

THE FIRST RADIO PIRATE

by Jim O'Carroll



Looking back over my life, I can truthfully say that some of my happiest years were spent in the electrical engineering class at the Technical Institute, O'Connell Avenue, Limerick. We knew it affectionately as "the Tech" and to me, due to previous experience in other schools, it was paradise. It was steam-heated throughout from a furnace which was always kept well stoked with coke by the caretaker Gus O'Brien.

In all the schools I had attended prior to this, cold had been a great enemy. Amongst other disadvantages, it left one's hands ill-prepared for the stick and the leather strap which were often applied with considerable force. In the Tech these hazards had disappeared and, even after all these years, I can still sense the relief I felt at the time. In addition, I was now being taught the subject nearest to my heart, electrical engineering, by kind and dedicated teachers. I responded by passing the first and second year exams in one year.

My teachers were Jack Whelan, Don Clancy, John Hersey and John Spencer, all now gone to their reward except John Hersey, who, at a venerable age, is still, happily, with us. My principal teacher, who taught electrical theory and practice, was John Spencer. He was also my second father and one of the kindest men I have ever known. Among my classmates were Jimmy Penny, Dick Power, Banger Browne, Charlie O'Connor, Martin McNamara, John Gleeson, Jimmy Sheehan, Stephen Moore and Paddy Kelly.

In addition to my studies of electrical engineering, I branched out in my spare time into the study of what later was to be known as electronics — a word which had not been invented in 1934. I built a two-valve wireless set which operated headphones. I progressed shakily afterwards to a three-valve set and this was powerful enough to drive a loudspeaker. I bought the loudspeaker at Hassett's, secondhand for £1. It was shaped like the horn on the old wind-up gramophones and made not of tin but of beautiful lacquered mahogany. It was beautiful to look at but its appearance belied its performance which by modern standards was pretty poor but at that time it was my pride and joy and, fed with my three

valve wireless set, gave myself and my friends many hours of joy.

When Christmas time came round, I was able to play the B.B.C.'s broadcast of the bells of Bethlehem on Christmas Eve for my mother. I will never forget the look of ecstasy on her face as she listened to the bells ringing direct from the birthplace of Christ.

I then did some experiments with oscillators. These were circuits which generated audio and various radio frequencies depending on the type of coils and condensers that one used. One night, while doing some experiments, it suddenly occurred to me that if I built an oscillator which would generate a radio frequency in the medium wave-band, and then if I modulated this frequency with an amplifier and connected the whole lot to an aerial and an earth, I should, in theory at least, be able to radiate a signal.

The idea of being able to broadcast to the people of the whole city of Limerick became an obsession and so, in secrecy that would do justice to the KGB and the CIA, I built circuits involving different coils and condensers, until one magical night I heard the most beautiful sound of my whole life, my very own carrier wave.

My next task was to give this wave something to carry. So it was back to Hassett's again where I ordered a microphone. One did not buy a microphone off the shelf in those days. After an agonising wait, it duly arrived. It was made by GEC and cost twenty five shillings. I fed this mike into an amplifier which I had already built and then on to the oscillator and aerial and, low and behold, I had a transmitter.

My next problem was to find out how far the transmitter was able to send a signal, the kind of signal I could readily identify as my own. This problem I solved by placing an alarm clock with a very loud tick on top of the microphone. I then took off on the bike to seek out wireless sets where I could surreptitiously listen for my ticking clock. To my astonishment and delight, I could hear it all over the city. My theory had worked out perfectly in practice, and so I was all set to become a radio pirate.

There was yet another problem. Where would I install this illegal apparatus? At the time, I was living

with my sister, Mrs. Keane, and her husband, Tom, at 78 Wolfe Tone Street. I could not have operated from there as my secret would soon have been out.

One of my school pals, Charlie O'Connor, lived with his mother and family in a very large house at 84 Henry Street. The third floor of this house was completely empty and was the ideal location. Charlie, when I told him my secret was delighted to have me installed in one of the vacant rooms.

I began to broadcast right away. I called myself Billy Dynamite and Charlie became Al Dubbin. I called the station the City Broadcasting Service, or CBS for short. Charlie checked on the field strength of the transmitter all over the city. I took turns at the same job, and I remember Clohessy's pub at Baal's Bridge was a favourite listening post and, although I was much too young to take a drink, I was able to ingratiate myself with the barman so that he would tune in "The Pirate".

In those innocent and unsophisticated times, the news of this unheard of phenomenon soon spread throughout the city. What the pirate said and, all too often what the pirate didn't say at all was on everyone's lips.

My usual hours of broadcasting were from 7 p.m. to 11 p.m. Providing four hours of entertainment every night was difficult, to say the least, considering that Radio Eireann, with all the resources of the state, was providing a mere five.

I had quite a few records and I played these a lot. I also had a short wave radio and regularly relayed from the United States news bulletins and the comedy shows of Jack Benny, Fred Allen, Amos and Andy, Fibber McGee and Molly and some of the big dance bands of the time such as Rudy Valee, Cab Calloway and a young singer just starting out, Bing Crosby. Those broadcasts came from a short wave transmitter owned and operated by General Electrics at its headquarters in Schenectady, New York State. They always began with a very loud crackling sound followed by an announcement in a stentorian voice: "You have just heard the sound of a 1,000 million volts of artificial lightening as reproduced in our research laboratory. This

is the voice of Electricity, General Electrics round the world Broadcasting Service".

Each evening, Charlie would cycle up to the railway station and arrive back post haste with the Dublin evening papers and before anyone else had them bought, I would be reading them out over the air. This was a long time before Radio Eireann thought of "It says in the Papers".

Charlie and I gave tips on the horses and, solely on the law of averages, we were often right.

When reception was favourable I was able to relay programmes from as far away as Australia. This sounds a lot more wonderful than it really was. If the signal was coming through I merely fed it into the input terminals of the transmitter and out it went over the city.

In a programme called "What's on To-night" I read out the pictures being shown in the Coliseum, the Atheneum, Grand Central, the Lyric and the Tivoli. The Savoy and Carlton had yet to be built. I also gave a round-up of other attractions such as dances, whist and 45 drives, local productions, missions, if they were on,

auctions, sports meetings, and swimming galas etc. I would have announced dog fights too if the dogs could have given prior notice.

During the summer of 1934, I gave a lesson on swimming each night. I read it all out of a book but it must have been no mean feat if anyone really set forth to swim, after listening to me on the radio. Anyway, it helped to put down the night.

As I began to get a little bolder I discreetly canvassed for commercials. My first contact was the owner of the Wolfe Tone Dairy, Mr. Twomey. He had a fine grocer's shop but, in addition, he made delicious ice cream on the premises. I told Mr. Twomey that I knew a man who could contact the elusive Pirate and arrange to have his delicious ice cream mentioned on the air. He was to make no payment until he heard the broadcast. He offered the incredible sum of £10 if I arranged this transaction. Ten pounds was about a month's wages at the time. For a schoolboy one could almost retire!

Needless to remark, that night the

glories of the Wolfe Tone Dairy's ice cream got the full treatment. After several nights plugging, there were very few people in Limerick City who did not know about it. The business expanded and more machines were bought to satisfy the growing demand.

I kept on expounding the virtues of the product and Mr. Twomey kept on paying, to our mutual satisfaction. An enduring sight in my mind's eye is a very long line of people reaching in the direction of what was then Gleeson's public house waiting to purchase cones and wafers from a delighted Mr. Twomey. This success demonstrated the power of advertising



Jim O'Carroll at his broadcasting desk, 1934.

and, as far as I know, was the first radio commercial in Ireland.

Up to that time, I had a loan of a battery eliminator from a friend, Mikey Madden, of 25 Wolfe Tone Street. He was totally unaware of the use I was putting it to. I would have bought one myself but I would have had to wait sometime to get it on order and, in the meantime, I would have to go off the air.

Mikey started to look for the return of his eliminator. Charlie and I decided that the only way we could continue to use it was to let Mikey in on our secret. When we told him, he was dumbfounded to learn that his eliminator was being used for this purpose as the real function of a battery eliminator was the much more mundane one of keeping a wireless set going without a HT battery.

I began to get some requests to announce various sporting events. I remember one for an athletics meeting in Castleconnell, and if my memory is not playing tricks on me, Eamonn de Valera attended it. All those transac-

tions took place through a second or even a third party. I began to see what I had always believed: that a small low-power transmitter could perform a wonderful local service for the people of Limerick and also give employment, which was sorely needed at the time, and still is of course. Young as I was, it made me very angry to see such a wonderful invention going to waste in the hands of a faceless, nameless few in Dublin City.

I had plans now to contact the cinemas with a view to getting them to pay a modest sum each week to do what I had been doing for free. This money, as well as cash from other

sources, I intended investing in better equipment but the long arm of the law cast a long, heavy shadow over me.

I knew that I could not go on for ever and this limited my ambitions to the very short term. Meanwhile, I still had Mikey Madden breathing down my neck and he requested the use of the transmitter from 25 Wolfe Tone Street. Broadcasting continued from there but something new was added: ear-splitting recitals by Mikey on his bagpipes. If you have never heard bagpipes played in a

small room, then you have missed something for which you should be eternally grateful. The noise defies description.

Soon after this, the end came and, although I had been expecting it, it was a shock when it happened. I was in Dublin for a few days and one morning I bought the *Irish Press* and there on the front page was the headline I had always dreaded: "Pirate Caught - Transmitter Seized!".

I caught the first train home but it was all over. I found Mikey in jubliant mood and enjoying every moment of his new found notoriety. The loss of the transmitter was a big blow, as the parts had cost me every penny I had. I also greatly missed the hours of excitement and happiness I had spent in broadcasting to the city.

Mikey appeared in court charged with the possession of illegal transmitting equipment and was fined £5. My equipment was confiscated.

And so ended a unique event. The station had been the first pirate radio in Ireland or Great Britain and, for all I know, in Europe.