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SHARING A LAUGH: SITCOMS AND THE PRODUCTION OF POST-IMPERIAL
BRITAIN, 1945-1980

by

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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Sharing a Laugh examines the social and cultural roles of television situation comedy in Britain between 1945 and 1980. It argues that an exploration of sitcoms reveals the mindset of postwar Britons and highlights how television developed both as an industry and as a public institution. This research demonstrates how Britain metamorphosed in this period from a welfare state with an implicit promise to establish a meritocratic and expert-based society, into a multiracial, consumer society ruled by the market. It illustrates how this turnabout of British society was formulated, debated, and shaped in British sitcoms.

This dissertation argues that both democratization (resulting from the expansion of the franchise after World War I) and decolonization in the post-World War II era, established culture as a prominent political space in which interaction and interconnection between state and society took place. Therefore, this work focuses on culture and on previously less noticed parties to the negotiation over power in society such as, media institutions, media practitioners, and their audiences. It demonstrates how British sitcom writers turned a form which was seen as frivolous entertainment into an

inquiry that questioned the most fundamental structures of their society. Sitcoms thus addressed and engaged with the critical issues of British life: postwar consumer aspirations and shortage of housing, fears of Americanization, racism and the end of empire. Sitcoms' incredible outreach extended these debates across the nation, and enabled a conversation that took place in the privacy of the home to resonant in the public sphere.

The dissertation looks both at institutions and at trailblazing individuals who shaped the genre. It considers the role of audiences and of technological innovation in turning a staple of broadcasting into a site of public debate, education, and memory. It maintains that vintage sitcoms still shape contemporary audiences, and their understanding of the past through sitcoms' repeated transmission on television, their availability on DVD, and via services such as YouTube.

For Oswaldo

A real comedian – that's a daring man. He dares to see what his listeners shy away from, fear to express. And what he sees is a sort of truth, about people, about their situation, about what hurts or terrifies them, about what's hard, above all about what they want.

*Trevor Griffiths, Comedians.*¹

¹ Trevor Griffiths, *Comedians* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1976), 20.

Acknowledgments

The questions that surround the creation of communities through language, sound, and vision are at the core of this dissertation. I ask how people come together, why, and how they feel an affinity with strangers. It is, therefore, appropriate that during the research and writing of this dissertation I had consolidated my own community. I was fortunate to meet inspiring friends, mentors, and scholars on the winding road to the completion of this project. I was equally lucky to have begun the trip with the support of family and old friends. It is a great pleasure to thank them all for nourishing and sustaining me in numerous ways during this process.

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Introduction

In a recent article in the *History Workshop Journal*, historian Frank Mort responded to the pleas of leading historians of Britain for a revision of the field as a result of historians' abandonment of total histories and the positive impact of interdisciplinary methodologies in challenging the core narratives of social history - the Marxism and Labourist narratives. Thus he acknowledged the significance of historians of gender and sexuality in complicating categories such as experience and class identity; the influence of the investigation of social movements through the prisms of language and imagery,¹ and the profound impact of transnational and comparative histories for the transfiguration of the field since the 1990s.² Mort argued that the central question which contemporary historians of Britain need to contend with is "how to write locally, without simply reproducing exceptionalism?"³ He suggests establishing "recurrent and typical patterns" for events, in terms not only of content, but "of form, genre and iconography."⁴ He also urges historians to "extend historical awareness of the deep contexts within which specific social and cultural processes are embedded."⁵

By examining the social and cultural roles of situation comedy in Britain between 1945 and 1980, this dissertation responds to Mort's challenge, and his suggested roadmap. It embraces Mort's invitation to write British history with new integrative

¹ See for example, Lynn Hunt, ed., *The New Cultural History: Studies on the History of Society and Culture* (University of California Press, 1989); Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780-1850* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987); Gareth Stedman Jones, *Languages of Class: Studies in English Working Class History 1832-1982* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); Judith Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992),

² Mort, Frank, "Intellectual Pluralism and the Future of British History," *History Workshop Journal* 72, no. 1 (2011): 215.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

frameworks that consider the exhilarating historiographical shifts of the last 30 years, and does so by focusing on specific case-studies and on genre. It offers an analysis of situation comedy in its British formulation as an opportunity to write “locally” on postwar Britain without forsaking the wider aims of social and cultural history, thus, the analysis of this form is situated firmly within the context of its production and reception. It looks at institutions but also at trailblazing individuals who shaped the genre, and considers the role of audiences and of technological innovation in turning a staple of broadcasting into a major site of public debate, education, and memory.

Through the lens of genre this research demonstrates how between 1945 and the end of the 1970s, Britain metamorphosed from a welfare state with an implicit promise to establish a meritocracy and expert-based society, into a multiracial, consumer society ruled by the market. This reconfiguration of society constituted the final stage of the break-up of the white working class and its representative institutions such as the trade unions accelerated by post-war affluence and its promise to establish an “endless middle” society. The post-war homeward movement and the culture of domesticity that accompanied it added to the institutional erosion of the ties of solidarity between members of the community.⁶ Meanwhile, the tide of immigration from the disintegrating empire gave rise to institutional and individual racism. As the white working class was becoming less of a homogenous community in the national imagery, the category of the “colored” immigrant was elevated to a threatening figure. Within this framework the once mighty empire shrank into “Little England;” the nation that had once included a third of the people of the earth witnessed some of its citizens working to exclude many of its former subjects.

⁶ See for example, Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy* (Transaction Publishers, 1998); Carolyn Steedman, *Landscape for a Good Woman: A Story of Two Lives* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1987).

British sitcoms were developed in a time of tremendous friction resulting from the shift from wartime consensus to a political culture governed by identity politics in the 1970s. This turnabout of British society was formulated, debated, and shaped in British sitcoms. These debates were communicated in a “rich and distinctive” idiom that appealed to contemporary audiences and remained with them long after the situations and actions of the protagonists were forgotten.⁷⁸ This idiom transcended their comic existence, and the moment of transmission. It gave the various and, at times, competing social groups a shared language with which to discuss race, family, gender relations, and the fear and fascination of American culture. British sitcoms were eagerly consumed by contemporary audiences. Some found the viewing experience strengthened bonds with their compatriots while others felt their onscreen representation relegated them to the margins of this nation of laughing subjects. But in both cases the consumption of this cultural form was an integral to the production of post-imperial Britain.

As a genre, television sitcoms attracted British writers enthralled by its potential to engage in social critique. Many of the leading figures of this genre rose from a working and lower middle class background and were anxious to communicate their experiences of living in Britain. Inspired and emboldened by the postwar British movement of social realism in the arts, writers such as Alan Simpson and Ray Galton confronted in their work the specter of class and the frustrations of working-class men. Johnny Speight forced viewers to acknowledge racism and prejudice at the forefront of their society, and David Croft and Jimmy Perry aspired to shape the national memory of historical periods such as the Second World War and the last stages of empire. None of them thought of their craft as simply frivolous fun. Much

⁷ Michael Billington, "An Idiom to Remember," *The Times*, December 13, 1967.

⁸ Ibid.

like Eddie Waters, the old comedian in Trevor Griffiths' 1976 play, they believed that comedians had a choice

We can say something or we can say nothing . . . Most comics *feed* prejudice and fear and blinkered vision, but the best ones . . . illuminate them, make people laugh till they cry. Cry. Till they find their pain and their beauty. Comedy is medicine. Not coloured sweeties to rot their teeth with.⁹

This spoonful of medicine was sugarcoated with jokes. It was broadcast in a slot reserved for entertainment by a medium seen by contemporaries as a promoter of superficiality and the responsible entity for the dumbing down of the nation. But the sitcoms under consideration in this dissertation did not offer an escapist tale—theirs was a story of a fractured society, and failed masculinity. While their American counterparts embodied the narrative of individual success in a capitalist order, British protagonists, almost exclusively male in this period, were entrapped within their social classes; they were rooted within their communities and social circumstances, constrained by them and their families. Their aspirations grew out of the promises of postwar social democracy, and their hopes were crushed by the advent of market capitalism and the continued influence of traditional webs of privilege. Ironically, the British mainstream embraced their writers, and decorated them with medals of the Excellent Order of the British Empire. Their entrance into the heart of mainstream society contributed to the establishment of the figure of the socially aspiring, frustrated male as a symbol of Britishness.

As James Vernon reminds us, many of the historical processes at the core of Britain's postwar experience were not unique to it. Other nations had to restructure their economy and assert their role in the world, come to terms with the experience of war, decolonization, and the process of democratization amidst the rise of identity politics. Few were untouched by the revolutions in the technologies of communication

⁹ Trevor Griffiths, *Comedians* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1976), 23.

and transport, accelerated urbanism and suburban development, or the rise and fall of welfare regimes.¹⁰

What is singular to Britain is the way its culture reacted to these fundamental transformations, and the eminent role humor had in the production of its post-imperial society. As Ross McKibbin's work has shown, the political sphere in twentieth century Britain altered radically with the last expansion of the vote after the Great War. British politics had to adapt to the new mass electorate, and the Conservative Party, in particular, had to reinvent itself to appeal to an electorate composed mostly of the working class.¹¹ By the 1950s it had succeeded in engaging this demographic, especially women frustrated by the continuing conditions of austerity.¹² Vernon points out that the focus "on who votes and for which party" is not sufficient to encompass the experience of politics for many in Britain.¹³ Thereby this dissertation does not focus on state actors but on other, previously less noticed parties to the negotiation over power in society. It treats culture as a political space of "constant interaction and interconnection between state and society."

Television sitcom thus becomes the kind of space that Steven Pincus and William Novak advocate for historical analysis; a space "where issues of national identity and belonging, democratic participation and exclusion, state-building and state-resistance, discrimination and equal protection, and competing visions of the good life are ceaselessly brought into focus, debate, and often coercive resolution."¹⁴ Indeed, this dissertation maintains that by the 1960s, culture had emerged as a central site of

¹⁰ James Vernon, "The Local, the Imperial and the Global: Twentieth-century Roundtable: Twentieth-century British History in North America," *Twentieth Century British History* 21, no.3 (2010): 408.

¹¹ Ross McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures: England 1918-1951* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

¹² Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska, *Austerity in Britain: Rationing, Controls, and Consumption, 1939-1955* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

¹³ Vernon, "The Local, the Imperial and the Global," 413.

¹⁴ Steven Pincus and William Novak, "Political History after the Cultural Turn," *Perspectives on History* (May 2011).

political activity and of state investment, and it is this realm which will be explored in what follows.

State investment in arts and culture was an expansion of the state far beyond its traditional role of protecting its citizens from external threats.¹⁵ Chapter one will demonstrate how, the process of the nationalization of culture that had begun in the eighteenth century, culminated in the postwar years.¹⁶ In tandem with the intensification of American cultural initiatives around the globe, British government realized the potential of culture to replace prior diplomatic and military actions. Thereby, politicians paid greater attention to culture and cultural figures. Thus, for example, in 1965, Harold Wilson awarded the Beatles MBEs as a way of aligning himself with the younger generation. A year earlier, Wilson featured Harry H. Corbett of the celebrated sitcom *Steptoe and Son* in Labour's 1964 election campaign, and gave the soap opera *Coronation Street* an export award for sales to Australian television. Politicians had clearly noted the prominence of the arts in this era,¹⁷ they grasped its power to enlist a populous disaffected with "the establishment" and old politics. Indeed, culture was conceived "as a cohesive force, overcoming social divisions through a common national identity."¹⁸ From the beginning of radio in the 1920s, governments had been convinced of the value of a nationalized broadcasting system. During the war, government investment in film and broadcasting expanded as its value for moral and propaganda became apparent.¹⁹ The subsequent chapters will

¹⁵ Jim Obelkevich and Peter Catterall, "Introduction: Understanding Post-War British Society," in *Understanding Post-War British Society*, ed. Jim Obelkevich and Peter Catterall (London: Routledge, 1994), 5.

¹⁶ Janet Minihan, *The Nationalization of Culture: the Development of State Subsidies to the Arts in Great Britain* (London: Hamilton, 1977).

¹⁷ Lawrence Black, "'Making Britain a Gay and More Cultivated Country': Wilson, Lee and the Creative Industries in the 1960s," in *The Wilson Governments 1964-1970 Reconsidered*, ed. Glen O'Hara, Helen Parr (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), 27-8.

¹⁸ Black, "Making Britain a Gay and More Cultivated Country," 26.

¹⁹ Arthur Marwick, "The Arts, Books, Media and Entertainment in Britain since 1945," in *Understanding Post-War British Society*, 187.

follow the shifting relationship between the state, broadcasting bodies, and the public over these issues.

In Britain humor was, and still is, inseparable to the definition of “Britishness.” The recent addition of questions about comedy to the test for foreigners who wish to settle permanently in the UK, testifies to this sentiment.²⁰ As chapter three will demonstrate, in the postwar era boasting the existence of a national brand of humor became a rhetorical means to bolster Britons’ national self-esteem. It was hailed as one of the great qualities that had won Britain the war, and was deployed to smooth over contemporary schisms and tensions—as discussed in chapter five. During the 1960s, Britain developed a global television format-selling industry. Humor along with heritage tours and paraphernalia nostalgic of the once great past, became a lucrative cultural export.

All this expanded the imagined links between humor and national character. Thus it is no surprise to find an abundance of comments that attribute to Britons the ability to keep their spirits high even in times of strife.

As a race, the British have one peculiarity that sets them apart from the rest of mankind: their extraordinary sense of humour; their ability to laugh at themselves, to laugh at others, to laugh at the sublime *and* the ridiculous, to laugh at disaster and triumph, to be indifferent to the subject of a joke but to seek and find humour in everything . . . I have a hunch that laughter is a symbol of freedom. It's anti-totalitarian. A free man can laugh, a slave cannot; and it's possible to assess the amount of freedom in a society by the quantity of laughter it generates.²¹

This self-aggrandizing statement authored in 1976 by Barry Took, a leading comedian and broadcaster, is steeped in Cold War language and betrays an essentialist view of identity that frames Britons as a race with primordial comedic abilities and

²⁰ It was recently published that the test will include questions about Monty Python and the comedy duo the Two Ronnies. Robert Booth, “Want to Become a British Citizen? Better Swot up on Monty Python,” *The Guardian*, January 27, 2013.

²¹ Barry Took, *Laughter in the Air: An Informal History of British Radio Comedy* (London: Robson Books, 1976), 1.

erases the contingent nature of identity and national community. The attribution of humor to Britons was a prevalent contemporary sentiment when the struggles over the nature of the national community were no laughing matter. British society was ruptured by race riots, anti-establishment and anti-war demonstrations fed by the global counter-cultural revolution peaking in 1968. The unity of the kingdom was challenged with the conflict in Northern Ireland flaring up and the beginning of thirty years of “The Troubles;” major economic crises and militant strikes culminated in the Miners’ strikes of 1973 and 1974 and by the end of the decade, the National Front and its anti-immigrant agenda reached its peak support.

In Took’s assessment, laughter functions as an avenue to social cohesion—it is used as a measurement of the strength of Britain’s political culture, and as a potential remedy to totalitarianism and slavery. It frames laughter as a political tool in the anti-totalitarian struggle, its very existence in society an indication of its level of freedom. This reading captures the social role of humor in many societies—its function as an acceptable outlet for criticism and questioning of authority. It ignores the prevalence of humor in oppressed societies for the very same reasons, as a legitimate tool to safely challenge authority.²²

Although the quote aims to establish the advantageous use of humor as a unifying discourse, it exposes the mechanism of differentiation at the heart of comedy. Jokes consistently separate “us” from “them,” in a similar manner as the divisions of race, gender, and class. As Andy Mudherst argues, comedy is a discursive work founded on the “binding and marking of symbolic boundaries,” and as such it is either an invitation to belong, or an expulsion. In Took’s view the boundaries are drawn around “the ‘British’ and exclude “the rest.” This mapping of the world has a moral judgment

²² See for example, Ben Lewis, *Hammer and Tickle: a survey of 80 years of Communist jokes* (Phoenix, 2009).

embedded within it—the superiority of the British who as a race can smile at times of adversary and strife.

It was also a reiteration of the spirit of the blitz, the mythologized patriotic sentiment that celebrated ordinarily Britons' wartime effort. The work of comedian Gracie Field both before World Word II and during the conflict came to embody this spirit. One of Fields' hit songs "Wish Me Luck as You Wave Me Goodbye" from the 1939 film *Shipyard Sally*, is a good example.²³ Fields portrayed plucky Sally, a failed music hall performer who leads a campaign against the closing down of a local shipyard. As Fields' character leaves the shipyard for London to protest its closure, she sings, "Wish me luck as you wave me goodbye / Not a tear, but a cheer, make it gay." The song became extremely popular during wartime when events deepened the patriotic meaning of its lyrics.

Andy Medhurst offers a valuable analysis of humor's role in Britain, but he conflates the intent of the writers of comedy with its reception. Medhurst supposes that authors' intentions were perfectly communicated to and adopted by viewers. This assumption is problematic for two reasons. First, authors frequently expressed various and conflicting agendas in their writing thereby opening the comic text up to various interpretations. Second, audiences were not unified and homogenous and they do not necessarily "accept the effort of the broadcasting institution to incorporate them into a 'national family.'"²⁴ In a special issue of *Participations: Journal of Audience and Reception Studies*, the editors lament that little work has been done on the reception end of comedy. They argue that most of what has been published ignores the divergent ways in which audiences interact with comedy, and maintain that this

²³ *Shipyard Sally*, directed by Monty Banks, (1939).

²⁴ Henrik Örnebring, "Writing the History of Television Audiences: The Coronation in the Mass-Observation Archive," in *Re-Viewing Television History: Critical Issues in Television Historiography*, ed. Helen Wheatley (London: I, B, Tauris, 2007), 171.

situation owes to the prevailing theories of humor used by most scholars interested in humor and comedy.²⁵

These theories are commonly grouped into three: a Superiority theory, an Incongruity theory and a Relief theory. The Superiority theory was explained by Plato and, some two millennia later, Thomas Hobbes. It suggests that we laugh at the shortcomings of others because it makes us feel better about ourselves. The Incongruity theory, championed by Friedrich Hegel and Emanuel Kant, maintains that we are amused when things are not where they should be, and thereby defy our expectations. Lastly, the Relief theory, most associated with Sigmund Freud takes a physiological approach, explains that our laughter is a mechanism that brings relief which cannot be resolved in other ways.²⁶

The first two make assumptions about audiences' relation to comedy: The Superiority theory assumes the existence and acceptance of a clear set of social hierarchies, understood in the same straightforward manner by everyone, and the Incongruity theory proposes that any viewer would react in the same way to incongruities—indeed that we all perceive the same things as inappropriate or out of place. The Relief theory takes an individual approach to laughter, but does not engage with its social context.²⁷

These critiques inform both the focus and the methodology of this project. Thus this dissertation does not examine the question of why something is funny; instead, it uses evidence such as ratings, newspaper reviews, the number of television repeats, interviews with fans and fan material, and letters to the BBC, to ascertain which sitcoms topped the popularity list of the time and how its creators and viewers

²⁵ Brett Mills, Sam Friedman, and Tom Phillips, "Introduction: Foregrounding the Comedy Audience," 8, no. 2 (November 2011): 120–127.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 123.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, *Ibid.*

explained its success. It adds the layer of reception to the discussion of sitcoms that made it into the canon (a methodological problem in its own right which will be addressed below). Adding this tier of sources to scripts acknowledges the problem of conflating the authorial meaning with audiences', professional reviewers' and other responses. It also recognizes the need to think about audiences in the plural.

Juxtaposing a large selection of sources from a variety of groups will, it is hoped, address, if not solve, the reception conundrum.

This methodology is best-suited for a study-case approach which facilitates recreating a web of audience responses. Therefore, chapter four offers a close reading of the work of writer Johnny Speight such as his series *Till Death us Do Part* (BBC - 1965-1968, 1970, and 1972-1975) and *Curry and Chips* (ITV 1969), to discuss racist humor and the various responses to it. For the same reason, chapter five focuses on the sitcom *Dad's Army* to answer why different kinds of audiences were attracted to its whitewashed vision of Britain. It is not, however, research that focuses solely on reception. As mentioned earlier, this is a cultural and social history of postwar Britain and thus television audiences are one avenue of exploration alongside examining the history of broadcasting institutions and individual writers.

The impact of the sitcoms analyzed in this dissertation reached well beyond their original run. In fact, they continue to shape the historical understanding of the period they depict for audiences today. In many ways the images inherited by vintage television constitute the way we think about the past. Janet Thumim argues, for example, that significant information about the 1950s, is "gleaned from the images purveyed through popular cultural artifacts of the time [as they are] re-run, re-

screened, re-consumed in our present days.”²⁸ Because “popular cultural artifacts” such as sitcoms dictate much of our thinking about the past, the reconstruction of their full social context is crucial. It is especially important to go beyond the status of unifying myths we now distill from them. This means interrogating, for example, the myth of postwar Britain as a society in which opportunities and resources were democratically divided among new classes.²⁹ It also means acknowledging their function as sites of memory—depositories of national hegemonic narratives—but also of counter-memories.

This process of knowledge creation and dissemination described above was invigorated by technological innovations and transformations in the media market. Video-taping, television reruns, cable television, DVDs, and, lately, YouTube all contributed to the exposure of new audiences to vintage sitcoms. Taken together, they cement the importance of sitcoms to historians of the postwar period, to scholars of media both old and new, and to those wishing to document how our current understanding of this period was shaped by broadcasting technologies.

The growing centrality of the home as a place of solace, socialization and entertainment increased sitcoms’ cultural role. In the winter months of 1965, the Educational Broadcasting Department of the BBC undertook a study into the interests of adults in Britain. The results that were published in May that year disclosed a “revolution in people’s everyday interests.”³⁰ Researchers found that home and family were the dominant interests of the people living in the areas covered by the survey: Lancashire and Cheshire, London, Scotland and the southern counties of Oxford,

²⁸ Janet Thumim, “Introduction,” in *Small Screens, Big Ideas: Television in the 1950s* ed. Janet Thumim, (London: I.B. Tauris, 2001), 5.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ “Survey Discloses a Revolution in People’s Everyday Interests,” *The Times*, May 18, 1965.

Berkshire, Hampshire, and the Isle of Wight. Evidence came from 900 questionnaires, a study of letters to the press, visits to adult education centers, and clubs and societies of various kinds. Researchers also visited libraries, travel agencies, bookshops, record shops, factories, and offices. All the data pointed to the fact that most people in Britain preferred “to stay at home mowing the lawn or watching television.”³¹

The research clarified that, by the 1960s, the movement homeward that originated during wartime had arrived at its destination and, once there, it was propped in front of the TV set. As the second chapter demonstrates, a television set rapidly rose to the top of contemporary Britons’ wish list. The prominence of television in Britons living-rooms and, indeed, in their lives, was an emblem of the shift from austerity to affluence. This was an expansion of the development of popular leisure in the 1880s that sprang from an increase in free time and income charted by Peter Bailey.³² The process that Bailey describes wherein in tandem with the growth of leisure activities on offer, popular culture became more homogenized was continued in this period; its consumption becoming more domestic and individual.

All this was riddled with paradoxes. The act of viewing is private and domestic but, unlike reading a novel, for example, the nature of television viewing from the 1950s to the 1980s had a public side to it too. Starting in the early 1920s, both policy makers and the public thought of broadcasting media as a national resource. Radio stations and later on television stations were licensed, regulated, and, in the case of the BBC, funded by the state. Unlike the American media market that was governed solely by the laws of demand, competition scarcely existed in Britain. The period

³¹ Ibid.

³² Peter Bailey, “Ally Sloper’s Half-Holiday: Comic Art in the 1880s,” *History Workshop Journal* 16, no.1 (1983): 4–32.

under consideration was aptly titled “the era of scarcity” referring to the narrow viewing diet consisting of the BBC and ITV.³³

Consequently, while individuals sat in their living-room to watch the evening news or a sitcom they knew that, at that very same moment, millions of their fellow countrymen and women indulged in the same act. Television viewed at home paradoxically became a public space in which a shared national culture was being shaped. Various individuals interpreted what they saw in different ways but, by the next day, images, bits of reporting, commentary, and banter broadcast on television had turned into social currency as viewers repeated them to people they saw at the greengrocer, the pub, and the office. This social trade created links between strangers; it offered them a common language, befitting the democratic pulse of the postwar era. This dissertation describes the role of postwar Britcoms in the production of this cultural currency.

Stuart Jefferies expounded in the *Guardian* the allure of viewing sitcoms in the 1960s and 1970s in similar terms,

We all watched questionable sitcoms and they brought us together as a catchphrase-quoting, difference-denying, hate-sublimating Britain. Even as many of us despised much of what we saw. Even as we watched in numbers scarcely imaginable in today's fractured TV milieu.³⁴

British novelist Zadie Smith described how British sitcoms sustained her relationship with her elderly father. “Like most Britons,” Smith wrote, “Harvey gathered his family around the defunct hearth each night to watch the same half-hour comic situations repeatedly, in reruns and on Video.”³⁵ Harvey’s favorite was the postwar comic luminary Tony Hancock, “a comic wedded to despair.” Hancock

³³ Robert Turnock, *Television and Consumer Culture: Britain and the Transformation of Modernity* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007), 17.

³⁴ Stuart Jefferies, “The comedy of cruelty,” *The Guardian*, March 9, 2007, 12.

³⁵ Zadie Smith, “Dead Man Laughing: Jokes Run Through a Family,” *The New Yorker*, December 22, 2008.

reminded Smith of her father “a quintessentially English, poorly educated, working-class war veteran with social and intellectual aspirations.”³⁶ Their shared love of vintage comedies, insisted Smith, “served as a constant source of conversation between my father and me, a vital link between us when, class-wise, and in every other wise, each year placed us further apart.”³⁷

Definitions and Media Background

The *Oxford English Dictionary* offers a brief definition for sitcom: “a comedy (serial) in which the humour derives largely from the particular conjunction of characters and circumstances.” According to the OED, the term “sitcom” was first used in 1953, in a piece about the impact of the success of *I Love Lucy* on American television. The roots of the sitcom, however, can be traced back to interwar radio. Its huge success there made it an obvious candidate to cross-over to television. In the US, *The Jack Benny Program* (CBS, NBC, 1950-1965) laid the foundations of the genre—recurring characters, linear plots, and a protagonist with a clear persona rather than “a performer spouting gags.”³⁸ The protagonist was then placed in comedic situations that were familiar to the audience, who could predict his actions.³⁹ In Britain, the OED states, the term debuted in a 1967 review in *The Listener*. The reviewer used it to describe *Steptoe and Son* and *Till Death Us Do Part* as the best situation comedies ever made in Britain.

When the sitcom first crossed-over to television, the medium’s visual particularities were not tackled. *I love Lucy* (CBS, 1951-1957) introduced a substantial innovation in filming that became a feature of sitcom—the three-camera

³⁶ Smith, “Dead Man Laughing.”

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Bret Mills, *Television Sitcom* (London: BFI, 2005), 38.

³⁹ Ibid.

set up. In any exchange between two characters, one camera would shoot both characters together, while the other two covered the close-ups of the individual characters. Thus the director could follow a joke with a reaction shot, which is how most sitcoms are still shot. The efficiency of this convention, explains comedy scholar Brett Mills, is that it gets two laughs from one joke: “one from the funny thing that was said and another of someone else's reactions to it.”⁴⁰

The reaction shot connected the “fireside spectator” to the characters of the sitcoms recreating, to a limited degree, the experience of attending the theatre.⁴¹ It was revolutionary for its privileging of reaction over action, which the close-up made possible. British writers were fast to realize this too, and the writing of Ray Galton and Alan Simpson for the television sitcom *Hancock's Half Hour* from 1959 onwards took the close-up shot into great account. The close-up became a signature feature of the show (it helped that Tony Hancock made splendid use of his facial expressions), and by the early 1960s, this model became common in Britain.⁴²

When comedy was first transmitted on radio it was performed live. Listeners at home heard the laughter of the audience at the theatre as punctuation to the performer's jokes. So, when sitcoms were developed for television they were performed and recorded in front of a live audience. Performers trained in the music halls or the theatre believed an audience was a prerequisite for a good performance, and it was also assumed that the audience's laughter would recreate the collective experience of the theatre or the music hall for the audience at home.⁴³ With the development of new recording techniques in the mid-1940s a separate sound track, for example, laughter could be added in post-production. CBS's sound engineer Charley

⁴⁰ Ibid., 39.

⁴¹ Ibid., 40.

⁴² Goddard, Peter, “Hancock's Half Hour: A Watershed in British Television Comedy,” in *Popular Television in Britain: Studies in Cultural History* ed. John Corner (London: BFI Publishing, 1991), 82.

⁴³ Mills, *Television Sitcom*, 39.

Douglass noticed *that* at times the live audience did not react to the comedy in the expected manner—they didn't laugh in the right places, they laughed too little or too loudly. Douglass corrected this by inserting additional laughter in places that he felt could use some encouragement, or mute laughter that was too conspicuous. As studio sitcoms became more expansive and detailed, a live audience became an antiquated feature, but the laugh track remained.

The British sitcom or 'Britcom' was an indigenous form born out of the union of the American sitcom, the tradition of the British music hall, and the new British movement of social realism in the arts. From these three sources of inspiration a local form was created, developed, and later exported around the globe. It began in radio with series such as *Bandwaggon* (BBC, 1938-1940), *It's That Man Again* (BBC, 1939-1948), and *Take It From Here* (BBC, 1948 - 60).⁴⁴ These series were not full-blown sitcoms, but neither were they just a string of gags. At least part of the show had a narrative, and featured recurring characters and catchphrases. The television sitcom took-off with the transfer of *Hancock's Half Hour* from radio in 1956.

The American television sitcom and its British sibling shared a family resemblance: They were 25-30 minutes long shows in a serial format—although each program had a self-contained plot; sitcoms were broadcast in peak time and very likely to be repeated on later occasions; they had a core of regular characters in a familiar scenery and set; the action and dialogue were punctuated with a recorded laughter soundtrack; they had a dramatic plot that tended to resolve in a positive note.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Stephan Wagg, "At Ease, Corporal: Social Class and the Situation Comedy in British Television, from the 1950s to the 1990s," in *Because I Tell a Joke or Two: Comedy, Politics, and Social Difference*, ed. Stephen Wagg. (London: Routledge, 1998), 3.

From the beginning, however, the American and British versions displayed differences of form and content. A substantial distinction was the creative process—in the American sitcom, an idea for a show was approved and entrusted with a producer who then resumed the lead for securing starts and engaging a group of writers to develop the initial idea. The group might consist of over ten writers who could be changed during the season. This method results in a faster pace—the large number of writers promises a substantial amount of jokes, and longer seasons of twenty four episodes rather than six to thirteen episodes in the British case.

In Britain the writers developed, wrote, and presided over the execution of the show. Frank Muir in his capacity as Assistant Head of Light Entertainment of Television at the BBC explained that, while the American sitcom was “formula comedy,” the British sitcom was of the “organic comedy” variety. By this he meant that it is, “the product of one writer—or a pair of writers. It is an original view of life, a comic attitude which is the product of one writer’s mind and talent and cannot be written satisfactorily by anybody else.”⁴⁶ Therefore it is possible to discuss an authorial vision, as this dissertation does.

The commitment of British sitcoms to realism was another substantial difference. In a lecture, Muir drew a line from nineteenth century publications such as *Punch* magazine to the kind of humor in 1960s sitcoms. He referred to the “minute observation of human behaviour; the bringing forward of unconsidered trifles to generate a quiet, analytical amusement.”⁴⁷ In the 1950s, however, this style of humor darkened as it attached itself to the aesthetic of social realism. In the tradition of dramatic and theatrical representation, social realism was available to writers since the 1940s. In the postwar context it was concerned with representing social

⁴⁶ Frank Muir, “Comedy in Television,” a lecture at the third of the fifth series of lunch-time lectures in the Concert Hall at Broadcasting House, (London: BBC, 1966).

⁴⁷ Ibid.

experiences that had not been seen on the stage before—those of the northern working class, young people, sexuality, women, and ethnic minorities.⁴⁸

The social realist plays and novels of the late 1950s and early 1960s such as John Osborn's 1956 *Look Back in Anger*, Alan Sillitoe's 1958 *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* or Shelagh Delaney's 1958 *a Taste of Honey* documented new forms of alienation as a result of growing income inequality and the effects of mass culture on class, regional, and gender identities.⁴⁹ This fiction, maintains literary critic Rod Mengham, was an "account of what was still owed to those whose needs were not comprehended by the materialistic criteria of never having had it so good."⁵⁰ As in the realist drama of the nineteenth century, the sense of entrapment in which characters find themselves is a central motif. The drama ends with containment and the defeat of the protagonist.⁵¹

The cultural movements of the 1950s and 1960s had a sense that politics mattered and that theatre, literature, and television drama could make a change in the world. Writing about working class people was conceived as a form of bearing witness to the struggles of ordinary people. It was sign of "fidelity to the cumulative truth of everyday experience, which was often political in its implications."⁵² The "kitchen sink drama" synonymous with the movement was connected to the domestic and the everyday. The view from a single family's kitchen sink was a metonym for other families.⁵³

⁴⁸ Stephen Lacey, "Staging the Contemporary: Politics and Practice in Post-War Social Realist Theatre," in *British Social Realism in the Arts since 1940*, ed. David Tucker (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 58.

⁴⁹ Rod Mengham, "Bad Teeth: British Social Realism in Fiction," in *British Social Realism in the Arts since 1940*, ed. David Tucker (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 81.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 82.

⁵¹ Lacey, "Staging the Contemporary," 59.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 62.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 64.

Sitcoms from the period shared many of these aesthetic, moral, and topical commitments. Their writers were inspired by the likes of John Osborne, Alan Sillitoe, and Harold Pinter. They put onscreen their versions of reality, made of building blocks created by their subjective experiences and interests. Thus they wrote their protagonists as aspiring working-class or lower-middle class men. Their characters elicited laughter because they, and the situations they were thrown into, were perceived as plausibly real by viewers. The characters were less stereotypical and were more social types, “whose situation and behaviour is represented as typical and not exceptional.”⁵⁴

Contemporary audience research reports from the BBC archives support this claim. A report from April 29, 1965, for example, summed up the answers of 424 people to a questionnaire about their viewing experience of an episode of *The Likely Lads*, broadcast two nights earlier at 8pm. Some viewers thought the episode a little crude for family viewing (the lads’ primary concerns were chasing girls and boozing). The authors of the report concluded, however, that, “It is clear . . . that it was this very ‘down-to-earth’ approach that delighted many, who found the exchanges between Terry and Bob refreshingly natural and true to life.”⁵⁵

Viewers added that the adventures of Terry and Bob “were not only vastly amusing but most realistic.”⁵⁶ What Britons of all classes had recognized as realistic in the *Likely Lads*, and indeed in most Britcoms, was the dominance of class in their lives. The common thread that runs through the most well-loved characters in British sitcoms is their social ambition and frustration. Frank Muir maintained that *Steptoe and Son*, the ultimate sitcom about familial entrapment, succeeded because it “showed what

⁵⁴ Terry Lovell, “A genre of Social Disruption?,” in *BFI, Dossier, 17: Television Sitcom*, ed. Jim Cook (London: British Film Institute, 1982), 24.

⁵⁵ “An Audience Research Report: The Likely Lads, the Other Side of the Fence,” April 27, 1965, BBC Written Archives (hereafter, WAC).

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

marvelous comedy values lay in real human relationships. Even, as in *Steptoe*, when the relationship is closer to tragedy than jolly, laughable eccentricity.”⁵⁷

The new emphasis on realism and its deep exploration of relationships had an enduring impact on the British sitcom. Muir, insisted that

The success of *Steptoe* opened writers' eyes to the fact that television viewers are particularly responsive to comedy based firmly in reality; that comedy which truthfully reflects human dilemmas can strike home with a power that gag comedy can never achieve.⁵⁸

The centrality of failure to the narrative is another chief theme that comes out of this commitment to realism and the social context in which these sitcoms were made. Looking back on his life's work, writer Jimmy Perry argued that the series he wrote, *Dad's Army* (BBC, 1968-1977), proved so enduringly popular “Because it's about failure.” Perry maintained that, rather than being an accidental occurrence, this was another example of British preference: “We like our characters that way—no one gets above themselves, or if they do they get punished. In America it's different, and in France or Germany they just wouldn't be amused by these characters.”⁵⁹ Perry's statement displays a degree of fantasy regarding the self-regulating capacity of the British social order. As in any society, Britain too had its share of those who got above themselves with no social sanction.

The role of the loser, however, was embraced by the protagonists of British situation comedy, from Hancock through Harold Steptoe and David Brent in *The Office* (BBC 2001-2003). The core drama of the comedy was based in class and the characters' inability to break out of its constraints. Frances Gray argued that generations of heroes “went on to test the boundaries of their social traps,” and by

⁵⁷ Frank Muir, “Under the Influence,” *The Listener*, August 10, 1967, 162.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 162.

⁵⁹ Stuart Jeffries, “some Like It Hot,” *The Guardian* 2, February 2003,

implication, they tested those of the viewers.⁶⁰ Because failure is so central to Britcoms, viewers' tendency to root for the protagonist is confronted with the character's impending failure—which arouses embarrassment in equal amounts to merriment.

Methodology and Its Challenges

The centrality of humor to British culture is evident in the relentless production of humorous works, encompassing various genres both in high and lowbrow realms of culture. Within this mass production, over 650 radio and television sitcoms were aired between 1945 and 1980. This gargantuan body of work consists of tens of thousands of hours divided into several genres. The great working-class television sitcoms are the protagonists of this dissertation. Additional examples of radio and television sitcoms feature as supporting cast. This choice was made for a few reasons, the first stemming from the identity of their creators. Individuals such as Frank Muir, Dennis Norden, Alan Simpson, Ray Galton, Johnny Speight, Jimmy Perry and David Croft were and are gifted social observers. Their texts are grounded in the social events, political discussions, and cultural trends of the period. In addition, they were earnest investigators of a British society that longed to shape its culture and produce post-imperial Britain. The immense popularity of their shows testifies to their success in turning sitcoms into an arena for public debate and engagement.

Secondly, the series that will be examined here led to the development of the genre as a whole, and their exploration traces the trajectory of the form in Britain. A close reading of sitcoms such as *Hancock's Half Hour*, *Steptoe and Son*, and *Till Death Us Do Part*, elucidates the characteristics that are unique to the Britcom. They

⁶⁰ Frances Gray, "Privacy, Embarrassment and Social Power: British Sitcom," in *Beyond a Joke: the Limits of Humour*, ed. Michael Pickering and Sharon Lockyer (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 152.

exemplify the commitment of contemporary writers, broadcasting institutions, and audiences to a realist exploration and representation of life in Britain. Zooming in on them enables the teasing out of preoccupations, desires, and the fears of contemporaries. Deciphering their singular idiom enriches our understanding of postwar culture as a whole.

Thirdly, these series now belong in the canon of vintage television. Canonic shows are intriguing for their content, but also for their trajectory of consumption. They are unusual in that they succeed in transcending the fleeting image of television. They manage to travel across time and social space, and appeal to more than one social or age group.⁶¹ These series were repeated on British television frequently since their original run. They were also consumed in changing social and political contexts, and reached audiences that were born long after their original broadcast. Their contemporary embrace reveals the boundaries of acceptability and desirability of the ideas and values that informed the shows.

There are challenges to this study nonetheless. Most television shows place a premium on the present. They use audio and visual references that plant them in the here and now. Thereby their analysis requires a deep acquaintance with their intricate web of references. Frank Muir commented in the early 1970s that “Good comedy is relevant and local and pinned to a time. It’s the froth on top of the beer, the fag-end in the gutter.”⁶² As the analysis of comedy, a product of social events well beyond its script, has to root itself in its historical time and place.⁶³ The notion that one can reconstruct a glass of beer from its ephemeral froth is both ambitious and ridiculous. Hopefully this dissertation will make for an interesting attempt to demonstrate that the

⁶¹ Wagg. “at Ease, Corporal,” 2.

⁶² Frank Muir as quoted in David Nathan, *The Laughtermakers: A Quest for Comedy* (London: Owen, 1971), 39.

⁶³ Mort. “Intellectual Pluralism and the Future of British History.” 215.

local and contextual nature of humor, establishes sitcoms an ideal topic for the kind of “local” investigation that Mort recommends without losing sight of the greater social picture.

The methodology employed in this dissertation is a form of “reverse archeology.” It layers myriad cultural products onto the sitcoms themselves to distill their social meaning by deploying an integrative framework that brings together the political, social, and cultural narratives of postwar Britain. Thus, in addition to scripts and taped performances, I used oral-interviews, novels, movies, pop songs, other television products, television and radio audience reports, broadcasting memos, newspaper reports, interviews and reviews, popular biographies and autobiographies. Applying them to a number of hand-picked study cases, I hope to reconstruct the social world of their production and consumption.

Television is not solely a written text, it is also a performance.⁶⁴ In the case of comedy, the delivery of the script adds an additional layer of meaning to the written word. Many of the earlier radio and television shows, however, were not recorded. Others were recorded but then taped over, as recording material was expensive and television was thought of as a live medium, at least until the 1960s. Therefore, in some cases, it was only possible to use the printed scripts and, where possible, to complement those with first-hand accounts or oral interviews with the writers.

A central concern is that institutional factors determine the source base.⁶⁵ More particularly, they privilege the BBC. From its early days, the BBC kept a comprehensive written archive. The BBC WAC contains production letters, letters to the broadcasting body, newspaper articles, and transcripts. Its unique position as commissioner, producer, and broadcaster of shows, makes it a singular archive, and

⁶⁴ John Ellis, “Is It Possible to Construct a Canon of Television Programmes?: Immanent Reading Versus Textual-Historicism,” in *Re-Viewing Television History*, 15.

⁶⁵ Helen Wheatley, “Introduction: Re-Viewing Television Histories,” in *Re-Viewing Television History*. 8.

its choice not to digitize its materials or create a catalogue makes it also a non-transparent one. It is open for limited hours a week and working there is by appointment only. The researcher is instructed to send the list of topics she hopes to work on, and dedicated members of the staff arrange the files they deem appropriate, which are then vetted before release. Consequently, research is even further mediated.

An equivalent archival does not exist for companies that produced sitcoms for the commercial channel. Far fewer sitcoms have survived and are available for purchase on DVD. (As an organization intent on its centrality to British culture, the BBC has released a lot of vintage TV in video and, recently, DVD form). Admittedly, the BBC took the lead in the creation of both popular and innovative sitcoms of the time. But our sense of television history is, unfortunately, shaped by the imbalance of sources.

Division of the dissertation

The dissertation is divided into five chapters. Chapter One, “Broadcast Media Arrives in Britain,” lays out the circumstances and set of values that had granted broadcast media a formidable role in British society. It argues that radio and television were implicated in the more general move towards home-based leisure, and the development of an individualistic and domestic culture central to the postwar moment.

It describes how radio was embraced enthusiastically in the 1920s as the emblem of modernity, a technology untainted by war. In the US, radio was usurped by entrepreneurs as a fresh venue for news and entertainment to be governed by the laws of demand and profit. In contrast, in Britain, radio was seen as a national resource to be ruled by the state and by middle-class standards of decency and good taste. For this

reason the BBC was established with a Royal Charter as a monopoly, funded by an obligatory license fee and given the mission to “educate, inform and entertain.” Many power struggles ensued over the meaning of these words and how they were translated by program makers, radio directors, parliament and listeners.

Television further expanded the influence of broadcast media in British life. It extended the domestication of public life, altered and shaped daily routines, and made viewers participants in historical events. Television complied with, and encouraged, democratic processes that the postwar settlement had promised. Both the state funded channels and ITV, the commercial channel, received their licenses on the conditions that their transmissions reach all parts of the country, and that they diversify the identity of program makers and their subject matters. The sweeping changes in education, class and gender relations, and the more mundane urgency for trained professionals, opened the door of the new industry to a greater variety of voices.

Chapter Two, “‘The Great Unwashed! That’s What We Are, Mate:’ Housing, Homes and Social Mobility,” examines the expansion of the interwar movement toward the home, and the individualization and privatization of culture and politics. The concern for the home and its reconstruction intensified after WWII and the destruction, loss of life, and breakdown of hierarchies it brought with it. The individual struggle to procure a home was echoed by the national anxiety to define the borders of the national community which accompanied the dismantling of the empire. By the 1960s, with greater affluence and decreasing working hours, more capital and free time were directed to the home and domestic leisure activities. These factors worked to change the content, feel and smell of individual homes.

This chapter shows how television became an important part of the new domestic culture by occupying the center of the family space, influencing daily routines, and

establishing itself as an honorary family member. In less than a decade after the war, the presence of a television set in the home came to embody working class aspirations for mobility, culture and refinement, and changing standards of housing, cleanliness and taste. Sitcoms both reflected and reinforced Britons' yearning for security and community in the private and in the national home.

Chapter Three, ““Our Screens Had Become Chocked with Dead Cowboys’: The Anglo-American Special Relationship,” examines contemporaries’ growing anxiety about an American cultural invasion, and a subsequent loss of identity. As the ascending super-power and owner of Britain’s debt, America stirred in Britons a medley of sentiments such as envy, resentment, curiosity, fascination, and inferiority—all of which were intermingled in the quest for a postwar national identity. In this climate, culture and heritage became sites to which Britons could look in order to nourish their self-esteem. It was the glorious past and a self-proclaimed unique brand of humor to which Britons would turn in defiance of the American “aggressor.” Thus, the allegedly unique English sense of humor was used repeatedly as a tool for self-definition, and as a measure of the character of other nations.

Chapter Four, “White and White TV: the End of Empire and Race Relations on the Small Screen,” maintains that sitcom writers aspired to educate their audiences about prejudice. Motivated by their belief in the transformative power of realistic art, they viewed their artistic output as a political act, undeterred by the commonplace view that commercial comedy’s sole aspiration should be to entertain or reinforce the existing beliefs of its viewers. As attitudes to race changed over the decades, sitcoms’ way of addressing the topic shifted from skirting around the topic, through blunt racist humor, to actual representation of the experience of multi-ethnic Britain.

This chapter reveals how instrumental radio and television were in the dissemination of ideas about race among a substantial and diverse population of viewers. The frequent repeats of sitcoms over the years in this media and through new technologies such as cable, satellite TV, and the internet, passed on these formulations of race relations to new generations of Britons. In the process they posed new concerns about the promises and pitfalls of racist humor. Out of their original broadcasting context, certain series no longer read as a subversive interrogation of prejudice, but rather as an embrace of it. This process reveals the double-edged nature of comedy, and the power and responsibility of audiences in its interpretation.

Chapter Five, “Technologies of Memory: Britcoms Whitewash the War,” explores the role of *Dad’s Army* (BBC 1968-1977) in the production of the “People’s War” and the “Little England” myths at the heart of the story of wartime Britain. During the 1950s and 1960s racial tensions intensified and demonstrations, riots and racism troubled the public sphere. These events had motivated anti-immigration legislation in the 1960s, but also the institution of anti-discrimination laws and mechanisms. The formal retreat from the empire by the mid-1960s gave birth to a resurgence of the vision of “Little England.” This vision replaced the version of the imperial national community. It was a whitewashed view of the country that was shaped by the growing presence of non-white immigrants, fears of the ending of the regime of white, male authoritative society, and the consequent discourse of decline.

The chapter demonstrates how the series constructed the war years as a period of national consent, and glossed all the aforementioned tensions and fractions. As television reruns continue to expose new generations to this narration of wartime Britain, it is consolidating into a hegemonic narrative. Examining its reception over the years reveals the seduction of ‘period sitcoms’ as cultural forms, and their

potency as tools of education and social formation, it shows sitcoms as a powerful, though neglected, source for the production of a collective narrative of the past.

To sum, this thesis explores how sitcoms addressed and engaged with the most critical issues of British life: from post-war consumer aspirations and shortage of housing, through fears of Americanization and loss of identity, to racism and the end of empire. Comedy not only brought these issues to the forefront of public debate, but also created the language and the terms in which to discuss them. Written by individuals with competing agendas, Britcoms contained many paradoxes. Yet, these contradictions enriched the public discussion, for sitcoms provoked audiences and provided them an opportunity to develop various interpretations of the pressing issues of the day. The exploration of sitcoms offers a foray into the contemporary mind. It also highlights the trajectory in which television developed in Britain as an industry and as a public institution. Today, with Technological innovations, such as the television re-run, the videotape, the DVD and YouTube, sitcoms created between 1950 and 1980 continue to shape British culture and to define Britons' vision and memory of the past.

Chapter One: Broadcast Media Arrives in Britain

On the evening of 15 June 1920, radio enthusiasts from around the world listened 'live' to the familiar melody of “Home Sweet Home” performed by the legendary Australian soprano Dame Nellie Melba. Unlike in her other performances, listeners were not gathered at London’s Covent Garden, the Paris Opera or at the New York Metropolitan Opera. Instead, this performance took place in a makeshift studio at the Chelmsford factory in Essex, England, the location of the first wireless factory in the world, founded by Guglielmo Marconi in July 1898. In 1920, with financial sponsorship from the *Daily Mail* newspaper, the Marconi Company broadcast the world's first live recital by a professional musician. Melba sang into a microphone made of a telephone mouthpiece and wood from a cigar-box.¹ Her voice, singing of the delights of home, carried to listeners as far away as Iran and Canada.

The song was an appropriate choice for a technology implicated in the more general move toward home-based leisure and the development of an individualistic and domestic culture.² “Home Sweet Home” was written by American actor and dramatist John Howard Payne for his 1823 opera “Clari, Maid of Milan.” In a perfect transatlantic collaboration its melody was composed by Englishman Sir Henry Bishop. Its promise that “Mid pleasures and palaces though we may roam, / Be it ever so humble, there's no place like home;” has since become a cultural trope both in the United States and in Britain.³

¹ The microphone bearing the signature of Nellie Melba is exhibited at the Museum of the History of Science in Oxford, UK.

² Tim O’Sullivan, “Listening Through: The Wireless and World War Two,” in *War Culture: Social Change and Changing Experience in World War Two Britain*, eds. Pat Kirkham and David Thoms (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1995), 175.

³ The song had a cameo appearance in another contemporary novelty—cinema. In 1909, it was featured in the silent film *The House of Cards*, an Edison Studios film. In one scene, a card reading “Play Home Sweet Home” was displayed, upon which an on-screen fiddler performed a pantomime of the song.

Carried by the radio waves, Melba voiced Payne's lyrics, but also the hopes of many individuals for a place they could call home. This dream was hard to realize as the Great War and the economic depression of the 1920s had a profound impact on the construction of new housing in great demand since the rapid urbanization at the turn of the century. Although many listeners did not own a place to call home, the new technology brought them together as an acoustic community.⁴ As the radio technology became more popular, it kept listeners company and drew them into new relationships with broadcasters and other listeners. They learned to appreciate the window it opened into the world and the discursive space it offered.⁵ Even when television came to dominate the media market, many remembered the charms of radio. Comedian and veteran broadcaster Barry Took explained radio's initial appeal in his 1976 history of British radio comedy:

Radio was cheap and it was cosy, and above all it was something that the whole family could share. Moreover, it was reassuring. The friendly voices of the broadcasters could and did reach the remotest parts of the country, and even more than the newspapers or the music hall, or even the infant cinema industry, it united the kingdom. Radio was a universally shared experience. Furthermore, it was new and modern and untainted by war. It hadn't existed in 1914, and people looking for a new and better world seemed to hear it crackling through the earphones of their primitive crystal sets.⁶

Initially radio was neither cheap nor user-friendly. Its newness, did however, excite contemporaries. An article in a Marconi industry publication from 1935 claimed that radio has provided people around the world with a constant flow of music and entertainment for their homes. Indifferent to the Nazi seizure of power and

⁴ I use the term "acoustic spaces" as it is used by the scholar of communications Tamar Liebes. Liebes argues that radio is capable of creating a series of "acoustic spaces" through which listeners can express their collective identities. Liebes maintains that "unlike the fixed-in-place television, radio can easily accompany listeners, assisting them in containing chaos, mediating threatening reality, and providing a sense of belonging by connecting the individual with the collective." Tamar Liebes, "Acoustic space: the role of radio in Israeli collective history," *Jewish History*, 20, no.1(Mar, 2006): 74.

⁵ David Hendy, *Radio in the Global Age* (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2000), 2.

⁶ Took, *Laughter in the Air: an Informal History of British Radio Comedy* (London, Robson Books, 1976), 5.

global militarization, it optimistically forecast that "The nations of the earth have been brought into close touch with one another, which must ultimately result in world peace."⁷

Unfortunately World War II, rather than world peace, ensued. However, the idea that radio can bring individuals and nations closer was appealed to contemporaries. In Britain, in particular, this sentiment was supported by the structure of the mass-communication market. Radio was understood by politicians to be a national resource and, therefore, was regulated by the state and financed by an obligatory listeners' fee. Companies that wished to commence broadcasting had to obtain a license from the General Post Office, which controlled all means of mass-communication with the exception of the printed word. This was different from the situation in the United States, in which the development of the telegraph, wireless telegraph, telephone, and wireless telephony were motivated by supply and demand for profit. Consequently, by the end of 1920 the American Commerce Department had licensed commercial broadcasting stations that offered daily programs to a general audience.

In Britain, in contrast, the BBC was the only licensed broadcasting body during radio's first decades. It divided its transmissions into two services: the National and the Regional programs. With the declaration of World War II, the Regional Service was suspended and the National Service was renamed the Home Service. In February 1940, the Forces Programme came on air to provide a 'lighter' schedule.⁸ In 1946, the BBC radio service was reconstructed with different programming for the Home, Light and Third channels—a trio of stations, each with a specific identity and target audience. On 28 March 1964, Radio Caroline began the first pirate radio transmission to Britain from a ship anchored off the Essex shore. Radio Caroline dedicated its

⁷ As quoted in Tony Slaughter, "On the Receiving End," *The Times*, November 2, 1972.

⁸ O'Sullivan, "Listening Through," 177.

transmissions to pop music which was rather limited on BBC radio. Its audience grew rapidly, especially among young listeners.

The transistor revolution of the 1960s made radio sets smaller, cheaper, and more mobile; teenagers could now listen to “their” music in their room at home. Listening to the radio was no longer a family activity. Government was less than enthusiastic about such non-licensed radio boats and ordered their persecution. The BBC was thus able to maintain its monopoly over radio for a little longer. On 2 January 1971, however, this came to an end with the opening of Radio Newcastle, the first licensed commercial regional radio station in Britain.

The Establishment of the BBC

One of the main companies that got into broadcasting in the early days was the British Broadcasting Company, Ltd., established on 18 October 1922 by a British commercial company formed by British and American electrical companies. On 14 December 1922, it hired the Scotsman John Reith as the managing director of the company and moved its offices to the premises of the Marconi Company, and on January 1923, the Post Office granted the BBC its first license. Although the Postmaster General could license other companies, it was in effect a monopoly. Its initial financial model consisted of three revenue sources: the sale of radio receiving sets and transmitters manufactured by its shareholding member companies; a percentage of the obligatory license fee for any purchase of a radio set; and the sponsorship of several programs paid for by British newspapers.

This financing model was short-lived. First, the relationship with Fleet Street soured as the Newspaper Proprietors' Association realized that the live aspect of radio posed an immediate threat to their business. The initial license contained a clause stipulating that the BBC should not broadcast any news or information except that

obtained and paid for from the news agencies.⁹ The Postmaster General clarified that the new service should not alienate or financially embarrass the press.¹⁰ The Association pressured the government that news be limited to a 7pm bulletin to decrease competition with the newspapers, a limitation held in place until 1938.¹¹ Second, and more importantly, people were not buying radio sets from the British Broadcasting Company, as it had hoped. Rather, they built their own sets from imported materials. They either took out experimenters' licenses that did not require the use of British Broadcasting Company parts or sets, or evaded the law by not purchasing any license at all.¹²

The financial situation of the company seemed dire within a year. In April 1923, the Postmaster General called a committee under Major General Sir Fredrick Sykes to look into its business. Its mandate was to include a wider inquiry into the broadcasting market following the claims made by the Beaverbrook newspapers that the company was a monopoly and barred smaller manufacturers from broadcasting. On 19 August 1923, the committee issued a report with various recommendations to rearrange its business model and address the concerns of other radio manufacturers. Most important for this discussion were decisions to extend the license for the British Broadcasting Company to December 1926, and the recommendation to replace its private ownership with a public one. The committee also acknowledged the value of radio and noted that "broadcasting holds social and political possibilities as great as any technical attainment of our generation." It praised the BBC's ability to manage this resource and recommended that it remain independent rather than commandeered

⁹ Michael Tracey ed., "Introduction to Microfilm Edition," *The BBC and the Reporting of the General Strike, 1926* (Microform Academic Publishers, 2005), 7.

¹⁰ Ibid., 7.

¹¹ Andrew Crisell, *An Introductory History of British Broadcasting*, (London: Routledge, 2002), 21.

¹² Asa Briggs, *The History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom: Volume I: The Birth of Broadcasting* (Oxford University Press, 1995), 134.

by government.¹³ The Sykes committee rejected advertising as a source of income, which it identified as a possible threat to the quality of broadcasting.

In 1925, the Crawford Committee reinforced the importance of the BBC's editorial freedom, recommending the creation of the British Broadcasting Corporation as a monopoly financed by annual fees on radio receivers and administered an independent public corporation. This entity would be established by a Royal Charter that would grant it a decade-long broadcasting license.¹⁴ This particular statutory and funding structure evolved both to symbolize quality broadcasting and to nurture a unique sense of national proprietary interest over the new institution, to which the rapidly multiplying numbers of license fee payers testified. In 1923, the Post Office issued 80,000 such licenses, in 1924 the number increased to 1 million, and by 1939 nine million licenses were issued. Media scholars argue that the actual number of listeners was remarkably higher as many listeners evaded the law and did not pay their fees. Thus for the early days of radio, one should compute five unlicensed listeners for every documented license.¹⁵ Moreover, because the license fee represents a household rather than an individual, the number is clearly larger than the license fee figures indicate. Within a short span of time, radio had become a central fixture of British life. George V's Christmas address to the nation in 1932 cemented radio's function as a growing arena of public life. That Christmas, five million license fee payers were on record, potentially listening to his speech.¹⁶ Since then, the royal

¹³ Burton Paulu, *Television and Radio in the United Kingdom* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1981), 7-8.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹⁵ Crisell, *An Introductory History of British Broadcasting*, 22.

¹⁶ Slaughter, "On the Receiving End."

Christmas address on radio and television became an inseparable part of the holiday tradition.¹⁷

Radio Takes Off

Radio generated immediate public interest, but in its first decade it was a limited affair both in respect to the hours of activity and to the audience's composition. Even when, in 1925, enough transmitters were built to service 80 per cent of the population programs were on for only a few hours a day, usually in the afternoon, and listeners were mostly male. This gender imbalance could be attributed to radio's technological configuration: sets had unreliable receivers and they required headphones. This made listening to the radio an uncomfortable, solitary activity. In 1972, reminiscing about the beginnings of radio, Tony Slaughter in *The Times* called those earphones “a nuisance.” Slaughter quoted comedian Tony Hancock assessment of the experience, “These headphones don't half make your ears hot. Dear oh dear, like two braised lamb chops under there they are.”¹⁸

It was more than discomfort that kept women away from radio. Women did not have the time to devote to listening to the radio alone. Technological innovations would soon bring them into the audience in large numbers. Valve wireless with improved reception replaced these receivers in the 1930s, and with the arrival of loudspeaker sets, radio really took off. Radio was now a group activity to be consumed collectively in “the home, workplace or barracks.”¹⁹ Once listening to the radio no longer required headphones, women joined the community of listeners in

¹⁷ All the major sitcoms have a “Christmas Special.” See chapter four for a detailed discussion of “Peace and Goodwill” from the series *Till Death Us Do Part* (BBC, December 26, 1966).

¹⁸ Slaughter, “On the Receiving End.”

¹⁹ O’Sullivan, “Listening Through,” 175.

large numbers, following various programs while completing their domestic chores and in their work places outside the home.²⁰

The demographic change was recognized by advertisers and broadcasters as the front page of the *Radio Times* from 23 April 1950 demonstrates. The cover celebrated the 1,000th edition of the BBC's beloved program *Woman's Hour* (broadcast daily on BBC 4 to this day). The accompanying illustration depicted a woman performing a variety of domestic chores: attending to a baby, cleaning, doing the washing, shopping for grocery, vacuuming, and finally, sitting on the sofa, appliances in tow, to listen to the radio.²¹ Soon other niche programs, like the BBC's *Children's Hour* (begun in 1922), populated the airwaves. On 31 December 1926, Reith's argument that the BBC should be transformed from a commercially based enterprise to a publically owned entity was accepted. Under the new license the BBC's structure would be determined by its charter, and its activities regulated by the government. According to its license it was obliged to inform, to educate and to entertain; to report the proceeding of parliament; to provide a political balance; and in a national emergency to broadcast government messages. The license terms brought into light pressing questions: what was radio for, who would use it and how. The queries that rise regularly with new technologies were hotly debated from the early 1920s by different individuals and institutions. Older models of communication and entertainment were used as a starting-point: the newspaper, the stage and the lecture hall, but radio's specific features necessitated developing new conventions. The delivery styles of cultural forms such as singing and talks had to be altered to suit their consumption as a domestic activity rather than at public gatherings. Such, for example, was the decision to address every listener individually rather than as a

²⁰ Crisell, *An Introductory History of British Broadcasting*, 2.

²¹ "Woman's Hour Celebrates Its 1,000th Edition on Friday," *Radio Times*, April 23 1950.

crowd. In other cases, conventions such as obliging news announcers to read the news while wearing their dinner jackets (similar to performers' formal dress) were kept.

One of the most influential figures in this debate was the BBC's first Director-General, John Reith who equated the technology to a national resource. He envisioned a schedule that would include the "best of everything," available to anyone who wished to listen. For him, conferring a monopoly status on the BBC and obliging listeners to pay a license fee were important measures to secure its institutional and editorial independence both from commercial pressures and from government influence.²² During his reign, the limited hours of broadcasting were filled with music and talks - a form which was introduced on radio and gained popularity rapidly. Until 1938, much of radio's output had an educational tone, as many of the morning and afternoon talks were aimed at schools and other pedagogical forums.²³

News proved an immediate area of contention. The BBC's original license had forbidden it to broadcast "controversial" content. This was understood to include a wide range of issues from politics to religion. It followed that the BBC should not engage in procuring news, but rely on the items gathered by news agencies and transmit government announcements. Initially, radio news was perceived by the BBC as a different beast from those which populated Fleet Street. The men in charge of the Talks Department, where News was based, drew a definite distinction between "BBC news values" and "journalistic news values." "Sensationalism," for example, was forbidden. Parliamentary news, known to have a limited grip on listeners, was given special prominence and the first person with newspaper experience was hired in 1932.

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²² Crisell, *An Introductory History of British Broadcasting*, 19.

²³ *Ibid.*, 21.

²⁴ "Technological Changes In The Newsroom," BBC website, accessed January 2013, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/aboutbbcnews/spl/hi/history/noflash/html/1930s.stm>

Even with little expectation to create news, the BBC's mandate had been quite limited. Reith was displeased by this and worked to expand the institution's remit, and the 1926 General Strike provided Reith the perfect opportunity for him to push this agenda. The General Strike began on 4 May 1926 when 1 million miners were locked out by their employers for refusing to take a pay cut. The general council of the Trades Union Congress (TUC) called for a general strike in an unsuccessful attempt to force the British government to prevent wage reduction and worsening conditions for the miners. Almost two million workers responded to the Union's call for action and the country's transportation system and supply routes were closed. The government responded forcefully, exploiting both its months long preparation for a strike and the TUC's fear of the strengthening of revolutionary elements within the organization. The strike ended on May 13.

The severe restrictions on the delivery of news by radio had left the BBC ill prepared for its role as a major national source of news. This did not discourage Reith, who found this bitter class struggle to be an occasion to establish the BBC as a chief player in British life. Two days before the strike officially began, on the evening of May 2, the printers of the *Daily Mail* refused to print an anti-strike editorial. Other printers followed suit. Reith was then able to convince the Postmaster General to lift the restrictions on news so that the BBC could cover the strike and distribute information from government offices and the TUC via several daily news bulletins. For the duration of the strike, the BBC became the single most important source of information. In addition, Reith maintained control over the final editorial decisions. The government obliged him largely because it was known that Reith shared the

Prime Minister's position about the strike, both believed that the strike threatened constitutional government and therefore, they agreed, it had to be defeated.²⁵

Reith's efforts had borne fruit. The weeks of the strike illustrated radio's unrivaled ability to disseminate news "live;" it convinced politicians of its value as a tool of governance. In his diary of 4 May 1926, Reith noted self-importantly:

I went with the Admiralty Deputy Secretary to lunch at the Travellers' Club, the Prime Minister was there and immediately he saw me he left the people he had been talking with and came over. I mention this because it showed that he knew what was what, and who was who, at this time of crisis.²⁶

Indeed, Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin made brilliant use of the new medium during the strike. In his first personal broadcast Baldwin appealed to the people to trust him:

I am a man of peace. I am longing, and looking and praying for peace. But I will not surrender the safety and the security of the British Constitution . . . Cannot you trust me to ensure a square deal and to ensure even justice between man and man?²⁷

Baldwin thus manipulated the democratic nature of radio in his favor. As a Conservative prime minister, a former industrialist educated at England's finest schools, he seized the opportunity to address the citizens of his country directly. His voice permeated into millions of living-rooms and prompted many into action. Middle-class men, for example, volunteered as bus drivers to compensate for the services on strike.

The BBC's new position of prominence is revealed in a letter that Reith received from the Prime Minister on 17 May 1926. Baldwin thanked him for his help during

²⁵ Tracey, "Introduction," 12.

²⁶ Ibid., 22.

²⁷ Stanley Baldwin in a speech broadcast on BBC radio, as quoted in *Baldwin: A Biography* by Keith Middlemas and John Barnes (1969), 415.

the strike and added “you and all the members of your staff may rest assured that your loyal service has earned the warm appreciation of the government.”²⁸

A few months later the company dissolved and was re-established as a public body—becoming, in effect, part of the establishment. As a vote of trust from the political establishment, certain restrictions were relaxed. Consequently, by 1930 the ties with news agencies were loosened. Reuters and the like supplied most of the raw material, but the BBC now took the lead in the selection and editing of stories for its bulletins. Information began pouring in, too, from the various arms of government, these were mostly official announcements such as advice to post early for Christmas or warnings about heavy traffic. Eventually, the bulletins became so cluttered with “official notices” that a separate slot had to be created for some of them.²⁹

The rest of the programming was planned according to Reith’s push for a schedule that would expose listeners to a range of programs rather than to what was already familiar and liked. Ideally, this would include a mixed programming incorporating as many tastes as possible. Many interpreted this stance as condescension and in no time the institution earned the nickname “Auntie,” after its “Auntie knows best” attitude. Reith was unmoved by these accusations: “...it is occasionally indicated to us that we are apparently setting out to give the public what we think they need – and not what they want...but few know what they want, and very few know what they need.”³⁰

Others were not as indifferent to these accusations. Three decades later, Sir Ian Jacob the sixth Director General of the BBC still had to contend with allegations of this kind. Unlike Reith he declared, during a luncheon at the Savoy Hotel of the Variety Club of Great Britain, that the corporation was committed to light entertainment and that “they had not the slightest desire to be a purely highbrow

²⁸ Tracey, “Introduction,” 23.

²⁹ “Technological Changes in The Newsroom.”

³⁰ Quoted in Crisell, *An Introductory History of British Broadcasting*, 34-5.

sectarian institution living on culture with a large 'C'.”³¹ In reality, in the 1930s, the BBC had already introduced more ‘popular’ elements such as serials, quizzes, variety shows and music.

Although radio enjoyed an immediate public appeal in the 1930s, radio sets, priced at five to six pounds, were still expensive for working-class households. Thus the relay exchange system formed a viable alternative to purchasing a radio set. The service connected individual homes to a central receiver for a modest weekly fee. The Post Office disapproved of the service as it endangered its monopoly on the passage of messages. It was also disliked by the wireless manufacturers who wished to sell as many sets as possible, and by the BBC which feared competition from foreign stations picked up through the relay exchange. Despite the band of naysayers, the first relay exchange service opened in 1925, and by 1939 over one million people were subscribed to it. The service's appeal waned rapidly in 1944 with the arrival of the affordable “Utility” set named for the brand of rationed goods the government had introduced to ensure reasonable quality of wartime production.³²

The “Utility” set was the government’s answer to wartime shortages of radios caused by British radio manufacturers' switch to the production of a wide range of military radio equipment for the armed forces.³³ As Tony Slaughter reminisced in *The Times* in 1972, "During the last war the radio became not only a source of entertainment, but one of hope and courage.”³⁴ Politicians acknowledged the value of broadcasting as a tool of national propaganda, and the connection between radio and winning over public opinion a decade earlier, during the General Strike. The military

³¹“B.B.C.'s Role in Entertainment,” *The Times*, November 12, 1958.

³² Crisell, *An Introductory History of British Broadcasting*, 23.

³³ O’Sullivan, “Listening Through,” 179.

³⁴ Slaughter, “On the Receiving End.”

and government made wide use of radio as a means to convey their interpretation of events, to communicate with covert forces in Europe, and to boost morale both of the military and on the home front. In 1943 the War Cabinet Production Planning Radio Committee recommended the production of a non-branded, standard design radio with as few components as possible. Production begun in June 1944 and over 250,000 sets were sold on the domestic market by the end of the war.³⁵ The only significant shortcoming compared with pre-war radios was the absence of a long wave band and a simple tuning dial. As a result, the sets had fewer tuning circuits and no wave-change switch. While the pre-war tuning dial displayed dozens of stations throughout Europe, now only two stations were identified, the 'Home' and 'Forces' stations both operated by the BBC. About 175,000 sets were sold, at a price of £12 3s 4d each.

Concentrating the enthusiasm for sound on two national stations gave more credence to what these channels broadcast. The BBC had established itself as the main channel of news. The institution's Audience Research Unit established in 1936, had concluded that 80 percent of the population of Britain had listened to the 9pm news bulletin on the evening of D-Day, at which time it was known that the Allied Forces had landed in Normandy.³⁶

This made listening to the radio a shared national activity mixed with the larger experience of war, and later, of its memory. Many, like Slaughter, remembered "Charles Gardener's account of an air battle over Dover, Sir Winston Churchill's broadcasts, and the transatlantic transmissions by Ed Murrow, with *London can Take It...*"³⁷ In 1968, when the creators of *Dad's Army*, the hit sitcom that was situated in 1940 England, wanted to evoke wartime England, they added snippets from Anthony

³⁵ O'Sullivan, "Listening Through," 179.

³⁶ Ibid., 181.

³⁷ Slaughter, "On the Receiving End."

Eden's radio address for volunteers for the Home Guard to the titles. As I discuss in further detail in chapter five, *Dad's Army* mixed memory of radio and war to consolidate its nostalgic period feel and replicate radio's ability to create an intimate acoustic community on the screen.

Between 1939 and 1942 censorship was strict and the authorities forbade materials that they conceived as damaging to morale. Thus "jokes about rationing, the blackout, poor conditions in the forces, and inadequacy and incompetence in high places" were out of the question. These easy sources of humor were exploited later in the war when the tables had turned and it was possible to imagine an Allied victory.³⁸ During the first period, the quality of comedy was questionable at best, with foreign stations such as Radio Luxemburg attracting many listeners.

The BBC's research unit found that up to twenty percent of the listeners they interviewed regretted the vulgarity of Variety programs. In 1942, the head of Variety, John Watt sent his assistant to the USA to buy or borrow American writers and stars to lift the standard of British radio comedy. The British representative acquired the help of USO (United Services Organization) whose job it was to entertain the troops. This opened the way to broadcasting American shows, which by 1944 aroused complaints about excessive "Americanization" on the BBC, as I discuss in chapter three.³⁹

Between 1944 and 1945 shows by and for the forces received a special place in the schedules: *Shipments Ashore*, *Navy Mixture*, *Forces Favorites*, *War Office Calling* *The Army*, *Strike a Home Note*, *Welsh Half Hour*, *S.E.A.C.* (a newsletter for forces in

³⁸ Took, *Laughter in the Air*, 33.

³⁹ Ibid., 39. Took argues that wartime collaboration with American variety people had pushed the development of the recording of radio shows. This was both for practical and for artistic reasons: the American stars could stay in Hollywood, the BBC could compile a stock of repeatable programs, and the belief that live performances would be better because of the added tension of going live were forsaken.

South East Asia), *Hello G.I.'s* (for the American forces in Britain), *War Review* and *Mediterranean Merry Go Round* (for services men and women in the Mediterranean area). The latter contained a mixture of materials provided by the army, the navy and the RAF, and mainly written, produced, and performed by men and women in those three services,⁴⁰ many of whom had never considered a career in entertainment prior to the war. These programs would breed the next generation of comics and entertainers.

Radio as 'Soft Power'

This period was a watershed moment for British radio as it consolidated listening to the radio as a daily activity shared by millions. It was also a formative period in two other respects. First, the BBC moved to a new mode of radio listening—"tap" listening. In the past the BBC had rejected the notion that people would switch on the radio and consume whatever came on like they did when they turned on a faucet. For this reason, long silences separated programs (sometimes up to five minutes long) and there was little scheduling regularity and continuity. This changed during the war as the silences were eliminated and programming became a central feature, as programs became more democratized and less formal. This translated into greater audience involvement in programs (call-ins, for example), a less rigid manner of speaking and addressing listeners by presenters, and more regional accents.⁴¹ The war had turned Britain into a multilingual country, with the arrival of refugees, exiled governments, and troops from continental Europe and the USA. In addition, troops and workers from the Empire had arrived adding more languages and various accented versions of

⁴⁰ Ibid., 40-41.

⁴¹ O'Sullivan, "Listening Through," 178.

English.⁴² The pretense of fighting a “people’s war” encouraged the BBC to incorporate more regional and working-class accents in its broadcasts,⁴³ this time not just as comic figures as was usually the case with working-class voices. The new diversity of accent was meant to symbolize the unity of the English speaking nations, but even so, most British media still presented a monolingual England.⁴⁴

As the war dragged on, many Britons conflated the institution with the country's goals and values. It didn't take long for politicians to realize this and exploit the BBC's diplomatic potential as a British embassy on air. In 1932, the BBC, with a grant in aid from the Foreign Office launched the Empire Service. Initially, the service targeted colonials of British origin in the colonies and the dominions. After 1938, due to Hitler's and Mussolini's radio propaganda, the service shifted its focus and added broadcasts in German, Italian, and French to the existing programs in English, Arabic, Spanish, and Portuguese. During the war, the service proved an essential tool of propaganda and resistance in occupied Europe. By 1943 the Empire Service was broadcasting in 45 languages⁴⁵ and was seen as a world service, although it was competing with other voices.⁴⁶

The government's close involvement in broadcasting during the war was reconsidered once the war was over. A committee headed by Herbert Morrison presented in July 1946 a White Paper on Broadcasting Policy. Morrison thought it undesirable to keep the current level of involvement intact. On the one hand, as a service funded by taxpayers it could not broadcast doctrines “hopelessly at variance

⁴² Wendy Webster, “‘The Whim of Foreigners’: Language, Speech, and Sound in Second World War British Film and Radio,” *Twentieth Century British History* 23, no. 3 (January 9, 2012): 360.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 362.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 367.

⁴⁵ Alban Webb, “Constitutional Niceties: Three Crucial Dates in Cold War Relations between the BBC External Services and the Foreign Office,” *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, 28, no.4 (October, 2008):558.

⁴⁶ Marie Gillespie, Alban Webb, and Gerd Baumann, “Introduction: Broadcasting Britishness, Strategic Challenges and the Ecology of Overseas Broadcasting by the BBC,” *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 28 no. 4 (October, 2008): 455.

with the foreign policy of His Majesty's Government." On the other hand, for this reason exactly, it was "'undesirable' to relinquish the service to the Foreign Office all together."⁴⁷

The report further reinforced the value of the Empire Service as a 'soft power' of diplomacy. Indeed, it had expanded its reach and turned out to play an important role in the Cold War eco-system. At the height of the Cold War, 50 countries created state-funded international radio services competing for international and domestic attention. The BBC was "number one international radio broadcaster" in 1950, but the US and USSR overtook that achievement in hours of broadcast per week. China and Germany soon surpassed the BBC's weekly hours of broadcasting.⁴⁸ However, from the 1950s to today, the BBC has been leading in audience reach. This is largely due to the way it was and is publically perceived – an impartial news network rather than a public agent of diplomacy.⁴⁹ Thus it became crucial for the BBC to keep the balance (at home and in the World Service) between political demands and values such as objectivity, impartiality and honest reporting that had secured its formidable global presence.⁵⁰

Government's push for more media involvement in its information offence abroad intensified with the coming of television. Different series for television were financed by the British Government and produced by the Central Office of Information (COI). The aim was to "see Britain projected, in a myriad of different languages, into living rooms across the world to a global audience of millions."⁵¹

⁴⁷ Webb, "Constitutional Niceties," 558-9.

⁴⁸ Graham Mytton, "The BBC and its Cultural, Social and Political Framework," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 28, no. 4 (October, 2008): 569-571.

⁴⁹ Graham, "The BBC and its Cultural, Social and Political Framework," 571.

⁵⁰ Jean Seaton, "Journeys to Truth: the BBC as a Pragmatic Ethical Engineer at Home and Abroad," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 28, no.4 (October, 2008), 444.

⁵¹ Linda Kaye, "Reconciling Policy and Propaganda: The British Overseas Television Service 1954-1964," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 27, no. 2 (June 2007), 215.

In 1952, the BBC had presented the House of Commons Select Committee on the Estimates of Oversea Broadcasting, a report with the corporation's proposition to establish an external television service. *The Times* reported that the BBC explained the need of a television service as being "linked with the needs of the Commonwealth, the cold war, and the maintenance of British prestige and leadership."⁵² The committee's report stated that the "influence of broadcasting on backward peoples is potentially very great and the Colonies are likely to continue to rely to a large extent upon the services offered by the corporation."⁵³

Moreover, the article maintained that it was agreed that

the contribution made by broadcasting in the cold war constituted one of the main facets of the rearmament programme and was directed towards preventing a war. Its present contribution was not limited to Russia and the satellite countries, but extended to all countries vulnerable to Communism. The committee was informed that, while the volume of British external broadcasting had decreased...the volume of external broadcasting done by other major Powers, particularly Russia and America, had grown rapidly.⁵⁴

Once Whitehall had recognized the potential of radio as soft power it was reluctant to relinquish control. British politicians were aware of American and Soviet investment in cultural activities, especially media ventures. Moreover, they had every intention to emulate this policy. During a Cabinet discussion on 8 January 1948, Britain's Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin announced to his colleagues that Britain should take the initiative in Europe and oppose Communism by "taking the offensive against it." BBC historian Alban Webb argues that in this discussion Bevin was actually "putting the External Services of the BBC on the front line of the emerging

⁵² "Broadcasting in Cold War: Committee on Role of B,B,C Coordination with West Urged," *The Times*, Aug 21, 1952, 4.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

cold war.”⁵⁵ Confrontation over editorial freedom was averted due to the continuous fluidity of personnel moving between the BBC and Whitehall.

Although ethically problematic, the personal ties between the two institutions smoothed the negotiations over the tone of Britain's voice over the Iron Curtain.⁵⁶ The heads of the BBC had shared government's commitment to cultural warfare and British foreign missions in Eastern Europe were encouraged to prepare telegrams for the BBC with political assessments, local information, reception conditions, and jokes. In the spring and summer of 1948, however, many in the foreign ministry were beginning to believe that the BBC was too independent and objective, but by 1949, after a “year of cajoling” the Foreign Office felt they had achieved the right anti-Communist tone. The process of aligning the BBC with government's objectives was so successful that the BBC's Research Unit concluded, in 1949, that some of the transmissions to Russia and Eastern Europe amounted to political warfare.⁵⁷

The civil understanding between the two institutions was tested in October 1956. It was a tense month for global politics: Britain was entangled in the Suez crisis; in the USSR Khrushchev's speech in February had initiated de-Stalinization and riots in Poland; in Hungary revolution was brewing. On October 25, the Foreign Office had scolded the BBC for not pursuing a more aggressive anti-Communist line in its broadcasts. The Foreign minister Anthony Nutting informed the BBC General-Director Ian Jacob that its budget would be cut by £1 million because it failed to deliver the goods. In addition, a censor would be installed in Bush House to “advise the BBC on the content and direction of the overseas programmes.” This time it didn't help that prior to his tenure as Director General, Jacob had been the Military Assistant

⁵⁵ Webb, “Constitutional Niceties,” 560.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 561.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 562.

Secretary to Winston Churchill at the War Cabinet.⁵⁸ The situation worsened when the BBC gave voice to diverse public opinions on the matter of military involvement in Suez. The BBC did not relinquish its stand and the dispute had ultimately secured it a greater amount of editorial freedom. In the public face off the BBC had won, but Webb questioned if there was a great enough divide between government and the BBC. He revealed, for example, that the institution participated in a highly secret Whitehall group, the Advisory Committee chaired the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs Douglas Dodds-Parker, for the discussion of the use of broadcasting in psychological warfare.⁵⁹

Publicly, at least, the dispute over the reporting of Suez consolidated the BBC's reputation for objectivity and fair reporting. This perceived image had retained its influence and popularity even in former colonies that had fought hard for independence, such as India. Historian Alasdair Pinkerton argues that the British in the form of the BBC and its personnel, "continued to leave a legacy and provoke memories in India long after they officially 'went home' in 1947."⁶⁰ The same people who created, planned, and developed radio broadcasting across the subcontinent prior to independence also helped radio become the dominant media in South Asia. This status was secured with the transistor revolution in the late 1950s, early investment in transmitter infrastructure, and broadcasting practice. Radio would cede its crown only with the arrival of television in the late 1970s.⁶¹

⁵⁸ Asa Briggs, *The BBC: the First Fifty Years* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 276.

⁵⁹ Webb, "Constitutional Niceties," 565.

⁶⁰ Alasdair Pinkerton, "A New Kind of Imperialism? The BBC, Cold War Broadcasting and the Contested Geopolitics of South Asia," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 28, no.4 (October, 2008): 542. Pinkerton argues that audience surveys from the period indicate that the BBC enjoyed a particular kind of "radio power" that gave the BBC an added authority and influence in the subcontinent. 543.

⁶¹ Pinkerton, "A New Kind of Imperialism?," 550.

Comedy on Radio

As these examples demonstrate, the BBC was frequently caught up in public debates about the proper relationship between government and media, and about the meaning of democracy. The principle question that the BBC came up against was about the content of its programs, and its intended audience. Critics of the BBC complained that it subjected the majority of Britons to a paternalist and elitist broadcasting diet. As we have seen, critics were bursting into an open door as the BBC's declared purpose was to open "the great treasures of our culture" to all those who had been denied them by a limited education, low social status, and small income.

In actuality the BBC was much more responsive to popular demands, and later to competition, than its public image allowed for.⁶² Consequently, postwar radio was less elitist, its comedy more in tune with ordinary people, and its stars ex-servicemen who entertained their fellow-soldiers and were used to big audiences.⁶³ Comedy had become broader and outspoken. So much so that, by 1949, it was felt that some of this spirit had to be reined in. The result was the *Green Book*, a guide to off-limits topics for producers and writers of light entertainment programs. In its opening paragraph the logic of the document was laid out:

The BBC's attitude towards its entertainment programmes is largely governed by the fact that broadcasting is a part of the domestic life of the nation. It caters in their own homes for people of all ages, classes, trades and occupations, political opinions and religious beliefs.⁶⁴

Politicians and media practitioners believed that the enthusiastic adoption of broadcasting in the household required extra caution from them. Thus, to avoid

⁶² Su Holmes, *Entertaining Television: The BBBC and Popular Television Culture in the 1950s* (Manchester, UK; New York, New York: Manchester University Press; 2008).

⁶³ Took, *Laughter in the Air*, 56.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 86.

offending its diverse audience the guideline forbade “vulgarity, political bias, and matter in questionable taste.”⁶⁵ In case of doubt, the guide warned, producers should err “on the side of caution.”⁶⁶ The guide was written by Michael Standing, the head of Variety at the time. He drew his recommendations from his own experience and from memos and guides that had been issued in the past to either individual programs or producers. A central principle was to refrain from “crudities, coarseness and innuendo.”⁶⁷ Humor, in particular, was to be

clean and untainted directly or by association with vulgarity and suggestiveness. An absolute ban was cast on jokes about lavatories, effeminacy in men, immorality of any kind and suggestive references to honeymoon couples, chambermaids, fig leaves, prostitution, ladies underwear, animal habits, e.g. rabbits, lodgers, commercial travelers. Additional care was expected when dealing with references to or jokes about pre-natal influences (“e.g. his mother was frightened by a donkey”), marital infidelity.⁶⁸

Biblical references were considered as an independent category; if a biblical phrase was still largely associated with the Bible it was advised that it not be used in a comic setting. Jokes that were built around biblical stories such as Adam and Eve or David and Goliath would have to be avoided, as well as any parody of them. Following the same logic, reference to, and jokes about, different religions were banned. Inadmissible were jokes about A.D. or B.C. (“e.g. ‘before Crosby’”), jokes or comic songs about spiritualism, christenings, religious ceremonies of any descriptions, parodies of Christmas carols, and offensive references to “Jews (or any other religious sect.).”⁶⁹

⁶⁵ The question of taste is, of course, highly problematic. Michael Standing (Director of Variety at the BBC at the time and according to Took the person who wrote most of the document) maintained that, “[O]n matters of taste it [BBC] has to set itself a standard that will be acceptable by most rational people,” Ibid., 86.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 87.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 88.

As to politics in comedy, it was best to refer to it tastefully. “To sum up,” the guide reads, “our approach to the whole subject should be good humoured, un-partisan, and in good taste.”⁷⁰ That said, the impersonation of “elder statesmen” such as Winston Churchill and leading political figures was banned. The guideline was a little more lax with deceased personalities, unless they “have died within living memory or whose relations may still be alive.”⁷¹ Expletives could only be justified “in serious dramatic setting where the action of the play demanded them.” Thus they had no place in comedy and words such as “God, Good God, My God, Blast, Hell, Damn, Bloody, Gorbimey, Ruddy, etc., etc., should be deleted from scripts and innocuous expressions substituted.”⁷² This was more aspiration than reality as the notorious beef between the heads of the BBC and Johnny Speight, the writer of *Till Death Us Do Part*, about rationing of the number of ‘bloodies’ he was permitted to include in an episode demonstrates.⁷³ The guide acknowledged the temptation to introduce jokes about physical and mental infirmities but asked comics, writers, and producers to avoid them.

The BBC had encouraged its consumption outside the British Isles and wished to address those listeners respectfully too. It recognized that audiences abroad were different and special channels and programs catered to the audience in the colonies (while they existed), to the dominions, to the United States, and Asia. This merited extra sensitivity and the BBC's Green Book included a section about the delicacy required in broadcasts outside of Britain. It called attention to the fact that humor depended on local social, political and religious taboos of which one should be aware.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 89.

⁷¹ Ibid., 90.

⁷² Ibid., 91.

⁷³ Graham McCann, *Spike & Co: Inside the House of Fun with Milligan, Sykes, Galton & Simpson* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2006), 142, The story was so well known that Peter Cook wrote a parody of Speight’s meeting with his producer, with Dudley Moore as Speight and Cook portraying his superior.

In particular, one should be conscious that the “majority of overseas audiences are not Christian by religion nor white in colour.” Thus the document argues that “Disrespectful, let alone derogatory, references to Buddhists, Hindus, Moslems, and so on, and any references to colour may therefore cause deep offence and should be avoided altogether.” The Green Book advised avoiding Chinese laundry jokes, jokes about “harems,” and using the term Boer War to describe the South African War.⁷⁴

The publication represents an ideal that presided over broadcasting from its establishment, through the war and the immediate postwar decade to the 1960s. Representative of that is a memo from the Head of Television Service Cecil McGivern to the Television Programme Director on 8 December 1947, informing his colleague of “the constant war I wage against dirt.”⁷⁵ McGivern argued that the main reason for “dirt” in variety in television was the producers who were “young and inexperienced in BBC ways.” He complained that they, “do not feel their responsibility to the Home. They must be trained. And are being so. But alas! It takes a little time.”⁷⁶

This remark can be read as a testament to the generational and cultural changes in the BBC in the 1960s. As will be discussed further below, that decade saw the enlistment of new talent from a more varied social background. It was also a generation that had grown up with broadcasting media and had a far less reverent attitude to it. In addition, as we will see in other chapters, authority as an institution was being challenged in society as a whole. Indeed it became the target of ridicule for the new 'satire movement' in the 1960s and 1970s. Although this dissertation does not consider this movement, it is important to note that along with the opening of the

⁷⁴ “Green Book” as quoted in Took, 90.

⁷⁵ Cecil McGivern, Head of Television Service, “Letter to Television Programme Director.” December 8, 1947, BBC WAC T16157.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

broadcasting market to competition in the 1980s, this movement had profound impact on the nature of British broadcasting.

To sum up, in the interwar period radio generated profound changes in the mode of consumption of news, opinions, and entertainment. Radio both revived and radicalized the ancient mode of sending messages to a mass audience. In antiquity both sender and receiver were required to share a location at the same time to communicate. The interaction was likely to have taken place in a large space, probably a public one and was inevitably a kind of performance. The invention of print changed this dramatically, as it opened a gap in space and time between senders and receivers and dispensed with the performative and live aspects of mass communication. The message could now travel longer and reach larger audiences. It could also be consumed individually, in private, when it was most convenient for the recipient. The invention of photography in the late nineteenth century and phonography later in that same decade, brought individuals a step closer to recreating the ancient live experience of mass communication, although this time, in the privacy of their homes.

At the turn of century, cinematography once again drew individuals into a public venue to consume a moving text. Starting in 1927, that experience was enriched with sound. Unlike the pre-print era, however, in the age of mechanical reproduction the same image could be projected simultaneously to several audiences gathered in diverse locations.⁷⁷ Unlike theatre or cinema, live sound cancelled the need to gather in a public venue for its consumption and the public hall was replaced with the home. Radio domesticated mass communication, but it also injected the public sphere into the private one as did newspapers and periodicals earlier on. Individuals no longer

⁷⁷ Crisell, *An Introductory History of British Broadcasting*, 3-4.

learned about current events by being present at the time of occurrence, or by being told about it at the pub, the private club, or the market square.

During the war, and after it, the BBC accelerated its process of popularization with scheduling popular music (including jazz!) and more entertainment, and adding a more democratic element with opportunities for audience participation in its programs. This direction was institutionalized in 1946 with the reorganization of the service into a trio of channels: Home, Light and Third -- each with its own target audience and specific programming. Commercial radio was launched in 1971, but until then a remarkably small number of radio stations was available in Britain in comparison to the vast number of local and national stations in the US. This structural feature promised the BBC a central role in British polity and society. As we shall see, the BBC has been remarkable in keeping this status even as the communication market underwent profound changes from the 1980s through the present.

“Television Has Produced a shape to the Family:” Television Arrives in Britain

The domestic experience of communication that radio ushered in was enhanced in 1936 when British television went live on air for the first time. Television added to the individualization and privatization of culture that sound broadcasting had initiated. The viewer was not only told what happened, but shown it, often being put in the position of a witness to events depicted on the screen alongside the broadcasters.⁷⁸

This experience however, was limited to a small group of wealthy Londoners. Reception was restricted to the Capital and television sets were too expensive for the vast majority of Britons. For this reason, in its first years television did not threaten radio's prominence as a site of public debate and entertainment. In fact, between 1936

⁷⁸ John Corner, “General Introduction: Television and British Society in the 1950s,” in *Popular Television in Britain: Studies in Cultural History* ed. John Corner (London: BFI Publishing, 1991), 12.

and 1938 the Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain appeared only once on television this was on 30 September 1938 at 5:38pm, after signing the non-aggression pact in Munich. A year later, in the early afternoon of 1 September 1939, a civil servant from the Postmaster-General's office telephoned the BBC studios at Alexandra Palace and instructed them to cut off television service immediately. Officially, this was to prevent the German air force from using the transmission signals from the aerial of Alexandra Palace as a navigational aid. In fact, the aerial would be used to transmit signals to obscure and jam the German plane navigation system.⁷⁹

Television resumed transmission on 7 June 1946 precisely in time for the National Victory celebrations. It was largely believed that radio would remain the central broadcasting technology, and the reign of television started modestly: in 1946-7 the BBC recorded 14,560 new television license holders (in a population of about 50 million).⁸⁰ As is often the case with new technologies, the barrier was cost. The price of an average television set was around £50 in relation to an average industrial wage of £7 a week.⁸¹ The beginnings were humble also in regard to content. Personnel as well as programs transferred from sound to screen with not much adaptation other than the addition of pictures. Nobody quite thought that this technology would breed an independent service, and they were generally distrustful of its visual component. Grace Wyndham Goldie, one of the pioneering figures of television current affairs, told readers in a book she authored about her years as an innovative producer that the staff at BBC radio "associated vision with the movies and the music hall and were

⁷⁹ "Teletronic the Television history Site," accessed February 2013.
<http://www.teletronic.co.uk/index.html#history>.

⁸⁰ BBC handbooks (1946-59) in Tim O'Sullivan, "Researching the Viewing Culture: Television and the Home, 1946-1960," In *Re-viewing Television History: Critical Issues in Television Historiography*, ed. Helen Wheatley (London: I. B. Tauris, 2007), 162.

⁸¹ Corner, "General Introduction," 10.

afraid that the high purposes of the Corporation would be trivialised.”⁸² Wyndham Goldie recalled that radio people that heard of her wish to move to television in 1948 would say, “‘But why do you *want* to go? Television won’t last. It’s a flash in the pan.’”⁸³ Indeed, Wyndham Goldie remembered “a marked hostility” between the staff of the new television service and those at Broadcasting House, with the latter clearly thinking the former inferior and insignificant.

Even in the US, where television broadcasts continued throughout the war, television did not gain momentum until the postwar era. In 1945 only 6,000 television sets were in use, mainly in the New York City area. Four years later, nearly 100 stations telecast to 3,000,000 sets.⁸⁴ In the Christmas season of 1946, TV sets became “the gift of choice, often a family to itself” the sales soared particularly in the NYC area where three stations were on air. In 1947, stations opened in St. Louis, Detroit, Milwaukee, and Cleveland, and TV sales went huge. Manufacturers began to target working, and upper-middle class audiences rather than the rich. The price of sets was reduced to \$100.⁸⁵ The sets themselves grew in size and dominated the rooms in which they were placed. Average screen sizes moved from eight to ten to twelve inches and larger numbers of people were ready to make room for TV and part with their savings to buy a television.⁸⁶

BBC executives travelled to the United States to learn more about the industry. H. Rooney Pelletier, North American Service Organizer at the BBC, shared his insights from his trip to the USA and Canada in 1950 with his supervisors, he was especially impressed by the omnipresence of television in American life:

⁸² Grace Wyndham Goldie, *Facing the Nation: Television and Politics, 1936-1976* (London: Bodley Head, 1977), 19.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ Douglas Gomery, “Rethinking How TV Came to the USA,” in *Screen Culture: History and Textuality*, ed. John Fullerton (Eastleigh, England: John Libbey, 2004), 231.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 237.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 239.

Television masts seemed to be everywhere, even above the humblest outskirt homes This was an impressive and immediate introduction to a fact that I was never allowed to forget during my stay in that country: the ubiquitous of television and its decisive effect on the pattern of American life.⁸⁷

Pelletier's impressions from the United States soon became a reality in Britain.

With the opening of the Sutton Coldfield transmitter in 1949, television had finally come to the Midlands. The beloved radio sketch show *Take it From Here* ridiculed the excited Midlanders. Miss N. Rintoul from Liverpool found that quite distasteful as she explained in a letter to *Radio Times*:

"Why in this modern age should we be so afraid of a little honest sentiment? I was dismayed to hear *Take it from Here* holding up to ridicule what I am sure many others found most moving—the delight of a Midland family with the first glimpse of television."⁸⁸

Southerners could sport their smugness only a little longer. The viewing-body expanded further thanks to new services such as the cheap monthly rental subscription of a television set. In 1952 the number of combined radio and television licenses passed the one million mark; in 1955, 13 transmitters broadcast television to all but 8 per cent of the country, and commercial television had begun.⁸⁹ Simultaneously, and in correlation with the lowering of the price of production, rental services of television sets had disappeared. Britons could afford to buy a set rather than renting one, and were motivated to do so as I explain in greater detail in the next chapter.⁹⁰

Television came of age with the Coronation just as sound broadcasting did with the general strike in 1926. In concurrence with the Coronation in June 1953, the BBC

⁸⁷ H. Rooney Pelletier, North American Service Organiser, "Report of a Visit to U.S.A. and Canada, Spring and Early Summer, 1950," July 17, 1950, BBC WAC E1/214 Countries: America, North American Services 1950-1954.

⁸⁸ N. Rintoul, Liverpool, "Why Ridicule Honest Sentiment?," *Radio Times*, January 6, 1950.

⁸⁹ Slaughter, "On the Receiving End."

⁹⁰ A Rediffusion Television Survey conducted in June 1955 by Mass observation Ltd, surveyed 375 ex-Rediffusion users in 14 towns (Bristol, Cardiff, Merthyr, Birkenhead, Warrington, Bootle, Rochdale, St. Helens, Salford, Nottingham, Sunderland, London, Hull and Newcastle). It found that most people had stopped the service because they decided to buy their own set. Four out of five who did buy a set, did it in the six months prior to the conduct of the survey. "Rediffusion television survey 1955," Mass Observation, Radio Rediffusion Survey box TC 45/2/C, Mass Observation archive.

had registered well over one million new television license requests.⁹¹ But, as the renowned historian of the BBC Asa Briggs commented, “While the general strike had divided the country, the Coronation united it.”⁹² The Coronation perfectly embodied the essence of the immediate postwar decade as a hybrid period of modernity and tradition. The Coronation ushered in a new Queen who had demanded that television cameras be admitted into Westminster Abbey. But the manner in which the ceremony was conducted resembled an “imperial display,” in the style of the Durbar of 1877 when Queen Victoria was made the Empress of India—hardly a “modern” beginning.⁹³

The modernity of the event was to be found in the circumstances and the media that brought it to millions in Britain and abroad. As *The Times* explained, the event drew so much attention because during its transmission the public grasped that they were seeing “not a news film but historic events unfolding.”⁹⁴ The television figures for the day testified to the level of excitement it generated. Over 19 million viewers (53 percent of the population) watched the procession to the Abbey, and 56 per cent followed the service. The magnitude of the numbers compared with the substantially lower number of television licenses suggests that most people watched the event outside the house – at the homes of friends, in cinemas, public halls and pubs.⁹⁵ Thus, although television was heralded as a domestic technology from its early days, in this stage its consumption was not household-centered.

Events such as the Coronation realized the exciting potential of broadcasting media to bring the world into the home. But consumers were finding out that

⁹¹ 1,110,439 new licenses were handed out in 1953, in O’Sullivan, “Researching the Viewing Culture,” 162.

⁹² Briggs, *The BBC: the First Fifty Years*, 274-5.

⁹³ Becky Conekin, Frank Mort, Chris Waters, “Introduction,” *Moments of Modernity: Reconstructing Britain, 1945-1964* (London; New York Rivers Oram: New York University Press, 1999), 2.

⁹⁴ Briggs, *The BBC: the First Fifty Years*, 274.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 275.

television also transported the home dweller into other territories and cultures. One viewer recalled that this capacity constituted one of his main motivations for buying a television set in the 1950s: “I remember thinking it would help the children to get on in school, that they would know more about the world and what was going on, they'd be more 'in touch' and be able to see and understand things better.”⁹⁶ This viewer understood television to be a tool of intellectual and cultural growth; a process that may well lead to social mobility. As I discuss in chapter two, Britcom revealed that this was a common sentiment, and a source of frustration.

The value Britons attached to broadcast media strengthened broadcasting as an institution. By the mid-1950s, nascent British television emerged as a pillar of British society, instrumental in the cultivation of a shared national culture. Watching the Coronation on television was a shared experience that reached across social, gender, ethnic, and generational divides. Like radio, it allowed Britons to form “an affinity with other people who were physically separated from them and complete strangers.”⁹⁷ Radio and television carved out an appealing and accessible public sphere in the political sense but also for fun and sociability.⁹⁸

Much like radio at the time, television was a technology that was new to all. Even more than radio television committed itself to an imaginary middle: it made its appeal to everyman rather than to a limited segment of the population. Unlike other forms of knowledge, television literacy was not as protected by the habitual safeguards of wealth, social standing, cultural capital, education, and tradition. Its audience learned the art of viewing by the repeated act of its consumption. A television set, TV license, and a basic command of English were the only requirements for joining the community of viewers. By 1960, 85% of the population could comply. Of these

⁹⁶ O’Sullivan, “Researching the Viewing Culture,” 166.

⁹⁷ Crisell, *An Introductory History of British Broadcasting*, 9.

⁹⁸ Hendy, *Radio in the Global Age*, 7.

television-set owners, 80 percent could watch both available channels, BBC and ITV. As television was distributed more evenly across the country, its populist nature was revealed.

This status was kept even when the Conservative Government's Television Act of 1954 broke the BBC's television monopoly. The first transmission of the commercial channel on 22 September 1955 signified also the beginning of the period of the dual system of public broadcasting. Although ITV was a commercial channel it was founded by an act of Parliament, was subject to the Independent Television Authority, and was made to comply with standards of "good taste and honesty."⁹⁹ The pressure for diversity that led to the licensing of a second channel resulted in the condition that it "de-metropolitanise": for the first time in broadcasting history regional cities such as Manchester, Birmingham, Newcastle, Plymouth, Norwich, Glasgow, Cardiff, and Belfast became production centers.¹⁰⁰

The addition of a second and commercial channel excited contemporaries. BBC employees were not indifferent either; *Take it From Here* ran a sketch about the competition invoking the newspeak in vogue when discussing Communism. In the sketch one of the show's presenters asks another why the BBC had hired a security officer. The answer comes fast, "Because, Pinwright, broadcasting is no longer the simple matter it used to be. We are now engaged in a cold war with – the Commies!"¹⁰¹ The explanation as to the identity of the "Commies" is somewhat different than one would think at first:

The Commercial Television people! Many of our best BBC brains have been lured away from us. Producers, artists, technicians—they've all suddenly disappeared. To re-appear a few days later on the other side, wearing dazed expressions and brand new suits.¹⁰²

⁹⁹ Briggs, *The BBC: the First Fifty Years*, 286-7.

¹⁰⁰ Corner, "General Introduction," 11.

¹⁰¹ *Take It From Here*, Muir and Norden archives, box 32.

¹⁰² Ibid.

The quote reveals a host of anxieties coached in Cold War rhetoric such as fears from the BBC to competing companies, and of “lefties.” This occasion of self-deprecation wasn’t always encouraged at the BBC. Television Controller Norman Collins warned his heads of departments in 1948 from “a spat of highly self-conscious jokes about the BBC,” which included cracks about the salaries paid at the institution or the accents of BBC announcers. Collins stated that while these jokes “would all be perfectly in place at a staff concert party, they were singularly unhelpful to any service that is endeavouring to do its work as a medium of communication addressed to an adult public.”¹⁰³

The infiltration of the world into Britons' living rooms first by radio and later by television had an immense impact on British notions of public and private.¹⁰⁴ Programming and scheduling had an important role in integrating the new medium and teaching the audience to become viewers.¹⁰⁵ They also impacted daily routines. For example, until 1956 television broadcasting stopped between 6 to 7pm for the *Toddlers' Truce*. The BBC thought it appropriate that television not interfere with parents and toddlers' bedtime rituals and therefore blackened its screen at this agreed upon hour. This act of consideration was understood by many as a paternalist gesture that aspired to reinforce the BBC's ideas of good parenting. It was finally revoked when the new commercial channel pleaded for extra broadcasting hours for its survival.

¹⁰³ Norman Collins (Controller, Television) Letter to Heads of department, “Jokes about the BBC,” September 9, 1948, BBC WAC T16157.

¹⁰⁴ This happened, of course, all over the world. In interwar France, for example radio was used to define and mobilize French veterans after WWI and their fight for civil rights and social recognition. See Rebecca Scales, “Radio Broadcasting, Disabled Veterans, and the Politics of National Recovery in Interwar France,” *French Historical Studies* 31, no.4 (2008):643-678.

¹⁰⁵ Örnebring, “Writing the History of Television Audiences,” 174.

Broadcasting conventions and struggles to alter them had also contributed to changing notions of politics: where it should be discussed, in what manner, and by whom. Television inherited from radio certain conventions about handling politics: the BBC, for example, was to refrain from expressing its own opinion on current affairs or on matters of public policy. The same restriction was also enforced on the Independent Television channel when it opened in 1954. This made the discussion of politics on sound and television vastly different from that in newspapers. In print media editors and journalists writing editorials habitually advocated or attacked different political decisions, parties and leaders.¹⁰⁶ The particularity of television viewing added to the sensitivity about broadcasting and politics. While millions of viewers may have been watching the same program simultaneously, each viewer did so sitting in her own living room, not physically aware of other viewers. Therefore, television could deploy a direct, personal approach - an approach that was bound to be used by politicians in a way that cinema could not do, and sound attempted, but succeeded only partially without the visual aspect.¹⁰⁷ This got politicians both excited and nervous about bringing politics to television. It also created a watchful atmosphere about news on television at Broadcasting House itself.

There were technical, practical, and financial concerns that challenged the imperative of impartial and impersonal television. Light-weight cameras came into use only in the mid-1970s, thus sending broadcasting units to film live events was not trivial. In addition, film was slow to process and edit and did not suit the presentation of live events.¹⁰⁸ One alternative was to show the news presenter reading the news instead of using voice-over and screen filmed images while he did so. That, however,

¹⁰⁶ The original reason for the ban was the limited number of radio frequencies and the subsequent few opportunities for competition. Wyndham Goldie, *Facing the Nation*, 25.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 37.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 44.

would violate the dictum of impersonality. In radio measures were taken to preserve this rule: presenters did not write the news themselves, they had to read all news items in the same tone of voice and for many years they did not announce their name.¹⁰⁹ This practice mirrored the journalist convention by which most articles till the mid-1960s were not signed by their authors. Authorities in broadcasting, as well as politicians, were reluctant to forgo this limitation.

Battles with radio over funding further limited the ability of television to establish an independent take on current affairs and news. Those working in television first had to convince broadcasting authorities that television was a different medium from sound broadcasting. Television was a medium in which, as Wyndham Goldie observed, “political comment could be made as effectively by a shrug of the shoulders as by a written statement.”¹¹⁰ Moreover, the nature of editorial control in current affairs programs changed when vision was added to sound. Naturally, there was still no cadre of trained television reporters, producers or editors to work with.

Nevertheless, television had become implicated in politics by the time of the General Election of 1950. Politics already had invaded the screen with shows such as *Foreign Correspondent* in 1948.¹¹¹ The night of the General Election, 23 February 1950, however, proved to be a watershed moment in the history of television and British life. Preparations had been vast, as was the anxiety concerning possible glitches and malfunctions. As a preventive measure, the Controller of Television had

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 45.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 52.

¹¹¹ “Foreign Correspondent” showed for instance, how Marshall Aid was affecting the countries in the west and how countries in the east managed the threat of Communist invasion. Wyndham Goldie, *Facing the Nation*, 55.

warned the Head of Television Programmes that during the period of the election “all political jokes will formally be banned in programmes.”¹¹²

Anxiety aside, the live broadcasting of the results of the General Election and the voting poll prepared for television went well. It demonstrated, in the words of Wyndham Goldie who produced the program that,

. . . television could present to the nation the compelling drama of a national political occasion in which every voter had participated by putting his cross on the ballot paper. Millions of individuals could see how the battle was going. They did not have to wait for others to tell them what they had decided and what their next government would be. They could see for themselves The privilege of the few had once again been extended to the many.¹¹³

In 1957 the 14-day rule, whereby the BBC agreed not to broadcast discussions on subjects which were due to be debated in Parliament within the next fortnight, was finally dropped. The rule had been the subject of fierce debate in the 1950s, but during the 1956 Suez Crisis the BBC had chosen to ignore it and it was subsequently cancelled. Politics had become inseparable from television.

After its conquest of the public sphere, television proceeded to occupy the private space. As rationing was lifted in the 1950s and new houses were built, it was understood that television would be integral to the new postwar home. Indeed, it might be the one consumer durable that would turn the house into a home¹¹⁴ (some critics argue that the refrigerator deserves this honor).¹¹⁵ Writing from America in 1950, Alistair Cooke confirmed the profound impact of television on the home (see chapter two for a more detailed discussion of this process). He mentioned for instance, a housing project on Long Island with a television room that “has a couple

¹¹² Norman Collins (Controller, Television, Letter to Head of Television Programmes), “Political Jokes and References,” January 11, 1950, BBC WAC T16157.

¹¹³ Wyndham Goldie, *Facing the Nation*, 67.

¹¹⁴ Briggs, *The BBC: the First Fifty Years*, 278.

¹¹⁵ Lawrence Black, “Whose Finger on the Button? British Television and the Politics of Cultural Control,” *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 25, no.4 (October, 2005): 551.

of set-backs in each wall to allow sister and brother to have an uninterrupted view sitting behind Mom and Pop on their several sides of the room.”¹¹⁶ The sitting arrangement described by Cooke reveals the power relations in the house: parents occupying the front seats, children on their side. Writing about viewing cultures in Delhi, anthropologist Purnima Mankekar noticed that sitting arrangements were always politically and emotionally charged “Who sat where, who spoke when, who kept silent, and who stayed on the peripheries of the physical and the discursive spaces revealed the role of television in mediating relationships,” she recalls.¹¹⁷ In a decade or two the arrangements Cooke described would be challenged not only at home but in the global public sphere with the development of teenagers as an independent category and with the outbreak of student revolutions.

Hand in hand with the transformation in physical space that television induced, it also affected patterns of leisure and entertainment. Cooke explained to British readers that in the United States,

It occurred to a lot of men that instead of going out to drink beer and look at television, they might stay at home and do the same thing: a simple thought that boosted the sale of home receivers and incidentally made drastic inroads on the saloon business and the sale of beer in bars and restaurants.¹¹⁸

Cooke alerted the readers that “television is already wheedling itself into our daily round not as a luxury or a game, but as a symbol of family life as characteristic as the old spinning wheel, and Franklin stove, and spelling bee used to be.” In fact, he told his readers, television “has produced a shape to the family—the way they sit in the room—which would suggest that television has taken the place of the fireplace.”¹¹⁹ In Britain few people had actively objected to the central role television now played in

¹¹⁶ Alistair Cooke, “Television’s Impact on American Home Life,” *The Listener*, July 6, 1950, 25.

¹¹⁷ Purnima Mankekar, *Screening Culture, Viewing Politics: an Ethnography of Television, Womanhood, and Nation in Postcolonial India* (Durham, NC; London: Duke University Press, 1999), 52.

¹¹⁸ Cooke, “Television’s Impact on American Home Life.”

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*

the life of the nation. Many had complained that television altered their daily routine, but as the researchers of Mass Observation noted, it was “non typical” to dispense with television altogether. They quote one woman who had done so as an extreme example:

I sent the set back because I couldn't get my daughter to practice her pianoforte lessons,' she told the researchers. 'She neglected her homework and I just couldn't get her to bed at night. My husband was very keen on it—so much so he wouldn't come out with me. Personally, I wasn't keen on it. Since I've sent it back life in this house is back to normal again.¹²⁰

This classed statement reveals television's seductive power over the old, the young, men and women. From its location at the center of the living room it drew emotional and cognitive energy from those propped in front of it. Silverstone notes that the process was not one-sided since television gave back to its viewers—“providing comfort or a sense of security.”¹²¹ Moreover, Britons felt an attachment to their television because it functioned as an entry point into a new community that required only minimal prerequisites to join.

The sense of comfort and security linked to the perceived domesticity of the medium won over audiences. It was also its potential source of weakness. In a BBC Lunch-Time Series event in 1969, Shaun Sutton Head of Drama at the BBC confessed to his listeners that “A television drama has to work much harder for its living than its counterpart in the theatre or cinema.”¹²² He explained that television struggled to create “a sense of occasion.” As audiences, he admitted, “We are there, in our own familiar, comfortable, unexciting homes. We are in slippers and shirt sleeves; we are

¹²⁰ Rediffusion Television Survey 1955.”

¹²¹ Roger Silverstone, *Television and Everyday Life* (London: Routledge, 1994), 40.

¹²² Shaun Sutton, *The Theatre in the Living Room: A Lecture* (BBC Worldwide, 1969), 8.

no longer present for the express purpose of enjoying a particular drama presentation.”¹²³

Remarkably, in Britain, program makers fought the enemy of monotony, as Sutton called it, by creating harsh, socially committed dramas and comedies. Deeply influenced by the contemporary local scene of social realism in the arts, television became a “key social realist arena,” exploiting its ability to address mass audiences in the domestic sphere and to “saturate the nation’s consciousness” in a unique way.¹²⁴ Program makers grasped their privileged position in the cultural life of the nation. Accordingly, they felt responsible for bringing burning social issues to the forefront. They built on, and experimented with, the forms and concerns of the literary 1950s movement of the Angry Young Men. Like those writers, many of those making television originated from working-class backgrounds, exploited opportunities arising from the postwar expansion of education, and had the advantage of joining the industry in its infancy. Writers such as Alan Simpson, Roy Galton, and Johnny Speight contributed to British social realism’s project of representing the grim lives of the working classes.

Johnny Speight had taken this impetus to its extreme when he created Alf Garnett, the bigoted, Tory east Londoner. As the patriarch in the sitcom *Till Death Us Do Part* Garnett splattered racist and sexist tirades. In a piece aptly titled, “Viewers, you were looking at yourselves!” Milton Shulman from the *Evening Standard* argued that

The fascination of Alf Garnett, the monstrous hero of the BBC’s *Till Death Us Do Part*, lay in his ability to act as a distorting mirror in which we could watch our meanest attributes reflected large and ugly. Like some boil on the back of

¹²³ Ibid., 6-7.

¹²⁴ Dave Rolinson, “Small Screens and Big Voices: Televisual Social Realism and the Popular,” in *British Social Realism in the Arts since 1940*, ed. David Tucker, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 172.

the neck that one cannot resist stroking or touching, this social aberration demanded the nation's attention.¹²⁵

Like Speight, contemporary comedy writers aspired to achieve a realist portrayal of British lives that would stand like “some boil on the back of the neck.” For that purpose they narrated the lives of protagonists not as individuals but as part of their social fabric. They carefully located them within families and communities, thereby highlighting their social realities. Whether the locations were urban or provincial, the genre comic or dramatic, it was imperative that the setting be recognizable and that the time be the present.¹²⁶

Television dramas by artists such as Mike Leigh, Ken Loach, and Toni Richardson emphasized repetitive details of daily life; positioning the ugliness of daily life (or anti-glamour) as a reaction against the idealized representation of life in Hollywood cinema.¹²⁷ As we shall see in following chapters, comedy writers such as the notable duo Simpson and Galton invoked, and occasionally critiqued, tropes such as the representation of family as a safe haven or the protagonist as a sympathetic character. They embedded in their comedy the “contemporary rhetoric of social mobility, generational tensions, the interrelationship of domestic and work spaces...and the stressing of practical limitations on narratives of escape.”¹²⁸ In fact, this was the premise of their innovative sitcom *Steptoe and Son* in which they explored the trapped relationship between rag-and-bone man Harold and his traditionalist father Albert.

Britons welcomed familiar strangers such as Albert and Harold into their homes like they would old friends. Indeed, for many, television itself became part of the

¹²⁵ Milton Shulman, “Viewers, you were looking at yourselves!” *Evening Standard*, February 21, 1968.

¹²⁶ Rolinson. “Small Screens and Big Voices,” 173.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 190.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 188.

family—an honorary member. Media scholar Roger Silverstone notes this was a two-sided process in which television gave back to its viewers “comfort or a sense of security.”¹²⁹ However, these benefits could only be enjoyed with a functioning set. In “The Set That Failed,” an episode of *Hancock's Half Hour* from 1959, Hancock is at the end of his wits because his television set broke down. He summons two television technicians and demands a quick fix because, “I haven’t missed a night’s television since 1936 and I don’t intend to start now!” When they tell him that fixing the set requires taking it for a day he cries out, “Please don’t take it away. You can’t leave me alone. You can’t take my telly away. Have pity on me!” They yield, and leave the set behind for comfort. When Hancock realizes that he will have to pass a whole evening without television, he experiences a nervous breakdown:

I shall go mad. I know I shall go mad! They’ll find me in the morning with white hair screaming the place down. I must pull myself together. Be brave, be brave, be brave [he mumbles to himself]. You can do without television. It hasn’t got you like it has most of them. [He starts shouting], It’s a drug! I’ve got to take the monkey off me back! [a little softer] You can do without it. You can take it or leave it. Yes, of course I can. I’m glad it’s broken. An idiot’s lantern. That’s all it is I will concentrate on better things. I can become an intellectual. I might as well It’s making us a nation of morons!

He tries to find comfort in listening to the radio but he no longer remembers how to turn it on. He tries putting together a puzzle but he cannot concentrate. Frustrated he resorts to acting out the television program that is scheduled to show at that time. His friend Sid drops by and when their attempts at conversation fail, Sid concludes that television is “killing the fine art of conversation.” Sid suggests that they join the neighbors in their evening viewing. The neighbors are watching television with their guests and refuse to let Hancock in. Hancock remembers that his uncle Fred has a television set. When they arrive, uncle Fred, who hasn’t seen Hancock in eight years, switches off the TV to honor the occasion. Hancock is horrified and leaves. Fred turns

¹²⁹ Silverstone, *Television and Everyday Life*, 40.

to his wife triumphantly and says, “That’s the way to get rid of them. Switch the telly off. I hate visitors!” he concludes and happily switches the set back on.

Sid and Hancock don’t give up; they sneak into a strangers’ apartment where they find a family fixed to the television in deep concentration. The family’s behavior is a cross between zombies and junkies. The mother, for instance, tells one son that his brother is in hospital. “Is it serious?” he asks in a sleepy voice, his eyes never leaving the screen. “Yes,” replies the mother. “What happened?” the son goes on. The father answers: “fell down the stairs, broke both his legs.” Nobody blinks during this exchange. A second son tells the father,

Son: I got the sack today.

Dad: Did you?

Son: Yes. I think they’re chucking us out the flat an’ all.

Dad: Really?

Son: yeah.

Dad: That’ll be awkward.

Son: Yeah. Mabel’s gone and left me and’ all.

The conversation carries on in this awkward manner, its participants transfixed by the images on the screen. Mistaking Hancock for one of them, the family sends him to prepare their tea. He fixes the meal as if moon-walking. The family consumes it without lifting their gaze from the screen. The two remaining brothers appear and Sid and Hancock manage to sneak out without anybody noticing the switch.

The episode introduces different viewing patterns: a small group of friends, an elderly couple, and a family. They are all united by their addiction to the screen. The content is of no importance - it is the act of viewing that holds their fascination. During the episode an entire range of arguments against television is articulated. All the objections fall flat in the face of what seems to be a national addiction. Television might be numbing, fatal to the art of conversation, lethal to viewers’ concentration span and warm family ties, but it is enjoyed collectively, as a nation. As such it alters

viewers' life-styles and values: it determines where they eat their dinner, how they relate to each other, and loosens their obligations to kin and neighbors. Viewers, it is understood, willingly succumb to the dicta of the magic box.

The discussion about television, its role and effects on Britain pops up in numerous public debates from the mid-1940s. As we shall see in chapter three, it tied into, and was frequently a foray onto, larger debates about youth culture, Americanization, and national identity.¹³⁰

The discourse of the corrupting nature of television flared up again in 1962 with the discussion of the Pilkington Committee Report on Broadcasting. The report blamed ITV, the second commercial channel, for all the ills of television and the era. One of the prominent members of the committee was the writer and social commentator Richard Hoggart. The committee report echoed many of the concerns that his book *The Uses of Literacy* (1957) expressed regarding the effect of commercialism upon 'authentic' working-class culture. The report blamed commercialism for the lowering of standards and the consequent dumbing down of British society. The Pilkington Committee accused ITV of neglecting its responsibility to challenge and educate its audience and to voice a variety of experiences.¹³¹ Thus the committee recommended granting the license for a third television channel to the BBC. The report induced a strong backlash from the popular press, the ITV companies, and many Conservative supporters who attacked the BBC's

¹³⁰ The declinist narrative so dominant in postwar Britain has its roots in the 1870s. It seemed at the time that the size of the country's economy has fallen in relation to the rest of the world. Out of this analysis rose a discourse that tied the slow economy to the alleged existence of pathological failings in British society in economic, technological, political and cultural areas. Since then, it has been taken up by historians and public intellectuals; some floated this flag periodically while others objected it. It intensified in the immediate postwar era and labeled television as responsible for decline. It gained further momentum in the 1980s, with the Thatcher government. Only recently historians such as Jim Tomlinson began questioning its analytical productivity. Jim Tomlinson, "Thrice Denied: "Declinism" as a Recurrent Theme in British History in the Long Twentieth Century," *Twentieth Century British History* 20, no. 2 (January 1, 2009): 227–251.

¹³¹ Rolinson. "Small Screens and Big Voices," 179.

monopoly on broadcasting. Labour MP Woodrow Wyatt published a column in the *Sunday Pictorial* in which he sarcastically asked how “trivial” people (borrowing the Pilkington Committee's phrase) dare to,

prefer watching commercial television to looking at what Auntie BBC so kindly provides for you? . . .” He went on in the same tone, “The ITV programmes are 'naughty' and 'bad' for you. They are produced by ordinary men and women who like the same things as you do Pilkington is out to stop all this rot about you being allowed to enjoy yourself You trivial people will have to brush up your culture.”¹³²

As we have seen, this line of attack on Auntie had its roots in the 1920s but was far from accurate. The BBC incorporated music and comedy in radio and television during the war and ever since. It did so not merely as a reaction to outer competition from foreign and pirate radio stations or commercial television stations. Rather it was part of the advent of broadcasting as a mass medium.¹³³ Moreover, the BBC always provided entertaining television that brought millions together. The “nation of morons” Hancock was so impatient to rejoin, came together watching BBC broadcasts of major events such as England vs. Germany, the morale-boosting victory in 1966 World Cup, soap operas such as *Coronation Street*, and sitcoms of the ilk of *Hancock's Half Hour*. In fact, veteran television agent and producer Beryl Vertue remembered in a recent interview that during *Hancock's* run, the BBC had received a call from Whitehall asking to change the transmission date of an episode so that it wouldn't go out on election day. Vertue maintains that Government's concern was that people would stay in to watch Hancock rather than go out to vote.¹³⁴

Furthermore, the memory of grand television moments entered the period memory of millions of Britons. Their individual consumption of a show transformed into an experience that they shared with their fellow citizens. Faraway dramas were now

¹³² As quoted in Corner, “General Introduction,” 10.

¹³³ Holmes, *Entertaining Television*, 5.

¹³⁴ “Beryl Vertue,” *Desert Island Discs*, BBC Radio 4 (January 20, 2013).

woven into the fabric of individuals' lives by the technology that brought reports of momentous events into the home. As one British woman recalled, "I remember that someone was doing my hair at the time President Kennedy was shot."¹³⁵

The novel technology triggered the invention of new national traditions such as Christmas television viewing. By 1960, the Queen's Christmas television broadcast and the Christmas Special, the production of an episode of a sitcom for Christmas, had established themselves as must watch TV. Television added an electric hearth to the late December crackling fire. Unlike religion's exclusive celebrations, the secular rite of Christmas was extended, at least in theory, to Britons from all walks of life. The prominence of Christmas television viewing in British culture remained intact up to the beginning of the millennia when competing modes of entertainment consumption, such as the internet, began to slash ratings.¹³⁶

The Royal Christmas address was first televised in 1957, twenty five years after the earliest Royal Christmas Day radio broadcast by King George V. The television address bridged over the public and private sphere even more than the radio one. In her speeches, the Queen linked herself with her subjects while enveloping them in a shared circle of made-for-TV domesticity. In her first speech she established that in her opening, "My own family often gather round to watch television, as they are at this moment. And that is how I imagine you now" as she went on to "welcome you to the peace of my own home." The camera work visually supported her invitation: Christmas music played in the background, the camera took in the house and grounds at Sandringham House in Norfolk. Then it got closer to the big house and nearer to the windows. Finally, a cut to the house's library. There, at a desk adorned with framed photographs of her children, and Christmas cards, sat the Queen.

¹³⁵ O'Sullivan, "Researching the Viewing Culture," 172.

¹³⁶ "Don McCullin; Christopher Martin-Jenkins," *The Media Show*, Radio 4, BBC (January 2, 2013).

The Queen's Christmas Day message immediately established itself as a fixture of the holiday. In the 1966 Christmas episode of the hit sitcom *Till Death Us Do Part*, Alf Garnett and his son-in-law Mike argued about the etiquette of welcoming the Queen when she appears on TV. The episode opened with the camera gliding from Mike, to Rita and then to Else chomping away on their Christmas meal to the tune of the anthem. The camera then proceeded to Alf's abandoned plate and climbed up to show him standing upright. Alf's posture embodied his unwavering faith in monarchy and respect for the Queen's dedication to her subjects, manifested, he said, in her commitment to the Christmas broadcast. Mike's initial ridicule for Alf's deference developed into an exchange that questioned the role of monarchy in Britain. Alf argued that the Royals were worth having thanks to the "class" they bestow on the country. Mike didn't need much more to jump on the class wagon: "Gawd, class, look, but what do they do? I mean, what do they work at? How do they earn their money? Eh? I mean, take your Parliament, Your House of Commons, I mean they're working all day making laws an' running the country."¹³⁷ Alf and Else maintained that the Queen is always out doing something – attending coronations and opening bridges. As Alf said, ". . . it's a lot more than your M.P's do, innit? Sitting on their backsides all day . . ." ¹³⁸

If the Royal appearance united television viewers under the auspices of the Crown; the Christmas sitcom invited them to question their social and economic arrangements. Alf and Else's earnest appreciation of the Royals is mocked, but it is presented on par with Mike's belief in Parliament and politicians. *Till Death*'s writer Johnny Speight, a loud advocate of working-class politics, obliged his full-bellied Christmas day audience to examine the principles of their social order. He urged them

¹³⁷ "Peace and Goodwill," *Till Death Us Do Part*, BBC (Original broadcast December 26, 1966), script at BBC WAC.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

to question the hereditary privileges of the few, articulate their expectations of their politicians, and consider their automatic deference to rank. The blow of these onscreen punches was softened by laughter and their utterance within a designated spot for comedy. Nonetheless, it put the question of class and representation on the Christmas table. Speight obliged viewers to grapple with these issues even if only for the duration of the episode. Chapter four considers his crusade against British prejudice in greater detail.

Conclusion

As this discussion demonstrates, sitcoms were now an arena of public conversation and debate. The use of comedy promised to unite viewers with the warm afterglow of a laugh rather than divide them. Laughter was a sign of recognition rather than a call to arms. Both radio and television drew Britons from a variety of backgrounds into an imagined community engaged in a shared ritual. But, as Speight's portrayal of working-class lives revealed, this unity was shaky and could be defeated easily either by the young – students or teenagers – as explored in chapter five, or racial tensions as discussed in chapter four.

The domestic site of consumption and the simultaneity of audiences' television experience made it part of everyday life in ways that further blurred divisions between private and public and self and other/s.¹³⁹ The intricate intrusion of broadcasting media into daily life made it crucial to the ways in which contemporaries learned to define themselves and their nation, learned about the present, and remembered their past.

¹³⁹ Thumim, "Introduction," 3.

Chapter Two: “The Great Unwashed! That’s What We Are, Mate:” Housing, Homes and Social Mobility

In *The Destroyers*, Graham Green's 1954 short story, the Wormsley Common Gang of preteens meets “every morning in an impromptu car park, the site of the last bomb of the first blitz.” Trevor, the gang's new leader, persuades the kids to pull down the only house to have survived the bombing, Old Misery's beautiful 200-year old house, said to have been built by Sir Christopher Wren. While the owner is away for Bank Holiday weekend, Trevor organizes the twelve boys' infiltration and destruction of the house. “We’d be like worms.” he tells them, “don’t you see, in an apple. When we came out again there’d be nothing there... just walls, and then we’d make the walls fall down—somehow.”¹ The gang works diligently, with the “seriousness of creators”² at dismantling every part and detail of the lovely house. When Old Misery returns unexpectedly, they lock him in his outside toilet and resume working. Trevor forbids the boys to stop their work before achieving total destruction: “Facades were valuable. They could build inside again more beautifully than before. This could again be a home,”³ he warns. The boys work all evening and before they leave, they tie the wooden shore that supports the house to the lorry parked against it. In the morning, when the truck driver starts the engine, he inadvertently pulls down the house. When he climbs out of the truck he sees that, “the whole landscape had suddenly altered. There was no house beside the car park, only a hill of rubble.”⁴ As Mr. Thomas looks at the debris that used to be his home, the driver laughs uncontrollably. By way of apology he says, “I can’t help it, Mr. Thomas. There’s

¹ Graham Greene, *21 Stories* (New York: Viking Press, 1962), 230.

² *Ibid.*, 235.

³ *Ibid.*, 238.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 244.

nothing personal, but you got to admit it's funny."⁵ The narrator explains, "One moment the house had stood there with such dignity between the bomb sites like a man in a top hat, and then, bang, crash, there wasn't anything left – not anything."⁶

Postwar Britain, Green tells us, was forever altered by the war - its material and mental landscape scarred. The Second World War brought havoc to Europe's crowded cities. The *Luftwaffe*, the RAF and the US Air Force all employed "Strategic bombing" targeted at city centers. The images of a smoking mushroom over the skies of Hiroshima and Nagasaki summed up six years of urban destruction and civilian suffering. The depression in the 1920s has already created a dearth of housing that deepened during the war when one house in every three had been destroyed or damaged and relatively few had been built to compensate. Thus a decade after the war had ended the Wormsley gang still played in a bombed car park, and Old Misery's house symbolized past beauty for a society suffering the bleakness of rationing. The destruction of civilian homes and family units by demolition, annihilation and mass displacement was central to the war. The visible signs of war that remained after it ended constituted British social reality. An invisible damage affected patterns of thought and language even a decade after VE-Day.⁷

Women and the middle-classes⁸ in particular suffered "fatigue with the years of Crippsian austerity."⁹ The inability to consume tormented Britons as full employment put money in their pockets but a dearth of materials and manpower left them hungry for new homes, consumer durables, and better foodstuffs. Eggs and meat, for example, were still rationed in 1952 as austerity measures had not been lifted since

⁵ Ibid., 245.

⁶ Ibid., 245.

⁷ Rod Mengham, "Bad Teeth: British Social Realism in Fiction," in *British Social Realism in the Arts since 1940*, ed. David Tucker (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 91-92.

⁸ Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska, *Austerity in Britain: Rationing, Controls, and Consumption, 1939-1955* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 2.

⁹ Alastair Horne, *Harold Macmillan: Volume I: 1894-1956* (USA: Penguin, 1988), 339.

the war. One correspondent thanked American writer Helene Hanff for a package of food she sent from New York to London in Easter 1950: “My little ones (girl 5, boy, 4) were in Heaven [with the parcel] – with the raisins and egg I was actually able to make them a cake!”¹⁰ Another wrote in April 1951 to thank Hanff on behalf of his 75 year old great-aunt, wishing Hanff could see “the look of delight on her face when I brought home the meat and the tin of tongue.”¹¹ Perhaps unsurprisingly, the Conservative’s 1951 electoral campaign pledge to a higher standard of living secured their victory. Harold Macmillan’s 1957 assertion that “. . . most of our people have never had it so good” became a motto of a generation hoping it were true, but for whom reality frequently proved to be different.

A concern for the home and its reconstruction preoccupied nations all over Europe. Housing became a locus for social policy.¹² In Britain this absorption took on a larger scale when postwar governments steadily dismantled Britain’s grand empire, creating a more modest national home. Outside threats were no longer a binding concern as they were during the war. It was the specter of worms eating into the social fabric, as Graham noted, that frightened many. Young people empowered by new educational and professional opportunities challenged their elders’ authority; immigrants from the former colonies realized their citizenship rights and challenged the national perception of a white citizenry; further democratization and the growing influence of television enhanced the power of the masses. Many like Graham Green’s narrator in *The Destructors* believed that the era of “top hat” Britain was over.

Sitcoms frequently revisited the tension between the postwar promise for welfare and mobility and its frustration—so violently expressed by the Wormsley Common

¹⁰ Helene Hanff, *Charing Cross Road* (London: Futura Macdonald & Co, 1983), 16.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 28.

¹² Paul Betts and David Crowley, “Introduction,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 40, no.2 (2005):215.

Gang. As a domestic genre sitcoms proved particularly suited to explore the dream of home ownership. Out of 70 sitcoms in the database I created for the years 1950 to 1980, 41 are situated within the home. If current affairs programs such as *Panorama* promised in the 1950s to “open a window on the world,” sitcoms opened a window on the living-room. Viewers peeked into homes and families that showed different living arrangements and reflected current trends, desires, and anxieties about the home and its makeup.

Sitcoms forged a connection between the home and social mobility. It showed viewers through quotidian vignettes in the lives of their protagonists, how rooted they were in their material reality. The emphasis on the protagonists’ investment of energy on acquiring material objects and climbing the social ladder reveals the writers belief that there was a tight link between the two. But because so many of the protagonists failed to improve their social standing, it is clear that although the postwar arrangement promised to take the nation beyond the constraints of class, this did not happen. Television content, more than any contemporary cultural form, cut across class, age, race, and gender differentiations, thus this poignant message reached far and deep.

The bombing during WWII along with the freeze on building new houses due to rationing, left Britain in shortage of two million houses. The desperate need to rebuild Britain elicited different solutions that together altered the country’s landscape: towns built with new materials such as concrete, and novel architectural forms like the tower block mushroomed. Slum clearing, new housing estates, and waves of migration transformed the material surroundings and the demography of towns. A surge of design exhibitions and a “Golden Age” of national design councils sought to transform postwar living and surroundings. Design from above became a way for

government in Britain as in Europe, to control the consumption of household goods and produce “modern citizens with renewed civic values and finely cultivated aesthetic sensibilities.”¹³

Central planning contributed to the advancement of the postwar cult of experts who had promoted a vision of Europe that would be “founded on its glorious past but setting course for an equitable, democratic and high-technology future.”¹⁴ The backdrop of the Cold War drew even more energy and resources to this project. The fame of the Khrushchev and Nixon “kitchen debate” in Moscow in 1959 testifies to the prevalence of this sentiment in the period.¹⁵ Overcoming the housing problem became a litmus test for governments’ success.¹⁶

Affluence, new technologies, consumerism, and aspirations to “keep up with the Joneses” changed the content, feel and smell of individual homes. Television became especially influential; it occupied the center of the family space, influenced daily routines and established itself as an honorary family member. Even at a time when the majority of houses were low in technology and consumer durables, television had made its way into the family budget. Studies from the 1960s show that consumer durables were a high priority for families of all classes and that even in slum areas the majority of the population had a television set; half owned a vacuum cleaner, and a third had a washing machine.¹⁷ Ownership of television sets increased in huge leaps

¹³ Betts and Crowley, “Introduction.” On the social role of urban planners see also John Burnett, *A Social History of Housing, 1815-1985* (London: Routledge, 1990), 279-80.

¹⁴ Peter Mandler, “New Towns for Old: The Fate of the Town Centre,” in *Moments of Modernity: Reconstructing Britain, 1945-1964*, ed. Becky Conekin, Frank Mort, and Chris Waters (London; New York: Rivers Oram: New York University Press, 1999), 208.

¹⁵ Betts and Crowley, “Introduction,” 224.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 227.

¹⁷ Burnett, *A Social History of Housing*, 275.

during the 1950s, and by the beginning of the 1960s over 85% of the population in Britain had access to a domestic television set.¹⁸

Life without television seemed inconceivable, as we saw from Hancock's manic reaction to the failure of his television in the previous chapter.¹⁹ Once a television was purchased, it was given due honor; frequently the whole living-room was rearranged to accommodate it. In houses with a division between living-room and sitting-room television usually went in the latter, previously used in more formal occasions. On the one hand, watching TV became somewhat of an awkward activity. One woman remembered that "you had to go into the front room to watch it, and in those days, the front room was really only used for 'best' – for special occasions"²⁰ On the other hand, entertainment was consumed in the comfort of one's home making it an intimate and pleasant activity.

The reign of television ensured that images of homes and scenes of domesticity reached millions of viewers. It set in motion norms, expectations and desires.²¹ Television broadcasts reflected and enforced contemporary expectations to acquire a home (whether through ownership or renting) and to furnish it with modern amenities – both ambitions proved hard to realize. Journalist Harry Hopkins remembered that after the war, "House-hunting, flat-hunting, room-hunting, occupied a fantastic proportion of so many peoples' lives and thoughts."²² Working-class and middle-class couples complained regularly about the impossibility of setting up their own home. The Population Investigation Committee/Gallup Poll survey of 1959-1961 found that access to housing was the most frequently articulated concern among

¹⁸ Of these set owners 80 percent had access to the only two existing channels in Britain. O'Sullivan, "Researching the Viewing Culture," 160.

¹⁹ "The Set that Failed," *Hancock's Half Hour*, BBC (January 9, 1959).

²⁰ O'Sullivan, "Television Memories and Cultures of Viewing," 167.

²¹ Silverstone, *Television and Everyday Life*, 24.

²² Harry Hopkins, *The New Look: a Social History of the Forties and Fifties in Britain* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1963), 45.

married couples, and that nearly half of the couples lived with their parents immediately after marriage.²³

The failed quest for housing brought laughs to viewers of the well-loved postwar radio comedy *Take It From Here* (BBC 1948-1959). The show featured a weekly sketch, *The Glums*: Mr. Glum, a working class rogue, his good-for-nothing son Ron and his fiancé Eth. The penniless couple spent their 11-year-long on air relationship living in the house of their respective parents. During the show's run, the couple had tried marrying four times and eloping once, but failed each time. Eth was particularly upset: "Here's people like Rita Heyworth talking about getting married for the fourth and fifth time – and I haven't been married once yet."²⁴

Housing featured prominently on the agenda of politicians, state and local organizations, civilians, refugees and veterans by the end of the Great War. Lloyd George's promise to build "homes fit for heroes" captures a broadly shared preoccupation with the issue in the interwar period. Conservative and Labour governments from the end of the war through the 1950s and 1960s attempted to address the housing plight with plans for social housing or increased private ownership, respectively. A study conducted by Mass Observation before the 1945 elections indicated that housing was mentioned so often as a major concern by voters that all other issues paled in comparison. Thus politicians remained acutely sensitive to the issue of new housing.²⁵

Taken alone, the rate of new housing during the immediate postwar years was regarded as a failure by contemporaries. It is, however, worth remembering that

²³ Rachel M. Pierce, "Marriage in the Fifties," *The Sociological Review* (March 1963): 233, as quoted in Langhamer, "The Meanings of Home in Postwar Britain," 349.

²⁴ "The Engagement," *Take it from Here* BBC (original broadcast January 29, 1958) Muir and Norden archives, box 32.

²⁵ Matthew Francis, "'A Crusade to Enfranchise the Many:' Thatcherism and the 'Property-Owning Democracy,'" *Twentieth Century British History* 23, no.2 (2012): 279.

although the rate of repairing war damaged houses was not acknowledged by politicians or the public, by 1948 these repairs were of real significance. In effect, if the number of repaired houses is added to new housing, then the Labour government had obtained its target of adding 200,000 new houses by 1948.²⁶

This achievement went unnoticed by contemporaries mainly because the effort did not match the demand. The Conservatives entered office largely due to their promise to meet grander targets of new housing. Once in Government in 1951 Churchill created the new Ministry of Housing with Harold Macmillan at its head. The ministry had met the target of 300,000 new houses a year by the end of 1953,²⁷ but this, too, did not quench the thirst for homes. In a 1970 *Monty Python's Flying Circus* sketch called "Face the Press" the Minister for Home Affairs dressed in a pink dress, pearls and a mustache appears on an interview show to address the housing problem. The host asks, "In your plan, 'A Better Britain for Us,' you claimed that you would build 88,000 million, billion houses a year in the Greater London area alone. In fact, you've built only three in the last fifteen years. Are you a bit disappointed with this result?"²⁸ While the minister begins his rehearsed answer, his voice is hushed and the conductor of the program continues to describe the minister's dress and accessories. The carnivalesque portrayal of gender representations—the male politician in drag—suggested the emasculation of politicians by the failure to solve the housing problem. It also embodied the sentiment that housing was a female concern. As we will see, contemporary Britcoms made the connection between women and housing repeatedly.

In fairness, politicians may not have been effective about housing, but as we have seen the issue was at the top of their agenda. Their preoccupation with it led to new

²⁶ Nicholas Bullock, "Re-assessing the Post-War Housing Achievement: The Impact of War-damage Repairs on the New Housing Programme in London," *Twentieth Century British History* 16, no. 3 (2005), 281-282.

²⁷ Horne, *Harold Macmillan*, 347.

²⁸ "Face the Press," *Monty Python's Flying Circus* BBC (September 15, 1970).

visions of politics and the relations between the individual and the state. On the left, shelter was formulated as a right to be fulfilled by the state. Larger investments went to social housing schemes to house hundreds of thousands of “deserving” poor. On the Conservative side, during the 1950s, and through the 1970s, politicians forged a connection between private ownership and democracy. The vision of a “property-owning democracy” would become a tentacle of the Thatcher regime. Through the Right to Buy scheme that offered tenants on housing estates owned by local authorities a 35% to 50% discount to purchase their homes, the Thatcherite regime dealt the last blow to social housing. The success of the scheme (one million tenants opted for this offer in its first year) was part of the Conservative's larger crusade to extend private ownership. Leading Conservatives from the 1920s onwards believed that a private investment in property (be it industry or housing) would increase individual ties to the state and would grant citizens a personal stake in capitalism.

Furthermore, it would rectify the damage socialism had caused by concentrating power in the hands of the state, thereby decreasing opportunities for individuals to make meaningful decisions over their lives, and participate in the democratic process. In effect, argued Conservative ideologues, increased private ownership on homes and industry was a more appropriate alternative to socialism's promise of equal redistribution of property.²⁹ Thus both on the left and on the right the discussion of housing incubated debates about social mobility. Both housing and social mobility were promised as part of the postwar settlement.

Over the decades moral and social preoccupations latched on to the material concerns over housing, the low standards of building of new social housing, the expansion of homelessness, and the possible social and environmental consequences

²⁹ Francis, “A Crusade to Enfranchise the Many.”

of new architectural forms such as brutalism.³⁰ The postwar era saw the spread of the automobile, the tower block, the office block and the concrete civic centre, which changed the face of Europe.³¹ An increase in the number of flats rather than semi-detached houses became a characteristic feature of British towns from the 1950s onwards. In the 1969 movie spin-off of the sitcom *Till Death Us Do Part*, Alf Garnett fights the eviction of his family from their semi-detached house in London to a tall block in suburban Essex. In the movie the relocation of the family is depicted as part of the slum clearance policy in the early 1950s to replace houses lacking in basic amenities such as a fixed bath, an indoor toilet or piped water.

While Alf clings to his old neighborhood and local pub, his family sees the move as cause for jubilation. The difference in response is not accidental. The young generation in general vied for an opportunity to leave the old rundown neighborhoods, and women, were excited about what they thought was an improvement in their standard of living. Thus it is 20-year old Rita who is incredulous about her father's entrenchment in his old ways embodied in his conservative political agenda. In the early scenes in the movie, Rita confronts her father about his refusal to vote Labour. She believes that it is the only party that will do something “for people like us,” meaning working-class people. She cries out, “Look how we have to live! Two up, two down, and an outside toilet. We don’t even have a proper bathroom!”³² Rita’s political outrage is articulated around housing and is presented as a standard of living

³⁰ Burnett, *A Social History of Housing*, 271.

The reception of *Cathy Come Home* (BBC1, 1966), a bitter drama of social critique of homelessness directed by Ken Loach demonstrates the prominence of this concern. The film narrates in the social-realist style the tale of a young woman who lost her home and family as a consequence of the housing crisis. *Cathy Come Home* reached 12 million people at its original broadcast and brought the issue of homelessness into the public eye. The film suggests that all that remains of Cathy’s dream of domesticity is the perpetually narrowing personal space she is allowed to occupy; a room of one’s own turns here from a literary metaphor into a desperate and unfulfilled need.

³¹ Mandler, “New Towns for Old,” 208.

³² *Till Death Us Do Part* directed by Norman Cohen (1969).

issue. Like Eth, she views sharing a house with no toilet or bathroom with her parents and fiancé as a sign of failure. Alf on the other hand, enjoys Rita and Mike's dependency on him because it increases his social power.

Affluence and employment exacerbated generational tensions such as those of the Garnetts. The new material reality provided opportunities for young people to lead lives that were very different from their parents. Youths from the age of 15 to 25 continued to contribute to the family budget as before, but they also had dispensable income to spend.³³ As austerity measures were lifted in the mid-1950s and local fashion and music industries matured to great success in the 1960s, there was much to consume. Youth culture, frequently defined by consumption became a way to assert identity.³⁴ These material and structural conditions impacted the power balance in the family. On the one hand, deference and dependence on parents weakened. On the other hand, the housing shortage curtailed opportunities for young people to move out of their family homes. These tensions turned out to be a perfect conduit for comedy in series such as *Till Death Do Us Part*. The generational divide between the two men in the house, Alf and his future son-in-law Mike often kindled heated rows that allowed the writer to present conflicting standpoints.

The 1968 "Blood Donor" episode of *Till Death Do Us Part* is a case in point. In it the family discusses new developments in medicine and their implications.³⁵ Alf reckons that difference is marked on people's bodies from outside and on their inner organs. As proof he brings the Royal family's preoccupation with lineage "your

³³ See for example, Selina Todd, "Breadwinners and Dependents: Working-Class Young People in England, 1918–1955," *International Review of Social History* 52, no.1 (2007): 57–87.

³⁴ The wages for people between 15 and 25 years doubled between 1938 and 1958. They contributed only five percent to the total purchase in the UK, but were the main consumers of products such as record players, cosmetic and toiletries and cinema admissions, Becky Conekin, "From Haughty to Nice: How British Fashion Images Changed from the 1950s to the 1960s," *Photography & Culture* 3, no. 3 (November, 2010): 294.

³⁵ "Blood Donor," *Till Death Us Do Part*, BBC (January 19, 1968).

Royals are so fussy about blood . . . that's so the blood can't be tainted," he tells the young ones. Mike and Rita ridicule this opinion and share their enthusiasm for the first heart transplant performed in South Africa. Alf reminds them that the man who received the new heart had died. He attributes the failure to the sex of the donor. Else, his wife, supports his view, "I can't think it's right meself . . . putting a woman's heart in a man's body." Furthermore, Alf believes the patient's body rejected the "foreign organ" because he was Jewish and the heart was Christian. Alf proceeds to question another operation in which "this black heart what's been put in a white body"³⁶ in South Africa. He asks "what kind of life is he going to have eh? Living in South Africa with Apartheid...I mean he won't know what toilet to use."³⁷ Mike argues that it's all nonsense. "What they want is fresh young vigorous blood . . . not tired worn out old blood like yours."³⁸ The episode aligns Alf's racist and sexist views to his "old blood." He and Else represent a generation suspicious of anything new and unknown. Mike and Rita are grouped together as a young alternative.

This literal reading of old versus new is apparent in the 1969 movie version as well. Alf's attachment to his old house and neighborhood is ridiculed by the family. But Alf's reluctance to move isn't only sentimental, it is also practical: he is concerned about the daily commute and the difficulty of enduring the changes it would bring to his routine with no pub to be found in miles. He is upset that in exchange for a modern home he is asked to forsake an urban life style and his community. When the old house is knocked down, Alf acknowledges defeat and heads to the council estate in Essex to join his family. He is horrified that none of the neighbors had heard of the Garnetts. It validates his anxieties about the move. As we see Alf's crestfallen face, the camera moves to show us the happy Garnetts—Rita,

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

Mike and Else—walking to the cinema. The cinematography indicates that they have been successfully transplanted into the new turf. Instead of holding on to the past they are ready to embrace the advantages of the future.

The Expansion of Home

As part of the shift homeward, the role of the home expanded from a place of shelter to a site of repose, entertainment, and an item of pride and self-expression. A soar in the number of households took place in this period due to a leap in the proportion of people getting married, earlier marriages, and the decrease in the size of the household.³⁹ This meant an unexpected and ever-growing demand for small households for one and two persons formed either of married young couples – now marrying younger and no longer content to live with their parents - or unmarried sons and daughters living independently.⁴⁰ The writers of *The Glums* Frank Muir and Denis Norden told David Nathan in 1971 that the idea for *The Glums* crystallized when, “we suddenly realised that one of the most hilarious and ludicrous positions to be in was this state of being engaged.”⁴¹ The uneasiness increased when young couples were forced to share with their parents, and various media narrated these stories about a new era of personal freedom.

Viewers from 1950 to 1980 recognized from their own experience, or from cultural memory, the discomfort and awkwardness of sharing a home with a married child, parents or in-laws. At the time, those who could afford it moved out of their parents’ homes and into bedsitters. The bedsitter, a small room for rent in the owner’s house with shared access to bathroom and kitchen, became a national institution.

³⁹ The population of England and Wales grew from thirty eight million in 1921 to forty eight million in 1966. The number of private households almost doubled from 8.7 million to 15.7 million. Burnett, *A Social History of Housing*, 272.

⁴⁰ The number of small households doubled from 21.5 percent of all households in 1911 to around 46 percent in 1966, Ibid.

⁴¹ Nathan, *The Laughtermakers*, 30.

Katherine Whitehorn, later a renowned columnist at the *Observer*, rose to fame in 1961 when she published *Cooking in a Bedsitter*. Whitehorn enumerated in her introduction the obstacles for those wishing to cook and entertain in their room. Some were apparent such as the lack of running water, a sink, and storage for the foodstuff. Others became visible only during the cooking process: “finding somewhere to put down the fork while you take the lid off the saucepan, and then finding somewhere else to put the lid,” or “finding a place to keep the butter where it will not get mixed up with your razor or your hairpins.”⁴² The bedsit became such a symbol of its time that the BBC even created a sitcom called *The Bed-Sit Girl* a vehicle for actress Sheila Hancock.⁴³ Hancock played Sheila Ross, a typist who lives in a bedsit and wishes more of life—a plotline that many contemporary young women could subscribe to.

A celebrated piece of postwar sitcom on this topic is an episode from Tony Hancock’s 1961 television show in a format of a soliloquy—“The Bedsitter.” It depicted an afternoon in the life of the lonely Hancock. In the opening scene the camera moves from a bird’s eye shot of a street, to street level to take in an apartment building. It then climbs up the doorbells to the one at the top that reads Esq. Anthony Hancock. Hancock’s location at the top alludes to John Braine’s 1957 bestseller novel (and 1959 movie), *Room at the Top*. The novel tells the story of the recently demobilized Joe Lampton, an ambitious young man determined to climb the social ladder. Lampton plots his way up from the little room he rents from a middle-class couple who live in the better part of the Midlands town of Warley, known as “T^{top}.”⁴⁴

⁴² Katherine Whitehorn, *Cooking in a Bedsitter* (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 1974 (1961), 13.

⁴³ *Bed-Sit Girl*, BBC1 (13 April 1965–23 May 1966). Unfortunately, all twelve episodes are missing from the archives and thought to have been destroyed.

⁴⁴ John Braine, *Room at the Top*. (London: Methuen, 1983 (1957))

The reference to *Room at the Top* alerts us to Hancock's social and cultural aspirations. Indeed, when the camera peers into his bedsit, we notice he has both a television set and a radio set and that his bedside table is loaded with the essential reading du jour: books by Franz Kafka, Bertrand Russell (*Human Knowledge: Its Scope and Limits*), Karl Marx's *Capital* and *Glam* magazine. We expect to meet a social climber like Lampton. But although Hancock tests out all sorts of types and personae via accents and gestures during the episode, his well-established onscreen persona is that of a loser, a dreamer who will never arrive at the top. A comic effect is created from the collapse of the comparison between the two men. It is enhanced when the camera finally settles on Hancock lying on his bed trying to puff perfect smoke rings. It's the weekend, but Hancock has no plans, or anyone to keep him company. In his boredom he enunciates in a variety of social and ethnic accents, burns himself with the butt of his cigarette, spends a few moments announcing to an invisible audience the contents of his first-aid cupboard, stands in front of the mirror singing in a French accent, checks his teeth, and tries to read Russell's book. He gives up in frustration but comforts himself with the belief that his failure lies squarely with Russell's inability to write lucidly. The afternoon drags on in much the same manner, when the phone finally rings. On the other end is a girl who had dialed the wrong number. Hancock is so desperate for company that he convinces her to go on a date with him. Since it's only half past four, he returns to his time wasting techniques to pass the time till eight in the evening. Finally, it's time to dress (jeans, open black shirt, a medallion "Harry Belafonte style" and a huge amount of hair cream). Just as he surveys himself in the mirror, the girl calls to cancel. The episode ends with Hancock back in bed, smoking.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ "The Bedsitter," *Hancock*, BBC (1961). This episode was taken from Hancock's new

During the episode's 30 minutes, the bedsit morphs from a symbol of liberated bachelorhood to one of social alienation and imprisonment. Hancock is supposedly "living the life:" he is a television comic, lives in a bedsit, and owns the right books and magazines. He is, however, a hostage of his social and cultural shortcomings. Like many other ambitious young men he is locked in his room at the top, unable to take advantage of the opportunities supposedly opened to them by new policies in education, employment, and health. In the novel, Lampton achieves social status and riches by marrying up (though sacrificing the woman he loves). Lampton's success has a bitter undertone to it, but Hancock's failure is merely pathetic and low-key. Not only does he fail to connect and create a relationship, the place that ought to shelter and comfort him from the world becomes a solitary jail. He displays both knowledge and purchasing power to obtain the proper artifacts, but it is insufficient.

The episode casts a doubt on the myth of the classless society that welfare planners had hoped for. It mocks cultural pretension and aspiration and the trendy social and literary discourses of the day. Hancock's loneliness adds a bitter tone of critique about contemporary isolation and anomie, and comments about enfeebled masculinity. This earnest social critique was quite common in Britcoms of that time. As one reader wrote to *The Sun* in 1968, *Till Death Do Us Part* was funny, but "...it has provided much more than entertainment. Some of the conflicts between Alf and

television series in which he appeared with no supporting cast. The change was due to Tony Hancock's increasing jealousy, insecurity and paranoia that he owes his success to his supporting cast and faithful writers rather than his own talent. Hancock proceeded to fire his writers after one season only. His onscreen loneliness in *The Bedsitter* was enhanced by the viewers' knowledge of his fall outs with friends and colleagues. His spells of depression were also known by then, especially after his appearance in the interview show *Face to Face* in June 1960. On the show he revealed himself to be a self-doubting, tearing, and brutally candid person. His suicide in 24 June 1968 adds further intensity to rerun viewing.

his son-in-law have led more powerfully to discussions about fundamental issues than highbrow features about them.”⁴⁶

Social housing was another topic of postwar hopes and contention. Another important housing phenomenon of the time was the spread of social housing. By 1968, when the aforementioned *Till Death* movie was made, social housing was in its heyday. By the 1970s, a third of the British population lived in houses that were owned by local authorities. A decade later, the image of housing estates would be radically transformed: they would be regarded as ‘concrete jungles,’ breeding soils for anti-social behavior and alienation. Thus the movie offers both an elegy for lost urban communities in the pre-1940s mould and an embrace of the improved houses on offer. Alf’s comic struggle echoes Richard Hoggart’s famous 1957 *The Uses of Literacy*. Hoggart regretted the loss of close-knit working class communities to mass culture. Hoggart argued that in new towns and council estates working class people felt lost: “In these brick and concrete wastes they feel too exposed and cold at first, they suffer from agoraphobia; they do not feel “it’s homely” or “neighbourly,” they feel “too far from everything.”⁴⁷

Hoggart and Garnett lamented the changes to working-class life, but most postwar Britons welcomed change. In his 1980 play *Enjoy Alan Bennett*, a scholarship-boy like Hoggart, ridiculed the nostalgia for authentic and organic working class communities and questioned their existence in the Hoggart mould. In the play a representative of the council appears at the Cravens’ home in Leeds. A pamphlet explains that the neighborhood is to be demolished and that because, “. . . redevelopment has often ignored many valuable elements in the social structure of

⁴⁶ Kenneth Housman, Bournemouth Park Road, Southend-on-Sea, Essex, “shocked by the Truth,” *The Sun*, February 21, 1968.

⁴⁷ Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy*, 68.

traditional communities... Their sense of identity has been lost and with it the virtues of self-reliance, neighbourliness and self-help.”⁴⁸

Enter one of the central figures of postwar culture: the expert. The council had commissioned “a social study of selected families,” and the Cravens are asked to admit a sociologist into their home to observe their daily routine.⁴⁹ They are forbidden to interact with the observer to ensure “authentic” actions. The study, we learn, is carried out for a development company that plans to transplant the neighborhood, its inhabitants, and their tasteless possessions to the countryside to live in “a people's park.” Visitors to the theme park would

... alight from one of a fleet of trams to find themselves in a close-knit community where people know each others' names and still stop and pass the time of day. There will be ... genuine hardship ... And people coming round will watch you work and skimp and save and remember the labour their mothers had and all for nothing and will go away contented and assured of their future.⁵⁰

Enjoy sends up the tropes of working-class lives central to Hoggart such as respectability, gregariousness, mutual help, and close family and communal ties. It satirizes the triumph of expertise and social science and mocks the persistence of slumming. Viewers double for the visitors to the theme park who enjoy the spectacle of “planned” working-class life only to discover clichéd pathologies. Thus we see Dad hits Mam and insults her, and that Mam’s turning senile, that their beloved daughter Linda is a prostitute, and that Ms. Craig their observer is actually their son Terry, who now dresses as a woman and goes by the name Kim. The neighborhood’s teenage hooligan forces his way into the Craven’s house with his silent documentarian in tow, taunts Dad, strikes him and causes him to suffer a stroke. Mrs. Clegg the next-door neighbor comes in to help Mam deal with the allegedly deceased Dad, but she is

⁴⁸ Alan Bennett, *Enjoy* (London; Boston: Faber and Faber, 1980), 6.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 40.

really motivated by her need to satisfy her observer's expectations of working class people: "Coping, mutual support. The way this cheek-by-jowl existence brings out the best in us."⁵¹

Enjoy is narrated in a tongue-in-cheek tone. Like numerous other contemporary works of culture and political action, it points to the changes in the makeup of the postwar home and its new centrality. With affluence and more disposable income both working-class and middle-class men and women began to consume one-time luxuries such as fruit, meat, wines and spirits, housing, electricity, durable household goods, furniture, and motor cars. Journalist Harry Hopkins described expansion of Britain's middle-class due to the downgrading of the middle-classes material status and the new working-class consumerism as resulting in the "endless middle" society.⁵² Sociologist Mark Abrams arrived at a similar conclusion. In a 1959 article in *The Listener* he maintained that much of the additional spending on the new goods came from working-class men and women and concluded that these patterns of consumption were ironing out class distinctions, especially in housing and diet.⁵³ Much more money was being spent on household goods and, claimed Abrams

for the first time in modern British history the working-class home, as well as the middle-class home, has become a place that is warm, comfortable, and able to provide its own fireside entertainment The outcome is a working-class way of life which is decreasingly concerned with activities outside the house or with values wider than those of the family.⁵⁴

The amelioration of material conditions facilitated making the home pleasant and seductive. The decrease in working hours from an average of 53 weekly hours at the beginning of the century to an average of 42 hours by the 1960s left Britons more free time to enjoy their homes. A fair amount of this free time was used both by men and

⁵¹ Ibid., 29.

⁵² Hopkins, *The New Look*, 153.

⁵³ Abrams, "The Home-Centred Society," 914.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 915.

women for domestic leisure activities. Contemporaries felt this to be a major change and Abrams famously coined the term “The Home-Centred Society” to describe this shift.⁵⁵ Abrams contended that the transformation of the house had far reaching implications for individual social relations. First, it gave greater power to women as they were in charge of the home and home-related expenditure. Second, the husband’s outside contacts were weakened and reduced in favor of his home ties. Consequently, argued Abrams in a somewhat idealistic manner, men participated more in domestic duties and women gained social power as the main spending force of the family. Optimistically, and some would say overly so, Abrams held that this domesticated and consumer based society was available to greater sectors of the public.

Make Room for TV

As the home grew in prominence, its interior changed radically and rapidly. If the prewar house was relatively low in technology, the postwar home reflected affluence, new materials, and a growing interest in domestic décor. Its design became more standardized, and distinction and status were found in the fine details.⁵⁶ “House of the Future” designed by architects Alison and Peter Smithson (A/A.R.I.B.A.) was presented in 1956 at the Ideal Home Exhibition. In the exhibition’s catalogue it was explained that the house was meant to present a “probable design for living twenty-five years from now.”⁵⁷ As in every year, the exhibition had commissioned the building and furnishing of a house for visitors to explore. The specific house on display (complete with actors dressed in appropriately futuristic clothes designed by sportswear designer Teddy Tinling) was a townhouse with one bedroom and a tiny garden. “Electric power, drawn from the nearest atomic power station,” it was

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Burnett, *A Social History of Housing*, 292.

⁵⁷ “Daily Mail Ideal Home Exhibition Catalogue,” 1956, 97. Art and Design Archive, Blythe House.

explained, “Was used for heating, lighting, air-conditioning, water-heating, cooking, house laundry and refrigeration.”⁵⁸

Although white, ultra-modern, futuristic spaces were not commonplace in the 1970s, the rest certainly was. Heating technology in particular, metamorphosed the homes it reached: it affected the way the home felt and smelled as well as the ways in which its inhabitants used the space. Without open fires to cause dust, ashes and soot, and with new cleaning products, expectations regarding the appropriate level of cleanliness were redefined. To be clean was no longer just “to be dirt-free but also to smell nice.”⁵⁹ In addition, thanks to central heating, the entire house could be used in the winter. Its various occupants could spend more time in their own bedrooms alone or with friends rather than in the family-room. Portable and personal size transistors combined with warm rooms turned teenagers’ bedrooms into their own private domain.

A modernist aesthetic in home décor functioned in the 1960s as a signal of class and social capital. A 1964 episode of *Steptoe and Son* exemplifies this well. As a home of rag and bone men, the Steptoe house is crammed with a multitude of eclectic objects; its interior design signals to the audience that these men are out of step with the times. In this episode Harold brings home six wooden coffins and tries to persuade his terrified father Albert that it’s a good business opportunity. Albert, however, is adamant: “I’m a respectable rag and bone man, not a dealer in death!” Harold tries to appease him “They look quite nice, don’t they? They’re simple, pleasing, aesthetically pleasing to the eye, wouldn’t you say? They’re a bit Scandinavian really, don’t you think?”⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Ibid., 98.

⁵⁹ James Obelkevich, “Consumption,” in *Understanding Post-War British Society* ed. James Obelkevich and Peter Catterall (London: Routledge, 1994), 146-7.

⁶⁰ “The Wooden Overcoats,” *Steptoe and Son*, BBC (January 1964).

Albert is not convinced. As a safety measure he decides to spend the night far from the coffins--in the stable with their horse Hercules. Harold mocks his father, but creeps into the stable in the middle of the night to snuggle up close to him. The idea of sharing a space with the coffins spooked him. The “aesthetically pleasing” Scandinavian quality of the coffins adds to their foreignness and alienation. Scandinavian design is the “correct” taste choice, but it is unfamiliar and cold; represented by the most morbid object, a coffin. Harold needs the physical closeness of his father and his old values to feel safe and confident.

Great social meaning was attached to objects such as fixed baths and indoor toilets. In 1951, twenty five percent of the household in Britain had an outside toilet or shared an indoor one with another family. Thirty eight percent lacked a fixed bath and seven percent shared one with another household. Those with no bathroom sat in a tin bath in the kitchen or in the living room in front of a coal fire. Water was heated on the stove and reused by other members of the family.⁶¹ In 1961, over a quarter of the families in Manchester still did not enjoy hot water running in their tap.⁶² Consequently, taking a bath was quite the ordeal and many limited it to once a month.

For many, the first indoor toilet and bathroom became an emblem of a modern standard of living. New social housing projects from the 1940s onwards included these amenities and became a source of pride for residents who secured a place on the queue for housing and had passed the vetting committees.⁶³ Former residents remember till today the novelty and excitement of running water and indoor toilets.

Clare McGann moved to Myrtle Gardens estate in Liverpool in 1941 with her family

⁶¹ Obelkevich, “Consumption,” 145.

⁶² Claire Langhamer, “The Meanings of Home in Postwar Britain,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 40, no. 2 (2005): 350.

⁶³ Tragedy struck when individuals couldn’t comply with prerequisites that qualified them as respectable working class. The tragic potential of the situation was famously represented in Ken Loach’s famous 1966 *Cathy Come Home* which narrates the devastating story of Cathy and her loss of husband and children due to housing plight.

when she was six years old. In a documentary for the BBC she remembered that “it was lovely being able to turn the tap on.” Her neighbor Rose Murphy, who moved to the estate in 1941, still marvels at the amenities they had: “The idea of being able to put the light switch on . . . to have your own bathroom. It was just heaven to us kids.”⁶⁴

“The Bath,” a 1963 episode of *Steptoe and Son*, encapsulates this sentiment. The series featured Harold, an ardent believer in the possibility of social mobility. Albert, his father, anxious that 40-year old Harold will leave home and desert him, skillfully employs emotional blackmail and manipulation to frustrate any such plan. In this episode, Harold is courting a woman and invites her home for cocktails prior to their date at the bingo. Unfortunately, Harold’s special day coincides with Albert’s monthly bath. Since they lack a bathroom, Albert sits in his tin bath in the living room with his old hat and filthy socks on. Albert brings his supper into the bath along with a bottle of beer and pickled onions (he carefully returns fugitive onions into the jar).

Walking into the room and taking in the scene, Harold is flabbergasted:

Honest people don’t live like that,” [he exclaims trying to persuade his father to get out of the bath.] “Not anymore. Those days is gone . . . I told her not to expect a palace, but I didn’t say nothing about scruffy old gits having a bath in . . . the dining room There’s a social stigma these days.”⁶⁵

In the last moment Harold manages to get Albert out of the bath and cover it before Delia’s arrival. She is nonetheless appalled by the sight of the room – stuffed with old objects it is an extension of the junk business the Steptoes own. To calm down, she sits on a bench that turns out to be Albert’s full bath, into which she unceremoniously sinks. Harold is deeply humiliated and the next day he returns home with a bath. He explains the purchase with great emotion:

⁶⁴ “The Great Estate: The Rise and Fall of the Council House,” BBC Four (August 26, 2011).

⁶⁵ “The Bath,” *Steptoe and Son* BBC, (January, 1963).

I have never been so humiliated in all my life. I tell you. When Delia disappeared into your bath water I could have died. I've always been a bit (?) about people knowing that we bathed in the front room. But I never ever thought they'd find out by falling into the bleeding thing . . . We gonna have a proper bathroom with running water and bath mats in there . . . We gonna have plumbing, and pipes and things and plug holes!

Harold's passionate speech ties his material and cultural desires with the failure of his social aspirations. In his mind the bath is the burrier to social acceptance and mobility:

I don't think you realize how degrading it is. It's uncivilized. Cor blimey! The Greeks had baths 2000 years ago. Here we are, 1963, the afflu-fletcherous society, never had it so good . . . Do you realize that there are four million houses in this country without a bathroom? Four million, dad. And I don't include the poor devils who ain't even got a house. Well I ain't gonna degrade me longer, mate. They ain't looking down on me no more. The great unwashed! That's what we are, mate... We got dignity dad. The facilities to bath one's person should be the inherent right of all men.

Harold believes the absence of the bath diminishes his humanity. He accepts the capitalist connection between material possessions and social validity. To fulfill his “inherent right” to wash he builds a bathroom copied from an advertisement from *Home and Beauty* magazine. Happiness, however, is short lived. When Harold brings home another woman, she too flees after finding Albert in the living-room sitting in the new bath that fell through the ceiling because it wasn't waterproof.

The episode managed a rare mixture of laughter and compassion thanks to the sharp writing and the finely-tuned performances, but it resonated deeply with contemporary audiences because it tackled a series of acute social issues. It touched on working class aspirations for mobility, culture and refinement, and generational differences, as well as on changing standards of housing, cleanliness, and taste.

Harold understands that living in a house with no bathroom carries a social stigma and he resents being part of the “great unwashed.” The humor is enabled by the housing problem being at once known to viewers and distant enough to enjoy a laugh. Because

outdoor lavatories, tin baths, and weekly washing were familiar to a large segment of the population, witnessing the humiliation and distress of Harold provoked a uniting laugh rather than contempt.

Harold declared the existence of these amenities as essential pillars of a dignified life. The episode told the viewers that it also carried a stigma—it labeled those who lacked them as socially disadvantaged. Harold is marked as a failure because he is unable to muster the required cultural capital to exploit the new possibilities of the “afflu-fletcherous” society. The absence of a bath humiliated Harold because it so clearly positioned him as an outsider, an ungracious relic of the past.

The convention that the appearance of the home and its objects made a powerful social statement was satirized by the 1970s.⁶⁶ Rather than a change in British attitudes to the home this was an expansion of the Victorian and interwar middle-class tendency to use home décor as a means to display uniformity with the neighbors. As working-class and lower-middle-class families moved to the suburbs or to new towns, they hoped to establish their reputation and their ties to the middle classes. A home that displayed trendy décor was a way to signal that its inhabitants were part of that community.⁶⁷

The massively successful 1990s BBC sitcom *Keeping Up Appearances* was predicated on this premise. It tells the story of a social-climbing snobbish middle-class woman who is desperate to erase her working-class background and align herself with the upper classes. The huge success of the show points to the prevalence of this sentiment and to the continuing centrality of class in Britain through the twentieth century. It demonstrates that social and cultural hierarchies were not erased

⁶⁶ Mike Leigh’s renowned play *Abigail’s Party* demonstrates this point. It is therefore no wonder that it still has a devout cult of fans. “Abigail’s Party,” *A Play for Today* directed by Mike Leigh (BBC, November 1977).

⁶⁷ Deborah Cohen, *Household Gods: The British and their Possessions* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 188.

by the war and its aftermaths, even though the political idiom spoke of equality and democracy.

The failings of protagonists such as Hancock challenged the postwar promise of greater social mobility that would enable working class men to infiltrate bourgeois society. From the late 1950s, and certainly through the 1960s, new cultural icons such as photographer David Bailey, actor Michael Caine, and the Beatles made working-class men cool. During that period numerous films and novels charted the success of working-class lads. Contemporary narratives celebrated the end of the British class system, although Britons knew that the leveling aspirations of the post-war welfare state never matched its achievements. Sitcoms acknowledged the gap between theory and practice. Sitcom characters were clearly unhappy with their lot. However, unlike Jimmy Porter's violent tirades against social inequality and scorn for middle-class values in *Look Back in Anger*, contemporary sitcom characters unashamedly yearned to belong. They met social and cultural apparatuses of exclusion with naivety, believing them to be only a momentary setback. Sitcoms not only proved the inability of the Hancocks and Harolds of this world to sever their working-class roots, but they emphasized how strongly they desired to do so.

The discussion of the home as a locus of tension continued into the 1970s. The 1970s hit series *Rising Damp* was built around three renters and their stingy and lascivious landlord.⁶⁸ Alan, a medical student who habitually complained of the cold and the rising damp in his room (a concern that still plagues renters in Britain) lived in

⁶⁸ *Rising Damp*, Yorkshire Television (1974–1978). *Rising Damp* is remembered till today as ITV's most loved sitcom and it enjoys repeats. Its actors have all gone on to develop successful careers and the series is available on DVD.

the attic.⁶⁹ In the first episode he tries to convince Mr. Rigsby the landlord to move him to a bigger and warmer room downstairs. The room that he desires is plastered with flowery wallpaper and fitted with old pieces of furniture. We learn that the room used to belong to Rigsby's father who died on the ugly settee. Alan's room has a full size skeleton, a poster of the human body, a few shelves stacked with cans and a small table with a gas ring where he cooks his dried peas. His most valued possession, however, is his hairdryer which he uses to blow-dry his long hair and to keep warm. This cherished object tells us both about Alan's material situation (although from a middle-class background and a medical student he cannot afford much more than dried peas) and his cultural position as a student. Alan's long hair attracts Rigsby's attention, who sees it as an embodiment of Alan's sexual ineptitude. Indeed, Alan's sexual inexperience and awkwardness define his character and is one of the show's axes of humor.

One floor below Alan lives Miss Ruth Jones, a university administrator and Rigsby's love interest. Her room is more spacious and it is clear that she has made it feel like home. Rigsby appeals to Miss Jones' proprietor's pride when he pays her the ultimate compliment of "good taste"

. . . you're the more artistic type – you like beautiful things (*motions to draining board*). Look at your cups-- willow pattern plate. Lovely theme— separates you from the rest, Miss Jones. And the table mats. Scenes from the ballet. How many people around here eat off scenes from the ballet? You're lucky if you get a beer mat. No, you've got that indefinable, something called good taste, Miss Jones.⁷⁰

Both Miss Jones's table mats with scenes from the ballet and Alan's hairdryer offer a commentary about the protagonists. In the early days of television it was

⁶⁹ David Lodge's famous American Prof. Morris Zapp habitually complains of the damp in *Changing Places*. David Lodge, *Changing Places: a Tale of Two Campuses* (Great Britain: Penguin Books Ltd), 1975.

⁴⁵ "Charisma," *Rising Damp*, Yorkshire Television (December 27, 1974). Eric Chappell, "Rising Damp:" *The Complete Scripts*, edited by Richard Webber (Granada Media, 2002), 66.

unclear to its practitioners what its visual faculties added to its array of artistic tools of expression. By the 1970s, set design augmented the spoken text. The materiality of the protagonists' accommodations is even more important in a show that takes place in the home and explores the relationships that living arrangement enforces on four strangers.

Like the others, the possessions of the third character, Philip Smith, a student at Miss Jones' college and her love interest, also define him. Philip is better educated and more refined than the other tenants, especially the crude Rigsby. He is also black and claims to be the son of a chief: he owns "African" artifacts such as a spear that are displayed in his quarters. Phillip represents sexual prowess and urban suaveness, which his smart clothes reflect. Both Miss Jones and Alan are drawn to these qualities and are eager to attract his attention.

In the first episode, Rigsby relocates Phillip to Alan's room. Their juxtaposition in the same room highlights their function as the two side of the student social type: white and black sharing one space. By 1974, the year the program initially aired, white students were no longer the symbol of social unrest they were in the 1960s (see more in chapter four). The perception of black students had changed too. In the 1950s and 1960s following Ghanaian and Nigerian independence, West Africans dominated the overseas student population in Britain.⁷¹ Their presence in Britain during the tumultuous decades of racial conflicts in the 1950s and 1960s strengthened their consolidation into a social trope. The initial post-colonial policy was sympathetic to African student-parents, and so many students from the former colonies had arrived in England with their families to pursue professional training. During this period, they were imagined however, as temporary, bourgeois and solitary male figures. By 1968,

⁷¹ Jordanna Bailkin, "The Postcolonial Family? West African Children, Private Fostering, and the British State," *The Journal of Modern History* 81, no.1 (March 1, 2009), 88.

changes in immigration had affected the policy towards students and their families. Students were encouraged to leave their partners and children behind as an incentive for their return “home” once they complete their training.⁷² The changes in legislation had reflected the concern initiated by the recognition that they were neither temporary nor solitary. Phillip’s character, however, still corresponds with the earlier perception.

Phillip’s inclusion in the trio of renters constituted an important statement. First, non-white actors were almost absent from the British screen before the 1970s. Indeed, they remain a rarity in sitcoms today as we shall see in further detail later. The omission of black and Asian faces from the British screen is glaring when one takes into account that 1961 was a peak year with 100,000 immigrants and that by the time the Commonwealth Immigrants Act took effect in 1962, the Black population included around 500,000 people. The number of immigrants affected the demography of towns and neighborhoods, especially in Liverpool, Manchester, and London. Sociologists were drawn to immigrant communities and their domestic habits, embracing the chance to exercise the tools and methodologies of their emerging field.⁷³ Their research and concern was focused on the home and the family with experts trying to teach the ‘foreigners’ the ways of the British family.

The second novelty in the inclusion of Phillip in the cast relates to the first. Lenny Henry, Britain’s most famous black comedian, explained the absence of non-white comics on the screen as stemming from a “fear of the audience having to actually speak to the real black people living in the next street.” Not only was Phillip a black actor in a mixed ensemble of actors on commercial television, but his character was sharing a home with white renters. This representation wouldn’t have been possible a decade earlier. Landlords in post-WWII Britain were famously suspicious about

⁷² Ibid., 90.

⁷³ Chris Waters, “‘Dark Strangers’ in Our Midst: Discourses of Race and Nation in Britain, 1947-1963,” *The Journal of British Studies* 36, no. 2 (April 1997), 228.

renting to black immigrants. Ignoring Britain's black community was part and parcel of Britons attempt to deal with the postwar identity crisis enforced by the eroding of national unity after the war, the economic crisis, the emergence of the United States as a world power, and the dismantling of its empire (see discussion in other chapters). As Chris Waters argues, the "representation of black migrants to Britain as un-British helped to reconfigure and secure the imagined community of the nation during a period of rapid change and great uncertainty."⁷⁴

Excluding non-white immigrants from the national home also translated to a rejection of intermarriage and the creation of mixed race domestic units. Thus the positioning of Philip as Miss Jones's love interest presented further opportunities for the discussion of race. Under the aegis of comedy, Miss Jones's racist father is frequently discussed and racial stereotypes are invoked and questioned. The 1960s saw different television shows documenting the controversy of inter-racial relationship. In April 1964 for example, ITV aired *Black Marries White* (produced by Rediffusion) in which mixed couples talked about their relationship and the reactions, usually negative, from their surroundings. This was still a relative novelty for television as the review of the *Daily Mail* admitted to its readers that "Racial intolerance was a tough nut for television to crack and Rediffusion deserves our thanks for exploring it so honestly."⁷⁵

Even though *Rising Damp* was produced a decade later, it did not go as far as to unite Miss Jones and Phillip. Miss Jones' infatuation with Phillip is mocked and is represented as visceral fantasy. The love affair that does develop over the seasons is that between Rigsby and Miss Jones. On the one hand, this is a more racially conventional relationship, on the other hand, theirs is a union of classes. This

⁷⁴ Ibid., 208.

⁷⁵ Monica Furlong, "TV," *Daily Mail*, 30 April 1964.

resolution demonstrates again that Britcoms social concern rested in the question of class rather than race.

In contrast to the familiarity that viewers acquired with the rooms of the three tenants, Rigsby's quarters remain out of bounds. What we know about his material possessions is that he owns a cat named Vienna and that he always wears the same stained knitted cardigan over an unpressed shirt. His accent and limited cultural capital gesture toward a working class background. Rigsby is at once repelled by and attracted to Alan's long hair and Philip's 'foreignness' and seeks for opportunities to interact with them. This aspiration is not limited to Rigsby. All the characters indulge in it and reveal their yearning for intimacy, kinship and a sense of home.

Their shared living space offers such occasions and becomes a potential site for multi-cultural Britain to forge ties. This connection, however, is fragile. As in so many Britcoms friends, neighbors, and family ties are volatile; they are not necessarily a ready source of comfort. Thus when *Till Death Do Us Part* was remade for American television as *All in the Family* (CBS, 1971) the marital and familial connections were recast "in a more sunnier, more advertiser-friendly way and situating the comedy exactly within genre and ideological conventions of American commercial television," argues Jeffrey Miller.⁷⁶ In Britcoms the home frequently stood-in for a boxing-ring in which some of the contenders would have been fighting out generational disagreements while others played out a gender conflict with the "patriarch" and the "lady of the house" pitted against each other.

The Trap that Is Home

⁷⁶ Jeffrey Miller, *Something Completely Different: British Television and American Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 143.

Although postwar Britons desired to turn the home into a site of comfort, sitcoms revealed the limitations of this vision. An uneasy current ran through Britcoms and dispelled the myth of home sweet home. Comedy writer and former head of comedy at the BBC Frank Muir noted in 1967 that the success of shows such as *Steptoe and Son* proved that British audiences subscribed to a more complicated world view that painted the home as a site of trapped relationships rather than a site of nourishment and growth;⁷⁷ a world in which families were a double-edged sword. Indeed, creating a show about a “trapped” relationship was the intention of the writers of *Steptoe and Son*. Albert and Harold love each other but they make day-to-day life miserable for one another. Albert deliberately ruins any chance for independence for Harold, leaving him bitter and unsatisfied.

This happens, for instance, when Harold wants to go on holiday with some young people (Albert makes Harold guilty and gets his revenge when the “young people” reject Harold for being too old), when Harold invites Albert to join him in a screening of Federico Fellini’s *8 1/2* (during which Albert shames him and gets them thrown out of the venue), and when Harold plans an illustrious Christmas dinner (Albert gets chicken pox and gets Harold sick and the dinner cancelled).⁷⁸

In Britcoms, family members might help one another (Albert gets revenge on poker players who take advantage of Harold, and Albert looks out for Harold when he falls in love with a woman who is using him) but this is tough love: power games are always played out and each party comes out of the confrontation a little more scarred. In the background floats the anxiety that the home would fail to be a refuge and would turn into a trap. During the decades under discussion, institutions such as the National

⁷⁷ Frank Muir, “Under the Influence,” *The Listener*, August 10, 1967, 161.

⁷⁸ “Homes fit for Heroes,” *Steptoe and Son*, BBC (January 7, 1964); “Sunday for Seven Days,” *Steptoe and Son*, BBC (February 4, 1964); “The Party” (Christmas Special), *Steptoe and Son*, BBC (December, 24, 1973).

Marriage Guidance Council, the media, leading sociologists, and psychologists such as John Bowlby and D.W. Winnicott advocated the importance of the marital home and the nuclear family.⁷⁹ The image of the family they argued for was, “one of cosiness, in which people live in tight little units, rather inward-looking, interacting very much more with each other than with others outside the household.”⁸⁰ Those Britcoms that strove to represent reality demonstrated just how often “coziness” was suffocating and miserable. The growth in divorce rates during these decades seems to support this view.

Like other television genres, sitcoms were usually consumed in the privacy of the living room. The mass scale and simultaneity of television broadcasting turned the individual act of viewing into a collective, community-building activity. Sitcoms thus rose to be one of the most powerful sites for discussion of “fundamental issues,” as *The Sun* reader recognized, even though sitcoms’ *raison d’être* was to entertain and secure the largest possible audience. Sitcom writers generally avoided turning them into ideological manifestos, but their humor is revealing nonetheless. As Eddie Waters, the veteran comedian in Trevor Griffiths’s 1979 play *Comedians*, tells his class of aspiring comics:

A real comedian—that’s a daring man. He dares to see what his listeners shy away from, fear to express. And what he sees is a sort of truth, about people, about their situation, about what hurts or terrifies them, about what’s hard, above all about what they *want*.⁸¹

What transpires from contemporary sitcoms is Britons’ yearning for security and community both in the private and in the national home. While sitcoms camouflaged poignant statements in the language of intimacy and familiarity associated with the

⁷⁹ Janet Finch and Penny Summerfield, “Social Reconstruction and the Emergence of Companionate Marriage, 1945-1959,” in *Marriage, domestic life, and social change: writings for Jacqueline Burgoyne, 1944-88* ed. David Clark (London; New York: Routledge, 1991.), 12.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁸¹ Griffiths, *Comedians*, 20.

private sphere, they revealed a contemporary frustration that the lines of social and cultural difference in the public sphere were not erased with the war, but redrawn.

Chapter Three: “Our Screens Had Become Chocked with Dead Cowboys:” The Anglo-American Special Relationship

The immediate postwar decades were plagued with economic strife and continuing deprivation. Politicians and the media hailed wartime Britons for their efforts and promised a New Jerusalem—a civilian adaptation of wartime social solidarity and national mobilization in a setting of greater plenty. In reality, the United States bailed out a country on the brink of economic collapse from a potential “financial Dunkirk” as economist John Maynard Keynes famously declared and helped promote recovery. While the British Empire disintegrated, a new world order was replacing the imperial world of the great European powers over which Britain had claimed to preside. In the bi-polar geopolitical system that emerged from World War II, it was not always clear what, if any, international role Britain would fulfill. Witticisms such as the one made by Dean Acheson, Harry Truman's Secretary of State, that “Great Britain has lost an Empire, and has yet to find a role” abounded.

The British themselves felt a tinge of failure over their postwar situation. Contemporary newspapers, radio and television shows were peppered with items discussing ‘what is wrong with Britain?’ A typical example is an article by Conservative MP L.D. Gammans published in *The Listener* in 1950. Gammans asked his readers, “Are we as a people going down the hill? Can we never hope first-class nation again, independent in every sense of the word intended as we were on VE-Day?”¹ Gammans warned not only of the devaluation of Britain’s currency but of its national character.

¹ M. L.D. Gammans, “Are we Going Downhill?,” *The Listener*, January 12, 1950.

Against the backdrop of self-doubt and existential questioning an American cultural invasion and a subsequent loss of identity became an eminent concern. Contemporaries feared that the flow of consumer goods from the US and its mass consumption in Britain would further subjugate it to the new power. Sitcoms from the era brought these fears to the forefront. They had reflected to viewers the perils and fascination that Americanization held.

Sitcoms, however, were more than reflectors of anxieties. They were the solution to the problem they had presented to the public: an indigenous cultural form inspired by Americanization and by local traditions in equal measures. As Britcoms developed an independent set of characteristics, they became an important cultural export—eagerly consumed in the United States. At home they highlighted the role of humor in British society as a source of self-identity, pride, and a substitute to the imperial past.

An episode of *Hancock's Half Hour* that aired on 26 December 1958, openly addressed the “American invasion” and the yearning of British artists to expand to the American market. It also acknowledged the temptation of “selling out” to Americans and the subsequent erasure of one's own cultural identity. In this episode, Hancock's friend Sid, a small-time crook, convinces Hancock to make a period drama about Ericson King of the Vikings. Sid pockets the production money, so the result is a poorly constructed film with shabby costumes and three short, feeble, and dark actors standing in for a herd of Nordic-looking Vikings. During the shooting of the movie, the Vikings suddenly begin to use American slang. When Hancock as king of the Vikings asks his men what news they had brought him from the battlefields, they reply “Crazy man, crazy. We're having ourselves a ball. We found this limey bum casing the joint so we took him in. Ten-four.”² Hancock stops the shoot to enquire

² “Ericson the Viking,” *Hancock's Half Hour*, BBC (December 26, 1958).

about the language. Sid answers that he incorporated the Americanisms to make it easier to sell the program to the United States. Hancock is livid

I won't do it. I'm British and proud of it. It's our language we invented it. I'm not ashamed of it.

Sid: That'll cost you 100,000 nicker.

Hancock promptly returns to the scene and says: Err...21-50.

Viking: check!³

The anxiety over Americanization tied into one of the grand narratives of postwar Britain, the discourse of British decline. Contemporaries discomfort from what politicians and intellectuals perceived as Britain's selling-out to the United States was ridiculed. *The Men from the Ministry* (BBC 1962-1977), a radio sitcom that later developed into the BBC classic TV sitcom *Yes, Minister*, also addressed this issue. Deryck Lennox-Brown and his assistant are two lazy civil servants who devote their days to horse-gambling and time wasting. In an episode from July 1970, the two are sent to the United States to convince Americans to buy British traditional fare such as black pudding and Cornish pasties. The American official with whom they meet confesses his aversion to the British offering. He is forced to place an order nonetheless to safeguard against a possible increase in British demand for financial aid. He is cornered when he is presented with black pudding since 'we can't discriminate on the basis of color,' a snide reference to American race relations. The transaction ends in a mix-up when the British civil-servants tell the American official they thought of investing in red China, referring to the tea cups they planned to buy for the office, consequently pressing him to collaborate for the sake of the Cold War alliance. It mocked the so-called 'special relationship' between the two countries by revealing that a shared language is not a shared culture: words and phrases have different inflections, meanings, and cultural baggage on both sides of this divide.

³ Ibid.

The episode demonstrates the strenuous relationship between the two nations: the British try to extract financial aid from the Americans while the latter swallow the bitter pill to keep the Cold War alliance intact. None of the sides is sincere, and it is questionable whether any of them profit from the forced exchange. Disguised as self-deprecation, this episode and many like it were part of the contemporary declinist discourse about the future of Britain.

The declinist debates were amplified by envy and resentment of Britain's powerful former ally. News items habitually measured Americans against Britons. The BBC's *Woman's Hour* for instance, assembled a panel of women to discuss their experience of life in America: whether they found American women "better groomed," cleaner, and whether they would have preferred to have been born American.⁴ The public intellectual J.E. Morpurgo lamented how Britons that once had so much, were rewarded so little for "our incredible victories in war and spirit – by loss of wealth, a loss of power and loss of prestige."⁵ He was embittered that while this was going on, the United States "has grown from political novice to world leader and has become the richest of all nations." Admitting that "it is almost inevitable perhaps that we should look upon America's rapid rise with feelings that are touched with resentment."⁶ Morpurgo accused Britons of contributing to their own belittlement,

. . . we offer ammunition to the enemy, so obsessed we have become with the necessity for modesty. Our easy acquiescence in the doctrine of American supremacy in the arts of war and the business of peace is taken in America as evidence that we are as inefficient as American schoolbooks have always insisted. Our determination to praise American effort, American skill and American energy is used by some Americans as proof that we have no

⁴ "Impressions of America," *Woman's Hour*, BBC Light Programme (September 13, 1955) BBC WAC Woman's Hour.

⁵ J.E. Morpurgo, "Talking to Americans," *The Listener*, July 20, 1950.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 93.

confidence in ourselves and is hardly inclined to inspire confidence in us from those Americans who wish us well.⁷

Morpurgo's words testify to the feelings of inferiority America's success stirred in Britain. They also point to sentiments of curiosity, fascination and admiration. This medley was common in the quest for a postwar national identity.

In this set-up culture and heritage became sites to which Britons could look in order to nurture their self-esteem. It was the glorious past and a self-proclaimed unique brand of humor to which Britons would turn to inflate their chests in defiance of the American "aggressor."⁸ In 1948, novelist, playwright, and broadcaster Sewell Stokes suggested to radio listeners of the BBC's Far Eastern Service a connection between humor and national identity. He assured his listeners that, although American humor was tightening its grip on Britain, at the present "the English sense of humour . . . does retain its individuality." He went on to explain that,

English humour is inevitable . . . it's something that's bound to happen in the ordinary course of events. The average Englishman isn't usually conscious of making a joke. His jokes are nearly always the result of a manner in which he naturally expresses himself. And he's doing it the whole time, very often in the most unlikely circumstances.⁹

The American sense of humor, on the other hand, argued Stokes was contaminated by commercialism and self-interest. It was motivated by an expectation for a reward. It is purposeful, conscious, and manufactured. Unlike the Englishman, when an American makes a joke,

he expects the reward of your laughter. . . . In America, humour has become an industry. Experts, whose job it is to invent new wisecracks – or reshape old ones – command very large salaries, paid to them by comedians who can't

⁷ Ibid., 94.

⁸ Commentators were aware that all that Britain was left with were nostalgic relics of the past. An article in *The Listener* equated Britain with great civilizations such as the Roman Empire—both admired by America, the new empire, as a thing of the past rather than a relevant power. "A Paradox," *The Listener*, February 7, 1957, 216.

⁹ Sewell Stokes, "The English Sense of Humour," *Aspects of Britain*, BBC Far Eastern Service (January 12, 1948).

think for themselves. And because the American's humour is more contrived than the Englishman's, it is perhaps more widely understood.¹⁰

According to this account, British humor is superior because it is authentic, amateur—done for love rather than crass commercialism. American humor exposes the true nature of Americans: artificial, soulless and motivated by greed.

The contemporary public sphere repeatedly used the allegedly unique English sense of humor both as a tool for self-definition and as a measure of other nations' character. For individuals who wished to be accepted by Britons, the English joke became a litmus test of worthiness. Journalist Denis Johnston, for example, spent eight days on a cruise ship with American students preparing to explore Europe. He was impressed by them, and assured his readers that they were nothing like the typical Americans for,

They have read Punch, and will both see and understand an English joke. They may not think it funny, but they do know that, all appearances to the contrary, it is in fact a joke, and they recognize that everybody is entitled to his own taste even in the matter of laughs.¹¹

Britons used humor repeatedly to define the boundaries of their community of laughing subjects—only those who understood the joke could belong.¹² This pertained both to other nationals such as Americans and to the nationalities and minorities that made up the British union. Humor defined the British citizen, and its particularities were meant to reflect laudable English characteristics.

The locality of humor was clear to those defining the vision of British broadcasting to North America, and they concluded that broadcasting British variety and comic programs to North America was a waste of time, not because Americans lacked a sense of humor or a sense of the ridiculous, but because they were different

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Denis Johnston, "Eastward Ho!," *The Listener*, August 20, 1953, 292.

¹² Andy Medhurst, *A National Joke: Popular Comedy and English Cultural Identities*, (London; New York: Routledge, 2007), 19.

. . . they obviously do not use the same local idiom of wit, humour or slapstick as the British, any more than the British use the American . . . both nations are touchy about this business of sense of humour, each misunderstanding the other . . . Cracks about the U.S.A. are frequently based on British misconception and fall flat because they are incomprehensible.¹³

Some contemporaries conceded that when dealing with the United States “We are not . . . dealing with another planet. Americans among us are not Martians.”¹⁴ Most were not convinced however, and the common belief was that the similarities were insufficient to make Americans part of “our” tissue.

The Special Relationship

America had aroused great interest in Britain long before it was independent. Some scholars argue that the constant flow of ideas over the Atlantic during the eighteenth century forged a special relationship between the two. Others locate the warming of this relationship in the Spanish-American war in 1898 and the ensuing period of the Great Rapprochement leading to World War I. Historian David Reynolds offers a more nuanced understating of the Anglo-American relationship as a construct that was reinvented and redefined in the 1940s as a response to a shared external threat during World War II, and later Soviet expansion.¹⁵ Winston Churchill invested a great amount of energy during the war and in the postwar era to build this relationship. Literary scholar Patrick Deer presents an even more limited view of this relationship, calling it a myth fraught with “frequent and repeated outburst of British

¹³ “Comments on B.B.C. Programmes Directed Towards the U.S.A. 1950”, BBC WAC E1/214 North American Services 1950-1954.

¹⁴ D.W. Brogan, “Impact of American Power on Europe,” *The Listener*, February 14, 1952, 255. (This was a printed version of the first in a series of nine talks broadcast on BBC European Service).

¹⁵ David Reynolds, “Rethinking Anglo-American Relations,” *International Affairs* 65, no. 1 (Winter, 1988-1989): 89-111.

Anti-Americanism as the former superpower struggled to adjust to its subordinate position in the Cold War Pax Americana.”¹⁶

Recently the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee released a press notice that shies away even further from the intimacy that Churchill’s famous coinage special relationship indicated:¹⁷

The UK and US have a close and valuable relationship not only in terms of intelligence and security but also in terms of our profound and historic cultural and trading links and commitment to freedom, democracy and the rule of law. But the use of the phrase 'the special relationship' in its historical sense, to describe the totality of the ever-evolving UK-US relationship, is potentially misleading, and we recommend that its use should be avoided.¹⁸

Intimate and historical connection, or not, the “Lend-Lease” policy approved on March 1941, the postwar loan, and later the Marshall Plan became vital life-lines for the struggling British nation. American postwar aid enabled government to roll up its sleeves and command the building of a “New Jerusalem.” The debate about the character and existence of the special relationship testifies to its volatile nature. But no matter how the pendulum of power swung, whether Britain was the imperial force in North America or an exhausted country in need of financial rescue, a continuous contact between these nations persisted. Americans read Shakespeare and incessantly toured London and the English countryside while the British snapped up (or wanted to snap up) American consumer goods.

Thus the Anglo-American relationship was a two-way dialogue in which each culture affected the other. Culture had become an essential contact zone for the meeting, negotiations, and novel creations that grew up from the collisions between

¹⁶ Patrick Deer, “The Dogs of War: Myths of British Anti-Americanism,” in *Anti-Americanism* eds. Andrew Ross and Kristin Ross (New York; London: New York University Press, 2004), 158.

¹⁷ The term was created and used earlier during the war but it was Churchill's famous ‘Iron Curtain’ speech delivered at Fulton, Missouri, on March 5, 1946 that made it shorthand to describe the relationship between the two nations. John Dumbrell, *A Special Relationship: Anglo-American Relations from the Cold War to Iraq* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 11.

¹⁸ UK Parliament – Foreign Affairs Committee: Press Notice, facpn280310:
http://www.parliament.uk/parliamentary_committees/foreign_affairs_committee/facpn280310.cfm.

the two entities over the years.¹⁹ Using the framework of the ‘contact zone’ is preferable to the theory of cultural imperialism in vogue from the 1960s on.²⁰ It reveals culture as a creative locale of negotiation and cultural selection both for Americans and Britons. This process intensified with the globalization of the media and entertainment industries and the trade in television formats. The creators of sitcoms on both sides of the Atlantic were well-aware of the output of their sister industries. Executives, producers and writers travelled between the two countries, closely observing each others’ creative output. They shared their findings with professional and lay audiences in inner reports, newspaper articles, and radio and television programs.²¹

Alastair Cooke, for example, in his popular talks on BBC radio regularly updated his listeners about the development of American television and its impact on domestic life. In many ways, Cooke was the cultural embodiment of the postwar ebb and flow between the two nations. He read English at Cambridge, where he was also the editor of the literary magazine *Granta*, and the founder of the first mix-gendered theatre group. In the 1930s, he recorded *London Letter*, a 15-minute talk about life in Britain for NBC’s American listeners. In 1937, Cooke emigrated to the United States where he attended Yale and Harvard. On March 24, 1946, the first out of 2,869 installments of *American Letter* was broadcast by the BBC. In *Letter from America* (as it was

¹⁹ I borrow the term ‘contact zone’ from postcolonial scholar Mary Louise Pratt who defined it as “Social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination—like colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths.” Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London; New York: Routledge, 2008), 4.

²⁰ Herbert I. Schiller, *Mass Communications and American Empire*, (Oxford: Westview Press, 1992).

²¹ Contemporary newspapers ran stories about the state of broadcasting in the United States. Readers enjoyed in particular, it seems, reports that included a critique of American output. See for example, “U.S. Television Programmes Come under Fire: Critics Denounce Lack of Seriousness,” *The Times*, November 17, 1958; or “Looking in on American Television,” *The Times*, May 8, 1959, in which the writer compares American television to rice in Asia: “Most of the people eat it most of the time. It can be presented in a number of different ways, but the basic recipes are limited and the basic dishes are eaten over and over again.”

called from 1950 on) Cooke shared his insights about life in America with huge audiences in Britain and around the world through the BBC World Service. In 1952, he became the host of CBS's *Omnibus*, the first arts program on an American commercial network.

In 1971, Cooke began hosting *Masterpiece Theatre*, PBS's showcase of quality British television, which he continued to host for 22 years. *Masterpiece Theatre*, like all of Cooke's oeuvre, was decisive in consolidating the image of British television in the United States. This image was forged in the mould of Cooke himself: sophisticated, classy and conversant in both American and British culture and politics. His performances were also central in shaping an idealized image of Britons in America.

Masterpiece Theatre was a huge success (it even generated spoof on *Sesame Street*—Alastair Cookie, the host of Monsterpiece Theatre). It was the epitome of the BBC's vision for its North American service. In 1950, Ian Jacob, then the Controller of BBC Overseas Service, wrote in a memo that the BBC service “must seek to strengthen” in Americans “friendly feelings towards and understanding of the people of this country.” He admitted that it was a “formidable” mission, and that the BBC would have “to accept the fact that we can only go a short way towards the level of success that our services achieve in other countries.”²²

In a different memo the full vision was laid out. The first step “towards fostering Anglo-U.S. unity and understanding”, it read,

would be to obtain the services of someone like Ed. R. Murrow or Alastair Cooke; someone not only well-acquainted with the American radio field but also favourably inclined towards the principle of Anglo-U.S. unity, who could

²² Ian Jacob C.O.S. (controller overseas service), “The North American Service,” September 7, 1950, BBC WAC E1/214 Countries: America, North American Services 1950-1954.

advise and assist in choosing the type and emphasis of the programmes directed to America.²³

Next on the list was the issue of announcers' voices: "Announcers with aggressively affected voices should not be used; i.e. Pansy (R.A.D.A or Sandhurst), North Country or Council School accents . . . A slow, well-annunciated delivery is what is needed."²⁴

Program content was driven by perceptions of American prejudices. It seemed that all "precious" programs such as "Morris-dancing, glee singing and rolling in the dew," should be avoided because "Americans do not like 'queers' or 'pansies,' both of which expressions they use." When choosing a radio play, producers should choose "good theatre" and avoid "intense intellectual drama which after all, even in the U.K., appeals to only a minority of listeners." Shakespeare "is always a great attraction."

Where possible, it was suggested, it was best to avoid dialect plays,

. . . which they find difficult to understand as we do some of the local American patois. When plays include an American character it would be preferable to choose players who can speak American. The choice of radio plays should incline towards more gusto and less cloister.²⁵

Music programs should stay away from jazz and swing since the Americans are superior in that field. In any case, "wet music of the Palm Court variety" shouldn't be chosen as "it is not appreciated by the Americans who are a robust people and incline towards robust things." Talks on current affairs and political commentaries seemed to go down rather well, and were usually, "most interesting to Americans who lap up any expression of opinion on a topical subject. Great discretion should be used when preparing programmes touching on the colour question."²⁶ Cooke's life-work served this vision perfectly. Indeed, it was recognized by the British establishment when he was made KBE (Knight Commander of the Most Excellent Order of the British

²³ "Comments on B.B.C. Programmes Directed Towards the U.S.A. 1950," BBC WAC E1/214 North American Services 1950-1954.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

Empire) and was awarded a special BAFTA silver award for his contribution to Anglo-American relations in 1991.

The Politics of Culture

Modern media such as cinema, radio, and television were indispensable to the way contemporaries on both sides of the Atlantic consolidated their sense of self, gathered knowledge about their national boundaries, and the nation's relations with others. American foreign policy at the time made frequent use of these technologies to disseminate its messages at home and abroad. A series of government sponsored documentaries such as *The Marshall Plan in Action* and *Strength for the Free World*, were shown on ABC television in the early 1950s. At the time, American television was still willing to incorporate government-produced materials, and the distinction between propaganda, documentary and news was often blurred. State and federal officials and different public relations offices of government agencies were happy to supply information for broadcasting bodies.²⁷

The same technologies were used to spread the American Dream abroad. Governmental and federal agencies, as well as the private sectors, actively sold the American economic system as well as its values and products to foreign countries.²⁸ Mass culture became a central vehicle for American intervention in Britain as it was in the rest of the world.²⁹ Contemporaries had recognized this policy. In a letter to *The Listener* in 1957, H.D. Northfield noted that American influence was spread through television and the popular press

²⁷ Elizabeth Heffelfinger, "Foreign Policy, Domestic Fiction: Government-Sponsored Documentaries and Network Television Promote the Marshall Plan at Home," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 28, no.1 (2008), 3-4.

²⁸ Scott W. Lucas, "Beyond Freedom, Beyond Control, Beyond the Cold War: Approaches to American Culture and the State-Private Network," *Intelligence and National Security* 18, no. 2 (2003).

²⁹ The broadcasting service Voice of America is a well known example, as well as, The Congress for Cultural Freedom that promoted exhibitions and performances, literary journals and publications such as *Life* magazine. Heffelfinger, "Foreign Policy, Domestic Fiction," 4.

. . . to the remotest communities in our islands, so that we are in danger of becoming, not politically but culturally, the 'forty-ninth State.' The fact that many of these 'American' products are either worthless or positively harmful clearly indicates that we are threatened by not political subordination but a moral and cultural conquest.³⁰

Culture had become a battlefield, but the offensive wasn't solely American. From as far back as the nineteenth century, Britain used communication technologies to rule its vast empire. The telegraph system, the creation of Reuters as a prominent international news provider, the telephone, the railway system and the Suez Canal reduced the journey time of ideas, goods, people, and soldiers--all vital empire maintaining tools.³¹ As we have seen in chapter one, during the 1930s the Empire Service emerged as "a key medium of imperial public diplomacy."³² Britain's hold on global broadcasting remained strong during the Second World War. Even as American media's global reach was expanding, British media became a significant "number two" in the flow of news around the world, in factual television such documentaries and natural history genres, in the popular music industry, book publishing and advertising.³³ The limited screening of American imports in British television had a vital effect on the local industries of film and television. The need to fill broadcasting hours and cinema halls motivated local productions the featured "loveable, somewhat caricatured, British idiosyncrasy and eccentricity."³⁴

Americanization?

The vibrancy of the local media industries and the fact that the model of a state-funded public broadcaster in the BBC mould was replicated all over the world often

³⁰ H.D. Northfield, "American Influence in Britain," *The Listener*, February 21, 1957, 313.

³¹ Chandrika Kaul, "Introductory Survey," in *Media and the British Empire* ed. Chandrika Kaul (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 4.

³² Douglas Bicket, Melissa Wall, "BBC News in the United States: a 'Super-Alternative' News Medium Emerges," *Media, Culture & Society* 31, no. 3 (2009), 375.

³³ Jeremy Tunstall and David Machin, *The Anglo-American Media Connection* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 1.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 8.

escaped contemporaries. Many focused on the subjugation of British media to the supposedly American takeover. Thus from the 1920s on, broadcasting became the locus for earnest debates about Americanization and its limits. Discussions about the nature of broadcasting and broadcasters' responsibilities were rekindled in 1946 when the BBC's license was up for renewal. The opening of the first commercial channel in 1955 roused the old arguments about the threats of commercialism. On 16 October 1958, *The Times* reported of a public discussion in which a MP had cried out that "Our screens had become chocked with dead cowboys."³⁵

Christopher Mayhew, Labour MP, former writer for television, and later ardent opponent of commercial television, denounced the dominance of gangster films, westerns, quiz shows, and variety shows both on commercial television and on the BBC.³⁶ Mayhew's critique was comprised of many of the usual components to be found in the anti-Americanization discourse. Indeed, in chapter two we met the comic version of it in the *Hancock's Half Hour* episode "The Set that Failed" in which Hancock is horrified that his television had stopped working. Hancock finds that he can no longer find pleasure in other diversions such as solving a puzzle, conversation or contemplation. Mayhew warned of this process: he claimed that television pushed for standardization and lacked programs that appeal to individuals interested in more esoteric sports, hobbies or intellectual pursuits. It encouraged a lack of balance and irresponsibility in children's programs.³⁷ It was thus especially unfortunate, as one parent remarked at the meeting, that "the more unsuitable the programme the quieter

³⁵ "Television's Impact on Taste, Habits, and Politics: Mr. Mayhew Lists Four "Failings" Of Commercial Service," *The Times*, October 16, 1958.

³⁶ In a 1953 pamphlet *Dear Viewer...* which sold 40,000 copies, Mayhew argued that without ideals and integrity, television would be the ruin of Britain. In 1958, *The Times* reported that Mayhew put a private bill to prohibit the interruption of programs on commercial television by advertisers. "Advertising Breaks on Television: M. Seeks Prohibition," *The Times*, November 12, 1958.

³⁷ "Television's Impact on Taste, Habits, and Politics."

it keeps the children.”³⁸ The interruption of programs by commercial advertisements was another plague. Mayhew argued that “the more commercialism entered into it the more trivial and jazzed-up the programme became,”³⁹ ironically, using the American slang “jazzed-up” to express his displeasure.

Anxieties regarding the invasion of American culture abounded during World War II when thousands of American GIs were stationed in Britain. American GIs and air force personnel caused resentment for being, “oversexed, overpaid, and over here.”⁴⁰ Their generous salaries in comparison to those of British soldiers unleashed sentiments of male sexual inferiority and consumer envy. British dependence on American generosity after the war added to the feeling of inadequacy and was a constant feature in contemporary comedy.⁴¹ A sketch in the first episode of the influential radio comedy *The Goon Show* (then still titled *Crazy People*) mocked the British inferiority complex. In the sketch different countries congratulate Britain on its 1951 celebration of the Festival of Britain. The American sound-bite is appropriately celebratory “Yes indeed, without doubts, Britain can take it. Every dollar that we have sent Britain, Britain has taken.”⁴² The announcer played by Michael Bentine continued,

And so Britain has struggled valiantly on through the post-war years, fighting for a better standard of life for the pursuit of happiness for freedom. . . Fighting for her very existence! Until today the Motherland can still raise her proud face to the skies and say. . .

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Deer, “The Dogs of War,” 166.

⁴¹ Ross McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures: England 1918-1951* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 524.

⁴² “The Crazy People,” BBC Home Service (May 28, 1951). The show will become famous with its revised title, *The Goons*. That name was a tribute to American culture. ‘Goon’ was used by prisoners of war to describe their German officers, but Spike Milligan the creator and main writer of *The Goons* confessed he lifted it from Popeye comics: “There was a creature called the Goon which has nothing in the face at all except hair. It had huge talk-bubbles with one little word in them like “Eeek!” It was very kind and gentle.” Nathan, *The Laughtermakers*, 49.

Harry Secombe: HEELLLPPPPP!!!⁴³

Apart from dollars, American soldiers in Britain brought with them American goods, slang and music which impacted British culture. The imports' impact resonated loudly in the reality of austerity. Britain's lack of raw materials to make records, for example, ensured that most of the wartime music releases were American. The American Forces Network was set up in London in 1943 to service the growing numbers of American personnel stationed in Britain. It broadcast the most popular music and comedy of U.S. domestic networks, and further increased the exposure to American cultural products. Although only 10 percent of the British population could pick up these broadcasts, they shaped the style of presentation of the BBC as well as the development of British comedy and music.

Sid Colin, the writer of television sitcoms *The Army Game* (ITV 1957-1961) and *Up Pompeii* (BBC 1969-1970), started out as a jazz musician and wrote comedy material for his bands. In an interview to David Nathan in 1970 he recalled how he would arrive home at 2.30 am after a gig, and tune in to

Radio Schenectady in America to pick up their shows - Jack Benny, Burns and Allen, Fred Allen, Charlie McCarthy and Edgar Bergen. What they were doing in the way of material was a revelation People forget that there was nowhere else to look except to America. It was the golden light of the West.⁴⁴

In particular, Colin was fascinated by Groucho Marx, who “introduced us to the idea of the wisecrack, the quick, destructive line,” and by the “architecture” of Jack Benny’s show. “We had nothing like It . . . the American shows were entities. Characters were invented and exploited . . . they were built like plays, with plots . . . We pinched stuff for the band show and at the same time tried to discover what the trick was, how it worked technically.”⁴⁵

⁴³ “The Crazy People”, BBC Home Service (May 28, 1951).

⁴⁴ Nathan, *The Laughtermakers*, 21.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

Also listening to American broadcasts were Alan Simpson and Ray Galton, who would become two prominent comedy writers of British sitcoms. Their classic and decisively British series *Hancock* and *Steptoe and Son* had secured them a place in the broadcasting pantheon. In 1947, Simpson and Galton then aged 17 and 16 were patients at the Milford Sanatorium in Surrey suffering from tuberculosis. Galton's next-bed neighbor was a son of an engineer. He owned an RAF radio receiver which could pick up the broadcasting of the American Forces Network. Galton remembers it with excitement

. . . this boy's room, I mean forget about hospitals, sanitariums are different...the room was absolutely covered in mechanical engineering equipment . . . he had this wonderful . . . radio which came out of a Lancaster bomber. It was an 1152 or something like that, an 1155 and he had it all stone enameled . . . beautiful. But by that and with an Ariel, we could then pick up the American Forces Network . . . in Germany even in the afternoon when the reception was not very good.⁴⁶

Galton and Simpson both remember how enamored they were with American culture those days; how thrilled they were to have access to American radio. Galton confessed that “the English and the world were . . . hypnotized by America.” He explained that America seemed “exotic” at the time

They did things that we didn't do . . . They had cowboys and Indians for a start . . . They were heroic people and they had gangsters as well which is oh, that's a bit . . . you know . . . they were glamorized too in their films. So you know those two things for a start were big things.⁴⁷

The glamour factor had won Simpson over too. He explained that glamour did not exist at the country at the time “Everything was rationed and we had air raid warnings every night, so . . . You'd go to the cinema and there was this . . . never never land they had there.”⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Ray Galton and Alan Simpson, Interview with the author. May 10, 2010.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

America was a shining presence in the rationed and blacked-out Britain, continued Simpson. “. . . it made a change to see lights! You see every town in England was blacked out. The whole country was blacked out. So you'd go to the cinema and see Broadway and Sunset Strip and all those lights blazing out, it was a different world.”⁴⁹

Galton and Simpson would spend hours listening to American comedy hits of the era such as “*The Jack Benny Show, The Fred Allen Show, Duffy's Tavern, The Adventures of Ozzie & Harriet, The Life of Riley, The Couple Next Door, Father knows Best, Fibber McGee & Molly, The Phil Harris & Alice Faye Show, Vic & Sade, The Bickersons,*” as well as to the domestic output broadcast by the BBC. “‘We were very conversant with all the American shows,’ Galton would recall, ‘and they were more sitcom-oriented than [the ones on British radio] were, and we thought, very superior, too.’”⁵⁰

Simpson thought American comedy was “much more hip” and young:

Whereas the English comedy of the time was very parochial. Old . . . we were young, in our teens, and really we were a bit thick in that way. It took us until we got into the business to appreciate how good were all these comedians we thought were corny, how good they were! As far as we were concerned, unless it were snappy and had wisecracks and you know, funny lines, you know, that's what we loved.⁵¹

They both found they liked the Jewish humor that informed contemporary American comedy. “Jewish humor was to us was very funny,” Galton admitted. “You know, Jewish jokes, very funny. Not about Jews, you know, I mean Jewish people.”⁵²

They were especially impressed by what seemed to be a class free humor. Galton explained that

In English films, British films, the working-class would never be romantic. They weren't . . . the one who got the girl . . . The working-class soldiers who were privates up to sergeant majors were nothing. You know, working-class

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ McCann, *Spike & Co*, 106.

⁵¹ Galton, Simpson. Interview with the author.

⁵² Ibid.

with no romance, no feeling at all, really, only the officers had feelings and romance.⁵³

The funny parts recalled Galton, were reserved to the working-class characters who were “never ever seriously taken as human beings.” He remembered the bewilderment he felt when he watched *From Here to Eternity* in 1953, a movie that narrated the unfolding romance of a sergeant in the American army

If you had made the film in England like that and you'd say he was a sergeant people would have collapsed in laughter [laughing] . . . they made us believe that really not us, to, I mean not us working-class people, that no talk about the female and male sex. They were married and that was it. No romance at all. They didn't have those kinds of feelings.⁵⁴

For Galton and Simpson, and many working-class young contemporaries, Hollywood, and in particular gangster movies, gave access to a more “realistic” language and style that better corresponded with their experience.⁵⁵ Youths used American cultural products to resist middle-class and upper-class culture. American expressive forms were experienced as “sensually expressive, shrill, unvarnished, enthralling and overwhelming,” and as such a way to “articulate class and generational conflicts.”⁵⁶

Generational conflicts, working-class aspirations for mobility, and frustrated sexual urges became definitive themes in their work. At the sanitarium they had only begun to dream of being writers. Together with the friendly engineer they established Radio Milford at the sanitarium. The beginning was modest, a daily hour long program which featured mostly album requests from patients and their visitors. As the popularity of the station grew, broadcasting hours were extended. Galton and

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Dominic Strinati, “The Taste of America: Americanization and Popular Culture in Britain,” in *Come on Down: Popular Media Culture in Post-War Britain* eds. Dominic Strinati and Stephen Wagg (London New York: Routledge, 1992), 61.

⁵⁶ Mel van Elteren, *Americanism and Americanization: a Critical History of Domestic and Global Influence* (Jefferson, N.C.; London: McFarland & Co., 2006), 45.

Simpson thought the station could extend its broadcasting mission to create a “mini-BBC with music, interviews and sketches.”⁵⁷ Later, as BBC employees, they would apply the lessons they had learned from the American shows to the BBC model. They admitted, for instance, that one of the characters in their celebrated sitcom *Hancock's Half Hour* was inspired by a character in the US radio comedy *The Phil Harris & Alice Faye Show*.⁵⁸

By that time listeners did not need to befriend a radio enthusiast to be acquainted with American radio. From 1944 on, American variety shows were syndicated on the BBC and British listeners, like the young Galton and Simpson, were enthralled by the aforementioned American stars.⁵⁹ The Director General of the BBC in 1944 admitted in an inner memorandum that “It is proper and in the listeners’ interest” to use American material in BBC programs. He warned, however, from over-using it lest it should be turned into a “Frankenstein.” He explained that

in many cases there is no original listener enthusiasm for such programmes; it has grown because of the B.B.C.’s persistence. It is also essential that the existence of such programmes shall not become an excuse for relaxation of effort on the part of the B.B.C. to produce similar programmes of equal merit of its own.⁶⁰

In 1949, the BBC distributed an internal guideline that included a section devoted to “American Material and ‘Americanisms.’” It reminded BBC employees that their broadcasting mission was to supply programs in “our own native idiom, dialects and accents” and to warn that the “spurious” Americanization of programmers was “unwelcome to the great majority of listeners” and therefore should be avoided.⁶¹ Indeed, figures from the 1960s reveal that the amount of foreign materials in BBC

⁵⁷ McCann, *Spike & Co*, 107.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 236.

⁵⁹ Crisell, *An Introductory History of British Broadcasting*, 64-65.

⁶⁰ Director General to Mr. Wellington, 16 August 1944. BBC WAC R/34 Policy American Material in programmes, File 1. Document is in poor quality and part of the page is torn off obscuring some of the details as well as the signature. At the time two men were D.G. so that the identity of the writer cannot be established.

⁶¹ Took, 88.

programs remained consistently low - never over fourteen percent. In December 1961, a press release from the BBC promised that it would not increase the proportion of American material in its television scheduling, having it remain around twelve percent.⁶² A different interoffice report confirmed similar figures for the use of American materials for 1965 and 1966.⁶³

In sound broadcasting the figures were decidedly higher because so much of the music originated in the United States. A report from a meeting between BBC executives with the Radio and Television Safeguards Committee in 1963 reveals the latter's concern that sixty percent of the music broadcast on the BBC was foreign, and even higher in the case of pop music. The BBC replied that this indeed was the case, although British composers were in fact heavily supported and the rules governing frequency of broadcasts and exploitation generally had been very much bent in their favor. Producers were pressed to include British materials if it was at all suitable and favored nation treatment was given to it all along the line.⁶⁴

Even though the postwar decades were a period of intense contact between the two cultures, these figures indicate that the encounter didn't end with the obliteration of British culture. British government tried to impose a quota system on the import of Hollywood feature films. The system that was in place at least up to the 1990s, determined that eighty six percent of what was broadcasted on TV had to be domestically produced. (This doesn't account for cooperation with foreign companies or the dominance of American products in the fourteen percent slots.) Some would

⁶² Margaret Bayley (Day Press Officer) "Announcement to Press Agencies: 'Use of American material,'" December 8, 1961 BBC WAC, T20/8/1.

⁶³ Report from Assistant (Forward), Programme Planning to A.C. (Planning) Television through Head. (F) Television, September 26, 1966 BBC WAC T20/8/2.

⁶⁴ "Note of a meeting with the radio and television safeguard committee in the board room, broadcasting house," 11 July 1963 BBC WAC T16/295 TV Policy Safeguards Committee 1956-1965.

say that this system enabled local culture to prosper.⁶⁵ I would argue that there was a genuine drive to create indigenous culture that originated in the belief in the tight connection between culture and identity. The BBC was a site where Britons developed products for other Britons. It was created in an idiom that those who participated in the national community could speak and understand.

Young writers eagerly consumed American comedy, but what they had produced in the postwar era was an original hybrid creation rather than a direct imitation. Comedy in both cultures grew up from different pre- and postwar influences. British writers had an urgent concern about the issues of class, for example, and a commitment to voicing it in a realist manner. This urgency and aesthetic commitment were absent from mainstream American comedy. Local contemporary cultural and social phenomena such as social realism in the arts and the tradition of the music hall were at least as important as American comedy to the trajectory of British comedy. Thus, rather than a unified genre of transatlantic sitcom we find a genre that developed in two parallel lines on both sides of the ocean.

This is not to belittle the American influence on British culture but to offer a more nuanced reading of it. Instead of out-right rejection or embrace, contemporary accounts reveal ambivalence towards American aid, American culture, and Americans in general. Research examining different surveys done in Britain between the 1960s and the 1990s found that more Britons considered the United States their country's best friend more than any other country. The United States was regarded as the most trustworthy country were Britain involved in a war. Only a tenth, however, said that they liked Americans a lot; by the close of the 1980s more reported feeling closer to Europeans than to Americans. In other surveys a third of Britons said that relations

⁶⁵ Strinati, "The Taste of America," 61.

with the United States were too close; about half claimed that British foreign policy depended too much on the United States, and two-thirds thought the United States didn't treat Britain as an equal in matters of common concern.⁶⁶

Historian of Anglo-American Puritanism in colonial America and intellectual Perry Miller observed in 1950 that, "on the simple day-to-day level of life America continues to disturb and frighten and prod Europe. It excites simultaneously both revulsion and envy."⁶⁷ American airbases and bombers in Britain, in particular, "haunted the imaginary"⁶⁸ of postwar British popular anti-Americanism. The army bases aroused conflict both in political circles and on the ground. A *Times* article from 1952 informed readers that "never before has a foreign force on this scale been stationed in Britain in peace-time,"⁶⁹ hinting at the abnormality of the subordinate situation. British politicians assured their public that the bases contributed to the country's defense, but the encounters between American servicemen and British civilian population was tense.⁷⁰ American servicemen were perceived as arrogant, "swaggering" in the "Joie de Vivre" manner of the American innocent abroad.⁷¹ The disparity in income was a chief cause for discontent. According to the article, an American captain was paid almost as much as the nominal salary of the Dean of Canterbury. "With so much money in their pockets," concluded the writer, "the Americans can naturally commend superior services of any kind."⁷² They apparently

⁶⁶ James M. McCormick and Jorgen Rasmussen, "British Mass Perceptions of the Anglo-American Special Relationship," *Political Science Quarterly* 108, no. 3 (autumn, 1993): 515-41.

⁶⁷ Perry believed that European criticism of America was frequently "a transparent effort to deny the common man in Europe what he, transported to America, believes he has achieved or can achieve." Perry Miller, "An American Professor Replies," *The Listener*, January 19, 1950, 101. His printed talk was a response to the BBC Third Programme series, 'The United States and Europe' (published in *The Listener* from 8 December 1949 to 12 January 1950).

⁶⁸ Deer, "The Dogs of War," 166.

⁶⁹ "American Bases in Britain: I - Strategic Contribution to Western Defence," *The Times* August 21, 1952, 5.

⁷⁰ Frances B. Paulu, "Thoughts of an American in England," *The Listener*, June 24, 1954.

⁷¹ "American Bases in Britain."

⁷² *Ibid.*

were successful since the article describes how English service people went out of their way to accommodate Americans' needs: "Shopkeepers, garage proprietors and the like," complained the journalist, "their attitude sometimes has something of degradation about it. One almost expects a cry of *"baksheesh!"* to fall from the lips of some of the taxi-men who lounge about the bases."⁷³

The article reprimanded the working-classes for degrading themselves in front of the new masters and for shaming the nation. Furthermore, the invocation of the Arab word for bribe was an ironic reminder of past times: once it was the British who had "natives" clinging on to their clothes asking for "baksheesh," now they were the beggars. Even more injuring to the national pride was the American tendency to retreat to their bases and live as "separately and independent a community as the British Suez Canal garrison is in Egypt"⁷⁴ - once again equating the English to the subordinate Egyptians. The erstwhile colonial master colonized in his own homeland.

The material contrast between British and American military men was startling to many. In January 1964 Shirley Nuns shared with the listeners of *Woman's Hour* her experience of living in an American air base in Suffolk as the bride of an American G.I.

the days were very full and at night the base was a lively town with plenty of amusements – clubs with dancing most nights and London floor-shows at weekends, centres specialising in most hobbies from bingo to pottery making. There was a choice of several eating places, an extension University, and of course, a bowling alley and a theatre.⁷⁵

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ "American Bases in Britain."

⁷⁵ BBC WAC Woman's Hour, "We Like you But...", *Woman's Hour* BBC Light Programme (January 13, 1964).

The experience was so encompassing that, “I sometimes forgot we were still in Suffolk and that we must take pounds with us instead of dollars when we went out on a shopping spree into the village.”⁷⁶

The *Times* article is rife with displays of jealousy of American’s advantageous material circumstances. In American army stores in Britain, it marveled, servicemen could get, “cameras from Germany, steaks from Ireland, eggs from Denmark, tobaccos and candies from the United States, cars, bicycles, leather goods and ghastly souvenirs, all at export prices, from Olde England.”⁷⁷

This enumeration of products reads as a literary picking at a scab. Food was rationed till the mid-1950s and the English diet expanded only towards the end of the decade. Housing was an especially painful subject for Britons, and Americans’ privileged access to it was envied.⁷⁸ Many young couples, lucky enough to secure a home found it wanting in amenities. In contrast, Nuns fondly remembered her first home on the air base in Suffolk as a brimming with American luxury. “Our little home was graded as below standard requirements, but I revelled in its automatic washing machine and heater, the massive fridge and deep freeze, the central heating and free use of electricity.”⁷⁹

The payoff for the annoying American presence was monetary. While *The Times* found shopkeepers' eagerness to make extra money shameful, it was Government that was really putting out. The American bases were an important source of dollars for British economy—a *Wall Street Journal* article estimated that during 1952 Britain would earn \$50 million from selling goods and services to members of the American forces in Britain. The American government was said to spend another estimated \$50

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ “American Bases in Britain.”

⁷⁸ “American Bases in Britain.”

⁷⁹ “We Like you But...”

million in connection with the bases. The USAF in Britain estimated it bought \$300,000 worth of food each month in Britain. This apparent dependence on American investment fed into resentment for the punitive terms of the 1946 U.S. loan to Britain.⁸⁰ Britons weren't exactly thrilled, either, by U.S. pressure for integration into a postwar European union or the U.S. refusal to share nuclear knowledge. But above all it was the recognition of Britain's subordinate role in the U.S.-Soviet Cold War that had forged a wider sentiment of anti-Americanism in political circles.⁸¹

The episode "The American Hit Town" from the radio show *Hancock's Half Hour* broadcast in March 1958 exemplifies the envy and resent for Americans but also the financial opportunities they seemed to embody.⁸² In this episode Hancock is upset because American soldiers had returned to the fictional East Cheam. Hancock is anxious that G.I.s will once again win over the women of the town. While Hancock views the soldiers as a threat, a woman enamored with an American soldier has no doubt that the soldiers are in much need and that "They've come to defend us!" Hancock is upset about the G.I.s return because he will lose his standing with the ladies, who will realize the Americans are able to offer a myriad of material offerings as they did during the war. Hancock is also anxious that the "loaded with money"

⁸⁰ In a letter to the editor of *The Listener*, Sidney Solomon from Richmond acknowledges Britons' resentment toward the US. This sentiment, he maintained, was a result of the American conduct in the two world wars. "After two world wars, in both of which the U.S.A. intervened, but only when she herself was threatened, the end of both found the victors, with one notable exception, impoverished and debt-ridden. Is it completely forgotten that in both wars we and France stood the first shock of a fully equipped and fully prepared enemy? Our own sacrifices seem to be completely over-looked. Our precarious economic position today is in no small measure due to the fact that, in addition to the enormous financial calls upon us during the war years, we had to devote so much of our resources to pay for munitions of every kind to the U.S.A. which emerged from this war, as it did from the first, the richest and most powerful country in the world." Sidney Salomon, "Thoughts of an American in England," *The Listener*, June 24, 1954.

⁸¹ Kenneth O. Morgan, *Britain since 1945: the People's Peace* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 85-88.

⁸² "The Americans Hit Town," *Hancock's Half Hour* (March 18, 1958) British Library Sound Archive, BBC Radio Collection.

Americans will lower his standard of living as coffee shop owners increase the price of a cup of tea in anticipation of the visitors.

Hancock's friend Sid is determined to profit from the situation; he creates a taxi service combined with guided tour for the Americans. "But there's nothing to see!" exclaims Hancock. "They'll be gone before they know it!" answers Sid calmly. The rest of the town follows Sid's cue and before long everybody takes advantage of the "rich" and "gullible" Americans. Even Hancock tries to let a tiny room for an exaggerated price, selling it as a "place steeped in history!" He markets the crumbling and dusty furniture as "Queen Anne Antiques."

The episode is rife with sexual insecurity, jealousy, frustration and economic inferiority. It pits British cultural superiority, illustrious history and character against American economic and consumer power. The *Britcom* as a cultural text instantiates this superiority via wit and allusion which enacts the problems that it critiques. It sympathizes with Britons' dreams of consumerism, offers comfort in the British ability to "get on" and nods at the collapse of the glorious past. In the process, the past becomes an article of nostalgia; a commodity to sell to naïve and "traditionless" Americans. The media coverage of the Queen's Coronation in June 1953 employed similar tropes. Presenters stressed the similarities between the two nations and Americans' enthusiasm for the ceremony. America was described as a young nation in comparison to Britain; news items reported American fascination with the Coronation and envy at their lack of a similar institution. American deference, however, only went so far – disappointed broadcasters reported the "vulgar" and "disrespectful" interruption of the ceremony for commercials.⁸³

⁸³ Webster, *Englishness and Empire*, 113-115.

Such juxtapositions were widespread. The leading article of *The Listener* on 7 February 1957 observed that while all the new crazes in Europe originated in America, American tourists arrived in Britain each summer to usurp relics from its past

American millionaires buy up our paintings, our historical manuscripts, even bits of our old houses, and transport them bodily to their own country. There they are regarded with amazement but not necessarily with deference as landmarks of a world passing away . . . to which people pay lip service but in which they no longer believe.⁸⁴

In the process of the commoditization and export of the glorious past, it loses its meaning—flattened instead into a quaint piece of décor.⁸⁵ Over the decades the trend had intensified and currently, heritage tourism to and within the UK is a leading sector of British economy. A Heritage Lottery Fund report from March 2010 maintains that the heritage tourism industry contributes £20.6 billion to the British economy, making it the fifth most profitable industry in Britain.⁸⁶

The Export of British TV

Television is frequently seen as dominated by American production. American television has indeed led the way, and during wartime it developed in an almost insular bubble. Other countries began to influence American television starting in the late 1960s, but in the 1950s and 1960s, British programs were very much geared toward their domestic audience. Some producers began to realize the potential of selling shows and programs abroad, but it was mainly sound broadcasting that was sold and transmitted through the BBC Overseas Service. One of the first to seize the potential of exporting British radio and television was Beryl Vertue, then the agent of

⁸⁴ “A Paradox.”

⁸⁵ Peter Mandler, *The Fall and Rise of the Stately Home* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997).

⁸⁶ Domestic tourism is the main component of this expenditure; of the annual £12.4 billion spent on heritage-based tourism in 2009, according to the HLF report, 60% comes from UK residents on day trips and UK holidays. Heritage Lottery Fund, “Investing in success: Heritage and the UK tourism economy,” press release, 5 March 2010, <http://www.hlf.org.uk/news/Pages/InvestinginSuccess.aspx>.

star writers such as Alan Simpson, Ray Galton, Spike Milligan, and Johnny Speight. During the 1960s, radio versions of *Hancock's Half Hour*, *Steptoe and Son*, *Eric Sykes*, and *The Goon Show* were broadcast by the BBC External Service to the Commonwealth, North America, Nigeria, Rhodesia, Gibraltar, Sierra Leon and Zambia.⁸⁷ Formats of successful programs such as *Hancock's Half Hour* and *Till Death Us Do Part* were sold in the 1960s to Germany. The format of *Hancock's Half Hour* was also sold to Finland, Norway, Denmark, and Sweden. In 1963 the Dutch made a version of *Steptoe and Son*. The same sitcom was later remade for the American market, renamed *Sanford and Son*, and aired in 1972.⁸⁸ Norman Lear, the producer of *Sanford and Son*, had enjoyed a huge success the previous year with *All in the Family*, the acclaimed adaptation for *Till Death Us Do Part*.

As we have seen, British sound broadcasting secured its niche in the American market by exporting products that reflected Britain's "traditional" culture and values such as the dramatizations of British classic literature or "serious" sound broadcast. Rooney Pelletier, North American Service Organiser at the BBC, suggested that the BBC should always have available the complete repertoire of Shakespeare on its shelves, ready to sell abroad. He also pointed out that obituary programs were of interest both in the US and Canada. Executives he met, he reported, wished for "dramatised half-hour programmes in the event of the deaths of prominent people" such as the Royal Family, Winston Churchill, George Bernard Shaw, Ernest Bevin, Anthony Eden, Clement Attlee, and General Montgomery.⁸⁹

The limited selling of formats and shows abroad fit with the prevalent sentiment that television was a local industry. Therefore 1950s and 1960s television displayed an "absence of an international dimension" and "little thought of programmes having

⁸⁷ Alan Simpson personal file, Rcont. 18 1963-1969 BBC WAC.

⁸⁸ McCann, *Spike Co.*, 334-5.

⁸⁹ Pelletier, "Report of a Visit to U.S.A. and Canada, Spring and Early Summer 1950."

an afterlife.”⁹⁰ This attitude was shaped by the notion that television was a live medium similar to theater and therefore, little was done in way of preserving programs in the 1950s.⁹¹ He confessed that in relation to sitcoms, “In any case the largest English speaking market, the United States, was virtually ruled out by consideration of content. The Americans have never shared our audiences’ acceptance of another country’s dialects and slang.”⁹²

Another problem stemmed from what Cotton termed, “sheer numbers.” While a good life expectancy for a British sitcom would be 30 to 36 episodes in five years, an American sitcom would fit almost 130 episodes in that time frame. “Our methods of production and our wish to have all episodes written by the original writers,” explained Cotton, “meant we could not cope with these numbers.”⁹³ In Britain, unlike in the United States, from the very beginning, the writer was the main figure: the one to create the program, and retain control over content and artistic vision. Writers were also the ones to select a producer and the actors they would like to work with. Sitcoms were written by one or two writers rather than a team of writers as in the United States. This often slowed the pace of the program and lessened the number of jokes, but it enabled writers to voice their agenda.⁹⁴

In the United States, producers were the central figures in the creative process. They chose a team of writers (who would join or drop out at any point during the run of a series; an individual writer often contributing a limited number of jokes per episode) and actors—often based on their fame, looks, or as a vehicle for an

⁹⁰ Bill Cotton, “It Was Funny when it Left Me,” a lecture given at the annual Hue Wheldon Memorial Lecture series on September 21, 1989 (script courtesy of the Royal Television Society). Bill Cotton was a comedy writer, former Head of BBC Light Entertainment and Controller of BBC One.

⁹¹ Television programs were shot on film and the combination of its high cost, and the inherently ephemeral nature of the medium as it was understood by contemporaries, are to blame for the lack of comprehensive television archives in Britain. The BBC was better at preserving its programs, but it’s a real methodological problem in the case of ITV as I explain in the introduction.

⁹² Bill Cotton, “It Was Funny when it Left Me.”

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Mills, *Television Sitcom*, 55-6.

established stand-up comedian. Writers thus conformed to producers' dicta and were left less space for innovation and self-expression. The American market, nevertheless, tempted British writers, actors, producers, and executives. Some of them found that packaging British broadcasting as something completely different from American creations would be their way in.⁹⁵

The Avengers, the adventure series that aired in Britain between 1961 and 1969, is a case in point. In 1965, ABC purchased 26 filmed black-and-white episodes of the series for one million dollars. ABC executives asked for American elements to be implemented in the show and for more control over the dialogue. The British network refused, and the program aired with no changes. Moreover, the style of the show was deliberately British: the male protagonist, John Steed, was dressed as an Edwardian gentleman and the female agent, Amanda Peel, was dressed in an extremely modern swinging London style. The program's rating proved the risk successful.

British dramas, such as *The Forsyte Saga* broadcast in 1969 on the non-commercial channel NET, filled American 1960s demand for quality television. Its immense success left an enduring impact on television in the United States. For example, it influenced the development of American soap operas by bringing “soap opera conventions of memory, consequence, and change into the prime-time television cosmos.”⁹⁶ It introduced the novelty of portraying the idealized family institution as manipulative and dangerous. Running on the difference could be tricky. Many times it was hard to ascertain whether something was authentically “British” or “American.” American genres were influenced by British literature and art, and American television genres defined their subsequent British appropriation. Critics saw, for instance, *Look Back in Anger* as a distinctive British piece of theater. Its

⁹⁵ Miller, *Something Completely Different*, xiii.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 64-5.

writer, John Osborne acknowledged the influence of American writers such as Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams on his writing and the influence of the “professionalism and polish” of American film on his vision for theater.⁹⁷

Britcoms Cross the Atlantic

Comedy crossed the Atlantic from Britain, first riding the wave of the new satire movement, and later seated in the sitcom vehicle. In the United States, satiric comedy was a response to mass culture which developed in urban clubs, small improvisational theaters, and late-night television.⁹⁸ In Britain, the satire movement grew out of the theatre clubs of Cambridge and Oxford. The largest explosion of this trend was the satirical sensation *Beyond the Fringe*, first performed at the Edinburgh theatre festival in August 1960. In what is now considered a classic sketch, “T.V.P.M.” (Television Prime Minister), Peter Cook ridiculed Tory Prime Minister Harold Macmillan. In the sketch, the Prime Minister appears on television to share the impressions from his trips to Europe and the United States: “I went first to Germany, and there I spoke with the German Foreign Minister, Herr . . . Herr and there, and we exchanged many frank words in our respective languages; so precious little came of that in the way of understanding.”⁹⁹ Cook went on to mock mercilessly Macmillan's fascination “with the young, vigorous President of that great country,” and the allegedly rapport the two shared

We talked of many things, including Great Britain's position in the world as some kind of honest broker. I agreed with him, when he said that no nation could be more honest; and he agreed with me, when I chaffed him and said that no nation could be broker . . .¹⁰⁰

⁹⁷ Ibid., 14.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 113.

⁹⁹ Alan Bennett, Peter Cook, Jonathan Miller, and Dudley Moore, *The Complete Beyond The Fringe* (London: Methuen, 2003), 51.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 51.

The sketch famously ridicules the era's deference to politicians, characteristic to the comedic etiquette of the time. It was also infamous for Cook's unflinching performance of the sketch during the Prime Minister's visit to the theatre. By the end of 1962, the show traveled to New York where it enjoyed great commercial success even though its creators were adamant about not adapting it to American taste. They were convinced its main attraction was the Englishness of the style.¹⁰¹ Although the triumph of satire opened a door in the United States for British comedy, sitcoms weren't as welcome. Sitcom, after all, was the definitive genre of American television and there was no quality gap to fill. Moreover, sitcoms constructed a reality and the laughter derived from the disruption and exaggeration of it. Dress, speech, the settings of the show, and the cultural references it evoked shaped this reality and the audience had to be able to decode it immediately.¹⁰² The use of stereotypes, catchphrases, familiar situations, and identifiable settings accumulated into a shorthand that secured laughs from an audience tickled by recognition. Indeed, the more familiar and identifiable the sets and surroundings, the more stereotypical the protagonists, the more easily laughter was harvested.

This laughter is in fact an act of recognition; inherent to the success of the genre. It occurs when viewers recognize the scene and accept that it contains a truth about their lives. Sitcoms such as *Hancock's Half Hour*, *Steptoe and Son*, *Till Death Us Do Part*, *The Likely Lads*, or *Dad's Army* sought "reality" as their jumping-off point to comment on society. In accordance with the social-realist aesthetic in vogue at the time, sitcom writers actively conjured up reality to ensure and enhance comic effect. Therefore, taking a sitcom out of its local context risked its losing meaning. The risk was especially great in the postwar decades in which, as noted in the introduction,

¹⁰¹ Bennett et al., *The Complete Beyond The Fringe*, 125.

¹⁰² Miller, *Something Completely Different*, 140-1.

British drama and comedy experimented with realism. The British cinematic "New Wave" led by directors such as Tony Richardson, Karl Reisz, and Lindsay Anderson, was deeply influenced by the French movement. It was also deeply rooted in social-realist novels of writers such as Alan Sillitoe and John Braine, theatre work such as John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* (1956), and "kitchen-sink" working class dramas shown on television.¹⁰³ These intellectual and aesthetic trends influenced the most successful sitcoms of the time such as *Hancock's Half Hour*, *Steptoe and Son*, and *Till Death Us Do Part*. *Hancock*, a unique product of its time for many reasons, was in debt to the social realism movement. Already on the radio show, *Hancock's* writers aspired to show life as it would have been understood by the audience, and offer situations that could have happened to anyone. "Sunday Afternoon at Home" from *Hancock's* radio version demonstrates this powerfully. In this episode Hancock and his mates are stuck at home on a boring Sunday afternoon. Their television isn't working, it's raining, they lost their monopoly board, since it is Sunday the cinema will only open in the evening, and there is absolutely nothing to do. Hancock repeatedly asks his friends for the time and is disappointed by the answer. He gets more frustrated as the day drags on

Doesn't the time drag? Ooh I do hate Sundays. I'll be happy when it's over. It drives me up the wall just sitting here looking at you lot. Every Sunday it's the same. Nowhere to go, nothing to do. Just sit here waiting for the next lot of grub to come up.¹⁰⁴

This was followed by similar remarks, humming, silences, meaningless conversation, spying on the neighbors and a visit from an irritating neighbor. The episode depicted in thirty minutes a typical Sunday for most listeners, breaking sharply from variety comic tradition and indeed from "situation." It had been

¹⁰³ Jeffrey Richards, *Films and British national identity* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), 148.

¹⁰⁴ Ray Galton and Alan Simpson, "Sunday Afternoon at Home," (original broadcast: 22 April 1958), *Hancock's Half Hour: Classic Years* (London: BBC Books, 1987), 114.

especially brave to attempt all that on radio with no visuals to hold the attention of audiences. The Galton and Simpson vote of trust in their audiences paid off, it received top ratings and was released as an LP. Recently, a fan uploaded to YouTube a video of himself lip-syncing part of the episode. Almost 10,000 views attest to the episode's enduring power.¹⁰⁵ The strength of an episode about boredom filled with awkward silences was its grounding in reality. Listeners were frustrated by the few options for diversion on Sundays, by the bad weather and gloom. The question for American television executives was, would American audiences feel the same?

They thought not. Adaptation was the chosen path in the 1970s.¹⁰⁶ "The industry had discovered the format deal," Cotton described the 1970s reality. He continued

British comedies which would not, we were told, work in the US were bought up and cloned for that market. The basic set-up, or format, was reworked by teams of American writers into an American context and a more generic formalistic comedy and produced in runs of up to 26 at a time.¹⁰⁷

Adaptations were economically appealing to networks, but they were not a sure success. American networks did extremely well with British adaptations in the 1970s such as *All in the Family* and *Sanford and Son*. Attempts at adaptation were abandoned in the following two decades and tried again in the 1990s but failing once again. It wasn't until 2003 that NBC hit the jackpot with the adaptation of *The Office*.¹⁰⁸

The American version of *The Office* is a success because it morphed into a show in its own right: it incorporated the local American context well enough to sever its British origins. Like its British predecessor it was able to make itself specific to a time, a place and a nationality to create "a sense of national identity and inclusion in

¹⁰⁵ "Tony Hancock's Sunday afternoon at home," YouTube, accessed February 7, 2013, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v4K44zg2Usk>.

¹⁰⁶ Mills, *Television Sitcom*, 58.

¹⁰⁷ Cotton, "It Was Funny when it Left Me."

¹⁰⁸ Jeffrey Griffin, "The Americanization of *The Office*: a Comparison of the Offbeat NBC Sitcom and its British Predecessor," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 35, no. 4 (2008): 154-163.

the ‘community’ of the joke, the sitcom, and ultimately the nation.”¹⁰⁹ A successful adaptation depends heavily on a reliable translation of the main character into local idiom. Thus in *The Office* Steve Carell's Michael Scott departed from Ricky Gervais's David Brent so that American audiences would identify with him more easily. While both men hide their deep insecurities with infantile egotism and insensitivity to others, the American boss appears to be more competent than the shamelessly idle Brent. More importantly, NBC executives decided to inject more heart into his character, because “Americans need a little bit more hope than the British.”¹¹⁰ This is indeed one of the fundamental differences between the two variations on the sitcom form. Unlike the typical witty American sitcom protagonist, David Brent stems from a long line of losers and failures. His comic forefathers Hancock and Harold Steptoe hoped to better themselves and climb the social ladder but unfailingly ended up exposing their own inadequacies and naiveté. The episode “The Poetry Society” from the radio edition of *Hancock's* is a case in point. Hancock decides to join a local poetry group inspired by the American beat movement. He dresses for the occasion: “Blue and white stocking cap, home woven vegetable fibre shirt, canvas trousers, and fisherman rope sandals.”¹¹¹ To his sniggering mates, Sid and Bill, Hancock explains in typical pomposity that, “We are going to show the world the real truth, by setting them an example, developing our superior intellects. Culture mate, that’s where the hope of the world lies.”¹¹²

He unashamedly goes on to explain, “We’re outsiders, you see, scorned and mocked by the mass but whether they like it or not, vital to the progress of future

¹⁰⁹ Alexandra Beeden and Joost de Bruin, “The Office: Articulations of National Identity in Television Format Adaptation,” *Television & New Media* (2010), 9.

¹¹⁰ Kevin Reilly, the NBC entertainment president at the time quoted by Griffin, “The Americanization of The Office,” 154-163.

¹¹¹ Galton and Simpson, *Hancock's Half Hour: Classic Years*, 148.

¹¹² Ibid.

generations.”¹¹³ When simpleton Bill pleads to join the group, Hancock sneers. Unsurprisingly, Bill's made-on-the-spot poem, *Incandescent* with the unforgettable line, “Life is mauve, I am orange,” gains him the group's immediate respect: He becomes their leader, and Hancock is ridiculed. Hancock's aspirations to break from class-restraints fail miserably. Even in a hippie and supposedly more egalitarian society, Hancock cannot progress. Failure is intrinsic to his character.

In the second season of *Steptoe and Son*, Harold is seduced by an attractive, wealthy woman with an appetite for working-class men. Albert is quick to understand her motives: “She fancies you because you are a rag and bone man. She fancies you because you're common. If you think something will come out of it, you will be hurt.”¹¹⁴ Albert warns Harold he will be cast aside like a used toy, but Harold is convinced this is the meaningful romance he has been waiting for all his life. “We talked about books, about politics, I taught her a few new things,”¹¹⁵ he says dreamily. Harold wakes up eagerly the next morning, and rushes to his lover's home. In front of the house he finds a coal truck. When he rings the bell he is answered by the coal man who informs him that he will be his replacement for the day. Albert, who has followed Harold, watches from the sidelines and comes to offer his consolation. Harold throws stones at him, and the show ends with the two men running down the street. The viewer is left with a pang at Harold's bitter disappointment and social limitations.

The fascination with failure is seen by scholars of television as a British trait. Indeed, the writers of *Hancock* and *Steptoe*, two working-class lads who made it to the top and were granted OBEs for their contribution to British culture, agree.

“American writers never do failure”, Simpson told me in an interview. He continued

¹¹³ Ibid., 151.

¹¹⁴ “Is That Your Horse Outside?”, *Steptoe and Son* BBC (February 14, 1963).

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

to explain, “In American sitcoms everything has to turn out well in the end, everyone looks good and the girls are young and beautiful. We Brits like failure. Being very rich or very successful just isn’t funny.”¹¹⁶

His co-writer, Ray Galton added, “We wanted to paint protagonists with warts and all. We wanted it to be real.”¹¹⁷ Sitcom writers like Galton and Simpson, inspired by the likes of John Osborne, Alan Sillitoe, and Harold Pinter, put onscreen their version of reality, made of building blocks issued from their subjective experiences and interests. Being mostly from working-class origins, they wrote their protagonists as aspiring working-class or lower-middle class men. Their characters enticed laughter because they and the situations they were thrown into were perceived as plausibly real by viewers.

The repeated failures of this lineage of men in Britcoms often caused viewers embarrassment rather than straightforward pleasure. Media scholar Frances Gray maintains embarrassment to be an especially potent sensation because it physically stirs the viewer, and is shared both by the character and the spectator.¹¹⁸ Laughter that is provoked by this sentiment is often more ethically dubious, “cruelty, an assertion of superiority, an act of social exclusion, or a sign of shared embarrassment.”¹¹⁹ This sentiment is frequently found in comedies of eccentricity that feature a protagonist who is often the subject of a joke. Renowned American examples from the 1950s are *I Love Lucy* and the *Phil Silvers Show*. But, unlike in Britcoms, we tend to laugh in admiration of the performer’s skill and efforts to ascend the social ladder. Their

¹¹⁶ Galton and Simpson, Interview with the author.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Frances Gray, “Privacy, Embarrassment and Social Power: British Sitcom,” in *Beyond a Joke: the Limits of Humour*, ed. Michael Pickering and Sharon Lockyer (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 147.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 148.

aspirations win the sympathy of the audience and served “to bind performer and viewer into a community.”¹²⁰

This is not so in the British case. As we have seen, British protagonists desperately tried to secure a social space for themselves outside their perceived social class. Unlike the American Lucy or Bilko, however, they do not have defined career goals or clear plans to realize that ambition. Furthermore, their deep yearnings were revealed by writers engaged in a project to expose their portraits warts and all. Therefore, concludes media scholar Brett Mills “while American sitcom often invites us to laugh *with* its characters, the Britcom instead offers pleasure in us laughing *at* them.”¹²¹

In addition, Britcoms deny their protagonists the comfort of family and friends. American sitcoms represent the individual’s circle of family and friends as a supportive community and a significant social network. In British sitcoms, family is the characters’ source of entrapment. Alf Garnett embodied the dark side of family life with his continuous putdowns of his wife and endless quarrels with his son-in-law. In the 1950s precursor of *Till Death Us Do Part*, the radio hit *The Glums*, Mrs. Glum leaves home after Mr. Glum pawns her teeth for the second time.¹²² In a different episode Ron, the incompetent son of the Glums gets sick because his father sold off his coat.¹²³ Family members are selfish, inconsiderate, never hesitating to exploit a weakness.

Contemporary American television executives believed these dark undertones would not thrive across the Atlantic. Therefore, when on 12 January 1971, CBS aired *All in the Family*, its version to the acerbic *Till Death Us Do Part*; it had significant

¹²⁰ Ibid., 149.

¹²¹ Mills, *Television Sitcom*, 42.

¹²² “The Glums: Marriage Guidance,” *Take it From Here*, BBC (original broadcast: January 19, 1958), Muir and Norden archives, box 32.

¹²³ “The Glums: Cambridge of Kensington,” *Take it From Here*, Muir and Norden archives, box 32.

alterations. The foremost was the positive spin to the familial relationships. The remodeling of the characters made the show more advertiser friendly and, as such, more suitable for commercial television.¹²⁴ The American adaptation kept many of the controversial elements of the British program: a racist and sexist head of family, his docile wife and argumentative son-in-law. The material differences however, were significant - the Bunkers were better off than their Cockney equivalents who lived in a working-class neighborhood in East London with an outside toilet.¹²⁵ Mike, the son-in-law, in *Till Death Do Us Part* was a laborer frustrated by his confinement to the working-class. In *All in the Family* he was a college student working his way up. In the British sitcom he's a Liverpudlian, which opened opportunities for North vs. South humor. In the American sitcom the regional humor was replaced by an ethnic one - Michael was Polish. Even though Michal's Polish roots distanced him from the white Protestant male dominating American culture, his Eastern European origins affirmed the family's "whiteness" and made it easier to sell to advertisers.¹²⁶ The mother character was more confined to the home than in the British case, as well as "sweeter" and more subordinated.¹²⁷

Conclusion

The study of sitcoms with methods and insights from the fields of cultural and diplomatic history and media studies provides a new perspective on the development of the Anglo-American relationship from the immediate postwar period to the 1970s. The case studies presented above demonstrate how radio and television sitcoms often expressed sentiments of sexual and economic inferiority that spoke to the preoccupation of the British population and government with the decline of empire,

¹²⁴ Miller, *Something Completely Different*, 143.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 144-5.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 149.

and the need to define a new role for Britain. British sitcoms situated British history and Britons' resourcefulness against American consumer goods and economic prowess. Britain's "glorious" past was presented as a commodity for a naïve American market that was likely to be seduced by it.

America had raised interest and suspicion in Britain, along with fascination and admiration. A whole generation of comedy writers borrowed consciously and frequently from the American comic idiom. But this process didn't only go one way, nor did it mean swallowing American production unquestionably. British cultural production was nourished by local traditions old and new: music hall and social realism. The fusing of these with American influences had resulted in the distinct form of the Britcom. This form was highly successful domestically as Britons recognized themselves, their struggles and hopes on screen.

Britcoms became, to the amazement of many, an important cultural export. Through their bleak narration of daily life, contemporary Britcoms captured an aspect of "Britishness" that became a staple of British identity: the self-deprecating, socially aspiring, good natured amateur. When exported, Britcoms' anti-glamour became inseparable from Britain's image overseas. It amplified Britcoms' allure in foreign media markets and made them a lucrative export commodity. Contemporaries were alert and bitter about the American cultural offensive. British policy makers were well aware of the power of communication technologies as a means of control. As such the "American invasion" was understood in its most aggressive interpretation as an attack on their culture and identity. America provoked so much fear and anxiety that Britons often neglected to notice the vitality of their own industry, the parallel British cultural offensive and its success in the United States.

Chapter Four: White and White TV: the End of Empire and Race Relations

On Sunday 20 January 2013 at 7:30 pm, BBC2 aired a rerun of the episode “The Germans” from the beloved sitcom *Fawlty Towers*. The episode, originally broadcast on 24 October 1975 is best remembered for the line “Don’t mention the war” and for John Cleese’s silly walk: holding a finger underneath his nose, shouting in mock German and marching in a Hitler impersonation. “The Germans” stirred controversy when it was repeated on television in earlier years. Although some viewers worried it was offensive to German, the BBC had always broadcast the episode in full. This time around, a short exchange was edited due to racist language—and it had nothing to do with Germans.

The scene involved the eponymous character and Major Gowen, one of the hotel’s permanent residents. In a conversation between the two, the Major reminisced about a time he took a woman to see India play cricket at the Oval stadium in London. He then said:

The strange thing was, throughout the morning she kept referring to the Indians as niggers. “No, no, no,” I said, “the niggers are the West Indians. These people are wogs.”¹

Defending the decision to censor the show, a BBC spokesman told the *Daily Mail* that the corporation was,

. . . very proud of *Fawlty Towers* and its contribution to British television comedy. But public attitudes have changed significantly since it was made and it was decided to make some minor changes, with the consent of John Cleese’s management, to allow the episode to transmit to a family audience at 7.30 pm on BBC2.²

¹ “The Germans,” *Fawlty Towers*, BBC (October 24, 1975).

² Laura Cox, “Don’t Mention the ***: Censorship Row as BBC Cuts the Major’s ‘Racist’ Lines from Classic *Fawlty Towers* Episode,” *Mail Online*, accessed February 7, 2013, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2266738/Censorship-row-BBC-cuts-racist-lines-classic-Fawlty-Towers-episode.html>.

The *Mail* reported that fans of the show were upset about the censoring. One posted the following comment on the BBC's Points Of View online message board, "You can't airbrush history away and I doubt if anyone but the terminally thin-skinned could be offended by the major, a character we're clearly supposed to laugh at rather than with."³

Another argued that the BBC acted in a patronizing manner (an allegation that "Auntie" had to contend with for decades) and that it edited the show,

. . . because it includes the W-word and the N-word. Let's face it, the whole episode and much of Fawlty Towers is racist by today's standards and misogynistic, but above all it is hilarious. We are all grown up, you know. We, the vast majority of us, can laugh at this without being racists. It's about time you grew up BBC, and trusted your audience. We know what is acceptable and what is not and what is funny and why, and the fact is it is of a time which is now long past. We understand context, the major is a figure of fun, he doesn't whip up hatred.⁴

The viewer scolded the BBC for not trusting its audience was mature enough to handle racist slur in the appropriate manner. As a natural follow-up, the *Guardian* ran a poll asking its readers whether the BBC's decision was right or wrong. 68% thought the BBC was mistaken. In the comments section many suggested that had the BBC scheduled the episode for a post-watershed audience rather than during family viewing time no harm would have been done. Few commentators on the *Guardian*'s poll supported the censoring categorically. One who did argued that,

Of course it was right to censor the language, attitudes have changed to the 1970s and as a country we have moved on. Even if the joke is intended to be ironic broadcasting it at half 7 on a Sunday evening would be the wrong place to raise such an acute joke.⁵

Similar discussions over the appropriate time to broadcast controversial material accompanied many sitcoms. In 1967, for example, James Green from the *Evening*

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Vicky Frost, "Was the BBC Right to Cut Racist Language from Fawlty Towers? – Poll," *The Guardian*, January 23, 2013, accessed February 12, 2013, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/tv-and-radio/tvandradioblog/poll/2013/jan/23/fawlty-towers-racist-language-cut>.

News complained that the scheduling of *Till Death Us Do Part*, the show that featured the most famous television racist, Alf Garnett, was unfair to parents. He argued that, “What is acceptable from 9.30 or 10p.m. to an adult audience can be embarrassing when presented earlier before the whole family. And results in many parents switching off TV completely or tuning in to ITV.”⁶

In 1969, the Independent T.V. Authority pressured ITV to move the transmission of *Curry and Chips*, the new sitcom authored by of the creator of *Till Death Do Us Part* from 9.30 pm to 10.30 pm because, reported the *Daily Mirror*, “they consider it is not really suitable for what they term ‘family audiences with children.’”⁷

Screenwriter Johnny Speight, who created and penned *Till Death Do Us Part* and *Curry and Chips*, was well aware of the domestic nature of television and of the expectation that its content not “shock the family.” However, the man who chose Frank Sinatra’s *I Did It My Way* as his favorite piece of music was not deterred easily. Speight was committed to presenting a warts and all portrait of society and believed that racist terms and swearing were integral to the realism of his characters.⁸ In an interview with *Panorama* as part of a program looking at the wide-ranging issue of censorship, Speight argued that it was Alf Garnett’s speech, punctuated with bigotry and lots of 4-letter words that made him a real working class east Londoner.⁹ This authenticity, he argued, could not be compromised in the name of family viewing.

The spirited debates over racism reveal the tension at the core of the comic representation of it. The line between humor that provokes debate about racism and humor that endorses it is a fine one to tread. As a genre, television sitcom attracted

⁶ James Green, “Unfair to Parents,” *Evening News*, January 3, 1967.

⁷ Ken Irwin, “A New Speight—but Not for the Kids,” *The Daily Mirror*, November 21, 1969.

⁸ Speight chose the song as one of his eight favourite pieces of music on the radio show *Desert Island Discs*. “Johnny Speight,” *Desert Island Discs* BBC (December 9, 1972).

⁹ “Panorama: Censorship, Swearing and the 1960s,” *The BBC Web Team Blog* accessed February 17, 2013, http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/panorama/2009/01/the_permissive_society.html.

British writers enthralled by its potential to engage in social critique. As we have seen in previous chapters, writers such as Alan Simpson and Ray Galton confronted the specter of class and the frustrations of working-class men in their work. Other writers such as David Croft and Jimmy Perry aspired to shape the national memory of historical periods such as World War II and the last stages of empire. For still others, racism, immigration, and the resulting issue of race relations were central concerns.

Sitcom writers like Speight hoped to expose race as a discursively constructed identity and to offer humor as an insight into the malleability of race, but they discovered that using racist humor ironically as a statement on its folly could fire back.¹⁰ Audiences could interpret race-based humor as racist, focus on the figure of the Trickster who outwits the oppressor, or understand it as an endorsement of their own bigotry. While some viewers shared the assumption that the butt of the joke was the racist monster on screen, others basked in the warmth of legitimacy that the public articulation of racism on primetime television offered them. It is in the discussion of race in sitcoms that the double-edged nature of comedy is exposed in its fullest.

“There is a message in the series: Prejudice is laughable”

Entertainment and sitcoms in particular may seem at first unlikely anchors for debates on identity and the national community. As Wendy Webster noted, however, there is no other public arena that could engage masses in these debates like television and radio. The two had “dramatically increased the audiences who could be involved in a sense of shared nationality.”¹¹ This was doubly true in Britain where broadcasting media enjoyed a halo of authority, especially before the arrival of cable TV in the 1980s. In addition, many contemporary Britcoms strove to tell the “truth” about living

¹⁰ Tara Alturi, “Lighten Up?! Humour, Race, and Da Off Colour Joke of Ali G,” *Media, Culture & Society*, 3, no.2 (2009), 197.

¹¹ Webster, *Englishness and Empire*, 5.

in Britain. As an ardent advocate of this approach, Johnny Speight was certain that TV audiences expected comedy to contribute to substantial debates in the public sphere. In an interview to the *Daily Mail* in 1966 he said that, “When TV first came along comedy went into decline in a gust of empty laughter. I believe that’s changing now. People are getting fed up with the emptiness of TV. They want to laugh at serious subjects and why not?”¹²

Audiences were seduced by the invitation to engage with reality: the familiarity of situations at the core of the Britcom was the secret of its success. British audiences fell for hard-boiled characters that made them laugh out of embarrassment rather than out of merriment. Moreover, the veneer of realism gave the fictional dialogue in series such as *Till Death Do Us Part* an extra layer of credence and legitimacy.

The perils of using realist articulations of racism and prejudice formed the core dilemma for writers such as Johnny Speight. Speight wished to make serious television that would “bring prejudice into the open” but was accused of spreading bigotry and legitimizing racism.¹³ Britcoms thus became stages for a culture war; a place where the war was refracted and debated) and as subjects of various ethical debate.

Speight was a working-class man on a mission. He thought that his comedy should reveal the truth about the plight of the working-class. He was born in East London to a Roman Catholic family, and his father was a boiler scaler on the docks.¹⁴ He was educated in a local Roman Catholic primary school, which he hated, and left at the age of fourteen, angry and frustrated.¹⁵ His attacks on religion on *Till Death Do Us Part* pitted him against the formidable Mary Whitehouse from the National

¹² Barry Norman, “Seriously, it’s All a Laughing Matter for Johnny,” *Daily Mail*, August 3, 1966.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ McCann, *Spike & Co*, 124.

¹⁵ Ibid., 125.

Viewers and Listeners Association. Whitehouse led the *Clean Up TV* campaign during in which she bombarded the BBC and the daily newspapers with letters of complaint about what she believed to be objectionable content in print and on TV. In September 1972, for example, Whitehouse wrote to the BBC complaining about an episode of *Till Death Do Us Part* in which Mike argued that the Virgin Mary was “on the pill” because she only had one child.¹⁶ Speight and Whitehouse clashed bitterly in 1967 when in an interview he gave to *The World at One*, Speight implied Whitehouse and her *Clean Up TV* campaign were fascist. The much publicized conflict ended with the BBC paying damages to Whitehouse.¹⁷

During World war II Speight was assigned to cremate the enemy dead on the battlefields. This experience had accompanied him all his life and shaped his outlook.¹⁸ Upon his return to Civvy Street he tried unsuccessfully to pursue a career as a professional jazz musician. He survived through working a string of jobs from milk delivery to selling insurance. In 1953 an army friend introduced him to Frankie Howard, one of the great comedians of the day. The first joke he sold bears the seeds of his future comedy – “I’m livid – they’re pulling down my house to build a slum!”¹⁹ Housing was an important issue in that period, especially as government had issued the destruction of many urban slums to build new housing estates. Speight used his comic creations as a mouthpiece to denounce the destruction of authentic working-class communities, many of them in slum areas. His joke refers to the heated discussion about housing and the quality of the new buildings. It reveals his use of comedy as a tool of political engagement, a device he always used in his work.

¹⁶ Whitehouse to Rt Hon Sir John Eden MP, Minister of Posts and Telecommunications, September 21, 1972, File R78/2811/1 BBC WAC.

¹⁷ R134/609/1, BBC WAC.

¹⁸ McCann, *Spike & Co*, 126.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 129.

The joke must have gone down well, as Speight began to write for radio and then for TV in 1956. In 1957, he began his nine-year tenure as the main writer of ITV's sitcom *The Arthur Haynes Show* starring an anti-establishment tramp, the forbearer of Alf Garnett. He also wrote several class-conscious plays for TV in which he developed his social criticism. An avowed socialist, he aimed to write comedy that would hasten the revolution. His work fitted with the British movement of social realism in the arts and the anti-establishment spirit of the new wave of satire that crashed on the English shore in the 1960s with television shows such as *This Was the Week that Was* (BBC 1962-1963). In 1964, when the BBC offered him a chance to contribute to its half hour experimental comedy series *Comedy Playhouse*, he was excited to develop a kitchen-sink sitcom.²⁰ The result was the first episode of what would become *Till Death Do Us Part*, a domestic narrative of trapped relationships in a working-class East London family.

In his work Speight aimed to educate his public. In an interview promoting *Curry and Chips* (ITV 1969) Johnny Speight told the *Daily Express* that "I have written it to entertain—but laughter is a good aid to education."²¹ In an interview with the *Daily Mail* he maintained that "There is a message in the series: Prejudice is laughable."²² The controversial sitcom, which was terminated after one season due to viewers' pressure, takes place at the novelty factory Lillicrap that manufactures jokes. The series is an ensemble piece but two characters stand out: Kevin O'Grady, a Pakistani immigrant of Irish descent who insists he's Irish, and Arthur Blenkinsop, the foreman of the factory. Spike Milligan, the chief writer of the groundbreaking *Goon Show*, portrays O'Grady, having darkened his skin for the role. The foreman is Eric Sykes,

²⁰ McCann, *Spike & Co*, 139.

²¹ Martin Jackson, "Now Johnny Speight Gets on the Colour Kick," *Daily Express*, November 14, 1969.

²² Brian Dean, "Curry and Chips Starts TV Colour Row," *Daily Mail*, November 22, 1969.

who co-wrote and performed with Milligan in *The Goon Show*. Blenkinsop is “the wishy washy Liberal Englishman who displays friendship but is a prey to secret phobias.”²³ These phobias include, among others, homophobia. For example, in a scene with O’Grady he is concerned he might be the object of O’Grady’s homosexual attention.²⁴ Homophobia is entangled here with racism as the fear of buggery was in itself a racist trope.

The rest of the cast exhibited varying degrees of racism from “outright boorish hostility”²⁵ by the union representative to the racist aversion to O’Grady that Kenny, the only black worker in the factory, displayed. Actor and singer Kenny Lynch portrayed Kenny, a black bloke wary of the wave of “coloured” immigration because “until this lot came over here I was treated all right. I was a Cockney spade then.” Now, he maintained, people treated him as “a bloody coon. They say to me, ‘Oi, Sambo, go home! I am home. I was born here. I’m bloody English, I am.”²⁶ Kenny’s anger points to the frustration of non-white citizens about their exclusion from the national community. Kenny’s indignation exposes the power struggle over the boundaries of this community. The myriad instances of racism in the show were amplified every time all the members of the cast shared a scene. In those moments, noted William Keanan of the *Daily Mail*, “we merely seem to have a multi-vocal Alf Garnett giving forth about bloody wogs and coons.”²⁷

This ran contrary to Speight’s self-proclaimed agenda, but it demonstrates the elusive nature of comedy and reveals the active role audiences played in its consumption. Writers could control the words and actions of their characters but not how these would be interpreted by viewers. Indeed, the reception of *Curry and Chips*

²³ Philip Purses, *Sunday Telegraph*, 23 November 1969.

²⁴ “Episode 2,” *Curry and Chips*, ITV (November 28, 1969).

²⁵ Purses. *Sunday Telegraph*.

²⁶ “Episode 1,” *Curry and Chips*, ITV (November 20, 1969).

²⁷ William Keanan, “Too Much Spice with the Curry,” *Daily Mail* (December 20, 1969).

questioned the viability of Speight's method. In his review of *Curry and Chips* Maurice Wiggin from the *Sunday Times* honed in on the problem. He conceded that Johnny Speight, "hopes to laugh racial prejudice out of existence," but asked "did not Alf Garnett confirm as many Garnetts as he confounded?"²⁸ He doubted the logic of granting so much airtime to vocalize prejudice because, "there must be at least a possibility that by giving extended currency to the vile vocabulary of prejudice it will make them seem respectable to the impressionable and the ignorant."²⁹

Broadcasters were not oblivious to this potential danger. The BBC for example, worried that *Till Death Do Us Part* might hinder race relations in Britain. In 1968, it put together a research based on the responses of 100 viewers "scientifically selected from the London Area by an independent firm," representing a statistical sample of the population by age, class, sex and earning power, and asked people to comment on the right of TV to upset and occasionally offend the nation. Eighty percent, reported the *Evening Standard*, agreed that it had that right. When asked if they thought Alf Garnett stimulated racial prejudice, 95 per cent said no.³⁰ In 1968, Hugh Green the then General Director of the corporation corresponded with leading race relations experts who assured him that the show had a positive impact.³¹

By the time the series returned to the screen in 1972, it was impossible to view it simply as harmless fun. Consequently, an investigation into the matter was commissioned. The report surveyed 800 participants in urban centers in the UK. It found that the series made audience less tolerant to immigrants, and that viewers of the show were twice as likely to believe that "coloured people" were inferior to white

²⁸ Maurice Wiggin, *Sunday Times*, (November 23, 1969).

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Milton Shulman, "Viewers, You Were Looking at Yourselves!," *Evening Standard* (February 21, 1968).

³¹ Gavin Schaffer, "Race on the Television: The Writing of Johnny Speight in the 1970s," in *British Culture and Society in The 1970's: The Lost Decade*, eds. Laurel Forster and Sue Harper (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010), 111.

people. Surprisingly, the BBC concluded that the show had a minor impact on viewers' attitudes to race.³² Historian Gavin Schaffer points out that broadcasters were not as tolerant of Speight's other creations. Speight struggled to find a broadcaster that would screen his television play *If There Were no Blacks in Britain You'd Have to Invent Them* (ITV 1968) and his sitcom *Curry and Chips* was cancelled after one season. Schaffer thus argues that the BBC turned a blind eye on the question of racism in *Till Death Do Us Part* because it was so hugely popular.³³ The reluctance to retire the show might also be owed to financial considerations; the rights to transmit or adapt *Till Death Do Us Part* were sold successfully to television stations around the world.³⁴

Those Who Laugh and Those Who Are Laughed at

Although some writers did not shy away from seizing the opportunity to embrace sitcoms to make a political statement, others hesitated to do as much, although their work dealt with contested issues nonetheless. As television established itself as a major public space, even dabbling in social critique was part of the web of power relations. At the end of the day, reminds us Andy Medhurst, "... there are those who laugh and those who are laughed at."³⁵ Viewing the aforementioned *Fawlty Towers* scene from this vantage point almost 40 years after it was penned exposes its mechanism of boundary-drawing. It reminds us how central the differentiation between "us" and "them" is to comedy. This basic binary that works in sitcoms as a mechanism of inclusion or exclusion in the comedy circle is the same as that fundamental to definitions of nationalism, race, gender and class.

³² Ibid., 111-112.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Shaun Usher, "Alf Garnett boosts BBC's television export sales," *Daily Sketch*, April 16, 1968.

³⁵ Andy Medhurst, "Part One: Laughing Matters: Situation Comedies," in *The Colour Black: Black Images in British Television*, eds. Therese Daniels and Jane Gerson (London: British Film Institute, 1989), 15.

As a social type, Major Gowen is accustomed to living with such binaries. He represents the imperial proconsuls returning to England after the winding-down of the Empire. He is pompous, elegantly dressed (with the obligatory mustache), disconnected from the present (a trait intensified with the beginning of dementia), and his outlook on the world is shaped by racial hierarchy as it was practiced in the Empire. Fawlty is the typical Britcom leading man: an aspiring, snobbish, middle-class white man, doomed never to realize his social ambitions. Basil Fawlty is as arrogant, racist, and misogynist as the Major. He frequently takes aim at the Major but he is also envious of the sense of social entitlement and confidence the Major's social class affords him.

This set-up of power relations questions an interpretation of the Major solely as a "figure of fun." It may be true that the Major and his racist agenda are a target of ridicule and that he is established as a relic of the past. This was probably how some past and present viewers read his character, as the comments cited at the beginning of this discussion indicate. This interpretation runs into some problems, however: First, Fawlty's outlook is not that different from that of the Major's. Second, the jokes were filtered into British living-rooms at the height of a period of racial tension. A large segment of the audience probably cringed at the jokes, unable to laugh at slurs they faced in their daily lives. Their inability to be amused kept them out of the community of laughing subjects, which also happened to be the majority group. The jokes thus left the power of laughter in the hands of the powerful.³⁶ Third, those labeled with the N-word and W-word were mostly absent from the British screen; their voice banished from the discussion.

³⁶ Ibid., 16.

Lenny Henry, Britain's most famous black comedian, dedicated his keynote speech at the prestigious annual meeting of the Royal Television Society in 2008 to commenting on the topic. In the speech aptly titled "The Road To Diversity Is Closed . . . Please Seek Alternate Route," he recalled that when he watched TV as a child

. . . there were no black people on it at all. That was in the days of black and white television. They should have called it white and white television. If a black person did come on, people thought there was something wrong with the set (fiddles with contrast with one hand, phone in other hand) "Hullo-Radio Rentals? There's a dark bloke on my telly. Can you come and get him off?" (Fiddle) "he's still there."³⁷

Henry remembered that Sunday television shows,

. . . all depicted pre-immigration Britain: blue skies, green fields, and white people. . . It's like today – you can't move for "Bonnets and Crinolines" on the telly and the people wearing them are all white. By the time Queen Victoria was on the throne - this country had a sizeable black population-- so where are they when I turn on the telly?³⁸

Henry accused TV producers of the 1960s and 1970s of having missed an opportunity: "Rather than reflect the reality of multi-ethnic Britain they chose a more xenophobic route--emphasizing points of difference instead of similarities."³⁹ Henry went on to speculate that black actors in Britain were and are not seen on screen, "for fear of the audience having to actually speak to the real black people living in the next street."⁴⁰

Consequently, until the mid-1970s, the British screen was predominantly white. The shift began in the 1980s in stand-up comedy clubs, black comics worked the stand-up comedy circuit especially in London, but also in cities with black communities such as Birmingham, Manchester, Liverpool, Nottingham, Leicester, and Bristol. These performers gained momentum with the tour of The Posse, a group

³⁷ Lenny Henry, "The Road to Diversity is Closed...Please Seek Alternate Route," presented at the Royal Television Society meeting, The Cavendish Conference Centre, London, accessed February 7, 2008, www.rts.org.uk/road-diversity-closed-please-seek-alternate-route.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

of black male comedians fighting their marginalization, and the tour of the BiBi Crew, a group of black female comics. These comedians performed mostly for a black audience and a small number of non-blacks, but they proved there was an audience for their comic interpretation of life in Britain.⁴¹ Media scholars argue that it was the impact of Channel Four and its official mandate on “minorities broadcasting” that helped to diversify the casting on television, and by the end of the 1980s black people became more visible on both sides of the camera.⁴² The success of the comedy *The Real McCoy* (BBC2 1991 to 1996), cemented this achievement.⁴³

From Racism to Immigration Control

Ignoring Britain’s black community was part and parcel of Britons attempt to deal with the postwar identity crisis enforced by the eroding of national unity after the war. The economic crisis, the emergence of the United States as a world power, and the dismantling of empire all added to the sense of crisis.⁴⁴ Consequently, the decades from the war and to the 1970s saw the reconfiguration of British society, as it moved into the home and away from its empire. Many Britons left for the Commonwealth countries and immigrants flowed in from Europe, the former dominions, and the colonies.

On the heels of the demographic transformations followed legal amendments to the immigration laws that changed the criteria of eligibility for citizenship and legislation aimed at diminishing racial discrimination. These last measures paled in comparison to governments’ concrete efforts to halt immigration from the Caribbean and from South Asia. Simultaneously, the public sphere filled with debates over race,

⁴¹ Stephen Small, “‘Serious T’ing:’ The Black Comedy Circuit in England,” in *Because I Tell a Joke or Two: Comedy, Politics, and Social Difference*, ed. Stephen Wagg (London; New York: Routledge, 1998), 221.

⁴² Kobena Mercer, “General Introduction,” in *The Colour Black*, 1.

⁴³ Small, “Serious T’ing,” 221.

⁴⁴ Waters, “Dark Strangers,” 208.

race relations and immigration these debates didn't remain on print or on the air, they spilled into the streets with increasing violence as will be discussed below.

Acute labor shortages plagued the postwar era and grew with the need to rebuild the country. In addition, workers were needed to jumpstart the economy and pay off war debt. Both Labour and Conservative governments in the immediate two postwar decades resorted to inviting workers from outside to unite the workforce.⁴⁵ An ongoing concern from the beginning of the century about a declining birth-rate prompted policy-makers to offer and assist these workers in assimilating to the national community. It was hoped that they would contribute not only to the economic reinvigoration of the nation but also halt and reverse the long-term demographic decline. For this reason, the process of labor procurement was complicated by a specific vision of the British national community. As historian Kathleen Paul demonstrated, British politicians did not mean to issue an open invitation to the workers of the world. Rather, they held a clear hierarchy of desirability informed by racial prejudice and shaped by centuries of colonial rule.

Consequently, the workers who poured into the country were accorded different prospects of joining the national community. European workers recruited among Displaced Persons in Europe were embraced as potential fellow-countrymen, encouraged and aided in their efforts to assimilate.⁴⁶ Individuals from Ireland and the "Old Dominions," i.e. white workers, were seen as part of the same "family" of nations as Britain. Though not perceived as equal to Britons, their work power was valued and they were permitted to remain in Britain and eventually enjoy full citizenship.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Kathleen Paul, *Whitewashing Britain: Race and Citizenship in the Postwar Era*, (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1997), 67.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 87.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 110.

In contrast, both Labor and Conservative government found colonial immigrants, i.e. non-white migrants, lacking. On the one hand, colonial immigrants were valuable skilled, semi-skilled and able-bodied workers. On the other hand, they were the “wrong” sort of workers - the negative meaning attached to their skin color rendered them unsuitable to assimilate in the British nation. Workers’ potential to contribute to the nation as breeders of future citizens, seen as a great advantage in other groups, was, in this case, a threat to the nation. Furthermore, their status as British subjects complicated matters even more; politicians in both parties worried they would be harder to dispense with once they completed the tasks they had been hired to do.

Articulating these concerns in the aftermath of the war on fascism was a challenge. British propaganda informed Britons that they went to war to fight the evil of racial annihilation, among other reasons. Many prided themselves on the absence of racial discrimination in contrast to America. Furthermore, colonial soldiers were invaluable to the war effort, and the image of the family of nations that made up imperial Britain was a popular propaganda trope. While in the 1940s, black and Asian immigrants trickled into Britain in relatively insignificant numbers, the figures became more substantial in the 1950s. As the narrator of Sam Selvon's famous novel *The Lonely Londoners* (1956) commented, “spades” were everywhere

. . . the boys all over London, it ain't a place where you wouldn't find them, and big discussion going on in Parliament about the situation, though the old Brit'n too diplomatic to clamp down on the boys or do something drastic like stop them from coming to the Mother Country.⁴⁸

'Old Brit'n' did not shy away from taking drastic steps for long. Following a series of race riots in the Notting Hill area of London in the summer of 1958, the rise of racial tensions, and a peak year with 100,000 colonial immigrants in 1961, the Conservative government passed a new Immigration Act In 1962. The 1962 Immigration Act

⁴⁸ Sam Selvon, *The Lonely Londoners* (London: Penguin Books, 2006 (1956)), 2.

initiated an exclusionist government policy designed to keep colored citizens out by only permitting those with government-issued employment vouchers to immigrate.

The discourse of nationalism resonated in popular culture. In June 1961 the BBC transmitted “The Blood Donor,” a TV episode of *Hancock*, one of the best-loved sitcom episodes in Britain. In this episode, Hancock decides to do “something for the benefit of the country as a whole.”⁴⁹ After discarding the option of joining the Young Conservatives, because he wasn’t looking for a wife and couldn’t play table tennis, he chooses to donate blood. He informs the nurse of his intentions “Here I am. A body full of good British blood and raring to go.”⁵⁰ When the nurse asks for his nationality, Hancock assures her,

Ah, you’ve got nothing to worry about there. It’s the blood you’re thinking about, isn’t it? British! British undiluted for twelve generations. 100% Anglo-Saxon with just a dash of Viking. Nothing else has crept in, no. Anybody who gets any of this will have nothing to complain about.⁵¹

Hancock ends his statement with a warning, “You wanna watch who you will be giving it to. It’s like motor oil. It doesn’t mix well if you know what I mean.”⁵² The viewers of *Hancock* certainly knew what he meant, as the increase in immigration had brought racial prejudice to the fore. During the episode, Hancock’s pride in his British blood is turned on its head. After he is informed his blood belongs to the rare AB blood group he becomes obsessed by the fate of his donation, calling in every few hours to hear if it was used. While slicing bread, Hancock inadvertently cuts himself and is admitted to hospital. To compensate for his blood loss he is given a transfusion of his own blood. Ultimately, his service to “the country as a whole,” morphs into an egoistic act. The hinted discussion of race turns into a demonstration of Hancock’s shortcomings as a man.

⁴⁹ “Blood Donor,” *Hancock*, BBC (June 23, 1961).

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

This episode and its lasting popularity demonstrate Britain's anxiety regarding race, and the nation's reluctance to face it head on. The way to address the unspeakable, suggests Paul, was to talk about it in terms of controls on immigration, and by constructing colonial immigrants as a social problem linked to poverty, disease and social disorder.⁵³ As such, their arrival needed to be curtailed or at least limited and their behavior investigated by the new "science" of "race relations," led by a group of anthropologists and sociologists. The group of renowned professionals such as Kenneth Little, Anthony Richmond, Michael Banton, and Sheila Patterson connected race, nation, and difference, and narrated the migrant other as an outsider to British norms.⁵⁴

The celebration of working-class Britain as heroic and indispensable to the war effort, with the advent of the "Endless Middle," facilitated peddling a narrative of unity that glossed-over class difference. In this account, whiteness and Britishness become synonymous, and immigrants were relegated to the sidelines of mainstream society.⁵⁵ Much of the language used previously to describe the working-class as a separate race was now deployed to describe immigrants.⁵⁶ For example, immigrants were presented as the bearers of the white working-class demise. As one character in the sitcom *Curry and Chips* utters during a pub fight, "Bloody coons You offer 'em the hand of friendship . . . 'an what they do? Turn on yer . . . and try to nick your jobs . . . and yer women."⁵⁷

In the same series, Norman the union representative is enraged with "Paki-Paddy" for working too fast. He warns Blenkinsop that he will start a strike unless O'Grady slows down. He explains, "...the lads out there work but nobody works during the tea

⁵³ Waters, "Dark Strangers," 218.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 217.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 212.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 227.

⁵⁷ "Episode 1," *Curry and Chips*, ITV (November 20, 1969).

break but him! It's one of the unwritten laws of British industry. It's part of our white culture."⁵⁸ At first, O'Grady refuses. He argues for his individual right to improve his lot. He tells Blenkinsop that,

Governor see me goes fast, says good man, give me a good job... Too many people in England going slow. Same in the toilet. I go to the toilet, I do proper business... Other men go in toilet, don't do proper ohhh . . . (makes the sounds of an effort and puts on an appropriate facial expression). No, nothing. Smoke cigarette, play cards, look at girls with big crystal ?? (unclear). That is not good for poor England.⁵⁹

By the end of the chapter, however, the workers are sitting around in a dirty space, unable to continue working. Paddy is on the toilet, checking the sport bets he placed on teams from Pakistan rather than cleaning the work space. He has adapted to England and to the union way.

The episode demonstrates Speight's Marxist analysis of contemporary Britain. Speight understood racial prejudice as a mechanism to exploit the weakest in society. At some times the working class was exploited, and at others the immigrants. In either case, the capitalists profit from cultivating a rivalry between the groups.⁶⁰ If these subjugated groups were to rise, they would have to create an alliance. Speight believed their close encounters at working places and neighborhoods would facilitate a coalition of the exploited. As Peter Black wrote in the *Daily Mail*

Johnny's writing always suggested that contact between the pinks and the browns is much franker and healthier among the unskilled and semi-skilled working class—which is where most of the coloured immigrants get their living - than among the classes above it. It's the people who fear the coloured without having much contact with them who can't stand hearing words like 'wog,' 'Sambo,' and 'coon' banded about and are horrified to hear their prejudices exposed as though they were funny.⁶¹

⁵⁸ "Episode 2," *Curry and Chips*, ITV (November 28, 1969).

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Schaffer, "Race on the Television," 115.

⁶¹ Peter Black, "Speighting for the Day When Pinks and Browns Can Laugh Together," *Daily Mail* (November 24, 1969).

Black endorsed the point of view Speight introduced to the series that working class racism, openly aired, was to the benefit of immigrants. Black agreed that it would be difficult for immigrants “ . . . to see that a man who calls another a wog has perhaps accepted him more completely than one who studiously avoids mentioning the subject.”⁶² The series, however, undermines this optimistic spin on racism. In the third episode Paddy wins the lottery and consequently life in England turns brighter. The racist union representative’s daughter, a pretty white girl, finds him attractive; his landlady fixes him a meal; the pub owner invites him to a round of drinks, and the bigot union guy threatens that, “Anyone who calls the wog a coon, will be sacked.”⁶³ Speight’s gang of workers buys into the capitalist promise that equates money with social acceptance and mobility. Their class camaraderie is superficial and their acceptance of O’Grady motivated by greed.

1968: A Year of Deterioration in Community Relations

The poisonous national discourse regarding immigration culminated in April 1968 with Enoch Powell’s “Rivers of Blood” speech and the public outburst that followed. The heated demonstrations both in favor of and against Powell blasted the myth of unity, pitting various social groups like the white working-class against non-white immigrants. In his speech to an assembly of Conservative supporters at a hotel in Birmingham, a few days before the Labour government’s Race Relations Bill was to have its second reading, Powell suggested an exclusive answer to the burning question “who was Britain.”⁶⁴ He cautioned Britons about a social and demographic revolution taking place under their noses. He described people from his constituency

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ “Episode 3,” *Curry and Chips*, ITV (December 5, 1969).

⁶⁴ The bill made it illegal to refuse housing, employment, or public services to a person on the grounds of color, race, ethnic or national origins. It also created the Community Relations Commission to promote “harmonious community relations.”

at Wolverhampton in the West Midlands who no longer felt at home in their own communities. Allegedly, they had complained to him that their old neighborhoods and streets were taken over by “wide-grinning piccaninnies,” who know but one word in English, “racialist.”⁶⁵

The “Rivers of Blood” speech had an immediate and immense effect on British society, evidenced in the ensuing street protests. Its adversarial tone contributed to the sense of national discord already provoked by the CND (Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament) demonstrations in the late 1950s and anti-Vietnam War protests.⁶⁶ On April 23, three days after Powell’s speech and his subsequent sacking from the Shadow Cabinet by Conservative leader Edward Heath, 1,000 London dockers went on strike to protest Powell’s sacking. They marched from London’s East End to the Palace of Westminster carrying placards that read “Don’t knock Enoch” and “Back Britain, not Black Britain.” The sentiments expressed on these placards were a far cry from the postwar vision of unity. Dockers formulated their support for Powell as working men anxious not to lose their jobs to newcomers. Blunt racist rhetoric like that displayed on their placards, however, exposed the racial undertones of this support.

On 24 April, a day after the march, 600 dockers at St Katharine’s Docks in London went on strike and numerous smaller factories across the country followed. Six hundred Smithfield meat porters marched to Westminster and handed Powell a 92-page petition supporting him. Strikes continued and within a week Powell was boasting 30,000 letters of support, claiming he had received only 30 letters of protest.

⁶⁵ Most famously, Powell shared with his audience a complaint of a widowed woman who felt unsafe walking in her neighborhood because of the “foreign presence.” Journalists who were intrigued by this story had failed to trace this woman, leading many to think it was an ugly rhetoric tool. “Rivers of Blood” transcript, accessed on October 3, 2012,

http://www.martinfrost.ws/htmlfiles/rivers_blood2.html#Transcript.

⁶⁶ Bill Schwarz, *The White Man’s World*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 3.

By 27 April, 4,500 dockers were on strike. By that time the voice of dissent began to be heard more forcibly. On 28 April, 1,500 people marched to Downing Street chanting “Arrest Enoch Powell.” The Gallup Organization took an opinion poll at the end of April and found that 74 percent agreed with what Powell had said in his speech, and only 15 percent disagreed. Sixty nine percent felt Heath was wrong to sack Powell and 20 per cent believed Heath was right. Eighty three percent now felt immigration should be restricted (seventy five percent had before the speech) and 65 percent favored anti-discrimination legislation.

The issues of blood, national identity, and entitlement were in the air decades before Powell. If at the beginning of the postwar era they were only hinted at, in 1968 they were talked about unashamedly. The decades leading from the war to this iconic year saw the rolling back of empire and the transformation of its role in the public imagination. The empire was gradually dismantled from its zenith in 1919 as a realm that stretched over a quarter of the globe and included almost a third of its population. It was a protracted process starting in the interwar years and ending in 1997 with the transfer of Hong Kong to China.⁶⁷ Decolonization “in formal constitutional terms” included the Statute of Westminster in 1931 for the so-called white Dominions, the ending of the mandate in Iraq in 1932, and the treaty which permitted Egypt’s entry into the League of Nations in 1936. Rapid decolonization took place in 1947-1948 in India, Pakistan, Burma, and Sri Lanka; Ireland’s departure from the Commonwealth, and the end of the mandate in Palestine.⁶⁸ The second wave of decolonization occurred in 1956-1957 with the debacle in Suez in the summer of 1956 as its symbolic embodiment. Within a few months, the beginning of decolonization in West

⁶⁷ John MacKenzie, “The Persistence of Empire in Metropolitan Culture,” in *British Culture and the End of Empire*, ed. Stuart Ward (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), 21.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 24.

Africa (Ghana) and South-East Asia (Malaya and Singapore) ensued. The last wave between 1961 and 1965 included acts of decolonization throughout Africa.⁶⁹

As the idea of the end of empire became more prominent, the cultural sphere filled with responses to it. Literary movements such as the Angry Young Men rejected deference and expressed rage at the failure of the traditional establishment. In addition, the discussion of the decline of Britain became more central, as for many decades scholars supported the minimal impact theory to describe Britons' reaction to the end of empire.⁷⁰ Historian Bernard Porter had controversially argued that there was little evidence that decolonization had impacted British culture at all.⁷¹

Author Bill Schwarz demonstrates the contrary. Schwarz links the various manifestations of disorder and challenge to authority in the 1960s that this chapter has discussed to the political-cultural effects of the end of empire in domestic society.⁷² In this interpretation, the support for Enoch Powell is in effect a reaction to the decline of empire—even if the two processes—decolonization and the rise of Powellism—were directly connected. Powell's speech caused such a public brouhaha even when the empire was formally a thing of the past because the memory of the empire was very much alive.⁷³ When non-white immigrants arrived at the metropole, it was urgent to define whiteness and establish a distance between "us" and "them."⁷⁴ This was getting harder to do while skirting around the topic of race. Powell's speech was such a key moment because it made race speakable and constructed non-white immigrants as natives and bearers of disorder.⁷⁵

⁶⁹ MacKenzie, "The Persistence of Empire in Metropolitan Culture," 22.

⁷⁰ Stuart Ward, "Introduction," In *British Culture and the End of Empire*, 8-9.

⁷¹ Bernard Porter, *The Absent-Minded Imperialists: Empire, Society, and Culture in Britain*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

⁷² Schwarz, *Memories of Empire*, 4.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 11.

What Powell expressed about the end of white authority—the declaration that in twenty years “the black man will have the whip-hand over the white man”—was an admission that the process of decolonization occurred also at home. The racial-colonial order would crumble not only in the colonies but in England.⁷⁶ An episode of *Till Death Do Us Part* titled the “Blood Donor” echoes the anxieties this prospect aroused. The premise is similar to that of the 1961 *Hancock* episode: Alf becomes a blood donor after Mike taunts him that he doesn’t have the courage to donate blood. Like Hancock, Alf fusses over who should receive his blood. Unlike Hancock who was mostly concerned about class, Alf worried that his blood would be given to a black man. When Mike and Rita challenge him that if he would need blood he would take it regardless of its human origin, Alf protests, arguing that not all blood is the same, “Course, you’ve got good blood and bad blood.”⁷⁷ As proof he brings-up the Royal family’s preoccupation with lineage “your Royals are so fussy about blood . . . that’s so the blood can’t be tainted,” he tells the young ones.

The conversation turns to a discussion about the ground-breaking heart transplant performed three weeks earlier in South Africa. Mike and Rita are impressed by the achievement but Alf reminds them that the man who received the new heart had died. He connects the failure to the sex of the donor. Else supports his view, “I can’t think it’s right meself . . . putting a woman’s heart in a man’s body.” Furthermore, Alf believes the patient’s body rejected the “foreign organ” because he was Jewish and the heart was Christian. Alf proceeds to question another operation in which, “this black heart what’s been put in a white body” in South Africa. He asks

⁷⁶ Ibid., 29.

⁷⁷ “Blood Donor.” *Till Death Do Us Part*.

“what kind of life is he going to have eh? Living in South Africa with Apartheid...I mean he won’t know what toilet to use.”⁷⁸

Unsurprisingly, Alf was appalled when he noticed a black man donating blood at the hospital. He asks Mike if he thinks the donation is “for other coons.” When Mike answers the blood would be used according to need, Alf argues that, “they start bunging that in white people...an’ who can tell what’s going to happen...we could all turn black.”⁷⁹ Mike offers that if that were true, it could solve the racial problem: “If what you’re saying is true...all they got to do then, is take your coloured people...drain all their blood off...and then fill ‘em up with white blood. And you’ve solved the colour problem...cos they’d all be white then.”⁸⁰

The episode was the most watched television show that week with 8,350,000 viewers.⁸¹ Quite a few of them telephoned the BBC to complain.⁸² The BBC’s response was that since the series was transmitted at adult viewing times and considering its reputation for controversy, viewers should have known what to expect.

Viewers, You Were Looking at Yourselves!

As we have seen, *Till Death Do Us Part* was a self-appointed, aggressive, non-apologetic exposé of British prejudice. At first, Alf and his conservative agenda seem to be the main target of ridicule. His slanders were met with comebacks from his young son-in-law Mike, a committed Labor voter. Superficially, this may seem a fair battle: a rowdy discussion of racism in Britain in which the bigot is defeated by the new generation of working-class men. Many contemporary critics shared this view, they justified its untamed rudeness by calling it a “public service...cleansing the

⁷⁸ “Blood Donor,” *Till Death Us Do Part*.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ “8,350,000 See ‘Till Death Us Do Part,’” *Daily Telegram*, January 13, 1968.

⁸² “Carry on Alf, Let ‘Em Moo,” *Daily Mirror*, January 14, 1968.

Augean stable of our national vices of mind,”⁸³ and a “laughing shock treatment to the nation’s consciousness.”⁸⁴

In practice, from its original run viewers felt confused about their relationship with Alf. The confusion grew from not quite knowing on whom to place the joke: was it on Alf? On people who endorsed his outlook? On those he attacked? On the viewers as representatives of their society? Viewers’ love for the show, and in particular, their sympathy for Alf complicated things by naming him the butt of the joke. Audiences were united in their affection for him, albeit divided by the reaction to his slurs. More importantly, the absence of black characters to voice a critique of racism weakened the opposition to Alf considerably. It also reinforced the myth of white Britain in face of a society that was now quite the opposite –especially in certain cities such as London or Birmingham. The 1970s resurgence of the late-1960s skinhead culture, this time in connection with far right politics and football hooliganism, showed that racism was not a relic of the past. It would not vanish with the disappearance of the generation of Alf Garnet and Major Gowen. Thus an optimistic reading of racism as aligned with Alf and the new tolerant Britain as represented by the new generation, crumbled in the face of reality.

By the time *Curry and Chips* hit the screens, most viewers had figured this out from their own experience. A year after Powell’s “Rivers of Blood” speech and the spirited public debate that accompanied it, racism could no longer be laughed away. The *Financial Times* reported that the first annual report of the Community Relations Commission (appointed by government as part of the 1968 Race Relation Act) concluded that 1968 would be written down by “many workers in this field” as “a

⁸³ T.C. Worsley, “Monstrous Alf,” *Financial Times*, January 18, 1967.

⁸⁴ Graham Stanford, “Ban Alf? Surely Not,” *News of the World*, February 18, 1968.

year of deterioration in community relations.”⁸⁵ It cited the head of the committee, Frank Cousins, as saying that “Perhaps the worst feature was that for the first time opinion in this country appeared to accept as socially respectable the use of blatantly hostile language in public utterances on the subject of race and minority ethnic groups.”⁸⁶

The critics of Speight argued that his oeuvre had a hand in this unfortunate turn of events. This alleged change in the public discussion about race, however, sits uneasily with the less than enthusiastic reaction to *Curry and Chips*. If racism became more acceptable, why, just minutes after the first episode was aired, did viewers begin calling ITV to object to its content?⁸⁷ Part of the answer pertains to the craftsmanship: critics agreed the show was not as funny as *Till Death Do Us Part*. One reviewer complained that Speight had already shot all the clay pigeons he lined up such as “the trade union restrictive practices and the fascinating myth that the coloured man is better endowed sexually than his poor white brother.”⁸⁸ Consequently, the show was a dull “one note symphony.”⁸⁹ Another argued that the problem was the “crudeness of construction and crudeness of characterisation.”⁹⁰ The same critic did not appreciate that it was smug and “holier than me.”⁹¹

Other critics found the failure of *Curry and Chips* to be a breach in form. Milton Shulman suggested in the *Evening Standard* that the series did not make good on its promise of realism. Shulman argued that the setting of the series in a novelty factory filled with masks and clown hats “immediately isolated its occupants in a vulgar

⁸⁵ Joe Rogaly, “Taking a Lesson from ‘Curry and Chips,’” *Financial Times*, November 25, 1969.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Dean, “Curry and Chips Starts TV Colour Row.”

⁸⁸ William Marshall, “Spike Was in Full Speight,” *Daily Sketch*, November 18, 1969.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Purses, *Sunday Telegraph*.

⁹¹ Ibid.

fantasy world . . . remote from reality.”⁹² Unlike the Garnetts, argued Shulman, they are, “. . . artificial characters living an unreal existence wound up like clockwork toys to utter Johnny Speight’s gags about colour in an electronic void.”⁹³ Consequently, “. . . we cannot really see the absurdity and ugliness of these foul-mouthed bigots because they strike at nothing we can remotely identify as credible.”⁹⁴ Ultimately, it becomes an aesthetic failure that its ideology implodes and yields racism rather than a critique of racism.

Shulman had hoped for the strand of unabashed realism that made him a fan of Speight’s in the first place. A year earlier, Shulman endorsed *Till Death Do Us Part*, in an article titled “Viewers, you were looking at yourselves!” In that article Shulman explained that “The fascination of Alf Garnett, the monstrous hero of the BBC’s *till Death Us Do Part*, lay in his ability to act as a distorting mirror in which we could watch our meanest attributes reflected large and ugly.”⁹⁵

Unlike the unrealistic bunch at Lilicrap Factory, Alf’s source of attraction was his perceived authenticity. As a distorted mirror Alf, “. . . brandishes his decadent and violent ideas in the foul-mouthed linguistic setting that suited them best. He was too uncultivated and ignorant to realise that if he disguised them under a veneer of propriety, they would have been acceptable in some of our best drawing-rooms.”⁹⁶

Ultimately, maintained Shulman, the show failed because “it is probably exacerbating rather than subduing racial relations.”⁹⁷ This undesirable outcome was due to the shift in power relations at the basis of the show, which in the minds of many vindicated racism. Audiences fell for Alf Garnett because there was always a

⁹² Shulman, “Too Many Chips, Mostly on Shoulders.”

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Shulman, “Viewers, You Were Looking at Yourselves!”

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Shulman, “Too Many Chips, Mostly on Shoulders.”

margin of ambiguity about his character: he was both offensive and ridiculous. He took aim at all the institutions of postwar society such as the Labour party and the welfare state, but his defense of conservative institutions such as the monarchy and class hierarchies at the peak of the anti-establishment movement was ridiculed. Moreover, he was one bigot against three members of his own family.

Curry and Chips reversed this alignment: it positioned one immigrant against the rest. Contrary to Shulman's critique of the show as being less realistic, this configuration was rather accurate for many immigrants, and it was this precision that made the viewing so uncomfortable. Hitting too close to home, it showed racism as a brutal act of ignorance, as men's ganging up on another asking to join. It exposed racism for what it is.

This cruel exposure ended-up spawning racism rather than diminishing it. O'Grady failed to manage a sufficient defense against the acts of bigotry aimed at him because he was constructed as a figure of fun. Spike Milligan, the brilliant comic who portrayed him, was playing for laughs, not only for noble principles. Second, the defense of immigrants came in the form of a white man in blackface pretending to be a Pakistani, mediated by the pen of another white man. This crude representation of the immigrant served to further silence immigrants' actual voices.

Spike Milligan imitating a Pakistani was a poor substitute for Lenny Henry's childhood wish to see more people of color on television. Henry recalled how his family would watch all the sitcoms with black actors, including those with white men in blackface such as *Till Death Do Us Part* and *Ain't Half Hot Mom* (BBC 1974-1981). He remembered his family's reaction to these programs, "...we enjoyed them

because it felt like we were being included. ‘Look! They’ve put someone in it who looks like us, so it must be for us.’”⁹⁸

The problem, he maintained was that, “You couldn’t see a black or Asian face on the screen without some dialogue about the problems they had ‘fitting in.’”⁹⁹ The construction of non-white citizens as a social problem had left a bitter taste.

Ultimately, it didn’t matter much that good intentions surrounded the representation of race, Henry acknowledged that,

Speight tried to ensure that in each story line, Alf came off the worst. But when I went to school the next morning, it was always me who came off worst. Wog, Coon and Paki were just some of the words parroted back to me in the playground. I tried to explain that I was not in fact from Pakistan, but Philip Sherman decided to overlook this technicality, as he repeatedly kneed me in the crotch.¹⁰⁰

Henry suggested that if scriptwriters and producers knew how influential they were, “they wouldn’t bandy offensive terms around quite so readily—post ironic or not . . . Words like Wog, Paki and Coon back then, and Chav and Pikey today, have a profound effect on our communities.”¹⁰¹

This problem did not resolve itself simply by replacing white actors with white ones. Henry, who in 1976 landed the role of Sonny Foster in the first all-black British sitcom made by an all-white production team, explained the problem:

So we had a white writer, a white director and a white producer, all telling this black family how to behave. ‘Well at 6 O’clock at my house, we usually have a sherry and break out the petit fours . . . Is that the sort of thing you’d do?’ All really nice people to work with, of course, but no way did this show reflect a typical black household anywhere in the UK that I’d ever seen.¹⁰²

He concluded that along with a more ethnically diversified screen, television had to represent more versions of being British. Henry maintained that “...if we are going to truly represent multicultural Britain in the 21st century; we must, as Hamlet

⁹⁸ Henry. “The Road to Diversity is Closed,”

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Ibid.

instructed the player king, ‘hold, as twere, the mirror up to nature.’ Because it hurts to be excluded.”¹⁰³

Conclusion

During the 1950s and 1960s racial tensions intensified and race riots and racism troubled the public sphere. These events had motivated anti-immigration legislation in the 1960s, but also the institution of anti-discrimination laws and mechanisms. The collapse of the empire in those decades convinced some politicians to court the European market in hopes of further collaboration.¹⁰⁴ Finally, the formal retreat from the empire by the mid-1960s gave birth to a resurgence of the vision of “little England.” This vision, at the heart of the next chapter, replaced the version of the imperial national community. It was a whitewashed view of the country that was shaped by the presence of non-white immigrants, fears of the ending of the regime of white, male authoritative society, and the consequent discourse of decline.

Even though postwar governments had no intention of building a multicultural state, it seemed that they had one on their hands. Taken together, this complicates our definition and understanding of the processes of decolonization; the timeline of decolonization has to be altered accordingly. It requires stretching the usual narrative of decolonization back to the 1930s with the beginning of forceful demands for dependency from the colonies, and forward into the 1990s. This narrative must include the immense impact of decolonization on domestic Britain as it was represented in popular culture. Consequently, we should locate the postwar era within the imperial past rather than describe it as a complete rupture with this legacy.

Sitcoms delved into this debate with glee, as writers aspired to educate their audiences. Motivated by their belief in the transformative power of realistic art, they

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ MacKenzie, “The Persistence of Empire in Metropolitan Culture,” 33.

viewed their artistic output as a political act, undeterred by the commonplace view that commercial comedy's sole aspiration should be to entertain or reinforce the existing beliefs of its viewers. As the attitudes to race change over the decades, sitcoms' way of addressing the topic shifted from skirting around the topic, to blunt racist humor, to representation of the experience of multi-ethnic Britain.

This chapter reveals how instrumental radio and television were in the dissemination of ideas about race among a substantial and diverse population of "fireside spectators."¹⁰⁵ The frequent repeats of sitcoms over the years in this media and through new technologies such as cable, satellite TV, and the internet, passed on these formulations of race relations to new generations of viewers. In the process they posed new concerns about the potential and pitfalls of racist humor. Taking certain series out of their contemporary context erased the subversive edge they might have had. Their reception by new audiences exposed them as evidence of racism rather than its social critique, thereby revealing the mercurial nature of comedy. It also showed the immense power and responsibility audiences have in its interpretation.

¹⁰⁵ Abrams, "The Home-Centred Society."

Chapter Five: Technologies of Memory: Britcoms Whitewash the War

Contrary to what contemporaries and many scholars believe, television and comedy in particular were not all light-weight gaiety and frivolity. Cinema and broadcast media were indispensable to the ways in which Britons produced and consolidated their sense of self, learned about the national and moral boundaries of their society, and remembered their past.¹ British sitcoms thus constitute a unique body of evidence for the study of the ongoing ways in which individuals learn to be “national.” They demonstrate the constructed and fluid character of the nation and expose the constant negotiations over its definition. In the decades under consideration the public mood shifted from a euphoric sense of social consensus to angry articulations of social collapse and friction embodied by the success of punk.

Britcoms were a central social space in which the redefinition and reformation of British society took place. A branch of Britcoms, which I term “period sitcoms,” had a pronounced preoccupation with the past and its memory. This chapter will focus on one such series, *Dad’s Army* that narrates the shenanigans of a Home Guard unit of volunteers during 1940. Although it relates the story of wartime Britain it was made in 1968. In that iconic year, it hit the screen with a whitewashed version of wartime Britain and offered its viewers a seductive narrative of national unity, popular patriotism and male cross-generational friendship.

¹ Some examples are Sarah Street’s, *British National Cinema* (London: Routledge, 1997), Jeffrey Richards, *Films and British National Identity: From Dickens to Dad’s Army* (Manchester; New York: Manchester University Press, 1997), Stuart Ward, *British Culture and the End of Empire* (Manchester, UK; New York: Manchester University Press; New York: Distributed exclusively in the USA by Palgrave, 2001), Wendy Webster, *Englishness and Empire, 1939-1965* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), Andy Medhurst, *A National Joke: Popular Comedy and English Cultural Identities* (London; New York: Routledge, 2007); Purnima Mankekar, *Screening Culture, Viewing Politics: Ethnography of Television, Womanhood, and Nation in Postcolonial India* (Durham [N.C.]; London: Duke University Press, 1999) Jeffrey Miller, *Something Completely Different: British Television and American Culture* (Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).

This vision could not have been further from late 1960s reality. In that eventful year, 1968, postwar tensions came to a head with mass movement on the left and on the right (anti-imperial and racist, respectively) taking to the streets. In April, Enoch Powell flamed Britons with his “Rivers of Blood” speech and drove thousands of supporters and opponents to the streets. The process of deindustrialization that began after the war resulted in the dramatic narrowing of job opportunities, especially for the young.² Already by 17 March protests over American involvement in Vietnam had turned violent as protesters, mostly students and young people, reached the American embassy in Grosvenor Square in London. Two hundred were arrested and 86 treated for injuries. The protest was fuelled by images of student demonstrations and violent putdowns in France and the United States broadcast on TV. In 1968, television was revolutionized by two technological changes: the replacement of film with cheap and reusable videotape and the same-day broadcast which allowed unedited images of rebellion to disseminate across continents. The symbolic leader of French student revolt, Danny Cohn-Bendit, later acknowledged the role of television in galvanizing his generation’s frustration, admitting that as the “first television generation” “we met through television.”³

A cursory survey of five major areas of contestation reveals how destabilized British society was at the time. Transformations in gender relations added further friction over race and immigration, deindustrialization, and the generational divide. They were accentuated by high-profile achievements of the women’s movement such as the 1968 strike for equal pay by female machinists at Ford's Dagenham plant, and the 1969 Divorce Act. Like the 1950s Angry Young Men, women now voiced their frustration. The public discourse was saturated with accounts of tension between the

² Peter Leese, *Britain since 1945: Aspects of Identity* (Basingstoke, Hampshire; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 4.

³ Sean O’Hagan, “Everyone to the Barricades,” *The Guardian*, January 20, 2008.

sexes and the “failure of intimacy and affection in relations between men and women.”⁴

To top it all, the conception of the nation as Great Britain was threatened by the intensification of national and regional demands in Ireland, Scotland, and Wales. This augmented the urgency of redefining the national community. As the last chapter demonstrated, this process had already begun with the dismantling of the empire in the two previous decades and its repercussions.

Regardless of the contested reality of 1968 Britain, the creators of *Dad's Army*, David Croft and Jimmy Perry chose to portray a homogenous and united society. Their Britain was England, a country free from such heated debates. It was located in the countryside and populated with white male citizens pining to dig for England. It had no urban working-class people or industrial hands. Women were marginalized, secondary to the band of men. The only youth was a docile 16 year-old. Non-whites didn't appear on the screen and the only representation of non-English citizens was a dour Scotsman.

All these omissions did not interfere with the show's success. To the contrary, achieved phenomenal success and swept audiences in Britain and abroad and has managed to retain this affection to this day. The loving portrayal of the Home Guard volunteers contributed to the narrative of the war as a period of national consensus, and glossed over the tensions and rifts that were part of wartime Britain. This sanitized retelling corresponded with late 1960s and 1970s desire for unity and cohesion and became the show's main source of appeal. Although the show mocked the inadequacies of wartime Britain, and even had a spiv as one of its main characters, it radiated neighborly warmth and unity unlikely to be found in reality. As the “Rivers

⁴ Leese, *Britain since 1945*, 99.

of Blood” brouhaha had demonstrated, the world of Wellington-on-Sea no longer existed. Indeed, some would argue it never had existed. Since Britain was en route to multiculturalism, it was not likely ever to appear.

Dad’s Army and its creators are a fascinating case-study of the power of Britcoms to shape public conceptions of the past. Perry and Croft are leading figures in a historical quest that many British sitcoms engaged in. As a writing duo, but also in their individual work, Jimmy Perry and the late David Croft (both OBEs) brought to the British screen period sitcoms such as *Dad’s Army*, *It Ain’t Half Hot Mum*, *‘Allo ‘Allo!*, *Hi-De-Hi!*, and *You Rang M’Lord* - all of which testify to, and embody their fascination with the past. In their illustrious careers as writers, and in Croft’s additional work as an influential producer and director at the BBC, they carved out a niche for sitcoms situated in the near past. With a commitment to historical detail, the two repackaged 1920s, 1940s, and 1950s Britain first to the permissive society and later to neo-liberal Britain.

Decades of reruns of period sitcoms first on national channels, and later abroad, on cable TV, and most recently on YouTube, exposed new generations to their particular version of the past. The Croft and Perry representation of England still informs and shapes contemporary understandings of it. In this way, Britcoms become technologies of memory. As such, sitcoms are a potent, though neglected, source for the production of collective memory and national identities. *Dad’s Army* invented a vision of the past peculiarly out of touch with—but paradoxically responding to—the increasing disintegration of Britain in the face of challenges by women, young people, immigrants, national, and nationalist groups.

Dad's Army (BBC, 1968-1977) was not the first sitcom to be situated in war time or to portray a militarized atmosphere. Other American and British sitcoms such as *The Phil Silver Show* (CBS, 1955-1959) and *The Army Game* (ITV, 1957-1961) were set on army bases. The military setting, however, was usually incidental to the plot.⁵ Moreover, those two shows were situated in peace time and the conflicts they portrayed were within the ranks rather than with an outside enemy. *Dad's Army* was different. It was set in the fictional seaside town of Walmington-on-Sea, on the south coast of England, and followed the story of the local Home Guard platoon from its moment of formation in the summer of 1940. The war was the main conduit for the situations and the fear of a possible German invasion was central to the actions of the characters.

In many ways the show brought the Home Guard into the narrative of the Second World War. During the war, the Home Guard was featured in different media: cartoons, jokes, stories, plays, and political debates. It continued to be discussed after the war, but did not achieve a strong hold on the public's imagination until Perry and Croft made it the center of their show in the late 1960s. The term "Dad's Army" is now habitually attached to both private and public histories of the Home Guard, and there is no evidence that it was used prior to the series. Its creator, Jimmy Perry, said in an interview that when he set out to research the topic he was surprised to find "not a single book on the subject." The public, he concluded, "had forgotten about the Home Guard, and I thought it was time they were reminded of it."⁶

⁵ Simon Morgan-Russell, *Jimmy Perry And David Croft* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), 35-36.

⁶ As quoted in Graham McCann, *Dad's Army: The Story of a Classic Television Show* (Fourth Estate, 2001), 37.

He succeeded. “Dad’s Army” is now a coinage used in contexts, “ranging from political discourse or military analysis to the sport pages.”⁷ The title of the show, the names of its characters, and their catchphrases entered into idiomatic English, and in the process became divorced from the show and from the Home Guard. The wide identification with the series symbolized by this process, argues Peniston-Bird, supports the argument that *Dad’s Army* has become “sufficiently dominant to supply ‘the very terms by which a private history is thought through’”⁸ By the 1990s, *Dad’s Army* had become *the* cultural representation of the force for veterans and for those not otherwise associated with it.⁹ In 1995, with the fiftieth anniversary of the Second World War, there was a surge in references from the show that was equaled in 1998, the year of the thirtieth anniversary of the program.¹⁰ These anniversaries did not put the show’s success to rest. A few years ago, the prestigious BBC Two series, *The Making of Modern Britain*, began its probe into wartime Britain with an examination of *Dad’s Army*.¹¹ In May 2012, Radio 4 aired *Dear Arthur, Love John* a radio play inspired by a letter that John Le Mesurier (the actor playing Sergeant Wilson) wrote to Arthur Lowe (the actor portraying Captain Mainwaring) in 1982. The play tells the story of *Dad’s Army* and the characters’ relationship with one another.¹² Recently, an enthusiastic fan both of Lego and *Dad’s Army* recreated scenes from the show with

⁷ Corinna Peniston-Bird, “‘I Wonder Who’d Be the First to Spot that:’ Dad’s Army at War, in Media and in Memory,” *Media History* 13, no. 2/3 (2007), 189.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 192

⁹ *Ibid.*, 187.

¹⁰ Events included the 30th anniversary of the show and the reunion of the surviving cast at the Imperial War museum in London; A revival of a play (*The Ghost Train*) by one of the actors, starring another actor from the show; The original 1968 series was re-shown for the first time, “earning BBC2 4.6 million viewers, making it the channel’s third-highest show in the ratings of July/ August 1998;” A special episode of Channel 4’s *Secret History* series dedicated to the Home Guard entitled *Dad’s Army* (aired 8 June 1998), “in which it was argued that the volunteer force was not only incompetent but dangerous to itself and the British public it was supposed to protect.” When two lost episodes were found in 2001, they were aired in December 2001. Their finding induced another documentary, *Missing Presumed Wiped* which was screened on the same evening. Peniston-Bird, “‘I Wonder Who’d Be the First to Spot That,’” 190.

¹¹ “Britannia at Bay,” Andrew Marr’s *The Making of Modern Britain*, BBC Two (December 2, 2009).

¹² “Dear Arthur, Love John,” *Drama of the Week*, BBC Radio 4 (May 2012).

Lego.¹³ A casual word search in *The Times*' online archive finds almost 700 hits with the phrase, "Don't Panic!" one of the show's main catchphrases.

Thus forty five years after the first episode was aired, *Dad's Army* is still an important cultural artifact, tightly connected to the memory of the war. The numerous events commemorating the Second World War helped to keep the legacy of *Dad's Army* alive for new audiences, and vice versa, for many born after the war the series opened a doorway onto 1940s England. Audiences' love for the show inadvertently schooled them in Perry and Croft's vision of wartime England, a vision that was in-line with the mainstream narrative of the war. *Dad's Army* taught new generations that the war was fought by self-sacrificing, good-natured volunteers who came together to resist the Nazi threat. Viewers embraced their portrayal as a heroic nation of "ordinary people" that withstood the Blitz and a harsh material reality with a smile. This was also a gendered imagery, and the "common man" was central to it. Sonya Rose is right to point out that war imagery recognized Britain as a gender and class divided society but "denied that it mattered to national unity."¹⁴

The show, allegedly the Queen's favorite at the time,¹⁵ remains one of the best loved sitcoms in British television history. Its nine seasons were released on DVD and many books describing its history, including biographies and autobiographies of all those involved in its making, script-books, and other merchandise. Its continued hold on public affections was exemplified by the inauguration of the *Dad's Army* museum in Thetford, Norfolk, the town where many of the scenes of *Dad's Army* were shot, at the end of 2007. The museum was opened following the success of the *Dad's Army*

¹³ Commander Seth, December 31, 2011, Dad's Army LEGO post, accessed on August 28, 2012, <http://mocpages.com/moc.php/302253>.

¹⁴ Sonya O Rose, *Which People's War?: National Identity and Citizenship in Wartime Britain 1939-1945*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 6.

¹⁵ Tom Hutchison, "Last of the Breed: Tom Hutchison on Dad's Army," *The Guardian*, August 15, 1970, 6.

Trail in 2004. The *Trail* targeted *Dad's Army* lovers who are shuttled into the town in buses and ushered through the locations used for filming. A local fan dressed as one of the leading characters, Captain Mainwaring, meets eager fans at 11:30 am on Sundays by the town's bronze statue of Captain Mainwaring for a walking tour.¹⁶ The *Dad's Army* Appreciation Society has over 1500 members from across the globe (this writer included), who receive the quarterly newsletter "Permission to Speak, Sir!" It also organizes yearly events to commemorate the show, and the editors answer fans' questions about the program.¹⁷

The Walmington-on-Sea platoon was headed by Captain George Mainwaring (Arthur Lowe), the pompous, committed, and patriotic local bank manager. His Sergeant, Arthur Wilson (John Le Mesurier), was his upper-class chief clerk in the bank. The class difference between the two men, and the reverse of the expectation that the upper-class man would be the Captain of the platoon, was a recurrent strand of comedy. Wilson's catchphrase reflected his ironic attitude to Mainwaring's social ambition. He habitually questioned Mainwaring's judgment - "Do you think that's wise, Sir?" with a slight knowing smile. While Mainwaring had an uncomfortable relationship with his wife (never seen, only heard commanding him), Wilson had the air of a ladies' man. He lodged with Mrs. Pike and her teenage son who referred to him as "Uncle Arthur." During the series it is made clear that Wilson and Mrs Pike are, in fact, a couple and it is implied that Wilson is Frank Pike's biological father.

¹⁶ A participant in the April 17th 2012 tour wrote to the museum "I booked the Dads Army Guided Tour as a gift to my Partner for Valentine's Day this year, and this weekend, finally, our "Dads Army Weekend" was here - a stay at The Bell, and the tour on Sunday (17th). I am writing to you as I would be so grateful if you could pass on our thanks to all your volunteers who make the tour such a lovely experience, we enjoyed the whole occasion so very much. Our guides were friendly, knowledgeable and interesting, they took care of us and no question was too much trouble at all - you can tell that they really care about what they are doing. I am 36, and my partner is 33, we grew up watching Dads Army with our own Dads, and we watch every Saturday now, this weekend (especially with the stay at The Bell too) is one of the nicest experiences we have had, we both agreed. Please keep up the good work, don't let people forget the history of your lovely town." Dad's Army museum website, accessed on April 26, 2012, <http://www.dadsarmythetford.org.uk/tour.htm>

¹⁷ "The Dad's Army Appreciation Society" website, <http://www.dadsarmy.co.uk>.

Lance-Corporal Jack Jones (Clive Dunn) is the local butcher, born in 1870, but as eager to sign up as he was when he first joined the army as a drummer-boy of 14, or when he fought in the campaign of Kitchener in the Sudan in 1896-98. “Jonesy” the enthusiastic veteran begs for “Permission to speak, sir!” when the occasion to volunteer appears, shouts “Don’t panic!” when the situation is troublesome, and promises that, “They don’t like it up ‘em,” an obvious double-entendre referring to his bayonet and his plans to fight potential invaders. Jones secures his involvement in the action by supplying Captain Mainwaring with rationed steak under the counter. His business is of special interest to the town people, as meat rationing was a major component of the quotidian experience of war. As central to daily survival of war’s austerity regime is Private Joe Walker (James Beck), a black market spiv and the only fit, able-bodied man of military age in the force. When he is called for his medical examination prior to being enlisted, the men are devastated. After verifying that Walker brought him a bottle of Whiskey, Captain Mainwaring expresses this sentiment for all of them,

...we really need you in the platoon. I mean, you’re more important to us here than you would be there, eh, Wilson?” Walker hands Wilson his cigarettes.
 Wilson: “Definitely more important, sir.”
 Mainwaring continues, “But you can’t expect a lot of brass hats in Whitehall to know what the situation is . . . to us he’s an important cornerstone in our organization.”¹⁸

Different members of the platoon try to assist Walker in various ways, some more legal than others, but they all fail. Luckily, a day after Walker begins training he discovers he’s allergic to corned beef and his position in the unit is restored.

Private James Frazer (John Laurie) is a sour Scottish undertaker and a former non-commissioned officer in the Royal Navy who served at the Battle of Jutland in 1916

¹⁸ “The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Walker,” *Dad’s Army*, BBC (March 15, 1969).

as a naval cook. His grim predictions frequently intermingle with his desire for greater authority in the unit. Private Charles Godfrey (Arnold Ridley) is a retired shop assistant who shares a cottage with his two elderly sisters. In the third season it's revealed that the gentle Godfrey was a conscientious objector during WWI and the men shun him when they first learn of this.¹⁹ After he is injured while saving Mainwaring's life, his sister reveals that far from avoiding service, he in fact served with distinction with the Royal Army Medical Corps. Godfrey heroically saved several men's lives during the Battle of the Somme and earned the Military Medal. These acts of bravery, both past and present, redeem his masculinity. As his sexuality isn't clear, the validation of his manliness works on a double level.

Private Frank Pike (Ian Lavender) is a 16-year old volunteer who wears a thick scarf with his uniform to prevent illness, and is often the target of Mainwaring's derision. "You stupid boy!" is still one of the famous catchphrases of the show. Pike, too, works under Mainwaring and Wilson in his day job as assistant bank clerk. His mother's fusses over his well-being and sends Mainwaring notes such as, "Frank is starting with his chest again. He ought to be in bed. If he can't wear his muffler he's to come home or he will catch his death."²⁰ The platoon's rival and nemesis is the Air Raid Precautions Warden William Hodges (Bill Pertwee), the aggressive and uptight greengrocer who calls Mainwaring "Napoleon."

Taken together, the ensemble constitutes a portrait of the volunteer corps as male, white and lower-middle-class. They are a bank manager, his assistant, a young clerk; a butcher, an undertaker, and a former shop-assistant—none works in a factory or for smaller manufacturers. This is due in part to its location in the South East of England rather than in the north, but it also reflects a certain ideal of a nation of shopkeepers.

¹⁹ "Branded," *Dad's Army*, BBC (November 14, 1969).

²⁰ "Command Decision," *Dad's Army*, BBC (August 14, 1968).

The men to whom the mission of defending the English shores was trusted were not young, virile or glamorous. British propaganda frequently constructed British masculinity in war against the hyper-masculine Nazi as the “good citizen” in opposition to those in the nation described as selfish.²¹ The committed, cheerful, British amateur-soldier was meant to compensate for what shortcomings he might have as a “real” soldier, as a man with enthusiasm and patriotism.

The deep affection for *Dad's Army* is far from a postmortem appreciation. Britons embraced it from the outset in July 1968, after the May 1968 global turmoil.²² The series secured its place in the contemporary cultural canon immediately upon its release, as it garnered critical and popular acclaim in equal measures. Its first episode, “The Man and the Hour,” aired on Wednesday 31 July 1968 and attracted 7.2 million viewers, 14.2 percent of the population of the UK. The ratings for the following episodes ascended to 25 percent of the population on average, hitting the 30 percent mark quite frequently.²³ The viewing figures for the first Christmas special, “Battle of the Giants” (Monday, December 27, 1971), broke all previous *Dad's Army* records, attracting 18.7 million viewers.²⁴ The BBC's television publicist acknowledged the unusual level of critics' endorsement in a note he attached to newspaper clippings sent to David Croft when the first season ended: “Just for the record there has been no comedy series in the past twelve months which has attracted anywhere near the

²¹ Rose, *Which People's War?*, 9.

²² Jeremi Suri, *Power and Protest: Global Revolution and the Rise of Detente* (Cambridge, Mass.: London: Harvard University Press, 2003).

²³ “Audience Research Report: Dad's Army, The Man and the Hour,” August 16, 1968, R9/7/94 BBC WAC. See also Audience Research Report: Dad's Army, If the Cap Fits... December 1, 1972; (30.6 percent ratings), R9/7/120 BBC WAC.

²⁴ Jimmy Perry and David Croft, *Dad's Army Walmington Goes to War* (Great Britain: Orion Books, 2001), 434.

number of reviews ‘Dad’s Army’ has. Nor has any comedy series received this kind of universal praise.”²⁵

The BBC Written Archive holds striking pieces of evidence of the enthusiastic reaction of the public to “our heroes.” Letters filled with wartime memories and offers of help poured in from around the country. Sonia Thurley from Hill Farm in Devon wrote to David Croft after she had heard that the set designers were in need of authentic army uniforms. Ms Thurley assured Croft that her grandfather owned a uniform “and it is in good condition. If you in any way require please send above address.”²⁶ Croft assured her that currently there was no need for more uniforms but that he would keep her generous offer in mind should the need ever rise.²⁷ Richard Sheppard from Bournemouth regretted not being able to watch the show due to his work schedule but sent in a photograph of GPO vehicles that he owned. He informed Croft that they were from 1940 and that he may keep the photo for future reference. Furthermore, “If you can use one of them in a scene,” he suggested, “perhaps you will let me know and I shall be most pleased.”²⁸ T. Rigby Taylor (Justice of Peace, CBE) wrote to “congratulate all concerned.” As a veteran of World War I and a volunteer in the Home Guard during World War II, he thanked the creator for “a good clean, humorous show which will appeal to the Old Brigade and I hope . . . the present generation.”²⁹

Like Thurley, Sheppard, and Rigby Taylor, it seems that those who wrote to the BBC were eager to include their memory of the war in the collective body of memories shaped by the writers. Robert Huntley from Kent, admitted that the series

²⁵ Keith Smith (Television Publicity) to David Croft, September 16, 1968, letter from T12/880/1 BBC WAC.

²⁶ Sonia Thurley to David Croft, August 8, 1968, letter from T12/880/1 BBC WAC.

²⁷ David Croft to Sonia Thurley, September 3, 1968, letter from T12/880/1, BBC WAC.

²⁸ Richard Sheppard to David Croft, August 9, 1968, letter from T12/880/1, BBC WAC.

²⁹ T. Rigby Taylor, Letter to David Croft, August 1968, T12/880/1, BBC WAC.

“sparked off so many memories that I felt I had to put them on paper and that they might be useful to you in re-creating them in some future episode.”³⁰ Huntley endorsed the idea of a comedy about the volunteer army as “right and proper for the British have always tended to write down the dangerous and to ride out our nervous feelings by making them appear ridiculous.”³¹ Huntley then went on to supply some anecdotes from his time in the Home Guard attached to the Royal Berkshire regiment. He described whimsical incidents in which the Home Guard managed to outdo the “regulars,” during training sessions. He ended his letter by saying, “it would give great pleasure to me and surviving members of . . . “B” company Home Guard . . . to see something made of such episodes in the series Would it be possible?”³² Perry and Croft might not have been inspired directly by these tales, but the tensions between the “regulars” and the volunteers were mocked frequently in the program, with the Home Guard crew coming up on top.

A good example is “Operation Kilt,” the first episode from the second season (the episode was presumed lost until 2001 when a copy was returned to the BBC). In the episode Captain Ogilvie of the Scottish Highland Unit challenges the platoon to capture his headquarters. Because Ogilvie’s men are camped at a farm, the platoon decides to disguise Walker as a cow so that he can get information about the Highland Unit’s plan without arousing suspicion. The plan fails as the “cow” mixes with other cows and is chased away by dogs. Plan B is of the Trojan horse variety: driving a hay cart into the Highland Unit’s camp with Jones hidden inside to spy. With the fresh information Jones supplies, they plan a trap for the Highlanders. When Mainwaring’s men are busted by Captain Ogilvie, however, it seems they had lost the challenge.

³⁰ Robert Huntley to the BBC, August 3, 1968, viewer letter from T12/880/1 Dad’s Army, General and External Correspondence, BBC WAC.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

Luckily, Ogilvie carelessly walks into one of the traps they had prepared and finds himself dangling from his feet. The episode ends with the camera focused on Wilson's reaction to the sight of the hanging kilt-wearing Captain:

"Good Lord, sir."

Mainwaring: "Yes Wilson, now we really know what they wear underneath."³³

The level of the public's emotional investment in the show is evident from individuals' eagerness to share their memories with the writers.³⁴ Mrs. Barbara Summers from Kent for example, remembered how her father, then a 60 year old former major of the 1914 war, was given the task of forming a local corps. His platoon companions were armed with improvised weapons, "very much like your characters," she wrote, "except that being a country village there was a predominance of pitchforks, scythes and other blood thirsty weapons."³⁵ Summers wrote of a "funny incident" when her father instituted a Rota of four men – two to sleep and two to stay on watch for two-hourly slots through the night in a shepherd's hut on a hill. Summers recalled that this went on for months with no incident until "one night my father in a zealous moment decided to inspect the outpost - having climbed the hill he entered the hut to find all four look-outs sleeping like babies and even his far from quiet and wrathful entrance failed to wake them!"³⁶ In the original drill, those who would spot anything suspicious were ordered to run down the hill and ring Summers's father and the police from a call box. (Pennies were kept for the occasion in the hut). During the embarrassing incident it transpired, however, that some of the members of the unit did not know how to use a telephone. A version of this anecdote appeared in an episode in

³³ "Operation Kilt," *Dad's Army*, BBC (March 1, 1969).

³⁴ One woman, for example, sent a play her late husband wrote during the war. See T12/880/1 *Dad's Army*, General and External Correspondence, BBC WAC.

³⁵ Mrs. Barbara Summers to the BBC, August 19, 1968, letter in T12/880/1 *Dad's Army*, General and External Correspondence, BBC WAC.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

the third season of *Dad's Army*.³⁷ Britons enforced the writers' investment in a "truthful" representation of the war. They were excited by the possibility of the sitcom acting as a site of memory to their loved ones, and to meaningful experiences.

The examples preserved in the archive make a touching plea from individuals on behalf of their loved ones: A wife remembering her husband, a daughter conjuring up her father as an eager volunteer, or a man wishing to pay tribute to the adventures of his unit—they all hope to use mass media to incorporate individual experiences into collective memory. *Dad's Army* audience had immediately sensed its importance. They recognized the historical mission that it embarked on, and wished to join it rather than passively observe Perry and Croft's vision of events from the sidelines. Although few put it into words, they acknowledged the program's contribution to the creation of a hegemonic narrative of wartime Britain. Even more importantly, they spotted an invitation to partake in its shaping. Thus the show that was inspired by the "true" stories of its creators induced the memory and writing of more "true" stories from the period, which in turn, they fictionalized. This two-way exchange constituted an exceptional relationship between the show and its audience. This relationship secured its place at the core of television canon.

The perceived image of television, and comedy in particular, as lowbrow and popular made *Dad's Army* and its creators seem accessible, and the incorporation of viewers' stories proved the sentiment correct. It was further reinforced by the platform on which *Dad's Army* was aired—the BBC. From its founding in the 1920s as a public radio service to its current business model (its main source of funding is the mandatory license fee) Britons had a proprietary stake in it. Being "their" station it had a commitment to their experiences and their interpretations of the war. Audience

³⁷ "The Lion Has 'Phones," *Dad's Army*. BBC (September 25, 1969). Summers' letter might have inspired this episode, although there is no actual evidence it did.

research reports reveal that, in general, viewers had agreed with the way “their” wartime story was told. Phrases such as “humorous yet plausible,” appear repeatedly in the reports.³⁸

A scene from an episode in the third season that took place in Jones’s butcher shop, received special praise.³⁹ During its four minutes run, a queue of ladies display all their “feminine tricks” to convince Jones to be generous with their rations of meat. One flirts and gifts him his favorite tobacco, another bakes him a cake to have with his tea, promising he can have as many of her ration points as he would like. They all praise his corned beef and are excited to learn he could add extra sausages to their purchase free of rationing coupons. One participant in the BBC’s survey group admitted that, “I did laugh at the scene in the butchers shop. This was so very true during rationing, people trying to get a bit more than their share.”⁴⁰ Viewers found the series amusing “all the more so because . . . the basic situation was perfectly credible, and the developments, if certainly exaggerated, no less so.”⁴¹ Another report concluded with a viewer’s remark, “Crazy but realistically true of many Home Guard units – God really did save England!”⁴² Viewers regularly praised the performances, arguing that, “these were all real and endearing characters. . . I feel that I have met them all,”⁴³ noted one viewer. From situation to characters, viewers felt an affinity with the show. As the ratings suggest, they were ready to incorporate it into their weekly routine and, as the continuous by-products, spin-offs and reruns demonstrate,

³⁸ “Audience Research Report: Dad’s Army, Never Too Old,” December 21, 1977, R9/7/145 BBC WAC

³⁹ “The Armoured Night of Lance Corporal Jones,” *Dad’s Army*, BBC (September 11, 1969).

⁴⁰ “Audience Research Report: Dad’s Army, The Armoured Night of Lance Corporal Jones,” October 27, 1969, R9/7/101, BBC WAC.

⁴¹ “Audience Research Report: Dad’s Army, Big Guns,” December 3, 1969, R9/7/101, BBC WAC.

⁴² “Audience Research Report: Dad’s Army, Sons of the Sea,” February 2, 1970, R9/7/102, BBC WAC.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

they are still eager to do so.⁴⁴ As it airs now on BBC 2, its viewers, mostly born after the war, are not deterred either by the humor or the topic. The reruns attest to the relevance of the show for contemporary audiences, to the continued interest in wartime England, and indeed to this specific narration of it.

From today's vantage point it is clear that *Dad's Army* was a success. This outcome was not predictable, however. Laughing at Britain's finest hour was not an obvious feat. Admittedly, it was more tasteful than making fun of World War II in other European countries such as France or Germany where significant segments of the population had an unsavory past to bury. Indeed, it was Croft, this time with Jeremy Lloyd, who ridiculed the French and German experience in *'Allo 'Allo!*, a sitcom that documented the debacles of a local resistance group in a village in southern France and its maneuvering between Nazi officers and clandestine resistance activity.⁴⁵

In Britain, where the war was a time of pride, the interest in it never dimmed. Between 1946 and 1960, 85 movies boasted of the heroic British soldiers and numerous autobiographies, biographies, memoirs, and children's books were published on the topic.⁴⁶ The late 1960s witnessed a growing engagement of popular culture with the war—a trend that had intensified with the beginning of a new decade. The growing popularity led Peter Fiddick, writing in November 1972 in *The Guardian*, to wonder whether audiences were not saturated with it. He calculated that, in two weeks, twelve programs used it as their main point of reference.⁴⁷ He argued that the profusion of television output attested to television's role as a central site for

⁴⁴ BBC 2 is currently (August 2012) showing series 4.

⁴⁵ *'Allo 'Allo!* BBC One, 1982-1992.

⁴⁶ Wendy Webster, "'There'll Always Be an England:'" Representations of Colonial Wars and Immigration, 1948-1968," *The Journal of British Studies* 40 no. 4 (Oct. 2001): 557-84.

⁴⁷ Peter Fiddick, "War Games," *The Guardian*, November 25, 1972.

the discussion and commemoration of the war. He maintained that, “newspapers, the modern cinema, and book publishing, have all virtually surrendered this arena as a source of popular appeal.” By way of explanation he acknowledged that the plentitude of programs about the war confirmed the “huge and varied impact – not all of it malign – the war years had on so many people’s lives.”⁴⁸

The immediate success of *Dad’s Army* demonstrates that the ample available output of war-related material did not quench viewers’ thirst. Finally, two decades after the war had ended it seemed that the time was ripe for comedy. The fierce debate over the opening titles of the pilot episode, however, uncovers the difficulties and anxieties in its creation. The original title sequence was made from the real-life sequence of events that began on 14 May 1940 with Secretary of State for War Anthony Eden’s announcement of plans for the formation of the Local Defence Volunteers force, and continued with the rush to enroll and establish an organization. Perry and Croft wished the opening title to appear familiar and informative without straining to educate. To that end, they had included original footage from the time, some of it quite grim. When Paul Fox, the Controller of BBC 1 received the pilot tape he didn’t like what he saw

In that original version, the opening credits featured actual shots of refugees fleeing the German army in France and Belgium, and the closing titles also featured authentic war scenes The reason that I didn’t like it—you have to realise that I’d been brought up in factual television . . . was that I was very much against this mixing of fact and fiction; film of actuality belongs to factual programmes and should not be used mischievously in comedy . . . to me . . . [including such footage] seemed unnecessary, unfair, unrealistic and, well, silly, and as this was a comedy programme, and as there were plenty of people still around who’d been in the services and lived through that time, I did feel that one had to step just slightly carefully. I know it was only 15 or so seconds, and it was, let’s face it, a piddling matter, but in the end it became an issue of principle.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ McCann, *Dad’s Army*, 78.

Croft and Perry were upset about what they perceived to be an intervention in their artistic license. Indeed, they believed that it was a missed opportunity. Croft argued that, “They were wonderful captions. They depicted all the massed forces of the *Wehrmacht*, and the tanks and all the rest of it, contrasted with the individually marching members of the Home Guard. That, to me, was what the show was all about.”⁵⁰

The symbolically charged juxtaposition of the massive Nazi war machine and the individual British amateur did not impress Fox. In an emergency meeting with Croft, Fox, Michal Mills (BBC Head of Comedy), Tom Sloane (Head of Light Entertainment), and Bill Cotton (Head of Variety), Fox won the argument. Mills remained sore about the decision, feeling it was influenced by Fox’s attitude to comedy that “clowns must stay clowns.”⁵¹ Here, he believed, was an opportunity for comedy to blaze the trail; to use the jester’s freedom to make a forceful statement about war and national character. This was an opportunity that, he believed, had been lost.

Mills could have been comforted had he known that the show did in fact incorporate a statement about war and national character. It had impressed the image of the English as committed, patriotic enthusiasts upon the national conscience. It promoted the public perception of the war just as its creators had envisioned it. The show’s gentle humor and kind depiction of humanity crafted an intimate connection between it and its audiences. Thus the contested opening sequence could easily be replaced with a more subtle set of images. The new animated title showed a Union Jack and a swastika facing each other from opposite sides of the Channel. Three

⁵⁰ The original title sequence is missing, believed wiped. McCann constructed the above description from his interviews with those involved in the debacle over the opening sequence. McCann. *Dad’s Army*, 78.

⁵¹ Memo from Michael Mills to Paul Fox, May 23 1968, in *Dad’s Army* T12880/1 BBC WAC as quoted in McCann, *Dad’s Army*, 80.

Union flags fly over the channel to confront three swastikas but are dully pushed backwards to the shores of England, shrinking into one flag in the process. The three swastikas threaten the flag from three positions on the continent but the Union flag, now united into one entity, does not relinquish its post on the coast.

This depiction echoed the postwar narrative of the battles of Britain as an ideological war. As Hitler was realizing his ambitious plan for the establishment of a New Order in the summer of 1940, British policy-makers came under pressure to outline their alternative. During the war years new formulations regarding the relationship between the state and the individual were articulated, resulting in the postwar revival of democracy and the birth of the European welfare state.⁵² The narrative of Britain going to war to defend democracy or to eradicate Nazism was not part of the war in 1940. It does appear, however, in the juxtaposition of the swastika and the Union Jack. *Dad's Army* presented its audience a post-events formulation that celebrates the determined little Union Jack defending the English coastline.

The second change that was made to the pilot episode involved framing wartime footage from a present vantage point. It is 1968, and Alderman George Mainwaring is seen instructing an audience populated with his old platoon about the 1968 "I'm Backing Britain" campaign. Mainwaring explains to his listeners that he did not hesitate before he joined this campaign

After all—I've always backed Britain. I got into the habit in 1940. Then, we all backed Britain. It was the darkest hour in our history—the odds were absurdly against us, but, young and old, we stood there—defiant—determined to survive, to recover and finally, to win.⁵³

The positioning of Mainwaring against the flag during a speech endorsing the "Dunkirk spirit," acts as a visual cue for the audience that the comedy would celebrate

⁵² Mark Mazower, *Dark Continent: Europe's Twentieth Century*, (New York: Knopf, 1999), 186.

⁵³ "The Man and the Hour," *Dad's Army*, BBC (July 31, 1968).

the wartime effort of individuals.⁵⁴ The short prologue further established a bond between the viewers and the series. Mainwaring promised to take them back to a time when “we all,” young and old, “backed Britain.” As in the show, however, this community of backers was exclusively male. As the camera moves from one older incarnation of the men to another, the Home Guard is established as a purely masculine undertaking.

The battle over the titles wasn’t Croft and Perry’s last before their vision of wartime England hit the screen. The pilot episode was previewed during three consecutive nights at the BBC Television Centre for three different audiences of 150 people. The questionnaires they filled echoed Fiddick’s question: who needs another series about the war? Croft recalled reading comments along the lines of, “‘Why do we still have to have these things about the war?’ . . . ‘Don’t the authors know the war’s over?’”⁵⁵ Even with the discouraging comments it was decided to go ahead with the broadcast with no preview for critics. This was not an unusual decision but rather the custom at the time. It reveals how television executives imagined the consumption of sitcoms. Bill Cotton explained in an interview that

we believed that it was important that one saw a new show at home, in the evening, in a domestic environment, with all the usual distractions—the telephone ringing, little conversations, people coming and going, the cat and the dog, all those things—instead of seeing it at eight o’clock in the morning . . . on your own or in a small group, and possibly nursing a hangover.⁵⁶

In the mind of executives, sitcoms were conceived as a domestic, informal, evening leisure activity. The creators might have treated their show seriously, but they did not expect the same level of attention from their viewers.

⁵⁴ Morgan-Russell, *Jimmy Perry and David Croft*, 38.

⁵⁵ McCann, *Dad’s Army*, 81.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 82.

This reading of the way audiences consumed television was true for *Dad's Army*. The small screen may have been populated with wartime programs, but those shows were not comedies, nor were they targeted at the family. This retelling of the war years, however, certainly was. As Ian Lavender, one of *Dad's Army's* stars, recalled recently, the sitcom was so successful because “it was aimed at everybody.”⁵⁷ When asked to explain what they liked about the show, viewers frequently mentioned it being suitable for family viewing. They praised the series for “achieving its comic effect without recourse to either malice or vulgarity . . . and therefore made excellent family entertainment.”

Indeed, not only those who remembered the war enjoyed *Dad's Army*. Several viewers asserted that their youngsters “wouldn't miss it for anything!”⁵⁸ Another viewer commented that, ““This is what the public wants. No swearing, no sex and no innuendo – just good, clean fun.””⁵⁹ This viewer's compliment was also a rebuke of Permissive Society that allegedly transformed postwar. Praise of the show as fit for family viewing and bridging the generational gap is forceful when one remembers the tense generational conflict at the time. The public sphere was saturated with reports about youth delinquency and the end of deference to authority alongside lamentations about the shift in morals of the young students' protests, and skinheads' riots. At the height of the sex, drugs, and rock and roll revolution, the vision of the family sitting in the living-room together was comforting.

Viewers felt grateful for the repose and intimacy the show brought to their homes. Its brand of humor brought them closer to the characters but also to one another, often bridging the generation gap. The generation gap that was made prominent in 1960s

⁵⁷ Pritchard, Tony. ‘Recorded Interview with Ian Lavender.’ *Permission to Speak, Sir!* 73 (summer 2012): 9.

⁵⁸ “Audience Research Report: *Dad's Army*, Under Fire,” June 5, 1969, R9/7/98, BBC WAC.

⁵⁹ “Audience Research Report: *Dad's Army*, Asleep in the Deep,” October 25, 1972, R9/7/109, BBC WAC.

discourse as a major source of social tension could be forgotten during the show's half hour run. Older members of the audience enjoyed that it echoed their experience of the war. Younger viewers "could apparently believe in the situations and join their elders in 'one long laugh.'"⁶⁰

Laughter bound together family members, but it also brought together the extended family—the nation. The series turned into a forceful educational tool and a disseminator of knowledge. Additionally, Perry was motivated by his desire to salvage the Home Guard, the force in which he had served as a 16 year old, from oblivion. He found a responsive collaborator in Croft, and the two consciously embraced their role as historical narrators. Oblivious of critiques about the impossibility of bringing the past accurately to the screen, they set out to tell the story of a period they found unique and were committed to its historical representation. They researched the period, its songs, fashions and designs. Ample attention was given to an accurate representation of period pieces and actual events. Thus for example an episode includes the following bit of conversation about wartime cooking; Captain Mainwaring tells Wilson about the treacle tart his wife made from their rationed allowance

. . . it's a new recipe my wife was trying out. The pastry is made from potato and the treacle from grated carrot and saccharin.

Wilson: What's it taste like?

Mainwaring thumps his chest again.

Wilson: Indigestion, sir?

Mainwaring: Just a touch of flatulence.⁶¹

The joke is that the "cake" was nowhere near a pre-war cake. This snippet of conversation embodies the charm of the show: it treated the memory of scarcity, which surely cast a shadow on daily lives, as a funny moment with the bank manager

⁶⁰ "Audience Research Report: Dad's Army, The Showing up of Corporal Jones," September 10, 1968, R97/98, BBC WAC.

⁶¹ "The Battle of Godfrey's Cottage," *Dad's Army*, BBC (August 3, 1969).

digging his spoon into a lame pudding substitute, doing his bit for England. It was also a more visceral brand of comedy evocative of the body-centered humor of the music hall.

Oliver Bayldon, a designer for the show remembered that,

We did a lot of research for *Dad's Army*. Much care was taken by all the design teams (sets, costumes and make-up) to be as authentic as possible As a designer, one had to furnish settings with what could be purchased and hired Most of the dressing . . . came from Old Times Hire, and later from Terry O'Docherty Hire. The sets, meanwhile, were all built in BBC Workshops.⁶²

Barbara Kroning, the costume designer, welcomed the opportunity for interesting research. She recalled that "Over a period of about three weeks, I spent quite a bit of time at the Imperial War Museum, reading up all sorts of records involving the Home Guard, and came across several amusing items."⁶³ Allowances for inaccuracy were made only to avoid hurt feelings. Thus area badges for the uniforms were "selected rather ambiguously so as not to tread on regional toes!" explained Kroning.⁶⁴

The theme song, *Who do you think you are kidding Mr. Hitler?* illustrates both the commitment to historical detail and the fabrication this commitment invariably entailed. The conceit gave it away: Perry wrote the theme for *Dad's Army* but had hoped that it would pass as a typical wartime tune—thus creating a built-in fabrication to foster a feeling of authenticity. "My aim was to write something that makes you know, as soon as the show starts, exactly what it's going to be about," he explained, and added "I wanted to come up with something that took you straight back to the period and summed up the attitudes of the British people."⁶⁵ The song tells of Mr. Brown who goes off to town "on the 8:21/ But he comes home each evening/And he's ready with his gun." Mr. Brown, we learn, is a volunteer in the Home Guard. The

⁶² Perry and Croft, *Dad's Army Walmington Goes to War*, 146.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 315.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ McCann. *Dad's Army*, 71.

song cordially assures Mr. Hitler that, “We are the boys who will stop your little game./We are the boys who will make you think again./ 'Cus who do you think you are kidding Mr. Hitler?/If you think old England's done?” To enhance the nostalgic effect Bud Flanagan, a popular English music hall and vaudeville entertainer famous for his wartime work, sang it. Brian Hiles, then the Sound Supervisor at BBC Television remembered that

Dear old Bud wasn't capable of singing the song unless he was giving a performance, and this extended to learning the words rather than having them written out in front of him. Unfortunately, his memory wasn't quite as sharp as he thought, so when the actual recording started we began getting new and different versions.⁶⁶

It soon became obvious that Flanagan wouldn't be able to deliver the whole song in one take. To overcome the problem the technicians “started cutting and assembling” the different takes. By the time everyone came back from tea break a perfect version was constructed from twelve different takes.

Ultimately, with the help of novel editing technologies *Who do you think you are kidding Mr. Hitler?* revived the sound of the disappearing world of music hall for an audience that mostly had never visited a music hall. This manufactured piece of “history” captured the power of sitcoms to effectively disseminate invented historical knowledge. It had created not only the look of the period for contemporary audiences but also its sound. Flanagan, who received an OBE in 1959, died shortly after the recording of the song. His voice sent many viewers gently down memory lane into wartime England.

Viewers appreciated this commitment to detail and historical accuracy and embraced it as an “authentic” representation of the past. Like all mainstream filmic representations, *Dad's Army* made reality seem natural and familiar, numbing the

⁶⁶ Perry and Croft, *Dad's Army Walmington Goes to War*, 168.

urge to ask how this specific representation was put together. The familiarity that viewers evidently felt when they watched the show obscured the fact that it wasn't reality but a version of it made out of bits and pieces of images put together according to genre conventions.⁶⁷

There were some critical voices at the time that questioned the show's role as an historical artifact. Indeed, with every rerun a few more viewers doubted *Dad's Army's* authenticity as an historical representation. The critique pertained to *Dad's Army's* portrait of the Home Guard as it was in its first months of enthusiastic mayhem rather than showing its development into an organized force. The beginnings, it's safe to say, were humble. The government's plan for the volunteer force was improvised. Technical and logistical problems arose, especially as these were the weeks leading to Operation Dynamo, the evacuation of the British Expeditionary Force from Dunkirk. Anthony Eden called on men between the ages of 17 and 65 not in military service but wishing to defend their country against an invasion to enroll in the "Local Defence Volunteers" (as it was initially named). In the first week after the speech, 250,000 volunteers signed up. By July, 1.5 million men were registered in the organization. The numbers reflect popular concern over a potential German landing on British soil following the successful arrival of the Wehrmacht at the English Channel and the subsequent surrender of Belgium, the Netherlands, and France by June 1940. The success of the German offensive conjured up horrific visions of a possible German invasion facilitated by a "fifth column" operating in Britain.⁶⁸ These popular anxieties pressured government to prepare for the possibility of such events and to intern foreigners. Wary of the prospect of the population taking matters into its own hands

⁶⁷ Robert Rosenstone, "The Historical Film: History and Memory in the Media," in *The Historical Film: History and Memory in Media*, ed. Marcia Landy (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 54.

⁶⁸ Michael Frayn's novel, 'Spies' captures this atmosphere remarkably well. Michael Frayn, *Spies: A Novel*, (London: Picador, 2003).

and forming private defense forces independent of the army, which seemed to be happening, the government made the popular demand official.

However, it was unclear who would manage the force and, more importantly, how they would supply it. In the first months an armband was all the volunteers had to distinguish themselves. It was agreed that arming the forces on the battlefields should have precedent. Instead of state of the art weapons, the War Office issued instructions on how to make Molotov cocktails, and emergency orders were placed for World War I vintage Ross rifles from Canada and Pattern 14 and M1917 rifles from the United States. In the absence of proper weapons, many units broke into museums and appropriated whatever weapons could be found, or equipped themselves with private weapons such as shotguns.

The humor and situations of the first season of *Dad's Army* derive from these difficulties, their improvised solutions, and the spirit in which they were carried out. For example, in the second episode of the series the men try to convince a guard at the Peabody Museum of Historical Army Weapons to let them seize some of the items on display. Although the museum's prize exhibit was a full scale replica of Boadicea's chariot, there were more recent arms from the Crimean and the Boer War. The custodian happened to be Jones's drunken father who refuses to cooperate. Mainwaring decides they will force their way in while distracting the man with whiskey. The plan works and they get away with some antique rifles that turn out to be of little use. In a surprising twist of events, a Chinese rocket gun from the time of the Boxer rebellion seems to work after all, and they manage to duck just before it goes off. The camera moves to Captain Mainwaring muttering, "Yes. Damn clever, these Chinese. Thank goodness they're on our side."⁶⁹

⁶⁹ "Museum Piece," *Dad's Army*, BBC (August 7, 1968).

In Perry and Croft's rendition, the limited arsenal of arms which often consisted of pepper and sticks, reinforced the British fighter. In the first season of the series, Mainwaring issues pepper to his unit and comforts his men about their meager supplies

A short time ago we were a disorganised rabble, now we can deal with tanks. We can kill with our pikes and make 'em all sneeze with our pepper. And after all, even the Hun makes a pretty poor fighter with his head buried in a handkerchief—but remember this, we have one invaluable weapon on our side. We have an unbreakable fighting spirit, a bulldog tenacity that makes us hang on as long as there's breath left in our bodies. You don't get that with Gestapos and Jackboots, you get *that* by being British! So, come on Adolf—We're ready for you.⁷⁰

As mentioned, some critics were upset that the series remained focused on the sticks and pepper days of summer 1940 which was only the initial stage of the Home Guard. In November 1940 it was announced in the House of Commons that the Home Guard would become more like the Regular Army with commissioned officers, a fixed organization, systematic training and better uniforms and weapons. It was also decided to introduce conscription, under the National Service (No. 2) Act, all male civilians aged between 18 and 51 could from January 1942, be ordered to join the Home Guard. Once recruited, they couldn't leave before the age of 65.⁷¹ As the war progressed, the possibility of a German invasion seemed less likely. Consequently, volunteers' enthusiasm waned and some grew bitter at their duties and limited role.⁷²

The focus on the initial phase of the establishment of the force erased these developments from memory. It further enhanced the prominence of the "spirit of Dunkirk" and the "myth of the Blitz" in the collective memory of the war. This telling of the war is of course a central strand of war historiography. However, even during

⁷⁰ "The Man and the Hour," *Dad's Army*, BBC (July 31, 1968).

⁷¹ McCann, *Dad's Army*, 26-7.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 32.

wartime resistance existed, and national representations were not always successful in creating a single face for the nation.⁷³

As in all historical fiction, and in period sitcoms too, era-orienting details are used to signal to viewers that they are watching a representation of a specific historical moment.⁷⁴ The details are chosen from a cache of dates, events, and characters that are known to members of the community and that constitute the group's "historical capital." The use of an element such as Anthony Eden's radio appeal for volunteers, for instance, indicates its inclusion in the group's historical capital; its function as a period locator for the audience would fail if viewers were not familiar with it.⁷⁵ As has been demonstrated thus far, the choices of historical building-blocks for the narrative are revealing. It is equally enlightening to note what events and details are left out either because they are unquestionably part of the historical culture of the community, or for the opposite reason.

Mum's Army

In *Dad's Army* women's contribution to the civilian defense of England is a glaring example of historical absenteeism. In this retelling of the war women were erased from the story of both the home front and the frontlines. Women appear only incidentally, in relation to men or as consumers—for instance, in the butcher shop queuing for meat. Mrs. Pike is the only female character to appear regularly, mostly to interfere with the men's plans and fuss over the health of Pike and Wilson. The marginalization of women was not particular to Perry and Croft. Indeed, during wartime women who wished to contribute to the defense of their country met with resistance.

⁷³ Rose, *Which People's War*, 9.

⁷⁴ Pierre, Sorlin, "How to Look at an 'Historical' Film," in *The Historical Film*, 37.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

The army relied on women, and although it did not integrate them, it allowed them to carry arms and train. As the war continued, half a million women were recruited to the armed forces as clerks, typists, telephonists, cooks, and messengers. The Home Guard, however, rejected women completely. The official reason was the scarcity of supplies of weapons, uniforms, and instructors. The shortage was real, as we have seen, but this did not necessarily mean that recruitment needed to be made on a gender basis. The circumstances of war, mainly the shortage in manpower, show this decision to be almost irrational, and indeed at the local levels women were frequently included in Home Guard units. Women, frustrated by their underemployment, established pressure groups in the House of Commons and the War Office. Others pushed for the formation of a parallel force of women, the Women's Home Defence.⁷⁶ Even as the army forbade training and arming women, the Women's Home Defence was preparing them to use guns, bombs and techniques of unarmed combat.⁷⁷ In April 1943, the War Office relaxed its attitude and permitted women to serve in limited capacity as "Women's Home Guard Auxiliaries." It called for female volunteers between the age 18 and 65 with a preference for women over 45. They were not permitted to wear a uniform apart from a plastic badge, and did not receive weapons training. They could neither become full members of the Home Guard nor defend their homes with hand grenades and revolvers.⁷⁸

Including only one episode that directly addresses women volunteers in a show committed to the memory of wartime England is a glaring omission. It turned the Perry and Croft experience of the Home Guard as a homosocial space into the major representation of the war in popular culture. With every rerun of *Dad's Army* this

⁷⁶ Penny Summerfield and Corinna Peniston-Bird, "Women in the Firing Line: The Home Guard and the Defence of Gender Boundaries in Britain in the Second World War," *Women's History Review*, 9, no. 2 (2000): 231–255.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 235.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 238.

representation is further entrenched in the public perception, and women's contribution to the war effort is erased as that of men is commemorated and celebrated.

The episode that was devoted to women volunteers was titled *Mum's Army* and broadcast on 20 November 1970. It revolved around the perils of including "womenfolk, who would like to join us in our fight against the common foe," as Captain Mainwaring framed it to the platoon.⁷⁹ When the Captain introduced his and Wilson's idea of recruiting women he explained that the women could "take over some of the paperwork, and making tea and cocoa."⁸⁰ Frazer is fast to inject, "Buttons!" suggesting they could also contribute to that important area. When Pike suggests inviting the new girl at the sweet shop to enlist, he says that she's "Very obliging" to which Mainwaring concurs that it sounds "like the girl we need." Walker, the sleek spiv is quick to affirm, "That's right—comfort for the troops."⁸¹ Mainwaring rounds up the conversation with, "Properly trained, they'll release us—the frontline troops—so that we can grapple with the enemy."⁸² In this one scene all the reductive ideas about the possible contribution of women are pronounced. It is clear from this initial set-up that women would not add anything substantial to the war effort.

While interviewing women for the force, Wilson cannot help being his flirtatious and charming self. Captain Mainwaring disapproves of it, and scolds him, "Wilson, I know you are something of a lady's man, but these women are going to be subject to discipline like the rest of the force. Let's start as we mean to go on, shall we?" Each man chooses a candidate for recruitment. Jones brings Mrs Fox, his best customer, because she is "a very fine cooking lady, sir—and a most understanding

⁷⁹ "Mum's Army," *Dad's Army*, BBC (November 20, 1970).

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid.

and warm female person.” The woman that Mainwaring finds most suitable for the job is Fiona Gray, a good looking, neatly dressed, middle-aged widow who arrived recently to Walmington-on-Sea from London to spare her mother from the daily air raids. She proves her patriotism and character when she confides in Mainwaring, “I’d love to have stayed . . . just being there would have shown that wretched little Hitler that we’re not going to give in.” Her statement has such an impact on Mainwaring that he loses his composure. In the heat of an inflamed passion, he repeats Wilson’s previous flirtatious lines. The episode soon evolves into a take on wartime’s most famous romance, *Brief Encounters*. Mainwaring falls in love with Mrs. Gray, who shares the sentiment but is bound by propriety to leave town so as not to compromise the dignity of the married man. As the romance evolves, everyone in the platoon has encountered the enamored couple in town

Frazer: Yon Mainwaring’s making an utter fool of himself. There’s no other way of putting it.

Edith: Three times they came last week to see *Forty Little Mothers* with Eddie Cantor and they come again last night to see *Shipyard Sally* with Gracie Fields... Shirley shows them in, so they think I don’t see, but they’re always in the back row – only holding hands, mind. Not like some people I know who seem to have more arms than an octopus.⁸³

The men think that Mainwaring should be warned about his carelessness. Wilson summons the courage to bring up the issue in his Wilsonian way: “. . . with the ladies’ section, do you think it is just possible that some of us are making tiny little fools of ourselves?”⁸⁴ Captain Mainwaring seems to understand Wilson’s concern and salutes him for bringing up such a delicate matter. He goes on to say that, “I’m not insensitive to what people have been saying, so I’ve decided to dismiss the female section and just hang on to one or two special helpers... So that should solve your problem and get Mrs Pike out of your hair.” Mainwaring has gotten it wrong. He is

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

blinded by love, and thus doesn't understand that Wilson was referring to the Captain's affair with Mrs Gray.

These two scenes frame the participation of women in the Home Guard as a problem. Women distract even the most committed soldier, turn the force to a social gathering, and reduce the men to "little fools." The issue is especially delicate as the masculinity of volunteers, especially older men, was habitually scrutinized by contemporaries. Physical fitness as an iconographic ideal and a lifestyle was becoming more important throughout the twentieth century. War propaganda had further enforced the links between the fit male body and the strength and endurance of the nation. In general, men who were beyond conscription age were represented in the media as having a lesser role in the war effort. Frequently, their age was viewed as a feminizing factor.⁸⁵ The inclusion of women who would further reduce them in the eye of the public was evidently undesirable.

It is left, however, to Mrs Gray to resolve the situation. She understands Mainwaring's circumstances and, without consulting him, decides to leave town. Mainwaring rushes after her to the train station and pleads with her to reconsider: "But I don't want you to go. My whole life is completely different. I just live from one meeting to the next . . . Fiona. I've never begged anyone for anything in my whole life, but I'm begging you not to go." As the responsible adult, Mrs Gray reminds Mainwaring of his responsibilities. At the moment of truth, when Mainwaring can choose to stay on the train to London, he steps off. The Captain, who lives in a loveless marriage with a recluse who hasn't been out of the house "since Munich," sacrifices his chance of happiness for propriety and country. Mainwaring's

⁸⁵ Rose, *Which People's War?*, 167-169.

misfortune becomes a cautionary tale about including women in the Home Guard and upsetting the gender order in the ideological constitution of the nation state.

In the absence of other cultural products documenting women's contribution to the war effort, *Dad's Army* became a lone channel of information in the education of the public on this issue. Only a decade later, *Backs to the Land* (ITV 1978 to 1979) purported to offer the perspective of women's wartime experience. It too is set in 1940, but unlike *Dad's Army* its main protagonists are three young women who join the Women's Land Army. They arrive from London to a Norfolk farm to replace the owners' conscripted sons. They are expected both to cope with farm duties and to manage abundant male attention. The series ran for three seasons made available recently on DVD. Its success and reputation, however, were nowhere near that of *Dad's Army* either in its original run or today. Even so it is worthy to examine it alongside the latter as it narrates the marginalized experience of women and of the countryside.

The three women are recognizable social types: Daphne Finch-Beauchamp the aristocratic, pretty but dim blonde, Shirley Bloom the clever, Jewish middle-class brunette from North London (daughter of a successful cloth merchant), and Jenny Dabb the street-wise, fast-talking Cockney from East London. The three arrive at Crabtree Farm in Clayfield, Norfolk. Tom Whitlow the farm owner is aghast to find out they were sent to replace his sons. His mortification grows when he learns that none of them had ever worked on a farm and will consequently require training. The situation is resolved to everyone's satisfaction when the local lads, eager to win the girls' sympathies, volunteer to help them. Whitlow is satisfied that seven men are working on the farm, "and all I'm paying is starvation wages for three little girls."⁸⁶

⁸⁶ "Nymphs and Shepherds Come Expensive," *Backs to the Land*, ITV (April 22, 1977).

Early on it is quite clear that while Daphne is helpless (she is the embodiment of the stereotype of the useless aristocratic woman, after all) and Shirley is down to earth and clever, Jenny will see the girls through. She masters the union rulebook, learning their rights as volunteering farm hands, knows how to haggle, and manages to manipulate the system to the girls' advantage. In particular, she is wise enough to exploit the girls' feminine charms. Although the series was made in the midst of the second wave of feminism it does not constitute a serious challenge to gender conventions. As aforementioned, Jenny is the brain among all the characters in the show but, unsurprisingly, she is framed as undesirable. For instance, when the army comes to train on the farm, their posh but dumb officer (Daphne's male counterpart) decides that the villagers should participate in a training drill. As part of the practice, his unit will attack the village, which the villagers will defend to the best of their ability. The soldiers are confident in their victory against a bunch of yokels. Lady Bramston, the head of the villagers, takes on the challenge and solicits volunteers. Mr. Whitlow leads the unit but it is Jenny who comes up with a winning plan, sees its successful implementation, and captures the captain.⁸⁷ Her plan includes using Daphne as a diversion, on horseback wearing nothing but a swimsuit, riding into a field lady Godiva like. While Daphne's desirability is underscored here and in other episodes, and Shirley is courted by one of the Whitlow boys, Jenny is represented as a competent "fixer," unlike working-class men described earlier who were losers.

Some female characters are endowed with greater complexity and allowed to move outside pure "type." Lady Bramston was a middle-aged aristocrat in charge of the female volunteers, who also runs the village affairs. Her status as the village leader is established in an episode depicting the contribution of English citizens to the

⁸⁷ "We Shall Fight Them in the Breeches," *Backs to the Land*, ITV (May 13, 1977).

evacuation of Dunkirk. In an emergency assembly Lady Bramston informs the villagers that as they might have heard over the wires, “our army is in a bit of a pickle.”⁸⁸ She explains that British soldiers were stranded on the French coast and that it has been decided to create a “flotilla of private boats, however small, and send them across to bring back as many men as possible at first light.”⁸⁹ The villagers do their bit and in the next scene we witness the return of the soldiers, the Whitlow boys among them.

Lady Bramston organization was fruitful; her conduct commendable. She is nonetheless a target of ridicule. In one scene she is all pomp and circumstance, wearing a tin helmet and looking to the sky with a binocular. She tells her manservant, “No, it seems to be a seagull. Mark it as a non-hostile, will you Tilford?”⁹⁰ Tilford’s reaction shot reveals his thoughts, that she would probably not know a seagull from a hostile aircraft. She is made fun of not because she is a woman, but because she is an amateur soldier. Her authority in the village is never questioned but her efforts always seem a little grand for the occasion. Although women do not step beyond their gender roles in *Backs to the Land*, unlike in *Dad’s Army*, their contribution to the war effort is clear and substantial. It is indicative of the cultural change that 1970s feminism had brought to Britain. In the very least, women’s contribution to the war is acknowledged. Their experience is written into the general narrative of the war.

A Vision of Unity

Women were not the only notable absentees from *Dad’s Army*. The series also ignored the heavy reliance of the UK’s wartime effort on colonial resources and

⁸⁸ “Alarms, Excursions and Day Trips,” *Backs to the Land*, ITV (April 29, 1977).

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ “Sons and Lovers, God Forbid,” *Backs to the Land*, ITV (May 6, 1977).

soldiers. The opening scene in the first episode of the series, in which Alderman Mainwaring declares that during the war “we all backed Britain,” sets the tone. Not only are there no women in the assembled crowd, as has been discussed above, but the distinguished listeners are all white. During wartime two narratives, that of the “people’s war” and that of Britain as a “people’s empire” were intertwined and deployed in British propaganda. The concept of a “people’s empire” was useful as it bound together the people of Britain and those of its colonies and dominions. It exploited emerging expectations from a democracy both at home and in the empire; expectations that progressed from the turn of the century and interwar demands for universal suffrage to demands of rights. In the war years, policy-makers, experts, intellectuals, and activists were at their desks, drafting a new social vision of welfare and egalitarianism. The Queen’s Coronation in 1953 was the zenith moment of this vision. As representatives from the empire paraded the London streets, a modern and optimistic portrait of the empire was celebrated by a supportive media.⁹¹

In the 1950s, as processes of decolonization intensified and immigration expanded, the two narratives were divorced. As the borders of the national community had shrunk back to their island proportions, the Empire was reconceived as a threat to Englishness. England was now portrayed as “a domestic sanctuary threatened by violation.”⁹² As *Dad’s Army* so clearly demonstrates, Englishness was represented through references to the domestic, the intimate, and the local. It was increasingly reformulated as an exclusive, white identity. Even England’s allegedly special relationship with the United States evoked anxieties, and anti-American sentiments abounded in the higher echelons of society.

⁹¹ Webster, *Englishness and Empire*, 7.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 8.

In this climate, the greatness of World War II and the heroic role of the citizens of England shone like a lighthouse on a stormy night. The spirit of the Blitz steadily took over the mental territory that was once populated with narratives of imperial greatness and adventure. Even if multicultural Britain existed unevenly across geographical locations—as immigration was directed to certain areas of England, there is no trace of Britain’s imperial past in *Dad’s Army*.

In addition to ignoring the empire, *Dad’s Army* left out wartime social tensions and fissures. This attitude was fuelled by Perry’s and Croft’s sincere belief in the narrative of the war as glorious moment of unity. In his 2002 autobiography Perry stated that for him there was not much difference between the real Home Guard and *Dad’s Army*. “*Dad’s Army* was based firmly on fact and the truth of the situation. In common with most hit television situation comedies, like *Steptoe and Son*, *Till Death Us Do Part*, *Yes*, *Minister* and quite a few others, its foundations were real.”⁹³ *Dad’s Army* did offer many moment that resonated with the experiences of segments of the population. This, however, did not make it an accurate portrayal of the period.

In the minds of viewers, many of whom were born after the war or were too young to remember it, it was more than the situation of the comedy that resonated truth. It was Perry and Croft’s retelling of wartime Britain that had become a reality. Furthermore, in their idealized narrative they had managed to evade the burning concerns that plagued the 1970s. They presented a nostalgic, fictional account of the past as a site of unity and comfort vastly different from the present social reality of its viewers.

In his autobiography, four decades after the first broadcast of *Dad’s Army*, Perry propagated the narrative of united Britain; he argued that “90 per cent of the British

⁹³ Jimmy Perry, *A Stupid Boy*, (UK: Century, 2002), 91-92.

public stood firm and came through. We were fighting for our very existence, fighting for our very lives.”⁹⁴ This interpretation was already quite mainstream when the program was first aired. Peter Black’s review of the series for the *Daily Mail* demonstrates that. Black explained the setting of *Dad’s Army* to his readers: “This is summer, 1940, when the heart of England beat with a single pulse.”⁹⁵

The yearning to return to a time “when the heart of Britain beat with a single pulse,” is, I believe, the secret of the show’s success. It is understandable when we consider the historical context in which *Dad’s Army* was broadcast. The mid-1950s saw the re-alignment of Britain’s social values. This was a time of a national identity crisis provoked by the loss of colonial power, and postwar legislation in health, education and welfare, and their consequent effect on class, gender, race, and age hierarchies.⁹⁶ Britain relied on the military, and on the industrial and diplomatic support of the dominions and the colonies. As importantly, Britain “needed the empire to boost its self-image as a virtues imperial power.”⁹⁷ Britons understood their relationship with the colonies as fostering democracy, development and progress, but this notion was undermined by racial discord and discrimination. The 1950s were fraught with overt discrimination in housing, the labor market, and public facilities. The late 1950s brought increasing racial violence (including notorious incidents in Notting Hill and elsewhere in 1958). The political mainstream had pressured government to restrict immigration from the Commonwealth.

During the 1960s the concept of citizenship went through considerable change in efforts to limit non-white immigration. Hand in hand with non-discrimination legislation, racism grew more vocal and violent. Moreover, the first episode of *Dad’s*

⁹⁴ Ibid., 92.

⁹⁵ Peter Black, “TV,” *Daily Mail*, 1968 in T12.880.1, BBC WAC.

⁹⁶ Janet Thumim, “Women at Work: Popular Drama on British Television C1955-60,” in *Small Screens, Big Ideas: Television in the 1950s*, ed. Janet Thumim (London: I. B. Tauris, 2001), 207.

⁹⁷ Rose, *Which People’s War*, 262.

Army went on air three months after Enoch Powell's "Rivers of Blood" speech caused a political storm in Britain in the spring of 1968. Powell's speech brought to the fore a burning question: who was Britain? Croft and Perry offered their limited vision of Britain as English (southern England, more specifically), male, lower-middle class, rural, and white. By adding a nostalgic veneer, this vision was presented to viewers as warm and inclusive.

Nonetheless, *Dad's Army* managed to provoke a nostalgic surrender to its idyllic vision even in commentators who were alert to the pitfalls of nostalgia. Stanley Reynolds, writing for *The Guardian* in September 1969 argued that, "We have been seeing a lot of nostalgic looks-back to the 1939-1945 war recently on television and we undoubtedly be seeing even more. But the one programme that truly seems to capture the folk-legend aspect of the war is 'Dad's Army.'"⁹⁸ Reynolds went on to say that "In spite of its appeal to the nostalgic the series is very funny and seems to appeal to everyone . . . It is, perhaps, typically English that the one programme that ideally captures the spirits of the time should be a mocking comedy, it is also rather a shame."⁹⁹

The show was so seductive that it even managed to cast the failures of the time in a forgiving light. In an article for *The Guardian* published in 1970, Tom Hutchison observed that the comedy obscured how ill prepared the country was: "The BOA-Constrictor British can swallow any number of home truths about errors of national judgments if the criticisms are well coated with the spittle of sentiment," maintained Hutchinson. "Dunkirk becomes a Byronic triumph. And the criminal unpreparedness of 1940 emerges thirty years on as the television series "Dad's Army," a sweetly

⁹⁸ Stanley Reynolds. "'Dad's Army' and 'Plays of Today'". *The Guardian*, September 12, 1969, 8.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

comic of celebration of the British amateur.”¹⁰⁰ Perry and Croft, he maintained, “have been busy pressing a nerve of need that mistakes of the past should seem both happy and rather glorious. Under the pompous father-figure of Captain Mainwaring... “our heroes” as the “Radio Times” calls them with Victorian patronage, become Our Heroes. They muddle through to do the right thing, loveableness excising their ineptitude. The cake has been had and eaten.”¹⁰¹

Conclusion

Nostalgia was a powerful ally to the program. It offered viewers a comforting view of wartime England populated with cheerful and lovable patriots. Tom Stoppard the then TV critic for *The Observer* wrote that the series reminded him of a quote by Cecil Rhodes: “You are an Englishman. That means you have drawn first prize in the lottery of life...Something of the same spirit,” he explained, “imbues *Dad’s Army* (BBC-1), a fond look back at 1940...A bit on the daft side, but liable to bring a smile and a tear to any lover of England and Ealing.”¹⁰² The show’s ability to bring “a smile and a tear” to families united in numerous living-rooms across fractioned Britain afforded it a unique place in British culture. Its feel-good capacity was not lost on a generation that was partaking in the outright criticism of authority and government. Its gentleness was reassuring as the cultural arena filled with angry and violent voices. Ridicule and satire were making heady progress in conquering the screen in programs such as *Beyond the Fringe* or *That Was The Week That Was*. Rapidly, they were becoming de rigueur cultural reactions to Britain’s perceived decline: anger at Britain’s diminishing world role and nostalgia for the past.¹⁰³ As Stoppard shrewdly

¹⁰⁰ Hutchison, “Last of the Breed.”

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 6.

¹⁰² Tom Stoppard, “Getting Slowly Better All the Time,” *The Observer*, August 1968.

¹⁰³ Stuart Ward, “‘No Nation Could Be Broker:’ the Satire Boom and the Demise of Britain’s World Role,” In *British Culture and the End of Empire*, 91-110.

noticed, audiences were drawn to *Dad's Army* because it reassured them that whatever happened, England was indeed great. Its ongoing success in television reruns, and now online, demonstrates that this sentiment has not been reduced over the last five decades.

Conclusion

In the four decades under consideration in this thesis, all that could have been considered “British” before the Second World War was brought into question: the Empire, the demographic make-up of Britain, the ties between the states bound by the Union Jack, the definition of citizenship, the relationship between individuals and the state, and the relationships between the young and the old, and between men and women. The landscape itself had changed. New cities sprung up, and in existing ones new housing projects and public spaces mushroomed, featuring novel materials and architectural forms. The content and feel of the home had transformed radically along with its human make-up and its space division. The house expanded from a family space into the locus of entertainment as broadcasting media further entrenched itself in homes and daily routines.

Starting in the 1950s television sets functioned as a symbolic hearth—It was a site for assembling, myth telling, and identity formation. Audiences seized the medium that asked so little of them. Television literacy was not as protected by the habitual safeguards of wealth, social standing, cultural capital, education or tradition. When television resumed transmission after the war, it was a technology new to most. Its audience learned the art of viewing by the repeated act of consumption. Its populist and democratic nature suited a society engaged in redefining the relationship between the state and the individual, and hoping to meet the ideological challenges thrown at it from fascist, communist, and capitalist regimes with a more democratic and fair alternative. While the daily newspapers had clear political associations and declared agendas, radio and television were bound by an obligation to impartial and impersonal reporting. On the one hand, this was restrictive. On the other, it enabled an appeal to the masses rather than to a more limited segment of the population.

Audiences used this mass media to constitute themselves as communities, based on the shared experience of viewing in a pre-cable culture. The narrow viewing options and broadcast hours promised a sizable audience for the output of the two existing television channels. Programing and scheduling influenced daily routines as they defined “family-viewing time,” and the content fit for a post-watershed audience. Television transformed family lifestyles and leisure pursuits, and produced images and narratives that individuals incorporated in various ways into their life-stories and memories.

At times, television succeeded in representing the nation as a fixed entity rather than the social construct in continuous flux it really was, by presenting it as a shared project, and glossing over the serious threats to it. On other occasions, television increased local and regional sentiments with decentralized broadcasting that gave voice to regional accents, traditions, and persons. Some viewers saw on the screen others like themselves, which increased their sense of belonging. Others found that the small screen did not mirror them or their experience, or worse, they met with a reductionist, unflattering, or ridiculed version of their community. This galvanized various groups such as the Conservative National Viewers' and Listeners' Association, feminists, leaders of minority groups, and disgruntled individuals to demand reform. In all these cases, Britons understood the power of television to affect their lives. Thus, an understanding of the processes that formed post-imperial Britain requires grasping the meaning of watching television in the postwar era as this dissertation had done.

As a genre, early television sitcoms attracted British writers excited by its power to impact society. Many of the leading figures of this genre hailed from working class families, and were anxious to communicate their truth about living in

Britain. Inspired and emboldened by the postwar British movement of social realism, they confronted in their work the specter of class and the frustrations of working-class men. They did not shy away from forcing their audiences to acknowledge racism and prejudice at the forefront of their society. Writers working between 1945 and 1980 turned a form which was often seen as frivolous entertainment into an inquiry that questioned the most fundamental structures of their society.

As such they highlighted the tensions and fractions of postwar society, and became some of the most earnest critical voices of their time. Britcoms brought gritty, grim, and unglamorous Britain into the living rooms of millions. They probed at the postwar promise of greater social mobility, and revealed the subtle apparatuses of exclusion and differentiation in British society that thwarted it. Anchoring these characters in the social realist tradition, as both the British sitcom and this dissertation have done, highlights the critique of the social order that these characters embody. Some of the most memorable and well-loved characters on screen presented Britons with a sobering view of their society: they were unattractive, unsuccessful, and socially immobile. They aspired to so much, but were held in place by what seemed to be their inability to take advantage of the changing times. What might have seemed as their personal failings, however, was in fact the greater failure of the welfare state.

Consumption by people from all walks of life, different ages, and occupations, provided contemporaries with a language to discuss and laugh at the tensions tearing the fabric of their society. It was a singular idiom made of catchphrases and stereotypes for Britons' exploration of their society – its limits, its advantages, and the desires and fears the rule it. Sitcoms' incredible outreach extended the debate

across the nation, and enabled a conversation that took place in the privacy of the home to resonant in the public sphere.

As we have seen, the chief concern of social realist sitcoms examined in this dissertation was working class social mobility. Even when they discussed race, they were commenting on the plight of the working class. Indeed, although Britain was becoming more multi-racial, and its gender and sexual conventions were being challenged, the characters that dominated its screen were predominantly white, male, and heterosexual. As these sitcoms moved into the canon of television, they became producers and suppliers of knowledge about the present, and also about the past. With each repeat on television, each sale of videotape, DVD, and hit on YouTube, their version of life in Britain acquired more credence as an official version of the past. Therefore, it is essential to question these images, to ask how, why, and by whom they were produced and consumed, as this dissertation has done. It is important to remember its status as a product of popular culture, but to also remember the various ways in which individuals had interacted with it. Although the conventions of the genre require that each episode ends with a return to order, the parameters of the social order to aspire to have changed over the decades. As this dissertation demonstrates, the potential of subversion of the sitcom is manifested not only in the process of production, but also in the process of consumption. And as long as the audience changes, the meaning of a joke remains in flux.

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