

## Review

**Dick Booth, *Talking of Sport: The Story of Radio Commentary* (Sport Books, 2008)  
*International Journal of the History of Sport*, Vol.26, No.9, July 2009, pp.1301-1303.**

**Richard Haynes, Stirling Media Research Institute, University of Stirling**

Dick Booth's book recounting the story of sports commentary on radio in the UK and in selected nations across the world is a fascinating and rare analysis of an overlooked aspect of broadcasting and sports culture. Its attempt to trace the origins of commentary technique in the BBC and beyond should be welcomed as an important contribution to our understanding of how a new vocabulary of sport was literally invented and innovated from the 1920's onward. Based on over 70 interviews with sports broadcasters, written archive material and hours of listening to recordings in the British Library's sound archive this book is packed full of interesting biographical information, transcripts of key sports commentaries and reminiscences of life behind the microphone.

Booth clearly has a passion for his subject that comes through his extensive narrative of sports commentary. The book is divided into four main sections: How radio commentary became a part of life; the making of the commentator; radio, sport and the nation; and the challenges of different sports. The main theme is to explore the nature of sports commentary, how it was practiced and the problems and issues faced by commentators in broadcasting to the radio audience. The focus on commentators, as both skilled broadcasters and radio personalities in their own right, runs throughout the book. How commentators strive to inform and entertain their listeners is of prime importance. As Booth suggests in his prologue: 'The voices in which we speak are statements of our selves, and of our individuality. This surely, along with the fascination of sport itself, is why radio commentary is still popular.' The outside broadcasting department of the BBC certainly garnered a whole array of familiar voices many, like John Snagge who from the mid-1930s was *the* voice behind the Oxford and Cambridge Boat Race, would become synonymous with particular sports and events. Details of the BBC's trailblazers in running commentary are all given their due status. H.B.T. Wakelam, George Allison, Howard Marshall, John Snagge and the important producers of the Inter-War period like Lance Sieveking and the BBC's first Head of OB's Gerald Cock are lauded as true pioneers. There is an interesting small section in Chapter 6 on sports broadcasts during the Second World War that brought names like Raymond Glendenning and Rex Alston to the microphone. Others, like Brian Johnston, Peter Dimmock, Kenneth Wolstenholme and Max Robertson having served in the war also got their starts in broadcasting.

The most influential figure in the BBC's formative years of sports commentary, however, was Seymour Joly de Lotbiniere, known as Lobby, who set the benchmarks for commentators from John Arlott to Wynford Vaughan-Thomas - two of the greatest broadcasters of their generation. Booth provides detailed anecdotes based on the written archives and biographical accounts of just how influential Lobby became and how his Monday morning review of 'programmes since we last met' became legend in the Department. Nearly all of the commentators Lobby worked with were men and one of the

more interesting stories Booth recounts is Lobby's exploration of women commentators who remained 'excessively rare' (p.57). Booth does not critically reflect on the reasons for the gender bias in the BBC's recruitment of commentators but, in a citation from *Some Notes on Commentary* written by Lobby, Booth reveals it was 'for technical reasons' connected to the pitch of a woman's voice. Lobby may have contributed to sports broadcasting as a male enclave but he also introduced the ideas of 'homework' and the ability for commentators to 'bring in the broad context of the event' (p.57). This often connected the drama of sport to wider meanings and identity of the nation through sports broadcasting.

In later chapters Booth analyses the role of radio sport in everyday life, in particular the way in which major encounters in different sports – whether it be boxing, athletics, baseball or football – brought people together through the popular imagination of sport and the nation. One of the most fascinating aspects of Booth's story of commentary is how this imagining affected different sports in different nations. His comparative analysis is both rare and refreshing in relation to other histories of media sport. In a series of short profiles we are introduced to Nicolò Carosio who is celebrated as an iconic figure of Italian broadcasting from the 1930s, Finn Amundson and Peder Christian Anderson who were synonymous with sport in Norway, and the Georgian Kote Makharadze whose renown across the former Soviet Union was born of his commentaries on Dynamo Tbilisi.

Outside of the UK, the most detailed account of a nation's sports commentary technique comes in Booth's analysis of Brazilian football commentary. Characterised by the extended cries of 'Gooooall', Booth explores the connections between broadcasting, football, music and culture that combine to create commentaries full of 'inventive and playful language' (p.150). Booth also reflects on the wider influence of television on the declining popularity of radio commentary particularly after the 1970s. Yet there are some great quotes from past commentators and players that emphasise the importance of radio commentary in Brazilian football culture. Paula Cezar, a former footballer and ex-patriot living in London compares the two styles to suggest 'English commentators commentate only with the mind. Brazilian commentators play the game as they talk, and commentate with the heart' (p.155). The book also connects the power of radio with the spread of cricket in India. Even if the concept of cricket as 'the national game' is overstated, there is little doubt that access to the BBC's post-War commentaries on Test cricket by John Arlott and others combined with the rising popularity of Hindi commentaries on All India Radio had a profound impact on the accessibility to the game. Booth briefly acknowledges the complexity of language and identity in India and how after a shift in policy in 1962 AIR began to broadcast in several languages in different parts of the nation. A final connection between sports broadcasting and national sporting cultures is made in a chapter on New Zealand where the commentaries of Winston McCarthy contrasted with the 'disembodied BBC-style' through his 'conversational, plain-speaking, and passionate' approach to sport (p.191).

The final chapters of the book are given over to various sports including - football, boxing, golf, tennis and cricket - where Booth traces the history of specific styles and the

transformations that have occurred over the years. One significant change here has been the inroads of expert summarisers, who are given their own analysis in Chapter 15, and the wider question of whether a commentator should be an expert in the sport or an expert broadcaster. Booth concludes: 'Voice, knowledge, broadcasting technique, small-group facilitator: the commentator needs it all' (p.298).

This is an important book for its array of sources and the comparative approach to commentary in different parts of the world and across different sports. There are limitations to its insight of both the history of radio and sport. At times there is a need for some wider historical context either regarding the place of sport in the BBC or the wider social and cultural importance of sport in society and its connection with broadcasting. There are also some key areas of BBC sports broadcasting that are not developed or explored, such as the rise of regional sports programming (particularly in the North of England, Scotland and Wales), the importance of the programme *Sports Report* in developing sports news and its competition with the outside broadcasting department, the role of commentaries in the BBC's overseas service and the eventual competition that came from commercial radio that introduced another dominant feature of sports broadcasting – the post-match phone in. These are, though, minor criticisms of an excellent celebration of the radio commentator.

Richard Haynes  
October 2008