The early years of
BBC Schools Broadcasting
in Northern Ireland

Edited by Douglas Carson
Right from the beginning there was an extraordinary confluence of talent and innovation. This would result in the creation of radio and television programmes of unique distinction - all of them rooted in a passion for place, language, history and tradition.

The editorial ambition for much of the Department’s early work on local radio was ‘to widen children’s interest, knowledge and experience of Northern Ireland and its affairs, past and present, and make them more curious about their own country.’

The programmes produced in those formative years retain an enduring significance. They are part of our region’s cultural history, as are the names of so many of those involved – Hammond, Carson and McAuley. Muldoon, Hawthorne and Heaney. Bardon and Longley. And there are many others.

The character and style of BBC Schools’ programming has changed much over the years – reflecting developments in technology and broadcasting and within education itself. Today’s BBC learning resources are designed for a multi-platform and digital world, but their core values and purpose provides a living, and unbroken, link with the past.

The children who watched and listened to the formative output of the BBC Schools Department in Northern Ireland are now grown up. They have children of their own. They have grandchildren. But they have memories undimmed of the sturdy television set in the corner of the classroom, the radio on the teacher’s desk and the magic that was in the air.

We are grateful to Douglas and Marie Carson and a stellar cast of contributors for their work telling the story of how BBC Schools’ programming began and reminding us why it matters still…

Peter Johnston
Director, BBC Northern Ireland
In 1953, Louis MacNeice wrote *Autumn Sequel*. It was a poem for radio - he read it on the Third Programme. It was also a poem about radio - it described his life as a Writer-Producer at the Features Department in London. MacNeice had grown up with the Wonder of Wireless. By 1953, he was a part of it:

To found
A castle on the air requires a mint
Of golden intonations and a mound
Of typescript in the trays. What was in print
Must take on breath and what was thought be said.
In the end there was the Word, at first a glint,
Then an illumination overhead
Where the high towers are lit.

The ‘high towers’ were more than transmitters. They were the pinnacles of his ‘castle on the air’ - his aspirations for the craft of programme-making. The microphone equipped him with an audience beyond the dreams of any poet before him: and he took that responsibility seriously.

MacNeice’s most famous production was itself about a tower - *The Dark Tower*. He wrote it at the end of the War, while Broadcasting House was still painted black and he was planning to find other employment. He came back to Ulster and recruited two Producers for the new Third Programme and the Features Department. One was the novelist, Sam Hanna Bell, appointed as Features Producer in Belfast. The other was the poet, W R Rodgers, who moved to the Features Department in London.

In 1955, Rodgers wrote *The Return Room*. It was recorded by Bell. *The Return Room* was Rodgers’s love-song to Belfast:

Strange city - God-fearing, far-faring, devil-may-caring. I would need a gold pen as big as a gun, filled with heart’s blood, to put down the rehoboams of its praise...
From the window of the Return Room
I see the childhood city,
lying open like a monster eye,
staring up at the soft sky
and the wet Atlantic winds,
and crying ’Weep!’

I was seventeen. I heard the first transmission, at Christmas, on a portable radio, at a farm in the Antrim Hills. *The Return Room* was important to generations of broadcasters. Paul Muldoon remembered it in 2010:

I have no hesitation in describing *The Return Room* as one of the most important Irish poems of the twentieth century... When I worked for the BBC in Belfast, between 1974 and 1986, *The Return Room* was already held up as an example of radio at its peak... helping producers like myself find the truth in Louis MacNeice’s observation that ‘sound can do many fine things which will never be possible on television.’

By the early 1960s, the BBC had changed radically. In London, the Features Department was terminated. In Belfast, the Schools Department was started. Louis MacNeice died in 1963, and W R Rodgers in 1969. Sam Bell survived: and kept the high towers lit.
Castles On The Air

After the War, classrooms in Northern Ireland were equipped for radio. They listened to Schools Programmes from London. The variety of the output was magnificent, and the broadcasts were supported by extensive publications - Notes for teachers, Pamphlets for the pupils, posters, wall-charts, and directories.

Scotland and Wales had their own Schools Departments, which generated programmes of 'national' interest. Northern Ireland had no equivalent. At intervals, a 'network' series might solicit a 'special' production from Belfast - a gobbet about Irish history or geography. These requests were usually handled by Sam Hanna Bell.

The initiative for change came from Britain. The use of Schools programmes was monitored by 'Education Officers', who worked for the Schools Broadcasting Council. The Officer responsible for Northern Ireland made a case for more 'local' programmes, and urged that a Schools Producer be appointed in Belfast.

His intervention was well-timed. The sixties began with political optimism. In Ormeau Avenue, at Broadcasting House, a fresh generation had changed the agenda. Bertie Rodgers and Sam Bell, John Boyd, Ronnie Mason, Maurice Leitch - all these and others helped to create a new audience. British Broadcasting was more relaxed, more open to the 'local' and the 'national'.

Two layers of management were induced to cooperate. 'The Region' was the empire of Controller Northern Ireland. Schools Broadcasting had its own Controller in London. Each had an angle. The Regions wanted a conspicuous success: and London wanted 'input' to the network schedules.

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Today and Yesterday became the flagship series - and a pioneer for all the series that followed. It was designed for older children in Primary Schools, and junior classes at the Secondary level. It was broadcast weekly, for three terms every year - with termly Pamphlets, Notes, and Wall-charts, produced to the standards of BBC Publications.

Today and Yesterday was a miscellany series. It sought to cover every aspect of 'local studies' - history, literature, geography, music; mythology and 'folklore', town and country. In the early 1960s, this was groundbreaking. There was a hunger for suitable broadcasts in schools - and a famine in usable schools publications.

Supplying the need was endlessly demanding. But Hawthorne had a great tradition to draw on. His 'conspicuous success' however, was local. In April 1961, he launched Today and Yesterday in Northern Ireland.

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At the BBC, the ground had been prepared by John Boyd. He produced two series - Ulster since 1800 - which engaged the attention of a large (adult) audience. The talks were presented by academic historians, and subsequently made available in print.

In spite of this, 'hot' history had to be handled with care - even in the optimistic early sixties. Two Centuries of Irish History was broadcast for the first time in 1964. It was produced by James Hawthorne. He also prepared Teachers' Notes and a Pamphlet. The series made the headlines for all the right reasons. It was widely applauded. It won an award. It was published in hardback and became a textbook in classrooms.

It also expanded the Schools Department. Today and Yesterday was a full-time job. To make the Irish history series feasible, a new Producer had to be appointed.

David Hammond was teaching at a big school in Belfast. He specialised in disadvantaged classes. He was also a broadcaster - a singer - whose voice was familiar in folk-music programmes, produced for Regional radio by Sam Hanna Bell.

Magic And Mystery

'Magicians', said the poet, 'need mystery'. He was talking about the production of programmes for schools. The success of Today and Yesterday was immediate. It reassured the managers in London and Belfast. It also encouraged a modest expansion.

Funding was provided for a one-term series, designed for pupils at the Secondary level. It was decided to offer programmes on the history of Ireland.

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He was seconded to the Schools Department. He worked on Today and Yesterday and Two Centuries. Both Hawthorne and Hammond kept in touch with their listeners. They were regular visitors to the classrooms. In 1965, they were given formal assistance. A local Education Office was created.

Tony Fleck was from Belfast, a teacher of English. He was lively and spontaneous, a natural enthusiast. He was employed by the Schools Broadcasting Council, and reported independently on the use of Schools programmes. He advised the local Producers until 1968. (He was succeeded by the equally supportive Brian Wright - a geographer who found his way from Aughnacloy.)

Meanwhile David Hammond was annexed by London. He was allocated an annual series for network. Over to You was designed for disadvantaged children. Like Today and Yesterday, it was a three-term miscellany. In a sense, it was a diversion from the 'Regional' brief. But all the programmes were produced in Belfast. They provided opportunities for local writers and actors: and they had listeners in Northern Ireland as well as in Britain.

Above all, they honed Hammond’s skills in production. He developed a distinctive personal style which enriched the traditions of Regional broadcasting. His presence was singular - both immense and elusive. He was a star who contrived to hide in the spotlight.

‘He’s a magician’, said Michael Longley. ‘And magicians need mystery’.
The Orange Revolution

James Hawthorne was a former pupil of John M Malone. John Malone was a great educationist. In 1957, he became a Headmaster. He presided over the creation, in east Belfast, of Orangefield Boys’ Secondary School.

John Malone’s Orangefield was a phenomenon - an embodiment of all that was best in the sixties. It also had a crucial role in SchoolsBroadcasting. The second Schools Producer, David Hammond, taught there. The first Education Officer, Tony Fleck, taught there. The third Education Officer, Eric Twaddell, taught there (he took over from Brian Wright in 1972). John Malone himself was a Consultant. The drama teacher, Ronnie Horner, acted in programmes. His successor Sam McCready, acted in programmes. Another teacher, Thompson Steele, worked on productions: and pupils, like Wilfrid Pyper, took part in recordings.

I joined the staff in Autumn 1960. I was twenty-two and learning to teach history. The following year, Schools Broadcasting started. I soon became involved - at first as a researcher, and later as a writer for Schools Publications. I worked on Today and Yesterday and Two Centuries.

The History Department in the school was expanding. It was led by Ken Stanley - an exceptional teacher, and a colleague with infinite humour and patience. In 1964, he made a further appointment. I found myself next door to a young man from Dublin who in turn played a big part in Schools Broadcasting. He was the future historian of Ulster, Jonathan Boyd.

Two Centuries was scheduled for revision. It was decided to make it less ‘academic’. It was replaced by a series called Irish History - another one-term module, with a similar format, but designed to be accessible to a much wider audience. I wrote scripts and tested them with classes in Orangefield.

The creation of Irish History coincided with changes which expanded the potential range of Schools Broadcasting. It was resolved to attempt a series on television - a black-and-white translation of Today and Yesterday. James Hawthorne moved from radio to make Ulster in Focus. His former job was advertised. I applied. (The principal competitor was a young Derryman. Years later, he told me he was promised the next Schools appointment. That vacancy occurred in 1970. By then, he had developed other interests. His name was John Hume.)

In 1966, I left the Antrim Hills. On the way, I heard the Northern Ireland Home Service. ‘And now’, said the Announcer, ‘Over to you’. It was one of David Hammond’s radio ballads. I sailed to Belfast on The Golden Vanity.

James Hawthorne went to London for a television course. I found myself in Bedford Street, in his office, with his Secretary, Maureen Somerville - and a long list of deadlines. From the window I could see the Workshops for the Blind.

There was no time for metaphors - or even for training. But fortunately, comfort was at hand. Twenty yards away, in Dickensian darkness - with mounds of typescript in the trays - were the cherubic John Boyd and the tweedy Sam Hanna Bell.

I recall them with gratitude and affection.

The Cutting Edge

In the late sixties, I was responsible for Today and Yesterday and Irish History. Beside me, David Hammond made Over to You. James Hawthorne was busy with Ulster in Focus - gearing up for the imminent arrival of colour.

I needed forty scripts a year. David Hammond needed thirty. About fifty of these were dramatised features. Demand, at first, exceeded the supply, and compelled us to function as Writer-Producers.

There were fifteen inches of tape for every second of air-time. The cutting edge of wireless was the razor-blade.

The summer term of Today and Yesterday was based on activities in primary schools. This usually involved four separate visits - the first to organise a project, the second to prepare the Pamphlet, the third to make the site recordings, the fourth to witness the transmission. We travelled the length and breadth of the Province, from Erne to Rathlin and from Mourne to Inishowen.

The Pamphlets were enhanced by Jack McManus, whose full-time work was with the Irish Times. His photographs are records of a lost horizon, before the sixties swung to their destruction.

It was not known, of course, that ‘The Troubles’ were permanent, an endless context for our working lives. But almost overnight the audience was altered. The cutting edge was on the barricades. Both teachers and their classes were beleaguered, and programmes, suddenly, acquired a new dimension. The broadcasts, after all, crossed every boundary, and offered possibilities for shared experience.

I replaced Irish History with a completely new series - Modern Irish History: People and Events. The intention, as ever, was to widen the audience - but also to provide ‘social studies’ departments with fresh materials for class discussion. Every programme was based on a particular incident - the Clare Election, the deaths of the Manchester Martyrs, the signing of the Covenant, the Belfast Blitz. The scripts were researched from original sources. The Consultant was Professor Leslie McCracken. The principal writer was Jonathan Bardon.

Modern Irish History ran for twenty years. I also produced another Secondary series - designed specifically for ‘young school leavers’. This was called Here in Ulster. It addressed practical problems - like finding employment. It also extended the ‘social studies’ debates, with programmes about ‘Catholic’ and ‘Protestant’ childhoods, a modern ‘morality play’ (Everyman), and reports from correspondents confronting conflict abroad.

A third Secondary series was devised by David Hammond. This was Explorations. It was about writers and writing - the tensions and complexities of Irish literature: ‘the mapping of the contours of reality’.

In the Schools Department itself, the contours were changing. James Hawthorne moved to management, and then to Hong Kong (he returned in the later seventies as Controller). The London directorate axed Over to You. David Hammond became responsible for Ulster in Focus. A new Producer was required for radio. In 1970, Tony McAuley arrived. His family was from the Glens and he grew up in Cookstown. He had worked on music programmes with Maurice Leitch and Sam Bell. For nearly two decades, he was in the office next door. Beyond us was the childhood city, lying open like a monster eye.
Every Frame A Rembrandt

Broadcasting is by definition team-work.

I remember with gratitude a succession of helpers who ran the office and enhanced my days. They were Personal Secretaries and Production Assistants.

In the sixties, Maureen Somerville and Marie Keenan: in the seventies, June Clawson, Isabel Anderson, Kathy Coulter, and Myrtle Johnston - for a quarter of a century, they made programmes possible.

In the earlier seventies, I started in television. I made contributions to Ulster in Focus. The series was emerging from the studio. Increasingly, it was defined by film, and the programmes were features shot on location. The costs were justified by the results. To the joy of the Controller - Waldo Maguire - a David Hammond film won the Golden Harp. This was Dusty Bluebells - about street-songs in Belfast, but also about children in the Troubles.

In 1974, I moved to London for a television course. The television output was expanding. David Hammond devised a series for junior Primary classes. This was called Green Peas and Barley-O. A straw clock was constructed for the title sequence.

The workload was becoming unsustainable. The Schools Department needed a film Director. Henry Laverty was appointed in 1975. In years to come, I worked with him continually, from Normandy to Orkney, and from Mayo to the Moy.

The film crews enjoyed their time with Schools. They were exposed day and daily to the latest atrocities, and shooting features was a welcome change. Rex Maidment. Ian McGregor White. Dave Barker. I hear the voices of three men now gone. George Middleton (soaked in a Biblical downpour): ‘I think the sky’s brightening up over there’. Patsy Hill (on a trawler, in thirty-foot waves): ‘Don’t be embarrassed, Douglas, about making me do this’. Eric Pollen (up to his boot-tops in excrement): ‘Every frame a Rembrandt - it’s only a pleasure’.

The editors were housed at Clarence Street, and lived like troglodytes, in gloom. Their genius could redeem a mediocre shoot, or raise good footage into greatness. Ian Hamilton. Rob Morrison. Brian Llewellyn. And two more voices from elysium. Bill Miskelly (a paternal cousin): ‘It’s a bit of a mess - but I think I can fix it’. And Don O’Donovan (a master of encouragement): ‘It doesn’t look too bad, now, after all’.

It took three weeks to cut a Schools production. The final flourish was ‘the dub’ - the mixing of the speech and sound tracks. In Belfast, facilities for dubbing were limited. We had to go to London or Dublin or Birmingham. Elaborate refreshment was essential: I remember an editor at an airport revolving on the baggage carousel.

So what good came of it at last?

The archive in the Ulster Folk Museum may help historians to answer that. I hope they will enjoy themselves as we did: and I trust they will not judge us too harshly.

Every frame a Rembrandt? Very unlikely. But they won’t find our best programmes on file. The sad truth is, we never made them.
The Covered Porthole
Michael Longley

In my last year at Malone Public Elementary School Mr Johnston would occasionally promise us a BBC Schools Broadcast as a breather from our labours for the Qualifying Exam. Ceremoniously two boys would carry in a large square wooden object. This was the wireless. In the middle of the square was a hole covered with a wire grill. The world lay beyond that covered porthole. Many years later when I was a regular scriptwriter for the Schools Department, I would imagine myself back in that crowded classroom.

For one of my earliest programmes I drove to Keady to interview the great folk singer Sarah Makem. ‘What can I do for you, young man?’ She was soon in spate, talking and singing. Rooted in her locale but with her eye on the horizon, miraculously inspired, no artist has impressed me more. I like to think of Sarah Makem as the patron saint of my long involvement with Schools Broadcasting.

I didn’t really get airborne until my collaboration with Douglas Carson. He encouraged me to mine Irish mythology for stories. Into classrooms across Ulster a company of colourful characters swung into action, their swords flashing, their armour clunking: Cuchullain and his emotional horse the Grey of Macha, Fergus the King of Ulster disfigured in the depths of Dundrum Bay, the Earl of the Drab Coat, Mac Glas the Jester, Osin in the Land of the Ever Young, Finn McCool and the Hard Man, Ronan the King of Leinster who in his jealousy killed his own son. I was also educating myself in Irish legend. The unsung boffins of the Radiophonic Workshop in London conjured up whole armies and navies in all weathers. They brought the swoosh of an eagle’s wing into being, a sea monster’s rattle and roar.

As well as brilliant sound-effects, recordings of Irish music and the symphonic repertoire were at our disposal. For but my favourite programme, The Bird of the Golden Land, we invited the Billy White Trio to interpret through jazz the spaces between my words. In the story a king sends his three sons to search for a beautiful songbird. There’s much coming and going. A talking horse gets involved. Billy White’s versatility caught it all, the hide and seek, the bird’s flirtatious trills. On his double bass Billy McAlpine slid giddily down a very deep well - an exhilarating glissando.

In all my scripts I created the central characters with favourite voices in mind: Stella McCusker, Harold Goldblatt, Catherine Gibson and, especially, Denys Hawthorne, the best reader of poetry I have ever heard, a link back to Louis MacNeice and Dylan Thomas and the golden years of the BBC Features Department and the Third Programme.

The audience for our mythic explorations diminished, alas, and Schools Broadcasting moved on and in different directions. I think Douglas Carson and I would happily have continued our dreamy adventure even if no one but ourselves was listening. The world still lies beyond the covered porthole.

Another Time And Place
Jonathan Bardon

“So bitterly cold was it that Parson Woodford recorded in his diary that the contents of his chamber pot under his bed had frozen solid.” It was essential to introduce lively detail into a history class, meeting on a dark evening in Belfast city centre in 1972. I was describing the invasion of Holland in 1794-5 when the French revolutionary cavalry galloped over the frozen Zuider Zee.

I continued: ‘The British troops came under sudden and unexpected attack’: and with that there was a burst of gunfire close by. The evening students merely groaned; by now they had become used to explosions and shots, being able in some cases to identify the weapons used by the sounds they emitted.

Northern Ireland was being convulsed. Should I not have been teaching history closer to home?

Irish academic historians were fast pushing back the frontiers of knowledge but their findings had hardly begun to percolate down to the classroom. Popular histories perpetuated propagandist interpretations and suitable textbooks had yet to appear. But the Schools Department in Ormeau Avenue was already throwing a lifeline.

James Hawthorne did not flinch at tackling controversial and divisive issues from the past in his Secondary School series Two Century Irish History.

Soon after, Douglas Carson was appointed to join his staff. Douglas approached programme-making with the same meticulous care his ancestors had deployed in setting up looms to weave damask. His skills had been first honed in classrooms packed with adolescent boys, chafing to be out kicking a ball. He never forgot the importance of dramatic presentation. At the same time, no matter for what age group, the history had to be proper history.

Soon after he was ensonced in the BBC, Douglas brought me in as a script-writer for his series, Modern Irish History: People and Events. Each programme was to draw on just one pivotal event, usually over no more than one twenty-four hour period.

For a young script-writer the objectives were exacting. For most of the programmes I had no choice but to turn to primary sources. For The Relief of Captain Boycott contemporary newspaper accounts were so voluminous and dramatic that it was possible to construct a lively, informative programme with only a line or two of linking narrative. To do the same for episodes such as The Battle of Kinsale and Robert Emmet required more detective work and delving. In the process, I learned more about historical research than I had in four years as an undergraduate. The challenge was to lift young listeners into another time and place.

On occasion, I was persuaded to be present during recordings. I would peer awkwardly and shyly through the glass at accomplished actors such as Stella McCusker, Harold Goldblatt, Sam McCready, Doreen Hepburn, and Denys Hawthorne. The cast of Robert Emmet included the young Liam Neeson.

Technology advances rapidly, expectations alter, and the time when classes of fifteen-year-olds could be expected to sit still for twenty minutes to listen to a radio broadcast has gone... or has it?
For Joy And For Fun
Seamus Heaney

It was more leisurely in the broadcasting world of the 1970s (and probably better funded): even in the Schools Service, you could occasionally go out on a ‘recce’ before you went out on the job. And so it was that I found myself aboard a hired boat on the waters of Lough Erne with my friend and producer, the ever buoyant David Hammond, early in 1973. David was always liable to do something scampish and on this occasion his derring-do compelled him to climb the mast to a height where the boat was tilting and I was terrified. At this distance, however, it’s easy to think of that mast as a radio mast and to think of David as one of the many Schools producers whose creativity and expertise turned what might have been a series of routine programmes into an overall epoch-making achievement.

David gave me my first job in Schools - to write and broadcast a programme called I had a funny dream for his Over to You series. I only hope the tape of it was lost. It wasn’t until I did an autobiographical script for Today and Yesterday (entitled Poet) that I felt I was sounding like myself and getting the best out of the medium - I can still hear Jack McQuoid’s big soft farmer’s voice (with slight ghostly reverb) going through a catalogue of what the child-poet found on top of the dresser - ‘old putty, broken bits of a sharpening stone, balls of string…”

And so it was the age of television, of Ulster in Focus, which included the Lough Erne film and another Hammond Special called Bogland, unforgettable for David’s inspired use of the band of the Irish Army as background music: the wobbly labours of the huge Heath-Robinson-like machines for turf-cutting and peat-mould-raising were accompanied by oceanic renderings of ‘Finnegan’s Wake’, and long shots of a helmeted motor cyclist bobbing across the bog played out to the strains of ‘Óró, bog liom í’.

Television must have given pupils a sensation of holiday in the classroom as well as a stimulus to imagination or further study of the subject. Radio, however, remained and remains the prime medium for literature and music, and Explorations, a series devised to serve secondary schools, added up to a term’s work in reading and writing. I wrote and presented it in the spring of 1974, and once again David Hammond was producer and believer in the power of the word.

The other ‘recce’ I’ll never forget was made with Tony McAuley, this time for a radio programme about Slieve Gallon’s Brae. Slieve Gallon was on the skyline where I grew up and ‘Slieve Gallon’s Brae’ is a song I learnt in primary school, so thanks to Tony’s company that day and his artistry as singer/producer, thanks to the solitude in the song and the scenery on the mountain, I can truly identify with the line, ‘I’ve rambled those mountains for joy and for fun’.

And when I think of those friends who held the note and maintained the standards, personally and professionally, ‘for joy and for fun’ seems a right enough blazon for them as well.

Pondering A River
Paul Muldoon

The experience of working as a writer for BBC Northern Ireland Schools Broadcasting was one that shaped my development as a poet. The first radio programme I wrote for the department was broadcast in the early 1970s, just as I was publishing my first poems, and was produced by Tony McAuley. Like all his colleagues in Schools Broadcasting, McAuley was an enthusiast and a perfectionist. I’ve no hesitation in saying that I began to understand that no less care might be given to the point at which a sound effect was crept in from a turntable than to where a line of verse might turn a corner. I now see for sure what I’d merely surmised at the time - that these radio and television producers paid more attention to detail than most self-styled poets.

Nowhere was this attentiveness more evident than in my experience of working with Douglas Carson on A Far Cry, a television film about my life and times in County Armagh which was broadcast on BBC One Northern Ireland on March 16 1982. I write ‘my life and times’ but what made this film distinctive was the decision made early on by Douglas Carson and myself that this not be yet another biopic but something a little more rigorous and rewarding. The conceit of this film, therefore, was that it would focus on my father, then a 70-year old, rather than myself. It would be a film dealing with what might have been had my father emigrated to South America. The film, narrated by me, would be about ‘my life and times’, but I would not appear on screen.

The film was shot in 1981 in County Tyrone, but a very particular version of County Tyrone. I’m thinking of the one represented by the Ulster American Folk Park, near Omagh.

My father reenacted scenes of his youth and manhood in a restored cottage, a restored schoolhouse, a restored forge. One of the strongest memories of my father is of his portrayal of his father as an itinerant thatcher, deftly spreading bundles of wheat straw and securing them with scollops. Among those who brought their own deftness to the weeklong filming process were the itinerant cameramen, Eric Pollen and Philip Dawson, with sound recording by Nigel Rees. The 20-minute film would be edited over a three-week period by Chris Wade, working closely with the director, Henry Laverty. Like all great producers, Douglas Carson had a detailed plan, the next best thing to a story board, which he was only too willing to change when something surprising, and obviously superior, would come down the road. In that respect, I don’t suppose anyone had quite anticipated the enthusiasm - perfectionism, even - with which my father took to the often tedious business of filmmaking, walking interminably in and out of shot, pondering a river that stood in for both the Oona and the Amazon, as if he had been born to it. And I don’t suppose anyone expected the film, which we might otherwise have believed ourselves to be making, to have gone one better and made itself.
The Lonely Curlew
Desmond Johnston

For many years I worked in the Audio Unit.

For me, and for other audio staff, assignment to Schools programmes was a welcome relief. The Region was preoccupied with The Troubles, with politics and non-stop current affairs.

As one wit put it at the time: ‘We’ve become the only Newsroom with a resident orchestra!’

A typical assignment was *The Week in Stormont*. This was known to sound staff as *The Week in Torment*. It was like turning the handle on a sausage machine.

Schools programmes were different. They were made in Studio 3 - the Radio Drama Studio - usually on a weekday between 2pm and 10pm. Three audio staff would be allocated - a Studio Manager or ‘Sound Supervisor’; a ‘gram swinger’ (who played the effects discs and tapes); and a ‘spot effects’ provider, ‘on the other side of the glass’ - in the Studio cheek-by-jowl with the actors: ‘spots’ rattled tea-cups, clinked beer-glasses, walked along a built-in gravel path, or ran up the on-site wooden stairs - we even had coconut shells for the horses!

A few days before a recording, I would be given a list of the ‘effects’ that were needed. Some of these were taken from the Record Library. Many were on old ten-inch ‘78s’. Others were on seven-inch ‘45s’. If I was working on a David Hammond programme, I always knew to add an extra disc. This was the 78 of The Curlew - recorded by Ludwig Koch in the thirties. I was certain that somewhere, sooner or later, Davy Hammond would say, in his almost hesitant manner: ‘Any chance, Desmond, of maybe a curlew in there?’

There was always the lonely cry of a curlew.

One day - on a Douglas Carson programme - the cast assembled in the Studio as usual. They knew one another. They were joking and laughing. But I found a new actor outside on his own. He was rehearsing intently at the Studio door. He was very tall. I had never seen him before. I discovered - much later - that this was his first job in radio. His name was unknown to me. He was called Liam Neeson.

I remember Duncan Hearle recording a nasal announcement: ‘And now, for Schools in Northern Ireland...’ For eight hours after that, we thought of nothing else. The Schools Producers knew what they were after. They had done their homework: they wanted to get it right: and we, in the audio staff, wanted to help them. It might be Douglas Carson’s history series, or Davy Hammond’s programmes about rural Ulster. We all felt we were making something of interest - and maybe even something of permanent value.

More than thirty years later, back in West Donegal, I sometimes hear a curlew in the hills. I think of Davy, Douglas, and the Audio staff: of the casts, long deceased, assembling in Studio 3 - and a young actor reading his lines in the corridor.

That lonely curlew has become the sound of Schools.
The Children Of Lir

Rosemary Sutcliff

THE CHILDREN OF LIR was broadcast on 4 October 1968. It was the first script for Ulster by Rosemary Sutcliff (see p.). The Narrator was Sam McCready. Margaret d’Arcy was Aoife. The Producer was Douglas Carson.

The Irish King, Lir, has a daughter and three sons. Their mother dies, and Lir marries Aoife. The step-mother resents his love for the children. She leads them on a journey to the house of Bodbh the Red. On the way, she plans to destroy them - at Lake Derravarragh...

NARRATOR: She took up the long black braid of her hair that hung across her shoulder, and began to stroke it, first with one hand, and then the other. And the braid began to stir, as though it were a living thing she fondled, and sparks came from it, as they do from a cat stroked the wrong way when there is thunder in the air, and clustered at the tips of her fingers, so that they shone with green witch light.

MAGIC-MAKING MUSIC. HOLD UNDER

NARRATOR: And all the while her eyes grew bigger and brighter, and they seemed to hold the children, so that they could not look away nor move at all. Then she fondled, and sparks came from it, as they do from a cat stroked the wrong way when there is thunder in the air, and clustered at the tips of her fingers, so that they shone with green witch light.

MUSIC SWELLS, AND RETREATS UNDER NARRATION

AOIFE: Three hundred years shall you bide here upon Lake Derravarragh: and three hundred years ye shall pass in the Straits of Moyle: and three hundred years ye shall face the storms of the Western Coast by Erris and InisgloRa...

SURGE MUSIC: OUT UNDER

NARRATOR: Next day she continued her journey, until she stood before Bodbh the Red in his hall. But Bodbh the Red was a lord of magic stronger even than Aoife’s own; and he saw, in his polished silver looking-cup, the thing that she had done. And he changed her into a demon of the air: and she flew forth wailing on the dark wings of the wind, and was never heard of again.

MUSIC, SHRRIEK, AND SWIRLING WIND: OUT

NARRATOR: Yet there was nothing the Chieftain could do to lift the witch-woman’s spell. So, far out, on the blue heart of the lake, the Swan Children sang as though their hearts were breaking - the saddest, sweetest singing that was ever heard in Ireland...

MUSIC AND SINGING: SURGE...

A Country Childhood

Sam Hanna Bell

The young Schools Department was fortunate. It was encouraged and supported by Sam Hanna Bell - at first as a Producer, and then in retirement. He was a link with MacNeice and the Features Department. He had also been everywhere and done everything. He wrote scripts for Schools and was a frequent ‘presenter’. He recorded A Country Childhood on 8 January 1970. It was broadcast to junior classes all over Ulster - and to a large adult audience of ‘casual’ listeners.

SAM: I was reared in a basket of eggs. That’s what they say those little round drumlin hills on the shores of Strangford Lough look like - a basket of eggs. I was born in a big city, and I’ve lived for years in another big city - Belfast. But in between were those years as a boy in the country, living on a small farm whose fields rose and fell on those little round hills - like a basket of eggs.

BRING IN SPRING COUNTRYSIDE: Rooks. HOLD UNDER

SAM: The countryside then looked very much like what it looks today - fields, hedges, cows, sheep, roads. But the way people live, and the tools they use, have changed a lot. I remember one day, when I was about nine years old, I was out for a walk with my dog. In a field I saw my grandfather and a group of neighbour men standing round a big machine on wheels from which was coming the strangest noise. I called my dog and ran towards this exciting scene.....

SLIGHT FADE ON SAM. HOLD COUNTRYSIDE. AT ‘MACHINE’, BRING IN OLD-FASHIONED TRACTOR. UP, WITH BARKING DOG. HOLD UNDER.

RABBIE: Look, would ye - it’s sinking into the ground!

ENGINE SPLUTTERS AND DIES. LAUGHTER. DOG BARKING. HOLD COUNTRYSIDE UNDER.

PAT: I tell ye, Rabbie, I only had to clap my eye on that contraption and I knew it was no good.

RABBIE: And them saying it would do away wi’ the horse for ploughing and such-like work. Heth, Pat, it’s flying in the face o’ Providence.

PAT: He, he, he. Them city ones and their Track Tors! And now we may go and get a couple o’ them ould, out-dated things - horses - and pull it outa that hole it’s got stuck in!

MEN’S LAUGHTER: DOG BARKING: MEN’S LAUGHTER: DOG BARKING: COUNTRYSIDE. FADE OUT UNDER

SAM: That’s what happened to the very first tractor that was seen in our townland. It was painted bright red, I remember. But it wasn’t one bit redder than the faces of the two young men who had brought it all the way from distant Belfast. For it spluttered and barged in front of all those farmers, then - just as Pat Lowry said - sank into the clay as if it was ashamed of itself...
CARSON: This family has sometimes been a bit unpopular.

ECHO ON DUNBAR

DUNBAR: I curse their head and all the hair of their head. I curse their face, their eye, their mouth, their nose, their teeth, their shoulders, their breast, their heart, their stomach, their back, their arms, their legs, their hands, their feet, and every part of their body, within and without...

CRASH OF THUNDER. OUT. LOSE ECHO

CARSON: That was Gavin Dunbar, the Archbishop of Glasgow. He lived about five hundred years ago. He came from Galloway, and knew his neighbours...

‘MAN-WITH-NO-NAME’ MUSIC. OUT SLOWLY

UNDER

CARSON: Imagine a Province obsessed with a Border. The Province is disputed by two governments. To both it is a nuisance. But they meddle in it. Two tribes live here. They are always fighting. Each proclaims allegiance to a different state. But both hate strangers. They are locked together. Nobody can know them as they know each other.

RIOT. OUT UNDER

CARSON: Both tribes are divided into factions. They hug old quarrels and ancestral feuds.

EXPLOSION. OUT UNDER

CARSON: The Province has been ripped apart by war. An ordinary, settled life is impossible. The daily work is blackmail, theft, and murder; burnings, kidnaps, and protection rackets. The people make hell on earth - for themselves.

The Debatable Land

Douglas Carson

THE DEBATABLE LAND was broadcast on 18 February 1987. It was written and presented by Douglas Carson. He was thinking about the Plunderation of Ulster - and the history of the Carsons before they left Scotland (see p. ).

CARSON: This family has sometimes been a bit unpopular.

ECHO ON DUNBAR

DUNBAR: I curse their head and all the hair of their head. I curse their face, their eye, their mouth, their nose, their teeth, their shoulders, their breast, their heart, their stomach, their back, their arms, their legs, their hands, their feet, and every part of their body, within and without...

CRASH OF THUNDER. OUT. LOSE ECHO

CARSON: That was Gavin Dunbar, the Archbishop of Glasgow. He lived about five hundred years ago. He came from Galloway, and knew his neighbours...

‘MAN-WITH-NO-NAME’ MUSIC. OUT SLOWLY UNDER

CARSON: Imagine a Province obsessed with a Border. The Province is disputed by two governments. To both it is a nuisance. But they meddle in it. Two tribes live here. They are always fighting. Each proclaims allegiance to a different state. But both hate strangers. They are locked together. Nobody can know them as they know each other.

RIOT. OUT UNDER

CARSON: Both tribes are divided into factions. They hug old quarrels and ancestral feuds.

EXPLOSION. OUT UNDER

CARSON: The Province has been ripped apart by war. An ordinary, settled life is impossible. The daily work is blackmail, theft, and murder; burnings, kidnaps, and protection rackets. The people make hell on earth - for themselves.

SURGE FIRE, RIOT, EXPLOSIONS. OUT UNDER

CARSON: It sounds impossible. But such a place existed. This Province was the frontier between England and the Scots.

COLD WIND: HOLD UNDER

CARSON: The Border was inhabited by Grahams and Carsons, Bells and Ivines, Elliots and Armstrongs. They lived in clans and called each other names: Ill-drowned Geordie; Archie Fire-the-Braes; Buggerback and Skinabake and Bangtail. Their places had hard names as well: Hungry Hill and Bloody Bush and Criblaw; Wolf Rig, Muckle Snab, and Blackhaggs.

SURGE WIND. HOLD UNDER

CARSON: The grimmest part was on the Western Border. At the Solway, the frontier had never been drawn. A great tract of countryside had no government.

SURGE WIND: HOLD UNDER

CARSON: This was outer space, a gap between the nations. It consisted of fifty square miles of nightmare: a place for outlaws, butchery, and horror.

SURGE WIND. HOLD UNDER

CARSON: The grimmest part was on the Western Border. At the Solway, the frontier had never been drawn. A great tract of countryside had no government.

‘MAN-WITH-NO-NAME’ MUSIC. FADE...
The Bird Of The Golden Land

Michael Longley

The Bird of the Golden Land was recorded on 30 April 1974. It was written by Michael Longley. Douglas Carson produced the actors (Bill Hunter, Harold Goldblatt, J G Devlin, Aine McCartney, and John Foley). Tony McAuley produced the musicians (the Billy White Trio - piano, bass, and drums). The idea was to tell a story without using 'sound effects'. The written instructions to Billy White were:

The central theme is 'a bird-like trill', which will undergo various metamorphoses - gentle like a lullaby, anticipatory, triumphant. There is also a 'once upon a time' theme, which will relate to, and be interchangeable with, 'promenade' and 'gallopping' themes (eg., Prokofiev's Peter and the Wolf and Mussorgsky's Pictures at an Exhibition). I would like the music to 'swing' as much as possible. Take it away, man.

ANGRESSOR: And now, for schools in Northern Ireland, 'Today and Yesterday'. This week's programme is an Irish legend: THE BIRD OF THE GOLDEN LAND.

BROAD, OPEN MAJOR CHORDS ON PIANO TO IMPLY 'ONCE UPON A TIME' FEELING. HOLD UNDER.

NARRATOR: There was once an Irish King who possessed very little: he had only a few stretches of poor land, three sons, and a crown. The crown was his most valuable piece of property. O yes, and there was something else he would have liked to own -

TREBLE TRILL ON PIANO: INTERJECT AT DISCRETION

NARRATOR: A beautiful bird visited his dilapidated castle occasionally. It sang the loveliest song that he or any other Irishman had ever heard.

TREBLE TRILL ON PIANO - PEAK, AND HOLD UNDER

KING (entranced): Ah, beautiful bird, you come to sing your golden song to a poor King like me. You visit my lands which are muddy and rocky, although your home must be golden like your songs. Yes, indeed - I shall call you 'The Bird of the Golden Land'.

CRESCEndo ON TRILL. FADE QUICKLY

NARRATOR: One day his three sons came to him. And each said the same thing.

ONE CHORD. HOLD PEDAL DOWN THROUGH SON'S SPEECH

SON: Father, I am old enough now to get married. Will you help me to find a wife?

SLIGHT FADE OUT

NARRATOR: And the King thought to himself -

KING: (thoughtfully, on echo): Now, my only precious possession is my crown. I can't divide that in three and give a piece to each of my sons. But I want to help them. What can I do? What can I do?

FADE. CUT ECHO. LIGHT REMINISCENT TRILL

KING: (business-like): Sons! Listen to me.

KING: (thoughtfully, on echo): Now, my only precious possession is my crown. I can't divide that in three and give a piece to each of my sons. But I want to help them. What can I do? What can I do?

SHOTS OF PATRICK, THATCHING

PAUL (in voice-over): My father's father, Hugh Muldoon, was a thatcher from Killeshil, Co Tyrone. He travelled from farm to farm to ply his trade. I have to try and pin my father down, to gather together the strands of his life and pin them down. He was born in 1910.

SHOTS OF PATRICK, IN SCHOOL-ROOM

PAUL (in voice-over): He went to a school that his father might have thatched. That was in nineteen-fourteen, the year of the start of the First World War. He never had much time for school. Often he would stay away to work around the house. If he did go to school, he was more likely to write his name with a penknife rather than a pen. He remembers the schoolmistress as 'a big rough woman with a beard'.

There were so many boys of his own age - he might not be one of the lucky ones. A farmer eyed him up and down, and felt the muscle in his arm. The farmer and he spat in their palms and shook hands. The deal was clinched.

SHOTS OF PATRICK, SCYTHING

PAUL (in voice-over): My father began by doing odd jobs about the farm. He milked the cows. He fed the pigs. He helped with the hay. He mowed a whole field in a day. The blade of his scythe moved easily through the grass, like his own hand through his hair. He could look forward to the end of the day, when all the hay was down and ready to be won...
Trams
Ciaran Carson

TRAMS was broadcast - in Today and Yesterday - on 31 October 1984. It was written by Ciaran Carson, who also - with Deirdre Carson - provided the music. The Producer was Douglas Carson. Like most Ulster people, Ciaran Carson is partly of Scottish descent. His Carson ancestors were Presbyterians, exported from Galloway and the Borders. But he grew up in West Belfast, on the Falls.

NARRATOR: My father and mother met at Irish classes, and when they married they decided to bring up their family in Irish. I don't remember learning English. But I suppose I must have picked it up off the street by the time I was three or four. I think all the neighbours thought us a bit peculiar. We were a further island in the island of the Falls, in the island of Belfast, in the island of Ireland.

SOUND OF SHOP DOOR-BELL

SHOPKEEPER: Well, Sir Edward - and what can we do for you the day?

CIARAN: My name's not Sir Edward, so it's not. And my grandma says you can give her a sixpenny twist of snuff...

SHOPKEEPER: Sir Edward Carson - sure isn't that your name? And isn't yer da Carson too? - for all that Irish yiz speak...

CIARAN: My name is not Sir Edward, so it's not. And my grandma says can you give her a sixpenny twist of snuff...

SLIGHT FADE OUT

NARRATOR: All the time in the world... Lying in bed at nights, you had all the time in the world - to think thoughts, or half-thoughts, that might, before you knew where you were, slip into dreams... Lulled by the low hum of my father and mother talking downstairs, I might think about words, and say them to myself under my breath. The word horse.

Or in Irish, capall. Capall seemed more like a horse. Capall. Capall. The clip-clop of its hooves on the cobbles... Capall, capall, capall: over and over again, over to myself under my breath. The word horse.

In the sixties, a distinction was drawn between 'Studio Managers' and 'Recording Engineers'. The Studio Managers (SMs) worked in 'the cubicle' and with the performers: they balanced microphones, provided sound effects, 'piped in' music, and improved the product. The Recording Engineers lurked upstairs. They recorded the final 'take' from the Studio and edited the ultimate tape for transmission. Their colleagues, on the road, ran the Mobile Recording Units. Technology made distinctions redundant, and the groups were amalgamated in an 'Audio Unit'.

By whatever description, the audio teams were remarkable. Their contributions made or marred a production - not only technically, but also socially.

In twenty-five years, I spent thousands of hours with the performers: they balanced microphones, provided sound effects, 'piped in' music, and improved the product. The Recording Engineers lurked upstairs. They recorded the final 'take' from the Studio and edited the ultimate tape for transmission. Their colleagues, on the road, ran the Mobile Recording Units. Technology made distinctions redundant, and the groups were amalgamated in an 'Audio Unit'.

Be not afeard; the isle is full of noises, Sounds and sweet airs, that give delight and hurt not.

Sounds And Sweet Airs
Douglas Carson

Earth-Takers was recorded - for Today and Yesterday - on 17 October 1985. It was the story of the peopleing of Ireland - the coming of the Gael. The script was by Michael Longley. The actors were Maurice O'Callaghan, Stella McCusker, Peter Quigley, Patrick Brannigan, and Michael Baguley. The Archive reports that, on leaving the studio,
Room, room, brave gallant boys -
Come give us room to rhyme!

The nightmare of destruction in the
seventies coincided with a surge of
creative achievement - in literature, in
painting, in music, in drama.

The Schools Department was (astonished)
host to straw-boys, mummers, revellers,
and sages - ‘a cavalcade of conjurors and
clowns’.

I end this memoir with a list - a roll-
call of writers, actors, and illustrators;
storytellers, talkers, scholars, and
performers. The register, of course, is
incomplete - an extract from the jottings
of a single Producer. Despite the gaps, it
is a witness.

Even in The Troubles there was room to
rhyme.

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### In Memoriam

James Hawthorne
David Hammond
Tony McAuley

---

O when shall we, all spent,
Row in to some far strand,
And find, to our content,
The original land
From which our boat once went,
Though not the one we planned?

---

This publication was compiled by
Marie and Douglas Carson, Gillian McIntosh and Niamh MacNamara.

Executive Producer Mark Adair, BBC Northern Ireland

The editors would like to thank a host of helpers whose presence is apparent in the text.

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### Cavalcade

**Douglas Carson**

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Recessional

They are gone, the old residenters.
The mill-horn has sounded for them
on the other side.
But I would give a sugar-bag
of polite talk
for just one nip
of their bitter old Puritan tongues,
one pull
of their racy old pipes.