Reading for Pleasure

A Yank reads in England

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When I came to England two years ago it was ostensibly to study clinical epidemiology. In reality it was to stabilise my marriage to a woman with a lifelong passion for the clichés of English tourism. I decided that for these two years I would forgo the pleasures of my usual American reading such as the script for *Raiders of the Lost Ark* and read only works written by English authors about England. Like many American university graduates, my knowledge of English literature began superficially with Beowulf, and the wife of Bath, and went steadily downhill from there. Therefore, with no systematic plan of reading I decided to keep an open, almost vacuous (which will soon become apparent) mind about what to read, and to peruse only those books suggested by my English experiences.

Most readers of the *BMJ* will think that the works I eventually chose to read for pleasure reflect simple tastes, narrow experiences, and my upbringing in a country that spends less money on books than it does on chewing gum. Nevertheless, Americans in England who finally overcome the language barrier will discover themselves affected by uniquely English forces. The books I eventually read during these past two years are a commentary both on England and on my birth in the country of *Dallas*, doughnuts, and Disneyland. With an epidemiologist's compulsion to classify things, I identified four general influences on my reading selections: the tube, television, travel, and reviews.

The London Underground

The London Underground, as the locale for most of my reading for pleasure, had a surprisingly strong effect on the works I selected. The tube "impacted" on my choices, as we say in the United States. Books for this setting must be inexpensive paperbacks since they are usually folded double and held at arm's length above the fellow members of the Central Line herd. They should also be small and relatively brief so that they can be kept readily available in a coat pocket, and to avoid the embarrassment of being seen reading the same volume week after week. An aside: Americans often refer to their television set as "the tube." An American comment such as "I watched *Women in Love* on the tube last night" can bring conversations with Londoners to a puzzled halt.

Television

Someone defined books as what they use to make a movie out of for television. I must confess that television programmes sparked many trips to Dillon's or the Belsize Bookstore. *All Creatures Great and Small* is a popular television programme in America as well, and a Herriot work is now considered obligatory

reading for a Yank visiting England. The screening of *Pride and Prejudice*, *The History Man*, *Sons and Lovers*, and *A Town Like Alice* led me to read not only the respective books, but also other works by Austen, Bradbury, Lawrence, and Shute. I happened to hear *Sredni Vashtar* on Radio 4 one morning and was so captivated by Saki's use of words that I have subsequently read most of his stories as well as the recent biography *Saki* by A J Langguth. Andrew Birkin's fascinating use of old letters and diaries in *J M Barrie and the Lost Boys* was reviewed after watching Ian Holm's superb performance in the television series. Television shows such as these are rarely produced in America, to our great regret, though certain channels do show British television exports. For example, American social calendars have often been arranged around the screenings of *Upstairs, Downstairs*; *Poldark*; *I, Claudius*; *Elizabeth R*; and *Lillie*. Imagine our dismay when we arrived in England to find, not a continuous feast of such productions, but the likes of *Dallas*, *Starsky and Hutch*, and *The Dukes of Hazzard*.

Travel

Travel about Britain has stimulated a number of obvious selections, such as John Hillaby's bittersweet *Journey through Britain*, the Automobile Association's outstanding publications, and the *Shell Guide to British Towns*. The authors of the *Shell Guide* had an uncanny ability to identify a superlative feature about virtually every town in their book. One village, for example, was said to possess the "largest hammerbeam church ceiling west of the Po." The Po? Is that not in Italy?

But travel has also led me to less obvious selections. A trip to Cambridge sparked a rereading of J D Watson's *The Double Helix* because of its many references to Cambridge landmarks. "The Whim," Watson's favourite restaurant, is now being converted into an "American style hamburger restaurant." Is that all America has to offer in exchange for England's great gifts of representative government and chocolate-covered biscuits?

A delightful mathematician from New Zealand, who was the sole companion I found in England to go running with, suggested that the only way to understand the life of Cambridge and Oxford was to read the novels of Kingsley Amis and Tom Sharpe. After *Jake's Thing* and *Porterhouse Blue*, I am not sure how serious this New Zealand bloke was, but I do have a new appreciation for sex therapy and the aerodynamic properties of condoms.

A visit to Cornwall was responsible for two purchases, one reasonable and the other flagrantly Yankee-like. At Tintagel my wife and I emerged from one of the innumerable tourist shops with T H White's *The Once and Future King*. We read this with great enjoyment, even though a change seems to have come over Tintagel since the days of Merlin and Arthur. The other purchase was that famous classic *The Making of Poldark* by Robin Ellis. For the next two days when we were not fighting hypothermia in Cornish camping grounds, we roamed the coastal roads seeking out locations where the television series was filmed. Yes, it is true—Americans really do things like that.

How Green Was My Valley by Richard Llewellyn ranks high

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on my lifetime list of favourite books. Brochures from the Welsh tourist board informed us that Gilfach Goch in Mid-Glamorgan was the model for the town where Huw Morgan grew to maturity. We visited Gilfach Goch one day, the treeless, greened-over tips of the area now bearing little resemblance to the lush descriptions in the book. After many inquiries we met only one person who had ever heard of the book, though this elderly woman had not read it. We spent a fascinating hour listening to her reminiscence about life in that valley decades ago. Later, I read *Up, Into the Singing Mountain* to see what happened to Huw Morgan when he emigrated to the Welsh colonies in Argentina. It was a decidedly inferior work, written some 20 years later, but disappointing mostly because Bronwen Morgan had become such a minor character that I could no longer sustain certain adolescent fantasies. At Hay-on-Wye, in the "world's largest second-hand bookstore," I saw a newspaper clipping of an interview with Richard Llewellyn. Convinced that *How Green Was My Valley* was totally autobiographical, I was devastated to learn that Llewellyn had made the whole thing up, loosely basing the work on some of his father's experiences and a month or so that he had spent observing Welsh coal miners.

Reviews

Finally, recommendations from book reviews and colleagues in England are often pursued, though not always completely. For example, this column introduced me to Colin Douglas's humorous and ironic explorations of life in British academic medicine: *The Houseman's Tale*, *The Greatest Breakthrough Since Lunchtime*, and *Bleeders Come First*. The latter two volumes in this trilogy were disappointing, but I enjoyed *The Houseman's Tale* so much that I returned to America with five copies to give to friends. Unfortunately, as William Thomson¹ and Jonathan Gash² intimated, many of the recommendations in "Reading for Pleasure" are rather esoteric and simply unreadable, and for me that virtually always spoils a book. A professor of epidemiology that I knew often recommended books with great enthusiasm, but I seldom followed his advice. He seems to

require that books he selected be written in the sixteenth century, be obscure, and cost less than 10p at the local used-book stall. As André Maurois said, "In literature, as in love, we are astonished at what is chosen by others."

For a long time conversations I had at morning coffee with a distinguished statistician politely stumbled along on the topics of multivariate analysis and the rules of cricket, both equally impenetrable to me. Our conversations blossomed with enthusiasm, however, when I glimpsed a mystery by P D James in this renowned scholar's coat pocket. From then on we concentrated on more important issues, such as the maturation of Eric Ambler's writing, and the vast inferiority of Frederick Forsyth's *The Devil's Alternative* compared with *The Day of the Jackal*.

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My family and I have now returned to America. I have been startled at how much I miss the daily one to two hours of enforced reading on the tube. My work requires only a 15-minute ride on "public transport," which in this part of America means a crowded, boisterously friendly setting where everyone wants to talk with you, and no one wants to read. Though obviously comfortable as Americans, we miss England a great deal; there is an addictive quality to the continuous sensory input that travel and living in a foreign country bring. Sadly, my daughters' English accents have begun to fade, and new friends, of necessity, have started to occupy the time that once was shared so enjoyably with our friends in England. Nevertheless, a need to read for pleasure was reawakened while in England and, I hope, will remain as one of the best souvenirs of those two years.

References

- ¹ Thomson W. Confessions of a lowbrow. *Br Med J* 1980;281:1130-1.
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MATERIA NON MEDICA

The eruption of Santorini

We were due to arrive in Santorini at dawn, but the SS *Leto* made good speed and was early. She entered the pool formed by the caldera of the ancient volcano at 5 00 am, stopped her engine, and dropped anchor. In the dense and warm darkness that surrounded the silent ship one could perceive, dimly, the outlines of the cliffs towering over us, and far away a few street-lights of Thera, the capital of the island. The starry moonless sky, and the ghostly shape of the rocky shore, evoked the mystery of the lost Atlantis connected with this part of the Aegean and told by Solon, Strabo, Plutarch, and Pliny.

Slowly the stars above began to fade and gradually the sea and land took shape and colour. The ship started her engines and soon docked gently against the quayside of the little port of Athinios. We boarded the ramshackle bus and started the slow climb up the steep road.

In the light of the rising sun the majestic panorama of the huge caldera unfolded slowly before our eyes. A semicircular wall of cliffs, over 1000 feet high enclosed a vast bay, some 12 miles in diameter, formed by the crescent-shaped island of Thera and the smaller Therasia. In the centre of the pale-blue expanse a sinister black shape of the inner volcanic island of Kammeni looked like an obscene, sprawling octopus, with its tentacles spread out.

This, one of the world's most impressive sights, brings to mind the stupendous event of about 1450 BC, when the volcano erupted and the huge old crater split. Millions of tons of seawater poured into the enormous fiery furnace, and in the resulting explosion some 50 square miles of the ancient island of Stronghlyli were blown sky-high. The

force of the explosion shook the seabed and raised an enormous tidal wave, which swept through the eastern Mediterranean and destroyed the Cretan city of Knossos about 60 miles to the south. The eruption was accompanied by a vast cloud of falling ash, which buried the city of Akrotiri on the southern shore of the Santorini island.

The volcanic theory of the destruction of the Minoan civilisation by this explosion, proposed by Professor Spyridon Marinatos in the 1940s, became accepted only recently when volcanic ash layers were discovered in sediment cores from the seabed of this part of the Mediterranean. The excavation in the 1970s by Professor Marinatos of the city of Akrotiri, buried and preserved like Pompeii under a mass of volcanic ash, revealed a number of splendid and well preserved frescoes, together with stored pottery. However, this started a controversy about the probable date of the eruption and the subsequent destruction of Knossos, since the pottery found in Santorini is of much earlier style than that found in Crete. Nevertheless, the case for a catastrophic destruction of the Minoan civilisation by the eruption on Santorini is based on indirect evidence.

Professor Marinatos died a few years ago after an accident during excavations at Akrotiri and, according to his own wish, was buried on the site. This poignant death and burial of the man wholly devoted to the task of revealing the story of the demise of one of Europe's great civilisations has the ring of a Greek tragedy. No one can leave Santorini without being deeply moved by it and without a worrying thought that today man has in his hand an awesome power a hundred times greater and more destructive than the one which nature deployed some 3500 years ago.—L J BRUCE-CHWATT, emeritus professor, London.