

'Lobby' and the Formative Years of Radio Sports Commentary, 1935 – 52.

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ABSTRACT

This article traces the professional career and influence on sports broadcasting of Seymour Joly de Lotbiniere, known within the BBC as Lobby. Lobby was the BBC's Director of Outside Broadcasts from 1935 to 1939, and then again encompassing radio and television from 1946 to 1952, before concentrating on television OBs from 1952-55. He is widely credited with transforming the codes and conventions of radio running commentary as the BBC expanded its radio coverage of sport in the late 1930s and in the immediate post-war years. The article provides a brief biographical sketch of Lobby's upper-class background and privileged education and how this influenced his eventual career in broadcasting. Drawing on papers held in the BBC Written Archives and on autobiographical accounts of BBC commentators, the article analyses Lobby's development of the core principles of running commentary, the recruitment and management of commentators and his relations with the producers of sports coverage in Broadcasting House and the BBC's regional centres. The article concludes that Lobby's meticulous management and analytical approach to sports commentary had a significant influence on the institutional practices of the BBC's outside broadcasting department, an influence that continues to reverberate today.

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Commentaries cannot in fact be turned out to a set pattern of excellence like shells or razor blades. There is no single measure of speed to suit every listener, no perfect pitch or cadence, no standard blend of scene setting and associative idea. There are nevertheless certain principles that underlie good commentary, and these principles have reached a stage of development that justifies their statement and analysis.

S. J. de Lotbiniere, 1942 [1]

Introduction

Seymour Joly de Lotbiniere was the British Broadcasting Corporation's Director of Outside Broadcasts from 1935 to 1939, and then again encompassing radio and television from 1946 to 1952, before concentrating on television outside broadcasts (OB) from 1952-55. Affectionately known within the BBC as (and from herein called) 'Lobby' he came from upper-class roots but used his acute sense of the listeners' needs and his 'common touch' to innovate, develop and refine the modern techniques of sports commentary that connected the emerging national audience to the major sporting events of the time. His legacy was the evolution of the generic codes and conventions of sports broadcasting that augured a new era of sporting vernacular, a new language of sport and society. This paper aims to address just how important Lobby was to the formative years of sports broadcasting in the UK and analyse his specific contribution to the institutional principles of running commentary as they emerged in the BBC.

In analysing Lobby's influence at the BBC, of central concern was how do commentators learn to commentate? This is not easy to discern. The autobiographies of numerous British sports commentators quite often reveal a highly individualistic approach to commentary. [2] More often than not commentators had to find their own way in the bewildering world of broadcasting. They learnt their craft from instinct as much as technique. But Lobby argued there were guiding principles to the technique and spent several years leaning his analytical ear toward the spoken word and gently persuading the main protagonists on how they might improve their 'art'. This article draws on papers held at the BBC's Written Archives Centre some of which have also been used in other popular histories of sports broadcasting, most notably by Christopher Martin-Jenkins on cricket and more recently Dick Booth's history of radio commentary. [3] However, where these studies principally focus on the emerging style of particular commentators and Lobby's influence

on their development, this article is preoccupied with his contribution to the occupation of radio commentary more broadly.

It is widely acknowledged in the broad discipline of history that biography can offer a way in to understanding and interpreting the past but that placing too much emphasis on the deeds of ‘great men’ quite often masks wider processes and confuses individual intentions with wider consequences. [3] Thus in focusing on Lobby there are potential limitations to the version of history this produces. Nevertheless, in concentrating on his professional life and the constraining factors and contingencies that impinged on his work— institutional, economic, social, cultural and political – it is possible to understand why and how certain decisions were made with regard to broadcasting from sport at any given time and place.

Lobby’s professional biography, therefore, stands as a way in to understanding how commentary technique evolved, was institutionalised, and later taken forward by a whole host of household names in British radio coverage of sport.

‘Lobby’: a career in broadcasting.

Aside from having one of the most pompous sounding names in the BBC’s history, Seymour Joly de Lotbiniere was undoubtedly one of the most important figures in developing the exposition and craft of sports commentary. He was one of the few broadcasting pioneers who, with a frame of 6 feet 8 inches, looked down upon the BBC’s first Director General Lord Reith. But it is the standing of Lobby in the esteem of his peers and contemporaries that makes him an outstanding figure in the history of British broadcasting.

As Chris Wrigley has noted, in the first half of the twentieth century it was ‘not uncommon to have grandparents, parent, uncles and aunts and brothers and sisters who had all been employed in one part of the empire or other’. [4] In this context, Lobby had prodigious ancestry. His father was Brigadier-General Henri Gustave Joly de Lotbinière (1868–1960) of the Royal Engineers and his grandfather Sir Henri-Gustave Joly de Lotbiniere (1929–1908) had been a senior politician in Quebec, Canada, and was lieutenant governor of British Columbia between 1900 and 1906. Lobby was born in Buckinghamshire in 1905 and was educated at Eton College and Trinity College, Cambridge where he studied economics and law. [5] His upper-class upbringing was firmly rooted in the obstinately rigid class culture of the Edwardian era. Crucially, as Ross McKibbin has argued, wealth was not necessarily the key indicator of ‘being upper-class’. [6] Rather, status and wider cultural symbolism were equally if not more important and Lobby enjoyed a clear social and cultural authority from attending both Eton and Cambridge. The cult of ‘athleticism’ promoted in the English public school system, played their part in this respect. [7] In sport, and due to his tall frame, Lobby became a competent rower in a halcyon period of the sport at Cambridge and was part of the Third Trinity Boat Club. Again this aspect of Lobby’s social life reflected the elitist culture of university sport. ‘The Third’ was open only to Old Etonians and Old Westminsters, another marker of exclusivity in an already privileged environment. As Tony Mangan has noted regarding the place of rowing in student life at Cambridge, ‘there were men of reading, rowing men and men who attempted both’. [8] Judging from his academic and rowing records, Lobby fitted into the latter category; neither excelling in his studies or sport, but engaged with both aspects of Cambridge student life. [9] Such experiences bolstered the view that the varsity fixtures between Oxford and Cambridge – the boat race in particular - were important features in the sporting calendar. Varsity fixtures featured strongly in the BBC’s formative coverage of sport, eventually bestowing the boat race with national importance well beyond its popularity as a sport.

In January 1927, aged 21, Lobby was admitted to Lincoln’s Inn and was called to the Chancery bar in 1930 where he practiced law from his chambers at New Court. According to Pimlott-Baker it was Lobby’s ‘concern for people’ that led him to turn his back on a lucrative career as a barrister, and instead, take up a new opportunity at the fledgling BBC in 1932. [10] Radio in Britain was only a decade old when Lobby joined the Talks Department amid a group of ‘high flying’ producers and administrators who would, before long, be influencing the future of the BBC.

[11] In August 1935, after three years in Talks in a young organization that enabled a fast-track trajectory into management, Lobby succeeded Gerald Cock into the role as Director of Outside Broadcasts. Cock had overseen the BBC's earliest forays into the coverage of sport from 1927 and was to become the BBC's first Director of Television in 1935. Along with producer Lance Sieveking he had paved the way for coverage of sport and established important relations with the governing bodies of British sport. [12] Lobby had clearly impressed senior management at the BBC from an early stage of his broadcasting career and was clearly moving into a role of high responsibility for someone just turned thirty. He had not been in the role long when, in November 1936, he was thrown into one of the seminal moments in the BBC's early history. Lobby was returning late from an outside broadcast when he passed the raging flames engulfing The Crystal Palace in South London. Lobby found himself delivering a running commentary of events as they unfolded. The commentary proved a portent of the immediacy of broadcast news, delivered after the evening papers had ended their runs and before the morning papers could deliver the previous day's news.

Reviewing the various memos, correspondence and papers written by Lobby one is struck by the assuredness of his knowledge and instruction on the process of commentary and in the organization of the Outside Broadcast department more generally. It is clear that Lobby had a calm analytical approach to broadcasting that enabled him to make judgments as to what sounded good and what sounded bad; how to ensure the experience of the listener was always of prime concern. To his credit, Lobby wrote some extensive guidelines, not simply on the general technique of commentary, but also on how to handle individual sports. He had an intuitive understanding of what made sense to the listener and viewer. Some of his critical analysis of commentary and advice were viewed in some quarters with a sense of resentment. His perfunctory interjections may have - given his Etonian background - been viewed as stern, abrupt and even sanctimonious. Even revered commentators, such as cricket commentator John Arlott, did not escape Lobby's critical analysis of their work. Some time later, in an interview for the BBC, Arlott recalled:

Old Lobby said "now listen, I think you have a very vulgar voice. I can't understand why people want to listen to it. But you've got a very interesting mind and I think you better continue". He was pretty good Lobby really. He was a harsh critic but his criticisms were invariably right. And of course, mine was, and is, a vulgar voice. [13]

In reviewing autobiographical and interview accounts by leading British commentators who began their careers under Lobby's charge it is clear he was viewed with both reverence and affection. Rugby and cricket commentator Peter West characterized him as a man 'endowed with a most genial nature and a clear, incisive, cultured mind'. [14] Racing commentator Peter O'Sullivan remarked that Lobby 'had managed to survive Eton without emerging totally convinced of his superiority to less favoured mortals'. [15] While, all-round outside broadcaster Wynford Vaughan-Thomas noted that Lobby was the 'unlikely Lenin of the commentary revolution' who was 'unfailingly courteous and considerate, with a cool analytical mind which he may have inherited from his remarkable father.' [16] Most tellingly with regard to the evolution of what might be called the modern commentary technique, Robert Hudson who later succeeded 'Lobby' as Head of OB's noted, 'He had legal training and a penetrating mind. To him we owe the original conceptual thinking about radio and TV commentary. Prior to his arrival, people just talked and hoped for the best'. [17]

What follows is an exposition of Lobby's 'conceptual thinking' about commentary and how it influenced the practice of the select group of individuals who emerged as household names as radio commentators of sport during the 1950s and 1960s.

The demise of 'Square One'

One of the key interventions Lobby oversaw was the end of 'the grid system', whereby a plan of the sports arena was published in the *Radio Times* as a visual aid to listeners. [18] In taking control of the BBC's OB department in 1935 Lobby had inherited a disparate team of commentators. Most

were freelance. Many had been recruited for their expertise in sport rather than broadcasting and had learnt the technique of commentary almost ‘off the cuff’. The BBC’s earliest commentators included characters like Captain H. B. T. (‘Teddy’) Wakelam who covered rugby union, George Allison a Director and manager of Arsenal Football Club who commentated on football, R. C. Lyle who handled horse racing and Sir Pelham ‘Plum’ Warner who had been the MCC’s Chairman of the Board of Control Selectors and broadcast reports from cricket. These pioneers of commentary were thrown in at the deep end. Many of the early contributors to sports broadcasting were upper-middle-class, public school educated – either Old Etonians or Old Harrovians – and, as John Arlott later recounted, they were ‘innovators with impeccable accents’. [19] The plan in the *Radio Times* had become an essential feature of BBC broadcasts from sport. They acted as spatial guides to the listener, but also required a secondary voice to announce and explain exactly where on the plan the action was taking place. Thus began the institutionalized practice of using a secondary commentator or ‘Number 2’, more commonly known as a ‘Dr Watson’. The device of using a plan and a secondary commentator was originated by one of the first producers of OBs; Lance Sieveking. Sieveking had witnessed the graphical interpretation of baseball in Times Square, an innovative electronic scoreboard, twelve-feet high and thirty-feet long, having been introduced to the public of New York in 1914. [20] With information remotely relayed from the stadium by telegraph to a controller lodged in the *Times* building, the bright lights of the scoreboard mapped out the location of a batsman’s strike on the plan of a baseball park. For radio broadcasts, the Number 2 helped provide background information to the listener. His interjections either set the scene of the event, with comments on the weather or playing conditions, or pinpointed action on the field of play with reference to the plan in the *Radio Times*. John Snagge, another early BBC OB producer who would go on to be a leading BBC announcer and commentator in his own right, recalled the role of the Number 2 in the autobiography of Wakelam:

The job itself is not so easy as many people believe. A good No. 2 must be able to work with all and every commentator, and each commentator has entirely different methods. It should not be the job of no. 1 to make openings for No. 2, rather it is the job of no. 2 to find the moments and to be prepared to fill in when and if No. 1 wants to take a rest during an interval. He must have a good knowledge of the game, but not so much that he interrupts or corrects No. 1. Two people talking at once into a microphone produces chaos in the loud-speaker. [21]

Not all ‘Dr Watson’s’ were as knowledgeable and professional as Snagge and, in a 1943 radio talk, Wakelam reflected on his career as a commentator and recalled a letter he received from a listener from Leeds in 1933. The correspondent railed ‘Dear Sir, You must be a man of considerable restraint, else how could you have kept your hands off the blithering idiot you had along-side you last Saturday? My advice to you is strangle him’. [22] After the Second World War Wakelam did no further commentaries; his style was too monotonous and stilted for the ears of the post-war audience. [23] The demise of his style and the annoyance to some listeners of the ‘Number 2’ signaled a change in the technique of commentary. Indeed Snagge, whose resonant voice according to another commentator Max Robertson ‘was perfect for any pomp and circumstance’ and gave ‘immense significance to his utterances’, represented an emergent group of BBC staff who operated under Lobby’s direction and whose role switched between OB manager, producer and commentator. [24] In 1935 Snagge became second in command to Lobby in the OB department. In 1931 he had become ‘the voice’ of the Boat Race, a role he remarkably maintained until his retirement in 1980.

Perhaps because of his vast experience as a Number 2, it was Snagge who entered into prolonged discussion with Lobby regarding the merits of the rather mechanical technique and its stultifying shortcomings for the listener. In 1937 the issue of the Number 2 commentator appears to come to a head. Crucially, the device of using a Number 2 and the use of terms like ‘back to square one’ became tired and something of a cliché. In a memorandum to all regional directors of outside broadcasts Snagge reports on lengthy discussions in the OB department regarding the value of

squares in football coverage. Although a decision had been made to continue with the use of a Number 2, with ‘some modifications’, it remained clear to both Lobby and Snagge that there were certain drawbacks to the technique which required remedy. In December 1937 Snagge reported:

The use of the word ‘square’ is, we think, redundant. For several reasons:

- 1) That it has become a Music-Hall joke;
- 2) That its constant repetition is irritating;
- 3) That very often the time for slipping in the squares is so short that the addition of the single word ‘square’ is all that is heard by listeners, and the number which follows is very often drowned by the commentator re-starting. [25]

The use of an eight square grid for both rugby and football clearly had its detractors towards the end of the 1930s. Listeners wrote in to the BBC with suggestions of ways to enhance the technique (for example, by increasing the number of squares to 12). In spite of suggestions from the public and regional directors to keep the grid system, prolonging its use to the outbreak of war in 1939, the days of its use were, themselves, numbered. After the war the technique disappeared completely.

New, more competent and confident voices of sport were beginning to emerge in the late 1930s. They were a set of broadcasters who would set the benchmark for outside broadcasting both during the war and the immediate post-war era. Again Lobby appeared to have his finger on the pulse of this change, although politically it threw up sensitive issues regarding the management of those who had already done the pioneering work, becoming household names in the process.

A good example came with an experimental rugby commentary where instead of one lead commentator it was decided to have two lead commentators sharing the microphone (a practice continued to this day). Wakelam and Howard Marshall were employed to share commentary on rugby and were listened to carefully by Lobby and another senior manager Lindsay Wellington then Director of Programming. In a memo to Lobby, Wellington noted:

I thought the comparison most unfavorable to Wakelam. By Marshall’s standards he seemed to have scarcely more than a single attribute, and that a doubtful one: his machine-gun rapidity of style was certainly a remarkable trick of the tongue, but it is so sustained, so unvaried, so monotonous, as to convey little of excitement. What struck me most was that Marshall, not only conveyed a delightful personality, but an extraordinary varied and picturesque scene. One became identified through him with the game and the crowd. His description, always leisurely, yet kept pace with the game, was varied in mood and built up admirably to crescendos and diminuendos of excitement. His vocabulary is much richer and, to me, pleasantly odd. Wakelam’s monotone is by comparison dull. [26]

From this analysis Marshall’s lyrical style was the future and depended far less on the mechanics of a printed plan and secondary commentator due to his ability to paint a picture and give the listener a ‘pair of eyes’ through varied description and a narrative of light and shade. Ultimately Lobby realized the strength of this argument and had therefore employed Marshall as his first and principal commentator for ball-by-ball cricket from 1934 – a sport Wakelam felt was not suited to radio commentary after his own attempt at covering the sport in the late-1920s. [27] However in 1937 Lobby moved with caution; Wakelam was one of the BBC’s stars of commentary and in his response to Wellington the personal politics of replacing him with Marshall were clearly of concern:

I do not think we shall be able to drop Wakelam for Howard Marshall where international matches are concerned since Marshall would not be willing to replace him. This is perhaps just as well as we use Marshall a fair amount. Anyhow, Saturday’s experiment has shown us that we shall always be safe in falling back on Marshall for rugger. [28]

Lobby’s defence of Wakelam – at least his unease in sacking him – reflected Wakelam’s status as the first sports commentator the BBC had ever used. Perhaps sentiment and Oxbridge loyalty

played their part. But the need to find more skilful broadcasters cast in the mould of Marshall was now his imperative and from the late-1930s through to the immediate post-war years the BBC OB department went on a sustained recruitment drive to find more talented commentators. More crucially, the comparison also confirmed there were new techniques emerging that pointed towards underlying principles of ‘good commentary’.

The Art and Techniques of Commentary

The commentator’s first duty is to make listeners feel that they have left their own fireside for the scene of action – that they really are looking on at something actually in progress.
S. J. de Lotbinere, 1942. [29]

In radio sports commentary the character and characteristics of the commentator play an enormous role in the listeners understanding and imagining of what is taking place. As Crissell points out, ‘for all the commentator’s objectivity there is a sense in which we become almost as conscious of him as of the events themselves.’ [30] From the internal memoranda and correspondence it is plain Lobby knew and understood this premise of commentary and its impact on the audience to a remarkable degree. It had been his drive to progress commentary to new levels of sophistication that saw an end to the perfunctory ‘square one’ technique. His analysis of what commentators did, how they behaved, how they delivered a line and conveyed a scene has become folklore among the team of commentators Lobby recruited and nurtured. The OB department became a tightly run affair and under Lobby’s management would continually strive to do a better job. A significant aspect of this process was the weekly review of programmes. Raymond Baxter, who joined the department in 1950, recalled the routine of a departmental meeting every Monday and its impact on commentary practice:

There would come the moment when Lobby, turning over the pages of the OB diary, which was a very impressive large book, would say “programmes since we last met”. And he would then analyse every single programme in which the department had been involved. And in the presence of everyone say exactly what he thought of it. And that was great discipline. [31]

How the OB department constructed its audience reflected the educated upper-middle-class background of its staff. [32] There survives a range of publications, some publicly available others within the BBC archive, that hint at Lobby’s deep and firmly held beliefs about the technique of commentary and how it should be done. In June 1937 he wrote a two-page article for the *Radio Times* under the title ‘Would You Like to be a Commentator?’ Lobby characteristically upholds the unique skills of the commentator and suggests an ability to cope with two or more things at once is a prerequisite. As he makes clear:

A commentator must be able to describe one impression in neat smooth-running sentences, and at the same time he must be registering his next impression. He must be watching the broadcast as a whole to see that it is not losing shape, and he must be noticing what effects are likely to be reaching listeners so that he can explain them and yet not talk through them. [33]

The notion that a commentary has ‘shape’ was essentially about delivering a coherent narrative that ‘helps materially in creating a picture in the listeners mind’ [34] Being conscious of the audience has always been key to commentary, which is why in his first ever commentary Teddy Wakelam was provided with a ‘stooge’ – a blind man recruited from the charity St. Dunstan’s – to whom he delivered his commentary. [35]

If this kind of discipline proved lacking Lobby would unceremoniously unpick a commentator’s performance and suggest areas for improvement. Lobby spent some considerable

time reviewing commentaries. Commentators were advised time and again to listen to their own commentaries. The volume of discussions on the topic ultimately led Lobby to set some of the core principles of commentary down on paper. In a memorandum from December 1942 Lobby was confident that the OB department team had reached ‘some sort of framework on which better performances can be built’. [36] A good commentary was a bespoke compound of ingredients: setting the scene; description of action; giving the score or results, regularly and succinctly; ‘effects’ from the stadium – to be explained but not interrupted; associative material – sometimes known as ‘homework’ - such as historic facts and figures or personal information; and assessment of the significance of the occasion and key moments – who is likely to win, what it means, and so on. Lobby’s insistence on having ‘a good stock of associative ideas’ would become standard practice throughout the BBC’s coverage of any outside broadcast event, exemplified by broadcasters such as Richard Dimbleby. [37] Lobby suggested the principle was ‘easier to exemplify than to analyse’ as it depended on the event, its history, the spectator’s point of view and the commentators own personal experiences. But all these ‘associations’ could be used since ‘the commentator must take all knowledge for his province and select his associative ideas from the widest possible field’. [38]

The reflective analysis was a form of ‘stocktaking’, as Lobby saw it, ‘so that future experiment wastes the least possible time on what has already been tried and found wanting’.[39] The general principles, given meticulous exposition by Lobby in a 48-page pamphlet from 1942, included the following:

1. The listener must be persuaded that he is in a ‘ring side seat’.
2. The listener’s attention must be held while he is in his ‘ring side seat’.
3. Different types of broadcast demand different treatment of commentary. [40]

Each of these broad statements was given more detailed treatment in the document. The first hints at the journalistic ideology of commentary, which included references to ‘no faking’. Included here would be what every listener wanted to hear: the score, to be given ‘without delay of any sort’. The second suggests the importance of capturing and maintaining an audience that placed more emphasis on entertainment – ‘telling the ‘story’ attractively and with competence’. Both would prove to be enduring principles of BBC sports coverage. There was emphasis on the commentator being ‘natural and friendly’, ‘making a striking start and neat finish’, building ‘suspense interest’ in order to ‘work to a climax’, ‘show assurance’ and ‘maintain speed’, blending material into a ‘well shaped story’ and never showing ‘partiality’ that ‘may effect the accuracy of his commentary’. All these traits had to become second nature to the commentator, but most importantly had to be learnt. Commentators also had other contingent matters to deal with – when timings went wrong or technology failed which in the 1930s and 40s was very commonplace. There were also some clear ‘don’ts’, such as the ‘judicious use of ‘wise cracks’ and avoidance of ‘irritating the listener’ [41].

Throughout the late 1930s and the 1940s major sports were analysed in detail for their own traits in coverage and commentary. Each sport presented its own set of problems for live radio: athletics was considered too drawn out to hold the listener’s attention for any length of time; billiards similarly extended over a prolonged period which made it ‘almost impossible to pick a moment when the event is reaching its climax’; boxing required two commentators, one to describe the fight, the other to analyse the match and the technical performance of the contestants; cricket was slow and meant ‘the commentator cannot rely on factual description to fill more than about half his time’; football and rugby presented ‘a complicated sequence for the listener to assimilate’; horse racing needed to be broken down into the preliminaries, the start and the race itself, the latter presenting acute problems of identification due to the speed of the horses and the varying proximity of the race to the commentator; tennis was considered ‘almost impossible to prescribe any treatment that is wholly satisfactory’ as play was fast and ‘the sameness of the strokes makes for monotony’; and finally rowing demanded a considerable amount of associative material due to the length of races or lack of visibility of the race itself. [42] Nevertheless, each diagnosis of the difficulties in covering individual sports found their remedy. In his conclusion, Lobby reiterates the

commentator's role is an 'extremely complicated one'. 'But', he emphasizes, 'it must be remembered that natural 'facility' at the microphone is half the battle and that technique cannot be acquired all at once'. [43] The recruitment of individuals with talent and confidence at the microphone proved one of the core tasks for Lobby and the OB Department from the mid 1930s to the early 1950s as the BBC expanded its coverage of sport.

The Recruitment and Management of Commentators

I think on the whole, though, that where possible it is far wiser to stick to the games which you really know, and to the fields upon which you yourself are known. And it is my firm opinion that anyone is a mug just to take a thing in haphazard fashion for the cash side.
‘Teddy’ Wakelam [44]

Lobby spent much of his time and energies on recruiting and developing commentators. The early career path of a sports commentator is both opaque and invariably circumstantial. Many of the household names of BBC sports commentary owed their start in broadcasting to a chance meeting or phone call from an old acquaintance, being in the right place at the right time. However, there were established avenues to the microphone emerging as early as the 1920s. The ‘old boy’ network of public school, Oxbridge education or time spent in the armed forces was usually the key to getting on in the brave new world of broadcasting.

From 1936 as the OB department sought to expand its range of activities and find new voices, there were a constant stream of commentary tests on new hopefuls. As broadcasting became a viable career opportunity so the BBC was flooded with ‘wannabe’ announcers and commentators. They had heard Allison, Wakelam and Snagge and, much like Rex Alston who joined in 1941, saw an opportunity to visit some of Britain’s finest sporting events. Whatever the motivation, many interviewees soon realised there was much more to the ‘art of commentary’ than just talking a ‘good game’. Commentary demanded a range of skills that needed to be mastered.

The producer who Lobby asked to oversee most of the BBC’s tests before the Second World War was Michael Standing. Standing, who would go on to be a war correspondent on the Western Front and ultimately become the Head of Variety for many years after the War famously penning the BBC’s ‘Green Book’ – the *Variety Programming Policy Guide* - had joined the BBC in 1935. In the late-1930s after joining the BBC he was soon doing OBs around the country, including *Standing on the Corner*, test cricket and other public events and was cast in the mould of Lobby’s new team of commentator/producers. As far as recruitment went his duty was to make arrangements for auditions – including short-listing interviewees, agreeing access to venues and, once the tests were completed, writing short reports one each and every individual regarding their suitability. The reports focused on voice tone, mellifluousness, colour of narrative and the ability to keep up with the action. Also included in the reports were short recommendations for future action – ‘showing potential’, ‘possible potential’ and ‘absolute no’s’.

One of the main challenges of the process was finding a suitable venue and adequate content for the applicants to comment on. Where possible arrangements were made with the owners of sporting venues in the London area. But all too often this was either impractical or simply too costly. On some occasions, therefore, the OB team had to be more inventive and it was not too long before interviewees were asked to make their way to the seventh floor that provided access to the top of Broadcasting House to provide a running commentary on the bustling West End streets below. In the edict that OB commentators should be able to describe any scene before them there lay a portent to the meandering cricket commentaries of Brian Johnston and Henry Blofeld of *Test Match Special* fame. In their commentaries setting the scene with a comment on a passing red London bus was given nearly as much import as action on the field of play. On one occasion interviewees were asked to commentate on a table tennis match between BBC employees in the canteen of the BBC Staff Training College. No event was too mundane for the test.

No matter where the tests were held the point of the exercise was to ascertain whether or not the person could convey the scene before them in a clear, interesting voice. The comments on the reports were candid and often circumspect – ‘poor voice’, ‘slight Cockney accent’, ‘blew up

through nerves', 'a precious voice' but 'inclined to be facetious' and simply 'bad – bad' [45]. One unsuspecting applicant suggested the BBC producers attend the Vaudeville Theatre in London's Strand to listen to his nightly prologue. Standing's remark on the suggestion was unequivocal: 'I have judged him without going to the theatre' [46].

Some of the BBC's leading commentators of the period were not immune from this high-minded, highly-critical tone of their assessors, including one of the BBC's first commentators on ice hockey Canadian born Stewart MacPherson. In autumn 1936 Lobby had been eager to find someone to commentate on ice hockey. In the late-1930s the sport had gained a new popularity as a spectator sport and Britain was home to eleven teams. [47] 1936 was also the year in which the British national team was crowned Olympic, World and European champions. Although British by birth, most of the national team had played at one time or another in Canada and the club sides were increasingly importing talent from North America to bolster their squads. Serendipity smiled on MacPherson when, after pestering the assistant head of OB's John Snagge, he was rewarded with an audition with five other hopefuls. [48] In his autobiography MacPherson recalled his luck in the audition when he realized it was to be held at Wembley Arena on a match between Harringay and Wembley – a venue and teams he knew 'like the back of my right hand'. Most of the players had played in Winnipeg, Canada. He also had the good fortune to listen to all four other applicants before he came to the microphone. As he explains:

Kismet dealt me a wonderful hand that evening for I was last to do my stuff. I was in a position to see where the others made mistakes and to try to avoid the pitfalls when my turn came. [50]

Others had been stilted in their commentaries, some according to MacPherson, overwhelmed by the speed of the play, others burdened by too much pre-scripted material. MacPherson simply drew on his knowledge of the game and prior experience of broadcasting in Canada:

When I was given the nod to take over the mike, I grasped it firmly and rattled off everything I could see going on in front of me. Names came to me easily and it was natural that I should be able to talk glibly about a game I had known since childhood. I had no notes but felt the best plan was to talk plainly and quickly, describing points that I reasoned might seem strange to a new Hockey fan. [51]

MacPherson's reflections on his own performance, particularly his speed of tongue, were certainly given credit at the time, but he may have been surprised at the more critical comments his performance received:

Fluent; very Canadian; very dramatic, perfect knowledge of the game, but, having no humour like bob Bowman, his rather overpowering American voice, all on one note, bores into one's head with the persistence of a pneumatic drill. *Efficient, but very newspapery.* [52]

MacPherson would go on to be one of the BBC's prominent voices during the war and immediate post-war years, renown for commentaries on boxing and one of Lobby's favorite commentators. His assessment hints at a prevailing prejudice in the BBC for anything too 'American', too sensationalistic ('very newspapery') and too vulgar and far removed from 'standard English' for British audiences to bear ('overpowering').

Lobby's method for testing new commentators continued in the immediate post-war years, another period of expansion in the OB department. During the war new commentators had come to prominence including Richard Dimbleby and Wynford Vaughan-Thomas, both cutting their teeth on sports OBs before venturing wider to cover life from 'the Front' and state occasions. Others like Raymond Glendenning and Rex Alston became the BBC's most prominent voices on sport, first during the reduced hours of coverage from sport in the war years, then subsequently on the wide

array of sports broadcasts that grew from 1946. Between them Glendenning and Alston covered football, rugby union, golf, greyhound racing, motor racing, cricket, boxing, horse racing, tennis and athletics. In October 1945 there was already a feeling that Glendenning was being overstretched and overused across his main sports of football, boxing and horse racing. With the prospect of covering the 1948 Olympic Games in London new commentators were at a premium.

New talent did come from an emerging crop of post-war sports journalists, many using connections from time spent in the armed forces to get their foot in the door. Commentators like Kenneth Wolstenholme, Peter West, Max Robertson, Brian Johnston, Peter Dimmock, Harry Carpenter, Murray Walker and Raymond Baxter (who joined from the British Forces Network) all began their careers with the BBC between 1946 and 1950, having served in the armed forces and would go on to have long and distinguished careers in the BBC in both radio and television. It was a period of great expansion in the OB department, which fostered a particular kind of ‘chumminess’ at its headquarters in Broadcasting House. As Raymond Baxter later recalled:

In the office of the outside broadcast department there were assembled a bunch of highly professional maniacs. For instance, we played cricket in the corridor, this was Brian Johnston’s idea of course. We didn’t call him ‘Johnners’ in those days, we used to call him ‘BJ’. I shared an office with Rex Alston and we got on very well although you could scarcely have two more disparate people...It was a remarkable period, because there was a collection of people of quite extraordinary personalities and capability, all under the control, and I use the word advisedly, of the great Seymour de Lotbiniere, who was Head of Outside Broadcasts and literally invented the technique of outside broadcasting which hasn’t really changed today. [53]

OB staff worked as a team; according to Glendenning they often frequented known OB pubs the Mason’s Arms or Dover Castle and were generally a highly motivated and committed group of individuals operating under the tutelage of Lobby. [54] What emerged in the late 1930s, through the war and the immediate post-war years, was a team of exceptionally talented broadcasters. In contradistinction to Wakelam’s claim of employing an ‘expert’ in the sport, the established vogue during this period was to recruit and foster multi-skilled broadcasters who could turn their skills to any given sport or outside broadcast.

Managing talent

Managing commentating ‘talent’ became an increasing burden for Lobby and introduced some acute issues for the BBC more generally. From the earliest days the BBC had been insistent on its policy that announcers remained anonymous in name and accent. This conservative philosophy dictated that news broadcasts were impartial, delivered by ‘the BBC’ in ‘standard English’ and not by credited individuals. However, the work of the OB department and the roster of freelance commentators worked to a different set of principles. From the early 1930s it was not unknown for commentators to be introduced by name and, somewhat contentiously, be announced as working for or having an association with particular newspapers. In an OB meeting on sport in 1937 Snagge recalled an occasion before R. C. Lyle’s broadcast from the 1934 Grand National when he received a phone call from Gladstone Murray the editor of *The Times* instructing him to announce the commentator as having an affiliation with his newspaper. Each year this practice continued by verbal agreement although, Snagge suggests, with ‘no justification under our licence for mentioning *The Times*'. [55] Once the precedent had been set all freelancers with careers in journalism would make a similar claim to be introduced in association with their newspaper. In 1937 the situation became so overt that Lobby requested a list of commentators who were also journalists to be compiled. The results, below, revealed nearly all the pioneers of early sports commentary to have press associations.

Howard Marshall – *The Daily Telegraph*

Harold Abrahams – *The Sunday Times*

B. Darwin – *The Times*

W. J. Howcroft – *The Morning Post*
C. B. Fry – *The Evening Standard*
H. B. T. Wakelam – *The Morning Post*
George Allison – *The Daily Express*
Marjorie Pollard – *The Morning Post*
Ivan Sharpe – *Allied Newspapers*
Charles Eade - -*The Daily Sketch*
H. E. Symons – *The Sunday Times*
J. E. Holdsworth – *The Cycling Correspondent*
Beril Rudd – *The Daily Telegraph*
Evelyn Montague – *The Manchester Guardian*

The announcements were viewed as a form of advertising, an anathema to the BBC Rethian ideals. In June 1938 Lobby made a final decision ‘that a commentator should not be taken on if a condition of his use is that such acknowledgment must be made’ and that mention of journalistic ties was appropriate in programme notes but not in the final billing. [56] Sports commentary had been one area where announcers were known in contrast to the anonymity of other ‘BBC voices’. But self-publicity and commercial advertising was strictly taboo.

New Voices From The Regions

Lobby not only managed the BBCs network coverage of sport but also helped coordinate the coverage of sport in the nations and regions through directors of outside broadcasting in the BBCs main centres of Glasgow, Manchester, Birmingham, Belfast, Cardiff, and Bristol. Not all BBC commentators lived in the metropolitan area and this brought with it issues of power and authority. Many new commentators were recruited by regional directors, were employed on a strictly freelance basis and got their start in sports commentary on opt-out programmes originally on the Home Service, and after the war, in the Light Programme. Glendinning (Northern Ireland), Wolstenholme (North West) and Vaughan-Thomas (Wales) had all made the grade through their initial experiences in the nations and regions and Lobby was constantly urging new talent to come through the BBC’s UK network. Regional directors of OBs were left to their own devices but there was an edict to maintain contact with London HQ as to the suitability of commentators and guidelines on good commentary technique were forwarded when deemed necessary. However when a big sporting event arrived the ‘star’ commentators from London were sent out to cover the occasion. This hierarchy of command, from London to the regions, was reason for resentment and dispute. Arguments were invariably raised regarding the blooding of new talent and analysis of their merits and, somewhat contentiously for London, the competence of their ‘star’ men when they operated outside the capital. For instance, there are several traces of arguments and animosity between Lobby and the North Regional director of OB’s Victor Smythe. Smythe had been with the BBC from its earliest period as a company in the 1920s and clearly felt he knew the operations of radio inside out. The sensitive nature of this relationship often reached its peak during the largest OB taken from the North region, the Grand National. The National caused all manner of problems as a broadcast event. Negotiations for access never ran smooth with Aintree’s owner Mirabel Topham and the difficult logistics of transmitting the event effectively led to vexed messages of how things should be done. In 1938 Lobby was eager to reduce the build up to the event and concentrate on the race commentary itself. ‘I am all for cutting down racing preliminaries to essentials and no more’ [57], Lobby wrote to Smythe, who replied:

I have heard a good deal of adverse comment on our curtailment....My own feeling is that to cut a race down to a mere rapid recital of runners and straight into the race provides a bald effect.

Pointedly he continued:

This clashing of opinion makes me wish more and more that London was a little closer to Manchester, and that you could occasionally spend a few days coming round and meeting the type of listener who appreciates his broadcasting but seldom, if ever, writes about it. [58]

Similar tensions grew in other BBC centres where local knowledge of particular sporting events and the audience for them could cause friction for Lobby and senior management at Broadcasting House if not handled with care. The cultural significance of Rugby Union in Wales was a case in point. In autumn 1947 Lobby wanted to continue with an idea he hatched the previous year in the coverage of Rugby Union from Cardiff Arms Park. The match involving Wales and Australia was to be covered by two commentators, each rotating in a twenty-minute cycle in order to give respite from continuous commentary. Lobby had in mind an up-and-coming Welsh commentator G. V. Wynne-Jones who would work alongside the ‘staff’ rugby commentator Rex Alston. The pair had first worked together the previous season in Paris when the experiment of dual commentary was first launched. In his autobiography Alston recalls his surprise at the ‘self-confidence’ of the ‘novice’:

Prospective commentators outside the BBC usually require several matches in which to pick up the technique, but Wynne-Jones sailed into his task without a trace of nerves. The fact that someone was present who could take over, should my voice fail completely, was of great psychological value to me. [59]

Although the sentiment is complementary to the Welsh ‘novice’, the underlying tone of Alston’s analysis was slightly sanctimonious. In his own memoir, Wynne-Jones reflects that he was terribly nervous of his first major commentary with Alston, whom he gave due deference when it came to the ‘staff’ man’s professionalism and abilities to organize the commentary. [60]

Regarding coverage of the Welsh game against Australia the Welsh Programme Director, A. Watkins Jones, agreed in principle with Lobby’s suggestion of using Alston alongside ‘their man’ but warned:

Our audience in Wales expect to hear Wynne-Jones throughout the game on this occasion, because with his regular coverage of club games at present in the Welsh Home service he is establishing himself as their own popular commentator. [61]

Rugby commentaries were hugely popular in Wales and per capita drew some of the BBC’s largest audiences for any form of programming. Technically the split commentary went well and continues to be used in football to this day. Unfortunately, the contrasting styles of commentary – the Welsh tones of ‘Geevers’ (Wynne-Jones) and the ‘school-masterly’ approach of Alston – did not. In a private and personal letter to Lobby, Watkins Jones suggested, ‘Alston put his foot in it badly on two occasions.’ First, he had suggested the Welsh crowd were ‘preparing to boo’ an Australian penalty kick; and secondly, that when Wales won a penalty Alston remarked, ‘You can tell that from the shout of the crowd. They’d boo if it was the other way round.’ [62] Innocuous as these comments may seem to contemporary audiences, in 1947 they would have been deemed an affront to Welsh sensibilities, with the suggestion the crowd were being ‘unsporting’ and even cheating. Welsh criticism was not confined to listeners. Word had reached Captain Walter Reid, secretary of the Welsh Rugby Union. The WRU threatened to halt future broadcasts in Wales if Alston were allowed to do any further commentaries. This led Watkins Jones to conclude, ‘It looks, therefore, as if your scheme was doomed from the start and in the circumstances had best be abandoned.’ [63]. The impasse on Alston led to a compromise in coverage, BBC Wales decided to cover only the second half of Welsh games for the remainder of the season enabling Wynne-Jones to work alone. Lobby conceded that perhaps critical comments about the Welsh crowd – or any other home nation for that matter – were better coming from one of their own. But unbowed he also argued, ‘Reading between the lines it seems clear that you are sacrificing a first half broadcast for Welsh listeners in order not to raise the Alston issue.’ [64]

It was suggested Alston might be reintroduced to the Welsh environment in order to ‘redeem himself’ through the more neutral fixture between The Barbarians and Australia. The view

being the BBC should persevere with their staff commentators rather than cave in to the demands of local audiences. The issue of English sports commentators operating in Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland has endured throughout the BBC's history, causing internal strife when London forces the hand of regional directors, and external consternation from national audiences who rail against the metropolitan point of view. [65]

Conclusion

Lobby had entered into the world of broadcasting at a critical moment in its history. The early pioneering spirit of technicians and the first producers of radio outside broadcasts, particularly Gerald Cock and Lance Sieveking, had revealed what was possible and whetted the appetite for live coverage of sport among the BBC's emerging national audience. By the mid 1930s some commentators, most notably Wakelam and Allison, had gained national recognition and were synonymous with the coverage of certain sports. The frequently didactic approach of the BBC under Reith that sought to improve the cultural taste of its listeners had started to soften by the late-1930s and sport as entertainment was considered a vital ingredient of the programming mix. [66] The policy of using sport to capture an audience and reveal the BBC's sensitivity to popular taste would gain greater momentum after the Second World War under the stewardship of the BBC's third Director General William Haley. Television too, would present new challenges and opportunities to cover sport, although its influence on the management of the outside broadcast department and its team of commentators did not take hold until the 1950s when its pull on resources increased to match the burgeoning audience for television. [67] The period 1935-52 proved an influential time in the formation of new bonds with sport, both at individual and institutional levels. Lobby and his team of commentator/producers forged strong ties with governing bodies of sport, clubs, venues and sportsmen and women. Some of these ties were fraught with problems, not least with the Football League who remained suspicious of the impact of broadcasting on attendances for more than half a century. [68] However, the power of broadcasting to place the listener in the 'front row' helped foster within the BBC a sense of delivering a national service of import and occasion. Through the voice of the commentator radio drew upon the ready-made interests of disparate individual listeners and constructed a national audience with common values and an understanding of the place of sport in society. As Crisell has argued it invariably did this in its own image, [69] which in much of its output produced an elitist and conservative culture born of the upper-class and upper-middle-class background of its producers and presenters. Many commentators of this period shared the same social background. In some instances this brought a recognisable authority to their voices due to their educated, 'Home Counties' backgrounds. On other occasions, as we have seen above, it alienated certain listeners because of its South East metropolitan overtones. During and immediately after the Second World War the recruitment drive for commentators broadened the range of accents from sport. Most notable examples were Arlott, Wynne-Jones, Vaughan-Thomas and the Canadian MacPherson. Sport also brought a different aspect of public life to broadcasting and ultimately into the home. In order to capture the imagination of the listener and convey the varied sporting events the BBC attempted to cover, Lobby built a team of expert broadcasters who grew to understand the grammar of the medium in which they worked that was inimitably mixed with a passion for sport itself. In listening to and overseeing their work Lobby instituted the principles of radio commentary. Lobby's work in the outside broadcasting department carries a significant influence and wider historical legacy to sports broadcasting in Britain. Most crucially, it was his attention to detail and the ability to introduce and apply a coherent set of principles that enabled him and others to analyse the quality of sports commentary, a process that endured into the television era.

Acknowledgement

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