

Sean Street, Historical Dictionary of British Radio.

In 2006, Sean Street published his 'Historical Dictionary of British Radio'. Almost a decade on, the revised and expanded second edition has now been published, which not only includes scores of new entries but reflects on a changed radio landscape. As he did in the original Dictionary, Street approaches British radio from a number of viewpoints, beginning with a brief chronology of significant events followed by a rich historical introduction and overview. As one might expect from Street, although the BBC features heavily, the Dictionary is decidedly not confined to the Corporation and includes commercial radio, dating back to the 1930s, as well as significant programmes, key legislation, major players, and technical advances. One of the most remarkable qualities of British radio, as Street points out, is its endurance. Despite continuous change and innovation it has always managed to reinvent itself. Most recently this has seen a move away from 'radio' as an object, to 'radio' as content, with the new term 'audio' often used. The focus is now on new platforms and formats that include mobile devices, listen-again, podcasts, downloads, Spotify and the radio player.

Some developments in British radio already seem so well established that it is hard to believe they post-date the original Dictionary. Global Radio, for instance. According to the new entry, it was founded in 2007 and almost immediately, through the purchase of Chrysalis, took control of some of the UK's best known radio brands, Heart, Galaxy and LBC (all of which have separate entries). The following year, GCAP Media was added, with Classic FM, Xfm and Gold now part of the mix. The original heritage local radio stations were subsequently rebranded and incorporated into the burgeoning Heart Network. With the acquisition of the Guardian Media Group in 2012, Global was subject to a regulatory review and following a Competition Commission ruling was required to sell seven stations. It remains, however, by far the largest commercial radio company in Britain owning a staggering 40 per cent of the market with a total weekly audience that nears 20 million listeners.

Other new additions are the BBC Trust, which replaced the Board of Governors in January 2007, and Russell Brand. It was a notorious edition of *The Russell Brand Show* on BBC Radio Two in October 2008 that prompted the suspension of both Brand and Jonathan Ross and which led to the Corporation being fined £150,000. The broadcasting of prank calls to the answerphone of the actor Andrew Sachs, which included crude references to his granddaughter, prompted thousands of complaints. As Street indicates, Brand had already been sacked from Xfm for reading pornographic material on air and had first been employed by the BBC on the less mainstream network, BBC 6 Music. Lesley Douglas, the Controller of Radio Two, who resigned as a result of the debacle, has her own entry in the Dictionary as does Andrew Sachs. Before the 'Ross Brand' affair, he was best known for his acclaimed 30 minute play-without-words, *The Revenge*, which was aired in 1978. Written and performed by Sachs, it is renowned as an early experiment in binaural sound and has been repeated many times. Another innovation in sound which makes an entry in the revised edition is Oramics, developed by Daphne Oram between 1957 and 1962. Oram, who had joined the BBC in 1942 as a studio engineer, was a composer who specialized in electronics and she was one of the founders of the BBC Radiophonic Workshop in 1958. However, she became frustrated by a lack of interest in the genre of electronic composition and resigned in 1959 to focus on developing her own Oramics studio in Kent. The Oramics machine she invented was a large rectangular frame traversed by synchronized strips of film on which drawn shapes could be converted into music and sound.

As will be apparent, the Dictionary is an eclectic mix. The first five entries are typical: Jenny Abramsky; Absolute Radio (a new addition); *Ack-Ack Beer-Beer*, Joe Ackerley and Douglas Adams. So, in just two pages, Street takes you from one of the most important players in the development of BBC radio news, through a success story of commercial radio, onto a Second World War variety show, then to a stalwart of the radio journal *The Listener* and finally commemorates the creator of

*The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. There are hundreds of such entries, which are extensively cross-referenced, and which build up a vivid picture of almost 100 years of British radio. Street also ends with a biographical section that encapsulates historical reference works, cultural and theoretical books, radio texts and websites.

As with any Dictionary of this kind, it is bound to be subjective, and where I do have to take Street to task is over the inclusion of women. There is an interesting spread of individual entries from Doris Arnold, the first female DJ in 1938; to Nesta Pain who won the 1957 Prix Italia for *The Dock Brief*; to Bridget Plowden, chairman of the Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA) in 1975; to Maria Williams, the founder of Sound Women in 2011. However, it feels odd to include 'women' as a discrete entry especially as they have been such an important force in radio generally. Rather, it would be more comfortable to incorporate them within the relevant entries themselves. So, for example, Hilda Matheson, the BBC's first Director of Talks in 1927 (who professionalised the genre), could be credited within the entry on 'Talks'. Similarly, if there were an entry on 'School Broadcasting', which played a huge role in British life for eighty years, it could embrace Mary Somerville, its pioneer. The omission of School Radio, as it now is called, is puzzling. It is an interesting beast. Although no longer available as an analogue service, it continues as a BBC online resource, signalling the way in which the medium has adapted to meet the educational requirements of today.

The book has a strong sense of looking to the future as well as reflecting on the past. Sean Street has provided much food for thought and leaves no doubt as to the great wealth of cultural and technical innovations that have taken place. As he makes clear, as British radio nears its centenary, there are immense challenges to be faced. 'The journey of British radio continues' are the closing words of his Introduction. And who could disagree?

(1065 words)