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Round Table on Broadcasting History

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ROUND TABLE ON BROADCASTING HISTORY

The morning of May 24 was devoted to a round table on "The Proper Presentation of History through Broadcasting". Professor R. G. Trotter was in the chair. The session began with a paper by Mr. Alan Plaunt, a member of the Board of Governors of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation.

THE PRINCIPLES OF EDUCATIONAL BROADCASTING

By ALAN B. PLAUNT

I feel conscious of my temerity in accepting your kind invitation to lead the discussion to-day on the broadcast presentation of history. While I have some reasonably well-defined views about the sort of framework necessary for effective educational broadcasting and a general notion of the proper conditions for the presentation of historical material, I can pretend to no intimate understanding of the technique either of writing or production. However, some general considerations may be of use, and Mr. Donald Buchanan of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation staff, who is both an historical student and producer, has consented to cover the technical aspects.

As to the conditions required for educational broadcasting generally, let me state at the outset my conviction that a public-service system is the only framework within which such work can effectively be carried out.

There are two main reasons for this assertion. The first relates to "aim" and the second to "planning". After explaining what I mean by these two terms, I shall attempt to illustrate my points with reference to the British and American systems of broadcasting. Also, with your permission, I should like to discuss the way in which educational work in general, and the teaching of history in particular, might fit into the new public-service system which is now evolving in Canada.

The essential difference between public-service broadcasting and commercial broadcasting may be defined in terms of their respective aims. The aim of a public-service system is to give public service, however that may be defined; the aim of a commercial system must first and foremost be to make profits. It is obvious that education, in both the wide and narrow senses, must be part and parcel of the aim of a public system and equally axiomatic that it is subsidiary to the commercial motive in the case of a private system. Let me not, however, be accused at this point of belonging to the "give the public what it should have" as opposed to the "give the public what it wants" school. In this way the protagonists of a commercial system often try to confuse the real issue. The real issue, however, is "who shall decide what the public wants?" Shall it be a publicly appointed body such as the B.B.C. or the C.B.C. acting as a trustee and staffed with experts in the entertainment business? Or shall it be those whose primary object is not entertainment but salesmanship and who must often cater to the lowest common denominator of their audience? Which should be most responsive to public tastes, interests, ideals, and aspirations, a body which has every resource with which to assess the public taste, or advertisers whose judgment of the public taste often depends on dubious generalizations from solicited fan mail? There is not, as I conceive it, any hard and fast line between education and entertain-

ment. On the one hand, all programmes of excellence, from grand opera to good dance music, can be regarded as educational and on the other, educational material must be presented in an entertaining, interesting way, if it is to be effective. The problem is largely one of presentation.

The second reason why it appears that education is best served by a public broadcasting system relates to the matter of planning. In schools in particular, and to a lesser extent in adult education, programmes must be planned far in advance and, without regard to commercial exigencies, fitted into the most suitable hours for such material. Talks, for example, lose their cumulative effectiveness if a series is broken by a subsequently arranged commercial programme. The matter of mood is also important in such programmes. The educational value of a good talk is greatly minimized by placing it after a programme completely out of harmony with it. The listener's mind simply cannot adjust itself to a mood of receptivity. Then there is the need of integrating schools programmes with curricula and of providing expert production facilities without which educational broadcasting succeeds only in being dull.

From the educator's point of view, broadcasting conditions in England have been advantageous from the start. Since its inception, the B.B.C. has recognized education as an integral part of its function. This, together with complete ownership of its facilities, has made planning and experimentation on a wide scale possible. The results have been amazing, and in addition to adult education 6,466 schools to-day receive broadcasts in history, geography, languages, music appreciation, nature study, literature, and science as supplementary to their regular curricula.

These results have been made possible because the relations between the educational authorities, the teachers, and the B.B.C. as producer have been properly worked out. In 1929 the Central Council for School Broadcasting was established. This body represents the various educational interests,—the Board of Education and local education authorities, the "public" and state schools, the teachers, administrators, technical and art associations. Its function is to lay down policy and to plan the broadcasts. This it does through sub-committees for the various subjects to be broadcast. Each committee consists of several specialists, an inspector who represents the Board of Education, and teachers who actually receive the programmes. These committees work in close conjunction with the producing body, the B.B.C. Thus is established a practical working arrangement which utilizes the best brains available for planning, which has the advantage of the check of actual experience on the spot, and which recognizes that only expert producers with a full understanding of radio technique can actually produce the programmes so as to interest the listener.

In the current season three types of historical programmes are being broadcast. An elementary course for children between 9 and 11, entitled "World History", has been planned for the history sub-committee by Mary E. Beggs, lecturer in history at Goldsmith's College, University of London. There is a series planned by Phyllis Doyle, lecturer in history, Avery Hill Training College, for children between the ages of 11 and 14. This is entitled "British History". Then there is another course for seniors between the ages of 13 and 15, entitled "History in the Making". This has been prepared by John Hilton, Stephen King-Hall, and others.

The technique utilized in these three series varies according to the age groups. The course entitled "World History" consists of quite simple stories, dramatic interludes, and talks with dramatic and musical illustrations. The series on "British History" relies on a somewhat more formal method of presentation. It aims to broaden the pupils' conception of British history by showing that present-day Britain is the result of international as well as national influences and events. It takes the form either of dramatic interludes, prefaced by short explanatory talks, or narratives with dramatic and musical illustrations. The third course, "History in the Making", takes a current problem and explains it by tracing backward to its roots in history. This course is primarily intended for those in their last year at school who have previously studied history on a chronological basis.

Despite this variation in approach, however, all three series have a common aim, that of supplementing rather than replacing the class-room curriculum. They have in common also a recognition that the function of broadcast history is primarily that of widening the horizons and of stimulating an interest in the subject.

With regard to adult education, this is handled more directly by the B.B.C., with the assistance of another advisory committee, the Adult Education Committee. It really forms part of the whole talks programme.

A significant feature of educational broadcasting in England has been its freedom to develop independently of the Board of Education. While the Board of Education is represented on the Central Council for School Broadcasting, there is no official relation between the two. Perhaps because of this the council has been freer to experiment and to adapt the new medium to new conditions.

An interesting result of the close co-operation, over a period of years, of educationalists and the producing authority can be noted in the decreasingly academic character of educational broadcasts. Throughout, the B.B.C. has stressed the paramount importance of good showmanship both in schools and adult education programmes. It is surprising to find some schools broadcasts, for example those of Stephen King-Hall, so entertaining that thousands of adults tune in on them.

This result leads one to the conclusion that where education forms an integral part of the aim of the dominant broadcasting system educationalists become less and less academic in their approach, recognizing both the real function and the limitations of the new medium.

In the United States, on the other hand, where education forms no part of the aim of the system, an entirely different situation prevails. Only a limited amount of planning has been possible and, consequently, little of the cumulative experience that planning involves. Educational broadcasting exists there on sufferance and in the battle between educators and private interests for facilities and channels the educators have been badly beaten. Of the 152 stations owned in 1926 by public-service institutions, only 54 had survived in 1936. As the cleavage deepens, the educators seem to become more pedantic and the broadcasters more contemptuous of their lack of showmanship. The proposal of the National Committee for Education by Radio for 15 per cent. of the total channels and government assistance to erect parallel facilities for the purpose of serving schools, churches, and others interested in education, strikes one as somewhat

unrealistic. One cannot help feeling that if education does not form part of the motive of the dominant system it cannot compete or survive.

As I see it, the chief defects of a commercial system, speaking generally, flow from the necessary subordination of planning and collaboration to the demands of advertisers. This also handicaps continuous research in production along educational lines.

From the point of view of the historian, a commercial system has a dangerous, even a sinister, aspect. Where historical material has been used for commercial programmes, and it is used extensively, a fine contempt for accuracy and a tendency to exploit ignorant prejudices have become marked. For example, in a recent series based on American history, one of the programmes attempted to create the impression that in the War of 1812 the citizenry of Canada showed no interest in defending their borders, the job being done exclusively by British regulars without even the moral support of the Canadians!

I do not wish to generalize in too dogmatic a way and would qualify what I have said by referring to the work of such states as Ohio where the Ohio School of the Air has, for more than a decade, been doing some excellent work. Such experiments are isolated, however, and have so far had no great effect upon the educational process.

As often appears to be the case, Canada has so far had the worst of both worlds. The commercial system as it obtained, and to a large extent still obtains, is badly financed, has weak facilities, and tends, in the case of the larger stations, to become commercially dependent upon the American chains. The public system in operation since 1932 has been obliged to work through private stations and so has been precluded from much educational work. Some excellent experimental work has, of course, been done, for example by the Extension Department of the University of Alberta until lately under the direction of Mr. E. A. Corbett, now director of the Adult Education Association of Canada. Under Mr. Corbett's direction, the University station CKUA gathered some very useful experience in the technique of broadcasting to rural areas.

If the plans and policies of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation are carried forward, Canada will, within a measurable time, be equipped with a publicly controlled system, and the conditions which I believe essential for the proper development of educational broadcasting will then obtain. As you know, the Canadian Radio Broadcasting Commission was replaced on November 1 last by the present Corporation. The Corporation is operated by a general manager, and an assistant manager, and is directed as to policy by a board of nine citizens chosen broadly to represent the various parts of Canada. The board acts as trustee of the national interest in broadcasting, is charged with the execution of the national policy with respect to it. It has adequate powers to control private as well as public broadcasting. Its plans as outlined by the chairman, Mr. Brockington, on May 21, envisage the ultimate ownership of all high-power stations in Canada and the control at the end of a three-to five-year period of a national network giving coverage to 87 per cent., in place of the present 50 per cent., of the population.

I wish to suggest that now is the time for educationalists to consider how both schools and adult education can be fitted into the new system of broadcasting that is emerging in Canada.

So far as adult education is concerned, the problem will be comparatively simple, since adult education falls naturally into the general scheme of talks. A more difficult problem relates to schools broadcasting, since education comes under provincial jurisdiction. A *modus operandi* will therefore have to be worked out between the Corporation and the provinces. Obviously, actual production should be handled by broadcasting experts, perhaps by a schools department of the Corporation or broadcasting branches of the provincial departments of education. Planning and policy are, of course, the prerogatives of the provincial authorities. It may be, however, that in some provinces it will be found that a semi-independent committee, representative of all the principal educational interests of the province, will be considered desirable in the light of British experience. This is obviously a matter for consultation and adjustment to particular needs.

Allow me at this point to offer several observations on the presentation of broadcast history in Canada. I have tried to show that the real function of broadcast history is to stimulate, to supplement rather than replace class-room teaching. I have suggested that the broadcast presentation of history, whether for adult education or for schools, is most effective when entertainment values are kept in mind.

I should like also to stress a point which many academic people lose sight of. I refer to the importance of the expert in the writing and production of historical material. Proficiency in the class-room or in writing does not necessarily qualify the teacher or historian in the technique of broadcast presentation. If anything, the reverse is true. An historian may have at his finger-tips all the material necessary for broadcast presentation, but still be incapable of writing good scripts. The writing of history for broadcasting should be a specialized profession. The most successful Canadian historical series to date, the "Romance of Canada" series, produced by the Canadian National Railways in 1933, was based on a recognition of this fact. The brains and information of many authorities were picked, so to speak, but the actual writing was done by Mr. Merrill Denison.

The problem of broadcasting historical material in such a way as to ensure acceptability from the point of view of the listener and accuracy from that of the historian, is one which the officials of the Broadcasting Corporation have much in mind. The great difficulty at present is a paucity of producers with both an adequate dramatic sense and a feeling for history. Writers and producers of this sort will simply have to be developed, and in this task the assistance of those who have students interested in this new field will be of great value.

A final word as to the conception of the true function of historical teaching which will, I am sure, guide us in whatever work of this kind we may undertake: We believe that history should be taught in an objective way, as an end in itself, and subjected to no ulterior purpose. For many years scientific historians have been trying to have text-books purged of distortion. The proper presentation of broadcast history can do something to further this object at a time when distortion, whether for commercial or propagandist ends, is again becoming the fashion. Avoiding a jingoistic or commercial motive, I think all members of this association will agree that historical broadcasting in Canada can do much to make

Canadians of both races conscious of themselves as Canadians, and help to develop a genuine pride in the rich story of our past.

A second paper was then read by Mr. D. W. Buchanan, of the programme department of the Corporation.

THE TECHNIQUE OF EDUCATIONAL BROADCASTING

By D. W. BUCHANAN

Before we consider what is proper and what is not so proper to the presentation of history over the radio, let us first discover, if we can, what forms of presentation we may wish to use. There are dramas, there are dramatic narratives and dialogues, and there are talks. Each has its own particular advantage, and each may be of some use in the broadcasting of history. Our choice will depend to some extent on the object which we have in view—whether we wish to provide popular entertainment, whether we want to stimulate a wider interest in the significance of historical studies, or whether we desire directly to provide instruction.

Is it historical drama we wish to favour? Well, if the analogy of the motion pictures—which alone can compare with the radio as a new and popular form of communication—is of any value, we shall hesitate before deciding. The screen has certainly provided historians with a score of reasons why they should continue to keep history safely cloistered in the collegiates and colleges. But what of broadcasting? So far, history has been drawn upon liberally by radio playwrights, but usually merely as a source-book of romance and adventure. A relatively simple method of composing attractive material for broadcast plays has been to write about the heroism of Wolfe or the bravery of the well-known Madeleine who defended the fort. The results, even from the point of view of the historian, are not to be despised. There have been some amusing plays—and some popular ones. The response to such a series as “Forgotten Footsteps”, as demonstrated by the immense number of complimentary letters received, has clearly shown that a taste exists among listeners for plays of this nature. There was much in “Forgotten Footsteps” that was sheer romance; some of these stories woven round objects on exhibition in the Royal Ontario Museum were purely apocryphal. But what is significant is that thousands of listeners preferred these dramas to concerts of classical music that were being presented over other stations at the same hour on Sunday nights. It seems highly probable that a similar series, in which some greater regard were taken for the historical aspects of the stories used, would turn out to be equally successful. There may be some, however, who worry lest ambitious producers, assisted by grandiloquent actors, may not begin to run riot with the facts of history and create dramas that will be mere rich toys of romance akin to the Cecil B. de Mille films. You know the type, which inspired that piece of nonsense verse:

Cecil B. de Mille
 Much against his will
 Was persuaded to keep Moses
 Out of the Wars of the Roses.

Well, we do not need to worry about that on the radio. Certainly in a national broadcasting system there will be enough supervision to prevent a Cecil B. de Mille from rising to fame. Manuscripts can always be checked when there is doubt about details, by referring them to a competent authority. This was done with most of these manuscripts for "Forgotten Footsteps".

From a purely technical point of view there is much to be said for the broadcast play. For example, it is easier to avoid artificial atmosphere in a radio drama than on the screen. All that visual background of museum furniture, Wardour Street gowns, and papier maché settings—so dear to our cinema directors—can't be used by a radio dramatist, no matter how perverse he may be in desiring them. As the American poet, Archibald MacLeish, says in the introduction to his published radio play *The Fall of the City*: "There is no visible actor disguised to assume a part. There is no stage-set contrived to resemble a place. There is only the spoken word." Negatively considered, then, the radio offers this advantage. But nevertheless it still has one vice to play with. Wardour Street language in a radio play can be as vicious as Wardour Street settings in a motion picture. Those "forsooths" and "albeits" are the too common device of some radio playwrights seeking archaic atmosphere. They must be avoided. On the other hand, from a constructive point of view, radio drama offers new features that may be of especial value. Chief of these features is the announcer, who according to Archibald MacLeish, is "the most useful dramatic personage since the Greek Chorus". This statement makes one wonder whether for this reason a verse play, like Thomas Hardy's *The Dynasts*, might not be adapted more readily to broadcasting than it could ever be to the modern stage.

From the purely historical point of view, the best series of radio plays in Canada was presented by the C.N.R. in 1933. In this series, Tyrone Guthrie and Merrill Denison collaborated. Such plays can be done again—and they could probably be well adapted for school use also. I shall now proceed to comment upon some different ventures. These may be of two types—talks and descriptive narratives. They can be employed to stimulate an interest in history, particularly local history, as with the series "Historic Roads of Ontario", which you can hear to-night at 7.30 if you wish. They may also, in the form of talks about men and women of the past, be useful in awakening the adult listener to a new understanding of the significance of historical studies. After all, not all listeners like drama. The broadcast talk—fifteen minutes in duration—is still the simplest form in which educational material can be presented, and if well used, it is one of the best forms. Unfortunately, not all of us are fitted to talk well over the radio. Clear voices may not be so rare, but a vivid and pleasant manner of delivery is. Once find a speaker with this combination of qualities and you have discovered a radio personality of rare price. Let us not neglect him. When he speaks, the listener does not tune away. He needs only to start his talk with a provocative statement and most of his audience will remain to hear the rest. But he must not dwell on too many ideas in one fifteen-minute period, that is, if he wishes to leave any lasting impression behind.

Believing that the straight talk is certainly the best medium for the serious interpretation of history, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation

plans to present a series of talks on "Forgotten Canadians" next season, and it now asks for the co-operation of students of history in preparing a suitable list of biographical studies. A few short paragraphs outlining the career of any person whom you think worthy to be included in this series will be most highly appreciated.

If we turn now to the question of stimulating an interest in local history, we find that the experimental series, entitled "Historic Roads of Ontario", has brought out pointedly some of the criticisms we may expect to encounter in historical broadcasting. These narratives, while they have had many followers, have yet seemed too much like a guide-book. A Baedeker may, of course, be interesting—and this has been an interesting Baedeker. But in any description of a tour along a road—unless you already are well acquainted with the highway—it is confusing to be confronted with forty or more proper names and casual facts in fifteen minutes. More concrete descriptions are needed of churchyards, of houses in their sylvan settings, of the architecture of old mansions, so that the imagination may be allowed to dwell on what is being related. Here is where, if the history of a road or a river is to be the subject, it might be better to use the technique of the chronological narrative, interspersed with dramatic episodes. You might take, for example, a landing stage along the river, a house alongside the road. Our first episode opens with a few characters arriving by canoe if it is the river, by horse if it is the road. We are back in the first days of settlement. The characters speak a few words about their trip, about some adventure. Then the episode finishes; the voice of the announcer enters, and a transition of fifty years or so in the history of the road or river is explained by him. Then another dramatic episode can follow, and so on, until we reach modern times and modern means of transportation. Naturally this technique requires more skill and expense in production than ordinary narrative form does. Yet do not think that I criticize the bald chronicling of facts over the radio—miscellaneous information, particularly unexpected information, straightforwardly related will and does attract a wide audience of listeners. A series devoted to the place-names of Ontario would be, for example, a most likely venture to undertake.

So far we have talked about historical broadcasting without much reference to children. What shall we do about children? In American advertising programmes, radio dramas of a certain blood and thunder type have caught the childish mind. Yet there is surely as much adventure to be found in history if we look for it as there is in those stories of assault and battery, featuring Pop Eye the Sailor Man, which are used by radio advertisers to sell, not spinach in this case, but a certain type of breakfast food. It will be a day of achievement for public broadcasting when we can find script writers who can make equally thrilling heroes out of historical characters, explorers, or fur-traders perhaps, and so wean the children away from their present interest in these more vulgar comic-strip heroes of the radio. Can we find people with a genuine interest in history, who can also write manuscripts of this popular nature? Perhaps the Canadian Historical Association might, sometime in the future, combine with the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation in offering a prize in the universities and elsewhere for the best scripts submitted for historical broadcasting, both of the serious type for adults and of the obviously adventurous type for children.

There is also the question of school broadcasts. We must approach this with a more avowedly didactic intent. The radio, one assumes, will be used by schools for material supplementary to the lessons. History in primary schools often suffers because the teacher has not the personality to make history live in the minds of the pupils. But it should be possible to find a few teachers who have that talent which enables them to make accounts of the lives of explorers and colonizers vivid and real to the children and who can also transmit this reality in broadcast talks to schools. But isolated talks are of little purpose. They need to be part of a course of regular listening periods. They should be accompanied by photographs and maps and even illustrated booklets which the children can use. The eye must see as well as hear, if we are to have the results we desire.

What can be done in future by co-operation between historians and radio producers remains to be determined, but that this co-operation is possible "Historic Roads of Ontario" has certainly demonstrated. The preparation of papers by historians, the translation of this material into narrative script for radio purposes by men trained in broadcasting, has all been accomplished with a minimum of friction and, may I say, an approach to the maximum of favourable results.

Discussion. The chairman then called on Mr. John Coulter, who spoke on the broadcasting of history in the dramatic form. Mr. Coulter claimed for the writer of a script liberty to select or omit material according to the conception which he had of the subject. He suggested that, since history was not a science, the historian could not dictate an interpretation, but rather that the dramatist must see an historical character himself, and bring it to life as he saw it.

Mr. G. W. Brown described the circumstances which had led to the decision to hold a round table on this subject. Some months earlier an informal group had been discussing the development of interest in local history, and one of the fruits of their conversations had been a series of broadcasts on "Historic Roads of Ontario", presented by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation on the basis of papers prepared by a number of men who had given particular study to the various localities. In the course of working out the plan, it had become evident that further study of the whole subject of broadcasting history was needed, and especially of how co-operation between historians and the Corporation could most usefully be continued. He suggested that two of the aims of such broadcasting were the encouragement of interest in local history and in the various archives.

Mr. D. C. Harvey took up the question raised by Mr. Coulter, and suggested that consultation between dramatists and historians might produce the best results, or—failing that—that historical dramas should be based on authoritative works. The most effective method, he believed, was to produce a series of broadcasts in which there was continuity, bearing in mind that the significance of the theme should be brought out as well as the more romantic side.

Mr. Séraphin Marion spoke of the value of the radio as a means of stressing the unity of Canada, and more especially in the field of education, the formal part of which was under the control of the provinces.

He also referred to the problem of language in broadcasting, and suggested that historical broadcasts might be given in both French and English, not only for the benefit of those listeners who understood only one, but also as a means by which other listeners might improve their knowledge of one or other language.

Mr. Chester Martin suggested that the views of Mr. Coulter and Mr. Harvey were not irreconcilable. Broadcasting is an art, but the historian might have a part in preparing material, especially at an early stage of the script.

Mr. C. W. New held that an historian who had the necessary qualifications might on occasion do the actual broadcasting himself. He would have the advantage of knowing the subject most intimately, and, as a teacher, should have experience in stimulating interest. He thought, too, that emphasis on local history could be exaggerated.

Mr. H. M. Morrison argued that the object of historical broadcasts should be both educational and recreational. While he sympathized with the use of topics in local history, he felt it to be important that they should be related to a larger whole.

Mr. F. H. Soward pointed out that the material in historical broadcasts should be both interesting and an encouragement to further reading. The organization and planning, and the publicity, for such series should be given careful attention. He suggested that the Canadian Historical Association might be helpful in arranging for its members to give talks themselves, to edit scripts at an early stage, or to suggest topics. Such topics, he thought, should be planned well in advance of their presentation, for example in relation to anniversaries. He agreed that there was a place for the dramatic method, but also emphasized the value of co-operation with the Corporation, schools, and other organizations.

Mr. Dixon Ryan Fox explained the position of educational broadcasts in the United States. There existed a degree of control over the commercial broadcasting firms, but in any case these had sponsored historical broadcasts which had had a wide appeal.

The chairman then invited Mr. Plaunt to comment on a number of questions that had arisen during the discussion. Mr. Plaunt then made the following remarks: (1) On the question of publicity he said that a number of improvements were contemplated, including a possible periodical. Negotiations were being carried on with the newspapers also. (2) The difference in time between the various parts of Canada could not be entirely overcome, but local history could be broadcasted in one or two zones, while other programmes could be recorded and given at suitable times in each zone. (3) He felt that it would be difficult to give broadcasts in two languages as listeners might become impatient, but some programmes might be exchanged, and others might be given over short-wave. (4) Experience had shown the difficulties of putting on series on historical subjects, and in this he felt that the co-operation of historians would be valuable. He therefore suggested that a committee of the Canadian Historical Association be appointed to co-operate with the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation.¹

¹This committee was subsequently appointed by the council of the Association, with members from all parts of Canada. Mr. G. deT. Glazebrook of the University of Toronto was appointed as chairman.