THE ROBYN WILLIAMS PHENOMENON*

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A review article of **The Best of the Science Show**, edited by Robyn Williams. (Nelson, Melbourne, 1983), pp. xi + 290, $9.95, ISBN 0 17 006263 5; **Science Show II**, edited by Robyn Williams. (Nelson, Melbourne, 1986), pp. viii + 229, $12.95, ISBN 0 17 006831 5; and **Outpourings**, by Robyn Williams. (Penguin, Melbourne, 1987), pp. viii + 189, $9.95, ISBN 0 14 009292 7.

Science promises miracles, as Robyn Williams points out in the lead article of his ebullient collection *Outpourings*. The problem is that it often fails to deliver them. Why? What's going wrong? Perhaps there's something in the structure of science, or the education of scientists, or the relation of science to people, or the application of knowledge, or its communication. Since Robyn Williams is Australia's best-known media science showman, his *Outpourings* of talks, articles and after-dinner secular sermons are as much a series of reflections upon science journalism as on science itself. *The Science Show* and *Science Show II* are his choice of edited scripts and interviews from his long-running Saturday programmes on ABC radio, the **Science Show**.

Robyn Williams asks two questions, often simultaneously: what is science for? and what is science journalism for? He is often asked how to solve the problems of the science enterprise in Australia: ridiculous, but true, he says, and he can't even solve the problems of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation. He wonders whether the ABC is for good programmes, or against them. I could call the exercise a self-reflexive one, except to do so would be to call down the wrath of Robyn Williams on my head for obscurantism. (He quotes Oscar Wilde on the virtues of clarity: "Nowadays, to be intelligible is to be found out.")

Because of his radio base, Williams is a science writer of an unusual kind. Most science writing rolls along on a combination of biography for the human interest, and exposition of the science, together with selected apt quotations to highlight some of the issues. In *Outpourings*, Williams will often take the biographical approach to a topic (with Sir Macfarlane Burnet, Stephen Jay Gould, or John Bolton); and he loves a pithy quotation, but he usually has very little actual science exposition. To read about science in the sense of "this is the theory, this is the practice", the reader must go elsewhere. The reader could well go to the **Science Show** books, for example, where Williams asks questions so that the person he is interviewing provides the exposition.

At times his prose defies the usual logic of more academic ways of writing about science. He is shameless in the use of personal anecdote to make a point, and he periodically lets fly on the topic of science and

the military: at least once an article, no matter what the ostensible subject. In addition, in *Outpourings*, the content of the individual articles is often interchangeable, with the titles providing the principal differentiation. Thus the first article, "A promise of miracles" deals with the themes (among others) of "science changes the world", "science and the democratic process", "science for the people", "science and nuclear warfare", "science and the media" and "science and public health". The second article, "Silly science" deals with "science changes the world", "science for the people", "silly science", and more. The third article, "Charlatans, ratbags, and wise virgins", deals with "science and public health", "science and the media", "silly science", and so it goes. The book, in short, reflects its origins in separate talks for separate occasions. Judging by the book's best-seller listing, Robyn Williams' fans are not particularly worried by the repetition.

His writing has an energy to it, and a clarity that is deceptive. His style seems so easy, but, in fact, to relate the scientific issue to its social implications, as he is doing all the time, is very difficult without using the specialised jargon of the social construction of knowledge. His clarity must, in the nature of things, be hard won. So if at times his arguments have holes in them through which the proverbial truck might fit, his words are read, and a voice of sanity in science is what matters at the moment.

What does Williams have to say about his profession of science journalism, and what is there about the way that he goes about his job that makes him so special? Of that last fact there is no doubt: he is a special person in the lives of listeners to the ABC. Both notions can be explored through a framework provided by Dorothy Nelkin in her book *Selling Science. How the Press Covers Science and Technology*, which deals with science reporting in the United States (US).[1] Whatever Robyn Williams is doing, he is not in the business of selling science, or science promotion or the public relations of science, though of course, some scientific communities might seek to make use of his programme for their own purposes. He is Australia's foremost scientific critic, where the science critic most proper is the person who really likes the subject matter of science (the listener gets that sense most strongly) but who at the same time is exasperated by its shortcomings, and is impelled to point to the flaws in the object of his devotion.

I suspect a careful programme analysis of the 1988 **Science Show** might find Robyn Williams rather more in the role of the public advocate for science in a time of changes of direction in science forced by present financial contingencies rather than the logic of the situation. The **Science Show** is less fun this year, more serious. After all, if science is cut back so severely that there will be no more science, where will science journalists find the raw material for their work?

Nelkin presents a comprehensive list of the persistent images of science in the US print media. First, the scientist is treated as a hero but a weirdo, brilliant but strange. Robyn Williams is different. He treats the scientist

as a person with an interesting story to tell, whether he (nearly always he) is a Nobel Prize winner or a young research student. (Of course the number of Very Important People who get onto the **Science Show** far outnumbers the research students. However he does print the research students along with the VIPs, one per volume of the two **Science Show** books.) Again he maintains an "open-door" policy towards contributions, a policy which allows access to anyone with an interesting story to tell.

The second persistent image of science that Nelkin picks up is that scientific truth is seen as definitive rather than tentative. Robyn Williams certainly avoids that trap in, for example, his use of Wendy Barnaby's interview with John Maynard Smith in *Science Show II*. Smith says vehemently that he does not want the public to perceive science as true: "I would much rather they perceived it as being done by mortals . . . About half of what I learned as an undergraduate has turned out to be false." (p. 13) In *Outpourings* Williams provides an amusing list of "wrong" scientific predictions, made for all the right reasons: Lord Kelvin said X-Rays were a hoax, and heavier-than-air flying machines were an impossibility; Edward Teller announced that atmospheric nuclear tests do not seriously endanger either present or future generations; John von Neumann announced that energy would be as free as the unmetered air. The list comes from an *Outpourings* article with a title that tells it all, "On being found out: science broadcasting as a subversive activity".

Nelkin's third point is that scientific findings and conclusions are found to be more newsworthy than discussion of the processes of science. Not so, at least in the Australian radio journalism scene. The examples are to be found more in the radio programme itself, rather than in the **Science Show** books. Selection for the anthologies seems to favour the good story over the account of daily working routine. But in the programme there are many examples of Williams in laboratories or out in the field, asking questions about what is going on and why people are doing what they are doing.

Nelkin makes a number of other points. The question of "balance" in reporting may result in the situation where technical disagreements between experts are covered with tennis match-type balance. Williams claims he doesn't necessarily aim for balance, but for the argued point of view. Nelkin mentions the preferential treatment towards science stories which offer either "new hope" or "no hope", salvation or doom. This is not the case with the Australian radio scene. There is so much science reporting in the various programmes that they require more than just one kind of story to keep the air-waves buzzing.

If Australian radio science is in better shape than many aspects of the US print media scene, at least as analysed by Dorothy Nelkin, that will come as no surprise to Robyn Williams. He says it himself, though he freely acknowledges the great limitations within which he works. For example, he does not try to compete for the "ambulance-chasing" hot

news story, but will leave that for the big-money operators. (In fact, he will often follow a story as it breaks, so that **Science Show** listeners soon heard about the recent discovery of the electric sense of the platypus.) Instead of the instant news coverage, Williams goes for the ideas, the analysis, the history, and the politics of the scientific situation. He pins the difference of ABC Science Unit reporting down to the fact that the Australian programmes are produced-presented by producer-presenters, with one person doing the job that at least two other people do in the United Kingdom or in the US. This allows freedom for the presenter to experiment without the constraints of a producer; it allows immediacy (even intimacy) in presentation; it allows him freedom to be himself. That it also saves the ABC money may even be beside the point, for once.

Showing my vested interest as a one-time historian of science, I would like to take issue with Williams' preference for scientists when it comes to reprinting talks on the history and philosophy of science. I know it is part of his programme to extend the range of scientists' interests from tunnel vision to a more integrated and reflective "basket-weaving", possibly as part of a master plan for the recovery of Western Civilisation, but surely now and then he can give the historian or philosopher print space in his books. We are not all without some kind of merit.

Indeed Robyn Williams happily interviewed Ann Moyal on the ABC television programme **The Uncertainty Principle**, introducing her as our best-known historian of Australian science. In the **Science Show** books he includes the physicist Ian Johnston on the history of ratbaggery in science (six articles), the engineer Louis Matheson on the history of bridge-building (three articles), and the zoologist Ronald Strahan on the history of evolution. Tim Sherratt, a young research student in the history of science at the University of Melbourne is included in *Science Show II*, with an article on Australian scientists at the British atomic tests at Maralinga, but as he is also the token research student in the volume, I am not satisfied that Robyn Williams really cares enough for poor historians, the people whose work is quarried by the scientists for their talks. I would like to see a fairer go for us, though this is probably a plea which will fall on ground made stony by too many ABC budget cut-backs, in a time when more and more the members of the ABC Science Unit are interviewing each other on air. Though each of the members of the Unit is industrious and interesting, I'm sure they'd like to take a break sometime and let the historians have their say. In a way it is good to see reflection on the history of science mainstreaming into science journalism, if only it can be done sometimes in a way that gives the underlabourers a chance to shine.

Williams concerns in *Outpourings* are consistent with his **Science Show** anthology selections. An example is the issue of choices in science and technology, with Mike Cooley on "The Greater London Enterprise and Work", and "Unemployment and Technology". (Cooley is the only person to be printed in both books.) Australian voices are also included,

with Coralie Creevey on "The society for social responsibility in engineering" and Barry Jones on "The future of work". The extracts illustrate the line he takes in his own writing, that science and technology must be presented in terms of choices for the future. There are ways in which science may be exploited at community levels (hence his delight with what Mike Cooley has achieved) and experts must learn to see their work in terms of offering their skills to the community, to make products people say they really need.

I suspect Robyn Williams of a bias towards the bicycle, and the hard-jogging low-cholesterol lifestyle generally. The often repeated emphasis in *Outpourings* on self-help public health measures such as less salt in the diet, less alcohol, no smoking, and more exercise are repeated in the selections in *The Best of the Science Show*, in ten articles out of 37. I also cannot see why *Science Show II* prints four talks on bicycles, where one example would have made the point. In general the selection for the first anthology ranges more widely, with contributions from 37 people. *Science Show II* is more restricted in its scope, with 27 contributors, several with multiple contributions. The importance of the social sciences is stressed in *Outpourings*, in the plea for "a science to tell us more about ourselves", yet in the selections for the anthologies the social sciences fare badly, with only three articles in each book. I particularly enjoyed "The soft sciences" in *The Best of the Science Show*, with Ron Johnston, Sol Encel and Cliff Hooker winning hands down in debate with their "hard science" opponents.

One persistent theme running through all three books is military science and its evils. Williams points out that military science would take up more than half his air-time, if he sought to present science according to the division of labour and resources within it. In *The Best of the Science Show* the theme of "Science, technology, and social conscience" encompasses the first six lead stories, with Patrick White on "The role of the Australian citizen in a nuclear war" as epilogue. The talks are by the physicist Rudolf Peierls on "The atom bomb", the historian E.P. Thompson on the European peace movement, the politican Tony Benn on democracy and technology (including nuclear technology), and Steven Rose on the concept of expertise. Rose argues that the focus on military technology pushes for a more warlike society more generally, with 80 per cent of all scientific research performed for profit or social control. Another point to note about Williams' particular selection of experts here is that three are not Australian, while the Australian is a Nobel Laureate, in literature. The big name, the overseas name, the assumption (probably correct) that they will attract buyers must be frustrating for the local scientists, who know they will never be anthologised in any European publication. Why not include Jim Falk, or Barrie Pittock, for Australians with relevant expertise?

Of course, it is always easy for reviewers to point to what could have been included, and Robyn Williams knows the problems of selection as well as anyone else. I will ask, however, where are the voices of women?

Then I'll run. *The Best of the Science Show* has five women contributors out of 37; *Science Show II* has two out of 27. There are excellent women science journalists working in Australia, even if there are few women scientists who will come forward to speak for themselves. Two out of 27 is to be deplored.

Robyn Williams has the knack of asking the question his listeners want to ask, and that is part of the secret of his success. He has trained as an actor, and the element of sheer showmanship in the **Science Show** should not be under-rated. Science as entertainment, that is part of his act. He has the knack of giving the person he is interviewing his complete attention, as if sitting opposite him at that moment is the most scintillating intellect he has ever met.

He has enthusiasm and commitment. Take the recent visit of the Canadian scientist and science journalist David Suzuki, and the attendant media hype from May to August earlier this year. Williams radiated 100 per cent enthusiasm for the overseas visitor, in contrast with Graeme O'Neill, science journalist with the Melbourne *Age*. O'Neill is more a "straight" science reporter, taking the image of science journalism from the conventional image of science itself, with detached, objective reporting. When O'Neill interviewed Suzuki, he reported him verbatim (*The Age*, 5 July, 1988) without evaluation, or "colour writing". His article was straight exposition, with biographical detail and well-selected quotations from the book Suzuki was promoting, *Genethics*. The reader/listener received different messages from the different media. From Williams came enthusiasm for the brilliant science communicator, the man who clearly links his science of genetics with its social implications. From O'Neill came an image of another author on a promotional tour. It is one of those situations where both reporters on the science scene may well have been right.

These three books are readable, entertaining and enlightening. They provide excellent material for students in Science, Technology and Society courses, and also for Media Studies students keen for an insider analysis of the problems of the ABC. I look forward to more selections of scripts and, at least, *Outpourings II*.

REFERENCE

1. Dorothy Nelkin, *Selling Science. How the Press covers Science and Technology*, W.H. Freeman, New York, 1987.