Reading for Pleasure

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ROBERT CUTLER

Paying one's rates is always painful, made hardly less so by the demand note which shows on the back how the money is spent, but there is one subvention I never regret, that spent on the library in my area. Not only are the assistants pleasant and helpful, the building modern, the reading room well arranged, with photocopying and Prestel facilities, but in addition a system exists, doubtless common to other libraries, where on paying 30p and filling in details on a card a book can be reserved with postal notification when it is ready for collection.

One can thus read the literary reviews, often a pleasure in itself, in the Sunday papers, some daily ones, and *The Listener*, this last always an excellent source. One's own tastes operate naturally, and of course there is no guarantee that any requested book will be taken into stock, and it would thus appear that my 30p request for what was clearly an entertaining book on a south London bordello may prove to have been a bad investment. In general, requests for newly reviewed books are honoured within two months, often much less, so by sending in sufficient requests one will come to hand more or less regularly. In view of this I have kept a list of those read in the past few months, and details of a few may be of interest, if only to divine the taste of the selector.

Travellers in Europe

T Zeldin's book, *The French*, is not his first book on France but is possibly the most profitable to read. Clearly he took a tape recorder around with him and was obviously sufficiently liked by the people he met to get the flavour of relaxed conversation. If one is not completely fluent in the language oneself, it is only by reading books of this type that one can get under the skin of our nearest but not necessarily dearest neighbour, and even if one is tolerably fluent the heat and passion with which any controversial subject is discussed can be unnerving; indeed a highly articulate French lady once complained to me that if in discussion English friends disagree, they often become silent or change the subject. This may be out of politeness but is highly frustrating to a French national. This book gives the opportunity of getting the flavour of an articulate and intelligent race without getting too involved.

The Impossible Europeans by L Barzini, an Italian journalist, goes down very well with *The French*, if only to note how others see us. Nor do we have long to wait, for he starts with the English. This writer, at once fascinated and frustrated by his fellow Europeans, deals not too unkindly with us and we come out of it marginally better than one might have hoped. By the time he has finished with the Germans and the French one can wonder how

with any sense of history we ever got involved in the Common Market, and though Barzini pillories us for our reluctance to lead in the early postwar years, it is fair to ask what we might have found ourselves leading. His final conclusions are not particularly optimistic, and they are likely to be confirmed by many elderly Europeans today.

Travellers in the East

To those intending to visit China in the near future—do not leave it too long, as tourism kills what it feeds on—*China Alive in the Bitter Sea*, by F Butterfield, and *The Dragon and the Bear*, by P Short, are essential reading. P Short worked as a newspaper correspondent in Moscow and Peking and speaks with the authority of a man with more opportunity to view the current scene than most. *China Alive in the Bitter Sea* makes sad reading of the miseries inflicted on the Chinese, not only by their own countrymen—and by the West in its day—but also by the Japanese, whose conduct before the second world war matched that during it. There is now a whole raft of modern tourist books on China, even with diagrams on how to hold chopsticks—an art I was never able to acquire—indeed, a copy of one such book is given to those going on the longer tours. The cultural revolution has made earlier books of little more than historical interest, but those named are in a class by themselves.

The Other Hundred Years War 1941-2041, by Russell Braddon, a prisoner of war of the Japanese, is also concerned with Asia. It is a gritty, down to earth book with reflections on the 100 years after Pearl Harbour; with the balance of less than 60 years remaining there is naught for our comfort. The Japanese suffered total defeat, though they do not admit it, and were at first forbidden to have any armed forces at all; later a certain strength was permitted without cost to themselves, their progress thus unhindered in their march to economic dominance, and now they are being asked to increase their armed strength, at their own expense this time, to bolster the Western alliance. Such are the ironies of history.

For Being Someone Else, by Laurens van der Post, is also largely concerned with the Japanese, this author also having been a prisoner of war. His ability to speak Japanese may have helped him, and quite characteristically he is more discursive and tempered with a humanity and generosity of spirit not all of us can achieve. Both van der Post and Braddon went back to Japan after the war and both books benefit from the experience; for Braddon, who is an Australian, it clearly has been harder to be objective but his insight into the Japanese character is considerable.

Novel entertainment

Rates of Exchange, by Malcolm Bradbury, is a change to fiction and describes the ditherings of a certain linguistics professor, Dr Petworth, who is invited to lecture in "Slaka," an Iron

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Curtain country, so sharply and minutely described as to place it in Czechoslovakia, Poland possibly, Hungary and East Germany certainly not. On arrival he is taken in charge by his escort Marisja, who turns out to be the nicest character in the book. Without exception all are devious to some degree but, as the reader comes to realise, this is essential in a country in a state of perpetual flux. Disaster soon follows after his arranged meeting with the second secretary of the British embassy whose nymphomaniac wife so assaults him as to make his best suit unwearable. Consummation of an attraction for a blonde writer of suspect political views leads to a later and final complication after he has completed his round of conferences, for which his second best suit is not wholly appropriate. A further character, a Dr Plitplov, is always appearing on the scene either by accident or by design and is the instrument whereby Dr Petworth becomes unwittingly charged with the delivery of a highly suspect manuscript of a novel of Katya for publication in Paris. Tension mounts as his tour ends and the dénouement of the last page is superb.

The author not only has immense talent for background description, whether it be airport or hotel bedroom, but also a marvellous ear for the phonetics, and there are numerous asides that any after dinner speaker could do well to memorise for use in select company, only one to my knowledge being a chestnut. The book is fundamentally serious and the publisher's blurb which describes it as a comedy of high seriousness is perceptive and correct.

An Ice Cream War and *A Good Man in Africa* by William Boyd are books similar in the excellence of background description and absence of heroes, though the deliberately lightly delineated character of the doctor in the second book is the only one deserving of sympathy in an atmosphere of political skull-duggery and the company of sleazy white expatriates. The first book deals with events in German East Africa in the first world war; it is extremely well researched and catches the flavour of the upper middle class English scene before the war.

The Russians

Among the Russians, by C Thubron, is a travel book, likely to be a best seller, with all the freshness a new writer can impart; the background is uncannily similar to that sketched in *Rates of Exchange*. Russia tolerates properly organised tour groups but discourages independent travellers—as indeed does China, though tour groups there are made much more welcome. I can

recall being at a railway station near the Great Wall and seeing a separate small building with an immense roof sign with the words "Foreign Guests Waiting Room," and though it was full of the locals—possibly because they could not read English—the idea and intention were praiseworthy. C Thubron, in spite of every discouragement, eventually secured permits to travel all over Russia in an old English car but, as would be expected, met obstruction at every turn. He describes the vastness of the central flat lands, leading almost to the sense of disorientation experienced by the Germans in their advance into what seemed to be nothingness in their 1941 campaign. He had learnt Russian and had various contacts of which the authorities were no doubt aware and tension mounts as he leaves the country with his travel notes intact. Many years ago van der Post also wrote a travel book, *Journey into Russia*, without evidence of the tension Thubron describes, but perhaps he made no notes, and in any case he is the sort of man who could charm the most dour official.

This short list covers two more books only, *History of the Modern World*, by P Johnson, and a *Social History of England*, by A (otherwise Asa) Briggs. The first has been rather panned by some critics, but I would set on record that a friend to whom I lent it for a day or two went off and bought her own copy. Neither book can really dull the reputation of Trevelyan's *English Social History*, a copy of which I treasure, but Brigg's book runs it close and has in addition some excellent pictures and photographs.

"Best buy"

Using the *Which* technique of "best buy" in the series described I would choose *Rates of Exchange* for the pleasure it gave me, but bearing in mind that masochism can have its own sort of pleasure too, my alternative choice is Braddon's *The Other Hundred Years War*; his conclusions are largely academic for my generation, but he fears for the West and, having read his book, I do too.

Presumably in the library world there is a selection committee that, subject to the current financial constraints, decides what books are to be made available and where they are to be allocated, and the regularity with which those that I have requested have arrived would suggest the committee's taste and mine run on much the same lines, but my wife warns me of delusions of grandeur as an infallible sign of the passing years, and of course she may well be right.

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Does treating common viral respiratory tract infections in adults with antibiotics have any value such as shortening the illness or reducing morbidity or even mortality?

Undoubtedly viral respiratory tract infections are common in adults. For the viral infections alone antibiotics are of no value. There is good evidence, however, that combined infections occur probably most often because the viral infection increases susceptibility to succeeding bacterial infection. Schwarzman *et al* noted, in particular, a pronounced increase in staphylococcal pneumonia during an influenza epidemic.¹ Lambert and Stern showed that viruses are implicated in exacerbations of chronic bronchitis and asthma.² Confronted with a respiratory infection it is often not practicable or necessary to determine whether the primary infecting agent is viral or bacterial. An acute infection with a little mucoid, or no sputum, might suggest a viral infection: with fit adults and mild symptoms it may be reasonable to withhold antibiotic treatment while carefully watching progress. The case for using antibiotics in presumed or known viral infections rests on the fact that bacterial infections often occur coincidentally or soon after viral infections. Treatment with antibiotics would therefore be prudent when the symptoms are severe or the patient vulnerable. Moss *et al* have suggested some guidelines for determining when respiratory infections

should be treated.³ Several trials using chemoprophylaxis or prompt treatment of respiratory infections have shown that antibiotics will reduce the duration of symptoms: this appeared to be so in the study of winter chemoprophylaxis for chronic bronchitis by Johnson *et al*⁴ and in a report of the Medical Research Council.⁵ Doubtless many exacerbations in such series resulted from infections initially caused by viruses. It seems reasonable to conclude that acute respiratory infections whether known or presumed to be initially viral should be treated with antibiotics, provided that reasonable judgment is exercised in deciding which cases require treatment. Given reasonable care in selecting patients for treatment, the period of illness is likely to be reduced and especially in vulnerable patients even the mortality will be reduced.—GRAHAM W POOLE, consultant physician and lecturer in respiratory disease, London.

¹ Schwarzman SN, Adler JL, Sullivan RJ, Marine WM. Bacterial pneumonia during Hong Kong influenza epidemic 1968-9. *Arch Intern Med* 1971;127:1037-41.

² Lambert HP, Stern H. Infective factors in exacerbations of bronchitis and asthma. *Br Med J* 1972;iii:323-7.

³ Moss FM, McSwiggan DA, McNichol MW, Miller DL. Survey of antibiotic prescribing in a district general hospital 2. Lower respiratory tract infection. *Lancet* 1981;iii:407-9.

⁴ Johnson RN, McNeill RS, Smith DH. Five year winter chemoprophylaxis for chronic bronchitis. *Br Med J* 1969;iv:265-9.

⁵ Medical Research Council. Value of chemoprophylaxis and chemotherapy in early chronic bronchitis. *Br Med J* 1966;i:1317-22.