

Gone Today

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religion editor by way of compensation for losing the *Today* berth," he writes. "The job did not exist then, and the first person to hold it was Martin Bashir, the *Panorama* reporter who later resigned under a mighty cloud over that Diana interview. What a lot of trouble the BBC could have saved themselves!"

One of the jobs that he moved on to was presenting the *Sunday* programme, which has a "very, very healthy audience" despite its early hour. "The nicest comments you get about it are from people who are not religious, but say 'I really enjoy the programme because it tells me things that I didn't know,'" he says. "I think it's important, because it does recognise what a power religion is, in all sorts of ways. It's not just about the Churches, or about Islam or Buddhism: it's about the interaction between religion and the world."

He refers to a recent episode that examined the violence in Jerusalem. "There's a strong religious component, and we tried to draw that idea out, and make a bit more sense of the dreadful events there."

If you started with a blank sheet of paper, you might not come up with *Sunday*, he admits. "You'd never think, 'Let's give — for 52 weeks a year — a good chunk of primetime Sunday morning to this.' But, actually, it proves itself by the affection of the listeners and by the numbers."

The strength of the programme lies in its ability to adapt, he says; when it was created in 1970, the BBC's religious department was entirely staffed by clergy of the

Church of England, and the idea that religion should be treated as a subject like any other was anathema. All that has changed.

What about the constant rows that the programme has to cover? Running "one awful Catholic abuse story after another" in the past decade was disheartening, he says. And he had to face up to the IICSA findings about sexual abuse at Ampleforth, his Alma Mater.

He writes about meeting two old schoolfriends soon after the revelations. Each expressed shock: they had had no idea that the abuse was taking place — until one of them



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mentioned the occasion "when Father X tried to snog me".

The fact that this was a very close friend speaking shook Mr Stourton. He went back to his diaries. "I came away with rather an uneasy feeling that all of us had probably suppressed quite a lot. It's not that we knew this was happening, but that we perhaps bought into a rather unhealthy culture." It was "disorientating", to say the least, to find that a period of his life that had been very happy was "shot through with less healthy elements".

He was a great admirer of Cardinal Basil Hume, Abbot of Ampleforth when Mr Stourton was a pupil, and someone whom he describes as an inspiration. "Because I

was covering religion, I went on encountering him all his life. I did what I think was the last interview he gave before he died of cancer, and he came out very forcefully to condemn an attack on a gay pub in London, which was quite a brave thing to do.

"In those days, not all Catholics would have admired him for that. So I remained a huge fan of many of the things he did; but the fact is, he did allow a priest, who later went to jail for abuse, to be moved from one parish to another without anybody really knowing what was going on. I can't believe it abrogates all the good that he did, but it does raise an awkward question in your mind."

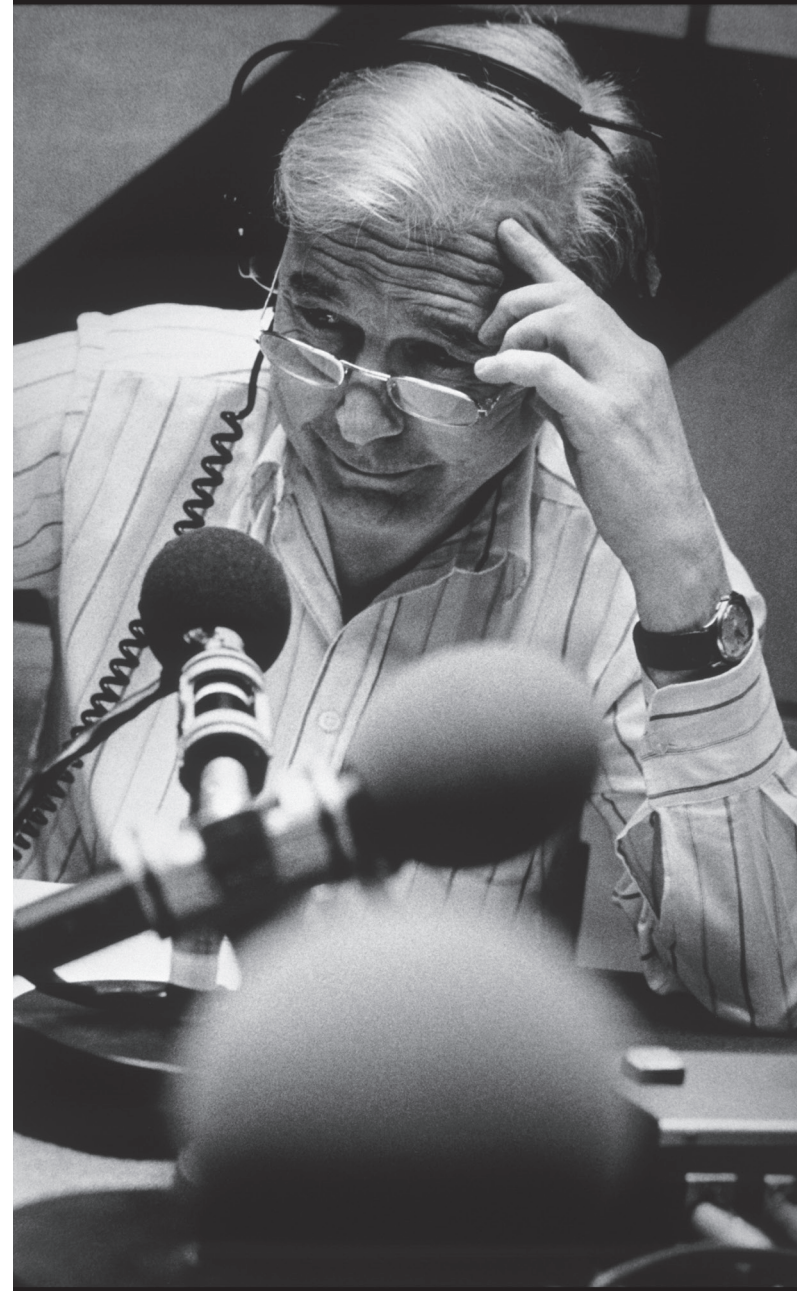
Towards the end of the book, Mr Stourton reflects that having an incurable cancer should make him consider the comforts of his faith. "It has not done that at all," he writes. "I find I think no more about such things than I did when I was healthy, and I have never been much given to agonised contemplation of eternity."

"My attachment to Catholicism owes much more to a sense that it is a good guide to this life than to any conviction that it is a passport to the next."

He says: "It just makes sense of the way I experience the world. And that's enough for me, really, without worrying too much about what comes next."

Towards the end of the book, he mentions bumping into a Catholic acquaintance in Battersea Park "one luminous autumn day", who remarked that it was "a Manley Hopkins morning". He immediately understood the reference to the poem "The Windhover".

He writes: "As another Manley Hopkins poem puts it, 'The World is charged with the grandeur of God.' And at moments like this it is simply easier to acquiesce."



John Humphrys in the *Today* studio, date unknown, but between 1987 and 2002

'And what's it like in the south of the country?'

TODAY is a surprisingly easy programme to present competently. All the "programme furniture" it has inherited may be daunting at first, but I quickly realised it provided useful props to hang on to.

As long as you get your time checks right and remember when to introduce sport and *Thought for the Day* you can sound perfectly plausible.

But it is a very difficult programme to present well: you need the confidence to take risks. And a solid relationship with your fellow presenters is key to that confidence.

John Humphrys, belying his fearsome reputation, welcomed me to the team with a piece of advice told as a joke.

On a bad morning, when lines were going down and minds were constantly changing, the gallery could descend into chaos. "Just occasionally," John warned me, "they'll fling you an interview at the last minute without telling you what it's about or who you're talking to. They'll just shout something like 'Millbank — now' at you, and all you can really say by way of introduction is 'We go live to our Westminster studio.'"

My technique for dealing with

this is to put on my gravest voice and say, 'Minister, this sounds serious' — with a bit of luck he or she will tell you what the story is in the first answer."

There was another version of this for dealing with complex foreign stories: if you felt you were getting out of your depth, you could resort to "And tell me, what's the position now in the south of the country?" It never quite happened like this, but it sometimes came close.

I became — and I hope remain — friends with all my fellow presenters, but relations between us were not made any easier by the steady stream of newspaper commentary on our relative status and performances, plus advice on which of us should be sacked and which promoted.

Leafing idly through the gossip columns before going on air, one was likely to chance upon charming little nuggets like this, from the Ephraim Hardcastle column in the *Mail*:

"As the published historian of Radio 4's *Today* programme, its former editor Tim Luckhurst writes about its decline. He says Sarah Montague is 'struggling to cope', and regards Ed 'Posh' Stourton as

second banana to Humphrys, whom he sees as the only class act. Mr Luckhurst fails to mention presenter James Naughtie at all. 'Mr Naughtie reeks of the politically correct bias that so damages the *Today* programme's reputation,' he says."

And when Mark Damazer, my friend from ITN days, took over as the controller of Radio 4, a former BBC editor offered him this in a long piece in the *Independent*:

"My advice: bolster James Naughtie and Ed Stourton, replace Sarah Montague with Carolyn Quinn, and sideline Humphrys. If he flounces out in a huff, so much the better."

Reflect that when you read this kind of thing, a colleague who had received one of the more disobliging notices was likely to be sitting in the chair next to you. We would both pretend we had not read it, while both knowing perfectly well that we both had, and it rather took the shine off the studio atmosphere during that day's programme.

Confessions: Life re-examined by Edward Stourton is published by Doubleday at £20 (Church Times Bookshop £18); 978-0-857-52833-9.

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