

## BROADCASTING IN QUEENSLAND

[By CHARLES PORTER]

(Read before the Society on 24 August, 1961.)

In these push-button days when we automatically accept both Broadcasting and Television as essential parts in the complex of normal existence, it is most difficult to recall those quiet days before radio and living-room pictures came along to bedevil our existence and inhibit both reflection and conversation.

It seems an age away. Yet in real terms this silent era was not so long ago that many of us unconfined to wheel-chairs or relegated to homes for the aged, cannot vividly recall it.

For my own part, I can recall much of it with a rather startling clarity. I say startling, because such memories seem to date one even more than the clothes worn in old snap-shots. If an armour-plated curiosity from the Age of Saurians suddenly appeared on the modern scene, he would feel understandably a little out of time and out of place. But I could sympathise with him, knowing how he would feel.

Indeed, as one interested in radio from its very earliest stages, and who then was actively involved in its early tentatively organised development, I sometimes feel that I must be well out of my own time cycle.

Radio in Queensland is forty years old this year.

That is not so very long, as time goes, but when miracle presses upon miracle with each successive crowded technological year, then memory quickly becomes blunted and fore-shortened, and time seems to stretch and stretch. But a little reflection makes it well-nigh incredible that so much can have happened in comparatively so short a space of time. The fantastic manner in which Broadcasting has metamorphosed from exciting wonder to cherished family friend, then to mere background noise, and finally to humble hand-maiden to Television, the glamorous younger sister of the air waves, is a salutary commentary on this scientific age of ours and the transitory reverence accorded to modern miracles.

### The Beginnings

Queensland's first organised broadcasting began in 1921, when Mr. Tom Elliott and Dr. Val McDowall



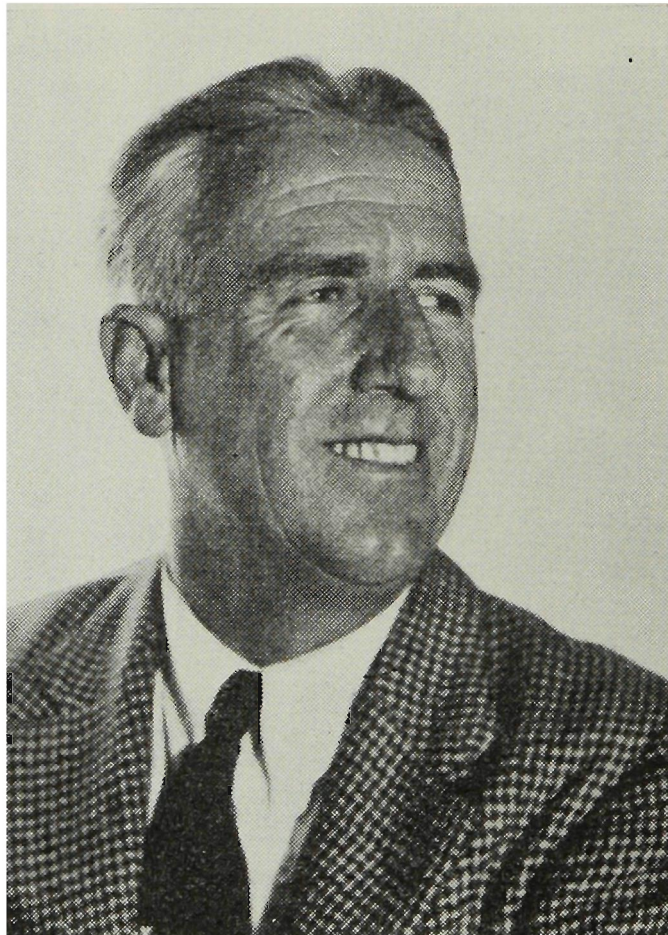
DR. VAL McDOWALL, a pioneer who worked in conjunction with Mr. Thomas M. B. Elliott in early day radio and television experiments at Observatory Tower, Wickham Terrace, Brisbane.

established Station 4CM in Preston House, and transmitted programmes of recorded music to a few enthusiastic listeners. No problems with Australian Performing Rights Association, or Actors' Equity, in those days: it was just a matter of collecting a few records and playing them. A highlight of 4CM programmes was a "live" broadcast from the stage of His Majesty's Theatre — a superb achievement for an amateur station of that time.<sup>(1)</sup>

Although 4QG came into existence in 1924, it is odd to reflect from the vantage point of hind-sight that no commercial station appeared until quite late

(1) In 1935, Dr. Val McDowall and Mr. T. Elliott from the old Observatory Tower on Wickham Terrace, capped a long period of studio experimental work in television by broadcasting some pictures which were received at Ipswich, 25 miles away from Brisbane. The TV experiments were carried out in conjunction with the Royal Society, of which body Dr. McDowall and Mr. Elliott were members. Portions of the radio and television equipment used by 4CM can be seen in the Historical Museum at Newstead House.

in the 'twenties. Indeed, the experimenters responsible for the pioneer 4CM tried to interest Brisbane's business men in their licence, but all to no avail. No one, as yet, could see any commercial future in the new toy.

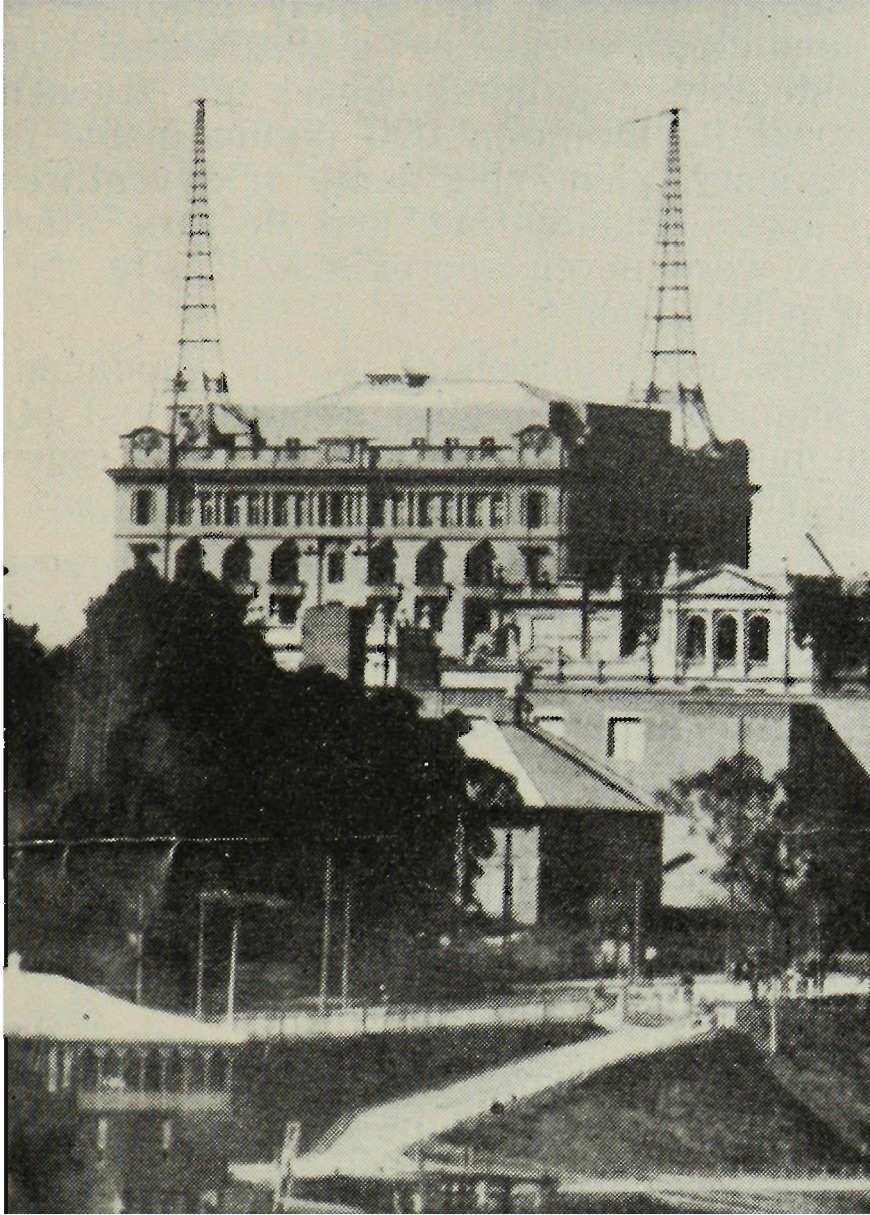


MR. THOMAS M. B. ELLIOTT.  
A photograph taken in 1940.

This was still the era of the cat's whisker crystal set, or the one and two valve with separate loud-speaker. Listening then was a participating, not merely a spectator, sport. With a crystal set, one sat with head-phones clamped against the ears, endeavouring in an agony of anxiety delicately to waggle a piece of wire on to a more sensitive "spot" on the crystal, and hence improve reception. The remainder of the household sat hushed and wondering whilst the struggle went on. Yes, a listener in those days really had to contribute something to the game.

### **Establishment of Station 4QG**

Broadcasting received the accolade of official recognition when the Queensland Government of the day decided to set up a radio station. For this purpose,



The wireless masts of Station 4QG. The Studios of which were opened in April 1926 in the State Insurance Building.

Mr. J. W. Robinson,<sup>(2)</sup> then Assistant Manager of Sydney's 2FC, was brought to Brisbane, and with Chief Engineer F. W. Stephens, established 4QG with studios and transmitter in the Executive Building, officially taking to the air on 29 July, 1925.

Organised broadcasting had commenced.

There was intense excitement with and interest in the new medium, and very rapidly personalities were established. Newspapers devoted substantial space to serving the natural curiosity in the new

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(2) J. W. Robinson was a Sydney journalist who took up radio as a hobby and studied through the Marconi School of Wireless during intervals in his newspaper assignments. The Queensland Government gave him almost a free hand to design Station 4QG, supervise its construction, train its staff, and organise its services, in all of which he showed enterprise and initiative in a job for which at that time there were little precedent and method to guide him.—Ed.

entertainment medium, and slowly the new station, by trial and error, worked out a programme format to fill its steadily expanding hours of transmission. Almost from its inception 4QG became noted for two things: a lusty, pioneering sense of adventure in its "on the spot" broadcasting, and Bedtime Story Sessions that were never approximated later, in either radio or in television.

The first radio personalities—the Sandman, Uncle Ben, Uncle Bob, Little Miss Brisbane and others—were not just disembodied voices to those eager early listeners: they were real and vital people, part of the



"LITTLE MISS BRISBANE," BROADCASTING FROM 4QG.

household if not, indeed, part of the intimate family circle. Everything was done with a gusto and a sense of real enjoyment that was communicated to listeners.

The same rule applied with Manager Robinson—affectionately known as Robbie—and Engineer Stephens. The Reiss-type carbon microphone went everywhere, down into mines, under the waters of Moreton Bay, deep into a caisson of Grey Street (now William Jolly) Bridge while it was building, and into the highways and byways in general. One of the notable "firsts" of Queensland broadcasting was Mr. Stephens' participation in the search for the lost

Kookaburra plane, which had vanished whilst making a search for Kingsford Smith's Southern Cross.<sup>(3)</sup> Fitted with two-way radio, Atlanta was the first plane in Australia to be in radio communication with the ground, and from this innovation Station 4QG was able to give the dramatic news of the search to Australia and to the world.

After three years in the Executive Building the pioneer 4QG moved into sumptuous premises — for those times — in the then State Insurance Building at the corner of Elizabeth and George Streets, and for many years the twin steel-latticed towers reaching up one hundred feet from the roof were the city's most notable land-mark. For over a decade 4QG operated here, and it was in these studios that national broadcasting slowly moved from the pioneering into the prestige phase of its being.

### Commercial Broadcasting

Oddly enough, commercial broadcasting did not commence in Brisbane but in Toowoomba, where the late Mr. Ted Gold established 4GR in 1928. Sir John Chandler — then widely known in the electrical goods trade as J.B. — commenced 4BC in Brisbane early in 1930, when Mr. Russell F. Roberts became Station Manager and continued in radio long enough to be one of its outstanding personalities. Station 4BK commenced in King and King's establishment a year later, and in January of 1932 Station 4BH opened from studios on the first floor of Grice's, another music firm in Queen Street.

These were the years of the depression, and as vaudeville in Australia found itself tottering under the blows of the slump, so radio lustily forged ahead, and many of the personalities from the legitimate stage and vaudeville found a welcome haven — if only a temporary one — in the new industry.

The difficult years of the early thirties were

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(3) In March 1929, Kingsford Smith, in the **Southern Cross**, and accompanied by C. T. P. Ulm and two others, took off from Sydney to fly west to England. After crossing the Overland Telegraph Line, in Central Australia, the aeroplane encountered a storm, and, running out of fuel, was forced down on the flats on the Glenelg River estuary, Western Australia. The flyers were found 13 days later, after an aerial search had been made, during which Kingsford Smith's friends, Keith Anderson and H. S. Hitchcock were forced down and perished. An official inquiry was held into the circumstances of the forcing down of the **Southern Cross**, for it was widely rumored that the incident had been staged as a means of attracting publicity. The inquiring committee found, however, that there had been no premeditation, and the flyers were exonerated.—Ed.

taken by the commercial stations if not in their stride at least in forward if faltering steps. J. B. Chandler came to the economic rescue of 4BH in 1933, and commenced acquiring interests in a chain of country commercial stations as licences were made available. From a total of 6,000 listeners in 1926, the end of the twenties saw some 30,000 licences in force, and with each



The late SIR JOHN CHANDLER, one of the pioneers of Commercial Broadcasting in Brisbane.

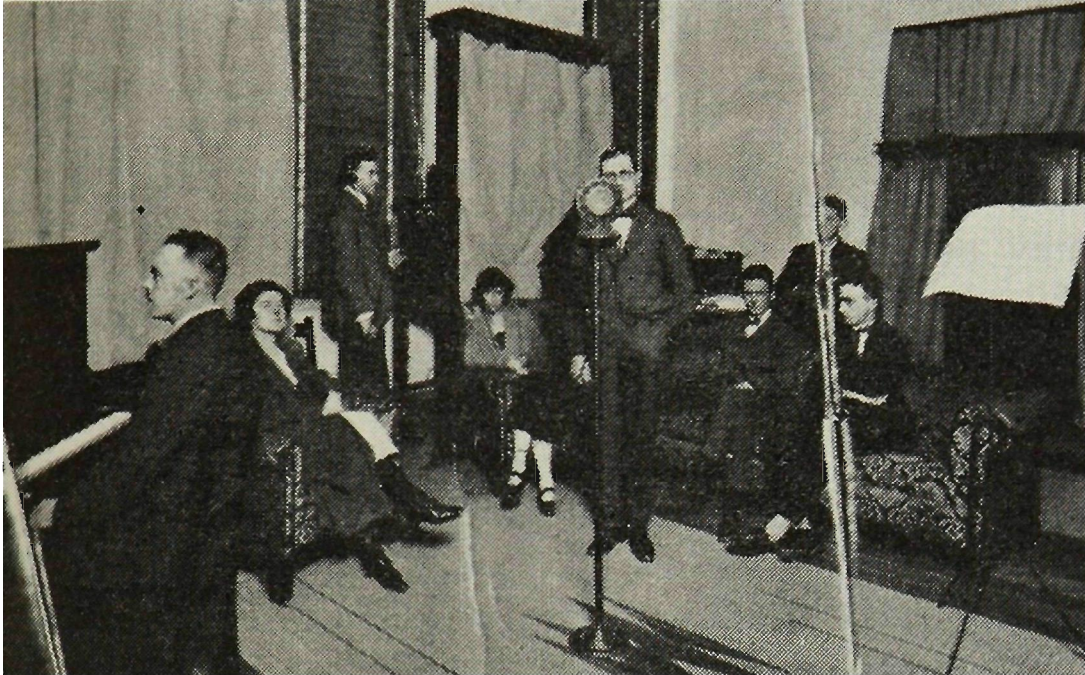
successive year the total grew and grew. Rapidly the various stations increased their technical facilities and stepped up their transmission output, whilst at the same time radio sets improved in capacity and selectivity.

### **The Golden Years**

The thirties were the golden years of Broadcasting in Queensland.

Already there were a host of well-beloved personalities: announcers Norman Cooling, Val Woodlands and Harry Humphreys of 4QG, and Bob Wight who did the first market reports; George Randall with Bebe Scott, and Ion Maxwell with June Carter, competed with their companies for 4QG's drama engage-

ments. There were Sunrise Sam of the 4BC Breakfast Session and John Christopher of the 4BH early morning session; the women announcers included Ruth Rutherford, Sally, Rita Humfress; Walter Pym and Ivy Ray had come to radio from the Nellie Bramley



BROADCASTING FROM RADIO STATION 4QG IN THE EXECUTIVE BUILDING IN BRISBANE.

*L. to R.*—Mr. Coy, A.W.A. Sales Representative in Brisbane. Miss M. E. McFarlane (now Mrs. R. H. Miller), Director's Secretary and Little Miss Brisbane. Mr. F. W. Stevens (Chief Engineer). Miss M. Warham (Premier's Dept.) Mr. J. W. Robinson (Director of Qld. Radio Service). Mr. Neuman (Installing Engineer A.W.A.) Mr. C. D. Moran (Cadet Operator and Engineer). Mr. L. L. Sheil (Accountant).

players; Frank Gorman became "Kanga" for radio after doing the vaudeville circuit as the Singing Parson; and there was Fred Monument and a host of others.

Mr. Tom McGregor, Mr. Terry Lambart and Mr. George Hardman are three of those vivid personalities of radio's early years who have stayed with the medium up to the present day.

In this era of mass-production and standardisation, it is difficult to evoke that sense of novelty, participation and exuberance that characterised so much of broadcasting in the late twenties and early thirties. There was nothing stereotyped for the simple reason that almost everything was novel, practically every trail had to be freshly blazed. Anything that promised to be interesting, or entertaining, or stimulating could be considered for programming. There were no Rating Surveys, with all their pretentious nonsense of statistics, to place an austere brake on the innovators; and



no experts solemnly diagnosing with ponderous idiocy what were the ingredients of a good programme or a bad one. Most of us in radio in those days worked by a simple rule of thumb: If I like it, then it's a fair bet at least a few other people will like it too — anyhow, we'll give it a go!

And give it a go, we did.

### Vitality in Programmes

The result was an immediacy and a vitality which made broadcasting programmes alive. Many of them may not have been profound, but very few of them were tedious. Many of the personalities may not have been admirable, but were neither pompous nor inane. The art of copy-writing was still merely budding so that commercial announcers perforce improvised from crudely scrawled notes often pushed into their hand just before they went on the air. The result was a rich and earthy originality allied to considerable ingenuity. Things were apt to go wrong at any moment, and the



THE AUSTRALIAN BROADCASTING COMMISSION TELLS THE STORY OF THE 1934 TEST MATCHES.

Sitting (*left to right*)—Sir Charles Moses (now General Manager of A.B.C.); E. L. a'Beckett (international cricketer); Mel Morris (deceased), then sporting supervisor for A.B.C. in Victoria; B. F. Kerr (now Federal Sporting Supervisor); James Hall (now Federal Supervisor, Production Facilities (TV) with A.B.C.)

Standing—A scorer—name unknown; M. A. Noble (famous Australian Test Captain); J. Duffey (runner); Dion Wheeler (A.B.C. announcer); R. H. Campbell (noted Australian cricket historian); Clem Hill (another famous Test Cricket Captain); C. E. Pellew (known as "Nip" Pellew), fine S.A. and Australian cricketer; P. C. Harrison.

announcer had to keep his wits about him and gloss over the dilemmas that arose almost hourly.

Since no union wanted to claim us, and we had no precedents to guide us, those of us working in Broadcasting did indeed work for our living. Starting as a part-time performer with Cap and Bebe in 4QG children's sessions in 1929 and moving to similar work with 4BC in 1930, I somehow found myself a professional radio announcer with 4BH in 1931. As with so many others in the game, my hours were long: a breakfast session that called for 5 a.m. rising, and most days concluding with an evening shift that went to either 9 or 10.30. All announcers had a children's session for which material had to be prepared, and for a couple of years I wrote a weekly half-hour thriller whilst conducting that breakfast session. All I can say is, you had to be young, and enthusiastic.

You even had to steel yourself to conduct community singing—this was in the days when Jim Gerald was in his hey-day at the old Theatre Royal. Indeed, after a few years in commercial Broadcasting, the average announcer could call himself the complete radio Dog's-body: I can recollect being stock announcer, compere, commentator (once for an Australian Rules game that I had never seen before in my life and of which I knew absolutely nothing), playwright, producer, actor, women's session announcer, children's uncle, news analyst, advertising space salesman and programme manager. Where and when necessary, you brought in relatives, friends and friends of friends to assist you: nobody auditioned them to assess whether or no they should be allowed to go on the air.

### **The Changing Pattern**

Emerging to proper status through the turbulent thirties, Broadcasting gradually became bigger and more important; its profitability was more assured, and so the manner and purpose of the industry insensibly and inevitably altered. National Radio, which had taken over early in the thirties from the old corporation controlling 4QG, took itself very seriously indeed and recognised that it had functions going beyond the provision of mere entertainment. The policy of furnishing programmes that did not necessarily give people what they liked, but aimed at habiting them to what they should like, rapidly altered non-commercial radio. The programmes gained in cultural



MR. THOMAS M. B. ELLIOTT operating TV monitor receiver at Observatory (Wickham Terrace) TV Transmitter in 1938.

terms but in the process of change lost something of the vitality that had made early Broadcasting so immediate and so personal.

Commercial radio performance became more efficient and more business-like. The opportunities for improvisation gradually reduced, and with their shrinking went most of the flamboyant personalities who had lustily used the freedoms of Broadcasting in its uninhibited years to loom larger than life-size through tens of thousands of receivers. The atmosphere of intimate family fun gradually yielded to something more contrived, much slicker and very impersonal, and by the end of the decade the pattern of Broadcasting as we know it to-day was firmly shaped.

To-day Broadcasting can reach into some 330,000 homes in Queensland and prior to Television's advent was heard daily by upwards of a million people. Commercial radio, subsisting solely on its advertising revenues, operates four stations in Brisbane and in sixteen provincial cities and towns. The A.B.C. has two metropolitan transmitters and ten Regional sta-

tions, and operates two short-wave transmitters. From the humble beginnings of forty years ago when a small amateur station in Preston House catered for a few enthusiasts, to twenty commercial and fourteen national stations catering for the entire State, is indeed a far cry.

Broadcasting can well claim that in 1961, it has come of age.