

Work, play and politics

Chapter 10: Welcome aboard

There was never a dull moment at Cornmarket. In the spring of 1969 I was summoned by Denis Curtis, the production director – the hub of the whole operation – and taken for a drink at his local, the swanky Westbury Hotel, a few doors down Conduit Street in Mayfair, where our offices were. I think we drank Montrachet, Denis's favourite tippie and one of the best white burgundies there is, but for once I was paying more attention to the message. "Would you like to edit *Welcome aboard*?" was the message. I didn't need much time to reflect.

Welcome aboard was an inflight magazine produced six times a year for the British Overseas Airways Corporation, then a separate outfit (it merged with British European Airways to make British Airways in 1974), by Clive Irving Limited, a contract publishing company linked to Cornmarket. Clive, a senior ex-*Sunday Times* journalist, was available for a chat if required but he was very much a hands-off boss for projects like *Welcome aboard*. BOAC was Britain's high-prestige intercontinental airline and the magazine reflected that. It came under the company's sales promotion manager whose assistant read every word and vetted every illustration.

There were three fixed points in every issue: first, a destination focus – Scotland, say, or East Africa or the Caribbean – so we needed a travel piece that promoted it. Then there was a short story for which we paid similar rates to those paid by the top American magazines. Graham Greene had been paid in air tickets worth £1,000 in old money for a short story; for everybody else the top rate was £500 (say £7,000 today). And the third fixed point was Denis Curtis's cookery column which meant that I had a curious – no, bizarre – working relationship with him: in real terms he was my immediate boss whereas I was the editor in charge of his copy. As far as editing consumer magazines went I was an absolute beginner. But I learnt.

I always listened to Denis who was an experienced magazine man but my main collaborator and source of ideas and expertise was the art editor, David Driver, who after *Welcome aboard* went on to become an outstanding designer of *Radio Times* and the *Times* (and also *Inside Story*). The key to David's success was that he was a journalist as much as he was a designer: he was as interested in what the story said as much as in what it looked like on the page. So he insisted on being involved from the beginning in everything we published.

BOAC imposed constraints of course. Our feature articles and short stories couldn't focus on air crashes or disasters in general and politics was an issue. That I could understand – it was the interpretation that was baffling. I couldn't see a problem with one science fiction story by Kingsley Amis until it was pointed out that it contained a passing reference to the state of Israel, which apparently might irritate/disconcert the Arab market. Amis declined to remove the reference so we had to look elsewhere for a replacement.

HE Bates had been far more amenable when some bits of his story *The Black Magnolia** about the attempted seduction of an oh-so-virtuous prig of a man by two voluptuous sirens were considered a touch too spicy by BOAC (even though this was the supposedly sexy Sixties). Here are some of the

cuts they insisted I had to negotiate with Bates via his agent (and unless I've misunderstood the law of copyright I am permitted to reproduce them here, having paid to publish the story in its original form, that's to say, uncut):

*anthologised uncut in *The Wild Cherry Tree*, Michael Joseph, 1968, and Penguin, 1971

"...for fully another half-minute he sat silent, trying desperately to avoid the trap of eyes, breast, navel, painted toe nails and the provocative curve of her thighs.

"...she moved the upper part of her body forward, so that once again her fine expanded breasts seemed about to escape from their black triangular covering.

"Then to his ultimate horror she grasped one his hands and lifted it to the curve of her bosom."

But we *were* allowed to include the key moment when the attempted seduction of Hartley Spencer began: "... the sight of a naked body whose only covering consisted of three modest black triangles actually brought a flush to his cheeks and a sudden prickle of cold sweat to the nape of his neck". There was more trouble over the illustration to the story. The drawing we presented to BOAC was accurate, that is consistent with the text: the woman was depicted wearing her "three modest black triangles", aka a bikini. Alas, the picture was too much for BOAC: the drawing had to go back to the illustrator so that the space between the triangles could be filled in. The would-be seductress finally appeared in a conventional one-piece swimsuit – which of course now made the illustration modest but inaccurate.

We did get away with a striking and colourful cover for that issue of the magazine, which was photographed by Harri Peccinotti, art editor of *Nova* and known for his erotic *Pirelli* calendars. Our cover girl presented herself to readers as a deep-sea diver, tanned and glamorous in a yellow bikini, though she looked challenging rather than seductive and she had a knife fixed to her diving belt. The reference was to a celebrated Sixties image, the emergence from the ocean in the 1962 James Bond film *Dr No* of Ursula Andress, magnificent in a white bikini equipped with a large shell diver's knife (which in turn echoed Botticelli's *Venus*, except that his Venus is both knife-less and bikini-less).

Elsewhere in the issue (my first) we had the opposite problem – lack of spark or flair, in a word dullness. The destination report I inherited on East Africa and its game parks was informative but pedestrian: it needed spicing up, Denis said – and it was hard to disagree. So for the all-important first paragraph of the piece I went back in time and conjured up some explorers' names and evocative memories of books and films like *King Solomon's Mines* by Rider Haggard and Humphrey Bogart in *The African Queen*. Then I recycled this view of the Great Rift Valley: "The rift comes upon you suddenly – an enormous plaster model from a forgotten geography lesson..." But I left out any reference to Tarzan of the Apes because he featured elsewhere in the magazine – in a piece by Anthony Haden-Guest, which was an affectionate biog, giving us the chance to show a superb comic-strip page of the rampant apeman dispatching a lion.

For our Christmas issue we put Tommy Steele on the cover and I persuaded Irma Kurtz, queen of agony aunts, to celebrate pantomime, explaining to readers including her fellow-Americans why it has such a hold on the English imagination. In general we were mid-Atlantic but in one of our issues we went full-on stateside: "The ABC of the USA" was an excuse to wallow in Americana. We had a page of black-and-white and sepia pix of heavyweight boxers from John L Sullivan to Joe Frazier but

in dominant position – the greatest, then and always: Muhammad Ali in full colour. Another spread featured LP covers of 12 pop-singing stars of the Fifties and Sixties with the kings of rock ‘n’ roll and soul, Elvis Presley and James Brown, on facing pages. My favourite feature assignment, though, was to write the words for a double-page comic strip on the American Revolution and the Boston Tea Party called “John Adams in Birth of a Nation”. It appeared in glorious full colour courtesy of a legendary artist, Frank Bellamy, who’d worked on *Eagle* and drawn its lead feature, *Dan Dare*.

The writers we used on *Welcome aboard* worked mainly for the English glossies – *Queen*, *Harper’s Bazaar*, *Nova* – and the colour magazines published by newspapers like the *Sunday Times* and the *Observer*. But when David Driver and I decided in our outdoor issue (Scotland was the featured destination) to celebrate the history of English sport, only one name cropped up – John Arlott’s. Like everyone who’d grown up listening to the BBC’s cricket coverage we were fans. When Arlott’s piece came in we illustrated it with a selection of historic pix including England’s victory in the 1966 football world cup final.

A year later, when the 1970 South African cricket tour of England was cancelled after Arlott had joined the boycott campaign, I interviewed him for *Radio Times*. I spent the day at the Edgbaston test match ground in Birmingham where he was covering the replacement international matches against a world XI and watched him work: 20 minutes in the hour on air for the six hours of play; then after just 20 further minutes he phoned over his match report to the copy-takers at the *Guardian*. Nowadays of course he’d have to type his own copy on a mini-computer keyboard.

I also got access to Arlott the legendary drinker: brandy and water was what kept him going throughout the day; then lunch for the two of us included half a bottle of white burgundy and a bottle of claret. But did he slur his words? No, never. Was the Hampshire burr a little slower after lunch? Possibly. But then his lucky radio listeners might have managed a glass or two with theirs and were hardly likely to notice.

The year I spent editing *Welcome aboard* was exactly what I needed to become a competent freelance magazine journalist on the basis of developing my writing and subbing skills. Because we published just six issues a year I was able to practise all the editorial tasks from thinking up and developing an idea to reading the proofs of the piece before it was published, by way of choosing and briefing a writer, checking what came in and tidying it up where necessary, not to mention discussing and agreeing the visual aspects of the feature with the art editor.

You needed both imagination and close reading ability. Once, in a retyped version of a murder mystery story by PD James, I spotted what looked like a big hole: something in the narrative was missing – or the whole thing didn’t add up. I phoned her agent and within 24 hours James herself came round to our offices with the missing paragraphs of the story. It had been retyped at the agency, without being properly checked, once too often.

Incidentally, every single one of the literary agents I dealt with in that year (1969-70) was a woman. The most memorable was Pat Kavanagh, of the AD Peters agency, who was married to the novelist Julian Barnes, though she once left him years later for a brief lesbian fling with another one of her clients, Jeanette Winterson. Ms Kavanagh – we were not on first-name terms – had a formidable, rather disconcerting manner: like an expert interviewer she was inclined to use extended silence to encourage you to say what you were thinking. I never bought a story or an article from her although

she once took me round to meet JB Priestley at his Albany flat; the elderly Priestley was affable enough but he didn't have anything for us.

By the way, on the issue of sexism, which was rampant elsewhere in 1960s media, I took over the editorship of *Welcome aboard* from Priscilla Chapman, the launch editor, and I was succeeded by Katherine Ivens. As far as I know their terms and conditions were comparable with mine; their budget was the same as mine; their policies in commissioning and paying journalists, both male and female, were the same as mine. I record this to make the point that in some magazines at least, as opposed to most of the others and virtually all newspapers and broadcast media, there didn't seem to be much of a sex/gender problem in 1969-70.

Once I wrote the main feature in the magazine myself. This was a report on the about-to-be-introduced Boeing 747, the jumbo jet that cheapened transatlantic travel and helped to inflict mass international tourism on the world, including some out-of-the-way places that hadn't seen it before. Now the 747's active life seems to be coming to an end but then it was a beautiful and impressive aircraft, inside and out, and I had an enjoyable week, flying via New York and Los Angeles to Boeing's Seattle factory to have a close look at it. As I wrote the piece puffing it, though, I was having more than doubts about the promotion of air travel. In fact I was beginning to think that only things like Australia's flying doctor and emergency aid after disasters justified the development and extensive use of the airplane. In the light of aerial bombing, atmospheric pollution and the spread of noxious viruses it was – is – difficult to see it more positively.

In any case I was never going to stay at *Welcome aboard* very long: I was becoming fascinated by the underground and alternative press, both the hippy, drugged-up version à la *International Times* and *Oz* and the more political left-wing papers like *Black Dwarf*. And I was confident I could now earn a living as a freelance journalist contributing to commercial magazines while working for the opposition.

My last assignment at *Welcome aboard* before handing over to my successor was to meet and commission the travel writer and historian James Morris (as he still was; he had sex reassignment surgery to become Jan Morris in 1972) to write a destination report on South Africa; he was working on the third book in his *Pax Britannica* series. We got on well enough but I was relieved to know that my name would not be on the issue of *Welcome aboard* promoting flights to apartheid South Africa.

However, I was disconcerted when Morris suddenly asked me over lunch if I knew who at the *Times Literary Supplement* might be responsible for adding the name of the Russian anarchist Peter Kropotkin to a book review he'd written. Asking me was a long shot on his part but it certainly hit the target. I knew at once that he was talking about Nicolas Walter, veteran anarchist, one of the Spies for Peace and chief sub at the *TLS*, but I didn't let on. However, I wasn't surprised that when a history of the *TLS** came out in 2001, it included a paragraph spilling the beans on Morris, Nick and Kropotkin.

**Critical Times*, Derwent May, HarperCollins

After *Welcome aboard* my first career move as a freelance was in the direction of *Radio Times*, the BBC magazine that had recently been facelifted by its new, cool editor, Geoffrey Cannon, and the art

editor David Driver, who introduced a distinctive italic masthead emphasising the *R* and the *T*. On the words side the magazine in the early 1970s certainly took itself seriously. As Geoffrey later put it in a letter to the *Guardian*, *RT* had “literary pretensions” and had adopted the slogan “writing of quality for a magazine of choice”. I wasn’t unhappy with that and I wrote features on various subjects, particularly sport, gradually moving over to features subbing which, as a day job, was easier to combine with work on alternative papers. The features editor was Peter Gillman, an old Oxford mate, while the chief sub, although I think he was styled “production editor”, was Brian Gearing, an able and amiable fellow who went on to edit the magazine when Geoffrey left in 1979.

A word here about Geoffrey who when appointed *RT* editor was already the *Guardian*’s dedicated “rock” critic. He always emphasised the trendy term “rock” in case anybody confused his subject matter either with “pop”, which was for the indiscriminating hoi polloi, or with old-style rock ‘n’ roll. Incidentally rock ‘n’ roll was not his strongest point and I’m sure he won’t mind my saying that, on one occasion, as his temporary tenant I felt obliged to remedy his lack of experience and knowledge of the real thing and pay my rent with a Little Richard LP.

On another occasion Geoffrey gave me a special assignment. To promote a BBC2 documentary on the upheaval in the United States over the Vietnam war he’d commissioned Andrew Kopkind, a radical left-wing American journalist, to explain and comment on the background; this included events like the notorious “massacre” of demonstrators at Kent State University in May 1970 when National Guardsmen opened fire on stone-throwing students, killing four and injuring nine. Whether he’d been told by Geoffrey to avoid direct criticism of the US government, police and university authorities – or had worked out a mild and muted policy for himself – the piece Kopkind sent in wasn’t really publishable. It was full of qualification, hesitation and circumlocution, with phrases like “on the one hand”, “it could be argued” and “some people would say”. Rewrite it, Geoffrey said to me, and I tried: that is, I took out the nonsensical contradictory padding and left... what Kopkind actually thought. Which, of course, was now perfectly publishable – though not in *Radio Times*.

Another assignment, this time planned, was subbing work on *Olympic Summer of Sport 1972*, a 96-page *Radio Times* special publication. It celebrated the BBC’s domination of TV sports coverage, featuring, besides the Munich Olympics, events like the Ashes test series, the Derby, Wimbledon, and the Open golf championship. The writers were the household names that delivered the coverage, people like Harry Carpenter, John Arlott and Julian Wilson. But one big name was missing, that of the man who, more than any other, stood for BBC’s sports coverage: David Coleman, the original inspiration for *Private Eye*’s piss-take on commentators’ cock-ups, “Colemanballs”, and also a celebrated *Spitting Image* character.

Coleman had something of a reputation. He was a star turn as a commentator but was said to have the shortest fuse in broadcasting. And as his ITV rival commentator Brian Moore once put it, “If he even said hello, it was more with a sneer than a smile.” So what follows is hardly surprising. Invited to write an article for *Olympic Summer of Sport* he said he wasn’t interested. Then, to make life easier for him, the athletics correspondent of the *Sunday Times*, Cliff Temple, ghosted the piece and it was sent to him for his approval. It came back from Coleman torn into four pieces and that was that: no Colemanballs after all.

The other notable aspect of *Olympic Summer of Sport* was that the decision of the BBC bosses to go ahead with the project was taken so late that a normal publishing schedule was impossible. The

result was that towards the end of the production process the art editor (David Driver) plus assistants and the subeditor (me) were sent down to the west country for a working week at Purnell's, the printers. We stayed in a Bath hotel and were chauffeured to and from the print works at Paulton. Sandwiches were provided at lunchtime though I insisted on a half-hour break in the pub.

My stint as a regular freelance for *Radio Times* lasted about three years. Then Nicolas Walter brought me into the subs' room of the *TLS* during the last months of Arthur Crook's editorship: since there was to be a new editor soon, full-time vacancies would have to remain unfilled while freelances did the work. My best-known colleague there was Martin Amis who rather pedantically objected to a paragraph break I'd introduced in a piece of his (purely to fill a line on a page proof). And once, minding the phone while Martin was on holiday, I picked up a call from someone at the Oxford Union who wanted him to debate with Mary Whitehouse on obscenity and censorship. "Well," I said, "I'm afraid Martin isn't here and I don't know where he is but I'll come and speak, if you like."

So I met the dragon Mary and John Mortimer who led for the opposition and thoroughly enjoyed the evening. Needless to say, Mary and censorship lost the debate.

After Arthur Crook's retirement I stayed on for a while under the new editor, John Gross, and was amused to see the effects of his radical innovation of introducing bylines for reviews. Suddenly, learned professors when checking their proofs insisted on reintroducing redundancies or pomposities that we'd cut or rewritten. Proud of seeing their names in print they no longer accepted that we at the *TLS* knew more than they did about clarity and writing style.

For the next few years I continued to work mainly as a freelance, writing features and subbing for various magazines. Besides *Radio Times* and the *TLS* I worked for *Woman* (where I spent some time on the staff and so was elected father of the NUJ chapel); the *Sunday Times* magazine for a month and the *Observer* magazine for several years; and *Decanter*, the wine magazine where, as well as writing and subbing, I acted as a consultant, helping the publisher hire a new editor. Among other things I started to collect house-style guides which laid down the law on arcane points of usage such as whether to spell "spoil" as "spoiled" and whether the word "none" can be followed by a plural verb or must remain singular. But what really interested me was the prospect of starting a radical magazine that would be a genuine alternative to the existing media.