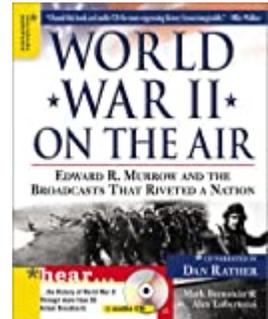


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Mark Bernstein, Alex Lubertozzi. *World War II on the Air: Edward R. Murrow and the Broadcasts That Riveted a Nation.* Naperville, Ill.: Sourcebooks, 2003. xv + 284 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-4022-0026-7.



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Just as the soldiers and sailors of “The Greatest Generation” who fought in World War II are rapidly dying, so are the journalists who told their stories. Of the group of CBS reporters known as “Murrow’s Boys,” after their leader, Edward R. Murrow, only Richard C. Hottelet, at 88, is still living. While their real voices have been silenced, their recorded voices will stay with us forever.

History buffs will therefore love this book, which draws from an eclectic mix of books, popular serials, and unpublished manuscripts, because it recreates the atmosphere of World War II and the CBS news broadcasts led by Murrow. Included with the book is a CD narrated by former CBS journalist Dan Rather, which includes excerpts from 51 wartime broadcasts.

The authors tell the story “as it happened,” using period reports to describe what transpired, providing the reader with a first-person feel to the war as it unfolded in the living rooms of America. They do not, however, use any of the many scholarly and official histories of World War II. Any of the faulty reporting or interpretations of the time live again. For instance, they call strategic bombing a “key Allied weapon” of the war whereas more recent research has raised serious questions whether the bombing had any significant impact at all. In other words, the news of the day has been converted into unreliable history.

Because so few broadcasts originated in the Pacific theater, Russia, North Africa, or even Italy, this book is really about World War II as fought in Great Britain, France, and Germany.

Among other things, it’s the errors that make me wary of this book. The late Joe McKerns is listed in the bibliography as Joseph R. (it should be P.) McKens [cq]. The book refers to Prague as the Czech, rather than the Czechoslovak, capital (p. 38) and identifies Jan Masaryk as the Czech (that is, Czechoslovak) foreign minister in 1938, a position he did not assume until 1940 (pp. 38, 40). In 1938, he was the Czechoslovak ambassador to Great Britain. Similarly, the authors refer on at least two occasions to Eduard Benes [Edvard Beneš] as the Czech, rather than the Czechoslovak president. The Norwegian city of Stavanger is spelled “Stavenger” (p. 66).

Other interpretations are questionable. For instance, the book refers to Murrow as “somewhat prudish” (p. 25), even though we now know that Murrow impregnated one of his fellow Washington State students and arranged for her to have an abortion and also had an affair with the daughter of a leading British official. On p. 126, the authors indicate that the details of Pearl Harbor “reached the public piecemeal,” but that on December 8, Eric Sevareid gave the full story, which is not true. Even Murrow knew the results of the attack from a conversation

with President Roosevelt at a long-scheduled December 7 dinner. The authors write that a Panzer division surrendered “near Czechoslovakia” (p. 205). They would certainly never have written that a division surrendered “near Germany.”

One reference to Paul White, CBS news director, as having the “center-parted, lacquered-down look of an oversize Dink Stover,” will seem obscure to people not familiar with Owen Johnson’s prep-school and Yale novels of the first part of the twentieth century. (The Owen Johnson who wrote these novels is no relation to this reviewer.)

Bernstein and Lubertozi assert that the Murrow boys “were the most significant source of news to the American people” (p. 218), better than other radio and print journalists, but they do not and perhaps cannot prove it. CBS did not repeat its news broadcasts; listeners did not record them. Perhaps their impact seems great today because *we* have heard recordings of them. Meanwhile, thousands of people at the time kept scrapbooks of reporter Ernie Pyle’s columns, which they could reread at their leisure.

Murrow and his buddies did not invent broadcast journalism. Their scripts used much more complicated sentence structure than do most broadcast journalists today. They did not ad-lib. They rarely had background sound. Most of the CBS News reports could easily have passed as newspaper articles. If Ernie Pyle could have been persuaded to read his columns over the air (and

Murrow tried to get him to do it), he would have sounded just like one of Murrow’s boys. Similarly, many of Murrow’s reports would have nestled nicely under Pyle’s byline. Murrow and Pyle both sweated what they wrote. They were both nervous perfectionists.

In fact, the authors explicitly argue that Murrow was better than Pyle because “while Pyle mastered the forms of newspaper journalism, Murrow invented the forms for radio” (p. 220). But the essays Murrow and his boys wrote did not set the style for radio journalism. Except in the work of some NPR reporters today, when was the last time you heard a radio reporter creating a picture with words the way Murrow and his boys (and girl) did?

In summer 2005, as part of my own research on Ernie Pyle, I was shown a 1970 letter from Murrow’s CBS colleague Charles Collingwood in which he recalled what he described as “the best dinner party I have ever given,” which—given what we know about Collingwood as something of a fashionable dandy—must have really been something. (That letter remains in private hands.) The guest list for the party, which Collingwood wrote was held about a week before D-Day, is impressive: Murrow and his wife, Alfred Lunt and Lynne Fontaine, Robert E. Sherwood, John Mason Brown, Pyle, and William S. Paley.

All were captains in the same game, which was to beat the Axis powers. Murrow and his colleagues had key roles, but so did the others. It’s hard to imagine the war without any of them.

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