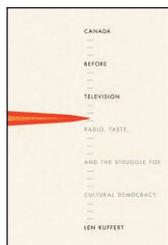


## Review



**Canada before Television: Radio, Taste, and the Struggle for Cultural Democracy.** By Len Kuffert. Montreal, QC or Kingston, ON: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2016. 344 pp. ISBN: 9780773548091.

The concept of cultural democracy is at the core of Len Kuffert's analysis of radio in *Canada before Television: Radio, Taste, and the Struggle for Cultural Democracy*. Kuffert argues that "with the arrival of the CBC, the free flow of information and expertise between public service broadcasters did not constitute collusion to deny listeners programs they might have wanted to hear. On the contrary, much of the exchange had to do with ensuring that listeners' various tastes were adequately served" (p. 90). Rather than evaluating the progress of Canada's public broadcasting chronologically, his historical analysis turns the idea of a public broadcaster "on its ear" to capture its essence. Kuffert speaks of the "vision" of public broadcasting and its inclusivity. The CBC and public broadcasting are deemed synonymous with cultural democracy in *Canada before Television*.

Although Kuffert treads upon the well-worn path of the development of the CBC, he widens the traditional historical lens and treatment of the topic. He goes beyond the starting points of E. Austin Weir's role in the development of the Canadian National Railway network and his contributions to the Canadian Radio Broadcasting Commission as well as that of Gladstone Murray's role in the early years of the CBC. Both Weir and Murray figure heavily in the histories of Canadian broadcasting published in the 1960s and the archival sources ensure their respective places in broadcasting history. The painstaking detail of Kuffert's extensive archival research is evident in the expansion of the narrative of CBC's first steps, to move beyond the same key stakeholders and to examine the impact of other members of the CBC team. Building on the foundation of revisionist broadcasting historians, such as Marc Raboy, Mary Vipond, Michele Hilmes, and Simon Potter, Kuffert is able to effectively add to the accepted interpretations of the relationship between Canada and radio. This book makes an impressive use of the CBC and Weir papers at Library and Archives Canada; the Alan Plaunt Papers in British Columbia; and the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) archives in the U.K. The BBC archives provide a counterpoint to some of the more traditional interpretations and Kuffert finds resources to reinforce a stronger sense of the development of radio. Kuffert is able, particularly in the discussion of the British affiliation, to widen the context for Canadian broadcasting by placing it within the Commonwealth, highlighting the use of more BBC programs and even exchanges with Australia. The comparison and consideration of the role and/or impact of American broadcasting is essential to any analysis of Canadian broadcasting, due to the signals wafting across the border and the incorporation of American programming within the

schedule of many radio stations, including those affiliated with or owned and operated by the CBC. Kuffert's assessment of the American role in Canada places the CBC just outside of the mainstream commercial broadcasting of the American networks.

*Canada before Television* does not attempt to be comprehensive in its coverage of the era before television. Its thematic coverage includes intimacy; American programming; British affiliation; regulating radio; music; and finally broadcasting and cultural democracy. Taste and cultural hierarchy are at the root of the analysis throughout the work. Cast as the arbiter of good taste and representative of the programming not favoured by commercial broadcasting, the CBC dominates the analysis. Although American broadcasting cannot be ignored, due to its proximity and how it figures heavily in the regulation and pursuit of a public broadcaster, local and commercial broadcasting are all but dismissed. American broadcasting is treated as synonymous with commercial broadcasting and local broadcasting is absent. While community broadcasting is out of the scope of this work, because it does emerge as a distinct licensing category, until decades later, local radio is a constant that does not fall under the purview of the CBC's work. By setting these parameters, Kuffert is permitted to focus almost exclusively on the CBC. The ideas of inclusion and taste or cultural hierarchy persist, so their consideration in *Canada before Television* is significant to the discovery of the origins of this cultural democracy.

The concept of cultural democracy figures heavily in Kuffert's exploration of radio regulation. For most of the period examined by the book, CBC acts as both broadcaster and regulator. The Audience Research Branch begins operations in 1953, but prior to that the guesswork that contributed to the programming of commercial stations and the CBC was influenced by perceptions of taste. Kuffert explains, "I've tried to show in this study of programming and taste, radio changed us, but we changed radio" (p. 225).

Kuffert argues that the intimacy of the invitation into listeners' homes was a guiding notion involved in the development of broadcasters' programming decisions. While commercial broadcasters followed listeners' tastes, the CBC diverged from that standard path. Kuffert explains that "Canada's public broadcaster attempted to use its programming to represent Canada at home and abroad and to 'round out' the broadcast schedule" (p. 227). The idea of taste and filling in the gaps pervades the work, taking the narrative from astrology to music. Kuffert further notes, "I mean to show that taste entailed more than aesthetic preference" (p. 230). At its core, the programming depended on the "broadcasters' readings of existing domestic and social rhythms and norms" (p. 230). These norms were subject to many changes during the early decades that Kuffert tackles: the early years of broadcasting, the development of the CBC, wartime broadcasting, and finally, the postwar period that led into the period of competition with television. This book reminds its readers that the decisions about the co-existence of public and private broadcasting in the 1930s established guidelines for the "entertainment and information for all" (p. 236).

*Canada before Television: Radio, Taste, and the Struggle for Cultural Democracy* should be commended for its ambitious work to studiously explore the circuitous route of taste and programming and its long-term impact on the CBC. The extensive archival research reveals more of the machinations behind the scenes with regard to

the growth and development of Canada's national, public broadcaster. *Canada before Television's* evaluation of public broadcasting and its contribution to cultural democracy adds to the larger sense of radio's early role.

*Anne F. MacLennan*, York University