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Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television 2017, 37(1), 82-95

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This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* on 19th April 2017, available online:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/01439685.2016.1272804>

DOI link to article:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01439685.2016.1272804>

Date deposited:

31/12/2016

Embargo release date:

19 October 2018



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‘MUST WE WAIT ‘TIL DOOMSDAY?’: THE MAKING AND MAULING OF CHURCHILL’S
PEOPLE (BBC1, 1974-75)

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In 1974, the lofty ambition of a BBC drama producer to manufacture a ‘prestige’ international hit along the lines of Elizabeth R (BBC2, 1971) came unstuck. In this case study, the authors consider the plight of Churchill’s People (BBC1, 1974-75) during a time of economic strife in the UK and industrial unrest at the BBC, and ask how a series which combined so many skilled writers, directors and actors could result in such a poorly-received end product. Churchill’s People is also placed in a wider context to assess its ‘neglected’ status, the authors drawing parallels with other historical drama of the era. The series’ qualification for being ‘forgotten’ is considered in relation to its struggle in the ratings against strong competition, the ‘blacking out’ by unions of production at the BBC for eight weeks and the subsequent pressures on transmission times, prompting the authors’ consideration of a more qualified definition of ‘lost’ drama, i.e. the drama projects which were remounted, reduced, or abandoned altogether during 1974.

Introduction

Churchill's People was a much maligned product of the BBC Drama Department – a 26-part adaptation of Winston Churchill's *A History of the English-speaking Peoples*,¹ commissioned to mark the centenary of his birth but also an attempt to emulate the success of international BBC hits like *Elizabeth R* (BBC2, 1971) and *The Forsyte Saga* (BBC2, 1967). Though intended as a prestige series, *Churchill's People* has been neglected in television histories and, judging by its critical reception at the time, was never likely to be remembered as anything other than an artistic failure. Few people watched beyond the first episode and adverse critical comment ensured an immediate, sharp and permanent dip in the ratings. This article will attempt to set out the circumstances in which a talented and experienced group of people ended up making such a 'forgettable' series and asks whether the critical reputation of *Churchill's People* can be recovered.

Development

Churchill's People was the brainchild of two television professionals, both of whom were also playwrights. Producer Gerald Savory was by the late 1960s Head of Plays at the BBC Television Drama Group and script editor Brian Rawlinson was an actor with regular parts in *Coronation Street* (ITV, 1960-present) and *The Onedin Line* (BBC1, 1971-1980). In 1966 Savory saw Rawlinson's plays about the Norman Conquests² on BBC2 and was inspired by their minimalist aesthetic: no grandeur to the set design, often the most basic backdrops using cycloramas and drapes and no film sequences either. Sharing a passion for history, Savory and Rawlinson soon devised a series inspired by Churchill's books: an epic cycle of plays stretching from Roman Britain to the Industrial Revolution. It was evident, however, that the books themselves were impractical for adaptation. Indeed, the author's estate was so keen to sell the rights that it eventually accepted just £4,000 for them, down from an initial £40,000.³ In the final analysis this was a sound investment, but there had already been tensions within

the BBC about the project. Negotiations to licence the books had opened in 1968 and the deal went through two years later after much resistance from David Attenborough (Director of Programmes), Paul Fox (Controller of BBC1) and Robin Scott (Controller of BBC2), all of whom regarded the series as a dauntingly expensive project. The prospect of a co-production deal with MCA Universal, however, appears to have swung matters in Savory's favour. The producer also promised a drama which would be 'suitable for world-wide family viewing and could be transmitted at any hour, any day of the week.'⁴

Savory's pitch featured grand plans to use the best talent available, in anticipation that the prospect of international sales would lure many good names. But, as is often the case, reality fell short of ambition. Benjamin Britten declined the music commission,⁵ which was an early blow, and when a framework for the 26 plays was speculatively issued to writers in August 1972, many significant names declined: Tom Stoppard, John Mortimer and Alan Plater each blamed a busy schedule while Ian Curteis, Hugh Whitmore, David Mercer and Peter Terson all expressed an initial interest but ultimately dropped out. The relationship with Terson was particularly messy, his requests for research material becoming ensnared by BBC bureaucracy and culminating in a withering resignation memo via his agent, Peggy Ramsay. Jim Allen also fell away, owing to an expressed unease with the source material which, with empathy, Rawlinson realised would result in 'a shot-gun marriage between you and Churchill.'⁶ To plug the gaps there then followed a considerable amount of pitching by agents on behalf of clients – among them Alasdair Gray, David Pownall and Christopher Isherwood, all rejected – as well as a string of scripts sent to the office by readers at the BBC Script Unit, but these were generally very new names. By this stage, a certain amount of caution was being expressed – as Savory explained to one agent, 'I am starting off my thinking in terms of our most experienced television writers who know the disciplines of the electronic studios.'⁷ This proved a sensible measure. Rawlinson, in his newfound role as script editor, was

completely unfamiliar with the demands of developing 26 plays scripted by almost as many writers. It was advantageous, therefore, that the writers used would be well versed in scripting studio drama and could cope with the restrictions of no location filming and a limited number of sets.⁸ Otherwise, a wiser head would have been required to ‘bed in’ writers straight from the worlds of prose or fringe theatre.

Aside from these practical concerns, Gerald Savory and Brian Rawlinson had a more fundamental issue which would cause problems for them later. There was a clear gap between the popular image of Churchill and the broadly left-wing outlook of the writers tasked with devising the plays, who were drawn towards depicting events such as the Peasants’ Revolt and the emergence of the Levellers. Or, as Savory later put it, ‘Peoples rather than pageantry.’⁹ This conflict did not trouble him, as an interview in the *Daily Mail* indicates: ‘I had always thought of Churchill as a rabid Tory until I read this history. He really took a very radical view.’¹⁰ As debatable as this may be, the series was being sold on the Churchill name – and a Tory interpretation of history was expected by many, not least, as we will see, by his rather angry grandson, Winston S. Churchill, then a serving Member of Parliament.

Production

Ten plays were recorded at fortnightly intervals in the five months leading up to May 1974. A benefit of the distance between recording and transmission of the plays – in some cases by more than a year – was that it allowed for them to be taped out of sequence; for instance, the final play *Death or Liberty* (23 June 1975), depicting the Peterloo Massacre, was recorded three months before the Roman Britain series opener, *Pritan* (30 December 1974).¹¹ Notable plays in this first tranche also included *The Lost Island* (6 January 1975) and *The Saxon Dusk* (27 January 1975), one of the final works of James MacTaggart, who both directed and wrote

the play. Recording began, however, on 28 December 1973 with the first studio day for *A Sprig of Broom* (10 February 1975), a play about Henry II's impact on the 'laws and institutions' of England.¹²

At the time of the recording, the country's present-day laws and institutions were in an almost unprecedented state of turmoil. The Industrial Relations Act of 1971 had attempted to restrict strike actions, but instead further radicalised a highly political trade union movement.¹³ As a result of this, Edward Heath's Conservative government had long been racked by industrial conflicts, with the miners' strike in 1972 as the most prominent of its defeats.¹⁴ Events in 1973 pushed the crisis to the tipping point. An Arab Oil Embargo in October triggered a global energy crisis. In the UK, the government introduced a counter-inflationary policy known as Phase 3 which was to have long-term ramifications, not least in the breakdown of pay negotiations with the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) who called for an immediate overtime ban.¹⁵ This in turn led to the declaration of a state of emergency: petrol ration books were printed (though ultimately never used), television channels were restricted to closedown at 10.30 p.m. and a three-day working week was imposed from New Year's Eve 1973. This chain of events culminated in Heath calling a General Election in February 1974 on the basis of 'Who governs Britain?' – the unions or the government.¹⁶ The electorate appeared to decide that if the Prime Minister did not know the answer then perhaps it was time for him to go and the Labour Party formed a minority government until the second election in November, where they governed with a very slim majority.¹⁷

It was against this stormy backdrop that *Churchill's People* was produced and the BBC itself was subject to significant industrial action during 1974. This impacted not only on *Churchill's People* but a whole range of productions, to the point where the Corporation had barely enough programmes left to fill its schedules.¹⁸ One example of industrial action and its

impact on programme-making was the strike by scenery shifters which disrupted work on the *Doctor Who* (BBC1, 1963-89, 1996, 2005-present) story 'Robot' (28 December 1974-18 January 1975). A peculiar side-effect of this action involved *Blue Peter* (BBC1, 1958-present), on 22 May 1974, going out live from the set of 'Robot' because, although the story was successfully taped the day before, the workers had refused to pack up the set.

Of greater significance was a long-brewing issue among the Production Assistants (PAs), who later became known as Production Unit Managers (now more commonly referred to as first assistant directors). The PAs' main grievance was that they were not allowed overtime pay despite working unsociably long hours, in some extreme cases as much as 100 hours per week. This stemmed from the way that the BBC organised its staff: one group were classed as Management and Production (MP) and the other Operators and Production (OP) and those on MP – which included the PAs – did not attract overtime. The BBC was 'terrified'¹⁹ at the prospect of paying overtime for the PAs and the Corporation was restricted by the minority Labour government's pay legislation from offering the kind of compensatory increase that might head off a strike. The BBC also demurred from Bill Cotton's suggestion that the PAs could be bought off with a free television and an on-screen credit.²⁰

Eventually the PAs' unions, the Association of Broadcasting Staff (ABS) and the Association of Cinematograph Television and Allied Technicians (ACTT), ran out of patience, 18 months after the first pay demands were made, and the PAs went on strike on 15 June 1974. Although the threat to some programmes did not materialise – most notably the blacking out of the World Cup finals in West Germany – and viewers were largely unaware of disruption, the strike caused chaos at the production level. Early casualties included *The Pallisers* (BBC2, 1974), a 26-part epic which halted production before the final two episodes were completed, something that viewers most definitely did notice. The series had to be

repeated later in the year so that people had a chance of understanding what was happening when the concluding two episodes finally made it to air.²¹

In addition to *The Pallisers* and *Doctor Who*, many other shows were affected by degrees large and small: *Top of the Pops* (BBC1, 1964-2006) fell silent for seven consecutive Thursdays; Howard Schuman's *A Helping Hand* (BBC2, 27 January 1975) was driven out of the studio and onto film²²; drama series *The Double Dealers* (BBC1, 1974) was shortened to four episodes; production on Dennis Potter's *Late Call* (BBC2, 1975) was suspended for months, with just one episode completed; recording of new sitcom *Porridge* (BBC1, 1974-77) was delayed; and a lightning stoppage on 3 July took out evening coverage of Wimbledon.²³ All in all, over 50 programmes were affected.²⁴ *Churchill's People* itself was thought to be doomed, with the *Guardian* stating in July that although ten episodes had been recorded the series was, according to the reporter, 'already considered dead.'²⁵

The PAs' strike was finally settled in August, after eight weeks, via 'a complicated peace formula hammered out between unions and the BBC [that] will basically allow the assistants one day of compensatory leave if they work excessive hours.'²⁶ Despite the close vote – 33 to 26 – and a certain amount of lingering ill-will, programmes were rushed back into production, including the reprieved *Churchill's People*.

A Wilderness of Roses (17 March 1975), set during the turbulent times of the fifteenth century as opposed to the twentieth, went before the cameras on 8 September 1974, marking the beginning of the second production block for *Churchill's People*. Soon the episodes abandoned over the summer were completed, including the already fully rehearsed *The Coming of the Cross* (13 January 1975) about King Penda, and the partially recast *The Whip of Heaven* (24 March 1975) which depicted the dissolution of the monasteries. Other notable productions included the Cromwell play *The Agreement of the People* (21 April 1975), written and directed by Don Taylor and recorded 'as live' – a far cry from the out-of-

sequence method on other plays in the series, which would often take two or three days to complete. *The Derry Boys* (5 May 1975) reunited the successful partnership of writer Dominic Behan and director Piers Haggard, who had previously worked together on *Carson Country* (BBC1, 1972), and there was even a semi-musical about the founding of the City, *The Fine Art of Bubble-Blowing* (12 May 1975). The calibre of writers and directors remained high: Julian Bond, John Bruce, Keith Dewhurst, Peter Hammond, Jane Howell, Julia Jones, Howard Schuman and Herbert Wise among them.

Characteristic of all productions was the minimalist aesthetic which Brian Rawlinson had first pioneered on *The Norman Conquests* in 1966. Savory shared these principles and had even sent out a memorandum outlining the philosophy: ‘A rose bush, a wheelbarrow and a spade against a bright blue cyclorama is a garden on a summer’s day. A mast, a sail, a few upturned boxes, the sound of the sea and wind is a ship.’²⁷ But in the midst of real-world austerity, and several months into production, it slowly emerged that this approach was more a liability (see below) than a point of celebration.

The completed plays were proving a disappointment with management. Bryan Cowgill, the new Controller of BBC1, was deeply underwhelmed by a private screening of *Pritan* and *The Lost Island* in July 1974 and, by year end, he and Christopher Morahan, the Head of Plays, were actively engaged in damage limitation.²⁸ *Churchill’s People* would not feature on the cover of the *Radio Times* and there would be no press preview. Cowgill had also forced seven minutes of cuts upon *Pritan*, which he considered unfit for broadcast in its original state.²⁹ The violence in the second play, *The Lost Island* – in which someone’s hand is cut off – also helped ensure that the series would never receive the family-friendly timeslot which Gerald Savory had pitched for.³⁰

Reception

Churchill's People was vulnerable. The effects of the prolonged PAs' strike were visible in a number of ways: there was a preponderance of repeats on BBC1 and BBC2 – indeed, on-screen copyright dates were changed to roman numerals in the hope that people would no longer notice the age of the programmes³¹ – and there were many US imports in peak time, with a noticeable slide in the quantity of home-grown drama and comedy, for the simple reason that none had been produced over the summer. When *Churchill's People* arrived – a series which intentionally lent towards a low-budget aesthetic – it was inevitable that (a) viewers assumed this was down to cost-cutting, and (b) critics made a series of jibes at the expense of experimentalism. Philip Purser's *Sunday Telegraph* review epitomised the critical view of the time: *Churchill's People* 'not only sounded like a poor schools radio programme but looked like it as well.'³²

The series was also trapped by its structure. The chronological sequence of the plays was integral, so it was not possible to reorder them for transmission in terms of accessibility or quality. This resulted in an opening play which was rather heavy on internal monologues and grunting men. Many of the 4.8 million people who tuned in did not return for the second episode. To provide some context for that figure, *Pritan* had a million fewer viewers than *Blue Peter* earlier that day and three million less than *Z Cars* (BBC1, 1962-1978) and *Whatever Happened to the Likely Lads?* (BBC1, 1973-1974), which both aired in mid-evening slots. That said, 4.8 million was quite normal for a play airing at 9.25 on a Monday evening.

The viewing figure fell sharply to 2.7 million for the second play, *The Lost Island*. By this point the reviews for the show had started to appear, and they ensured a downward spiral for the whole series. Indeed, it became a punch-bag in the press for weeks to come: 'Is this Winston's worst hour?'³³ asked the *Sun*, while Clive James at the *Observer* suggested that 'somebody on the top floor has gone berserk.'³⁴ Nancy Banks-Smith of the *Guardian* asked

whether *Churchill's People* should be entered for the Golden Rose of Montreux instead of *The Goodies*.³⁵ Dennis Potter of the *New Statesman* hid in his hospital bed from the television on Monday nights.³⁶ Attacking the visual aesthetics of the series, *Daily Mail* critic Shaun Usher suggested that *Pritan* had the 'general aura (words and acting apart) of being an outside broadcast from some Women's Institute pageant at the village hall'³⁷, which provoked an angry letter from Mrs Patricia Spencer of the WI: 'Mrs Spencer points out that WI players take a great deal of trouble over their productions, and do not deserve to be bracketed with *Churchill's People*.'³⁸

The internal BBC reaction was of a similar, though more subdued, tenor, as can be gleaned from the Television Weekly Programme Review (TWPR) minutes. This was a Wednesday meeting at which the heads of department gathered to review the previous week's programming. Assessing the first two episodes of *Churchill's People*, Christopher Morahan confessed to being 'rather depressed' by the whole thing. His children had proclaimed: 'Friends, Romans and Countrymen – cut off your ears [...] Why all this blood and bad acting?'³⁹ Huw Wheldon believed that a lot of damage had been done to the remaining 24 plays and this was borne out by the regularity in which the series was discussed at the TWPR meetings held over the subsequent six months.

The BBC soon cut its losses and announced in week seven that *Churchill's People* would no longer enjoy the peak slot of 9.25-10.15 p.m. on Monday nights. Instead, the series would see out the rest of its run from 10.15 p.m., still on Mondays and on BBC1, but in a slot where it would frequently suffer the ignominy of being out-rated by the science programme *Horizon* (1964-present) on BBC2. Savory and Rawlinson's historical epic would never recover its five million launch figure and was hovering around two million by the time of its rescheduling. For most of the series run to date, some 13 million viewers had instead been opting to watch the seventh and final series of *Public Eye* (Thames, 1965-75) on ITV. *Public*

Eye was a reliable ratings winner but another detective now entered the fray: the American crime series *Kojak* (CBS, 1973-78) had been an enormous hit for the BBC on Saturday nights – the Christmas broadcasts had been seen by around 20 million people⁴⁰ – and it was thought that a transfer to 9.25 p.m. on Monday nights would have two instant effects: decimate *Public Eye*'s audience share and offer an 'inheritance' to *Churchill's People*, the programme which would now directly follow *Kojak* on BBC1.

On 17 February 1975, the first night of the new schedule, the impact was most immediately felt by ITV where ratings in the 9-10 p.m. hour dropped below 10 million. *Kojak* now consistently held the attention of 12-15 million viewers every week. It was a clear defeat for ITV in the ratings war, but the 'inheritance' strategy was far less successful, with no discernible improvement in the ratings for *Churchill's People*, even when the biggest show on television was airing immediately before it. That first night saw a catastrophic drop, with the 12.8 million attracted to *Kojak* deserting BBC1 in their droves soon after, leaving just 1.5 million behind for *Silver Giant*, *Wooden Dwarf* (17 February 1975), the episode of *Churchill's People* about the creation of the Magna Carta. The lowest point was the night on which the war film *The Battle of the Bulge* (1965) aired on ITV (31 March 1975) to great success, not only denting *Kojak*'s supremacy but ensuring that a mere 0.6 million tuned in to the Walter Raleigh play, *A Rich and Beautiful Empire* (31 March 1975). *Churchill's People* would soldier on in this late slot, rarely rising above three million.

The reasons for the audience's strong aversion to the series can be gleaned from the Audience Research Reports produced by the BBC, which were compiled through questionnaires completed by an audience sample. Viewers were heavily critical of the early episodes, calling *Churchill's People* 'cheap' and 'shoddy'. They described the staging of the Peterloo Massacre (*Death or Liberty*) as 'particularly inept', but there was another side to their reactions: both *The Agreement of the People* and the navy drama *Mutiny* (9 June 1975)

were warmly commended. It was felt that *Agreement* benefited from ‘more realistic sets being used’, helping the series ‘gain considerably in “credibility” and consequently in appeal’, whereas one viewer of *Mutiny* was moved to say that ‘if the shipboard scenes were not on HMS Victory they were an exceedingly good reconstruction.’ This was a far cry from the moans of earlier weeks, but these two plays were so deep into the series – weeks 17 and 24 – that the damage was already done.⁴¹

The critics also mellowed as the series progressed. Both the *Daily Mail* and *Daily Express* were positive about play 14, *A Rich and Beautiful Empire*,⁴² and by play 18, *A Bill of Mortality* (28 April 1975), even the perennially hard to please Dennis Potter was growing sympathetic to the cause. Writing in the *New Statesman* he said ‘the curse of failure which so quickly cast a spell on *Churchill’s People* has tended to hide much that is efficient, properly economical and decently accomplished in its more recent manifestations.’ He specifically noted ‘real bite’ to the dialogue, but still chided the production values.⁴³

With the series concluded in June 1975 the department heads gathered for the Television Weekly Programme Review meeting. Christopher Morahan said of the well-liked Tolpuddle Martyrs play, *True Patriots All* (16 June 1975), that ‘it had been one of the first to be made, which confirmed the fact that there had been no simple progression in the making of the series; the best episodes had been successful because they had been better written, acted and directed.’⁴⁴ Pursuing this thought, the department heads came to the view that there were probably ten good episodes in the series which might merit a repeat, but the repeats never came and even the much coveted overseas sales were sparse. The surviving promotional booklet offered just 13 episodes to the world⁴⁵ and Alasdair Milne would later claim that the main lesson learnt from the whole endeavour was to never commission 26 episodes of anything ever again.⁴⁶

Historiography

One particularly irate viewer of *Churchill's People* was Winston S. Churchill, the grandson of the wartime Prime Minister. He had corresponded with the production team at an early stage but in July 1975 the mood of his renewed correspondence was actively hostile, specifically about the episode *Mother India* (2 June 1975) which covered Britain's exploits in the region. Churchill regarded the play as having 'a politically jaundiced, anti-British view' and that colleagues and members of the public found it particularly offensive that such views 'should be attributed to my grandfather.' More generally he remarked: 'While I would not go so far as to presume to suggest, as did one reviewer, that the series should be retitled *Benn's People*, I would be grateful if you would reconsider the title for any overseas sales which you may be making.'⁴⁷ Overseas sales for *Churchill's People* were in fact almost non-existent, but that aside, Churchill was right to identify a problem with the mismatch between Winston Churchill's original work and the approach taken by the series. It was not only a simple question of right versus left, but rather a clash between a Whig view of history and the then popular historiographical school of 'History from Below'.

The 'History from Below' movement was popularised by E.P. Thompson's 1966 *TLS* article which provided an overview of what was also known as 'people's history.'⁴⁸ The focus was on the unknown and marginal individuals or groups in society, and unlike the Whig narrative of history did not assume that progress towards liberty and enlightenment was inevitable.⁴⁹ History from below was highly influential in the 1960s and 1970s. Its impact on popular culture can be seen in such disparate examples as the long-running BBC2 documentary series *Yesterday's Witness* (1969-81), the ambitious, impressionistic 26-part Radio Four series *The Long March of Everyman* (BBC, 1971-72)⁵⁰, and the popular histories of John Prebble.⁵¹ Gerald Savory made it clear in the very early stages of production that *Churchill's People* would follow the people's history approach and be based around 'the little

known but real under-currents which swelled the growth of these islands and their people.⁵² Script editor Brian Rawlinson had no trouble finding willing volunteers: 'I can assure you, the queue of writers anxious to tackle nineteenth century Industrial and Labour subjects is extensive – it's a very 'in' topic at the moment.'⁵³ But the problem with this approach over a long series, leaving aside the fact that it is entirely contrary to Churchill's own view of history, is that it is ultimately repetitious. The antagonists tend to be small, unregarded men such as Trooper William Thomson in *Agreement of the People*, or James Ings (one of the alleged Cato Street conspiracists) in *Death or Liberty*. Although the protagonists strive to achieve freedom in the teeth of fierce and well-established opposition, they are usually crushed by these wider forces, invariably killed, and any eventual triumph decades later is only seen in the history books, rather than in the drama. This, repeated 26 times weekly, was not a recipe for success. However, the series' problems went beyond unappealing content, and it is instructive to compare *Churchill's People* with a contemporaneous series offering a similar historical philosophy.

In the same year as *Churchill's People*, the BBC transmitted *Days of Hope* (BBC1, 1975), a series of four films about the Labour movement. The series viewed major historical events, particularly the Great War and the Miners' Strike of 1926, through the eyes of a working-class family and is clearly a form of fictionalised history from below. However, the form of the series is entirely different to *Churchill's People* and, to understand why, it is worth examining the development of television drama up to this point. Until the mid-1960s the dominant form of drama was studio-based and either live or 'as live' and recorded onto videotape. Pioneers such as producer Tony Garnett and director Ken Loach (who both worked on *Days of Hope*) then began to work on location using 16mm film and produced filmed plays such as *Cathy Come Home* (BBC1, 16 November 1966) and gradually a perception arose that studio-based 'naturalistic' drama was an inferior form.

Unlike the studio-based *Churchill's People*, *Days of Hope* was filmed entirely on location and its adoption of a realist aesthetic became the focus of intense academic debate regarding the politics of form.⁵⁴ There is no evidence, however, that Gerald Savory considered the form of *Churchill's People* in relation to the politics of the subject matter and by making some unusual aesthetic decisions – such as crumpled golden drapes on a shiny studio floor representing the seashore in *Pritan* – even sacrificed a ‘standard’ naturalistic studio look which later worked for the superficially similar, *I, Claudius* (BBC1, 1976) and which might have made *Churchill's People* more accessible to a general audience.

The modest visuals of *Churchill's People* – ‘upturned boxes’ *et al* – can be viewed as a brave stylistic experiment, but the production files reveal that Savory was warned as early as September 1972 that it would more likely prove disastrous. Clifford Hatts, the Head of Television Design Group, wrote a lengthy letter to Savory in which he said:

I am sceptical of your realising your production intentions by the means expressed in your brief. The style of presentation you seek [...] is, in my view, an illusion and liable to produce more disappointment than satisfaction. I believe that I speak from experience.⁵⁵

Hatts even had an existing example to strengthen his case

Eighteen months ago I was approached by the producers of *The Shadow of the Tower* [BBC2, 1972] who proclaimed their intentions in identical terms to your own. Their fine ideals cut little ice with their directors, and before long the studio was crowded to the roof with scenery, and we put straw down for the horses.⁵⁶

That Savory ignored this advice so completely arguably demonstrates a lack of judgement.

The form of *Churchill's People* falls between two stools: it is neither naturalistic enough to be accessible or radical enough to engage with the politics of ‘history from below’.

After the series had been transmitted Savory made some valiant, if rather desperate excuses: ‘We never had the opportunity to explain ourselves. The *Radio Times* wouldn’t even give us a cover, and we were pushed all over the place in the programme schedules,’⁵⁷ but the failure of *Churchill’s People* must have been a severe disappointment to him, especially coming at the end of his television career. His former colleagues were largely sympathetic and defended Savory’s record during their discussions at a TWPR meeting: “Mr Morahan deplored the way in which some critics had been writing the series down with near relish. Gerald Savory had given long and devoted service to Television Drama.”⁵⁸ Posterity appears to have followed this respectful path and Savory is now remembered much more for his work in the theatre and the notable series that emerged from his reign as the BBC’s Head of Plays, such as *The Six Wives of Henry VIII* (BBC2, 1970) *Elizabeth R* and Dennis Potter’s *Casanova* (BBC2, 1971). The speed with which *Churchill’s People* was forgotten ensured that Savory’s reputation suffered no lasting damage.

As for the series itself, there’s at least some evidence to suggest that once time had passed and the specific contextual issues around its creation and reception had faded in the memory the prevailing view of *Churchill’s People* began to change. As early as July 1975, Bernard Davies ruminated in his *Broadcast* column on the differences between ‘costume drama’ and ‘historical drama’, focusing on *Churchill’s People* and the recent ATV drama *Edward the Seventh* (1975). His view, expounded over two issues, was that *Churchill’s People* was by far the most successful and that:

It was an experiment of the utmost importance in television, since it has declared bravely and, I think, irretrievably that TV history need no longer be bound by the limitations of biography, but that ‘total history’ is a suitable and fascinating subject for the medium.⁵⁹

However, this nascent critical reevaluation was inevitably limited by the subsequent invisibility of the series. Unlike *Days of Hope* it was never repeated and never succeeded in provoking the same kind of critical debate. It also suffered because it was a studio drama; this began to be perceived as the poor relation to filmed series as early as the mid-1970s and had become virtually extinct by the 1990s, barring special cases such as soap operas and other 'continuous' drama.

However, it is not impossible that *Churchill's People* could yet be saved from the condescension of posterity. Should the series become available via DVD or online services such as the BBC Store, then there will be a second, much delayed, opportunity for it to find an audience. If that audience does emerge, then it will probably be for reasons that were far from the intentions of Savory and Rawlinson, but to be remembered for any reason is better than to be forgotten.

Appendix – *Churchill's People: List of episodes*

Pritan (30 December 1974), w. David Rudkin, d. Michael Hayes.

The Lost Island (6 January 1975), w. Robert Muller, d. Philip Saville.

The Coming of the Cross (13 January 1975), w. David Rudkin, d. Alan Gibson.

The Great Alfred (20 January 1975), w. Keith Dewhurst, d. Herbert Wise.

The Saxon Dusk (27 January 1975), w. James MacTaggart, d. James MacTaggart.

The Conquerors (3 February 1975), w. Ian Thorne, d. Donald McWhinnie.

A Sprig of Broom (10 February 1975), w. Brian Rawlinson, d. Michael Hayes.

Silver Giant, Wooden Dwarf (17 February 1975), w. Adrian Mitchell, Richard Martin.

On the Anvil (24 February 1975), w. Alan Cullen, d. Alan Bridges.

The Wallace (3 March 1975), w. John Prebble, d. Donald McWhinnie.

Shouts and Murmurs (10 March 1975), w. Julia Jones, d. John Bruce.

A Wilderness of Roses (17 March 1975), w. Roger Woddis, d. Mike Vardy.

The Whip of Heaven (24 March 1975), w. Nick McCarty, d. Michael Ferguson.

A Rich and Beautiful Empire (31 March 1975), w. Brian Rawlinson, d. Michael Hayes.

America! America! (7 April 1975), w. Jack Russell, d. Donald McWhinnie.

March on, Boys! (14 April 1975), w. Beverley Cross, d. Peter Hammond.

The Agreement of the People (21 April 1975), w. Don Taylor, d. Don Taylor.

A Bill of Mortality (28 April 1975), w. Beverley Cross, d. Jane Howell.

The Derry Boys (5 May 1975), w. Dominic Behan, d. Piers Haggard.

The Fine Art of Bubble-Blowing (12 May 1975), w. Adrian Mitchell, d. Piers Haggard.

O Canada (19 May 1975), w. Alvin Rakoff, d. Alan Gibson.

The Liberty Tree (26 May 1975), w. Howard Schuman, d. Alvin Rakoff.

Mother India (2 June 1975), w. Jack Russell, d. Herbert Wise.

Mutiny (9 June 1975), w. Julian Bond, d. Kenneth Ives.

True Patriots All (16 June 1975), w. Ray Lawler, d. John Glenister.

Death or Liberty (23 June 1975), w. Ken Taylor, d. Michael Hayes.

Notes

¹ Winston Churchill, *A History of the English-speaking peoples, v.1: The Birth of Britain* (London, 1956); *A History of the English-speaking peoples, v.2: The New World* (London, 1957); *A History of the English-speaking peoples, v.3: The Age of Revolution* (London, 1957); *A History of the English-speaking peoples, v.4: The Great Democracies* (London, 1958).

² *Theatre 625: Conquest Pt.1: The Encounter*, BBC2, 29 October 1966 and *Theatre 625: Conquest Pt.2: The Leopard and the Dragon*, BBC2, 30 October 1966.

³ Memo from Gerald Savory to Paul Fox and Robin Scott, 23 February 1970, BBC Written Archives Centre (hereafter BBC WAC) T41/500/1; memo from R.G. Walford to Paul Fox and Robin Scott, 25 February 1970, BBC WAC T41/500/1.

⁴ Memo from Gerald Savory to Paul Fox and Robin Scott, 3 November 1969, BBC WAC T41/500/1.

⁵ Letter from Britten to Savory, 17 August 1972, BBC WAC T65/39/1.

⁶ Miscellaneous documents, BBC WAC T65/42/1.

⁷ Gerald Savory to Michael Robson, 25 September 1972, BBC WAC T65/42/1.

⁸ In fact, a small amount of filming at Ealing Studios was carried out by Philip Saville for *The Lost Island*.

⁹ Peoples Pageant, *Guardian*, 28 February 1973, 13.

¹⁰ Martin Jackson, TV Diary, *Daily Mail*, 7 December 1974, 15.

¹¹ The full list of *Churchill's People* plays, with corresponding writer and director credits, is included as an appendix to this article.

¹² Churchill quoted in episode billing, *Radio Times*, 6 February 1975, 30.

¹³ Keith Harper, One-day strikes planned, *Guardian*, 4 February 1971, 1.

¹⁴ The Conservative government of the time eventually conceded to the bulk of the wage increases asked for by the National Union of Mineworkers. The 21% increase flew in the face of the existing wage policy. For more detailed reading about this period see Stuart Hall et al, *Policing the Crisis* (London, 1978), 273-323, and Arthur Marwick, *British Society Since 1945* (London, 1982), 151-165.

¹⁵ John Wyles, Miners to ban overtime from next Monday, *Financial Times*, 9 November 1973, 1.

¹⁶ David Wood, Mr Heath decides on general election for February 28, *Times*, 8 February 1974, 1.

¹⁷ David Butler and Dennis Kavanagh, *The British General Election of February 1974* (London, 1974).

¹⁸ Martin Jackson, The bitterness that blacks out the BBC, *Daily Mail*, 28 June 1974, 6-7.

¹⁹ Minutes of the Television Weekly Programme Review (TWPR), 27 February 1974, BBC WAC.

²⁰ Minutes of the TWPR, 13 March 1974, BBC WAC.

²¹ Quite a week, *Broadcast*, 12 August 1974, 4.

²² Leah Panos, Chaos, culture and fantasy: The television plays of Howard Schuman, *Journal of Screenwriting* 4 (3) (2013), 289.

²³ BBC Television strike still escalating, *Film and Television Technician*, July/August 1974, 6.

²⁴ Philip Jordan, Screen scene, *Guardian*, 12 July 1974, 13.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Eight-week TV strike settled, *Daily Mail*, 6 August 1974, 11.

²⁷ Gerald Savory, A History of the English-speaking Peoples, undated (c.1969), 2, BBC WAC T65/39/1.

²⁸ Letter from Bryan Cowgill to Alasdair Milne, 22 July 1974, BBC WAC T41/500/1. For Morahan's views see minutes of the TWPR, 8 January 1975, BBC WAC.

²⁹ The cuts to *Pritan* are referred to in the minutes of the TWPR, 8 January 1975, BBC WAC. Both Cowgill and Milne were interviewed in *TV Hell: The Official History of Hell* (BBC2, 31 August 1992) in which Milne reports that Cowgill emerged from the private viewing stating that *Pritan* wasn't transmittable. The first edit of the play was completed on 16-17 May 1974, and the second at some point after the July private viewing.

³⁰ Letter from Bryan Cowgill to Alasdair Milne, 22 July 1974, BBC WAC T41/500/1. For further reading see Bryan Cowgill, *Mr Action Replay: Bryan Cowgill recalls a golden age of television* (Stratford Upon Avon, 2006), 118-19, and Alasdair Milne, *DG: The memoirs of a British broadcaster* (Sevenoaks, 1989), 83-4.

³¹ The Times Diary, *Times*, 7 December 1976, 14.

³² Philip Purser, International inlook, *Sunday Telegraph*, 5 January 1975, 15.

³³ Philip Phillips, Is this Winston's worst hour?, *Sun*, 27 January 1975, 11.

³⁴ Clive James, In case you haven't heard, *Observer*, 2 February 1975, 28.

³⁵ Nancy Banks-Smith, Television, *Guardian*, 11 February 1975, 10.

³⁶ Dennis Potter, Switch back, *New Statesman* 89 (1975), 319-20, reprinted in Dennis Potter, *The Art of Invective: Selected Non-Fiction 1953-94*, eds. Ian Greaves, David Rolinson and John Williams (London, 2015), 161-64.

³⁷ Shaun Usher, What would Sir Winston have said?, *Daily Mail*, 14 January 1975, 16.

³⁸ Shaun Usher, This Alfred was anything but great, *Daily Mail*, 21 January 1975, 15.

³⁹ Minutes of the TWPR, 8 January 1975, BBC WAC.

⁴⁰ All ratings information is derived from Viewing Barometers, 30 December 1974-23 June 1975, BBC WAC.

⁴¹ *Churchill's People*: 'Pritan', Audience Research Report, VR/75/9, 31 January 1975; *Churchill's People*: 'The Coming of the Cross', Audience Research Report, VR/75/38, 31 January 1975; *Churchill's People*: 'Death or Liberty', Audience Research Report, VR/75/375, 22 July 1975; *Churchill's People*: 'The Agreement of the People', Audience Research Report, VR/75/238, 15 May 1975; *Churchill's People*: 'Mutiny', Audience Research Report, VR/75/350, 27 June 1975, BBC WAC.

⁴² Shaun Usher, Noble Raleigh to the rescue, *Daily Mail*, April 1, 1975, 16; James Thomas, Brought back to life by death of Sir Walter, *Daily Express*, April 1, 1975, 8.

⁴³ Dennis Potter, Voice squad, *New Statesman* 89 (1975), 602-3.

⁴⁴ Minutes of the TWPR, 18 June 1975, BBC WAC. *True Patriots All* was the sixth play to have been recorded.

⁴⁵ The selected episodes were presented in the following sequence (with original episode number in brackets): *The Saxon Dusk* (5), *A Sprig of Broom* (7), *On the Anvil* (9; here retitled *A Prologue to Parliament*), *The Wallace* (10), *A Wilderness of Roses* (12), *The Whip of Heaven* (13), *A Rich and Beautiful Empire* (14), *March On, Boys!* (16), *The Agreement of the People* (17), *A Bill of Mortality* (18), *The Fine Art of Bubble-Blowing* (20), *The Liberty Tree* (22) and *Mutiny* (24).

⁴⁶ Milne in *TV Hell*.

⁴⁷ Winston S. Churchill, letter to Sir Michael Swann, 28 July 1975, BBC WAC T41/500/1.

⁴⁸ E.P. Thompson, History from below, *Times Literary Supplement*, 3345 (1966), 279.

⁴⁹ For the most famous, if contentious, analysis of the Whig school of history see Herbert Butterfield, *The Whig Interpretation of History* (London, 1931).

⁵⁰ Produced by Michael Mason and Daniel Snowman, this was at the time the most expensive radio production ever made by the BBC. See David Hendy, *Life on Air: A History of Radio Four* (New York, 2007), 63-67.

⁵¹ Prebble also contributed the tenth *Churchill's People* play, *The Wallace* (BBC, 3 March 1975).

⁵² Letter from Gerald Savory to John Arthur McCracken, 23 February 1968, BBC WAC T41/500/1.

⁵³ Letter from Brian Rawlinson to Ian Rodgers, 19 September 1972, BBC WAC T65/42/1.

⁵⁴ For a summary of the debate see Lez Cooke, *British Television Drama: A History*, 2nd edition (London, 2015), 108-113.

⁵⁵ Memo from Clifford Hatts to Gerald Savory, 7 September 1972, BBC WAC T65/39/1.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Martin Jackson, At last – the end of the Hindsight Saga, *Daily Mail*, 23 June 1975, 21.

⁵⁸ Minutes of the TWPR, 22 January 1975, BBC WAC.

⁵⁹ Bernard Davies, One man's television, *Broadcast*, 21 July 1975, 16.

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