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# History Magazine

QUARTERLY

**The Girls  
Who Danced**

**Lincoln's  
Business  
Ventures**

**CORONATION  
RACE**

**Sir William Logan**  
A Man Who Rocked!

**ONE LAST  
HURRAH**

Former U.S. Presidents'  
Third-Party Runs for Office

The Radium Girls  
of Ottawa Illinois

**Virginia's  
Lost Bison**

**Ireland's  
Centenary**

**A Tale of  
Two Mutinies**  
The Mutinies  
of 1797

A portrait of a man with a white powdered wig, a high-collared white cravat, and a dark coat. He has a serious expression and is looking slightly to the left. The background is dark and indistinct.

**KING  
*of*  
America?**

The Possibility of a Monarchy in the  
Early Days of Independence



# THE CORONATION RACE

BY JULIA BRICKLIN



*In the end, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation won.*

The coronation ceremony of Queen Elizabeth II on 2 June 1953, was the first to be televised. Here, she is receiving the Spurs of Chivalry from the Lord Great Chamberlain. Getty Images

It was the first television company in North America to broadcast the Coronation of Queen Elizabeth II on the same calendar day as its occurrence, which was Tuesday, 2 June 1953.

Though it technically had not entered any race, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) proudly aired the first kinescope recordings of the 900-year-old rite before America's NBC and CBS, which had embarked on a very publicized and even dangerous competition to get the films on air first.

But all three American networks claimed some sort of "first" with respect to this significant event. A converted fighter plane carrying CBS films won a neck-and-neck race with an NBC jet. But NBC and ABC both claimed they were the first U.S. networks to carry Coronation films.

Besides the same-day coverage, the event was special because television cameras were allowed in the Abbey itself. The 1937 Coronation of Elizabeth's father, King George VI, was filmed, but cameras were only allowed to cover the procession, not inside the Abbey where the

actual rites occurred. And, only about 10,000 viewers with early televisions saw these rudimentary images.

For her Coronation, though, the Queen overrode objections by Parliament and Prime Minister Winston Churchill and allowed plans for cameras to capture all the exterior and interior ceremonies, which had never before been viewed by anyone besides invited royals, dignitaries, and their families. In keeping with tradition, cameras would respectfully turn away when it came to the anointing of the Queen with fragrant

oils, but otherwise, it would be captured for posterity.

When 25-year-old Princess Elizabeth ascended to power on 6 February 1952, televisions were still a novelty in every country. There were only about seven million sets in the United States, and color would not be widespread for another seven or eight years.

But as soon as the British government agreed to give access to its own British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), the U.S., as with many other nations, scrambled to see how it could get the footage in front of as many of its viewers as possible. More specifically, its television broadcasters scrambled to see how they could make it as unique as possible for their viewers, solidifying their brands.

In 1953, there were no overseas live capabilities. The invention of videotape was still three years away, and satellites were at least ten years away. Other than "live," kinescope recordings were the only way to distribute television programming.

On the day of the Coronation, BBC planned to send a microwave link from Dover, across the English Channel to Calais, France, then to the Netherlands and Germany. Kinescopes of the proceedings would have to do for the rest of the world and would take several days to develop, pack, and ship.

But the American networks wanted their own same-day coverage. They had promised their affiliates they would be the first to air the Coronation, which would be the world's first global television phenomenon. CBS still led in radio coverage, which was still the more wide-reaching technology – NBC wanted to be "first" with the Coronation in the hopes it could lure more radio stations to trust in its leadership. ABC had similar designs, but in early 1953,

it dropped out of the race. It was clear that the costs would be astronomical; its fledgling news department decided to re-transmit BBC footage from Canada.

And so, NBC and CBS made elaborate plans.

The BBC graciously offered the use of its films as they were made throughout the daylong event. The American companies negotiated with the BBC and British government representatives for space for their microwave relay stations. These were needed so NBC and CBS could bring the BBC moving pictures to huts nearby where they could be duplicated on film.

Then, they chartered helicopters, which would shuttle each batch of films to Blackbushe Airport, 40 miles from London, and then board various planes for the United States.

In 1953, a flight from London to New York on a commercial jetliner filled with passengers took about 14 hours, including a stop for refueling at Gander, Newfoundland. However, a spokesperson for the airline said it could shave this time down to 12 hours if the craft carried extra fuel in place of passengers, omitting the need for the stop in Newfoundland. Both networks arranged for these types of commercial jetliners to bring later films, but each wanted to be "first" with moving pictures of Elizabeth's crowning. So, for the first batch of films of the beginning of the ceremony, NBC and CBS began investigating the use of jet planes, which could shorten the trip time to anywhere between five and nine hours, depending on the weather.

C. H. Colledge, NBC's Director of Engineering Operations, was tasked with finding a "secret weapon" for his employer – to find a jet plane that could carry its film and get it on the air

before CBS. In those days, the only civilian jet in the world was the Comet, which belonged to the British Overseas Airway Corporation (BOAC).

If NBC could get use of The Comet, it would be perfect to beat its rival on Coronation Day afternoon. At first, BOAC showed interest in providing a Comet. But on the day Colledge was scheduled to take a test flight, one of the planes crashed en route to London from India, killing all forty-three passengers. This was the third Comet to crash in the year since it had entered private service. The company decided to withdraw its offer.

This left military jets. The most successful combat jet airplane for sale or charter internationally at this time was English Electric's Canberra bomber. Colledge managed to secure the use of one that was slated for the Venezuelan Army. He contracted with that country to use it for 2 June. Everyone involved was sworn to secrecy, and the undertaking was christened, "Operation Astro."

Meanwhile, both CBS and NBC made arrangements to broadcast from Logan International Airport in Boston on Coronation Day. NBC laid claim to space in the administration building; CBS secured a hangar. Boston was an hour closer to London than New York, and every minute counted for both networks to try to be first on the air.

A Royal Air Force Canberra jet – different from NBC's "secret weapon" one – would bring three kinescope copies to Goose Bay, Labrador: one for CBC, one for NBC, and one for CBS. These copies were just that – there was not enough time to splice any commentary within this first batch at this early stage if the networks were to make sure these first moving images were on their way to



North America. The later sets of film, brought by commercial airliners, would bring footage from later events of the ceremonies, developed and spliced en route.

CBS and NBC had both arranged with private owners of P51 Mustangs, World War II fighters. These were the fastest propeller planes ever made; they would meet the RAF Canberra in Goose Bay and bring the film to Boston.

On the morning of 2 June, the doors of Westminster Abbey opened at 6:00 British time. Radio and television commentary, of course, started even before this. More than 200 microphones were stationed along the path and in Westminster Abbey, with 750 commentators broadcasting descriptions in 39 languages to serve the estimated 30 million viewers around the world who would watch the event in the hours and days to come.

At 12:30 a.m. EST in the U.S. and 8:30 a.m. in the UK, approximately 8,000 invited guests started filing into the Abbey. As soon as the Queen's procession from Buckingham Palace to the Abbey was finished, CBC engineers used an accelerated method to process a high-quality 35mm film recording of the BBC broadcast as it aired.

At 6:22 a.m. EST time, NBC alerted its audience to the existence of its "secret weapon," to keep people tuned in. From New York, it began airing footage and still photos of its Canberra bomber, while Romney Wheeler's voice, by a radio circuit from Blackbushe Airport, talked of NBC's coup. The network might have footage, he said, as early as one in the afternoon! This would be as much as three hours earlier than anyone else's pictures. The announcement stunned the CBS employees at Logan Airport.



The transmitter control station at Senate House, London, showing the portable transmitter control unit. Getting films of the Queen's coronation from ground to air to broadcast required the utmost coordination among people, technology, and flights. Getty Images

NBC's elation at "scooping" CBS was short-lived. At 8:21:30 EST, the network announced that its special Canberra bomber had a defect in its fuel tank. Its pilot turned it back to England, a little more than three hours after it took off. Its "secret weapon" was no longer an option.

Now headed back to London was its hour-long "special report": a film program, edited in NBC's Quonset hut at Blackbushe from kinescopes of the BBC live telecast. It contained unique footage shot by NBC News cameramen outside the abbey and other unrestricted sites. Woven into it were pictures of British history and tradition, filmed in the preceding weeks of preparation.

All NBC had left was the same BBC footage that CBS had. The race from Goose Bay to Boston was now of paramount importance.

CBS's "souped-up" P51, owned by actor Jimmy Stewart, was flown by Joe DeBona, who won the Bendix

trophy race in 1949. Flying the NBC P51 was air racer and movie stunt pilot Stanley Reaver, who finished second in the same race. Reaver was determined not to let DeBona beat him again.

DeBona left Goose Bay at 2:02 p.m. and arrived in Boston at 3:13 EST. CBS TV began airing its first actual Coronation footage at 3:25 EST. Unfortunately for Reaver, his plane had some problems with ice on the wings. He couldn't leave Goose Bay until some precious minutes later, at 2:15; he arrived in Boston at 3:37 EST. NBC lost the heavily publicized race.

However, when it became clear that Reaver was going to have a delayed start from Goose Bay, Charles H. "Bud" Barry, Jr., NBC's vice president for television programs, got an idea. He quickly ran it up the proverbial flagpole and got permission to do what he wanted.

Barry called Robert Kintner, the president of ABC. What if, he said, NBC paid for ABC's line charges

to get its feed from Montreal, in exchange for letting it also air the CBC footage? The alphabet network agreed, and both ABC and NBC began showing the Coronation at 3:15 p.m. EST, ten minutes ahead of CBS.

In yet another twist, while ABC and NBC were airing the event in

its full length, CBS's editors quickly and deftly snipped much of their footage copy, eliminating much of the street scene footage. The ritual in the Abbey was reached as soon as possible – thus, CBS was the first of the three American networks to show the actual Coronation ceremony itself.

All of this was possible because while NBC's and CBS's bombers sped through the skies, an RCAF bomber flew the CBC's film toward Montreal and got there before the other two reached Boston. Thus, the Canadian network got its footage on air nine minutes before CBS, making it possible for NBC and ABC to piggyback on her broadcast, and for the Queen's Commonwealth in North America to see it first. *See*

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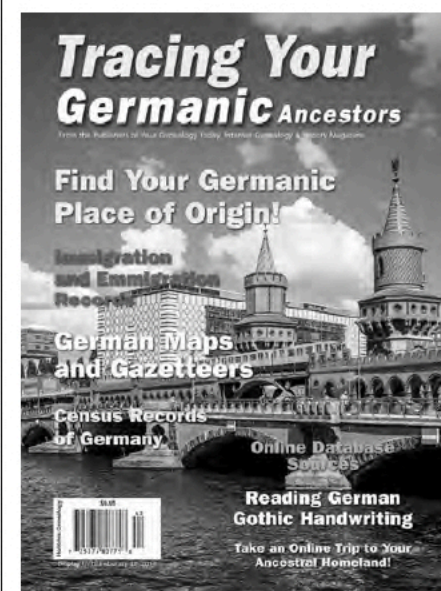
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**JULIA BRICKLIN** is the author of five nonfiction books. Her upcoming *RED SAPPHIRE: THE WOMAN WHO BEAT THE BLACKLIST* highlights the 1950s transnational TV programs secretly written by blacklisted writers.



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