
Australian Radio and Cultural Formation

By Scott Howden

Since the 1920s radio broadcasting in Australia has both reflected and instituted social change. The 1920s saw the development of Australia as a mass consumer society transforming radio from a technological marvel into an essential commodity of everyday life—a world in which the listener themselves became a commodity. Throughout the 1920s-1940s, programming and marketing adapted to social conditions seeking varying ways in which to establish a reliance amongst listeners on radio broadcasting; a reliance that would make radio central to listeners' ability to understand themselves and their place in the new society. Radio served as a means through which increased emphasis was placed on the structured working day, the nuclear family, (centred around the modern home) and the consumption of commodities, all as the central tenets of modern living. The following essay traces the development of Australian radio broadcasting from its inception in the 1920s through to a decline in popularity with the development of television in the late 1950s. By adopting this approach, images of gender and class within broadcasting and popular radio magazines will be focussed on, highlighting the way such images were reflected in the popular drama, women's sessions and serials of the time, and the response of audiences to such imaging. In summary, the extent to which as an entertainer, informer, and sales medium of the modern age, radio broadcasting served, by fostering tastes and desires within the listening community, to ensure the continued prosperity of the modern consumerist society, will be seen.

The First World War stimulated the development of wireless technology throughout the world. Realising the potential of radio as means of communication, the Commonwealth government, in 1919, awarded contracts to the Marconi and Telefunken corporations for the establishment of wireless telegraphy throughout the nation.¹ Amateur radio clubs proliferated throughout the post war years and into the 1920s serving as a forum for discussion of the latest wireless construction techniques and componentry.² Hailed as something of a technological marvel, a wonder from the modern world of electrical science, radio in these former years remained the province of an exclusive group of experimenters or 'hams' as they were popularly known, the considerable financial outlay required to construct a crystal set, coupled with heavy governmental licensing restrictions, only further limiting popular participation in the new medium.³ Administration of the nation's wireless system was placed under the control of the Post Master General's (PMG) Department, which in 1921, instigated a series of experimental broadcasts in Melbourne mainly as a service for the experimenter to test new apparatus - popular newspapers meanwhile, advertised radio for its ability to "unite nations, speak to the dead, and cure cancer."⁴ It was not until 1923 that wireless broadcasting officially commenced when Sydney station 2SB broadcast a live musical concert. The first major stations established such as 2BL

¹ Bedford, Ian and Curnow, Ross., "The Origins of Australian Broadcasting 1900-1923" in *Initiative and Organization*, (Melbourne: Cheshire, 1963), p.47

² Potts, John., *Radio In Australia* p.23

³ Jones, Colin., *Something in The Air: A History of Radio In Australia* (Sydney: Kangaroo Press, 1995), p.19

⁴ Kent, Jacqueline., *The Heyday of Australian Radio: Out of the Bakelite Box* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1983), p.4.

Sydney and 3AR Melbourne were owned by department stores such as Buckley and Nunn and Farmer and Co., (2FC) or by wireless apparatus manufacturers whose primary concern was the use of radio as sales medium. Such broadcasts usually featured a friend or relative of the station owner playing the piano, punctuated by advertisements for all manner of products over a two hour period each day.⁵

The growth of interest in radio broadcasting necessitated the development of control mechanisms and, realising the benefits of broadcasting to the nation, Post Master General William Gibson, officially introduced the sealed set scheme devised by Ernest Fisk of Amalgamated Wireless Australasia Ltd. (AWA).⁶ This short lived scheme required listeners to pay for each of the stations they wished to tune into. A culmination of the difficulties AWA faced in constructing a set capable of receiving only one station, of listeners complaining that being restricted to one station neglected their democratic right to freedom of choice, and finally and most importantly, a lack of support from wireless dealers, doomed the scheme to failure by 1924.⁷ It was the failure of the sealed set scheme which gave rise to a unique hybrid broadcasting system that would remain functional for several decades, consisting of 'A' and 'B' class stations. Gibson argued that the new system offered the listener the best of both the American and British broadcasting systems whilst improving on them to suit Australian circumstances.⁸ 'A' class stations were to be financed largely via a system of listener licence fees regulated by the PMG and based on the BBC model, whilst 'B' class stations were to receive their funding by private means which led, ultimately, to funding by way of advertising.⁹ Government authorities felt that the Australian broadcasting system boasted the best of both worlds in that it prevented the total domination of corporate entrepreneurs, allowed for government support and guidance, and engendered healthy competition and ultimately, first class services to the Australian people. Australian broadcasting developed throughout the 1920s in a rather unorthodox fashion with governments being more concerned with the regulation of radio frequencies than broadcasting content, though by the 1930s and 1940s the system, enjoying the benefits of fierce competition, was regarded as one of the finest in the world. It was not until 1932 that the Australian Broadcasting Company was made a Commission, (ABC) charged with the responsibility for all national broadcasting, ('A' class stations) and with ensuring that all services operated in the interests of majority and minority tastes alike.¹⁰ It was from this time that the transformation of radio from a piece of scientific gadgetry to a necessary household appliance of the modern world, commenced.

The 1920s saw the onslaught of Americanization in Australia and the country's conversion to a modern, consumerist society driven by the production and consumption of commodities. It was in this period that radio passed from the realm of scientific marvel into being packaged and presented for mass consumption. Public exhibitions, newspapers and magazines which had once focussed on the relative merits of valves and ferrite aerials, now marketed radio in terms of its simplicity and

⁵ Johnson, Lesley., *The Unseen Voice: A Cultural Study of Early Australian Radio*, (London: Routledge, 1988). p.31

⁶ Potts., op.cit p.26

⁷ Jones., op.cit p.23

⁸ Mackay, Ian., *Broadcasting In Australia* (Carlton: Melbourne University Press), p.14.

⁹ Bedford, Ian., op.cit, p.47.

¹⁰ Ibid, p.49

centrality to the modern household - passing (in the minds of advertisers at least) from novelty to necessity and as the means through which society could be converted to the world of electricity.¹¹ “Beautiful, Entertaining, Enthralling, Fascinating, Simplistic: You can’t afford to miss the Electrical and Radio Exhibition, Sydney Town Hall” read a 1929 advertisement.¹² Whilst the tremendous hardships suffered by so many throughout the Great Depression of the late 1920s and 1930s served to dampen interest in the new medium, radio, magazine and newspaper advertisements glossed over the doom and gloom and continued to promote radio as a necessity of everyday life.¹³ The fact that so many fathers and husbands left their wives in search of employment or to flee responsibility to their families, served to further consolidate women’s position in the home as central to the smooth functioning of family life. Advertising centred on women as central to the nuclear family, and the nuclear family as central to the development of the nation. In addition, advertisements of the 1930s focussed on low prices, radio’s ability to counter the monotony of unemployment, to “bring cheer into the lives of all listeners”, and as central to the lives of the modern family: pictures depicting a family huddled around the wireless.¹⁴ More than just a product of the modern society, radio broadcasting served as a medium through which the values of that society would be reinforced and expressed so that by the 1940s and 1950s broadcasting passed easily into daily life providing relaxation, escapism and intellectual stimulation after a hard day’s work.

The establishment of broadcasting in 1923 necessitated the construction of a listening audience which, by the late 1920s was largely uninterested in the technicalities of radio operation and focussed more on that which could be discovered and enjoyed over radio. Whilst the controversy of the sealed set scheme and the cost of licences caused radio popularity to fall markedly in the years 1923-1924, the growing interest of amateurs and department store based radio stations in the relaying of music and comedy, served to counter the downturn in popularity. In these formative years radio audiences were looked upon as one amorphous mass that could be satisfied by announcers simply reading news from newspapers, and playing music from gramophone recordings. Largely an extension of music hall and vaudeville, programming in these early years focussed on live musical performances which necessitated a constant stream of performers with fresh performances.¹⁵ The competition that emerged between radio stations seeking the most popular performers, served to orientate broadcasting towards catering more for the needs of the listener. It was from this point forward that listeners began to be categorized along traditional lines into groups such as men, women, children and farmers, seen as having distinct tastes and interests. Increasingly, listeners aired their views on the content of programming, requesting programmes that suited their needs and tastes, and although initially reluctant to do so, commercial radio stations in particular, realized the benefits of bowing to such requests.¹⁶ Noting the possibility for the manipulation of

¹¹ Johnson, Lesley., ‘Radio and Everyday Life. The Early Years of Broadcasting in Australia, 1922-1945’, *Media Culture and Society*, 3, 1981, p.172.

¹² *The Labor Daily*, Thursday, March 23, 1929.

¹³ Lowenstein, Wendy., *Weevils in the Flour: an Oral Record of the 1930s Depression in Australia*,(Melbourne: Penguin, 1988), p.43

¹⁴ *The Sunday Mail Brisbane*, July 4, 1932

¹⁵ Kent, op.cit., p.45

¹⁶ Higgins, CS., and Moss, P.D. *Sounds Real: Radio in Everyday Life*, (St. Lucia UQP, 1982), p.37.

social trends a 1927 Royal Commission in Wireless Broadcasting Services in Victoria found:

In view of the far-reaching influence of Wireless transmission on listeners and particularly children and youth, the Commission is of the opinion that the greatest care should be taken by broadcasters to secure announcers who can afford an example to the listener of how the English language should be pronounced and used.¹⁷

As a result of these findings, highlighting the possibilities of broadcasting's influence on cultural formation, strict guidelines were implemented, one of the key requirements being that broadcasting cater for people from all classes.

Whilst the initial intention of the PMG's Department had been for radio to transcend all class barriers, conflicting listener demands soon posed difficulties for programmers. Indeed, the very structure of the broadcasting system into 'A' and 'B' stations in itself caused class differentiation amongst listeners.¹⁸ Assuming control of all 'A' class stations in 1932, the newly formed ABC emerged with the aim of being a "cultural elevator", intending to raise the standards of the Australian listening public in the areas of art appreciation, music and education.¹⁹ Based very much along BBC lines, the ABC was to concern itself with only 'high quality' material. The influx of American popular forms such as jazz and Hollywood were to be confronted by the "superior quality of British material", and denounced as debasing class distinctions and the all important ties with Empire.²⁰ Whilst the process of Americanization received much opposition from either end of the class spectrum, it was the masses who were seen as most vulnerable to succumbing to American cultural forms. And so, in the supposedly egalitarian country, there emerged throughout the 1930s the terms 'highbrow' and 'lowbrow' as radio stations attempted to come to grips with the composition of their audiences and the variety of tastes in music and programs.²¹

That segment of the listening audience defined as 'highbrow' were seen as having a preference for classical music, traditional plays and serious talks, whereas 'lowbrows', perceived as constituting the bulk of the listening audience, (the popular) were said to prefer jazz, comedy, variety and light hearted entertainment (especially during the depression and war periods)²². The extent to which listeners saw themselves as belonging to a particular class is evident in the letters received by magazines such as *The ABC Weekly* in which listeners presented their views on an issue and signed off "concerned lowbrow" or "disgusted highbrow".²³ Whilst it insisted that the delights of highbrow culture were open to all, it is clear that the ABC had a preference for "the more cultured section of the community" and further, that it encouraged the distinction between high and low in its broadcasting. Highbrow superiority was expressed by listeners as "not simply a matter of taste but of intellectual superiority" and "natural distinction" though radio magazines were, in the main, reluctant to confront issues of class.²⁴ The highbrow nature of the ABC was

¹⁷ Blain, Ellis., *Life With Aunty: Forty Years With the ABC* (Sydney: Methuen, 1977), p.32.

¹⁸ Johnson, op.cit., *The Unseen Voice*, p.144

¹⁹ Dixon, Frank., *Inside the ABC: A Piece of Australian History* (Melbourne: Hawthorn Press, 1975). p.67

²⁰ Ibid, p.69

²¹ Johnson, Lesley., "Sing Em Muck, Clara": High-brow versus Lowbrow on Early Australian Radio", *Meanjin*, 41, 2, (1982) .p.196

²² Ibid., p.197

²³ *The ABC Weekly* Vol. 2, No.8-24th February 1940, p.65

²⁴ Johnson, *The Unseen Voice*, p.130.

evident, not only in the moralistic tones of its programmes throughout the 1930-1950s, but in the decline of its listening audience, a 1945 letter to *The ABC Weekly* stating “Who needs to knock off after a day’s work and be lectured to by some stuffy Pom.”²⁵ By the close of 1945, ABC officials chose to branch into different stations providing “light, cheery entertainment.”²⁶

Concerned with the attraction of as wide an audience as possible, commercial stations, on the other hand, whilst still very formal and proper by today’s standards, argued that they were far more attune to, and representative of, the tastes of the great majority of listeners - that they were out to entertain, not educate. In meeting popular demand, such stations became increasingly reliant upon the adaptation of American material, whilst the ABC continued to focus more on local material until the late 1940s. Falling outside state control until the 1940s, ‘B’ class or commercial stations, enjoyed freedom and independence but failed to attract a more general body of listeners until later in the decade.²⁷ Whilst the ABC required listeners to leave aside their ordinary lives, commercial stations associated with the everyday life of the worker “At the end of a hard day’s work sit down, close your eyes, relax and tune into the music and light entertainment of 3UW.”²⁸ Throughout the 1940s commercial stations featured stunt shows and amateur hours providing tremendous competition, and so, succumbing to listener demand, the ABC introduced spelling and general knowledge bees. Throughout the period ABC officials argued over the extent to which popular demand could be bowed to and the best ways of serving both minority and majority audiences. Thus, whilst radio had initially placed cultural hierarchies of taste under threat by treating the listening audience as equal, by the mid 1930s this threat was reduced with the segmentation of audiences into specific groups based on gender, class and taste, by moulding those tastes and creating loyalties.²⁹

The rise of wireless as a product of science and a technical marvel in the early 1920s placed it firmly in the domain of men. Experimenting with circuitry, aerial design and battery composition became the stuff of mates and the radio clubs that emerged in this period experimented with wireless reception and were often exclusively male. By the 1930s, however, radio clubs established by the various national and commercial stations were predominantly organised around women with a focus on sporting activities, excursions and charity work largely in a bid to counter the effects of the depression.³⁰ Thus, it can be seen that in a period of some ten years, both radio broadcasters and market advertisers alike, sought to focus their programmes and advertisements more towards women as a specific entity. Wireless had passed the point of being a mere scientific novelty benefiting a minority, to be transformed into a commodity taking its place in the modern consumer society. Newly formed stations and advertisers looked to women as a specific audience whose lives centred around the home as they cooked, cleaned and cared for the children.³¹

²⁵ *The ABC Weekly* Vol.1, No.8-3rd February, 1939, p.25.

²⁶ Blain, op.cit., p.63

²⁷ Johnson op.cit “Sing ’Em Muck Clara”, p.215

²⁸ *The Age*, July 23, 1942 p.27

²⁹ Counihan, Mick., “The Formation Of A Broadcasting Audience: Australian Radio In the Twenties” in *Meanjin*, 41,2, (1982), p.196

³⁰ Johnson, op.cit *The Unseen Voice*, p.134

³¹ Kent., op.cit p.54

Being a successful mother from the 1930s onwards involved participating fully in the consumption of radio and the commodities of the modern world.

Once bombarded with advertisements for wireless components, batteries, journals, diagrams and technical sessions, the social and political changes that had taken place to broadcasting meant that men were no longer the centre of attention for programming and advertising. Whilst men were partly addressed as a collective group by the diminishing technical sections of *Listener-in*, *Broadcasting Business* and the various newspapers, it was really only in sporting sections that they were spoken of as sharing particular interests in common.³² A closer study of *Wireless Weekly* and *The ABC Weekly* reveals that radio stations and advertisers felt it unnecessary to address men specifically and further, that their participation in radio as forming the general audience was taken for granted. Men could not be as regularly confronted by marketing as much of their day was spent away from the home, away from the radio set. Jim Donald's "Page of Sport" in *The ABC Weekly* throughout the period 1939-1940 focussed largely on the masculinity and power of boxing and on horse racing. Other features included stories on the progress of athletes and sportsmen around the world, with such titles as "triumphant nigger" and "Aussie defeats world best."³³ Additionally, were to be found everything from tips on how to bet on a winner at the races to the "The correct procedure for oiling a cricket bat."³⁴ More than anything, Donald's pages emphasized the physical superiority of the bronzed Aussie, and his suitability for war. By creating "a page for women" and a separate, overtly masculine sporting page, radio magazines played a vital role in defining the differences between male and female audiences. However, it should not be inferred that by the focus of advertising centring on women, that this signified a degradation of the standing of men in the social order. The ABC's broadcasts of "The Watchman", a popular social critic of the 1940s, serve to reinforce the ultimate authority of men in society, many of his broadcasts opening with the lines "As all you fathers return home from a long day at work to wives winding up their daily chores, let us pause for a moment..."³⁵ A focus of the radio programs from *The ABC Weekly* throughout 1940 (and I think it no mere coincidence) reveals that around 6.00pm, the time when husbands were due home from work, radio programming changed in tone from light-hearted serials and stunt shows to the more serious, factual reporting of news, weather, stock prices as if signalling that now the "head of the house" had arrived, broadcasting could become more serious.

Throughout the week on both the ABC and commercial stations, wrestling and boxing dominated the air waves, whilst on the weekend it was over to Australian Rules Football and Rugby Union. Established in 1932, live sports broadcasting was received with mixed reactions by various sporting bodies concerned that crowds would simply stay at home and tune in to the matches and races on the radio.³⁶ In Melbourne from 1930 to 1936, with a ban on the broadcasting of all football and horse racing, race callers and commentators could be seen climbing trees and light

³² Johnson, "Wireless and Women: The Definition of the modern woman by Australian Radio in the 1920s and 1930s" *University of Melbourne Working Papers in Education*, 1984 p.82

³³ *The ABC Weekly* Vol.1, No.3-20th January, 1940 p.35.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p.37

³⁵ Mann, EA., *Arrows in The Air: A Selection From Broadcasts by "The Watchman" through Public and Private Radio Stations in Australia.* (Melbourne: John Bacon, 1940).p.7

³⁶ Kent, *op.cit.*, p. 208

poles in a desperate attempt to update listeners on the proceedings. By the 1940s race callers were finally, under certain conditions, allowed to broadcast from within the course when it was realised that radio provided greater interest in their sport and helped attract larger crowds. By the mid 1930s, live broadcasts of overseas sporting events were possible by way of short-wave radio with coverage of cricket tests from Lords.³⁷ Test cricket and events such as the Melbourne Cup were seized upon for their ability to create excitement by bringing the listener the sounds of the crowd and the pound of hooves, all helping to create a popular enthusiasm for radio. The outbreak of war tended to place a damper on the broadcasting of sport in Australia and a focus on *The ABC Weekly* during that period reveals decreased emphasis on sporting events in favour of heroic tales of courage, of young Australian soldiers in Europe and the glorification of physical strength and fitness. Following the war, transmission facilities had improved so dramatically that the direct broadcasting of overseas sporting matches became commonplace interspersed by variety and comedy sessions on commercial stations. It was the commercial stations that came to dominate sport broadcasting in the late 1940s and 1950s, networking reaching tremendous sophistication as epitomised by the Macquarie network and its station 2GB, operating the largest sporting and racing network in the nation. As did much radio announcing, sporting commentary remained the domain of men and was exalted as something of an art, particularly in the early years when the broadcaster was often unable to see what was happening.³⁸

In the 1920s and 1930s as radio stations and market advertisers sought to establish radio as part of the pattern of daily life, women increasingly became the centre of attention. Via radio, advertisers claimed that the modern housekeeper could lessen the burden and monotony of daily chores by becoming an active participant in the consumer world. Advertisements in *Women's Weekly* and the *Herald and Weekly Times*, depicted radio as the perfect companion with which floors could be washed, shelves dusted and the evening meal cooked. "Roast, Rub and Relax with Radiola" spouted an AWA advertisement for the Radiola 55E set in 1929.³⁹ In a letter to the editor of *Women's Weekly* in 1929 one housewife remarked:

*Personally, I can find considerable enjoyment in moving about the house leaving behind me a wake of cleanliness provided I may wear gloves at the time: and fortunately in these days of modern conveniences housework can be accomplished without soiling the hands.*⁴⁰

Radio and electrical exhibitions held in capital cities throughout the country concentrated on the "beauty and elegance" of their radio sets and as fine pieces of furniture designed to "complement the decor of the modern home."⁴¹ Such advertising sought to establish the desire in women to acquire and use the products of the electrical age.⁴² Once the radio set was purchased, broadcasting then served to

³⁷ Jones, op.cit., p.87

³⁸ Walker, R. *The Magic Spark: The Story of the First Fifty Years of Radio in Australia*, 1973 p.68

³⁹ *The Australian Women's Weekly*, September 9, vol.2 No.15, 1929 p.44

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, July 18, 1929

⁴¹ Johnson, op.cit., *The Unseen Voice*, p.34

⁴² Reiger, Kerreen, M., *The Disenchantment of the Home: Modernizing the Australian Family 1880-1940* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), p.110

further reinforce the advantages of modern labour-saving devices, and continually instilled in housewives the centrality of radio to day-to-day living.

By the 1930s women's sessions, as heard on stations such as Melbourne's 3MP, taught women how to become, not only efficient managers in the home, but also effective radio listeners. 3MP featured Mrs. Helen Hicks "expert home economist" who presented regular talks on beauty, fashion, child care and household matters, all as a part of the daily routine.⁴³ In an attempt to establish a regular, reliable audience, women's sessions on the ABC and commercial stations alike spoke of the virtues of punctuality and regularity, urging women to structure their day to include both rest and relaxation. In addition, the importance of being a selective listener, of selecting stations to meet one's needs, was promoted as the mark of a successful housewife again providing an engaged and regular audience - women becoming a commodity in themselves.⁴⁴ The listening guide of *Wireless Weekly* for 22 January 1937, on Sydney Station 2UE, presented women's sessions as covering the "making the perfect sponge cake, glass cleaning, decorative floral arrangements for the home, and skin care for children."⁴⁵ Often promoted as an intermission between daily chores, women's sessions became central to the structure of household life. Lesley Johnson argues that the wealth of information available to women on every aspect of domestic life served not only to create a reliance upon the consumer world, but also to reject remedies traditionally passed down from mother to daughter, neighbour to neighbour, and encouraged women to stay at home and consult their radio rather than converse with other women.⁴⁶

Constantly, however, marketing and women's sessions stressed that domesticity was the means through which women were to find inclusion in society. Content in their domestic roles, women were to make perfect consumers and not pose a threat to the domination of men in the wider society. But whilst increasing numbers of women found themselves living a solitary daily life in the suburbs, the extent to which they participated in women's session is ambiguous. E.M Tildesley's essay of 1938 argues that, after conducting a questionnaire on women listeners, her results showed that ninety per cent of those interviewed did not listen to women's sessions and further, "that women would take something better if it were provided."⁴⁷ Despite such statistics, however, women's sessions continued on well into the 1960s, the ABC not fully recognising the possibility that men and women shared interests in common until the late 1950s.

Whilst in the 1920s and 1930s the term "women's sessions" referred to programs providing information on child rearing, preserving, cooking and cleaning, by the 1940s, with the outbreak of war, came a shift in the role of women within society and a gradual shift in broadcasting style. Having weathered years of depression and being subservient housewives, women were now asked to fill the jobs of men at war. Ernestine Hill's "Page For Women" in *The ABC Weekly*, whilst still reinforcing the necessity for women to maintain their beauty regime, tended to focus more on practical advice throughout the war years on "coping in air raids" "chang[ing] light bulbs" and purchasing insurance schemes and war bonds, not to

⁴³ *Argus*, September 14, 1936 p.22.

⁴⁴ Johnson, *The Unseen Voice*, p.98

⁴⁵ *Wireless Weekly*, January 22, 1937, p.17

⁴⁶ Johnson, op.cit, p.65

⁴⁷ Tildesley, E.M., "Women and Broadcasting" in *The Australian National Review*, 1/2/38, p.25

mention countless designs for cardigans and balaclavas to send off to loved ones in battle.⁴⁸ Despite the nation's orientation on war, however, women's true role as housewives was constantly reinforced in magazine articles as in the following article by Florence James

My friend Mary is the happiest woman I know ... If you ask Mary her secret she will tell you it is because she has had for the last ten years the job that suits her best: "I'm an unashamed career woman," she will say with her pleasant smile, "I have one of the most strenuous and yet satisfying jobs I know. I'm a professional housewife."⁴⁹

Throughout the 1940s Ernestine Hill raised countless questions in the pages of *The ABC Weekly* on the role of women in society. Women's ability to become doctors formed the basis of one such article "Would you place your health in the hands of a woman?" to which one woman replied "I'd, no sooner place my life in the hands of a woman than jump off a bridge" and in response to the same article "whilst I have never visited a woman doctor before, I see no reason whatsoever why we can not fulfil this role as well as men."⁵⁰ In a subsequent issue, the question was posed "can women be trusted to keep secrets in time of war?" which received a similar range of responses, as well as an outline on women's preference for the "tonal superiority of male announcers."⁵¹ By posing such questions on the position of women in society, announcers and writers such as Ernestine Hill began to question the position of women and the dominance of men. Gradually, whilst still segregating women and reinforcing their domestic role, radio also became the medium through which women could air their conflicting opinions on their own value in society and start to develop a sense of themselves as a collective group.

With an end to the war women were asked to resume their position as caretakers of the home, the reintroduction of fashion and beauty pages highlighting the need for women to present themselves as sexually appealing to their husbands. On the other hand, however, women's articles spoke far more of women as a collective group whose capabilities, proven in the war period, far outstripped cleaning bathtubs, cooking lamb chops and listening to serials on a daily basis. Whilst commercial stations tended more towards treating their audience as one broad collective mass, the ABC, as evident in letters of criticism to *The ABC weekly*, continued on with the policy of audience segregation along gender lines. In his book, MacKay notes that women's sessions of the late 1950s appealed more to women in the "lower income brackets" who "are confined to their homes either by distance or by family responsibilities."⁵² Intent on attracting as large an audience as possible, commercial stations tended to be more responsive to listener demands, women being treated less as housewives and more as sharing an interest in the latest art, literature, theatre, travelogues and current affairs, as well as having an interest in the problems of other women.⁵³ Increasingly, the programs of Gwen Plumb and Lorna Byrne tackled the social taboos of alcoholism, divorce, and whilst women were still very

⁴⁸ *The ABC Weekly* April 7-April 13 1940 p. 19.

⁴⁹ *Ibid* Friday October 11, 1949 p.11

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, August 11-17 1940p.43

⁵¹ *Ibid*, August 18-24 1940, p.45.

⁵² MacKay, p.90

⁵³ Kent, op.cit, p.63.

much encased in the domestic role, change was slowly taking place as women entered the workforce and moved out of the domestic realm.⁵⁴

Arguably the most effective way that the values of the modern consumerist society were conveyed and reinforced to the listening audience as a whole, was by way of radio drama: in particular family serials or soap operas. Such serials commonly centred around a domestic situation and depicted the trials and tribulations of an everyday, ordinary family in the modern consumer society. It was via such serials as *Blue Hills* and *Dad and Dave* that men and women alike were able to reflect upon their own lives and determine their position within society. The primary consumers of serials were women who, (it was hoped) after completing the household chores for the morning, sat down to relax for short periods in the afternoon to be entertained. E.M Tildesley attributes women's interest in radio serials to an innate preference for a lack of closure, for serials that, like everyday life, continue on and connect from one episode to the next.⁵⁵ Consumption was reinforced as the order of the day as listeners heard from characters the benefits of vacuum cleaners and refrigerators. The families depicted in radio serials such as *Dad and Dave* reinforced the role and status of family members and their (albeit limited) interactions with the rest of society. Radio dramas were advertised for their ability to "liven the humdrum liv[es]" of the average housewife and provide a form of escapism as listeners were taken through the emotional crises of the characters. Letters to *Wireless Weekly* highlighted the popularity of the serials as listeners, believing the characters to be real, wrote inviting particular characters to dinner and sending gifts of flowers and chocolates whenever a character celebrated a birthday or wedding.⁵⁶ Following the war, 'soapies' as they became known, developed a reputation for being slow-paced.

Script writer Alan Hargraves explained that radio stations saw the capacity for women to concentrate on performing their household duties and tune into and follow the serials as being so limited, that subsequently the pace of such productions was kept to a minimum.⁵⁷ Increasingly after the war, however, as the ban on the importation of overseas material was lifted, more and more serials became adaptations of the faster-paced American shows. By the mid 1950s serials had become fast paced, more realistic and stimulating for the audience with commercial stations increasingly adopting the murder/mystery genre. Serials such as "White Coolies" centred on stories of bravery during the war such as Australian Army nurses depicted as competent and capable of performing their roles under extreme circumstances in the defence of the nation, a far cry from the traditional portrayal of women.⁵⁸

Commencing in 1949 *Blue Hills* was the most successful serial on Australian radio of all time running for a world record 5,795 episodes. A continuation of Gwen Meredith's popular serial *The Lawson Family* which began in 1944, *Blue Hills* took on the more popular characters of the original serial, dealt with the problems of rural life, and went to air five days a week. The characters and their interactions with one another formed the basis of *Blue Hills* as they tackled the problems of their 'ordinary' rural life fighting fires, poor crops and tackling marital problems. Whilst *Blue Hills* lacked the murder, mystery and intrigue common to the commercial serials, listeners

⁵⁴ Ibid, p.65

⁵⁵ Tildesley, op.cit, p.29

⁵⁶ *Wireless Weekly* Jun 13 1938 p.23

⁵⁷ Johnson "Wireless and Women" p.83

⁵⁸ op. cit, Walker p.112

across the nation were able to relate to the characters and ritualistically tuned in over the years.⁵⁹ By the 1950s the characters in *Blue Hills* tackled the problems of divorce and alcoholism at a time when governments shied away from such issues. *Blue Hills* presented an accurate picture of outback life in Australia unlike its counterparts on commercial stations, which in seeking a guaranteed wide audience, concerned themselves with dramatic storylines and sensational American scripts.⁶⁰

Vaudeville based comedy similarly provided much entertainment from the 1930s to the 1950s. Renowned for his comedy timing on stage, Roy Rene or “Mo” as he was popularly known, successfully adapted his routine to suit radio starring in the popular series *MacCackie Mansion*, a rather risqué comedy which sought laughter from such issues as homosexuality, and what today would be looked on as racist jokes.⁶¹ Throughout the period radio plays also became increasingly popular, the ABC presenting regular plays throughout the week which were so successful that by the late 1950s, Lever Brothers established *Lux Radio Theatre* in opposition as well as stunt and quiz shows, such as Bob Dyer’s *Pick-A-Box*, which sought to provide entertainment and “challenge the intellects of participants.”⁶² At times constituting up to eighty per cent of all material broadcast on popular stations, music was one entertainment that catered for all tastes. Hymns, recitals, community singing, jazz and big band were all immensely popular forms of entertainment and relaxation. Classical music, however, tended to remain largely the domain of the ABC, national stations seeing the need to “wait for the public demand to catch up,” though Macquarie Network’s *Mobil Quest* was responsible for discovering Joan Sutherland as Australia’s finest voice, and for making performers such as Gladys Moncrieff so enormously popular throughout the 1930s and 1940s.⁶³

The other serial of the 1930s that has now passed into Australian legend was *Dad and Dave* which, like *Blue Hills*, idealized Australia as rural based nation despite the realities of rapid industrial development. Aired on commercial stations, *Dad and Dave* was uniquely Australian and based on Steele Rudd’s *On Our Selection* of 1899. The story centred around Dad and his son Dave, his practical Mum, and Dave’s sheila, Mabel. Dad and Mother Rudd were battlers who managed to scrape by making a living from their small property in Snake Gully.⁶⁴ As was the case with *Blue Hills*, *Dad and Dave* was not based on a complex plot structure, but rather focussed on a few significant events in the year such as the Snake Gully Cup, around which the whole series was structured. Sponsored by the American company Wrigleys *Dad and Dave* did much to convert the Australian public away from seeing the chewing of gum as a “filthy American habit” towards being an accepted and highly successful American product. Unlike the characters of Rudd’s original story, those in the radio series were used as a means of invoking nationalistic sentiment and as vehicles for social satire, subtly conveying the cultural values of the new Australia

⁵⁹ Potts, op.cit p.46

⁶⁰ Ibid, p.50

⁶¹ Parsons Fred., *A Man Called Mo* (Melbourne: Heinemann, 1973), p.21

⁶² Lane, Richard., *The Golden Age of Australian Radio Drama 1923-1960: A History Through Biography*, (Canberra: Melbourne University Press, 1994), p.17

⁶³ Ibid, p.19.

⁶⁴ Fotheringham, Richard., *In Search of Steele Rudd: Author of the Classic Dad and Dave Series*. (St.Lucia, UQP, 1995), p.18

and the benefits of modern technology.⁶⁵ As an illustration of this, episode 34 centres around Mum's desire to keep up with the neighbours and replace the family horse and cart with a motor car. Highlighting Mum's influence over the family's consuming habits and contrasting the benefits of modern society over the traditional, Dad and Dave rush out and buy the car on hire purchase, throwing the family into financial difficulties.⁶⁶ *Dad and Dave* provided the impetus that helped develop commercial radio possibly more than any other single factor. It is possible to see the success of this serial as centring around the fact that its characters were facing the same difficulties as Australians living in the suburbs, Australians making the transition from a rural society to an urban one.

In conclusion, by having focussed on the images of gender and class as broadcast by radio from the 1920s to the 1950s, the role radio played in the formation of a unique Australian culture has been seen. Careful advertising and programming established radio broadcasting as a companion to listeners in the enactment of their everyday lives, and once this had been established, played a tremendous role in the transition of Australia from a rural based society to a modern, consumerist one. In that process of change, radio served to reflect and influence such factors as class boundaries and gender differentiation. In an attempt to satisfy particular tastes, audiences were segregated along the lines of class and gender, and catered for according to their social position. One such group was women, who as listeners, were depicted as having a pivotal role as housewives in the domestic environment, and as sharing common interests. By focussing on images of class in radio broadcasting, the extent to which broadcasting was seen as means of educating and enlightening the masses, highlights radio's role as an instigator of change. By the 1950s the development of the transistor allowed radio to break out of its domestic orientation into fast cars and onto the beaches with teenagers, whilst on the horizon loomed an all new medium that added pictures to sound.

⁶⁵ Potts, op.cit., p.82

⁶⁶ Johnson, *The Unseen Voice*, p.98

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