

Radio In Canada

A. DUDLEY COPLAND

A Pictorial History of Radio in Canada, Sandy Stewart. Illustrated by photographs. Gage Publishing Limited, Toronto, 1975. 154 pages. \$11.95 hardcover.

For this reviewer, who has listened to radio for over fifty years, but knew little or nothing of its early struggles, this book is a revelation. It will surprise most readers to know that it was a Canadian, born near Sherbrooke, Quebec, who first used the human voice to replace the Morse Code form of communication. Reginald Aubrey Fessenden was educated in Canada, but, bitterly disappointed about the seeming indifference of the government and about the loss of a Professorship in Electrical Engineering in McGill University in favour of an American, he moved to the United States. Soon he had gained a reputation with the United States Weather Bureau and with the United Fruit Company who had a very vital interest in weather.

On December 24th, 1906, Fessenden broadcast a Christmas Eve programme to some United Fruit Company ships at sea. To the amazement of the listeners, instead of the Morse Code messages, a human voice informed them that they were about to hear music and song. Thus the genius from Canada had invented radio-telephony, or what we now call "real radio", to quote author Sandy Stewart. A request for mailed-in acknowledgements resulted in abundant correspondence from listeners. The giants of the electrical world, Marconi and Westinghouse, got into the act and Aubrey Fessenden's fertile mind brought many improvements to the equipment in use. However, his mind was never at rest and he lost control of the inventions which went on to make others rich.

There was considerable rivalry between Marconi and Westinghouse as to which company should do the "first radio broadcast". In the United States, three large corporations were merging into the Radio Corporation of America to take effective control of the manufacture of broadcast equipment. It is claimed that the first scheduled broadcast in North America was the relay of a musical programme by Montreal Radio Station, call letters XWA, to a Royal Society meeting in Ottawa on May 20th, 1920. A few months later the American Station KDKA of Pittsburgh, broadcast presidential election returns. Although no mention is made of it in the book, it was the powerful KDKA station that initiated, through the efforts of George Wendt of Canadian Westinghouse Company, the weekly "Messages to the North" which broke down the tedium and monotony of isolated living in the Arctic settlements.

As far as development in Canada was concerned, political differences limited expansion, and little money was made available. However, for five

years the Canadian National Railway carried programs across the country from studios in its hotels. A Royal Commission then recommended the formation of a Canadian Radio Broadcasting Company. The Commission also wanted several high-power stations across Canada, since American radio was beginning to dominate Canada. They also recommended an annual subsidy of one million dollars, with a recommended listener fee of \$3.00 per annum. A Conservative government passed the Canadian Broadcasting Act in 1932.

There were long periods of wrangling, particularly over religion, about which battles were waged over the air, until all denominations came together to form a Council of Churches. There were attempts to let the private sector get into the act, but since advertising (as distinguished from "sponsoring") was not permitted under the Broadcasting Act, it took a long time for Canada to reach anything like equal status with the rapidly expanding American networks. Canada had as yet no well-known "stars" of radio. It was not unusual for guest artists to perform without fee, gaining experience in a new and difficult field. In contrast, however, hockey, one of the Canadian public's favourite pastimes, had an early start, as far back as 1923. Thereafter, Foster Hewitt, that versatile and enduring producer, actor, commentator, took over. By 1933 Saturday Night Hockey was being broadcast from coast to coast, sponsored by General Motors.

Another landmark in Canadian broadcasting occurred in 1936. Two men 141 feet underground in an abandoned Moose River Mine pulled a signal cord and the shaft caved in on them. Frank Willis of the CBC rushed to the scene, and with two relief men, commenced a marathon sixty-nine hour vigil, reporting several minutes every hour. The story was carried by 650 U.S. radio stations and by 58 Canadian stations. This was hailed as the finest broadcasting feat of the first half of the twentieth century.

The next significant event was the Royal Tour of 1939. The best equipment was provided and the tour was a spectacular success. Canada could now prove to the world that she could compete with the best in radio programming. Two broadcast teams, comprising in all about 100 men, leap-frogged across the country. They travelled 7000 miles and carried out 91 broadcasts. Many producers, announcers, and technical people can date their subsequent success from this remarkable performance.

Then came the war. War news at first came from the Canadian Press news service, but in 1940 Dan McArthur was appointed to head CBC news and to establish accurate news services from four regional news bureaus, under rather strict guidelines as to content. Charles Jennings was appointed the first news reader, followed by Lorne Greene. Correspondents covered all fronts and the people were kept well-informed by radio as to how events were shaping. The CBC also sent out Canadian home news which the BBC re-broadcast for Canadians on active service. The hockey broadcasts were particularly enjoyed. It is impossible to list all the Canadian war correspondents within the scope of this review, but the reader will note that some are still active in the media.

There is little doubt that radio had a tremendous influence on the country during the war. It stirred the imagination and patriotism of the

Canadian people and strove to hold the country together. Radio dramas, hosted by top flight commentators and supported by well written scripts and fine actors, caught the popular imagination. L FOR LANKY delighted those who had special feelings for the air force, while FIGHTING NAVY, from the mythical destroyer H.M.C.S. MISSINABI, won the hearts of those who had a special interest in the navy. Stirred by the need for more and more war equipment, Canada was rapidly becoming an industrialised country, with many people moving to the cities. However, to serve the rural population, farm programs ran on French and English radio for 25 years in some provinces, in marked contrast to today's brief market reports. From these dramatized programs, top flight executives like Harry Boyle, Ron Fraser, Keith Morrow and Bob Graham emerged.

Although the Canadian radio audience listened to the flow of American talent that flooded the airwaves, men like Andrew Allen were forging dramatic teams and introducing programs that soon achieved top ratings in Canada and some other countries. For music lovers it is interesting to note the CBC regularly broadcast on radio the Metropolitan Opera for 43 consecutive years. These are still enjoying popularity amongst the radio listeners. The best remembered children's stories were those written by a New Brunswick, Mary Grannan. After one year of local programming her "JUST MARY" series moved to the CBC network and she moved to Toronto where the "MAGGIE MUGGINS" stories were written and broadcast. Political broadcasts were dynamite, unless masterfully and impartially handled by Reid Forsee. The Liberals, according to Sandy Stewart, thought they owned the CBC, having been so long in power, while the Conservatives thought the corporation was riddled with left-leaning "communists".

When television made its "flickering debut" it did not at first "turn-on" the radio listening audience, although it did capture the attention of the young. The so-called stars of radio, for one reason or another, were unsuited for the new media. A good appearance, some talent and clear enunciation went to make the new stars. Television dealt radio a severe blow, but by no means a lethal one. There must be scarcely a household in Canada where, throughout the first half of the day, radio isn't being listened to. The young who create singing stars by their enthusiasm and purchase of records, remind us that entertainment through the ears is often much more interesting than through the eyes. Radio has a firm place in the hearts of the Canadian public.

There is something of interest in this book for every adult; also, young adults will find it a useful source of historical information about the Canadian news media. The pains-taking research done by Sandy Stewart, his interviews with his contemporaries, and his own experience have produced a splendid account of the history of radio in Canada.

A. Dudley Copland has been a radio "fun" since the days of the little black box with its banks of batteries. During his career he has been fur-trader, air force officer; and northern writer. He has written and broadcast free-lance for the CBC, mostly on northern subjects.