

# *Tuning in: Canadian Radio Resources*

by JOSEPHINE LANGHAM

In the 1920s, private commercial radio quickly became a cheap<sup>1</sup> and popular form of mass entertainment in Canada. From 1932 onward, with the formation of the Canadian Radio Broadcasting Commission and its successor, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), public radio in Canada not only extended the mass entertainment programming of the private stations, but also nourished the growing sense of Canadian national identity. Through the years of the Great Depression and the ministries of R.B. Bennett and W.L. Mackenzie King, and during World War II, the Cold War, and the era of Louis S. St-Laurent and C.D. Howe, millions of Canadians were informed, entertained, and diverted by the news, music, variety, comedy and drama which poured into their homes through radio sets. Radio formed opinions, interpreted the world, patronized the arts, modified social habits<sup>2</sup>, and was the only real expression of a Canadian national theatre. Yet, despite today's preoccupation with nostalgia and Canada's continuing obsession with the exact nature of its identity, very little serious attention has been paid to assessing the content, and, above all, the influence of Canadian radio programming in those years<sup>3</sup>.

This neglect of Canadian radio resources as a fit subject for study reflects the long-standing disinterest of Canadian archivists in broadcast materials. Research depends on documents, and Canadian archivists have been lax both in recognizing the value and significance of broadcast documentation and in ensuring its preservation. This is particularly true for radio in its heyday—a period of about thirty years (1925 to 1955 approximately) when radio, unchallenged by television, enjoyed pre-eminence as an entertainment and cultural medium. In

- 1 Radio sets were, in fact, by no means cheap. According to E. Austin Weir quoting from *Radio Industry* published by the Dominion Bureau of Statistics in 1930, 22,646 standard receivers were sold in Canada in 1930; of these 95.7% were AC sets and 15% of these cost less than \$100; 44% cost \$100 to \$200 dollars and 41% cost over \$200. From the beginning, however, radio was the delight of the "do it yourselfer" and kits and parts did a roaring trade. See E. Austin Weir, *The Struggle for National Broadcasting in Canada*, (Toronto, 1965), p. 23. It should be remembered that between 1932 and 1953 there was also the cost of the license fee which was first of all two dollars and then rose to two dollars and fifty cents.
- 2 Radio has been blamed for the flight to the suburbs from the city. It has been suggested that radio and the automobile ended the isolation which had always been associated with life outside of the city. See Erik Barnouw, *Tube of Plenty*, (New York, 1977) p. 44.
- 3 Weir discusses programming although his main concern is with the political battle for national broadcasting. A popular and appealing volume on radio which is concerned with programming is Sandy Stewart, *A Pictorial History of Radio in Canada*, (Toronto, 1975).

1976-77, John Twomey<sup>4</sup> devoted a year to an investigation of the state of radio and television broadcasting resources in Canada. Twomey was particularly concerned with the preservation of contemporary broadcasting but his findings did direct attention to "the location and preservation of Canadian broadcasting materials from the past"<sup>5</sup> and since, for the second quarter of this century, these broadcasting materials in effect meant radio, then radio naturally received considerable attention. Twomey's report is perceptive, frank and critical, both of Canadian archivists because they have not given radio the attention it deserves, and of Canadian scholars because they have ignored the resources that do exist. Twomey points out that published material on Canadian broadcasting deals largely with the official aspects of broadcast legislation, regulation, and administration, and that it omits analyses of programme content as well as of any investigation of the social and cultural impact of radio.

While archivists must share blame for the neglect of Canadian radio, researchers have demonstrated no sense of urgency in pressing Canadian archives to acquire the sound record of Canadian radio. Scholars appear wedded to the notion that print and manuscript are the only valid form of archival documentation. Although electronics have fundamentally altered the pattern and form of modern source material, researchers seem to be blind and deaf both to the existence of "unorthodox" documentation and to its effective use. In part, this is inevitable. Rare is the scholar who can earn a doctorate while sustaining lengthy daily contact with either television or radio. The rigours of the academic marathon tend to isolate the serious student from the mass entertainment industry, the values of which seem largely irrelevant to and at variance with, a narrow élitist education. In short, the very habits, demands and biases of academic training militates against scholars attributing much of worth to radio and television—media of which they often have little knowledge and even less experience.

There is also a common assumption that what radio is today, radio was yesterday. Such an assumption is quite misleading. Under the impact of competition from television, North American radio has changed dramatically in the last twenty years. Radio, observed Marshall McLuhan fifteen years ago, has shifted "from an entertainment medium into a kind of nervous information system."<sup>6</sup> Radio, through its news bulletins, traffic data, time signals, and weather reports has become a local bulletin board and the pervasive phone-in programme is now the equivalent of a chat over the garden fence. This, of course, is a revolution in the style and content of radio in Canada. Twenty to thirty years ago, radio attracted not only the dynamic and the energetic but the serious and the clever. It was a far more exciting, diverse and dominant medium than it is today. For many years Canadian writers, actors, musicians, and producers regarded radio as a

---

4 Former Chairman of the Radio and Television Arts Department at Ryerson Polytechnic in Toronto.

5 John Twomey, *Canadian Broadcasting History Resources in English*, "Critical Mass or Mess", (Toronto, 1977), p. 12.

6 Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, (Toronto, 1964), p. 298. Jack Craine, a former Director of CBC radio expressed somewhat the same idea in an article published in 1968: "Radio is the modern equivalent of the old town crier, "Three o'clock and all's well". He went on, "radio must coexist with TV. Its silly to bury our heads in the sand and says its the same as it was in 1933". *CBC Times*, 16-22 March 1968, p. 6.



*"Home from School and On with the Radio" — CGE receiver in home use, 1935. (Public Archives of Canada, C-27898)*

major art form and recognized that radio broadcasting was an important source of employment. A substantial quantity of Canadian creative energy was then directed toward radio and especially the CBC which, through its personnel and policies, became a major patron of literature, poetry and drama in Canada and a seminal influence on many of the cultural institutions of the country. While the intellectual tradition of radio is certainly being maintained on the CBC through such programmes as "Ideas" and "Anthology"—direct descendants of the cultural policies of early public broadcasting in Canada—it is no longer as significant as it once was because there are now so many more outlets for the talent of creative Canadians. Moreover, radio as an entertainment medium has been eclipsed by television and it does not have the same diversity and innovation as it had in the past. Canadian radio during its "Golden Age", unfettered by competition from television for money and original ideas, produced programmes of a wide variety and type which cannot be produced today largely because of economic restrictions. Twomey has stressed that "it is imperative that the programmes of literature and ideas be recognized as separate and distinct cultural entities and be preserved as such."<sup>7</sup> The admonition is timely. Nevertheless, Canadian radio of the past should be preserved and studied in aspects beyond its cultural dimensions. The impact of radio on the social scheme of things from the 1920s to 1950s is also unique and particularly worthy of research attention.

Radio may be regarded today as a solitary activity. Since the introduction of television "radio has turned to the individual needs of people at different times of the day, a fact that goes with the multiplicity of receiving sets in bedrooms, bathrooms, kitchens, cars, and now in pockets. . . . The teenager withdraws from the TV group to his private radio."<sup>8</sup> The relationship between the radio station and audience is now on a one-to-one basis. Listening to radio, however, was once a social activity and commenting on programmes a prime feature of conversation among families which gathered around the wireless for an evening of social listening. Rural isolation and distance from major centres of artistic and social activity left radio as the principal challenge to family and small community assumptions.<sup>9</sup> Lionel Brockington, first Chairman of the CBC Board of Governors (1936-1939) called radio "the thing that purrs like a kitten and sings like a kettle on every hearth."<sup>10</sup> Memoirs of those who experienced the Depression and which mention radio leave an unmistakable image of cozy intimacy:

---

7 Twomey, *Canadian Broadcasting History Resources in English*, p. 12.

8 McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, p. 306.

9 Andrew Allan told a splendid story about the popularity of "CBC Stage". Allan was travelling by train from Toronto to Vancouver in 1949 when he decided to send a letter to the CBC resigning from the hassle of producing the 'Stage' series. A young girl on the train spoke to him. "You're Andrew Allan, aren't you? . . . You're the reason I'm here." Allan admitted his attention was seized by the remark and the girl went on: "We live on a farm north of Edmonton. We're just plain people I guess. We haven't got any books or pictures or music or anything. But I have a little radio in my room. Every Sunday night I go up there and listen to your plays. All week I wait for that time. It's wonderful. It's a whole new world for me. I began to read books because of your plays—all kinds of books I thought I'd never be interested in. And now I'm on my way to Vancouver to stay with my aunt. . . . and in the fall I'm starting university. What do you think of that?" Allan writes: "What I thought of that was too deep to be said but what I did about it was to go to my compartment and tear up the draft of the letter. We had seven more years of 'Stages' after that." Andrew Allan, *Self Portrait* (Toronto, 1974), p. 116.

10 Quoted in Peter Stursberg, *Mr. Broadcasting*, (Toronto, 1974), p. 109.

Life itself could never be a bore as long as there was a working radio within earshot. Radio listening was a passion the unemployed shared with the employed, the rich with the poor and all the rural West with the urban West. For farm families a radio in working order was a categorical imperative. It broke the barrier of isolation that held the prairie West in its grip for almost fifty years. The radio was not only entertainment, it enabled the farm people to shut themselves away from the depression itself, from the dust and from the wind that blew night and day with its incessant deranging whine.<sup>11</sup>

Again, in Barry Broadfoot's *Ten Lost Years*, a woman from the Maritimes spoke affectionately and revealingly of the place of radio in her daily routine:

It saved my life. There I was my husband cutting wood in the bush and me with three kiddies on that farm miles from nowhere. It was the world talking to me. I had never seen a hockey game but I think I became something of an expert listening to Foster Hewitt doing the Saturday Night games. And the CBC news. The drama series, Baker's Dozen, I still remember, and Lux Radio Theatre, Pepper Young's Family, Ma Perkins, the soap operas. . . .<sup>12</sup>

Foster Hewitt and the CBC news conveyed a sense of belonging to Canada to this woman and to many like her throughout the country. Domestic radio programmes were moulding a distinctive image of the country for Canadians.

Radio was also conveying an image of the United States and it is perhaps for this reason that Canadian researchers have not shown much interest in the medium.<sup>13</sup> During the "Golden Age of Radio", Canadian programmes were frequently competing with American imports and all too often the radio that is remembered by Canadians is American radio, the world of "Amos n' Andy", "Arthur Godfrey's Talent Scouts", "Nick Carter, Master Detective", "The Romance of Helen Trent"—syndicated fast-paced, wise-cracking shows which have all but disappeared from the airwaves today. One of the interesting developments in Canadian broadcasting in recent years has been the repatriation of radio as a Canadian medium when the impact of television contributed to the decline of the American syndicated programmes and their sale to Canadian stations. Nevertheless, although in the past there was a considerable amount of American programming on Canadian radio stations there was also a great deal of high quality Canadian material. It is this which must be recovered, preserved and assessed, but there are certain problems.

From the very early years of Canadian radio, indeed of radio material throughout the world, very little survives. Most people think of radio as synonymous with recording. This is not the case. Between 1922, when commercial radio broadcasting really began to spread in North America, until the mid 1930s, recorded material was very rarely used on radio and radio programmes themselves were not often recorded. Early radio was live, the very essence of epheme-

11 James Gray, *The Winter Years*, (Toronto, 1966), p. 53.

12 Barry Broadfoot, *Ten Lost Years*, (Toronto, 1973), p. 250.

13 Americans are very interested in old-time radio and there is a flourishing market in the cassettes of old American programmes.



*Foster Hewitt — conveying a sense of Canada?* (Public Archives of Canada, Imperial Oil Collection, PA-98735)

rality.<sup>14</sup> The spontaneous quality of the medium was highly valued by broadcaster and listener alike. Recording was expensive and therefore saved for “important” occasions and the logic of what was deemed important often appears highly peculiar today.<sup>15</sup> Trying to analyse the content of radio programmes of the 1920s and early 1930s from the fragments that therefore do survive is an activity roughly equivalent to reconstructing the social life of a civilization from pottery shards. By the late 1930s, substantial quantities of recordings begin to survive and from then on a serious investigation of Canadian radio from the sound record can begin. Even then there are problems. Broadcasters in general are not graced with any special sense of history. A tremendous amount of energy is required to fill the airwaves and it is today and tomorrow, not yesterday, which are the main objects of their concern.<sup>16</sup> “As It Happens” is a title which characterizes the average broadcaster’s need to be up-to-the-minute in world events. The only more satisfactory programme would be one which could predict the future—“As It Will Happen” perhaps—but that must wait until fate endows broadcasters with the second sight to which many of them aspire. Pending this, an inordinate amount of broadcast time is devoted to experts discussing this or that trend and making predictions about the future. Given this orientation, sensitivity to archival principles would not be a quality likely to be found in the broadcasting world. As a result, the recordings that do exist today have survived for a wide variety of reasons among which logical principles of archival preservation can confidently said to be the least important factors.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, technological innovations in more recent years have served to aggravate the impermanency of radio broadcasting since the modern recording medium,

- 
- 14 One exception to this was Germany where the Nazi propagandists quickly appreciated the value not only of radio but also of recording radio. Asa Briggs, the historian, in his study of broadcasting in the United Kingdom refers to the delay in using recording in Britain as opposed to Germany. He attributes this partly to economics but also “because there was a feeling (in Britain) . . . that it was better to broadcast ‘live’”. *The History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom*, Vol. II, “The Golden Age of Wireless”, (London, 1965), p. 101. Until 1959, Canadian broadcasters were required to announce the broadcast of recorded items before and after transmission.
- 15 Radio stations often recorded the opening ceremonies of the station. There are therefore many examples of these. For this information and other material to do with early recording, I am grateful to Ernest J. Dick of the Sound Archives of the Public Archives of Canada who let me read an unpublished article of his on early broadcasting.
- 16 “The elemental fact about broadcasting is its tremendous output. You may have all the authorities, restrictions, committees and regulations but they are all defeated by the rapidity of successive programmes.” Lionel Fielden, *The Natural Bent*, (London, 1960), p. 104.
- 17 One of the reasons which contributed to the recording of radio and therefore its survival is the vast geographical size of Canada. The CBC, for example, in the 1940s was broadcasting programs throughout the country, across several different time zones. It was not practical to repeat programs “live” to accommodate the time zone differences so, gradually, the CBC began to record programs on soft-cut discs. These discs were cut for a specific and immediate purpose and they were not intended for preservation. Large collections did, however, accumulate in Montreal, Toronto, Ottawa and Vancouver. These disc collections provide the main sound record of the radio programming of the 1940s and 1950s. The discs accumulated on a haphazard basis since the CBC lacked an archival policy in its early years. The soft-cut discs were only designed to be played four or five times at the most. They are the originals, not duplicates, and special care must be taken with their preservation. For further information on this, consult the manual of the PAC’s Sound Archives, *Sound Archives: Guide to Procedures*, (Ottawa, 1979). For a further discussion of the archival policy of the CBC see Appendix L of the *Twomey Report*—a paper by Robin Woods—“An Account of the Development of Program Archives in the English Language Services, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 1937-1977.”



*"The Housewife makes her cakes and pies/While Radio sings sweet lullabys."* (Photograph and caption from *Radio News of Canada* 1, no. 2, Toronto, August 1922, p. 8)

magnetic tape, can be erased at will and easily re-used, encouraging rapid recycling and swift destruction.

Miraculously perhaps, despite all this, examples of Canadian radio have survived from the late 1930s onward in sufficient quantities to be of interest to researchers. Yet, all too often in studies of Canadian society, radio is mentioned for background colour but little effort is directed towards establishing what Canadians listened to as they gathered in the evening around their radio sets. Asa Briggs, the historian of broadcasting in Britain, has complained of exactly the same situation in historical studies of Britain during World War II. Briggs maintains that most historians have disregarded or dismissed the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) from the wartime reckoning. Yet the BBC played an exciting, vital and sometimes controversial role both in maintaining national morale and as a medium of propaganda to occupied Europe and this was obvious to anyone who lived in Britain or on the Continent between 1939 and 1945.<sup>18</sup> Canadian radio, which helped to lessen the isolation of vast distances and was surely as important as the transcontinental railway as a symbol of unification, has suffered

---

<sup>18</sup> Briggs, *The History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom*, Vol. III, "The War of Words", chapter 1.



the same fate in historical studies of Canada in this century.<sup>19</sup>

There are many areas in which this indifference can be rectified and a beginning may be made by increased study of the content of programmes of the CBC and its predecessor, the Canadian Radio Broadcasting Commission (CRBC). The research can be carried out through written and sound sources, the written sources—scripts, programme logs, newspaper criticism—being the main ones for the early years. The development of public broadcasting in Canada was a landmark in the cultural history of the country and an interesting divergence from the general pattern of North American broadcasting. Radio in the 1920s and 1930s in North America and Europe was the subject of a conflict between two distinct philosophies of broadcasting: one which viewed radio as a public service with enormous powers of indoctrination and the other which saw radio as a purely entertainment medium.<sup>20</sup> This ideological conflict was particularly acute in Canada and it had important ramifications as the advocates and antagonists argued the case for and against public broadcasting. The political struggle, in and out of Parliament, for public broadcasting in Canada is one aspect of the history of radio which has attracted the attention of some Canadian scholars, but what remains to be done is an analysis of the degree to which the aspirations and objectives of the supporters of public broadcasting were realized in the policies and programming of the CBC and the CRBC. The Canadian advocates of public broadcasting were usually very ardent Canadian nationalists. In 1931, Graham Spry of the Canadian Radio League wrote:<sup>21</sup>

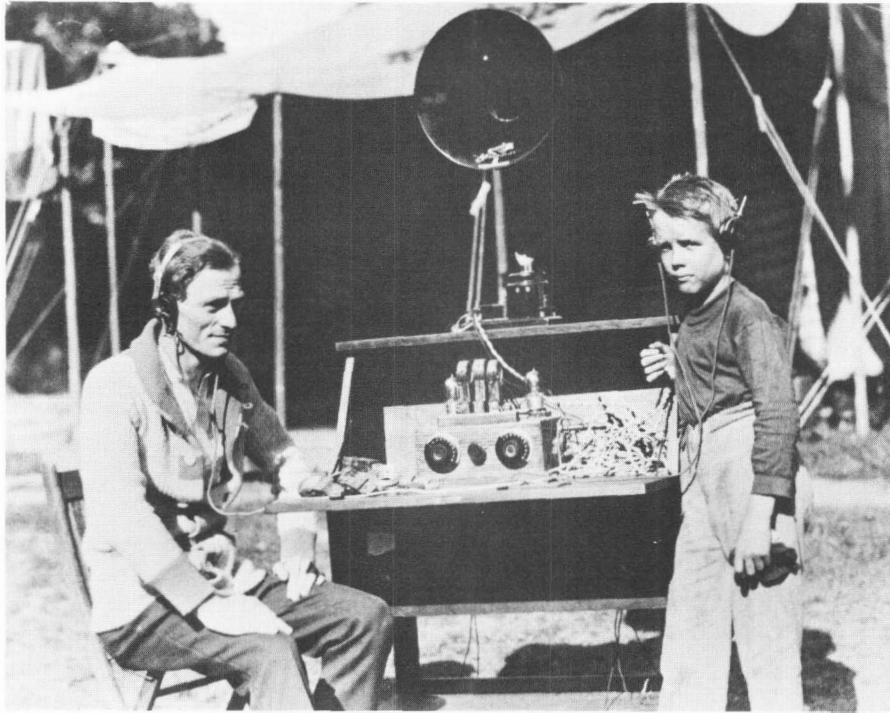
There is no agency of human communication which could so effectively unite Canadian to Canadian and realize the aspirations of Confederation as radio broadcasting. It is the greatest Canadianizing instrument in our hands . . . and its cultural influence is equally important.<sup>22</sup>

In his testimony to the Committee of Broadcasting in 1932, Spry emphasized that:

- 
- 19 The spoken word also illustrates linguistic divisions in Canada while emphasising the links between Canadians of the same language group. This is certainly true of the early days. It is often forgotten that the CRBC was bilingual, that it carried French and English programming on the same stations. On 12 July 1933, *The Toronto Telegram*, reported that the York Lodge of the Orange Association had declared its opposition to the CRBC until, "that body stops the continued use of radio for the means of spreading French throughout Canada . . . Radio offers the finest means of educating all the peoples of Canada in British principles and the English language." Thomas Maher, a CRBC Commissioner, was perhaps replying to this when he defended the use of French: "A national radio should be a great agency for promoting understanding and a realisation that French and Anglo-Saxons are alike Canadians." *The Toronto Star*, 24 July 1933.
- 20 Lionel Fielden, a pioneer member of the BBC, expressed the idealism of the public broadcaster when he wrote: "We really believed that broadcasting would revolutionise human opinion." *The Natural Bent*, p. 100.
- 21 The Canadian Radio League was formed in 1930. The two leading initiators were Graham Spry and Alan Plaunt (1904-1941). Spry has continued to write on matters concerning broadcasting. Plaunt was a member of the Board of Governors of the CBC from 1936 until his death. The Canadian Radio League was an enormously effective body in the lobby for public broadcasting. For more information see Margaret Prang, "The Origins of Public Broadcasting in Canada", *The Canadian Historical Review* XLVI, no 1, (March 1965) : 8-15.
- 22 *Canadian Forum*, "The Canadian Broadcasting Issue", (April 1931), p. 246.

Radio broadcasting is no more a business than the public school system, the religious organization or the varied literary, musical and scientific endeavours of the Canadian people. It is a public service.<sup>23</sup>

These are strong, important words and provide a good glimpse of the idealism which motivated Spry, Alan Plaunt, and other members of the Canadian Radio League. They had a distinct and clear idea of the national purpose which public broadcasting could serve. Surely it is time to analyse the CRBC and the CBC in the light of their idealism? A beginning should be made with programme content and policy.



*Outdoor listening in the 1930s. (Public Archives of Canada)*

Leaving aside the question of nationalism and public broadcasting, radio has played, and continues to play, a role in the political life of the nation and not just in relation to laws governing its own regulation. Thanks to radio, Canadians for the first time were able to hear their politicians at first-hand without them, or the politicians, travelling miles to political meetings. The question to ask, therefore, is not only how political debate has affected the directions taken by Canadian radio, but did Canadian radio affect the direction of political debate? Mackenzie King was one of the first politicians to recognize the truly novel possibilities that

<sup>23</sup> Quoted in Frank Peers, *The Politics of Canadian Broadcasting 1920-1951*, (Toronto 1969), p. 90.

radio provided for its listener—the sense of intimacy with distant events. On 1 July 1927, King participated in the historic Diamond Jubilee broadcast from Parliament Hill.<sup>24</sup> Less than two months later in a speech at the Canadian National Exhibition, King commented on the experience:

On the morning and evening of July 1st all Canada became for the time being a single assemblage, swayed by a common emotion, within the sound of a single voice. . . . Hitherto for most Canadians, Ottawa had seemed far off but henceforth all Canadians will stand within the sound of the carillon and within the hearing of the speakers of Parliament Hill.<sup>25</sup>

If radio was to mean that Canadians could hear the speakers on Parliament Hill, then did the speakers on Parliament Hill adapt to any substantial degree to the new opportunities offered by broadcasting? Did broadcasting modify the art of political propaganda?<sup>26</sup> Did party political advertising alter with radio? Did radio skills become an element in the development of party strategy?<sup>27</sup>

24 This is one of the earliest and most precious of Canadian sound recordings. As part of the Jubilee celebrations an impromptu radio network of twenty three stations was established across the country. These programs were broadcast on 1 July and the items included Percival Price, the carilloner, playing "Oh Canada" and other patriotic tunes, a choir of children singing in French and English, and Margaret Anglin, the actress, reading a poem written for the occasion by Bliss Carman. There were vocal solos, instrumental music by the Hart House Quartet and addresses by the Governor General, Lord Willingdon, Prime Minister Mackenzie King and others. In many towns throughout Canada local loudspeakers were installed. In Montreal, 20,000 people gathered at Fletcher's Field to hear the broadcast. On 2 July 1927, *The Ottawa Citizen* reported: "At least three continents heard the broadcast. . . . Canada now leads the world in broadcasting having arranged a hook-up which far excels anything yet attempted on this planet. Not only were twenty three broadcasting stations in Canada lined up but Brazil, Mexico, Panama and Bridgewater, England, all caught and heard and re-broadcast every note . . . every word . . . Incidentally for the first time in history people west of the Great Lakes heard voices east of the Great Lakes through an all-Canadian broadcast." Today, when listening to extracts from the broadcast, one is struck by the nervousness of many of the speakers as they face a very new experience, speaking into a microphone. George P. Graham who was Chairman of the Jubilee celebrations enunciates very carefully and clearly as if he had no confidence that his voice would be carried anywhere. Mackenzie King, by contrast, races through his words with scarcely a pause and leaves the listener breathless. Nevertheless, it was this broadcast which was said to have convinced Mackenzie King, eighteen months later, to establish a Royal Commission on Broadcasting.

25 Weir, *The Struggle for National Broadcasting in Canada*, p. 38.

26 The art of political propaganda in Canada received a sharp setback with the "Mr. Sage" scandal of 1935. In the 1935 election campaign, the Conservatives used radio drama to advertise the policies of their party. A "Mr. Sage" and "Mrs. Sage" (played by actors) were the supposed residents of a small Ontario town. Mr. Sage, a Conservative, was heard arguing about politics on his verandah with his Liberal neighbours. Since this was a Conservative broadcast, Mr. Sage won all the arguments. The broadcasts made disparaging allusions to Mackenzie King and because the programme announcements, at least at first, did not make it clear what organization was sponsoring the dramas, the Liberals became very annoyed and critical of the CRBC. The resulting uproar led to the establishment of a Parliamentary Committee and pointed questioning of the participants in the "Sage" affair. Memories became hazy and no-one knew where copies of the scripts could be found. According to Weir, the controversy sealed the fate of the CRBC at the hands of the Liberal government. It certainly contributed to strict guidelines for party political broadcasting in Canada with the consequent depressing lack of liveliness. Weir, *The Struggle for National Broadcasting in Canada*, pp. 200-203.

27 In January 1935, Prime Minister R. B. Bennett announced in a series of startling radio broadcasts, his New Deal, a programme which was to bring him much public attention. These broadcasts and their effects are discussed by Donald Forster and Colin Read, "The Politics of Opportunism: the New Deal Broadcasts", *Canadian Historical Review* IX (1979) : 325-349.

Radio drama is an area of broadcasting which *has* begun to attract attention of Canadian scholars. The developing interest in domestic literature has contributed to a growing interest in the original radio plays and scripts of Canadian writers.<sup>28</sup> Between 1940-1960 the CBC, in particular, sponsored radio drama and won for itself an international reputation. Much of this drama was written by Canadians and in 1944, for example, more than eighty percent of the plays broadcast on the public networks were by Canadian authors. In 1947, the percentage reached ninety-seven percent.<sup>29</sup> Many radio drama scripts have survived and are increasingly available to Canadian scholars.<sup>30</sup> The emphasis of the research, however, has almost always been on the written rather than the sound version, yet there are large collection of recordings of radio drama available.<sup>31</sup> While the study of the scripts is valid it means that research writing about radio drama is mainly concerned with literary values. The men and women whose work was equally important in radio drama programming—the producers, actors and musicians—are still being ignored. Producers of the calibre of Andrew Allan and Esse W. Ljungh receive a few glib words of praise for what they did but an understanding of their work through in-depth research into their techniques is rarely encountered. J. Frank Willis, best remembered for his news broadcasts of the Moose River Mine disaster in 1936 for the CRBC, was also a radio drama producer for many years. In 1947, he wrote of the importance of radio to the Canadian acting community: “In the absence of a national theatre . . . we provide the market for the playwright, the only nation-wide proscenium arch to frame the actor and his talent.”<sup>32</sup> John Drainie, the actor, whose name for many years was a household word in Canada and who, through the range of his dramatic skills, brought very diverse Canadian experiences to life in radio drama, is now almost forgotten except in the fading memories of those who actually heard him on “CBC Stage” of “CBC Wednesday Night”. Yet, because of his versatility in and understanding of radio, Drainie can be fairly claimed to be one of Canada’s most effective broadcasters.

World War II was reported in detail on Canadian radio. Matthew Halton, Peter Stursberg, Andrew Cowan, Don Fairbairn, among others, were heard day after day giving Canadians their own interpretations of the war and events in Europe. Canadians heard the war through the words of these reporters. Yet it is rare to find any mention of them in histories of the war, let alone any analysis of what was said and its impact in moulding impressions.<sup>33</sup> These Canadians who became the main link of communications between the war and the home front should certainly be the object of intelligent appraisal.<sup>34</sup> Matthew Halton had a deep love of French civilization and culture which was often reflected in his

---

28 Writers such as Len Peterson and George Salverson. The script writers for radio were incredibly hard working and prolific.

29 Weir, *The Struggle for National Broadcasting in Canada*, p. 273.

30 The most notable collection is being assembled by the Radio Drama Project at Concordia University, Montreal. The Project is headed by Professor Howard Fink.

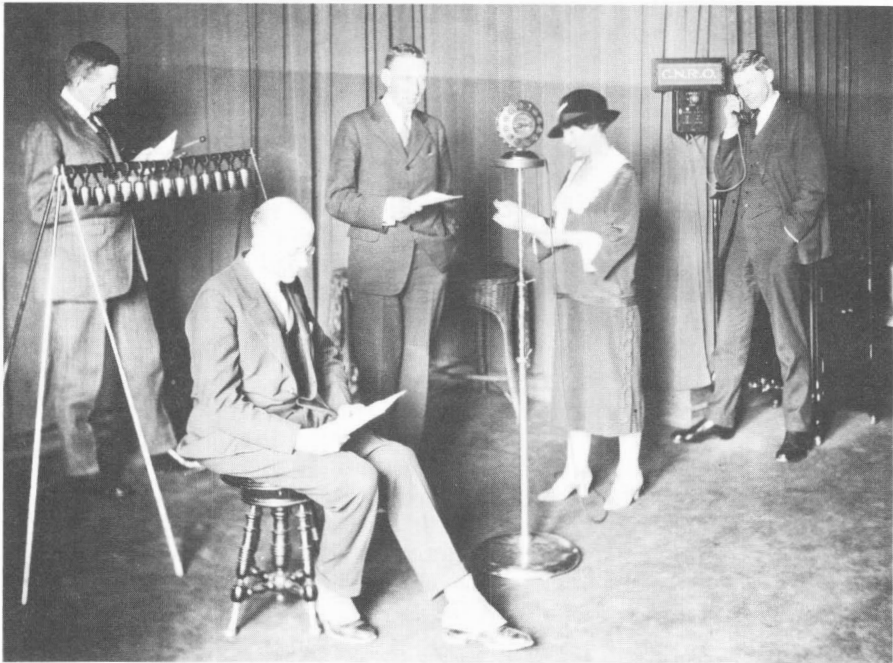
31 There are over 4,000 recorded radio dramas in the collection of CBC Radio Drama deposited with the Sound Archives of the Public Archives of Canada.

32 J. Frank Willis, “What is Radio Anyway?” *Radio*, CBC Staff Magazine, (November 1947), p. 273.

34 There are between three and four thousand war recordings in the CBC War Recordings Collections in the Sound Archives of the Public Archives of Canada.



*Broadcasting at Radio Station CNRN, Fort Garry Hotel, Winnipeg, 1920s. (Public Archives of Canada, C-79116)*



*Madge Macbeth's drama "Superwoman" being broadcast from Radio Station CNRO, Ottawa, 1920s. (Public Archives of Canada, C-29468)*

broadcasts from Europe after D-Day. He frequently referred to Canada's attachments to France and often dealt with the heroism of the French Resistance. His views were communicated to Canadians as the Allies fought the battles for Europe. Did his personal views of France and the French national character have repercussions on Canadian public opinion? Halton was a brilliant broadcaster. It is his voice bringing reports from the war that most Canadians remember. Listening to him today, it is easy to see why. Halton had an intuitive sense of how to use the spoken word to convey powerful emotion. Speaking calls for different skills from writing and Halton had a seemingly effortless grasp of this. He understood the force of alliteration and rhetoric and was not afraid to express himself in a sentimental, poetic mode which gave a sense of great drama. Can anyone who heard his D-Day broadcast ever forget the emotional impact of his words as, in a rather haunting, low-key, serious tone, Halton described the departure of the invasion force for France? Here, indeed, as Halton speaks, the sense of a terrible lull before an almighty storm strikes the ear and the imagination of the listener:

In the lounge of our ships that night we pored over our maps, then we played bridge or gathered around the piano and sang. We were going where our fathers and brothers had gone twenty-five years ago and we sang the same songs they sang. But there was one we sang more than the others, "There's a Long Long Trail Awinding" and I began to wonder if it wasn't a dream after all, playing bridge and singing as we approached the beaches of Hitler's Europe. The assault was to be in broad daylight. We were to go in on a rising tide so there would be enough water to carry the assault craft over the underwater hedgehogs and mines but not so much that the marine engineers couldn't get at the obstacles to blow them. But the weather was rough and even the heroic commando sappers couldn't always do their job and some craft had to go ashore where no lanes had been cleared. It was absolutely astonishing to stand on the deck in the early morning before H hour, the moment when the battle was to start. It was bewildering. There was this enormous Armada at anchor right off the coast of France in broad daylight and nothing was happening, not a thing, not a gun, not a bomb. It was fantastic. A soft dawn with the sky overcast and not a thing to be heard or seen except the vast flotilla off the coast of France. We stared at the villages, the tall, church spires of Normandy and there was not a sound. But at last it started. . . . I've been through many battles but I was never as excited as when my time came to go ashore for this was France and the beginning of the end. The rough swirling tide carried our assault craft over the obstacles and we jumped into more water than we expected—six feet of it. I had to swim a yard or two with my pack and waterproof typewriter before I could wade ashore. Then the struggle across the soft sand that will always be vivid in my mind. . . . And everywhere the soldiers and vehicles rolling into battle down the little, lovely, lanes of Normandy.<sup>35</sup>

---

35 Public Archives of Canada, Sound Archives, CBC War Recordings, C 1805. Matthew Halton Report, 8 June 1944.

In the post war period, until the advent of television, Canadian radio was at the peak of its influence and also very rich in its programming. In 1945, for example, there were nearly 56,000 programmes broadcast on the CBC's national networks and while fifty-two percent of this was music, the remaining forty-eight percent consisted of drama, news, farming comment, speciality talks, children's programming and features for women.<sup>36</sup> This is a tremendous output of material and does not include the programming of the commercial private stations. A medium which was directing entertainment and information at Canadians on such a scale as this deserves recognition. Of course, only a proportion of the programmes have survived to repose in archives and they are often uneven in scope and not necessarily representative of the whole.<sup>37</sup> Nevertheless, there is ample material to provide insight into Canadian preoccupations in these years. The old debate between the advocates of radio as a means of education and those who saw broadcasting as a means of entertainment of the lightest sort continued in the post war years. The CBC continued to be the main source of serious programming and despite financial restraints adhered to its commitment to foster Canadian culture. This was particularly evident on 3 December 1947 when the CBC inaugurated "CBC Wednesday Night" an imaginative experiment whereby all commercials were cleared off the air at 8:00 pm and the whole evening was devoted to items of a cultural interest. This innovation proved to be an excellent outlet for the literature, poetry and music of Canada. The CBC's commitment to Canadian ideals was also strongly reflected in children's programming particularly school broadcasts. According to Richard S. Lambert, former CBC Supervisor of School Broadcasts, "the quickened national self-consciousness which arose from Canada's participation in World War II" contributed to the expansion of school programming.<sup>38</sup> The school programmes, both regional and national, stressed Canadian interests. Drama was used extensively to portray events in Canadian history; Canadian poets, writers, artists and musicians talked to children about their work. There were programmes on Canadian cities, Canadian geography and the North. One very popular programme, "What's in the News?", discussed world events from a Canadian viewpoint in a way children could understand.<sup>39</sup> Educational programming for children was not all confined to school broadcasts; for example, one very popular programme was the CBC's "Sport's College" which, for fifteen minutes every week, gave advice on fitness and sportsmanship. Canadian sporting figures were interviewed and Canadian amateur athletes were encouraged. "Sport's College", in common with many of the programmes for children, often used a discussion on one subject, in this case sportsmanship, as an opportunity to indicate ideals of good citizenship within the Canadian democratic system.<sup>40</sup> Children's programming was not the sole

36 Public Archives of Canada, Sound Archives, CBC Vancouver Collection, C 1544. Radio programme, "They Tell Me", 11 November 1946.

37 The news reports, for example, were not often recorded. Other collections of radio recordings have survived because of individual initiative but these do not necessarily include programmes which are of interest to researchers today.

38 Richard S. Lambert, *School Broadcasting in Canada*, (Toronto, 1963) p. 117.

39 Public Archives of Canada, Sound Archives, CBC Miscellaneous Collection, contains a number of examples.

40 Many programmes in the CBC Miscellaneous Collection, 1977-184 and the CBC Vancouver Collection, 1977-66. The popularity of this programme can be assessed by the 426, 998 pieces of mail it received in its first year.

prerogative of the CBC, private commercial radio was also involved in broadcasting for young Canadians. One very popular series was "Men in Scarlet" produced for Walter M. Lowney, the chocolate company, by Harry E. Foster Productions. This series dealt with the adventures of Sergeant North (played by John Drainie) of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. The stories were produced with the approval of the RCMP and they present an interesting insight into attitudes towards police, crime and Canadian myth-making in the post-war period.<sup>41</sup>

One of the most difficult achievements for the historical imagination is the reconstruction of how it felt to be alive in a certain period. For the Canada of the post-war world, radio is a powerful aid to that imaginative leap. Listening to radio archives for the years 1945 to 1955 one becomes quickly aware of a tremendous optimism and lack of cynicism among Canadians at the beginning of the period. Radio broadcasters frequently refer to the fact that Canada had helped to win the war and the war had been a fight for the virtues of democracy against the evils of totalitarianism. There was considerable interest in and support for the United Nations on Canadian radio and sympathy with the ideals of international cooperation.<sup>42</sup> Canada, it was felt, had a great future. Canadians, in fact, were becoming a little smug, an attitude exemplified by the journalist, Kate Aitken, who, after a tour around the world, declared in a broadcast her delight in returning to Canada where "we're all so well fed, so secure, so happy."<sup>43</sup> All the optimism and contentment began to fray a little as the decade wore on and the Cold War tightened its grip. Radio provides a fascinating sounding board of these shifts, changes and nuances in Canadian public opinion. It also confirms and throws new light on various, social developments. The post-war period, for example, according to many sociologists, witnessed the return of women to the home. Husbands and babies were felt to be the proper interests of any self-respecting Canadian female. Radio certainly confirms this observation and, in fact, the whole question of women as they were portrayed on radio programmes after 1945 would be an interesting and fashionable study for the students of women's history. There were a vast number of programmes for women, "A Mirror for Women", "Your Good Neighbour", "Women's Talk", "Cooking School of the Air" to name just a few. Many of them project an image of cloying, self-satisfaction which would be unacceptable today. After hearing the high pitched cooing tones of certain female broadcasters as they projected an image of sunny domesticity, it is an enormous relief to listen to the natural fundamental frequencies in the voices of Ruth Springford, Beth Lockerbie and Aileen Seaton.<sup>44</sup> Whether it was deliberate policy or just through self-consciousness in the medium, a few women broadcasters manifested verbal mannerisms which do

---

41 Public Archives of Canada, Sound Archives, Harry E. Foster Collection, D 1978-62/1 to 434.

42 Public Archives of Canada, Sound Archives, CBC Vancouver Collection contains many examples of a programme entitled "United Nations Today".

43 Public Archives of Canada, Sound Archives, CBC Vancouver Collection, C 1590 Radio programme, "Morning Visit", 12 May 1949.

44 Actresses best known for their work in "CBC Stage". They did of course alter their voices for character roles. One should also allow for the fact that microphones in many of the smaller radio stations were not always the best available and they did sometimes distort female voices. (I am very grateful to Esse W. Ljungh for this observation.)



RADIO NEWS OF CANADA

1

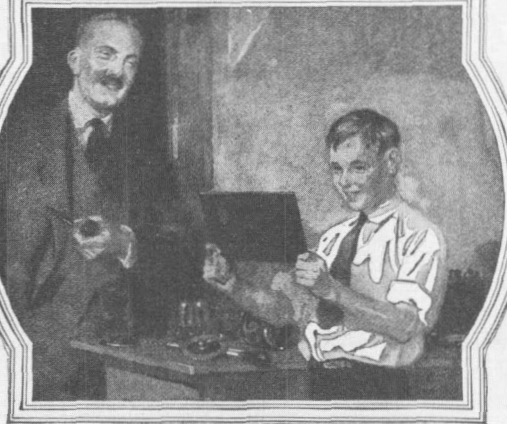
# CONDENSITE CELORON

## STANDARD RADIO PANEL

CONDENSITE  
CELORON

Standard Sizes:

6 × 7  
7 × 9  
7 × 12  
7 × 14  
7 × 18  
7 × 21  
7 × 24  
7 × 26  
12 × 18

Immediate Delivery  
on Special Sizes

Each panel is wrapped in a glassine wrapper, that protects the polished surface. On this wrapper are full instructions for working and finishing.

## “CELORON! That’s It, Dad”

MAC got one of those panels last week. He says you can drill the cleanest holes in it you ever saw. His set looks like a million dollars.”

Hundreds of radio fans are giving their home-built sets the same snappy, professional appearance by mounting their instruments on Celoron Radio Panels. Some like the glossy black Celoron panels. Others get the mahogany or oak finish. They all find they can drill clean holes anywhere in Celoron panels without chipping the smooth, hard surface.

### CELORON AS INSULATING MATERIAL

Good looks aren't all a Celoron panel gives your set. This panel's high dielectric strength increases the volume of your set and helps you get results from your instruments that you wouldn't get with a cheap panel.

Celoron is one of the best insulating materials known. It is approved by Marconi, Canadian Government, the U. S. Navy and U. S. Signal Corps. Leading radio manufacturers mount their parts on Celoron bases.

Ask your dealer for a Celoron panel. You can identify it by the Celoron label that is on every panel. These panels come already cut in nine standard sizes ready for working. A dust-proof glassine wrapper protects each panel surface. Full instructions for working are on every envelope.

*Send for our free Booklet, “Getting the Right Hook-up with Celoron.”*

It contains diagrams, list of broadcasting stations and radio information every set-builder should have.

To radio dealers: Send for special dealer price list and free display material

## Diamond State Fibre Company of Canada, Limited

TORONTO, CANADA

Tell Them You Saw It in "Radio News of Canada"

*Radio, the delight of the “Do it Yourselfer”.* (Advertisement in *Radio News of Canada* 2, no. 11 (Toronto, May 1924), p. 1)

not appear to exist in Canadian female speech today. Attitudes to women, and the concerns of women, can also be studied in Canadian soap operas such as "A Tale of Toronto" and "Brave Voyage". The "soaps", American or Canadian, were a source of irritation to any listeners with aspirations to seriousness. In 1940, one indignant lady had written to the radio magazine "Manitoba Calling" to complain of their pernicious influence on tender sensibilities.

Radio has a great responsibility because it does influence people's thinking and eventually their characters. The flimsy plots, over-dramatized voices and situations in some of the emotional drama serials have an immediate effect on the listener's heart and nerves. Kept up indefinitely—well my own heart would give out completely. Further influence is evidenced in more than one community by young girls who find themselves in unwholesome dramatic situations which used to be rare and regard them as natural, because they are frequent occurrences in certain programmes... a direct effect of radio on people's thinking.<sup>45</sup>

The serials and women's programming are not the only broadcasts to yield sociological information. Mental health, physical handicaps, immigration, child care, poverty, marital problems, all in a Canadian context, were the subjects of Canadian radio programmes in the post-war period. The CBC often used drama to illustrate a problem followed by a short commentary by an expert who would propose certain solutions to particular dilemmas. One notable series of this type was, "In Search of Ourselves", written by Len Peterson and directed by Esse W. Ljungh. The titles of the individual programmes are revealing: "A Criminal in the Family", "The Defeated Couple", "The Retarded Child", "The Salesman Who Isn't Selling", "The Girl Who Played Deaf", "The Burden of Promotion".<sup>46</sup>

In studying Canadian radio one can look at particular historical periods in detail, the 1930s, World War II, the post-war decade, or one can analyse an aspect of radio programming which has been significant for a particular section of the Canadian population. An example which springs quickly to mind is the significance of radio to Canadian farmers. Canadian agricultural programming was enormously important. Radio, in addition to providing the isolated farm family with entertainment, also brought useful information, from weather reports and market prices to up-to-date information on scientific advances in agriculture. Commercial stations on the prairies were broadcasting daily reports on prices from the Winnipeg Grain Exchange in the 1920s.<sup>47</sup> The Canadian National Railway radio stations as early as 1924 were producing livestock reports, grain prices and talks for farmers.<sup>48</sup> In 1939, the CBC English Farm De-

45 Fay Amelia Stewart, "A Listener Looks at Radio", *Manitoba Calling*, (January 1940), p. 10.

46 Public Archives of Canada, Sound Archives, CBC Miscellaneous Collection, 1977-184, contains many examples of the series.

47 Weir, *The Struggle for National Broadcasting*, p. 86.

48 At the end of the 1920s the main challenge to the domination of the Canadian airwaves by the Americans came from the Canadian National Railways. The CNR established a number of radio stations to broadcast to passengers on the CN trains as they passed within range of the receiving equipment. The policy was introduced by Sir Henry Thornton, President of the CNR, as a means of attracting passengers and it was very successful. It is interesting that Sir Henry who was in charge of railway communication, coast to coast, quickly realized the potential of radio. Travelers could go to the radio cars for news reports, music, church services and even talks. Thornton can really be called the father of Canadian network broadcasting.



*"King Radio" — window display by James Cowan Co., Ltd. (Public Archives of Canada, A. Gleason Collection, PA-74703)*

partment was started by Orville Shugg and CBC farm programming quickly earned a reputation for reliability and excellence. CBC farm programming was not only directed at farmers. It also aimed at informing city-dwellers about farming and agricultural concerns. In one programme, "National Farm Radio", broadcast in 1945, farmers across the country can be heard bemoaning the lack of emphasis on the dignity of agriculture in Canadian schools. Agriculture, thundered a farmers' spokesman, was the backbone of Canada and Canadians in the cities failed to realize how dependent they are on the farmer and his work; schools and universities should acknowledge the fundamental importance of farming to the Canadian way of life.<sup>49</sup> The very popular radio drama series, "Summer Fallow", consisted of farming stories aimed at increasing the city listener's appreciation of agriculture as well as boosting the farmer's morale.<sup>50</sup>

Radio broadcasting is, thus, a rich source for the study of many aspects of Canadian society, particularly for the period before television began to compete with radio for money, ideas, and talent. In a country like Canada, where the problems of communication over vast distances have been a constant theme of its history, broadcast programming, in the years when radio was the main means of national communication, should be of interest to all those who are concerned with the nature of the Canadian identity. It may well be that the radio programming of the "Golden Age of Radio", rather like the era of the silent film in the

49 Public Archives of Canada, Sound Archives, CBC Vancouver Collection, C 1527, Radio programme, "National Farm Radio Forum" 19 November 1945.

50 Ron Fraser, "Farm Team on the Beam", *Radio*, CBC Staff Magazine, (October 1947), p. 16.

history of the cinema, expresses a type of creativity which has passed the peak of its influence but was very important once and had social, political and cultural consequences of considerable significance. Radio drama may never again enjoy the same impact and popularity which it encountered in Canada between 1940 and 1960; the techniques of radio drama of the past—the elaborate sound effects, the live music, the voice skills which the actors developed to compensate for the inadequacy of primitive microphones—may all now be anachronisms but they contributed to the success of radio drama and thereby acted as a stimulus to Canadian writing and Canadian theatre. In an article such as this, a written account, the force and power of radio broadcasts of the past can never be adequately conveyed. No quotation from Matthew Halton can ever do justice to his unique voice. John Drainie's versatility can only be realized by listening to him in many roles. In the transference from the sound record to the printed page the quintessential quality of radio is lost. It is only by hearing the radio of the past that the intellect can be stimulated to a full appreciation of radio's dynamic power. For sound, as opposed to written documentation, the ear rather than the eye is the channel to imagination. Since the invention of the printing press the ear has become subordinated to the eye for receiving serious information. It makes for an interesting speculation that the medieval scholastic trained to an appreciation of oral debate and argument might be immeasurably more appreciative of radio than the contemporary scholar who, apparently, hears no sound beyond the rustle of the page and the tap, tap, tap of the typewriter. Canadian resources in radio should be heard because listening to the archives of radio enriches the historical imagination and without that, no deep understanding of the past is ever really achieved.

## **Résumé**

Les archives radiophoniques ont été très négligées, encore que ceci est en train de changer. L'auteur nous montre pourquoi celles-ci méritent d'être connues. Elle nous fait découvrir un peu de la richesse et de la saveur de cette catégorie importante d'archives et nous démontre sa valeur intrinsèque, qui transcende la simple illustration.