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SIR ERNEST THOMAS FISK (1886 - 1965)

The man who was to become a pioneer of radio in Australia was born at Sunbury-on-Thames, Middlesex, England on 8 August 1886.

His father, Thomas, was a builder and could only afford to have Ernest educated at the local schools of St.Mary's and Sunbury Boys'.

Ernest later enrolled in a private London Coaching College and, during his stay in Australia, in the diploma course in economics and commerce at the University of Sydney.

He did not sit for any of the examinations.

As a boy he sold newspapers on Sunbury railway station and afterwards, as he put it, 'graduated in engineering' in the works of Frederick Walton. Presumably it was a form of apprenticeship.

His career in radio began when he joined the British Post Office as one of their earliest wireless telegraphists.

In 1906 Fisk joined the Marconi training school. The 22 year old Guglielmo Marconi had been granted the world's first patent for wireless telegraphy in 1896.

Fisk learned morse and wireless telegraphy at Liverpool and Chelmsford and qualified as a radio engineer and operator.

He then took a job as a radio operator on the Cunard liner *Campania* on the New York - Liverpool run.

From 1909 he worked for American Marconi and demonstrated wireless to Newfoundland sealers and at stations along the St.Lawrence River.

He then returned to the Marconi Company's headquarters in London.

In Australia, H.V. Jenvey in 1896, was the first to experiment with the Marconi system to try to establish radio communication between Victoria's Cape Otway lighthouse and passing ships. Nothing eventuated from his work.

The British government installed a Marconi plant in Brisbane in 1903 to communicate with Cape Moreton lighthouse.

Later, in 1905, the Marconi Co. started a regular service across Bass Strait between Queenscliff in Victoria and Devonport, Tasmania. It was also demonstrated that the service could be extended to Hobart.

In 1910, Fisk first visited Australia in the *Otranto* to demonstrate his company's equipment to the Orient Steam Navigation Company.

Even though wireless in Australia was still largely in the hands of enthusiastic amateurs, in 1910 the government granted the contract for the construction of two land-based wireless stations for shipping to Australasian Wireless Ltd., a Sydney firm with patent rights to Telefunken, Marconi's German competitor.

In 1911 Fisk returned to Sydney as resident engineer to represent the English Marconi Wireless Telegraph Co. Ltd., which, at that time, traded under several names.

He was responsible for the sale and installation of Marconi equipment to shipowners and the training of telegraphist operators.

He established service offices in Australia and New Zealand and the company enjoyed a significant increase in business as a result of the sinking of the *Titanic* in 1912.

During the same year, the English Marconi Co. sued the Australian Government for infringement of patent. Australasian Wireless Ltd., holding Telefunken patents, then issued writs against firms using Marconi equipment.

The matter was resolved in July 1913 with the formation of a new company, the familiar Amalgamated Wireless (Australasia) Ltd.,

A.W.A., with exclusive rights throughout Australasia to patents 'present and future' of both Marconi and Telefunken.

Fisk was appointed a Foundation Director and was General and Technical Manager of the newly formed company.

He became Managing Director in 1916 and Chairman in 1936.

During a visit to England in 1916, he arranged for a series of test transmissions to Australia from the Marconi long wave station in Caenarvon, Wales.

On his return he married Florence Chudleigh, a music teacher, on 20 December 1916 at St. John's Anglican Church, Gordon.

Australia's contact with the rest of the world then depended upon underwater cables but, on 22 September 1918, at Fisk's home in the north-west Sydney suburb of Wahroonga, he made Australian radio history when he picked up the first successful morse code wireless transmission from Great Britain to Australia.

Messages were received from Australia's Prime Minister W.M. Hughes and the High Commissioner to London, Bro. Sir Joseph Cook.

Hughes, ever the opportunist, made a recruiting speech:

'I have just returned from a visit to the battlefield where the glorious valour and dash of the Australian troops saved Amiens and forced back the legions of the enemy. I was filled with greater admiration than ever for these glorious men and more convinced than ever that it is the duty of their fellow-citizens to keep these magnificent battalions up to their full strength'.

On 13 August 1919, Sydney witnessed the first public demonstration of radio telephony in Australia.

An address given in person by Fisk to the Royal Society of New South Wales was followed by an amplified recording of the National Anthem transmitted from his office on the other side of the city.

The following year, Fisk demonstrated radio broadcasting in Federal Parliament House, Melbourne, where the orchestral strains of *Rule Britannia* were heard followed by the singing of *Advance Australia Fair* by Miss L. Walker. He also established the first wireless newspapers on British ships operating in the Pacific and Indian oceans.

In 1921, Hughes took Fisk to the Imperial Conference in London where Hughes, in his forceful style, promoted Fisk's scheme for direct communication between Britain and the dominions. This was in direct opposition to the Imperial Wireless Committee who advocated that the Empire should be linked by short distance relays.

In 1922, the Australian government insisted that it would accept nothing less than a direct link and it commissioned A.W.A. to create the service. The government injected capital and became the company's major shareholder.

Further history was made on two occasions in 1924 when Fisk, in Sydney, spoke to Marconi in England. This was the first voice contact between the two countries.

A wireless beam service between Australia and Great Britain was established in April 1927. Five months later A.W.A. pioneered Empire broadcasting. In 1928 a beam service between Australia and Canada was inaugurated and in 1930 an Empire radio-telephone service.

Fisk continued to maintain close contact with his mentor and Guglielmo Marconi was Godfather to the Fisks' fourth son whom they named David Sarnoff Marconi.

Ernest Fisk continued to promote wireless as an integral part of the development of the Empire. He wrote:

'No scientific discovery offers such great possibility for binding together the parts of our far-flung Empire, and for developing its social, commercial and defence welfare.'

He joined the New South Wales branch of the Royal Empire Society in 1934 and became President in 1941 and 1944.

He was awarded the King George V Silver Jubilee Medal in 1935 and was knighted in the coronation honours in 1937. He visited England for his investiture.

In 1933 he had been appointed to the Order of the Crown of Italy.

Sir Ernest was also proudly Australian.

He promoted the professional organisation of the wireless industry and was President of the New South Wales Division of the Wireless Institute of Australia from 1914 to 1922. The Institute had been founded by George Taylor in 1910. Fisk founded the journal *Sea, Land and Air* and was a member of the Institution of Radio Engineers Australia, and the American Institute of Radio Engineers.

In 1923 he published 'The Application and Development of Wireless in Australia' in the *Proceedings* of the Pan-Pacific Scientific Congress.

Fisk promoted local industry and its prosperity even though he was the head of a heavily protected manufacturer. He was concerned with business ethics and he published *Business Lectures for Business Men* in 'Ideals in Modern Business' in 1933.

He involved himself in a variety of activities.

He was a member of the Royal Society of New South Wales; President of The Electrical and Radio Development Association; Vice-President of the New South Wales Chamber of Manufacturers and a member of the Royal Safety Council of New South Wales.

He was a member of The Millions Club in Sydney and the Australian in Melbourne; a Rotarian and in 1939 inaugural Chairman of the N.S.W. Council for Physical Fitness. During the same year he was Chairman of the Young Men's Christian Association Appeal.

He was a Director of the Royal Exchange Assurance of London and of York Air Conditioning and Refrigeration Australasia Pty. Ltd., Standard Portland Cement Co. Ltd. and the famous pie manufacturer, Sargents Ltd.

In 1939 Bro. Robert Menzies appointed him Secretary of the economic cabinet and Director of economic co-ordination. In October 1941, Bro. Arthur Fadden terminated the appointment.

Even though his technical knowledge, particularly of electronics, was rapidly being overtaken, he continued to promote an optimistic future for radio communication.

He even claimed to see the possibility of communicating with the dead after the death of his son Thomas on active service during The Second World War.

He maintained a laboratory at his home and registered many patents including soundproof windows which were used in Wireless House, the headquarters of A.W.A. in Sydney built in 1939.

In 1944 he resigned from A.W.A. to become Managing Director of Electrical and Musical Industries, E.M.I., more popularly known as His Masters' Voice, in London.

1952 he left E.M.I. and returned to Sydney where he became interested in the future of solar, hydro and nuclear power. He showed little interest in television, although when interviewed in November 1931 he had said:

'Today we can broadcast a picture but it is only two or three inches square and not as vivid as we are aiming to be I believe that success is just around the corner we shall then look forward to witnessing, in our own homes, the Melbourne Cup as it is won.

Going further, we may expect to sit at home in any part of the world and witness His Majesty the King opening the British Parliament.'

He continued to enjoy champagne for lunch and cycled rather than his old habit of a daily swim.

In his younger days he was interested in landscape gardening and he was something of a 'speed demon' who created 'business driving records' between Sydney, Melbourne and Canberra.

He was an early member of the Australian Aero Club and Vice President of the Australian Air League.

He enjoyed singing and reciting Bro. Rudyard Kipling's *If* and was good company and an accomplished speaker.

One of the great entrepreneurs of his time, Fisk died at his Roseville home on 8 July 1965. He was survived by his wife and three sons.

Bro. Ernest Fisk was an enthusiastic Freemason.

He was initiated on 28 April 1910 in St. John Lodge, Newfoundland, No. 579, English Constitution.

In Sydney, he affiliated with Lodge Victoria No. 73, United Grand Lodge of New South Wales in 1914.

He was also a foundation member of Australia Lodge No. 6506, English Constitution at its consecration in London on 3 July 1947.

He was the foundation First Principal of Electron Royal Arch Chapter No. 684, Scottish Constitution, founded in Sydney on 27 February 1937 for A.W.A. employees.

He presented a paper to the Sydney Lodge of Research No. 290 in 1944 entitled 'Radio Developments', and published an article entitled 'The Meaning of Empire Day' in the *N.S.W. Freemason* in July 1943.

Bro. Sir Ernest Fisk was a prominent citizen and a Freemason.

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