

BRIDGET O'SULLIVAN

Bridget 'Bid' O'Sullivan was the first teacher of the School of the Air in Queensland. Miss Adelaide Meethke conceived the idea of using the wonders of radio to create the School of the Air. The first lessons were transmitted from Alice Springs on the Flying Doctor network in 1949.

Bid O'Sullivan was born in Taroom and had attended primary school there. She had extensive experience in bush schools, having taught in Winton, Charleville and Chinchilla before the Second World War. In 1942, she began work in the Correspondence School in Brisbane where she remained for 17 years.

Miss O'Sullivan's voice became very well known as she conducted many school broadcasts for the Australian Broadcasting Commission. Later, a School of the Air parent, recalled that it 'was her voice, of course, that captured the children. It held all the warmth and generosity of her personality'. Correct elocution was one of Bid's hobby horses, and she used every attempt to inculcate a high standard of grammar and pronunciation.

School of the Air lessons began in Queensland on 25 January 1959, in a converted house which also housed the Flying Doctor Service in Cloncurry. Bid O'Sullivan was 63, a tall, white-haired lady, at this challenging time in her long teaching career. The first broadcast began: 'This is a proud day for Cloncurry and the Royal Flying Doctor Service. It is the very first day of the School-of-the-Air'. But the console had not been switched on, and Bid had to repeat her opening.

The School of the Air provided more than basic instruction to complement correspondence lessons; it was also a very important vehicle for social contact for pupils spread sparsely across 300,000 square miles (?sq kms) from the Gulf Country in the far north to Birdsville in the far south-west. Traeger 59SA transceivers were available for hire from the Education Department at a cost of 12 pounds per annum. Each day's lesson was followed by a 'cockatoo' session which Miss O'Sullivan arranged so that the children could chat to each other. Some of the children were so shy, and so unused to contact with children outside their own families, that they didn't participate for months.

The School of the Air adopted its own school song, sung to the tune of 'A spoonful of sugar' from the film *Mary Poppins*.

Bid O'Sullivan had a gentle sense of humour. One of her favourite techniques was to add verses to nursery rhymes, such as this addition to Humpty Dumpty:

Come quite close and listen well,
I've a little tale to tell.
Humpty Dumpty on the wall
Is just a big fresh egg. That's all!
Boil him well and you will see
He won't break so easily.

And this one to Jack and Jill:

Up got Jack and said to Jill,
As in his arms he caught her:
'You're not hurt,
Brush off the dirt,
And then we'll get the water'.

Bid encouraged the children to participate in wider activities, and lavished praise where it was due. Geoffrey Wharton from Oorindi was chosen to sing the National Anthem when the Governor, Abel Smith, officially opened the school on 26 Sept 1960. Bid wrote to him: '... I want to tell you how very proud of you I felt as you opened yesterday's ceremony with the singing of National Anthem. It was a wonderful thing to see fully-uniformed police inspectors standing at full salute as your clear little voice came to us over the air. Good boy, Geoffrey'.

On that occasion, Penny McClymont from Mitchell spoke the words of the presentation of flowers to Lady May and Rayleigh Logan from Richmond thanked Sir Henry.

Bid introduced a Captain and prefect system. Office bearers changed each week to give the pupils experience of the boarding school system they would go on to enter when they time at the school of the Air was finished. Miss O'Sullivan designed a school badge in 1960 and a motto: *per ardua ad caelestia* – through difficulties to the heights – a nice play on words.

All sorts of opportunities were provided to the seventy-four students who were enrolled by the end of the first year. Bid organized a concert at the end of the year. One father dragged the piano across the house so that it would be near the radio for his daughter's item. Bid said it was the 'longest school concert in the world'. Bid O'Sullivan did not stint herself on her pupils' behalf. She traveled to visit students over awful roads and in all kinds of conditions. Some families drove more than 130 miles to meet her.

Bid O'Sullivan was became a Member of the British Empire (MBE) in the 1963 New Year's honours list 'For her outstanding services and devotion to the children of Q in the field of education'. She travelled to Brisbane in March for the ceremony and, on her return, described the ceremony and what the Queen wore and said.

In May 1963, Bid retired when she was sixty-seven years old. Her retirement was a very emotional day for her many devotees. A big testimonial function was held in Cloncurry. She was presented with the Cobra microphone which she used for so long. It had been dipped in gold, mounted, and inscribed: *Service above Self*. She was delighted¹.

¹ H McKerrow, *Over to you. The first 25 years of the School-of-the-Air in North West Queensland*, Mt Isa 1985.