

The Radio Years: a History of Broadcasting in New Zealand, Volume 1. By Patrick Day. Auckland University Press in association with the Broadcasting History Trust, Auckland, 1994. 352 pp. NZ price: \$54.95. ISBN 1-86940-094-1.

NEW ZEALAND HISTORIANS have picked over some bones pretty completely. The Land of the Long Pink Cloud has been done to death, of course. Various topics to do with women's and Maori experience now seem set to give that old nag a good run. And then there is broadcasting, set at the intersection between high culture, popular culture and politics. Many books — of varying quality — have told us how radio started and developed in this country. So do we need *another* history of New Zealand broadcasting? Laying down the first part of Pat Day's two-volume work the answer seems to be yes, but with some qualifications.

This is the second book to be commissioned by that estimable body the Broadcasting History Trust (may its shadow never diminish!). As the sub-title suggests, the second volume (entitled *Television Years*, no doubt) will follow more or less trippingly from Auckland University Press. Day has been fortunate in his publisher. This book is beautifully produced, with no typographical errors speaking to careful editing, with good paper, with a solid binding and an uncluttered text. Many illustrations leaven Day's words, though one needs a good lens to appreciate the point of many reprinted cartoons.

So what of the words between these illustrations? For those familiar with earlier broadcasting histories, *Radio Years* is curiously conventional. The argument is strongly narrative, ordered chronologically around constitutional envelopes for New Zealand radio. Pioneering days give way to the Radio Broadcasting Company in the 1920s, then to the New Zealand Broadcasting Board in the early 1930s and to the National Broadcasting Service and the National Commercial Broadcasting Service — that extraordinary administrative cock-up — under the first Labour government. These two bodies merge in 1943 to form the New Zealand Broadcasting Service; still rumbling on in 1960, when we stop. Different parts of this story pass us at different speeds. We reach 1930 somewhere around page 80; 1940, 160 pages later. The next 20 years whistle past in 65 pages, with the 1950s occupying no more than fourteen. Very clearly, in common with everybody else, Day takes the 1930s to be the key decade in radio broadcasting.

The argument may be conventional, but the documentation is not. Day's long text allows him freedom to explore detail. To find this detail he mined parliamentary, company and departmental records, together with a range of archived personal papers. His bibliography is surprisingly short — thesis literature is entirely absent, for instance — but primary evidence fills that space. This evidence clarifies important detail. We learn much more about technical development than we knew before. Political deals behind founding the Radio Broadcasting Company, behind jamming Colin Scrimgeour's IZB broadcast in the run-up to the 1935 general election, behind Scrim's sacking eight years later, emerge in all their grubby facticity. Students and scholars following his tracks will find this detail very useful: certainly I learnt much about things which I thought I knew.

That said, this is not a book which will entice the general reader. *Radio Years* is no *Radio Days*, and Pat Day is no Woody Allen. The point is more than a mere pun. Given how many others have trodden this path before him, in however scanty a fashion, it would have been welcome to have a study that cut into this history from a new direction. This was not to be. The introduction promises a study of the relationship between the growth of broadcasting and 'the changing nature of the society that adopted the medium'. We hear much of the former but surprisingly little of the latter, particularly when the author earns his honest crust as a sociologist. To a large extent this remains broadcasting history from

the inside, concerned with transmitting equipment; with policy decisions about the proper (or the most expedient) relation between politicians, administrators and private companies; about balancing national, regional and local control; about the viability of a dual mandate to inform while entertaining. Even when discussing these matters, the book's strong narrative cast thrusts analysis to the margin.

That does not mean that there is no analysis, of course. Rather, judgements slide in among the detail. Once again, the judgements are conventional. It is not altogether easy to appreciate as the detail unrolls inexorably, but the climax of Day's argument is the long battle between Colin Scrimgeour, director of the National Commercial Broadcasting Service, and the director of the National Broadcasting Service, James Shelley. Resting on Long Pink Cloud historiography and an attachment to popular culture, our author's heart is with the doomed Scrim. No problem with that, except that Shelley then is constructed as the antithesis of Scrim. Scrim is a simple populist so Shelley becomes 'Reithian', code for a simple elitist. Scrim is on the left, so Shelley must be some kind of Tory. This is a travesty of the truth about that extraordinary, complicated, contradictory man; but it points to a more significant matter. As a glance at the pages of *Tomorrow* would have told him, cultural politics in the 1930s (and, of course, in other decades also) were much more subtle and complicated than Day's account suggests. A leftist political project could seek to appropriate high culture and turn it to 'the people's' use, as the history of the WEA demonstrates. Day's conflation between leftist politics and popular culture needs a justification that it does not get.

Analysing these matters — and there are others equally meriting our attention — needs sharper tools than those employed here. Perhaps we will find them used as Day strides onwards and upwards toward the television years. Perhaps that will not happen, and other scholars will have to tell us what the history of New Zealand radio means; but even they will be forced to build their explanations from bricks manufactured in this magisterial summary of the evidence.

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Wire and Wireless: A History of Telecommunications in New Zealand, 1860-1987. By A.C. Wilson. Dunmore Press, Palmerston North, 1994, 236 pp. NZ price: \$39.95, ISBN 0-86469-210-2.

THE FOCUS of this work is at once narrower and wider than its title suggests. It does not cover the whole field of telecommunications, referring only briefly to the development of radio and television broadcasting. Nor does it say much about the systems of communication operated by government departments other than the Post Office, including railways, marine, defence and civil aviation, or the numerous private telephone systems that operated for a time. Conversely, about a third of *Wire and Wireless* goes back well beyond its declared starting point of 1890 to deal with the beginnings of telegraphy and telephony in New Zealand. This is fortunate, as 1890 does not constitute a logical break in the story, and a survey of the forces promoting and delaying the early spread of these technologies is welcome.

Wilson presents the development of telecommunications in New Zealand as the