Reading for Pleasure

History opened my eyes

DOUGLAS GAIRDNER

I have no difficulty in deciding the book which has had the most influence on me, it is H G Wells's *Outline of History*. In 1937, as a houseman, I was feeling utterly exhausted from the long hours and hence only too thankful when a tonsillitis put me to bed for a few days. By chance I picked up a 6d Penguin; this was the abridged version of the *Outline*, and I read it with mounting excitement straight through—a masterly, coherent account of the beginnings of life, and of man's slow evolution, culminating in his invention of agriculture a mere 10 000 years ago and all that has subsequently gone to make up what we ordinarily think of as "history." Belatedly (for I was 27) my eyes were suddenly opened to the fact that everything to be seen or sensed in the world must somehow fit into this history. Sightseeing, which had hitherto bored me, and the arts now took on a fresh dimension; looking at a city, a building, a ship, a picture, or listening to a piece of music became a challenge to understand why these things were the way they were, and what they could tell about the kind of men who made them. A copy of the *Outline* has gone around with me ever since; my original copy finally fell to pieces and has been replaced by the last edition of 1971 (revised by Wells's son G P Wells and Raymond Postgate).

Seed of sailing

Influential in a different way was Erskine Childers's *Riddle of the Sands*. I must have first read this as a schoolboy of about 14. The book may at the time have had some increased impact because there were boys at the school who remembered the terrible day in 1922 when Erskine Childers was executed as an IRA "extremist" by the Irish Free State Government, his son being then a boarder at the school. (That son subsequently became President of the Republic of Ireland.) At the time I read the book I had never been near a boat, but a seed must have been sown by that now famous story and I think I must thereafter have carried (probably still do!) a fantasy of myself as Davies, the hero of the story. So when, about 10 years later, sailing did come my way, it rapidly became something of a passion.

Among the host of books written by sailors who have done marvellous things, I have a special affection for McMullen's *Down Channel* (1869). McMullen, who was a stockbroker, must have been a curmudgeonly fellow, and enjoyed recounting his various quarrels, one of which led to his sacking his crew. Comfort was low in his priorities, and he hated going into harbour, preferring to anchor in the open. It comes as a slight shock therefore to find in the preface that, "Mrs McMullen was occasionally on board in very trying times," although "never adding to the strength of the crew," for she gets no

mention anywhere in the rest of the book. Poor woman, one pictures her cold, wet, seasick, and miserable, cringing in the cabin and getting no sympathy from her martinet of a husband.

Puzzling contradictory women

I read novels when I was younger, I think with the hope of learning more about what went on in the minds of people other than oneself, and particularly, perhaps, what made women act in the often puzzlingly contradictory fashion that, I suspect, is a continual source of bafflement to many a young man. Sadly, as I grow older, I find it increasingly hard to find a really satisfying read among modern novels. Despite the powerful new concepts about human motivation that Freud gave writers when he popularised the notion of the unconscious, I wonder whether modern novelists succeed in penetrating human minds any more effectively than did the writers of pre-Freudian days. For instance, in George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*, Gwendolen, an ambitious and spoilt young woman, succeeds in getting herself married to a rich and heartless local bigwig. After the marriage we are not taken into the couple's bedroom, as would be unavoidable if the story were written today, but as the marriage soon begins to disintegrate, a few deft clues dropped by the authoress enable our imaginations to fill out what must have gone on in the privacy of that room. Of the nineteenth-century English novelists George Eliot's *Middlemarch* seems to me almost in a class by itself—didn't someone say it was the first English novel written for adults? Its richness comes partly from the skilful way three separate stories are woven together, partly from the subtle changes in the characters during the course of the novel, and partly from the telling asides, comments, and generalisations that George Eliot throws in along the line. For medical readers, her Dr Lydgate is a thoroughly modern character, an idealist who abandons the London medical scene to set up practice in a small provincial town where he believes he can best practise good medicine (alas, it is his choice of wife that leads to his downfall). What a pity, after reading *Middlemarch*, to find that none of George Eliot's other novels quite come up to that level.

From Tolstoy onwards there seems to have been a tradition in Russia for long, big-scale novels, and in our time we have been richly supplied by Mikhail Sholokhov's *And Quiet Flows the Don* and its equally gripping sequel *The Don Flows down to the Sea*; Solzhenitsyn's quartet, *August 1914*, *The First Circle*, *Cancer Ward*, and *A Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, and Pasternak's *Dr Zhivago*. These cover a third of a century of Russian history from the years just before the 1917 Revolution, through the chaotic aftermath, leading up to the horrors of the Stalin era before and after the second world war. The intensely vivid picture the reader gets of this piece of Russian history perhaps helps also to make current Soviet policies and attitudes one degree less incomprehensible. A deeply moving account of the life of a writer under the Soviet system is Nadezhda Mandelstam's *Hope Against Hope*.

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Victorians and Edwardians

If by and large I have been disappointed by much of the fiction written in our time, the reverse is true when it comes to reading about real people. Strachey's "hagioclastic" *Eminent Victorians* opened the way to a fruitful new era of biography writing. Here indeed post-Freudian ideas about childhood influences and about unconscious motives have been wholly useful, as has the general acceptance of the fact that sex is mighty important.

I have found the men and women of the Victorian and Edwardian eras a never-ending source of fascination. Where else do you find people with quite so extraordinary a mix of admirable qualities—selfconfidence, energy, massive achievement in practical matters—along with less attractive features such as uncritical complacency with the stratification of their society, or the effects of imposing their own culture on primitive peoples? The rigidly moralistic mores of the time meant that those individuals who did not fit into the accepted pattern of thought and behaviour had limited options; their energies seem often to have become canalised in the form of intense activity. It is not surprising therefore to find homosexuals featuring strongly among the most interesting people of those times. Reading the life of General Gordon (*Charles Gordon—an Eminent Victorian Reassessed* by Chenevix Trench) it is hard to escape this explanation of his strange personality. Equally strange is the story of Roger Casement (*Roger Casement* by Brian Inglis) a man who spent his life altruistically working for poor and depressed people in distant countries, ending up by becoming an extreme Irish nationalist and working for the Germans in the first world war. He was captured by the British in 1916 and shot, but only after his diaries had come to light (the notorious Black Books, for a long time believed to be forgeries); these proved to be made up of a farrago of crude homosexual encounters. All those who had known and worked with Casement regarded him as the most honourable and selfless man they had ever met, none could believe that the experiences detailed in his diaries were real. It seems much more likely that his diaries were just homosexual fantasies. The same fantasy world of homosexual activity is disclosed in Trevor Roper's engaging detection of that arch con man Sir Edmund Backhouse (*Hermit of Peking*).

The Victorian "greats" have provided many splendid biographies, *Florence Nightingale* (Woodham Smith), *Gladstone* (Philip Magnus), and *Octavia Hill* (Moberly Bell) to name but three, while those wonderful nineteenth-century engineers *Thomas Telford*, *George and Robert Stephenson*, and *Isambard Kingdom Brunel* have been the subjects of excellent biographies by L T C Rolt. But my prize for the "best" biography has to go abroad to Troyat for his (well-translated) *Tolstoy*.

The peculiar fascination that Africa and its great rivers had for the Victorians provide many truth-stranger-than-fiction stories, such as that of the explorer Sir Samuel Baker (*Lovers on the Nile* by Richard Hall) who married a girl he had bought at a slave market in what is now Bulgaria. But Livingstone himself remains perhaps the most intriguing personality of all, epitomising as he does the archetypal Victorian mixture of admirable and not so admirable qualities. Victorian biographers resolutely set up a plaster-saint image of the man, but modern writers have described a far more interesting and complex character, still undoubtedly a very great man but one with massive flaws. Owen Chadwick's *Mackenzie's Grave* tells the disastrous story of Livingstone's last major expedition, on which his wife perished, along with the saintly Bishop Mackenzie and most of the other white men; so also perished Livingstone's confident belief that the Zambesi would prove a major waterway giving traders access to central Africa, and thereby lead to elimination of the slave trade.

John Stuart Mill, the Victorian intellectual leader, provides a different facet of that culture. His *Autobiography* tells us a great deal about his astonishing bringing up by a father who believed that most of what could be learnt by the brain had to

reach it before the child was five. When Mill was 25 he fell in love with a married woman who became also his close collaborator. After 17 years of a curious sort of ménage à trois the husband died and Mill was able to marry the lady, who sadly by this time was an invalid. In his autobiography Mill touches very discreetly on this remarkable story, which is more fully related in Bruce Mazlish's *James and John Stuart Mill*.

Politics in the Middle East

Having been brought up as a small boy in Egypt during the first world war and posted there again in the second world war, the politics of the Middle East have always been of the greatest interest to me. The crucial Balfour Declaration of 1917 is described by its architect Chaim Weizmann in his fine autobiography *Trial by Error*, and Golda Meir's vivid *My Life* takes the story of Israel on to recent times. Marvellous though that 65-year story is, the end of the drama has yet to be played out, and this onlooker may not be present quite long enough to know whether the last act is going to turn out to be triumphant or tragic.

T E Lawrence was for my generation a romantically heroic figure. The publication of his *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* in 1935 was a much heralded event, preceded by years of rumour and speculation on account of the secrecy surrounding the privately printed version of 1926. Despite its patchiness as a historical record of a campaign, and the tantalisingly scanty glimpses of Lawrence's own enigmatic character, it remains one of the great books to be published in my lifetime. Here is the Lawrence to be remembered—everything that befell him afterwards is best forgotten.

T E Lawrence's regard for Charles Doughty led me to *Travels in Arabia Deserta*, read in the handsome 1936 edition of Jonathan Cape. Doughty was an academic and a philologist, who judged that language had reached a peak in the English of Tudor times. He decided that he ought to know intimately some other great language in order to test this belief, and with this unusual motive embarked, at the age of 34, on a two-year wandering through the wildest parts of Arabia. His book, published in 1888, is written in Doughty's own peculiar style of archaic English (one of the four publishers who turned it down reported that it ought "to be practically rewritten by a practised literary man"); by common consent it is a prose masterpiece.

A knowledge of the past . . .

I end by recommending three books, having in common only the fact that each was read "with pleasure." *The Common Stream* by Rowland Parker is a detailed study of the local history of Foxton, a small village near Cambridge. From it I understood for the first time how the feudal system actually worked and much else about mediaeval life, such as how our surnames came about. *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* was written in 1909 by Robert Tressell, a house painter in Hastings. He describes the life of an ordinary working-class man and the near-starvation conditions of much of the population, and this at the time when the power and wealth of Britain was at its zenith and Edwardian society at its most glittering. As with Soviet Russia, a knowledge of the past helps (a little) to make sense of the present, and reading this highly imperfect but powerful book made me understand how the attitudes of today's trades unions have come to be as suicidally Luddite as they so often are. Finally, for those who enjoy a whodunnit *Jack the Ripper—the Final Solution* by Stephen Knight provides an impressive mass of evidence that the Ripper was none other than Sir William Gull, physician to Queen Victoria. Absurd? Well read it and see!

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