

Light entertainment Child abuse and the British public¹

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On 23 May 1949, Lionel Gamlin, producer of the Light Programme's *Hello Children*, wrote to Enid Blyton to ask whether she would be willing to be interviewed about the best holiday she could remember. 'Dear Mr Gamlin,' Blyton wrote the next day. 'Thank you for your nice letter. It all sounds very interesting but I ought to warn you of something you obviously don't know, but which has been well known in the literary and publishing world for some time - I and my stories are completely banned by the BBC as far as children are concerned.'

From Room 432 at Broadcasting House, Gamlin later received a memo addressed to him by Derek McCulloch, the producer and presenter of *Children's Hour*. McCulloch was known to every child growing up between the mid-1930s and 1950 as 'Uncle Mac' and was as famous to them as anyone could be. The memo was marked 'Enid Blyton Stories' and, in red, 'strictly confidential and urgent'. 'I will be grateful,' McCulloch wrote, 'if you would first discuss with me should you be considering the inclusion of material by the above author. I am most anxious that no conflicts in policy shall get loose, not only to our embarrassment, but to yours also.' Gamlin was a company man and he clearly got the point.²

... Lionel Gamlin, born in Birkenhead in 1903, was a Cambridge graduate who came to broadcasting via acting, a profession he turned to in the mid-1930s after he got tired of being a schoolmaster. ... Along with the BBC's senior announcer, Leslie Mitchell, he became a voice of authority, the tone of war and peace, the man whom people heard in the cinema on the newsreels produced by British Movietone. Gamlin was a star. ... He had a gentle, pleasant manner on air, eventually presenting *In Town Tonight* and *Top of the Form*, and becoming a stalwart of light entertainment broadcasting in the 1950s. He once introduced a talk by George Bernard Shaw. 'Young man,' Shaw said, pointing to the microphone, 'this is a devilish contraption. You can't deceive it - so don't try.' Gamlin later said he remembered all his life the genial advice Shaw had given him. He didn't want to deceive anyone, yet sometimes deception is a way of seeming brave in your own eyes as you go about getting your way.

It was a time of Player's cigarettes and gin after hours at the pubs on Great Portland Street. Broadcasting House was a maze of stairwells, long corridors and unknown powers, a world within worlds that couldn't quite decide whether it was a branch of the civil service or a theatrical den. Many of the men who worked there were getting their own way in the national interest, and the best (or worst) of them combined the secrecy of Whitehall with the languor of Fitzrovia. ... Men such as Gamlin practically lived in Langham Place. ...

In the issue of *Lilliput* magazine for May 1943 Gamlin wrote an essay called 'Why I Hate Boys', which is signed 'A School-Master'. It was a developing theme, boys, children, whatever, and in 1946 Methuen published a book written by Gamlin and Anthony Gilbert called *Don't Be Afraid! A Short Guide to Youth Control*. ... Gamlin, in common with later youthquakers such as Jimmy Savile, never liked children, never had any, never wanted any, and on the whole couldn't bear them, except on occasion to fuck. And, again like Savile, Gamlin managed all this quite brilliantly, hiding in plain sight

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² Editor: The exchange of letters and memos can be seen at www.bbc.co.uk/archive/people/65/04.shtml

as a youth presenter full of good sport but who didn't really care for youth and all its pieties. This was in the days before 'victims' - days that our present media and their audiences find unimaginable - but it gives context and background to the idea of an eccentric presenter as a teasing anti-hero within the Corporation. Auntie was essentially being joshed by a child abuser posing as a child abuser. 'Before we examine the second stage of the malignant disease of Youth with a capital Y (sometimes conveniently glossed over by the mystic term "adolescence"),' Gamlin wrote in his book, 'it should be remembered that all Youth, like ancient Gaul, is divided into three parts: The Imponderable - The Improbable - The Impossible. No successful treatment is possible if this fundamental division is ignored, for although the three parts combine to make the unwholesome whole, they remain distinct (if revolting) entities, and treatment must vary accordingly.' In Savile's day, a decade on from Gamlin's prime, such avuncular kidding could gain you your own TV show plus charity-god status, an almost nationalised belief in your goodness and zaniness and readiness to help. ...

A friend of Gamlin's remembers going to see him in a flat in All Souls Place in the 1950s, just round the corner from Broadcasting House. A man from Light Entertainment used the flat during the working week and Gamlin often stayed there with young boys. It was clear to the friend that both men were renting the boys, and that the boys were young: 'They were boys with the kind of good looks that would seem very lewd in a woman.' ... 'Broadcasting House was well stocked with men interested in sleeping with young boys. It was a milieu back then. And people who sought to be sexual predators knew that. It wasn't spoken about.'

People who worked at the BBC then are reticent about the sexual habits of the time. They speak like survivors - many of the big names are dead, some for more than forty years - and have an understandable wish to resist the hysteria, the prurience, the general shrieking that surrounds discussions of sexual conduct, whether risky and deviant or not. When I spoke to David Attenborough he was amazed to hear that someone he knew might have been named by others as part of the scene surrounding Gamlin at All Souls Place. I don't hesitate to believe him: he clearly knew nothing about it. Others saw much more than he did and can put names to the people involved, but most of them wanted to tell their stories off the record. The BBC isn't the Catholic Church, but it has its own ideals and traditions, which cause people to pause before naming the unwise acts that have been performed on its premises. Perhaps more than any church, the BBC continues to be a powerhouse of virtue, of intelligence and tolerance, but it is now suffering a kind of ecclesiastical terror at its own fallibility. One has to look further into the institution to see another, more obscure tradition, the one that leads to Savile and his liberty-taking. There was always an element of it waiting to be picked up. Many people I spoke to wished to make that clear, but - feeling the Chorus watching from above - they asked for anonymity.

One presenter told me of being 'grabbed' in Broadcasting House by Malcolm Muggeridge, who spent most of his time in the 1960s railing against the permissive society, 'pot and pills'. The Muggeridge grope wasn't welcomed but it didn't seem totally irregular to the person on the receiving end. She could name at least one other person, a politician, who thought it was OK to put his hand up the skirts of young women at the BBC. It wasn't irregular. What was irregular was the idea of talking about it, even now. ...

Whatever else it has been in the past, paedophilia was always an institutional disorder, in the sense that it has thrived in covert worlds with powerful elites. Boarding schools and hospitals, yes, churches certainly, but also in our premier entertainment labyrinths. It is becoming clear that Gamlin and his friend at the flat in All Souls Place were not alone in what they were doing. There was at least a third person: Derek McCulloch, 'Uncle Mac', the man in charge of *Children's Hour*, and the voice of Larry the Lamb in *Toytown*. ... Though Gamlin's activities were under wraps until now, there have long been rumours about McCulloch. ... In his book *Strange Places, Questionable People*, published in 1998, John Simpson, the BBC's world affairs editor, writes about his early days there. In 1967, he was given the task of preparing the obituary of a famous children's presenter. He calls him 'Uncle Dick'. In 1998, and still today, Simpson felt he shouldn't name McCulloch directly: but it is now clear that

Uncle Dick is Uncle Mac. In preparing the obituary, Simpson rang 'Auntie Gladys', who had worked with him, to get a few quotes. 'Week after week,' Auntie Gladys told him, 'children from all over the country would win competitions to visit the BBC and meet Uncle Dick. He would welcome them, show them round, give them lunch, then take them to the gents and interfere with them. If their parents complained, she said, the director-general's office would write and say the nation wouldn't understand such an accusation against a much loved figure.' Auntie Gladys was Kathleen Garscadden, who worked for *Children's Hour* for a number of years and died in 1991. ... When Simpson reported her remarks to his boss, the man rounded on him and told him he was an 'ignorant, destructive young idiot'. The boss then rewrote Simpson's copy; McCulloch, the obituary now said, 'had a wonderful way with children'. The Corporation turned a blind eye to what was being said about McCulloch just as it later would with Savile and some of the others. Yet people knew. ...

One of the qualities that made the journey from radio to television was 'personality'. ... At the BBC these people became like gods. Even the weird ones. Even the ones whom everybody could tell were deranged. They had personality and that was the gold standard. Soon enough the notion of 'men being men' was extended, institutionally, into that's just 'Frankie being Frankie' or 'Jimmy being Jimmy'. We never asked whether a certain derangement was a crucial part of their talent.

And so you open Pandora's box to find the seedy ingredients of British populism. It's not just names, or performers and acts, it's an ethos. Why is British light entertainment so often based on the sexualisation of people too young to cope? And why is it that we have a press so keen to feed off it? Is it to cover the fact, via some kind of willed outrage, that the culture itself is largely paedophile in its commercial and entertainment excitements? Milly Dowler's phone was hacked by journalists cynically feeding the ravenous appetites of three million people who love that stuff, and that's just the ones who actually bought the *News of the World*. When Leveson's findings are duly buried, will we realise that it was the nation's populist appetites that were on trial all along?

We're not allowed to say it. Because we love our tots. Or, should I say: WE LOVE OUR TOTS? We know we do because the *Mirror* tells us we do, but would you please get out of the way because you're blocking my view of another 14-year-old crying her eyes out on *The X-Factor* as a bunch of adults shatter her dreams. Savile went to work in light entertainment and thrived there: of course he did, because those places were custom-built for men who wanted to dandle dreaming kids on their knees. ...

There's something creepy about British light entertainment and there always has been. ... Those of us who grew up on it liked its oddness without quite understanding how creepy it was. I mean, Benny Hill? And then we wake up one day, in 2012, and wonder why so many of them turned out to be deviants and weirdos. Our papers explode in outrage and we put on our *Crucible* expressions before setting off to the graveyard to take down the celebrity graves and break them up for landfill. Of course. Graffiti the plaques and take down the statues, because the joy of execration must match the original sin ...

The public made Jimmy Savile. It loved him. It knighted him. The Prince of Wales accorded him special rights and the authorities at Broadmoor gave him his own set of keys. A whole entertainment structure was built to house him and make him feel secure. That's no one's fault: entertainment, like literature, thrives on weirdos, and Savile entered a culture made not only to tolerate his oddness but to find it refreshing. ... 'This is the worst crisis I can remember in my nearly fifty years at the BBC,' John Simpson said on *Panorama*. 'It's off the scale of everybody's belief system,' said the DJ Paul Gambaccini.

But it is our belief system. And now it is part of the same system to blame Savile. He's dead, anyway. Let's blame him for all the things he obviously was, and blame him for a host of other things we don't understand, such as how we love freaks and how we select and protect people who are 'eccentric' in order to feed our need for disorder. We'll blame him for that too and say we never knew there would be any victims, when, in fact, we depend on there being victims. ... And no one said, not out loud: 'What's wrong with that man?' ... When Benny Hill's mother died, in 1976, he kept her

house in Southampton as a shrine, just as Savile kept his mother's clothes, and it might have been weird but it was also the kind of celebrity eccentricity we had come to expect.

Day by day ... details have emerged about the shelving of the *Newsnight* investigation into Savile. Girls from Duncroft children's home had given evidence: some of them were 14 when Savile began coercing them into giving him blow-jobs. They felt it would be 'an honour' to be in the company of someone so famous. ...The *Newsnight* programme was well sourced and strong, but it clashed - in the old-fashioned, scheduling sense - with two tributes to Savile the BBC had planned. The investigations will continue, but the bigger story is missing from all the discussions around Savile, the bigger story being the milieu that existed not only at the BBC but in the light entertainment firmament.

Gamlin's BBC friend from All Souls Place, where the underage boys used to come and visit, was responsible for some of the landmark comedy shows at the BBC. He was also part of the team that came up with the idea of *Top of the Pops* and launched it on New Year's Day 1964 with a presenter called Jimmy Savile. The birth of rock'n'roll had a complicated relationship with the coming of the permissive society. Asa Briggs (1985), in his history of the BBC, documents the struggle in which sexual freedoms and sexual norms were bent out of shape. ... Fame was a new kind of licence. And presenters at the BBC were suddenly even more famous than Gamlin had been. ...

After 1964, and perhaps not before it, familiarity bought you unlimited trust from the public. Suddenly, the greatest virtue of them all was fame - that was fame before celebrity, which brought other favours but also drawbacks. Savile was so famous it blotted out any of the other obvious things about him, and that is a deal we're still living with. 'These men, people like Jimmy Savile, were treated like rock stars,' Joan Bakewell said when I asked her about him. 'And sexually many of those men lived in a self-contained culture.'

'And Jimmy Savile?'

'Later, yes. Repellent, you know. He once tried to get me to go to his hotel room. But many of the young girls who did go I'm afraid went willingly.'

Bakewell says it's odd to see how the ethos now looks so horrible and so bent. 'You can't re-create the mood of an era,' she said. ...

Gilbert Harding, a refugee from the culture of the Light Programme ... seems to have differed from the other BBC paedophiles only inasmuch as he kept it mainly to himself. ... A writer who knew Harding told me he was another of those, like Gamlin, who liked to enter into correspondence with schoolboys. On one occasion the writer was taken from school to visit Harding for tea (the headmaster was dazzled), whereupon Harding insisted the boy take a bath and scrub himself with soap while the gameshow veteran sat watching him. 'Harding was a rather disturbed individual', the BBC presenter Nicholas Parsons told me. 'Nowadays a man with troubles of that sort would be in therapy.'

Child abuse is now a national obsession, but in 1963 it scarcely came up as a subject of public concern. That doesn't mean it was fine back then and we were all better off, but it allows one to see how much the public understanding of what isn't all right, or more or less all right, has changed. ... Light entertainment was a big, double-entendre-filled department, of interest to brilliant deviants. By 'deviants' I mean anybody who wasn't in a monogamous heterosexual marriage that produced children. And many in that position too were deviant in 1963, when it was unclear where sexual power began and ended. ... I once asked John Peel, the late Radio 1 DJ, about the tendency in his youth for people (including him) not to be fussed about how young their girlfriends were. (Peel was briefly married to someone in America who was 15 and he made the point that one just couldn't tell, and one wasn't inclined to ask, how old people were.) But Peel went on to describe the kind of abuse that was common at boarding school, with nobody really complaining. He suffered some of that himself and didn't go on about it, but he made the point that the famous freedoms of the period were really more

like confusions. The 1960s weren't tolerant, as they are said to have been, they were mixed up: people say it felt as though sexual freedom was on the increase but many proclivities couldn't and shouldn't be free and the era had a very odd way of dealing with them. ...

'If you're going to be an entertainer you have to accept that you're an odd human being,' [Nicholas Parsons] said in response to one of my questions. 'You have to be a little bit mad to succeed in that world.'

'Odd, yes. Mad even,' I said, 'but deviant?'

'No,' he said. 'Definitely not. Not everyone at the BBC, or anywhere else for that matter, will be a shining example of rectitude. The BBC is a fantastic place, though, and these weird exceptions can't tarnish it. Savile was immoral and disgusting but not typical, not to me.'

... This was the milieu - so far unmentioned in all the hoohah - that Jimmy Savile entered when he left Radio Luxembourg. ... For forty years people believed Savile was the hero of Stoke Mandeville Hospital and for forty years the red-top papers promoted his image as the nation's zaniest and most lovable donor. He may have abused two hundred children during that time. ...

Savile was not an intelligent person, he was also defensive, exploitative and furious. At some level, he got away with everything because the nation wanted him to, taking to him like a long-running alibi. Bosses and colleagues who knew what he was doing say he was just being Jimmy. And he was just Jimmy to the public as well. It is the kind of concession a sentimental society makes to its worst deviants. ... 'The BBC is a big family,' Savile said to Louis Theroux. 'Turn over any family stone and you will find all sorts of peculiar goings on. Our family is no worse than anybody else's.' Savile not only entered a culture of sexual anxiety: he was a culture of sexual anxiety. The fact was spotted by an anxious boss figure from that time, Tom Sloan, who became head of Light Entertainment in 1961. He was the man who was worried by Marty Wilde's swinging pelvis, but he was also worried about Savile, and an engine of worries, according to some. In 1959, the new pop show Juke Box Jury was produced by Johnnie Stewart. 'I wanted to use Jim [Savile] as a bit of variety to give David Jacobs a little break,' Stewart explains in *The Story of 'Top of the Pops'*. 'My boss at the time, the late Tom Sloan, said: "I don't want that man on the television." I said: "Sorry baby, but that man is box office. In his own sweet way - boy is he box office." ... If the Savile story - and the stories that constitute a hinterland at the BBC - turn out to involve a great conspiracy, it will be a conspiracy that the whole country had a part in. There will always be a certain amount of embarrassment about Savile, not because we didn't know but because we did.

...I went to look at All Souls Place. The BBC has recently expanded into it and the houses have gone, replaced by a shiny new extension. Outside, reporters wrapped in scarves delivered pieces to camera about the current crisis. I wonder if any of them know about the old flats.

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