Spicer worked as a personal assistant to Selfridge until she secured her position with the MOI. While the BBC appears to have valued the fact that she administered both men and women—something noted in her staff file—the Civil Service may have been less enthralled with her experience in the retail sector, or perhaps even her messy personal life, as divorce was both very public and difficult to obtain in 1935. In her BBC oral history interview, Spicer glossed over her time at Selfridges and mentioned little about her personal circumstances during what was an undoubtedly difficult period in her life; she indicated that she went directly into employment with the MOI after graduating from Oxford, erasing more than a decade of her post-university experience.⁴⁷ At the MOI, Spicer would work in various capacities ultimately working alongside Isa Benzie who had herself joined the Ministry in 1939.

Benzie and Spicer at the Ministry of Information

In December 1938, Benzie had given birth to her only child—a daughter; five months later, in April 1939 she accepted the role of Deputy Director of the Joint Broadcasting Committee (JBC). The JBC was a semi-clandestine organisation established by the Foreign Office and headed by Benzie's former BBC colleague Hilda Matheson.⁴⁸ The JBC's main role was propaganda: to create radio programmes that would show British life in a positive light, either as scripts or as recordings on discs, that could be sent to broadcasting organisations throughout the world. Benzie's previous experience and status at the BBC was recognised in her salary; at £800 pa this was much higher than the £600 pa usually paid to women in comparable positions in the Civil Service. The JBC trod similar ground to the BBC's Empire and Overseas Services. The tricky relationship was partly facilitated by Benzie who, in August 1939, took on the role of Liaison Officer for the JBC.⁴⁹

In April 1940, the MOI established a new Broadcasting Division under Lindsay Wellington, who was released from his senior post at the BBC. The Broadcasting Division worked closely with the BBC; indeed, in its early days it was described by the MOI as a 'kind of BBC out-post in our midst', although later this was vociferously refuted

by the BBC.⁵⁰ As her former manager, Wellington knew and valued Benzie's work and he insisted that she be transferred from the JBC to join him. She was to be one of three Specialists and would head up the Foreign Language Broadcasting Section. When requesting the transfer, Wellington had stipulated that her present annual salary be preserved—the salary level that was paid to men.⁵¹ The MOI Specialist roles were significant; amongst much else, Benzie was to 'advise the BBC on all points affecting the content of [foreign] broadcasts'.⁵²

Wellington was also involved in Joanna Spicer's transfer from the Communications and Secretarial Division of the MOI to the Broadcasting Division in September 1940.⁵³ The MOI oversaw the writing of finance cases that dealt with BBC expansion, especially the provision of overseas broadcasting, including personnel, equipment, transmitter construction, programme allowances and administering the Monitoring Service. This had been Spicer's remit in her former division and with these duties now reassigned to his Division, Wellington was keen that she should move with them.⁵⁴ Evidently, Spicer was developing a flair for planning which she would carry over to the BBC. By November 1940, Wellington was requesting that Spicer be allocated a Research Assistant because the volume of work was too much for her. This was approved.⁵⁵

At this time, the Broadcasting Division was still divided into three sections: Empire Broadcasting, headed by former BBC staffer James Macgregor; Foreign Language Broadcasting headed by Isa Benzie; and Home Broadcasting, headed by Andrew Stewart. Home Broadcasting was Spicer's section where, as second in command, she was designated only as a Senior Assistant Specialist. In February 1941, it was agreed that the intensity of the Division's work was such that a reorganisation was required and a new section 'BBC Finance and Administration', to be headed by Spicer, was added. At the same time Macgregor was promoted to Deputy Director of the Broadcasting Division. Despite Spicer now holding a similar position to Benzie in the divisional structure, she continued to be graded as a Senior Assistant, rather than a Specialist, with a correspondingly lower salary. While both Wellington, and later Macgregor, worked to push Spicer's salary higher at the MOI, the Civil Service was reluctant to move her to a position higher than an Assistant Principal which paid £480 pa.⁵⁶

Spicer was aware that the BBC had more favourable pay rates for female staff, and that Benzie enjoyed a higher status at the MOI because of her BBC connections. This influenced her decision to leave the MOI in July 1941 to work for the Corporation, as it appeared that the BBC would value her contribution more than the MOI was willing to. However, Spicer was not the only one to make overtures to the BBC at this time, as Isa Benzie was also in negotiations to return.

Forging new links with the BBC

In April 1941, Wellington was abruptly recalled by the BBC with Macgregor taking over as Director of the Broadcasting Division at the MOI. This may have been the reason why Benzie approached the Corporation in May 1941, with a view to returning there. Rather than use official channels, she drew on her earlier friendship with the now Deputy Director General, Cecil Graves, whom she had worked under as Foreign Director. Graves was keen, convinced that it would be 'a great mistake to lose the chance of employing

someone with such first-class experience and knowledge of broadcasting, particularly where it relates to foreign countries'.⁵⁷ The problem was what role would this be? A flurry of memos then ensued involving several senior managers.

J. B. Clark, Assistant Controller (Overseas), for example, suggested a variety of different possibilities for Benzie including taking charge of American broadcasters and overseeing the centralisation of records in the Overseas Division.⁵⁸ However, because of Benzie's previous BBC grade and salary, it was acknowledged that it would be difficult to find something at an appropriate level.⁵⁹ It was then agreed that a special role could be created for her that would draw on her knowledge of the MOI to ensure there was no duplication of research within the BBC's Overseas Division, as well as carrying out Overseas Liaison work.⁶⁰ Benzie was certainly aware of her special value to the BBC; in early July she wrote to Clark stressing that, 'my years' experience in the Ministry has given me so clear a view of the deficiencies of the Ministry's organisation that I believe the Corporation could in some degree profit from it'.⁶¹ A good role for her within the Corporation, she suggested, would be public relations work for the Overseas Division.⁶² Clark shared her letters with Graves who, while aware of the value of Benzie's insider knowledge, felt strongly that it would be 'unsound' to bring her back on this basis.⁶³

Internal deliberations about Benzie's return to the BBC continued. It was agreed that she should be placed on Grade A1, not only because of the work she would do, but also because there was 'no doubt about [her] personal qualities and ability'.⁶⁴ The MOI were now involved, confirming that she had done 'a very good job of work', the only query being with regard to her health as it was sometimes felt she was 'flogging herself rather hard'.⁶⁵ The salary she would be offered by the BBC was £950 pa, a small rise on what she had earned before, and considerably more than her MOI pay. However, when Benzie met with A.C. Cameron, the Deputy Director of Staff Administration, to discuss conditions of service, she 'turned the offer down flat'. Cameron stated that he was not surprised because, 'she obviously valued her services to us considerably higher'.⁶⁶ Benzie's correspondence with the BBC does exude an air of confidence and entitlement. While these traits might be accepted and even encouraged amongst professional men, it seems that Cameron—who did not know Benzie well—found them to be unpalatable in a woman. The records do not provide direct evidence of why Benzie made the decision to turn away from the BBC. The proposed salary may have been the sticking point. However, it may also have been that her relationship with Macgregor had improved, and she now felt herself to be more valued at the MOI.

At almost the same moment that Isa Benzie was turning down a BBC job, Joanna Spicer was accepting one. Since mid-1940, Spicer had been actively looking for employment with the BBC. She had had two interviews and was considered for several positions including Assistant Overseas Intelligence Executive.⁶⁷ Spicer was also in the running for the post of Women's Staff Administrator (WSA). This was a senior administrative role that oversaw the recruitment and working conditions of the BBC's weekly-paid female staff who primarily held lower-level secretarial and clerical jobs. The WSA also served as welfare officer for monthly-paid salaried women.⁶⁸ Benzie, in her initial approach to the BBC, had hinted that she too had been identified as a possible candidate for the WSA position, but this idea was quickly squashed by several BBC managers who did not see her as suitable.⁶⁹ There was also doubt about Spicer's aptitude for the role.

Asked to comment on Spicer's suitability, Margery Fry did not wholly endorse her, stating that '[she] didn't think that [Spicer would] feel people really mattered, as people, quite enough'.⁷⁰ The role of WSA eventually went to another former Selfridges' employee, Gladys Burlton.

Spicer was also considered for a lower-level supervisory role in BBC Monitoring which paid the same as her MOI post. Presumably this was seen as appropriate due to her involvement with Monitoring estimates.⁷¹ However, because of Spicer's value to the MOI Broadcasting Division, Wellington refused to release her to the BBC, pushing hard instead to upgrade her to Principal.⁷² While she did receive a raise to £400 pa in March 1941—Wellington was asking for £500 pa—by April 1941 it was clear that the MOI would not budge regarding a promotion and Spicer resigned.⁷³ Following more discussions with the BBC, Spicer was selected for the post of Empire Executive, a significant job on Grade B with an annual salary of £800 pa, which was described as the administrative officer for the Empire Service. She joined the BBC on 28 July 1941, shortly after Benzie's aborted attempt to return.⁷⁴

Within months of Spicer's departure from the MOI, her male replacement was complaining about the routine nature of some of his tasks; tasks he felt should be conducted by someone of a lower status.⁷⁵ While this complaint probably reflects the uninteresting nature of controlling and monitoring budgets, it also demonstrates male expectations of senior roles—that routine tasks should be delegated. In Spicer's BBC annual reports, there are repeated references to her holding on to responsibilities that someone of her level would not have been expected to do.⁷⁶ Planning may also not have been prestigious enough for Spicer's replacement due to its support functions which were coded feminine. Files indicate that after her departure, Spicer's replacement at the MOI had five people (a Senior Assistant Specialist, a Junior Assistant Specialist, two Research Assistants and a newly-hired clerk, all of whom were women) working on the same tasks that Spicer had been handling with initially only two Research Assistants (a Junior Assistant Specialist had been added to Spicer's team in March 1941).⁷⁷ While recollections of her job duties reflect those in the MOI's records, Spicer's own description of her time at the MOI downplays her authority and she paints herself as a very junior and inexperienced learner who quickly became fascinated with broadcasting. In her oral history interview, she described the job in secretarial terms indicating she 'took minutes' and that she was 'very untrained' and had 'really only just left Oxford, more or less', further noting that 'she was very undisciplined' and the job 'taught her a lot'. As to why Spicer left the MOI, she emphasised the encouragement of people like Wellington, alongside financial concerns, rather than highlighting her own agency and ambition in joining the BBC.⁷⁸

As Empire Executive, Spicer earned more than double her MOI salary, confirming her expectations that the BBC would value her more than the MOI. There are few clues in the BBC files as to what the duties of this role were. However, Spicer later related that the position was akin to her MOI role and that she was involved in the expansion of English-language broadcasting, mainly news, to a global audience, but especially to British colonies and the Dominions.⁷⁹ Spicer's time at the MOI and the BBC coincided with an ambitious expansion in programming, broadcasting streams and transmitting stations dubbed the Triple Expansion Plan, and she worked directly with these efforts. Recognising the public relations and propaganda value of broadcasting in the war effort, the BBC, in conjunction with the government, launched a series of broadcasting

infrastructure-building projects to allow British programming to reach and influence a worldwide audience.⁸⁰ The MOI records indicate that Spicer was closely involved in monitoring the finance of these projects from the government side, and the BBC specifically asked the MOI to release her to work on the expansion project from the broadcasting planning side.⁸¹

This was a tense time at both organisations with an increasing amount of work being assigned to Spicer while she was still at the MOI. The heads of both the MOI and the BBC were replaced in the midst of the expansion, most likely due to a loss of confidence in their leadership over repeated failures to fully execute the plans. At the MOI, Brendan Bracken took over from Duff Cooper in July 1941, the month Spicer left.⁸² At the BBC, the delays in the project implementation eventually led to the Director-General Frederick Ogilvie's reluctant resignation in January 1942. Ogilvie's departure was followed by a sweeping BBC reorganisation where Spicer was first shifted to the post of Assistant Administrator for the Overseas Service.⁸³ In December 1942, she directly replaced Leslie Stokes as Empire Programme Planner without interview; a note in her file stated that she was 'well suited to the job' and that no advertisement should be made in order not to 'mislead applicants into thinking there is a fairly open field'.⁸⁴ This appears to have been a lateral transfer as neither her grade nor salary changed.⁸⁵ Although there were questions about her lack of programme production experience, her budgetary skills, honed both at the MOI and the BBC, clearly translated well into a similar role with programming.⁸⁶

While Spicer was becoming increasingly associated with programme planning at the BBC, Isa Benzie settled back into her Specialist role at the MOI; in September 1941, Macgregor noted that 'happily' Miss Benzie was not leaving the Broadcasting Division.⁸⁷ By April the following year, Macgregor was proposing that Benzie be given the title Deputy Director because as far as he was concerned this was a true reflection of her work: 'She is so de facto: let her be so de jure too'.⁸⁸ With salary likely to be an issue, he suggested that 'even a token rise would be a gratifying recognition of two years outstanding and unremitting work—not to say overwork!', implying that money was less important to her than recognition. Although the plan for a Deputy Director did not come to fruition, in June 1942 Benzie was moved to a new Specialist role in the Broadcasting Division, heading the newly created Coordination and Planning section.⁸⁹

When James Macgregor left in September 1942 to return to the BBC as Assistant Controller of News, Benzie again became dissatisfied with work at the MOI. Macgregor's replacement as Director of the Broadcasting Division was Arthur Burrows.⁹⁰ At the start of the BBC in the early 1920s, Burrows had held a top post as Director of Programmes before leaving to become Secretary General of the International Broadcasting Union (IBU) in 1925. In this latter role he would certainly have encountered Benzie when she took on the position of BBC Foreign Director. It may be coincidental, but within months of Burrow's arrival at the MOI, Benzie took the decision to accept a non-leadership and lower-paid producer job at the BBC, a move that would precipitate a big change in the perception of her value to the Corporation.

The BBC and questions about value, 1941–45

In the meantime, Joanna Spicer was adjusting to BBC culture and practices. During the first few months, concerns were raised about her work ethic and skills by her supervisor,

and gendered questions about her professionalism arose. In September 1941, Spicer was told she would have to do weekend duty once every seven weeks. Typically, this only meant being available by phone, but Spicer was required to come into the office as she had been evacuated with her young son to Kent—phone lines outside of London were deemed too unstable for her to be merely called if she was required to respond to inquiries.⁹¹ While the issue was resolved, for the Deputy Overseas Programme Administrator, Lionel Schuster, and the General Executive Officer (GEO), it raised questions about her professional dedication, prompting Schuster to prepare a list of her deficiencies. He observed that some of her memos were 'unclear', questioned her deputising of confidential tasks, and criticised her punctuality and her objections to weekend duties. However, it was the question of weekend duties and the issue of Spicer's childcare responsibilities that sparked the debate. The GEO specified that this was the 'first time' that any employee had 'any reluctance' to working weekends.⁹²

In a memo to Spicer on the topic, Schuster strongly suggested that parental concerns should not have an impact on the job. In referring to weekend duties, he noted that: 'We all, of course, have home and family responsibilities in varying degrees ... but I cannot agree that those of us who are married and parents should be excused duties such as these'.⁹³ A few months later while assessing her progress he was still critical of her family responsibilities, indicating he:

had difficulty in persuading her that it is unreasonable for staff to be given exceptional privileges in respect of week-end duty, attendance on Saturday morning, or 9.30a.m. punctuality because they are married, have children, and live in the country, and further that exceptional latitude in such respects was not, in an Executive, conducive to good discipline in a department.

While he did praise her understanding of her role and the speed to which she had adapted to the BBC environment, the memo ended by stating that 'It is too early to say if she has qualities of leadership or the extent to which she inspires enthusiasm in her subordinates, but I suspect deficiencies in these respects'.⁹⁴ What started as a dispute about weekend duties ended up mushrooming into a larger discussion about Spicer's professional behaviour as an administrator, and whether she could command the respect of subordinates. This gendered assessment of her work highlights the way domestic responsibilities could be seen as a professional liability that diminished the value of female staff, particularly those with young children. The issue does not seem to have affected Isa Benzie. In her files there are no references to children or childcare.

When Isa Benzie returned to the BBC service on 1 March 1943, however, she too would face questions about her value and professionalism. In January 1943, she had responded to a vacancy for a producer post in the Talks Department and subsequently met with the BBC's Director of Talks, George Barnes, to discuss the job. In his report to the Controller, Home Service, Richard Maconachie, Barnes stressed his view that, 'Miss Benzie would be an extremely valuable person here'.⁹⁵ Her wide contacts, her understanding and experience of security and policy censorship and her knowledge of BBC practice placed her at 'a great advantage' over the other applicants. Maconachie agreed, though he did pose a concern about her salary: 'She was a 'Director' here I think'.⁹⁶ Following her interview, Benzie was selected for the post accepting a salary of £750 pa in Grade B with a £50 salary rise each year.

There is nothing in Benzie's staff file to suggest she was unhappy with the salary and grade she had been offered. Neither is there any detailed information about what her duties were in her first months back at the BBC. While she could draw on a wealth of knowledge *about* programmes that were broadcast, she had no hands-on experience of *producing* a programme herself. In her Progress Report for August 1943, Benzie's immediate supervisor Christopher Salmon noted that she was better with solo broadcasters than discussions and that she tended to overwork.⁹⁷ Barnes's assessment was brusquer, commenting on her 'not always happy' relationships with speakers and outside contacts, and that she struck him as being 'very opinionated'.⁹⁸ Benzie had entered a new world at the BBC. She was no longer in a senior role among men who knew and respected her and who were prepared to look past her sometimes idiosyncratic behaviour. She was now one of many producers in an over-stretched department who was expected to come up with the goods.

In February 1944, Barnes drafted his first confidential annual report for Benzie.⁹⁹ He commended her 'first rate' talks by single speakers, the thoroughness of her investigations, her unusual 'turn of ideas' and her hard work. However, he was less impressed by her preference to work entirely on her own, her tardiness in submitting scripts and her strong personal views which were expressed 'with violence' causing difficulties with speakers. These comments were a far cry from the wholly positive appraisals that she had received in her previous Foreign Department reports in the 1930s, where Benzie's value had frequently been evoked. A year later, as he wrote her second annual report, Barnes' views had not significantly changed.¹⁰⁰ Benzie was evidently good at 'getting to the root of a subject' and an element of flair had been brought to some of the programmes she made. Her office routine had also improved. Yet her intolerance of people and their views were a handicap for her and sometimes made her 'a difficult colleague'.

But then things began to shift. At the close of 1944, Benzie had taken on much of the responsibility for *Can I Help You*, a long-running weekly strand that was first broadcast at the end of 1939. Here, she was seen to have excelled; her work on the series described as 'plainly outstanding'.¹⁰¹ More significantly, at the end of 1945, she had taken charge of health talks. From the mid-1930s, most regular talks on health had been overseen by Benzie's friend and colleague Janet Quigley, many being broadcast within women's programming so establishing a link between health and women's interests.¹⁰² These talks accelerated during the war, and two of the programmes that Quigley debuted—on infant care with Donald Winnicott (from December 1943) and the Radio Doctor with Charles Hill (from May 1942)—would assume legendary status. In July 1945, Quigley announced she planned to marry, tendering her resignation, and Benzie was her obvious replacement. Not only did Benzie take on Winnicott and Hill (she remained Hill's producer until 1951, and Winnicott's until 1960) but she would also begin to introduce numerous health-based ideas of her own.

Moving up the BBC ladder?: 1946–1950

In the immediate post-war era, Spicer remained in her planning role in the Overseas Service. However, like many others, she was eager to move out of a less-visible, and possibly less-prestigious, job into a more high-profile position in the domestic service.

Additionally, the future of the Overseas Service was in doubt. As Alban Webb's research demonstrates, the initial post-war expectation was that overseas broadcasting would slim down to a few crucial languages with an intended smaller target audience of educated male elites, and a significantly reduced broadcasting schedule. Webb notes that while the 1945 Labour government reversed some of these plans, broadcasting hours did shrink. Ultimately, the Overseas Service (later the World Service) would remain dependent on direct government financing, rather than through the licence fee. In the short-term this ensured that overseas broadcasting would continue but brought its own set of uncertainties including the extent of government oversight, and the instability that came with changing political climates and geopolitical events.¹⁰³

In February 1946, in the midst of these existential deliberations about the Overseas Service, Spicer—eager to advance her career and concerned about future opportunities—applied for the role of Assistant, Light Programme (Programme B). The Light Programme was one of the three new networks that were established in a major post-war overhaul of BBC Radio into three distinct services: Home Service (Programme A), Light Programme (Programme B) and 'Programme C'—what would become the Third Programme. Spicer had already applied for a similar position in Programme C and had given up hope for that role. In a personal, hand-written memo to J.B. Clark, now the Controller of the Overseas Service, Spicer had sought his approval for the application citing her desire to deal with 'new problems and responsibilities of a medium wave service'. She also noted that she felt future opportunities would be scarce and this was the last opportunity she saw on the immediate horizon.¹⁰⁴

In an echo of Lindsay Wellington's refusal to release her from the MOI, Clark, approved Spicer's application, but also immediately undermined her chances by attaching a memo indicating his reluctance to let her go by referring to the need to 'safeguard the staff position of shortwave services'.¹⁰⁵ Spicer had just been promoted to Grade A1, the first rung on the highest grading level, and was now earning £1260 pa. The promotion was possibly an attempt to forestall her from leaving, and may have played a part in Clark's opposition.¹⁰⁶ When Spicer, the only female applicant, was subsequently judged to be by-far the best candidate to become third-in-command to Norman Collins at the Light Programme, Clark delayed her appointment and launched a formal objection to her transfer, ultimately refusing to release her from her duties.¹⁰⁷ Collins strongly objected, indicating that he felt that no one else in the Corporation could fill the position as well as Spicer (Figure 2).¹⁰⁸

In his justification for keeping Spicer in the Overseas Service, Clark expressed his frustration that so many of his staff had shifted away from the Service in peacetime, including Collins and Tom Chalmers, who would be Collins' deputy at the Light Programme. Clark justified retaining Spicer on the basis that the greater needs of the Corporation should outweigh her personal ambition, something Clark had done in his own career.¹⁰⁹ He did suggest promoting her to a higher grade (A2) as a consolation and insisted that she was content with her current role. Collins had also intended to push for a quick promotion for Spicer had she moved into the Assistant, Light Programme position.¹¹⁰ While her post was nominally held for her for six months, an outside candidate, John McMillan, was placed in the role on an interim basis and was later confirmed when it was deemed 'in the best interest of the Corporation' not to displace him.¹¹¹



Figure 2. Joanna Spicer, 1963. Courtesy of BBC Photo Archive.

Benzie too, had her eye on a senior role within one of the new networks. In December 1945, evidently not content with her producer role, she had sought a job through the Ministry of Labour and National Service Appointments Department.¹¹² Then, in February 1946, she took the impulsive decision to apply for the post of Deputy Head of Programme C.¹¹³ While neither of these jobs materialised, both these applications suggest that Benzie felt herself to be insufficiently valued by the Talks Department at this time, but this would change. Rather than continue to look for work away from the Talks Department, Benzie increasingly carved out a niche for herself as the doyenne of health talks, a prolific output that was augmented by the inauguration of *Woman's Hour* in October 1946. Yet, her managers were slow to recognise the importance of health programmes to BBC listeners. Because a connection had developed between health and women's programming, the value of Benzie's talks may have been diminished. Indeed, it wasn't until 1950, when Janet Quigley returned to become *Woman's Hour* editor, that the status of women's programming was finally acknowledged.¹¹⁴

In Benzie's February 1947 confidential annual report, the new Director of Talks, Harman Grisewood, had expressed frustration at her reluctance to engage with spheres other than, 'the field of medicine and ... aspects of health, physical and psychological', hinting that this was endangering her role within the department.¹¹⁵ When he challenged her on this the following month, she remained adamant that this was the sphere she wished to devote herself to, urging the Corporation to 'recognise more fully ... its obligations in regard to this subject'.¹¹⁶ Aware now of the intensity of Benzie's commitment to health broadcasting, Grisewood recommended that she be given the opportunity to develop it, recognising also that this might help her to be more settled in her work.¹¹⁷ Richard Rendall, the Controller of Talks, agreed. In March, following a meeting with Benzie, Rendall stated that he was now of the opinion that the BBC's policy on health education talks should be reviewed.¹¹⁸ Because of her 'past service to the Corporation and her general ability', it was agreed that she should do this work. Rendall also introduced the question of

whether the time had come to make Benzie a permanent employee and place her on the established staff.

Before the war, Benzie had held an established post at the BBC (i.e. a permanent post, rather than a short-term/ad hoc contract). However, her return in 1943 was to an unestablished position, which was the wartime norm. In 1944, staff had been categorised 'with reference to retention' and for reasons which are unclear, Maconachie, took the decision that, while Benzie qualified for retention, this was on 'other work than that of a talks producer'.¹¹⁹ This was probably linked to her confidential reports, which, as noted above, were at this time often unfavourable. Because of Maconachie's verdict, Benzie was placed in a nebulous 'Category Z'. Although the files are unclear about what this category conferred, the designation resulted in Benzie remaining unestablished, without a proper staff post. There is no indication that Benzie's status was reconsidered prior to 1947, when it was raised by Rendall, and it took a further year for any action to be taken. By then the reasons for her being assessed as Category Z had become muddled.¹²⁰ There were suggestions that it was linked either to the Corporation's policy on health talks or also possibly to her own health record, although it was acknowledged that she rarely took sick leave.¹²¹ To avoid any confusion, a medical was arranged, which she easily passed.¹²²

There is no doubt that Benzie could be a difficult person to work with, however, it is also clear that her professional judgement was underestimated. Her push for health talks, particularly on the Light Programme, which was predominantly aimed at working-class listeners, was only gradually accepted. Following his meeting with Benzie in March 1947, Rendall had agreed that a review of the BBC's policy on health talks was needed but, as with her established status, this re-evaluation stalled until the following year. Benzie did not start her new contract as an established member of staff until November 1948, following her medical and a subsequent agreement among her managers that she now qualified as a 'General Talks Assistant'.¹²³ Shortly afterwards, she was finally given the status of 'Specialist Producer' in connection with health, which would remain her role in the Talks Department for much of the rest of her BBC career.¹²⁴ Benzie's continued pressure ensured that health talks were, at last, accepted as a vital part of the department's output. However, Benzie's salary (£1,100 pa) and grade (Grade B) remained unchanged.

Questions about Joanna Spicer's place within the organisation and her permanency were also being raised in the late 1940s. When McMillian's temporary post in the Light Programme was made permanent in early 1947, an effort was made to find Spicer an alternative post of comparable level. The files reveal either an absence of open positions—confirming Spicer's prediction of limited chance of advancement—or arguments as to why Spicer was not right for the role available. Despite having musical training, she was declared 'not musical enough' for an organising role in the Music Department, and although the Acting Controller (Entertainment) thought the post of Administrative Officer (Entertainment) would be appropriate, he believed it should go to a man. Even her old MOI Supervisor Lindsay Wellington declared there were no positions in her grade available in the Home Service.¹²⁵ With the position of the Overseas Services in flux, and budget cuts a concern, Spicer, like Benzie, remained in a temporary, unestablished wartime staff position; her move to a permanent, established contract was delayed by concerns regarding potential staff reductions.¹²⁶ In the midst of post-war insecurities, the BBC also seemed uncertain about Spicer's continued value to the Corporation. However, she was finally made an established member of staff

in September 1947, effective on 1 October—around the same time that Benzie's permanency was first being discussed.

For Spicer, established status also appears to have given her a new confidence and impetus to progress. Shortly after being confirmed as permanent, in early 1948, the Assistant, Light Programme position became vacant again. Collins had moved to a senior position in Television and Chalmers was being considered for the Controller role. Spicer was eager to move, even temporarily, to the post that was being vacated, and it was Chalmers who suggested that Spicer be given the role without the need for an appointment board. In the end, the move did not happen, even though Basil Nicolls, then serving as the Director of the Home Service, was eager to find a permanent place for Spicer in domestic radio.¹²⁷ A delay in naming Collin's replacement and concerns that the move would jeopardise Spicer's newly-won established role were to blame. The Overseas Service was now willing to release her but suggested downgrading her planning role, in effect leaving no way for her to return on her current grade if a permanent position did not materialise.¹²⁸ This final failed transfer marked the last opportunity for Spicer to have a career in medium-wave radio. Spicer eventually left the Overseas Service in 1950, first on a secondment and then to take up a specially created post as a general assistant to George Barnes, who had been appointed Director of Television.¹²⁹

Spicer and Benzie—post 1950, in brief

Although in an initially unstable position, Spicer's transfer to television marked a change in her professional value to the Corporation. In the early stage of her tenure in Television, she was specifically given non-supervisory duties, operating as a personal assistant to George Barnes, the Director of BBC Television.¹³⁰ Barnes insisted she operate in a clandestine fashion 'to stop fires' and 'to go after one or other problem areas' that were damaging the Television Service, with the stipulation that if something went wrong it was 'on her head' as he would not 'offer her general support'.¹³¹ It seems likely that professional jealousy played a role in keeping her duties strictly tied to Barnes, as Barnes indicated there were grumblings about a 'non-television' person being appointed into an influential position without advertisement.¹³² For Spicer, it was an appointment that helped secure her future at the BBC and her gradual elevation to Assistant Controller (Planning) Television in 1963, on a personal grade of Grade A+, based on her special value to the Corporation. While the BBC did not seem able to officially give her the title of Controller—which in effect she was, as there was no one senior to her in planning—they evidently valued her expertise and experience. Spicer recounted that upon receiving her promotions in the 1950s the then-Director-General Ian Jacobs commented to her, more than once, that he would never have expected a woman to rise to the level that she had.¹³³ Spicer's entry in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, penned by Leonard Miall, described her Assistant Controller of Planning role in gendered terms, calling her a 'housekeeper' who kept department heads in line and who was 'the power behind the throne'.¹³⁴

In the later part of her career, Spicer became a member of the European Broadcasting Union—a role once held by Isa Benzie in its previous incarnation as the IBU. Spicer retired in 1973, nearly seven years after the BBC's usual retirement age of sixty. While the BBC often kept senior staff on past the stated retirement age, these staff tended to

take on special projects or work reduced hours. However, Spicer did not seem to scale back her workload at all. Her annual reviews give no indication that her output was slowing, or that her tenure was nearing an end. The reports were unusually glowing and spoke of the depth of her knowledge and command of programming. In 1970 and 1971, Huw Weldon declared it was useless to review her work and called the process 'ridiculous'. In his opinion Spicer's efforts 'could not possibly have been anything but good', and that it was 'a privilege to work anywhere near her'.¹³⁵

The final years of Isa Benzie's career were less illustrious than that those of Joanna Spicer, but she still completed important work. By the time of her retirement in 1964 (she was also invited to stay on past her 'official' leaving date, but only by two years), Benzie had at last reached Grade A (though on the bottom level, A1 minus). This was in 1958, so twenty years after it was first offered to her. The regrading was largely in recognition of her work on the *Today* programme, of which she had been the driving force—and organising producer—since it first aired in October 1957.¹³⁶ However, Benzie's annual confidential reports indicate that throughout her post-war BBC career she continued to be viewed as a complex and sometimes difficult person to work with. While her programme output is applauded, and her professionalism remarked on, there is almost always mention of her unusual character and behaviour: the word 'eccentric' is often used. In June 1955, Mary Somerville, as Controller of Talks (Sound), requested Benzie be regraded to A1 on the grounds that Benzie's BBC career should be 'judged as a whole', recognising her achievements in Health Education, her length of service and her pre-war distinction as Foreign Director.¹³⁷ This was turned down by John Arkell, the Controller of Staff Administration, because of criticisms in her annual reports.¹³⁸ It is interesting to note that the three senior women that Benzie worked with—Mary Somerville, Janet Quigley (as Editor, *Woman's Hour*, then Chief Assistant, Talks and ultimately Assistant Head, Talks) and Elizabeth Kilham Roberts, Administrative Officer, Talks—continually supported Benzie; it was her male superiors in her post-war career who perceived her value as less.

Conclusion

While both Benzie and Spicer continued their careers into the 1960s and 1970s, the late 1940s and early 1950s marked an inflection point for both women's professional status within the BBC. As Foreign Director, and again in her MOI work, Benzie had held important posts which conveyed elevated status. Indeed, in her earlier BBC role, she had been on the periphery of the 'men's club'. This seems to have been her natural niche; like many of the men she worked alongside, she held herself in high esteem and exuded a sense of entitlement. While this was acceptable in a senior role, it was not tolerated in a more junior Talks post, especially in a woman. Benzie was obviously aware, in her later career, of how she was regarded by her managers in the Talks Department, and after 1950 she did apply, unsuccessfully, for more senior posts. She would also have known that she did not have the same support as she had had during her first BBC career when, because of her value and the high-calibre networks in which she operated, she was frequently lauded and given pay and grade rises. For Benzie, the interrupted tenure with the BBC disrupted her career trajectory. While she had the same skills and qualities that led to her rapid rise in the 1930s, her re-entry into the BBC put distance

between her and her former colleagues as she joined a new, unfamiliar production environment. While Benzie's expertise and value were eventually, somewhat reluctantly, appreciated, she had lost the opportunity to advance in her new role and, like most BBC women at this time, remained in the same area of work for the remainder of her career. Benzie's career may have been vastly different had she remained with what would eventually become the World Service, but even within the Talks Department she used her professionalism to define a valuable career, which, in the scope available to her, she found rewarding.

While Spicer is mostly known for her work in television, her years in the Civil Service and radio were formative in creating her professional persona and throw light on how she ultimately became a highly valued member of the BBC staff—one of the highest-ranked and highest-paid women—in a very masculine environment. As a planner, her work was acknowledged as vital but because of its coding as female, it was a less-coveted role. Benzie had been at ease working closely with members of the BBC's 'men's club' in the 1930s as Foreign Director and Spicer seems to have followed a similar, but divergent, path. Spicer was confident and had comfortable working relations with the men around her, but unlike Benzie in the 1930s, she did not have the same opportunity to assume a top role. While respected by those around her, Spicer had to be content with being, as Lionel Miall noted, the 'power behind the throne'. Spicer also transitioned from radio to television at a pivotal moment when television's post-war importance was still in flux and opportunities remained open to women. While Spicer rose to a high-level position in the television service, her movement through the BBC ranks similarly did not involve shifting through roles and departments. She carved a niche in programme planning from her earliest days with the Overseas Service. When Spicer was prevented from advancing into domestic radio, she took her chances in television but was again anchored in programme planning.

For women staff, much more than for male staff, the key to success in these early years was not just having the qualifications the BBC prized—a university education and influential social ties—but also carving out specific roles and climbing through the ranks as far as these roles would allow. Another important aspect, as demonstrated by comments made about Benzie and Spicer by their colleagues, was that, in order to be valued, a woman should be authoritative, but not outspoken or overtly in command. Additionally, high-ranking women in the early BBC had to meet the professional standards first articulated in the BBC marriage bar—to be career-minded, to be dedicated to the Corporation and to have special expertise. These qualities did allow women to rise to a senior level and to develop careers in a niche area, but with such high expectations, they also effectively limited the number of women who could meet this elevated bar.

Notes

1. Melanie Bell, *Movie Workers: The Women who Made British Cinema* (Urbana, Chicago and Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2021), 1.
2. Bell, *Movie Workers*, 5.
3. Sarah Arnold, *Gender and Early Television: Mapping Women's Role in Emerging US and British Media* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), 211.
4. Kate Murphy, *Behind the Wireless: a History of Early Women at the BBC* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 47–82.

5. See for example Helen Glew, *Gender, Rhetoric and Regulation: Women's Work in the Civil Service and the London County Council, 1900–55* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016); Alison Oram, *Women Teachers and Feminist Politics 1900–1939* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996).
6. Murphy, *Behind the Wireless*, 141–50.
7. Murphy, *Behind the Wireless*, 153–88.
8. Kristin Skoog, 'Striving for Editorial Autonomy and Internal Recognition: BBC's Woman's Hour', in *Women and the Media: Feminism and Femininity in Britain, 1900 to the present*, ed. Maggie Andrews and Sallie McNamara (New York: Routledge, 2014), 107–9; Sian Nicholas, *The Echo of War: Home Front Propaganda and the Wartime BBC, 1939–45* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), 75–80, 117–19; Murphy, *Behind the Wireless*, 213–17; Joy Leman, "'Pulling our weight in the call-up of women": class and gender in British radio in the Second World War', in *Nationalising Femininity: Culture, Sexuality and British Cinema in the Second World War*, ed. Christin Gledhill and Gillian Swanson (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), 109–18.
9. Jeannine Baker, 'Australian Women Working in British Broadcasting in the 1930s and 1940s', *Feminist Media Histories* 5, no. 3 (2019): 140–67.
10. Laura Carter, 'Rhoda Power, BBC Radio, and Mass Education, 1922–1957', *Revue Française de Civilisation Britannique* XXVI (2021): 7.
11. See Kate Murphy, 'A Marriage Bar of Convenience? The BBC and Married Women's Work 1923–1939', *Twentieth Century British History* 25, no. 4 (2014): 533–61.
12. Heidi Egginton and Zoe Thomas, eds., *Precarious Professionals: Gender, Identities and Social Change in Modern Britain* (London: Royal Historical Society, 2021), 1–39.
13. Egginton and Thomas, *Precarious Professionals*, 27.
14. Anne Witz, *Professions and Patriarchy* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), chapter 2, ProQuest Ebook Central.
15. Joan Acker, 'Gender and Organisations', in *Handbook of the Sociology of Gender*, ed. Janet Saltzman Chafetz (New York: Springer, 2006), 117–94.
16. The outcome of BBC Appointment Boards makes this abundantly clear — of the 272 selection panels between May 1934 and February 1939, 221 had all-male shortlists, ten had all-female shortlists, while forty-two had mixed shortlists. BBC Written Archives (forthwith BBC/WAC):R49/31/1 Staff Policy Appointments Procedure, 1925–39, File 1. BBC copyright content reproduced courtesy of the British Broadcasting Corporation. All rights reserved.
17. For a discussion on the 'old boys' network' see Krista Cowman and Louise Jackson, eds., *Women and Work Culture in Britain c1850 - 1950* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 15; Murphy, *Behind the Wireless*, 143. There is ample evidence of this within BBC personnel files and memoirs, for example, Joseph MacLeod, *A Job at the BBC* (Glasgow: William MacLellan, 1947), 28–33.
18. See Catherine Murphy, 'On an Equal Footing with Men?: Women and Work at the BBC 1923–1939' (PhD diss., University of London, 2011), 272–79.
19. Kate Murphy, 'New and important careers': how women excelled at the BBC, 1923–1939', *Media International Australia*, 161, no. 1 (2016): 18–27.
20. BBC/WAC:R49/605: Standardisation of Salaries, Pym to Nicolls, November 11, 1938.
21. BBC/WAC:R49/177: Staff Policy: Equal Pay for Men and Women, 1943–46, Pym to Haley, May 16, 1944.
22. Peter Dimmock, interviewed by Frank Gillard, *Connected Histories of the BBC*, February 7, 1990, <https://connectedhistoriesofthebbc.org/play/?id=56> (forthwith Dimmock interview); BBC/WAC: Isa Benzie Staff File 2 (forthwith IBSF2): Report by Vincent Alford, February 1, 1946.
23. Leonard Miall, *Inside the BBC: British Broadcasting Characters* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1994), 171–8.
24. BBC/WAC: Joanna Spicer Staff File 1 (forthwith JSSF1): interview notes, Freeston, June 6, 1940; Staff Training School Report, September 5, 1941.
25. BBC/WAC: Joanna Spicer Staff File 2 (forthwith JSSF2): Annual Confidential Report: 1951.

26. IBSF2: Annual Confidential reports, 1931, 1934, 1935.
27. JSSF2: Annual Confidential Reports: 1945, 1946, 1948.
28. Kathryn R. Terkalian, 'Women, Work, and the BBC: How Wartime Restrictions and Recruitment Woes Reshaped the Corporation, 1939-45' (PhD diss., Bournemouth University, 2019), 65-7; Kate Murphy, 'Relay Women: Isa Benzie, Janet Quigley and the BBC's Foreign Department, 1930-38', *Feminist Media Histories* 5, no. 3 (2019): 114-39.
29. Miall, *Inside the BBC*, 171-8.
30. Joanna Spicer, interviewed by Frank Gillard, *Connected Histories of the BBC*, February 29, 1984, <https://connectedhistoriesofthebbc.org/play/?id=194#> (forthwith Spicer interview). Spicer requests the recording be stopped in several places when she cannot recall information. Additionally, although her delivery is relaxed and natural, the rustling of paper on the recording suggests she is reading from a prepared script at times.
31. Dimmock interview; John Drummond, interviewed by Frank Gillard, August 16, 1993, <https://connectedhistoriesofthebbc.org/play/?id=57> (forthwith Drummond interview); Esther Rantzen, interviewed by Alban Webb, June 29, 2021, <https://connectedhistoriesofthebbc.org/play/?id=410> (forthwith Rantzen interview).
32. For more biographical information on Benzie, see Murphy, *Behind the Wireless*, 175-81.
33. IBSF2: June 6, 1927, Colonel Benzie to Reith.
34. BBC/WAC: L1/1049/1: Isa Benzie Staff File 1 (forthwith IBSF1), October 8, 1928, Wade to Carpendale; March 6, 1929, from Atkinson [handwritten note].
35. IBSF1: Wade to Carpendale; March 6, 1929, from Atkinson [handwritten note].
36. IBSF1: February 6, 1933, Atkinson to Goldsmith: Foreign Department Salaries.
37. Murphy, 'Relay Women', 130, 132.
38. IBSF1: Annual Confidential report April 1936.
39. IBSF1: Annual Confidential report April 1935, note by Nicolls.
40. As an 'exceptional' woman, there was no requirement that Benzie should resign—it was her choice.
41. BBC/WAC: E4/52: Empire Service: Internal Instructions: 1927-1939, March 1, 1938, from DDG to relevant staff, Internal Instruction No 480: Organisation.
42. Miall, *Inside the BBC*, 171-8; Leonard Miall, 'Spicer [née Gibbon], Joanna Ravenscroft (1906-1992), television executive', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, September 23, 2004; Accessed February 17, 2026, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/51326>; Girls' Scholarships', *The West Middlesex Gazette*, August 2, 1924, 12.
43. "Department for the Training of Teachers: Examination in the Theory, History, and Practice of Education", *The Oxford Chronicle*, August 3, 1928.
44. JSSF2: BBC Staff Application Form, December 20, 1941.
45. The National Archive (forthwith TNA): J 77/3424/4492, Divorce Court file 4492, Appellant, Reginald Harvey Spiller, Respondent, Joan Ravenscroft Spiller, Co-Respondent, Robert Henry Spicer, 1935.
46. TNA: J 77/3544/8096, Divorce Court file 8096, Appellant, Gladys Winifred Spicer, Respondent, Robert Henry Scanes Spicer, 1935; 'Plumpton Divorce', *Sussex Express* (Lewes), May 29, 1936, 15.
47. Spicer interview.
48. Michael Carney and Kate Murphy, *Hilda Matheson A Life of Secrets and Broadcasts* (Bath: Handheld Press, 2023), 134-52.
49. BBC/WAC: E2/374/2: Foreign General: JBC July-December 1939, July 24, 1939—note of meeting held at 71 Chester Square.
50. TNA:MOI/INF-1-41B - Staff Organisation - Broadcasting Division 1940, April 7, 1940, Bamford to Woodburn.
51. TNA:MOI/INF-1-41B - Staff Organisation - Broadcasting Division 1940, April 4, 1940, Wellington to Woodburn.
52. TNA:MOI-INF-1-85: Reorganisation of Broadcasting Division 1940-1943, Wellington to BBC Director General MOI, September 10, 1940.
53. TNA:MOI-INF-1-85: Wellington to Establishment Office, October 8, 1940.

54. TNA:MOI-INF-1-85: Wellington to Director General MOI, September 10, 1940.
55. TNA:MOI-INF-1-85: Wellington to Woodburn, November 26, 1940.
56. TNA:MOI-INF-1-85: Macgregor to Bamford, February 26, 1941; Wellington to Bamford, March 1, 1941.
57. IBSF2: Graves to Tallents, May 21, 1941.
58. IBSF2: Clark to Tallents, June 2, 1941.
59. IBSF2: Miss Walton to Miss Hope Simpson, June 20, 1941.
60. IBSF2: Graves to AC(O), June 23, 1941.
61. IBSF2: Benzie to Clark, July 2, 1941.
62. IBSF2: Benzie to Clark, July 5, 1941.
63. IBSF2: Graves to Clark, July 8, 1941.
64. IBSF2: Clarke to Graves, July 11, 1941.
65. IBSF2: Cameron to Clark, July 14, 1941.
66. IBSF2: Cameron to Graves, July 22, 1941.
67. JSSF1: Interview Notes, Freeston, June 6, 1940; Interview Notes, Burns, June 11, 1940; DPAO to CA, July 1, 1940.
68. Murphy, *Behind the Wireless*, 53-7; JSSF1: Cameron to Spicer, June 17, 1941.
69. IBSF2: Graves to DSA and C(O), May 26, 1941.
70. JSSF1: Fry, June 25, 1941, quoted in Interview Notes, Cameron, June 23, 1941.
71. JSSF1: Interview Notes, Freeston, June 6, 1940.
72. TNA:MOI-INF-1-85: Reorganisation of Broadcasting Division, Woodburn to Bamford, February 26, 1941; Left Staff, letter, Clarke to Woodburn, December 18, 1940.
73. TNA:MOI-INF-1-85: Reorganisation of Broadcasting Division, Macgregor to Woodburn, April 28, 1941.
74. JSSF1: Interview Notes, June 23, 1941; letter, DDSA to Fry, June 27, 1941; Letter, GEO to Spicer July 19, 1941.
75. TNA:MOI-INF-1-85: Reorganisation of Broadcasting Division, Kidd to Macgregor, December 9, 1941.
76. JSSF1: Annual Confidential Report 1951, Warren McAlpine and George Barnes, May 15, 1951; Annual Confidential Report 1954, S.J. de Lotbinière, November 6, 1954; Annual Confidential Report 1955, November 14, 1955.
77. TNA:MOI-INF-1-85: Reorganisation of Broadcasting Division, Kidd to Macgregor, December 9, 1941; Macgregor to Bamford, February 26, 1941.
78. Spicer interview.
79. Spicer interview.
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81. TNA:MOI-INF-1-85: Reorganisation of Broadcasting Division, Woodburn to Bamford, February 26, 1941; JSSF1: Clarke to Woodburn (MOI), December 10, 1940.
82. Briggs, *War of Words*, 352.
83. JSSF1: Record of Interview, ADPA(OS) and Spicer, January 5, 1942; GEO to Spicer, June 15, 1942; GEO to Standard Distribution, July 1, 1942; OSEO to AppO, December 30, 1942; Spicer interview.
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85. JSSF1: Financial Details (front cover).
86. JSSF1: Annual Confidential Report, August 2, 1943.
87. TNA: INF-1-85: Reorganisation of Broadcasting Division 1940-1943: Macgregor to Woodburn, September 5, 1941.
88. TNA: INF-1-85: Macgregor to Woodburn, April 13, 1942.
89. TNA: INF-1-85: Paper no 1380: OEPEC Broadcasting Division: Staff, April 13, 1942.
90. TNA: INF-1-85: Office Circular no 168, September 8, 1942.
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92. JSSF1: GEO to DOPA, September 12, 1941; DOPA to CA, November 3, 1941; Annual Confidential Report 1942 (signed by Schuster), June 26, 1942.
93. JSSF1: DOPA to Spicer, September 8, 1941.
94. JSSF1: DOPA to CA, November 3, 1941.
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96. IBSF2: Barnes to Maconachie, note at bottom by Maconachie, January 7, 1943.
97. IBSF 2: comments by Salmon, Isa Benzie Further Progress Report, August 20, 1943.
98. IBSF 2: Barnes note at bottom, Isa Benzie: Further Progress Report, August 20, 1943.
99. IBSF2: Annual Confidential Report, February 8, 1944.
100. IBSF 2: Annual Confidential Report, February 19, 1945.
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103. Alban Webb, *London Calling: Britain, the BBC World Service and the Cold War* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2015), 15-34.
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105. JSSF1: C(OS) to AppO, February 26, 1946.
106. JSSF1: HSA to AO(OS), February 14, 1946.
107. JSSF1: C(OS) to HSA, March 25, 1946; April 1, 1946.
108. JSSF1: Collins to HSA, March 25, 1946; April 2, 1946; Collins to DDG, April 14, 1946.
109. JSSF1: C(OS) to AO(OS), February 4, 1946; Maurice Farquharson, interviewed by Frank Gilliard, *Connected Histories of the BBC*, July 26, 1979, <https://connectedhistoriesofthebbc.org/play/?id=64>.
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111. JSSF1: DDG to Collins, April 15, 1946; AppO to Spicer, April 25, 1946; Record of Interview; Pym (HSA) and Spicer, May 21, 1946; memo, Collins to HSA, September 13, 1946; Record of Interview, DH Clarke and Spicer, October 4 & 7, 1946; Record of Interview, DDG and Collins, December 2, 1946; memo, Collins to HSA, December 19, 1946; memo Collins to HSA, January 9, 1947.
112. IBSF1: Rendall to Ministry of Labour and National Service Appointments Department, December 15, 1945.
113. IBSF2: February 18, 1946, Benzie to Appointments Officer.
114. Skoog, 'Striving for Editorial Autonomy and Internal Recognition', 99, 107-9.
115. IBSF2: Annual Confidential Report, February 13, 1947, written by Harman Grisewood.
116. IBSF2: Grisewood, record of interview with Benzie, March 6, 1947.
117. IBSF2: Grisewood record of interview with Benzie, March 6, 1947.
118. IBSF2: Rendall interview with Benzie on subject of annual review, March 21, 1947.
119. IBSF1: Thornton to SAO, July 1, 1948.
120. IBSF1: Williams (Resettlement Officer) to Administrative Officer, Talks [Spicer], May 3, 1948. Benzie was assessed under order W.S.I.329.
121. IBSF1: Thornton, Staff Administration to Spicer, June 7, 1948.
122. IBSF1: Dr Whyte to Spicer, September 28, 1948.
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125. JSSF1: note for file, HSA, January 10, 1947; Wellington to AppO, February 19, 1947; memo note, to AppO, February 20, 1947; AppO to C(OS), March 3, 1947.
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127. JSSF1: record of interview, Pym and Spicer, January 21, 1948; memos, Chalmers to CSA through AppO, February 13, 1948; AppO to CSA, February 27, 1948; DHB to DOS, April 1, 1948.
128. JSSF1: AC(OS) to DDOS, April 7, 1948; CSA to AppO, May 4, 1948. OPP to CSA, October 24, 1948.

129. JSSF1: AO-TV to CSA, September 7, 1950; CSA to DTel, January 24, 1951.
130. JSSF1: DTel to Spicer, November 22, 1950; Annual Confidential Report, May 21, 1951.
131. Spicer interview.
132. JSSF1: Annual Confidential Report, July 30, 1944; Report of Interview, Barnes and Spicer, February 15, 1951; Annual Confidential Report, May 21, 1951.
133. Spicer interview.
134. Leonard Miall, 'Spicer [née Gibbon], Joanna Ravenscroft (1906–1992), television executive'.
135. JSSF2: Annual Confidential Review 1970 and 1971.
136. See BBC WAC: Talks: Today, File 1, May-October 1957.
137. IBSF2: Somerville to Wellington, as noted in memo of December 20, 1955.
138. IBSF2: Arkell to Thornton (Assistant Controller Talks (Sound), December 21, 1955. Benzie was offered a one off special payment instead, but remained in Grade B.

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