

Radio Hill – A hill without a name but with an important history.

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If you have driven along Canberra Avenue to Queanbeyan, or along Hindmarsh Drive from Woden into Fyshwick via Newcastle Street then you have seen 'Radio Hill'. It is the pine tree covered hill bordering Canberra Avenue and Newcastle Street. If you are like me then you have driven past it several hundred times. It is not marked with any name in *Gregorys Canberra Street Directory* so why is it called Radio Hill and what is its historic significance? To answer that question we have to go back in time before World War II, to the early 1930s when Canberra was beginning to take shape as the nation's capital and broadcast radio was emerging from an experimental stage into a prominent form of public media.



The remnant foundations of the small radio station
On Radio Hill, Fyshwick.

By the end of the 1920s Sydney was enjoying the privilege of a new form of information and entertainment – the wireless. But in Canberra broadcast transmissions from Sydney were difficult to tune into, especially in the daylight hours, and many Canberrans were cut off from this wondrous new form of technology. What was the point, many Canberrans would have thought, of having a wireless in the lounge room if you could hardly hear through the static a radio broadcast from distant parts?

Enter Albert John (Jack) Ryan, an AIF veteran who knew a bit about radio having been for some time a signaller during the First World War. He owned a small shop in Kingston selling and repairing electrical equipment and in conjunction with this had begun selling radio sets. Jack Ryan appears to have had an eye for a commercial niche – why not start his own broadcasting station from the shop in Kingston, create a niche demand for wireless receivers, and then sell them to the Canberra public? And that is just what he did. Jack secured a licence from the minister for Home Affairs to operate a 50 watt commercial broadcast station from his shop in Kingston. Financed in part by local businessmen and in part by himself, Jack Ryan constructed his transmitter and began broadcasting on 14 November 1931. In time he would employ a young lad, George Barlin, to help with every aspect of broadcast. Radio station 2CA was born.

Broadcasting between 8 and 10 p.m. the opening night's programme included a live concert with a piano trio including C.S. Daley, poems by R.A. Broinowski and speeches by the secretary for Home Affairs, Percy Deane. Thomas M. Shakespeare, proprietor of the *Canberra Times*, was at first opposed to the establishment of a radio station indignantly claiming that it would take away the advertising revenue which kept the paper alive. He eventually began to see the value of a radio broadcasting station and withdrew his objections. By 1933 the popularity of the radio station was increasing, as no doubt were the sales of wireless receivers from Jack Ryan's shop. The Canberra public were now listening intently to 2CA. It was time to expand the whole enterprise. The Commonwealth granted Jack Ryan an increase in power from the original 50 watts to 500 watts. This increase in transmitting power made the small backroom station in the Kingston shop unsuitable as a broadcasting site. After receiving notice from the broadcasting authority, Jack told his young off-sider, "They want me to move the bloody thing!"

With financial aid from young George Barlin's father, a site was selected not too far from Kingston, but far enough so the now-powerful signal would not swamp programs from more distant stations, and a small building was erected on a low hill close to the Canberra-Queanbeyan road. The hill quickly became known as 'Radio Hill'. Masts to support the long wire transmitting aerial were acquired from Duntroon, the new transmitter and power supply installed, a desk, microphone and turntables fitted in the small hut, and radio 2CA was now transmitting at greater power to a much wider audience. Canberra was now no longer so isolated from the rest of Australia and the world.

The young George Barlin would spend his days and most of the nights in the small hut crammed with humming equipment and a powerful transmitter just next to him, broadcasting to Canberra. It was a great adventure for George; he became the engineer, technician, programme presenter, serial writer and reader all in one. Station 2CA, with the only significant transmitter in the region, also became Canberra's air traffic control point for the Canberra leg of the early commercial Sydney to Melbourne flights. In those early days Radio Hill overlooked the Molonglo workers' settlement (formerly the Molonglo Internment Camp, originally constructed in 1918 to house German prisoners of war, but eventually housing enemy civilians and their families). Children from the camp would often climb the small hill to the radio hut and stand around outside hoping to catch a glimpse of the amazing events taking place inside. They learned quickly to keep quiet while the microphone was open, after the records stopped playing.

The new more powerful station was expensive to run and Jack Ryan soon felt the financial strings begin to tighten. Eventually he was no longer able to run the station and was forced to sell. By the late 1930s the 2CA studios had moved from Radio Hill and were housed in a new building in Mort Street, Civic, next to the Civic theatre. The power of the radio transmitters was increased again from 500 watts to 2,000 watts and moved to outlying Belconnen. The small hut on radio hill, now no longer functioning as a commercial radio station, was dismantled along with the aerials and transmitting equipment. The name of Radio Hill slowly disappeared from the vocabulary of Canberrans and today is only remembered by a few people, one of whom is George Barlin, rightly remembered along with Jack Ryan as the pioneer of radio broadcasting in Canberra.

So, the next time you are in the Fyshwick area, or driving north or south along Canberra Avenue, take some time and visit the site. There is a small lay-by parking bay on Newcastle Street 150 metres from the junction with Canberra Avenue; and from there follow one of the tracks up to the top of the hill – the walking is easy. All that remains of the radio building is a small concrete slab located in the middle of a disused vehicle track. Stand on the concrete slab and imagine what it would have been like to have been crammed into such a small space among the radio transmitter and its associated power supply each day while the radio station was broadcasting. There are two other remnants of the radio station to be seen. Along the edge of the track on which the slab is situated, and about 20m equi-distant from the hut slab, are two small concrete footings – one has the remains of a timber post embedded in it. These are the footings for the former aerial support towers. Further up-slope (north) from the hut slab, on

the apex of the hill is a large open, but empty, water reservoir. This reservoir was connected to the Cotter water supply system and was used by the former Molonglo Internment Camp and later the Molonglo Workers Settlement. In the days of the radio station it was used as an earthing point for the transmitter, with a cable running from the equipment in the hut to the iron inlet pipe of the dam. Jack Ryan and George Barlin also used the dam as their source of drinking water while working at the station.

Today, if you stand quietly next to the concrete slab among the pine trees you can imagine yourself being one of those small children of the Molonglo Settlement, from just at the bottom of the hill, peering through the door of the building into the interior where you could perhaps see large panels of dials, cables, coils, and huge glowing valves, and a young lad sitting at a desk talking into a microphone. You would have to be silent though and not disturb him, as he would be talking on the wireless to Canberra and the region. You could then imagine yourself quickly running down the hill to your home and if your parents were fortunate enough to have a wireless in the lounge room, you could listen in and know exactly who was talking and where the music was coming from.

Radio Hill has recently been nominated to the ACT Heritage Register because of its historical importance. The nomination is being assessed by the ACT Heritage Council.

References

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