

# Commentators: Female Of the Species

SYLVIA WRIGHT

"I'VE BEEN compared to Tennyson's brook, babbling, babbling as I go—or is it chattering, chattering as I go, Vincent?" Mary Margaret McBride recently asked Vincent Connolly, the announcer on her radio program.

"I think it's babbling, babbling, Mary Margaret," said Vincent.

"Well, I'd rather be babbling, babbling, than chattering, chattering," said Mary Margaret, who conducts the most famous of what are known in the radio business as "women's talk shows."

Strong men and many weak women have blanched and hastily switched off the radio on hearing one of the ladies babbling cozily on about "her products." On many of the shows, though, the babbling is also about current events, new books, civic affairs, medicine and psychiatry, the arts, and important questions of the day.

Mary Margaret's program (like all her listeners and most of her guests, I find it impossible to call her Miss McBride) represents one out of about four hours devoted to such fare every weekday in the New York area. In one typical day an assiduous listener might hear the following: With "Martha Deane" on WOR, a psychiatric adviser to the Women's Prison Association discusses how the organization rehabilitates prostitutes. Then, with Mary Margaret McBride on WABC, an editor talks about magazine writing, and a Metropolitan Opera soprano reminisces about her career ("I think the modern prima donna is sweeter and nicer

and less temperamental than the old-fashioned kind"). Switching hastily while Mary Margaret is catching sardines in the icy blue fiords of Norway, the listener may hear "Barbara Welles" on WOR interviewing Kim Stanley, the actress, currently appearing in the play *Picnic*. On WABC, a haberdasher tells Maggi McNellis about a sleeveless shirt for men, a night-club singer discusses her technique, and another psychiatrist talks on tolerance. Later, on WQXR, Alma Dettinger talks with Thomas J. Hamilton, the New York Times correspondent at the United Nations, about U.N. activities, and still later on WCBS Emily Kimbrough chats with Reginald Gardiner, the comedian.

## Oysters and Hemlines

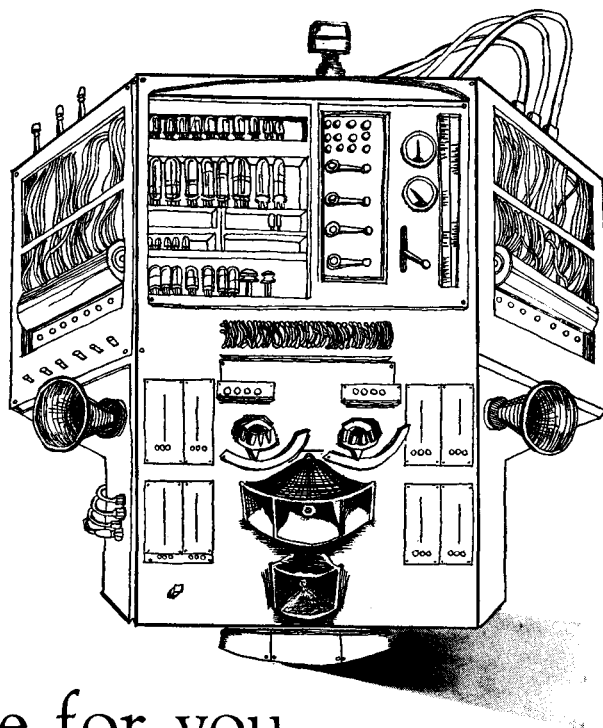
There are over eight hundred women radio commentators in the United States, many of whom run programs similar to those mentioned above. In the course of a typical program a listener may be told how oysters are cultivated, who lives in Tasmania, and what the spring fashions are. Neither listener nor interviewer seems to find the combination indigestible. Mary Margaret McBride, who must have a photographic mind, frequently reads two books in an evening to prepare for her program the next day and displays an uncanny familiarity with her subject matter.

Mary Margaret, the originator of this type of program and the Grand Panjandrum in the field of women broadcasters, has been doing this

sort of thing for nineteen years. The first woman to conduct an ad-lib radio program, she became WOR's "Martha Deane" in 1934. Originally, "Martha Deane" (the name is owned by the station) was a grandmotherly character who gave household hints and recipes. In her book, *Here's Martha Deane*, Mary Margaret describes how she discovered that this role did not suit her and how gradually she dropped her nonexistent family and emerged as herself, a woman reporter. Her manager, Estella Karn, introduced the idea of guests—the feature that is the basis of all such programs today. It is also, of course, an important part of the vast industry of press-agentry; most women interviewers estimate they are offered four or five guests for every one they take.

Like the listener to soap operas, the listener to these programs is not sitting still. She dusts, mops, feeds a child, eats a sandwich. Somehow, while making the baby's formula, she takes in Dr. Paul Tillich's remarks about the kind of anxiety that has its basis in the human situation of finitude. In addition she seems to remember to contribute to the Red Cross, note down a list of movies suitable for children, and—most important—ask for Herb-Ox bouillon cubes at her grocery. Her consistency in the latter kind of response makes her one of the most valuable audiences in radio.

Recently, when Mary Margaret discovered that the Middle West, where her program is relatively new, responded better to a new soup than



## A Magazine for you *who still like to do your own thinking*

**T**ODAY'S WORLD is so complex and so rapidly changing that more and more people despair of keeping up with its developments. They feel that the task of following all the important political and economic events may be too much for the human mind. And as though to justify this attitude, some point out that scientists have even had to devise mechanical brains to deal with present-day problems.

THE REPORTER takes issue with this attitude. It believes that such a surrender can undermine our freedom from within—because freedom depends primarily on each man's active exercise of his own intelligence. No one, no machine, no newspaper or magazine can relieve anyone of this precious responsibility. In fact, THE REPORTER's emphasis is just the opposite: to *increase* its readers' responsibility by giving them everything they need to know in order to make sound judgements for themselves.

You don't need a mechanical brain to understand your world. You need pertinent facts, and accurate insights into how these facts fit together—the *how* and *why*, the *who* and *what* behind them. And no gadget can give you this information. For though electronic systems can solve in a few minutes certain problems that would take you a lifetime, they could never *discover* something that needs thinking about—the way THE REPORTER's correspondents discovered the truth about the China Lobby, about the sources of communist gold in America, about wiretapping, or about MacArthur's secret history of the Pacific War. They could never *interpret* or *evaluate* the ever-present human element in our history the way THE REPORTER's experienced contributors do. What's more, mechanical brains must translate everything into colorless abstractions—while THE REPORTER always helps you *see* and *feel* events as vividly and concretely as possible.

Some of the very scientists who worked on mechanical brains are worried about the threat they may present, the danger of dehumanized, assembly-line thinking. But though we concede that there may be occasional cause for concern, our readers are continually confirming our faith in man's intellectual vitality. Last year, we tripled our circulation—not by thinking *for* our readers, but by thinking *with* them; not by *digesting* things for them, but by offering them a nourishing and intellectually appetizing diet of information and ideas.

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# *The* Reporter

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did the East, she was personally affronted. "Is that a reproach to all of you, I ask you?" she addressed her Eastern followers. For several days she cajoled humorously, and finally remarked to Vincent, "I'm not going to beg them any more, would you?" "No," said Vincent, "I think an air of injured innocence would do better." Thousands of housewives presumably rushed to their grocers.

### Who Needs It?

Although the radio business is littered with surveys, the statistics on who listens are not very revealing. Listeners to "Martha Deane's" program are found in all three of the age groups 18 to 35, 36 to 50, and over 50, with the middle group comprising about forty per cent and the other two about equally divided. The large majority are housewives, over half of whom listen somewhere else than the living room. About one-seventh of the audience is male. Another survey indicates that almost forty-three per cent of "Martha Deane's" listeners belong to the upper income group, thirty-three to the middle, and twenty-four to the lower. These groups are defined on the basis of rent paid by a family in New York City: Lower means between \$30 and \$50 a month, middle \$51 to \$90, and upper \$91 and over.

In spite of the barrenness of such data, the broadcasters have convinced themselves that their listeners are a superior collection of intelligent and cultivated women. "My listeners," says Emily Kimbrough, "are people I would like to know." Miss Kimbrough, a graduate of Bryn Mawr, maintains firmly that nothing that interests her—for example, how to play the recorder—is too *recherché* for her audience. Marian Taylor, who is the present "Martha Deane," says her typical listener is a college graduate, a young married woman with two or three children, who wants to keep up with things in the outside world but hasn't time to read all the magazines, buy all the best-sellers, and see all the new plays.

On the basis of the fare to which she gives such attention, one would guess that the listener is interested in fashion, home decoration, and children. She is concerned about civic corruption and social welfare. She wants to know about new books

and the arts; with modern art she is prepared to try. She believes in the popularized tenets of modern psychology, and like thousands of housewives in respectable organizations like the General Federation of Women's Clubs, she accepts a good deal that would have been considered radical twenty years ago. She even sees the need for unions and for some government interference in the lives of private citizens. Her world is not an eccentric or a passionate one, but it is a pleasant world where problems are solved with "counseling," "packaged savings," Dromedary cake mix, and good will.

**I**N HER home life, "Martha Deane," as Marian Young Taylor, is the wife of an advertising executive, the mother of twins, and an ardent gardener. But it is as a woman of the world of politics, current events,



achievement, not as a housewife, that she holds her listeners' interest. Alert, intelligent, and without side, Mrs. Taylor says she runs her program (10:15 to 10:55 on WOR) like an independent newspaper. She devotes a few minutes each day to comment, to an interesting news item, or to reading a poem. Politically her main purpose seems to be to correct overexaggerated attitudes. Ten days after the Eisenhower Administration took office, she listed, for the benefit, she said, of disgruntled Stevenson voters, three good things it had done. When a reporter appearing on her program commented fliply that nobody had voted for Stevenson except Tallulah Bankhead and some college professors, she carefully pointed out that twenty-seven million Americans had. But she is perfectly capable of dropping the straightforward, determined manner with which she treats current affairs and giggling with a

woman expert about new fashions.

As a young woman, Marian Taylor followed in Mary Margaret McBride's footsteps, first by working for N.E.A., the Scripps-Howard syndicate, then by becoming "Martha Deane." The McBride forces follow her career with the slightly acid concern characteristic of maiden aunts. But the world of the women's talk shows is a polite and honorable one, and professional rivalry rarely becomes barbed.

"Martha Deane's" program resoundingly and repeatedly affirms the economic usefulness of the listener loyalty such shows create. It is estimated that the program reaches about 500,000 homes; the subscribers to the top four women's magazines are numbered in the millions. Yet when "Martha Deane" offered her listeners a recipe book in a one-minute announcement, she received more requests than did all four women's magazines that had run ads making the same offer. Statistics like these make it possible for "Martha Deane" to get \$600 a week from each of her sponsors—the highest rate in the field.

Rather surprisingly, since the two have similar guests, "Barbara Welles" (Helen Hall) (1:30 to 2 on WOR) finds her audience unaffected by the fact that she is "opposite" Mary Margaret McBride. Miss Hall, an ex-actress with a noticeably trained voice, conducts a thoughtful and conscientious program, whose function, she has said, is to "humanize the abstract." Guests are usually impressed with her almost overcareful preparation of material. This, plus the fact that the guest is interrupted too often by the commercials, gives the program a somewhat calculated atmosphere.

Under her own name, Miss Hall conducts a shorter program over the entire Mutual Network. Tape-recorded material is shifted back and forth between the shows. Interviewed by "Barbara Welles" when he returned to this country from Germany, General Lucius Clay said "Yes, Barbara," "No, Barbara," and "On the other hand, Barbara" so many times during the interview that it was impossible to use it on Helen Hall's program. The busy General did not have time to do another interview, but agreed to sit

down and tape-record, in as many different inflections as he could think of, "Yes, Helen," "No Helen," "On the other hand, Helen."

During the past few years, Helen Hall has made regular trips abroad, which have resulted in on-the-spot broadcasts from a Finnish steam bath, Christian Dior's salon, and the shrine of Our Lady of Fatima. WOR's publicity staff asserts that she is the only woman ever to broadcast from a submerged submarine, where she undoubtedly sounded as competent and unsurprised as she does in the WOR studios.

### Maggi, Alma, Emily

Maggi McNellis, a former night-club singer, conducts a light, casual show called "Maggi's Magazine," from 12:15 to 12:45 on WABC. By her own admission, she "doesn't have time to read all those books," and her guests are mainly actors, singers, and people in the news. Since she has three or four a day, no one guest gets much chance to sound off. The Army colonel's wife who is anxious to describe what kinds of clothing should be sent to Korean children finds herself cut off after she has said a few sentences about Korean cooking. Male guests are greeted with slapdash flirtatiousness. But in our civilization really frivolous women are no longer supposed to exist: Like the other women broadcasters, Maggi McNellis is grim about atom bombs, fascinated with psychiatry, judicious about politics, and indignant about race prejudice.

Genial, cheerful, and perpetually surprised, Alma Dettinger of WQXR (2:30 to 3) has a special problem in attracting listeners. WQXR broadcasts mainly highbrow music, and, says Miss Dettinger, "A lot of listeners are annoyed when they hear a voice starting up." It is not a matter of making them turn the radio on but of keeping them from turning it off. Perhaps as a result, Miss Dettinger has developed a slightly breathless delivery.

Like the other ladies, Miss Dettinger feels nothing is too difficult or highbrow for her audience. Some years ago, she had an enormous response when she offered her listeners a reproduction of an abstract painting by Kandinsky. Recently she completed a series with guests

from the Women's City Club, in which various complicated aspects of New York City's government, including its budget, were discussed.

Emily Kimbrough, a newcomer to the field, started her program (4:05 to 4:30) last year, when CBS's Margaret Arlen moved to television. Miss Kimbrough presents on radio a personality already successful on the lecture platform and in books and articles, a woman who has peculiar experiences, gets imprisoned in taxicabs, loses one glove or one earring—in short, who is incident-prone.

An important feature of the program is anecdotes about Miss Kimbrough's childhood, her family, her experiences, told with skill and a theatrical sense of timing. On Fridays, Miss Kimbrough (who uses her maiden name professionally) is often

joined on the program by her twin daughters, young married women with almost identical voices who are called A and B. They discuss something like how to teach a child to love music or how to run a party.

But Miss Kimbrough also operates in the international realm. During a short interview with Mme. Pandit of India she evoked a surprising amount of detailed information about Mme. Pandit's career, elections in India, the party system, campaigns, and the place of women in politics.

### 'Favorite People'

In moments of discouragement, Mary Margaret McBride complains that she now has so many imitators that the bloom has worn off her program and off many of her guests. But she continues to take the pick

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of guests offered by press agents. With her remarkable interviewing technique and ability to put complex topics on a chatty plane, she commands the devotion of eight million listeners. When she recommends a book, publishers say, sales immediately reflect her plug. In addition, practically everybody at all well known in the United States is either "one of our old friends," or "one of our favorite people," including such disparate individuals as General Bradley, Norbert Wiener, Jimmy Durante, and Mrs. Roosevelt.

Mary Margaret has never been married and her program is her life. Early in the game, her listeners came to mean as much or more to her than her friends. When she was preparing to travel to Europe before the war on the zeppelin *Hindenburg*, hundreds of listeners wrote and said they would pray for her, while "lots of my oldest friends didn't even bother to say good-bye." "A psychologist," she commented disarmingly, "would be able to diagnose me and my ego in a second. All right, let him."

Into her hour between one and two o'clock, Mary Margaret pours all the energy and love the average woman scatters among several people and activities during a whole day. If occasionally her outpourings amount to gush, Mary Margaret is not a bit embarrassed to admit it.

THERE IS an atmosphere of dedication at a Mary Margaret broadcast quite unlike the businesslike mood of other programs. Mary Margaret broadcasts from her apartment on Central Park South, in a room lined with the gaily jacketed books she has discussed on the air. In a corner is a huge screen all her guests must sign. Everything is ready and everyone assembled before she appears. Vincent Connolly waits on one side of a long table and the two guests on the other. Mr. Connolly, a graduate of Princeton whose mealy voice is almost as well known as Mary Margaret's, has been with the program for years and has grown portly in Mary Margaret's service.

A few minutes before one o'clock, overwhelming and resplendent in a Chinese jacket and voluminous black pajamas, Mary Margaret mani-

festes herself, her eyes bright and clear, her cheeks pink and healthy. She chats a few moments with the guests, striking the mood with some direct question such as, "Lucile Watson, what is on your mind?" The guest begins to spout. Mary Margaret listens a moment and says, "Let's save it for the program." There is a pause. She says, "Here we go!" Vincent announces, "It's one o'clock and here's Mary Margaret McBride." Then she launches into the program, often as if she were continuing a previous conversation—"with one of those days," she burbles, "when I expect to have a wonderful time with one of our favorite people."

The other women broadcasters make faces, fidget, light cigarettes, dangle their pumps, and twist their feet around the rungs of the chair. Mary Margaret does not smoke and she forbids it to everyone else (with the exception, for some reason, of Quentin Reynolds). Utterly relaxed, she leans her head on her hand, fixes her guest with a spellbound gaze, and draws out his story almost by spiritual suction. Although her questions sometimes sound childlike, they are often brilliantly calculated to draw out unexpected material; the look she turns on the bemused celebrity is alert, wise, and sybilline. Who are you and what is your significance? it seems to say. The guest pours out his soul.

On her fifteenth anniversary in radio, Mary Margaret broadcast from the Yankee Stadium, surrounded by some sixty thousand admirers, including many of the great and near great of the United States. In spite of such acclaim, she worries perpetually about her program and its competitors, and wants constantly to be reassured that she is the best, the most popular. Her ambition is driving and nervous. Once she told over the air of dreaming that she was walking through a field with Mrs. Roosevelt (who for a brief time was a competitor) and having a very hard time keeping up with her. Actually her position seems invincibly secure, and she can yield playfully to other potentates. "I just know," she said this winter, "that President Eisenhower is going to take my time for the State of the Union Speech." (He did.)

MARY MARGARET is too much of a professional ever to be really stumped by a guest, but she sometimes gets one who taxes her benevolence. Not long ago one guest failed her and she was faced with devoting her full time to her second guest, Irene Rice Pereira, the painter. Mrs. Pereira, who specializes in abstractions and sometimes paints on different layers of glass over canvas, indicated to Mary Margaret that she did some of her work in a state of mystic ecstasy. Mary Margaret found this hard to take.

"You want me to be a truthful woman, don't you?" she asked, as near belligerence as such a genial person can be. "Well, I'm a truthful woman and I don't know what you're getting at."

Cheerfully, Mrs. Pereira made an effort to explain, ending up with "the reality of space and time in ever-flowing, never-ceasing continuity. I guess that's not clear for a layman. You ask me questions."

A certain sternness crept into Mary Margaret's voice. "We'll start with you growing up," she said, "because otherwise I don't know how you got the way you are."

"I don't either," said Mrs. Pereira happily.

For years Mary Margaret has encouraged people to explain how they got the way they are. She was appalled. "You mean," she asked, "you go around just not *knowing* how you got where you are?"

Mrs. Pereira tried to explain. She rambled on about her childhood and the nature of an artist's life, pointing out that it was not "all joy and exultation."

"Sometimes you're crying?" asked Mary Margaret, meltingly.

There was a moment's silence. "Yes," said Mrs. Pereira, now in her turn grim, "sometimes I feel this type of hysteria."

But, as she always does, Mary Margaret kept the upper hand and her usual charming manners. "Now it's important," she pointed out to her audience, "that we listen to what she has to tell us, because she's a famous artist. She's illustrious." And she ended graciously, "I think you're a very exciting person. That's I. Rice Pereira. P-E-R-E-I-R-A. Now," she went on with visible relief, "*Dromedary* white cake mix."

# The Years Of Indecision

McGEORGE BUNDY

THE CHALLENGE TO ISOLATION, 1937-1940, and THE UNDECLARED WAR, 1940-1941, by William L. Langer and S. Everett Gleason. Harper & Brothers. \$7.50 and \$10.

THERE HAS BEEN no more important period of American history than that between Munich and Pearl Harbor. In those thirty-nine months a series of diplomatic revolutions spun the American people outward from their self-centered isolation into careening contact with the realities of international politics, until finally they found themselves at war in the one way they had not expected—by a direct attack upon their land and their fleet. In *The Undeclared War*, William Langer and Everett Gleason have completed the massive study of American foreign affairs in this period that they began in *The Challenge to Isolation*. It is a magnificent achievement of collection and organization, so thorough that it will not have to be done again. That so fine a record could be compiled within a decade of the events (for these volumes were essentially complete three years ago) is a commentary on the degree to which historians have now established their claim to full information on the very recent past. Only where the statesmen have reserved the right to be their own historians—in Soviet Russia and in both Red and White China—are there still major gaps in the record.

If these volumes have a major failing, indeed, it is that the treatment is too thorough. Together they total about eighteen hundred pages and a million words: It is too much, even for this momentous period. The skillful organization and the narrative clarity of the account sometimes fail to prevent the reader from getting lost among the myriad

trees of the forest the authors have re-created. And in the painstaking examination that is given to each and every problem one can come to feel that the discussion with Mexico over oil claims is just as significant as the last negotiations with Japan. Moreover, Mr. Langer's long interest in European diplomacy and his reluctance to leave any source unused seem to have led the authors too far into matters that might properly have been given more summary treatment in a history centered on American policy.

BUT THE QUALITY of the work remains. Among the million words there is hardly an error of type or fact beyond the curious misspelling of Clement Attlee's name. Although the judgments the authors made are restricted, many of them are fresh and nearly all are persuasive. And the very detail of this account, with its indefatigable report of each turning, small and large, has a special value. Almost more than if it were better proportioned and more sharply centered on the great issues behind the details, a history like this one takes the reader back into the prevailing atmosphere of the time. If the authors use too much space on Finland and not enough on the freezing of Japanese assets, do they not simply repeat an error that was a part of the reality of the time? The history is written in the same perspective in which it was lived. To relive the experience of 1941 is to be confronted again by some of the most persistently fascinating and disturbing questions of American history.

Langer and Gleason themselves, in the introduction to their first volume, pointed to one of the ques-

tions: the quality and character of Franklin Roosevelt. Certainly the President was the central figure in the determination of American policy during this period. And yet in these volumes he seems to fade and rematerialize like the Cheshire Cat in *Alice*. This is only partly the result of Mr. Roosevelt's penchant for unargued and verbal decision. Partly also it is that the President laid his course very close to the ground. It is true that he was partial to the brave phrase and the striking idea, and one of the high points to which these volumes give full play is the

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