

Gone *Today* but here on *Sunday*

COLIN THOMAS

Edward Stourton reflects on his long broadcasting career and his own mortality in a new memoir. Interview by **Sarah Meyrick**

IT'S almost impossible to read a memoir by a well-known BBC radio presenter without hearing the story read aloud in his familiar voice. This is certainly the case with *Confessions: Life re-examined*, by Edward Stourton. It's all very Radio 4: intelligent and thoughtful, cultured and courteous, and yet dogged in its pursuit of truth.

It's the author's first venture into memoir (if you overlook his *Diary of a Dog-walker: Time spent following a lead*, a collection of his *Telegraph* columns).

He undertook the project as "a kind of journalistic challenge", he says. "I bumped into a friend at a mutual friend's book launch, and he said he'd been asked to write our host's obituary. And then he said, 'I offered to write yours, but they said you'd already been done.' Which gives rise to all sorts of questions, doesn't it? Do they think I'm about to die? How exciting that they think I'm worth writing an obituary about. And do I mind what it says?"

And then there's "the wretched cancer": in his case, prostate. The disease is being held at bay for now by a range of treatments, but these are all time-limited. "It seems likely that [the oncologist] will be able to stretch my years to the biblical 'three score and ten' but I shall probably not celebrate my eightieth birthday," he writes in the introduction.

Hence, "a tug to reflect on the past, to look for some sort of sense and order in a helter-skelter life".

That life began in 1957. His parents met in colonial Nigeria; the young Edward followed his father's footsteps to Roman Catholic boarding schools in England. He went up to Trinity College, Cambridge, to read English, where his contempor-



4 *News*, becoming the network's Washington correspondent in 1986. In 1988, he moved to the BBC as Paris correspondent. Two years later, it was back to ITN as diplomatic editor, reporting from Baghdad during the Gulf War, and from Bosnia during the siege of Sarajevo, and from Moscow in the final days of the Soviet Union.

In 1993, he began presenting *The One O'Clock News* on the BBC. He presented *Absolute Truth*, a four-part series for BBC2 on the modern RC Church in 1997. In 1999, he moved to Radio 4's *Today* programme, which he presented for a decade. Since then, he has presented *The World at One*, *The World This Weekend*, and the *Sunday* programme.

That's the overview — although, naturally, the journey was nothing like as linear as the bald facts suggest. There are screw-ups and lucky breaks aplenty along the way, recounted in a warm and self-deprecating style. He is uncomfortably aware of his privilege, and unflinching in the critique of his own behaviour. "If you go in for this kind of archaeological digging in your past, you are bound to turn up some nasty finds that would have better been left to rot," he writes.

What does he mean? "When you read a diary, back when you were a teenager or in your early twenties, it is quite a shock, because it was a very different world. And we did absorb all sorts of attitudes that now would be shocking, and which I certainly wouldn't agree with," he explains.

"[Looking back] was interesting. It helped me appreciate the degree of social change that there's been during my life, which is also part of the point of the work.

"But it was quite painful . . . the snobbery and that wonderful certainty you have when you're young

“There was an outcry when he was dropped from the flagship *Today* programme

that you know all the answers.”

So, what has he learned? A change in attitudes to sexuality, he says at once. In the Catholicism of his upbringing, there was no suggestion that homosexuality was of equal value to heterosexuality. Similarly on divorce; as he writes in the book, his younger self took a very hard line on the sanctity of marriage, only to find himself divorced and remarried some years later.

"But the great privilege of being a journalist is you are always learning, especially one who travels a lot, because you constantly meet people who challenge your world-view, and you are constantly forced to re-evaluate things. Pope Francis has that rather nice phrase about the 'culture of encounter' — pompous, in a way, but that's what journalism is really about."

The job is "endlessly exciting", he says. "When you get [to an assignment], it's immediately different, more exciting, and more enriching."

Unusually, Mr Stourton has travelled in reverse: from TV to radio to writing books. Why so?

"Mostly, it's been pure happenstance," he says. But TV is, he thinks, a young man's game. "It can have a huge impact, but it's also quite limited in what you can do, because it's a very linear medium." Radio, by contrast, is "incredibly intimate". It's easier to be more thoughtful. "The pictures are still there, but you have

to paint them." Radio has suited him in maturity, he thinks; and writing goes one stage further in allowing him to explore ideas in still greater depth.

Radio 4 is a particularly British institution, and, as he writes in the book, most members of the family of listeners believe that the network belongs to them. He first realised this when covering for Jonathan Dimbleby. "Almost everyone I met over a glass of *Any Questions* wine was completely uninhibited with their views on programmes and individual broadcasters — and they were often very trenchant. And if they wanted to critique — or praise — one of my own performances, they picked up on what I had said on air as if we were simply continuing a conversation."

This was one reason why there was such an outcry in 2009 when Mr Stourton was dropped from the flag-

ship *Today* programme after ten years, allegedly for being "too posh". He describes the incident in the book; it was clearly appallingly handled. And he admits that it was bruising. "You're never going to have a job quite like that again."

Being fired from *Today* gave him a higher profile than any other event of his career, he writes. Loyal listeners wrote letters of protest; his children set up a Facebook campaign demanding his reinstatement. "But there is life after *Today*," he says now, and repeats a quotation attributed to St Augustine which he uses in the book: "Feeling resentment is like drinking poison and hoping the other person will die."

His research for the book turned up an intriguing insight. "One of the ideas kicked around behind the scenes was to make me the BBC's

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“We did absorb all sorts of attitudes that now would be shocking

aries included the future journalists Charles Moore, Dominic Lawson, and Alastair Campbell, and the future politicians Oliver Letwin and Andrew Mitchell. (One Justin Welby was in the year above at Trinity, but not one of his friends remembers him, something he ascribes to the future Archbishop's membership of the God Squad.)

From Cambridge, Mr Stourton joined ITN as a graduate trainee. He was a founder member of *Channel*



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