# REVIEWS

*Broadcasting Empire: The BBC and the British World, 1922–1970*. By Simon J. Potter. Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2012. 261pp. NZ price: $136. ISBN 9780199568963.

In 1932 the BBC broadcast a special Christmas programme around the empire, which featured contributions from Dublin to Brisbane and everywhere in between. In the words of Rudyard Kipling, who had ghostwritten the King's closing address, it seemed 'a good omen that Wireless should have reached its present perfection at a time when the Empire has been linked in closer union … it offers us immense possibilities to make that union closer still'.[1] This successful transnational broadcast, which not only generated goodwill around the Commonwealth, but also inaugurated a tradition of royal Christmas messages, appeared to make good on Kipling's claims. Yet, as Simon Potter's meticulous deconstruction of the phenomenon of imperial broadcasting reveals, this new system of communication was far from perfect. Listeners in England complained the following Christmas when an Australian segment, passed off as live, apparently involved a family enjoying the sun on Bondi Beach at 1am Sydney time! Nor did it guarantee closer union. That same year Wellington's *Evening Post* claimed that the 'high cultural ideal' of the BBC was 'anathema to a large section of New Zealanders'. These feelings were reciprocated at 'Home': the BBC turned down a series of talks on Canada because British audiences had 'little interest as yet in Dominions' affairs', although 'the suggestion of an Eskimo feature programme to be put on at Christmas' was 'welcome' (p.102).

At a time when networks are fast becoming the new model for thinking about imperial spaces, Potter's story of the BBC and its empire of the air provides an instructive and perhaps cautionary tale. Although radio seems tailor-made for such an approach, the BBC is instead a clear example of a much older conception of empire: that of hub and spoke. From the outset, Lord Reith hoped to extend the BBC's civilizing mission from British domestic audiences to the rest of the empire (indeed, his imperial fantasies extended beyond radio to becoming a colonial governor somewhere in Africa, or perhaps viceroy of India). London, the imperial centre, was imagined as the 'imperial broadcasting hub sucking in the raw material of talent and exporting the fruits of concentrated cultural activity' (p.12). Empire broadcasting thus followed a pattern made familiar to readers of Potter's earlier work on the imperial press system. Here news flowed outwards from the centre, with little space given to reciprocal currents. When it came to broadcasting, what little collaboration there was with the dominions managed to be both grudging and patronizing. Fears of 'low' dominion broadcasting standards kept early contributions to the relatively safe ground of ceremonies and sports, which slipped in only because their potential to boost imperial sentiment counterbalanced their otherwise risible production quality. Consequently, not only was there little interaction between edges and centre, there was little exchange between dominions either. 'For the BBC, empire broadcasting at root meant one thing: the corporation broadcasting from Britain to the empire' (p.37).

In practice the corporation's reach was always much less than its grasp and this, too, forces us to think carefully about the role of networks in empire. Early attempts at centralized imperial broadcasting were frustrated at almost every turn. Most apparent were limitations in technology. Poor shortwave reception in Australia and New Zealand made rebroadcasting difficult – 'sopranos especially have many enemies' (p.95) – while Canadians could easily tune into American stations. Different regulatory regimes also posed problems. All the dominions (other British colonies and India are covered, but in less detail) had varying levels of private broadcasting initially. The BBC had to compete for audiences against local broadcasters, for whom Reithian uplift and imperial identity ran a distant second behind the interests of commercial enterprise. Further, funding for a greater range of services and improved technology was not always forthcoming from the British

government. Finally, the BBC's own outdated and intransigent view of empire provided further barriers. Accustomed to broadcasting rather than to receiving, they were slow to respond to dominion requests over relatively minor issues such as the accents of presenters or the types of programmes that might appeal to local audiences.

Despite this, Potter demonstrates that there remained a surprising mutuality of objectives among public broadcasters. They may have had little patience for the BBC's self-important, centralizing tendencies and been hampered by different technological and bureaucratic regimes, but dominion broadcasters remained committed to sustaining Britannic identities. Once again we are forced to think carefully, this time about the opposition of 'national' and 'imperial' identities. There are no easy dichotomies here. The BBC's role in sustaining and creating a 'British world' – what Potter calls 'beating the tribal drum of Britishness' (p.70) – is intelligently deconstructed. Nonetheless, as he suggests, it would be relatively easy to line up the various conflicts and tensions between dominion broadcasters to create a narrative of a 'steady inevitable growth to maturity', with the dominions 'throwing off the shackles of BBC empire-building' (p.234). Instead the author presents a more complex and dynamic story, attuned to the different contexts of broadcasting development, both in the centre and on the edges. That sense of dynamism is captured in the book's structure. Arguing for a more robust, if always contingent, attachment to 'Britishness', his chapters move from a focus on 'Diversity' and 'Discord' in the 1920s and early 1930s (a time he aptly describes elsewhere as 'dysfunctional'), towards a period of 'Integration' from the late 1930s. Potter argues that collaboration increased as time passed, with the Second World War marking a period of particularly close co-operation. 'Continuities' and 'Challenges' traces links through the post-war era, in both the revival of radio and in the development of British television for export. No nostalgia buff, Potter nevertheless provides an equivocal final chapter, 'Disintegration?' which takes us through to the 1970s. By this time, he argues, close working ties remained but much of their old imperial, Britannic meaning had faded away. Some equivocation is indeed warranted: in New Zealand's case it is by no means clear that the 1970s marked the end of either such links or a particular set of Britannic meanings. That would wait another decade or so.

Nevertheless, *Broadcasting Empire* makes a compelling case to take the cultural impact of the BBC, and its role in a wider British world, seriously. With this in mind, there is a further dimension that needs to be considered. As exhaustive as it is, *Broadcasting Empire* captures only the organizational – not creative – world of the BBC. Programming, which would reveal a great deal about the content of the BBC and its collaborators' empire, remains, tantalizingly, at the margins. There is already some work, most notably by Thomas Hajkowski and Sian Nicholas, which considers the content of empire programming in relation to metropolitan identity. Potter's research suggests the potential of extending this focus into a transnational setting. What exactly did the ABC choose to run? How did this differ from what was done in Canada or New Zealand? What can this tell us about the different purchase of a British world in each case? Furthermore, attention to the business of programming might also draw attention to the conceptual slippages between empire and Britishness. Even though the two are often used interchangeably, the hub model reminds us of the primacy of Britain, and London in particular, rather than empire, in this relationship. It may be therefore that British programming held different and more enduring sets of meanings than an empire or Commonwealth frame might suggest. Finally, a focus on programming might help with the other great absence in this literature: the audience. Audience research was not an important feature of early broadcasting regimes, and so we have few ways of understanding how participants in this broadcast British world really felt about it. Some integration of programme analysis, organizational reactions and perhaps the local radio and television press might bring us just a little bit closer to learning what they thought.

Without these elements it is difficult to fully assess the BBC's impact in fostering, or prolonging, a British world. But assessing *Broadcasting Empire's* impact is much easier. It

makes an important contribution to the resurgent historical interest in empire and its cultural impact. The product of wide research and impressive scholarship, Potter's book provides a keenly analytical perspective on some key debates within that literature. Significantly, it does so by drawing the metropolitan centre into the same frame as the dominions and colonies the BBC was broadcasting to. Such a broadbrush approach to the British world remains relatively rare. At the same time, this integrated approach ensures that it makes an important contribution to media history, which can also be limited by 'national' histories. Whether read by historians of empire or historians of media, *Broadcasting Empire* is a valuable resource in its own right and a stimulus to further work.

NOTES

1 Tom Fleming ed., *Voices out of the Air: The Royal Christmas Broadcasts, 1932–1981*, London, 1981, p.11, in Potter, p.59.

FELICITY BARNES

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*Patched: The History of Gangs in New Zealand*. By Jarrod Gilbert. Auckland University Press, Auckland. 2013. 332pp. NZ price: $49.99. ISBN 9781869407292.

In the cyclical panic that discontinuously rends the sensibilities of suburbia, now is the time of the Outlaw Motorcycle Gang. Whereas in the past various media may have dragged Mafiosi, Bodgies and Skinheads out of the shadows, popular *frisson* is, for the moment, best engendered by men on big motorbikes. Jarrod Gilbert takes up their story in what is – from some perspectives – the unlikely locale of New Zealand.

In that sense, a book confidently subtitled *The History of Gangs in New Zealand* promises a broader recounting. Disappointingly, the boys from the backblocks of the nineteenth century and street gangs of an emerging urbanism in the first half of the twentieth century (admittedly less threatening than those of New York or Chicago) are dismissed in the briefest of paragraphs. History commences here in the 1950s, with the story of rock and roll rebels, but without, as far as this reviewer could tell, any significant use of A.E. Manning's pioneering 1958 study *The Bodgie: A Study ion Abnormal Psychology*. The narration moves speedily on to the world of motorcycle outlaws, by way of the 1960 and 1969 Hastings Blossom Festival. This turning point in relations with police is suitably highlighted in the narration so that Gilbert is able to distinguish the motorcycle 'gangs' from the preceding 'clubs'. The research is consequently strong on ethnic succession within gangs and the author neatly traces the sequence from origins amongst Anglo youth in Auckland to more diverse yet segmented gang structures in the later twentieth century, with gangs diffused more broadly across New Zealand. The rise of the Mongrel Mob and the concept of multiple marginality receive deserved attention. Internal workings of the gang are balanced by reflection on legal and political pressures and the inevitable scapegoating of men on bikes. This is, after all, a tale of masculinist identity. The girls in the gang infrequently appear. When they do they are often doubly brutalized and marginalized. If women remain for the most part silent, the elaborate media web in which the clubs and their members were routinely enmeshed draws considered analysis. Gilbert reflects further on the gang 'scene' as outlaw groups moved from the street to the highway and from brawling to illegal commerce. This transition eventually invites a draconian – and quite possibly a supra-legal –