After dinner Cookebook

RUTH HOLLAND

"Hooray and hallelujah, you had it comin' to ya" was my first thought. Here is a layman telling the professions what the rest of us think about them. Revenge at last for the insolence of office, conspiracies against the laity, and professional fouls of all kinds.

Such bloodthirsty instincts are not, however, going to be satisfied by *The Patient has the Floor*. Its truths are more homespun than home, and its tone is civilised and gentlemanly, which is not surprising as it is written by Alistair Cooke. A collection of after dinner speeches given to various professional bodies in Britain and the United States, it demonstrates that, layman though he may be to such audiences, Cooke is himself a master of several professions: journalist, public speaker, and impersonator.

The impersonation, which he does to perfection, is of a plain, down to earth, ordinary guy, and it is one that has beguiled radio audiences for 40 years in "Letter from America." So familiar is it that reading these speeches you can almost hear Cooke's voice: the warm tones, the relaxed, confidential manner, nicely blending transatlantic worldly wisdom with the faintest trace of Lancashire grittiness. This is all part of the protective covering of a wily old fox who knows exactly what he is doing, and it is very dangerous to any reader who, like me, lacks moral fibre, because you are lured by the amiable persona and the modest persuasiveness of the language into agreeing with everything he says. The sweeping statements sweep you happily along with them, until you stub your toe against a piece of nonsense like, "the delusion that every young mother hugs to her person: the belief that her obstetrician is the only man who has ever safely delivered a baby." I have never met a young mother hugging anything like that to her person; the thinking, if my own experience is anything to go by, is more along the lines of "I hope that twit knows what he is doing."

There is much genial humour, pertinent comment, and good sense in these speeches, but they are speeches and so demand more indulgence than a reader may be prepared to give. What is swallowed easily after good food and wine may be harder to take in cold print. The reader, even in bed or a deckchair, is more critical than a member of an invited audience; you have to do without the good fellowship and laughter, the interplay between speaker and listeners; you miss the nuances of tone of voice, change of emphasis, gestures, and facial expressions. So instead of lolling back and laughing which is probably all that is required, you tend to carp and argue when he airily says "the moment a man... can call himself Doctor he is endowed by simple minded people—grocers, liftmen, bus drivers, old ladies—with an insight into many things outside medicine: 'Good morning, doctor, you think it'll rain today?... Your car is ready, doctor... doctor, is the government going to fall?'" Leaving aside the implication that grocers, liftmen, bus drivers and all old ladies (Barbara Castle? Catherine Bramwell-Booth? Dame Janet Vaughan? the Queen Mother?) are simple minded, surely the reason they ask such questions is not because they think that the doctor infallibly knows the answer but because they are interested in his opinion as a representative medic. He is probably the only one they know—it's a small profession, after all: in relation to the rest of the population there's not a lot of it about.

It is also the profession that Cooke has directed most of his speeches to, including the best one in the book, "Staying alive in 1776," a masterly evocation of American history, given before the College of Physicians of Philadelphia. A lot of what he says, while elegantly expressed, is not new, though every now and then he slips in something rather startling ("It is, though you may not know it, a permanently humiliating relationship: I mean the relationship between doctors and the rest of mankind") and he has some bracing things to say about medical jargon and its unfortunate side effects on patients, hoping that "the day might even come when doctors would

talk to patients about collarbones instead of clavicles and admit to a scared patient that an oedema is nothing more or less than a swelling." I wish he'd touched on something that has always puzzled me: the peculiarity of medical pronunciation, which to a layman is just as unnerving as Latin terminology, though productive more of smirks than of terror. Patients, for instance, are prescribed "cheemotherapy," though they are not advised to take their prescriptions to the cheemist. They may also suffer from

enkephalitis. That, you may answer stuffily, is correct. So it's correct, but it isn't what the rest of us say (it isn't what the *Oxford English Dictionary* says, either: "c before e,i,y, is soft," it observes) and while we're being correct, how many medical persons pop round to the kineema on their night off? I suppose we must just accept it for what it is: a professional oddity, a sign that you belong, like a BMA car park sticker, or a verbal equivalent of the masonic handshake.

I don't know if Cooke has ever addressed the masons, but he's certainly got a lot of other groups under his belt—soldiers, lawyers, Shakespeare scholars, linguists, conservationists, and civil servants. They have all been treated courteously and entertainingly in these speeches, in which, he says, he is the layman talking back to the College of Cardinals. Well yes, but he's also an old trooper showing them how it's done.

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