

BOOK REVIEW

The Listener Historical Archive, 1929–1991 (Gale Cengage Learning, 2011, available via <http://gale.cengage.co.uk>. Institutional subscriptions only).

The BBC's weekly magazine, the *Listener*, originated as an aid to students, and now—twenty years after its final issue—this marvellous resource enables that mission to continue in a new form. With origins not in the *Radio Times*, but rather in the 'Aids to Study' produced by the BBC's adult education section, the *Listener* was designed to fall—in content, price, and audience—somewhere between *John O'London's* and the *Spectator*. Initially, critics worried that the title suggested a passivity bordering on eavesdropping, but more than eighty years later—after both Donald Winch and John Burrow have compared the intellectual historian's task to that of an eavesdropper—even that one-time anxiety points to the value of this resource for the cultural and intellectual historian. The *Listener's* conversations were meant to be overheard by a particular set of readers: as its first editor, Richard Lambert, recalled in his memoir, the founders imagined their magazine being read 'by the country parson, by the overseas cousin, by the clerk or artisan keen upon self-education, by the keen teacher and by older children beginning to supplement their school studies by general knowledge of the world around them'. Within that formulation lies a world of assumptions about the BBC's inter-war audience, alongside equally decided views of those not in the roll-call: 'It is a subtle quality, rather akin to the flavour of fine wines', Lambert explained, 'which many palates cannot appreciate'.

The *Listener's* eventual form was the product of a series of internal disputes. First, advocates of a 'stately sixpenny' were outmanoeuvred by the BBC's educators, who favoured—and got—a more popular twopenny. Next, the BBC's talks directors were frustrated when the *Listener's* editors insisted on publishing original material, rather than following the directors' preference for a 'Talks Hansard' instead. Most significant, though, was the Corporation's confrontation with Fleet Street, as newspaper proprietors, led by the *Times*, protested that the BBC was encroaching on their turf. They took their case straight to the Prime Minister, while the BBC's supporters hyperbolically compared this opposition to an educational publication to a modern-day Inquisition. This tempest—a single moment in a longer dispute between broadcasters and the press—forced a compromise that ensured the *Listener's* unique value for scholars today. The BBC agreed that ninety per cent of the *Listener's* content would relate to broadcasting, with the result that the magazine's pages were filled with talks, comments on talks, articles on broadcasting, and broadcasting news. This decision, taken to placate the press barons, brought two unintended consequences: it ensured that the BBC would not judge the *Listener* against the market (astonishingly, during the first five years of its existence, its editor was not permitted to glimpse circulation figures); and it bequeathed an invaluable record of sayings and doings which might otherwise—short of a trip to the Written Archives Centre in Caversham—have proved ephemeral.

Now Cengage Learning has produced *The Listener Historical Archive*, an electronic resource that includes every issue of the *Listener* from its debut in 1929 to its closure in 1991. This online archive makes all 129,000 pages available, amounting to more than 226,000 articles (in addition to all advertisements), easily searchable by keyword, programme, contributor, and date. The results appear in full context from the magazine's pages, rather than as disaggregated text, with articles outlined and keywords highlighted—not unlike *The Times Digital Archive*, for those familiar with that useful resource. Now hours, even days, of research can be completed in a few moments, as students and scholars can immediately identify every article that mentions, for instance, 'New Towns' or *The Young Ones*. The text of these articles can then easily be downloaded, with full reference information, in .pdf format. A search for 'New Towns', for example, yields twenty-one articles published between 1934 and 1968, while a search for *The Young Ones* locates sixty-three articles published between 1982 and 1990. To be sure, not all of these 'hits' are actually 'finds', but separating the wheat from the chaff is considerably easier when sifting through twenty-one articles rather than sixty-two years of text.

Yet there are costs. The first is intellectual, and applies mainly to our students. As efficient as it may be to download every mention of 'Auden' in thirty seconds of 'research', students learn incomparably more when they make their way to the library and read through a decade of the *Listener* for themselves. Not just about Auden, but also about the times: the context, the idiom, the advertisements—and, most of all, the neighbouring tidbits that bear no relation to Auden whatsoever. This problem is hardly the fault of Cengage, which has in fact done its best to mitigate these effects—by providing images of pages, rather than isolated text, and by making it possible to work through issues chronologically, as well as thematically. In any case, *The Listener Historical Archive* will not make the library's bound volumes disappear (though that might well seem the result), and this fact raises a second cost, which is economic. In 1929 the *Listener* was priced so as to place the magazine into the hands of as many country parsons and overseas cousins as possible, but it is considerably more difficult to learn the price of *The Listener Historical Archive*. Yet, in an age of tightening budgets, if a library already has those bound volumes on the shelves, it might well be the case that this unspecified—but presumably sizeable—chunk of money could be better spent on books.

While these are decisions (hopefully) for professional librarians, teachers and researchers have long known that the *Listener* offers an almost unparalleled resource for twentieth-century cultural and intellectual history. Now, by facilitating access to more than 200,000 articles, this magnificent resource promises to enhance immediately the collection of any research library.

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