

‘Treading on Sacred Turf’¹: History, Femininity and the Secret War in
the three *Plays for Today*, ‘Licking Hitler’ (1978), ‘The Imitation
Game’ (1980) and ‘Rainy Day Women’ (1984)

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Abstract: The article examines the three single television plays ‘Licking Hitler’, ‘The Imitation Game’ and ‘Rainy Day Women’, which were broadcast in the celebrated BBC drama strand *Play for Today* between 1978 and 1984. Each play was set within the secret war: at a black radio station, at Bletchley Park, and with a secret mission to investigate dark doings in remotest Fenland. Similarly, each play dealt substantially with female characters and their troubled experience of wartime Britain. The plays provided a revisionist treatment of the mythology of the Second World War, painting a less cosy picture of the People’s War and its supposed egalitarianism, shared sacrifice, and of the different classes supposedly ‘pulling together’. The article investigates the changing historiography of the secret war, a process in which the authorities attempted to manage the release of wartime secrets dealing with sabotage, resistance, deception and cryptography, and shows how the three dramas came into being through, and were influenced by, the opening up of the secret archive. Detailed attention to the production of the plays and their reception considers how the three historical dramas related to the *Play for Today* strand, traditionally celebrated for productions dealing with contemporary social and political issues.

Keywords: *Play for Today*, secret war, Second World War, BBC, television, David Hare, Ian McEwan, David Pirie, Richard Eyre

Introduction

There is something especially thrilling about any really authentic story about Intelligence in war (Slessor 1974: xi).

The BBC's *Play for Today (PFT)* (1970-84) strand of single plays has long been considered a high-point in British television drama, a showcase for hard-hitting productions dealing with contemporary social and political themes. It had been nurtured by Sydney Newman as BBC Head of Drama from January 1963, who proposed that *PFT*'s precursor *The Wednesday Play* pursue an ethos of 'agitational contemporaneity'; this was inspired by developments in theatre from 1956 and ABC's popular networked strand of single dramas *Armchair Theatre* (which Newman had overseen from 1958).² Newman fostered a 'progressive social realism' tradition in TV drama, within institutional constraints, though the space for dissent gradually narrowed from 1974 onwards. In its long run, the *Play for Today* strand broadcast two dramas dealing with contemporary espionage matters: Dennis Potter's 'Traitor' (1971) treated an anxious British double-agent now exiled in Moscow, while Stephen Poliakoff's 'Soft Targets' (1982) conversely dealt with a Soviet diplomat in London nervously seeking ways to get recalled home (Burton 2018 : 204-7, 210-12).

Between 1978 and 1984 *PFT* unusually broadcast three historical dramas treating the secret war, centring on secret establishments dealing with radio propaganda and code-breaking, and treating a secret mission to investigate reports of deteriorating morale in remotest East Anglia. 'Licking Hitler' ('LH') (1978), 'The Imitation Game' ('TIG') (1980) and 'Rainy Day Women' ('RDW') (1984) each put women at the centre of their narratives, revealing a rare concern for the female experience of the 'People's War'. This desire to treat wartime secrecy from the vantage point of the late 1970s was influenced by recent historiographical changes in writing about deception, code-breaking and special operations of the wartime period.

David Hare, Ian McEwan and David Pirie have each specifically acknowledged the new writing about the secret war which began to appear from the 1960s onwards as stimulating and shaping their own interest to write about this previously obscured aspect of the Second World War. Similarly, their desire to de-mythologise was a consequence of new critical writing on the British experience of the Second World War, especially Angus Calder's landmark and hugely influential study *The People's War* which first appeared in 1969. The new perspectives were allied to emergent concerns regarding female experience and agency which were very much in the air at the time the playwrights were setting their ideas to paper. The following article sets out in detail the pressures which led the traditionally hesitant authorities to loosen its grip on the secret archive, provides an overview of the various publications, some sanctioned and some not, which began to open the door on wartime secrets, and shows how these surprising insights and perspectives, allied with the demythologising impulse emanating from the work of Angus Calder and fresh attitudes arising from the new feminism, directly influenced the writing of 'Licking Hitler', 'The Imitation Game' and 'Rainy Day Women'.

Each of the *PFTs* receives discussion and analysis along the lines indicated above, in terms of their secret war credentials and their treatment of central female characters. Their reception is charted generally across a range of periodicals and newspapers, especially for any consideration of the dramas' treatment of wartime secrecy and of femininity, and internally, with an examination of BBC documents and reports where they exist. A range of interviews with the dramatists and technicians who worked on the productions adds further to the general explanation and understanding of the dramas.

History and Historiography

Popular accounts of secret missions and bravery behind enemy lines began to appear soon after the war finished. Unsurprisingly, there was an appetite for such stories with the public, which included many who had served in military roles or had been closely affected by the conduct and consequences of the conflict. The curiosity was satisfied by numerous fictions which sat comfortably in the ever popular thriller genre, as well as by a steady trickle of memoirs from former agents who had served with the Special Operations Executive (SOE) aiding resistance in occupied Europe. The personal accounts and biographies counted among their number George Millar's *Maquis* (1945) and *Horned Pigeon* (1946), Ann-Marie Walters's *Moondrop to Gascony* (1946), Jean Overton Fuller's *Madeleine* (1952), Peter Churchill's *Of Their Own Choice* (1952) and *Duel of Wits* (1957), Elizabeth Nicholas's *Death be not Proud* (1958) and Ben Cowburn's *No Cloak, No Dagger* (1960). Outstandingly successful were Jerrard Tickle's *Odette* (1949), Bruce Marshall's *The White Rabbit* (1952), R.J. Minney's *Carve Her Name with Pride* (1956), and W. Stanley Moss's *Ill Met by Moonlight* (1950), accounts of the SOE agents Odette Sansom, F.F.E. Yeo-Thomas, and Violette Szabo, and the extraordinary kidnapping of Heinrich Kreipe, Commander of the 22nd Air Landing Infantry Division that was occupying Crete. The books were adapted for the screen in 1950, 1957, 1967 and 1958 respectively (Burton 2018: 243-258).

While the stories satisfied popular demand, the approved attitude to the secret war remained one of keeping wartime secrets firmly locked up. The official historian M.R.D. Foot referred to the accounts as 'good thrillers, but bad history', and at their worst, 'pieces of downright fiction elaborately disguised as fact' (1966: 453, 454); thus, they served the useful purpose for the authorities of seemingly revealing something about the secret war without giving away any classified material. The British authorities had long maintained a 'culture of secrecy', and nowhere was this more firmly entrenched than in the area of British Intelligence and the secret services.³ The main reasons professed for this cautiousness were the need to protect agent anonymity in perpetuity, and to safeguard operational practice. Why should former agents be

left open to intrusion and possible retribution, and why should potential enemies be privy to British achievements in, for example, code-breaking?⁴

However, the post-war decades witnessed increasing pressure on Whitehall to relax its attitude to secrecy, especially in regard of the recent world war. Statesmen and soldiers were queuing up to publish their memoirs, not least among them Winston Churchill who quickly settled down to writing his multi-volume history of the Second World War and who would tax the authorities with his intention to comment on the part played in the victory by Bletchley Park and the breaking of many of the German codes, usually designated as Enigma (the cipher machine) and Ultra (the operational use of the intelligence) (Moran 2013: 208-211). Allied to this was the increasing desire to praise publicly the remarkable British achievements in the secret war, in aiding and sustaining resistance, in deception, such as the turning of German agents to work for the allies and feed false information back to the enemy, and in code-breaking. The concern here was fuelled by the growing claims of the communists to have been the main effective support for resistance across Europe, and further there was resentment stemming from a spate of memoirs by former Office of Strategic Services (OSS) staff which gave the impression that the main initiative from the allies for sabotage and resistance had come from the Americans. The crucial role of SOE was being overshadowed and the challenge was not being met.

The various pressures on Whitehall led to a slow and cautious relaxation on the part of officialdom to its wartime secrets. As Christopher Moran has detailed, the secret state under pressure in the period shifted from its traditional stance of blanket secrecy to one of information management (2013), The trickle of memoirs and accounts of secret missions had fed popular curiosity and usefully deflected attention from the more sensitive practices of wartime deception, sabotage and code-breaking. However, later in the 1950s awkward questions were being asked in Parliament about the role women had played as agents of the SOE in France and

the Prime Minister Harold Macmillan consented to a 'trial run' in the official history of the Second World War series, one dealing with the Special Operations Executive in France, but without a promise of publication. The Oxford historian and former wartime Special Air Service officer M.R.D. Foot was authorised to commence the study in November 1960. Despite hostile reactions to the final draft from various government departments, which appeared in spring 1963, the study was passed and published as *SOE in France* in 1966. A 'milestone in the history of British secrecy' (Moran 2013: 281), and a best-seller in the official series, the book ran into immediate difficulties, attracted litigation, and proved costly in out of court settlements as former agents felt aggrieved by some of Foot's acerbic assessments. The chastened authorities vowed not to repeat the experiment in the short term.

However, the idea of putting further revelations from the secret war archive on ice for the time being did not prove expedient or practical, and the prospect of secrets leaking out through unofficial channels remained a real issue. The problem lay in effectively silencing well-placed secret war warriors with a tale to tell, as well as the investigative journalists and specialist writers who were sniffing out intriguing titbits and who were often in touch with former participants in wartime deception and code-breaking. The first of these irritants to confront the authorities was J.C. Masterman who had been chairman of the wartime 'Double-Cross' committee, which had managed the complex business of captured agents and deceiving the Germans through feeding back false information. The activities of the committee had been crucial, for example, in the deceptions around D-Day and in sufficiently convincing the enemy that the invasion of France would be launched against the Pas-de-Calais rather than Normandy. John Masterman had long pressed for publication of his in-house record of the work of the committee which had originally been prepared in 1945. He was a believer that there was no longer an operational imperative in keeping such activities secret and an advocate of the need to celebrate the remarkable national achievements in the secret war as a counter-balance to the inflated claims of the communists and the Americans, and subscribed to the view previously

expressed by the official historian M.R.D. Foot, that society owed it to the survivors, and still more their dead companions, to set the public record straight, ‘to show that the dead deserve honour, and that SOE’s effort was not made in vain’ (1966: 453). The frustrated Masterman eventually circumvented the guardians of the secret world – and the possible strictures of the Official Secrets Act – by publishing his *The Double-Cross System in the War of 1939 to 1945* in America in 1972, outside of the jurisdiction of the Crown. And then only on the tacit agreement that half of the royalties went to her Majesty’s Stationery Office (Foot 2007: xiv).

The second type of irritant was the specialist writer on the secret world. In the early 1970s, it came to the notice of the authorities that Anthony Cave Brown, through meticulous researches in the American archives, was preparing a manuscript that would blow the gaff on the most closely-guarded wartime secret of all, Ultra. Concluding that it would be impossible to silence all journalists, writers and would-be memoirists, the reluctant decision was taken to beat the competition to the punch and a secretly-sanctioned account of the wartime success in code-breaking was hastily put in train. The job was given to F.W. Winterbottom, the former representative of the Air Staff at the Secret Intelligence Service (SIS), whose ground-breaking *The Ultra Secret* appeared in 1974. Still denied access to the official archives, the book was written quickly from memory, took most by surprise, and profoundly changed military history and the understanding of the Allied victory in the Second World War. Cave Brown’s *Bodyguard of Lies* appeared in 1975, proved extremely popular, but has been largely dismissed as fanciful and unreliable by scholars.

The three publications led to a sea change in attitudes to wartime secrecy. Whitehall could no longer argue for blanket restrictions on the archive and there commenced a piecemeal release of documents pertaining to the secret war; the first of the formerly classified papers relating to Enigma and Ultra, for example, finding their way to the Public Records Office in 1977. Thus, a spate of new studies began to appear from the later 1970s. Former participants in the secret

war now felt freer to publish their accounts, although restrictions remained (Hinsley, Thomas, Ransom and Knight 1979: vii-viii), and these included R.V. Jones's *Most Secret War: British Scientific Intelligence 1939-1945* (1978), Ewan Montagu's *Beyond Top Secret Ultra* (1977), Patrick Beesly's *Very Special Intelligence: The Story of the Admiralty's Operational Intelligence Centre 1939-45* (1977), Ralph Bennett's *Ultra in the West* (1979) and Peter Calvocoressi's *Top Secret Ultra* (1980). And writers now with access to an archive were also tempted into action, as with Ronald Lewin's *Ultra Goes to War: The Secret Story* (1978), and Charles Cruickshank's *The Fourth Arm: Psychological Warfare 1938-1945* (1977) and *Deception in World War II* (1979). In the 1970s, the authorities relaxed its attitude and official history once again 'became part of the secret state's strategy of information management' (Moran 2013: 326). Accordingly, the spate of recent studies was crowned by the multi-volume *British Intelligence in the Second World War*, which began to appear from 1979, supervised by the Cambridge professor and Bletchley veteran F.H. Hinsley. The decision to commission and publish, though, had its critics, including the leader of the Opposition Margaret Thatcher, no friend to the disclosure of secrets as she would prove as prime minister throughout the 1980s (Moran 2013: 323).

Such works, alongside the explosive revelations in 1979 exposing the wartime spy Anthony Blunt and later in 1985-7 concerning the 'Spycatcher Affair', were extensively commented on in the press. This provided stimulus for original dramatic writing for television, and, as will be clarified, David Hare with 'Licking Hitler', Ian McEwan with 'The Imitation Game', and David Pirie with 'Rainy Day Women', all acknowledged the ground-breaking factual writing as influential on their decision to write about the secret war. More broadly, new, less reverential writing on the war itself also impacted on how these dramatists would treat their characters and the experience of the home front in the conflict.

Historiography, Myth and the Second World War

Until the 1970s the period of the second world war had been covered with a web of largely unchallenged mythology (Stammers 1983: 5).

The advances in knowledge by the mid-1980s gave intelligence writer Nigel West the confidence to confront what he considered the entrenched espionage myths of the Second World War (1984). Other recent work had also challenged, in varying degrees, the stubbornly enduring Churchillian myth of the Second World War, its dominant representations and discourses. Chief among these was Angus Calder's *The People's War* (1969), published on the thirtieth anniversary of the war and only a year after the turbulent events in Paris which profoundly changed the outlook on culture and politics, and a civilian rather than military history of the conflict. In this version the focus was shifted from mythic leader, and in his place 'the people' become the protagonists in their own history, 'represented in the very process of sloughing off the old restraints on their energies, the old limitations of consciousness, as they begin to take control of the war effort' (Dawson 1984: 5). *The People's War* also caught the spirit of the new writing of 'history from below' and the privileging of previously voiceless witnesses. Interestingly, the book was reviewed by the dramatist Dennis Potter in *The Times*, on whom the new inflection was not lost. Potter was sensitive to the 'paralysing nostalgia' that coursed through the veins of British culture like an embalming fluid, aware that 'We British are always having our puckered and pasty faces thrust hard into that capacious nosebag of carefully mined legend and myth which is so often and so cunningly cast off as our real history' (6 September 1969).

The agenda marked out by Calder was reiterated in such popular studies as Raynes Minns's *Bombers and Mash: The Domestic Front 1939-45* (1980) and Peter Grafton's *You, You and You! The People Out of Step with World War II* (1981). A revisionism working in a different direction was evident in P. and L. Gillman's *Collar the Lot* (1980) and Neil Stammers's *Civil*

Liberties in Britain During the Second World War (1983). Dealing with such thorny issues as the internment of enemy aliens, the widespread use of defence regulations, the control of political action, and censorship, these works exposed a troubling assault on civil liberties during the war which flew in the face of the myth of a war for democracy and for civilisation. Angus Calder remained active, and around the turn of the 1980s, 'in reviews and articles and papers', continued to promote widely the 'Myth of 1940' (Calder 1991).

However, any emerging revisionism had to confront a powerful backlash in the period from 1979, which witnessed the right-wing authoritarian populism and elitist neoliberalism of the Margaret Thatcher regime.⁵ This was accompanied by a neo-imperialist logic which found expression in the Falklands War in 1982, during which the powerful myths of the British nation in its 'Finest Hour' were reignited and reworked. Angus Calder, incensed by the abuse of 'Churchillism' by Mrs Thatcher in the recent conflict, found further drive to undermine the mythical narrative and pursue what would become his later classic *The Myth of the Blitz* (1991); a point further developed by Lucy Noakes who showed in detail how the experience and the myth of the war shaped perceptions of the Falkland's conflict nearly half a century later (1997). Various facets of British cultural production challenged the dismaying regressive tendencies, not least in British film and television which in some sectors mounted a rear-guard challenge to the reactionary turn (Friedman 1993, Hill 1999).⁶

Bringing the discussion back to the secret world, national confidence, as it centred on the validity of entrenched myths and eventually the nostalgic ideology of neo-Conservatism, was also tested in the period following the Second World War by a series of exposés and scandals centring on national security and the secret services. The 'missing diplomats' Burgess and Mclean in the 1950s, and later the Soviet spies George Blake at MI6 and Andrew Vassall at the Admiralty, the Portland spy ring, the defection of former MI6 officer Kim Philby, and the Profumo Affair in the early 1960s, all attracted unwanted sensationalist attention as far as the

authorities were concerned. The image of traitors at the heart of British Intelligence gathered new momentum when the *Sunday Times* began a series of articles on Philby in 1967, further cemented with the sensational appearance of Philby's autobiography *My Silent War* in 1968.⁷ Such revelations fuelled support for more positive accounts of the wartime secret record, to boost morale and to restore reputations, and played their part in the spate of new publications in the 1970s dealing with the secret war. However, the tarnished image lingered, and the forced exposure of the 'fourth man' in 1979, Anthony Blunt, who had spied for the Soviets during the Second World War and had been 'protected' by the authorities since MI5 first learned of his espionage in 1963, created further controversy and bred additional doubt in a sceptical public.⁸

Three Secret War Dramas for Play for Today

Our lives must be refreshed with images which are not official (Hare 1978: 70)

In the tradition of the thrillers and the early published memoirs of wartime agents, a handful of early television drama series treated the secret war. These included *Man Trap* and *Secret Mission* broadcast on ITV in 1956, the Anglo-American series *O.S.S.* (ITV, 1957), a screen adaptation of Lt.-Col. Oreste Pinto's published memoirs *Spycatcher* (1952) and *Friend or Foe?* (1953), which appeared on the BBC between 1959-1961, and *Moonstrike*, a BBC drama series broadcast in 1963. The aforementioned, four-part adaptation of *The White Rabbit* starring Kenneth More received a single broadcast on the BBC in 1967, after which the tape was destroyed (Burton 2018: 253). A little later the new awareness regarding the secret war stemming from the recent revelations from the archive also led to some popular series, such as *Secret Army* (BBC, 1977-79), *The Fourth Arm* (BBC, 1983), and *Wish Me Luck* (ITV, 1987-1990). By this time factual programming was also attracted to an hitherto no-go area, and closely allied to the new writing there appeared Brian Johnson and Fisher Dilke's seven-part

The Secret War (BBC, 1977), arising out of Professor Jones's recent *Most Secret War*, and the eight-part *SOE* (BBC, 1984), arising out of M.R.D. Foot's *SOE: The Special Operations Executive 1940-1946* (1984).

The three *Plays for Today*, therefore, appeared at the moment when the secret war was emerging out of a dense fog of secrecy, and joined other fictional and factual programming similarly inspired by the new historical writing and archival revelations, although, as we will see, the single dramas were more revisionist in intent. The dramatists David Hare, Ian McEwan and David Pirie have each alluded to the influence of recent key studies in arousing their interest as well as in shaping their attitude to the material. The following section introduces each of the three plays in turn, examining their origins, authorship, production, treatment of secret war material, and their place in the traditions of the *PFT* strand.

'Licking Hitler' (1978)

David Hare wrote 'Licking Hitler' following a sustained period of writing history plays, dramas undermining established myths about the nature of contemporary British society (Coates 1989). Among Hare's early theatre works was *Brassneck*, a collaboration with Howard Brenton which opened at the Nottingham Playhouse in 1973. This scathing satirical chronicle of corruption among local government and property speculators in a post-Second World War Midlands town was adapted for television as a *PFT* (1975) and communicated disillusionment at the post-war 'settlement'. Hare attributed his change in thinking about the Second World War and the recent past to Angus Calder's *The People's War* (1969), 'a complete alternative history to the phoney and corrupting history I was taught at school' (Hare 1978: 66). The idea for writing 'LH' came to Hare after a chance meeting in the Weiner Library with Sefton Delmer, a wartime secret warrior who had headed-up a radio station broadcasting black propaganda to the Germans, and located within the Political Warfare Executive (PWE). The factual basis for the drama was provided by *Black Boomerang* (1962),

Delmer's account of his unorthodox wartime work, and one of the few authoritative narratives of the secret war published up until then (Hare 1984: 13).⁹ One of Delmer's early clandestine stations was called *Gustav Siegfried Eins* (GS1) and Hare imitated this with the station *Otto Abend Eins*, seen at operation through May 1941-July 1942.¹⁰ GS1 has been described as 'the greatest exponent of the pornographic theme' in British wartime propaganda, and it worked as a purely subversive station, its purpose to stimulate distrust of the Nazis and the administration in general among the German population, and to stir up friction between the Nazi Party and the military leadership (Cruickshank 1981: 80).

'Licking Hitler' centres on the tricky work of black propaganda concocted and broadcast from the remote Windlesham House. A young middle-class translator Anna Seaton (Kate Nelligan) arrives at the house and the brilliant, instinctive propagandist Archie MacLean (Bill Paterson), a working-class Glaswegian, forces his attentions on her and they lapse into an abusive relationship. Just before the station is de-sanctioned, Archie cruelly sees to it that Anna is removed from her duties.

Hare was determined for the drama to speak not just of Britain then but of Britain now. Therefore, he added a postscript, wherein an authorial voice-over (performed by Hare himself) informs the viewer of the post-war circumstances of the main characters. For example, John Fennel (Clive Revill), the unit's contact at the PWE, is shown to attain ministerial position in the Labour Government of the 1960s, marking him as the real-life Richard Crossman who had served at the wartime PWE. We are told that Will Langley (Hugh Fraser), the unit's commander, became a world famous thriller writer, noted for his emphasis on sex and violence, equating the character with Ian Fleming, who had served in Naval Intelligence rather than black radio.

Central protagonists Anna and Archie are seen as 'trapped in myths about their own past from which they seem unwilling to escape', much in the way Hare perceived the nation as

constantly harking back to the war and an idealistic view of the conflict (Hare 1984: 13). As drama historian Richard Johnstone has observed, ‘LH’ is ‘the kind of historical drama that is more concerned with the way we are than with the way we were’ (1985: 196). There is a lasting resonance in how Anna enjoys her sexual ‘thing’ with Archie, but cannot cope with how the secrecy and lying extends beyond their propaganda work and hampers their ability to communicate on a personal level. Initially, Anna appreciates the tough Glaswegian’s physical dominance and his worldlier outlook, which is refreshing to someone with her sheltered upper-class background, but they are ultimately unable to be honest with each other. Recently, Hare has commented on this final montage sequence, suggesting that counter to dominant myths about the Second World War, the British actually had a ‘gift for lying’, and that the Establishment could only justify its continued existence and self-importance through continual lying (quoted in *Drama Out of a Crisis: A Celebration of Play for Today*, BBC4, 12/10/2020).

‘LH’ was shot on 16mm colour film from 9-27 May 1977.¹¹ Its opening credit ‘A film by David Hare’ rhetorically positions Hare as a film *auteur*: as Hannah Andrews has argued, marking a convergence between the film and television mediums (2014: 50-52). It was one of 26 *PFTs* David Rose produced from 1972-1980, 23 of which were made from BBC Birmingham’s Pebble Mill where Rose had been Head of the English Regions Drama unit since November 1971. Its Birmingham location was ‘centrally situated’ so that Rose could ‘concern himself with non-metropolitan drama for the national network’ (BBC 1972: 73). Hare’s drama was shot on location at Compton Verney House, Warwickshire, representing Windlesham House mansion, Surrey, which Hare describes as ‘An English country house. Perfect and undisturbed. Large and set among woods’ (Hare 1977: 1).

Hare’s *PFT* is shot with the sedate, deliberate pacing of a European art film and Hannah Andrews has compared its use of lighting indoors on location to 1940s British cinema (2014:

50-52), while Julian Petley has noted Hare's break with television's customary naturalism with 'discordant' juxtapositions of sound and images (*Monthly Film Bulletin*, August 1984). Its Average Shot Length (ASL) is 11.1 seconds, a fairly slow cutting speed which reflects Hare's visual aesthetic of lingering on ensemble acting within the wider *mise-en-scène* of the country house which is a textural character in its own right. There is no underscore, though *Chopin's Waltz No. 3 in A-minor* features thrice diegetically. Hare uses deep focus, an often mobile camera tracking the bustling movements in Windlesham House, or swooping in as characters perform their radio propagandist duties. There is a de-glamorised, lengthy take of Anna dragging the drunken Archie's body out of her room, leaving it in the corridor, covering it and leaving him out there, visually complementing her later claim they are doing 'degrading work'. In the previously mentioned epilogue, Hare uses a sequence of monochrome still photographs and staged exterior film sequences made to look like 1950s and 1960s newsreel or home movie recordings, interspersed rhythmically with cut-outs to a black screen. This dynamic section (56:14-58:33) is rapidly cut with an ASL of 3.2. Hare's bravura stylistics here recalls and comments on the Grierson-led British Documentary Movement and its complicity in the art of national lying.

'LH' ends, aptly, in the present, with static shots of the interior of Windlesham, empty and devoid of the vital, flawed life that had occupied it during wartime. A window is reflected on the carpet. Depth of field enables us to see outside; we feel a sense of decay and hollowness as Hare's voice-over makes clear how the habit of 'daily inveterate lying' has never since abated in British public life. Next, we see an exterior shot of a Neo-Classical statue of a man carrying a scythe which may signify the political betrayal of the hopes of the working-class following the 'People's War' – pre-echoing the elaborate montage that concludes Trevor Griffiths and Richard Eyre's later *PFT* 'Country'. As the credits ensue, in the foreground is a radio microphone back in 1942, signifying the pre-eminence of communications technology and the importance of who controls it, then and now.

'The Imitation Game' (1980)

This *PFT* was written by Ian McEwan at the invitation of the producer-director Richard Eyre, and filmed on location in Essex and Suffolk in October-November 1979.¹² McEwan brought together three elements that were preoccupying him at the time: the first was the Women's Movement and the wish to write about society not in terms of economic classes but as a patriarchy; the second was an interest in the mathematician and wartime code-breaker Alan Turing¹³; the third was Mozart's *Fantasia in C Minor*, K475.

'The Imitation Game' begins early in the summer of 1940. Cathy Raine (Harriet Walter) is an intelligent and head-strong young woman stifled by her familial surroundings, described as a 'modest suburban home ... on the edge of a small southern town' (McEwan 1980: 1). Desiring to contribute to the war effort, Cathy joins the Auxiliary Territorial Service (ATS) in preference to working in a munitions factory and opts to serve in the exciting-sounding role of 'special operator'. She is posted to a wireless intercept centre (Y-station) where she laboriously records incoming coded messages.

At each stage of her attempt to be independent and do something more fulfilling, her ambition is hampered by an external sexual appraisal of her role, from her father, her boyfriend or a senior officer (Head 2007: 53). After assaulting a chauvinistic publican (Peter Schofield) who refuses to serve Cathy and her friend Mary (Brenda Blethyn) and, in an attempt to eject Cathy 'hauls her by the lapels' and slaps her face – which McEwan sardonically calls 'the cure for hysteria' – she is re-assigned to Bletchley Park where she is put on general duties in the mess (McEwan 1981: 143). Turner (Nicholas Le Prevost), a Cambridge don, is intrigued by the young woman's independence, invites her to his rooms for tea, and their attempt at lovemaking ends in his humiliation. He storms out angrily and the curious Cathy is caught looking over some of his secret papers. Accused of 'knowing more about Ultra than any woman alive' she is imprisoned for the rest of the war by a nervous security organisation. Our final view of Cathy

is through the barred window of her cell, reading the score to Mozart's *Fantasia in C Minor* sent by Turner, the musical motif which fascinates Cathy and runs through the drama (McEwan 1981). This time, we hear the piece as non-diegetic sound, in contrast to Cathy's earlier diegetic renditions on pianos, signifying Cathy's loss of agency and freedom as she is incarcerated by the suspicious patriarchal authorities. As Hayes and Grote assert: 'We leave Cathy forced to retreat into the realm of the imaginary, literally and figuratively imprisoned and excluded from reality' (2009: 36).

Eyre and McEwan both found inspiration in Angus Calder's *The People's War*. The director remembers its influence on both he and his friend David Hare and their respective *PFTs* (Eyre 2021); while the playwright after reading it 'resolved to write something one day about the war' (McEwan 1981: 17). However, finding it difficult to research Alan Turing at that time, McEwan decided that his Turing 'would have to be invented', resulting in the character of Turner. However, the writer did discover that the majority of personnel who worked at Bletchley were women, doing vital but repetitive jobs, that women in the early war years were chauvinistically thought incapable of keeping a secret, and, with the observation that 'Secrecy and power go hand in hand', that he could ally this to his intended theme of patriarchy (McEwan, 1981: 18). Concurrent with McEwan's findings, historian Penny Summerfield was confirming that the war accelerated the segregation of women in 'inferior' sectors of work and consolidated the sexual divisions of labour (1977, 1984), and a little later Lucy Noakes offered challenging studies of gendered understandings of the early war years and their lasting impact on British culture (1997), and of the problematic position of females in the traditionally male sphere of the military (2006). Film historian Robert Murphy has argued how 'TIG' revised the ideology of such wartime consensual dramas as *The Gentle Sex* (1943, about the ATS) and *Millions Like Us* (1943, about women conscripted into a aircraft factory). Cathy refuses to act with traditional deference to men and is accordingly disgraced and punished. There is no suggestion of the emerging equality of the earlier films and McEwan's revisionist interpretation of wartime

circumstances emphasises chauvinism and discrimination: ‘all male-female relationships are troubled by misunderstandings, hostility and prejudice’ (2000: 263). Indeed, Harriet Walter spoke of her ‘great sympathy’ for Cathy: ‘She’s a curious girl who couldn’t fit into the mould of a patriotic, submissive female’ (*Daily Mirror*, 24 April 1980).

Jo Imeson’s review in *Monthly Film Bulletin* also took into consideration class, embedded in the setting in the echelons of intelligence and code-breaking. As Imeson noted, the Bletchley Park elite are all Cambridge graduates, their power residing in their unique code-breaking ability. So, Turner is not disciplined for having secret files in his room as he is ‘indispensable’, a privilege denied to those providing the massive support structure around him and his colleagues (June 1983). ‘TIG’ remains unusual as both a critique of the wartime myth and of the venerated achievement of Bletchley Park, and reminds us that it would be wrong to idealise blindly the remarkable successes of wartime code-breaking. Like many centres of wartime activity, intercept stations, dissemination stations and their like suffered problems of absenteeism and staff discontent at working conditions and motivation, not least among women who resented their low pay and status, and who were often unenlightened about their vital contribution to the winning of the war (Hastings 2015: 406-7).¹⁴ Females, essential for the war effort, are needed only in versions of their old roles.

McEwan de-personalises many of the characters who represent the patriarchal institutions, de-individualising them as ‘Publican’, ‘Colonel in cell’, ‘Major’, ‘ATS Officer’, ‘ATS Sergeant’ and ‘Technical Officer’. This is a Brechtian dramatisation of history and its objective inequalities via social types. McEwan centres the human interest elsewhere: profoundly granting devolution to gender and class; while *three* of the four main characters given forenames are women. Whereas Anna in ‘Licking Hitler’ has 16 close-ups or extreme close-ups (4.8 per-cent of the total shots), Cathy is accorded 49 in ‘TIG’ (10.2 per-cent), indicating Eyre’s allocation of spatial centrality to Walter’s performance. There are five close-

ups of Cathy's dexterous piano-playing fingers, signifying her creative agency, while the camera also observes Cathy's firm, intent looks and mordant eye-rolls that make her such a transgressive and relatable protagonist.

Eyre shows Cathy as spatially distant from her father Mr. Raine (Bernard Gallagher), complementing how she argues with him, a paid-up member of the British Union of Fascists in 1937. Undergoing a dehumanising drill ritual in a hangar, the female ATS recruits are verbally barracked by their Sergeant (Carol Macready), but they are recalcitrant and unruly and won't be moulded so easily – which, less positively, includes their raucous and puritanical bullying of Sarah (Belinda Lang), whom they forcibly bathe, claiming she is promiscuous.¹⁵

At the Y-station, we see Cathy in deep concentration, working amid whirring radio signals on the soundtrack. In a briskly cut, rhythmic sequence of short takes, one fading into another, Eyre conveys the mechanistic discipline and rhythms of the women's teamwork. As they transcribe signals, film editor David Martin matches the fades to the ebbing sounds. In the following fateful pub scene, the camera mimics the male gaze in the bar, surveying Cathy and Mary's legs; followed by a medium-shot of male punters watching them warily. Mary talks about courting, while Cathy talks about the war and her work, and the men resent their presence in the pub as vocal women.

Alongside the bullying scene is further tangible physical violence as Cathy knees the landlord in the crotch – accompanied, wittily, by a split-second shot of his assailed nether-regions. Following this, her male C.O. (Tim Seely) reprimands Cathy for her offence: 'I don't know I wouldn't rate that more serious than rape', and gets her to assent to this preposterous claim. Cathy is subsequently sent to Bletchley Park to work as a skivvy, doing menial odd-jobs around a reclining young officer in the mess who listens to a BBC radio talk on women's role in the war effort, its tone described in McEwan's stage direction as 'one of patronising intimacy and bluff inanity' (McEwan 1980: 101A). As the RP voice acclaims women's function of

cooking meals for the armed forces, Cathy rebelliously switches the radio off, eliciting the officer's ire. Later, the toiling Cathy is ignored and left behind as the entirely male group of scientists rush off to engage with an exciting new development. When Cathy plays the *Fantasia* on the piano, Turner voices traditional class hierarchies by claiming disdainfully that 'Mozart's only for officers'.

In the climactic scene in the cell, the Colonel (Geoffrey Chater) justifies Cathy's detention and paternalistically puts his hand on her shoulder, earning her fiery rebuke: 'Take your hands off me!' This follows her eloquent explanation, framed in medium-shot in a long take, of how the men keep women out of the frontline in the War to preserve their position in male eyes as idealised innocents: 'If... If the girls fired guns and women generals planned the battles. *Then*, the men would find there was no morality to war, there'd be no one to fight for... Nowhere to leave their *consciences*...'

The image in 'TIG' is often multiplane with lighting cameraman Peter Bartlett operating in rack focus to shift attention within shots, implementing Eyre's suggestions (2021). Eyre selected exterior and interior locations – such as the greensward at Frinton, a house in its fellow Essex seaside town of Clacton, and Woolverstone Hall School, near Ipswich in Suffolk – which add verisimilitude to McEwan's portrait of pervasive societal restrictions. After the stultifying Raine household and the incongruous beach huts flanked by barbed wire, we see a range of dehumanising institutional spaces: an officer's mess, barracks, impersonal corridors and a hangar; contrasted by the more inclusive Bletchley Park workspaces.

McEwan and Eyre's *PFT* is even more sedate than 'Licking Hitler', with an ASL of 11.5. 'TIG' contains many long, clinically surveying takes, for example, of the officer's mess, as we see Cathy's busy activity as skivvy while the officer sits back and listens to the radio broadcast. Precise depth of field captures long corridors and a staid, closed social world, where the toiling worker Cathy is excluded from the still, privileged centre.

'Rainy Day Women' (1984)

David Pirie has also confirmed that he was influenced by the new writing about the Second World War that was appearing in the 1970s; he recalls, for example, 'avidly' reading Anthony Cave Brown's *Bodyguard of Lies*. In the late 1970s, he fused this interest with a long-standing aim to write a film about a community where the 'sexual centre of gravity' had been disturbed, settling on a setting among the Land Girls in 1940. Pirie spent much effort researching 'secret war stuff', including time at the Imperial War Museum (2019).

Pirie had unsuccessfully pitched his synopsis for what became 'Rainy Day Women' as a novel and a film, until he took it to Michael Wearing at the BBC, producer of *Play for Today* who was very keen and commissioned Pirie to write a script. Pirie's title came from the 'idea that on a Rainy Day, a day of trouble, women would be the ones to suffer' (2019), and the term 'Rainy Day' is used in the drama as code for a situation in which morale would be irreparably damaged if word ever got out.¹⁶

The production was more fraught than its *PFT* secret war predecessors. Reportedly, 'it very nearly did not happen because of the cost'; Wearing said they were at one point 'hanging by a thread'; and Pirie claims that Wearing's skilful budgetary management saw them pull through (2019). In place of original choice as director Philip Saville, Ben Bolt, son of the playwright Robert and a relatively experienced film and TV director at 31, was enlisted to helm a production that was shot on film during September-October 1983 in locations mostly around North Somercotes, north-east of Louth in the Lincolnshire Marshes (Charlesworth 2021).

Like McEwan's 'TIG', 'RDW' is set following the British retreat and evacuation at Dunkirk in May-June 1940, where Captain John Truman (Charles Dance) has recently served. In this 'darkest hour' of the war, which precipitated the mythical national 'pulling together', Ministry of Information official Reed (Cyril Cusack) assigns Truman on an unusual mission

to investigate the morale of people in the fictitious Darton village, in ‘an isolated Fen north of the Wash’. A poster on Reed’s MoI office wall denotes a pervasive paranoia over fifth columnists.

Life has been tilted on its axis. Road signs have been altered, rural by-passers tell Truman they don’t follow maps or the news anymore, and the English pastoral is infused with the uncanny and the fearful. The changed centre of gravity is reflected in Bolt’s off-kilter framings, such as a sideways view of Truman collapsed on the ground suffering the after-effects of post-Dunkirk shell-shock, and a weirdly horizontal gas-mask-wearing boy Tom Durkow (Anthony Rowson), with his ear to the earth, paranoid about a German invasion from underground.

The influx of Land Girls Joan (Joanna Foster), Linda (Gwyneth Strong) and Susan (Sally Baxter) has disrupted what the men of the village see as its natural balance and they resent these irreverent urban young women. Led by the sinister Dennis Ibbetson (played with suppressed brutality by Ian Hogg) the men begrudge the Land Girls’ alliance with the local left-wing atheist intellectual Alice Durkow (Suzanne Bertish) who has housed them in what ‘upper-class gentleman farmer’ Fleming (Bert Parnaby) calls a ‘witch’s castle’ (Pirie, 1984: 19). The sense of foreboding is intensified as this follows shots of dead birds in a bucket which Ibbetson brings into the pub, and Ibbetson taking trial aim at the upper windows of Alice’s home with a gun.

Alice is a German internee’s widow who makes money from billeting Land Girls; her husband was a Communist in Vienna whom, Dr Karen Miller (Lindsay Duncan) reveals, was drowned on a British deportation ship to Canada. Fleming tells Truman that the authorities tried to intern her ‘but she’s English and slippery’. Ibbetson’s ally Joe Hutton (Anthony Langdon), who, suffering impotence, perpetrates domestic violence against his wife Gayle (Anna Mottram), claims without evidence that Alice has taken a Land Girl into her room at

night. Joe and Dennis's leering comments and use of the vocative 'girl' to put-down Joan prefigure later violence.

Spurred by their bigoted paranoia, the Home Guards violently ransack Alice's house, and 'with scarcely disguised pleasure Ibbetson hits Joan hard across the face' (Pirie 1984: 54). Ibbetson also strikes Alice and Truman stops him hitting her again, asking with piquant irony: 'Who do you think you are? The bloody *gestapo*?' Next, the Home Guards believe they have located 'some primitive Morse transmitter or jamming device', but which Dr Karen Miller sardonically reveals is 'an electrical hair remover' (Pirie 1984: 55-56). This builds towards Truman's eventual realisation of his own misogyny and that he has to fight for 'everyone', including women. He heroically travels eleven miles across the fen to Thurston military base in an attempt to avert the looming threat from the Home Guards; yet, echoing Cathy's incarceration, the military establishment does not believe him: he is locked up for the night, thoroughly emasculated.

The earlier frightening incursion into Alice's home prefigures the grim conclusion of the 1940 story, when the Home Guards are implied to have raped and butchered the women and young Tom. As with 'Licking Hitler', there is pervasive establishment secrecy. While an ARP Warden (Godfrey Jackman) claims the place was flattened by the Luftwaffe as happened 'at Meldreth', Cambridgeshire, 'two weeks ago', it is clear the secret state has blown-up the house to eradicate any possibility that the harrowing truth will emerge and undermine the war effort. In a point pertinent to the longer time-scale embodied in the dramatists' objectives about wartime myths and secrets, Reed tells Truman that the appalling tragedy can never appear in subsequent histories or memoirs. Pirie furthers the conspiracy narrative through the implication that Reed may also work for the Security Service. Justice for the women and child murdered by the Home Guards is foreclosed: the perpetrators themselves have been

obliterated and thus spared prosecution or having to live with their actions; the groundwork is being laid for the subsequent myth.

Pirie's grasp of politics is sophisticated and allusive. Villager Charles Muir's (John Joyce) pregnant utterance of 'back to the land' after he and Ibbetson have pedantically and cruelly tested Linda on her reading ambiguously implies that the local men may have sympathy with H.J. Massingham and Rolf Gardiner's contemporary 'rural restoration' movement which exerted fascistic military discipline over its members. Ironically, there is 'hysterical gossip' among the male villagers that Alice is a spy sending signals to the Nazis, while in the pillaging of her home Muir claims to have found 'Communist' propaganda, which Truman clarifies is actually a government pamphlet. Alice disdainfully notes how 'Most in the village think Communists and Nazis are the same thing. Including the magistrates', which chillingly implicates the local authorities in this tangible and vindictive local conspiracy.

While Pirie openly discloses being influenced by the 'contaminated community'-set 1950s science fiction films *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956) and *Quatermass 2* (1957), as well as John Bowen's rural *PFT* thriller 'Robin Redbreast' (1970), 'RDW' was also grounded in actual events he researched (2019). There was a real invasion scare on 7 September 1940 in Southern England and he 'uncovered several stories of cruelty and discrimination against Land Girls'. A disturbing incident in 'RDW' wherein the Home Guard brutally interrogate the women concerning a possible clandestine radio, which turns out to be an electrical hair remover, was seemingly derived from a similar incident recounted in R.V. Jones's recent *Most Secret War*.

Echoing David Hare's voice-over in 'LH', 'RDW' incisively demonstrates Svetlana Boym's idea of restorative nostalgia (2002: 41).¹⁷ In his *Listener* preview, John Wyver noted how Pirie's film challenges the culturally persistent idealised harking back to 'Dunkirk' and 'Blitz' spirits, and the cosy representations of the Home Guard in sitcoms *Dad's Army* (1968-

77) and *Backs to the Land* (1977-78) (5 April 1984). This is seen in Bolt's framing of the hard-faced Home Guards Ibbetson, Muir, Hutton and special constable Ian Street (David Hatton), who are lined up as a threatening, armed mob outside Alice Durkow's home (Pirie 1984: 52). These named characters feel more tangible than McEwan's patriarchal functionaries, and Pirie heightens the awful realism by having this directly follow a pub scene where we hear an authentic BBC broadcast on the radio by Air Marshal Sir Philip Joubert.

The play 'opens with a memory of 1940 revealed in the present' (Wyver op.cit.), with schoolboy Christopher (Lauren Beales) discovering his recently deceased grandfather Truman's hand-written journal from the War. We hear in his eulogy that Truman (1905-1983) later became a Colonel; however, the account of his war record omits any reference to Operation Rainy Day, it only being revealed that 'he served and suffered as much as any man at Dunkirk, yet recovered to play an outstanding part in the Allied Invasion of Europe'. Pirie's *PFT* closes in 1984, subtly critiquing the contemporary Thatcher-led restorative nostalgia with an unseen guest at Truman's funeral heard on the soundtrack claiming, smugly: 'At least he lived to see the Falklands'. The melancholy finale leaves it ambiguous as to what Christopher will make of the truth of what happened, with the last section of the journal noting that the Cromwell invasion alert 'was a notorious false alarm'. We imagine horrifying scenes – which, sensitively, are not shown on-screen – and have to face the grim stay of historical reckoning with the descendants of the same cynical establishment still in power in Britain in 1984.

'RDW' is cut at a notably brisker pace than 'LH' and 'TIG' with an ASL of 9.2 seconds, unsurprising given that Bolt includes sequences of terror and physical action, realising Pirie's intentions to use horror and science fiction tropes. Unlike Hare and McEwan's, and indeed most *PFTs*, there is a commissioned underscore by film composer Stanley Myers. Myers uses

horns including the cor anglais and grave, ornery strings to create an ominous mood that evokes the English Gothic and the Hungarian modernist composer Béla Bartók.¹⁸

Truman's eavesdropping through the wall of the Hutton household he is staying in echoes the cult British horror film *The Wicker Man* (1973), which BBC Head of Purchased Programmes for Television and ex-*Film Night* producer Barry Brown had identified.¹⁹ Furthermore, the sequence where the Home Guards approach the Durkow household at the grim climax quotes contemporary horror stylistics: jerky, handheld camera, Myers's shock-instilling underscore and a dramatic zoom into Tom's terrified face as the men close in. 'RDW' in fact sits comfortably in that cycle of British 'Uncanny Landscape' films and television dramas of the 1970s and 1980s which included *The Wicker Man*, *And Soon the Darkness* (1970), *Straw Dogs* (1971) and *Children of the Stones* (HTV 1977) (Hutchings 2004). Pirie makes his use of these genre tropes more troubling by including Mattel Electronics' actual intellivision video-game, *B-17 Bomber* (1982), which Truman's other grandson Timothy (Hayden Parsey) is playing in the concluding 1984 sequence. Pirie's camera-script specified this particular game: 'Bizarre computer voices and sound effects accompany lurid graphic sand bombs and planes and land explosions' (1984: 84). In this Second World War-set shoot-'em-up simulation, the player flies a bombing mission into Europe: Pirie's inclusion of it straight after the revelation of the multiple atrocities in Darton signifies contemporary trivialisation of the horrors of the war.

Femininity and Female-Centred Dramas

One of the most useful spheres for women in the services is cooking. As the war progresses the number of meals they cook each day for His Majesty's armed forces has risen to millions. (Wireless broadcast in 'The Imitation Game')

If some of Miss Bertish's outbursts sounded too contemporary for 1940, the play gave disturbing substance to the theory that uniforms dehumanise by giving false legitimacy to brutish acts (*The Times*, 11 April 1984, on 'Rainy Day Women')

The traditional myth of the nation's 'finest hour' has rightly been castigated as a masculine fantasy, one which sentimentally 'portrays women in the conventional and silenced role of weeping and then welcoming wives, mothers and girlfriends' (Dawson and West 1984: 9). Wartime British cinema was implicated in such a process, demonstrating that women's desires could be fulfilled only when they were directed 'inwards' in the confirmation of family unity and continuity through motherhood (Gledhill and Swanson 1984).

All three *PFTs* considered here were united in their concern over femininity in wartime. Although revisionist in intent, the dramas attracted some criticism for their portrayal of women, and this might have surprised the male authors who professed they were genuinely responding to changing perceptions regarding women's place in society. Hare has revealed how his treatment of Anna in 'Licking Hitler' 'infuriated' some viewers, 'who asked how I could allow so fine a heroine to grow so convincingly through her wartime experience and yet be shown years later to have become effectively a victim of it'. The dramatist also alludes to feminist criticism which objected to the portrayal of a woman who chooses to go on meeting and making love to a man who has originally taken her by rape. Hare does not see his play as 'irresponsible' and defends his depiction of the relationship as something that, regrettably, does happen, and that to portray only what you would like to be true is an unacceptable form of censorship (1984: 13).

Conversely, critic Philip Purser claimed 'The Imitation Game' was untrue to what the Second World War was actually like, noting his experience of the friendliness of pubs, and criticised its over-dependence on a contemporary feminism he pejoratively associates with transient advertising: 'Women's lib and women's rights and equality have become such an

unescapable bore, propped up everywhere you look like hoardings covered with the same few posters' (*Sunday Telegraph*, 27 April 1980). Similarly, Russell Davies regarded this *PFT* as becoming a 'feminist tract' (*Sunday Times*, 27 April, 1980); while Sean Day-Lewis – who termed it 1980's 'most memorable feminist television play' – pointedly reported that a male reader had written to him bemoaning that it was the latest in a general 'flood of feminist propaganda' on television (*Daily Telegraph*, 28 February 1981).

'The Imitation Game' was also viewed suspiciously by some women. A number of former ATS women wrote to the BBC's listings magazine *Radio Times*, 'mostly in a critical vein'. Ian McEwan graciously replied to the correspondents, pointing out that it had not been his intention to 'impugn the ATS'. He claimed to have researched 'The Imitation Game' for four months, to have interviewed many former ATS and Women's Royal Naval Service (WRNS) personnel, and that despite a 'total refusal of co-operation from the Ministry of Defence' had tried to get the period details right.²⁰ He explained his aims for the drama at length:

By the end of the war there were over 10,000 women working in and around Bletchley; a great proportion of them were in vital but mechanical tasks. The closer you moved to the centre of 'Ultra' the more men you found; the further out, the more women. In terms of sex and power, Ultra suggested to me a microcosm of a whole society My play exploited a series of accidents and coincidences in order to move the heroine from the periphery of Ultra to its centre where she was to be destroyed.

The author expressed his hope that 'viewers would be prompted to consider that they live in a patriarchy and that its values are perverse' (17 May 1980: 71). Imeson's review also critiqued the portrayal of women, claiming that the intelligent drama ignored the great social changes that took place in the war, and that Cathy's 'solitude, sullen silences and aggressive sarcasm – the result of her frustrated ambitions – undermine any notion of incipient female solidarity'

(op.cit.: 160-161). This, of course, could be where the writers to the *Radio Times* had felt a personal affront.

In 1984, a British Film Institute Summer School debated the struggles over the meaning of the Second World War. A screening of 'The Imitation Game' led to some angry reactions from the female participants who felt 'betrayed' and 'patronised' by a drama which for them essentially shared characteristics with conservative popular art. The critical view articulated from the conference has similarities with that of those ex-ATS women who voiced their disappointment in *Radio Times*. That is, McEwan's portrayal of wartime women is 'completely negative' and that any meaningful description of new possibilities opened up by the war and the new felt independence are lost. The consequence of representing Cathy as unique and exceptional has resulted in unacceptable stereotypes for most of the other women in the drama, thereby making the heroine alone in her struggle, losing sight of the positive outcome of female solidarity (Perkins 1984).

However, such responses to 'The Imitation Game' were in a minority. 'IMG' was previewed by Hilary Kingsley in the *Daily Mirror* as 'one of the most powerful plays yet about the unfair deal that women get... and it was written by a man' (24 April 1980). Michael Church saw it as 'a feminist statement of welcome maturity' and 'subtlety' (*Times*, 25 April 1980). Rosalie Horner empathised with Cathy's anger at 'continually being the prisoner of her sex' in a world where men idealise and ignore women (*Daily Express*, 25 April 1980). Jennifer Lovelace celebrated how McEwan had mixed 'dialectic with drama in reasonable proportions' and echoed Horner in claiming the production had avoided stridency. In an implicit critique of Purser's subjective diatribe, Lovelace notes that 'only those who were there can tell if the judgement was too harsh' (*The Stage and Television Today*, 1 May 1980).

Julian Barnes identified 'TIG's' 'argument' as blending 'cleanly public and private feminist themes', while being representationally complex in having the ATS Officer deliver 'a

mind-shrivelling lecture putting down her own sex' (*New Statesman*, 2 May 1980). Significantly, fellow literary-minded reviewer Hermione Lee claimed it was a 'moving demonstration' of Virginia Woolf's argument in *Three Guineas* concerning how, in the patriarchy, public and private 'tyrannies and servilities' are 'inseparably connected' (*Times Literary Supplement*, 25 April 1980). Both Lee and the feminist Ruth Wallsgrove acclaimed in realist terms how Cathy *isn't* an exemplary heroine and the ATS girls lack any wider collective feminist consciousness. Wallsgrove approves of Cathy being 'a particularly good propaganda device' against the portrayal of men's 'exquisite viciousness', as in the pub scene which she perceives as a 'feminist set-piece' where Cathy is persecuted for daring to ignore the men by chatting with Mary and kicks back. Wallsgrove concluded with: 'It's the kind of piece that shows up the sex-war in such terms that makes you want to see women take machine guns to men' (*Spare Rib*, June 1980). Clive James accepted 'TIG' as a successful feminist drama which made him personally feel 'apologetic' to women for his own past behaviour towards them (*Observer*, 27 April 1980).

For David Pirie, 'Rainy Day Women' came out of the 'general feminist flux at the time' and was 'about sexual politics'. A seminal influence was a challenging time he spent living at a 'strongly centred feminist commune' where some of the women were effectively 'separatist' (2019). While this *PFT* attracted less criticism than the others regarding the portrayals of its heroines, Philip Purser decried how Pirie had chosen to prioritise 'the eternal and these days inescapable conflict between oppressed woman and ravaging man' over and above the War (op.cit.). Furthermore, Maureen Paton attacked what she saw as its 'trendy [feminist] obsession' with misogyny while herself expressing an objectifying admiration of Charles Dance's body. Like Purser, who called it a 'sadly unconvincing rustic melodrama' (op.cit.), Paton betrays a judgemental attitude towards popular forms, claiming non-ironically that Pirie has 'obviously absorbed far too many British horror movies for his own good' (*Daily Express*, 11 April 1984).

More typical was Herbert Kretzmer, who contrasted the ‘unbounded malice’ of Ian Hogg’s Dennis Ibbetson with Arthur Lowe’s ‘genial codgers’ in *Dad’s Army*. Kretzmer commended the story’s historical grounding in the real German invasion scare in Southern England on the evening of 7 September 1940 and traced its historical continuities with witch-burning (*Daily Mail*, 11 April 1984). John Naughton found its ‘convincing and menacing [portrayal of] gender-based savagery [...] more frightening than anything Sam Peckinpah could have produced’ (*Listener*, 19 April 1984). As Pirie recounts, there ‘was some nervousness at the BBC [as] we were treading on the ‘sacred turf’ of 1940 with a dark and negative view of *Dad’s Army*’. Notably, the production did not create as much of a stir in the printed press as McEwan’s *PFT*, although Pirie refers to a letter he received following the broadcast in which a former Land Army girl recounted a traumatising sexual violation during her posting. She praised the play as a ‘courageous’ portrayal of a previously hidden side of the wartime experience which left her feeling ‘liberated’ (2019).

Audience, Critical Reception and Afterlife

‘Licking Hitler’ and ‘Rainy Day Women’ were scheduled for broadcast on BBC1 in *Play for Today*’s usual post-news 9:25pm slot, both on Tuesday. ‘Licking Hitler’ was shown on 10 January 1978 while ‘The Imitation Game’ went out ten minutes later on a Thursday, broadcast on 24 April 1980, ‘Licking Hitler’ gained strong viewing figures of 6.57 million (approximately 13 per-cent of the UK public aged 5 and over), a 40.3 per-cent audience share, as against 26.6 for BBC2 – whose main programming in opposition was a *Man Alive* documentary about dieting in young girls – and 33.1 per-cent for ITV, which showed *Hello! Central State Puppet Theatre of the Soviet Union* and the news. It obtained an audience ‘Reaction Index’ of 54 per-cent, exactly equal to its parent 1977/78 series average.

On 24 April 1980, 'The Imitation Game' garnered a slightly lower audience of 5.69 million, gaining a narrower ratings victory, but with its impressive 42.4 per-cent share outscoring another *Man Alive* on BBC2 about apartheid in Northern Irish education (18.7 per-cent) and Thames's sitcom *Shelley* and the news on ITV (38.9 per-cent). Its RI was a high 67.

On 10 April 1984, 8.60 million tuned into 'Rainy Day Women', 47.2 per-cent of the viewing public, as against 12.3 per-cent for BBC2's documentary *A Prospect of Kew*, 27.5 per-cent for ITV's repeat of its Paul Scott adapted single play *Staying On*, and 13 per-cent for Channel 4's screening of the film adaptation of Doris Lessing's dystopian *Memoirs of a Survivor*. 'RDW's performance was especially impressive given that *PFT* had been defeated in the ratings 'battle' by ITV for all previous eight episodes in *PFT*'s fifteenth series – led by Granada's prestigious *The Jewel in the Crown*, which had regularly gained around half of the TV audience.

Broadcast put its large audience down to Charles Dance's star appeal, following his performances in Granada's Paul Scott adaptation, implying loyal *Jewel* viewers had transferred to *PFT* due to Dance's presence (1984: 30-31). The audiences for these three 'secret war' *PFT*s were all in excess of their parent series', while audience RIs for the latter two exceeded their season averages: 'Rainy Day Women' scored an impressive 66. While 'Licking Hitler' registered an audience share of 1 per-cent lower than the *PFT* 1977/78 series average, McEwan and Pirie's *PFT*s obtained shares 12 and 17 per-cent higher than their parent series'. Clearly, these secret war dramas were among the more popular late *PFT*s.

'Licking Hitler' and 'The Imitation Game' were widely reviewed, garnering 9 and 14 reviews from a range of publications.²¹ Despite its large, appreciative audience, 'Rainy Day Women' was comparatively neglected: receiving just 6 reviews. Hare and Eyre's productions were widely applauded by critics for their realism, though audiences were divided on 'Licking Hitler': while many in the audience sample described it as 'very credible', 'plausible',

‘believable’, ‘natural’, ‘realistic and genuine’, almost as many thought it was a ‘lifeless, gloomy production’ and that ‘the Scottish journalist (Bill Patterson) had been grossly overplayed’.²² While many strongly admired ‘The Imitation Game’, a minority found it questionable on historical grounds: claiming gas masks were worn in the wrong position and one viewer claimed ‘it didn’t seem true to ATS Royal Signals life as I knew it; the characters were thought unbelievable’. More typical were commendations of Harriet Walter’s performance as ‘outstanding’ and how ‘the costumes and sets’ [locations] had led to the creation of a very convincing atmosphere’.²³

While most critics admired the ‘fidelity’ to historical detail in ‘Licking Hitler’, playwright-critic Dennis Potter (1978) discerned how Hare’s courageously open-ended work ‘was dangerous and subversive, as is all good-writing’. Potter noted how ‘the team itself, and their very surroundings, inevitably reflected the lies that had been told, and are still being told, to the British people’. “Licking Hitler” – the title is sickeningly ambiguous – was thus an examination not simply of a particular time, and a special segment of war-work, but of the gangrenous nature of deception [...] “Licking Hitler” cannot be safely locked away in its period’ (Quoted in *Guardian*, 11 January, 1978). Reviewing ‘LH’ in the Thatcher era, Julian Petley made specific reference to Hare’s play’s contemporary resonance, noting how Fennel’s proposed formation of a “Rumour Committee” aimed at smearing “the little man” prefigured ‘a sinister and malign Security Service [and] the dissemination by a gutter press of calumnies against those least able to fight back’ (op.cit.).

Some critics perceived connections between the three ‘secret war’ *PFTs*. Philip Purser discerned that Hare and McEwan were both drawn to ‘the confined, dramatic possibilities of backroom warfare’ (op.cit.); Michael Church situated ‘TIG’ in the context of ‘Licking Hitler’ and Peter Ransley’s highly-regarded recent *PFT* ‘Kate The Good Neighbour’ (1980) as ‘new and profound’ dramas based upon ignored aspects of the Second World War’s social history

(op.cit.). While Richard Johnstone (1985) grouped Hare and McEwan's *PFTs* with Trevor Griffiths's 'Country', John Wyver discussed all four as a 'distinguished cycle [presenting the] dark face of the war' (op.cit.); as echoed later by Robert Murphy, who perceived these *PFTs* as viewing the War in 'dark, conspirational terms', adopting contemporary feminist concerns (2000: 7).

Rare exceptions to the pervasive praise were Hazel Holt who perceived a 'coldness of spirit and aridity of emotion' in 'LH', finding Archie McLean 'totally charmless and unsympathetic' and Anna unbelievable, though approving of how MoI boss John Fennel was 'a suitably Brendan Brackenish figure' (*The Stage and Television Today*, 19 January 1978). Mervyn Jones saw 'TIG' as too much of a compromise between Ian McEwan's unique prose style and 'the *Play for Today* formula, which makes one play after another look like the product of a reductive computer'. Jones was alone in arguing that Cathy became 'a bore' (*Listener*, 1 May 1980).

Both audiences and BBC bosses elided the core gender theme. When BBC management met to discuss 'Licking Hitler', Head of Drama Shaun Sutton praised 'a good play. Very well done'; BBC1 Controller Bill Cotton 'was glad it had had good reviews', while David Rose highlighted Hare's dual writer-director role.²⁴ 'The Imitation Game' was also not seen as a film but as 'A marvellous play [which] was praised by all who had seen it'.²⁵ Head of Plays Keith Williams agreed with Head of Series and Serial Drama Graeme McDonald about 'a splendid central performance' by Harriet Walter and 'remarkably distinguished direction from Richard Eyre'.²⁶ 'Rainy Day Women' saw more of a mixed, though still positive reception from the BBC elite. Roger Laughton, Peter Goodchild and Jack Henderson rated it highly, the latter describing it as 'remarkable'; though Laughton thought it was 'a shade melodramatic'.²⁷ However, Pebble Mill's Head of Drama Robin Midgley and BBC1 Controller Alan Hart thought it overly complex and that its first half-hour should have been simpler.²⁸

These *Plays for Today* were garlanded with industry acclaim: in March 1979, ‘Licking Hitler’ won a BAFTA for the ‘Best Single Play’ of 1978, though lost out for the Broadcasting Press Guild’s equivalent award to Jim Allen’s contemporary-set *PFT* ‘The Spongers’ (*The Stage and Television Today*, 15 March 1979; *The Stage and Television Today*, 29 March 1979). Kate Nelligan’s performance as Anna won a Commendation at the Royal Television Society Awards. While it was overlooked in the BAFTAs – as was Harriet Walter as ‘Best Actress’, unbelievably – ‘The Imitation Game’ was nominated by the Broadcasting Press Guild for its ‘Best Single Play’ Award, losing to Stephen Poliakoff’s ‘Caught on a Train’ (*Broadcast*, 16 March 1981). While ‘Rainy Day Women’ was overlooked domestically, it won a Bronze Award at the New York International Film and TV Festival (BBC 1985: 11). From 1979 to 1993, ‘LH’ and ‘TIG’ were each repeated twice on British television, while ‘RDW’ was reshowed once in 1990; only ‘TIG’ has been commercially available since its DVD release by Simply Media in October 2018.

Conclusion

‘Licking Hitler’, ‘The Imitation Game’ and ‘Rainy Day Women’ were direct responses to the new writing on the secret war that began to appear from the mid-1960s. In each case, the dramatists made it clear that inspiration was drawn from publications such as Delmer’s *Black Boomerang* and Cave Brown’s *Bodyguard of Lies*, which offered original insights into a previously closed-off world. Similarly, the playwrights drew on the critical perspectives embodied in Calder’s influential *The People’s War*, and in 1985 the drama historian Richard Johnstone commented on the book’s ‘influence on some of the best of recent television drama’ (189). Calder had argued that despite the challenges and idealism thrown up by the war, ‘the forces of wealth, bureaucracy and privilege survived with little inconvenience, recovered from their shock, and began to proceed with their old business of manoeuvre, concession, and studied

betrayal' (1969: 18). 'What caught these writers' imaginations, and seemed to strike them as true', Johnstone argues,

was the paradox that Calder deliberately emphasises in everything he has to say about the War: that a national experience which seemed, despite the suffering, to offer new beginnings, new roles, which seemed to point the way to an exciting and fulfilling future, was in fact a dead end. Far from ushering in the millennium, the War actually consolidated everything that had gone before. (1985: 190)

The governing class remained in power, and the governors were men. Johnstone sees the gender issue as 'embedded' in Calder's *The People's War*: a point forcefully adopted by the three *PFTs* in which women remain in 'secondary roles', or are disappointed (Anna), imprisoned (Cathy) or killed (Alice Durkow and the land girls). In effect, women's war contributions are reduced to 'silent helper' and, as most forcefully apparent in McEwan's 'The Imitation Game', women are 'kept resolutely away from the centre' (1985: 190). Female sexuality as a threat to male superiority or even adequacy is also foregrounded in the dramas, each of the *PFTs* harshly punishing its women for what male characters perceive as unsettling and unacceptable displays of desire: in Turner's revenge on Cathy for his own sexual inadequacy in 'The Imitation Game'; in Archie's false complaints against Anna which result in her dismissal in 'Licking Hitler'; and in the Home Guard's savage and murderous attack on the women who have 'invaded' their preserve in 'Rainy Day Women'. For each of the dramatists, as Richard Johnstone once observed, in this war 'it is the woman who seems to be the real enemy, the real threat' (1985: 195).

Many of the writers for *PFT* had been inspired by the promises of renewal and reform inherent in the Labour Government in 1945, and this greatly affected their work in the theatre and on television. The complex Attlee legacy was dissected in the *PFTs* 'All Good Men' (1974, w. Trevor Griffiths), 'Brassneck' (1975, w. David Hare and Howard Brenton), 'Destiny' (1978,

w. David Edgar) and ‘Country’ (1981, w. Trevor Griffiths). Recently, Hare has confirmed that ‘Licking Hitler’ was an attempt ‘to diagnose what had happened in the Second World War and why we were telling ourselves lies’. He reviles the return of the ‘myth’ in recent times, evident in the ugly nationalist discourses and abundant lying around Brexit, the slavish flag-waving and mindless cheering during the seventy-fifth anniversary of V.E. Day in 2020, and even in some of the rhetoric around the Covid-19 crisis, with calls for wartime stoicism in face of adversity and privation, and, dare we add, the idolatry of centenarian servicemen and wartime icons offered up as models of behaviour (Captain Tom Moore and Vera Lynn). In response to the airing of a recent documentary on the Second World War, the television critic at *The Times* mulled over the fact that, ‘If we have not moved on from the war, it is because we refuse to properly stare at it’ (27 February 2021).

Four decades ago, three dramatists invited the audience to do exactly that; revealing that the British were every bit as good at lying as the Germans, that women were thought incapable of keeping a secret and were consequently kept well away from wartime secrets, and that the authorities were capable of bottling up unpleasant and uncomfortable facts about wartime morale and behaviour. It is time once again to remind ourselves of the need to counter the dominant myths of the Second World War and to re-appraise a tradition in British television drama which did not shirk from confronting those myths.

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¹ The phrase is David Pirie's (2019), author of 'Rainy Day Women'.

² Asa Briggs explains how at ABC and the BBC, Newman was drawn to English writers, 'most of them, in the language of the time, more interested in the kitchen sink than in 'tea and crumpets''. He encouraged producers to appeal to multiple audiences, sending them a printed card to hang in their offices, bearing the words 'Look back not in anger, nor forward in fear, but around with awareness'. (1995: 395-7)

³ There is a vast literature on secrecy, security, intelligence and the British state. Interested readers could start by looking at Pincher (1981), Wright (1987), Porter (1989), Gill (1994), Thurlow (1994), Hennessy (2002) and Moran (2013) for a cross-section of academic, journalistic and insider accounts of state secrecy, security and intelligence in Britain. Attention could also be given to *Lobster* magazine, published since 1983, and devoted to exposure of intelligence secrets and conspiracies, but it should be treated with due care, see <https://www.lobster-magazine.co.uk/>. The very abundance of the literature indicates the widespread concern over the nature, extent and validity over governmental secrecy and its practice in the UK.

⁴ In a wider sense, the authorities were protecting the anonymity of the secret services, which were never acknowledged, as well as the Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ), which officially did not exist, and which sticky questions about wartime code-breaking might compromise. The keepers of secrets had slipped up previously with Ewan Montagu's *The Man Who Never Was* (1953), an account of a stunning wartime deception, and with *Cloak without Dagger* (1955), the memoir of Sir Percy Sillitoe, former head of MI5, and were determined to stop further disclosures.

⁵ Stuart Hall (1979: 15) coined the phrase 'authoritarian populism' to describe Thatcher's tabloid press-abetted anti-trade union and pro-law and order discourses. Following Thatcher's landslide victory in the 1983 general election, Conor Cruise O'Brien (1983: 7) described Thatcher's politics as 'QUALP': 'Quasi-regal, authoritarian laissez-faire populism'. Thatcher fulfilled David Harvey's second definition of neoliberalism in advancing 'a political project to re-establish the conditions for capital accumulation and to restore the power of economic elites' (2005: 19).

⁶ The extensive and complex matter of collective memory and the Second World War from the vantage point of the new Millennium is gone over in Eley (2001). See also, Smith (2000).

⁷ Philby's story informed Dennis Potter's *Play for Today*, 'Traitor' (1971), featuring John Le Mesurier as the Philby-like Adrian Harris.

⁸ Blunt was outed in Andrew Boyle's study of the Cambridge spy ring *The Climate of Treason* (1979). Television intrigued by such revelations, put together the drama series *Philby, Burgess and Maclean* (ITV, 1977) and *The Atom Spies* (ITV, 1979), and although Euston Films bought the rights to *The Climate of Treason*, the production never materialised (Burton 2018: 272-277, 281).

⁹ Hare has also claimed that in preparing the play he interviewed as many of the original black propaganda teams as he could find (1984: 14).

¹⁰ In reality, GS1 operated until October 1943, when it was brought to an abrupt end in the manner correctly shown in the drama.

¹¹ Notably, David Edgar's 'Destiny' (31 January 1978) which went out in the same month in *PFT*'s series 8, was mainly shot on video-tape in the studio: an aesthetic which produced over 33 minutes of material used in the final cut per day, whereas on 'Licking Hitler', each of the 15 days of production produced an average of 4 minutes per day. This reflects Hare's painstaking, auteur-like perfectionism, in contrast to the more economical studio craft.

¹² McEwan and Eyre's fathers served in the armed forces during the Second World War; the writer and director also had in common an interest in Bletchley Park and both had read Virginia Woolf's influential book-length feminist essay *Three Guineas* (1938) which focused on women's need for economic independence from men (Eyre 2021).

¹³ The title 'The Imitation Game' derives from Turing's famous 1950 article for philosophy journal *Mind* on artificial intelligence.

¹⁴ Mass-Observation revealed that by 1945, most ATS women felt a shared grievance about being paid two-thirds of what male British soldiers earned (Calder and Sheridan, 1984: 184-186).

¹⁵ Expressing *PFT*'s contemporaneity, Patricia Routledge performs her lines as the ATS Officer with an officious moralistic voice that bears uncanny resemblance to Margaret Thatcher.

¹⁶ Like 'The Imitation Game', but unlike 'Licking Hitler', 'RDW' was made by BBC London.

¹⁷ Boym defines this as a cultural reconstruction of the past to 'return home' to national myths, thus achieving a conservative restoration in the present.

¹⁸ In his mystery novels Pirie drew extensively on the gothic; in his non-fiction writing he investigated the gothic horror of British cinema and, more widely, vampire cinema.

¹⁹ BBC Television Weekly Programme Review minutes, 11 April 1984. BBC WAC, micro-film.

²⁰ In the end-credits, McEwan's research is indicated: ex-Wren Helen Rance is thanked, alongside historians Angus Calder, Peter Calvocoressi and *The Secret War* director Fisher Dilke. By coincidence, the first memoir of a female Y-Service operative was published the year of the broadcast, Aileen Clayton's *The Enemy is Listening*.

²¹ Eleven newspapers (*Daily Express*, *Daily Mail*, *Daily Mirror*, *Daily Telegraph*, *Sunday Telegraph*, *Financial Times*, *Guardian*, *Observer*, *Jewish Chronicle*, *Times*, *Sunday Times*) and nine magazines (*Broadcast*, *Gay News*, *Listener*, *New Society*, *New Statesman*, *Spare Rib*, *Spectator*, *The Stage and Television Today*, *Times Literary Supplement*) were consulted.

²² BBC Audience Research Department (1978).

²³ BBC Audience Research Department (1980).

²⁴ BBC Television Weekly Programme Review minutes, 11 January 1978. BBC WAC, micro-film.

²⁵ BBC Television Weekly Programme Review minutes, 30 April 1980. BBC WAC, micro-film.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ BBC Television Weekly Programme Review minutes, 11 April 1984. BBC WAC, micro-film.

²⁸ *Ibid.*