

B.B.C. Popularizes Archives

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PERHAPS "popularizes" is too strong a term for a series of talks on the British Broadcasting Corporation's "Network Three," which is certainly not for the masses; but to have been allotted no less than 8 weekly half-hours in March–April 1964 is a big step in the right direction for English archivists.

After reading Prof. V. H. Galbraith's stimulating *The Historian at Work* (B.B.C., 1962), which was the basic book for a short series of broadcasts, I wrote to the B.B.C. suggesting that there should be a followup dealing with *postmedieval* and *local* archives, aspects barely touched by the Regius Professor. There followed an interview with Jean Rowntree, head of B.B.C.'s Further Education Unit, in which she expressed her hope that 1963 would see the allocation of more time to educational programs. After her unit was upgraded to a department she invited me to write a booklet somewhat similar to that which had led me to seek the B.B.C.'s influential support. I was given only 3 weeks to compile the booklet and 3 more weeks to collect all the illustrations, which were to be a major feature.

The manuscript of *Introduction to Archives* (1964, 3s. 6d.) met official requirements, and it resulted in my being asked to advise on the structure of a series of eight talks and to recommend two or three speakers for each. The names that I submitted were approved, and I was enjoined to invite the speakers to participate. I was told that the topics must be closely related to the booklet.

I was lucky in the response to the invitations, my only misfortune being the absence of my friends W. G. Hoskins and H. P. R. Finberg, the first and second heads of the department of English local history of the University of Leicester. Both were too pressed with urgent work to accept further tasks.

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The series as broadcast comprised the following topics and speakers:

1. *What Are Archives?* By F. G. Emmison, County Archivist of Essex; and Sir Robert Somerville, chairman of the British Records Association.
2. *The Student and the Archives.* By F. G. Emmison and Peter Walne, secretary of the Society of Archivists and County Archivist of Hertfordshire.
3. *Village History and Village Records.* By W. E. Tate, author of *The Parish Chest*; and John West, author of *Village Records*.
4. *Town History and Town Archives.* By Prof. M. W. Beresford, University of Leeds; and Miss E. Ralph, City Archivist of Bristol.
5. *The Family Tree.* By Sir Anthony Wagner, Garter Principal King of Arms and author of *English Genealogy*; and Marc Fitch, chairman of the British Record Society.
6. *How To Write a Biography.* By Prof. Joel Hurstfield, University of London, noted Tudor biographer; and K. C. Mullins, secretary of the History of Parliament Trust.
7. *Themes in Local History.* By F. G. Emmison, author of *Tudor Secretary*; John Bestall, university extra-mural tutor in Derbyshire and Yorkshire; and Philip Whitting, chairman of the Standing Conference for Local History.
8. *Working With Records.* By F. G. Emmison; Robert Douch, lecturer in local history, University of Southampton; and Jennifer Nias, senior lecturer in history, King Alfred's College, Winchester.

The chairman for the whole series was Lionel Munby, department of extra-mural studies, University of Cambridge, and editor of the *Amateur Historian*. He proved to be just the right man to blend the discussions and to chip in when he felt a topic had been sufficiently aired and divert discussion to fresh fields.

It was settled at the outset that the first quarter-hour of the first and second programs would be taken up by a set talk, to be followed by discussion, but that the whole time in the subsequent weeks would be used for discussion. The mood that we hoped to establish was one of spontaneity and informality. In order that we might sound unprepared, we were in fact given beforehand by the chairman only brief notes of possible lines along which he might lead the discussion. And we met together for only 20 minutes before the recording of each discussion to test each other's reactions to some of the points to be raised.

The producer, Gordon Croton, formerly a postgraduate historian of Reading University and a man of wide knowledge, handled the course firmly and ably, lopping off enthusiasms and grafting in improvements here and there and generally taking charge, as was his responsibility, of the overall and technical aspects. A preliminary test of voice projection and opening remarks of not more

than 10 minutes were given, and then without further ado we recorded conversation for 40 to 50 minutes, with the understanding that our weaker efforts would be excised. One speaker monopolized the arena and was inclined to interrupt and disobey the chairman; the producer, however, edited the tape so well that the overenthusiastic speaker's time roughly equaled that of his fellow speaker and the interruptions seemed to be evidence of informality!

Any evaluation I give, as requested by the editor of the *American Archivist*, is merely my own view. Most speakers were allowed to make fairly long statements in reply to key questions. Provided that our remarks seemed unprepared, the chairman gave us free rein. The most lengthy replies were undoubtedly useful to the listeners. But the producer's insistence on unexpected questions yielded the natural crop of vague or trite answers or answers unnecessarily verbose and not very helpful to potential users of archives.

If my own assessment of our talks is "fair to middling," I do not suggest that, had we been given more time to prepare, the results would have been as pleasantly spontaneous to the listener. We could, however, have provided listeners with sounder and more accurate information, expressed more concisely.

Distinguished speakers such as Professor Hurstfield and Sir Anthony Wagner gave the polished performance expected of them but spoke relatively little about archives. When they did, there were flashes of truth—and humor. For example:

HURSTFIELD: Too many books assume that what they see in the Star Chamber records is a description of what happened. It's really a description of what a man alleges to have happened.

CHAIRMAN: It's a case made by a witness in court?

HURSTFIELD: Exactly. It's like these motoring cases which are always between two cars on the opposite sides of the road, both stationary, which manage to have a collision.

In the last two talks frank discussions ranged over controversial themes, such as the appearance at archival establishments of too many trainee teachers and postgraduate researchers who lack basic knowledge of how to tackle original archives, the selection of a thesis subject in relation to available material, and so forth—topics enlivened by plenty of thrust and parry.

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