

# RADIO REVIEWED

BROADCASTING IN NEW ZEALAND, by Ian K. Mackay; A. H. and A. W. Reed, 12 6.

(Reviewed by Philip Hewland)

MR. MACKAY has been close to radio since crystal-and-cat's whisker days. He was present at the birth of the federation of B stations. He knew the Broadcasting Company and the Broadcasting Board, and he sat behind a glass-top in the chromium castles of Uncle Scrim. When he resigned to join an Australian network he was senior executive of the Commercial Division of the New Zealand Broadcasting Service. He had grown up with radio.

Now in this book he tosses back at us across the Tasman enthusiasms and prejudices that are the residue of his long experience in New Zealand: to this he adds historical detail, the value of which is considerable, but reduced by the presence of errors of fact in various parts of the book. His real purpose, however, is to be provocative. In that he has succeeded.

Mr. Mackay suffers acute nostalgia for the old days and ways of the friendly road, notwithstanding that it

proved for him, as for so many others, a blind alley. His central concern is the absorption of the commercial stations into the national service since 1943. He believes that competition is the soul of broadcasting; that monopoly dulls its voice. He considers that while the ZBs were to all intents and purposes autonomous from 1937 to 1943, New Zealand listeners were better served.

He seems to imagine that those days could be recalled. But that is unlikely. The ZB service took impetus from its association with the political mainstream of the time. And radio was then in its adolescence. The ZB innovators found the lowest common denominator and exploited it. True, they caused things to spin at more than the customary 78 revolutions a minute at the YAs. The YAs were startled out of their habit of playing both sides of every record, and into the employment of the latent capacity of their technicians. The ZBs quickened the air with "live" shows and controversy.

But radio seems to have played most of its tricks. The return of autonomy to the ZBs would no doubt give them some new stimulus, but the duplication of service would be at high cost for little, if any, real gain, since the temper of



Spartan Pictures

IAN MACKAY  
Enthusiasms and prejudices

the national division is much changed and its capacity enlarged.

There is much more to attract the listener in some of Mr. Mackay's other propositions. He wants thoroughgoing controversial sessions. They would be stimulating fun, but we are so intolerant, unimaginative and humourless a people that he may never see his wish

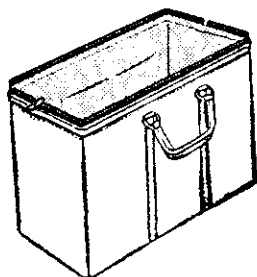
fulfilled. Even if enough forthright speakers could be found, it is doubtful if public opinion would support them. He will carry listeners with him in his desire for a better news service, though cost is one obvious reason why we do not get it.

I think he speaks with the voice of the majority of licence-holders when he says the Broadcasting Service should not have to meet the whole of the cost of the National Orchestra. He wants it community-sponsored. His prejudice toward commercial radio runs away with him in his references to the *New Zealand Listener*. He wants it to carry yet more advertising; he does not want it to cater for "a small academic minority," the suggestion being that that is about all it does serve.

In his record of political interference in broadcasting Mr. Mackay goes straight to the heart of the real argument over broadcasting control. The information here is a reminder that there should be safeguards against political intrusion. Quoting him:

I am not suggesting that ministerial control inevitably results in a plot to control broadcasting, nor am I suggesting that the Director of Broadcasting becomes a supine tool of the political machine, but both are well aware of the implications. It is not political censure, but the threat of censure, that will dictate departmental policy in certain circumstances. Whenever the Minister feels inclined he can take the wheel and the Director becomes the navigating officer who steers a course laid out for him. There is no limitation of ministerial authority: he is at liberty to regulate the administrative process of the Broadcasting Department to

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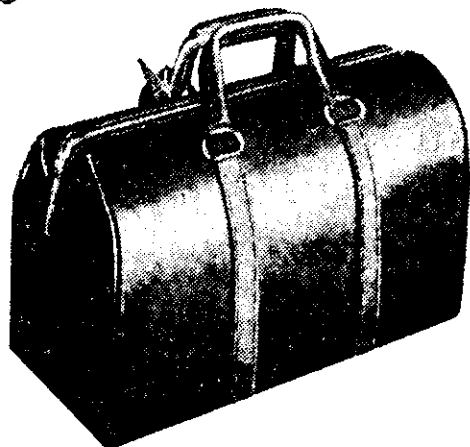
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