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# ‘We Span the Distance’: Women’s Radio and Regional Communities

City women have so much and country women so little in the way of recreation. I would like to see greater specialisation in broadcast services to the outback.<sup>1</sup>

In August 1948, Ivy Kent, the sole woman member of the Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC), visited Adelaide to get South Australian women’s feedback on the quality of ABC programming. The *News* reported that South Australians ‘felt they should not be “swamped” by relays from the eastern States’ and that ‘intelligent women’ wanted content that went ‘deeper than recipe sessions’.<sup>2</sup> Kent was impressed with these suggestions and believed that ‘more attention should be paid to interviews with important visitors at times that suit women listeners’.<sup>3</sup> The special circumstances of women in rural areas of the state were also considered, as demonstrated in the above epigraph. These complaints demonstrate the complex meanings of women’s radio in Australia in the mid-twentieth century. Women in urban areas had very different needs to those in rural areas, while listeners in states other than New South Wales and Victoria bristled at the dominance of programming produced on the east coast. While there were complaints about the centralising influence

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1 ‘Women Complain of Radio Sessions’, *News*, 3 August 1948, 1.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

of radio, Kent's response also indicated that radio had the potential to meet the differing needs of female listeners across the country and give a voice to women in their local communities.

This chapter uses several case studies of women's radio programs in areas outside of the major east coast capital cities of Sydney and Melbourne to examine how women broadcasters used the medium to fulfil the distinctive needs of sub-national communities. These examples include Catherine King's use of the medium to foster a distinctive Western Australian identity and to address issues specific to women in the state, especially those in very remote areas. The chapter also looks at examples of local radio programs from Wagga Wagga and Shepparton, as well as the Queensland *ABC Women's Session* and the national *Country Hour Women's Session*, an ABC program that attempted to foster a national community of country women. Radio stations became an integral part of the patterns of life across the nation from the 1930s until the 1950s and, as this chapter shows, broadcasting was adapted to address the various needs of different communities. Within this context women broadcasters played a very important role by providing practical support and companionship to their listeners, bridging long distances between women in their regions, fostering distinctive identities and providing intellectual stimulation. In many cases, these broadcasters were not only recognisable radio voices, but also were civic leaders who actively worked to improve the lives of their listeners and communities.

## Gender, Radio and Country Life

The relationship between the city and the country is one of the 'great themes' of Australian history. This relationship has been characterised by an idealisation of the bush in national mythology, even while the bush shrinks and the cities grow.<sup>4</sup> Elite discourse has promoted the bush as the solution to problems caused by urbanised modernity for over a century.<sup>5</sup> In the early twentieth century, the city was painted as being responsible for bad health, lowered fertility and looser morality. Rural

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4 Graeme Davison, 'Fatal Attraction? The Lure of Technology and the Decline of Rural Australia 1890–2000', *Tasmanian Historical Studies* 9, no. 1 (2003): 41.

5 Kate Murphy, 'Rural Womanhood and the "Embellishment" of Rural Life in Urban Australia', in *Struggle Country: The Rural Ideal in Twentieth Century Australia*, ed. Graeme Davison and Marc Brodie (Melbourne: Monash University ePress), 34.

settlement was promoted as the solution to the declining birth rate, as the natural environment supposedly encouraged more frequent and better quality breeding. By the 1920s, this pro-natalist sentiment had given way to a fixation on the morality of young women, which was supposedly imperilled by their presence in urban areas as increasing numbers moved to the city for work. Country girls were presented as paragons of pure femininity who needed to be protected from the negative influences of city life.<sup>6</sup>

This idealisation of rural femininity resulted in a discursive push to 'present country life as more attractive, less arduous, and to depict the rural woman of the 1920s as a contented, domestic-maternal figure rather than an overworked drudge'.<sup>7</sup> During the 1920s, the amenities available in rural areas lagged behind those in the cities, but new technologies including the telephone and the pedal wireless promised significant improvements in the quality of life in isolated communities. The possibilities presented by radio were also presented as a key part of the attractiveness of bush living—women could have the best of both city and country.<sup>8</sup>

Radio was a modern technological wonder that transformed private leisure, political culture and women's integration into the public sphere. But radio had an even greater impact in regional areas and, from the mid-1920s, stations and advocates for radio promised to bring the city to the country. Stations began to install wirelesses as soon as they could receive broadcasts, and shearers even purchased their own sets to take with them, claiming that they quelled the loneliness of camping. Wireless sets were also used as public entertainment in country towns. Radio carried very practical benefits for rural communities, as it enabled farmers to access market reports more quickly than ever and schoolchildren to access educational broadcasts. There was hope that the medium would assist in arresting the depopulation of rural areas by bringing some of the culture and entertainment that was previously lacking.<sup>9</sup>

The radio press trumpeted the benefits of the new medium to regional communities. For example, an article published in the *Listener In* in July 1930 announced that the medium had 'shattered' the isolation of

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6 Ibid., 35.

7 Ibid., 44.

8 Richard Waterhouse, *The Vision Splendid: A Social and Cultural History of Rural Australia* (Fremantle: Curtin University Books, 2005), 219.

9 Ibid., 241–42.

the outback.<sup>10</sup> Farmers no longer needed to make long journeys on dirt roads into town to find out financial information, but could now hear it announced multiple times a day. They could also listen to talks on agricultural issues and get new ideas. However, its biggest impact was bringing entertainment to country homes. As the report noted:

Wireless has brought a flood of sunshine into what was often for them a drab and monotonous existence, filling in the gaps of many long winter evenings with an intriguing interest.<sup>11</sup>

Further, women's sessions kept farmers' wives up-to-date with their 'sisters in the city'.<sup>12</sup> It would not be long, this author opined, before the radio was considered as essential to the running of the farm as a plough or a harvester.<sup>13</sup>

Although the potential of radio to improve the lives of rural dwellers was often repeated as one of the medium's key benefits, most Australians in rural areas could not access radio on anywhere close to the same level as their urban counterparts until at least the late 1930s. Most urban stations could not be heard in the country and there were few regional stations at first. Country listeners also required more expensive sets in order to get adequate reception. The relatively low rates of electrification in rural areas posed a further problem, as rural listeners could only use battery sets and not the more sophisticated plug-in sets that their urban counterparts could use.<sup>14</sup> In 1950, for example, 95 per cent of Melbourne households had electricity, but only half of households in the Mallee and Wimmera regions in north-western Victoria were electrified, demonstrating the significant gap between urban and rural development in Australia in this period.<sup>15</sup>

The arrival of the wireless also elicited anxiety and criticism within regional Australia. As Graeme Davison has argued, technological innovation has been a 'fatal attraction' for the bush, as the benefits of new amenities were often accompanied by an erosion of the unique character and lifestyle of rural communities.<sup>16</sup> Many were also critical of what they saw as the

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10 'Radio—Down on the Farm', *Listener In*, 5 July 1930, 11.

11 *Ibid.*

12 *Ibid.*

13 *Ibid.*

14 Megan Blair, 'Listening in to the Lawsons: Radio Crosses the Urban–Rural Divide', in *Struggle Country: The Rural Ideal in Twentieth Century Australia*, ed. Graeme Davison and Marc Brodie (Melbourne: Monash University ePress, 2005), 128.

15 Davison, 'Fatal Attraction?', 49–50.

16 *Ibid.*, 41.

centralising influence of radio, which increasingly broadcast material produced in major cities—especially serial dramas from the 1940s.<sup>17</sup> However, this argument neglects the role that women's radio sessions played in regional Australia. These programs were key points of social interaction and citizenship activity until well into the 1950s. Radio was useful in fostering communities and identities for those in regions outside of the capital cities, as it connected people living on rural properties to the towns and to each other. In an era when travelling into town was less common, radio provided a much-needed link to other members of the community, and this was especially so for country women.

## The Role of Radio Clubs in Regional Communities

Regional women's radio clubs enabled women in town and on properties to connect with each other daily, host get-togethers on a regular basis, and perform fundraising and other charitable works to support the community. They provided daily contact with other women in the area, which went a long way to alleviate the loneliness of women on farms and in small villages. As such, these clubs were a significant feature of regional communities from the 1930s until the 1950s, and notably offered women an opportunity to fulfil their civic duty to their communities.

Just as radio clubs such as the 2GB Happiness Club were established in major cities throughout the Great Depression, regional stations began to establish their own clubs during the 1930s. The 3SR Friendship Club, for example, was established in Shepparton, Victoria, in February 1937 and was heard in northern Victoria and southern New South Wales.<sup>18</sup> In a profile of the club for the *Argus Women's Magazine* in 1946, then-leader Elizabeth Burchill described how the club had offered 'practical friendship' to women in the region since its inception:

Help for those who have lost their home, help for those who are sick, help in the house, practical help—those are things that spring from the spirit which is the driving force of the Friendship Club.<sup>19</sup>

17 Ibid., 51–52.

18 '3SR—"The Heart of Victoria"', *Argus*, 2 February 1937, 15; "Mary Ann" Leaves 3SR', *Australasian*, 10 December 1938, 24.

19 Elizabeth Burchill, 'Friendship that is Practical', *Argus Women's Magazine*, 17 July 1946, 5.

The club's objectives were to 'foster the spirit of friendship, to organise social gatherings, and to develop a spirit of community service'.<sup>20</sup> The club's motto was 'We Span the Distance', which succinctly encapsulated the role of the club as a means of connecting women living across the region.<sup>21</sup> In 1947, the 3SR Friendship Club had approximately 10,000 members who raised money for hospitals, blind appeals, bush fire victims and the Food for Britain appeal. The daily radio sessions featured 'ideas, thoughts [and] amusing incidents'.<sup>22</sup>

Although many women broadcast on the radio stations that served their local area, there is evidence that some women broadcasters moved around regional stations to develop their careers. One notable example is Betty Raymond, a broadcaster whose career spanned stations in Tasmania, Victoria and South Australia—including serving as the compere of the 3SR Friendship Club in the 1940s. She started her career in 1936 as host of the children's club on station 7BU in Burnie, Tasmania, where she also compered the women's session and commentated on local events. After the outbreak of war Raymond felt that she had to 'branch out' to the mainland to contribute to the war effort, as Tasmania felt 'cut-off' from the action.<sup>23</sup> In 1941, she found a job as the compere of the 3SR Friendship Club in Shepparton—a much larger station than 7BU.<sup>24</sup> At 3SR, she hosted the daily women's club session, performed general announcing duties and fundraised for the merchant navy and the local hospital. She also gave regular broadcasts on the war situation in Britain called 'London Letter'. These broadcasts were relayed by station 3UZ in Melbourne and helped to increase her profile there. She eventually took a job at Melbourne station 3KZ in 1944, where she compered the children's program and a women's session, as well as performing general announcing duties. She stayed at 3KZ until she married and moved to Adelaide in 1946. From April 1947 until March 1951 she worked at commercial station 5DN as the women's session compere, where she reported on events occurring in South Australian society.<sup>25</sup>

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20 Ibid.

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid.

24 'Long Radio Job Ends', *Mail*, 3 March 1951, 35.

25 'Retirement from Radio', *News*, 28 February 1951, 19.

Raymond's career in radio spanned over a decade across three states in both regional and metropolitan stations. Reflecting on her remarkable career in an oral history interview in 1984, she noted that women of her era were lucky to enjoy a different lifestyle to their mothers, as they married later due to the war and could thus have careers beforehand. Although she left her position at 5DN once she had children, she mused that she was 'foolish' not to have gone back to work. She believed that radio was a fantastic medium for helping people, as listeners wanted 'philosophy and caring' and to talk about personal things. Women's radio clubs were especially important in filling that need among audiences and, as a result, listeners considered announcers to be their friends. The work that Raymond performed in her local communities, especially Burnie and Shepparton, further demonstrated the importance of radio stations as pillars of the community that worked to improve the lives of residents by providing entertainment, companionship and fundraising.

2WG, a B-Class station broadcast out of Wagga Wagga in the New South Wales Riverina, provides another example of the active role that radio stations played in local communities during the mid-twentieth century. The station was established by Eric and Nan Roberts, schoolteachers from Narrandera, 100 kilometres west of Wagga Wagga. A keen amateur radio builder, Eric Roberts kept up this hobby throughout the late 1920s until the school district decided that it was impinging on his duties as an educator and asked him to give it up. Instead, Eric and Nan resigned and moved to Wagga Wagga in 1931, where they began the process of setting up a radio station. They received enough capital to begin broadcasting in June 1932 and the station was a rapid success. A pillar of the local community, 2WG connected Wagga Wagga with the surrounding towns and villages and fostered a more cohesive Riverina community while providing much-desired entertainment.<sup>26</sup>

The 2WG Women's Club was started in 1937 by Nan Roberts, who identified a need for a club to ameliorate the loneliness of country women—especially those on farms outside of the region's major towns. The Robertses' daughter, Wendy Hucker, observed that it fulfilled a very important role of 'friendship across the distance'.<sup>27</sup> Each town or village within receiving range of 2WG set up its own branch of the club with a branch president and secretary. An estimated 40–50 towns had

26 Wendy Hucker, Interviewed by Bob Pymm, 2005, 0548718, Wagga Wagga City Library.

27 Ibid.

branches, including Griffith, Leeton, Tarcutta, Batlow and Tumbarumba. At its peak in the late 1940s and early 1950s, the club had approximately 22,000 members, which represented a significant percentage of women in the area.<sup>28</sup> The local branches would fundraise and hold events for their local area, but some of the money raised would go back to the central club funds to be put towards bigger projects for the region.<sup>29</sup>

The club was centred on the daily radio session and the compere was also the president of the club as a whole. The session was broadcast twice a day—from 10.45am to 11am and 11.30am to 12pm.<sup>30</sup> There were no fees to join the club, and all members were given a radio name, which was a common feature of women's radio clubs during this period.<sup>31</sup> The radio sessions primarily consisted of reading the letters of club members, which made the sessions intimate and social. These letters were especially important for women outside of town centres, who could not socialise with other women as easily as those in the towns.<sup>32</sup> The club's rules clearly stipulated that members were to submit a letter of 'two normal sized pages' each month.<sup>33</sup> Women were also able to request that the compere make birthday calls to friends or relatives on their behalf.<sup>34</sup>

The 2WG Women's Club's radio sessions were first compered by Susan Barrie, a newcomer to broadcasting with a reportedly charming personality, and, from mid-1938, by Kay Millin (later Brownbill), a veteran broadcaster from South Australia who would later become the third woman elected to the Australian House of Representatives.<sup>35</sup> But it was Ada Webb, known on air by her club name 'Cobby', who came to define the 2WG Women's Club. Webb became the president and compere in 1939 and stayed in the role for nearly 19 years. Her daughter, Marie Black, stated that the role was her mother's full-time job and that she was

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28 Marie Black, Interviewed by Bob Pymm, 2007, 0590730, Wagga Wagga City Library. This was a significant percentage of the women in the area. According to the 1954 census, the Riverina district had a population of 40,484 females and the South Western Slope district had 61,649—a combined 102,133 females in the region that 2WG broadcast to. Wagga Wagga itself had a population of 9,852 females, which indicates that a substantial number of the club's members came from outside the town.

29 Marie Black, Interviewed by Bob Pymm.

30 Ibid.

31 Wendy Hucker, Interviewed by Bob Pymm.

32 Evelyn Patterson, Interviewed by Bob Pymm, 16 May 2006, 0547537, Wagga Wagga City Library.

33 2WG Miscellaneous File, 0482529, Wagga Wagga City Library.

34 Ibid.

35 Wendy Hucker, Interviewed by Bob Pymm; 'Meet Susan Barrie', *Radio Pictorial of Australia*, October 1937, 33; Rosemary Francis, 'Brownbill, Kay Catherine Millin (1914–2002)', *The Australian Women's Register*, 2009, [www.womenaustralia.info/biogs/AWE4046b.htm](http://www.womenaustralia.info/biogs/AWE4046b.htm), accessed 6 March 2018.

heavily involved in the day-to-day operations of the club, including running the radio session and organising fundraising activities. Black estimated that Webb handled approximately £200,000 between 1942 and 1954. This was a change from previous club presidents for whom the 2WG Women's Club had been only one part of their job—they were also general announcers, advertising script writers and administrative assistants. Webb developed epilepsy in the mid-1950s and had several seizures on air yet continued to work until she resigned to care for her husband in 1958. The club kept going under another president until 1965.<sup>36</sup>

The club played a vital role in bridging the distances between towns, villages and farms in the area. These distances were compounded by poor infrastructure, making it difficult to travel around the area easily. As was common in country areas at this time, residents of the hinterland would often come into the main town one day per week to perform errands.<sup>37</sup> The radio club had a room where visiting farm women could rest during the day and held regular morning teas sponsored by Robur Tea.<sup>38</sup> The club also raised significant amounts of money for local projects, mostly through small-scale drives such as raffles, dances and a mile of pennies down the main street of Wagga Wagga. Through these efforts, the club funded a bed elevator, an ambulance, a portable x-ray machine and furnishing for a maternity ward at the Wagga Wagga Base Hospital. In the 1930s, the club initiated a baby box program, in which club members would knit layettes that were anonymously donated to needy young mothers who could not afford to clothe their babies due to the privations of the Great Depression. During World War II (WWII), the club's fundraising focused on the war effort, and they donated a field ambulance and a mobile canteen to the army.<sup>39</sup> The local branches also took charge of their own fundraising activities, such as holding parties, afternoon teas and competitions in aid of local hospitals and ambulance services.<sup>40</sup>

The club's most lasting contribution to the community came in 1946 when the husband of a club member came to see Webb. He told her that his wife's health was failing and that there was no facility in the district that was able to take care of her—she had to travel 460 kilometres to Sydney to receive appropriate care. The man tearfully told Webb that if

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36 Marie Black, Interviewed by Bob Pymm.

37 Evelyn Patterson, Interviewed by Bob Pymm.

38 Marie Black, Interviewed by Bob Pymm.

39 Wendy Hucker, Interviewed by Bob Pymm.

40 Evelyn Patterson, Interviewed by Bob Pymm.

this happened, he would never see his wife again as he could not afford to travel to Sydney to visit her. His story was a common one as there were no nursing homes in the area. Webb was moved by the man's plight and approached the Robertses to see if there was anything the station could do. This was the impetus for the Haven, a retirement village and nursing home complex that continues today. From 1947, the women's club began to fundraise solely for the Haven project, and this would continue until the end of the club in the 1960s. The Robertses bought a plot of land on the outskirts of Wagga Wagga and the Haven opened in 1954. It featured a central nursing home and a number of cottages for married couples so that they were not separated.<sup>41</sup> The example of the Haven demonstrates the important role that the 2WG Women's Club played in the community through providing social welfare and healthcare that was not being provided by the state. Like the radio station itself, the Haven fostered a sense of community and identity, as people who had lived in the district their whole lives were no longer forced to leave it in their old age.<sup>42</sup>

The 2WG Women's Club and its radio session declined in popularity in the 1960s and eventually ceased in 1965. During the decade after WWII, traditional pastoral industries boomed and tourism took off in country areas. Regional towns began to prosper on the backs of these industries and received modern shops and new forms of entertainment such as bowling clubs and swimming pools.<sup>43</sup> Hucker believed that the popularity of the session declined as living standards in the country improved, and especially as farming families were able to purchase cars. As women on isolated farms were able to travel more easily, the need for such a session disappeared—while some loneliness remained, it was not the all-encompassing isolation of the 1930s and 1940s.<sup>44</sup>

In 2007, the Wagga Wagga City Library undertook a local history project on the 2WG Women's Club that culminated in three oral history interviews with women involved in the session—Patterson, Hucker and Black—and a website about the session. As Amy Heap and Bob Pymm have noted, local radio clubs were a 'social phenomenon that lasted around 30 years and which for many was a key entertainment and support service', but their history has largely gone unrecorded.<sup>45</sup> The 2WG website is sadly no

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41 Marie Black, Interviewed by Bob Pymm.

42 Ibid.

43 Waterhouse, *The Vision Splendid*, 213–16.

44 Wendy Hucker, Interviewed by Bob Pymm.

45 Amy Heap and Bob Pymm, 'Wagga Wagga Women's Wireless and the Web: Local Studies and New Technologies', *Australian Library Journal* 58, no. 1 (2009): 10.

longer online but the interest taken in the club as an important part of the Riverina's history demonstrates the importance of local radio to women's lives in the region.

## ABC Country Women's Sessions

Local stations such as 3SR, 2WG and 2KO provided a way of rejecting the centralising influence of broadcasts that originated in the capital cities by broadcasting local content and supporting the local community. The ABC significantly increased the number of its regional studios in the late 1940s, so that more country areas could receive locally produced content from the national broadcaster.<sup>46</sup> The ABC had its highest audience shares in country areas, especially among those listeners living on rural properties. This meant that locally produced women's sessions broadcast on regional ABC stations reached a higher proportion of their target audience than those in metropolitan areas.<sup>47</sup>

From 1953 until 1966, the ABC broadcast a national program aimed at regional women called the *Country Hour Women's Session*, which aired at 1pm on Friday afternoons. This program was compered by Lorna Byrne, an experienced broadcaster who had given regular radio talks in the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s for the New South Wales Department of Agriculture, where she was employed to promote the interests of rural women.<sup>48</sup> The *Country Hour Women's Session* faced a difficult beginning, as it replaced the popular serial *Blue Hills* on Fridays. In an oral history interview in 1978, Byrne recalled that the program was a 'terrible failure' at first and that she received many 'insulting' letters castigating her for daring to replace *Blue Hills*.<sup>49</sup> One listener wrote to the *ABC Weekly* that the session was 'the worst thing we've ever heard from a National station'.<sup>50</sup> Another complained to the magazine:

46 'Build 22 Radio Stations', *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miner's Advocate*, 18 November 1947, 4.

47 K. S. Inglis, *This is the ABC: The Australian Broadcasting Commission, 1932–1983* (Carlton, Vic.: Melbourne University Press, 1983), 155.

48 Anonymous, 'Byrne, Lorna (1897–1989)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography* (National Centre of Biography, The Australian National University, published first in hardcopy 2007), adb.anu.edu.au/biography/byrne-lorna-12277, accessed 6 March 2018.

49 Lorna Hayter, Interviewed by Hazel de Berg, 13 February 1978, DeB 1064–1065, Hazel de Berg Collection, National Library of Australia, Canberra.

50 L. Bradford, 'Country Women's Session', *ABC Weekly*, 7 February 1953, 2.

All I can say is the A.B.C. must surely think the country folk are a lot of half-wits to want to listen to such a session, not to mention the harsh masculine voice with it.<sup>51</sup>

The attack on Byrne's voice demonstrates the continued importance placed upon radio speech as a foundation for a successful program. By attacking the compere's voice, the listener was attacking a central element of the session and, in doing so, the program's legitimacy. It is important to stress that, in surviving recordings of the session, Byrne's voice is low, older-sounding, and well-intonated and modulated, giving her an authoritative air; certainly, her voice was lower than usual for a woman's voice.<sup>52</sup> Yet, not all listeners disapproved, one writing: 'Miss Lorna Byrne's voice—unlike most women's voices—is as a rule clear and easy to follow'.<sup>53</sup>

These difficulties were not helped by disagreements within ABC management as to whether a session for country women was truly needed. Director of Rural Broadcasts Dick Thompson pushed for the institution of a daily session, as he argued that the national women's session produced in Sydney did not meet the needs of women in regional areas.<sup>54</sup> Director of Programs Keith Barry disagreed, arguing that the national session was 'just as much for country women as it is for city women'.<sup>55</sup> Barry pointed to the presence of the president of the Country Women's Association (CWA) on the women's session advisory committee as evidence of this fact.<sup>56</sup> There was also disagreement about the frequency and length of the program, which again centred on whether the national session was of relevance to country women or not. A listener wrote to Byrne, advising that she and her friends felt that the session contained so much information that was relevant to their lives that it was 'far too short' and should be extended to one hour per week.<sup>57</sup> Thompson forwarded the letter to Barry as proof that there was listener demand for an expanded *Country Hour Women's Session*.<sup>58</sup> Barry, however, replied that the national *ABC Women's Sessions*

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51 A. E. Tonge, 'Countrywomen's Session', *ABC Weekly*, 21 March 1953, 2.

52 'The Country Hour – Women's Session – Final Program with Lorna Byrne', C102, 1500453, National Archives of Australia (hereafter NAA).

53 G. Meryon Ward, 'Countrywomen's Session', *ABC Weekly*, 4 April 1953, 2.

54 R. G. Thompson, Memo, 6 December 1955, Country Women's Session [Box 21], SP1687/1, R16/2/4 PART 1, NAA.

55 Keith Barry, Memo, 15 December 1955, Country Women's Session [Box 21], SP1687/1, R16/2/4 PART 1, NAA.

56 Ibid.

57 F. Hayes to L. Byrne, 18 May 1955, Country Women's Session [Box 21], SP1687/1, R16/2/4 PART 1, NAA.

58 R. G. Thompson to Keith Barry, 30 May 1955, Country Women's Session [Box 21], SP1687/1, R16/2/4 PART 1, NAA.

contained plenty of content of interest to country women and that the listener 'might care to listen to it'.<sup>59</sup> Barry's opinions were shared by others at the ABC. The Tamworth advisory committee discussed the session in April 1957 and were divided on its success: some members believed it to be an unpopular session while others thought that it was excellent. Some members suggested that Byrne's voice was an impediment to the session's success, as it 'gave the impression of talking down to the audience from time to time'—again demonstrating the importance of radio speech to the success of a program.<sup>60</sup> Although the program experienced considerable criticism from listeners and ABC management, it continued to be broadcast until 1966, which indicates that it was popular enough to keep its weekly timeslot for nearly 14 years. As Byrne later recalled: 'I began to establish it, and before very long it was really a very well patronised program.'<sup>61</sup>

Indeed, a report in December 1955 noted that Byrne was receiving 'very regular and enthusiastic' mail from listeners and received many invitations to visit regional areas across the country.<sup>62</sup> During her time on the program, Byrne travelled extensively across Australia. Her visit to Tasmania in November 1955 was the first trip that she undertook as compere to establish the legitimacy of the session. Listeners there were keen 'to hear her voice' and the CWA wanted her assistance in drawing attention to their activities.<sup>63</sup> Thompson thought that the trip was a good opportunity to gather new content, as, although the session was ostensibly national, it contained 'too much material gathered in New South Wales'.<sup>64</sup> Byrne travelled around Tasmania over 10 days in November 1955, interviewing local women and visiting schools and CWA branches.<sup>65</sup> Her visit attracted significant interest among Tasmanian women, and the listener response was 'amazingly high', the session being 'listened to extensively in the rural areas and the listening audience of the groups

59 Keith Barry to R. G. Thompson, 1 June 1955, Country Women's Session [Box 21], SP1687/1, R16/2/4 PART 1, NAA.

60 'Extract from Minutes of Tamworth Advisory Committee', 1 April 1957, Country Women's Session [Box 21], SP1687/1, R16/2/4 PART 1, NAA.

61 Lorna Hayter, Interviewed by Hazel de Berg.

62 John Douglass, 'Country Hour Women's Session', 6 December 1955, Country Women's Session [Box 21], SP1687/1, R16/2/4 PART 1, NAA.

63 Walter Colwell to R. J. F. Boyer, 24 June 1955, Country Women's Session [Box 21], SP1687/1, R16/2/4 PART 1, NAA.

64 R. G. Thompson, 'Letter from W. R. Colwell', 6 July 1955, Country Women's Session [Box 21], SP1687/1, R16/2/4 PART 1, NAA.

65 R. G. Thompson to Walter Colwell, 15 August 1955, Country Women's Session [Box 21], SP1687/1, R16/2/4 PART 1, NAA.

which met Miss Byrne, was almost 100%'.<sup>66</sup> A public relations success for the ABC in its 'relations with Tasmanian country dwellers', the visit marked the beginning of regular cross-country travel for Byrne.<sup>67</sup> During the 14 years of the program, she travelled to Western Australia, where she was met with 'nothing but friendship and cordiality'; Queensland, where she became a 'temporary Queenslander' each time she visited; as well as South Australia, Victoria, the Northern Territory and Papua New Guinea.<sup>68</sup> In 1958, she even travelled to China and broadcast a session of the *Country Hour Women's Session* from Singapore.<sup>69</sup> In the last session of the program, broadcast on 6 May 1966, Byrne stated that she would miss visiting her friends in other states who meant a great deal to her. Indeed, Thompson, the director of rural broadcasts, stated that Byrne had 'built a wonderful reputation for cheering the hearts of women throughout the length and breadth of Australia'.<sup>70</sup>

State-based ABC women's sessions also catered to rural listeners and were often better able to tailor their content to the specific needs of their audiences. Rita Humfress compered the Queensland *ABC Women's Session* from January 1937 until 1946, after which she gave a weekly talk on the ABC national women's session and hosted the national program once a month. The *ABC Weekly* reported in March 1940 that Humfress was one of 'the most popular women' on the ABC and was especially known for her celebrity interviews.<sup>71</sup> Humfress herself noted in 1939: 'Thousands of women daily open their doors to me. I am their guest and I appreciate their friendship tremendously.'<sup>72</sup>

Humfress focused on Queensland's regional and rural women in her session. She stated in an interview with *Queensland Country Life* in 1939 that she tried to be the eyes of country women and 'take an impression of what I see each day and endeavour to pass it on to them'. She also enjoyed the 'narratives of bush incidents in their daily lives which they send me, and am intensely interested in everything that happens

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66 E. P. Whitlock, 'Visit of Lorna Byrne to Tasmania', 12 December 1955, 'Country Women's Session [Box 21], SP1687/1, R16/2/4 PART 1, NAA.

67 Ibid.

68 'The Country Hour – Women's Session – Final Program with Lorna Byrne', 6 May 1966, C102, 1500453, NAA.

69 Lorna Hayter, Interviewed by Hazel de Berg.

70 Ibid.

71 'Rita Humfress: Runs Popular Women's Session', *ABC Weekly*, 9 March 1940, 21.

72 'Guest in a Thousand Homes!', *Queensland Country Life*, 14 December 1939, 6.

to them'.<sup>73</sup> She emphasised the role of radio as a two-way method of communication—she provided listeners with content from Brisbane and they wrote to her about their lives in regional areas of the state. She appears to have travelled to regional areas of the state to meet her listeners and experience their lifestyles firsthand. This was demonstrated in June 1946 when Humfress flew to Rockhampton for a brief visit, and the town's *Morning Bulletin* reported that she was a 'confirmed air traveller' who was pleased with the hour and a quarter flying time from Brisbane.<sup>74</sup>

In 1949, Humfress was given a weekly music request show to host on ABC radio entitled *Hello There*. Brisbane's *Sunday Mail* reported that listeners who had 'long mourned' her decreased presence on the air would appreciate the new session, and new listeners would find her 'warmth and sincerity' to be 'quite infectious'.<sup>75</sup> This program was reportedly very popular in the Far North Queensland Gulf Country, and, as the *Sunday Mail* observed in January 1952, Humfress had a 'strong following' among the 'coloured as well as white women' who received ABC programs via short-wave broadcast.<sup>76</sup> This rare mention of Aboriginal women as radio listeners indicates that broadcasts reached audiences in remote areas. As the article noted, residents of the Gulf Country relied on pedal wirelasses as a tool that enabled them to communicate with others across vast distances, and, as such, they had a deep appreciation of the medium. Radio programs were heard on pastoral stations, where they served as a key form of entertainment, and radio was also the primary source of news in the region, as newspapers only arrived once a week.<sup>77</sup>

## Catherine King and Western Australia's Outback Women

Women's radio played an important role in the cultural and social development of Western Australia. Western Australian women's radio came into its own with the premiere of King's ABC session in the final months of WWII, followed by Greenwood's commercial session in 1948. During the postwar years, King and Greenwood fostered distinctively

73 'Guest in a Thousand Homes!'

74 'Visit by Radio Personalities', *Morning Bulletin*, 28 June 1946, 5.

75 'Nothing "Phoney" About Amateur Hour Voting', *Sunday Mail*, 6 March 1949, 7.

76 'Radio is Now Vital Lifeline in Gulf Country, Says E.C.W.', *Sunday Mail*, 20 January 1952, 7.

77 Ibid.

Western Australian programs that contributed to the cultural output of the state. Their programs 'showed that Western Australia still possessed the capacity to respond innovatively to isolation'.<sup>78</sup>

Western Australia's isolation has shaped its history, identity and culture. The political and cultural dominance of Sydney, Canberra and Melbourne also draws in Adelaide and Brisbane in their 'commercial and cultural orbit'.<sup>79</sup> Not so Perth; rather, Western Australians, 'challenged by greater distance from the dominant south-east, have found scope for independent initiative'.<sup>80</sup> Experiences of and responses to isolation are a defining feature of the state, although these experiences differed dramatically between Perth, coastal towns and outback communities located across its vast landmass.

King's session was unique in the national repertoire of ABC women's programming, as she fought to maintain the independence of her session and conceptualised the program as addressing a long felt need for intellectual stimulation that had been unfulfilled due to the state's isolation. She advocated for a greater recognition of the importance of Western Australia within national programming. In late 1946, Clare Mitchell, the organiser of the national women's session, asked King to speak about life in Western Australia for the opening program of the new national session.<sup>81</sup> King was 'a bit taken aback at first at your wanting to know how we live, and so on. We think we think pretty much as you do'.<sup>82</sup> However, King conceded that there were some differences that could be discussed on the air. Mitchell replied that she was 'sorry if I conveyed the impression that we thought you were a foreign country' and that she wanted King to build the 'personality' of the state through her talk.<sup>83</sup> King continued to be annoyed by Mitchell's tone, and wrote back that she was 'not at all happy' about the talks she was being asked to give. She responded that she would like to focus on how residents of the eastern states ignored the west:

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78 Ibid., 139.

79 Geoffrey Bolton, *Land of Vision and Mirage: Western Australia Since 1826* (Perth: University of Western Australia Press, 2008), 2.

80 Ibid.

81 Clare Mitchell to Catherine King, 16 October 1946, Talks – Mrs Catherine King – Women's Session WA [Box 38], SP1558/2, 650, NAA.

82 Catherine King to Clare Mitchell, 22 October 1946, Talks – Mrs Catherine King – Women's Session WA [Box 38], SP1558/2, 650, NAA.

83 Clare Mitchell to Catherine King, 12 November 1946, Talks – Mrs Catherine King – Women's Session WA [Box 38], SP1558/2, 650, NAA.

Because of our isolation, Australia has got into the habit of regarding us as a different country. The point I'd try to make is that we are really very much part of Australia.<sup>84</sup>

Mitchell was 'a little perturbed at the mare's nest I stirred up by my unfortunate phrase "how you live"', which she noted was used in letters to all states, not just Western Australia, but she nevertheless conceded to King's request. She explained:

My first impression was that your scolding of us for our belated interest in Western Australia detracted from what I consider is an interesting and delightful talk. However, on thinking it over, if it is a question you feel strongly on far be it from me to curb you.<sup>85</sup>

It is apparent that King was acutely aware of the perception of the west by those in the east, and she was outspoken in her opposition to any insinuation that the state was different to the rest of the country, or less a part of the nation than anywhere else. She was also critical of perceptions that the west was less developed than the east, as seen in her exclamation that she lived exactly as Mitchell did. King advocated for an increased awareness of Western Australia by residents of the eastern states and a greater recognition of the state's contributions to the nation.

Like Humfress, King's session was especially aimed at an audience of women in regional and rural areas of Western Australia. Indeed, much of the impetus for the reinstatement of a women's session in the state was due to the belief that it would do much to ameliorate the isolation of outback women. In their submission to the ABC commission in 1944, the Women's Service Guilds (WSG) emphasised the isolation of Western Australian women, especially those in outback areas. They pointed out that the 'old isolation of peacetime', which was 'geographic, economic and political', had been made worse by wartime conditions.<sup>86</sup> Rural women's ability to travel had been curtailed by petrol rationing and the reduction of train services. Their husbands were away fighting, leaving them to take care of the farm on their own—a situation that was especially acute in

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84 Catherine King to Clare Mitchell, 26 November 1946, Talks – Mrs Catherine King – Women's Session WA [box 38], SP1558/2, 650, NAA.

85 Clare Mitchell to Catherine King, 20 December 1946, Talks – Mrs Catherine King – Women's Session WA [box 38], SP1558/2, 650, NAA.

86 Women's Service Guilds of Western Australia to the Chairman of the Australian Broadcasting Commission, 5 May 1944, Talks – Mrs Catherine King – Women's Session WA [Box 38], SP1558/2, 650, NAA.

dairying and wheatbelt areas. Newspapers were only delivered twice or three times per week, and women often did not have enough time to read them. Further, the reduced print runs of women's magazines due to wartime print restrictions meant that they often did not even reach the west, as the eastern states absorbed the limited number available. All of these reasons meant that radio held a special position as the 'only outside contact with the great world of affairs from which countrywomen in this State feel so completely cut off'.<sup>87</sup> The WSG argued that the importance of radio in the lives of rural Western Australian women necessitated programming specifically for them, as 'above all they want to feel that this is their own session which belongs to them'.<sup>88</sup> The importance of having such a program was crucial for women in isolated outback areas, as well as women isolated by health problems or for other reasons, as 'for a short while each day there is someone who is interested in them and their lives' and they could feel they were 'part of a large group of women whose lives are like their own'.<sup>89</sup>

The *Broadcaster* reported the announcement of the new women's session with a particular focus on its utility to women in regional areas, noting that they had particularly 'felt the loss' of the women's session and that it was anticipated that they would form the majority of the audience for King's session.<sup>90</sup> In response to the announcement, a woman from Piawaning in the state's northern agricultural region wrote: 'At last we women in the country can turn on our radios in the knowledge that there will be something worthwhile to listen to'.<sup>91</sup> Another wrote that country women 'everywhere' would welcome the new session: 'I lived for 20 years on a farm and know how isolated the folk there feel especially since transport difficulties'.<sup>92</sup> The return of women speakers would fill a 'longfelt want among women listeners'.<sup>93</sup>

Six months after the start of the session, the *Broadcaster* published four letters from women across outback Western Australia. A woman from Kondinin wrote that the session made her forget the 'drudgery of farm life in a drought' and provided emotional support. Another woman

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87 Ibid.

88 Ibid.

89 Ibid.

90 'ABC Women's Session Begins on Monday', *Broadcaster*, 30 August 1944, 3.

91 'A Country Woman', 'Boon in the Country', *Broadcaster*, 20 September 1944, 8.

92 'Mrs. M. J.', 'Women's Session Welcome', *Broadcaster*, 13 September 1944, 8.

93 Ibid.

from Eastern Pingelly wrote that the session, which aired at 10.45am, gave her a pleasurable break after rising at 4.30am to tend to animals, cart hay and harvest peas.<sup>94</sup> A woman from Pithara wrote that city dwellers might not realise 'how cut-off we women of the outback are from the city and its many interests and doings', and that the women's session 'brings us some of this over the air'.<sup>95</sup> The *Broadcaster* opined that:

It is interesting to know that 90 per cent of the women who have written to express their appreciation live in isolated country districts. They are the women who are debarred from taking part in many of the things they love. They crave companionship and knowledge of current happenings. They can get this companionship and knowledge from the session, and their letters are proof of their appreciation.<sup>96</sup>

The Western Australian *ABC Women's Session* focused on issues that particularly affected women in the country. In 1945, for example, the difficulties that mothers faced in obtaining a decent education for their children in the bush was discussed in a series of talks on the session. One mother wrote of the deprivation of her child's rural school that was built on barren land, had no toys or play equipment, old desks, and required local mothers to do the work of washing dishes and cleaning the school while also supporting their husbands on the farm.<sup>97</sup>

King sometimes travelled to regional areas to speak with women and gain a better sense of the realities of their lives. She spent a week in the country in May 1946 to 'meet country listeners' and listen to the session herself 'under country conditions'.<sup>98</sup> In March 1947, she proposed a visit to Kalgoorlie to 'spend a couple of days with a miner's wife', which she expected would provide 'a wealth of good human material for broadcasting'.<sup>99</sup> Talks Director B. H. Molesworth agreed with her, and noted that the visit would provide her with 'a more exact knowledge of the life and problems of women in the goldfields', which would enable her to

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94 'Appreciation for a Session: Outback Women Approve', *Broadcaster*, 9 May 1945, 6.

95 Ibid.

96 Ibid.

97 'A.B.C. Women's Session', *Broadcaster*, 24 October 1945, 6.

98 Catherine King to B. H. Molesworth, 30 May 1946, Talks – Mrs Catherine King – Women's Session WA [Box 38], SP1558/2, 650, NAA.

99 Catherine King to B. H. Molesworth, 6 March 1947, Talks – Mrs Catherine King – Women's Session WA [Box 38], SP1558/2, 650, NAA.

‘talk more directly’ to them on her program.<sup>100</sup> She visited Kalgoorlie again in May 1949 and conducted a radio session from the town. The session featured local speakers who discussed the experience of living in the area, as well as Kalgoorlie’s history. The *Kalgoorlie Miner* reported that King believed that ‘people who live outside the city are the people who are wearing the real fabric of life’.<sup>101</sup> The issue of King performing public relations work in regional areas caused some friction among management at the ABC. Molesworth believed that King could improve her session if ‘she could get out into the country areas sometimes and meet women and women’s organisations in country towns’, as more country listeners tuned in to the session than those in city, and thus the interests of country listeners should be more directly addressed.<sup>102</sup> Barry, however, did not believe that meeting country listeners was important enough to warrant taking one day per week to do so.<sup>103</sup>

King specifically requested feedback from rural listeners and received a significant number of letters from them. She stated in November 1945 that 80 per cent of her correspondence was sent by country women.<sup>104</sup> A farmer’s wife wrote that the radio was her ‘only source of world information’ and that she found it ‘depressing beyond words’ that the daytime programming schedule was dominated by serials and music. She wanted more talks and interviews with foreign visitors who could provide insight into their countries.<sup>105</sup> Another listener from North Collie wrote of the ‘marvellous difference’ that the wireless had made to the lives of country listeners, and commented that educational content was its primary value.<sup>106</sup> King herself stated that country people were anxious ‘to gain knowledge of progressive ideas’.<sup>107</sup>

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100 B. H. Molesworth to Catherine King, 12 March 1947, Talks – Mrs Catherine King – Women’s Session WA [Box 38], SP1558/2, 650, NAA.

101 ‘Broadcast for Women: Visit of Mrs Catherine King’, *Kalgoorlie Miner*, 27 May 1949, 1.

102 B. H. Molesworth to Keith Barry, 28 March 1947, Talks – Mrs Catherine King – Women’s Session WA [Box 38], SP1558/2, 650, NAA.

103 Keith Barry to B. H. Molesworth, 24 March 1947, Talks – Mrs Catherine King – Women’s Session WA [Box 38], SP1558/2, 650, NAA.

104 ‘Woman’s Realm: Country Needs’, *West Australian*, 30 November 1945, 11.

105 E. Robertson to Catherine King, 18 January 1946, Talks – Mrs Catherine King – Women’s Session WA [Box 38], SP1558/2, 650, NAA.

106 G. M. Rees to Catherine King, 17 January 1946, Talks – Mrs Catherine King – Women’s Session WA [Box 38], SP1558/2, 650, NAA.

107 ‘Women and Broadcasting’, *Broadcaster*, 29 August 1945, 6.

## Conclusion

This chapter examined the significance of women's broadcasting in areas outside the major east coast capitals. Local commercial women's sessions such as 3SR Shepparton and 2WG Wagga Wagga played major roles in their communities through fundraising, volunteering and creating a community among local women over the airwaves. The example of Newcastle demonstrates the role of women's radio in helping women in need and fostering a community and identity among working-class women in the region. It also highlights the importance of the compères themselves, who were or became leading citizens in their communities. The ABC similarly tried to meet the needs of country women; however, its public service ethos meant that the sessions could not emulate the hands-on work that the local commercial stations performed. Lorna Byrne's *Country Hour Women's Session* was also criticised for trying to cater to all country women listeners in Australia; yet, the session built up a substantial following and ran for 14 years. Catherine King's Western Australian *ABC Women's Session* catered specifically to the state's very isolated outback women and integrated them into the public sphere. These examples emphasise the importance of radio as a medium that brought women across Australia into the public sphere. Radio catered to the very different needs of women in regions across the country, improved their lives and provided opportunities for them to engage in active citizenship in their local communities. The role of radio in regional areas demonstrates its role in fostering women's civic participation and, moreover, the practical ways it could be used to improve the lives of women and the community as a whole.

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