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RADIO BROADCASTING  
IN PALMERSTON NORTH 1924 - 1937

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A research exercise presented in partial  
fulfilment of the requirements for the degree  
of Bachelor of Arts with Honours in History  
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ABBREVIATIONS

AJHR Appendices to the Journals of the House of Representatives  
MDT Manawatu Daily Times  
NZH New Zealand Herald  
NZPD New Zealand Parliamentary Debates  
NZR New Zealand Radio

## INTRODUCTION

The 1920s and 1930s were a period when many new developments were taking place in the field of leisure and entertainment, like the rise of the motor car and the emergence of the 'talking picture'. The introduction of radio broadcasting was, perhaps, one of the most important of these developments. New Zealanders took up the new medium with eagerness and from the plaything of a few enthusiastic amateurs, it developed into an integral part of community life. In 1924, for example, there were 2,830 radio licenses issued yet by 1934 there were 118,086 licenses current and by 1936 the total had risen to 192,265.<sup>1</sup> This increased interest in radio reflected, to a considerable extent, improvements in the quality, coverage and organization of the Dominion's national radio stations. I would suggest, however, that the B class stations, small stations privately operated by groups of amateurs and radio dealers, played a vital role in introducing the new medium of radio to the community, a role which will be elucidated in the following pages.

This paper relates the experience of two such B stations which operated in Palmerston North from 1924 to September 1937. Study of their origins, their activities and their role in the community is particularly rewarding since the two provide definite contrasts and represent two very different examples of B class broadcasting. Station 2ZF, operated by the Palmerston North Radio Club and, later, the Manawatu Radio Club, played an important pioneering role in the district but was one of a handful of B stations which, unlike the majority, enjoyed harmonious relations with the broadcasting authorities. In contrast, station 2Z0, owned by local radio dealer J.V. Kyle, was conscious of its 'independent' status and of its part in the greater struggle of the Dominion's B class stations.

Although the text does not presuppose any knowledge of broadcasting,

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<sup>1</sup> New Zealand Official Year Book 1938, p.847. By 1936 the number of radio licenses suggested that radio sets were located in over half of the Dominion's households. See Report of the Post and Telegraph Department, AJHR, 1936, F-1, p.35.

a brief survey of national broadcasting developments is valuable to set the background for local events and experiences. On November 21, 1921, New Zealand's first radio programme was transmitted by Otago's Professor Jack and thereafter developments moved rapidly. In February 1922 the International Electric Company established a broadcasting station in Wellington's Courtenay Place and by the end of the year five more stations were transmitting, many of them operated by radio clubs and societies which sprang up around the country.<sup>2</sup> The interest aroused by these pioneering groups was such that the Government was obliged to take some action and in 1925 it awarded a charter to the Radio Broadcasting Company of New Zealand to develop a broadcasting service for the Dominion. Under the terms of their charter, these "three keen, solid businessmen"<sup>3</sup> were to provide a maximum of twelve hours entertainment weekly, exclusive of Sunday and with an additional silent day each week. The period during which broadcasting was operated by the Company saw an increase in quality, in coverage and in transmission hours but many listeners, who had seen their license fees jump six hundred percent with the introduction of the charter, were critical of the Company and the Government.<sup>4</sup> Hampered by a lack of capital, by the insecurity and short-term nature of its charter and by the 500 watt maximum output prescribed in the charter, the Company was unable to provide a truly national service.

There was a growing conviction among many people that a body which collected funds from the public should be answerable to it and that so important a public utility should not be in private hands. Consequently, when the Company's charter expired in December 1931, broadcasting was administered by the Broadcasting Board. This began a process of state domination which reached its climax in the Labour Government's determination to make radio broadcasting a state monopoly. The years of the Board were exciting ones and witnessed the modernisation of facilities, an increase in the power of the national stations and far-reaching

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2 See R.M. Burdon The New Dominion: A Social and Political History of New Zealand 1918-39, Wellington, 1965, p.91. P. Downes and P. Harcourt, Voices in the Air, Wellington, 1976, p.10.

3 A.F. O'Donoghue The Rise and Fall of Radio Broadcasting in New Zealand : The Tragedy of Government Control and Management, Auckland, 1946, p.5.

4 A radio receiving license cost five shillings per annum from 1923 to 1925. In 1925 it rose to thirty shillings (£1 10s), of which the Radio Broadcasting Company received five-sixths, but was lowered to twenty-five shillings (£ 5s) in 1935.

improvements in programme quality and planning. At the same time, however, the Board found itself subject to criticism reminiscent of that levelled at the Radio Broadcasting Company: that it was aloof and inept, that it neglected listeners in country areas and that it was unjust in its treatment of the B stations.

These B stations were an important part of contemporary broadcasting and the support which they enjoyed from the community was reflected in their proliferation during this period. Numbering only ten in 1928, the total of B stations had risen to thirty-six by 1931, a surprising development in view of the problems which these stations faced.<sup>5</sup> If the B stations' continued existence was "a miracle of survival",<sup>6</sup> it was also a tribute to their popularity and the valuable service which they rendered. This was especially true with regard to those listeners who, although subsidizing the national stations through their license fees, were unable to receive these national stations. Palmerston North listeners, for example, found 2YA transmissions subject to fading, and distortion, especially in the evening. The existence of 'silent days' and of restricted hours of transmission meant that the B stations provided entertainment when the airwaves would otherwise have been quiet while many of those listeners who could receive the national stations preferred, instead, to listen to the friendly and more informal broadcasts of the B stations. The B stations were, as Mackay notes, "the illegitimate offspring of successive administrations".<sup>7</sup> In time they were to be removed from the scene to make way for the new stations of the National Commercial Broadcasting Service whose breezy style compensated, at least in part, for the loss of B class broadcasting.

Anyone embarking upon a local study of broadcasting history, such as this, has many problems with which to cope. As Prothero comments, most of the sixty-odd stations which operated at one time or another in this period "are now only a memory"<sup>8</sup> and one is hampered by the fact that one is dealing with a medium that is transient in nature. While

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5 See A.G. Prothero, 'Broadcasting in New Zealand: Policy and Practice 1921-36', University of New Zealand, M.A., 1946, p.156.

6 Downes and Harcourt, p.53.

7 I.K. Mackay Broadcasting in New Zealand, Wellington, 1953, p.58.

8 Prothero, p.i.

some news about radio in Palmerston North, especially in its pioneering years, was discussed in the community's newspapers, radio offered an obvious and easily accessible medium for the two stations, 2Z0 and 2ZF, to discuss their activities, their plans and their problems. Consequently it is inevitable that much information about local broadcasting is lost forever and this exercise has been based largely upon the study of contemporary newspapers. The intensive nature of this research necessitated that concentration be placed upon one of the town's two newspapers but I am confident that little difference would have been made if attention had been directed, instead, to the alternative local paper. In many respects, by relying on how one medium, print, viewed another, radio, one is able to determine what issues and occurrences attracted the attention of contemporaries and to gain an insight into local relations between the press and the B stations. One also has to be wary of anecdotal material and of press reports which were obviously based upon hearsay or were contributed by organizations like the Manawatu Radio Club. Consequently, where possible material from one source has been checked against material from another source, for example, national radio publications.

I owe a debt of gratitude to Professor W.H. Oliver both for suggesting a topic which has proved fascinating and rewarding to study and for supervising work on it. I would also like to acknowledge the helpful advice and comments of Ms. M.A. Tennant and the cooperation and obliging service of the staff of the Massey University, General Assembly and Alexander Turnbull libraries. Special thanks are due also to the people who shared with me their experiences of stations 2Z0 and 2ZF. In particular I owe gratitude to Mr J. Vance Kyle and his wife for their hospitality and their cooperation. It is unfortunate that Mr. Kyle passed away during 1980 and did not see the completion of this history in which his own creation, 2Z0, plays such an important role.



# Radio broadcasting in Palmerston North, 1924-1937 : a research exercise... Bachelor of Arts with Honours in History at Massey University

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