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Abstract

This review addresses *Radio Modernisms: Features, Cultures and the BBC* (edited by Aasiya Lodhi and Amanda Wrigley), an essay collection which captures the entanglements of the feature—a radiogenic art form, popular at the mid-century BBC, that blended dramatic, documentary and musical attributes—with the currents of literary modernism that swirled around and through the BBC from the late 1920s until roughly the mid-1960s. While attending to the frequently experimental aspects of modernist radio features, this collection successfully frames the broadness of “modernism” as a mid-century aesthetic project by emphasizing the demotic and vernacular forms it took, and by stressing the connections between radio and other media forms in the period. The volume should be of great interest to scholars of radio, literary modernism, and mid-century British culture more generally.

Keywords

Radio, Modernism, BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation), Radio Features, Radio Drama

Aasiya Lodhi and Amanda Wrigley, eds. *Radio Modernisms: Features, Cultures and the BBC*. Routledge, 2020. 144pp, \$160 (hardcover).

Review by Ian Whittington
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Emerging from a one-day conference at the British Library in May 2016, and originally published as a 2018 special issue of *Media History* (vol. 24, no. 2), the present volume makes more widely available an excellent collection of essays on the BBC Features Department, its precursors, and its legacies. Specifically, the essays in this collection address the entanglements of the feature – a radiogenic art form, popular at the mid-century BBC, that blended dramatic, documentary, and musical attributes – with the currents of literary modernism that swirled around and through the BBC from the late 1920s until roughly the mid-1960s. The aim of the collection, as editors Aasiya Lodhi and Amanda Wrigley outline in their introduction, is to connect the sometimes siloed worlds of media history and literary scholarship through close analysis of broadcasts that emerged from within a global media industry but which bear the traces of their authors' status as literary craftspeople before, or in addition to, their engagement with radio.

The cross-disciplinary urge that motivates the collection resonates within several of the individual chapters. For example, Leonie Thomas's essay on Jamaican broadcaster and poet Una Marson, the first woman of colour to host a BBC program (the Second World War-era Overseas Service program *Calling the West Indies*), foregrounds the effect that the institutional matrix of the BBC had on Marson's poetry, contributing to her shift away from an anachronistic pastoralism and introducing a more disconsolate note as Marson felt increasingly isolated and alienated in London and at the BBC. But the institution and the individual played off each other in other ways, too: Alexandra Lawrie, in "Who's Listening to Modernism? BBC Features and Audience Response," notes that even highly personal and recondite works like David Jones's long poem of the First World War, *In Parenthesis* (1937, broadcast 1946), could become remarkably successful radio features in the hands of a talented producer like Douglas Cleverdon (who would go on to produce *Under Milk Wood* [1953]) (85–9). (Attention to Features producers like Cleverdon, Laurence Gilliam, Olive Shapley, Denis Mitchell, Philip Donnellan, and others is a welcome element across the collection.) Todd Avery, in an essay that formed the keynote of the original conference, highlights the shared Aestheticist heritage of landmark BBC broadcasts like Tyrone Guthrie's *The Flowers Are Not for You to Pick* and seemingly radio-inflected literary works like Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*, both of which, Avery argues, "allegorize the new perceptual experience that [Walter] Pater himself had felt at the dawn of the age of waves in the 1880s and that was occurring in the minds of listeners everywhere in the 1920s and 1930s" (31). As this and other essays in the volume make clear, radio and literature did not so much covet and steal each other's best formal moves as they drew from the same moment of bubbling cultural ferment.

Testifying to this shared cultural moment is the persistently intermedial focus of the essays in this collection. This is true not only in the sense that many of the broadcasters considered here (Marson, Woolf, Louis MacNeice, and Herbert Read among them) were published poets and

novelists. The radio feature was, itself, embedded in a vibrant and competitive media ecosystem that included periodicals (*Radio Times*, *The Listener*), pamphlets (including those by the wartime Ministry of Information), sound recordings, television, and cinema. Wrigley, in the chapter “Afterlives of BBC Radio Features,” assesses the formation of an “informal canon of literary radio features” (including Edward Sackville-West’s *The Rescue*, MacNeice’s *The Dark Tower*, and Dylan Thomas’s *Under Milk Wood*) through the remediation of that canon via live performances, recordings, print publication, periodical coverage, and other modes of recirculation (108). Other chapters treat radio’s intermediality in an entirely different sense: in one of the most generative essays, Kate Lacey reads the schedule of the early BBC, as printed in the *Radio Times*, as its own kind of modernist text. As a representation of sensorial flow, a collage object, the abstract trace of a disembodied institutional force, and a species of automatic writing, the schedule becomes, in Lacey’s reading, “something like the nation’s stream of consciousness”, each listed program a fragment of broadcast experience (14). “The relentless unfolding of the schedule over years and decades,” she writes, “produces through these fragments a communicative text that exceeds comprehension or control” (15).

David Hendy, in a thoughtful afterword, points out that media historians have often been wary of over-emphasizing the more “grandiose and baroque” efforts of the Features Department, which seem so unlike the vast majority of broadcasting as a cultural form as to be outliers (126). If the present volume does lean, ever so slightly, towards the radio-minded literary scholar rather than the radio scholar with a literary bent, the lean is on the whole salutary, and all of the authors demonstrate a deep familiarity with and indebtedness to radio scholarship stretching back to the early decades of the medium. Moreover, the book usefully recalibrates its central “ism” away from the baroque and towards more demotic ends: if the feature and its paratexts are modernist assemblages, the emphasis throughout *Radio Modernisms* is on the vernacular nature of that modernism. It is by now no surprise that the ideas and forms of modernism were at once informed by the broader culture that held them, and permeated that culture in myriad ways; but by highlighting the BBC’s central role in the formation of a more vernacular modernist style, this volume does a great service to literary studies and to radio studies.



Ian Whittington is Associate Professor of English at the University of Mississippi. He is the author of *Writing the Radio War: Literature, Politics and the BBC, 1939–1945* (2018) as well as a number of essays on radio studies and twentieth-century British, Irish, and Anglophone literature, and is editor of a special issue of *The Global South* on ‘Radio Cultures of the Global South’ (2022).