



[CLICK HERE TO PRINT](#)

February 26, 2005

Leonard Miall

BBC broadcaster whose report from Washington helped to ensure the success of the Marshall Plan

JOURNALISTS often report the making of history but only rarely do they influence it. As the BBC's chief correspondent in Washington after the Second World War Leonard Miall did both. In June 1947, while accepting an honorary degree at Harvard, George Marshall, the American Secretary of State, made an offer of economic help to the war-ravaged countries of Europe.

The speech was largely ignored by the American press and most international correspondents. Even the British Embassy in Washington gave it low priority, sending the text to the Foreign Office by diplomatic bag rather than the more immediate telegraph. Miall, however, who had previously been briefed by Dean Acheson, the Under-Secretary of State, immediately grasped the significance of Marshall's offer.

In a broadcast that evening, Miall described Marshall's statement as "an exceptionally important speech" which "propounded a totally new, continental approach to the problem of Europe's economic crisis". Ernest Bevin, the British Foreign Secretary, happened to listen to Miall's broadcast and decided there and then to persuade his European colleagues to accept what became the Marshall Plan. Years later Acheson declared: "It was a good thing Leonard did not lose his voice that night".

Miall's involvement in the Marshall Plan was one episode of a distinguished BBC career, which saw him as an influential figure in radio and television. After a baptism of fire in wartime propaganda, and eight years in Washington, he played a creative managerial role in the development of television in the 1950s and 1960s. In retirement he helped to preserve the memory of the BBC's growth as its most knowledgeable in-house historian.

Born in London in 1914, Rowland Leonard Miall was educated at Bootham School in York, the University of Freiburg, where he gained a

knowledge of German which later helped to launch his BBC career, and St John's College, Cambridge. He was president of the Cambridge Union in 1936 and while still an undergraduate gained an early taste for broadcasting in a transatlantic debate with students from Harvard. A profile of Miall in *The Granta* described him as "a supreme jack of all trades" and predicted he would end up in the BBC.

After leaving Cambridge he lectured in the United States for a while but already had his eye on a job in broadcasting. As one of 3,000 applicants for a vacancy in the BBC press office he made the shortlist of two but lost to his rival. Early in 1939, however, the BBC offered him the chance to join its European Service to organise news talks in German.

On the night war was declared, he was embroiled in a row between his BBC superiors and the Government's new enemy propaganda unit over what to broadcast to Germany. It was a row which was to continue throughout the war years, as the tensions between editorial independence and patriotic duty were constantly debated, and the Government's black propagandists sought to wrest control of broadcasting from the BBC professionals.

Miall's diplomatic skills were also tested by the demands of exiled broadcasters such as General de Gaulle, who sought to project their leadership to their downtrodden compatriots from the cramped studios of Bush House, and rarely appreciated young producers' advice on microphone technique.

Miall worked in the European Service until 1942 when he was seconded to the Political Warfare Executive, a government body set up to co-ordinate broadcasting to enemy countries and occupied territories. Miall was a member of the British Political Warfare Mission to the United States where he was director of news in San Francisco and head of the New York office. He stayed in propaganda broadcasting until the end of the war.

In 1945 he rejoined the BBC and after short spells as a correspondent in Czechoslovakia and acting diplomatic correspondent he was appointed to the Washington job. His distinctive baritone voice soon became familiar to radio listeners in Britain as he interpreted the US scene with sympathy, humour and, above all, authority.

Returning to Britain in the 1950s he worked in television for the first time as head of Talks and Documentaries. A dry title embraced a wide range of responsibilities. Miall was in charge of not only the corporation's current affairs output, to which he brought a much tougher journalistic approach, but also areas such as science and the arts.

Panorama was one programme which developed under Miall's leadership — a frequently stressful responsibility at a time of much live broadcasting, encompassing everything from tricky last-minute

editorial decisions to the drunkenness of interviewees such as Brendan Behan. He also oversaw the launching of *Tonight*, the mould-breaking early-evening magazine, Huw Wheldon's *Monitor* and John Freeman's *Face to Face*.

Miall used his American contacts to bring in new kinds of documentary style from the USA, while attempting to hold the line against too much blurring of fact and creative reconstruction. Other factual programming, including *The Sky at Night* and *The Glory that was Greece*, flourished in his department. Later, he took a leading part in the planning of BBC2, which came on air in 1964.

He retained, too, a close interest in the BBC's international role. After Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin he had travelled to Moscow in an attempt to exploit the Cold War thaw. No concessions were made on the jamming of BBC external broadcasts, but tentative contacts were made with Soviet broadcasters, enabling the BBC to work towards shedding a little more direct light on events inside the Soviet Union. In 1966 he returned to the US as the corporation's representative and ended his BBC career in charge of overseas and foreign relations.

Miall was a popular figure within the BBC. People sought his advice because he knew better than most how the corporation worked. In appearance, he resembled Alastair Sim: slightly balding, slightly stooped. With a gentle smile, he was a good raconteur: his years in the United States were the source of many stories.

After his retirement from the staff in 1974 Miall was employed part time by the BBC as its research historian. He prepared material for three of Asa Briggs's books on the history of the corporation and carried out interviews for a BBC oral history project. In 1994 he published *Inside the BBC*, a book of short profiles of 25 personalities from John Reith to Robin Day. He had known them all and worked closely with many.

Miall was always keen to keep in touch with news of the latest BBC internal convulsions, while urging the fast-changing BBC of later years not to forget his and his colleagues' part in a uniquely exciting and creative period in postwar British and international broadcasting.

Miall's first marriage, to Lorna Rackham, which produced three sons and a daughter, ended with her death in 1974. In the following year he married Sally Bicknell. He was appointed OBE in 1961.

Leonard Miall, OBE, broadcaster, television executive and BBC historian, was born on November 6, 1914. He died on February 24, 2005, aged 90.