

RADIO HISTORY 101

Gordon Bathgate: *Radio Broadcasting: A History of the Airwaves*,
Barnsley: Pen & Sword History 2020, 224 pp.

Radio is regarded by many to be a largely obsolete medium. The very first means of wireless broadcasting, it has been around for more than a century, serving generations after generations of listeners, but never quite reaching the same level of passion and enthusiasm of audiences as in its Golden Age, between the 1930s and 40s. Still, its burial seems to be much premature, given the medium's uncanny ability to redefine itself and survive subsequent technological revolutions. Not able anymore to maintain its status as the primary platform for journalism and family entertainment, radio became a major hit with the working and commuting crowds instead, finding its new roles in the media environments of the latter half of the 20th and the early 21st century.¹ Apparently, contrary to what The Buggles sang about on the early MTV, video did not kill the audial medium after all.

As the British media scholar David Hendy put it, the radio's "profile in the social landscape is small and its influence large".² This observation is true also on the historical level, as the early radio broadcasting structures shaped the entire electronic media systems for decades to come in many countries, and the classic formats of radio shows are still very much alive in the brave new world of podcasts and digital streaming. The continuing relevance of radio can be seen as well in many of its fans' relentless devotion to the medium, even today – in the times of vast abundance of much glitzier media technologies.

"Radio Broadcasting: A History of the Airwaves", written by Gordon Bathgate and published by Pen & Sword History in 2020, seems to arise from (and capitalize on) this devotion. Its author, a self-declared radio geek, is a veteran broadcaster from Aberdeen, Scotland. The book is a well-researched and accessible history of the medium (but with a few caveats).

Bathgate's work is composed of eleven chapters, starting with "The Fathers of Radio" and ending with "Radio in the Twenty-First Century". This comprises more than a hundred years of the audial medium's development, from the late 19th century to the present day. Each chapter discusses a section of the history of radio

1 R. Campbell, C.R. Martin, B. Fabos, *Media & Culture: Mass Communication in a Digital Age*, Boston–New York: Bedford 2017, p. 154.

2 D. Hendy, *Radio in the Global Age*, Cambridge: Polity 2000, p. 3.

broadcasting and is presented through a narrative that is both detailed and easy to understand, even for readers without any prior knowledge of the subject. “Radio Broadcasting: A History of the Airwaves” smooth flow is interrupted several times throughout the volume by little vignettes shedding light on some of the intriguing and illuminative episodes from the history of radio (including such gems as “The War of the Worlds” and “The Myth of ‘Tokyo Rose’”), reminiscent of the manner of presentation of such classic history works as Norman Davies’ “Europe: A History”.³

One large shortcoming of the book, at least from certain points of view, is its strict focus on the English-speaking parts of the world. We learn a lot about the history of the BBC (“Britain Begins Broadcasting” and “The British Broadcasting Corporation”) and the radio landscapes of the United States and Australia (“Radio in America” and “Radio Down Under”), as well as some other selected issues, such as the audial medium’s role in World War II (“Radio at War”) and the struggles of the British radio broadcasting in the second half of the 20th century (“Radio Fights Back” and “All Change”), but not much else (Chapter 5, titled “Voices from Europe”, focuses on English-language programming broadcast by European continental stations). The volume was certainly not meant to be a universal history of radio, as its title might suggest. Another deficiency of the publication is its lack of footnotes or endnotes of any kind, which surely goes well with the popular history vibe of Bathgate’s work, but undermines to some extent its usefulness for students and scholars of the history of wireless broadcasting (however, a list of references is provided at the end of the tome).

It is my opinion that “Radio Broadcasting: A History of the Airwaves” is a well-written volume whose strengths lie primarily in its informative value. Even with the work’s limitations, it may still be a great read for anyone interested in the history of wireless broadcasting (especially in English-language countries). And if the radio’s “simplicity and portability will ensure it remains” and the audial medium “will continue to occupy an important place in the media landscape of the twenty-first century”,⁴ as Gordon Bathgate believes, there are many reasons to think that his book will attract many readers in the years to come.

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3 N. Davies, *Europe: A History*, New York: Harper Perennial 1998.

4 G. Bathgate, *Radio Broadcasting: A History of the Airwaves*, Barnsley: Sword & Pen History 2020.