

I DISCOVER WIRELESS— IN PRISON!

Impressions of a "Radio Rip Van Winkle"

(Written for "The Listener" by O. E. BURTON)



IT will perhaps surprise many of our readers to know that some of the keenest listeners to radio are the inmates of our prisons. It was a surprise to us when we were told that this is the case, and we have therefore asked O. E. Burton, whose photograph appears on the left, and whose recent history most of our readers know, to give us his personal experiences and reactions.



HORRIBLE although the fact may seem, I was very nearly one of the original wireless uncles. Indeed, I broadcast three times away back in 1925 when to do so was something of a novelty. Soon after, though, I disappeared into the solitude of the country, and forgot about wireless until I emerged from this happy seclusion and became a parson in a Wellington slum. Even then I took little heed of the contraption except to marvel that the poorer my poor folk happened to be the more certain were they to have a set on a time-payment basis. My main reaction to the wireless then, was that it made visiting considerably more difficult, as most folk kept the radio going and talked at the same time. Now and again, of course, I was invited in to some special function such as a cricket Test Match relayed from England with applause supplied in Australia, but by and large, I took very little heed of wireless programmes.

Yet as time went on, we did feel a bit out of things, especially when ours was the only house in the street without an aerial. Finally, a friend took pity upon us, and gave us a set she was no longer using. But as this jibbed a good deal, I still remained more or less immune.

A Gradual Process

It was not until I went to prison that I really discovered wireless. Even then the process was a gradual one. In the first jail the acoustics were impossible, and the radio was just one more thing sent to try us. Plaster walls and long corridors reduced the sounds issuing from the loudspeaker to a meaningless jumble of crackling explosions. The authorities had the kindest intentions, no doubt, but the result was penal in the extreme.

In another institution, the result was not much better—though less disintegrating to the nervous system. However, in a third, where I spent more than a year, the reception was usually perfect. My education, therefore, in 1943-44 proceeded apace, especially as we had to take everything that was coming to us. I became, if not a fan, at any rate a listener who was something of a modern Rip van Winkle. It is just possible that my unsophisticated reactions may be of some interest to the sophisticated.

In general, I would say that what we heard was a composite of the tastes of warders and prisoners. Racing, for example, was the most popular topic of all. There were lots of things I detested wholeheartedly. The Ballad of the Leatherneck Corps always made me gnash my teeth. Crooners gave me the jim-jams. Even that stirring refrain, "Roll Out the Barrel," left my heart strangely cold. The war commentators, with fruity voices talking down to their listeners, always stirred in me an insane desire to drag them round no-man's land through the mud and beneath the muzzles of machine-guns I once knew. When the Friendly Road turned mildly religious, I wanted to smash furniture. As for one Hettie, a bad little minx with a baby voice and a nasty habit of saying He-he-he at her own jokes, I am sure that if I wrung her neck any self-respecting jury would acquit me on the ground of justifiable homicide.

Yet heartily as I disliked all these, I wouldn't for worlds interfere with them. Presumably someone loves even Hettie. After all, it is one of the fine things about wireless that normally you needn't listen to anything you don't like. Turn it off — and on with something else. What you don't like doesn't matter much: someone else does, and that is the justification for its being put on. I believe in free air and the right of all to gas.

Are We Grown-up Children?

The serials, of which there seem a vast number, intrigued me. Most of them were very well done, I thought. The selection of stories seems to be fairly wide and probably caters fairly well for most tastes. I thought, for instance, that the girls in a South African story were about as feather-brained as might well be, but no doubt they had a tremendous appeal to a wide public who thought and felt in much the same way. Some of the yarns were really good thrillers, and kept you on tiptoe all the while—especially as the break was always made at a point just when the murder was obviously coming but hadn't yet happened. Now and again a really good story from one of the classics was put on. Most of the plays which I heard done in serial form were very well read.

The thing that made me wonder about it all, though, was to what extent the radio was transforming us into a number of grown-up children having stories read to us instead of growing up and reading our own stories. I don't know. Library statistics and shop sales,

examined against the background of wireless and the vast extension of educational facilities in the last generation, might give some basis for comparison.

I am rather scared of saying anything about music. Most of my friends know a great deal about it, and I have managed to keep up appearances by preserving a wise silence. Musical selection seems to cover a wide field, from stuff that is just mush, to some that reaches the very heights of expression and depths of feeling. This, things being as they are, is quite as it should be. Some ordinary little lass with an ordinary lover on a man-of-war has got as much right to an appalling sailor-boy thing that I mercifully can't remember, as I have to go in quest for a marvellous thing from Bach which I once heard and have never been able to find again, but which haunts me by reason of the kingdom and the power and the glory in it.

Singing in the Bathroom

But here again I have my doubts about the total effect. Apparently Paul Robeson is generally regarded as a great singer. Certainly I like him a tremendous lot if my vote counts at all. Perhaps he and some others are as good as men and women can ever expect to be. In which case not many more people need to sing. We just get a few Paul Robesons and listen to them. Yet this obviously would be all wrong, because the most important music in the world is that of women singing in solitary kitchens, of children in the sunshine, and of happy fathers in bathrooms. Is the wireless aiding and abetting these things—if so, all's well; if not, all's wrong. Robeson's a grand chap, but if my family listen to him always instead of to my efforts from the bathroom, something is wrong somewhere. In other words, is the wireless teaching us to sing or to listen?

"Our Biggest Laugh"

Perhaps mercifully, I was delivered from the politicians. I have an idea that the prison authorities thought they were not very nice people for us to know. As to that, of course I can hardly express an opinion. The only time I heard the House was when a debate was, I think, accidentally switched on. There was a most heavenly row proceeding, but before we could get the hang of it another station was put on. As a result, the only politicians I heard

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