

Light Entertainment

Andrew O'Hagan writes about child abuse and the British public

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. 'In spite of the desire voiced by some of the children who wrote,' Gamlin replied, 'I have no intention of using any material by the above author, as I think I mentioned to you after I had first approached her without knowing your policy in the matter. Have no fear, there will be No Orchids for Miss B. at any time.' The BBC brass didn't like Blyton's work – 'there is rather a lot of the Pinky-winky-Doodle-doodle Dum-dum type of name' – and Gamlin, glad to have a job, didn't hesitate to overrule what children wanted in order to please Room 432.

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. He once said he had liked teaching because it kept him young, but acting let him be other people, and in the 1940s he thrived, voicing the RAF documentary *Squadron 992* and appearing as the compere in the variety show *Rainbow Round the Corner*. 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. Terence Gallacher, who worked for Movietone at the time, remembers him visiting the offices at 22 Soho Square once a week. Gamlin was a first-class commentator who rarely made a mistake. 'In those days, before the introduction of magnetic tape,' Gallacher wrote, 'a mistake was quite expensive. The voice was recorded onto 35mm film as an optical soundtrack. If the commentator made a mistake, all the film used up to that point for the sound on a given story had to be junked.'

Gamlin had done well at the BBC making life easier for people who had power. 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. It was Patrick Hamilton in conversation with George Smiley down a blind alley off Rathbone Place, with froth sliding down the insides of pint tumblers and lipsticked fags in every ashtray. Men such as Gamlin practically lived in Langham Place: their outer bounds were Soho, Bloomsbury, Marylebone, and everything else was the World Service.

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 Freud! A Short Guide to Youth Control (The Book of the Weak)*. The book is just about as funny as it wants to be, with author photographs ('aged 7 and 8 approx') and a caption: 'The authors on their way to the Psychoanalyst'. 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 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.

But Gamlin lived his double life in the country that existed before Cliff Richard. On the back of his broadcasting fame, and his other interests, he became a spokesman on the tribulations of the Ovalteens. At the Albert Hall in 1949, he followed the Duke of Edinburgh and Clement Attlee in speaking at the *Daily Mail* Youth Forum – an audience of six thousand young people from around the world. He described himself as 'a middle-aged old fogey' (he was 46). 'If Britain's contribution to [a] better world is both important

and invaluable,' he said, 'especially in the field, as the prime minister just reminded us, of human relationships, Europe's contribution is no less so. It is fitting, I think, that those young men and women on whom the brunt of the task will fall in a very few years from now, should voice their opinions and ideals.'

A BBC producer from the 1950s told me that he remembers Lionel Gamlin as a person with large ears and a face that seemed to be crumpled in the middle. Unlike the tall and elegant Mitchell, his chief rival, the hero of *Hello Children* was short and round, with a face for radio. Indeed, the onset of television pushed a lot of well-known radio announcers onto the back foot, and several struggled to make the move. Some who did, such as Gilbert Harding (another Cambridge graduate and former schoolteacher, later a famously agitated contestant on *What's My Line?*), were known for their melancholy and their loneliness as well as for their charitable work. Terence Gallacher remembers that Gamlin constantly worried that TV would end his career: 'Lionel complained to anyone willing to listen that he was being ostracised by the BBC Television Service.'

Gamlin liked to help young actors and one colleague, now in his eighties, told me that he was always surrounded by them in Broadcasting House. The actor and director Bryan Forbes, who would go on to direct *Whistle Down the Wind* and *The Stepford Wives*, remembered the help he got from Gamlin. Forbes wrote to him at the BBC – at the time Forbes's name was John Theobald Clarke – and Gamlin wrote back, telling Forbes that his letter was so extraordinary he would have to meet him. When they met Gamlin said it would be necessary for him to change his name. 'Another young actor, ahead of me,' Forbes wrote years later in *Notes for a Life*, 'was also named John Clarke. "You want a good-sounding name," Gamlin said, "and one that looks right on the bills. These things are important."'

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.' He also remembers going for a coffee with one of the boys from the flat. 'The boy was nice,' he said, 'very young. He thought he might get a job or something of that sort. And it was clear the men were using him for sex. 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.

There was a bar nearby where many of the people who worked at Broadcasting House would meet for drinks during and after working hours. Louis MacNeice conferenced there and the Light Entertainment people came and went too, en route to other haunts. A schoolboy who was part of a team that had done well on *Top of the Form* told me Gamlin was extremely sweet to him and 'a nice man all round'. The boy did an interview with him for his school magazine. 'Thanks for the honey-sweet publicity,' Gamlin said. They stayed in touch and the young man knew that Gamlin took it very badly in the mid-1950s when he was deemed unsuitable for TV. 'He was spending a lot of time in Brighton,' the man, who is now in his eighties, told me. 'He ended up as a valet; he was a gentleman's gentleman between infrequent acting jobs – and he once told me the beach at Brighton, this would be in the 1950s, was covered with copies of Angus Wilson's *Hemlock and After*.'

Wilson's novel, pretty much forgotten now, tells the story of a writer called Bernard Sands who is married but homosexual and ends up living next door to a woman, Mrs Curry, who procures children for paedophiles. The book was deemed shocking on publication and would perhaps be thought even more so today, given the way the subject grows and grows to become our chosen national nightmare. 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*. A veteran of the Somme who lost an eye there, McCulloch lost his left leg in a motor accident in the 1930s. He was famous at the BBC for nearly forty years and can still be

heard in the archives introducing young Princess Elizabeth as she delivers her wartime address to the children of Britain. 'Goodnight children, everywhere,' was Uncle Mac's catchphrase.

Though Gamlin's activities were under wraps until now, there have long been rumours about McCulloch. He was given the OBE in 1964 and died in 1967, the same year as Gamlin. Of the three men named to me as I talked to people about the BBC in those days, Uncle Mac is the one who stirs the strongest emotions. 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. Again, many of the people who worked for her, the actors and singers, are not alive, but some were available to be spoken to. Protégés of hers such as Stanley Baxter never heard her accuse McCulloch. One of her 'young artists' said: 'She would have been at pains to shelter us from any hint of such a thing.' 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. The *Times* obituary of McCulloch was written by the poet Geoffrey Dearmer. 'Children of all ages were always comfortable in his unseen company,' Dearmer wrote. 'There was something of Larry the Lamb in him, and Larry could get away with murder.'

One of the qualities that made the journey from radio to television was 'personality'. Suddenly, you had these human beings who were ultra-everything: they were funnier and quicker and smarter than you – and, once on television, they were prettier, too. 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. If you grew up during 'the golden era of British television', the 1970s, when light entertainment was tapping deep into the national unconscious, particularly the more perverted parts, you got used to grown-up men like Rod Hull clowning around on stage with a girl like Lena Zavaroni. You got used to Hughie Green holding the little girl's hand and asking her if she wanted an ice-cream. Far from wanting an ice-cream, the little girl was starving herself to death while helpfully glazing over for the camera and throwing out her hands and singing 'Mama, He's Making Eyes at Me'. She was 13.

There's something creepy about British light entertainment and there always has been. Joe Orton meets the Marquis de Sade at the end of the pier, with a few Union Jacks fluttering in the stink and a mother-in-law tied in bunting to a ducking-stool. 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, when we made heroes out of these damaged and damaging 'entertainers'. We suddenly wish them to have been normal, when all we ever ask of our celebrities is that they be much more fucked up than we are. And what do we do now? Do we burn the commemorative programmes, scratch their names from the national memory?

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. We can't say so. We can't know how to admit it because we don't know who we are. '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. Savile just wouldn't have been worth so much to us without his capacity to hurt. He was loved for being so rich and so generous and for loving his mother, the Duchess. And no one said, not out loud: 'What's wrong with that man? Why is he going on like that? What is he up to?' He was an entertainer and that's thought to be special. A more honest society brings its victims to the Colosseum and cheers. We agreed to find it OK when our most famous comedians were clearly not OK. 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 over the past month 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. He promised them visits to the BBC studios and one of them says she saw Gary Glitter having sex with another girl who was also from Duncroft in a BBC dressing-room. 'Did Duncroft, a well-equipped approved school for "intelligent emotionally disturbed girls" in leafy Surrey, really require the patronage of "Uncle" Jimmy Savile?' Dan Davies asks in his unpublished book about Savile:

Many of the 25 or so girls in its care at any one time came from comfortable backgrounds and included the daughters of ambassadors and BBC producers. As a Home Office-approved school, funding came from Social Services. Regular guests at their parties included the actor James Robertson Justice, who was one of Britain's leading film stars in the 1940s and 1950s and reportedly a close friend of the Duke of Edinburgh. Princesses Marina and Alexandra are said to have attended. Among the former Duncroft girls to have come forward, one has said she was put in the isolation unit for 'two or three days' after loudly protesting when Savile groped her in a caravan on the school grounds. 'For years we tried to report him,' another confided to me. 'We even had a mass breakout to Staines police station.'

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, in his

history of the BBC, documents the struggle in which sexual freedoms and sexual norms were bent out of shape: for every permissive moment there was a shadow of the not-permitted. And so, not long before we had Orton and *Entertaining Mr Sloane*, we had Mr Tom Sloan of BBC Light Entertainment threatening to drop Marty Wilde from the fledgling pop show *Six-Five Special* on account of his 'Presley-type belly-swinging'.

Fame was a new kind of licence. And presenters at the BBC were suddenly even more famous than Gamlin had been. Sexual intercourse began, if Larkin's your man, in 1963 – a year before *Top of the Pops* – and off the back of the *Lady Chatterley* trial and the Beatles' first LP. But the intermediaries, too, were now part of the strange dance of the permissive with the banned. And it became part of their public profile to thrive at the centre of a doubt about acceptability. That might be one way of thinking about Jimmy Savile getting the keys to Broadmoor. 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.' Bakewell was working as a studio manager in those days and she saw how available and how willing many of the young people were. 'People were at the top of their form and many were jubilantly having affairs,' she says. 'The homosexual element was murkier. You just didn't hear about it. We'd drink in the George, round the corner from Broadcasting House. Sensuality lay in drink – those men with red faces. People like MacLaren-Ross would be sponging for money and it all seemed excessive but fine.'

'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. 'You just can't get into the culture of what it was like, transfer our sensibilities backwards from today. It would be like asking Victorian factory owners to explain why they sent children up chimneys. It's the same with the BBC that I first entered. It had habits and values that we just can't understand from the point of view of where we are now. What we now find unacceptable was just accepted back then by many people.'

Gilbert Harding, a refugee from the culture of the Light Programme – a man who made his way into TV memory by weeping on John Freeman's television interview show *Face to Face* – was a stalwart of the milieu inhabited by Gamlin and company. A man can't help whom he fancies, but Harding seems to have differed from the other BBC paedophiles only inasmuch as he kept it mainly to himself. He had spent his childhood in a Wolverhampton orphanage and maintained he wanted to die long before he actually did,

stepping out of Broadcasting House after a radio recording on 16 November 1960 to collapse on the pavement. 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. There have always been genuine causes for concern, but overall, nowadays there is an unmistakable lack of proportion in the way we talk about the threat posed to children by adults. (It's hard not to imagine that the situation has to do with a general estrangement from the notion of a reliable community.) The 1960s, on the other hand, seem like a sexual kaleidoscope made of unusual colours, out of focus, out of order, but not 'out'. There is always a dark lining to permission – asking for it, granting it – and 1963 was a moment of blurring more than a moment of clarity. Women might have worn shorter skirts and gone on the pill but society still didn't – and still doesn't – sexually know itself as well as it might.

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. It wasn't merely the time of Christine Keeler and Mandy Rice-Davies, the time of the Cliveden set, *Up the Junction* and *Carry on Camping*. It was also the time of the Polari-speaking world of the Colony Room and the Gargoyle Club, filled with the kind of people sent up by Julian and Sandy in the BBC's *Round the Horne*. 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. There was the funny world of Julian and Sandy, but, behind it, there was also the world of Joe Orton and Kenneth Halliwell having regular sex with 14-year-old boys. Peggy Ramsay encouraged Orton to keep a journal 'à la Gide' about their time in Morocco. The diaries are a long whirling trip of hashish and sex, full of what John Lahr, who edited Orton's diaries, called 'the cockeyed liberty of the time'. A Tangier acquaintance, a 45-year-old Englishman called Nigel, told Orton he liked young boys.

‘How young?’

‘Oh very young.’

‘But how young? Twelve?’

‘Oh no, about fourteen.’

‘Oh, perfectly natural.’

The cockeyed-ness is evident when you look at the diaries of Orton’s friend Kenneth Williams, who was happy to come to Morocco but whose diaries blench at the mere thought of liberated sex:

Thursday, 26 September 1963: The Denning Report on the Profumo-Ward case is out. Apparently it says that well-known actors were at these filthy parties. It is a disgrace that such people should bring our profession into disrepute in this vile way. Thank the powers that my own private fantasies have been left to wrestle with my own conscience and not in physical acts with others.

Orton wrote letters to Williams using the name Uncle Whuppity, one of them offering advice to children about how to avoid the clap.

I asked Nicholas Parsons about Kenneth Williams. ‘He was inhibited and tortured,’ Parsons said, ‘and was trying to embrace the new freedom but didn’t know how to do it properly. Some people can’t escape from the attitudes and conditions laid upon them by their parents and Kenneth had a very difficult childhood.’

‘And what about Orton and company?’ I asked.

‘They probably allowed Kenneth to express that other side of his nature,’ Parsons said. ‘I mean, that’s the thing about those freedoms in the 1960s: it was wonderful to have it, but it also included the freedom to reject it. We weren’t all dropping our inhibitions and dropping our trousers. And there were still some very conservative elements. I remember I was working at the Savoy, it was before Lady Chatterley, and the Wolfenden Report had just come out. I made some joke saying ‘Homo Adds Brightness’ – there was an advertisement for Omo washing powder along those lines – and the management was horrified.’

‘If you’re going to be an entertainer you have to accept that you’re an odd human being,’ he 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.'

People can like children in the wrong way. And there no doubt is a wrong way. So when you see Gilbert Harding crying about his impossible self, you may feel very sorry. You may feel, as many people who liked Lionel Gamlin felt, that these were talented people whose paedophilia constituted a difficulty for them as well as for others. This was the milieu – so far unmentioned in all the hooah – that Jimmy Savile entered when he left Radio Luxembourg. But nobody will feel sorry for him because he was made to the public's specifications and to the specifications of the tabloid press, which has the skill to carry both the public's worst fantasies and its deepest shame into print. 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.

I met Dan Davies, Savile's biographer, when he was deputy editor of *Esquire* and was writing his book. He always said the story was seedy and strange and that when the book was published he would call it 'Apocalypse Now Then'. He met up with Savile in transport cafés or at home in Scarborough, had supper with him at the Athenaeum, followed him onto the QE2. 'It's a dark story,' Davies said years ago. 'But it's our childhood, you know.' 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. Live and let live: he's just being Jimmy. And if there were worries then the worries got buried, just as the BBC buried that *Newsnight* story.

Victim Support lawyers are now talking about an endemic culture of sexual misconduct at the BBC. ('What? A paedophile ring at the BBC?' asked the consternated reporter Shelley Jofre on *Panorama*.) But when the lawyers look for evidence they should look to the culture itself to find proper answers. Until now, no one thought to examine *Children's Hour* and the world around it, much less the payola scandal involving radio DJs in the first flush of Savile's fame. Janie Jones, a singer, appeared at Bow Street Magistrates' Court in 1973 on 26 charges, which included controlling prostitutes and offering them as bribes 'to BBC men as inducement to play records'. The men in the case were often referred to as Mr Z or Mr Y, or 'unnamed broadcasters'. The court heard how Mr Y, 'a television producer', might have made a 14-year-old girl pregnant and could therefore be blackmailed. Mr X later answered questions about a cheque for £100 he gave to one of the girls but said he didn't know she was a prostitute. 'I thought she was much too young to be involved in anything like that,' he said in court. Others remanded on bail included Jack Dabbs, a former producer of the radio programme *Worldwide Family Favourites*, Len Tucker, a theatrical agent, and several record promoters. At the time of the trial arrest warrants were out for members of the New World pop group who had won TV's

Opportunity Knocks ten times. The big trial that followed is now forgotten. According to the *Times*, 'a shop assistant, aged 18, referred to as Miss G, said at the Central Criminal Court yesterday that Miss Jones said she could get work in modelling and television commercials, but she must play her cards right.' 'Playing her cards' meant going to bed with producers and showbusiness people.

'I was very interested in the work, but not in going to bed with producers,' she said ... Miss G agreed that Miss Jones had taken her a couple of times to the *Top of the Pops* show at Shepherd's Bush ... 'All I saw were a bunch of little kids jumping up and down.'

Peter Dow QC, for Miss Jones, asked: 'Some of them got a chance that way?'

'Having lived with Janie,' Miss G replied, 'I know the scene inside out and it sickens me when I think about it.'

'Radio 1 was well known to be a law unto itself,' a BBC broadcaster from the 1960s told me. And Jimmy Savile would be safe there for nearly fifty years. '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." It is true to say that with his two-tone non-regulation hair, a somewhat bizarre taste in clothes and his rather buoyant personality, Jimmy Savile was not the typical "righter than right" BBC presenter.'

It would take another 53 years for Savile to be unmasked. And the BBC employed him for nearly all of that time and the nation loved him. 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 contacted Dan Davies to see how things were going with the sale of his book. Turns out every major publisher had turned it down. 'It remains,' Dan said, 'the biography everyone wants to read but no publisher has the balls to publish. Just 140,000 words of interviews over six years, days and nights spent talking to him at his various homes, thousands of miles of ocean crossed in his company, scores of friends; associates hunted down and grilled. The millstone gets heavier and heavier. Let me know if you need anything – quotes, background, detail, a stetson hat given to him by Elvis Presley in 1962.' I emailed him back immediately, telling him to hold the stetson. I then asked whether he knew anything

about Lionel Gamlin and the old guard at Broadcasting House. 'He was an old actor, wasn't he?' Davies replied. 'Part of a paedo ring at the BBC, I presume.'

Later that evening 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.

26 October

LRB volume 34 number 21, 8 November 2012