

THAT DRAGON GOEBBELS

AN ADDRESS BY S. J. DE LOTBINIERE, ESQ.
To The Empire Club of Canada
Chairman: The President, Mr. Eason Humphreys.
Thursday, April 20, 1944

MR. HUMPHREYS: Today's session of The Empire Club constitutes a salute to Britain, for we pay homage to St. George, the Patron Saint of England.

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In a moment or so, I shall give you the toast to St. George and Britain. Afterwards, our guest of honour, Mr. S. J. de Lotbiniere, will reply by addressing us on the subject: "That Dragon, Goebbels".

Although born in Britain, Mr. de Lotbiniere is the descendant of a distinguished Canadian family. In one sense, he has come home, for his grandfather, Sir Henri Joly de Lotbiniere, was Prime Minister of Quebec (which is somewhat unusual for a Protestant), and, for a short time, he was a member of Laurier's Cabinet. His father trained at the Royal Military College, Kingston, and became a commissioned officer of the Imperial Army.

Mr. de Lotbiniere was educated at Eton and Trinity College, Cambridge, and for a time practiced as a member of the Chancery Bar. He joined the British Broadcasting Corporation in 1932, and has held several responsible positions there. For example, he was responsible for the great Coronation Broadcast. More recently, he has been associated in London with the organization of United States, Canadian, and other broadcasting networks. A few months ago, he came to Canada for the first time, to forge the final link in a broadcasting chain, namely that between the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation and the British Broadcasting Corporation, and he is now in charge of the B.B.C. Office in Canada.

Mr. de Lotbiniere's duties are of special interest to us, for he directs the attention of the B.B.C. to material representative of Canadian life broadcast or otherwise publicized, an important and useful function, especially in the interests of Canada. Now, gentlemen, and perhaps you who are listening, too, will you drink a solemn toast with me: "St. George and England."

Gentlemen: Mr. S. J. de Lotbiniere, his subject: "That Dragon Goebbels",

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Now that was evidently a dragon of no substance. And some people were inclined to think the same of Goebbels and his gang--but only at first. Within a few weeks of the outbreak of war Lord Haw Haw was one of the most popular radio stars in Britain.

Very soon he and others were being widely listened to overseas and it was clear that the B.B.C. had a big job on hand. Now I don't want to suggest that the B.B.C. was the only organization that was out to defeat Goebbels and his Italian and Japanese counterparts. There were other broadcasting organizations--there was the press--there were films. But the B.B.C. was at least well situated to join in the fight. We were well situated--but we had certain problems. Let me take you in imagination back to the summer of 1939. War wasn't a certainty then, but assuming it was, what preparations had we got to make to meet what was to us a wholly new and unknown set of circumstances. We'd got two main problems to settle--first how best to keep the radio machine going and then how to put that machine to wartime use. I suppose, in that summer of 1939, the thing that puzzled us most about keeping the machine going was the scale of possible enemy attack. We'd got our programme centres in eight or nine of the principal cities of Britain--with a heavy concentration of studios and staff in London. Here the concentration was largely in one building--Broadcasting House. That's an eight storey building above ground with three floors below--and were to find that in the long run those below ground floors were to stand us in good stead. All the offices at Broadcasting House are built round a sort of central tower in which are--or were--the studios, and our control room was on the top floor under a glass roof. We knew that we couldn't make Broadcasting House bomb proof. And we were proved right about eighteen months later when a 500 pound bomb came in at an angle through the outer shell of offices and into the studio tower where it burst. Six of the staff were killed, and three floors of studios vanished in dust and broken glass. Down below in the basement, news bulletins were on the air both in the Home and Overseas services. I was out of London listening to the Home news. I heard the thud of the explosion and then a girl's voice saying, "Go on, it's all right." I thought to myself--"A lot of fool listeners will think that's a bomb hitting Broadcasting House." I was the fool listener that time--while the announcer read on to the distant rumble of walls crumbling only two or three floors above his head.

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Well, that's one thing that eventually happened--but in that summer of 1939 we were only guessing. We knew that the London hospitals were preparing for 200,000 casualties a week and we decided to reduce their labours, if we could, by planning a large scale dispersal of staff. That dispersal took place in due course. But even then we had to decide what line to take in the event of a raid on one of our dispersal areas. We didn't feel justified in spending the labour and materials in making all our studios bomb proof,

and so we were left with the possible alternative of finding ourselves having to abandon a programme already on the air or of risking the lives of maybe twenty or thirty artists.

Our practise evolved with experience. In 1941 I found myself at Bristol--at a time when we had our big symphony orchestra there, as well as three smaller orchestras. Many's the night I and others spent roof spotting--with the German planes droning overhead on their way maybe to Coventry or Birmingham, or Clydeside. I'd have a programme schedule with me, so as to know at any given moment what programmes might be originating in Bristol. There were usually several of these and we'd be faced with a problem. On the one hand the German planes seem to be on their way elsewhere. On the other hand, down below was a studio full, maybe, of eighty or ninety of the best musicians in Britain. Should they be sent to the shelters or should the broadcast go on?

It was a gamble and a good deal more exciting than shooting crap. Though it was a gamble, I know that some of those musicians--many of them veterans of the last war--rejoiced to think that in this war they'd still got a job to do that kept them within sound of enemy action. Another unknown quantity that we were facing in the months before the war was the effect of security regulations on our operations. They were bound to prove embarrassing--but how embarrassing?

You've heard the news from time to time of enemy stations going off the air--with the implication that an allied raid was in progress.

Well our medium stations sometimes went off the air too--but our short-wave stations never did. In fact I believe it is true to say that so far the enemy have never interrupted our short-wave services to any part of the world. The enemy may have caused some programme changes--but never more than that.

Then there was anxiety about what our microphones might give away as to the whereabouts of falling bombs or as to where and at what exact times sirens might be sounding "alerts" or "all clears." In fact at one time we were asked by a service ministry if we couldn't record all our programmes a day in advance--news included! That scheme, fortunately, came to nothing. All the same whereabouts of raiding was an important security secret and I've little doubt a wise one.

It is possible to mistake a target and it's not good to tell the enemy when he makes such a mistake. But it led to some strange situations. After one particularly heavy Bristol raid--when the fires were still burning and the rescue squads still at work--we had to broadcast to Bristol's citizens, news of a raid on what we had to call "A West Country Town". The only extra identification that we could give to listeners was that the Germans claimed that it was Bristol.

Then there was the weather. The Englishman is said to talk little and when he does talk, to talk only of the weather. Well, he's had to be rationed in this war on weather news. Targets are too close to German bomber stations to let them know when the sky over London is clear or cloudy. We tell them now about the Straits of Dover and that's all. But this ruling made it difficult for commentators on outside events. No longer could they see gold braid gleaming in the sunshine, or Union jacks flapping in the wind. You couldn't even say whether the Newmarket "going" would suit the favourite or not.

There was one occasion when we'd got a commentary on a football match in North London--at the "Spurs" ground at Tottenham. About an hour before the match the Air Ministry rang up to say they were expecting London to be hit by a sudden blizzard--of an intensity that might stop even a League football match. If so, they said, our commentator must on no account attribute the abandonment of the match to weather conditions.

I got through to the ground and told the commentator what to expect and what not to say. Then I waited to see how he'd get out of this difficulty. Unfortunately, the blizzard never materialized.

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So much, gentlemen, for the problems of enemy attack and of the Service Department's Security regulations. What about expansion? What wartime developments if the war ever came--what wartime developments must we prepare for?

In that summer of 1939 we had a Home service, a European service and a World service. Our European service then consisted of an hour a day in three languages. Now it broadcasts for a total of 42 hours a day in 25 languages. Our prewar World service broadcast only in English and Arabic. Now it broadcasts in some 23 languages or dialects. Only the other day--just before I left London--I was passing one of our studios when I heard a language new to me coming from the control cubicle loudspeaker. I went in to ask the operator what it was. "Hokkien," she said, "that's one of the three Chinese dialects we're now using."

You can imagine what sort of thing that development has meant in the way of staff. Our offices now are a miniature League of Nations. You can sit in committees where the Commonwealth is as fully represented as at an Imperial Conference. You can go into the canteen and gossip in any language you happen to know with someone from almost any one of Europe's capitals--for Europe is one of our especial targets.

So little does Goebbels appreciate these European activities of ours, that he employs a multitude of men

and equipment in jamming the various services. But he's got his work cut out. Thirty transmitters serve Europe alone and that gives the enemy plenty to do, when they're all being used together. Not content with that we put out a Morse service for the editors of Europe's underground press--and Morse is almost impossible to jam.

But besides jamming, Goebbels has the help of the Gestapo to discourage listening. He can discourage it but we have plenty of evidence that he can't stop it. When the B.B.C. started the "V" campaign--the dot-dot-dot-dash, it swept Europe in spite of Goebbels. It only took a few days for the slogan to catch on in 50 different countries and to be translated into signs and sounds and words and even music. We still use it on our European service as a discreet introduction to news bulletins. Da-dada-da. It sounds like a mysterious knocking on a closed door, so that the Gestapo have to be almost in the room to know that the set is tuned to London.

One last thing about the radio machine itself, the machine that the B.B.C. has been developing and building up during the past four and a half years. We had to have world-wide coverage. Somehow we had to reach all parts of the world some of the time; we couldn't hope to cover all parts of the world all the time.

Some of the things that I came across during the time I was working with our overseas service made me realize what a part we could play in world communications with our powerful shortwave transmitters--those strange networks of wires and masts which rise from amongst moorland and ploughland in some of the loneliest and loveliest parts of England.

During the Libyan campaign the South Africa Broadcasting Corporation had a war reporting unit in North Africa. Their reports and front line recordings were radioed to us from Cairo and we'd put them back to South Africa, over the war reporters heads. That was the only way they could reach South African listeners, via London. We did the same for the Australian reporters and for the New Zealanders. We're doing the same now for your C.B.C. unit in the Mediterranean.

I remember, too, that during the Hong Kong siege, we put out messages to the garrison, messages that had been cabled to us from Vancouver on the Pacific coast.

At another time Singapore cabled to ask us to include all possible Chungking news in the bulletins that we were beaming to them from London. If you look at a world map, that seems a surprising request--Singapore listening to London for news from Chungking. And in the last days of Singapore we were sending them Reuter's messages at dictation speed--to use in their local newspapers.

And here's another random memory. Towards the end

of that same year a naval petty officer, who'd been stationed in the Falkland Islands for the previous four years, came to see me to discuss some special programme for the Islanders. I happened to ask him what the time difference was--between London and the Falkland Isles. He thought for a moment and then he said, "It must be four hours difference. I remember it was eight o'clock Island time last year when we all brought our radios up on deck to listen to Big Ben bring in the New Year." That made us realize afresh what a strange and powerful instrument we had at our disposal for better or for worse--an instrument that could link so effectively the lonely Falkland Islands with blacked-out London.

Mind you the links are nothing like complete. Canada's shortwave station is still in the making, and Britain must be able to listen to Canada, as well as Canada to Britain. Broadcasting between different parts of the Empire must be two-way--if we are to learn enough of each other to be able to overcome our mutual prejudices and suspicions which are largely born of ignorance that Goebbels and others like him seek to foster and foment.

Incidentally, the B.B.C.'s service to Canada is not as reliable as it should be. There's many a night when listening to London is difficult or impossible. That's partly due to the fact that London's radio beam passes too close to the disturbing influence of the magnetic North. But we're hoping to overcome that. Even now engineers are on their way from London to Leopoldville in the Belgian Congo. When these engineers get there we shall be able to use the transmitters there as a relay station for a few hours each evening. London's signal will go 4,000 miles south to the Belgian Congo and then 6,000 miles North West again to Canada--and that will take about 1/18th of a second. Tests have shown that this will cheat the magnetic North of some of its evil influence, and so make the evening transmission from London easier for Canadian listeners.

That, gentlemen, is enough and more than enough about the radio machine itself. What about the use we've made of it? I'll tell you. I believe that our guiding principle from the first day of the war until today has been to stick to the truth. We believed that in the long run people would want the real story and not what ought to be called the "Goebbled version".

Mind you it isn't always easy to get at the truth. The same words will mean one thing to one person and one to another. Suppose Mr. X visits London and comes away saying "I'd no idea that the bomb damage was so extensive." What measure is that of the actual damage? Or if Mr. Y. reports that there's a lot of absenteeism in a certain shipyards--what's a "lot"--is it 5% or 25%?

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That Dragon Goebbels

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Then again, even if you can make words mean the same to every listener; mechanized warfare moves so swiftly that genuine optimism at Headquarters can easily be hours behind the actual turn of events. War reporters found that all right in the desert fighting in North Africa.

Sometimes too, for security reasons it pays to withhold details of a particular engagement. Do you remember the Ark Royal at the beginning of the war? Haw Haw went on the air day after day saying "We've sunk your Ark Royal. If we haven't, where is she?" The Admiralty decided not to tell them until she was safely back in port--and naturally the B.B.C. followed suit.

Of course the wise guys were at us all the time. "The truth's all very well," they'd say, "but at least jazz it up. Make people listen to the news. Get Gracie Fields to read your bulletins and let her sing the good parts if she feels like it."

Well we stuck to our guns. The world smiled a bit and some of our best friends ground their teeth and said "You'll never do it that way." I believe they were wrong. We knew that it was to be a long war and if, in the long run, we wanted people to listen to London, we'd got to do all we could to give them the truth, straight and unvarnished.

Haw Haw, by contrast, hit the highlights all right--for a time. But today how many people in this room know if he's still broadcasting? I'm almost ashamed to say that I, for one, don't know. And I believe that's because Haw Haw and his like have preferred the "Goebbled version" to the truth.

I was told once that in a certain newspaper in Lisbon a full page advertisement appeared one Sunday and announced in bold capitals "Berlin Broadcasts and Europe Listens." On the following Sunday that same page proclaimed "London Broadcasts and Europe Believes."

And that's been our objective--to see and to tell the truth--and I think it has paid handsome dividends. As for the jazzing up of our news broadcasts, again I believe we did the right thing. I've had the good fortune to go right across Canada in the few months that I've been here, and I've been impressed by the number of people who've said this sort of thing to me about the B.B.C.'s news bulletins. "I like the calm voices of your announcers. When things were going badly they seemed to give us confidence." I believe those voices gave confidence on the Home Front, too. And there was a time when confidence alone saved the day for us when we hadn't in fact the men or the arms to resist the enemy--but we believed in our cause and in that belief and with God's help we won through.

Only the other day I noticed a fresh sample of our restrained approach to news reporting. One evening during Mr. Churchill's recent illness I met in Toronto one or two people who seemed to think that things were very serious. They'd heard rumours of Mrs. Churchill flying to his bedside and so on. So I tuned into London and waited for our next news bulletin. We led with a Japanese story, went on to the Cassino fighting and only third did we report on Mr. Churchill's health. That made me feel he'd pull through and he did. That restraint wasn't lack of emotion--whatever it may have seemed like here and in the United States.

There's a well known United States radio writer called Norman Corwin. He came to Britain two years ago to do a series of programmes back to the United States. They were called "An American Looks at Britain." In one of them he was poking fun at the Englishmen's alleged lack of emotion and he introduced into the programme our senior announcer reading a B.B.C. news bulletin. From memory the bulletin began something like this: "At three o'clock this afternoon the world came to an end during a session of the House of Commons. The House immediately adjourned. A full report of today's Parliamentary proceedings will be given at the end of this bulletin"--and then the bulletin went on to report that the Foreign Secretary had seen a snipe in St. James' Park--or something of the sort. Corwin was poking fun at us all right--but I'm not at all sure that I didn't feel rather pleased that that was the way we struck him at a time when we were in the very midst of a life and death struggle.

In any event it's no good pretending that the Englishman is something that he is not. It's not by pretense that international broadcasting will help to build understanding between the nations of the world. We've all got to put our cards on the table and then we shall have an understanding of each other's weaknesses as well as of each other's strengths.

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