

WIRELESS IN MY LIFE ; Alistair MacNeill – North Berwick ...January 2015

I am not sure when I became aware of the term “wireless” or “The Wireless” as it was referred to, but as far as I know when our family became resident tenants of 4 Upper Square, Hynish in Tiree in April 1941 there was only one radio/wireless in the village.

It belonged to a Mrs MacDonald who lived on her own at number 2 and therefore in wartime it was the source of instant news. Apparently going to her house to hear the news was a “man thing” and the resulting passing on of information could be, in effect, sometimes rather like the party game “Chinese Whispers”.

Of course, at this time the houses had no electricity supply and so the wireless was powered by two sources – a battery and an accumulator. The accumulator was a form of acid cell battery which could only be recharged at the Reef (the war-time aerodrome, while the dry battery (brand name Vidor ?) had to be replaced when it ran out of power. However we discovered, that when the latter happened, a short spell in the range oven, while distorting the battery’s shape, did prolong its life.

When the accumulator ran low in power it was referred to in Gaelic as “Chaidh an accumulator sios” – in literal translation “The accumulator went down”.

This phrase resulted in what was thought of as a Gaelic wartime joke in “non PC times”.

After the war boxing matches were very popular with fights being broadcast by the BBC every week. The commentators I recall were Raymond Glendenning, who gave the blow by blow accounts, and Barrington Dalby who gave the in-between rounds summaries. Eamon Andrews of the later TV programme “This Is Your Life” also became a commentator

Some of the fighters who were featured regularly included bantam weight Johnny King, whose ship had been torpedoed, apparently, resulting in him spending days on a life raft, and Cliff Anderson from British Guyana – not that I was aware of that country’s location!

As the years went by the broadcasts continued and we became aware that generally when American fighters fought their British counterparts, the result was a foregone conclusion – the Yank would win.

The adult men that I knew in my childhood days were very interested in boxing and “Big Fights” were keenly followed, so that names like Freddie Mills, Bruce Woodcock, Gus Lesnevitch, Randy Turpin, and Joe Baksi were very familiar to us.

Revealing how we were captivated by the immediate realism of radio on one occasion, the British Champion, Bruce Woodcock, was receiving a hiding from the American, Joe Baksi, - to which the menfolk of the house were listening intently.

At last the mother, who was aware of how the fight was progressing, shouted to them, “For goodness sake, put that thing off before he kills the man”.

Our interest in what I now describe as “violence by proxy” continued into my student days. On a holiday visit to our uncle in Balevullin about 1960 (Mum and Dad living on the mainland at this time), we set the alarm for 3a.m. and the three of us (my brother, uncle and I) sat on a bed listening to a World Heavyweight title fight between Floyd Paterson and Ingemar Johansson.

At some point in the 1940s we acquired our own wireless – made for us by someone on the Wartime aerodrome, but its use was strictly controlled!

Gaelic song recitals were regularly featured. Among the singers to be heard was Margaret MacDonald, whose relatives – if I remember correctly- were from Balemartine i.e. Lachain Beag, the shoemaker.

Saturday evenings brought us two not to be missed programmes, The MacFlannels and Scottish Dance Music.

The MacFlannels were like a wireless version of The Broons and probably an early version of a Soap. We listened intently to the happenings in their household. The down-to-earth comments of Willie the dad (“I’ve never died a winter yet”), Uncle Matta with his catch-phrase, “It’s terrible tae be auld an’ nae tae be wantit”, and visits from Mrs MacCotton, who had obviously moved up in the class structure of the times- with the accent to match. All the characters were names of types of cloth.

The tune Kate Dalrymple introduced Scottish Dance Music, which meant we could listen to the best bands of the day, like Jimmy Shand, Jim Cameron or Bobby MacLeod, although I don’t recall us following the announcer’s invitation to roll up the carpet and join in.

As children we had Children’s Hour with the inimitable Auntie Kathleen (Kathleen Garscadden) introducing us to items such as Down at the Mains and Tammy Troot stories by Borders Author, Lavinia Derwent, read by W.D.Joss.

There were also dramatized versions of books. I cannot recall what the drama was called, but unless I am mistaken there was one where one of the actors had a Tirie connection- a Lachlan Brown, perhaps? His catch phrase in it was “Away to Argyll”.

My own favourite was “The Black Wherry” by Kintyre author, Angus MacVicar.

The story concerned two local smugglers from near Southend, Kintyre, who were being closely watched by the excise men in the hope they could catch them red-handed. Rather like an Alistair MacLean novel the story had an unexpected traitor.

Each episode was a cliff-hanger which meant a hurried retreat from school at the end of the day, as in those days there was no way to record programmes. Sco

A few years ago I found a copy of the book in a second-hand bookshop and, after enjoying the story again, I wrote to Angus, who was living in Southend, Kintyre, to tell him about how I had first come across his book. He replied saying I was lucky to find a copy as he didn’t have one himself. Another trawl of second-hand bookshops produced another one which I sent to him. Although now losing his sight he sent another letter of thanks, which now makes my copy even more special.

Sport, especially football, came into our living rooms now with the exciting commentaries of Peter Thomson. I was a total fanatic. I listened avidly to a game then afterwards replayed it using a "tanner ba' ." against the wall of the house. If the game was an international in which Tiree's own Johnny MacKenzie was playing, then the excitement was even greater. Another game I remember was what is known as the "Jimmy Cowan" international when the goalkeeper's heroics enabled us to beat "The Auld Enemy" at Wembly in 1949.

Although I didn't know what was really happening on the field I also listened to commentaries on Rugby internationals, not knowing that in a couple of years I would be playing the game myself and going to Murrayfield to watch games. The fact that the Scottish stand-off was called Angus Cameron was an added incentive as we had relatives of that name. Being a role model has more than one aspect to it! Perhaps that is why I became a stand-off myself a few years later.

Another important sports announcement on a Saturday evening was the reading of the football results so that we could check our football coupon in the hope that we had selected those elusive 8 draws and thus win the fabled £75,000 top prize. Sadly it never happened, but each week we continued to dream the dream.

On a Sunday evening we listened to the Church Service and our next-door neighbour, Kate Crawford, would join us, dressed up for the occasion – complete with fox fur.

As I said our choice of listening was strictly controlled by our father, but when he was not at home "the mice began to play"!

We discovered Radio Luxembourg and, as Mum was more broad-minded in her approach to culture, we enjoyed listening to the stars of the time such as Guy Mitchell singing "She wears red feathers and a hula hula skirt". So our musical parameters were wide enough to encompass songs like these and "Lag Nan Cruachan".

If I was off school with some illness I slept in the bed recess in the kitchen and could recuperate by listening to "Music While You Work", "Workers Playtime" or "Down your way" with Wilfred Pickles encouraging Barney or Mabel to hand the quiz winner his prize - "Give him the money, Barney".

I think "Music While You Work" was a programme broadcast into factories in the belief that it improved production.

Another programme that comes to mind is a Wild West series called the Chisholm Trail recalling the driving of large herds of Longhorns to market in America. There were also episodes about Wild West characters such as Billy the Kid and the Jesse James Gang.

When I became a boarder at Keil School in 1954 TV, records and films replaced wireless as the medium of entertainment, but when I became a teacher, Wireless (now called Radio) again played a big part in my working life through the programmes for schools.

When I moved as a teacher to Killin School, although teaching in the Secondary Department, radio rather than TV, because of poor local reception, became the medium for both education and home entertainment. My wife and I were avid listeners to a Sunday evening programme called "Your Hundred Best Tunes". On a Saturday there was the Pools scores programme by which the jackpot dream lived on and on and

As Headteacher and full-time class teacher of Primary 6 and 7 at Ballachulish from 1968 to 1972 the Wireless was a valued reaching aid bringing a variety of programmes into the classroom from the "Weekly Religious Service for Primary Schools", Geography programmes, to "Singing Together". I still remember snatches of some of the songs from the latter – "Do you know Elsie Marley, honey, The wife who sells the barley, honey".

On one occasion one wee boy in my class found the announcer's voice so realistic that when he said for the second time, "Are you all listening carefully", the boy said to me, "Please, Sir, can he see us"?

Before I left Ballachulish, Arthur Brocklebank had started broadcasting a Gaelic version of Singing Together based on the National Mod competition songs for that particular year, which was a great help if you had neither Gaelic nor a musical instrument.

In 1977 while the Head Teacher, come Gaelic Teacher, come Junior Gaelic Choir conductor, come mini-bus driver at Banavie School, the BBC Schools department produced a programme in the series Around Scotland called "Going To The Mod" which featured me and my choir. This was an interesting and educational experience for me and the pupils.

While I was in my office at Law Primary School, North Berwick one day waiting to record a radio programme for classes, a news flash which I will never forget was broadcast. The announcer told listeners that a massacre had been carried out by a gunman at Dunblane Primary School.

Nowadays Radio Nan Gael has given the wee Hynish boy, who used to sit with his ear glued to the wireless, the opportunity to be a broadcaster, and especially in January 2014, to be part of the team presenting a live broadcast from the Emirates Arena in Glasgow looking forward to the Commonwealth Games. A telephone call from Glasgow or Inverness may ask if I will contribute to a programme on a particular topic in the news or give an opinion on a sporting event.

The circle was complete!