

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Susan Ware. *It's One O'Clock and Here Is Mary Margaret McBride: A Radio Biography*. New York: New York University Press, 2005. xii + 304 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8147-9401-2.

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## A New Look at Old-Time Radio

This intriguing work offers a look at a complicated personality, Mary Margaret McBride, who once was a household word among millions of American women who tuned in to her interview show for two decades on daytime radio. While it provides far more than a glimpse, the author concedes it does not give a complete portrait. Susan Ware bills her book, the first full-length study of McBride, as a “radio biography.” Its strength lies in its ability to trace the contours of radio listening among housewives in the mid-twentieth century by crediting McBride with being the forerunner of today’s talk show hosts.

Not a conventional cradle-to-grave biography, this book is of particular interest to mass communication scholars because it concentrates on relating the story of a star performer to the media technology of her day. Ware states that one of her purposes in writing it is to widen the customary definition of biography. This aspiration makes the volume a notable addition to works dealing with media history by telling the story of an entertaining personality who maximized the potential offered by radio broadcasting.

What was the secret of the much-heralded but long-forgotten success of McBride, a poverty-stricken, overweight journalist from rural Missouri who mixed ad-lib interviews and chatty, unrehearsed advertisements into fare that tantalized a national audience of faithful listeners? Ware, an authority on women’s history who edited the last volume of *Notable American Women* (2004) for the

Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study at Harvard University, tackles this question as she ponders McBride’s success in radio. She concludes that McBride, unlike other women broadcasters who confined themselves to trivial comment and household hints, constructed a lasting tie with her audience because she respected its intellect. She credits McBride with helping advance the cause of civil rights by having African American guests on her show, but faults her for giving in to the communist hysteria of the McCarthy era and dropping some guests accused of subversive leanings.

With a warm, somewhat girly and gushy voice that drew in listeners, McBride presented serious ideas in a down-home manner that made her a trusted friend to fans across the country. Refusing to advertise products that she herself thought were harmful (including alcohol and tobacco), she smoothly integrated commercials into her interview format, leading listeners to transfer their loyalty to her sponsors. Although much of her fan mail, which arrived daily by the bagful, was given to the U.S. government during World War II paper drives, enough has survived, supplemented by firsthand recollections, to enable Ware to emphasize McBride’s enormous influence on her audience.

In her preface Ware notes that she became interested in McBride when she ran across her obituary while working on *Notable American Women* and found it hard to believe that a person once so well known had been forgotten. Discovering voluminous quantities of archival ma-

material at the Library of Congress, including 1,200 recordings of McBride's programs, Ware found her a perfect subject for exploration of early radio, an area vastly underresearched by cultural and media historians. The author, who spent countless hours listening to these recordings, comments that she wishes readers were able to listen to the shows, too, perhaps via the Internet. In the absence of such an opportunity, one would have liked for Ware to have included at least a few transcripts to display McBride's unique interviewing skills that tended to conceal the many hours of preparation she put in before meeting her guests.

Describing McBride's career, Ware points out the significance of daytime radio in the broadening the lives of middle-class women beyond the confines of domestic pursuits. In her heyday from 1934 to 1954, McBride broadcast from New York, first doing a half-hour local show (as "Martha Dean") from 1934 to 1940. In 1937 she started her own fifteen-minute talk show on the CBS network that lasted until 1941 when she launched a forty-five-minute program on NBC. That show continued until she moved to ABC in 1950 for an additional four-year run. Her audience numbered from six to eight million listeners as she hosted thousands of radio guests ranging from unknowns to key personalities of the times and featured interesting persons, books, plays, and places of note.

Refusing to use notes, she guided her guests into non-confrontational conversations and talked about her own daily life including her passion for various kinds of food. To the East Coast sophisticate, she may have sounded like a hick. *Time* called her "radio's queen of endearing mush" (p. 7). But to her listeners, mainly middle- and lower-class women, she sounded like a beloved relative who convinced them to use the products she endorsed.

Ware begins her book in the year 1944 when McBride was so successful that she filled Madison Square Garden for a broadcast that celebrated her tenth anniversary on the air. With keynote speaker Eleanor Roosevelt, a longtime friend and frequent guest, standing out among the numerous celebrities present, the event was billed as the "First Lady of the Land pays tribute to Lady No. 1 of the Radio." [1] Five years later, Yankee Stadium was nearly sold out for McBride's fifteenth anniversary show.

Yet, as Ware explains, the McBride phenomena resulted from a fluke. Desperate to find work after losing her savings during the Depression, from a well-paid career as a magazine writer, in 1934 she auditioned for the part of a fictional grandmother, Martha Deane, on a women's program broadcast by New York's WOR. As

she liked to tell the story, after a few weeks on the air, she confessed to her audience that she was not a grandmother and that she wanted to talk about more stimulating topics than homemaking. To the station's (and her own) surprise, she received an immediate enthusiastic response from listeners.

In spite of her extraordinary appeal to the public, McBride suffered from depression and low self-esteem. Ware roots these in her childhood experiences as the oldest child of a Missouri farm family perpetually short of money. Born in Paris, Missouri in 1899, she worked her way through the University of Missouri School of Journalism, seeking a passport to a wider world. Moving to New York in the 1920s, where she worked as a publicist and journalist, McBride met Estelle H. "Stella" Karn, who became her lifelong friend and business manager. Karn served as the power behind McBride's independently produced radio shows.

While acknowledging that the two women may have had a lesbian relationship, Ware does not delve deeply into personal aspects of McBride's life, reiterating McBride's own contention that she gave up marriage for a career. Certainly, McBride made no secret of her closeness to Karn, who was well known to listeners as one of McBride's "radio family" members. Another "radio family" member was longtime announcer Vincent Connolly, frequently ribbed about being a "confirmed bachelor," which may have been a code term for being gay. Ware, however, does not give more than a surface mention to McBride's possible same-sex orientation or the causes of her binge eating and obesity.

Ware's focus is solely on McBride's national radio career, which, except for a five-minute daily broadcast on NBC that lasted until 1957, ended in 1954 when Karn developed cancer. Ware refers only in passing to McBride's other media activities, which included magazine articles, a cookbook, four autobiographical works, and a nationally syndicated newspaper column that ran from 1953 to 1956. When she made a foray into television in 1948, her nightly program lacked what Ware calls "the visual sparkle" needed for the new medium (p. 203). Although McBride was a frequent guest on national radio and television shows in the 1950s, radio interviewing remained her love. For the last sixteen years of her life, from 1960 until 1976, she conducted a local show broadcast on a station in Kingston, New York, from her retirement home in the Catskills.

Media historians should be grateful to Ware for resurrecting the life and media times of a woman who per-

sonalized the shift in American society from a rural to a consumer lifestyle created in large measure by the power of radio. Why has she been forgotten? Because she was a woman on daytime radio. Too bad that too few historians have recognized the significance of both women and radio in American life.

Note

[1]. Bennett Cerf, "Here Comes McBride," *Saturday Review of Literature* (March 1, 1947), 6.

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