

## Rewriting the Beginning of BBC Audio Drama History- Three Women Playwrights and Their Contribution to British Radio Drama Culture

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## Rewriting the Beginning of BBC Audio Drama History- Three Women Playwrights and Their Contribution to British Radio Drama Culture

Tim Crook 

### ABSTRACT

For most of the first hundred years of the history of the BBC Richard Hughes (1924 & 1928) has been celebrated as the first author of an original radio play and other male dramatists or directors such as Cecil Lewis (1924), Tyrone Guthrie (1931), Reginald Berkeley (1925), L. du Garde Peach (1931), Lance Sieveking (1931) and Val Gielgud (1932, 1946, 1948, & 1957) have been canonised as the leading creators, voices and pioneers of sound drama. This paper reveals this to be a problematical trope and elevates the names of three women writers- Phyllis Twigg, Gertrude Jennings and Kathleen Baker who can be argued in some respects to be of equal and perhaps even greater cultural significance.

Richard Hughes and his *Comedy of Danger*, first broadcast January 15, 1924, remains a significant canon and landmark achievement in the art of audio drama, but he was certainly not the first original radio playwright in Britain. Three exceptionally talented, imaginative and brilliant women merit proper consideration, respect and recognition for their contribution to the dramatic art-form. Phyllis Twigg and Gertrude Jennings had their writing produced and aired before him. It can also be argued the extent of Kathleen Baker's 47 broadcasts of original scripts credited in the *Radio Times* between 1924 and 1933 are an indication of importance and significance.

These three women can now be properly celebrated for the quality, creativity and cultural significance of their contribution to broadcasting. Why have they been rendered virtually invisible in the narrative of broadcasting history? Why did it take until March 19, 2023, for Phyllis Twigg to be confirmed and celebrated as the BBC's first original radio dramatist and receive a powerful though posthumous round of applause at the BBC's audio drama awards? (BBC online, 2023)

## Canonising and Misrepresenting “The First”

The award-winning BBC radio playwright, Tina Pepler, completed a PhD with the University of Bristol in 1988 for her thesis “Discovering the art of wireless : A critical history of radio drama at the BBC, 1922–1928” and at pages 37, 63, 81 and 92 repeatedly highlights that the first original radio play written for the BBC and broadcast by it was “*The Truth About Father Christmas*, written by Mrs Phyllis Twigg and broadcast on Christmas Eve 1922.”

Dr Pepler also endeavored to correct repeated mistakes by people writing British radio drama history for crediting the first original play as *The Comedy of Danger* by Richard Hughes which was broadcast in January 1924. She says it is: “a distinction often wrongly attributed to Richard Hughes’s *Danger*” (Pepler, 1988, p. 92, n. 18). The trope was repeated by Lord Asa Briggs in *The Birth of Broadcasting 1896–1927*: “... in January [1924] Nigel Playfair had produced the first play actually written for broadcasting- *Danger*, by Richard Hughes: it was set in a coal mine” (Briggs, 1995, p. 256).

The BBC’s second director of drama productions, Val Gielgud, in his *British Radio Drama 1922–1956* referenced the same error: “The first play actually written for broadcasting- *Danger*, by Richard Hughes, in the ingenious setting of a coal-mine” (Gielgud, 1957, p. 20). In fact, the mistake was repeated in 2004 when the US *Museum of Broadcasting Radio Encyclopedia* changed my manuscript crediting Phyllis Twigg’s Christmas play as the first BBC original radio drama and substituted the attribution to Richard Hughes’s *Comedy of Danger* on the basis of the authority and credibility of the Briggs’ BBC history series (Fitzroy Dearborn, Sterling & Keith, 2004, p. 217). It is conceivable that the significance of Twigg’s radio play has been overshadowed by Hughes because his script has survived and has been published (Hughes 1924 [1924 [1928]]). Twigg’s script was supposedly written for children. Adult plays have elevated cultural importance. For most of the BBC’s first 100 years of existence, its histories have been written by men. Richard Hughes was a friend of the BBC’s second director of drama productions, Val Gielgud, serving between 1929 and 1962 and of the producer, script editor and auteur Lance Sieveking whose career in the BBC extended from 1925 to 1956.

Richard Hughes’ script *Danger* continues to be the subject of academic cultural appreciation. Professor Takeshi Kawashima recently analyzed its contribution as a play about Wales, miners, generational discontinuity, and regional and class differences. He argues “there is little doubt that the sympathy this radio drama evokes is political” (Kawashima, 2022, p. 14).

Twigg, Jennings and Baker are not mentioned once in the Lord Asa Briggs' five volume BBC History series. They are absent in all of the BBC annual Handbooks published since 1929 where there were frequent reports on BBC radio drama output, retrospective histories of the art form and the BBC's development of it. Only one BBC production script of the three women is retained in the BBC's Written Archives- an adaptation of Gertrude Jennings' stage play *Family Affairs* in 1950.

### **Origins, Nature and Impact of *The Truth About Father Christmas***

Mrs Phyllis Twigg (1887–1957) has in some respects been hidden in plain sight. The fact she wrote the first original radio play for the BBC was published by Arthur Burrows in his book *The Story of Broadcasting* in 1924:

It was for the amusement of these dear little folk that the first specially written wireless play, *The Truth about Father Christmas*, was broadcast (with effects) in this country. This was performed in the London studio at 5 p.m. on Christmas Eve, 1922, with the writer in the role of Father Christmas. The authoress was Mrs Phyllis M. Twigg, of Ventnor, whose interesting series of stories, the "Tales of a Fairy Dustman," was also broadcast at a later date. (Burrows, 1924, p. 74)

After he became Secretary-General of the International Broadcasting Union in Geneva, he would write an article for *World Radio Magazine's* Christmas 1933 edition recalling his days as the 2LO station director:

The Christmas Eve programme of 1922 included a real wireless play written specially for the occasion. The play was called: "The Truth about Father Christmas." And its authoress was Mrs Phyllis Twigg, who later made several other happy contributions to the London "Children's House." The play was possibly the first to be written in Europe specially for broadcasting. [...] The cast included children and a number of "effects" were introduced. How many of the then 30,000 listeners recall, I wonder, that early incursion into the realm of radio-drama?. (Burrows, 1933, p. 817)

New research has revealed a rich and complex hinterland of creative entrepreneurship in story telling on the part of Phyllis Twigg since the full title of *The Truth about Father Christmas* included the final phrase *As Told By The Fairy Dustman*. By 1922 Phyllis had created a multimedia *Fairy Dustman* franchise of illustrated songbook, published 78 rpm records, and newspaper syndication. The merchandising even extended to *Fairy Dustman* lampshades to help children get to sleep more easily. She would produce much of her work under the *nom de plume* Moira Meighn.

The commissioning by Arthur Burrows, the BBC London 2LO station's first Director of Programmes was, therefore, in the context of an established publishing storytelling concept and brand in both book and audio

publication. *The Tales of the Fairy Dustman* book had (Twigg, 1922) been very favorably reviewed by Britain's leading liberal newspaper of the time: "... the interest of the children is aroused. They love to hear of the fairies which are in our thoughts and to learn 'the best game you can ever play is making dreams come true'" (*The Daily News*, May 5, 1922).

The HMV London Gramophone Company produced three 78 rpm records of Fairy Dustman stories and songs in 1922 performed by Marjorie Montefiore & Walter Glynn. These were heavily advertised and marketed following the songbook's publication and leading up to the Christmas Eve broadcast on the BBC.

The *Radio Times* was not published until September 1923, but national, regional and local newspapers did preview it. The broadcast was very briefly reviewed in *Popular Wireless* and in 1924 *The Radio Times* did publish an amusing anecdote about the play's reception.

Many regional newspapers previewed the schedule:

Sunday (Christmas Eve), 5 p.m. : A short seasonable address by a well-known London divine; 5.30, a specially written Christmas playlet, giving "The true story about Father Christmas," as told by the "Fairy Dustman." (*Shields Daily News*, Friday 22 December 1922)

It seems the play was half an hour in duration as it was followed by "Children's Stories and Competition" at 6 p.m. The front page of *Popular Wireless* reported:

2LO and Christmas. I think most readers of POPULAR WIRELESS who listened to 2LO over the Christmas holidays will agree that the programmes were first-rate. [...] The True Story of Father Christmas was probably the most thrilling thing any kiddie has ever listened to, especially when Mr. Burrows announced that the old gentleman had started off in his aeroplane with seven tons of toys! (*Popular Wireless*, 6 January 1923)

Two years later *The Radio Times* recollected the impact of the play's broadcast with this anecdote and profile of Phyllis Twigg's writing:

The Child Idea. Listeners since the early days will be interested to know that Miss Moira Meighn is the writer of "The True Story of Father Christmas," which was broadcast from London on the memorable first Christmas Eve of that station. On that occasion, an amusing incident occurred. A little child who was listening to the story tried to squeeze herself into the loud speaker in order "to live with Santa Claus always in the Hall of Hearts"! Miss Meighn, by the way, is also the author of the popular "Tales of the Fairy Dustman." (*Radio Times* 20 June 1924)

The play was produced live in the attic studio of the 2LO station's broadcasting facility at Marconi House. *Illustrated London News* published a feature on the BBC's early broadcasting January 13, 1923, and even included a photograph of Arthur Burrows banging bell chimes at the hour

and half hour, to indicate clock-time during the period of broadcasting. A prose version of “The True Story of Father Christmas” appeared in the volume of illustrated children’s stories co-written with Marjory Royce and Barbara E Todd titled *The Normous Sunday Story Book* published by Stanley Paul & Co. in Twigg and also writing as Meighn, M (1925).

The text of the story covers four and a half pages with a cast of characters including a five-year-old girl called Anne receiving an invitation to meet Father Christmas on Christmas Eve sent to her in a red envelope. The plot includes a big “horrid and Unkind” boy disillusioning Anne and leaving her in tears with the claim that Father Christmas was only an ordinary man dressed up. Father Christmas visits her mother in the middle of the night to reassure her of his true origins and credentials as a wise man. There is a dialogue linking Father Christmas to the story of Jesus Christ’s birth in Bethlehem, and how his spirit developed over the centuries with all the rituals associated with Christmas. She hears him say: “Remember, it is always the spirit that matters most.” The story ends with Anne’s mother passing on these truths to her daughter and “Father Christmas- so gracious, so loving; so friendly to the lonely- seemed more real to her than he had ever done before” (Meighn, 1925, p. 212).

The prose does not include the character of the Fairy Dustman, Arthur Burrows as Father Christmas in an aeroplane with seven tons of toys and any description of Santa Claus in the “Hall of Hearts.” But this would appear to be an adaptation by Phyllis of her BBC Christmas drama script.

Phyllis’s grandson, Peter Grimaldi, has assisted the research into her broadcasting and writing career by revealing how the *Fairy Dustman* stories were passed down through his mother Anne who had been a leading actor in BBC radio drama productions during the late 1930s. He recalled her telling them to him at bedtime. He has also provided access to a handwritten book produced during the Second World War for her grandchild when they reached the age of 21 in which she explained that the inspiration for the BBC Father Christmas play had in fact been Anne’s upset when as a four-year-old child she had been told that Santa Claus did not exist. She had raged at her mother calling her a liar and a deceiver, and when going to sleep had been sobbing in disillusionment.

Phyllis wrote that she could not find the right answer to restore her daughter’s faith in the magic of the legend until in one of her dreams she “saw a pure perfectly quiescent light out of which came a voice saying “Tell your child the truth about me: That will suffice- Tell her . . . ” (Twigg, circa Twigg, 1940). The manuscript explained this became the source of the BBC’s

first broadcast play commissioned by Arthur Burrows for live production at Marconi House in 1922.

As Arthur Burrows indicated, Phyllis's *Fairy Dustman* dramas for children continued to be commissioned and broadcast throughout 1923 and the *Daily News* reported how Mrs Twigg would be extending the theme to include "the printing of a newspaper, and on future days there will be all sorts of marvelous secrets from all parts of the world disclosed" (*Daily News*, 14 March 1923).

### Spiritualism and Mass Telepathy

There is some evidence that Phyllis' imaginative story telling ability intersected with what was a fashionable belief and legitimacy for spiritualism and telepathy during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. She was on the jury for a mass telepathy experiment run by the BBC in November 1925. The programme was listed in the *Radio Times* as "Mass Telepathy. An Experiment in Thought Reading. In which every Listener will be invited to assist" (*Radio Times*, 12 November 1925). It may also be significant that the mass telepathy programme was broadcast the day after Armistice Day when the BBC presented the haunting anti-war play *The White Chateau* by Reginald Berkeley (Berkeley, 1925). However, the *Belfast Telegraph* reported on the following day that the "Mass Telepathy" experiment turned out to be a failure. The jury sequestered at the Savoy Hotel were unable to correctly identify the information BBC at Savoy Hill was asking listeners to "telepathize" to them (*Belfast Telegraph* 13 November 1925).

### Phyllis Twigg Writing as Moira Meighn- *The Tragedy in F*

At the time of writing there appears to be only one surviving drama script by Phyllis which was published by Samuel French in 1930 as a compendium of playlets apparently written to promote good practice in medicine *The W.P.B: twelve sketches for revue*. It is a playlet about "Ferdinand Fernandez" a physician who "considered it beneath his professional dignity to admit failure in diagnosis" in his treatment for his patient Flossie (Twigg & also writing as Meighn, M, 1930, p. 39). The four page script is unique in every word- verb, noun, preposition, etc., beginning with the letter "f." It is a bit like a composer creating a symphony with notes only in the scale of F Minor or F Major. Parts of it look like it was written for radio, but there is no evidence the BBC ever received or produced it. Actors would need to concentrate on their lines though with speeches such as "Flossie fancies fresh fried fish" (p. 40). It was not something to be done live in radio production and performance. It turns out that the cause of Flossie's medical

issues is a flea; something Fernandez misses entirely and after his abject incompetence is exposed, the playlet ends in melodramatic absurdity of:

FERNANDEZ (*bowing his head in shame, and fumbling in his hip pocket.*)  
 Fame forsakes Fernandez . . . Future fortune . . . foiled; fozzled. (*Taking revolver from his pocket.*) Farewell, Fred and Flo Frissiter. Farewell, fair Flossie.  
 Farewell fat flea. Ferdinand Fernandez falls finished. (*Shooting himself as CURTAIN falls*) (Twigg & also writing as Meighn, M, 1930, p. 42).

The play seems to be written as an absurdist comedy and has the style and burlesque of a Goons script written by Spike Milligan in the early 1950s. It could be argued that the script is modernist, witty and certainly eccentric.

### **From First Original Radio Playwright to BBC Television's First Cookery Demonstrator**

Phyllis combined her creative career writing imaginative stories and illustrating them for children with the unique research and writing specialism on the practice and history of cookery. By the middle to late 1930s she had published a canon of highly regarded books on cooking by Oxford University Press, Faber and Faber, and the Medici Society with a commitment to disseminate the cookery arts to children and enabling everyone to cook well and in an affordable way.

This led to her becoming the BBC's first television cook from Alexandra Palace in December 1936. During World War Two she was employed by the Ministry of Food to travel around the country as a cooking expert and inspire everyone to cook good food during those desperate years of shortages and rationing. Her expertise was held in such great esteem she was commissioned to perform her real-life role in a Ministry of Information documentary film *Bampton Shows The Way* made in 1941. The dialogue from the film said of Moira Meighn: "A cookery expert. She's stepped into Exeter out of the blue, well eh . . . out of a bomb crater to be exact" (MOI Meighn & see Twigg, P. Ministry of Information, 1941). This appears to have further verisimilitude because the Twigg family had a flat in the Victoria area of London which was bombed during the Blitz destroying many of her scripts and papers- and perhaps her own copy (ies) of the original *The True Story of Father Christmas as told by "The Fairy Dustman."*

A BBC correspondence file on Phyllis discloses repeated pitching for creative drama projects with cooking and food as a theme in detective and mystery series. While they were being rebuffed by the BBC, during World War Two she was devising drama scripts to inspire food and cooking knowledge for children which she workshoped around the country.

Her persistence would test the patience of some, mainly male, producers. When proposing a talk on "Eel pie, curry and eels for breakfast" in June 1941,



a producer in Bristol referred to her as a badgering “human elver” claiming to know more about eels than anyone in Britain (BBC, 2005; WRAC Twigg, 1941). He made it clear they did not want to have “anything more to do with her than absolutely necessary!” (ibid) A recipe for “Herbs On A Hill” was tested by an unenthusiastic producer who condemned it as: “Unsatisfactory. Very Unappetising in appearance – texture and flavor very poor” (1946). Some of the younger generation of BBC producers did not take to what they may have regarded as her Edwardian style of talking and manners, and one memo reporting on her audition for BBC Schools in 1938 said she had a “Lady Bountiful voice” (April 1938).

The only evidence of her drama and cooking expertise combining into a commission is that BBC Schools producer, Rhoda Power, asked her to script a twenty-minute drama on the subject of *Diet: A Dramatic Interlude*. The play was scheduled in the *Radio Times* for broadcast on June 2, 1938, and it was referenced in the booklet *British History Term III The Modern World*, distributed to schools. However, in the archives there is a letter from Rhoda dated May 27, 1938, explaining that the manuscript on “Diet” was impossible to adapt for broadcasting, was being returned and that she was “very sorry that you have had so much trouble in preparing it. The subject is a difficult one” (May 1938). It was not the first time the BBC had scheduled a play in *The Radio Times* only to not go ahead with the broadcast. The script whether live produced or withdrawn from transmission has up until the present time not been traced.

In 1950 the deputy editor of BBC Home Service’s *Woman’s hour* wrote her a thank you letter saying that presenter Olive Shapley had read out her poem “Valentine to a Cook” live on air and the file contains the original manuscript (BBC WRAC Twigg 1950). This appears to have been her last broadcast contribution on the BBC.

### **Gertrude Jennings- Much More Than *Five Birds in a Cage***

In the year Phyllis was still active writing and broadcasting *Fairy Dustman* stories for early BBC radio, another high achieving woman writer had her broadcasting debut and for a while her plays were regularly commissioned and much more celebrated. Gertrude Jennings was one of the most frequently produced original living playwrights on BBC Radio between 1923 and 1934 with eighteen broadcasts of her scripts. She was described by the *Radio Times* as a “brilliant writer” whose one-act play *Five Birds In A Cage* was described as “possibly the best ever written by the best-known writer of one-act plays of modern times. It sparkles with wit and draws character with a deft hand” (*Radio Times*, 1934). This play was in fact the BBC’s first full studio production of a modern original stage play and its first broadcast on November 29, 1923, predates *Danger* by Richard Hughes which has been

repeatedly canonized by male historians as the significant turning point in radio drama history.

Gertrude's script originated the potential of audio drama connecting with the comedy and suspense of characters being trapped and plunged into a claustrophobic situation. The one-act farce featured five people trapped in a London Underground lift. It was originally produced at the London Haymarket Theatre for a special *matinée* in 1915 and continued there in the evening bill for further 285 consecutive performances. The quality of the writing can be attributed and valued in the context of its undoubted commercial success in front of live theater audiences over a period of over 40 weeks of continuous performances in the West End of London and thousands of performances by amateur productions using the one guinea fee rights of the script publication by Samuel French. Her comedy writing touched on social and political tensions of her time and interesting questions. It was much more politically and socially nuanced with subtext and sophisticated writing than the ingénue scripting of Richard Hughes.

Gertrude Jennings is now something of an unknown in 20th century dramatic literature and criticism, but when she died in 1958 the *Times* newspaper deemed her important enough to mark her passing with an obituary and the headline description of: "Successful writer of comedies" (*Times*, 1958). She established her reputation with one-act play hits during the First World War (Marriott, 1928, p. 194). Soldiers on leave getting off the Channel trains from Folkestone and Dover at Charing Cross and Victoria stations only had a short walk to the Haymarket and other West End theaters putting on her comedies as lunch time *matinées* or first bill offerings before the presentation of full-length plays at night (Crook, 2023b, p. 28).

The subversion of class hierarchies in *Five Birds in a Cage* when five people with such contrasting class backgrounds find themselves equal in the face of death would have greatly amused soldiers directly experiencing Eton, Rugby, Marlborough and other public school educated elites mixing with everybody else in the mud, blood and desolation of the trenches. She could find comedy in a bus stop, workhouse, the passage way of a Channel steamer and in *The Rest Cure*, a London nursing home. *The Times* admired how she characterized the dilemmas of a nervous invalid and "sketched with much skill the din in the streets outside, the banging of doors, the demeanor and the conversation of the nurses, the boiled mutton and suet pudding and the effect of all of them upon the hypochondriac" (*Times*, 1958).

She did not need the BBC as a professional writer for she had great success with full-length comedy stage plays. The first, *The Young Person in Pink*, launched as a charity *matinée* in 1920 with an all-star cast. This was followed by *Love Among the Paint Pots* which was about a middle-aged spinster who yearns for romance and love during the intervals when she is not acting as an amateur detective. This was followed by *Money Doesn't Matter*, *Isabel*,

*Edward and Anne, These Pretty Things, Family Affairs* and *Our Own Lives*. *Family Affairs* would be adapted for BBC radio broadcast in 1950. Her plays were performed by the leading actors of her generation: Lady Tree, Dame Irene Vanbrugh, Dame Lilian Braithwaite, Helen Haye, Marie Löhr, Athene Seyler, Sydney Fairbrother and Mary Jerrold.

The film rights to *The Young Person in Pink* resulted in the war-time 1940 black and white British comedy film *The Girl Who Forgot* directed by Adrian Brunel and starring Elizabeth Allan, Ralph Michael and Enid Stamp-Taylor. The screenplay was written by Louise Birt.

The film's plot begins with an eighteen-year-old girl called Leonora on the train traveling back from her school to Paddington but having completely lost her memory. At the same time her father has qualified for his pilot's license and decided to take her mother on a flight to Baghdad. Leonora is lost in London with amnesia and at a hotel meets a handsome young man who wants to help her. Will he be able to rescue her? She was not to know that his fiancée would react badly with extreme jealousy and arrange for a poor confidence trickster to pretend to be her mother in exchange for cash.

### **Cultural Significance of *Five Birds in a Cage***

Her achievement needs to be contextualized by the fact that Phyllis M Twigg originated and scripted the first radio drama play, *The Truth About Father Christmas as told by the Fairy Dustman*, on Christmas Eve 1922 and Gertrude Jennings provided the first original modern play to be produced from the BBC's first radio station in London, 2LO. *Five Birds in a Cage* (Jennings, 1915 [1928]) is hugely successful because it has been written by the most experienced and successful contemporary dramatist to be produced by the BBC in its early years. She was not an apprentice, or experimenting. By November 1923 she was a fully established professional playwright with a canon of one-act plays produced throughout the world and full-length stage comedies running in London's West End.

Gertrude had traveled the world performing as an actor with Sir Ben Greet's touring company, her mother was an actress, her first produced script in the West End, the one-act comedy *Between the Soup and the Savoury*, had premiered in 1910. And she was a clever political dramatist; something fully recognized by the academic Alan Beck in his 2000 study of early radio drama *The Invisible Play* (Beck, 2000, 13.1.13–18). The importance of Gertrude's BBC *Five Birds in a Cage* was acknowledged in Dr Tina Pepler's 1988 University of Bristol thesis (Pepler, 1988, p. 28 & 73).

Its intrinsic qualities for radio and as biting social satire and political drama are analyzed in the printed text of *Writing Audio Drama* (Crook,

2023b, pp. 28–36). By the time the BBC’s resident drama critic Archibald Haddon listened to and admired the live transmission on 29th November, this script had been performed in the West End several hundred times and was a Samuel French am-dram global hit earning Gertrude one guinea for each performance. When Haddon listened to it for the first time as a sound play, he was moved to realize:

All this is marvellous, yet it is only the beginning, the inception of the radio play . . . The radioplay, when it is in full blast, will be a profitable new medium of expression for the actor (Haddon, 1924, pp. 123–4)

Radio drama scholars Alan Beck and Roger Wood are convinced it is likely Richard Hughes listened to Milton Rosmer’s BBC production of *Five Birds in a Cage* on November 29, 1923, and it influenced him strongly in the writing of *The Comedy of Danger* which would be wrongly canonized as the first original radio play, but certainly merits celebration for its success and intent as drama written specially for the sound medium (Beck, 2000, 4.2.9) and (Wood, 2008, p. 39). It may be the case that Gertrude’s first successful Samuel French published one-act play *Between The Soup And The Savoury*, first performed in 1910 (Jennings, 1910 [1926]), was an inspiration, or influence on the ITV television drama series of the 1970s, *Upstairs Downstairs*. It starts with the following description:

*The scene is a cheerful, bright kitchen, and the time the beginning of dinner-upstairs. EMILY, a meek, pathetic little kitchen-maid, is at the range; COOK, a handsome, buxom woman, is washing parsley.* (Jennings, 1910 [1926] & 1926, p. 169)

Gertrude’s Cook is a similar characterization of “Mrs Bridges” in the television series as is her relationship and interaction with Emily so reminiscent of that between Mrs Bridges and Ruby and her other kitchen-maids. The smart “ADA . . . *pretty girl with a brisk manner and rather a strident voice*” (p. 170) could be somewhat resonant of the character Rose in *Upstairs Downstairs*. All of the comic tensions and class ironies of the “upstairs and downstairs” farce and pathos of Gertrude’s play and its potential would appear to have been realized with so much success 60 years later by London Weekend Television and the creation by Jean Marsh and Eileen Atkins. Jean and Eileen set their series during the first decade of the 20th century.

## A Suffragette Writer

Gertrude Jennings was also a Suffragette dramatist and commissioned by Inez Milholland Boissevain to write a play for the cause. *A Woman’s Influence* (Jennings, 1909 [1985]) was never produced by the BBC although it should have been. It was written for the Actresses’ Franchise League which

began its performances for the 1909 Votes for Women Exhibition at the Prince's Ice Skating Rink in Knightsbridge, London. Partial suffrage was granted to women in 1918 and full equal suffrage in 1928. The BBC did have a major aversion to explicitly political plays during the 1920s and this might explain why it was not even considered.

Carole Hayman observed:

This play is fascinating as it deals with the still ongoing debate on how to “manage” men. Do you play the game as laid down, be “feminine,” sexy, dumb, attempting to exert power through devious emotional holds and throwing in a few squeezes or a fit of tears? Or do you insist upon being treated as an equal, a creature with powers of intelligence and reason, as able and responsible as any man? (Hayman, 1985 p. 128)

Gertrude's political campaigning background on matters of equality and injustice clearly informs *Five Birds in a Cage* and her other plays. She was a writing activist during one of the most memorable and dramatic struggles of the early 20th century. The BBC Written Archives do not have any correspondence files in relation to her commissions and contact with the BBC, even by way of her agent. Consequently, we have no idea whether she offered to write radio drama or was ever specifically commissioned. Her output appears to be stage scripts adapted for the radio medium. Cynthia Pughe dramatized her play *Family Affairs* for the producer Wilfred Grantham in 1950 (Jennings, 1950).

## Kathleen Baker Lost to History

Kathleen Baker was one of the BBC's most prolific early original radio playwrights, but not one of her original scripts has survived. Between 1924 and 1933 she had well over 40 credits for original plays broadcast by BBC Radio; mainly by the BBC's Birmingham station. In correspondence she referred to some 250 scripts, most likely an indication of including sketches which did not have standalone credits in *The Radio Times*.

Her romantic novels were published by Methuen, Hodder & Stoughton, and T Werner Laurie. Yet up until now no serious research has been done into her achievements and contribution to the art-form of writing sound plays. She specialized in writing stories for children.

In the early 1930s, after a pause in her writing caused by illness, it seems the BBC went cold. Surviving documents in the BBC's Written Archives indicate her writing was being frequently dismissed and rejected. Eventually her contribution to writing had virtually disappeared from cultural memory. One of her most successful novels, *My Lady April* was made into the film *A Gipsy Cavalier* in 1922, directed by J. Stuart Blackton and starring Georges Carpentier, Flora le Breton and Rex McDougall. This was one of three films

made in Britain during the early 1920s by the British-born American founder of Vitagraph Studios.

Mary Kathleen Baker was born in the Aston area of Birmingham in 1883. Birmingham and the Midlands would be her home throughout her life. Her family home and refuge would remain in Handsworth Wood Road, Birmingham, until her death in June 1967 at the age of 84. Rather like other early pioneers of radio dramatic writing at the BBC she was very much a multimedia polymath of the creative arts. In 1910, at the age of 27 she was writing, directing and producing plays to serve the imagination of children and benefiting those much less fortunate than herself. The *Birmingham Daily Gazette* was reporting and praising her raising money for the poor children's holiday fund with a "new fairy play" called "On The Borders of Fairyland" at Birmingham's Temperance Hall to an enthusiastic audience of mainly young people (*Birmingham Daily Gazette* 12 January 1912).

Fast forwarding to 1922 when Kathleen Baker was well-established as a published romantic adventure and historical novelist and her successful book *My Lady April* has been made into the silent film by the legendary Anglo-American director James Blackton, called *A Gipsy Cavalier*, she would be given this fascinating though short profile in the regional newspaper *The Sheffield Independent*:

John in Skirts– (Writer with the large rose-trimmed picture hat)

When asked to meet John Overton, the author of the novel of adventure, from which the J. Stuart Blackton film, "A Gipsy Cavalier" was made, one naturally would expect to see a robust man of the type that would be likely to work out the many virile incidents so bravely enacted by Georges Carpentier. Instead, the interviewer faces a very feminine little woman, daintily dressed in a frock of crepe fabric, with a large rose-trimmed picture hat.

This was a surprise. Miss Kathleen Baker, who writes her romances in a pretty cottage in a suburb of Birmingham, smiled as she saw the startled expressions of her callers.

"Everyone thinks I'm a man," she said, "and I rather enjoy this Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde experience. It is not at all unusual to receive gifts of pipes and cigars from my reader." (*Sheffield Independent*, 12 September 1922)

In another interview published in the *Dundee Evening Telegraph* Kathleen Baker said: "I am simply athrill over the prospect of seeing more of my stories filmed. I have always loved the theater and the "movies," and have done quite a bit of acting and producing in an amateur way, as well as dancing' (*Dundee Evening Telegraph* 19 September 1922).

## Kathleen Baker's Radio Drama Written as John Overton

As is now becoming more widely known, prior to the development of national radio transmission in the late 1920s, BBC radio began with a network of local radio stations scattered across many cities and towns of Britain. In fact, Birmingham was one of the first regional stations to broadcast outside London in 1922 under the call sign 5IT. Kathleen Baker would become the BBC Birmingham station's most prolific radio playwright in the 1920s.

She contributed mainly to children's programming which had built up a considerable following of young listeners which Arthur Burrows would write in 1924 amounted to some 10,000 devotees, encouraged by the station's "children's uncle" Percy Edgar.

An example of her writing is described in great detail in an entry for the *Radio Times* scheduled for Tuesday December 7, 1926. This was "The Immortal Melody," A Radio Fantasy Written for Broadcasting by John Overton and produced by Percy Edgar. In the sequence between 8.30 and 9.05, it was divided into four episodes. Kathleen and the legendary Percy Edgar play several parts in the live drama and it is rather intriguing and mischievous for the time that Kathleen is credited in her male-gendered nom-de-plume as performing the role of Sally Truscott (*Radio Times* 7 December 1926).

## Kathleen Baker's "Costume" Novels by "A Man Who Knows How to Use His Pen."

In correspondence with the BBC she mentioned she had written and had published six novels between 1912 and 1925. They were favorably reviewed in the Regional Press and apparently sold well. *My Lady April* was a bestseller and clearly benefited from being adapted into the successful silent film *A Gipsy Cavalier*. Despite her proven skill at writing sound drama, a reasonable question to ask is why the BBC did not commission adaptations of her novels? As the *Birmingham Daily Post* wrote in a review of *Dickie Devon* "It should appeal to those more particularly who like their stories simple with not too much brain on the villain side of the stage, and not too many misunderstandings between the lovers. A clean well-written book, by a man who knows how to use his pen" (*Birmingham Daily Post*, 10 April 1914).

## Why Did Kathleen Baker Stop Writing for the BBC?

One surviving file in the BBC's Written Archives for *Children's Hour* provides some clues. It was not for the want of trying. There is evidence that she

had to stop writing for a few years because of serious illness. But correspondence between male BBC executives responsible for Children's programming in the early to middle 1930s indicates a disrespectful and inconsiderate attitude to a significant writing talent, and somebody who had contributed so much. It may also be the case that her writing ideas had become old-fashioned. It is difficult to evaluate this conundrum without having access to the scripts she submitted and which were so dismissively rejected. It is also the case that by the 1930s Kathleen was submitting to a much more competitive writing market and industry.

In May 1933 she had contacted Joseph Lewis, musician and producer she had previously worked for in the *Children's Hour* strand in the Birmingham studio, and was now associated with the programme *Children's Corner* at the new Broadcasting House in Portland Place London. Lewis' internal memo to a colleague in the BBC does not seem as supportive as it could have been. It could be said he was trying to be sympathetic when he called her a "poor soul", but rather than represent her as one of the most significant writers for the BBC Birmingham station 5IT during the 1920s in his language he reduces her to being "a certain lady" who wrote "little sketches" using the characters of the "Snooky" stories which were the original creation of somebody else whom he identifies as his assistant in Birmingham, Phyllis Richardson:

I am merely sending this to you so that I can inform her that you have seen it and do not find it suitable, etc., because I feel that her illness has kept her mind where it was six years ago, and I should not like to hurt her feelings by returning the manuscript without your having seen it. (BBC, 2022; WRAC Baker 30 May 1933)

The script Kathleen sent to the "BBC's Director," *Puss In Boots*, did in fact receive quite favorable feedback from *Children's Hour* script-readers. In the end, they thought the dialogue needed some tweaking; something which could have been achieved in a respectful conversation between a producer and Kathleen by telephone or correspondence.

### **BBC Script Reader: "I Wish This Woman Wasn't Mad!"**

It would seem from Kathleen's *Children's Hour* archived file, prospective scripts would be sent round to three readers who were required to fill in a form. One said "Puss in Boots" "might be quite attractive- dialogue a little abstruse at times," another said "This is rather original and attractive. But the Cat speaks an obscure kind of Telegraphese which is at times unintelligible" (June 2, 1933). Kathleen received a letter bluntly saying "we find that the language spoken by the cat is largely unintelligible and would certainly be unintelligible to our audience. Would you, perhaps, care to alter this and re-submit the play?" (ibid) The envelope contained the rejected script.



When Kathleen wrote back to the programme organizer there are indications her thinking and writing may well have been in advance of her time:

With regard to the language – it is not, perhaps, generally understood that animals talk like that in thought, but most children know, and dislike the dialogue put into the mouths of animals, if it is like the words men use. I am certain that – had you broadcast it – most of the audience would have understood, and welcomed something written in that way. It would be well if people knew that all animals are trained so – getting through in thought first and then in spoken words. Horses hear well, and so do circus animals. (8 June 1933)

The next few months would be a spate of Kathleen sending in scripts for *Children's Hour* and a fair tsunami of rejections. The comments were brutal: “depressingly moral!,” “so completely in the nature of sermons,” “it is a little mad!,” “I don’t think the theme of a selfish parent is very well suited to the Children’s Hour,” “dreadfully depressing. No!” “the usual morality tale and by the cartloads!” and “not much point to this” (10 & July 18, 1933). When Kathleen wrote a play called “When Dragons roamed in England” it was rejected because “it has the usual eccentric bits of dialogue” and a second reader says: “I wish this woman wasn’t mad! For her ideas are charming but the language is impossible” (August 18).

One reader said: “I don’t like the way she plays around with classic fairy-tales” (July 10, 1933).

We do not have the advantage of seeing any of Kathleen Baker’s rejected scripts which played around with classic fairy-tales. However, in the 1970s and 80s the radio playwright Angela Carter would be celebrated for reinterpreting the folk and fairy tale. In 1985 she said she was “Weaned on the now defunct Children’s Hour” and left with potent memories of “snow and mysteries . . . what we now call ‘magic realism’” (Carter, 1985, p. 9). In the introduction to Carter’s collected dramatic works, Susannah Clapp wrote “Playing with style, making fairy tale and fantasy tell new truths, was part of the point of her work” (Clapp, 1997, p. viii). The rejection and loss of Kathleen Baker’s scripts mean we are unable to determine the extent of her origination in reinventing the fairy-tale for her time.

## Parting of Ways

The BBC did bite on some of Kathleen’s scripts. Two were designated as meriting an offer when possible. She did receive a cheque for five guineas (£5 & 5 shillings in old currency) and a contract for “In The Fog” at the end of 1933. We do not know if “In The Fog” ever made it into *Children's Hour*. It may have been broadcasted but not credited in

the *Radio Times*. It is presumed the other scripts were in reserve for possible production.

By January 1935, Kathleen had had enough. She may have been responding in a huff, or she might have been chasing better offers in the American market with broadcast buyers demanding world rights. She said:

I hereby withdraw the offer of any work of mine, of which you hold a copy, for broadcasting purposes; and shall be grateful if you will return my plays, as I intend to make use of them in other ways. I ask you to give me a guarantee that no work of mine be used over Radio from this date 12th January 1935.  
(12 January 1935)

The BBC sent back her scripts but to the wrong address. There is no evidence of Kathleen Baker as John Overton writing radio drama for the BBC again or, indeed any more published novels in the romantic historical and adventure genres.

At the beginning of the Second World War in 1939 she was looking after her elderly parents at 74 Handsworth Wood Road in Birmingham. Her 87-year-old mother Mary was “incapacitated.” Her father Frank was listed as a director/chairman also 87 years old.

It seems she passed away living alone in the same street in 1967 and leaving an estate of £11,583 which in today’s money (June 2023) would have been £175,664.03.

## **The Significance of Twigg Alias Meighn, Baker Alias Overton and Jennings as Jennings**

Phyllis Twigg merits considerable recognition for her unique and imaginative contribution to 20th century culture. She pioneered the first original written sound drama for the radio medium through her care and desire to engage with children’s imagination. Her mission had comfort, consolation and affection. In a society where the power and agency of women was being ardently fought for she was entrepreneurial, hardworking and creative in forging a distinctive multimedia career bridging illustration, journalism, fiction and early broadcasting.

She was a first in radio and television. She was also motivated by commendable social conscience in communicating economical ways of cooking during a time of grave economic hardship for many people. Through the exigencies of BBC Head of History Robert Seatter, I was commissioned to write a BBC timeline of its audio drama history between 1922 and 2022 (Crook, 2023a online). Phyllis is rightly given the accolade and credibility of being the BBC’s first original radio playwright.

It can be strongly argued that Kathleen Baker did not deserve what would now be certainly regarded as sexist and ableist prejudice. The derogatory treatment from BBC script editors and producers was discriminatory at a time when male patriarchy ruled the roost.

It may have been the case she was disadvantaged by being out of the circulation of commissioning and writing as a result of her illness for several years. This precipitated comments which ranged between pity and offensive constructions of insanity.

Full equal franchise in Britain was not achieved for women until 1928 and up until the Second World War women were compelled to leave many professions if they were married.

There is certainly an argument that a writer with Kathleen's provenance and success in popular novels, film and radio did not deserve to be kicked into the dustbin of failed, past sell-by-date authors.

Her last historical romance novel *Striped Roses* (1925) received consistently rave reviews and more than merited consideration for radio dramatization; something Kathleen could have accomplished in great style when that would have been informed by all the experience of her original scripting for broadcasting since 1924. *Striped Roses* was described by the *Leicester Chronicle* as "a good brisk story . . . gives a fresh romance of the days of the Civil Wars," and the *Leicester Evening Mail* said: "The author has portrayed "the head-strong, chivalrous obstinate gentlemen of a most obstinate, chivalrous and headlong age"" (*Leicester Evening Mail* 12 November 1925).

It would seem Kathleen Baker aka John Overton ended up being defeated by obstinate BBC men in the 1930s who were greatly lacking the chivalry and imagination she was so good at conjuring in her plays and novels.

It could be argued that authors of BBC radio history may not have fully appreciated that it was a considerable coup for the BBC in November 1923 to produce the work of the country's most acted woman playwright. Because that is exactly how important Gertrude Jennings was. In 1919 the *Daily Mail* said so:

Up and down the land the amateur actor is doing homage to a new-found love. We live in an era of Gertrude Jennings . . . a short while before the war a young girl began a career of wit and quips and capital jokes by writing "Between the Soup and the Savoury." (Hogg, *Daily Mail*, 21 November Hogg, 1919)

By 1919, she had sold 12,000 Samuel French copies of the play with twelve more one-act comedies added to her portfolio. There are a number of curious questions to be explored about the pattern of commissioning and production of Gertrude's work by the BBC. There seems to be a very long pause between 1934 and 1950. The one and a half hour production of *Family*

*Affairs*, 73 years ago, was the last time anyone heard or saw her work on the BBC.

This may have followed changing patterns in fashion and popularity of playwriting styles during this period. It can be argued that many forms of comedy age as quickly if not faster than time itself. But it remains a fact her work could be the basis of a successful comedy film made in 1940.

Throughout her life Gertrude was a playwright whose one-act curtain-raisers would often dwarf the audience's reception for the main production. There are repeated accounts of stage audiences spontaneously producing thunderous applause and calling for the author to enjoy their encores- and often when Gertrude was not even there to take them. After 1934, apart from the dramatization of *Family Affairs* in 1950, the BBC missed out on continuing to engage with the potential thunderous applause of listeners to her writing.

The writing and contribution to early BBC audio drama of these three remarkable women

indicate a need to reimagine and rewrite the histories and cultural narrative of this period; particularly in the light of renewed interest in the role of women and an obvious need to challenge and re-assess the validity and reliability of historical cultural accounts so often defined and written by men.

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## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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