Extraordinary Sky, Living Air

by Fabian Monds

This bouquet of memories is a treasury of literary riches, and its value is enhanced by the directness of their personal connections with our lives, homes and communities. The reflections and reminiscences are mainly based on the content of remembered broadcasts, on broadcasting itself and on consequential influences. The sense of gaining access to the wide world, and to a better knowledge of our local world, is evident throughout the writings and perhaps is best captured by Seamus Heaney in these lines from his poem “The Skylight”:

But when the slates came off, extravagant Sky entered and held surprise wide open.

So it is with The Living Air. The value of this collection is in its literary excellence, eclectic span and individual sense of connection and access.

I found myself also thinking of the innovation that makes the air alive, from Marconi’s radio experiments of over a century ago between Ballycastle and Rathlin, to the creative and technical skills of today’s programme makers and broadcasters. From my childhood, I remember well my own first hand-crafted one-valve radio receiver, with coils lovingly wound and capacitors carefully adjusted, and the excitement of listening to radio stations from far away. As darkness fell, the population of competing stations grew and so did the diversity of content. In today’s digital broadcasting world, choice and diversity can be somewhat overwhelming, making quality, always the key, all the more precious.

The BBC’s public service responsibilities are nowadays often characterised in terms of quality and in the values of citizenship, culture, education, connecting with communities and a global perspective. This collection brings life, affect, understanding and relevance to these critical elements of public value. Our contributors have made it so, through their originality, insight and generosity, and they are most deserving of our thanks.

Professor Fabian Monds
BBC National Governor for Northern Ireland

Worlds Near and Far

by Anna Carragher

If there was a time before radio I don’t remember it. A brown, Bakelite presence, glowing valves and sounds that crackled out of nowhere to live among us and become part of our lives; the rhythmic, helter-skelter commentary from Clones or Croke Park is the smell of my father’s Sweet Afton cigarettes; the noise and bustle of Sunday lunch; the clapping and singing. It was geography – those strange, exotic places, Hilversum, Athlone, Cologne; it was history as our parents told us, and on a global scale; it was education, concerts on the Third at home, music and stories in Miss McArdle’s dusty, cream-painted classroom.

As a small child I had a passion for all things Chinese, and one evening my father woke me up – at half past eight! – and took me downstairs in my dressing gown to listen to a programme of Chinese music from The Living Air. I found myself also thinking of the innovation that makes the air alive, from Marconi’s radio experiments of over a century ago between Ballycastle and Rathlin, to the creative and technical skills of today’s programme makers and broadcasters. From my childhood, I remember well my own first hand-crafted one-valve radio receiver, with coils lovingly wound and capacitors carefully adjusted, and the excitement of listening to radio stations from far away. As darkness fell, the population of competing stations grew and so did the diversity of content. In today’s digital broadcasting world, choice and diversity can be somewhat overwhelming, making quality, always the key, all the more precious.

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Anna Carragher
Controller, BBC Northern Ireland
When Mark Adair of BBC NI suggested that I compile a short anthology of writers reminiscing about listening and viewing, it sounded like a pleasant enough little project. The first indication that it was going to be something altogether more interesting was when I tried the idea out on a few writers and realised that something was starting to hum – they could hardly wait to begin.

Then the contributions started to arrive, bringing with them a buzzing web of recollection and reflection. David Park yearned to hear again, ‘through the dark tide of the past’ and ‘through the glass wall of the TV’. In a startling image, Anne Devlin recalled feeling so spellbound by Miss Havisham in *Great Expectations* that ‘I go up close and push myself through the glass wall of the TV’. Ciaran Carson remembered the back being taken off the family radio, allowing him to ‘tune into the air and the old woman who swallowed a fly. In a startling image, Anne Devlin recalled feeling so spellbound by Miss Havisham in *Great Expectations* that ‘I go up close and push myself through the glass wall of the TV’. Ciaran Carson remembered the back being taken off the family radio, allowing him to ‘tune into the air and the old woman who swallowed a fly. In a startling image, Anne Devlin recalled feeling so spellbound by Miss Havisham in *Great Expectations* that ‘I go up close and push myself through the glass wall of the TV’.

This idea of the air being alive, full of crackling energy, suggested the title for the anthology. It’s from ‘Tintern Abbey’, Wordsworth’s poem about the past being caught, held and handed on by ‘something... / Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns, / And the round ocean and the living air, / And the mind of man...’

Arranging the contributions in roughly chronological order revealed an intriguing shift between the narrow intimacy of older writers’ memories and the wider horizons of television-age writers like Sinead Morrissey, Jo Baker and Daragh Carville.

Michael Longley described huddling with his brother inside a wigwam pitched in the living room, not really understanding the jokes on *ITMA*, but full of happy contentment at their parents’ overheard laughter.

Sam McAughtry recalled BBC concerts being broadcast from the Ulster Museum seventy years ago, and he and his mother stopping what they were doing to ‘listen to Mozart, Bizet, Verdi, or to switch off Wagner’.

A.T.O. Stewart remembered his confusion when his father said that he had just seen Franco (a neighbour’s nickname, as it turned out): how had the Spanish general, whose advance on Madrid was being reported on the radio news, ‘time to go gallivanting on one of our old Belfast red trains?’ An early memory for Annie McAnaty was the rush of happiness from seeing my mother in a giddy mood, walking the baby to radio music. Christina Reid helped her mother to polish the brasses on Sunday afternoons as they listened to radio comedy shows, without which, ‘I swear to God, I might have died young of boredom in Belfast’.

For Frank Ormsby, his father’s welfare wireless had ‘an aura of mystery and promise’ that ‘might give us access to anywhere. And while the bits slips of the stations, London, Hilversum, Athens, Helsinki, Moscow hinted at a wider world for Ciaran Carson and the late-night shipping forecasts told Seamus Heaney that the world would be watched over until you wake again, for some writers it was the advent of television that brought the outside world into sharper focus. Marianne Elliott’s family bought the first television set in the neighbourhood to watch the Grace Kelly wedding, and ‘our house became a mini-cinema. A few years later, a harsher world was brought into the living room with the assassination of John F. Kennedy.

All too soon, instead of merely listening to and watching the news, we ourselves became the news. Martin Lynch, on his way to Broadcasting House to talk about a new community project, witnessed an assassination and found himself in demand for the news programme. Malachi O’Doherty began to realise that the apparently safe world, under the control of Richard Baker’s civilised ‘balanced’, was in fact anything but safe. Marianne Elliott, studying in the US when ‘the province erupted’, recognised that ‘from now on only negative things would be reported about Northern Ireland’.

Glenn Patterson had a sudden flashback memory of a car exploding on *Scene Around Six* and rushed home to complete his third novel. Graham Reid’s outraged sense of the difference between the measured tones of the news items and the obscene reality of the maimed people he saw in hospital became the underpinning for his work as a poet as well as a radio producer.

Compiling this anthology has been not just a pleasure but an unexpectedly moving experience for me, bringing memories of much-loved programmes and of the half-forgotten voices of family, friends and neighbours, of ‘other days around me’. I hope that it does the same for you.

Anne Tannahill – Editor: Anne Tannahill, managing director of the Belfast publisher Blackstaff Press until her retirement in 2003, currently works as a freelance editor and publishing consultant.

**Introduction**

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Anne Tannahill – Editor: Anne Tannahill, managing director of the Belfast publisher Blackstaff Press until her retirement in 2003, currently works as a freelance editor and publishing consultant.
I made my first broadcast around seventy years ago, when the wireless reached the bedrock classes through the hire-purchase system. In the early 1930s light and classical music was broadcast weekly by the local BBC from the Ulster Museum and my mother and I would stop what we were doing to listen to Mozart, Bizet, Verdi, or to switch off Wagner.

"Do you hear them all coughing when the music stops?, I said to Mother. "If I were to go there and cough, you could tell all the neighbours: "That's my son coughing on the wireless"."

"I certainly did," she said, "but you only coughed the once, in the first break."

"I know," I said, "that's because, after that, they threw me out."

In the last twenty-eight years I have covered most broadcasting fields – drama, documentaries, presenting, script writing, and religious broadcasting. The patience of many a producer has been tried, and I well know it. Like many a writer I am in debt to the likes of Paul Muldoon, Sam Hanna Bell, Paul Evans, Jim Sheridan, Bernagh Brins, John Boyd and many others. For regional broadcasting to exist, local talent is vital. It says a good deal for Radio Ulster that it hasn't just dipped into a pool that was there: it has nurtured and created artistic talent that, under the miasma of the Troubles, might otherwise have never lightened our day.
I have been trying to work out when I heard my first radio broadcast and I think it must have been about the time of the Franco incident. My father came home from work one evening and said that Franco had been on the news. I was put off by this. I could not understand how the Spanish general, with four columns advancing on Madrid and a fifth column in the city itself, had time to go gallivanting on one of our old Belfast red trams. Later it was explained to me. My father had nicknamed a neighbour who looked like the man in the news.

I certainly remember hearing the radio in my grandparents' home when one of my aunts, who had a fine soprano voice, gave a song recital from the local station. Our own radio set arrived in 1939, and changed life for ever. My clearest memories are of the wartime broadcasts. Listening to the chimes of Big Ben and the nine o'clock news was a daily ritual, and newscasters Bruce Belfrage and Alvar Liddell became almost like members of the family. At 10 pm you could, if you wanted, tune in to Hamburg and hear the Nazi version of the news, read by the traitor William Joyce. He had an affected upper-class accent and always began with the words: 'Armies calling, armies calling'. Very clearly, the government never jammed the station, and 'Lord Haw-Haw' became a figure of fun, a morale-booster instead of the opposite.

It was the age of ITMA and the variety shows and dance bands - Ambrose and his orchestra, Billy Cotton - and crooners singing 'Smoke gets in your eyes' and 'When they begin the Begin'. And of course there was radio drama. My father said it would never work, because the disembodied voice could not capture the magic of the theatre. Within weeks he was listening with the zeal of the converted. Television still lay in the future. All the accents were received English, and there was very little regional input.

I can't say that radio much influenced my early desire to write, but it did occur to my adolescent mind that the BBC might be a market for budding authors. I prepared a script about the ancient Celtic monastery at Nendrum and sent it to Ormeau Avenue. It was politely returned. I made a vow never to have anything more to do with either the BBC or Irish history. I would become a creative artist, a poet or a novelist. How the gods must have laughed! I was destined to find my career in Irish history, and to make many broadcasts from Ormeau Avenue. But it has left me with a curious sensation that somehow I have not yet finished my school homework. I still want to be a writer when I grow up.

A.T.Q. Stewart

A.T.Q. Stewart is one of Ireland's most distinguished historians and has written extensively on Irish affairs. His 1967 book The Ulster Crisis: Resistance to Home Rule, 1912–1914 remains the definitive text on this period. Further works such as The Narrow Ground (1977) and The Shape of Irish History (2001) examined various aspects of Irish and, in particular, Ulster History and were published to widespread critical acclaim.
John Morrow

My uncle James guided my infant right hand to the cat’s whisker, the half of a headphone clutched to my left ear... And suddenly, shockingly, a fat lady sang (screeched, rather: Dame Nellie Melba, the toast of Wogga Wogga, I learnt later).

And thus began for me a lifelong, haphazard tutorial provided by radio, Hollywood and, later, television – plus books, of course. ‘Elementary’ schooling in those days meant just that: a litany of English monarchs, geography the red patches on an atlas (but we were early readers, thanks largely to comics).

Uncle James gave us an accumulator (wet battery) set and on it we followed the progress of the Second World War, laughed at ITMA and listened to The Brains Trust. I recall vividly hearing Professor Joad mention General Wolfe at Quebec and the ‘French and Indian’ wars in America. ‘Caédoc’... thinks I, and with the help of my library ticket was soon up to my neck in the mire of personalities, politics and mayhem that was the eighteenth century – a mire in which, sixty-odd years on, I still wallow happily.

It was from a footnote in a condensed history of revolutionary France that I first heard about the 1798 rebellion in Ireland. Then, in a radio programme written by Sam Hanna Bell, I discovered that the rebels were Presbyterians and that our own church in May Street had been a hotbed of sedition, with muskets secreted in the roof space! All this my father, an Orangeman, reluctantly verified.

As one who, against the odds, aspired to be a writer, I owe a debt to BBC radio, and not only because it provided an outlet for my early work at a fraught time when outlets were few. It also brought to the voice of the great Frank O’Connor, reading and discussing his work. It was a revelation. For all his fame, O’Connor considered himself to be in the line of the hearthside sasachal, telling his tales to the ‘rapt faces in the firelight’. The ‘literary’ writer who lost sight of those faces, he said, did so at his peril.

The faces in the glow of today’s electronic hearth are generally rapt – and if not, the remote is to hand. Critics may carp, but that other presence in the living room has become a great comfort and companion, not least for the often solitary folk of my vintage.

George Bernard Shaw once railed against ‘flannelled fools to whom age brings golf instead of wisdom’. Age and the box have brought this fool a weekly microcosm of all the intrigue, greed and vanity of the eighteenth century: Premiership football. For that I am eternally grateful.
On Sundays, I swear to God, I might have died young of boredom in Belfast, if it hadn’t been for the wireless.


I'd like to thank the BBC for helping me to survive the longest day of the week in my childhood. On Sundays, I swear to God, I might have died young of boredom in Belfast, if it hadn't been for the wireless. Everything else about Sunday was dire. Sunday School in Sunday-Best Clothes; Best Behaviour; No Rowdy Playing in the streets. And no point in going to the local playground, even if you were allowed out, because the swings and roundabouts were padlocked on the Lord's Day by order of Belfast Corporation.

Sunday afternoon was given over to the tedious task of helping my mother to clean her collection of brass ornaments. She handed me the blue-and-white tin of cotton wadding impregnated with Brasso, “You rub it in, and I'll polish it off”, and then she turned the radio on. I still associate the heady smell of Duraglit with the glorious years of radio comedy shows starring Al Reed, Jimmy Clitharose, Ted Ray, Jimmy Edwards, Dick Bentley, June Whitfield, and Elsie and Doris Waters. And the ventriloquist Peter Brough with his wooden dummy Archie Andrews. My mother swore that Peter Brough never ever moved his lips when he was projecting the voice of Archie. “Catch yourself on,” laughed my father. “Why would the man be bothered to do that on the wireless where nobody can see him?” My mother advised me to pay no heed. “It's whatever you think yourself,” she said.

And that's what I still love about the radio, whether I'm listening to it or writing for it. The visual images that words and sound conjure in the minds' eye know no bounds. In the imagination of every listener, it can be whatever you think yourself.

The first drama I ever heard and saw in my mind's eye was BBC Northern Ireland's The McCooes. It was a family favourite. Every character in it was just like somebody we knew. Bella McCoubrey from the Stoney Mountain was as real to me as the big woman from the country who lived up our street. In those pre-TV days, the wireless was the magic box. And still is.

Don't get me wrong. These days I enjoy television and I love the theatre. But radio will always be special to me. The childhood friend who inspired my imagination and rescued me from the banality of the three Bs – Boredom, Brasso and Belfast Corporation.

# On Sundays, I swear to God, I might have died young of boredom in Belfast, if it hadn't been for the wireless.
Some of the signature tunes will always transport me back to the coke fire and the cream walls turned browny-yellow by my parents’ chain-smoking. My twin Peter and I are huddled inside a faded second-hand wigwam which we have pitched in the middle of the green carpet in our seldom-used living room. I can still hear my father’s rather formal baritone laugh, my mother’s jolly descant. They are listening to ITMA, Tommy Handley’s weekly progression of brief encounters with colourful regulars whose voices and catch-phrases have entered the national consciousness to such an extent that after only a word or two they are applauded by the studio audience. Colonel Chirnside, Mrs Mop (‘Can I do you now sir?’), Mona Lot (‘It’s being so cheerful that keeps me going’). Peter and I are far too young to follow the comedy, but we feel happy eavesdropping on our parents’ laughter. Perhaps not understanding the jokes mysteriously increases our contentment.

We have two radios in our house, in the large chilly living room the good one that receives all the stations in the cosy kitchen-cum-breakfast room a wee Bakelite box that delivers only the Home Service, its dial a parchment glow. Children’s Hour is part of the familial fug: Toy Town with Larry the Lamb, Mr Mayor, Mr Poot; the stories and songs of Auntie Vi; Uncle Mac; Commander Stephen King-Hall who ends his broadcasts, ‘Be very good and very quiet, but not so good and so quiet that somebody says “What are you doing?” ’; and from BBC Northern Ireland the fanfare of kazoos that introduces Cicely Matthews’ I want to be an actor. (My friend Jim Fitzpatrick’s appearance on this show brings him brief celebrity in Birstow Park.) Some of the signature tunes (Toy Town’s ‘The Dance of the Little Tin Soldier’, for instance, or ‘The Jewels of the Madonna’ which introduces - I think - the magical Box of Delights will always transport me back to the coke fire and the cream walls turned browny-yellow by my parents’ chain-smoking.

Michael Longley

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The challenge was to lift young listeners into another time and place to create a coherent, accurate and compelling story using the voices of the past.

Jonathan Bardon – Historian: Born 1941 in Dublin and educated at TCD and QUB. He taught for many years at the Belfast Institute of Further and Higher Education and is now a lecturer at the School of History, QUB. His many books include *A History of Ulster* (1992) and *Beyond the Studio: A History of BBC Northern Ireland* (2000). A frequent broadcaster on Irish history, he has also scripted a number of BBC NI schools series including *Modern Irish History*.

“We ought to listen to that,” my father said, pointing to the Radio Times. It was *Blues and Greys*, a ballad documentary on the American Civil War. I was about fourteen: not only did the programme reinforce my fascination with history but this was the first occasion when I became dimly aware of the skills and craft required to make a compelling broadcast. Recollection of my childhood in Dublin is crowded with memories of BBC Home Service and Light Programme radio.

“I would try to start off by getting them to sit down,” the Principal, John Malone, advised shortly after I had begun my teaching career in east Belfast in 1964. I turned for help to the *Today and Yesterday in Northern Ireland* programmes being made in the new Schools Department. Would the boys sit quietly? My anxiety was unnecessary. Hubbub lapsed into quiet absorption as they became familiar with the writings of Sam Hanna Bell, Michael Longley, Seamus Heaney and others.

It was in the Schools Department that I cut my teeth as a writer. James Hawthorne – creator of the ground-breaking *Two Centuries of Irish History* – produced my very first programme, on the Battle of Clontarf, and he insisted on driving me down to Dollymount strand so that I could set the scene as vividly as possible. My mentor thereafter was Douglas Carson.

His series, *Modern Irish History: People and Events*, had exacting objectives: each programme was to draw on contemporary sources to dramatise just one pivotal event over no more than a twenty-four hour period. The challenge was to lift young listeners into another time and place to create a coherent, accurate and compelling story using the voices of the past. Each programme forced the writer to search out old documents, some being brought to light for the first time. David Hammond was usually on hand to resurrect long-forgotten ballads. We were buoyed up by the enthusiasm of the actors who were grateful that they, too, had learned a little more about their past. We seemed to be involved in a collective campaign to show that the real history of an increasingly fractured country was not dull but could be gripping and enlightening.

Finally, I am firmly of the view that the most perfectly crafted local radio programme ever was *Wings of a Seraphim*, Douglas Carson’s account of growing up in Belfast during the most terrible years in modern history while some of his cousins were storming the Normandy beaches and most of his German cousins were dying for the Reich as the Red Army advanced. I play it to my Queen’s students once a year: without fail, the classes are transfixed and some are moved to tears.

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But in the end, it wasn't so much as the weather forecasts that flowed longest and deepest in the channels of the ear, and the shipping forecast most of all.

My earliest and most unforgettable radio experience: a play on the Northern Ireland Home Service being listened to by grown-ups in the kitchen, but overheard by me in the dark of the bedroom, when I was supposed to be asleep.

It told the story of the Cooneen ghost, of a Fermanagh family haunted out of house and home, and pursued across the ocean to their new home in America. What terrified me most was the recurrent knocking of the poltergeist, at first behind the walls of the family home and then, unerringly and ever more menacingly, from behind the walls of their cabin on the transatlantic liner. If I heard it now, it might strike me as a primitive sound effect, but at the time it had uncanny, unsettling power. It made a space for nightmare, a space that opened fitfully and a little frightfully for years afterwards.

Radio has the power to flow into your dream life, which is one reason why schools broadcasts proved so effective, particularly in the realm of language and literature. Some teachers probably regarded a class period spent listening to the wireless as a waste of time, but no class period in all my years at school left as deep a mark as the one when I first heard Thomas Hardy's poem 'Weather' read by an actor from the BBC's repertory company.

A big, commanding, standard English voice, that shook the speakers in the classroom and seemed to possess a force that equaled the natural forces at work in Hardy's landscape, 'When showers betumble the chestnut spikes,/And nestlings fly'.

But in the end, it wasn't so much the weathers as the weather forecasts that flowed longest and deepest in the channels of the ear, and the shipping forecast most of all. Night after night, year after year, at the moment of close-down, that solemn invocation of the names of the regions of the sea told you that the world would be watched over until you woke again. It operated as a kind of mantra, and in fact it was only in the 1970s, when I started to live near the coast in Co. Wicklow, that I finally realized the seriousness and consequence of the phrase 'attention all shipping'; after a stormy night I'd sometimes see French trawlers at anchor in the sheltered but still rolling waters of the bay:

L'Etoile, Le Guillemot, La Belle Helene
Nursed their bright names this morning in the bay
That toiled like mortar. It was marvellous
And actual, I said out loud 'a haven',
The word deepening, clearing, like the sky
Elsewhere on Minches, Cromarty, The Faroes.

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Seamus Heaney

Born 1939 in Bellaghy and educated at QUB and St Joseph's College, Belfast. He taught at St Thomas Intermediate School, Belfast from 1962 to 1963 and later at QUB, Caryart, Harvard and Oxford. Poetry collections include Death of a Naturalist (1966), North (1975), The North (1996) and Electric Light (2001). Awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1995, he has also received the Somerset Maugham Award (1967), the Duff Cooper Prize (1975) and the Whitbread Award (1987 and 2000). His work has featured in many BBC programmes including the 1970s schools' series Explorations, a 1972 profile to mark the publication of Wintering Out and a 1987 radio at QUB.
At first I was indignant. Then I discovered that the more words you took out, the better the story got.
In the wee back room of our house in Lisburn, beneath the five delft ducks flying up the wall, half asleep in front of the coal fire while her shins melt in the heat, there sits my mother.

We didn’t have a television in our house until the late fifties, so my early memories of the BBC are of listening to the wireless.

Listening to the wireless introduced me to many things, including science fiction. In the wee back room of our house in Lisburn, beneath the five delft ducks flying up the wall, there sits my mother, half asleep in front of the coal fire while her shins melt in the heat. Behind us, from a corner of the room, a dramatic voice announces the next episode of Journey Into Space. Mars, I think it was. A character called . . . was it Whittaker? . . . got into a spot of bother with the local aliens. What a boost it was for the imagination – what a step up from the Beano, the Eagle and the Topper. I’ve enjoyed space stories ever since, and had a go at the genre when I developed the ambition to write myself.

You see, being a writer is one tough business. There really is not much money in it unless you get lucky. If I’m truthful, the definition of writer that has guided me through the years is crude and simple: if you can’t support your family through what you write and sell, you’re someone with a day job, by no means yet a writer.

And for me, the long haul to being a professional writer began about 1967, when I was in my twenties. A man called John Boyd at the BBC accepted a script called The Tenant Shall Not. . . It was a fifteen-minute talk about moving in to 43 Maralin Avenue – a house on the newest state being built at Knockmore, Lisburn. No words of mine had been published before, so how amazing it was to write something, send it away, and hear it on the radio. And get paid for it! I didn’t know it then, but the apprentice years had begun. In the three decades to come there would follow contributions to Morning Story, network radio plays, scripts for Schools TV and radio, and special commissions.

No doubt about it, the British Broadcasting Corporation quickened the hope that I might be a writer some day, and has been an open market for creative thinking and writing for as long as I can remember; may it remain so.
Marianne Elliott

We acquired our first television set in 1956 to watch the wedding of Prince Rainier and Grace Kelly. But the first broadcast to make a huge negative impact was the funeral of Pope Pius XII in 1958. In contrast, I over-indulged in television's sheer escapism and endless American imports – Sergeant Bilko, The Lone Ranger, I Love Lucy, Rawhide, Maverick... I associate television in the late 1950s and early 60s with children and laughter. Ours was the first television set in the neighbourhood and our house became a mini-cinema for childhood friends during school holidays.

It all seems very idyllic now. If there were nasty things happening in the world, I was blissfully unaware of them. It was the assassination of John F. Kennedy in 1963 which I recall as ending all this, the horror magnified by the relatively novel colour transmission. I was too young to experience the best of the 1960s, but just old enough to realise that things were beginning to go wrong in Northern Ireland. Terence O’Neill seemed the great white hope against the gathering forces of evil. My family gathered around the television to watch him deliver his ‘Ulster at the cross-roads’ speech in December 1968, and, more somberly, the first broadcast of James Chichester-Clark after O’Neill’s resignation.

How far all this had an impact on my future writing is hard to say. I am unsure where my passion for France came from. Perhaps the allure of those sleek black Citroëns and the femme-fatale chic of the Maigret detective series sowed the seeds. The passion for Irish history was bred at home. But it also had something to do with the memory of how things had been in a mixed North Belfast community and all those unthreatening television programmes noted earlier, when contrasted with the bleaker memories from the increasingly sophisticated current-affairs programmes of the 1960s and 1970s. I suppose I have been on a mission ever since to explain how history does not work in the black-and-white polarities which produced the Troubles.
Even when it is not in use, it has an aura of mystery and promise, as though the push of a finger, the turn of a dial might give us access to anywhere.

Frank Ormsby – Poet and Editor:
Born in Enniskillen in 1947 and educated at QUB, he has taught at the Royal Belfast Academical Institution since 1971. His poetry collections include A Store of Candles (1977) and The Ghost Train (1995) and he has edited a number of anthologies including Poets from the North of Ireland (1979) and Northern Windows (1987). Winner of the Eric Gregory Award in 1974, he edited the Honest Ulsterman from 1969 to 1989. He has been a frequent contributor to BBC NI radio in programmes such as Causeway (1972/3), Poetry Now (1978) and Passing the Time (1990).

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We might not have a radio at all, were it not for my father’s illness. In the late 1950s he suffers a series of strokes and as a result we become eligible for a ‘welfare wireless’. It is an imposing piece of furniture—a wooden box with substantial knobs and a curved finish. Even when it is not in use, it has an aura of mystery and promise, as though the push of a finger, the turn of a dial might give us access to anywhere.

But it is my father’s wireless, so in practice ‘anywhere’ means Athlone and so Radio Eireann rather than the BBC becomes our main source of news, weather, music, religion and sport.

My father’s sporting interests are not confined to Gaelic football and hurling, however. He is also a devotee of horse racing, so that my earliest memories of listening to the BBC are tied in with the geography of racecourse England. On a Saturday afternoon we are linked, through the racing results to Catterick and Hunt Park, Redcar and Wincanton, Newmarket and Uttoxeter. If one of the English classics is on, our heads lean even closer to the box on the sideboard, the commentator’s voice gathers volume all through the final furlong, we are wired to the syllables of the chosen horses names.

One other memory persists from that period. We are settling down in the calm of a Saturday evening to our weekly dose of Jack Loudan’s serial, Mrs Lally’s Lodgers, on the Northern Ireland Home Service. For me the programme is a twenty-minute ordeal, a peculiar compound of anticipation and pubertal dread. The focus of all this is a character named Lancelot Magowan. It is appallingly clear that Lancelot has the hots for Mrs Lally and the unspeakable minutes arrive when he must utter his feelings. He does so in a voice that can only be described as throbbing and Mrs L, though decorously controlling his advances, is not unresponsive. The wireless exudes ragged breathing, strained passion and the odd shameful silence and I stare tensely at the floor. What a relief when it is time for the Deep River Boys to give us some Nago spirituals. At this point, my mother usually turns the wireless off, to ‘save the battery’, presumably for Lancelot’s next hormonal gallop.

Never to be forgotten, this first precious access to the airwaves, this total immersion, so natural and comprehensive that it is as if the radio itself has disappeared.
There they all were, paralysed, maimed, people I'd heard about on the radio and television. Their lives and the lives of their loved ones ruined, changed forever.

Graham Reid – Playwright:
Born in Belfast in 1945. Graduated from QUB in 1976 and after university spent a number of years as a history teacher. After coming to prominence with his first play *The Death of Humpty Dumpty* (1979), Reid left teaching to concentrate on writing full time. Subsequent plays such as *The Closed Door* (1980) and *The Hidden Curriculum* (1982) cemented his reputation as a 'Troubles' playwright. Between 1982 and 1984 Reid wrote the acclaimed trilogy of Billy plays for BBC NI. Other BBC television work included the series *Ties of Blood* (1985) and one-off drama *The Precious Blood* (1996).

I also recall Over the Bridge on television, but the very first radio play I ever listened to was one of my own!

Indirectly it was the news reports on radio and television that started me writing. When a report came in of someone having been shot or caught up in an explosion, two questions formed in my mind: was it someone I knew? Did they live? If the answer to the first was ‘yes’, and the answer to the second was ‘yes’, then I assumed everything was all right. It wasn’t until I went to work in Musgrave Park Hospital as a ward orderly that I realised everything wasn’t all right. When I first walked into the ward the great majority of the patients were victims of the Troubles. There they all were, paralysed, maimed, people I’d heard about on the radio and television. Their lives and the lives of their loved ones ruined, changed forever. The experience hurt me a great deal. I in turn wanted to hurt others, to shatter any easy assumptions that to ‘live’ was all that mattered.

At the time I wasn’t a writer, but I knew that I had to write about this experience. A play? A poem? A novel? I didn’t know what. Three years after that scarring experience I wrote *The Death of Humpty Dumpty*. It was accepted by the Abbey Theatre.

Graham Reid

There are memories of television dramas, written by one of our schoolteachers, Stewart Love: *The Big Donkey*; *The Randy Dandy*; *A Headful of Crocodiles*, though maybe not in that order. One line sticks in my mind, I don’t know from which play. During a family row a son turns angrily to his father and says: ‘Why don’t you go to Windsor Park and lose yourself in the crowd’. A crushing, hurtful put-down.
There was a whole world out there. There was a whole world in there. When my father took the back of the radio off to see what was happening it looked like an alien temple. Most homes had a wireless then. Ours was a big square box in the fireplace alcove, where it sat on a lace-trimmed tablecloth on a lacquered table. It hummed when you turned the milled half-crown of the knob till it clicked. It needed time to warm up. You could tell by the glow and the noise that would dawn from the sunburst fascia. It gave out the News.

Sometimes it would drizzle, or the News would be swept aside by the weather. I'd spin the big milled knob past the lit blips of the stations, London, Hilversum, Athlone, Helsinki, Moscow, through beeping Morse and the wind in the chimney and waves of static, orchestras that played in dim-lit rooms behind competing urgent voices, overlapping languages that rose and fell like music, or the oceanic swell collapsing onto shingle, muezzins crying from the minarets of Arabia, jazz quartets in Paris, silver jubilees in London, and an underlying fundamental buzz that came from everywhere, from nowhere.

There was a whole world out there. There was a whole world in there. When my father took the back of the radio off to see what was happening it looked like an alien temple. For days I wandered in the labyrinth of colour-coded wires between the tall forbidding bulbs of the valves. Years went by.

I'd flip the switch to short-wave radio, and slip the needle in between the stations for the crackling of an intercom, army and police jeeps calling to each other in the dark, the streets awash with static, swash of window-wipers and a broken flare of neon letters, the city demarcated by a coded alphabet. Bombs went off, reverberating through the console as the News became the News, and three or four alarms rang out in different keys like faulty echoes of each other, making ghostly enclaves of acoustic space. I'd switch it off and go to bed at dawn.

And years went by. I'm listening to Talkback right now, and I'm listening to Talkback right now, and there's talk of talks, and some are pro and some are con, and some remain tight-lipped, and some go on and on.

And, wanting to get lost, I twist the knob that little bit to slip between the stations, past the whining of a steel guitar, through urban funk and hip-hop yack, and fading punk, and broken soul, to reach the fundamental buzz that comes from everywhere, from nowhere.

Ciaran Carson

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Everyone on it sounded posh and spoke properly as if they had been to hundreds of elocution lessons – all except the McCooeys who were common.

My Nanny Simpson’s radio had to be warmed up. It was a big imposing radiogram and the most important piece of furniture in the parlour. Everyone on it sounded posh and spoke properly as if they had been to hundreds of elocution lessons – all except the McCooeys who were common.

At home on our less impressive set, we listened to Uncle Mac’s Children’s Favourites, and never tired of songs like ‘Inchworm’, ‘Sparky and the lost chord’ and ‘The little engine who could’.

Later on in school, I came to love the plays from Today and Yesterday in Northern Ireland featuring Viking invasions, sad tales of the Potato Famine and swashbuckling stories about wrecked Armadas. We would sit enthralled, hearts in mouths, as the actors drowned convincingly in the roaring waters of the Atlantic. Perhaps then the notion that radio has the best pictures was sown.

We were slow to get a television, and at first we were just allowed to watch children’s TV. An avid reader, I revelled in dramatisations of my favourite books – The Silver Sword, The Railway Children, Treasure Island.

Then there was the forbidden delight of Radio Luxembourg. On Sunday nights, we sat on the stairs listening to The Top Twenty – our first taste of commercial radio, with its endless ads for Stablond and Brunitel shampoos. Radio Caroline came next and played our favourite tunes non-stop – endless Beatles and Rolling Stones. Then the sixteenth-birthday present of a transistor of my own. I would swing it nonchalantly on a Sunday afternoon walk, listening to Alan Freeman count down the Pick of the Pops on BBC Radio One.

The radio is never off, either in the house or the car. According to a friend in the business, I am what is known demographically as a ‘heavily promiscuous’ listener. I listen a lot. And change channels a lot. At home, I listen all day to Radio 3 and 4 and during the night when I can’t sleep, I listen on an earphone to Radio 5. It influences my writing in the sense that it keeps my imagination fired.
My earliest memory of drama on TV was watching a play with my father as he commented out loud, occasionally cursed and generally appeared agitated. It was called Over The Bridge. I wouldn't have been that aware of Northern Ireland politics at the time but I could make out that it was about the Belfast shipyards and my father was going on about the Orange Order and Protestant bigotry. I also remember the face of a frightened Catholic worker – in fact I never forgot it. Later I learnt it was that of Donal Donnelly. That play, its Belfast accents and its explosive atmosphere stuck with me for years.

You have to fast-forward a number of years for my next experience of what we now call Radio Ulster. In the late 1970s I started writing plays for the Turf Lodge Fellowship Community Theatre. Along with a cast member we were invited onto the Walter Love programme to talk about our latest play. So early one Tuesday morning we found ourselves sitting in a black taxi at the top of the Whitelock Road waiting on it to fill up with passengers to start our journey to the BBC. Suddenly, we were witness to a frightening gun attack in the butcher’s shop ten yards away. An assistant in the shop was shot four times in the chest. The gunman stroked right past us on his way to a waiting car. When breathlessly relating this story to Walter Love before going on air, we were overheard by newshound Norman Stockton. Quick as a flash, the enterprising Norman arranged to interview us for the next Radio Ulster news bulletin the minute we were finished with Walter.

I've since been a regular guest on various BBC Radio Ulster programmes over the years but I doubt if I have ever contributed with the urgency of that first Norman Stockton news bulletin.
Words, names, people’s voices – sounds, magically transmitted through the air and walls, into heads.

Medbh McGuckian

Irene. The girl next door, Irene, playing ‘Irene Goodnight’ on her radio. Words, names, people’s voices – sounds, magically transmitted through the air and walls, into heads.

Chimes of Big Ben at nine, the solemn disapproving news. Did my mother send me to elocution to learn how to say such sad things? Twenty Questions, Friday Night is Music Night, Music While You Work in her morning scullery. The tune made her smile and she warmed. But not to the up and down of the Saturday afternoon football results. The assurance and dilatation of Wolverhampton Wanderers – nil, Sheffield Wednesday – late kick-off. The strange mounting excitement of horse racing and boxing, the graceful cricket. Stories where people spoke intimately.

The chubby walnut-effect Bush arrived after my 11-plus. Our hunger at the wavy wobbly lines. The despair of valves’ frequent explosions, the bottomless tube that left for weeks. My granny doing her bun and best slippers for Richard Baker who, she fully credited, could, like God, see her back.

We were only allowed to watch children’s television but on Sundays while she dozed we swallowed matinées and Brains Trusts. I learned a lot of words from these. How beautiful people could be: The Railway Children, Little Women. Their opening music haunted, but was no match for the astounding and rousing chords of Dr Who, always on at confession time. Why were The Wednesday Play and That Was The Week always snapped off at the seemingly most interesting moment?

The animals and close-ups and underwater frolics of David Attenborough and Hans and Lotte. The wild depth of their narrations. Westerns like Wells Fargo, Laramie, Cheyenne. The Lone Ranger prepared us for violence to come. The Sky at Night for the moon landings, Crackajack.

Christmas revolved around the pantomime circus they showed. Because my mother liked Billy Cotton and the Black and White Minstrels and Russ Conway and Val Doonican and Vera Lynn but not the Miss World we saw a lot of them. I have a friend now in a Pilates class who used to be a Television Topper. I said to my husband the other day, are you getting more and more like that man Fyfe Robertson, out of Tonight. Tales of the Riverbank, the mellifluous seduction of Johnny Morris, a river in itself and as near to a caress as one experienced, in those days. For which, all of it, though my children would not agree, I am inexpressibly grateful.

Even if we didn’t understand politics and international affairs, we went to bed with a sense that everything was under control, Richard Baker’s control. The BBC represents a balance of authority and humour that has intrigued me since the television first came into our home in about 1961. Indeed, it was on the wireless before that. My earliest memories of radio include Mrs Dale’s Diary and the broadcasts from Hungary during the Russian invasion. The BBC mediated a huge and complex world but opened that window also on domestic drama in which problems were always resolved. The Russians might not get out of Hungary but Mrs Dale would make a good flan.

Ours was a big argumentative family that was calmed by the mystery of Richard Baker’s poise. He spoke to us in even tones that we heard from no adult in the real world – parents and teachers were as moody as the children; they were the ones we got it from. Baker – or Robert Dougal – could tell you solemnly that the Americans were taking losses at Tet, that a tiger cub had been born at Whipsnade – wherever that was – and that the wind was coming from the west. He seemed to suggest that this was all we needed to know and his limited emotional range, from a tight frown to a soft chuckle, seemed sufficient to encompass the whole world.

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Ever since, this poise has been a challenge to me. I rebel at times and launch challenges against the patrician reassurance of balance and try to import anger, cynicism and contempt into broadcasts including paper reviews – the closest I ever come to being a newsreader. But I am challenged to find my inner Richard Baker too. Authoritative poise and anarchic emotion are the poles I move between and the BBC has become like a wise parent I am devoted to but whose shins sometimes need a good kicking.

Malachi O’Doherty

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Malachi O’Doherty – Writer and Broadcaster: Born in Muff, County Donegal, in 1951, he grew up in Belfast and was educated at the city’s Glen Road CBS and later lived abroad for spells. The author of The Trouble With Guns (1998) and I Was A Teenage Catholic (2003), he is a regular commentator on political and cultural affairs on BBC NI’s Talkback and Hearts and Minds. He has fronted several documentaries for the BBC and has written on Irish affairs for, amongst others, the New Statesman, the Belfast Telegraph and Fortnight, which he edited for a number of years.
Paul Muldoon

The radio was in a cupboard to the right of the mantelpiece, just where the saltbox might have hung in the mud-walled cottage my mother had been brought up in, and it was with something of the same ceremony that the door of the cupboard was opened and the radio turned on. My mother was a schoolteacher and used the radio in the classroom, so it was quite natural for her to season the meat and potatoes of our everyday existence with Schools and Children's Programmes from the BBC. Our favourites were Children's Hour with Cicely Mathews and John D. Stewart and Graeme Roberts, and some version of Music and Movement, a programme that encouraged a connection between song and dance, reading and writing, that we neither lost sight of, even in these pass-in-an-iPod days.

There was always that other song and dance of the political toings and froings, of course, and that influenced our listening in predictable ways. For better or worse, there was a greater likelihood of our tuning in for news, and more, to Radio Eireann than the faintly Giangilli-street-tinted BBC, preferring an Angelus-tainted herald to Duncan Heaths. The BBC broadcasts we listened to tended to come from the UK, a particular favourite being Beyond Our Ken, with that loony of loonies, Kenneth Horne, whose way with puns and double-entendres had as much influence on me as Joyce, I'm certain.

This changed when I began to make more connections with voices on BBC Northern Ireland, particularly the voices of Sean O'Baill and Jerry Hicks, two singers and folklorists who also happened to be my teachers in St. Patrick's College, Armagh. In the classroom, I vividly remember Sean O'Baill explaining the phenomenon of 'potatoes and point', whereby a poor peasant would point his or her magpie spud at a herring or a bit of bacon hanging up to the right of the fire - not too far from the saltbox, probably - and simply point the potato at the herring or bit of bacon and imagine the taste.

It's an image that often came back to me when, ten years later, I went to work for BBC Northern Ireland and had barely been issued with my stopwatch when I fell happily with the great mantra on the difference between radio and television, i.e. on radio, the pictures are better. The power of the imagination to summon the smell of the sea, the sound of a thousand horsemen coming over a hill, the taste of herring from a few evocative words, was one on which I would base the next thirteen years of my life, not only as a radio producer but as a poet. It was, at least part of the same line that ran back all the way through to the cupboard door closing until the next time.

Paul Muldoon – Poet and Broadcaster: Born in Portadown in 1951, he grew up near the Moy and was educated at QUB. As a producer for BBC Radio Ulster from 1973 to 1985, he was responsible for landmark arts broadcasts including Irish Poetry and Bazaar. He moved to the USA in the 1980s, and is currently Professor of Creative Writing at Princeton. His nine collections of poetry from New Weather (1973) to Moy Sand and Gravel (2002) have earned him numerous awards, including the T.S. Eliot Award in 1994 and a Pulitzer Prize in 2003.
Every Saturday morning, when I was a child, a woman came to my house and swallowed a fly and because this fly wriggled and tickled inside her, the unfortunate swallowed a series of increasingly large creatures in an attempt to catch this irritating insect. The eagerly anticipated ending which culminated in swallowing a horse was comic and tragic comedy – she’s dead of course. This was the radio world of Saturday morning Children’s Favourites, a world soon to be swept away by the pop revolution where beat and rhythm replaced narrative.

In this Big Rock Candy Mountain realm of the imagination a boy called Sparky searched for his missing voice and a bad’un called Big John redeemed a worthless life through self-sacrifice in a mining disaster. And in the midst of these little snow-globes of sentimentality and melodrama – the perfect catalyst of the child’s imagination – there was too, the swirl of humour. How that laughing policeman laughed!

The songs flew out of the Bush radio with its red-faced dial – the model now sold as a piece of nostalgic retro chic – and so many memories of growing up and family are intimately related to both television and radio. Television entertained and educated; it showed us the march of history and the unseen face of the world we lived in. Sometimes it showed us ourselves. Although a writer of prose, I found stimulus in the BBC’s tradition of radical drama such as the series Play for Today. Here was the provocative challenge of ideas, of honest criticism of our society and a faithfulness to realities however painful. BBC Northern Ireland kept this torch lit even in those dark years when we faced a fragmenting society. As a teacher, as well as a writer, I have also been impressed by the quality of school broadcasting where strengths of our own culture have been celebrated and explored in creative ways.

Now, however, I am no longer a child waiting for the visit of that afflicted woman but just for a moment I see again the red face of that dial and part of me strains to hear its voice journeying through the dark tide of the ether. Perhaps I listen hard enough it will teach me how to redeem my life, where to look to find my voice. Perhaps it will show me how to laugh. How to really, really laugh.
We are the last in our neighbourhood to get TV. I will go anywhere to see it.

Anne Devlin

Via... Who is speaking when I speak? 1953. I am born. First memories? A cream silk tapestry curtain darts up turns out to be the woven screen on the radio. And pips, Pip, Pip, Pip, Pip. Behind the silk screen tapestry curtain is the world and a man's voice from London: here is the news at nine o'clock. Hungary... China... Mau Mau...

Maimi, my grandmother, leans over her cranking paper to steady the wavering signal; she is searching for something... I am looking through the steaming folds of dothyesine washing from my sick bed on the sofa. I have cotton in my ears and my head is boiling... A burst of music from a place called Luxembourg: "When I was just a little girl I asked my mother what will I be?"

We are the last in our neighbourhood to get TV. I will go anywhere to see it. I crash into Auntie Peggy's Sunday afternoons in Lady Street; they are so fed up with me they all go out. I take to visiting my other granny, Anna, even though there is clearly a feud between my father and his mother. I learn very early on to distinguish between his feuds and my own - my granny has TV.

With her I discover the Sunday serial. Dickens, Dumas... the BBC must have been working through the adaptations alphabetically. The Count of Monte Cristo had thirteen episodes and I missed the last one! This still feels like deprivation...

Que sera, sera... Oh what will I be?

Granny Anna is sitting bolt upright on her bedsette when I catch my first sight of Miss Havisham, whose icy white locks seem to gather in that nesting wedding cake and wrap themselves around the very legs of the table. So I go up close and push myself through the glass wall of the TV. It seems to me that in my efforts to move through the glassy screen that separates the world of my two grannies from the one which I see, if as if the glassy screen is moving through me, a molten river of such slippery cleanness nothing could live there, even the fish.

As soon as I am able I am walking Maimi Nicole across the park and down the Falls to Anna Livia for a word.

Your lipstick's a rotten colour. I know. But I like it.
If I had a great big medal I'd pin it on the person who dreamed up Scene Around Six. I'm sure the play on 'seen' was intentional. From that first syllable – sibilant – it was unmistakably of this place, where most of us are only ever an excited slip of the tongue away from the wrong end of the seen-saw. (And though Scene Around Six was grammatically correct, I half expected London to give us a collective slap: 'You saw it around six.')

I don't remember news programmes before SAS came along, though I'm told they were much briefer. It must have seemed a gamble in 1968 to give Northern Ireland twenty minutes of nightly news to fill, but, credit where credit's due, Northern Ireland rose to the challenge, serving up, in Scene around Six's sixteen years, a constant diet of murder and mayhem for its cameras to feed off; feed us on.

It was on Scene Around Six I saw the car bomb explode. Maybe you saw it yourself. Yes, that one: a soldier in the foreground ducks just before the vehicle becomes less and more than the sum of its suddenly lethal parts. I saw worse ... to me the perfect symbol of a society where everyday objects, and the lives they furnished, were no longer reliable.

It's probably too simplistic to say (but I'm a novelist, it won't stop me) all this fuelled my childhood desire for escapist; the Saturday Morning Club at the Majestic, the James Cagney Season on the BBC. I loved Cagney, the tough guy of course, but I loved him too in Yankee Doodle Dandy, the bio-pic of George M. Cohan. I imagined myself the 'old timer' not recognised on the street as he left the White House with a medal for the song all the Doughboys were singing, 'Over There.'

Aged about seven, I tried writing my own song. I tried writing a lot of other things over the next twenty years before I tried a novel and, when that finally worked, tried another.

I was writing my third – was on the bus home from the pictures (Lulu, with Louise Brooks) – when I remembered the car bomb clip. I ran into the house and typed a passage. From then until the book was published, I didn't ... As rare as deconstructing cars are these days, thank God; as rare as Sean Rafferty on our televisions, more's the pity.

Glenn Patterson

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It was on Scene Around Six I saw the car bomb explode. Maybe you saw it yourself. Yes, that one: a soldier in the foreground ducks just before the vehicle becomes less and more than the sum of its suddenly lethal parts. I saw worse things back then, on screen and off, but that seemed to me the perfect symbol of a society where everyday objects, and the lives they furnished, were no longer reliable.

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I was writing my third – was on the bus home from the pictures (Lulu, with Louise Brooks) – when I remembered the car bomb clip. I ran into the house and typed a passage. From then until the book was published, I didn't change a word, which is rare for me. As rare as deconstructing cars are these days, thank God; as rare as Sean Rafferty on our televisions, more's the pity.

Glenn Patterson

Glenn Patterson – Novelist: Born in Belfast in 1961, he studied at the University of East Anglia, taking a Creative Writing MA under the tutelage of Malcolm Bradbury. Returning to Northern Ireland in 1988, he took the post of writer-in-the-community for Lisburn/Crystalton and has since been writer-in-residence at the universities of Cork and East Anglia and at QUB. His first novel Burning Your Own (1988) won a Betty Trask Award and the Rooney Prize; subsequent novels include Fat Lad (1992), The International (1999) and the recent That Which Was (2004).
I think many of us regard ourselves as ‘British’ rather than ‘Irish’ because of the BBC – it’s not about politics or religion or geography, it’s because we grew up watching Blue Peter and Jackanory and Dr Who and Match of the Day and there was absolutely no room at all for anything that might be considered Irish. There was no locally-produced TV drama, and the closest we had to a local superstar was comedian James Young on a Saturday night after the football and James Ellis’s Belfast accent on Z Cars. Irish League soccer highlights showed how woefully inadequate the local game was, with a few hundred hardy souls attending the matches. I had no idea that tens of thousands followed Gaelic football, or that it even existed. I thought camogie was something you ordered in an Italian restaurant.

It wasn’t until the early 1980s when Graham Reid’s A Matter of Choice for Billy, which was followed by two sequels, exploded onto our screens, that I even became aware of local drama. Coming from a non-theatre background, it was the first time I’d seen my own country properly portrayed on screen – the sense of humour, the sarcasm, the bigotry, the sheer bloody madness of it all and it had such a galvanizing effect on me, and I wouldn’t be surprised if it inspired dozens of aspiring writers. It was real ‘water cooler’ television. I just thought it was fantastic, and for months after it was quoting lines (although interestingly, the critic in me was already playing that game we have all grown to love – spot the dodgy Northern Ireland accent. It was Kenneth Branagh’s TV debut and even though he was originally from Belfast, his accent sounded suspiciously middle-class compared to the rest of his on-screen family).

BBC Northern Ireland has always made fantastic drama, but the problem remains that it’s too expensive just to make for local consumption, and there’s not enough interest in it on the mainland to make it anything other than a rare event. It’s a huge pity, because there are thousands of stories to be told here, and in some ways there are even more now that we’ve begun to throw off the shackles of ‘The Troubles’. What’s more were the only BBC region without our own soap opera – now imagine that The Scots have it, the Welsh, the English, obviously. I grew up hearing old folks talking wistfully about a radio soap called The McCooeys – which ran for seven years in the 1950s. Seven years! Come on BBC Northern Ireland, I’m ready and I’m willing.
And local programmes on Irish writers opened my consciousness to writing in this time, from this place. Anything to do with poets or poetry on the BBC was a huge event in my early life. A dramatisation of the letters of Sylvia Plath that my mother had switched on by accident when I was thirteen had me transfixed (like Jo March upon her threshold). I hadn’t heard of Sylvia Plath, though I’d heard of her husband, and even read one or two of his poems in the Touchstone anthology in school. A woman spoke directly into the camera about getting up at six every morning, when the sleeping tablets are beginning to wear off, and writing the greatest poems of her life. I was rapt, already deeply happy for her, as though it was clear to me what that could mean. I made a trip to Greens on South Street and found a copy of her selected poems, and from then until I was eighteen, fell headlong into a Plath obsession, which, for all its decidedly mixed influence on my own early poetry, nevertheless clarified one essential thing in my mind: I wanted to write. Writing was what I wanted to do with my life.

Snippets of other poetry programmes throughout my teens. One Easter Sunday, a camera exploring the wooden face of a crucified Christ, while all of George Herbert’s heart-rending study of the Passion was read aloud in a low, sonorous voice. Whatever grief like mine. And then came Alan Bennett’s marvellous series on modern poetry when I was in sixth form. He perched on a stool and gave a lecture each on Housman, Auden, MacNeice, Larkin, interposing his own text with poems, quietly but powerfully delivered, with that understated, omnipresent melancholy Bennett does so well.

And local programmes on Irish writers that opened my consciousness to writing in this time, from this place. Glenn Patterson, writer-in-residence at Queen’s (was there such a thing?), talking about the perceived culture vacuum in the Protestant community, and how unfair this perception was. I thought he looked so young to be so eloquent and on television. I was impressed. And finally, a loving documentary of John McGahern that was to mean so much more when I met him at the Kavanagh weekend in Iniskea in 1990, where I’d gone to collect my prize. He wrote only in the mornings, he said. You can’t maintain the kind of concentration you need to write properly for more than a few hours. And then he took us outside and showed us the land and the two lakes (or was it three?) that bounded his world.

Sinead Morrissey

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Sinead Morrissey – Poet: Born in Portadown in 1972 and spent her first six years there before moving to Belfast. She was educated at TCD and her awards include the Patrick Kavanagh Award (1990) and the Rupert and Eithne Strong Award (2002); she was also shortlisted for the 2002 T.S. Eliot Award. Currently writer-in-residence at QUB, she has published three collections of poetry: There Was Fire in Vancouver (1996), Between Here and There (2002) and The State of the Prisons (2005).
Jo Baker

There were four of us in my year at primary school. Helen, Neil, Marie and me. The school radio was kept in the staff-room, and was never moved, so we had to troop in there to listen to BBC School Radio broadcasts. This, in brief, is the plot of a programme we heard in the summer term of 1984, our last year at primary school.

The Earth is so polluted that it’s no longer habitable: a vast spaceship has been built to take everyone to another planet. Onboard are two classes of passenger: the wealthy, housed in luxury, and the overcrowded poor. A friendship blossoms between a wealthy girl and a boy from steerage.

Disease breaks out amongst the poor. Scientists develop a vaccine, but they cannot make enough for everyone. The wealthy are vaccinated, the poor are left to die.

The boy falls ill. The girl, risking her own life, shares her medicine with him. He recovers. But then the wealthy passengers begin to die. The scientists had miscalculated the dose. It was double the safe level.

The ship, now a charnel house, arrives at the new planet. The children take an escape pod to the surface. The planet is pristine, unpopulated; they must make their lives there.

For the rest of term we immersed ourselves in the world of that story. Me, Marie, Helen and Neil surviving on the new planet. Out of bounds, in the fields, we collected grass seeds and hips and hare. We built ourselves a shelter, roofed with giraffe’socks. The narrative extended, evolved. We were so deep in it, we didn’t notice trailing shoelaces, bramble scratches, the need to pee.

And then it was the end of term, and the leaving service. In September we started at different secondary schools, where no-one played games like this and there were a hundred and thirty-two people in my year, not four.

For me, this story is as indelible as the barbed-wire scar on my left calf muscle that I got climbing through the fence. In part, this is because it was a beautifully-crafted, challenging, open-ended piece but it also has to do with who I am as a writer and the fact that this was the last great epic narrative game I played as a child. All children have this facility for creative, imaginative play. Mostly it gets shed or withers away under the inevitable pressures of life. For writers (or at least for me) it remains, like a vestigial tail, evidence of an earlier stage of development. Now, when I write, however intellectual I’m trying to be, however adult the material, it’s the little girl in the playground who takes over. I get lost in whatever story she’s playing.

That I ended up becoming a playwright and screenwriter has everything to do with television. Earlier generations grew up with radio, the family gathered round the wireless, tuning the dial into the scratchy sounds of the Home Service or with movies, back when even as small a place as Armagh had three or four cinemas.

But my generation was the television generation. Even now there's something faintly shameful about saying that. As children we have the idea drilled into us that watching TV is a waste of time and that real life is spent out of doors and don't get me wrong, much of my childhood was spent scrambling around in the open air, getting bloody knees and noses, getting stung by nettles, and all that Stanney Hanesy kind of stuff. But for all that, my childhood is most vividly conjured back into life – the real Proustian rush happens – when I hear, say, the theme tune to *White Horses*, a 1968 Czechoslovakian children's programme dubbed into English and shown on the BBC in the early 1970s.

I was born in 1969 and grew up in Armagh. By my time Armagh had only one cinema left, the Ritz on Market Street, and even that didn't last long. And if access to the cinema was limited, access to the theatre was non-existent. That I ended up becoming a playwright and screenwriter, then, has everything to do with television. And television was extraordinary then, children's television especially, a strange cultural ecosystem of its own, where *White Horses* could rub shoulders with an old Abbott and Costello movie, or a homegrown cartoon like Mr Benn could run alongside the French-dubbed-into-English swashbuckler *The Flashing Blade*.

The heroes of my childhood included people who were, unknown to me, long dead. The BBC used to fill out the schedule with old Harold Lloyd or Buster Keaton movies, or, our particular favourites, the absurd cross-eyed silent comedian Ben Turpin. For the BBC no doubt these were just cheap fillers, but for me they were magical. Then there were the adventure serials from the 1930s, *Flash Gordon* and *Buck Rogers*. Or a choice of Tarzans – Johnny Weismuller in black and white, Ron Ely in colour (though that may – God forbid – have been on ITV).

These were the stories that first fired my imagination. From before I could even read, these were the stories that made me fall in love with storytelling. They were stories that were carried from the living room to the playground, and on from there, folded away and packed in the memory. It was because of these stories that I became a writer.

Daragh Carville

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Daragh Carville – Playwright and Screenwriter: From Armagh, Daragh Carville was born in 1969 and educated at the University of Kent. Plays include *Language Roulette* (1996) and *Observatory* (1999). Radio work includes *Regenerations* (BBC Radio 3, 2001) and *Dracula* (BBC Radio 4, 2003). He has received numerous awards including the 1997 Stewart Parker Award and 1998 Meyer-Whitworth Prize. Writer in residence at QUB from 1999 to 2002, he was editor of the anthology *New Soundings* in 2003 and has recently produced the screenplay for his first feature film, *Middletown*. 