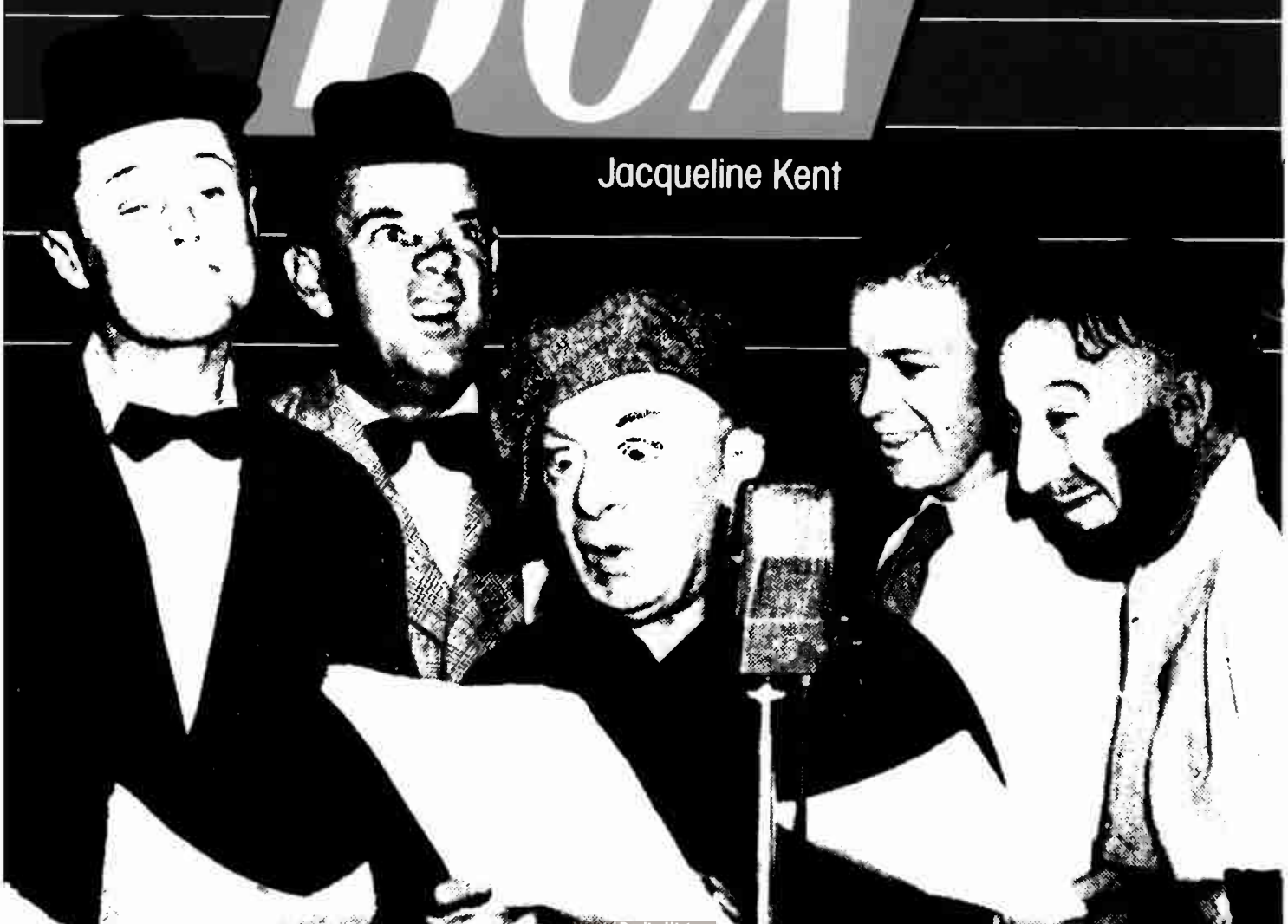
The Heyday of Australian Radio

OUT OF THE BAKELITE BOX

Jacqueline Kent



Out of the Bakelite Box *is a celebration of Australian radio from World War II until television changed its voice forever. By discussing and describing some of the best-loved programmes and personalities on both ABC and commercial radio, this book builds up a word picture of the vital and frequently joyous industry that Australian radio was.*

The author has covered the major programme areas: comedy shows, variety programmes, drama series, musicals, the "sweep while you sweep" serials, children's programmes, news, sport, talent quests. A section entitled "Behind the Programmes" describes the skills unique to radio — those skills practised by the band of professionals behind the microphone.

Almost 50 current and former radio performers helped to write this book. They have described their world, often giving hilarious insights into life inside and outside the studio, as well as providing penetrating comments about the performers — such as Eric Baume, Jack Davey and Roy Rene — who have become legendary. The contributors' words have been interspersed with extracts from scripts and tapes, as well as comments about well-known programmes.

Paraphrasing the words used to introduce the famous weepie **When a Girl Marries** *this book is dedicated to all those who love radio . . . and to those who can remember.*

Cover photo: A performance of the hilarious 1940s programme McCackie Mansion featuring (from left to right) Hal Lashwood, Jack Burgess, Harry Avondale, Harry Griffith and Roy Rene. By courtesy of the South Australian Performing Arts Collection.

ANGUS & ROBERTSON PUBLISHERS

One of the highlights in the childhood of Dragon's Tooth Cadena 3 (Jacqueline Kent) was being chosen for a one-night stand as a guest Quiz Kid in 1959 — an experience from which she has never fully recovered.

After growing up in Sydney and Adelaide, she started her working life in Sydney as a journalist on a television magazine. But the attraction of the bakelite box proved too strong, and she became a writer, producer and broadcaster for the ABC radio children's session. After working at a variety of jobs in London, including freelancing as a journalist and radio interviewer, she returned to Australia and became a book editor. She now divides her time between her own writing and editing books for other people.

She reads and listens to radio a lot, dislikes gardening, enjoys bushwalking and conversation, and tolerates cats.

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ANGUS & ROBERTSON PUBLISHERS

For Norma Frances Kent

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OUT OF THE BAKELITE BOX

Contents

Without whom...

The list of people who have helped me in writing this book is a very long one. The following is by no means complete, but it includes those people and organisations to whom I owe a special debt of gratitude.

The Literature Board of the Australia Council, who gave me a grant for preparation and research; Bryce Fraser, who contributed support and encouragement at every stage; Peter Burgis and the staff of the sound archives section of the National Library, Canberra; the staff of the Mitchell Library, Sydney; Pat Kelly and Val Napthene of the ABC Archives department; Alison Conlon and Sue Ridley for their help in picture research; Jo Peoples of the South Australian Performing Arts Collection; Marion Ord and John Stevens, who read the final manuscript and contributed helpful suggestions; Jane Hall, who typed innumerable transcripts and who prepared the final manuscript; Reg James of Grace Gibson Productions; Leslie Rees; Harry Harper; Terry Dear; Willie Fennell; Richard Walsh and Richard Smart of Angus & Robertson Publishers.

I must also thank those friends and acquaintances who helped me find some of the people whose words appear in this book and, finally, I am extremely grateful to the contributors themselves. They very generously gave me their time — some on successive occasions — to tell stories, to explain, to clarify points and to answer endless questions with patience and good humour. In some cases, they have allowed me to use their own precious programme tapes, scripts and photographs. This really is their book.

Jacqueline Kent
Sydney 1983

Prologue

This book is about Australian radio at its peak — from the end of World War II until television changed its style and voice forever. It has been written for the many thousands of Australians whose memories were moulded by a bakelite box in the kitchen rather than a Cyclops-eyed one in the living-room.

I am one of those Australians. My earliest memories are woven around a squat, tan-coloured box that held pride of place on a shelf above the Early Kooka stove. It was an AWA-Radiola mantel model, and the bakelite from which it was made was much in vogue in the 1950s and earlier for making radios, as well as many other household items. (It tasted horrible, a fact I discovered when I thought ours was made of toffee and licked it at the age of two.) Our radio had three knobs: one to turn the set on and off, lighting up the dial, a volume control and — most exciting of all — the knob regulating the red line that moved across the dial from station to station. In our household, children were not considered responsible enough to choose what programmes the family would listen to. That privilege was reserved for adults.

Some people had bakelite radios with graduated plastic bumps down the front, like the cartoon figure that presents advertisements for Michelin tyres. There were also uncompromisingly square radios with rounded dials, round-cornered ones with flat tops and angular, snooty-looking models. There was even a pompous version with columns, conveying the impression that the radio was a miniature cathedral.

Bakelite radios came in a range of colours, from white, through khaki, brown, maroon and green, to black.

These were the radios for everyday listening, but some families proudly showed off their "big" radios. The most glamorous people in our street, the Careys, possessed a huge walnut cabinet that combined a radio, a record player with an automatic changer and a cocktail cabinet with glass mirrors and a pink plastic ballerina doll that turned around to the tinkling of "Für Elise" when a switch was flicked on. Everybody who knew the owners of this wonderful object was very impressed, for possession of such a radio meant that the Careys were successful people; a "big" radio as well as the more humble day-to-day set was a status symbol, the 1950s equivalent of two cars a decade or so later.

Radio punctuated daily life in Australia to an astonishing extent. Morning milk and cornflakes lost something without a breakfast announcer radiating good cheer from the set above the sink. When the kids had gone to school, mothers washed up, made the beds and vacuumed with one ear straining for the tortured and tortuous adventures of the men and women in the serials. If children were off sick, they were sometimes allowed to have the bakelite box in bed with them for the drip dramas, the afternoon children's serials and — if they were privileged — the quiz shows with tea on a tray in the evening. Their school lessons included radio lessons on everything from folk dancing to social studies and English.

People on the land used radio as a tool of trade, noting the early weather reports and the day's prices before they sent produce off to market. They found out how and when to plant Federation wheat, if they didn't already know, and what to do if something went wrong with their crops or their livestock.

On Saturday afternoons, particularly in Australia's cities, sporting fans studied the racing form and listened to commentators describing the races with the precise delivery of a machine-gun. When wrestling or boxing was on during the week, would-be Jimmy Carrutherses thumped the air vigorously and gave the fighters good advice. Cricket fanatics stayed up long after the rest of the family had gone to bed, concentrating deeply as they visualised flannel-trousered batsmen piling up runs for Australia.

In the evenings, whether in the city or the country, families gathered around the bakelite box or the "big" radio to listen to the feature programmes: the prestige quiz shows, the variety shows, the plays, the talent quests, documentaries, news broadcasts. "What did you *look* at in the evenings while you were listening to radio?" a twelve-year-old television addict once inquired curiously, unable to imagine a group of people just sitting. But, as every radio listener knows, the answer is simple. You looked at the pictures you made in your mind's eye. Radio has always provided the best ones, because you can make them up for yourself.

So the uses of radio seemed endless. It was the main source of entertainment, laughter, news and information for almost the whole population.

Before going on to discuss the programmes and the people who made them in more detail, here is some background to Australian radio.

At the end of World War II, which is where this book begins, there were no fewer than 129 medium-wave radio stations in Australia, 100 of which were run by commercial interests and 29 by the Australian Broadcasting Commission. All these stations had (and have) call signs consisting of a number from 2 to 7 followed by two letters of the alphabet. The reason for the use of the number prefix goes back long before 1923, when radio started in this country.

As everyone knows, the numbers indicate the station's geographical location: 2 for New South Wales, 3 for Victoria, 4 for Queensland and so on. This originated at the time when defence became the responsibility of the Federal Government, at Federation in 1901. Australia was divided into numbered zones: New South Wales was the second military district, Victoria the third, Queensland the fourth, South Australia the fifth, Western Australia the sixth and Tasmania the seventh. (There was no first district and no figure 1, probably because it might have been confused with the letter I or L.) This method of identifying the states was followed by the wireless authorities about twenty years later, and since then Australia Post has adopted it for postcodes.

The letters after the numbers have much more imaginative origins. They often refer to the initials of the station's original licensee: 2FC Sydney stands for Farmer and Company and 3DB Melbourne was started by the Druleigh Business and Technical College Pty Ltd, to give only two examples. Many take their letters from the station's location, such as 2AY Albury and 7LA Launceston. Sydney's 2SM's first licensee was the Catholic Broadcasting Co Ltd, and its letters stand for either "Saint Mary" or "Saint Mark". And 2GB, set up by the Theosophical Society, takes its initials from those of Giordano Bruno, a sixteenth-century Christian martyr.

A number of stations do not seem to have any logical reason for the letters used in their call signs, particularly those incorporating Z and X. As licensees named Xavier, Zebedee or Zachariah are thin on the ground, it seems that people adopted those letters just because they liked them. Perhaps they were good at Scrabble.

Once the government started granting radio licences in 1923, stations sprang up like mushrooms. In 1924, the government established two categories: A-class stations financed by listeners' licence fees (though they were allowed a little advertising) and B-class stations that depended on selling advertising time. The licensees were one-off entrepreneurs at first. There was no networking until 1929, when the government granted the Australian Broadcasting Company (a group consisting of Greater Union Theatres, Fullers' Theatres and J. Albert and Sons, music publishers) a three-year contract to take over the A-class stations and to produce programmes on a national basis. The Company soon faced great problems: it could not extend facilities to the country areas fast enough to keep up with listener demand (in 1929 310,000 listeners had radio sets) and it made a small loss in some states and rural areas.

When the Company's contract expired in 1932, the government did not renew it. Instead, Parliament passed the Australian Broadcasting Commission Act, enabling a new body, the Australian Broadcasting Commission, to acquire four stations in capital cities and eight regionals and to take over their service. The Commission was given power to publish journals, collect news and to take over the staff and assets of the Company.

Thus on 1 July 1932 the ABC came into existence.

The ABC established most of its major programming departments before World War II (the Rural Department did not come into being until 1946; Parliamentary broadcasting began the following year). The *ABC Weekly* was first mooted in 1939; between 1945 and 1950, fully professional symphony orchestras were set up on a state-by-state basis.

All these things were done without much public fuss, but some stirring battles took place over the ABC's right to its own independent news service. Press representatives argued that the new national organisation should stick to entertaining people, not take over the newspapers' role in presenting news. But the ABC won out and was able to set up its own news department in 1936. Partly because of World War II, when the commercial stations did little to increase their own news-gathering capacity, the ABC news service developed greatly. Many now consider it the most authoritative radio news source in Australia.

For commercial radio, the dominating influence in the 1930s and for some years after World War II was the power wielded by national advertisers; particularly through Australia's two largest advertising agencies, J. Walter Thompson and George Patterson. Both had strong links with broadcasting in the United States, and both introduced a great number of American programme ideas to Australian radio. Given an Australian twist with the use of local talent and scripts, many of the shows became the most popular programmes on Australian radio. They included *Lux Radio Theatre* and *Australia's Amateur Hour*, both of which began in 1939 and were made by Thompsons for Lever Brothers, and a whole range of programmes that Pattersons made for its most important sponsor, Colgate-Palmolive. The Colgate shows really took off during the war years, and what was known as the Colgate-Palmolive Unit made the *Quiz Kids*, *Calling the Stars*, *Youth Show*, *Pick a Box* and *Can You Top This?*, among others. Through Pattersons, Colgate-Palmolive sponsored more than twenty shows over fifteen years, most of which had very high or top ratings. Stations all over Australia clamoured to get them, and Pattersons became influential enough almost to make or break a station's hold on peak listening audiences.

The agencies' power grew partly because of another important development just before the war: in 1938, the Major and Macquarie "networks" came into being. The word "network" is in inverted commas because the Major network was

not really an integrated system of affiliated stations, but an association of independents that realised the advantages of pooling resources to finance programmes. Each station in the "network" could choose which Major-produced programmes it wished to take; the "network" had no national time channels and very few programmes were common to all affiliates. The Major network, though not large, was strong, and by 1957 there were metropolitan station members in Sydney, Adelaide, Brisbane, Perth and Hobart, and eleven country stations spread over New South Wales, Victoria, Queensland, Tasmania, South Australia and Western Australia.

Naturally, the Major affiliates quickly made arrangements with Thompsons and Pattersons to broadcast their national programmes; the Major stations and the agencies were enthusiastic about the amount of money they made.

However, selling programmes was more difficult for stations that were not Major affiliates. They had to depend on local sponsors, since the national advertisers tended to go with the Major network. Out of this weakness, the Macquarie network came into being in July 1938. It differed from the Major-affiliated stations because Macquarie followed a policy of "one in, all in"; Macquarie programmes were broadcast over the entire network and advertisers had to buy time on all member stations on a collective basis. This worked very much to the advantage of smaller country stations; advertisers had to use them if they wanted the benefit of the more popular city-based outlets.

By the late 1950s, the Macquarie network had grown to the point where it had twenty-two stations in cities and country areas, with Sydney's 2GB as the key station and metropolitan outlets in Canberra, Melbourne, Brisbane, Adelaide, Perth and Hobart. Macquarie also placed some programmes on thirty-nine other country stations in New South Wales, Victoria, Queensland, Western Australia and Tasmania.

Macquarie was eventually able to take a great many top-rating programmes, particularly the Colgate-Palmolive shows, and the network went from strength to strength. But their "one for all and all for one" policy was severely tested after the war, when Colgate decided to broadcast its shows on some Macquarie member stations and not on others. Because Macquarie stood firm and insisted on the rights of its members, Colgate withdrew its shows and programmed them on the Major network.

Other national advertisers did the same thing, starting a "run" on the network similar to a run on a bank; also they withdrew their programmes and placed them with the opposition. It took a long time for Macquarie to recover, but the network eventually managed to do so, and its executives vowed that from then on the network would control its own programmes and personalities. Never again did advertisers gain such a crippling hold on the network.

As well as the two national commercial networks, smaller associations of stations grouped by region grew up in Victoria, Queensland, South Australia, Western Australia and Tasmania during and after the war. Some had affiliations with the national commercial networks.

The establishment of networking — both ABC and commercial — was one of the most important things that has happened in Australia's radio history. Networks provided a valuable and stimulating mixture of rural and city programming. Just because a station had comparatively few listeners spread over a wide area, it did not have to miss out on the big, city-produced, top-rating shows.

Networking, of course, allowed many radio personalities to become big names; literally household words. Listeners from Kalgoorlie to Hobart knew Jack Davey, Bob Dyer, Terry Dear, Mo, the Argonauts and a score of others. Wherever listeners were, they could usually hear their favourite

programmes. Fan magazines and newspapers fed people's urge to find out as much about the top radio names as they could ("Jack Davey relaxes at the wheel of his new Packard"). Paradoxically, however, though listeners became very familiar with their national personalities and knew a lot about their private lives, they didn't usually regard them as close friends. The more listeners knew about and heard the national personalities, the more remote and glamorous they often thought these people were.

The six years of World War II gave commercial radio the biggest boost it had ever received. Newsprint was in very short supply, so advertisers had to look to radio to sell their products. National advertisers headed by the sponsors that Pattersons and Thompsons represented poured money into radio, and more money meant the development of more and better programmes.

The war also meant that Australian radio could no longer depend on transcriptions of American programmes, so Australia had to make its own. And because advertisers were spending so much more money on radio, smaller, independent production companies greatly increased the number of shows they made, could sell them to sponsors more readily and could place them on national networks. Such companies as Grace Gibson Productions in Sydney and Hector Crawford Productions in Melbourne made and sold shows that were broadcast overseas as well as in Australia.

In 1958, the total amount earned by the Australian radio transcription business through sales here and overseas exceeded one million pounds.

At the end of World War II, radio in Australia was a varied, diversified and professional industry. The bakelite box had truly come into its own. Although a great number of programme ideas were not home-grown (most originated in the United States; some came from Britain) they were given a distinctively Australian flavour.

Radio created employment for an army of writers, journalists, actors, technical people and personalities in a way that television has never done in this country. Putting on programmes was relatively cheap. There was room for improvisation, for new ideas, for creativity, for ad hocery; radio in Australia has always had to live by its wits.

This book celebrates the industry and the way in which its voice came to people out of the bakelite box.

Radio's story from the end of the war to the coming of television is partly told in the words of the people who helped to make it such a vital medium. They are announcers, writers, producers, journalists — people behind the microphone as well as in front of it. Some of their names are well known today, others are less familiar; all put their stamp upon the world of radio in Australia over at least twenty years.

I have asked them to describe their world of radio. This they have done, giving often hilarious insights into life inside and outside the studio — as well as penetrating comments about the characters and techniques of performers who are no longer alive, such as Jack Davey and Roy Rene.

This book, then, is not a history. It is an impressionistic survey. By using the voices of the people whose industry it was, as well as interpolating extracts from scripts and commentaries on well-known programmes, I have tried to build up a word picture of radio as it was. The book concentrates on national programmes and personalities, those that people who listened to the bakelite box will recall most readily.

So here it is. In a paraphrase of the famous opening line from that most glutinous of serials, *When a Girl Marries*, this book is dedicated to all those who love radio . . . and to those who can remember. I hope that readers whose early lives were, like mine, intertwined with the existence of the bakelite box will enjoy switching it on again in memory.

Part 1: The Programmes

1
Mo and Co

From the moment that a baggy-pants comedian walked onto a stage and asked: "Who was that lady I saw you with last night?" vaudeville was part of theatre in Australia. Variety and gag shows flourished in the 1920s and the 1930s, particularly during the Depression. People wanted to forget their troubles and guffaw at the jokes of the stand-up comics such as Mo and George Wallace, and the broader and dirtier they were, the better. But with World War II, vaudeville theatres all over the country went dark. People knew life was serious, but they still wanted the people who had cheered them up and sent them away laughing and happy — not only the comics, but the singers and specialty artists.

Towards the end of the war, they found them again — not on a theatre stage, but on radio.

Once big-time variety and gag shows started on the bakelite box, they took on their own form and momentum. First came the lavish Colgate shows, then gag shows with individual comedians, "stunts" featuring hapless members of the studio audience being asked to do funny things, and finally the comedy programmes whose impact depended on the sheer number of their set-up jokes and one-liners.

All these were slightly different in form, but they had certain things in common. The comedy was broad, the jokes loud and well telegraphed; subtlety was a word that did not exist in the joke-writer's dictionary. For this was Australia before anybody had ever heard of black humour or satire, at a time when people wanted belly laughs rather than social comment.

Audiences responded in their thousands. True, they were missing out on the chalk dust and spangles, as well as the ballet girls with their high heels and plumed headdresses, but on radio they had a much better chance of hearing their favourite comedians properly. They could join in with the audiences in the auditoriums, laughing happily at Mo, George Wallace, Dick Bentley or Bob Dyer without having to worry about the bloke in the next seat unleashing a manic laugh right on the punchlines.

The first big radio variety shows were mounted by the Colgate-Palmolive Unit. The Unit (whose manager was Ron R. Beck) also presented the *Cashmere Bouquet Show*, and the format for both programmes was similar: songs, comedy spots and orchestral numbers following each other in quick succession in front of an audience. They employed Australia's best talent and their ratings were astronomical.

To get an idea of the scope of these Colgate shows, it's necessary only to glance at any of the Unit photographs taken at the end of the 1940s. At the back is the orchestra, its members wearing black ties and white jackets and clutching a great variety of musical instruments; certainly *not* a scratch band. Dennis Collinson conducted the orchestra for the *Cashmere Bouquet Show* on Wednesday nights; Montague Brearley did *Calling the Stars* on Tuesdays. There are the

glamorous vocalists, wearing slinky evening dresses or dinner jackets, according to sex, and at the front is a motley crowd of people, beaming happily, some wearing funny hats, glasses and varying quantities of make-up. These are the comedians: Willie Fennell, Harry Griffiths, Mo, Hal Lashwood, Jack Davey, Kitty Bluett.

Then there are Ada and Elsie, two youngish-looking women who wear frilly-necked white blouses, round glasses and straw hats, under which their hair is severely pulled back.

Their real names were Rita Pauncefort and Dorothy Foster, and both had been in show business for years. Rita Pauncefort (Ada), who trained as a coloratura soprano, had sung in musical comedy in South Africa and the UK, as well as appearing in several Australian-made films (including *Rangle River* with Victor Jory). Dorothy Foster (Elsie) ran her own company in Melbourne before the war, hiring actors and producing serials and plays for radio. It was her idea to start a comedy team, and she wrote a great deal of the material. Pauncefort and Foster started doing radio comedy spots in 1941, and by the end of the war they were well established as Ada and Elsie.

Dorothy Foster was small, dark-haired and birdlike, while Rita Pauncefort was a much larger woman, with the hauteur and vowels of a duchess. They were usually introduced as "those two old-fashioned girls", at which point they would flutter to the microphone and gaze demurely at the audience for several seconds. Elsie was

A publicity shot of the Colgate-Palmolive Radio Unit in the late 1940s. In the front row wearing a dinner suit is Harry Griffiths; from left to right behind him are Queenie Ashton, Willie Fennell and Mo. Third from the right in the row behind Mo is Howard Craven, still one of Sydney's best-known announcers, and moving left along the same row one can see: Rex "Wacka" Dawe, Dorothy Foster (Elsie), Jack Burgess (Mr Bird's Nest and Horrible Herbie), Rita Pauncefort (Ada), orchestral director Dennis Collinson and comedian Dick Bentley.

supposed to be a bit brighter than Ada, but there wasn't much in it. Both of them spoke with great innocence, as befits old-fashioned girls, but what they said was scarcely sweet and demure. Innuendoes fizzed at the edges of practically every line. For instance:

"Oooh, what a thrill to see El Toro!" flutes Ada.

"What's that?" asks Elsie, in a flat Aussie voice.

"Spanish for bull."

Pause, then Elsie says, "Vote for us and reduce your taxes."

"What's that?"

"Australian for the same thing."

Boom, boom!

Like Ada and Elsie, most of the Colgate comedians had been playing radio for years, except for the man who became the Unit's brightest star. He joined it in 1946 and he didn't know much about radio, though he knew all about comedy. He was Roy Rene: Mo.

Mo had been on the vaudeville circuit for almost forty years, but had fallen out with the Tivoli management. By 1946, he could still have toured in shows, but he was tired of that. So he went into radio; before the Colgate Unit approached him, he had done a few advertising spots in Melbourne.

Mo, as everybody knows, was anything but a "clean" comedian. He had a dead-white mask of a face ringed by a blackened five o'clock shadow, and his spluttering, leering voice could turn almost anything he said into a line the colour of Reckitt's blue.

Even so, he apparently had no idea *why* people laughed at him or said he was dirty. His comedy timing, for which he was famous on stage as well as on radio, was purely a matter of instinct. Willie Fennell, who worked with him in both media, says:

Mo had no idea of construction and comedy at all . . . he was one of the few natural comics. See, Hancock, Dick Bentley, Jack Davey and every comic from the world's best down knows how to plant a line. He didn't even have a clue what his writer Freddie Parsons had done for him. He just said what was there, or what he felt like saying, and he was naturally a very funny man.

I'll never forget when I started doing stage shows. Roy and I were both in Brisbane, and I watched him work the night before I was due to go on.

His sketch before interval was a thing called 'Pearl the Sharp Shooter' and you must get a mental picture of him coming out with a horrible phallic-looking whip with a little tassel on the end, and one of the ballet girls holding a banana. Roy said: 'I do all the whip cracking and I do cracks this way, that way and up that way.' What he did with the bloody banana and the ballet kid and the whip you can't imagine. It was the filthiest *sketch, and the audience was killing themselves and I was thinking: 'Oh, my* God.'

At intermission I went backstage to Roy's dressing-room, and this is how the conversation went.

'Hello, Will. Enjoying the show, son?'

'Yeah, Roy, it's going great.'

'Yes, it is going pretty well. Of course, they're a very nice audience. You're on tomorrow night?'

'That's right, and I'm terrified. It's the first show I've done live on stage.'

'You'll go very well, son, because they like you from the radio and all that. But just take a bit of advice from an old trouper. You'll find up here in Brisbane they're a family mob; the grandfathers, the grandmothers and kids all come. A real family mob. So don't do anything blue.'

He was absolutely serious. I said, 'What about the whip and all that? That's as blue as I've ever seen, Roy!'

He said, 'What do you mean? It's their own dirty minds, that's all!'

He honestly didn't know why people laughed. And I stood there thinking, Jesus Christ — here's me with my little script and if I had something like that, I'd give

a thousand quid a line for it!

The thought of doing radio worried Mo a little. How would his "mob" react to him when they couldn't see him? His facial expressions, so much a part of his stage style, would be lost over the air. Besides, he would be working with people like Dick Bentley and Jack Davey, radio professionals who knew radio much better than he did. Mo never relished the thought of competition.

However, everything went well. *Calling the Stars* was done live in front of an audience at the Macquarie Auditorium, and Ron Beck advised Mo to play to those 200-odd people in exactly the same way as he did to 1000 in a theatre. All he had to do was to wear his Mo make-up and not worry about the microphone. Besides, his listeners at home knew him so well that they could visualise what he was doing as that lisping voice came over the air — even if a few words were lost in a flurry of spittle, people would laugh in the right places. Ron Beck was right. They did.

Even so, Mo took special care with his scripts. He had seen experienced radio performers underline all their lines so they wouldn't miss a cue. According to his writer, Fred Parsons, Mo was so diligent that he underlined *every word* in the script in red, whether he was speaking it or not. "His scripts always looked as though they were suffering from a particularly nasty case of varicose veins", wrote Parsons in his book *A Man Called Mo*.

Parsons and Alexander Macdonald, two of the Unit's resident writers, recast some of Mo's stage material for radio and, given the strict standards of censorship in the 1940s, this might have meant drastic cleaning-up. Fred Parsons says:

He had to be a bit cleaner for radio, but redoing his stuff was no real problem because even on stage he never actually said *blue things. He never said a word a child couldn't repeat at home — it was all by inference. All his comedy was in the way he reacted to something that somebody else had said.*

At 2GB we had a lovely old censor who wore a hearing aid. The Macquarie network employed him to come to all rehearsals and check if anything wasn't right before the show went on. If he saw the cast laughing, he'd decide the line must be blue, so he'd come to me and say: 'You can't have that line. You'll have to put in another one.' I found out then that all censors are the same; if they tell you to take out a line, they expect you to put in a clean one instead. I'd say: 'Yes, Ernie,' and substitute something that Roy could react to in an even bluer way.

As Mo pointed out: "If anything blue does get through, the censor can always say, 'Me bloody battery was flat at the time'."

Some of the things he was required to say on radio bemused Mo from time to time. Willie Fennell says:

He'd come to me or to Freddie or Alex after the show and say: 'That gag about me falling flat on my face — geeze, it went well tonight!'

We'd say, 'Yes, that was very nicely done, Roy.'

'Yes, I thought me timing was good.' Then he'd frown and I'd say: 'What's bothering you, Roy?'

Then there'd be a pause and he'd say: 'Listen Will — between you and me — I don't bloody well get it.'

I'd have to explain: 'Look, Roy, that line was planted three times, so that when you referred back, it was a play on the words.' He'd brighten up and say, 'Yes, and I did it well, didn't I?'

Mo soon became very jealous of his professional reputation on radio as elsewhere; having gained confidence in his new field, he was determined to let nobody top him, to get more laughs than he did. He and Jack Davey, another performer who was not keen on coming off second best, had a running battle. Fred Parsons describes it in *A Man Called Mo:*

Ron Beck devised a situation comedy called Colgate Cavalcade *and Jack presided over a radio Crazy Gang. Mac (Alexander Macdonald) and I tried to be fair, and we honestly wrote as many comedy lines for Davey as we did for Roy. But Roy got most of the laughs. Then one day Beck called us into his office and told us he was taking us off* Cavalcade. *We were to concentrate on* Calling the Stars *and* Ada and Elsie. *We asked Ron who was going to write* Cavalcade: *Jack Davey.*

And Jack did. The way he wrote it, he was never off microphone, and guess who got all the funniest lines! Roy was thrown an occasional crumb of comedy, but Jack made a big mistake. Instead of writing him completely out of a scene, he kept him on with about three lines to a page of script . . . Roy stood at Jack's elbow with hardly a word to say and mugged as only he knew how to do. The audience was in hysterics. They didn't look at Jack and the laughter drowned out all his best lines.

Even when he isn't saying a word, you can't keep an old pro down.

In 1947 Dick Bentley went to England, leaving a gap in *Calling the Stars*. Ron Beck asked Fred Parsons for a regular sketch to fill up the twelve-minute spot that Bentley had occupied — and Parsons wrote the first of a series called *McCackie Mansion*. It starred Roy Rene as Mo McCackie, a devious, ingratiating character who was inclined to be obsequious to people's faces but who would mutter things about them behind their backs.

Mo was playing on radio the kind of stage character that had made him famous; even the character's name came from his vaudeville years. Years before, Mo had done a sketch involving a hotel manager

The cast of McCackie Mansion *in rehearsal. From left: Hal Lashwood, Harry Avondale, Harry Griffiths, Mo and Jack Burgess. The Colgate Orchestra is behind them.*

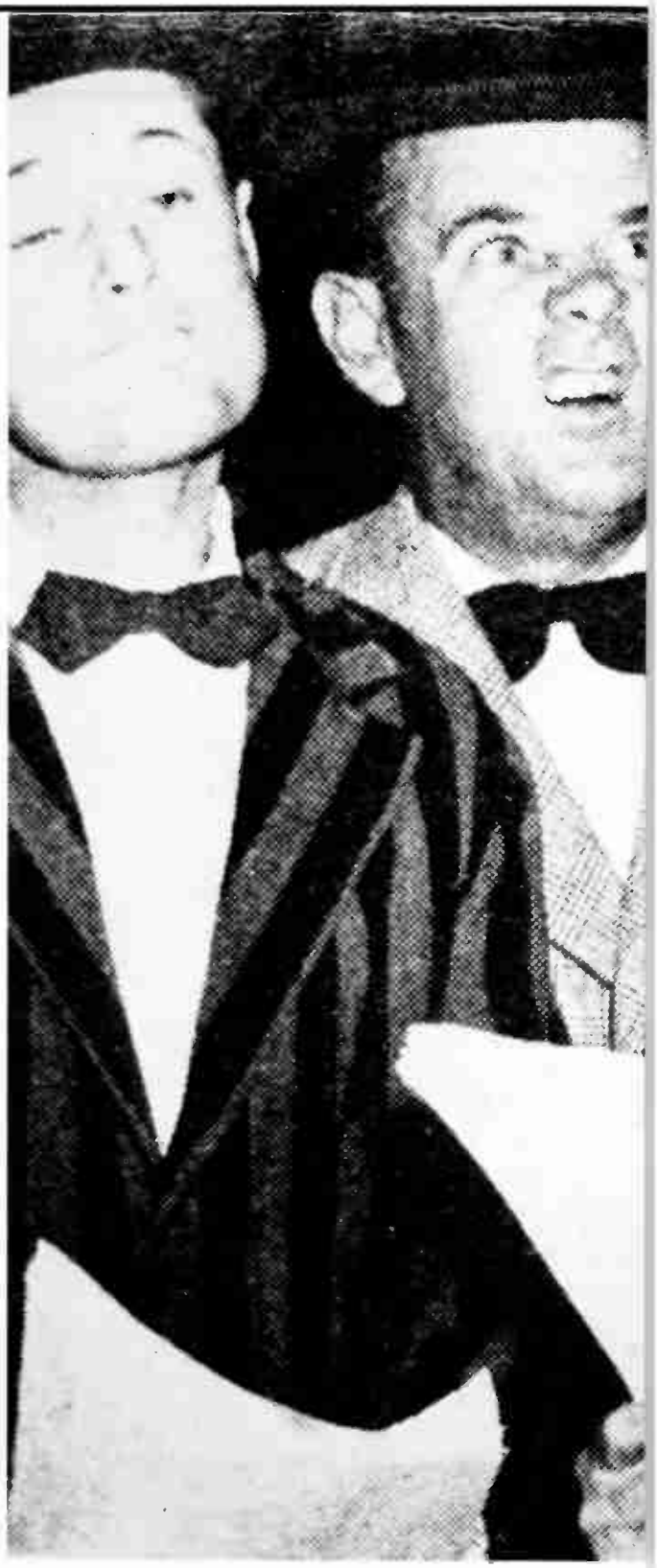
named McCackie, and he got so many laughs out of the rude way he said Mc*Cack*ie on stage that he decided to use the name again on radio.

For his role as McCackie, Mo even wore a modified version of his stage make-up. His hair was plastered to his head, and his face displayed the familiar white paint with black outlining his eyes and his moustache and covering his chin. He also wore a vaudeville-type costume of appallingly baggy trousers and an undershirt with sleeves to the elbow and a button at the neck.

McCackie Mansion was intended to last for six weeks; it ran for two and a half years. People still think that it comprised the entire hour of *Calling the Stars*, but it occupied about one-fifth of the show's running time.

Why? Because *McCackie Mansion* had many of the best-loved ingredients of vaudeville comedy. Just as Harry Lauder's stock-in-trade was being a mean Scotsman, so Mo McCackie's stock-in-trade was being Jewish. The signature tune for the show, played wildly by the full Colgate orchestra, was "Mazel Tov". *McCackie Mansion* usually included at least one joke per week about Mo's nose, usually mentioned slightingly by one of the other characters, as well as gags about Haile Selassie; the Lion of Judah was not only supposed to resemble Mo slightly, but the fact that Mo was Jewish gave the line added point. Nowadays lines like these would be considered offensive — but in the 1940s they had 'em rolling in the aisles.

Then there were the stock phrases the characters used. "If we didn't have Mo saying 'you filthy beast', we'd get phone calls and letters demanding why," says Fred Parsons. Mr Lasho (Hal Lashwood) always announced his entrance with:



McCackie Mansion *in performance. From left: Mr Lasho (Hal Lashwood), Horrible Herbie (Jack Burgess), Spencer the Garbage Man (Harry Avondale), Young Harry (Harry Griffiths) and Mo McCackie (Mo).*

"Aaaaah there, McCackie!" Spencer the Garbage Man (Harry Avondale) invariably said: "It's little me, Spencer"; when Mo McCackie's son Young Harry (Harry Griffiths) made some particularly offensive remark to his father, Mo's reply was: "Cop this, Young Harry!" and thump! a slapstick would descend on Harry's hapless cranium. So well known did this catchphrase become that it has passed into the Australian language, meaning more or less: "Here you are", or "Have a go at this". You still hear the expression occasionally.

Then there were the roles played by the other characters. Young Harry, who had the wholesome, guileless air of the young Mickey Rooney in the Andy Hardy films with Judy Garland, wore sports trousers and a cheerfully coloured short-sleeved pullover over his shirt. He was the only member of the cast who spoke in a normal, clear Australian voice, counterpointing Mo's irritated, whispering lisp and the vocal idiosyncrasies of the others. Horrible Herbie (Jack Burgess), who was Mo's next-door neighbour, wore a check coat, a crushed trilby-type hat and an expression of malevolent stupidity. He sounded as though every remark he made should have been prefaced by "duh", and his muted yokel tones make him somewhat difficult to understand from tapes these days. (Radio audiences in the 1940s obviously had keener hearing than they now have.)

Mo McCackie didn't mind Horrible, which is what he invariably called him; after all, he gave him some good feed lines. But he was less tolerant of Mr Lasho. The latter's signature call: "Aaaaah there, McCackie!" sounding like a lovesick ambulance siren, usually provoked a Moish mutter of disapproval such as: "Oh blimey, it's Mr Lasho, looking like a lubra from Maroubra." For Mr Lasho, whose voice was a curious whine, reminiscent of a race caller with a cleft palate, had a gift for stating the obvious or asking silly questions. "Are you having a *tête-à-tête* with your neighbour?" he would inquire artlessly when it was obvious that Mo and Horrible were the only two people on stage. Mo usually crushed him with a retort such as: "Mug alec!" which got a big laugh.

Mr Lasho wore a flattened felt hat with a turned-up brim, a striped sports coat, white shirt and large bow tie.

But the most bizarre of the *McCackie Mansion* characters was Spencer the Garbage Man. His arrival was heralded by a timid knock offstage.

"Who's that knocking at my doorbell?" Mo would ask. There was a breathless pause while the audience waited for it.

After a second or two, it came. "It's little me . . . Spencer!" called Harry Avondale.

There was always a whooping roar when he appeared: the slightly shocked "Ooh-ah!" of a delighted Australian audience watching something outrageous. For outrageous Spencer certainly was . . . the word "camp" is inadequate. He did not just walk onstage, like the others — he made his entrance on point like a ballerina and *pirouetted* around the stage before he said a word.

Spencer had all the stock stage homosexual mannerisms, and then some: a lisping voice, coy expressions ("Flatterer!") and a limp, limp wrist. Harry Avondale, who had been in British vaudeville for years before coming to Australia, made his stock-in-trade the contrast between his camp style and the "tough"-guy parts he was supposed to be playing. Jack Davey gave him his first radio job when he cast him as Lothar, the constant companion of Mandrake the Magician; from being a camp Nubian slave, it was a shortish step to playing an effeminate garbage man.

Avondale, a tiny man with saucer-wide brown eyes, played Spencer in dilapidated workman's clothes with a knotted handkerchief on his head.

Of course, in the 1940s Gay Liberation

Hal Lashwood greets Roy Rene in George Street, Sydney.

was not a force in the community and, to the audiences of the time, homosexuals were funny; at least on stage. But it still seems odd that, at a time when the word "bloody" was banned on radio, Spencer was quite acceptable.

Spencer was not in the least an offensive character, except in the olfactory sense. He never bridled at Mo's: "Come in, Spencer dear, but stand down wind of me . . . oh, peeeeew!" and other tributes to his lack of personal freshness. The contrast between his dimpling sweetness and remarks about the odours he attracted in pursuit of his profession provided some of *McCackie Mansion*'s best comedy. The biggest laugh Harry Avondale ever got was when he coyly confided to Mo that his surname was "Smellie".

Spencer also gave Mo some excellent opportunities for his style of laughs-by-innuendo. For instance:

SPENCER: Oh, mercy me, I nearly forgot! The postman came up and thrust an epistle into my hot little hand.

MO (*spluttering*): The filthy beast!

No wonder Mo never tried to upstage Harry Avondale; he didn't need to. "He could bounce back off Spencer," Parsons says. "And if Spencer got a laugh, Roy could always top it." Harry Avondale was one comic of whom Mo was not jealous.

McCackie Mansion delighted audiences for almost three years. Then Ron Beck resigned from the Colgate Unit and set up his own company, taking Fred Parsons with him. Mo stumbled on for about a year in an unfunny show called *It Pays to Be Ignorant* — but quiz shows were gradually replacing big-time variety (they were popular in the United States and much cheaper to put on) and Mo went out of radio for about eighteen months.

He returned late in 1952 to star in the *New Atlantic Show*. His co-stars were Patricia Shay and Pat Hodgins, an announcer and comedian whose claim to fame was that he sounded almost more like Jack Davey than Davey did.

In the new show, Mo's comic timing was unimpaired. Fred Parsons, who was writing for him again, remembers doing a comedy routine for him and Pat Hodgins, which lasted for two minutes and consisted of Hodgins making a series of about twenty remarks, to each of which Mo simply replied, "Oh".

"Each 'oh' was completely different, and every single one had a big laugh," says Fred Parsons. "I can't think of any other comic who could get belly laughs with the constant repetition of a single word."

Mo was in the *New Atlantic Show* until he had a heart attack and couldn't work again. He always thought he would come back and be top once more; after all, he had conquered this new medium of radio, and he wasn't going to sit back and let the mug alecs take over. But Fred Parsons knew that, once he left the show, he would never return. He says:

The last thing I wrote for Roy was a thing I knew would never get to air. Ron Beck was producing a show called Actors' Playhouse, *and Roy wanted to be in it. Ron and I knew it was useless, but we got together and I wrote a half-hour* Actors' Playhouse *for Roy. It was about a comic who wanted to play Hamlet. Roy loved it because it would enable him to use what he called 'me lovely pathos' and would show the mugs that he could do 'smart stuff' as well as straight comedy. But it was one of the hardest scripts I have ever written — because I knew all the time that Roy would never do it. He was too sick.*

Mo died on 22 November 1954.

Since his death, there have been dozens of tributes to him in the form of books, plays, radio shows (one of the best known was Hal Lashwood's *Memories of Mo* in 1957). Because of radio, Mo gained a huge new audience that would have taken years to build up in vaudeville, and, largely because of radio, people remember and use some of the phrases that Mo introduced into the Australian language: "One of my

mob", "You little trimmer", "I don't know whether to kiss him or kick him" and, of course, "Cop this, Young Harry".

Was he so popular just because Australians' taste in comedy was less sophisticated in the 1940s than it is now? Not according to Fred Parsons, who says that Graham Kennedy used elements of the Mo style years later on television.

Graham once told me that he only saw Mo on stage once, yet he often asked me whether I'd adapt one of his old scripts for television, which I did. Although Graham played it as himself, of course, he managed to pick up the right timing instinctively, and a lot of the inflections were Roy's too.

Graham Kennedy himself modestly says that the only common factor between himself and Mo was Fred Parsons, who wrote for them both. However, Australians loved Graham Kennedy's cheeky style on his show *In Melbourne Tonight* during the 1960s, too. If Fred Parsons is right, and Kennedy was Mo's successor, it proves that vaudeville didn't die with Mo.

The Colgate shows gave Mo a huge new audience on radio; they also enabled a twenty-five-year-old ex-radio operator to begin a career in comedy that has lasted up to the present day. He was Willie Fennell.

"I was bloody lucky," he says. "I started at the top." It happened when George Blackshaw, one of the leading comedians with the Unit, died, and the Unit was looking for a replacement in *Calling the Stars*. Quaking in his shoes, Fennell decided to audition, never having done any professional radio work whatever. He says:

At that time, my pride and joy were my Hollywood impressions. They were my pièce de résistance *— I did Ronald Colman, W. C. Fields, Lionel Barrymore. So did everybody, but I thought I was good. So I did those for the audition.*

At the same time, I thought I'd do a little send-up I'd written when I was about twelve, and did for Army shows and at parties. I had once heard a London racing commentator who said things like: 'There's rather a small horse leading, not too big, a sort of medium-sized horse, he's going along very well', so I had written a sketch about a terribly toffy BBC race commentator doing the Ascot Handicap. The guy told you absolutely nothing about the horse and ended up having to get information about the results from somebody else.

I didn't like it very much, and thought it was a bit sophisticated for most audiences, but I put it down on the audition disc anyway because I couldn't think of anything else to do — apart from my fabulous Hollywood impressions, of course!

To my surprise, Ron Beck liked the racing commentator thing, and said: 'We'd like you to do this next Tuesday night in a spot. How would fifteen pounds suit you as a fee?'

How would it suit *me? At the time I was getting five pounds eighteen and six a week for six days' solid work. I said, 'Yes, that would be very nice'.*

It was a wonderful opportunity for a young, untried comedian; the best chance he could possibly have had in Australia. "At the time," he says, "the Colgate shows were going on a network of fifty-nine stations and the response was unbelievable ... they got a rating of something like fifty-eight per cent."

Willie Fennell began to learn the art of comedy timing by doing his five-minute spot week after week for nine months. He called his first character Phooey.

When I hear the first tape I made today, I simply can't believe how awful *I was. I'd never had people laugh at me like that before; I rode through all the laughs, because I just wanted the audience in the auditorium to shut up and listen. My timing was terrible. After the first show Ron said: 'That was all right, Will, but you've got to learn to* wait *for the laughs, mate!'*

Phooey, the supercilious English character, developed every week. "I did all sorts of sketches with him," Fennell says. "One of my things was a sketch about planting poppy gardens in concentric circles — a send-up of suburbia. The sort of thing Barry Humphries did later."

Willie Fennell was not only learning from the other writers in the Unit, experienced professionals such as Fred Parsons, Alexander Macdonald and Al Thomas, but was being paid handsomely for the privilege — twenty pounds a week after the first few months.

Then Ron Beck came to him with an idea for another character.

'Will,' he said, 'I think the Phooey character is a bit blasé, a bit sophisticated. I reckon you could play a real Australian character — something with a bit of pathos.'

I told him I'd think about it and was just heading out of his office when I said: 'Good on yer, mate.'

Ron Beck said: 'What's that! What about, "'Ow are yer, mate"!'

That phrase gave Willie Fennell his idea for a "character with a bit of pathos". At the time, there was a popular British comedian named Horace Kenny, a doleful character who was always getting jokes wrong and meekly accepting the unflattering comments of his superiors. ("That's not very good; we can't use that sort of comedy." "Oh, oh. When will I come back?" "I would suggest maybe the third of July next." "Oh, righto, sir ... morning or afternoon?")

Fennell batted the Kenny character around for a bit, picked up the gloomy underdog character, and gave him an Australian voice. He wore a viciously checked coat, a Chico Marx-type felt hat and a pencil-thin moustache ... and came out on stage the following week with the line: "'Ow are yer, mate?" He called the character Willie and he was a success from the start. "The spot was with Kitty Bluett and Jack Burgess," says Fennell, "and Kitty broke up at the character the first time. I've still got a tape of that — we all broke up in the middle of the spot."

"'Ow are yer, mate?" spoken in a voice that implied that the answer should be, "Awful", became a catchphrase — and Fennell became known as Willie "'ow are yer mate" Fennell.

He says:

I think Willie was so popular because he was always the little guy who got slapped around by big business. That's why everybody identified with him. He was a much stronger character than he would have been if I'd tried to make him clever!

Nowadays people think Willie was just a character who did sketches about anything — but he wasn't. I always used what was topical. If cab drivers were in the news, he was Willie the cab driver. When we had electricity blackouts and the big powerhouse at Bunnerong near Sydney went, I came on the next night and said to Jack Burgess: 'I've got a little pome, Mr Bird's Nest. Would you like to hear it!'

'No, thank you.'

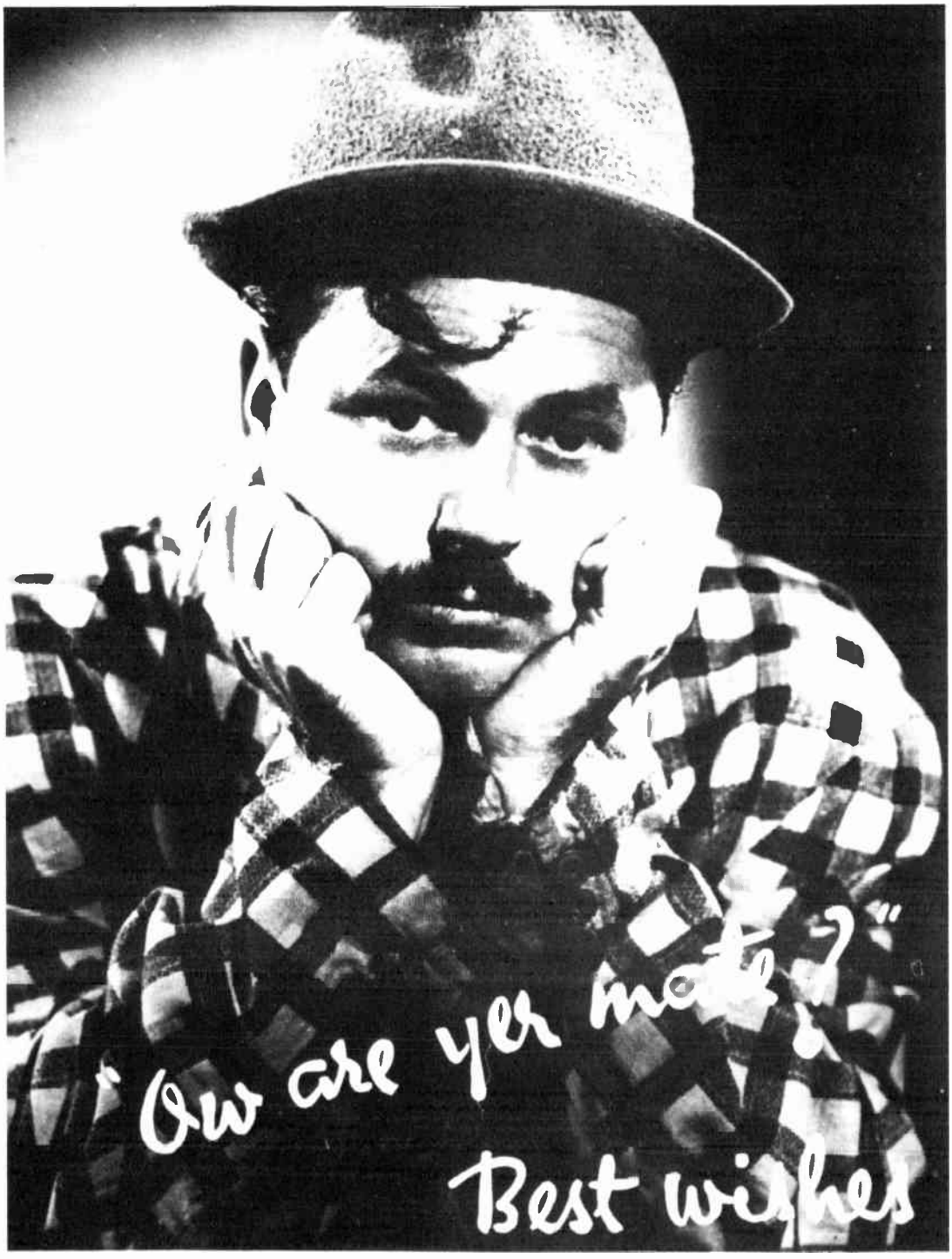
'Well, I'll tell it to you anyway,
because it's very good.
It ain't a story and it ain't a song,
It ain't too short and it ain't too
long,
But I've wrote this ode to Bunnerong,
Where they bung 'er off and they
bung 'er on.'

So popular was Willie as a character that Fennell took over the top comedy spot in the *Cashmere Bouquet Show* with Ada and Elsie. And Fennell, who had originally joined the Colgate Unit on a week-by-week basis, stayed with them for years.

• • •

George Wallace's career had been a long and celebrated one well before he came to

Willie Fennell as the mournful underdog, Willie.



from Willie Fennell

radio. He had been in just about every form of show business there was: films, musical comedy, club work, vaudeville. He's remembered and loved as a vaudeville comedian par excellence: people still recall the little bloke with short legs and big eyes doing stage sketches such as "Sophie the Sort on the Bus", and appearing with Dinks Patterson as the comedy team of Dinks and Onkus. He was much more the Aussie everyman than Mo was: the original larrikin, a real "cheeky bugger".

Like Mo, he had misgivings about how his vaudeville technique would transfer to radio. If he couldn't use his rolling eyes or his hands, would he still be as funny? In a 1949 magazine interview, he frankly admitted his difficulties. "The hardest thing about working in radio is keeping my voice down," he said. "After years on the stage where you have to raise your voice to make a point, I found in radio that this only made the mike blast, and it took me a long time to break the habit of wanting to shout at it.

"I found it very hard to read from a script and act at the same time, too. In the early stages I learned every script by heart so that I didn't have to wear my glasses. My hands were free to swing around so I was able to forget all about the microphone. I slowly overcame the menace of the script which, by the way, I am still inclined to hold in front of my face."

But during the late 1940s and early 1950s, George Wallace emerged triumphantly as George "Wallaby" Wallace, chief identity of the outback town of Bullamacanka (or Bullamakanka: the spelling is a matter of personal taste). Like its sister town, Woop Woop, Bullamacanka is unlisted in any Australian atlas, and it has gone into the language as a synonym for the back of beyond. At this stage it is unclear whether Bullamacanka was invented by George Wallace and his co-stars in programmes such as *The George Wallace Road Show*, but it certainly had a life of its own on radio.

The George Wallace shows differed from the programmes made by the Colgate Unit in several important respects. Singers and instrumentalists were introduced as residents of the town, which gave the whole show a distinctly rural identity. (The publicity described a series as one in which "a little fat fellow runs a barn dance every week . . . and locals are introduced every session".)

Like *Calling the Stars* and the *Cashmere Bouquet Show*, the George Wallace shows were performed live in front of a studio audience. However, the styles of George Wallace and Mo on radio were different. Unlike Mo, Wallace didn't have his own particular set of catchphrases, and the Bullamacanka characters had fewer recognisable mannerisms such as costumes or funny voices. They spoke standard (though stage rural) Australian, and the humour depended on fast gags rather than vaudeville-type routines. Though the humour of the Wallace shows stands up better now than does, say, *Calling the Stars*, the characters did not have the same predictability and therefore the same kind of familiarity as did the people living in and around McCackie Mansion.

Take this extract from a typical George Wallace show broadcast during the early 1950s.

The announcer, George Foster (who also wrote most of the scripts . . . he was one of radio's most prolific gag writers) says: "We bring you another dramatic epic by the Bullamacanka dramatic players. Tonight's play, ladies and gentlemen, is a story of the Foreign Legion, and being a story of the Foreign Legion, it takes place in . . ."

"Kings Cross." Enter George Wallace, the interrupter. Those two words make it clear immediately that Foster's role is going to be that of straight man.

"I'd just like to warn you," says George Foster, "that it may be necessary for some of the characters in this play to speak French."

George Wallace.

"I can speak French," Wallace assures him. "Gave me whole order at a restaurant in French the other night. The waiter was amazed."

"You gave the whole order in French?"

"The whole lot of it in French, yes." Just in case the audience misses the point, this is the "plant" for the gag coming up.

"My heavens," adds Wallace, "the waiter was astounded."

"Why was that?" asks George Foster.

Wait for it . . .

"Well, it was a Chinese café I went to."

Boom, boom!

The reply from George Foster is: "Will you do me a favour? Go and commit chop sueyside."

That one gets a groan, and it sounds as if it's coming from the cast as well as from the audience.

"You're brilliant tonight!" says Wallace. "I never suspected you were so smart."

"Well, thank you," replies Foster, modestly.

"You're not as dim as you sim."

There's a good, full laugh on that one.

Foster is still doggedly explaining the plot of this thespian extravaganza to Wallace.

"Now," he says, "secretly in cohorts with Fifi Bonbon . . ." Then follows a vaudeville exchange showing that Mrs Malaprop has a lot to answer for.

"Co what?"

"Cohorts."

"Cohorts?"

"Cohorts."

Payoff: "I didn't have any long trousers, so I wore cohorts."

"George," says Foster, "you play an Arabian sheik, Abdul the Bulbul."

"Abdul the Bulbul?"

"Yes. You play a mighty Moroccan chieftain, in charge of the parliament."

"Aah," says Wallace understandingly, "hence the bull bull."

And so it goes . . .

George Wallace was in radio comedy longer than Mo: he presented and starred in gag programmes of this kind almost up to his death in 1960. His son, George Wallace Jr, also did radio comedy, though he carried on the family tradition on television, presenting a show, *Theatre Royal*, in Brisbane for many years.

It was television vaudeville, and it wasn't so very different from the quick, sure-fire radio style his old man had developed in the days of Bullamacanka.

• • •

"Fun! For every wrong answer, this contestant loses a garment! This'll slay you!"

It laid 'em in the aisles, in fact. This was a line from the publicity for the Bob Dyer stunt shows in the late 1940s and early 1950s. They were different from the other vaudeville shows on radio at the time for, instead of a comedian or a group of people getting up in front of an audience and telling jokes, the Dyer shows depended for their fun on members of the audience themselves. They had titles like *Can You Take It?* and *It Pays to be Funny*, and their formula was basically simple. People were hauled from the studio audience and, if they failed to answer a quiz question or questions correctly, they had to pay a forfeit in the form of a stunt. (This sometimes applied even when they got the questions right.)

The forfeits were often fiendish. Sometimes, as already mentioned, hapless contestants had to divest themselves of their clothing; they might even have to stand in the firing line of custard pies. In one 1955 episode of *It Pays to be Funny*, a Liberal Party and a Labor Party supporter discussed their political differences by dressing up in crowns and voluminous robes and squirting each other with soda siphons; an interesting comment on politics as vaudeville.

The idea for the stunt shows originated in the United States. The American radio and television star Art Linkletter allowed Bob Dyer to use and adapt his scripts and stunts for Australian audiences.

And Dyer was the right person to present this kind of vaudeville, whether slapstick or elaborate set-up stunts. He was born in Tennessee, and had had a tough grounding in the art of standing up and amusing people on stage because he had travelled around on the vaudeville circuits. Dyer came to Australia with the Marcus variety shows in 1937, billed as "the last of the hillbillies", and playing the ukulele and singing bluegrass ballads. A tall, dark man, he was noted for having an impressive moustache that would have graced an RAF officer had its owner not happened to be a product of the US of A.

Harry Griffiths, who worked with Dyer as well as being Young Harry, recalls:

I first met Bob when I was six or seven years old, when my father was in the Tivoli orchestra playing first trombone for the Marcus shows. If Bob didn't steal the show, he came darned near it, and he was a big hit.

He was a good actor, musical and full of life. He knew how to do gags, and was a thoroughly trained performer. You see, he'd learned his trade in the hardest possible way, touring with travelling shows and doing five shows a day in the US. He told me once that nobody used to speak between performances, because if your voice went, you didn't work.

I said to him once: 'I've never seen you in a situation in show business where you didn't know all the answers.' He said: 'Well, if you'd done all the work I have, you'd know the answers; you can't help picking them up.'

Knowing all the answers becomes most enjoyable when you are asking other people the questions, or asking them to do what you want. This was the case in the Dyer stunt shows. Dyer, who was not naturally a funny man, plotted all the stunts he used meticulously; his job was to control the action, make sure that the audience as well as the "victim" knew what was expected, and lead the audience laughter and applause. Dyer's professionalism came through by the way in which he convinced everybody that the whole thing was as spontaneous as possible; the victim had no idea what he would be required to do, and neither did the audience, until the very last minute. This made the whole thing great fun.

Harry Griffiths, who worked closely with Dyer in preparing the shows, says:

I was the liaison between his company, Bob Dyer Productions, and George Pattersons, the advertising agents for Colgate-Palmolive, who sponsored the shows. Bob used to pay me and Colgate used to pay me, too.

I'd take the scripts up to Bob for the commercials and tell him how the Colgate people wanted them done, and Bob used me to go over the audience and pick out the various victims.

I'd look for somebody who seemed to be a bit of an extrovert, by warming the audience up before we went to air.

I'd pick somebody and say, 'I'll just ask you a simple question: what would you fill a box with to make it lighter?' Some smart guy would say, 'Helium', and I'd say: 'You couldn't fill it with helium — it would leak out the cracks. Why don't you try saying "holes"?' Bang, and on to the next one. 'Why do ducks fly south in the winter?' The guy might say, 'It's warmer'. 'Nothing of the kind — it's easier than walking.'

If I found a suitable victim — and I always did — I'd say: 'You, sir, come out here for a second.' Some of the people were born showmen, real laughers and talkers, and they were the ones we wanted.

We might dress a man up in a black hat, an overcoat, a pair of dark glasses and a muffler, and he'd have to go out into George Street and sell pound notes for ten bob.

"And you'll try and sell pound notes for ten shillings and come back and tell us what happened!" cried Bob Dyer, sounding

like a cross between an auctioneer and a revivalist preacher.

"Can you take it?" There was a murmur from the contestant standing beside him; he was probably thinking of all the prizes he stood to win; either that or how on earth he would face the blokes at work in the morning.

"He can take it!" Bob Dyer would yell at the audience, and they all applauded wildly.

"The gags might have been more obvious than Jack Davey's quick slick humour," says Harry Griffiths, "but Bob knew what people wanted. His stuff was for the masses."

The guy would come back at the end of the show and tell us how he got on; Bob would paint a mental picture of this poor bloke scaring the hell out of people by offering them money dressed in this sinister gear. You wouldn't believe *how hard it was to sell pound notes for ten bob!*

Sometimes we'd have to make sure the stunt worked; we'd make *it bloody work!*

Sometimes the stunts were so bizarre and funny that Griffiths and Dyer didn't have to do any extra work. The most celebrated one was the time that a service station proprietor, Ray Mitchell, was offered fifty pounds to wheel a pram containing a midget along Sydney's Pitt Street at lunchtime one day. The idea was that people would peep inside the pram, ready to make cooing noises, and get the shock of their lives when they found themselves looking into the face of an adult male wearing a frilly bonnet and smoking a cigar, with a baby's bottle in one hand and a hooter in the other.

As soon as people realised what was

Another popular Bob Dyer show of the early 1950s required listeners and contestants to guess a "secret sound". Here Dyer experiments with discs and recording equipment to make the "sound" as ingenious as possible.

happening, they came rushing out of city offices, stopping on the streets, crowding around the pram. Traffic was tied up for almost an hour. The newsreel pictures look as though downtown Sydney was the scene of a minor riot, and the stunt got tremendous press and cinema publicity. It even landed Bob Dyer in court, charged with procuring, aiding and abetting. "He was fined two quid for creating a nuisance," says Keith Smith, who watched the stunt from the balcony of the Australia Hotel.

People loved the stunt shows; part of their appeal was almost certainly that humans enjoy seeing their fellows put into funny and sometimes embarrassing situations. (This feature of human nature has since been exploited by Barry Humphries when, as Dame Edna Everage, he hauls people on to the stage and satirises them unmercifully.) But few "victims" came out of the stunt shows with hard feelings; Bob Dyer was always genial and good-humoured and the prizes for doing ridiculous things were substantial.

At least once a contestant came out on top. The trade paper *Broadcasting and Television* ran this story in 1955:

Colgate-Palmolive compere Bob Dyer recently gave one of his It Pays to be Funny *contestants a sealed box to test her curiosity. She had to return it intact the following week, and if the seals were unbroken, she would get a prize. If she peeped in the box, she had to take what it contained. She returned it with the seals unbroken; Dyer duly paid out the prize and asked her if she hadn't been curious to know what was inside.*

'I know . . . there's a mousetrap in it,' she said. 'I had it X-rayed.'

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In the years between World War II and the early 1960s a tremendous number of jokes poured out of the bakelite box; innuendoes, elaborate set-up gags, one-liners. From this distance, it seems little short of incredible how many vaudeville comedy shows there were, and how many writers worked to produce them.

Writing gag comedy is a peculiar art and, like being able to deliver jokes, it cannot be taught. "Gag writing is more perspiration than inspiration," says Keith Smith, who wrote hundreds of comedy sketches for programmes such as the *Club Show* during the 1950s. "A gag writer has to have a good memory, a finely developed sense of humour and an inclination to see the funny side of things." These qualities, added to an instinctive sense of timing, were honed to a fine edge by years of professional practice.

All writers of comedy sketches — Fred Parsons, Alexander Macdonald, Willie Fennell, Keith Smith, Dorothy Foster, Jack Davey, George Foster and many others — worked at a cracking pace. "To do the *Club Show*, Jack Davey, George Foster and I started with a blank sheet of paper at nine o'clock in the morning," says Keith Smith. "By four-thirty, we had to have written three spots for a half-hour show. And they had to be funny."

When Jack Davey was writing his own comedy spots, he would sit down with a pencil and paper, scribble furiously until he had finished the script and pick up a ruler and measure the page. "There has to be a laugh in every inch of this," he said. And Dorothy Foster found writing gags compulsive. As recently as 1980, long after Ada and Elsie had fluttered to the microphone for the last time, she said: "I still write a gag a day, just to keep in touch."

George Foster, a man with mad eyes and the dapper moustache of a used-car salesman, kept a record of every joke he put into the George Wallace shows, *Bonningtons Bunkhouse*, the *Club Show* and a host of others. Keith Smith says: "I've still got all of George's files . . . there are tens of thousands of jokes in them."

Having to produce funny lines and situations under pressure occasionally meant that writers tripped themselves up. Fred

Parsons recalls the time that he and Alexander Macdonald wrote a sketch for one of the Colgate shows in which Mo and Jack Davey headed a team of firemen. The payoff was that the fire they were supposed to control was becoming worse and worse because fireman Mo had accidentally connected the hose to a petrol tank.

The sketch was ready to go to air live that evening, but Parsons and Macdonald discovered that there had been an accident and six firemen had been killed. This would obviously be fresh in the minds of their listeners, so they had to scrap the sketch on the grounds of taste. "We had to go like mad late that afternoon to get something else ready," says Parsons laconically, not thinking to mention the craft demanded in writing a completely new situation, with gags, from scratch in something like three hours.

The new sketch was ready on time, and was duly presented. The following week Parsons and Macdonald decided to use the fireman sketch ... and it went to air on the evening of the day that the firemen were buried. There was a storm of protest, and the Colgate team was accused of poor taste. As Fred Parsons points out, "Sometimes you just can't win!"

Like Parsons and Macdonald on the Colgate shows, many gag writers worked in pairs or teams, bouncing ideas off each other, coming up with gags, using them, rejecting them. "You had to draw on an amalgam of ideas," says Keith Smith; ideally that amalgam was so complete that at the end nobody could say which member of the team had been responsible for what jokes.

Given the volume of comedy material being produced for so many years, it was impossible to think of fresh gags and situations all the time, or even for most of it. There have always been stock situations in comedy sketches: characters on a desert island, in love, meeting native tribes in the jungle, and so on. "They have to be situations on which you can hang jokes," says Keith Smith.

Scenes in bed are perfect. For the Club Show *we had a routine when Jack Davey was always dreaming at night about a lovely woman named Gloria, and it drove George Foster and me crazy. So to psych him out of it, we put a billygoat in bed with him — the fun came when he described what was happening.*

He'd say, 'Gloria, Gloria', running his hands over her: 'Oh, Gloria, I love you; those eyes, that mouth ... what a funny place to find two bumps!' That sort of stuff lends itself to lovely gag writing. If you combine situations with gags, you have the two most important things working for you.

Some people might consider that puns are the lowest form of wit; gag writers did not, and they made them a staple of their shows. George Wallace's line "You're not as dim as you sim" is a good example; and Keith Smith adds: "When we were doing the *Club Show*, which was sponsored by a company that made razor blades, we had a situation where some people broke into a bowling club and stole the members' blazers. The newspaper headline was 'CLUB BLAZER RAIDS'."

Giving established characters their own stock phrases is a well-tried comedy writing technique. Fans of *McCackie Mansion* expected to hear Mr Lasho say, "Aaaaah there, McCackie!" and to laugh when Young Harry copped this every week. And some listeners still remember a running exchange between Jack Davey and Keith Smith on the *Club Show* in the 1950s. Whenever Davey said, "Excuse me", Keith Smith, who played a quavery-voiced character called Grandpa, invariably replied, "Why, f-f-f-son, what did you do?" (One occasionally hears people over the age of thirty say that, even now ...)

In comedy writing, as in everything else, fashions change over the years. Some gags that audiences thought hilarious in the 1950s are likely to be greeted with stony silence these days. Keith Smith says, perhaps a trifle wistfully, "We were lucky

because there was no prohibition about making jokes on anything much."

What would now be regarded as arrant racism was always good for a laugh. Keith Smith:

You could do Jewish jokes then, like that one of Mo's when he said he was as lonely as a ham sandwich at a Jewish picnic.

We had a sketch once, too, about a native tribe — jungle sequences were always good for gags — and the chief said to George Foster: 'You are different from me and I am different from you.'

George's reply was: 'Well, what do you know! Licorice allsorts!'

Although they didn't turn a hair at jokes like these, audiences sometimes got upset about peculiar things. Keith Smith remembers the Great Wooden Leg Controversy.

We once used an ancient gag: 'I was engaged to a girl with a wooden leg.' 'What happened!' 'I broke it off.' You wouldn't believe it, but a journalist complained to Canberra and the file of correspondence grew immediately *to be half an inch thick. She really hated people who made jokes about wooden legs!*

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Just as vaudeville theatres went dark during World War II, so radio vaudeville gradually disappeared with the passing years, and for the same reason. It cost too much.

"The arse fell out of big-time radio variety in the early 1950s, when the Colgate-Palmolive Unit disbanded in 1953," says Willie Fennell.

In its heyday, it had a sixty-piece orchestra and comedians and scriptwriters and singers to pay, and it all cost a fortune. It was all tax deductible for Colgates, all legitimate advertising expenditure, but the management decided it was crazy.

They said, 'Quiz programmes are big in America. We don't need orchestras, we don't need comics, we don't need all these people. All we need is a good man and a quiz and all our money goes into giveaways. It costs a quarter of what we've been spending and it looks good, because we can organise contradeals with everybody.' So they bought out Bob Dyer's contract — and that's when Colgates went to quiz programmes only and Bob Dyer was number one on the air.

Dyer traded setting up stunts with contestants for offering them "the money or the box"; his *Pick-a-Box* quiz show rode the radio airwaves until the late 1950s.

The writers and comedians of the Colgate shows either retired or went into writing radio comedy in other, less extravagant, shows. In the 1950s there were still several of these, including the *Club Show*, *Bonnington's Bunkhouse* and the George Wallace shows.

During the 1950s, three of the best-known comedians in Australia died: Mo in 1954, Jack Davey in 1959 and George Wallace in 1960. According to Keith Smith, no new stars were rising to carry on their tradition. He says: "The comedians they have now aren't funny people. They have hungry eyes. They're not generous people, simple people, and the great comics of the radio days *were* funny."

His opinion is shared by many listeners.

Television put the last nails into the coffin of gag comedy. One by one, the sponsors withdrew their money from shows on the bakelite box and put it into the shiny new medium. Audiences turned to television and the craft of radio vaudeville died.

The final symbol of its demise was probably the abandonment of the Macquarie Auditorium in Bligh Street, Sydney, where so many of the great comedy shows had been played out before laughing and applauding audiences and where writers watched and listened and learned their business.

Keith Smith and George Foster went down to 29 Bligh Street for the last time:

Just before they dismantled the auditorium — Jack Davey was long since dead, the whole scene was finished — George and I pushed open the dusty front door and walked in. The place was empty.

We stood at the back of the auditorium and walked down to the apron of the stage, and stood looking at it for a long, long time.

We were very inarticulate about it all. George just said: 'I'd like to take something away from here.'

'So would I,' I said.

He got a table, put a chair on top of it, reached up and took the 'Exit' sign off the side door. I couldn't think of anything to take except a wire tray out of the old fridge at the back.

That was all. We both felt we wanted to take something; we both knew how much laughter had gone on in that place.

2

Fred, Dexter, Dad and the 'Obbses

When people ask me what I think the basis of comedy is, I tell them that you don't want them to think you're clever. People forget the bloke who juggles fourteen chairs on his chin and rides a tricycle and blows bubbles at the same time, but they remember the guy they like.

That comment of Willie Fennell's certainly applied to the situation comedy shows on the bakelite box. They were full of likeable characters. People still remember the gentle and slightly dithery Fred and Maggie Everybody, the henpecked Dexter Dutton, Willie Fennell's Dexter in *Life with Dexter*, the laconic mob from *Dad and Dave*. There were also Alfie and Lizzie 'Obbs, cheerful Cockney characters and great champions of the dropped aspirate, and the street-smart schoolboys Bottomley and Greenbottle in *Yes, What!*, as well as dozens of others.

Whether these characters lived in Australian suburbia or in the backblocks on the road to Gundagai, listeners laughed at them and the predicaments in which they found themselves. In the tradition of situation comedy the world over, these were usually simple. They forgot each other's wedding anniversaries or birthdays, read each other's diaries and love letters, triumphed over their scheming relatives and neighbours. Everything was all right in the end; any domestic squabbles were always resolved without having to go anywhere near the Marriage Guidance Council.

Listeners recognised their problems and laughed at the way in which the characters tackled them. They were ordinary people — perhaps a bit less intelligent than the average, and that, too, was part of their charm. The humour in these situation comedies came from the characters themselves. They didn't usually go in for smart one-liners or even particular catchphrases. Except for the schoolboys in *Yes, What!*, who were always giving bright answers and thinking up new ways to play "get the teacher", they didn't perform the verbal equivalents of juggling fourteen chairs on their chins and blowing bubbles at the same time.

Listeners went on enjoying the situation comedies on the bakelite box for a long time. *Fred and Maggie*, in various metamorphoses, continued for twenty-one years; *Dad and Dave* notched up over 2200 episodes; *Life with Dexter* went past the 500 mark. If any Australian television comedy series could quote figures like those, a lot of writers, producers and actors would be laughing, too — all the way to the bank.

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The longest-running situation comedy series on Australian radio was also the first. This was *Fred and Maggie*, a fifteen-minute show which began in 1932. Over

the next twenty-one years it changed titles several times: *Mr and Mrs Everybody, Fred and Maggie, Fred and Maggie Go Abroad.* (It changed networks, too; the show was first broadcast over the ABC as *Mr and Mrs Everybody* and four years later it moved to commercial radio.)

The show was the brainchild of the English actor and producer Edward Howell, who produced it and wrote most of the episodes. He starred as Fred; Maggie was played by his wife, Therese Desmond. As the "Everybody" part suggests, Fred and Maggie were people who got themselves into ordinary human predicaments. Edward Howell has said, "I think the reason the session maintained its popularity was because the doings of Fred and Maggie were based on actual incidents that took place in my home and other homes."

Fred was a warm-hearted chap who held down some kind of anonymous clerical job in an unidentified city. He had a rather bleating British voice and a tendency to bungle. Maggie, who had an upper-class British voice a bit like Margaret Leighton's, spent her time buying new hats, speaking on the phone or chatting to the neighbours. Domestic *angst* was not a feature of their marriage.

They were warm and friendly characters — though not, perhaps, mental giants. On one occasion they decided to borrow some money to buy a house. Maggie assured Fred, "The bank will give you the money to buy the house. Banks have lots and lots of money".

"Yes," Fred agreed gloomily, "but the bank doesn't give you the money, it only lends it. If I borrow it, I have to pay it back, don't I?" Faced with this embarrassing fiscal fact, they decided not to borrow the money at all.

The publicity for *Fred and Maggie Go Abroad* (1951) gives a further idea of the "human interest" situations that Edward Howell mentioned. "The first episode starts at the office, where Fred is called to a meeting, notified of his appointment to the Board of Directors and told he is being sent overseas to expand the firm's business. You'll hear of the many applications they had for their house, the trunk of soap they took with them (the well-known Pommies-don't-wash joke), of their experiences in Aden and England, how they became bamboozled working out foreign rates of exchange." All good, solid stuff, with excellent scope for expanding situations indefinitely.

Fred and Maggie was a pleasant show, uncomplicated and reasonably entertaining. The problems that the Everybodys face aren't what you would call tricky, and sometimes Fred and Maggie are guileless to an almost incredible extent, but there is no malice in them.

The other characters in the series followed this pattern. They sometimes had Happy Families names (such as Mr Meaney, the bank manager) and they were basically good chaps.

Fred and Maggie could have been made in almost any English-speaking country; there was nothing particularly Australian about the situations, the writing or the characters. Fred and Maggie themselves sound British to the last vowel. This paid dividends in terms of overseas sales. The show went down very well in places as far apart as South Africa and the Bahamas.

It was extremely popular in New Zealand, too. Just before the last war, Edward Howell and Therese Desmond made a trans-Tasman tour and were accorded the kind of reception normally reserved for members of the British royal family. Vast crowds cheered them wherever they went; they were interviewed and feted. There are still reminders of their tour. Visitors to Orakeikorako, near Taupo on the North Island, are proudly shown two small stretches of still water known as the Fred and Maggie Pools.

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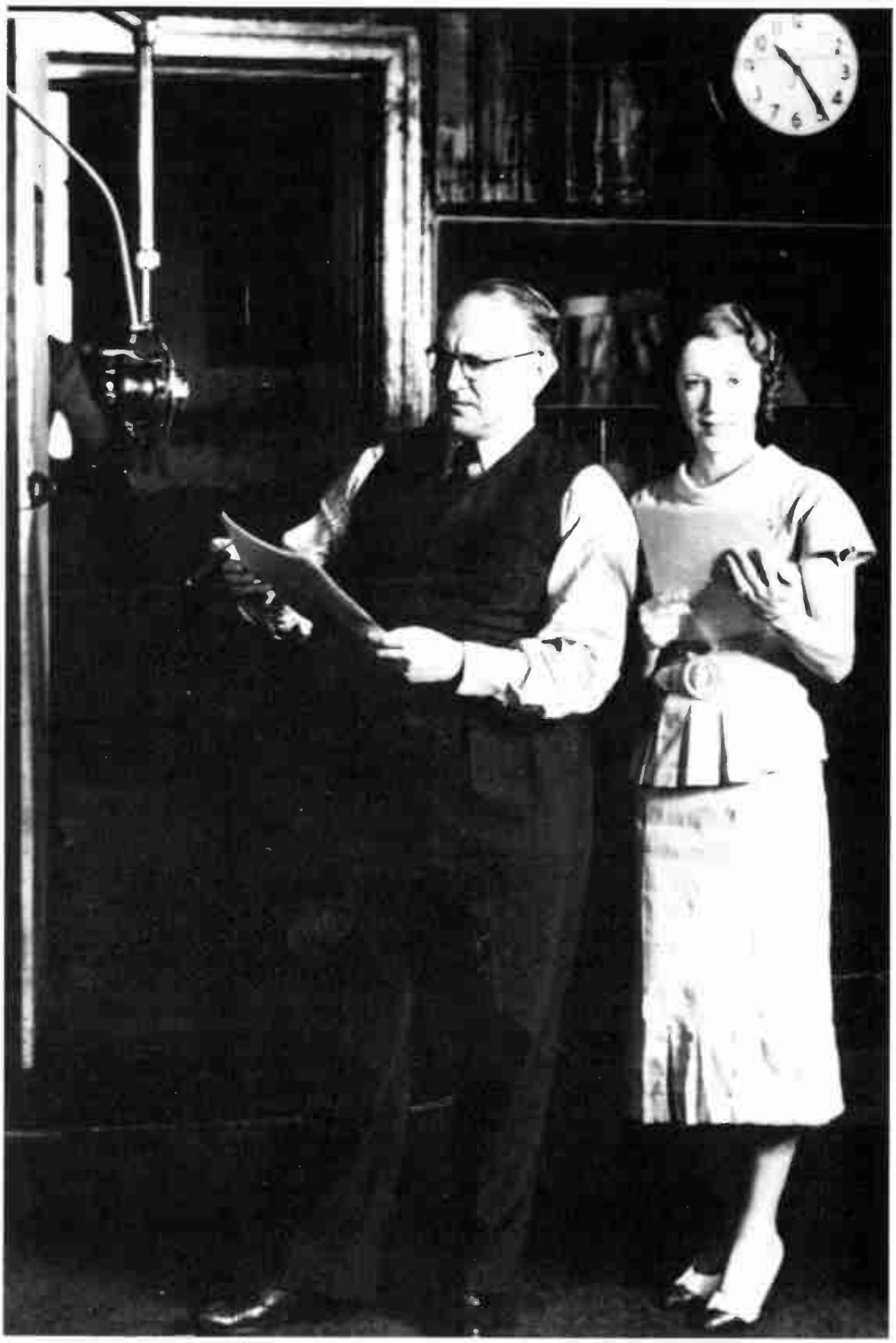
Fred and Maggie could have been made in almost any country in the British Commonwealth; *Dad and Dave* could only have come from Australia. The laconic



style of the slow-talking but cunning Dad, his son Dave, practical Mum and Dave's sheila, Mabel, is right in the tradition of Australian bush humour.

That kind of humour has probably been around since the first joke was cracked in Sydney Cove; Dad and Dave yokel jokes were popular long before the radio series started. (One of the better and more recent ones concerns Dave going down to Sydney and seeing the girls in their two-piece swimming costumes on Bondi Beach. He returns to Snake Gully, and Dad asks him: "Enjoy your trip, son?" "Yeah, Dad," says Dave, "but you know what? They've ringbarked all the sheilas!")

Dad and Dave were probably Australia's first multi-media personalities; they were literary, stage and screen stars before they came to radio. They started life between the covers of Steele Rudd's book *On Our Selection*, published in 1899; other Dad and Dave books followed. Dad and Mother Rudd and their family were small farmers, eking out a meagre living on their small-holding in Snake Gully.

The actor and entrepreneur Bert Bailey bought the dramatic rights from Steele Rudd in 1912 (with Edmund Duggan), and had a very successful stage career as Dad for about twenty years. He grew an impressive white beard for the role, and his accent and humour grew broader with each passing year. In 1930 the film director Ken G. Hall made the first of nine films based on the Rudd books; all starred Bert Bailey as Dad.

So by the time the George Edwards Players brought the Rudds and their Snake Gully neighbours to radio, Dad and Dave had been an established part of Australian comedy for almost forty years.

The original characters underwent some changes for radio. One alteration, about which Steele Rudd was reportedly furious, was that Dad's wife became known as "Mum"; he had always respectfully called her "Mother". Then Snake Gully, which had been geographically unspecified in the original books, was firmly placed in southern New South Wales, as the series' theme music was "On the Road to Gundagai". (In the 1930s the "great Australian outback" must have started a bit closer to the cities than it does now.)

Considering how long Dad and Dave had been around, it's rather surprising to find that the opening narration for the very first episode sounds as though nobody had ever heard of Snake Gully's First Family before. It goes like this:

We now present the first episode of Dad and Dave — *the human story of two typical Australians, their families, their lives, their hopes, their dreams, their fears and their triumphs. The characters of Dad and Dave represent all that is sturdy, honest and resourceful in the Great Australian Outback. You'll laugh with them, you'll sympathise with them and perhaps their troubles will remind you of your own, and their courage will inspire you.*

Now let us visit the homestead in Snake Gully, just off the road to Gundagai. It is a typical Australian homestead. There is a verandah running almost right round the home. In front of the house are a few trees and a small, well-kept garden.

Let us enter the homestead. It is night-time, and in the living room we make the acquaintance of Dad and Dave. Dad is sitting at the table laboriously writing, while Dave has just finished reading the daily paper.

DAVE: *What's the matter, Dad?*

DAD: *I've been adding up these figures and adding up the interest and looking at me bank book, and things just don't look too good, Dave.*

Not very close to the road to Gundagai, George Edwards and his wife Nell Stirling in an episode of Dad and Dave. *Edwards could have been playing any one of half a dozen characters; Nell Stirling was probably playing the part of Mabel.*

DAVE: *Well, what can we do, Dad!*
DAD: *What do you mean, 'What can we do!' You can't do anything.*
DAVE: *Too right I can. Your troubles are my troubles.*
DAD: *Good on you, Dave!*

And it was "good on you, Dave" for no fewer than 2276 fifteen-minute episodes.

Fortunately for the series, Dad and Dave settled down and made far fewer noble remarks as the series progressed. They became more human and funnier with the passing of time.

Not a great deal happened in Snake Gully except once a year when the Snake Gully Cup was run. It took place in November, at about the same time as the Melbourne Cup, and the big question was: Will Bill Smith succeed in nobbling Dad's horse so that it cannot run? Smith, played by Eric Scott, was the series' resident villain, and a nasty piece of work he was. Every year his attempts to get Dad's horse grew more ingenious.

The Cup was always a highlight of *Dad and Dave*. For weeks the characters built up to it by discussing the merits of the various horses:

"That's the eye of a stayer."

"He's a stayer all right — he'll stay right at the post!"

Laughter all round.

Listeners all over Australia took the Snake Gully Cup almost as seriously as the characters did. "For weeks beforehand we'd get hundreds of telephone calls asking about the horses," says Deirdre Hill, who worked as a stenographer with the George Edwards Players. "People wanted to know whether the leg of such-and-such a horse was better than last week, and what jockey would ride. People thought it was real — they honestly did!"

We never worked on Snake Gully Cup Day. The script was done by one person, and the result of the race was terribly secret; nobody except the writer and the actors knew which horse won the race. The episode was cut at EMI under great secrecy and the record was locked away until it was broadcast.

Other events in Snake Gully included the citizens rallying around to build a hospital for "orphaned kiddies", or putting on gala fetes (to one of which Dad's neighbour, Annie Morton, wore a coat perfumed by a specially pungent sort of rural mothball). Apart from the horse-nobbling Bill Smith and one or two others, Snake Gully was populated by a public-spirited bunch of blokes and sheilas.

The show set a record of sorts in that it was sponsored by the same company for the whole of its run — Wrigleys, makers of chewing gum. They produced a special series of rural ads to go with *Dad and Dave*, giving brief descriptions of small Australian towns: "Joadja, on the road to Canberra, has a post office, a petrol pump and a few houses . . ." with words about the oldest inhabitants.

From the viewpoint of the comparatively slick 1980s, in which chewing gum is advertised as a glamorous product to the point that rhythmically moving jaws are synonymous with having fun on the beach, it's fascinating to hear the slant that Wrigleys gave its *Dad and Dave* ads in the 1940s and early 1950s. Chewing gum was recommended as an aid in preventing carsickness on the long journeys that families would have to make to visit small country towns in Australia. "Children will love its flavours . . ." said a soothing, dark-brown voice, implying that while they were enjoying the gum they would be less inclined to throw up all over the back seat.

Only four years after *Dad and Dave* finished production, it was on the air again. EMI sold 520 episodes to seven stations in New South Wales, Queensland, Western Australia and Tasmania. In Sydney it ran on 2GB and the station's manager, Bert Button, said: "The series built up such a fabulous audience in its heyday that it must have a large number of former supporters, plus a brand new audience who have not heard it."

As Dad himself might have said, "Too right". Episodes of *Dad and Dave* are still heard occasionally. Only a few years ago it was being repeated in Darwin.

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Like Dad, Dave and the other Snake Gully residents, the characters in *Mrs 'Obbs* were basic, down-to-earth people. But they came from a totally different comic stock; Mrs 'Obbs, her husband Alfie, her niece Blossom, her friends Mrs Bottomley and Mrs Jeffries and her arch-enemy Mrs Jupley are straight out of English pantomime.

Take Mrs 'Obbs himself. Himself? Yes, because, in the best pantomime dame tradition, the character was played by a man; first Athol Cheer and then Dan Agar. Photographs show a bulky person, simpering coyly and wearing an extravagant floral dress, with hair in a bun. Even in the blurred and poorly reproduced publicity pictures, he's obviously wearing a wig.

As Australian audiences had been more or less familiar with traditional pantomime on stage (the Tivoli theatre in Sydney presented them at Christmas well into the 1950s), hearing a "dame" on the air was an extension of a well-developed vaudeville tradition. And the creator of the show, Dan Agar, had a stage background. "He was a musical show man," says Harry Harper, who produced *Mrs 'Obbs* for some years. "He'd had a lifetime on the stage. He owned the show, really, because it was his idea, his script, and he used his own scriptwriter, Tom Swain."

The shows followed an old formula. First of all you've got the man playing the dame, and then Tom Swain developed some beautiful characters in Alfie 'Obbs and Dicky Bart and Mrs Bottomley and Mrs Jupley and all the others. In that line — low-life but quite clean comedy — old Dan was a genius.

The plot lines for *Mrs 'Obbs* were simple. The running gag was Alfie 'Obbs's determination not to get a job, though his wife, aided by Dicky Bart, did everything in her power to make employment as easy for him as possible.

Mrs 'Obbs also had occasional problems with her neighbours, particularly the upper-class and poisonous Mrs Jupley. In a typical episode, Mrs 'Obbs's niece Blossom finds all the love letters Alfie wrote to his wife when they were courting. She decides to play postman, putting the letters in boxes all down the street. Mrs 'Obbs finds out and retrieves them — all except one, which has fallen into the hands of Mrs Jupley. The latter starts spreading all sorts of evil rumours, and the characters have to do some hectic running around before the situation is cleared up.

Mrs 'Obbs's Cockney speech seemed to vary according to whether Dan Agar was being interviewed for radio magazines or on air. In the show the character used a kind of Popeye English: "I does look very dashing ... mascara gives blue shadders under yer eyes wot makes you look mysterious."

In print her use of English was even more idiosyncratic. Here's a typical example, taken from a 1949 issue of the *Radio-Pictorial*:

Yes, I always make New Year restitutions, having had it compressed upon me what a good thing it were. I even tried to get my 'Obbs to wear braces instead of a belt ... belts might be all right for the working classes, but it is real infer the dig among the more higher alert of Sydney society.

For somebody as conscious of her social position as Mrs 'Obbs, the conduct of Alfie, "my 'Obbs", must indeed have been very distressing. A lot of the show's comedy came from the differences between them, for Mrs 'Obbs was a gentle soul, while Alfie (Owen Ainley) was a tougher character altogether, without a single pretension to refinement. Publicity pictures of Alfie show a large, glowering man in shirtsleeves, with a stubbly beard. He

spoke in a gravelly voice that was Aussie Ocker rather than English working-class, and he could have been the butch brother of Spencer the Garbage Man.

"Whadderya done to yer dial?" he asked in one episode, having inspected the mascaraed dark shadders under his wife's eyes wot she thought made her look mysterious. "Go and wash off all that muck, and if you can wash off some of ya dial as well, that'll do me."

Owen Ainley carried his love of comedy through into real life; he was famous for his outrageous jokes. Willie Fennell remembers getting into a crowded lift with him at David Jones's store in Sydney.

First of all, he planted the fact of who I was: 'Willie Fennell! *The one and only! My God, I haven't seen you for ages!' By this time everybody in the lift was listening. Then he said: 'How's that woman you're living with! Well, I call her a woman, but at sixteen she's not really, is she!' Oh, he was terrible. 'How did you get on with that little bit of trouble in the park, by the swings! Is it all right now!' Dreadful! He'd say anything at all.*

Mrs 'Obbs reached its 1500th quarter-hour episode in 1948 and of course by then the cast knew their roles backwards.

"You didn't have to *produce Mrs 'Obbs*," says Harry Harper. "My main object was to see that it ran to time — twelve and a half minutes with a further two and a half for commercials."

We had a script and so on, but we had to make sure that Owen Ainley, who had only one eye, could see me in the booth so he could take his cues. If the programme was running a little short, I'd give the actors a stretch signal through the window, spreading my arms wide, which meant, 'Extend this a bit, fellows'. Once Owen saw that, he would start to ad lib and the others would go along with him. They were beautiful players. But Owen would just keep carrying on and you'd have to stop him, otherwise you'd be running overtime. You had to catch his one eye and give the wind-up signal.

Really, the actors could produce themselves. You never had to say to them, 'I'd like a bit more emphasis on this line', because they were too good and had been doing the show for too long.

When you hear the shows on disc today, you can tell that this is true. Even though the actors used an amazingly wide range of accents for their characters, ranging from Cockney through Ocker to refeened upper-class English, you forget this after about five minutes because the characters take over.

The actors became Mrs 'Obbs, Alfie and all the others, and their adventures kept Australians laughing for over ten years.

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The two most successful characters in the history of situation comedy must be the Bumsteads: Blondie and Dagwood. The comic strip drawn by American Chic Young was syndicated in Australia from the 1930s (it's still running in the newspapers) and in the 1940s Hollywood made a series of films starring Arthur Lake and Penny Singleton. It was a long-running radio show in the USA, too.

By the time that producer Ron Beck got hold of thirteen of the American radio scripts and decided to adapt them for Australia in 1952, audiences were very familiar with the henpecked Dagwood, his bossy wife Blondie, their two children Alexander and Cookie and Dagwood's irascible boss, Mr Dithers.

Fred Parsons did the adaptations; Willie Fennell played Dagwood. Then Ron Beck received a letter from Chic Young's agent, threatening legal action if Australia continued to use the scripts.

But Willie Fennell did not want to let the idea go.

When Blondie *folded, I said to Ron: 'Look, I love the idea of a family*

situation comedy. It's never been done here . . . why can't we do a show of our own? I'd love to have a whack at writing, at least the pilot, and then other writers could take over if you like.'

But Ron said it wouldn't go. He said: 'Blondie *went because it had the comic strip behind it and the films. Everybody knows them. We'd have to establish characters.'*

Undeterred, Fennell went ahead and wrote a pilot for a show based on an Australian family. It was rejected by J. Walter Thompsons advertising agency. So he sat down again and wrote another show with a new cast of characters: the bumbling and henpecked Dexter Dutton, his wife Jessie, his children Ashley and Janey, who called each other "Compost" and "Death Adder", and the Wilmots, Dexter's boss and his wife. He called the new show *Life with Dexter.*

Still nobody wanted to know about it, but Willie Fennell refused to give up.

I got three hundred quid together, which I couldn't really spare, and I hired a studio, booked a cast, produced it myself and made a half-hour show. The cast was me as Dexter Dutton, with Neva Carr Glyn, Kevin Brennan, Amber Mae Cecil and Ray Hartley. It was good; the guts was there — I knew I had a show. Everybody knew comedy backwards and they were playing it well.

I took it back to the agency and was told: 'Will, if this is the same show, mate, we're not really interested . . . have you rewritten it?'

I told them I hadn't changed a line. 'I want you to hear it,' I said.

That's why I'd made the disc in the first place. Nine out of ten people can't hear *what a radio show will sound like just from reading the script. It takes a lot of experience. (Even today I won't put up a pilot of anything unless studio managers can hear it.)*

Anyway, I left the disc with them, much against their will, and it didn't look very promising. But three days later they told me, 'Will, we loved this. This is nothing like you showed us before — it's much better.'

And I hadn't changed a bloody line *of it!*

Fennell decided to keep control over *Dexter* and he offered it to the agency as a package deal. This was absolutely unheard of: nobody had ever supplied cast, producer and script for one fee before. But after a lot of haggling over money, Fennell kept the complete rights.

Life with Dexter ran for eleven years. It was classic, true-blue situation comedy. Dexter was a recognisable suburban bloke, keen on gardening and beer, though a bit of a ditherer. "He was a combination of Willie (the little underdog bloke I played in the Colgate shows) and Dagwood Bumstead," says Willie Fennell. The Dagwood part was Dexter's henpeckedness; he was always worried about going out to play cards without telling his wife Jessie.

Jessie herself was the non-working "typical" housewife who, like Blondie, really had her husband where she wanted him. The two children, Ashley and Janey, were ordinary kids; whenever they got a bit above themselves, particularly Ashley, they were called to order by their parents.

Then there were the supporting characters: K. G. Wilmot, Dexter's boss, and his domineering wife Clara. "When Clara walked in, K. G. wasn't the boss any more," says Fennell. "You know how it is when you meet the boss and realise he's really human. I brought in the next-door neighbours, Maudie and Steve Gallagher. He was this real beer-drinking character who had his wife walking all over him, too."

Willie Fennell wrote over 500 half-hour episodes of *Life with Dexter.* "I kept a notebook for jotting down ideas," he says. "If somebody said, 'Oh, I forgot my wife's birthday yesterday', I'd make a note and use the idea in a script."

I used to pester my own family to get ideas. I'd tell my two daughters: 'For Christ's sake, do *something, will you! The Duttons have done just about everything possible for a family.'*

I remember one fireworks night when my kids were both little; they kept pestering me to let off bungers with them.

I had to write a Dexter *script for the following morning — and I didn't have an idea for an episode. 'I'll come out with you when I have,' I told the kids, 'and I'll write it later, but just give me time to think, will you!'*

'Daddy, you've got a million ideas,' they said, but I couldn't think of a thing.

Eventually I gave up and let off fireworks with the kids. I was hanging on to one and the damned thing exploded; I got burned fingers and somebody accidentally dropped a bunger into a box and the whole thing went off. The kids were screaming.

When it was all over I thought: 'This is terrible! I've wasted a whole night out here.'

Then I went inside and thought: What are you talking *about! Dexter on Cracker Night! And that was one of the funniest episodes of all. I did it in five hours flat — it just wrote itself.*

Like *Fred and Maggie, Life with Dexter* became such a popular series because its humour was taken from life. The *Dexter* characters became real to people. "It was like soapies on television today," says Willie Fennell. "Listeners felt that Dexter and Jessie and the rest weren't just actors. They were real."

I did a lot of personal appearance tours, charity shows in country towns. I can remember thousands of kids sometimes waiting on an oval for Dexter to arrive, and a few times I came down in a

K. G. Wilmot (Kevin Brennan, left) lays down the law to his most dithery employee, Dexter Dutton (Willie Fennell).

helicopter. They didn't really like this . . . one of the characters in Dexter *was Hector, the old car. I usually tried to arrive wherever it was in an old bomb, or else I'd disillusion the kids.*

Sometimes I came with my own wife and two daughters, who would be completely ignored by everybody. Either that, or people would say, 'Oh, didn't you bring your family?' They meant my radio family, of course. I couldn't have taken them with me; Ray Hartley who played my son Ashley was obviously an adult, and so was the actress who played Janey.

Life with Dexter was recorded in front of a studio audience at the Macquarie Auditorium. (It's the only situation comedy series in this chapter that was played in front of people; the others were whipped through production in small studios on a four-episodes-a-morning-or-else basis.) Then, too, *Dexter* was a half-hour series and the others were quarter hours.

Willie Fennell says:

We never charged admission for a radio programme — the audiences were doing a job for us. We would cut two episodes at the same time, back to back. People would come in and see an hour of Life with Dexter *with me doing a few gags in between, so they got about an hour and a half of entertainment.*

We got regulars who came every week and they would explain how radio worked to their friends. They loved seeing a sound effects bloke crunching gravel in a box when somebody was supposed to be walking up a path.

And scenes from the show: I remember one where Dexter says, 'Ashley, will you hurry out of the bathroom? I'll be late for the office.' And Ashley says: 'OK, Dad, I won't be long.'

'Well, hurry up or I'll miss my bus. It doesn't take you all that time to clean your teeth.'

'I know, Dad, but I don't soak mine in water all night.'

Then Ashley comes out of the bathroom and Dexter hits him for being rude. On the radio you heard that Dexter had a go at Ashley, but the audience in the auditorium would see me giving Ray Hartley a clip over the ear. They'd love all that. They adored being in the know.

Dexter wasn't popular only in Australia: the show sold to South Africa and New Zealand. It finished production in Australia eight years after television came here because Fennell decided to concentrate on television shows.

Life with Dexter had an unexpected final run early in 1981.

The actor Owen Weingott, who taught drama at the University of New England, let the kids do a play every year in the Town Hall. This time, instead of doing a play, they presented two episodes of Life with Dexter. *I went up and played Dexter and the drama students took the parts of Janey, Jessie and all the other characters. We presented it before a live audience with two mikes, in stereo, with sound effects. I was very doubtful about it because I didn't know how the show would stand up, but the audience loved it. The magic was still there.*

• • •

"Goo-o-o-o-d morning, boys!"

"Goo-o-o-o-d morning, sir!"

Every episode of *Yes, What?* began like that, and "goo-o-o-d morning" became a catchphrase during the 1950s. The show's title came from another exchange between teacher and pupils: when a student said, "Yes", the exasperated teacher would reply, "Yes, what?" to which the usual answer was, "Yes, sir".

Although it was a schoolroom comedy series, *Yes, What?* fits into the vaudeville tradition as well as into situation comedy. Schoolroom sketches were a part of vaudeville routine for years; almost every stage comedian, from Groucho Marx and

his brothers to Stiffy and Mo, donned mortarboard and gown and stood in front of a blackboard, roaring at naughty students.

But, since *Yes, What!* was a series, the characters were able to develop their own personalities. Dr Pym (Rex Dawe) was fussy and silly, a schoolteacher who never seemed to establish any discipline. Using a technique for which any decent school inspector would have dismissed him on the spot, he whacked into the pupils with a cane whenever they said something cheeky, which was all the time.

He must have had one of the smallest classes in recorded history: it consisted of three students. Bottomley, Greenbottle and Stanforth were adolescents of a particularly raucous kind. Bottomley (Ralph Peterson) was the one who seemed to be hit most often; he made the silliest remarks, and was very quick. He occasionally smuggled his girlfriend Daphne into the classroom. Even though she was obviously hiding under the desk, Dr Pym *never* seemed to see her.

Greenbottle (Jack Gardiner) was the most cunning of all. His forte was making wonderfully elaborate excuses for being late for school. "What is it *this* time?" Pym would say, and the answer usually started off with something like, "Well it was me grandfather's false teeth . . ." and might continue through a detailed discussion of missing dentures, which were found, then they were dropped and had to be glued; when they were glued together, they attached themselves to Greenbottle's school trousers and his mother had to soak them in water to get the dentures off, so the trousers had to dry . . . and so on. Greenbottle's excuses always took several minutes to explain.

Stanforth (Jim Williams) also had his moments, but he had less to say than his fellow-pupils. "Ooooh, ouch, ow!" he bellowed when Pym laid into him, but, like Greenbottle and Bottomley, he recovered from the pain with remarkable speed.

Publicity stills from the show look like illustrations from the Billy Bunter books. There stands Dr Pym, wearing a gown, mortarboard, an improbable wing collar and round glasses. His hand holds a cane balanced over Bottomley's posterior. Bottomley is wearing a white shirt, shoes and socks and short pants. In his back pocket is a catapult. His face is turned towards the camera and he is grimacing wildly.

On his right sits Stanforth, a strapping lad with melted gramophone record hair, and Greenbottle. The latter is wearing a girl's straw hat with elastic under the chin and a bow on the crown, a long-sleeved shirt, a bow tie, shorts, dark shoes and socks.

Although the three pupils were supposed to be young (and in fact the actors were), they look about as adolescent as Malcolm Fraser.

Rapid-fire repartee was the main feature of *Yes, What!*'s style. Puns, jokes and one-liners flew thick and fast.

"I know about zinc," says Bottomley.

"What?" asks Dr Pym.

"We have one in the kitchen."

A flurried Pym bleats, "No, no . . . zinc is an element in the magnesium family."

"Magnesium *family*?" asks a mystified Bottomley. Then he brightens: "Then her name must be Maggie."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, Maggie Nesium."

A little later, he mutters, "That's any amount of twaddle", in response to a remark of Dr Pym's.

"Bottomley, you're being rude," announces Pym severely.

"No . . . I said that'll be the colour of wattle."

This time, the discussion involves mercury. For some peculiar reason the *Yes, What!* class always seems to be having chemistry lessons.

"What, mercury?" says Pym. "But mercury's silver."

"That's right," agrees Bottomley affably. "Haven't you ever heard of silver wattle?"

Pym decides that the class has given him enough cheek for one lesson; a decision he reaches on average every two minutes. He leads the discussion to mousetraps, announcing: "Making mousetraps is a *catchy* business."

"Huh?" inquires Stanforth, who isn't very bright.

Very pleased with himself, Pym explains, "That was just a joke."

"Yeah," mutters Stanforth, unimpressed. "*Just* a joke."

Some of the plays on words in *Yes, What!* were outrageous. Greenbottle once made up a poem about fishing that went:

Be calm, o sea; don't be so boisterous,
Be kind to fishermen and to us oysterers.

This rhyme must be unique in the annals of Australian radio.

The characters even got into the commercials. Mortein sponsored *Yes, What!* for a number of years and one ad, spoken by a Bottomley clone (it's not the original voice), goes:

"There was a young feller from Perth,
The unluckiest chap on earth,
When he had a mosquito or fly,
The poor chap'd half-die,
Until he got Mortein."

"Well, go on," urges a Pym-type voice. "The poem's not finished."

"No," says Bottomley, "but the mosquitoes and flies are."

Yes, What! started and finished life in the studios of 5AD, Adelaide. Rex Dawe wrote the scripts and produced the show, getting the sum of ten shillings per episode; the actors got two shillings each.

The thousands of listeners who roared at *Yes, What!* throughout the 1950s were probably unaware that they were listening to a show that had been made before World War II. About four hundred episodes were

A typical day in the life of Yes, What!. *Dr Pym (Rex "Wacka" Dawe) applies discipline to Bottomley (Ralph Peterson), watched by Stanforth (Jim Williams) and Greenbottle (Jack Gardiner).*

made altogether, and they were repeated and repeated all over Australia.

"The whole thing started in the late 1930s," said Ralph Peterson in an interview he gave the *Australian* in 1966. (Peterson was about fifteen when he played Bottomley, and the others were a year or two older.) "We all joined up when World War II broke out, and we never got together again."

Recording techniques were primitive. "We used to stand in front of a huge microphone and bellow our lines into it," said Peterson. "We had a total of about three sound effects, too."

Peterson went on to become a well-known scriptwriter in radio and television. He said that he began to learn about writing comedy from his stint in *Yes, What!* "Not so much from its jokes, but from the dimension of its characters. They were so individual. They just said, 'Yes, what?' and people would fall about laughing."

Rex Dawe, whose inspiration the show was, became one of the regular comics for the Colgate shows during and after the war, and continued to write gag comedy. He was known as "Wacka" Dawe, and it's not too far-fetched to suppose that his nickname came from his prowess with the cane as Dr Pym. Dawe, who trained as a lawyer, went to live in Spain in the 1950s, where he died. He never got a penny for all those years of *Yes, What!* repeats; just his original fee of ten shillings an episode.

People still smile when you remind them of *Yes, What!* They are likely to say, "Oh, yes", and mention Greenbottle's excuses or some outrageous line they remember from the show. Of all the comedy programmes in this chapter, it's probably the one that stands up best today; its howlers, puns and gag lines will be remembered for a long, long time.

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What happened to all those shows? Were they preserved?

The answer is a qualified "yes". You can still hear episodes of *Dad and Dave* and *Fred and Maggie* if you care to visit the sound archives section of the National Library in Canberra (and if the staff isn't too busy to help you find them; being an understaffed and underbudgeted government department, they don't have much spare time). Grace Gibson Productions still advertise that they have 260 episodes of *Yes, What!* available for local sponsorship.

As for *Life with Dexter*, Willie Fennell says:

Macquarie rang me a while back and said that there were about a thousand recordings stashed away and seven hundred tapes, and I was welcome to have them. So there they are. Now I have to sort out what's to go in the archives. Maybe some of the tapes I'd like to give to my granddaughter.

Mrs 'Obbs is a special case. It was sponsored by Bonningtons, makers of Bonnington's Irish Moss cough mixture. (The commercials always featured a voice saying "Sip" ... followed by a glissando swoop on a violin, played by Manny Fischer ... "sip" ... swoop ... "sip" ... swoop. The announcer said that Irish Moss contained "pectoral oxymil of carrageen", a mysterious seaweed-based substance that allegedly came from Ireland and that "went to work to clear the membranes". Whatever they were ...)

Sponsors were not encouraged to watch their programmes being produced; a producer felt that the man who was signing the cheques should do just that and let the actors and technical staff get on with making the programmes. After all, it was discouraging to see a business-suited figure, whose company was paying for a comedy show, gliding into the control room and failing to crack a smile as he worked out how much it was all costing him.

Not Louis Bonnington. He loved *Mrs 'Obbs*. When he came into the control room he always laughed loudly at all the

gags. Naturally, the cast and producer enjoyed having him there.

When the last disc had been made, when Mrs 'Obbs and her friends had gone from the airwaves forever, there was some discussion of destroying the master discs. (Radio stations usually did this at an alarming rate; there was no storage space for them, and a vast number of Australia's best radio shows will never be heard again.) Bonnington, however, made up his mind that his beloved *Mrs 'Obbs* would not disappear in this haphazard way. He had all the discs packed up and took them to his factory, where they stayed for years. (One wonders whether his staff, who probably had to walk around the crates, were quite as thrilled to have them there as he was.) Then Louis Bonnington died and his son asked the National Library if they wanted *Mrs 'Obbs*. They did. And when you listen to Mrs 'Obbs, Alfie and the rest of the cast, you wish that others had been as keen as he to preserve "their" programmes.

3

Take a hint and a hankie

Once upon a time, in the days before they were encouraged to get out into the workforce and help the consumer revolution, most married women stayed at home. All over Australia, in cities, country centres and small towns, they spent their time cooking, cleaning, washing, shopping and looking after the kids. They were alone for most of the day, except for the bakelite box on the shelf above the stove or on the kitchen dresser. Radio often provided their only source of company and entertainment.

In the morning, after children had gone to school and husbands to work, women listened to the serials that dominated the air from breakfast time to lunchtime. To the accompaniment of throbbing, sobbing violins, drip dramas delineated every possible nuance of human emotion: rage, fear, jealousy, joy and particularly the miseries of love unrequited.

About lunchtime the pattern changed; the brisk, friendly women's sessions came on the air. These fulfilled a variety of needs. When convenience foods were just a twinkle in Colonel Sanders' eye, women found out how to make lamb chops or mince go further and taste more interesting. They discovered how to run the household budget more efficiently and how to save money by upholstering the sofa that they had been meaning to fix for ages.

If they had neither the money to buy books nor the time to visit a library, book reviewers kept them up to date with what was going on in the world of literature. If they were keen on music or theatre, radio women's shows enabled them to follow these interests also.

In the afternoons there were more serials, and in the evenings came the panel shows. These were light entertainment programmes and their format was simple: a male compere and a group of women discussed problems that listeners had sent in. ("How do I stop my son getting a crew cut?" . . . "My husband is having an affair; what should I do about it?")

Drama, household hints, discussion, advice: these were the elements of women's radio programmes in Australia from the 1940s to the 1960s.

Sponsors fully realised the value of a captive audience in selling their products. Even if listeners did not earn the money to buy their goods, they greatly influenced what that money was used for; in 1955 advertisers estimated that women were responsible for making decisions about almost 80 per cent of the goods purchased in Australian homes. "The woman's programme is the colossus astride the consumer goods market", said one executive, no doubt rubbing his hands with satisfaction at the thought of all those captive buyers in front of their radio sets. Listeners to serials were told the benefits of almost every household item, from

Wettexes to washing machines. Sometimes it's easy to feel that, for advertisers, women's shows were just the fillers that kept the ads apart.

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Daytime serials, soap operas, "weep while you sweep" dramas: they seeped out of the bakelite box for almost thirty years. (The first one broadcast nationally was *Big Sister*, which started in 1941.) The avid interest with which listeners followed them is shown by the impressive records that some of the weepies notched up. *Mary Livingstone, MD*, the story of a woman doctor, had reached 2000 episodes by 1956; Portia faced Life no fewer than 3544 times altogether; Dr Paul did not hang up his stethoscope until he had used it in a record 4634 episodes.

Most serials were domestic dramas, centred on the heartrending adventures of a woman and her family or the chief character's quest for Love. The characters' emotional crises, which had a stunning range and which were described in throbbing dialogue, appealed to thousands of women whose lives were basically humdrum. They provided excitement and escapism in lavish quantities.

Consider the storyline for *Barbara Dale*, a typical daytime serial of the early 1950s. "*Barbara Dale* is the story of a woman of courage and charm and young enthusiasm, kept constantly alive by her growing children. She has known great love and, even six years after her husband's death, compromise to her is as grandeur to dust." (Yes, that's actually what it says.) "This, then, is time's backcloth, with the figures of the Dale family moving into the spotlight of drama, romance and near tragedy."

While the average woman listener would certainly have been kept constantly alive by her growing children, sometimes to the point of feeling blind rage, she would probably not have recognised the spotlight on time's backcloth if it had followed her around the house and up to the corner shop. Nevertheless, people listened to Barbara Dale's adventures, and those of characters like her, with avid interest.

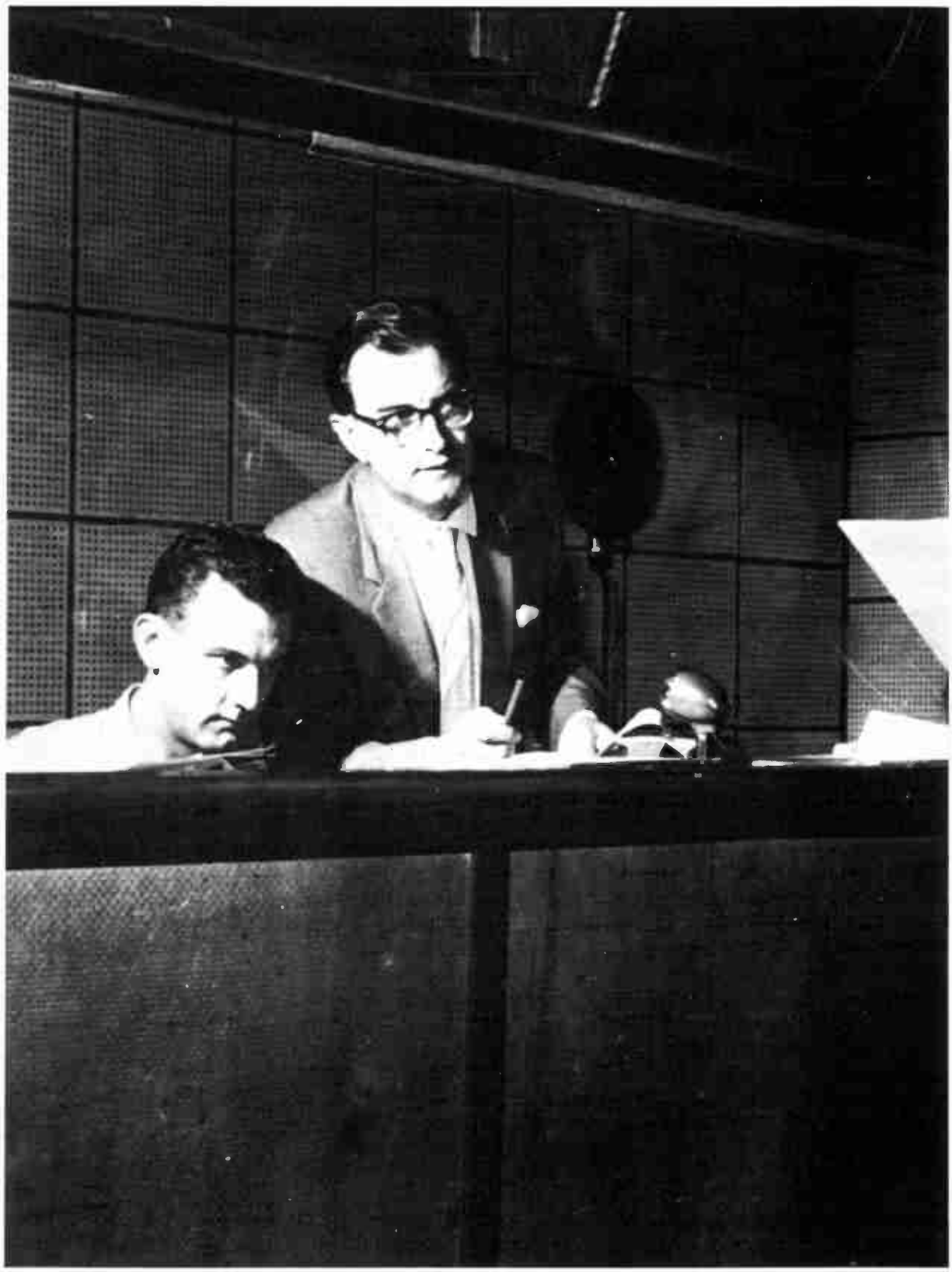
Some listeners were so devoted to their serials that they took the characters as seriously as they would have done real people. When a character in *Big Sister* was having a baby, the station received enough bootees, jackets and layettes to stock a maternity hospital. In *Martin's Corner*, a long-running George Edwards serial about a corner grocery shop, in which the characters were far too busy having emotional adventures to think about doling out pounds of tea or sugar, Mrs Ludlow announced that she was selling her house and leaving the town of Fernington. Several people rang asking what price she wanted and exactly where Fernington was.

Occasionally listeners even called characters to account. In 1947, a woman wrote to the *ABC Weekly* about the way in which the Lawson family in Gwen Meredith's serial of the same name treated their cook, Hilda. "Her treatment is nothing short of astonishing," she wrote severely, "and quite contrary to the free and easy spirit of this country as I have known it."

Woe betide a writer who slipped up, too. Actress Muriel Steinbeck recalled that the producer of *Hagen's Circus* ("mystery and romance under the Big Top") received a letter from a woman.

It said, 'That young girl is marrying that man, and he's already married!'
'Heavens, he is, too!' said the producer, and we had to kill off his wife in the next episode.

There was always a fuss if a character died. This usually happened because an actor had other commitments and had to be written out of the serial. When the actor who played Joe in *Blue Hills* moved to Perth, Gwen Meredith wrote his demise into an episode. "The reaction was so great that I never killed off a character again," she said. She didn't, either — Nellie Lamport, who played the much-loved Hilda the



cook, died in the early 1960s, and for the next ten years of *Blue Hills*'s run, Gwen Meredith had the other characters say that Hilda had moved to Tasmania. "She's still living in Tasmania, as far as everybody's concerned," says Gwen Meredith.

Programme makers themselves were known to panic if a star wanted to leave a long-running serial and do something else. Lyndall Barbour, who played the stalwart and noble Portia, once decided that she didn't want to Face Life for a while, and made plans to go overseas. When Grace Gibson heard this, she became very worried. *Portia Faces Life* was a great money-spinner for her company and Barbour had played Portia for so long and had such a distinctive voice that she would have been very difficult to replace. "Will you give Lyndall a message from me?" she allegedly asked a colleague. "Tell her that I've seen the world and it's not *worth* it!"

The jaundiced person who defined a radio serial as a show in which a vase took three episodes to fall off a shelf could have been talking about Australian-made weepies, particularly after World War II. They were rarely notable for the speed with which things happened — probably because listeners were presumably moving around the house and had one ear on the radio while they concentrated on whatever they were doing.

A prime example of this languid treatment was *When A Girl Marries*. Like most other Australian soap operas, it came from the United States. It was first broadcast by NBC in 1939 and the original writer was one Mrs Elaine Carrington, who well and truly mastered the art of having very little take a long time to happen. AWA bought the scripts during the war and adapted them for Australian audiences.

A tense and meaningful moment in the life of lawyer Portia Manning (Lyndall Barbour). The producer is John Sawle and seated behind the panel is Warren Cooke. The picture was taken in 1954.

Peter Yeldham, who is now a well-known television scriptwriter, started learning his craft by adapting *When A Girl Marries* scripts at the end of the war when he was only about seventeen. He says:

They were easy until I got to the episodes dealing with the war. AWA told me I had to jump from episode 432 to episode 999 and put the missing five years into two or three episodes because they dealt with American life. Over those three episodes extraordinary things happened — people were grown-up suddenly, or married. So little happened in those serials that a job like that wasn't too difficult. After five years, the characters still seemed to be saying the same things!

And they did. Over and over again. Take episode 2357 of *When A Girl Marries*, broadcast in the early 1950s. Like episodes 1 to 2356, it begins with music that sounds as though it was composed by Mantovani or his brother, with lots of lush, sweeping violins. A subdued Australian male voice describes what has been happening: "Harry Davis hasn't accepted Joan's death as he waits for Sylvia to arrive at the airport to help him get his house in order before the children arrive with Mrs Morris next week."

From Harry's first words, it's easy to tell that he is suffering the tortures of the damned, though he is suffering very, very slowly. He speaks in a light American accent, with an Aussie overlay on the vowels.

"It isn't any better," he announces gloomily to his sister-in-law. You know he's not referring to his skills as a housekeeper.

"Time will heal," Sylvia assures him breathily.

There is a lo-o-ong pause. "I wonder," states Harry.

Sylvia, with conviction: "I know."

If listeners are not already aware of the fact, that line gives them the clue that Sylvia has a Secret Sorrow in her own life. Will these two people, to whom life has dealt such horrid blows, ever find Love?

Plenty of time is allowed for speculating about this possibility. For Harry (pronounced "Hairy") and Sylvia go over and over the pain they have suffered over losing Joan, the wonderful woman who was Harry's wife and Sylvia's sister. It's all so *hard*.

Then, after about ten minutes' discussion (interrupted by much brisker commercials) about whether Harry's children can possibly become well-adjusted human beings without their mother to love them ("She left such a gap in their lives" ... "Yes ...") drama strikes with the speed and precision of a wet sock.

"Hullo, Hairy," says a woman's voice loaded with meaning.

"Clare! Clare O'Brien!"

This resourceful person, the Other Woman, has secreted herself in Harry's broom closet to await his return.

Up comes the suave string orchestra again, sounding as though it's been in the broom closet with her.

"What is Clare doing in Harry's home?" asks the announcer with perceptible lack of interest. "How will she explain her presence there? These and other intriguing questions will be answered in the next chapters of ... *When A Girl Marries*." His voice drops to about knee level. "Dedicated to those who are in love ... and to all who can remember ..."

Fortunately, as the 1950s progressed, serials did pick up a bit of pace and realism; things did start to happen faster and the weepies made greater demands on listeners' attention. (Was this because better household appliances enabled women to do their housework more efficiently, so they had more attention to spare for the serials? Some enterprising postgraduate sociology student may one day do a thesis examining a possible correlation between greater drama and pace in radio serials and the increasing availability of labour-saving devices.)

Grace Gibson, whose company made

and sold radio serials for a longer period than any other in Australia, says:

As time went on, we tended to speed things up; we didn't have so much of Dr Paul sitting around drinking cups of tea and chatting.

When I was considering a new serial, I looked for suspense. Kathleen Carroll, a writer who worked for me practically all the time I was in business, would submit the opening few episodes. If I came into the office the next day and said I'd had a good night's sleep, she knew it wasn't a success, because I was only interested in scripts that were exciting enough to keep me awake! Kath used to throw everything into the first few episodes; we had to have a murder, or a damn good argument, or a fight.

Grace Gibson's attitude was shared by more and more producers of serials — and writers gradually found them more interesting to do. "In the early days," says Peter Yeldham, "I was told that the average mental age of the audience was thirteen, so please write to that level. Even when I was just starting out, I thought that was pretty appalling. Later on, we were allowed to do more adult shows."

Some serials were realistic dramas about life a bit closer to home than the fairy-floss world of Dr Paul, Portia and Harry in *When A Girl Marries*. In fact, a very popular one, *White Coolies*, was based on a diary that an Australian Army nurse wrote in a Japanese prison camp during World War II. It was announced as "a true story of Australian women at war ... dedicated to those nurses who did not return" — a far cry from dedication to those who are in love and to those who can remember.

In one episode a group of nurses is trapped in a Singapore hospital in 1942 as the Japanese are invading. The women are good, brisk characters; there's not much of Mary Livingstone, MD about any of them. "Here," one says authoritatively to an Australian soldier patient, "just try and keep still to stop further bleeding." The hospital is surrounded by Japanese. "While the little so-and-sos are all around us they won't be bombing us," says Matron grimly. "At least we can have some peace and quiet."

They receive a message that about thirty nurses are to make a dash through the enemy lines to a waiting ship; Matron looks out the window. "It looks as though the whole place is on fire," she says doubtfully.

"I'd rather stay," says one nurse. (She fails to add: "My patients need me", as Mary Livingstone or Dr Paul would probably have done. There isn't time.)

"We all would," points out Nurse Jeffries, who narrates the episodes. "It's for Matron to decide who's to go and who's to stay."

Matron makes her decision, and they go. But they don't make it to the ship ...

Apart from its pace and genuine excitement, what makes *White Coolies* particularly interesting to hear now is the view it gives of women. These Army nurses are shown as practical professionals, who are cool and competent, doing what they must with as little rhetoric and fuss as possible. There isn't a throbbing emotion or a Sundered Heart within earshot.

However, the realistic Australian serial *par excellence* wasn't on commercial radio at all. It ran for almost thirty years and had one writer; she wrote all 5795 episodes, setting a world record that has never been broken.

As thousands of people know, it started like this.

THEME: A French horn solo for a few bars, then strings; music that suggests a country panorama opening up before your eyes.

ANNOUNCER: The ABC presents *Blue Hills* by Gwen Meredith.

Blue Hills grew directly out of its predecessor, *The Lawsons*, which began in 1944. Gwen Meredith, who had already made a name as a writer of radio serials, was asked by the head of the ABC's drama

department to write a serial dealing with the problems of people in rural areas during the war. *The Lawsons* was the story of the Lawson family, and it was popular enough for the *ABC Weekly* to run a strip cartoon following the adventures of the characters. It went to air five days a week.

In 1949, Meredith felt that she had written as much about the Lawsons and their friends as she could. She wanted to develop new characters and to write about new scenes, so *Blue Hills* came into being. It took over from *The Lawsons* without a break — *The Lawsons* finished on a Friday and *Blue Hills* began on the following Monday. Gwen Meredith made sure that the new serial had some of the characters that had been so popular in *The Lawsons*, particularly Hilda the cook, her niece Emmie and Ted Lawson.

"By changing the name, we dropped listeners for about a year," she says. "But gradually they came back and the audience built up again."

Why was the serial called *Blue Hills*? "Because," Gwen Meredith says, "I thought — what is typical of Australia? Blue hills. Wherever you go, you see hills blue in the background."

People with literal minds may point out that there are precious few blue hills in the background of Pitt Street, Collins Street or North Terrace, but the serial was not about urban Australia, even though it had a great number of city listeners.

The hundreds of characters who came and went over the serial's run lived in the snow country, the wheat belt, cane farms in North Queensland, even the red centre of Australia. Their homes were called Balarca, Minnamoota, Narweena Station and Copper Downs.

Blue Hills's characters faced problems common to Australian rural dwellers everywhere: flood, fire, drought, poor crop yields. They had marital problems and difficult children who failed exams and became involved with unsuitable people. Their lives were not sensational, for they did not include murders, kidnappings or the other dramatic events that were often the staples of the commercial serials. "If the serial had depended on plot, it would have been easier for lots of people to write it," says Gwen Meredith. "But it depended very much on the characters, and I knew them very well." Because *Blue Hills* dealt with the interactions and conflicts among its people, rather than on strongly dramatic plot developments, thousands of Australians identified with the characters and kept on listening.

Meredith made her characters so credible that listeners wrote constantly. "Isn't Ed dreadful?" women would write. "He always reminds me of my brother-in-law." Almost everybody disapproved of Fleur, the city girl who was unhappy about living in the country. "Why doesn't Jack divorce Fleur and marry Jane?" they demanded.

Another crucial reason for *Blue Hills*'s success was that Gwen Meredith never wrote about something she had not researched or a place she had not visited. She spent time in Central Australia and visited a sugar cane farm in North Queensland. When she wrote a character with a drink problem, she went to meetings of Alcoholics Anonymous to find out about it. Once, when immigration was an issue in the serial, she took time off when the serial had its end-of-year break and went to England, returning on a migrant ship.

"If you're going to write about something you don't know, the audience realises," she says. "If you get something wrong, they're irritated and you lose them."

That authenticity comes through every episode of *Blue Hills*. For instance, one sequence deals with the Flying Doctor service in Central Australia. Oolara Hospital in the Red Centre picks up a distress call from a woman at Copper

Members of the Blue Hills *cast in 1949. From left: Nellie Lamport (Hilda), Queenie Ashton (Lee), Max Osbiston (Peter Frobisher) and Gordon Grimsdale (Dr Gordon).*

Downs whose little boy has wandered off. "Is there anybody listening who can get to Copper Downs?" she asks on the wireless. "Over . . ." She then assures whoever is listening, "Our strip's OK if the doctor should be needed", since any plane bringing help will have to land on the airstrip behind the station.

Two of the characters, one of whom is a Scottish nurse newly arrived in the outback, go out to Copper Downs.

"That's the bore ahead," says the older woman.

"And she can look on that as home?" The Scottish nurse is horrified.

"It *is* home," says the other woman quietly.

The nurse describes the Russell Drysdale-like landscape: "A line of washing and beyond that, nothing. Just red sand and gibbers and beyond that . . . red sand — endless, waterless."

A rescue party is organised to cover the surrounding area by car to try and find the child. When they see him, sleeping beside the track in the middle of nowhere, the narrator says: "Their silence covered their emotions, as it always covered all their emotions." No tearful reconciliation scenes; no cries of joy. And the episode is more moving and realistic because of its reticence.

Gwen Meredith never shrank from tackling contemporary problems. "I never felt inhibited in tackling issues," she says. "Alcoholism, divorce, immigration . . . they all appeared in *Blue Hills* at some time."

In the 1950s, when racial prejudice in Australia was a subject that most people either half-admitted or ignored, Meredith met the issue of Aborigines' treatment head-on. At one point she made one character come to terms with the fact that her stepson was part-Aboriginal.

Amelia says to her husband Josh: "I never dreamed he wasn't a white child!"

"He's three parts white," says Josh defensively.

"And one part black! You allowed me to think his mother had been a decent white woman! Instead of which . . ."

"That's enough!" flares Josh. "I had a respect for Anderson's mother."

"I've seen half-castes," says Amelia, "huddled on the outskirts of towns."

"And whose fault is that? We've never given them a chance!"

To show how much more realistic this was than the normal radio serial treatment of Aborigines, here is a piece of publicity for a commercial one named *Hart of the Territory* that went to air in 1951: "You'll hear a lot about station life in that lonely outpost with its wandering prospectors and black trackers . . . you'll accompany Gil Hart on an expedition into the heart of Australia, where he finds a beautiful white girl living with an Aboriginal tribe . . ." True, writers of commercial serials were more concerned with dramatic storylines than with presenting an accurate picture of outback life. But the Aboriginal was regarded as a primitive curiosity, and it's a fair bet that Gil Hart and his macho brothers did not see Aborigines huddled on the outskirts of towns. Gwen Meredith did.

The final episode of *Blue Hills* was made on 30 September 1976: Gwen Meredith felt she had been writing it long enough.

When you know what *Blue Hills* meant to so many people, including the actors, the last few lines are still very moving.

Rose, played by Maeve Drummond, says: "It's saying goodbye, Granny. I always feel it's sad to say goodbye."

Granny, played by Queenie Ashton (who, as Lee Gordon, had delivered the first line of *Blue Hills* twenty-eight years before), says: "Yes, Rose, it certainly is this time . . . but we don't have to see or hear people every day of the week to remember them in their surroundings." Then, with a slight tremor in her voice, she says: "It isn't really so hard to say goodbye . . . to say goodbye . . . and God bless!"

And up comes the theme for the last time.

But that wasn't quite all. Just after the

last episode had been recorded, the producer asked Gwen Meredith, "Do Jack and Fleur end up making a go of it?"

Gwen Meredith replied, "How would I know?"

Because *Blue Hills* was on the ABC, Gwen Meredith did not have to take the pressures of advertising into account. On the commercial stations the standard duration for a daytime serial was fifteen minutes — twelve and a half for the programme itself and two and a half for commercials. On that one-sixth of running time depended the existence of the rest, for sponsorship was vital. From the 1940s to the 1960s most advertisers with money to spend on radio wanted to buy serials. They were not expensive, they had a guaranteed listening audience and thus they were often good money-spinners for sponsors.

Production companies such as Artransa, Broadcast Exchange, British Australian Programmes, AWA and Grace Gibson Productions made their money by finding writers who would adapt existing serial scripts (usually from the United States), hiring actors to appear in them, producing them and selling the result to a sponsor, often through his advertising agency.

Grace Gibson, who founded Grace Gibson Radio Productions in 1944 and who continued to run it until 1978, says, "If you had made a pilot that you thought had the potential to become a long-running serial, you'd ring an advertising agency about it. The agency would bring one of its clients, a prospective sponsor, along to hear the show — or we would take our sample of the programme along to the agency. Then, if he liked it, the sponsor would buy the show."

Because he put up the money, the sponsor had a great deal of power over a programme, whether it was a serial or a series. Grace Gibson says:

The sponsor had the right to tell you what he liked or didn't like about a programme, and if he told you he wasn't happy about something, you made every effort to correct it. Sometimes he was wrong, but usually he wasn't; those men were pretty astute. We never had much trouble with them. They didn't buy our shows because they liked the way I parted my hair or anything . . . they bought them and kept on buying them because we made a good product.

But occasionally sponsors would pull out for the oddest reasons.

I remember one show we did — it was a half-hour series called The Shadow, *sponsored by the Vacuum Oil Company. The catchphrase was, 'The Shadow knows . . .' and the head of the company got so sick of going into his Melbourne club and having his colleagues whisper 'The Shadow knows . . .' that he decided not to go on with it. I would have thought he'd be thrilled at the free publicity!*

Because of the control they had over their programmes, sponsors sometimes irritated writers. Peter Yeldham says:

They interfered a lot, sometimes. When I first started after the war, I saw a set of guidelines about what they wanted or didn't want. They didn't like divorce to be mentioned, for instance; if characters were unmarried, they were not allowed to be alone together in a hotel room.

Sponsors wouldn't change dialogue, but they might ring up and say, 'I don't like that character', or 'I don't like that sort of situation; I don't think it's very good for my image'. They could sometimes be very difficult. Their interference generally came too late for you to rewrite what you had been doing, but you were usually told, 'Watch it . . . you're annoying the sponsor'.

The amount of work that the radio soap opera industry generated is nothing short of amazing. It gave work to writers, actors, producers and production companies for years. Grace Gibson Productions alone had a staff of seventeen employees and its own studio in 1954, ten years after the company

started. The company used freelance scriptwriters and actors, and sent out no fewer than 180 calls a week to book actors for various programmes. Grace Gibson says:

During the years I had the company, from 1944 until 1978, we produced and sold thirty thousand quarter-hour programmes. We made five-minute serials, fifteen-minute serials, half-hour complete stories, hour-long complete stories, every type of dramatic show and even some educational ones. In 1955 we were producing for Sydney alone sixty-six quarter-hours a week. We used three studios at once.

Grace Gibson Productions was only one of several companies that worked in this way. No wonder overseas visitors were impressed at the vigour of the industry and the speed with which Australians turned out programmes. (Actors, for instance, didn't get anywhere in radio here unless they could rehearse and record a quarter-hour serial in less than an hour; any writer worth his salt churned out at least ten episodes a week.) In 1954 a Canadian producer said, "Had I been told at home how Australian productions were handled, how quickly they were finished and the fabulous number turned out weekly, I wouldn't have believed it." He was also amazed at the versatility of Australian writers and actors.

Commercial radio drama, particularly serials, bred a school of tough professionals, and their speed and skill really paid off in terms of sales. Grace Gibson recalls that her company sold *Dr Paul* to Lever Brothers nationally through Australia and then to New Zealand and South Africa, and this was by no means atypical.

These days, overseas sales of Australian television programmes make headlines in the afternoon papers; only thirty years ago Australian-made radio programmes (mainly serials, but dramatic series as well) were being bought by New Zealand, South Africa, Singapore, Malaya, Hong Kong, Rhodesia, Kenya, Nigeria and the Bahamas. Overseas sales were so commonplace that all they rated was a laconic paragraph or two in trade papers such as *Broadcasting and Television*.

The 1958 edition of the *Broadcasting and Television Yearbook* says that the radio transcription business in Australia was worth between £750,000 and £1,000,000 per year and an important part of that income came from sales to English-speaking countries, including the USA, England and Canada. This is one export industry that somehow has not made the record books. But then Australians have never been famous for appreciating their own.

A quirky little footnote to this is that Grace Gibson Productions sold *Dr Paul* to Sierra Leone as late as 1978. If it's still going, listeners there will be wondering over the next ten years whether the good doctor and his beloved Elizabeth really will find happiness.

When sponsors started putting their money into television programmes the heyday of the radio serial was over. From about 1960, stations began to re-evaluate their programme line-ups, concentrating on music and talk shows in the mornings instead of serials. Many followed the lead of Sydney's 2UE, which announced, "We're just putting our stories away for the Christmas holidays", after one or two new serials had just begun. They were never heard again.

If it's possible to pinpoint a month and a year in which the radio serial ceased being an important part of radio programming in Australia, that date might be June 1964. 2UW, the Sydney station that at one time had broadcast almost nothing but serials every weekday, announced that all serials and dramatic programmes were to be taken off the air. It was the last Sydney station to do so.

Writer Ross Napier recalled that day.

Grace Gibson.

The announcement wasn't entirely unexpected. Since the advent of television, the writing had been on the wall. But it was no less a blow when it came. It was like a death in the family, or the passing of an old friend — not to mention a means of existence for dozens of actors and writers. It left a void that showed no promise of being filled.

Actors, writers, producers, production companies: all were badly affected. The production companies still had country stations, but without the capital city outlets prospects were bleak. They turned to producing television programmes or went out of business.

However, Grace Gibson still firmly believed there was a place for good, suspenseful radio drama, and Grace Gibson Productions continued to produce serials. Grace Gibson says: "We tightened up our shows, making them move faster and doing away with narration as much as possible."

Grace Gibson Productions began making what they called "mini-dramas", four-minute serials in which every word had to count. The first of these was *I Killed Grace Random*, produced in 1970. It was about a young advertising executive who ran down a young woman in a car and left her dead on the roadside, while he was launching a national road safety campaign. Ross Napier wrote the first five episodes, which were sent out to stations for audition. The serial sold in every capital city, proving Grace Gibson's point that people still wanted radio serials.

Two more followed: *My Father's House* and *Without Shame*.

To show what had happened to radio serials since the heyday of *Dr Paul* and *Portia Faces Life*, I quote from the closing narration in the first episode of *Without Shame*.

As I let myself in, I heard Belinda laughing. The thought crossed my mind that her headache must have improved. Then I saw them through the bedroom doorway, Philip and Belinda — their naked bodies entwined in a passionate frenzy.

And only twenty years before, a sponsor wouldn't have let two unmarried characters be alone in a hotel room together . . .

Grace Gibson says:

Without Shame *was very fast-moving, with a bit of sex in it (which people like) and a murder or two. It built up quite an audience on 2GB in Sydney and in other capital cities. When it finished, people who hadn't been able to hear the final episode for some reason wrote in; we had quite a few letters!*

Grace Gibson sold her company in August 1978, but Grace Gibson Productions is still going strong. Nowadays they sell some of the old shows (as well as new mini-series) to country stations. "They want more shows than can be supplied these days," says Grace Gibson. "I'm sure the same thing would happen in the city if someone put new radio productions on."

This note of buoyant optimism is echoed in the company's recent brochures. "The move is back to recorded drama in the US", says the latest one. "Where will it lead?"

Where indeed? Perhaps history will repeat itself.

• • •

The phrase "women's programmes" conjures up pictures of listeners learning how to make sweaters, bottle jam and being told 101 cunning things they can do with lamb chops. In the early days of Australian radio, particularly on the ABC, sessions for women relied very heavily on the traditional household preoccupations; 1933 programmes included "housekeeping in all its many forms: preparation for, care and upbringing of children; knitting, sewing and

Lorna Byrne.

fancy work; interior decoration and other matters of essentially feminine appeal".

Programmes like these were undoubtedly useful, though the thought of such a relentless parade of household hints is a bit daunting. After the war, however, women's sessions extended their scope and became much more varied. Because most women at home during the 1950s spent much of their time in domestic pursuits, there was still a great deal of "homemaking" information in women's sessions. However, the presenters realised that their listeners wanted something more. They were not "just housewives"; they read, they wanted to know what was going on in the arts and they kept up with current events and personalities as much as possible.

To show how women's radio programmes had changed since the less than heady days of the 1930s, here is a week's rundown for the ABC metropolitan women's session in early 1958, compered by Ida Elizabeth Jenkins. Items included book reviews, "an interview with a woman in the news", a summary and discussion of readers' letters and a segment entitled "A Traveller Returns" about life in Madrid. There was even a bit of literary criticism; Pauline Watson presented "an appreciation of George Eliot".

Presenters of women's sessions had different backgrounds and specialties. For example, Lorna Byrne, who ran a national ABC session for country women for thirteen years, had worked in the Department of Agriculture; she was one of the first agricultural science graduates in New South Wales. "I remember that my first programme was about the control of houseflies ... a very essential subject!" she says. "Gradually I became known to the ABC rural broadcasters all over the country, and when they were doing their own reports for the *Country Hour*, they would collect material that they thought might be suitable for my programme — about the way women lived and ran their homes in different parts of the country."

Gwen Plumb, who was an experienced radio actress, ran her own women's session on Sydney's 2GB during the 1950s and 1960s. "I did topical interviews; discussions with people in the news," she says. "A lot more current affairs than the other women's sessions were doing — as well as book reviews and theatre crits. There wasn't much 'knit one, purl one' stuff on my programme."

Del Cartwright, who presented *Del's Diary* on 2CH, was a trained home economist who had been a professional demonstrator of electrical appliances for the Sydney County Council. "I was a specialist in my own field," she says, "and I don't think any other person with my domestic knowledge was broadcasting at the time. I had a certain knowledge, which gave me confidence in presenting it."

Del Cartwright's programme did not deal just with aspects of household management.

I used to get square dancers into the studio and interview the caller, and then they'd actually dance in the studio and the listeners would hear what they said and how it was done. Then I had my hair done in front of the microphone. Of course, listeners couldn't see it, but I could describe what was happening.

Radio taught me how to write specialist scripts, it broadened my own knowledge and taught me the value of audience participation. The listeners were *the programme. They would write and tell me what crafts they were doing, and I'd have them on the show.*

This rapport with listeners was a very important part of women's programmes. Women wrote to the presenters asking for further information about all sorts of things that had been mentioned over the air. "You have no idea what it means to give a recipe on radio," says Lorna Byrne. "People wrote for it in droves."

Del Cartwright.

One week I went down to Bega for the Red Cross, and a woman there served very nice chocolate biscuits for morning tea. She gave me the recipe. When I came back to Sydney and was pre-recording my show before going to Cairns, I suddenly realised I had a minute and a half to go. So I picked up this recipe for chocolate-coated biscuits and read it out.

The following week I dropped into the ABC office in Cairns. You wouldn't believe it, but there were a whole lot of telegrams for me about the chocolate biscuit recipe — I hadn't told them how to put in the chocolate! Either the woman who gave me the recipe had forgotten about it, or I'd neglected to mention it.

There was such a fuss with all these people demanding: 'Why no chocolate!' that the manager of ABC Bega had — most reluctantly — to see the lady who had given me the recipe. She was practically in tears, poor thing. Anyway, the manager came back and sent a message to Sydney on the teleprinter: 'One dessertspoon of cocoa or chocolate, and I hope it chokes the lot of you!' I had to apologise to the listeners very humbly.

Because of the enormous listener interest in and response to women's sessions, advertisers practically lined up to buy time on them. This of course did not apply to the ABC sessions — but putting in the ads was a very important part of those on commercial stations. Del Cartwright, whose calm and friendly manner made *Del's Diary* immensely popular with listeners and advertisers alike, says that she often had to do some fast footwork to get all the ads into her programme.

There weren't any recorded commercials and I was allowed to ad lib them, fitting them between or during interviews or near music breaks. I might start the programme by saying, 'Good morning, this is Del's Diary. *I hope you're all sitting in a comfortable chair with your cup of Ceylon tea.'*

I personalised the ads as much as I could because that's how I worked best. Twenty-four commercials had to go in, in the hour between eleven and twelve! They weren't all a minute long, thank goodness — some were thirty seconds. I had to learn to group them and make them flow on.

In the end there were so many commercials that I felt like saying, 'I'm sorry to interrupt the ads because I've got to interview somebody now!'

Del Cartwright and Lorna Byrne both loved getting out of the studio and talking to their listeners, finding out about different lifestyles and interests. Lorna Byrne says, "This was the part of my job that I really loved best. For years I'd been wandering around all parts of the country for the Department of Agriculture before I joined the ABC, talking to women in different areas, giving talks, organising field days and conferences. I had the feel of the country, and I still have."

I had some delightful experiences when I was with the ABC. I was invited to Tasmania, the Northern Territory and over to Western Australia, meeting people all the time and doing recordings. It was one of the most interesting times of my life.

When I went over to Tasmania, I talked to the Country Women's Association and met an Englishwoman. Sitting at her feet was a beautiful Afghan hound and when I admired it, she told me, 'Apart from being a great friend of mine, he's got economic value. The pups that he fathers bring up to fifty or sixty pounds each. And he's valuable in another way.' She got a brush and brushed some long hairs out of the Afghan and told me how she spun them and wove them. She showed me scarves and cardigans and all sorts of other things she'd made from this dog!

Then there was this woman who was a crack rifle shot. I asked her the obvious question: 'How did you become one!' She

replied, 'Oh, my husband's always shot!'

Sometimes Lorna Byrne found country hospitality overwhelming.

In Western Australia, people were so kind and eager to help that they didn't give me a minute to myself. They organised entertainment for me, too. One evening, some people who were managing a station took me to a local hall and introduced me to their friends. They put on a film about two or three children who set off to find their way from somewhere to somewhere — it was up the Birdsville Track — and their mother got ill and they had to look for a doctor. I still remember a woman in the audience saying crossly, 'The silly fools . . . they've got a wireless there. Why don't they send for the Flying Doctor!' Anyway, the kids wandered and wandered and the poor little things died and I think their mother died too! And this was meant to send us away happy! It wasn't a very cheerful evening, I can tell you.

At least two presenters of women's shows collected material overseas. This is a commonplace of broadcasting now, but in the early and mid-1950s a woman interviewer carrying a "field" recorder was most unusual. The tape recorders of the time were not like the small, compact machines used now; they were battery operated and, according to Del Cartwright, they looked like sewing machines and weighed about as much. "They were portable . . . just!" she says.

Gwen Plumb lugged one of these all over London among the crowds for Queen Elizabeth's coronation in 1953, interviewing bystanders and sending voice reports back to the Macquarie network by radio telephone. And in 1954–55 Del Cartwright toured twenty-six countries for *Del's Diary*. She had to fight for the privilege. "The station didn't want me to go," she says, "so I struck a bargain that if any of the sponsors dropped out while I was away, the money the station lost would be taken off my salary." Brave and confident words, considering that she needed her salary to be paid while she was away. "All I had was enough money to pay my fare," she says.

The items she collected while she was away give a clear indication of the scope of *Del's Diary*.

I found out various things about the countries I visited, concentrating on two subjects: the status of women and the country's economy. In India I talked to women about choosing their own partners, because up to that time girls married men whom their parents chose. I asked women in Italy how they ran their households, and how much control they had over the money coming in.

I was interviewed on radio wherever I went; I had letters from people in Australia, including Prime Minister Menzies, and I got some wonderful stuff. I met famous people — Marlene Dietrich, Louis Armstrong — and in Canada I even interviewed a Russian cipher clerk who had defected. That was very hush-hush.

I was quite fearless; I took a lot of risks because I was innocent of all the possibilities of being attacked or robbed. I went around at night to all sorts of places, including nightclubs.

Once, a wire on the recorder broke. I wandered down a dark alleyway in Rome and found a soldering garage. It was just a shed with a brazier. There were three men crouched down playing cards and the scene looked like a Rembrandt painting.

I wouldn't do this now, but I went up to them. 'Recorder', I said. They didn't get it, because they didn't speak any English at all. I tried: 'Wire . . . weer' but that didn't work either. Then I had an inspiration. The wire was copper, so I said: 'CU_2' . . . the chemical name for copper. 'Ah!' They understood immediately, and soldered the wire together.

Lorna Byrne was one of five women invited to go to China in 1958; she must have been one of the first Australian women to be

invited. She says:

It was the time of the Great Leap Forward, and flocks of people all over the place were growing rice, harvesting and threshing it in the most primitive manner. That was fascinating. The Chinese were the nicest people; they did everything they could for us. I think I'm one of the few Australians who shook hands with Mao Tse-tung.

I'm glad I went to China at that stage. I'd like to see it again, but it's all so different! Hate the thought of Coca-Cola in China.

Lorna Byrne could have been the first Australian woman to tell radio listeners about China — antedating television documentary maker Suzanne Baker by about twenty years. But she wasn't.

Do you know, I didn't get to say a word about the trip on air! China wasn't recognised by Australia at the time. I don't know whether there was an ABC ban of some kind about mentioning the country — I never found out. But nothing was said.

A great opportunity missed.

After thirteen years, Lorna Byrne retired from the ABC in 1967.

"It was hard," she says, "because that programme had become part of my life."

I'll never forget the day I gave it up. One of the ABC producers had recorded a little introduction to my last programme. He started off with: 'I have something to tell you today which I'm quite sure will make you feel very sad.' (Some of my old school friends heard that, and one said: 'My God, Lorna's dead. I never realised how much I liked her before!')

Then I came on and did the programme. I always finished off with: 'I'll be with you next week . . . until then, goodbye everybody.' That day, I got as far as 'I'll be with you next week . . .' then I remembered and said, 'Oh, no I won't!'

Elizabeth Schneider took over the programme, but women's sessions had disappeared from the ABC by 1970. Del Cartwright transferred to television as soon as it started and for a while did both radio and television programmes. "It was hard work," she says, "and eventually an hour of radio and half an hour of television got too much. TV was live then, you see. I gave up radio."

Del Cartwright feels that women's programmes stopped being made for several reasons. Firstly, more and more women went out to work; secondly, as she says: "There are not as many women, except women in the country, who are interested in the same way as they were then. They don't want to make their own cakes — Sara Lee produces as many as they want. There's takeaway food, convenience food, and it's not all bad. The smell of freshly baked biscuits and cakes has long disappeared from the modern kitchen."

Thirdly, technical schools and libraries give lessons in household crafts and languages. "I used to have a French professor giving lessons on my programme," she says, "and I directed the segment towards going to a restaurant and ordering from a menu in French. That's not necessary any more because you can buy tapes and learn whatever language you like in your own home." There may also be craft courses on television.

However, Del Cartwright still feels that there is a place on radio for segments dealing with home science and home economics.

I don't think women are really getting that from television now. It's all right to say that radio and television have to be with it, but a lot of practical information gets lost. A lot of young people would like to know what is actually involved in looking after a baby, for instance, and to know about budgeting for running a home and dressing better and looking better.

People sometimes need a voice they

can trust because they don't have the confidence to search out this information for themselves, and that's why I think radio is very intimate. I was talking to women in their homes, and I became a friend. Everybody wrote letters to Del, not Miss Cartwright, which is a compliment. Radio was, and is, an intimate means of reaching into their homes and helping them, guiding them and sometimes giving them confidence and inspiration.

• • •

Leave it to the girls,
Let's leave it to the girls,
If you've a problem puzzling you
And you don't know just what to do —
Ask Terry Dear to help you (APPLAUSE)
and he'll
Leave . . . it . . . to . . . the . . . girls!
ORCHESTRAL FLOURISH

That jingle, sung in close harmony by three women who sound like the Andrews Sisters, introduced one of the most popular radio "advice" shows of the 1950s, *Leave It to the Girls*. Like *Dear Mr Dearth* (which featured producer Harry Dearth as compere), it followed a simple formula. "The girls" were well known, intelligent women, usually writers or actresses, who gave off-the-cuff comments about problems put to them by a male compere. These ranged from difficult domestic issues to lighter, not-so-serious ones; some came from listeners' letters, others were invented by the programme's production staff for the sake of variety.

Terry Dear, the urbane chap who "left it to the girls" for many years, says:

Normally we had three panellists and a male guest who would all comment. The whole show was completely spontaneous; the panellists were good enough to express an opinion without having seen the letters beforehand. The regulars we used were Elizabeth Riddell and Jo O'Neill, who were journalists; Margo Lee and Gwen Plumb were actresses. They all had the sort of flair that enabled them to put their thoughts succinctly into spoken words, and they were all excellent.

I held the peace, that was the idea. If the show degenerated into backbiting, there was no fun or value in it. I had to make sure that a subject didn't drag on too long, too.

Handling serious questions such as those about marital breakdowns could be ticklish. After all, *Leave It to the Girls* was a light entertainment programme, not a substitute for the Marriage Guidance Council. The panellists were well aware that they could not be expected to give thorough analyses of problems when they had very few clues about the personalities and priorities of all the people involved. Gwen Plumb says:

Heaven knows if we always said the right thing. If a listener said she was having terrible trouble with her husband, somebody might say airily, 'Oh, I'd leave him and get out!' But then another panel member would point out that that's easy to say, but how can a woman with children pack up and leave, just like that! She might have no money of her own, nor would she have access to any. She might not be able to live with her parents, because they would be too old and not have room for three more kids. Women couldn't just leave and get jobs — and often they can't now, either!

Terry Dear adds, "In these cases, all we could do was offer a source of comfort to the person concerned without a possible solution. Sometimes I had to sum up by saying, 'Look, dear, just go to the police.' If we could, we'd suggest a useful avenue of approach, though."

One of the most interesting things about *Leave It to the Girls* is the way in which it mirrored some of the social attitudes of the 1950s, as well as what you could and could not say on air. "I think somebody said

'bloody' once and all hell broke loose," says Terry Dear.

Harry Harper, who produced *Leave It to the Girls*, was once reprimanded by the Broadcasting Control Board for allowing the word "pregnancy" to go to air at a time of the evening when many young people were listening. "That gives you an idea of the sorts of things you couldn't broadcast in the 1950s," says Terry Dear. "Nowadays, of course, you get four-letter words spelled out, even in reputable newspapers . . ."

"Bloody" and "pregnancy" were not all right on air in the 1950s; jokes about women were OK, though, and this probably indicates more than anything else the way in which attitudes have changed over thirty years. Nowadays, a remark such as Terry Dear's, "Fancy Margo in that hat thinking about decimal coinage!" would be unacceptable to Australians sympathetic to the feminist movement. *Leave It to the Girls* had constant references to women's supposed lack of logic and their interest in new hats and washing machines. In the context of a light entertainment programme of the 1950s, these comments were not regarded as offensive; the audiences laughed comfortably and did not take them seriously.

The panellists themselves seldom replied; for Margo Lee in "that hat" to make a pointed comment about Terry Dear's tie would have been regarded as extremely aggressive. They just accepted the jokes as part of the show. They did not giggle kittenishly, either; this would have been completely out of character. And when the panellists were making provocative and intelligent points, as they did all the time, they were always taken seriously. After all, what they said was the basis of the show, and they were all professional communicators who could state their views cogently and with wit. The jokes were not intended as put-downs; just thrown in for their entertainment value.

Terry Dear and three of the regular panellists of Leave It to the Girls, *photographed in December 1955. Next to Terry Dear is Margo Lee, while in the front row are Josephine O'Neill and Gwen Plumb.*

The topics discussed on *Leave It to the Girls* sometimes indicate attitudes to other current social issues. In 1958, there was a discussion about the Sydney Opera House, at the time when the controversy about it was at its height. A letter suggested that Australia didn't need an opera house at all.

"The cultural standards of Australia are lamentably low," states Morris West in an oracular manner. (He is the male guest on this occasion.) "So are our critical standards. Our attitude to art is provincial, and Australia is a culturally immature country. Sydney is not culturally mature enough to warrant the expenditure on the new Opera House."

Josephine O'Neill, a well-known Sydney theatre critic and regular panellist, disagrees. "You're treating cultural standards as though they're static, which they're not," she says. "The Opera House will give everybody an opportunity to see the spectrum of the arts. Culture is a matter for individuals; it's an individual taste. And it starts with self-criticism."

"We should have an Opera House," adds Margo Lee. "I agree with Morris that we're culturally immature. But Australia is only one hundred and seventy years old, and we don't have a cultural tradition. All our artists have to go overseas because there's no opportunity here; maybe they won't have to any more."

But Morris West isn't having any of that; he states that the new building won't widen community interest in the arts because Australians just don't go to performances by their own artists. "At the same time, anybody who comes here from overseas gets a hearing. Every half-baked theatrical personality from America or Britain gets the red carpet treatment," he says, sounding rather bitter.

At least 200 people agree with him. That

last statement gets a round of applause from the audience in the auditorium where the programme is being recorded. But do they think that overseas artists should be treated as though they're minor royalty? Are they saying that this is undesirable?

Anyway, the discussion ends on this note. Australians aren't cultured; they'll clap a bad performance as vociferously as a good one. But perhaps, with the Opera House, Australia is on its way to becoming a truly cultivated nation.

(It is for you, gentle reader, to judge whether and how much attitudes to Australian culture have changed over the last thirty years!)

Leave It to the Girls went to television. With a different title, it survives on the screen to this day. It is now called *Beauty and the Beast* and it depends on exactly the same kind of rapport (or lack of it) between women panellists and the male compere that was first heard on the bakelite box more than thirty years ago.

4
Music, music, music

Up to this point, we've dealt with words over the bakelite box; music has been mentioned only incidentally. The time has now come to restore the balance to some extent, because over the sixty-odd years that radio has been part of life in this country, musical programmes have accounted for about 50 per cent of what is broadcast. In the early days the figure was up around 80 per cent, according to one source; in 1948 the Australian Federation of Commercial Broadcasting Stations stated that its commercial station members devoted no less than 55 per cent of air time to musical shows of various kinds. (The ABC wasn't far behind, with 53 per cent.) The "transistor revolution" and other factors have changed the character and style of much of the music heard over the air, but radio stations still devote at least half of their broadcast time to music of various kinds.

In the heyday of the bakelite box the variety of musical programmes broadcast was most impressive. Look at a week's rundown for a commercial station in the early 1950s and you will find band recitals, hymns, community singing, hillbilly music, jazz, "hot swing", hit parades and "jive", and military band music: almost every kind of popular music you care to name.

Commercial stations were more cautious when it came to classical music, tending to concentrate on what were known as the "light classics": the music of Grieg, Chopin, Strauss (Johann Jr, not Richard) and bits of Beethoven. The weight limit was set at about Tchaikovsky. "While we are well aware of the excellence of composers such as Mahler, Sibelius or Bruckner," said a station executive in 1950, "we feel that we must wait for public demand to catch up to them." Commercial stations are still waiting.

Not only were classical music programmes on commercial stations "light", but they usually consisted of well-known pieces. Sessions such as *Starlight Serenade*, *Musicale* and *Sunday Aubade* had "a judicious blend of the familiar music of such world-renowned figures as Tchaikovsky and Grieg". Opera was treated in the same way; the better known operas in the repertoire have at least a couple of familiar tunes, so a show such as Hector Crawford's *Opera for the People* could comfortably fill half an hour with rousing arias from *La Bohème* or *La Traviata*. There was an occasional exception to this general rule. For example, over Easter in 1947 a Sydney commercial station broadcast a complete recording of Bach's *St Matthew Passion* by the Gewandhaus Orchestra and the choir of St Thomas's Church, Leipzig. But for the most part, the commercial stations left the "heavier" stuff to the ABC.

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The Australian Broadcasting Commission has done more than any other organisation to promote and encourage an interest in classical music in this country. A clause in its 1932 charter said that part of its function was "to establish and utilise in

such manner as is desirable in order to confer the greatest benefit upon broadcasting groups of musicians for the rendition of orchestral, choral and band music of high quality''.

One of the ABC's first jobs was to find existing Australian talent and develop it — and this meant, in part, setting up orchestras, one for each state of Australia. In the early days, this was quite a problem. Isolated from the centre of the musical world, Australia possessed a limited number of professional musicians. There had been a Sydney Symphony Orchestra under that name since 1916, but in the other states, any concerts that were given were performed by casual musicians who were brought together for concerts as they were required.

The man who probably did most to set up fully professional orchestras in Australia was Sir (then Dr) Bernard Heinze, who worked with Charles Moses, the General Manager of the ABC from 1935 to 1965. Charles Moses says:

We decided that the Sydney orchestra would comprise forty-five musicians with all the sections of a symphony orchestra, including, for example, four horns; that Melbourne would have an orchestra of thirty-five, but with only three horns. Queensland, Western Australia and South Australia would each have orchestras of seventeen players, including not only the major instruments, but a few extra strings. We couldn't afford much for Tasmania, and it sounds ridiculous now, but their strength was eleven players — one horn, one oboe, a flute, a bassoon, a timpanist, a trombone, a trumpet and four strings.

Even given these limitations, which in orchestral terms were considerable, the ABC started to give concerts featuring the state orchestras, and many of these were broadcast. The pioneer series was conducted by Sir Hamilton Harty, who came out to Australia in 1934. We gave four concerts by the orchestras in Tasmania, and six each in Brisbane, Adelaide and Perth. It wasn't much, but it was a start. And sometimes the logistics took a bit of working out.

When required, we would move to Hobart, for example, a dozen players from Melbourne. We never moved less than half a dozen players from Sydney to Brisbane, from Melbourne to Adelaide, and perhaps on to Perth as well.

Charles Moses adds that the ABC would like to have done many more concerts. As it was, the ABC's budget allocation from the government was mostly used for setting up and maintaining the orchestras, as well as for other music sessions. ''When I became General Manager in 1935, the total income the ABC received was something like £380,000,'' says Moses. ''Very soon, the amount being spent on music was greater than on anything else the ABC did.''

Full-time state symphony orchestras did not come into being until after the war. In the years from 1946 to 1950, all states gradually established their own orchestras, which were subsidised by state and local government funding as well as by the ABC.

At first, the orchestras concentrated on the standard repertoire. Works by Wagner or Richard Strauss were out because they demanded a very large number of players, particularly in the woodwinds, brass and timpani sections in which the early orchestras were rather weak. But as time went on, and particularly after the war and during the 1950s, more and more contemporary Australian composers were represented in ABC concert programmes, including John Antill, Arthur Benjamin, and later Peter Sculthorpe and Nigel Butterley.

Charles Moses says:

Choosing the programmes was entirely the responsibility of the Director of Music. The first director was William G. James [who will be remembered by generations of schoolchildren for his Australian Christmas carols, with words by John Wheeler.] *From the time he took up the*

job, he was responsible for all music broadcast by the ABC, and that included, of course, the concerts performed in public, because they were also broadcast. His officers kept a record of works that were played so that they were not repeated too often every year.

Not only did the ABC set up its own orchestras but, as classical music enthusiasts know, they started bringing out well-known soloists, conductors and singers to play with them. The first celebrity artist, Sir Hamilton Harty, was followed by an impressive line-up of the world's best musicians.

Australians were therefore able to hear concerts by people whose names had been familiar to them only on disc. Sir Malcolm Sargent came out twice in the years immediately after the war; Otto Klemperer was a visiting artist in 1949 and 1950; Irmgard Seefreed, Elisabeth Schwarzkopf, David Oistrakh, Paul Badura-Skoda and Claudio Arrau all gave recitals for the ABC before 1965. A nine-year-old prodigy named Daniel Barenboim also gave piano recitals for the ABC some time before the rest of the world knew how good he was. One of the best years was 1960, which saw a series by the Boston Symphony Orchestra, Philippe Entremont, Igor Markevitch and Mstislav Rostropovich, as well as Tibor Paul, Malcolm Sargent again and Australian-born conductor Charles Mackerras.

Australians eagerly took advantage of the opportunities the ABC gave them, subscribing to ABC concerts in their thousands. In 1936 the total number of subscribers was 2500; by 1957 this had increased to a quarter of a million.

Younger people benefited from the ABC's concerts too. Youth concerts, intended for people under twenty-six, began in 1947 and ten years later there were 12,000 subscribers. These concerts also featured celebrity artists, and they were broadcast from time to time, as they still are.

Thousands of Australians had their lives enriched by the ABC concerts, whether they were subscribers or listeners to the recitals and concerts broadcast. Many primary schoolchildren were first introduced to classical music by means of the free concerts that the ABC held in capital cities and major country centres.

The repertoire for these usually consisted of classical pieces with a story and with action delineated by the various instruments. At least once every year, *Peter and the Wolf* "by a Russian composer with a rather difficult name, Pro-ko-fiev" was featured, as well as Britten's *Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra* and jolly pieces such as Rossini's *Thieving Magpie* overture. The conductor always explained what was going on; every section of the orchestra stood up in turn so that the audience would be very clear about what each instrument sounded like and where its player sat. Bearing in mind that ten- and eleven-year-olds are usually bored by a lot of music going on without anything much happening, the conductor would interrupt and explain. And judging by their beaming faces, most members of the orchestra enjoyed the whole thing. They were always vigorously applauded at the end; especially the timpanists, for, to eleven-year-olds, the players with the greatest charisma were those who made the loudest noise.

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On commercial radio the people who probably did most to make classical music palatable to thousands of listeners were Hector and Dorothy Crawford. When they formed Crawford Productions in 1945, Hector Crawford expressed his opinion that "with imaginative presentation, better-class music programmes have a wide appeal to a mass public". These "better-class music programmes" covered a wide variety: they included a series of light music concerts that he arranged and conducted under the title of *Music for the People*. They were produced by Dorothy Crawford who, like her brother, had an im-

pressive musical background. Hector Crawford, born in Melbourne in 1913, made his name as a choral conductor; Dorothy Crawford was a Melbourne contralto who later became a radio actress and announcer. (She was also the ABC's first woman announcer in Melbourne.)

After their success with *Music for the People*, the Crawfords lauched an opera programme, *Opera for the People*. Like its predecessor, it was a series of half-hour programmes. One hundred and four episodes were made, and budding Australian opera stars were given the opportunity to sing well-known arias, accompanied by an orchestra that Hector Crawford conducted. Some of the featured artists were lyric soprano Elsie Morison (who later went overseas, returning as an ABC celebrity artist), Glenda Raymond and Valda Bagnall. The show, sponsored by the Vacuum Oil Company, proved popular enough to be sold in many overseas countries, including Canada and New Zealand.

But Crawford Productions' most innovative radio programme was probably *The Melba Story*, which they described as a "musical drama". It was a skilful blend of narration, music and dialogue which, as its title indicated, followed the career of Dame Nellie Melba, "a great Australian". This method of combining drama and music was quite new in Australian radio; indeed, Hector Crawford announced that it was unique in the world.

The Melba Story consisted of twenty-six half-hour episodes, and it still makes good and interesting listening. "We bring you the actual facts of Melba's life ... all the incidents portrayed actually took place on the occasions mentioned in the story," says the smooth narrator, Eric Pearce. (A lot of digging into the juicier facts of Melba's life has gone on since the late 1940s. The series did not dwell on the fact that Melba was an artist who was not only "beloved by her public" but most vigorously by several famous men. However, as censorship was very strict at the time of *The Melba Story*, little could have been said about this.)

The series starts with sound effects of a murmuring audience and of an orchestra tuning up. It's Melba's farewell concert in the Albert Hall, London, in 1926. "This great auditorium is full to overflowing," orates the announcer, "and we recognise many familiar figures." Up comes the disc of the murmuring audience again. "The Australian cricket team is here, and many more Australians are present." Pause. Applause. "And here she is: Melba herself!"

The orchestra, actually conducted by Hector Crawford, breaks into a few bars of Puccini's *La Bohème*, and we hear a clear, pure soprano voice uplifted in song. It sounds very much like Melba's voice as we hear it on disc today, but in fact it belongs to soprano Glenda Raymond. She made a great success as Melba in the series, as well as in other Crawford radio productions. For the next few years magazines such as the *Radio-Pictorial* described her as "the new Melba".

Fade out. Then cut to a child's voice singing "Comin' Thro' the Rye". This is Melba as a child, a fact that is not explained except through the sound of the voice. This was a rather subtle touch for radio productions of the 1940s, in which everything was spelled out. It works. (Melba as a child was sung by Careen Wilson.) "You know something?" says a child's voice. "Nellie Mitchell — I saw your drawers!" (Audiences must have known that Melba's real name was Nellie Mitchell, otherwise that last line would have been pointless.)

"We have been with Melba from her first public appearance as a child of eight to her final appearance at the age of sixty-seven," announces Eric Pearce. "Will you come

A rehearsal for the Melba Story. *From left: Glenda Raymond, musical director Hector Crawford, producer Dorothy Crawford and cellist Marston Bate.*

with us on a journey through the years between? We shall live again with glorious music and human drama, the most fascinating years in history."

John Reid's script is perhaps a little worshipful, but not unduly slow. And Dorothy Crawford's production, with its swift intercutting, is highly efficient and professional.

The Melba Story was exceedingly successful. Not only did it sell nationally, but it was played in Fiji, Rhodesia, Hong Kong, Malta, New Zealand, Singapore, South Africa and Trinidad.

Crawfords followed *Melba* with two other musical drama series: *The Amazing Oscar Hammerstein* and *The Blue Danube* (about Johann Strauss Jr). Each featured a narrator, a full orchestra, singers and actors. The productions grew more and more lavish; in fact, by the time *The Blue Danube* was made, each episode cost £350, making it the most expensive production in Australian radio history up to that time. However, Crawfords eventually made £2000 per episode from its national and overseas sales.

Melba, *Danube* and *Hammerstein* gave a boost to the careers of many singers, (as well as giving orchestral players, arrangers and copyists a bit more butter for their bread), but the Crawford show that really made singers' names was the *Mobil Quest*. Its intention was to find the best singing voice in Australia. It was sponsored by the Vacuum Oil Company, who were making quite a name for themselves as sponsors of musical shows, and the prizes they presented were lavish. As well as being given the opportunity to make a concert tour of all Australian states, the winner was awarded a first prize of £1000, the largest prize then offered for a radio talent quest in the country. If the winner went overseas for further study within the year, he or she was given an extra £150 plus a free air trip to London. There were cash prizes for runners-up, ranging from £300 down.

The *Mobil Quest* followed the usual radio talent show pattern of heats, semifinals and finals, but there any resemblance it had to, say, *Australia's Amateur Hour* finished. Most amateur talent contests relied on the opinions of listeners to decide winners; the adjudicators for the *Mobil Quest* were Hector Crawford, Edgar Bainton, the retired director of the New South Wales Conservatorium of Music, and two Vacuum Oil representatives.

Competitors were given full orchestral accompaniment for their presentations of songs or arias from opera or operetta. Nothing about the *Mobil Quest* was cheap; everybody wore dinner jackets or evening dresses for all heats and finals. Even the commercials had a certain amount of pomp and ceremony. "You have heard from all competitors," the plummy announcer informed the audience, "and you will hear from them again soon." Pause. "Now, you may not know this, but Mobil helps combat engine wear. It's the greatest oil ever made." Another pause. "And now, our singers appear for the second time . . ."

By 1955 the *Mobil Quest* was broadcast over more than fifty stations throughout Australia. Vacuum Oil proudly announced that the show had auditioned 6154 Australian singers and that a total of £15,628 had been won in prizes and fees.

Mobil Quest gave the first great opportunity to several singers who have gone on to become famous in Australia and overseas. They include Ronal Jackson (the 1949 winner) , Donald Smith (1952) and Ronald Austin (1954). Robert Allman, later a principal baritone with the Australian Opera, was the runner-up in 1950.

In that year the major prizewinner was a twenty-three-year-old soprano from Sydney: Joan Sutherland.

Even *Radio-Pictorial*, a magazine not noted for its musical acumen, assured its readers that Sutherland's voice was "among the purest [they] had ever heard". And *Radio-Pictorial* almost interviewed her; they didn't quite make it because she was on her way from Mascot Aero-

drome to Canberra and she was pushed for time. Nevertheless, they interviewed Joan Sutherland's mother, who said, "Joan is a career girl. She says she will not consider marriage until she is thirty. I said to her only the other day, 'What if you meet a man and grow very fond of him? Would you give up your career if he wanted you to?' But it's difficult to predict such things."

It certainly is. As the world knows, some years later Joan Sutherland married "the talented young pianist Richard Bonynge" (who first came to public notice as a fourteen-year-old star on the Saturday afternoon radio programme *Roundelay*). And Mrs Sutherland need not have worried: Joan's husband did not want his wife to give up her career.

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"You Australians seem to be quite good at singing," an English dowager informed me some years ago. "I think it must be something to do with *the throat*."

From the early days of radio, people got a lot of fun out of going to a theatre or a hall and belting out "Moonlight Bay" and other old songs, particularly when they knew that their voices, uplifted in their favourite twiddly bits at the end of the chorus, might be heard by thousands of people on the wireless. "Before the war," says Dick Fair, who compered many of these programmes, "we did the singing at the Savoy Theatre in Sydney. We had about a thousand people in the audience and used slides on the screen, and a pianist. All the traditional songs were sung — they used to tear the place down!"

Community singing persisted after the war, particularly in church broadcasts, when people sang their favourite hymns. In 1952 Lever Brothers sponsored *Australia's Hour of Song*, a show that gave bathroom baritones and sopranos a golden opportunity to show what they could do.

It went to air on Sundays at 8 pm, replacing the *Lux Radio Theatre*. (Some listeners didn't like it because they missed the plays, and a few cynics referred to it as *Australia's Hour Gone Wrong*.) It wasn't any ordinary singing show; "community singing *de luxe*" was how the publicists described it. The *luxe* — a nice pun on one of Levers' most popular products — was supplied by guest artists, including Gladys Moncrieff, Peter Dawson, Valda Bagnall and accordionist Gus Merzi, as well as overseas visitors such as Tommy Trinder and Allan Jones. "It's grand to hear people singing," commented a Lever Brothers' spokesman at the time, "and in this show, everybody will sing. When a guest star appears, we will join him or her in singing a song." A great idea, people thought. After all, how else could an ordinary member of the public claim that he or she had accompanied Gladys Moncrieff?

Australia's Hour of Song was produced by Len London.

We rehearsed our audiences very strictly for about half an hour before we recorded the show. If we had 'Swing Low, Sweet Chariot', for instance, the soloist might sing that line and the audience would follow with, 'Comin' for to carry me home'; you had the soloist singing one line and the audience singing the following one. [In this particular case, there was little scope for the audience to improvise: *all* they got to sing was 'Comin' for to carry me home'.] *Then another time, you'd have the soloist sing the whole verse, with the audience doing the chorus.*

Sometimes it got more complicated; I'd conduct them and put on a slide with the correct words at the appropriate time, so they could only sing what they saw. When we rehearsed, we did just a chorus of one thing and a bit of another; if there was a sticky bit with the harmony or something, we went over it, but we didn't do the whole lot.

One of Len London's responsibilities in preparing *Australia's Hour of Song* was arranging the magic lantern slides on which the words appeared for the audience

to sing. He says:

Once I'd got permission from the copyright holders to use the words, I typed them on a thing that looked like a piece of cellophane between two sheets of carbon. Then I'd put this between two sheets of glass and sort them out for the magic lantern projectionist to put on at the right time. It was more hack work than musical work, but music was involved, so therefore I loved it.

When *Australia's Hour* finished in 1955, Len London produced a couple of shows that encouraged listeners to write their own songs. "There was one called *Search for a Song*, which went on for six months or so," he says. "People sent in songs they'd composed from all over Australia, and we performed them with first-class musicians and singers. I won't say that any of the music made top of the hit parade, but it was pleasant. Mostly ballads and pop music."

When that finished, we did a calypso programme; this was in about 1955, at the time of Harry Belafonte and 'day-oh'. With nothing more than a pair of maracas and a few ideas, one or two of us made up some samples of calypso and invited people to send in their own, which we arranged and presented professionally. That was great fun.

Television killed community singing and "amateur" music programmes. The lone standard-bearer after 1956 was the ABC's *Village Glee Club*, which continued until 1971; listeners could hum along with the songs after the conductor said, "Now, watch my beat . . ." tap . . . tap . . . tap . . . . But their best vocal effects had to be confined to the living-room.

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In the days of the "big band" musical shows, a professional musician could earn a reasonable living in radio, if he or she worked hard. "I could earn about fifty pounds a week just after the war," says Jack Macnamara, a trombone player who worked with Jim Gussey's ABC band for many years. "But even so, very few of us could afford cars. You'd often see a drummer with all his kit or a double bass player wrestling his instrument on to the back of a tram, on the way to a show. They weren't allowed to sit up in the seats."

Jack Macnamara had had a lot of professional experience before coming to radio. Before the war he even did a stint as a player in the band that appeared at the Regent Theatre, Sydney, when people who went to see a film expected a live musical show as well. "There was sometimes a singer on stage, and the orchestra would play a selection of some sort, as well as accompanying him or her," he says. "Then the main first half of the show would start, and during the interval the orchestra would play music. We'd also do the playout at the end of the main film."

We had to stay back and look at the whole of the last picture so we could do our bit at the end of the show. I will never forget one picture: Sergeant York *with Gary Cooper. It ran for seven weeks, and we had to do two shows a day every day except Sunday. I played my damned trombone solo eighty-four times. By the end of the run, we could practically say the actors' lines with them. I could just about repeat the whole of the dialogue, even now!*

Anyway, Jim Gussey of the ABC band heard me and I joined him in about 1942. The hours were much better — the pay wasn't marvellous but, as everybody said about the ABC, it wasn't the cash, it was the prestige — and we had days off as well. And thank God I never had to look at Gary Cooper again!

The Village Glee Club *was one of the ABC's most durable programmes. It featured excellent choral singing presented as the efforts of a small village choir. Publicity pictures maintained the same daffy, rustic flavour.*

Jack Macnamara stayed with the ABC band for twelve years, with occasional time off for moonlighting.

There were about sixteen of us. Three or four brass, four saxes and about four rhythm players, I suppose. We had three fiddles with that band, too. That was most unusual; as a matter of fact, a lot of questions were asked about whether they were really necessary in a dance band.

You see, the ABC dance band was a difficult thing because not only was it a dance band but an accompaniment vehicle for lots of vocalists. You had to be versatile. Some of the shows were put together so that we were a sort of backing group.

Arranging and scoring musical numbers for bands was a long and difficult job. Arrangers had to score for each instrument, which occasionally meant writing sixteen parts; they had to write each part out, bar by bar, so that every musician had a copy for his or her own instrument. It was much easier to score for vocalists, who had only one melody line. Jack Macnamara adds:

We sometimes had hassles with arrangements; most of them were done by ABC staff arrangers. Sometimes the big problem was that pieces were scored for vocalists, so they were useless as purely instrumental numbers. Or else you had to have a particular type of vocalist — a tenor, or a soprano — or you couldn't do the number. If we had been engaged to play at a ball or something, there was always a scramble to get music that had been arranged suitably.

Musicians had to dress up in dinner jackets and black ties. "We had to wear soup and fish for everything," says Jack Macnamara. "We called them musicians' overalls." And photographs of "big bands" do indeed show a resplendent bunch of chaps, none more so than the large Colgate orchestra

Jim Gussey and his ABC band. Jack Macnamara is on the far right of the back row.

under Dennis Collinson. Colgate spent more money on its orchestra than the ABC did, and often there were thirty or forty players, as well as a choir.

At one point Jack Macnamara worked for them, playing the music for *Colgate Cavalcade* and *Calling the Stars* in the late 1940s. "It was a great pleasure to play for them," he says. "They were very highly skilled, with some good players."

We used to do featured numbers, backing for vocalists and play-on music for comedians. (I remember playing 'Mazel Tov', which was Mo's entrance music in his sketches with Hal Lashwood and Horrible Herbie and all those others.)

We did those shows in the old radio theatre opposite the Trocadero dance hall in George Street, Sydney. Of course, that's all gone now. I used to think it was a huge auditorium, but I've always found that if you go back to places again, they're a lot smaller than you thought!

I don't think Australia has seen anything like the Colgate orchestra for shows since then. It was like a small symphony orchestra, and big bands are as dead as the dodo now. Nobody can afford them any more.

Before we went to air, we would run through all the numbers that were required and all the vocal backings. That would all be on one day — maybe a morning. The following morning we would have a rehearsal with the artists and the singers, then we'd do the numbers through with them. Later on, we might run through again for timing; that would be all until we went to air.

It sounds like a lot of work (particularly since there were usually new songs to learn in the player's own time), but a musician's life varied between bouts of frenetic activity and slackness. "Sometimes the biggest enemy — no matter what the show — was boredom," says Macnamara. "You could be sitting around a lot, waiting for the vocalists to learn their parts or a sketch to be fixed up. Not very challenging."

You could also get to the stage where you weren't having enough practice. The trouble with a brass instrument is that if you don't play it regularly you can't, because your lip goes. You could strike some awful snags. The thing about playing any brass instrument is that if you make a mistake, you really *get it wrong. Everybody hears you!*

People used to say that home practice — which was very necessary in playing any instrument, particularly if you were a professional — wasn't taken into consideration when awards were set for musicians. This is quite true.

In fact, though being a professional musician for radio shows didn't pay badly, there was very little security. Like most others, Jack Macnamara was on a short-term renewable contract, with a week's notice. He says that this applied to instrumentalists who had been playing in the same band for almost twenty years.

Another great disadvantage was that facilities for bands were not good. "I often thought that the Musicians' Union could have worked on improving conditions for us," he says. "In the theatres and the auditoriums where we rehearsed and played our radio shows, there were dressing-rooms for the artists and the ballet ladies, too; nothing was ever provided for the orchestra."

When I did a 2GB show called Radio Hollywood, *we had to rehearse in the little lane out the back of the auditorium. Too bad if it was raining! What was worse, we had stacks of music, and once we had just worked out the order for the numbers with Reg Lewis the conductor. We had all our music in sequence, all our parts — and you know what! A little gust of wind came sneaking up the alley and the music flew off our stands and went absolutely everywhere! Not only did we lose the order the numbers were going to be played in, but we lost our parts and some of them were mixed up. You wouldn't believe the mess. We spent a*

long, long time sorting it out. And that was only one case of many.

During the war, band and variety shows were done live. "They only wanted to record shows for security reasons," says Jack Macnamara. "Everything had to be approved before it went on air during the war, including music. We played live on air, but the announcer had to stick to his script. If he didn't, questions were asked."

Immediately after the war, bands played live on such shows as *Colgate Cavalcade* and *Calling the Stars*, as well as others. However, as recording techniques improved and tape came in, it was easier to put material down and replay it on air a week or so later. Like actors, musicians greeted this with a certain amount of relief; at least the balance of the different instruments could be experimented with, so that it sounded right. Nevertheless, the usual set-up was having about twenty musicians in the studio — on one microphone — with another for the vocalist (and one for the announcer). Jack Macnamara says:

We used a big RCA unidirectional mike — a thing about a foot high with a dome-shaped top. There was also a smaller version which we used sometimes; that was unidirectional too. This meant that it was only live from one side and wouldn't pick up echoes from the back. These mikes had a double ribbon, the bottom half of which was baffled, and a coiled acoustic chamber at the bottom. We used these almost the whole time I was with the ABC. As a general rule, the mike was placed well away from every instrument, so the whole sound came through. Frankly, I think that a lot of the recordings made this way sounded pretty good.

They did, too; when you hear some of the Jim Gussey recordings, it's hard to believe that the whole band was recording on a single microphone. Some Australian producers and engineers held to the use of one microphone almost as an article of faith, believing that having any more was excessive or fussy. Ron Wenban, who was an ABC sound effects officer and occasional panel operator for some years, remembers an incident that took place when he was working the panel for a Bob Gibson band show.

Bob had recently returned from the United States, where everybody used more than one microphone. The sound engineer in this particular studio, one of the old school, insisted that you could do a band programme with only one mike (which you can: they're coming back to using fewer microphones now). Without his knowledge, and with Bob's consent, I took four cardioid-type microphones, using one for the vocal group — the Lester Sisters — and the other three for different sections of the orchestra.

'That's not bad,' said the sound engineer. 'See. You can do it with one microphone, can't you!'

Musicians generally have the reputation of being hard-drinking, hard-living mortals. Jack Macnamara says that he was one of the few he knew who was an almost complete teetotaller (even when the grog was free, which is *really* being a non-drinker). But he agrees that "most musos are a pretty mad bunch".

When I was with the ABC we had a trumpet player who was a poor unhappy little bloke, with a bad marriage and a drink problem. We had to do a charity concert at the Town Hall in Sydney as a backing group for the vocalist Marie Bremner. The trumpet player — let's call him Fred — turned up very drunk on the job that night. On top of that, he'd just broken his foot and it was in plaster. How he managed to get around drunk without breaking his neck I wouldn't know.

We started, and halfway through one of Marie Bremner's numbers Fred suddenly announced, 'They don't want to hear this. What they want is a trumpet solo'. Up he

got to play and I grabbed him and pulled him down again, because he would have blown his trumpet for sure. He got cranky with me and tried to get up and play several times, so by the end of Marie Bremner's spot, I was a bit tense.

Finally she finished and we went into a band number. As we played, I felt a weight on my shoulder. Fred's head! He'd actually gone to sleep. I had to get him off the stage, so I picked him up and carried him straight down to the dressing-rooms.

Everybody was watching this, including some of the big boys at the ABC. They thought Fred had collapsed and asked Jim Gussey what had happened. Of course Jim protected him, and explained that Fred had a broken foot and had collapsed with the pain. He said to me later, 'If they'd gone down to the dressing-room and smelt Fred's breath, that would have been that!'

• • •

Without singers — those men and women who presented the ballads, up-tempo numbers and romantic songs — music shows on radio would have been much the poorer. There were dozens of them, singing songs about love unrequited: Johnny O'Connor, Lorrae Desmond, Jimmy Parkinson and Eula Parker were some of the best known.

In the late 1940s the men adopted the "crooner" style. (People who remember Bing Crosby and Frank Sinatra at that time will know that a crooner was the type of singer whose vocal chords were in a perpetual state of low, tremulous vibration.) At the same time a new word entered the Australian language to describe women singers: "croonette". Croonettes were, as far as I can make out, simply women vocalists, who presented songs in any style that was not actually operatic.

There was an immense variety of work for both men and women singers from the 1940s to the 1960s, and they had to be versatile. Not only did they present feature spots in musical and variety shows, but they also did commercials.

Three of the best-known singers on radio were Betty, Nola and Olive Lester, who performed as the Lester Sisters. They were featured artists in the Colgate shows, and appeared in almost every other national variety show that was on radio in the late 1940s and 1950s. They sang the sort of close harmony made famous by the Andrews Sisters, and were required to extol the virtues of products such as Rinso, as well as informing the public that "national washing machine month comes round again in May, my friend" and doing other songs for advertisers. Their vocal style is immediately recognisable in the jingles that introduced *Leave It to the Girls* and the *Quiz Kids*. They also appeared as soloists from time to time.

Nola Lester branched out into comedy in radio and, later, television. Her flat, deadpan style and the Orstrylian accent she adopted are a bit like Noelene Brown's in television's *Mavis Bramston Show* and *Kingswood Country*. Keith Smith remembers her in a sketch where George Wallace was playing a revivalist preacher and Nola Lester was in the audience. "Sister, sister," he cried, "what do you do, now that you have been Saved?" She said flatly: "Well, I stay at 'ome on Satdy noights, readin' the *War Cry* and eatin' jelly beans." Nola Lester was also featured in the early Digby Wolfe shows on the Channel 7 network, where her catchline was, "That'll be noice".

Many other singers who started in radio went on to careers in television, as well as in the clubs. Neil Williams was one; Cathy Lloyd another. And a young Adelaide saxophonist named Bobby Limb and his comedienne wife Dawn Lake first became nationally known through radio variety shows in the early 1950s.

One young singer who gained a lot of attention during the late 1940s and early 1950s was Ross Higgins, who owed his career to radio. He was "discovered" on

the 2GB *Staff Show*, a short-lived talent quest with a very obvious source of talent: the men and women who worked for the station. A young man with a pleasant tenor voice, he was soon appearing in big-budget extravaganzas such as the *Caltex Show*, as well as the *Songs of Irving Berlin*, a series with Betty Bucknelle. (The narrator for that programme was a young man named Leonard Thiele, who became even more famous when he changed the spelling of his surname to Teale.)

Ross Higgins also sang in many children's shows for the ABC and when television started he compered one of the earliest shows for children. Now he's best known as a star of television's *Naked Vicar Show* and *Kingswood Country*. All of which proves that it pays to be versatile.

At least two of Australia's best-known singing stars on stage and on record extended their careers and gained a whole new audience when they came to radio: Gladys Moncrieff and Peter Dawson.

Gladys Moncrieff, "Our Glad", was a featured artist on many shows, including *Australia's Hour of Song*, when she led the audience in popular songs and ballads. This was fine because she could project all she liked, and she gave big, well-rounded performances, as befitted the star of *The Maid of the Mountains* on stage.

However, like George Wallace before her, she found it difficult to scale down her performances when she appeared as a radio solo artist. Producer Jim Bradley, who worked with her in a musical show in the late 1940s called *Australian Star Parade*, remembers:

The idea was to build the show around a great artist, and when the guest was Gladys Moncrieff we wanted her to sing her favourite songs, including selections from The Maid of the Mountains. *Her problem was always projection; her voice was so big that the needles on the control panel veered into overdrive! No matter how often we told her to pull back a bit she always forgot, because she was giving a stage-type performance. And she always had to have an audience, so we'd round up the kids on the staff and Gladys would sing to them. She couldn't work without that.*

Gladys always sang very long phrases in one breath, and the microphone picked it up every time she filled her lungs. It was far too obvious, so I suggested that every time she was going to breathe, somebody should thrust blotting paper in front of the microphone so it wouldn't be picked up on disc. A poor, bewildered little guy from the office stood by, and every time Gladys took a breath he shoved his blotting paper in front of the mike. Gladys was a rather large lady, and he got so fascinated watching her enormous bust moving up and down that he used to dart in and hit *the mike with the blotting paper!*

Unlike Gladys Moncrieff, Peter Dawson had few problems in adjusting to radio. Jack Macnamara worked with him in one of the last shows he did for the ABC, in 1953.

The thing that stood out with Peter Dawson was that he spoke in exactly the same voice that he used for singing. He didn't have to change his vocal register at all, and that's why I think his voice lasted until old age. And you could hear that beautiful voice resonating everywhere, all over the studio, even in ordinary conversation.

He was a hell of a nice bloke; unlike most of the others he used to come and chat with us in the band room during breaks in the show. Even though he was so famous, he was unpretentious.

He had a great sense of humour, too. I remember that in that show Bryson Taylor asked him about his early years. You see, Peter Dawson had worked for his father, who owned a big plumbing firm in South Australia, before he won a scholarship and went to London for training. Bryson, who had a very plummy ABC-type voice, asked him, 'When you

knew you were going to London to be a singer, what went through your mind?'

Peter said, 'I thought: Hooray! No more dunny diving!'

• • •

In the early 1950s a new kind of adolescent started to emerge in Australia. Bodgies with their winkle-picker shoes, dark suits and narrow string ties, their hair sculptured into glossy waves with masses of Californian Poppy or Brylcreem, began haunting milk bars in cities and towns all over the country. So did their female counterparts, the widgies, who wore their hair in ponytails or short bangs, and sported peasant blouses and full skirts with several rope petticoats underneath. Heedless, hasty youth, sighed their parents, as parents have sighed for generations.

Radio executives — who might have had teenage children themselves — recognised that these kids were an important market force. For they were the turntable teenagers, who bought more and more records and who started demanding their own kind of music. Hit parades became an important part of radio music programming.

Like so many other features of Australian radio, the hit parade came from the United States. Announcer Allan Toohey, the man who was known as "Old Smoothie" on Sydney radio, heard hit parade shows in the early 1940s. "The one I remember best was called the *Lucky Strike Hit Parade*," he says. "It was done with Mark Wernaugh's big orchestra. They took seven or eight of the most popular tunes every week and presented them with various singers including the Andrews Sisters, Frank Sinatra and Skinny Ellis." Allan Toohey thought that this sort of show would go down well in Australia, and he says he introduced the idea to this country after the war.

It wasn't quite the same thing because I knew that, especially after the war, a huge orchestra was very expensive and there didn't seem to be much point in getting Australian artists to present versions of other people's hits. We figured that if Bing Crosby or the Ink Spots made a hit record, people would want to hear them, so we used records that had been made by the stars themselves.

We went round record shops, finding out the top-selling records for each week. Then I'd do my programme on 2UW on Wednesday nights at 8.30, asking listeners to say what they thought were the week's seven top tunes. There was a jackpot prize for people who chose correctly. From this programme grew all the other hit parades — the Top 40 programmes and the others on commercial radio even today.

After the war, technically advanced record-playing equipment (including record players with electric motors, lighter heads and better acoustic quality) led to the greater availability of cheap records. More and more programmes for what the *Radio-Pictorial* gingerly called "the younger element" started to appear. In 1951 Sydney commercial station 2CH introduced a show called *Junior Disc Jockey* (the American term "disc jockey" dates from the late 1940s) four times a week in a late afternoon timeslot, presumably timed so that teenagers would be able to listen to it before they did their homework or got ready for an evening at the milk bar.

Teenage boys and girls who wanted to present their own session were invited to contact 2CH, usually bringing along their own records. They had to talk about the musicians and artists whose music they played, and the junior disc jockey who presented the best programme on the first three nights was featured in something called the *Thursday Star Quest*.

Listeners responded in huge numbers, quite ready to talk about "the merits of short- and long-playing records, jazz, bebop, rebop" (*rebop*?) "dixieland, hillbilly and the light classics". They did not suffer from microphone fright, apparently.

The programme's compere, a young and serious-looking man named Garry Blackledge (whose hair in photographs looks rather like melted vinyl) said, "So far no teenagers have been self-conscious in front of the mike, which means that it's losing the terrors it had in the early days. Many are facing it like veterans." The media-conscious teenager had obviously arrived.

Radio-Pictorial rather self-consciously described this show as "a wow".

There were other, more relaxed teenage programmes, some of which were billed as "family entertainment" — a somewhat optimistic description, considering how many parents felt about their offspring's choice of music. One of the most popular was *Rumpus Room*, which went to air over Sydney's 2UE late in the afternoon. As well as just playing popular tunes of the moment, compere Howard Craven chatted with teenage guests. "As a rule, the teenager is exceptionally sensitive to many things," he said in 1955, no doubt echoing the heartfelt sentiments of any parent who has had to deal with an adolescent. "They don't like being referred to as kids or children, not having their viewpoints sympathised with and they don't like being talked down to." *Rumpus Room* was a warm, relaxed programme. Teenagers had plenty of opportunity to air their views and they could even try out as announcers.

The show had plenty of music — and perhaps that tag of "family entertainment" was applied because it featured the audience uplifting its collective voice in song. Community singing was regarded as "relaxing the audience" on *Rumpus Room*. If it actually did this, it might perhaps be considered by today's governments as a new secret weapon against juvenile crime.

To cater for the turntable teenager, a new, shining-eyed and glistening-toothed breed of announcers sprang up: the professional DJs, whose forte was "platter chatter". They included Bill Gates, Ron Hurst, Michael Williamson, John Laws and Bob Rogers. Rogers, who celebrated his sixteenth year on radio in 1958, according to the publicity blurbs, was typical of the other DJs. A smiling, cheerful man whose style does not seem to have greatly altered in the years since then, he was described as "a man whose sincere approach to radio audiences and wide knowledge of music and records stamps him as one of Australia's foremost DJ specialists".

This knowledge of music and records, then as now, was the DJ's most important professional tool. *Broadcasting and Television* magazine did a major survey in 1958, in which they asked well-known disc jockeys to describe the criteria they used in choosing the records they played. About two-fifths said that the most important factor was the popularity of the artist. One DJ said, "With so much material on the record market today, the overall quality of popular music has deteriorated. Consequently, when selecting music, I always endeavour to programme artists with ability; musicians who can play and singers who have voices." According to some people the interpretation of these criteria has been open to question ever since.

Apart from the artist, the disc jockeys rated several other factors as important in choosing music. Most of them thought that the local best-seller lists were much less important than the American hit parades compiled from magazines such as *Billboard* and *Variety*. This probably explains why so much of the pop music heard during the 1950s and after is American.

Broadcasting and Television, as usual, didn't give the size of the sample of disc jockeys they chose, nor did it define whether they were talking solely about hit parade music. (They might, just, have included one of the most intriguing programmes of early 1958: *The Hit Parade of Singing Salesmen*, in which "catchy singing commercials submitted by 3AW clients are played".)

Looking at a list of the most popular discs for 1958 is an instant exercise in

nostalgia. Who remembers "All I Have To Do Is Dream" by the Everly Brothers? Laurie Lendon's "Whole World In His Hands"? What about the one-eyed, one-horned, flying purple people eater — not to mention the advice that the Witch Doctor gave to David Seville, which goes: "Oo, ee, oo, ahah, ting, tang, walla walla bing bang . . . oo, ee"? Can current Top 40 hits even compare?

In the mid- to late 1950s and the 1960s, television probably had less impact on the style of teenage music than the advent of the transistor and car radios. For the first time kids could take their music with them wherever they went. Out went the rather leisurely delivery, the slowish pace: people on the move wanted to hear music, lots of it, and information about it delivered quickly and with few words. The few words became bastard American-accented gabbling as time passed.

Teenagers had more money and more leisure in those affluent days and particularly on the east coast of Australia, they flocked to the beaches; winkle-picker shoes and jelly-roll hairstyles gave way to bleached sandy locks and thongs. Allan Toohey saw this change as a great marketing opportunity. He says:

My son was a very keen surfer in the early 1960s. There was a lot of music around then, so I put it to my station management that, if we could get all the surfies and their friends listening to us, we would have about another forty or fifty thousand listeners.

I had a Sunday morning programme on 2UW, so I started to direct it to the surfie kids. I used to get reports from all the beaches in summer about how the surf was. I had competitions, including a limerick contest about beaches or surfing or surfers. The programme eventually ran for about four hours. We gave away prizes every week: radios, beach buggies, things like that. Most of the kids listened on transistors, and the beach loudspeakers carried the programme too.

Music on radio followed Australians almost everywhere.

5

A theatre inside your head

Radio drama filled a cultural gap for many people. If they happened to live outside the capital cities, they usually missed out on seeing the theatre stars who came to Australia. But if they failed to see Dame Sybil Thorndike and Lewis Casson during their Australian tour in 1955, they could hear them in *Triple Bill*. Many Australians had never come across the work of Arthur Miller until Hollywood actor Melvyn Douglas played the lead in a radio adaptation of *Death of a Salesman*, with a supporting cast that included John Meillon and Patricia Kennedy — both Australians. Audiences who had previously seen Shaw's *Arms and the Man* done by amateurs at the local school of arts could tune into a first-class Australian production starring Ralph Richardson. Students who had "done" the great plays of the world for public examinations were able to listen to them over the ABC. And those comparatively few listeners who were vitally interested in plays written and performed by Australians could listen to them on the national network without commercial breaks.

In the early 1950s a radio drama enthusiast was able to listen to at least three plays a week. If he or she lived in Sydney, such a listener could pick from three plays broadcast at the same time on a Sunday evening; the *Lux Radio Theatre*, the *Caltex Theatre* and the featured ABC play, all on at 8 pm. During the week the ABC presented two further plays, while on the commercial stations the chief showcase play was the *General Motors Hour* on Wednesday evenings.

The ABC was the first radio organisation in Australia to present plays on a regular basis; the federal drama department was established in 1936, only four years after the national network started broadcasting. However, while many listeners were very loyal to the ABC, the full theatrical impact of radio drama was not made until three years later — on commercial radio. In 1939, after a lot of showbiz fanfare, the *Lux Radio Theatre* began. Because commercial stations always made much more fuss than the ABC about their radio productions, it's probably the "showcase series with a star-studded cast" that people remember best. It became almost a Sunday night institution.

The *Lux Radio Theatre* was an Australian adaptation of a very popular series that had started in the USA five years before. To underscore its American origins, the very first broadcast in Australia included a congratulatory message from that greatest producer of epics on film, Cecil B. de Mille; an appropriate choice that foreshadowed the extravaganzas *Lux Radio Theatre* produced over the succeeding years. Like its American counterpart, the Australian show was presented under the all-powerful sponsorship of Lever Brothers.

The two men who ran *Lux Radio Theatre*

at the beginning were Harry Dearth and Dick Fair. "We set up a unit through J. Walter Thompson, who handled Levers in Australia, to do not only the *Lux Theatre* but *Australia's Amateur Hour,*" says Dick Fair. "Harry was the producer-director of the show at first, and I did all the commercials."

But we did everything together, really. We bought the rights to overseas plays and had to rewrite quite a number of them. We used a number of the scripts from the Hollywood Lux Theatre, *though not their tapes or discs. We always used local actors.*

When war broke out Harry joined up and I stayed on, doing the Lux Theatre *as well as* Amateur Hour *throughout the war years.*

Unlike other radio plays, which were recorded in a studio live or for later broadcast, the *Lux Radio Theatre* productions sought to involve the audience by making them as much like live theatre as possible. People who came to the auditorium to see the *Lux Radio Theatre* play done live every Sunday night didn't just see a group of humdrum actors standing around a microphone holding scripts.

An excerpt from a film called *Let's Look at Radio* illustrates this point very well. A group of six or eight actors and actresses in dinner jackets and evening dresses stand at varying distances from a microphone, plays in hand. On cue, an actor steps forward and growls ferociously into the mike; an actress emits a short, sharp scream. The rest of the cast gasp and mutter when required. (It is impossible to know what the play is . . . judging by the amount of noise everybody is apparently making, it looks like a thick-ear melodrama.)

To the left of the actors sits the sound effects officer, Len London, a young, moustached man, also in evening dress. He has his own microphone and is flanked by a sandbox and a scaled-down effects door. He holds a starting pistol in his right hand.

On the far right of the stage behind a table stands a tall, slim man; he, too, is in dinner jacket and black tie. He looks as though he has just strolled in from playing the leading role in Noel Coward's *Private Lives*.

This is producer Harry Dearth; his suave evening gear is marred by a pair of small round headphones covering his ears. He glances at his script before him on the table occasionally, but spends a great deal of his time waving his arms around like Herbert von Karajan conducting the Berlin Philharmonic. At a crucial stage in the play he lifts his right hand, points his index finger and does the classic mime of somebody firing a pistol. Duly cued, the sound effects officer pulls the trigger of his effects pistol . . . bang! . . . and almost immediately opens the door, very nearly falling off his chair in the process.

It's hard to escape the suspicion that everybody is making his or her job look a little larger than life because the production is being filmed — but perhaps not. After all, 500 people filed into the auditorium, expecting to see the drama of radio production every week, so actors and production staff had to make it look as exciting as possible. This was particularly true because the audience also dressed up in their best clothes.

This style of production, with the producer down there on stage with the actors, was Harry Dearth's idea. As a former actor himself, he enjoyed all the flourishes he gave his producer's role. However, there was a practical reason for his style, as Harry Harper, who took over from Dearth, explains.

The stage we used had a great pillar blocking the actors' view of the producer in the control room. That's why Harry went on stage with earphones and produced from there. But when I did Lux Theatres *I didn't follow that method. I believed that the audience wanted to see the actors, not a producer throwing his*

arms about.

Be that as it may, audiences loved being part of the *Lux Radio Theatre* shows, and Harry Dearth actively encouraged audience participation. In an interview he did for the *ABC Weekly* in 1947, he said:

I have used audiences as part of the actual background of a play on several occasions, and have found that listener reaction was remarkably good.

One that comes to mind was a drama with an Irish setting in which a principal character had to deliver a speech to a crowd in the open. I rehearsed the audience five minutes before the show, then had members of the actual cast 'planted' among them, and combined this live background very effectively, according to listener reports that came later.

Lux Radio Theatre *plays, of course, purposely provide the illusion of the theatre. One has to be careful that laughs do not come from the audience in the theatre at unexpected situations which may arise, and which the listening audience neither understands nor appreciates.*

But most certainly I think audience participation in our shows not only encourages an intelligent interest in the drama generally, but is of value because it helps to establish that almost indefinable 'feel' of the theatre you get when you hear flesh-and-blood shows.

Did this rather flamboyant method of producing radio plays distract the theatre audience from the drama being enacted on stage? Not according to Len London, who says:

It didn't matter whether the play was The Patsy, *set in New York with Damon Runyon-type characters, or* Henry V *or* Alice in Wonderland *or a romance. You still had the same setting: the actors wearing dinner jackets and evening dresses or cocktail frocks, no matter what the period. But within minutes of the opening lines being read, people forgot that they were watching actors reading scripts and became totally absorbed in the play. They really did. They used their imaginations, just as they would have done if they had been listening to the play on the radio at home.*

Seeing some of the more spectacular *Lux Radio Theatre* shows in production must have been an exhilarating experience. Dick Fair recalls a particularly complicated musical version of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*.

The seven dwarfs weighed from seventeen stone down to about six stone — it didn't matter what they looked like, as long as their voices were right. We had two Snow Whites, one who did the acting but who couldn't sing, so we got somebody else to sing for her. The Prince didn't sing either; we had to get another voice for him, too. The only time we used a live orchestra on the Lux Radio Theatre *was in that show; we had a twenty-piece orchestra! I remember that it cost Lever Brothers about two hundred pounds to extend the stage for that one production, just so we could get everybody on together.*

We got a bit more economical later; when we did How Green Was My Valley *we had to get a big chorus of Welsh coalminers singing. A friend of mine very kindly got the Welsh community in Sydney together and they recorded all the songs for the show. So when the script called for miners to burst into song, the sound effects man simply put his needle down onto a track on a disc.*

Whether a *Lux Radio Theatre* play had a cast of thousands or six — which was much more common — presenting it live in front of an audience could be nerve-racking for both producer and actors. Nigel Lovell, who took part in several Lux productions, says:

It was pretty hair-raising. You only rehearsed on Friday, Saturday and Sunday

afternoons, then did the show live on Sunday night. Everything had to jell; the music had to be in the right place and so did the sound effects. It was a hell of a mess if you missed your cue and said, 'Aargh! I'm shot!' and the shot came afterwards. The producers used to get understandably uptight quite often.

People thought that the actors just picked up their scripts and read through their parts for the first time on Sunday nights with every line right and every inflection intact. This, of course, is a tribute to the skill and professionalism of the actors, whom long experience had taught the art of covering any mistakes and carrying on, even if they dropped their scripts. Muriel Steinbeck, who starred in Lux productions, commented, "People used to say to me, 'Oh, it's easy for you ... you just read the parts'. I'd like to see them have a go!"

As time passed, other sponsors gave Lux a run for its money in the showcase radio play area. When Caltex started the hour-long *Caltex Theatre*, a company spokesman said: "We believe that radio plays are our best buy; firstly because they build an audience, secondly because they allow the commercials to be broadcast in suitable surroundings in peak timeslots." Nothing there about the human benefits of broadcasting radio drama — but then sponsors rarely thought about such things.

The *General Motors Hour* was another prestige drama series. Like the *Lux Radio Theatre*, the *General Motors Hour* cashed in on a successful American series. It began on the Macquarie network in 1952. Half the plays, which were adaptations of what were described as "top-ranking films and stage shows" were produced in the USA and broadcast here; the other half was done in Australia. The *General Motors Hour* did all its Australian productions before live audiences in the capital cities. However, unlike the *Lux Radio Theatre* shows, they were not presented live, but recorded on alternate Saturday nights for broadcast on the following Wednesday evening.

Just as significant was the *Macquarie Theatre*. The significance of *Macquarie Theatre* was that it instituted annual awards for radio acting; the best performances of the year by an actor and actress, as well as excellence in supporting roles, were acknowledged. The intention was to make them Australia's radio equivalent of the Oscar, and the presentations had all the show business glitter of the Academy Awards. Winning a Macquarie Award really meant something.

Towards the end of prestige radio drama productions, plays were recorded in the studio, not in front of a live audience. Harry Harper says:

Cost was becoming important then, because television had hit and sponsors were putting more money into it. Besides, presenting radio plays in a studio was easier because tape was available. At least you could stop if people dropped their scripts on the floor or turned over two pages at once. I believed, though, that actors gave a better performance when the chips were down; I used to think that they sometimes took advantage of the safety valve that tape provided, though not often!

Radio plays did not invariably represent all that was best and greatest in world drama. Particularly on the commercial stations, a good proportion of the features were adaptations; in 1948, Harry Dearth said, "I have a number of excellent plays lined up for the near future, including some English stage plays for use even before their West End productions." Some were adapted from books that could have been borrowed from the fiction section of the average public library ... the works of Jeffrey Farnol and A. J. Cronin, for instance, were popular. Radio versions of famous films were done, too; Australian writers adapted them with Australian actors taking roles played on screen by such stars as Clark Gable, Ronald Colman or Deborah Kerr.

Often performed in the early 1950s were radio versions of *The Prisoner of Zenda*, *The Seventh Veil* and even *From Here to Eternity*, the last in a two-hour version with most of the "language" in the book removed for the protection of Australian radio listeners' tender ears.

There were practical rules that had to be followed when a producer was choosing a play for a commercial station. It had to last only an hour, including commercials; because of cost, there could not be a huge number of characters. Nevertheless, choosing a good play for the *Lux Radio Theatre* or *General Motors Hour* was not a mechanical process, as Harry Harper explains.

You can't choose something like that by formula, otherwise anybody could sit down and decide how it should be done. Knowing how to do it is something you take in through your pores. Being able to choose plays for radio comes from a sort of instinct, certainly some knowledge and a lot of experience. I know that I read an enormous number of plays every year to get fifty-two — one a week — because you wouldn't average better than one suitable play in ten. You have to be able to hear the play in your head and see its dramatic development.

Producing a play was very different from doing a serial. First of all, you had to find your play which, very often, was from a stage play and you had to get it adapted. (A good writer could adapt and write a play from a film in a week.) You had to vary the kinds of plays you chose and get the best possible mix. Then you had to cast from your adaptation and produce it. If one man was in control of all those processes, the system worked much better than trying to work by committee.

I worked on the basis that theatre is bums on seats. You had to get plays that would appeal to the generality of people because you wanted the greatest possible number to listen to the commercials.

Putting in the ads was usually done smoothly. In *Lux Radio Theatre*, for instance, the routine was: announcement, commercial, introduction of play, first act, music, commercial, next act, commercial and so on. But presenting the cast list at the end could sound distinctly odd; a producer and actors alike had to remember that the sponsor was He Who Must Be Obeyed.

Consider this example, from a *Lux Radio Theatre* production of Dickens's *Great Expectations*, broadcast at the end of 1955. After urging listeners and the studio audience to buy the big, economy size Pepsodent tomorrow, the jammy announcer's voice continues, almost without a break: "In tonight's play you heard as Miss Havisham Neva Carr Glyn; Joe Gargery, John Bushelle; Madgwick," (a mispronunciation here; it's Magwitch) "the convict Alexander Archdale. Also Ngaire Thompson, Judith Godden and Ward Leopold."

There is a pause.

"As our stars, Pip and Estella, you heard John Meillon and Pamela McGee . . . who now return to the microphone with our producer-director Mr Paul Jacklin."

The following dialogue takes place.

"Congratulations, Pamela and John, on a very fine show," says Paul Jacklin.

"Thank you, Mr Jacklin," they murmur.

Pause. "How does it feel to be a star, Pamela?" asks Paul Jacklin, for this is Pam McGee's first major production.

"It's the loveliest Christmas present I've ever had," replies the actress who has just been demonstrating extreme heartlessness as Estella.

It gets folksy now. "Are your parents listening in?"

"I'm sure they are. Thanks to Lux, I've been swamped by telegrams and flowers from friends I've not heard from in years."

Then there's a bit of talk about how Pamela, aged nineteen, has won trophies for ballet, swimming and physical culture and how she plans to go to Taree for an aquatics festival.

"Don't you ever get tired?" asks Paul Jacklin. Having organised the production, he has as much right to be tired as anybody else.

"Sometimes," Pam McGee admits cautiously, "but my favourite pick-me-up's a nice hot bath."

"With Lux toilet soap?" asks Paul Jacklin, sounding as though he really wants to know.

"Yes. It's wonderfully refreshing."

This rather stilted advertisement cuts right across the actors' splendid performances as Pip and Estella, and it's obvious that Paul Jacklin would have been much more comfortable back in the control room.

Not having to worry about such things as sponsors, the ABC had none of these problems. An hour play on commercial radio had to run forty-nine minutes to incorporate the advertisements, but ABC plays could run as long as the producer saw fit, so the ABC could often do greater justice to a play. Leslie Rees, who was the ABC's first federal drama editor, in which capacity he worked from 1936 until 1966, says:

We would do an hour play that lasted fifty-nine minutes (with a minute for music and introduction) and if it was a really important play by Bernard Shaw or somebody, we'd give it ninety minutes. You can't compress the classics unduly.

We wouldn't require the playwright to write to an exact time; we wanted him or her to have the freedom to write something that ran twenty minutes, forty-five minutes, thirty-two minutes and so on, and not say, 'You have to draw it out; we've got to fill in the hour', or 'Cut it down'. That all interferes with the freedom of the writer, and our object was to give writers as much freedom as possible, whether they were doing original plays or adaptations. We had brilliant adaptors, very good people who could sometimes slim down a two-and-a-half-hour play to whatever its weight dictated.

Most of the plays the ABC presented during Leslie Rees's time there were radio adaptations of classic plays. He says:

Greek plays were good to do . . . not too many parts, a clear storyline, easily followed main characters. But I thought they needed a bit of presentation for listeners. You could easily do this skilfully so that even university professors wouldn't feel they were being talked down to. You don't start the broadcast with, 'I'm now going to tell you some of the background to Oedipus Rex*'; you'd say something like, 'As you know . . .' or 'I'll just repeat the story'. Lots of people have the capacity to listen to Greek tragedy and to understand it without any education at all. If they can get tremendous feeling for Sophocles — an ancient Greek playwright of whom they've never heard — don't you think you're making an advance! My attitude was that we must continually enlarge our audience.*

However, a particular ABC attitude that is current even now came up from time to time. Leslie Rees:

The head of the drama department wouldn't explain. 'People who want to hear will be listening,' he said. He didn't feel that Sophocles, for instance, needed any changing whatever. So we presented it like this: 'Oedipus Rex. *A play by Sophocles.' Then we went straight into it; no explanation at all. The play starts off with Oedipus talking to a crowd, then there's a long speech by the priest. Goes on for about four or five minutes. No explanations. I think we got about two listeners for that programme!*

That would never have done on the *Lux Radio Theatre* or the *General Motors Hour*. But then the ABC was under no compulsion to be "popular"; no sponsors were going to cancel shows if they didn't have a large listening audience. At the ABC

Leslie Rees could follow quite different criteria for choosing plays to broadcast.

I became very keen on making the distinction between classic plays that were broadcastable and those that weren't. Now, my opinion is that Bernard Shaw's or Ibsen's plays are very suitable for radio. On the other hand, Chekov, with his peculiar way of one person asking a question and the answer coming four speeches after that, was very hard for radio, and I never even tried to put his plays on. On the other hand, Shaw's plays were good. There is so much driving language in them.

We did some really remarkable things. I produced Man and Superman. *The great scene in the middle, set in hell, is usually left out when the play's presented on stage, but I did it as a separate two-hour play. Two hours without a cut. Sheer argumentation. Brilliant stuff!*

Though the ABC presented many more plays from other countries than the home-grown variety, the part of Leslie Rees's job closest to his heart was finding and nurturing Australian writing talent. (To be fair, commercial producers did this too, but to a much lesser extent than the ABC.) In his autobiography Leslie Rees has pointed out that he saw himself helping "not only to provide chances for writers but to bring oral drama to a population otherwise, in the context of the times and in the wide spread of the Australian scene, so far almost completely denied any drama experience at all. I mean people in far suburbs of cities, in country towns, in isolated country homes".

Unlike the commercial stations, however, the ABC drama department rarely commissioned original scripts from Australian writers. This is interesting, considering Leslie Rees's contention that the ABC never got enough plays. But he is very clear about the reasons.

I've seldom found that you got a good play if you commissioned it. Supposing I went to Jack Smith, a good writer, and said, 'Come into the office; I want to talk to you about writing a certain type of play for us on a certain subject'. He would come in and ask, 'Well, what do you want?' In fact, what I wanted in practice was the sort of play he *wanted; something he had to get off his chest or a good idea he had had.*

In America during the war, as a morale effort, one of the big broadcasting companies commissioned ten of the very top commercial stage authors to write a play on a certain range of subjects connected with the war. I got hold of these plays, and they were tripe. At least, not tripe — they were professionally written — but they were dead at the heart.

I know that today an attempt is made to reconcile that difficulty with the fact that professional writers have to be sure of acceptance for their work. This always worried me. We would say to writers: 'How about having a go at a radio play? Send one in.' I didn't tell them what it was supposed to be about and they would send one in and we'd read it, say it was no good, and have to send it back. I must have accepted about one in twenty of the plays that came in.

This was, of course, very discouraging for writers. Once the ABC turned a play down, they could hardly approach the commercial stations. "They didn't want original Australian plays," says Rees.

So this was the thing that always bit into me: was I right in saying a play wasn't good? Was I being fair to the author? It was a very, very difficult business.

Many well-known Australian writers, however, took advantage of the opportunities the ABC had to offer. "People would deal directly with us," says Leslie Rees, "and high and low were dealing: Katharine Susannah Prichard, Mary Durack, Vance Palmer. Our most esteemed writers in other fields were also

sending us plays." In the list of radio plays that Leslie Rees includes as part of his book *The Making of Australian Drama*, a lot of other well-known names keep coming up: Gwen Meredith, Sumner Locke Elliott, Betty Roland, Colin Thiele, Morris West, Peter Kenna, Hal Porter.

One of the most prolific and successful radio playwrights that Leslie Rees remembers was Ruth Park.

She did some fine plays about the sea. I don't know if she had any direct maritime background, but she had a feeling for it. She wrote plays about the explorers, men such as Tasman and Dampier. They weren't just historical plays . . . I think Dampier had a problem at home with his wife leaving him . . . and she used the external conflict of his life to illuminate the inner conflict that he felt, which is the real stuff of drama.

Oddly enough, the novel for which Ruth Park is probably best known — *The Harp in the South* — has never been adapted for radio. Leslie Rees was the co-author of the stage version, and says he never had enough courage to put it into programmes when he was the federal drama editor.

The ABC also presented a quota of plays that Leslie Rees calls "experimental".

We had to let authors have their way sometimes. I thought there ought to be a place for plays with a poetic strain, and so did Clewlow, the Director of Drama. We'd save up seven or eight of these offbeat plays, which we knew that only a small handful of people would like, but that minority audience had its rights, and so did the minority playwright. We'd get from the programme arrangers a series of spots on Friday or Thursday night, very late — about half past nine — and present them then.

Not many of the plays presented to Leslie Rees sprang fully formed from their creators' typewriters. Most needed some reworking or editing. Leslie Rees spent a lot of time with writers, discussing their work.

I consider that my greatest contribution, which differed from other people who did work of this kind, was in saving plays. I was told by many an author that I had a sufficient imaginative comprehension of what they were doing to say something like, 'There's a good idea', where another reader might say, 'No, that won't work out'.

I seem to have some kind of faculty for reading a play and saying: 'That's good, that's a good scene, that's going to be a play . . . yes . . . hello, what happened here? Hm. It's going down the drain. Needs more building up there . . . another character . . .' and so on.

There's a lot of work and strain connected with that, because what you're doing is imagining the play in the sort of way that you think the author should have been doing. It's terribly hard to assess a cold script. Anyway, I'd get the author in and say, 'I think the play is good, but it's going down the drain . . . there' — and I'd point to the script — 'page twenty-three, speech four'.

I'd never say, 'Now, this is what you ought to do'. That was the author's job. I'd say, instead, 'You go and think over what we've said, and see if you can build it up in certain ways'.

I'd spend a long time with authors, talking over such things as characterisation or motivation. This sometimes helps them understand what they're doing. They might have been writing a play intuitively, but eventually they had to get to grips with the bones of it, as well as the flesh. You have to make sure that the bones will support the play.

This was the sort of thing I liked doing best.

However, the Australian play that Rees has called "the finest written radio play yet to have come out of Australia and among the

Ruth Park.

finest written half-dozen in the world" came to the ABC in 1941 without needing to be changed by so much as a comma. It was *The Fire on the Snow*, Douglas Stewart's poetic account of Scott's last expedition to the South Pole in 1911.

In his introduction to the published version of the play, Douglas Stewart said:

I wrote the play for only one reason: because Scott's story had always fascinated me. I thought of doing a narrative poem and once or twice attempted it with lamentable results: I could never solve the problem . . . of how to get directness into the narrative poem, to go straight into telling the story and dramatising the characters instead of wasting time over rhymes and pretty lines . . . to approach from the inside so that the story seems to grow of itself, instead of coming along from the outside with a bagful of pretty poetry ready to paste on it.

Eventually, Stewart decided to present his material as a radio play, despite his saying that he "was afraid of the public and afraid of the technicalities of radio playwriting". The notion of a radio play in verse is often a daunting one. It suggests actors declaiming high-flown sentiments in bejewelled words or, in Douglas Stewart's phrase, "a bagful of pretty poetry". However, what makes *The Fire on the Snow* so special is the flexibility of its language; it changes according to what the characters are saying, the feelings they are expressing. It is verse, but it is meant to be spoken and it sounds spontaneous. Even a descriptive passage spoken by the announcer, setting out the theme of heroic struggle, has the quality and the rhythm of speech.

But the reply comes: the world is spun
Between two giant hands of ice
And on any peak of living won
From hardest hours the blizzards hiss,
And the reward set for the blindest faith
Is the fixed needle directing us
Is to reach the Pole; and the Pole is death.

Douglas Stewart.

Not everybody who heard *The Fire on the Snow* over the ABC recognised its quality. One L. L. Woolacott, himself a playwright, wrote to the *ABC Weekly*: "I am prepared to wager that a huge majority of listeners knew within a quarter of an hour that the play was fustian — a mixture of Shakespearean blank (very blank) verse and misfire melodrama." (Douglas Stewart was delighted by the word "fustian".) But other listeners quickly responded with praise, author Dymphna Cusack going so far as to say that she thought the play "the most significant contribution to a new medium that it has been my pleasure to hear".

The Fire on the Snow is still in print, and is still regarded as a classic of Australian radio drama.

Douglas Stewart wrote other verse plays during the 1940s. The next was *Ned Kelly*. "I'm sure he would never have written it if it hadn't been for the success of *The Fire on the Snow*," says Leslie Rees. "I can't say he talked to me about it, though. He wrote it for the stage, said nothing and sent it to me. I adapted it for radio and reduced it to ninety minutes. Laurence H. Cecil did the first production and was absolutely thrilled by it. I produced a later adaptation." *Ned Kelly* was also broadcast by the BBC, by the New Zealand National Broadcasting Service and by Radio Eirann (the Irish were just as interested in their son Ned as were Australians).

Douglas Stewart wrote two further verse plays during the 1940s: *The Golden Lover* and *Shipwreck*.

Summing up Douglas Stewart's contribution to Australian radio drama, Leslie Rees says:

Stewart's four major plays all came from him without any consultation with us.

He wasn't a person who relied on anybody to help him. All I take credit for is having got him on the path of writing plays rather than something else. I did help him a bit, too, when it came to production. I cut The Golden Lover *a great deal, though with his agreement. He tended to overwrite, but so did Eugene O'Neill. So did Shakespeare sometimes. Overwriting, though, is not a bad fault. It's remediable.*

As time went on and television made inroads on the radio listening audience, the commercial stations stopped making lavish radio dramas; the radio play became a specialty of the ABC. More than ever, the national broadcasting organisation provided the most important outlet for Australian radio dramatists. And soon the quality of ABC radio plays and their productions was recognised in other places. True, Australian plays had been broadcast overseas before, but some condescension had been involved. Charles Moses says:

By the mid-1950s, we had shown ourselves to be capable of doing things that were equal to the best the BBC could do. I'm afraid the BBC rather gave itself airs; it felt that we should take its stuff but that ours wasn't necessarily good enough for it.

Our staff was convinced that we could do as well as the BBC could, and we started to enter for the Italia Prizes. We won a prize with one of our first efforts.

The Italia Prizes were — and are — internationally recognised awards given for original works, both documentary and dramatic, in radio (as well as in television). Broadcasting organisations all over the world submit tapes of what they consider to be their best productions, and the competition is fierce.

In 1959 the ABC won the Italia Prize for the best documentary with *The Death of a Wombat*, written and produced by Ivan Smith with music by George English.

It's a superb piece of dramatic writing, dealing with the death of a wombat in a bushfire. On another level, it is an allegory about humanity; life is impersonal, the disasters and tragedies that occur are to be overcome, or not, according to one's personal characteristics. In the introduction to a published version of the radio script, Ivan Smith wrote: "I had been wanting to write a sort of allegory on the human condition as I had been seeing it as a young man. I wanted to synthesise certain groups of human characteristics, and to set these groups in contrast in order to say something about human success and failure ... The wombat seemed to be friendly, stupid, innocent, slow — all characteristics that I was looking for in the main character ... He had courage and a certain amount of resourcefulness and doggedness ... with the sort of gentleness and vulnerability that make nice guys finish last."

Here is one of the most moving passages.

The river is yards ahead of the wombat's snout now, just nine yards. Lurch and crump have sunk to slovenly heave and slide. The flames have washed over him twice, and there are little scrub fires in his fur. The smoke has made him sob to catch his breath, and the heavy, continual sobbing takes up most of his last strength. His eyes are blind with hot fluid, but his snout detects the river six yards on. His last fragments of life tell him: there! The flames find him out again. He cries out in blind agony ... high squealing that doesn't match the lumpy body. He slumps forward. The fire mounts over him. His small shrieks are drowned by the noise.

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Tragedy, comedy, extravagant and epic drama, domestic drama: all had their place on the bakelite box in the twenty years after World War II. While listeners gazed at the floor or the curtains, they peopled the living room with creatures of their own imaginations, brought into being by the

words they heard on radio. They invented their own costumes and sets; they knew what the characters looked like. Poetry came through in all its musical rhythm; emotion expressed in words could hit with raw force.

Radio drama proved that the magic of theatre can exist even without the dimming of the lights and the hushed rise of the curtain.

6
Aunties and Argonauts

Some of the most interesting programmes on the air were made for a heterogeneous group of listeners who, nevertheless, had several things in common. The law forced them to spend up to seven hours a day in an institution, they were supposed to do as they were told by people whose authority came from more advanced age, and they had no political or economic power whatsoever. Nevertheless, the imaginations they possessed were unrestricted and sometimes magical — for some years at any rate — and radio, that medium where imagination provides the pictures, stimulated them in a multitude of ways.

These listeners were Australians under sixteen years of age: the kids.

The variety of children's radio programmes from the 1940s to the 1960s was very great. This is hardly surprising, considering how much people develop between the ages of three and sixteen. But, whatever the level of sophistication these programmes reached, almost all of them encouraged or even demanded audience participation.

For small children there were the many sessions over which presided that strange creature, the Radio Uncle or Aunt. These relatives often had "animals" in attendance; a group of beasts that might be koalas, or grasshoppers, mice or kookaburras depending on what station you preferred. Kids loved them. They sent in riddles or jokes, which might even be read over the air. If a child was lucky, he or she might even get a birthday call. ("This is for Craig Smith, who is six years old today! Happy birthday, Craig, and love from Mum and Dad and Auntie Beth and Uncle David and Sally and Louise and Zephyr the dog. If you follow the string from your wireless set, you might find a birthday present . . .")

Young children tended to take their animal friends seriously. During the late 1950s a very popular Sydney character was Gerald the Grasshopper, part of the 2UE breakfast session. Gerald, who spoke in a squeaky voice and who made execrable jokes, was actually a ventriloquist named Russ Walkington; publicity pictures show an angular young man cautiously holding a large wooden grasshopper by the thorax in front of a microphone.

Judging by the mail from local children who sent in riddles and jokes in their dozens, Gerald was much loved, and one week 2UE decided to test his popularity. On the Monday morning, Russ Walkington came on air and sadly announced that Gerald had disappeared. Distraught young listeners kept the switchboard busy for some time. Some cried because they feared that Gerald had fallen victim to Mortein insect spray; others reported sighting him.

By Wednesday, Walkington was forced to say that Gerald could take care of himself and that his absence was only temporary. However, this did not satisfy listeners, who kept ringing up and demanding to know where their favourite insect had gone. Walkington told them that Gerald was driving a car with the number plate GG 87.

Soon afterwards, a schoolteacher from

the southern suburb of Hurstville rang the station to say that he was unable to move his car because it had been surrounded by a crowd of glaring children. The number plate was GG 087, and the kids were convinced that Gerald was hidden somewhere behind the dashboard. Walkington and 2UE hastily called off the stunt, and no doubt station executives rubbed their hands in glee at its success. It is not reported what happened to that schoolteacher's car.

Actors who took part in sessions for very young children really enjoyed them. "Everybody had a go at the kids' session," says Gwen Plumb. "I used to love them . . . you never knew whether you'd have to be the voice of a child or a lettuce." And indeed, if you flick through radio magazines, scrapbooks or the entertainment sections of the daily newspapers in almost any year from 1940 to 1965, you will come across pictures of adults wearing schoolboy costumes and caps, or dressed as rabbits or dowagers complete with wig and glasses. Sometimes they are pretending to thump each other over the head with balloons or bats or tennis racquets. The costumes they are wearing are frequently bizarre — but they all look as though they are having a whale of a time.

Many presenters spoke in the "children's radio voice"; an example of what happens when Australians speak very slow-ly to people under six or seven years old: their voices curl up at the edges. That voice with its languid delivery, super-careful enunciation and rising inflection at the end of a phrase has been with us for years and shows no signs of disappearing. It's an exaggeration of the way some infants' teachers talk to children. On radio, it sometimes gives the impression that the presenters do not feel entirely comfortable around small children; this is not to say that they *are* ill at ease, but sometimes you wonder. (On this subject, there is a story about an Australian radio "uncle" — name unspecified — who allegedly said at the end of his session, "And that takes care of the little buggers for tonight", without taking the precaution of turning the microphone off. This is one of those legends that crops up from time to time; it's been reported of an English "uncle" and an American radio relative as well. Somebody must have said it at some time somewhere, but just who — and when — is not known; it's now gained the status of folklore.)

On the rare occasions that children were supposed to interview adults, however, they really sounded uncomfortable. It's interesting to compare a session made just after the war, in 1946, with today's programmes, in which kids are much more self-possessed and less nervous of adults. This session was 3DB Melbourne's children's show, which was different from others in that it was compered by children themselves. They were two thirteen-year-olds: David Witner, who described himself as "your news editor" and Zoe Caldwell ("your news editress"). Zoe Caldwell has since gone on to an illustrious Broadway career as an actress and director.

Both children start off by sounding very self-possessed; they speak well, to the point of elocuting. But this is what happens when they have to interview a famous adult.

David Witner says: "This afternoon, we have the honour to announce that our guest is Sir Thomas Blamey, the former Commander-in-Chief of the Australian General Forces. I will ask my news editress" (wince) "to welcome Sir Thomas Blamey to the 3DB microphone."

Zoe Caldwell comes over all flustered. "Oh," she says. "I wish you'd done that, David . . . that is, well er . . ." It's very stagey indeed, and the listener wonders why on earth she finds it necessary to pretend that she's so nervous. Is it because she's a girl, who is supposed to be dithery? Or has the thought of interviewing greatness unpersoned her?

"Hello, Sir Thomas. Would you like to say hello to all the young listeners?" she finally manages.

In a very peremptory fashion, Blamey replies, "Hello, boys and girls. Cheerio to you all!"

Zoe Caldwell practically dissolves in gratitude at these kind words. "Oh, thanks again so much, Sir Thomas . . ."

"That's better," he says briskly. "No need to feel nervous with me, you know. Well, now, what are you going to ask me?" And you'd better hurry up, says his tone. I'm a very busy man.

Blamey adds, "You said something about your 3DB Save the Children Fund. Tell me all about it." This is a complete switch: the adult is asking the questions. This seems to make everybody feel more relaxed. Zoe and David, all nervousness forgotten, explain lucidly and well about sending food parcels to unfortunate children in England. Everything's all right, because the adult has taken control.

The rehearsed ineptitude and the feeling that children have no right to be too assertive when grown-ups are present make this little snippet of tape very interesting. Zoe and David's reaction went far beyond the normal respect that children were supposed to give adults. I suspect that the children were reading from a script that they did not write themselves; it was probably prepared by an adult at 3DB. And what effect would this broadcast have had on its listeners? Perhaps it was intended to show them that even Zoe Caldwell and David Witner, experienced and usually confident child broadcasters, were just as tongue-tied as other children would have been if confronted by a famous person.

If the aim of the programme was to show adults what children thought, it is unsuccessful. However, there were several shows that were intended to do just that: the Keith Smith shows. In the early 1950s and thereafter, Smith gained quite a

Keith Smith interviews youngsters for the ABC's A Word From Children. *The dog obviously has reservations about the whole thing.*

reputation as a children's interviewer because of his programmes *A Word from Children* and *The Pied Piper*. He talked to them — for adult listeners — about their daily lives, finding out their opinions on all sorts of things. *A Word from Children* started on the ABC; *The Pied Piper* went over the Macquarie network. Smith says:

We introduced gimmicks which were tremendously successful; asking kids to tell riddles and giving them a secret word. I used compering techniques that I'd learned from working with Jack Davey. When you're talking to an audience of country kids in a hall or the local school of arts, and they're rolling Jaffas down to the front, you've simply got to capture them. But we got the most fantastic shows.

Confronted by a grown-up with a microphone, many children freeze up. How did Smith get them to talk to him? He says:

I don't tell anybody that. It's my secret. But if you understand and appreciate the child, you've won your first major battle. If a child refuses to speak before the mike, gets cut-up or stutters, it's not his or her fault — it's usually the compere's.

Once upon a time, you talked to thirty children in a schoolroom or library, and you could pick brothers and sisters from the opposite ends of the group, simply by the way they talked. You could often make a pretty good guess about the sorts of people their parents were, too! There were kids who were eccentric; kids who were terribly responsible for no apparent reason; they were born with a sense of responsibility. And now I can talk to a group of kids and in many cases I know what they're going to say before they say it.

The Pied Piper, which was broadcast at 7 pm on Fridays, continued for about ten years. It featured children aged between eight and twelve. "Over twelve they're subject to their environment, shy and self-conscious; under eight they're unpredictable," says Keith Smith. "In the right age group, children are naive, not self-possessed and yet not shy." The show's format consisted of choosing six couples of children and getting them to talk on any subject they chose, such as "my room at home" and "what my parents do on the weekend", cunningly prompted by Keith Smith.

Often the children said things that mortified their parents, such as, "My Mum and Dad fight a lot, then they go to bed together and get up in the morning the best of friends". Sometimes, the comments were worse than embarrassing. Keith Smith says:

One kid told me about how his father had made a beautiful fish pond out of forty-eight sheets of glass he'd picked up. The Post Office people happened to be listening, and one bloke remembered that, in the same week, forty-eight sheets of glass had been taken from telephone boxes in the area where the kid lived, and the father was prosecuted!

At least once, the police were very understanding about what they heard on a Keith Smith show. Smith recalls that one day, when he was working on the ABC's *A Word from Children*, "a shadow darkened the doorway of this very office. It was a small policeman — about eight feet tall — from one of Sydney's inner-city areas, who reminded me that I'd been speaking about greyhounds and cats in a programme the week before. I explained that I didn't know about cats and greyhounds, because I'd never played any sport in all my life".

He said: 'Well, we're looking into the Cruelty to Animals Act at the moment and interviewing people about blooding greyhounds. If you can remember anything about what one particular child told you about it, we'd very much like to hear it. Of course, if we carry on with this case, the child will have the tail walloped out of him by his father. But if

you can't remember anything, we can't do a thing about it.' And one eyelid dropped a fraction of an inch. I said, 'Sorry, I can't remember', and he said, 'OK', and left. I didn't see him again!

A Word from Children and *The Pied Piper* went on for years; Keith Smith also did shows called *Children Look at the News* and *Small Talk*, which transferred to television. Keith Smith interviewed children in other parts of the world; he remembers children in London telling him that a reef was something you took to a funeral and that a musquash was a soft drink.

Often children themselves didn't think these shows were at all amusing and they couldn't understand why adults found *The Pied Piper* and *A Word from Children* so funny. Keith Smith is doubtful whether the same format would work now. He says:

Today you face a group of thirty children and they wait for you to turn yourself on. When you don't, when you expect them to cooperate with answers to your questions, their responses range from confusion to sheer resentment because they expect to be entertained. They don't expect to contribute. Individuality has flown out the window because kids don't talk to their parents any more, either. Family conversation has disappeared because of fractured family life.

When kids talk now, they all sound like the children of the same mother and father, which indeed they are — the television set.

• • •

In the early 1950s a four-year survey (from 1951 to 1955) was conducted in Victoria to monitor the listening habits of 800 schoolchildren aged between twelve and seventeen. The report in *Broadcasting and Television* magazine in January 1957 does not say who conducted this survey, the results of which were interesting. Eighty-seven per cent of the children surveyed listened regularly to commercial stations, and twelve-year-old boys and girls enjoyed serials more than any other type of programme.

These were programmes on commercial stations in the late afternoons of weekdays (timed to start just after the kids had come home from school). A typical 1958 weekday on 2GB, the key station of the Macquarie network, had *Superman* at 4.15; *Hop Harrigan* at 5.45; *The Sea Hound* at 6.00; *Nick Carter* at 6.15 and *Tarzan* at 6.30. All these were good, fast, adventure serials, hot on action, and presumably this is why they were so popular. Many readers who were children in the 1950s will remember them — as well as the serial that the Victorian children in the survey nominated as their favourite: *The Air Adventures of Biggles*.

Biggles is utterly British, like the books by Captain W. E. Johns on which it was originally based. To get the required accent and urgency to deliver such lines as, "But sizzling sausages, old chap!" and "He's gone and done the jolly old vanishing trick!" the Australian actors appear to have perfected the art of talking through their teeth, and the result sounds odd.

There's lots of adventure in *Biggles*, both on the ground and in the air — almost too much to assimilate in twelve and a half minutes. Like other exciting radio serials, it has to contend with the fact that everything that happens must be explained, often in situations where any decent British chaps would just keep quiet and concentrate on thumping the enemies of Empire.

These enemies are often unpleasant persons who come from a lower social stratum; another carryover from the Johns books. In one episode, Biggles, Algy and Bertie are searching for a missing professor, following the strange convention that academics in serials never disappear when they are tutors or lecturers. They are required to go to the East End for reasons that are unclear; perhaps its inhabitants are experts at finding mislaid intellectuals.

The three of them go to a seedy bar (you can tell it's seedy because the sound effects include simian growling). Everybody they speak to drops his aitches and final gs, proving beyond all doubt that they are working-class. Biggles, Algy and Bertie are not in the least polite to them, delivering lordly lines such as, "Look here, my good fellow!"

There's a lot of this sort of thing in *Biggles*, and one wonders whether this perpetuation of class stereotypes had a lasting effect on Australian children and what ideas they formed about the British. While not wanting to labour the point — after all, the goodies and the baddies had to be identified as clearly as possible — Australian children could be forgiven for thinking that British people who didn't speak properly were capable of the most sinister acts imaginable.

An even more obvious example of perpetuating stereotypes in serials was the long-running George Edwards production *The Search for the Golden Boomerang*. A few episodes of this prove that Australians lived in a much more innocent and racially unsophisticated age. If it was on air these days, the Department of Aboriginal Affairs would take a very close look at it because of the impressions it created about Aborigines.

Most of the action concerned the adventures of a group of children and their uncle in the Australian outback. In one sequence of episodes, they are required to question a group of Aborigines on a "reservation". They know they are close to the area when one of the children says, "Ooh, look, there's a totem pole". This object consists of a series of wooden carvings placed on each other, with a lizard at the top. The children are apprehensive about meeting the Aborigines until their kindly uncle, Bill Bourke, consoles them with the thought that "Our guns are superior to the primitive weapons these people have".

When the natives appear they speak English, which proves that they are friendly, but in a dialect that could be described as Red Indian Spaceman. It includes such remarks as: "Oh great white spirit that has come . . . you have played us false!" delivered very slowly.

At the end of an episode, a reassuring male voice says, "Well, kiddies, Dom and Felada" (the natives) "certainly seem terrified at the sight of Bill and his party. Will Bill be able to reassure them and get any information from them?" Then up comes the theme, a *Viennese* waltz, inviting the speculation that the answer is "Yes", probably because of superior white fire power.

City children listening to *Golden Boomerang* would probably have been given what information they had about Aborigines through school projects dealing with the first Australians purely as hunter-gatherers; these tended to feature naked full-bloods poised on rocks with spears. They might also have read books of Aboriginal myths and legends in school libraries. Like most adult Australians, they would hardly have come across Aborigines in their daily lives. Country children might have seen the fringe dwellers "huddling on the outskirts of towns", the people described by Josh in *Blue Hills*. And, while it's unreasonable to expect a serial such as *Golden Boomerang* to preach racial harmony and understanding between whites and Aborigines, one does feel that the scriptwriters might have made more of an effort to eliminate such absurdities as totem poles and characters named Dom and Felada.

Golden Boomerang was very slow, almost languid in places; much more exciting were the two best known American-inspired serials of the period, *Tarzan* and *Superman*. In the latter, Leonard Teale played the rather intense Man of Steel. "Who are you, anyway?" somebody asked him. "I have no name," he replied solemnly. "I come from a world that no longer exists. In this world of yours, men would call me . . ." pause ". . . a super man." While the characters in *Superman* were obviously Americans, according to their

accents, they were not excessively so.

A good deal happens in *Superman*'s twelve and a half minutes, and some of the dialogue still reads well.

SECRETARY: Mr White, all the planes are grounded.
PERRY WHITE (editor of the *Daily Planet*, who has asked ace reporter Clark Kent to investigate a crime in a far-off city): Well, Clark, how are you going to get there?
CLARK KENT (who of course is really Superman): Oh , that's all right, sir. (*meaningfully*): I'll get there.

A minute or two later he assumes his real identity. "Up, up and away!" he cries, leaping into the air and tearing off to the rescue in the storm-swept night.

Tarzan was even more fun to listen to than *Superman*. Many actors played the main role, Rod Taylor being one of the first. The part required a certain amount of grunting, of course, and it must have been one of the easier acting jobs on Australian radio.

Kids from Kogarah to Kununurra played Tarzan games, uttering the famous backbone-crinkling cry: "Aaargh arga aah aaargh *ah*!" as they swung from trees in the backyard. The part of Jane was always given to the slowest girl in the group, and no wonder — of all the female characters in radio serials, Jane must have been the least intelligent.

For example, a typical episode has Roger Climpson's urgent voice saying: "But Jane's thoughts about the past were interrupted by a huge lioness padding around outside . . ." They certainly are; there are sound effects to prove it. The animal bursts into a hut and bails Jane up. But fortunately she is not alone. Tarzan, who has made his intentions perfectly clear ("Me help . . . come!") grunts and charges in.

It's a pretty crowded hut, as a matter of fact. Also cowering in a corner are a couple of scientists, whose role is to explain to the audience what is going on. (This, of course, was a well-known radio convention.)

One of the scientists informs Jane that a lioness is planning to attack her; Jane responds to this comment by screaming. In comes Tarzan. "Now he's trying to get his knife into position. There's nothing he can do," one scientist tells the other.

"You must admit he's a bit unusual," says his friend in a conversational tone as the lioness is snarling and Tarzan is attacking it ferociously. "He swings through the treetops like a monkey, he wears nothing but a bit of skin around his waist, fights like an animal and screeches like one . . ."

Because her best friend is killing the lioness, Jane isn't having any criticism of him. Using whatever breath she can spare from screaming, she says with hysterical intensity: "He saved my life! Not once, but *three times*!"

And, of course, Tarzan does it again. Suddenly the sound effects growling stops and with a final "Uh!" of triumph, he says, "Me . . . Kill!" In case listeners have escaped the significance of this, one scientist says to the other: "Well, the beast is dead." (Why these two men of knowledge don't whip out their guns and shoot the lioness right between the eyes is not explained. They obviously know the plot.)

Tarzan swung through the treetops for years on radio. The style didn't change much; characters told each other what was happening from the beginning to the end. The coming of television appeared to make little difference to the serial's pace.

This is not so with *The Air Adventures of Hop Harrigan*; a good example of the difference that the coming of television made to children's serials. Hop and his mates, including Tank, righted wrongs energetically, zooming all over the Canadian skies. They flourished in the mid- to late 1950s, after television arrived, and the most obvious thing about the serial is the speed with which information is given. Children were presumably familiar with aeroplanes because of the adventures of that other airborne champion of democracy, Biggles, so *Hop Harrigan* has

much less chat about what an increase in altitude, a spin and so on actually mean. Moreover, all the *Hop Harrigan* characters are men of few words.

From the opening words: "Control to CX4, control to CX4 ... all clear, all clear" on filter mike, followed by the confident announcement from Hop himself: "CX4 to control ... This is Hop Harrigan, coming in!" and swooping music, the pace is fast. Narration is minimal, and most of the description about what the planes are actually doing is given by the cunning use of sound effects, timed to the split second. When we learn, for example, that Hop's plane is being pursued by a DC3 commanded by a wicked Frenchman named Red Louis, it's no longer necessary to discuss his infamy. With very little dialogue: "I'm taking her up now ... there she is", the chase begins. *Hop Harrigan*, in fact, is almost audible television.

• • •

Old Mother Hubbard and Jack and Jill
And Tom the Piper's son;
Leave your cupboard, forget your spill —
We're going to have some fun!
The wireless says to hurry and run
So leave your games and toys,
The wireless says the time has come
For all the girls and boys ...
So-o, come with a hop, a skip and a run —
It's time for the session, it's time for the fun!

That song, presented by a male chorus with orchestral accompaniment, heralded the ABC's national children's session. It started at 5.30, which gave country children, who had to travel long distances, time to race home from school and turn the radio on — and it catered for listeners right across the age spectrum. "All our work was spaced through the hour," says John Appleton, who was the ABC's Federal Director of Children's Programmes until his retirement in 1970. "We went from the youngest listeners, say seven-year-olds, to the teenagers, say about sixteen or seventeen."

Over the years the session presented an amazing variety of material. There were songs, sung by the presenters and a pianist (the first pianist was Cecil Fraser, who wrote the songs for the *Children's Hour*). Eager listeners of all ages could take part in competitions, guessing words in charades in the Saturday session; they had their letters read over the air in the Argonauts' Club, a very important part of the session (more of which later), and there were also comedy sketches and serials. "About the only things we didn't broadcast were race finishes, prize fights and sex," says John Appleton. "We stayed right away from anything to do with school, too."

The serial for children that almost everybody remembers is *The Muddleheaded Wombat*; this was written for very young listeners, but older kids, and sometimes their parents, loved it, too. Ruth Park came up with the idea of a serial featuring a wombat who always got into trouble, from which he was often rescued by his friends, particularly the sensible, fat-tailed pouched Mouse.

The first Wombat was Leonard Teale, who invented the character's nasal, roaring voice. He was replaced by John Ewart, who carried the voice on and invented a few flourishes of his own. Wombat had problems with his words; his friends were "animiles" and when catastrophe struck, it was "terribubble". Mouse, who was played by several actresses, including Penny Battye, Sue Newton, Gina Curtis and Barbara Frawley, enunciated clearly in a high, pure voice that sounds rather like June Whitfield's as Eth in *Take It From Here*. Though Wombat was "he", Mouse was "it".

The other characters in the *Wombat* series were Aunty Bun, who was Mouse's aunt, and almost as sensible. She was played by Winifred Green. Tabby Cat, a

self-pitying character who was introduced when Ruth Park decided that she wanted a "bad sport" in the serial, was literally a sourpuss. John Appleton played him. Tabby was a coward and a great alarmist, and his constant cry was: "Oooh, everything happens to meeeee!" *Wombat* was narrated by Athol Fleming.

The Muddleheaded Wombat was delightful, with lots of witty touches. For example, when Wombat was stung by a bee, he complained plaintively to his friend: "Maaaaouse, this animile's got *hot feet.*"

In the early 1960s Ruth Park wrote a series of books on the adventures of Wombat and his friends, illustrated by Noela Young. The characters looked just right: Mouse was a tiny creature with a long nose and elegant paws (of which it was very vain) and Wombat was a bulky animile who wore a battered felt hat and an almost perpetual smile. He looked, as indeed he sounded, like a cross between a swaggie and a marsupial from the Ozarks.

When *Wombat* went off the air — a casualty of the ABC's revamped children's session — children and their parents wrote in to protest. But Wombat's roar has not faded away entirely. In 1981 and again the following year, the ABC reproduced and rebroadcast some of the early episodes. Not all the same actors were used (Athol Fleming and Winifred Green had died) but John Ewart played Wombat, triumphantly unchanged.

The ABC children's session serials for older children ran for about eight minutes at the end of each weekday programme. They were usually adventure stories, either written especially for the ABC by well-known professionals, including Ivan Southall, Richard Lane and Ruth Park, or adapted from existing children's books.

Everybody who listened to the ABC's children's session knew the presenters; not only did they tie the show together, introducing the various segments, but they sang, took part in the charades and acted in the serials. They travelled around Australia, particularly to the various state agricultural shows, and kids lined up in their hundreds to talk to them, or just to wave.

Mac, or Athol Fleming, is the personality whom many listeners probably remember best. A large, burly Scot, he came out to Australia in the early 1940s and acted in many radio drama productions before John Appleton asked him to be the linchpin of the children's session. "Old Mac was absolutely solid," says Appleton. "He was a very nice man, big enough just to be himself, and the kids thought he was great." One of Mac's roles was to keep order among the other presenters. These changed over the years, but they always included another man and a woman. At first, they were Joe (Albert Collins) and Elizabeth (Ida Elizabeth Jenkins, who later presented the ABC metropolitan women's session); later came Jimmy (John Ewart) and Gina Curtis, followed by Sue Newton and Barbara Frawley, who were simply "Gina", "Sue" and "Barbie". Jimmy was the show's "naughty boy" and a running gag for many years involved his car, which was always going wrong and making extraordinary noises, courtesy of the sound effects department. When it blew up, which it frequently did, the others would sigh: "Oh, *Jimmy*!" and a chastened Ewart would promise to try and do better next time.

But the most important role that the personalities of the children's session had was presenting the Argonauts' Club. At this point, the music swells and a deep baritone voice sings:

Here are the Argonauts, bending to the oars —
Today we go adventuring to yet untroubled shores;
Fifty young adventurers today set forth
And so we cry to Jason, 'Man the boats and row, row, row . . .'
MALE CHORUS: *Row, row, merrily oarsmen row,*
That dangers lie ahead, we know, we know;

SOLOIST: *But bend with all your might*
As you sail into the night
And wrong will bow to right, Jason cries

. . .

CHORUS: *Adventure ho, Argonauts row,*
row, row!

And they did, for almost thirty years. During that time, the Argonauts' Club established its position as the most imaginative and creative outlet for children's talent in writing, music, drawing and painting that Australia has ever seen — on radio or television.

The club's ideal was to share "much of wonder and delight; of merriment and loveliness" and it encouraged creative talent in children between the ages of seven and seventeen. The idea came, of course, from the Greek legend of Jason and the Argonauts, the group of warriors taking part in a quest for the Golden Fleece. In the Argonauts' Club, the Fleece was a symbol of excellence, and the club embodied the idea of progress through effort towards a goal; excellence and achievement in a chosen field. "In some ways, it's a Victorian ideal," says John Gunn, who helped budding writers, "but it underpins an awful lot of literature and painting and human endeavour generally."

Any child could become an Argonaut. All he or she had to do was write in to receive the green and silver enamel badge with the word "Argo" written underneath. A joining member also received a certificate with a ship name and number. In the original legend there was only one ship, the *Argo*; in the club there was a limitless number, each with a Greek name. There were fifty rowers per ship; if you were given the name Demosthenes 3, it meant

Personalities of the ABC Children's Hour, *photographed in 1962. Front row: Marilyn Taylor (Lyn), Diane Hosking (Robyn), Diana Horn (Diana), John Ewart (Jimmy) and John Gunn (Icarus). Back row: Roy Kinghorn (Tom the Naturalist), Lindley Evans (Mr Melody Man) and Athol Fleming (Mac/Jason).*

that you were rower number three in the good ship *Demosthenes*. Members of the club were given points for sending contributions to the session, whether in the form of letters, poems and stories, paintings, musical compositions, inquiries about flora and fauna or entries for competitions. If a contributor sent in enough material to be awarded 150 marks, he or she won the Dragon's Tooth certificate; for 500 points, the Golden Fleece was awarded — and the greatest possible glory was to be known as Golden Fleece and Bar. Blue and purple certificates were given if a contribution was read over the air; if a contributor collected a certain number of these, he or she was awarded a book prize.

Children's real names were never given on air. "From first to last, a child was Demosthenes 3; never little Jilly Smith of Coonamble," says John Appleton. (It's interesting how many ex-Argonauts can remember their ship names and numbers; like soldiers who never forget their Army numbers.)

According to one source, one Australian child in twenty was an Argonaut in 1957. John Appleton says:

At one point, there were something like three thousand ships. We had everybody marking contributions, even the personalities; we'd never have finished otherwise. When we went to the agricultural shows in Brisbane or Perth, we'd all sit around at night with sackfuls of them, swatting moths as we marked.

We had girls in the main office who used to sit at trays of cards — one card per member — recording points. These were checked regularly. If somebody went through and discovered that Demosthenes 3 hadn't sent in a contribution for a year, his or her name was deleted from the ship list and given to somebody else. Otherwise we would all have gone mad, or been out in the street, pushed out by the number of those cards! Then, if

THE ARGONAUTS CLUB

Before the sun and the night and the blue sea
No..... in the good ship.....
has shared much of wonder and delight; of merriment and loveliness with fellow rowers in Jason's great Fleet of Argonauts.

The ORDER of the DRAGON'S TOOTH
is awarded to a strong oarsman.

GOOD ROWING in the calm days ahead;
GOOD FAITH in the troubled stormy waters; and
GOOD FELLOWSHIP throughout an adventurous life.

Demosthenes 3 did come back, we had a nice little letter that Mac would sign: 'We're glad you've returned. Unfortunately your ship has left port, so we've put you in another one, and this is your new name and number.'

Athol Fleming was Jason in the Argonauts' Club, as well as being Mac for the whole session. He and the others periodically read out lists of points and ship names: "Cadena 14, Artaxerxes 23, Diogenes 2 and Socrates 37 have all been awarded the Dragon's Tooth. Well rowed, all of you!"

Apart from points and book prizes, special prizes were awarded to children who were gifted in writing, painting and music. These were the Commonwealth Awards, which were instituted in 1955 on an annual basis. John Appleton says:

We knew there were brilliant children in the arts, who were perhaps isolated in the country and who couldn't get much encouragement. The ABC gave me fifteen hundred quid to buy prizes for these children; a lot of money in the mid-1950s. We could give them really good things.

For instance, we'd notice a boy out at Boggabri, say, who showed signs of being a pretty good painter. He might have won the top prize in his age division of the Commonwealth Awards. We would write and ask him what he'd like as a prize, and he might reply very humbly, saying that he had some water paints but would like to try a few oils. We'd get him a very good set of student oils, some canvases and a portable easel, and we'd keep track of his progress from then on.

I remember a kid in Rockhampton who had written some good music. We asked him what he wanted and he said that, though he was studying piano, he would like to have a go at the violin. He had one, but the bow was lousy, so we arranged for a bow maker to help him. Eventually that boy came down to Sydney and studied at the Conservatorium High School.

These things were very important — to the kids and to us.

Many people who are now well known in the arts submitted their first poems, paintings, drawings or musical pieces as Argonauts. It's a long, long list, and it includes poet and reviewer Fay Zwicky, critic and author Humphrey McQueen, and David Ellyard, science correspondent and author. One of the most prominent Argonauts during the 1950s was Winsome Evans, who carried off what seemed like dozens of prizes in literature and music; she has since become the founder and director of the Renaissance Players, one of Sydney's best-known and most original music groups. Michael Dransfield, who was one of Australia's most talented and promising young poets until his tragic early death in 1973, was a senior prize-winner in the literature section of the Commonwealth Awards.

The people who helped budding artists, musicians, naturalists, philatelists and writers were well known in their various fields. Geoffrey Smart and Bill Salmon, who successively took the name of Pheidias, gave detailed advice and criticism about art. Lindley Evans, known as "Mr Melody Man" and a prominent arranger and composer, worked with musicians. Naturalist Roy Kinghorn and philatelist Barry Brown also provided segments.

John Gunn, who presented the session for writers, speaks for all of them when he says: "We tried to be didactic in the Argonauts. I don't mean heavily pedantic, but we did say, 'Look, this is good. Listen to it. What do you think?' Nowadays I think it's the other way round. People say to kids, 'You tell us what you want and we'll embellish it and bring out your ego.' Or so it seems to me now!"

An Argonaut who had gained at least 150 points was awarded the Order of the Dragon's Tooth. The Argonauts' Pledge was written by Nina Murdoch.

John Gunn joined the Argonauts' session in 1957. A well-known writer with an aviation background, he was christened Icarus by John Appleton, and so he remained for twelve years. He says:

The basis of all those things we got the kids to do was to make them do it themselves. Full stop. You would have a variety of sessions — in my case, it included literary quizzes — to get the kids to look up things and to become familiar with writers and poets. Then you'd suggest essay topics or projects and ask them to write poetry or prose.

The response to this was startling, because the kids wanted to do it. There was no outlet for them, and there still isn't. Not like the Argonauts gave them.

I marked all the literary contributions, and in some ways that could be dreary because there was such a huge pile every week. Some kids would write their hearts out and sometimes the result wasn't very good. But then again there were times when I'd stop marking and say to my wife, 'Can I read this to you!' because something had really touched me.

I can still remember some of the lines that kids wrote, and my own children, who are grown up, quote them back to me even now. I've never forgotten this, for instance; it came from a boy in Queensland.

The rocking horse days of my childhood
Are slipping and sliding away,
And though I lived well in the half-light,
I welcome the coming of day.

I think that's a marvellous poem from a boy who's maturing and seeing what is coming out.

John Gunn and the Argonauts wrote three books — in 1959, 1960 and 1965. Two of them were published by Lansdowne Press, one by the ABC. Their titles are *Dangerous Secret*, *Gold Smugglers* and *The Gravity Stealers*. On the jacket of each one is a paper ribbon with the proud words: "Written and illustrated by the boys and girls of the Australian Broadcasting Commission's *Children's Hour* Argonauts' Club." Inside each one is a double-page spread giving the names, the ship names and short biographies and photographs of the young authors. All three books have been illustrated by artist Argonauts, organised by Pheidias (Bill Salmon).

John Gunn says:

I can't quite remember how the whole project started, but we thought it would be a good idea to get the kids to write a book together. You can't be too subtle in doing that, because the process of getting a book published is horrifying at the best of times; with a lot of people contributing, it would be even harder!

I asked them what they'd like to write about, and they gave me their ideas. I then said, 'Right, this is what you want to do; why not consider some of the following backgrounds and perhaps people!' Inevitably, they had to follow some of my suggestions, just to keep the whole thing in one piece. We had God knows how many first chapters and dozens of bits and pieces, and keeping it all together was a jolly hard job.

I wasn't trying to teach them the subtleties of artistic writing; I just wanted to give them an idea of the simple, Trollope-type technique of keeping a story marching, and that's what happened.

Each one took about nine months to write and six months to publish, which wasn't bad. They were beautifully illustrated; I think two of them were translated into Norwegian.

A jolly good night to you, and you, and you, and you, and you;
The time has come to finish and the session now is through.
. . . A jolly good night to everyone;
A jolly good night to everyone;
A jolly good night to all, specially you —

TENOR: *And you —*
BARITONE: *And you —*
DEEP, DEEP BASS: *Aaaand yooooooooouuuuuuu . . .*

In 1969 the ABC decided to devote less time and money to children's radio programmes. The running time of the children's session was cut to half an hour and moved forward to 4.30, which disappointed many kids who were not able to get home from school by then. Mac, Jimmy and Barbie were still at the helm; so were the experts from the Argonauts' Club, but a great deal of the show's vitality had disappeared. John Gunn now sees the change as inevitable. "The world got a bit too complicated for the innocence of the children's session and the Argonauts, I think. It changed from the time of the Beatles onwards, and the session had to change with it. It is a pity, though, that it couldn't have kept some element for the younger children."

In its watered-down form, and under the title of *Young World*, the Argonauts' Club continued for a further two years until it disappeared over Easter 1971. Mac, Jason, Jimmy and Barbie — and for that matter Demosthenes 3 — ceased to exist. The audience was never told this was going to happen. Instead, children tuned in on the Tuesday after Easter to hear a whole new group of smooth-voiced young announcers, who gave children pop music, presented interviews and "news" items. It was all much slicker — but not, many people thought, better.

John Appleton, who had retired in the previous year, says:

It wasn't long after it all finished that Athol Fleming, who had been in fine fettle, died, and then Dick Parry, who had been our loyal drama producer, died. I was out, too, but I didn't die.

If you ask me if I was sorry when the Argonauts and the children's session went, I'll say that nothing in television here has ever approached the standard it reached. The wasteland of programmes for children starts above kindergarten and continues up to sub-adult level.

Parents must know that they can win against the ghastly pressures of the peer group and kids' lives today. They are the ones who would like to see the Argonauts' Club back. But there aren't enough of them. You can't justify it. Not with the type of thinking there is today, where everybody wants to chase ratings and use the media to make money.

We were fortunate in our time and in our work. The children's session brought to the lonely child or the small bush family everything that a city child could have. I still feel honoured and happy that we were able to make that contribution.

7

"Here is the news... and this is what I think about it"

One of the most popular radio drama series after World War II was an American-inspired half-hour show called *Night Beat*, dealing with the adventures of one Randy Stone, a cool, laconic reporter who "covered the night beat for the *Daily*".

Stone, like so many of his counterparts in films and novels, embodied every possible cliché about the hard-fisted, pavement-pounding journalist. He spent very little time bothering with such technicalities as collecting news or checking sources; his skills in thumping crooks and chatting up beautiful women were much more important in doing his job. The honest citizens of the country could sleep soundly in their beds, secure in the knowledge that Stone was out there, busily making the world safe for Democracy by single-handedly eliminating all the murderers and subversives who presented themselves for his inspection.

If an Australian radio journalist had tried to emulate Randy Stone in the 1940s and 1950s, he would have had a pretty thin time of it. There simply were not enough murderers, spies and crooks in Australia to go round. Even if they had appeared promptly on cue once a week, as they did in *Night Beat*, it is highly unlikely that one reporter would have been given a free hand to deal with them, since editorial control had to be taken into consideration. Any thumping of dubious persons was done verbally on air by news commentators such as John Henry Austral, John Pacini and Eric Baume, with due regard for the libel laws. And doing tough, controversial interviews was not easy when the only available recording equipment was a wire recorder about the size and weight of an old-fashioned manual typewriter, and when politicians and other community leaders made smoothly worded prepared statements "for the press" and discouraged questions afterwards.

Gathering, presenting and commenting on radio news in Australia's pre-television days, then, was much less glamorous than the antics of Randy Stone. However, as is the case with most things, the reality was more interesting and varied than the cliché.

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Considering radio's unrivalled potential for bringing listeners news quickly, radio journalism in Australia had a sluggish start. Newspaper proprietors had a very

Alan White as Randy Stone, grimly covering the night beat for the Daily.

real fear that radio news would kill their sales and, before the war, stations were not permitted to put stories on air before they had appeared in the newspapers. Many stations made arrangements to take what they wished out of the morning and evening editions — provided that no item lasted longer than a couple of minutes.

In the 1930s, for ABC and commercial stations alike, presenting a news broadcast consisted simply of going through the daily papers, cutting out whatever items looked interesting and reading them over the air. ("The most unpopular person in the office at that time was the bloke who mislaid the scissors," said one early announcer.)

This cut-and-read technique did not make for exciting listening. "The first news broadcasts were very wooden indeed," says Charles Moses who, as a young announcer, did his share of cutting and reading. "I always felt that news should be written especially for reading on air, with shorter and more vigorous sentences."

Not only was the presentation dull, but any errors that had crept into newspaper reports were perpetuated on radio. The ABC pointed out the desirability of having its own independent radio news source, but this was not established for some years. The ABC set up a news department under Frank Dixon in 1936 and wished to have access to the overseas cable services from which to compile their news, just as the newspapers did. The press barons refused. Why, they argued, should they make their own resources available to a broadcasting organisation in opposition to them? The commercial stations were perfectly happy to take their news directly from the papers, and that should have been good enough for the ABC.

World War II altered the situation considerably. For some reason commercial stations did not significantly expand their own news-gathering services, preferring to concentrate on producing entertainment programmes. On the other hand, the ABC set up war reporting units in all major areas where Australian forces were stationed. ABC war correspondents such as Laurence Cecil and Chester Wilmot sent back eyewitness reports — and many commercial stations took ABC coverage of major events. (One of the many ironies of broadcasting!) Besides, all news and information was controlled by the government's Department of Information, which used the ABC as a mouthpiece for presenting wartime policy statements.

So the ABC had taken an important step towards independence, but it still had some battles to fight. In 1945, at the end of the war, it battled with the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Broadcasting for the right it had wanted before the war: that of selecting material from the overseas cable services. Charles Moses says:

We finished by being told to pay twenty thousand pounds a year — equivalent to half a million dollars now, I should say — just for access to the overseas and wire services such as Australian Associated Press and Australian United Press. We could get it as it arrived in the newsroom of any paper we selected.

Of course, people were pressing for a truly independent news service, but we couldn't have afforded it then. We would have had to sack all our orchestras and give up most of our programme money.

Frank Dixon persisted in his fight for the ABC to have independence in news gathering — and he won in 1946. The Broadcasting Act was amended to give the ABC the power it sought. It said: "The Commission shall employ adequate staff, both in the Commonwealth and in overseas countries, for the purpose of collecting news and information to be broadcast . . . The Commission shall also procure news and information relating to current events in other parts of the world from such overseas news agencies and other overseas agencies as it thinks fit." And the government granted more money for the purpose.

Not everybody hailed this as a great

victory. Charles Moses says:

The decision was made against the will of the Opposition in Parliament, the Liberal-Country Party. I remember Larry Anthony (the father of Doug Anthony) saying that as soon as they came into power, they would get rid of what he called 'this wasteful expenditure of public money'. By the time they came into power, they realised that the ABC news was so important to them that they would never have dreamed of getting rid of it. Often important statements that ministers or members of a party made were not reported in the newspapers.

"And of course," Moses adds, "the fact that we had our own news service meant the newspapers were forced into giving a fairer, more objective treatment of news." But did newspapers become more "objective" because of the ABC? It's probably a question of emphasis rather than bias. Certainly, the ABC's treatment of, say, a strike in Western Australia was not given the prominence that the *West Australian* newspaper would have accorded it.

Because the ABC had to "employ adequate staff" for its news service after the war, many more journalists had to be recruited and trained. "All our Australian news had to be our own," says Moses, "and we had to set up newsrooms in each state. We did not have one bulletin for the whole of Australia. We had a main bulletin that was broadcast all over the country, then the state bulletin, then the regional news after that in country centres."

We also had to recruit large numbers of 'stringers'; people who might send us items of news but who were not journalists. They could be bank managers, post office employees or even policemen. They would be paid a small amount for items that found their way into regional bulletins, more for a state bulletin and still more for anything that was read over the air in a national bulletin.

We also had overseas people. News came in through Australian Associated Press, through Reuters and through Exchange Telegraph, a British service. We already had our own office in London, set up in 1932, and we opened one in New York straight after the war. Now, of course, the ABC has expanded its overseas operation to bring in places like Djakarta, Peking, Hong Kong, Tokyo and New Delhi.

Gary Scully was a young ABC journalist in 1953; in that year he joined the ABC in Brisbane as a cadet, having already worked on a country newspaper. He was one of several cadets. By the time he joined, the routine of finding and covering stories was well established.

You'd get to work and front the Chief of Staff, who would assign you a number of stories; some you could cover by phone, with others you had to go to the source. You'd gather your news and your facts and write your story. (Now you can take a recorder with you and use actuality; in those days you were simply setting down the facts on a piece of paper.) It would then go to a sub-editor, who would take it and evaluate it against all the other stories to work out its position in the bulletin. He might check a couple of points in your story, or he'd ask you to check it. Then the subs would take your raw copy and make it into a bulletin.

This procedure was very similar to the way news was prepared for newspapers, though the ABC material was written especially for radio, and the stories were evaluated in terms of spoken length rather than column inches. (Even now, announcers introduce a radio news bulletin with, "Here are the headlines" — newspaper terminology that has never changed.)

Though the procedure in preparing news on commercial radio was similar to the ABC's, there were differences. For a long time commercial stations' news departments saw themselves as supplementing newspaper reports. The Macquarie news

service, probably the most prestigious in commercial radio during the 1950s and which was run from 2GB in Sydney, took its news from the *Sydney Morning Herald* (the Fairfax organisation that owned the *Herald* bought shares in 2GB early in 1953). Macquarie journalists took items by *Herald* reporters and rewrote them for radio. "We also had the AAP wire service, which was written virtually in cablese in those days," says Brian White, who became the first Macquarie news cadet journalist in 1953. "Radio news in those days was seen as a rewrite job."

The Macquarie news service began in 1949. Because its scope was much smaller than that of the ABC — its network covered only New South Wales, instead of the whole of Australia — it had a small staff. Macquarie didn't put a cadet on until 1953; Gary Scully, who joined the ABC in the same year as Brian White joined Macquarie, was by no means the first cadet the ABC employed. The ABC had a news organisation with reporters in the major centres of Australia as well as "stringers"; in 1957, Macquarie had a total of only ten journalists.

Because Macquarie's staff was so much smaller and because it did not have the responsibility of covering national news, its emphasis was different from that of the ABC. Brian White says:

At Macquarie, interesting news always rated very highly — perhaps more highly than important news. As we only covered New South Wales, we didn't have to worry about giving prominence to something like a drought in Western Australia. We always concentrated on Sydney news. For us, a train strike in Sydney would always be given more weight than a drought in Perth — or even Bathurst, west of Sydney.

There were also differences in technique of presentation between the ABC and Macquarie news in the early 1950s. Brian White says:

Hugh Elliott, the Director of Macquarie news, was the man who brought American techniques into radio; he used the voices of people in the news. It hadn't been done before him, and the ABC resisted it for another fifteen years or so. The technique of getting a comment from a politician was in use by the time I started at Macquarie, but I don't think it was being used elsewhere.

What was it like being a cadet in radio news at that time? Gary Scully and Brian White both say that they were "chucked in at the deep end"; cadet journalists anywhere, whether on newspapers, in radio or television, are told what to do and learn by doing it. "It is, I believe, the best method of training journalists," says Brian White. "I remember reading that Harold Ross, who founded the *New Yorker* magazine, used to talk in contemptuous terms about journalists with academic training. He always described himself as a 'tramp journalist' and long ago I stole the term."

Being a trainee "tramp journalist", learning about the business of collecting and writing news, was not always a hectic business. Gary Scully remembers:

One night I went out with some friends to a nurses' graduation ball, and a whole lot of us went back to my place for a post-ball party. I turned up for work the next day as usual, not having been to bed — and I thought it was pretty hilarious to be the only person ever to present himself at the ABC subs' table in a dinner suit!

It was a great joke until I fell asleep across the table about an hour after I got there. The chief sub wrote a note to Wally Hamilton, the head of news: 'Mr Scully is never, never, never again *to be employed on the early morning subs' desk!'*

This was fine with me — early mornings and I don't agree very much, and I always felt more comfortable as a reporter than as a sub-editor.

Some of the lessons that cadets learned

from their more senior colleagues, too, would probably not have been included in any journalists' training manual (assuming that such a thing existed). Brian White:

The deputy editor when I started was a guy called Justin Arthur, who took me under his wing; his kids hadn't gone into journalism and I think I was a sort of surrogate journalist son. Justin would do eccentric things when he was bored. For instance, an air fan led into the little studio which was jammed onto the end of the newsroom, giving it its only source of air. When he was fed up, Justin's idea of fun was to roll up pieces of paper and throw them into the fan, watching them shred as they fell down into the studio. He and I used to compete to see who could hit the fan most often. Then we threw towels into it, just to see what would happen.

Justin was a terrific bloke. He had the reputation of once having thrown a typewriter out of the window of Sir Frank Packer's offices on about the tenth floor. He'd also chopped up a teleprinter with an axe. I've always thought that was a great education for me!

Learning how to write news for radio was one of the most important skills. For Gary Scully, the differences between writing copy for print and writing words to be spoken on air were obvious.

For a country newspaper, you wrote as much as you could. You had a whole paper to fill with shire council news, local sport, city council news, courts and whatever was happening around a fairly small town.

The main thing I had to learn when I joined radio was to condense a great deal. The other thing, of course, was to write for the ear rather than for the eye. For instance, a newspaper might have a lead saying: 'The Prime Minister is a transvestite, said the leader of the Opposition today' (though that's *pretty unlikely!), but in radio you'd say: 'The leader of the Opposition said today that the Prime Minister is a transvestite.' Otherwise people might think that the radio station was calling the Prime Minister a transvestite. There were other basic rules about keeping the subject of the sentence, the object and the verb close together so you didn't confuse your listener with a convoluted sentence.*

Brian White adds:

I'm one of those who believes that writing is writing, whatever you're doing with it. Justin Arthur introduced me to the writing of Thomas Wolfe, Theodore Dreiser and Henry James. I had read Hemingway. I soon began to realise that what all great writers have in common is clarity of thought. Their words may be prolix and they might get themselves into all sorts of semantic tangles, but the best of them always have a clear mind. I think a journalist's first duty is to get the story clear in his head, then he can write.

I had one of my first and best lessons in journalism and writing for radio on the day after Sir Edmund Hillary had climbed Everest. I wrote a story for Macquarie news with the phrase: 'Sir Edmund Hillary, the conqueror of Everest.' The editor handed it back to me and said: 'Nobody conquers *a mountain. A man* climbs *it.' That was a lesson in simplicity and not dressing up news that I've always clung to. I've avoided those meaningless verbs ever since.*

The cheapest and most portable equipment used for gathering news has always been a standard shorthand notebook, one or several sharp pencils and a biro or two. However, in radio in the early 1950s, huge wire recorders were used as well. These machines were bulky and cumbersome, and editing material from them was difficult. The journalist needed two so that he could dub the material from one to the other, stopping and starting all the time.

The introduction of tape recorders made a great difference to the presentation of

news bulletins. Tape could be cut and only one recorder was needed. It was a much faster process, and it made the reports tighter. Even so, in the 1950s, the snappy ten- or twenty-second comment from a politician was still some years away. Brian White says:

If you recorded material at a press conference, say, you edited your tape and wrote your script with provision for it to be inserted into the item. But you'd have three or four minutes of comment from a politician or other public figure, instead of about thirty seconds as you do today. The modern use of short snatches of actuality didn't come in for a long time, not until the mid-1960s. Up to then, a three- or four-minute taped insert in a news bulletin was common.

This practice appealed greatly to some public figures because a lot of words can be said in three or four minutes. But their approach to radio journalists, as to newspapermen, was very formal in the 1950s. The age of "image-making" by the media was still years away. A press conference by Albert Monk, President of the ACTU before Bob Hawke, was typical of many others. Brian White says:

I went to Monk's press conference when one of Australia's biggest strikes — the wharfies' strike of 1956 — came to an end. When the Herald *industrial roundsman and I got to the conference, with a lot of other radio and news people, Albert Monk greeted us all gruffly. He read out a prepared statement and wouldn't answer any questions. He was wearing a dreadful old battered cardigan and looked completely un-media-conscious.*

Menzies, the suave, bristly-eyebrowed and assured Prime Minister, was not on chummy terms with reporters either. "He gave very few press conferences," says Brian White. "He never did interviews; all he did was read out prepared statements, too."

As time passed, politicians became more aware of the way in which radio could be used for making policy statements that sounded more intimate and casual. They thus began to be more cooperative towards radio journalists. "People like Sir Robert Askin, the Premier of New South Wales, regarded radio as enormously important by the 1960s," says Brian White. "In my experience, he was the first politician who really knew how to use it. If you interviewed him, the first question he asked was: 'How much do you want?' If you said thirty seconds, he'd give you thirty seconds almost to the pip; if you wanted sixty, he'd give you sixty. His timing was immaculate."

Every reporter, whether he or she works for radio, television or the press, must at some time cover and present stories that he or she doesn't like. What a politician is saying might be totally opposed to what the journalist believes. "It was hard sometimes," admits Gary Scully. "You might sit there, not agreeing with a word a politician was saying — but when you reported the story, you had to be as objective as possible. It's a matter of ethics. You were as fair as you possibly could be. Your own views couldn't come into it at all."

That was ABC news policy; the Macquarie approach was the same. "Macquarie was always very proud of the fact that they had no news policy," says Brian White. "Stories were judged on their merits — which I think was always totally absurd because one man's merit is not somebody else's."

During a political campaign, such as those in the 1950s and 1960s, the only thing that tended to be a rule was that you avoided evaluating policies. You just reported them. We would cover the policy speeches, write summaries of them and then cover the election. There would be nothing in between unless somebody got shot, which never happened, or unless some other really dramatic event occurred. The whole shape of a campaign

was never commented upon.

From the time I started to have any power over what was going into the Macquarie news, which was in the mid-1960s, I started to change all that. I don't think that the editor, for example, realised that political news was creeping in more and more.

I don't think you can report politics objectively — though the ABC goes through the performance of trying to.

What effect did the coming of television have on radio journalism? Gary Scully, who moved over from radio almost as soon as ABC television started late in 1956, says, "In the early days of TV it was a bit like radio in that reporters were never identified and they always asked their questions off camera."

We had to get used to the increased pace. In radio, you could spend as much time on a politician's comments as he'd give you, but for TV the questions had to be extremely tight. You had to learn to ask perhaps three questions to get a point across, so you had — and have — to do your homework very carefully to work out exactly which three questions to ask.

Radio news had to search harder for material when television came in, though of course it could get material to people much faster than television could. "Radio could tell you the whole story instantly," says Brian White, "whereas television couldn't, until satelliting started. You had to wait a day or two for the pictures to back up the story."

In the late 1950s, partly because it had to compete with television, and partly because the tape recorder was gradually becoming a more efficient tool, radio began using a great many more voices and much more actuality. Macquarie news had been doing this for a few years and the other commercial radio stations followed suit — as did the ABC.

The transistor also changed the presentation of radio news. People could carry their radio sets with them wherever they went, even in the car. One result was that quality control in radio bulletins, particularly in actuality, ceased to matter so much. "Engineers in radio stations had terrific fights with editors, and they in turn would have battles with the Broadcasting Control Board about quality of equipment," says Brian White. "The modern gear wasn't as good as the Board was used to, and the machines that the journalists wanted to use, particularly when cassette recorders came in, were not as good as the engineers would have preferred."

The coming of television and transistors changed the way in which radio news bulletins were presented, as well as what they sounded like. Stations became much more conscious of radio's flexibility and began to present spot bulletins and news on the hour. Listeners who might have had their radios with them did not have to stop and take note for several minutes to know what was going on in the world; they could get the gist in a minute or two and catch up with the pictures on television or read the newspapers for background later. (In 1955, Sydney radio station 2UE broadcast twelve regular daily bulletins; by 1963 the number was up to thirty.)

So radio news has become more urgent and breathless. Clear, punchy presentation is all-important these days, with adjectives and adverbs ruthlessly pruned. At least in the daily bulletins, there is not much space for the leisurely reporting of items.

One wonders what Randy Stone who covered the night beat for the *Daily* would think of *that*.

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"Here is the news." After it had been collected, written and checked, it had to be read over the air. For listeners, the voice of the announcer carried great authority, especially on the ABC.

Reading the news on commercial stations never reached the heights of for-

mality that it did in the ABC, particularly in the early days. In the 1930s, newsreaders were usually Englishmen with wondrously rounded Home Counties vowels, who presented a news report as though they were reading the Ten Commandments with divine permission.

In the 1930s and 1940s the chief ABC announcer and newsreader was a former English parson and schoolteacher named Heath Burdock. "For clarity of voice, I don't think we had anybody to equal him," says Charles Moses. "If you were in the shower with the water cascading down, Heath's voice would cut through like a knife from the living-room."

The quality and clarity of Burdock's diction impressed a young man named James Dibble, who wanted to join the august company of ABC announcers. "I didn't think I'd make it, though ... I thought you had to be an Oxford don, at least," he says.

However, after a stint as a general announcer on Canberra's 2CA, Dibble joined the ABC in 1950. He says:

The first news bulletin I did on the ABC was a four o'clock five-minute one. Then I was put permanently onto the newsreading panel. There was a lot of feedback from listeners, and I got a lot of letters — people liked the way I read the news. The ABC said, 'You seem to have found your niche', and so I remained a newsreader.

By the time James Dibble started, the ABC was beginning to swing away from the Oxbridge Plum voice. Charles Moses says:

Some of our people had begun to realise that there were voices apart from English ones that were not only acceptable, but good. I felt we should look for voices that were Australian in character; not that I would object if we got somebody with a superlative voice who was an Englishman, provided that he spoke in such a way that he didn't make people squirm. What we were looking for was the sort of voice that Menzies had.

James Dibble in 1954. A Macquarie network publicity photograph.

James Dibble didn't project quite the rotund certitude that Menzies did (but, then, he wasn't Prime Minister of Australia for years, either). That calm, pleasant voice that thousands have heard reading the ABC news over radio and television, the voice that Dibble himself wryly describes as "educated Australian", had another quality, very important for a newsreader, and Dibble says:

I always based my reading of the news on the theory that I was just talking to someone and telling that person what was happening. I feel that news is quite a personal thing. I tried to visualise the listener. If it was a rural story, I'd imagine the farmer listening; if the story concerned parents, I'd imagine one and talk to him or her.

Reading the ABC news was not just a question of sitting down in front of a microphone and speaking words written on a piece of paper. The bulletin was split into three parts: national, state and regional, each of which might be read by a different person. The divisions in the bulletin had to be precisely signalled, so that each announcer would know when to come in.

These signals were given by means of gongs, which the newsreader struck when required. The word "gong" suggests something round and booming, perhaps wielded by a half-clothed man, as in the advertisements for films made by J. Arthur Rank, but in fact it was a small metal xylophone with two or three metal slats, politely tapped by a small, cloth-covered beater or a hammer. (Gongs were important tools of trade for announcers, apart from ABC newsreaders. Particularly on the commercial stations, they were used to announce the time, to break up the flow of chat, or to introduce advertisements.)

James Dibble says:

When you were reading the national news the gongs were the signals for the networks to come in or drop off. One high note meant that interstate stations took their own news or joined the main news from the state capital. One low gong was for the country regional stations to drop off and three gongs meant that the whole network went off, the regionals as well as the interstate stations, and switched over to their own programmes.

These gongs are still significant. At ten and a half minutes past seven on the seven o'clock bulletin, for example, you hit the gong and the technicians switch over to the other states; the local newsreader reads the state news. The gongs still have three tones, but instead of hitting the metal bars with a beater, you press little buttons. They're electronic these days.

News on radio had to be read without any extraneous noise coming over the microphone, such as a cough or a rustle of paper. A button on the microphone could be pressed whenever the announcer felt a cough or a sneeze coming on; this cut the sound for a few seconds. But preventing paper rustle was less easy, for items were typed on separate pieces of paper. James Dibble says:

You picked up the page you'd finished with very deliberately and lifted it onto the pile that you'd read. (If you do that on television it looks terribly ponderous, so you just slide the paper over and put it down on top of the pile so that it causes the least possible visual distraction.)

How easy this was depended upon the kind of paper the bulletin was typed on. The ABC really experimented with all sorts, trying to see which made the least noise. Fine, thin paper is no good — it

Graham Connolly reads the ABC news in 1962. Note the turntable and record; the newsreader had to play in the theme Echoes of Empire *before he began reading. The "gong" is next to the turntable.*

rustles too much. They finally found a thicker sort, a bit like blotting paper (if anybody can remember now what blotting paper was!) This was stiff enough to move across without being bent, so it wouldn't rustle or crackle when it hit the other sheets.

Some people marked bulletins before they read them — putting in lines to show emphasis and so forth — but I never did. I just read them.

There can scarcely be a newsreader who has escaped the awful moment when his tongue has become entangled with a phrase or a mispronounced word. Perhaps the reader looks up into the control room and realises what he has done only when he sees the operator doubled up with laughter ... or perhaps he has thought "Oh, my *God*", and just continued reading, hoping that nobody has noticed. The most famous clanger in Australian newsreading history was dropped by John Chance of the ABC. It has been attributed to several people, but Chance was the man who said, "Mrs Dorothy Aitken of Blacktown was bitten on the funnel by a fingerweb spider."

In 1953, when he had been at the ABC for three years, James Dibble resigned to join the Macquarie network because he was interested in theatre and wanted a newsreading job that did not involve too many evening shifts. After working with the ABC, he found that there were crucial differences in the way he was expected to present news on a commercial radio station.

I always felt that newsreading or writing for news should be done as you speak, and you don't always use sentences the same length when you're talking. They vary — some are long, some are short. But when I went to 2GB, the basic tenet of writing the news was that every sentence should be as short and distinct as, 'The cat sat on the mat'. That was actually quoted as a guideline.

I said, 'Look, I'm sorry, but I can't read news like that; to me it will just sound staccato and boring and terribly repetitive. You don't have enough length in a sentence to give it any different emphases, or different meanings or cadences. The sentences must be spaced and all of varying lengths.'

In the end they seemed quite happy to write the news the way I wanted to read it. When I left Macquarie two years later to rejoin the ABC, because I wanted to get into television as a newsreader, the staff put on a party for me. One of the journalists presented me with a card that read: 'To Jim, who killed the cat!'

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In the 1940s and 1950s listeners not only heard straight news bulletins, but programmes giving background. It was here, rather than in the preparation of news items, that the recorder really came into its own. During the war the ABC had presented voice reports from their correspondents in places where Australians were fighting, giving depth and immediacy to the straight news broadcasts. After the war, programmes such as *Macquarie Newsreel*, the ABC's *News Review* and 2GB's *Monitor* presented eyewitness accounts of happenings and longer interviews with people in the news. Programmes such as these were the radio equivalents of newspaper feature stories.

One of the first post-war news feature programmes was *Macquarie Newsreel*, which began on the Macquarie network in 1946. As the name implies, it had something of the "feel" of a movie newsreel (without the pictures, of course). Its publicity described it as "a pioneer in special event broadcasting"; the programme featured regular interviews with people who had been present at big news events, and reporters Bill Weir and Peter Barry also did voice pieces — descriptions of such things as fires, parades and political meetings.

The ABC's *News Review* was a similar programme, and a story in the *ABC Weekly*

in February 1948 gives a succinct and vivid account of the way in which it was put together.

'Is this going on the air right away?' is the usual question ABC News Review *men are asked whenever the undisguisable mobile van, which, incidentally, saw much service in the Middle East, makes its appearance. The answer of course is 'no'; interviews are recorded and put to air later at a convenient time, and so the programme is relayed to other states* [i.e. apart from New South Wales] *as a composite session. The mobile recording van has special technical staff in addition to the actual interviewer, who accompany it, nurse it where necessary like a fretful child and in all sorts of conditions manage to do a very good job of work.*

The ABC man must usually keep interviews down to two and a half minutes, maybe less. Of course, by no means all News Reviewing is done by mobile recordings — some of the events of which the session tells are eyewitness descriptions of incidents that have happened during the day.

Talks editor Fred Simpson says that the organisation of the thirteen-and-a-half-minute feature is most complicated. Landlines from every state are constantly used to bring in events of nationwide interest.

2GB's *Monitor* was basically a news and comment programme, but it extended its scope in other areas. As well as having interviews, it included commentary from people such as Eric Baume, Bill Weir and Hugh Elliott as well as sporting information and music. Adapted from an American idea, *Monitor* marked 2GB's gradual turning away from light entertainment shows to news and current affairs broadcasting. It was an ambitious show; unlike most others of its kind, it presented a great many reports from overseas.

Radio feature journalists in the 1940s and 1950s were an enterprising breed, who lugged their recorders into all sorts of unlikely places for the sake of a story or an interview. One of the most adventurous was Tom Jacobs, news editor on Sydney's 2SM at the early age of thirty-two. Jacobs did some of the most spectacular news programmes that have ever been heard on Australian radio. He broadcast from the top of the Sydney Harbour Bridge in a howling gale; he went into an operating theatre and recorded the progress of an appendicectomy.

Jacobs also visited institutions to talk to mental patients and prisoners. He says, "I was one of several who got out of the regular routine. Some of the people in news broadcasting here were doing programmes that were firsts in the world, not just Australia. In those days, people in institutions trusted journalists."

They must have done. Jacobs did a series of programmes from Goulburn gaol in southern New South Wales — a place that, like other prisons, now has very strict security. Jacobs's programmes there, recorded in 1950, were not exposés of the prison system; they came under the heading of "human interest" stories. He says:

The then Minister of Justice, who controlled the prisons, let me go in there, working for weeks on end to explore the musical talents the prisoners had. We had silent keyboards built for the prisoners; we trained and encouraged composers, instrumentalists and vocalists to perform on air.

We had half a dozen lifers in the orchestra, and one man who was a very gifted composer. And we had one man in for committing murder who had the most beautiful voice. This got me into a little trouble with the authorities because when he finished singing, thousands of people wrote or rang up the Minister for Justice saying that, with a voice like that, this man shouldn't be in prison!

We timed the broadcasts for 7.15 in the evening, for three-quarters of an hour,

and they would end with the chapel clock striking eight. One moment the prisoners would be singers and musicians whose voices were heard Australia-wide; the next they'd be numbers again, filing back to their cells.

Jacobs did a programme along similar lines, involving inmates of New South Wales mental hospitals.

It was to raise money for building an after-care hostel for mental patients. It took about eleven weeks to put it together; we auditioned people from the various mental hospitals in New South Wales for a musical show. We had an orchestra that was very good indeed — about sixteen musicians, all inmates — and a chorus of fourteen, mainly women. Some people in the programme were sopranos; we had some baritones and a bass and a couple of contraltos.

The two stars of the programme were singers. One was a soprano who had migrated to Australia. She was quite young and could not cope with the pressure of living in a new country, and she broke down and landed in a mental hospital. I'm happy to say that, because of the programme and public reaction to it, she never went back to the hospital.

The other star was a thirteen-year-old girl with an absolutely magnificent voice who was a schizophrenic and who spent something like ninety per cent of her time in a straitjacket. But every now and again she would have moments of complete sanity when she was all right.

For that programme we probably had all of Sydney listening; people had their fingers hovering over the dial ready to switch off if what they heard was offensive. To them, this was a collection of mad people. But you would only have known that there was something wrong with most of them if they had a conversation with you. Then you realised that they were different. But their differences in the way they reacted to the world were not apparent when they sang.

We had thousands of telephone calls and letters as a result of that broadcast, and money poured in for the hostel. Ten thousand pounds in two hours — at that time, it was an absolute fortune.

Tom Jacobs is in no doubt about the value of radio programmes like these.

This is the type of thing that the innovative reporters should do now, instead of just being somewhere to chronicle things as they happen. They should be doing reports with a distinct human message, that can do permanent good. The broadcast from Callan Park, for instance, opened up an entirely new avenue of therapy. The simple fact of the matter was that you could put people like the prisoners in Goulburn gaol or from mental institutions together and have a human programme that inspired listeners, that educated them, that provided a lasting sense of knowledge and at the same time showed people giving extremely creditable performances. That's a feeling you don't get now.

Jacobs is only partly right about the last point. There are, of course, still human programmes that inspire people, except that now these people may be not radio listeners, but television viewers. A fascinating parallel to his Callan Park programmes is a recently made film called *Stepping Out*, which showed mentally retarded young people from Sydney's Lorna Hodgkinson Sunshine Home preparing and presenting a show at the Opera House. Directed by Chris Noonan, it was shown nationally on television at the end of 1981 (after a very successful film season) and has won a number of international awards. People still care. They still want what Tom Jacobs calls "reports with a distinct human message" — it's just that film or television

Tom Jacobs (left) interviews a very young Ron Randell before his departure for Hollywood in the early 1950s.

has now taken over something that radio once did.

"But radio is such a powerful medium that it can create minor and major miracles," adds Tom Jacobs firmly. He once helped bring about a "minor miracle" himself. In 1952 a girl called Shirley Butler was found dead, strangled and battered on a vacant allotment at North Sydney. "The last that was seen of this girl alive was travelling across Sydney Harbour Bridge on a tram on Christmas Eve," says Jacobs. "The tram was packed. There were well over a hundred people on it, but right up to the thirty-first day after the murder the police had only succeeded in finding four or five of the people on the tram; I put it to the Commissioner of Police that radio could help with the case."

I put together a programme called Shirley *and, using actors and actresses, we re-enacted the last hour in the life of this girl; that last tram journey. The programme was made from police records — the police cooperated as fully as they could. We had the conductor saying, 'Fares, please' and the drunk who kept on singing,* 'Auf wiedersehen'. *I did the narration and tied the whole thing together.*

Within thirty minutes of our going off the air, everyone *who had been on that tram had come forward. We identified every single person. And as a result of that broadcast, and the information the people on the tram gave, the police found and arrested a man for the murder.*

The story of the way in which radio helped police with the Shirley Butler murder case made front pages in all major Australian newspapers. (One Sydney paper showed two pictures of passengers on a tram; the first with the faces blank except for question marks, the other with the features drawn in.) "The story was reported overseas, too," says Tom Jacobs.

Despite his comments about the influence of radio, Tom Jacobs says he often wished that Australia had had television in the early 1950s. "Many a time I used to go out with a microphone and I wished people could have seen what I was describing," he says, "particularly when I did my first tour of the world in 1951. I can remember wanting to show the streets of Cairo to the audience. But of course I could only tell them."

The smaller, modern tape recorders used today would also have made the task of reporting easier, according to Jacobs.

I had to carry a big recording machine with a disc spinning at thirty-three and a third, as well as a wire recorder. Nothing like today's cassettes. The wire recorder was terrible — if it became in the least unbalanced, you'd have wire all over the place, miles of it. On my world tour — I visited something like one hundred and four countries in twenty-six weeks and did a series called The World Today *— I was racing back to the hotel to edit an interview I'd done with de Gaulle on to the recording machine, and I stumbled. The machine fell and the wire all came out in about a million knots. I couldn't put it together, and had to do the interview again. Anybody who's ever had to do an interview twice will tell you that you can't do it the same way a second time.*

Even though he felt that developments in technology, particularly television, might have held great promise for feature reporters, Tom Jacobs hung up his microphone before television came to Australia. "I'd reached the stage when you feel as if you've scooped the bottom out of the market," he says. "No-one was very well paid in radio. I'm not saying that's the yardstick at all, but you have to do something about money sometime. I'm earning more in a minute now than I earned in six months in radio thirty years ago." (Tom Jacobs's real name is Thomas Hayson: he now runs a successful Sydney property development business.)

He feels very strongly that television has caused a decline in the standard of special

feature reporting.

When I look at news journalism today, I'm very sad that more sophisticated broadcasting and the coming of television have destroyed the ability of and the enthusiasm for the innovative reporter. I don't mean the one who just does a story that comes and goes, the twenty-four hour sensation; I mean the reporter who does something that has a lasting effect. There wouldn't be more than one or two of those in this country at the present time.

Today's media are all looking for short-term sensation. We have not bred a group of journalists that anybody in power or in a sensitive area would trust. If there's no trust, it's impossible to get really innovative programmes off the ground. What happens is that reporters go into places like gaols and mental hospitals to do something and find out half a dozen extra things that they add to their programmes later when perhaps they promised not to do so.

The human face of mankind is not presented. Sure, I presented the sensational stories, but I tried not to hurt anybody. There is no need to hurt people.

Most of the people in today's media are young men and women who have never learned to do their homework, to build up trust — they've never had to do things the hard way. We did.

• • •

As early as the 1930s, Australian radio had its oracles: men who gave their views on current events and the news of the day. They included such men as Captain Peter, William Tainsh and Professor Julius Stone. Some of them, such as Professor Stone, who ran an ABC programme called *Current International Affairs*, broadcast "considered opinion on international affairs"; others were more impassioned. The Watchman (Edward Mann), a very popular commentator during the war, sometimes sounded positively Churchillian, as when he assured Australia in 1944 that "if we try (as far as fallible and ignorant men can) to range ourselves on the cause of right against wrong, we may be assured that, however dark and lowering the clouds at any time, we may rest calm and confident that, in the end, the powers of evil will be cast down". Good, stirring stuff — even with that number of subordinate clauses.

Some commentators, such as John Henry Austral, grew quite bold after the war. "Fearless! Outspoken!" gasps the publicity for his programmes in a 1948 issue of the *Radio-Pictorial*. "John Henry Austral arouses nationwide discussion in a series of commentaries on current affairs and problems."

Whatever their style, whether they were quietly thought-provoking or loudly passionate about their opinions, these commentators were eagerly listened to by thousands of people. But none evoked such hostility or support as one Frederick Ehrenfried Baume.

Eric Baume came to radio in 1953, when he was in his fifties, after a distinguished career in journalism. He had been editor-in-chief of Truth Newspapers in Sydney, European editor of Truth and Sportsman Ltd and the Sydney *Daily Mirror*, as well as editor of the Sydney *Sun*. He had never been a quiet or self-effacing chap, and he took to radio with a roar of satisfaction. His programmes over the Macquarie network had aggressive titles: *I'm On Your Side, This I Believe, Say What You Think*. The most tentative title for a Baume programme was *The World and You*.

His shows were as trenchant as their titles. *I'm On Your Side*, which went live to air in the mornings, concentrated on people's problems and ranged over an enormously wide field, including alleged bad treatment of Aborigines in Darwin, the adoption laws, door-to-door salesmen, the machinations of lawyers. He even had a go at the price of potatoes; when they reached something like two shillings and sixpence a pound, he urged housewives to stop

buying them until they got down to a reasonable price. It's a measure of his listening audience that his attack succeeded; before long, some shops were advertising an "Eric Baume Special... potatoes one shilling a pound".

When he started on 2GB, interviewing political figures was rather a polite business. "Usually people liked being able to walk into the office of the Premier or whomever and have a little chat," says Brian White. "Then the politician would talk for three or four minutes on the subject of the day, the journalist would thank him and that would be it. At 2GB, the only political interviews as such were those that Baume did."

His programme on Saturday night, Say What You Think, *was absolutely riveting radio. I remember one interview he did with Ernie O'Dea when he was Lord Mayor of Sydney. They had a real donnybrook, insulting each other, and Baume just knocked down punches from beginning to end. He was the only man in radio capable of doing that.*

Eric Baume never came out in support of a political party. If he had done so, he would have lost his freedom to comment on politics from all sides — a freedom that, as a showman and a journalist, he enjoyed to its fullest.

He was never at a loss for an opinion on anything, and what he said was always guaranteed to infuriate a proportion of his audience. One irate man wrote to the station: "How much longer are we to have Mr Eric Baume inflicted on us? I questioned ninety members of the public; the result was twenty in favour of him, twelve couldn't care less and the remainder were emphatic in their dislike of his programmes. On behalf of my friends and club mates, I beg of you to have done with this idiot of a man."

Baume said that he could not understand

Eric Baume makes a point in his usual style.

why people often referred to him as "a controversial figure". In *Larger Than Life* — an appropriate title — he told his biographer Arthur Marshall:

I'm not controversial at all. To be controversial you have to be phoney, you have to do something as a stunt, and I haven't got time to do that.

. . . I've learned too much in a long life in radio and journalism to start trying to put across stunts. If I have something to do, I'll do it. I smashed the price of potatoes in 1954. That was radio at its best. We had a duty to stop the filthy racket which was going on and we did it. It wasn't controversial. I've also learned that it pays to be honest about what you say so that if somebody quotes you, you have to be able to come back and tell them it's not only what you said, but what you meant as well.

I merely say what I think. If I refer to some of the blacks in those murderous republics of Africa as 'monkeys hanging by their tails from trees' I mean it. That's the way I regard them. That's not being controversial.

Eric Baume a controversial figure? Never!

He described *This I Believe*, his show that went to air on weekday evenings, as being characterised by "a refusal to take the conservative view". (Given the last paragraph of what he said above, this statement is somewhat surprising.) Many people remember Eric Baume as an arch-conservative, but the truth was that he was not at all consistent in what he said. In fact, *This I Believe* should have been retitled *This I Believe at the Moment*. One evening he might defend Australia's defence policy most vigorously; the following evening listeners might tune in to hear him announce that it was totally inept. Arthur Marshall quotes him as saying, "It's not wrong to say I have a bit each way. As a matter of fact no man has changed his mind more than I have done. I have made it a rule that if I think I am wrong, I say so. That is to say, I might have an opinion one day and I might change that opinion the next day because of certain facts."

For example, I've always believed in the defence of my country. The family tradition has always been military, and I've always supported military service. Yet, after mature consideration, I threw the bombshell of saying that, while everybody should be militarily trained, no conscript should be sent abroad. This raised a cry of 'communist'. Me, a communist!

There's a lesson in this business of changing one's mind. One of the dangers of Australian politics is the complete party line. It's fine for discipline, but what about the country! How can a man persist in a point of view when he has proved to himself that he was wrong! Right or wrong, I'm not going to be bound forever by my opinion on a certain date, because that opinion might have to be changed by next Wednesday.

First and foremost Eric Baume was a showman; and as both a performer and a journalist, he knew that the cardinal sin that anyone can commit is to be dull. This led to frequent accusations that he said things just for effect, but Brian White doesn't agree.

I thought he was a man of integrity. A lot of people in journalism would disagree with that, but I've always believed that the only truth in journalism is to say what you think. If you do that, you can often turn yourself upside down from your position the day before. And, until very late in life, Eric was still a consummate journalist.

Baume did his shows live, usually without a script. "He might come in to do *This I Believe* from a dinner, dressed in a splendid dinner jacket and black tie," says Brian White. "He'd pass by the newsroom on his way to the studio and pick up the evening papers. Then he'd sit down in the studio and give ad lib comments about stories he

was reading for the first time and, after fifteen minutes, he would sign off, put the papers down and go back to his dinner."

Because almost everything he said was off the cuff, Baume liked to have somebody with him in the studio. "Eric liked to see a face," says Brian White, "just somebody who could smile at his jokes or look sad when he was trying to make them sad. It was a useful way for him to gauge whether or not he was getting the reaction he wanted — and I think a lot more radio people ought to do that."

This was sometimes traumatic for the other person in the studio, particularly if Baume wanted to test him. Brian White remembers:

On one occasion he presumably hadn't been able to find anyone who'd go and sit in the studio with him, and he called me in as I walked past because I happened to catch his eye. This was the first time he'd done that to me.

I walked into the studio just before we went on air and he said: 'Just sit down. I want you to do something in a minute.' Then he started I'm On Your Side, *reading out some letters and making comments on them.*

He suddenly said: 'I'm going to read another letter now, and then I'll do something I haven't done before. We have a brilliant young journalist working for us, whose name is Brian White. I think his opinions are going to matter and I want you to hear what he has to say.'

He read the letter, handed it across to me and said: 'What do you have to say about this, Brian!'

I looked at the letter he gave me. It wasn't the one he'd just read out at all; he'd made that one up, straight out of his head. And of course when I started to read the thing in front of me, I completely forgot what he'd just been talking about. I struggled and waffled while I tried to remember what the hell he'd just said.

In the meantime, Eric got up from the microphone and walked away into a corner of the studio; this meant that if I didn't say something, he wasn't going to cover for me. There would just be dead air, which is the worst thing you can have on radio.

I started to talk . . . God knows what I said now, but I kept it up for about five minutes. It was only when I made it very clear that I wasn't going to say another word that Eric sat down again. Then I threw a remark at him as well — I forget what it was, just to throw the show back to him, and he picked it up from there. When we took a commercial break, Eric said: 'That was good. You did that very well.'

He must have done that sort of thing to other people, but it had a cataclysmic effect on me, as you can imagine. But it made me realise — and I'm sure this was his intention — that I could ad lib on air without any preparation. I'd proved myself to him, and I know that he advanced my cause with management from that point onwards.

White remembers at least one occasion on which Baume went in to bat for him. It was during the 1963 Profumo affair, a sex scandal involving several prominent members of the British establishment and their involvement with call girls. It broke at a time when the reporting of such issues as prostitution was a relatively genteel affair. Euphemisms abounded: sex was not mentioned, and Brian White and his colleague, Bill Weir, decided that this particular story should be reported as unequivocally as possible. "The action really centred on the trial of Dr Steven Ward on charges of conspiracy and living off the earnings of a prostitute," says White. "Day after day evidence would come through, perfectly timed for breakfast news, which I was running and Bill Weir was reading. We'd had lots of material about prostitution and scandals, then we started to get into the juicier bits of how one of the girls, Mandy Rice-Davies, entertained British cabinet

ministers and frequently wore only panties and a bra and even leather gear with a whip.''

The following story sheds a certain amount of light on both Eric Baume and Brian White.

White says:

I came in one morning when the evidence was particularly juicy; it was more or less the climax of Ward's trial. I had written the story when Bill Weir suddenly called out, 'Have you seen the memo on the notice board? It says, ''There shall be no further reference made to the trial of Dr Steven Ward''.' We decided that this was because of all the juice we'd been putting in.

I said, 'Well, today's story is terrific. It's really a good, big one.' Bill said that if I'd written it, he would read it because we both thought we should carry it; we'd been covering the whole thing for a week or more. So we did.

Within minutes of its going to air, the editor rang up and said to me, 'You're fired and so is Weir. The chairman himself said that there should be no further mention of the trial, and I'll see you when I get to the office.'

Bill and I decided that the only thing to do would be to short-circuit all this by getting hold of Eric, who was the editor-in-chief. When we came off the air, we went down to the little coffee shop that used to be below 2GB in Phillip Street and waited for him.

When he came in the first thing he said was, 'You're both fired'.

Bill said: 'Come on, Eric, stop the bullshit. Sit down and have a cup of coffee.' Eric, being Eric, did, and we discussed the whole thing. We were so successful in putting our point of view that when we came back up to the office, Eric smacked me mightily on the back and said, 'It takes a wise man to know when an order is wrong and to defy it!'

The editor came in moments later and was absolutely taken aback when he learned that Eric had already approved what we'd done. It turned out that the chairman hadn't given any order at all — he had just indicated that he thought we were going too far. Eric had told the editor to do something about it, that was all.

That turned out very well for us, but Eric was hardly a help to his editor, who was supposed to be the bloke responsible to him!

Everybody — colleagues, listeners and politicians alike — soon learned that Eric Baume couldn't be put into a slot, because he just refused to stay there. He thrived on disagreement and argument and liked nothing better than a good fight. Shades of grey did not exist for him; compromise and subtlety were words that found no place in his working vocabulary. And when his dark, pontifical voice hit the airwaves, it couldn't be ignored.

8

"And now we cross to Parliament House, Canberra"

For many Australians, the broadcasting of parliamentary proceedings is a mixed blessing. We agree that, yes, it's very important for us and for our children to hear exactly what is going on in the House of Representatives or the Senate; generations of primary schoolchildren have prepared projects on that premise alone. But it cannot be denied that democracy in action can also be dull. The number of people fascinated by the second reading of a bill about something like dovetailed flanges is likely to be very small.

On the other hand, when something important is happening in Parliament, being able to hear it is worth more than any number of newspaper reports. Listeners have understood this from the time parliamentary broadcasting was introduced. About a year after it started in October 1947, the *ABC Weekly* reported that "the introduction by the Prime Minister [i.e. Chifley] of the Banking Bill and the address made by the leader of the Opposition [Menzies] probably attracted the biggest audiences in the history of broadcasting in Australia". And, more recently, the people who listened to what was happening in the House of Representatives on 11 November 1975 — the day on which the Whitlam government was dismissed — numbered hundreds of thousands.

The first country in the world to broadcast Parliament was either Australia or New Zealand — the answer depends on whether one is referring to state Parliament or federal Parliament. If it's state Parliament, Australia was the first; in 1931 the Labor Party's radio station, 2KY, put debates to air during the Lang government's period in office. New Zealand began broadcasting some of the proceedings of its national Parliament in 1936.

The New Zealand Labor Party was responsible for instituting these broadcasts, and across the Tasman, politicians measured their success. In 1945, when a Labor government was in power here, Ben Chifley suggested that a similar service would be most desirable. He and his party had felt for some time that newspaper coverage of Parliament was both sketchy and biased; radio would prove an effective counterweight.

However, Chifley didn't feel that everything that happened in Parliament should be broadcast. "My own view is that there may be value in broadcasting important debates, but not the whole of the proceedings", he wrote to the Chairman of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Broadcasting in 1945. In other words, he agreed with what the New Zealand Broad-

casting Corporation was doing — it took only the second reading of any bill in the House in which it was presented, as well as Question Time, but it did not broadcast unimportant bills.

Charles Moses agreed with this, though his enthusiasm for broadcasting Parliament at all could be described as qualified. In 1945 he went to New Zealand at the behest of the Postmaster-General, to investigate.

I went over there fully intending to report against it. (I think the fact that it was being done to the satisfaction of both parties in New Zealand was probably the reason that I was asked to make a report.) But I was against it because I knew that a great deal of what happens in Parliament is very boring. It's not good broadcasting, and I was looking at it as a broadcaster; I couldn't believe that it would be good broadcasting to have hours of discussion on what could be very dull matters on the air. Taking up a lot of time for that was anathema to me.

But on the other hand, this is very different from putting on Question Time and presenting the second reading of a bill. That's important, and I think the public should have the opportunity to hear what they're about and to assess the way in which the government and the opposition deal with them.

The more I listened and the more I spoke to people, the more I believed that at least certain parts of parliamentary proceedings should be broadcast. When I came back my report was very different from the one I went there to make, because I had become convinced that there was something in it.

Although both Charles Moses and Ben Chifley were convinced parliamentary broadcasting should be selective, the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Broadcasting overruled them. The 1946 Parliamentary Proceedings Broadcasting Act directed that "the proceedings of the Senate and the House of Representatives shall be broadcast from one medium wave national station in each capital city and in Newcastle, New South Wales, as well as other national stations that would help to give a complete coverage". The emphasis was on that word "complete"... broadcasts are usually allocated to the House of Representatives on Tuesdays and Thursdays when Parliament is sitting, and on Wednesdays and Fridays from the Senate. On each day after the first sitting day of each session, Question Time is rebroadcast after 7.15 p.m.

When only one chamber is sitting, the ABC broadcasts as much of the debate as possible. However, not all of it gets through. Kevin Chapman, who has covered Parliament since 1957, says, "One of the great things of course is that, no matter how late they go, we cut them off at twenty past eleven at night. If they sat on a weekend they wouldn't be broadcast. But I don't think they're that keen!"

The times during which Parliament is broadcast are fixed, regardless of what is under debate, and the Parliamentary Standing Committee has drawn up an impressive eight-page list of instructions on exactly when, how and where the ABC is to broadcast Parliament. Charles Moses has never been happy with this.

I do think it was a pity that it started in this way and that it has continued like this. I believe that we overdo parliamentary broadcasts now and that we always have overdone them; we were saddled with that from the very beginning. If parliamentary broadcasting had begun in a more modified way so that broadcasts were shorter and we were only taking matters of real importance, I think we would never have got into the state we're in now. New Zealand is selective, and I think that's better.

Just after parliamentary broadcasting started in 1947, the *ABC Weekly* decided to tell its readers just how important it was. "The broadcasting of Parliament should stimulate greater interest in

politics", it began optimistically. "The attitude of too many Australians has been to leave politics to the politicians. Politics today intimately concerns everyone, and parliamentary broadcasts are a growing recognition of the fact."

So there. The *ABC Weekly* even published a listeners' guide to Parliament in September 1947. This showed a layout of the House of Representatives with outlined, numbered figures and a legend underneath so that any interested voter could immediately pinpoint where his local MP sat. Provided that the voter knew the name of his representative.

This was all very well, but the Australian electorate failed to react with gratitude. People felt it was satisfactory knowing where your MP sat in Parliament; they sometimes didn't much enjoy knowing what he *sounded* like. A listener wrote to the *ABC Weekly* in 1949, "If the debates had never been put on air, people would have remained in blissful ignorance about how many of their elected representatives had unpleasant voices, were unskilled in syntax and careless with the letters 'h' and 'g'." There were even mutterings that Parliament had lowered broadcasting in public estimation because the entertainment value of the broadcasting was so low.

But then, as the *ABC Weekly* pointed out, the fault lay with the electorate for failing to engage an all-star cast.

Senators and MHRs reacted to radio "stardom" in a variety of ways. They had to learn where the microphones were; not every MHR has his or her own. It has always been quite common for a parliamentarian to push a colleague out of the way of the mike if he feels Australia must hear his golden words. Having his words broadcast may be one of a backbencher's rare chances to shine: the papers may not take note of his brilliantly witty ripostes but the people in his constituency might. Parliamentarians occasionally used the broadcasts of proceedings to deliver messages to their constituents. (There was, for example, the famous occasion on which the Labor member for Hunter, Rowley James, interrupted his speech, leaned over the microphone and said to his dentist, "Milton, get my teeth ready this weekend".)

Listeners could always tell if parliamentarians found the debate less than riveting. "Some of the members used to go to sleep on the benches." says Kevin Chapman, "and the awful thing was that, if a microphone came on in the next bank, you could hear the snoring in the background. That doesn't happen now because the committee system in the Senate and the Reps keeps all the backbench very busy indeed."

The Speaker in the Reps has a separate microphone, which can be switched on and off, but in heated discussions this fact is sometimes forgotten. Kevin Chapman:

One time when we had about twenty divisions, one Speaker, without switching his microphone off, said, 'Well, where do we bloody well go from here!' A woman who knew I was the broadcaster that day took me to task over that because she said it destroyed his image. But what could I *do about it!*

Some parliamentarians have abused the opportunities broadcasting offers; others have learned how to use parliamentary broadcasts to their best advantage. Kevin Chapman:

Menzies, for instance. I used to watch him a lot. He definitely knew how to use a microphone — to work around it, to vary his voice pitch and so forth. He treated it as a person, as a woman, you might almost say. And he couldn't be interrupted in Parliament — he was too good. He thrived on interjections. (I think, by the way, that Chifley's flat, monotonous delivery cost him a few votes — he wasn't nearly as good.) When Calwell was leader of the Opposition in the early 1960s, he issued an instruction that ALP MPs were not to interject when Menzies was speaking, because he was so

much better and wittier when he had a sounding-board.

The other parliamentarian who used a microphone like that was Fred Daly, who was always good for a laugh; he livened things up no end when he was speaking.

I also remember Dorothy Tangney with affection. She was Senator for Western Australia for quite a few years and I can remember on one occasion she was complaining about the quality of the tea in Parliament House during Question Time. The President of the Senate at the time, Sir Alister McMullen, ruled her question out of order and quick as a flash she said, 'So's the bloody tea!' which I thought was marvellous.

Any broadcast from the Senate or the House of Representatives sounds as though it's coming from a room about the size of Peking's Great Hall of the People. The voices are hollow, the throat-clearings and rumblings cavernous. As thousands of visitors to Parliament House know, this is an acoustic trick. Though the ceilings are very high, the Senate and the House of Representatives chambers are really quite small rooms. So close together are the green or red benches that one sometimes wonders how all those bodies will fit on them, particularly in the House of Representatives.

This can make life a little tricky for the announcer, the man whose job it is to give the name, party affiliation and state of any member who is speaking. Particularly at the beginning of a new session, when he is gazing from his broadcasting booth upon a crowded House, with members jostling each other, laughing, passing papers and occasionally leaning over for a merry chat, the announcer could find it very difficult to tell them apart. How does Kevin Chapman do it?

I have a specially fashioned piece of cardboard that I prepare myself before every session. It fits around the microphone housing and it consists of a diagram corresponding directly to the position of each representative in the chamber. It's coded by constituency, and there's an alphabetical list of every seat represented with the name of the member beside it; so all I have to do is look up, see who's sitting where, glance down at my list and give the name of the member, his seat and the state. The Speaker also gives the name of the member who is speaking (in the Reps, that is) so when he says 'The Honourable Member for Kingston' I just glance down to K and give the name. What makes my life a bit easier is that the Speaker never recognises a member unless he's seated in his correct position. The list I use is prepared by the parliamentary papers office and it's important not only for me but for the technician, so he can tell which mike to open.

The broadcasting booth in the House of Representatives has been in use since 1947. It's a tiny, claustrophobic room, with the sort of damp-cotton-wool quiet common to radio studios. A desk with two chairs, the broadcaster's on the right, the technician's on the left, butts on to a wall, the top half of which consists of a narrow glass panel about sixty centimetres high and one and a half to two metres long. "The glass isn't shatterproof," says Kevin Chapman, "so if anybody let off a bomb in the chamber it could implode and then we'd be in trouble." When you sit down in the broadcaster's place, you are facing the Speaker's chair on the other side of the chamber. The semicircular rows of members' benches are immediately in front and to the right and left, so the broadcaster sees the backs of their heads.

When there isn't anybody in the chamber, the green of the benches and carpet and the polished wood of the speakers' chairs are rather soothing. (The walls of the broadcasting booth itself are made of walnut-stained wood.)

Fitted around the base of the announcer's microphone, sure enough, is the list of members — but the diagram shows the Speaker at the bottom of the

sheet. The announcer sits there, of course; he is in the opposite position, and the whole thing is back to front. "You soon get used to reading upside down and back to front," says Kevin Chapman. "That can come in useful, too; announcers never used to be given their personal reports by the Assistant GM of the ABC. He'd just call in and tell us what he thought we should know. The report was always on the desk in front of him, and thanks to my parliamentary training I was able to read it upside down!"

The list of members and their positions looks as though it has been the victim of gangland warfare: there's red everywhere. Some names are crossed out, others carefully written in. "We have to change it every time somebody resigns, or loses his seat in an election, or moves from the front to the back benches," says Kevin Chapman. "It can be a bit hard when a member who's been there for twenty years goes for some reason and he's replaced. You can get so used to giving the former member's name on air that you forget he's not there any more."

To the left of the broadcaster's microphone is the technician's panel, consisting of different-coloured buttons: red, yellow, blue, green, brown, white. These control the microphones, which you can see on flat stands at intervals around the benches; they are pencil-slim and curved, looking like the head of the Loch Ness Monster. "I must say that the members have always abused them shockingly," says Kevin Chapman. "When they rustle papers it sounds like a bushfire, and they often turn their backs to the microphone on the main table and address other members directly — which means you can't hear them properly sometimes."

The technician has to work very fast, punching the right buttons, "or he might miss something and the ABC will be accused of being biased", says Chapman.

When I started, just after the Evatt era, the PM was always on the left of the House. The front row didn't have any microphones — it still doesn't — and the frontbenchers had to come to the mike on the front table to speak. If the mikes had been lined up in the front row, they'd have been tripping over them.

There are very definite rules about what the parliamentary announcer is and is not allowed to say. Kevin Chapman:

You're obviously not allowed to make any political comments; you can say 'It's a lovely day here in Canberra', or cold, or raining, or whatever, but not much more.

When one member is speaking for a long time, you give his or her name, seat and state (or just name and state in the Senate) about once every seven minutes or so — the optimum time was decided by the Parliamentary Committee. This can vary. If it's a major speech by the Prime Minister or the leader of the Opposition in the House of Reps, you might identify him about once every ten minutes. In Question Time, each speaker is mentioned once.

It wouldn't seem possible to accuse a parliamentary announcer of bias — but it has happened. Kevin Chapman remembers a colleague who identified a member in a ho-hum voice, implying, "Here's that dreary old bore going on and on as usual". He was taken off parliamentary duties.

Working in the Senate has sometimes been a problem.

The red tonings are terribly soporific. Not so long ago, the announcer and the tech were in separate booths and one announcer wasn't at all well, and he kept going to sleep! But now we're together, which is a good thing; if one of us goes to sleep, the other one can wake him up.

ABC announcers in Parliament are not covered by parliamentary privilege and this has caused tension on at least one occasion.

In 1971 when Gorton was Prime Minister, one of the members of the press gallery called him a liar. His words were

picked up by the microphone, and I had to decide whether to identify him or not for the listeners. I thought I knew who it was, but I didn't feel prepared to take the responsibility; if I'd nominated who it was and I'd been wrong, I could have been in some sort of trouble.

Parliament has been broadcast in Australia for more than thirty-five years. Politicians should now be accustomed to using radio; are they becoming more articulate and better able to communicate with their voters? Charles Moses doubts it.

Some members are frankly much more adept at using the broadcast than others, and some I think did attempt to play to the gallery as far as the microphone was concerned, but I think the business of broadcasting it has not altered the way Parliament's business has gone ahead — not at all. Parliament is no better since it's been broadcast than it was before, judging by what one hears from time to time.

Kevin Chapman does not entirely agree.

I think when you have a fairly evenly balanced Parliament — with each of the main parties having approximately the same number of seats — people are much more efficient and speak better. They're on their toes. We've got to have men who are articulate, who can express themselves and who can make a contribution on the nation's big issues. This is one thing that's starting to happen. I think they could sometimes use the microphones more judiciously and sympathetically, but I think we're getting better Parliaments.

And judging by what one hears from time to time, one can only hope so.

The House of Representatives, photographed from a point directly above the broadcasting booth. Prime Minister Robert Menzies addresses the House on Australian foreign policy (August 1954). Opposite him sits the Leader of the Opposition, H. V. Evatt.

9
Everybody wants to get into the act

Breathes there a man with soul so dead who never to himself hath said, "Dammit, I can sing/play the spoons/tell jokes/do Hollywood impersonations much better than half those blokes on the air"? In the days of the bakelite box many listeners cherished show-business ambitions. Deep within the psyche of a chartered accountant or a bus inspector often lurked a tenor, a comedian or even a musical saw player, struggling to get out. And there were shows that met this demand — the radio talent quests.

The first person to introduce this type of programme to Australia was probably announcer and compere John Dunne. In the late 1930s he returned from a trip to the United States with the suggestion that, since amateur talent quests were very popular there, Australian advertisers should consider sponsoring similar shows. His advice to them was perhaps a little cynical: make sure that the talent chosen includes the good, the indifferent and the downright awful, because audiences enjoy listening to a bad performer just as much as to a good one. He also said that such talent quests should not compete with big national shows such as quizzes, and that they should be compered by a personality who was "sincere". Dunne followed his own advice by introducing and compering a show called *Amateur Night*.

Sponsors enthusiastically took up the idea and, over the next twenty years or so, amateur talent shows blossomed. There was never any shortage of people wanting to have a go at being famous on radio. These shows were basically similar in format — half an hour to an hour long, featuring from five to ten acts: singers, instrumentalists, comedians, impressionists and vocal groups. They ran on a system of heats, semifinals and finals, with a panel of judges or the public deciding the best acts.

Some shows that used this formula to good effect were 2UW's *Amateur Hour*, which went to air not only in Sydney but over New South Wales country stations and in Brisbane; 3UZ's *Swallows Parade* (aired in Melbourne, Victorian country stations and outlets in Adelaide and Tasmania) and *Swallows Juniors*, a Victorian-made show for young people that later transferred successfully to television.

Sometimes big money was involved. In 1955 Shell sponsored a National Top Pop Star Quest, which offered a prize of £500; listeners who guessed the judges' decision about the contestants' placings also won £500.

However, the talent quest that people

best remember is *Australia's Amateur Hour*. Like the Shell *Top Pop Star Quest*, it was a national programme, but its audience range was greater. It went out on fifty-four commercial stations throughout Australia, as well as being relayed to troops via Radio Australia in its early days, so it went to Japan, Korea and other parts of the world as well.

Australia's Amateur Hour, sponsored by the company jocularly called the Brothers Lever, ran for almost twenty years. It had three comperes during its run, the last of whom was George Alexander Dear, always known as Terry. He says:

When Sammy Dobbs, the great power-that-was at Lever Brothers, started up Amateur Hour, *he first got Harry Dearth to do it, and he was very good indeed. Then when he joined up, Dick Fair took over and carried it through the war years. That's when the show got its tremendous popularity. People couldn't go out; there were blackouts and no street lights and since everybody stayed at home, the radio was the best means of communication.*

Amateur Hour *wasn't just made in Sydney. It was broadcast from all over Australia. So if a listener heard Dick saying, 'Good evening, this is* Amateur Hour *from Cairns in Queensland', this was real glamour. It was also comforting; the show was still there and still going on, even when the Japs came into the war and people were afraid Australia might be invaded.*

Dick left the show in 1950, and that's when I took over. When I did, we were up to show number 423 or something like that, and when I finished ten years later we had done something like 930 shows. I was there the longest of the three of us.

What made it different from the other talent quests? Terry Dear and Dick Fair have no doubt; it was a combination of professional presentation and sympathetic help for the artists who appeared, as well as the quality of the talent. Dick Fair says, "Anybody who was connected with the *Amateur Hour* on a professional basis knew something about show business. We knew the pitfalls and how difficult it could be to succeed as a performer, even for people who were good."

This meant that if the people selected to appear on *Australia's Amateur Hour* were serious about pursuing their show business ambitions, they had the best professional help available. Indeed, the show was registered as a theatrical agent. Terry Dear says:

We kept all the names and details of people who had appeared on the show and, if somebody wanted a singer for a wedding, or a dance band, say, they would ring us. We would put them in touch with the people who had been on. A lot of people got further employment that way — for instance, Bobby Limb and Donald Smith. I got the Four Guardsmen singing group out of the police force on to the Tivoli circuit in a job that paid £200 a week. We never charged artists for getting them jobs.

By 1953, thirteen years after *Amateur Hour* started, Lever Brothers estimated that the show had featured 6600 acts out of about 500,000 auditions. The production staff had the selection of suitable talent down to a fine art; not an easy job when ten acts per week had to be selected from the hundreds who auditioned. This would have been challenging enough if the show had had the same base every week, but it travelled all over Australia. Terry Dear estimated that he travelled about 50,000 miles a year when he was the compere.

Australia's Amateur Hour couldn't have become the show it did if the organisation hadn't depended on the sort of efficiency that is needed to land a battalion on a coral island. Terry Dear describes how the system worked.

About two months before a show was going to be broadcast from a particular centre, which could have been almost anywhere in Australia, the advance agent

would go up there and book the hall, hire pianos (we used to accompany artists on piano if necessary) and a public address system; put ads in the local papers and pre-audition the artists, eliminating those whom he thought were not up to standard. By the time the rest of the production unit got there, we had about thirty people who had been pre-auditioned and from whom we made a selection for the show.

We never had two of the same sort of act on the same show, and sometimes the producer would choose people for their novelty value. He'd look for spoons players or bones players or bellringers. I remember one group of sixteen Swiss who rang bells — from tiny little cow-bells up to great big ones that were supposed to echo over the countryside.

We had some hilarious acts; very funny. I remember going to Perth when Rolf Harris was on the show. He played the piano with boxing gloves on! And in Alice Springs, we had a didgeridoo player. (I learned to play the didgeridoo myself . . . mmmboing, mmmboing, mmmboing!)

Often the producer had to show a certain amount of tact if a performer insisted on doing a number that was too popular. "We'd occasionally get runs on songs," says Dick Fair. "Once or twice I had to bar a particular number because lyric sopranos *always* sang it, and we couldn't have a lyric soprano singing the same thing week after week. In that case, we'd suggest diplomatically that the artist might like to sing something else, something new that the audience might like. That was the secret."

The help that *Amateur Hour* gave contestants often extended to doing more suitable arrangements of their music for them, if necessary. Contestants did not always appreciate this. Dick Fair says:

Terry Dear, the Dulcie Reading Trio and guitarist Walter Pitt rehearse for a Cairns-produced Australia's Amateur Hour.

I remember a young boy in Newcastle once, who was quite a good singer, but we changed his number for him. Five minutes before the show went on, his father came to me and said: 'He's got to sing the whole thing right through, the way he sang it before you changed it, or I'll take him off.' I just told him that he'd have to do that, and he did. We had nine acts instead of ten on that particular show.

But mostly performers were OK. They realised that they were getting the best professional advice they could from us.

On at least one occasion, a hopeful contestant decided to get the advice he wanted by short-circuiting the audition system. He telephoned Dick Fair. "God knows how he got my number," says Dick Fair, "but he told me that he was going to audition for the show, right there and then. It didn't matter how much I protested ... he started singing at me, bellowing through the telephone!"

Even on the show, performers sometimes got carried away by their enthusiasm, leading to problems for the pianists who accompanied them. There were two for a long time — Marie Ormston and Jean Bates, and they could play in any key the contestant nominated; most of the time. Dick Fair says:

Marie was one of the greatest accompanists Australia ever had, I think. I remember one night we had an Italian tenor who kept changing key. I was listening very intently, and she jumped with him and picked up every time. But at one point, she took her hands right off the keyboard and just listened for about a minute before she picked him up again.

After the show had finished, I asked: 'Marie, why did you stop playing, for heaven's sake!' She just looked at me and said: 'I did that because you can't play in the bloody cracks between the notes!'

When the ten performers for any show had been selected, the *Amateur Hour* production team interviewed them, so that Dick Fair or Terry Dear would know what questions to ask when the artists had finished doing their numbers. The idea was to find out what they were interested in, so they would talk in front of the audience when the show went to air. Some of these interviews sound stilted now. It's hard to escape the impression that, since the performer's moment of glory is over, all he or she wants is to get off the stage and hide under a blanket somewhere.

There were times when "interview" was too grand a word to describe what happened. For instance, Terry Dear remembers what happened in Alice Springs when the Aboriginal artist Albert Namatjira was a special guest on the show.

I said, 'Albert, welcome to the show'. Just a slight nod of the head is all I got, no words. 'Albert, you would say, wouldn't you, that Rex Batterbee has been a tremendous help to you in your career!' Another nod. It went on and on and on. It was then I realised that the Australian Aboriginal never makes two words do the work of one!

Occasionally the compere had to grit his teeth when interviewing artists. Terry Dear recalls:

In Rockhampton we had a chap who was a singer and guitarist and my interview with him was one of the greatest disasters of all time.

'Now, you're Fred Jackson.'

'Yes, Mr Fair.'

'Where did your guitar come from!'

'From so and so, Mr Fair.'

He said 'Mr Fair' eighteen times ... I could have killed him! That was the thing, of course; Dick Fair had left his stamp on the programme, as had Harry Dearth before him. Dick got, 'Yes, Mr Dearth'.

In common with other talent quests, the listening audience for *Australia's Amateur Hour* had an important part to play when it

came to deciding who were the best acts on the show for the week. In the theatre or hall where the show might be held, everybody who was listening had a card on which he or she rated all the artists, numbered one to ten. Terry Dear adds:

We invited people to ring in and give their votes after the show, too. We had a switchboard of ten to fifteen girls supplied by Lever Brothers, taking down votes, or people could write in. There were many ways they could vote, and we sometimes had colossal totals.

Sometimes people would ring with a huge number of votes for one act. We wouldn't know how many people were putting them in, but if there was a lot of background noise, we could assume that they were all in a pub. If they put in, say, fifty-seven votes, we accepted them. The Amateur Hour *organisation was very good, believe me!*

The lad who got the highest number of votes in the whole history of Amateur Hour *was an Aboriginal when Dick Fair was doing the show. He was a young guitarist who had experimented with gunpowder or percussion caps and who had blown away part of his hand. He only had the forefinger and thumb on one hand, and I think the other had been completely blown off. He had the guitar around his neck and held it close to him, then used the thumb and forefinger to play his guitar accompaniment.*

The story that Dick got out of him about his hardships was really superb. Dick was very good at getting stories out of people, and this was what the listeners liked, as well as their acts.

Australia's Amateur Hour moved to television. Even though it seemed in theory to be the perfect show to transfer to the new medium, its exposure on TV was rather short. In its early days, Australian TV was not nearly as professional as radio's *Amateur Hour.*

Terry Dear remembers a test transmission in 1955, the year before regular television broadcasts began.

We tried to do a facsimile of the show for television, so we got the Gresham Hotel's banquet area in downtown Sydney. The crew moved in half a dozen monitors, dug up the street and laid cables. It was the grand final show for the year, and we proceeded to try and mount this television spectacular.

It was terrible. Nobody knew anything about television; it was all amateurs trying to get the thing together. The cameras were not linked so that every time we had a camera change — camera one to camera two — one monitor would stay in synch and the other would go out. The result was that on the monitor we would see the top of an artist's head or his chin, or else nothing at all.

It was terribly embarrassing. And to top it all off, a fairly rotund bloke who worked for George Pattersons, the agency that represented Lever Brothers, suddenly observed that the person who was doing a commercial for Lux toilet soap didn't have a cake of it in his hand. So we saw a picture on the monitor *of this bloke on hands and knees, crawling across the floor to the lighted area and showing a fair amount of ample rear end, and then his ghostly hand came up in front of the camera with a cake of Lux toilet soap in it. It was a really funny show.*

Whether because of that incident or not, *Amateur Hour* didn't last on television. It stayed on radio only about four years after TV came to this country. Over twenty years, a lot of people had stood up there in front of that microphone and belted out songs, or played gum leaves, or told jokes. Terry Dear says:

Who were some of the people who became famous when I was doing the show? There were dozens of them. Some were outstanding: I think Rolf Harris was the best variety performer who came out of Amateur Hour; *there were also Donald Smith, Australia's greatest tenor, and*

Clifford Grant, who is acknowledged as one of the finest bass singers in the world today. Others: Neil Williams, Marie Tysoe, Shirley Abicair, Rosina Raisbeck. A great number of very, very good artists.

Both Terry Dear and Dick Fair have fond memories of *Amateur Hour*, despite the constant travelling involved. Dick Fair probably sums up how they both feel about the show when he says:

I enjoyed it thoroughly. Australia's Amateur Hour *was my best memory of radio. There were many times when I was thrilled and many times when I was disappointed, but what gave me the greatest thrill in* Amateur Hour *was — not once but many times — when the people we found did well and went on to bigger and better things.*

• •

At the end of the 1940s all the major radio magazines carried advertisements featuring a tall, serious young man wearing a dinner suit, with his hands spread out just below his chin as though holding a large invisible object. Seated beside him was a young woman who looked as if she might have been pretty; it was rather hard to tell because she was blindfolded. The copy underneath the picture always had some variation on: "You are the judge ... for those who believe, no explanation is necessary. For those who do not believe, no explanation is possible."

It sounds like an ad for a new kind of faith-healing religion ... but it's nothing of the sort. In fact, it's the only Australian radio show that has dealt with thought transference and mental telepathy. The serious young man is Sidney Piddington; the blindfolded woman is his wife, Lesley Pope. In the late 1940s and early 1950s they became famous.

Telepathy, thought transference, mental waves: the possibility of transmitting thoughts without speech has fascinated people for centuries. Nowadays the initials ESP are as familiar as ABC or OPEC, but to the literal-minded Australians of the years just after the war, extrasensory perception was generally regarded as suspect, while people who practised it were considered ratbags.

Nevertheless, Sidney Piddington built a very successful radio career on his ability to pick up thought waves. "All I was doing was offering an interesting show," he says, "based on genuine ESP experiments, and of course it was presented as an entertainment. It was heightened to some degree by showmanship and was 100 per cent sheer entertainment, whether people believed it or not."

How did an ex-accountant come to present one of the most unusual variety shows in Australian radio history? It's an interesting story, and it starts in Changi prisoner-of-war camp during World War II. Piddington and fellow-inmate Russell Braddon started doing thought transmission tests that they found described in an old *Reader's Digest* magazine. Sid Piddington says:

Russell, who later became a well-known writer, said he thought it was pure ratbaggery; but we found that, after a couple of months, we could transmit colours and numbers to each other without saying a word. We were getting a sixty-five per cent correct result when we concentrated on this, compared to a ten or fifteen per cent success rate you might get if you were guessing.

We were asked to demonstrate our techniques to the other men in the camp, which we did, and we caused the most tremendous uproar. Some of the men said it was all fakery; others were sure it wasn't because they had special feelings of closeness to their friends or their wives, to the point where they could tell what they were thinking. (Everybody has some degree of ESP — it's simply increased awareness between people who are close.) It even got to the stage where men were betting their cups of rice on

whether the act was real or not.

After the war, Piddington and Braddon thought seriously about presenting their ESP act on stage, but Braddon decided to complete a degree at university. Sid Piddington, however, did not find the idea of returning to accountancy particularly compelling, and he continued to think seriously about making the ESP act a travel ticket for seeing the world.

He was even more convinced about its possibilities after he met and married Lesley Pope, an actress with whom he had a special rapport. The idea of an ESP act simmered for a while, until he took a job in the advertising department of radio station 2UE and became a close friend of Paul Jacklin, then the station's chief producer.

"Paul was one of the most brilliant radio producers Australia ever had," says Sidney Piddington, "and he thought that Lesley and I had definite radio possibilities. He, Howard Craven and I set to work to see if we could make a show out of ESP."

The problem was that Piddington's act depended on the audience's seeing what was happening. It's easy to demonstrate to an audience in a theatre or auditorium that your partner has been blindfolded and that you are standing several metres away with your back to her — but how would it work if listeners had to be told? Would the suspense be destroyed?

Sidney Piddington admits that the format of his show was very difficult to develop.

The technique took us months to evolve; we did trial recordings and weren't satisfied with them. The idea was basically simple — Lesley was blindfolded and she sat with her back to the microphone so that she couldn't see what I was doing at any stage. I would hold up a card or select a song title, and she would tell me what it was. The main point was that at no stage did she receive any message from me after I'd made my selection — a design, a colour, a line of a book — because from that moment I didn't speak.

That was the problem. Silence is death to radio, and Paul Jacklin hit on the idea of getting a studio audience involved. They would be witnesses to what was happening, and using them by saying something like, 'I'm going to ask you for complete silence, please, while Lesley concentrates' would generate suspense.

We knew we'd have to do the show live, always. On disc much of the suspense would be lost and the station would be open to charges that somehow the experiments and responses had been tampered with.

We also had to get people who would authenticate what was going on. We decided to use well-known people, whom we called judges, as an independent panel: such people as Justice Dovey, Judge Adrian Curlewis or the Lord Mayor of Sydney. We thought it was important for them to assure the audience that no verbal communication took place between Lesley and me.

I'd say to one of the judges, 'Would you take a marking pen and put a cross beside the title of one of these songs? I will then try to transmit the title direct to Lesley.' The studio audience could see that the judge was marking the card, and Howard Craven would fill in for the listeners, telling them what was happening.

Then Lesley would say, 'You have selected "Stardust"'. I'd say, 'Correct', and ask the judges to confirm that this was the title they had selected. They acted, really, as the eyes of the audience.

The first programme featuring Sidney Piddington and Lesley Pope — the *Piddington Show* — created a sensation. "How does he do it?" journalists trumpeted in evening newspapers and magazines. But of course "urbane Sidney Piddington and his beautiful actress wife Lesley Pope" were not giving anything away, insisting that there were no tricks in their act.

As the listening audience grew, listeners' awe turned to scepticism. "At one stage,

somebody wrote to 2UE and said the show could not be done without paid confederates," says Sidney Piddington. "I offered a thousand pounds reward to anybody who could prove that this was the case . . . and nobody took me up on it."

At school I stammered slightly, which meant I couldn't take part in plays and things, and as I grew older this became a sort of hesitancy. In Changi, with the lack of good food and the tension, the stammer came back again and, though it improved after the war, occasionally I would have a little difficulty with words containing 'p' when I was doing the show. A number of people claimed that this hesitancy was a clue for Lesley, and that because of it she could tell what I was thinking of!

The *Piddington Show* was on air for about two years in Australia; Sid Piddington and Lesley Pope then went to London to try their luck. They did well, appearing on stage at the London Palladium and on the BBC. In 1950 they returned, partly to do one major national broadcast over the Macquarie network. This turned out to be the most spectacular *Piddington Show* of all. Sidney Piddington says:

We did the 2GB broadcast on a Sunday evening for Johnson and Johnson, the sponsors, replacing the Quiz Kids *just once. On that occasion, I was in the Macquarie auditorium in Phillip Street, and Lesley was in a flying boat over Sydney Harbour.*

We did all our tests from the auditorium to that aeroplane. Lesley had no earphones at all and Howard Craven (who had moved from 2UE at this point) was in the aircraft with her. He could hear what was going on in the studio, but of course he did not know what had been selected for me to transmit to Lesley.

It was actually a line from a book. Jim Osmond of 2GB had gone to Angus and Robertson's bookshop in Pitt Street and had selected a book from the many thousands there. He was the only person who knew which book it was, and it was sealed and locked in the GB safe. The line from the book was chosen by involving a number of people. One of them signed a card, then four others wrote numbers on the card. Those numbers were added up and that gave a page number and the line on the page, so that five people were actually doing the final selection. The main reason for this was so that nobody could say one person had been set up to pick a particular line.

Never had preparation been so elaborate, and it got a lot of publicity at the time. Naturally, Lesley Pope unhesitatingly gave the correct line.

As well as elaborate stunts to which the audience responded, Sidney Piddington also conducted occasional group tests that involved the audience much more directly. The first series was done with the *Piddington Show*.

I would think of a colour, or a number or a design, and ask the audience to ring in and say what they thought they'd received. You'd be amazed how many people said 'blue' if a colour was involved! It seems to be everybody's favourite. After the first series, the PMG asked 2UE not to go on with the tests, because the number of calls was seriously interfering with the operation of the switchboard.

Piddington could have retorted that if the PMG had really developed their thought transference powers, they would not have needed to use telephones (and neither would we, so Telecom would probably cease to exist).

These days, Sidney Piddington and his second wife Robyn are still presenting an ESP act, appearing regularly in clubs and shopping centres around the Sydney area. Not only that, but they've turned to television, and the Piddington magic still works. A few years ago, the Sydney TV

show *A Current Affair* ran mass telepathy tests with parapsychologist David Brown, in conjunction with the *Daily Mirror*. "They went on for five days," says Piddington. "We just wanted people to say what thought waves they had picked up from me. Well, the *Mirror* got something like 3500 calls the first night and 4500 the second night. By the third night the total was up to 6500 and the police complained because they couldn't use their switchboard."

All of which shows that, whether people believe in ESP or not, they're interested in it — and nobody presented thought transference experiments over the bakelite box but Sid Piddington. His *Piddington Show* was a cross between a variety performance and a "stunt" and if it hadn't been based on the mental closeness of two people, it couldn't have worked.

Some people, however, found their own explanations for its success — like a man in London. Sidney Piddington remembers:

The letter I had, which I've never forgotten, came on good bond writing paper and was written in a very well-educated hand. The writer said: 'I want to tell you that I know how you do your act. There is a little green man who sits on your shoulder. Of course, he is invisible. He sees the message to be transmitted and, no matter where she might be, he gets to Lesley and whispers the answer in her ear.

I know this is true, because I have a little green man myself.'

10
Thousands of pounds to be won, if you're lucky

"Now, remember . . . sit up straight and *don't gabble,*" were my grandmother's parting words. I nodded impatiently — it was what people had been telling me for most of my life, after all — and I watched her walk away from the stage door. I wanted to run after her and go into the Macquarie Auditorium with her, instead of meekly following the man up the stairs. But it was too late.

My best corduroy dress with the lace collar suddenly felt prickly and my glasses seemed to weigh a ton. Why, *why* had I said I'd do this? What if everybody laughed? And worst of all, what if I couldn't answer any of the questions?

Ghastly as these possibilities were, they were still the most glamorous that I had yet faced. For I had been chosen as a guest Quiz Kid.

Some months before, two men from the Macquarie Broadcasting network had come to West Ryde primary school and some of us had been hauled out of class to answer general knowledge questions. They had been easy. I had stood up straight in my summer blue uniform, my hands by my sides, and told them what the capital of England was and how many were in a baker's dozen. I hadn't given the incident another thought until the letter arrived, telling me I was among the chosen. "Think you're smart, don't you?" my classmates had said.

Now, the man led me from the stairs into a bleak room that smelled of rubber and sweat and chalk, like the cloakroom at school.

What little confidence I had been able to scrape together rapidly seeped into the lino as I gazed at the other occupants: two boys and two girls, all of whom looked much wiser than I. All four were wearing school uniforms, though I didn't know what schools they represented. In my best green dress, I felt very young, awkward and unsophisticated.

These were the Real Quiz Kids. To my envious eyes, they were the epitome of Show Business. Supercool, they were (or would have been had the phrase been current in 1959). Laid back. Ve-ry profession-al. I gazed at them for a few seconds more, wondering if any of them ever giggled.

Sensing an alien presence, one of the girls turned round. Her eyes coolly took in a tall eleven-year-old with a red face. Me.

"Hello," she said in a voice that matched her cool exterior. "You must be the guest."

"That's right." I tried to smile and in-

troduced myself. All four showed total lack of interest. After perfunctory "hellos", they resumed their conversation, leaving me feeling like a sweaty shag on a rock.

"Right," said a bulky man who strode in at this point. I blinked. Yes, it was he and he looked exactly like his photographs: tall, dark-haired, with rounded glasses and a kindly expression.

"I'm John Dease," he said in the rich, warm voice I'd been listening to for years. "Uhum," I said. How could I be witty or even intelligent, faced with this paragon of erudition?

He smiled, and I instantly felt much better because he looked like a very kind schoolmaster who wouldn't dream of keeping anybody in. "I suppose you've met . . ." and he reeled off the names of the four Genuine Quiz Kids who, having been formally introduced, now seemed a shade less formidable.

"Don't be nervous," said Dease "You'll be all right."

He opened a large folder. "I'll just ask you a couple of questions as a sort of warm-up." He couldn't have chosen a better way to put a terrified eleven-year-old at her ease.

"What's a female Indian called?"

A female Indian? Was this some kind of nasty trick question?

"S . . . squaw," I tried.

"Fine. What's Danny Kaye's real name?"

It wasn't Danny Kaye? I felt vaguely resentful, as though he'd tricked me after all.

"It's Daniel David Kaminsky," he said.

"Oh." I smiled weakly.

Somebody poked his head around the door. "Five minutes." Gulp.

"Thanks," said John Dease. Suddenly the atmosphere became very businesslike. The four Real Quiz Kids reached for their mortarboards and gowns — I hadn't noticed them hanging from a hook on the wall before — and John Dease took his from a locker. I deeply envied the crisp flick of the wrists with which he settled the lapels into position.

"Here's yours," he said to me. There was a sixth gown on the peg, but it looked miles too big for me. I put it on, getting my arm tangled in the sleeve. The mortarboard was another problem; it was far too small. When I'd successfully perched it on top of my head, I caught a glimpse of myself in a small mirror. My glasses glinted evilly; I looked like a depraved midget academic.

We lined up, ready to walk down a corridor to what I could see was a brightly lit stage beyond. All the others looked sober, clean and worthy; priests about to participate in a solemn rite. The next couple of minutes dragged by. My gown smelled as though it had absorbed the sweat exuded by generations of terrified children and I added my own contribution.

Then we heard the theme. Women's voices soared in Andrews Sisters harmony, singing the familiar tune: "Quiz Kids on pa-rade, With your favourite show, Now you'll hear the answers, To things you want to know . . ."

To a spatter of applause, which grew louder as we came on stage, we followed John Dease like good little schoolchildren.

The five of us took our places in creaky chairs behind a long table. In the front of each place was the name and age of the Quiz Kid. Theirs were neatly lettered; the card in my place had been hastily chalked with my name. Once more I felt like a ring-in, an interloper.

The spotlights were very hot. I looked past them, left, down into the auditorium. My God, why were there so many *people* out there?

The microphone in front of me reared up, pointing accusingly. John Dease stood behind a pompous-looking lectern to the left of the Quiz Kids' table.

After a disembodied voice had presented a commercial for Johnsons' Baby Powder: "Best for baby, best for you", John Dease calmly introduced us and explained how the show worked. There were various gimmicks, including points for listeners who sent in questions that the Quiz Kids

couldn't answer. That's fine, I thought, my mortarboard getting tighter and tighter. As long as those smart alec adults don't ask me an impossible question.

The others answered their questions quickly, easily and calmly. As I waited for my turn, I longed to adjust my mortarboard but was afraid to because I thought it would look unprofessional. Nobody else, I noted, seemed to have the same trouble.

My turn. "Jackie, what is the capital of Romania?"

"Bucharest," I replied composedly, hoping that my grandmother down there had noticed that I was sitting up straight and was not gabbling.

My confidence rose mightily. Was that the best the omnipotent adult listeners could come up with?

After another round, a curly question about the Virgin Mary. Despite years of Sunday School, I really wasn't so hot on religion, and I got it wrong. "No," said John Dease gently. One point for some gratified listener. His tone implied that no one person could possibly win them all, and I didn't feel mortified.

"What's a female Indian called?"

Hooray! "Squaw," I said, my voice lugubrious from sheer relief.

John Dease laughed. "Very good," he approved. "Now," to one of the others, "what's the name of the river . . .?"

So it went. Daniel David Kaminsky, alias Danny Kaye, came in and I fielded the question as though I'd known the answer all my life. Didn't everybody?

Finally, applause, blaring music off tape and a smooth announcement that the *Quiz Kids* was brought to you by Johnson and Johnson, makers of the world's finest surgical dressings. We filed off, myself leading, and the show was over.

As I took off my mortarboard and gown, I felt grumpy. I hadn't been asked what a male swan was called, who wrote *David*

John Dease and four of the Real Quiz Kids in 1956.

Copperfield, in which of Shakespeare's plays the drunken porter appeared . . . oh, there were so many things. I felt a distinct sense of anticlimax. Why hadn't somebody asked me some of the other things I knew? Was *this* all there was to it?

Not long afterwards, a letter arrived from the Macquarie Broadcasting Service, but this time it contained a pink cheque for three pounds; my fee. It was the first money I had ever earned, and I wanted to go out and spend every bit of it on books. But my mother was firm. She pasted the cheque into the family scrapbook, and my moment of glory was over.

Many Australian schoolchildren had similar experiences as permanent or guest Quiz Kids. Some have gone on to professional careers in such fields as foreign affairs or medicine, presumably getting to a stage in their lives where they can ask the questions rather than having to answer them.

On the air they sounded very serious and professional, and John Dease took them seriously, too. The Quiz Kids were thus the total opposite of the smart children whom one suspects were the show's original stars. For, like so many other Australian shows, the *Quiz Kids* was a US import.

The urbane, dignified John Dease stayed with the show right through its run on radio and into the early years of television. The success of the *Quiz Kids* depended partly on his authoritative presence, partly on the various gimmicks introduced into the show. These included jackpot prizes for listeners who answered questions that the Quiz Kids missed, guest Quiz Kids (an idea introduced in 1956) and — horror of sexist horrors — having the boys compete with the girls.

John Dease wore his gown and mortarboard with conviction; he had been a schoolmaster before coming to radio. His beautifully modulated voice was the result of many years as an actor with J. C. Williamson's after he left teaching. It seems odd to think of such a dignified man as Dease touring in musical shows around Australia, but he had.

Dease joined the staff of 2GB as an announcer in 1935, when his colleagues included Jack Davey, Harry Dearth and Eric Colman, brother of Ronald the film star. As well as doing the *Quiz Kids*, he presented a show called *World Famous Tenors*. He had therefore had quite a lot of varied experience in show business — and just before his death he became a film star as well. He played the announcer in Phil Noyce's feature *Newsfront*.

In spite of being such a polished and accomplished radio performer, John Dease was a shy man. He also had a somewhat endearing trait for somebody who spent years of his professional life in working with children. "He'd run a mile from them," says a secretary who worked with him at Macquarie. "They used to come up to the office to see the famous John Dease of the *Quiz Kids*, and he'd hide in somebody's office or in the toilet until they gave up and went home."

When he was nervous, Dease had a tendency to stammer, though he very rarely did so on air. Producer Jim Bradley recalls: "One Christmas party, some of the techs at GB put together a tape of all his 'ers' and 'ums'. It went on for minutes. At the end of it, you heard John's irritated voice saying, 'Ah, blast!' "

The *Quiz Kids* was a serious attempt to test children's knowledge, and the way in which Dease did this — without easy laughs, without encouraging the kids to show off — gave his show an intellectual credibility that most other national quiz shows lacked from the 1940s to the 1960s.

Quiz shows in Australia started off without fanfares. The first nationally sponsored one, a "name-that-tune" show called *Rinso Melody Riddles*, offered ten shillings plus a packet of Rinso as the top prize before the war.

Information, Please, a Melbourne-produced show that started in 1938, also operated on the principle that knowledge

for its own sake was more valuable than the winning of mere money or goods. "Listeners gain the chance to obtain much useful information", announced a prim press release; panellists Crosbie Morrison, Professor W. A. Osborne and Eric Welch supplied the information from questions that listeners sent in. After sixteen years on the air, listeners were awarded one pound for every question that the panel failed to answer, and five shillings for each question used.

This thirst for knowledge in radio shows lasted until the early 1950s, when executives noticed that quizzes with big prizes were very popular in the USA. This realisation hastened the demise of lavish radio vaudeville-variety shows such as those mounted by the Colgate-Palmolive Unit; it was cheaper to sponsor a show with big prizes than a *Calling the Stars* or a *Cashmere Bouquet Show*, because contra-deals could be organised and prizes written off.

Despite the inconvenience they might have caused contestants, quiz show prizes often included vast quantities of the sponsor's product. *Give It a Go*, a Jack Davey show sponsored by Persil, gave the opportunity to win up to 100 packets of the sponsor's washing powder. Where on earth did lucky contestants put it all? you wonder. Did contestants give packets of Persil to fortunate friends and relatives as Christmas and birthday presents for the next ten years?

Sponsors lost no time in switching to quiz shows, and big money prizes followed. The following story from an issue of the *Radio-Pictorial* illustrates how far Australian quiz shows had diverged from the seeker-after-truth style of *Information, Please* by 1951.

With the headline "£4000 Atlantic Show Jackpot" the magazine related how the Australian advertising managers of Atlantic Union Oil and the film company Twentieth Century-Fox decided to exploit the release of a Fox motion picture named *Jackpot*.

"Firstly they had to amass a huge array of prizes, secondly they had to publicise them, and they had to do it quickly, because the picture was due for early release," states the reporter, giving an intriguing example of putting the prizes cart before the quiz horse. "It wasn't long before they lined up a most comprehensive range of merchandise worth £4000. Then they turned out a million brochures, each containing four entry forms, using up seven tons of super calendar paper in the process. With the exception of 100,000 which went to Hoyts Theatres, these all went to the 4000 retailers of Atlantic Union Oil."

Radio-Pictorial described the prizes: a Vanguard sedan, a caravan, a refrigerator, jewellery, a vacuum cleaner, a de luxe bicycle, furs, a year's supply of breakfast and tinned foods (how did they calculate that? surely some people eat more luncheon beef than others . . .) and so on.

"All listeners have to do," the *Radio-Pictorial* assured its readers, "is to listen to every session of the *Atlantic Show*, compered by Bob Dyer, and they will hear two voices of film stars, making eight in all over the first four weeks of the broadcast. With the aid of rhyming clues, they must identify the stars' voices." In case readers hadn't quite realised what all this was for, the *Radio-Pictorial* assured them: "Thousands of prizes are to be won!"

The beauty of this quiz, as of so many others since, was that the average listeners didn't have to be very bright to win all this wonderful loot. All he or she had to do was listen.

Giving away prizes instead of cash was very useful for the sponsors, as quizmasters themselves agreed. However, they didn't always think that huge prizes were necessary to make a radio quiz a good one. Bob Dyer (who, with Jack Davey, dominated the quiz show compere field) once became almost apocalyptic about the question of money versus goods. He said: "When I opened the *Sydney Morning Herald* of 4 October and read the headline

'Big Jackpot in New US Quiz', I got quite the same feeling — but perhaps to a lesser degree — that I got when I read of the A-bomb on Hiroshima . . . I believe there is a happy medium that does not insult the intelligence of the listener and yet makes for good radio entertainment. It has always been my contention that listeners would rather hear Mrs Jones the housewife win a wristlet watch than the equivalent in cash. This senseless race for supremacy in cash giveaways can only lead to chaos in the industry."

Without comparing the winning of large amounts of money in quiz shows to the consequences of radioactive fallout, Jack Davey echoed Dyer's words. "Money is not the most important thing in quiz shows," he said. "I've been in quizzes for over twenty years and I've learned to place as much or more emphasis on human interest as on the cash or prizes to be won."

Even so, people found quizzes more interesting if the contestant stood to win a great deal of money or bigger and better goods, or even to lose the lot by answering a question incorrectly. The greater the value of the prizes offered, the more suspense generated by the quiz show, a fact that was thoroughly exploited by both Bob Dyer and Jack Davey. As an advertising agency representative said in *Broadcasting and Television* in 1955: "Quizzes give the listener at home the excitement of hearing somebody trying to win money or prizes under a certain amount of strain. This represents a kind of vicarious win or loss for the listener, and the home listeners can actively compete against the question and the stage participant. They can find a certain amount of satisfaction and pride in being able to answer questions that the contestant cannot." The other advantage for the sponsor was that his product could be painlessly mentioned, again and again.

There were many variations on the basic

Jack Davey presenting his Club Show *auction quiz segment over the Macquarie network.*

ask-a-contestant-questions-for-money-or-prizes formula. One was the "animal, vegetable and mineral" theme, a variation of which was Jack Davey's *Ask Me Another* in the early 1950s. A panel of experts was required to guess an object in a certain amount of time, by answering twenty questions. (This was once torpedoed by Lulla Fanning, one of those "experts". When the panel had ascertained that the object in question had springs and bodies that moved — it was a watch — she shrieked, "I know! I know! It's a double bed!")

There were "fun" quizzes, such as Bob Dyer's vaudeville-type shows in which contestants had to pay forfeits if they did not answer questions correctly. However, Dyer's most famous quiz was a very "straight" one; *Pick a Box*, which began in 1948. Two contestants had to compete against each other to answer general knowledge questions. The victor had the chance of choosing a cash prize, or of picking the contents of one of a large array of boxes advertising the sponsor's product. This contained either a substantial prize or a booby prize, but the contestant would not know which until he or she had made the choice. Bob Dyer's cry to the audience, "What'll it be, customers? The money or the box?" and the audience's answering shriek, "The box! The box!" echoed over radio and later television for many years. There is more about Bob Dyer and *Pick a Box* later.

Jack Davey was very inventive when it came to thinking of ways in which the sponsor could give money or prizes away to contestants. In 1951 he introduced an auction quiz segment into the *Club Show* based on his own activities as the manager of an auction business. According to *Broadcasting and Television* magazine, the segment went like this: "Suppose Bill Smith, who has an old vacuum cleaner, hears about the auction quiz on 2GB. He knows Davey's reputation, reckons he'll get a good prize plus the opportunity of doubling it, so he rings Jack and makes arrangements to bring it into the show" (which was broadcast from the Macquarie Auditorium). Members of the studio audience had to make bids for the item with Davey as auctioneer and the item went to the highest bidder. The person who was selling the item had to answer quiz questions; if he or she was successful, the money bid was doubled and handed back, and if the contestant failed, the money that had been raised by bidding was given to charity.

By 1955 a McNair and Anderson survey reported in *Broadcasting and Television* found that the quiz was Australia's most popular type of radio show. In that year, ten of the twenty-five national feature programmes produced by the Macquarie network — i.e., 40 per cent — were quizzes. They included Bob Dyer's *Pick a Box*, Jack Davey's *Give It a Go*, the *Brylcreem Show*, the *Ampol Show* and the *Dulux Show*; the *Quiz Kids* and *You're on Clover* with George Foster. The Major network followed a similar pattern; six out of their sixteen national programmes (37 per cent) were quizzes, including the *Kayser Show*, *It Pays to be Funny* and *Cop the Lot* with Bob Dyer.

The main reason why quizzes were so popular on radio (and still are on TV) was listener involvement in the contestant's success. But another very important factor was the personality of the quiz compere. None of the radio quiz men was an automaton. All the major comperes knew that their job consisted of being warm, bright and entertaining, making contestants feel at home and allowing them to shine.

The two who were best in this field were Bob Dyer and Jack Davey.

As well as being warm and charming on air, Dyer and Davey knew all there was to know about chasing ratings. They were rivals, and they exploited their rivalry both in their programmes and in publicity stories and pictures that went on year after

Friends to the end: Bob Dyer and Jack Davey.

year. A well-known and much-reprinted picture shows them hugging each other, apparently demonstrating brotherhood and good fellowship — but each is picking the other's pocket. That photograph summed up quite a lot about the Dyer-Davey relationship. They were friends who went fishing together and saw each other from time to time socially away from the microphone, but each was quick to strike the best deal for himself that he could.

Both being showmen, Bob Dyer and Jack Davey made sure that listeners got a lot of fun out of their "feud". Bob Dyer had elaborate "get Davey" gags, ranging from custard pie throwing to rigged fishing contests. Davey, whose chief weapon was his wit, once made up an impromptu poem about his rival and used it on air:

In this coffin you all admire
Lies the body of Robert Dyer.
With polished lid and handles slick,
Now, there's a decent box to pick!
And if on the Pearly Gates he'll knock,
St Peter will give him an awful shock.
'What, come in here! I'll do my
block . . .
Go to hell and Cop the Lot!'

The differences in personal style between the two men — the Davey inspiration of the moment versus Dyer's more carefully planned routines — carried through to the way in which they ran their quiz shows.

Bob Dyer was warm, but he rarely attempted jokes, and he ran a successful formula show. Consider this extract from a *Pick a Box* show recorded in 1960. "BP *Pick a Box*, with Australia's favourite compere, Bo-ob Dyer!" cries the announcer to a spattering of applause from the studio audience.

After a brief "Thank you, customers", Bob Dyer goes straight into the business of the programme, which is to see whether the contestant can answer questions and win prizes. The first is a rather tentative woman.

"Where was the famous newspaper proprietor Lord Beaverbrook born?" Dyer asks.

"England?"

"No, honey, he was born in Canada," says Bob Dyer, sounding genuinely regretful that she has answered the question incorrectly.

The next question deals with the Christian names of the painter Rubens. When the contestant says, "Peter Paul", Dyer sounds warmly delighted. "That's quite right, and it's not terribly well known, either," he says.

The woman gets four out of the five questions right. "And now, we're going to bring your opponent out of the soundproof room," Bob Dyer announces. His wife Dolly, or "Dol", duly does so, and is warmly thanked. (This tiny detail illustrates another important difference between the Dyer and Davey styles; Jack Davey very rarely credited his assistants on air.)

This second opponent is asked the same questions we have just heard — and now Dyer's professionalism really comes out. Hearing the same things again would be boring, if Dyer didn't increase the tension. He does this by suddenly speaking in a more urgent voice than he used before, thus indirectly emphasising that the first contestant may have a lot to gain — or to lose — if this person beats her.

The second contestant fails to answer two questions, so the first woman is the winner of the round. When Bob Dyer announces this, he makes it sound as though he is almost as happy as she is.

But she can't get her reward until the sponsors have had their turn. "Before we go any further," says Dyer, "let me list the prizes you could win. A set of *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, from which we take all the questions for *Pick a Box*; a Bell and Howell projector; and five hundred and twenty pounds worth of goods from any Woolworths' store.

"Now it's time to pick a box . . ." he adds, and she does so. "And you have won . . . the BP Comprox box!" Applause

again. "What is it, Dol?" Dolly goes into a rather wooden recital of the glories that stem from BP Comprox.

"All right. The BP Comprox box," just in case you, the listener missed the name of the product ... "is worth — forty pounds. Now. What'll it be — the money or the box?"

"The box," says the contestant faintly.

Here we go. Dyer raises his voice to the audience. "What am I bid, customers ... the money or the box?" The question sounds like an urgent appeal to back-benchers in a political party leadership contest.

"The box! The box!" they call obediently.

So she picks the box. "And-you-have-won ..." pause for effect; the audience is hanging on Bob Dyer's every word "... a complete treasure trove of jewellery, fashioned by the House of Hawke!"

Throughout any episode of *Pick a Box*, Bob Dyer's technique as a quizmaster is superb. The show is very well run; the contestant is given very little chance to speak for himself or herself, except to answer the questions. Nevertheless, Bob Dyer as a personality does not dominate the show either; through the warmth of his voice, he really does give the impression that he is there solely to help the contestant win the wonderful prizes he can offer (with due acknowledgment to the sponsor, of course).

Compare this with an extract from a Jack Davey quiz show, recorded in 1954. The difference in style between Davey and Dyer is obvious from the first.

The first contestant is a middle-aged woman, who sounds as though she expects the microphone to attack her physically.

"Now," says Davey authoritatively — he speaks slightly faster than Bob Dyer, and his voice is a light tenor, crisp and warm, "Your first question is ... say yes in three languages."

Pause. "Oui, si, aye," says the woman tentatively, adding apologetically, "Scotch."

The audience laughs. Davey joins in, but not for too long. There is much more "fun" in a Davey show than a Dyer one ... the questions are often set-ups for gags. The fun often comes from the contestants, at least to some extent. For Davey adds: "Oui si aye — say that down in one of the Chinese cafés and you'll get steamed chicken." It's a completely spontaneous gag (for Davey never screened his contestants before he saw them) and he's topped the contestant.

The next one is one Davey from Leichhardt, an inner Sydney suburb. "We're mates, Jack," he announces confidently. Obviously one of the chummy sort.

"Nice to meet a relative," says Jack Davey without great warmth. "Ooh, you're going to hate this question, I think. Name two furlongs as a fraction of one mile."

"Two furlongs a fraction of one mile a quarter son." Mr Davey of Leichhardt is not one to be intimidated by microphones.

"Just a minute, just a minute," interposes Jack Davey. "You're doing all right, but you said it all together. Would you put some punctuation in it?"

"Well," says Mr Davey of Leichhardt, "eight furlongs in a mile ..."

"Yeah, I know how you arrived at it, but you said, 'Two furlongs a quarter of a mile son'. You know? It all went together. I mean, you became my father and gave me the answer at the same time." The audience laughs; this is the wisecracking Jack Davey they have come to hear. "OK. So two furlongs is what fraction of one mile?"

"A quarter."

"That's correct," says Jack Davey. "Well," he adds, "I had to get my money's worth out of him, didn't I?"

Laughter. What Jack Davey says is true. The contestant must learn to speak at the right speed. There is also more than a slight hint that there's only one funny Mr Davey on this stage, and he doesn't come from Leichhardt.

There's no question about it: Jack Davey

was a very funny man — witty, quick. Bob Dyer wasn't particularly amusing. As far as their running of quiz shows is concerned, people remembered the names of the successful contestants on *Pick-a Box*; Barry Jones, Leah Andrew, George Black — not what questions Bob Dyer asked them. Bob Dyer was the quizmaster; that was all. On the other hand, people very seldom remembered the names of the people on the Davey shows, no matter how much money they won. They were much more likely to say, "Did you hear what Jack Davey said last night?" and laugh all over again at something like this:

DAVEY: What's a brazier?
KID: Do I have to answer?
DAVEY: If you want the prize, you do.
KID: Well, I'll probably catch hell when I get home, but it's the thing that holds a woman together.
Shrieks of joy from the audience. Davey gives them about four seconds.
DAVEY: Together? Or apart?

As a quizmaster, Jack Davey liked to give money away — but you suspect that he enjoyed making the contestant laugh (and sometimes scoring off him or her) even more. He usually had to have the last word.

As a radio personality, there was nobody who could touch Jack Davey. But Davey the man — what was he like? That's another story.

11
"Bite off more than you can chew, then chew like buggery"

A few years ago, a very young trainee disc jockey burst into an office of the radio station where he worked, waving a tape box.

"Listen to this!" he beamed. "I found it lying on somebody's desk. This guy is the greatest announcer I've ever heard. I don't know where he is, but we've got to get him. He's fantastic!"

"What's his name?" asked a colleague.

"Davey," answered the young man. "Jack Davey."

At this point an older station executive probably took him gently by the arm and explained that it really wouldn't be possible to get Jack Davey. He had died of lung cancer in 1959.

Davey would probably have enjoyed that story, and he might not have been surprised that he was still admired years after his death. After all, he was probably the most popular personality Australian radio has ever seen. During the twenty-odd years in which he dominated popular radio, he was known as "Mr Radio", "the man with the golden voice", and "Dynamo Davey". Everybody who owned a bakelite box between 1935 and 1959 knew who he was; when Australia's population was eight million or so, Anderson Analysis estimated that two in every five Australians heard a Davey show at least once a week.

Not only were his quiz shows — *Give It a Go, The Dulux Show, Ask Me Another, The Pope Show* and many others — top-rating programmes, but he presented innumerable charity shows, wrote newspaper columns, ran various businesses and prepared and presented commentaries for Movietone newsreels. The number of things he did was enormous, and almost everything he did, he did well. The closest he ever came to enunciating a philosophy of life was probably this: "Bite off more than you can chew, then chew like buggery." He never stopped working.

But people can become very tired of the same face and voice, and Jack Davey risked being overexposed. Why didn't this happen? Why did men, women and children queue for hours to get tickets for his shows? What made women all over Australia get out their knitting needles, pattern books and wool and knit scarves for him if they read in the paper that he had a cold? And when he took part in the Ampol round-Australia car trials during the 1950s, why did people stand in the hot sun in the main streets of towns all over the country, just to catch a glimpse of a white-haired, slightly pudgy man in his forties whizzing past in a cloud of dust?

One answer to this is that his shows were always entertaining and very amusing. Whether he was giving a pound to a school kid who told him what a brazier was, or handing out lavish jackpot prizes, listeners knew that they could rely on him for spontaneous fun. And it was completely unscripted — when a show began, Davey knew as little of what would happen as the contestant did. He relied on the fun in people, adroitly managed by his quicksilver wit, to make his shows entertaining.

As an illustration of his style, take this extract from one of his many "animal, vegetable and mineral" quiz shows in the early 1950s.

"Now, Mr Ross, you're the gentleman who's going on a holiday," he says. His voice is friendly and encouraging. "You know what happens now? They put earmuffs on you, so you can't hear a thing we're talking about, and you have to guess the secret object. I'll tell you, so it makes it nice and easy. What you're looking for is vegetable — er — with a touch of animal in it, but I think for safety's sake we'll tell you that it's animal, really, and is manufactured. That'll make it easy for you." Laughter from the audience.

The secret object is an evening dress worn by a singer on the show.

"Right, Mr Ross," says Davey. "The people know what it is, the listeners at home know what it is — you're entirely in the dark. Ask me."

"Do we wear it?" asks a timid-sounding Mr Ross.

Sounding aggrieved, Davey says: "Not so much of this 'we' business." Laughter. "I mean, I've been blamed for a lot of things, but . . ."

Mr Ross twigs. "Is it something worn by the ladies?"

"Right."

"Is it made of rubber?"

Shrieks of laughter from the audience. "I see you're still thinking of my figure," says Davey, chuckling. "No, try again. . ."

It's all very easy, relaxed.

Though Jack Davey was never at a loss for something to say, responding quickly to contestants, his technique didn't just involve being ready with a smart quip at all times. People who do that sound cold, and Davey never did. He always gave the impression that he was on side with his contestants in quiz shows. When people listened, they felt that he genuinely wanted them to win the big money, to get the answers that would give them the jackpots. Lew Wright, Davey's biographer and sometime personal assistant, says:

An old lady appeared on a programme and Jack asked her what colour a galah was. She said: 'It's one of those white things with a sulphur crest.' Jack looked into the control room and asked the judges, 'Will you pass that!' and they all shook their heads very solemnly. 'Sack all those judges,' he said. 'Mrs Jones is eighty-three. She must *know what a galah is!'*

This sort of thing happened again and again. Davey's generosity with contestants, in fact, occasionally got him into trouble. "A lot of the sponsors would get quite upset," says Benny Coombes, who was the financial controller of the Macquarie network. "He'd give away money because he liked the contestant. There might be a lot at stake, and a person would be fiddling around the edges of the answer somewhere; Jack sometimes let him win."

Add that sympathy to the sort of wit that cannot let a potential gag line go, and it's easy to understand why Davey's tongue sometimes ran away with him. He occasionally fell foul of the station censors.

"You have to remember that at the time he was on air, censorship was very strict," says Lew Wright.

I remember that once a woman got very close to a jackpot answer worth about four thousand pounds, and it had to do with the largest nugget of gold ever found

Jack Davey's favourite photograph of himself, taken in 1948.

in Australia. She kept saying that gold was discovered in such and such a place, but she didn't quite get the right answer, even with a lot of prompting. Jack said: 'Look, you're on the right track, but I want a bit more from you. Give the answer a twist.'

She couldn't, so he said, 'I'll tell you what I'll do. How long have you been married?'

'About eighteen months,' she said.

Jack said, 'OK. Tell me what you said to your husband as he carried you across the threshold on your wedding night, and that'll do.'

'Ooh,' said the woman. 'That's a hard one.'

Jack yelled, 'Give her the money!'

That's a show that never got to air!

The jokes, the wit — they were part of Davey's personality, on and off stage. One evening he was holding a script conference in his office at 29 Bligh Street, Sydney, and he walked across to a window that overlooked one of the neighbouring offices. He saw a man and a woman kissing each other with great enthusiasm, so he established where the office was, found out its phone number and waited. As soon as he saw that the couple had progressed to the desk, he rang the number. When a scared male voice answered, Davey put on his most ringing, stentorian voice and said, "God is watching!"

No personality on radio or television, before or since, has been able to generate such laughter on air as Davey did. He was also a product of his time. He was the most glamorous personality of the 1940s and the 1950s — and glamour then meant not only having a lot of money (in his final year Jack Davey earned the then staggering sum of £28,000 from his four weekly shows on the Macquarie network alone) but splashing it around. For many people in the 1950s, a car was a luxury, something that had to be taken care of. The advertisements for motor oil in the late 1940s and early 1950s described "your car" as "an investment". Though people in Australia were more prosperous than ever before, they still remembered the Depression and rarely threw money around.

Against this background was Australia's highest paid radio star, a man who spent huge amounts on cars, clothes, lobster dinners at Romano's or Club Enchantment; a man who owned a luxury cabin cruiser on which he entertained Nat King Cole, Liberace and the other top show business people of the time; a man who owned more suits, shirts, ties and watches than he could possibly have needed. This was glamour. This was the high life — and people all over Australia no doubt sighed enviously as they read about Jack Davey, the man who accepted all this as his due. The papers printed dozens of photographs showing him surrounded by beautiful women in clubs; a typical shot shows him smearing suntan oil on the back of Sabrina, an English model with the most amazing mammary development ever seen in those pre-cortisone days.

It was all part of the "image" at a time when this use of the word was not part of the language. You rarely see photographs of Davey sitting around drinking a beer with the blokes; that wasn't his job. All the splashy spending went with being A Star. In advertising and publicity terms quite a lot of it was legitimate; it was what people and sponsors expected. But the way in which Davey handled money, or rather failed to handle it, gives an illuminating insight into his character.

For one thing, he often seemed to hand it out lavishly to whomever happened to be passing. This wasn't just a stunt; in many ways Jack Davey was a generous man. He once gave a newsboy five pounds for a paper because the kid had no shoes or socks. He spent almost five hundred pounds on blankets for a hospital and lavishly tipped some boys from an orphanage to deliver them. Once in Tasmania, he gave a waiter eighty pounds for telling him the time because the man said that he and his wife were expecting their

first child. "Buy your son a watch," Davey said. "Then when I ask him the time, he'll be able to tell me."

It's all rather like a little boy giving away sweets; look, I've got plenty, why don't you have some, too? Davey liked making people happy, and, if money was all it took to do that, he gave it.

But it wasn't entirely a case of being Lord Bountiful. Money was for spending, spending, spending, all the time. "It is difficult to describe his attitude to money and still convey a sense of realism," says Lew Wright, one of whose jobs as Davey's personal assistant involved trying to keep tabs on the money he spent. In his book *The Great Jack Davey*, he continues: "In money matters, I fought a lone and losing battle. The goal I set was not the accumulation of vast wealth, nor even (more commendable) the achievement of some measure of monetary independence. My prime objective was to get him to live within his enormous income. He had absolutely no idea at any time whether he had £1 or £1000 in the bank, but he always spent as though he had £10,000."

Easy come, easy go.

Willie Fennell tells a story that illustrates the Davey attitude to money and what it could buy.

Jack once said to me: 'Will, I'm going to drive up to Surfers Paradise. Do you want to come up for a run? Beautiful weather, and we can have a swim up there.' He used to do a lot of work for the oil companies, and he had a little flat above one of the Ampol service stations on the coast.

'Before we go,' he said, 'I've got to go and see the general manager at Macquarie because I'm in debt again.'

So I sat outside the office while he went in and saw the big boss and when he came out we got into his car and he said: 'Oh, Jesus, I didn't think it was that bad again. I'm thirty thousand quid in debt. You know they scrubbed off my last thirty thousand!' And Macquarie had, you know. They paid off thirty thousand pounds for Jack to gamblers who would have bashed him up in a dark alley sometime, because he was the star of the whole network. They paid it off and it cost Jack nothing, but they said, 'No more gambling'.

Anyway, there we were. Before he knew it, he was back in for thirty thousand. (If I can digress for a moment, he got that second thirty thousand on two conditions . . . one was that he signed himself to the Macquarie network for the term of his natural life, and the other was that he insured his own life for thirty thousand. So when he died, at least Macquarie got their money back.)

But on this day, when he was in debt again, we got into his car, which was only about a year old, and we started to drive up William Street towards Sydney's eastern suburbs.

'Jack,' I said, 'I thought we were going north.'

'I know,' he replied, 'but I want you to look at something before we go.'

He pulled up outside a new car showroom and we looked at a brand new Packard, which was three thousand pounds, a huge price for a car in those days. You could get a decent one for five hundred then.

'What do you think of that?' he asked me. 'Beautiful, isn't it?'

Well, he bought it. He left his own car there as a deposit, signed something, and we got into the new Packard and started driving up towards Queensland.

We got about twenty miles along the Pacific Highway before I was game to ask the question. 'Jack, are you serious? You've just bought this?'

'Yeah,' he said. 'What's wrong? Don't you like it?'

'Jack, it's wonderful — but I just don't understand you. I don't get it. First you take me to Macquarie, then you tell me that you owe them thirty thousand pounds and what's going to happen. Then you go up William Street and buy a car

for three thousand quid and we're off for a holiday at Surfers. I don't get it.'

Jack looked at me and said: 'Will, I thought you'd understand, mate. Look. Thirty thousand, thirty-three thousand . . . what's the bloody difference?'

That was Jack!

He was a compulsive worker, as well as a compulsive spender. In all his shows everything had to be right, and he did things at enormous speed. His firecracker brilliance illuminated every aspect of the way he worked. Harry Griffiths remembers him preparing his commentaries for Movietone cinema newsreels.

He had great powers of concentration and a mind like a razor. He always wrote his scripts by hand and, if he was doing a comedy script, he'd put a ruler on the paper and say, 'There has to be a laugh in every inch of this'. If there weren't enough jokes, he'd go back over the script and put them in.

I ask you, how many people could have done that? There are people in advertising agencies who think they're creative. Jack could eat them. Eat them!

But there was much more than instinctive brilliance to Davey's working method. He never stopped thinking about his work, evaluating his shows, finding ways to make them better. And his output was nothing short of staggering. In 1958 "personalities" in England and America set themselves thirty-nine shows a year. In his book, Lew Wright added up the number of programmes Jack Davey did that year: five weekly half-hour shows for the sponsors Ampol, Dulux, Singer and Samuel Taylor totalled 260. There were also 52 newsreels (one a week for Movietone), two charity shows per week (104), five radio breakfast shows a week (260) and six short films. That makes a total of 682. And towards the end of the year he had to double up, recording shows in advance to be broadcast over the Christmas break.

Not surprisingly, Jack Davey gave himself only four hours' sleep a night. He said he couldn't afford any more, and if it was enough for Napoleon, it should be enough for him. For, like Napoleon, he had an empire to hold together. He studied ratings very keenly indeed. If somebody else had a show in the top five, he would worry about the problem and think of ways to improve what he was doing. Were the quiz questions too easy? Too hard? What prizes had been won? What hadn't? Why?

He had to be top; he had to be the biggest and the best. Nobody else could be allowed to "creep into his crypt", as he said. And he gave very little on-air credit to the Macquarie team who helped him, though he was always very generous to them in other ways, spending money on them, giving them valuable presents. A colleague has said that "working for Jack Davey was like being a deck hand on the *Bounty*."

After recording a series of shows in front of a studio audience, he always held postmortems with his staff. After hours of work, everybody was exhausted . . . but these sessions were necessary. In *The Great Jack Davey*, Lew Wright describes what these were like.

He'd notice delays in timing, contestants in the wrong order; if there was somebody particularly bright, the show might finish with him. But a lot of that could be faked on the tape by moving that person from the first position in the show to the last. Over supper in his suite he analysed the completed presentation, ironed out defects and heard suggestions.

JD (To secretary, Dell): *There's a pause in the show while you're getting the next contestant. It leaves me like a shag on a rock.*

DELL: It shouldn't, boss, because as the last contestant leaves, I give you a card with the new jackpot and subject on it. Can you fill in with that?

JD: Well, perhaps I could, but we might be able to cut the gap altogether . . . I think I've got it. If Dell brings the next contestant to her table and brings the

cards at the same time, the one trip will be covered by applause. That means you'll have to be right on your toes, Dell, and get ready as I ask the last question. Right!

. . . Long after a programme had been broadcast, he continued to work on it, arriving at decisions about it only after he had played tape-recordings right through the night. Stopwatch by his side, the playback of tapes went on and on. I estimate that he spent 100 hours of his own time to get [one show] *to the point where he was happy with it.*

As if doing all that work wasn't enough, Jack Davey took part in round-Australia car trials. To participate in the Ampol trial of 1956 he had to prerecord forty-five shows. But for Davey, it was worth the work.

Brian White recalls that trip.

I travelled initially in a small truck that followed Davey around, and I ended up with tremendous admiration for him; I hadn't felt that before, except for him as a radio personality. I didn't idolise him because he wasn't a particularly likeable man up close, but one of the things you constantly heard about him was that he only drove through the towns and that his co-driver did all the rest.

I saw that Davey did all the driving until he almost killed himself. He drove every inch of the way that he possibly could. He had back trouble and, by the time he was halfway round the country, he was half-crippled. But he still did it.

"Bite off more than you can chew" . . .

And Davey was not well, not for many years. Benny Coombes says, "It was all a terrific strain on him. When he got to the end of his life, it was sometimes half an hour before we could get him on stage. He had to push himself. Just think of the nervous strain of knowing he was going to be listened to by three or four million people! He had to do a good job, and he mostly did."

He suffered for years from a back problem called spondylitis, which was repeatedly misdiagnosed as a heart ailment. Lew Wright says that part of his own job was to stand offstage when Davey was performing with amyl nitrate in little ampoules, which he gave him to relieve the pain. "When he went off stage to get the amyl nitrate," says Wright, "people often assumed that he was having a little nip of scotch somewhere. But he wasn't. He never drank while he was working."

At the end of his life, when he might or might not have known he had cancer, he took on even more work in a medium he didn't know: television. Here he miscalculated. His charity shows, quizzes and personal appearances were spontaneous in style; he was not nearly so good when he presented scripted material. "He was always best when he stuck to what he did better than anybody — spontaneous comedy," says Willie Fennell. "Once he tried to do something with the Jack Benny 'freeze' . . . you know, the long pause before the gag line. It wasn't him."

This might have been why Jack Davey did so much less well on television than his rival, Bob Dyer, or than many other people. When television first came in, the medium's lack of spontaneity was all wrong for Davey. Lew Wright explains:

He didn't do well in television and many people think it was because of his health, but it wasn't. Throughout his radio career, he had always had control of his shows. He could say to people, 'If anything goes wrong, we can cut it out of the tape.' But once he got to television, half an hour's worth of film, three cameras and lighting and studio facilities had to be paid for. It was all very expensive and he couldn't guarantee that nothing would go wrong and he'd be able to fix it. If anything did go wrong, that was money down the drain. So his television shows lost the spontaneity and instant rapport that his radio shows had always had, and a lot of fun. He was torn between two ways of working — one in a

new medium — and nobody was much help to him, really.

"Jack was slaughtered by television," adds Benny Coombes.

The first producer he worked with turned out to be very difficult. He kept saying, 'You can't show a microphone in a television show', and chalked a little circle on the stage; Jack had to stand within it. The competitor in the Pressure Pak quiz show he was doing had to stand in another circle. I kept saying: 'I've been to the States, and I know they're using microphones.' But no, this bloke knew all the answers.

Then Jack didn't look good. There was a pinspot above him which shone on the top of his bald head and reflected on the television set. It took four episodes to get them to move it.

You see, Jack went into television before anybody really knew what it was about. And also he was very sick at the time, which we didn't realise.

Did he ever relax? Well, say his former colleagues, it depends what you mean by relaxation. Certainly, Jack Davey's off-stage time did not include a great deal of staring into space. He must have had introspective moments, but nobody was around to witness them, apparently.

"One word that sums up Jack?" says Lew Wright. "People. He loved them, and they loved him. He had to be surrounded all the time."

Benny Coombes adds:

He had to have them around afterwards because if he finished his show at ten at night, he would have been keyed-up for hours to get the right feeling and to do the show properly. Perhaps for two hours he had been warming up the audience, doing the show, having a break, warming up the audience, doing another show, and when it was all over and the audience went out, that was it. So Jack would go and find some friends and have a late supper, or go to Thommo's or another gambling house to play cards or two-up. He didn't get drunk much.

As the most glamorous radio star in Australia, Jack Davey had thousands of "friends"; backslappers, contacts. "Most people in his position do," says Benny Coombes. "But he was a very private man. Nobody got really close to him. He never talked about his problems." The people at the other end of the radio sets listening to him, of course, would not have realised that he had any. Like his "personal friends", they were kept at a distance.

Jack Davey married and divorced twice. "He was a gentleman," says Benny Coombes. "Always very polite, always very nice and courtly to women. He was a sucker for them, and they appreciated him."

Occasionally Davey took advantage of his position as far as women were concerned. Lew Wright recalls:

We were going by plane to Melbourne and Jack couldn't sit still, even for an hour and a quarter. He was working on a show, tapping away on the typewriter.

'What do you think of this, Lew!' he asked, passing me the sheet.

I said I thought it was too long getting to the punchline. He had a couple more goes which weren't successful and I eventually said, 'Look, Jack, why don't you just sit down and relax! Look at those two hostesses.' And they were good sorts, too; one blonde and one brunette.

'You won't find a more attractive pair of lasses anywhere,' I said.

He glanced down the aisle and said, 'Mm, good legs, too. Now, what about this!' and another piece of paper went into the typewriter.

We got to Melbourne and did the shows; I was with him the whole time. After we finished, he said, 'No post-mortem tonight, kids,' to the unit. 'But,'

Illness and overwork had dramatically changed Jack Davey's appearance by the late 1950s.

and he waved a finger at me, 'I want you.'

I couldn't imagine what I'd done. Everybody was sober, all the mikes had been tested, all the giveaway goods were there, nobody had missed the plane . . .

Anyway, I went along to his suite, and a very gruff Davey voice said, 'Come in'. I did, thinking: 'This is the sack for sure.'

Guess who was there in pyjamas! The two hostesses from the plane! God knows how he got them there. I'd sat beside him the whole way, no note had passed hands, and he could hardly make a telephone call — and how do you contact a pair of hosties just arrived in Melbourne, anyway!

About three days before he died, Jack said to me: 'I promised you that one day I'd tell you about the two hostesses.'

'Oh, yes!' I said.

'Well, I've decided not to. It'll give you something to think about after I'm dead!'

And it has. I'm still wondering how he got hold of those girls!

Nevertheless, Davey's colleagues agree that he wasn't really a playboy type. Benny Coombes, whose comments are echoed by others, says, "He certainly wasn't a womaniser. In fact, I got the impression that he wasn't greatly interested in women. He was normal, of course, but it seemed to me that, particularly in the last years of his life, he wanted companionship from women. After he divorced his second wife, one young woman was always there. She went out with him after he had finished his shows. Wherever he wanted to go. I really think he only wanted a companionable woman. And I never heard him talk about having children."

The tension under which Jack Davey worked — and played, as much as he did play — grew and grew. To get through all he wanted to do, he never stopped "chewing like buggery". And this took its toll in emotional terms, as well as on his health. At least twice Jack Davey tried to commit suicide. Lew Wright was with him when he made the second attempt.

I think he just got more and more depressed. The feeling was caused by lots of things; one was a girl he was having trouble with and the other was just work; a result of his total exhaustion. There must have been times when he said to himself: 'Look, I'm slaving my guts out, and where do I go from here!'

One night he was just talking to us on the kerb, after he'd been guest of honour at a ball. He suddenly said, 'Bugger it all' and hopped in front of a taxi. The vigilance of the taxi driver was the only thing that saved him; he saw Jack and swerved so much that he almost turned the taxi inside out.

He stopped further down the road. I followed him and said, 'Sorry for your trouble.'

He said, 'What's going on!' and looked up the road. He said, 'Isn't that Jack Davey!'

'A lot of people think that,' I said, slipping him a fiver.

And that was that. I put the five pounds on the expense account. When Jack saw it, he said, 'What's that for!' I told him it was a tip for a taxi driver. Jack said, 'Nothing in the papers!'

'No.'

'Taxi driver right!' he asked.

'He's sweet,' I said. 'It's all OK.'

During the 1950s Jack Davey's health became worse and worse. He was in hospital no fewer than nine times in seven years, being treated for his back complaint, having his heart checked. He grew thinner and thinner, tenser and tenser — and took no notice when doctors told him to give up cigarettes. He had been smoking at least fifty a day for years. Eventually, in 1959 when he was forty-nine years old, they caught up with him.

Benny Coombes says:

I'll never forget one day that three or four of us had lunch with him in a restaurant in Martin Place. The Macquarie network

was sending him to America for a trip, and this was a sort of farewell.

He was a bit late and when he came in he told us he'd been to see a doctor about an X-ray he'd had done of his lung. He'd coughed a lot for years and, about a fortnight before the lunch, I knew he had been occasionally coughing blood. I knew about this, but didn't tie it to his cigarette smoking, thinking he had an ulcer. But he told us very calmly that the doctors had said he had cancer, the fast-growing kind.

I asked him whether he thought he should go to the States. He looked surprised and said, 'Definitely'. He really didn't say much more. Just put on a big front. As far as he was concerned, the subject was closed.

Jack Davey still maintained a bright, chatty exterior. "I think he knew he didn't have much time left when he drove in the last Ampol trial in 1957," says Willie Fennell. "He kept it from everybody, and he did something that a sparkling eighteen-year-old wouldn't have tackled."

If Jack Davey actually confided his feelings about his approaching death and about the life he led to anybody, that person isn't telling. And this was his style right up to his death. Lew Wright visited him in hospital.

He said: 'How'd I finish, Lousy?' He always called me that if he thought I was clutching the purse strings too tightly; otherwise it was Lewsy.

'You finished £3750 in front,' I told him.

'Gee, you're lousy,' he said. 'How could you let that happen to me?'

I said: 'Jack, you don't owe a penny in the world.'

'That part's good,' he said. 'I like that part, but what about the money? Think of all the television sets I could have bought for the old ladies' home.'

Then he went to sleep. He looked terrible — his lips were chipped and cracked because St Vincents Hospital knew there was no hope that he'd recover and were giving him morphine. They weren't worried about him becoming addicted.

I walked up to the chemist's shop and got a little elevenpenny tube of lanolin. I went back to the hospital, up to his room, and put some on my finger. I was rubbing it on his lips when he woke up and said: 'That'll be you, Lousy. You're not fooling me. You're just trying to get sweet over that £3750 I couldn't spend.'

That £3750 I couldn't spend . . . that phrase gives a very clear indication of Davey's character. A man who earned hundreds of thousands of pounds in his lifetime, a man who knew his own value to the last pound and who had no compunction in ditching his current employers if he could have got a better deal elsewhere, left less than £4000 pounds behind. Where had it all gone? There are no Jack Davey memorial funds, no Jack Davey scholarships — not even a house that he owned. No family of his own. Nothing, except a steady stream of pound notes that left his hands as rapidly as did the pages of a script when he had finished with it. That was that; on with the next thing.

Jack Davey died on 14 October 1959. Willie Fennell says:

Jack's funeral was bigger than any political funeral in this country. I drove in the cortege, and it was just unbelievable. The whole of Australia mourned Davey. That funeral had every workman on the road putting down his pick and shovel as we went past on the way to St Mary's Cathedral.

You won't believe this bit. I hardly could myself. Fans kept racing up to our car and saying, 'Willie! Dick!' (Dick Bentley was there too), 'could we have your autograph?' and pushing and jostling us. We just said: 'Oh, please, not today.'

What sort of man was Jack Davey? A complex person? Yes, certainly. A superb professional? Undoubtedly; he was prob-

ably one of the best in his particular field — spontaneous radio comedy — in the world. Nobody else could be so funny on the spur of the moment — making up instant limericks, puns, jokes about whatever caught his attention at the time. Lovable? No, probably not. He was too conscious of his own worth; his ego was too driving. He always, always had to be on top. Even in his darkest moments he couldn't let down his guard to show anybody how he really felt, though he could genuinely and readily sympathise with other people, and often helped them.

He was a small boy who gave away money as though it were sweets; he had too many and other people should have some too. But, unlike a small child, he does not appear to have cried on anybody's shoulder, or to have complained about his own life. A very reserved man, with few real friends.

His life was short: like a firecracker, he flared across the sky — and then stopped. But he didn't fizzle out, so he died in the way he wanted to.

His career — and his emotional life — seem from this distance to have had little depth. One colleague actually used the word "shallow" in describing him, though he quickly changed what he said... it's not clear whether this was through loyalty to a superb professional or whether, on reflection, he thought the word inappropriate.

But, really, in the end, does it matter what sort of man Jack Davey might have been? What mattered to him, the most important thing in his life, was being the top radio personality in Australia. Financially irresponsible, unpredictable, living for every day... and truly professional. Most of the people who remember him — whether as a colleague, a rival or as a personality whose shows they never missed on radio — agree that he was one of the funniest and best radio personalities and performers that Australia has ever known.

For Jack Davey himself, that was probably enough.

12
Truly rural

No group of Australians used the bakelite box for more practical purposes than the people scattered across the country outside the major cities. With neighbours separated by miles and miles of road, with paddocks often stretching out to the heat-shimmering horizon on either side, keeping in touch with the community nerve centre was vital. Even more than the local newspapers, the local radio station told country people what was happening in the district. Nothing could match it when primary producers wanted to find out current prices for stock, note the latest weather patterns that would help plan the sowing or harvesting of crops, or be told of the newest pest control systems or improvements in farming equipment. "The broadcasting of local market reports on the night preceding sales makes the station especially valuable to farmers and graziers, particularly those without telephones," wrote a listener to 2QN Deniliquin in 1944, when it looked as though the station was about to close through lack of money. (Fortunately, it didn't.)

Getting this sort of information from the local station sometimes took the place of talking with your mates down at the pub; it was a great boon when the local watering hole might be 200 miles away. For isolated women, too, radio took the place of a good gossip over the back fence, which might have been a considerable distance from the main house on the property. In 1957 a member of the Victorian Country Women's Association wrote to *Broadcasting and Television* magazine that "CWA sessions give news of branch activities and help members of the smaller or more distant branches to keep in touch with central doings . . . advertising from local shops helps the housewife, especially when detailed mail and phone orders are offered. Local advertising with fashion talks, information about hand beauty care, foot comfort and other titbits mean a lot to the isolated woman . . . Wedding reports are particularly interesting, especially if a description of the bride and wedding party is given."

Because radio stations in country centres catered so personally for the needs of the district, they had a completely different sound from that of the brisker stations in Melbourne or Sydney. Although country stations took news bulletins and national programmes from the networks , they concentrated on local material — and the broadcasting style was completely different. (It still is; when I was on Norfolk Island in 1971, I heard the local announcer say, "We were going to bring you a selection of music by the Russian composer Tchaikovsky, but the cat got the record, so here's some Chopin.")

The pace was much slower, for one thing, and the emphasis on international news much less. After all, what did the Suez crisis of 1956 matter to a farmer compared to the price his stock was likely to fetch at the markets the next day? A local radio talent show, featuring your neighbour's little girl singing "Home, Sweet Home" probably meant more to local listeners than a Jack Davey quiz

show, enjoyable though the latter undoubtedly was. Unless you happened to see Jack Davey barrelling through your town on a round-Australia car trial, or unless he came to the local town or centre to do a show, he was a remote, glamorous figure. He didn't have nearly the personal relevance of one of the kids from the local school whom your family knew. As for advertisements, they were much longer and more detailed. For instance, city folk wouldn't have given a damn about what was in a sheep dip. They would hardly have heard of the stuff, anyway, but a slow and loving enumeration of its benefits and ingredients was extremely useful to the farmer who might be considering a change of brand.

There were also city-based programmes that catered to country listeners. Most of these were made by the ABC; rarely did the commercial networks produce sessions specifically for people outside the cities, although they sold them throughout Australia. Apart from *Blue Hills*, which dealt with people on the land, serials were usually set in fictitious towns or cities. "Service" sessions were locally made and aired, with the honourable exception of the ABC's *Hospital Half Hour* (later *Hospital Hour*). This ran every morning for years and was broadcast all over Australia; each programme concentrated on a particular hospital, either in the country or the city. The smooth-voiced compere, Garry Ord, might say something like: "It is a small hospital, built in 1944, with a hundred beds, and it is situated in the kauri forests many miles south of Perth . . ." and so on, with details about the administrative staff and its facilities, before requested songs were played for patients and their families.

On at least one occasion, country radio stations have played a vital part in telling people about an event of national interest. In 1955 the Hunter River Valley suffered the worst floods in its history. The newsreel footage is still dramatic and poignant almost thirty years later; groups of people were huddled, shivering in the rain, on the tin roofs of houses and sheds, bloated carcasses of livestock were left in the tops of trees with the water inexorably flowing past. During the emergency, twelve radio stations in the district banded together in a network, directing rescue operations (including the organisation of Army ducks to pick up stranded people), passing on urgent messages to relatives elsewhere, and indicating where people could pick up food supplies for themselves, as well as telling farmers how they could receive fodder for the cattle. They also organised appeals for the families who found themselves in desperate straits as a result of the floods; quantities of money and goods, including blankets, clothes and shovels came in as a result.

The Hunter Valley floods demonstrated community service radio at its best. No other communication medium would have enabled help to be given to distressed people as quickly.

In the normal course of events, collecting the information broadcast over country radio stations usually meant travelling around the district. By the 1950s, outside broadcast vehicles were important pieces of equipment for commercial stations outside the major urban centres. These were usually small panel vans or lorries with recorders and transmitting equipment crammed into the back — and sturdy axles and springs, for a technician and broadcaster often had to jolt over appalling roads in all sorts of weather conditions to cover events from picnic races to a CWA ball in an outlying community hall. They would transmit their reports back to the central station on landline or record them for later broadcast to listeners in the area.

These vans, of course, solved the long-standing problem of covering major district events. But in the early days, long before landlines and telephones were in widespread use, and when there were far fewer country stations, at least two groups of broadcasters brought radio to far-flung parts of the country — by means of mobile

radio stations.

The first of these was known as the Great White Train. It travelled over New South Wales in 1925 and 1926, and in that twelve months it visited over 100 towns. Wherever it stopped, AWA engineers leaped out, put up a mast and an aerial and, lo, station 2XT was in business.

The second example is even more interesting. From 1931 until 1935 station 3YB, consisting of two motorbuses and later a railway carriage, travelled Victorian country districts. The idea came from one Jack Young, whose home town was Ballarat (hence the "YB" call sign). He was a manufacturer of tractors and agricultural machinery who wanted to take some sort of mobile apparatus around country districts to advertise his products. An enterprising chap named Vic Dinenny picked up the idea, recognising that such a station would have great possibilities for general broadcasting in country areas where reception was generally poor. He applied for a licence, which was granted on the proviso that 3YB would not operate closer than thirty miles from any fixed station.

So travelling station 3YB was born. It consisted of two motorbuses painted red and gold; one contained the transmitter and the other had the studio and living accommodation for the technician, the maintenance man and Vic Dinenny himself; he filled the roles of advertising salesman, copywriter and announcer. A trailer behind carried the power plant.

When 3YB reached a centre, the technician, Bert Aldridge, set up the transmitter and mast while Dinenny called on the local businessmen in the district to sell advertising. After he had done this he wrote his copy, preparing a programme of district announcements, advertisements, music and chat and the station went to air. It broadcast from 6 to 10.30 pm.

The station might stay in any one town for up to fourteen days. Dinenny always let potential advertisers know his itinerary, assuring them that "sessions missed by travelling, adverse weather or any such unforeseen circumstances will be made up by the duplication of announcements or by extra sessions at the completion of the stated itinerary until the deficiency is covered". The clients were generally happy, and 3YB drew crowds wherever it went.

After about a year, Dinenny and Aldridge found the process of setting up, dismantling and reassembling the unit cumbersome, so they applied to the Victorian Railways for a railway carriage. The Railways Commissioner turned up trumps — he let them have a coach that had been used by George V when he visited Australia as Duke of York. This magnificent royal vehicle was quickly turned to practical use. It housed the transmitter room, the studio and living accommodation, while the masts, hinged to the top of the carriage, were put up and lowered when necessary.

3YB continued its majestic travels over Victorian country tracks for another three years. However, by 1935, more and more commercial licences were being granted for local stations; 3YB's usefulness was at an end, so it was dismantled. (Station 3YB is now immobile at Warrnambool.) But it was a noble and literal illustration of how radio can be brought to the people.

• • •

Up to the end of World War II, the Sydney-based ABC, mindful of its charter's responsibility to serve all sections of the community, presented occasional rural or agricultural talks under the auspices of the Department of Agriculture. Farmers had no real national session, until a stocky, pugnacious redhead named John Douglass happened along.

Douglass, a graduate of the Hawkesbury Agricultural College, had specialised in the large-scale growing of fruit and vegetables for canning. Charles Moses, who met him in 1933 when both men were in their early thirties, says, "I found it quite exciting to talk to a man who was able to speak of

thousands of acres of vegetables, grown on a big scale and being taken across Australia in refrigerated trains. I'd never dreamed of that, because I always thought of vegetables being grown in people's back gardens. This was something entirely new."

During the war Douglass was put in charge of vegetable growing not only for the Australian Army, but also for the Americans in the Pacific. He encouraged farmers to put down hundreds of acres of vegetables, including asparagus. "I think he had quite a lot to do with Edgell's developing the way they did here," says Moses, who adds:

Mr Douglass travelled extensively during the war, including to Russia and to the USA, and he realised that farm broadcasting was very important in the United States. He told me that the Canadian Broadcasting Commission had a country hour, and convinced me that the ABC should have a rural department that would provide regular broadcasts for farmers. So he became the ABC's first Director of Rural Broadcasts in 1947.

It all sounds very smooth and civilised; a decision made, handshakes and smiles all round. But setting up the rural department wasn't so simple. For one thing, certain ABC officers didn't see the necessity for having a rural department at all. John Douglass, whose pugnacity does not seem to have decreased with the years, says:

The ABC's never had much time for rural broadcasting. They think that poofters going into drama are much more important than programmes for farmers. I had a few battles with the ABC's Chairman, Dr Boyer. Mad on cattle, he was. 'Look,' I said, 'there are 30,000 primary producers in the Sydney area alone.'

'Oh, yes,' he said, 'but they're only tin-shed farmers.'

Tin-shed farmers! I said to him: 'Everybody's interested in agriculture. You have to eat *every day, don't you!'*

Granted — and Douglass got his department. But his battles were not over.

I started out with no budget, no time on air and no staff. When they asked me what time I wanted for a country hour programme, I said, 'Midday'.

'But,' they said, 'nobody's listening at midday.'

'Nobody in the ABC's listening at midday,' I told them, 'because you're all out having your long lunches. But the farmers who start work early come in from the farm, and they're ready to listen at about then.'

So I got the Country Hour *going.*

I got the three essential features of rural broadcasting: weather reports with an agricultural slant, market reports for regional listeners and up-to-date information about the scientific aspects of farming.

The *Country Hour* started broadcasting from Sydney. "The information was too thinly spread," says Douglass. "I pointed out that Tasmanian farmers weren't terribly interested in knowing how to grow bananas, for instance."

The main part of the programme was then organised on a national basis, with special times set aside for state and regional segments. A typical rundown — in a 1957 programme guide — was: introduction and music; a short agricultural talk or interview of general interest ("the District Horticultural Advisor at Renmark, South Australia, Mr R. R. Cant, will speak about US irrigation methods"), followed by more music, news items of interest to agriculturalists, state and interstate market reports and a regional weather report.

Douglass knew exactly the sort of broadcaster he wanted to present the *Country Hour*.

I wanted to use people with Aussie voices. I got farmers, fruit growers. Went

John Douglass.

out and found them; the real blokes. Then I chatted to blokes who worked for the Department of Agriculture in the various states. They started to feed us information in no time.

I got some magnificent blokes, really magnificent! But then sometimes they went on leave and all I could get were standard ABC announcers, who were all ex-BBC types. Poms. Didn't even know how to read a market report. I'll never forget one bloke who said, 'The rainfall at Albury is 320 inches, and at Waggy Waggy. . . ' and another marvellous faux pas when a bloke talked about 'ex-bred ee-wees'. Bloody hopeless, they were.

John Douglass, a tireless and highly efficient organiser, knew the value of getting out and finding the best local sources possible for rural information, as well as the best blokes to present it. He says:

We employed about sixty or seventy rural officers in the end, all over Australia. I was the only senior officer in the ABC who had been to every regional station in Australia.

All my blokes were keen. I told them not to use those leaflets put out by the Department of Agriculture; all the information they gave on air had to be checked first hand. In a market report, say, they had to go to the cattle markets or the fruit markets, so they could say, 'I saw Bill Smith's Aberdeen Angus. . . ' and part of their job was to ring up the regional officers of the Agricultural Department, who would say: 'Now, you'd better tell your listeners that this is the last week they can plant Federation wheat.' Or else: 'Codlin moths are starting to hatch out; fruit farmers had better start spraying.' All the information had to be up to date, right up to the minute.

One of the longest-serving ABC rural officers is Bob Logan, who is now based in Tamworth. Before he joined the ABC in 1957, he had had no broadcasting ambitions at all; he spent his early adulthood farming in the Lockyer Valley near Brisbane. Then he saw an advertisement for a rural officer in the Brisbane paper. "I mentioned to my mother that this seemed a good sort of job," he says, "and perhaps I'd be more secure there, the way farming was going. She said: 'What do you want to work for the ABC for? They're all mad!' "

Bob Logan's interview for the position seems to bear out John Douglass's contention that the ABC wasn't terribly interested in rural broadcasting. Apparently the interview panel didn't have a rural representative because the state rural supervisor was off sick. "One of the senior officers asked a colleague, 'What was that rural question about pommy fruit?' " recalls Logan. "That was the extent of the questioning on rural issues!"

Bob Logan was appointed to the Brisbane office, but later he went to the regional office further west in Toowoomba.

You know, I still remember the first regional broadcast I did. I went up on a Sunday afternoon and booked into a third-rate pub, then I had the evening meal with the bloke who was going to show me the ropes. We went into the studio and he said, 'You use this microphone and that fader. . . there's the controls', and I said, 'Yeah', because I thought he'd be there with me in the studio the following morning and I'd watch him and have the next day to learn.

I got down to the studio the next day after a fairly sleepless night on an uncomfortable old iron pub bed.

'Righto,' the bloke said, 'into the chair.'

'Fair go,' I protested. 'No,' he told me, 'you're doing it.'

So I didn't have any choice! The normal procedure with a regional programme was to talk for a bit, put on a tape or two until it was time to talk some more, then we had to cross back to

the state programme. We had a fader that was green on one side and red on the other. I was just about managing to get through the broadcast when I ran out of material and just grabbed some item about a poor old Aberdeen Angus cow that had had her twenty-third calf; this was some sort of record. I'd just started to stagger through this story when the bloke I was replacing hissed, 'Go on! Time to cross! Now!' I forgot I was talking, grabbed the fader and cut myself off in my prime.

Later somebody asked me: 'Whatever happened to that old cow?'

ABC regional offices in which people like Bob Logan had to work could sometimes be, as John Douglass says, "pretty rough", even though they had been set up in the last half of the technologically sophisticated twentieth century. John Douglass adds:

In the Longreach office, the regional officer — cattle bloke — broadcast from his house. It was a real old place, riddled with white ants. The train used to come past every second day, and once he said on air: 'Excuse me, I'd better close the door. You can probably hear the train . . . it's just going past, which means it's on time today.'

Then there was the bloke in Western Australia. He could see the Town Hall clock from the studio if he stood on a chair and he used to get up, walk away from the microphone to the window, stand on a chair, look at the clock, walk back and say: 'The time is three minutes to one.' He told me that the ABC clock in the studio told the time all right from six o'clock to twelve, but after twelve, on the downhill run, it was useless!

A vital part of the rural officer's job was, of course, getting around the district he was covering, bearing in mind the Douglass dictum that whatever information was found had to be authentic and right up to date. "Mr Douglass used to make us join the local golf club and whatever other clubs there might be in the district," says Bob Logan, "just so's we'd be able to have a beer with the farmers, have a bit of a yarn and find out what they were all doing — the small ones as well as the big ones."

We also went on interviewing trips around the district. You know, the 1950s and 1960s were good years for Australia. There were no problems — the EEC hadn't hit anybody yet — and you could interview a chap who was trying some new crop or a new method of production or harvesting. People were experimenting. If something was a failure, it didn't matter; they'd try something else. There was so much going on that we rural officers were never at a loss to find something to talk about.

Most people, especially farmers, are very self-conscious when they're faced with a microphone. But most of them — like most people — can talk quite well when it comes to describing what they do and how they do it, and the rural department has been the only one in the ABC that's made a practice of going out and talking to people when they're on the job. If you ask people what they're doing, interviewing is a lot easier — especially because we go and see them in their own environment, on their own territory.

This, too, is the reason why Douglass insisted that all rural officers should have had some farming experience. As Bob Logan says, "You can contribute to the interview and ask reasonable questions because you have some idea of what the farmers are talking about. It helps to be able to say, 'I used to be a farmer, too'."

Mind you, you learn as you go. I remember once at a Country Party conference in Toowoomba, I said to a journalist: 'I'd like to interview a peanut farmer, but we're a bit short of money and I can't see myself getting up to Kingaroy.'

The journo told me that there was a

fella at the conference who had been growing peanuts in Kingaroy since they started. So I looked him up. I said to him: 'I don't know that much about peanuts, but we'll draft an interview and you can tell me.' Here was I, you see, trying to give regional representation and very piously showing that the ABC was everywhere all the time!

We did the interview and I broadcast it, and that was the last of it, I thought. But some months later I did manage to get up to Kingaroy. I went straight to the Dept of Ag and saw the chief bloke, who said: 'I'm going out for the day, why not come with me!' We often went out with Ag blokes.

Coming home that night, I said: 'I often wonder if I'm representing this region sufficiently well; I did an interview on peanuts, though, some months back.'

'Yeah,' he said, 'we're still laughing about that one. That bloke did start peanuts, sure, but now he grows only about three or four acres. They're all covered with weeds and he's regarded as one of the worst growers around!'

All experience, see! You learn as you go!

As well as keeping farmers up to date with all the developments in horticulture and agriculture, the ABC's rural department branched out into an unexpected direction — drama. At least it was surprising, and rather irritating as well, to John Douglass; he didn't approve of his department's spending the precious time and resources for which he'd worked so hard to broadcast material at the behest of the "poofters in Broadcast House". ("Drama's not my interest," he says. "I did *Henry V* at school and hated every bloody word.") But the Canadian Broadcasting Commission's rural programming, on which the ABC's was based to some extent, included a serial "with a rural or agricultural slant". Douglass grudgingly said that this was all right, if such a serial were used strictly for the purpose of presenting farming information in a dramatised form. But the serial was *Blue Hills*, which concentrated on humans as well as horticulture — and once more John Douglass felt that the ABC had let him down. "I didn't like what they did to it," he says. "It got to be a sort of *Dad and Dave* thing. There wasn't enough technical information in it."

Despite his views on drama in general and radio drama with rural programming in particular, Douglass didn't mind *The Land and Its People*. This half-hour series of dramatised documentaries went to air on Fridays both in the city and in the country areas.

The Land and Its People had a very special purpose: to tell the stories of the little-known people who had settled in Australia; to dig into the lives of the men and women who had left their mark on places all over the country. They included Francis Barrallier, the Frenchman who almost crossed the Blue Mountains but was beaten by Blaxland, Lawson and Wentworth; an old Frenchman who lived alone on the banks of the Lachlan in a mysterious house; the poet Will Ogilvie; and better-known people, too. "Faces at 252" dealt with Norman Lindsay and the other "bohemians of the *Bulletin*" (whose office was at 252 George Street in Sydney). Long before Edward Woodward put him on film, Breaker Morant was on radio; Caroline Chisholm was portrayed in sound years before the five-dollar note existed. Writers researched and scripted stories about the old, crumbling houses that you sometimes see in the Australian bush and described just what it meant when a community was forced to leave a valley that was going to be flooded.

The Land and Its People at its best was the stuff of which folklore and legend are made. It captured the Australian "spirit of place" perhaps better than any radio series has done in this country, before or since.

The programme stopped because of one thing: television — and it's not inaccurate to say that *The Land and Its People* was the

parent of television's *A Big Country*, also made by the rural department.

Television made other differences to ABC rural broadcasting. John Douglass says:

I was sent overseas to look at how the thing worked, and I remember one bloke in America saying, 'TV is so useful to the farmers that somebody had to invent it'. I've always thought that was a pretty good thing to say. So we had To Market, To Market, *giving people a look at fruit and vegetables so they could see what they were paying for.*

Douglass claims to be the first head of an ABC department to present a show from the grounds of the Royal Agricultural Society in Sydney. In fact, the rural department was probably responsible for showing sex on ABC television for the first time. "I told the cameraman who was covering the Grand Parade, 'You want to watch those randy stallions and bulls', and a mare and a stallion suddenly went at it. This was in the early days of television, and the poor cameraman didn't know how to take the camera off them!"

The ABC is one of the very few national broadcasting organisations in the world with its own rural department. Though America and Canada do have facilities for farmers' broadcasting, the BBC has never seen fit to set one up; nor have most others. John Douglass feels, however, that just having a department to cover Australian rural affairs is not good enough.

What we should have had is an overseas agricultural correspondent. When I did some work for the Food and Agricultural Organisation of the UN after I retired, I saw that there were some magnificent things going on overseas. I saw how the farmers in Hawaii were growing pineapples — that'd interest our blokes in Queensland. The FAO crowd in India had herds of milking buffaloes, even! Farmers in Australia would want to know what was happening in other places. But my department never got a guernsey. Instead, you have all these current affairs blokes in places like Washington and New York who know bloody nothing about agriculture.

When the Colombo Plan started, a lot of agricultural broadcasters came here and we helped them. I even ran agricultural broadcasting training schemes in places like India. Anyway, I think the ABC rural department has had a very powerful influence on world agriculture.

And as for Australia, TV's all right — but as far as farmers are concerned it won't replace the Country Hour *in a hurry!*

It hasn't yet.

13
God and the microphone

When the first evangelists went out to preach the gospel about 2000 years ago, the procedure was both laborious and dangerous. For example, St Paul would arrive in Ephesus or Corinth, collect a few dozen or a couple of hundred listeners (the biblical word "multitude" is about as exact as a policeman's estimate of the number of people at a demonstration) and talk to them quietly, or harangue them. After this was over, he would go on to the next place on his schedule or be thrown in prison, depending on public reaction to what he had said.

St Paul's job would have been so much easier if he had had the benefits of twentieth-century technology. He would merely have gone to the local radio station, sat down in front of a microphone and talked to thousands of people sitting in front of their bakelite boxes at home.

Indeed, from the earliest days of radio, Christian groups were very much aware of its effectiveness in getting the biblical message across. Australian churches were effective radio station pressure groups from the beginning; three Sydney commercial outlets based their call signs on their religious affiliations. The SM in 2SM, which started in 1931 and was run by the Catholic Broadcasting Company Limited, stands for St Mary or St Mark. The New South Wales Council of Churches founded 2CH the following year. And 2GB was set up by the Theosophical Society, a religious group founded in the nineteenth century with a name that meant "wisdom about God". Their call sign came from the initials of Giordano Bruno, an Italian philosopher who preached the necessity for Christian liberty and freedom of thought and who was burned at the stake by the Inquisition in 1600.

Many commercial stations had direct links with the Protestant and Roman Catholic churches. Licensees of commercial stations had to devote at least an hour per week to broadcasting "material of a religious nature" and they were not allowed to charge for it. However, a group might have to pay for putting on its Christian programme, according to the Broadcasting Act. Whether or not this was an example of the Lord helping those who helped themselves, it is clear that God and mammon were never far apart in Australian radio.

The proportion of time allocated to each denomination on radio was, according to the Act, to be in proportion to the number of people who followed it. This looked like a thoroughly fair-minded way of evaluating how much time was given to whom, but it was potentially a programmer's nightmare. In fact, a radio version of the religious wars that have made European civilisation what it is today could well have resulted. If, for instance, one church had 1000 more followers than another, how many minutes of broadcasting time was each allowed to have?

Radio stations solved this problem by making their religious programmes acceptable to as many denominations as possible, with general meditation sessions (classical music interspersed with quotes from the

Bible or other devotional literature), talks on general social and doctrinal matters, using scripture as a reference, dramatisations of well-known stories from the Old and New Testaments, and plays and serials devoted to the travails of missionaries and other people who were involved in spreading the Word.

These programmes also came about because religious broadcasters gradually realised that presenting straight religion did not really attract enormous listener interest, no matter how Christian a nation Australia was supposed to be. In this country, the first religious broadcasts were straight presentations of church services (as they were in Britain and the United States). In fact, according to the Reverend Vernon Turner, who founded the Christian Broadcasting Association in 1953, the first outside broadcast in Australia was a service from the Congregational Church, Pitt Street. "That was in about 1924," he says, and adds:

These early broadcasts were really eavesdropping exercises, where the microphone was more or less shoved through the window of a church and picked up whatever was going on inside. The service was not changed in any way. It might last for an hour and a half — maybe longer — and after half an hour or so, people would generally switch it off.

Gradually, preachers changed the order of service for the sake of the microphone. They shortened the services, cut out dead air, removed crying babies so that extraneous noises weren't so obvious and chose more topical subjects for sermons.

And Vernon Turner says that this trend has continued. As time passed, too, ministers of religion who also broadcast became better at presenting radio progammes. The ABC thought that this was so important that, during the war, the Reverend Kenneth Henderson, who was the head of the religious broadcasts department, went around all state capitals discussing problems of presentation with church leaders. Most of them spoke very slowly, even bleatingly; the ABC phrase for this was "parson's voice".

Not all clergymen suffered from this. Most forceful deliverers of the Christian message have learned a few dramatic skills; some preachers took to the microphone as eagerly as radio actors did. One of the best was the Reverend T. E. Ruth, who was minister of the Pitt Street Congregational Church in Sydney during and just after the war. He was a riveting speaker, who, by all accounts, rolled up his spiritual sleeves and let the congregation and listeners have his message right between the eyes. Ruth had a large and appreciative following, though sometimes he let his enthusiam get the better of him. While presenting a service for the ABC just after the war, he denounced ABC cocktail parties, declaring that they gave Australia's national broadcasting network a bad image. The management could do nothing about this except fume privately. It's not recorded whether they cut down their consumption of white ladies or highballs.

Although he used unorthodox means, Ruth dealt with social issues — something that few radio ministers of the time did. "I think his cudgels were taken up later by the Reverend Gordon Powell," says Vernon Turner. Gordon Powell, in fact, has been one of the most successful radio ministers in Australia. In 1981 he notched up his twenty-eighth year of presenting a weekly programme.

Ministers did try to make Christianity on radio more "personal"; because radio was such an intimate medium, they tried to relate their message specifically to the problems of their audiences, rather than being too oracular. One type of programme that did this was the devotional, about which Vernon Turner has a slightly jaundiced view.

This sort of programming came into common practice from about the end of the war. It usually consisted of a Sunday night exercise in which a very tired

clergyman would climb the steps to the studio, clutching last Sunday's sermon notes and hoping that somebody had been able to find a couple of old records for him to play. These were as scarce as hens' teeth at the time . . . apart from the occasional 'Messiah' or 'Mass in B Minor' on 78s, you couldn't get them. Interviews weren't in vogue then; it was just one man talking to the masses out there.

The clergyman would read his sermon and present a little prayer, a bit of exhortation and play a couple of old 78s. Devotionals were conducted by the Protestant Ministers' Fraternal on a roster system. Most clergymen hated doing it.

One man who really succeeded in making his radio ministry personal was the Reverend Alan Walker, who later became the Director of World Evangelism for the World Methodist Council. He first discovered his ability to communicate directly with people by means of radio when he was a minister at Cessnock in the Hunter Valley of New South Wales from 1939 to 1944. He found that this experience proved vital when he came to present a weekly radio talk to the people in the area. "It was called *The Friendly Road*," he says.

Working in Cessnock was a great creative experience for me. I was encountering young people who had never worked at twenty-five years of age; they only got work because the war started and the munitions factories needed a lot of coal. At that time I was confronted with the exploitation of miners in order for the factories to make more money, with no real attempt being made to institute safety measures that are taken for granted today. I spoke at pit-top meetings as well as on radio, and gained a real insight into the structures of their society, and I had

American evangelist Billy Graham with the Rev. Alan Walker (centre) and the Rev. Gordon Powell at a meeting in Sydney, 1959.

to come to grips with some of the causes of human misery.

I would talk to them in a Christian context, starting off with a discussion of their problems and trying to make them come to know the love and power of God in their lives. This was a pioneering thing to do on radio in the 1940s, but more and more people are doing it now. You see, I have a conviction that the Christian faith isn't just to save people's souls. It's also to change life and to make it tolerable for people, to help them come to grips with their conditions of living as well as their own internal needs.

As time passed, more minister-broadcasters used radio to link Christian values to the problems of everyday life. Clergymen such as Vernon Turner geared their message to women at home, "about the problems of trying to run a house with the husband away a lot and the kids screaming their heads off, the phone ringing, the milk boiling over", says Vernon Turner. "I did a programme called *Counsellor* after the war and it's still running today over Sydney FM radio. It's about things that affect people every day of their lives." Such broadcasts often became very important to them.

In the early 1960s a woman sent in a very interesting piece of doggerel verse about a mother grieving for her stillborn child. It wasn't very good, but I read it over the air one day. I got a whole lot of requests for copies of it, and wondered why, so I did another run of it three months later and the same thing happened. I was a bit surprised about this, and asked a doctor friend why people kept asking for it. He told me that lots of women — at least one in every street, he said — have had miscarriages or stillborn children and they keep their grief about it to themselves. And when you present something like that on air, you get an enormous response because so many people are hurting about issues like that.

In the postwar years, then, people who listened to such sessions as *Counsellor* were less concerned with hearing about questions of Biblical interpretation than social issues. They sent in more and more questions about their own personal problems. "Of course, they were a little bit naive then," says Vernon Turner. "For instance, people used to ask me whether they should have sex before marriage; and if they had de facto relationships, they wouldn't talk about them. Nowadays, people *tell* me!"

In some ways, the changes in the questions I'm asked now parallel what's happening in Australian society. People never used to talk about loneliness, grief, the failure of interpersonal relationships. Then they threw off a lot of constraints and became freer in their lifestyles. I've found in these latter years, however, that people have more deep-seated problems than they used to have — or perhaps they just talk about them more. Issues such as gambling, drug dependence, marriage breakdowns; these things have become much more prominent in our society. When you talk about drugs, for instance, you know you're going to reach a lot of people who are hurting about that. You can talk about separation and divorce and you know you'll reach a lot of people, too. You never run out of subjects.

It could even be argued that the logical conclusion of this approach is talk-back radio, which many people now seem to use as a secular confessional.

Vernon Turner strongly believes that to run a programme such as *Counsellor*, a minister must have had a great deal of experience in dealing with people in everyday life. "I believe that a good religious broadcaster must have pastoral experience," he says. "Without my experience of running churches, marrying people, visiting people — doing the whole bit — I don't think I could be a broadcaster at all."

Radio clergymen also saw their responsibility as becoming involved in social

comment in a wider context. Alan Walker has been very prominent in this area; he has done a lot of overseas broadcasting and was adviser to the Australian delegation to the United Nations in 1949. He recalls:

Probably the most stupendous radio event in my life was a forum I chaired after Hiroshima called: 'Will Civilisation Survive the Atomic Bomb?' There were four of us on a panel. I took a Christian pacifist line and had the most amazing response I have ever had on radio. There was a great deal of support for what I said, and the whole thing caused intense interest.

In the 1950s I was appointed to lead what was called a Mission to the Nation, by the Methodist Church. I worked with Sim Rubensohn, of the advertising agency Hanson Rubensohn (now McCann-Erickson), and we undertook a series called Drama with a Challenge *as part of this Mission. We had the top scriptwriters write a half-hour radio drama which dealt with all sorts of issues; questions of personal life, doctrine, international affairs. I came on in the last three minutes and sort of thumped the message home.*

At its peak it reached, I think, sixty-two radio stations all over Australia. It was the first time a religious programme had gone to air in peak time, 8.30 to 9 at night, and it got the highest ratings of any religious programme in Australia's history.

We had hundreds of groups all over Australia listening to the drama, and we provided questions emerging out of it. People discussed it afterwards. It was a very big, planned campaign, and it lasted for three years.

I don't think anything like it has been attempted before or since. It really showed the power of radio.

• • •

"Why should the devil have all the best tunes?" asked General William Booth of the Salvation Army. Of course, the devil doesn't; all Christian denominations have come up with rousing or moving hymn tunes. It is difficult to imagine a church service without them, and from the earliest days of radio in this country, broadcast church services featured congregations singing enthusiastically for the glory of God over a microphone.

Until recently, the ABC presented *Community Hymn Singing* and *In Quires and Places*, both of which featured choirs singing church music. There were church choral sessions on commercial radio, too.

Hymn singing on radio was a natural extension of the community singing sessions that were so popular before and just after the war. A transcribed American series called *Hymns of All Churches*, which consisted of hymns sung by various congregations, was popular in Australia for some years. However, Vernon Turner says he was the first to present an Australian programme of hymns sung by a congregation in a church, while he was working in Brisbane during the war.

While I was working at 4BC, the chief engineer said, 'Why don't you go to the Ann Street Presbyterian Church across the street and get a congregation together for community hymn singing!'

It was just an idea that cropped up. Nobody else was doing anything like that, and we evolved a programme called the Sunshine Hour. *It was really just half an hour of hymns, with a bit of commentary between them. I announced the music and compered the programme. The hymns we sang were mainly requested by listeners, and people used to ask for the old favourites, such as 'Rock of Ages' and 'Abide with Me'.*

The church was always packed. We broadcast on Sunday afternoons, and the acoustics were really good. We had a pipe organ and used two microphones; some of the techs gave up their own time to come and do the programme.

We did it live to air at first, then on landline, and we recorded it on sixteen-inch acetate transcription discs at the studio. This was because it was taken up by almost fifty stations in all states of Australia.

We taped it after a while, when tape came in. In fact, we didn't always present the Sunshine Hour *in the church. The first time we used tape we recorded in an Army camp outside Brisbane. I remember that very well, because it took us four or five hours to edit afterwards, using bits of sticky tape!*

Vernon Turner looks back on the *Sunshine Hour* with a certain amount of nostalgia. "It was great fun doing those," he says. "I remember a lot of very good fellowship involved in it; the show was wholehearted and very happy. I still meet people who formed part of the congregation and who used to come along and sing in those days."

But, as it did to so many other radio shows, television made a great difference to the *Sunshine Hour*. Vernon Turner says:

When television came in 1956, the whole pattern of social and family life changed. People stopped singing. They stopped talking to each other, too, and sat glued to the set. This happened all over the place; people simply stopped singing hymns in such large numbers. We found it very difficult to keep going, and had to change the whole format in about 1960.

So Vernon Turner feels that the "good fellowship", generated by people gathering together in a church to sing, has gone. He thinks this is a great pity. "People don't even go to church any more," he says with some regret.

• • •

In the early 1940s a British cycle of radio plays with a religious theme — the kingship of Christ — had a profound effect on listeners. The cycle was *The Man Born to be King* by Dorothy L. Sayers. Broadcast for the first time in 1941–42, the plays were replayed again and again, both in Britain and by the ABC in Australia.

There had been radio religious dramas before, but the chief impact of *The Man Born to be King* was that, for the first time, Jesus and his disciples were shown as speaking in ordinary, colloquial language. Even presenting Christ on radio, portrayed by an actor, was in some people's minds an alarming novelty. But as the BBC Director of Religious Broadcasting said at the time, "It was as if for the first time the barricade of unreality which surrounded Christ's person had been pulled down. Hitherto, he had belonged to the teaching of a remote childhood or to bad stained glass." (Or to very good stained glass, one might add.)

However, even with the BBC example before it, Australian religious drama was awkwardly presented for some years. Writers still found difficult what Dorothy L. Sayers had tackled and overcome: the problem of presenting Biblical characters as real people.

Sometimes stations tried so hard to do this that they veered far away from reverence and close to lurid drama. A 1949 series of dramas that Sydney station 2UW presented introduced a new art form: the Bible as soap opera. "This is the story of the execution of John the Baptist," announced the publicity for one episode, "to satisfy the hatred of King Herod's wife Herodias, thrillingly dramatised in *Salome*."

Thrillingly? Even with this exciting blurb, *Salome* is more than a shade ponderous, even arch. Consider this extract from it, in which Herod and Herodias are having a thoroughly civilised quarrel about the fate of the irritating young prophet. The sixth chapter of St Mark's gospel was *never* like this.

Herodias, whose wickedness is concealed behind very careful vowel sounds, says: "Well, you saw him."

"Saw whom?" asks Herod, whose grammar is very correct. "Whom do you

mean?"

"You know very well whom I mean," replies Herodias indignantly.

After a few minutes of this, Herod starts showing signs of a regal sense of humour. "A very remarkable young man," he says thoughtfully, referring to John the Baptist. "He ended by making me feel slightly ridiculous . . . that was the only flaw in his technique. He should have known that when a king is made to feel ridiculous, he practically has to have someone thrown into gaol to recover his poise."

He then adds a few fashion notes. "Tell me, my almond blossom," he addresses his wife, "for my birthday, shall I wear the crown with the turkwahse or the one with the rubiz, or shall I wear none at all and simply appear as a man among men?"

Herodias refuses to be sidetracked. Her ambition is to have John the Baptist executed. "It seems to mean nothing to you that as the result of this man's slander, my name is a byword in the taverns and that people are leering and smahking [smirking] and saying horrible things," she says. "If you were a man, you would have stilled this John the Baptist's slandering tongue forever."

Herod accuses his wife of having "a one-track mind where John the Baptist is concerned", but he agrees that the prophet should appear before them both.

John the Baptist's appearance highlights the prime difficulty of religious drama: how to make a Biblical figure, representing All That Is Good, appear human. The Gospel according to St Mark wasn't much help here, so the writer had to fall back on phrases such as "the word of God" and "sin" and "wickedness". This John the Baptist has a particularly cultivated voice, so the conversation between him and the royal couple sounds a bit like an elocution lesson. Herod and Herodias, of course, decide that he has to go, and the prophet is cheerfully reconciled to martyrdom.

The unfortunate result of all this is that one feels much more sympathetically disposed towards the villains than towards John the Baptist. He is so pompous that one feels that he almost *deserves* what he gets. (Australian radio writers at that time were much better at domestic squabbles than presenting real goodness.)

However, as time went on, religious drama programmes became more interesting and provocative. Alan Walker's *Drama with a Challenge* in the 1960s is an example; at one point it seemed that the series would be cancelled because of its controversial nature. Alan Walker says, "We were suddenly given notice that the whole thing was to be cancelled because we did a very powerful drama on the liquor trade which offended the brewers, who put such pressure on 2GB that it almost stopped our doing them. In the end, though, they backed down."

Vernon Turner and the Christian Broadcasting Association also dramatised real-life issues on radio. "Way back at the end of World War II we tried to do some amateur drama at 2CH," he says. "For instance, we used to do stories of men on drugs or drink who heard the gospel and became Christians and their lives were changed. I think we were pretty naive because those early dramas, though they gave us a lot of fun, didn't have a similar effect on our listeners!"

When we set up the Christian Broadcasting Association in 1953, we realised that amateur drama just wasn't good enough. We were up against the big, professional radio dramas like Macquarie Theatre, *shows that used the top script writers and actors. So when the CBA studios were built in 1961, we went into professional radio drama.*

The biggest series we did was called Dangerous Mission, *based on a book called* Through Gates of Splendour *by Elizabeth Elliott. This was about five missionaries killed by the Auca Indians in Ecuador. We commissioned Lyle Martin to adapt this book for radio, and got in a cast including Diana Perryman, Ron Haddrick and John Unicomb. It cost a*

fortune to make, but proved enormously successful. It's been run over and over again by almost every commercial radio station in Australia. We did fifty-two quarter-hour episodes.

The story itself is gripping.

As an example of colloquial radio drama, *Dangerous Mission* still stands up well. This is how it opens.

ELIZABETH (played by Diana Perryman): *On our first night in Ecuador, I was wildly happy and so deeply grateful that this could have happened to me. Some women would have been horrified about living in a tent in an Indian village, but I knew that what Jim was doing and what I'd be doing was the most important thing in our lives . . . Yet, through my happiness, I couldn't help thinking about the Aucas and the things I'd heard about them, and I wondered how I'd react when the time came for Jim and the others to go into Auca territory, where savage Indians kill on sight.*

Now listen on . . .

"Our venture into drama lasted, I suppose, for about ten years," says Vernon Turner. "After that, rising costs forced us to give up."

However, radio drama with a religious flavour did not disappear from Australian radio when the CBA stopped making serials and drama programmes. Mainly through its programme *Encounter*, the ABC continued to present short plays and dramatised documentaries on Sunday mornings. And radio drama — though not necessarily religious drama — is still alive and well on the Christian Broadcasting Association's Sydney FM station. "We regularly broadcast serials," says Vernon Turner. "A lot of the old Grace Gibson ones, still."

• • •

Church attendances are now still declining, people's interests have become more and more secular, television dominates Australians' leisure time. There might have been a very important place for religion on the bakelite box, but does it still exist? Vernon Turner says:

There are times when, because I'm human with human frailties, I ask myself: is it worth it? I've given my whole life to my radio ministry, and I've had to do a lot of things in pursuit of it: I've been a bookkeeper, a writer, a financier, an engineer and a holder of hammers and nails. It's all meant long hours and not much pay, and there have been times when I would gladly have given the whole thing up.

At the same time, I can't do that in all conscience, because I may be able to help the people I know. I've been instrumental, I believe, in preventing a number of suicides — I think every Christian minister faces that sort of thing. But radio is very important because it can reach where nobody else can, particularly in high-rise units. In cases like this we've been able, through radio, to reach a number of people who are hurting, and I think that to give it away would be a cowardly thing to do.

You see, I believe that with the microphone God gave me come all the responsibilities for doing what I can, as well as the privileges.

14
The sport of kings and other people

I loved sports broadcasting. If there was any broadcast on sport, no matter what the game, I'd listen to it. When the synthetic cricket tests were on in the late 1930s, I used to walk around imitating the commentators. I was the Alan McGilvray of Wangaratta! Or else I'd be Hammond or Bradman or Larwood, bowling and scoring fours like mad. Racing, too. At Wangaratta there was an old stallion called Valiant Chief. He had been a very good racehorse in his day, and if I had a few moments to spare when I came home from school for lunch, I'd climb the rails, jump on his back and call a race. In those days the top horses were Avenger and Ajax. Valiant Chief and I used to take part in races against them. We never lost!

Des Hoysted, who became one of Australia's best-known race callers, speaks for thousands of Australians who grew up in the heyday of the bakelite box. On radio, sport was king. When Sheffield Shield matches or the cricket Tests were on, paddocks and vacant blocks all over the country echoed to the shrill cries of "Howzat?" and "Out!" as budding Bradmans, Millers or McCabes strove to copy their heroes' bowling and batting styles, often using a plank from a paling fence and a tennis ball if no better equipment was available. If they were lucky, they visited city cricket grounds and saw their idols in action; most often, however, they stayed at home and heard great feats of cricket meticulously described by the commentators on radio.

On almost every Saturday afternoon during the year, drinkers in pubs stopped downing their West End, Foster's, Resch's or Four X for a few minutes at a time as they caught the machine-gun rattle of the race callers. Impatient souls might ask the publican to switch over to another station so they could hear the half-time results of the football, be it Union or Aussie Rules.

During the week there was wrestling or boxing, often broadcast from the Sydney Stadium. Otherwise peace-loving citizens would pound the air with their fists, translating into action the mighty blows or holds that the commentators described.

When live sports broadcasting started in Australia — which was very soon after radio itself — not everybody was pleased. Some sporting bodies objected to having events described live on air, because they thought people would be more likely to stay home and listen than to come and see. (This was, of course, well before the days of transistors; now people frequently bring their radios to sporting events with them, so they can both see and hear what is happening.) In the 1930s the Tasmanian Football League forbade a Hobart station to broadcast matches from inside the

grounds; race clubs also did not permit commentators to call races from the course, feeling that punters would get all the information they needed to bet starting price without actually attending the race.

However, since commercial radio has always had to live by its wits, both football commentators and race callers refused to be daunted by this. They called on skills that had nothing to do with broadcasting — including climbing trees. The Hobart football commentators and engineers found a rickety ladder and used it to scramble up a convenient tree that overlooked the football ground, after which they hauled their microphones and other equipment up by pulley. Even though the Tasmanian Football League did all sorts of dastardly things to stop the broadcasts (lighting fires to provide a smoke screen, shining mirrors into commentators' eyes), the match continued. A truce was declared after almost a whole football season, perhaps because the TFL ran out of wood or mirrors.

Sydney's ace racing broadcaster, Ken Howard, was just as determined to overcome the problems of off-course broadcasting. In 1941 he climbed up a tree that overlooked Pakenham racecourse and broadcast races from there. Suddenly he looked down to see a grim-faced course employee with an axe in his hand; Howard descended rapidly at about the time that the axe had bitten halfway through the trunk. But Howard didn't let a little incident like that daunt him. A few weeks later, he went up in a balloon and called the Pakenham races from a prime position over the course, using short-wave transmission.

Life for racing commentators gradually became less exciting. The race clubs allowed callers to broadcast from inside the course by the early 1950s, provided they agreed to certain conditions. They were not allowed to criticise racing in any way (how would they have had time, anyway?); they couldn't give late tips, and at first they were not permitted to give the riders, starters and scratchings until five minutes before the actual start of the race. (Later still came the TAB, which has meant that callers can give more information about races.)

By the mid-1930s the first steps had been taken to broadcast overseas sporting events live, by means of short-wave radio. In 1934 the ABC and commercial stations both covered the England-Australia cricket Tests from Lord's. This was absolutely riveting for cricket fans who, for the first time, could hear the progress of the matches as they happened. The short-wave service was not consistently good, and the ABC devised an ingenious method of filling in when transmission from England was too bad. More about that later. For commercial stations, this 1934 Test was the first of those known as the "Rickety Kate" Tests; before the war, a tune was played to announce that a wicket had fallen.

After the war, when transmission facilities had improved and direct broadcasting from Lord's or Old Trafford was becoming commonplace, Australian commercial stations sought to liven up their cricket broadcasts in a way that seems odd now. They took advantage of the time difference between England and Australia to broadcast a variety show in between the commentaries. In June 1948, for example, the *Radio-Pictorial* announced: "A complete description of all five Tests will be provided by 2KO. Descriptions will commence at 9.30 each night, concluding when stumps are drawn at 3 am. During the luncheon adjournment, an outstanding variety show will be presented." There were several such shows. "Listeners are encouraged to try for prizes in the Test Jest competition . . ." (how often did the station hear the aged witticism about bowling a maiden over?) ". . . Distributors of Standard cars present one of their models, and also £1000 is waiting to be won. There is no entry fee and every Test jest broadcast receives a substantial prize." Cash prizes were also awarded for the most interesting cricket questions that listeners submitted.

Shows like these pulled a great listening

audience, and advertisers were always eager to sponsor overseas sporting events for Australian broadcast, as well as local ones in all fields.

By the early 1950s networking had reached great sophistication; the ABC was naturally among the leaders in this field, but the commercial stations were not far behind. In 1953 the Macquarie network proudly announced that 2GB operated the largest racing and sporting hook-up in New South Wales. (The staff included sporting editor Clif Carey and racing commentators Des Hoysted and Frank O'Brien.) The description of the 1953 Davis Cup, sponsored by Ampol, was relayed throughout Australia by the network and American tennis star Ted Schroeder was flown over from America. On the night of the Carruthers-Gault world championship bout, 2GB organised what it called "the biggest fight hook-up in the history of Australian broadcasting".

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Being a sporting commentator — no matter what the game — is an art, demanding fast vocal reflexes, an accurate eye and the ability to tell listeners what they cannot see for themselves. And describing a sporting event is challenging enough when the broadcaster can see what is happening — but what if he can't even do that?

Some of the most creative and innovative sporting broadcasts in Australian radio history took place despite this apparently insurmountable handicap: the ABC "synthetic" Test cricket broadcasts of the 1930s. Although, strictly speaking, they fall outside the time scope of this book, they were such special events and were done so well that they must be described. Nothing like them has been done since.

The first of these took place in 1934 — and they happened because the radio reception from England to Australia was so unreliable. Charles Moses set them up. "They were his baby," says Alan McGilvray who, as a young first-class cricketer, broadcast his first series in 1938. "The whole idea was to make the listeners feel that they were hearing a live broadcast from the Lord's cricket ground, where Australia was playing England." McGilvray says:

Moses absolutely brainwashed us and did everything he could think of to make us believe we were actually at Lord's. We would work from half-past eight at night until three-thirty in the morning. They were very long nights. But he talked to us as though it were day — gave us midday meals late at night and afternoon tea at one-thirty in the morning, following the English time scale.

At that time, McGilvray had never been to England; he had never even seen Lord's. He, Vic Richardson and Alfred Hooker had a photograph of the ground propped up in front of them, and referred to that. "Vic Richardson was lucky," says McGilvray. "He had been to Lord's and he could talk about the gasometer and the nursery end, and various other things."

At first, it took an enormous imaginative effort to translate a tiny, smoke-filled Sydney radio studio into a green cricket pitch with men in white flannel moving purposefully around it — particularly as the studio was crowded, with people rushing in and out to supply the scores.

McGilvray says:

There was a commentator — Vic Richardson, Alfred Hooker or myself; we took turns every twenty minutes to describe the game — M. A. Noble who did the afternoon tea and lunch summaries; a sound effects man who gave us the crowd noises from a record on the turntable, and a scorer. We had a scoreboard in the studio, and this man had to see that all the figures were kept up to date. There were usually three people in the studio at any one time: the scorer, the sound effects man and the commentator.

The ABC had a man named Eric Scholl who sent us cables from the cricket ground every over in code. They were

The first "synthetic Test" series, 1934. Charles Moses is seated on the far left; M. A. Noble, the summariser, stands in the back row, wearing a bow tie.

flashed from Lord's, monitored from the post office, phoned to the ABC, decoded and brought into the studio. We had runners coming into the studio all the time.

Before the match started, Eric Scholl sent details about the weather and which side had won the toss. The commentators also knew the field placement and whether somebody had been hurt. And, with their photograph of Lord's propped up in front of them, they started from there. Alan McGilvray:

The cables we worked from were coded like this. If we had one that said 1:4, we knew that 1 was the number allotted to the fieldsman at the boundary, who hadn't been able to get to the ball, so four runs were scored. We knew who the batsman was, and who the fieldsman was, so we could tell the listeners the score. We might get a cable when we knew, say, that Fleetwood-Smith was bowling to Hammond, and it might say something like: first 4, second 3, nothing till fifth. That meant that scores had been made from the first and second balls of the over and that no further scores were made until the fifth ball.

But what did the commentators say between balls in an over, where nothing was happening? They couldn't just wait, saying nothing. McGilvray says:

Making up a story between overs was very difficult. We'd talk about bowling styles or tell stories about, say, a cricketer and his brother who went shooting the previous weekend. We really had to do our homework!

The system also meant that commentators had to time their words. "The problem at first was that we'd receive a cable for the

full over," says McGilvray. "We'd race through that in about a minute. But it took three minutes to bowl an over, and we had to keep talking, saying something, for two whole minutes."

I worked with a stopwatch, giving myself a certain amount of time for each ball. It was very hard. Sometimes we'd be getting to the fifth ball in an over and there would be a delay that we might not have known about. Somebody might have been hurt, for instance. Even if a cricketer took a minute to do up a shoelace or take his jumper off, there was a delay. We wouldn't know why for a little while, and we had to fill in there as well.

After midnight, sometimes the radio reception became clearer and we could receive the BBC direct. As soon as we heard that, we'd dive under the table and go to sleep. But then the lines might go bad and then it was: 'Get on your feet, Mac, quick!' and away we'd go until the lines became clearer again.

The sound effects were a vital part of the broadcasts. When a cricketer was out or if he scored a four or a six, the effects man had to put on a disc of crowd applause and fade it up and down where appropriate. It had to sound authentic — and so did the noise of a cricket ball on a bat when somebody made a stroke.

Charles Moses had an answer for that. "He experimented to get the exact sound of a ball hitting a bat," says Alan McGilvray, "and it took a while. Just tapping a pencil on a piece of wood didn't sound right. So he evolved the method of putting a little bit of rubber on top of a pencil and we hit a round piece of wood set in a rubber base. Tap! That gave the sound he wanted."

We had to be careful, though. For instance, I might say, 'Now, Jones is coming out to bowl to Smith and it's a nice shot', and tap! with the pencil. You see, that'd be wrong. We had to remember to tap before *we described the shot. Now and again we'd tap afterwards, and then Moses would get hot under the collar and say: 'Look, can't you bloody well remember to tap* first*!'*

Given the amount of preparation and the problems that had to be overcome in describing a cricket match they couldn't see, it is hardly surprising that the commentators made a few mistakes. "It's a wonder we didn't make more," says Alan McGilvray. "But some funny things did happen."

We had started the morning's play one evening and we got a cable that translated as: McC out — caught so-and-so. There were two McCs, McCabe and McCormick, and we didn't have a clue which one was out. I raised my eyebrows enquiringly at Vic, who whispered: 'Give Stan.' Stan McCabe. So I said something like: 'And McCabe is out! A brilliant catch by so-and-so and he's walking off the field. The crowd is giving him a tremendous ovation . . .' the sound effects man brought up the crowd disc for that '. . . and he's scored a hundred and something . . . a great game . . .' and so on.

Then another cable came through. It was McCormick!

What could I do! I just admitted my mistake. McCormick was about six feet three; McCabe about five feet ten. People started ringing up to abuse me: 'Surely Alan McGilvray knows the difference between a tall cricketer and a short one!'

There was intense rivalry between the ABC and commercial stations over cricket broadcasting during the time of the "synthetic" tests. "It got so that the other stations wanted to be ahead of each other and ahead of us," says Alan McGilvray. "If we said the score was 1 for 114, they'd take it up to 1 for 118, just to be in front of everybody else. Of course, when a wicket went at 1 for 114, they'd be in trouble!"

We never did anything like that. We were doing a straight broadcast and the competition made us faster. By the end of that Test series we were a minute and a half behind the game in England, which wasn't bad.

A typical McGilvray understatement.

So successful were the ABC cricket broadcasts that listeners began accusing the commentators of deceit.

They said that we weren't in England, so what were we talking about! We were making up a story, they said. So Moses arranged for us to go to the Fox Movietone studio near the University of Sydney, and we re-enacted a synthetic broadcast. It was filmed and shown in the theatres as part of the newsreel before the main feature. So people knew exactly what we were doing.

That newsreel is still shown from time to time.

Vic Richardson, who dearly loved a joke, thought that the comments about this "deceit" were too funny to ignore. McGilvray says:

When Alfred Hooker was doing the commentary, Vic and I used to go walkabout occasionally just to get a bit of air and exercise. We would see crowds of people standing in the radio shops, listening to Alfred. Vic would walk in, watch the crowd and say: 'What are you fellows doing there! That's all nonsense, what he's saying. They're not at Lord's at all.' They didn't know Vic or me, and Vic got a lot of fun out of kidding them. And the things they said!

"I don't know anything else that's been done so well in radio as those Test broadcasts," says Alan McGilvray. "As far as I was concerned, they really taught me my craft, particularly how important preparation is." And, as thousands of ABC radio listeners know, that lesson has paid off ever since.

After World War II, communications improved to the extent that "synthetic" broadcasts were no longer necessary. The short-wave radio transmission was good enough for the Tests to be transmitted live from England to Australia — but the lessons McGilvray learned did not change, even though he and the other commentators saw and described the action.

How, for instance, does a commentator work out which cricketer is which? Often the pitch is a long way from the broadcasting booth, and one would imagine that twenty-two men in white flannels look very much the same. But McGilvray says:

Once I see the players, it's simple. I can tell most of them by the way they walk, you know. I study every individual — you must, to keep things going. Quite often I go out and see the teams practising, particularly if there are new blokes in a side. Then I can see their styles of bowling and batting. I reckon I could broadcast some of them blindfold now! Some of them only have about three shots.

The "characters" of cricket — the men who play to the gallery — can be as much of a blessing to the commentator as to the beer-swilling spectators on the Hill. In those matches where describing the building up of runs has as much excitement as an oral tally of China's population, there's nothing better than a bit of showmanship. To Alan McGilvray, the best cricket showman was bowler Keith Miller. "Keith loved his cricket," he says.

He always did things that appealed to the spectators. He'd get a comb out of his pocket all the time and comb his hair back. See, the girls liked that. I said to him one day: 'If you get that comb out once again, I'll give you a real mention!'

He used to walk back to me in the broadcast box and he'd give me a little hand signal sometimes. I'd know what he was going to do then. His next ball would be a bouncer. So when he was bowling, I'd say: 'Miller bowling from the northern

Broadcasting the fifth Test of the Australia v. the West Indies series, Sydney, 1952. From left: Johnny Moyes, Ernest Eytles, Alan McGilvray, Vic Richardson, Bernie Kerr (later ABC Director of Sporting Broadcasts).

end . . . his hair goes back . . . this'll be a bouncer! And there it is!'

In the days before Kerry Packer and building-site-type hard hats revolutionised the style of cricket, umpires and commentators used to work quite closely together.

Some of the umpires — Lou Rowan was one — used to give me signals from the ground. When they saw me with my binoculars on them, they knew I wanted detail. I think we had about twenty-one signals; we used to re-establish them every season. For instance, the signal for a leg bye was a hand on the hip.

Another commentator once said to me: 'You must have good eyes, Mac! I can never tell if a ball hits a bat or a pad from here.' I just said, 'Oh, well, I have no trouble . . .'

Receiving signals like that is very important on a ground when the broadcaster can be up to two hundred metres away from the players. "That's a trap for young commentators," says Alan McGilvray. "It's hard to get used to the distance."

Height is a big thing, too. When you're up high in the broadcast box, the length of a ball looks different to when it's down low. We have to make adjustments; when you're high up, it's easy to call a ball short of a length when it's not. When you're down low, you can see it's longer.

But when you're down low, seeing the spin of a ball is difficult. The keeper blocks the commentator's view and he's over the stumps. You can't tell what the ball has done, because you're right behind him. You lose the ball halfway down the wicket and you have to determine which way it's spinning by the way in which the batsman moves his feet. I watch him; I forget the ball. This is where knowing the characteristics of the players is a tremendous advantage.

Though the distance and height of the broadcasting box in relation to the pitch might not have changed, Alan McGilvray says that facilities are now much better and more comfortable for the broadcasters. "It was pretty bad just after the war," he says. "We broadcast from tin boxes out in the open among the crowd. We had kids crawling all over us, lumps of Minties and other sweets on our shirts. The kids would pick up my glasses so they had sticky fingerprints all over them. We couldn't avoid background noise, either; when we got that, we'd have to move. We ended up among Moreton Bay figs in Adelaide once. The figs dropping on the tin shed sounded like a machine-gun. Didn't help the microphone one bit!"

When television came, people rejoiced at the thought of being able to see sport properly — to look at exactly what was going on during a match. Alan McGilvray, however, is not particularly enthusiastic about it.

Television has improved the efficiency of cricket broadcasting, but I don't like it. You can't express yourself if you're saying only what the producer wants. He presses a button and you've got to talk about what you see. Well, I might see something that's not in the picture — a man being moved, for example. I can't talk about that or the viewer gets confused.

But at any rate, microphones have improved enormously over the years.

I have to use a microphone, working around and over it because I get more animation that way. In the early days, we had to talk right into the mike and it was like putting a straitjacket on. If we were too close, we'd blur. But now it's possible to vary your voice, and it's much more interesting. I lie over the desk; I'm always broadcasting with my elbows on the table. Gives confidence. I smoke a lot; I give a couple of puffs and then talk — well, you have to do something.

Some people just belt out their commentary and it gets terribly monotonous. That's people with hard voices; they don't think. I have a

confidential sort of voice anyway, and I suppose I've practised using it over the years.

One of the things I tell young commentators about is breathing. I just tell them to breathe in during every ball . . . not to think about it; just to do it. See, if you inhale and a wicket falls and you exhale, you've got two different tones. And that's where it becomes exciting for the listener. You have to put your excitement in your breathing.

From his position as the doyen of Australian cricket commentators, Alan McGilvray looks back at a career in broadcasting that has lasted over forty years. He says:

Broadcasting has changed so much since I started. Television has made the difference. It keeps me on my toes.

You have to have a sort of flair for broadcasting, though. That's how it goes. I've apparently got a bit of a nod for it. You can be lucky, can't you!

• • •

Although it has its moments of excitement, cricket has always been regarded as rather a gentlemanly sport. No matter how much they may want to, players really don't attack each other with cricket bats in defence of a point of principle; their aggression takes other, less violent forms. This is not the case with some other sports, particularly boxing or wrestling. For years, people have paid good money to see two men belt the daylights out of each other.

Frank Hyde, now a well-known football broadcaster, was a fight commentator for many years on Sydney station 2SM. He says, "The basic appeal of boxing, of course, was that people always like to see a bit of blood spilled. The people who came to see fighters tear each other to bits were probably the spiritual descendants of the Romans who flocked to arenas to see lions rip the hearts out of the Christians."

In Sydney, the main gladiatorial arena was the Stadium, affectionately known as the Old Barn. All through the 1940s and 1950s, people flocked to see their favourite fighters or wrestlers in a huge, draughty building on the corner of Bayswater Road and Neild Avenue just down from Kings Cross; at the same time, the rafters echoed to the screaming of enthusiastic fans when promoter Lee Gordon and others presented pop and rock concerts. (The Stadium was pulled down some years ago and in its place is a rather sterile block of town houses.)

To see the fights, fans took their bottles of beer up to the wooden slats near the tin roof — the bleachers — and drank their Toohey's and ate their newspaper-wrapped prawns while they watched fighters from Jack Johnson to Jimmy Carruthers.

Frank Hyde used to broadcast the fights live from the Stadium every Monday night. He says, "I've seen some very skilful exponents of the pugilistic art there; a lot of beautiful boxers. And a lot of fighters, too, as distinct from boxers!"

I did the fights there from 1953, always for 2SM. Because we commentators had to set up our gear and so on, we always arrived at the Stadium before the public. I remember going past the queues at the ticket office, and the air was electric with excitement. People would be talking about the fight to come and arguing who would win.

I'd look up the hill towards Kings Cross, and people would be streaming down the hill to the Stadium. Not just the boxing fans, either — there would be jockeys and trainers, footballers, bookmakers and cricketers. Everybody came to see the fights on Monday nights.

Before we went to our ringside seats, we always checked on what was happening in the dressing-rooms. We broadcasters had to walk down a ramp to get there. That ramp was trodden by some of the greatest names in Australian boxing. It went into a tunnel that led to the dressing-rooms, then up to the arena

itself. On the tunnel walls were photos of old-time fighters and past champions.

In the dressing-rooms things would be humming. All the boxers were there, being rubbed down, trying to keep calm and having their hands taped. I can still smell the liniment they used for rubbing the boxers down. The pressmen were also there, getting last-minute comments from the fighters. An awful lot was going on.

The whole atmosphere was very tense. From inside the dressing-rooms we could hear the crowd up in the arena taking their seats. A murmuring of excitement. We asked the boxers how they felt, and some of them would get up and shadow-box, throwing punches in front of a mirror to warm up. Then we talked to the trainers.

Like Alan McGilvray, Frank Hyde knew the value of doing his homework before a match. "I didn't ask many questions just before a fight," he says, "because I had already prepared for it in the weeks before, going to gymnasiums and training camps and talking to boxers and their trainers."

The listeners would already know quite a lot about the fight. I would have told them about seeing somebody working out with so-and-so and being caught with a couple of left hooks, which were favoured by his opponent. I might have mentioned that such and such a fighter had been working out with a left-hander, because his opponent would be a southpaw, too. We had to make ourselves au fait *with the boxers' styles, so we could anticipate while broadcasting. For instance, if a boxer slipped a left leg, we knew that he would follow with a right cross because that was his style.*

Once he had chatted to the fighters for a few minutes, it was time for Frank Hyde to

Sydney's Stadium, Rushcutters Bay, in the mid-1950s. As can be seen from the announcement above the entrance, the Old Barn was also used as a venue for pop concerts.

take his place at the ringside. "I'd walk up the tunnel between the rows of wooden plank seats in the arena to take up my position in the corner of the ring," he says. "That's where all the broadcasters sat." Like most facilities for broadcasting sporting events, those at the Stadium were less than ideal.

When I first started, the ABC and four Sydney commercial stations were all broadcasting the same fight at the same time. It was a pretty crowded corner, I can tell you! Next to me there might be a sound engineer, and next to him somebody from the press, another journalist rubbing shoulders with him and an interstate sports writer, then perhaps a few more broadcasters. We were right in the front row, with our gear and our microphones.

And when it rained! You could hardly hear yourself talk against the noise; the rain belted down on the tin roof like machine-gun fire. The old Stadium leaked at times, too, and we had to make sure that our gear didn't get too wet. Many's the time I described a fight with my body hunched right over the mike to protect it a bit.

Naturally, with everybody so close together, we'd have to shout pretty loud once the fight started, so that the listeners didn't hear somebody else's commentary coming over our microphone. Great huge things those mikes were, too, set in a steel base, and they picked up everything everybody said if we weren't careful.

Frank Hyde remembers the first fight he ever broadcast from the Stadium as a tyro broadcaster in his early twenties. "For a start, I was shaking like a leaf," he said. "George Barnes fought George Kapeen (he died a few years ago) and fortunately for me, though not for Kapeen, Barnes knocked him out in just a few rounds. I was very grateful to him. Heaven knows the state I would have been in if they'd gone the full fifteen rounds!"

Sitting at their corner of the ring, the broadcasters used to catch a lot of remarks that weren't for broadcasting — including what trainers said to their fighters. "We used to get a lot of laughs out of those," says Frank Hyde.

Fellers would stagger back to their corners with pieces out of them and the trainer would say: 'Right, keep going, you're going well — he hasn't laid a glove on you!' I suppose the trainers thought they were being encouraging, but I often used to wonder what went through the boxers' minds. Maybe they thought somebody up there was hitting them from behind!

One of the most satisfying aspects of being a sports broadcaster, no matter what the game, is the rapport that develops between commentator and the sportsmen. Frank Hyde has warm memories of some of boxing's characters.

I got on well with some of the trainers, great blokes like Billy McConnell and Ern McQuillan. Not to mention Vic Patrick, the greatest referee of them all. Vic used to make signs at me when I was broadcasting, opening and shutting his fingers to indicate that I was a non-stop talker.

I got very friendly with the fighters, too — George Barnes, for instance, and also Jimmy Carruthers. I'll never forget the day that Jimmy leaned over my shoulder at the Stadium and said, 'Frank, I'm making a comeback.'

'Jimmy,' I said, 'that's the saddest news I've ever heard. This is one game where there is no comeback.' You see, he'd retired when he was the undefeated bantamweight champion of the world. There is no road back in fighting or football. Once you've retired, that's it.

Carruthers fought Aldo Pravisani and was defeated on points. In his heyday, Carruthers wouldn't have given Pravisani a job as his sparring partner. But that's life. That's the game.

Frank Hyde rather sadly dates the decline of boxing in Australia — both broadcasts and bouts — from the end of the 1950s, when, he said, the standard started to slip.

In the early years I was there they'd have one main fight, but later it deteriorated to double bills. Some of those fights were very poor, with fellers out of condition, ill-trained and badly coached. They circled each other and stared into each other's eyes, maybe giving a half-hearted jab every now and again. And I'd sit there, describing the fight, and I had them belting hell out of each other! Well, I had to keep the listeners out of bed, you see. I used to get a bit embarrassed, though, wondering what people at the ringside were thinking as they watched the game and listened to my commentary. They probably thought two different fights were going on there. But I had to do something because, honestly, I was nearly going to sleep myself in a lot of the fights towards the end.

Frank Hyde doesn't see television as the reason why fight broadcasting disappeared in Australia. For him, its demise has another cause.

Although I loved every minute of broadcasting fights, I would hate to see a reawakening of interest now. You see, boxing depends on bad times to unearth a champion fighter. It's an old but true saying that a good boxer is a hungry boxer, and in Australia the best fighters were produced during the Depression and the war years.

Affluence isn't good for the boxing game, because the grind of training and the hard life that it is go hand in hand with periods of adversity. There was only one great heavyweight champion that I can recall who wasn't the product of a poor environment — Gene Tunney. The others, like Jack Dempsey, for instance, were more or less hoboes. Some people were drawn to the game because boxing was an easy way of making money. But there were very few who were so good that they could get out of the game with a fat bankroll and without scars.

At the end of the 1950s, people were becoming so affluent that they were able to pursue a lot of other sports that had been denied them in harder times — bowls and golf and boating and motor car sports, for example. These were beyond the ordinary man in the street in the 1930s and 1940s; in the 1950s, when people had more money, they could afford to be doers rather than spectators.

That's why I think we won't see boxing or fight broadcasting again. And when the Stadium was pulled down, with it went an era that will never, never come back.

• • •

"Andtheyreracinggreyprinceismakingagoodruncominguponthe inside..." The typesetters of this book haven't gone mad; that is a race call. It's impossible to set it down any other way in type. And that flat, pell-mell style is unique to Australia. In America and Britain callers give just the first three over-the-line positions or the first few horses at different points during the race. It's the rather languid style that was parodied by Willie Fennell in his early Colgate-Palmolive shows. ("Well, that horse is doing quite well... it's a medium-sized one, actually ...")

Anybody who has ever heard a race broadcast from Moonee Valley, Flemington, Randwick or a country track must wonder how on earth the caller manages to get out so much information about *all* the horses running, not just the first three. When about ten horses are tearing around the track and most of them are brown, how can a caller tell them apart? Is race calling a gift, or does it take a lot of training?

According to Des Hoysted, who started his career as a caller in 1948, the answer is both. Being involved in the racing game from an early age helps, too; his father was a jockey and one of his uncles was a well-

known trainer in Victoria. "Because these and other members of my family were in racing," he says, "I suppose it was natural that I should want to do something in that line."

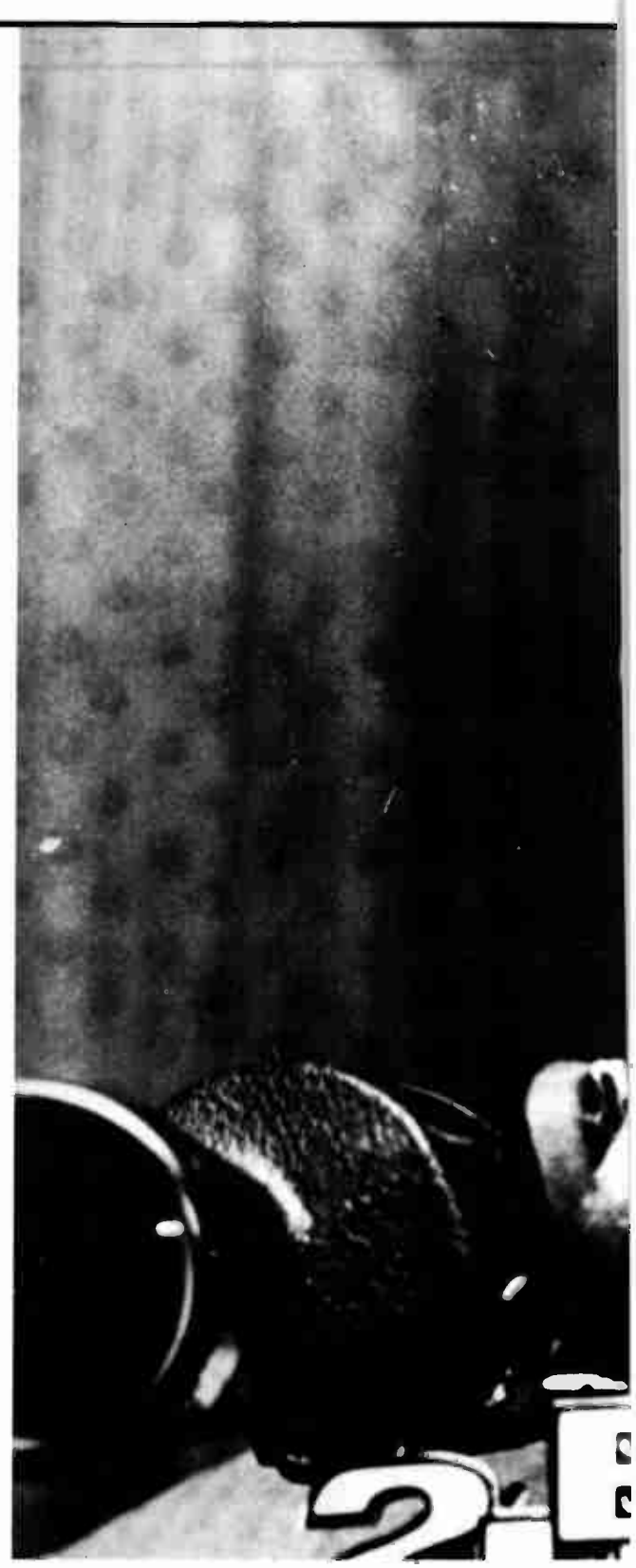
Des Hoysted grew too tall to be a jockey, to his regret — so he decided to be a race caller. When he was growing up, the top callers were Mel Morris and Jim Carroll. "They were the ones who pioneered the descriptive style," he says.

Des Hoysted decided to train himself to call races.

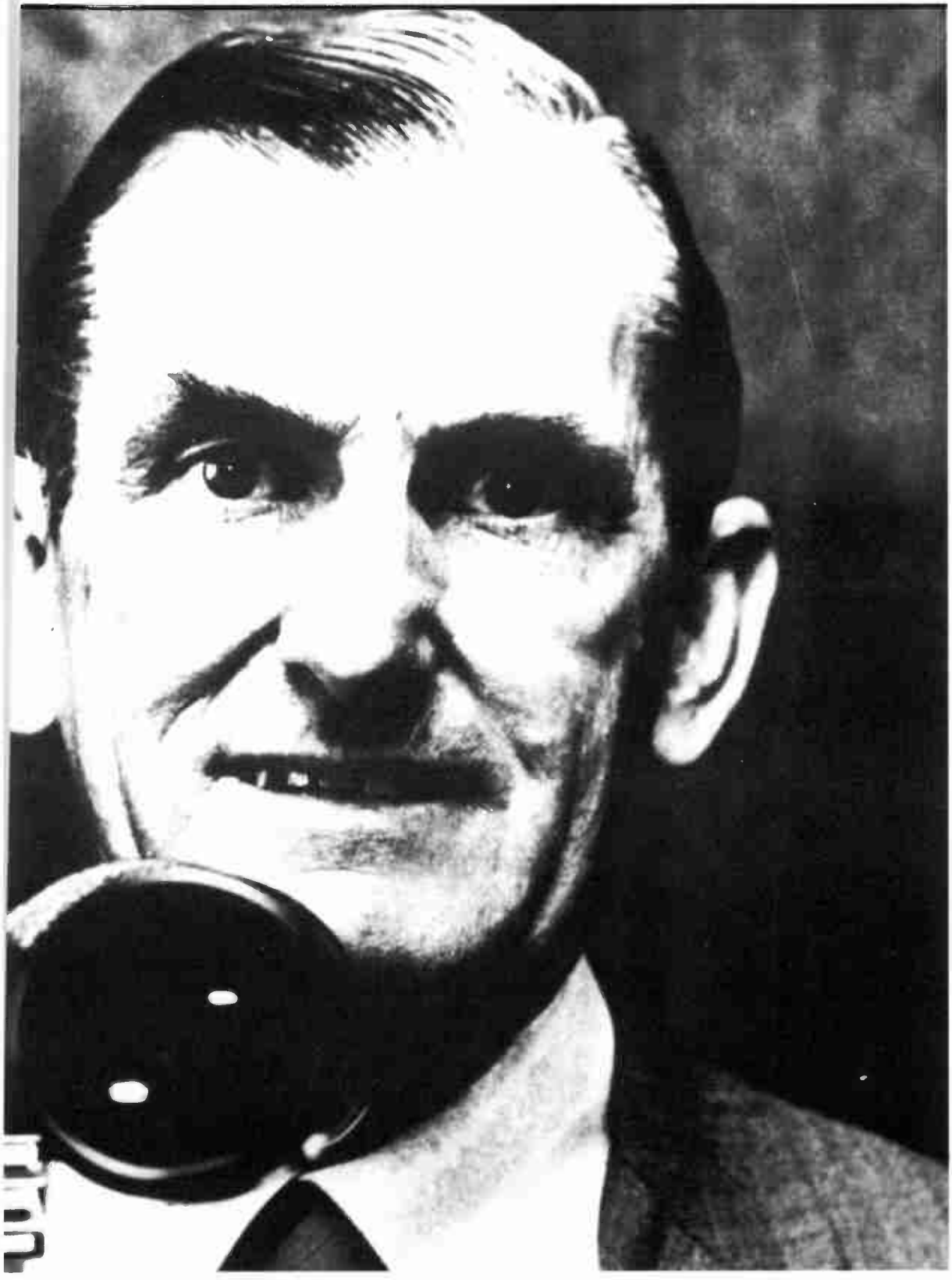
I knew that the clue was remembering the colours of the silks, so I'd cut out little bits of paper and paint the horses' colours on them with watercolour, according to the race books. Then I'd paste the bits of paper around pencils, line them up at the end of a long table and put a long ruler in front of them. I'd tilt the table, pull away the ruler, and off they went! The pencils rolled down the table reasonably slowly and I'd call them by the names of the horses, according to the colours in the book.

I did the same sort of thing with flat icecream sticks. I coloured the ends of them, then, if it was raining, I'd drop them in water flowing down a gutter and run alongside on the footpath, calling the names of the horses. When the sticks went down a culvert I'd wait for them to come out the other side. All that was good training for the two-thousand-metre chute at Rose Hill, where the horses suddenly come at you out of nowhere!

After some experience in calling races at country tracks, Des Hoysted was taken on as assistant to Melbourne's premier race caller, the ABC's Joe Brown, in 1948. He did his first metropolitan race at Caulfield that year. "It was good training in accuracy," he says. "They put me on to call a race over the public address system. I'd been used to that at country meetings,



Des Hoysted.



and I'd probably trained myself to be accurate. If you're broadcasting over PA, you've got to call the horses right; if you're just doing radio you can make errors calling horses in the wrong places and get out of it, but if you're on a racecourse, everybody can see where the horses are."

At that time two of the top national race callers were Lachie Melville and Ken Howard — the man whose devotion to race calling had led him to climb trees at Pakenham. Howard, who was a master of the colourful phrase ("it's London to a brick the horse'll do it") is probably the best-remembered caller. According to Des Hoysted, his style couldn't have been more different from Melville's.

They used to call Ken the Word Factory, because he never stopped talking. Accuracy didn't play a very big part in his broadcasting make-up . . . as long as he kept going and made the race sound interesting, he was happy. He'd bring horses from impossible positions to win, probably because he called them wrong in the first place. If he called a horse last and it was running second or third, he'd bring it up two or three places at a time until he got it up to where it had been all through the race.

Lachie, on the other hand, was accurate to the nth degree. I don't recall his ever calling in the wrong place and if he said horses were going well, they were right in the finish. He could anticipate far better than anyone I've ever known.

I can tell you a good story that shows the difference between Lachie and Ken. See, Lachie was a big punter and, when I first came to Sydney with 2GB in 1952, he was in the broadcast box next to mine for the AJC Spring Carnival. In those days it was a matter of calling the race and waiting for the next one, so you had time to yarn to your mates. You can't do that now, with all the Tote dividends and things we have to announce.

I asked Lachie how he was going and he looked very depressed and told me he was having the worst carnival of his entire life. It was the third day and the last race was coming up. Lachie said: 'I've lost a thousand quid a day so far . . . and I've backed Oversight in this race to get square.' It was five to two, and he had four hundred quid on it. I'd never had that much money on a horse in my life, and I told him that I wouldn't be able to call the race if I'd been him. All I could do was wish him luck and get back to my box.

Well, it was a damned close finish. Johnny Zero was leading, then Darby Munro brought Oversight down the outside and it won on the last stride!

I can just imagine how Ken Howard would have called that race. He would have been hysterical at the finish. But all Lachie said was, 'Here comes Oversight with a strong run'. That was all. Lachie wasn't the type of bloke to get excited about things. I listened to the recording of that race afterwards, and there was nothing in the way he described that finish that would have given the impression that he was desperate for that horse to win.

I think it's almost impossible in human terms to call a race and not to show any emotion if you've got a financial interest in the result. If the horse is way back, you're apt to dodge three or four to go back and find it; and if it meets a slight check or interference, you're apt to magnify it. If it's coming home, you'd have a tendency to make it come home faster than it actually is.

So, really, the ideal situation is that if you're a race commentator you shouldn't bet; and if you're betting and you're a race caller, I guess you've got to be Lachie Melville.

At the track over the years, Des Hoysted has met people who would rather like to be Lachie Melville or Des Hoysted. "You meet some real characters in this game, I can tell you," he says. "There's this bloke that was at all the race meetings. Let's call him Joe. He knew everybody. Little old bloke, well into his sixties, I'd say. Had

two shirts, his blue check and the white one, and two pairs of pants, a blue pair and a grey pair. He never paid to get into a course! I have no idea how he did it."

Joe used to go down somewhere in front of the grandstand when he called a race. I don't know if he was a frustrated caller, but he cupped his hand behind his ear the way they used to in the old days, and he yelled at the top of his voice as he called the race when they were running.

He always had a go at us, too. He'd wait at the bottom of the moving staircase at Randwick and call out, 'Des Hoysted!'

'Yes, Joe!' I'd say.

'You made a mistake today.'

'What'd I do, Joe!'

'You called so-and-so running fifth; it was runnin' sixth.'

I'd say, 'Oh, Joe, not again.'

'Yeah,' he'd say. 'You've done it again, mate.'

So I'd say, 'Joe, you've been trying for twenty years to teach me how to call and I'm still a mug.'

This was where Joe would try and cheer me up a bit. 'That's all right, mate,' he'd say. 'You'll come good.'

Race calling can be a tense and anxious business. It is often easy to make a mistake with a horse's name if its colours look like those of another horse, and they often do. "I dream a lot about race broadcasting," says Des Hoysted. "And every time I dream about doing the job, I can't. I get up there and the race starts and I can't nominate the horses. I freeze; I just stop. I suppose everybody's had this kind of dream; it's probably human nature. Everybody's afraid of making a mistake."

If you're going to call wrong horses somewhere and they don't win, it doesn't matter that much; but when you call wrong winners, everybody knows about it. It's just not possible to go through a career without calling wrong winners. I've done it about four times, I think, and in a span of over thirty years, that's not a bad record. But, people being what they are, they'll immediately recall your errors rather than the hundreds of times that you've been right.

If you do make a mistake, you've just got to keep going, and that's the hardest part of it. If it's a long race you can sort of skip the horses you can't nominate and come back to them in a minute, and meanwhile you've got a chance of looking at your race book. If you're quick enough to turn the page and run through the field, you can find a few more to fill in.

One day at Rose Hill there was a horse from the country, and when I'd seen it race before, it carried different colours to those it carried on this day. On the other occasion its colours had been yellow and blue, but on this day it carried black and white squares. This is an example of my being careless. The race was the two-thousand-metre chute that I mentioned earlier, where they go round at the start and you don't see them.

All of a sudden the horses came out of the chute and this thing in the black and white squares was leading! I hadn't a clue what it was; started to get a bit tense and churny inside. So I didn't call it. I just called the horse that was running second as being in front — luckily, the race wasn't on television — and had a quick look for the horse in the race book.

I couldn't find him.

They were up at the first turn by this time, 1600 metres, and this damned horse was still in front and I still couldn't nominate it. I went back through the field and the second time I looked at the book, I found it. Prince Chantic! What on earth was I going to do! It was two or three lengths in front and I hadn't called it anywhere. When the horses went along the back of the track, I said, 'Prince Chantic has come out of the trees and taken the lead.'

And no-one said a word!

Part 2: Behind the Programmes

15

"And now, here is your producer"

So far this book has concentrated on some of the radio shows that people are most likely to remember. From time to time people described as "producers" have moved through its pages, commenting on programmes and telling stories about them. But who were they? Most listeners know that they were the people who got a laconic "Production by" mention as part of a show's closing credits, but they may know little more than that; up to this point the producer's role has not been discussed at any length.

The time has now come to look more closely at radio producers — to build up a picture of what they did and to talk about the sorts of people they were. For the men and women who sat behind the glass panel in the control room had enormous control over what was heard on the bakelite box.

The number of skills needed to make a good producer of radio programmes seems endless. Producers might have to do anything from thinking up a programme idea and finding somebody to write scripts (or even doing them themselves), smooth down sponsors' ruffled feathers, be pleasant and constructive to actors and make sure that the music and sound effects in the studio are faded to time. They have to be drama critics, editors, casting agents, diplomats, psychologists, technicians.

Different shows demanded different skills. When Charles Moses worked out the best way of making the exact sound of a ball hitting a bat in the "synthetic" cricket broadcasts, he was filling the producer's role just as much as John Tuttle, who travelled all over Australia scouting for talent to appear in *Australia's Amateur Hour*. When Jack Davey spent about a hundred hours of his own time listening to tapes of his shows, timing them and working out how they could be better, he was taking on an aspect of a producer's job. The men who edited news interviews for 2GB's *Monitor* programme were producers, just as surely as was Harry Dearth waving his arms around at a *Lux Radio Theatre* performance.

And, strictly speaking, a radio producer wasn't a producer at all; he was a director. The producer is the person who gets money together for a show — be it a film, a play or a musical. In radio, so-called producers did practically everything *except* find the cash; they tied shows together, making sure that all the component parts were organised into an enjoyable or informative whole. (One could say that the sponsor was really the producer of radio programmes . . . he had the power to fund a show or to cancel its production.)

The closest analogy to a radio producer's role is probably that of the orchestral conductor, the man who chooses the repertoire, who controls the orchestra in performance and who is responsible for the sound that results. At least one producer took that literally — Harry Dearth on the stage, directing a *Lux Radio Theatre* performance, directed his actors as though they were strings, woodwinds or timpani, exuberantly giving them flourishing signals. Most producers, however, did their "conducting" behind the scenes, from the

control room.

In radio's heyday, listeners had some inkling of a producer's importance, though not much, perhaps, of his role. At the end of play productions, for example, the producer would come forward. "After the play had finished, the announcer would say, 'And now, here is your producer,'" says Gordon Grimsdale. "Then he'd hold up the applause cards and everybody clapped and screamed. The producer would stomp out facing the audience and say, 'Thank you, ladies and gentlemen. Tonight's play was written by so-and-so and adapted for radio by whomever. In it you heard . . .'" Occasionally, producers interviewed the stars of the show for the sake of doing a plug for the sponsor — as Paul Jacklin did at the end of the 1955 *Lux Radio Theatre* production of *Great Expectations*.

Sometimes, too, the producer was the person who gave publicity information about new shows to radio magazines. There are dozens of paragraphs along these lines: "It's a good show, full of suspense," said Fred Bloggs about his forthcoming production of *Anna Karenina*. "Based on Tolstoy's long novel of the same name, the show is set in Moscow and St Petersburg, in Russia. I was very fortunate to engage the services of that splendid young actress Freda Smith as Anna, and to book Bill Jones, who plays Vronsky, her lover . . ."

The "personality profiles" of producers could be equally uninformative. Reporters sometimes seemed so much in awe of radio producers that they couldn't make them human, let alone explain their jobs in detail. A typical article of this kind appeared in the *ABC Weekly* late in 1947. Gazing sternly out of the pages are five of the best-known drama producers of the time: E. Mason Wood, Paul Jacklin, Paul O'Loughlin, John Cairns and Edward Howell. They wear the expressions of

A worried-looking producer cues actor John Gray in an episode of the George Edwards serial Inspector Scott of Scotland Yard.

major shareholders of BHP who have just been told that this year's profit is a few million down on last year's.

The accompanying article does little to help. All five are variously described as "delightfully sarcastic", "devastating" or possessing "the iron hand in the velvet glove". Considering the immense responsibility these men had, and what consummate professionals they were, one feels that the reporter of this particular article might have tried harder to show how proficient they were. But no. The *ABC Weekly* makes them sound like a combination of Heinrich Himmler and Wackford Squeers of Dotheboys Hall; no account is given of their job's subtleties.

What E. Mason Wood *et al* thought of this sort of publicity has not been recorded. However, considering that — publicly at least — radio producers tended to let actors do the interviews because they provided good publicity for whatever show it was, their attitude was probably: "If somebody wants to say that about us, fine . . . meanwhile, I've got a script to vet and a show to cast."

"Big production" — the making of major radio plays, features, documentaries, serials and series — really went ahead after World War II; this led to the growth of independent production companies and the emergence of many more actors, writers — and producers — to serve the burgeoning industry. "To show you how opulent the new Australian radio was becoming," says former Artransa executive producer Jim Bradley, "I remember strolling into a radio office just after the war and there were men actually building desks and french polishing them by hand on the spot."

If the person who sat behind one of those gleaming new desks was a radio producer, the chances were that he, or she, had worked in another field first. Many radio producers were former actors; some, like Jim Bradley, had worked in advertising. And there were no university or technical college courses to teach people how to produce radio programmes. They learned on the job.

Artransa, the production company that Jim Bradley joined in 1951, was then owned by the London *Daily Mirror*, though it was closely linked to the Macquarie network. The company sold a great deal of material overseas — to South Africa, the British Armed Forces, New Zealand and Fiji. Jim Bradley became the company's programme manager and executive producer. "Artransa's specialty was self-contained half-hour shows," he says, and he gives some insight into how these programmes came into being.

As a result of a round-table chat, we might decide to do a drama series called, say, The Concrete Jungle *about a big city and the sorts of things that happened in it. My first job was to find a writer who would handle that sort of theme. We'd call the writer in, explain the idea, and he'd go away and develop a storyline. That would be the basis for the product you'd have to sell. The storyline would come in from the writer, then you'd look at it and discuss it with him.*

You might say, 'No, you're telescoping your punches here, and you've made a dramatic point too soon. Forget that bit there, and do this . . .' and so on.

If a new programme was mooted, then, the producer handling it obviously had to have a very clear idea of how it should be developed so that he could brief the writer properly. He therefore needed some knowledge of radio writing techniques. If a major play was being chosen for adaptation, the producer had to have the ability to translate stagecraft into radio terms, and to find a writer who would be able to handle it.

The situation was slightly different when it came to plotting storylines for serials, in which there was a clear framework of characters or events. In this case the producer formed part of a "committee". Harry Harper says:

For something like Dad and Dave, *we'd have story conferences. The people in-*

volved might be the writers, the producer and the sponsor. The script writers would present ideas for storylines, and we'd thrash them out together. This way of working had merit because people strike sparks off each other. With self-contained plays the fewer people involved in choosing, the better; but with serials, where you've got a running story that's going to go on for about ten years, it's better to have more people to develop it.

Somebody might say, 'Let's have a calamity', a bushfire or a flood, then side issues would come from that. This is where you needed skilful script writers. The man I knew best and worked closest with was a genius at taking a simple idea and making eight episodes — brilliant ones — out of it. He was Tom Swain, who wrote Mrs 'Obbs.

If the relationship between producer and writer was good enough, the producer might simply suggest an idea that the writer would go away and develop. Jim Bradley recalls that when a space serial called *Operation Moon Satellite* proved one of Artransa's great successes, selling to twenty-seven stations, people began asking for a sequel.

I had to think quickly, and called in the American writer Jimmy Carhardt. 'We'll call the new serial The Nth Planet,' *I said. 'Where is it?' he asked, and I told him that was for him to decide.*

When he rang me a day or two later, he said that he was having great problems in locating the serial. I suggested that we should set it on the moon. 'But as men might land on the moon in the foreseeable future,' I said — this was in 1958 — 'let's set it on the part of the moon that nobody has ever seen on earth.'

That's all the briefing I gave him, and he went away and wrote some lovely stuff.

Once a writer had finished doing the scripts and they had been approved by the producer, and sometimes by the sponsor, casting could begin. A photograph in a 1952 *Broadcasting and Television Magazine* gives a somewhat romantic view of this process. It shows a very pensive Harry Dearth, biting the end of a pencil and frowning over a script. The caption (which is really an advertisement for Macquarie) reads, "What we need is a good, elderly sadist." Whatever this play might have been — if indeed it existed — the photograph does carry the point that the whole business of finding the right actor for a part could be crucial. At a time when the really good actors were much in demand, rushing from studio to studio, knowing two or three suitable people (in case the first choice was not available) was important.

As some drama producers had been actors before they came to radio, they had built up working contacts in the theatre. However, it was very much the actor's responsibility to make sure that producers knew about him or her. "They had to promote themselves constantly," says Benny Coombes, former financial director of the Macquarie network. "They still do, I guess, even though most of them have agents now. But even really top people like Lyndall Barbour had to keep going around the various companies to say hello to producers and to make sure she was not forgotten."

Macquarie found a solution to this problem by adopting a system that streamlined some aspects of the casting process.

We employed two women on casting. Each producer would fill in a sheet with alternative choices for a particular part, and the women were responsible for tracking down and booking the actor or actress.

I remember that at one time a few actors complained that they were being overlooked for parts; Neva Carr Glyn came in one day and really sounded off about some producers having favourites. So the manager of the station, a man called Horner, set up a very simple system. He would go through the producers' casting sheets every now and

again and make a note of actors' names. Then he might say, 'We haven't used so-and-so for a while . . . how about him or her?'

Of course, there might have been a good reason why the producer hadn't used a particular actor for some time. The right part might not have come up or the actor might have been a very difficult person to work with. "Some actors you would like as people and you'd fraternise with them to some extent," says Harry Harper. "Others you'd use because they were competent, but you had nothing in common with them, nor did they have anything in common with you. They might not like you, but they wanted the work. You might not like them, but you wanted their talent."

Once casting had been completed the producer might talk to the sound effects operator about any special music and effects necessary for the show. If the show was a serial, he wouldn't usually bother; he simply gave the effects man a copy of the script and depended on the right discs being brought into the studio for the production. However, if the show was more complex, producer and effects man could spend a long time doing a "line-up", going through the discs available. It was up to the effects man to invent particular sound combinations to suggest certain things, if required. There's more about this in the chapter on sound effects — but I'll just mention one of the most celebrated examples. For one *Goon Show* script, Spike Milligan wanted the exact sound of somebody being hit by a sock full of custard. The producer and BBC sound effects officer spent a long time running through almost every conceivable combination of sounds — until they hit on something that sounded right. They found a long woollen sock, filled it with custard and hit a board with it.

Once the play, serial or series moved into the studio, the producer's job suddenly became much more tense. Sitting in the control room with actors on the other side of the glass panel, and being surrounded by turntables and faders, he or she had to make sure not only that the actors delivered their lines properly, but that the whole production was recorded to time and on schedule and that all the effects were right. In the days before tape, schedules and tempers suffered if an actor fluffed a line or the effects person put a needle down on the wrong track; the whole show had to be done again from the top.

Sometimes things could go wrong for reasons totally outside the producer's control. Gordon Grimsdale recalls:

I wrote a programme called I Like Australia, *which was sort of free verse, rhythmic verse in some places — and with bits of acting interspersed. The ABC decided to do it and the Director of Drama, who at that time was Neil Hutchinson, allowed me to direct it. I did, and it worked very well. Then the BBC decided they would like to use it. They wanted me to reproduce it for them, but using original music because they couldn't use our recorded stuff for copyright reasons.*

We assembled the cast again, but we couldn't get all the same people we had had the first time round. Then we had the ABC orchestra for a large segment of the show, so we needed two studios. They were quite separate and a long way apart. So we had an elaborate system of rehearsal with the orchestra in one studio and the sound effects man in the studio, with the actors doing the live sound effects. We were hearing the music through at a whisper level, and getting cued. I had to cue the actors to come in and do things and cue the orchestra when they had to start.

It was pretty complex; I think we had five guys working in the control room. In those days (and it's probably still the same with the ABC) the control room staff were employed by the PMG.

The only time we could get for recording the show was an hour and a

quarter — allocated for a three-quarter-hour programme. So we had to work fast. The show was being recorded on a Saturday between, shall we say, two and three-fifteen in the afternoon.

On the day, we rehearsed early and I broke everybody off for lunch at about half past twelve I said, 'We'll take an hour for lunch, come back and have one quick run through before we tape it, and then we'll go.'

We came back and found that the PMG had changed shifts in the meantime; they had a completely new set of technicians who didn't have a clue what they were doing! By the time we'd explained it all to them, and they'd got it right, we were out of time. We had to do it again and it all cost a lot of money.

Even under more normal circumstances, a producer had to develop as many hands as the Indian goddess Kali when a production was running — either going live to air or being recorded. He had to listen to the actors and cue them when necessary, either by pressing a button that switched on a light next to the microphone, or by pointing through the glass in a modified Hitler salute; he had to cue the music, effects and faders and, while all this was going on, he had to make a mental calculation about the show's timing. This could be difficult to gauge. Quite often in rehearsals actors played faster or slower than they did during the recording. Sometimes a producer might have calculated that he had plenty of time, only to find that two or three minutes had disappeared.

Making calculations about how long a page of dialogue or narration would take in performance was an art in itself. "You got quite good at it by practising," says Leslie Rees, who produced plays for the ABC as well as being federal drama editor. "I remember once I did a production of Eugene O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra*; two hours, live to air from the studio. I kept progressive timings as we went through it and at the end it came to one hundred and nineteen minutes and thirty-five seconds . . . just twenty-five seconds off the two hours, which wasn't bad."

No. Not bad at all. It's casual comments like this — as well as Gordon Grimsdale's story about the ABC programme — that demonstrate producers' technical expertise. And this skill came from having sharp ears, great powers of concentration, the ability to do several different things at once and devote attention to each, and, of course, years of experience.

Knowing how to get the performance he wanted from an actor or group of actors was a vital part of a producer's job. This often took tact and that indefinable quality, intuition. "The best producers could draw a performance out of you by letting you have your own ideas," said actress Muriel Steinbeck. "Paul Jacklin was tops. He had an amazing ability to inspire you without imposing his own ideas on your interpretation of a role. He could draw out the best of somebody without putting himself into that person."

Harry Dearth was terrific, too. He would sometimes get a bit obstreperous and say, 'I want you to do it this way', but normally his approach would be: 'How would you like to do this? What do you think about it?'

He had a very sensitive ear, but he wasn't beyond arguing. I remember one day refusing point blank to do a line in a show that had been okayed in England and done on the stage there. Nobody had objected to it, but I didn't like it. The line was: 'Oh, that would be just as if the Archbishop of Canterbury were in a bordello.'

I said to Harry, 'I won't do that line.'

He asked, 'Why? On religious grounds?'

I said, 'No, on the grounds of taste. I'll say "a bishop in a bordello" but that's all.'

We had a ding-dong blue about it, but he saw my point. You could fight like billyo with Harry but he'd love you if you were doing a good performance. Some

producers hated you forever if you argued with them!

Some producers employed more cunning methods of getting good performances from actors. An ABC drama producer was once faced with an actor who was known for his fruity delivery; something not appropriate for the show. Knowing that he couldn't convince the actor to tone it down a bit — that, after all, was his style — the producer asked him to speak very close to the microphone. The actor therefore had to drop his voice and speak more naturally, and he gave the performance the producer wanted.

In the studio — that deathly quiet, enclosed space — tension could build inexorably, particularly if deadlines were tight. It was then that the producer had to know how to relax the actors and just how far to let them go. Jim Bradley says:

I did a lot of Tarzan *episodes with Ray Barrett and Pamela Page. Ray used to mess around between takes to break the tension (assuming we had time for even a read through; we used to do six of these things in one afternoon!) Once the storyline called for Tarzan and Jane to climb a wall, and Ray said in rehearsal: 'No, Jane, I'll go first . . . now, you jump up . . . now hold me . . . not* there, *you fool!' I used to let him and Pamela play around with the script for a few minutes to get it out of their systems, then I'd say, 'OK, now work.'*

When one looks at the career profiles of some of Australia's best-known producers in the days of the bakelite box, it is not surprising that the standard of production in this country was so high. Very few came to radio without a great deal of experience in other related fields of show business. Harry Dearth was described in *Broadcasting and Television* in May 1957 as, "One of Australia's best-known radio producers and an actor-compere-announcer-singer-dancer of no mean repute". His father had been a well-known English bass baritone, and he himself played for J. C. Williamsons in the early 1930s before joining the ABC and later 2GB as an announcer and subsequently became the producer of the *Lux Radio Theatre* just before World War II broke out. He left radio to organise the first RAAF entertainment unit, touring the South Pacific area and presenting shows for the troops. After his discharge he rejoined radio as a producer and panel show compere.

Nigel Lovell was one of Australia's best-known radio actors before he moved to the other side of the microphone; Robert Peach made his mark as an actor and a writer as well as a producer. And Edward Howell, who started his career as a ten-year-old actor for J. C. Williamsons, was not only executive producer for AWA and the writer and star of his own *Fred and Maggie Everybody* for over twenty years, but he appeared in Australian films and on television, as well as in plays for the BBC and British repertory theatre.

These are just a few of the well-known names in Australian radio production; there are many others. They really knew their business. So many had had stage and radio acting experience themselves that their ability to draw out performances in other actors is not surprising.

Occasionally, too, they could not resist getting back behind the microphone and being actors again. One such was Laurence H. Cecil, who was born in Australia but who made a career as an actor at the Shubert Theatre, New York. He was also the first person to play *Hamlet* on radio, and he understudied John Barrymore's stage *Hamlet*.

As senior producer for the ABC, he once decided to play *Macbeth* as well as producing it. Nigel Lovell says:

As well as being "one of Australia's best-known radio producers", Harry Dearth conducted the occasional radio interview. Here he listens appreciatively to American tennis star Gussie Moran (January 1952).

This was OK — goodness knows, Laurie had produced so much radio by that stage that he knew all the technical business.

Came the night. The show was live on air, not recorded at all. Laurie must have thought he was back in the Shubert Theatre with John Barrymore, because he really cut loose and was giving the greatest stage performance of all time in front of the microphone. The guy on the panel was juggling his faders in and out — didn't know where he was. It was a very vigorous performance: 'Is this a dagger that I see before MEEEEE?'

Next morning Laurie met a fellow ABC producer at the lift. Laurie came bouncing up and said, 'Morning, Frank! Did you hear my Macbeth *last night?'*

'Yes,' said Frank, 'I was in Pitt Street at the time.'

Harry Dearth, too, found it difficult to resist the lure of the stage, even when he was producing. His flamboyant style in doing the *Lux Radio Theatre* set his own particular stamp on the show. "He was a very thorough and sympathetic producer," says Len London. "I don't think he was a very good actor myself, but he had a sense of drama and certainly got to know a lot about plays. I think he became one of the best radio producers in Australia, possibly one of the best in the world. He didn't need to stand on the stage like a conductor when he was doing the Lux shows, but it certainly was good to watch."

He could move fast when he had to, as well. I remember Marshall Crosby one night — he had a part in one of the Lux plays and he was getting pretty old. He stood there with his script shaking, waiting for his cue. When Harry gave it to him, he couldn't speak. Harry took one leap from his table, hit Marshall in the small of his back, and out came the words!

Photographs of Harry Dearth show a tall, thin man with a rather worried expression but an elegant appearance. He looks like the sort of man whose very glance would shame an errant speck of dust into disappearing before he had to flick it away from his sleeve. But he wasn't at all supercilious; in fact, everybody seems to remember him as "a very nice man"... and, as Gordon Grimsdale says, a "teddibly English" one.

One of the famous stories about Harry was when he came out in the middle of a production of the Lux Radio Theatre *and walked up to one character. He said:*
'Nownownowdearboy,
yabbayabbayabbayabba page sixty-two
dear boy, yabbayabbayabbayabba...
remember: diction, dear boy, diction!'

Another producer whose name was very familiar to listeners was E. (for Evelyn) Mason Wood. Executive producer of the *Caltex Theatre* and the Macquarie Theatre, for which he worked extensively with adaptor Richard Lane, he produced many other plays and serials. Born in the west country of England, he served in World War I in France and was awarded the Military Cross in 1916. He began his Australian radio career as an announcer in Victoria, joined the staff of 2GB as an announcer and chief copy writer in 1935 and stayed with Macquarie for many years as executive drama producer.

"Woody", as everybody calls him, looked as different from Harry Dearth as two men possibly could. He was short and round, and wore those circular spectacles much beloved of opticians in the 1930s and 1940s. Photographs show a frowning, serious chap; there's a superb publicity shot showing him attacking a rose bush with a pair of secateurs. The caption reads: "E. Mason Wood, relaxing in the garden away from the worries of radio..." It would, however, be impossible to find a photo of anybody who looks less relaxed. Judging by the worried gleam behind those round glasses, he expects the rose bush to

E. Mason Wood discusses a script with American star Freddie Bartholomew (1948).

snarl and bite.

Unlike Harry Dearth, Woody was not at all comfortable on the other side of the microphone. "I'll never forget the time he had to announce the name of an actor at the end of a play called Hans Farkas," says Gordon Grimsdale. "The correct pronunciation is 'Farkarse', actually. Woody got as far as 'Fark' and then stuttered over it about fifteen times and couldn't get any further."

Gordon Grimsdale also remembers Woody's distinctive way of giving notes to actors.

He once told Gordon Chater, 'No, no, no, Gordon, dear boy. When you come through the beaded curtain and the shot rings out and you're hit, the script says, "Oh". Well, you don't just say, "Oh". You must explode the word like a shot from a startled gun. Yes!'

And his approach to actors off duty could also be idiosyncratic.

One day he walked into the Assembly pub and an English actor called David Butler was the only bloke drinking at the bar. They said hello and stood drinking for a while, and Woody said to him, 'By the way, I've got a production coming up in about three weeks' time, a Caltex Theatre; *it's set in wartime and needs a lot of English chappies in it. I think we've got twenty-eight actual people in the cast, some of them doubling, so there are about forty speaking parts, you see. I've been scraping the absolute bottom of the barrel to find you.'*

Dave said: 'Thanks very much, Woody.'

Woody nodded, drained his glass and walked off, saying, 'Well, bye-bye, Barry', which left Dave feeling a little bit confused.

Under Woody's apparently vague exterior, however, lurked a sadistic streak: not as a producer, but as a writer. Jim Bradley gave him a writing job to do after his retirement.

He said he'd like to get his teeth into a show I was doing called Danger Point, *and I said, 'Now look, Woody, we don't want any violence in this one. New Zealand hates it, and they're one of our best customers.' Woody looked a bit hurt, and said, 'You don't have to tell me, Jim', and off he went.*

You know what he came back with! One of the most horrific scripts I've ever seen. He had three sisters called Faith, Hope and Charity; each one was a nurse. They lived in this extraordinary house, like a French chateau, and you could visualise a winding marble staircase leading up to the minstrels' gallery. And the gore! Faith, having murdered four men and knowing that the police were after her, decided to take a nosedive onto the marble floor below. Woody wrote as a sound effects note the best way to get the sound of her neck breaking!

I kid you not! A funny man.

After television hit and large-scale radio production gradually disappeared, many producers were philosophical about it. Several transferred to television with relative ease; stage experience presumably helped. For instance, Harry Dearth became programme manager for ATN7, compered one of the first TV quiz shows, *Pantomime Quiz*, with his daughter Harriet, and was executive producer for one of Australia's first drama series, *Jonah*. Hector and Dorothy Crawford, whose *Music for the People* and *Opera for the People* had been among the most popular musical productions, forsook high notes and *rallentandos* for the more violent delights of police shows, such as *Homicide* and *Division 4*, among others. And Gordon Grimsdale is still running a successful company that makes television commercials and short films.

Some stayed as actors in radio; some, such as Harry Harper and E. Mason Wood, retired; others moved on to entirely different fields.

For producers were all vigorous, creative entrepreneurs — members of a special breed.

16
"You have to write your head off"

C. O. THEME. FADE FOR
1. SULLIVAN (Softly): Marianne! She made a bonfire of life . . . and danced in its flames.

C. O. MUSIC STING
2. VOICE: Danse Macabre. . . from the novel by Frederic Mullaly, the intriguing story of the loves of Marianne, fabulous, exotic and despairing, set against the background of café society in Europe today. . .

If a radio producer was like the conductor of an orchestra, the script was his score. The expression marks were the instructions to the control operator; the numbers at the side of speeches corresponded to the bars marked in music scores — indicators for performers in rehearsal if something had to be done again. (A common production note in radio was, "Fred, take it from 15 on page 2".)

Whether a composer is putting down black notes on ruled manuscript paper or a writer is typing dialogue with studio and effects directions on blank white bond, he or she must be able to "hear" the sound being made through the imaginative, inner ear. A conductor or producer must "hear" it back by the same means while reading it.

Of course, the people who wrote radio scripts for a living in the days of the bakelite box didn't spend any time musing about their craft. People like Kay Keavney, Richard Lane, Peter Yeldham, Sumner Locke Elliott, Morris West, Eleanor Witcombe, James Workman and dozens of others just put their heads down and worked at their typewriters or dictating machines. The result was that Australian radio produced some of the fastest and most professional radio script writers in the world.

They had to be fast; the volume of material necessary to feed the Australian radio industry was stunning. As Grace Gibson has said, at one time her studio was turning out sixty-six quarter-hour serial episodes per week for Sydney alone, plus dramas, documentaries and educational programmes, and Grace Gibson Productions was only one of several companies that produced radio shows. To keep up, writers had to take their scripts straight from the typewriter to the studio; there wasn't much time for revision, then or later. "You'd give it to the producer and that was the last you ever saw of it," says Peter Yeldham, who wrote his first radio script at seventeen and who is now well-known as a TV script writer; he adapted Kylie Tennant's *Ride On Stranger* and Roger McDonald's *1915* for the ABC. "It went straight on to the stencil and out to the actors. Probably the next day they were doing it in the studio."

Kay Keavney regards writing scripts for Australian radio as "surely the toughest school in the world". Like Peter Yeldham, she started when she was young, worked

for years in commercial radio and is now a successful journalist. In a piece she wrote for the *National Times* in 1981, she added: "Fees being pretty low by overseas standards, you had to work fast and be versatile. You switched schizophrenically from drama to comedy, from original stuff to adaptations of the world's classics, from children's plays or documentary to the perennial, 'Aye, it's me, Dr Mac...' Visiting English and American producers expressed amazement at the speed with which we worked on low budgets and the standard achieved in spite of it."

People like Peter Yeldham and Kay Keavney were not only working for the Australian home market, of course; production houses sold a great many shows overseas. Because of foreign sales, writers had to follow certain rules. "We were told not to do anything about Australia, because that wasn't very interesting to the world at large," says Peter Yeldham. "We were trying to sell scripts to America or to South Africa. Most of the scripts had to be set in Europe or New York. None of us had ever been there, but we seemed to know it very well. We read travel books and we were all very hooked on overseas at the time."

Writers' bread and butter was soap opera, the daytime serials, which were fun to do and set the writer free to spend more time on better-quality shows. However, they weren't always easy to write. Putting them together, in fact, could involve a great deal of work. Peter Yeldham says:

Generally with a long-running serial or series you had to make up your own stories. You'd go to somebody like Grace Gibson and say, 'I've got this idea; here it is'. Grace would ring around sponsors and see if there was any interest in the idea. Then, if there was, she'd come back to you and say, 'Right. Start it'.

Generally you were asked to write fifty-two or a hundred and four episodes, but sometimes you were told that wasn't enough. The sponsor might want two hundred and eight episodes because they intended to run it four times a week for a year. But everything was geared to twenty-six, fifty-two, a hundred and four or two hundred and eight episodes.

We wrote twelve and a half minutes for a quarter-hour and twenty-five minutes for a half-hour episode. The rest of the time, of course, was for the commercials. In quarter-hours, the commercials came just at the beginning and the end, so that was no problem; in half-hours I think there was one at the beginning, one in the middle and one at the end. (I remember writing for Smoky Dawson when he came back from America — a sort of adventure series. The marvellous thing was that in the fifteen minutes he always sang at least one cowboy song, so I only had to write nine minutes!)

You had to think of some kind of cliff-hanger so people would keep listening after the commercial break, but it wasn't quite as bad as today's commercial television. I find it very inhibiting that you have to build up to a climax before the commercial break every ten minutes or so; in fact, I think that's responsible for a lot of the phoniness in television serials, because you can't build up to some false climax five times in an hour. It's impossible. .

Writing serials could be a lonely business because one writer was responsible for all episodes. "I don't know how television can swap writers around as much as they do and still keep the story-line tight," says Grace Gibson.

Writers were not worth their salt if they couldn't manage to turn out at least five quarter-hour episodes per week. (They would also have starved, since scripts were bought on a piecework basis.) Some writers did many more than five — ten, twelve, even fourteen quarter-hour scripts per week was not an uncommon output. The most prolific writer of all must surely have been Maurice Francis, well known for his thrillers. He could dictate no fewer than

twenty to twenty-five quarter-hour serial episodes per week.

Peter Yeldham says:

When you were writing five episodes to be broadcast in any one week, you'd roughly plan what was going to happen and then go helter-skelter to finish them. This discipline was very useful to me later on, because it taught me to work very hard and to be inventive.

To this day, I don't like to work with a step-by-step outline of exactly what's going to happen. I like to let the characters work it out as they go along. I think this goes back to the radio days of saying: 'Well, we've got to get to this stage after x minutes of drama, and in the meantime let's look at all the permutations that could occur.'

One thing you had to remember all the time: you had to catch and hold people's interest very quickly. In television there's a phrase — 'the shit point' — that also applied to radio. If, after about a minute, the listener doesn't find the programme exciting, he will say, 'Oh, shit' and change the channel.

If it was a serial of fifty-two episodes, I'd do myself a precis and take it in batches of four episodes. Self-contained shows were much harder to work out; I literally had to think of an idea before I went to sleep at night. My wife was a great help because she has a very fertile mind. We'd lie in bed and I'd say: 'We can't go to sleep before we've thought of an idea.'

Eventually something would come and I'd get up at five in the morning and start work on it, trying to write a large chunk before breakfast. I could never work like that today! But lots of people were then.

Writers pounded on typewriters for hours on end, muttered their words aloud, sometimes acted them out; there were probably almost as many individual working methods as writers. But as long as the scripts came out of the typewriter or the dictaphone professionally and on time, it didn't matter how they were done.

Some methods of script writing were a little unusual. Deirdre Hill, who worked as a stenographer with the George Edwards production company during the war, recalls:

Eric Scott wrote Inspector Scott of Scotland Yard *and* Martin's Corner. *He loved doing the thriller type of serial, but it was always horrifying to work with him because he was an actor too. You'd be sitting there while Eric Scott (who liked to work in the dim light and who always had the curtains drawn a bit) acted out the whole thing. There would be murders and screams . . . and you'd be sitting there, just quietly taking it all down in shorthand!*

Another writer who preferred dictating scripts to typing them out (though presumably with less exciting interpolations than Eric Scott provided) was Gwen Meredith, the author of *Blue Hills*. She has said that she was a very bad typist and that typing interfered with the "flow" of her episodes. She started to use a dictaphone — this was in the days when they stood about seventy-five centimetres high and used wax cylinders instead of tape. When she spoke, a needle marked the wax, recording what was said. The wax cylinders were sent to a typist, then back to her for corrections, after which they went to the ABC where they were retyped and duplicated for the actors. "I started doing the different voices of the characters," she says, "but I stopped out of kindness to the typist."

Gordon Grimsdale, however, does not agree that typing results in a stilted script. He says, "I tried dictating, but it wasn't very successful. In writing I found, as a lot of people who write dialogue have done, that you can pound the typewriter when it's an angry moment and caress it when the script calls for affection. This is very difficult to do when you're dictating to a secretary."

It must be nice to be a writer, thought

people outside the radio industry. All he or she has to do is sit at the typewriter or scribble on a pad, making up wonderful stories all day. How glamorous! What fun!

But of course writers were anything but glamorous to their colleagues in radio. "We were very poorly regarded in those days," says Peter Yeldham. "Just creatures who stayed at home and produced endless reams of words on paper. We weren't encouraged to come in and see our work being recorded because producers and techs would think: What's he doing here? Why has he got time to come and watch? He should be writing."

Our only release was that on Fridays we'd come in and collect our money in cash, then we'd all go to the Australia bar and generally get very drunk. All the production units in Sydney were around Bligh Street and Phillip Street, and we found some good drinking spots in that area.

Writers were a hard-drinking lot on Fridays. We really couldn't afford the time the rest of the week. All our relaxation time seemed to be channelled into that one day, then we'd start again on Monday mornings. Funnily enough, even then weekends were sacrosanct; it was very strange for anybody to work on weekends. But during the week, when you were working, you had absolutely no social life. All you did was write, write, write your head off.

The sheer pressure and tension involved in turning out words week after week had predictable results from time to time. "An awful lot of writers had breakdowns, you know," says James Workman. "The more you wrote, the more money you made. But you can't keep going churning stuff out and still keep it original, and the sheer pressure of working that way was too much for many people."

It's hardly surprising. The quantity of words a writer with a family to support had to turn out in order to make a living was phenomenal. "Because we were paid so badly we had to write a great amount every week," says Peter Yeldham. "When I started just after the war, original scripts paid three pounds a quarter-hour. About six years later the figure was five pounds a quarter-hour. By the time I left to go to England in the mid-1950s, I was actually getting twenty-five pounds a half-hour, and they told me I was pricing myself out of the market!"

The production companies set the scales of pay; only if you were a bit more in demand could you say, 'I want another five pounds'. There was no Writers' Guild until about 1956. It was very, very weak, and we could achieve nothing. Looking back, if we'd been a bit more assertive we could have achieved a lot, but nobody ever thought that way in those days, which was a great pity.

Could this have been because competition was so tough and that if Writer A refused a certain fee, a company would have no trouble in employing Writer B, who would take it?

When writers sold their words they also sold the copyright on their script — a state of affairs that is unthinkable now that the Writers' Guild is a body that effectively guards the interests of writers. "We were paid for the script, and that was that," says James Workman. "The company who bought it got all the rights. Of course, the copyright laws were very lax then. It would have been nice to think that we could make thousands and thousands of dollars with repeat fees, but in those days sixty pounds a week was pretty good money."

The company could repeat the programme as often as it liked without paying the author a penny. If a programme was sold overseas the writer did not profit from the sale, either. "I think that if I got a shilling for every script of mine that was sold outside Australia, I'd be retired now," says Peter Yeldham wryly.

Writing for radio has certain very obvious limitations, the main one being that the

audience makes use of only one sense: hearing. When used creatively this limitation can be an asset, a spur to the imagination; often, though, it creates difficulties for writers. A plot may be developing beautifully, music might have established the right mood, every aspect of the character might be thoroughly delineated . . . but what happens if a writer has to describe a room or a setting for an audience who cannot see it?

In bald terms, the problem is like this:

MAN 1: See that building opposite?
MAN 2: You mean the grey, seventeen-storeyed castle with the hunchback in front of it, and a portcullis — the building that looks like an asylum, or worse?
MAN 1: Yes.

It looks ridiculous on paper; it wasn't so good spoken aloud on radio, either. This kind of flat, unrealistic writing is called "pearl-handling" or "pearl-handled pistolling". Gordon Grimsdale says that it came about "because the actor John Cazabon had to say the immortal line: 'Now that I'm standing on this carved ebony staircase with this pearl-handled pistol in my hand, stick up your hands!' "

Writers pearl-handled a lot. It was very frustrating for a writer not to be able to mention the fact that the walls of a room might be hung with ancestral pictures, if they weren't using narration in the script. But it had to be realistic. In real life people don't exclaim: 'Ooh, look at the lovely pictures of your ancestors hanging in those carved frames on those damask-lined walls!'

Some problems could be solved by the ingenious use of sound effects or dialogue; writers used other tricks of the trade, too. The passage of time was suggested by a fade or a few seconds of music (a "sting" or "bridge") to act as a sort of aural scene change, for instance.

However, in 1952 Gordon Grimsdale decided to see if successful radio could be written without the aid of the conventional narration, fadeouts and music bridges.

Having worked in the legitimate theatre a great deal, I was very conscious of the three Greek unities of time, place and action. [i.e., the action of a Greek classical tragedy takes place in a single day, the same scene is used throughout and one story is developed without subplots.] *I tried to work out in my own mind what unities one would have to observe for making perfect radio in the same way that the ancient Greeks thought their unities did for theatre.*

I decided that radio has only two dimensions — sound and time, and I devised a radio programme which I called Thirty Minutes to Go, *in which the elapsed time of the action was the same as the elapsed time on air. For example, we might have a story about a condemned prisoner with only thirty minutes to live. There would be no narration, no fadeouts or music bridges; the action would just follow straight through. Of course, we had to think of the commercials but we made allowances for those; if a commercial break lasted for one minute, by the time you got back to the story one minute had elapsed.*

It was avant-garde, way ahead of its time, and people didn't want to know about it to begin with. Then a network picked it up and took a punt on it, and it caused an enormous amount of attention. We did fifty-two, and then another fifty-two under the title of Deadline. *The whole series was replayed at least eight or nine times, and it sold all over the place.*

Including the USA. In February 1954 *Broadcasting and Television* magazine reported that *Thirty Minutes to Go* was rated the fourth-highest programme on the American CBS network in Chicago, and the top imported show; it also rated among the top ten shows in New York. Script writers who worked on it included Kay Keavney, Coral Lansbury, Gordon Grimsdale himself and James Workman.

James Workman, who was born in Scotland and came to Australia in 1947, was an actor as well as a writer. His scripts were innovative and, some thought, difficult to produce and act. At a time when most writers let each character say something definite, followed by a speech from another character, Workman's scripts used parallel conversations. "His scripts moved terribly fast," says Gordon Grimsdale, who worked with Workman a great deal. "Five characters speaking together would say one word, three words, two words, then perhaps five words — and it was all totally interlaced. Sometimes, when one conversation was going on, another would be riding over the top of it. The actors couldn't handle it. They said, 'Christ, what's that?' But we rehearsed and rehearsed, and in the end they loved it!"

James Workman adds:

The actors were very unhappy with the first one I did. We had a lot of effects in it, too, and the panel operator orchestrated it brilliantly. But the play was hard on the actors because very short lines of dialogue don't necessarily follow each other in normal speech. The dialogue ran from idea to idea, rather like a Goon Show *format. They'd listen to the characters and forget the exposition and plot.*

James Workman was writing Pinteresque dialogue long before Harold Pinter; in Australian radio his technique was way ahead of its time.

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James Workman, Kay Keavney, Peter Yeldham, Morris West, Eleanor Witcombe and dozens of others moved out when television came. It gradually became impossible to earn a living simply by writing for radio.

One of the first to make the move was Peter Yeldham, who went to London in the late 1950s and stayed for some years. He says:

You had much more time over there. In fact, I was amazed how much time you had to write scripts. Gradually, I got into a new pattern where I'd write the first draft of something and then rewrite it myself. I found rewriting much more important than the original draft; they weren't doing as much work in quantity as Australia, so I could polish more.

I enjoyed doing radio writing for the BBC, mainly adaptations from television plays, and it was wonderful from a financial point of view because they actually paid you for repeats. But getting work was tough. I sent some shows back to Grace Gibson, which kept me alive for the first year in London.

But I had to get out of Australia at that time. I felt that there wasn't going to be much chance here for writers with television, and I could see radio closing down eventually. I don't think there was anything clairvoyant about that — we all felt that way. It did take a while, though.

James Workman did some television in Australia when it started here. "I didn't like writing for TV," he says, "it's such a cold medium."

I stayed on longer in radio than most of us, I think, because I was happy in it. Lots of writers were eager to get into television, but it was a dead thing. Impossible. Radio stopped and television wasn't interested. It was a long, long time before television really got off the ground in Australia.

You see, what was so good about writing for radio was the fun of things being produced that you'd written. When you've written something you think is good and it's on air very quickly, it hasn't lost its magic for you. TV's awful. You might write a script and two years later somebody says they like it and you go through interminable sessions with producers and directors. The magic goes.

With almost every writer who worked in radio during the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s,

the tough training told. Some of Australia's best-known writers came out of radio: Alan Seymour, author of the play *The One Day of the Year*, novelist and playwright Sumner Locke Elliott, Ralph Peterson, Rex Reinits, Morris West and Eleanor Witcombe, television writer and adaptor of *My Brilliant Career* and *The Getting of Wisdom* for film.

But what did writing for radio teach that enabled these people and others to go on to success in other media? Peter Yeldham says:

Discipline, I think, and the ability to create stories. I've always thought it was a very good training ground, and I think most of the people who were in radio in those days would say the same. It was virtually all we had at the time . . . there was no film, no theatre, and we worked away at radio as professionally as we could. I think we got a lot out of it.

Kay Keavney, who has worked in radio, television, film and print journalism, has said that she still likes radio best.

This is the lure: the intimacy and immediacy of communication. Your theatre is right inside the mind of each individual listener. His imagination has to work with you and you have to stir it, with no other tools but sound or silence. For a writer I think radio was a marvellous medium. The writer creates his own images, peoples his own bare stage, much as Shakespeare begged his audience to do.

And your own imagination is untrammelled. You can put a girdle round the earth in forty seconds, switch continents or centuries without worrying about sets, costumes or costs — just with a fade or a music transition.

I've a notion that Shakespeare would have loved radio.

17

"Speak the speech... trippingly on the tongue"

Speak the speech, I pray you, trippingly on the tongue . . . Nor do not saw the air too much with your hand, thus. . .

Hamlet *Act III Scene ii*

If Hamlet had been an Australian radio producer instead of the Prince of Denmark, the scene in which he gives directions to his cast would have been played very differently. Knowing that he would probably have to get through four episodes of a serial in a morning, he would not have had time to go over a script with the actors in such detail. Besides, the actors would have been looking at their watches and muttering, "For God's sake, can't he hurry it up? I've got a call at AWA in an hour."

Admittedly, *Hamlet*'s cast appeared in only one performance; a one-off show with no possibility of overseas sales or repeat fees. But even with special plays or productions, Australian actors rarely needed a producer to tell them what not to do at great length. They were too professional, too polished.

Hamlet's scene with the players could have been rewritten for a 1954 Australian radio studio to read: "OK. We'll run it through once, then we'll go for a take."

Australian radio actors were regarded as some of the most professional and adroit in the world. When overseas stars came to this country to appear in special productions, they were often staggered at Australians' ability to pick up a script, read it at sight and turn in a good performance. Moreover, they were very skilled with accents.

Jim Bradley tells a story to illustrate this.

On one of his trips to America, Stan Clark, the General Manager of 2GB, decided to take three or four examples of our half-hour self-contained dramas to audition for the big boys on a network over there. We used to get actors to do an American sort of accent, but I suppose it was really mid-Atlantic; a voice that I called 'Ronald Colman in jeans'. It had to be acceptable anywhere — in Fiji, South Africa, New Zealand, wherever our shows were sold.

One night Stan sat down with a bunch of very hard-headed Americans and one said, 'We understand you have Gunsmoke *over there.'*

This was a very popular western that went to television later; we had the rights to it, but we did our own scripts for Australia. 'We'd be very interested to hear how you handle it, because you Australians really can't do an American accent.'

Stan played them a disc of the show and when they'd heard two episodes, they said: 'Very good, very interesting indeed . . . but you've still got this problem with

the accent.'

Stan said, 'You mean you're not happy with the accents of the lead characters?'

'Well, the sheriff is fine — he's great, but we're not sure about some of the others,' the American boss said. 'They haven't got it quite right.'

Stan just said: 'OK. Such and such a character is played by Arthur McGuire, who's an American. This one is Wayne Polsen, who's an American. The lead is Joe McCormack, a Canadian who's lived most of his life in America.

'And the sheriff, whom you think is so great and who has the best accent, is Terry McDermott, who was born and bred in Australia!'

They couldn't believe it!

One very good reason why Australian radio actors developed such expertise at their craft was because there were so few other outlets for their talents. Unlike America and Britain, Australia did not have a flourishing amateur or professional theatre in the 1940s and 1950s; only J. C. Williamsons and the Elizabethan Theatre Trust (in the mid-1950s) put on plays, and they tended to import casts for successful musicals. Television didn't start until 1956. Small wonder that producer Laurence H. Cecil said: "For more than twenty-five years these artists have developed skill in radio reading to such an extent that it ceases to be reading and in some cases is really great acting."

In a 1956 advertisement, *Broadcasting and Television* magazine proudly announced that more than 200 Australian radio artists had shared 936 parts worth 7488 hours of employment in the 104 plays presented in the *Caltex Theatre* and *General Motors Hour* alone in 1955. "Both the sponsors of the programmes and Macquarie are proud of this substantial contribution to the development of Australian acting talent," said the ad.

So much radio was being made that good actors were much in demand. It was not unknown for an actor to do sixty or seventy quarter-hour productions per week, for most of them had to be able to rehearse and record a fifteen-minute script in less than an hour. They often read or rehearsed a one-hour drama at the weekend. Gordon Grimsdale says:

We would rehearse all morning from half-past eight until one o'clock, start again at two and go through till five-thirty or six, maybe seven. So we sort of grabbed a sandwich and a couple of beers in the middle of the day. We met in pubs at lunchtime — one called the Assembly in Phillip Street (now demolished), the long bar of the Australia, or the Metropole or Usher's. There were sometimes enough people who weren't working in the afternoons who'd set out to get drunk, and also try and get their mates drunk if they were working in the afternoon.

In those days, when I was directing a great deal, I always found it was wise to have morning sessions for the important plays — rehearsals or recordings — and to save the drip dramas for the afternoon.

With the hectic scheduling that working in radio involved, actors usually had little time to study their parts. Chasing the work was also a matter of split-second timing. Actors would ring their booking agencies (if they had them; most of them handled their own bookings), find out if they had a part for the next day and go around to pick up a script from whatever company had employed them.

Actor Nigel Lovell says:

You had to watch your bookings very carefully. If you double-booked you were really in the poo with your mates! The same thing happened if you forgot a call and didn't turn up. Everybody was on such a tight schedule, you see. You'd think, 'Right, I'm in this from nine to ten, but I think they'll finish at about ten to and I'll be able to get over to AWA and do a couple of episodes there, and I've got commercials at 12.30 at EMI.'

In Sydney, where most of the big shows

were produced, the rushing around was slightly easier than it could have been because most of the important studios and production houses were in the same general area. "In those days, and I'm speaking about the early 1950s, the major studios were in or around Market Street," says Gordon Grimsdale. "The 2GB Macquarie Broadcasting Service was in Phillip Street, 2UE was in Bligh Street and 2UW was in the State Theatre office block."

Even so... "You were always running," says Gwen Plumb. "That's why I'm in such good health for my age now. I had to run everywhere to get from one job to another. I could beat trams — I was faster than most of the buses. I've hitched rides on trucks and everything to get from one job to another — anything not to be late!"

Like writers, actors were very badly paid. This was partly because the money that a production company could earn for selling a quarter-hour serial all over Australia was a pittance by today's standards, and the company had to pay for its actors, writers and producers. Gordon Grimsdale says:

If you had a serial that had been sold on the basis of forty pounds an episode nationally, and each actor was receiving about one pound of that for appearing in a quarter-hour show, the economics got to the point where, as the producer, you had to say to the writer, 'Well, we can only average about five and a half people per episode (or four and a half, or four and three-quarter people). In other words, over twenty programmes you could only afford x number of actors.

When this happened — as it frequently did — it tested the ingenuity of both the writer and the actor. The situation was slightly easier on the writer — particularly if the producer had hired an actor or group of actors who were experienced "doublers". Most actors were; people played two or three parts in the same episode. Gordon Grimsdale:

Alan White and John Baker in a 1953 production of Rattigan's The Browning Version.

Somebody would walk on and say, 'The carriage awaits, me lord,' and reply, 'Thank you, Johnson' as the lord in the next breath. We always tried to use the people who were versatile, who could change their voices. They got extra money for it, but only twenty-five per cent extra for doubling. And an actor had to say more than fifteen words before he or she was paid for doing a double.

George Edwards, for instance, was renowned for the number of voices he used in his company's serials *Dad and Dave*, *Martin's Corner* and *Inspector Scott of Scotland Yard*. On one occasion, he played an old man, then had to go off mike and return as a young one. He faded off all right, but returned and delivered his next line in the same cracked old voice. Nell Sterling, who was playing opposite him, said quickly, "What are you doing back here? I thought you'd gone." In the same cracked voice, Edwards said, "I've just come back for my hat. Goodbye, my dear." Then he went off mike again and returned as the young man.

The reason why Edwards didn't just stop and start again can be stated in one word: time. The programme was being recorded straight on to a wax master, to be pressed into a sixteen-inch acetate disc. In the days before tape came along all recorded programmes were made in this way. If somebody fluffed a line it wasn't possible to stop, go back to the mistake, erase it and carry on. The whole episode had to be remade, right from the beginning. Nigel Lovell says: "I remember doing an episode of a serial called *Danger Unlimited* with Lyndall Barbour. Heath Burdock was the announcer and narrator. We came to the end, and Heath said, 'How will Jeff and Beth get out of this? *Miss* the next exciting episode of *Danger Unlimited*!' Lyndall and I looked at him as the final music played, and said: 'Do you realise what you've just done?' We had to do the whole thing over again, just because Heath had fluffed on the very last line!" In a situation like this

everyone lost time — and money, too, because they were not paid extra for running through the episode again.

Stumbling over words was one of those occupational hazards in radio acting, and it's produced some good stories. Muriel Steinbeck was in the studio when a colleague became confused one day.

He hadn't picked up his script before. The typist had written one line, 'What's that on the road!' and on the next line was 'Ahead!' He read it as: 'What's that on the road! A head!'

But there were ways in which a bit of foresight could avoid the danger of fluffing on disc. Deirdre Hill says: "We had to be very careful when we did George Edwards's scripts because he never looked at them before he cut the episodes. If he came to an unfamiliar word, he would fluff. We adopted a system of phonetic spelling to avoid this: for instance, instead of typing 'psychiatric', we'd spell it 'sykiatrick'."

Not only did actors have to start again if they messed up a line, but if the show took longer to record than was regarded as necessary, the production company wanted to know the reason why. Every time a delay in production occurred, the fact — and the name of the actor responsible — was recorded on the producer's running sheet, together with the time taken to do the show all over again. If an actor made too many mistakes too often he or she soon found that bookings dropped off.

Other actors besides George Edwards became very skilled in getting out of awkward situations and potential fluffed lines; their livelihood could be affected, after all. Writer Bill Jones once told a story illustrating this.

Recording the biblical epic The Prince of Peace *was a nerve-racking business.*

In a typical rehearsal, producer John Wiltshire cues actors F. G. Guster, May Haynes, Joe Brennan and Ida Newton.

Because of the huge cast in the New Testament we had to use would-be actors in the bit roles. One afternoon a tyro, with only two lines to say, stood up and approached the mike five minutes before his cue. The old hands shouldered him gently aside.

Eventually his moment of truth came. He was sweating and pale and holding on to his script as if it was a sky hook. He opened his mouth to establish his claim to fame — and promptly fainted. Robert Peach, playing the disciple John, caught him on the way down, read the lines in a cool voice and then lowered him to the floor. He lay there for the remainder of the episode.

There has always been a lot more to radio acting than simply reading lines from scripts without mistakes. As soon as an actor walked into a studio he or she had to size up the microphone that was being used for the recording, and tailor his or her performance accordingly. Nigel Lovell says:

We used a few round old carbon microphones with a sort of plug at the back. These were only single-sided. People would dart in and say a line, then dash back again to let the next person say something. This was OK for a two-handed scene, but if there were four or five people there could be pandemonium around the microphone. You just had to shove your way in and say your line.

Then we had the 44, which is that diamond-shaped microphone you see in a lot of pictures. That was marvellous because it was double-sided. The normal way to fade on and off was to walk away from the microphone and come in or out, saying your line — but the best fades on the 44 were done by going in a circle around to the dead side. You'd get a nice, smooth fade or an entrance that way.

You had to be careful with it, though, because it had a ribbon. If your ps and bs were very explosive the ribbon used to blur and you'd get distortion. Even if you were supposed to be in a rage you learned very quickly not to blast hell out of the microphone.

Then we had the cardioid type with a heart-shaped field around it, and you could adjust them with a key or a penny; then gradually came the Neumanns and the C12. They were almost too sensitive for good acting.

You had to play all your mikes. If you were doing an intimate scene you'd get in closer, and if you were angry you'd talk past the mike rather than straight into it. You were told if you blasted the mike; the producer would say, 'Hey, break that down'.

I remember the wax discs that Columbia used for recording in the early days. After you'd done the show they'd take the disc off the machine and hold it up to the light at an angle, inspecting all the grooves. If somebody had expanded too much or made too much noise they could see that the groove was too big — the needle might even have gone over into the next one. They'd say it was unsatisfactory for making a matrix from, and we'd have to do it again.

Whether they blasted the microphone or not, actors were sometimes told off for "four-twelving". This curious expression was much used in radio during the 1950s and 1960s — it comes from a Stan Freberg comedy record of the 1950s, which had a send-up of a popular US television programme called *Dragnet* (which was popular here for a few years when TV first started). Like the series it parodied, this sketch used a lot of cop-type jargon. In one section the dialogue ran something like this:

Young actors Rod Taylor and John Meillon in the early 1950s. Taylor (left) went to America to continue his career in television a few years after this picture was taken; John Meillon, whose radio career began at the age of 13, has since become one of Australia's best-known television and film actors.

SUSPECT (hysterically): But you can't arrest me! I've got a wife and kids and a blind grandmother to support . . . you've got to let me go! You *must*!
COP (laconically): Book him on a four-twelve.
SUSPECT: What's a four-twelve?
COP: Overacting.

During the 1950s at least two well-known Sydney actresses were reputed to have car number plates with their initials, followed by the numbers 412.

Actors had to know how to be intense if the script required it, without hamming it up. As Gwen Plumb says, "If you had nothing to work with except your voice, you learned to analyse every word so that you could extract the most from it to portray what you had to portray — whether the emotion was amusement, terror, hatred or whatever. You learned to put light, shade and colour into your voice; it became instinctive after a while. A lot of the young kids now who come into television haven't had that experience or training in radio or theatre. I wince every time I hear some of their inflections. They're all wrong!"

Muriel Steinbeck added:

Anybody can read a script. A parrot can be trained to say the words. But voices have to be real *— temporarily, at least, you have to feel the emotion before you can present it properly. In radio you can pick a phoney voice so quickly. But if you've got to be sexy, for instance, you don't necessarily have to speak in a deep, husky voice. You can be sexy in a high register. If you feel the emotion and think it, it will come.*

As well as remembering to play the microphone, to read lines correctly and to express the right feeling through the words they were given, actors had to know about accents. "It was absolutely necessary for every successful Australian actor working in radio to have a sort of indeterminate accent which, as far as I can remember, was based on standard southern English," says Leonard Teale.

He not only had to have that as his base, but he had to have a number of English provincial accents, certainly Cockney, Lancashire, Yorkshire, Scots and Irish. He was also expected to have what was vaguely known as West Country . . . they didn't differentiate between Somerset and Devon, provided you went, 'Aaargh, aaargh', a bit. It was also necessary to have a non-provincial American accent; it helped if you had Bronx and Brooklyn, strangely enough, for taxi drivers. And an American southern accent. That would just about get you by.

In fact, about the only accent an Australian actor didn't need to have was an Australian one. This was because shows were sold everywhere — and Americans and British sometimes complained (as they still do, with Australian films) that the home-grown accent was difficult to understand. There was a style for playing Australian parts when required. Leonard Teale:

We were doing a dramatised documentary once and I was playing a stockman for John Thompson of the ABC. After I read it through, I thought, 'Well, this character would probably come from the sort of background I come from.' I was born in Milton, a suburb of Brisbane, and I went to Milton State School, which was a pretty rough sort of place. I remembered the way the kids spoke, and the way people spoke when I was in the Air Force during the war. The most obvious thing was to get very lazy lips, not to move them at all, and to drop final gs as well as final aitches. So I started to do this for the part of the stockman.

When we came to production notes, Thompson insisted that the aitches

Roger Climpson and Diana Perryman in a synthetic Forest of Arden for an ABC production of Shakespeare's As You Like It *in 1957.*

should be sounded, and the gs too. He said: 'No stockman talks the way you were speaking then. Stockmen don't drop gs and final aitches.'

That was his opinion, so I had to revert to a sort of unaccented English voice. And that was pretty well standard practice.

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To the reading public at least, radio actors and actresses were, like writers, glamorous, exciting people. Newspapers and magazines carried endless photographs of them; they were pictured as Marie Antoinette or the Scarlet Pimpernel, complete with wigs and patches, if a major costume drama was about to begin, posed masterfully against the Sydney or Melbourne version of an eighteenth-century historic building. (In Sydney, this was usually the Conservatorium of Music; in Melbourne, the Exhibition building.) If they were advertising a contemporary drama, they faced each other scowling; and if the series was a detective or mystery thriller, the actress was likely to lie on her back on the floor, while an actor crouched over her, clasping her throat in his bare hands and leering at the camera.

Actors and actresses were "captured informally" as they sauntered down Collins Street or Pitt Street or Darlinghurst Road, Kings Cross. Photographers sneaked up on them by invitation as they sat outdoors "studying their scripts". These pictures usually show an actress seated on the grass, her full skirt spread around her in a half-hoop as she gazes pensively at some paper in her lap. There is not a pencil or a frown of concentration in sight.

Nigel Lovell says, "We welcomed the publicity, mainly for the show rather than for us. One of the things you learned very early in the business was never to believe any of your own publicity, and when you looked through those cuttings, you realised why you wouldn't! We used to make up some of these paragraphs about our private lives, just to give magazines like the *Radio-Pictorial* something to write about. Everything was done on the cheap. I didn't do many of those dress-up shots; they cost money. I suppose we were glamour people to some, but mostly it was very hard work."

Whether actors regarded themselves as being "glamorous" or not, they were certainly a raffish and bohemian community. In Sydney, they mostly lived around Kings Cross which, in the 1940s and 1950s, was a much more "arty" place than it is now — with its small coffee shops, trees and sunny streets. "I first started living in the Cross in about 1949," says Gordon Grimsdale. "Lloyd Berrell, Guy Doleman, John Cazabon and I all lived in the same block of flats in Liverpool Street, Darlinghurst. Sheila Sewell was living off Macleay Street, as was Neva Carr Glyn. Peter Finch lived in William Street, just above the shops, when he was around; Alan White lived in William Street, too. We lived there because it was only about a threepenny tram ride to the studios in the city."

In those days, Kings Cross had rather the atmosphere of New York's Greenwich Village. "God, the actors were a crazy bunch of people," says Gordon Grimsdale. "I remember one bloke whose wife had left him and his kids, too; he suddenly announced in the middle of a party that he was going to end it all. He just leaped out of a window, disappearing from sight and scaring the living daylights out of people. Fortunately, he landed on an awning a couple of storeys below."

Then there was the time that a well-known actress knocked on the door of a scriptwriter friend's flat very early one morning. When the scriptwriter opened it, wanting to know why on earth she was being visited at that hour, the actress said, "Look. You've got to help. John [a prominent actor] is down in the street, and he's after me with a crossbow."

"A *what*?"

The actress stuck to her story. Finally the scriptwriter lost patience. "I've never heard such rubbish," she declared, stalking

to her window. "If John's really down there, I'll soon tell him where to go."

She opened one of the shutters, ready to lean out, when ... *thkkkkk*! an arrow thudded into the wood.

Crazy, actors might sometimes have been; unintelligent they rarely were. "A great many people had come from the Sydney University Dramatic Society and lots had degrees," says Gordon Grimsdale. "Nigel Lovell was a Bachelor of Arts and a law graduate, and Lyndall Barbour had a BA too. Betty McDowell was supposed to walk around with a book of Persian mathematics under her arm!"

When you think about it, when you have to be articulate enough to deliver speeches well, literate enough to read quickly and intelligent and adaptable and, I guess, learned enough to use other accents and languages as freely as actors could, it stood to reason that there were very few ning-nongs around the place.

Some of us used to play word games when we were waiting around between episodes in the studio. They were really quite funny, some of them, and they often required quite a lot of research and erudition. For instance, we might play 'The Egyptian Hit Parade' and invent song titles such as: 'Tutankhamen Round the Mountain' and 'It's Getting Pharaoh Warmer'.

We sometimes talked in Latin or French ... we made awful puns sometimes. A few of us invented a sort of dog French, which consisted of taking Australian colloquialisms and translating them word by word into French. You got things like Donnez-moi une blonde aller *which meant, literally, 'Give me a fair go', or* Cessez porter sur *which is, 'Stop carrying on'. One of my favourites was* Gendarme cela*: 'Cop that!'*

I remember when Lyndall Barbour was standing in for Gwen Plumb on the 2GB women's session, she sat across the desk one day in paroxysms of delight, unable to laugh out loud. Opposite her was a bloke called Tom the Bookman who reviewed books once a week. He had said, 'Now, this book I found excellent, but it might be a shade urudite for some.'

They were quite urudite themselves, the actors!

They sometimes had a lot of fun in the studio. Gordon Grimsdale, who did some radio acting though he was better known as a producer, recalls a stirring incident that took place not long after he arrived in Sydney from New Zealand:

They had the Actors', Announcers' and Jockeys' Ball at the Trocadero in George Street, Sydney. A whole lot of us went and got very drunk and I woke up with several other people the following morning on Seven Shillings Beach. I realised that I had a nine-fifteen call — it was somewhere about seven at this stage. I leaped up, grabbed a bus and got myself washed and dressed and down to the studio and puffed and panted in through the doors at a quarter past nine, to find they'd already started.

Well, you should have seen everybody. Alan White was playing the lead and Frank Waters was the narrator. The show was When a Girl Marries, *and Frank was being wheeled around the studio on one of those sound effects doors about two feet high, on wheels. He was preaching a sermon on the evils of drink. Queenie Ashton was asleep under the piano. Alan White was asleep with his head against one of the baffle boards and his feet up on the wall in a V-shaped position.*

Colin Creagan, who was the producer, was in the control room with his head down on the desk. When I said, 'Where's my script?' he went, 'Mmmm', and pointed to it.

I found I was playing a character called Lieutenant (Police). I looked at the first page and found that after the first little piece of narration by Frank Waters, which was, 'When a girl marries ... dedicated to all those who are in love and to those who can remember', the music came up and I had to say a whole lot starting something like, 'Now, where were you

on the night of the fifteenth of February at eight pm! We know that at seven-thirty you were seen in Joe's Bar and Grill on the corner of 42nd Avenue and 3rd Street. Then you were seen by the Widow Twankey looking through the venetians . . .' and so on. This went to the bottom of the page, then I went halfway down the next page. My cue line was, 'And what do you have to say for yourself!' and Alan White had the next line.

I marked my part very quickly then looked up and Colin Creagan was flapping his arms behind the glass which means, 'We're going to fly it'. No rehearsals. The music started and Colin, with his head still down, threw a signal to Frank Waters. Frank said, 'When a girl marries. Dedicated to all those who are in love and to those who can. Remember!' Then the music came up again, at which point I was almost hysterical.

Colin either didn't notice or didn't care. He threw me a signal when the music faded down, so I started on my speech. I was halfway down the page when I glanced up and Colin was stretching his arms, indicating that I should spin it out. The script wouldn't fill up the twelve and a half minutes. So I started to ad lib and I made up various locations and characters I'd never heard of. Stuttered and stammered and backtracked. I repeated myself and Colin was still making stretch signs. I slowed down even more, got about halfway down the following page and eventually, after a tremendous amount of ad libbing and making up things, I got to the cue. I said to Alan White, 'And tell me, what do you have to say for yourself!' Alan looked at me, swaying unsteadily on his feet and said: 'Lieutenant, would you mind repeating that!'

• • •

The coming of television caused various reactions among radio actors, ranging from doubt to panic. "When it came, we were a bit worried," says Nigel Lovell. "We thought it would do what it eventually did — put an end to radio as a medium for drama. Everybody was very chary about it."

Gordon Grimsdale adds:

It started to get worrying around 1956. Nearly everybody in the industry — producers as well as actors — wanted to just pull the rug up over their heads and pretend that television didn't exist and that radio would go on forever. I got out very quick smart at that point and started a film company because it seemed obvious that radio was going to die the death of a pig.

The majority of actors really tucked their tails between their legs and ran for cover; numbers of others mistakenly believed that, because they could talk on radio, they could automatically make the switch to television. Needless to say, an ego is a necessary part of being an actor, but they discovered how wrong they were about the change, because television is such a rapid medium. It tends to show everything, warts and all, very quickly.

When television first started, I think the actors did an incredibly stupid thing. They went on strike and said they wouldn't work in the new medium. That threw up an enormous number of models who were willing to do the work, and they tended to become the stars. Not the actors. A lot of them really did themselves in.

Not all of them, of course. "There was a hard core of radio people who were also stage actors, what we called legit actors," says Jim Bradley. "When they had to make the transition from working to a microphone from a script to working in a visual medium, though, we had a lot of problems. That was where the actors who had had stage experience came into their own: people like Jimmy Condon, John Meillon, Stewart Ginn and Kevin Brennan." Many more can be added to that list: Gwen

Plumb, Owen Weingott, Alwyn Kurts, Neva Carr Glyn and Leonard Teale also learned how to use television very quickly and prospered from it, particularly as time went on and they landed feature roles in long-running television soap operas, or in commercials, especially the latter. Many of the well-known voices also became well-known faces.

Quite a few actors, however, regret the passing of radio drama, and Gwen Plumb sums up their feelings when she says:

Radio was the most marvellous acting training of all. You had to learn how to think on your feet, how to act when you had only your voice to help you. We really had to make bricks without straw, too — some of those scripts we worked with were pretty ghastly.

But apart from the wonderful training, radio was much more fun to be in than almost anything else I've done. I think the best part of it was the camaraderie among actors, which I'd say is unique to Australia. There is so little of the bitchiness of other countries here, so little of the malice and the envy. This is true even now, when acting is so competitive — but in the old days, we were all mates. Whoever had the bottle of sherry or the two and ninepence to buy one gave a party. We all ate together and went for weekends or on holidays together. And yet we were very ambitious — we were interested in our work and determined to do it well.

It was marvellous and it was fun because, I suppose, it was a smallish community. There was always laughter, gales of laughter, day and night.

18
Coconuts for horses

For years, two objects lay in state on a shelf of the ABC's radio sound effects library. No Western or historical play was complete without them: at the drop of a "Head them off at the pass" or a "Forsooth," out they came. They were two empty coconut shells, which were rocked from side to side on a hard surface whenever the script called for the sound of horses' hooves. These particular shells had obviously done some sterling galloping in their time: cracks split the surface from end to end, carefully taped over with pink bandaids. They may still be there, for all I know.

Coconut shells for horses' hooves are the radio sound effect with which people are most familiar. Only a few years ago, part of the promotion for that warped epic *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* included a competition in which the prize was a horse. Winners proudly lined up to claim their prizes: two coconut shells.

If a radio sound effects man wasn't paying attention to the script, even these simple devices could cause problems. Ron Wenban, who was an operator on commercial radio and on the ABC for many years, remembers a celebrated occasion when a colleague, Oscar Lansbury, fell foul of them. "He used to do all his effects *sitting down*," he says, "and sometimes he dropped off to sleep. Once somebody said, 'We left the horses five miles down in the canyon'. Oscar woke up to hear 'the horses', and he picked up the coconut shells and started using them!"

There were lots of other standard manual effects in radio. A wooden stick was used for whacking a cabbage briskly across its outer leaves while an actor on another microphone said, "Aaagh, duhh" to indicate that somebody had just bashed him over the head. Fencing foils could be clashed together to represent a duel to the death. If a script called for a character to walk through leaves and the play was being recorded in the middle of the city without a tree in sight, nothing was simpler than to grab an old spool of recording tape, unwind it, hurl it into a box and shuffle through it.

"A lot of those old effects were pretty obvious; a matter of common sense as much as anything," says Len London, who did the sound effects for *Lux Radio Theatre*. "If you had people shooting each other with guns, the thing to use was a starter's pistol loaded with blanks. A piece of bamboo or cane whacked on a seat would give a pistol shot sound, too — a sharp report."

If you wanted to do jingling harness, you rattled a few key chains. I remember walking around the stage with Harry Dearth for about ten minutes one afternoon for some historical play we were doing, clapping our thighs and bodies and making horse noises and jingling keys in our pockets. We recorded them and used them for when King Henry or whoever it was rode through the forest chatting to his mates.

Fires were cellophane. Once we did Jane Eyre *for the Lux show and a mansion had to collapse in great, roaring flames. Three of us stood around the*

effects microphone, crackling handfuls of cellophane in our hands and running rubber bands up and down a roll of paper. When the walls were supposed to go, we crushed a few matchboxes next to the microphone.

One of the standard effects props was a door. This was usually about half to two-thirds normal size, with a loose knob on it so that it could be rattled vigorously to indicate that somebody was about to enter the room; it could also be knocked on and slammed if a character was in a temper. "You could get into trouble with doors if you weren't listening to the show you were working on," says Ron Wenban. "I remember one bloke who opened a door on an aeroplane once."

At first, almost all the sound effects were manuals. Few had been recorded on disc, and those were pretty basic. "If a script had a car crash, the same record was used," says Len London. "We had recorded dogs and birds, too. If somebody was going down a country lane at night, or two lovers adjourned from the interior of a house to a porch and wandered down to the river, or even if a couple of nasty characters were sneaking up on somebody at night — you always had crickets going chirpa-chirp-chirp-chirrup-chirrup in the background. For some obscure reason, crickets *never* failed to be around at night on radio."

With the passing of time, disc effects became more sophisticated. The ABC was luckier than the commercial stations in this respect because it was allowed to use the BBC discs, and the British library was quite extensive. Heard in isolation, some of these were little short of surrealistic, as were their titles. As recently as ten years ago, an ancient disc with the title "Explosion and falling debris" was still being used; it meant exactly what it said. (The effects man put it on after the words, "Look out!") Another track, named "Murmuring men with armour" consisted of actors muttering and hitting selected bits of ironmongery. This one accompanied speeches in which Henry V, Richard III or any other medieval Shakespearian told his troops to get ready to thump the French or the Welsh or whomever. A third disc featured a group of people muttering, then gasping in concerted horror, for plays in which somebody announced the demise of a prominent citizen. (When you hear these tracks and others like them, you can imagine a group of actors around a microphone being cued: One ... two ... three ... "aah-ah!" or "gosh"! They must have been great fun to make.)

"We also used a tremendous lot of recorded music as bridges," adds Len London. "Sometimes I picked suitable tracks from the special library; you couldn't use any old music because of copyright problems. But in *any* period play, you had to have 'Greensleeves'!"

Being a sound effects operator was a nerve-racking job, particularly in commercial radio, because the operator was not only responsible for playing in discs or creating effects; he had to operate the microphones and faders at the same time. "You drove four turntables and two to four mikes," says Ron Wenban. "That was standard procedure."

We used steel needles for the discs, and you couldn't hold them down on the turntable and just start the motor when you needed to. There wasn't enough torque on the early turntables, and the needle would have chewed the track to pieces. What you did was to mark the groove with a yellow wax pencil; it didn't hurt the disc if you applied it lightly. Then you dropped the pick-up on to the yellow mark. You became fairly expert at just dropping it on the spot.

You could slow down discs for effects, but you couldn't speed them up except by hand, and that was touchy. You had to put the turntable motor in neutral and turn the disc by hand up to whatever speed you wanted. On the old sixteen-inch acetates, if you made a mistake you had to go right back to the beginning, just as actors did if they fluffed ... and nobody thanked you for it, either.

The variety and number of skills required to be a good sound effects operator would make any one-man band give up in despair. An operator needed an eye with the precision of a laser beam to enable him to gauge exactly where to find an effect or a music bridge on disc, lightning reflexes for whipping discs on and off the turntable, and an ear for the right effect in the right context. He had to work faders and microphones at the same time, and sometimes be fit enough to dash from control room to studio, hit a gong or stomp through some gravel in a box, rush back, pick up a disc, put it on the turntable, find a track and play it — all within the space of about two minutes.

He also had to know how to deal with producers when they came in to do an effects line-up for a show. "Some of them were a bit difficult to get on with," says Ron Wenban. "Some were fine if you did your job properly; if producers knew that you understood what they wanted, they would leave it all to you. But others would go to great lengths at the line-up and reject a lot of things that you thought were right. You had to go along with what they wanted, even though you didn't agree with them."

All this to do a job for which there was no formal training. "You just learned as you went," says Ron Wenban. "You picked up the job by watching other blokes do it."

Not everybody could. You could tell the people who didn't have a flair for it almost straightaway. But there weren't many who fell by the wayside, strangely enough, because it was a pretty hard life. You worked darn hard and after work you'd go and drink darn hard. That could have been the downfall of a lot of us; but amazingly, it wasn't. We survived.

Oscar Lansbury, the doyen of effects operators, instructs an eager assistant in the intricacies of ringing bells and opening doors.

When one thinks of the number of commercial radio shows that were produced in Sydney alone, it comes as a surprise to learn that there were only about eight people who did sound effects there. "We weren't allowed to freelance at all," says Ron Wenban. "We were tied to one company and that was it. In emergencies, some companies would borrow an operator from another company, but this very rarely happened."

We didn't have a union, either. Actors' Equity wanted us to join them at one stage, but they couldn't really justify including us because we weren't actors or performers. I think the Musicians' Union once tried to get us on their books, but we weren't musicians either. We played music, but it was canned stuff. So we never had to join any union. There just wasn't one that covered us.

Even so, adds Ron Wenban, effects operators were very well paid, particularly in commercial radio. "Well above the rate the ABC paid their blokes," he says. "On the commercial side, you were more appreciated because you had a good management and they understood what you did and the pressures involved. Sometimes you'd find extra in your pay packet for no real reason; the management would say, 'We think you're worth it' if a producer recommended you. Where I worked, at the Australian Recording Company, the management was interested in the staff because it was a small firm. So we were OK.

"We were paid well above the actors, who were on a shockingly low figure (and I still think they're underpaid)."

Part of an actor's job was to do manual sound effects in the studio when required. "Some of them thought it was a bit beneath them," says Ron Wenban, "but most of them didn't mind opening their own doors or dialling their own telephones." Many actually loved it; Ron Wenban remembers when Owen Ainley played a mad professor in an episode of *The Shadow*. "I think the script was a bit short," he says, "and Owen went berserk. He started to ad lib, picked up bits of bottles around the studio, started clanking them together and muttering, inventing experiments. He had the time of his life!"

Gordon Grimsdale recalls a time when Rod Taylor's enthusiasm for sound effects almost literally ran away with him.

I gave Rod the lead in a programme about diamond mining in South Africa. In the opening episode he had to run across the desert, so the effects were ploughing through a sand box. Then he had to come to running water, represented by a small glass tank. He was supposed to kneel down in that, scoop up a handful of gravel and discover that it contained diamonds. This all had to run for about two and a half minutes; the only actor involved was Rod, puffing and panting and talking to himself the whole time.

He decided to do all the effects himself so it would sound realistic. Off we went. So he ran up and down in the sand box, stumbling and four-twelving all over the place. He got into the tank which had about two inches of water in it, and jumped up and down in that, getting his feet all wet. It was all OK until he got down to drink water out of the tank. There he was, scooping up what was supposed to be a handful of gravel, muttering, 'Diamonds, diamonds' and trying to spit the old cigarette butts out of his mouth at the same time.

We had to stop and recut it. It was too much, even for him!

Sometimes an actor could use sound effects without dialogue to create a very moving sequence. When Rod Taylor played the legless war hero Douglas Bader in an adaptation of Bader's book *Reach for the Sky*, the script called for him to climb out of bed late at night, get on to his crutches for the first time and go down a hospital corridor to the bathroom without any help at all. When it came to recording, Taylor refused to have an effects man tap a crutch on a piece of wood while he made sounds

showing effort on another microphone; he did the whole scene himself, manipulating the crutches.

For several minutes, he made the others in the studio believe that he was Bader, a man on crutches that he couldn't manipulate very well, making his slow and painful way down a corridor. On air, the only sound listeners heard was clunk ... tap ... tap ... gasp, as he almost fell and steadied himself ... tap as he went on. Taylor created the whole scene and made listeners feel Bader's determination and angry effort simply by using those few sound effects.

An important part of working in sound effects was what Ron Wenban calls "fiddling around". Effects men spent a great deal of their spare time — early mornings, evenings, occasionally weekends — working out exactly how to produce the right combination of sounds for a particular show. This might mean taking a whole stack of discs into the studio and playing them at half speed, or speeding them up by hand; it could involve taking a recorder out into the street to record traffic noises or climbing a tree to get a particular bird call.

A sound effects man also needed the ability to hear the right sound in unlikely contexts. "The best mad effect I ever did was when we did a play about a hotel with a revolving door," says Len London. "I found that putting a telephone receiver on a table and rolling it produced the right clunkety-clunkety ... clunk ... clunk."

Ron Wenban remembers a script about the mysterious East that called for a gong.

We had a reasonable-sized one, but it wasn't big enough for the producer. I took the thing into the corridor, which was all tiled and reverberated quite well, placed it down the end of the hall, put the microphone up the other end and recorded the striking straight on to acetate to get natural reverberation. Then I slowed it down so we got a J. Arthur Rank gong sound.

Ron Wenban probably speaks for most ex-sound effects operators when he says: "We all enjoyed our work, even though it was tough. We got a great deal of satisfaction out of it, even though there wasn't much praise." And no wonder. It must sometimes have been great fun to experiment with sounds and to find out what could be done with apparently unpromising material to get realistic effects.

Sometimes, though, effects could be *too* realistic. In *The Shadow*, for example, violent deaths were featured almost every week. Sound effects men had ways to make them as gruesome as possible. Ron Wenban says:

Bodies falling from a great height would be the softest, squashiest melon or pumpkin you could find, and you'd climb up a stepladder and hurl it down onto a concrete slab. I remember once we had to do a bloke crushed to death by a giant snake. That consisted of getting bunches of celery and breaking them up all over the studio.

At the end of a show like The Shadow *— there were lots of others with gruesome deaths in them — the studio would look a real mess, with pieces of vegetable all over the walls!*

So well did the effects men do their jobs, so credible were these effects, that people occasionally complained about violence on radio. (Of course, some now object to the literal presentation of violent death on television or film, but hearing and imagining a violent death could be so much more ghastly than seeing it.) "There was a complaint in Parliament about *The Shadow* once," says Ron Wenban. "People got really quite upset."

A 1957 report in the Sydney *Sun* stated that an eleven-year-old boy had been found a quarter of a mile from his home at midnight one evening, crying because he had had a nightmare about a murder serial. The Australian Federation of Commercial Broadcasting Stations became very worried about this story, then the child's mother

assured them that her son was just suffering from an earache, not a murder serial at all. The AFCBS were relieved (perhaps they even sent the child some ear drops), but they did resent the fact that the *Sun* had blamed radio violence for the child's wanderings. "To blame unspecified serials for a sick child's nightmare would be just as unreasonable and foolish as to say, 'You can't believe everything you read in the newspapers'," said the head of the organisation. And presumably he meant it to sting.

Writers sometimes overdid the sound effects instructions. Consider this example, from a 1951 episode of *I Hate Crime:*

LIFT STOPS SUDDENLY. PASSIONATE PAUSE. SHOT, RICOCHET. GOOD FIST TO JAW. SCUFFLING, BRITTLE SOUND OF FEET TO WRIST. THUD. BODY AGAINST WALL. KNEE TO STOMACH.

Even if he knew how to do a passionate pause (an interesting trick), how would an effects man manage something like "brittle sound of feet to wrist" if nobody in the cast had the grace to say at least, "You're hurting my arm!"?

However, often one of the joys of the sound effects craft was working with a writer on a script in which the effects might be difficult, but they were also ingenious. When this happened, the result could be a really valuable partnership between the writer and the man handling the sound.

According to Ron Wenban, the script-writer who used sound effects most creatively was James Workman.

Now, that boy knew that we had an extensive library and he used it, but he used it well. He would go crazy sometimes, but it was tongue in cheek. I'll never forget doing Ben Hur, *which he adapted. The chariot race was really tough — I had to use wagons and whatever other motors I could. I made up a multiple for that one — an existing horse and carriage, speeded up or slowed down, adding horses neighing and thundering hooves (no time for manual effects like coconut shells!) and the roar of the crowd. For chariots overturning, I did a car crash at a different speed.*

Workman ad libbed with sound effects, too, because he sometimes ran out of storyline. Once, when he didn't want to use up the book too quickly, he introduced a mad scene involving a Roman street sweeper — of all things! One of the characters had a lengthy discussion with the sweeper about some marvellous device he had for keeping Rome's streets clean. I had to cook up an effect with large bristles and rollers and some kind of motor. And Workman incorporated the Hoover slogan: 'It beats as it sweeps as it cleans!'

When commercial radio ceased to produce drama shows and serials, there was only one place an effects man could go — the ABC. Ron Wenban did, and thought that life was going to be a bit more sedate. He says:

The ABC was a bit of a shock after commercial radio. I could remember hearing stories from some of the chaps about the number of people who used to be in the control room. 'Three or four,' they said. 'The ABC has separate people for the manuals, the discs and the faders and microphones.'

Gee, I thought, that's unnecessary. I had thought I was going to sit at the console with turntables surrounding me, and I found out that the turntables were over here and the console somewhere else. I couldn't believe that all I had to do was play the records, not worrying about the microphones or anything! That was fine until the productions got heavier and heavier. No one person could possibly have done the lot himself — drive the microphones, play the tapes and so forth. I was quite content to play the grams.

It got even more complicated when

they started doing stereo plays a few years ago. That was a whole new ball game. The producer told you where the actors were going to be, on which microphone, and you had to mark your script accordingly so the effect didn't sound too loud or too soft, or just wrong. You had to plot your moves, like a stage play.

Like so many other jobs in the days of the bakelite box, being a sound effects officer is one of those jobs that is not the same any more. Gone are the days when effects men had to scan fruit barrows to find a melon that they could hurl from a ladder. These days, if you want to give the impression of somebody falling from a great height, all you need do is show it on television. This is much more literal — and probably less fun for the technical staff, not to mention the actor.

There are still sound effects departments on television and in radio, of course. Radio effects are now more sophisticated, partly as the result of stereo broadcasting, as Ron Wenban points out. But for television, they're usually standard: tracks of crowd scenes, gun shots and screaming cars accompany news bulletins about riots or elections or massacres.

It's just not the same as breaking up bunches of celery to imitate being crushed to death by a giant snake, the way they did in the old days.

Appendix: The Programmes

The following list presents extra information about the best-known radio shows described or mentioned in this book. It is by no means complete; radio is an ephemeral industry and tracking down complete details about programmes 30 years after broadcast has been impossible in many cases. What follows has been compiled from a variety of sources of varying reliability: trade journals, daily papers, books about radio cited in the bibliography on page 269, and even people's memories. Radio stations themselves have destroyed most of the material relating to many shows; transcription companies have gone out of business, and often their records have ceased to exist. There is an urgent need for somebody to spend time in preparing a complete "bibliography" — but this is a task that will take years. Nevertheless, it must be done, because these shows are, after all, a very important part of our history.

1: MO AND CO

Calling the Stars (1941–1953) Executive producer: Ron R. Beck. Producer: Russell Scott. Writers: Fred Parsons, Alexander Macdonald, Willie Fennell, Jack Davey, Al Thomas, Rex Dawe, Dorothy Foster (among others). Stars: Dick Bentley, Jack Burgess, Rex Dawe, Willie Fennell, Queenie Ashton, Rita Pauncefort, Dorothy Foster, Al Thomas, Wilfred Thomas, Dinah Shearing. Singers: Lester Sisters, Brian Lawrence, John Cameron (among others). On air: Tuesday evenings over Macquarie network (to 1946), thereafter over Major network.

McCackie Mansion (1947–1951) Producer: Russell Scott. Writers: Alexander Macdonald, Fred Parsons. Stars: Harry Avondale, Jack Burgess, Harry Griffiths, Hal Lashwood, Roy Rene (brief appearances by Rita Pauncefort and Neva Carr Glyn). On air: Tuesday evenings over Major network.

George Wallace Road Show (late 1940s–early 1950s) Chief writer: George Foster. Stars: George Foster, George Wallace. On air: Macquarie network.

It Pays to be Funny (1947–1957: radio and television), *Cop the Lot* (early 1950s), *Can You Take It?* (early 1950s) Star and originator of stunts: Bob Dyer. Assistant: Harry Griffiths. On air: Major network.

Club Show (early 1950s–1954) Writers: Jack Davey, George Foster, Keith Smith. Stars: Jack Davey, George Foster, Keith Smith. On air: Macquarie network.

2: DEXTER, FRED, DAD AND THE 'OBBSES

Fred and Maggie (under various titles 1932–1953) Producer: Edward Howell. Writers: Edward Howell; others, including Gwen Meredith. Stars: Edward Howell, Therese Desmond. Production company: Amalgamated Wireless Australasia.

Dad and Dave (1937–1953) Producers: various. Writers: Lorna Bingham; others. Stars: George Edwards, Nell Stirling, Lorna Bingham, Peg Christensen, Lou Vernon. Production company: EMI (George Edwards Players).

Mrs 'Obbs (1940–1951) Producers: various, including Harry Harper. Writer: Tom Swain. Stars: Athol Cheer, Dan Agar, Owen Ainley. Production company: Amalgamated Wireless Australasia.
Life With Dexter (1953–1964) Producers: various. Writer: Willie Fennell. Stars: Willie Fennell, Kevin Brennan, Amber Mae Cecil, Ray Hartley, Gwen Plumb. On air: Macquarie network.
Yes, What? (1938–1940) Writers: Rex Dawe, Ralph Peterson. Stars: Rex Dawe, Ralph Peterson, Jim Williams, Jack Gardiner. On air (during 1950s): Macquarie network; episodes bought by Grace Gibson Productions.

3: **TAKE A HINT AND A HANKIE**
Portia Faces Life (1952–1970) Producers: various. Writers: various. Stars: Lyndall Barbour, Muriel Steinbeck, Leonard Teale. Production company: Grace Gibson Productions.
When a Girl Marries (1946–1965) Producers: various. Chief writer: Elaine Carrington. Stars: Madeleine Howell, Queenie Ashton, Alan White.
Dr Paul (1949–1971) Producers: various. Writers: various. Stars: Alistair Duncan, Lynne Murphy. Production company: Grace Gibson Productions.
The Lawsons (1944–1948) Producers: various. Writer: Gwen Meredith. Stars: Nellie Lamport, Gwen Plumb, Queenie Ashton. Production company: Australian Broadcasting Commission.
Blue Hills (1948–1976) Producers: various. Writer: Gwen Meredith. Stars: Queenie Ashton, Maeve Drummond, Max Osbiston, Winifred Green, Nigel Lovell, Fay Kelton and many, many others. Production company: Australian Broadcasting Commission.
Del's Diary (1952–1958) Producers: various. Compere and interviewer: Del Cartwright. Station of origin: 2CH, Sydney.
At Home (1954–1967) Producers: various. Compere and interviewer: Lorna Byrne. Production company: Australian Broadcasting Commission.
Leave it to the Girls (1951–early 1960s) Producers: various. Writers: various. Compere: Terry Dear. Panellists: Gwen Plumb, Jo O'Neill, Morris West, Elizabeth Riddell (among others). On air: Macquarie network.

4: **MUSIC, MUSIC, MUSIC**
Music for the People (1946–early 1950s) Producer: Dorothy Crawford. Musical director: Hector Crawford. Production company: Crawford Productions.
Opera for the People (1946–1948) Producer: Dorothy Crawford. Musical director: Hector Crawford. Production company: Crawford Productions.
The Melba Story (late 1949) Producer: Dorothy Crawford. Writer: John Reid. Musical director: Hector Crawford. Stars: Glenda Raymond, Careen Wilson, Eric Pearce (announcer). Production company: Crawford Productions.
Mobil Quest (1948–1957) Production company: Crawford Productions.
Australia's Hour of Song (1952–1955) Producer: Len London. Stars: various.

5: **A THEATRE INSIDE YOUR HEAD**
Lux Radio Theatre (1939–1951; 1955–1956) Producers: Harry Dearth, Paul Jacklin, Harry Harper (among others). Writers/ adapters: various. Stars: various. On air: Sunday evenings at 8 p.m.
Caltex Theatre (1949–mid-1950s) Producers: various. Writers: various. Stars: various.
General Motors Hour (1952–1955) Producers: various. Writers: various. Stars: various. On air: Macquarie network.
Macquarie Theatre (mid-1950s) Producers: Lawrence H. Cecil, E. Mason Wood. Chief writer/adapter: Richard Lane. Stars: various. On air: Macquarie network.
The Fire on the Snow (1941) Producer: Frank D. Clewlow. Writer: Douglas Stewart. Cast: Frank Harvey, John Tate, Lou Vernon, Peter Bathurst, John Alden, Ida Osbourne (announcer). Production company: Australian Broadcasting Commission.
The Death of a Wombat (1958) Writer/

narrator: Ivan Smith. Music: George English. Production company: Australian Broadcasting Commission.

6: **AUNTIES AND ARGONAUTS**

A Word From Children (1949–1960s) Compere: Keith Smith. Production company: Australian Broadcasting Commission.

The Pied Piper (1954–1960s) Compere: Keith Smith. On air: Macquarie network.

The Air Adventures of Biggles (1945–early 1960s) Producers: various. Writers: various. Stars: Frank Waters, James Mills, Walter Sullivan. On air: Macquarie network.

The Search for the Golden Boomerang (1940?–1951) Producers: various. Writers: various. Stars: various. Production company: EMI (George Edwards Players).

Superman (late 1940s–late 1950s) Producers: various. Writers: various. Star: Leonard Teale (at beginning).

Tarzan (1940s–1950s) Producers: various, including Jim Bradley. Writers: various. Stars: Rod Taylor, Pamela Page (and others later). On air: Macquarie network (made by Artransa).

The Air Adventures of Hop Harrigan (1955–1960) Producers: various. Writers: various. Stars: Stewart Ginn, John Ewart. On air: Macquarie network.

Argonauts' Club (1941–1969) Producer: Richard Parry (mainly). Writers: various. Stars: Athol Fleming, John Ewart, Lindley Evans, Roy Kinghorn, Barry Brown, Geoffrey Smart, Bill Salmon, John Gunn, Barbara Frawley, Sue Ewart, Gina Curtis (among others). Production company: Australian Broadcasting Commission.

The Muddleheaded Wombat (1957–1971) Producer: Richard Parry (mainly). Writer: Ruth Park. Stars: John Ewart, John Appleton, Gina Curtis, Sue Ewart, Barbara Frawley, Winifred Green, Athol Fleming (narrator). Production company: Australian Broadcasting Commission.

7: **"HERE IS THE NEWS . . ."**

Macquarie Newsreel (1946–late 1950s) Reporters: Bill Weir, Peter Barry. On air: Macquarie network.

News Review (post-war–late 1960s) Producers: various. Production company: Australian Broadcasting Commission.

Monitor (1956–late 1960s) Executive producer: Hugh Elliott. Reporters: Bill Weir, Hugh Elliott (and many others). On air: Macquarie network.

I'm On Your Side, Say What You Think, This I Believe (all 1953-4–1967) (*This I Believe* transferred to television) Presenter: Eric Baume. On air: Macquarie network.

9: **EVERYBODY WANTS TO GET INTO THE ACT**

Australia's Amateur Hour (1940–1960) Producer: John Tuttle (mainly). Comperes: Harry Dearth, Dick Fair, Terry Dear. On air: Thursdays 8 p.m.

The Piddington Show (1947–1949) Producer: Paul Jacklin. Stars: Sidney Piddington, Lesley Pope. Compere: Howard Craven.

10: **THOUSANDS OF POUNDS TO BE WON, IF YOU'RE LUCKY**

Quiz Kids (1942–early 1960s) Compere: John Dease. On air: Macquarie network.

Pick a Box (1948–1971; 1957–1971 on television) Compere: Bob Dyer, assisted by Dolly Dyer. On air: Macquarie network.

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B & T: Advertising, Marketing and Media Weekly, Greater Publications, Sydney, 1953–1965

Radio-Pictorial of Australia, Sydney, 1945–1952

Radio programme pages of the following newspapers:

Melbourne *Age*

Sydney *Daily Mirror*

Sydney Morning Herald

Sydney *Sun*

Radio archival material and tapes

The sound archives section of the National Library, Canberra, very kindly allowed me access to tapes and discs of the following programmes:
Australia's Amateur Hour
Dad and Dave
Dr Paul
Fred and Maggie
George Wallace Road Show
Jack Davey quiz shows (sources unspecified)
Lux Radio Theatre
McCackie Mansion
Martin's Corner
Melba Story
Memories of Mo
Mobil Quest
Mortein advertisement in *Yes, What!*
Mrs 'Obbs
Night Beat
Pick a Box
Salome
Search for the Golden Boomerang
Superman
Tarzan
3DB children's programme
When a Girl Marries
White Coolies
Wrigley's advertisement in *Dad and Dave*

Grace Gibson Productions:
Portia Faces Life
Yes, What!

Australian Broadcasting Commission archives:

ABC Children's Session
Argonauts' Club
Blue Hills
Death of a Wombat

Note on the National Library

This book could not have been written without the help of Peter Burgis and the staff of the sound archives department in the National Library, Canberra.

They do a magnificent job of preserving and cataloguing the thousands of acetate discs that remain as Australia's radio programme heritage — and they work under particularly trying circumstances. The department is understaffed and underfunded; it lacks sufficient equipment for transferring discs to tape, some storage areas are not air-conditioned, and cleaning the records that come in is a mammoth task. (I have seen discs brought in after lying for years in back rooms, under beds and — in one case — in a fowlhouse; a collection of valuable discs had wisps of chicken down still clinging to them.)

These are the difficulties that exist when discs *are* available for cataloguing, but one of Peter's abiding regrets is that so many have been destroyed. Radio stations and production companies "threw them out by the truckload", he says. He tells a story that illustrates one facet of the problem. In 1972 Margaret Jones of the *Sydney Morning Herald* wrote a piece about sound archives in general, in which Peter was quoted as saying that people often did not realise how precious the old discs are. He pointed out that some acetates had even been used for road filler on a section of Sydney's Warringah Expressway. The following morning he had a call from a spokesman for the Department of Main Roads, who said in injured tones: "I've read the story about you, and I'd like you to know that we tested that acetate and it's *perfectly safe* to drive over!" So motorists approaching the Harbour Bridge can drive over the voices of Mo, Jack Davey, George Wallace and dozens of others who are part of Australia's radio heritage.

Picture Acknowledgements

Many thanks to the following people and organisations who kindly allowed me to use the photographs which appear in this book.

Australian Broadcasting Commission: pages 23, 25, 57, 63, 65, 77, 81, 83, 107, 115, 116, 130, 148, 167, 189, 211, 233, 253, 261

Terry Dear: pages 70, 152

Harry Griffiths: page 19

National Library of Australia: pages 36, 52, 98, 100, 121, 162, 180, 226, 246, 248

News Limited: pages 11, 28, 42, 46, 60, 128, 134, 138, 169, 197, 215, 219, 235, 250

Index

References for illustrations are in italics.