

The AUNT DAISY story

A WICKED northerly gust whined across Wellington Harbour one morning and butted into Kelburn hill. It caught the tiny figure awaiting the cable-car off balance and slapped her against the wall. Aunt Daisy stood stunned for a moment, a great bruise swelling round her eye. But fellow passengers assisted her to the car; technicians at the studio made a reviving cup of tea; and, punctually at nine o'clock, she was telling her listeners that although there was a dangerous wind, a wind liable to knock small people about, it was nonetheless quite certainly a good morning.

For twenty-seven years—twenty-one of them for the NZBS—Aunt Daisy has brought her invincible optimism into the homes of commercial station listeners. Her half-hour morning session opens with what is perhaps the most hopeful, probably the best-known, and certainly the most cheerful Good Morning in the world. It is, she says, the most natural thing to say to people in the morning. For her, all mornings are good, though some are occasionally better than others.

To reinforce the effect, Aunt Daisy follows with a weather report that would buckle any forecaster's isobars. It is factually accurate for the weather above Courtenay Place, Wellington, at five minutes to nine on weekdays. It is emotionally right for a legion of discouraged housewives facing the breakfast dishes. It carries Aunt Daisy's own personal conviction that the day is good and will get better. Further outlook: Fine.

The breakfast blues disposed of, Aunt Daisy warms to her work. Winston Churchill is said to speak at a rate of 111 words a minute, Roosevelt spoke at 100, Lloyd George at 87, and George V at 79. Wynford Vaughan Thomas's descriptive commentary reaches listeners at 165 words a minute, but 130 is regarded as nearer the New Zealand ideal. Aunt Daisy knows no such rules. She speaks at a speed ranging from 202 words a minute at the beginning of her session down to 175 or so as she feels her way toward the end. It is her speed, and there is evidence to show that it is at least as good as any other.

After the morning comes the day, and after the weather report the Thought for the Day. Never quite the same one twice, but always positive, upward-looking, optimistic. "The soul that gives is the soul that lives," she may declare, "and in bearing another's load we lighten our own, and shorten the way and brighten the homeward road." Aunt Daisy belongs to the Bible Reading Fellowship, and its influence on her Thoughts is clear. There is a pause before she again takes up the relentless narrative.

AUNT DAISY has made a highly successful career of being absolutely nobody but her natural self. She assumes—often rightly—that whatever interests her will interest those to whom she talks. Her session therefore may continue with the information that men of the cruiser *Royalist* have requested

"The Listener" presents a serial biography. This first instalment describes—

A Victorian Childhood

recordings of her sessions to make them feel at home; with the recitation of a Dunkirk anniversary poem; with notice of a bazaar or collection for some good work; or, with an account of the achievement of a friend, often a public figure.

After this Aunt Daisy gets down to the hard, economic basis of her session and her livelihood—the plugs. Advertising a dozen or so products a day, she carries to the listener her own conviction that each is a highly desirable object. Useful or ornamental, tasty or simply hygienic, each is worth every penny of its price. There is none of what advertising men call "knocking copy." Nothing is held to be the best, but everything she recommends is among the best. It is simply good, very good, or excellent. Aunt Daisy sells by talking most of the time as if she were not advertising at all. She is the fellow-customer sharing the tips on her shopping list; never the professional "pushing" a product.

But every advertiser knows that Aunt Daisy's conviction carries weight. Even before her session ends people will walk into shops asking for products mentioned only a minute or two before. Half an hour after she finishes speaking a host of shoppers are converting her words into goods for themselves and hard cash for the makers. If the morning session opens to the tune of "Daisy Bell," it closes to a merry jingle for cash-register bells.

IN her time, Aunt Daisy has been given many titles. Canada knew her as The Mighty Atom. At home she has been called the First Lady of Advertising and First Lady of Radio. These honours have come to her relatively late in life. When young she was commonly admonished, "Daisy, don't talk so much! Daisy, don't get so excited!" In an age when children were to be seen and not heard, she made herself seen—in spite of her lack of inches—and extensively heard.

Exactly when these early attempts to stifle Aunt Daisy's childhood chatter were being made is difficult to discover.

She is a capable actress, and the inquirer after birthdays will be treated to a delightful imitation of a woman suffering from loss of memory. Some years ago she reduced the producers of *Portrait from Life*, a broadcast profile, to declaring that she was born a very long time ago. Her entry in the New Zealand *Who's Who* gives no date whatever up to 1930—the year she joined the Radio Broadcasting Company of New Zealand. However, as she puts it herself, "By reading this, people will know jolly well what the times were—when I talk about Gladstone and people like that."

Mention of Britain's famous Liberal Prime Minister is not out of place, for Aunt Daisy was born in London, the youngest of four children born to Robert Taylor, an architect, and his wife Elizabeth. Her father was already ailing with his last illness and did not attend the christening. But it was the period when the famous tenor Sims Reeves was singing "Come Into the Garden, Maud," and Elizabeth Taylor left for the church with instructions that her newest-born was to be named Maud. She obeyed. It was an age when women did. Nevertheless, when the water dried on her forehead, the baby was not simply Maud Taylor. She was Maud Ruby Taylor.

Perhaps because the decision was taken in haste; perhaps because Elizabeth was a changeable, volatile woman, even the name Ruby did not stay long in favour. Almost from the beginning Maud Ruby was called Daisy, and only

on the most formal occasions since has she been called anything else. This name, too, had its literary origins. A trilogy of popular books at the time were titled *Melbourne House*, *Daisy*, and *Daisy in the Field*. "They were more or less religious books," says Aunt Daisy, "but there was a lot of fun in them, too." The description, as well as the name, fits well the person Daisy was to become.

THE dominant figure of the world into which Daisy Taylor was born was the deeply mourning "widow of Windsor," Victoria, a Queen trying to rule according to the wishes of her dead husband. Later her reign was to burgeon into its full imperial glory, but at that time she was neither amused nor pleased. Gladstone was her chief Minister, and Gladstone she distrusted. Disraeli had been her favourite, but Disraeli, Earl of Beaconsfield, had been ousted from office and died a year later in 1881. The Queen yearned for times past, when the brilliant Jewish-born courtier had both pleased and amused; had made her emerge at times from her unpopular seclusion and enjoy the warmth of her people's affection. She was not alone in her yearning. One of the earliest songs Daisy Taylor learned at home was a political ditty:

We'll all wear the shamrock on St Patrick's Day,
We'll wear the rose and thistle when all England's gay,
But while old Mother Earth still a primrose flower can yield,
We'll wear it for the sake of dear old Beaconsfield.

But nostalgia apart, England was near the zenith of her power. The Bank of England, with some help from the British Navy, directed the affairs of nations; and the middle-classes, into which Daisy Taylor was ushered,

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TRAFFIC outside the
Gaiety Theatre in the
Strand, 1890.

