

Prologue

Voice of America

"I ALWAYS AM HAPPY WHEN A WOMAN SUCCEEDS, but when a woman succeeds superlatively, she's an inspiration to all other women."¹ With those words Eleanor Roosevelt greeted the audience of 18,000 women (and a few men) who jammed Madison Square Garden on May 31, 1944, to celebrate Mary Margaret McBride's tenth anniversary on radio. Millions more listened on a nationwide network broadcast.² The next day, the First Lady told the readers of her "My Day" column, "I have seen the Garden filled for important meetings, but never before have I seen it as full as it was yesterday for just one woman and a program of radio interviews."³

Mary Margaret hadn't been so sure when she left her apartment that the event would be such a success. (Everyone was on a first-name basis with her, and we generally will be, too, in this book.) Ever the pessimist, she was certain that nobody would come, despite the fact that NBC had received more than 44,000 requests for tickets. A favorite cab driver, more dressed up than usual in honor of the event, was waiting outside her Central Park South apartment to take her downtown, and even his reassurances that his wife and daughter were coming did little to allay her fears. "There's nobody here," she muttered as she entered the Garden through a side door. Only when she walked out on to the stage, dressed in a signature navy blue dress with white collar and cuffs and heard the cheers and applause of the assembled crowd did she finally let herself savor the moment. Her instant reaction was that she wanted to shake the hand of every person who came, just as she did after each of her radio broadcasts. "But they're my friends and they've come to see me," she exclaimed. Her skeptical manager, Stella Karn, who had arranged the extravaganza, barely dissuaded her boss from carrying out her grand gesture.⁴

Originally Karn had a more grandiose idea for Mary Margaret's entrance: she wanted her to enter Madison Square Garden astride an elephant. Stella Karn had always had a thing about elephants, probably dating to her days as a circus press agent. No matter that the sight of the short and rather plump radio personality on top of an elephant might have seemed more than a bit comical—once Stella made up her mind, she did not give up easily. This was one of the few times when McBride prevailed.⁵

It was still wartime when Mary Margaret McBride celebrated her tenth anniversary on the air, and the world situation was too serious to have only a party, so the event was dedicated to recruiting women volunteers for the armed forces. Keynote speaker Eleanor Roosevelt, Mary Margaret's favorite guest and longtime friend, told the audience that the men overseas recognized the important contributions that women were making to the war effort. Actress Billie Burke performed a skit about a WAC being decorated for bravery by the president, and the audience also heard from authors Margaret Culkin Banning and Fannie Hurst, as well as war correspondent Margaret Bourke-White. To reinforce the patriotic theme, members of the Red Cross spelled out the victory signal (three dots and a dash) from the balcony, and the event concluded with a fashion show of military uniforms.

NBC president Niles Trammell was so pleased with the broadcast event that he predicted, "I wouldn't be surprised if we had to take the Yankee Stadium to celebrate your twentieth anniversary on the air."⁶ His star radio personality beat his prediction by five years, filling Yankee stadium almost to capacity on May 31, 1949, her fifteenth anniversary on radio. This event replicated many elements of the Madison Square Garden gala, except on a much grander scale, with attendance estimated at around 45,000 people.⁷ Once again Stella tried to convince Mary Margaret to make her entrance on an elephant. When that failed, she proposed a helicopter to land the guest of honor on the temporary stage set up over second base. Instead, Mary Margaret strode in accompanied by Scottish bagpipers in honor of her ancestral home. Author Rex Stout remarked, "At the next anniversary, they had better use Grand Canyon."⁸

It was a very hot day on this fifteenth anniversary celebration, unusual for late May, and the predominantly female audience treated the occasion like a Sunday picnic. The city had added extra police, but the

crowd was orderly, having arrived by car, bus, and the extra subway cars marked “To Mary Margaret McBride’s Yankee Stadium” for the occasion. One local reporter described the scene:

Solid streams of women were boiling up from the Independent subway station. Every incoming train on the elevated IRT station overhead brought additional hundreds. By 11:30 the two streams of womanhood had merged, and it was plain that very few dishes were being washed in the five boroughs, and precious few babies were being rocked.⁹

Many of the women brought box lunches, often filled with the products that McBride endorsed on her show. Concessionaires noticed a definite trend toward ice cream and soft drinks, rather than the usual beer and hot dogs consumed by Yankee fans. The pigeons also were a bit confused. One man in attendance was overheard to observe, “Those birds. They think the Yankees are gonna play a ball game after we get outta here.”¹⁰

More than two hundred dignitaries filled the podium, including Eleanor Roosevelt, actress Eva Le Gallienne, novelist Fannie Hurst, and NAACP head Walter White. (McBride was later rebuked by conservatives for embracing White in public.) Mary Margaret’s friends, longtime sponsors, and the members of her radio family, especially Stella Karn and veteran announcer Vincent Connolly, sat proudly alongside the celebrities. Fred Waring and the Pennsylvanians supplied the music, and Waring served as master of ceremonies. Mary Margaret McBride roses—a salmon pink hybrid recently named in her honor¹¹—surrounded the stage. There was time for only brief remarks, and many agreed that commentator H. V. Kaltenborn’s tribute to a “miracle woman” captured her best:

Where else can you find one who pretends to be so ignorant when she is so wise—who is smart enough to be willing to sound foolish—who asks a thousand questions to which she knows the answers—who can talk by the hour without giving away a single secret—who is a super-salesman without trying to sell—who makes everyone feel good by just feeling good herself? . . . She loves all the world and all the world loves her.¹²

McBride's reaction to all the hoopla? "I'm not worth it, but I'll try harder after this."¹³

While much of the afternoon was spent with tributes, gifts, and lighthearted stories, the anniversary event (like its Madison Square Garden predecessor) also had a serious component structured around the theme of justice and human rights. Margaret Bourke-White talked about the last conversation she had with Gandhi before his death, which concerned the threat of atomic warfare. Kenneth Spencer sang the African American spiritual "Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen," and Lawrence Tibbett sang the Israeli national anthem. Eleanor Roosevelt discussed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights recently passed by the United Nations, to which she was a delegate. The centerpiece was a dramatic skit narrated by actor Melvyn Douglas called "Unfinished Business, U.S.A.," which presented "Negroes" as America's displaced persons, called for the abolition of the poll tax, denounced anti-Semitism and housing discrimination, and endorsed the civil rights legislation pending in Congress. In 1949, issues of intolerance and civil rights were fairly new to the national agenda, but Mary Margaret made sure they had a nationwide platform through her radio program.¹⁴

Even though Mary Margaret McBride spent her entire career broadcasting out of a New York City studio, she had a surprisingly national reach. In 1934 she started out locally on station WOR as "Martha Deane," a half-hour afternoon show geared toward housewives that ran until 1940, when she turned over it and its copyrighted name to Bessie Beatty. From 1937 to 1941, McBride broadcast a second fifteen-minute show under her own name, this one nationally syndicated but also airing in New York on CBS. For a year after she gave up Martha Deane, McBride also had a fifteen-minute nationally syndicated show sponsored by the Florida Citrus Commission. In 1941 she dropped that and returned to doing a local show on WEAJ, the main NBC station in New York, forty-five minutes at one o'clock, her favorite time slot. In 1949 she went to a full hour.¹⁵ In 1950 when NBC refused her requests to take the show national,¹⁶ she bolted to ABC, where she stayed until she gave up her regular show in 1954. Starting in 1951, the ABC show was widely syndicated in a cooperative arrangement in which the New York show was cut down to thirty minutes and local commercials were added by Mary Margaret, Stella, and Vincent Connolly before the new version was distributed by WGN of Chicago.¹⁷

The wide if selective reach of her program over the years explains why even though the majority of Mary Margaret's loyal listeners were in the New York metropolitan area, she could still count on a nationwide following. While not every radio owner had the chance to hear Mary Margaret every day of every year, she was definitely one of radio's best-known stars in the heyday of radio's pretelevision popularity. In addition, as a result of the extensive national media coverage she received, Mary Margaret had a presence in popular culture that transcended the millions who were her regular listeners, allowing the radio personality to reach into corners of the United States where her radio broadcast was not carried. Her name was a familiar one to Americans across the country in the 1940s and 1950s and can still elicit a warm, if somewhat vague, response when the three words "Mary Margaret McBride" are mentioned today.¹⁸

Daytime radio had not seen anything like her when Mary Margaret McBride debuted in 1934, but by the height of her program in the late 1940s and early 1950s, dozens of radio shows were imitating the ad-lib interview style she pioneered. *Current Biography* hailed her as "the first woman to bring newspaper technique to radio interviewing and to make daytime broadcasts profitable."¹⁹ When she first went on the air, most radio shows were developed and written by advertising agencies, who then sold them to stations. For most of her career McBride and Stella Karn followed a different course, producing the show themselves and brokering it to New York stations or the national networks. This arrangement allowed McBride and Karn to exercise unprecedented control over the show's format. As long as they had enough sponsors to keep the show on the air (and they always did), they could shape the program's content and signature style free from outside interference. In the process, they pioneered roles as independent producers that later became the norm for the radio and television industries.²⁰

Two things were important to Mary Margaret in regard to her radio slot, and she wasn't always able to have them at the same time. The first was to reach as broad an audience as possible, preferably on a nationally syndicated show. It sounds sentimental, but she really wanted the folks back home in Missouri to be able to listen in, and her mother, too, once she moved to Florida. The second was to have enough air time—forty-five minutes was her preferred amount—so that she didn't feel rushed or hemmed in. Hers was a program that needed time to grow on its listeners; she had to settle into it just as much as they did.²¹

At the height of her popularity, Mary Margaret McBride attracted between six million and eight million listeners, men as well as women, comprising 20 percent of the available broadcast audience in her time slot. Five times a week, her blend of current affairs, literary trends and tidbits, news from the world of Broadway theater and Hollywood film, and more offered listeners a literate yet accessible radio conversation that both entertained and informed. Each show was different—there were no repeats. It is only because producer Stella Karn paid to make recordings of hundreds of selected shows that we have the opportunity to listen again and recreate the experience of Mary Margaret's listeners each day at one o'clock. Her shows remain remarkably fresh and interesting today, more than five decades after their original broadcast.²²

Revisiting McBride's broadcasts offers a window on twentieth-century America as the country struggled through years of depression, war, and cold war. These were anxious times, and Mary Margaret helped her listeners get through them. She never aspired to be a political commentator along the lines of Dorothy Thompson or Walter Lippmann, and she never pushed an overtly political agenda. During the 1930s she kept her focus fairly tightly on home and hearth. Especially after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, however, she encouraged listeners to become more involved in their communities and the nation at large. By prominently featuring wartime refugees on her show, for example, she helped counter American isolationism and helped prepare her listeners for the revelations of Hitler's "final solution." She also helped lay the groundwork for the postwar civil rights revolution with her outspoken support for tolerance, racial understanding, and human rights. The widening of her political vision paralleled her own personal evolution as she increasingly found her voice not only as a radio personality but also as a concerned citizen.

Even while her show was outdrawing everybody else, McBride often found herself the target of negative stereotypes linked to her gender, her predominantly female audience, her unmarried status, and her ample physique. Covering all those bases, *Newsweek* ran this description of McBride after the 1949 gala at Yankee Stadium:

Mary Margaret McBride is a 48-year-old spinster with a talent for back-fence gab and an hour a day . . . in which to display her talents. . . . Her audience is almost wholly feminine—fluttery, middle-aged and purely housewife. Men, as a rule, disdain the show. . . . In good

housewifely tradition, she dotes on and drools over anything that pleases her, particularly food. She is built along the lines of a bulldozer, with a face as unlined and pink-cheeked as an English farm girl.²³

Such demeaning coverage was nothing new to the radio talk show host. In 1940 *Time* titled an article about her with a single word—"Goo"—and later anointed her "radio's queen of endearing mush."²⁴ *Newsweek* called her a "radio chatterbox" with a "twangy patter" who "chatters rudderless on the radio just as most people chatter in everyday life."²⁵ By using such dismissive language, commentators made it sound as though her show amounted to nothing more than whatever came into her head, as opposed to a carefully orchestrated show by a shrewd performer who was perhaps the best interviewer radio has ever had.

Mary Margaret McBride took her listeners seriously, and this book takes Mary Margaret seriously. *Collier's* might dismiss her audience as "McBride's Dustpan Army,"²⁶ but she never talked down to them, which especially endeared her to female listeners tired of being patronized by radio personalities and advertising executives who assumed that all they were interested in was recipes and curtains. At a time when popular culture rarely judged women's intellectual capabilities on a par with men's, Mary Margaret did not discriminate, treating women and men equally when it came to their desire for interesting conversation and involvement in the world at large. She treated her guests just as respectfully. As an interviewer she always put the guest first, carefully disguising her advance research and preparation by making the interview seem like a chat between friends. She never spoke from notes (she had a phenomenal memory), nor would she let her guests use them. All her day-to-day activities—what plays she saw or books she read, which dinner invitations she accepted, what vacations or weekend jaunts she took—were selected according to whether they might produce a good anecdote or an interesting person to be shared with listeners of the show. The radio show truly was her life.

McBride's radio career was something of a fluke. Born in Paris, Missouri, in 1899, she always wanted to be a writer and set her sights early on New York. By 1920, she finally reached the city, where she excelled not as a fiction writer but as a reporter, and then as one of the highest-paid freelance journalists of the decade. Along the way she teamed up with Stella Karn, a hard-talking, no-nonsense character who became her manager and lifelong companion. When the crash wiped out her

and Stella's savings and the Depression dried up Mary Margaret's lucrative freelance career, she found herself at rock bottom. A chance radio audition in 1934 opened the door to her new career. Stella Karn served as her producer, and they worked successfully as a team until McBride gave up her daily show twenty years later.²⁷

For someone as famous and successful as she was, Mary Margaret McBride never really seemed to derive much pleasure or peace of mind from what she had accomplished. A true perfectionist, her mood swings were legendary. "If I have a good show, I'm walking on air. But let me hear it on record and all the glow is gone," she told an interviewer in 1950. "My reason tells me that I could not have remained on the air for seventeen years without being good, but I really cannot believe it."²⁸ Even when she became a radio legend, she never really got over her failure to become a great writer, pushing herself to produce more than a dozen books and hundreds of articles, most of them far less original than her radio broadcasts. As she admitted in the last volume of her autobiography, "I can't explain why I should have been so miserable much of the time in such a happy job. I suppose it's just that I was never satisfied."²⁹

Mary Margaret McBride was one of those people who always saw a glass as half-empty—or less. While others were amazed that she drew a near-capacity crowd to Yankee Stadium in 1949, she fretted about the empty seats. In a revealing television interview with Mike Wallace on his *Night Beat* show in 1956, she confessed that she always had the feeling that her listeners would find out she wasn't as good as they thought "and it'll all end." When Wallace asked her why she felt so unfulfilled despite her success, she couldn't really answer but did admit, "I suppose psychiatrists would say it's something I've never resolved, something that happened to me when I was young." She continued, "We were poor, I was worried about my mother, I worried about mortgages. I worried about everything. I was the oldest child in the family and the only girl. I think that had a lot to do with it."³⁰ Mary Margaret McBride went through life always looking back over her shoulder.

As far as her fans were concerned, she needn't have bothered. Mary Margaret was blessed with one of the most loyal radio audiences ever. Many of them listened to her for more than twenty years straight, long enough so that their daughters who were youngsters in the 1930s when her show debuted could tune in as housewives with young children of

their own at the height of the program in the early 1950s. These were active, not passive, listeners. They structured their day around the program; they learned from it; and they supported it by buying the products that Mary Margaret promoted on the air. The show was a vital part of their everyday life, not just a diversion or a sop, and the connection was mutual. As the radio host said of her relationship with her listeners in 1939,

I reach for every scrap of glamour and glitter and I hoard it for the best time of all—the time the control room gives me the signal and I'm on the air. I want them to have as much of this mad, lovely city as I've had. In return they give me all of America.³¹

In an image that seems especially apt here, Mary Margaret's listeners were part of what, in another context, Benedict Anderson called an "imagined community."³² Even though most listeners rarely met in person, they shared a deep bond through their shared activity of tuning in each day at one o'clock to listen to a radio host they considered a dear friend and practically a member of the family. Or to put it another way, they belonged to the same radio nation. Through the act of broadcasting, Mary Margaret drew American women together and reassured them that their lives were important, too. She never encouraged women to abandon their domestic responsibilities but felt strongly that they should have access to a world of ideas and events as well. Accordingly, the radio program addressed the tensions in modern women's lives between traditional gender roles and the new opportunities opening up beyond the home.

But McBride has been nearly forgotten, in both radio history and the history of twentieth-century popular culture, primarily because she was a woman and because she was on daytime radio, a lethal combination. In the 1930s and 1940s, daytime radio was dismissed as the world of the feminine, dominated by weepy soap operas and the crude commercialization typified by the soap companies that sponsored the serials. By contrast, nighttime radio was seen as more serious, less commercial, in a word, more masculine. No matter that women made up the majority of audiences for both day- and nighttime radio: these gendered perceptions ruled and helped consign Mary Margaret McBride to historical oblivion.³³

Mary Margaret McBride died in 1976, five years after National Public Radio went on the air. The links between McBride's brand of sophisticated talk and reportage and NPR shows like Terry Gross's *Fresh Air* or *The Diane Rehm Show* are unmistakable, but just as striking are the differences, notably McBride's unapologetic acceptance of commercial sponsorship. "Shock radio"—opinionated ranting, usually by men, on sports, politics, and social issues—is another direction that talk radio has taken since her death. Even though McBride would have deplored its lack of civility, there also are clear parallels between today's call-in shows and her program. When thousands of fans regularly wrote to Mary Margaret to tell her their problems and dreams, and she shared those letters on the air, the talk show host and audience were connecting through the seemingly impersonal medium of radio.

Perhaps the closest contemporary parallel to Mary Margaret McBride is the television talk show host Oprah Winfrey. Like Mary Margaret, Oprah is usually referred to by her first name and has problems with her weight. Opinionated yet sympathetic, she connects with her audience through her own life and the lives of the guests on her show. Books are among her favorite topics, and she runs a successful production company that produces her show and other independent projects. More confessional than Mary Margaret and much more closely linked to the identity politics and self-help movements of the past several decades, Oprah takes her audiences seriously and tries to address their needs. Although the line from an early talk show pioneer like Mary Margaret McBride to Oprah Winfrey is not direct, the parallels are unmistakable. Comparing their careers illuminates two important eras in broadcast history.³⁴

Looking back over the course of twentieth-century American history, there are hundreds, perhaps thousands, of individuals who were well known in their time but who have gradually faded from public view, Mary Margaret McBride included. Why, then, is it important to resurrect this lost figure? There are many answers, beginning with the ongoing fascination with biography and life narratives. American history is full of stories of men who made good in fields such as politics, business, or popular entertainment. The stories of comparable women are far less well known but just as compelling, especially when they demonstrate the far-reaching transition from a rural and agrarian way of life to the more urban, consumer-based lifestyle that characterizes the twentieth century. McBride captured especially well the monumental

changes that can occur in an individual's life span in her description of spending the night at the White House in 1941: "I, Mary Margaret McBride, brought into the world in a kitchen of a Missouri farmhouse by the ministering hands of a scared neighbor woman, was actually spending the night in the White House at the invitation of the wife of the President of the United States."³⁵ From those humble beginnings, she became one of the leading women broadcasters in the golden era of radio: "The First Lady of Radio." As a broadcast pioneer, communicator, and writer, she reached millions of Americans with her talk and words. Her life story makes an important contribution to twentieth-century American history.

Mary Margaret McBride's career also reflects broader themes in women's history. Her desire for a life more interesting than that of a Missouri farm wife, her struggle for an education and a career, and her attitudes toward feminism and women's roles all were concerns faced by modern women of her generation, and they still are relevant today. Her decision not to marry because of her career, and the dimensions of her often testy but highly rewarding relationship with Stella Karn, which was the most important emotional commitment of both women's lives, speak to the challenge of forging a satisfying personal life while also pursuing an independent career. Probing the often illusive meaning of this partnership and placing it within the larger history of sexuality and same-sex relationships in modern life confirm the importance of looking at the personal as well as the political when charting women's lives.³⁶

Mary Margaret McBride's career also has a broader cultural significance, especially when her program is viewed as representative of mid-twentieth-century Middlebrow culture. The term "Middlebrow" was originally coined by Margaret Widdemer in the *Saturday Review of Literature* in 1933 to refer to "the majority reader," and it came to connote a range of cultural tastes and preferences in the interwar years that were distinct from elite highbrow intellectual tastes but more elevated than the lowbrow tastes of tabloid popular culture. The Book of the Month Club, founded in 1926, is the epitome of Middlebrow culture. Like its panel of experts whose selections guide its members' reading choices, Mary Margaret McBride was a guide and interpreter, too, choosing guests from the world of books, theater, and the arts for her audience's daily consumption. Even though the names of figures such as Dorothy Canfield Fisher, Will Durant, Edna Ferber, and Bennett Cerf are no

longer very well known, at the time they were a vital part of American cultural life. Using the medium of radio, Mary Margaret McBride was able to bring their ideas to a wider audience as part of her belief that culture should not be just for the elite but should reach the broad middle ranges of American society, including (or, rather, especially) its female members.³⁷

Resurrecting Mary Margaret McBride's career also reinforces the importance of radio to twentieth-century popular culture, recognition that has not always been forthcoming in media studies.³⁸ When making the case for radio history, however, it is important not to inflate the claims. After all, as Gerald Nachman pointed out, a great deal of old radio was "simply cheap entertainment, much of it silly and trashy."³⁹ And yet, as the content of Mary Margaret's shows demonstrates, important material did go out over the airwaves, content that needs to be treated with the same respect and authority accorded to film, television, and books, all of which survive in forms that are easier than sound is to study and codify into popular and scholarly history.

Reclaiming a spot for radio in twentieth-century American history is as much about restoring the experience of actively listening to radio to our collective memory as it is about specific shows or personalities. This reclaiming goes far beyond nostalgia, although that is part of its appeal. Radio has been a part of everyday life since the 1920s. So many things that individuals do—jobs, family, schooling, recreation, growing up, and growing old—are accompanied by memories of radio. Radio brought not just background noise but also exciting new historical connections: the first introduction to jazz, swing, or opera; a Fireside chat assuring the country that the Depression will end; wartime news of London under siege; teenagers discovering rock and roll on their transistor radios under the bed covers at night; sports fans following the triumphs or losses of favorite teams; news from faraway places like Korea, Vietnam, or China. In our attention to the historical contours of everyday life in all its diversity, radio needs to be a larger part of the story.

Radio also needs to be part of the story of women's history. Radio is one of those cultural spaces in which women have had unexpected latitude to shape and filter messages coming over the airwaves. In fact, women listeners may have a special relation to the medium, especially during the daytime hours when no one else is presumed to be listening. Radio was a piece of women's lives for most of the twentieth century, and as the experiences of Mary Margaret McBride's listeners suggest,

women actively, indeed greedily, listened to the radio, taking from its offerings information and ideas to which they would not otherwise have access. These ideas in turn opened a window to a world wider than the domestic sphere, breaking down the societal forces that have kept women isolated and marginalized in their homes. In the right hands—and few hands were better than Mary Margaret’s—radio encouraged women to think of themselves as individuals with a stake in modern life and the public sphere.

Mary Margaret McBride is not just a quaint figure from radio’s past. Drawing on her years as a freelance journalist for women’s magazines, she pioneered the magazine-style format that still structures many talk shows on the air today. Early on, she realized the freedom and power that she could exercise independently of networks and advertisers by producing her own show, which is now the norm for many successful media personalities. Even though she never married or had children, she reached out to and connected with women who had made those choices, offering them the opportunity to stretch their lives beyond the confines of their homebound existence through her daily radio program. Most important, she realized the cultural and political importance of talk radio, and she was one of the first to exploit its potential. The phenomenal bond that she formed with her listeners is critical to understanding popular culture in twentieth-century American life.