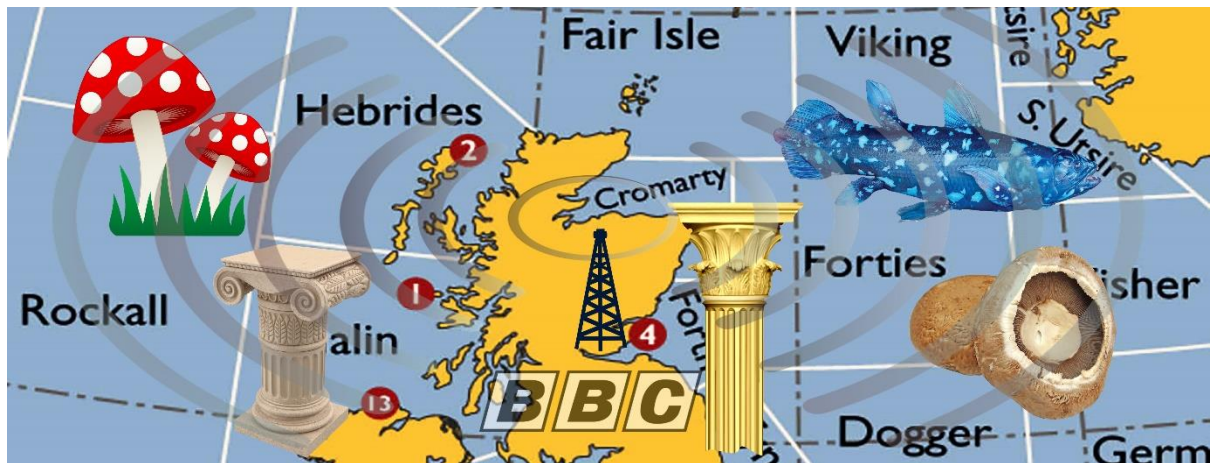


Mushrooms, Doric Columns and the Shipping Forecast

Shôn Ellerton, August 4, 2020

The paradox of learning more about life with less choice including a brief trip down memory lane of BBC Radio 4 and long car journeys.



The other day I was driving my son home from school and I was thinking why I could talk or write about practically anything that comes to mind. Many subjects I write about are those that I do not possess an expert knowledge of; however, with all of them, there was something that did spark an interest for me to do so.

To date, the variety of topics that I wrote about include artificial intelligence, database programming, travel to China, powder-actuated nail guns, safe driving, lucid dreaming, vinyl LPs, property subdivisions, motorcycle riding, peanut butter, phone interviews, psychologists, road planning, international border crossings, handwriting, waxwork museums, and many more. Those readers who glance at my history of writings could assume that I hold no expertise in any one field, except, perhaps in the field of databases and IT technology.

There are some readers who express concern that I be so presumptuous as to embark on writing a piece on subject matter which only the experts should encroach upon. Especially those which are considered opinion pieces. For example, I hold no reservations when it comes to writing opinion pieces which may be considered controversial. Such subjects may include Australian indigenous landmarks, climate agreements, wokeness and, of course, Sweden's position on the pandemic; all topics which many would not want to tackle. Many are over-zealous to get stuck in by criticising these pieces, but most would not want to have their names potentially tarnished by writing something

of their own. When writing pieces of controversy, I exercise caution and ensure that I am armed with some factual data and try to investigate from a wide variety of sources; however, it is often difficult to traverse the minefield of false information, much of which, portrays itself as the appeal to authority with many mainstream readers. By that, I mean many are succumbed into believing something is true if the source of the information is widely held to be reputable. Many a time, this is true; however, it is not always the case. The converse, of course, may happen. For example, Trump-haters may dismiss *any* fact if Trump says it is true. They would most would certainly double or triple-check the facts!

What prodded me to tackle so many subjects and take an interest in them might have originated from one main source of information. The radio, and to a lesser extent, the television as well. But not the television of today consisting of an unlimited choice of streaming services and content, but the television of only three channels from yesteryear.

It probably all started for me at a very young age when I was subjected to being driven around by my father on many of his business trips around the UK, much of which involved being tossed around violently trying not to get car sick. He drove as if he was on the racing track claiming that he was very competent and able to negotiate corners and obstacles with ease but tending to forget about pedestrians or other drivers on the road who may not be so adept. During those long trips, he usually had BBC Radio 4 turned on. Now for those who do not know what Radio 4 is, it is a 24/7 radio talk show comprising of a mixture of news, interviews on any number of subjects, long-running dramas like [*The Archers*](#) (one can never forget the theme tune if they were brought up on this), Women's Hour, parliamentary discussions (they did get a bit tedious), the weather and, of course, my favourite, the shipping forecast. At late night and the wee hours of the morning, this radio service reverted to the BBC World Service which embarked on an even more eclectic range of subjects and world news in an even more calm voice, all of which was mostly, and still is, excellent to listen to.

Most subjects presented, even from those in Women's Hour, are decidedly interesting to listen to, especially when one is gridlocked in the rain on one of the UK's motorways. One could be fully immersed into the world of mushrooms and fungi or, perhaps, learning how to dye clothes during mediaeval times, only to be transported in the next half hour to the world of space and

nuclear technology. Radio 4 is like that soothing and knowledgeable companion on those long car journeys where you don't need to spend energy to answer back. There are no advertisements, many of which today are designed to the best of their abilities to irritate most who are subjected to them. There is not much in the way of shouting or outbursts. It is mainly intelligent talk, except, perhaps, that talk uttered by some of today's politicians during parliamentary debates. An exemplary use of the English vocabulary is often employed and there is very little in the way of profanity if at all.

Many of us became fond of the consistency and soothing nature of the service. For example, listeners would be assured to know that the news would follow the seminal six pips of the [Greenwich Time Signal](#). And who can forget the [shipping forecast](#); by far, the most bizarre and soothing of them all? After the weather, what sometimes follows is the shipping forecast, which, for most of the population, has absolutely no practical use. The shipping forecast is voiced in a relaxed calming way giving a brief description of the weather conditions in each of more than thirty sea areas surrounding the British Isles. For example, weird and wonderful sea area names being cited followed by wind direction, a [Beaumont Scale](#) reading, precipitation and subjective conditions. For example, *'Tyne, Dogger. Northeast 6 or 7. Heavy rain. Moderate to Severe.'* The listener may be sat in one's car in the *middle* of the country safe in the knowledge that in no way being marooned out in a darkened sea is of any importance or concern. However, for some peculiar reason, many of us like to listen to it letting our imaginations run wild much like crossing the great smoking plains of Mordor in Tolkien's Lord of the Rings.

This wealth of knowledge is being transmitted out to millions of people at any time of the day and from only a few radio sources. One could not really choose what to listen to, because there was not much else to listen to. Especially when traversing the lonely hills of Wales or Scotland in which the only radio stations available were those broadcasted over the AM band. My father enjoyed music as well; however, it was something he seldom played in the car because it seemed to make him more tired whereas talk radio kept his mind engaged, and on the road. For me as a youngster, much of what was being talked about on the radio was clearly over my head; however, it is quite surprising just how much a child can absorb. Parents are often surprised how and where their children pick up specific pieces of information.

In today's world, we generally do not choose something so random like how to make a musical instrument out of a deer hide or delving into the history of toilet paper or something inordinately obscure and arcane. Most of us channel into something we want to watch or listen to. Our choice of what to watch and listen to is so vast that, paradoxically, we are *limiting* ourselves to what we could possibly take an interest in, because we do not know that it exists. I often make the deduction that the raising of the collective knowledge of a nation's people could be partly attributed by informative radio talk shows like Radio 4. However, these days, I am guardedly aware that this phenomenon is slowly disappearing due to the proliferation of social media and choice. Kids in the backseat are oft to bring out their mobile phones, tablets or other gaming devices to while away the time. For most kids (some adults included), watching an exciting sequence of parkour or a couple of guys bashing their heads in a boxing match will prove far more entertaining than someone discussing the history and symbology of classical Greek architectural orders. I strongly believe that those children who are raised up on a series of random discussions from one radio source rather than the ability to choose from any topic that they want to hear from our seemingly unlimited online material will place them as being far more interesting to talk to when they grow into adulthood. Exceptions will always apply but generally, I believe this is the case.

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Now being a parent of a five-year-old, I am doing precisely the same thing my father did (except drive like a lunatic) by listening to Australia's equivalent radio talk shows in the car while he is in the backseat. During an interview with a tuna fisherman whilst driving at night in the Adelaide Hills, I look into my rear-view mirror to catch a glance at my son's face to see if he has fallen asleep. He has not, but rather, sitting there comfortably and quietly watching the stars through the window as I wend and weave along the twisty road. I learnt something new about tuna fishing, but I was wondering if he was, as well, taking a shared interest in the discussion. Maybe. Maybe not.

There is one thing I do miss though. It's that soothing but not particularly relevant shipping forecast, something I wish we had an Australian equivalent of.