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Bragg, Melvyn, host; Simon Tillotson, producer. In Our Time

Michael Ullyot

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bbc.co.uk/programmes/b006qykl.

The trouble with reviewing a podcast like *In Our Time*, BBC Radio 4's discussion panel, is its scope. Its 1,002 episodes (as of this writing) airing weekly over 25 seasons address a vast range of subjects in intellectual, scientific, and cultural history. Since 1998, its format has held steady. The host, Melvyn Bragg, plunges straight into a brief synopsis of the subject before he introduces his three guests, typically "only scholars who [are] also teaching academics [...] asked to pour the accumulation of decades of scholarship into a half pint, at most a pint glass."¹ Bragg directs his guests through a brisk 45-minute conversation—posing questions, commending their masterful summaries, and interrupting them when they veer off course, as academics are wont to do. The novelist Will Self compares Bragg's method to "that of a man throwing a stick for a dog: he chucks his questions ahead, and if the chosen academic fails to bring it right back, he chides them."² By the close of each episode, you feel mentally exercised yourself: well informed about subjects outside your area and reacquainted with those you thought you knew.

I have been listening to the *In Our Time* podcast for more than 15 years, paying special attention to early modern topics but also indulging a magpie-like wish to mitigate my utter ignorance of subjects from antimatter to the invention of zero. (Some of my favourite episodes are on geological time: "Ageing the Earth" and "The KT Boundary.") This is the problem with curiosity: the program "flatters its listeners with the implicit message that it is better to be very broadly shallow than deeply bored into any given specialism."³ I cannot resist the temptation to hear intelligent people clarify interesting subjects. And *In Our Time* convenes some of Britain's best minds: novelists A. S. Byatt and Ian McEwan; philosophers A. C. Grayling and Susan Greenfield; cosmologists Carolin Crawford and Martin Rees; and critics Christopher Hitchens and Susan Sontag (two rare American guests). I pay closer attention to episodes

1. Bragg, *Companion*, ix–x.

2. Self, "On the Common."

3. Self, "On the Common."

with the most engaging panelists, like the geneticist Steve Jones (the episode on “Genetics” also includes Richard Dawkins, and “Mammals” and “The Whale” are memorably good) or the philosopher Angie Hobbs, whose episodes on “Neoplatonism,” “The Muses,” and “Rhetoric” pertain to *EMDR* readers.

Speaking of whom, my aim in this review is to focus on episodes relating to early modern culture, lest I digress any further off course. This presents the problem of identifying which episodes those are. Although the program’s online archive helpfully subdivides its episodes into periods (including “Renaissance,” “16th Century,” and “17th Century”), this archive is incomplete. In early 2022, BBC enthusiast Stuart Ian Burns compiled a Dewey-decimalized catalogue of every episode to date,⁴ but the most current list of episodes is on Wikipedia, which includes a table of dates, titles, and contributors, with links to the BBC’s archive page for every episode. There you can download an audio file and, for recent episodes, see reading lists of books and links.⁵

Coverage of early modern topics began in the program’s first two seasons (“Shakespeare and Literary Criticism” in 1998–99, and “Shakespeare’s Work” and “The Renaissance” in 1999–2000). Unsurprisingly, English literature supplied the early modern topics in these initial seasons, addressing “Shakespeare’s Life” and “The Sonnet” in 2000–1; other programs on “Humanism” and “The Glorious Revolution” also appeared in that year. (Because the podcast launched after the series began in October 1998, services like Spotify are the only place to access nearly every episode.)

In the seasons that follow, there are dozens of episodes of benefit to curious early modernists, from novices to experts. I regularly direct undergraduate students to individual episodes, and have even assigned them as required “readings” to supplement my own podcast introductions to, say, Milton’s *Paradise Lost* or metaphysical nature-poems.⁶ A few of the most worthwhile include the four-part history of “The Royal Society and British Science” and a standalone episode on the Society’s formation (“The Royal Society”); episodes on texts and authors (“Foxe’s *Book of Martyrs*”; “Sir Thomas Browne”); episodes

4. See Burns, “Cataloguing.”

5. See Wikipedia, “List.” Though the BBC does not publish the transcripts, Bragg has edited or co-edited select transcripts in 2009 and 2018; see Bragg, *Companion*; Bragg and Tillotson, *Celebrating Twenty Years*.

6. See Ulliot, “How to Read *Paradise Lost*”; “Metaphysical Nature-Poems.”

on historical periods ("The Interregnum"; "The Restoration"; "The Glorious Revolution"); and episodes on intellectual history ("Renaissance Magic"; "Renaissance Maths"; "Baconian Science").

But as I say, it's often the panelists who draw my attention. When I recently met Emma Smith at a conference I gushed embarrassingly about her appearances in episodes from "Romeo and Juliet" to "Macbeth" to "The Plantagenets" to "Shakespeare's Sonnets." I love hearing the voices of scholars I once knew and remember fondly, now that they are gone—Lisa Jardine ("Milton"; "The Fire of London"), Frank Kermode ("Shakespeare's Work"; "The Sonnet"), and Kevin Sharpe ("Reading"; "Seventeenth Century Print Culture")—and I appreciate hearing from learned friends, like Lauren Kassell ("Alchemy"; "Renaissance Astrology"; and a very memorable episode on "The Unicorn") or Jill Kraye ("Erasmus"; "Skepticism"; "The School of Athens"). Historians are well represented, naturally, with episodes featuring John Guy ("The Tudor State"; "Mary, Queen of Scots"; "The Death of Elizabeth I"), the church historian Diarmaid MacColloch ("The Dissolution of the Monasteries"; "Calvinism"; "St Bartholomew's Day Massacre"), and David Wootton ("Montaigne"; "Hobbes"; "The Trial of Charles I"; "Robert Hooke"). Finally, there are episodes with the literary scholars Jonathan Bate ("Marlowe"; "Lear"; "The Tempest"; "Hamlet"; "The Roman Plays"), Thomas Healy ("Rhetoric"; "Paganism in the Renaissance"; "The Divine Right of Kings"; "A Midsummer Night's Dream"), and Julie Sanders ("Pastoral Literature"; "Elizabethan Revenge"; "The Metaphysical Poets"; "The Anatomy of Melancholy").

One of the first programs the BBC released as a podcast, *In Our Time* presents the form's most valuable features: colloquies on learned subjects, preserved for the ages in a lively format. The series' rich archive offers countless hours of insight and conversation, introducing both specialists and polymaths to a vast range of subjects. Listen on the bus, at your desk, or on a stroll, and eavesdrop on the cleverest minds of our time thinking aloud about the worthiest subjects to know.

MICHAEL ULLYOT

University of Calgary

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