



When I Think Back...

by Neville Williams

Ernest Fisk the man

Last month, in the first of these two articles looking at the life of Sir Ernest Fisk, I told of the way he played a vital role in the founding of AWA and guided the company through two world wars. This month we look more closely at the man himself.

The heading 'The Man Fisk' appears at the top of an interesting article in *Radio in Australia and New Zealand* published by Wireless Newspapers, Sydney — the same company that owned *Wireless Weekly* before it was taken over by Associated Newspapers. Kindly supplied to me by Neil Bonney of Bundaberg, Old, the article is dated August 15, 1927, and was probably prompted by the inauguration of the Beam Radio service.

Described in the introduction as 'an intimate pen-portrait' of Mr E.T.Fisk, it was written by 'a friend and colleague' F.W.Larkins — presumably the same Fred Larkins that I remember as AWA's General Advertising Manager, when I worked there in the mid 1930's.

The article traces the career of Ernest Fisk, along parallel lines to what has already been set out in the first of these

articles. Larkins makes the point that maritime radio telegraphy had made fairly rapid progress in the northern hemisphere in the decade 1900-1910, with several thousand shipboard and land stations in operation.

By contrast, when Fisk first entered Australian waters, there were no permanent shore stations and accessible wireless equipped ships could be counted on the fingers of one hand: the P&O ss *Malwa*, the Orient ss *Otranto*, the Norddeutscher-Lloyd ss *Bremen* and the HMS *Powerful*.

Says Larkins: "As Marconi discovered wireless, so E.T.Fisk discovered a continent — a continent without wireless, but a continent where he was destined to be one of its greatest pioneers".

In the article Larkins comments on 'The Man Fisk' in a manner more suited to the '20s than the late '80s:

- "The man behind the impenetrable suave mask, which so baffled a formidable array of legal talent at the Royal Commission".
- "His inner self is 'overcovered' by his work. The trivialities, all the manifestations of mediocrity which mark the ordinary are submerged, absorbed in his pursuit of a definite objective".
- "He is so far above the crowd that he is frequently misunderstood when he descends to a more earthly level of thought".
- "Yet he is by no means an impractical visionary... It is his grasp of everyday affairs which has enabled him to pursue his objective and to force men to recognise his genius".

In more down-to-earth terms, Larkins elsewhere refers to Fisk's 'abnormal capacity for work', whether at a technical or business level. Even when ostensibly relaxing, says Larkins, he was most con-

tent when experimenting, or reading scientific books, or dreaming up ideas outside his immediate field of expertise.

An independent tribute to Fisk the amateur, the enthusiast, is provided by the fact that, in 1921, while he was hobnobbing with the Prime Minister and making his presence felt at an Empire level, he was still chairing meetings and 'chewing the rag' with fellow amateurs as President of the NSW Division of the Wireless Institute of Australia (see panel last month).

Be that as it may, in August 1927, when Larkins' article was written, some 200 ships of the Australasian mercantile marine had been equipped with radio, manned by 250 operators — largely the result of Fisk/AWA initiative. The company's radio-electric works had expanded from an original dozen-odd to around 150, employed in producing a wide range of receiving and transmitting equipment.

Questioned at the time as to what lay ahead, Fisk nominated international radio-telephony and picturegram services and, further down the track, television. True to form, the first two became a reality in the early 1930s, with television being delayed by World War II.

Fisk & broadcasting

But Fisk didn't get everything right as, for example, his blueprint for broadcasting in Australia. He was certainly keen to promote it, along with AWA's ability to supply transmitting and receiving equipment.

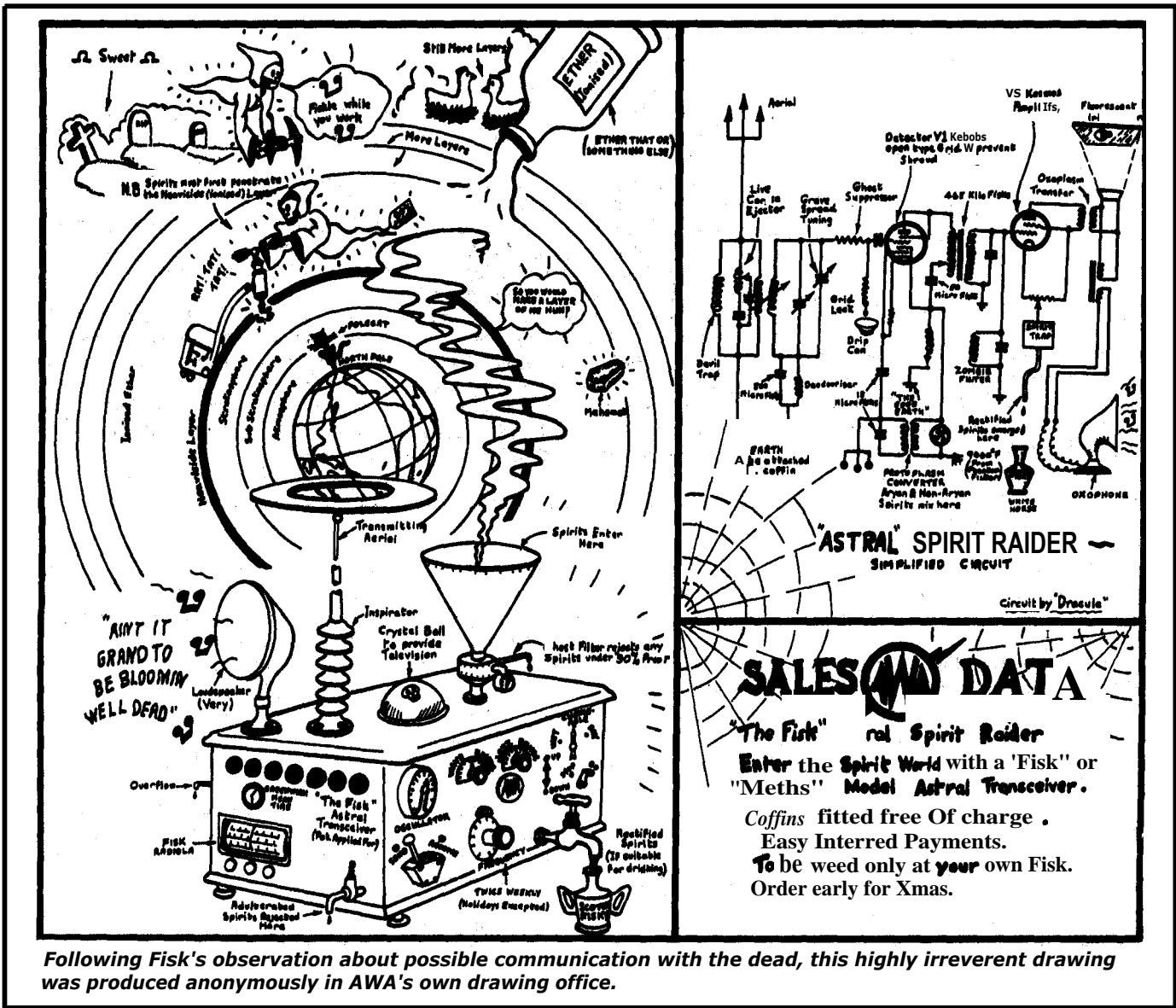
In 1919, in Australia's first public demonstration, a recording of 'God Save the King' was broadcast from AWA's office in Clarence St, Sydney to a meeting of the Royal Society in Elizabeth St — an organisation of which E.T. Fisk was a member.

In 1920, at Prime Minister Hughes' request, AWA transmitted a live program from the home of AWA's Melbourne Manager L.A.Hooke to **politicians** and others in Queen's Hall.

In 1921, AWA began a series of



Meant to be funny, this cartoon produced by a *Wireless Weekly* artist caused no official amusement in AWA top management. They cancelled all advertising in WW, to emphasise their displeasure.



Following Fisk's observation about possible communication with the dead, this highly irreverent drawing was produced anonymously in AWA's own drawing office.

weekly demonstration wireless concerts for the Melbourne area, with similar concerts in Sydney commencing shortly afterwards.

1923 saw the official commencement of public broadcasting, with AWA poised to dominate the production of receivers and transmitters, and to collect royalties on the many patents for which it held Australian rights. Under the Fisk 'sealed-wireless' scheme, listeners would nominate the station to which their receiver would be pre-tuned — and sealed — and would pay the required fee to that station.

Despite intense public interest in broadcasting, the sealed set idea was a resounding flop. Listeners wanted all or nothing while, at the commercial level, there was strong opposition to the scheme and to AWA's potential monopoly.

Under the heading 'A monopoly in

wireless will not be tolerated', the *Australian Wireless Review* for March 1923 reported the formation of an Association to voice those objections. Involving a dozen or more companies, it was headed up by George A. Taylor, with O.F. Mingay as Hon Sec — a man who featured large in the radio/electronics industry in subsequent years.

In November of the same year, AWR carried another story on thirteen wireless retailers in Sydney who had combined to form the Free Broadcasting Company. Their aim was to provide programs from loam to 10pm daily, free of all charges, in return for a 'fair share' of listeners' patronage.

The following year saw the end of the sealed set scheme and the introduction of 'national' stations supported by licence fees, plus 'commercial' stations relying on advertising revenue. It was highly successful.

Despite the setback, however, AWA still managed very nicely — thank you — as a supplier of transmitting equipment, and of receivers ranging from 'traditional wireless sets of the 1920's through to the popular 'Fisk Radiolas' of later years.

Talking to spirits

In terms of his image, Fisk also got it wrong (even if inadvertently) at a luncheon at the Millions Club during 1935. This was when he mentioned the possibility that, some day, radio technology might provide a means of communicating with the dead.

The remark was not out of character. As Sir Ninian Stephan observed in the lecture referred to in the first of these articles, Fisk combined with his technical knowledge and business acumen a free-ranging intellect, not limited to current commitments.

When I Think Back

Beyond the foreseeable future, with world-wide telephony facilities, picture services and television, he might as easily talk about the possibility of transmitting electrical energy in bulk by radio. He was deeply involved in the constructional features of the new head office that AWA was planning to erect in York St, Sydney. And he was interested in metaphysics, having been a member of a committee set up in 1932 to investigate spiritualism.

For good measure, he was a director of numerous companies and associated with the NSW Chamber of Manufacturers; a Freemason, a Rotarian, involved in the Boy Scout Movement, symphony concerts, physical fitness and road safety — the latter, despite his early reputation as a 'demon driver', given to challenging **Sydney-Canberra-Melbourne** speed records! He was even involved in an advisory capacity to the Federal Government, during the early stages of World War II.

For whatever reason, Fisk's remark in the Millions Club about communication with the dead featured so prominently in the press that it became an essential component of his image. Australia's senior radio pioneer had seemingly



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Maritime wireless communications became very important during WW1. Here's what an operator of the day was expected to wear.

'gone over the top', in the footsteps of Conan Doyle and **Hive Lodge!**

Even in the company drawing office at Ashfield, a self-styled 'Dracula' prepared imaginary technical data on the 'Fisk Astral Spirit Raider'.

And, years later, after joining the staff of this magazine, I came across a drawing of a Frankensteinian Fisk, complete with fangs. I gather that, reacting to press reports, somebody in the old *Wireless Weekly* had asked their artist 'Hotpoint' to produce an appropriate cartoon, which he did, endorsing it 'E.T. Fisk, 1935'.

The cartoon produced gales of laughter in the *WW office* and was duly published. But the laughter was somewhat muted away when AWA reacted by officially cancelling all advertising in the magazine!

But enough said. It is appropriate that the last word on the incident should be an extract from a clipping from my files, itself an eloquent comment on the man. (See panel 'Fisk the realist')

Personal memories

Ernest Fisk was knighted in 1937 and honoured by the various societies and groups of which he was a member.

It was about then that I transferred from the Valve Company lab in Ashfield to the new Head Office in 45-47 York St, ironically occupying exactly the same site where I had begun work with Reliance Radio in 1933. But whereas Reliance had been a struggling family company in a run-down building, AWA was a prosperous, formal semi-government institution in just about every sense of the term.

Christian names were the exception

rather than the rule and top management, entering or leaving the building, were accorded private use of the lifts. Even out at Ashfield, the arrivals and departures of the 'great' from York St had been 'occasions', witnessed from afar by we lesser mortals. My one close encounter with 'himself' was in less than happy circumstances.

The new building had been equipped with Fisk anti-noise windows — this at a time when the merits of full-scale air conditioning were still a matter for de-

Marketing a Service

Seven years ago the Wireless Company was incorporated to develop in Australia the art and science of Wireless Communication. To give to travellers at sea the benefits arising from communication with their friends on land, and to the latter reciprocal advantages, has been our immediate aim.

Modern, efficient and economical service is the keynote of the organisation.

To this end we direct a large staff engaged in the production, installation, maintenance and operation of wireless telegraph stations, the direction of personnel, and the recording and accounting of thousands of messages daily.

Every ship station is a floating telegraph office and every post-office a medium of communication.

Logde your message at the nearest Post-office.

Amalgamated Wireless (Australasia) Ltd.

OPERATING

AN ORGANISED RADIO SERVICE

Around 1920, Fisk was ensuring that AWA publicised its wireless telegram service, providing a communications link with maritime travellers.

bate.

The Fisk windows involved the use of overlapping glass panes, which blocked much of the street noise but allowed a somewhat convoluted passage for air movement, assisted by small built-in fans. The idea worked well enough on mild days, but certainly not in the heat of a Sydney summer.

On one particular day, with the sun full on the western windows, the temperature in the Valve Company office on the 5th floor was intolerable. Street noise notwithstanding, I/we had opened wide the hinged panes in an effort to gain a breath of fresh air.

It was then that Sir Ernest, with a VIP in tow, chose to walk into the Valve Company office to boast about the effectiveness of his pet idea. The half-closed eyes blazed as he diverted into the departmental manager's office to deliver a brief oration that was never documented for posterity!

Return to Britain

In 1944, much to the surprise of industry journalists in both countries, Sir Ernest Fisk resigned his position in AWA, leaving the management reins in the capable hands of his long-time deputy, Lionel Hooke. In fact, he had

accepted the position of Managing Director of Britain's Electrical and Musical Industries (EMI).

Perhaps he saw it as a triumphant return to the land of his birth but, viewed from afar, it proved to be scarcely that — due in part to the entrenched conservatism of the **EMI/HMV** group.

With the end of the war in sight, there had been mounting pressure from the **audio-hifi** industry for a quantum leap in disc recording technology. British Decca, in due course, released their 'ffrr' low noise pressings. In Australia, **Fisk's** old company produced something similar. Then British Decca, American CBS, RCA and smaller companies elsewhere began talking about radically new fine-groove, low noise, long-playing vinyl pressings, spinning at 33 or **45rpm** instead of the established **78rpm**.

The moves caused confusion in the record market, but few doubted that the long overdue technological revolution had begun. If it hadn't, the way would be wide open for magnetic tape.

But EMI's reaction was beyond belief, even to talk of retaining the **78rpm** format so that it could continue to serve both electrical and mechanical reproducers!

The one statement that I can **remem-**

ber from EMI Chairman Fisk was a solemn assurance to record vendors and consumers alike that, as far as EMI was concerned, **78rpm** records were still the industry standard and the company would not adopt any other without first giving 6 months clear notice of their intention.

With the microgroove tide already flowing strongly (Refer John **Moyle's** 'Off the Record' columns in *Radio & Hobbies* during 1951) Sir **Ernest's** widely publicised emulation of King Canute caused only an incredulous shaking of heads — including mine. But mention of King Canute is perhaps not entirely inappropriate.

Drawn from the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Sir **Ninian Stephan's** final picture of Sir Ernest is of a man in his sixties, covering the 50 miles from London to Brighton on a bicycle during an English winter and, having arrived, plunging into the chilly waters for a swim. This in the cause of physical fitness.

Enthusiasm notwithstanding, it's perhaps little wonder that, following his ultimate retirement at 65, he chose to return to a more appropriate outdoor climate for the final years of his life. Sir Ernest Fisk died in 1965 at age 78.
