
**Access to the published version:**
BEFORE THE PARROT:
THE ‘NEWS COMMENTATOR’ ON AUSTRALIAN COMMERCIAL RADIO

‘Although some of the “B” class stations have interesting commentators on the foreign news, the main responsibility for educating the listening public inevitably falls upon the A.B.C.’, asserted the political scientist W. Macmahon Ball in 1938 (Ball 1938, p. 127). While he correctly noted the presence of news commentators on commercial radio, Ball understated their number and prominence in this sector. By the early 1930s news commentators, tending to focus on domestic politics and international affairs, were an important feature of the Australian broadcasting system. A good deal of scholarly attention has been paid to the ABC’s A. E. Mann, better known as ‘The Watchman’ (Inglis 1983, pp. 63-4, 83-4; Petersen 1993, pp. 106-7). But with the principal exception of some Australian Dictionary of Biography articles, Mann’s commercial radio counterparts have been largely overlooked; certainly, there has been no sustained attempt to examine the phenomenon of the news commentator on Australian commercial radio. This paper seeks to begin this process by recovering the broadcasting activities of J. M. Prentice, Dr W. G. Goddard, Charles Cousens, Major-General Sir Thomas Blamey, S. H. Jordan, Eric Baume and even ‘Dad’ of Steele Rudd fame. Moving from the 1920s to the 1960s, the paper considers the commentators’ backgrounds, their at times schizophrenic broadcasting duties, some of the controversies they generated, and the ways in which they were perceived by public figures and other listeners.

Early news commentators
One of Australian radio’s earliest news commentators was J. M. Prentice, a former salesman and army officer who had dabbled in the occult and astrology while in England during World War I (Roe 1986, p. 221). He commenced his broadcasting career in 1924 presenting a series of love stories on 2BL. Although, as ‘Uncle Jack’, he hosted a program for children, by 1925 he was also broadcasting talks on foreign affairs. Prentice continued these features when he moved to 2UW in 1928, and also presented grand operas and symphonies. Listeners to his foreign affairs talks became accustomed to his anti-Communist leanings and his views on the ‘iniquity known as the Treaty of Versailles’ (Moore 2002, p. 27).\(^1\)
‘Mr Prentice is in my opinion the most objectionable announcer … he is always seeking to thrust his (in his own opinion) superior education and knowledge of most subjects down our throats, with his style of “schoolmaster instructing small pupils” tone’, wrote one listener, J. Lea, in 1930. Opinionated news commentators attracted harsh criticisms, and vigorous defenders: Lea’s letter inspired another listener to attest to Prentice’s ‘ability and intelligence, his culture and experience’, and yet another to assert that Prentice possessed ‘a knowledge of these topics far in advance of the average individual’. But just how cultured and well-educated was Prentice? In a serialised biography published in *Radio Pictorial of Australia* in 1937, Prentice admitted to his humble country origins, but elected not to mention that his earlier career in ‘commercial work’ had been as a salesman in Moonee Ponds. He preferred to talk more about his past as a public speaker, first with a debating club in rural Victoria and then at the Bijou Theatre in Melbourne, his activities as a freelance journalist and book reviewer, and his passion for music. Prentice must have been delighted to see the publication refer to his ‘enthusiastically intellectual life’ before the war; later, he would falsely claim that he had matriculated from the University of Melbourne. In other profiles he spoke of the importance of a knowledge of languages and ‘a training in the highest traditions of journalism’, and boasted that he had been able to supply a listener ‘from memory’ with the words of the ‘Marseillaise’. He wore a bow-tie, cultivated a sing-song accent, and publicly detailed the lengths his overseas ‘correspondents’ went to in order to despatch the latest news on international developments (Moore 2002, p. 28).

As Prentice’s career demonstrated, news commentators were drawn from a variety of backgrounds. Some came from journalism, as with 2UE’s E. C. S. Marshall, a New Zealander who had specialised in writing about foreign affairs for the Sydney *Daily Guardian*, and 2UE’s A. H. Hauptmann, an English-born journalist who had been asked at short notice to comment on the 1935 New South Wales election for 2UE. Several of the lecturers who appeared on air were employed in Australian universities and occupied a prominent role in the nation’s intellectual life. If *Wireless Weekly* thought that ‘playful’ professors were pleased to be let off the academic chain and to talk about … lightsome subjects, the academics and experts themselves were surely grateful for the opportunity to disseminate to a wider audience the insights and opinions gleaned from their studies. When Prentice went on holiday in 1932, Dr George Mackaness, the head of English at
Sydney Teachers’ College, and a major figure in Sydney literary circles, lectured on ‘My Idea of Democracy’. In the summer of 1933-34, 2UW ran a series of lectures entitled ‘Australian Affairs’ on Sunday evenings, featuring economists and other academics from the University of Sydney.\(^7\)

The early news commentators wanted to be taken seriously, so it was not just Prentice who viewed academic qualifications and honorifics as important. There was more than a degree of exaggeration at 2GB, the theosophical station designed to be more highbrow than the ABC. Ernest Wood, who had been secretary to C. W. Leadbeater, a Liberal Catholic ‘bishop’ and leading theosophist, dubiously adopted a professorial title when presenting on 2GB lectures about his travels to India, England and America, and his views on philanthropy, religion and art (Roe 1986, p. 304).\(^8\) George Arundale, the station’s chairman, used the title ‘Dr’ in his lectures during the Depression, even though he had only been awarded an honorary doctorate from a short-lived theosophical university in Madras (Roe 1979, p. 104).\(^9\)

At 4BC, Dr W. G. Goddard emerged as a prominent international affairs commentator in the 1930s. A somewhat elusive individual, Goddard was born in Newcastle in 1887 and apparently went on to obtain Masters and Doctoral degrees, possibly in the United States. He worked at the West China Union University, a Christian missionary institution in Sichuan that closed down in 1926. Goddard was a fervent supporter of Chiang Kai-Shek and the Kuomintang, receiving in 1941 an official decoration from China and forming the China Society of Australia (Queensland).\(^10\) Over 4BC and its affiliates in 1934, Goddard began advocating that listeners in Brisbane and in towns throughout Queensland establish their own ‘Round Table Clubs’. The title drew cheekily on the Round Table group, which had been formed in 1909 to organise influential citizens in Britain and the dominions for discussion of the empire and its future, and published a quarterly journal to which a number of Australians contributed anonymously. The group was seen as providing an outlet for informed journalism and consistently intelligent commentary on imperial affairs (Robson 1975, pp. v-vii). Visiting 4BC in 1935, a senior radio inspector from the Postmaster-General’s Department was impressed by the popularity of Goddard’s talks and the spread of his clubs, which apparently centred on the discussion of international affairs.\(^11\)
Several of commercial radio’s news commentators served their radio stations in other capacities and they were expected to entertain as well as inform. As we have seen, Prentice was ‘Uncle Jack’ as well as ‘J. M. Prentice’. If the letters to wireless periodicals are any guide, listeners were quite unfazed by this apparent schizophrenia. As Wireless Weekly put it in 1938, news commentators did not talk to a select and blue-stockinged few; letters to the publication, and to stations and networks, showed that the commentators appealed to a cross-section of the public.¹² One particularly popular feature in Sydney was the 2GB News Review, heard six nights a week since 1937 and promoted as ‘fearless in exposing hypocrisy, sham, and subterfuge’. A Vaucluse housewife declared it her favourite program because, having bad eyes and finding it a struggle to wade through the newspaper, ‘I can get the world’s news presented in a form which stimulates thought’.¹³

News commentators became an entrenched feature of the Australian airwaves at a time when neither the ABC nor the commercial sector had well-developed mechanisms for news gathering. Until well into World War II, most stations relied on agreements with newspapers to form the basis of news bulletins. News commentators offered, in essence, a kind of ‘value adding’—perspective, interpretation, insight—to the news bulletins that were broadcast. It is unsurprising that the commentators were drawn from a diversity of backgrounds, for journalists were much less a feature of the radio industry than were entertainers—musicians, comedians, vaudevillians and actors. Emerging as they did in the late 1920s, news commentators had plenty about which to talk and to fulminate: the Great Depression, domestic political turmoil, and international crises.

Both the limitations of, and the opportunities provided by, commercial radio news practices in the interwar years are perhaps evidenced by 2GB’s creation of the ‘Children’s Newspaper of the Air’. The program was run by Charles Cousens, who had served in India with the Sherwood Foresters in the mid-1920s and worked in radio advertising before becoming a 2GB announcer (Chapman 1993, p. 514). Children could qualify as ‘reporters’ and obtain a membership badge once they sent in an original sample of their work, and they were expected to ring through or deliver an account of any news item that came their way. As a result, Cousens boasted in 1939, 2GB had broken several stories before the press. By now the Children’s Newspaper was said to have 15 000 members. The essay competitions the child reporters entered posed questions such as:
‘Should we have a national register?’ and ‘Do you consider it advisable for Britain to have a pact with Russia?’. Cousens himself also delivered nightly commentaries on national and international events, which appealed to adults as well as children.\textsuperscript{14}

Ball (1938, p. 132) observed that speakers on political and economic matters were constantly anxious that their talks would be considered dull, meaning that they endeavoured to be bright, provocative and interesting; as a result, some events were exaggerated or sensationalised. A decade later, writing in the \textit{Current Affairs Bulletin}, J. D. B. Miller (1949, p. 197) was somewhat harsher, declaring it impossible to analyse the intricacies of political and international affairs in 600 words, and dreaming of hour-long lectures and discussions. But business and political figures generally enjoyed hearing serious matters discussed on radio, even in short formats, at a time when music rather than news dominated Australia’s airwaves. In 1938 businessman Sir Arthur Cocks told Sir Ernest Fisk that his friends and the members of his club preferred to listen to the news commentaries on 2GB than to the ‘music and music and just more music’ on 2CH.\textsuperscript{15} Questioned by \textit{Radio Pictorial of Australia}, the New South Wales premier, Bertram Stevens, spoke of the importance of keeping in touch with views that might influence public opinion; Percy Spender, assistant federal treasurer, described the commentators as ‘men of ability’ who were in ‘direct touch with the people’.\textsuperscript{16} Were these, perhaps, the first intimations of Australian political leaders seeking to appease and to flatter outspoken but popular radio commentators?

Individual and group profiles of news commentators were now a staple feature of radio periodicals. The fact that the 2GB News Reviewer would not reveal his name only fuelled interest in the session and inspired articles about the ‘mystery’. In 1938 the commentator declared that he didn’t like publicity, and that it was the comment, not the presenter, who was important. But the commentator had already been exposed in \textit{Truth} as Eric Baume, a journalist and author who was a natural showman; his reticence about his identity seems to have been due to the fact that he was simultaneously editing the \textit{Sunday Sun}, part of a newspaper and magazine stable accused of monopolistic tendencies.\textsuperscript{17}

How, then, did Baume and his contemporaries view themselves? In articles published in 1938, Baume contended that Australians were fit and healthy, but in many cases ‘possessed of a mind so lazy that if it were a stomach the only nourishment would be obtained from forcible feeding’. He wanted to receive more than just letters of praise:
‘At least when people attack me, I have made them think’. Articulating his philosophy a little more diplomatically, the anonymous ‘2UE Observer’ asserted that the commentator dealt ‘largely with that inchoate mass of the people who, inexperienced in public matters and unlearned in foreign or local politics, are unable to form their own opinions’. Cousens believed that the commentator who would prove most popular was the one who appealed not only to the reasoning of his listeners, but to their emotions. Some other commentators had more respect for their listeners’ intellect, and were in no way inclined to use a force feeding analogy. The elderly A. M. Pooley, who presented ‘World Personalities’ talks on 2GB, felt that it was a commentator’s job to explain the news and leave his listeners to form their own opinions.18

Early in 1938 Major-General Sir Thomas Blamey, under the pseudonym of ‘The Sentinel’, began presenting Sunday-night commentaries on 3UZ. He was grateful for the extra income—three guineas a week—as well as for the opportunity to talk about the rising threat of another world war. He warned of the dangers posed by a resurgent Germany and an expansionist Japan until October 1939, when he resigned to take up the command of the 6th division of the AIF (Hetherington 1973, pp. 74-5). 3UZ’s chairman now smugly revealed Blamey’s identity, saying that eighteen months ago the station had sought to satisfy the public’s growing demand for more knowledge about international affairs: ‘We were prepared to make the necessary time and finance available to supply that service … if we could find the person who was adequately equipped with wide knowledge, an astute mind, a background of experience and wisdom—and a voice. It was a lot to seek’.19

Wartime news commentators
‘The Sentinel’ had obviously been signed to 3UZ to counter the popularity of the ABC’s famous ‘The Watchman’. Since 1932 E. A. Mann’s daily news session and weekly commentary had been heard on national relay from Melbourne, giving him a much greater reach than any commercial station or network could dream of. Mann’s dogmatic, bombastic style worried more than one ABC official, and led to questions and criticism in parliament. However, his criticism of Chamberlain’s appeasement of Hitler provided proof of the ABC’s independence, and his robust liberal imperialism helped him to survive. From September 1939 Mann was subject to censorship on the orders of the
Menzies cabinet (Inglis 1983, pp. 14, 63; Andrews 1996, pp. 392-3). News commentators were a source of some disquiet for the wartime government. In November the PMG, Eric Harrison, flagged the possibility of introducing a regulation that would compel all news commentators to reveal their identities. He feared that there was an illogical ‘suggestion of infallibility about the anonymous news commentator’. Harrison’s idea, for whatever reason, was not implemented, although Mann’s name was revealed in parliament.

In late 1940, having been deprived of his regular session, Mann resigned from the ABC. Almost immediately, 3UZ took out a full-page advertisement in the Listener-In crowing that it had secured the most sensational ‘RADIO SCOOP’ of the year by signing up Mann. Lever Bros. agreed to sponsor the session, which was relayed to 2UW, 5DN, 6ML and other affiliated stations. 3UZ may have lost ‘The Sentinel’, but it had acquired ‘The Watchman’. A survey in 1943 showed that half the people in Sydney listened to Mann at lunchtime on 2UW, compared with 28 per cent who listened to his more temperate successors on the ABC (Inglis 1983, p. 84).

The wartime activities of Brisbane’s W. G. Goddard were also closely monitored. His sessions had a ‘definitive Australian policy’ from the outset: an Australian air force of at least 5000 bombers, a great inland defence road from south to north, and the rapid development of northern Australia. On the outbreak of war, Goddard self-importantly offered himself and the Round Table Clubs—an ‘organisation [that] had been studying world affairs for years’ and represented ‘in most cases the leading public men in their respective centers’—to the Department of Information. While the precise terms of the offer are unclear, Goddard seems to have wanted the Round Table Clubs to play some sort of a role in official propaganda. When his representations came to nought he became even more strident in his criticisms of Australia’s defence preparedness and war effort. Censors described him as a ‘shrewd’ but ‘objectionable’ ‘charlatan doctor’ who appeared to harbour hopes that the Department of Information would make him director of propaganda. Although Goddard’s ‘rambling’ talks caused consternation and made him the subject of surveillance, they were not censored as they were deemed to be political comment rather than prejudicial to national security.

Goddard also established a ‘4BC Plane Fund’ that raised money for the purchase of trainer aircraft. Some aircraft were handed over to government officials, although Goddard was unable to persuade Prime Minister Curtin to accept them in person. The
certainty with which Goddard spoke, and his professed commitment to the Australian war effort, made him difficult to contain; by 1944 his clubs were said to have some 25,000 members. In circumstances that are unclear, Goddard left 4BC after the war and seems to have tried, and failed, to find work with the Department of External Affairs and ASIO. He also lobbied the Menzies government, again unsuccessfully, for an honour in recognition of his wartime broadcasting activities. Instead, adopting a virulently anti-Communist and pro-Nationalist line, he wrote extensively about Chinese and Taiwanese affairs until well into the 1960s. Nevertheless, his considerable knowledge of Asian affairs was recognised in some quarters of Australian officialdom, and for a decade his preoccupations had undoubtedly brought a unique perspective to Australia’s commercial airwaves.

Less contentious were the wartime news commentaries of A. M. Pooley and ‘Dad’ of Snake Gully fame. In mid-1942, having seen interest in news commentaries skyrocket in the United States since the start of the Pacific war, 2UW signed up the experienced Pooley to present a nightly news commentary. A year later, he also began broadcasting a ‘War Digest’ session each night. At around the same time, Kolynos toothpaste began sponsoring a weekly, sanguine round-up of world events over 30 stations that broadcast the ‘Dad and Dave’ serial. The sessions conducted by ‘Dad’ and ‘The Watchman’ indicate that commentaries by high-profile figures had commercial appeal.

Postwar news commentators

By the second half of the 1940s, with several commercial stations and networks aggressively establishing their own news services, ‘news commentators’ were much more about comment, and to some extent politics, than they were about news. As a number of stations were licensed to political and religious interests, there had long been a direct nexus between news commentators and specific political agendas. A particularly conspicuous example was S. H. Jordan, who had held various positions with the Communist Party of Australia and served as secretary of the State Unemployed Relief Workers Labour Council. In late 1939 the 29-year-old began presenting a fill-in news commentary on 2KY, owned by the Trades and Labour Council (TLC), and before long he was permanent host of ‘Views on the News’ and editor of an eponymous newspaper.
In 1940 *Radio Pictorial of Australia* declared him Sydney’s youngest news commentator and described him simply as ‘outspoken’ and unafraid to express his views on national and international affairs. *Broadcasting Business* matter-of-factly noted Syd Jordan’s appeal for money to help re-elect the Curtin Labor government in 1943, while *Radio Pictorial* remained content to portray him as one of 2KY’s ‘star’ personalities. However, his activities, like those of Prentice and Goddard, were closely monitored by intelligence authorities. Jordan remained on air until 1948, by which time the TLC, in the era of rising anti-Communism, had moved to the right. Apparently dismissed by 2KY, Jordan took up a position as an industrial organiser in country New South Wales. According to Frank Browne’s not always reliable *Things I Hear*, Jordan later re-appeared as a drinks waiter at the Royal Sydney Yacht Club and a milk bar operator.

Some of the battles of the Cold War were played out in Australia’s commercial radio industry, and not all news commentators survived. By the early 1950s Frank McManus, assistant secretary of the Victorian ALP, had been appointed by the Melbourne Trades Hall Council to conduct a nightly political commentary on 3KZ. His anti-Communist activities helped to get him sacked from the labour station, and McManus went on to become a founding member of the breakaway Democratic Labor Party (McManus 1977, pp. 48, 69).

But there was no stopping Jack Prentice after his period in military intelligence during the war. He wrote intelligence bulletins for ‘The Association’, a proto-fascist auxiliary, and returned to 2UW. From now on he would call himself ‘Colonel’ and despatch letters on ‘J. M. Prentice—World Affairs’ letterhead. In 1955 R. G. Casey, as Minister for External Affairs, refused to give a personal letter of recommendation to Prentice, who informed the media that he was planning a world trip to bring him up to date with world affairs. To do so, feared Casey, would suggest that Prentice had an official relationship with the government; diplomats were instructed to treat Prentice with ‘reasonable politeness, without particularly going out of their way’. The Australian Minister to the United Nations, W. D. Forsyth, received what he described as three ‘curious epistles’ from Prentice and decided not to discuss with him Australian policy or activities at the UN. When Prentice visited India and spoke in favour of Pakistan controlling Kashmir, Australian officials had to explain to the Indian government that he was a commentator on a commercial station, and had nothing to do with the ABC or its
short-wave service for listeners overseas, Radio Australia. In the Philippines, Prentice advocated a trade agreement between the two countries and an exchange of military cadets, and turned an interview with President Magsaysay into a monologue. President of the Australian-Korean Association, Prentice visited the Republic of Korea in 1955 and 1956, and also attended conferences of the Asian Peoples’ Anti-Communist League. In the first tape recording he made for 2UW from Seoul, he claimed that there was no evidence whatsoever that South Korea was a police state. When the technician murmured that this was going too far and cited some instances of repressive government behaviour known to him personally, Prentice at least had the good grace to erase the offending portion of the interview for 2UW listeners. But he remained a ‘bosom friend’ of President Syngman Rhee, who awarded him the Korean medal for ‘Education and Culture’ (Moore 2002, p. 28). 28

Increasingly, however, radio managements became interested in recruiting polemicists, rather than self-styled ‘experts’ and propagandists, to their staffs. After being sacked as editor-in-chief of Truth and Sportsman Ltd in 1952 (Lawson 1993, p. 137), Eric Baume approached 2GB to take him back. The Macquarie network’s board agreed to his suggested salary of £2250 per year, describing him as an ‘outstanding’ news commentator. Baume’s ‘This I Believe’ commentary, presented between 10 and 10.15 p.m. each weeknight, quickly proved popular, attracting press interest and sales to 2CA, 2HR and 2WL; as a result, 2GB not only covered overhead costs but secured new late-night revenue. Baume’s on-air profile steadily expanded. Following a debate between Baume and the Reverend Alan Walker about hotel closing hours in 1954, the 2GB switchboard was jammed with callers requesting more of this type of program. The station obliged, arranging for Baume to challenge individuals to discussions of contentious current issues. The trick was to be provocative rather than defamatory: when Macquarie took out defamation insurance in 1956, it was on the proviso that Baume’s commentaries would be vetted by the company’s solicitors. He developed two new opinion sessions on 2GB, ‘I’m on Your Side’ and ‘Say What You Think’, and in 1956 also became a news commentator on ATN-7. 29

Baume died in 1967, the year the Broadcasting Program Standards were finally amended to allow the recording and re-broadcasting of telephone calls. Although he may never have had the opportunity to take open-line calls, Baume was in some respects a
direct forebear of the opinionated talkback host. He and the other news commentators who populated Australia’s commercial airwaves from the 1920s may have emerged and thrived as a result of depression and war, but they shared a good deal with contemporary talkback hosts like John Laws, Neil Mitchell, Howard Sattler and Alan Jones: a foundation built at least as much on entertainment as on news; strong opinions; a desire to be taken seriously; and a potent ability to attract listener loyalty and commercial support, resulting in responses from officialdom ranging from monitoring and censure to pandering and flattery.

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1 See also *RPA*, 1 December 1935, p. 15, 1 January 1937, p. 6.
2 *WW*, 31 October 1930, p. 17, 14 November 1930, p. 15, 21 November 1930, p. 11.
3 *WW*, 2 September 1938, p. 10; *RPA*, 1 July 1937, pp. 10-11.
4 See also *RPA*, 1 February 1936, p. 42.
7 *WW*, 29 January 1932, p. 9, 24 November 1933, p. 25.
9 See also *WW*, 20 February 1931, p. 19.
10 See Goddard’s ASIO files at NAA/ACT: A6119, 3561-2.
11 NAA/Victoria: MP522/1, 4BC File 3, senior radio inspector report, December 1935. See also *BB*, 12 September 1940, p. 12; *RPA*, 1 February 1944, p. 19.
12 *WW*, 2 September 1938, p. 10.
13 *WW*, 9 July 1937, p. xiii; *RPA*, 1 August 1938, p. 6.
14 *RPA*, 1 July 1939, pp. 16, 58.
16 *RPA*, 1 June 1939, p. 32, 1 July 1939, p. 34.
18 *WW*, 2 September 1938, pp. 10, 11, 14.
19 *BB*, 12 October 1939, p. 12.
21 *Listener-In*, 2 November 1940, p. 5; *RPA*, 1 December 1940, pp. 22-3, 51; *BB*, 16 January 1941, p. 3.
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BB, 27 August 1942, p. 10.

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