

Balsillie, John Graeme (1885–1924)

by Lindsay Cleland

John Graeme Balsillie (1885-1924), engineer and inventor, was born in Brisbane on 11 September 1885, second son of James Pearson Balsillie, wholesale warehouseman, and his wife Eliza, née Johnston, both of whom were Scottish-born. Brought up by an uncle after his father's death in 1889, he was educated at the Brisbane Boys' Central School and Brisbane Grammar School. In December 1901 he became a clerk in a warehouse, attending the Technical College part time until, in 1903, he went to England to study electrical engineering. He worked in the Armstrong-Whitworth workshops and was coached by a cousin who was a school principal. In May 1904 he invented a magnetic detector and in August joined a company erecting wireless telegraph stations in England and then in Russia. After working in Germany, Siberia and China for about five years, he formed in England the British Radiotelegraph Co. which marketed the 'Balsillie System' of wireless telegraphy, judged in 1911 to be an infringement of the Marconi patent.

Balsillie had been elected associate member of the Institution of Electrical Engineers in 1910. Next year he met Prime Minister Andrew Fisher in London and on 31 July was appointed engineer for radiotelegraphy, within the Australian Postmaster-General's Department, to establish a coastal maritime communication service. By late 1915 there were twenty stations around Australia, using a new system which survived an action for infringement of patent brought by the Marconi Co. in 1912 and settled to the government's advantage in 1915. That year an inquiry into another patent dispute lapsed before evidence was taken. In September wireless telegraphy was transferred to the Department of the Navy and Balsillie resigned in December, though with a retaining fee as consulting engineer for six months.

He had become interested in rainfall stimulation and by April 1915 had designed an apparatus, the 'Balsillie Rain Stimulation and Procuration Plant', which was purchased by the Department of Home Affairs; he operated it in arid country at Bookooloo, on the transcontinental railway, from May 1916 and later at Wynbring and Tarcoola. Patents were subsequently granted. Plants also established at Hopetoun and Boonoke survived temporary closure in 1919. The Commonwealth meteorologist disputed the experimental stations' claimed increase in rainfall; a report by Balsillie was tabled in parliament, but operations ceased in January 1921 after press and parliamentary criticism. In September his work, which had cost over £6000, was referred to the Institute of Science and Industry. In 1919 and 1920 he had obtained patents for improvements in light projection and reflectors with application to vehicle headlights. Commercial manufacture of his 'Flatlight' reflectors took him to the United States of America.

Fair, with a high forehead, Balsillie smoked a pipe, wore pince-nez, and though usually immaculately dressed could 'jump into overalls and do the dirtiest work'. He was described as a 'scholarly man and a brilliant conversationalist of courtly manners'. He married Carmen Poleyh in 1909. Survived by their daughter, he died of nephritis in Cincinnati on 10 July 1924 and was cremated.

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