

TALKING FOR THE BBC . . .

ONLY the best is good enough for the BBC, and no effort is spared to obtain it. So one soon discovers when commissioned to broadcast a talk for that renowned institution. Behind the deceptively natural voice that eventually converses so persuasively by British firesides lies a great deal of skill and application. And by no means all of this is contributed by the speaker: as it finally reaches the listener, the BBC talk is a product of team-work.

From the very beginning, the whole project is handled much less informally, as I recollect my impressions and experience, than it is by the NZBS, which seven years ago, before I left New Zealand, seemed to me to be splendidly casual. Perhaps a new regime of sterner efficiency—not that one could possibly describe the BBC's efficiency as "stern"—has been instituted since then. However, I find it hard to imagine the NZBS, with its 26 stations for two million people, matching the methods of the BBC, with its immense resources, operating seven programmes for fifty million. This is not to deny, of course, that NZBS speakers frequently reach the highest levels of BBC quality. But an exiled New Zealander cannot help being impressed by the very considerable pains always taken by the BBC to ensure that the inferior is never broadcast, and wondering if the NZBS is doing as much along similar lines as it could and should.

Whenever I broadcast a talk in New Zealand, the procedure could hardly have been more simple. One submitted a talk to the Programme Organiser; one received it back, and was given a date and time. One arrived at the studio before the appointed hour. If one was new to the station, one read a trial page for the technician to check one's volume. One waited—with some quickening of the heart-beats—while the second hand of the studio clock swept round remorselessly. The red light came on; one spoke. The result, one hoped, was not too bad.

In Britain it is quite different. In the first place, one's "talking" ability is not taken on trust: unless, presumably, one is a celebrity, there must be an audition. Writing facility, one producer assured me, is no guarantee of ability to read a script acceptably—some writers can "talk," others cannot. Only that week he had been asked by his Regional office to make contact with a local writer and press her to be auditioned: the writer happened to be his wife, using a pen-name. He had been obliged to fail her utterly! Relations in the home, apparently, were not then back to normal.

Though a writer may have the ability to "talk," a skilled producer can usually help him "talk" better. Every BBC broadcast talk is "produced." First, the producer edits the script, perhaps reshaping a few paragraphs, sometimes re-writing a great deal of it. (One producer, amused at my concern over an alteration in an opening paragraph, told me he never troubled about the first few sentences: he was sure listeners were always too preoccupied with savouring the new voice to notice what one was saying. Since then I've always tried to write opening sentences that would rivet the attention of the most completely preoccupied listener—I imagine

the best technique would probably be to use a question of not more than six words! It's a challenge to one's ingenuity!) The author is, of course, asked for his approval of the alterations. As they usually express his thoughts better than he has been able to put them himself, though in his own sort of language—the whole process is very skilfully done—he normally grants it. The script being ready now for broadcasting, the date is fixed.

As yet, however, the producer's task has only begun. Before the talk may go on the air, it must be rehearsed. And the rehearsal, generally held an hour or so before the broadcast, is the producer's main *raison d'être*—the time when he really earns his salary. It is then the innocent speaker finds there is more to making a good broadcast than he had thought.

It is done very pleasantly, however, as well as most skilfully. In fact, the producer's function is to cajole the best he can from his performer, which includes putting him into a suitable state of mind. (The BBC have always paid great attention to creating the right atmosphere behind the microphone, though I was relieved to find that the evening dress that was compulsory in the early days of broadcasting—presumably to foster a sense of occasion—had gone out many years ago.) Nor, as far as the actual performance is concerned, does the producer's task consist merely of suggesting a different emphasis here, a slight alteration of expression there.

Some speakers "talk" better with their legs stretched out under the table; some are better with them tucked under their chair—it is his task to discover which is which. Some are much more effective standing than sitting. My own main preference is to take off my collar and tie: hence my profound relief about evening dress. Some must be calmed down, others evoked. Some, apparently, have to be positively restrained; as became common knowledge during the war, Sir Winston Churchill always made several false starts before the red light came on! (A producer told me Churchill always had his script typed in a way of his own—one phrase to a line, like blank verse: it took up a startling amount of paper.)

With some speakers, the BBC may go to particular trouble. There is one university don, for instance—an authority on the history of the English countryside—who is most stimulating as a lecturer, but dry as dust from a script. His producer therefore always invites a small picked audience to the studio and records his talk, as delivered from brief lecture notes. It is then "tightened up" by editing the recording. When a discussion among a group is presented, the speakers are often dined beforehand. The producer then has the task, executed with even a little more than usual of the superb tact that is his main stock-in-trade, of seeing that just the right amount of drink is partaken—enough to loosen up inhibited tongues, but not to loosen them too much.

If a talk is recorded, the producer's work may not be complete even when the recording has been made. One of many BBC employees with a highly unusual speciality is a woman I once met—in circumstances typifying the BBC's zeal for perfection—who does

by Desmond Crowley

nothing else but move needles from one point to another on discs while they are actually being played. I was making a contribution to a composite programme, a "literary magazine of the air," broadcast from Aberdeen: one of the contributors, a poet reading some of his own verse, had recorded his item. At one point in his recording, he had accidentally turned over two pages of his script instead of one, resulting in a pause of three or four seconds' duration. Although he had made a second recording because of this, he had not read as expressively the second time as in his first attempt: thus the producer wanted to use the first recording. Few listeners, I am sure, would have noticed the pause. But the BBC would not be satisfied with anything less than the best possible. This needle-lifting specialist had been brought up all the five hundred miles from London to move the needle deftly across the pause at the vital moment.

It was fascinating to watch her at her conjuring. Previously she had marked the two ends of the pause on the disc with two pin-points of white ink. As always on these occasions, she lit a cigarette as the disc began to play, then bent over it, poised her hands and, using both of them, lifted the needle from one point to the other in the merest fraction of a second when the moment came. Meanwhile no one in the studio seemed able to draw a breath.

Some months afterwards, the BBC recorded a conversation between a

Rugby commentator and myself concerning the All Blacks' tour. (This was helped out by a producer's trick: we conversed for a few minutes until we had become obviously fatuous, then stopped, went back to a suitable point on the record and reconsidered how we should proceed from there, then continued from that point on a fresh disc. We repeated this several times, and the resulting set of discs made up our "conversation"). This was due to be broadcast before the commentary on a notable match the following Saturday. On the day, however, bad weather caused the postponement of the match: thus the broadcast was also postponed, until several weeks later. In the meantime, however, one of my remarks became outdated.

As a result, I listened carefully for the particular passage when eventually the recording was presented. Had the producer noticed the error, I wondered; and what would he do about it? I need have had no fears: when the passage came, my remark was neatly taken out so as to leave no trace. Apparently the lady with the cigarette from London had crossed my path again.

There is a great deal to be said—a very great deal—for New Zealand's system of a large number of radio stations, many of them homely little stations closely linked with the life of a small local community. For all its high quality, the BBC is rather remote. (It would, of course, be impossible on Europe's crowded wavebands to operate a system of numerous local stations in Britain similar to the New Zealand system.) Nevertheless, one wonders if a little more attention to the broadcasting of talks as one of the literary arts would not be worth the expense of a few extra salaries for the contribution it would make to raising the standards of New Zealand life.

. . . and for the NZBS

DR. CROWLEY'S main concern is with the BBC; his references to broadcasting in New Zealand are few and brief. In noticing, however, that his recollections of NZBS methods are seven years old, we saw an opportunity—a welcome one—to bring the picture up to date, and at the same time to provide a fuller background for comparisons between BBC and NZBS standards. With this in mind, we asked the Supervisor of Talks, Mr. J. H. Hall, to tell us about the present situation.

"THERE have been changes in New Zealand broadcasting since Dr. Crowley left seven years ago," said Mr. Hall. "The YC programme is new. Special sessions on YA and YZ stations have been improved and greatly extended—notably those for women, for farmers, and for followers of sport—and very substantial technical advances have been made, both in equipment and in operators' skill. Stations from Invercargill and Greymouth to Auckland have been linked by programme line.

"Simultaneously, some progress has been made in improving scripts and ensuring that they are more easily and more naturally spoken—quite striking progress in some cases; but in general working through people is a much slower business than working through machines. Apart from the fixed handicaps that Dr. Crowley acknowledges

(the impossibility, for example, of maintaining from 2,000,000 people a flow of programme quality that will compare with the flow from 50,000,000), other factors make fair comparison difficult. For one thing, the BBC is much better served with buildings and studio facilities than the NZBS is. A BBC talks producer may be able to interview prospective speakers in a separate room undisturbed by telephone or typewriter or other worker; few NZBS talks officers enjoy such quietude. A BBC producer has studios available for rehearsal; his opposite number here usually has not.

"Moreover," Mr. Hall explained, "the talks staff would need to be three or four times its present size to allow each job to be given anything approaching the time and attention it can be given by the BBC. The proportion of staff to volume of product was lower in all the Dominion's broadcasting systems than in the BBC, and much lower in the smaller Dominions. A much larger output was required of the New Zealand talks officer than of his British counterpart, the BBC talks producer.

"Some of these physical obstacles," he went on, "are being overcome as new premises are remodelled. But it would be uneconomic, in New Zealand conditions, to expect to be allowed the time and money spent in preparing BBC programmes. The best of our technicians,

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N.Z. LISTENER, AUGUST 10, 1956.