

Desert Island Discs
in historical perspective

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The cultural baggage of the desert island

WILL STRAW

1. Introduction

IN 1876, THE *HUDDERSFIELD DAILY CHRONICLE*, a newspaper serving West Yorkshire in England, reported on a public lecture given by Walter Parrett, the organist of Magdalen College, Oxford. The title of the talk was ‘The Pianoforte Sonatas of Beethoven’. Seeking ways to praise these works, Parrett refers to the common practice of asking ‘eminent men’ what books they might wish to have were they marooned upon a desert island. He notes how typical it was for such lists to lead with the Bible and Boswell’s *The Life of Samuel Johnson*. Parrett goes on to speculate about the musical works shipwrecked musicians might wish to take with them. ‘If a musician were placed in that position’, Parrett claims, ‘and if, through some miracle, his piano were cast ashore in a playable condition, I suppose his choice of two books would, in the case of 99 out of 100, include these sonatas as the first choice’ (‘The Pianoforte Sonatas of Beethoven’ 1876: 3).

The 1876 account of Parrett’s lecture represents the earliest case I have been able to find in which someone expresses the desire to take music to the fabled desert island. Parrett looks forward to the desert island disc lists of the mid-20th century, even as he confronts the practical problems (of playback and equipment) which will haunt all such lists. Parrett might well have treated the sheet music of the Beethoven Sonatas as, quite simply, a form of book, ‘readable’ and enjoyable as such. Instead, he is drawn to imagining a piano washing up on shore alongside himself, just as later compilers of desert island disc lists would speculate (or joke) endlessly about the difficulties of resuscitating shipwrecked gramophones or finding the electricity needed to make them function.

Parrett’s lecture condenses a particular moment in 19th-century British imaginings of the culture of the desert island. In his reference to the desert island book list as ‘common’, Parrett is capturing the extent to which such lists had already become a staple of cultural journalism. His designation of the Bible as an inevitable entry in such lists signals a growing impatience with the predictability and piety which so often marked them. By 1960, of course the Bible and the works of Shakespeare would be given freely to participants on the BBC radio programme *Desert Island Discs (DID)* (Magee 2012: 50), so that they would not feel obliged

to use up their book choices confirming their religious sentiments and cultural nationalism. Actor/director Henry Kendall had been the first *DID* guest to ask if he might include a book in his desert island baggage, in 1951 (he chose *Who's Who in the Theatre*); the practice of naming desert island books became standardised in March 1959 (Magee 2012: 50).

2. Before the BBC: desert island music in *The Gramophone*

I shall return shortly to the desert island book list, to examine its role in laying the template for later lists of desert island musical recordings. For the moment, though, I will follow some of the scattered references to desert island music collections appearing in print prior to the launch of *DID*. While they are scarce before the third decade of the 20th century, references to desert island music in British print culture grow in frequency from the 1920s onwards. In his 1922 book *A Dominion Abroad* the Scottish educator A. S. Neill describes a pastime which involved asking people to imagine which five books and gramophone records they would wish to have with them were they to be stranded for five years on a desert island. In his memoir about *DID*, Roy Plomley points to both Neill and two early deployments of the concept in the British periodical press. In 1921 the magazine *The Music Teacher* invited readers to choose ten records which they would take, with the promise of an accompanying gramophone, to a desert island. By the late 1930s, Plomley recalls, the pop music magazine *Rhythm* engaged in the regular practice of asking readers to send in lists of records (typically six) which they would want to have on a desert island (Plomley 1975: 25).¹ While they were clearly modelled on earlier lists of desert island books, music lists were forced to negotiate the specificities of music listening. Should these lists contain musical compositions or specific recordings thereof? Was it necessary to comment (even frivolously) on the playback technologies needed or available for island-based music listening? Between the early 1920s and 1942, many of the conventions of the desert island music list were being worked out in the periodical press.

A thread of references to the desert island disc list runs through the pages of *The Gramophone*, the magazine founded in 1923 by Compton Mackenzie and dedicated to reviews of new recordings of classical music. Mackenzie, we learn in his autobiography, had an intimate relationship to islands. He lived while young on Capri, and spent a good part of his life on the island of Herm off the Guernsey coast. Later still, he lived on the island of Barra in the Scottish Outer Hebrides. The American author Archibald Marshall, who collaborated with Mackenzie in the 1920s, describes the collection of gramophone records (numbering over

¹ I am very grateful to this book's editors and anonymous reader for directing my attention to these and some other references.

1500 discs) which Mackenzie kept in his Herm home as supporting ‘a life of perfect contentment’ (quoted in Mackenzie 1955: 68). Mackenzie’s isle of Herm was no desert island, of course, but in the image Marshall offers of an individual luxuriating amidst a carefully selected collection of recordings it is easy to glimpse elements of the castaway fantasy. Mackenzie would be a guest on *DID* on 19 February 1952, when he named, as his desired island luxuries, ‘pipes and matches’, and offered a list of musical recordings limited to classical and operatic works.

The reviews published in *The Gramophone* are dotted with phrases which invoke the desert island to give colour to judgements of musical works or particular recorded versions thereof. In a review of orchestral records in 1926, the columnist ‘K. K.’ notes that, while a new recording of Mozart was a ‘light recreation’, it was not the one to be taken to a desert island (K. K. 1926). Mackenzie himself, in a 1927 column, qualifies his enthusiasm for a cluster of recent recordings by noting that ‘I wouldn’t choose those twenty tunes if I knew I was going to be on a desert island for the rest of my life’ (Mackenzie 1927: 86).

‘K. K.’, *Gramophone* readers learned in 1929, was one pseudonym for W. R. Anderson, author of the magazine’s Orchestral column (‘Who is “K. K.”?’ 1929). In 1931, Anderson writes that ‘[i]n spite of all the electric marvels, I am not converted from my faith in the finest acoustic machines, and I should not repine if, on that imaginary desert island to which a marooning fancy condemns the music-lover, I found no Swiss Family Robinson turbine to make me electricity, but had to turn the handle in the good old-fashioned way’ (Anderson 1931: 116–17). In 1930, Anderson casts himself as more forward-looking when, accepting that ‘gramophone music must not be wholly judged by its likeness to the original’—to live performance, presumably—he suggests that ‘those of us who love music retire to our desert islands and invent gramophones of our own that do not try to out-stunt Stentor’ (Anderson 1939: 504).² Musical consumption on a desert island was seen both to benefit from the existence of modern playback devices and to allow the castaway a respite from ongoing technological change. In other words, while the invention of the gramophone freed the desert-island compiler from the obligation of imagining an entire orchestra washed ashore, the probable absence of electricity on an island allowed commentators to cling to their beloved (but increasingly obsolete) acoustic gramophones.

In the 1920s, the desert island was typically invoked by *The Gramophone*’s music reviewers only in passing, as a hypothetical setting serving judgements of quality. In the 1930s, however, the desert island music list became more institutionalised. In January 1934, *The Gramophone* reported on a public lecture by Keith Prowse at HMV’s Abbey Road studios, on ‘Records I would wish to save

² Stentor was a manufacturer of musical instruments and cylinder recordings. So-called ‘Stentor’ cylinders were of larger size than other cylinders and considered appropriate for recordings of concert music.

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3 if wrecked on a desert island' ('Trade Winds and Idle Zephyrs' 1934: 336). By
4 this point, the solicitation of reader lists as a form of 'user-generated content' had
5 become a recurrent feature of Compton Mackenzie's editorials in *The Gramo-*
6 *phone*. He asked readers for lists of their favourite symphonies, their most cher-
7 ished symphonic movements, and their preferred works of chamber music. In the
8 November 1934 issue, Mackenzie announced that the magazine would run its
9 own full-blown desert-island music competition (which required readers filling
10 in coupons contained within the magazine). The lists requested by the magazine
11 were to contain musical compositions rather than recordings themselves:

12
13 And this suggests another competition. Suppose you were able to save from a wreck
14 six complete musical works that were to last you until you were rescued from a
15 desert island five years hence, which would you take with you? To the reader whose
16 choice gets the most votes we will give any album he wants. The closing date will be
17 February 15th, and in making your choice, please remember that you are not choos-
18 ing your six favourite compositions at this moment, but what you are likely to think
19 will be your six favourite compositions when you have no other music to listen to
20 except the roar of the surf and the screaming of the sea-birds.

(Mackenzie 1934: 208)

21
22 In these instructions to list-makers, Mackenzie often delineated that differ-
23 ence between canonical and utilitarian desert island lists discussed elsewhere in
24 this volume by Julie Brown. In a 1938 list-making exercise, he asks readers for
25 two lists of favourite pieces of chamber music: 'I want two lists. I want the twelve
26 works of chamber music which a chamber music enthusiast would recommend
27 to a friend who was starting to cultivate a taste for chamber music and I want
28 another list of the twelve works of chamber music which an enthusiast would take
29 with him to a desert island to beguile his solitude' (Mackenzie 1938: 233). Two
30 sets of distinctions are laid out in these sets of instructions. One divides musical
31 selections with present-day appeal from those with lasting value, separating the
32 momentary pleasure from the work of eternal value. Another distinction sets the
33 general listenability of musical works against their suitability for the conditions
34 of the desert island (such as its solitude). Mackenzie's ongoing efforts to spec-
35 ify the criteria by which desert island music was to be selected read in part like
36 attempts to stop the degeneration of these lists into mere popularity charts. Like
37 others after him, he sought to balance the status of the desert island as a refuge
38 for individual tastes—that is, tastes free from the judgement of others and the
39 dictates of fashion—with a sense of the castaway as the guardian of enduring
40 cultural values. The tensions we may glimpse here would carry over into the BBC
41 radio programme. BBC executives involved in the programme worried that desert
42 island disc-making might become little more than a parlour game producing lists
43 of personal favourites. At the same time, some level of personalisation was neces-
44 sary to prevent all lists from revealing the same consensual choices.

Like desert island cartoons in magazines, with their recurrent images of missionaries boiling in headhunters' pots, magazine lists of desert island books and records were often marked by eruptions of colonial prejudice. In his report on the results of *The Gramophone's* 1938 desert island competition, Compton Mackenzie gives considerable space to a letter from a reader residing in Basutoland, in southern Africa. 'Well', Mackenzie writes, 'we did not actually receive an entry from a desert island, but listen to this from a Basutoland reader!' Indeed, this reader inhabits no desert island—he lives, in fact, surrounded by 600 'natives'—but his letter constructs a familiar parallel between the isolation of the desert island and the spiritual solitude of the colonial white man living far from metropolitan civilisation. The reader writes:

Picture a country about the size of Switzerland, roughly speaking, and about as mountainous, too, with a native population of 500,000 and with 15,000 Europeans. Here is Moriija, headquarters of the French Missionaries, with 40 white inhabitants, of whom I am one—a German refugee, working in what is probably one of the strangest printing offices in the world. About 600 natives live in the kraals around us and their monotonous singing mingles in the evening with the sounds of Bach, Beethoven and Schubert from my gramophone.

(Mackenzie 1939: 411)

The colonialist's solitude, of course, is that of someone still able to subscribe to *The Gramophone* and participate in metropolitan discussions of the relative value of European musical works.

3. Cultural baggage and the voyage

The list of musical recordings to be taken to a desert island has several antecedents, all of them involving books and the activity of travelling. In each of these, reading is set in relationship to ideas of travel and isolation. One antecedent, reaching back at least as far as the middle of the 19th century, is the list of books to be taken on a long voyage over land or sea. The voyage list runs alongside the desert island list, then disappears in the 20th century just as the latter becomes ever more common and institutionalised. The distinction between land and sea voyages in the elaboration of these lists is stark. The land voyage is typically described in terms of the harsh encounter with unfriendly terrains, in the face of which the survival of European cultural values becomes uncertain. The *New York Sun*, in 1917, catalogues the reading habits and book lists of men engaged in arduous expeditions through the North: 'Besieged by death and shrinking in a pile of reeking skins, men read "Les Misérables" in the Arctic' ('Arctic Trials Old and New' 1917: 6). In 1886, the *Pall Mall Gazette* recounts the slow destruction of the book collection carried by explorer Henry Stanley into Central Africa:

He started with a whole reference library—dictionaries of biography, geography, dates, natural history and science, all the great classics ancient and modern, novels by Scott, Thackeray, Dickens, George Eliot, Charlotte Bronte, Hawthorne, Kingsley, Lytton, and Whyte Melville, Dick’s English Plays, selections from the Old Dramatists, ‘Selections from Ruskin’—in all 180 lb. weight of books. Pound by pound, as he proceeded, the library lessened, famine, fighting, and sickness diminishing his carrying power. The leaves of Homer and Horace, of Cervantes and Gibbon, and Byron and Tennyson, lie bleaching along the route of his caravan, a line of light into the heart of the Dark Continent, so that explorers who follow in his track will find their task a sort of mammoth paper-chase. At last the library was reduced to the Bible, Shakespeare, ‘Sartor Resartus’, Norie’s Navigation and a nautical almanac. The people of Zingua, who had doubtless been reading Benedix, Rumelin, and the German realist critics, insisted on his burning Shakespeare, and ultimately he was left with the Bible alone. We have here the traditional ‘desert island’ test of the value of books, a desert continent amounting to precisely the same thing. How sad that Carlyle should not have lived to know that ‘Sartor Resartus’ was the last survivor but one!

(‘Occasional Notes’ 1886: 3)

At least three features of this account are of interest to us here. The first is the way in which what might have been merely a personal, private library assumes the status of a public resource, a corpus of books distributed across a terrain for the enlightenment of both natives and those explorers who will follow in Stanley’s footsteps. The second element of interest here is that the order in which Stanley’s books are discarded or destroyed follows, albeit in reverse order, the ranking typical of 19th-century lists of books to be taken to desert island. The Bible and Shakespeare are almost inevitably at the top of such lists; works of the Greeks and prominent British poets will commonly follow; and only when large numbers of selections are permitted will lists venture into the realm of novelistic fiction. Finally, this account is noteworthy for its reference to the ‘desert island’ test as ‘traditional’, that is well established as a parlour game or device for measuring literary worth. Indeed, it was typical of 19th-century reports on desert island book lists that they regularly designated such lists as ‘common’ or even clichéd, as if the desert island list had been around forever, though it is principally in the latter half of the century that clear evidence of its popularity may be found.

The vulnerability of the books hauled on a land voyage may be set against the secure companionship of those books intended to accompany the list-maker on a long sea voyage. The sea voyage book list is a product of the latter half of the 19th century, with few recurrences thereafter. The prospect of long periods of time with few responsibilities or distractions encouraged people who were planning (or imagining) sea voyages to anticipate the sustained reading in which they might indulge themselves, and to compile lists of books to be taken as accompaniment. Unlike the explorer Stanley, who imagined himself taking the accumulated

intellectual heritage of the West to places and people for whom this would serve as an agent of uplifting, the maritime lists were almost exclusively about individual pleasures and self-instruction. The abundance of anticipated time linked the sea voyage to the desert island (though the issue of the vulnerability of books to shipwreck seems to have been overlooked).

In the early 20th century, when journalists and public speakers reflected on lists of books for sea voyages or desert islands, they occasionally invoked Robert Browning's 1855 poem 'Bishop Blougram's Apology' as a foundational text of the genre. Browning's poem offers one of the best-known (albeit briefest) versions of the sea voyage book list. It imagines a trip lasting six months and speculates as to the 'convenient' things which the narrator should take along with him. An instrument for performing music was among such things:

Now for our six months' voyage—how prepare?
 You come on shipboard with a landsman's list
 Of things he calls convenient: so they are!
 An India screen is pretty furniture,
 A piano-forte is a fine resource,
 All Balzac's novels occupy one shelf,
 The new edition fifty volumes long;
 And little Greek books, with the funny type.

(Browning 1879: 266)

Here, some of the things to be taken on a sea voyage are those which might provide comfort and amusement over a six-month period of confinement. However, while furniture might be a mere convenience, books and the piano-forte function in part as challenges demanding a sustained investment of time and attention. The sea voyage book list is intended, in part, as a remedy for boredom, but it is already marked by that imperative of self-improvement which will influence the making of most desert island lists (of books and records) to follow. While later lists would require paring individual oeuvres down to a few essentials, the sea voyage allowed the list-maker to imagine the luxurious company of large compendia of authors' works. Even if Browning's Balzac collection is meant as an entertaining alternative to the 'little Greek books', its exhaustiveness ('fifty volumes long') suggests a focused labour of reading. Collections marked by this level of indulgence in a single corpus have remained, of course, a staple of those lists devised for desert islands or lengthy holidays. The Balzac collection to which Browning refers is the 19th-century equivalent of today's boxed sets of Dylan bootlegs or TV series which, in their promise of mastery of a given oeuvre, stand as much for the fulfilment of cultural obligations as for simple pleasures.

There is a crucial difference, however, between the ship cabin and the desert island as a repository for books. The ship's cabin is a space of temporary retreat, from community and responsibility. It is thus a space of freedom in which one can

indulge in the luxury of one's whims or engage in a strictly personal activity of self-improvement. The desert island is sometimes imagined in similarly hedonistic fashion, but the open-ended character of the marooned state (in which rescue is uncertain and may certainly not be planned) spurs the devising of lists of greater seriousness and higher purpose. On the desert island one hopes, of course, for things which will amuse, but one wishes, as well, for worthy companions for what might turn out to be a lifetime.

4. Literature as luggage

The desert island book list is a recurrent trope in British journalism of the second half of the 19th century. The range of citizens from whom lists were solicited, or to whom they were directed, was wide. It included young girls, who, invited by *The Girl's Own Paper* in 1880 to name fifty books for a desert island, were guided by the magazine's writer as follows:

Suppose I were Mary, or Kate, or Alice, and banished—of course for nothing at all—to a desert island, what books would I carry with me of a useful and fairly representative kind, so that the time might be pleasantly and profitably spent until remorse attacked my oppressors and urged my recall? Here they are: The first is the bible, the best of books and a library in itself. 'Turn it, and turn it again', says an old writer, 'for everything is in it'.

(*'How to Form a Small Library—II'* 1880)

The Bible performed a dual function in desert island book lists. It was both a primary source of present-day moral authority and an enduring work to be set against the ongoing flow of literary fashions. The desert island is imagined, in several accounts, as a place cut off from time and thus effective as a bulwark against a world marked by increasing speed and cultural change. In an 1896 speech (*'Summary of News'*), Sir Arthur Conan Doyle argued that a 'desert island containing a small but select library would be the prescription of the future against the haste and superficiality of modern life'. In 1889, a commentator in the London *Morning Post* dared to suggest that Queen Mary's library might constitute a corpus of more enduring literary value than anything available since: 'The person who happened to be cast on a desert island with Queen Mary's library, and with the linguistic knowledge required to read the books contained therein, might, when duly sighted by a passing vessel, return to civilisation even more cultured than if he had equipped himself with all the literature of the subsequent period, although the mighty works of Shakespeare and of Goethe were included in his stock' (*'Untitled'* 1889). Few other lists would dare to omit Shakespeare.

By the 20th century, one may observe a trans-Atlantic traffic in desert island book lists. The lists compiled by British writers such as H. G. Wells or Sir Arthur

Conan Doyle were covered in both British and North American newspapers, and well-known British authors were invited to speak of their desert island choices to audiences across the ocean. (I have found no instances in which the reverse was true.) In 1921, G. K. Chesterton delivered a talk in Toronto, Chicago, and other North American cities on the kinds of books one would want to have if stranded alone on a desert island ('Informally' 1921; 'Chesterton' 1921). Chesterton's talk came at a time of ascendant popularity for the desert island book list in North America. In the pages of local and national newspapers, critics, authors, and journalists of the early 1920s argued about the sorts of books best suited for the life of an island castaway.

Some of the criteria employed by Chesterton in making his choices were functional in character. He warned against bringing works of fiction marked by the surprise plot or ingenious climax since these, obviously, would not bear re-reading. Other choices were intended to identify those works which, over the entirety of a castaway's life, would yield unending lessons and pleasures. The Bible and the works of Shakespeare, for example, would serve for long periods in providing models for good behaviour. Victorian novels, Chesterton argued, were sufficiently rich to warrant re-reading, and those of Dickens and Thackeray particularly so. Were he only allowed one book on the island, he confessed, he would take Dickens's *Pickwick Papers*.

Desert island book lists proliferated in the first 30 years of the 20th century, but their spread during this period seems to have been more virulent in the United States than in Great Britain. As Nicholas Cook has suggested, this may reflect differences in systems of education and cultural authority between the United Kingdom and the United States and the degree to which controversies over canon formation have been much closer to the surface in the latter (personal communication). Indeed, the list of important books appeared more settled within British culture and less prone to dispute and ongoing renegotiation than in the United States. In contrast, an ongoing lack of consensus in Britain over the most important musical works (and, importantly, over the national traditions in which those works were to be found) laid the grounds for the sorts of disagreement which made the *DID* programme, on its introduction in 1942, a lively terrain of discussion. In its first article on the *DID* programme, in January of 1942, *Radio Times* notes that, while the 'old question' of which books were to be taken to a desert island had been 'thoroughly thrashed out', the selection of gramophone records for the same fate remained an open one ('Desert Island Discs' 1942: 15).

In the United States, devising desert island book lists in the 1910s and 1920s had become a kind of parlour game for ordinary newspaper readers. Undistinguished columnists for small-town newspapers sometimes reported on the lists put forward by their friends or by letter-writers as a result of playing such games. For the newspapers which published them, these lists functioned as highly adaptable forms of filler. With low levels of timeliness, they could be held by editors until empty space within newspapers needed to be filled, and their appearance

could be scattered throughout the year. (In this, they were unlike lists of holiday gifts.) Much of the time, these lists were syndicated to newspapers across Anglo North America. A search of ‘desert island books’ on digitised newspaper sites like *Newspapers.com* shows the same lists turning up in dozens of newspapers, from towns or cities of variable size, over periods of several weeks.

5. The list made trivial

In the United States, more than in Great Britain, the desert island list succumbed in the 1920s and 1930s to the temptations of faddishness. It is easy to see such lists, in the 1920s, sitting comfortably amidst the crossword puzzles, celebrity gossip columns, and other new forms of amusement which filled an expanding American periodical press. By the end of the decade, however, the signs of corruption of the desert island list were multiple. For example, lists of desert island books chosen by movie stars, already a sign of crumbling cultural authority (‘Books Celebrities Read’ 1923), were soon displaced by lists of movie stars whom readers wished to have as company on a desert island (Wilson 1935). By the end of the 1930s, college students were holding polls to rank the film stars with whom they most wanted to be marooned (‘Senior Poll Holds Girls “Best Topic”’ 1939).

A more ominous index of the desert island list’s waning seriousness was the widespread tendency, by those solicited to contribute to them, to comment sarcastically on their usual piety and predictability, or to overturn their seriousness through the inclusion of objects of no apparent cultural value. Already, as we have seen, British journalists of the 19th century had commented sceptically on the inclusion of the Bible on so many lists. This scepticism expressed itself in ever more elaborate ways in the United States as desert island lists proliferated. In 1929, the *Los Angeles Times* notes the predictability of the Bible as choice, then jokes about desert islands already being loaded with Bibles: ‘Deciding what books to take with you if you were to be cast away on a desert island is a cinch. It has been done so often that the list is stereotyped. Probably by this time most of the desert islands are already equipped with copies of the Bible, Shakespeare and the heavier classics which one was supposed to read in high school’ (‘The Buskin and the Shock’ 1929). In his contribution to an earlier list, the 1914 *New York Sun* survey of authors (‘Authors Choose Their Desert Island Libraries’), Julian Street notes facetiously that he has not included the Bible or Shakespeare ‘because I believe that the Carnegie Library on every desert island can supply these’.

The declining esteem in which respondents and the public held the desert island list is most evident in the tendency to offer, as selections, items which would help one escape. In the same 1914 survey of authors Mary E. Wilkins Freeman admits to choosing the Bible, but insists on adding ‘little books filled with carefully worded messages in various languages to be sent by wireless to . . . ships

which might come along and be either unable to take me aboard or be headed in the wrong direction'. In a playfully convoluted scenario for escape, Freeman surmises that these ships would pass the messages on to countries not at war, who would ensure her safety ('Authors Choose Their Desert Island Libraries' 1914). In American lists of the 1920s and 1930s, such choices became a way of mocking or denouncing the very activity of list-making. *New York Times* essayist Simeon Strunsky claimed, with mock naivety, that the most important book to take to an island 'is one which will help you get away from the island as soon as possible'. His choice was *The World Almanac*, a volume of useful knowledge which would aid him in planning his escape (Strunsky 1926).

In the following decades *DID*, with its 'Luxury Items' category, would invite these sorts of responses: the actor Joseph Cotton and the businessman Sir Adrian Cadbury were among those saying they would want a boat; the artist Steve McQueen requested a compass; the Very Reverend Dr W. R. Matthews wanted a guide to making rafts; and physicist Peter Mansfield asked for a helicopter. Ten more *DID* respondents requested a telephone, and George Clooney, in 2003, asked for the novel *War and Peace* (adding that its size made it an excellent source of toilet paper). In the case of *DID*, these requests were frivolous supplements to the more serious musical choices provided. In the American periodical press of the 1920s and 1930s, by contrast, such choices signalled the rapid collapse of the desert island book list as a repository of sanctimonious cultural value.

A brief paragraph of fanciful miscellany, published in the *Toronto Star* in 1936 ('A Little of Everything'), captures both the descent of the desert island list into farce and the extent to which castaway scenarios now seemed able to generate innumerable narratives both titillating and comedic. It begins by referring to the seemingly faddish notion of musical recordings that might be eaten.

There's a good short story plot in this idea of edible records: Great musical artist is wrecked on a desert island, with, of course, the inevitable girl. Phonograph cabinet complete with records also drifts ashore. Artist and girl have nothing to eat but the candy discs. One by one they are sacrificed until at last only the artist's favorite is left. He declares it would be a sacrilege to eat it. So he and the gal join hands and die to its sweet music just as a ship comes in sight. Landing party finds them, and impious seaman, breaking up the record, distributes it among his fellows. There ought to be a movie comedy somewhere in that.

6. Oceans, islands, and the list

In her contribution to the 1914 list of desert island books published by the *New York Sun* ('Authors Choose Their Desert Island Libraries'), Edna Ferber struggles with the competing claims of the unread and the already read: on the one hand, she writes, she would take *David Copperfield*, because she read and loved it as a

child; on the other hand, she would want something called *The Greek Anthology*, because, in her words, ‘I never have read it through, and am always declaring to myself that I will.’

The sense that a desert island list might combine familiar works and those as yet unexperienced points to one of the key differences between lists of books and lists of music. Put very crudely, we might say that lists of books are very often prospective, about ways in which one will change oneself, while lists of music are almost always retrospective, about the preservation and repetition of experiences from the past. In her chapter in this volume, Julie Brown analyses the role of music in the constitution of an ‘autobiographical self’; music does not merely evoke past memories, but can stand as the congealed memory of friends, family, and life events. In contrast, there is rarely a construction of autobiography in book lists. People are less likely to include books that they have read in the past and which have marked particular moments in their life which they might want to recover. There is a banal reason for this, of course: books are normally read once, while listening to musical recordings is almost always a repeat listening. Just as importantly, music is heard, much of the time, in conditions of social and affective interaction, while reading is almost always solitary. This means that, while lists of desert island discs will trace evolving interpersonal experiences or affective states, or bind memory to place, lists of books are much less likely to do that.

Desert island lists of musical recordings will hardly ever include works which have not already been heard. In contrast, lists of desert island books will usually be lists of books one wants to read, or to read more fully, with one or two added because, while they have already been read, they promise to yield further depths of experience. As a result, lists of desert island books are usually described in ways which are low in claims about autobiographical importance or affective charge. Rather, selections of books will be tied to notions of self-improvement or to the sense of a cultural obligation finally being fulfilled. The external, objective constitution of the desert island list, its dependence on consensus as to what is important, is thus higher in the case of books than of music. While this might seem to simply reiterate the higher cultural prestige of reading over listening, it is deeply rooted in differences between books and music which arise from their distinct relationships to repeatability.

The desert island list, whether of books or records, lends itself to analysis within two recent and scarcely intersecting bodies of scholarly discourse. One of these has to do with lists and their place within processes of cultural judgement. The Canadian communications scholar Liam Young (2013) suggests that lists are a way of reducing noise in a cultural or communications system. The history of desert island lists is marked by an ongoing tension between their fragmentation into innumerable personal choices—into a chaotic cultural ‘noise’—and their consolidation within consensual canons. My experience studying the lists discussed here suggests that the ‘noise’ of idiosyncratic taste has already been

reduced by the time a public figure submits their list. The recurrence of such works as the Bible or the plays of Shakespeare, in the case of literature, or in the case of music Mozart, Beethoven, and Bach (the three composers cited most often by *DID* ‘castaways’), points to a consensus already operating within the cultural space in which individual lists are devised. Eccentric choices come across as gestures intended to add the spice of individualism, or to resist the absolute conformity which these lists would otherwise suggest. If the authority of cultural lists has diminished over the last century, this is less because of a simple withering of cultural authority than because sites of this authority have proliferated, producing ever more cultural spaces within which authority congeals and is expressed. The study of these transformations links the study of lists to broader questions over the status of cultural canons and regimes of cultural value (as discussed in Andrew Blake’s chapter in this volume).

The other field pertinent to examinations of *DID* is the loosely defined domain of ‘Ocean Studies’. Across a variety of disciplines, from literary to media studies, and most prominently within historical scholarship, an ‘oceanic’ turn has produced an explosion of work on the material and affective dimensions of large bodies of water. Oceans are studied as social spaces, as sites of conflict, and as environments for the circulation of people, information, and commodities (e.g. Feinsod 2015; Peters 2015; Steinberg 2001; Starosielski 2015). The most pertinent of this work is concerned with the place of oceans in the global circulation of culture. For a century or more—between the commercialisation of trans-oceanic travel and its decline in the face of competition from the airplane—the ocean-faring ship functioned as a significant carrier of cultural goods and influences. Feinsod notes the importance of sea travel in joining together the various elements of literary modernism—books, people, and artistic impulses—in the first half of the 20th century. More prosaically, ocean-bound voyages often carried as ballast, buried deep within their cargo holds, large stocks of pulpy periodicals, which were then scattered around the world, extending the reach of the industries (usually British or American) which produced them (Bleiler & Bleiler 1998: xxv). Hollywood films like *The Big Broadcast of 1938* or *Gentleman Prefer Blondes* (1953) imagined the ocean-crossing liner as an unending festivity of music and dance. More recently, the genealogies of British pop music have included founding narratives of American soul records brought on ships to Liverpool or London by military personnel, then set in circulation to transform the sensibilities of British youth.

The *DID* list is a particularly fanciful product of the oceanic imagination. In the image it offers of the sea-faring metropolitan, it represents a colonialist fantasy, but in its presumption (most of the time) of lands occupied but not conquered, it is an innocuous version thereof. From the mid-19th-century booklist through the BBC’s *DID*, the appeal of the stowaway/castaway life has been much more about the liberation of time, in a dual sense, than the vanquishing of space. The freedom of the desert island is liberation from the schedules which otherwise

limit one's devotion to the enjoyment of culture. The desert island list reveals itself to be a distinctly modern phenomenon in the vision it offers of disengagement from cultural worlds more and more engaged in the production of books or music with which one could never keep up.

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