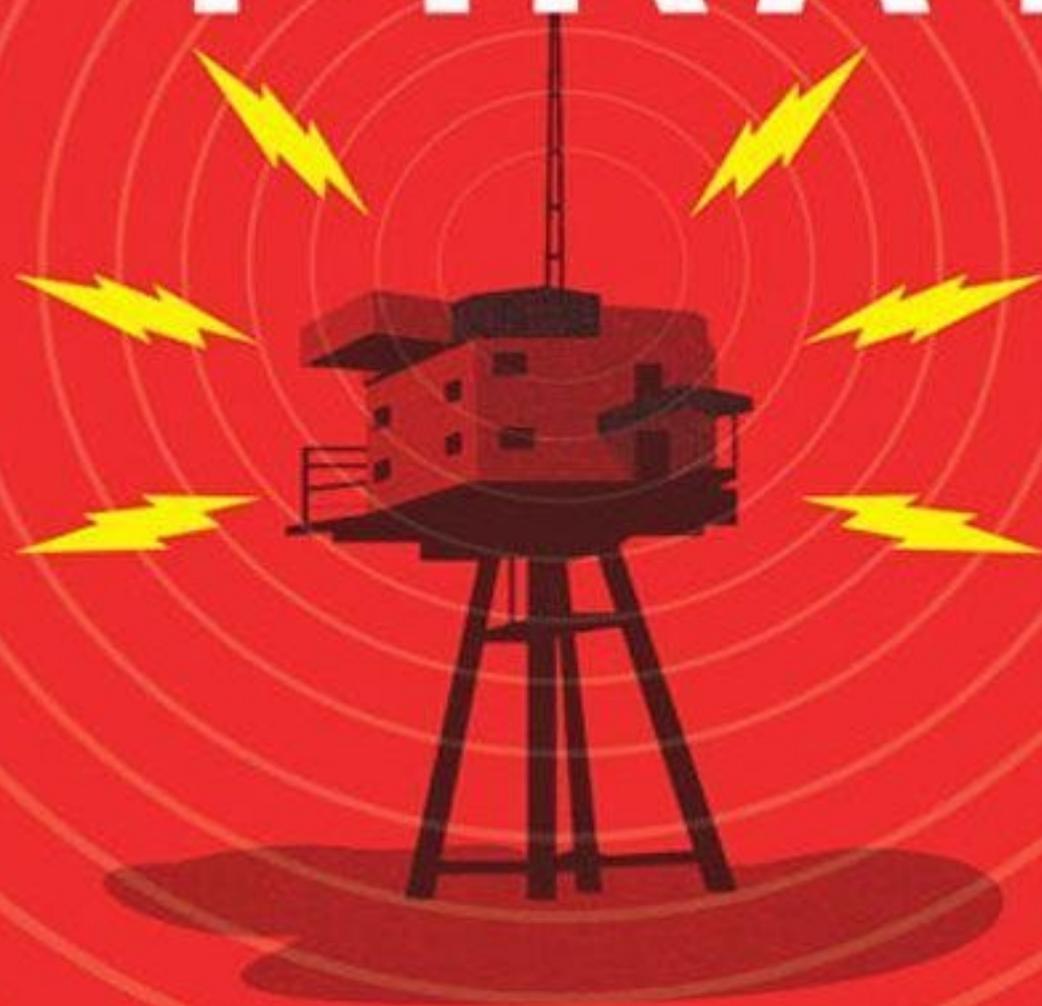


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DEATH OF A PIRATE



BRITISH RADIO AND THE MAKING

OF THE INFORMATION AGE

ADRIAN JOHNS

DEATH OF A PIRATE

ALSO BY ADRIAN JOHNS

Piracy: The Intellectual Property Wars from Gutenberg to Gates

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DEATH OF A PIRATE

BRITISH RADIO AND THE MAKING OF THE INFORMATION AGE

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TO ELIZABETH

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DEATH OF A PIRATE

PROLOGUE

JUNE 21, 1966

The Ford Zodiac edged cautiously down the lane. High hedges loomed to the left, and overhanging branches brushed the roof. It felt barely wide enough for the big car to pass. On the right, a row of old cottages. At the last of them the Zodiac coasted quietly to a halt, nestling into a parking space to the side of the road.

A man got out from the passenger side. He felt the cool, still air of a midsummer's night in the country—a pleasant change from the clamor and grime of London. It had rained earlier, but now the sky was clear and the pale walls of the seventeenth-century thatched cottage in front of him shone faintly by the light of the crescent moon. Nobody was about at this late hour. The only sound was of voices, softly audible from within the cottage itself.

He looked at his watch. Almost eleven o'clock: they had made good time. Even after stopping to get directions—they had been lucky enough to find a furtively courting couple at the pub who knew the village well and could point them to the exact house—it had still taken less than two hours. As the low rumble of a man's voice reached them from an open window, the passenger stopped. He listened, then started forward.

"Smedley's here," he whispered. "I recognize his voice."

As he strode toward the cottage, Reginald Calvert glanced back and beckoned the driver to come with him. Calvert was a well-built thirty-eight-year-old northerner, open-mannered and energetic, but at this moment he felt agitated and distracted. He had dressed warmly for the season, in an attempt to mitigate the lingering side effects of a smallpox vaccination. A brown tweed coat covered his blue three-piece suit, and he had even pulled on fleece gloves as he rushed from his flat in the capital earlier that evening. But his mission was urgent and brooked no delay. So he had come anyway, accompanied by an acquaintance named Alan Arnold. The men did not know each other well, but Arnold too had an interest in their task tonight. And Calvert, whose eyesight was weakened by cataracts, had wanted him to drive.

The two had left Arnold's home at about nine, taking Calvert's sedan rather than Arnold's E-Type. The Ford was slower, but it was one of the few private vehicles in Britain at that time to carry a radio-telephone, and Calvert needed to keep in touch as they drove to the village. They had chatted as they drove about what the outcome of their journey might be. Heading into the tiny Essex village of Wendens Ambo—at first they missed the house and had to turn around—Arnold saw no reason to doubt that it

would be good.

Inside the cottage, Oliver Smedley had risen to get himself a drink. In his mid-fifties, Smedley moved with military bearing and an assured air bespeaking a man of conviction. He was still wearing the gray suit and tie that he had put on in the morning to go to his office in London. From the living room where he had spent the last few hours talking on the telephone, he strode through the hall to the dining room. These rooms, all small and low, stood in a line along the front of the cottage, facing out onto the lane. The living room was the largest, with a sofa, an armchair, and a gas fire standing in the old fireplace. But three adults would fill the room. To the rear, through doors that led out from both the dining and living rooms, was a conservatory running the length of the three rooms. As Smedley began to pour, he continued to chat about the events of the day with his twenty-three-year-old housekeeper, assistant, and occasional mistress, Pamela Thorburn. His voice drifted out through an open window.

The knock that answered it surprised them both. It was not aggressive, but firm and resolute. Then it came again.

Calvert had not waited for the radio engineer to catch him up, but had marched straight up to the cottage door and knocked, as if suddenly resolved on something. Now he waited for someone to answer, Arnold standing slightly behind him. A moment later the door began to open. Behind it stood Thorburn.

For what happened next we are reliant on the testimony of Thorburn herself, corroborated at points by Arnold.¹ As they described it, she looked blankly at the newcomer for an instant, then seemed to start as she realized who he must be. She made a movement to shut the door. But Calvert preempted her. He pressed forward with startling speed. Suddenly he was flushed, furious—"demented," Arnold would later say. He threw open the door and barged in, colliding with the astonished Thorburn. She fell back a little, but recovered her footing and tried to push the intruder back. It was too late. He was stronger and heavier, and had the benefit of surprise. Calvert made it into the hall. She found herself struggling with him, pushing at him and scratching his face. A cut opened above his good eye.

"Where's Smedley?" He grabbed her arm. "I'm going to take him to the police."

She tried to free herself. "Be sensible," she stalled: "go and bring a policeman here."

Arnold, shocked by what was happening, moved into the cottage behind Calvert. "You look upstairs," Calvert ordered. Arnold went to obey. As Calvert looked up after him, Thorburn saw her chance. She broke away, ducked under his arm, and lunged for the telephone that sat on a table in the living room. She got as far as dialing 9 before Calvert saw what she meant to do. He grabbed at the telephone cord and yanked it out of the wall. Thorburn fell back, staggering into the bathroom and colliding with the wall. As she got to her feet, she felt the phone handset hit her on the shoulder. They scuffled, knocking over the table and an electric heater. The lamp fell to the floor. Thorburn called out for help to Arnold, who had reappeared empty-handed. But he was rooted to the spot in apparent horror. The shouting got louder. "Where is that bastard Smedley?" Thorburn later recalled him saying. "I'm a desperate man—don't you know what he's done to me?"

At that moment Calvert spotted what he thought must have been his quarry's escape route. The French window into the conservatory was standing open. He thrust

Thorburn aside, dropped the phone, and sprang forward into the dining room, heading for the open door. "He's gone this way," he told Arnold. It took Thorburn a moment to grasp what was happening. Then she followed and pulled on his shoulder to hold him back.

"He isn't there," she cried. "And why don't you get the police if you want them to have him?"

Calvert stopped, and for a moment they confronted each other in the hallway. As though struck by the thought that Smedley was indeed not there, Calvert suddenly reached for a statuette of Napoleon, one of several in the room. Thorburn froze as he hefted the ornament. "If I can't get him," he announced, "I'm going to take you. Are you coming willingly?"

Thorburn backed away. "This is ridiculous," she retorted. "Of course I'm not." She was still determined above all to prevent Calvert going into the dining room.

"All right," Calvert started to say, "if that's the way you want it..." But suddenly something else caught his attention. Calvert's eyes darted to a spot behind her where the door to the conservatory stood open. A triumphant note entered his voice. "There's the bugger!" He pushed Thorburn aside. She fell against the dining room door. Tossing away the bust, Calvert leaped forward, toward his real quarry.

SMEDLEY HAD BEEN lucky. He was in the dining room when Calvert first knocked at the cottage door. As Calvert pressed forward into the hall he had moved and looked to the right, which meant that Smedley was behind him. The struggle with Thorburn then took the two of them into the lounge, giving Smedley a precious moment to duck out unnoticed into the conservatory. Almost instinctively, he did so. Collecting his wits, he turned to his right, moved quickly down the passage, and went through another door. It led directly into his bedroom. There he reached up, pulled down a gun case from the top of the cupboard, and silently opened it. Inside was a double-barreled twelve-bore shotgun. Smedley loaded cartridges into both barrels. With no time to pause, he hefted the gun under his right arm and stood up.

Rather than go straight back into the house, Smedley went out into the garden. He headed for the neighboring cottage that stood to one side of the lawn, looking for a way to call the police. Even before he reached it, a man emerged. It was another stranger. But Neil Warden was no threat. A friend of the housewife who lived there, Evelyn Pithers, he had been visiting to check on her well-being at the request of her husband, who was away on business. He was just taking his leave when Smedley accosted him. There was no time for introductions. "Ring the police," he ordered, already turning back toward his own house. "I have big trouble."

The sounds of Thorburn struggling with Calvert rose up again as Smedley crept back into the conservatory. He released the safety catch and headed slightly to his right as he reentered the house. There, at the entrance to the dining room, he turned. He saw Calvert for the first time.

And Calvert saw him.

ARNOLD HAD ROUSED himself from the state of horror that at first held him transfixed. He ran out of the front door of the cottage, intent on finding help and somehow stopping the chaos. A few yards into the lane, and the tranquillity of the rural night enveloped him once again. He slowed to a halt, his eyes adjusting to the gloom. Arnold stood still in the middle of the lane, panting slightly and wondering what to do. Already the survivor of two heart attacks, the idea of violent confrontation appalled and terrified him. He felt helpless, indecisive, and confused.

At that moment a sharp, harsh *Bang* cut through the silence. There was no mistaking it. A gunshot.

Snatched back to the moment, Arnold spun round and made for the house once more. The front door had swung shut again. He pushed it open. As he entered, Calvert staggered across the doorway. Arnold had a brief glimpse of a ragged, red-lined hole in his chest. Then Calvert half-turned, pitched forward, and fell to the floor face-first.

There was a sudden, eerie calm—a moment of stasis after the furor. The silence was weighty after the brutal sound of the shot.

It took Thorburn a second or two to see Smedley, take in the gun, and realize that Calvert had been shot. She bent down and checked him. He was alive but unconscious, his eyes half-closed and his breathing shallow and rough. Bubbles of blood had already appeared about his mouth. His skin had taken on a blanched tone, and the rattle of each breath filled Arnold with dread. Thorburn rose and went for a cushion. Gently raising him, she placed it under his head. Then she laid a coverlet over his chest.

Arnold too was astonished and horrified. He stared at Smedley and their eyes met. “My God,” he said. “This is murder.”

Smedley made a movement. Fearing that he was about to turn the gun on him, Arnold retreated. He ran out again to the street, desperate now to find help. He went first toward the car, then turned, trying to collect his wits. Then he walked to the house next to Smedley’s, where he found a door open. Inside were Warden and Evelyn Pithers. They were already terrified after their previous exchange with Smedley. Warden was talking into a telephone.

“Get help,” Arnold told him. “A man’s been shot.”

“I’m on to the police now,” the man replied.

“For God’s sake,” Arnold pressed, “get help quickly—a man is bleeding to death.”

Smedley now appeared at the door, and Arnold retreated again. The engineer ran back to the cottage. Calvert was still prostrate on the floor, unconscious. Arnold breathed out as Smedley reappeared. He was still carrying the gun.

“I need a drink,” Arnold declared. Thorburn stepped past the prone man and poured a whisky. He downed it, and then a second.

While Thorburn continued to check Calvert’s fading pulse, Arnold drifted agitatedly between the prone man and the street outside, desperate to see the lights that would signal the approach of help. It seemed to take a long time. But in fact the ambulance took only a few minutes to get to the cottage. It drew up at 11:18 pm, two men jumping out and marching past Arnold into the hall. The first medic knelt and removed one of Calvert’s gloves to check for a pulse. He looked up at Smedley, who was still clutching the shotgun. “What’s happened here?” he asked.

“I’ve shot him,” Smedley said flatly. “Is he dead?”

“Yes. I’ll wait for the police; you go and call a doctor.”

In fact, a doctor was already on his way. As soon as he had called the police and ambulance, Warden had phoned the local GP out of concern for Pithers. The physician turned up at eleven thirty. At almost the same moment the local constable, Christopher Kearney, arrived, followed shortly after by Robert George, a sergeant from the nearest sizable town, Saffron Walden. The doctor confirmed that Calvert was dead. Just after midnight, they were joined by Detective Constable Frank Mann from more distant Harlow, a dreary New Town on the outskirts of London. And two hours later Detective Superintendent George Brown arrived from the opposite direction, having driven from the county town of Chelmsford, thirty miles away. Brown took charge. The long, painstaking, and intimately modern process of bureaucratizing violent death began.

Mann handled the physical evidence. He also took photographs. Early the following morning he would gather clothing and artifacts from Calvert’s body at the mortuary, along with physiological specimens, and take them all to Scotland Yard. Twice more in the next week he would return to take more photographs, to draw the ground plan that is reproduced on page 2 of the photograph insert. Only on one of those later visits would the police think to look in the car. When they did, along with a packet of butterscotch and an unopened bottle of cider, they found a package. In it was a draft for a business partnership—some kind of entertainment venture called “UK Good Music.”

Brown, meanwhile, paced slowly and carefully through the ground floor, noting damage to the furniture and minutely observing the positions of objects dislodged in the fight. The detective read both with an expert eye. A broken bust told him how it had been thrown—its force, velocity, and trajectory. An overturned lamp betrayed the course of a struggle. A scraped wall spoke of a woman falling back before an assailant. Brown reconstructed from angles, patterns, and shards the clumsy history of a fracas.

Three hours later, tired but resolute, Brown attended the postmortem. Calvert had died from lacerations to his lung and liver, caused by a gunshot wound sustained at close range. He noticed only one unusual thing: a strange device that Calvert had been carrying in his pocket. It was the size and shape of a fountain pen, but it could never have been used for writing. Instead of ink it contained a small canister of gas.

Before he could go to bed the detective had one more duty to perform. Brown drove to Saffron Walden police station and charged Oliver Smedley with murder.

SMEDLEY HAD BEEN taken to the station by PC Kearney at 2 am. Before that, he had sat quietly and to all appearances rather desolately in the living room of his cottage, feet from Calvert’s body, as the police worked. It was Kearney who asked him what had happened.

“I shot him,” Smedley repeated.

“And you?” Kearney turned to Arnold. “Do you live here?”

“No,” Arnold replied. He gestured toward the body. “I came with him.”

“What happened?”

“I don’t know.” Arnold shrugged. “We came to the house and this man went mad and shot him.”

Leaving Arnold aside, PC Kearney sat Smedley down in the dining room and started again, trying to coax more from him. Shock was beginning to set in. Smedley, who had had the presence of mind to put the gun down carefully in a corner and to warn that it was still loaded, was suddenly looking shaken. But Kearney had Pamela Thorburn sit down at Smedley's side, and soon he began to respond. As the initial horror of the shooting receded, the words flowed more freely. Scraps and hints began to cohere. Sergeant George recited the standard caution and let him continue. As he did, Smedley would get up and pace the room, only to sit down and put his head in his hands at the memory. "Any rational man would now be quiet and say no more," he remarked. But he went on.

At first, Smedley's words focused on the events of the night. He had realized it was Calvert as soon as he heard the door open, Smedley said. He knew too, he added, that this was a man capable of violence. "I knew he came here to kill me: I had a message yesterday to say things were getting dangerous." Smedley told how he had crept into his bedroom, fetched the gun, and returned just in time to see Calvert apparently about to hit Thorburn over the head with the bust. When he saw Calvert make to lunge at him, he had fired instinctively, not thinking to warn or wound. "What a terrible tragedy," he added, glancing at the body in the hall. Calvert had a wife and two daughters. "But I feel I was doing right in what I did. He came here to get me.... He did not come 40 miles just to have tea." He was already recovering confidence in his actions. "I feel morally right and I am not worried because he was a very violent man."

But there soon began to emerge—at first haltingly, in fragments, then in more extended measures—another story altogether. It began, apparently, some time earlier, days before the knock on his cottage door.

"This is the outcome of something that happened in the week" Smedley explained—"a joke which turned sour." He turned to Kearney. "You see, we had an expedition the other day.

"It was to do with pirate radio stations."

WHEN DAWN BROKE the next day, the tale that Smedley had begun to tell was already on its way to becoming a national sensation. Radio news reports opened with the revelation. The tabloid press too pounced on the opportunity. The nation's economic woes and political feuds were suddenly relegated to the margins. Within forty-eight hours, lurid stories of kidnappings, conspiracies, and threats were filling the front pages. At the peak of a pirate radio boom, one of the country's foremost pirates had been killed.

The enterprise of pirate radio was a signature phenomenon of the sixties in Britain. Offshore commercial broadcasters—immediately and lastingly dubbed "pirates"—had proliferated since the start of the decade, challenging a formal monopoly that the British Broadcasting Corporation had enjoyed ever since the 1920s. Dedicated to the latest pop music at a time when the BBC was tightly constrained in its ability to broadcast records, pirate radio became massively popular at all levels of society. It seemed set to flourish. It was already shaping a new generation's musical

taste, favoring the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, the Who, and the latest American soul. But the enterprise was an unstable one, vulnerable to any North Sea storm or high court decision. After long delays, Europe's governments were converging upon measures that threatened its future. Some of the pirates, at least, were bound to fail. By mid-1966, a scramble to survive was in the offing. The jockeying for position had already begun. Everyone was waiting to see who would win and who would lose. Fleet Street capitalized to the maximum on this anxiety.

By the time Smedley faced the magistrates at Saffron Walden a month later, a fairly consistent tale had emerged out of the welter of scandalized rumors. It focused not on Smedley himself but on the man he had shot. Reginald Calvert appeared to have been a desperate man whose recklessness had led to his own death. The legal proceedings followed the same line, giving this account weight and authority. It was soon accepted as true. And it had immediate consequences. For if this was what pirate radio entrepreneurs were like, then the country had to act to end their operations. Sure enough, after years of inaction the Cabinet in Westminster suddenly announced decisive action to silence the pirate stations. The death of Reginald Calvert was set to catalyze the biggest changes to British radio since its inauguration forty years earlier.

To this day, sound broadcasting in the United Kingdom retains the imprint of the transformation it underwent at that time. What had been a continuous historical trajectory was brought to a halt, and a fundamental change imposed. The direction that broadcasting would follow in the aftermath would be markedly different, affecting popular culture itself—not only in Britain but well beyond. Our musical sensibilities, our practices of listening, and our moral assumptions about creativity all bear the imprint of that moment in 1966.

The story of desperation that emerged in mid-1966 proved resilient. Yet it remains only one version of the events of that midsummer night. It left much about the incident itself unclear. More important, it entirely obscured the historical currents that gave rise to the tragedy and would help explain it. Those currents—the real causes, perhaps, of Reginald Calvert's death—were as far-reaching as its consequences. They extended back to the invention of broadcasting itself in the 1920s, and they included the most important processes in twentieth-century political and social history. Much of *Death of a Pirate* is devoted to revealing those deeper currents.

In one sense, then, this book is about the significance of a moment. It tells a story of how ideology, pop music, and demimonde entrepreneurship led to tragedy, and through that tragedy to the transformation of a medium. We shall see that not everything that was reported about that incident should be accepted at face value—and that includes some of the evidence on which the story told in the previous few pages rests. The image of a desperate and violent man intruding into a country cottage was powerful and compelling at the time, and it remains so today. But perhaps all was not quite what it seemed.

In addressing this moment, the book is also about a process. To discover that process, it ventures farther afield as well as further back: as far afield as Normandy, Berlin, Geneva, and Chicago. Decisions made and practices forged in these places created the possibility of pirate radio. For some, they made such radio not merely a money-making enterprise but an urgent moral imperative. As they coalesced, so pirate media came to challenge a well-entrenched, centralized public service, and to do so in

the name of popular freedom.

That challenge has its own parallels today. Our networked society faces its own hordes of pirates, proclaiming once again virtues of liberty, freedom of speech, and engaged citizenship. None of us can escape engagement with those issues, whether or not we direct our browsers to Rapidshare or The Pirate Bay. Reflecting on the death of a pirate—on what happened, why, and with what consequences—should help us come to terms with our own predicament. It will help us recognize not only its technological character but its historical formation. Attention must be paid.

A PIRATE PEOPLE

On Saturday, December 20, 1922, promptly at nine o'clock in the morning, a tall, impeccably dressed man with piercing eyes walked up to the doors of Magnet House, the headquarters of the General Electric Company (GEC) in the busy London thoroughfare of Kingsway. As it was not a working day the building was quiet, but an obliging attendant showed him up to the second floor. The office there was deserted and sparse—just a table, a telephone, and a pile of accumulated mail. But the newcomer tried to make himself at home as best he could. “The new company,” as the doorman called it, might not be expected until Monday, but its incoming general manager already had much to do. He had to create not just a new corporation, but a new kind of enterprise: one devoted to something called “broadcasting.”¹

John Reith was thirty-three. He hailed from Glasgow, the engineering heart of the empire, where his father had been a senior minister in the Free Church of Scotland. That combination of technical and moral conviction—steel, in both its senses—distinguished the son, too. Almost ten years younger than his six siblings, he emerged from an emotionally austere childhood to become an engineer and factory manager. During World War I he was wounded in the face by a German bullet. Being unfit to return to the front, he traveled to the United States, where he managed an arms factory in Philadelphia. Reith increased its production from fifty rifles daily to five hundred, even while introducing important technical improvements. He also found himself in demand as a public speaker for his exhortations to America to enter the conflict. But after 1918, with his return to Britain, he became frustrated at the task of reviving a declining engineering plant in Glasgow. He resigned his position to come down to London and enter politics.

There followed a period of irresolution while Reith sought a future for himself. But in his private diary he expressed undimmed confidence: “I believe there is some high work for me in the world,” he wrote, “but that it won’t come till I have reconciled myself absolutely to God’s way of working.” He at first seemed inclined toward Labour, telling one MP that the Old Testament virtues of his father’s church were the best foundations for political life. But by late 1922 he was seeking patronage from the Conservatives. It was during this quest that he chanced upon an advertisement in the *Morning Post* for positions in a concern so new that it did not yet even exist: a British Broadcasting Company. What it might amount to he was not sure, but he put in an application anyway, taking care to highlight the Scottish background that he shared with Sir William Noble, the GEC executive and ex-Post Office man who would be making the appointment. On December 13, Noble interviewed him, and the next morning gave him the job. As Reith later recalled, he still “hadn’t the remotest idea

what broadcasting was.”²

If Reith had little notion of what broadcasting might be, he was not alone. Radio was the technology of the hour. An extraordinary surge in public interest in the medium had taken place since the armistice. But using it to send out transmissions to all and sundry, who might be expected to have receiving sets in their homes and listen in as they wished, was a form of communication without any precedent in history. Many of the fundamentals—its technical character, its day-to-day practices, its norms, its regulation, and perhaps above all its economics—had yet to be determined. Amid much intense debate, the major companies in Britain’s radio industry had agreed over the previous summer to pool their patents and create a single consortium charged with this formative task. It was this syndicate that Reith was about to take control of.

Reith set about his responsibilities with the same conviction that he had shown in marshalling the Philadelphia rifle works. He had already interviewed staff (all four of them) before he arrived at GEC that Saturday morning, barely a week after being offered the position. And by then Reith had also made one of the most significant decisions he would take in shaping British broadcasting. Naturally, his company would “observe Sundays.” That meant it would restrict itself to a curtailed schedule on the sabbath of sober, even austere programming centered on religious services and music by such composers as Bach. This policy—so self-evident to Reith himself that adopting it scarcely amounted to making a decision at all—would be critical to both the development of a distinctive culture of public broadcasting and the possibility that rivals to it might prove popular. The “Reith Sunday,” as it would become known, isolated a moment of calm and reflection in the helter-skelter rush of modern life. Piracy would owe a lot to it.

WIRELESS BROADCASTING WAS unbounded and undirected. There was no obvious way to know who was receiving it, where, how, and to what effect; nor was there a way to prevent anyone in particular from doing so. A single program could reach an unknowable—but clearly large—audience simultaneously. The advent of this medium, with properties so unlike those of writing, print, the telegraph, or even the telephone, therefore posed radically new questions. And as the 1920s wore on, so these questions had to be tackled against a background of new uncertainty about what had once seemed political and economic fundamentals. The turmoil of the General Strike of 1927, followed by the Crash and the Depression, cast doubt on what had long been established verities about *laissez-faire* and free trade. The result was that as it took shape, broadcasting itself came to be seen as providing a model for a new kind of economic culture. Its institutions and practices, many thought, showed the path from social malaise to a bright national future. The first radio piracy arose in the midst of this ferment. It too seemed to have implications that extended far beyond broadcasting itself.

The phenomenon of piracy in general—the expropriation, in some manner, of intellectual goods—is much older than broadcasting. It was first spoken of in the mid-seventeenth century, as the upheavals of the English Civil War and Glorious Revolution were fomented by newspapers and the excesses of Grub Street. The term

caught on and became commonplace in the 1700s. At that point it spread to other fields of creative endeavor. During the Industrial Revolution there were pirates of music, of spectacles, and of medicines. Inventors and engineers habitually decried the hordes of pirates waiting to steal their devices. By the high point of British industrial supremacy in the Victorian era, piracy was an internationally recognized sin with a global impact. And so it would continue in the twentieth century.³ But radio was different, and radio piracy would be radically unlike anything that had gone before. So far, piracy had always been a matter of reproduction. Pirate printers replicated books; musical pirates reproduced notes on staves; pirate engineers appropriated machines. But the first radio pirates did not physically produce or replicate anything. They were pirate *listeners*.

The furor over pirate listening arose from the sheer popularity of wireless among the general public in the early 1920s. Across the UK, continental Europe, and the United States, countless amateur enthusiasts, many of whom had been introduced to radio while in military service, launched themselves into homemade projects to transmit and receive signals. Their magazines—*Wireless*, *Amateur Wireless*, *Modern Wireless*, *Popular Wireless Weekly*, and others—had hundreds of thousands of readers.⁴ The extraordinary phenomenon encouraged visionary proclamations for a future of social harmony and peaceful progress. Many pronounced that the ideal nature of science itself was finally set to become a reality.

One such was Oliver Lodge, a prominent pioneer of wireless science and a staunch advocate of the amateurs. Not coincidentally, Lodge was also a champion of spiritualism, and of ether theories of electromagnetic radiation. These theories invoked an all-pervading medium to account for the propagation of light and other forms of electromagnetic wave radiation, such as X-rays and radio waves. They had a long pedigree in the history of science, extending back at least to Newton. Although it is commonly thought that Einstein's special relativity rendered ether theories unviable, in practice they remained plausible to respected physicists and especially radio engineers well into the 1920s. And this mattered, because convictions about the ether correlated with those about popular research and creativity. For Lodge, and for the mass of amateurs whom he represented, the ether through which an announcer's voice reached citizens' homes was the physical concomitant to the ideal universality of science. A natural commons, it allowed an "interchange of discoveries between the nations," as "scientific discoverers throughout the world virtually pool their resources and communicate to each other their results." If secrecy was "alien to the spirit of science," then radio was science's natural vehicle as well as its most compelling subject. The conjunction of wireless and mass popular science, Lodge concluded, stood to bring to an end the whole long history of human error and conflict. Partly thanks to its cultivation in the British Empire, "the ether welds the worlds together into a cosmic system of law and order."⁵

Sentiments like Lodge's were by no means hard to find in the heady days of the early 1920s. Yet when it came to the nascent enterprise of broadcasting, they posed profound questions. And, given that powerful individuals and companies were already proposing to launch broadcasting ventures, those questions had to be answered urgently. Two problems loomed especially large for the constitution of this peculiar