

Till Death Us Do Part exploded onto the BBC on the 6th June 1966.

It ran for seven series, finishing on 17/12/75.

The show was briefly reborn on ITV in 1981 and then was reincarnated as 'In Sickness and in Health' running from 1985 to 1992.

From beginning to end the show was written by Johnny Speight.

Speight came from humble origins (His first sold joke: They've pulled down my old house and built a slum).

Before writing Till Death he had written over 500 scripts for Arthur Haynes among a host of other comedians.

I probably don't need to tell you that from beginning to end Till Death was highly controversial.

Story of Alf Garnett (Warren Mitchell), his wife (Dandy Nicholls), kids (Una Stubbs and Tony Booth) living a working class life in Wapping. Alf is a Working Class Tory, set against the socialism of Stubbs and Booth. He is a royalist, pro Empire, sexist and racist.

Whilst nowadays it is perceived as such because of its employment of ideas of race (which is what this paper will be about) it is worth noting that most of the show's critics did not focus on any racial issues.

Led by Mary Whitehouse's Clean Up TV/ Viewers and Listeners Association, Till Death was attacked for its bad language (the 'bloody' count), for its blasphemy (the biggest controversy that I have seen is over Alf and Mike's discussion of the sexual morality of the Virgin Mary), and for its repeated attacks on politicians (eg) Calling Ted Heath a 'grammar school twit'.

Thus, putting race at the forefront of the issues that made Till Death controversial is a matter of historical choice, speaking more of our values and beliefs than those of its contemporaries.

That said, I will argue in this paper that the creation, popularity and longevity of this series offers the historian a window into the race relations history of the 1960s and 1970s

Firstly a few words on the legitimacy of approaching social history in this way. On what we can hope to learn from a sitcom.

In Comic Transactions, James English has explored the way that humour functions in our society, specifically on its relationship with social conflict which he argues, is the very essence of what ultimately makes comedy funny.

'Comic practice is always on some level or in some measure an assertion of group against group, an effect and an event of struggle, a form of symbolic violence. The inescapable heterogeneity of society, the ceaseless conflict of social life, the multiple and irreconcilable patterns of identification within which relationships of solidarity and hierarchy must be negotiated - these are what our laughter is "about".'

Andy Medhurst

'If you want to understand the preconceptions and power structures of a society or social group, there are few better ways than by studying what it laughs at'. 'Comedy is about power: there are those who laugh and those who are laughed at'.

It can thus be argued that ideas of race on TV carry their resonance far beyond the medium of entertainment.

Stuart Hall contends that representations 'organise and regulate social practices, influence our conduct and consequently have real, practical effects'.

Bell Hooks concurs in regards to racial images:

'There is a direct and abiding connection between the maintenance of white supremacist patriarchy in this society and the institutionalization via mass media of specific images, representations of race, of blackness that support and maintain the oppression, exploitation, and overall domination of all black people'.

The extent to which TV really affects wider issues is debatable and should not be assumed or exaggerated. However, the opposite assumption, that TV has little or no influence, is equally inappropriate.

AS Sarita Malik reminds us:

'to assume that television simply reflects what is going on "out there", overlooks the fact that representation does not merely reflect, but is an active part of society'.

Back to comedy, Ross is surely right to point out that 'joking inevitably presupposes attitudes'.

So what were the 'attitudes' of the period as regards race relations?

The tone of the period, I would argue, was set by the violence and conflict which led to the passing of the Commonwealth Immigrants Act of 1962.

This Act served as a departure point in British immigration policy closing the door on unrestricted Black commonwealth immigration which had been taking place in an accelerated fashion since the late 1940s (the British Nationality Act had explicitly given any Commonwealth citizen the right to live in the UK).

Coming after racial rioting in Notting Hill Gate and Nottingham the Macmillan government utilised very real levels of public disaffection with immigration to enact what was basically racist 'restrictionist' legislation to control the number of Black people in the UK.

At the core of this agenda was the idea of Black racial difference.

As Hampshire has noted, concepts of British immigration policy moved in the sixties from the idea of 'citizenship' to the idea of 'belonging'.

Put simply, many people felt that irrespective of the passport that they may have held, black people had no business residing in Britain.

Such an agenda fuelled Peter Griffiths 1964 'If you want a nigger for your neighbour vote liberal or labour' Smethwick election victory.

It also led to another Commonwealth Immigration Act in 1968 which attempted to prevent the immigration of British passport holding Kenyan Asians, who were British citizens but were perceived not, in Hampshire's language, to belong.

1968 of course also saw Enoch Powell deliver his notorious 'Rivers of Blood' speech to a Birmingham Conservative Association.

This was then a period where race relations were, to put it mildly, strained.

At the root of government and popular concerns was the idea that Black and Asian immigrations were inherently different and were a threat to the racial core of Britishness.

But these fears do not sum up the period in themselves.

In what Shamit Saggat has called a 'limitation-integration equation' there was also a desire amongst policy makers and much of wider society to integrate and protect the immigrants that were here.

Not everyone supported Griffiths and Powell. The 1960s thus brought (in 1965 and 1968) Britain's first Race Relations Acts, aiming to prevent public discrimination.

Whilst Zig Layton Henry is no doubt right that this law was 'declaratory rather than effective or efficient' it is at least indicative of a desire in some quarters to mend race relations and lend some support to Britain's growing black and Asian communities.

And this is where the story of Till Death Us Do Part begins.

The relationship between comedy and real life was not lost on the Till Death team. Speight and the BBC, along with the actors in the sitcom, believed that the show could and should have a social impact.

The BBC had an agenda to this end. Put simply, the organisation had decided at the highest level that it had a responsibility to promote good race relations.

Lord Hill told the Guild of Editors in 1968:

'In talking about the BBC's obligation to be impartial I ought to make it clear that we are not impartial about everything. There are, for instance, two very important exceptions. We are not impartial about crime...nor are we impartial about race hatred'.

However, voices within the BBC perceived a counter pressure. In a memorandum prepared for submission to the Annan Committee on the future of broadcasting in 1975 titled 'Broadcasting and minorities' it was noted that the BBC:

...believes in exercising the greatest responsibility and restraint lest it exacerbate racial tensions. It believes in taking every reasonable opportunity to represent racial equality in Britain and accepts the importance of challenging stereotypes and focusing attention on

injustices. However, it does not believe that it is the BBC's job to subordinate its pursuit of truth and of truthful representation to a policy of audience manipulation even for so meritorious a cause as racial equality. Its research work suggests that, even were it to do so, such a policy would not succeed.

Now, to me, Johnny Speight and Till Death Us Do Us Part need to be read as an amalgamation of both these aims. The idea was to represent the truth about society and to push anti-racist education.

Speight never tired of telling people that the programme was designed to undermine prejudice.

Responding to criticism from the Community Relations Commission in 1975 that the show reinforced racism he told the Sun:

'They have completely missed the show's point...

When a coloured person is involved with Garnett, it's Alf who ends up looking stupid and the coloured person who appears clever.

There is still deep-seated racial prejudice in this country, based on ignorance and fear. But my show brings it out in the open and tries to make people realise how silly it is.

Before Till Death, you wouldn't have known it existed as far as TV was concerned. At least people are laughing at it now'.

In line with claiming anti-racist educational function, Speight argued that the show held up a mirror to society.

In his autobiography in 1991, he explained his hostility towards his growing number of critics:

'Most of these liberal zealots, who attack me and my writing with such fundamentalist fervour, appear to lack any kind of subtlety of mind. They miss the satire entirely, and blame me, as if I had endowed Alf Garnett, and other characters I may write, with all the unpleasantness they reveal. It seems they would prefer me not to draw attention to the nastier, more disagreeable side of people. They would prefer, if I must draw my characters from life, not to draw them with warts and all. How they expect me, or any other writer, to record truthfully all those bigoted, illiberal chauvinists and other xenophobic half-wits that plague us, without sowing them in full cry, is beyond me. Never mind, eh? You can't please 'em all'.

To help consider whether Speight had a case here let's consider some of the writing. What did it say about the idea of black/ white essential difference, about the potential assimilability of Black people into Britain?

Now at this point I would like to show you several examples but because of time I will focus on one which I have taken right from the middle of the initial run.

Series 3, Episode 3: The Blood Donor broadcast on the 12/1/68

In this episode Alf goes to offer his blood and makes the following observations.

Firstly, topical as ever, Alf comments on the failure of the first human to human heart transplant which had taken place the previous month in South Africa.

The patient was a Jew, Louis Washkansky, and lived for 18 days before dying of pneumonia.

Alf's wisdom on this was as follows (and this is the script, not necessarily how Mitchell read the lines):

'I mean, take your Washkanski...I mean, why did he die eh? I mean the operation was successful wasn't it? Eh? But the reason why he died was...because his own body rejected the foreign heart your doctors put in it. See...Your Washkanski was a Jew...an if your Doctors had...had a Jewish heart to put in him...he'd have been alright...'Cos his body would accept that you see...'

'Well, I mean...of course they're gonna reject a Christian heart...because it isn't what they call Kosher. I mean, the same way a Christian would reject a Jewish heart...annit?'

Alf goes on in this episode to see a black man giving blood and he comments as follows:

'...they ought to label it...black blood for your blacks...and white blood for your whites'.

'Coon blood is coon blood. An its only fit for coons. I mean, they start bunging that in white people...an who can tell what's going to happen...we could all turn black'.

So how is this anti-racist education?

Well, Speight would argue that the idiocy of Alf in this instance would make people check their own prejudices. That you would hear this nonsense and realise that the bit of Alf in you was a prat.

To some people this was clear and evident. Commenting on the 'Talkback' programme that followed the episode one viewer wrote in to say:

'I thought last week's programme of the Garnett family did more to root out false unscientific ideas about blood, race and heredity than any number of earnest biology programmes and though most of the people who voted for the programme in Talkback wouldn't realise this perhaps the next time they find themselves expressing this sort of belief they may feel uncomfortably like little Alfs and Elses and stop to think a moment. I was glad the family were their real nasty selves this week.

Other viewers, however, were less impressed:

'This sort of material is alien to BBC Television Standards, and after watching the programme 'Talkback' last Sunday evening, I am compelled to register my protest in view of what was said, and it was a very sad reflection to hear a coloured fellow human-being say that the immigrants thought that we had something to offer them in Great Britain, but this was not so after seeing the disgusting behaviour and comments by Garnett at the Blood Donor session'.

Because of time constraints you will have to take it from me that this mixed bag of comments were commonplace on Till Death.

Some viewers 'got the point' as Speight wanted, some did not.

In 1973 the BBC commissioned an Audience Research Report to try to find out exactly what impact the show was having, amid fears, in the language of the report itself, that it may be 'backfiring'.

'An Audience Research Report: 'Till Death Us Do Part' As Anti-Prejudice Propaganda: A Study of the Relationships between viewing the series, perceptions of the Garnett family and attitudes such as authoritarianism and racial prejudice', March 1973

The results here were interesting as viewers were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with a series of statements. On the character of Alf, viewers were asked if they agreed that he was:

'A foul-mouthed ignorant fool unfortunately typical of too many people in this country'.

Of regular viewers, only 36% agreed with this statement. 59% disagreed.

'People as stupid and ignorant as him make progress impossible'.

Of regular viewers, 33% agreed, but 62% disagreed'.

'Although his views are too extreme most of the time, some of the things he says are true'.

Regulars: 84% agree, 10% disagree.

'Right more often than he's wrong'.

Regs: 45% agree, 46% disagree.

Now I am presently this data selectively.

Along with the statistics above viewers also agreed that Alf was so extreme in his views that he was just a joke and that he was misguided but harmless.

However, if I am presenting the data selectively, it's nothing on how the BBC presented it.

They concluded from this report that:

'Most people (5 out of 6) see Alf Garnett as a harmless buffoon and there is no evidence that viewing of the series has much (if any) direct effect on relevant attitudes and prejudices, in either direction – despite the conviction of about one person in five that it can do harm. Viewers of the series are no more likely to be authoritarian in outlook or to be prejudiced against coloured people, it seems, than they were before viewing; nor is there any evidence that the series has rendered prejudices risible to those who were not disposed to laugh at them already. Other factors were found to be far more influential in the development of prejudice'.

Well that's not the report I read.

So why the spin?

Why did the BBC (who I generally believe to have been true to their overall agenda of trying to produce better race relations) keep a show going which they knew was certainly not having any kind of positive impact on what was a very volatile race relations situation.

I myself think that it may have had something to do with the fact that between during both of its three year runs, Till Death was repeatedly the most popular show on TV.

Speight is probably right when he noted in his autobiography:

'If it hadn't been for the large audience, and the critical approval, it would probably have been taken off because of the controversial storm it generated. The executive who would have dared to take it off in those days though, would have had to have been either very brave or raving mad, probably both, so very large audiences have other large qualities apart from the wealth they can spawn'.

Put more succinctly by Norman Lear, producer of the American spin off of Till Death, 'All in the Family':

'Nobody fucks with success'.

The success of Till Death, I feel, also explains to a great extent why Speight and Warren Mitchell could not let the character of Alf Garnett go.

By 1968 Speight (the cockney from Canning Town) had leap-frogged Galton and Simpson to be the highest paid writer in television. For him I think and for Mitchell, the money and acclaim that Alf Garnett brought probably fuelled their ideological belief in the project.

Faced with a deteriorating race relations situation Speight dug his heels in and argued that it just proved his point.

Commenting in the Observer two weeks after the Rivers of Blood speech he said:

'All Enoch Powell has done has proved my point: the country's full of Alf Garnetts'