

*It's One O'Clock and Here Is Mary Margaret McBride: A Radio Biography.* By Susan Ware. New York: New York University Press, 2005. xii + 304 pp. Index, notes, photographs. Cloth, \$29.95. ISBN: 0-814-79401-7.

Reviewed by Susan Smulyan

In *It's One O'Clock and Here is Mary Margaret McBride*, Susan Ware presents the biography of a woman broadcaster; describes how a midcentury radio personality balanced the demands of the audience, sponsors, and networks; and shows how radio history fits into the larger story of twentieth-century women's history. There has been a spate of books on radio history lately, but biographies have been lacking, and Ware's account of Mary Margaret McBride's contribution to the emerging mass media and to the changes in women's social status is most welcome.

As a subject, Mary Margaret McBride presented her biographer with challenges. Talent is hard to explain, and the appeal of certain personalities to a large audience remains mysterious. In addition, the factors that push an individual to public performance, often a strange mixture of personal needs and loneliness, can be difficult to untangle. Capturing the intimacy of the connection between a broadcaster and radio listeners has also proved hard. Finally, Mary Margaret McBride appeared on local radio, even if, as in her case, "local" represented New York City's large audience. Local radio has not received scholarly attention, at least in part because radio history has focused on programming as a constituent of national identity. Ware adds another reason for McBride's neglect: her largely female audience meant that neither contemporary critics nor historians took her seriously as a broadcaster. In this engaging "radio biography," Ware addresses all these issues and shows that McBride's story deserves to be included as a chapter in women's history.

Ware spends about half the book recreating the experience of listening to McBride's radio show. The existence of 1,200 hours of program recordings and a range of written materials left by McBride to the Library of Congress make this possible. Ware writes in the introduction: "These recordings are a treasure trove of interviews with an incredibly wide range of public figures over three decades, for nearly everybody who was

anybody in those years appeared on her show. One of the goals of this book is to alert other scholars to the possibilities for using this resource in their own research” (p. x). The serious topics taken up by McBride, often during the broadcast segments in which authors publicized their books, earned the program its place on the U.S. political and intellectual scene in the 1940s and 1950s. In a passage that shows Ware’s ability to integrate political, social, women’s, and broadcasting histories, she says of her subject: “In her commitment to interesting and stimulating programming, Mary Margaret McBride demonstrated her belief that the daytime audience was a significant force and should be taken seriously. Her claim to radio history lies less in being the ‘first’ to do ad-libbed interviews or host a talk show than in her unerring ability to speak to the nation’s women in a way that reinforced but ultimately challenged traditional gender roles” (p. 61).

Some of Ware’s most interesting analysis is of McBride’s relationship with her sponsors. McBride called her interpolated discussions of sponsored commodities that served as advertisements on her show “doing the products.” “Doing the products” gave McBride a chance to shine both as a broadcast personality and as a mediator between her audience and the culture of consumption. Ware writes: “Rather than just a necessary evil, ‘doing the products’ was a central and creative part of every show. . . . Mary Margaret managed to make commercials interesting, suspenseful, timely—and persuasive” (p. 88). While doing the products was a necessary part of the U.S. commercial radio system, McBride also acted “as an intermediary between the emerging mass-consumption economy and several generations of women learning how to participate in its complexities” (p. 90). Ware contends that radio listeners did not dislike commercials, and while I find her evidence on this point unconvincing, I would be willing to admit that the audience liked commercials when McBride did them. Ware carefully explains how McBride managed the contradictions between her roles as objective interviewer and pitchwoman by accepting as sponsors only those companies whose products she personally endorsed. Her sponsors proved extremely loyal (and vice versa) and repeatedly bought time on the show (even though they were not guaranteed a set number of minutes, nor were they even informed in advance as to what their ads would sound like). Ware contends that McBride’s policy of using multiple sponsors was a precursor

of the spot advertising that was just coming into use. I see it differently. McBride maintained a personal connection to the advertised products, creating an alternative to spot advertisements and thus helping to prove that many models existed for commercial broadcasting.

Ware finds McBride to have been important for a number of other reasons. In an illuminating epilogue, she compares McBride to current talk-show hosts, including Oprah Winfrey, and she repeatedly demonstrates the closeness of the relationship between McBride and her female New York listeners. Television was not hospitable to McBride and her fans. Thus, her show might be thought of as genre specific. Ware sees this in a positive light, writing that McBride “made her name in radio, and her heart would always be there. Her style truly was better suited to the intimacies of radio, where she could use her warm and enfolding voice to draw listeners into an imagined community” (p. 208). Ware’s book helps us understand what it was like to have been a member of Mary Margaret McBride’s radio community.

*Susan Smulyan is associate professor in the Department of American Civilization at Brown University and the author of Selling Radio: The Commercialization of American Broadcasting, 1920–1934 (1993). She is working on a book about twentieth-century American mass culture and consumption.*