

# **Radio Broadcasting and Identity in the Southern British World 1929-1939**



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## Short Abstract

This thesis explores the role radio broadcasting played in the 1930s in the development of senses of national and transnational cultural identity in the British world. It focuses on Australia and New Zealand, where broadcasting reflected and amplified a process of active reconstruction of identities already underway in the years following the First World War. It argues in four chapters and a series of case studies that broadcasting incubated both national and pan-British sympathies. That it could do this was a function of the central place broadcasting came to occupy in cultural life.

The first chapter assesses the impact of the arrival of radio in Australia and New Zealand in the 1920s, and that on senses of identity of broadcasts of occasions of remembrance. The second chapter examines the consequences of regulation on the development of broadcasting in Australia and New Zealand and the popularity of broadcasts of sporting events, with their contribution to conceptions of identity. The third chapter looks at the creation of the BBC Empire Service and particularly the Empire broadcasts on Christmas Day, bringing together the sounds of the British world for the world to admire, but nowhere more admired than by the British themselves. The fourth notes that if across the decade broadcasting in Australia and New Zealand had developed rich and distinct domestic cultural forms, it also carried regular reminders of connection to the wider British world, reminders that might offer a brake on imaginings of wholly separate national identities. None were bigger than the Coronation of King George VI, heard by two thirds of New Zealanders and carried by every radio station in Australia.

At a time when forces of national self-interest might be pushing the British Empire apart, it is argued that broadcasting sustained, even reconstructed, a sense of shared British identity.

## Long Abstract

This thesis examines the role radio broadcasting played in the 1930s in the development of senses of national and transnational cultural identity. It does this through an examination of the experience of listeners in the British world and in Australia and New Zealand. It focuses on Australia and New Zealand because, of the territories in the British Empire in which broadcasting was rapidly developing, here it was wrestling with questions of identity quite different from those exercising broadcasters in Canada, South Africa, and India. Whilst previous scholars have correctly identified the media as an important factor in the shaping of senses of national identity, relative to its cultural significance comparatively little research has been done into the role of broadcasting. For this was the decade in which broadcasting - instant communication, instant connection to ideas being heard in that moment by thousands, if not millions, of others - became a commonplace. The *Sydney Daily Telegraph* could declare that by 1936 a radio set in an Australian home was 'nearly as essential as a bath'. By 1939 four fifths of New Zealand households, and two thirds of those in Australia, owned a radio.

The proposition developed here is that radio broadcasting and listening incubated both national and pan-British sympathies. In so doing it reflected and amplified a process of active reconstruction of identities already underway in both Australia and New Zealand in the years following the First World War. This thesis explores the role radio listening played in building national cultural identity through its daily schedule of programmes bringing the same voices, the same songs, the same dramas, the same jokes, the same news, to widely scattered national communities. It explores the role played by the celebration of national sporting success. Yet at a time when forces of national self-interest might be pushing the British Empire apart, broadcasting did something to resist this, sustaining, even reconstructing, a sense of shared British identity amongst listeners across the scattered British world, generating a sense of their forming a transnational community, an active contemporary sense, not something simply inherited. That radio

broadcasting had capacity to do this was a function of the central place it had come to occupy in cultural life in the 1930s. This thesis is supported by a series of case studies of broadcasts, which it considers in greater depth than previous studies: occasions of remembrance; broadcasts of sporting competition; Christmas Day broadcasts and broadcasts of Royal events. It examines these with a focus primarily on the programmes, on what the producers sought to achieve, what listeners heard and their reactions. It asks whether and how radio helped maintain, enhance or merely adjust national and pan-British identities, and examines their compatibility.

In wrestling with the concept of nationalism Benedict Anderson proposed 'in an anthropological spirit' a definition of the nation as 'an imagined political community - and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign'. Michelle Hilmes argues, in *Radio Voices: American Broadcasting, 1922-1952*, that 'listeners tuning in by the tens of thousands to one specific program airing at a specific time created that shared simultaneity of experience' central to Anderson's concept of nationhood, going so far as to argue that it was as it 'found a voice through radio' that the 'imagined community of the 20<sup>th</sup> century United States began to take shape.' This was repeated across the globe. However, in a study of the British world of the 1930s Anderson's conception of the 'imagined' community invoked by radio listening, whilst useful and resonant, only goes so far. For through radio listening individual listeners were invited to reflect on their place not only within their nation but also within a wider pan-national British community. If 'nationality' was imagined as 'limited' the boundaries of the British world were less inhibited, less geographic, perhaps more psychological and there was a psychological dimension to both conceptions of belonging to Australia or New Zealand and of belonging to the British world. What radio listening was creating by the end of the 1930s, in the moment, perhaps many moments across a listening day, was, as Lesley Johnson argues, in *The Unseen Voice: A Cultural Study of Early Australian Radio*, senses of community 'of an abstract nature', with listeners 'kept in touch with each other not by direct communication', but by sharing experiences of listening to the radio. Such senses of community

might be local, or national, or, in societies formed by migration, rooted in connections to a previous personal or family 'home', however distant in time or space. As David Hendy notes in his *Radio in the Global Age* simply because the shared experience of listening can be 'more illusory than real...the experience does not have to be based on geography or political boundaries...to listen...is to become - if only temporarily - a member of a community of interest which ignores location.' He observes that radio therefore 'gives us the potential to experience at the same time multiple identities.' To return to Anderson's hypothesis, for nations to be created, to be 'imagined', they must first become somehow 'imaginable'. For the national communities of Australia or New Zealand to strip themselves of a 'British' sensibility, for a more 'limited' distinctly and uniquely 'national' sensibility to become 'imaginable', the wider sense of organic British community might need to become more 'unimaginable'. This thesis argues that in the 1930s broadcasting was offering a brake on this process, broadcasts from London, integrated into the schedules of the radio stations of Australia and New Zealand, regularly invited contemplation of the place of each in the wider 'British world' – itself a conception through which, in all its diversity, the British Imperial system could be 'imagined' by its inhabitants. That place was compatible with wider imaginings of global interconnections in the 1930s, with Pacifism, with Internationalism, even as it militated against wholehearted adoption of American popular culture and against the anti-British nationalisms of the Catholic Irish. For different individuals at different times, even at the same time, it was possible to hold both national and pan-British sympathies. In the 1930s these were not incompatible, a fundamental reimagination of the relationship with Britain lay some way in the future.

Central to research on the history of pan-Imperial British broadcasting is the work of Simon Potter. In his *Broadcasting Empire: The BBC and the British World 1922-1970*, Potter argued that for Britain, 'broadcasting had seemed to offer a means to shore up an old, disintegrating world-system, rather than to create a new one'. There is much in this analysis as this thesis

acknowledges, in a climate of 'imperial weakness' it was a rather forlorn hope that in the long-term efforts to reinforce a sense of unity across the British world through BBC broadcasts from London would succeed. However, the thesis advanced here is that whilst there is no denying that in the long-term allegiance to the Empire was not sustained by broadcasts from London, in the short term at least some of the 'old, disintegrating world system' was, however briefly, held together in the 1930s by broadcasting, even if only - as we shall see - on Christmas afternoon.

This thesis is rooted in three underlying propositions. First, that it was regulation by governments that established the broadcasting ecologies of individual nations, and that this regulation had a direct impact on the place broadcasting occupied in the national culture and on its cultural influence. Second, that two quite different modes of listening to radio broadcasts shaped that influence. A radio set offered both a comfortable background noise to daily life but also calls to deeper engagement - listening might, then, inspire a complex range of sympathies and emotions. Third, that in the 1930s broadcasting opened both national and transnational cultural spaces, making possible shared and simultaneous engagement in events which invited listeners across the British world to reflect on their place not only within their nation but also within a wider pan-national British community. Through broadcasting it was possible to find audiences that might otherwise have neglected their sense of 'Britishness'. This was a two-way process. Through their connections to the BBC, the national broadcasters in Australia and New Zealand could themselves on occasion step onto this global stage. If it was the case that through broadcasting listeners in Christchurch or Brisbane might be inspired to stay up all night to listen to BBC coverage of the Coronation, it was equally the case that listeners in Britain or America might be impressed by the sheer scale and scope of the British world invoked on Christmas Day, by the sounds of revellers on Bondi Beach, or the strains of Maori song.

This thesis examines how radio broadcasting helped shape senses of identity in the British world in four chapters, each built around a case study. The first begins with an assessment of the social impact of the arrival of radio in the 1920s, exploring how exactly it was that radio came to occupy a prominent position in the cultural lives of Australians and New Zealanders. In outlining the development of broadcasting in Australia and New Zealand it examines the central role regulation played. It offers a detailed examination of broadcasts marking remembrance of the First World War, some of the earliest major broadcast events. It considers how, and with what significance, such events emotionally engaged those who heard them, and how, then, broadcasting came to contribute to the development of conceptions of national and pan-British identity. The second chapter builds on this, noting that by the end of 1932 the landscape of broadcasting in Australia and New Zealand had been largely drawn. In each a national organisation had been created. The ABC and NZBB were public service broadcasters, in large part modelled on the BBC, operating alongside commercial stations. It examines the consequences of the creation, by regulation, of these two classes of broadcaster. In both Australia and New Zealand there was revealed less deference to the cultural tastes of the 'establishment', to the 'highbrow', and more delight in the 'lowbrow'. Through the decade, and through its cultural influence, broadcasting began to not merely reflect but shape national identity. What united the experience of listeners remained a fascination with 'actualities' – things actually happening at that moment. If occasions of remembrance had been amongst the first of these, in the early years of broadcasting nothing in the British world had a greater appeal to audiences than sporting competition, broadcasts of which made a significant contribution to the development of conceptions of both national and pan-British cultural identity. The third chapter asks how radio broadcasting supported notions of British co-ownership of the Empire and its symbols. It looks at pan-Imperial broadcasting and the creation of the BBC Empire Service, its objectives, output, and reception. It looks at how broadcasters in Australia and New Zealand responded - often with enthusiasm. It looks particularly at the Empire broadcasts on Christmas Day, occasions co-ordinated from London but which gave a

global platform to broadcasters in Australia and New Zealand. These annual programmes were a product of the very latest technical possibilities, bringing together the sounds and voices of the British world for the world to admire, yet nowhere were they more admired than by the British themselves - their scope and delivery, which were almost beyond comprehension, left listeners with a satisfied amazement at the wonders of broadcasting itself, at the idea that such things were indeed possible, and at British mastery of this technology. The fourth notes that if across the decade broadcasting in Australia and New Zealand had developed rich and distinct domestic cultural forms, it also carried regular reminders of connection to the wider British world, reminders that might offer a brake on imaginings of wholly separate national identities. None were bigger than the Coronation of King George VI, heard by two thirds of New Zealanders and carried by every radio station in Australia. This chapter examines the impact broadcast coverage of events in the lives of the British monarchy had on conceptions of national or pan-British identity. The power of broadcasting to make connections is examined in a concluding case study, the immense global popularity of the song and dance 'The Lambeth Walk', which spoke to the draw of London as a place of cultural significance, and the power of radio to shape popular culture.

Broadcasting was clearly not the only cultural influence on conceptions of identity as they developed in Australia and New Zealand in the 1930s. The Imperial swagger of the broadcasts we will examine was reinforcing the impact of the more 'banal' domestic symbols of Imperial identity which already existed - the flags, the coinage, the stamps, the anthem, the school oaths.

Identification with Britishness in Australia and New Zealand both formed the foundation for civic expressions of community in the imperial era and also offered more prosaic benefits - access to British produce, jobs and credit. Broadcasting reinforced such connections, leant on shared myths and stories and repeatedly drew listeners back to London, the Imperial capital. In all its cultural diversity, from the Cenotaph to the Abbey, from the 'homes' of rugby and cricket to the 'Lambeth Walk', London was positioned as being at the heart of pan-British cultural life.

Broadcasting - disruptive, transformative - linked the multiple British world spaces, bringing listeners together, providing a platform on which all the varied dimensions of Britishness could be expressed, reinforcing connections between the scattered global 'Britons', reminding them of a shared heritage, broadening conceptions of what it might be to be considered 'British'.

## Acknowledgements

This has been a later-life academic project and in finding the confidence to return to study after so many years I'm hugely grateful to the staff at the Oxford University Department for Continuing Education for their encouragement and support, particularly to Janet Dickinson and Myfanwy Lloyd, and to Michael Redley and Tom Buchanan who supervised my Postgrad. Cert. and my Masters. I thank Jamie Belich for giving me the opportunity to tackle a DPhil, Andy Thompson for his advice and engagement and Peter Brooke for his enthusiasm and opportunities to present my work. I greatly appreciated the friendship and encouragement from day 1 of Katy Phipps. An implausible number of my Rewley House cohort went on to tackle PhDs and I salute my fellow members of the PhD Lunch Club and Mike Power who kept us together.

This would have been nothing without the support of archivists. I thank Tom Hercock at the BBC for many hours of toil on my behalf, and Robert Seater for some wonderful opportunities to publish my research as it was progressing. BBC copyright content is reproduced courtesy of the British Broadcasting Corporation. All rights reserved. At the Royal Archives Julie Crocker was very supportive and brought out some gems. I'm grateful for the permission of His Majesty King Charles III for the use of this material. Staff at the Alexander Turnbull Library in Wellington and the State Library of New South Wales in Sydney made me very welcome. I'm grateful for the support given over many days at Archives New Zealand and reserve special thanks for Emily and Samantha at the National Archives of Australia in Chester Hill for their cheery welcome on my first day when train delays, heavy rain, and a failure to appreciate just how far the archive was from Chester Hill station, saw me arrive rather wetter and later than planned.

I have been fortunate to work for the BBC on twenty first century coverage of many of the events explored in this thesis and for the pleasures and insights that has brought I have to thank some wonderfully supportive BBC colleagues. I have enjoyed reading of the ways that almost a century ago our forebears successfully overcame many similar challenges.

I was fortunate to have parents who believed in education and a mum who, had she lived, would have delighted in all the trappings of my late life return to Oxford - and in that vein I might offer a thought to my younger self - who wouldn't have believed this was very likely to happen. That it did is in large part due to the support and encouragement of my family and above all Gina, who had to listen as I read through most of this - more than once.

If it is dedicated to anyone it's the men and women whose endeavours it captures, many of whose names, in the nature of the medium, were once on everyone's lips - until the day they weren't. If one archival find inspired me more than any other it was Cecil Madden's scrapbook, a defiant effort by one of the creative heroes of the early years of broadcasting to not be forgotten. It was good to make his acquaintance, albeit through the archives and at a distance of many years, as it was to have made that of so many of his generation on whose shoulders stood the world of broadcasting I was fortunate to have worked in.

## INTRODUCTION

On the night of 11 November 1932 reception of the experimental BBC short-wave radio service G5SW was, in New Zealand, notably good. Listeners reported 'slight fading' but otherwise 'music came through very clearly', 'every word' was heard. It was Armistice Day and in Wanganui 'many listened in' to the Cenotaph service taking place in London. They noted the music, the massed bands playing the Dead March in Saul, the Reveille and the Last Post, 'with their impressive significance'. 'Many' residents of Wairoa were also reported to have listened, and what was particularly noted by listeners across New Zealand that night was that at the precise moment that Big Ben chimed 11, so, in Gonville, a kitchen clock began to strike, and in Wellington the Town Clock struck, and in Ashburton that of the Post Office - across the country the 'differently toned bells could be heard at the same time', one local, the other chiming 'from the other side of the world' – it was 'an outstanding feature of the occasion'.<sup>1</sup>

In 1932 radio broadcasting, only a decade earlier the plaything of amateur enthusiasts, was a medium uniting a nation, connecting individual listeners across New Zealand with each other and with the sounds of an event taking place 12,000 miles away. This thesis looks at the role radio broadcasting played in the 1930s in the development of senses of national and transnational cultural identity. It does this through an examination of the experience of listeners in the British world and in Australia and New Zealand. It focuses on Australia and New Zealand because, of the territories in the British Empire in which broadcasting was rapidly developing, here it was wrestling with questions of identity quite different from those exercising broadcasters in Canada, South

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<sup>1</sup> *Poverty Bay Herald*, 15 November 1932, page 10.

<<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/PBH19321115.2.140>>; *Wanganui Chronicle*, 12 November 1932, p. 6 <<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/WC19321112.2.32>>; 'Local and General', *Ashburton Guardian*, 12 November 1932, p. 4. <<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/AG19321112.2.19>> [Accessed: 1 August 2025]

Africa, and India. Whilst previous scholars have correctly identified the media as an important factor in the shaping of senses of national identity, relative to its cultural significance comparatively little research has been done into the role of broadcasting. For this was the decade in which broadcasting - instant communication, instant connection to ideas being heard in that moment by thousands, if not millions, of others - became a commonplace. The *Sydney Daily Telegraph* could declare that by 1936 a radio set in an Australian home was 'nearly as essential as a bath'.<sup>2</sup> By 1939 four fifths of New Zealand households, and two thirds of those in Australia, owned a radio.<sup>3</sup>

The proposition developed here is that radio broadcasting and listening incubated both national and pan-British sympathies. In so doing it reflected and amplified a process of active reconstruction of identities already underway in both Australia and New Zealand in the years following the First World War. This thesis explores the role radio listening played in building national cultural identity through its daily schedule of programmes bringing the same voices, the same songs, the same dramas, the same jokes, the same news, to widely scattered national communities. It explores the role played by the celebration of national sporting success. Yet at a time when forces of national self-interest might be pushing the British Empire apart, broadcasting did something to resist this, sustaining, even reconstructing, a sense of shared British identity amongst listeners across the scattered British world, an active contemporary sense, not simply something inherited. That radio broadcasting had capacity to do this was a function of the central place it had come to occupy in cultural life in the 1930s. This thesis is supported by a series of case studies of broadcasts, which it considers in greater depth than previous studies: occasions of remembrance; broadcasts of sporting competition; Christmas Day broadcasts and broadcasts of

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<sup>2</sup> 'Pillows Talk in the Night', *Sydney Daily Telegraph*, 24 March 1936, p. 23.

<<https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/246729130>> [Accessed: 1 August 2025]

<sup>3</sup> Patrick Day, *Radio Years: A History of Broadcasting in New Zealand* (Auckland: Auckland University Press in association with the Broadcasting History Trust, 1994), p. 247; Lesley Johnson, *The Unseen Voice: A Cultural Study of Early Australian Radio* (London: Routledge, 1988), p. 82.

Royal events. It examines these with a focus primarily on the programmes, on what the producers sought to achieve, what listeners heard and their reactions. It asks whether and how radio helped maintain, enhance, or merely adjust national and pan-British identities, and examines their compatibility.

In support of this thesis are three underlying propositions. First, that it was regulation by governments that established the broadcasting ecologies of individual nations, and that this regulation had a direct impact on the place broadcasting occupied in the national culture and on its cultural influence. Second, that there were (and are) two quite different modes of listening to radio broadcasts. On the one hand the radio set was a 'domestic companion', supplying a comfortable background noise to daily life. On the other it might (and did) issue calls to action, inviting a quite different form of attentive engagement. Each played a part in shaping the influence of broadcasting in cultural life, what resulted was a complex range of sympathies and emotions. Third, that in the 1920s and 1930s, across the globe, broadcasting opened up both national and transnational cultural spaces. If the barriers to entry to national markets were maintained by governments, added to the barriers of entry to global broadcasting were the costs of the infrastructure necessary to broadcast short-wave radio signals to the world and of the intellectual property that formed the basis of the broadcast. These often proved hard to surmount, yet in London the BBC had abundant capital, both financial and cultural, and exploited this to develop a prominent British presence in this new media landscape and in so doing reinforce pan-British cultural ties. Whilst this was a platform not wholly untethered from the costs of transportation, once these had been met, by investments in infrastructure by the broadcaster or by the purchase of a receiving set by the listener, it offered opportunities to reach new audiences released from considerations of time or distance. The transnational dimension of the new medium was itself a source of fascination, as could be observed that November night in 1932. Through it was made possible shared engagement in events which reinforced connections across the British world, and

more than reinforced, for in offering access to some of the biggest broadcast occasions of the age, the biggest 'media events', it was possible to find audiences that might otherwise have neglected their sense of 'Britishness'. This was a two-way process. Through their connections to the BBC, the national broadcasters in Australia and New Zealand could themselves on occasion step onto this global stage. If it was the case that through broadcasting listeners in Christchurch or Brisbane might be inspired to stay up all night to listen to BBC coverage of the Coronation, it was equally the case that listeners in Britain or America might be impressed by the sheer scale and scope of the British world invoked on Christmas Day, by the sounds of revellers on Bondi Beach, or the strains of Maori song.

## The British World

In August 1938 the Director of BBC Overseas Services, J. Beresford Clark, wrote a 'personal' letter to the General Manager of the Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC), Charles Moses, proposing a series of programmes with an 'authentic' Australian background, 'which would help people in this country and in other parts of the Empire to appreciate to a fuller extent the interests and problems of the various parts of the British world.' The programmes, six in all, were to form a series titled *Australia Speaks*.<sup>4</sup> The conception of the 'British world' that Clark referenced, and the BBC embraced, was broad and imprecise, comprising the British Isles, the Dominions, rather more ambiguously the colonies, and also untold numbers of British people scattered across the globe, many living under other flags. In the 1930s this 'world' was formally bound economically by trade, politically by statute.<sup>5</sup> It was also bound by something more informal, yet in some ways more

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<sup>4</sup> BBC Written Archive (hereafter WAC) R46/32, 18 August 1938, letter Clark to Moses.

<sup>5</sup> see D Bell, *The idea of Greater Britain: Empire and the Future World Order, 1860-1900* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007); Geoffrey Serle & Richard A. Preston. *Contemporary Australia: Studies in History, Politics, and Economics*. (Duke University Commonwealth-Studies Center: Duke University Press, 1969); James Belich, *Paradise Reforged: A History of the New Zealanders, From the 1880s to the Year 2000*, (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2001); K.C. Wheare, *The Statute of Westminster and Dominion Status*, 4<sup>th</sup> edn (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1949); John Darwin, 'A Third British Empire? The Dominion Idea in Imperial Politics' in *The Oxford History of the British Empire, Vol IV: The Twentieth Century*, ed. by Judith Brown and Wm Roger Louis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

powerful, for the concept of this 'British world' was also both a driver and a product of migration. Stephen Constantine estimates that 1.64 million people migrated from the British Isles in the 1880s; 1.67 million in the 1900s; and 1.8 million in the 1920s.<sup>6</sup> As Andrew Thompson and Meaghan Kowalsky conclude, for many 'migration was the essence of empire', perhaps 'the aspect of empire that touched most British people most profoundly' playing a 'tremendous social and imaginative role in British society'.<sup>7</sup> Migration knitted people together in new ways.<sup>8</sup> They wrote letters and sent back wages.<sup>9</sup> What these huge numbers of individual experiences produced was a 'cultural glue' of shared sentiment, values and networks through which knowledge and ideas could pass, binding people who considered themselves 'British'.<sup>10</sup> Barry Crosbie & Mark Hampton see the cultural British world supplying the 'sinews', what Gary McGee and Andrew Thompson characterise as the 'software', that reinforced or underpinned the more formally understood institutional, political and economic bonds of empire.<sup>11</sup> The British world thus occupied both geographic space but also something less tangible, what Tamson Pietsch terms a more 'fluid' space, what resulted was not a 'singular' British World but rather 'multiple, produced British world spaces...made in the minds of its inhabitants'.<sup>12</sup> Broadcasting was an emergent medium through which to facilitate such connections, it played on the imagination of listeners, it stirred sentiment,

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<sup>6</sup> Stephen Constantine, 'British emigration to the Empire-Commonwealth: from overseas settlement to diaspora?' *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 31 (2003), (16-35), p. 19.

<sup>7</sup> Andrew Thompson with Meaghan Kowalsky, 'Social Life and Cultural Representation: Empire in the Public Imagination' in Thompson, Andrew S. (ed.) *Britain's Experience of Empire in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 260-4.

<sup>8</sup> Robert Bickers, *Settlers and Expatriates: Britons over the Seas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 2.

<sup>9</sup> Kent Fedorowich and Andrew S. Thompson, 'Mapping the Contours of the British World: Empire, migration and identity', in *Empire, Migration and Identity in the British World*, ed. Kent Fedorowich and Andrew S. Thompson (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), pp. 10-13.

<sup>10</sup> Carl Bridge and Kent Fedorowich, *The British World: Diaspora, Culture and Identity* (London: Frank Cass, 2003), pp. 6-11; Tamson Pietsch, 'Rethinking the British World', *Journal of British Studies* 52 (April 2013) (441-463), pp. 447-9; David Lambert and Alan Lester, 'Imperial Spaces, Imperial Subjects', in *Colonial Lives across the British Empire: Imperial careering in the long nineteenth century*, ed. David Lambert and Alan Lester (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 1-6 & 11-12.

<sup>11</sup> Barry Crosbie and Mark Hampton, 'Introduction' in *The Cultural Construction of the British World*, ed. by Barry Crosbie and Mark Hampton (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2017), pp.2-4; Gary B. Magee, and Andrew S. Thompson, *Empire and Globalisation: Networks of People, Goods and Capital in the British World, C. 1850-1914*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 16.

<sup>12</sup> Pietsch, pp. 447-9.

it was, like refrigeration, a technology that 'changed the nature of distance'.<sup>13</sup> These are all ideas central to this thesis and to them we shall return.

Across the globe the 'British' shared, in the 1930s, an understanding of what constituted 'food', 'fashion' and 'entertainment'. For all the vast differences in their geographies, climates, flora and fauna, the Dominions were portrayed to the domestic British audience as 'familiar' places, inhabited by people just like 'us'.<sup>14</sup> New Zealand marketed its lamb as 'Produced by Britons for British Homes', Australia's 'Kangaroo' butter was another 'All British product'.<sup>15</sup> A consequence of this was that, as Bill Schwarz argues, 'the imagined geographies of empire, particularly of the white settler societies, operated close to home'.<sup>16</sup> A sense of shared 'Britishness' enabled a transformation of the 'geographical space within which people in the British Isles could imagine their lives'.<sup>17</sup> Yet this was a 'complex entity', containing within itself the means of its own disintegration if it failed to hold at bay the forces of national self-interest that might push it apart.<sup>18</sup> Broadcasts from London regularly invited contemplation of the vast breadth of the 'British world', a notion that, as Stuart Ward proposes, offered a way in which, in all its diversity, the British Imperial system could be 'imagined' by its inhabitants - a 'transcontinental sweep of peoples unbounded, in theory, by the conventional constraints of geography, citizenship and separate statehood'.<sup>19</sup> An examination of the history of such broadcasting, through both medium and message, through the work of broadcasters like Clark and Moses, invites exploration of the

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<sup>13</sup> Felicity Barnes, *New Zealand's London: A Colony and its Metropolis*, (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2013), pp. 8-9.

<sup>14</sup> Felicity Barnes, 'Bringing Another Empire Alive? The Empire Marketing Board and the Construction of Dominion Identity, 1926-33', *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, (2014) 42:1, 61-85 (p. 79). <<https://doi.org/10.1080/03086534.2013.826456>> [Accessed: 1 August 2025]

<sup>15</sup> 'Advertising Australian Butter', *Gippsland Times*, Victoria, 14 March 1927, p. 6. <<https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/62607184>> [Accessed: 1 August 2025]

<sup>16</sup> Bill Schwarz, *Memories of Empire, Volume I: The White Man's World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 10.

<sup>17</sup> John Darwin, *The Empire Project: The Rise and Fall of the British World-System, 1830-1970*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 48.

<sup>18</sup> Bridge and Fedorowich, pp. 3-6.

<sup>19</sup> Stuart Ward, 'Introduction' in *The Break-up of Greater Britain* ed. by Christian D. Pedersen and Stuart Ward (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2021), pp. 7-8.

ways in which that imaginative conception was developed and identities were formed across the 'British world.'

## Identity

It has been well established that identification with national identities is at least in part a work of the imagination.<sup>20</sup> This thesis agrees with this assessment, and with Anthony Smith when he argues that vital to conceptions of national identity are stories and myths, history and symbols, which carry authenticity and 'grow out of the existing, living memories and beliefs of the people who are to compose the nation'.<sup>21</sup> On one level identification with Britishness in Australia and New Zealand reflected the geographical origins of the majority of their settler populations, or more grandly ties 'of a common blood and a common language'.<sup>22</sup> A British ancestry was the characteristic shared by people of differing classes and political and religious persuasions. Yet there was more to it than this. As Russell McGregor argues an attachment to Britishness, whilst it unquestionably 'complicated and sometimes compromised Australian national identity and interests', resulted not from its adherents being 'toadies of empire or spineless semi patriots' but rather from 'the Britannic repertory' providing 'a vital source of the myths on which national solidarity and community depended'.<sup>23</sup> Keith Sinclair asserted that in 1940 most people born in New Zealand would have identified themselves as New Zealanders 'without hesitation,' yet it was still possible 'to be and feel both a New Zealander and British'. One attraction of a 'British' identity, Sinclair proposed, was that it allowed New Zealanders to identify with contemporary notions of 'British greatness'.<sup>24</sup> More prosaically a British identity also offered New Zealanders the right to

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<sup>20</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 2006) pp. 6-7.

<sup>21</sup> Anthony D Smith, 'The Nation: Invented, Imagined, Reconstructed?', *Millennium*, vol. 20, issue 3, 1991, p. 359.

<sup>22</sup> Douglas Cole, 'The Crimson thread of kinship: ethnic ideas in Australia 1870-1914'. *Australian Historical Studies*, 14:56, (511-525), p. 523.

<sup>23</sup> Russell McGregor, 'The necessity of Britishness: ethno-cultural roots of Australian Nationalism', *Nations and Nationalism* 12 (3), 2006, (493-511), pp. 493-4 & 501-502.

<sup>24</sup> Keith Sinclair, *A History of New Zealand*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (London: Allen Lane, 1980), pp. 326-9.

‘privileged access to British produce, jobs and credit markets’ on the basis of shared ‘kinship, blood and race’, as James Belich argues.<sup>25</sup> James Curran, whilst acknowledging that a sense of Britishness ‘may not have resonated uniformly’ throughout Australia, nonetheless notes that it formed the foundation ‘for virtually all civic expressions of community in the imperial era’.<sup>26</sup> The evidence for this lay in school oaths of loyalty, in the saluting of the Union Jack, in the celebration of Empire Day. Indeed, Deryck Schreuder and Stuart Ward assert that in the early twentieth century ‘Empire’ was for Australians ‘a key conceptual anchor of their identity and security in a fast-expanding world of modernity’. It was indeed ‘home’.<sup>27</sup> Britain was the ‘Mother Country’. In the early 1930s it could be referenced as such, in correspondence with the BBC, by E.C. Hands, the Secretary of the New Zealand Broadcasting Board (NZBB) and by Walter Conder, then General Manager of the ABC.<sup>28</sup> Australia claimed to be 98 per cent British, New Zealand 98.5 per cent.<sup>29</sup> The connections were not a matter of nostalgia. The British Empire belonged as much to them as Britons living in the British Isles.<sup>30</sup> London was positioned as being at the heart of pan-British cultural life, it was ‘the Mecca of all artists of outstanding ability’, as the ABC Chair put it on the night of the launch of the service, the location of almost all British Imperial ceremonial, the location of the sporting venues on which the greatest battles with the metropole might be fought.<sup>31</sup>

Both the national and pan-national - British - identities of Australia and New Zealand were being actively reconstructed in the 1920s and 30s, in part as a consequence of service in the First World War and the trauma of the massive losses. A recalibration of national identity was born of the

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<sup>25</sup> Belich, *Paradise Reforged*, p. 189.

<sup>26</sup> James Curran, ‘Australia Should Be There’, *Australian Historical Studies*, 39, 1, (2008), (72-90), pp. 74-5.

<sup>27</sup> Deryck Marshall Schreuder & Stuart Ward, ‘Introduction’ in *Australia’s Empire*, ed. by Schreuder & Ward (Oxford: OUP, 2008), pp. 2-4.

<sup>28</sup> WAC E5/53, 24 July 1935, letter E.C. Hands, NZBB to Clark; WAC E1/315/3, 26 February 1934, Walter Conder, ABC to Clark.

<sup>29</sup> James Belich, *Replenishing the Earth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 466-7.

<sup>30</sup> Phillip Buckner, *Canada and the End of Empire* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2004), pp.2-3

<sup>31</sup> Kenneth S. Inglis, and Jan Brazier, *This is the ABC: The Australian Broadcasting Commission 1932-1983* (Carlton, Vic: London: Melbourne University Press; Eurospan, 1983), pp. 5-6.

experience of having travelled to the other side of the world to fight shoulder to shoulder with other 'Brits', wherever in the world they might have come from, and of carving out of service in Imperial armies distinctive 'Kiwi' and 'Aussie' identities. The legacy was complex, on the one hand offering the foundation myths of a distinct national identity rooted in martial endeavour, on the other a reminder of shared pan-British loyalties, and losses. Radio broadcasting would play a part in reinforcing the established narratives of the war, and in time not merely 'remembering' but retelling these, as memories themselves faded, and for a new generation. One legacy was a sense that 'the Empire', and fighting for it, was not merely the preoccupation of the Britons living in the British Isles, but also those beyond, in the 'neo-Britains'.

This thesis asks whether, and then how, radio helped maintain, enhance, or adjust these various identities, and examines their compatibility. Was sports broadcasting, for example, intrinsically narrowly nationalist as opposed to pan-British? Were games against the Old British more important than games against Others? Or was it the case that sporting competition reinforced imperial connections? What was the impact of a plethora of broadcasts of events in the lives of the British Royal Family, some of the biggest global media events of the day, and of regular broadcast appearances by the King - the King being King not just of England but King of Australia, and New Zealand. On Royal occasions, adapted in subtle ways for the radio audience, what was the impact of listeners in Australia and New Zealand being explicitly encouraged not merely to tune in but to consider themselves invited guests, witnesses no less, equal partners, however distant from London, in the Imperial endeavour? It argues that whilst a sense of Greater British identity might diminish with time this process was arrested in the 1930s, and that one of the factors influencing this was radio broadcasting. Broadcasts from London, integrated into the schedules of the radio stations of Australia and New Zealand, regularly invited contemplation of the place of each in the wider 'British world' - itself a conception through which, in all its diversity, the British Imperial system could be 'imagined' by its inhabitants. They, as we shall see, militated against

wholehearted adoption of American popular culture, and on great occasions - in the overwhelming dominance of the airwaves by pro-British, often pro-Monarchist, sentiment - they militated against anti-British nationalisms of, say, the Catholic Irish populations. For different individuals at different times, even at the same time, it was possible in Australia and New Zealand to hold both national and pan-British sympathies. In the 1930s these were not incompatible, a fundamental reimagination of the relationship with Britain lay some way in the future. The vision of the 'British world' presented was moreover compatible with wider imaginings of global interconnections in the 1930s, with Pacifism - the British Empire perceiving itself as being, after all, 'the friend of all, the enemy of none', as George V proposed in his Christmas message of 1935 - and particularly with Internationalism, for in a turbulent world it could be argued, as does Andrew Dilly, that there were 'few more effective examples of international collaboration' than the British Commonwealth of Nations.<sup>32</sup> Into the late 1930s broadcasting retained some of the ambitions of the International Broadcasting Union, or Union Internationale de Radiophonie (UIR), established in Geneva in 1925 as a medium for the promotion of international harmony through cultural exchange, reaching out to the estimated 87 million receiving sets around the world. As late as Christmas 1938 the BBC producer Laurence Gilliam was coordinating *Christmas Over Europe* with broadcasters in France, Germany, Czechoslovakia, Greece, Italy, and Sweden.<sup>33</sup> We will later explore one of the UIR's most ambitious projects, a series of 'World Concerts', the fourth of which came, in 1938, from the ABC in Australia.

Stuart Hall proposes that instead of thinking of cultural identity 'as an already accomplished fact', with 'shared cultural codes' which provide 'stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference

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<sup>32</sup> Tom Fleming, *Voices Out of the Air: The Royal Christmas Broadcasts 1932-81* (London: Heinemann, 1981), pp. 17-18; Andrew Dilly, 'The tale of two commonwealths? The British Commonwealth of nations, decolonization and the break up of greater Britain', in Christian D. Pedersen and Stuart Ward, *The Break-up of Greater Britain* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2021), pp. 178-9.

<sup>33</sup> Simon J. Potter, *Wireless Internationalism and Distant Listening: Britain, Propaganda, and the Invention of Global Radio, 1920-1939* (Oxford: OUP, 2020), pp. 112-3; *Radio Times*, 25 December 1938, pp. 10-11.

and meaning', we might think of it, instead, as a 'production', which is never complete, 'always in process'. Cultural identity, in this sense, is a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being', belonging to the future as much as to the past, not a 'fixed essence' at all.<sup>34</sup> If we accept Benedict Anderson's proposition that nations are in some sense 'imagined' then to be created they must first become somehow 'imaginable'. For the national communities of Australia or New Zealand to strip themselves of their 'British' sensibility, for a distinctly and uniquely 'national' sensibility to become 'imaginable', it might be equally necessary, as Stuart Ward argues, that the wider sense of organic British community should become more 'unimaginable'. Such reimagination was not simply the product of nations 'growing to maturity' and shaking off the 'mother country', it was also a reaction to changing circumstance, to changing perceptions of self-interest.<sup>35</sup> For all that broadcasting was reinforcing, and itself creating, in Australia and New Zealand popular cultural forms quite distinct from those in Britain, broadcasts of events of shared interest to listeners across the British world struck chords in the collective imagination. In the 1930s, and in part thanks to broadcasting, a fundamental reimagination of the relationship with Britain lay some way in the future.<sup>36</sup>

## **Broadcasting in the British World**

This thesis is rooted in the work of previous historians of broadcasting and seeks to build on it. It focuses on Australia and New Zealand because, whilst across the British Empire broadcasting was rapidly developing, here it wrestled with questions of identity quite different from those facing broadcasters in Canada, South Africa, and India. The 'vast majority' of Canadians in the late 1920s were listening to American stations. Even after the creation of the Canadian Radio Broadcasting

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<sup>34</sup> Stuart Hall, 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora [1990]', *Selected Writings on Race and Difference* ed. by Ruth Wilson Gilmore, and Paul Gilroy. (Duke: Duke University Press, 2021), pp. 257-261.

<sup>35</sup> Stuart Ward, *Australia and the British Embrace: The Demise of the Imperial Ideal* (Carlton, Vic.: Melbourne University Press, 2001), pp. 258-261.

<sup>36</sup> Geoffrey Partington, *The Australian Nation: its British and Irish Roots* (Transaction Publishers: New York, 1997), p. xx (argues that in Australia this was not until the 'Whitlam era').

Commission (CRBC) in 1932 the broadcast environment remained one in which Canadian radio listeners felt part of a broader North American community of listeners.<sup>37</sup> Broadcasting in South Africa served a different function and had a different significance to broadcasting in many other parts of the Empire. At 150,000 in a population of 9,590,000 the proportion of licenced radio listeners in South Africa was small. It was a small proportion even of the 2 million 'European' South Africans as defined by the 1936 census.<sup>38</sup> The output of the African Broadcasting Company (ABC), and later South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC), primarily reflected the interests of the white English-speaking elite.<sup>39</sup> There was little provision for the remainder. Like the CRBC the ABC made much of its rebroadcasts of events live from Britain.<sup>40</sup> Yet so poor was the infrastructure of South African broadcasting that in London it was assumed by the BBC that listeners there could be treated almost as 'overseas fragments of the home audience'.<sup>41</sup> Broadcasting in India was also poorly resourced and under the control of a government in which 'the bureaucrats of the British Raj, disliking everything new', were suspicious 'from the word go' of anything that might offer a platform to Indian Nationalists.<sup>42</sup>

Peter Downes and Peter Harcourt charted the development of broadcasting in New Zealand, its movement away from pre-existing cultural forms and towards new styles of entertainment which only worked as radio and in which the listener established a personal relationship with the

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<sup>37</sup> Anne F. MacLennan, 'Learning to Listen: Developing the Canadian Radio Audience in the 1930s', *Journal of Radio & Audio Media*, 20 (2013), p. 320-5; Mary Vipond (2013) 'What's a New Public Broadcaster To Do?: The Canadian Radio Broadcasting Commission's Programs in Transnational Context, 1932–1936', *Journal of Radio & Audio Media* 20.2 (2013), pp. 296-300.

<sup>38</sup> Population – 1936 census of the Union of South Africa.

<<https://www.jstor.org/stable/2730411>> [Accessed: 6 August 2025]

<sup>39</sup> Ruth Teer-Tomaselli, Keyan G. Tomaselli, and Johan. Muller, *Broadcasting in South Africa*, Studies on the South African Media (London: Currey, 1989), p. 23.

<sup>40</sup> Eric Rosenthal, *You have been Listening: The Early History of Radio in South Africa* (Cape Town; New York: Purnell, 1974), p. 127.

<sup>41</sup> Simon J. Potter, *Broadcasting Empire: The BBC and the British World, 1922-1970* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p.40.

<sup>42</sup> Potter, *Broadcasting Empire*, pp. 26-27; Lionel Fielden, *Four Talks on Pakistan* (Karachi: Kamel Publications, 1950), pp. 3-4. (Published text of a radio programme 'first broadcast in the Third Programme of the BBC')

broadcaster.<sup>43</sup> This shift was a function of, as Patrick Day has chronicled, the extent to which in the 1930s radio receivers became household possessions for most of the New Zealand population and broadcasting became 'both the country's main form of leisure time activity and a new means of communication from the government to the population'.<sup>44</sup> How New Zealanders experienced listening, and the sounds they heard, shaped their views of the world, argues Peter Hoar, something which has 'received very little attention from historians and other scholars.'<sup>45</sup> Hoar encourages historians to reflect on the wider cultural significance of radio broadcasting - listening might be a solitary or a communal experience, a rugby match 'might fill a room with people enjoying the social occasion as much as the broadcast itself', the wedding of a radio personality such as 'Aunt' Gwen Shepherd or the Coronation of King George VI 'might be a communal experience for people who were not otherwise connected'. Broadcasting 'provided material for conversations and other social interactions', around, say, the Australian comedy serial, *Dad and Dave*, perhaps inspiration to dress as the characters for a fancy-dress party - these 'were ways of connecting listening with everyday life that involved imagination and shared cultural knowledge.'<sup>46</sup> This thesis seeks to redress the balance between the history of the institutions responsible for broadcasting and the experience of listeners, many historical studies of broadcasting having been on 'politics and administration, and only incidentally about what comes out of the speakers and screen', as Ken Inglis asserted in his foundational history of the ABC.<sup>47</sup> It does this whilst recognising the possibilities and challenges presented by the surviving archive of listener responses, examined in depth by Bridget Griffen-Foley and by Gordon Johnston and Emma

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<sup>43</sup> Peter Downes, Peter Harcourt, *Voices in the air: radio broadcasting in New Zealand, a documentary* (Wellington: Methuen, Radio New Zealand, 1976), p. 59.

<sup>44</sup> Day, p. 1.

<sup>45</sup> Peter Hoar, *The World's Din* (Dunedin: Otago University Press, 2018), p. 9.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 148-151 & 200.

<sup>47</sup> Kenneth Inglis, *London Calling: the Empire of the Airwaves* (London: Menzies School for Australian Studies, 2000), p. 7.

Robertson.<sup>48</sup> It explores the important distinction between routine 'effortless' ways in which radio spoke to listeners in their private domestic lives and by contrast the special occasions on which they were brought together as 'an abstract collectivity', as 'the Nation' or 'the Empire', the occasions on which they were not 'listening-in' but listening out for, and responding to, appeals for, say, engagement with major sporting or Royal events.<sup>49</sup>

Central to research on the history of pan-Imperial British broadcasting is the work of Simon Potter. In his *Broadcasting Empire: The BBC and the British World*, Potter argued that for Britain, 'broadcasting had seemed to offer a means to shore up an old, disintegrating world-system, rather than to create a new one'.<sup>50</sup> There is much in this analysis as we shall explore further, indeed one motivation for Clark's letter to Moses was an expression of his despair that even in 1938 'people in each part of the Empire are still woefully ignorant about other parts'.<sup>51</sup> In a climate of 'imperial weakness' it was rather a bold hope that in the long term efforts to reinforce a sense of unity across the British world through BBC broadcasts from London would succeed, indeed Potter suggests that these were 'probably doomed to failure from the outset'.<sup>52</sup> Across the period of his study - 1922-1970 - this seems fair, what this thesis will argue, however, is that whilst there is no denying that in the long-term allegiance to the Empire was not sustained by broadcasts from London, in the short to medium term at least some of the ambitions of the BBC were realised, that at least some of the 'old, disintegrating world system' was, however briefly, held together in the 1930s, even if only - as we shall see - on Christmas afternoon. The 'familial' connections proposed by pan-Imperial broadcasts of the 1930s were consistent with later wartime co-operation between

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<sup>48</sup> Bridget Griffen-Foley, *Australian Listeners and Viewers, Historical Perspectives* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020); Gordon Johnston & Emma Robertson, *BBC World Service: Overseas Broadcasting, 1932 -2018* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

<sup>49</sup> Johnson, *Unseen Voice*, pp. 203-205; Susan J. Douglas, *Listening in: Radio and the American Imagination: From Amos 'N' Andy and Edward R. Murrow to Wolfman Jack and Howard Stern* (New York, N.Y. Times Books, 1999), p. 24; Kate Lacey, 'Listening Overlooked', *Javnost - the Public*, 18 (2011), pp. 5-20.

<sup>50</sup> Potter, *Broadcasting Empire*, p. 239.

<sup>51</sup> WAC R46/32, 18 August 1938, letter Clark to Moses.

<sup>52</sup> Potter, *Broadcasting Empire*, p. 1.

the broadcasters, by efforts to celebrate the contributions of Dominion soldiers, sailors and airmen to the British war-effort, and were perhaps epitomised by the emergence of the Australian Chester Wilmot as one of the great broadcasters of the war years on both the ABC, from Tobruk, and the BBC, on and after D-Day.

Between 2016 and 2019 Potter led a Leverhulme Trust International Research Network project titled 'Connecting the Wireless World: Writing Global Radio History'. It brought together a group of scholars from around the world to think about global perspectives on the history of international broadcasting. It explored issues relating to programme making and audience responses, radio technologies and infrastructure, and the auditory cultures and soundscapes of the past, asking what international radio actually sounded like, and how people listened to and heard it. It sought to understand how radio 'connected up' the world during the twentieth century. This thesis, research for which began just as that project ended, seeks to build on and add to its work. It seeks to closely examine specific broadcasts and to closely read archival material which sheds light on their production and reception, even as the broadcasts themselves have been lost.

This thesis builds on the work of Thomas Hajkowski on understandings of the contribution of broadcasting to British culture, and on his assertion that through the development of its domestic national and regional services the BBC 'reinforced a particular kind of Britishness', one which embraced multiple and multi-layered 'British' identities.<sup>53</sup> It accepts Linda Colley's proposition that 'Britishness' was an 'invented' conception of identity, embracing concurrently multiple loyalties to towns, regions, and to the constituent nations of the British world, first England and Scotland, later Australia and New Zealand.<sup>54</sup> Yet it questions Colley's notion that what emerged

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<sup>53</sup> Thomas Hajkowski, *The BBC and National Identity in Britain 1922-53* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010), pp. 235-7.

<sup>54</sup> Linda Colley, 'Britishness and Otherness: An Argument', *Journal of British Studies*, 31 (1992), 309-329, (pp. 315 & 327); Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707-1837* (London: Vintage, 1996), p. 6.

was something 'forged', rather it was less fixed, more fluid, embracing 'plural identities and cultures', as Robert Bickers argues.<sup>55</sup> Broadcasting played a key role in providing a 'British' stage upon which could be celebrated the varied identities of the many constituent parts of the British world of the 1930s.

At a conference in September 2019 the social historian of British broadcasting Paddy Scannell suggested to me that he had long hoped that experienced broadcast producers would take up the study of its history. I have approached this work with a perspective informed by four decades of production experience, indeed experience of having some responsibility for the broadcast coverage of many of the events that feature in this study, of the cycle of British State occasions, of Royal Weddings, Jubilees, a funeral, a Coronation, the Festival of Remembrance, a cycle established in the late 1920s and 30s. I know the extent to which, decisions having been made at executive level to broadcast an event, what is actually seen and heard is in the hands of individual producers and commentators. We are dealing here with 'humanly made things.'<sup>56</sup> Understanding the people behind the decisions, and the reasons for offering this comment, or this perspective - but not that - helps bring to life what it was that listeners experienced. It helps reveal the chords that were intended to be struck. I have brought my production experience to searches through the archive for material that reveals the motives of producers. Through an understanding of their intentions and technique, and in noting the responses of listeners at specific broadcast moments, it has been possible to reconstruct the spirit if not the sound of broadcasts and, in the almost total absence of objective audience research, to glean a sense of the impact they had.

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<sup>55</sup> Bickers, pp. 16-17.

<sup>56</sup> David Hendy, 'Painting with Sound: The Kaleidoscopic World of Lance Sieveking, a British Radio Modernist', *Twentieth Century British History*, 24 (2013), (169-200), p. 172 (attributing the quote to, and agreeing with, Paddy Scannell).

As Johnston and Robertson concluded in their comprehensive analysis of listener feedback on Empire broadcasts captured in BBC publications, listening to broadcasts from London was part of the way in which listeners in the 1930s created their very contemporary sense of connection to others in the British world.<sup>57</sup> This was a modern medium, exploiting the latest technology to bring listeners close to events perceived to have a contemporary significance. Yet this thesis recognises that what was broadcast rarely reflected the realities of life for most of the inhabitants of the British Empire, from London the picture painted was, as John MacKenzie considers, 'confident, optimistic' and 'self-congratulatory.'<sup>58</sup> Radio broadcasting in Australia rarely addressed or represented the experience of Aboriginal Australians, indeed in the 1930s the ABC saw discussion of even their living conditions as likely to raise questions of government policy and lead to 'undesirable controversy.'<sup>59</sup> Australian broadcasters nonetheless on occasion appropriated Aboriginal culture in showcase international productions when asked for material with 'a characteristically national atmosphere.'<sup>60</sup> Aboriginal Australian culture might be embraced as an exotic symbol of Australia's difference, of the diversity of the 'British world', even as the population itself was left on the margins. Whilst New Zealand broadcasters to a far greater extent embraced Maori culture and encouraged Maori listeners they nonetheless also engaged, for an international audience, in cultural appropriation, to facilitate a presentation of New Zealand to the world which whilst 'British' was distinct from 'Old Britain' - offering Maori song, Maori welcomes for distinguished visitors, and the haka at international rugby matches.<sup>61</sup> Thus, even if it was the case that 'on almost every demographic, social and economic criterion' Maori were disadvantaged New Zealand could, at least superficially, and with sufficient evidence to convince casual radio

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<sup>57</sup> Johnston & Robertson, *BBC World Service: Overseas Broadcasting*.

<sup>58</sup> John M. Mackenzie, *Propaganda and Empire: the manipulation of British public opinion 1880-1960* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), p. 93.

<sup>59</sup> Inglis, *ABC*, p. 31.

<sup>60</sup> 'World Concert', *Evening Post*, 3 March 1938, p. 26.

<<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/EP19380303.2.200.4>> [ACCESSED: 18 August 2025]

<sup>61</sup> Belich, *Paradise Reforged*, pp. 208-214.

listeners from elsewhere, present itself as 'a paradise of racial harmony', and often did so.<sup>62</sup> In radio broadcasting the exploitative nature of Empire was almost invariably blotted out, rendering a vision of British imperialism that the many American listeners could accept. Indeed, the comfortable clichés and stereotypes presented arguably contributed to what Catherine Hall and Sonya Rose conclude were the residual 'damaging effects and the treacherous silences' that followed from being 'at home' with empire.<sup>63</sup>

## America

The development of broadcasting in the United States of America is not the subject of this thesis, nevertheless it was, as we shall repeatedly note, hugely influential in the development of broadcasting elsewhere and nowhere more so than in the British world, where a shared language and many shared cultural traditions facilitated reciprocal broadcasts. At the outset, then, it is useful to point to three areas in which American practice - and its adoption or rejection - influenced that in Australia and New Zealand, and indeed Britain itself. The first was the regulation of the airwaves, born of an early realisation of the need both to allocate frequencies and to enable governments to exercise some control over what was being broadcast. The form this took in America was the creation of large corporations, the National Broadcasting Company (NBC) and Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS), which built networks and syndicated programming. This was neither government regulated monopoly nor unfettered commercial competition. Whilst this precise form was not copied in the British world what was significant was both the early recognition of a need for regulation, acted upon in America by 1922, and later, in Australia, an aspiration to build similar media conglomerates.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Belich, *Paradise Reforged*, pp. 189-91.

<sup>63</sup> Catherine Hall and Sonya O. Rose, *At Home with the Empire: Metropolitan Culture and the Imperial World* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 30-31.

<sup>64</sup> Valeria Camporesi, "'We Talk a Different Language": The Impact of US Broadcasting in Britain, 1922-1927', *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, Vol. 10, No. 3, 1990 (257-274), pp. 258-260.

Second, American broadcasting was both innovative and influential, creating cultural forms that would dominate radio output in later years - the 'serial' drama, the massively hyped live event, often sporting. In the desire of the advertisers who funded American radio to keep listeners engaged a broadcasting style was developed that made a radio set a 'domestic companion', to which the tasks of the day would be undertaken, from breakfast to bedtime. Linking it together were a succession of familiar voices, mainly male, 'friendly', 'affable'. It was style adopted by commercial broadcasters the world over, and one that the most senior voices might themselves embrace. Exemplary were the 'fireside chats' of President Roosevelt, the President adopting a homely style, restricting his vocabulary to the most commonly used words, speaking in short sentences.<sup>65</sup> It was a style that made Stanley Baldwin a respected broadcaster at the BBC.<sup>66</sup> It was arguably never more effectively adopted in the British world than by the most unlikely of 'stars' of the early radio years, King George V, his very affable Christmas messages being addressed from his 'home and his heart' to 'his peoples' wherever they may be listening, with special thoughts for their children.<sup>67</sup> Yet the attractions of the radio set as a 'domestic companion', presented a challenge to the approach to broadcasting favoured by John Reith's BBC and adopted by 'public service' broadcasters that modelled themselves on it. If radio listening was a comforting entertainment where was the space for the self-improvement of listeners, for education, for the 'uplift' of the cultural standards of the nation?

Third, engagement with American broadcasters and listeners was seductive. In the 1920s and 30s 'American' might be associated in the popular mind with all the attractive connotations of modernity. These might challenge, and be resisted by, the more 'traditional' British cultural world.

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<sup>65</sup> David M. Ryfe, 'Franklin Roosevelt and the Fireside Chats', *Journal of Communication*, 49 (1999) (80-103), p. 92. <<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1999.tb02818.x>> [Accessed: 1 August 2025]  
Amos Kiewe, *FDR's First Fireside Chat: Public Confidence and the Banking Crisis* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2007), p. 21.

<sup>66</sup> Stuart Hibberd, *This is London* (London: MacDonal & Evans, 1950), p. 31.

<sup>67</sup> Fleming, p. 11.

Such was the concern that American social mores might overwhelm British rivals that the BBC dispatched one of its most experienced producers to assess the threat from the 'Trans-Atlantic octopus'.<sup>68</sup> Yet if it presented challenges America was also receptive to specific aspects of 'Britishness'. An appetite for 'chocolate box' folk tradition manifested itself in co-productions with the BBC with a focus on town-criers and cathedrals.<sup>69</sup> A spate of Hollywood movies were based in British history - *Captain Blood*, *The Charge of the Light Brigade*, *The Adventures of Robin Hood* (all starring the Australian Errol Flynn) - or presented the British Imperial experience as one of glorious adventure, in ways contemporary American critics considered at least as enthusiastic as anything the British themselves might produce - possibly more. The blockbuster hit of 1935 was *The Lives of a Bengal Lancer*, starring the very American Gary Cooper, transformed for the purposes of the tale into a Canadian, it was, as Ranajit Guha observes, pure Hollywood fiction, presenting the North-West Frontier as a British Wild West.<sup>70</sup> For the *New York Times* film critic it was 'so sympathetic in its discussion of England's colonial management that it ought to prove a great blessing to Downing Street.'<sup>71</sup> Above all Americans were fascinated by the comings and goings of the British Royal family. The NBC and CBS invested substantial time and resources in coverage of the 1937 Coronation - 'the greatest achievement of broadcasting in radio history.'<sup>72</sup> These fascinations had an influence not just on American broadcasting but also on that in the British world, they invited collaboration and engagement with broadcasters and listeners in the most populous community in the English-speaking world through celebration, even glorification, of quite specific aspects of the

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<sup>68</sup> Paddy Scannell and David Cardiff, 'Serving the Nation: Public Service Broadcasting Before the War', in *Popular Culture Past and Present* ed. by Waites, Bennett and Thompson (London: Croom Helm, 1981), pp. 180-1.

<sup>69</sup> 'Five Years of Trans-Atlantic Broadcasting', *World Radio*, 8 November 1935, p. 3; Potter, *Wireless Internationalism*, pp. 90-1.

<sup>70</sup> Jeffrey Richards, 'Imperial Heroes for a Post-Imperial Age: Films and the End of Empire' in *British Culture and the End of Empire* ed. by Ward (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), p. 129.

<sup>71</sup> Andre Sennwald, 'The Paramount Presents "The Lives of a Bengal Lancer"', *New York Times*, 12 January 1935, p. 12. <<https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/paramount-presents-lives-bengal-lancer-enter/docview/101623317/se-2>> [Accessed: 23 August 2025]

<sup>72</sup> WAC R47/135/1, 12 May 1937, cable NBC to BBC.

British experience. Such engagement, and celebration, was hard to resist and might influence British as well as American perspectives on what defined a 'British' sensibility.

### **'What's left is nothing more than the directions on the lid.'**

Radio remains 'one of the least studied of the major areas of human artistry and communication' partly as a result of its ephemerality. Broadcasting was in its early years primarily a 'live' medium. What survives as evidence of it having taken place are more usually written records of its production and reception.<sup>73</sup> In the 1930s programmes were rarely repeated, and unlike books, films or recordings of music there was rarely anything of the broadcast itself that could be bought or sold or enjoyed at leisure.<sup>74</sup> A further challenge to any historian of broadcasting in this period is a lack of reliable audience data. Audience research had been born in America, where George Gallup had established the American Institute of Public Opinion in 1935.<sup>75</sup> By the mid-1930s, American 'ratings' were established by telephoning listeners, by attaching tracking devices to radio sets and by door-to-door interviews.<sup>76</sup> None was adopted on a global scale. Indeed audience research was met with scepticism - in 1932 the BBC's official position was that there was 'nowhere to be found any final and infallible method of ascertaining listeners likes and basing policy on the discovery.'<sup>77</sup> When, in 1936, the BBC, in what at the time was considered a pioneering move, appointed Robert Silvey, an experienced market researcher by the standards of the day, to establish its 'Listener Research' department, he found that the very principles of his work might be dismissed as on the one hand 'utopian', on the other, 'dangerous.'<sup>78</sup> Early audience research in

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<sup>73</sup> Michelle Hilmes and Andrew J. Bottomley (eds), 'Introduction' in *The Oxford Handbook of Radio and Podcasting*, ed. by Michelle Hilmes and Andrew J. Bottomley (Oxford: OUP, 2024), pp. xix-xx.

<sup>74</sup> Carolyn Birdsall, 'For the Love of Radio: The Archival Impulse in Broadcast Institutions, in *The Oxford Handbook of Radio and Podcasting*, ed. by Michelle Hilmes and Andrew J. Bottomley (Oxford: OUP, 2024), p. 695.

<sup>75</sup> Douglas, p. 128.

<sup>76</sup> Robert Silvey, *Who's Listening?: the story of BBC audience research* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1974), pp. 73-76.

<sup>77</sup> *BBC Year Book 1932* (London: British Broadcasting Corporation, 1931), pp. 105-108.

<sup>78</sup> Silvey, p. 14.

New Zealand was basic. Donations were requested by stations which posted cards in the neighbourhood. Announcers asked listeners to ring in if they had heard programmes. Advisory listener committees were established, even a network of 'official listeners'. On its creation the NZBB, went a step further, and undertook, in 1932, one of the first really significant pieces of audience research in the British Empire. As they renewed their licences 50 000 listeners were sent questionnaires examining their listening habits. The results, as we shall explore further, showed a distinct preference for popular music and light entertainment and a rejection of radio's use for education in 'highbrow' culture. Yet as Patrick Day observes 'disappointingly, there were no further attempts by the Board to study listeners preferences'.<sup>79</sup> The ABC collected no precise information on listeners other than through unsolicited letters and the insights of its own appointed 'official listeners'. The first suggestion of something more substantial came from its advisory committees in South Australia which proposed that the ABC copy the BBC and set up a listener research department. Ken Inglis, noting a lack of enthusiasm, speculates at anxiety at what it would reveal.<sup>80</sup> With good reason. Audience research in Australia was pioneered by William Allan (W. A.) McNair in a series of surveys beginning in 1934 and culminating in a detailed examination of Sydney listening habits in 1936. McNair, who worked for J. Walter Thompson, published his results in *Radio Advertising in Australia*. McNair found that commercial stations were listened to by 87% of the audience.<sup>81</sup> These insights were unwelcome at the ABC, yet Inglis notes that as 'surveys of any sort were so rare...it was easy for anybody who found the figures unpalatable to be sceptical about the whole enterprise.'<sup>82</sup> In the 1930s accurate recording of audience numbers, for reasons of both practicality and residual scepticism, failed to gain traction.

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<sup>79</sup> Day, pp. 163-4.

<sup>80</sup> Inglis, *ABC*, p. 74.

<sup>81</sup> W.A. McNair, *Radio Advertising in Australia* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1937), p. 324; William Allan McNair, *Australian Dictionary of Biography* <<https://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/mcnair-william-allan-11021>> [Accessed: 30 August 2025]

<sup>82</sup> Inglis, *ABC*, pp. 75-76.

The paucity of the surviving sound archive itself offers challenges. Relative to the volume of production scarcely anything of the daily output of radio stations was preserved. Writing of his groundbreaking, and never recorded, 1928 radio drama *Kaleidoscope*, the BBC producer Lance Sieveking despaired that 'what's left is nothing more than the directions on the lid.'<sup>83</sup> Yet as Josephine Dolan argues, too much might be made of this absence. Engagement with the medium was indeed ephemeral, but for most consumers was it more so than with newspapers or magazines - an assumption of their 'impermanence' being central to their production? Likewise films in this period, which were accessible to the vast majority of viewers for only the brief period they remained in circulation. Dolan argues for the value of the written archive, that 'transmitted voices that are the focus of the sound archive cannot be isolated from the voices of the written policy statements about audition, selection criteria, scripts and performance that are anterior to the moment of transmission'. Transmission 'is not a spontaneous event...rather it is a highly orchestrated production that is fully located within the complex relationships' that play out between broadcasting personnel and the audience.<sup>84</sup> Dolan's argument, fortunately, has weight - 'fortunately' in that when it comes to hearing the sounds of the early years of broadcasting it remains the case that, as Susan Douglas puts it, 'in trying to conduct an archaeology of listening in the twentieth century', radio historians find themselves 'without much to lean on'.<sup>85</sup>

In Australia the National Film and Sound Archive holds a smattering of recordings from the 1930s.<sup>86</sup> The New Zealand national sound archive is searchable and accessible through Nga Taonga, Sound and Vision.<sup>87</sup> Neither offers more than a highly limited selection. The BBC sound archive was thin even in the 1930s.<sup>88</sup> What survives is preserved at the British Library. Commercial

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<sup>83</sup> Lance Sieveking, *The Stuff of Radio* (London: Cassell and Company Limited, 1934), p. 383.

<sup>84</sup> Josephine Dolan, 'The Voice that Cannot be Heard: Radio/Broadcasting and 'the Archive''. *The Radio Journal* Vol. 1, no. 1 (2003) (63–72), pp. 66-69.

<sup>85</sup> Douglas, p. 26.

<sup>86</sup> [www.nfsa.gov.au/collection](http://www.nfsa.gov.au/collection)

<sup>87</sup> [www.ngataonga.org.nz](http://www.ngataonga.org.nz)

<sup>88</sup> BBC Sound Archives, *Chronological Catalogue*, Vol. 1 1852-1949, August 1964.

recordings are occasionally reproduced online by enthusiasts or by historians of broadcasting. Yet the written archive is rich with detail of what was broadcast, by whom, with what intent, and with what impact. I have particularly sought out programme files and personal papers that I believe bring productions to life. In Wellington the records of the NZBB and its successors, the New Zealand Broadcasting Service (NBS) and New Zealand Commercial Broadcasting Service (NCBS) can be accessed at Archives New Zealand. Personal papers of Daisy Basham, James Shelley and Colin Scrimgeour were viewed at the Alexander Turnbull Library at the New Zealand National Library. In Australia the records of the ABC were reviewed at the National Archives at Chester Hill and unpublished memoirs at the State Library of New South Wales in Sydney. These are all well organised, well catalogued, collections, offering detailed records of the content of individual productions, the decision making that went into them and their scheduling. They offer valuable insights into the relationships between broadcasters in the British world. It has not been possible to undertake primary research in the more scattered archives of Australia's commercial broadcasters. The BBC Written Archive is extensive, offering insights into almost every aspect of many of the productions reviewed here. Regular visits to the BBC Archive and the relationships established with the archivists, both in explaining my research interest and writing a series of articles for the BBC Heritage team on my discoveries, have enabled examination of a range of tangential material, notable has been the discovery of the personal scrapbook or the programme script.

The Royal Archives, like the BBC Written Archive, has no externally searchable catalogue, yet contains comprehensive files of correspondence relating to specific broadcasts, their preparation and aftermath. The Kipling Archive contains letters relating to the drafting of the King's Christmas messages, as does the Lang archive held at Lambeth Palace. Beyond the archives there is extensive published material written by the pioneers of broadcasting, who, particularly in Britain, were recognised in their own lifetimes as having made a significant contribution to British culture,

despite their names and achievements having faded from public memory. Recently the BBC/University of Sussex project 'Connected Histories of the BBC' has released recordings of interviews with many such men and women reflecting on their experiences at the end of their careers. The digitisation of newspaper archives has transformed research into the reception of broadcasts, and anticipation of them. It has been possible to search through national and provincial titles for responses to specific broadcasts. In the listings pages of newspapers lie details of the broadcast schedules. Particularly valuable have been Trove and Papers Past.<sup>89</sup> In the pages of newspapers lie traces left by broadcasting in popular culture, and occasional use has been made here of cartoons and photographs of the day referencing the significance of broadcasting, its engagement with listeners, and its impact on cultural life.



**Wee Wireless Enthusiast (finishing prayers): "This concludes our programme for to-night. Good-night and amen."**  
—Humorist.

Fig. 1: 'Wee Wireless Enthusiast', *New Zealand Herald*, 2 November 1929, p. 2 (Supplement)

<sup>89</sup> [www.trove.nla.gov.au](http://www.trove.nla.gov.au); [www.paperspast.natlib.govt.nz](http://www.paperspast.natlib.govt.nz)

This is an archive that, relative to the cultural significance of broadcasting in the 1930s, and in relation to specific broadcast moments, remains relatively unexplored. For in the archives, amidst the detritus of the administrative life of an institution, sit gems - in the State Library of New South Wales a box full of transcripts of interviews with the earliest pioneers of Australian broadcasting, at Archives New Zealand the raw data and all the paper calculations of the pioneering audience research carried out by the NZBB in 1932. In the BBC Archive, written with a clumsy hand in Tippex is the title of file S24/15/1: 'Cecil Madden's scrapbook'. Madden has a determination not to be forgotten, for he was, as he has written in hand on the inside cover page, 'first producer of the BBC's television service' and the Empire radio producer in the years before that. Madden has written his epitaph, for anyone who chances upon it. This autobiography in cuttings and commentary captures his pride at his work, his challenges, his inspiration, what on reflection it felt like to work in the Empire Department and who it considered to be its audience.<sup>90</sup>

The idea for this thesis grew from the chance discovery of an *Adelaide Chronicle* review of reception of the broadcast of the first Christmas message of King George V on Christmas Day 1932. It had been: 'one of the most amazing events ever conceived by man.'<sup>91</sup> Fine speech though it was, how could it merit such praise? On investigation it became clear the writer was in large part referring to the programme that introduced the King, *All the World Over*, a live radio tour of the British Empire, a programme of immense technical ambition and in its success hugely influential but lost to time - other than the King himself no recording appears to have survived. Yet in the archive is the script, file R19/2529/1, and not just any copy of the script but the annotated script presumably guiding the broadcast as it proceeded and capturing that progress in notes in the margin. This is no pristine document, it is marked by the sweat of the hand that held it that afternoon, the margins record the timings as it over-ran, scored out are the lines never to be

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<sup>90</sup> WAC S24/15/1: 'Cecil Madden's scrapbook'.

<sup>91</sup> *Adelaide Chronicle*, 'Round Empire by Radio in 60 Minutes', 29 December 1932, p. 35.

<<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article90627892>> [Accessed: 6 August 2025 (first accessed 2 May 2018)]

spoken, the locations never to be visited. Why is it there? The expectation is surely that someone, someday, will hold the file and be invited to understand the drama and the satisfaction of a pioneering broadcast, for there is the moment - at, the marginal note records, 2.11pm - at which, script in hand, the call was made to the liner 'Majestic' in mid-Atlantic 'outbound from Southampton to New York' - a moment of maximum technical jeopardy - and from the middle of the Atlantic ocean came the sounds of a children's Christmas party.<sup>92</sup> How implausible it must have seemed that this broadcast, of a scale and ambition almost unparalleled, was actually happening. This thesis seeks to bring such moments to life and to reflect on their significance.

In considering broadcasting and questions of identity in Australia and New Zealand in the 1930s I am particularly interested in the role played in shaping conceptions of Britishness. I see the relationship between broadcasting and Britishness as being complex - hence the many words already employed here to describe the impact of broadcasting, suggestions that it variously 'reflected', 'reinforced', 'reconstructed' and 'amplified' existing senses of 'Britishness'. The contention here is that for different individuals at different times it did all these things, and more. Yet if just two words were to capture the impact of broadcasting in this period they might be 'disruptive' and 'transformational', changing the nature of distance, bringing closer the voices, the sounds, the culture, the ceremonial of British life, as led both in the metropolis and in its centres across the globe. This thesis is exploring the transformative impact of such disruption. Whilst the focus here is on the 1930s it will be necessary to step back into the previous decade to account for the role that radio came to play in the lives of Australians and New Zealanders. I will be exploring what broadcasting offered that was different, and indeed how broadcasting worked, because without this understanding we can't gain a clear view of its impact - understanding the one helps explain the other. What broadcasting inspired was emotional reaction, which fortunately the

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<sup>92</sup> WAC R19/2529/1: 'All the World Over'.

historical record preserves, inviting reflection on both how this was achieved and the consequences that flowed. We will later encounter an Australian nurse living in New York inspired by a broadcast from London with hope for the future, a Canadian mother moved by the same broadcast to thoughts of a homeland left decades before, a young woman asking herself whether her far-distant parents were listening on another shore at the same time as her, the radical New Zealand preacher and broadcaster Colin Scrimgeour expressing affection for a family man about to be crowned, and a sceptic drawn into the Coronation fervour of May 1937 later reflecting that there was a sinister dimension to the way in which their rational scorn had been overcome. People moved, chords touched, expressions of amazement at their reactions. That broadcasting might have such a capacity was not lost on its earliest cheerleaders. Where all this led in relation to 'Britishness', and what this thesis seeks to understand and explain, was to a sense of ties not being severed, a sense of geographic space ceasing to be a barrier to connection. The most distant listener could directly hear voices from the other side of the world, voices that spoke in terms evoking shared heritage, of 'Home', of connection that was in some way familial.



Fig. 2: 'A Voice is Calling', *The Herald*, 14 January 1927, p. 4

Broadcasting could carry a connection to British sensibilities into the most isolated homes, could reach populations previously disengaged, and could do so in the most powerful of ways. An isolated listener could receive an invitation to, say, the Coronation, could be addressed at their kitchen table by such a previously remote figure as the King himself. This spoke to a rhetoric of the conquest of distance and isolation that was central to the discourse of national as well as trans-national broadcasters. If national broadcasting policy specifically embraced a British sensibility in the expectations of public service broadcasters in New Zealand and Australian, commercial stations in search of audiences also jumped on the bandwagon of major Imperial broadcast events. What resulted, it will be argued, was a brake on separatist national sentiment. Indeed, the implications were wider. In Britain itself listeners were exposed to the Britishnesses fostered in the 'Britains' overseas, in America a celebration of the pageantry and ceremonial of British state occasions, and particularly the ups and downs in the lives of the British Royal Family, appealed to an audience far wider than that with a recent British heritage. For broadcasting linked the multiple British world spaces. It could on occasion bring listeners together, providing a platform on which all the varied dimensions of Britishness could be expressed, on which could be reflected, recognised and celebrated British lives that were being led in ways that were different, but through broadcasting linked. Broadcasting, disruptive, transformative, had the capacity to reinforce connections between the scattered global 'Britons', to remind them of a shared heritage and to broaden conceptions of what it might be to be considered 'British'.

## **Chapters**

This thesis examines how radio broadcasting helped shape senses of identity in the British world in four chapters, each built around a case study, a broadcast, or series of broadcasts which, whilst being distinct from the generality of daily broadcasting, offer rich evidence of the impact of broadcasting as a medium. The first asks how radio broadcasting contributed to a general reconstruction of national and pan-British identity taking place in Australia and New Zealand in the

1920s and 30s. What did it add that was unique? It begins with an assessment of the social impact of the arrival of radio in the 1920s, exploring how exactly it was that radio came to occupy a prominent position in the cultural lives of Australians and New Zealanders. In outlining the development of broadcasting in Australia and New Zealand this chapter examines the central role regulation played. It offers a detailed examination of broadcasts marking remembrance of the First World War, some of the earliest major broadcast events, assessing both why occasions of remembrance held such a deep cultural significance for broadcasters themselves across the British world and why, and how, such broadcasts had the capacity to convene huge national and pan-Imperial audiences. It considers how, and with what significance, such events emotionally engaged those who heard them, and how, then, broadcasting came to contribute to the development of conceptions of national and pan-British identity. The second chapter builds on this, noting that by the end of 1932 the landscape of broadcasting in Australia and New Zealand had been largely drawn. In each a national organisation had been created. The ABC and NZBB were public service broadcasters, in part modelled on the BBC, operating alongside commercial stations. Broadcasting was now an established medium and broadcasters and listeners alike were confronted with questions: what was the purpose of broadcasting, was broadcasting merely a form of entertainment, or something more? What role could, or should, broadcasting play in the wider cultural life of the nation? It particularly examines the consequences of the creation, by regulation, of two classes of broadcaster in Australia and New Zealand, and of the different regulatory expectations of, and constraints on, each. In both Australia and New Zealand what was being revealed was, given a choice, less deference to the cultural tastes of the 'establishment', the 'highbrow', and more delight in the 'lowbrow'. Through the decade, and through its cultural influence, broadcasting began to not merely reflect but shape national identity. What united the experience of listeners remained a fascination with 'actualities' – things actually happening at that moment. If occasions of remembrance had been amongst the first of these, in the early years of broadcasting nothing in the British world had a greater appeal to audiences than sporting

competition, broadcasts of which made a significant contribution to the development of conceptions of both national and pan-Imperial cultural identity.

The third chapter asks how radio broadcasting supported notions of British co-ownership of the Empire and its symbols. It looks at pan-Imperial broadcasting and the creation of the BBC Empire Service, its objectives, output, and reception. The BBC's stated objectives for Imperial broadcasting were the dispelling of 'isolation and loneliness'; the sharing of 'the amenities of the home country and metropolitan interests and culture'; and the promotion of 'a greater understanding and a greater sympathy...among the constituent parts of the Empire', thereby drawing the 'far-scattered units of the Empire' closer together'.<sup>93</sup> There was a propaganda purpose to this, yet one aimed not at other powers but at those listeners it was assumed would be instinctively sympathetic to the British point of view, a global audience of 'British' heritage.<sup>94</sup> This chapter takes as its structure an examination of the delivery of the BBC's objectives for its Empire Service in the years before 1937. It looks at how broadcasters in Australia and New Zealand responded - often with enthusiasm. It looks particularly at the Empire broadcasts on Christmas Day, occasions co-ordinated from London but which gave a global platform to broadcasters in Australia and New Zealand. The first, in 1932, had employed all the technological developments of the radio age to connect the British world. These annual programmes were a product of the latest technical possibilities, bringing together the sounds and voices of the British world for the world to admire, juxtaposed specifically for dramatic effect. Yet nowhere were they more admired than by the British themselves, their scope and delivery, which were almost beyond comprehension, left listeners with a satisfied amazement at the wonders of broadcasting itself, at the idea that such things were indeed possible, and at British mastery of this technology. The fourth chapter examines 'the world's biggest broadcast to

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<sup>93</sup> *BBC Empire Broadcasting*, 2 Dec 1936, p. 2.

<sup>94</sup> The National Archives (hereafter TNA) CAB 32/95, (November 1929 - EE (30) 46: Imperial Conference 1930 - First Report of the Committee on Communications – Empire Broadcasting Appendix A: 'Proposals submitted by the British Broadcasting Corporation of the United Kingdom in November 1929').

date'.<sup>95</sup> Coverage of the Coronation of King George VI engaged broadcasters from across the world. It was said to have been heard by more than half the population of America, by two thirds of New Zealanders and an estimated global audience of 500 million. It was carried by every radio station in Australia. This chapter explores in depth the impact broadcast coverage of events in the lives of the British monarchy had on conceptions of national or pan-British identity. It begins by examining the ways in which broadcasting at the end of the decade both continued to popularise, in Australia and New Zealand, cultural forms that were quite distinct, whilst also celebrating those that invited connection to the wider British world. Amongst these were an increasing number of rebroadcasts of BBC programmes from London, and in May 1937, the Coronation.

Connection to the Imperial capital, to London, will be a recurring theme. London, whilst geographically distant, occupied a place in cultural, political, and economic life which was far from peripheral. It drew artists of talent, it attracted the ambitious, for Robert Menzies attending the 1935 Imperial Conference and having never been to England, his arrival was as the ending of a 'journey to Mecca', his mind 'abandoned to those reflections which can so strangely...move the soul of those who go "Home" to a land they have never seen.'<sup>96</sup> Geoffrey Partington goes so far as to propose that well into the twentieth century 'links with London were more important for each state capital city than those with other cities in Australia'.<sup>97</sup> London was well known to a generation who'd fought on the Western Front, Felicity Barnes paints a picture of tens of thousands of New Zealand soldiers on leave roaming the streets of London, a place that would thereafter always be remembered as a haven and a 'half-way Home.'<sup>98</sup> London, although 12 000 miles away, was tightly woven into the New Zealand economy as it was into newspapers, novels,

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<sup>95</sup> WAC R47/135/1, 13 May 1937, Cesar Saerchinger, European Director CBS to Benzie.

<sup>96</sup> John Rickard, 'Loyalties' in John Arnold, Peter Spearritt and David Walker, *Out of Empire: The British Dominion of Australia* (Port Melbourne, Vic: Mandarin, 1993) p. 48.

<sup>97</sup> Partington, p. xx.

<sup>98</sup> Barnes, *New Zealand's London*, p. 53.

and school lessons.<sup>99</sup> Radio broadcasts from London drew New Zealand 'within earshot of the centre.'<sup>100</sup> This connection to London, its draw and the familiarity with its culture and practices, even its streets and sounds, finds expression in many of the case studies that follow, and particularly the last, examined in the conclusion. In the 1930s broadcasting worked on the imaginations of radio listeners in Australia and New Zealand to incubate both senses of distinct national identity and national culture and to periodically reinforce, even grow, a sense of membership of, perhaps loyalty to, a wider 'British' 'family' through radio coverage of 'British' occasions of all varieties. Broadcasting had a capacity to draw together listeners widely separated by geographic space to simultaneously share such experiences, it could unite British listeners across the globe in a 'collective moment'. The first of these is the subject of the following chapter. In November 1927 Australia's broadcasters were very hopeful of successfully relaying the BBC's first planned global broadcast, from the Remembrance Festival at the Royal Albert Hall, coverage which began in the early hours of the morning.<sup>101</sup> The Brisbane *Telegraph* anticipated a 'veritable romance of wireless.'<sup>102</sup> It was a chance to join with old comrades in singing the wartime songs. In New Zealand station 3YA in Christchurch was on air early, with 'a good many owners of sets' being consequently 'late for work'.<sup>103</sup> In the event nothing was heard in 1927, the signal was too weak, nonetheless in the years that followed annual efforts were made to pick up and rebroadcast BBC coverage of events of remembrance from London. By 1932 this was, as we have seen, clear enough for listeners to be moved by the synchronous chiming of bells, bells ringing from the other side of the world.

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<sup>99</sup> Barnes, *New Zealand's London*, p. 278.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 189-191.

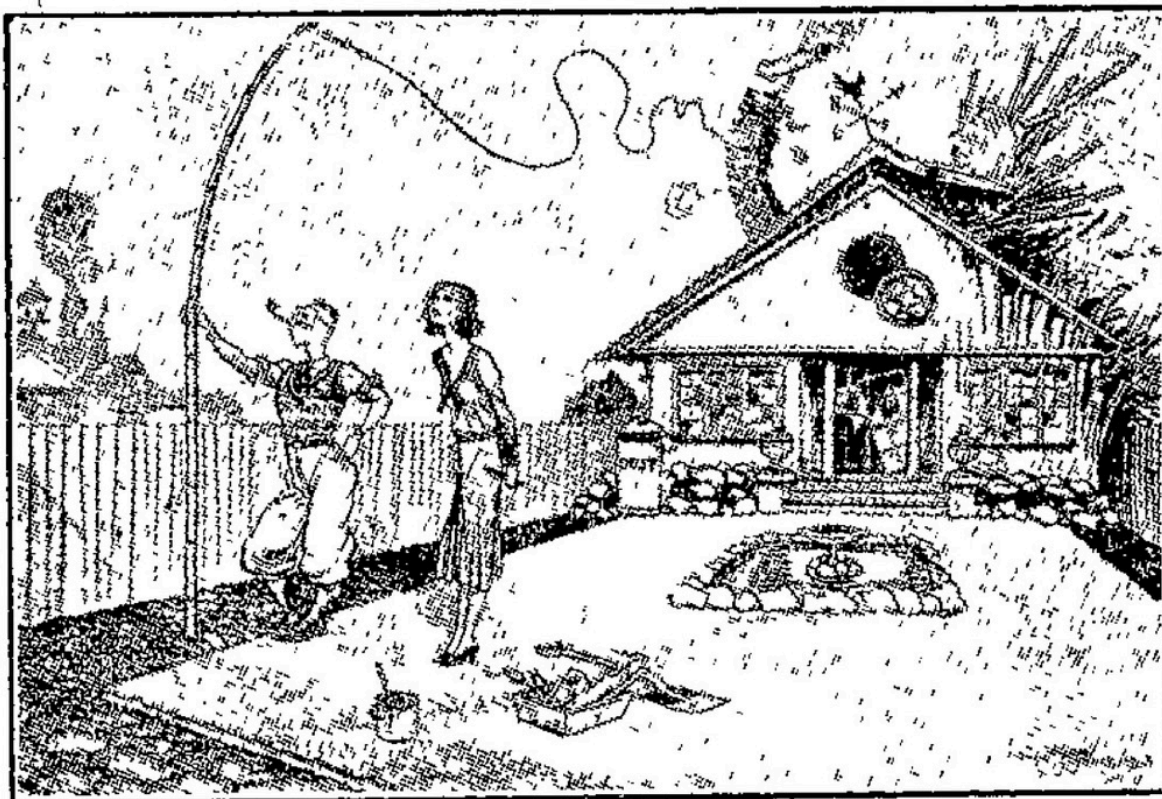
<sup>101</sup> 'Hear London'. *The Daily News*, Perth, 7 November 1927, p. 8 <<https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/78965423>>; 'Armistice function, Sydney may hear', *Evening News*, 10 November 1927, p. 1 <<https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/118935429>> [Accessed: 6 August 2025]

<sup>102</sup> 'A Romance of Wireless', *The Telegraph*, 12 November 1927, p. 5. <<https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/179365978>> [Accessed: 6 August 2025]

<sup>103</sup> 'Reception of Broadcast', *Evening Post*, 12 November 1927, p. 10. <<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/EP19271112.2.96.6>> [Accessed: 6 August 2025]

## CHAPTER ONE: 'NEARLY AS ESSENTIAL AS A BATH'

*Sydney Daily Telegraph*, 24 March 1936



**Bungalow Owner (shaking newly-planted wireless mast): There you are!  
That's as safe as houses.**

Fig. 3: 'Bungalow Owner', *Auckland Star*, 30 October 1931, p. 13.

This chapter explores how radio broadcasting came to occupy a prominent position in the cultural lives of Australians and New Zealanders in the 1920s and 30s. Broadcasting burst into a post-war world in which national and pan-British identities were being questioned, refashioned, reconstructed. Before addressing the role broadcasting played in this process, 'disruptive' and 'transformational' as it proved, this chapter asks what broadcasting was in its earliest years, what claims were made for this new medium, and what was its initial social and cultural impact? It asks how broadcasting fitted with contemporary conceptions of modernity, arguing that it epitomised new ways of life - the self-sufficient family home, the more formalised regulation of time, the adoption of new domestic routines. This was a 'noisier' world, one in which intellectual horizons were broadening. It explores how listeners engaged with broadcasting and how it was that a

technology initially conceived as offering opportunities for wireless one-to-one communication became a medium through which broadcasters instead transmitted messages from the centre. It asks how listeners *listened* - the sound of the radio was more usually a background noise and yet on occasion demanded attention, listening could be both passive and active. Regulation by governments shaped the social and cultural impact of broadcasting, this chapter argues that it did so fundamentally. It outlines the development of radio broadcasting in Australia and New Zealand to 1932, assessing its reach and impact. It explores a case study, broadcasts of occasions of remembrance, some of the first major broadcast events, events which brought listeners across Australia and New Zealand together and linked them with listeners in Britain. It asks what influence these early broadcasts had on conceptions of 'Britishness'.

The creation of the Commonwealth of Australia in 1901, indeed the general trend towards greater autonomy exercised by the settler Dominions, required of Australians, New Zealanders, and policy makers in London in the early twentieth century, reflection on what the character of such territories was to be, on the extent to which they had their own national identity, to which they were inheritors of, yet also contemporary contributors to, the pan-British sensibility.<sup>1</sup> In New Zealand what was under way was what James Belich characterises a 'recolonisation', a process whereby from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries links were tightened between New Zealand and Britain. This tightening was practically enabled by technological developments, notably in refrigeration, which saw New Zealand, through exports of butter and lamb, become virtually a farming 'hinterland' of London - what Belich terms 'the great New Zealand protein industry' to a significant degree fed the city. By 1933 New Zealand supplied roughly half of all Britain's imports of mutton, lamb, butter, and cheese, combined. In the opposite direction, through the relationships developed, London became the 'cultural capital of New Zealand'. The

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<sup>1</sup> Andrew S. Thompson, *Imperial Britain* (Harlow: Pearson Education, 2000), p. 161.

submarine cable laid to Sydney in 1876 enabled messages from London to reach Wellington within 24 hours, as opposed to three months a decade before. By 1901 this was possible in four hours. Wireless broadcasting was another technology with the potential to shrink distance, to surmount challenges to connection presented by physical geography. This desire for connection to Britain reflected a conviction that New Zealanders were 'Britons too...co-owners of the British Empire and of old British culture and heritage'. Yet they had a distinct, if complimentary, identity, an emergent sense that in at least some respects New Zealanders were 'better Britons' than those of the homelands, 'qualitatively superior'.<sup>2</sup> 'Better', perhaps, in their capacity to preserve and develop aspects of contemporary 'Britishness', enhancing conceptions of what 'Britishness' embraced.

The trading ties between Britain and Australia were also strong - for Geoffrey Serle 'unnaturally close' - with around half Australia's exports going to Britain and half its imports returning, and whilst these proportions slowly declined in 1936 60% of Australian imports came from the Empire and almost all overseas investment was British.<sup>3</sup> Yet in Australia, if it remained true that, as Geoffrey Blainey argued, in the early twentieth century it 'still acted on most issues as if it were the Isle of Wight' and that judged 'by her behaviour rather than by her constitutional status' observers might think 'she had no independence and was in fact a British colony', a sense also grew of its distinct qualities, distinct from Britain, qualities to be celebrated.<sup>4</sup> The 'sunburnt country' loved by Dorothea Mackellar, with its 'sweeping plains', 'drought and flooding rains', was loved, in 1908, in stark contrast to the 'green and shaded lanes' of the British Isles which had long run in the 'veins' of Australians. In the growing importance of sport in Australian society and the ease with which sporting partisanship could be associated with separatist sentiment some later

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<sup>2</sup> Belich, *Paradise Reforged*, pp. 11, 21, 29-30, 53, 66, 69.

<sup>3</sup> Serle & Preston, p. 13.

<sup>4</sup> Geoffrey Blainey, *The Tyranny of Distance* (Melbourne, London: Macmillan, 1968), p. 328.

saw the birth pangs of nationalism.<sup>5</sup> Yet in a celebration of sporting competition with the nations of the British Isles lay another dimension of expressions of global pan-Britishness.

The balance of the 'British world' was shifting, in 1901 the combined population of the Dominions was a quarter of Britain's, it was, by 1931, just under half.<sup>6</sup> Politically first the Balfour formula of 1926, which proposed the Dominions become 'autonomous communities within the British Empire, equal in status...united by a common allegiance to the crown', and later the Statute of Westminster, which established the monarchy as the sole remaining institution to which all Dominions owed allegiance, brought a redefinition of the status of the Dominions within the Empire.<sup>7</sup> An aspiration for greater Dominion independence might be welcomed in London. For at least some imperialists 'the ultimate reunion of the British nations' could only come about 'once the Dominions were recognised and regarded themselves as British peoples on a par with those of the United Kingdom.'<sup>8</sup> Whatever the ultimate destination, the Dominions' response to the outbreak of the First World War might both be taken as 'proof that they were in the Empire voluntarily' and 'deepened' a 'conviction that the national aspirations of the Dominions needed to be more fully recognised.'<sup>9</sup> Whilst sceptics might be right to question the long-term prospects for what was increasingly termed a 'British Commonwealth of nations', as Dilly argues this was one of the more effective inter-war examples of international collaboration, not simply 'a vague variation on the idea of the English-speaking world' but an attempt at a 'tightly defined practise of interstate cooperation grounded in shared constitutional values' a 'key element in the expression of global Britishness.'<sup>10</sup> Here then were moves both towards greater autonomy and towards closer, if refashioned, collaboration - how relationships would settle was far from clear.

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<sup>5</sup> W. F. Mandle, 'Cricket and Australian nationalism in the nineteenth century', *Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society*, 59 (4), 1973, pp. 225–45.

<sup>6</sup> Bridge and Fedorowich, p. 8.

<sup>7</sup> Harold Nicolson, *King George V: His Life and Reign* (London: Constable, 1952), pp. 471-2; Wheare, p. 227.

<sup>8</sup> Darwin, 'A Third British Empire?', pp. 69-71.

<sup>9</sup> Thompson, *Imperial Britain*, p. 168.

<sup>10</sup> Dilly, 'The tale of two commonwealths?', pp. 178-9.

What gave particular focus to reflections on national and trans-national identity in the 1920s and 30s was that legacy of participation in the First World War. In rubbing shoulders with large numbers of British, Canadian and other English-speaking people, Australians and New Zealanders had become 'Aussies' and 'Kiwis'.<sup>11</sup> They returned convinced of their superiority as fighting men compared to the British. Yet if 'the torch kindled...on the shore of Gallipoli' lit the 'path of duty' for post war Australians, if as for the *Age*, writing in April 1926, Australia emerged 'into the full bloom of nationhood' at Gallipoli, it was also noted that 'its men had proved themselves worthy of the highest traditions of the British race.'<sup>12</sup> If the returning 'Aussies' and 'Kiwis' had proved themselves 'better' Britons they remained 'Britons' nonetheless. For the war had also been the defining Imperial experience of the early years of the twentieth century.<sup>13</sup> The experience would be remembered both for distinctive national contributions to imperial 'Britishness' but also by participants for a sense of community with fellow Britons overseas.<sup>14</sup> The legacy was complicated.

## The arrival of radio

When radio broadcasting burst into this post-war world the claims made for it were bold, for its arrival - the flowing through the 'ether' and into homes and streets of a torrent of words and music broadcast from well, who knew where? - was perceived by contemporaries as miraculous, magical, its 'revolutionary and mystical properties' performing nothing less than a transformation of the human condition.<sup>15</sup> In 1927 Billy Hughes could speak of 'wireless' bringing 'the whole world in touch, it banishes isolation, it annihilates distance, it brings races sundered through the ages by

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<sup>11</sup> Sinclair, p. 329; David Reynolds, *The Long Shadow: The Great War and the Twentieth Century* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2013), p. 107; K.S. Inglis and Jan. Brazier, *Sacred Places: War Memorials in the Australian Landscape* (Carlton, Victoria: Miegunyah Press at Melbourne University Press, 1998), p. 84.

<sup>12</sup> 1929 Anzac Day speech by Stanley Bruce at the inauguration of the Canberra Memorial, *Townsville Daily Bulletin*, 26 April 1929, p. 6. <<https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/61178859>> [Accessed: 7 August 2025]; 'The men of Anzac', *The Age*, 26 April 1926, p. 9. <<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article201637235>> [Accessed: 18 August 2025]

<sup>13</sup> Richard White, 'Motives for Joining Up: Self-Sacrifice, Self-Interest and Social Class 1914–1918', *Journal of the Australian War Memorial*, October 1986, pp. 3–16.

<sup>14</sup> Schreuder & Ward, 'Introduction' in *Australia's Empire*, p. 19.

<sup>15</sup> Douglas, p. 29; Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), pp. 14-15.

fathomless oceans into close touch with one another.<sup>16</sup> As Kate Lacey has argued such was the impact that to seek to measure its significance simply in terms of licences purchased or sets sold ‘captures neither the extent of people’s encounter with radio...nor their awareness of radio as an idea and a promise.’ There was a ‘popular sense of marvel at radio’s ethereal yet everyday ubiquity, an outlandish technology that could yet be domesticated’, a technology that could ignore ‘physical, social, cultural, and generational divides’, that was there ‘for anyone, anywhere, anytime, all the time.’<sup>17</sup> And whilst the radio might be a background noise, engaged with in an ‘automatic, effortless mode’, Hadley Cantrill and Gordon Allport, amongst the earliest researchers into the impact of radio, observed in 1935 its unrivalled capacity ‘when it comes to producing eerie and uncanny effects’, noting that listeners would ‘enhance this distinctive quality of radio’ by sitting in the dark and closing their eyes so that ‘their fantasies are free.’<sup>18</sup>

Radio assumed its significance as technological innovation boomed in the years after the First World War. In Britain D.L. LeMahieu notes the ‘remarkable rapidity’ with which these innovations were ‘absorbed’ into everyday life.<sup>19</sup> Initially a form of person-to-person communication, radio became a ‘broadcast’ medium in this environment, distributing the experiences and ideas of a burgeoning popular culture, keeping listeners connected and in touch with a rapidly changing world.<sup>20</sup> The listener’s perception of that world might itself be altered by radio. Newer receivers incorporated calibrated panels to enable tuning, the cities of the world, certainly the European world, sitting in proximity in ways that defied geography - London, Paris, Hilversum all just a twist of the dial away. The mental map of radio listening need bear little relation to other

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<sup>16</sup> Johnson, *Unseen Voice*, pp. 45-48.

<sup>17</sup> Kate Lacey, ‘Communication in the Radio Century: Thinking through Radio’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Radio and Podcasting*, ed. by Michelle Hilmes and Andrew J. Bottomley (Oxford: OUP, 2024), pp. 736-7.

<sup>18</sup> Douglas, p. 30.

<sup>19</sup> D. L. LeMahieu, *A Culture for Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 81.

<sup>20</sup> Raymond Williams, Ederyn Williams and Roger Silverstone, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* (London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 19-22.

understandings of the juxtaposition of peoples and places.<sup>21</sup> Whilst the media landscapes into which radio landed were far from static or uniform they had previously been populated by 'discrete or periodical media texts', a daily newspaper, a weekly magazine, a nightly cinema performance, each 'a distinct commodity...its own event.' By contrast radio broadcasting, present continually 'in the air', was a medium freed 'from the everyday logics of time and space'.<sup>22</sup> For Rudolph Arnheim, writing in 1933, the great miracle of wireless was the 'omnipresence of what people are singing or saying anywhere, the overleaping of frontiers, the conquest of spatial isolation, the importation of culture on the waves of the ether, the same fare for all', radio was 'disrespectfully breaking through boundaries of class and country'.<sup>23</sup> The consequences were unclear.

Anne F. MacLennan in Canada, and Shaun Moores in England, undertook interviews with early adopters of radio and recorded their impressions of its arrival in homes, noting that it 'initially signified something quite different for men and for women'. For men the pleasures were 'grounded in the technical'...in constructing and tuning the set...for women it was 'an ugly box and an imposed silence' as men listened on headphones.<sup>24</sup> 'Listening-in' became more accessible with the development of affordable ready-made radio sets with loudspeakers. The role of amateur enthusiasts was gradually usurped, radio receivers designed for domestic settings required less and less technical expertise on the part of the user.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Andreas Fickers, 'Visibly Audible: The Radio Dial as Mediating Interface', in *The Oxford Handbook of Sound Studies*, edited by Trevor Pinch and Karin Bijsterveld (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 413 & 431-2.

<sup>22</sup> Lacey, 'Communication in the Radio Century', pp. 734-5.

<sup>23</sup> Rudolf Arnheim, *Radio*. (London: Faber and Faber, 1933), pp. 14 & 226-34.

<sup>24</sup> Shaun Moores, 'The Box on the Dresser': Memories of Early Radio and Everyday Life', *Media, Culture & Society*, 10 (1988), p. 30.

<sup>25</sup> Fickers, pp. 412-3.



Fig. 4: 'John, dear, whatever are you doing?'. 'Listening in, m'dear, listening in. It's a simply topping band they're broadcasting.', *Auckland Star*, 18 May 1929, p. 7 (Supplement)

Changes in radio technology shaped listening habits. Whilst listeners to early large, expensive, loudspeaker sets were focused on listening, later tabletop radios tended to be in livelier kitchens, and it was at this point that the radio might become a 'domestic companion'.<sup>26</sup> The consequences were significant, yet unplanned, for as Ray Williams noted, radio had been developed 'with little prior thought as to what exactly was to be communicated, or by whom, to whom.'<sup>27</sup> The rhetoric surrounding radio in the 1920s was caught up with conceptions of 'modernity': 'Are your new neighbors modern people?', asked an article in *Readers Digest* in 1922, 'Modern? Say, they sent in last night to borrow our Radio set!'<sup>28</sup> The 1920s were a decade in which people might refer to themselves as 'modern', inhabiting modernity, not a state of mind but a state of being.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>26</sup> MacLennan, pp. 323-4.

<sup>27</sup> Williams, p. 17-18.

<sup>28</sup> Timothy D. Taylor, 'Music and the Rise of Radio in 1920s America: technological imperialism, socialization, and the transformation of intimacy', *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, Vol. 22, No. 4, 2002, (425-443), pp. 425-6 (Quoting *Radio Digest*, 17 June 1922, p. 6.).

<sup>29</sup> Don Slater, *Consumer Culture and Modernity* (Malden, MA, 1997), p. 13.

Modernity was epitomised by ownership of radios, telephones, and cars. The rapid growth in private car ownership was an early indicator of a changing world, in which individuals expressed their desire to feel better connected through the acquisition of technologies which might also enhance personal leisure. At a time when only one in ten farms in the American Midwest had running water or electric lights more than half had a telephone, a technology developed for business use but rapidly adopted 'for what telephone engineers saw as a frivolous use, socialising and gossiping'. A car - whatever its business use - facilitated 'visiting and going on trips'.<sup>30</sup> Yet if Americans led the way in the embrace of modernity - with 23 million passenger cars on the road in 1929 being not far from one for each of the 29 million American families - Australians and New Zealanders were not far behind.<sup>31</sup> In 1929 whilst in Britain there was a car for every ten households, the figure in Australia was one for every four. In New Zealand the proportion was greater, reckoned second only to that in America - car registrations were required from 1925 and by 1929 there were 150 000, one for every 2 households.<sup>32</sup> Australians and New Zealanders similarly embraced the acquisition of telephones at a rate that, for *The Advocate* in Burnie, Tasmania, read in July 1929 'like a romance'. More than half a million telephones represented a third of Australian homes 'sixth on the list of nations showing the greatest number of telephones on a per capita basis', Tasmania was about to be connected to the mainland and at 4 762 miles the line running from Geraldton, in Western Australia, to Cairns was the longest in the world.<sup>33</sup> New

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<sup>30</sup> David Edgerton, *The Shock of the Old* (London: Profile Books, 2019), p. 55.

<sup>31</sup> Motor Vehicle Registrations 1895-1929 <<https://www.railsandtrails.com/AutoFacts/1930p15-100-8.jpg>> [Accessed: 28 October 2025] For statistics on population and household size in this period see Families in the United States by Size and Type, 1930 <<https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/decennial/1930/families/families-type-size.pdf>>; Vision of Britain 1931 County Reports <[https://www.visionofbritain.org.uk/census/table/EW1931COU1\\_M3](https://www.visionofbritain.org.uk/census/table/EW1931COU1_M3)>; Census of Australia 1933, Part XXXVI, Dwellings <[https://www.ausstats.abs.gov.au/ausstats/free.nsf/0/4DC7D06B1D99137CCA257840001BD81B/\\$File/1933%20Census%20-%20Volume%20III%20-%20Part%20XXXVI%20Dwellings.pdf](https://www.ausstats.abs.gov.au/ausstats/free.nsf/0/4DC7D06B1D99137CCA257840001BD81B/$File/1933%20Census%20-%20Volume%20III%20-%20Part%20XXXVI%20Dwellings.pdf)>; Stats NZ <<https://www.stats.govt.nz/reports/a-century-of-censuses-dwellings-and-households/>> [Accessed: 28 October 2025]

<sup>32</sup> Eric Pawson, 'Cars and the motor industry', *Te Ara - the Encyclopedia of New Zealand*, <http://www.TeAra.govt.nz/en/cars-and-the-motor-industry/print> [Accessed 7 January 2025]

<sup>33</sup>; 'Amazing Development of the Telephone System in Australia', *The Advocate*, 3 July 1929, p. 2 <<https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/67662446>> [Accessed: 28 October 2025]

Zealand was similarly connected, and whilst many were used for business in 1930 161 000 telephones had been installed in a country with 300 000 private dwellings.<sup>34</sup> The explicit appeal was to the overcoming of isolation. As an advertisement placed in the *Wellington Evening Post* exhorted: 'a telephone in the home...will keep you in touch with old friends and help you make new ones; it makes distant friends your neighbours; it is invaluable in times of sickness and emergency; it is a comfort and means of protection. Make life easier. Come on the telephone.'<sup>35</sup> As David Egerton notes 'in the rich world the household was to take up technologies of leisure...much faster than washing machines or vacuum cleaners' and prominent amongst them was radio.<sup>36</sup>



Fig. 5: 'The Young Wife', *Auckland Star*, 1 May 1931, p. 14

<sup>34</sup> *An Encyclopaedia for New Zealanders*, 1966

<<https://teara.govt.nz/en/1966/post-office/page-3>> [Accessed: 8 January 2025]; Belich, *Paradise Reforged*, p. 74 (cites as evidence of New Zealand's enthusiastic embrace of new technologies a plethora of developments - increases in the number of patents issued, the high number of photographers relative to Britain, innovations in police finger printing techniques, the invention of stamp vending machines).

<sup>35</sup> 'Overcome Isolation!', *Evening Post*, 18 September 1936, p. 6.

<<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/EP19360918.2.54.1>> [Accessed: 18 August 2025]

<sup>36</sup> Egerton, p. 55.

Ray Williams considered these modern 'consumer durables' paradoxical, they promoted 'mobility' and connection, yet were symbols of the 'apparently self-sufficient family home'.<sup>37</sup> Radio offered a domestic source of news and entertainment. Susan Douglas sees the radio age of the 1920s as 'the beginning of Americans' century-long retreat into the private, domestic sphere.'<sup>38</sup> The American commentator Frederick Allen Lewis, writing in 1931 on the decade just passed, considered the year 1921 one of novelty, 'new toys and fads and scandals', all seized upon 'feverishly', but first amongst them was radio, 'destined ultimately to alter the daily habits of Americans as profoundly as anything that the decade produced.'<sup>39</sup> For Paddy Scannell and David Cardiff, in this 'new way of life' radio listening came to be 'not merely a taken-for-granted element...it embodied it.'<sup>40</sup>



**Radio as a social help. Dancing taught by wireless.**

Fig. 6: 'Dancing to radio', *Sun* (Auckland), 12 December 1928, p. 16

<sup>37</sup> Williams, pp. 19-20.

<sup>38</sup> Douglas, p. 65.

<sup>39</sup> Frederick Lewis Allen, *Only Yesterday: An Informal History of the Nineteen-Twenties* (New York: Bantam Books, 1959), pp.54-55.

<sup>40</sup> Paddy Scannell and David Cardiff, *A Social History of British Broadcasting, Volume 1: 'Serving the Nation' 1922-1939* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), p. 367.

The first displays of wireless technology at the 1906 Christchurch Exhibition had brought a suggestion that in embracing such innovations New Zealand might be 'born modern'. This was not to be 'an isolated and peripheral island, remote from the world centres of North America and Europe', this was to be a 'connected society', such technologies might offer the 'annihilation of time and space, the shrinking of the world' and participation in the 'exciting and nerve tingling acceleration of the speed of modern life.'<sup>41</sup> In Australia, as Bridget Griffen-Foley notes, radio, or, to use the more 'evocative' term, 'wireless', was presented by manufacturers and advertisers as 'the quintessence of modernity', radio towers dotting the skylines of Australian cities being its visible symbols. This was 'the Radio Age.'<sup>42</sup> *Wireless Weekly* regularly extolled its virtues, a succession of editorials in 1925 lauded the virtues of broadcasting, which would prove 'a power for good'.<sup>43</sup> The very geography of Australia would enhance its attraction and speed its development, bringing 'city joys to distant country homes.'<sup>44</sup>

There were many unanticipated impacts of radio listening, amongst them the regular announcement of the timings of programmes. Responses to this were, as *Wireless Weekly* observed in 1931, 'rightly considered, one of the strangest of the new things that the harnessing of the ether has brought to us.' Listeners, previously 'uninfluenced by considerations of time' through the whole 'history of mankind' were 'now reminded half a dozen times of the passage of the minutes via broadcasting.' The outcome exemplified what might be considered - and presumably was considered so by readers of *Wireless Weekly* - one of the improvements of the 'modern' world, 'an unobserved quickening of our pace, better scheduling of all our movements and actions

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<sup>41</sup> Hoar, pp. 99-100.

<sup>42</sup> Bridget Griffen-Foley, 'Modernity, Intimacy and Early Australian Commercial Radio' in *Talking and Listening in the Age of Modernity*, (Australia: ANU E Press, 2007), pp. 123-4.

<sup>43</sup> 'The March of Broadcasting', *Wireless Weekly*, 18 September 1925, p. 6.  
<<http://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-636172047>> [Accessed: 23 August 2025]

<sup>44</sup> 'The Development of Wireless in Australia', *Wireless Weekly*, 2 October 1925, p. 29  
<<http://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-636172186>> [Accessed: 23 August 2025]

to a standard and accurate time.<sup>45</sup> It was now possible to switch a radio set on and off automatically, to set the clock of a combined radio/clock 'in order to listen to an item in the wireless programme'.<sup>46</sup>



Fig. 7. 'A combined electric clock and radio set in one unit', *Star*, 29 October 1929, p. 6.

As significant as the material radio broadcast was, then, the fact that it did so at set times, those who wanted to hear, say, the latest news bulletin, knew that they had to be listening at a time set by the broadcaster, when it would be understood that millions of others might be hearing of the same events at the same moment. The consumption of news was no longer at leisure after the delivery of the morning paper. To fail to listen was to miss out. Radio schedules published in magazines and newspapers might disrupt, or dictate, the structure of domestic life if favourite

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<sup>45</sup> *Wireless Weekly*, 26 June 1931, p. 8.

<<http://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-721194353>> [Accessed: 23 August 2025]

<sup>46</sup> 'A combined electric clock and radio set in one unit', *Star*, 29 October 1929, p. 6.

<<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/TS19291029.2.34.1>> [Accessed: 18 August 2025]

broadcasts were to be heard.<sup>47</sup> One popular example, in both Australia and New Zealand came to be 'Dinner Music', relaxing music 'that the ordinary citizen can appreciate', music to listen to whilst eating between 6pm and 7pm.<sup>48</sup> The arrival of radio sets had, then, a profound effect on the sonic environment. New Yorkers were warned in May 1930 that 'the use of loudspeakers outside any building or at a window looking upon the street' was now directly prohibited under amendments to the city's Sanitary Code. Penalties could be levied on domestic users who listened at excessive volumes.<sup>49</sup> The French composer and critic Emile Vuillermoz, born in 1878, observed, as music drifted from open windows, how much *noisier* the world had become, young people listened 'from the moment they wake up.'<sup>50</sup> This was a regular, if unoriginal, subject of newspaper comment:



"Our wireless set is one of the latest."  
 "Yes, I know. I've heard it at two o'clock in the morning."



"Our wireless is one of the latest!"  
 "I know, we heard it at three in the morning!"

Fig. 8: *Smiths Weekly*, 27 May 1933, p. 22      Fig. 9 *Northern Star*, 2 September 1935, p. 8.

<sup>47</sup> Hoar, pp. 128-9.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 139.

<sup>49</sup> 'Ordinance Forbids Street Amplifiers', *New York Times*, 21 May, 1930, p. 35.

<<https://www.proquest.com/hnpnewyorktimes/docview/98968519/E2537CD2B85E4D8DPQ/1?accountid=13042&sourcetype=Newspapers>> [Accessed: 10 January 2025]

'Father Knickerbocker Warns Loud-Speakers to Be Quiet', *New York Times*, 13 April, 1930, p. 137.

<<https://www.proquest.com/hnpnewyorktimes/docview/98576268/A5D35DEAF1DB4256PQ/2?accountid=13042&sourcetype=Newspapers>> [Accessed: 10 January 2025]

<sup>50</sup> Rebecca Scales, *Radio and the Politics of Sound in Interwar France, 1921-1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp. 1-2 (Quoting Emile Vuillermoz, 'La peu du silence,' *Le Miroir du monde: hebdomadaire illustre*, 6 April, 1935, pp. 55-57).

Yet there was more. Hilda Jennings and Winifred Gill concluded, in their ground-breaking survey of the impact of radio on 1930s British domestic life, that through its ubiquitous presence, broadcasting had brought about nothing less than a 'complete revolution' in the 'mental life' of the working-class Bristolian community they studied. Listeners had begun to become 'conscious of themselves and their lives in relation to a larger community'. The fact that millions were listening to the same programme gave each 'the sensation of being part of a nation in a way that was experienced rarely and for short periods only in the past.' Listeners felt themselves 'a part of things', 'more important and not left out'. Radio was 'an equalizing and unifying factor in national life.'<sup>51</sup> Broadcasting did indeed, then, appear to epitomise modernity - city skylines were dotted with radio masts, ethereal words and music flowed from open windows, in response to the latest news and entertainment domestic routines were reshaped. By the late 1920s ownership of a radio set, if not ubiquitous, was commonplace, radio listening was an established practice. To what use, then, might broadcasting be put?

### **'The banishment of isolation, the annihilation of distance.'**

Guglielmo Marconi's patent for his wireless telegraphy initially appeared a further development in point-to-point communication, akin to the wired telegraphy of Samuel Morse and Alexander Graham Bell's telephony. What was new was the wirelessness. The possibilities of communication without cables were clear to military planners and those running overseas empires. Such speculation as there was as to domestic applications assumed, as Elizabeth Cregan suggests, that it might develop much as mobile telephony was to develop a century later. The experience of the First World War changed such assumptions. Whilst radio broadcasting was indeed used for person-to-person communication, in the trenches and in aircraft, it was also adopted as a means of broadcasting propaganda, and, later, of broadcasting entertainment to the bedsides of

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<sup>51</sup> Hilda Jennings & Winifred Gill, *Broadcasting in Everyday Life* (BBC, 1939) pp. 12 & 39-40.

hospitalised soldiers.<sup>52</sup> Returning service personnel were equipped with both knowledge of a new technology and enthusiasm to develop it. They were assisted by technological developments which saw radio receivers become devices that might be marketed as domestic appliances.<sup>53</sup> Broadcasting promised, as Billy Hughes declared, a particular social value in Australia and New Zealand - the 'banishment of isolation, the annihilation of distance.'<sup>54</sup> This sentiment was a regular feature of the discourse of broadcasting in both. For James Millett, secretary of the Western Australian Listeners' League, whilst 'the bane of the pioneer settler, and especially his wife, is isolation and a sense of loneliness, nothing on earth is so well designed to be an antidote as wireless.'<sup>55</sup> By 1927 wireless was seen as offering outback listeners participation in a Royal visit:

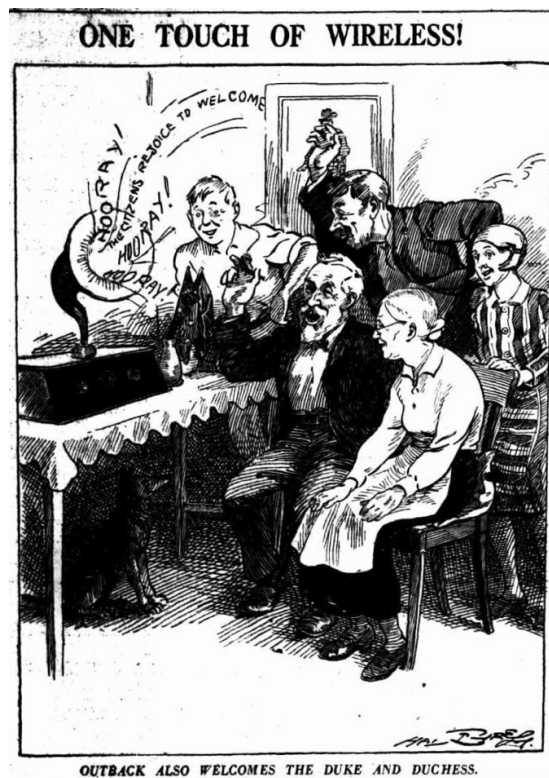


Fig. 10: 'One Touch of Wireless', *Sunday Mail* (Brisbane), 10 April 1927, p. 9.

<sup>52</sup> Elizabeth Cregan, 'The Impact of WWI on American Radio', draft paper, Monmouth University, Spring 2011 (citing: William Crookes, "Some Possibilities of Electricity," *Fortnightly Review*, February 1, 1892, pp 174-176; The Wireless Age," *The Los Angeles Times*, November 4, 1901, p 6; *The Wireless Age*, April 1919) <<https://monmouth.academia.edu/ElizabethCregan>> [Accessed: 23 August 2024]

<sup>53</sup> Christos BarBoutis, 'The birth of radio broadcasting: the matrix of science, technology and communication in the western world', *The Radio Journal – International Studies in Broadcast & Audio Media*, Volume 11 Number 2, pp, 161-2.

<sup>54</sup> Johnson, *Unseen Voice*, pp. 45-48.

<sup>55</sup> Quoted in Bridget Griffen-Foley, *Changing Stations: The Story of Australian Commercial Radio* (Sydney: University of New South Wales, 2009), p. 10.

In the backblocks of New Zealand listening to the radio offered a link to a national, or provincial, cultural life that was geographically very distant. In 1933 a 1YA listener proposed that in addition to announcements of the time of day the station might offer the day of the week: 'what a blessing it would be to the people who live right in the backblocks and who worked so hard that they do not even know what day it is'...a suggestion the General Manager of the Radio Broadcasting Company (RBC), E.C. Hands, took seriously enough to acknowledge, despite feeling it would appeal to 'few listeners'.<sup>56</sup> There was an assumption that broadcasting would make life in the backblocks or outback more attractive, and that 'isolation will no longer be so great a drawback to settlement.' Yet a technology lauded for its capacity to annihilate distance was to do so not by enabling isolated communities to speak to each other, but rather by bringing remote places in communication with the big cities. It was in the cities that the speaker would sit.<sup>57</sup> It would be possible, as the *Sydney Daily Telegraph* anticipated in 1924, that 'the King will speak in London and be instantly heard in all parts of the Empire.'<sup>58</sup>

There were challenges to such a one-sided view of radio communication, notably from Bertolt Brecht. Radio had greater possibilities 'if it knew how to receive as well as to transmit, how to let the listener speak as well as hear.'<sup>59</sup> Brecht called for a 'rebellion by the listener.'<sup>60</sup> It should, he argued, be possible to develop radio in such a way as to allow working people to communicate with each other, to join in an active relationship with other listeners.<sup>61</sup> In Australia a section of the

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<sup>56</sup> Archives New Zealand, The Department of Internal Affairs Te Tari Taiwhenua, Wellington (hereafter ANZ – see bibliography for full file references), R22012631, 6 August 1933, Miss IV Salisbury, Auckland, to 1YA; 11 August 1933, Hands to Miss Salisbury.

<sup>57</sup> Johnson, *Unseen Voice*, pp. 28-29.

<sup>58</sup> 'The Wireless World', *Daily Telegraph*, 8 February 1924, p. 8.

<<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article245896423>> [Accessed: 10 January 2025]

<sup>59</sup> Bertold Brecht, 'The Radio as a Communications Apparatus', in Marc Silverman, ed., *Bertolt Brecht on Film & Radio* (London: Methuen, 2001), pp. 41-42.

<sup>60</sup> Bertold Brecht, 'Explanations', in Silverman, ed., *Bertolt Brecht on Film & Radio*, p. 39.

<sup>61</sup> Johnson, *Unseen Voice*, pp. 5-6 (quoting Bertolt Brecht, 'Radio as a means of communication' trans. By Stuart Hall, Screen 20 93/4) 1979/80, 24-8).

labour movement did just this.<sup>62</sup> In December 1925 the Sydney station 2BL invited listeners to take part in what would now be considered a 'phone-in' and to telephone the station with questions for a lecturer, with both the questions and the answers heard. *Labor Daily* welcomed this experiment, the listening-in public might throw off its 'passive role' as they 'talked back' at the broadcaster.<sup>63</sup> The experiment was rapidly halted by the Postmaster General (PMG) on the grounds that it violated broadcasting regulations forbidding conversations between individuals by wireless.<sup>64</sup> In 1925 this was primarily an attempt to preserve a monopoly existing in other forms of person-to-person communication, in the postal and telegraph services, yet over time the policy was not reversed as it came to be recognised that this medium, whilst offering great social benefits, had great power, power that might need to be checked.

The 'shape' of broadcasting, framing listeners' understanding of what would be coming at them from that box in the corner, was captured in the 'schedule', found in the daily newspaper or a magazine. The 'art' of scheduling developed, as Lacey notes, with the 'precise aim of maximising the size of the audience'.<sup>65</sup> Gendered day-time schedules offered programmes designed to help women fill their time in the home, offering tips on best domestic practice, drawing attention to domestic routine and to 'the fact that those routines were shared by countless other households across the country.' In this context radio was often presented as 'an escape route from boredom.'<sup>66</sup> At other times radio stations offered music to start the day, to accompany the evening meal, news bulletins, evening plays or serials, dance music to close. Across time, as one schedule ran into another, broadcasting developed its own daily, weekly, 'flow'. This had consequences. First, cultural forms previously encountered and enjoyed in isolation from each other - the concert,

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<sup>62</sup> Johnson, *Unseen Voice*, p. 5.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25 (Quoting *Labor Daily*, 7 December 1925).

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 34-36 (Quoting *Wireless Weekly* 12 January 1934).

<sup>65</sup> Kate Lacey, 'Radio's Vernacular Modernism: The Schedule as Modernist Text', *Media History*, 24 (2018) (166-179), p. 170.

<sup>66</sup> Kate Lacey, 'Towards a Periodization of Listening: Radio and Modern Life', *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 3.2 (2000) (279-88), pp. 285-6.

the news report, the vaudeville comedian - were now juxtaposed. Second, in its utter relentlessness, 'constant repetition without reproduction...constant novelty, the refusal of any real sense of final closure as the daily, weekly, seasonal and annual round promises ever more of the almost same', here was a form of communication that in aggregate exceeded 'comprehension or control.' Amongst the many responses to this auditory avalanche might be 'anxiety', resulting from the interjection into daily life, and domestic space, of things previously conceived as existing in the world beyond the realm of the domestic. Nothing was more noted in this regard than 'the voices of monarchs and ministers', provoking both an anxiety amongst broadcasters as to how listeners would react to, say, the voice of the King - would they behave appropriately? - but equally anxiety amongst listeners themselves as to what 'appropriate' might entail. Accounts of listening made much of the sense that the appropriate response to the intrusion of the voice of the Monarch into the home was to stand rigidly to attention - even in one's own kitchen or front room!<sup>67</sup>

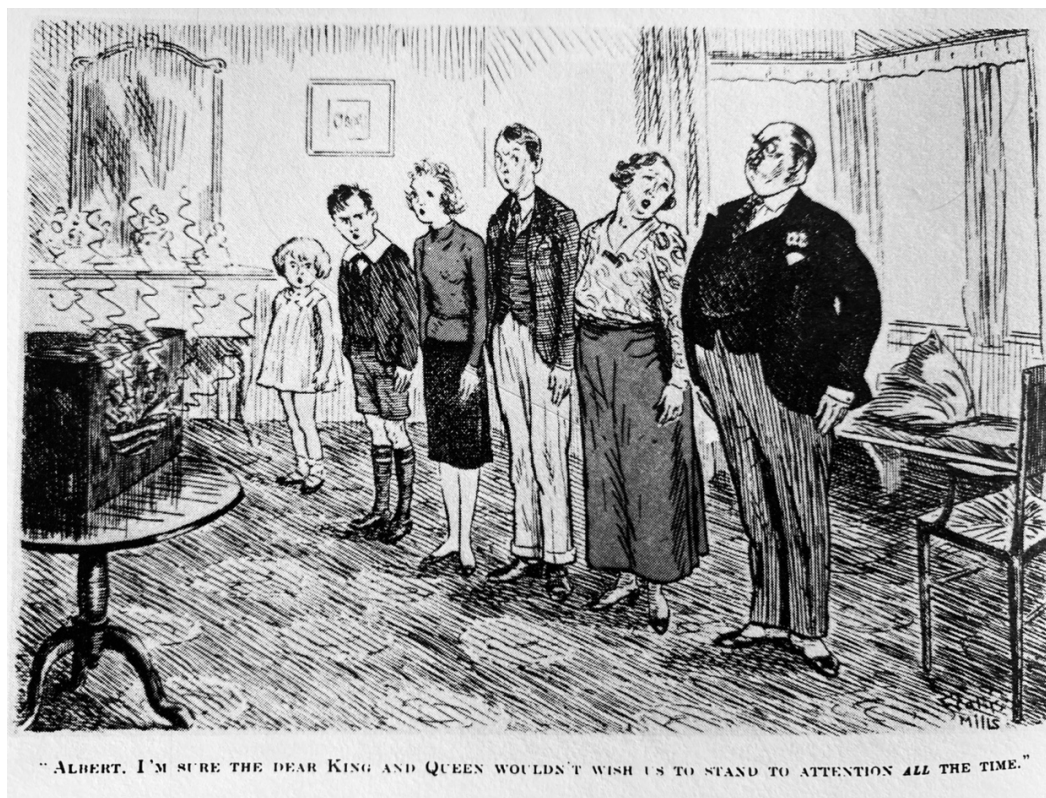


Fig. 11: 'Albert I'm sure the dear King and Queen wouldn't wish us to stand to attention *all* the time', Arthur Wallis Mills, *Punch*, 'Coronation Number', 28 April 1937. p. 458.

<sup>67</sup> Lacey, 'Vernacular Modernism', p. 174.

Listening, engagement with the schedules of broadcasters by audiences transcending 'physical, political or social boundaries', came to be equated with 'citizenship', yet whilst broadcasting might be celebrated 'as a public good' it might also be feared as a 'dangerous tool of propaganda'.<sup>68</sup> Access to the airwaves was therefore to be controlled, and by governments, not interest groups or individual listeners. It suited both regulators and manufacturers to define 'radio' as a medium of reception, not transmission.<sup>69</sup> Lesley Johnson argues that 'the dominance of radio traders' in the development of broadcasting also 'limited the extent to which the experience of listening-in or concepts of programming were discussed.' For their primary interest was in attracting potential buyers and 'novelty, variety, and a general sense of excitement was seen as the best means of attracting consumers'.<sup>70</sup> This opened, as we shall see, a door for those keen to celebrate great 'events', among them the ceremonial and sporting occasions of the British world.

## How to listen?

Yet how might one listen? In the British world of broadcasting there developed two distinct perspectives. In homes across the world the radio was 'for most people most of the time, irrespective of class or education...a domestic utility for relaxation and entertainment...a cheerful noise in the background'.<sup>71</sup> The objective of broadcasting as developed by commercial stations in America and copied elsewhere was therefore to offer something that would keep the listener engaged throughout the day. This was not however how many of those engaged in radio production in the British world wanted their output to be regarded. Nowhere was this more the case than at the BBC. From the outset the BBC sought to dissuade what it termed 'tap' listening. In the 1928 BBC Handbook - the first - the prominent radio critic, and regular BBC producer, Filson Young, argued that there is a 'right and wrong way to use broadcasting...no one, however

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<sup>68</sup> Lacey, 'Listening Overlooked', p. 10.

<sup>69</sup> Johnson, *Unseen Voice*, p. 25.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.

<sup>71</sup> Scannell & Cardiff, 'Serving the Nation', p. 185.

measured his or her life, ought to listen all the time. There would be something excessive and intemperate about such a person.<sup>72</sup> The BBC Director of Talks, Hilda Matheson, wrote in 1933 that whilst listening might be ‘a means of enlarging the frontiers of human interest and consciousness, of widening personal experience...a source of pleasure’, it might also be a ‘vice...like gin or opium.’<sup>73</sup> Consultation of the schedule and the choice of specific broadcasts to engage with was to be preferred to simply leaving the set switched on all day.



Fig. 12: ‘Wireless Enthusiast’, *Auckland Star*, 24 April 1931, p. 18

Asa Briggs argues that ‘it is impossible to understand BBC programmes of the period from 1927 to 1939’ without appreciating this perspective.<sup>74</sup> This was the extreme, yet across the British world of public service broadcasting the purpose of the medium, and engagement with it, was to remain a

<sup>72</sup> *BBC Handbook 1928*, (London: British Broadcasting Corporation, 1927), pp. 349-351.

<sup>73</sup> Hilda Matheson, *Broadcasting* (London: T. Butterworth, 1933), pp. 14 & 156.

<sup>74</sup> Asa Briggs, *The History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom*, 5 vols (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), II: ‘The Golden Age of Broadcasting’, pp. 72-75.

source of unresolved tension throughout the 1930s. Such intense listening was clearly not a passive process.<sup>75</sup> Whilst early radio listening was termed 'listening in' at times audiences were also actively 'listening out' for, and responding to, messages, they formed a 'latent public', in a state of anticipation.<sup>76</sup> If an association of listening with 'passivity' might, as Lacey notes, 'hinder it being properly attended to either as a critical public disposition or as a political action' this was not the perspective of contemporaries - governments were alert, as the Australian PMG had been, to the potential that Brecht had noted.<sup>77</sup> Across the globe, it was concluded that broadcasting required regulation.

America was first to confront the regulatory challenges and opportunities presented. In 1922 the Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover called a conference, the 'Radio Conference', bringing together American manufacturers to discuss 'the chaos of the air'. It confirmed to British observers that broadcasting could be very profitable to the manufacturers of radio sets, but also that broadcasting required regulation.<sup>78</sup> Hoover, himself an engineer with a faith in both big business and technology, turned to major radio corporations in seeking a way to balance free speech with the avoidance of public harm from disreputable broadcasters, offering both favourable frequencies and broadcast times.<sup>79</sup> That the American experience was influential in the creation of the BBC monopoly in Britain was confirmed by the Crawford Committee on Broadcasting which reported to Parliament in 1926 that: 'the US system of free and uncontrolled transmission is unsuited to this country, and that broadcasting must accordingly remain a monopoly', the intention being 'to avoid mutual interference by the number of transmitting stations' and to guard

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<sup>75</sup> Douglas, pp. 26-30.

<sup>76</sup> Lacey, 'Listening Overlooked', pp. 6-7.

<sup>77</sup> Kate Lacey, *Listening Publics: The Politics and Experience of Listening in the Media Age* (Cambridge: Polity, 2013), p. 3.

<sup>78</sup> Camporesi, pp. 258-260.

<sup>79</sup> Michael A. Krysko, Department of History, Kansas State University, *American Radio and Technological Transformation from Invention to Broadcasting, 1900-1945*, Published online: 26 April 2018, p. 7 <<https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199329175.013.414>> [Accessed: 10 January 2025]

against 'abuse', 'a monopoly in efficient hands seemed likely to provide the most successful service.'<sup>80</sup> The monopoly suited the commercial interests of the shareholders in what was then the British Broadcasting Company - the manufacturers of British radio receivers - and it suited the man they had hired as its General Manager. John Reith had no doubt that centralised power 'proved more, not less, efficient' than competition.<sup>81</sup> The early development of broadcasting was to be driven by the manufacturers of radio receiving sets, for even in America profits were initially seen to be drawn primarily from their sales, and not from any advertising that might be attracted by broadcasts.<sup>82</sup> The regulation of broadcasting in Australia and New Zealand, when it came shortly on the heels of developments in America and Britain, owed something to both approaches but was different to each - and, despite superficial similarities, different to each other. Regulation by governments was to shape the social and cultural impact of broadcasting - and did so fundamentally.

## **The early development of broadcasting in New Zealand and Australia**

The post war development of radio broadcasting had been led by enthusiastic technicians, many being demobbed service personnel. In New Zealand experimental transmissions began in 1921 at Otago University. In Wellington and Auckland broadcasts were made by shop owners creating a market for the radio parts they sold, likewise in Christchurch, where Ambrose Harris was a pioneer. Harris, having worked in America for Edison before the war, had returned as Edison's national New Zealand agent.<sup>83</sup> In 1923 there were 11 stations broadcasting in New Zealand, each

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<sup>80</sup> Camporesi, citing Cmd. 2599 "Report of the Broadcasting Committee 1925", chaired by the Earl of Crawford; Cmd. 2599, op. cit., p. 344 ("Appendix II").

<sup>81</sup> D. L. LeMahieu, 'John Reith 1889–1971' In *After the Victorians: Private Conscience and Public Duty in Modern Britain*, by S. Petersen and P. Mandler, (London: Routledge, 1994) p. 196.

<sup>82</sup> Camporesi, p. 262.

<sup>83</sup> The New Scheme, *Wanganui Chronicle*, 29 January 194, p. 5.

<<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/WC19140129.2.47.2>> [Accessed: 10 January 2025]

'Kiwi Radio Legend' <<https://www.radioheritage.com/kiwi-radio-legend-ambrose-reeves-harris>> [Accessed 7 August 2025]

with an identifying call sign prefixed by a number: 1 for Auckland, 2 for Wellington, 3 for Christchurch and 4 for Dunedin.<sup>84</sup> In time the national stations retained the identification number with the suffix YA. In Australia hundreds of licenced 'experimenters' exchanged information, exploring the technical possibilities of wireless transmission and reception.<sup>85</sup> In September 1923 there were 37 amateur clubs in New South Wales alone.<sup>86</sup> At the outset, then, broadcasting was being developed rather haphazardly by many groups, indeed in Australia the newly created journal *Wireless Weekly* expressed hope that amateur broadcasters who entertained the public at no cost would work alongside broadcasting stations when they eventually appeared.<sup>87</sup> Regulation by government defined broadcasting as a medium by which a handful of licenced producers broadcast to a mass audience. Regulation, partly justified by the need to manage the allocation of frequencies to stations, also enabled the management of standards of taste and decency and of political controversy.

New Zealand's Wireless Telegraphy Act of 1903 was the world's first to legislate for state control of sound waves, even anticipating a government monopoly, it offered the legislative framework to regulate broadcasting in 1923.<sup>88</sup> The Post and Telegraph Department required each applicant for a licence to broadcast to present a circuit diagram of the transmitter to be used and to swear on the Bible, in front of a JP, that the service would not disclose any 'secret messages' it happened to hear.<sup>89</sup> 1923 was also the year in which the Australian Wireless Telegraphy Act of 1905, giving the PMG the power to license the sending and receiving of all wireless messages, was extended to the

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<sup>84</sup> Downes & Harcourt, pp. 10-20.

<sup>85</sup> Alan Barnard, *Ruling Australia's Airwaves in the 1920s* (Canberra: Australian National University, 1982) p. 5.

<sup>86</sup> Johnson, *Unseen Voice*, p. 12.

<sup>87</sup> Griffen-Foley, *Changing Stations*, p. 4 (Quoting *Wireless Weekly*, 10 November 1922 p. 2; 1 December 1922, p. 2; 7 February 1923 pp. 2-3).

<sup>88</sup> Downes & Harcourt, p. 73.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 10-20.

regulation of radio broadcasting. Each licensed broadcaster was to be offered a particular frequency and allowed to collect a licence fee from anybody choosing to listen to that station.<sup>90</sup>

In Australia the initial licence fee was set by the broadcaster, but from it the PMG took 10 shillings. The take-up was modest.<sup>91</sup> The mechanism used to licence listening was built around 'sealed' radio sets only capable of receiving the stations to which the purchaser subscribed when acquiring the set. In practice 'unsealing' the sets proved too easy and by June 1924 only 1 400 licenses had been purchased, with traders accused of ignoring the system when selling sets.<sup>92</sup> Yet after a major review of broadcasting and the creation of a wider range of stations, licence sales rose rapidly and by 1928 a radio licence was held by around one in 25 Australians, they were concentrated in the major urban areas, Melbourne's 3LO was the most successful radio station in Australia throughout the 1920s and for three years, 1926-28, over half of all licence sales in Australia were in Victoria.<sup>93</sup> Indeed it was claimed that Victoria had the highest proportion of licence holders anywhere in the world that a licence was required.<sup>94</sup> In Australia sales of radio licenses, like telephone subscriptions and car registrations, fluctuated during the Depression, yet rose from 270,000 in 1928 to 370,000 by 1932.<sup>95</sup> Quite how many actual 'listeners-in' Australia had by 1932 can only be guessed. 370,000 licences represented around one in twenty of the population yet no one knew how many people listened at each receiver, or how many unlicensed listeners there were. Ken Inglis guessed at four listeners to each licenced receiver, and if there was in addition one unlicensed listener 'the potential audience on 1 July 1932 approached two millions in a population of seven.'<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Inglis, *ABC*, pp. 7-8.

<sup>91</sup> Johnson, *Unseen Voice*, p. 13.

<sup>92</sup> Philip Geeves, *The Dawn of Australia's Radio Broadcasting* (Alexandria NSW: Federal Publishing, 1993) p. 34; Griffen-Foley, *Changing Stations*, pp. 6-7.

<sup>93</sup> *The Sound of Melbourne: 75 Years of 3LO* (Sydney: ABC Books for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 1999), p. 45.

<sup>94</sup> Inglis, *ABC*, pp. 7-9.

<sup>95</sup> *Australian Yearbook 1940* p. 170

<[https://www.ausstats.abs.gov.au/ausstats/free.nsf/0/B400A30A4444FF77CA2573AD0020057C/\\$File/13010\\_1940%20section%205.pdf](https://www.ausstats.abs.gov.au/ausstats/free.nsf/0/B400A30A4444FF77CA2573AD0020057C/$File/13010_1940%20section%205.pdf)> [Accessed: 9 January 2025]

<sup>96</sup> Inglis, *ABC*, p. 22.

In the mid-1920s crystal sets, consisting of little more than a mineral crystal and a coil of wire, could be purchased, or made, relatively cheaply, for around 55 shillings Lesley Johnson estimates, at a time when an annual newspaper subscription to *Labor Daily* cost 32.<sup>97</sup> Alan Barnard estimates that with a set of headphones and a licence the cost might be around £4, roughly a weekly wage.<sup>98</sup> Valve receivers were more complex and the components more expensive but not difficult to construct and magazines printed instructions for enthusiasts.<sup>99</sup> The purchase of a fully pre-assembled set was however a significant decision, costing anywhere between seven and 75 pounds, or more.<sup>100</sup> This had a consequence, to attract more sales of manufactured radio sets Australian broadcasters were encouraged to broadcast programmes that would appeal to whole families and thus benefit from a loudspeaker - an increase in the number of stations also had the benefit of making it harder to tune crystal sets. Barnard notes that in Australia radio sellers or manufacturers made seven applications to establish new stations in 1927 alone.<sup>101</sup> In Australia, tariff barriers having been imposed on the importation of assembled radio sets, there emerged a domestic radio industry, with at least 11 manufacturers in Melbourne.<sup>102</sup> As the industry grew data was collected on a whole range of its manifestations. In 1930, for the first time, 'wireless apparatus' was measured separately from other 'electrical apparatus' in the Australian Yearbook. The 1940 Yearbook recorded that in 1938/39 Australia assembled 168 821 'receiving sets' in 72 factories employing over 5 000 workers.<sup>103</sup> The appeal of ready-made sets increased as prices fell, a set was 25% cheaper in 1933 than it had been a year earlier.<sup>104</sup> Radio and electrical exhibitions

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<sup>97</sup> Johnson, *Unseen Voice*, p. 14.

<sup>98</sup> Barnard, p. 23; *Sound of Melbourne*, p. 44.

<sup>99</sup> Johnson, *Unseen Voice*, p. 14; Barnard, p. 23; *Sound of Melbourne*, p. 44.

<sup>100</sup> Johnson, *Unseen Voice*, p. 14.

<sup>101</sup> Barnard, p. 23.

<sup>102</sup> *Sound of Melbourne*, p. 45.

<sup>103</sup> *Australian Yearbook 1940*, Chapter XVIII - Manufacturing Industry. p. 492.

<[https://www.ausstats.abs.gov.au/ausstats/free.nsf/0/612826AFFE127379CA257AF300119014/\\$File/13010\\_1940\\_bk33.pdf](https://www.ausstats.abs.gov.au/ausstats/free.nsf/0/612826AFFE127379CA257AF300119014/$File/13010_1940_bk33.pdf)> [Accessed: 7 August 2025]

<sup>104</sup> *Sound of Melbourne*, p. 45.

attempted to persuade the Australian public that every home should have at least one set.<sup>105</sup>

Radio ownership was spread fairly evenly through the Australian population, it being estimated in 1936 that 12.5% of radio sets belonged to the upper 10% of households by income, and 45% to the lowest 50%.<sup>106</sup> By 1936 the *Sydney Daily Telegraph* could claim that owning a radio had become 'nearly as essential as a bath.'<sup>107</sup> In 1938 two in three Australian homes owned a radio receiver.<sup>108</sup>

A licence to listen in New Zealand cost 5 shillings in 1924 and 2 830 were sold.<sup>109</sup> But licence sales were initially price sensitive. In 1925, when the government intervened to create a national service - the RBC, led by Ambrose Harris - it also raised the fee to 30 shillings, the *Evening Post* noted that many listeners 'have abandoned the use of their sets or have gone on using them without licences.'<sup>110</sup> The number of licence holders fell from 4 702 in 1925 to 3 588 a year later.<sup>111</sup> The scale of the reduction was such that the Post and Telegraph Department initially declined to publish the figure.<sup>112</sup> It took technical improvements led by the construction in 1927, on Mount Victoria, of a 5000 watt transmitter for the Wellington station 2YA, the second most powerful in the Empire, to transform licence sales.<sup>113</sup> There was a six-fold increase that year. In 1927 barely one in a hundred New Zealanders had been a holder of a radio licence, by 1932 it was, like Australia, one in twenty.<sup>114</sup> The major inconvenience of the early radio sets had been their reliance on battery

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<sup>105</sup> Johnson, *Unseen Voice*, p. 16.

<sup>106</sup> McNair, p. 292

<sup>107</sup> 'Pillows Talk in the Night', *Sydney Daily Telegraph*, 24 March 1936, p. 23.

<<https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/246729130>> [Accessed: 9 January 2025]

<sup>108</sup> Johnson, *Unseen Voice*, p. 82-83.

<sup>109</sup> Downes & Harcourt, pp. 10-23; New Zealand Official Yearbook 1940 section XLIV

<[https://www3.stats.govt.nz/New\\_Zealand\\_Official\\_Yearbooks/1940/NZOYB\\_%201940.html#idsect1\\_1\\_15555](https://www3.stats.govt.nz/New_Zealand_Official_Yearbooks/1940/NZOYB_%201940.html#idsect1_1_15555)> [Accessed: 9 January 2025]

<sup>110</sup> 'Broadcasting System: Irritating Delays', *Evening Post*, 30 May 1925, p. 22

<<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/EP19250530.2.128.27.2>> [Accessed: 7 August 2025]

<sup>111</sup> *New Zealand Official Yearbook 1940* section XLIV

<[https://www3.stats.govt.nz/New\\_Zealand\\_Official\\_Yearbooks/1940/NZOYB\\_%201940.html#idsect1\\_1\\_15555](https://www3.stats.govt.nz/New_Zealand_Official_Yearbooks/1940/NZOYB_%201940.html#idsect1_1_15555)> [Accessed: 9 January 2025]

<sup>112</sup> Day, p. 62.

<sup>113</sup> Downes & Harcourt, p. 33.

<sup>114</sup> *New Zealand Official Yearbook 1940* section XLIV

<[https://www3.stats.govt.nz/New\\_Zealand\\_Official\\_Yearbooks/1940/NZOYB\\_%201940.html#idsect1\\_1\\_15555](https://www3.stats.govt.nz/New_Zealand_Official_Yearbooks/1940/NZOYB_%201940.html#idsect1_1_15555)> [Accessed: 9 January 2025]

power. Radio sales and the popularity of listening grew as domestic electric power spread.<sup>115</sup> In the 1930s radio listening became, Patrick Day argues, 'both the country's main form of leisure time activity and a new means of communication from the government to the population.' Whilst radio sets were to be found in workplaces, pubs, cars and on trips into the countryside, most listening took place in the home.<sup>116</sup> Radio broadcasting had been of immense social value, argued Ambrose Harris as he sat with a correspondent from the *Waikato Times* one November morning in 1929, for it had:

'embraced practically every phase of human activity...It brought into the home, no matter how remote, a diversity of interests that could not help but widen the individual outlook, create a better understanding between all classes and a keener interest in national affairs.' Broadcasting was now 'one of the greatest economic and social factors of the age, it provided a service of infinite variety of virtually universal use and benefit.'<sup>117</sup>

These were bold claims - yet uncontested. The 'rugged' geography of New Zealand made listening a complex matter.<sup>118</sup> In 1932 one listener wrote to the newly created NZBB of the challenges of listening in Gisborne, where, as the crow flew, the nearest station was in Auckland: '...the Wellington dinner session is generally good, but during the winter months only, Christchurch is a comparatively good station for reception here, at times. Auckland's reception is spasmodic in the extreme', stations from 'outside' New Zealand, 'cannot ever be relied on to be listened to with pleasure on account of various interferences both local and otherwise.' The listener concluded 'I do not fail to appreciate the wonders of wireless but it certainly could...be more pleasant to listen to'.<sup>119</sup> Tuning a crystal set clearly presented a challenge in New Zealand, when that year the NZBB surveyed its listeners it found that 94% listened on valve sets, over half the survey returns came

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<sup>115</sup> Day pp. 94-95.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 1-3.

<sup>117</sup> 'Wireless Broadcast. Position Outlined. Prospects for the Future.', *Waikato Times*, 6 November 1929, p. 8. <<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/WT19291106.2.68>> [Accessed: 7 August 2025]

<sup>118</sup> A word chosen at a public meeting by Mr J. Ball, Editor Announcer at the RBC Dunedin Station: 'Progress of Radio', *Waikato Times*, 28 May 1929, p. 7.

<<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/WT19290528.2.83>> [Accessed: 7 August 2025]

<sup>119</sup> ANZ, R22012631, 14 April 1932, L. Grey Barton, Gisborne, to Secretary NZBB.

from listeners to Wellington's 2YA.<sup>120</sup> Relative to the size of the population the initial take-up of radio licences in New Zealand had been slower than in either Britain or Australia, yet by 1939 New Zealanders held more licences per head of population than either Britons or Australians. In 1939 it was estimated that 80% of New Zealand households had a radio set.<sup>121</sup>

Quite why New Zealand might have pulled ahead of Britain and Australia in radios per household is unclear. There is no evidence that sets were more affordable, and despite the creation of a commercial service, and the consequent response of the national to up its game, there seems nothing to suggest that the output of New Zealand broadcasting was any more popular with audiences than that in Australia. Does the answer perhaps lie in a more conscious national desire - as was suggested right back in 1906 - for this to be a nation 'connected', and through broadcasting to better participate in the 'exciting and nerve tingling acceleration of the speed of modern life.'<sup>122</sup> There is evidence to support this in figures for the acquisition of cars and telephones. Was it that radio listening offered access to cultural experiences denied by distance or isolation? This is perhaps an interesting question for New Zealand historians.

Governments regulated, then, opportunities to broadcast and to listen. The fees levied on listeners funded both broadcasting infrastructure and broadcast stations. There were always listeners without licences, an unknowable number. Governments also established the structures within which broadcasting would develop, structures which would have a profound influence on the social impact broadcasting might have. In New Zealand Harris's RBC stations had initially been contracted to broadcast at least 12 hours of programmes each week, between 8 and 10 each evening, six days a week. They subsequently added early evening sessions for children, Saturday

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<sup>120</sup> ANZ, R22012635: Listeners Survey Board 1932.

<sup>121</sup> New Zealand Official Yearbook 1940 section XLIV

<[https://www3.stats.govt.nz/New\\_Zealand\\_Official\\_Yearbooks/1940/NZOYB\\_%201940.html#idsect1\\_1\\_15555](https://www3.stats.govt.nz/New_Zealand_Official_Yearbooks/1940/NZOYB_%201940.html#idsect1_1_15555)> [Accessed: 9 January 2025]

<sup>122</sup> Hoar, pp. 99-100.

afternoon sports broadcasts and Sunday evening services. Evening news bulletins were broadcast from 1927. The offer of a news service was, from the outset, both perceived by broadcasters across the British world as providing a vital public service and by existing news organisations as a challenge. The battles to overcome the resistance of the latter were engaged from the start. The BBC, a respected source of broadcast news from London, was constrained by contracts with Reuters. Whilst in 1930 a deal was agreed for the rights to broadcast Reuters news on short-wave, resistance persisted from newspaper proprietors in the Dominions which challenged rebroadcasting of BBC bulletins.<sup>123</sup> In Australia the provision of news remained dependent on constraining agreements with the local and national press until the late 1930s. In New Zealand whilst the 'news hour' became a feature of the broadcast schedule, carrying talks on health and farming matters, daily stock reports and weather forecasts, broadcast news offered precious little detailed reflection of what had been tempestuous years of political and social upheaval, and remained dependent on clippings from the press - as the 1YA announcer was reported to have declared on New Year's Day 1934: 'as there are no newspapers today, no news items can be broadcast.'<sup>124</sup>

By 1929 the RBC stations were offering 30 hours programming each week.<sup>125</sup> Radio provided a vital service in the aftermath of natural disasters, such as the earthquakes in Murchison in 1929 and Hawkes Bay in 1931. Its cultural influence was significant. In December 1927 Wellington's 2YA broadcast an evening from Otaki Maori College. Its success led to the Prime Minister, Gordon Coates, attending a 'pageant of Maori history' to mark Waitangi Day 1928, broadcast on all four national stations and repeated for listeners in Australia and the Pacific Islands. 'Keen anticipation' was reported for the two and a half hour broadcast.<sup>126</sup> It reached the largest audience yet for a

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<sup>123</sup> Potter, *Wireless Internationalism*, pp. 150-3.

<sup>124</sup> For a detailed history of the development of New Zealand news broadcasting see Jim Sullivan, *A History of Broadcasting News 1921-1962* (Timaru: Radio New Zealand Sound Archives, 1987)

<sup>125</sup> Day, p. 121; Downes & Harcourt, pp. 48-49.

<sup>126</sup> 'A Maori Pageant', *New Zealand Herald*, 2 February 1928, p. 17.

New Zealand production, *Radio Record* noted the capacity to 'bring in new audiences'.<sup>127</sup> Since a government regulation of 1926 dictated that only a quarter of airtime could be filled with recorded music, stations relied on booking local speakers and local musical talent. The latter might be hired from cinemas and theatres, yet programme organisers could, in the early years, as did Tom Venables at 1YA, find themselves playing the piano and singing with 'an eye on the door' until someone more suitable turned up.<sup>128</sup> In time the RBC appointed a Director of Music and trios or quartets of professional musicians were recruited at each of the stations.<sup>129</sup> Also appointed was a national head of Children's programmes with the express aim of ensuring that the already popular children's hour was 'instructive as well as entertaining'.<sup>130</sup> As across the British world the hosts of the children's programmes became 'Aunts' or 'Uncles' and were national stars. The wedding of 2YA's 'Aunt Gwen', Gwen Shepherd, in 1930, attracted an estimated 30 000 listeners, equivalent to half New Zealand's licence holders.<sup>131</sup> The most notable 'Aunt' was 'Aunt Daisy', Maud 'Daisy' Basham, at the start of remarkable career.<sup>132</sup> Perhaps the most distinctive feature of broadcasting in New Zealand was the close attention paid to it by politicians. In 1923 the very first regulations had specifically prohibited the broadcasting of propaganda – without defining precisely what constituted 'propaganda'. The effect was to dampen coverage of anything that might be considered 'controversial'. What was permitted was 'matter of an educative or entertaining character such as news, lectures, useful information, religious services, music or elocutionary entertainment and such items of general interest as may be approved by the Minister from time to time'.<sup>133</sup> Downes and Harcourt argue that whilst intervention from the Ministry was rarely required the principle had been established from the outset that broadcasters were answerable to

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<<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/NZH19280202.2.169.1>> [Accessed: 97 August 2025]

<sup>127</sup> Downes & Harcourt, pp. 45-48.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 28 & 35-36.

<sup>129</sup> Day p. 74; Downes & Harcourt, pp. 35-39.

<sup>130</sup> Downes & Harcourt, pp. 39-42.

<sup>131</sup> Hoar, pp. 119-120.

<sup>132</sup> *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography*, Basham, Maud Ruby,

<<https://teara.govt.nz/en/biographies/4b11/basham-maud-ruby>> [Accessed: 10 January 2025]

<sup>133</sup> Downes & Harcourt, p. 93.

the government.<sup>134</sup> Indeed from 1936 the Prime Minister himself, Michael Joseph Savage, was also the minister responsible for broadcasting, consulted personally, on occasion, on editorial matters.<sup>135</sup> When James Shelley was appointed Director of the National Broadcasting Service (NBS), in 1936, Savage authorised him, in writing, to run the service 'under my control'.<sup>136</sup> As we shall see the New Zealand government exercised its power to completely restructure broadcasting in 1932, 1936 and later in 1943. In the reorganisation of 1932 Harris's RBC lost its licence as the state took control. The newly established NZBB bought the YA stations and offered some subsidy to stations operating in areas where YA reception was poor.<sup>137</sup> The YA stations worked as a network. The assumption was that most listeners - like the writer from Gisborne - could hear more than one station.

In New Zealand and Australia the most significant departure from the structures of broadcasting in the USA and Britain was the formalisation, in both, of a division between two classes of broadcaster - 'A' and 'B'. The national A class stations were expected to perform a similar broadly culturally 'uplifting' function to that played by the BBC in Britain, whilst competing with B stations with fewer responsibilities. The consequences in Australia and New Zealand were significant, if quite different, enabling the incubation in the B stations of Australia of a commercial culture that owed much to American practice and would in time threaten to overwhelm the ABC, and in New Zealand of the most radical political voice in the British world of broadcasting.

The distinction between the A and B stations of Australia was, at least initially, broadly between those supported by licence fees and those, presumed more local, reliant on advertising. Such a plural yet licenced system was presented, by amongst others Ernest Fisk of Amalgamated Wireless

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<sup>134</sup> Downes & Harcourt, pp. 68-69.

<sup>135</sup> ANZ R22011278, as an example see 29 October 1936 correspondence with Savage regarding the appropriate New Zealand contributor to a BBC talk on world affairs.

<sup>136</sup> ANZ, R11740998, 9 December 1936, Savage to Shelley.

<sup>137</sup> Downes & Harcourt, pp. 81 & 91.

(Australia) (AWA), as a middle way between the monopoly of the BBC, which Fisk argued failed to cater for the tastes of British listeners - 'the radio equivalent of attempting to have only one theatre in London' - and the commercially highly competitive, yet financially risky, American model.<sup>138</sup> This was to be a 'uniquely Australian' approach, justified on the grounds of special national characteristics just as the systems in Britain and America had been, Australians should have both structure and choice.<sup>139</sup> There were A class stations in each capital, with two in each of Sydney and Melbourne, each had a numerical prefix, 2FC and 2BL in Sydney, 3AR and 3LO in Melbourne, 4QG in Brisbane, 5CL in Adelaide, 6WF in Perth and 7ZL in Hobart. Of these 3LO was the most profitable, benefiting from ownership by a combination of Melbourne's leading theatre owners, the city's big retailers and the *Herald* newspaper, and from the leadership of the dynamic Walter Conder.<sup>140</sup> The B stations were initially run by organisations as varied as the Electrical Utilities Supply company - selling electrical appliances through 2UE - and the Trades and Labour Council operating 2KY.<sup>141</sup> Since many of the B stations initially found advertising revenue insubstantial they were perceived to offer little more than a supplementary service to the A stations.<sup>142</sup> In part to address the struggles of the B stations and in part to focus the efforts of the A on programming, in 1928 it was announced that the latter were to be nationalised. A 3-year tender to run this new operation was won by the Australian Broadcasting Company, forbidden to carry advertising, relying on licence revenues alone. The tender specifically stated an objective: to 'cultivate a public desire for transmissions of educational items, musical items of merit, and generally for all items and subjects which tend to elevate the mind.' A stations were to concern themselves only with material of 'high standing'. Yet as beneficiaries of licenses they also had an obligation to offer something to all listeners. By contrast B stations, in the 1920s offering a service to particular geographical or interest groups, had no such obligations. This had a consequence. The

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<sup>138</sup> Potter, *Broadcasting Empire*, pp. 29-30; Griffen-Foley, *Changing Stations*, pp. 4-6.

<sup>139</sup> Griffen-Foley, *Changing Stations*, p. 6.

<sup>140</sup> Inglis, *ABC*, pp. 9-10.

<sup>141</sup> Griffen-Foley, *Changing Stations*, p. 9; Inglis, *ABC*, pp. 6-8.

<sup>142</sup> Griffen-Foley, *Changing Stations*, p. 11.

commercial B stations were able to present themselves as offering 'what the public wants', as serving the 'real' interests and desires of the general public, as servicing the 'real' nation, offering 'true reflections of the peoples desires', as opposed to the more formal responsibilities of the ABC.<sup>143</sup> Allied to this was a running debate, in newspaper letters pages, as to the merits of differing categories of programmes - 'highbrow' or 'lowbrow'. Classical music and intellectual talks characterised the former, dance music and comedy the latter. There was little doubt which category of broadcaster was associated with each. Yet there was equally a sense that a great benefit of the Australian system was that every taste could be satisfied with a twist of the dial. The B stations, once monopolising the broadcasting of advertisements, began to make money. In their early development a key influence was the broadcasting of sport. Through overnight coverage of the 1930 Australian cricket tour of England, arranged in cooperation with AWA, Oswald Anderson's 2UW was able to build a significant audience, and attract advertisers. By the end of July 1930 Anderson was building a network of B stations carrying the coverage, 2UW, 4BC, 3DB and 5AD, later joined by 4GR, 2HD, 2AY, 3TR, 3BA and 6ML, many having been launched just that year. In such collaboration lay the foundations of the substantial networks that later shaped Australian commercial radio.<sup>144</sup>

From 1929 efforts had been made to address the 'metropolitan' bias of New Zealand broadcasting by also encouraging the establishment of B stations, many outside the big four population centres. Privately owned and initially prevented by law from advertising, Downes and Harcourt note that they were kept going 'only by the dedication of their loyal staff', yet by 1931 over 30 had been licensed.<sup>145</sup> These might be very local affairs, in Hastings 2ZL, at Locker's Piano Stores, and 2ZI at Sutcliffe's Music Store, were located on the same street and shared a frequency.<sup>146</sup> The New

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<sup>143</sup> Johnson, *Unseen Voice*, pp. 57-61.

<sup>144</sup> Geeves, pp. 65-67.

<sup>145</sup> Downes & Harcourt, pp. 53 & 81.

<sup>146</sup> 'The New Zealand Radio Dial 1930-31', *Radio Heritage Foundation* <<https://www.radioheritage.net/Story93.asp>> [Accessed: 9 January 2025]

Zealand B stations were not however solely run by dealers 'for advertising purposes', others were run by 'radio clubs' funded by subscription, it was hoped that an expansion of the number of stations would be 'the salvation of broadcasting'.<sup>147</sup> Their appeal was to be their localism and their distinctive, popular style. The New Zealand B stations were associated with 'light' programming and with popular music. Yet they also became associated with something more radically experimental. In Auckland 1ZR, at Lewis Eady's music store, made sure to be on air in the afternoons when 1YA shut down at 3pm. 1ZR was a pioneer, one of the first stations to take sponsorship when rules were relaxed in 1931, amongst its recently recruited programme hosts was Daisy Basham, destined to become perhaps the most celebrated female broadcaster in the British world, a mile a minute talker whose breakfast show in later years was a national phenomenon. 1ZR was also the first B station to broadcast religious services, amongst its preachers was the Reverend Colin Scrimgeour, 'Uncle Scrim'. Scrimgeour was a broadcaster unlike almost any other in the British world, an unashamedly populist preacher, leader of a street church, the 'Friendly Road', a talented publicist, he saw broadcasting as a medium 'for reaching out to the common man'.<sup>148</sup> Whilst the national stations were tightly bound by regulatory obligations the same was less true, in 1931, of New Zealand's B stations.

Back in Australia there were in 1932 43 B stations, 20 in capital cities, 23 in country towns, represented by a new trade body, the Australian Federation of Commercial Broadcasting Stations, amongst its purposes was discouragement of the term 'B-class'. They were soon in competition with a different, but similar, national broadcaster. By 1931 the shareholders in the Australian Broadcasting Company had decided that there was more money to be made in running a purely commercial service. They declined to renew their tender.<sup>149</sup> In response in 1932 a new 'ABC', the

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<sup>147</sup> 'Static': 'More "B" Stations Planned', *Waikato Times*, 24 January 1929, p. 10.

<<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/WT19290124.2.113> > [Accessed: 7 August 2025]

<sup>148</sup> William Renwick, *Scrim: The Man with a Mike* (Victoria University Press: Wellington, 2011), p. 107.

<sup>149</sup> Inglis, *ABC*, pp. 15-16.

Australian Broadcasting Commission, had been created. Radio broadcasting had, then, found listeners across Australia and New Zealand. Governments had shaped the form broadcasting took and the requirements of differing classes of broadcaster. There were national broadcasting organisations with specific cultural responsibilities and there was also a class of broadcaster of which fewer such things were expected. This rupture would have enduring, if not yet clearly apparent, consequences for the influence of broadcasting on national cultural identity. In Australia offering a vehicle for those seeking to challenge established cultural norms, in New Zealand offering a platform for social radicalism. If a radio set was not yet the ubiquitous domestic presence it was to become, it was on the way to being so.



Fig. 13: 'So your mother goes to church regularly. And what religion is your father dear?' 'Daddy's? Oh, daddy's is wireless'. *The Recorder* (Port Pirie, South Australia), 30 November 1933, p. 3.

Radio broadcasting was bringing listeners together, listening simultaneously, sharing experiences with others they had never met. This was presented as one of the defining dimensions of the public value of radio, a medium acknowledged to have a powerful potential to move hearts and minds and to convene audiences both domestic...and international.

In 1927 the BBC Chief Announcer Stuart Hibberd noted something extraordinary in his diary, that on 20 May a news bulletin he had read in London had been heard in Sydney. It had been relayed by the Dutch station PCJJ in its service to the East Indies and picked up and rebroadcast by 2BL, listeners 'telephoned the Sydney station to find out if it were a hoax or not, and were surprised and delighted to be told that they had indeed been listening to London.'<sup>150</sup> In 1932 *The Listener* noted that international broadcasting was no longer a 'scientific toy' but now reached 'a potential audience of 138 million people'.<sup>151</sup> Into that world of international broadcasting had stepped the BBC. Whilst fully aware of the existing limitations of the technologies of short-wave broadcasting, it being 'one thing to broadcast a programme to the Empire on one night when conditions happened to be exceedingly good and quite another to put out a regular service', in November 1927 the BBC had launched from London an 'experimental' short-wave station, 'G5SW', an attempt to utilise the new technologies of broadcasting to create a service for men and women seeking a link with Britain, perhaps with life at 'home'.<sup>152</sup> Its first broadcast was to be on 11 November, Armistice Day, with Stuart Hibberd promising listeners a chance to hear the Prince of Wales and 'the Community Singing of war-time songs in the Remembrance Festival at the Royal Albert Hall'.<sup>153</sup> Australia's broadcasters had been hopeful of successfully receiving and relaying the transmission.<sup>154</sup> The Brisbane *Telegraph* was anticipating its 'veritable romance of wireless'.<sup>155</sup> In the event Australian listeners, having heard Hibberd's introduction, immediately lost the signal.<sup>156</sup> In New Zealand, despite stations starting up early and listeners being late for work, they had fared

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<sup>150</sup> Hibberd, p. 31; Potter, *Wireless Internationalism*, p. 41.

<sup>151</sup> *The Listener*, 9 Nov 1932, p. 656, Editorial on Broadcasting as a Social Force.

<sup>152</sup> Potter, *Wireless Internationalism*, p. 174.

<sup>153</sup> Hibberd, pp. 31-32.

<sup>154</sup> 'Hear London'. *The Daily News*, Perth, 7 November 1927, p. 8 <<https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/78965423>>; 'Armistice function, Sydney may hear', *Evening News*, 10 November 1927, p. 1 <<https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/118935429>> [Accessed: 18 August 2025]

<sup>155</sup> 'A Romance of Wireless', *The Telegraph*, 12 November 1927, p. 5. <<https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/179365978>> [Accessed: 18 August 2025]

<sup>156</sup> 'Wireless', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 14 November 1927, p. 6; <<https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/16418660>>; 'Not strong enough to rebroadcast' *Daily Standard*, 12 November 1927, p. 1. <<https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/183064183>> [Accessed: 18 August 2025]

no better.<sup>157</sup> The technical challenges presented by transmission and reception of short-wave signals were to persist throughout the decade but the attraction of searching for such broadcasts was, as we shall see, largely undiminished by this initial setback.

### **‘At the going down of the sun...’**

Domestic broadcasts of remembrance ceremonies in the major cities on Anzac Day or Armistice Day were among the first broadcast ‘events’, they form a case study in the establishment of broadcasting in the cultural lives of Australians and New Zealanders, cementing the place of the war and the myths and stories associated with it in thoughts of both national and wider pan-British identity. Around them developed a broadcast ‘soundscape’ of remembrance, embracing poetry, familiar hymns and the war-time marching songs. Yet before examining the forms such broadcasts took and the motivations of the broadcasters, and before we explore what influence these early broadcasts had on conceptions of ‘Britishness’, we might ask why it was that occasions of collective remembrance had such a powerful capacity to bring listeners across the British world together. Participation in the First World War had been the defining collective experience of the age, whether of service or suffering. It had also been an exercise in Imperial collaboration. The armies in which the ‘Aussies’ and ‘Kiwis’ fought were Imperial armies, indeed Australians had joined the ‘Australian Imperial Force’. Serving on the Western Front had been many of the key figures in post-war broadcasting in Britain, Australia, and New Zealand, and for all that twenty years later they would be running the separate national broadcasting services, during the war John Reith, Charles Moses, and James Shelley had all been serving in units of the British Army.<sup>158</sup>

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<sup>157</sup> ‘Reception of Broadcast’, *Evening Post*, 12 November 1927, p. 10.

<<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/EP19271112.2.96.6>> [Accessed: 18 August 2025]

<sup>158</sup> John Charles Walsham Reith, *Into the Wind* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1949), p. 19; Charles Moses, *Australian Dictionary of National Biography* <<https://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/moses-sir-charles-joseph-15044>>; James Shelley, *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography* (DNZB) <<https://teara.govt.nz/en/biographies/4s23/shelley-james>> [Accessed: 18 August 2025]

As a consequence of the theatres into which their soldiers had been deployed, and the front-line roles they had played, the impact of the war was disproportionately felt in New Zealand and Australia. One in five of the third of a million Australians who had served overseas was dead.<sup>159</sup> New Zealand lost proportionately more men than Australia, 18,000 from a population of around 1 million, compared with 60,000 from a population of 5 million, as a consequence a greater proportion of people knew, or were related to, men who had died.<sup>160</sup> It was a national trauma.<sup>161</sup> In Britain Adrian Gregory estimates that one in ten of the population was a bereaved parent, wife, child or sibling, and whilst it might not be true that every family had 'lost someone' the idea of universal bereavement remained 'true in a sense', the 'main dynamic of post-war commemoration was not...a straightforward product of familial grief but one rooted in a concern for the proper acknowledgement of the losses of others.'<sup>162</sup> Jay Winter argues that the cultural history of the war was a 'common history', 'class or rank mattered less than the simple distinction between those who had lost someone and those who had not.' Winter concludes that 'among the many legacies of the Great War, this bond of bereavement was one of the most prominent and most enduring'.<sup>163</sup> This was, moreover, a bereavement with no body over which to mourn, repatriation being ruled out on grounds of expense and equity.<sup>164</sup> News of deaths came by telegram, by a visit from a local priest, details were scarce. It was only returning comrades who might fill in the blanks.<sup>165</sup> Winter sees in this search for knowledge the beginnings of 'kinship', both the 'adoptive' kinship of charitable support and the 'fictive' kinship of groups who met to remember or to

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<sup>159</sup> Inglis & Brazier, *Sacred Places*, pp. 91-92; Belich, *Paradise Reforged*, pp. 96-109.

<sup>160</sup> Philippa Mein Smith, 'The 'NZ' in Anzac: different remembrance and meaning', *First World War Studies*, 2016, Vol. 7, no. 2, (193-211), pp. 195-6.

<sup>161</sup> Belich, *Paradise Reforged*, pp. 116-118.

<sup>162</sup> Adrian Gregory, *The Last Great War: British Society and the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 253.

<sup>163</sup> Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning* (Cambridge: CUP, 2014), pp.227-8.

<sup>164</sup> Winter, *Sites of Memory*, p. 27; Inglis & Brazier, *Sacred Spaces*, pp. 75-78.

<sup>165</sup> Kathryn Hunter, "'Sleep on dear Ernie, your battles are o'er': A Glimpse of a Mourning Community, Invercargill, New Zealand, 1914-1925', *War in History*, 2007 14 (1) (36-62), pp. 44-45; Winter, *Sites of Memory*, pp. 35-36.

organise in the political sphere.<sup>166</sup> In the aftermath of the war what Winter terms the ‘small-scale collective memory’ - the aggregation of individual memories - was ‘both powerful and brittle’. At the time it gave comfort to survivors, over time as mourners died, or moved on, ‘the activity - the glue - which held together these cells of remembrance atrophied and lost its hold on them’. In the process the richness and diversity of what was recalled eroded at the edges. What remained was a ‘national framework...a host of associative norms constructed over years by thousands of people.’<sup>167</sup> A ‘collective memory’ was created from repeated articulations of a particular narrative and over time became settled as the dominant, definitive account.<sup>168</sup> This framework was maintained by families, communities, ex-servicemen’s organisations, and by broadcasters, who almost from their establishment found themselves drawn into the creation and later reinforcement of an established narrative. Broadcasters from the outset recounted tales from old soldiers. In 1929 Sydney’s 2BL ran a competition in which ‘prizes were offered for the best authentic stories’ of the Gallipoli campaign ‘which could be written on one side of a postcard’, the winners to be ‘read from the station during the evening’.<sup>169</sup>

In Britain many of the enduring cultural responses to the war were bleak, with plays, poetry and prose emphasising the human cost of the conflict.<sup>170</sup> In Australia and New Zealand the dominant narrative focused more on what was achieved by its soldiers, not what was lost. For New Zealand what its servicemen had asserted was their nation’s reputation for ‘fighting prowess within the

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<sup>166</sup> Winter, *Sites of Memory*, pp.44-46.

<sup>167</sup> Jay Winter, ‘Forms of kinship and remembrance in the aftermath of the Great War’, in *War and Remembrance in the Twentieth Century* ed. by Jay Winter and E. Sivan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 59-60; Maurice Halbwachs, ‘From *The Collective Memory*’, in *The Collective Memory Reader* ed. by J. Olick, V. Vinitzki-Seroussi and D. Levy, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 144.

<sup>168</sup> Wulf Kansteiner, Finding Meaning in Memory: A Methodological Critique of Collective Memory Studies, *History and Theory*, Vol. 41, 2 (2002), p. 187. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3590762>> [Accessed: 10 January 2025]

<sup>169</sup> ‘Over the Aerial’, *Auckland Star*, 19 April 1929, p. 19.

<<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/AS19290419.2.168>> [Accessed: 18 August 2025]

<sup>170</sup> Mark David Sheftall, *Altered Memories of the Great War: Divergent Narratives of Britain, Australia, New Zealand and Canada*, (London: I.B. Tauris, 2009), p. 2.

British Empire.<sup>171</sup> In Australia participation in the war was, Schreuder and Ward argue, 'remembered in terms of a deep sense of community with fellow Britons overseas' whilst also becoming the 'key reference point for highlighting Australia's distinctive contribution to imperial Britishness.'<sup>172</sup> The efforts of the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps were marked on 25 April, the day on which the landings at Gallipoli had begun. Notwithstanding that three in every four Australian deaths had been in France or Belgium the landings at Gallipoli held a sacred status, for they had, as Inglis notes, furnished a moniker that, whatever other shared sacrifices, did not embrace other 'Britons', the Aussies and Kiwis were 'Anzacs' together.<sup>173</sup> In post-war narratives Australia's contribution had to 'stand out from the crowd', and it did so in the work of C. E. W. Bean, who fashioned from a heritage of martial Britishness the distinctive Australian 'digger', embodying qualities 'as purely British as the people of Great Britain', but more so.<sup>174</sup> As Joy Damousi argues commemorations are 'ever changing and contested: each generation defines them to suit the needs and interests of the contemporary moment'. In the 1920s memories of the war 'amplified the paradox of loyalty...celebration of the heroic feats of the sons of Empire coexisted with that of the mythology of Anzac'. If over time 'the significance of the local, Australian contribution gradually expanded to overshadow the narrative of Empire...the peculiar 'double loyalty' endured during the interwar years.' Resentment of bungling British officers was not yet associated with a complete 'renunciation of the imperial tie'.<sup>175</sup> The collective memory of the war helped shape an imagined community of 'Britishness', the cultural connections to Britain ran deep. On Anzac Day 1928 listeners in Adelaide, Melbourne and Sydney to the special 2FC evening

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<sup>171</sup> Mein Smith, p. 194.

<sup>172</sup> Schreuder & Ward, 'Introduction' in *Australia's Empire*, p. 19.

<sup>173</sup> Inglis & Brazier, *Sacred Spaces*, pp. 110 & 262-4.

<sup>174</sup> Schreuder & Ward, 'Introduction' in *Australia's Empire*, p. 19.

<sup>175</sup> Joy Damousi, War and Commemoration: 'The Responsibility of Empire', in *Australia's Empire* ed. by Deryck Schreuder and Stuart Ward (Oxford: OUP, 2010), pp. 289 & 296-7.

programme heard a broadcast which opened with the chimes of Big Ben at 7.30 and the Metropolitan Band playing the fantasia 'Memories of Britain'.<sup>176</sup>

As Gregory notes the process of coming to terms with death had at least two interrelated elements, first, in the absence of a body over which to mourn, the naming of the dead, and second coming to terms with the guilt of having survived, which might be aided by finding 'meaning and purpose in the death.' Memorialisation served both functions.<sup>177</sup> Its language and imagery was carefully chosen, the wording often biblical - 'greater love hath no man' - often that of poets of Empire, notably Kipling. 'Lest we forget' was found on one in ten memorials in New Zealand and New South Wales. 'King' and 'Empire' appear on around one in six memorials in Australia and New Zealand.<sup>178</sup> In his review of Australian memorials Ken Inglis found no example of listing both Australia and Empire: 'those two concepts shared so much meaning that to use both would have approached tautology', indeed 'Australia' rarely appears.<sup>179</sup> In the iconography of domestic New Zealand war memorials, ferns and Kiwi were rare.<sup>180</sup> Whatever else it entailed, remembrance of the First World War recalled Imperial loyalties. The Melbourne Shrine was unequivocal, it had been: 'erected by a grateful people to the honoured memory of the men and women who served the Empire in the Great War of 1914-1918.'

By 1927 memorialisation of the war was well established, its settings and its rituals. Laurence Binyon had written the ubiquitous 'For the Fallen' on a Cornish clifftop in September 1914:

'At the going down of the sun and in the morning  
We will remember them.'

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<sup>176</sup> 'Broadcasting', *The Register*, 25 April 1928, p. 12.

<<https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/57041626>> [Accessed: 18 August 2025]

<sup>177</sup> A.M. Gregory, *The Silence of Memory: Armistice Day 1919-1946* (Oxford: Berg, 1994), pp. 23-24.

<sup>178</sup> K.S. Inglis & Jock Phillips (1991) 'War memorials in Australia and New Zealand: A comparative survey', *Australian Historical Studies*, 24:96, (179-191), pp. 189-190.

<sup>179</sup> Inglis & Brazier, *Sacred Places*, p. 191.

<sup>180</sup> Belich, *Paradise Reforged*, pp. 116-118.

The singing at gravesides of 'O God Our Help in Ages Past' had been noted at the Front in November 1915.<sup>181</sup> The foundation stone of the first Australian war memorial was laid three weeks before the first anniversary of the Gallipoli landings.<sup>182</sup> The Cenotaph in Whitehall was the site of an annual service of remembrance on Armistice Day, from the outset in 1919 a major State occasion, led by the King. The two minutes' silence, observed for the first time that year, was framed as a personal request from the King for 'a complete suspension of our normal activities'. Whilst it had been only mentioned in newspapers days before, within a week it had been mythologized, the *Times* writing that 'the very pulse of time stood still'.<sup>183</sup> Anzac and Armistice Day memorial events shared many elements: army chaplains, bands playing Chopin's Funeral March, the singing of 'O God Our Help in Ages Past', a trumpeter playing the Last Post and Reveille.<sup>184</sup> The rituals of remembrance became the near perfect example of Eric Hobsbawm's 'invented tradition' in their inculcation of 'values and norms of behaviour by repetition.'<sup>185</sup> How then did broadcasting, with its capacity to bring listeners together, to create 'imagined communities', address memories of the war and reflect its memorialisation? For the First World War was not merely the great military and political event of its time it was also, as Samuel Hynes proposes, 'the great *imagined* event', one eventually presented as creating a 'radical discontinuity' between one age and the next.<sup>186</sup>

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<sup>181</sup> Kate Tiller, *Remembrance and Community: War Memorials and Local History* (Ashbourne, British Association for Local History, 2013), p.46.

<sup>182</sup> Inglis & Brazier, *Sacred Places*, p. 110.

<sup>183</sup> Peter Parker, *The Last Veteran: Harry Patch and the Legacy of War* (London, Fourth Estate, 2009), pp. 50-51.

<sup>184</sup> 'Today's Observance', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 25 April 1927, p. 10 <<https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/16371763>> [Accessed: 10 January 2025]; 'Telling the World About Anzac', *Evening News*, 25 April 1929, p. 7 <<https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/118784814>> [Accessed: 18 August 2025]; Inglis & Brazier, *Sacred Places*, p. 241.

<sup>185</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, 'Introduction: Inventing Traditions', in *The Invention of Tradition* ed. by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 1.

<sup>186</sup> Samuel Hynes, *A War Imagined; The First World War and English Culture* (London, Pimlico, 1990), pp. ix-x.

For the early broadcasters the war had been the defining experience of the years in which they came of age, often the experience that introduced them to radio broadcasting. Amongst those working on its development were Arthur Burrows, later the first BBC Director of Programmes and the first voice heard by BBC listeners, and Peter Eckersley, the BBC's first Chief Engineer. One of the first radio operators in the trenches was Eckersley's successor, Noel Ashbridge.<sup>187</sup> Amongst the pioneer airmen with a radio set in his cockpit was Cecil Lewis, later Burrows' deputy.<sup>188</sup> Clive Drummond, one of the leading voices in New Zealand broadcasting, had been a pre-war wireless pioneer, intercepting a message between two German ships in the Pacific which had led to the delay of the sailing of the New Zealand Expeditionary Force, he later served with the 1<sup>st</sup> Australian and New Zealand Wireless Signal Squadron in Mesopotamia.<sup>189</sup> Walter Conder was amongst the first returned wounded Australian soldiers from Gallipoli.<sup>190</sup> Hilda Matheson had worked in wartime intelligence.<sup>191</sup> As broadcasting's subsequent development was taken up by these men and women war shaped their view of what broadcasting might, or perhaps should, become, indeed such was Arthur Burrows' belief that radio had the power to promote peace and international cooperation that he later ran the UIR, in Geneva.<sup>192</sup>

Through radio broadcasting remembrance became formalised, with unchanging ritual and etiquette, a process assisted by broadcasts of carefully managed civic events. Anzac Day and Armistice Day became occasions on which radio stations reflected the events of local and national communities, yet they also promoted their broadcasts as a focus of commemoration, broadcasts

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<sup>187</sup> Peter Eckersley, *The Power Behind the Microphone* (London: Scientific Book Club, 1942), p. 33; Arthur Burrows; Noel Ashbridge, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

<sup>188</sup> Cecil Lewis, *Sagittarius Rising* (London: P. Davies, 1936), p. 240.

<sup>189</sup> *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography*, Clive Drummond <<https://teara.govt.nz/en/biographies/4d20/drummond-david-archibald-victor-clive>> [Accessed: 10 January 2025]

<sup>190</sup> Inglis, *ABC*, pp. 9-10.

<sup>191</sup> Michael Carney & Kate Murphy, *Hilda Matheson: A Life of Secrets and Broadcasts* (Bath: Handheld Press, 2023), pp. 11-16.

<sup>192</sup> Peter Black, *The Biggest Aspidistra in the World* (London: BBC, 1972), p. 16.

to be listened to, to imagine others listening. The two-minute Silence came to have particular resonance as a bonding moment, a striking broadcast moment. It could still be characterised, a century later, as 'radio's loudest sound'.<sup>193</sup> On Armistice Day in 1930 a 'silence for two minutes in memory of those who lost their lives' was to be observed 'in British and Allied countries throughout the world.' Specific instructions were issued in the Australian press: 'During the two minutes all work and movement should cease and men should bare their heads. The silence will be observed throughout town and country alike.'<sup>194</sup> Perhaps paradoxically in a sound medium the silence captured that sense of mass participation in something happening at that very moment. In an article for *Radio Times* the Head of BBC Outside Broadcast Engineering, H.H. Thompson, wrote in 1935 of the 'background to the broadcast':

'Its impressiveness is intensified by the fact that the silence is not a dead silence, for Big Ben strikes the hour, and then the bickering of sparrows, the crisp rustle of falling leaves, the creaking of pigeons wings as they take to flight uneasy of the strange hush, contrast with the traffic din of London some minutes before'.

Broadcasting managed the presentation of such events and dictated listeners' understanding of what was happening: 'audible distress too near a microphone would be amplified, would give a false impression to listeners...vigilant control of the microphone is essential.'<sup>195</sup> If the wailing of mourners disturbed the silence at the Cenotaph, as it had in London in 1920, radio listeners were to be protected from it.<sup>196</sup> Broadcasters enthusiastically embraced coverage of such events, events recognised as of significance to the whole community. They were particularly attractive to national broadcasters anxious to speak to, perhaps for, the nation. Whether national, or local, the broadcast programme offered was comprehensive.

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<sup>193</sup> Paddy O'Connell, *The Cenotaph*, BBC Radio broadcast commentary, 9 November 2024.

<sup>194</sup> 'Armistice Day: Plans for Observance. Silence of Two Minutes', *Argus*, 11 November 1930, p. 8. <<https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/4219354>> [Accessed: 18 August 2025]

<sup>195</sup> 'Background to the broadcast', *Radio Times*, 8 November 1935, p. 7.

<sup>196</sup> David W. Lloyd, *Battlefield Tourism*, (Oxford & New York, Berg, 1998), pp. 69-70.

On Anzac Day 1927 Sydney's 2BL carried coverage of the commemoration service in the Domain, led by chaplains of the AIF.<sup>197</sup> In the afternoon 2FC broadcast the annual reunion at Sydney City Hall, with its singing of 'all the old wartime choruses.'<sup>198</sup> In Auckland Mr Prentice of 1YA had 'successfully broadcasted running commentary of the parades and the procession', and thanks to a microphone 'placed on a stand at the eastern end of the Town Hall,' listeners had heard 'the addresses in connection with the Anzac Day services'.<sup>199</sup> By 1928 listeners to the four national stations in New Zealand could follow Anzac ceremonies taking place in all the major cities, Dunedin's 4YA offered both the memorial service from Kensington Drill Hall and an evening talk, 'Landing on Gallipoli'.<sup>200</sup> After a day of reportage the 2FC evening programme that began with Big Ben and 'Memories of Britain' continued with a rendition of 'Advance Australia Fair', followed by Anzac talks and performances of wartime songs by the Sydney Male Voice Choir.<sup>201</sup> The highlight of the day had been the broadcast of the playing of the officially opened Carillon at Sydney, a broadcast picked up in New Zealand.<sup>202</sup> The dedication of the Wellington War Memorial Carillon was to be a highlight of 1932 schedules.<sup>203</sup> Anzac Day was marked by a series of such broadcast events. 1929 saw the opening of the Australian War Memorial at Canberra and a stirring speech by the Prime Minister, Stanley Bruce:

'the torch kindled 14 years ago, on the shore of Gallipoli, still lights our path of duty. Let us, in a spirit of high resolve, place our feet firmly upon that path. In the sure and certain realisation that it alone is the way that leads to national greatness.'<sup>204</sup>

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<sup>197</sup> 'Today's Observance', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 25 April 1927, p. 10.

<<https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/16371763>> [Accessed: 18 August 2025]

<sup>198</sup> 'Anzac Day', *Daily Telegraph*, 22 April 1927, p. 6.

<<https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/246111235>> [Accessed: 18 August 2025]

<sup>199</sup> 'Anzac Day Broadcast', *Sun*, 27 April 1927, p. 12.

<<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/SUNAK19270427.2.150>> [Accessed: 18 August 2025]

<sup>200</sup> 'Broadcasting', *Press*, 24 April 1928, p. 13.

<<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/CHP19280424.2.109>> [Accessed: 18 August 2025]

<sup>201</sup> 'Broadcasting', *The Register*, 25 April 1928, p. 12.

<<https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/57041626>> [Accessed: 18 August 2025]

<sup>202</sup> 'Music of Sydney's Bells' *Evening Post*, 26 April 1928, p. 20.

<<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/EP19280426.2.138.3>> [Accessed: 18 August 2025]

<sup>203</sup> 'Carillon Ceremony', *Evening Post*, 23 April 1932, page 12.

<<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/EP19320423.2.72.1>> [Accessed: 18 August 2025]

<sup>204</sup> *Townsville Daily Bulletin*, 26 April 1929, p. 6. <<https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/61178859>> [Accessed: 12 January 2023]

The event was broadcast by stations across Australia connected by trunk lines and to listeners beyond on 2ME, the short-wave station of AWA. By 1931 broadcasting was central to Anzac Day, enabling 'thousands of people to participate in their own homes.'<sup>205</sup> That year the BBC could claim of Armistice Day that it 'is to most of us one of personal memories, to which such a personal medium as broadcasting is, perhaps, the most fitting accompaniment.'<sup>206</sup> The BBC morning schedule was built, from 1928, around the ceremonies at the Cenotaph, broadcasts from local civic events having largely ended in 1927. In the evening came the Festival of Remembrance, despite some early scepticism. In 1927 Hilda Matheson was doubtful of the value of the link with the joint organisers, the *Daily Express*, whose readers had chosen the songs in a competition.<sup>207</sup> Perhaps the event was little more than 'a noisy expression of cheap patriotism'.<sup>208</sup> Over time the BBC made the Festival its own.

Stations offered increasingly sophisticated programmes of readings, music and presentations of plays, 'The White Chateau', originally adapted by the BBC, being a favourite of Melbourne's 3LO.<sup>209</sup> In 1929 BBC producers adapted R.C. Sherriff's, 'Journeys End': 'the greatest play yet produced by experience of the war.' The broadcast came with a *Radio Times* note on how listeners might approach listening to it:

'Whoever listens to the play by wireless...may perhaps remember that these men, whose voices he hears, are now either dead or nearly half a generation older, but that the sons and daughters of some of them must live on in the world'.<sup>210</sup>

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<sup>205</sup> 'Memory of the Fallen', *New Zealand Herald*, 27 April 1931, p. 11.

<<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/NZH19310427.2.125>> [Accessed: 18 August 2025]

<sup>206</sup> *Radio Times*, 6 November 1931, p. 453.

<sup>207</sup> WAC R34/227/1, correspondence on regional broadcasts in Manchester and Hull in 1927 and their cessation in 1928; WAC R34/227/1 6, September 1927, Miss Matheson to AC (P), Armistice Day.

<sup>208</sup> WAC R34/227/1, 7 September, 1927, Eckersley to Miss Matheson.

<sup>209</sup> 'Radio in the Home', *Queanbeyan Age*, 6 November 1930, p. 6.

<<https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/265199611>> [Accessed: 18 August 2025]

<sup>210</sup> *Radio Times*, 8 November 1929, pp. 404-7.

'Journeys End' drew 'more letters than any single broadcast of the past two years'.<sup>211</sup> The following year 'Brigade Exchange' by Ernst Johannsen, was presented as a 'counterpoint' to 'Journey's End', set in a German dugout, translated from the German by Isa Benzie, the BBC Foreign Director's Assistant.<sup>212</sup> The day ended with *In Memoriam*, 'a symposium of poetry and music', linked by 'passages from Elgar's Enigma Variations.'<sup>213</sup> The poets included Rupert Brooke, Laurence Binyon, Siegfried Sassoon, Robert Graves and Wilfred Owen.<sup>214</sup> Produced by Val Gielgud and E.A. (Archie) Harding this was an early example of the ambitious 'feature' production. In 1931 Harding produced *Resurgam*, a programme combining music and the poetry of Milton: 'an invocation to an ideal Commonwealth'.<sup>215</sup> The music was played live by the BBC Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Adrian Boult.<sup>216</sup> For one listener *In Memoriam* had offered a 'beautiful selection': 'it is heartening to be lifted back to the heights and glories of vision which these poems recalled and deepened.' Gregory argues that such responses reinforce the notion that one function radio listening served was to offer solace. *In Memoriam* was repeated in 1932 and 1937, poetry and prose selections were also broadcast by the BBC in 1933 and 1938.<sup>217</sup> Such editorially ambitious material was offered by Australia and New Zealand's commercial as well as national stations. In 1928 the Christchurch B station 3ZC, run by Home Recreations Ltd, had produced a 'special Anzac Day session' featuring 'a description of the landing' at Gallipoli by Mr H.D. Vincent, 'a member of the original landing party'.<sup>218</sup> In 1936 Sydney's 2GB invited listeners to leave radio sets on overnight 'so that they will be awakened by the singing of 'Lead, Kindly Light,' which

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<sup>211</sup> *Radio Times*, 6 November 1931, p. 453.

<sup>212</sup> *Radio Times*, 7 November 1930, p. 389.

<sup>213</sup> *Radio Times*, 6 November 1931, p. 453.

<sup>214</sup> *Radio Times*, 7 November 1930, p. 395.

<sup>215</sup> WAC R34/227/1, 4 September 1931, Harding to Gielgud copy to Wellington. Armistice Day 1931; 4 September 1931, Gielgud to Wellington.

<sup>216</sup> WAC R34/227/1, 3 November 1931, Chilman to Engineer in charge. Armistice Day programme rehearsal; *Radio Times*, 6 November 1931, p. 456.

<sup>217</sup> Gregory, *Silence*, pp. 139-140.

<sup>218</sup> 'Wireless News', *Press*, 28 April 1928, p. 10.

<<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/CHP19280428.2.54>> [Accessed: 18 August 2025]

preludes the dawn ceremony of remembrance from the Cenotaph.<sup>219</sup> In 1937 4AK and 4BK, commercial stations in Brisbane owned by the *Courier-Mail*, part of Keith Murdoch's chain of newspapers, offered coverage of the processions, the service from Brisbane's memorial, 'exclusive interviews with returned soldiers and sailors', and Harry Harper, the 4BK book reviewer, led a musically illustrated book review 'incorporating choice extracts from the works of Rupert Brooke and other war poets and novelists, including Rudyard Kipling.' The finale was 'a special atmospheric presentation, "The Roads to Anzac", a musical and descriptive survey of the route taken by the Anzacs across the high seas via Egypt to Gallipoli', followed by 'a goodwill memorial recital of dugout ditties.'<sup>220</sup> Yet as the 1930s progressed it was sometimes asked what exactly was being remembered by a new generation with little personal experience of the war. As the BBC producer Felix Felton put it, in a memo offering suggestions for Armistice Day programming, all he could recall was 'the rattling of window panes when guns were fired, and a man climbing a lamp post on Armistice Day; And I am now 24.'<sup>221</sup> If it was becoming less clear what was being remembered, broadcasting played a part in not forgetting.

Membership of ex-servicemen's organisations had grown in New Zealand and Australia since the mid 1920s. In Australia the Returned Sailors and Soldiers Imperial League of Australia (RSL) had, through its early and national organisation, become recognised by the government as the representative body of the returned servicemen. In 1919 150,000 of the 270,000 returned soldiers and sailors were members, this fell dramatically to 25,000 by 1923, but rose to 80,000 by 1939. For the government the RSL had a role to play in the rehabilitation and reintegration of ex-servicemen, and particularly in the support of those who through physical or psychological injury found such

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<sup>219</sup> *Australian Women's Weekly*, 25 April 1936, p.39.

<<https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/46463759>> [Accessed: 18 August 2025]

<sup>220</sup> *Sunday Mail*, 25 April 1937, page 22.

<<https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/97890430>> [Accessed: 18 August 2025]

<sup>221</sup> WAC R34/227/2, 8 April 1935, Felton, North Regional Office to Drama Director. Suggestions for an Armistice Day programme.

reintegration difficult. Men were drawn to the League as an advocate for their interests but also as 'a lodge, a haven, even a church'. The RSL used its status to wield cultural power, framing the returned soldiers as heroes, building the Anzac myth.<sup>222</sup> In Sydney the memorial erected in Hyde Park 'to perpetuate the memory of the men and women of New South Wales who served in the Great War' was also built to house the New South Wales branch of the RSL.<sup>223</sup> Whilst New Zealand and Australia might share observance of Anzac Day and elements of ritual, there were, however, differences in the nature of the observance, between wild cheering for marching ex-servicemen in Brisbane and sombre respect in Dunedin.<sup>224</sup> Interpretations of the events at Gallipoli were different. For New Zealand Gallipoli was not the birthplace of the nation New Zealand's dead hadn't died for 'a cause that could be easily or directly related to separate New Zealand national interests. The nobility of their sacrifice depended on the conceptual merging of British and New Zealand interests'.<sup>225</sup> The Australian Anzac myth held that it was at Gallipoli that the Australian nation was founded, the Diggers standing 'shoulder-to-shoulder' with their mates, facing overwhelming odds with heroism, humour and a resistance to discipline and authority. Their egalitarianism being contrasted with the class-based hierarchies of the British military.<sup>226</sup> The RSL campaigned for those who had fought for the nation to have priority over those who had not.<sup>227</sup> Distinctions between those who had and had not served were to be maintained. The unveiling of the Melbourne Shrine in 1934 was the climax of efforts to erect memorials in every State, yet amidst a day of radio celebration a noteworthy feature was what was not broadcast. The *Herald*

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<sup>222</sup> Martin Crotty, 'The Anzac Citizen: Towards a History of the RSL', *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, Volume 53, Number 2, 2007, (183-193), pp. 189-193; Belich, *Paradise Reforged*, pp. 116-117; Inglis & Brazier, *Sacred Places*, p. 243.

<sup>223</sup> The Anzac Memorial, Hyde Park, Sydney, N.S.W, *The State's National Memorial to the Men and Women of New South Wales Who Served in the Great War, 1914-1918* (Sydney: Anzac Memorial Official Publications, 1950)

<sup>224</sup> Mein Smith, pp. 194-6.

<sup>225</sup> Belich, *Paradise Reforged*, pp. 116-118.

<sup>226</sup> Matt McDonald, 'Remembering Gallipoli: Anzac, the Great War and Australian Memory Politics', *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, Volume 63, Number 3, 2017, (406-418), pp. 410-411.

<sup>227</sup> Crotty, pp. 189-193.

reported that the ABC had been asked to refrain from broadcasting the ex-serviceman's ceremony because the organizing council:

'felt that such a broadcast would strike a discordant note...Our dawn muster is held as an expression of reverence to the men who fell at Anzac' to broadcast the ceremony 'would to a certain extent have destroyed the sincerity of the service which is really a tribute from Digger to Digger.'<sup>228</sup>

Charlotte MacDonald notes that through government assistance to former soldiers, and through the 'diffuse yet powerful cultural and moral authority' of the returned servicemen, the war, and memories of it, remained 'a very tangible element' in political and social life in both Australia and New Zealand through the 1920s and 1930s. The annual broadcasts from memorial events served both as a response to mass bereavement and grief, as acts of remembrance, but also to ensure that things were not forgotten.<sup>229</sup>

The New Zealand National Memorial was at Gallipoli, an obelisk with an inscription by Kipling. On the Western Front four smaller battlefield memorials were erected, three being obelisks with the inscription 'From the Uttermost Ends of the Earth' and a fern design framed by a Maori carving. Ferns marked the individual graves of New Zealand soldiers scattered through France and Belgium, the largest concentration being within the immense cemetery at Tyne Cot.<sup>230</sup> By contrast Australia erected an Australian National Memorial at Villers-Bretonneaux.<sup>231</sup> This, the last of the memorials erected between the wars, was dedicated in 1938 at a service attended by Stanley Bruce, now High Commissioner in London, and by Earle Page, the Deputy Prime Minister, both veterans. Also there was the future Prime Minister Robert Menzies, who had not volunteered to serve, a fact of which Page publicly reminded Menzies on the eve of Menzies becoming Prime Minister himself, it

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<sup>228</sup> 'Why Shrine Broadcast was Cancelled', *The Herald*, 26 April 1934, p. 12.

<<https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/243260614>> [Accessed: 18 August 2025]

<sup>229</sup> Charlotte Macdonald, 'The First World War and the Making of Colonial Memory', *Journal of New Zealand Literature*, 33, Part 2: New Zealand and the First World War (2015), pp. 17-18.

<sup>230</sup> I.C. McGibbon, *New Zealand Battlefields and Memorials of the Western Front* (Oxford: Oxford University Press in Association with the History Group, Ministry for Culture and Heritage, 2001) pp. 6-9 & 82.

<sup>231</sup> Inglis & Brazier, *Sacred Places*, pp. 262-4.

represented, Menzies observed, the latest expression of 'a stream of mud' thrown at him throughout his political career.<sup>232</sup> The unveiling was by the King, George VI, mentioned in dispatches at the Battle of Jutland, accompanied by the Queen, whose brother had died at the Battle of Loos. Their credentials with veterans were impeccable. The event was broadcast by the BBC and relayed by the ABC, with repeat broadcasts the following day allowing 'Australian listeners to follow the ceremony minutely.'<sup>233</sup> The King spoke of 'that comradeship which is the watch word of our British Empire' the men remembered 'came from every corner of the earth to fight for ideals that are common to the whole Empire. They rest in peace.' The King felt 'great pride' in unveiling the memorial, 'pride and a deeper sense of reverence and gratitude towards those whose last resting place it guards.' The last man to leave the memorial that day was Charles Atkin, newly appointed caretaker, noted by the press to be both a war veteran himself - and a fully paid-up member of the RSL.<sup>234</sup> As the King spoke he was heard through loudspeakers erected at the Sydney Cenotaph by the Anzac Council of Women, 'many people going home from the theatres stood bare-headed.'<sup>235</sup> The broadcast had been an invitation, twenty years on, to remember sacrifice in the cause of Imperial collaboration even as war again threatened, and to not forget links to Britain.

What of broadcasts from Britain? Back in 1927 Australia and New Zealand's broadcasters had been very hopeful of successfully relaying BBC coverage of the Remembrance Festival, yet despite disappointment in the years that followed both the Festival and the Cenotaph service from Whitehall continued to attract attention. In 1928, whilst 'at first reception was somewhat patchy',

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<sup>232</sup> 'Sir Earle Page's Speech', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 21 April 1939, p.12

<<https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/17592843/1172223>> [Accessed: 18 August 2025]

<sup>233</sup> 'King to Broadcast Tonight', *Shepparton Advertiser*, 22 July 1938, p. 3.

<<https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/176268607>> [Accessed: 18 August 2025]

<sup>234</sup> 'Memorial Caretaker', *Telegraph*, 23 July 1938, p. 7.

<<https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/183491336>> [Accessed: 18 August 2025]

<sup>235</sup> 'Australia's War Memorial', *Times*, 23 July 1938, pp. 12-14.

<[link.gale.com/apps/doc/CS202060535/TTDA?u=oxford&sid=bookmark-TTDA&pg=12&xid=45a231fc](http://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CS202060535/TTDA?u=oxford&sid=bookmark-TTDA&pg=12&xid=45a231fc)> [Accessed 23 August 2025]

New Zealand stations had relayed the Cenotaph: 'the solemnity of the two minutes' silence, while the huge city remembered those who had fallen on the field of battle, could be felt over the radio'.<sup>236</sup> In 1930 the BBC broadcast was heard by Florence E. Torlesse, whose account in a letter to the *Timaru Herald*, says something of both the imperfect quality of reception and of the details which listeners recalled. Florence noted: 'a Highland lament, I should think...(and) the clank of rifles on the ground...The Last Post was sounded, and 'O God Our Help in Ages Past' was sung by the masses...followed by 'God Save the King'.<sup>237</sup>

What, then, had the broadcasting of remembrance events added to what were already deeply felt rituals? In what way had they contributed to conceptions of identity? First, regular broadcasts had popularised a specific 'soundscape' of remembrance, which listeners could expect to navigate by familiar and readily identifiable words, music and atmosphere: military commands, horses hooves, marching feet, the clank of rifles, Binyon's 'at the going down of the sun', 'O God our Help in Ages Past', the Last Post, silence falling in what had moments before been a bustling town or city. These were sounds shaped by shared culture and shared traditions, they united Australians and New Zealanders, these were national occasions, yet at the same time whatever domestic interpretations might be put on events the soldiers marched to the same tunes across the British world, whether cheered lustily or gently applauded. For distant listeners to London another key feature of this soundscape was poor reception, something that Susan Douglas argues made the experience of listening, perhaps paradoxically, all the more compelling, the listener was 'inclined to lean closer' and the 'different sound quality itself signified the urgency and the importance of the broadcast'.<sup>238</sup> Second, broadcasting enabled these to be both widely shared and standardised

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<sup>236</sup> 'Heard from London', *Auckland Star*, 12 November 1928, p. 18.

<<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/AS19281112.2.138>> [Accessed: 18 August 2025]

<sup>237</sup> 'Short Wave Thrills', *Timaru Herald*, 14 November 1930, p. 6.

<<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/THD19301114.2.23.2>> [Accessed: 18 August 2025]

<sup>238</sup> Douglas, p. 178 (Quoting biennial census of manufacturers Washington DC: GPO & Business Week, 27 June 1936).

experiences. In Sydney in 1927 an appeal had been made for owners of ‘wireless sets...to gather as many ex-soldiers as possible in your district on the afternoon of Anzac Day and allow them to listen in and thus join with their comrades of old in celebration of the day.’<sup>239</sup> In New Zealand radio coverage was presented as the opportunity for ‘listeners in the country districts’ to be ‘able to take part in the memorial services.’<sup>240</sup> The broadcast experience was of solemn memorial service followed by familiar tales from old soldiers, the singing of old songs, perhaps poetry and dramatic reconstruction. BBC coverage of major events in London or selections of verse compiled in Brisbane each reinforced the ‘collective memory’ through repeated articulations of the dominant narratives of the meaning of the war, and shaped an increasingly standardised experience, a pan-Imperial ‘British’ experience. The term ‘Cenotaph’ came to be adopted for memorials in general. When, in 1935, the Australian Post Office issued a commemorative stamp to mark the twentieth anniversary of the landing at Gallipoli, the stamp, approved by ex-servicemen, was not an image of a Digger, or even an Australian memorial, but rather the Cenotaph in Whitehall, standing for all the Empire’s dead.<sup>241</sup>



Fig. 14: 1935 Anzac Commemoration 1 shilling stamp.

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<sup>239</sup> ‘Anzac Day’, *Daily Telegraph*, 22 April 1927, p. 6.

<<https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/246111235>> [Accessed: 18 August 2025]

<sup>240</sup> ‘Wireless News’, *Press*, 28 April 1928 p. 10

<<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/CHP19280428.2.54>> [Accessed: 18 August 2025]

<sup>241</sup> Inglis & Brazier, *Sacred Places*, p. 333.

Third, broadcasting enabled listeners to experience events at the same time as their fellow listeners - simultaneously. Gregory notes the power of the shared silence, and the role that radio broadcasting played in enabling it, indeed that prior to radio broadcasting 'the perfect coordination of time...would have been impossible.'<sup>242</sup> By 1930 an established feature of the BBC contribution to Armistice Day, a feature requested by the Home Office, was that to help the nation set its clocks the Greenwich Time Signal was broadcast at 9 the previous night and at 10.30 on the morning itself.<sup>243</sup> Events could therefore take place almost simultaneously, however many miles might separate them. When in 1932 Sydney Town Hall created its own remembrance event 'along the lines of the historic ceremony held annually in the Royal Albert Hall' - 'historic' being a term applied here to an event but 5 years old - it featured 'the assemblage of returned soldiers...a patriotic concert...the Last Post...Binyon's 'For the Fallen' - but the moment of greatest significance was to come at 9pm, when at 'the exact moment when the King is placing his wreath on the Cenotaph in London' the Governor would give an address.<sup>244</sup> Listening to the Festival in London in 1927, however fruitless it might have proved in practice, was presented as a chance, the *Daily News* in Perth had suggested, for 'Australian diggers and their relatives' to join simultaneously with old 'comrades in arms' in London in singing 'wartime marching songs'.<sup>245</sup> The appeal was not simply listening, it was the knowledge that what was heard had left London 'one fifteenth of a second' earlier.<sup>246</sup> What these broadcasts suggested was that in this modern world of communication, listeners in the British world, old comrades, were not so far apart. Listeners were invited to share in the event and to gather others to share with them - to sing along with the old songs or to respect the silence and in so doing imagine other listeners doing the same. The

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<sup>242</sup> Gregory, *Silence*, pp. 133-136.

<sup>243</sup> WAC R34/227/1, 29 September, 1930, OB Department to Mr Sutthery; R34/227/1, 26 October 1931, Programme Routine memo. Time signals.

<sup>244</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 9 November 1932, page 17. Armistice Day.

<<https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/16929138>> [Accessed: 18 August 2025]

<sup>245</sup> 'Hear London'. *The Daily News*, Perth, 7 November 1927, p. 8.

<<https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/78965423>> [Accessed: 18 August 2025]

<sup>246</sup> 'A Romance of Wireless', *The Telegraph*, 12 November 1927, p. 5.

<<https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/179365978>> [Accessed: 18 August 2025]

emotional power of such an occasion was all in the moment. Singing along to the old tunes would never feel the same when unaccompanied by the singing relayed from the Hall. Silence for two minutes at any other time could never have the same power or significance.

The bold claims made for broadcasting were being realised, it could indeed 'annihilate distance', bring 'the whole world in touch'. It epitomised modernity and if in 1932 a radio set was not yet a ubiquitous domestic presence it was on the way to being so. What was heard were more usually sounds issuing from provincial or national centres, but on occasion the sounds of the broader British world. The spaces that 'world' occupied were not merely topographical, but also conceptual, imaginative and emotional, spaces which broadcasting opened up and populated. As 'spatial beings' listeners were well used, in the physical world, to making sense of everything in their immediate surroundings existing simultaneously.<sup>247</sup> Broadcasting had opened a new space, an invisible, audible space, it had made possible an awareness of a vast range of things all happening at that very moment, all over the globe, onto which a listener might be invited to eavesdrop. To make sense of this broadcasters themselves laid out 'maps' - schedules, announcements - to guide listeners, and they exploited the sense of awe inspired by such revelations, inviting wonder both at the technology that enabled this, and at the complexity and diversity of the world presented. Broadcasting had a capacity to draw together listeners widely separated by geographic space to simultaneously share such experiences, it could draw British listeners across the globe closer together. Benedict Anderson's conception of the nation as an 'imagined' community sits comfortably with ways in which it has been assumed radio listeners conceived the community of their fellows.<sup>248</sup> It was in the process of listening simultaneously together that isolated listeners came to form an audience, whose members felt a connection

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<sup>247</sup> Karl Schlogel, 'Horror Vacui: The Terrors of Simultaneity', in Karl Schlogel, *In Space We Read Time: On the History of Civilization and Geopolitics*. Trans. by Gerrit Jackson, (New York: Bard Graduate Center, 2016), pp,62-66.

<sup>248</sup> Anderson, pp. 5-7.

through the shared physical sensation of absorbing exactly the same sounds at exactly the same moment.<sup>249</sup> Listeners could imagine themselves 'transported' to the Domain or the Town Hall, across the globe to the Albert Hall or the Cenotaph, to observe the silence and imagine the King doing the same at that very moment, to share the experience with other listeners they had never met, and imagine others sharing it, drawn closer together in a 'collective moment'.

If Anderson offers one lens through which to view the shared experience of listening Charles Taylor offers another in his conception of the 'social imaginary', the way ordinary people 'imagine' their 'social surroundings'. It seeks to make sense of the ways people 'fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met' and is informed by a 'common understanding' which 'makes possible common practices' which thus enjoy 'a widely shared sense of legitimacy'.<sup>250</sup> This understanding is expressed both in everyday behaviours and in shared 'images, stories, and legends'. For Taylor the 'social imaginary' speaks to nothing less than 'our sense of our whole predicament in time and space, among others and in history', indeed to 'a sense of moral order'.<sup>251</sup> Nothing spoke more clearly to senses of shared predicament or indeed moral order in the years following the First World War than the 'common practices' surrounding remembrance of the resultant suffering and sacrifice, broadcasting had played a significant role in popularising these, in spreading awareness of them and giving them legitimacy. It offered many opportunities to tell and retell commonly understood stories and legends, opportunities for individual listeners to pick up, put down, and reflect on, their own sense of identity. Whilst early radio listening was termed 'listening in', audiences were also actively 'listening out' for, and responding to, messages that engaged them.<sup>252</sup> As we have seen on the night of 11 November 1932 'many' in Wanganui, Wairoa, Gonville, Ashburton and Wellington

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<sup>249</sup> Douglas, p. 29.

<sup>250</sup> Charles Taylor, 'What Is a 'Social Imaginary'?' *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), p. 23.

<sup>251</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 27-28.

<sup>252</sup> Lacey, 'Listening Overlooked', pp. 6-7.

listened to the service from the Cenotaph - with sufficient attention to note the striking of the 'differently toned bells' both local, and chiming 'from the other side of the world'. They shared the sense that as Big Ben tolled and then silence fell, observing it alongside them, in that moment, were untold millions of others - among them the King himself. It was this sense of simultaneity that had been the 'outstanding feature of the occasion'.<sup>253</sup> It was a sense that suggested some sort of 'participation' in the event itself, the focus of the next chapter.

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<sup>253</sup> 'Wairoa News', *Poverty Bay Herald*, 15 November 1932, page 10.  
<<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/PBH19321115.2.140>> [Accessed: 19 August 2025]  
'11am London', *Wanganui Chronicle*, 12 November 1932, p. 6  
<<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/WC19321112.2.32>> [Accessed: 19 August 2025]  
'Local and General', *Ashburton Guardian*, 12 November 1932, p. 4.  
<<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/AG19321112.2.19>> [Accessed: 18 August 2025]

## CHAPTER TWO: 'THE MOST UNITED COUNTRY IN THE WORLD'

*The Australian Women's Weekly*

PHAR LAP'S VICTORY COMES OVER THE ETHER TO BRISBANE.



Fig. 15: "Phar Lap's Victory Comes Over the Ether", *Telegraph* (Brisbane), 21 March 1932, p. 23.

By the end of 1932 the landscape of broadcasting in Australia and New Zealand had been redrawn. New national organisations were in place, the ABC - the Commission - and the NZBB. These were public service broadcasters, operating alongside commercial stations. In 1932 a radio licence was owned by one in twenty Australians and a similar proportion of New Zealanders, within 3 years this would be one in ten.<sup>1</sup> If we applied the calculation used by Ken Inglis - four listeners per licence and one unlicensed - by 1935 2 million Australian listeners-in had grown to 3.5 million, in New Zealand 375 000 had become 700 000 in a population of 1.5 million, it was reasonable to assume that from the middle of the decade half the population could regularly listen at a wireless set. As the focus of the radio industry shifted from the selling of radio reception equipment and towards the content listeners might consume broadcasters and listeners alike were confronted with questions: What was broadcasting to be? What social need did it fulfil? What responsibilities did broadcasters have? What role might broadcasting be expected to play in the cultural life of a nation?

<sup>1</sup> Australia Yearbook 1940 p. 521; Australian Yearbook 1940 for figures on licences and stations p. 170; New Zealand Official Yearbook 1940.  
<[https://www3.stats.govt.nz/New\\_Zealand\\_Official\\_Yearbooks/1940/NZOYB\\_%201940.html#idsect1\\_1\\_155](https://www3.stats.govt.nz/New_Zealand_Official_Yearbooks/1940/NZOYB_%201940.html#idsect1_1_155)> [Accessed 24 February 2025]

This chapter does not attempt a comprehensive account of the development of the radio services of Australia and New Zealand, it rather offers snapshots which explore the various ways in which broadcasting engaged with, and began to shape, senses of identity. It advances several propositions, the first being that in its near ubiquity radio broadcasting served as an agent for convening huge audiences in both the imaginative world of listenership and the real world of listeners' everyday lives, in so doing it came to occupy a central place in the cultural lives of Australians and New Zealanders. The focus of such audiences might be both local, perhaps very local, or much larger, national, pan-national, radio broadcasting might, in a sense, 'create' a local or national sensibility. A second proposition is that the regulatory structures within which domestic radio developed in Australia and New Zealand to a significant degree defined what broadcasting was, what listeners might experience. There was, in the requirements of the A class public service broadcasters, a limitation, a restriction, on what broadcasting might embrace, it was to engage, educate, 'uplift', to be this - but not that. What this opened was a space for a B class alternative, initially more local but with arguably greater scope to explore the possibilities of a new medium, here the expectations were less urgent, more relaxed, such broadcasting might more easily blend into the background of everyday life. A third proposition, however, is that even where a radio set offered a comforting background noise much of the day on occasion it commanded attention, and in both Australia and New Zealand few broadcast events had that capacity like sporting competition involving the favoured national sport and national team. Sport, then, came to play an ever more significant role in understandings of national identity. Such understandings were, however, complex. Sitting up all night to listen to the exploits of the national cricket or rugby team playing on the other side of the world unquestionably invoked a sense of national pride, yet also, in the ritual nature of the competition, in the anticipation of future victories on the shores of the metropole, powerfully and regularly reminded listeners of the cultural ties that bound them to their fellow Britons. Radio broadcasting played a central role in reinforcing such ties. In their deep engagement with such broadcasts listeners shed the passive role of 'listeners-in' and were

encouraged to think of themselves as ‘participants’ in the event, a shift that was to have a significant impact on the power that broadcasts might have over both listeners’ engagement with the medium and its capacity to shape their senses of personal and collective identity, a theme introduced here and explored more fully in the next chapter. This chapter examines the period to the middle of 1936, after which commercial broadcasters in Australia began to work more closely in networks and broadcasting in New Zealand was again restructured. It begins in September 1932, with some of the earliest correspondence between the NZBB and the newly created ABC.

### **‘If only you could stand on your hind legs and talk...’**

It related to sport, and rights to carry commentary on what was already one of the great occasions in the broadcast calendar, a horse race, the Melbourne Cup. Could the NZBB, asked General Manager E.C. Hands, have ‘exclusive re-broadcasting rights for New Zealand?’ The reply from the ABC General Manager, H.P. Williams, was warm, he was happy to grant ‘the sole right to use this description in New Zealand’.<sup>2</sup> Whilst we will examine sports broadcasting and its significance in greater detail the Melbourne Cup offers a snapshot of its appeal, an appeal the NZBB was keen to tap into. Each year produced new drama, this notwithstanding that the radio commentary on the race itself was rather pedestrian, a product of the difficulty of identifying the horses from a single distant commentary position, the BBC had similar problems covering the Derby.<sup>3</sup> Vehicles and spectators blocking the view, the runners bunching on the final turn, made the swift and accurate identification of the horses extremely challenging.<sup>4</sup> Yet none of this seemed to matter to listeners, what mattered was something more visceral, hearing what was happening at the very moment it

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<sup>2</sup> ANZ R3024705, 30 September 1932, Hands to Williams, General Manager ABC; 7 October 1932, Williams to Hands.

<sup>3</sup> WAC R30/812/3, The Derby and the Oaks, Epsom, 1932-35, 9 May 1932, OB Director to ADP; 15 February 1933, Gerald Cock to R.C. Lyle, Epsom Grandstand Association.

<sup>4</sup> ...and can be heard here - what is claimed to be the earliest known surviving recording of an Australian radio broadcast. Melbourne Cup 1932, The Australian National Film and Sound Archive. <[94](https://www.nfsa.gov.au/collection/curated/asset/101212-melbourne-cup-1932#:~:text=Favourite%20Peter%20Pan%2C%20badly%20checked,races%2C%20including%2027%20Melbourne%20Cups.> [Accessed: 24 February 2025]</a></p></div><div data-bbox=)

took place. The broadcasting of live 'running commentary' on sporting events was rooted in the heart of radio schedules almost from their inception. Sport was already embedded in popular culture and to find an audience for the new medium broadcasters simply piggybacked on this interest, for radio offered no more attractive 'front row seat' than at one of the great sporting occasions. The attraction of the Melbourne Cup, of the occasion, of the competition, was assumed to be universal, the potential radio audience was assumed to embrace the whole population, young and old, male and female. In 1933 *Women's Weekly* commissioned for the front cover of its 'Cup' edition an illustration from a Sydney based artist, Wynne W. Davies. 'The Cup Girl' presented a glamorous image from the creator of Hollywood movie posters.<sup>5</sup> Radio positioned itself as central to this appeal.



Fig. 16: 'The Cup Girl', *Australian Women's Weekly*, Front Cover (detail), 4 November 1933.

What made the Melbourne Cup a particular attraction in the late 1920s and early 1930s was the emergence of a great sporting favourite, the chestnut gelding Phar Lap. Born in New Zealand,

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<sup>5</sup> 'The Cup Girl', Wynne W. Davies, *Australian Women's Weekly*, Front Cover, 4 November 1933. <<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article48076044>> [Accessed: 19 August 2025]

bought for a relative song and raced in Australia, Phar Lap rapidly became the favourite in every race he entered, a national celebrity. It was on the afternoon of 4 November 1930 that his legend was secured. For the *Sydney Morning Herald*, 'never before' had any Melbourne Cup, 'attracted so much public attention'. Phar Lap had become 'nothing short of an obsession in the public mind.'<sup>6</sup> As the horses turned the final bend, listeners heard Phar Lap burst from the field and win by three lengths in what the newsreels would reveal to be an emphatic win for the ages. A successful punter - and there were many - cabled from 'East of Perth': 'If you could only stand on your hind legs and talk, we'd make you PM of Australia.'<sup>7</sup> When in 1932 Phar Lap died suddenly obituary newsreels were produced in his honour. Yet the appeal of the Melbourne Cup and its dramas continued. In 1932 after 'a good deal of extraneous noise which could be put down to the vagaries of short-wave' New Zealand listeners had heard the victory of Peter Pan, miraculously recovering from a trip, encouraged on, it was said, by an equine stable mate, to win by a neck, on which the grass stains from his stumble could still be seen.<sup>8</sup> Every year brought new drama, listeners delighted in a sense of 'being there'. By 1937 *Women's Weekly* could claim that in listening live to the Melbourne Cup, from the moment the race started, no nation in the world was more united than Australia:

'For a few minutes you forget everything but the thrill of it...Out at Alice Springs the group around the radio have very much the same feeling as the group that will be listening to the running of the Cup in your home, your office, in the street, or in the place next door. It's almost a solemn rite, this obligation to hear the Cup run.'<sup>9</sup>

Much of the cultural significance of sports broadcasting lay in the creation of 'moments' that brought audiences together, moments in which they were emotionally invested, in which they had

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<sup>6</sup> 'Phar Lap Wins the Cup', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 5 November 1930, p. 13.

<<https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/16728295>> [Accessed: 19 August 2025]

<sup>7</sup> National Film and Sound Archive of Australia, Curated Collections, Phar Lap: 'cable from a successful punter East of Perth'. <<https://www.nfsa.gov.au/collection/curated/melbourne-cup-1930>> [Accessed: 24 February 2025]

<sup>8</sup> ANZ R3024705, 3 November 1932, Hands to Williams, ABC.

<sup>9</sup> '3 mins. 30 secs: When Australia Stands Breathless', *Australian Women's Weekly*, 30 October 1937, p. 3. <<https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/52247539>> [Accessed: 19 August 2025]

a sense of 'participation' in the occasion, that entered folklore. A post-war visitor to the Melbourne Museum wrote asking why, having gone to explore the history of the city, they found themselves confronted, at the very entrance, by a stuffed horse. The answer was that the museum authorities then, as they do today, considered the horse, Phar Lap, and the event he came to embody, of such cultural significance to Melbourne that his story offered no better starting point for an exploration of the city and its passions. Phar Lap came to embody a whole series of 'Aussie' traits; the horse bought for a song, plucky, brave, and in the darker days of the Depression a national hero, the horse with the big heart. The heart itself is displayed in the Museum of Australian History in Canberra, Phar Lap's skeleton can be seen in the land of his birth at Te Papa in Wellington. Almost a century later Phar Lap's 1930 victory is presented as a 'defining moment' in Australian history by the National Museum of Australia, supported with 'classroom resources.'<sup>10</sup>



Fig. 17: Phar Lap Winning the Melbourne Cup, 1930 (detail)

To return, then, to broadcasting as it was structured in Australia and New Zealand at the end of 1932. The NZBB and ABC were organisations wishing each other well, and, having shared another

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<sup>10</sup> 'Phar Lap', National Museum of Australia.  
<<https://www.nma.gov.au/defining-moments/resources/phar-lap>> [Accessed: 24 February 2025]

successful Melbourne Cup broadcast, Hands and Williams were planning coverage of the next major broadcast event - what were to prove momentous matches between Australia and the touring cricketers of England that December.<sup>11</sup> These were examples of co-operation across the 'Tasman world', a world ruptured by Australian Federation in 1901 but never completely so, a world in which broadcasters shared output and knowledge even as - and particularly in the world of sport - rivalry between their nations grew. This was a rivalry played out within, like much of the sporting competition, a framework of wider 'British' cultural practices, indeed 'Britishness' was itself a source of rivalry - as Belich notes 'the slogan, repeated ad nauseam in official and unofficial texts, was that New Zealand was 98.5% British,' the 0.5% there to trump Australia claims to be 98%.<sup>12</sup>

The ABC and NZBB were stations, run by, and representing the interests of, that section of Australian and New Zealand society sympathetic to conventional British social and cultural sensibilities, those with a determination not to see this new and powerful medium undermine what they understood to be the cultural heights which all citizens should aspire to scale. As we shall examine consequences flowed from this understanding of their purpose, for it limited the audience to which they might appeal. Whether this mattered was a subject for debate, but since every listener paid a licence fee that in part subsidised these A class stations it was a debate that would never go away. The need to offer something to every listener gave great significance in their output to broadcast events, such as the Melbourne Cup, which could be presented as occasions on which the nation should come together. How then did broadcasting develop in Australia and New Zealand, what did listeners hear, and what influence did the pluralities of the emergent approaches to broadcasting have on national culture and identity? For those seeking swift, ready-made, answers to the questions raised by broadcasting - the social need it fulfilled, the

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<sup>11</sup> ANZ R3024705, 3 November 1932, Hands to Post & Telegraph Dept, Wellington; 3 November 1932, Hands to Williams.

<sup>12</sup> Belich, *Paradise Reforged*, p. 189.

responsibilities of broadcasters, the role broadcasting might play in national cultural life - there was, in the British world, just one place to look in the early 1930s, one broadcaster that offered a model to be adopted ... or alternatively comprehensively rejected.

## Public Service Broadcasting

In 1934 L.R.C. MacFarlane, one of the 3 members of the New Zealand Radio Board, overseeing the work of the NZBB, was impressed by a visit to London. MacFarlane returned believing that broadcasting 'as exemplified by the present policy of the BBC' would 'go a long way to supply that spiritual longing common in all our beings' by bringing 'real culture to the masses'. The BBC approach was contrasted with the alternative - 'sordid commercialism.'<sup>13</sup> MacFarlane was not alone in his appreciation of the BBC. In 1933 the Chairman of the ABC referred to the BBC as 'the parent company'.<sup>14</sup> The 'present policy' of the BBC was characterised 'public service' broadcasting, the principles of which had been shaped by John Reith: not intended to make money, making programmes under 'unified control', not in response to interest groups; aiming to reach the greatest number of listeners and treating each as 'capable of growth and development.'<sup>15</sup> Reith was sympathetic to Matthew Arnold's view of the role of culture in society, that in an economically unequal world collective and personal salvation might come through cultivating 'all sides of our humanity' through the pursuit of wisdom and beauty, 'sweetness and light', and through ensuring there was the widest engagement in this pursuit.<sup>16</sup> For Reith, whilst listening to the radio might be 'a mere means of passing the time, and therefore of wasting it' alternatively it could be 'part of a systematic and sustained endeavour to re-create, to build up knowledge, experience and character.'<sup>17</sup> The BBC, Reith believed, had no specific obligation to broadcast material that

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<sup>13</sup> WAC E1/1091/1, L.R.C. MacFarlane, 'Overseas Empire Central Broadcasting Bureau'.

<sup>14</sup> WAC E1/317, 22 March 1933, letter Lloyd Jones to Reith.

<sup>15</sup> Asa Briggs, *The History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom*, 5 vols (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), I: 'The Birth of Broadcasting', pp. 235-9.

<sup>16</sup> David Hendy, *The BBC: A People's History* (Profile Books: London, 2022), p. 13.

<sup>17</sup> John Reith, *Broadcast Over Britain* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1924), p. 18.

listeners wanted to hear, it should shape taste, not follow it.<sup>18</sup> The mission was ‘to carry into the greatest number of homes everything that was best in every department of human knowledge, endeavour and achievement’, in this it was better to overestimate than to underestimate the public appetite.<sup>19</sup> Yet, as David Hendy notes, the whole project ‘would come to nothing if millions of radio sets were not actually being switched on in the first place.’<sup>20</sup> So for Reith ‘the BBC must lead, not follow, its listeners, but it must not lead at so great a distance as to shake off pursuit.’<sup>21</sup> From Reith’s vision flowed, as we have seen, distinct views on how listeners might approach listening. The key to success lay in the shaping of public taste, pursued in Britain by a BBC enjoying a domestic broadcasting monopoly. For Asa Briggs all this constituted a ‘purpose’, a purpose that ‘animated and directed’ early broadcasting at the BBC and at organisations which copied its public service model.<sup>22</sup>

The BBC was the foremost ‘public service’ broadcaster in the world and in the development of the A Class stations of Australia and New Zealand its influence cannot be overstated. Lesley Johnson notes that ‘in journals, newspapers and Parliamentary debates, from the time of its inception’, the ABC had been referred to as ‘Australia’s BBC.’ The adoption of a similar voice and style ‘was seen as ensuring that the ABC played the same cultural role as the BBC.’<sup>23</sup> When in 1935 the National government proposed a restructure of New Zealand broadcasting, it was intended, the Post Master General (PMG), Adam Hamilton declared, ‘to follow the British Broadcasting Corporation policy, rather than to adopt the Australian or American systems’, the British was ‘generally recognised as the best in the world’.<sup>24</sup> There were, however, problems for any organisation

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<sup>18</sup> LeMahieu, ‘John Reith 1889–1971’, p. 196; Roger Eckersley, *The BBC and All That* (London: Sampson, Low, Marston, 1946), p. 121.

<sup>19</sup> Reith, *Into the Wind*, p.101.

<sup>20</sup> Hendy, *BBC*, pp. 81-82.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 139-142.

<sup>22</sup> Briggs I, p. 239.

<sup>23</sup> Johnson, *Unseen Voice*, p. 133.

<sup>24</sup> ‘Broadcasting Policy’, *Press*, 7 March 1935, p. 14.

<<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/CHP19350307.2.108>> [Accessed: 19 August 2025]

seeking inspiration from a BBC operating in the very specific broadcasting ecology prevailing in the British Isles. First, the BBC faced neither domestic competition nor the same scale of logistical challenge as broadcasters in Australia and New Zealand in building and maintaining a national broadcasting infrastructure. As early as 1925 broadcasts from a single transmitter at Daventry could reach 85% of the British population.<sup>25</sup> In contrast New Zealand's transmitters lacked sufficient power, Australia's connections depended on thousands of miles of telephone line. The BBC was a monolithic, metropolitan, organisation. This was true of neither the ABC nor NZBB. In New Zealand, whilst Ambrose Harris had set his stall up in Christchurch, it was soon replaced as the headquarters of national broadcasting by Wellington, in Australia there was initially no recognised broadcast centre, until 1934 cooperation between the Melbourne and Sydney arms of the ABC was 'a matter more of goodwill than organisation'.<sup>26</sup> Second, the BBC was based in London, the home of British and Imperial government, ceremonial and pageantry, the cultural centre of the British Empire, a city that presented itself as the centre-point of a world of entertainment, a British rival to the glamour of Hollywood. At 8.3 million in 1932 the population of Greater London was six times that of Sydney and five times that of New Zealand.<sup>27</sup> London had the entertainers to sustain a world class radio service, many of whom, such as Peter Dawson, 'the greatest of living baritones', and the pianist Eileen Joyce, had moved to London from Australia.<sup>28</sup> On the day of its launch the ABC Chairman had asked listeners not to compare its programmes unfairly with those of the BBC since 'London is the Mecca of all artists of outstanding ability whereas in Australia, although we have many fine artists, the field is limited.'<sup>29</sup> Third, and related to the first two, the problem faced from the outset by those hoping to reproduce the style and

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<sup>25</sup> Briggs I, pp. 223-4.

<sup>26</sup> *Sound of Melbourne*, p.30.

<sup>27</sup> *Year Book of Australia, 1933* 'Metropolitan Population - Australia and other Countries' p. 765. <[https://www.ausstats.abs.gov.au/ausstats/free.nsf/0/AB0F7F5ADDF9FOC6CA257AF000163300/\\$File/13010\\_1933%20section%202025.pdf](https://www.ausstats.abs.gov.au/ausstats/free.nsf/0/AB0F7F5ADDF9FOC6CA257AF000163300/$File/13010_1933%20section%202025.pdf)> [Accessed: 24 February 2025]

<sup>28</sup> *Radio Celebrities*, (London: WD & HO Wills, 1934); Eileen Joyce, *Australian Dictionary of Biography*. <<http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/joyce-eileen-alannah-14817>> [Accessed: 24 February 2025]

<sup>29</sup> Inglis, *ABC*, pp. 5-6.

form of broadcasting adopted by the BBC was one of authority. Whilst the BBC enjoyed a monopoly, the ABC and NZBB were expected to fulfil a similar function as national broadcasters, but in the face of competition. It was competition with which, as we shall explore further, each struggled to compete.

Fourth, and fundamentally, was the question of whether there was in practice any demonstrable evidence that broadcasting might play the role that Reith proposed - was cultural 'uplift' being delivered, or deliverable? It was undeniable that in Britain Reith's ambitions, the BBC monopoly, and the ubiquitous presence of broadcasting in everyday life, had broadened cultural horizons. Jennings and Gill in their 1939 survey found broadcasting had opened for listeners whole 'realms of knowledge, hitherto unsuspected, to their astonishment and delight'. Such knowledge was no longer confined to a world of books. Yet this was in large part a function of the BBC's unconstrained capacity to define what broadcasting was, a consequence of which was that listeners might find delight in the hitherto unknown - one woman 'rather bashfully' admitting to Jennings and Gill that 'anything to do with whales or whale fishing' spelled 'romance to her'. That the Boat Race was now an eagerly anticipated event among working class Bristolians was not a function of historic fascination for, even familiarity with, rowing.<sup>30</sup> Listeners in Australia and New Zealand by contrast could turn away from material which held no obvious initial attraction. In 1936 the BBC had appointed Robert Silvey as head of 'Listener Research'. After extensive field work and reflecting, later, on many such studies, he concluded that 'basic tastes...are grounded in the cultural environment of the society in which people find themselves and as such are resistant to modification.'<sup>31</sup> It was a challenge to expect that given a choice listeners would tune to something to which they felt initially resistant. In Australia the ABC was tasked by government with a 'Reithian' objective - to 'cultivate a public desire...for all items and subjects which tend to elevate

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<sup>30</sup> Jennings & Gill, pp. 12-14 & 37.

<sup>31</sup> Silvey, p. 71.

the mind'.<sup>32</sup> In so doing it couldn't rely on a monopoly. The ABC and NZBB were vulnerable to competitors free to offer not what the public 'needed' but what it wanted, and to politicians seeking to align themselves with popular tastes. In New Zealand the case for the survival of the B stations became an election issue supported by an incoming government, in Australia not only were commercial stations to dominate urban listening shares but also, slowly but surely, they were to be absorbed into media conglomerates which again sought political influence. Yet despite such challenges, and perhaps even inspired by them, the idea of the potential of broadcasting to 'uplift' national cultural tastes and standards remained attractive and persistent to those responsible for public service broadcasting to the end of the decade, and it was the model of the BBC that was held up to justify this approach.

The ABC was, then, conceived as following 'the British system as closely as Australian conditions will permit', the 'BBC model'.<sup>33</sup> The first ABC Annual Report stated an ambition with which, at least in so far as it implied leadership without shaking off pursuit, Reith, could have sympathised:

'While full attention will be given to the important national duty of improving standards of culture and education in Australia, the inseparable development of entertainment will at no stage be overlooked...enlightenment must come through entertainment.'<sup>34</sup>

Tasked with its delivery was Walter Conder, who had replaced H.P. Williams as General Manager of when Williams had died just a few months after his appointment. Williams had been a technical pioneer, Conder was a showman, running 3LO in the early years of broadcasting, then Australia's most profitable radio station.<sup>35</sup> He later ran a circus. He carried in his pocket a notebook in which he logged licence sales, asking of each programme whether it would improve his figures.<sup>36</sup> Conder

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<sup>32</sup> Johnson, *Unseen Voice*, pp. 57.

<sup>33</sup> Inglis, *ABC*, pp. 17-20.

<sup>34</sup> Albert Moran, 'ABC radio networking and programming, 1932-1963' in *Stay Tuned: the Australian Broadcasting Reader* ed. by Albert Moran (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1992), p. 51 (quoting ABC First Annual Report, 1932/33, Section 15).

<sup>35</sup> Inglis, *ABC*, p. 9.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 42-43.

doubted that it would ever be worth broadcasting a programme simply because the public ought to listen to it: 'No dictator could make Australia drink castor oil daily.'<sup>37</sup> His slogan was: 'everything on the air but hot air'.<sup>38</sup> Asked what attitude the ABC ought to take to the question of 'highbrow versus lowbrow', Conder declared that it should offer neither, but rather 'the best available examples of every taste in the community...In as nearly as possible the proportion shown by those tastes themselves.'<sup>39</sup> He'd come into his role at the ABC informed by his experience at 3LO: 'I did feel that the public who were paying were entitled to get what they wanted - I felt the better the show you put on, the more licences you would get.'<sup>40</sup> Yet for all his flair, and for all the ABC's commitment to entertainment he, and it, were constrained by cultural responsibilities. Despite Conder's aversion there was always a perception of 'a lot of talk' on the ABC - in a typical week 'more than 50 speakers covered everything from infant welfare to the mysteries of the universe'.<sup>41</sup> Its talks were by people the ABC judged worthy of hearing from, many being 'university men', the results were considered by at least one Sydney listener, 'worthy, but with a slight suggestion of patronage'.<sup>42</sup> The development of 'groups of musicians for the rendition of orchestral, choral and band music of high-quality' had been a stipulation of the Act creating the ABC and it broadcast a great deal of music, over 50% of its output in the first year, a year in which it had employed more than 17 000 musicians. Yet ABC music tended towards the 'serious', the 'classical'.<sup>43</sup> W. G. James, the first ABC of Director of Music, later conceded that in 1932 the Commission's music activities 'did not start with a high listener interest', the task was to grow that interest.<sup>44</sup> Conder's touches

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<sup>37</sup> Simon J. Potter, *Elitism, the ABC and the BBC, 1922-1970* (London: Menzies Centre for Australian Studies ; King's College London, 2008) p. 9 (citing National Library of Australia, Canberra, W.T. Conder papers, MS 1454, folder 6, press cutting, Maj. W.T. Conder, 'Castor Oil by air?', *Telegraph*, 24 April 1933).

<sup>38</sup> Alan Thomas, *Broadcast and be Damned: the ABC's First Two Decades* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1980), p. 26.

<sup>39</sup> Inglis, *ABC*, p. 43.

<sup>40</sup> State Library of New South Wales (hereafter SLNSW) MLMSS 5636/Box 19/Item [3]: Transcript of taped interviews with ABC and other celebrities on their lives and careers, Walter Conder; Inglis, *ABC*, pp. 42-43.

<sup>41</sup> R.R. Walker, *The Magic Spark* (Melbourne: Hawthorn Press, 1973), p. 38.

<sup>42</sup> Inglis, *ABC*, p. 32.

<sup>43</sup> Thomas, pp. 31-35.

<sup>44</sup> SLNSW MLMSS 5636/Box 19/Item [3]: W. G. James.

were the red and blue uniforms the ABC musicians wore and the creation of its own Dance Band.<sup>45</sup> Efforts to improve the quality of talks and plays were restricted by the availability of suitable speakers and scripts. Conder worked to develop a collaborative relationship with the BBC, seeking permission to read over the air articles published in the *Listener* and *Radio Times*.<sup>46</sup> He sought recordings of BBC talks on the grounds that 'the common attitude in this country is to associate oneself closely with the Mother Country' and 'to look anxiously for any opportunity' of hearing the voices of its great men and women, Conder wrote of the 'imperial value of such an attitude'.<sup>47</sup> To such requests the BBC often replied it didn't hold the necessary copyrights, obtaining such would be time consuming and expensive.<sup>48</sup> Yet Conder was undeterred and proud of his efforts, setting out his achievements in a 1935 article 'Broadcasting through a continent, how it is done in Australia', a copy of which found its way to London. The ABC had run competitions for Australia's composers, it had gathered 'bands and choirs and orchestras', in drama the Commission had sought 'the best of productions from overseas and at the same time encouraged the more promising of the local producers.' Conder summed up his understanding of the ABC approach:

'The British race is essentially cultured, though traditionally adventurous, and if the second characteristic had induced this part of it to risk of the decay of the first, then it is for the Commission to handle the great new force known as broadcasting in such a way that all that was best in our civilization should be retained and expanded.'<sup>49</sup>

The ABC was in many respects quintessentially 'British' in its values, the very aesthetics of ABC broadcasting maintained a sense of connection to London, in the chiming of a public clock marking the hour - that of the Sydney General Post Office, on occasion Big Ben itself - in the accent of the

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<sup>45</sup> Inglis, *ABC*, p. 29.

<sup>46</sup> Thomas, p. 41; WAC E1/315/3, 20 February 1934, letter Conder to 'The Director of Publications' BBC.

<sup>47</sup> WAC E1/315/3, 26 February 1934, letter Conder to Clark; 19 May 1934, letter Conder to Clark; 31 July 1934, letter Conder to Clark; 31 July 1934, letter Conder to Graves; 9 October 1934, letter Conder to Graves; 19 December 1934, letter Conder to Clark; E1/315/4, 4 June 1935, letter Conder to Clark; 12 June 1935, letter Empire Executive to Conder.

<sup>48</sup> WAC E1/315/2, 30 October 1933, letter Graves to Conder; E1/315/3, 27 March 1934, letter Graves to Conder; 6 April 1934, letter Clark (for DEFS) to Conder; 22 June 1934, letter Graves to Conder; 27 June 1934, letter Clark to Conder; 3 September 1934, letter Graves to Conder.

<sup>49</sup> WAC E1/315/4, Broadcasting through a continent, how it is done in Australia, by W T Conder, General Manager, ABC.

ABC announcers, 'approaching the educated accent of BBC announcers'.<sup>50</sup> They wore evening dress.<sup>51</sup> Considerable attention was paid to their broadcast style and if in 1934 Conder was reminding them that it was a mistake, in a search for 'correctness and dignity' to be 'too formal, stilted and 'elocutionary'' it was equally unacceptable to display the 'affability...frequently heard from the B class stations' - at 'all costs' this was to be avoided.<sup>52</sup> Many were English. In the Sydney studio, from where announcers were likeliest to speak on the Australian national relay, they included Heath Burdock, who'd actually been at school with the BBC Chief Announcer Stuart Hibberd.<sup>53</sup>

Overseeing Conder's work, was, from 1934, William James Cleary, the second ABC Chairman, an 'interventionist' with strong views on Australian society. He did not accept the 'standards of today'. He shared Reith's belief in the power of radio to inspire self-improvement, yet Cleary perceived a prejudice against intellectuals and his challenge as confronting 'the philistines'. He questioned Conder's willingness to pander to popular taste, he could accept neither his outlook nor his 'barrack room standards'.<sup>54</sup> Cleary and Conder disagreed - both about what listeners liked and about what they could be brought to like, Conder resisting the influence of a newly appointed National Talks Advisory Committee with the argument that 'by far the most common complaint heard concerning our national stations is simply 'too much talking!''<sup>55</sup> Conder departed at the end of 1935, replaced by the more compliant Charles Moses. In July 1936 the ABC was planning a restructure, what resulted was greater organisational unity that surmounted state boundaries and

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<sup>50</sup> Thomas, pp. 28-9; Inglis, *ABC*, p. 70.

<sup>51</sup> National Archives of Australia (hereafter NAA), SP1558/2, 30513907 Programmes – Announcers: copious correspondence regarding the wearing and laundering of Mess & Dinner jackets.

<sup>52</sup> NAA, SP1558/2, 30513907 Programmes – Announcers, 17 March 1934, Walter Conder, draft memorandum to all States: Announcers.

<sup>53</sup> Inglis, *ABC*, p. 71; NAA, SP1558/2, 30513907 Programmes – Announcers, February 1939 Australian Broadcasting Commission, List of Announcers; NAA, SP341/2, 318857 BBC General Correspondence (Box 1) Report on the British Broadcasting Corporation. Prepared during a visit in August and September 1939 by Heath Burdock.

<sup>54</sup> Thomas, pp. 45-50.

<sup>55</sup> Inglis, *ABC*, p. 41.

a larger number of nationally relayed programmes.<sup>56</sup> For beyond its approach to programming the greatest challenge faced by the ABC was that of offering a truly national service. By 1935 the ABC ran 12 stations, connected by 4 300 miles of landline, broadcasting on medium wave, with 8 of the 12 producing 'almost entirely' their own local programmes. The technical and logistical challenges of achieving this had been considerable. When Aubrey Jarrett was sent to Newcastle to establish the first ABC relay station in January 1931 he found the studio entrance through a billiard room and up a narrow winding staircase. Aside from relaying the national output it initially offered just two local news sessions, read from local newspapers.<sup>57</sup> At 7ZL, in Hobart, Stanley Darling was, in 1932, one of just 2 announcers, Darling selected the records, read the news, technically balanced the programmes, led the community singing and managed outside broadcasts. To relay events from the mainland he listened on headphones and simply repeated what he heard - 'you can imagine it wasn't a very good service.'<sup>58</sup> Yet on its day the ABC national service was capable of competing in quality and range with any broadcaster, certainly any public service broadcaster, in the world. On a December day in 1935 Melbourne's 3LO opened at 7am, offering a morning music programme, a morning serial, a sporting talk, a talk on women's affairs, at noon there was a programme for schools, then more music, a programme for older students, perhaps a classical concert, some light theatre. Dinner music filled the early evening followed by Wagner, with Jim Davidson's dance band to close, at 11pm. All interspersed with news, weather, express train, shipping and aviation reports, prices on the fish market, the corn exchange and the London stock exchange.<sup>59</sup> Conder's legacy had been a rich and sophisticated mix.

A snapshot of the role the ABC aspired to play in Australian cultural life can be found in the 1936 tour of the pianist Eileen Joyce, a tour it arranged, and which began in Perth, where she had grown

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<sup>56</sup> Thomas, pp. 51-53.

<sup>57</sup> SLNSW MLMSS 5636/Box 19/Item [3]: Aubrey C Jowett.

<sup>58</sup> SLNSW MLMSS 5636/Box 19/Item [3]: Stanley Darling.

<sup>59</sup> *Sound of Melbourne*, p.30.

up. Joyce was well known in Britain, a cigarette card 'radio celebrity'. What stood out was not just her playing, however, but her back story, a publicist's dream, a girl from the bush 'who does not know her birthday', whose family had seen its possessions destroyed in a tent fire, a child learning to play the piano in a bar, 'the talk of the township'. Whilst there was a grain of truth in this story it was unlikely to wholly survive contact with Australia's press on her arrival in Perth, where members of the local community could testify to the support given by her school, her family and the funds raised to send her to study in Leipzig.<sup>60</sup> Basil Kirke, ABC Manager in Western Australia, was responsible for shielding Joyce from unwanted publicity, and for the first concert, setting the tone for what were hoped to be significant cultural events. He was dismayed then, when His Majesty's Theatre, the one suitable hall in Perth, was 'taken over by some Sydney people' who were turning it into a cinema. Fortunately delays allowed the theatre to be used by Joyce and like every concert on the tour the first was a great success. Bothering Kirke had also been a request from the Kalgoorlie B station 6KG to relay the concert broadcast, this was denied, Kirke was determined that the ABC take all of the credit for a major financial and logistical undertaking.<sup>61</sup> Joyce's tour spoke, then, to the ABC commitment to 'uplift', to its contribution to Australian society, yet the extent to which this was appreciated by listeners was, in the absence of audience research, a matter for conjecture. If Conder had measured his success by sales of licences the fact that these were required by listeners to simply own a radio set said nothing about which station their set was tuned to. As we shall see the results of the first listener research in Australia, undertaken just months after Joyce's triumphs, would make sobering reading for Kirke and his colleagues.

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<sup>60</sup> *Radio Celebrities, Second Series*, (London: WD & HO Wills, 1934); Richard Davis, *Eileen Joyce: A Portrait* (Freemantle: Freemantle Arts Centre Press, 2001), pp. 15-94; Eileen Joyce, *Australian Dictionary of Biography*. <<http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/joyce-eileen-alannah-14817>> [Accessed: 24 February 2025]

<sup>61</sup> NAA, SP341/2, 12143454 Personal Files, Eileen Joyce: 14 January 1936, BW Kirke, Manager ABC WA to General Manager; 11 February 1936, BW Kirke, Manager ABC WA to General Manager; 1 April 1936, lettergram Moses to Kirke; 2 April 1936, BW Kirke, Manager ABC WA to General Manager.

In New Zealand Ambrose Harris's Radio Broadcasting Company ceased to exist on 31 December 1931, replaced by the Radio Broadcasting Board and the NZBB. The RBC had been struggling, lacking the financial resources to develop national coverage. City dwellers might be reasonably happy but listeners in Hawkes Bay, Poverty Bay, Taranaki, Nelson, West Coast and Southland felt poorly served.<sup>62</sup> The national transmitters, other than in Wellington, were under-powered, a consequence of which was the development of local B stations.<sup>63</sup> MacFarlane, returning from his trip to Britain, had asked why New Zealanders felt none of the pride for their radio network that the British felt for the BBC? He was scathingly answered by the New Zealand Manufacturers Association, how could he possibly 'compare the British Broadcasting Corporation with the painful programmes put over the air by his own board'?<sup>64</sup> The NZBB was sensitive from the outset to suggestions that its output would fail to both uphold the principles MacFarlane so admired and meet public demand. The tension was captured at an early meeting of the 4YA Music and Dramatic committee, in June 1932. Its Chair argued that programmes should be 'kept at a high level' and not 'swayed by letters' that represented 'but a few people.' The counter argument was put by the Station Director:

'every listener counts...the man who wants his wireless entertainment as light as he can get it and the man who would appreciate good stuff. We have to consider the men away up in the country, perhaps shepherds and drovers away by themselves, we have to try and please them; perhaps they will appreciate good stuff, but it mustn't be above their heads.'<sup>65</sup>

In response to such debate, at its second Board meeting, the NZBB resolved to undertake 'a plebiscite on the question of programme requirements and other matters in connection with the broadcasting service.'<sup>66</sup> 50 000 questionnaires were printed.<sup>67</sup> They were sent to applicants for a licence renewal, just under half returned, to date an unprecedented piece of granular audience

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<sup>62</sup> Ian K. Mackay, *Broadcasting in New Zealand* (Wellington: AH & W Reed, 1953, pp. 29-30.

<sup>63</sup> Mackay, pp. 40-42.

<sup>64</sup> Downes & Harcourt, p. 90.

<sup>65</sup> Day, pp. 154-5 (quoting transcript of the meeting of the 4YA Music and Dramatic committee 3rd June 1932).

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 163-4.

<sup>67</sup> ANZ R22012635, 22 February 1932, Hands to Secretary Post & Telegraph Dept.

research in the British world of broadcasting. Listeners were asked not simply whether plays or music were preferred but specifically whether the preference was for 'serious and dramatic', or 'light and humorous', for 'Hawaiian Music', or community singing? The results gave valuable insights into both listening practice and distribution. Almost all respondents listened on valve sets, only one in twenty on crystals. More than half were listeners to the more powerful Wellington transmitter of 2YA, the only station to which more than half of listeners lived in country districts, suggesting that the power of the transmitter was a major factor - urban listenership to Auckland's 1YA and 3YA in Christchurch outnumbered rural by two to one. Listeners preferred to listen in the evening, between 8 and 9. The answers could be interrogated by listenership to the four YA stations. The results presented a challenge to the principles of public service broadcasting. Of the 1725 listeners to 3YA who gave a ranking only 21 placed 'serious' talks first, only 22 chose 'light' and only 30 would ideally sit down to a whole evening of drama. What Christchurch listeners wanted was music. Broadcast output had been divided into seventeen categories. Across New Zealand the top eight in terms of preference were all light and musical, of all types, bands, singers, Hawaiian music, community singing, at the bottom were more serious items, talks, classical music, serious drama. What this suggested was not so much that no one would ever listen to 'serious' things but rather that this wasn't what listeners would choose, perhaps wasn't the sort of material that had motivated the purchase of a radio set in the first place. New Zealand listeners were very satisfied with the service offered to children but wanted more 'running descriptions' of sports events. Three times as many wanted to hear recorded artists rather than local.<sup>68</sup> These results suggested that the New Zealand listening public might prove resistant to radio being used to engage them, as regulation required, with 'lectures, useful information and religious services.'<sup>69</sup> In responding Hands was constrained by both regulation and available resources. He was restricted in the amount of recorded material that could be played even as a reliance on live music was hampered

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<sup>68</sup> ANZ R22012635: Listeners Survey Board 1932 results.

<sup>69</sup> Day, pp. 163-4.

by, as the NZBB noted in its first annual report, a lack of local musicians.<sup>70</sup> By 1934 the NZBB was 'getting hard up for suitable short plays and comedies'. Hands turned to the ABC, which forwarded scripts.<sup>71</sup> In 1935 he, like Conder, approached the BBC and was offered plays, many written by members of BBC staff, among them Cecil Madden, Lance Sieveking and Val Gielgud. Hands sought from the BBC the rights to adaptations of works by authors ranging from Shakespeare and Sheridan to H.G. Wells.<sup>72</sup> Hands did, however, have one tool at his disposal which required no support from elsewhere, the coordination of the broadcast schedules of the YA stations. These were increasingly built to offer contrast, on the assumption that listeners could hear more than one. If 1YA broadcast classical music on a Monday night, 2YA should offer an alternative, say, comedy or popular music. It was a system that was to endure throughout the decade.<sup>73</sup> This offered choice, within the YA framework. It was a strategy admirable and ambitious in its proposal that the national stations could themselves offer variety to listeners on any given evening, but also something of an acknowledgement that listeners might be resistant to efforts to shape their listening tastes.<sup>74</sup>

Change came rapidly in New Zealand broadcasting. Just 4 years after the creation of the NZBB and in the wake of the 1935 election of the Labour government its structure was, as Hands wrote to Moses, 'very much in the melting pot.'<sup>75</sup> The NZBB was to be replaced by the National Broadcasting Service (NBS) in 1936, to which, beyond Hand's co-ordinated scheduling, it offered another legacy, an explicit rejection of American influence. When in 1930 Ambrose Harris had returned from a visit to America he brought back some American programmes, which he broadcast

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<sup>70</sup> Downes & Harcourt, p. 28; *World Radio*, 10 November 1933, p. 608.

<sup>71</sup> ANZ R3024706, 2 February 1934, Hands to Manager ABC, NSW; 2 February 1934, Hands to Conder.

<sup>72</sup> ANZ R3024712, 15 February 1935, Dewar (BBC Empire Exec.) to Hands, 15 March 1935, Hands to BBC EPD, 3 April 1935, Hands to EPD, 30 May 1935, Empire Exec to Hands; 6 June 1935, Hands to BBC EPD; 4 October 1935, BBC EPD to Hands.

<sup>73</sup> Mackay, p. 46.

<sup>74</sup> Day, pp. 166-9.

<sup>75</sup> ANZ R3024709, 9 January 1936, Hands to Moses.

on 2YA. One was an edition of one of the 'lengthy serials which are said to create the greatest furore imaginable among listeners throughout America'. Radio serials were American broadcasting at its most seductive. There were few, if any, more widely heard radio shows in the early 1930s than the comic serial *Amos n Andy* - the tales of two credulous innocents navigating the complexities of modern life - black characters played by two white actors. What listeners liked was 'their dialogue and the crazy things they did and what they got into, their problems'.<sup>76</sup> As we shall see the theme of naïve innocence in the face of modernity was later to be developed in Australia by the immensely popular *Dad and Dave*, a hit in New Zealand. Yet in 1930 Harris's experiment was perceived, by critics, as an intrusion from an alien culture. Whilst younger listeners might enjoy this American style, Harris's move was met with outrage at such 'American trash'.<sup>77</sup> For as a letter writer put it: 'we are a British community and, wishing to preserve British ideals, do not want to be surfeited with American nasal twang...If thousands of misguided people patronise the American sound pictures they do so voluntarily, but wireless listeners have no option but to switch off their sets.'<sup>78</sup> One of the first acts of the NZBB, discussed at its first Board meeting, was the replacement of recorded American programmes with British. Here the BBC was to prove of assistance, and whilst in time some American programming returned, alongside the broadcasting of Australian drama serials, the voice of New Zealand public service broadcasting was to be culturally 'British'.<sup>79</sup>

In Australia and New Zealand the A class stations offered, then, national public service broadcasting, however challenging that provision might have proven. Alongside them, and often filling in the gaps, were B class stations, to varying degrees commercial, relying on advertising,

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<sup>76</sup> MacLennan, pp. 320-5.

<sup>77</sup> Downes & Harcourt, pp. 57-59.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 79.

<sup>79</sup> Day, pp. 163-4. (citing letter Hands to MacFarlane 10 January 1934); WAC E5/53/1, 25 October 1933, letter Hands (General Manager NZBB) to Director, Empire Service; 28 December 1933, letter & cable Hands to Graves.

sponsorship, voluntary subscription or donation. If the BBC offered a model for the public service stations the B stations more often turned to America, where the objective was not cultural 'uplift' or selective listening but rather, as Michelle Hilmes notes, 'building up the largest possible listenership' and keeping the listener tuned in all day long, for radio to become a 'domestic companion.'<sup>80</sup>

## The B Stations

New Zealand's B stations had grown out of the experimental tradition that had inspired early broadcasting pioneers. They were initially small scale - Hasting's 2ZL and 2ZI we have already met, very local, minimally resourced, on the same street, sharing a frequency. Even those destined to see out the decade had modest beginnings. What they incubated was an alternative vision of what New Zealand broadcasting culture might embrace, that this was rich and varied can be seen in the early history of 3ZM in Christchurch. Launched in March 1933 3ZM offered 'the first regular breakfast sessions' to listeners in Canterbury, opening each morning at 7.30 and staying on air until 10, when 3YA started broadcasting with its daily service. 3ZM promised nothing but recorded music, and to 'fill in the blanks that at present exist in the radio day', it returned with music between 7 and 11 each evening, Monday to Wednesday and on Fridays. It broadcast until 2pm on Saturdays and between 11.30 and 2 and then 7 until 11 on Sundays.<sup>81</sup> Its studio was, in 1933, at 253 Brougham Street, in Christchurch, a 'specially draped room' in a house belonging to the father of one of the engineers. The transmitter was next door. Records were stacked floor to ceiling according to their genre and a grandfather clock in the corner kept the time.<sup>82</sup> It was 'The Sunshine

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<sup>80</sup> Michele Hilmes, *Radio Voices: American Broadcasting, 1922-1952* (Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p. 81.

<sup>81</sup> 'Broadcasting, New Radio Station', *Press*, 27 March 1933, p. 3.

<<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/CHP19330327.2.10>> [Accessed: 19 August 2025]

<sup>82</sup> 'Radio Club Notes', *Timaru Herald*, 20 May 1933, p. 15.

<<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/THD19330520.2.108.4>> [Accessed: 19 August 2025]

'Entertainment First', *Press*, 31 March 1934, p. 6.

<<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/CHP19340331.2.32>> [Accessed: 19 August 2025]

Station' and at the announcer's desk sat the 'Sunshine Girl', Grace Green, 'jollyng people along'. Green was one of just two employees, she also supplied sound effects for studio plays.<sup>83</sup> 3ZM filled 'the blanks' with coverage of local social events - in June 1933 the presentation of local 'debutantes', with the promise of their being named on air.<sup>84</sup> That May its offer to cover 'rugby league topics' had been accepted by the provincial management committee of the Rugby League.<sup>85</sup> The 3ZM slogan was 'Entertainment First', it offered dance music every Saturday night.<sup>86</sup> Its 'genesis and continued existence' owed 'more to the enthusiasm of its owners for radio transmission as a hobby than as a means of livelihood'.<sup>87</sup> Whilst this enthusiasm might motivate early station owners, it might equally decline, those at 2ZL and 2ZI had decided in 1932 to close their stations down after a rival started up in Napier, deeming their service now 'unnecessary'.<sup>88</sup>

Yet by the end of 1933 3ZM was itself already threatened with closure, as new regulations banning sponsorship of radio shows were debated. The station gathered letters of support.<sup>89</sup> Listeners lamented the possible loss 'of our most enjoyable programmes'.<sup>90</sup> 'If 3YA could be run by the staff of 3ZM' wrote one, 'we should perhaps get something worthwhile, but at present a concert from 3YA is not a thing which brings brightness to any home and silence is better.'<sup>91</sup> The New Zealand Listeners Federation complained that in return for the highest licence fees 'in the world' listeners

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<sup>83</sup> Downes & Harcourt, p. 85; *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography*.

<<https://teara.govt.nz/en/biographies/4g20/green-grace-winifred>> [Accessed: 19 August 2025]

<sup>84</sup> 'Dances', *Press*, 10 June 1933, p. 1.

<<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/CHP19330610.2.3.7>> [Accessed: 19 August 2025]

<sup>85</sup> 'Rugby League Management Committee', *Press*, 9 May, 1933

<<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/CHP19330509.2.98>> [Accessed: 19 August 2025]

<sup>86</sup> 'Entertainment First', *Press*, 31 March 1934, p. 6.

<<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/CHP19340331.2.32>> [Accessed: 19 August 2025]

<sup>87</sup> 'Genesis of 3ZM', Advertisements, *Press*, 31 March 1934, p. 6.

<<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/CHP19340331.2.33.1>> [Accessed: 19 August 2025]

<sup>88</sup> 'B Radio Stations Closing Down in Hastings', *Hawke's Bay Tribune*, 5 September 1932, p. 7.

<<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/HBTRIB19320905.2.59>> [Accessed: 19 August 2025]

<sup>89</sup> 'Radio in the Home', *Timaru Herald*, 18 November 1933, p. 11

<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/THD19331118.2.75>> [Accessed: 24 February 2025]

<sup>90</sup> 'Broadcasting', *Press*, 30 December 1933, p. 7.

<<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/CHP19331230.2.48.5>> [Accessed: 24 February 2025]

<sup>91</sup> 'Letters to the Editor', *Press*, 3 January 1934, p. 7

<<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/CHP19340103.2.35>> [Accessed: 24 February 2025]

were getting a poor deal from the YA stations, in Canterbury: 'more people listen to the B station...many listeners do not tune into 3YA from one week's end to another.'<sup>92</sup> A 3ZM Radio Club had been formed and by March 1934 it had 3 000 subscribing members, amongst the attractions of 3ZM was its 'personal touch'.<sup>93</sup> The club organised fundraising social events, and dances.<sup>94</sup> 3ZM was to survive this crisis, and in the midst of it to introduce something quite remarkable. In February 1934 'The Air Institute' took over Sunday evenings, the brainchild of a lecturer at Canterbury University College, Professor James Shelley. Shelley and a group of Christchurch intellectuals aspired to offer expressly 'highbrow' music, plays and talks, material 'of a type of which the New Zealand Broadcasting Board would rightly regard as not satisfactory entertainment for the majority of licence holders.'<sup>95</sup> It offered 'something different'.<sup>96</sup> Its plays included 'The Mary Celeste' - at the 'somewhat dramatic' finale of which listeners heard 'the entire crew swallowed by a giant octopus'. Sunday evenings were being 'enlivened'.<sup>97</sup> It produced Shaw's 'Androcles and the Lion', for which Shaw personally waived his fee. Its Epilogue was not, however, broadcast, banned by 'an officer of the Board' on the grounds that its commentary on the contemporary social relevance of the tale was 'controversial', a decision one cast member, Greville Pocock, the Professor of Classics at Canterbury, considered 'a little cheap and silly.' The local MP thought the whole thing 'too funny for words.'<sup>98</sup> Such decisions did little for the reputation of the

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<sup>92</sup> 'B Class Radio Stations', *Press*, 6 March 1934, p. 6.

<<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/CHP19340306.2.32.1>> [Accessed: 24 February 2025]

<sup>93</sup> 'B Class Radio Stations', *Press*, 29 March 1934, p. 12.

<<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/CHP19340329.2.113>> [Accessed: 24 February 2025]

<sup>94</sup> 'Successful Dance', *Star*, 11 May 1934, p. 9.

<<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/TS19340511.2.135.5>> [Accessed: 24 February 2025]

<sup>95</sup> Day, p. 211.

<sup>96</sup> 'New Zealand Air Institute', *Press*, 6 February 1934, p. 14.

<<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/CHP19340206.2.98.11>> [Accessed: 24 February 2025]

<sup>97</sup> 'Wireless News', *Press*, 17 February 1934, p. 19.

<<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/CHP19340217.2.162>> [Accessed: 24 February 2025]

<sup>98</sup> 'Shaw Play to be Broadcast', *Press*, 21 March 1934, p. 10.

<<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/CHP19340321.2.78>> [Accessed: 19 August 2025]

'Broadcast Banned', *Ashburton Guardian*, 26 March 1934, p. 6.

<<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/AG19340326.2.61>> [Accessed: 19 August 2025]

'Forbidden!', *Star*, 26 March 1934, p.7.

<<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/TS19340326.2.97>> [Accessed: 24 February 2025]

governance of New Zealand broadcasting. Nor did the next controversy to embrace 3ZM, when, by arrangement with the Sydney station 2UE, it relayed, in July 1934, overnight coverage of the Fourth Test match between the cricketers of England and Australia. The broadcast was considered by the Board to have breached 3ZM's agreed hours of transmission and in compensation 3ZM was obliged to close down all day the following Friday and cancel its Saturday morning broadcast.<sup>99</sup> What the history of 3ZM illustrates is the degree to which, beyond the national network managed by the NZBB, the B stations of New Zealand were experimenting with the potential of radio, testing the boundaries of its cultural scope. 3ZM embraced music purely as entertainment, all night sport, and high drama, and also the comedies that entertained the rest of the British world, for as a letter in the *Star* put it in October 1934, through 3ZM 'we have all been to the zoo and other places with wee Albert', 'Albert' being the star of a by now very familiar recorded monologue by the British comedian Stanley Holloway.<sup>100</sup> This mix was popular, by February 1935 membership of 3ZM's Radio Club had reached 5 000, each paying a 2 shilling and sixpence subscription.

In 1935 the National government proposed a restructure of New Zealand broadcasting. It was intended, as the PMG Adam Hamilton had declared, to follow British practice, rather than 'adopt the Australian or American systems under which maintenance depends on advertising and revenue from other services.' Questions were asked - by Labour members - as to 'why should we follow, not lead', and what would happen to the B stations in a 'British' system - there were no B stations in Britain. The answer was that the Board could, if it wished, subsidise them.<sup>101</sup> The survival of the B stations became an election issue, taken up by the Leader of the Opposition,

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<sup>99</sup> 'Test Match Broadcast', *Star*, 21 July 1934, p. 12.

<<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/TS19340721.2.97>> [Accessed: 19 August 2025]

'Broadcast of the Test', *Star*, 24 July 1934, p. 4.

<<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/TS19340724.2.48>> [Accessed: 24 February 2025]

<sup>100</sup> 'Radio Programmes', *Star*, 18 October 1934, p. 8.

<<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/TS19341018.2.78.4>> [Accessed: 24 February 2025]

<sup>101</sup> 'Broadcasting Policy', *Press*, 7 March 1935, p. 14.

<<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/CHP19350307.2.108>> [Accessed: 24 February 2025]

Michael Joseph Savage: 'broadcasting is one of the greatest services of the age and under this legislation it is going to be hamstrung at every turn.'<sup>102</sup> The supporters of the B stations rallied, they were clear in what they considered they had brought to New Zealand broadcasting, these were 'really the pioneers of radio' and had 'shown more enterprise and initiative than all the national stations put together', without them 'radio, which has developed into part of the life of the community, will become a droll business...3ZM will be sadly missed if it is forced to close down.'<sup>103</sup> In Christchurch Labour Party newspaper advertisements asked 'Do you want 3ZM to continue?'.<sup>104</sup>

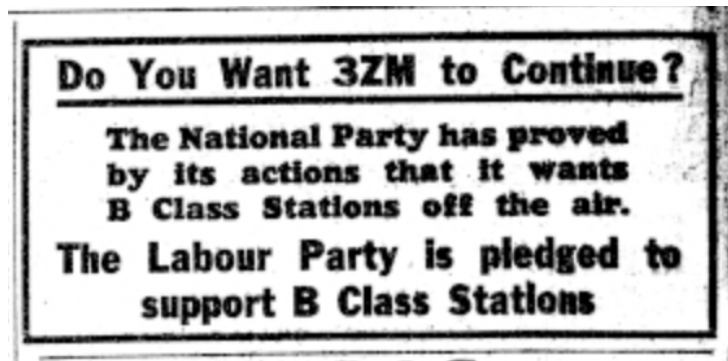


Fig. 18: Advertisement, *Press*, 26 November 1935, p. 2.

After the victory of the Labour Party, and although questions of funding appeared unresolved, it seemed certain that many of the B class stations would survive, among them 3ZM, 'the most popular in Christchurch'.<sup>105</sup> What was being developed was a framework for the accommodation of commercial broadcasting which did indeed lead, not follow. The creation of a National Commercial Broadcasting System (NCBS) promised government control of advertising funded stations, and this was to be led by Colin Scrimgeour who, like James Shelley, had strong views on the function radio broadcasting might play in New Zealand society, and like Shelley the contacts

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<sup>102</sup> 'Broadcasting Control', *Press*, 15 March 1935, p. 12.

<<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/CHP19350315.2.103>> [Accessed: 24 February 2025]

<sup>103</sup> 3ZM Club Member, 'To the Editor', *Press*, 27 November 1935, p. 7.

<<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/CHP19351127.2.35.6>> [Accessed: 24 February 2025]

<sup>104</sup> Advertisement, *Press*, 26 November 1935, p. 2.

<<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/CHP19351126.2.5.5>> [Accessed: 24 February 2025]

<sup>105</sup> 'Radio Programmes', *North Canterbury Gazette*, 9 June 1936, p. 3.

<<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/NCGAZ19360609.2.5>> [Accessed: 24 February 2025]

and energy to bring these to life. Scrimgeour had himself played a key role in pushing the boundaries of New Zealand broadcasting, in directions complementary to those at 3ZM in their engagement with local audiences but differing in their impact. Scrimgeour's base had, as we have seen, been in Auckland, at 1ZR.<sup>106</sup> It became home to his radio church, 'The Friendly Road'. In 1933, in the plan to remove sponsorship from New Zealand broadcasting, 1ZR was purchased by the government.<sup>107</sup> The 'Friendly Road' broadcasts moved to 1ZB, an existing station purchased by Scrimgeour, to which Daisy Basham also moved.<sup>108</sup> Through 1ZR and 1ZB Scrimgeour, in his weekly 'Man in the Street' broadcasts, took social action and listener engagement in directions more radical than meetings of radio clubs and fundraising balls. Each week he tested the limits of regulatory restriction with advocacy of the concerns of working men and women. This reached a peak when, on the Sunday before the 1935 election and when it was anticipated that he would tell his listeners how to vote, a reported 'jamming' of his signal was attributed to the PMG.<sup>109</sup>

Scrimgeour was ambitious and well connected, from 1935 he was President of the New Zealand Federation of B Station Owners, he broadcast on 2UE in Sydney, and whilst in July 1936 Shelley was a candidate for Director of the proposed new National Broadcasting Service Scrimgeour was in discussion with the Labour government, amongst his supporters were Savage, the new Prime Minister, and John A. Lee, for whom 'Scrim' was New Zealand's 'Radio Man Number One'.<sup>110</sup> That July 1ZB was thriving and Scrimgeour's latest publicity vehicle was about to launch, a feature film 'The Friendly Road', said to be New Zealand's first domestically produced 'talkie'. Attracting

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<sup>106</sup> Lewis Alfred Eady, *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography*.

<<https://teara.govt.nz/en/biographies/4e1/eady-lewis-alfred>> [Accessed: 24 February 2025]

<sup>107</sup> ANZ R11740998, 30 August 1933, Proposed purchase of B class broadcasting stations, memorandum for the Postmaster-General; 5 September 1933, memo Secretary, General Post Office Wellington, to District Telegraph Engineer, Auckland.

<sup>108</sup> Alexander Turnbull Library, National Library of New Zealand (hereafter ATL) MS-Papers-7343-2, 12 April 1990, letter, Peter Dawson to Barbara Basham.

<sup>109</sup> Day, pp. 204-5; Colin Graham Scrimgeour, *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography*

<<https://teara.govt.nz/en/biographies/4s16/scrimgeour-colin-graham>> [Accessed: 24 February 2025]

<sup>110</sup> Ian Carter, *Gadfly: The Life and Times of James Shelley* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1993), pp. 204-5; Downes & Harcourt, pp. 103-107.

'practically a full house' to the Majestic Theatre in Auckland, in its first week it competed with films starring Mae West and Clark Gable - the star of 'The Friendly Road' was Scrim himself.<sup>111</sup>

What the commercial B stations were offering, then, was not just light, pleasure giving, entertainment. They offered a platform on which New Zealand broadcasters could embrace a tradition of social and cultural innovation, using the radio for both experiments in 'highbrow' culture and calls to social action. They reinforced a sense that however it might be regulated broadcasting was not easily constrained, it was not one thing, but many. The B stations provided a platform for a broader presentation of 'British' entertainment. Stanley Holloway and his monologues, of which Albert's encounter at the zoo with a lion was an exemplar, was just one reflection of the more 'lowbrow' 'music hall' traditions of British culture, a culture which might cause consternation amongst those whose view of 'culture' was more narrow - never more so than in the Parliamentary debate confirming the creation of the commercial service. Adam Hamilton, now Leader of the Opposition, voiced a specific concern, that in merely creating a national commercial broadcasting service, in formalising the existence of the commercial stations, standards would inevitably be lowered. He raised a complaint he claimed to have heard 'frequently' - was it the case, he asked Savage, that a recording of a song titled 'Sandy at the Nudist Club' had been broadcast on a commercial station? 'Perhaps the Prime Minister should get the record and listen to it'.<sup>112</sup> We will return to this controversy, but what the playing of Sandy Powell's 1934 comic sketch 'Sandy Joins the Nudists' represented was a celebration of the traditions of working-class British culture, a culture with many of its rough edges still showing. Whilst this was not an aspect of 'Britishness' that was to be celebrated by Adam Hamilton, there

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<sup>111</sup> 'Film Programmes Reviewed', *Auckland Star*, 29 August 1936, p. 16.

<<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/AS19360829.2.154>> [Accessed: 24 February 2025]

<sup>112</sup> 'Divided Control, Vigorous Attack', *New Zealand Herald*, 4 November 1937, p. 13.

<<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/NZH19371104.2.130>> [Accessed: 24 February 2025]

was clearly an audience for such material, and New Zealand listeners might hope to find it on the B stations.<sup>113</sup>

The B stations of Australia developed in ways which had both some similarities to those in New Zealand and quite significant differences. We might examine their development in the early 1930s through three snapshots: of rural broadcasting in Victoria, of the B stations of Brisbane and of commercial broadcasting in Sydney.

In remoter parts of Australia the broadcasting world could be even more homespun than that in New Zealand. If the smaller ABC stations were, as in Newcastle and Hobart, far from generously staffed, facing numerous logistical challenges, these were as nothing to some of the B stations. There was perhaps no better example than 3YB, which in 1931 comprised two buses touring rural Victoria, one with a transmitter and the other a studio, in which the announcer, writer and advertising salesman, Vic Dinneny, also lived. His was a demanding life. On arrival in a town Dinneny would set about selling advertisements to local businesses and finding material for his shows whilst his engineer sorted the transmitter. 3YB's licence dictated that Dinneny was not to broadcast within 30 miles of any of the rival commercial stations in Geelong, Ballarat, Bendigo, Hamilton or Wangaratta. His first broadcast was from Creswick in October 1931. In 1932 3YB moved to a railway carriage which moved along rural railway lines. From his portable studio Dinneny broadcast each evening using a record library pre-sorted into 14 four hour shows, sorted to avoid repetition. 3YB stayed in a town until the advertising ran out, whereby it packed up and moved on, and it 'drew crowds wherever it went'.<sup>114</sup> Its very arrival was an event. In 1934 readers of the *Camperdown Chronicle* were reminded of 'the great deal of interest' the station had

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<sup>113</sup> 'Sandy Joins the Nudists' can be heard here:

<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CcwXtERGeGQ>> [Accessed: 19 August 2025]

<sup>114</sup> Walker, pp. 114-5; Jacqueline Kent, *Out of the Bakelite Box: the heyday of Australian Radio* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1983), p. 187.

aroused on previous visits as it announced 3YB would be in town from 12-17 March: 'listeners can be certain of a treat when they tune in.'<sup>115</sup> The arrival of 3YB connected Australia's more remote settlements with the wider world of broadcasting. When, as more stations were granted licences and a roving broadcaster 'was no longer a proposition', in 1935 3YB finally settled in Warrnambool. In 1936 it was bought out by the Melbourne newspaper *The Argus*.<sup>116</sup>

In 1936 C.R. Carson was manager at 4BH, one of Brisbane's B stations, its studio 'one tight little room on the first floor of Grice's music store'. 4BH had been launched in January 1932.<sup>117</sup> Carson had started broadcasting in 1929 as a casual singer and announcer at Brisbane's 4CM before joining 4BC, and then 4BH - as he later reflected, 'continuity of employment was something that was uncertain, there was a great turnover of staff'.<sup>118</sup> In Brisbane the B stations each sought something distinctive to set them apart from rivals, what this might be might change over time. In its early days 4BH sold itself on its breakfast start up, at 7am with 'cheery music to put the spirit right for the day's trials'.<sup>119</sup> It offered technical advice to listeners 'keen to get maximum entertainment' from their radio sets, it advertised 'original sketches and radio plays performed by studio players', it produced a children's session.<sup>120</sup> It broadcast from local events, notable in its first month was a broadcast from the swimming championships, 'a service not previously attempted by a B class station in Queensland'.<sup>121</sup> It experimented with Dinner Music, and later pitched itself as a station of appeal to 'the tastes of all lovers of good music', offering classical

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<sup>115</sup> 'Local Wireless Broadcast', *Camperdown Chronicle*, 10 March 1934, p. 2.

<<https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/29093367>> [Accessed: 24 February 2025]

<sup>116</sup> Walker, pp. 114-5; '3YB was born on wheels', *Argus*, 9 May 1953, p. 7.

<<https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/23243231>> [Accessed: 24 February 2025]

<sup>117</sup> 'Station 4BH', *Brisbane Courier*, 4 January 1932, p. 10.

<<https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/21768839>> [Accessed: 24 February 2025]

<sup>118</sup> SLNSW MLMSS 5636/Box 19/Item [3]: CR Carson, Manger 4BH 1936-1963.

<sup>119</sup> 'New Station Comes on Early', *Daily Standard*, 2 January 1932.

<<https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/178927003>> [Accessed: 19 August 2025]

<sup>120</sup> Station 4BH', *Sunday Mail*, 24 January 1932, p. 19.

<<https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/97924753>> [Accessed: 19 August 2025]

<sup>121</sup> 'B Class History', *Daily Standard*, 26 January 1932, p. 14.

<<https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/178930303>> [Accessed: 19 August 2025]

recitals.<sup>122</sup> Carson's contributions included a 'novelty broadcast' in which the microphones of 4BH were taken onto the streets of Brisbane for a live tour of the city.<sup>123</sup> There was a talent contest for local singers run from Grice's Music Room.<sup>124</sup> 4BH offered community singing, often from the Theatre Royal.<sup>125</sup> Its sessions were networked across Queensland. Community singing in Town Halls and theatres - a mixture of vaudeville comedy and audience sing-along - had begun independently of radio in the 1920s but was an established part of radio schedules by the end of that decade. It was celebrated 'as a radio form peculiar to Australia', and like the radio clubs it offered the chance for listeners to gather together in the real world, whilst linking them to those listening in, who were encouraged themselves to sing.<sup>126</sup> Community singing could be heard on all the Brisbane stations, it was a phenomenon across Australia, stations produced their own songbooks. At 4BH Carson considered his rivals 4BC, 'the outstanding station', 4QG, the ABC station, and 4BK, purchased in 1934 by the *Courier-Mail*, part of the Herald newspaper group.<sup>127</sup> Looking back Carson reflected that in Brisbane in 1936: 'the standing of the industry...was not high. As a matter of fact it was a very chancy operation'.<sup>128</sup> The success of a station like 4BH - of which Carson was still Manager in 1958 - was dependent, he believed, on 'an outstanding background of service to the local community.'<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> Station 4BH', *Telegraph*, 21 December 1932, p. 10.

<<https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/179215370>> [Accessed: 19 August 2025]

'4BH sessions', *Truth*, 3 September 1933, p. 17.

<<https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/198661181>> [Accessed: 19 August 2025]

<sup>123</sup> 'Round the Town', *Telegraph*, 2 October 1936, p. 15.

<<https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/182418712>> [Accessed: 19 August 2025]

<sup>124</sup> 'Radio Talent Quest', *Telegraph*, 20 October 1936, p. 7.

<<https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/182326874>> [Accessed: 19 August 2025]

<sup>125</sup> 'Grandmothers to Sing', *Telegraph*, 23 January 1935, p. 9.

<<https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/187300937>> [Accessed: 19 August 2025]

<sup>126</sup> Griffen-Foley, *Changing Stations*, pp. 248-9.

<sup>127</sup> SLNSW MLMSS 5636/Box 19/Item [3]: CR Carson.

'Courier-Mail Station, purchase of 4BK', *The Queenslander Illustrated Weekly*, 18 January 1934, p. 46.

<<https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/23331794>> [Accessed: 19 August 2025]

<sup>128</sup> SLNSW MLMSS 5636/Box 19/Item [3]: CR Carson.

<sup>129</sup> 'Service to the Community', *ABC Weekly*, 24 September 1958, p. 11.

<<https://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-1390067585>> [Accessed: 19 August 2025]

In Sydney in June and July 1936 W. A. McNair, director and research manager at the Australian branch of the advertising agency J. Walter Thompson, was undertaking one of the first detailed surveys of Australian listening habits. It offers a unique snapshot of broadcasting tastes and audiences in a city where multiple commercial stations competed with each other, and with two from the ABC. McNair published his results in *Radio Advertising in Australia*. McNair's headline finding was that 87% of Sydney listeners tuned to the commercial B stations.<sup>130</sup> Sydney's commercial stations offered an unrelentingly popular schedule - 2CH played music 80% of the time. The range of music was vast, 2CH offered classical music, musical comedies and singing lessons, 2UW everything from piano recitals and Gilbert and Sullivan to Hawaiian guitar duets and Maori music.<sup>131</sup> In their stated preferences Sydney listeners most enjoyed, then, programmes of music and singing (58%), 'records were liked best'. Listeners were less keen on plays and serials (31%), least on 'talks' (10%). McNair found - as did Robert Silvey at the BBC - that the ranking was consistent across social groups, although serials were more popular amongst the least well off (35%) and talks amongst the wealthiest (15%). McNair considered the small number of listeners that preferred talks 'not altogether surprising. The average listener presumably buys a radio set for entertainment rather than for educational purposes', they couldn't be 'expected to regard them as the main attraction in the wireless programmes.' It was 'indisputably' the case that the unpopular talks had been left to the ABC.<sup>132</sup> Station popularity was 'to a great extent' determined by 'personalities.' The most popular radio performer in Sydney was comedian and actor George Edwards, 'the standard bearer on the home commercial scene', who had recently switched his productions from 2GB to 2UW.<sup>133</sup> Next was 2GB's Jack Davey, in 1936 host of the breakfast session.<sup>134</sup> The commercial stations built 'a certain glamour' around their stars, by contrast few people recalled individual broadcasters on the ABC stations, 2BL and 2FC, a function, McNair

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<sup>130</sup> McNair, p. 324.

<sup>131</sup> Griffen-Foley, *Changing Stations*, p. 247.

<sup>132</sup> McNair, pp. 341-9.

<sup>133</sup> Walker, p. 36.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 73.

concluded, of the ABC rarely mentioning their names.<sup>135</sup> Listeners were asked to name 'one or more favourite recorded artists'. High in the lists were Peter Dawson, Paul Robeson and Bing Crosby - 'founder of the crooning craze' - and British stars, Gracie Fields, the comedy duo Clapham and Dwyer and Stanley Holloway, whose 'Albert and the lion' sketch was again mentioned.<sup>136</sup> When it came to favourite programmes McNair was clearly fascinated by the appeal of serials, their plots presenting 'little difficulty to even the least educated listeners'.<sup>137</sup> Three American serials stood out: *Jimmy Allen*, 'air pilots and air gangsters'; *Chandu the Magician* and *Charlie Chan*, 'a philosophical Chinese detective'. They offered 'simple, stirring adventure'. There was also a large audience for original Australian serials and most popular in 1936 was *Mrs 'Arris and Mrs 'Iggs*, a comedy starring the male performers Athol Tier and Dan Agar as two elderly gossiping women, a show sponsored by the brewer Toohey's, whose Oatmeal Stout they advertised. It got regular mentions, indeed 'Here's To'Ee' was their catchphrase.<sup>138</sup>

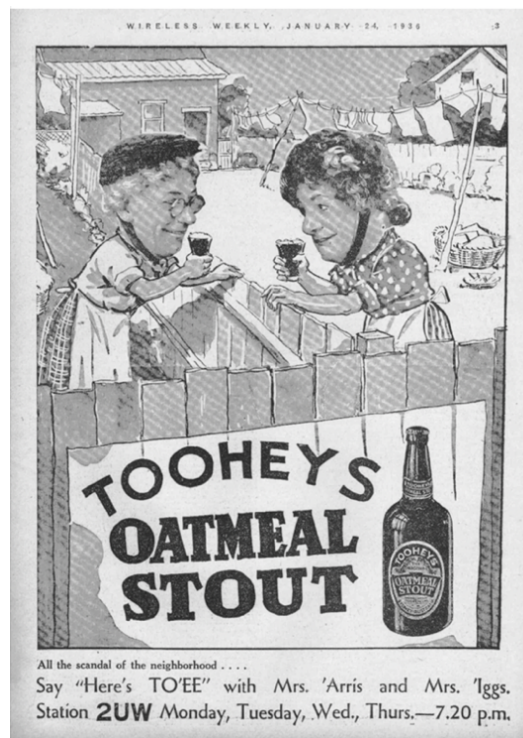


Fig. 19: 'Toohey's Oatmeal Stout poster, 1936

<sup>135</sup> McNair, pp. 335-8

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 339.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 341-9.

<sup>138</sup> Walker, p. 36; Griffen-Foley, *Changing Stations*, pp. 210-11; McNair, pp. 363-381.

Almost all the favourite shows were broadcast by the commercial stations. There were but few mentions of ABC shows although 2FC Dinner Music was the most widely recalled of all, particularly by older and wealthier people.<sup>139</sup> The success of commercial radio in Sydney in 1936 was rooted in giving people what they wanted - recorded music, serials, humour and the 'friendly feeling' inspired by familiar announcers. They exploited the diversity of the possibilities of broadcasting. As in New Zealand the B stations of Australia showcased entertainers popular with the British working class, and as in New Zealand the commercial stations formed 'clubs', a physical manifestation of qualities that radio listening was purported to inspire - 'a means of escape and fun and solace and support', the most notable in Sydney being that of 2GB, the 'Happiness Club' with dozens of branches in the suburbs.<sup>140</sup> These stations were rooted in local communities inspiring loyalties that extended far beyond broadcasts. Australian B station owners had noted developments in America, where NBC and CBS were building networks of affiliate stations. They saw opportunities to share costs and access to the best entertainment, and to challenge the notion that the ABC was the only 'national network'. Whilst these took much of the rest of the decade to come to fruition, AWA, the Chandler chain of stations in Queensland - which included 4BC - and the *Herald* group - which had purchased 4BK - were already acting as 'selling organisations' for advertising.<sup>141</sup> Such building of networks attracted controversy. The purchase of 4BK was condemned by *Truth* as the creation of an 'octopus in the air'.<sup>142</sup> By the end of 1935 it was estimated that between them the *Herald* and AWA controlled 24 commercial stations. The Australian government moved to limit such control but faced opposition from newspapers with broadcasting interests. Robert Menzies told Reith that since 'everyone had got cold feet about the next election' the government hadn't 'the guts' to do anything about increasing domination of the commercial stations.<sup>143</sup> Australian broadcasting

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<sup>139</sup> McNair, pp. 363-381.

<sup>140</sup> Griffen-Foley, *Changing Stations*, p. 125.

<sup>141</sup> McNair, pp. 158-60.

<sup>142</sup> 'Octopus in the Air', *Truth*, 14 January 1934, p. 12

<<https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/169338818>> [Accessed: 19 August 2025]

<sup>143</sup> Griffen-Foley, *Changing Stations*, pp. 21-23; Reith, *Into the Wind*, pp. 222-3.

would be reshaped by the development of powerful commercial networks. Such developments were noted at the BBC.

## Competition

In November 1935 Isabel Hodgson left a job in London at the BBC for 'a return to university life' in Australia. Before she left she met with Cecil Graves, Director of the BBC Empire Service, for a conversation about 'Empire and foreign broadcasting matters', as a result of which she promised to write when she had 'anything of interest to report about the ABC or the Empire Service'. As it happened, despite having 'thought I had done with broadcasting', on arrival in Australia she was offered a job by the ABC, developing its international relations.<sup>144</sup> This included assisting Moses in correspondence with the BBC.<sup>145</sup> Remembering her promise to Graves she had asked of Moses permission to write to Graves 'confidentially' which she did in June 1936. What she offered was a snapshot of Australian broadcasting as seen with a perspective informed by an intimate understanding of the BBC and of broadcasting in Britain. By chance Hodgson's observations reached Graves just as the Australian broadcasting veteran T.W. Bearup was visiting the BBC. Bearup had worked across the various iterations of Australian broadcasting, for AWA, for 3LO and as Victoria Manager of the ABC, and as he toured the BBC he declared that he 'was perfectly happy' at the competition between the national and commercial stations, indeed he was 'inclined to favour the existence of commercial broadcasting, provided listeners had an alternative, non-commercial service.' Bearup considered that 'they both kept each other very thoroughly up to the mark'.<sup>146</sup> By complete contrast Hodgson had 'a tale to unfold'. Her new ABC colleagues were 'rather amused' by her 'serious concern about commercial broadcasting', her colleagues being sure that 'the competition of A and B services worked well in Australia'. Hodgson, having initially

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<sup>144</sup> WAC E1/317, 18 June 1936, letter Isabel Hodgson to Graves.

<sup>145</sup> NAA SP1558/2, 12171142, 14 August 1936, 'Daventry Broadcasts Copyright', Moses to Mr Sheppard.

<sup>146</sup> WAC E1/338, 26 July 1936, memo Morris to North Regional Director.

been 'willing to accept that theory' was by now 'thoroughly sceptical about it' on the grounds that the ABC simply wasn't competing effectively, the output of the commercial stations being '90% frivolity', and hence overwhelmingly popular. Hodgson reported to Graves that to reverse such perceptions Moses was inclined 'to fight the B class with its own weapons', was 'putting more emphasis on the lighter talks, dance music, etc', yet she believed this would be in vain, for the ABC Chairman - Cleary - had no such interest: 'he and the rest of the Commission console themselves that the people who count listen to the A class stations.' The success of the B stations lay in giving 'the largest possible public as much as possible of what it wants, and of the best possible quality'. When it came to entertainment the ABC could not 'escape its moral obligation to support native talent', whilst the B stations, having no such obligation, could 'without scruple use mainly records of the world's best artists.' Hodgson foresaw 'war to the death', a war the ABC would lose for whilst the interests of the B class stations were safeguarded by the fact that they 'served a large public,' they were doubly secured by the fact that they were 'so much in the hands of the newspapers that the government must not offend them.'<sup>147</sup>

Hodgson was writing as McNair was conducting his survey, its results starkly revealed that the challenge facing the ABC was every bit as great as Hodgson suggested. McNair found that half of Sydney radio owners always tuned to their favourite station.<sup>148</sup> Whilst on average each radio set was in use for four and three quarter hours a day, for the most part the families he questioned listened to just two different stations a day. In Sydney the stations most listened to were 2UW (26.9%), 2GB (22.8%) and 2UE (19.5%). These three stations dominated Sydney listening. By contrast the total for the ABC stations was 13.7%, split between 2BL (7.6%) and 2FC (6.1%). This meagre share was greatly boosted by the listening habits of the financially well off, amongst whom the ABC stations had a 34% combined audience share, falling to just 7% amongst the least well

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<sup>147</sup> WAC E1/317, 18 June 1936, letter Isabel Hodgson to Graves.

<sup>148</sup> McNair, pp. 315-6.

off.<sup>149</sup> McNair concluded that ‘a majority of listeners of all economic grades usually prefer programmes of a more popular type than those provided by the national stations’.<sup>150</sup> In July 1936 McNair’s analysis, and Hodgson’s observations, suggested that, on the evidence of Sydney, the remainder of the decade might be one of struggle for the ABC. Hodgson encouraged Graves to offer whatever assistance he could to help ‘strike a blow for national broadcasting’.<sup>151</sup>

With the benefit of decades of hindsight it is possible to see that what Australia’s B stations were developing was consistent with the development of daytime radio the world over. The tone of Australia’s commercial stations was friendly, their shows presented by men like Norman Banks of Melbourne’s 3KZ, the ‘ordinary, fellow next door’, full of friendly common sense advice offered in programmes such as *Help Thy Neighbour* and *Husbands and Wives*, Banks was ‘just another member of the family, the ordinary man with no pretensions - leaning over the backyard fence, chatting’.<sup>152</sup> This presented a stark challenge to any broadcaster appreciative of, and adopting, the more formal style of the BBC where the Empire announcer Robert Dougall recalled that ‘announcers then were very different from the jolly chaps we know today’, rather they were ‘anonymous, indeed almost indistinguishable one from another’.<sup>153</sup> As late as 1937 Noel Ashbridge, the BBC Chief Engineer, was writing that a ‘friendly’ tone was out of place: ‘there is far too much of the “motor salesman” or “hotel receptionist” and not enough confidence’.<sup>154</sup> The BBC was not itself wholly free from the influence of commercial competition, despite its domestic monopoly. From 1933 Radio Luxembourg and Radio Normandie attracted audiences to their ‘light’ programmes, dominated by recordings of popular music, particularly on Sundays when an adherence to Reithian values dictated that the BBC offer was more serious and the available

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<sup>149</sup> McNair, p. 324.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 411-2.

<sup>151</sup> WAC E1/317, 18 June 1936, letter Isabel Hodgson to Graves.

<sup>152</sup> Johnson, *Unseen Voice*, p. 73.

<sup>153</sup> Robert Dougall, *In and Out of the Box* (London: Collins, 1973), pp. 48-53

<sup>154</sup> Emma Robertson, ‘The Isolated Men in the Back of Beyond’: Masculinity and the BBC Empire Service, 1932–45’, *Gender & History*, Vol.29 No.2 August 2017, (292–308), pp 298-300.

audience was high. Like the commercial stations of Australia and New Zealand what they offered was what the British listener 'really wanted'. By 1935 it was estimated that on a Sunday Radio Luxembourg might attract one in two British listeners. In response the BBC sought to prevent its stars appearing on the 'continental' stations, reassuring itself with higher audiences to its service on other days of the week.<sup>155</sup> The challenge presented to the BBC by commercial radio was considerably less than in Australia but rooted in the same clash of broadcasting cultures. The struggles of the public service broadcasters might, then, be considerable, but might be shared. The BBC offered some, if limited, access to what Conder characterised its embarrassment of cultural riches. Pan-Tasman co-operation was greater, the ABC and NZBB sharing information on a host of matters - from identifying the most appropriate locally available technology, to hiring the best available artists and speakers. Rights were shared, visits arranged to new studio buildings, recommendations given as to new recording apparatus, requests met for administrative support. When George Bernard Shaw visited New Zealand his only broadcast speech was shared with the ABC. Shaw, disregarding avoidance of 'controversy', declared New Zealand to be the leading communist nation outside the Soviet Union. Conder was delighted, Shaw had been 'as pleasantly outrageous as everybody hoped he would be.'<sup>156</sup> Both the ABC and NZBB, like the BBC, aspired to be the home of broadcasts of significant national or Imperial events.

## **Sport**

At the heart of this thesis lies an analysis of the impact on senses of national and pan-British identity of a series of such broadcast events, events that dominated the schedule, were framed as 'historic', events the cultural significance of which appeared to defy criticism, events happening in

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<sup>155</sup> Briggs, II, pp. 54-55 & 361-5.

<sup>156</sup> ANZ R3024706: Correspondence with ABC 1934, voluminous correspondence between March and May 1934, 7 March 1934, Hands to Conder; 7 March 1934, TW Bearup (ABC Manager for Victoria) to Hands; 13 April 1934, Hands to Conder; 16 April 1934, Conder to Hands; ANZ R3024707: Correspondence with ABC 1935, 13 February 1935, Conder to Hands; 2 April 1935, Hands to Conder; 17 April 1935, Hands to Conder; Downes & Harcourt, p. 94.

the moment, for which listeners might gather to listen. These offered particular opportunities to the national broadcast networks, whether state ceremonial occasions such as the broadcast from the Cenotaph, or major sports events.<sup>157</sup> As we have seen in broadcast coverage of the Melbourne Cup, and will now examine further, nothing in the world of broadcasting in Australia and New Zealand in the 1930s created 'broadcast events' as regularly as sporting competition. Before examining broadcast coverage of sport we might, though, reflect on the role sport already played in British Imperial culture and the place it occupied in the cultures of Australia and New Zealand.

In the British world, as Richard Holt notes, sporting competition between the constituent units of the Empire was 'thought to help create a climate of relations that would bind the empire together', it enabled a 'permissible' expression of 'a legitimate sense of dominion pride and independence within the wider imperial framework'.<sup>158</sup> The appeal of sports differed from territory to territory but there was little doubt as to which sports excited greatest national interest. In Australia, whilst many sports flourished in their respective heartlands, the sport played across all States was cricket, the appeal of which ticked many boxes. On the one hand it might be seen as the most 'Imperial' of sports, redolent of connections to and an affection for 'the Old Country,' on the other it appealed to 'a sharply democratic 'Jack is as good as his master' attitude', it thus offered opportunities for 'the lower class immigrant to beat England whilst appealing to the British establishment in Australia as an imperial sport'.<sup>159</sup> In New Zealand cricket was seen as 'quintessentially English', 'genteel' and unable to compete with rugby as the focus for the collective national sporting passion.<sup>160</sup> James Belich argues that the passion for rugby 'incorporated the notions of New Zealand military excellence, and racial homogeneity and

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<sup>157</sup> Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz, *Media Events: The Live Broadcasting of History* (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992), pp. 5-17.

<sup>158</sup> Richard Holt, *Sport and the British* (Oxford: OUP, 1992), p. 212.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 231-3.

<sup>160</sup> Belich, *Paradise Reforged*, p. 373.

superiority; it reflected and reinforced a 20th century reassertion of masculinity.<sup>161</sup> In so doing it became part of the essence of 'Better Britain', 'proving both Britishness and superiority with every victory over a fellow Dominion and the Mother Country'. If cricket was a resolutely English game then rugby, played by all of the nations of the British Isles, was surely the most British, and how better to prove Better Britishness than by being better than other Britons at the most British of games? The role each played in creating or affirming a sense of national identity spoke to what John Hoberman has termed 'sportive nationalism', sporting success in international competition functioning as 'an instrument of national self-assertion...national prestige...national vitality.'<sup>162</sup>

Yet whilst this is unquestionably one lens through which the successes of Australia's cricketers or New Zealand's rugby players might be viewed, what resulted from such competition in these sports was less 'fully independent nationalism' and more a 'collective identity'.<sup>163</sup> Richard Cashman develops this concept, arguing that what was at play, in the context of Australian sport, was performance in front of what Graeme Davidson terms an 'imaginary grandstand', in which are sat the peoples of the world witnessing and applauding Australian national sporting achievement. Prominent among them were always, Cashman argues, the English, and those from the wider British world, partly because these were the nations Australians most wanted to beat, partly because comparisons with the English helped define Australians' sense of national prestige. Sporting success against, or in, England, simply mattered more, for to score a century at Lords, or like Jack Crawford in 1933 to win the singles title at Wimbledon, was not only to triumph at the 'home' of the sport, but to do so in front of the English media and spectators, such demonstrations of superiority simply had to be recognised and acknowledged.<sup>164</sup> That Australian success against

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<sup>161</sup> Belich, *Paradise Reforged*, p. 387-8.

<sup>162</sup> John Hoberman, 'Sport and Ideology in the post-Communist Age', in *The Changing Politics of Sport*, ed by Lincoln Allison (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993), pp. 15-36.

<sup>163</sup> Belich, *Paradise Reforged*, p. 387-8.

<sup>164</sup> Richard Cashman, *Sport in the National Imagination* (Sydney: Walla Walla Press, 2002), p. 102; Alan Clarke and John Clarke, 'Highlights and Action Replays' in J.A. Hargreaves ed. *Sport, Culture and Ideology* (London: Routledge, Keegan and Paul, 1982), p. 80.

England was prioritised in cricket can be seen from the attention paid to competitions between the countries, to the 'Ashes' series, of which there were four in the 1930s, two in England, two in Australia. By stark contrast cricket competition against New Zealand was relegated to a sideshow, Australia did not tour New Zealand for 18 years after 1927-28. Yet this did not signal a lack of interest in Australian cricket in New Zealand, particularly in matches between Australia and England, an interest Cashman characterises an 'obsession', the New Zealand press, 'with very few exceptions', appearing, from an Australian perspective, to support the English, itself a fascinating indicator of the complexities of relationships between the Dominions and metropole. Yet when it came to rugby, matters were very different. The dominance of the All Blacks in both codes saw Australian fixtures against New Zealand enjoy high status.<sup>165</sup> An 'imaginary grandstand' seating the rugby playing world, and again the English, would be impressed by any Australian victory in such a contest. However partisan the celebrations, the contests themselves, then, constantly reminded participants and spectators of their shared cultural connection with other Britons, not least because the most British of the sports the British played were scarcely played by anyone else. In sporting contests 'imperial sentiment' persisted and 'proved surprisingly resilient', a large part of the endurance resulting from the ritual nature of the competition, repeated year after year, building a tradition, chalking up records to be broken, something to be anticipated and reflected upon.<sup>166</sup> In the broadcast age these sporting contests became part of the calendrical procession of the great 'broadcast events', and as such were eagerly awaited.

Sporting broadcasts, from the off, drew huge audiences of all ages, sexes and dispositions. In 1930 the author Winifred Holtby, wrote excitedly in the BBC's *Radio Times* of listening to a football commentary for the first time.<sup>167</sup> America audiences for sport were phenomenal. It was estimated

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<sup>165</sup> Cashman, *Sport in the National Imagination*, pp. 137-9.

<sup>166</sup> Richard White, Hsu-Ming Teo, 'Popular Culture', in *Australia's Empire*, ed. by Schreuder & Ward (Oxford: OUP, 2008), pp. 350-1.

<sup>167</sup> 'Sports for the Slothful, or Football in the Dining-room', *Radio Times*, 21 February 1930, p. 437.

that in 1927 50 million listeners had heard the boxing match between Jack Dempsey and Gene Tunney, one store claimed to have sold \$90 000 worth of radio equipment to people wanting to hear it. Susan Douglas argues that through such events the reach of radio 'outstripped anything the newspaper had been able to do in terms of nation building on a psychic, imaginative level.'<sup>168</sup> Listeners were made aware that there were millions of others listening, sharing the same emotions.<sup>169</sup> In 'constituting an audience, a public' for such events, Lesley Johnson argues that radio 'brought together' even, in a sense, 'created', the nation.<sup>170</sup> At the dawn of the broadcast age rugby was already established as the national sport of New Zealand. It appealed across all classes, from top to bottom.<sup>171</sup> Two victorious tours of the British Isles by the national team had established both New Zealand as the dominant force in rugby, and the pitch as a stage on which New Zealand's character might be expressed. The first, in 1905-06, saw the 'All Blacks' win 34 of the 35 games played. When the All Blacks returned in 1924-25 the 'Invincibles' won every match.<sup>172</sup> It was during that tour that broadcasting established its place in the national sporting consciousness of New Zealand. In the early hours of 4 January 1925 Clive Drummond had stayed at the microphone of the Dominion Radio Company to relay the result of the match against England. Yet as it reached its climax the line from London faded. Taking a calculated chance Drummond called the match for the All Blacks by the last score he had heard, 17-11: 'I risked it...turned out it was.' The score, chalked on the sides of railway engines, crossed the country before the newspapers had been delivered.<sup>173</sup> As the *Evening Post* noted: 'there were not many who by 7 on Sunday morning had not heard the score either as a result of wireless broadcasting or by word of mouth, and all were feeling elated at the victory'.<sup>174</sup> For Patrick Day 'this initial pairing of

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<sup>168</sup> Douglas, pp. 24 & 205.

<sup>169</sup> Johnson, *Unseen Voice*, pp. 168-9.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 195.

<sup>171</sup> Belich, *Paradise Reforged*, p. 383.

<sup>172</sup> Greg Ryan, 'A Tale of Two Dinners: New Zealand Rugby and the Embrace of Empire, 1919-32', *International Journal of the History of Sport*, 2011 8:10 (1409-1425), p. 1410.

<sup>173</sup> Day, pp. 53-45; Downes & Harcourt, p. 16.

<sup>174</sup> 'Unconquered: All Blacks Defeat England', *Evening Post*, 5 January 1925 p. 3.

<<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/EP19250105.2.19.1>> [Accessed: 24 February 2025]

broadcasting and rugby is not incidental. By waiting up for a rugby test result, Drummond was illustrating that whilst broadcasting itself was a new and even revolutionary activity, there was no intention to link it with other than the 'established verities of New Zealand culture.'<sup>175</sup>

The framework for domestic rugby competition in New Zealand was matches between representative regional teams. The regional structure of national New Zealand broadcasting to some extent mirrored that of rugby union and within the YA network it fell to the nearest station to arrange coverage of a significant match, this coverage being made available to all the other YA stations.<sup>176</sup> The regional Rugby Unions, from the outset, understanding their position in New Zealand society, were robust in their dealings with broadcasters, whose broadcasts were initially seen as a threat to gate receipts. In August 1930 the *Auckland Star* reported the story of a rugby fan who'd not seen much of the game from a crowded enclosure at the ground, comparing notes with a friend who'd listened on the radio and concluding: 'if you got all that by wireless, then I'm going to follow the next big game the same way.'<sup>177</sup> The 1930 tour of the British team came, then, at a time of tension between broadcasting and the Rugby Unions.<sup>178</sup> This came to a head when the Canterbury Union threatened to refuse 3YA permission to broadcast from the Second Test. Outrage followed, expressed in letters to the press in terms making clear the role broadcasting now played in national life: 'it is the crippled, the blind and the sick...who are being robbed of a great pleasure.'<sup>179</sup> In the aftermath, and in order to guarantee future access, the YA stations were to agree to relationships with the RFUs that put all other sports at a disadvantage. The terms demanded by the Unions varied and extended beyond financial compensation. In Auckland the

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<sup>175</sup> Day, p. 54.

<sup>176</sup> ANZ R22011282, 5 July 1937, Hands to Station Manager 1YA.

<sup>177</sup> Hoar, p. 145.

'The Test Broadcast', *Auckland Star*, 1 August 1930, p. 15.

<<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/AS19300801.2.182>> [Accessed: 24 February 2025]

<sup>178</sup> Day, pp. 113-118; Hoar, pp. 145-7.

<sup>179</sup> Football Broadcasts, To the Editor', *Press*, 26 July 1930, p. 19.

<<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/CHP19300726.2.113.5>> [Accessed: 24 February 2025]

arrangement for 1933 required of the NZBB a commitment to broadcast the list of local rugby union fixtures 'during the news section' each Friday evening.<sup>180</sup> In April 1932 the Canterbury Union refused outright the offer of £50 for permission to broadcast matches under their control.<sup>181</sup> Broadcasters were banned until August the following year.<sup>182</sup> The deal, when agreed, carried a rider, that the commentator on matches at Lancaster Park should be Alan Allardyce: 'we consider that Mr Allardyce with the experience which he has had, is a very suitable man for this position'. 3YA had awkwardly already contracted a teacher at Christchurch Boys High School.<sup>183</sup> In April 1933 the Otago Union agreed to grant permission to broadcast on two conditions, the first being that 'the announcer be approved by the ORFU', the second that 'rugby matches only, except with the express permission of the union, be broadcasted during the football season.'<sup>184</sup> This would have obvious implications for all other sports, yet these conditions were accepted.<sup>185</sup> Indeed Hands felt obliged to request of the ORFU that 'there would be no objection to breaking in at suitable times on the football broadcast to permit of a commentary on a racing event.'<sup>186</sup> These represented considerable editorial concessions, but at a time of competition with the B stations the upside of a close association with the national sport for the national broadcaster was clear, by 1938 Shelley, now Director of the NBS, could write to Moses of coverage of that year's All Blacks' tour of Australia that 'we have a tremendous audience, because as you are doubtless aware, practically every person in New Zealand is a football fan of the deepest dye'.<sup>187</sup> Broadcasting offered both a chance for individual listeners to follow matches, but also for them to come together, to listen

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<sup>180</sup> ANZ R3024702, 12 April 1933, Hands to Station Director 1YA.

<sup>181</sup> ANZ R3024702, 26 April 1932, Sec. Canterbury Rugby Union to General Manager.

<sup>182</sup> ANZ R3024702, 19 August cable Sec. Canterbury Rugby Union to Hands.

<sup>183</sup> ANZ R3024702, 23 August 1933, Sec. Canterbury Rugby Union to Station Director 3YA; 25 August 1933, Hands to Sec. Canterbury Rugby Union.

<sup>184</sup> ANZ R3024702, 23 March 1933, Hands to Sec. Otago Rugby Union; 4 April 1933, Sec. Otago Rugby Union to Hands.

<sup>185</sup> ANZ R3024702, Hands to Station Director 4YA.

<sup>186</sup> ANZ R3024702, 12 April 1933, Hands to Sec. Otago Rugby Union.

<sup>187</sup> NAA SP1558/2, 30513776 Sporting – Rugby Union, 26 July 1938, Shelley to Moses.

with friends, as Peter Hoar observes in New Zealand a rugby match 'might fill a room with people enjoying the social occasion as much as the broadcast itself'.<sup>188</sup>



**BROADCAST OF ALL BLACKS' OPENING MATCH.**—Members of the Pioneer Sports Club listening in at Christchurch on Saturday afternoon to a running description of the Rugby match between New Zealand and New South Wales.

Fig. 20: "Broadcast of All Blacks' Opening Match", *Press*, 27 June 1932, p. 13

In 1930, by the time of the Fourth Test, in Wellington, it being anticipated that there would be great demand for tickets, 'over 2 000 seats' were advertised at the Winter Show building, to hear the broadcast of the game.<sup>189</sup> The listening audience was expected to be large, in Gisborne it was predicted that 'most owners of wireless sets' would be 'listening-in'.<sup>190</sup> In the aftermath of another New Zealand victory the Prime Minister, G. W. Forbes, at the farewell dinner for the British tourists - having noted the value of the tour 'in bringing the people of the two countries together', it had been one 'which maintained the traditions of British love of sport' - spoke of listeners 'in every little hamlet where there was a wireless set', of 'many thousands listening in to every move and

<sup>188</sup> Hoar, p. 151.

<sup>189</sup> 'Advertisements', *Dominion*, 9 August 1930, p. 4.

<<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/DOM19300809.2.9.7>> [Accessed: 24 February 2025]

<sup>190</sup> 'Howlers located', *Poverty Bay Herald*, 7 August 1930, p. 8.

<<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/PBH19300807.2.99>> [Accessed: 24 February 2025]

kick'.<sup>191</sup> It was little wonder that in 1938 Shelley was delighted at the 'close association' his broadcaster had with such a 'wonderful team'.<sup>192</sup>

In New Zealand this link between the national broadcaster and the Rugby Unions had a consequence for other sports, and particularly for the rival football code, rugby league. In the British world of sport rugby league was a sport of the 'working man', with close connections in both Australia and New Zealand to the labour movement and the Irish Catholic community, indeed Belich argues that the growth in the appeal of rugby league in early twentieth century New Zealand might be associated with the simultaneous rise of working class consciousness, as 'a denomination of dissent'.<sup>193</sup> The Rugby Unions saw it as a rival and sought to use their deals with the NZBB to stifle it. When the April 1933 agreement with the Otago Union ceded control over which other sports might be broadcast on 4YA during the football season, Hands pointed out to the 4YA Director that this effectively meant that the ORFU could dictate whether any rugby league fixtures could be broadcast.<sup>194</sup> A consequence of such concessions was that rugby league was not a sport much covered by the NZBB, or the NBS, indeed in 1938, when Moses proposed offering coverage of the Australian tour of the New Zealand rugby league side, which he assumed would interest 'quite a large section of the New Zealand public', Shelley, whilst grateful, declined. It was 'unlikely' that the NBS 'should be broadcasting any of the league teams matches'.<sup>195</sup> In New Zealand rugby league, then, was a sport which presented an opportunity for the commercial stations, as we have seen featuring in the output of 3ZM. It became a feature of the popular 1ZB offer, indeed celebrations of the second anniversary of the founding of the Friendly Road

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<sup>191</sup> 'Battles Over', *Dominion*, 11 August 1930, p. 12

<<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/DOM19300811.2.100>> [Accessed: 24 February 2025]

<sup>192</sup> NAA SP1558/2, 30513776, 26 July 1938, Shelley to Moses.

<sup>193</sup> Belich, *Paradise Reforged*, p. 384.

<sup>194</sup> ANZ R3024702, Hands to Sec. Otago Rugby Union; 4 April 1933, Sec. Otago Rugby Union to Hands; 12 April 1933, Hands to Station Director 4YA.

<sup>195</sup> NAA SP1558/2, 30513776 Sporting – Rugby Union, 19 May, Moses to Shelley, 31 May 1938, Shelley to Moses.

movement, addressed by Colin Scrimgeour and attracting over 10,000 people, were held at Auckland's Carlaw Park, the venue having been donated by the Auckland Rugby League 'reports of whose matches had been relayed every Saturday during the season by station 1ZB'.<sup>196</sup>

When in 1935 Walter Conder had laid out his assessment of the successes to date of the ABC there was one area he considered an unquestioned triumph: 'descriptions of sporting events...ever high in popular estimation, for in Australia sport plays a remarkably large part in national life.'<sup>197</sup> Ken Inglis notes that when the first ABC Annual Report was published amongst the key characteristics of Australian society which broadcasting had to recognise and reflect was 'the keen national interest in sport'. The importance of sport in Australian society and the ease with which sporting partisanship can be associated with separatist nationalism led historians, notably W.F. Mandle, to see in Australian sporting competition the birth pangs of nationalism.<sup>198</sup> Yet the ABC's commitment to sport was combined with another, that its output should reflect 'our position as part of the British empire and British race'. The aspiration to do both gave cricket 'a singular importance', for cricket was not just a sport popular in every state and therefore 'the most suitable for interstate relays', it was also perceived as 'the most imperial.'<sup>199</sup> Lesley Johnson notes that in the national passion for cricket the sport 'became central' to the sales of radio equipment in Australia 'as the new advances in broadcast descriptions were hailed each year as promoting more and more widespread interest in the game'. Radio traders broadcast the Test matches to large crowds thronging inside and outside their shops.<sup>200</sup> Scoreboards erected outside stores caused traffic chaos, publicans found that having a radio in a bar boosted sales of beer.<sup>201</sup> It was through

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<sup>196</sup> Day, p. 189; 'The Friendly Road Anniversary Celebrations', *New Zealand Herald*, 3 December 1934, p. 12. <<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/NZH19341203.2.148>> [Accessed: 24 February 2025]

<sup>197</sup> WAC E1/315/4, 'Broadcasting through a continent, how it is done in Australia', by W T Conder, General Manager, ABC

<sup>198</sup> Mandle, 'Cricket and Australian nationalism', pp.225-45.

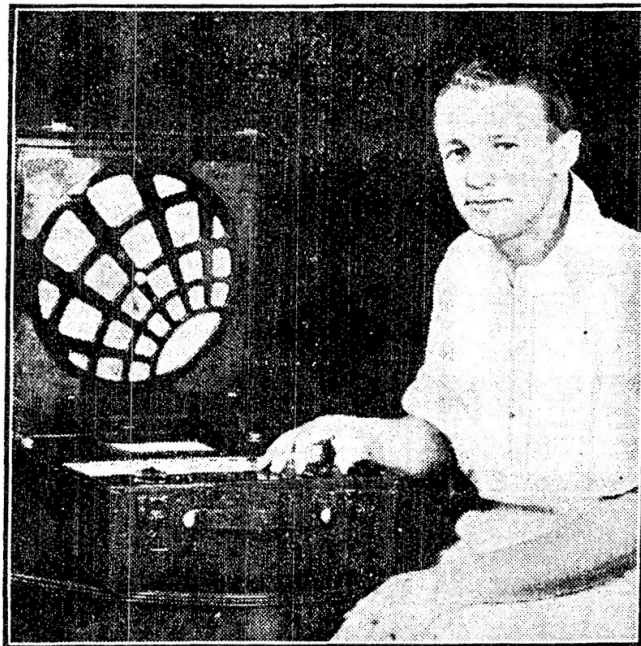
<sup>199</sup> Inglis, *ABC*, p. 36.

<sup>200</sup> Johnson, *Unseen Voice*, p. 43. (citing *Labor Daily*, 9 January 1926, 3 November 1926, 1 December 1928).

<sup>201</sup> Bridget Griffen-Foley, 'Sporting Chances: Sport on Australian Commercial Radio', *Sporting Traditions*, Vol 26, 1 November 2006, p. 40.

overnight coverage of the 1930 Australian cricket tour of England that Oswald Anderson had been able to build his early network of commercial stations stretching across Australia.<sup>202</sup>

In 1932, as Hands and Williams had been discussing, the ABC had the rights to cover one of the most celebrated and controversial series of matches in the history of the game - the 1932-33 Ashes series, England's cricket tour of Australia, in which the Australian national hero, Don Bradman, was expected to make hay.



Don Bradman, the Australian cricketer, listening in on his portable wireless set.

Fig. 21: 'Don Bradman', *Press*, 16 December 1932, p. 27.

To counter this the English captain, Douglas Jardine, developed a notorious tactic, 'Bodyline', bowling at the batsman's body to restrict his opportunities to strike out. Interest in the series reached a peak in the middle of the afternoon of 14 January 1933 when a ball bowled by England's Harold Larwood struck the Australian captain Bill Woodfull above the heart. Woodfull staggered away clutching his chest, 'listeners all over Australia could hear spectators hooting, share their

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<sup>202</sup> Geeves, pp. 65-67.

outrage, and ask neighbours in to listen.<sup>203</sup> What broadcasting offered ‘a huge range of people’, reflected the ABC commentator Alan McGilvray, was the chance to experience all the emotions of a match ‘while it was actually taking place’, a ‘luxury’ denied them in the past, by dint of cost or isolation, in the process broadcasting itself gave cricket ‘a new exposure’.<sup>204</sup>

Coverage of cricket helped shape Australian broadcasting in two ways. First it tapped a national passion for sport at a time when Australian cricket was enjoying a ‘golden’ era, led by Bradman, a national hero for the ages. Second, through the calendar of regular competition with England, particularly through coverage of matches in England taking place outside hours of work, a national culture of listening was created - in all its joyful absurdity. To understand just how through broadcasting the sport and the medium became embedded in Australian cultural life and identity, we might look at coverage of two Test series, the Australian tours of England in 1930 and 1934.

In 1930 broadcasters in Australia following the progress of a match in England worked from cabled reports costing six shillings per word, posing immediate questions as to whether this was worth the outlay, and so at 1am on the second day of the First Test the manager of 3DB leaned over the shoulder of his announcer and asked listeners directly: ‘would you like us to keep going? Our telephone number is F2118’. Within five minutes calls ‘swamped all the suburban exchanges’, they came from across Victoria, from Queensland, New South Wales and South Australia.<sup>205</sup> Some came from parties where 50 to 100 listeners had gathered for the occasion, Charlie Vaude, an entertainer and the 3DB host, adapted his latest song ‘How Do You Do’ to allow mention of the locations in which parties were taking place. Whilst the precise audiences for these broadcasts were not recorded they were sufficiently popular for ‘Test Match’ parties with food and drink to

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<sup>203</sup> Inglis, *ABC*, p. 36.

<sup>204</sup> Alan McGilvray, *The Game is Not the Same* (London: David & Charles, 1986), p. 54.

<sup>205</sup> NAA SP1558/2, 30513777, news cutting ‘3DB Will Broadcast tests’, *Herald*, 6 February 1934; Griffen-Foley, *Sporting Chances*, p. 38

become a feature of future Test coverage from England.<sup>206</sup> 2UW pioneered a 'ball-by-ball' commentary constructed from cabled reports. As the series progressed and audiences grew the ABC approached 2UW for the rights to use the cabled information itself - on the understanding that 2UW had already announced the scores.<sup>207</sup> The coverage lasted all night, attracting listeners across Australia, this at a time when BBC coverage of Test cricket in England was limited to a handful of 10 minute reports, at lunch, tea and the close of play.<sup>208</sup>



*TWO O'CLOCK IN THE MORNING.—The enthusiasm of Australians over the Test cricket is illustrated by this picture, showing guests at Kosciuszko listening in to the scores of the third Test match. Kosciuszko is one of Australia's popular winter pleasure resorts.*

Fig. 22: 'Two O'Clock in the Morning', *Auckland Star*, 18 July 1934, p. 5.

When the Australian team returned to England in 1934, the ABC worked in partnership with a commercial chain, comprising 2UW, 3DB, 4BC, 5AD and 6ML, to arrange the cable service, splitting the costs between them. They again worked from cabled reports to keep audiences up to date

<sup>206</sup> 'Synthetic Test Cricket', The Museum of Lost Things.

<<https://www.museumoflost.com/synthetic-test-cricket/>> [Accessed: 24 February 2025]

'Test Match Humour', *Northern Star*, 1 July 1930, p.8

<<https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/94140838>> [Accessed: 19 August 2025]

'The Social Round', *Telegraph*, 9 June 1934, p. 18.

<<https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/182889204>> [Accessed: 19 August 2025]

<sup>207</sup> Griffen-Foley, *Sporting Chances*, pp. 38-39.

<sup>208</sup> WAC R30/3363/1, 7 March 1930, OB Director to Midland Regional Director; 6 August 1930, Eye-Witness accounts, July, Miss Wilson to Miss Seymour.

with developments at a match, BBC short-wave radio coverage being unreliable: 'it seems almost impossible to expect decent reception'.<sup>209</sup> The BBC Empire Service nonetheless made some coverage available: 'eye-witness accounts at the luncheon and tea intervals and at the close of play each day, with possible short-period 'ball-by-ball' commentaries up to half an hour in length'.<sup>210</sup> It made 'composite' recordings of daily accounts as half hour programmes broadcast on the service to Australia.<sup>211</sup> The BBC offered both the ABC and the commercial stations help at the grounds with 'technical facilities'.<sup>212</sup> For British domestic listeners, 'in view of the importance attached to Test Matches, particularly this year', the BBC upped its game, offering British listeners occasional 10 minute 'flashes of running commentary' delivered by Howard Marshall, establishing himself as the voice of English cricket.<sup>213</sup> By contrast in 1934 listeners in Brisbane were being invited to follow the play from start to finish, to 'switch on the radiator and settle down in cosy armchairs to be thrilled until the early hours of the morning' by 'ball to ball' descriptions. They could choose between 4BC or 4BK or the ABC relay on 4QG. All offered coverage of the whole match, pulled together in different ways from the cabled reports. If they dozed off listeners to 4BK would be alerted to an event of significance by the sound of a siren 'to attract the attention and bring the wanderer back to the speaker'. In Melbourne listeners to the 3DB service were being offered similar alerts, but by means so eccentric as to enter Australian cricket folklore, for in 1934 it was the 'Ricketty Kate' experience that advertised the 3DB output. 'Ricketty Kate' was a surreal doll with eyes that lit up. The 3DB studio had an invited audience and entertainment, again from Charlie Vaude, and they were alerted to significant events at the Test by interventions from 'Ricketty Kate', the illumination of whose eyes might inspire an invitation to sing the 'Ricketty Kate' song: 'we don't worry, we don't care, who's afraid of the big brown bear', as compere and

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<sup>209</sup> NAA SP1558/2, 30513777, 8 February 1934, memo re. Test Cricket Service.

<sup>210</sup> WAC R30/3363/1, 8 February 1934, EPD to E&F Ex.

<sup>211</sup> WAC R30/3363/1, 13 April 1934. EPD to EPD to E&F Ex.

<sup>212</sup> WAC R30/3363/1, 8 February 1934, EPD to E&F Ex; 31 May 1934, DEFS, Graves to Madden, memo with timings of broadcasts from Test matches.

<sup>213</sup> WAC R30/3363/1, 5 January 1934, OB Director, Cock, to DE.

audience waited for confirmation from the cables of the latest news, good or bad. It was a display of audience participation acknowledged at the time as notably ridiculous, and all great fun.



Fig. 23: 3DB advert, *The Herald*, 20 June 1934, p. 4.

Alternatively, listeners across Australia could tune to more stylistically conventional ABC commentary, this was, however, not delivered by an eye-witness commentator in England but by one sat in a Sydney studio describing events reported by cable. This was 'synthetic' commentary. The process behind it was meticulously described in ABC publicity - the reporters in England sending hugely detailed coded cables on the latest developments, a team in Sydney 'under the supervision of an experienced cricketer' filling out the details of the action, a commentator speaking into a 'mike...with a special hood' which made the commentary sound authentic, the commentator having beside him 'three blobs of wood which make different noises when tapped with a pencil', intended to represent the noise of the ball hitting the bat. Applause records mimicked the sounds of the crowd.<sup>214</sup> The ABC approach was rooted in a desire, whatever the

<sup>214</sup> 'Radio Interests', *The Telegraph*, 4 July 1934, p. 19.

<<https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/179929549>> [Accessed: 19 August 2025]

technical constraints, to give listeners as near as possible a conventional experience of listening to commentary on a cricket match, its success was dependent, it told itself at the outset, on 'careful working' - it 'could easily become ludicrous'. Whilst the sound effects would give listeners 'the thrill of feeling that they are listening to an actual description', the ABC was anxious that they should be informed 'over the air and in the press' that this was not actually the case, whatever the success of the imaginative venture the ABC had no desire to be accused of 'deception'.<sup>215</sup>

These 'synthetic' commentaries were received, Conder noted in a letter to Cecil Graves at the BBC Empire Service, 'with appreciation far beyond anything which we anticipated...interest in Test Cricket in Australia would probably amaze you...more than half our total population, I should think, regularly listen to our descriptions of the games until well after midnight if not actually til the drawing of stumps at 3.30am.'<sup>216</sup> Conder was sufficiently proud of the 'synthetic' approach to offer the BBC a special feature on the way it worked.<sup>217</sup> It was entirely typical of the BBC reception of such ideas from Dominion broadcasters that this was turned down.<sup>218</sup> Writing to Moses to congratulate him on the role he had played Conder asserted that this had been 'the most extensive, elaborate and altogether successful sporting broadcast which has yet been carried out in any part of the world'.<sup>219</sup> The 'synthetic' approach was to be carried on even as short-wave reception from England improved. Amongst the ABC commentators in 1938 was Alan McGilvray, former captain of New South Wales, beginning a broadcasting career spanning 50 years, becoming himself the 'voice of Australian cricket'. Yet of all his achievements, of all the technical innovations seen in those 50 years, nothing, he felt, writing in 1985, could match 'the masterful improvisation and the sheer daring which those synthetic Tests embraced'. If there was something absurd in his observation that so good was the work of the sound effects team that in all his years of attending

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<sup>215</sup> NAA SP1558/2, 30513777, 8 March 1934, memo Horner to Conder, the 1934 test Cricket broadcasts.

<sup>216</sup> WAC R30/3363/1, 18 July 1934, Conder to Graves.

<sup>217</sup> WAC R30/3363/1, 16 June 1934, cable Conder to London.

<sup>218</sup> WAC R30/3363/1, 20 June 1934, cable London to Sydney.

<sup>219</sup> SLNSW MLMSS, 7584/Box 6, 23 August 1934, Conder letter to Moses.

matches he had never 'known a crowd more animated', these broadcasts had required 'imagination and co-ordination of extraordinary depth', they were, he wrote, 'my highest experience in broadcasting.'<sup>220</sup> McGilvray described how he might, in a break from his commentary duties, wander down the road 'to one of the radio shops that operated in the city in those days' and mix with the crowds who had stopped to listen:

'...it became obvious to me that the small band of devotees listening was fairly emotionally involved in the Australian progress and the broadcasting bringing it to them. The fact that it was emanating from a room a few hundred yards up the road didn't seem to matter...It was magic. It was broadcasting as an art form.'<sup>221</sup>

Sporting contests were then broadcast 'events' in every sense, not merely convening national audiences but doing so in ways that reflected the role broadcasters sought to occupy in society. In New Zealand the matches of the All Blacks rugby union team were to be heard on the national public service broadcaster, aspiring to play the same unifying role in national life as the team. New Zealand's B stations, in the years before 1936, played a more specific, local role, filling the gaps, and just as that might mean waking the district with a cheery greeting it might also mean offering coverage of those sports which were neglected elsewhere, notably rugby league. In Australia there was no question that a fascination for cricket was uniting the nation. In recognition public service and commercial broadcasters might come together to corral the raw data needed to offer more-or-less up to the minute coverage of events taking place on the other side of the world, even as the technologies of short-wave transmission made the reception of live commentary from the venue an unpredictable affair. The use made of this data demonstrated with gusto the different approaches Australian broadcasters had to the medium. Whilst the ABC created, in a studio thousands of miles from the action, a complex imaginative facsimile of a conventional live commentary, at the commercial stations a party might be in full swing, an all-night entertainment show interrupted by the ominous interventions of the eyes of a doll alerting listeners to something

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<sup>220</sup> McGilvray, pp. 56-58.

<sup>221</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 62.

of import. Both spoke to broadcasting as a vehicle for shared national celebration, both convened audiences real and imaginary, whether huddled by a radiator in an armchair or drinking and dining with friends, both used novel approaches to the possibilities of broadcasting, one sober, conventional, true to the established verities of British best practice, the other something slightly wild.

To return to the questions confronting broadcasters in the years 1932 to 1936 – what, then, was broadcasting? What social need did it fulfil? What responsibilities did broadcasters have? What role might broadcasting play in national cultural life? Broadcasting was many things, it entertained - all day long if listeners chose - but it also informed and educated, and if the latter was a less popular offer it could nonetheless be found. Broadcasting could be a national or Imperial unifier, through the celebration of great events, what became ‘broadcast events’. The social needs broadcasting filled were varied. National broadcasters might, in line with their understanding of their public service principles, offer listeners experiences of ‘higher’ culture, might offer the opportunity to attend a concert or to enjoy all the dramas of a sporting occasion whilst it was actually taking place, experiences denied to many in the past. But equally broadcasting could be unashamedly just good fun, on occasion in the tradition of British working class humour - Albert could visit the zoo (and get eaten by a lion), Stanley could join the nudists. Broadcasters understood that they had responsibilities but might interpret them very differently. The regulatory structures within which domestic radio developed in Australia and New Zealand had defined to a significant degree what broadcasting embraced. The requirements of the A class public service broadcasters, the expectations of education and ‘uplift’, limited its scope. This had opened a space for a B class, commercial, alternative, of which expectations were more relaxed and within which the possibilities of a new medium could be explored. In both Australia and New Zealand it seemed clear that there was less of a tradition of deference to the cultural tastes of the ‘establishment’, less respect for the anonymous ‘educated’ voice of the male announcer, more delight in the

'lowbrow', in the cheery 'Sunshine Girl'. Even in sport 'Rickety Kate' could give the measured tones of former Test cricketers a run for their money. In Australia the commercial stations were finding their feet, moving to offer a more national, networked, service in the years that followed. The ABC would have to decide how to react to what appeared an almost overwhelming audience preference for the commercial offer. In New Zealand an experiment was about to be launched, the creation of a reinvigorated national public service broadcaster under the dynamic leadership of a man of Reithian conviction, James Shelley, and alongside it the creation of a national commercial service, government owned, under the equally dynamic leadership of a man of differing convictions, Colin Scrimgeour. In neither was the government to find itself wholly in control of developments. In its near ubiquity radio broadcasting was convening huge audiences. Precisely how huge was, in the absence of audience research, impossible to judge. Yet through shared listening experiences, through community singing, through the charitable work of radio clubs, broadcasting had come to occupy a central place in the cultural lives of Australians and New Zealanders. The focus of such engagement might be local, perhaps very local, in Christchurch or Camperdown, or much larger, bringing the nation together for a family drama, for a rugby international, linking chilly nights in Australian homes to events transpiring on an English summer's afternoon - in so doing radio broadcasting was contributing to understandings of the properties a town, a city, a region or a nation might have in the imaginations of its inhabitants - it might be informing, even creating, a national or wider 'British' sensibility.

Charles Taylor's conception of the 'social imaginary', the way ordinary people 'imagine' their social surroundings, proposes, as we have seen, that this is informed by a 'common understanding', by 'common practices', is rooted in both everyday behaviours and shared 'images, stories, and legends'.<sup>222</sup> Such could be found in broadcast moments that brought listeners together, as on the

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<sup>222</sup> Taylor, 'Social Imaginary', p. 23.

day of the Melbourne Cup when, as *Women's Weekly* had observed, at Alice Springs the group around the radio would have 'very much the same feeling as the group that will be listening...in your home, your office, in the street, or in the place next door.'<sup>223</sup> They might equally be found in everyday engagements with broadcasters and broadcasting - the morning session from Sydney, Dinner Music, the 'friendly feeling' inspired by familiar announcers, the weekly invitation to join with others on 'The Friendly Road'. To return to Anderson's conception of the nation as an 'imagined' community, listeners could imagine themselves 'transported' by broadcasting to a Perth concert hall, to the Adelaide Oval, to Athletic Park in Wellington, to Lords in London, to share interests and enthusiasms with other listeners they had never met, and never would. That a radio station would appear to offer isolated listeners, through its signature sounds, through the voices of its announcers, 'a sense of belonging to a collective' was an 'extraordinary' consequence of radio listening.<sup>224</sup> For this to resonate, for listeners to continue to listen, these voices, these sounds, had to speak to something with which the listener identified.<sup>225</sup> This was recognised. The BBC announcers spoke in a house style that met the expectations of the BBC's listeners, and if in the popular mind they all sounded alike this was a 'tribute to their training...the BBC is one Corporation...it has many voices but one mouth'.<sup>226</sup> On state ceremonial occasions such a sense of formality might be expected, accepted as appropriate, but, as Conder had observed, there was a line to be trodden between 'correctness and dignity' and 'stilted' and 'elocutionary', even if the 'affability' of 'the B class stations', was to be avoided at the ABC at 'all costs'.<sup>227</sup> At the B stations 'affability' was the watchword as broadcasters sought to make the listener feel as if their radio was speaking to them as an individual, even a friend.<sup>228</sup> As we have seen in sports broadcasting

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<sup>223</sup> '3 mins 30 secs When Australia Stands Breathless', *The Australian Women's Weekly*, 30 October 1937, p. 3. <<https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/52247539>> [Accessed: 19 August 2025]

<sup>224</sup> Martin Shingler and Cindy Wieringa, *On Air: Methods and Meanings of Radio* (London: Arnold, 1998) pp. 128-30.

<sup>225</sup> Pete Wilby and Andy Conroy, *The Radio Handbook* (London: Routledge, 1994) pp. 130-131 & 139.

<sup>226</sup> Briggs II, p. 123 (quoting Announcement Editor memorandum of 13 November 1936)

<sup>227</sup> NAA, SP1558/2, 30513907 Programmes – Announcers, 17 March 1934, Walter Conder, draft memorandum to all States: Announcers.

<sup>228</sup> Johnson, *Unseen Voice*, p. 70-72.

Australian commercial stations might employ all the devices of light entertainment to enliven a cricket broadcast, at the ABC such was the similarity of approach to that of the BBC that in later years Alan McGilvray could, when the Australians were touring, seamlessly join the panel of the BBC domestic cricket commentators.

If a radio set offered a friendly, comforting, background noise much of the day - for four and three quarter hours each Sydney day - on occasions it commanded attention, and in the 1930s many of those occasions were sporting events. The popularity of sport drove sales of radio equipment and licences. Sport had offered broadcasting, and the nascent broadcasters, a way into the cultural life of the nation. The passions aroused by sport offered regular prompts for listeners to acquire, or reinforce, loyalties - to embellish or reaffirm their sense of personal, and collective, identity. Sport might, then, be argued to have incubated, or inflamed, partisan national sentiment, yet the sporting context within which international competition in the major sports of Australia and New Zealand took place was almost invariably 'imperial'. Even the 'Bodyline' controversy was ultimately framed as an offence by the English against 'British' values of sportsmanship.<sup>229</sup> In the 1930s rugby and cricket were sports scarcely played outside the boundaries of the British world. Defeating the English, or British, remained a high point of any sporting year. Sport had come to play a significant role in understandings of national identity, yet those understandings were complex, national pride and fellow feeling, yet also regular reminders of cultural ties to Britain and fellow Britons. Radio broadcasting played a central role in reinforcing such ties. In their deep engagement with such broadcasts listeners stepped beyond the passive role of 'listeners-in', for in the act of listening, in the knowledge that what you were hearing was being heard at that very moment by others around you, in your home, your street, your city, across your country, across the world, in the knowledge

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<sup>229</sup> Tony Collins, 'Australian Nationalism and Working-Class Britishness: The Case of Rugby League Football', in *History Compass*, Vol. 3, 2005; K. S. Inglis, 'Imperial cricket: Test matches between Australia and England, 1877-1900' in *Sport in History: The Making of Modern Sporting History*, ed. R. Cashman and M. McKernan (St Lucia, 1979), pp. 149-79.

that the emotions you were experiencing were being shared by so many others seen and unseen, lay a sense that this was more than mere witnessing - this was participation. The sense that listeners might be considered participants, and be encouraged to think of themselves as such, was something that broadcasters would develop as the decade progressed, it was to have a significant impact on the power that broadcasts might have over both listeners' engagement with the medium and on its capacity to shape their senses of personal and collective identity.

## CHAPTER THREE: 'THIS IS LONDON CALLING'



Fig. 24: BBC Broadcasting House, Empire Studio, 1934

The BBC Empire Service was launched at 09.30 GMT on 19 December 1932. The first words listeners heard, broadcast from the BBC transmitter at Daventry and directed towards Australia and New Zealand, were a friendly 'good evening everybody', spoken by the BBC Chairman, J.H.H. Whitley.<sup>1</sup> He was followed by John Reith, who summarised the BBC's objectives for the Service:

'If we succeed in dispelling some of the isolation and loneliness which is the lot of many of our kindred overseas; if we bring to them and others some share of the amenities of the home country and of metropolitan interests and culture which for one reason or another, may not be fully available; if we can induce among the constituent parts of the Empire a greater understanding and a greater sympathy; if we can broadcast at Home some programmes from overseas; if in general, as is our hope, the several far-scattered units of the Empire may be drawn closer together; then our efforts will be amply rewarded.'<sup>2</sup>

Whitley assured listeners that the BBC would 'spare no effort to make the service a real link between the homeland and the people overseas who share our heritage of speech and thought.'<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> WAC E4/6, 19<sup>th</sup> December 1932, Mr J.H.H. Whitley: speech on the inauguration of the Empire Service.

<sup>2</sup> *BBC Empire Broadcasting*, 2 Dec 1936 p. 2.

<sup>3</sup> WAC E4/6, 19<sup>th</sup> December 1932, Mr Whitley: speech on the inauguration of the Empire Service.

This chapter poses a number of questions and proposes answers. It asks why an Imperial radio service had been created, and why, given that the technology and the will existed for such a service to be developed elsewhere, it was based in London and created by the BBC. It examines the various rationales advanced at the time for its creation - the relief of isolation and loneliness and the spreading of greater understanding and sympathy between the constituent peoples and territories of the British Empire - observing that there was in all this a propaganda purpose. It asks who this radio service was aimed at, who exactly were 'our kindred overseas'? If one of its objectives was to share the 'amenities of the home country' how were 'metropolitan interests and culture' defined, by whom? It explores how, in broadcasts inviting participation from the Dominions, radio broadcasting supported notions of co-ownership of the Empire and its symbols, noting ways in which the geographic and cultural diversity of the British world were brought to life and the development of a pan-Imperial 'tradition' of linking the broadcasters of the Empire. This chapter examines in detail one recurring occasion on which such links were made in the early 1930s, the Christmas Day Empire programmes that culminated in a speech by the King, George V, each year from 1932 to 1935. Their message was rooted in a developing conceit, that the British were a 'family' and that at the head of that family was the Monarch. It examines reactions to these broadcasts, which brought together the sounds and voices of the British world for the world to admire, juxtaposed specifically for dramatic effect. It argues that nowhere, however, were these broadcasts more admired than by the British themselves, their scope and delivery being almost beyond comprehension, inspiring amazement at the wonders of broadcasting itself, at British mastery of this technology.

The first words spoken on the BBC Empire Service framed five explicit objectives. This chapter takes as its structure an examination of their delivery in the years to, and including, 1937, a watershed year after which improvements in technologies of reception and transmission made the rebroadcasting of material from London on domestic stations in Australia and New Zealand more

attractive, and when a change in BBC policy saw the focus of global broadcasting from London shift to programmes in languages other than English.

### **'Dispelling isolation and loneliness'**

Amongst the more celebrated promises of the radio age was, as we have seen, the banishment of isolation, and in the years that followed the launch of the Empire Service it was a sense of being far from 'home' that inspired listeners to write thousands of letters each year to the BBC, of people coming into their home 'just to listen to an English voice', of the 'unforgettable memories' conjured by 'the dear familiar street noises.'<sup>4</sup> This romantic view of listening to the Empire Service, to sounds of London, in locations with varying degrees of exoticism, was captured in illustrations in the BBC publication *World Radio*.

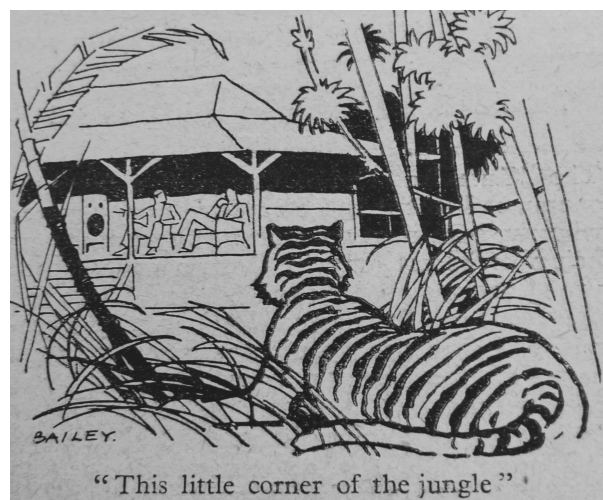


Fig. 25: 'This Little Corner of the Jungle', *World Radio*, 13 October 1933, p. 463.

Published letters heightened a sense of the immensity of the British world and the role the BBC might play in it. As a writer from the Western Australian goldfields wrote, radio offered an opportunity to be transported 'on wings of imagination and be with you.'<sup>5</sup> Yet a sense of the

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<sup>4</sup> WAC S24/4, letters from Mexico and Tennessee: 'Mailbag': A Programme of letters received from Outside the Empire'. Compiled by Cecil Madden. Empire Production, 16/17 April 1935.

<sup>5</sup> WAC S24/4, letter from 'The School House, Beria, Western Australia': Letters compiled by Cecil Madden for a *Radio Times* article.

capacity of broadcasting to reduce isolation was not merely felt by lonely or nostalgic ex-patriots, it was a factor shaping the embrace and development of the possibilities of broadcasting in both Australia and New Zealand, for beyond the isolation of individuals and communities broadcasting promised an end to the 'sundering' of peoples by 'fathomless oceans'.<sup>6</sup> As proposed by those first displays of wireless technology at the 1906 Christchurch Exhibition, New Zealand might not to be 'isolated and peripheral' but rather 'connected', through the progress of science might be achieved the 'the shrinking of the world.'<sup>7</sup> The promise began to be realised in 1927 when Stuart Hibberd's news bulletin had surprised Sydney listeners, yet Sydney broadcasters had themselves been making successful, if unpublicised, test transmissions to England since the beginning of that year.<sup>8</sup> On 5 September Amalgamated Wireless (Australia) (AWA) went a step further making a first scheduled broadcast.<sup>9</sup> It featured the chimes of the Sydney General Post Office and speakers including the Australian Prime Minister and Dame Nellie Melba. It was relayed by the BBC to listeners in Britain, by Marconi to listeners in India and South Africa and by RCA stations in Canada and America.<sup>10</sup> A 1927 Colonial Office Conference had encouraged the BBC itself to utilise the new technologies of broadcasting to create a short-wave service for expatriate men and women living 'in the bush' who were considered to need 'a sentimental link' with life at 'home' and help 'to overcome their isolated loneliness'.<sup>11</sup> It was widely believed that radio could remove psychological barriers to living overseas.<sup>12</sup> In November the BBC had, as we have seen, launched its 'experimental' short-wave station, 'G5SW'.

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<sup>6</sup> Johnson, *Unseen Voice*, pp. 45-48.

<sup>7</sup> Hoar, pp. 99-100.

<sup>8</sup> Hibberd, p. 31; 'How 2FC was Heard in England', *Wireless Weekly*, 15 April 1927, p. 7.

<<https://worldradiohistory.com/AUSTRALIA/Archive-Wireless-Weekly-AU/1927/Wireless-Weekly-1927-04-15.pdf>> [Accessed: 25 February 2025]

<sup>9</sup> Dr. Adrian Peterson, 'The Voice of Australia, AWA's VK2ME Sydney and VK3ME Melbourne', Radio Heritage Foundation <<https://www.radioheritage.net/Story2.asp>> [Accessed: 25 February 2025]

<sup>10</sup> *Wireless Weekly*, 9 September 1927, p. 7.

<<https://www.worldradiohistory.com/AUSTRALIA/Archive-Wireless-Weekly-AU/1927/Wireless-Weekly-1927-09-09.pdf>> [Accessed: 25 February 2025]

<sup>11</sup> Potter, *Wireless Internationalism*, p. 174.

<sup>12</sup> Vincent Kuitenbrouwer, 'Radio as a Tool of Empire. Intercontinental Broadcasting from the Netherlands to the Dutch East Indies in the 1920s and 1930s', *Itinerario*, 40 (2016), (83-103), pp. 88-90.

The Chairman of AWA was Ernest Fisk, a British born Australian sub-Imperialist determined to extend Australia's technological and political reach and status. Fisk saw no reason why empire broadcasting should be a solely metropolitan affair, and with an ambition to connect Australia to the world and to attempt to participate more equally in British imperialism, and not always accept one-way traffic from London, Fisk launched 'The Voice of Australia' in July 1931. Carrying 'entertainment interspersed with interesting and informative lectures and talks on Australian matters' its weekly broadcasts opened and closed with the 'laugh' of the kookaburra.<sup>13</sup> Fisk's ambition was 'broadcasting to the world, not just the Empire, and to the Empire from somewhere other than its centre.'<sup>14</sup> He was limited by the resources at his disposal, but also by, as we have noted, the prominence of London as cultural capital of the wider 'British world', a prominence the BBC was anxious to reinforce, even drawing on the expatriate stars of Australian entertainment to support it. A year later the BBC was ready to launch its Empire Service. In the promise of the creation of a regular Imperial broadcasting service from London the Dunedin *Evening Star* felt a 'world revolution' coming - 'but not, let us hope, in the Moscow way' - a revolution 'in the matter of communications, which will end the isolation of the past.'<sup>15</sup>

### **'Sharing the amenities of the home country...'**

If the realisation of Fisk's ambition was - and it was - to be limited by the resources at his disposal the BBC had, in London, all the resources - cultural, political and financial - to establish and run a global radio service. It was the wealthiest broadcaster in the Empire, in 1932 Great Britain had over five and a quarter million radio licence holders, fourteen times the number in Australia (370

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<sup>13</sup> SLNSW MLMSS 7828, Donald Jock Given, *Transit of Empires: Ernest Fisk and the Worldwide Wireless*, pp. 23 & 211-6.

<sup>14</sup> Jock Given, 'Another Kind of Empire: the Voice of Australia, 1931-1939', *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* Vol. 29, No. 1, 2009, p. 52.

<sup>15</sup> 'Empire Broadcasts', *Evening Star*, 12 November 1932, p. 9.

<<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/TS19321112.2.104>> [Accessed: 25 February 2025]

"World Revolution", *Evening Star*, 28 November 1932, p. 8

<<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/ESD19321128.2.55>> [Accessed: 25 February 2025]

000) and seventy times that in New Zealand (75 000), a function of a larger population. The consequence was that whilst the total income from radio licences in Australia was less than half a million pounds, and in New Zealand around a third of that, licence fees generated an income for the BBC of £1.4 million, an income that it didn't have to share.<sup>16</sup> It was at the 1930 Imperial Conference, held in London, that the BBC's central role in delivering Empire broadcasting was decided, in meetings chaired by the Prime Minister of New Zealand, G.W. Forbes. Broadcasting was being discussed because as Reith, one of the delegates, put it, short-wave stations were 'springing up everywhere' with the intention both of maintaining contact 'with outlying nationals' and also of presenting to the world 'the national viewpoint in terms of national culture.' On the basis of the experience of G5SW Reith declared that 'his Corporation had substantial evidence both in correspondence and otherwise, of a genuine demand' for an Empire broadcasting service. Reith presented a proposal, that the BBC 'was fully prepared' to create an Empire broadcasting station, but that control should 'be placed exclusively' in his hands.<sup>17</sup> The Conference resolution, whilst encouraging 'reciprocal broadcasting of programmes and events of special interest', welcomed Reith's proposal. It invited the BBC to seek support from other Empire broadcasters.<sup>18</sup> Little came of this. Typical had been the response of Stuart Doyle at the Australian Broadcasting Company. Whilst supporting broadcast accounts of 'actualities' Doyle regretted that 'in the present state of the radio art' high quality transmission between Britain and Australia was impossible - and so, for now, Australia 'would not be making any heavy annual contribution.'<sup>19</sup>

The BBC Empire Service promise of sharing 'the amenities of the home country and of metropolitan interests and culture' begged questions. Amongst these were indeed 'actualities',

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<sup>16</sup> *BBC Year Book, 1933* (London: British Broadcasting Corporation, 1932), pp. 292-4 & 469.

<sup>17</sup> TNA CAB 32/95, November 1929 - Imperial Conference 1930 - First Report of the Committee on Communications – Empire Broadcasting Appendix A. 'Proposals submitted by the British Broadcasting Corporation of the United Kingdom in November 1929'.

<sup>18</sup> WAC E4/5, Resolution of Imperial Conference 1930.

<sup>19</sup> WAC E4/5, 23 April 1931, Australian Broadcasting Company Ltd to Reith.

events of remembrance, sporting competition, yet what precisely otherwise comprised 'the amenities' rather depended on who was making the choices. On the one hand there was what broadcasters in Australia and New Zealand believed their listeners wanted, on the other what the BBC in London believed it should offer, informed more by 'metropolitan interests and culture' than any detailed understanding of local demand. In the early years of the service, reception quality being poor and unreliable, Walter Conder at the ABC took up, as we have seen, a tenacious - if rather unsuccessful - pursuit of what he felt the BBC could nonetheless offer: drama scripts, sheet music, permission to read over the air articles published in *The Listener* and *Radio Times*. The ABC, he told Reith, 'has undertaken to spread knowledge and artistic culture throughout an isolated and not unimportant section of the British race', the BBC should assist it.<sup>20</sup> He was not alone in his quest for recordings of BBC talks by 'outstanding men and women'.<sup>21</sup> When, in 1935, Ernest Fisk met with Reith he stated that there was no need for BBC to broadcast music to Australia, 'good music could be supplied by the local stations', what the BBC should offer were 'talks similar to that given by His Majesty the King, and probably by men like Mr Anthony Eden', things 'an Australian station could not get'.<sup>22</sup> In New Zealand the BBC programming that initially had the greatest impact was not its live broadcasts, indeed 'on almost all occasions when there is a broadcast of special interest to the dominion, the reception conditions have been unfavourable'.<sup>23</sup> Rather it was recorded programming shipped on disc that New Zealand listeners heard - the 'transcriptions', programmes on a variety of themes produced by the BBC and bought by broadcasters in the Dominions on condition of a limited number of airings. Listeners would judge these programmes not for the thrill of listening to a distant event but on their quality and entertainment value. The

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<sup>20</sup> WAC E1/315/2, 19 September 1933, letter Conder to Reith

<sup>21</sup> WAC E1/315/3, 26 February 1934, letter Conder to Clark; 19 May 1934, letter Conder to Clark; 31 July 1934, letter Conder to Clark; 31 July 1934, letter Conder to Graves; 9 October 1934, letter Conder to Graves; 19 December 1934, letter Conder to Clark; E1/315/4, 4 June 1935, letter Conder to Clark; 12 June 1935, letter Empire Executive to Conder.

<sup>22</sup> WAC E1/317, cutting, *Broadcasting Business*, 21 May 1936.

<sup>23</sup> ANZ R3024711, 12 March 1934, Hands to Ashbridge; ANZ 890 R3024711, 1 May 1934, Hands to Graves.

first to be heard in New Zealand, a life of Sir Christopher Wren, had been ‘markedly popular’.<sup>24</sup> These were very British productions initially supervised by the BBC’s Malcom Frost, an unapologetic ‘old fashioned Empire man’, who saw these broadcasts as projecting ‘the English ethic’.<sup>25</sup> For the NZBB their appeal was as an alternative to imported American recordings - ‘something of a godsend.’<sup>26</sup> In 1934 the NZBB enquired about recordings of sporting events.<sup>27</sup> In 1935 Hands set out what the NZBB was looking for in future transcriptions, echoing Conder: ‘talks by eminent British citizens and thinkers on important subjects...bringing our listeners...in closer touch with eminent persons and outstanding events at home’.<sup>28</sup> A year later James Shelley was seeking ‘really outstanding’ drama and again ‘talks by well-known world figures on social or political subjects.’<sup>29</sup> If the supply of suitable material was one challenge another, initially greater, was reception. By 1932 it was possible for listeners to purchase ‘all-wave’ radios which alongside domestic long and medium wave stations would allow them to listen to short-wave international broadcasts.<sup>30</sup> Yet reception was a significant problem.



Fig. 26: ‘Two keen listeners to the Empire transmissions’, *World Radio*, 17 November 1933, p. 642.

<sup>24</sup> WAC E5/53/1, 13 October 1933 & 25 October 1933, letters Hands to Director, Empire Service.

<sup>25</sup> Interview with Malcolm Frost, Connected Histories of the BBC  
<<https://connectedhistoriesofthebbc.org/play/?id=71>> [Accessed: 25 February 2025]

<sup>26</sup> WAC E5/53/1, 28 December 1933, letter & cable Hands to Graves; Day, pp. 163-4.

<sup>27</sup> WAC E5/53/1, 10 September 1934, letter from Clark (on behalf of Graves) to Hands.

<sup>28</sup> WAC E5/53/1, 24 July 1935, letter Hands to Clark

<sup>29</sup> WAC E5/54, 22 December 1936, letter Shelley to Clark

<sup>30</sup> Potter, *Wireless Internationalism*, pp. 63-4.

In November 1932, in the weeks before the Empire Service was launched, Malcom Frost, one of its first employees, had been sent on a global tour, seen off on an Imperial Airways flight to South Africa from Croydon Aerodrome, he was to be an ambassador for the new service, to promote the transcriptions, and check on reception. On the opening night, listening in Cape Town, Frost heard nothing.<sup>31</sup> In the early 1930s the causes of the technical limitations of short-wave broadcasting were, it was officially noted, 'obscure and their solutions incomplete.'<sup>32</sup> Interference appeared influenced by changes in the seasons, by sunspots, and by signals passing from zones in which it was day to those in which it was night.<sup>33</sup> Initially the BBC divided the globe into 5 zones, aiming its transmitter at each in turn with the intention that signals would be picked up in the evening. Questions soon arose however as to whether the BBC zonal system actually delivered programmes to its intended recipients. Both the ABC and engineers at the New Zealand Post Office asked whether the same signals could in fact adequately reach both New Zealand and Australia, which had been grouped together.<sup>34</sup> On nights when New Zealand had good reception Australia had drawn 'almost a total blank.'<sup>35</sup> Listeners in Western Australia found it easier to hear programmes intended for India.<sup>36</sup> New Zealand listeners found the African transmissions easier to receive, and that they were best received in the morning.<sup>37</sup> Back in 1927 the then BBC Chief Engineer, Peter Eckersley, had cautioned that the 'romance aspect' of hearing sounds from 'Home' had 'blinded many to the service aspect. The romance is ephemeral, the service permanent.' At the launch of G5SW he had warned listeners that there was 'no guarantee that transmissions will be heard throughout the world, or if heard that they will be intelligible, or if intelligible that they can be

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<sup>31</sup> 'The BBC Empire Tour', *World Radio*, 25 November 1932, p. 1181; Cecil Graves, 'Looking Backwards – The Empire Service in Retrospect'; *BBC Empire Broadcasting*, 7 April 1937, p. 15; Interview with Malcolm Frost, Connected Histories of the BBC.

<sup>32</sup> TNA CAB 32/95, Imperial Conference 1930 - Appendix A.

<sup>33</sup> Edward Pawley, *BBC Engineering 1922-1972* (London: BBC, 1972), p. 129.

<sup>34</sup> WAC E4/49, Empire Service: M.A. Frosts Tour VI (b) 1933-1934, 17 June 1933, Frost report from New Zealand.

<sup>35</sup> WAC E1/315/2, 17 January 1933, Letter, HP Williams, General Manager ABC to Graves.

<sup>36</sup> WAC E4/37, First Summary of Programme Correspondence, February 1933; E1/315/2, 30 January 1933, letter HP Williams, General Manager ABC to Graves.

<sup>37</sup> WAC E4/37, Ninth Summary of Programme Correspondence, February 1934.

guaranteed to remain so.<sup>38</sup> Things were not a great deal better 5 years later, nonetheless stations in Melbourne and Sydney and the four New Zealand national stations had felt able to relay or rebroadcast, 'about 9 hours' of Empire Service material in its first three weeks. By March 1933 rebroadcasting by the ABC and NZBB had, however, ceased.<sup>39</sup> Reception conditions were too poor, the novelty value had expired. When Frost's tour reached Australia Walter Conder told him, 'quite frankly', that the Empire station was 'of no practical value to the Commission whatsoever'.<sup>40</sup> Improvements would clearly be needed. As early as February 1933 Noel Ashbridge, Eckersley's successor as BBC Chief Engineer, was arguing that without some improvement no one with a local alternative would 'break into their best programmes' to listen to 'an unreliable service with some fading and atmospheric.' The only exception might be for 'outstanding events', of which listeners 'in places like New Zealand and Australia' might be expected to find no more than 'about 50' in a year.<sup>41</sup> However in July, whilst New Zealand reported 'a somewhat flagging interest', improvements in reception were indeed noted, if not fully understood, and Conder reported himself able to rebroadcast three 'topical' items each week. The highlight was a relay of the victory of Australia's Jack Crawford at 1933's Wimbledon tennis Championships:

'Thousands of keenly interested listeners in every state...knew in an instant of time, the progress of a match that was taking place more than 10,000 miles away from them...they shared, with pleasure and pardonable pride, the triumph of their fellow countryman over the picked representatives of all the nations of the world.'<sup>42</sup>

The quality of reception depended in part on that of the receiving radio set: 'my valves are dud, and my wander-plugs useless...the only part that appears to be right is the cabinet' lamented a New Zealand listener.<sup>43</sup> From the middle of 1933 the BBC saw evidence that listeners were 're-

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<sup>38</sup> 'Empire Broadcasting', *World Radio*, 11 November 1927, p. 489.

<sup>39</sup> WAC E4/37, Second Summary of Programme Correspondence, April & May 1933.

<sup>40</sup> WAC E4/47, Empire Service: M.A. Frosts Tour IV 1933-1934, 20 June 1933, Frost to Graves.

<sup>41</sup> WAC E4/6, 28 February 1933, Chief Engineer to Empire Service Director.

<sup>42</sup> 'BBC Representative in New Zealand', *World Radio*, 21 July 1933, p. 74; WAC E1/315/2, 13 April 1933, letter Graves to General manager ABC; 28 June, cable, Conder to Graves; 11 July 1933, cable, Conder to London; 12 July 1933, letter Conder to Reith.

<sup>43</sup> Quoted in Johnston & Robertson, *BBC World Service: Overseas Broadcasting*. Chapter 2, Consuming Radio in Imperial Contexts.

equipping themselves after their first experience of the Empire service', the need for better receivers had 'been impressed on the trade'.<sup>44</sup> By the end of 1934 the improvements in direct reception observed by Conder the previous year, were being noted in New Zealand, along with a greater availability of short-wave receivers. The rebroadcast of the Cenotaph that year was reported as 'fairly good', the Royal Wedding of Princess Marina and the Duke of Kent, at Westminster Abbey, was heard 'almost perfectly'.<sup>45</sup> Yet reception remained unreliable, and as late as the summer of 1936 there remained debate about the optimal times of transmission and reception.<sup>46</sup>

In New Zealand, throughout 1936, the rebroadcasting of BBC programming remained limited to events of such significance that the quality of reception scarcely mattered, notably the matches of the touring All Blacks, the funeral of George V and the Proclamation and first broadcast of Edward VIII.<sup>47</sup> In August the NZBB had carried an interview with the newly crowned Olympic 1500 metre champion Jack Lovelock, an interview 'listened to with much interest' despite reception being 'only fair, due to a high noise level'.<sup>48</sup> The summer of 1936 saw the first reliable rebroadcasting of material by the ABC, by the autumn BBC material could regularly be found in ABC schedules.<sup>49</sup> As we shall explore further it was the introduction of higher-powered transmitters in time for the Coronation in 1937 that enabled a far higher level of rebroadcasting in both New Zealand and Australia for the rest of the decade.<sup>50</sup> Now broadcasters in each could choose the BBC material

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<sup>44</sup> WAC E4/7, The Empire station: report for print.

<sup>45</sup> ANZ R3024711, 12 November 1934, cable NZBB to London; E12/249/1, 3 December 1934, Letter, R.M. Hacket, Editor, *New Zealand Herald* to Clark.

<sup>46</sup> WAC E1/1093, 24 July 1936, letter Hands (NBS) to Clark (Director Empire Service); 25 August 1936, memo Clark to EPD; 17 September 1936, letter Clark to Hands; 13 October 1936, Ashbridge to Hands; E1/338, 29 June 1936, letter Clark to Moses.

<sup>47</sup> ANZ R3024714, 20 January 1936, Hands to Ashbridge; 3 February 1936, Clark to Hands; 18 February 1936; 2 March 1936, cable NZBB to London.

<sup>48</sup> WAC E1/1097/2, 23 July 1936 Hands to Noel Ashbridge; 13 August 1936 & 19 August 1936, cables to and from NZBB; 21 September 1936, letter Hands to Ashbridge.

<sup>49</sup> WAC E1/323, Schedules of Overseas Receptions, August 1936-November 1937.

<sup>50</sup> WAC E1/1093, 20 April 1937, letter Ashbridge to Shelley

they wished to showcase with far greater independence. They would be less reliant on the BBC to alert them or make special arrangements.

What then of 'metropolitan interests and culture'? The BBC understanding of such was shaped by the people who ran it. The organisation had no formal recruitment policy until 1934, fearing to openly advertise because of the volume of applications anticipated.<sup>51</sup> Recruitment was by word of mouth. The Director of Variety, Eric Maschwitz, rose to be a leading player in British popular entertainment as a producer and writer, his 'A Nightingale Sang in Berkley Square' was a hit song on both sides of the Atlantic. He'd applied for a job at the BBC in 1926 on the recommendation of his friend Lance Sieveking.<sup>52</sup> Sieveking himself had joined the BBC on the basis of a recommendation to Reith that from war service with the Artists Rifles he brought valuable social contacts.<sup>53</sup> Val Gielgud, Director of Drama, owed his job to his friendship with Maschwitz and Sieveking: 'it was more or less as easy as that!'<sup>54</sup> The BBC's influence on British culture was, Ray Williams considered, the product of a 'pre-existing cultural hegemony', itself resulting from 'an unusually compact ruling class'.<sup>55</sup> When George VI later awarded him the OBE, the King recalled that he and Maschwitz had played tennis together at Cambridge.<sup>56</sup> The contrast with the experience of broadcasters in Australia and New Zealand was stark - there the structure of broadcasting was more regional, power and prestige were more dispersed, and there was no real equivalent of the BBC's Broadcasting House, the incontestable seat of broadcasting power and influence. Men like Ambrose Harris, James Shelley, Colin Scrimgeour, Walter Conder and Charles

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<sup>51</sup> Kate Murphy, *Behind the Wireless: A History of Early Women at the BBC* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), p. 121.

<sup>52</sup> Eric Maschwitz, *No Chip on My Shoulder* (London: H. Jenkins, 1957) pp. 46-7.

<sup>53</sup> David Hendy, (2012) 'Biography and the Emotions as a Missing 'Narrative' in Media History', *Media History*, 18:3-4, 361-378 (pp. 364-68).

<sup>54</sup> Val Gielgud interviewed as part of the History of the BBC 100 Voices project.

<<https://www.bbc.co.uk/historyofthebbc/bbc-memories/val-gielgud>>  
[Accessed 24 March 2019]

<sup>55</sup> Johnson, *Unseen Voice*, pp. 153-4

<sup>56</sup> John Snagge and Michael Barsley, *Those Vintage Years of Radio* (London: Pitman, 1972), p. 107.

Moses had come from very different places and backgrounds and had little in common. None had played tennis with the King. There was a consequence to this. As Simon Potter notes, when debates about BBC output occurred, they did so between men with a 'shared background of core values, assumptions and attitudes.'<sup>57</sup> As we have noted in 1932 the BBC was sceptical of definitive methods of 'ascertaining listeners likes and basing policy on the discovery.' Rather it balanced what it knew 'from whatever source it comes' against its own 'sense of responsibility to the country as a whole which is the central conception of British broadcasting.'<sup>58</sup> On his appointment in 1936 Robert Silvey had found not only that the basic principles of his trade as a market researcher could be dismissed as on the one hand 'utopian', on the other, 'dangerous', moreover that 'a pile of letters acclaiming his programme' was a producer's answer 'to anyone who had the temerity to criticise.'<sup>59</sup> In time a combination of challenges from continental broadcasters, the fruits of Silvey's research and a growing appreciation by producers like Maschwitz of the opportunities presented by embracing popular tastes saw a shift in BBC opinion and output, but there was none of the sense of 'battle to the death' with the forces of 'lowbrow' commercialism identified by Isabel Hodgson in her correspondence with Cecil Graves.

Graves himself was another member of the compact British ruling class, ex-Guards, heir to the Earl of Falloden, an establishment figure orthodox in his tastes, later to become wartime joint BBC Director General. At the Empire Service he carefully maintained a network of contacts with High Commissioners and officials.<sup>60</sup> Calm, cultured, and clear minded, his colleagues admired in Graves a 'common sense which disarmed the most eager and fanatical specialist'.<sup>61</sup> If 'word of mouth' was the key to finding good talent Graves listened carefully, recruiting an exceptional team and paying

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<sup>57</sup> Potter, *Broadcasting Empire*, p. 26.

<sup>58</sup> *BBC Year Book 1932* (London: British Broadcasting Corporation, 1931), pp. 105-108.

<sup>59</sup> Silvey, pp. 14 & 28-9.

<sup>60</sup> Hendy, *BBC*, p. 97; Briggs II, pp. 385-6.

<sup>61</sup> 'Obituary—Sir Cecil Graves', *The Times*, 14 Jan. 1957, p. 10.

<[link.gale.com/apps/doc/CS169695278/TTDA?u=oxford&sid=bookmark-TTDA&xid=d8b79d57](http://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CS169695278/TTDA?u=oxford&sid=bookmark-TTDA&xid=d8b79d57)> [Accessed: 10 March 2025]

attention to listener opinion. He was assisted by J. Beresford Clark, who Graves considered 'one of the leading men in the corporation...that rare combination, a man possessing creative as well as administrative ability.'<sup>62</sup> Clark retired in 1964 as Director of External Broadcasting. Graves had begun work in September 1932 with a team of just four, himself, two secretaries, Rita Hope-Simpson, later Chief Planner of the Overseas Service and Ursula Branston, later a producer, and Malcolm Frost, a precocious 21 year old, having already acquired experience of working at the American networks and with Fisk in Australia, and having established his own company successfully producing and distributing recorded programming for international sale.<sup>63</sup> Frost later established the BBC Monitoring Service and at D-Day liaised with the American broadcasters.<sup>64</sup> The Empire Department was always small, as late as 1936 attendance at the weekly Department meetings never exceeded a dozen staff, yet they were talented and many went on to greater things.<sup>65</sup>

The BBC had no clear idea how many listeners the Empire Service might have. The Empire Edition of *World Radio* sold fewer than 3000 copies a week, despite carrying, until 1934, the only printed schedule available. Its successor, *BBC Empire Broadcasting*, launched in 1936, contained schedules, programme information, features and broadcasting news, but in mid-1937 had a circulation of just 6,219, only 4,000 of whom lived in the Empire.<sup>66</sup> Lacking any other form of audience research the BBC regularly asked listeners to write with their views and opinions, indeed Graves and Clark, who personally broadcast requests for letters, liked to emphasise that Empire programme planning was 'largely guided' by listener feedback.<sup>67</sup> At the heart of understanding the Empire Service audience was Janet Quigley, educated at Oxford, and working at the Empire Marketing Board before joining

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<sup>62</sup> WAC E4/7, 11 December 1934 'Strictly Confidential' memo from DEFS (Graves) to Director-General.

<sup>63</sup> Interview with Malcolm Frost, Connected Histories of the BBC.

<sup>64</sup> Hendy, *BBC*, p. 260.

<sup>65</sup> WAC E4/33, 14 May 1936, Empire Department: minutes of meeting.

<sup>66</sup> Potter, *Wireless Internationalism*, pp. 179-80.

<sup>67</sup> WAC S24/4, 19 June 1934, *Empire Mailbag*; 'The Empire Broadcasting Service II—Programme Presentation', *World Radio*, 25 Oct. 1935, p.4.

the BBC Foreign Department in 1930 on the recommendation of her flat mate, and Oxford contemporary, Isa Benzie. Benzie, as C.F. Atkinson's successor as BBC Foreign Director was to become one of the most senior women in the organisation in the 1930s.<sup>68</sup> Benzie had joined the Foreign Department as Atkinson's secretary in 1927.<sup>69</sup> Quigley was again, like Graves, Clark and Frost, a significant figure in the later development of the BBC, as was Benzie. Quigley's great contribution to the Empire Service was a systematic approach to the analysis of feedback from listeners. Graves wrote to Reith of how she handled 'the Empire correspondence extraordinarily well. She has a very balanced judgement.'<sup>70</sup>



Fig. 27: BBC Foreign & Empire Department, 1932. Cecil Graves sits third from the right to his left sits Clark. Janet Quigley sits far left next to her friend, Isa Benzie.

By 1935 30,000 letters and reports arrived each year.<sup>71</sup> Quigley selected 'a few of the more interesting' for discussion at each weekly departmental meeting.<sup>72</sup> In November 1935 alone these

<sup>68</sup> Murphy, pp. 175-180.

<sup>69</sup> Murphy, p. 120.

<sup>70</sup> WAC E4/7, December 11<sup>th</sup> 1934: 'Strictly Confidential' memo from DEFS (Graves) to Director-General.

<sup>71</sup> Potter, *Wireless Internationalism*, p. 187.

<sup>72</sup> WAC E4/33, 31 October 1935, Empire departmental meeting: 2:45pm.

came from Ontario, Cincinnati, Hyderabad, Johannesburg, Addis Ababa, the West Indies, Lima, Poona, the Argentine, and one 'written in the Red Sea en route to Persia' - all 'expressing diverse opinions on the Empire services.'<sup>73</sup> On the basis of Quigley's analysis, discussed at every departmental meeting, the Empire Department came to conclude that the following were all prerequisites for their Service: that the pace of programmes and speech had to be slower; that it was more important to be intelligible than entertaining; that large choirs, large orchestras and soprano singers should be avoided; that the noise of the crowd should be dampened as far as possible at sports events so that the commentator could be clearly heard.<sup>74</sup> Across its early years there were running through the schedules some consistent themes. The Empire Service was fascinated by Royalty; military history; British technological advances, particularly the launching of ships; London life and London's place as a global entertainment centre, and by contrast timeless rural British life; and live sport, and live broadcasts from major events.<sup>75</sup> It was felt at the BBC that such material would find an audience.

In its first year the transmissions directed at Australia and New Zealand comprised two hours entertainment each evening, dominated by recordings. In 1934 of the 14 hours broadcast each week, six were filled with gramophone records, and five by programmes in a mix of genres, some specially commissioned, some already broadcast in the BBC domestic service, the remainder being readings of the news.<sup>76</sup> In Perth Basil Kirke was a keen early listener and whilst unimpressed with the rudimentary offer - 'the old fashioned routine: novelty pianist, comedian, solo balladist, banjoist, light orchestra' - delighted at the enthusiasm of the BBC announcers, who seemed to be

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<sup>73</sup> WAC E4/33, 7, 14, 21, 28 November 1935, Empire departmental meeting minutes.

<sup>74</sup> WAC E4/33, 12 and 19 Dec. 1935, , 2 Apr. and 31 Dec. 1936, 30 Sept. 1937, Empire departmental meeting minutes; WAC, E4/33; 'New Year's Day Talk by the Director of Empire Service', 1 Jan. 1936; WAC, E4/70; Minutes, 'Empire Departmental Meeting', 5 Mar. 1936; WAC, E4/33; 'Overseas Intelligence Department—Empire Correspondence—Summary of Analysis—October, 1938 to March, 1939'; WAC, E4/38; 'Empire Service Department—Tenth Summary of Correspondence relating to the Empire Programme Service', Apr. 1934.

<sup>75</sup> 'The Empire Broadcasting Service II—Programme Presentation', *World Radio*, 25 Oct. 1935, p.4.

<sup>76</sup> The weekly schedules were published in *World Radio*.

‘enjoying the programme as much as the listener’ and at small details, such as ‘the frequent use of the pronouns ‘we’ and ‘you’ which he felt had ‘a remarkable psychological effect upon the listener’. He gave an example: ‘We are taking you over to the Imperial Hotel, Blackpool’. The BBC Dance Band was ‘an absolute revelation.’<sup>77</sup> Kirke’s reports were forwarded to London. An Empire News section was established in September 1934. It sought to tailor bulletins to the perceived requirements of audiences in the specific target area for each transmission.<sup>78</sup> Simon Potter notes that whilst they might be ‘edited to place controversial aspects of British foreign and colonial policy in a positive light’, there was little evidence of telling falsehoods.<sup>79</sup> Bulletins contained major items of domestic news, updates on Empire affairs, and coverage of sport.<sup>80</sup> Their editorial parameters spoke both to ‘Empire consolidation’ and to fostering latent sentimental links to London. The news was followed on Mondays by Dairy Produce Notes and on Fridays by Fruit Market News, supplied by the Empire Marketing Board. The call-sign of the Empire Service was the chiming of Big Ben, followed by the voice of one of the Empire Announcers: ‘This is London calling through the British Empire broadcasting station at Daventry’. Big Ben was amongst the most popular sounds on the Empire Service, regularly receiving more letters of appreciation than any of the programmes.<sup>81</sup> This popularity was sustained until the end of the decade. It was a sound of which listeners ‘never seem to tire’.<sup>82</sup> The announcers who followed knitted the BBC schedule together, their ‘educated’ southern English accents being, Big Ben aside, perhaps the most distinctive sound of the Empire Service.

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<sup>77</sup> WAC E1/315/2, undated, BW Kirke ‘Observations on British Empire Programmes Indian Zone’.

<sup>78</sup> ‘The Empire Broadcasting Service - The Distribution of Programmes’, *World Radio*, 11 October 1935, p. 3.

<sup>79</sup> Potter, *Wireless Internationalism*, pp. 145-159.

<sup>80</sup> WAC, E4/53, 24 March 1930, News Editor to C. F. Atkinson and Reith,

<sup>81</sup> WAC E4/38, 20<sup>th</sup> summary of correspondence relating to the Empire programme service. By way of example in this summary of correspondence received in November and December 1935 of 2801 letters received 121 contained appreciations of Big Ben, 3 times more than for the nearest programme, Howard Marshall’s *Under Big Ben*.

<sup>82</sup> WAC, E4/38, ‘Overseas Intelligence Department—Empire Correspondence—Summary of Analysis—October, 1938 to March, 1939.’

Graves had little money, his programme budget being, initially, a mere £10 per week.<sup>83</sup> Yet he used the audience insight gained from the work of Janet Quigley to supplement recordings of BBC domestic output with commissions of his own. Small and impoverished it might be, but the Empire Department was one of the most autonomous in the BBC.<sup>84</sup> It moreover delivered BBC programming to a global audience. Graves had, then, both considerable latitude and could offer an unrivalled platform to people who might work with him. Graves appointed Cecil Madden as the Empire Producer, 'a most capable man in a creative capacity.'<sup>85</sup> With a background in shipping, mining and stage design his was 'not a typical BBC CV.'<sup>86</sup> Within the Empire Department he was considered 'the ideas merchant.'<sup>87</sup> Madden was an impresario, 'always discovering someone. He had to, because his budget didn't run to using many established artists'.<sup>88</sup> He was exuberantly creative on all stages, the Empire Service was merely the first of these. In July 1936 he left for the television department and produced the BBC's very first television programme. What he brought to the Empire Service was immense creative energy and ambition. Madden devised, produced and often presented his shows, and helpfully for cash-poor but time-rich Graves, Madden's specialism was programmes that could run and run and cost next to nothing. His first production was *Anywhere for a News Story* featuring accounts by 'famous journalists' of their coverage of dramatic events, the series started with 'The Burning of Smyrna'. It received, Quigley noted, 'many specific appreciations'.<sup>89</sup> Similar formats followed, in *Meet the Detective*, twenty-six 'celebrated writers of detective stories' presented 'their own creation of fiction at the microphone'. *Living Dangerously* offered thirty-seven 'true Stories of Adventure'. Many of Madden's shows celebrated what he found on his doorstep, the culture of London, his *Round London at Night* employed the latest

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<sup>83</sup> Potter, *Broadcasting Empire*, p. 58.

<sup>84</sup> Briggs II, p. 385.

<sup>85</sup> WAC E4/7, December 11<sup>th</sup> 1934: 'Strictly Confidential' memo from DEFS (Graves) to Director-General.

<sup>86</sup> WAC S24/15/1, Cecil Madden Scrapbook Volume 1: 24 May 1935, *Radio Pictorial*, 'A Day in the Life of...' 'Cecil Madden – a man who helps run the Empire programmes'.

<sup>87</sup> WAC E4/75, 26 February 1935, Empire Executive to E&F Ex.

<sup>88</sup> Dougall, pp. 62-65.

<sup>89</sup> WAC E4/37, Seventh Summary of Programme Correspondence, October 1933.

technology to tour the streets with a microphone and was carried in America by both NBC and CBS.<sup>90</sup> The guests of *Gossip Hour* included, in its very first edition, the Pearly King and Queen.



Fig. 28: *Gossip Hour* first episode, 1 January 1934. Cecil Madden holds the microphone.

These programmes were rated as good as anything listeners might hear on the BBC domestic service, indeed Collie Knox, the often abrasive *Daily Mail* radio critic, suggested to his readers that so 'many attractive ideas' were in the Empire broadcasts that 'one could do worse than fly to Australia or South Africa' to hear them.<sup>91</sup> If Madden was the leading man behind the microphone, before it no one could rival Graves' choice as host for what he intended in 1933 to be 'a fortnightly review of home affairs.' *Under Big Ben* was one of the most popular Empire Service programmes, written and presented by Howard Marshall, educated at Haileybury and Oxford, a journalist who

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<sup>90</sup> WAC S24/15/1, Cecil Madden Scrapbook Volume 1.

<sup>91</sup> WAC S24/15/1, Cecil Madden Scrapbook: Volume 1. Cutting: 11 June, 1934 *Daily Mail*, 'Broadcasts we never hear' – Collie Knox Calling

had worked at both the *Daily Telegraph* and *Daily Mail*, and as a BBC Assistant News Editor in 1927.<sup>92</sup> Marshall was a versatile broadcaster, as we have seen he was to find fame as a cricket commentator, he was to be the voice describing many Royal occasions, during the Second World War he headed the team of BBC War Correspondents, landing with British troops on D-Day, staggering back to England that very night with a celebrated eye-witness report.<sup>93</sup> Graves had felt Marshall would 'prove popular.'<sup>94</sup> He was right. By November 1935 Howard Marshall was receiving 'more than three times the number of appreciations as received by any other speaker.'<sup>95</sup> The only thing bothering Graves had been Marshall's 'extremely deep voice', he proposed asking 'the engineering branch' whether this meant Marshall was 'ruled out for Empire work'.<sup>96</sup> He was not, indeed it was a voice that charmed contemporaries, for Robert Dougall its 'peculiar Englishness...held all the magic of the cricket field, the trout stream or the cathedral close'.<sup>97</sup> It was a voice that through his work on the great ceremonial occasions was to be very familiar to listeners in Australia and New Zealand. Beyond this core staff Graves was able to call, on special occasions, on the wider creative community at the BBC, what resulted was some of the most distinctive BBC programming of the decade.

By 1936 the service was well established. Room 241 at BBC Broadcasting House had been equipped as a 'Listening Room' to allow staff to listen-in, it was also where, each Thursday at 2.45pm, the Empire Department meeting took place. On 14 May 1936 Clark chaired the meeting, having replaced Graves as Director, Graves being promoted to BBC Controller of Programmes.

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<sup>92</sup> WAC L1/289/1, Marshall, Howard Percival (BBC personnel file); Mark Pottle, 'Marshall, Howard Percival (1900–1973), broadcaster and writer on sport.' *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. 06. Oxford University Press <<https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/65081>> [Accessed: 25 February 2025]

<sup>93</sup> Marshall's D-Day dispatch can be read in *War Report: A record of the dispatches by the BBC's War Correspondents* (Oxford: OUP, 1946), pp. 68-71.

<sup>94</sup> 'Empire Broadcasting Has Come to Stay', *World Radio*, 17 November 1933, p. 641.

<sup>95</sup> WAC E4/38, 19<sup>th</sup> summary of correspondence relating to the Empire programme service.

<sup>96</sup> WAC E4/76, Empire service: Talks- 1933-1935, Undated memo entitled Empire talks. From DEFS to EPD (the notes at the foot are dated 1.9.33)

<sup>97</sup> Dougall, pp. 62-65.

Malcolm Frost, Cecil Madden and Janet Quigley were there. A 'general discussion on the quality and quantity of Empire programme material' was led by J.C.S. MacGregor, Clark's successor as Empire Programme Director. In his opinion, 'week 28', in early July 1936, which he had just planned, 'was one of the most satisfactory from the programme point of view.'<sup>98</sup> There was music of all kinds, and of course Big Ben and the announcers. In sport listeners could hear Fred Perry's victory at Wimbledon. Outside broadcasts took listeners live, or in recordings, to Hyde Park for the presentation of Colours to the Brigade of Guards by the King - 'as splendid as Trooping the Colour' - and to Hatfield Aerodrome for the Kings Cup Air Race.<sup>99</sup> There was *Owt Abaht Owt*, a programme from the North region. The National Programme was joined for music from Mantovani and his Tipica Orchestra, and the BBC's celebrated (and fictional) *Café Colette*, which used effects and liberal French accents to give the impression of a live broadcast from 'the Continent'. Madden's productions included *London Scenes*, this week a description of Kew Gardens, and a review of listener letters, chosen with Janet Quigley, *Empire Mailbag*.<sup>100</sup> For the listener with the right equipment this was a rich mix, comparable to the BBC domestic service, this did indeed reflect 'metropolitan interests and culture' as understood by the BBC and its producers. Whether this met the needs or requests from the ABC or NZBB, or indeed of listeners in Australia or New Zealand, was not much of a consideration, for them the BBC approach had largely been 'take it or leave it', broadcasters might relay Daventry broadcasts if they so chose, listeners might tune to Daventry.<sup>101</sup> Yet when it came to major anniversaries and events of Imperial significance the BBC behaved quite differently. From the very first weeks of Empire broadcasts the BBC alerted the ABC to Anzac Day programming, in 1933 it shared arrangements for the Cenotaph broadcast, for major speeches,

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<sup>98</sup> WAC E4/33, May 14<sup>th</sup> 1936, Empire Department: minutes of meeting. (Understanding which was BBC week 28 is difficult without access to a 1936 BBC diary. Week 28 was that beginning either 5 or 12 July).

<sup>99</sup> 'Short Wave Programmes', *World Radio*, 3 July 1936, pp. 12-13 & 10 July 1936, pp. 14-15.

<sup>100</sup> WAC S24/15/1, Cecil Madden Scrapbook Volume 1.

<sup>101</sup> WAC E1/315/2, 30 October 1933, letter Graves to Conder; E1/315/3, 27 March 1934, letter Graves to Conder; 6 April 1934, letter Clark (for DEFS) to Conder; 22 June 1934, letter Graves to Conder; 27 June 1934, letter Clark to Conder; 3 September 1934, letter Graves to Conder.

and for sporting events.<sup>102</sup> In July 1936, as the Empire Service broadcast its 'week 28' schedule, McNair was undertaking his survey of the radio habits of Sydney listeners. Whilst he noted the 'comparatively small' number of domestic short-wave receivers, 'the majority' of Australian listeners had heard BBC broadcasts thanks to Australian broadcasters picking up programmes and retransmitting them on their medium wavelengths. What they had heard, over the years, were broadcasts of 'outstanding interest' - notably the King at Christmas.<sup>103</sup>

The output of the BBC Empire Service was not, then, tailored specifically to the needs or wants of broadcasters in Australia and New Zealand. It reflected metropolitan interests and culture as perceived by producers and administrators based at BBC Broadcasting House in London. It nonetheless offered on a daily basis such 'interests and culture', or a taste of them, to those listeners in Australia and New Zealand who could persist with listening at times when reception was good. It also offered the ABC and NZBB opportunities to rebroadcast live coverage of events taking place in the Imperial capital, first experienced on occasions of remembrance and sporting competition and, as we shall see, opportunities for their producers to step onto a global stage otherwise denied them and to present a picture of their nation to the listening world.

### **Promoting 'a greater understanding and a greater sympathy...'**

When John Reith spoke of inducing 'among the constituent parts of the Empire a greater understanding and a greater sympathy', and when his Chairman spoke of sparing 'no effort to make the service a real link between the homeland and the people overseas who share our heritage of speech and thought', each was reflecting some of the earliest thinking of the value to

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<sup>102</sup> WAC E1/315/2, 14 March 1933, Graves letter to Mason; 8 November 1933, letter Graves to Mason; E1/315/3, 7 March 1934, letter Clark to Mason; 19 March 1934, letter Clark to Mason; 24 April 1934, letter Clark to Mason.

<sup>103</sup> McNair, p. 113.

the Empire of a broadcasting service controlled from London.<sup>104</sup> The first internal BBC proposals for an 'Imperial Broadcasting Service' had been presented to Reith in 1927, by Gerald Beadle, BBC Station Director in Belfast but recently returned from South Africa. Beadle argued that the 'greatest political and moral stronghold' in a world threatened by Bolshevism was 'the Commonwealth of English-speaking peoples' and so there was 'a strong argument in favour of using every possible means of maintaining a consolidated British Empire.' Beadle's motivation was the prevention of 'the Imperial ideal from being swamped by local nationalism'.<sup>105</sup> His underlying notion of 'consolidation by wireless' is key to understanding the thinking of those running the Empire Service in the years that followed.<sup>106</sup> At the 1930 Imperial Conference, Reith argued for the creation of the Service explicitly as a response to short-wave stations from other nations 'springing up everywhere', Reith argued that 'the Empire is presumably entitled no less than others to diffuse its ideas' and indeed that 'deliberate recourse to propaganda...might become desirable'.<sup>107</sup> As Michelle Hilmes observes, 'propaganda has many meanings' ranging from perhaps little more than 'advertising', to something perhaps 'fundamentally untrue', information 'used by some form of enemy deliberately designed to manipulate public opinion'. The latter definition prevailed in the public mind in the years following the First World War. It had been almost immediately clear to contemporaries that radio might play a role in promoting propaganda, as a consequence, as Hilmes notes, 'no other twentieth century medium of communication was brought more tightly under state control'.<sup>108</sup> Nowhere was the potential of broadcasting given more attention than in Nazi Germany. Its propaganda purpose was explicit, Joseph Goebbels was the 'Minister of Propaganda', his focus was intense, his power over a listener lying in understanding 'how to pluck

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<sup>104</sup> WAC E4/6, 19<sup>th</sup> December 1932, Mr Whitley: speech on the inauguration of the Empire Service.

<sup>105</sup> WAC E4/1, 11 May 1927, Belfast Station Director to Director General.

<sup>106</sup> Peter Eckersley, 'Empire Broadcasting', *Times*, 12 August 1927, p. 11.

[link.gale.com/apps/doc/CS185670924/TTDA?u=oxford&sid=bookmark-TTDA&xid=535b6913](http://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CS185670924/TTDA?u=oxford&sid=bookmark-TTDA&xid=535b6913) [Accessed: 23 August 2025]

<sup>107</sup> TNA CAB 32/95, Imperial Conference 1930 - Appendix A.

<sup>108</sup> Michelle Hilmes, "The New Vehicle of Nationalism': Radio Goes to War", *Oxford Handbook of Propaganda Studies*, edited by Jonathan Auerbach and Russ Castronovo (Oxford 2013), pp. 1, 2 & 5.

the string in the harp of his soul that must be made to sound'.<sup>109</sup> If later developments in Germany were viewed by contemporaries with horror, they initially attracted fascination. When in 1933 Goebbels had delivered a lengthy statement on the Nazi approach, stating that 'broadcasting is the most modern and the most important instrument for influencing the masses which exists today', such was the 'intrinsic importance of the address' that *World Radio* reproduced it in full in English and German.<sup>110</sup> In Britain propaganda was viewed on the one hand as something that the British had become rather good at during the First World War, on the other as something 'contrary to our traditions'.<sup>111</sup> Stanley Baldwin had assured a restive House of Commons that the Ministry responsible would be closed when the war ended for 'propaganda is not a word that has a pleasant sound in English ears'.<sup>112</sup> The word itself was a problem, it was rather 'un-English'.<sup>113</sup> Yet the question soon arose as to whether 'cultural propaganda...should or should not be liquidated'.<sup>114</sup> Cultural propaganda was perhaps acceptable, especially if framed as 'cultural diplomacy' and justified as 'furthering international peace and understanding'.<sup>115</sup> Here a distinction was drawn between domestic and foreign audiences and between Britons at home and in Dominions and Colonies, with whom the government might legitimately engage, and Britons 'living under other flags'. Britain should abstain from 'directly' addressing the latter not least because of the potential hostility from other governments, particularly the United States, home to over a million Britons.<sup>116</sup> From America concern was expressed to the Foreign Office that the BBC

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<sup>109</sup> David Welch, *Propaganda, Power and Persuasion* (London: The British Library, 2013), p. 2.

<sup>110</sup> 'The Future of German Broadcasting: Dr Goebbels Outlines the Plan', *World Radio*, 5 May 1933, p. 588 (printed in German in the 14 & 21 April editions – alongside, on April 14, an obituary for Walter Schaffer, the Jewish Chief Engineer at the national German network, sacked by Goebbels, his death 'unexpected'.)

<sup>111</sup> 'Ministry of Propaganda', *Times*, 22 Feb 1918, p. 6.

<[link.gale.com/apps/doc/CS101911126/TTDA?u=oxford&sid=bookmark-TTDA&xid=1caf2ec4](http://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CS101911126/TTDA?u=oxford&sid=bookmark-TTDA&xid=1caf2ec4)> [Accessed: 23 August 2025]

<sup>112</sup> House of Commons, House of Commons Debate (5 August 1918, vol 109 col 994)

<<https://api.parliament.uk/historic/commons/1918/aug/05/ministry-of-information>> [Accessed: 25 February 2025]

<sup>113</sup> M.L. Saunders and Philip M. Taylor, *British Propaganda During the First World War, 1914-18* (London: Macmillan, 1982), p. 248.

<sup>114</sup> TNA FO431/1, 1935: 1 – Introductory Memorandum; British Cultural Propaganda from 1919 to the Formation of the British Council p. 1.

<sup>115</sup> Philip M. Taylor, *The Projection of Britain* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 125-6.

<sup>116</sup> TNA FO431/1, 1935: 1 – Introductory Memorandum, p. 1.

might develop 'broadcast propaganda such as has been indulged in by the Germans and the French...England is much more vulnerable than any other country when it comes to such activities.'<sup>117</sup> It was by the decision not to broadcast in foreign languages that, as Potter argues, the BBC could claim both to respect international agreements to refrain from propaganda and 'subtly to circumvent the Foreign Office's interwar ban on the conduct of official British propaganda in the US, by producing a service that would inevitably be picked up by American listeners', if not explicitly aimed at them.<sup>118</sup> It was picked up - readers of the *Philadelphia Inquirer* in 1935 voted 'Daventry' their favourite foreign short-wave station.<sup>119</sup> Transatlantic broadcasts of sporting events were established, notably tennis from Wimbledon, with commentary 'direct from the Centre Court to United States listeners.' The BBC developed strong links with the major American networks, which took 149 broadcasts from Britain in the year to November 1935, often 'a picture postcard in sound' of a place or ceremony that appealed 'both to the sentiment and curiosity of American listeners about places of romantic or traditional significance'.<sup>120</sup> Royal events were invariably occasions of great American interest. The King's Christmas Day broadcasts were relayed each year from 1933 by both NBC and CBS. Malcolm Frost, listening in America, noted that he had heard the broadcast 'frequently discussed most favourably both in the trains and in private homes.' It was, he concluded, 'a fine example of indirect British propaganda.'<sup>121</sup> In 1934 the Christmas Day broadcast *Empire Exchange* was carried by over 150 American stations, attracting 'more attention and comment than even the elaborate radio entertainment arranged locally', many American newspapers 'devoted more than a column in space to a detailed description.'<sup>122</sup> Eastern stations started up in the early hours to carry coverage of the 1935 Jubilee.<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> WAC E4/7 15 March, 1934. Letter from Mr Gaselee the Foreign Office to Graves – forwarding the observations of Mr Fletcher at the British Library of Information in New York.

<sup>118</sup> Potter, *Wireless Internationalism*, pp.10-11.

<sup>119</sup> 'American Listeners' Favourite Stations', *World Radio*, 25 Jan. 1935, p. 23.

<sup>120</sup> 'Five Years of Trans-Atlantic Broadcasting', *World Radio*, 8 November 1935, p. 3; Potter, *Wireless Internationalism*, pp. 90-1.

<sup>121</sup> WAC R47/92/1, 30 December 1933, Frost memo to Graves.

<sup>122</sup> 'The USA's Holiday Listening', *World Radio*, 25 January 1935, p. 6.

<sup>123</sup> 'Five Years of Trans-Atlantic Broadcasting', *World Radio*, 8 November 1935, p. 3.

There was, then, from the outset an understanding, implicit, if not always explicit, of the propaganda purpose, or value, of broadcasting in the British Empire, but the BBC's approach was not, initially, to engage listeners with loyalties to other nations, rather its focus was on those listeners it assumed would be instinctively sympathetic to the British point of view - the British expatriate audience and their descendants. This was not, then, a service embracing in the early 1930s all inhabitants of the Empire. When Whitley assured listeners that the BBC would 'spare no effort' to create 'a real link between the homeland and the people overseas' he was very specific who these 'people overseas' were – people 'who share our heritage of speech and thought.'<sup>124</sup> Indeed the BBC Empire Service, as a matter of policy, initially spoke only to the 'white population under the British flag', the 'exclusion of peoples of other races' justified on the grounds that the 'appeal of European-type programmes is substantially limited to Europeans'.<sup>125</sup> This was known to be a questionable assumption even in 1932. That July Noel Ashbridge spoke with a dozen overseas managers from General Electric who believed educated Indians formed 'a very promising type of listener for the future,' being 'very keen on fiddling about with a wireless set.' No translation was required 'because anyone not knowing English would never be able to afford the set.'<sup>126</sup> Their recommendations were not pursued. Looking back on failures to engage Indian nationalists, in a 1950 series of BBC broadcast talks, Lionel Fielden, who ran India's radio service in the 1930s, lamented neglecting 'the very people whom it was most desirable to reach.'<sup>127</sup> At its launch this was not, then, a service intended to speak to the whole Empire, nor to compete with stations in the domestic broadcasting markets of Australia and New Zealand. Its underlying purpose was, at least partially, one of propaganda, but prior to 1937 directed toward a very particular audience. In December 1933, on the first anniversary of the Empire Service Cecil Graves made a speech on 'Broadcasting in the Empire'. Having listed the Empire Service objectives he drew to a conclusion

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<sup>124</sup> WAC E4/6, 19<sup>th</sup> December 1932, Mr Whitley: speech on the inauguration of the Empire Service.

<sup>125</sup> TNA CAB 32/95, Imperial Conference 1930 - Appendix A.

<sup>126</sup> WAC E4/6, 29 July, 1932. Memo from Mr. Ashbridge to Mr. Graves. Copy to Director-General.

<sup>127</sup> Fielden, pp. 3-4.

with a comment on the threat from propaganda. His audience should be aware of 'a competitive element' in international broadcasting. Graves avoided the more controversial definitions of 'propaganda', the BBC's 'attitude on this subject is simply this', he said, 'that we intend to make our Empire short-wave programmes the very best...with the result that people will listen to them in preference to anybody else's.'<sup>128</sup> Here a central role was to be played by broadcasts of British Imperial occasions. As we have seen radio broadcasting was proven by the end of the 1920s to have a capacity to convene large audiences for such 'events'. Broadcasts of acts of remembrance and of sporting competitions with their attached rituals and ceremonies, were already 'traditions', occasions on which daily life might stop in its tracks. From the outset the BBC had been drawn to one occasion and one date of which it might be safely assumed everyone in the British world and of British heritage would share an understanding, the one guaranteed holiday in the working year, an occasion when normal life would be suspended and the potential audience enormous - Christmas Day.

### **'Christmas is the season of listening'.**

... declared *Radio Times* in 1927.<sup>129</sup> That year the Christmas edition sold a million copies.<sup>130</sup>

The BBC quickly established Christmas traditions. What the *Times* considered, in 1938, 'the most lovely annual event of the year,' the Service of Nine Lessons and Carols, had first appeared in the BBC schedules in 1928.<sup>131</sup> In 1932 *The Spectator* had identified 'modernism and mechanism and

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<sup>128</sup> WAC E4/6, 9 December 1933: 'Dominion and Empire Broadcasting' – a speech to the Ashridge weekend school by Capt. CG Graves.

<sup>129</sup> *Radio Times*, 16 December 1927, front cover.

<<https://genome.ch.bbc.co.uk/page/d56838be02674bca8e655be70becd538>> [25 February 2025]

<sup>130</sup> Martin Johnes, *Christmas and the British: A Modern History* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), p. 157.

<sup>131</sup> Alexandra Coghlan and Mai Osawa, *Carols from King's: The Stories of our Favourite Carols from King's College* (London: BBC Books, 2016), p. 121; 'Plays And Carols', *Times*, 27 December 1938, p. 15.

<[link.gale.com/apps/doc/CS253440923/TTDA?u=oxford&sid=bookmark-TTDA&xid=0dcea0a8](http://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CS253440923/TTDA?u=oxford&sid=bookmark-TTDA&xid=0dcea0a8)> [Accessed: 23 August 2025]

speed' as enemies of the traditional Christmas.<sup>132</sup> Yet, far from replacing old customs, radio made awareness of them part of a 'cultural web', uniting people.<sup>133</sup> They spoke to continuity in the 'swirling currents of the emerging modern world.'<sup>134</sup> Christmas had become a time of 'family', of gathering together, of celebrating children, and perhaps of adults themselves behaving childishly.<sup>135</sup> Christmas was 'a chance to smile', perhaps in difficult times a rare chance, it brought families together, it brought reminders of 'home', of 'absent friends'.<sup>136</sup> The first Christmas air-mail flight had carried 50 000 letters to Australia and New Zealand in 1931.<sup>137</sup> The inauguration of the first regular airmail service between Britain and Australia and New Zealand in time for Christmas 1934 was the subject of a special broadcast at which both High Commissioners spoke, along with the Chairman of Imperial Airways. The flight carried a letter from Reith to the ABC Chairman, on its return was a letter from Conder to Graves.<sup>138</sup>

The particular form that a 'traditional' British Christmas took was understood to be that celebrated in England, in the depths of winter, and much fun was made with efforts to celebrate a 'traditional' Christmas in the vast variety of seasons and climates pertaining on Christmas Day in the British world, indeed this was the focus of much that of was written about Imperial Christmases.<sup>139</sup> It was an aspect of the British experience which BBC producers were keen to reflect when they planned what was to be the first live pan-Empire broadcast, linking the radio studios of its major cities and scheduled for Christmas Day 1932, in the first week of the new Empire Service.

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<sup>132</sup> J.A.R. Pimlott and Ben Pimlott, *The Englishman's Christmas: A Social History* (Hassocks: Harvester Press, 1978), p. 179.

<sup>133</sup> Johnes, p. 146.

<sup>134</sup> Mark Connelly, *Christmas: A History* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2012), p. xv.

<sup>135</sup> Gavin Weightman & Steve Humphries, *Christmas Past* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1987) p. 15; J. M. Golby and A. W. Purdue, *The Making of the Modern Christmas* (Stroud: Sutton, 2000) p. 51; British Library, Sound Archive, T8077, 'Absent Friends', Howard Marshall, 'Christmas in London'.

<sup>136</sup> Johnes, pp. 212-4.

<sup>137</sup> Connelly, p. 122.

<sup>138</sup> WAC E1/315/3, 6 December 1934, letter Clark to Mason; 7 December 1934, letter to WJ Cleary; 7 December 1934, letter Conder to Graves.

<sup>139</sup> Connelly, p. 101.

The script was drafted by Lionel Fielden, yet to be seconded to India, then one of the BBC's most experienced producers, and developed by another, Archie Harding, the man behind *Resurgam*. It formed part of the paperwork sent to Buckingham Palace to persuade the King to take part in the broadcast. Fielden and Harding were clear about both the intended audience, 'British citizens wherever they may be on the surface of land or sea', and about what they believed would resonate with them on Christmas Day. Play was to be made of the fact that whilst in Britain listeners 'have just finished their Christmas Dinner' in Australia they 'are already keeping Boxing Day'. Dramatic impact might be achieved by joining a ship, by linking the major cities of Canada, by hearing from Auckland or Wellington and Sydney or Melbourne. What the producers were looking for in each location were reminders of geographic and temporal diversity - 'local colour...weather, time of day etc, vividly confirming their geographical location.'<sup>140</sup> The finale was to be an address by the King. At the heart of the proposal was that wherever the broadcast was to be heard what would resonate with listeners was a sense that Britain remained in some sense 'home', or as Conder and Hands had each characterised it: 'the 'Mother Country'.<sup>141</sup> As Stuart Ward notes, what made the notion of 'home' so 'serviceable' was its 'profusion of meanings', which weren't literal, over time it 'acquired a more generalised symbolic capital, laden with emotional baggage.'<sup>142</sup> It spoke to something constant in a shifting world. That Britain was 'home' offered, perhaps, reassurance at moments of disorientation - notwithstanding that it was the destiny of the British to be a 'roaming', pioneering, people - reassurance that had secured a certain status for the popular song *Home Sweet Home* - 'Mid pleasures and palaces though we may roam, Be it ever so humble there's no place like home'.<sup>143</sup> Migration, as Robert Bickers observes, may have 'sundered

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<sup>140</sup> The Royal Archives (hereafter RA) PS/PSO/GV/PS/MAIN/54335, 9 November 1932, copy of BBC internal memo Harding to Graves.

<sup>141</sup> WAC E5/53/1, 24 July 1935, letter E.C. Hands, NZBB to Clark; WAC E1/315/3, 26 February 1934, Walter Conder, ABC to Clark.

<sup>142</sup> Stuart Ward, *Untied Kingdom* (Cambridge: CUP, 2023), pp. 131-2.

<sup>143</sup> Alison Blunt, 'Imperial Geographies of Home: British Domesticity in India, 1886–1925', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 24: 421-440, p. 421; 'The Colonial and Indian Exhibition, The Opening Ceremony', *The Argus*, 10 June 1886, p. 9. <<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article6098646>> [Accessed: 23 August 2025]

ties' but it also 'knitted people together in new ways.'<sup>144</sup> Christmas Day, with its reinforcement of the place of 'home' and the 'hearth' in shared British sensibilities, was the perfect annual opportunity to attempt to recognise those ties, which however sundered ran deep, the most powerful being familial, the son or daughter, father and mother, the aunts, uncles and grandparents living on another shore, perhaps never to be seen again, exchanging letters over years that had now stretched into decades. There was no single occasion on which people across the British world might all be more expected to be gathering and thinking of each other than Christmas Day. The annual Christmas Day programme coordinated from London and linking the radio studios of the Empire became, bar none, contemporaries asserted, the BBC's 'greatest' programme.<sup>145</sup> These broadcasts were - whatever the other links proposed between inhabitants of the Empire - quite expressly, and powerfully, appeals to a vision of the British world which was exclusive, to ties of racial kinship, and the word which captured this was 'family'. Through collaborations with Dominion broadcasters the Christmas Day Empire broadcasts exemplified efforts to construct a British community of the imagination - the British 'family' all celebrating together just as individual families would be, annually raising a glass to real, or metaphorical, 'absent friends'.<sup>146</sup> There was to be no clearer expression of this than the role adopted in broadcasts on Christmas Day by George V, whose Christmas messages explored a consistent theme. Of the 1 481 words George spoke in his four messages the most frequently recurring was 'family.' By 1934 George was, on Christmas Day, suggesting that he be regarded 'in some true sense' as 'Head' of the 'family' of British people.<sup>147</sup>

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That *Home Sweet Home* enjoyed both prominence is evidenced by its being performed at the opening in London in 1886 of the Colonial and Indian Exhibition by Queen Victoria. It came immediately after the Queen had spoken of 'the bond of union which now exists in every portion of my Empire', and before the National Anthem. It was sung in a manner – one Australian eye-witness related: 'worth more than all the rest of the show'. The exhibition attracted over 5 million visitors.

<sup>144</sup> Bickers, p. 2.

<sup>145</sup> Snagge, p. 92.

<sup>146</sup> The title of the 1933 Christmas Day broadcast.

<sup>147</sup> Fleming, pp. 11-18. (The most frequently used words were: family (used 13 times), Christmas (10), children, Empire, peoples (7), good, spirit (6), God, hope, past, world (5)).

Technical possibility, and the extension thereof, lay at the heart of ambitions for pan-Imperial Christmas Day broadcasts. The first had been planned a year before Fielden and Harding set to work, an experimental programme for Christmas afternoon 1931, *Half the World Away*. One of the BBC's regular broadcasters, Commander Stephen King-Hall, was to 'put a Puck-like girdle round the world in literally forty minutes' calling 'the corners of the Empire on the long-distance wireless telephone.'<sup>148</sup> Highlights were to include joining the ship 'Majestic', listening to the Niagara Falls and the playing of 'tricks' with time.<sup>149</sup> Ominously *The Listener* noted that 'till the actual moment it will be impossible to say how it will go.'<sup>150</sup> As *Radio Times* later recalled, at the last moment a 'technical hitch' saw the programme cancelled, leaving producers 'up 'til 4am writing sketches' for an impromptu show starring Gracie Fields...who fortunately happened to be in London.<sup>151</sup> A year later *The Listener* announced, with more confidence, that on Christmas Day 1932 'His Majesty the King has graciously consented to broadcast a message to the Empire.'<sup>152</sup> The possibilities of such a broadcast were dictated, then, by existing technologies. Radio telephones could only connect the most economically developed cities of the Empire, ruling out hearing from practically all colonies barring Bermuda and even in 1932 from India where radio broadcasting was still under development.<sup>153</sup> Again a 'circle' would be 'put around the world and tricks played with time,' but now the King's speech would end the show and the new 'British Empire Broadcasting Station' would ensure that 'all Empire listeners will have the chance of hearing the King.'<sup>154</sup> *Radio Times* declared that:

'The Christmas Day programme will be a family occasion. Those who listen to it will, most of them, be reunited in family groups, while the King and members of his family will be spending Christmas at Sandringham. His Majesty could have chosen no happier occasion upon which to broadcast to his people.'<sup>155</sup>

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<sup>148</sup> *The Listener*, 16 December 1931, p. 1038.

<sup>149</sup> *Radio Times*, 18 December 1931, p. 968.

<sup>150</sup> *The Listener*, 16 December 1931 p. 1038.

<sup>151</sup> *Radio Times*, 20 December 1935 p. 10.

<sup>152</sup> *The Listener*, 30 November 1932 p. 770.

<sup>153</sup> Simon J. Potter, 'The BBC and the Rise and Fall of the Empire Feature, 1932-1966', in *The Oxford Handbook of Radio and Podcasting*, ed. by Michelle Hilmes and Andrew J. Bottomley (Oxford: OUP, 2024), p. 553.

<sup>154</sup> *The Listener*, 14 Dec 1932 p. 849.

<sup>155</sup> *Radio Times*, 9 December 1932, p. 740.

The broadcast was to be carried to 'his people' across the globe. The King's Private Secretary, Clive Wigram asked Reith for an outline of the programme and expectations of the King. As we have seen the outline was worked up by Fielden and Harding. Reith supplied reassurance as to the ease of the task: 'we should put a microphone on a table in some room at Sandringham, and all that His Majesty would have to do would be to sit by the table, then, when a small red light came on (meaning that the Empire was waiting), he would say the few prepared sentences.'<sup>156</sup> Reith later offered a 10 point summary of what he might like the King to say, it included references to 'the importance of the new Empire Service' - which were not taken up - and suggested themes, many of which were: 'the influence and power of broadcasting'; the 'speed of light' and 'annihilating of space'; the wonder that the King could speak from his home in Norfolk 'to the Antipodes'; that this was 'a co-ordination of family circles all over the Empire' with 'greetings of affection and peace covering all parts by land and sea', there would, Reith promised, 'be conversations with ships'.<sup>157</sup> The King's message was written by Rudyard Kipling. Beyond its initial proposals the BBC played no role in drafting what became annual messages, indeed the King 'would never show anyone his script before the broadcast', the producer got only his last word, 'as a cue for the National Anthem.'<sup>158</sup> On Christmas Day 1932 *All the World Over* linked radio studios travelling westward from London around the globe. No recording exists, except of the King, yet the annotated script survives.<sup>159</sup> At 1.45pm a signal from London synchronized studio clocks around the world.<sup>160</sup> Archie Harding sat in Broadcasting House at the Dramatic Control Panel, a mixing desk through which incoming sounds could be blended, with scripts of the local contributions to be read if calls failed.<sup>161</sup> At 2pm *All the World Over* began, the chimes of Big Ben were followed by an announcer

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<sup>156</sup> RA PS/PSO/GV/PS/MAIN/54335, 18 October 1932, Wigram letter to Reith; 20 October 1932, Reith letter to Wigram.

<sup>157</sup> RA PS/PSO/GV/PS/MAIN/54335, 26 November 1932, Reith letter to Wigram.

<sup>158</sup> Stephen Walter Smithers, *Broadcasting from Within* (London: Pitman, 1938), p. 81.

<sup>159</sup> WAC R19/2529/1, Christmas Day 1932 – 'All the World Over'

<sup>160</sup> *Manchester Guardian*, 'Wireless Notes', 27 December 1932, p. 10.

<<https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/wireless-notes/docview/478504280/se-2>> [Accessed: 23 August 2025]

<sup>161</sup> Smithers, p. 80; 'The King To His People', *Times*, 27th December 1932, p.10. *The Times Digital Archive*.

who laid out the driving theme of the broadcast, the power of broadcasting, its capacity to defy boundaries of time or space:

Wherever you may be, in England or the Antipodes,  
At whatever season of the year, the dead of winter or high summer,  
By whatever time of the clock, mid-day or midnight, dusk or dawn,  
You have just heard radiated with the speed of light from London and Daventry and by the British Empire Broadcasting Station, the chimes of Big Ben striking two on the afternoon of Christmas Day in the Year of Our Lord 1932.

After a verse of 'God Rest You Merry Gentlemen' listeners were off to Cardiff, Belfast and Edinburgh, and then westward around the world. At 2.11pm they joined - as planned a year earlier - a children's party on the liner 'Majestic' in mid-Atlantic 'outbound from Southampton to New York'. It was the first of the moments later fondly recalled. The next came fifteen minutes later when, having greeted Montreal in French, and heard a message from Toronto which listed, as though scripted by the Empire Marketing Board, the range of its farm produce, listeners heard the 'thunder of waters' of the Niagara Falls. A little after 2.30 Vancouver was called where though 'it is only now nearing dawn of Christmas Day...eager children may be busy ransacking stockings...' and then began a flight through time to Wellington, where, it being Boxing Day morning, 'our Christmas greetings will be about three hours late.' The greeting from New Zealand was in Maori, made at 2.39. Four minutes later, in Sydney 'it is dark and the children whom we left in Vancouver, before dawn, awake, have in Sydney gone to bed on Christmas night.' From Melbourne listeners heard the Australian cricket captain Bob Woodfull - yet to be embroiled in the 'Bodyline' controversies - and then from Cape Town and Port Said but not Gibraltar as the programme was over-running. Listening with the Queen, his children and grandchildren had been the King.<sup>162</sup> A little before three o'clock George left his family and walked along an out-of-the-way corridor to a small office under the stairs at the front of Sandringham House, where he sat at a table covered

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<[link.gale.com/apps/doc/CS167978907/TTDA?u=oxford&sid=bookmark-TTDA&xid=4b06e6fd](http://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CS167978907/TTDA?u=oxford&sid=bookmark-TTDA&xid=4b06e6fd)> [Accessed: 23 August 2025]

<sup>162</sup> *Manchester Guardian*, 'Kings Message to the Empire', 27 December 1932, p. 9.

<<https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/kings-message-empire/docview/478509668/se-2>> [Accessed: 23 August 2025]

with a heavy cloth to dampen the sound of nervous paper rustling.<sup>163</sup> The King, as yet, had little experience of speaking into a microphone to an invisible audience.<sup>164</sup> This was ruining his Christmas.<sup>165</sup> On the table were two microphones, encased in 'Australian walnut,' a pair of red lights and a card with instructions. When the first light was illuminated, he was to stand-by, and when both were lit everything in the room could be heard.<sup>166</sup> One light glowed as the announcer read: 'And now let silence fall' - a note was made in the script to pause here:

'In these Islands and the Antipodes, in the dead of winter or high summer, at midday or midnight, dusk or dawn, British people all the world over are listening for the voice of His Majesty the King'.

At which point the King's second red light shone. Taking his cue he spoke for three minutes:

'Through one of the marvels of modern Science, I am enabled, this Christmas Day, to speak to all my peoples throughout the Empire...'

He memorably addressed:

'...men and women so cut off by the snows, the desert or the sea, that only voices out of the air can reach them.'

In Wellington the speech was 'not very clearly received', but making the most of what little had been heard reporters highlighted 'the striking phrase "I speak now from my home and from my heart."' <sup>167</sup> By contrast five listeners at 'Palm Beach, near Sydney' composed a letter to the BBC at 1.20am on Boxing Day to say that having 'spent the day surfing' they had just been sitting 'around the wireless, some in shorts, some in pyjamas listening in the early morning. The reception was

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<sup>163</sup> John Gore, *King George V: A Personal Memoir* (London: John Murray, 1941), p. 423; WAC, 40/2961/1, 6 December, letter Gerald Cock to Major Hardinge.

<sup>164</sup> WAC, R30/2961/1, Gerald Cock to Major Hardinge, arrangements for a 'modulation test' at 2.30pm.

<sup>165</sup> Kenneth Rose, *King George V* (London: Macmillan, 1984), p. 394.

<sup>166</sup> WAC, R30/2961/1, Gerald Cock to Major Hardinge, with sample instruction cards; 'His Majesty's Broadcast', *Times*, 23 December 1932, p. 10.

<[link.gale.com/apps/doc/CS169551767/TTDA?u=oxford&sid=bookmark-TTDA&xid=80c218ea](http://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CS169551767/TTDA?u=oxford&sid=bookmark-TTDA&xid=80c218ea)> [Accessed: 23 August 2025]

<sup>167</sup> 'The King Broadcasts to the Empire', *The Scotsman*, 27 December 1932, p. 7.

<<https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/king-broadcasts-empire/docview/480834054/se-2>> [Accessed: 23 August 2025]

excellent.<sup>168</sup> *All the World Over* had offered, *Radio Times* reflected, ‘a poetic juggling with space and time...there was not time to say much...but the fact that it had been said was enough.’<sup>169</sup> When it came to the King’s contribution what precisely he had said appeared less significant than his speaking. Harold Nicolson, pondering the success of the Christmas message - ‘surely there was a magic in all this?’ - attributed it to the King, ‘an unreal incredible personage’ suddenly becoming ‘a human voice - intimate and paternal’ - speaking to listeners ‘in their own room from a box at the table between the sewing machine and the mug.’<sup>170</sup> For *The New York Times* it had seemed to listeners in 1932 that ‘for an instant’ the King, speaking with ‘not a trace of affectation...had been celebrating with them around their own firesides.’<sup>171</sup> Wigram rang Reith from Windsor to say ‘that the King was delighted with the whole affair.’ It had been, wrote Reith, ‘the most spectacular success in the history of the BBC so far...Nothing went wrong.’<sup>172</sup> The broadcast brought the BBC ‘one of its heaviest postbags.’<sup>173</sup> *The Daily Mail*, so often a BBC critic, celebrated the achievement: ‘Boys and girls and those of riper years...could hear in each city the answer given, the speech exchanged, the accent of the speaker, and the language used. Never before have the people of this country been able so clearly to realise what the Commonwealth of British nations means.’<sup>174</sup> Yet nowhere was the hyperbole greater than in the editorials of the Australian press, for the *Adelaide Chronicle* this had been nothing less than ‘one of the most amazing events ever conceived by man’.<sup>175</sup> *The Hobart Mercury* was effusive:

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<sup>168</sup> ‘What the Listeners Say’, *World Radio*, 17 February 1933, p. 223.

<sup>169</sup> *Radio Times*, 21 December 1934, p. 974.

<sup>170</sup> Nicolson, pp. 525-6.

<sup>171</sup> ‘King George Greets Whole Empire by Radio; Distant Lands Thrill to His ‘God Bless You’, *New York Times*, 26 December 1932 – Front Page <<https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/king-george-greets-whole-empire-radio-distant/docview/99755584/se-2>> [Accessed: 23 August 2025]

<sup>172</sup> Reith, *Into the Wind*, pp. 168-9.

<sup>173</sup> *The Listener*, 4 January 1933 pp. 8-9.

<sup>174</sup> ‘The New Link of Empire’, *Daily Mail*, 27 December 1932, p. 8.

<[link.gale.com/apps/doc/EE1864263055/DMHA?u=oxford&sid=bookmark-DMHA&xid=7c66d328](http://link.gale.com/apps/doc/EE1864263055/DMHA?u=oxford&sid=bookmark-DMHA&xid=7c66d328)> [Accessed: 23 August 2025]

<sup>175</sup> ‘Round Empire by Radio in 60 Minutes’, *Adelaide Chronicle*, 29 December 1932, p. 35.

<<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article90627892>> [Accessed: 25 February 2025]

‘To sweep over 13,000,000 square miles of the earth’s surface, to hear the voices of those in mid-Atlantic, to listen to the roar of the Niagara Falls...To do all this and more, in an hour, is to cease to be human and to become at least akin to the gods of old.’<sup>176</sup>

The rebroadcasting of Empire Service programmes had offered opportunities for the public service broadcasters of Australia and New Zealand to present themselves as partners of the BBC, and by association to make good on aspirations to occupy a similar status in their national broadcasting ecosystems to that enjoyed by the BBC in Britain. This aspiration, and the challenge presented to it, was evident that Christmas Day in 1932. Alongside their enthusiasm to contribute both the ABC and NZBB requested that the BBC rebuff any approach from ‘private stations controlled by private interests’ to carry the King’s broadcast, the NZBB asking that the ‘corporation will vest that right only in this Board’, allowing access to private stations would cause ‘serious embarrassment...the progress of the national services would be retarded.’<sup>177</sup> Yet the BBC was unequivocal. Whilst Reith would have preferred the position to be that ‘where broadcasting in Australia and New Zealand is concerned there is one authority, and one only, with whom we had to deal’ he had, he believed, a responsibility to make the new Empire Service ‘an Empire one in the true sense of the word, the programmes must, in the interest of individual listeners, be distributed over as wide a field as possible.’ The ABC Chairman thanked Reith for his ‘frankness’ and stated his belief that ‘in the interests of the Empire and the world’ it was ‘very necessary that the closest association should exist’ between the ABC and BBC.<sup>178</sup> In 1932 the unpredictabilities of short-wave transmission and reception had required that contributions from Dominion studios be brief and simple.<sup>179</sup> Nonetheless the contributions from the ABC and NZBB had been significant, and had been heard. As Cecil Graves later recalled it was following this broadcast, in the first week of the Empire

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<sup>176</sup> *Hobart Mercury*, ‘Hello Australia!’, 27 December 1932, p. 6.

<<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article24707236>> [Accessed: 25 February 2025]

<sup>177</sup> WAC E1/1091/1, 12 December 1932, EC Hands, General Manager NZBB to Director, Foreign and Overseas Department.

<sup>178</sup> WAC E1/315/2, 3 February 1933, letter, Reith to Lloyd Jones; 22 March 1933, letter Lloyd Jones to Reith.

<sup>179</sup> Potter, ‘Empire Feature’, pp. 552-3.

Service, that he 'at Broadcasting House and, I think, you also, who listened to it overseas, realised the possibilities of this new service, and its ultimate success was ensured.'<sup>180</sup>

That afternoon the possibilities of pan-Imperial broadcasting, indeed of broadcasting itself, had been exploited by a particular group of BBC staff. In the sound picture painted by visiting a children's party on a ship, by bringing listeners the roar of the Niagara Falls, Archie Harding was applying techniques developed by the BBC Research Section, techniques that now informed the work of the BBC Features Department. Radio 'features' had developed from early experiments in radio drama, such as Lance Sieveking's *Kaleidoscope*, which had mixed voices, music and sound to inspire imaginative responses in listeners.<sup>181</sup> At times of remembrance, as we have seen, poetry and music had combined to invite reflection. For Christmas Day the BBC developed 'Empire' features, with producers seeking to bring together the voices of 'ordinary' people, the 'authentic' sounds of their everyday lives and suggestions of exotic location. As Simon Potter argues these soundscapes 'were consciously constructed to serve an ideological purpose, emphasizing both the vast extent and the underlying unity of the British Empire' through contributors who spoke to 'globe-spanning family connections.' Radio features 'were used to make empire seem both modern and consensual'. They had 'a distinctive sound' shaped both by the material broadcast and the constraints of short-wave broadcasting - brief speech, combined with song or sound recorded on location of a quality that could be picked out through the surging and fading of atmospheric interference.<sup>182</sup> BBC Features was under the control of the Head of Drama, Val Gielgud, who, as we have seen, had already adopted Armistice Day as one on which his team could shine.<sup>183</sup> His work

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<sup>180</sup> Cecil Graves, 'Looking Backwards – The Empire Service in Retrospect', *BBC Empire Broadcasting*, 7 April 1937, p. 15.

<sup>181</sup> Aasiya Lodhi & Amanda Wrigley (2018), Introduction: Radio Modernisms, *Media History*, 24:2, (159-165); Hugh Chignell, 'British Radio Drama and the Theatre', in *The Oxford Handbook of Radio and Podcasting*, ed. by Michelle Hilmes and Andrew J. Bottomley (Oxford: OUP, 2024).

<sup>182</sup> Potter, 'Empire Feature', pp. 548-9.

<sup>183</sup> WAC R34/227/1, 22 May 1931, Gielgud to Wellington. Armistice Day 1931.

with Harding laid the ground for *All the World Over*.<sup>184</sup> Along with Harding Gielgud had recruited D.H. Munro who brought expertise in sound mixing, and Laurence Gilliam.<sup>185</sup> Gilliam was a Londoner in his mid-twenties, educated at Cambridge. He joined Gielgud's team in 1933 after initially working on *Radio Times*.<sup>186</sup> Considered by his contemporaries 'one of the outstanding personalities of radio', Gilliam was admired as a man with 'a real passion for radio itself, not merely radio as a road to anything else.' He worked on the principle of always ending 'with a punch line...give them a final image they won't forget.'<sup>187</sup>

For Gilliam one of the major revelations of radio production in the early 1930s was that 'the listener himself, and the world in which he lived, provided a rich field of programme material.' The invention of mobile recording devices made it possible for a producer to 'go direct to the source' and 'photograph it in sound.'<sup>188</sup> Harding was himself using real voices recorded in real places, to explore social issues.<sup>189</sup> The Christmas broadcast was then, in all its pan-Imperial ambition and significance, placed in the hands of some of the BBC's most adventurous producers. Gilliam was meticulous in his planning, scheduling a full week of careful studio rehearsals to iron out problems and in 1934 building a larger, 15 channel, Dramatic Control Panel through which the greater number of contributions from around the globe could be blended.<sup>190</sup> Items were carefully plotted to drive a narrative, locations and sounds were juxtaposed specifically for dramatic effect. The key sounds were the voices of the contributors, carefully chosen and confirming every possible regional and national stereotype, Dominion broadcasters themselves choosing locations and individuals that often did nothing to confound preconceptions of their national 'type'. In 1934,

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<sup>184</sup> Val Gielgud, *British Radio Drama, 1922-1956* (London: Harrap, 1957), p. 50.

<sup>185</sup> WAC R34/227/1, 6 October 1931, Munro to HH Thompson, copy to Harding. Armistice Day programme; M. Gorham, *Sound and Fury: Twenty One Years in the BBC* (London, 1948), p. 62.

<sup>186</sup> Snagge, p. 171.

<sup>187</sup> Wynford Vaughan-Thomas, *Trust to Talk* (London: Hutchinson, 1980), p. 210.

<sup>188</sup> Laurence Gilliam, *BBC Features* (London: Evans Brothers Limited by arrangement with the British Broadcasting Corporation, 1950), p. 11.

<sup>189</sup> Potter, 'Empire Feature', pp. 550-1.

<sup>190</sup> WAC R19/166, Studio rehearsal plan and Channel allocation grid.

when Gilliam solicited opinions, Canada proposed a lumberjack speaking from a lumber camp.<sup>191</sup> Such stereotypes served a purpose.

For both its domestic and global audiences the BBC played a role in maintaining empire 'as a central part of the British worldview.'<sup>192</sup> In 1929 Reith had decided to 'boost Empire Day,' in 1930 the BBC Control Board agreed that 'the Corporation should identify itself closely with Empire consolidation' and should 'stimulate interest in the Empire'. In programmes titled *Edges of the World or Strange Peoples and Places*, the side of Empire presented to BBC listeners was that of 'a progressive entity, acquired by trade or settlement, not conquest,' home to kinsfolk or alternatively to people for whom Britain had a 'civilizing mission.'<sup>193</sup> Whilst there were series of talks, such as *Responsibilities of Empire*, which might address thorny issues, listeners more usually encountered clichés and stereotypes, which in remaining within the established discourse of Empire, were, at the time, uncontroversial.<sup>194</sup> Paddy Scannell and David Cardiff coin the term 'typification' for the use of such clichés, which were adopted by the BBC precisely to avoid specifics and controversy.<sup>195</sup> When it came to speakers on Christmas Day producers actively sought what they termed 'representative types', representative of geographical location or social status, clichéd perhaps, but useful when casting Imperial productions.<sup>196</sup> Their value came not just from avoiding 'specifics', they facilitated an 'understanding' however flawed or superficial, of the inhabitants of the British world.

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<sup>191</sup> WAC R19/166, 24 & 26 September 1934, memos from Miss Branston to Gilliam. Christmas Day Programme 1934.

<sup>192</sup> Hajkowski, p. 235.

<sup>193</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 21-29.

<sup>194</sup> Catherine Hall & Sonya Rose, pp. 30-31; John M. Mackenzie, 'In Touch with the Infinite': the BBC and Empire, 1922-53' in *Imperialism and Popular Culture*, ed. by John M. Mackenzie (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986), p. 186.

<sup>195</sup> Scannell & Cardiff, *A Social History of British Broadcasting*, p. 286.

<sup>196</sup> WAC R34/299/1, 31 July, 1935. Memo from Mr. Felton to Drama Director, 'Christmas Day-suggestions'.

Within the loosely overarching 'British' identity efforts had been made in popular culture across the Empire to define distinctive national characteristics in a national 'type', the 'chirpy' Cockney, the 'canny' Scot - the voice of Wales was, almost invariably, 'lyrical', quite probably that of a miner, singing would be heard. A Canadian might typically be, as we've seen, a lumberjack. From song and popular literature had emerged in Australia the bushman, the swagman, the shearer - in both the 'national type' was a man engaged in heroic struggle in the wide open spaces, experiencing 'the exhilaration of camp life'.<sup>197</sup> Both offered a contrast to the more constrained lives of urban 'old Britons' at 'home', even as in practice few Canadians were lumberjacks, and few Australians lived in the bush, indeed in the 1930s just under half of the population lived in one of the State capitals.<sup>198</sup> From the Great War emerged 'the Digger', the man whose courage and physical prowess had been proved at Gallipoli, standing for all that was 'decent, wholesome and Australian' yet, Richard White notes, 'a split personality', both physically courageous and 'an unkempt larrikin'. The final pre-war incarnation of the Australian 'type' was the Bondi Beach life saver, a heroic, modern, and urban man, a character playing a prominent role in the imagery and pageantry of the sesquicentenary celebrations of 1938. As White observes the life saver wrapped up, in modern form, a whole series of traditional traits of the Australian 'type' – sun bronzed, physically robust, dependent on 'mates', and male.<sup>199</sup> Ann Curthoys observes that the search for 'a completed, unique and distinguishing Australian character and set of values' led down 'some unrewarding paths'.<sup>200</sup> There were fewer commonly established New Zealand stereotypes. Perhaps the independent dairy farmer, the 'cow cocky', 'neighbourly and unpretentious'.<sup>201</sup> Perhaps the 'man alone', hardworking, strong and silent.<sup>202</sup> Sinclair suggests that perhaps New

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<sup>197</sup> Richard White, *Inventing Australia*, (St. Leonards, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 1981), p. 83.

<sup>198</sup> Census of Australia 1933, Part XXXVI, Dwellings

<[https://www.ausstats.abs.gov.au/ausstats/free.nsf/0/4DC7D06B1D99137CCA257840001BD81B/\\$File/1933%20Census%20-%20Volume%20III%20-%20Part%20XXXVI%20Dwellings.pdf](https://www.ausstats.abs.gov.au/ausstats/free.nsf/0/4DC7D06B1D99137CCA257840001BD81B/$File/1933%20Census%20-%20Volume%20III%20-%20Part%20XXXVI%20Dwellings.pdf)> [Accessed: 28 October 2025]

<sup>199</sup> White, *Inventing Australia*, pp. 125, 136 & 154-7.

<sup>200</sup> Ann Curthoys, 'History and Identity' in *Creating Australia* ed. by Wayne Hudson & Geoffrey Bolton (St. Leonards, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 1997), pp. 28 & 36.

<sup>201</sup> Belich, *Paradise Reforged*, p. 148.

<sup>202</sup> John Mulgan, *Man Alone* (London: Selwyn & Blount, 1939).

Zealanders were simply seen from Britain as ‘an outdoor people, vigorous and rugged’, less abrasive than ‘drunken and chundering’ Australians – in short ‘genteel Aussies’.<sup>203</sup> The influence of such ‘typification’, of such stereotypical ‘national types’, was enduring. The New Zealand contributor to the 1939 Christmas Day broadcast was Flight Lieutenant Sherwood Hale, a sheep farmer now serving in the air force.<sup>204</sup> When Australians serving in the Middle East were asked in 1941 from whom they would like to hear in Australia, amongst the suggestions was the painter of the Sydney Harbour Bridge.<sup>205</sup> Together such characters could be presented as embodying the richness and diversity of the tableau of ‘British’ life, yet in a way that was reassuring, suggesting that this mindbogglingly vast world was inhabited by people with whom readers of books, theatre and cinema goers, and listeners to radio shows, were familiar, that however far from ‘home’ a British traveller might wander they would be surrounded by voices and customs that were readily understood.

The broadcasts introducing the King in 1933, 1934 and 1935 built on that of 1932 to exploit all of the creative and technological developments at the disposal of Laurence Gilliam and his fellow BBC producers. In 1933 the title, and theme, was *Absent Friends*, beginning with Big Ben chimes and Stuart Hibberd calling to ‘British citizens wherever they may be’, proposing the toast ‘absent friends’. The programme painted a picture in sound of Christmas in the British Isles - at ‘Home’. Howard Marshall gave a poetic, heavily sentimental, account of Christmas Day in London, items followed from Devon, Lancashire, and Belfast, from a Glasgow pantomime, a Birmingham children’s hospital and a Welsh mine, from where, half a mile underground, over the sound of the miner’s lift, greetings were sent ‘to miners all over the world’. ‘There’ the announcer declared ‘as we chanced upon them this Christmas afternoon, were the people of Great Britain.’ The climax was an exchange of greetings between, in sequence, Dublin, Bermuda, Ottawa, Wellington,

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<sup>203</sup> Sinclair, p. 329.

<sup>204</sup> ANZ R22011349, 9 December 1939, Telegram NBS to BBC.

<sup>205</sup> NAA 1902544, 28 April 1941, Australian Programmes for the BBC, Report of Committee Meeting.

Sydney, Bombay and Cape Town. Celebrating the linguistic diversity of the Empire French was spoken in Ottawa, Maori in Wellington, Hindi in Bombay, Gaelic in the Scottish Highlands and Welsh at the foot of the mineshaft.<sup>206</sup> The King again read words written by Kipling.<sup>207</sup> He spoke of the 'sober progress' of the year, and of 'hope' and 'confidence.' He wished 'all who hear me, and especially to the children, whose great day this is, a very happy Christmas.'<sup>208</sup>

In 1934 *Empire Exchange* stretched the boundaries of technical and editorial ambition. Gilliam's creative conceit was that the BBC was operating as a telephone exchange, 'putting people in remote parts of the Empire and at home in touch.'<sup>209</sup> It opened with bells ringing across the Empire, in Bethlehem, Bombay, Wellington, Ottawa, and Armagh. Big Ben drew the sequence to a close with the chimes of two and Hibberd again called 'British citizens wherever they may be.' The programme linked items in Britain, Canada, Australia, South Africa, India and New Zealand. Bugles were heard on the Khyber Pass. Listeners heard from toll keepers on the Mersey Tunnel and Sydney Harbour Bridge, each newly opened Imperial engineering triumphs. There was a poignancy to items specifically addressing recent migrants from the British Isles - from Scotland, as a piper played, the announcer reassured Scots thinking of home that they had not been forgotten. An item addressed to Welshmen 'in exile' declared that in Wales 'though distress shadows many of her valleys, her spirit remains brave.' Canadian children at a raucous party at an indoor ice rink in Winnipeg made, the organisers hoped, 'the first round the world broadcast ever performed by children.'<sup>210</sup> The complexity of the combination of such a range of sounds and sources fascinated the newspapers, a fascination focused on D. H. Munro, sitting 'like an organist' at the expanded

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<sup>206</sup> British Library, Sound Archive, T8077, 'Absent Friends' & WAC R5/2/1, 'Empire Exchange' – Christmas Day 1934.

<sup>207</sup> University of Sussex Library, SxMs-38/2/2/2/1/2/2/5/3, George V Christmas Broadcast 1933, D2, 19 October 1933, Wigram to Kipling.

<sup>208</sup> Fleming, pp. 12-13.

<sup>209</sup> WAC R19/166, 28 September 1934. Memo from Gilliam to Gielgud copied to DEFS. Christmas day Programme 1934.

<sup>210</sup> 'Canadian Children and Empire Exchange', *World Radio*, February 8, 1935, p. 13.

Dramatic Control Panel 'half the world at his fingertips.'<sup>211</sup> The pressure was such that, Hibberd observed, Munro 'could only speak in a whisper' for a week afterwards.<sup>212</sup> It was anticipated that come the day connections to Australia and New Zealand might be poor, and so it was decided that their contributions would not be 'live' but rather recorded, relayed to London in the days before the broadcast when conditions were more favourable, and then played into the programme from the London studio. This was to be an 'unofficial' decision, not widely publicised.<sup>213</sup> Australia's took the form of informal observations on the day's events from four men, three being a drover, a farmer and a fisherman. In the way of such 'informal' radio pieces in the early 1930s all were heavily scripted - and sounded it. It was later established that whilst the Australian speakers were 'authentic workers' and 'in the majority of cases' the background effects were 'authentic' at least some of the pieces had been 'faked in the studio.'<sup>214</sup> The most memorable Australian contribution, both for its location and for the sheer effrontery of efforts to pass it off as 'live' - it being the middle of the Australian night - came from the fourth man, on Bondi Beach:

(FADE IN NOISE OF WAVES AND CROWD CHATTER)

ANNOUNCER: Bondi Surf Beach...here is one of the lifesavers.

LIFESAVER: I'm afraid I can't stay long, pretty busy, today. It's difficult to keep so many people between the safety flags. One or two swimmers were in trouble earlier but nothing serious. There are two too far over now. (BLOWS WHISTLE) They never look. (WHISTLE AGAIN) That's better. It's not really dangerous. It's a great beach and wonderful surf. Those chaps right out are regulars - waiting for big shoots. See, they're catching one now they'll be beached in a minute. Good surf today - don't the crowd enjoy it? Just listen to them.

(FADE OUT CROWD AND WAVE NOISES, THEN DISTANT WHISTLE BLAST)<sup>215</sup>

Whether recorded on the beach or in the studio it was delivered with all the confidence and bravado that might be expected of a national hero of the age.<sup>216</sup> New Zealand's contribution, which opened the broadcast, was less heroic, more intimate, and included Mr A.S. Patterson, 'Milk Superintendent in the town of Otaki, North Island...12 000 miles by shortest ocean route from the

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<sup>211</sup> Dougall, p. 70.

<sup>212</sup> Hibberd, p. 107.

<sup>213</sup> WAC R19/166, 7 December 1934. Gilliam memo to CP.

<sup>214</sup> WAC R19/166, 18 December 1934, memo, Clark to Gilliam.

<sup>215</sup> WAC R5/2/1, Christmas Day, Empire Exchange 1934-1935, Script.

<sup>216</sup> British Library, Sound Archive, T81837, 'Empire Exchange'.

Old Country, or 'Home', as we in New Zealand call England'. Mr Patterson gave an account of the volume of milk needed to service Wellington's demands for Christmas Day strawberries and cream - 20,000 gallons. He spoke of the warm weather and gave listeners a Christmas greeting from 'The Britain of the South Seas'.<sup>217</sup> He was followed by a Maori greeting and New Zealand drifted into the ether to the sound of Maori song.<sup>218</sup> As a finale the singing and dancing of 8,000 South African mine workers offered a sharp contrast to the more tranquil and muted sounds of the church in a Cotswold village that followed.<sup>219</sup> The village was Ilmington, chosen in large part because its manor house was 'equipped with a telephone which has been successfully used for broadcasting before' and because its owner was a helpful friend of the BBC announcer Freddie Grisewood.<sup>220</sup> From Ilmington, the King was introduced by Walton Handy, a local shepherd of a similar vintage and with a splendidly rustic burr - no greater vocal contrast with the measured gentlemanly Edwardian tones of George V could be imagined.<sup>221</sup> Hibberd noted in his diary that 'it was a stroke of genius on the part of the producer to find him and put him in the programme; there must have been many people with lumps in their throats as he announced the King.'<sup>222</sup>

In 1934 Kipling was unwell and the King turned to the Archbishop of Canterbury for his message.<sup>223</sup> The King was 'quite delighted' with Cosmo Lang's 'theme of the Family, of which His Majesty is the Head'.<sup>224</sup> The 1934 message proposed, then, that the Empire formed 'one Great Family.' The King hoped that in a 'restless and troubled' world, anxieties might be met 'in the Spirit of one Family.' He concluded by asking that he might be considered its Head.<sup>225</sup> Gilliam's biggest technical gamble

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<sup>217</sup> WAC R5/2/1, Christmas Day, Empire Exchange 1934-1935, Script.

<sup>218</sup> British Library, Sound Archive, T81837, 'Empire Exchange'.

<sup>219</sup> WAC R19/166, 21 December 1934. Christmas Day Programme. Note from Gilliam to Chapman.

<sup>220</sup> WAC R19/166, 22 October 1934. Memo from Gilliam to Gielgud. Visit to Birmingham and the Cotswolds.

<sup>221</sup> British Library, Sound Archive, T81837, 'Empire Exchange'.

<sup>222</sup> Hibberd, p. 107.

<sup>223</sup> University of Sussex Library, SxMs-38/2/2/2/1/2/2/5/4, George V Jubilee Souvenir 1935, E2, 15 July 1934, Kipling to Wigram.

<sup>224</sup> Lang Papers vol. 318, George V 1925-35 ff. 1-45, 26-27, 11 December 1934, letter from Wigram to Lang.

<sup>225</sup> Fleming, pp. 14-15.

in 1934 arose from the way in which he proposed to perform the National Anthem that concluded the broadcast, it was to be 'played and sung, simultaneously, in Australia, Canada, England and South Africa'. Munro would mix between the venues. The first verse was to be repeatedly sung, performed in 'G Major and in a tempo of crotchet to equal 66', cued from London. It was appreciated that 'perfect synchronization' would be a challenge.<sup>226</sup> It is hard to conceive of a more impressive demonstration of the capacity of broadcast technology to shrink time and space than what resulted - the sounds of the choirs singing in turn, in almost perfect synchronisation, each faded up as the announcer called out to first Australia, then Canada, then South Africa, the finale coming from the Concert Hall at Broadcasting House in London.<sup>227</sup> In 1934 the intention had been to expressly communicate the 'incredible vastness of our Empire'. The technologies of broadcasting would enable experiences otherwise impossible.<sup>228</sup> For 'Recorder', writing in *World Radio*, 'Empire Exchange' had been 'one of the most amazing broadcasts that have ever been attempted...the contrasts of place, climates, and voices...at times one's brain reeled.'<sup>229</sup> The microphone 'skipped around the world', noted *The New York Times* 'in breath-taking fashion'. The 'miracle' lay 'in linking so many far-flung cities together in split seconds as if it were all on some small island.'<sup>230</sup> For the *Listener* 'here, indeed, was the diversity and unity of the Empire made audible'.<sup>231</sup>

*Empire Exchange* was received in New Zealand at 2am, with the King speaking at 3am - 'an unsuitable hour for reception'. Listeners wishing to hear him would have to tune to the BBC or wait for the YA station rebroadcast at 09.30. New Zealand's B stations didn't have licence to

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<sup>226</sup> WAC R19/166, 5 December 1934. Christmas Day Programme 1934. Notes on the National Anthem.

<sup>227</sup> British Library, Sound Archive, T81837, 'Empire Exchange'.

<sup>228</sup> 'The Empire Broadcast', *World Radio*, 11 January 1935, p. 6.

<sup>229</sup> 'The Empire Broadcast', *World Radio*, 11 January 1935, p. 6.

<sup>230</sup> 'Behind the Studio Scenes', *New York Times*, 30 December 1934, p. xx15.

<<https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/behind-studio-scenes/docview/101020005/se-2>> [Accessed: 23 August 2025]

<sup>231</sup> *The Listener*, 4 January 1932, pp. 8-9.

broadcast throughout the night.<sup>232</sup> The situation was different in Australia, and Reith's determination that such broadcasts should be for the Empire 'in the true sense of the word', and 'distributed over as wide a field as possible' was reflected in Australian radio schedules. In Sydney 2GB, 2UW, 2CH and 2SM all carried *Empire Exchange* with the King's message coming at 1am. In Brisbane listeners could tune to the ABC station 4QG or to 4BC for what was billed by the ABC as the 'Empire Broadcast on Christmas Night', or by 4BC, more simply, as the 'British Empire programme'.<sup>233</sup>

In 1935 *This Great Family* took its title from the 1934 Christmas message and was built around connections between scattered members of the 'British family'. From South Wales and a Christmas party at a children's hospital it linked to New South Wales where the Jenkins family demonstrated the prosperity their migration had brought by ostentatiously - and loudly - pouring themselves a cold drink from their refrigerator. The producer Felix Felton wrote of the importance of choosing 'representative types.' 'From the success of the shepherd last year,' he wrote, 'it is very clear that the type needed in each case is one absolutely typical of his own class or district.'<sup>234</sup> For *This Great Family* he proposed that in South Africa, as it would be 'summer weather' could it be in the open air perhaps with the 'introduction of native music from farm boys quarters'? India might be represented by an 'army mess with British and native officers present.'<sup>235</sup> Felton was interested in the 'difference in dialect' between speakers. He proposed an order of speakers in which 'the contrast of dialects would be very pointed.'<sup>236</sup> The programme finale came from New Zealand

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<sup>232</sup> 'On the Broadcast Band', *Timaru Herald*, 22 December 1934, p. 14

<<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/timaru-herald/1934/12/22/14>> [Accessed: 27 May 2025]

<sup>233</sup> 'Broadcasting for Today and Tuesday', *Sydney Daily Telegraph*, 234 December 1934, p. 5.

<<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article246997068>> [Accessed: 19 August 2025]

'On the Air', *Daily Standard*, 24 December 1934, p. 4.

<<https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/page/20871663>> [Accessed: 27 May 2025]

<sup>234</sup> WAC R34/299/1, 31 July, 1935. Memo from Mr. Felton to Drama Director. Christmas Day-suggestions.

<sup>235</sup> WAC R34/299/1, 11 September 1935, Notes for Christmas Day programme 1935.

<sup>236</sup> WAC R34/299/1, 31 July, 1935. Memo from Mr. Felton to Drama Director. Christmas Day-suggestions.

where a child rather clumsily introduced the King, with assistance in London from Hibberd.<sup>237</sup> 1935 was the King's Jubilee year and in his Christmas message the King spoke of 'a spontaneous offering of loyalty - and may I say of love - which the Queen and I can never forget.' He reasoned that at a time of 'world anxieties' it was good that the Empire was 'the friend of all, the enemy of none.' He hoped for solutions to 'the economic troubles which still beset us.' He concluded with thoughts for 'those who are suffering or in distress' and for 'the children who may be listening to me'.<sup>238</sup> Lang's papers contain an annotated early draft of the 1935 message with a handwritten note that 'alterations by the King in this draft are in pencil.' The tone of the alterations can be judged by the first - the change of 'my dear *People*' to 'my dear *friends*,' and the last, where the King has added to the Archbishop's suggestion of his 'truest Christmas wishes' those 'of my dear wife, my children, and grandchildren who are with me today.'<sup>239</sup> The King died three weeks after the broadcast.

In his messages there was little the King had said that departed from the established inter-war discourse of royal speeches, yet as was revealed in letters written to the BBC, and to the King, their impact was, for many listeners, profound and moving. As Miss Alice A. Mullett in Melbourne wrote, in Australia 'even the biggest cynic' - suggesting she knew at least some - 'must have kindled at the paternal voice of the King. We are so proud of our King and the royal family out here...no man has set a finer example to the nation.'<sup>240</sup> Dominion candidates sitting the Staff College examinations in 1934 answered a question on the value of broadcasting as an instrument of Imperial policy with the observation that the King's broadcasts had done more than anything else to bring the Empire together.<sup>241</sup> For George had succeeded in projecting himself as King in each and all of his national territories, a reassuring fatherly figure, and was celebrated as such,

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<sup>237</sup> British Library, Sound Archive, ICL0067450-54, 'This Great Family'.

<sup>238</sup> Fleming, pp. 17-18.

<sup>239</sup> Lang Papers vol. 318, George V 1925-35 ff. 1-45, 40-43, annotated undated version of the 1935 Christmas message.

<sup>240</sup> John d. M Johnson, *Selected Appreciations from Listeners Overseas Following the Message to His People: Broadcast by His Majesty the King, Christmas 1933* (Oxford: At the University Press, 1934)

<sup>241</sup> RA PS/PSO/GV/PS/MAIN/54793, 2 May 1934, letter to Wigram from Sir A. Lynden Bell.

even as his voice and reassuring old world persona set a trap for his sons - the ultramodern and reckless David whose reign as Edward VIII was to be brief, and Bertie, the frustrations of whose speech impediment would be massively exaggerated in the broadcast age.

This was, then, the promotion of 'a greater understanding and a greater sympathy' among 'the constituent parts of the Empire', and on an epic scale. Through the Dominion contributions to the broadcasts what was building was a pan-British co-ownership of the Empire and its symbols. These broadcasts delivered something of Reith's final objective of broadcasting 'at Home some programmes from overseas' - and more than at home, for this was the ABC and NZBB broadcasting to the world.

To date there had been two factors undermining any conceptions of Empire broadcasting being a partnership of equals - of the BBC and the ABC or NZBB being co-creators, of relationships being reciprocal. The first, as noted by Doyle at the outset, was that the inadequacy of broadcast technology stifled the production and exchange of programming across the globe. The second was a fundamental lack of interest in London in routine engagement with other Dominion broadcasters, seen, as we have considered, in the out-of-hand rejection of Conder's offer of a programme on his rather remarkable, and surely engaging, 'synthetic' cricket commentaries. Whilst Graves argued that the long-term development of the Empire Service depended 'quite a lot on reciprocity' he observed at the same time a 'tendency in London to judge the work of Dominion broadcasters by our own ideas.'<sup>242</sup> The Empire was not regarded 'as a source of what might be called general entertainment.' By May 1936 no more than a dozen programmes or items had been relayed to Britain from the Empire in any year.<sup>243</sup> Yet on Christmas Day such judgements were reserved. What resulted were some of the more memorable moments of the broadcasts. These

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<sup>242</sup> WAC E4/7 November 1934, memo from Graves, 'Imperial policy'.

<sup>243</sup> WAC E4/9, 27<sup>th</sup> May 1936, Programmes Incoming from the Empire, Clark to Graves.

contributions were important, as Conder put it to Graves in a letter explaining why it was that the ABC contribution to *Absent Friends* had 'departed a little from the message which you had been good enough to prepare for us, while - of course - endeavouring not to disorganise the remainder of the programme'. For this had been an occasion 'upon which the Commission came directly before the Empire, with the result that it felt itself entitled to give some expression of its individuality...it seemed to us to be possible to capture the Australian atmosphere a little more accurately than the quite excellent work of your writer had done.' Conder saw future occasions as those on which the ABC might 'have an opportunity of expressing itself as it thought fit'.<sup>244</sup> As time passed Dominion broadcasters came to realise that on such occasions Imperial broadcasting might serve their own propaganda purposes.

The 1939 Empire Day Programme proved the last great Imperial broadcast occasion before the outbreak of war. It was coordinated by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation in Toronto along familiar lines. From New Zealand it was proposed that there might be two contributions delivered by a war-veteran school inspector and a senior Maori leader.<sup>245</sup> In the event they came from young people, Henare Kohere Ngata, a Maori student at the University of New Zealand, son of an ex-cabinet minister, and a 14 year old schoolgirl from Wellington Technical College, Ngaire Joyce MacKenzie, whose photograph dominated the front page of the very first edition of the *New Zealand Listener*.

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<sup>244</sup> WAC R47/92/1, 18<sup>th</sup> January 1934. Letter from Conder to Graves

<sup>245</sup> ANZ R22011349, Telegram, CBC Toronto to NBS, Wellington 8 March 1939; Telegram NBS to CBC, 15 March 1939.



Fig. 29: *New Zealand Listener*, 2-8 July 1939, Front Cover.

Joyce - her first name proving too complex for the Canadian announcer who introduced her - was already a regular broadcaster in the 2YA children's session. On the day of the broadcast James Shelley himself collected her from her home for the 10-minute drive to the studio, from where her message was to be 'very simple, quite un pompous' composed of 'colloquial words' she 'normally used'. She spoke of hopes to go to university in the future and of an outdoor life of tennis, swimming and basketball, she was 'just a tiny bit nervous'.<sup>246</sup> What she and Henare Ngata - later himself an important Maori leader - projected through their presence was an image of New Zealand as a young country, looking forward, populated by young people with hopes for the future.<sup>247</sup>

<sup>246</sup> ANZ R22011349, Telegram NBS to CBC, 31 March 1939.

<sup>247</sup> Henare Kohere Ngata, Dictionary of New Zealand Biography <<https://teara.govt.nz/en/biographies/6n2/ngata-henare-kohere>> [Accessed: 23 April 2025]

Such broadcasts brought together the sounds and voices of the British world for the world to admire, or at least those people in the world who had access to a radio set. They heard a satisfyingly ordered, peaceful, parade of contributors, mainly white and male and from the Dominions, even those who broke this mould, the shepherd, the Indian officer, the miners and the 'farm boys', the Maori student, the Wellington schoolgirl, nonetheless fitted into a familiar and seemingly harmonious hierarchy. It was, as John MacKenzie considers, a 'confident, optimistic, self-congratulatory view.'<sup>248</sup> The exploitative nature of Empire was blotted out, what was left was a vision that gained Bernard Porter's 'contingent' approval of domestic listeners, a vision palatable to 'white Britons living under the flag', to 'neo-Britons' living in the Dominions yet to wholeheartedly adopt a non-British identity, and a vision of British imperialism that the many American listeners could accept. How then were these broadcasts received by their intended audience, that to which Stuart Hibberd called at their opening?

Whilst, for the *Times*, *Empire Exchange* had given the sense that 'the peoples of the Empire seemed just to have paused in their daily tasks to tell each other about them, and then to go on', for many listeners the programmes had an altogether different, deeper, significance.<sup>249</sup> What was inspired, awakened, reawakened, was perhaps a lingering homesickness, perhaps an awareness of an absent loved one at a time when families wished to be together. Hibberd was sufficiently experienced to know the impact his 1933 toast to 'absent friends' would have on people who did indeed feel 'absent.' A Mrs. Jorgensen wrote from Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan: 'that toast...it went straight to the heart'. As she wrote to the BBC in a letter of thanks for:

'the wonderful radio programme which we heard on Christmas morning...I cannot explain how much it was appreciated...I have been out in this country for 26 years, but England is still home to me.'<sup>250</sup>

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<sup>248</sup> Mackenzie, *Propaganda and Empire*, p. 93.

<sup>249</sup> 'Fellowship Of The Empire', *Times*, 27 Dec. 1934, p.10.

<[link.gale.com/apps/doc/CS167979931/TTDA?u=oxford&sid=bookmark-TTDA&pg=10&xid=5bad059b](http://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CS167979931/TTDA?u=oxford&sid=bookmark-TTDA&pg=10&xid=5bad059b)>  
[Accessed: 23 August 2025]

<sup>250</sup> John d. M Johnson, *Selected Appreciations*.

The broadcasts inspired in such listeners the belief that Britain was still, in some sense, their 'Home'.<sup>251</sup> Wonder at the simultaneity of the listening experience was a recurring theme of correspondence. The administrator of an Indian military hospital wrote in 1934 to share a thought of one of his patients:

'...what thrilled me most was to think that my wife and boy in England were also listening, and I could almost see them together and wondering if I was listening too.'<sup>252</sup>

A listener in Toronto had felt the same the previous year:

'The King's voice was very clear...and I may say I felt very homesick, my home being in South Kensington, London. I have been away 15 years, but any time 'London is calling' believe me, I am right by, listening in, as I wonder - are my parents listening in at the same time as I am?'<sup>253</sup>

For some this was an encounter with something awesome in its scope and delivery, responses to which, could be unexpected. The Christmas programmes were like few others in their emotional impact, inviting and inspiring an emotional response. For a Mrs. O'Neil in Boston:

'I suppose we were not unlike many another family - All sitting there, listening to every sound, some of us with tears running down our faces, and all leaping to our feet at the sound of 'God Save the King''.<sup>254</sup>

It is noticeable how many surviving letters come from writers in America, recognition that this was where as many as a third of the letters to the Empire Service originated.<sup>255</sup> From Culver City, in the very heart of the Los Angeles movie making industry, A.R. Cornwell wondered whether BBC producers could 'estimate the value' of *Absent Friends* to someone 'living in a foreign land, divorced from all you hold dear...

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<sup>251</sup> Emma Robertson, 'It is a real joy to get listening of any kind from the homeland' BBC Radio and British diasporic audiences in the 1930s' in *Diasporas and Diplomacy: cosmopolitan contact zones at the BBC World Service (1932-2012)* ed. by Marie Gillespie & Alban Webb (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2013)

<sup>252</sup> 'Empire Program Letters: 'Transported Home', W. Hammond, Trimulgherry, India, 27 December 1934, *World Radio*, 1 February 1935, p. 12.

<sup>253</sup> 'Empire Programme Letters', *World Radio*, 2 February 1934 p. 155.

<sup>254</sup> 'Empire Programme Letters', *World Radio*, 2 February 1934 p. 155.

<sup>255</sup> WAC E4/39, Empire Service: Empire Correspondence: Weekly analysis 1935 to 1937, prepared by Janet Quigley.

...your admirable program touched us all very deeply, and I am not ashamed to say, that in all the remote parts of the earth there were many loyal Britishers whose eyes were filled with tears - tears of homesickness - gratitude, and pride.<sup>256</sup>

An Australian born nurse in New York wrote to the King:

‘Today you gave something to a lonely heart apprehensive of the future, a comfort that my words only fail to adequately express.’<sup>257</sup>

Lest there be any doubt that such sentiment was noted, in his autobiography the Dominion Secretary, Jim Thomas, recalled that for his last broadcast it was the letters sent from listeners in previous years that persuaded the King, despite his ‘physical weakness’, to continue: ‘King George read many of the letters; then, with a simple nod of the head he said: ‘Very well. These letters are sufficient justification. Let the arrangements for the broadcast go forward.’<sup>258</sup>

To return to our initial questions. Why, then, had an Imperial radio service been created at all, and why was it based in London and created by the BBC? There was and always had been an underlying propaganda purpose in this but not one primarily directed towards listeners with loyalties to other nations, rather at those listeners it was assumed would be instinctively sympathetic to a British Imperial perspective - the British expatriate audience and their descendants in the colonies and the Dominions, ‘our kindred overseas’. Objectives of relief of ‘isolation and loneliness’ and the spreading of ‘greater understanding and sympathy’ reflected some of the earliest thinking of the value to the Empire of a broadcasting service controlled from London - the maintenance of a ‘consolidated British Empire’ and the prevention, as Gerald Beadle had put it in 1927, of ‘the Imperial ideal from being swamped by local nationalism’.<sup>259</sup> The BBC, based in London, was able to present itself as the Imperial broadcaster thanks to resources -

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<sup>256</sup> John d. M Johnson, *Selected appreciations*.

<sup>257</sup> RA PS/PSO/GV/PS/MAIN/55357, letter to the King.

<sup>258</sup> J.H. Thomas, *My Story* (London: Hutchinson, 1937), pp. 14-15. These letters are preserved in the Royal Archives, for 1933 and 1934 in files PS/PSO/GV/PS/MAIN/54793 and PS/PSO/GV/PS/MAIN/55357.

<sup>259</sup> WAC E4/1, 11 May 1927, Belfast Station Director to Director General.

cultural, political and financial - which enabled it to establish and sustain a global radio service. Its output was not tailored specifically to the needs or wants of listeners or broadcasters in Australia and New Zealand, but rather reflected metropolitan interests and culture as perceived by the BBC's producers and administrators. The Empire Service schedule offered listeners a broadly 'British' radio experience defined by the cultural norms of Reith's BBC. Cecil Madden produced a substitute for a domestic radio service, appreciated where it met a need and largely ignored where it did not. Janet Quigley interpreted listener feedback and recommended adjustments. What Howard Marshall offered was both the sentimental appeal of tales from home for the ex-patriot audience and a conscious invocation of joining an imagined community of fellow listeners. Laurence Gilliam played with broadcasting technology to make this imagined connection between people and places more real, to paint pictures in sound of the immensity and diversity of the British Empire. The technical challenges of transmission and reception initially made it hard to listen to the Empire Service and for many years there was little evidence that in either Australia or New Zealand there was a great deal of engagement with the regular schedule, yet it offered, on big occasions, or perhaps simply in catching the chiming of Big Ben from the other side of the world, opportunities for connection, to both listeners and to broadcasters. For the latter it offered opportunities to step onto a global stage and to present a picture in sound of their nation to the listening world. Such broadcasts added to the ways in which the geographic and cultural diversity of the British world were brought to life. In the 1930s few such opportunities had been greater than those created on Christmas Day, in broadcasts linking the Empire which stretched the bounds of technical possibility, as Howard Marshall recalled: 'when you waited for your man to take over from your cue somewhere around the world, it was a very great relief to find him doing it so sweetly and so smoothly'.<sup>260</sup>

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<sup>260</sup> Howard Marshall, *Connected Histories of the BBC*  
<<https://chbbc.sussex.ac.uk/play/?id=136>> [Accessed: 25 February 2025]

If through shared listening experiences, broadcasting had come to occupy a central place in the cultural lives of Australians and New Zealanders, and if the focus of engagement might at times be either local, perhaps very local, or national, it might equally speak to a wider sensibility in the British world, to a listening experience shared with fellow Britons the world over. Historically the conception of the 'British world' had been both a driver and a product of migration. Millions had migrated from the British Isles since the just the turn of the century, for them, for their immediate descendants, for the people they had left behind, to say nothing of the many who had contemplated but not taken the step to leave home, migration had indeed been, as Thompson and Kowalsky propose, 'the essence of empire'. The ties fashioned ran deep, a Gallup survey in 1948 found that half the population of the British Isles claimed a personal connection with a colony, Dominion or other foreign country. If over time such ties would fade, as generations passed, in the 1930s the legacies of migration still played a 'tremendous social and imaginative role in British society'.<sup>261</sup> Broadcasting facilitated this, reinforcing, even at times re-applying the 'cultural glue' of shared sentiment, values and networks through which knowledge and ideas could pass, binding people who considered themselves, 'British'.<sup>262</sup> It did this alongside broadcast output which reinforced and celebrated the living, active, contemporary sense of shared Britishness, that in which Australians and New Zealanders were participants as co-owners, co-creators, of the British Imperial enterprise. To return again to Anderson's conception of the 'imagined' community, listeners could regularly imagine themselves 'transported' by broadcasting to the other side of the globe. The shared 'images, stories, and legends' of Taylor's 'social imaginary' embraced, for listeners in the 1930s, sounds from ships at sea, of the natural world, chiming bells from the earth's four corners. They captured the voices of Canadian children, Indian army officers, New Zealand milk superintendents, Bondi lifesavers, Maori choirs and singing from English churches and from South African farms, as well as the paternal voice of the King. This auditory avalanche

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<sup>261</sup> Thompson with Kowalsky, pp. 260-4; *Mass Observation Survey: Public Opinion on Colonial Affairs*, G.K. Evans for Colonial Office, June 1948

<sup>262</sup> Bridge & Fedorowich, pp. 6-11; Pietsch, pp. 447-9; Lambert & Lester, pp. 1-6 & 11-12.

might once have provoked an anxiety resulting from the interjection into daily life, and domestic space, of things previously conceived as existing in the world beyond the realm of the domestic, yet by the middle of the decade all this was familiar, and if it was never fully resolved how one might appropriately react to the voice of the King, even in one's home it seemed that many stood - even leapt to their feet - for the National Anthem. Amongst the most frequently expressed reactions to all of this, in letters, in the press, was a sense of wonder:

‘The prevailing impression was one almost of awe at the incredible vastness of our Empire...I found myself marvelling at the science which had made such an impossible broadcast possible’.<sup>263</sup>

For these were broadcasts which brought together the sounds and voices of the British world for the world to admire and, as Potter notes, the choices made in the sounds featured were instructive of assumptions of what it was that was being celebrated.<sup>264</sup> Bells ringing on Christmas Day in British administered Bethlehem, or the sound of an army bugle from India, spoke of both the breadth of the British world but also of the control the British exerted in these places. Nowhere was this more admired than amongst the British themselves. These were broadcasts which, as Val Gielgud put it, both reminded listeners of the power of the medium and served as ‘the unrivalled communicating link on the day of all days when we feel rightly proud to be members one of another.’<sup>265</sup>

In 1934 Brisbane's *Sunday Mail* published a substantial feature on ‘the Empire broadcast’, ‘the third year of that wonder of modern science’. It reported that in their efforts to ‘recreate the atmosphere of the different parts of the Empire’ the producers of *Empire Exchange* hoped that ‘listeners will be able to visualise how Christmas is being enjoyed in the far-flung parts of the Empire’. The *Sunday Mail* writers excelled themselves by wrapping into their brief opening

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<sup>263</sup> ‘The Empire Broadcast’, *World Radio*, 11 January 1935, p. 6.

<sup>264</sup> Potter, ‘Empire Feature’, pp. 553-4.

<sup>265</sup> Gielgud, *British Radio Drama*, p. 51.

paragraph almost every aspirational cliché of British broadcasting, for whilst it would be true that Australia's Christmas Day would be over by the time the broadcast came:

'...for a short hour wireless will annihilate space and reduce time to an abstraction with listeners the Empire over brought into one big family circle, gathered, as it were, on a magic carpet.'

It was a carpet 'whisking its passengers' around the globe 'and then back to England, to conclude in a quiet fire-lit room in the Royal home at Sandringham'.<sup>266</sup> The technological accomplishment of delivering such experiences to the ears of British listeners was indeed almost beyond comprehension.

The BBC had ridden the wave of interest in broadcasting and exploited the developing technical possibilities of the medium to reach out to British people scattered across the globe. It had been joined in this by its partner public service broadcasters in Australia and New Zealand. Together they had rapidly created, in a few short years, a 'tradition' of linking the broadcasters of the Empire and of deploying the techniques of the outside broadcast and the 'feature' programme to capture and celebrate key Imperial moments. In so doing a precedent had been established for some of the biggest global broadcast events of the decade, events the next chapter explores.

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<sup>266</sup> 'Christmas Round the Radio Dial', *Sunday Mail*, 23 December 1934, p. 22  
<<https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/page/10195599>> [Accessed: 27 May 2025]

## CHAPTER FOUR: 'THIS GREAT FAMILY'



Fig. 30: *New Zealand Herald*, 11 May 1937, Souvenir Supplement

May 12, 1937, was Coronation Day in London, the Coronation of King George VI. Amongst the congregation were the Prime Ministers of New Zealand, Michael Joseph Savage, and Australia, Joseph Lyons. Notwithstanding his being the first Australian Prime Minister to have Australian born parents, and his family having migrated from Ireland, he and the other the Premiers felt, said Lyons: 'like 'children coming home to a great family reunion'.<sup>1</sup> The ceremony, broadcast live from within Westminster Abbey by the BBC, was heard, the BBC declared, 'by a greater number of the

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<sup>1</sup> WAC R30/439/1, *The Empire's Homage* script.

people throughout the world than any other programme in the history of radio.<sup>2</sup> In Australia it had been carried by the 21 national and 75 commercial stations.<sup>3</sup> The Wellington *Evening Post* felt it 'fairly safe' to say that 'one million New Zealand listeners heard the Coronation broadcast', two thirds of the population.<sup>4</sup> In America it was estimated that 240 stations had carried the broadcast. At a time when the population of the USA was 130 million the Press Association reported that 75 million Americans had listened, with 'taxicabs with radios and loudspeakers broadcasting London accounts of proceedings in the streets.'<sup>5</sup> For the NBC it had been 'the greatest achievement of broadcasting in radio history.'<sup>6</sup> CBS declared it to be 'the world's biggest broadcast to date'.<sup>7</sup> At Westminster that day, watching from specially erected booths outside the Abbey, had been commentators from America, the Argentine, Belgium, Czechoslovakia, Denmark, France, Germany, Holland, Hungary, Italy, Japan, Norway, Sweden and Yugoslavia.<sup>8</sup> Amongst countries carrying the coverage that had never previously relayed a BBC broadcast were Chile and Puerto Rico.<sup>9</sup> The voice listeners the world over had heard from inside Westminster Abbey was that of Howard Marshall. The following day Marshall shared his reflections on the Coronation with listeners to *Under Big Ben*. From his commentary position he had been aware, as he 'looked down the whole length of the Abbey' of:

'...the significance of this service as a heritage shared with the Empire. The realisation that you were listening too, joining in with us, gave it at once a depth and a vivid sense of common purpose and understanding. It's so difficult to express these things simply, but in effect you and I were there together, and the illusion of distance vanished, and, at least to us in the Abbey, we became one family.'<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> *BBC Handbook 1938* (London: BBC, 1937), pp. 31-39.

<sup>3</sup> 'Coronation Broadcast', *The Maitland Daily Mercury*, 14 May 1937, p. 5.  
<<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article125458366>> [Accessed: 19 August 2025]

<sup>4</sup> 'Radio History', *Evening Post*, 20 May 1937, p. 28.  
<<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/EP19370520.2.226.2>> [Accessed: 19 August 2025]

<sup>5</sup> 'Through Foreign Eyes', *Timaru Herald*, 14 May 1937, p. 9 (citing United Press Association report).  
<<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/THD19370514.2.80>> [Accessed: 19 August 2025]

<sup>6</sup> WAC R47/135/1, 12 May 1937, cable NBC to BBC.

<sup>7</sup> WAC R47/135/1, 13 May 1937, Cesar Saerchinger, European Director, CBS to Benzie.

<sup>8</sup> WAC R30/438/1, 8 April 1937, BBC Press Release.

<sup>9</sup> WAC R30/439/1, BBC Announcement, released on or after Thursday March 18<sup>th</sup>.

<sup>10</sup> Marshall, *Under Big Ben*, pp. 139-148.

There could be few better contemporary expressions by a broadcaster of the conscious creation of a community of the imagination, the community created on this occasion being 'a family'. This chapter will explore in depth the impact broadcast coverage of events in the lives of the British monarchy had on conceptions of national or pan-British identity, arguing that it was significant, and will return to the Coronation broadcast of 1937, but before doing so it will recognise that broadcasting continued to popularise in Australia and New Zealand cultural signifiers quite distinct from those in the rest of the British world, even as it celebrated those that were shared. In so doing it examines three very different broadcast occasions: the centenary celebrations in New Zealand and competing approaches to marking it; the creation of the latest vehicle for the Australian star George Edwards, *Dad and Dave*; and the fourth 'World Concert', which offered the ABC an opportunity to present Australia to the world.

### **Shelley vs 'Scrim'**

From 1936 New Zealand broadcasting rested in the hands of two men, each with his own strong views on what the function of broadcasting in New Zealand society should be, divergent yet in agreement that this was an important medium which could shape the cultural identity of their fellow countrymen and women, the question being with what outcome? In the debates confirming the appointments of James Shelley and Colin Scrimgeour and the creation of the commercial service the latter was to run, the NCBS, Adam Hamilton, now Leader of the Opposition, had raised a specific concern, one we have already encountered, that - alongside his assertion that the government had created a vehicle for its propaganda - in merely creating a commercial service, standards would be lowered. He had, as we have seen, illustrated this observation by condemning the playing of a record - 'Sandy at the Nudist Camp'.<sup>11</sup> In exploring how exactly commercial broadcasting might propose to contribute to the development of New Zealand's cultural identity

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<sup>11</sup> 'Divided Control, Vigorous Attack', *New Zealand Herald*, 4 November 1937, p. 13.  
<<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/NZH19371104.2.130>> [Accessed: 19 August 2025]

we might pause here to reflect on what exactly the controversy over Sandy's visit to the nudists represented. Sandy Powell was an established British star. 'Sandy Joins the Nudists' was a 1934 comedy recording of a sketch in a tradition of music hall entertainment, laced with inuendo and comic situations resulting from the antics of an innocent abroad...where, for example, might he pin his badge?! Powell had recorded many similar sketches, he was a respectable artist, appearing at Royal Variety Performances, in 1938 he was voted fifth in a poll of the film stars British audiences most enjoyed. At a time when American audiences were voting for Shirley Temple, in London George Formby, Gracie Fields and Jesse Mathews regularly topped the bill, the latter a self-made working-class girl who had acquired the trappings - and voice - of an upper-class society beauty, the former both proudly from the north of England. What they represented was a solidly working-class British culture, with many of its rough edges still showing. Stanley Holloway was, with Gracie Fields, one of the more popular artists on Australian radio in 1936, as were fellow Britons Clapham and Dwyer whose quick-fire comedy featured double-entendre and saw them banned for a time by the BBC. Powell's song was, then, in a tradition, of which Formby's 'When I'm Cleaning Windows' was to be the exemplar - also for a time banned by the BBC. This was not an aspect of 'Britishness' that was celebrated by Adam Hamilton. Yet there was clearly an audience for such material, and New Zealand listeners might find it on the commercial stations - under the control of Colin Scrimgeour. Scrimgeour had been appointed by the Labour government to create and run a nationally owned commercial network and he approached his task with gusto. He - 'Scrim' - was a controversialist in a broadcasting world that specifically frowned on 'controversy', literally a man with a mission. The 'Friendly Road' had grown out of a street church and Scrimgeour's view of what broadcasting could offer New Zealanders reflected his religious and political beliefs - through broadcasting the man and woman in the street could have a voice, make their concerns known, enjoy their own popular culture. The ZB stations retained the popular approach of the early B stations, they were light, and fun. Sandy was presumably free to join the nudists if he so chose.

By sharp contrast James Shelley, now Director of the NBS, was arguably more interventionist in his application of Reithian values than Reith himself. For whilst Reith was unquestionably the dominant figure in the organisation he had created - 'both literally and psychologically' - by training he was an engineer, Shelley was a Professor of Education, a teacher with a mission to educate.<sup>12</sup> He'd been a lecturer in the established canon of classical music for the New Zealand Workers Education Council, as we've seen he'd led the 'Air Institute' in explorations of self-consciously 'highbrow' entertainment. He was an experienced producer of theatrical productions, a long-time correspondent with the Poet Laureate, John Masefield.<sup>13</sup> He considered broadcasting a 'sacred trust'. If Reith was happy to let creatives - who he didn't really understand - take a lead in the productions of the BBC, this was not how Shelley perceived his role. He was opinionated, somewhat egotistical, a 'larger than life' personality.<sup>14</sup> From his appointment as Director of the NBS, and to the occasional consternation of his staff, he involved himself in programme production, in his first week usurping the regular announcers to personally announce the abdication of Edward VIII. His was the voice announcing the Coronation in 1937. His relationship with his star announcer, Clive Drummond, did not survive such interference. Shelley's engagements invited the criticism of *Truth*: 'the navigation of a ship is not improved by the captain leaving the bridge and taking upon himself the duties of the crew.'<sup>15</sup> Shelley employed a speech coach to improve announcer pronunciation.<sup>16</sup> Shelley held strong views on what was and was not appropriate for the ears of New Zealanders. Whilst he expanded the YA network with second stations which sought to offer a lighter, more popular, more competitive, more 'snappy', programme, such as 2YD in Wellington - which opened just days before the launch of 2ZB - he had firm tastes, breaking a record by Vera Lynn over his knee, it was unlikely that Sandy would be

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<sup>12</sup> Val Henry Gielgud, *Years of the Locust* (London: Nicholson & Watson, 1947) p. 69; James Shelley, *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography* (DNZB) <<https://teara.govt.nz/en/biographies/4s23/shelley-james>> [Accessed: 19 August 2025]

<sup>13</sup> ATL MS-Papers-5183-26, correspondence from 1913 onwards between Shelley and John Masefield.

<sup>14</sup> Downes & Harcourt, pp. 113-114.

<sup>15</sup> Day, p. 232.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 246.

joining the nudists on his watch.<sup>17</sup> Shelley believed, like Reith, in the democratising potential of broadcasting, in its power to invite all to join in the life of the community, of all to educate themselves, but that engagement, that education, was to be within the cultural framework recognised by the British establishment. Shelley and Scrimgeour had, then, very different views of the direction in which broadcasting might lead the cultural lives of New Zealanders, and they were very different personalities. As Day notes 'each felt the other was unnecessary and that he should be the head of a combined service'. Moreover, they disliked each other.<sup>18</sup> Yet it would be wrong to assume that there was no convergence in their approaches. Each believed in the potential of radio to empower the listener, where they disagreed was on where that might take him or her. Each saw New Zealand as a 'British' society. Shelley took great delight in being the voice of Imperial occasions. Scrimgeour, famously railing against press intrusion in private lives - 'an amazing tirade' - used the treatment of Edward VIII as his case study: 'one of the worst things I ever came across. The power of the press to besmirch a man's name and drag his honour in the dirt and get away with it...Edward, the man who had come to be regarded as the most illustrious of them all...and won the admiration of all, there was only one way by which he could have been made to get out.'<sup>19</sup> Scrimgeour was equally full of admiration for Edward's successor: 'the courageous gentleman who carries the greatest burden and responsibility of all.'<sup>20</sup> Yet if there was convergence there was also spectacular cultural divergence, with each offering an alternative view of how broadcasting might contribute to the cultural life of New Zealand in the future, alternatives evident in their very different interpretations of how broadcasting might reflect the national celebrations of the Centenary of the Treaty of Waitangi.

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<sup>17</sup> Day, pp. 230 & 245-6.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., pp. 244-5.

<sup>19</sup> 'Newspapers Attacked'; 'An Amazing Tirade', *Press*, April 6 1937, p.10.

<<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/CHP19370406.2.84>> [Accessed: 11 March 2025]

<sup>20</sup> ATL MSY-1928: Cuttings - Vol 3, Scrimgeour, Colin Graham, 1903-1987 'The King', *Radio Record*, 14 May 1937, p. 13 (cutting).

In July 1938 the Music Teachers' Association of New Zealand wrote to Shelley proposing twin competitions to mark the Centenary, both the composition of a 'suitable' 'ode' and the 'selection of the selected ode for chorus work'.<sup>21</sup> Shelley replied that 'unofficially' 'something of the sort' was being considered.<sup>22</sup> For Shelley, in line with the accepted cultural norms of the British establishment, there could be no more appropriate way of marking the Centenary than in the NBS supporting a competition to find a new choral work. Scrimgeour was similarly exercised. Again, he saw a competition as the ideal way of marking the occasion, yet his conception of how this might engage New Zealanders, and of what might be celebrated, was strikingly different. For what could be more different to a competition between New Zealand's aspirant choral composers - than a Miss New Zealand pageant? Proposed by the National Advertising Manager as 'a very excellent publicity stunt', and discussed and agreed with the Minister responsible, Scrimgeour asserted, in a letter asking for funding for the enterprise, that it would 'contribute substantially' to publicity for New Zealand.<sup>23</sup> In time Scrimgeour was to run into difficulties, the headstrong independence that had driven his early success sat ill in a role running what was effectively a government department. In a further reorganisation of broadcasting in 1943 the NBS and NCBS were brought under the control of a single Director, it was the cultural perspective of James Shelley that was to prevail. Yet the NCBS left an enduring legacy, arguably in the 1930s the most significant female broadcaster in the British world - 'Aunt Daisy'.

Maud 'Daisy' Taylor (Basham after her marriage) had arrived in New Zealand from London in 1891. She found fame first as one of the 'Aunts and Uncles' that introduced the Children's Hour, working at 2YA, then at its commercial rival 2ZW, before moving to Auckland's 1ZR, where she met Colin Scrimgeour. Basham transferred with him to 1ZS when 1ZR was bought by the Government in

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<sup>21</sup> ANZ R22011375, 19 July 1938, Music Teachers' Association of New Zealand to Director of Broadcasting, 2YA.

<sup>22</sup> ANZ R22011375, 19 April 1939, Shelley to E.C. Cachemaille, Music Teachers' Registration Board of NZ

<sup>23</sup> ANZ R15422235, 24 November 1937, Scrimgeour to Secretary of the Treasury.

September 1933, and again at the end of the year to 1ZB.<sup>24</sup> By the end of the decade there was no more notably 'New Zealand' radio personality, her style defined by her mile a minute chat and multitudinous commercial endorsements at a time when such were unusual. Aunt Daisy's cheery 'Good Morning everybody' roused the nation. Perhaps nothing better captures her status in New Zealand life than a photograph taken in the early years of the Second World War when, as New Zealand sought a use for an apple crop that it was no longer possible to export, Aunt Daisy fronted the campaign to get the country baking apple pies. There she is, on stage, out front, judging the 2ZB Wellington Apple Pie Contest.



Fig. 31: Aunt Daisy, Wellington Apple Pie Contest, 23 April 1940.

<sup>24</sup> ATL MS-Papers-7343-2, Correspondence, clippings and printed matter, Basham, Barbara, 12 April 1990, Peter Dawson letter to Barbara Basham; Renwick, pp. 67-77 & 81-88.

Daisy Basham wasn't the only female voice on the air in the British world, but it said at least something of the status of women in New Zealand society that there was no other with her informal authority or her star billing.

### **'Looking back to 1935 as to a medieval age.'**

On the very eve of the outbreak of war the ABC announcer Heath Burdock was granted three months leave to pay a visit to England, where he had been born, and where, as we have noted, he had been at school with Stuart Hibberd. He spent time at the BBC and wrote an engaging report, notable for both perceptive observations and a striking confidence that if the ABC might be doing things differently to the BBC it was, in many respects, doing them better. Burdock began in the street outside BBC Broadcasting House, entering 'through the imposing portals...past the 'four commissioners', then, accompanied by 'cadet messengers...boys dressed in blue lounge suits', to his first meeting: 'Impressions. That this was a little overdone.' But rather better than the ABC office in Market Street, 'where visitors wander up in the lift in a rather haphazard way'. Burdock admired the professionalism and preparation of the announcers - yet was surprised at the 'impersonal' nature of their reading of news bulletins: 'the BBC men should be capable of doing a better job...our men are at least 50% better in every way.' He believed that Australian sporting commentators were superior, especially when it came to racing, yet he noted the value of training and specialism and one significant exception - Howard Marshall, 'the Prince', whose account of the early evacuation of children from London he had heard and was, Burdock felt: 'one of the most sympathetic and colourful descriptions I have ever listened to...a true word picture...designed to remove any anxiety on the part of parents as to how their children were being taken care of.' He concluded that the BBC certainly had better facilities, yet if the ABC could match them its

programmes and presentation 'would take a lot of beating, even by the British Broadcasting Corporation.'<sup>25</sup>

From the middle of 1936 the ABC had begun to function more impressively. The newly appointed Federal Controller of Programmes, Keith Barry, worked 'not only in conjunction with the Federal Controllers of Music, Production and Talks but also in friendly co-operation with State Managers.'<sup>26</sup> Barry brought experience of working in Europe, at the BBC and as a writer for *Wireless Weekly*.<sup>27</sup> He brought rigour to programming, to scheduling, and to the development of relationships between the ABC State offices, setting the running times of programmes, scripting the lines to be read to announce programmes on the National service.<sup>28</sup> He laid out his principles of broadcasting - that a radio speaker was to think of himself, whatever his status or authority, as 'a guest in a private home', anyone coming across as 'superior' 'will find himself quickly shut out of the room'. If he regretted that a vaudeville artist could command 'a bigger fee than Menuhin' he accepted that this was a reality, yet questioned whether this mattered for the ABC, asking whether there were sufficient vaudeville stars with a truly national profile worth the outlay: 'many things that mean a lot to Sydney or Melbourne mean very little to Bathurst or Bendigo.' In music he felt that whilst 'listener tastes are progressing all the time' and the ABC was leading them 'to higher delights' this must be done 'with due discretion'.<sup>29</sup> Talks should bring 'the best possible' to the microphone - might the ABC use improving air services to bring good speakers from England? In developing its news service the ABC was facing a challenge from a tendency in Australia to equate news events with 'murder or tragedy', yet moving away from a dependence on newspapers for its news would require investment in staff.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> NAA, SP341/2, 318857, Heath Burdock report.

<sup>26</sup> NAA, SP341/2, 318909, 19 December 1936, 'Federal Programme Department'.

<sup>27</sup> Inglis, *ABC*, pp. 46-47.

<sup>28</sup> NAA, SP341/2, 318909, 1936 Barry memorandum.

<sup>29</sup> NAA, SP341/2, 318909, 1936 memorandum, Barry to General Manager.

<sup>30</sup> NAA, SP341/2, 318885, undated memo: 'Programme Planning'.

Barry demanded higher professional standards, lamenting a tendency to 'under-rehearsal...a badly presented programme or a weak continuity is rarely forgotten.'<sup>31</sup> He expressed frustration at sweeping generalisations in ABC assessments of its programming - what were these based on - 'the reactions of a hundred people, a thousand people? Or ten thousand?' How was this assessed - in letters, phone calls? If it could be said 'with a certain complacency' that there was 'among the suburban public...very solid listening to the Dinner Music programmes' how did this square with the fact that *Dad and Dave* was scheduled against them and had 'probably the largest following on the air'?<sup>32</sup> Nevertheless Barry celebrated the contribution the ABC was bringing to Australian cultural life, 'over a two year period' the ABC had 'presented all the plays of Shakespeare', there was no question that it had 'brought new life to Australian music' through the hiring of 'world artists' and the creation of orchestras and concert seasons. Barry lauded international collaboration and what it brought to Australian listeners, he praised the BBC, the Commission was 'indebted for long-continued and freely-given favours.'<sup>33</sup> The ABC acquired new transmitters and new stations in Adelaide, Brisbane, Perth and Hobart, listeners in each capital now a choice of public service stations. More consistent scheduling from 1938 now saw programmes aired at the same time each week, ambitious live broadcasts celebrated Sydney's 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary, with historic re-enactments, ceremonies, speeches and song from Gladys Moncrief. In 1938 Barry 'was looking back to 1935 as to a medieval age.'<sup>34</sup>

Yet, as Ken Inglis notes, all this took place against a backdrop of intense commercial competition. When in 1943, influenced by staff returning from work at the BBC, the ABC established a Listener Research unit and interrogated audience preferences, the task facing one of its first members, Nancy Sheehan, was breaking bad news: 'Our programme officers and management could not

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<sup>31</sup> NAA, SP341/2, 318885, undated memo: 'Programme Planning'.

<sup>32</sup> NAA, SP341/2, 318885, 12 January 1939, Barry to General Manager.

<sup>33</sup> NAA, SP341/2, 318885, undated memo: 'Outstanding Broadcasts Arranged by the Australian Broadcasting Commission'.

<sup>34</sup> Inglis, *ABC*, pp. 47-8 & 58.

believe that the audience was as small as it was seen to be in these reports, and their reaction was...that it was some ploy on the part of the commercial stations or somebody trying to make the ABC look very small.' The results were, however, reliable.<sup>35</sup>

## **Dad and Dave**

Australia's commercial broadcasters enjoyed, as McNair had found in Sydney, an at times overwhelming audience share, exploiting their ability to broadcast a relentlessly popular programme of music and entertainment. Yet at individual stations commercial broadcasting could be, as C.R. Carson saw it in Brisbane in 1936, a 'chancy affair'. To ward off financial uncertainty, and to exploit the power that might come from working together, commercial broadcasters developed networks, or 'chains', of stations. As Bridget Griffen-Foley observes the 'most notable' feature of Australia's commercial industry in the late 1930s was the growth of these networks, formed 'to share programming costs and appeal to advertising agencies seeking a national reach'. Three, the Major network, the Commonwealth and the Macquarie were prominent. The complexities and costs of linking Australian cities by landlines saw less syndication of programmes from a central station and more distribution of recorded material, for playing locally.<sup>36</sup> Alongside the networks the biggest players in the shaping of Australian commercial radio came to be the largest advertising agencies, notably the Australian arm of the American company J. Walter Thompson and George Patterson Limited. The former worked for Lever Brothers to develop an Australian version of the American Lux Radio Theatre, the latter for Colgate-Palmolive, producing a whole range of radio entertainment. It was in response to perceptions of advertiser dominance that the networks had been formed, individual stations coming together to collectively negotiate and contract to broadcast particular programmes at particular times, whilst retaining a local

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<sup>35</sup> Inglis, *ABC*, p. 142.

<sup>36</sup> Bridget Griffen-Foley, 'Australian Commercial Radio, American Influences and The BBC', *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, Vol. 30, no. 3, 2010 (337-355) pp. 343-4.

independence.<sup>37</sup> This networking provoked, as we have observed, some political debate, and some concern at the ABC, yet Griffen-Foley argues that audiences seemed bothered less by the creation of such networks, and their ownership, than by debates around the competing cultural merits of commercial and public service programming - 'lowbrow' and 'highbrow'. Griffen-Foley sees in BBC engagement both with the ABC and with London representatives of Australia's commercial operators - with, for example, AWA - a degree of concern, stretching into the war years, that popular Australian radio was acquiring an American, as opposed to British, character.<sup>38</sup> It was certainly the case, as we have seen, and will see again at the Coronation, that the BBC was anxious to engage with both to promote its coverage of major British Imperial occasions. Of all the innovations of American radio that shaped listener experience around the world in the 1930s none was more influential than the radio 'serial'. In the late 1930s Patrick Day estimates that radio serials could attract up to 85% of New Zealand's listeners. Amongst the most popular was the Australian show *Dad and Dave*.<sup>39</sup> Nothing in the world of radio had been more popular to date than the American comedy serial *Amos n Andy*, in which the protagonists navigated the complexities of urban American life. Early Australian serial comedies also played on the comic potential of the innocent abroad. Its first stars were Fred and Maggie - Mr and Mrs Everybody - British migrants, with very English accents. The show could, Jacqueline Baker notes, 'have been made in almost any English-speaking country, there was nothing particularly Australian about the situations, the writing or the characters', which helped sales to New Zealand. *The 'Obbs* - another long running series - were also English, cheerful cockney characters. *Dad and Dave* was different. Based on popular books by Steele Rudd the comedy was built around a family of Australian farmers, wrestling with modern life's complexities in Snake Gully on the road to Gundagai, indeed 'The Road to Gundagai' was their theme song. The show ran for over 2000 episodes, from 1937 to

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<sup>37</sup> Griffen-Foley, 'Australian Commercial Radio', p. 345; Griffen-Foley, *Changing Stations*, p. 29.

<sup>38</sup> Griffen-Foley, 'Australian Commercial Radio', pp. 346-9.

<sup>39</sup> Patrick Day, 'American Popular Culture and New Zealand Broadcasting: The Reception of Early Radio Serials', *The Journal of Popular Culture*, Vol. 30, (203-214) p. 209.

1954, sponsored by Wrigley's gum. These were archetypal Australian rural folk, decent, hardworking, living in a bungalow with a veranda, prone to bad luck but with things always turning out alright. An annual highlight was the running of the Snake Gully Derby, for which Dad had spent weeks training his horse and the result of which was a secret closely guarded by the cast and crew.<sup>40</sup> Dad and Dave were, however, in all their scrapes, admirable characters, naïve but resourceful. The appeal of *Dad and Dave* extended beyond the broadcast. It offered opportunities for jokes and conversation. The characters became part of popular culture in Australia and New Zealand. They, like Daisy Basham, owed little to the prevailing broadcasting culture of Britain and far more to that rooted on the other side of the Pacific.

## The World Concert

On 6 March 1938, in a considerable coup, Australia - and the ABC - hosted the fourth 'World Concert' in a series organised by the Geneva based UIR.<sup>41</sup> This was an opportunity to present to the world a vision of Australia and Australian culture unmediated by Australian association with the BBC or the British world, with no requirement or expectation that 'representative' sounds, as understood in London, should be heard. If Keith Barry could argue later that the programme provided 'was of the type directed by the Union' the choices of material could be free of any externally imposed script.<sup>42</sup> The thirty-minute broadcast featured folk songs and a work by Percy Grainger, it ended with a verse of the National Anthem. It also featured something of the indigenous sounds of Australia, of the natural world and of Aboriginal culture, doing so in ways that spoke to the status of each in Australian cultural life in the 1930s. For one significant dimension of the identities of Australia and New Zealand expressed in, or absent from,

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<sup>40</sup> Kent, pp. 34-39 & 266-8.

<sup>41</sup> 'World Concert', *Evening Post*, 3 March 1938, p. 26.

<<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/EP19380303.2.200.4>> [Accessed: 19 August 2025]

<sup>42</sup> NAA, SP341/2, 318885, undated memo: 'Outstanding Broadcasts Arranged by the Australian Broadcasting Commission'.

broadcasting, was that which reflected the sounds and cultures of their indigenous inhabitants. What listeners heard was reflective of the status they enjoyed.

As we have already seen, to listeners from overseas the distinctive sounds of New Zealand were not those of its inhabitants with a heritage rooted in the British Isles, rather broadcasts from 'the Britain of the South' were distinguished by Maori speakers speaking the Maori language and by Maori song. The appropriation of Maori culture enabled a presentation of New Zealand to the world which whilst 'British' was distinct from 'Old Britain'.<sup>43</sup> The Maori language and particularly Maori music offered audible signifiers of New Zealand's difference, Maori song being considered notably pleasant and harmonious. As we have seen broadcasts of Maori cultural events had been among the earliest from New Zealand, at Scrimgeour's commercial stations it was recognised that audiences could be built through the employment of Maori announcers.<sup>44</sup> However socially or economically disadvantaged Maori might be New Zealand could, with sufficient evidence to convince casual listeners from elsewhere, present itself as 'a paradise of racial harmony'.<sup>45</sup>

The contrast with Australia could scarcely be greater. If the 'sound' of New Zealand was that of its indigenous inhabitants, in Australia they were largely silent.<sup>46</sup> Instead the sound of Australia came from its indigenous wildlife, for thanks to broadcasting Australia had a national sound, made by an indigenous creature. Australian radio broadcasts, and indeed films, were introduced by the 'laugh' of the kookaburra, a feature of the first broadcasts from Australia to Britain in 1927.<sup>47</sup> A whole set of characteristics had long been anthropomorphically attributed to kookaburras, not least their

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<sup>43</sup> Belich, *Paradise Reforged*, pp. 208-214.

<sup>44</sup> Day, p. 242.

<sup>45</sup> Belich, *Paradise Reforged*, pp. 189-91.

<sup>46</sup> Inglis, *ABC*, p. 31.

<sup>47</sup> Diane Collins, 'The "voice" of nature? Kookaburras, Culture and Australian Sound', *Journal of Australian Studies*, Vol. 35, No. 3, September 2011, 281-295, (p. 286); *Wireless Weekly*, November 18, 1927, p. 10 <<https://worldradiohistory.com/AUSTRALIA/Archive-Wireless-Weekly-AU/1927/Wireless-Weekly-1927-11-18.pdf>> [Accessed 19 August 2025]

resilience and joviality, and in the inter-war years its call was presented not as a sound of the wilderness but as laughing in the face of the hardships of post-war grief and the Depression.<sup>48</sup> By the early 1930s, this sound was often produced by the same kookaburra, 'Jacko', a bird raised by a family in Melbourne. Jacko, the 'most famous bird in Australia', had made his first broadcast in 1928. His life was celebrated in recordings, films, children's books and live theatrical performances.<sup>49</sup> The 'Jacko' show was, in 1933, the 'happiest entertainment in Sydney'.<sup>50</sup> The winning entry in the Australian Girl Guides song competition of 1934 was the camp fire song 'Kookaburra Sits in the Old Gum Tree'.<sup>51</sup> When, then, Australia hosted its 1938 'World Concert' it was entirely predictable that it should open with, amongst other bird calls, that of the kookaburra.<sup>52</sup> Aboriginal culture was represented, by a recording of an Aboriginal corroboree and a selection of Aboriginal songs, yet if this was a representation of indigenous culture intended to suggest harmony, it was at best superficial. The corroboree featured, the *Mackay Daily Mercury* noted, '40 aborigines from the Cherbourg settlement', whilst they were 'interested in the fact that listeners throughout the world would hear them', they could not, it was reported, be described as 'excited'.<sup>53</sup> The songs had been collected by Dr H.O. Lethbridge and arranged by Arthur Loam.<sup>54</sup> The notes prepared for announcers across the world described these as 'tribal songs' of a people 'no longer to be found leading their tribal life in parts of Australia where white men have settled' for as in 'almost every land...where whites have settled in numbers...the original inhabitants have deteriorated or even become extinct.' The last song was a lament: 'not a piteous wailing lament

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<sup>48</sup> Diane Collins, pp. 281-3 & 286; Toby and Juliana Hooper, *The Laughing Australian: A Celebration of Australia's Best-Loved Symbol*, (Melbourne: Nelson, 1982), p.10.

<sup>49</sup> Diane Collins, pp. 281-8

<sup>50</sup> 'Advertising', *Sydney Morning Herald*, November 3, 1933, p. 1.

<<https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/17020887>> [Accessed: 19 August 2025]

<sup>51</sup> Diane Collins, p. 290.

<sup>52</sup> 'World Concert', *Evening Post*, 3 March 1938, p. 26.

<<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/EP19380303.2.200.4>> [Accessed: 19 August 2025]

<sup>53</sup> 'Aboriginal Broadcast', *Daily Mercury*, 8 March 1938, p.6.

<<https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/170474656>> [Accessed: 19 August 2025]

<sup>54</sup> WAC R47/389/1, 5 October 1937, Arthur Burrows, Secretary General, Union International de Radiodiffusion (UIR), to members; Arthur Loam <<http://music-ed.net/loam/>> [Accessed: 19 August 2025]

but a fierce anguished cry that the hunting grounds have been destroyed, and that sickness and sorrow have overtaken the black fellow.<sup>55</sup> Yet there was no Aboriginal contribution to their performance - it came instead from the soprano Marie Bremner and the baritone Clement Williams, accompanied by the Sydney Wireless Chorus.<sup>56</sup> The culture of the indigenous population of Australia might then be embraced as an exotic symbol of Australia's difference, might speak to the diversity of the 'British world', to qualities the British across the globe appreciated when contemplating the vast scope and diversity of their Empire - even as the population itself was left on the margins.

In both Australia and New Zealand broadcasting was, then, by the end of the 1930s, a media form exploring, exploiting, and popularising a whole range of distinctly national, cultural forms. It was increasingly professional in its approach. Both commercial and public service broadcasters had, in a decade, firmly established themselves and their medium in the cultural life of the nation, however divergent their approaches might be. At the same time they were aware of developments in the wider world of broadcasting, often embracing these. Persistent amongst the radio voices inviting connection with the world beyond was that of the BBC.

## **Empire Broadcasting**

In 1937 the magazine *BBC Empire Broadcasting* published a series of front-page articles in which listeners were invited to give their 'frank' impressions of the BBC Empire Service and suggestions for its development.<sup>57</sup> These came at a time when the BBC was itself reviewing what function such broadcasting served. Among the contributions were forthright assessments from Australia and New Zealand. For the New Zealand journalist Charles E. Wheeler, a writer for the BBC magazine

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<sup>55</sup> WAC R47/389/1, 21 December 1937, Arthur Burrows, to members, 'notes on the programme'.

<sup>56</sup> WAC R47/389/1, 5 October 1937, Arthur Burrows, to members.

<sup>57</sup> *BBC Empire Broadcasting*, 14-20 November 1937, pp. 1-2.

*World Radio*, the BBC was 'attempting the impossible' if the Empire Service was intended to compete with local stations as a source of entertainment. Yet there was an audience for the BBC in New Zealand since 'most New Zealanders are either of English parentage or have been born in the Old Country, as they call it...more than one generation maintains its close personal interest in the sport and pageantry of Britain.' That audience, whilst it would never listen to the whole BBC schedule, would be 'content with those parts of the Empire programme of particular interest to Englishmen everywhere.' It was an audience that alongside the pageantry liked occasional 'passing references to rain and snow, for when there is snow in Britain, we are perspiring.'<sup>58</sup> Such a proposal sat comfortably with the agenda of the Empire Service to date. A more challenging Australian perspective was offered by G. L. Blunden, for ten years Editor of *Wireless Weekly*, and as such a significant figure in Australian broadcasting. Blunden focused on the chimes of Big Ben, a sound that 'strikes right into the heart of the exiled Englishman' but a sound that did little for 'third generation' Australians like himself. He offered 'some friendly criticism.' He accepted that the Empire Service helped 'maintain and encourage the ties of sentiment and objective shared by all the peoples of this great Commonwealth of Nations'. He argued that Australia indeed, as a consequence of its immigration policies, might yet prove 'the last refuge of British independence.' To attract Australian listeners in the future the BBC would, however, have to do more than just the things for which it was 'rightly famous', the BBC being famous for 'Coronation broadcasts, the Derby...the sound of Big Ben...and news and announcements read in that remote unimpassioned manner.' Without some 'humanising of the Empire programmes' he could see no future for them 'except as a vehicle for descriptions of pageantry and, of course, Big Ben; in short, a service for homesick Englishmen.'<sup>59</sup> Their arguments revealed not just opinions on the future of the Empire Service but also a fault line in conceptions of the British world. For Wheeler there was no distinction to be made in practice between 'England' and 'Britain'. By contrast for Blunden there

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<sup>58</sup> Charles E. Wheeler, 'New Zealand and the Empire Service', *BBC Empire Broadcasting*, 12-18 December 1937, pp. 1-2.

<sup>59</sup> G. L. Blunden, 'The Empire service in Australia', *BBC Empire Broadcasting*, 14-20 November 1937, pp. 1-2.

was, in the encouragement of ties of sentiment and objective which naturally existed between the British nations, no place for the 'homesick Englishman' - almost a figure of contempt. 'British' was an identity that might embrace 'English' but was to be informed as much by the experience of Australians as it was by those in the British Isles - indeed perhaps better preserved. The BBC, for all that it was based in London, for all that its announcers spoke in the 1930s in an almost uniform southern English accent, did not consider itself an English institution, its ambitions and claims were wider, it was the British Broadcasting Corporation. If evidence were required of the need to remind listeners - and on occasion its own staff - of this, it was there in the instructions to observers commentating on the Coronation, as we shall see. Right up with avoiding the heinous crime of speaking over the National Anthem was: 'don't use English when you could use British.'<sup>60</sup> 'British' was an identity of which 'English' culture was a subset - as was that of Australia or New Zealand. To claim to be British was to claim a wider cultural inheritance - and influence. Predictably Blunden's article provoked a number of letters from readers. The 'typical' views the BBC published ranged from 'makes very poor reading', through 'I have read it three times and I still ask myself 'what is it all about?'' to 'although I am probably what he calls a homesick Englishman I heartily agree with him.'<sup>61</sup> Blunden was anticipating, or perhaps sympathising with, a debate already raging within the BBC.

In 1935 John Reith, in evidence to the Ullswater Committee on Broadcasting, had lobbied for greater funding for the Empire Service, using a comparison with the German short-wave station at Zeesen to argue that it was of 'national and imperial importance' that the BBC be funded adequately to allow it to compete. Whilst the BBC spent £78 000 annually on the Empire Service, offering two hours daily to each of six 'transmission zones' in English, Zeesen broadcast for six hours daily in ten languages and offered 'concerts by the best orchestras and so on'. To do so it

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<sup>60</sup> WAC R30/443/4, 18 April 1937, draft script.

<sup>61</sup> 'Listeners reply to Mr Blunden', *BBC Empire Broadcasting*, January 9-15 1938, pp. 1-2.

received 'a subsidy of no less than £3 million' from the German government. Reith advocated greater funding - and broadcasting in French, German and Spanish.<sup>62</sup> When its recommendations were published the Ullswater Committee report represented a watershed for the Empire Service. On the one hand it recommended that the government pass on an increased proportion of licence fee revenue to increase its funding. Daventry was expanded and by 1937, for the Coronation, it had six short-wave transmitters and twenty-three aerials.<sup>63</sup> On the other, the increased funding was not intended for the Empire Service to simply invest more in what it had been doing for the past four years. First it was argued that British foreign policy objectives should be more explicitly supported, notably through the development of broadcasting in foreign languages. News bulletins were planned in Spanish, Portuguese, and Arabic.<sup>64</sup> Second, a fundamental shift in focus was required, away from geographically isolated listeners and towards wider audiences, countering foreign propaganda.

These were not proposals lacking support within the BBC. Malcolm Frost believed that the Empire Service needed to move beyond 'preaching to the converted'.<sup>65</sup> Lionel Fielden suggested from India that the BBC drop the word 'Empire', 'give up sentimental twaddle about Big Ben, and concentrate instead on giving the world the best of England's writers, poets, musicians, engineers, actors, playwrights, philosophers....the best propaganda that any nation can do for itself.'<sup>66</sup> Yet Graves questioned the changes, telling Reith that his experience to date suggested that the introduction of services in foreign languages would be damaging to the BBC 'reputation for integrity', which partly came from 'not doing something which other countries were doing.'<sup>67</sup> In

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<sup>62</sup> TNA DO35/199/2, 27 May 1935, note on the evidence of Sir John Reith and Mr. Phillips of the GPO before the Broadcasting Committee.

<sup>63</sup> Potter, *Wireless Internationalism*, pp. 93-95.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 94-5.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p.197 (citing WAC, E4/10 Frost, 'The BBC Empire Broadcasting Service—A report on certain public relations aspects', 21 Oct. 1937)

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p.195-6 (citing WAC, E4/10 Fielden to Graves, 14 July 1937)

<sup>67</sup> Briggs II, pp. 399 (Citing Graves to Reith, undated note)

America, where BBC efforts 'to present the news in the Empire bulletins truthfully, impartially and objectively' had been widely praised, foreign language broadcasting could be regarded by some as a form of deception.<sup>68</sup> He nonetheless accepted the need to change, 'looking back over the past five years I believe our policy to have been right', Graves wrote, 'but the political situation now makes it necessary for us to study the question of competition with foreign short-wave programmes.'<sup>69</sup>

As the Ullswater Committee had met the Abyssinian crisis was developing. Asa Briggs argues that 'thereafter the international situation began to impinge more and more on the BBC's own plans and purposes.' Talk of Empire broadcasting 'merely as an extension of sentimental ties gave way.'<sup>70</sup> For the remainder of the decade, in the shadow of war, the Empire Service offered improved news coverage and a renewed commitment to share the best of British culture, technical improvements enabled broadcasts of a quality that made it attractive to stations willing to rebroadcast it. By 1937, relays from Britain to America were being arranged on an almost daily basis.<sup>71</sup> They were also, slowly, becoming a feature of the public service schedules of Australia and New Zealand.

In May 1936 the maiden voyage of the Queen Mary, from Southampton to New York, was turned into a broadcast event with daily updates from the voyage, ticking all the Empire Service boxes – technology, ships, Royal associations, and a helpful connection to America. The ABC was keen to both rebroadcast these and to offer updates from cabled reports the BBC was planning to send. Moses impressed on Clark the importance 'for the Commission, vis-à-vis B class competition, to

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<sup>68</sup> Gerard Mansell, *Let Truth be Told: 50 Years of BBC External Broadcasting* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1982), pp. 43–4.

<sup>69</sup> Briggs II, pp. 397 (Citing Graves, report on the Empire Service, 20 August 1937)

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.395–6.

<sup>71</sup> Potter, *Wireless Internationalism*, pp. 90–1 (citing WAC, R6/30/5 'G.A.C. 76—General Advisory Council—Precis of Discussion at the Meeting held on Wednesday 16th June, 1937')

miss no chance of being the first distributors on any such important occasion as this.<sup>72</sup> By the summer of 1936 regular ABC rebroadcasting of BBC output was taking place. The Opening of the 1936 Olympics in Berlin and accounts of several days of the competition were picked up at Mont Park from Daventry and rebroadcast.<sup>73</sup> ABC stations rebroadcast occasional editions of more routine BBC shows - on Wednesday 30 September listeners to Melbourne's 3AR could start their day with a relay of Jack Payne and his orchestra, by the following month they could hear something from the BBC almost every night of the week, talks on 'Sea Power' and by a tea blender and editions of *Empire Exchange* and *Under Big Ben*.<sup>74</sup> The greatest interest in rebroadcasting from Daventry remained at times of major events, which came thick and fast in December 1936, the first of which, rebroadcast by all the ABC stations, was a news event, the Crystal Palace fire, an account of which, despite the reception being 'not at all clear', was broadcast at 8.30pm on 1 December and repeated two hours later. Ten days later Stanley Baldwin's statement on the Abdication crisis was recorded and rebroadcast on all ABC stations, the King's 'Farewell message' on 12 December was relayed as it was received from Daventry at 8am and repeated twice at lunchtime and in the evening. The following day George VI's proclamation was received with 'excellent' quality at 12.55am and rebroadcast that night.<sup>75</sup> January 1937 saw celebrations of Australia Day, including a relay of a performance in London by 'Stars of Australia'.<sup>76</sup> From April 1937 nightly rebroadcasting of BBC shows became a regular feature of ABC schedules across the nation, the shows chosen ranged in tone and content from 'Chinese Music', through 'Today in Germany', to a talk on 'Responsibilities of Empire' by Stanley Baldwin, they were allocated a regular slot at around 10.30pm.<sup>77</sup> This was all building, in May, to extensive coverage, live and recorded, of the Coronation. From the end of August 1937 a fixture in the Wednesday night ABC

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<sup>72</sup> WAC E1/383, 28 April 1936, letter Moses to Clark.

<sup>73</sup> WAC E1/323, Schedule of Overseas Receptions, August 1937.

<sup>74</sup> WAC E1/323, Schedules of Overseas Receptions, August 1936-November 1937.

<sup>75</sup> WAC E1/323, Schedules of Overseas Receptions, December 1936.

<sup>76</sup> WAC E1/323, Schedules of Overseas Receptions, January 1937.

<sup>77</sup> WAC E1/323, Schedules of Overseas Receptions, May 1937.

schedule at 10pm was the 15 minute talk series *World Affairs*, recorded at Mont Park at 7.45pm when first picked up from Daventry.<sup>78</sup> Later in the year came another series of occasional 15 minute talks, *As I See It*, opened by George Bernard Shaw, and delivered on Christmas Eve by H.G. Wells.<sup>79</sup> There remained an anxiety that material produced in London would be too 'highbrow'.<sup>80</sup> Yet the ABC Talks department 'considered that the talks would be welcomed by all that section of people who listen to any kind of serious talk'.<sup>81</sup> The ABC was by now listening to output from many of the BBC frequencies and using whatever it could find, in March 1938 Moses wrote of a recording made of 'the Harry Lauder half hour' which had been relayed nationally, 'the actual reception was one of the best we have ever had and the programme was delightfully arranged...it was good to get Lauder free - he cost us a lot when we got a broadcast from him out here!'<sup>82</sup>

By the middle of 1938, Shelly was reporting that whilst his use of Empire Service material couldn't exactly be termed 'regular' rebroadcasting, in that reception conditions, particularly of music, were far from ideal: 'the programmes are scanned regularly and any items which it is thought can be received satisfactorily and which will appeal to the New Zealand listeners are selected and either rebroadcast, or recorded and rebroadcast at an appropriate time as early as possible after the time of transmission.' What was used were 'spoken matters such as talks, sporting commentaries et cetera. All the important events coming within this category are used by this service, and the privilege is very much appreciated.' This was welcome news to the BBC, and it planned now to reciprocate, to, in the words of MacGregor, 'do rather more than we have done in the past by way of including programmes from the Dominions in our normal programme schedules here in England and also, of course, in Empire transmissions from Daventry.' He was clear in his motivation, that the BBC valued 'the friendly collaboration of broadcasting organisations overseas'

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<sup>78</sup> WAC E1/323, Schedules of Overseas Receptions, August 1936-December 1937.

<sup>79</sup> WAC E1/323, Schedules of Overseas Receptions, November-December 1937.

<sup>80</sup> WAC E1/383, 12 February 1938, letter Cliffe to Moses

<sup>81</sup> WAC E1/383, 1 March 1938, letter Moses to Cliffe.

<sup>82</sup> WAC E1/383, 17 March 1938, letter Moses to Clark

and hoped 'that the exchange of programmes will stimulate real understanding and sympathy throughout Empire.' Might Shelley oversee production of a series of programmes to be made in New Zealand and send the finished productions on disc? What was proposed was a reverse of the previous transcription process. Shelley's suggestions ranged from a programme on New Zealand leadership in reducing infant mortality, through Maori chants and music, to 'Thar She Blows', dealing with offshore whaling. In the light of everything we have examined so far in regard to BBC representations of the Dominions it was unsurprising that MacGregor was most interested in the whaling and Maori ideas.<sup>83</sup>

By March 1939 a more robust template for such broadcasts had been established by *Australia Speaks*, the subject of Clark's correspondence with Moses we have already encountered.

Broadcast weekly in the BBC domestic service six programmes started with an introduction to Australia and continued with life in its cities, its countryside, 'the beauty and tragedy of the Australian bush', its economy and its culture.<sup>84</sup> The plan was to commission something similar from New Zealand to broadcast in early 1940. Shelley was excited, he proposed to offer an introduction to the country, an assessment of relations between Maori and Pakeha, and profiles of life in New Zealand's countryside, of its social services, of its sport and finally a programme asking: 'What is the New Zealander. Is he a separate type? How is he developing?'.<sup>85</sup> Such plans were interrupted by the outbreak of war, after which collaboration, on matters relating to the progress of the war and the experiences of its combatants, was of a completely different character. In November 1939, as the world of pan-Imperial broadcasting changed, Shelley wrote expressing his appreciation of the Empire Service as it had been: 'we can assure you that this programme service

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<sup>83</sup> ANZ R22011355, 26 August 1938, Shelley to MacGregor Empire Service Director; 15 September 1938, MacGregor to Shelley; 22 December 1938, Shelley to MacGregor; 10 January 1939, MacGregor to Shelley.

<sup>84</sup> *Radio Times*, 19 February 1939, p. 17.

<sup>85</sup> ANZ R22011355, 24 April 1939, Shelley to MacGregor.

has been of immense benefit to our organisation in New Zealand and has done something to uphold the prestige of British material and methods in broadcasting.<sup>86</sup>

So, to return then to what was widely acknowledged, at the time, to be the greatest broadcast event to date, embracing all the possibilities of the medium and all the connections and collaborations fashioned by the BBC and Empire broadcasting in the years leading to it. May 12, 1937 was Coronation Day.

## **Coronation Day**

From March Shelley's NBS had been anticipating the day of the Coronation and issuing instructions for the national stations. They were to expect that 'head office will be responsible for the whole of the evening programme' and that every station would be rebroadcasting 2YA's output from Wellington. The programme would comprise 45 minutes of material followed by the BBC Empire Service coverage of the event. All stations were to come on air at 05.30 the following morning for *The Empire's Homage* and the message from the King. That evening the schedule should be cleared for a rebroadcast of both, again from 2YA. For the rest of the week, until the following Tuesday, head office would be providing a mix of very British programming: British military bands, British artists, British vaudeville, English playwrights - 'Noël Coward etc' - music by 'English composers played by the studio orchestra; English dance bands; English opera, including 'Gilbert and Sullivan gems.'<sup>87</sup> In April memos directed that all Station Managers should ensure that talks during Coronation week should be 'British', in the broad sense of the term. They should be popular in subject and treatment, but non-British names should be avoided. They should ensure that

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<sup>86</sup> ANZ R22011358, 14 November 1939 Shelley to Overseas Services Executive.

<sup>87</sup> ANZ R22011340: Overseas broadcasts Coronation ceremonies 1937, 11 March 1937, Memo to station managers.

Dinner and Breakfast sessions included 'no items played by foreign combinations, to which any objection can be taken...This applies particularly to German and to American combinations.'<sup>88</sup>

At the ABC Keith Barry saw the Coronation as radio's 'greatest opportunity'.<sup>89</sup> ABC stations carried Daventry's coverage from 7.10pm to 12.30am the following morning, of the procession to Westminster Abbey, the Coronation ceremony and the return. Listeners to all stations could rise again at 4am to hear *The Empire's Homage*, or wait to hear it repeated, again on all ABC stations, at 12.50 and 6.30pm. Building on the interest in events in London several ABC stations carried in subsequent nights the BBC hit variety show *In Town Tonight*.<sup>90</sup> Australia's commercial stations also cleared their schedules. The Commonwealth broadcasting network had commissioned its own comment on the Coronation and through it listeners across Australia - to 3YB in Warrnambool, to 2UW in Sydney, to 4BC in Brisbane - heard 'a series of interesting talks' from the Australian journalist Edward Short, 'now in London', who 'broadcast direct by radiophone' with his 'impressions of the decorations'. Further talks covered London 'on the Eve of the Coronation' by Delamore MacKay, with Miss Betty Wilson commenting on the scenes at the Abbey.<sup>91</sup> On the day itself all the Sydney commercial stations - 2GB, 2UE, 2UW, 2CH, 2SM and 2LM - carried the BBC coverage, the full commentary on the processions and the service itself.<sup>92</sup> 2GB remained on air all night - and offered a rebroadcast of the ceremony in the early hours for those who 'not been home' earlier. 2UE came back on air at 4am, in time to broadcast, as did 2GB, *The Empire's*

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<sup>88</sup> ANZ R22011340: Overseas broadcasts Coronation ceremonies 1937, 3 & 13 April 1937, memos Head Office to Station Manager 4YA, Dunedin.

<sup>89</sup> NAA, SP341/2, 318885, undated memo: 'Outstanding Broadcasts Arranged by the Australian Broadcasting Commission'.

<sup>90</sup> E1/323, Schedules of Overseas Receptions, May 1937.

<sup>91</sup> 'London Talks Through 4BC', *Telegraph*, 10 May 1937, p. 29.

<<https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/page/19897843>> [Accessed: 27 May 2025]

'Bringing the Coronation to the Fireside', *Argus*, 8 May 1937, p. 15

<<https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/page/580155>> [Accessed: 27 May 2025]

'Coronation Broadcasts', *Labor Daily*, 8 May 1937, p. 9

<<https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/page/25569217>> [Accessed: 27 May 2025]

<sup>92</sup> 'Preparations Complete for Broadcast', *Northern Star*, 12 May 1937, p. 8.

<<https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/page/9653317>> [Accessed: 27 May 2025]

*Homage*, and at 5am the message from the King, again rebroadcast on 2GB at breakfast time for those who'd missed it.<sup>93</sup> For the duration Australia's airwaves were, then, dominated by events taking place in London, and by the BBC presentation of them.

The broadcast of the ceremonies themselves had been, the BBC declared, 'the most elaborate and complicated of the kind ever undertaken by the BBC' and had, as we've noted, been heard 'by a greater number of the people throughout the world than any other programme in the history of radio.'<sup>94</sup> This was a claim impossible to verify but given credibility by the sheer number of broadcasters across the world carrying the coverage. What then was the fascination with British Royal broadcasts, with British Royalty? What impact did broadcast coverage of royal events have on conceptions of national, or pan-British, identity?

First, the fascination. In Britain, the power and influence of the monarchy had been challenged in many ways in the twentieth century to date, not least in the growth of the mass democratic electorate and the greater concentration of power in the hands of politicians.<sup>95</sup> Yet a prevailing opinion in the 1930s was that far from diminishing, the significance of the British Monarchy had increased, Stanley Baldwin declaring in 1935 that 'the influence of the Crown...the necessity of the Crown' had become, in Britain, 'a thing of paramount importance.'<sup>96</sup> In the British world fascination with royalty reflected a changed constitutional position. The adoption of the Statute of Westminster had seen the creation of the 'divisible crown', the King now King in each of his territories separately. By implication each could reject him. The status and profile of the monarchy

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<sup>93</sup> 'King's Message Broadcast', *The Sun*, 12 May 1937, p. 6  
<<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article229401126>> [Accessed: 19 August 2025]

<sup>94</sup> *BBC Handbook 1938* (London: BBC, 1937), pp. 31-39.

<sup>95</sup> Philip Williamson, 'The monarchy and public values 1910-1953' in *The monarchy and the British Nation 1780 to the Present* ed. by Andrzej Olechnowicz (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 224.

<sup>96</sup> 'Influence of the Crown', *Times*, 4 May 1935, p. 16.  
<[link.gale.com/apps/doc/CS268905636/TTDA?u=oxford&sid=bookmark-TTDA&pg=16&xid=22674d6d](http://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CS268905636/TTDA?u=oxford&sid=bookmark-TTDA&pg=16&xid=22674d6d)>  
[Accessed 23 August 2025]

arguably rose as Dominion governments used it 'to endorse the Empire's re-constitution.'<sup>97</sup> The *Bay of Plenty Times*, in a Coronation Day editorial, asked: 'What holds the Empire together?' Its answer was that 'obviously it is the King. Although it is conventional to speak of His Majesty as the King of England and Emperor of India, he is, in point of fact, King of New Zealand...It is the King who holds us together.'<sup>98</sup> In Australia 'God Save the King' was routinely played at the beginning or end of concerts, plays, films, dances, sporting finals, it was the National Anthem and when it was played people stood to attention.<sup>99</sup> Deryck Schreuder and Stuart Ward note that 'Royal tours would be greeted with scenes of unbridled enthusiasm that were never matched in Britain where the mere presence of Royalty was not, in itself, a cause for celebration.' This even where the 'rituals, etiquette, curtseys, and customs' attached were embraced by Australians not so much as symbols of deference but rather for their 'sheer novelty and strangeness'.<sup>100</sup>

The enduring popularity of the British Monarchy baffled many contemporaries, not least in Britain itself, a bafflement reflected in the work of Mass Observation, whose first publication was an analysis of Coronation Day 1937, *May the Twelfth*.<sup>101</sup> Philip Williamson notes that understanding the monarchy's popularity is 'notoriously difficult', and attributable to a number of 'not necessarily consistent' factors, amongst them 'reverence', 'romance', 'pageantry' and the 'illusion of proximity' created by Royal visits and broadcasts. Yet Williamson concludes, 'with some certainty', that in large part the popularity was a product of the media. The public was 'deluged with reasons to admire the monarchy, and during the Silver Jubilee and the Coronation and royal funerals, the radio, newsreels and print media made it almost physically impossible to escape these

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<sup>97</sup> Williamson, p. 243.

<sup>98</sup> 'Empire at a Unit', *Bay of Plenty Times*, 18 May 1937, p. 2.

<<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/BOPT19370518.2.10>> [Accessed: 19 August 2025]

<sup>99</sup> Neville Meaney, 'Britishness and Australian identity: The problem of nationalism in Australian history and historiography', *Australian Historical Studies*, 32:116 pp. 79-80.

<sup>100</sup> Schreuder & Ward, 'Introduction' in *Australia's Empire*, pp. 18-19.

<sup>101</sup> Williamson, p. 224; *May the Twelfth*, ed. by Humphrey Jennings & Charles Madge, (London: Faber & Faber, 1937)

messages'.<sup>102</sup> Indeed Williamson proposes that key to the survival of the British Monarchy in an age when so many others collapsed was it becoming 'more vocal'.<sup>103</sup> In the process the Monarch became 'the symbol and exponent of a particular set of public values', values 'promoted by almost all public organisations and respected by most of the general public.'<sup>104</sup> For Norman Bonney, a 'special' and 'sacred' quality came to be attached to the Monarch - who was, after all, supreme governor of the Church of England. In a more secular society perhaps royalism was similar to a secular 'religion', something latent, emerging at times of crisis or celebration.<sup>105</sup>

What impact, then, did broadcast coverage of royal events have on conceptions of national, or pan-British, identity? How was this exerted? As Eric Hobsbawm observed modern democratic states with monarchies were obliged to build their state 'traditions' around the Crown, the need was urgent, for 'the very existence of a mass electorate dramatized the problem of maintaining its loyalty.'<sup>106</sup> Such 'traditions', in so far as they could claim 'continuity with a suitable historic past', might be expected to 'inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition', they might, like a Jubilee, be conveniently revived, or even 'invented'.<sup>107</sup> In a period of social and economic change 'traditions' might, as David Cannadine suggests, be 'deliberately adulterated' to give an impression of 'continuity, community and comfort' despite all evidence to the contrary.<sup>108</sup> The observance of state 'traditions' could, then, be manipulated to serve specific social and political functions, but Hobsbawm noted that this was most successful where they clearly met a 'felt', if not 'clearly understood', need.<sup>109</sup> Yet what was that need? At one level there was a satisfaction of a

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<sup>102</sup> Williamson, pp. 255-6.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., p. 226.

<sup>104</sup> Williamson, pp. 255-6.

<sup>105</sup> Norman Bonney, *Monarchy, religion and the state: Civil religion in the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia and the Commonwealth* (Manchester: Manchester University Press 2013), pp. 11 & 16-17.

<sup>106</sup> Hobsbawm, 'Mass-Producing Traditions', pp. 281 & 267-8.

<sup>107</sup> Hobsbawm, 'Inventing Traditions', p. 1.

<sup>108</sup> David Cannadine, 'The Context, Performance and Meaning of Ritual: The British Monarchy and the 'Invention of Tradition', c. 1820-1977' in Eric Hobsbawm and Terrence Ranger eds. *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 105.

<sup>109</sup> Hobsbawm, 'Mass-Producing Traditions', p. 307.

cultural phenomenon of the age, the radio critic Sydney Moseley writing in 1935 of the 'immense public interest' taken in broadcasts of "actualities" ...something which is really happening.<sup>110</sup> The BBC producer Filson Young believed that the popularity of such live broadcasts was due to their engagement of listeners in 'a kind of spiritual travel.'<sup>111</sup> Scannell and Cardiff argue that in its outside broadcast coverage of religious services, concerts, theatre, variety, dance music, public speeches, ceremonies, and sport the BBC 'became perhaps *the* central agent of national culture' through its 'cyclical reproduction, year in and year out, of an orderly and regular progression of festivities, rituals and celebrations', offering British people 'constant opportunities for shared national experience.'<sup>112</sup> Big events were precisely what listeners in Australia and New Zealand tuned to London to enjoy - or were taken to London by their domestic broadcasters to hear. These also attracted audiences across the world. What made such broadcasts attractive to listeners was the sense of 'being there', as offering 'the best seat in the house.'<sup>113</sup> Anyone not listening would be 'missing out.'<sup>114</sup> Lesley Johnson notes - in the visit to Australia by the Duke and Duchess of York (the future George VI and Queen Elizabeth), and the opening of Parliament House in Canberra - the first of many eulogies to radio's power to 'unify the nation'. Radio traders advertised radio sets in these terms and though the Duke's speech 'could not be heard clearly', much was made of 'the thrill of hearing Royalty speak', the press declaring that the homes of all those fortunate enough to own a wireless set had been witness to a 'grand occasion in the history of Australia'.<sup>115</sup>

At one level, then, broadcasts of British Royal events met a need to 'be there', to not miss out on the great event of the day, and nowhere on the planet was a greater event taking place on 12 May 1937 than the Coronation. There was, however, more, for deployed in the broadcast coverage of

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<sup>110</sup> Sydney A. Moseley, *Broadcasting In My Time* (London: Rich & Cowan Ltd. 1935), p. 156.

<sup>111</sup> Filson Young, *Shall I Listen: Studies in the Adventure and Technique of Broadcasting* (London: Constable, 1933), p. 204.

<sup>112</sup> Scannell & Cardiff, *A Social History of British Broadcasting*, p. 277-8.

<sup>113</sup> Johnson, *Unseen Voice*, p. 45 (Quoting *Sydney Daily Telegraph*, 3 September 1929)

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 193-4 (Quoting *Women's Weekly* 30 October 1937)

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 193-4.

these Royal events was a consistent metaphor for the relationship between the scattered peoples of the British world, the suggestion that they formed - as proposed in Marshall's commentary, and as in the Christmas messages of George V - a 'Great Family', the Royal Family being simply foremost amongst all the others. Royal Family occasions were, then, both 'public events' attracting global attention but also 'family occasions' which all family members were invited to witness, and as Williamson argues what 'especially evoked this sense of closeness was the use of radio.'<sup>116</sup> The broadcast projection of the Monarchy developed rapidly in the five short years between 1932 and 1937, growing in scale, ambition and profile, executed by many of the BBC producers and engineers who had drawn up the plans for George V's first Christmas messages - Gerald Cock, BBC Director of Outside Broadcasts, his successor Seymour Joly de Lotbiniere, and Robert Wood, the engineer behind all the broadcasts from the wiring of Sandringham for sound back in 1932.

First intimations of what was to follow came in broadcast coverage of the marriage of the Duke of Kent, Prince George, to Princess Marina of Greece, at Westminster Abbey in November 1934, a broadcast which scaled new technical and editorial peaks. Outside the Abbey a picture would have to be painted of the scene. Howard Marshall was hired for the occasion, as ever thoroughly prepared, yet also aware that 'you've got to be very much alive when you are broadcasting, to put the material you have got in touch with the things that are happening and make them blend as one.'<sup>117</sup> Inside it fell to Wood to offer coverage of a service that would have no commentary, and to specifically allow listeners to hear the key exchanges between the Archbishop of Canterbury and the bride and groom. The efforts of Wood and Marshall met with almost universal acclaim. The BBC had no greater critic than Collie Knox of the *Daily Mail*, yet Knox was fulsome in his praise, writing that Marshall's descriptions of the scenes outside the Abbey had offered 'a real appreciation of the 'picture''. Knox reserved his greatest praise for 'the brilliant technical work of

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<sup>116</sup> Williamson, pp. 245-6.

<sup>117</sup> Howard Marshall, Connected Histories of the BBC  
<<https://connectedhistoriesofthebbc.org/play/?id=136>> [Accessed: 19 August 2025]

the outside engineering staff of the BBC...Whatever we may or may not say and think about the actual programme organisation of the BBC' - and Knox made a living by thinking little of it - 'as a technical achievement in broadcasting it stands unsurpassed.'<sup>118</sup> Knox revealed that:

'...during the rehearsal of the wedding service both the Duke and his bride-to-be paid special attention to the microphone that was slung 10 feet above the spot where they knelt before the Archbishop...It was impressed on them that if they failed to pitch their voices high enough the millions of well-wishers at home and throughout the Empire might not be able to catch their responses. How splendidly they remembered the listening hosts during a moment of such tension will long be recalled.'<sup>119</sup>

For this was the Royal event at which listeners were for the first time explicitly invited to think of themselves as participants, as 'witnesses'. Marshall suggested that listeners might consider that the Prince represented 'every man' and the Princess 'every woman'. For New Zealand's *Press* the 'outstanding feature of the close of the ceremony' had been the Archbishop of Canterbury's assertion that listeners 'formed a company who were really wedding guests', indeed more than guests, they were 'members of a family of the nation's beloved King'.<sup>120</sup> Listeners had heard the Royals speak not just any words, but 'I will'.<sup>121</sup>

The listening audience might be unmeasurable but reports came of gala nights for listeners in Portugal, of a run on English language newspapers in Sweden, and 'pictures by wire of the royal procession' featuring on the front pages of all the Berlin evening papers.<sup>122</sup> Every detail of the service had been heard with the utmost clarity in Buenos Aires.<sup>123</sup> L.E. Bernays, the British

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<sup>118</sup> 'Collie Knox in the West', *Daily Mail*, 30 November 1934, p. 25.

<[link.gale.com/apps/doc/EE1864998390/GDCS?u=oxford&sid=bookmark-GDCS&pg=25&xid=a196c67d](http://link.gale.com/apps/doc/EE1864998390/GDCS?u=oxford&sid=bookmark-GDCS&pg=25&xid=a196c67d)> [Accessed: 23 August 2025]

<sup>119</sup> 'Historic Broadcast', Collie Knox, Our Radio Editor' *Daily Mail*, 30 November 1934, p. 7.

<[link.gale.com/apps/doc/EE1864998181/GDCS?u=oxford&sid=bookmark-GDCS&pg=7&xid=46173753](http://link.gale.com/apps/doc/EE1864998181/GDCS?u=oxford&sid=bookmark-GDCS&pg=7&xid=46173753)> [Accessed: 23 August 2025]

<sup>120</sup> 'Broadcast of Ceremony', *Press*, 30 November 1934, p. 11.

<<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/CHP19341130.2.51.4>> [Accessed: 19 August 2025]

<sup>121</sup> 'The Royal Wedding', *Waipawa Mail*, 30 November 1934, p. 3.

<<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/WAIPM19341130.2.15>> [Accessed: 19 August 2025]

<sup>122</sup> 'Worldwide Interest', *Manchester Guardian*, 30 November 1934, p. 14.

<<https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/world-wide-interest/docview/483729474/se-2>> [Accessed: 23 August 2025]

<sup>123</sup> 'Royal wedding broadcast. Reception throughout the world.' *Times*, 30 November, 1934, p. 14.

Consulate General in Chicago, wrote of Americans waking at '4.45 in the morning to tune in', he had himself, 'and felt amply rewarded...occasional broadcasts of this character (and they must of course be kept for special occasions) are a great binding force not only within the Empire but in this country.'<sup>124</sup> The Purser of the liner *Majestic*, '500 miles out of Southampton in the Atlantic', wrote of sitting with passengers in a silence broken only by 'the faint throbbing of the mighty engines beneath us...I closed my eyes and forgot the ship in the glamorous scene which the broadcast conjured up with the clarity of a picture...all listening felt that they were really participating in the ceremony'.<sup>125</sup> At the State Theatre in Hamilton, opened in 1932, Mr G. S. Anchor invited those watching the last film of the day to remain in their seats 'for the reception of the radio broadcast of the royal wedding', indeed 'any others of the public are invited by the management to listen to the relay at 10:30 o'clock'.<sup>126</sup> This was one of the first occasions on which the BBC provided facilities for material commissioned by the ABC, Marshall broadcasting to Australia a special eyewitness account from Studio 3B at Broadcasting House. The occasion had, Walter Conder cabled, provoked 'overwhelming public interest' in Australia, the broadcast had been 'outstanding', indeed he asked whether the recording could be repeated.<sup>127</sup> For 'Dynamite' writing in the *Bay of Plenty Times* it had been 'possibly the finest broadcast ever heard...The description of the scene was very pleasantly put over by Mr Howard Marshall, whose charming manner we have got quite used to now. One can always sit down and listen to his talks and feel that one is in really good company'.<sup>128</sup> A week later the *Manawatu Standard* was already looking

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<[link.gale.com/apps/doc/CS236006270/TTDA?u=oxford&sid=bookmark-TTDA&pg=14&xid=2e037334](https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CS236006270/TTDA?u=oxford&sid=bookmark-TTDA&pg=14&xid=2e037334)> [Accessed: 23 August 2025]

<sup>124</sup> WAC R19/166, 27<sup>th</sup> December 1934. Extract of letter from British Consulate General, Chicago, forwarded to the BBC by the Department of Overseas Trade in London.

<sup>125</sup> 'Women's Interest', *Daily Mail*, 30 November 1934, p. 7.

<[link.gale.com/apps/doc/EE1864998180/GDCS?u=oxford&sid=bookmark-GDCS&pg=7&xid=12dd8c1e](https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/EE1864998180/GDCS?u=oxford&sid=bookmark-GDCS&pg=7&xid=12dd8c1e)> [Accessed: 23 August 2025]

<sup>126</sup> 'Local and General', *Waikato Times*, 28 November 1934, p. 6.

<<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/WT19341128.2.30>> [Accessed: 19 August 2025]

<sup>127</sup> WAC E1/315/3, 22 November 1934, memo Empire Executive to Graves; 1 December 1934, cable Conder to London; 5 December, letter Conder to Clark.

<sup>128</sup> 'Radio Notes', *Bay of Plenty Times*, 1 December 1934, p. 4.

<<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/BOPT19341201.2.30>> [Accessed: 19 August 2025]

forward, to 'the next Empire transmission of particular interest...that on Christmas Day...The London cables state that this country is to commence the exchange of greetings' and had offered the 'very vague' suggestion that the speaker was to be 'the man in charge of New Zealand's milk supply'. Mr A.S. Paterson's great moment was yet to come.<sup>129</sup>

George V's Silver Jubilee, 6 months later, was carried by the BBC Empire Service, by European broadcasters and by the NBC and CBS networks in America.<sup>130</sup> The Jubilee of a Monarch who considered Mussolini a 'mad dog' and the Nazis 'horrid fellows,' may have been a perfect example of an 'invented tradition' yet was, Cannadine argues, a deliberately reassuring 'antidote to the high-tech parades and search lights' in Italy and Germany.<sup>131</sup> The centrepiece of BBC coverage was the carriage procession to St Paul's and the Service of Thanksgiving. It was decided to - as Gerald Cock, put it - offer 'no attempt' to describe the events 'in detail' but rather to present a 'sound picture' of the advancing procession: 'the voice of London will take as important a part as the commentators.' The ambition was to offer 'the maximum of reality and enthusiasm.' In a Cathedral vestry it fell to Wood to mix the sound from his 10 microphones along the route and use a further 17 to capture the service itself. Reflecting public fascination as to how all of this was achieved the *Radio Times* published his microphone plans for the occasion.<sup>132</sup> In Western Australia Albany's *Mount Barker and Denmark Record* reflected on the significance of the broadcast coverage of the event in terms that would surely have delighted its organisers - whilst 'there might be some carping critics who would deny the authenticity of the newspaper reports of the celebrations' what confounded such observations was 'the fact that radio now permits people, to the uttermost parts of the earth, to listen to the heart of London', to the 'rolling waves of

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<sup>129</sup> 'Radio Programmes', *Manawatu Standard*, 5 December 1934, p. 3.

<<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/manawatu-standard/1934/12/05/3>> [Accessed: 19 August 2025]

<sup>130</sup> WAC R47/341/1: King George V Jubilee, Relays.

<sup>131</sup> Rose, *King George V*, pp. 387-8; Hobsbawm, 'Mass-Producing Traditions', p. 281; David Cannadine, *Ornamentalism, How the British saw their Empire* (London: Penguin, 2002), p.130.

<sup>132</sup> *Radio Times*, 3 May 1935, pp. 8-9.

enthusiasm', it argued that 'to those nations who may have been disposed to believe that the stability of the Empire was crumbling...the tenor of the Jubilee celebrations must have been a revelation.'<sup>133</sup> Within the year George was dead. The BBC coverage of his funeral was stark, notable for the paucity of the commentary and for the sounds of mourning, listeners were left, in the words of the *Gippsland Times*, 'to picture the solemnity of the scene in their own minds...from the whole could be gathered a picture of solemn mourners, marching in slow time over the wet streets.'<sup>134</sup> The *Wanganui Chronicle* fancied that 'at times even the weeping of mourners along the route could be heard by those with keen ears', listeners, it stated, had 'retired to their beds with their hearts sad as they realised that an era in the history of a mighty empire had closed.'<sup>135</sup> The centrality of broadcasting to the experience of such events was captured in that of passengers on the liner *City of Manchester*, which docked in Brisbane on 2 February 1936. They had heard, the *Courier-Mail* reported, the King's Christmas message in mid-Atlantic, news of his illness and death 'near the Friendly Islands', the funeral service had been clearly heard 'in the middle of the Pacific Ocean.'<sup>136</sup>

Edward VIII was assumed to be a natural at the microphone, broadcasting since October 1922.<sup>137</sup> Few world leaders were better travelled, he was a 'modern Ulysses.'<sup>138</sup> For John Simon, the British Home Secretary, he was 'the most universally popular personality in the world'.<sup>139</sup> His first broadcast as King, on 1 March 1936, St David's Day, was relayed live by all the national stations in

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<sup>133</sup> 'Jubilee Lessons', *Mount Barker and Denmark Record*, 13 May 1935, p. 2. <<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article240405001>> [Accessed: 19 August 2025]

<sup>134</sup> 'Gives glimpses of solemn ceremony of funeral', *Gippsland Times*, 30 January 1936, p. 2. <<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article62980143>> [Accessed: 19 August 2025]

<sup>135</sup> 'The King's Funeral Broadcast to the World', *Wanganui Chronicle*, 30 January 1936, p. 6. <<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/WC19360130.2.43>> [Accessed: 19 August 2025]

<sup>136</sup> 'Funeral Broadcast Received at Sea', *Courier-Mail*, 3 February 1936, p. 14. <<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article36807720>> [Accessed: 19 August 2025]

<sup>137</sup> RA PS/PSO/GVI/PS/MAIN/261 Broadcast Speeches by HM when Prince of Wales.

<sup>138</sup> 'The King to His People', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 3 March 1936, p.10. <<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article17328153>> [Accessed: 19 August 2025]

<sup>139</sup> Alexander Larman, *The Crown in Crisis* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2020), p. 33.

New Zealand.<sup>140</sup> Likewise in Australia, where the B stations of Sydney and Melbourne carried the speech.<sup>141</sup> Reports of reception came from across the globe. It had been broadcast in Tokyo and by CBS and NBC.<sup>142</sup> The *Sydney Morning Herald* reported an estimated global audience of 200 million for what was - by its estimation - the King's 76<sup>th</sup> broadcast.<sup>143</sup> Yet the event lacked drama. There were no bells or choirs, no crowd, no atmosphere. The speech itself was somewhat unimpressive, the first drafts being no more than 'a noble example of Whitehall rhetoric', the King had rewritten it 'in my own simple style.'<sup>144</sup> The *Sydney Morning Herald* noted it had been made not from 'a royal palace' but from 'a studio in Broadcasting House.'<sup>145</sup> This was not the King inviting anyone into his family home. It was very modern and practical, and whilst this modernity fitted Edward's personal image it somewhat jarred with 'familial' metaphors - at 43, unmarried, with no children, Edward was one of the world's more notorious bachelors, it was a leap to regard him as a patriarch. Edward let it be known that he would not be following his father in delivering a Christmas message.<sup>146</sup> Events overtook him. To his Private Secretary Edward appeared 'entirely' ignorant of 'the lines on which the King's business should be carried on'.<sup>147</sup> The King sat at the head of the British religious as well as social hierarchy, yet at a time when most British people were used to praying for the King and sang for God to save him, Edward rarely went church.<sup>148</sup> When he made clear that in order to marry a divorcee he might abandon his public duties, he was seen to be 'selfish', striking 'at the heart of the most obvious and essential royal and public principles', millions had, after all, recently been obliged to serve the King in war.<sup>149</sup> The Abdication Crisis

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<sup>140</sup> ANZ R3024714, 2 March 1936, cable Radioboard to London; 25 March 1936, Hands to Ashbridge.

<sup>141</sup> 'King Talks to His Empire, Millions Charmed by Royal Message', *The Herald*, 2 March 1936, p. 4 <<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article244882838>> [Accessed: 19 August 2025]

<sup>142</sup> WAC R47/238/1, 2 March 1936, Foreign Line Relays of the King's Broadcast, Mr Pawley OEID to ACE.

<sup>143</sup> 'The King', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 March 1936, p. 9. <<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article17316233>> [Accessed: 19 August 2025]

<sup>144</sup> Duke of Windsor, *A Kings Story*, (London: Cassell, 1953), p. 284.

<sup>145</sup> 'The King', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 March 1936, p. 9. <<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article17316233>> [Accessed: 19 August 2025]

<sup>146</sup> RA PS/PSO/GVI/PS/MAIN/326 British Broadcasting Corporation, 28 May 1936: Graves to Sir Godfrey Thomas; 8 June 1936: Thomas to Graves.

<sup>147</sup> Larman, pp. 34 & 36

<sup>148</sup> Williamson, p. 246.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 254-5.

unfolded at pace. At its heart lay the King's unwillingness, or inability, to embody the public values now expected of the Monarch. It became a global broadcast event.

The first British press coverage of the King's relationship with Wallis Simpson was not until 3 December.<sup>150</sup> Edward's romance had however long been a matter of public discussion in America. On 4 December the BBC representative in New York, Felix Greene, was writing to the Foreign Director, Isa Benzie, 'You cannot imagine what it is like here!'<sup>151</sup> Between them CBS and NBC broadcast, from London, 26 talks on the affair in the 5 days between 3 and 7 December.<sup>152</sup> For the BBC the Abdication announcement presented both problems and an opportunity. The declaration that the King was to abdicate was announced first in the House of Commons, to relay it the BBC waited for a scheduled news report on the hour.<sup>153</sup> As a consequence of the delay the American networks, not waiting for news 'on the hour', had been first with the news. At Broadcasting House Benzie, in a spirit of cooperation, had arranged for a phone line to be installed in the corridor outside the studio the Americans regularly used, a call to this line the moment the word 'Abdication' had been reported from the Commons alerted the American producers and their newsrooms. Listening to live broadcasts from America Benzie was 'astonished' to hear that 'New York had all the news first'.<sup>154</sup> In Maryland Felix Greene felt there was 'surely something wrong' when the 'little low powered local station to which I was tuned, could announce a great item of British news so much sooner than the British Broadcasting Corporation.'<sup>155</sup> He wrote to Clark - this had been a significant mistake: 'on occasions like the one we are discussing I think we must remember that every American man, woman and child is listening to the BBC, as well as Britishers in the Empire.'<sup>156</sup> Testament to the significance in British society of the BBC, and broadcasting, was

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<sup>150</sup> Larman, p. 163.

<sup>151</sup> WAC R47/1/1, 4 December 1936, memo Greene to Benzie.

<sup>152</sup> WAC R47/1/1, 7 December 1936, Foreign Exec. to FD (Benzie)

<sup>153</sup> WAC R47/1/2, 14 January 1937, Graves to Greene.

<sup>154</sup> WAC R47/1/2, 23 April 1937, Benzie to Greene

<sup>155</sup> WAC R47/1/2, 5 January 1937 Green to CNE & Benzie.

<sup>156</sup> WAC R47/1/2, 8 February 1937, Green memo to Director Empire Service.

that Edward's Abdication speech was delivered in a broadcast live from Windsor after an introduction by John Reith. It was one of the broadcast moments of the age. Interest was the greatest yet, 80 European stations had carried it, from Iceland to the USSR. In the USA 200 stations took it as did six in Argentina, and stations in Brazil, Uruguay, and the Dutch East Indies. It had been carried simultaneously by 78 in Australia.<sup>157</sup> In New Zealand, whilst reception was awful, with listeners 'able to distinguish only a few words here and there', it was nonetheless surmised that Edward 'was speaking with great feeling.'<sup>158</sup> It was the occasion that inspired Colin Scrimgeour's notorious *Friendly Road* broadcast in Edward's defence.

The stage was set, then, for the high point of Royal broadcasts in the years before the outbreak of war, the Coronation of Edward's brother, Bertie, Duke of York, as George VI, a high point for two reasons. First, it brought together all the by now familiar elements of a Royal broadcasting spectacular: an invitation to listeners to be witnesses to a unique historic event, a trip to London to hear the crowds, the marching, the horses, and a renewal of the proposal that the King, surrounded in the Abbey by his own young family, sat at the head of a great 'family' comprising all the listening 'British'. Second there was the nature of a Coronation itself. Emile Durkheim had argued that 'there can be no society which does not feel the need of upholding and reaffirming at regular intervals the collective sentiments and collective ideas which make its unity and personality.' Durkheim considered religious belief and ritual to 're-present' social realities, rituals being 'rallying signs', 'dramatic representations', which served to involve the whole community.<sup>159</sup> A British Coronation was - is - weighted with religious and ceremonial ritual, ritual being defined by Steven Lukes as a 'rule governed activity of a symbolic character which draws the attention of its

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<sup>157</sup> '78 Stations Broadcast Abdication News', *Daily News* (Perth), 12 December 1936, p. 8  
<<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article84107489>> [Accessed: 19 August 2025]

<sup>158</sup> 'Broadcast to Nation', *Poverty Bay Herald*, 12 December 1936, p. 5.  
<<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/PBH19361212.2.35>> [Accessed: 19 August 2025]

<sup>159</sup> Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1915), pp. 225, 358, 379 & 427.

participants to objects of thought and feeling that they hold to be of special significance.<sup>160</sup> State rituals were not therefore merely symbolic but also opportunities for governing elites to project their vision of desired social values and hierarchy, 'to reinforce and perpetuate dominant and other official models of social structure and change' and consequently repress others.<sup>161</sup> Broadcasting vastly increased the audience for such events. Moreover, to Lukes' observation, the BBC was, as we have seen, an enthusiastic participant in the reinforcement of the dominant and official view of such occasions.

George VI succeeded to the Throne with reluctance, confiding to his cousin Lord Mountbatten that the situation was 'absolutely terrible.'<sup>162</sup> In the broadcast age the new King had a great disadvantage, his speech impediment, indeed Reith was informed that the King was as anxious about the speech he was to make on the evening of the Coronation as anything else that day. Could it be recorded? Reith, reflecting what might today be considered an idiosyncratic notion that recording involved a form of deception, discouraged this, but ensured that for the broadcast Robert Wood would be on hand, along with the King's speech therapist Lionel Logue.<sup>163</sup> The intention, agreed with Cosmo Lang, Archbishop of Canterbury, was that the Coronation should be made an occasion of 'spiritual significance' for people of the Empire.<sup>164</sup> The BBC went along with this, announcing that during the service 'the BBC director of religion, Reverend F.A. Iremonger, Chaplain to the King, stationed alongside Howard Marshall...will offer guidance for the thoughts and prayers of listeners.'<sup>165</sup>

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<sup>160</sup> Steven Lukes, *Essays in Social Theory* (London: Macmillan, 1977), p. 54.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 72-73.

<sup>162</sup> John Wheeler-Bennett, *King George VI*, (London: Macmillan, 1958), pp. 272 & 293.

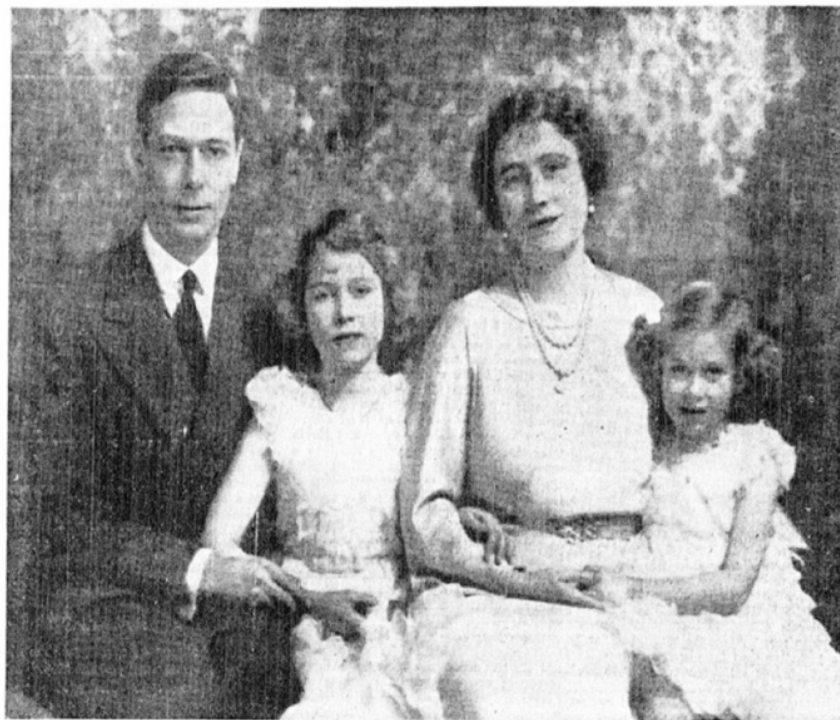
<sup>163</sup> Sarah Bradford, *George VI* (London: Penguin, 2002), pp. 277-8.

<sup>164</sup> Wheeler-Bennett, pp. 304-305 & 311.

<sup>165</sup> WAC R30/438/1, 8 April 1937, BBC Press Release.

The Australian press claimed it would be 'the biggest world broadcast ever attempted.' The ABC was seeking to 'ensure that no detail of the description shall be lost by possible difficult conditions of reception', with two 'receiving sets' set up in each capital, 'connected by trunk line' to Melbourne, one relaying the Empire signal from London, one 'continually searching the ether' for the best reception, from all these the ABC would select the best, to 'be broadcast throughout Australia over 7 400 miles of landline'.<sup>166</sup> In *Radio Record* Colin Scrimgeour looked forward to the day, inspired by childhood recollections of the Coronation of King George V, reflecting on his sense of connection with the new Monarchs:

'the fact that they have children, who are very much as our children, will bring the Royal Family into the hearts of those who appreciate the loving and selfless service given so graciously by the man and woman who they called their King and Queen'.<sup>167</sup>



THE LATEST PHOTOGRAPH OF THE ROYAL FAMILY  
Their Majesties with Princess Elizabeth, who was 11 years of age last month, and Princess Margaret Rose, who is now six years old.

Fig 32: 'The Latest Photograph of the Royal Family', *New Zealand Herald*, 11 May 1937, p. 7.

<sup>166</sup> 'Plans for Gigantic Radio Relay', *The Advertiser*, 11 May 1937, p. 23.

<<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article41642908>> [Accessed: 20 August 2025]

<sup>167</sup> ATL MSY-1928: Cuttings – Vol 3, Scrimgeour, Colin Graham, 1903-1987, 'The King - A Courageous Gentleman Who Bears a Great Burden', *Radio Record*, 14 May 1937, p. 13.

The Sydney newspaper *The Sun* declared 12 May 'A Great day for the Empire' and reflected on the role of the Monarchy and on its prestige - 'the respect it receives from the people' was 'one of the wonders of modern times...more firmly founded now than in the last generation'. Like Colin Scrimgeour its focus was on the Royal Family - the new King, it declared, was a man 'simple in manner and friendly and easy in approach' and with a family 'which on present indications' would give the British 'a second Queen Elizabeth'.<sup>168</sup>

In America interest, noted as early as the summer of 1936, was heightened in the aftermath of the Abdication. From New York Felix Greene reported a 'publicity ballyhoo'.<sup>169</sup> This was less about 'family', although shared history and heritage formed part of what the American broadcasters wanted to cover, it was more about spectacle - one of the most populous, most famous cities in the world, celebrating an event in the life of one of its most famous families, with all the colour and glamour that London could conjure. CBS promised that just as it had:

'...broadcast the story of the death of King George V when Britain grieved; and the story of King Edward's abdication when Britain was tense; so will the broadcasting system bringing to Americans the joyous, colourful ceremonies of the coronation when all of Britain rejoices over its new rulers.'

The NBC promised to bring American listeners 'all the pomp and solemnity, the excitement and glamour of England's traditionally greatest celebration', listeners would hear 'the actual words of the solemn coronation ceremony, the same words which William the Conqueror and Richard the Lionhearted uttered centuries ago'.<sup>170</sup> Each requested additional commentary positions and later 'facilities to enable them to fade backwards and forwards from their own commentaries into the

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<sup>168</sup> 'A Great Day for the Empire, *The Sun*, 12 May 1937, p. 6

<<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article229401128>> [Accessed: 20 August 2025]

<sup>169</sup> WAC R30/443/1, 5 August 1936, Benzie to AC (P) Eckersley; R47/135/1, 26 February 1937, memo NAR (Greene) to Marriott.

<sup>170</sup> WAC R47/135/1, 26 February 1937, CBS press release; 11 March 1937, NBC Press release.

national programme.<sup>171</sup> To help - and manage - the Americans, and as evidence of their importance, Janet Quigley was allocated to support them at Green Park, with Isa Benzie herself at Middlesex Guildhall.<sup>172</sup> The NBC's Fred Bate declared himself 'almost silenced by gratitude in the face of everything the corporation was doing for him.'<sup>173</sup> The NBC offer was ambitious, it included the Coronation Costume Ball at the Royal Albert Hall, with 'music by Ambrose and his orchestra', and on 8 May, aided by many of the BBC's most senior outside broadcast staff, including de Lotbiniere, it broadcast eyewitness accounts of Coronation preparations from outside the Palace and the Abbey, from Piccadilly Circus, and from an East End pub, The Kings Arms in Stepney, 'with its cheerful chatter and its clink of glasses and its tinkling piano...All the world and his wife gathers around the counter on a night like this.' The broadcast ended at the Troxy, 'one of the largest cinemas in England', where the 'vast audience of 4000' sang listeners 'back to America' with choruses of 'Land of Hope and Glory' and 'God Save the King'.<sup>174</sup> Special talks were carried by CBS & NBC on May 9, 10, 11, 12 and 13.<sup>175</sup>

It was decided important that the voices of the commentators, or to use the contemporary BBC term, 'observers', should be representative of the nations of the UK, so that when de Lotbiniere employed a Scottish commentator, George Blake, he 'should make provision for a Welshman and a Northern Irishman'.<sup>176</sup> The Welsh voice was that of Wynford Vaughn-Thomas.<sup>177</sup> They were issued 'points to remember', as we have seen these included 'don't use English when you could use

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<sup>171</sup> WAC R30/443/3, Notes of a meeting held on Wednesday 24 March, 1937, to discuss technical arrangements for programmes during Coronation week; R30/443/5, Notes of a meeting held on Tuesday 4th May 1937, to discuss technical arrangements for programmes during Coronation week.

<sup>172</sup> WAC R30/443/4, 22 April 1937, Coronation broadcast: foreign commentators; R47/135/1, undated note by Benzie.

<sup>173</sup> WAC R30/443/5, 20 April 1937, Isa Benzie record of telephone conversation.

<sup>174</sup> WAC R30/2545/1, 19 April 1937, letter OB Exec to Mr Sherwood Forster, coronation costume bowl, Royal Albert Hall; R47/342/2, 3 May 1937, Programme for NBC, May 8<sup>th</sup> 2130-2230 OB Ex to Miss Wadsley; undated, Script for 'On and Off the Coronation Route'.

<sup>175</sup> WAC R30/439/1, BBC Announcement, released on or after Thursday March 18<sup>th</sup>.

<sup>176</sup> WAC R30/443/3, 5 March 1937, memo Graves to DOB; 4 May 1937, DOB to Northern Ireland Regional Director.

<sup>177</sup> WAC R30/443/3, 12 March 1937, DOB to Welsh Regional Director.

British', 'don't talk through God save the King' and - perhaps even worse - 'don't say that was God save the King'. They were to 'make the most of strong and characteristic effects; keep it lively, be simple, be truthful.'<sup>178</sup> Above all, 'always keep in mind a listener who is of reasonable intelligence, who has no great education and who has never been to London.' The tone should be 'dignified and straightforward'.<sup>179</sup>

The observer's positions were published in newspapers across the world:

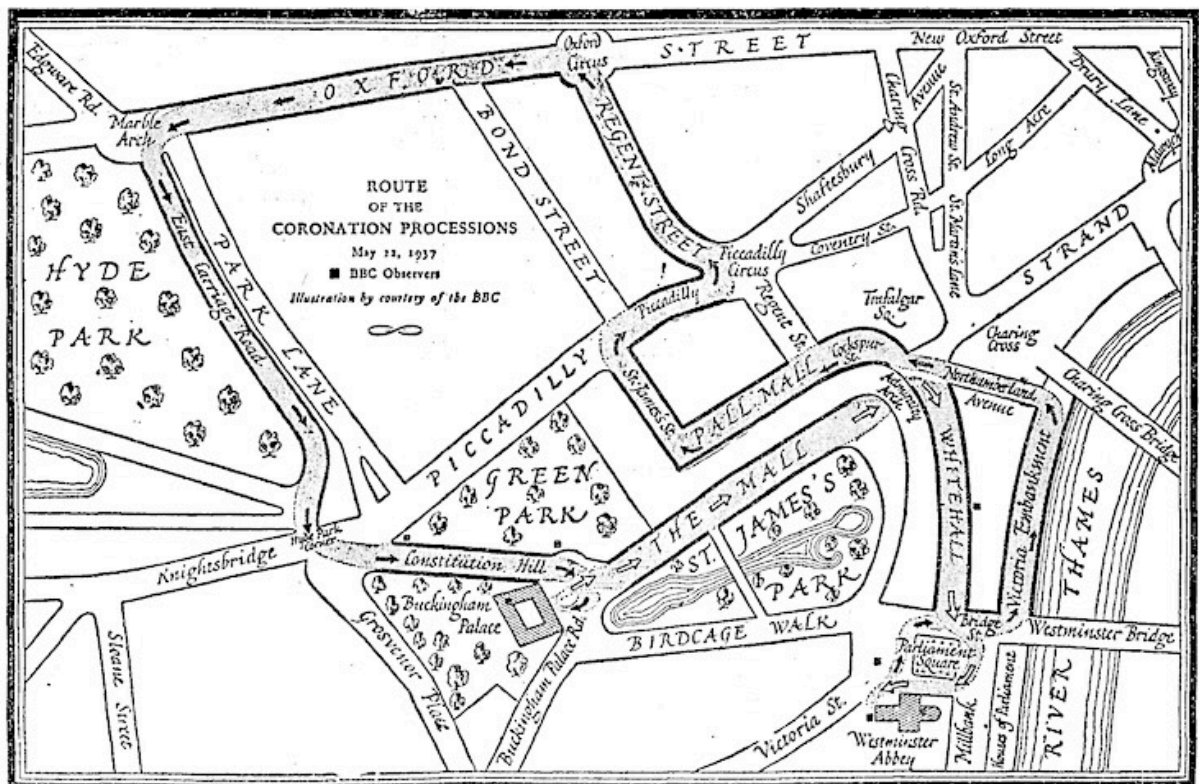


Fig. 33: 'Broadcasting the Coronation', *Evening Star*, 22 May 1937, p. 4

<sup>178</sup> WAC R30/443/4, 18 April 1937, draft script.

<sup>179</sup> WAC R30/443/5, 5 May 1937, draft script with handwritten notes.

Also published was Wood's microphone plan.

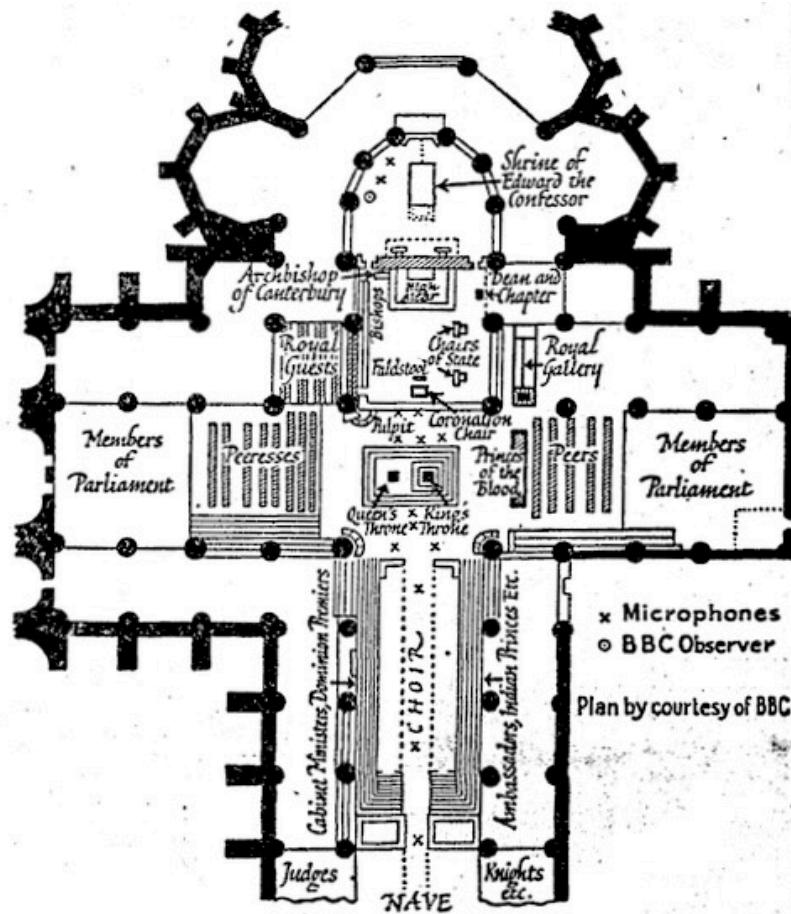


Fig. 34: 'Broadcasting the Coronation', *Evening Star*, 22 May 1937, p. 4

The voice in the Abbey was that of Howard Marshall, and as was his custom he had prepared a draft script in advance. Much was a basic assembly of lines to be used to set the scene:

'I must try and tell you what we see here looking down from our position in the triforium so many feet above the High Altar. Imagine the Abbey lying below us in the form of a gigantic cross...'

Some was quite specific, specific commentary prepared on events that hadn't yet happened, but it was reasonable to assume would - the following scene would almost certainly present itself:

'...light streams down on the golden carpet of the Presbytery and catches the jewels of the Crown as the King moves forward, a ring of gold glinting on his hand, the Ruby engraved with George's cross. And there, in the front of his Crown, there is the great blood red ruby of the Black Prince, with diamonds and sapphire shining. It is a great stirring moment this...'

These were lines Marshall used. Yet some of his preparations strayed beyond this. Was it the case, for example, as Marshall anticipated, that six year old Princess Margaret Rose would be ‘watching intently...as lively as Quicksilver’ with her nose ‘on the edge of the Royal gallery’? Would she be ‘eager and happy...asking Princess Elizabeth questions’? It was reasonable to assume that this *might* be the case and to have such lines to hand for a quiet moment in the summing up - yet when the time came Marshall delivered almost these exact words - was this commentary, or invention? Whichever, Marshall’s words were to form, for listeners, the public record of the day.<sup>180</sup>

For this was ‘commentary’ not as reportage - although it might be informed by what was happening in front of the observer - but rather as the painting of ‘pictures’ in sound, it was what Marshall was admired by his colleagues as well as listeners for delivering: ‘the way he takes a detail and builds the picture around it is the most effective way of getting atmosphere and pictorial effect over. It gives you a focus from which to start and to refer back to as the canvas gets bigger.’<sup>181</sup> That such pictures might be incomplete and would inevitably be selective and to a degree distorted by the preferences of the commentator, was perceived by contemporaries as less important than conveying a sense of the spirit of the occasion. It was a sense present when later in 1937 a man broke through the cordon of sailors at the Cenotaph and ran towards the King shouting what appeared to be anti-war slogans - whilst newspaper comment was extensive, so astonished were Marshall at the BBC microphone and John Snagge his producer, that, having no idea how to appropriately respond, they said nothing.<sup>182</sup> It was there in the annual management of the Cenotaph microphones to eliminate any audible mourning, it lay behind the acceptable (if better articulated) fiction of ‘synthetic’ cricket commentary. Mass Observation’s observers noted

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<sup>180</sup> R30/443/5, Howard Marshall’s draft script. The full BBC broadcast can be heard at *The Coronation Service of King George VI*, Marshall’s observations on the Princesses can be found at timecode 02.29.57-02.30.11 <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y\\_-MLPIYCaA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y_-MLPIYCaA)> [Accessed: 20 August 2025]

<sup>181</sup> R47/343/5, 13 May 1937, letter Stephen Fry to Lotbiniere, written from Palestine Broadcasting Service, Jerusalem.

<sup>182</sup> WAC R30/275/1 12 November 1937, memo John Snagge to Director Outside Broadcasts; ‘Crowd Unmoved by Cenotaph Incident’, *Manchester Guardian*, 12 November 1937, p. 11. <<https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/crowd-unmoved-cenotaph-incident/docview/484347346/se-2>> [Accessed: 23 August 2025]

that in Britain, whilst radio listeners might 'enter wholeheartedly into the celebrations' or alternatively 'resist the general tendency of the day...by escaping into solitary places', it was nonetheless 'interesting that even those persons who shut themselves up most completely could not escape the day entirely'. Loudspeakers were placed at windows 'so that passers by should be able to hear', some listeners '...seemed to have been bored and to have switched off, but others became increasingly moved, even to the point of tears, and this in the case of some of the more sceptical and hard boiled. Music seems to have contributed a great deal to this access of interest.' As for the King himself, 'the hesitation in the Kings speech seems to have aroused general sympathy, even among anti monarchists, and to have operated as a factor in his favour; though this sympathy was closely connected with a feeling of embarrassment.'<sup>183</sup>

In New Zealand the NBS Coronation Programme had opened with drum rolls, fanfares, and James Shelley:

'The National Broadcasting Service celebrates the Coronation of His Majesty King George VI. Let the priest and the prophet anoint him King and blow ye with the trumpet and say God save the King.'

After a fanfare Shelley again cried 'God save King George and Queen Elizabeth. Long live our King and Queen!' and was followed by the National Anthem.<sup>184</sup> Shelley was heard by the 200 girls of the Christchurch Girls High School enjoying a Coronation night party, organised by the Headmistress, with parents sending provisions: 'in the morning a real campers meal, hot saveloys and bread and butter, was enjoyed by these hardy spirits. The heaters were kept going to keep out the cold.' Lacking the space to plant a commemorative tree 'the Board of Governors decided that a radio set would be an adequate way to mark the Coronation of the King.'<sup>185</sup> In Wanganui the Girls College Old Girls Association Ball had arranged for a 'special wireless' to be installed to allow revellers to

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<sup>183</sup> *May the Twelfth*, pp. 267 & 270.

<sup>184</sup> ANZ R22011340: Overseas broadcasts Coronation ceremonies 1937, Coronation broadcast script.

<sup>185</sup> 'Hardy Schoolgirls Coronation Broadcast,' *New Zealand Herald*, 15 May 1937, p. 14.

<<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/NZH19370515.2.114>> [Accessed: 20 August 2025]

hear 'a full broadcast of the Coronation.'<sup>186</sup> For the *Evening Star* this was 'Coronation by radio' and the results had been good, 'for the most part, uninterrupted by disturbances of the elements...Vivid and impressive was the sound picture that was brought to homes in this country by means of the magic of radio.'<sup>187</sup> An *Evening Post* columnist reflected on how envious the 'noble ladies' at the Abbey would have been of 'us who sat slippers at the fireside', they were denied the opportunity to hear the King take his oath or 'the pleasant voice of Mr Howard Marshall describing the Abbey scene for me. No, I think we fireside participators in this historic event had the advantage.'<sup>188</sup> The *New Zealand Herald*, noting that 'this service went far beyond the confines of the British Commonwealth' believed however that 'none outside this vast family circle' could have felt as 'so truly present in spirit and so profoundly moved by the proceedings as were the members of it'.<sup>189</sup> Shelley wrote to the BBC of his gratitude 'for the special arrangements made to enable this part of the Empire to be associated with so magnificent a venture.'<sup>190</sup>

In Mackay, Queensland, station 4MK and the radio department of a local store installed a 'public address system' at the Rotunda at Jubilee Park, extending a 'cordial invitation' to listeners to gather 'to enjoy a night's free entertainment embracing a historic incident, in ideal surroundings.'<sup>191</sup> Across Australia the PMG's department announced that '96 stations, comprising 75 commercial and 21 national services', had relayed the Coronation.<sup>192</sup> The Secretary General of the Australian Federation of Broadcasting Stations wrote to Clark to thank him for 'the very

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<sup>186</sup> 'Broadcast of Coronation', *Wanganui Chronicle*, 12 May 1937, p. 2.

<<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/WC19370512.2.4.2>> [Accessed: 20 August 2025]

<sup>187</sup> 'History Made', *Evening Star*, 13 May 1937, p. 19.

<<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/ESD19370513.2.112>> [Accessed: 20 August 2025]

<sup>188</sup> 'Radio History', *Evening Post*, 20 May 1937, p. 28.

<<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/EP19370520.2.226.2>> [Accessed: 20 August 2025]

<sup>189</sup> 'The Homage of the Empire', *New Zealand Herald*, 14 May 1937, p. 10.

<<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/NZH19370514.2.51>> [Accessed: 20 August 2025]

<sup>190</sup> ANZ R22011360: Correspondence re. transmissions. BBC 1937-1945, 28 May 1937, Shelley to Ashbridge.

<sup>191</sup> 'Coronation Broadcast in Jubilee Park', *Daily Mercury*, 10 May 1937, p.9.

<<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article170106321>> [Accessed: 20 August 2025]

<sup>192</sup> 'Coronation Broadcast', *The Maitland Daily Mercury*, 14 May 1937, p. 5.

<<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article125458366>> [Accessed: 20 August 2025]

excellent broadcasts' carried by commercial stations 'even in the most remote centres.'<sup>193</sup> Charles Moses wrote that whilst 'it was doubtless felt in England that the broadcast of the Coronation ceremony was in itself a splendid event, you can imagine how much more it was an event in the lives of people here, the greater portion of whom will never see London or the home country...We on our side cannot adequately express our admiration for these most striking triumphs yet achieved in the broadcasting field'.<sup>194</sup> Reflecting the enduring fascination with how and where such broadcasts were heard the *Sydney Morning Herald* reported that 'passengers in the Imperial Airways flying boats on the Australian service heard the Coronation service in full while flying at 3 miles a minute. Two of the boats were over the Mediterranean and the third near Marseille.'<sup>195</sup>

From America excellent reception was reported by CBS and NBC.<sup>196</sup> For the NBC it had been 'the greatest achievement of broadcasting in radio history', the BBC 'should feel very proud...we of the National Broadcasting Company were happy to have been a part of it.'<sup>197</sup> The European Director of CBS, Cesar Saerchinger, wrote to Benzie of the 'the magnificent and outstandingly effective arrangements the BBC carried through for us...This was the world's biggest broadcast date and we're all proud to have had a part in it.'<sup>198</sup> For the BBC it had been a test, indeed when the Acting Director of the Empire Service, C.A.L. Cliffe, replied to Shelley's congratulations he noted that 'most people here who were concerned with these broadcasts are not sorry that they are over.'<sup>199</sup> De Lotbiniere felt 'very lucky not to have any major disasters', the 'subject matter' however 'was a gift'.<sup>200</sup> If he had one regret it was that amongst the voices 'a competent woman commentator

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<sup>193</sup> WAC R47/343/5, 26 May 1937, Secretary General, Australian Federation of Broadcasting Stations (Duffy) to DES.

<sup>194</sup> WAC R47/343/6, 1 June 1937, letter Moses to Cliffe.

<sup>195</sup> 'Airmail passengers', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 14 May 1937, p. 13.

<<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article17368034>> [Accessed: 20 August 2025]

<sup>196</sup> RA PS/PSO/GVI/PS/COR/1000/106, Coronation – BBC Reception reports.

<sup>197</sup> WAC R47/135/1, 12 May 1937, cable NBC to BBC.

<sup>198</sup> WAC R47/135/1, 13 May 1937, Cesar Saerchinger, European Director, CBS to Benzie.

<sup>199</sup> ANZ R22011340: Overseas broadcasts Coronation ceremonies 1937, 25 June 1937, Cliffe to Shelley.

<sup>200</sup> WAC R47/343/5, 25 May 1937, letter Lotbiniere to Stephen Fry, Palestine broadcasting service, Jerusalem.

might have been a help.<sup>201</sup> Mass Observation had no doubt: 'The importance of radio on the day is made abundantly clear in the reports.'<sup>202</sup> For the *Northern Advocate*, noting that 'thousands of Northland people tuned in to the national stations' at 5.50am, 'when the short-wave station at Davenport called all units of the British Empire', only one word did justice to the experience - 'Thrilling'.<sup>203</sup>

The broadcasts of Coronation Day had concluded with *The Empire's Homage*, another programme from the BBC Features Department. It was constructed around messages of loyalty to the King from Dominion Prime Ministers and from 'representative' citizens, Clark wrote to Shelley explaining what the BBC was looking for: 'somebody who could properly be regarded as a representative New Zealander, and yet have some individuality and picturesque colouring of his own, a man in the street, or on the farm, rather than an official.'<sup>204</sup> Contemporary Imperial politics presented challenges in constructing such a programme, whilst there was no issue engaging the Prime Ministers and broadcasters of New Zealand, Australia and Canada, participation in an 'Empire' event and the notion of 'homage' raised questions in South Africa, from where the British High Commissioner proposed approaching General Hertzog 'in manner you think best'.<sup>205</sup> In the event Hertzog was persuaded. A further challenge came from the desire to follow each Premier with a representative piece of music, for as Cliffe pointed out to Gilliam, who was producing, 'the trouble is that there is really no official national air in any of the Dominions'. Whilst it appeared obvious to use 'Advance Australia Fair' and 'God Defend New Zealand', Canada had two tunes 'The Maple Leaf Forever' and 'O Canada'...which to choose? In preparation Clark and Cliffe had met

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<sup>201</sup> WAC R30/443/5, 10 November 1937, Coronation, DOB to C (P)

<sup>202</sup> *May the Twelfth*, p. 270.

<sup>203</sup> 'Homage Broadcast Heard Clearly Here', *Northern Advocate*, 14 May 1937, p. 9.

<<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/NA19370514.2.100>> [Accessed: 20 August 2025]

<sup>204</sup> ANZ R22011340: Overseas broadcasts Coronation ceremonies 1937, 19 February 1937, Clark to Shelley.

<sup>205</sup> TNA DO35/536/2 19 March 1937, telegram to the United Kingdom High Commissioner in the Union of South Africa.

with High Commissioners at their offices in London.<sup>206</sup> Cliffe was advised by Canada House that 'O Canada' 'would be the more suitable for this purpose.'<sup>207</sup>



Fig. 35: Rehearsing *The Empire's Homage* at Broadcasting House. Young Laurence Gilliam sits in the centre, fourth from the right.

The BBC was specific in its requests of the Dominion Premiers, asking for advance drafts of the messages, specifying their duration - 'about 120 words' - and their content 'we hope that it will contain some expressions of loyalty to the King on behalf of the people' - and their style - 'we

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<sup>206</sup> WAC R47/343/1, 3 March 1937, Secretary to Director of Empire Service to the office of the High Commissioner for New Zealand; The same arrangement is made to meet with the office of the High Commissioner for Australia on 5<sup>th</sup> March.

<sup>207</sup> WAC R47/343/2, 12 April 1937, ADES (Cliffe) to Gilliam

should like any allusions to the King to be made in the third person.<sup>208</sup> It was agreed that the Premiers, in London for the Coronation, would broadcast live from BBC Broadcasting House. This was a significant BBC occasion, if rather low-key. Rehearsals were held on 6 and 7 May.<sup>209</sup> Joseph Lyons rehearsed his lines on 7 May at 3.30pm, Michael Joseph Savage joined him at 4. They were met by Reith.<sup>210</sup> For the Coronation both Lyons and Savage stayed at The Savoy, from where, having returned from the Coronation ceremony, a police escort was provided to accompany them 'through the less congested streets' to Broadcasting House.<sup>211</sup> The Dominion leaders were escorted to the Director General's room from which they went in relay to the studio.<sup>212</sup> They spoke from studios 6A, 6B and 6C, Savage being the first speaker from 6A, Lyons being followed by Hertzog in 6B.<sup>213</sup> When they returned 'buffet refreshments' were provided - 'sherry, whiskey and brandy and soda, soft drinks, and sandwiches, etc' - and they were able to listen to the remainder of the programme and the King.<sup>214</sup> For a photograph the table was 'pushed back and a couple of rows of chairs put ready.'<sup>215</sup> Each Premier received a copy of the photograph.<sup>216</sup> Lyons wrote: 'I shall retain this as a souvenir of a very important occasion.'<sup>217</sup> Savage appreciated the 'most expeditious passage' of his car.<sup>218</sup> He arranged to meet Reith in the following days to discuss 'broadcasting matters' and to 'look over' Broadcasting House.<sup>219</sup>

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<sup>208</sup> WAC R30/440/1, 30 March 1937, Graves to VC Duffy, Australia House, Strand.

<sup>209</sup> WAC R47/343/3, 28 April 1937, memo ADES (Cliffe) to Mr Burns & Gilliam; 28 April 1937, ADES memo to Empire Exec.

<sup>210</sup> WAC R47/343/4, 5 May 1937, ADES to DG The Empires Homage, rehearsals

<sup>211</sup> WAC R47/343/4, 4 May 1937, Clark to Inspector Nicholls, Operations Department, Scotland Yard; 6 May 1937, Chief Constable, New Scotland Yard to Clark; 10 May 1937, Cliffe to Private Secretary to Rt Hon MJ Savage, Savoy Hotel; Cliffe to Private Secretary, to JA Lyons, Savoy Hotel.

<sup>212</sup> WAC R47/343/3, 28 April 1937, memo ADES (Cliffe) to Mr Burns & Gilliam; 28 April 1937, ADES memo to Empire Exec.

<sup>213</sup> WAC R47/343/4, 3 May 1937, Gilliam to DFD & Cliffe – studio arrangements for 12 May.

<sup>214</sup> WAC R47/343/3, 28 April 1937, memo ADES (Cliffe) to Mr Burns & Gilliam; 28 April 1937, ADES memo to Empire Exec.

<sup>215</sup> WAC R47/343/4, 11 May 1939, ADES to DG & Miss Stanley, 11 May 1937, memo Photograph Section to House Superintendent, Dominion Prime Ministers.

<sup>216</sup> WAC R47/343/5, 14 May 1937, Graves to Lyons; Graves to Savage.

<sup>217</sup> WAC R47/343/5, 20 May 1937, letter Lyons to Carpendale.

<sup>218</sup> WAC R47/343/5, 14 May 1937, NZ PM Private Secretary to Cliffe.

<sup>219</sup> WAC R47/343/5, 18 May 1937, Savage letter to Reith written from the Savoy Hotel.



THE DOMINION PRIME MINISTERS, who were heard during the broadcast of 'The Empire's Homage' on the evening of the Coronation Day, photographed at Broadcasting House, London. Seated (left to right): Rt. Hon. M. J. Savage (New Zealand), Rt. Hon. W. L. Mackenzie King (Canada), General the Rt. Hon. J. B. M. Hertzog (South Africa). Standing (left to right): Dr Ba Maw (Burma), Rt. Hon. J. A. Lyons (Australia), Hon. G. M. Huggins (Southern Rhodesia), Mr W. R. Howley (vice-chairman of the Newfoundland Commission of Government).

Fig. 36: 'The Dominion Prime Ministers', *Evening Star*, 3 July 1937, p. 4.

For the *New Zealand Herald*, whilst it was appropriate that the 'Prime Ministers of the self-governing Dominions and others formally qualified, spoke for the regions whose destinies were, at the time, so much in their hands' more impressive were 'the words of many a humble and, for the time being, nameless bearer of spoken tribute.'<sup>220</sup> Australia supplied the most memorable contributions. Lyons, having talked of the Premiers feeling like 'children coming home' spoke 'I know' for all Australian people 'when I assure their Majesties that they have our undivided love, respect and loyalty.' He was followed by a 'flash of Advance Australia Fair' and by a 'jackaroo...a kind of apprentice to the business of wool growing' who had travelled '500 miles from Willandra sheep station' to Sydney to make the broadcast. The jackaroo spoke of his work and leisure, of 'cricket, tennis, country dances, picnics, races, kangaroo and emu hunting', 100 years since his

<sup>220</sup> 'The Homage of the Empire', *New Zealand Herald*, 14 May 1937, p. 10.

<<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/NZH19370514.2.51>> [Accessed: 20 August 2025]

great grandparents had emigrated from Scotland: 'I suppose I'm what we call a real Australian. We're a bit out of the world at Willandra but we are heart and soul with all Australians in saying God bless their Majesties.'<sup>221</sup> The jackaroo had been chosen in preference to the gold miner or dairy farmer also proposed by Moses. The 'plain men' were anonymous, but as fan mail arrived, the jackaroo, was revealed to be a young man named David Ritchie.<sup>222</sup> As ever the New Zealand contribution had featured two speakers, one Maori. Shelley proposed a farmer, a sailor, or a railwayman.<sup>223</sup> The BBC chose the sailor, who spoke 'from the most distant of His Majesty's Dominions, 12,000 miles by the shortest course from the old country' on behalf of all who 'follow the sea for a living'.<sup>224</sup> The Maori greeting reaffirmed 'loyalty' and expressed the 'warmest hope that Their Majesties' reign will be long and happy.'<sup>225</sup> Moses wrote with his appreciation of the 'heavy task the BBC had in arranging this programme, and we wish to thank all those who worked for its success.'<sup>226</sup> Shelley had been 'pleased to cooperate in playing a small part.'<sup>227</sup> Reception had been 'excellent'.<sup>228</sup>

On the day after the Coronation Howard Marshall had, as we have seen, offered his reflections to listeners to *Under Big Ben*. He felt that all the pageantry had 'meant something...which the modern mind doesn't easily appreciate.' In declaring what he believed this revelation to be the go-to commentator for such occasions revealed something of what the BBC itself considered their significance:

'I must admit that before I had felt that the ceremonial was overdone - that these symbols of other days, this resuscitation of outworn rites was empty and out of keeping with bitter

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<sup>221</sup> WAC R30/439/1, The Empire's Homage script.

<sup>222</sup> WAC R47/343/6, 1 June 1937, letter Moses to Cliffe

<sup>223</sup> ANZ R22011340: Overseas broadcasts Coronation ceremonies 1937, 19 March 1937, cable Natbroadcast to London.

<sup>224</sup> ANZ R22011340: Overseas broadcasts Coronation ceremonies 1937, sailor script.

<sup>225</sup> ANZ R22011340: Overseas broadcasts Coronation ceremonies 1937, script, Maori greeting (Translation), 28 April, cable Natbroadcast to London.

<sup>226</sup> WAC R47/343/5, 17 May 1937, letter Moses to Cliffe (re. Homage).

<sup>227</sup> WAC R47/343/5, 17 May 1937, letter Shelley to Cliffe.

<sup>228</sup> ANZ R22011340: Overseas broadcasts Coronation ceremonies 1937; 12/13 May 1937, draft cables Shelley to BBC; 17 May 1937, letter Shelley to Cliffe.

contemporary realities. But I was wrong. It isn't so. There must be continuity. We can't cut ourselves at a blow adrift from the past, even if we want to. And there's another thing. We can't allow drabness to hold us fast - it's in human nature to love this pomp and circumstance, if only subconsciously, as a reminder that we can lift ourselves above the commonplace...We are groping for better things...It had been a great day... profoundly reassuring day. An inspiring day. And now, together into the future.<sup>229</sup>

Such sentiments lay at the heart of the presentation of Royal occasions to the listening world. How then to account for their popularity? What impact did all this have on conceptions of national, or pan-British, identity?

First, there was a sense created that what was happening was hugely significant, historic, something to tell the grandchildren, and like a major sporting occasion not to be missed. In an age with limited means of measuring audiences to broadcast programmes it could irrefutably be asserted that the Coronation had been heard by 500 million people across the globe, by half the population of America, by two-thirds of New Zealanders. To fail to engage was to miss out. Second, to return to Philip Williamsons' hypothesis that key to the survival, indeed to the increased significance in British public life, of the British Monarchy, was it becoming 'more vocal', there was actually more than this. The noises emanating from the Crown were not merely the words spoken by the Monarch, there was the roar of the London crowd, the music and chiming of bells, the marching feet, the clank of the rifles, the horses' hooves, and the words of commentators - whether radio broadcasters describing the scene or commentators in the press. The volume of all this served, periodically, to drown out critics - for there were dissenting views. The Abdication might be seen in Australia, as it was by the *Sydney Morning Herald*, as an example of 'British common sense and practical considerations' saving the day, with 'full play...given to the emotions upon which the most emotional spectators would insist' yet 'loyalty to the crown' saving them 'from loss of balance'.<sup>230</sup> Alternatively for *The Worker* the circumstances surrounding Edward's

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<sup>229</sup> Marshall, *Under Big Ben*, pp. 145-8.

<sup>230</sup> 'The Crown Impregnable', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 14 December 1936, p. 8 <<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article17300337>> [Accessed: 20 August 2025]

abdication would be 'universally regretted' except by the 'snobs and prelates.'<sup>231</sup> *Labor Daily* declared the whole affair a coup d'état, 'the most democratic sovereign ever to ascend the English throne' banished 'for that very reason'.<sup>232</sup> In Britain, in a Civil list debate in which Clement Atlee expressed mild disquiet at the 'boasting' of Monarchy on the 'wireless', the Communist MP, Willie Gallacher, declared it to be no more than a symbol of 'control and domination by a ruling class in this country', for his West Fife constituents the Coronation celebrations had been nothing more than 'an opportunity for once, for a day or for a night or two, to feel free and to get the drab streets coloured...with no policemen to interfere with them.'<sup>233</sup> On the eve of the Coronation Harty Pollitt had been, in the *Daily Worker*, decrying the whole event as an engine of 'imperialist propaganda' enabling 'the institutions of monarchy to be more effectively used to uphold British imperialism' in an Empire 'upon which the sun never sets and into whose slums the sun never shines.'<sup>234</sup> Such views were, however, overwhelmed by supportive comment. There was something seductive in the relentless positive blanket coverage. In London a 'Female Typist, Single, 39' recorded her impressions for Mass Observation. She had become 'very bored with the word coronation', which she felt was being 'artificially bumped up', her office walls being festooned with pictures of the King and Queen and 'crowns and what-not' on everything from chocolate bars to suspender belts. Yet come the day: 'I was surprised how much I responded to the atmosphere of the crowd, the cheering, etc. I felt a definite pride and thrill in belonging to the Empire, which in ordinary life, with my political bias, is just the opposite of my true feelings. Yet I felt a definite sense of relief that I could experience this emotion and be in and of the crowd.' She noted the appeal of 'the pageantry, colour, little princesses etc'...yet, 'reviewing it all calmly afterwards, one

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<sup>231</sup> Editorial, *The Worker*, Brisbane, 15 December 1936, p. 6.

<<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article71307243>> [Accessed: 20 August 2025]

<sup>232</sup> 'Revolution from the Right', *Labor Daily*, 8 December 1936, p. 4.

<<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article237973793>> [Accessed: 20 August 2025]

<sup>233</sup> 24 May 1937, *Hansard*, vol. 324, columns 40-49.

<<https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/1937-05-24/debates/26e9fd76-5b15-4cd6-9703-6c10fc385689/CivilList>> [Accessed: 20 August 2025]

<sup>234</sup> *May the Twelfth*, p.85 - Harty Pollitt's message, *Daily Worker*, 12 May 1937.

sees how very dangerous all this is, that the beliefs and convictions of a lifetime can be set aside so easily.’<sup>235</sup>

Third, there was, as Norman Bonney proposes, in a more secular world, an almost ‘religious’ aspect to this engagement, and it is notable that almost all of the Royal events of significance, the wedding, Jubilee, funeral, the Coronation, had a religious dimension and took place in a religious setting. The British Monarch was, after all, in addition to everything else, Supreme Governor of the Church of England. Fourth was a single metaphor. Of all the many potential ‘imagined communities’ created by radio listening in the British world a single powerful metaphor recurs to characterise the relationship between ‘British’ listeners wherever they may be living, and whatever other identities they might have adopted. It was, as Marshall had suggested at the Coronation, that they formed a ‘family’, at the head of which was the monarch. On the great British Royal occasions, as the world listened, members of the British ‘family’, British listeners, wherever they may be, however remote, however humble, enjoyed a special and really rather satisfying status. They had a right to attend - more than attend - to ‘participate’, to bear witness to such ‘family’ occasions. On Royal occasions the ‘barriers’ between UK and Dominion listeners were indeed ‘partially dismantled’, audiences being invited ‘to imagine themselves as members of a single imperial community’, a process that spoke directly to ‘Empire consolidation by wireless’.<sup>236</sup>

In the 1930s the BBC Empire Service and the Royal Family had come to enjoy something of a symbiotic relationship, one which served the pan-Imperial ambitions of each. There had been no single guiding hand in creating this, indeed it might be argued that the development was unexpected, if swiftly pounced upon. Back in 1932 George V was a reluctant and inexperienced broadcaster, led to the microphone by a combination of his advisers and relentless pursuit by

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<sup>235</sup> Ibid., pp. 303-4.

<sup>236</sup> Potter, *Broadcasting Empire*, pp. 85-87.

Reith. That the King proved to have an excellent voice and could, however implausibly, be presented as a 'radio personality', was a happy accident but one which laid the way to a rapid succession of broadcasts of British Royal occasions in the years that followed, constructed with considerations of the needs of broadcasters and listeners at their heart. Yet at the end of the decade times were changing. The BBC was itself reviewing the objectives of its 'overseas' broadcasting. Not every year brought a Coronation, a Jubilee or a Royal Wedding...or indeed a Christmas message. As Graves had suggested back in 1933 it had been the first Christmas broadcast of George V that had assured him of the likely success of the BBC Empire Service, and these Christmas occasions had been the great annual Imperial broadcast events of the King's remaining years. Yet the Empire Christmas Day broadcasts ceased when in 1936 Edward VIII had abdicated, when in 1937 George VI made but a short speech recalling his father's broadcasts, saying he couldn't aspire to replace them, and when in 1938 he declined to broadcast at all. A Christmas Day without a Royal broadcast was one on which there was no broadcast of pan-Imperial significance. These were also, of course, Christmases at which the Monarch played no starring role in the family occasion. Whilst it is true that by the late 1930s BBC output relayed from London was finding its way into the broadcast schedules of both the ABC and NBS and that there was a degree of reciprocation, this was an exchange of co-productions, not an exercise in convening vast global and Imperial audiences.

Royal occasions had however, on their day, provided the motivation for some of the great global broadcast events of the 1930s, few greater than the 1937 Coronation. These had been memorable occasions. This had consequences for conceptions of a 'British' identity as captured by broadcasting. The Royal Family could be presented and understood as symbols of unity and continuity, both sitting at the apex of the British class system, yet also, familiar, cherished, leaders, London could be presented as the centre of Imperial life, 'family' could be popularised as a metaphor for the links between the scattered Britons. There was in Australia and New Zealand a

great satisfaction, indeed pride, amongst the national broadcasters, no less than amongst their colleagues at the BBC, in being part of such broadcast occasions, which were, in their planning and complexity and their global distribution, another technological wonder of the age. Yet perhaps there was more than this, for such a broadcast offered a valuable platform from which to project the voices of their people and leading politicians, from which to present a picture of their nation to the world.

## CONCLUSION

Asa Briggs, reflecting on his monumental history of the BBC, noted that the relationship of broadcasting to society was 'never one of foreground to background.' Broadcasting both registered 'perception and experience' and influenced it.<sup>1</sup> The thesis developed here has been that in the 1930s radio broadcasting and listening incubated in Australia and New Zealand both national and pan-British sympathies. That it had the capacity to do this was a function of the central place it had come to occupy in cultural life. A radio set was indeed 'nearly as essential as a bath'.

Radio listening was popularising in Australia and New Zealand cultural signifiers quite distinct from those in the rest of the British world. Yet at a time when forces of national self-interest might be pushing the British Empire apart, broadcasting did something to sustain, even reconstruct, a sense of active and contemporary shared British identity amongst listeners across the British world, reaching into the most isolated homes, engaging populations perhaps previously disengaged. Indeed, broadcasts from Australia and New Zealand were themselves reshaping understandings of what it was that was culturally 'British' - for here 'British' lives embraced surfing and sheep stations, there were whalers in this wider British world, and people who sang in 'exotic' languages. In America, across the globe, a celebration of the pageantry and ceremonial of British state occasions appealed to an audience far wider than that with a recent British heritage, reinforcing for the British themselves the significance of such events. Broadcasting linked the multiple British world spaces, however loosely defined.

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<sup>1</sup> Asa Briggs, 'Problems and Possibilities in the Writing of Broadcasting History', *Media, Culture and Society* 1980 2, 5-13 (p. 10).

By the end of the decade broadcasting was not, however, merely shaping national sensibilities, it had the capacity to shape popular culture on a global scale. Radio listening was a global phenomenon - at least in those parts of the world in which broadcasting systems had developed and receiving sets were available - increasingly it elevated broadcast coverage of events happening at that moment, or of contemporary popular culture, to unprecedented heights of public engagement, bringing them into private homes with an ease and regularity that other more time limited or occasional 'mass media' - newspapers or films - had never achieved. The 1937 Coronation had been claimed to have been heard by a greater number of people than any previous broadcast, perhaps 500 million. However inaccurate the tallying of the listenership what, as Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz asked of later events, in all human history, had ever simultaneously commanded the attention of so many people?<sup>2</sup> We have seen that audiences across the British world were fascinated and engaged by the simultaneity of the listening experience, by a sense of participation in major events, by - in a world shaped by migration - the metaphorical raising of a glass to 'absent friends' and by the invitation to consider themselves part of a vast global 'family'.

There was one further dimension of listening that remains to be explored, in a final case study, for in a world in which listening to a radio set was a ubiquitous activity opportunities were presented to engage with events and cultural experiences in which the whole world was engaging. To do so was to be up to the minute, to be 'a part of things' on the grandest scale, to feel, as Hilda Jennings and Winifred Gill put it in their survey of the listening habits of working-class Bristolians in 1938, 'not left out'.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Dayan & Katz, p. 14.

<sup>3</sup> Jennings & Gill, p. 12.

## **'a part of things...not left out'**

As the decade ended this desire for engagement was reflected in the vast audiences attracted to news bulletins. Susan Douglas notes that at the time of the Munich Crisis more radio sets were sold in America 'than during any previous three-week period.' 'Glued to the set' became a national cliché.<sup>4</sup> At times during the Crisis the BBC Empire Service devoted half its air-time to news, with bulletins running to half an hour.<sup>5</sup> Robert Dougall recalled an immediacy, a drama, with bulletins over-running and updates read straight from the news wires with little opportunity for editing.<sup>6</sup> In its wake Jennings and Gill found very few homes in Bristol in which the news was not turned on 'at least once in the evening'.<sup>7</sup> This trend was recognized at the ABC, where Charles Moses was enlisting the help of the BBC to build a news service, his motivation being 'the growing international tension, which here of course, however deceptively, is much less felt'.<sup>8</sup> If this attraction to news of events as they unfolded was but an extension of a power radio had long exercised, there was also, by the end of the decade, a greater flexing of the power of broadcasting itself, of its capacity to shape popular culture, a consequence of which was that things of radio might themselves make news. When in the autumn of 1938, recognizing now more intense interest in news from Europe, Moses requested further BBC assistance, he was sent bulletins for six consecutive days, among them that for 6pm on 31 October 1938, which spoke directly to the impact of broadcasting - it began: 'A panic was caused in parts of the United States by a broadcast last night describing an imaginary invasion of the Earth by men from Mars.'<sup>9</sup> A *Times* editorial addressed the power that it felt broadcasting now had in the affairs of men: 'Would it be extravagant to suggest that (an) ethereal interchange of dance music has played some small part recently in the prevention of war?' For throughout the Munich Crisis a single song was being

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<sup>4</sup> Douglas, pp. 161-2.

<sup>5</sup> Potter, *Broadcasting Empire*, pp. 105-6.

<sup>6</sup> Dougall, p. 86

<sup>7</sup> Jennings & Gill, pp. 13-14.

<sup>8</sup> WAC E1/371, 8 December 1936, letter Moses to Clark

<sup>9</sup> WAC E1/373, October/November 1938, news bulletins sent to ABC

enjoyed by radio listeners in all the belligerent powers, and beyond: ‘...we found ourselves unable - even if we had wished - to get away from it. In French, in Italian, in German...it would come rollicking home to us through the ether night after night.’<sup>10</sup> What was this phenomenon, why had it attracted the attention of the *Times* leader writers, what was the source of its global appeal and how did it speak specifically to listeners in the British world?

In 1937 Lupino Lane was a British comic actor developing a musical, the story of a cockney lad who, as a billing in the Wellington Evening Post later put it in finest Cockney: ‘walking down Lambeth all innocent like...sees a copper watchin’ ‘im...tries to scoot...but they gets ‘im and hauls ‘im off to a castle’ where ‘they tells ‘im ‘e’s ‘eir to millions of quid’.<sup>11</sup> But Bill stays true to his roots, and his girl. The music was composed by Noel Gay. Initial reaction was mixed, on its tour of Scotland on one occasion it had only two paying customers.<sup>12</sup> It failed to secure a West End venue. When *Me and My Girl* opened in London on 16 December 1937 it was at the Victoria Palace Theatre, opposite the station, and whilst it was ‘bright and breezy’ it received unspectacular reviews.<sup>13</sup> Takings were poor, within weeks it was ‘sinking into oblivion’ and about to close.<sup>14</sup> However, before it did a glimmer of hope was offered, a last minute live BBC relay from the theatre.<sup>15</sup> A drastically cut version of Act One was developed for the broadcast, with efforts

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<sup>10</sup> ‘Peace and the Lambeth Walk’, *Times*, 18 October 1938, p. 15.

<<https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CS252392274/TTDA?u=oxford&sid=bookmark-TTDA&xid=140b208e>> [Accessed: 23 May 2025]

<sup>11</sup> Advertisements’, ‘Tonight at 8’, *Evening Post*, 30 June 1939, p. 2.

<<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/EP19390630.2.8.3>> [Accessed: 20 August 2025]

<sup>12</sup> Teddie St. Denis, *Almost a Star* (London: F. Muller Ltd, 1940), p. 147.

<sup>13</sup> ‘Bright, Breezy Comedy’, *Daily Mail*, 17 December 1937, p. 4,

<<link.gale.com/apps/doc/EE1863343451/GDCS?u=oxford&sid=bookmark-GDCS&xid=246869de>> [Accessed: 23 August 2025]

‘Me and My Girl’, *Sunday Times*, 19 December 1937, p. 4.

<<link-gale-com.ezproxy-prd.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/apps/doc/FP1802493899/STHA?u=oxford&sid=bookmark-STHA&xid=519e665d>> [Accessed: 23 August 2025]

<sup>14</sup> James Dillon White, *Born to Star: The Lupino Lane Story* (London: Heinemann, 1957), p. 275; M. Dibbs, *Radio Fun and the BBC Variety Department, 1922–67* (Palgrave Studies in the History of the Media, 2019); Charles Brewer, *The Spice of Variety*, (London: Frederick Muller, 1948), pp. 202–7.

<sup>15</sup> ‘Collie Knox Calling’, *Daily Mail*, 3 January 1938, p. 18.

<<link.gale.com/apps/doc/EE1866582836/GDCS?u=oxford&sid=bookmark-GDCS&xid=879bd2d3>> [Accessed: 29 May 2025]

focused on the finale and the song the critics most admired - 'The Lambeth Walk.'<sup>16</sup> The BBC broadcast was at 9.05pm on 4 January 1938, the announcer linking to BBC producer Charles Brewer whilst the show was in progress, Lane pacing the performance to ensure that the broadcast started on the right line in the dialogue. It was a triumph - as Brewer recalled: 'the moment the broadcast finished the telephone in the box office started ringing', by 9 next morning the queue for tickets stretched around the theatre.<sup>17</sup> Collie Knox reported from the scene in his next *Daily Mail* column, he quoted one of the cast: 'I have been on the stage a long time but I have never come across anything like this...this all dominating power of radio...It's miraculous.'<sup>18</sup> Lane's co-star Teddie St Denis recalled that from that night 'we were packed' the audiences were 'hanging from the chandeliers.'<sup>19</sup>

'The Lambeth Walk' was both a song and a dance, a global hit, recorded by British bands, by singers in most of the major European languages, and in America: 'You'll find us all, Doing the Lambeth Walk, Oi!' The dance, and especially the enthusiastic shout of 'Oi', was a craze. By April it was 'sweeping all the palais-de-dance' throughout Britain.<sup>20</sup> It was a floor-filler. In July the annual conference of the Imperial Society of Teachers of Dancing ended with all 1 400 delegates from Britain, the Continent, the Dominions, and America taking to the floor to 'Lambeth Walk'. It was, it was said, being regularly danced by 3 million Britons. It was claimed to be the only modern ballroom dance to have crossed the Atlantic from Britain to America, where it was a sensation.<sup>21</sup> In

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<sup>16</sup> St. Denis p. 155; White, *Born to Star*, p. 274.

<sup>17</sup> Brewer, pp. 205-7; White, *Born to Star*, p. 275.

<sup>18</sup> Collie Knox Calling', *Daily Mail*, 10 January 1938, p. 18.

<[link.gale.com/apps/doc/EE1863699406/GDCS?u=oxford&sid=bookmark-GDCS&xid=d751e69e](http://link.gale.com/apps/doc/EE1863699406/GDCS?u=oxford&sid=bookmark-GDCS&xid=d751e69e)>  
[Accessed: 23 August 2025]

<sup>19</sup> St. Denis p. 155.

<sup>20</sup> 'I See Life' by Charles Graves, *Daily Mail*, 25 April, 1938, p. 10.

<[link.gale.com/apps/doc/EE1865770288/GDCS?u=oxford&sid=bookmark-GDCS&xid=b496250d](http://link.gale.com/apps/doc/EE1865770288/GDCS?u=oxford&sid=bookmark-GDCS&xid=b496250d)>  
[Accessed: 23 August 2025]

<sup>21</sup> 'The Lambeth Walk' - new dance craze recognised', *Manchester Guardian*, 26 July 1938, p. 10.

<[www.proquest.com/newspapers/lambeth-walk/docview/484472590/se-2](http://www.proquest.com/newspapers/lambeth-walk/docview/484472590/se-2)>  
[Accessed: 23 August 2025]

August the Washington Post reported that “The Lambeth Walk’ is what the dancers ordered!’<sup>22</sup> The following month Hedda Hopper noted that it was diverting movie makers in Hollywood.<sup>23</sup> It was danced at the White House in December, before the President.<sup>24</sup> At New Year the *New York Times* saw 1938 ‘gayly stepping off into space to the tune of the Lambeth Walk’.<sup>25</sup>

In July the Lambeth Walk had reached Australia, danced at the Perth Artists Ball.<sup>26</sup> It was danced at the Sydney Trocadero in mid-August and was introduced at New Zealand tea dances, with classes advertised for those keen to learn.<sup>27</sup> Jim Davidson’s ABC Dance Band made their own arrangement.<sup>28</sup> By October the Lambeth Walk had been danced by the King and Queen at Balmoral.<sup>29</sup> A celebrity Lambeth Walk was the finale of the 1938 Royal Command Performance in London - amongst the dancers was Sandy Powell - and a film was being shot, Lambeth Walk dolls had been produced, and over 870 000 people had seen the show.<sup>30</sup> A Lambeth Walk ‘broke up the

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<sup>22</sup> ‘At Capital Night Clubs’, *Washington Post*, 24 August 1938, p. 8.

<<https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/at-capital-night-clubs/docview/151042909/se-2>> [Accessed: 23 August 2025]

<sup>23</sup> Hedda Hopper, ‘In Hollywood’, *Washington Post*, 1 October 1938, p. 12.

<<https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/hollywood/docview/151049453/se-2>> [Accessed: 23 August 2025]

<sup>24</sup> ‘White House Scene of Cabinet Dinner’, *New York Times*, 14 December 1938, p. 30.

<<https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/white-house-scene-cabinet-dinner/docview/102451327/se-2>> [Accessed: 23 August 2025]

<sup>25</sup> ‘A Year’s Round-Up’, *New York Times*, 1 January 1939, p. 106.

<<https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/years-round-up/docview/102804778/se-2>> [Accessed: 23 August 2025]

<sup>26</sup> ‘Artists Ball’, *Mirror*, 11 July 1938, p. 18.

<<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article76057433>> [Accessed: 20 August 2025]

<sup>27</sup> ‘Introducing the ‘Lambeth Walk’, *Truth*, 14 August 1938, p. 32.

<<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article169096028>> [Accessed: 20 August 2025]

‘Tea Dance’, *Dominion*, 5 August 1938, p. 4

<<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/DOM19380805.2.16.6>> [Accessed: 20 August 2025]

‘Southern College will teach London’s Latest Dance’, Advertisements, *Evening Post*, 20 August 1938, p. 5.

<<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/EP19380820.2.12.2>> [Accessed: 20 August 2025]

<sup>28</sup> ‘Dance Music’, *Wireless Weekly*, 28 October 1938, p. 11.

<<http://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-683262095>> [Accessed: 23 August 2025]

<sup>29</sup> ‘Queen does the “Lambeth Walk”, *Nottingham Evening Post*, 13 October 1938, p. 9.

<<link.gale.com/apps/doc/JA3239685882/GDCS?u=oxford&sid=bookmark-GDCS&xid=0b20608f>>

[Accessed: 30 May 2025]

<sup>30</sup> White, *Born to Star*, p. 277; ‘How the Princesses Got Their Lambeth Walk Dolls’, *Daily Mail*, 23 November 1938, p. 10. <<link.gale.com/apps/doc/EE1863167345/GDCS?u=oxford&sid=bookmark-GDCS&xid=011e2fe4>> [Accessed: 23 August 2025]

dignity' of the Government House Ball on the night of the Melbourne Cup - 'at the 17<sup>th</sup> encore the "O!" was so terrific' that the orchestra was 'asked not to play the number again.'<sup>31</sup> From Brisbane, *Truth* reported: 'everybody is asking how to do the Lambeth Walk' – helpfully a 50 word explanation followed.<sup>32</sup> Australia's cricketers - who had surely had 'ample opportunity to study the Lambeth Walk' on their recent tour of England - were invited to lead dancers at the New South Wales Cricket Association Annual Ball.<sup>33</sup> At the Ritz Assembly Hall in Christchurch, at Dunedin Town Hall and at the Timaru Tea Rooms, introductions were offered to 'the rage of London'.<sup>34</sup> In December the dance floor at Wellington's Star Boating Club proved 'totally inadequate. The overflow danced in the billiard room'.<sup>35</sup>

By the New Year not having danced the dance was itself a news story in rural Queensland.<sup>36</sup> In March it was reported from Moscow that Foreign Affairs Commissar Maxim Litvinov had been 'strutting the Lambeth Walk' at a Grand Ball for the Diplomatic Corps at the Italian Embassy.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> "Lambeth Walk", *Sydney Daily Telegraph*, 3 November 1938, p. 11.

<<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article247438418>> [Accessed: 20 August 2025]

<sup>32</sup> 'Lambeth Walk', *Truth*, 23 October 1938, p. 31.

<<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article203915430>> [Accessed: 20 August 2025]

<sup>33</sup> 'Cricketers Taught the Lambeth Walk', *Sydney Daily Telegraph*, 7 November 1938, p. 10

<<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article247439370>> [Accessed: 20 August 2025]

<sup>34</sup> 'The Lambeth Walk', *Press*, 11 November 1938, p. 6.

<<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/CHP19381111.2.33>> [Accessed: 20 August 2025]

'Town Hall Dance', *Evening Star*, 16 November 1938, p. 2.

<<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/ESD19381116.2.9>> [Accessed: 20 August 2025]

'Lambeth Walk Featured', *Otago Daily Times*, 22 November 1938, p. 17.

<<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/ODT19381122.2.156.2>> [Accessed: 20 August 2025]

'News and Notes', *Timaru Herald*, 24 November 1938, p. 2.

<<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/THD19381124.2.9>> [Accessed: 20 August 2025]

<sup>35</sup> 'Topics for Women, Popular Dance', *Evening Post*, 5 December 1938, p. 14.

<<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/EP19381205.2.154>> [Accessed: 20 August 2025]

<sup>36</sup> "The Lambeth Walk", *Maryborough Chronicle, Wide Bay and Burnett Advertiser*, 15 February 1939, p. 8.

<<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article151670805>> [Accessed: 20 August 2025]

<sup>37</sup> 'Diplomat in Moscow Attend a Gay Party', *New York Times*, 20 March 1939, p. 3

<<https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/diplomats-moscow-attend-gay-party/docview/102819569/se-2>> [Accessed: 23 August 2025]

Cartoonists at the *New Zealand Herald* had fun with the inherent social contrasts - a dance instructor teaching an elegant young woman the dance whilst a stereotypical cockney working man stood-by 'to help you perfect your 'Oi!'.



Fig. 37: 'Well, that was the Lambeth Walk...',  
*New Zealand Herald*, 28 January 1938, p. 2 (Supplement)

Perhaps no better evidence of the presence of the dance in everyday discourse can be found than in many such cartoons:

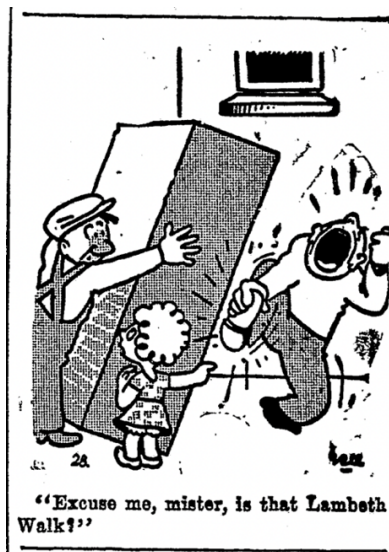


Fig. 38: 'Excuse me mister...'



Fig. 39: 'Look, Winnie...'

*Hawkes Bay Tribune*, 29 July 1939, p. 16     *Auckland Star*, 20 May 1939, p. 9 (Supplement)

On 1 May 1939 the Victoria Palace Theatre unexpectedly took a call asking whether the King and Queen might have tickets to that night's performance, the 852nd.<sup>38</sup> The King told Lupino Lane that he had 'never enjoyed a show so much before', he had however been getting the dance all wrong.<sup>39</sup> Thanks to a live BBC television broadcast the Princesses had watched the performance at the Palace...with their Lambeth Walk dolls.<sup>40</sup> 'The Lambeth Walk' was the hit song and dance of a show rescued by radio exposure, but it had become something more, a global cultural phenomenon, leading the Times to ponder whether indeed an 'ethereal interchange of dance music' had 'played some small part recently in the prevention of war?' For 'while dictators rage and statesmen talk, All Europe dances - to the 'Lambeth Walk'.'<sup>41</sup>

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## "DOING THE LAMBETH WALK"



Fig. 40: 'Doing the Lambeth Walk',

*Newcastle Herald and Miners Advocate*, 31 March 1939, p. 15

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<sup>38</sup> 'King and Queen at the Victoria Palace', *Manchester Guardian*, 2 May 1939, p. 10

<[link.gale.com/newspapers/court-pers-o-nal/docview/484646892/se-2](http://www.proquest.com/newspapers/court-pers-o-nal/docview/484646892/se-2)>

[Accessed: 29 May 2025]

<sup>39</sup> 'The Queen's 'Oi!' at Lambeth Walk Show', *Daily Mail*, 2 May 1939, p. 13.

<[link.gale.com/apps/doc/EE1863433205/GDCS?u=oxford&sid=bookmark-GDCS&xid=cdae8087](http://link.gale.com/apps/doc/EE1863433205/GDCS?u=oxford&sid=bookmark-GDCS&xid=cdae8087)>

[Accessed: 29 May 2025]

<sup>40</sup> 'How the Princesses Got Their Lambeth Walk Dolls', *Daily Mail*, 23 November 1938, p. 10.

<[link.gale.com/apps/doc/EE1863167345/GDCS?u=oxford&sid=bookmark-GDCS&xid=011e2fe4](http://link.gale.com/apps/doc/EE1863167345/GDCS?u=oxford&sid=bookmark-GDCS&xid=011e2fe4)>

[Accessed: 29 May 2025]

<sup>41</sup> Editorial, 'Peace and the Lambeth Walk', *Times*, 18 October 1938, p. 15.

<[link.gale.com/apps/doc/CS252392274/TTDA?u=oxford&sid=bookmark-TTDA&xid=140b208e](http://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CS252392274/TTDA?u=oxford&sid=bookmark-TTDA&xid=140b208e)>

[Accessed: 29 May 2025]

In her analysis of the development of dance as a cultural form in the first half of the twentieth century Alison Abra notes that the Lambeth Walk was one of a series of deliberately simple dances introduced at Mecca ballrooms in Britain, intended to appeal to inexperienced dancers. Its success was rooted both in its quality as a dance and in 'connections to British culture', for despite being a dance constructed by a dance instructor - Adele England - it was promoted by Lupino Lane and indeed by people living in London's Lambeth Walk itself, as - however dubiously - a 'traditional' working class British dance, hence a 'quintessentially national dance'. It offered the latest outing for a national 'character', one of the great British 'types', Bill Snibson needed no introduction, he was a 'cockney', doing 'cockney' things. What was being invited was enthusiastic celebration of British working-class culture, a celebration embraced from the top to bottom of British society and across the globe. It was observed that dancers themselves, and especially men, often picked up the 'cockney' association and even whilst dancing the steps adopted a strutting 'cockney' persona. One woman revealed to Mass Observation that part of the attraction of dancing the Lambeth Walk lay in permission to be 'a bit common, particularly the "Oi!" bit at the end' - it was 'lovely to be common and let yourself go in these days of refinement.'<sup>42</sup>

The appeal of the Lambeth Walk was at one level 'simply good fun', helping restore 'the party spirit to the ballroom'. It made a ballroom an accessible place for those without training in the standard ballroom dances, picked up by a large group of people in just 5 minutes. No one danced solo, no one was put on the spot.<sup>43</sup> It soon developed a life of its own, people, as Teddie St Denis observed - simply introducing their own 'twiddly-bits'. With its 'ev'rythin' free and easy, do as you darn well pleasey' attitude, it was refreshingly modern, unstuffy, perfectly capturing the spirit of the radio age. It invited irreverence. Would it, one contributor to correspondence on the choice of

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<sup>42</sup> Alison Abra, *Dancing in the English Style: Consumption, Americanisation and National Identity in Britain, 1918-1950* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017), pp. 179-181 & 187-9; Charles Madge and Tom Harrison, *Britain by Mass Observation* (London: Harmondsworth, 1939), p. 173.

<sup>43</sup> Abra pp. 182-3.

a new street name in Ashburton, be possible for it to be 'something very modern', perhaps 'Lambeth Walk'.<sup>44</sup> Lupino Lane noted, as his dance spread, that it appealed to 'rich and poor alike...there is no class distinction about dancing...ours is a truly democratic nation and such institutions as the "Lambeth Walk" make it more so.'<sup>45</sup> It appealed equally to high society in Manhattan, to dancers at the Sydney Trocadero and the Dunedin Town Hall, and to young people in Hitler's Germany, where, it being 'undignified', even 'bestial', German airman were ordered not to join in.<sup>46</sup> For Jim Davidson commenting in *Wireless Weekly*, this was an unsurprising development in a despotic state, for 'the Lambeth Walk really is nothing more or less than a symbol of tolerance'.<sup>47</sup> The invitation to break down barriers, linking arms with strangers and shouting 'Oi!' was all part of the appeal of the Lambeth Walk, it offered a sense of being 'a part of things', and this was surely the appeal to George VI on his night out, as he cocked his thumb and shouted 'Oi!'

In its capacity to invite listeners to think of themselves as in some way connected with others radio broadcasting had had a particular role to play in young countries. As Merlin Aylsworth of the nascent NBC had put it, in America it held the promise of bringing people of disparate heritages together, to 'honor the same heroes, love the same songs, enjoy the same sports, realise our common interest'.<sup>48</sup> In Australia and New Zealand it had achieved this. There was something

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<sup>44</sup> St Denis, p. 157; 'Letters to the Editor', *Ashburton Guardian*, 20 January 1939, p. 4.  
<<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/ashburton-guardian/1939/01/20/4>>  
[Accessed: 21 June 2025]

<sup>45</sup> Abra, p. 189-191; Lupino Lane, 'About this (You know) Walk', *Answers*, 10 December 1938, p. 9 (clipping in the Mass Observation Archive)

<sup>46</sup> 'Anytime They're Lambeth Way—Oi!' *Daily Mirror*, 7 January 1939, p. 5.  
<<link.gale.com/apps/doc/KVEDNJ881160160/GDCS?u=oxford&sid=bookmark-GDCS&xid=e3a79e56>>  
[Accessed: 2 June 2025]

'German Airmen Must Not Dance the Lambeth Walk', *Evening Telegraph*, 25 March 1939, p. 4.  
<<link.gale.com/apps/doc/JF3237750858/GDCS?u=oxford&sid=bookmark-GDCS&xid=c98e56f6>>  
[Accessed: 2 June 2025]

<sup>47</sup> 'Why Hitler banned The Lambeth Walk', *Wireless Weekly*, 17 May 1939, p. 7.  
<<https://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-723119005/view?partId=nla.obj-723148615#page/n6/mode/1up>>  
[Accessed: 29 May 2025]

<sup>48</sup> Lacey, *Listening Publics*, pp. 34-35.

distinctly 'of New Zealand' in the popularity of Daisy Basham with her homespun and self-reliant advice, and 'of Australia' in the antics of Dad and Dave, and the closely guarded recording of the Snake Gulch Derby. Both would be perfectly intelligible in London, but already belonged to a different broadcasting tradition. Radio broadcasting had also had a particular role to play in a British world in which cultural, economic and political ties both stretched across the globe, and led back to London.

For the cockney world of 'The Lambeth Walk' was a real place. Whilst Lambeth Walk itself was an otherwise nondescript Victorian high street, not far from the Thames, it was in many ways familiar, a New Zealand journalist might be invited to call it to mind, in print or on 1YA.<sup>49</sup> Just down the road were, in one direction, the New Zealand dairy businesses at Hays Wharf, in the other the Oval, where that August Australian listeners had heard another Ashes record chalked up, England's Len Hutton hitting a record 364 runs in its final match. Across the river was Westminster Abbey, scene of more moments not to be missed. For all that the proportions of the populations of Australia and New Zealand born in the British Isles would fall through time these remained societies whose cultural norms and connections were in large part the product of migration from a far distant place. In this geographically spread world nothing spoke with more confidence of the strength of the ties binding the 'British' than invitations to celebrate with other Britons. The success of the Lambeth Walk spoke to the draw of London as a place of cultural significance, its working-class culture a cause for celebration. It was hailed as a British challenge to American cultural supremacy, an 'English dance success.'<sup>50</sup> The *New Zealand Herald* argued in January 1939 that this was not a mere 'craze', the Lambeth Walk promised 'to continue indefinitely as one of

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<sup>49</sup> Philip J. Soljak, 'Birthplace of the Lambeth Walk', *Auckland Star*, 31 December 1938, p. 19. <<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/AS19381231.2.154>> [Accessed: 20 August 2025]  
'Coming Talks', *Evening Post*, 12 January 1939, p. 21  
<<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/EP19390112.2.158.2.>> [Accessed: 21 June 2025]

<sup>50</sup> Abra p. 192; Madge and Harrison, p. 161.

Britain's national dances...because it expresses the London spirit'.<sup>51</sup> For the 'British', wherever they dwelt, whatever their background, this was an open, inclusive 'Britishness', capable of celebration equally by people having a 'knees-up' in London's pubs, enjoying a tea dance in Wellington, linking arms at the Sydney Trocadero, or by the King himself.



Fig. 41: 'Oi!', *New Zealand Herald*, 14 January 1939, p. 12 (supplement)

In this the role of broadcasting had not gone unnoticed. Mass Observation recorded that 40% of those who'd come across the Lambeth Walk by 1939 had first heard it on the radio.<sup>52</sup> As the *Marlborough Express* radio correspondent wryly observed in February 1939, Lane and Gay's immensely popular celebration of working class culture - with its permission to be 'a bit common' - had been made popular by an organisation whose reputation was by contrast 'rather highbrow'. It was thanks to the BBC that 'nearly everybody who is not doing the Lambeth Walk is apt to be humming or whistling' the tune.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> 'How To Do It', *New Zealand Herald*, 14 January 1939, p. 12.

<<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/NZH19390114.2.193.64>> [Accessed: 20 August 2025]

<sup>52</sup> Madge and Harrison, p. 163.

<sup>53</sup> 'Over the Aerial', *The Marlborough Express*, 25 February 1939, p. 3.

<<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/MEX19390225.2.9.2>> [Accessed: 21 June 2025]

## Radio broadcasting and identity in the southern British world

Global broadcasting had opened both national and transnational cultural spaces. A senior figure in the Soviet politburo could be seen 'strutting' a cockney dance popularised by radio, one danced by the King of England. Broadcasting made possible shared engagement in cultural phenomena which made new - and reinforced old - connections, this had, this thesis has argued, a particular resonance in the scattered British world. Here we might pause to consider again what radio broadcasting was and its impact in its first decades. In so doing we might revisit one of the essential challenges of the archival record, the almost complete absence of the audio productions themselves - and conclude that for all its inconvenience, this perhaps doesn't matter at all. Radio was, in the 1930s, a fundamentally ephemeral medium and as Carolyn Birdsall argues, the very ephemerality of broadcasting compared to other media was 'a distinct, if not motivating, factor' for what she terms 'radiophilia' - the love of, or strong attachment to, radio.<sup>54</sup> You had to be listening in the moment to hear your favourite shows, a broadcast might become something to make a date with, an occasion to gather friends and neighbours, to experience moments that would live in the memory even as they might never be heard again. This dimension of radio broadcasting has been captured here and explored, whether the wonder at the simultaneity enabling the singing of the old war time songs with former comrades 12 000 miles away, or the joys of participating in a cricket match as it played out in a different season on the other side of the globe. It has been noted that radio ownership and listening was associated with 'modernity', a modernity epitomised by ownership of telephones and cars and radio sets, taken up by Australians and New Zealanders at rates greater than their fellow Britons in the British Isles. It has been argued that the promise, in a society conscious of isolation and distance, was of connection. In this new, modern, connected, way of life radio listening came to be 'not merely a taken-for-granted element...it embodied it.'<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Carolyn Birdsall, *Radiophilia* (London: Bloomsbury, 2023), p. 2.

<sup>55</sup> Scannell & Cardiff, *A Social History of British Broadcasting*, p. 367.

The thesis developed here leans into a series of conceptual approaches to the examination of both broadcasting and development of senses of national identity. It has embraced Kate Lacey's argument that whilst early radio listening was termed 'listening in' at times audiences were also actively 'listening out' for, and responding to, messages - in a state of anticipation.<sup>56</sup> Such intense listening was clearly not a passive process.<sup>57</sup> It has been argued that from an appreciation of this sprang government enthusiasm for regulation and that the consequences of regulatory decisions were profound. It has built on Lacey's argument that such was the impact of the arrival of broadcasting that to seek to measure its significance simply in terms of licences purchased or sets sold 'captures neither the extent of people's encounter with radio...nor their awareness of radio as an idea and a promise.'<sup>58</sup> Hence its cultural significance, a significance reinforced by the sheer relentlessness of, as demonstrated here, the broadcast schedule of 'the daily, weekly, seasonal and annual round.'<sup>59</sup> Benedict Anderson's conception of the nation as an 'imagined' community sits comfortably with ways in which it has been assumed radio listeners conceived the community of their fellows.<sup>60</sup> Broadcasting has a particular ability to create shared communities of interest among people who will never meet, it offered many opportunities to tell and retell national stories, for listeners to reflect on their own sense of national identity, this thesis has brought such occasions to life. If Anderson offers one lens through which to view the shared experience of listening Charles Taylor offers another in his conception of the 'social imaginary', the way ordinary people 'imagine' their 'social surroundings'. This is, as we have seen, rooted in both everyday behaviours and in shared 'images, stories, and legends'.<sup>61</sup> Many such could be found in the broadcast moments examined here. Broadcasting played into the reassessment of cultural identity underway in both Australia and New Zealand in the years after the First World War. The case

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<sup>56</sup> Lacey, 'Listening Overlooked', pp. 6-7.

<sup>57</sup> Douglas, pp. 26-30.

<sup>58</sup> Lacey, 'Communication in the Radio Century', pp. 736-7.

<sup>59</sup> Lacey, 'Vernacular Modernism', p. 174.

<sup>60</sup> Anderson, pp. 5-7.

<sup>61</sup> Taylor, 'Social Imaginary', p. 23.

studies explored have supported Stuart Hall's observation that senses of cultural identity, far from being 'stable' and 'unchanging' are more a 'production', a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being', belonging to the future as much as to the past, not a 'fixed essence' at all.<sup>62</sup> This was a 'process', of invention and reinvention, 'embroidered', as Richard White puts it, 'in different ways by different people for different reasons.'<sup>63</sup> The cultural identities of the 'British' communities around the globe, and in Britain itself, were in a constant state of development, of construction. It has been shown here that at moments of pan-Imperial significance, be they sporting, festive or more solemn, broadcasting played a part in this process.

Across the decade Australia and New Zealand had each developed a broadcasting culture of their own which, to return to Briggs, both registered 'perception and experience' and influenced it.<sup>64</sup> In Australia the ABC, holding true to its founding principles, was operating with an admirable professionalism even as, as has been demonstrated, its commercial competitors were exploiting all the possibilities of the medium to entertain the majority of the Australian listening public. In New Zealand a commercial/public service mix had also been developed, but in 1939 both were run by the state, although, as illustrated by their approaches to the Centenary, by very different men with very different visions of what broadcasting might bring to New Zealanders. In each there had been some representation of indigenous culture, reflecting the status it held in wider society. It has been noted that whatever the hopes of a W. J. Cleary or a James Shelley to associate the new medium in Australia and New Zealand with 'highbrow' culture it simply had to be acknowledged that many, perhaps the majority, of their listeners refused to accept this. In Britain the BBC might periodically enlist a distinguished figure such as Adrian Boult to defend 'highbrow' musical tastes - 'an acquired taste you may call it, but a taste worth acquiring' - and such output might find a

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<sup>62</sup> Stuart Hall, 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora', pp. 257-261.

<sup>63</sup> Richard White, 'Inventing Australia revisited' in *Creating Australia* ed. by Wayne Hudson & Geoffrey Bolton (St. Leonards, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 1997), pp. 18-20.

<sup>64</sup> Briggs, 'Problems and Possibilities', p. 10.

listenership in the absence of an alternative.<sup>65</sup> In Australia and New Zealand the broadcasting environment was different and 'lowbrow' culture whole-heartedly embraced, in each there was less deference to the cultural tastes of the 'establishment'. A question had been on what tradition this popular culture might draw, would the tentacles of the 'Trans-Atlantic Octopus' draw in Australians and New Zealanders? To a degree, in the popularity of radio serials, they did. Yet here it has been demonstrated that British popular culture also played a part, in invitations to great Imperial occasions in London, in the Lambeth Walk disturbing the repose of the Governors Ball, or swamping the Boating Club dance floor, as even the most sophisticated of citizens accepted with gusto an invitation to be a bit 'common'.

At the heart of this thesis has been a discussion of, in all its complexity, understandings of 'Britishness'. It has developed Thomas Hajkowski's assertion that the BBC 'reinforced a particular kind of Britishness', one which embraced multiple and multi-layered 'British' identities.<sup>66</sup> It has demonstrated that the BBC provided a global stage upon which could be celebrated the varied identities of the many constituent parts of the British world of the 1930s, arguing that these were being developed by Australians and New Zealanders themselves. Reflecting on Australian sacrifices at Gallipoli, Billy Hughes could argue that so true had its soldiers remained to the 'glorious traditions' of the 'cradle of our race' that they had perhaps demonstrated themselves 'more British than the people of Great Britain', indeed that in Australia the true nature of 'Britishness' was being better preserved than it was back in London.<sup>67</sup> For the 'neo-Britains' hadn't simply replicated British culture and institutions. There had been radical departures from British norms, most notably the New Zealand enfranchisement of women. As James Belich notes 'Better British ideology melded an increasingly intense assertion of Britishness with a pre-existing popular self-image and an embryonic collective identity', an identity built around loyalty, egalitarianism,

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<sup>65</sup> Smithers, p. 59.

<sup>66</sup> Hajkowski, pp. 235-7.

<sup>67</sup> Damousi, pp. 296-7; John Rickard, *Australia: A Cultural History* (Longman: Harlow, 1996) pp. 118-9 & 135.

ingenuity and self-reliance, all virtues assumed to be found more widely in New Zealand than in Britain itself.<sup>68</sup> Here it has been proposed that these were reflected in the popularity of Aunt Daisy, in the rise of 'Uncle Scrim' and his 'Friendly Road'. For Neville Meaney British 'race sentiment' made it difficult for Australian political leaders to adopt the language of national independence, inhibiting them 'from bringing conflicts with imperial policy out into the open' fearing to 'upset the emotional attitude of public opinion at large'.<sup>69</sup> Whatever other developments in either national or pan-British sentiment there remained throughout the 1930s a sense that even where interests didn't coincide, they ought to.<sup>70</sup> Here it has been argued that it was broadcasts from London, relayed and integrated into the schedules of the radio stations of Australia and New Zealand, that underpinned such sentiments, regularly inviting contemplation of the place of each in the wider 'British world'.

This thesis has been supported by a series of case studies of broadcasts, which it has considered in great depth, exploring the intentions and technique of producers, noting the responses of listeners at specific broadcast moments, through this it has been possible to reconstruct the spirit if not the sound of broadcasts and to glean a sense of the impact they had. Occasions of remembrance had been amongst the earliest on which British trans-national broadcasting had been attempted and their significance had not diminished as the decade progressed. For Keith Barry the unveiling of the Australian war memorial in 1938 had been 'the most important of all recent Overseas broadcasts.'<sup>71</sup> Sport offered the nascent broadcasters a way into the cultural life of the nation and it has been argued here that, whilst it incubated partisan national sentiment, at the same time, through a celebration of competition taking place within an Imperial context, often with the

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<sup>68</sup> Belich, *Paradise Reforged*, pp. 78 & 124.

<sup>69</sup> Neville Meaney, 'Australia's Foreign Policy: History and Myth', *Australian Outlook*, 23:2, 1969, 173-181 (pp. 180).

<sup>70</sup> Ward, *Australia and the British Embrace*, p. 260.

<sup>71</sup> NAA, SP341/2, 318885, undated memo: 'Outstanding Broadcasts Arranged by the Australian Broadcasting Commission'.

metropole, sports broadcasting also offered regular reminders of cultural ties to Britain and fellow Britons. Imperial broadcasting from London served a propaganda purpose. At the launch of the BBC Empire Service John Reith spoke of inducing 'among the constituent parts of the Empire a greater understanding and a greater sympathy' and of drawing the 'far-scattered units of the Empire...closer together.'<sup>72</sup> The Empire Service had offered listeners a broadly 'British' radio experience and if there was little evidence in either Australia or New Zealand of regular engagement with it, it offered, on big occasions, opportunities for connection, to both listeners and to broadcasters. For the latter it offered opportunities to step onto that global stage. Such broadcasts added to the ways in which the geographic and cultural diversity of the British world were brought to life. In the 1930s few such opportunities had been greater than those created on Christmas Day, capturing bells chiming from the Earth's four corners, the sounds of Bondi Beach and its lifesavers, the song of Maori choirs, doing so in ways that inspired wonder at the technology and at British mastery of it. Coverage of the Coronation of George VI was hailed from America as the 'the greatest achievement of broadcasting in radio history'.<sup>73</sup> It was the culmination of a series of broadcasts of major British Royal occasions, central to each being both their setting - London, Imperial, often religious - and the suggestion to British listeners that they consider themselves invited guests, fellow members of a British family, of which the King was head. It has been demonstrated that Royal occasions increasingly came to be constructed, as were the Christmas Day messages, with considerations of the needs of broadcasters and listeners at their heart. UK and Dominion listeners were 'encouraged to imagine themselves as members of a single imperial community' listening together.<sup>74</sup> This 'dismantling' of barriers spoke directly to 'Empire consolidation by wireless'.

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<sup>72</sup> *BBC Empire Broadcasting*, 2 Dec 1936 p. 2.

<sup>73</sup> WAC R47/135/1, 12 May 1937, cable NBC to BBC.

<sup>74</sup> Potter, *Broadcasting Empire*, pp. 85-87.

This thesis began with J. Beresford Clark's letter to Charles Moses, and his despair that after a decade of pan-Imperial broadcasting even in 1938 'people in each part of the Empire are still woefully ignorant about other parts'.<sup>75</sup> It was, as Simon Potter has argued, rather a bold hope that in the long term efforts to reinforce a sense of unity across the British world through BBC broadcasts from London would succeed, yet here it has been argued that in the 1930s, despite Clark's despair, in the short to medium term at least some of the ambitions of the BBC for 'Empire consolidation by wireless' were realised. For if we accept Anderson's proposition that nations are 'imagined' then to be created they must first become somehow 'imaginable'. For a fully sovereign national community in Australia or New Zealand to become 'imaginable' it was necessary that the wider sense of organic British community should become more 'unimaginable'. As Stuart Ward argues this was not so much a process by which nations grew to 'maturity', shaking off the 'mother country', rather such reimagination was a reaction to changing perceptions of self-interest.<sup>76</sup> The thesis developed here is that broadcasting arrested this process, that whilst it was the case that distinct and national cultural identities were being developed in Australia and New Zealand listeners in each were also regularly being reminded of their shared British heritage, and that this had - and has - a legacy. How enduring this legacy was remains contested, Manning Clark proposed that it was the Second World War that 'turned the minds of many Australians toward the question of who we are'.<sup>77</sup> For Stuart Ward the retreat of British sensibility in Australia was driven by Britain's embrace of closer economic ties with the European Community from the early 1960s.<sup>78</sup> Geoffrey Partington points to 'the Whitlam era'.<sup>79</sup> Whatever the precise timeline it seems clear that, as Philip Buckner argues, the 'core dynamic' of the relationship between Britain and the Dominions in the years before and immediately after the Second World War was not 'mutual

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<sup>75</sup> WAC R46/32, 18 August 1938, letter Clark to Moses.

<sup>76</sup> Ward, *Australia and the British Embrace*, pp. 258-261.

<sup>77</sup> Manning Clark, *The Quest for Grace* (Ringwood: Victoria, 1990), p. 159.

<sup>78</sup> Ward, *Australia and the British Embrace*, pp. 257-60.

<sup>79</sup> Partington, p. xx

antagonism'.<sup>80</sup> Ties remained strong. They were reinforced by broadcasting from London, and here it has been argued that a particular consideration be offered to the role of the British Monarchy and its presentation through broadcasting. There was in the 1930s, as has been demonstrated, a particular fascination with the British Royal Family, and this proved enduring. In 1954 seventy per cent of all Australians turned out in person to catch a glimpse of the newly crowned Queen Elizabeth II on her Australian tour, it had been, the Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese stated at the time of her death almost seventy years later, 'the biggest single event ever organised' in Australia and remained 'a defining moment' in Australia's history.<sup>81</sup> In 2024 no less a historian than Margaret Macmillan could reference an estimate that half the world's population had watched the Queen's funeral, a figure as speculative as that attached to the listenership for the Coronation of her father.<sup>82</sup>

This thesis has demonstrated the many ways in which, by the end of the 1930s, listening at a radio set had offered regular opportunities for 'British' listeners - however isolated or disconnected they might consider themselves - to feel 'a part of things...more important...not left out'.<sup>83</sup> It has demonstrated that broadcasting played a central role in sustaining the 'social imaginary', offering the shared experiences that maintained the 'imagined community', both reinforcing established cultural norms and creating new ones - as shaped by broadcasting cultural identity was rather more recognisably 'always in process', than something 'fixed'.<sup>84</sup> A declaration, to oneself or to others, of one's 'British' heritage might, for some, be a significant element of an individual's identity - it certainly appeared so to a Robert Menzies. Yet such an identification might equally be

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<sup>80</sup> Buckner, pp.2-3

<sup>81</sup> Statement from the Prime Minister, 9 September 2022 <<https://anthonyalbanese.com.au/media-centre/queen-elizabeth-ii>> [Accessed: 17 November 2022]

<sup>82</sup> 'The Queen of role play', Margaret MacMillan review of Craig Brown's *A Voyage Around the Queen*, *New Statesman*, 23-29 August 2024, p. 38.

<sup>83</sup> Jennings & Gill, p. 12.

<sup>84</sup> Taylor, 'Social Imaginary', p. 23; Anderson, pp. 6-7; Stuart Hall, 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora', pp. 257-261.

something more occasional, whether a convenient shorthand description of one's cultural background, or a latent, perhaps quite powerful, sympathy, even loyalty, tickled into life at particular moments, moments often conveyed by radio. Confirmation of both the place of broadcasting in public life, and of the reinforcement of connections to a British sensibility, came when, on 3 September 1939, it was to radio that Neville Chamberlain turned to announce to Britain and the world the declaration of war on Germany. Listening in Melbourne was Menzies, who went to the microphone immediately to declare that 'as a result' of Britain's action Australia was also at war.<sup>85</sup> There could be 'no doubt', Menzies declared, that 'where Britain stands there stand the people of the entire British world.'<sup>86</sup> Two days later Michael Joseph Savage announced in similar terms, in a broadcast from his home, that New Zealand was following: 'we range ourselves without fear beside Britain. Where she goes, we go. Where she stands, we stand.'<sup>87</sup> On the night of the declaration, in the early hours of the morning in Australia and New Zealand, listeners heard The King address 'every household of my peoples, both at home and overseas', again in terms that spoke to the role broadcasting now played in everyday life. His message was, he declared, 'spoken with the same depths of feeling for each one of you as if I were able to cross your threshold and speak to you myself.'<sup>88</sup>

Which of course, through broadcasting, he had indeed been able to do.

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<sup>85</sup> Australian War Memorial, Prime Minister Robert Menzies: wartime broadcast.  
<[https://www.awm.gov.au/articles/encyclopedia/prime\\_ministers/menzies](https://www.awm.gov.au/articles/encyclopedia/prime_ministers/menzies)>  
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<sup>86</sup> 'Australia's Part', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 September 1939, p. 11.  
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<sup>87</sup> Nga Taonga, Sound and Vision, Rt. Hon. Michael Joseph Savage Broadcasts to NZ, Outbreak of War.  
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<sup>88</sup> 'Late News: King Speaks to Empire', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 September 1939, p. 11.  
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Fig. 16: 'The Cup Girl', Wynne W. Davies, *Australian Women's Weekly*, Front Cover (detail), 4 November 1933. <<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article48076044>> [Accessed: 20 August 2025]  
*The artist, Wynne W. Davies, died in 1963, so this work remains in copyright, holder unknown.*

Fig. 17: Phar Lap Winning the Melbourne Cup, 1930 (detail)  
Phar Lap Winning Victoria Derby, Framed, 1929.  
*Copyright Museums Victoria Collections, Public Domain (Licensed as Public Domain Mark)*

Fig. 18: Advertisement, *Press*, 26 November 1935, p. 2.  
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Fig. 19: 'Toohey's Oatmeal Stout poster, 1936.  
<<https://australianbeerposters.com.au/shop/tooheys-oatmeal-stout-mrs-arris-mrs-iggs-heres-toee-poster/>> [Accessed: 13 July 2025]  
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Fig. 20: "Broadcast of All Black's Opening Match', *Press*, 27 June 1932, p. 13.  
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Fig. 21: 'Don Bradman', *Press*, 16 December 1932, p. 27.  
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Fig. 22: 'Two O'Clock in the Morning', *Auckland Star*, 18 July 1934, p. 5.  
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Fig. 23: 3DB advert, *The Herald*, 20 June 1934, p. 4.  
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Fig. 24: BBC Broadcasting House, Empire Studio, 1934  
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Fig. 25: 'This Little Corner of the Jungle', *World Radio*, 13 October 1933, p. 463.  
*Reproduced courtesy of the British Broadcasting Corporation. All rights reserved.*

Fig. 26: 'Two keen listeners to the Empire transmissions', *World Radio*, 17 November 1933, p. 642.  
*Reproduced courtesy of the British Broadcasting Corporation. All rights reserved.*

Fig. 27: BBC Foreign & Empire Department Staff Photo: 1932  
© BBC Photo Archive ID: 211073

Fig 28: Gossip Hour first episode, 01/01/1934. Cecil Madden with the Pearly King and Queen.  
© BBC Photo Archive ID: 141668

Fig. 29: *New Zealand Listener*, 2-8 July 1939, Front Cover.  
<<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/periodicals/new-zealand-listener/1939/06/30/1>>  
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Fig. 30: *New Zealand Herald*, 11 May 1937, Souvenir Supplement  
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Fig. 31: Aunt Daisy, Wellington Apple Pie Contest, 23 April 1940.  
Wellington apple pie contest conducted by radio station 2ZB, showing Aunt Daisy, Town Hall, Wellington, New Zealand  
*Free Lance: Photographic prints and negatives. Ref: 1/2-100928-G. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand. /records/22339928*

Fig. 32: 'The Latest Photograph of the Royal Family', *New Zealand Herald*, 11 May 1937, p. 7.  
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Fig. 33: 'Broadcasting the Coronation', *Evening Star*, 22 May 1937, p. 4  
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Fig 35: Coronation Day: 1937: Rehearsing the 'Empire's Homage' in the Dramatic Control Room.  
© BBC Photo Archive ID: 61843

Fig. 36: 'The Dominion Prime Ministers', *Evening Star*, 3 July 1937, p. 4.  
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Fig. 37: 'Well, that was the Lambeth Walk...', *New Zealand Herald*, 28 January 1938, p. 2 (supplement) <<https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/NZH19390128.2.198.23.1>>  
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Fig. 38: 'Excuse me mister...', *Hawkes Bay Tribune*, 29 July 1939, p. 16.  
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Fig. 40: 'Doing the Lambeth Walk', 'From a postcard sent from Rome', *Newcastle Herald and Miners Advocate*, 31 March 1939, p. 15. <<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article135481435>>  
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Fig. 41: 'Oi!', *New Zealand Herald*, 14 January 1939, p. 12 (supplement).  
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