

PREPARING FOR THE ROYAL TOUR

BBC and ABC Producers Arrive

WHEN Geoffrey Bridson, senior features producer for the BBC, and Wilfred Thomas, commentator and producer for the ABC, arrived in New Zealand last week, the news that their visit was connected with the coming Royal Tour was not surprising. Bridson told *The Listener* in an interview that he is here mainly to gather background material for use with the day-by-day progress reports of the tour that will be given by BBC commentators next year. Thomas is gathering material for programmes of a similar kind for Australian listeners.

Geoffrey Bridson (whose name, incidentally, is pronounced *Brideson*) is a quiet, deep-voiced man of medium height, with a piercing eye and a neat brown beard. He explained that for the last six months he had been with the ABC under the Commonwealth exchange scheme. "I thought that as I was so near I should take the opportunity of having a look at New Zealand, and I suggested to London that I make this trip to gather feature material. I also hope to produce one show here—I have in mind a 60-minute documentary programme with some such title as *This is New Zealand*—which can be used as a curtain-raiser to the Royal Tour. It would give English listeners some idea of what the country the Royal Family is visiting is like."

"Do you think they know much about us already?"

"I don't think the people of Britain know the first thing about New Zealand

—any more than they know the first thing about France, which is only a few miles away across the Channel. Accordingly, I have to present them with as much palatable and colourful information as I can get, dressed up as entertainment. My general aim would be to present a comprehensive picture of the historical development of the Dominion, combined with a picture of life here to-day, emphasising such things as scenery, social services, and State development. It would be what we call a 'poster programme,' that is, a more or less superficial picture of New Zealand life, but with great care taken to ensure that all the facts are absolutely accurate.

Picture of Maori Life

"Then I also want to get material for a Maori programme," he said. "This will be a separate feature presenting a general picture of Maori life, including their traditions, history, and culture. Additional recordings will be put together into programmes when I get back to London."

Producing radio feature programmes is no novelty for Geoffrey Bridson. He has been with the BBC since 1935 and estimates that in this time he has written and produced about 350 features. Many of these have involved travelling about foreign countries, as for instance the series on Continental countries called *An Englishman Looks At . . .* Just before he left England he produced *Mirror of Our Time*, commemorating the 25th anniversary of the BBC. Other productions he called to mind were the play *Aaron's Field*, *March of the 45*, *Johnny Miner*, a programme on UNRRA, and *This Was an American*, a verse programme tribute to the American Army.

For release at the time of the Royal Tour of South Africa last year Bridson produced a documentary *This is South Africa*, and another programme *Great Trek*. While in Australia he wrote a series of five programmes on Australian life for English listeners. These have been recorded on ABC discs and sent to London for release at the time of the Royal Tour.

Had he, he was asked, noticed any particular trend of development in BBC feature and documentary programmes.

"I don't think you can say there is any particular trend. The feature department of the BBC has about 25 writers, each of whom works more or less according to his own ideas. Thus



GEOFFREY BRIDSON—"Even the superficial picture must be factually accurate"

you might say that the department has been developed by individuals—men like Louis MacNeice and Stephen Potter, who leave their individual impress on any programme they make."

Third Programme Under Fire

What did he think of recent newspaper reports that the BBC's much-publicised Third Programme was losing popularity? Mr. Bridson said the Third Programme was originally designed for minority listening, and could never be accused of pandering to popular taste. "It was intended to present the best 'intellectual' listening that could be put out," he said, "and we hoped that taking the long-term view the mere fact that the programme was on the air would eventually increase the general all-round standard of popular taste."

"Wouldn't that depend on a sufficient number of people listening?"

"We don't expect everybody to listen to it. Whereas the Home Service is expected to capture about 20 per cent. of the potential listening public, and the Light Programme about 30 per cent., the Third Programme is quite satisfied to get a figure of 3 per cent.," he said. When it was started in 1946 the figure was considerably higher than this, so any decline at present did not need to be taken too seriously. In any case, because of reception difficulties in some parts of Britain the figure of 3 per cent. might represent a potential of 6 per cent. So even if its popularity was waning, the Third Programme could not be considered a failure. He thought it possible, however, that the BBC might decide to incorporate material from the Third Programme in the Home Service

or the Light Programme, which had higher listening figures.

Wilfred Thomas, who has been described by the Americans as "a self-contained radio package," was uncertain whether to describe himself as an Englishman or an Australian, for his life has been more or less equally divided between the two countries. He was born in England, spent his youth in Australia, returned to England with Edward Branscombe's company, and now is living in Australia again. While in England he acted, sang, and compered shows for the BBC, and also produced commercial programmes for the International Broadcasting Corporation, which supplies Continental commercial stations with programmes for their English broadcasts. Early in the war he visited the United States for the British Ministry of Information, which was then sending artists to neutral countries as unofficial ambassadors of goodwill.

One of the "Brains"

Following the American tour came an appointment in Australia as federal director of light entertainment for the ABC. He has now relinquished this post but still broadcasts for the ABC under contract. For eight years he has been regularly producing the weekly *Wilfred Thomas Show*, which he believes is listened to by a good many country people in New Zealand. At least he assumes they are country listeners since most of the New Zealand fan letters he gets have "unpronounceable Maori addresses." He has also done some film work, including commentaries for newsreels, and he contributes a page of radio

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Spencer Digby photograph

WILFRED THOMAS

"Unusual characters will be especially welcome"