

## Life On Air

*D. Attenborough*

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I first became alerted to Attenborough in the late 70's when his series 'Life on Earth' was aired on Swedish Television with great success. I remember being informed that he had very badly wanted to do the series coming back to his interest in zoology after having been for some years engulfed in administrative duties at the BBC. Attenborough delivering on the spot commentaries next to wild animals became a hallmark of nature programming at its best and it was hard not to be enchanted by his sympathetic personality and his obvious genuine and passionate interest in the natural world.

The book is a memoir, not starting from childhood, thank God, although with some inevitable flashbacks; but at his desk at a dead-end job at a publishing company as a recent zoology graduate at Cambridge. Restless he applied for a job at BBC radio, was turned down, but was later offered an internship at the burgeoning television section of the company. BBC had already inaugurated TV back in the 1930's but the war came in between and services were not resumed until after the war and when he was hired back in the early 50's television was still very much a pioneering activity, he himself had not a set.

So he started at the bottom and soon worked himself up seemingly with no real struggle, promotions just coming his ways. He had a mission, nature programs, which in co-operation with the London Zoo, still on the outlook for bringing home exotic animals from an apparent inexhaustible wild, and the Natural History Museum of London, he was able to travel to exotic places with a small staff and primitive equipment, but his programs were well received. In those days people did not travel that much and pictures from abroad were exciting, especially those from exotic places. In my childhood when anyone had been to Africa, that was considered more or less equivalent of being an explorer, and he and she could travel around lecturing and showing slides, and even better fuzzy silent movies droning on a small fluttering screen. As the years passed, the operations became more and more professional and the equipment improved drastically. While in the past he endured hardships trudging through jungles (as they were called at the time) for days on end, he now is typically whisked by helicopters all practical things taken care of by his staff, all he has to do is to be on location speaking a few words on camera, giving to the enterprise the golden Attenborough touch.

True, he has a genuine and passionate interest in the living world, but his mission in life has not been to be the specialized scientist but the communicator, bringing to the general public the wonders of the world, with the tacit hope that this will give them a stake in its preservation. Thus his main concern has always been, how will this play to the audiences? What will be spectacular, what will excite them, what is new and has never been filmed before? It is easy to disparage such concerns and ambitions, on the other hand one senses that they have never been allowed to take precedence over his own underlying genuine interest. Thus in particular he has been very much hurt by innuendoes and accusations that much of what he has shown has been faked for dramatic effects. He

has countered by referring to ethical guidelines about what is acceptable and permissible, because after all in order to get results, to have animals 'perform' in front of cameras, they have to be prompted and a number of tricks can be used. Tricks, he assures us, he is always very open about. True, any trade has tricks, and tricks and shortcuts inevitable develop once you are in a professional situation having to deliver. However, with the modern techniques of computer animation, the photographic picture has lost much of its former automatic authenticity. In the past a picture could be used as documentary evidence of obvious forensic value, now in the digital age, everything can be fake, and authenticity has to be earned and persuaded, thus the hallmarks of BBC and Attenborough cannot be allowed to be sullied in any way.

It is a book, not on natural history per se, although it serves as the ultimate *raison d'être* of his life and mission, but on the behind the scenes narration. It is indeed a fascinating life, one of action and improvisation all over the world, and naturally one cannot refrain from a certain envy. Not everyone is granted such privileges, and although they seem given to him by a generous fate, one suspects that there has been much struggle and hard work and determination against all kinds of frustrations which do not really come out in the narrative. Some do, but only the kind of dramatic setbacks, which come out well in retrospect; but most of the humdrum ones remain hidden, he is after all addressing a wide audience, not his psychiatrist. In particular we hear little about his family life, his wife comes on the scene only when she dies and he is rushed back from one of his countless assignments. One gleans that he has been residing in Richmond all his adult life thus always having possessed a fixed point in his life to be anchored to. It has been a life on the run, on the other hand maybe not that different from that of a corporate executive, with the difference that his assignments have not been dreary meetings but pilgrimages to exciting locations to catch yet another elusive moment on film. In short the life of an artist with the budget of a solid corporation,

So here we are being privy to the long list of programs he has produced, from the tentative forays in his youth to the large expensive productions of his old age. What would he preferred? There is not much nostalgia for the past, although there is some, he cannot be indifferent to what time has done to the innocence of the unexplored through the emergence of mass tourism; instead he is mainly looking forward, excited by the technological advances and their potentials. When it comes to the actual work we are of course only treated to the highlights, and that is of course the rationale of a book, so everything, as noted above, appears deceptively simple. He has an idea of a program, writes a short script as a synopsis, shares it with co-workers and bosses, i.e. people sitting on the money, and everybody seems almost as gong-ho as himself. But there is more than just a script tossed off while drinking a cup of coffee; and the final production must involve an abundance of footage out of whose chaos a coherent narrative must be teased and edited out. This is the artistry and the professionalism rolled in one, and which appears almost more interesting than the productions themselves! (In fact he discloses that during filming two things are really going on, in addition to the filming of the actual thing itself, also a meta-filming of the very filming. A so called 'Making-Off'). This is done, I guess both for purely documentary reasons, but also as to be providing additional material to be shown to audiences hungry for more gossipy material. (However, there seems to be no real interest in doing a 'Making-

Off' of a 'Making-Off' even if the latter would be more interesting than the original film. Induction does not work that straightforward way.)

So what is the future of the nature film? Will it be engulfed in a totally virtual reality, which would undercut the need for the underlying reality. Why mourn the extinction of elephants and tigers, if we anyway can enjoy them safely in full 3-D animation in our living rooms? A scary and most depressing thought. But the author is old, already entering upon his tenth decade, maybe he will be spared the ultimate.

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