

Guy Woodward

‘These people know what they’re fighting for’: Denis Johnston and the Partisans

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Shortly after dawn on 8 March 1944, the BBC radio correspondent Denis Johnston and his recording engineer GF Wade embarked in a British military landing craft from the Italian coastal town of Monopoli. Crossing the Adriatic, they arrived on the small Croatian island of Vis under cover of darkness.¹ Johnston had covered the Allied Italian campaign since the previous autumn, and travelled to record material on the Yugoslav Partisans, who held Vis assisted by British land and sea forces; all other islands of the Dalmatian archipelago had fallen into German hands following the Italian surrender in September. Johnston spent four days on the island, recording spoken and sung contributions by Partisans and RAF officers stationed there. He developed cordial relations with the Commander of the Partisan Yugoslav Navy, Josip Černi, who was ‘delighted to find that a British War Correspondent has come across’ and agreed to help Johnston secure a much-coveted visit to Josip Broz Tito, leader of the Partisans, at that time directing operations on the Yugoslav mainland in Bosnia.² Due to the British military establishment’s hostility to Johnston’s ambitions and to his idiosyncratic approach to reporting, however, this never happened.

The bureaucratic obstacles to making the journey across the Adriatic were certainly many and various, and Johnston went to considerable efforts to surmount these; his biographer Bernard Adams suggests that he was captivated by the prospect of the Partisans ‘not because they were Communists but because they allegedly carried strings of eyeballs and bombs attached to their belts, and some of these formidable fighters were women who lived and fought side-by-side with the men.’³ Johnston, he

writes, was ‘intrigued’ by the prospect of encountering ‘Tito’s exotic guerrillas’.⁴ Johnston’s excitement at escaping the hierarchical and sclerotic Allied military machine, and his preoccupation with the novelty of female fighters are evident throughout his broadcasts and writings arising from the visit. However, the two radio reports for the BBC and his account of his encounters on Vis in *Nine Rivers From Jordan* (1953), the ambitious, experimental, and cross-generic memoir of his wartime experiences in North Africa and Europe, reveal more complex ideological dimensions to his evident attraction to the Partisans than Adams suggests. It is striking that the Vis episode is described in *Nine Rivers From Jordan* with a radical diminution of cynicism or irony, within a text so often dominated by these qualities, as Johnston deconstructs the emptiness of much wartime propaganda and ridicules notions of ‘facts’, ‘truth’, or ‘common-sense’ under wartime conditions (p.111). Drawing on archival research in the Denis Johnston papers held in Trinity College Dublin, and examining *Nine Rivers From Jordan* alongside his broadcasts, manuscripts and notebooks, this essay outlines how his visit can be understood as a brief moment of imaginative liberation and escape, made possible both by Vis’s utopian status as an island free from Nazi occupation and by the egalitarian social environment that Johnston found there. However, Johnston’s portrayal is by no means straightforwardly celebratory, and this essay will go on to chart how the work’s register of imaginative escape is complicated by the affinities he implies between the landscape on Vis and that of the West of Ireland, and between the Partisans and Irish Republicans. If Johnston’s island seems approachable then as an alternative or even utopian vision of Ireland, these correspondences also return us inexorably to the longer arc of his career, and to plays of the pre- and post-war period in which idealistic Irish Republicans who appear on stage – Robert Emmet in *The Old Lady Says ‘No!’* (1929), Blake in *The Moon in the Yellow River* (1931), and

O'Callaghan in *The Scythe and the Sunset* (1958) – are treated with a vexed and unresolved combination of admiration and scepticism; I propose that the subtle but perceptible deflation in Johnston's enthusiasm for the Partisans over the course of the nine years between landing on Vis and the publication of *Nine Rivers From Jordan* in 1953 must be read in this context.⁵ Finally, this episode in Johnston's career opens overlooked lines of transmission between Ireland, Britain, and South-Eastern Europe during the Second World War and Cold War: contemporaneous reactions to Johnston's broadcasts and their unexpected afterlife in post-war Yugoslavia emphasise the transnational cultural significance of radio in these times.

The chapter in which the Vis episode appears in *Nine Rivers From Jordan* is entitled 'Detour in Illyria' and opens with a reproduction of a confidential memorandum from Allied Forces Headquarters to all correspondents forbidding travel to the Balkans. There follows a passage of comic dialogue between the narrator and an unnamed military bureaucrat, in which the narrator discovers that the Balkans 'come under Cairo. So only Correspondents from Middle East are to go there' (p. 197).⁶ The narrator challenges this and is told that 'administratively that area has always been part of the east. You've read your Roman history' to which he replies sardonically 'I see. So it's the doing of the Emperors Arcadius and Honorius' (p.197).

This exchange locates the subsequent Illyrian episode within a Balkanist discourse familiar from several centuries of literary and scholarly engagements with the region, characterised by apprehensions of temporal instability and geographical indeterminacy, recorded with often lofty bemusement by a Western European narrator. The official's justification for the 'eastern' administration of the region with reference to Roman history lampoons British military bureaucracy, but also suggests that travel to the Balkans presupposes an illusory departure from contemporary military reality.

As Maria Todorova has observed, ‘discourse on the Balkans as a geographic/cultural entity is overwhelmed by a discourse utilizing the construct as a powerful symbol conveniently located outside historical time.’⁷ In classical antiquity, Illyria refers to the western part of the Balkan Peninsula which includes the Dalmatian coast and islands, but within western culture it has inescapable mythic and ludic associations with its namesake in Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night*. Vesna Goldsworthy suggests in *Inventing Ruritania* (2013) that this ill-defined region signifies ‘all-purpose semi-mythical remoteness’ in British literature, functioning as ‘an imaginative “end of the known world,” an area distant but still recognisable in many respects.’⁸ In Johnston’s writings Vis is likewise figured as a space in which norms can be overturned or suspended: in his War Field Book he writes that as the landing craft approached the pierhead at Komiža he saw in the moonlight ‘Red inscriptions on quay wall SMRT FASCISMU Hilarious [British] Commandos dancing highland flings for no reason at all’ and observes that ‘Hilarity seems to be the order of the place’.⁹ *Smrt fašizmu* was a Yugoslav Partisan slogan widely used during and after the Second World War, meaning ‘Death to Fascism’ in Serbo-Croatian; if the writings and broadcasts convey an atmosphere of festivity redolent of Shakespearean Illyria, they also contain the promise of twentieth-century social and political transformation.

Subsumed in Illyria the island also becomes geographically indeterminate – the British direction of operations in Yugoslavia and elsewhere in the Balkan Peninsula from Cairo resulted from the reality of German territorial control of south-eastern Europe, but also reflects longstanding literary and scholarly approaches to the Balkan countries as contested ‘intermediaries’, to use Hegel’s term, caught between Europe and the East.¹⁰ The sense of geographical indeterminacy is compounded by the circumstances in which the first of Johnston’s BBC Home Service features was

broadcast, on 26 March 1944. Due to censorship restrictions the broadcast could not refer to Vis by name, or even mention that the report, suggestively entitled 'Inside Yugoslavia', had been recorded on an island.

Johnston's failure to reach the Yugoslav mainland before the war's end proved a source of enormous regret, as did his failure to obtain an interview with Tito, with whom like many others at this time he was fascinated. In *Nine Rivers From Jordan* the exchange with the obstructive bureaucrat at the start of 'Detour in Illyria' suggests that Cairo was keen to prevent correspondents making contact with the Partisan leader, given the complexity of the many-sided conflict in Yugoslavia:

- Isn't Tito on our side?

- Yes, but he's not on Cairo's side. It's all very complicated. The Royal Yugoslav Government is trying to function from Cairo, and although it's against the Germans, I imagine that it's even more against Tito.

- Why?

- Because Tito is a Red. If Tito wins it's going to be very awkward for the Royal Yugoslav Government. And I don't think that our own Foreign Office will be too pleased either.

- So we're still not quite certain who we want to win this war.

- Oh, we're certain enough here in Italy, Monty has always backed up Tito, because he is a good soldier and is tying up more German divisions in the Balkans than the entire Allied Force is fighting on this front....

- Then I think it's up to us to say a good word for Tito, in spite of Cairo.

- It's no good, old boy. Anything that you write about the Balkans has to be referred to Middle East for censorship. That's the rule too. You just can't get round it (p.198).

This passage prolongs the Illyrian sense of uncertainty, as the contemporaneous Yugoslav political situation is summarised in comic terms of misapprehension and inversion. As the functionary suggests, Tito's Partisans were by far the most effective resistance movement in Yugoslavia, while the Serbian General Mihailović's royalist Četniks, loyal to the King and government in exile, by this stage of the war were more concerned with fighting the Partisans, had largely ceased operations against the Germans and in many cases were collaborating with the Nazi occupiers. At the Tehran conference in late 1943 the Allies had decided to switch support from Mihailović to Tito, and relations with the King and government were consequently tense and awkward. In a speech to the House of Commons on 22 February 1944 Churchill proclaimed that 'This is no time for ideological preferences for one side or the other', regretted Mihailović's passivity and Četnik collaboration, and declared support for the 'wild and furious war' being waged by the 'elusive and deadly' Partisans under the 'outstanding' leadership of Tito. The Partisans, Churchill concluded, were the 'only people who are doing any effective fighting against the Germans'.¹¹ The switch in military support was accompanied by a shift in propaganda which reflected this narrative – attempts by the BBC, for example, to promote myths around Mihailović and the Četniks ceased, and efforts instead were made to bolster the heroic credentials of Tito and the Partisans.¹² By spring 1944 'Yug-fever' was raging in Britain and across the Atlantic, as 'Everyone, from the press to Eisenhower, wanted to know about Tito.'¹³ The timing and content of Johnston's broadcasts reflects this new enthusiasm. Trailed

heavily in news bulletins throughout Sunday 26 March, the first newscast was broadcast at 8.45pm in the 'Into Battle' slot, immediately before a 9pm broadcast by Churchill, in which the Prime Minister hailed 'the heroic struggle of the Partisans of Yugoslavia under the leadership of Marshal Tito'.¹⁴ As the exchange with the functionary shows, however, the situation away from the airwaves was more complicated, as the British worried about the implications of the Soviet-aligned, communist ideology of Tito and the Partisans for the post-war future of Yugoslavia and its young king-in-exile Peter II. On the ground the Partisans not only conducted guerrilla operations against the Germans, Četniks, and Croatian fascist Ustaše, but also prepared for a revolutionary post-war reshaping of Yugoslavia as a socialist federal republic, adhering to Marxist principles in the field. The former Partisan Slavko Goldstein has described how 'the national liberation struggle, had a double character for the communists: It was a radical antifascist movement because the communists were committed antifascists; it was also a war for the establishment of a new order, a revolutionary war, and a socialist revolution patterned in many ways after the October Revolution in Russia.'¹⁵

In this context Johnston's assertion, repeated in both broadcasts, that 'These people know what they're fighting for' can be interpreted as subversive. The Allied propaganda machine promoted the Partisans' anti-fascist credentials and tactical efficacy in the field, but muted their Marxism; the word 'guerrillas' was often used as a less politically-inflected term to refer to the organisation. Johnston's broadcasts test these boundaries. Explained in part by circumstance and censorship, it is nevertheless significant that neither broadcast focuses on the Partisans' military prowess: although the second broadcast covers co-operation between RAF personnel and Partisans co-ordinating air raids on the Yugoslav mainland, the focus in both broadcasts is on the

social environment on Vis, with its radically egalitarian ethos and apparent absence of hierarchical strictures.

The week before his departure from Monopoli, Johnston records in his War Field Book the impressions of an acquaintance recently returned from Vis, describing the island as a co-operative and non-hierarchical 'Community of Interest and of Property' where money was not used and judges were serving in the ranks.¹⁶ The narrator in *Nine Rivers From Jordan* tells us before embarking that 'I like the idea of the Partisans, and all that I have heard about them. They are gay, singing fighters who really know what this war is about. And to one as confused on that subject as I am becoming, that is very refreshing indeed' (p.199). He denies that his interest in them is because they are 'Reds', since he has 'still to be shown that Communism makes men or States any less cruel, jingoistic, or convinced that the only answer to disagreement is punishment' (p.199) and predicts that:

sooner or later we will have to have a universal economic system, based on order. ... if our present rulers cannot see their way to provide us with a unified authority in such matters we will have to look around for somebody who will, before we start killing each other again.

... In the meantime, the behaviour of the Socialist Fatherland in international affairs has not given us any reason to suppose that the Proletariat in Office has any solution either (p.199).

Following this digression he repeats his earlier sentiment that 'All the same, I like the sound of the Partisans'. (p.199) Johnston's use of the present tense in *Nine Rivers From Jordan* reflects the immediacy of the diary entries in his War Field Books, on which he

drew heavily for the memoir. In this instance of prediction and speculation however, it produces a strange naivety which serves to confuse or conceal Johnston's political beliefs, as the enthusiasm for the Partisans expressed in private and on air is toned down and obfuscated. The reader of 1953 knows that the 'universal economic system, based on order' has not (yet) arrived, and that since the hardening of East-West divisions between communism and capitalism in the early years of the Cold War, these matters are hardly any longer 'open for discussion.' These sentiments can therefore be interpreted as overtly critical of the repressive Soviet 'Socialist Fatherland' and covertly nostalgic for the possibility felt in the closing stages of the Second World War of social and political transformation, amidst an atmosphere of flux and uncertainty.

Johnston's previous exposure to a communist society had come on a tour of the Soviet Union in 1931. The previous year, at the end of his twenties and fearing that his bourgeois life as a Dublin solicitor was terminal, he had read Theodore Dreiser's *Dreiser Looks at Russia* (1928), and experienced what he described as the 'nearest thing to a conversion' when on 4 April 1930 he attended the initial meeting of the Irish Friends of Soviet Russia at Banba Hall on Parnell Square, where amongst others he met Maud Gonne MacBride and Hannah Sheehy Skeffington. For Johnston at this point left-wing politics promised a means of confronting the nationalist and clerical forces that were ascendant in Free State public life and which he hated.¹⁷ Adams writes that 'The temperature of Johnston's Marxism rose and fell on an hourly basis' during his visit to Russia the following year; in a letter to his wife Shelagh, written during the voyage from Southampton to Leningrad, Johnston describes setting off for the 'paradise of great thoughts', but he quickly becomes bored by the earnestness and political commitment of his fellow tourists who sit in cabins discussing 'overproduction', the 'exploitation of depressed races', and 'collectivised wealth'.¹⁸ Their time in Russia

involved the usual visits to a collective farm, a Workers' Rest Home and to the Bolshoi ballet; Johnston's ambivalence is apparent from his journal which records inconclusively that 'it all seems saner and saner to me. Of course I may make a mockery of their efforts to construct a new system in my easy, Irish, destructive way, but ... an awful lot of what one laughs at in Russia is really not communism but merely Russian habits.'¹⁹

The Partisans on Vis promised a different communism to that which Johnston had witnessed in the Soviet Union, and manifested an ideological purity and commitment that he felt was lacking in Ireland or in wartime Britain. *Nine Rivers From Jordan* is subtitled 'The Chronicle of a Journey and a Search', and in approaching its quest-narrative, so heavily freighted with biblical and classical allusions, we should acknowledge that on Vis at least, Johnston appears to have found something meaningful. For all his cynicism he seems to have held affection and respect for the resistance movement and their cause: on his return he records criticising Wade for wearing the red star on his uniform when this had not been conferred by the Partisans.²⁰ Johnston's first broadcast opens with commentary outlining the context of a 'struggle of an outraged people against a very relentless invader, and against his even more relentless quislings and satellites. ... A war into which men and women, regardless of sex or distinction, are flinging themselves side by side'.²¹ He describes a visit the following day (described excitedly in his War Field Book as 'A monumental day!') to meet 'one of the units of the army of liberation' through countryside which makes him feel 'homesick ... it's so like, well, parts of Scotland, but most of all it's like Connemara. Little stony fields surrounded by loosely built grey walls.'²² In *Nine Rivers From Jordan* meanwhile the 'white cottages' (p.204) remind the narrator of the west of

Ireland, and a further Irish parallel appears in the War Field Book where he describes the Partisans as ‘very like I.R.A.’²³

Johnston’s radio commentary stresses the improvisational adaptability of the guerrillas, describing Partisan men and women dressed in ‘bits of German and Italian uniform’.²⁴ He also observes a twelve-year-old boy carrying a Bren machine gun on his back, while from his belt hang ‘two very dangerous looking hand grenades, and an enormous German luger’; in the War Field Book he records a feeling of terror when another boy, reported to have killed twelve German commandos, offers to demonstrate how he dismantles his bombs.²⁵ Both broadcasts feature music: in the first singing and the sound of marching feet are heard after the description of this child Partisan, then a recording of the Partisan anthem sung by a choir, before the boy also sings to wild applause. The BBC announcer next introduces ‘in honour of their British visitors’ two Partisan speeches directly addressing the British radio audience, one female and one male, both of which seek to identify and emphasise bonds between the British Home Front and the Yugoslav resistance movement. The female partisan describes ‘hard days’ over the previous two and a half years of occupation, when ‘our land has been destroyed, our homes burned, our children have been slaughtered or thrown alive into pits’. Now, she suggests,

we are tightening our connection with the world forces of anti-fascism, with your people and with you women of Great Britain, of America and of the Soviet Union. We know that you too are in the struggle by our side ... much of the armaments that you women are making and sending to us are being used by women here to fight the Huns with more and more effect.²⁶

These sentiments appear designed to foster a sense of identification on the part of the British radio audience with the Partisans, an ambition loosely coordinated through the broadcasts: elsewhere Johnston reports that alongside the graffiti reading ‘Smrt Fascismu’ on the quayside he spotted a slogan in praise of Churchill, whose portrait he also finds alongside those of Roosevelt, Stalin, and Tito on the wall of Partisan headquarters on the island.²⁷ Johnston then introduces a Partisan rendition of ‘It’s a Long Way To Tipperary’, before giving these closing reflections, reinforcing the impression of a festive resistance movement:

One of the things that struck me most of all about this extraordinary community was the light-heartedness, and I’d almost say its hilarity. Living under constant threat from the enemy, nobody goes out unarmed – they sleep at nights with their tommy guns loaded and parked by the windows, and everyone seems to enjoy it. These people know what they’re fighting for. They have an absolute faith in its rightness, and their own ultimate destiny, and in this world of cynicism and divided loyalty, it is a great and most unique experience to have lived amongst them and to be able to lend a hand.²⁸

While acknowledging the fraught political context for his broadcasts, Johnston likewise records in his *War Field Book* that ‘I like these people. They know what they’re fighting for. It’s a good thing we came. Obviously the H.Q. reason for trying to stop [Correspondent] is political – not security. They don’t like the idea of people knowing what they’re fighting for when it’s not for Eton & Oxford.’²⁹ After the war, in *Nine Rivers From Jordan*, Johnston qualifies these stirring affirmations, attributing an amended version of the line from which this essay derives its title to another visitor to

the island, the medical officer Doc Outfin, who tells the narrator that the Partisans are 'a tough lot' but that 'you can't help being excited by their enthusiasm. They act like they know what they're fighting for. Which is more than can be said for some of us.' (p.203) The following exchange between the narrator and Outfin is then deeply suggestive of Johnston's unresolved discomfort with Irish neutrality:

- That's interesting, I said. From all I hear, they seem to be fighting on more sides than one.

- In times like these, perhaps it's better to fight on all sides than on no side at all.

- Rather a delicate thing to say to an Irishman. It used to be the traditional policy of my own country, but we seem to have given it up lately.

He gave me a friendly smile, and sucked his pipe.

- There's not much to be said for the way any of us got into this War. Not even England. We avoided it as long as we could. But the Jugos – they don't put up with much in the way of bullying. I like them (p.203).

The subtle alteration of 'These people know what they're fighting for' to 'They act like they know what they're fighting for', and the line's attribution to a character other than the Johnstonian narrator suggests that his enthusiasm for the Partisans had dimmed in the intervening years. The manuscript draft of *Nine Rivers From Jordan*, 'Dionysia', deposited in the British Museum by Johnston, complicates matters however. Here the narrator observes that Yugoslavs on all sides of the conflict – Ustaše, Četniks, and Partisans – are 'a tough and merciless people'.³⁰ 'On the other hand,' he writes, 'it is impossible not to be infected by their enthusiasm, and by the feeling that here, for the

first time, I am amongst people who really know what they are fighting about', referring here to all Yugoslav combatants, rather than to the Partisans specifically (and significantly 'about' is far more ambiguous than 'for'). In these lines Johnston seems drawn to a Balkan predilection for pugnacity rather than to Partisan ideology; indeed, in 'Dionysia', he goes further in proclaiming Yugoslav exceptionalism, continuing to dismiss in turn the actions of a series of nations during the war as devious and untrustworthy before concluding that, by contrast, 'the Jugoslavs, rather than be bullied, come in with a roar, regardless of the consequences. And although it is true that since then they have followed Ireland's ancient prerogative of fighting on all sides at once, there is no doubt of their fierce sincerity and their unconquerable will to win, that quite sweeps one off one's feet.'³¹ Johnston here again associates Yugoslavia with Ireland, on this occasion yoking the nations together as stereotypically and historically prone to internecine conflict. The preceding litany of unreliable nations also includes contemporary Ireland however, condemned by the narrator as 'sulk[ing] in a mealy-mouthed neutrality, taking advantage of the situation to censor everything in sight from the works of De Maupassant to the name of the Kingstown Presbyterian Church'.³² Johnston's frustration here with censorship and consequent equation of Irish neutrality with cultural stagnation and nationalist gesture politics are familiar, but his nostalgic and misplaced envy for the supposed Yugoslav enthusiasm for conflict is more complex, and recalls the deeply ambivalent portrayals of political idealism, and, specifically, armed Republicanism in his drama. In Johnston's plays addressing twentieth-century revolutionary Ireland, *The Moon in the Yellow River* and *The Scythe in the Sunset*, the cynical sentiments of Dobelle or MacCarthy cannot extinguish the idealism of the nationalist characters whose beliefs they question and contradict.

In these interlinked contexts of pragmatic neutrality and political idealism, Johnston's wartime role as BBC reporter, supposedly a non-belligerent observer yet inevitably responsible for the production and dissemination of imperial propaganda, occasioned much self-examination. Johnston held a British passport and as an embedded reporter wore a British uniform, but his Irish identity clearly intensified his anxiety. Clair Wills has argued that writings by Johnston and his Irish contemporaries, Samuel Beckett, Elizabeth Bowen, Hubert Butler, Louis MacNeice, and, most contentiously, Francis Stuart, 'record the morally complex and sometimes traumatic exposure of an Irish sensibility to the violent politics of mid-twentieth-century Europe, an exposure that often has a disruptive impact on the sense of self.'³³ In Johnston's case, she suggests that Irish neutrality during the Second World War initially seemed to 'provide a platform for the writerly ideal of detachment', an ideal which comes under immense stress during his career as BBC correspondent and is then shattered by the suffering he witnesses at Buchenwald concentration camp near Weimar in Germany, shortly after its liberation by US forces.³⁴ Johnston's harrowing descriptions of Buchenwald have rightly been accorded much critical attention; in *Nine Rivers From Jordan* the narrator himself emphasises its significance to his quest in the chapter's concluding paragraph: 'How horrible that this should be the place that I have been seeking all these years' (p.397).³⁵ However, this understandable critical focus on disillusion and betrayal in a text which in form and tone so often undermines itself and seemingly culminates in this confrontation with catastrophic proof of the Holocaust, has been at the expense of considering Johnston's capacity for idealism, as it is articulated earlier in the book and elsewhere. His 'detour' to Vis opens a brief space in which to express this; there he appears to have found a cause to which he responds with

genuine enthusiasm as he records in his diary, celebrates on air, and recalls in *Nine Rivers From Jordan*.

The Irish references in his broadcast and writings on Vis – to Connemara-style walls and cottages, to Partisans resembling IRA men, to female Partisans ‘with cross, bitter eyes gleaming behind their spectacles, like the Cumann na Ban’ (*Nine Rivers From Jordan*, p.202) – therefore suggest the possibility of reading Vis as a utopian distortion or inversion of Johnston’s island home, ‘distant but still recognisable’, to borrow Goldsworthy’s description of Illyria. Operating in accordance with different cultural, moral, social and temporal frameworks, island communities have long presented opportunities for rethinking the mores of larger societies. In *Archipelagic Modernism* (2014) John Brannigan identifies a series of late-nineteenth and twentieth-century Irish and British writers who gravitated towards islands, finding there ‘prelapsarian societies, remote from the corruptions of the mainland’.³⁶ He argues that ‘In the cultural laboratories of Aran, or Iona, or Innisfree, such writers either found or invented models of alternative forms of living, alternative moralities, to cast against the values represented by the metropolis and the Empire.’³⁷ Significantly, Brannigan also identifies a late Modernist preoccupation with islands: citing W.H. Auden and Louis MacNeice’s *Letters from Iceland* (1937) and the poetry of Hugh MacDiarmid, he suggests that islands function in these texts as ‘waypoints for thinking about the future shape of an archipelago off the coast of a Europe at war’, and that the ‘islomania’ of the 1930s enabled writers ‘to imagine post-imperial and post-metropolitan forms of community and citizenship.’³⁸

In this context Johnston’s Vis can also be approached as a projection of an alternative society, through which he questioned the social and political structures of both Ireland and Britain – doing so, at first, from within the British propaganda

machine. The fragments of an egalitarian island utopia sketched by Johnston also gestured towards a positive post-war future for Yugoslavia itself of course, as he stressed the warm, friendly, and cooperative relations between three of the main ethnic groups. The initial newscast highlights the multi-ethnic composition of the Partisans, noting the differing caps worn by Serb and Croat Partisans and describing a political meeting at which speeches were delivered in ‘Croat, Slovene and Serbian’. He also emphasises Partisan hospitality to outsiders: the first broadcast avoided any mention of British personnel in Yugoslavia, but material Johnston recorded with the RAF did feature in the second broadcast on 14 May. This included interviews and staged exchanges of dialogue explaining how the RAF were liaising with the Partisans in identifying German and Ustaše targets for air attack; he also recorded a party at which the ‘Lambeth Walk’ was played by an RAF accordionist. In *Nine Rivers From Jordan* he wrote that ‘An embryo Communism has affected even the RAF, for there is, of course, no currency whatever, and all transactions are on the basis of barter and lease-lend’ (pp.204-5). The War Field Book records that RAF personnel on the island had even taken to wearing red stars on their pockets.³⁹

The island can also be understood as utopian in its promise of greater equality between the sexes, although this is undermined by Johnston’s own attitudes. The narrator of *Nine Rivers From Jordan* concedes with refreshing baldness that ‘There are not enough women in this book’ (p.348), but Johnston’s adolescent fascination with the Partisan women is consistent across notebooks, broadcasts, and the later memoir, as an undoubted attraction to the egalitarian ethos of the Partisan movement is overshadowed by his paternalistic sexism and prurience. On air and in the memoir he notes approvingly how at the improvised mess in a farmhouse on the island British airmen and Partisan women take turns washing up and serving food to each other ‘because

that's the spirit of this community. There are no masters and no servants. Each does his or her job in turn.⁴⁰ However, Johnston remains preoccupied by the women's appearance, observing in the first broadcast:

a great strapping wench with freckles and red hair, and beside her a little fair skinned blonde in battle dress. Put her in a gym tunic and a straw hat (she's about sixteen years old) and she might have come out of any of our more select ladies' public schools. By the way, I notice that rifle of hers isn't as clean as it might be, lucky she can't understand me.⁴¹

In the second broadcast an RAF officer and 'expert in languages' explains to Johnston that in the Partisan army 'Men and women are sharing rights and duties alike on a basis of complete equality' but that 'No horseplay and flirtations are strictly discouraged.' The officer advises Johnston that although some of the Partisan women may be 'extremely pretty ... they salute you as an ally and not as a potential boyfriend' and 'are always armed, even when they dance.' He goes on to suggest that

It's nice to see all these girls without make up – I guess they had used lipstick and rouge at one time but nowadays they just can't buy it. In fact you can't buy anything – there are no shops, and there is no money. ... None of the partisan soldiers, from Marshal Tito down to the private, get a penny pay. They get their food, and the clothing they need, an occasional cigarette, when they capture a German depot.⁴²

It is striking how some of the later tropes of anti-communist Cold War prose – women without make up, the absence of consumerism, shortages of basic foodstuffs – in this context are propagandised as romantic virtues.⁴³ The transnational alliance between British and Yugoslav women in terms of ideological commitment and physical fortitude, established earlier in the contribution by the female Partisan, here expands to encompass the shared privations of rationing. Noting the fascination in Britain with stories of women Partisan fighters, Vesna Drapac suggests that ‘onlookers saw in the action of women resisters the elements of a new Yugoslav revolution’, but denies that there was any real basis for this investment, since outsiders were concerned with resistance ‘only in so far as it could be marshalled to the Allied goal of total victory in a total war and secure stability in postwar Yugoslavia.’⁴⁴ In respect of the attitudes expressed towards women Johnston’s broadcasts conform to this view, and the prodigious work ethic and conditions endured by Partisan women are seemingly presented solely for the stimulation of a British radio audience. Johnston’s ability to imagine his Illyrian utopia was constrained by the prejudices he brought to the island, including his sexism.

The day after Johnston returned from Vis he wrote euphorically in the War Field Book that: ‘I’ve been to Yugoslavia in spite of the Army and all concerned and if there’s a row or not I don’t care. ... How nice to get the sack for going to Yugoslavia!’⁴⁵ The broadcast on 26 March occasioned excitement in Britain and in Italy; Johnston records in his War Field Book that ‘everyone was buzzing with it’.⁴⁶ His friend and BBC colleague Frank Gillard sent his congratulations in a letter dated the day of broadcast and later quoted in *Nine Rivers From Jordan*, writing ‘It’s a wow. You’ve rung the bell with a hell of a clang’ and stating that ‘Obviously the boys in London are terribly

excited.⁴⁷ However, in a diary entry later that week Johnston wrote disconsolately that ‘I’m one of those that have had their chance and missed it. Somewhere on the files of the great Corporation my records are blotted. And now they’ve got me. They won’t call me back, because they know I’d resign and go home.’ He expressed hope, however, ‘that the receipt of these discs raises and stirs up every people political and otherwise that it’s possible to stir up’.⁴⁸ Johnston was well aware that his reports had subversive qualities: rather than send the disc recordings back to the BBC in London via Cairo, where they would have been subject to censorship by the Mediterranean authorities, he managed to have them sent via the Air Ministry in London, in the care of an American officer.⁴⁹ He appears to have been correct in his assumption – a letter from an officer at Central Mediterranean Forces the following May informs Johnston that his ‘recent exploit on [Vis] has not made you too popular in some quarters’ with the result that ‘High Army levels’ would likely prevent him from interviewing Tito.⁵⁰

If the broadcasts excited listeners and irritated the British military establishment, their impact in Yugoslavia itself was also considerable, it seems, and endured long after their original broadcast. In early 1977 Johnston was forwarded a letter from Zoran Udovičić, Editor in Chief at Radio Television Sarajevo in Yugoslavia, who was attempting to locate Johnston as a result of his report from Vis, which had been rebroadcast by RTS on Victory Day of 1975. Udovičić hailed the newscast as ‘a very remarkable example of a great war correspondent’s work in the quest for the truth in those hard days’ and stated that ‘Mr Johnston’s reportage has proven very valuable. It is a real part of our country’s history.’⁵¹ Having traced most surviving participants he invited Johnston to return to Yugoslavia to record material for a documentary and radio-play, which he did that September, travelling to Vis from Split, where he met veterans including the man who had sung for him as a boy thirty-one years previously.⁵² The

resulting documentary was presented at the Ohrid Festival of Radio in Macedonia that June and was awarded a special prize; the programme makers also produced a drama-documentary titled ‘These People Know What They Are Fighting For’, which was broadcast across Yugoslavia on 14 June to considerable acclaim and interest.⁵³ At the Prix Italia broadcasting festival later that year the documentary received a special mention from the international jury; following Polish interest it was translated and broadcast in Poland on 7 May 1978.⁵⁴

The unexpected post-war afterlife of Johnston’s report suggests that its presentation of the Partisan movement accorded with the Partisan-focused cultural propaganda promoted by the post-war socialist regime in Yugoslavia to foster and maintain adherence to the principle of ‘brotherhood and unity’.⁵⁵ It also shows how radio publics were radically expanded and unsettled by the Second World War. As Emily C. Bloom has recently suggested in *The Wireless Past* (2016), radio tends to originate in national institutions often established to promote a nationalist ethos, but in practice the medium has the potential ‘to mediate across national borders, revealing the fluidity if not the arbitrariness of those borders, and to create transnational imagined publics.’⁵⁶ In ‘air-borne bard’, a phrase from Louis MacNeice’s long poem *Autumn Sequel* (1954), Bloom finds a metaphor which both illuminates the partial dislocation of Anglo-Irish writers of the mid-twentieth century from emerging national territories and identities, and addresses ‘the unmooring of modern literature from its home in print into the new forms and publics made available by the emerging media of the period [whereby] writers found on the airwaves, often to their surprise, a powerfully generative space for mid-century literature.’⁵⁷ In print and on air, in private and in public, Denis Johnston found on Vis a physical and metaphorical space which enabled a brief escape

from both British and Irish demands on his loyalty, and from the cynicism, disillusion, and metaphorical despair with which he addressed his own part in the war.

¹ Vis is ninety square kilometres in area, just under three times as large as Inis Mór.

² Denis Johnston, *Nine Rivers From Jordan* (London: Derek Verschoyle, 1953), p.205. A revised edition was published in the United States by Atlantic/Little Brown in 1955. Further references in parentheses in the text.

³ Bernard Adams, *Denis Johnston: A Biography* (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 2002), p.255.

⁴ Adams, p.255.

⁵ Fifteen years before Johnston's visit to Vis the cry of 'Up the Partisans' was heard in *The Old Lady Says 'No!'* in reference to Emmet's rebellion of 1803 (*Selected Plays of Denis Johnston*, ed. by Joseph Ronsley (Gerrards Cross, Buckinghamshire and Washington, D.C.: Colin Smythe and The Catholic University of America Press, 1983), p.45).

⁶ The British Army's Middle East Command, located in Cairo, co-ordinated operations in South-East Europe (including Yugoslavia) in addition to its responsibilities in Egypt and the Middle East. See Walter R. Roberts, *Tito, Mihailović and the Allies, 1941-1945* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1987), p.97.

⁷ Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), p.7.

⁸ Vesna Goldsworthy, *Inventing Ruritania: The Imperialism of the Imagination* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), p.11.

⁹ Denis Johnston, 'War Field Book 4 (Italian Campaign)', 8 March 1944 (Denis Johnston papers, Trinity College Dublin, 10066/191). A photo in the Johnston Papers shows RAF personnel dancing with a mixed group of Partisans on Vis. They appear to be doing the hokey-cokey (10066/299/324).

¹⁰ Todorova, p.129

¹¹ Winston Churchill, 'War and the International Situation', House of Commons, *House of Commons Debates* 22 February 1944, vol. 397, cols 693-

94.<http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1944/feb/22/war-and-international-situation#S5CV0397P0_19440222_HOC_342> (accessed 14 November 2017).

¹² Ioannis Stefanidis, *Substitute for Power: Wartime British Propaganda to the Balkans, 1939-44* (Farnham, Surrey and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012), p.264.

¹³ McLynn, p.197.

¹⁴ Winston Churchill, 'Road to Victory', BBC Home Service, 26 March 1944

<<https://www.winstonchurchill.org/resources/speeches/1941-1945-war-leader/road-to-victory-2>> (accessed 14 November 2017).

¹⁵ Slavko Goldstein, *1941: The Year That Keeps Returning*, trans. by Michael Gable (New York: New York Review of Books, 2013), p.495.

¹⁶ Johnston, 'War Field Book 4', 29 February 1944.

¹⁷ Adams, p.108.

¹⁸ Adams, pp.116-7; Denis Johnston, letter to Shelagh Richards 12 September 1931, Johnston Papers 10066/288/375.

¹⁹ Adams, p.117.

²⁰ Johnston, 'War Field Book 4', 21 March 1944.

²¹ 'Inside Yugoslavia', BBC Home Service, 26 March 1944.

²² Johnston, 'War Field Book 4', 10 March 1944; 'Inside Yugoslavia'.

²³ Johnston, 'War Field Book 4', 9 March 1944.

²⁴ 'Inside Yugoslavia'.

²⁵ 'Inside Yugoslavia'; Johnston, 'War Field Book 4', 10 March 1944.

²⁶ 'Inside Yugoslavia'.

²⁷ 'Denis Johnston with the R.A.F. in Yugoslavia', BBC Home Service, 14 May 1944, BBC Written Archives Centre, DLO 56132.

²⁸ 'Inside Yugoslavia', BBC Home Service, 26 March 1944. The final two sentences are repeated in Johnston's second broadcast of 14 May 1944.

²⁹ Johnston, 'War Field Book 4', 9 March 1944.

³⁰ 'Dionysia: An Account of the Author's Experiences as a BBC War Correspondent, 1942-45', British Library, London, p.445.

³¹ 'Dionysia', p. 445.

³² 'Dionysia', p.446.

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- ³³ Clair Wills, 'The Aesthetics of Irish Neutrality During World War Two', *boundary 2* 31.1 (Spring 2004), 119-45 (p.122).
- ³⁴ Wills, p.125.
- ³⁵ Terry Boyle, 'Denis Johnston: Neutrality and Buchenwald', in *Modern Irish Writers and the Wars*, ed. by Kathleen Devine (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1999) pp.205-18; Maurice Walsh, 'Nine Rivers From Jordan: A Lost Masterpiece of Reportage', in *Irish Culture and Wartime Europe, 1938-1948*, ed. by Dorothea Depner and Guy Woodward (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2015), pp.148-60.
- ³⁶ John Brannigan, *Archipelagic Modernism: Literature in the Irish and British Isles, 1890-1970* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), p.43.
- ³⁷ Brannigan, p.49.
- ³⁸ Brannigan, p.16, p.148.
- ³⁹ Johnston, 'War Field Book 4', 10 March 1944.
- ⁴⁰ 'Denis Johnston with the R.A.F. in Yugoslavia'.
- ⁴¹ 'Inside Yugoslavia'.
- ⁴² 'Denis Johnston with the R.A.F. in Yugoslavia'.
- ⁴³ Andrew Hammond has noted the preoccupation of British writers with poor shop displays, meagre diets, and abject clothing in depictions of the Eastern bloc. See *British Fiction and the Cold War* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p.43.
- ⁴⁴ Vesna Drapac, *Constructing Yugoslavia: A Transnational History* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p.185, p.188.
- ⁴⁵ Johnston, 'War Field Book 4', 13 March 1944.
- ⁴⁶ Johnston, 'War Field Book 4', 27 March 1944.
- ⁴⁷ Letter from Frank Gillard to Denis Johnston, 26 March 1944, Johnston Papers 10066/362/104.
- ⁴⁸ Johnston, 'War Field Book 4', 18 March 1944.
- ⁴⁹ Cassette copy of 1977 RTS broadcast (1977), Johnston Papers, 10066/270.
- ⁵⁰ Letter from Major M. Culme Seymour to Denis Johnston, 3 May 1944, Johnston Papers, 10066/362/111.
- ⁵¹ Letter from Zoran Udovičić 'To the inhabitants of 8, Sorrento Terrace', undated, Johnston Papers, 10066/290/3230.
- ⁵² Denis Johnston, notebook diary of visit to Yugoslavia in September 1977, Johnston Papers, 10066/187.
- ⁵³ Letter from Majo Topolovac to Denis Johnston, 1 June 1977, Johnston Papers, 10066/287/3000.
- ⁵⁴ Letter from Majo Topolovac to Denis Johnston, 2 June 1978, Johnston Papers, 10066/287/3003.
- ⁵⁵ See Andrew Horton, 'The Rise and Fall of the Yugoslav Partisan Film: Cinematic Perceptions of a National Identity', *Film Criticism* 12. 2 (Winter, 1987-88), 18-27, and *Partisans in Yugoslavia: Literature, Film and Visual Culture*, ed. by Miranda Jakisa, Nikica Gilic (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2015).
- ⁵⁶ Emily C. Bloom, *The Wireless Past: Anglo-Irish Writers and the BBC, 1931-1968* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p.15.
- ⁵⁷ Bloom, p.7.