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## ABC Radio: Culture and the Spoken Word

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It was a different Australia fifty years ago; no ockers, no ethnics; multiculturalism unheard of; republicans as scarce and despised as wine-drinkers; nine out of every ten people able to regard the British Isles as, in some sense, 'home'. The Prime Minister, 'Joe' Lyons, and the P.M.G. [the Federal Post-Master General, in charge of telecommunications and broadcasting] J. E. Fenton, were in no doubt that the ABC should be made in the image of the proper British exemplar. Introducing the Australian Broadcasting Commission Bill on 9th March, 1932, Mr Fenton told the Parliament that

...under the Empire broadcasting system, it will be possible for naked blacks to listen-in in the jungle to the world's best operas. We may also reach the period when brown-skinned Indians will be able to dance to one of England's best orchestras, and when fur-clad Canadians in distant snow-

bound outposts may listen to a description of the running of the English Derby.

Mr Fenton was not overestimating the influence of radio; he was mis judging its effects. Only thirty years would pass before Marshall McLuhan would write that ‘the subliminal depths of radio are charged with the resonating echoes of tribal horns and antique drums...’, and that ‘radio is the medium for frenzy, and it has been the major means of hotting up the tribal blood of Africa, India and China, alike.’<sup>1</sup>

The ABC’s first chairman, Charles Lloyd Jones, made the Commission’s intentions quite clear. In the Melbourne *Argus* of 28th May, 1932, he was quoted as saying:

We intend following in the footsteps of the British Broadcasting Corporation.... With the staff of the Australian Broadcasting Company taken over, the Commission is confident that broadcasting will continue effectively while the Commission is feeling its way. This action is in line with the advice given by the Prime Minister [Mr Lyons] to walk in the footsteps of the BBC and fall in behind Britain.

Dr Alan Thomas, in his book *Broadcast and be Damned* (Melbourne University Press, 1980), observes that ‘fall in behind Britain’ is a phrase that would have appealed to an Australian audience in 1932. For the ABC, the aim of making itself in the image of the BBC was not merely commendable, but pretty much inevitable.

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<sup>1</sup> *Understanding Media*, London, 1964, pp.299, 310.

Whether it was possible, though, is quite another matter. There were similarities, and there were differences. The British Broadcasting Corporation had been formed from a British Broadcasting Company, the ABC from an Australian Broadcasting Company. But whereas the ABC's precursor had been a rather haphazard, middle-of-the road outfit, the BBC had from the outset been moulded by that determined visionary John Reith. It is not insignificant, I think, that the BBC, which is celebrating its 60th anniversary in 1982, reckons its age from the start of the company. Because of the start that Reith gave it, the BBC has always had a tradition of intellectual strength in its management, and a corporate self-awareness and confidence that have been matched only rarely and partly by the ABC. But the big difference was that Reith's Corporation from 1924 until 1954 (indeed much longer in radio) would enjoy a complete broadcasting monopoly in the U. K. Our Commission began life in the capital cities of Australia as a minority of two national stations among a majority of commercial ones. Whatever the ABC might achieve, it was in the nature of things, in a competitive world that was learning fast about advertising, that it would never broadcast daily as a matter of course to the mass of Australians as would the BBC to the British. From the start it was restricted to a largely middle-class appeal, and with some notable exceptions that has continued to be so. The constitution of television twenty-five years later, with one ABC channel versus two commercials in major centres, reinforced this state of affairs.

So the ABC's role was restricted. Nevertheless, so far as influencing a national culture was concerned, it did have one essential advantage. By 1936, when it had got itself organized into federal departments, it *was* national, not just organizationally, but in the extension of its broadcasts.

Anyone who works in radio or thinks much about it will understand something that Martin Esslin has put rather well in a recent essay. He says that radio is

...first of all, a mechanised technique for the transmission of pre-existing material, just as printing, when first invented, was above all seen as a new mechanical device for the rapid reproduction of manuscripts, or the cinema as a means for preserving and mass-distributing stage performances. It is only at one remove that fine printing and the production of beautiful books was recognised as an art-form in its own right, that the cinema developed its own aesthetic and artistic techniques.<sup>2</sup>

So we have radio as a means of transmission; and radio as the creative medium of sound, sound as an art-form.

It is not surprising that the early programmes of the ABC were very much concerned with 'the transmission of pre-existing material' in the shape of musical performances, gramophone records, talks, and so on. More medium-based techniques would come in time. Neither is it surprising that the greatest and most noticed cultural effort of the early ABC was in music: the development of orchestras, and broadcasts of recitals and concerts.

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<sup>2</sup> *Mediations*, London, 1980, p. 172.

Depending on where one works in radio, one will think of it according to one or other meaning of the term. In News, in most Music broadcasts, in much of Talks, it is thought of as a means of transmission. In Drama, Features, Documentaries, it is very much the sound-artifact to be transmitted that is uppermost in our minds.

The subject originally suggested for my consideration in this paper was 'The ABC and Literature'. Does radio transmit or create literature? It does both, of course, but the word 'literature' may cause a frisson in a dyed-in-the-wool radio person with etymological hangups — and perhaps other hangups caused by awareness that his works fade into the air. Even reading the Chairman of the ABC's message to our staff on our fiftieth birthday, in which she observed justly that the ABC had become a reference point 'for the things that go to make up a literate and informed society', I confess that that word 'literate' occasioned in me, if not a frisson, then certainly an afterthought. Perhaps, to avoid classification as some sort of neurotic nit-picker, it might be wise for me to mention that a few years ago, doing a long interview with the *Adelaide Advertiser's* drama critic, I mentioned in passing that, all told, I thought the best of all media was still probably the book. He rebuked me in print, remarking on the danger of having one so obviously print-oriented in charge of an electronic medium.

What I am getting at is not as frivolous as I am making it seem, and it can perhaps illuminate ways in which radio might approach literature. For a start, taking extreme cases, we might say that

publication in sound is on the whole better for *Beowulf* or the *Tain Bo Cuailnge*, whereas publication in print is better for Patrick White or Graham Greene. But then a moment's reflection will persuade us that, given the shortage of bards and shenachies in our culture capable of calling up 30,000 words at a time, it is as well that our *Beowulf* or *Tain* or whatever should be in a book in the first place to be read from; and a further moment's reflection will make it no less clear that although the styles of Patrick White and Graham Greene, children of a literate, print culture, *require* literary publication, their literary artifacts will gain enormously, under certain aspects, by being read aloud — one might as well say 'performed' — by a sensitive reader. Locked behind the printed letters are not just reference and emotional connotation and other associations, but that primal element, the sound of the words. And that locked-up sound has its part to play even when a solitary reader reads without moving his lips. It resonates in his mind's ear and contributes essentially to the total effect. This is true of all literature, with only slight exceptions in the case of some modern page poetry (maybe) and concrete poetry (maybe). We regularly, and normally, criticize a printed prose style that offends this inner ear.

There are all sorts of ways in which works of literature can and do find their way into the air-waves — adapted as serials or plays, for instance — but I am talking about the simple, straight reading of such works. Practically all of literature can be treated as a text for the performer's art, and can gain thereby. Thus radio can be an excellent performing space (perhaps by its very nature, the

ideal one) for a one-man show of the kind originated, I think, by Dickens and popularized in our time by Emlyn Williams, Michael MacLiammoir and others. I think that in ABC radio we've perhaps developed this notion a bit further than has been done in most other places, thanks partly to the presence of several very talented performers and our own attitudes to literary texts. In other places there is a tendency to prefer performing such texts with a number of voices, even in a straight reading — different voices assigned to different characters in the interests of some kind of 'variety' which I personally view with suspicion. The text is one, its persona is a single storyteller, and I prefer that this basic unity of the work should be expressed by a single performer. Of course, his or her ability to embody various characters and enact their dialogue is essential, and enriches the whole thing, but the performer never entirely vacates the persona of the storyteller. When Professor R. D. Williams came to introduce our readings of the *Aeneid*, he asked if we would have several voices; we told him no, just Wynne Roberts. Michael Alexander wondered the same about his translation of *Beowulf* and again we said no, just Ron Haddrick. On the other hand, our broadcasts of the Argo recordings of *Paradise Lost* assigned parts to various voices, and although the cast included some of Britain's finest readers, I thought the over-all performance deficient in that it lost the pure sense of an integral text, a single epic poem.

From the beginning, there were talks on ABC radio. The first Annual Report to Parliament (for the year 1932/3) mentions among overseas speakers Pope Pius XI and Herr Hitler. The talks

given by locals were referred to often as lectures, and by present standards many of them seem to have been trivial or dull. But there were some celebrated exceptions — among them Vance Palmer (who contributed plays and short stories), H. M. Green, and (especially) Walter Murdoch. And there was some drama, plays accounting for just under 3% of programme time in the first year. By the late '30s radio plays had become important and popular, and the standard was high. Leslie Rees, the ABC's first Federal Drama Editor, has written about their development in his book, *The Making of Australian Drama* (Sydney, 1973). Authors included Edmund Barclay, Dymphna Cusack, George Farwell, Max Afford, Betty Roland, Catherine Shepherd and Gwen Meredith. In the '40s came Douglas Stewart and *The Fire on the Snow*, which Tyrone Guthrie produced for the BBC in 1951. There were also short stories. And it is worth noting that although the BBC broadcast the first radio play, the radio serial was an Australian and American development.

Plays and serials and short stories and talks constituted 'performances in sound'; but, apart from the scripts they were performed from, they were as transient as the breath that uttered them. I have already used the term sound-artifacts. The greatest single step in the development of radio sound as an art-form would come with the application in radio of the tape-recorder. In the '30s and '40s (and notably in the war years) it was possible to record sound performances on acetate discs, but there was no flexibility. One mistake, one fluff, and you had to start again from the top. The tape-recorder, which arrived in Australian radio in

the '50s, made it possible to collect sounds quickly and easily, to amass different voices and music and other sounds as raw material, and then to cut, to splice, to juxtapose sound elements at will, to mix or superimpose them at different levels simultaneously, and so on.

A Radio Features Department had existed in the BBC since 1935. With studio musicians and turntables and sound effects and actors all working direct to air, it had in fact been putting out quite complex and sometimes poetic creations. D. G. Bridson's feature *King Arthur*, for example, in 1937 provided the first BBC commission for a young composer named Benjamin Britten. As early as 1931, Tyrone Guthrie, reacting against naturalism, had envisaged a kind of radio drama that might concentrate less on conveying to the audience 'a series of mind pictures' and, instead, explore the symphonic possibilities of the medium — vocal rhythms, colours, tempos, pitch.<sup>3</sup> Francis Dillon and Bridson were at the same time exploring the possibility of presenting recorded actuality-material in dramatic ways. The coming of the tape-recorder liberated the aspirations of these people. In Britain it was the Features people in the '40s and '50s, thinking and working flexibly in sound, who made the running for drama.

The ABC had a Features Department in 1948, which in 1950 was joined to Drama to form the present Department of Radio Drama and Features. The Commission's annual report for 1950–51 said that

<sup>3</sup> *BBC Handbook*, 1931, p. 189.

Allied to the broadcast play by its dramatic form, the feature provides a vehicle for documentary and other specially-written programs on a wide range of subjects and is designed to present these subjects in a manner that will appeal to a lay audience...

With the advantage of hindsight I would prefer to define a feature as a confected programme, on any subject, which is natural to radio in that it so uses radio that it could not be presented in any other medium.

The ABC was very fortunate in its first two Features Editors, Mungo MacCallum (snr) and Ivan Smith. Both were first-rate producers. Mungo MacCallum is still a distinguished, if occasional, writer of radio plays and features; Ivan Smith won the ABC's first Prix Italia in 1959 with *Death of a Wombat*. By 1955, Australian writers of features included Shan Benson, Barbara Jefferis, Nancy Keesing, Coral Lansbury, Richard Lane, Frank Legg, MacCallum and Smith, Ray Mathew, D'Arcy Niland and Ruth Park, Morris West, Myra Roper, Leslie Greener, Catherine Shepherd and John Thompson.

Because they were made in a time of fast developing techniques, many of the features of that time can sound dated today. But the works of the poet, critic and writer-producer John Thompson still find a place on the air. His *Harney's War* was broadcast on Anzac Day 1981, and we are now planning a season of the 'radio portraits' he made through the '50s and '60s of famous Australians including Christopher Brennan, Maurice O'Shea, Curtin, Monash, Melba, Alf Conlon, and many others. These programmes are among the finest sustained work of ABC

radio. They are also probably the first rudimentary examples we have in Australian radio of what we now call 'writing on tape'. They were transcribed to the printed page and published under the title *On Lips of Living Men* [Melbourne : Lansdowne, 1962]. But they must be heard to be appreciated. John Thompson's method was to talk with a number of people about the particular subject of his (posthumous) portrait, and then to edit and juxtapose their various utterances until the picture had been built up. It has been done since, but it has not been done better.



The most important media event of the 1950s was the arrival, in 1956, of television. Its effect on ABC radio was enormous, and demands consideration. But first let me make a short digression to consider television itself in our context.

Competing with commercial stations in TV was much harder than in radio, because the ABC had only one channel on which to range the whole gamut of 'adequate and comprehensive programmes' against two commercial channels in the major centres. It could not but be left high and dry in the ratings race, and this would eventually affect ABC programmes and programming in the new medium. In its first decade, ABC TV was leisurely, comfortable and, by today's standards, uncompetitive. Whatever the quality of productions in comparison with those of today, there is no doubt that the aspirations were different. So far as ideals were concerned, it was closer to Reith's

BBC, or to Cleary's and Boyer's ABC radio, than to its own latter-day self of the 1980s.

It was in the nature of things that a more aggressively competitive programming attitude towards the commercials should develop. It came in 1966 and its agent was the dynamic Controller of Programmes, Ken Watts. [Actually, Ken was Federal Director of TV Programs, under Neil Hutchison, Controller of Programmes (Radio and Television) at that stage – but Ken was the dynamo as described. – R.C., 2011] His main weapon was current affairs. Over against the familiar commercial fare he placed *This Day Tonight* at 7.30 pm every week-night, introducing current affairs to the front line of Australian television. There followed weekly contemporary Australian drama with *Australian Playhouse*, and weekly documentaries about Australia with *A Big Country*. At the same time, clever use was made of audience research data in the placement and sequential arrangement of programmes. On screen announcers were replaced by commercial-style voice-overs and up-beat station-themes ('musical logos'). A trend had started, perhaps inevitably — a trend away from the old ABC TV with a human face. For the moment its effect was on presentation and style rather than upon programmes, but it was not long before Drama began to move away from one-off plays into serials and series (often well done) like *Contrabandits* and *Delta* and *Certain Women*. I remember at the end of the '60s the documentary producer Tom Haydon (*The Talgai Skull*) telling me he thought the future looked rather bleak for his sort of work, and he left for the BBC. So did Storry Walton

(*My Brother Jack*). So did Bill Fitzwater, Ken Hannam, Henri Safran, and others. When they came back it was to the film industry.

In the 1970s, the commercial channels began to catch up in current affairs, and the ABC lost the few points it had gained in the ratings race. As a result, ABC TV was pushed further along the pop road. We had slogans like 'Ain't We Got Fun', and British comedy (not always the subtle kind) in prime spots every week-night. The new path taken in 1966 had, by the mid-1970s, acquired a distinctly Gadarene aspect. It is interesting, and perhaps instructive, to note that by 1970 radio had definitely reasserted itself inside the ABC as an attractive medium offering interesting work and congenial subject-matter for thoughtful people.

In celebration of its fiftieth birthday the ABC put on a specially commissioned television opera by Peter Sculthorpe straight after the current affairs programme *Nationwide*. This was a strange choice, opera having been banished from our TV screens since the mid-1970s. The irony escaped the critics and commentators — or perhaps they were decently polite. I found the work absorbing, but not so much so that I was not able to reflect for a moment on the unusualness of sitting in front of a TV set watching a commissioned Australian work that engaged my serious critical judgment about it. In fine, I think ABC TV, in the late 1960s, in the midst of a shake-up that brought about much that was good, took a fatally wrong step in deciding to programme aggressively for a big audience at the cost of seriousness. It was a

slight, almost negligible cost at first, but it inevitably grew. Just how great the consequences were only became apparent in the 1970s. Maybe a single national channel in competition with a number of commercial ones is bound to be a mixed bag; but in the mixture the things of the mind and spirit should have and be seen to have the primacy. Why else should the parliament and the people continue to think it worth paying for? The ratings themselves provide a final comment. During its first decade of fairly uncompetitive programming ABC TV in the big cities attracted around 14% of evening viewers. Ken Watts's 1966 revolution raised this figure to a peak of at least 17%. But the increase was short-lived, lasting only as long as it took the commercials to wheel on their Willesees. Through most of the 1970s the ABC's share was around 11% or 12%, and it has never regained the 14% it enjoyed in its first decade without any populist huffing and puffing.

Some of this commercialism has spread from TV to radio. All radio programming is now determined much more by reference to audience-research data, with considerable benefits. But I would agree with a fellow department head who remarked that our programming deliberations in recent times seem more and more to deal with questions like 'Saturday afternoons don't seem to be going so well. What sort of programme should we put there?', whereas formerly it would more likely have been 'Yes. This is a good idea for a programme. Where should we put it?' Radio One (i. e. the 'light' stations in capital cities) has been transformed into a smooth-flowing continuum of talk interspersed with research-

approved formulaic music, as free as possible [*pace* Parliament) of ‘hiccups’, which is the term the planners use to denote disparate items that might interrupt the even flow. Such a ‘hiccup’ for instance, was the Friday day-time one-hour play, which was discontinued a year ago on the ground that it hindered the station’s ability to broadcast sudden ‘news-breaks’ even though it rated well. This emptying out of certain elements from Radio One has put greater pressure on Radio Two to accommodate lighter non-topical and performed spoken word that used to be on Radio One. ABC FM, committed to gramophone music, only slightly interested in spoken performance, and demanding stereophony, does little to relieve this pressure.

The question ‘What is the ABC for?’ inserts itself. I do not propose to give the answers here. I assume them. And my assumptions imply the indispensability of intellectual strength in managing national radio and television programmes. Not vague highbrow-ness, but the strength of mind which manages ideas with clarity and decision, sorts out values, and approaches the public confidently with what it has decided, and which is helped, not determined, by extrinsic considerations like the data of audience-research. Heads with some fire in them.



Writing for radio drama declined as the 1960s went by. Television took over the mass audience, and radio was traumatized for a time. The writers who had worked for radio

went after the richer pickings and a bigger audience in TV. But in one important area the Features Editor, Ivan Smith, maintained a holding operation that was in the main unsung, but which ensured that certain qualities and genres and writing techniques were not lost and might be built upon later when radio re-grouped itself at the start of the 1970s.

Working with writers who were not always of top quality, but applying exacting standards and ingenious editorial guidance, he kept three important radio programmes going through the 1960s. These were the Sunday evening half-hour *Quality Street*, which presented features on literature and the other arts; another half-hour, *Tuesday Night Feature*, which treated more general subjects, including biography and history, and also presented some very notable half-hour plays — true radio works, not mere proscenium radio — at a time when the official drama-editing machine was failing; and *The Poet's Tongue* on Sunday afternoon. I should also mention *Nocturne* (poetry with improvised music).

Ivan Smith's standards were rigorous and he would do anything short of murder to see that a piece of good radio writing got to air. By the end of the 1960s the radio feature was beginning to 'take off', and his stable of writers had increased in both number and quality. Two of them were outstanding, and without them he would certainly have had to shut up shop. Both were freelancers who for long periods lived very largely or wholly from Smith's radio programmes. One was Colin Free, now an ABC script editor, and well known as the author of novels and stage plays as well as radio and TV ones. I have no doubt that Colin

Free's real genius has been for radio; and in Ivan Smith he found not only a helpful editor but a crack producer (in many ways the best I have seen anywhere) exactly fitted to his talents and writing style. One can only lament that this superb combination of talents functioned at a time when ABC radio was definitely the poor relation. Such programmes were little publicized; they were heard by comparatively few listeners; and there were no radio reviews or criticism. I certainly commend the radio scripts of Colin Free (there are some dozens in our Drama and Features script library) to any serious student of radio in this country, and even more the extant productions of them by Ivan Smith in our sound archives (here there are some un fortunate lacunae). They are nearly all half-hour pieces that revel in the freedom and the suggestive and associative possibilities of radio. Unfortunately, many of them (especially the futuristic and science-fiction ones) tend to abound with contemporary references and half-hints about topics of the day, and generally do not translate well across time. 'Brain Drain', for instance, loses much of its point since the fuss about organ transplants has died down. An exception is *A Walk Among the Wheenies*, which in the production by Ivan Smith was heard on the BBC and in many other countries through its issue by the BBC Transcription Service. It also became a stage play and a TV serial, and a number of the others were translated to TV or the stage — but I think they were best on radio.

The other writer on whom Ivan Smith depended, Norman Gear, was not of the same order as Colin Free. He was a Hampshire man who migrated to Australia in the early 1960s and,

having told the migration authorities in London that he hoped to work as a writer here, finished up in Elizabeth, South Australia. He had been advised that Adelaide was the city of culture. The ABC in Adelaide sent him to see Ivan Smith in Sydney, and he moved to Sydney and stayed for a couple of years before returning to the UK. But both here and (for years afterwards) from his home in Wales, he contributed hundreds of feature scripts on writers and poets, radio portraits of historical figures, series like *Three Men of the Reformation* (with Ron Haddrick as Luther, Robert Peach as Erasmus and Edward Hepple as Calvin), *Three Russian Novelists* (Dostoevsky, Tolstoy and Turgenev), *Giant at War* (about Wallenstein and Gustavus Adolphus), and countless arrangements of prose and poetry including two serial surveys of British and American verse. As a writer, he could be a bit pompous at times, but that was easily fixed up before going to air. What he did superbly was to research the essentials of a subject and shape them for radio productions. He was much appreciated then (one listener wrote asking if Norman Gear was a real person or a consortium of historians) and listeners today are in his debt.

The difference between Colin Free and Norman Gear is the difference between creative radio writing pure and simple, and the high-class journalism that can arrange the presentation of general literature on the air. The latter is a proper task of a Features Department. The ABC, as we have seen, had started one in 1948 and joined it with Drama in 1950.

In the ABC's Report to Parliament for the year 1950/51 we read of the beginnings of the *Quality Street* programme:

On Sunday evenings a different field was covered in a series of anthology programs of literature and music, in which special attention was given to the work of Australian poets — Roderick Quinn, Christopher Brennan, Judith Wright, Rex Ingamells, ‘Banjo’ Paterson, Adam Lindsay Gordon, and many others were represented in this series.

The juxtaposition of Quinn and Paterson and Gordon with Brennan and Wright may startle, but allowance should be made for the need to impress politicians and others with as many Australian names as possible. When I first worked on these annual lists there was a perfect paranoia about this, which even now has not entirely disappeared. But we can note advances in sophistication if we compare titles presented to the Parliament in the mid-1950s with those of the mid-1960s.

Features titles selected for mention in the Annual Report of 1954/55 are:

#### AUSTRALIAN LITERATURE

Some Australian Poems — an anthology;

Australian Panorama — (Australian ballads & descriptive verse)

Australian Writers (an anthology)

The Moonbone Myth (Aboriginal Myth)

Gordon the Poet

#### GENERAL LITERATURE

Anthology of American writers and poets

Under Milk Wood

Poet of Darkness (poems of Novalis, translated by Ivan Smith)

François Villon

Horace — Poet of Rome

The Devil and young Tennyson

Poems of Stephen Spender

In 1963/64, Australian literature is still a bit thinly represented, with mention of Christopher Koch, Shaw Neilson, David Campbell, Mary Gilmore and Bernard O'Dowd. Notable, though, is the first mention of *A First Hearing*, a quarterly programme of unpublished Australian verse, established by John Croyston, which persists today and attracts many contributions. (Many Australian poets were published here in their early careers, including Les Murray, Geoffrey Lehman, Rhyll McMaster, Roger McDonald, Michael Dransfield, Peter Skzrenecki, and others. ) World literature in 1963/64 is more cosmopolitan, with mention of Robert Frost, John Pudney, Marianne Moore, Whitman, Vernon Scannell, Archibald McLeish, Mark Van Doren, Ungaretti, Montale, Quasimodo, Wilfrid Owen, Heine, Hölderlin, Allen Curnow, and Edgar Lee Masters, among a lot of classics. And in 1964, '65, '66, things looked up further for Australian poets, with programmes on

Bruce Beaver, John Blight, Gwen Harwood, Roland Robinson, Vivian Smith, Douglas Stewart, John Thompson, Kath Walker, Judith Wright, James McAuley, Thomas Shapcott, J. R. Rowland, Rosemary Dobson, Eric Rolls, Elizabeth Riddell, R. D. Fitzgerald, and William Hart-Smith.

In all of these programmes, the accent was strongly, if not exclusively, on presentation of the literary work. In a half-hour feature on Wordsworth or Browning or whomever, the narration, talking about Wordsworth or Browning, might assume an air of critical importance, but this was partly a device. Its essential function was to support and illuminate the actual works that were being presented. Purely discursive programmes — as opposed to these performance-oriented ones — were more normally the business of the Talks Department; and through the 1960s, on Friday evenings, it put on a half-hour programme variously called *Books for Comment* and *Today's Writing*, the latter describing itself as 'interviews, comments, original poetry readings, occasional chit-chat by authors, publishers, bookmen'. After the demise of the Talks Department in 1969 and the rise of Allan Ashbolt's 'Special Projects', this programme changed its name ominously to *Books and Ideas*, with the even more ominous sub-title 'A programme not so much about books as about the ideas they contain'. In the manner of other Special Projects programmes, it began to deal almost exclusively in books about the environment, the arms race, property-developers, multi-nationals, and so on. The nearest it came to literature would usually have been in political biography. This moved me in 1977 to start a pure Talks programme in Radio

Drama & Features called *Books and Writing* [produced initially by Jan Garrett and John Tranter and later by Martin Harrison, Robert Dessaix and others], to get some attention back to books as literature. Thus were the roles of departments muddled and confused during the lively '70s. But again, I jump too far ahead.



In 1971, I left my ABC Features Editor's desk for six months to take up a Churchill Fellowship to study 'cultural spoken-word radio in Italy, Germany, France and Britain'. It was the first time that anyone from the ABC had gone into Continental radio at the programme level and at length. During this trip I sat on *Prix Italia* juries for stereophonic works and radio documentaries for the first time. My ears were opened to a whole range of new things, and on my return to Australia I wrote, proposing an internationalization of our programming outlook:

I should summarise the difference I observed between the continentals and the BBC (which the ABC tends to follow). Simplifying for the sake of brevity, I would say that the Continental program-makers favour a technique-based approach, founded in the medium itself: boldly experimental, with an appreciable failure rate but some stunning successes to compensate. At the BBC the approach is more word-based. This is safer, perhaps, more tied to a text, but the tradition of good writing in Britain (much envied on the Continent, I thought) brings successes of a different kind. The two approaches are by no means mutually exclusive.

Writing about my time in Radio France, I said:

Of most interest to me were the programs of the Atelier de Creation Radio-phonique, which is headed by M. Alain Trutat and provides fine programs for a regular 3-hour Sunday night spot on the France Culture network. This three-hour program may consist of a single work, or more often a number of works. Sometimes it consists of several works (talk, documentary, music, poetry) all on a particular person or hovering around a particular theme — but suggestively, paying due attention to the fact that radio is an associative medium and operates at various levels like a poem.

M. Trutat's approach is radiophonic and his programs tend to be markedly documentary, the documentary elements often being 'treated' with much mixing and cutting and the use of particular sounds as symbols. The Atelier grew out of the events of 1968, and its interests often reflect that origin. Trutat says that its programs offer insights, not judgments, and this is true.

At the suggestion of the then Controller of Programmes, Neil Hutchison, I had written my Churchill report in such a way as to stimulate comparisons with the ABC without making direct suggestions that might alienate those they were directed at. I was hoping to be influential, but never dreamed that I might be asked to take up this idea of a 3-hour programme and apply it *mutatis mutandis* to Australian radio. Arthur Wyndham, then in charge of Radio Two, made the suggestion, and I still remember the 1965 Mildara Cabernet Shiraz with which he tempted myself

and my two Features colleagues, Julie-Anne Ford and Rodney Wetherell. So was born *Sunday Night Radio Two*.

It was born for other reasons too. The ABC's historian, Professor Ken Inglis, mentioned in a recent broadcast three programmes of ABC radio in the '70s that he considered innovatory (in ways the BBC was not) in reacting to television: Radio Drama & Features' *Sunday Night Radio Two* (now *Radio Helicon*), Special Projects' *Lateline*, and the Science Unit's *Investigations*. I agree with him. It is intriguing that SNR2's French exemplar should have been born out of 1968 in Paris, because I think that these three programmes and especially SNR2 and *Lateline* (*Investigations* was a slightly later derivative) were also the result of an Australian upheaval, very noticeable in the ABC, which owed much to the same anti-authoritarian spirit (arriving a bit later in Australia and getting an extra fillip from the Vietnam and conscription controversies). Programme-makers in radio formed a Radio Action Movement (RAM), which adopted a strong attitude towards management and was influential in bringing about the programme changes of the early 1970s. I was later to describe *Lateline* as 'boringly repetitive and tendentious'; it was supposed to cover a wide range of subjects including literature and the arts, but it quickly got hooked into what Denys Pryor, in the *Melbourne Age*, termed 'social engineering'. Nevertheless it did make some outstanding programmes, and its introduction of the use of international circuits to hold serious and lengthy discussions with authoritative people anywhere in the world was imaginative.

*Sunday Night Radio Two* (the predecessor of the present *Radio Helicon*) began on 11th March, 1973. The people who worked on it in the beginning were Rodney Wetherell, Julie-Anne Ford and, at times, Ron Blair. Instead of producing half-hour features researched in libraries, we were suddenly scouring universities in Australia and abroad for expert writers and presenters of spacious and authoritative programmes. *SNR2* was a gigantic undertaking, always employing far too few people inside the ABC; and its demands affected the orderly transmission of production-skills in, e. g., poetry and tightly structured half-hour features, from which we have not recovered. The restrictions on staffing imposed only a couple of years after it started did not help. But the programmes are there and they represent nothing less than a revolution in Australian radio.

In 1973 they included *The Surrealist Dream*, a history of dada, surrealism and pop-art arranged by Colin Free, with music by Satie, Emerson Lake & Palmer and Lukas Foss; *The Branch of Dodona*, presented by David Campbell; Dr Frances Yates of the Warburg Institute; a six-part Survey of Australian Verse arranged and presented by Leonie Kramer; a radio version by Ron Blair of his Nimrod Theatre musical, *Flash Jim Vaux*; translations of Georg Trakl by James McAuley specially commissioned for the programme; two evenings on Fascism and Nazism by Richard Bosworth; a brilliant arrangement of Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past* by Rodney Wetherell and read by Gordon Chater.

In the couple of years that followed, there was a long poetic treatment of the search for Prester John's kingdom, by Rodney

Hall; *The Celtic Inheritance* by John Pringle; a programme in words and music on John Cage by Nigel Butterley; my own production with music of Ron Haddrick reading James McAuley's *Captain Quiros*; *The People of the Sagas* presented and arranged by A. D. Hope; an evening with Peter Porter on his first return to Australia after 21 years; three whole evenings assessing the Existentialists, by Max Charlesworth, which included interviews with Sartre and de Beauvoir, and contributions from R. D. Laing, Raymond Aron, Maurice Cranston, Alistair Davidson, Philip Thody and others; another evening on Ionesco built around an exclusive and hard-to-get interview; Bill Mandle on *Sport in Australia*. Robert Peach made the documentary on deafness, *The World of JK*, which won the ABC's third Italia Prize in 1974. Denys Pryor presented *Juvenal: the Indignant Poet*. Kingsley Amis accepted our commission to write and narrate a 2½-hour essay on comedy, *The Comic Muse* — penetrating, biased and funny. John Douglas Pringle devoted a whole evening to *The Poet's War*, a study of the Spanish Civil War as seen through the eyes of a *Manchester Guardian* leader-writer of the time. We discovered the possibility of one-man shows on radio when Alastair Duncan presented Robert Williams' arrangement of *Boswell on Johnson*. Other examples included Ron Haddrick's reading of *Beowulf*, introduced by the translator, Michael Alexander, who was so excited by the undertaking that he took leave from Stirling University to come here and participate. Ron Haddrick also read *The Moods of Ginger Mick*. Perhaps the high point of this genre was in 1977 when the Virgil scholar, Professor R. D. Williams, of

Reading University, introduced the readings by Wynn Roberts of Virgil's *Aeneid*.

Among the big undertakings there were all sorts of small delights — readings of poems or odd bits of music in the interstices of things. I remember with particular pleasure a reading by Nigel Lovell of Douglas Stewart's poem *Rutherford*; a little 20-minute feature on Scott Joplin, in which Joshua Rifkin's recordings of Joplin's rags were broadcast in Australia for the first time; and the performance by a visiting German, Werner Ganse, of some of Kurt Schwitters' 'sound poetry', including the *Ur Sonata*.

We took numerous programmes from overseas, especially the BBC. We argued about techniques of 'voicing over' foreign language inter views, and sometimes got them right. And there were also the flops. (Flops, like the poor, are always with us. ) Sometimes they were caused by the actual spaciousness of the programme-spot: programmes that should have run for one hour were allowed to run for two. At other times they resulted from arch or twee attempts to be funny. As well as the successful ones, there were one or two failed attempts at anthology-programmes; this sort of thing can be one of the delights of radio, but it must be done with sensitivity and some originality. I have lost count of the number of people who have offered to undertake an anthology-programme on death. I still run a mile from them.

With *Sunday Night Radio Two*, ABC Radio, although a net gainer, also sustained some losses that we did not foresee as all our efforts went into one big programme. The gentle art of the half-

hour feature, the Norman Gear type of programme of the 1960s, has been all but lost — lending weight to accusations that we have become too exclusively high brow. *Nocturne*, the Sunday-evening quarter-hour of poetry and improvised music, disappeared. So did those tidily balanced Sunday afternoon broadcasts of poetry, to be restored only six years later. In fact, to our ashamed surprise, surveying results at the end of the first year of *SNR2*, we found that over-all we had broadcast less poetry than in the previous year.



The presentation of poetry on radio is a vexed question. The only thing James McAuley wrote that I find in any way tedious is his *Primer of English Versification*. I am not saying that it doesn't serve a useful purpose or that it is not well done; it is in fact ingenious. But its virtues are like those of, say, a written manual for non-swimmers on how to stay afloat in the water. There are, admittedly, a lot of non-swimmers around these days. If I may change metaphors, A. D. Hope once described the eighteenth-century attitude to poetry as being like the educated discrimination that people today think worth acquiring in the world of wine. I think there are plenty of people around today who can tell you whether a wine is in balance, but would be at a loss trying to balance a few lines of Shakespeare or Milton. That doesn't mean, though, that they don't enjoy hearing Olivier or Scofield or John Bell speaking the same lines. Certainly, the

reading of poetry aloud is a very delicate art, and many radio listeners enjoy it, most of them in the way that the majority of concert-goers enjoy music — as non-practitioners who could not say theoretically what is wrong with a performance but who, nevertheless, know pretty surely when it is well done and when it is not.

All production is a matter of tact and personal interaction. With poetry it is especially so; and having produced plays and features, and poetry, and music, I have no hesitation in saying that I have found poetry the hardest to get just right. For a start, your casting choices are much narrower; and when you have got your performer, his margin of error is usually narrower. (It is as though he were on a higher, tauter tight-rope.) Then, leaving aside such gross error as mis-interpretation, there are three broad ways in which it can easily go wrong. (1) You can muck it up technically: wrong pacing or pausing, or *legato* when you should be *staccato*, or getting the intonation-tunes wrong, or failing to achieve the right counterpoint between the stress-requirements of the metre and the natural rhythm of the words. (2) You can get things wrong emotionally, so that the emotional qualities of the reading don't correspond honestly to the content of the poem. There are a thousand ways in which this can occur. The least offensive is probably the too-flat reading, when the reader, emotionally, doesn't come up to the mark of the words. Worst of all, and unfortunately much more common, is when the reader invests the words with emotion that they do not warrant. This spurious emotion is the hallmark of the bad reader, but it can happen to the

best, too, when he gets tired and his concentration starts to wane. I call it ‘intoning’. It is the main reason why many poets and others say that actors should not read poetry. (3) You can fail acoustically to suit your microphone and studio technique to the style of the poem. The works of Homer and Eliot, for instance, would benefit from quite different technical approaches.

On the question of who should read poetry, I can often sympathize with poets who state baldly that ‘actors shouldn’t’. But despite my sympathy, I think the attitude is wrong and short-sighted. I remarked earlier that practically all of literature can be treated as a text for the performer’s art. When arguing this point with a poet, I am more likely to say baldly that poetry *is* a performing art. Once a poem is written, then (neither more nor less than a play) it is there to be read — let us hope as well as it deserves. Jonathan Miller, a few years ago, talking as a producer of plays, remarked that every playwright deserves at least one production of his play according to his own insights and wishes. I would say that the reading of a poem by the poet is bound to be a significant and interesting reading of it. What the poets often mean is that they should read their poetry on the ABC. My answer is yes, if they’re good enough (and extant). If the argument hots up, then I’m likely to come out with the old one-two: why is it that Russians like Yevtushenko and Vosnesensky read so beautifully, yet so many Australian poets — and I’m thinking of some whose writing is ingenious and effective in terms of sound — don’t read well? It may be pertinent to note that a really fine reader-poet like James McAuley was as fussy as anyone about the

reading of his work on air — but his fuss was all directed towards ensuring that we got Ron Haddrick.

If I say that in recent times the over-all bias of our literary programmes has been a bit highbrow, I am not thinking of poetry. I still take comfort from the memory of something that happened in 1979. The *National Times* critic, Harry Robinson, upbraided *Sunday Night Radio Two* for broad casting Milton's *Paradise Lost*, which he described as 'indigestible to all but a few of extremely scholarly bent' and 'a work that not one per cent of the population have ever read or will read'. The very next week there were three letters in the *National Times* taking him to task as a philistine. None of them was from a scholar; in fact, one was from a migrant couple whose first language and culture was obviously not English. A few weeks later I was to introduce a production of C. J. Dennis's *Ginger Mick*, and although I don't believe in answering critics, on this occasion it happened to suit the trend of my argument to mention Harry Robinson's criticism. I was referring to the vanished vogue for recitation, and I took up his remark that only 1% of the population would ever read *Paradise Lost*:

When we do these long poems, whether it be *Paradise Lost* or *Ginger Mick*, we don't *ask* people to read them. We'll take care of the reading. We ask you to listen to them. What we're on about is oral performance — reading stories aloud, listening to stories. Maybe it's only scholars nowadays who read Virgil's *Aeneid* on the printed page. Virgil himself, of course, wrote it for reading aloud, and recited it himself. And when Wynn Roberts read it aloud — performed, recited it — on Radio Two, the mountain of letters we

received asking for more of the same came ten-to-one from ordinary people, not scholars or latinists. The art of recitation is not dead — it's alive and well on Radio 2.



Having begun this paper with comparisons between the ABC and the BBC in 1932, I shall end with more comparisons as at July 1982. We should expect to find differences, and there are many. Looking through the spoken-word radio programmes of the two organizations, I think three are worth noticing here.

In the first place, BBC talk is more variegated, covers more subjects and areas of interest; the ABC concentrates more on current socio political questions. In a week's programming on the BBC, there are more occasions when you are likely to bump into, say, a half-hour feature on an exchange of letters between B. R. Haydon and the Duke of Wellington; a documentary about life on a super-tanker; a biography of Robert Owen; a quarter-hour on 'Words'. To the BBC more things seem to be 'relevant'. It seems less moved by considerations of topicality, less bounded by the present. It seems to assume to a far greater extent than the ABC that its listeners will find the past interesting. The same applies to criticism. ABC radio's critical gaze tends to fix itself more exclusively on practical, social things like the law and its reform, education and child-rearing, the environment and the wood-chip industry, &c. There are good review programmes, especially of films and books, but nothing to match the scope of the BBC's

nightly half-hour *Kaleidoscope* and its weekly 50-minute *Critics Forum*, which offer criticism of theatre, architecture, art, as well as cinema and records. If your touchstone is Terence's dictum, 'I am a man: there is nothing human that I consider alien', then the BBC seems to come off rather better.

The second difference is that more of the spoken word on the BBC is the result of reflection. A greater proportion of ABC talk comes 'off the top of the head' of the speaker, in response to questioning by an interviewer. The third difference is in the vastly greater amount of performed, as distinct from discursive, spoken word on the BBC, and especially the larger amount of fiction — drama, readings, story-telling of all kinds — that the BBC puts on. It is hard to be precise because of week-to-week variation, but from examination of the most recent programme layouts I think one could express the difference pretty accurately as follows: *Short stories (new, unpublished)*, BBC, 1 each weekday, ABC, nil; *Short stories (published)*, BBC 2 per day, ABC nil; *Serialized book-readings*, BBC 1 programme per week-day (total 15 minutes), ABC 2 programmes per week-day (total 27 minutes); *Dramatized serials*, BBC 4 hours 45 minutes per week (including one-hour repeat), ABC 1 hour 20 minutes (including half-hour produced by BBC); *One-off plays*, BBC 10 hours 30 minutes per week, ABC 3 hours per week (including some BBC productions). The BBC broadcasts at least one play per day; the ABC broadcasts at most three plays per week.

Some, but not all, of these differences simply reflect the BBC's superiority in sheer size and financial resources. Others certainly

reflect differences of outlook and relative values between the two organizations. Whether they also reflect basic differences between the two societies is a question I often ask myself. But my own particular professional back ground, and the possible biases you may infer from it, caution me not to offer an answer now. You are listeners and for that matter owners of the ABC. These are questions you should think about. They should certainly not be left only to us broadcasters.

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