TRANSCRIPT OF INTERVIEW WITH TERRY WOGAN

March 12 2002

RN
Terry 1965 and that was the first time you came through the portals of Broadcasting House what was it like, what was the BBC like in those days?

TW
Well I was working for RTE in 1965, I was the senior announcer in RTE I had about whatever it was 1965, 27 years of age and I had sent a couple of tapes of what I had done at RT radio and Mark White, who was Deputy Head of Gramophone Department and was an extraordinary figure, balding head, military bearing, handle bar moustache, ex RAF man, Deputy Head of Gramophone Department and he took a smack to me – quite extraordinary because I sent him a tape of a programme I did in Ireland and didn't rewind it. So he got this un-rewound tape and he actually rewound it and that for me, was if you like, the essence of the BBC and equally if you like a quality that perhaps maybe no longer there. The idea that a senior executive in the BBC gets sent a tape and he goes to the trouble of rewinding it so he can listen to it – not today it wouldn't happen today so I was very lucky that I found a receptive ear in Mark White and I did a couple of programmes obviously he responded well to what I was doing. I did a couple of programmes on a line from RTE…….. all it would have taken was a seagull to sit on the line and I would have been cut off from Britain for ever, but everything worked……. and those were the days when you worked to script, meticulously written out and cues and were rehearsed, you rehearsed your voice-overs.

RN
So you weren't ad-libbing in those days?

TW
No there was no ad-libbing done at any stage in popular radio…….. in the BBC they were apprehensive on ad-libbing and indeed when Radio One started, in 1967, after all the pirates had been sitting out there on the high seas, paying nobody and broadcasting illegally to the fury of the Musicians' Union and the Performing Rights Society …..who along with the BBC and the Government eventually sunk them. So all these ex pirates came along and were photographed in the church that's not very far from where we're sitting now and I was photographed with them and I was perhaps one of the few people – well maybe along with Jimmy Young and Bob Holness and Pete Murray who hadn't been on the boats, but all these fellows came off the boats where they'd been used to sitting and making it up as they went along and suddenly they were on Radio One under Robin Scott and they had to go into studios, …….but the BBC didn't trust them on their own so they had something they never had, when they were on the boats, a producer, a producer sitting with them saying "fifteen seconds for the next link, I think"…… "keep the next one short"……. "you can give the next one a minute" ……

…….and overlooking everything they said and did which was a complete change for them, but it still brought a kind of spontaneity to BBC Radio that it hadn't had before because, as I said, everything had to be scripted, voice-overs were rehearsed ……..indeed I used to work for BBC World Service, down in Bush House, in the seventies and old habits had still failed to die there because we were rehearsing voice-overs and everything had to be scripted down there, it may still be so I don't know, but yes the idea of spontaneity and making it up as you go along and trusting your presenter not to say anything litigious or against the BBC Charter was foreign to the BBC it took them a long time to get used to the fact that you could put somebody in front of a microphone who would make it up as they went along and could be trusted to do so.

RN
And just going back to when you arrived and walked through those doors, for the first time, what was it like? Were you in awe of the place, I mean what was the atmosphere like?

TW
The BBC, of course, was perceived by anybody in broadcasting and the entire public as the archetype, the broadcasting organisation – no other broadcasting organisation could come anywhere close to it in terms of kudos, in terms of status and I think that's probably still true, well it may not be still true but it's still a perception, then it was the truth and for somebody like me coming over from Ireland walking through the portals of Broadcasting House with enormously impressive legends written across the front of reception desk and the BBC was incredibly self-confident, indeed probably complacent, I think that's really what struck you, the BBC was entirely convinced of its own rectitude, of its own brilliance, of its own status within the World as the pre-eminent national broadcaster in the World. That's how the BBC saw itself and it gave it an enormous self-confidence. The BBC, one felt, could do anything. It was a bit like the British Empire under Victoria that anything was possible. You could build huge English buildings in the middle of Bombay if you felt like it, you could send your soldiers out, in pith helmets and red uniforms, over the Khyber Pass and the British Broadcasting Corporation felt exactly the same about itself and there is an enormously self-confident and powerful organisation and when I came into it, it was full of, if you like, old fashioned people, certainly people in suits, Aeolian Hall from whence the BBC Light Entertainment emanated. Everybody wore a tie and military people appeared to be in charge. Karn Mahoney was in charge of Light Entertainment and you asked yourself "what is this man's background, he's obviously military?"…….. he was all tweed suit and one felt that one should salute him really and……. he ran the place a bit like a battalion, the guards battalion , and I'm sure he'd been in the guards, he did carry himself with that extraordinary military bearing. I don't know what his experience as a light entertainment producer was and of course everybody was in the Free Masons as well – you learned that very early, but Theolian Hall was free Masonic lodge really and you needn't expect to get on awfully well if you hadn't been a Free Mason, but they were such an extraordinary band of people, there was an air of raffishness as well, they all wore suits and they all wore ties and they had a military way about them and there was a very, very distinct pecking order,

……but also they were in show business so you had that dichotomy like almost contradiction between these people who carried themselves so well and spoke rather well…. "like that"….. and crisply, but also would go out and get absolutely magidee meldy rotten drunk whenever the mood took them …….and quite often the mood would take them – so there were drinking clubs. One of the features that struck me originally, when I came to work for the BBC, was the number of drinking clubs that were around both Broadcasting House, Aeolian Hall and Egton House all the producers knew them. It's the very nature of broadcasting but because of its broken hours it is a dangerous business for the drink, I had plenty of experience of that when I was with RTE, but when I came to the BBC I found it was no less a feature of broadcasting which is the pubs have closed, you know in Ireland it was the Holy Hour so people would just stay in the pubs 'til the Holy Hour was over and here in various drinking places off Bond Street and Portland Place you'd go down into usually a basement and a fairly dingy one as well and there they'd be eating sausage pies and drinking pints……. the producers and the presenters.

RN
Did it feel a very alien culture to you when you arrived?

TW
It didn't feel particularly alien to me. It must have felt very alien to the boys who came off the boats. Didn't feel particularly alien to me because I had been in a semi-state structure myself with RTE which was almost like a civil service operation so ……. and it had been, RTE Irish Radio and Television, had been formulated along BBC lines and indeed for many years after the BBC abandoned those very lines RTE was still doing that kind of thing, it's freed up an awful lot now of course, but I didn't feel any great restriction, but the people were strange certainly and later on when I went to do television I found the same kind of thing, but there was an air of, as I say, complacency….. an air of "well the BBC can do anything they like", "oh for heaven's sake, you know, well he was drunk during that programme and it doesn't matter somebody will tidy it up" and somebody did because it was the BBC, standards were high.

RN
You say you didn't feel restricted, but when you were on-air it was clearly quite a controlled environment in those days you were scripted and were there rules about what you could say and what you couldn't say and what words were acceptable and what ones were taboo?

TW
It wasn't anyway strange to me when I came to the BBC because I'd been used to working with scripts in RTE, same thing you submitted your script to the head of the department who passed it and then that's what you did when you did the programme, a music programme or a magazine programme or whatever it was, everything was written down and so when I came to BBC and that was the way it was in the mid

……sixties on until, as they say, 1967 happened and things began to free up a bit so it wasn't particularly strange to me that you submitted scripts and somebody vetted them and that was that, but as they say when the pirates happened and were sunk and then came and joined the BBC, the poachers became game keepers, the BBC still didn't trust them enough, they didn't require them to write scripts, but they did put a producer in who acted in a kind of supervisory role to make sure that there was nothing untoward said. I was then unconscious of what you – because I'd been brought up in that kind of context anyway, in RTE, I knew very well what I could say and what I couldn't say….. BBC had a big problem originally and initially with the pirates and that was a hellava risk they took .

RN
In launching Radio One?

TW
In launching Radio One, it was an extraordinary risk.

RN
This was the first time the complacency had been challenged and the interesting thing, I remember you saying, it wasn't television that was being challenged, at that time, it was radio that was first challenged by others and they were nicking BBC audience - that must have been something you were very conscious of in the run up to the launch of Radio One?

TW
Out of the blue, in the sixties, the pirates suddenly arrived. Now the BBC had been used to Radio Luxemburg, could handle that, it was only on in the evening anyway and the BBC were doing their own kind of programmes in the evening …….it wasn't really denting their popular appeal, they were still getting huge listening audiences across the board from the various networks, Home and Light and Third programme. So they weren't particularly worried about that, then suddenly, I think it was a fellow called Ronan O'Reilly, an Irish fellow who'd been to the same school as me and he suddenly found this old tanker, gut bucket of a boat and stuck it in the Irish Sea, just off the Isle of Man and started broadcasting from it and then he did Radio Caroline South which was in the English Channel and then came Radio London, good idea, everybody jumped on the ban wagon, now it revolutionised popular music in this country and it happened at a time when popular music had begun to explode in this country…… The Beatles had arrived suddenly and you didn't have to listen to the BBC or Radio Luxemburg to hear it any morning suddenly it was on every day and all day and it was being played in a context and being introduced by people with whom young people could identify. BBC tried to reply, typically BBC, on a Saturday morning when they would have Brian Matthew or David Simons, but it never felt comfortable, they never really felt at home, it didn't sound right with them doing it, but that was the BBC's riposte and the penny dropped obviously as far as the BBC

…….was concerned that this was happening and they were losing audiences during the day disastrously, they were losing all their younger audience to the pirate stations, popular music which is what young people wanted to listen to so Home Service, Light Programme probably the most affected, the Third Programme probably not at all. So something had to be done and of course at the same time as the BBC felt something had to be done the Musicians' Union and the Performing Rights Society, who were never being paid, the BBC continues to pay I think it's sixty pounds every time a record is played which is an extraordinary amount money, but the pirates weren't paying anybody, they weren't paying the presenters very much either, if it comes to that, I mean they were making an awful lot of money on advertising but they weren't paying anybody so legally nobody was being paid, composers weren't being paid, the record companies weren't being paid. The record companies were in an ambiguous situation, they wanted their records played so that they could be sold …… they didn't quite know what to do, they supplied the pirates with the records, but they still weren't being paid by the pirates for the composers or the performers or indeed for their expensive printing of the records, but on the other hand the pirates were playing them so they were able to sell them in the record shops all over the place, so they had a slight difficulty. So that's how the pirates got hold of the records and they played them and played them, but eventually of course the Government, the Musicians' Union, the Performing Rights Society, the BBC altogether combined and sank the pirates.

RN
So the BBC was almost in cahoots with the Government in this?

TW
I would have thought so, I would have thought it was in everybody's interest, apart from the unfortunate listeners' who quite enjoyed the pirates I mean the young people, people of the younger generation who wanted to hear pop music all day which is what they wanted to do, it didn't serve them awfully well, but on the other hand what the BBC did was to say "look we're going to supply you with a popular music service." It was never quite the same, it never had quite the same, Radio One, never quite captured the spirit of the pirates, the joie de vivre, the madness of it, the carelessness of it, the BBC was too professional an organisation to really to do that and was still under restrictions of the Musicians' Union so for instance when I came in 1967, I used to introduce a late night show….. a proportion of the music we played had to be live music, you know had to be recorded in Maida Vale or one of the BBC studios with an orchestra with singers and all they did was, of course, cover versions of records and this existed right up in the mid seventies when I was doing then the afternoon show for Radio One and Two and then the morning show on Radio Two…… a proportion of the music was always Ray McVey or –

RN
So specially recorded for the programme as it were?

TW
Specially recorded in BBC Maida Vale Studios usually.

RN
So that move towards the recorded programming, more recorded programming, was there a resistance to that?

TW
Well I think, one has to say with the best will on the World, that those live music cover versions were never as good as the records. You weren't actually catering for the listeners, you were catering for the Musicians' Union. Somewhere along the way the BBC said no, no more, the public want to hear records and that's that.

RN
And then, of course, that meant the BBC was becoming even more important in the world of the record industry and the pop music industry – you then get into the world of the pressures that the pop industry exerted on the BBC – what are your memories of that?

TW
Well what was really interesting was that for once, once Radio One got off the ground BBC was the only game in town then as far as record companies were concerned, as far as music publishers were concerned, there was no opposition, it wasn't Radio London, Caroline any of those…… BBC. There was nothing else, don't forget there were no local regional stations, there were no commercial stations, BBC had it all to themselves and therefore became the focus of all the selling and all the merchandising that was being done by the record companies and by the music publishers. This meant that no BBC producer ever had to buy a lunch in his life or a drink and the Christmas parcels that used to come in, for producers and presenters alike, were enormous and for a long time the BBC didn't do anything about that, which was strange, because I suppose it was foreign to the BBC and anyway the producers weren't going to complain about this so there was a tremendous element of….. probably bribery and corruption is to strong a word but maybe not……and it came to a head, of course, very shortly after a few years when it turned out that at least one or two people were offering sex as a bribe…….had moved on from bottles of champagne and huge Christmas parcels to actually offering sex and naturally the tabloid press got a hold of it and an enormous scandal blew up in everybody's face. It was always an enormous source of regret to me nobody and I can say this quite frankly…..and with an element of shame, nobody ever offered me sex for playing the record, you know I thought I don't quite know how to take this, does this mean I mean nothing in the pecking order ?…….. and it was very sad a lot of people lost their jobs, lot of people lost credibility and probably not the people that should have.

RN
And did the BBC then bring in a system that made sure that – (INTERRUPTION)

TW
The BBC then brought in obviously rules and regulations that you couldn't take presents, there was no sort of overt present giving, but to be frank I would say right up on – certainly into the eighties whether might not have been overt, but there was still people getting little gifts, there were still people being taken out to lunch, I mean certainly Radio One and Two producers still didn't have to ------ producers used to have their own tables at places like Wheeler's.

RN
How do you mean their own tables?

TW
Well they went there every lunch time – they went there every lunch time either at the expense of a record company or indeed at the BBC's expense because they all had expense accounts and indeed there wasn't much work done after lunch, not in my memory of it on Radio Two and Radio One. There was a whole strand of executive producers who nobody was terribly sure what they did, they oversaw a couple of programmes each, but really there was very little for them to do and there was an enormous amount of feather bedding and this was probably true of television as well, but I was more conscious of it because I was involved in the radio more than the television I could see it on a day to day basis and there was certainly producers who – they came in about ten o'clock, did a nominal amount of work and then went off to lunch and were rarely seen again.

RN
And were these high calibre, young, thrusting people, I mean were they ……excellent and there own jobs.

TW
These were middle management people…… one could never see exactly what their qualifications to do, what their job was, that's always been the problem anyway with our business is that people get into television and get into radio……. there is no ladder – you just get in one way or the other and suddenly you find yourself an executive producer and they did their jobs, but there wasn't much to their jobs and so I think a lot needed to be addressed in the BBC, I think, even by the beginning of the eighties.

RN
So bureaucratic layers weren't something invented in the nineties?

TW
I think those particular layers weren't recognised as bureaucratic layers, but there was certainly an awful lot of dead wood and I used to be conscious of it in BBC Television as well because although people will tell you "oh we had budgets, we didn't need John Birt to come in here and show us how to run the place",

…….in fact something did need to be done, the fact there were people there who were supposed to be producing but in fact never got near it and there was the problem – there was a problem, a drink culture, there was no doubt about that, BBC Club all the rest, but you saw the same people in the BBC Club all the time.

RN
And you described them as sort of middle managers but were they set a good example by the top managers or could you see profligacy at the very top of the BBC the sort of Board of Managers, Managing Directors?

TW
I was never obviously in a position to have a look at the books or anything like that, but it seemed to me that it was almost impossible to get fired from the BBC, but there was a lot of dead wood, there were people misbehaving, there were people careless, but that was part again of a BBC that was so utterly self-confident and complacent, content in itself …all right there are a few people……oh he was drunk ….. you know ….. but his secretary, PA produced it anyway, did a very good job and so on and so on……. the editor tightened it up and it all went to bed…….. that's what they had been used to, that was the way it worked and it did work, of course, it worked extremely well, but in the BBC I was always conscious of the fact and this maybe true to day that there was no confrontation. Certain people did very well in the BBC by marching into other executives offices, flinging the door open and shouting at them and that's how you got your way. Most BBC executives, the way most things were done in the BBC, certainly in the seventies and possibly the early eighties as well, was memos – send a memo. I remember somebody being complimented, by Hugh Weldon….. I think it was Bryan Cowgill……. "yes well he maybe a little on the rough side, but he writes a damn good memo"……. and the memo was important because the memo meant you didn't have to look face to face with somebody and say "look you're not doing your job, you're going to have to be fired", but it did seem to me, at that time, that it was very hard to get fired from the BBC…..it might still be very hard….. well obviously when one looks around the BBC now you see it's still quite hard to get fired from the BBC, but maybe even more difficult now, but memos were the thing you didn't confront, but chaps like Bryan Cowgill and Paul Fox achieved what they did mainly by being tough old journalists who believed in confrontation which was foreign to most executives of the BBC they would rather you wrote a note.

RN
Let's move a little on now into the seventies because this was a point, in the BBC's history, where it became very accountability conscious and the Chairman, Duke Hussey……. he personally thought that the BBC treated its licence payers appalling. Do you agree with that?

TW
Looking back it's very hard to try and make a choice between what you thought was the better BBC. I, as a broadcaster, had such an admiration for the BBC that I liked its self-confidence, I liked the Reithian thing of "we'll tell you what you want to see, we'll tell you what you want to hear, we'll tell you what's good for you." That air of self-confidence – if a broadcasting organisation of the status of the BBC, of the stature of the BBC, doesn't have that…… it's lost. If you're going to start questioning everything you do or not relying on your people to make your decisions for you and to make your artistic decisions and to be brave and say….. "we think this'll work, we think this is got to go…… we are going to go with this"…… and that was the great thing that the BBC had which was……. that if they got an idea that they thought was good and would work they put it on the screen, or they put it on the wireless – now if it didn't work they didn't take it off they worked at it until it worked and these examples are everywhere – "The Good Life" is a good example "It Ain't Half Hot Mum" is another "Only Fools and Horses" is another one. Initially programmes that didn't work they fiddled around with them, they honed and they polished until the thing worked. Nowadays I think when one looks at it now and sees that, that confidence is gone and there's much more of an attitude of commercial television which is "if nobody's watching it take it off for heaven's sake" and I think that shows a lack of confidence in your people as well, I think that's been lost so if I was asked what I thought was the preferential thing for me at the BBC I would say, it would be …..when it had a bit more confidence, when it relied on the judgement of its people, I think there's much less of that now and much more knee jerk reaction to the failure of the programme. You've got to have confidence, BBC should have self-confidence, but as far as serving its licence fee payers –

RN
Are you sceptical of the notion of accountability does it feel a kind of -

TW
I must say that when Duke Hussey, he asked me in very early in his reign for advice because he said Princess Anne had told him that I knew everything about the BBC –

RN
She's right!

TW
So I came in to offer….. and the only advice I could offer him was the advice I offered to everybody in the BBC which was "be nice to the commissionaires and the tea ladies because they are the ones who can do you irreparable damage…… otherwise you can never get fired……. but as far as accountability goes I used to be very irritated at these programmes that we did "It's Your BBC" ……..Well the reason I – I had to front them 'cause I was the front man in those days everything BBC Television did I somehow was pushed forward to do it and the sort of combination of Del Winton and Ian Wright of my day and so I came on and I would do these things but I remember having a conversation with Michael Checkland and saying "Michael why are you doing this?"

……and they……..all of them even, Bill Cotton who I would have thought be the last man to actually agree with this…they were all convinced of the rectitude, of the correctness of accountability on the screen and on the radio, but on the screen mainly to show the Great British public where the money was going, what they were doing and I just thought it was a mistake because all you ever did was make yourself vulnerable….It's one of those things….. you couldn't win. The public were not going to look at it with any great interest and they certainly weren't going to take in the great details of your fiscal husbandry and the press were going to kill it…… and that of course is what happened, every little tick was taken out and laughed at, but they persisted in that for quite a while and then it disappeared and I thought a good thing to…… but I could never understand why the BBC felt it necessary to do that. If you're a confident organisation you assume that the public have confidence in you. Once you start telling the public that you're insecure about yourself and that you feel you should be telling them what you're doing that makes them feel a little uneasy about the whole thing. The British public would certainly prefer……. I can only speak of the British public because I suppose I have many millions of them listening to me every morning and I get a reaction from them in their thousands every week – they prefer a BBC that was self-confident, that did give them what it, the BBC, thought they would enjoy rather than referring back to the public all the time in these ridiculous focus groups and seeing what the public might like, because the focus group is anyway completely devalued now because it's proven that all it ever does is tell you what you've already seen so it can't possibly give you any new ideas….. all it can ever do say "let's have more gardening programmes".

RN
But there's an odd contradiction in here because the research, the current research……. the audience say the BBC is safe, arrogant, old fashioned and out of touch which in its own is fairly damning and yet if you take something like your own programme or "Children In Need" nothing could more in touch with the audience than those two programmes. Now how is it that the audience generally says that of the BBC and yet, you know you, I speak of two programmes that your very closely involved with are incredibly in touch with the audience?

TW
I think that if you ask people their opinions on anything they'll give you an opinion…….so they will always assume that you want a critical opinion. So if you turn to people and say "what do you think of the BBC?" there going to say "Oh yeh I like the BBC, you know I love it for sport and I think it's wonderful for big occasions and all this kind of thing", but then they'll have to say…… but!…… because they won't feel that they're giving an opinion unless they say…… so they're probably going to say "arrogant, smug"……. yea it is perhaps, I mean it used to be smug and arrogant, but these are small things. I honestly don't think that you should be asking people things like this because ….it only confuses them.

I do not believe for instance in the Government asking people their opinions on things and whether they should do something. That's why you vote people into the Parliament…. you have enough faith in them, you voted for them, they're supposed to take your decisions for you. There's no point going to the people and saying "would you rather have a Euro?"…….. they don't know enough about it to give you an opinion anyway, but this I don't mean that everybody is ignorant but I'm saying is that the whole point about is it that the Government is supposed to be…… people in Parliament are supposed to be better informed that's what they do and it's the same thing if the BBC's forever turning to people and asking them what do they think of them. All its breeds is insecurity and a gratuitous subjective criticism, it's after all only one person's opinion.

RN
Let's move onto the late eighties and the arrival of John Birt in the BBC and one of the things, one of the first things that happened, when John came, was that Michael Grade left and I think I'm right in saying that disappointed you?

TW
I well remember when Bill Cotton was wooing Michael Grade – Michael Grade had gone across to produce in Los Angeles, which I think was probably a mistake nobody should ever try and produce in Los Angeles even with all his talents, and I happened to be in Los Angeles at the time because I was fronting radio's coverage of the Olympic Games 1984 and I remember walking down to the hotel, in Los Angeles, where Michael Grade and Bill Cotton were having discussions and I arrived there, it was a very warm day, it was only two blocks away from where I was and I was covered in perspiration and Michael Grade said: "What's wrong with you?" I said: "I've just walked down" he said: "In Los Angeles" he said: "you pay somebody to walk for you." That was the beginning of it and it was Bill Cotton who then approached me to do "Wogan" and he saw it as a late night show, Michael Grade didn't, Michael Grade saw it as something to break audiences at 7 o'clock, the same way that he was hoping to do with "East Enders"…… which did worked for an awful long time, it certainly has continued to do with "East Enders", but it worked for a long time with Wogan as well…..but we started Wogan and Michael started to run BBC……. and appointed beneath Michael Grade, by Bill Cotton specifically, were Jonathan Powell, as Head of BBC One, and AlanYentob, as Head of BBC Two. Then unfortunately everything fell apart –

RN
Three days later.

TW
Yeh and deputy was, you know – John Birt was appointed Deputy to Michael Checkland, he insisted on having a say so in programmes…….. now he had been junior to Michael Grade, in London Weekend, and Michael Grade obviously resented the fact that certainly if he had an idea everything had to be cleared through the new Deputy Director General.

Michael didn't like the idea and left. Then Bill Cotton had an enormous problem. He lost his Director of Programmes. He had two Heads of Programmes whom he had never actually really thought of as Controllers of Programmes. They were people who were good at their job, but who were going to go with their ideas to Michael Grade who, in Bill's opinion, had a better view of what constituted Light Entertainment and what would be acceptable to a BBC One and a BBC Two audience. Bill was left without Michael Grade and Jonathan Powell was made Controller of Programmes for BBC One and Alan Yentob Controller of Programmes for BBC Two. Jobs for which Bill had never actually designed them, but he had no alternative after Michael Grade went. It was a disappointing thing that Michael Grade did leave…… and I think ultimately professionally for Michael as well. I wish he'd stayed on – he may have been everything we expected of him, he might have been a disappointment, but there was still this extraordinary thing and it always does strike me……. and it's a thing that John Birt never understood is the sheer unpredictability of what we do…….. that you cannot tell what's going to work until you actually do it and that it is no use drawing graphs and asking everybody in the world, you've just got to do it, you've got to trust your people to do it and then it'll either work or it won't……. and the chance of it working are about one in three …….because people's opinion is subjective. I mean you just never know – I mean Hollywood is the best example of it….you can do small budget movies…. suddenly be an enormous success, you can spend millions and get all the stars in the world to do a big movie and nobody will watch it…. and I think that's the problem for John who always had to face and could never really face 'cause he didn't really understand it. But when we started "Wogan" neither Michael Grade nor Bill Cotton were quite sure – who they wanted. They really wanted me to do a kind of talk show, but they weren't sure what it was going to be ……and they never were sure and maybe that's a good thing about television – it worked anyway.

RN
But you are entering into a period here where John Birt had a huge impact on the organisation across the thirteen years that led up to the turn of the century, I mean how would you assess and describe the impact on the BBC, he's impact on the BBC?

TW
I think obviously John Birt, the more the years go by and indeed for his tenure in the BBC, was perceived as an eminence gris……. the nature of the man he seemed to me
TAPE ONE RUN OUT AT THIS POINT – ONTO TAPE TWO

RN
I was talking about, what I call the Birt years, really from 1987 to the turn of the century and he had a huge impact on the organisation I'd just like you to quantify in your view what was his impact?

TW
I think that John Birt, whom I knew before he came to the BBC…… vaguely, and he seemed a pleasant man…….. now as he grew in the BBC and became an object of criticism and began to be perceived as an eminence gris really, great sort of Damocles hanging over the BBC…. and subsequently I think history will be very unkind to him for the same reasons. He seemed to me, as its bound to happen, to adopt a siege mentality. He went into himself and I would say he began to become a bit like say Margaret Thatcher…. that would only listen to himself would not listen to a cabinet, became destructful if you like of other peoples' opinions because he became so embattled….. and he did. He came to the BBC, I think, with a very clear idea that the BBC needed to be reformed. His perception would have been, much the same as mine which was that this is an arrogant, self-satisfied organisation. He would have seen that there was lot of fat that needed to be trimmed off, that there were a lot of people who were feather bedded…. and he would have been perfectly right in seeing that. The problem was, I think, he applied his rigour too sternly without any warmth, without getting in touch with his people. He lost the affection and he lost the support, very early on, of his staff. Now anybody who comes in as a reformer is bound to lose some affection, is bound to lose loyalty, but he didn't try and compensate at all for this loss of confidence, this loss of loyalty, this loss of affection. The one thing I think that I would criticise him more than anything else for would be for his undermining of this self-confidence which is I think is so important in the BBC. The individual self-confidence, the people that I would work with, the studio managers, the technical operators. When I first came to the BBC these were people who weren't being paid very much, who working long hours, but who A….. loved what they did, were prepared to spend long hours unpaid to get something right because they believed that BBC standards are higher than anybody elses and the most important thing was they believed that they were the best because they had got into the BBC, they were working for the BBC, as T.O.s, as P.A.s, as cameramen, as editors, as whatever. Now what John did was undermine their confidence in themselves by generally going outside, by instead of saying ….."you're my people – alright I will have to get rid of some dead wood here – you're my people" or "I trust you – you come up with ideas, you put the programmes together, I trust you to do the right thing, I trust you to make the right programmes." Well he didn't, he moved out into areas of new management, if you like, into public consultation, into structures. It was part of his training, he was an engineer and ……I suppose this will always be levelled at him that he did believe that everything could be done by graphs. He did think that if he went out, asked the public, had enough committees, put enough people in place, had enough meetings…… had enough meetings about meetings…… that eventually people would come up with perfect programmes that the public would immediately respond to.

RN
And part of your argument there is that he didn't trust the very staff that had to deliver what he wanted?

TW
He didn't trust them enough….he may have trusted them …… but he didn't give them the impression that he trusted them. He was a reformer and as I have said reformers have to reform and there was a need to reform….the BBC was fat and complacent, he needed to weed out a lot of stuff…….. but he didn't carry his staff with him.

RN
Your phraseology from your own book……. you say "he made the place very mechanistic driven by focus groups he thought you could run it like an engineering business…..just put in the structures and it will all happen – the result was insecurity, ……he created a huge administration and damaged the creative process, he made it very arithmetic and took away the risk element."

TW
Yeh – I think what he - and he after all he was a enormously experienced in the making of television programmes – he tried, I think, to cut out the risk element in the making of television particularly….. and you can't….. it is a creative process, it can't be done by graphs, it can't be done mathematically. You have to, in the end, trust the people making the programmes, they will produce them and some will work and some won't. I don't think he ever accepted that principle. He couldn't understand why everything didn't work and that was why he kept putting people between the programmes and himself, or between the programmes and the controllers. I remember being at a lunch with John and various people, there was some producers who were there and presenters…… and a producer on BBC Two said: "I have no point of reference" he said: "I have no one to talk to. I don't know whether I'm doing the right thing or the wrong thing. I can't talk to the Controller of Programmes." And Matthew Bannister, who was at the far end of the table and was an acolyte of John Birt's and indeed invented many of the phrases that were used, he said: "Ah well I'm going to solve that" he said "we're putting somebody else" he said "in between" he said "the producers and the controllers so you can actually talk to them and they'll talk to the controllers." And of course this wasn't what was needed – what was needed was that poor producer to be able to go to the Head of Light Entertainment, to the head of his department and say "look is this….. is this alright, should I be doing this….. what do you think?" And so…..it has always been….it's an age old problem with the BBC….it wasn't an invention in a sense of John Birt. You could never get a reaction….. you never knew whether you were doing the right thing or the wrong thing. You still don't.

RN
Do you think something was irredeemably lost during that period?

TW
Yeh I think spirit. It's a hard thing to define, but as I identify it, it's the people that I work with and what happened to them and their spirit. There are still, of course, great people in the BBC, the majority of people you work with will still go the extra mile to make the thing work – they don't have to, but they still do it, it's still there, but there is a general loss and because of what is seen as good husbandry, what I perceive now is…… although there's been a lot of dead wood cut away……. there may have been too much dead wood cut away….. because I will walk into a studio as I have this morning and find that there isn't a microphone there. Now that would never happen in the old BBC because there would be somebody checking the studio to make sure that the studios were there and in perfect working order in case of an emergency. So there's no microphone and because there isn't a backup there was no studio manager – studio manager…… again not the BBC's fault….. the trains don't work properly these days…… so there is no standby person either.

RN
In fairness, of course….. this isn't John Birt's BBC now it's Greg Dyke's BBC and it's a BBC that is better off financially than it has been for many, many years to such an extent that it's now launching new radio and television channels, but you're saying you didn't have a microphone in the studio this morning and the carpet was threadbare.

TW
Wasn't it Duke Hussey who said that the BBC was awash with money? The BBC is awash with money and always has been. There is a lot of money in the BBC. This is not a good thing. I don't think this is a particularly good example of good husbandry if you have an awful lot of money to spend and unfortunately the BBC of its nature is full of rumours, but there appears to be an incredible wastage of money going on in this interplay between White City and Broadcasting House where people leave Broadcasting House to set up in the new building of White City and we suddenly find two or three years later they're all coming back to Broadcasting House. I think at a cost of millions. The BBC has an awful lot of money, but the problem is that when there is going to be – it's like any other organisation I think - when there are cuts to be made it's tea ladies, commissionaires, technical operators, studio managers who get cut……. not middle management, senior management, heads of department they're not the people who leave, but I think that there is or there appears to be or there has been slightly too much cutting, there's been a lot of wastage, a lot of money wasted on schemes that haven't worked.

RN
And yet again, just staying with the Birt years for a moment, there are those who believe quiet passionately that John Birt saved, literally saved the BBC…..that such was the arrogance and lack of accountability of the BBC and such was the scorn and dislike for the BBC amongst politicians and this is especially during, I accept during the Thatcher years, that that BBC was in real danger in the late eighties and the early nineties of being broken up by Thatcher if John had not come in and as they would see it saved it?

TW
Yea…… the problem was – I remember Matthew Bannister getting up as Head of Radio One saying "I'm going to change Radio One" he said "and I know I'm going to lose sixty per cent of the audience." I thought only somebody in the BBC could possibly say that and the reason he said it was Margaret Thatcher was in power and Margaret Thatcher was saying…….and she was saying a lot about BBC but specifically about Radio One she did not see why the BBC should be doing popular music. Commercial Radio was doing popular music perfectly well as far as she could see. So the BBC was in danger certainly of losing a network and that was what Matthew Bannister and John Birt did ……they tried to make it more cutting edge and less popular because commercial stations were perceived as doing the popular and that was the problem. John Birt came along and was seen as somebody the BBC had brought into position to overcome the strictures of Margaret Thatcher – to keep the BBC from Margaret Thatcher……and only Margaret Thatcher…… 'cause she wasn't listening to anybody then except herself, from breaking it up into various constituents of free enterprise pots……. and I would say that probably he deserved a deal of credit for having fought off the initial – but he didn't have to fight it off for very long because Margaret Thatcher lost her job and so the necessity for the Birtian attitudes and the Birtian creation of all sorts of strange things like the internal market wasn't necessary after a year or two because John Major's attitude was completely different to the BBC.

RN
But also I think you're saying that it wasn't just what he set out to achieve, it was really the style of how he achieved it that you take issue with?
TW
I think that it's not John Birt's fault that he didn't emanate much warmth, but I think somebody else might have been – somebody like a Michael Grade or a Bill Cotton would have exuded more humanity, would have been able to do…….. but possibly wouldn't have been able to do the things John did, because John did a lot of good things and did have to tighten up. Unfortunately like – like it's the old cliché…… as with Margaret Thatcher you become so consumed in your job and because – and consumed in your own rectitude that you don't listen to anybody else and you continue to follow the line that you think is correct although everybody else is saying don't do this. I mean the classic example was the internal market which John set up along National Health Service lines. The National Health Service abandoned it after a couple of years as not being workable and certainly not being a fruitful way to go…… however John persisted with it and it is at the root of what is wrong with a lot at the BBC still…… because there is the false economy of Television Centre with all these studios empty – empty because they have to work on a commercial basis so they have to justify if you're a producer you want to use that studio and BBC says, well BBC Studio Resources say "well that will cost you such and such" and you say "No, no I'm a BBC producer, but according to the internal market I can go outside and use another studio which I can get cheaper."

Now this has created a completely false economy within the BBC. It's meant that you have loads of empty studios which should be used and are in fact a total waste of money. So the internal market, I think, was a mistake and has been a sort of crippling factor.

RN
Although John would argue that in fact it released vast sums of money that he then turned round and put into programmes…….. that would be his take on it.

TW
I think you'd probably get some arguments about that, that the vast sums of money sometimes were seen as salaries and all the rest of it, but like anything else I'm always extremely chary about people giving me figures – they can be taken from other sources – to say that these were spent on programmes – well were they really, what programmes were they spent on? I'm not sure about that. I'm sure, from my own point of view, that this was a false economy….. that it seemed like a very good idea. Like the Napoleonic Law. At the time seemed like a good idea, but take it a generation and you realise that it doesn't work and I don't think the internal market worked for the BBC – I think it's a great pity. It also had the effect of undermining the BBC's cohesion as a unit. The fact that everybody felt part of this great big BBC and so if we did "Children In Need" we didn't have to pay the cameraman, we didn't have to pay for the studios…… they were part of the BBC. If you wanted an orchestra you went to the BBC orchestra, you didn't have to pay for the BBC orchestra it was part of the BBC and that may have led to certain hiccups in economics, but on balance it was probably the best way to go for an organisation like the BBC.

RN
As we speak there is a new Director General, he's not that new he's been here for two years, Greg Dyke. Now when Greg arrived he said he'd become very concerned about the culture that he found at the BBC and you know this year he's launched a campaign "Cut the crap, make it happen", but he did find an organisation, in his view, there was a rag bag of cynics, whingers and moaners. Does he exaggerate?
TW
He probably doesn't, but that's the essence of any big organisation. Greg hasn't run a big organisation. BBC is huge…….. in my opinion now too big for one man. I can't see….. you have to delegate authority to so many people now if you have BBC Worldwide, you have BBC Choice, you've BBC Prime, you have all the digital services, you can find….. you've got growing radio digital networks. How can one man keep an eye on the ball, on all those balls in the air, you can't do it. Now you've got to, as I say, have lots of very, very competent senior people under you. It's not the same as it was in what could be thought "the good old days" – it was easy – it was easy for Director Generals in the fifties, the sixties and earlier on. I mean you'd only got what, three, four networks on radio and one, two networks on television. Now look at it.

It's almost impossible to hold together and of course the BBC has always been full of whingers and moaners, but that's because it's the kind of organisation it is. We own it. I pay a licence fee, I'm entitled to moan and so is everybody who works for the BBC, they work, but they also pay a licence fee. It's not the same as a commercial organisation. In a way, in a sense that is what is always made it great…… is that people feel enough about it to be involved in it and to want it to improve – you can't possibly say you do not want people, who are working in the BBC, to criticise it. It's not the same, it's not the same as working for London Weekend, Carlton Television or Pearson. It's our BBC.

RN
Well as you know one of these dictats, this year, was telling presenters and indeed the staff that it was not acceptable to go on public platforms or be quoted in the press criticising the organisation and as he would have it "damaging its reputation"?

TW
I don't think presenters, working for the BBC, should have to listen to strictures like that, I think if you have an opinion you should express it and the BBC does not employ somebody like because they love me, they employ me because I'm successful at what I do because I get a large radio audience. I'm grateful to the BBC for giving me a platform to do this kind of thing, but my listeners would not respect me if I didn't have, the reason they listen to me, those who choose to and of course there's huge majority who don't, but those who do choose to listen to me for what I say, for what I am and to turn round to your presenters and people who work and say "keep your mouth shut we're paying you." "OK don't pay me I'll walk away."

RN
He would say of course you should be critical of the organisation, but be critical within, don't be critical to the outside world.

TW
He would say that, yes, be critical within but who are you going to be critical to? I've never seen Greg Dyke come into my studio once in two years, he's never asked me my opinion on anything. That goes back to the Birtian thing….. who are you going to say or give your opinions to – your producer? Your producer is not going to pass that on, he's not going to turn round and say "oh by the way Terry was saying the other day" ….he's not going to turn to the controller and say: "By the way Terry was saying the other day he thinks this, that and the other" ….that's not the way – you know what I mean? The fact is we're in the public eye ……now occasionally presenters maybe in a public context where they say about the BBC that gets reported. It doesn't damage the BBC in any way. It's a subjective opinion, it may reflect – it will only in a sense have an affect on the BBC if the opinion is shared by the public.

RN
I think you're also arguing that it's a positive strength that an organisation can take that kind of criticism from within.

TW
I think the BBC has to do that. I think the BBC is not a commercial organisation owned by shareholders – it's owned by the public, the public subscribe to the BBC and therefore the public are entitled to express an opinion about it.

RN
You came at that from a slightly different angle in your book. You said: "With the passage of years the BBC has taken itself increasingly seriously and is much more given to introversion and navel gazing than it was eighteen years ago." What do you mean by that?

TW
I think the BBC has become much more self conscious with the lack of self confidence that has been diminished over the years, so the BBC is more sensitive to criticism. In the old days the BBC wouldn't pay any attention to that kind of criticism, you know well it's just an opinion we'll carry on, we will do what we think is right for the Great British public. The BBC should not be seen as too sensitive, as too worried about what people say about it…… that's the kind of thing that leads to all sorts of various strata being created in management to cope with the public opinion and making sure that everybody is alright and everybody's OK about the BBC and everybody thinks the BBC is wonderful. You're never going to find yourself in that happy situation – the BBC will continue to be a wonderful organisation and a huge and a marvellous national broadcaster, but it has to be prepared, of course, to accept criticism. As far as commercial broadcasting organisations are concerned they don't care about criticism all they care about is whether they get viewers or listeners or advertising revenue. In the BBC the revenue comes from the public and the public are going to have an opinion and I think it's not disloyal if a presenter expresses an opinion about what's wrong with the BBC……. and I don't think presenters go around doing it all the time anyway, you know I'm not forever on a soap box giving out about the BBC I wrote a book in which I made a couple of mild comments about the BBC, but the BBC has become hyper sensitive about it all. I didn't say anything enormously anarchic or iconoclastic about the BBC I merely made a few points and one would think that I'd gone round the glass house hurling stones in all directions so it's best not too become to sensitive about these things.

RN
One of the other things you say in your book is it has a real sense of being an uncaring organisation in many ways which I think to some people outside would be a surprise. "The BBC's attitude to its staff and contracted artistes has always been cavalier and remote. Nobody bothers to tell you whether you're doing a good, bad or indifferent job."

TW
Well that's true – the problem about the BBC – this is not a Birtian thing – you never knew and you'd still never know with the BBC whether you're doing well or whether you're not with the BBC management structure and philosophy has never been awfully good at encouragement. Back to the old days one should feel privileged to work for the BBC. Well everyone does feels privileged to work for the BBC, but management was never awfully good at conveying to its presenters, or its producers, or its technical people that they thought they were doing a very good job. They expected them to do a good job so there is no need for a lot of back slapping and things. I suppose it goes back to the original structure of the BBC ….done along slightly militaristic lines, you know and……. you are here to do the job, you've done the job, what do you want a slap on the back, no we'll tell you if you've done it wrong of course…….. and that's always been the way the BBC is and has been for years and years that they tell you when you've got it wrong, but they are not awfully good – it's a slight generalisation because of course there's always been people in the BBC who are good at man management, who are good at communicating whether they think programmes are good, bad or indifferent, but it goes back to that chap sitting at the table with John Birt saying he had no idea who to talk to, no idea whether he was doing the right thing or not, no feed back. That is as I say not a Birtian thing that's always been there in the BBC and it's a paternalistic organisation that does care enormously for its staff when they reach the end of their years with the BBC. The BBC pension scheme is beyond doubt…… it doesn't have an equivalent of excellence anywhere, but gradually as the BBC loses staff and decides to do without staff, its structure will change – structure is changing because everybody is on a contract now, very few people – people who are on BBC staff are in a minority now and that of course will lead to a change in corporate mentality, a change in the mentality of the people who work for the BBC.

RN
Just finally Terry taking the militaristic parallel would you like to have been the commanding officer?

TW
The thing is that your life, certainly mine, is formed by what you do. When I worked in a bank I could analyse a balance sheet and I could pass the banking exams and do all those kind of things and I might have made a decent manager some day, but when I started to do what I did I found over they years that what I did, I did best spontaneously making things up as I went along so I lost the capacity to take pains, I lost the will or the wish to organise other people or to indeed organise myself to any great extent because everything I was doing I was doing on my toes, everything I was doing on radio I was making up as I went along, the same with television I could never bear to an awful lot of rehearsals or anything like that so I got out of in a sense the habit of preparation and so therefore production so I never really wanted to be a producer all I ever wanted to do was doing what I was doing.

If my life had taken me in another way yes I think I would have liked to perhaps tried, but I think rather like being a prime minister, being Director General of the BBC is ultimately a task for which you are going to get criticised and I think very few ever escape without ultimate criticism and sometimes lack of respect – it's a bit like being the England football manager – they all start well and they get a couple of good results, but they all end up being called turnips and I think if you put yourself up on top of the parapet of Broadcasting House behind us you stand a terrific chance of getting your head shot off in the end.

RN
Terry Wogan thank you very much.

TW
It's a pleasure.