Grace Wyndham Goldie at the BBC: Reappraising the ‘first lady of television’

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Abstract
This working paper explores the significance of the work of the assistant head of BBC Television Talks and Features, Grace Wyndham Goldie, in the development of current affairs and documentary television which took place at the BBC in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Wyndham Goldie was central to these processes. She was passionately committed to the creation of a ‘neutral’ current affairs television, built upon the veracity of the live image. This same passion was not evident in her attitude to the production of documentary television, and she disdained the carefully crafted process of documentary filmmaking. Notably, while Wyndham Goldie was one of a very few women to reach the top of the BBC management ladder, she offered limited encouragement and support to other women working at the corporation.

Keywords
BBC television, women and television, television history, women’s media history

Grace Wyndham Goldie was born in Arisaig in the Scottish Highlands in 1900, into an upper middle-class Scottish and colonial background, her engineer father having worked in Egypt on the construction of the Aswan Dam. She was well educated, attended Cheltenham Ladies’ College, afterwards studying at Bristol University and Somerville College, Oxford. She then variously, and prior to joining the BBC, taught for a period and became Head of History at Brighton and Hove High School. She lectured for the Workers’ Education Association, was radio drama critic for the BBC magazine The Listener and
worked as a civil servant during the War. In 1944 she joined the BBC to work as a Radio Talks producer. In 1948, she was made a producer in Television Talks and Features at the Alexandra Palace television studio, under the department head Mary Adams. She made programmes about a range of topics including international affairs and politics. These became significant personal interests. In 1954 she was made Assistant Head of Talks at the BBC television service, and, in 1962, became Head of Talks and Current Affairs. In 1962, Wyndham Goldie became head of talks and current affairs. In the early 1960s, she was one of only four women among 30 high ranking executives at BBC TV Centre and Lime Grove. For this reason, she was often referred to as the ‘first lady of television’ (Vahimagi, n.d.). This working paper offers an exploration and appraisal of her career as a prominent and highly successful woman working at the BBC in the early postwar period.

The focus of this paper is the impact of Grace Wyndham Goldie on the shaping, direction and historical reputation of one of the most powerful of departments in the history of late 1950s and early 1960s BBC non-fiction programming - the Talks and Features Department. It is from within Talks and Features that Grace Wyndham Goldie and her team conceptualised, developed and produced a type of British television ‘current affairs’ programming which articulated how they considered news could be most objectively and effectively presented on screen. At the same time, Wyndham Goldie was paramount in decisions about what happened to the BBC television documentary, an earlier and already established television form. She was also, perhaps rather unexpectedly, a catalyst for the BBC’s hugely successful creation of arts television programming which went on to achieve worldwide acclaim and influence. The department’s arts strand Monitor (1958-65), for example, is renowned both for the quality and imagination of the coverage offered and its considerable influence on subsequent UK arts programming (Irwin, 2011). As one of a very few women who made it to the highest levels of television management at the BBC, in the early postwar period, Wyndham Goldie’s achievements are substantial, and evidence her grit, tenacity and talent in simply getting where she got to. She is, very significantly, one of a handful of female figures in the almost exclusively male domain of managing non-fiction television making in the early postwar world of the BBC.

To reposition Wyndham Goldie and her story within the frame of recuperative feminist narratives, concerned with the acknowledgement and celebration of female achievement produced by media historians such as Arnold (2021), Lloyd (2020), Murphy (2016) and Skoog (2017) is a problematic strategy. Wyndham Goldie very much did not, as best as can be understood, perceive her story through what would now be seen as the construct of gender politics. Her legacy is a problematic one. She was no champion of other women, and was especially cruel to young women, favouring instead the brightest young men emerging from the Oxbridge colleges. John Grist in his biography Grace Wyndham Goldie: First Lady of Television (2006) documents the unforgiving and hostile treatment young women received. Interview testimony from those who worked for Wyndham Goldie support this analysis of her professional behaviour. Catherine Freeman (nee Dove) (2006) and James (2005), who worked on Monitor, recalled what it was like, as women, to work in this climate. Both were reflective and self-aware subjects, and both pointed to the disadvantages faced by able ambitious women and the preference that men almost
inevitably received. Of upper middle-class stock herself, Wyndham Goldie was uninterested in and generally dismissive of the lives and perspective of those who had more modest backgrounds. This attitude was to have a detrimental impact upon the future development of the television documentary. In her dealings with television documentary filmmaker Philip Donnellan, for example, she was adamant that Donnellan’s desire to chronicle the lives and thoughts of working-class people was unacceptable. For Wyndham Goldie, as Donnellan’s autobiography (1992) recollected, television was made for these people, not about them. A repeated theme across Wyndham Goldie’s career is the question of gender. Despite her experience, her very evident abilities and her driving ambition, it was Wyndham Goldie’s male peers who were consistently appointed to the very top jobs. Her identity as a broadcasting professional was always qualified by the fact that she was a woman.

Scholars such as Arnold (2021), Lloyd (2020) and Murphy (2016) have explored and chronicled the working lives of successful and high achieving senior women within the institutional structures of the early BBC. To augment understanding of how Wyndham Goldie operated within the BBC, she might best be considered, rather than alongside other men, as instead against her illustrious, pioneering radio and television female predecessors and peers such as Mary Somerville, first director of school broadcasting for radio; Hilda Matheson, first director of radio talks; Olive Shapley, pioneering radio producer and broadcaster; Janet Quigley who shaped the flagship radio programmes *Woman’s Hour* (1946-) and *Today* (1957-); Doreen Stephens editor of *Women’s Programmes*; Mary Adams, first female head of Television Talks; and Joanna Spicer, Assistant Controller of Planning (Television). They all made their mark at the corporation. Aside the illuminating scholarship Lloyd et al. have produced on these women, the sense of a ‘structure of feeling’, in Raymond Williams’ formulation (1954), of what the lived personal and professional culture was for women within the early and then post-war BBC is rather harder to capture. Did any of the other women cited reflect much on their relationships with other female colleagues or feel a responsibility to nurture and encourage the young women coming up in their wake? Was this an explicitly and implicitly male institutional culture, where the achievement of success for women might mean there was little room for sisterhood and support? All the primary and secondary source material drawn upon for this paper demonstrates no tangible evidence that women’s routes to success were given any consideration by the male establishment, nor by women themselves. There was no practical nor discernible career ‘road map’ for women to follow. Although Wyndham Goldie’s abrasive confrontational relationships with other women is documented in biography and interview, it may be the case that other prominent women were also forced to negotiate in less-than-ideal ways an overtly sexist environment. Such considerations must also come into play when making sense of Wyndham Goldie and reappraisals of her career at the BBC.

This exploration of the most significant achievements of Wyndham Goldie’s professional life draws extensively from programme files housed at the BBC Written Archives Centre, and semi-structured interviews conducted by the author with BBC personnel. In such circumstances, the historian must be mindful of the personal interests, perspectives and biases which occur in this type of primary source material. Concurrently,
the individual point of view, be it an archived memo which contains, for example, an individual’s own interpretation of a meeting, or a spontaneous verbal response to an unexpected interview question, can enrich and/or problematise an understanding of institutional decisions, or the development of a programme or series. The historian’s subject knowledge, critical expertise and experience are crucial in evaluating and judging the importance and relevance of these materials to the arguments presented. This is the approach taken throughout this working paper.

Grace Wyndham Goldie and current affairs

The development of ‘current affairs’ television built on the complex processes of innovation and negotiation which took place at the BBC in the late 1940s and mid-1950s. Decisions were being made within Talks and Features about how best to cover politics on television. In Facing the nation (1977), her account of her career in television news and current affairs, Wyndham Goldie recalled that this process included developing the first televisual coverage of party election broadcasts for the 1951 General Election. There was exploration of how to offer a forum for discussion and explication of, or at least comment on, political events. In addition, there were debates on the ongoing problem of how best to shape a regular television news broadcast for the BBC, particularly in the light of the development in 1955 of a rival system of news on television for the independent commercial network, edited by former MP Aidan Crawley. As assistant head of Talks and Features, Wyndham Goldie was central to these processes, and in a strong position to develop her own vision of what current affairs television should be. Current Affairs began to grow: Cecil McGivern, Controller of Television Programmes, wanted more programmes; more staff were needed, and Wyndham Goldie was asked to find them. She chose mostly young men educated at Oxford or Cambridge universities whom she considered full of ideas and capable of making scrupulously honest and dynamic current affairs television for the ‘modern age’. It is interesting to note that the irony here that Wyndham Goldie did not doubt her own ability as a woman to carry out high level managerial duties, but in contrast did not consider other women appointable to senior roles. More accurately perhaps, she did not actively nor consciously consider women for these roles in the first place. If Wyndham Goldie had little inclination to offer women opportunity, the same applied to those who came from obviously working-class back-grounds without any cultural connection to established power or privilege. Such seemingly unexamined beliefs do call into question more than a little Wyndham Goldie’s guiding principle of ‘scrupulous’ objectivity.

For Wyndham Goldie, the topical evening magazine strand Tonight (1957-65) was very important as it ‘looked at power from the point of view of the powerless; it examined the effects of the judgments of experts upon specific cases; and of administrative policies upon the human beings who were at the receiving end of the administrative machine’ (Wyndham Goldie, 1977: 216). Behind Tonight lay the belief that, ‘experts were not invariably right; the opinions of those in high places did not have to be accepted’ (Wyndham Goldie, 1977: 216). The same belief underpinned That Was The Week That
Was (1962-3), an irreverent, late night satirical review programme which poked fun at the big political events of the week, the government and the establishment.

It is, however, also very important to be clear that whilst Wyndham Goldie, and by extension her chosen Talks and Features producers, felt it important that the current affairs strand within the department provided a diet of programmes in which accountability and accessibility played a far greater part than hitherto. At the same time, these programmes had no explicit ‘political’ motivation. The rationale was to make sure those at the top, particularly politicians, could give coherent and truthful accounts of their decisions and decision-making processes. The aim was not to engage in discussion about whether those who were at the top should be there; far less consider it fair or justifiable that some were at the top, while others were not. Wyndham Goldie later made it very clear in her own account of her working life at the BBC, that she had not been interested in any controversy; she had seen the business of news and current affairs as presenting what for her were the objective truths of any given situation: ‘I wanted to aim at elucidation rather than dispute’ (Wyndham Goldie, 1977: 54). The key to this new approach to current affairs was that, although programmes like Tonight were certainly lively and audience friendly, they made no real attempt to question the status quo. There may have been an active public interrogation of important and powerful figures in a public forum, a notional early ‘public sphere’ by meritocratically selected public representatives; but there was very tightly controlled entry to this forum and implicitly a very tightly circumscribed set of implicit hegemonic values governing it. The values were those of the predominantly upper middle-class managers and producers who ran and staffed Talks and Features. These values, however, were not seen as part of a particular constructed world outlook but rather the embodiment of sound ‘common sense’. In her writing and reflections on creating television news, at no point did Wyndham Goldie ever doubt or question the rightness of her and her colleagues’ world outlook. As will be demonstrated later, she brooked absolutely no challenge to this perspective. It followed for Wyndham Goldie and her team that their presentation of events was not nuanced and particular, but neutral and objective, and this ‘neutrality’ represented for them the holy grail of current affairs broadcasting.

In Wyndham Goldie’s account of setting up current affairs television, there is an evident desire to be transparent, but this is constantly undercut both in her memoir and much archival material by a lack of realisation or acknowledgement that the choices which she and her team were making at that time about the content and stance of programmes and the people (or in effect men) who worked on them were of themselves value judgments. As will be demonstrated presently, decisions made about screen representations of working class lives as exemplified both in Wyndham Goldie’s treatment of the television documentary department, and her intolerance of the social and cultural preoccupations of Donnellan, speak to unexamined prejudgments and prejudices about class and politics. Arguably, her stance reflected the confidence shown by the BBC generally during this period, that the content of what they were presenting was neutral and objective and that there could be no question of looking at issues and events from another perspective, because how the BBC saw things was in the judgement of both Wyndham Goldie and her colleagues, the way that they were.
Grace Wyndham Goldie and BBC television documentary

So I was hostile to what I felt to be the documentary tradition of the cinema, where the attitude of one man the film-maker was presented as an unchallenged truth, rather than merely a selection, however good and well intentioned, of one aspect of reality chosen by a single person from all the different possible aspects which might be chosen by others (Wyndham Goldie, 1977: 54).

As things stand in the documentary world here at the moment, I shall have to slit my own throat. As far as I can see, documentary is on the point of being sold out to the topicality news/magazine boys, and that will mean the end of anything worthwhile one is trying to do (Birmingham City Library, n.d., Philip Donnellan Archive, undated letter written by Donnellan).

In a department where ‘neutrality’ and ‘objectivity’ (or at least the departmental interpretation of such values) were the watchwords when it came to the creation of current affairs and non-fiction television, programmes and programme makers that did not meet such criteria came in for rough treatment. While Wyndham Goldie judged that the crisp, objective veracity that she aimed for in current affairs television was the apogee of BBC non-fiction programme making, she had little time for those engaged in making another non-fiction form of television, which she regarded as inimical to her quest for objectivity. In the television documentary form Wyndham Goldie saw an old fashioned and potentially dangerous heritage of subjective and implicitly political filmmaking. She had little time or patience with those engaged in such a craft. For the established documentary department, its documentary filmmakers and tradition of screen documentary more generally, Wyndham Goldie’s stance and the power that she wielded were to have a significant effect on the department’s future and the future of television documentary itself. In 1955, the Documentary department was disbanded, with some of its members being absorbed into Talks and Features. The making of television documentary from this point, until the resurgence of a discrete Documentary and Music department in 1963 under Huw Wheldon, came under the management of the heads of Talks and Features: nominal head, Miall (1994), and considering available archival records, biographical material, interviews and her own accounts in fact its real driving force, assistant head Wyndham Goldie. BBC TV documentary making during the 1950s and 1960s was then aligned within a department, the direction of which, and whose tacit ideology, stemmed largely from Grace Wyndham Goldie.

Of particular importance here are Wyndham Goldie’s own stated opinions on the making of television documentary films. This is reflected in both her own writing on the making of television documentary and, as will be seen shortly, her adversarial exchanges with BBC producer and documentary filmmaker Philip Donnellan. If she was passionately committed in the mid and late 1950s to the creation of a new self-styled ‘neutral’ current affairs television, the same passion was not evident in her attitude to the production of documentary television. Documentary television at this point could not but avoid connection and comparison with the earlier, socially conscious, British
Documentary Film Movement of the 1930s and 1940s. From 1953 until 1955 Rotha (1956), one of the filmmakers who had been involved with the movement, became briefly, and unsuccessfully, the Head of the BBC Documentary department. His left-wing politics and his passion for film rather than television were the principal reasons why his BBC appointment did not work. Wyndham Goldie had little time for both the processes and the politics that she felt the movement entailed. She felt that the films made by these film makers were biased and very much against the spirit of BBC neutrality which she saw as vital to the work of her department, as in the opinions she expressed about documentary filmmaking and filmmakers in her quote which opened this section. Neither was she interested in what she saw as the documentary style of cinema film makers, which to her mind seemed to pretend to a kind of auteurism; a kind of film making inimical to what she felt was the strength of her Talks and Features department. Indeed, she appears to be almost hostile to any idea of expressive film making in connection with factual television: ‘I was not concerned, therefore, with making films, but in the use of visual images on celluloid as one among many visual tools in the hands of those who were discussing or reporting upon events, ideas and places’ (Wyndham Goldie, 1977: 54).

In contrast to the careful crafting process of documentary filmmaking, Wyndham Goldie was most interested in the veracity of the live ‘unmediated’ image. For her, this was best achieved with the use of outside broadcast cameras: ‘they were more essentially television instruments and less hung around with the mystique of the cinema and with the sociological hangover of the Grierson documentary tradition’ (Wyndham Goldie, 1977: 54). She clearly did not see the Talks department building on the legacy of the British Documentary Film Movement, of the 1930s and 1940s which, produced socially aware films, and frequently deployed new and experimental moving image aesthetics. Wyndham Goldie was, above all, hostile to employing techniques which might lead to a ‘politicisation’ of supposedly objective representations of events. It is interesting to note here ‘sociological’ being used seemingly as a euphemism for ‘socialist’. Wyndham Goldie makes it very clear that there is no possibility that the BBC’s new world of current affairs would have any connection with polemicising documentary of the past.

Philip Donnellan was a very gifted, very political and extremely single-minded BBC documentary filmmaker. In his unpublished autobiography he encapsulated succinctly the origins and purpose of the Documentary department:

Until 1955 there was a small, self-contained documentary group, put together by BBC Television’s Controller of Programmes Cecil McGivern, who felt the need to pick up the torch of documentary film-making in Britain after the Labour Government extinguished the Crown Film Unit. McGivern grouped those producers working in the field or somewhere near it: script editors, directors and writers into a small department and then recruited a powerful name from the world of documentary film, Paul Rotha (Donnellan, 1992: 201).

In Donnellan’s opinion, the department fell apart primarily because of corporate antipathy toward Rotha and his politics. For Donnellan, the department led by Rotha posed possible threats to the BBC’s sense of its own impartiality. Struggles ensued when Wyndham Goldie’s commitment to actuality television, characterised above all by
objectivity and neutrality, was forcibly challenged by the conformational Donnellan’s politically engaged, interrogatory and polemical filmmaking of the left. As Donnellan puts it: ‘I found my growing concern to reflect the skills and experiences of working-class people, which were grossly ignored by BBC programmes, was in direct opposition to the central position of the BBC as interpreted by Grace Wyndham Goldie and the Talks Department’ (Donnellan, 1992: 68).

In 1957 Wyndham Goldie met Donnellan, who had joined the BBC Midland region in 1948, first as a radio announcer and eventually becoming a documentary producer. He was keen to break into film making. She commissioned him, initially, to make some short films for Tonight. It was the success of two television documentaries he made at this time, particularly his film Joe the Chainsmith (1958), a look at the life of a Black Country chain maker and The Steel Goddess (1959), a film of the building of the Durgapur steelworks in Bengal by British companies, which led to Wyndham Goldie in 1960 appointing him to make documentary films for the Talks and Features department. Increasingly however, Wyndham Goldie became unhappy with Donnellan’s work. Perhaps a key exchange between her and Donnellan captured in his autobiography sums up their differing attitudes best.: ‘The value of television, my dear Philip, is that it enables one to examine the people who hold power. It is about them. It is not about the sort of people you seem to be interested in’ (Donnellan, 1992: 45). While there is no record of Wyndham Goldie’s side of the story, the judgement made here is that Donnellan’s report of what she said would be an accurate record of her opinion. What Wyndham Goldie said mattered to him, as it challenged his own passionately held beliefs and he would want to capture and document their disagreement. Much of Donnellan’s work as a documentary maker at the BBC attempted to put on screen those who were not typical subjects for BBC documentary and factual programmes at the time, and in Donnellan’s view it did not articulate with the way that such subjects might usually be presented if they were to be featured. Donnellan states he had become angry that ‘the BBC remained largely ignorant or disdainful of working class people’s lives, experience and culture’ (Donnellan, 1992: 68). For Wyndham Goldie such views did not align with what is interpreted here as her own professional understanding of the department’s policy and rationale, based on a reading of the related institutional files and her own writing.

Wyndham Goldie liked Joe the Chainsmith because, as Donnellan states in his autobiography (1992), ‘Joe was just the sort of working man that most television administrators would be delighted to see. This would be their image of the audience, or at least that significant section of it, which worked in British industry in those days. [He was] a man happy with his lot - not one of those troublemakers’. For Wyndham Goldie, most significantly the film did not step outside the boundaries therefore of what were acceptable Talks and Features attitudes. What she found unacceptable was Private Faces, a film Donnellan made in 1962 for a projected series of close-up portraits (called We, The British). Private Faces was never transmitted. The focus this time was to be on Jack Elliot, a Durham miner, socialist and atheist. In the film, Jack and his wife talked honestly about the struggles and difficulties that they had had to face in the course of their very hard lives. According to Donnellan: ‘Her reasons were that, “It’s the jump cuts! They are quite unacceptable! And how dare you ask someone, do you believe in God? It’s quite
unacceptable. The series is rejected and you will come back here [to London] and I will find work for you to do” (Donnellan, 1992: 99). As with earlier critical references made by Wyndham Goldie’s about his films, the judgement here is that once again he would have wanted to record the exchange accurately. Donnellan’s autobiography was where he could record in full the grievances he felt about his treatment by the BBC, and by Wyndham Goldie in this instance.

Wyndham Goldie’s struggles with Donnellan and the politics of his documentary films illustrate her active defence of what she judged to be the absolute standards to which she felt BBC non-fiction output should adhere. If a filmmaker such as Donnellan, regardless of the quality of their work, did not meet these standards or, perhaps even more unacceptably, sought to challenge them, she would have no compunction in rejecting their work. For Wyndham Goldie, the fundamental purpose of her Talks and Features department lay in the capture and broadcast of the compelling instant modernity of current affairs. Such was her institutional power, and belief in the former type of non-fiction programmes, and her mistrust of established documentary tradition that the latter moved to the very margins of the departmental production.

The originality and quality of the programmes emerging from Talks and Features were due entirely to the remarkable achievements of the young Wyndham Goldie team, counterintuitively, in realms quite distinct from those of daily current affairs and reportage. In no little measure, due to the confidence vested in them by Wyndham Goldie and under her management, they were extended freedoms which allowed them to create and produce two of the most influential and significant television strands of the early postwar period, and which went on to be significant both as a historical resource in themselves but as influences on future and equally important and influential television productions. These are Monitor (1958-1964) and The Great War (1964). Notably, neither was anything to do with current affairs or actuality television. Monitor in fact was the brainchild of one of Talks and Features’ young female trainees Catherine Dove (Dove was interviewed under her married name of Freeman and is cited herein as Freeman). Dove, then a member of Talks and Features’ Panorama (1953-) team, remembered her annual staff review meetings in 1955 and 1956: ‘I started to say that I think it is extraordinary that we didn’t have a serious arts programme’. She continued ‘I was summoned and told that there was going to be an arts programme and I was to be editor – I was amazed’ (Freeman, 2006). Dove acts as something of an exception in proving the rule with regard to Wyndham Goldie’s treatment of young women. James (2005), in interview, recalled Dove’s good looks, cool confidence, her obvious intelligence, and her very evident ability. From the evidence of these interviews, it appears that Dove was an exceptional young woman whose professional qualities, allied with her social class and connections, managed to impress Wyndham Goldie.

Dove was eminently qualified and well-connected. She studied English at Oxford then, as a BBC trainee, worked alongside John Read, who made pioneering BBC TV films about artists. She had a wide network of friends in the arts, such as John Schlesinger, Kingsley Amis and Tony Richardson. Yet qualified as she was, she was bypassed by her male peers. James (2005) recalled: ‘She thought she was running it as producer before they went on air, then they moved Wheldon in and she disliked him very much, and
basically she went off and married Wheeler. Huw began it and Catherine never really
featured. She was very frustrated, Huw was very dominant’. Dove was fairly rapidly
bested for the Monitor role by Wheldon, and then superseded by any number of eager
young male BBC trainees such as Melvyn Bragg (another prominent ‘Goldie boy’), and
Jonathan Miller. This says much about the sexual politics of the institution and Wyndham
Goldie’s consistent lack of interest in or motivation to support young women. Dove, who
was elbowed off the production by Wheldon and his ambition, was in fact told by Goldie
she could learn from Wheldon, not someone with any knowledge of or interest in the arts.
Wyndham Goldie said, ‘You are very young - it would be good to attach Huw Wheldon to
your group as a senior advisor. He is so much more experienced than you are.’ Dove
(Freeman, 2006) recalled, ‘he wanted to do it and I didn’t oppose it and that was the
beginning of the end’.

More extraordinarily, considering what Wyndham Goldie felt about time-consuming
historical documentary making at Talks and Features, what came from the creative
impulse of Tonight alumni Alasdair Milne and Antony Jay is what might be seen as the
definitive early television historical documentary series The Great War, which chronicled
the events of the 1914-18 conflict. The Great War team combined, in a mammoth un-
dertaking, found footage of the conflict and interviews with veterans, historical scripts
written by contemporary historians Corelli Barnett and John Terraine, with a voiceover by
celebrated actor Michael Redgrave. The result was, as with Monitor, another colossal
success, above all for the innovative way in which this enormous and complex twenty –
six -part series engaged the audience on a very human scale and allowed them to equate
this world event with their own lives through the medium of images and personal re-
fections. Directly influenced by this was Thames Television’s The World at War (1973),
also acclaimed as a landmark in television documentary. The Great War does prob-
lematise however the scrupulous honesty, integrity and accuracy upon which Talks and
Features under Wyndham Goldie built its reputation. It might now be best considered
rather as, in fact, an arts documentary strand. That is, a brilliant compelling highly creative
production which used image, sound, music and voice to immerse its audience in the war:
at times a highly emotional rather than a dry, intellectual experience. This type of film had
in fact much in common with the type of highly crafted and poetically textured docu-
mentary film making which Wyndham Goldie had firmly eschewed.

Conclusion

Wyndham Goldie’s career at the BBC is one of considerable achievement. She ran a
prestigious and highly influential department, and, in the late 1950s and 1960s. She was in
a pivotal position when the BBC was establishing its reputation for excellence and
creating dazzling, exciting and highly innovative new television. Her responsibility for, or
involvement with notable programmes runs the gamut from the institution of an accessible
popular and informative early evening television magazine strip Tonight (an enduring
format) whose legacy can be seen in BBC’s The One Show (2006-) to, at the other end of
the scale, the launch of Monitor, the flagship of 1960s arts documentary television
broadcasting. Above all, Wyndham Goldie achieved what she did as a woman working at
a time and in a place, when only a handful of women occupied such influential senior positions. In these most testing of circumstances she thrived and shone.

Looked at through an historical lens, there is much about her life and times that requires careful interpretative judgment on the part of the television historian. Wyndham Goldie’s relationship with gender is, for a 21st century reader, very problematic. Yet, the contemporary climate in which she operated did not generally offer women opportunities unless they took them for themselves. Wyndham Goldie had to fight extremely hard to achieve the position that she did at the BBC. This did not predispose her to take on other women’s battles for them, much less actively promote them. Mobilising Bell’s (2021) exploration of strategies women used to make headway in the male dominated film industry Wyndham Goldie became ‘one of the boys’ by proving herself tougher, more exacting and less forgiving than her male colleagues.

Wyndham Goldie’s exclusive attitude to class is broadly and very predictably of a piece with extant contemporary historical internal BBC politics more generally, where scant consideration was given to the possibility that talent and ability lay outside the ranks of the highly educated middle and upper classes who were to be encountered in the professional public sphere which she inhabited. For Wyndham Goldie it was unquestionably Oxford and Cambridge where the best were always to be found. The programmes made under her leadership aspired towards objectivity, but were framed by her class position. Revisiting her fiery clashes with Philip Donnellan over the content and focus of his emotionally charged and very personal films, it seems more than a little likely that many of her colleagues would have had similar reactions. Indeed, it may have been the case that the confrontational and hot-headed Donnellan reacted particularly badly to be told what to do by a very assertive woman ‘boss’. Would he have been more amenable to seeking and finding compromise with a male colleague?

In any final account, Grace Wyndham Goldie’s story is always a woman’s story, and her experiences and achievements always those of a woman. Questions are asked of her, and judgements made as to temperament and ‘likeability’ that would not be the case of any male equivalent male colleague. The personality and temperament of, say, Huw Wheldon, is of no account when considering his extensive legacy of programme making at the BBC. Grace Wyndham Goldie was a formidable woman, and had to be so in order to make her mark at the BBC. It may well be testament to her forceful, difficult, memorable character that the traces of her career survive as they do. Yet, her story still lacks the visibility and acclaim it merits, and public histories of the BBC at the time do not fully acknowledge her significance and influence. Throughout this paper, drawing on the author’s knowledge of the media ecosystem of the early postwar BBC, and her interpretation of archival records, biographical and autobiographical sources, the importance of Wyndham Goldie’s role and influence in shaping the direction and character of the BBC within news and current affairs and beyond becomes very clear. Without telling women’s stories like that of Grace Wyndham Goldie, BBC history and wider histories remain lacking, inaccurate and incomplete.
Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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