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David Hendy. *Life on Air: A History of Radio Four.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007. Illustrations. ix + 518 pp. $55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-924881-0.

Reviewed by David Simonelli (Youngstown State University)

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David Hendy's introduction opens with a pair of extreme vignettes that aptly capture the nature of the Radio Four audience. In May 1988, an elderly woman strode into Broadcasting House and opened fire with a pistol full of blanks when she could not receive Radio Four in Blackpool; more tragically, a vicar in Surrey beat his wife to death with his radio when he objected to someone's musical tastes as broadcast on the program *Desert Island Discs*. As a loyal National Public Radio (NPR) listener, one sniffs at the idea that NPR could elicit the same response, no matter how demented the listener might be.

To my knowledge, there is no true equivalent in any other Western nation-state's culture to match the role that Radio Four plays in Britain. The founder of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), Sir John Reith, declared that the entire service had a mission "to inform, to educate, and to entertain" (p. 400). In post-Victorian terms, Reith's idea was to improve people through listening and get them to like the effort. While other branches of BBC radio and television have drifted off to serve each single aspect of that mandate, only Radio Four has kept a true balance between information, education, and entertainment.

Hendy's *Life on Air* is a balanced narrative of the history of Radio Four, from its origins as the BBC's Home Service to the present day. Critical to his story is the fact that Radio Four's programming has created its own audience, one that amounts to only 10 percent of the available listeners at any one time. Yet that audience–never entirely anachronistic but rarely flexible, welcoming of qualitative change but afraid of structural ones–is fiercely loyal and unusual in its attachment to Radio Four's programming. Hendy's book is subtitled *A History of Radio Four*, but it might as easily have been referred to as its "life and times," since Hendy is just as interested in that audience and its efforts to shape programming as he is in the programming itself.

Hendy's story of Radio Four, then, is one of reciprocation between its "Little England" audience and its programmers and personalities. The result is a history of the establishment of an exclusive club that sees itself as a bastion of traditional English civilization, exclusive yet at least nominally interested in being inclusive. A good measure might be the letter Hendy quotes from a Scottish working-class woman who asked the rhetorical question of why she chose to listen to Radio Four: because its programs " 'surely represent the tastes of a certain level of intelligence, which is not confined to any one class' " (p. 276).

The book's narrative is slow going in the beginning. It takes a little while for Hendy to bring his story past a series of programming decisions made to transform the Home Service into something different. Hendy's focus makes sense, though, largely because it took a little while for Radio Four to find and define its audience, which is at the center of the story. Radio Four was created in September 1967 in a shake-up of programming whose real purpose was to provide a permanent pop music station (Radio One) to replace the illegal pirate stations whose presence defined the broadcasting landscape in 1960s Britain. As the flagship frequency for Reith's middlebrow values, Radio Four was even more of an afterthought than it might appear at first glance. But it maintained the positive critical reviews of the old Home Service for its mixture of news, talk, comedy, dramatic serials, documentaries, poetry, and above all else, the *Shipping Forecast*, of use to nearly no one and yet the very image of what Radio Four eclecticism was all about.

In 1969, Broadcasting House produced a White Paper defining the future of BBC Radio and Television called *Broadcasting in the Seventies*, and Radio Four employed

a new controller, Tony Whitby, who meant to implement the new ideas contained in the report. This especially meant a new schedule of news programs that provided the cornerstones of the channel's programming: *Today*, the old Home Service's *The World at One*, *The World Tonight*, and *PM*. But as Hendy notes, it also began a vigorous debate about the future of the channel. Many journalists believed it was a matter of time before Radio Four adopted an all-news format. Yet to the apparent surprise of nearly everyone associated with Radio Four (except for Whitby, who seems to be one of Hendy's heroes in this narrative), the station's programmers and audience stepped forward to demand that the old BBC standards of entertainment and education be maintained along with information. Most of the rest of the station's history can be brought back to this ongoing debate, over whether Radio Four should embrace its worldwide reputation for news or maintain its old Home Service programming blend–and if so, how.

The long-term successful effort to maintain the blend provides the most interesting stories in Hendy's book. It is amazing and amusing today from the perspective of 2010 to reckon with the uproar caused by using the word "bugger" in a British radio play. Perhaps the station's finest hour came with the original broadcast in 1978 of *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, which has since become a novel, a television series, and a movie; it saved the format of Radio Four programming for at least another decade and a half, and critically, built an entirely new audience of young people that has helped sustain it ever since. It also presented Radio Four as a place where new young writers, comedians, and playwrights could try out their material. When, a few years later, the first listeners' groups were founded to protect the spirit of Radio Four programming, these mixtures of comedy and drama would be what they saw themselves defending.

Hendy himself was a producer of Radio Four news programming in the late eighties and early nineties, a good period to assess the role of the news service in British life. Various Thatcherite politicians harassed the service as overly biased toward the Left; cabinet minister Norman Tebbit referred to the entire BBC as the purveyors of an " 'insufferable, smug, sanctimonious, naïve, guilt-ridden, wet, pink orthodoxy' " (p. 282). Hendy does a commendable job of addressing these complaints, while also noting that Labour Party politicians had their own issues with Radio Four's opinion shows and interviews. But most of all, Margaret Thatcher's vague threats to force the BBC to fend for itself in public funding pointed out that a sizeable number of Radio Four's listeners identified themselves as they came to its defense–many of them politicians themselves, but most of them professionals, highly educated, some affluent, some not, but culturally literate and demanding of the kind of services Radio Four provided.

This is the audience Hendy is interested in bringing out into the open in his book. It is one that does not seem immediately to match up to the Reithian ideal; one would likely define NPR listeners in the United States in the same manner. In the nineties, they reared their heads once again to reject a folksy show called *Anderson Country*; I had never heard it but it sounds something like NPR's *A Prairie Home Companion* with news. It seemed more directly to be a parody of Radio Four programming writ small into one program, its eclecticism and flippant presentation mocking the listeners' desire for variety. The audience takes that desire seriously, and it is for that reason, according to Hendy, that with Radio Four programming, "disunity is part of its DNA: symbolic, both of the older Reithian injunction 'to inform, to educate, and to entertain,' and, one senses, of a newer–and sometimes hesitant–commitment to cultural diversity" (p. 400).

Hendy's book gets more interesting as it continues, but it would be hard to assign to an undergraduate or even graduate class on postwar Britain. To the informed reader, though–even one with only a limited exposure to Radio Four–it has a lot to teach on the development of British broadcasting and British culture in the twentieth century.

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