

# A Man of Many Parts



Spencer Digby photograph

THE voice of William Austin is one of New Zealand radio's most formidable and familiar assets. As an actor he has played an astonishing variety of parts, from Greek tragedy to feather-weight modern comedy. On several occasions he has appeared as narrator at National Orchestra concerts, and has turned up next day in a documentary feature for Broadcasts to Schools. Verse-speaking, short story reading, religious programmes—Bill Austin takes them all in his stride. Even in the role of disc-jockey he has found an opportunity to develop a personal and more individual style. For this he uses his warm, splendidly resonant voice to give the atmosphere of a casual fireside chat. Almost the only thing William Austin hasn't been (so far) is that ubiquitous character in radio today, the quiz-master.

When a man is so many things to so many people ("Jack-of-all-trades," to use Bill's description) it's only natural that his different audiences should have their own mental picture of the man himself. It's Bill Austin's special good fortune that, unlike some men who have built up a reputation as a radio personality, he doesn't fall short of his listeners' illusion.

To begin with, he looks like an actor: burly, broad-shouldered, with strong, distinctive features and an air of self-confidence that never oversteps the mark to mere self-importance. He's a stickler for detail, but in aiming for perfection he doesn't maintain a standard so impossibly high that he can't be content with anything but the best. He admits that at one stage of his life he was impatient and dissatisfied with a result that didn't come up to expectations, but gradually he realised that a flawless performance might seem too mechanical and lacking in depth. On the other hand, he reacts violently to any suggestion that "near enough is good enough," that philosophy of the second-rate and the happy-go-lucky.

Born in Greymouth and educated in Wellington, Bill drifted into radio acting during his pre-war days as a law student. Before the Production Studios came into being as a special department of Broadcasting, it was the practice for drama groups to be given an assignment to "do" a radio play. These were rehearsed and then broadcast "live" from studios in Waring Taylor Street. Bill still remembers his first line in his first play. It was a show called *Off Finisterre*, and his part consisted of four words: "I don't play quoits." Even in those days he was anxious to make the most of his character, and he spent hours deciding what would be the proper inflection to give this profound statement and on which of the four words the emphasis should be laid. The memory remains but the actual way in which the line was eventually spoken has been lost.

Then came the period of re-organisation when Bernard Beeby was appointed Productions Supervisor. Bill's name went into the list of actors "on

call," and he appeared in one of the first plays ever recorded at Waring Taylor Street. This was *Loyalties*, by Galsworthy, and William Austin was duly featured in the role of Captain Dancy, the villain of the piece. Recording was still a novelty and its attendant dangers had not been fully realised. The cutting needle removed a black thread from the surface of the disc, and this was discarded in the nearest wastepaper basket. Not all of the cast were aware that it was highly inflammable, and Bill can remember nonchalantly tossing a cigarette butt into a handy WPB—with spectacular effect! Aunt Molly, who was broadcasting her Children's Hour from a studio next door, was heard to exclaim with a sort of awed and breathless delight at an event of such moment happening on her doorstep: "And what do you think, children? One of our big uncles is just setting fire to the studio!"

Two months after the outbreak of war Bill joined the Air Force and left New Zealand in May, 1940, as an acting Pilot Officer. For the next six years he was attached to Bomber Command, first in England and later in the Mediterranean, the Middle East, India and North Africa. For this last posting he was stationed in Algiers, with a tour of duty that ranged from Casablanca to Tunis, Corsica and Sardinia, Malta, Sicily and Italy. But although he was by now a Squadron Leader and Navigating Officer (gonged, too, with the D.F.C.) the part of his life Bill likes to recall at this time is his contact with various theatrical groups on tour with ENSA.

He met the original London cast of *Quiet Weekend*, and saw Vivien Leigh in a concert party with Leslie Henson and Hermione Baddeley. If you wonder what on earth Vivien Leigh could do in such surprising company Bill will describe for you how effective she was in a recitation of "You Are Old, Father William," and "I'm Not as Scarlett as Scarlett O'Hara." Another of Bill's memories of this period is his glimpse ("goggle-eyed like a school kid") of Marlene Dietrich and Jean Gabin chatting in the sun on the terrace of the Majestic Hotel. Apart from the Casbah and the exotic atmosphere, Algiers was much like Bill's home town of Wellington; at least there was a certain similarity in the way the houses sprawled over the hills around the harbour.

It was 1947 before Bill saw Wellington again, when he was repatriated with the last batch of R.N.Z.A.F. personnel. By then the practice of law was less insistent than the call of Productions, and in August, 1947, Bill became a staff member of the NZBS. This was the beginning of his protean existence as a producer, compère, narrator, actor, verse-speaker and "Jack-of-all-trades" in radio drama. For three years he was in charge of the Auckland production studios, but since 1952 he has worked with Bernard Beeby at his old stamping-ground in Wellington.

In the winter of 1955 Bill launched his career as a disc-jockey. From the start, *Won't You Come In?* was intended to be a programme for middle-

browsing. Bill found himself back in the navigator's chair, this time charting a course between the deep waters of serious music and the shallow breakers of jazz and Tin Pan Alley. The post-war boom in highly-polished LP recordings, window-dressed to catch the eye and tuned to catch the most discriminating ear, took away a lot of the old pleasure in just "listening to the wireless." It was Bill's idea to get away from the bustle of this new urge to excite in music and take down a few records from the dusty shelves of a quiet corner of the library. With a friendly word and a reminder of the past he has developed a Monday night half-hour that brings back the voices of Peter Dawson, Tarry Tate, Clara Butt and Florrie Ford, and presents them alongside a selection of today's lesser heard recordings.

1956 was an important year in Bill's life, too. In February of that year he married Valerie Spencer Smith, a graduate of the London Academy of Music and Dramatic Art (she did both stage and film work in England), and a radio personality in her own right on the Commercial Division Women's Hour. For months before the wedding Bill and Valerie gave all their spare time to painting and decorating a house at Pukerua Bay, about twenty miles north of Wellington. This was when Valerie discovered (the hard way) that Bill had a passion for detail. One day he left her with careful directions about putting-up all nail holes before applying a coat of paint. Valerie worked away all afternoon, and by the time Bill was due back she had finished what looked to her like a perfect job. Bill walked in, gave the wall a long hard stare, nodded approvingly, and said, "It would have been dead right if you hadn't missed a nail hole over there"—and he pointed to where a minute puncture was scarcely visible in an obscure corner of the room.

This desire for perfection, though it has mellowed through the years, is still the most outstanding feature of William Austin's work as a radio performer. As a young man he tried his hand at a number of things—learning to play the piano, singing, and even a persevering attempt to master the grand organ. To all of them he gave the same concentration and the same high standards he now brings to a new part or a new play. When he first heard his voice recorded he enjoyed the novelty, like everyone else who has to go through this alarming moment of self-revelation. At the same time he was acutely conscious of the faults and imperfections he could hear. Hard work and constant attention—listening, correcting, listening again—have taught Bill to be critical of himself and other people. This makes him a hard taskmaster, but one for whom it is immensely satisfying to work. Actors who did not realise they had it in them have given outstanding performances under Bill's direction, but though he may approve of the result he never makes the mistake of thinking "That's as good as it will ever be." It can always be better.

As Bill says of his own work, "Once you begin to relax and become self-satisfied—once you let yourself get away with something you know is not the very best you can do—you might as well give up. The rot's set in. You've had it."

—P.M.H.

(Next Week: Selwyn Toogood)

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