

RECENT BOOKS

AMERICAN WAY

SHRILL voices have warned us lately that Washington, under the sign of war emergency, may move in on the press and take over the radio. Personally I think the broadcasters sound overwrought. At noon today TEK toothbrushes and Gulden's mustard were still inextricably tangled with War Bonds and Defense Stamps, Bosco opened, closed, came in on the middle and the quarter of the news about our biggest naval engagement, and on Saturday night the government's own *This is War* program was neatly sandwiched between commercials. Daily I grow more confident that for local, coast-to-coast consumption at any rate, the American Way is safe for the duration.

In the eloquent pleas of radio lobbyists, our American Way tends to lean heavily on the "free-enterprise system." That does tell us something, but not much. After all, the really monumental tribute to free-enterprise is the British Empire, over whose far reaches no airwaves carry the message of vitamin-rich-whole-wheat bread. A more candid and illuminating guide to what we have here is Robert Landry's little 126-page book, *Who, What and Why is Radio?* just issued by the George W. Stewart Company. Landry is one of the editors of *Variety*, the famous trade weekly of American show business, which sees, hears, knows and tells all. He has been listening to radio longer and harder than anyone else, he has most of the facts and only a few illusions.

The American Way, says Landry, is simply the Way of Business. His picture – projected with such effortless clairvoyance I'm not sure he has stood off to view it himself – is of a great market-place, a kind of wholesale bazaar, where the booths (stations), half of them controlled by powerful, unlicensed operators (networks) are set up, largely by squatters' rights, to sell Time-on-the-Air. This product is supplied free of charge by the government, on an apparently ever-renewable lend-lease basis. Wandering about are a number of little-known but important men, the Time Brokers (station salesmen) of whom, as of the Washington radio lawyers, "no one can say how much influence" they exert on the broadcasters. Sales go to the highest bidders – manufacturers of shoes, soap, pants, cigarettes, who turn their purchases over to "experts" (advertising agents.) These fill up Time with Words, Music Sound Effects and Silence (Landry's ingredients of radio programs) for retail mass distribution. The market is indeed so open and so free that when the government issues an occasional regulation it may become endlessly involved in law-suits in the effort to track down ultimate responsibility.

Given the framework of a market economy, Landry finds the American Way about as good as can be expected. The actual results he judges to be the best in the world – a rating few will dispute who have ever tuned in on London, Berlin or Rome. He tells refreshing tales

not only about our efforts to curb the unbridled urge of business self-expression, but also about the English. The English, it seems, had a way of circumventing B.B.C. boredom to the tune of three-million-dollar annual subsidies for the pre-war commercial entertainment, sent out by powerful, continental stations of Luxembourg and Normandie.

Landry has, however, the glib habit so dear to Messrs. Sarnoff and Paley of referring to American radio as an Art. Radio, writes Landry became an art "gradually, after 1927," which birthday comes miraculously just a year after "NBC began life as big business." This canonization of mass entertainment has its obvious uses for the industry's promoters, but it is also one of the most popular legends about the American Way. So far as I can figure it out, the claim rests chiefly on the support given radio, from the beginning, by "Music." The inventors and developers have always gone all out for "music in the home." "The receiver," wrote Sarnoff in 1916, when he was working for Marconi Wireless, "can be designed in the form of a simple 'radio music box.'" This persistent concentration on the "music box," the interchangeable use of the term "concert" for radio program, were potent enough in the Twenties to engender a plan that "radio programs be financed like symphony orchestras, whose annual deficits are absorbed by subscribers." Though finances now are more prosperously arranged, the musical aura lingers on. As a matter of fact, music still gives radio its major support; on all programs its "casual as well as preponderant usage" adds up to fifty-eight percent.

Even more significant is the cultural,

or what might be called the plush "Toscanini" front that music provides for the industry. No one can over-estimate that value when the question of public interest is raised by a government considering renewal licenses or scrutinizing network profits and monopoly practice.

This great dependence on music being obvious, I can never understand why musicians, as a professional group, have brought so little criticism to bear on radio. "Radio's most clear-cut contribution to the elevation of taste is in musical matters" says Landry, casually adopting the industry's slogan because he doesn't much care. But why should musicians give it their tacit support? There is hardly a procedure affecting program selection, performance, education, "appreciation" that isn't open to question or improvement. Yet star conductors, harsh autocrats with their own Trustees, will ungrudgingly accept the advice of station "experts" or advertising "geniuses" as the last word of wisdom on "mass taste". When works are cut off in the middle with hastily improvised endings, composers grumble – but in private only. Critiques of appreciation and education programs seldom come from teachers themselves, but from such remote experts as university musicologists or research sociologists.

Of all the concessions granted by the industry to the various clamoring pressure groups of the country – and Mr. Landry lists a vast number of measures by which the National Association of Broadcasters has divested itself of "editorial" rights, to meet the demands of demagogues, political parties, racial minorities, religious organizations, occupational bodies – only one is noted as having been made to Music. It appears

as a "suggestion" issued by the Federal Communications Commission that concert programs be not interrupted by advertising announcements!

What radio needs – and Landry has been crusading for this ever since he began tuning in – is responsible, professional criticism. (Not to be confused with the gossip and trivia that feeds the country's three hundred daily "radio columns.") This is the least and most essential corrective to large-scale business dealing in ART. Of course Landry advocates no "high-brow" approach by way of "symphony standards." But the music public may well ask, why not? What after all does radio deal out that needs serious re-viewing more than music? And isn't the symphony, for better or worse, radio's big "culture number," its splurge and splash, its fanciest claim to public service? Today after twenty years of broadcasting, an international premiere of major importance will be consistently ignored by the press if it has the misfortune to be heard first over the air. Which of course

leaves the industry free to rely on what, according to Landry, it calls "the one true, the one best, the one really important radio critic" – meaning public opinion – and to determine policy on the basis of high and low percentages from popularity surveys.

Lest any modest soul hesitate to cast himself in the role of reformer, let him remember that the industry is neither so formidable nor so tyrannical as its great control over mass entertainment would make it appear. Already it has denied itself a great number of folk-ways still cherished by the theatre, and most of the practices which the press holds to be the very breath of life and freedom. On Mr. Landry's last page there is a very significant reminder. Broadcasters, he says, sometimes have the incomplete impression that they can move in this business primarily as business men. The impression needs correction. First and foremost they are as he points out "in custody of the public's domain, and they operate as a privilege, not a right."

Minna Lederman

FURTHER INITIATION RITES

HERE is another of the many books intended to help the uninitiated or the partially initiated to "understand" music. Douglas Moore's *From Madrigal to Modern Music* (W.W. Norton, 1942) is a volume to make the anti-appreciationists rage and the musicologists imagine many vain things.

It is a text issuing from academic halls which in 338 pages proposes to "give the reader a background of musical understanding, so that when he encounters a composition from one period or another he will feel at home in the style, will have an idea of what to expect, will not

be disappointed if he is not blasted out of his seat by a Baroque concerto grosso, nor surprised when a contemporary string quartet begins with a fugue." The vociferous opponents of Appreciation will need to read no farther: they will know that nothing of this sort can be done in thrice three hundred pages and that Professor Moore with all his prestige as composer, lecturer, administrator and university professor is trying to delay the time when only the purest of meticulous musical knowledge will be given out in colleges to the musically élite. The book, moreover, begins with an