

A Remembered Soundscape: A British Family Listens to the Wireless in the 1930s and 1940s

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Drawing on media history and studies of soundscapes, this essay uses a reflexive self-ethnography to recover and provide a contemporary interpretation to remembered acoustic experience. The focus is a British child's experience of listening to radio in the 1930s and 1940s. The enquiry has two aspects: one is the author's personal audio memory, the other is the cultural context of radio listening in the pre-television age when the only means of reception was the "wireless", a medium which occupied, along with the gramophone and the cinema, almost the whole known world of public, mediated sound. "Wireless" listening thus had a significant place in a rather undeveloped mediascape.

Contemporary sources – family diaries, the author's letters home from boarding school, social histories, and records of the period, including Mass Observation – assist in reconstructing the context and culture of listening within a domestic and school setting.

Throughout, an attempt is made to trace and interrogate the interweaving of public and personal memory and, drawing on recent studies of "memory work," to recognise that the past is constantly rewritten, revised, and misremembered. The experience under study was in part pre-literate, while the long-gone radio listening culture, situated within an acoustic environment less busy and invaded than that of today, bears comparison with the geographically remote cultures more usually studied in aural anthropology.

A Remembered Soundscape

It is night time. Down the long path, at the bottom of the garden, the wicket gate clicks open and bangs shut, clicks and bangs, clicks and bangs, until the last boy has gone through. Silence, the boys now safe in their air raid shelter in the woods, my brothers and I in bed upstairs in the house. Silence – and waiting, ears straining to catch the next sound, the throbbing drone of German bombers. They might not come this time, the silence might continue, so then, only the night sounds of the wood beyond the gate, and, once, a pear dropping from the tree in the yard below our window, an imagined time-bomb, terrifying at the time, later a family joke.

The date: mid-1941; London, forty miles to the east, emerging from the worst of the Blitz; for us, in the boarding school¹ where my father was a

¹ Wellington College in Berkshire was a leading "public school," which in the misleading English

housemaster, the night-time alerts less frequent, provoked by stray planes returning from targets in the West and Midlands. But still, on receiving the “orange alert” by telephone, he would switch on the electric bell in the dormitory that signalled the routine decamping to the shelter for the thirty or so boys in his charge. Months earlier, at each alert, we too had taken refuge – in the cellar beneath our house, we slept in the bunks improvised by my mother, and heard the whistle and thud of bombs. Now it was safer, my father said. I did not have to leave my bed, normally a safe haven for a child of six, but now I was not so sure. The silence after the gate’s last click and bang meant the boys were safe. I was not sure about us. Was it better, perhaps, to stumble half-asleep trying to find the door to the cellar round the twists and turns and stairways of this old Victorian house? That was a dream often repeated in later years.

So I start with a memory charged with emotion, the reason, perhaps, for its remaining in my repertoire. It mixes place and time and sound, and introduces a family: my father, a teacher who was inspiring, unorthodox and strict, and a brilliant club cricketer. My mother, capable and sympathetic, began a lifetime of “putting up with him” when he insisted on taking her, for her honeymoon, on a cricket tour of the Channel Islands. So cricket was in my mother’s milk and, no sooner weaned, my two brothers and I were being coached how to hit a half volley through the off-side field. My mother’s unpaid job, as the wife of a housemaster, included supervising the domestic help needed to clean and keep a house running smoothly, and crucially to assist my father in the social dealings with parents. He could do male camaraderie, as with cricketing friends, but could not match her sensitivity – and memory for names and histories. She came from a sociable family (unlike his) where emotion was given free rein. This was a passport into the wives’ network, in effect an extended family for us children in whose company we were able to detect a softening, even subversion, of the institutional discipline.² Later in the war, it was my mother who organized a cricket match between the wives and the men of the school community. The younger boys, including my brothers, and I were recruited into the wives’ team to make up numbers. Here is my extended family on that sunny August afternoon, and within it my father (standing, 3rd from right), my mother (seated, 3rd from left), and in the front row my brothers (2nd from left, and 3rd from right). In the right-hand corner, myself, my grumpy expression a reminder against nostalgic misremembering.

usage stands for “private school.” Pupils attend these schools from the age of 12 or 13 up until 18. Entry is by an examination, known as Common Entrance, taken at preparatory schools (“prep school”), which are usually boarding schools and take in boys from the age of 7 or 8.

² Peter M. Lewis, “Mummy, Matron and the Maids: Feminine Presence and Absence in Male Institutions, 1934-63,” in *Manful Assertions: Masculinities in Britain since 1800*, ed. Michael Roper and John Tosh (London: Routledge, 1991), 174.



Image 1. My Extended Family: Wives versus Men Cricket Match, 3 August 1944³

In what follows I will move in different directions away from these wartime memories and return to them, positioning them within my memoryscape”⁴ and its motivations, within the contemporary “soundscape”⁵ as far as I can recall it, showing its connection with a “mediascape”⁶ whose main inhabitant at that time was the wireless, and discussing the methodology and sources of this type of investigation.

Memory is performative, a staging, as Annette Kuhn puts it:

We cannot access the past in any unmediated form. The past is unavoidably rewritten, revised, through memory; and memory is partial: things get forgotten, misremembered, repressed. Memory, in any case, is always already secondary revision: even the memories we

³ Photographer unknown, Lewis family photograph, now in the possession of Peter Lewis.

⁴ I use memoryscape to mean the whole field of my connected memories, rather than implying an association with a walk through a physical landscape, as in Toby Butler’s usage. See, for example, <http://www.rhul.ac.uk/whats-new/news2005/Thames-audio-walk.html>, last accessed on 24 September 2009.

⁵ Murray Schafer coined this word to mean the acoustic environment. I refer to his work later in the article.

⁶ I use “mediascape”, a notion introduced by Arjan Appadurai, to mean the range of visual and audio media available at any one time and place. See, for example, *Modernity At Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

run and rerun inside our heads are residues of psychical processes, often unconscious ones; their (re)telling – putting subjective memory-images into some communicable form – always involves ordering and organising them in one way or another.⁷

My recall here of the memoryscape under consideration is complicated by the fact that, aside from the repeated rehearsals in which memory is usually staged, I have twice previously visited this landscape/memoryscape – though without the particular attention to sound I am now giving.

The first time was when I returned to teach in my father's school some ten years after the rest of my family had left it in 1948. I was a young adult, in a different role, but though my experience of the place was obviously different from when I was younger, I inhabited the same physical space and frequently, as I walked about the school buildings and grounds, was confronted by childhood memories. The result is an added "layer" of memories. This picture is rich in layers. As a child I was a curious spectator of Sunday chapel services; as a teacher I endured them, clad in hood and gown. The parade of boys, before and after chapel, was matched by the gathering of teachers and their families in a quadrangle beyond the chapel, for both groups an occasion for the ritual of gossip.

The second re-visiting was of a different kind, a contribution to a book on British masculinities.⁸ The chapter, titled "Mummy, Matron and the Maids" (MMMs), was a critical analysis of male institutions and feminine presence in, and absence from them. In it, I launched an attack on an ideology unquestioned in my upbringing: the values of the British public school. I wrote of "the repression of the private that went on in this public school - perhaps the contradictory title is after all apt."⁹ It was an attempt to exhumate feelings systematically proscribed in that educational environment, and to repair, along with therapy and participation in a men's group, the emotional damage I had experienced.

For MMMs, I used the same primary sources which I am using here: my mother's diaries and the tapes of several recorded conversations with her, as well as (unrecorded) conversations with my parent's contemporaries, colleagues, and servants. I also used, as I am using now, my letters home from the prep school to which I was sent in 1942. Though that experience had some negative consequences, for my present project it has produced an advantage: contemporary

⁷ Annette Kuhn, "A Journey through Memory," in *Memory and Methodology*, ed. Susannah Radstone (Oxford & New York: Berg, 2000), 184.

⁸ Peter M. Lewis, "Mummy, Matron and the Maids: Feminine Presence and Absence in Male Institutions, 1934-63," in *Manful Assertions: Masculinities in Britain since 1800*, ed. Michael Roper and John Tosh (London: Routledge, 1991).

⁹ *Ibid.*, 174.

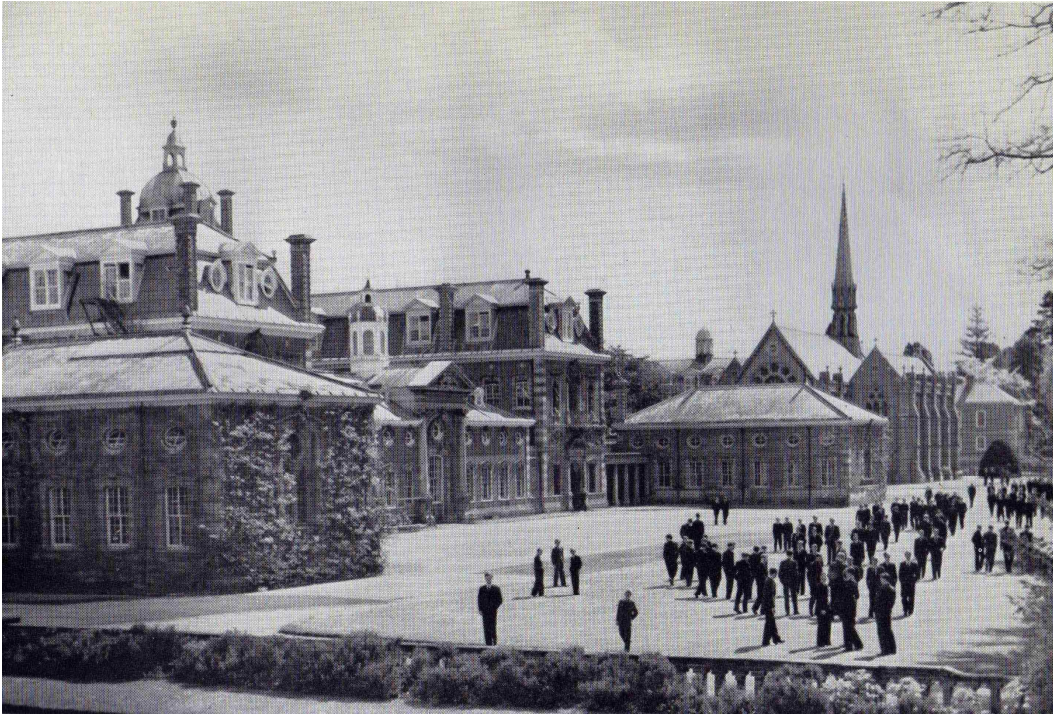


Image 2. Wellington College South Front 1958: before Sunday morning chapel (photograph by P. D. Waghorn)

evidence – for example my letters home - which, however, must be treated with caution. As Raphael Samuel said of memory, “what it contrives symptomatically to forget is as important as what it remembers.”¹⁰ In MMMs, I drew on historical and fictional accounts of boarding school, sociological studies of institutions, and contemporary analyses of masculinity. I was influenced by critical or “revisionist”¹¹ autobiographical writings like Carolyn Steedman’s *Landscape for a Good Woman*¹² and Ronald Fraser’s *In Search of a Past*.¹³ My chapter included both autobiographical passages, some reflection on the sources, and a contextualization of my account within historical and sociological perspectives. In other words, there was an attempt to recollect experience and my feelings at the time of that experience, as well as to take a position of critical distance. The result of having done this exploration is that in the present venture there is a feeling of

¹⁰ Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of Memory: Past and Present in Contemporary Culture* (London and New York: Verso, 1996), x.

¹¹ Kuhn, “A Journey through Memory,” 181.

¹² Carolyn Steedman, *Landscape for a Good Woman: A Story of Two Lives* (London: Virago Press, 1986).

¹³ Ronald Fraser, *In Search of a Past* (London: Verso, 1984).

added familiarity about a memoryscape that can be recalled in my mind, but which also exists as a written text.

Memories have something in common with Walter Ong's orality. Before they are written down, they are, like the bard's memory "a float of themes and formulas out of which all stories are variously built."¹⁴ But Ong goes on to say in a later chapter in his book *Orality and Literacy*, "print encourages a sense of closure [...] [and] is comfortable only with finality."¹⁵ We might, then, regard writing as a performance which is in contradiction to "the inherent incompleteness of oral sources," each performance having therefore "the unfinished nature of a work in progress."¹⁶

For this current "performance," I revisited the same primary sources as those for MMMs, and checked them against accounts of wireless listening in the Mass Observation Archive (MOA)¹⁷ and the publication of edited material from the MOA.¹⁸ My interrogation of the interweaving of public and personal memory has had, this time, the benefit of work on memory and methodology not available to me in 1991.¹⁹ The secondary sources I used include work in the field of sound and radio studies.

Sound studies have, in Britain, been encouraged by the *Sounding Out* series of conferences organised by the University of Sunderland; this has been an attempt to raise the profile of sound within the image-sound relationship, and to promote a dialogue between sound practitioners and scholars working on different aspects of sound, like radio, video, sonic arts, and electro-acoustic music.²⁰ My interest in the sonic arts aspect of radio studies was stimulated by an earlier event at Sunderland, the *Hearing is Believing* conference of 1996, where I was

¹⁴ Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London and New York: Routledge, 1982), 60.

¹⁵ Ibid., 132.

¹⁶ Alessandro Portelli, "What Makes Oral History Different," in *The Oral History Reader*, ed. Robert Perks and Alastair Thomson, 2nd edition (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), 39.

¹⁷ Mass Observation Archive, <http://www.massobs.org.uk/index.htm>, last accessed on 27 July 2009. Founded in 1937, Mass Observation recruited a team of observer/investigators to record ordinary life in Bolton in North-West England, and diarists from across the country who were also required from time to time to answer specific questionnaires. The activity continued through World War II until the early 1950s and is now kept as an archive at the University of Sussex.

¹⁸ For example see Simon Garfield, *We are at War: The Diaries of Five Ordinary People in Extraordinary Times* (London: Ebury Press, 2006).

¹⁹ Susannah Radstone, "Working with Memory: An Introduction," in *Memory and Methodology*, ed. Susannah Radstone (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2000); Annette Kuhn, *Family Secrets: Acts of Memory and Imagination* (London and New York: Verso, 1995); Kuhn, "A Journey through Memory;" Katharine Hodgkin and Susannah Radstone, "Introduction," in *Contested Pasts: The Politics of Memory*, ed. Katharine Hodgkin and Susannah Radstone (London and New York: Routledge, 2003).

²⁰ Sounding Out 4, <http://www.soundingout.sunderland.ac.uk/>, last accessed on 25 September 2009.

introduced to Murray Schafer's work on soundscapes. It was his comment that "sounds may alter or disappear with scarcely a comment from even the most sensitive of historians"²¹ that led me to explore the theme of remembered soundscapes – an attempt at a sort of aural "rescue archaeology."

Historical accounts of British radio listening before World War II are available in the work of Shaun Moores and Paddy Scannell and David Cardiff.²² While Moores interviewed people who recalled listening to the radio in their sitting rooms in the 1920s and 1930s, Scannell and Cardiff emphasised the British Broadcasting Corporation's (BBC) "calendrical role" in the nation's life: "the cyclical reproduction, year in year out, of an orderly and regular progression of festivities, rituals and celebrations – major and minor, civil and sacred – that marked the unfolding of the broadcast year [...]. Such broadcasts unobtrusively stitched together the private and the public spheres [...]. [The calendar] not only coordinates social life, but gives it a renewable content, anticipatory pleasures, a horizon of expectations."²³ This might be a description of life in a boarding school. I remember my father saying that, if you gave him any date, he could tell you exactly what was going on that day, so repetitive was the routine of sports fixtures and events. "Crossing off and counting the days in the school calendar till the end of term rationed our longing for home," I wrote of my experience in the school to which I was sent at the age of eight.²⁴

Listening to the Wireless

But all of that happened later. First let me bring you downstairs from the bedroom where I listened to the clicking gate to the sitting room where the wireless lived. It was positioned at the side of the fireplace in the sitting-room, the sofa and the chairs grouped around it. The receiver was set in a "walnut veneered plywood cabinet, with brown Bakelite and bronze trim" – a piece of furniture rather than of technology. It was a version of the Mullard MAS4, made in 1936.

When you switched it on, a bulb lit up the dial, but you had to wait a minute for the valve to warm up before you heard the rush or mush of background and the emerging station sound. The slowly lighting valve could be glimpsed

²¹ Murray Schafer, *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World* (Rochester, Vt: Destiny Books, 1977/1994).

²² Shaun Moores, "'The Box on the Dresser': Memories of Early Radio and Everyday Life," *Media Culture and Society* 10 (1988), 23-40; Shaun Moores, *Interpreting Audiences: The Ethnography of Media Consumption* (London: Sage, 1993); Shaun Moores, *Media and Everyday Life in Modern Society* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000); Paddy Scannell and David Cardiff, *A Social History of British Broadcasting: Volume One 1922-1939 - Serving the Nation* (Oxford and Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1991).

²³ Scannell and Cardiff, *A Social History of British Broadcasting*, 278.

²⁴ Lewis, "Mummy, Matron and the Maids," 176.

behind the patterned cloth which covered the grille. When we listened, we looked at the fire, or out of the window or at each other. My mother might be sewing or

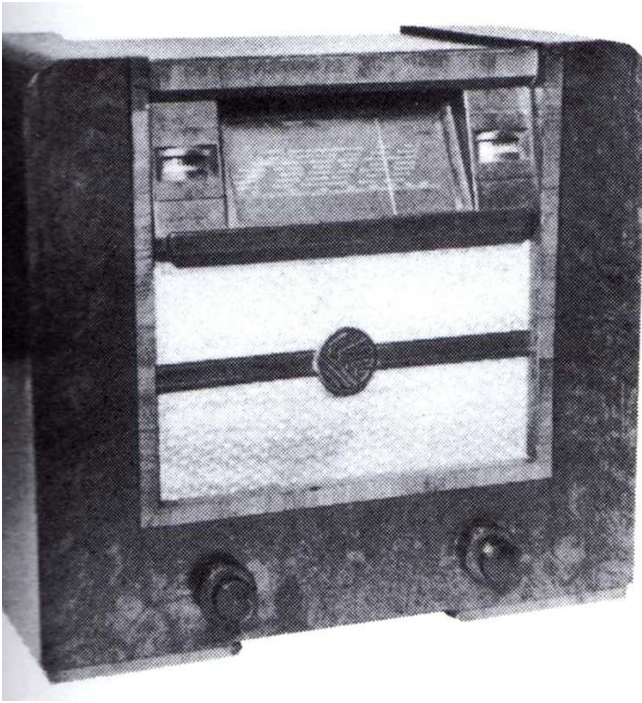


Image 3. Our Wireless²⁵

darning, my father reading the paper. No mobility, nothing portable: the sitting-room was where we listened. And what we listened to was the BBC's Home Service, aptly named. *Children's Hour* with its plays and features introduced us to the radiophonic idiom. Later our wireless diet included talks (*The Brains Trust*), comedy and quiz shows, sport and thrillers and, later still, classical music. The tunes and voices and stories that illuminated our childhood imaginations were undisturbed by the visual interference of television. Affection and warmth clung to our wireless, but it was not the only focus or source of sound in the room. There were other activities. One childish sketch (my mother's note at the top says it is drawn "from memory" in December 1941 when I was seven) is of my mother playing the piano to my younger brother perched on a chair to the right. We would often join in singing as she played nursery rhymes and carols.

²⁵ Image found in Jonathan Hill, *Radio! Radio!* (Bampton: Sunrise Press, 1988), 145.

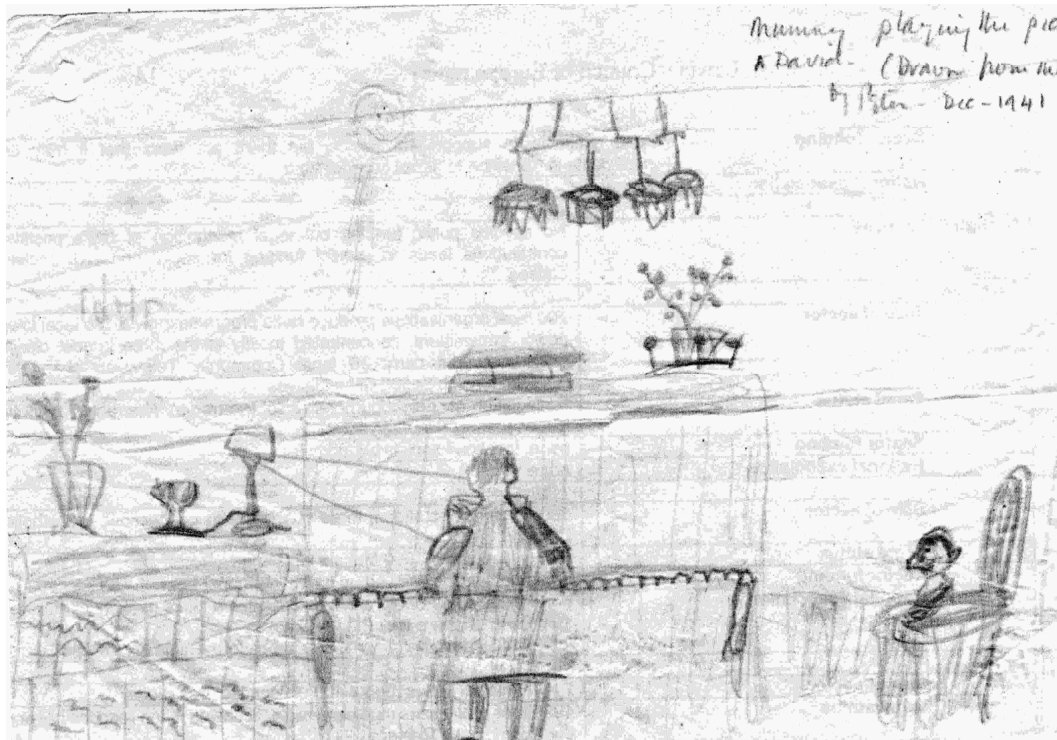


Image 4. "Mummy playing the piano to David"²⁶

There was one other wireless in our house – in the room next to the kitchen where the domestic staff relaxed. This was a middle-class household in the Home Counties in the 1930s, servants did housework and the house included thirty teenage boys so there was plenty of cleaning and cooking to do. When the cook and the housemaid relaxed, they would listen to the wireless and I would often be there, enjoying the announcer's intonation as he read the football results that made no sense to me then ("Partick Thistle 2, Heart of Mid-Lothian 3"), or enjoying the popular tunes on the BBC's Forces Programme.

Later, we acquired a third wireless, a "radiogram", combining radio and gramophone in one. This was put in the boys' common room and was ours to use in the holidays. In the winter of 1946, I recall my father waking us to listen to the live broadcast of an England versus Australia cricket match, the first Test Match series since before the war. The four males in our family huddled in the dark before dawn, the only light coming from the glow of the dial. And from it, magically, came the twang of the Australian commentator, using strange and graphic descriptions of the game, the excitement in his voice quite foreign from the measured gravity of the BBC style, the crowds roaring and barracking in a

²⁶ Drawing by Peter Lewis, December 1941, in the possession of the author.

shockingly un-English way, the whole aural experience swelling and dying on waves of short-wave mush, relayed across the world.

Six years before that, on the first Sunday in September 1939, I recall a very different wireless experience. I was playing on the steps that led from the sitting room down to the garden when Prime Minister Chamberlain announced his declaration of war. "I have to tell you now that no such undertaking has been received, and that consequently this country is at war with Germany."²⁷ Do I really remember hearing those words or have I listened to the BBC recording so often that I have laid the soundtrack alongside my memory of playing on the steps? Certainly, for many others across the country this was a remembered moment, recorded in the diaries of the Mass Observation Archive. Christopher Tomlin in Lancashire heard the news announced by the priest during mass; Eileen Potter in London listened to Chamberlain on a colleague's portable set outside her office; in Cornwall after the broadcast, Tilly Rice and her family "sat around the wireless set in silence. Even the children were quiet."²⁸ My mother wrote, "And so that's that. Let's hope it will mean the end of Hitlerism. We all felt almost relieved I think."²⁹

Memory gathers accretions in the telling and re-telling. After a while, we get lazy and tell ourselves or others shorthand versions of the past. For years I remembered my fifth birthday party, which followed a few days after Chamberlain's broadcast, being interrupted by an air-raid warning. Parents gathered up my small guests and their gasmasks leaving my brothers and I to eat all of the remaining ice-cream – it made a cute start to my war. Only after reading my mother's diary did I find it happened a year later, in 1940. Historically, not much hangs on the difference, but it is a salutary reminder of the work of secondary revision – a term used by Freud in his *Interpretation of Dreams*, outlining what happens when we remember and try to make sense of a dream.³⁰

The Mediascape

What else inhabited the mediascape? Where else in this period did I encounter mediated sound? The *gramophone*: wind-up, 78s, needle hiss, scraping of the head if you forgot to lift it at the end of a record, comic distortion of pitch if you did not keep winding. The Savoy Orpheans, Layton and Johnstone, the

²⁷ Sound file from the British Library *The Century in Sound* No 20: Declaration of War. Speaker: Neville Chamberlain. To listen to this clip see the attached sound file.

²⁸ Simon Garfield, *We are at War: The Diaries of Five Ordinary People in Extraordinary Times* (London: Ebury Press, 2005), 23-24. Garfield's book consists of edited excerpts from diaries preserved in the Mass Observation Archive.

²⁹ Diary of Mary P. Lewis, 3 September 1939, in the possession of the author.

³⁰ Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. and ed. James Strachey (London: Vintage Books, 2001).

Californian Blue Boy – I have them still, a record of my parents' courtship in the late 20s. The *telephone* was fixed in the hallway in public earshot, its use was strictly regulated by my father; the point of reception for the “orange alert,” the bell, was fixed high on the wall, ringing apart from the apparatus. To make a call you spoke to a human being at the local exchange who could answer your questions, no bleeps or pips, no recorded music, no choice of options. The *cinema*, in the village and in the nearby town: my first acquaintance with Walt Disney – Snow White, Dumbo. Robin Hood was the first feature film I saw. At the cinema there were also newsreels with their extraordinary measured, triumphalist commentary, immortalised in *Citizen Kane*. But the newsreels, changed only once a week, were out of date by the time anyone saw them, and with the arrival of war, radio news was paramount, the daily routines being organised around it. “I find I am listening to the BBC news more now. I did not usually bother about bulletins before the war” wrote a seventeen year old student in Manchester, a month into the war.³¹ My mother's diary provides a good example of the way the news nevertheless had to take its place alongside the banalities of everyday life.

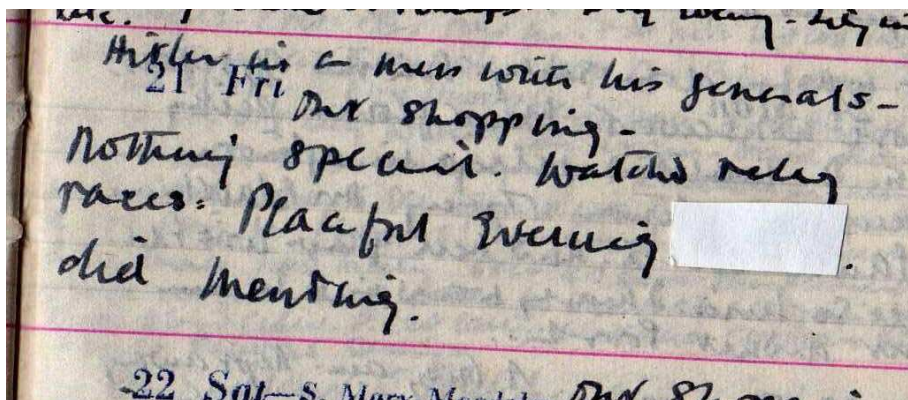


Image 5. My Mother's Diary Entry for 21 July 1944³²

On 21 July 1944, BBC bulletins announced the failure of the assassination plot against Hitler. As the scan image above indicates, my mother wrote:

Hitler in a mess with his generals. Out shopping. Nothing special.
Watched relay races. Peaceful evening. Did mending.³³

³¹ Mass Observation Archive, letter 5121, 10 October 1939.

³² Diary of Mary P. Lewis, 21 July 1944, in the possession of the author.

³³ Ibid.

A photograph of a handwritten letter on lined paper. The handwriting is in cursive and somewhat slanted. The text describes a change in school routine from a 5-minute break to a 10-minute break, and mentions listening to the news in the corridor. The letter is signed 'With much love from Peter.'.

the 1st. rule now, about
is usually a 5 minutes break then
break, but now it has been
changed + instead of that we
go straight on with the next
lesson + then we go 10 minutes
earlier to lunch + when we have
got washed etc. + there is a wireless
in the corridor + we listen to
the news.
With much
love
from
Peter.

Image 6. A Letter I Wrote to My Parents, 16 May 1943³⁴

By this time I was in a prep school.³⁵ The headmaster, a retired Major who had fought in the World War I, followed the military campaigns closely and explained the news in current affairs sessions, aided by maps that lined the walls of the classroom. Keen to have us follow events, he re-arranged the timetable to allow us to hear the one o'clock news in a corridor outside the dining room before we went in to lunch.

³⁴ Letter by author addressed to parents, 16 May 1943.

³⁵ See footnote 1.

We go in ten minutes earlier to lunch and when we have washed etc, there is a wireless in the corridor and we listen to the news.³⁶

It was not only the news that became embedded in domestic routine. As a family we never missed ITMA if we could help it. This was the hugely popular and morale-boosting weekly show featuring the comedian Tommy Handley that satirised wartime personalities and stereotypes, ranging from Hitler (“It’s that man again” – ITMA – doubling as an acronym for both Hitler and Handley) to domestic objects of hate (bureaucrats) and admiration (Mrs. Mop, the cleaning lady). That I missed the show when I went away to school is evident from a letter written a few months into my exile asking, “What is Tommy Handley like to-day?” The next sentence ends the letter, “Well, I don’t think there is anything more to say.”³⁷ It might be taken as the ultimate accolade to ITMA, but thinking about it, I detect some pathos in a reference that I tried to link with home, and left me feeling blank.

My point here is that radio, “the wireless”, occupied not just a major space within my mediascape, but the dominant space. Even as a teenager, sweeping the dial of our wireless set was my default distraction when bored or avoiding work. Shortwave stations brought me inevitably, directly – and magically – into a realm of linguistic otherness. To hear that there *are* other languages, to begin to recognize them as different, one from another and to enjoy the music and emotion of language without necessarily understanding it – this was and still is part of the European radio listening experience. But mostly what I was searching for was music, at first classical (when the BBC’s new Third Programme was in a modern mood and I could find no classical concerts), and later jazz, when the only jazz program within reach was Hugues Panassié’s *Jazz Panorama* from Paris.

The Soundscape

As I have explained, listening to the wireless or to gramophone records, and going occasionally to the cinema constituted, for me at that time, the entire mediascape – and was relatively a small proportion of what my ears took in. The day to day acoustic environment, the natural and human sounds were what Murray Schafer has categorised as the soundscape. His typology consists of *keynote sounds*, *signals* and *soundmarks*.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Letter by author addressed to parents, 09 May 1943.

Country (Italy) won't be taken. I hope Have put that anchor in my cupboard and told David not tidy @ my cupboard, Mummy. We might have an oslo breakfast to-day, but I don't know for certain. What is Tommy Handley like to-day? Well I don't think there's anything more to say. With much love from Peter.

Image 7. A Letter I Wrote to My Parents, 09 May 1943³⁸

The keynote sounds of a landscape are those created by its geography and climate: water, wind, forests, plains, birds, insects and animals [...].

³⁸ Ibid.

Signals are foreground sounds and they are listened to consciously [...] for the purposes of our community-oriented study [...] signals which *must* belistened to [...] bells, whistles, horns and sirens.

The term *soundmark* [cf. landmarks] [...] refers to a community sound which is unique or possesses qualities which make it specially regarded or noticed by people in that community.³⁹

Schafer's interest in the acoustic environment stimulated a succession of initiatives among sound artists and academics that made use of the introduction of light-weight, portable audio recorders to record sound captured in natural or urban settings. No such equipment was available to me, but while at the second of my two boarding schools between 1947 and 1952, which I experienced as more lonely and isolating than the first, I invented a private game of pretend communication with my mother, *listening* to sound as I walked in the open as if I *could* record it, and "sending" it to her in my mind. I can remember nothing of what I "recorded," only the physical places where I walked doing it. But the habit has remained, and years later it came into use as an exercise that I, like most colleagues who teach radio work, use with students to encourage them to open their ears and divert their attention from the distracting and socially dominant visual signals that surround them.

To recall the soundscape of the period when I first lived in Wellington College is hard work. Schafer states that "[to] report one's impressions of sound one must employ sound."⁴⁰ That would be the obvious course if I was preparing a piece of audio for replay or broadcast. I could interview contemporaries for their recollections, spoken with voices that had aged since the memories they recalled. I would also consider what broadcasters call a "reconstruction," drawing on countless archive and album sources to use recorded sounds to stand in for the sounds I want to mention. But I cannot do that here: I can only write words and since "there is virtually no language to describe sound in our culture,"⁴¹ I have to choose my words carefully, hoping that they do justice to the remembered sounds they represent.

What was the soundscape I inhabited in the period under study? In answering that, I have to try to strip from my account all contemporary experience of sound. I want to show how listening to the wireless took on a different meaning and an added significance, compared to nowadays, when it was, within the mediascape and the soundscape, a relatively singular experience. In order to make

³⁹ Schafer, *The Soundscape*, 10.

⁴⁰ Schafer, *The Soundscape*, 153.

⁴¹ Bernie Krause, "Nature's Surround Sound," interview with Jennifer Ouellette, *New Scientist* (12 July 2008), 42-43.

the comparison with contemporary life, I will be noting absence, absence of other mediated sound and a less cluttered soundscape. One can define *something* by what it *is not*.

Where we lived, near the Berkshire/Hampshire/ Surrey borders, sandy pinewoods, scattered with oak and birch and some heather and scrub, covered the local terrain. A quite extensive wood lay across the road from our house. In hot summers it often crackled into flame. Our house was on the edge of a large estate enclosing the main school buildings. Outlying houses and classrooms dotted the area between considerable open spaces of playing fields. Beyond our garden at the back of the house a small wood, in which an air raid shelter was built around 1938, opened out to a playing field where cricket was played in summer.

It was not the heart of the countryside, but at that time it was as quiet as you can find nowadays in the country. Wind in the trees, the pear falling from the tree in our yard, birdsong. Dogs barking. There was little traffic on the road, even less when wartime fuel shortages discouraged the use of cars. On a clear evening you could hear, from the railway station, a mile away, Charlie the porter's shouted announcement on a train's arrival: a short "Crowthorne" repeated in a long drawn out "Cro-o-ow- thorne". A few minutes later the heavy discharging shunts of steam as the train left. I recall other sounds of people working and the machines they used: there was the clinking of the milk delivery; once I heard and saw the muffin man with his bell passing along the road; the sound of the printing works by the station where we scrounged off-cuts of paper; the school carpenter's where circular saws screeched and rasped. In the school holidays we would often stay with my grandfather in Wherwell, a Hampshire village where he was vicar.

Thatched cottages border the road that led to the village from his vicarage. At the end is the little bridge over the stream where we stirred up the mud with sticks. "Charles," I can hear my grandfather's housekeeper say to my brother in her Hampshire burr, "all you ever do is play, play, play!" On the skyline is the tree-lined hill where we would picnic – it was, after all, a children's holiday. Round the corner, at the village sawmill, using the electric saw powered by a waterwheel, before my eyes the sawyer cut a small chair for me from a single block of wood. The village smithy provided a feast of sound: the huff and puff of bellows and the roar of the furnace from which, with long-handled pincers the smith withdrew the red-hot metal; then the ringing sound of repeated blows as he flattened and shaped the shoe, the hiss as it was dipped in water, then the snort and fidgety shuffle of the horse as with a different hammering sound the nails fixed the shoe in place.

At Wellington, the school clock, striking the quarter hours, could be heard across the grounds. The nostalgic attraction of this recalled time and place must have much to do with the safe containment of the school estate, within which as children we could wander in safety, and the Foucauldian regularity of the striking

hours, a Garden of Eden from which the family was expelled some years later. Bells are an important “signal” to use Schafer’s word, and had added significance in our family as my mother was a trained bell-ringer. So it was a great loss when the ringing of church bells was banned in June 1940, only to be used thereafter as a warning of enemy parachute attack.⁴² Two years later, my mother’s diary records the conclusion of the battle of Alamein:



Image 8. Wherwell, circa 1940⁴³

Heard bells being rung on wireless to celebrate Victory in Egypt and North Africa. Grand to hear them again, including [school] chapel bell.⁴⁴

From Easter the following year the ban was lifted to my delight, expressed in a letter to my aunt.⁴⁵

⁴² Garfield, *We are at War*, 260.

⁴³ Photographer unknown, Lewis family photograph, now in the possession of Peter Lewis.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Letter of author to Clare Newhouse, 25 April 1943, in the possession of the author.

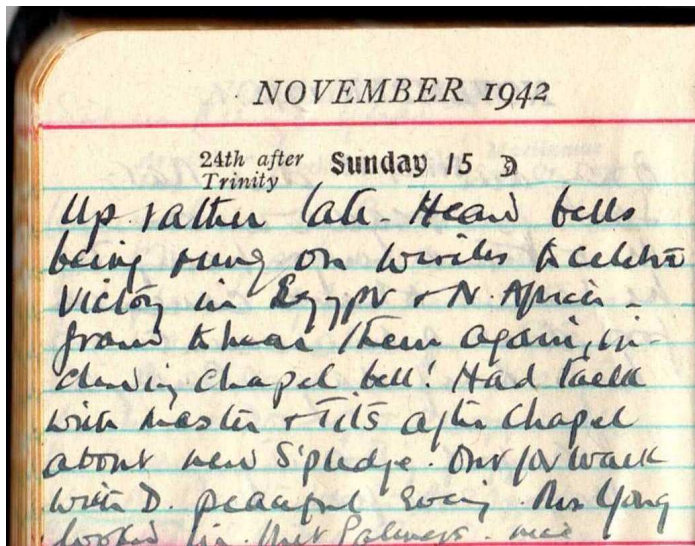


Image 9. My Mother's Diary Entry for 15 November 1942⁴⁶

The chief wartime signal, the air-raid siren, is so well known it has passed almost into cliché. But its use as a sound effect in contemporary television does not do justice to the drawn out descent into the lowest pitch, which preceded the tense expectant silence before the bombers came. Our local siren was fixed on the roof of a building across from our house, so we got an aural close-up of the sound. Less well-known was the use of a rattle to signal a gas attack. Once, a hoax alarm by a passing cyclist sent my brother and I rushing to the cellar. Another use or meaning of rattles was celebratory: noise as fun. They can sometimes be glimpsed in newsreel footage of crowds watching football matches in the late 1940s. A smaller version is used to good effect by children in synagogues at the festival of Purim when the hated Haman's name is read in story. The rattle's different uses illustrate how the social and temporal context of a sound, or a sound object, anchors the meaning.

Soundscapes Compared: Then and Now

Mechanical sounds, less common in my childhood, were more significant in the soundscape than now. The first sound I remember is a car passing outside our house in the middle of the night. I was in my cot. Its eerie sound, growing louder, then falling in pitch, a wailing effect, was, I realised many years later, an example of the Doppler effect. Then, it was just scary. Or take the noise of aeroplanes – commonplace, irritating, unbearable if you live under a flight path. In World War

⁴⁶ Diary of Mary P. Lewis, 15 November 1942, in the possession of the author.

It obviously the meaning was different for domestic populations. Most had never flown in an aeroplane. In the part of England where we lived, the sound of German bombers passing overhead was disturbing to say the least. Often the engines seemed to be desynchronised. A contributor to the BBC's *People's War Archive* remembers "the discordant noise of the German aeroengines was created by running the two motors at different speeds. It produced a very sinister and menacing sound; a throbbing drone."⁴⁷

In my family, as I have noted, the sounds of cricket were very meaningful. Early on my brothers and I became used to the different sounds made when bat hit ball. A defensive stroke will sound different from the satisfying slam of an offside drive, sweetly hit in the middle of the bat. A mis-hit has a higher pitch and is of briefer duration. When a ball hits the edge of a bat and is scarcely diverted from its course, the *snick* is a very distinctive sound, signalling in a split second that there could be a catch by wicket-keeper or slips.

In the period I am talking about, sound was far less privatised, more social. For example, shopping was about walking and talking. You had to talk, make contact, to explain what you wanted from the shelves behind the counter. It was the same on the bus. You had to speak to the bus conductor and he or she to you, then the whirring series of clicks as the ticket was produced. No place for Michael Bull's "aural solipsism,"⁴⁸ no drifting round a supermarket with a Walkman or iPod in your ears, no bleep as you press your travel card on the electronic reader of a bus without even looking at the driver.

The sound of *speech* was obviously an important part of the soundscape, that is, the *exchange* of speech. Talking to yourself, children told themselves, was "the first sign of madness;" by contrast today, overhearing the sound of one side of a mobile phone conversation in public is a commonplace experience – a sign perhaps of a different sort of madness. *Silence* carried great weight in our family. The silence of disapproval was a weapon my father used in argument and he could carry it on for days at a time – my mother's diary confirms this. In arguments in our family, the expression of emotion was taken to be a sign of female weakness, not by any means an exceptional position. It is one that underlay the whole public school philosophy.⁴⁹ The ideal, we three brothers learned, was to drain all affect from our intonation.

⁴⁷ See the BBC's *People's War Archive*, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/ww2peopleswar/stories/80/a2760680.shtml>, last accessed on 22 October 2008.

⁴⁸ Michael Bull, "Thinking about Sound, Proximity, and Distance in Western Experience: The Case of Odysseus' Walkman," in ed. Veit Erlman, *Hearing Cultures: Essays on Sound, Listening and Modernity* (Oxford: Berg, 2004).

⁴⁹ I have elsewhere described this philosophy as underpinning "a system in which masculinity is defined by absence of the feminine." Lewis, "Mummy, Matron and the Maids," 176. The significance of the nineteenth century public school for Britain's imperial role is discussed by

Music, a legitimate vehicle for emotion in our family, was an important feature at home and in both my schools, music that people activated or made themselves, playing an instrument, singing or whistling. Whistling – an interesting activity with a range of different meanings. You could not take your music around with you, so you had to produce it yourself, something that required an exercise of memory. Does the widespread use of recorded sound, replayed in personal devices (Walkmans, iPods etc.) explain why one rarely hears public whistling of tunes nowadays? People can whistle, especially when in the final minutes of a football match they think the referee should blow time, but you do not hear much whistled music nowadays.

Conclusion

I have only scraped the surface in an attempt to convey my remembered soundscape, and I must again emphasise that its recall is not unproblematic. Clifford Geertz remarked that “ethnographies are supposed to be what [we] ethnographers think about things, as much as they are supposed to be accounts of what we think the locals think they are doing.”⁵⁰ So what is happening here? I am both the local and the ethnographer. From a distance of sixty years I have been trying to recover the meaning for a small boy of his acoustic experience, and to interpret that experience from a contemporary perspective. To recover the meaning, I cannot simply describe the soundscape, I have to recover the “structures of feeling” that gave it meaning.⁵¹ Some parts of the exercise have been straightforward. I have compared my mother’s references to wireless listening to those of diarists in *Mass Observation*. I can put myself in contact, sometimes embarrassingly, with myself at a young age by reading my letters home, but I do not have to remind myself, because I am reminded as I read them, that they were increasingly self-censored as time went on. I have many memories that were not recorded at the time – for instance, I did not write letters when I was home.

In making comparisons between then and now, between a remembered and a contemporary soundscape, I shuttle between the role of investigator of a remote culture and that of contemporary observer. In the latter role, however, I cannot shed the past connection. In the former, the project risks falling into the state described by T.S. Eliot in the pessimistic reflections of *East Coker* in *The Four Quartets*:

John Tosh in *A Man’s Place: Masculinity and the Middle-Class Home in Victorian England* (Newhaven and London: Yale University Press, 1999), 117-119.

⁵⁰ Paraphrased in Steven Feld, *Sound and Sentiment: Birds, Weeping, Poetics and Song in Kaluli Expression* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982/1990), 253.

⁵¹ Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984).

And so each venture
Is a new beginning, a raid on the inarticulate
With shabby equipment always deteriorating
In the general mess of imprecision of feeling,
Undisciplined squads of emotion.⁵²

Still, writing brings closure. The attempt to record my past in this way involves, for me, assembling the several versions of the memory in question, the candidates, as it were, for accurate representation and fixing on the choice of one of them. But it is important to emphasize that both the “successful candidate” among the short-list and my act of choosing it are the product of “the interaction between individual and public forms of memory;”⁵³ that “memories are at once intensely private and seemingly unique, and inextricably shot through with the social conditions of their production.”⁵⁴ In my case, the experience remembered is that of a child, a male, living in a middle-class home at a certain period, and the remembering, revisiting and revising of the memories has been undertaken over decades by the person who grew up from those origins: these are the social conditions of production. But the production of the memories have also been affected by what a widening circle of “editors” chose to remember: that is, the stories accepted in the family canon, the pictures selected for the photograph album, the secrets deliberately hidden or unconsciously overlooked, and the significance accorded in public memory to the events which form the backdrop to my account.

⁵²T.S. Eliot, *Quartet No. 2, East Coker* (London: Faber & Faber, 1952), Stanza V, 22.

⁵³ Michael Pickering, “Introduction,” *Research Methods for Cultural Studies*, ed. Michael Pickering (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008).

⁵⁴ Emily Keightley, “Engaging with Memory,” in *Research Methods for Cultural Studies*, ed. Michael Pickering (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008).