

# AUSTRALIAN BIOGRAPHY

A series that profiles some of the most extraordinary Australians of our time



**Mungo MacCallum**  
1913-1999  
Writer and Broadcaster

This program is an episode of **Australian Biography** Series 5 produced under the National Interest Program of Film Australia. This well-established series profiles some of the most extraordinary Australians of our time. Many have had a major impact on the nation's cultural, political and social life. All are remarkable and inspiring people who have reached a stage in their lives where they can look back and reflect. Through revealing in-depth interviews, they share their stories—of beginnings and challenges, landmarks and turning points. In so doing, they provide us with an invaluable archival record and a unique perspective on the roads we, as a country, have travelled.

**Australian Biography: Mungo MacCallum**

**Directors/Producers** Robin Hughes, Linda Kruger

**Executive Producer** Sharon Connolly

**Duration** 26 minutes **Year** 1997

Study guide prepared by Roger Stitson © Film Australia

Also in Series 5: Charles Birch, Zelda D'Aprano, Miriam Hyde,  
Ruby Langford Ginibi, Dame Margaret Scott, Tom Uren.

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For more information about Film Australia's programs, contact:  
Film Australia Sales, PO Box 46 Lindfield NSW 2070

Tel 02 9413 8634 Fax 02 9416 9401 Email [sales@filmaust.com.au](mailto:sales@filmaust.com.au)

[www.filmaust.com.au](http://www.filmaust.com.au)

## SYNOPSIS

Mungo MacCallum questioned accepted values all his life. As a distinguished journalist, writer and broadcaster he was known for his satirical wit and sense of the absurd.

MacCallum was born in the Sydney harbourside suburb of Point Piper in 1913. His father was a lawyer turned leader writer on the **Sydney Morning Herald**. Mungo followed him into the newspaper business, joining the Herald as a cadet journalist.

When war broke out in 1939 he enlisted and soon found himself editing an army journal called **SALT**. This, he says, was 'political dynamite' as the journal ran articles questioning the establishment and its social attitudes.

Returning to civilian life, he was given a column on the Sydney **Sun** newspaper in which he turned his scathing eye and pen on a wide range of targets. However, overwork and a continuing problem with drinking led to a nervous breakdown. After recovering, he changed careers and joined the Australian Broadcasting Commission where he developed a successful career writing radio features.

In the 1950s the ABC sent MacCallum to England to find out about the new medium of television. He returned to Australia to become head of television training, and produced the ABC's first television broadcast. MacCallum won an Australian Writers' Guild award for his radio program **Stone Bloody Henge**.

A move into ABC management caused more problems with overwork and another nervous breakdown, and led to his becoming a freelance broadcaster—a role in which he feels he did some of his most important work.

MacCallum, who at the time of this interview lived in Sydney with his second wife Polly, wrote two novels, **A Voyage in Love** and **Son of Mars**, and an autobiography, **Plankton's Luck**.

## CURRICULUM LINKS

This program will have interest and relevance for teachers and students at secondary and tertiary levels. Curriculum links include English, Media, History and SOSE/HSIE.

## AFTER WATCHING

What do you recall from viewing the program?

- Name the academic position held by Mungo MacCallum's grandfather.
- What elite academic award was won by Mungo's father?
- What was the accident Mungo suffered when young that affected him for the rest of his life?
- Describe the distinction Mungo achieved while a student at Sydney Grammar.
- Name the three careers that interested Mungo when he was a school student.
- At what age did Mungo's father die, and what was the probable cause?
- What was the personal problem Mungo realised about himself when he was 18 years old, and how did his mother react to this at the time?
- Describe in your own words Mungo's attitude to his writing abilities and to his writing methods.

- What did Diana Wentworth's parents think of young Mungo?
- After World War Two, what was the name of the regular newspaper column Mungo wrote, and what kind of content did it feature?
- What effect did writing this newspaper column and drinking heavily have on him? What medical treatment was he given, and was it a success?
- What did Mungo find satisfactory about working for ABC radio?
- Describe what happened to Mungo's marriage, and why.
- What historically important position in the ABC was Mungo given?
- What were the locations of two of the outside telecasts Mungo did before the official opening night of ABC television?
- Why did Mungo have a second breakdown of health, and what changes did he make to his employment and professional activities?
- In what ways did Mungo struggle in his personal life, after his first marriage ended?
- What was the name of Mungo's second wife, and why does he believe he owes her 'a great debt'?
- What gives Mungo joy even in bad times? What does he learn or realise from these things?
- What is the 'test' Mungo applies to any 'wonderful' experience?

## GROWING UP

Although Mungo MacCallum appears to have enjoyed the advantages of being born into affluent family and social circumstances, subtle and unspoken pressures to succeed existed in the background.

- Mungo's family lived in the Sydney suburb of Point Piper. On display posters draw a map of Sydney for tourists, indicating the location of this suburb, and how to get there by road and rail. Has Point Piper changed greatly since Mungo was born in 1913? Include a brief description for tourists of the suburb's development over the years, its most attractive features, its demographics, and other items that may be of interest to tourists.
- Discuss in class the pressures placed on children by members of their own family to succeed either academically, in sport, or any other area of endeavour. Does this apply equally to both boys and girls? Is any pressure at all, spoken or unspoken, justified? Is it good for your personal development? What negative and positive effects and outcomes can pressure to succeed have on you? How is it possible to cope with such pressures and expectations?
- Arising from the previous discussion, in pairs draft and present to the class a dialogue scene between a parent and a son or daughter, in which the confrontational issue of responsibilities versus unreal expectations and demands arises.
- Mungo speaks of his name never being recorded on his school's honour board. Discuss the possibilities in class first, then plan, draft, edit and proofread a short story about a boy or girl who begins studies at a school his older brothers or sisters, uncles or aunts, parents and grandparents formerly attended.
- In the program Mungo speaks of being unable to complain after experiencing a nasty bicycle accident that had long-lasting effects. Convert this incident, or one you may fictionalise for yourself, into a set of private diary entries.

## JOURNALISM AND SATIRE

After Mungo MacCallum received a cadetship in journalism with the **Sydney Morning Herald**, he edited the army journal, **SALT** (ie acronym for 'Sea, Air and Land Troops') during World War Two, then after the war gained a reputation writing a daily newspaper column of social and political satire.

- Working in pairs, research then write and produce for a youth magazine an article about cadetships in journalism. Explain what a cadetship is, how you acquire one, what qualifications you need, and what the duties and responsibilities involve.
- Discuss the character, plot, setting and thematic possibilities in class, then write a short story about a day, or week, in the life of a cadet reporter. Present it from any point of view and in any style or genre of your choice.
- Do journalists have responsibilities to the general public in the way they report news? Does the 'public's right to know', and the 'protection of sources', outweigh ethical concerns in not only reporting news, but in presenting particular points of view about people featured within news stories? You may wish to discuss in class and to research these issues about the power of the news media to direct or manipulate community and social attitudes, then to write a considered argumentative essay on whether the press in Australia abuse their power and their responsibilities.
- One of the characteristics of satire is that it sets out to create victims. Research then discuss in class more about the meaning and purpose of satire as a form of humour. Does satire set out to reinforce or alter or even educate the audience's opinion on any issue or public figure? Can satirists go too far in their ridicule—or should they go further? Should issues such as race, religion, sexuality and gender, and physical and mental disabilities be off-limits to satire—if so, why? Bring examples of satire (written articles and extracts, cartoons, songs, poems, TV sketches, scenes from films) into the classroom and use them to illustrate and extend your discussion.
- With a concept of satire clearly in mind, in small groups prepare and write a satirical item for a TV sketch, featuring a public figure such as a politician, sportsperson or media personality. You may wish to enact and record or tape your item, or to present it as part of a 'live' class revue.
- Write, edit and proofread two letters to the editor with opposing viewpoints. One should be critical of a satirical TV sketch about a public figure such as a politician, sportsperson or media personality, while the other should defend the sketch.

## A CAREER IN RADIO

When Mungo MacCallum moved from newspaper to radio journalism, he says that it 'suited me enormously', because he was able to find a more 'natural' and 'creative' writing style.

- The class is to select a current affairs commentary item from a daily newspaper, in which the writer expresses a point of view, an argument, an opinion, and compare it to a commentary item recorded from a radio program such as those on ABC Radio National. Discuss the similarities and differences between the requirements of presentation for both media – for example, the written word as distinct from the spoken word. Are the audience roles and expectations different from reader to listener?

- Does a newspaper editorial read out loud to a listening audience have the same impact as for a reading audience? Select a newspaper editorial and re-write it for presentation on a radio station aimed at a teenage audience. Practise your voice delivery, revise if necessary, then record the editorial. Play back to the class for further discussion and critique on clarity, coherence of argument and presentation. (With assistance from other students you may need to practise with sound levels and placement of microphones.)
- As a class project involving a range of activities, devise, present and record a 30-minute radio broadcast that could be posted on the school intranet, made up of items on a selected issue, such as environmentalism, Indigenous affairs, drugs and alcohol, workplace regulations, sports funding. Include opinion commentaries, reviews of related books, TV programs etc. mock interviews, historical overviews, on-the-spot reports. You will also need to consider the title of the program, introductory and concluding music and/or sound effects (if any), and the role of a presenter/announcer who will link each item.
- Select a short story, comic book or section from a novel you have read in class or at home, and adapt it as a script for radio. Remember that 'adaptation' does not mean attempting to copy everything from the original; as you are relying on sound only, you may have to make many changes to the original plot and presentation, while attempting to be faithful to the overall story. An example may be the famous 1938 radio version, produced by Orson Welles, of **The War of the Worlds**, a science fiction novel from 1898 by HG Wells.
- With other students you may wish to produce, rehearse, act and record your finished radio adaptation, and to present it to the class. It may be necessary to experiment with recording sequences of the script for feedback and to discuss ways of improving the quality. Remember that you don't have to record the entire program in one unbroken session; sections may be recorded at different times and edited together.

## A CAREER IN TELEVISION

Mungo MacCallum was one of the pioneers of Australian television, and played an important role in 1956 when the national broadcaster, the ABC, commenced transmission. As with many others formerly in radio broadcasting, he had to learn new ways of presenting various types of information, not merely in the form of sound messages, but also in 'live' and filmed images, to the public.

- View the sequence, in the program, of Michael Charlton introducing the opening night of ABC television in 1956. Write a short analytical discussion about it. Consider in what ways the details in this archival clip may look 'old-fashioned' or 'modern' today. Is it merely sound with pictures? If it were being presented today, what other techniques or methods of presentation might be used and how different would it look from its original presentation? Would the essential information being imparted by Charlton be different today?
- Discuss in class the methods, similarities and differences between presenting a news bulletin on radio and presenting a television news program. Consider, for example, whether a news item on TV is considered usable only if there are pictures to accompany the spoken word.

■ Record both a radio and TV news program selected from the same day. Choose one item that features in both programs, time them and compare them for news content within each of their time-lengths. Is one more informative than the other, does it offer more explanation, is there a point of view incorporated into it or is it presented as objectively as possible? Are there differences in content between them? Overall, would you trust or value one medium's news presentation in preference to the other? Should people rely purely on television for news and current affairs? Explain your answers.

■ Mungo MacCallum says, of his own experiences as a producer of outside broadcasts, that 'television was terrific for...giving you the best seat if it was well done'. Write a review for a teen magazine or website of an outside telecast you have seen recently, discussing the various qualities and characteristics of the telecast, including, if appropriate, the commentary, the production, the camera angles and editing, even whether the advertising was too intrusive. It may be a sports event, a rock concert, a political campaign speech, a street parade, a 'red carpet' arrival of media personalities etc.

■ Is it possible today for a young person born into the television, computer and mobile phone age to appreciate how excited children and teenagers were when television broadcasting began in Australia during the 1950s? Most young people of the time gained their first experience of TV when crowding around and gazing into the display windows of electrical appliance shops, where small, fuzzy black-and-white images glowed day and night. (The author of these notes also recalls visiting a friend's home twice a week to watch **The Mickey Mouse Club**.) Research these times – including, if possible, speaking to people who can recall them – then plan and write a short story about a child or a young teenager, during the early days of television in Australia. Write the story from the central character's viewpoint. Discuss the plot, setting, character and genre possibilities in class.

## PERSONAL AND PRIVATE

Mungo MacCallum says that his problem with alcohol affected his professional activities and, combined with long working hours and stress, took a toll both on his general health and his marriage.

■ In pairs or small groups, research and prepare a poster display about the effects and results of long-term alcohol abuse, and how alcoholism may be treated medically, socially and psychologically. Your display should convey an adequate definition of 'alcoholism', and the agenda, purposes and methods of health clinics and such groups as Alcoholics Anonymous. It may be necessary to discuss in class, first, the possible range of issues covered within this activity, and to allot each pair or group a specific task.

■ In small groups, plan, write and act out to the class a domestic scene about the stresses induced by work-related responsibilities and overload, and how these impact on self and family.

■ In the contemporary western world the issue has developed of people, particularly women, juggling employment demands and responsibilities with those of marriage and family. This is reflected in popular television dramas such as **Medium** (a mix of crime and supernatural genres), and **Commander in Chief** (political intrigue). Are there other, similar programs you know of? Write a review of an episode from one of these programs, discussing how these themes are played out.

■ Mungo speaks of music and art as being 'the great consolers and the great un-consolers'. What do you think he means by this? Present a short talk to the class about what makes life worthwhile for you, the people, objects, activities and places you appreciate, and what you think you gain and learn from them.

## REFERENCES AND FURTHER RESOURCES

Please note this listing is not exhaustive.

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Lois Baird (ed), **Guide to Radio Production**, AFTRS, Sydney, 1992

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Robert Pullan, **Four Corners – Twenty-Five Years**, ABC Books, 1986

Ian Simmons (ed), **Good News Week**, ABC Books, 1997

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[www.family.org/fofmag/cl/a0025440.cfm](http://www.family.org/fofmag/cl/a0025440.cfm)

Adventures in cybersound:  
[www.acmi.net.au/AIC/phd8555.html](http://www.acmi.net.au/AIC/phd8555.html)

Alcoholism:  
[www.abc.net.au/health/minutes/stories/s1205369.htm](http://www.abc.net.au/health/minutes/stories/s1205369.htm)  
[www.aa.org.au](http://www.aa.org.au)

History of Australian television:  
[www.mcc.murdoch.edu.au/ReadingRoom/film/AFTV.html](http://www.mcc.murdoch.edu.au/ReadingRoom/film/AFTV.html)

Humour and satire:  
[www.webwombat.com.au/magazines/listings/humour.htm](http://www.webwombat.com.au/magazines/listings/humour.htm)

Journalists' code of ethics:  
[www.alliance.org.au/hot/ethicscode.htm](http://www.alliance.org.au/hot/ethicscode.htm)

Media resources for students:  
[www.studentnet.edu.au/members/forums/media.html](http://www.studentnet.edu.au/members/forums/media.html)

Mungo MacCallum dynasty – disambiguation page:  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mungo\\_McCallum](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mungo_McCallum)

Old time radio plays and serials – links to many titles:  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Golden\\_Age\\_of\\_Radio](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Golden_Age_of_Radio)

Point Piper:

<http://users.tpg.com.au/tjbatey/pointpiper.html>

Radio production – examples and advice:

[www.pendantaudio.com](http://www.pendantaudio.com)

[www.radio.murdoch.edu.au/projects.html](http://www.radio.murdoch.edu.au/projects.html)

[www.ruyasonic.com/rdr\\_\\_main.htm](http://www.ruyasonic.com/rdr__main.htm)

**The War of the Worlds** radio broadcast:

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_War\\_of\\_the\\_Worlds\\_\(radio\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_War_of_the_Worlds_(radio))

Work and family:

[www.hr.unimelb.edu.au/balancing-work-family](http://www.hr.unimelb.edu.au/balancing-work-family)

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