

The Great Canadian Network

Perhaps nothing is as Canadian as the CBC, or Radio-Canada, as it's known in French.

It is a mother of invention and a child of circumstances. It wins awards, at home and abroad, inspires some Canadians and outrages others. It is always in a crisis, usually a fiscal one, often a cultural one, and today's admirer may be tomorrow's critic, but down deep, almost all Canadians take a proprietary pride in its accomplishments. As Warner Troyer wrote in *The Sound and the Fury*, the people at CBC, despite relatively small budgets, often "outrun those in other nations... both technically and creatively."

The current crisis is technological – how will it adjust to the new world of satellites, pay-TV and direct, producer-to-home broadcasting?

In this issue of *Canada Today/d'aujourd'hui* we look at Canada's first network as it was, as it is and as it is about to be.

CBC Then and Now

Canada's first scheduled radio waves – now sixty-five light years out in space – were broadcast by XWA in Montreal, the first station in North America. By 1924 the Canadian National Railway was sending music to parlor car passengers rolling across the country, and by 1928 the CNRV Players were presenting Othello with sound effects. Still, there were a few clouds on the southern horizon.

By the late 1920s Canada had scores of weak and scattered stations that reached less than half the population. Powerful U.S. and Mexican stations, some 50,000 watts, were flooding the country and the American ones, rich in advertising revenues, were producing elaborate and expensive entertainments.

The problem was easily defined – it was important to Canadians, both French- and English-speaking, that they have the daily opportunity to hear their own artists in works that reflected their own cultures.

In 1929 a Royal Commission, chaired by Sir John Aird, president of the Canadian Bank of Commerce, recommended

