

Raddigan's Rocketmen

BBC 1957-62, B&W, 34x25m

This little remembered science fiction series from the BBC paved the way for "Quatermass" and "Doctor Who" and helped establish the role of children's science-fiction as being at least partially educational.

Initial Concept

After the success of several children's science-fiction serials such as *Stranger from Space* in 1951/52, the production leads of the embryonic children's department began to look for a more expansive serial. Adaptions from literature came with the inbuilt limitation of the source material and so an original production with an ongoing episodic format was commissioned.

Raddigan's Rocketmen was obviously inspired by the 1949 American film serial *King of the Rocketmen* albeit given a distinctly British twist. In total at least 57 25-minute episodes were created between 1957 and 1962. They were pre-filmed productions recorded in the then ubiquitous live-performance-to-telecine method. As with early *Doctor Who* episodes six years later, they were almost entirely studio-bound, sound- and special- effects performed 'live' along with the acting.

Raddigan, played by John Dunnigan, is a Colonel in the British 'Rocket Infantry' apparently charged with defending the British Empire's interests in space and in other circumstances where no other agency is available. The background was never fully explained; an introductory episode may have been planned and scrapped or produced and lost or the decision might have been to work out the details later.

The soldiers are clearly equipped with scientifically advanced tools and weapons, but they wear almost Victorian era uniforms. The 'Rocket' aspect is limited to the backpacks worn by the characters; although they occasionally leap into or out of shot as though landing or taking off, they are never actually seen to fly. A 'rocket ship' is mentioned in several episodes set on other planets however their 'ray-gun' pistols make a perfectly ordinary bang on the few occasions they're used.

Villains

As with *Doctor Who*, the series quickly gained a set of recurring villains.

'Hardcourt' was a be-cloaked, top-hat-wearing time traveller from Victorian days who brainwashed followers into obeying him. The minions, in hooded coats and grotesque masks, were set to work on various diabolical schemes which needed foiling; he was often to be found in foreign locations plotting to steal vital secrets or artifacts.

A 'modern day' villain was provided by Aaron Pendragon. He was an embittered industrialist who had sided up with a set of unfortunately fairly obviously cardboard mechanical men to help them invade the earth while making himself massively richer in the process. Aggressive capitalism of this kind was clearly not compatible with the prevailing socialist attitudes of both the production time or the far future; Raddigan rarely captures Pendragon but ends several episodes delivering 'social good' monologues at Pendragon's fleeing figure.

Destroying the earth (for no presented reason!) was the omni-present aspiration of the Murderous Martian Menace; portrayed largely by teenage and dwarf actors wearing large paper-mache heads. Although hugely popular amongst the target audience, few of their episodes survive and enjoyment of a number of the ones which do is somewhat limited by the frequency at which the Martians trip over scenery they clearly can't see with their heads on.

The episodes generally followed a number of formulaic plots; For example, either the Martians or an alien-of-the-week would be plotting to destroy the earth or steal rocket-ships and would need to be stopped.

Earth-bound episodes would usually begin with some mysterious crime, causing Raddigan to have to work out who was responsible. In this kind of story, the rocket infantry's Science Officer, Zigby, would often deliver a science lesson in some aspect which would be crucial to the solving of the mystery. Some of the science lessons have, of course, now drifted out of date, but the educationally intended basis for the series is still obvious. In some respects these 'mystery solving' episodes could

almost be seen as a precursor to the 1980's series *Captain Zep: Space Detective*.

Lost Episodes

Eps.	Recordings	Scripts
34	full B&W 16mm	full
7	partial B&W 16mm	full
4	lost	full/part
13	lost	outlines
4	unproduced	outlines

Many episodes have sadly been lost. The BBC film archives of children's programmes were culled (to make space for more recent work) in the 1970s. Unlike *Doctor Who* which quickly gained a following amongst adult science-fiction enthusiasts and hence had many off-air recordings and saved material, *Raddigan's Rocketmen* screened on a weekday and was viewed almost entirely by children and so little was retained outside the BBC.

All told just 34 of the known 57 episodes exist completely (although often only in grainy reprinted 16mm) and portions of another 7 exist. Others are known from screenplay fragments, production paperwork or proposal documents. At least 60 episodes appear to have been made (based on contract agreements with the stars) but which of the various scripts/titles made it to production are unknown. All of the major players and staff involved in the productions have since died and so detailed information is hard to come by.

Cancellation

As the series progressed, it apparently suffered an increasing difficulty in attracting writers willing to spend enough time trying to be innovative within the limitations of both the series universe and the production techniques.

The decision was taken to cancel it after five seasons and work would begin on a replacement whose setting and budget would allow much more creative scripting – and *Doctor Who* would, of course, become famous and far eclipse its precursor. The decision was only finalised after the last episode of season 5 had been recorded, and thus there was therefore no conclusion; Raddigan never did finally defeat the Murderous Martian Menace.