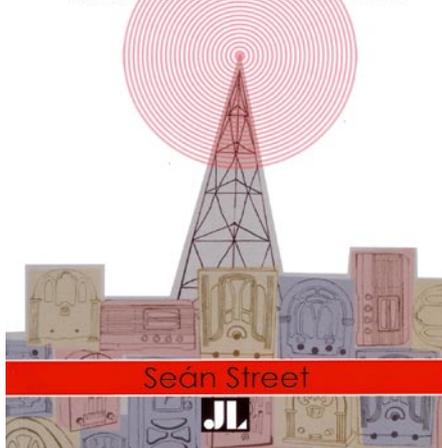


CROSSING THE ETHER

BRITISH PUBLIC SERVICE RADIO AND
COMMERCIAL COMPETITION 1922-1945



BOOK REVIEW

By Jeffrey Borinsky FIEE, CEng

Crossing the Ether: Pre-War Public Service Radio and Commercial Competition in the UK
Seán Street
John Libbey Publishing 2006
ISBN 0 86196 668 6
Paperback with CD pp 296
£22, available from Amazon UK and elsewhere

Many of you may think that UK commercial radio began in 1973. Capital Radio and LBC indeed started then but Seán Street takes us much further back. Before the pirate stations of the 1960s, before the Radio Luxembourg that many of us grew up with, right back to the dawn of broadcasting to The Hague and Fécamp. Their transmissions were not made from the UK but they were very much aimed at a UK audience. This book shows how they and other commercial stations influenced the BBC.



Seán Street

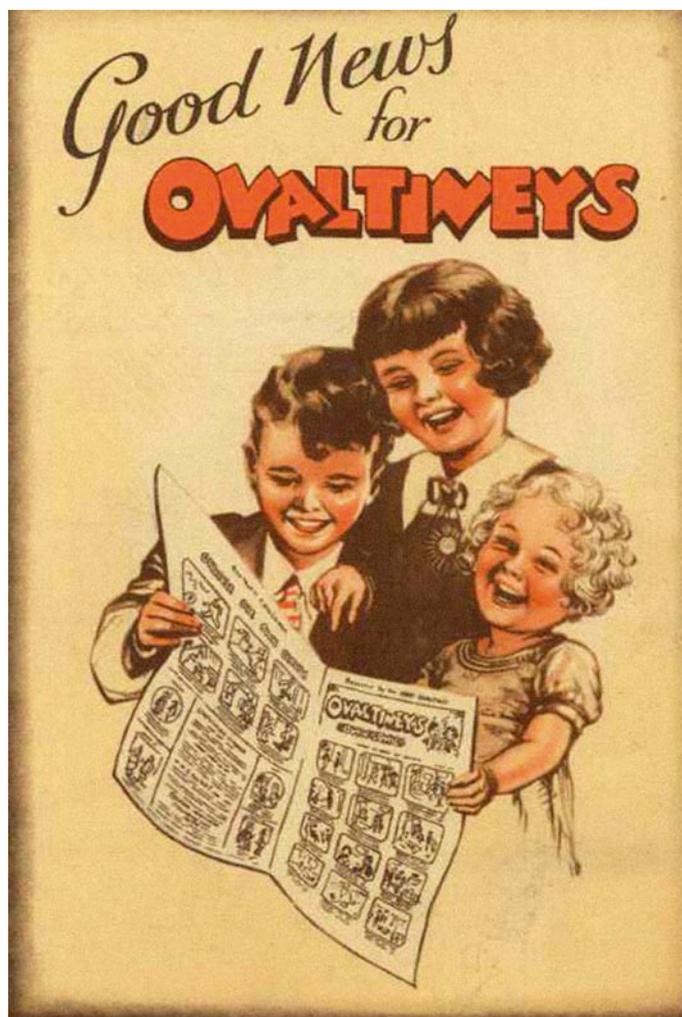
Most of you will know Asa Briggs' monumental five volume history of the BBC. This is the usual starting point for any serious research into the history of UK broadcasting. Many fewer will have heard of Robert Silvey. His book, *Who's Listening*, is the seminal work on audience research. This may be a somewhat arcane subject but it's well worth reading if you can get hold of a copy. Seán Street draws heavily on Silvey's work to demonstrate the influence of commercial broadcasting on the BBC. Not just *Who's Listening* but also many internal memos which illustrate just how much the BBC was concerned about Radios Luxembourg, Normandy etc. Silvey is just one of many sources, well known and otherwise that the author uses to make his case.

The BBC's attitude to commercial broadcasting was hostile. Right up until the

outbreak of war the BBC made many attempts to suppress the competition. It could be seen as a battle between popular culture and BBC paternalism, much of which derived directly from Reith himself. The BBC was clearly influenced and the outbreak of war saw the BBC breaking out of its paternalistic shell and adopting many of the tricks of the commercial broadcasters. Post war developments are a minor part of this book but the brief summary is very welcome.

As an engineer, I'm especially glad that the author does not neglect the technology that made commercial broadcasting a success. His review of sound recording techniques is a good introduction to the subject.

There is no doubt that Professor Street has successfully shown how substantially the BBC was influenced by commercial radio. The one area where I'm not so sure about this book is the intended audience. It's a serious historical work, well argued and supported by extensive research and references. Could it also be aimed at a wider readership? There are a few photos and a CD with some rare and interesting clips, well worth having but not really enough to make this into a popular history. Despite this reservation I can thoroughly recommend the book to anyone who wants to find out more about how BBC radio developed from its dawn up to 1945.



The Ovaltineys, as heard on Radio Luxembourg