Reading for Pleasure

Ancillary aids

D McCracken

The last time I contributed to this series I discussed some of the books which gave me much pleasure when I read them. To enjoy books fully it is essential to have a reasonable reference library easily to hand and preferably within stretching distance of your favourite armchair for the more commonly consulted volumes. In my youth and in the days when I was educating my children cost dictated which books I felt I could buy. Now space is the prime factor and whether a book justifies shelf space usually decides the issue. Reference books rate highly, and I have seldom bought a reference book I have regretted. Sometimes I have doubtfully succumbed and later repeatedly blessed the decision.

Dictionaries

A sine qua non, of course, is a good dictionary and preferably two. At home my parents had the two volume shorter Oxford dictionary and also the standard Chambers dictionary for quick easy reference where nuances were not important. They had also the six-volume Arthur Mee pictorial dictionary to which I will advert later. When I started my own library I bought a Chambers (since changed a number of times and now supplanted by the latest Collins thumb-indexed edition) and the single volume shorter Oxford on India paper. The latter was a mistake—it is very heavy and not as easy to handle as the two volume edition on thicker paper. Although I do keep this within stretching distance, it is too heavy and bulky to lift out of the bookcase with one hand from the armchair. It is very good for less commonly used words and different nuances of meaning. The Collins dictionary is reasonably sized, easily handled, and has scientific and biographical entries which make it very convenient as a first port of call when not much detail is required. The Arthur Mee pictorial dictionary in six large volumes I transferred to my own library when my parents died. It is not available now I imagine, and I would not be without it. It is wonderfully comprehensive, and it is amazing how often one can find the answer to a problem in its pages—incidentally I find it invaluable for the *Guardian* quick crossword, which is the only crossword I am capable of even attempting.

With some authors one rarely needs a dictionary, and with a few it is needed very frequently. I enjoy Anthony Burgess very much and thought *Earthly Powers* a superb book, a really meaty chunk of enjoyment. However, I certainly needed my dictionary. Some authors—and I do not mean Anthony Burgess—seem to use difficult words purely for the pleasure of doing so as if it demonstrated some literary ability. This I find both frustrating and irritating. I regard the secret of good writing as including the ability to express oneself as simply as possible. An unusual word

should be used without hesitation where it gives a special nuance but never to try and score a point over the reader.

Atlases

I have no sense of geography. This means that I need a good atlas more than most people but perhaps get less pleasure from it. I find the *Times Atlas* the best and keep it on the floor under a chair for easy access. I have no bookcase into which it fits comfortably. As a quicker source of information on most of my geographical problems I find the *Penguin Dictionary of Places* much easier to use. *Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable* is to me essential. It contains a mass of information not easily or quickly obtainable elsewhere. This is the book I use for Latin tags, classical references, heraldry, and much else. It even has a picture of Chad—Wot, no char? I use also the *Penguin Dictionary of the Ancient World* and occasionally the large Hamlyn paperback *Mythology*, which I find of much less practical value than either of the other two despite its bulk and detail.

Quotations

A good reference of quotations is essential and here I think personal preference must operate. I started with an early edition of the *Oxford Book of Quotations*, which is still good for the older bread-and-butter quotations. I find that a number of small books used with this answers my own wants best, and I have the *Penguin Modern Quotations*, *Thesaurus of quotations*, and *Concise Dictionary of Biographical Quotations*. The *Thesaurus* is arranged much on the lines of Roget's *Thesaurus* (itself an essential in any reference library) with quotations arranged under headings like "wedding" and "retirement" with excellent cross references. Ideal for speeches. The *Concise Dictionary of Biographical Quotations* is arranged alphabetically under names—each followed by things said both by and about the name heading them. When I leave the dining table to check some point and return with the answer the family often ask where I found it. When I reply, "Oh, in the bible" they know I do not mean the revised version but the *Oxford Companion to English Literature*. I christened it the bible many years ago when I first became so impressed with what could be extracted from it. It has the right combination of being reasonably comprehensive, precise, informative, and easy to use. I know of no book which fulfils its particular function so well. So often one wants to know quickly, or to refresh oneself on, the plot of a book, to check a literary character, find out something about an author, or to learn something about a well-known (to other people!) major poem. This and many other things it does so well. The difficulty with this companion is the same as with so many other reference books—one gets waylaid and ends up browsing with the original quest all but forgotten. None of the guides to English literature have interested or stimulated me to anything like the same degree.

84 Charing Cross Road (now in a paper back) I first came

across as a radio play when I had switched on by pure chance. I was fascinated. It deals with the wartime correspondence between an American woman in search of certain books and a second-hand bookseller at the address of the title. A warm relationship and friendship gradually developed, leading to food parcels from the States and reciprocation in book form. A year or so ago I found myself near Charing Cross Road one afternoon with an hour to kill and for sentimental reasons wandered up it to identify No 84, although I knew the particular bookshop no longer existed. Inevitably I browsed in several others and made an impulse purchase—*The Oxford Book of English Proverbs*. I had no idea there were so many of them, between nine hundred and a thousand pages in fact. I would have preferred more explanation of the meaning and less of the derivation but nevertheless a fascinating book both as a reference book and a book to dip into. I note from inside the cover that my foray into Charing Cross Road was actually in February 1981 and on the occasion of a very pleasant weekend spent at the Tower Hotel in St Katherine's Dock. Checking the date, with this fact annotated to it, brings back to me other memories of that weekend.

Oxford reference books

The Oxford reference books are numerous and for the interested but not necessarily well-informed seeker are sufficiently comprehensive without being too detailed or erudite. I have—and frequently use—in addition to those mentioned already their *Companion to Music*, *Companion to the Sea and Ships*, *Dictionary of the Christian Church* (just as useful whether you are a Christian, an agnostic, or a heathen), and *Companion to Film*. Reference books are in one way like cars—many of them have many of the things you want but none are designed with exactly the combination of virtues you want yourself. Recently the *Guardian* quick crossword had a clue “to sail with the wind.” The word just eluded me so *Companion to Ships and the Sea* was hauled out of the bookcase. It did not help—I looked up under wind and other similar terms I knew like luff, gybe, and so on to no avail. I had to go to the final arbiter, my wife, who told me that what I wanted was scud. I felt this was not a very nautical term but indeed it is, “to run before a gale with reduced canvas, or under bare poles—it is apt to be a dangerous practice with the risk of the vessel being pooped.” What thoughts it conjures up! When I acquire a new reference book I usually make a few spot checks to see how useful it is going to be. When my son presented me with the *Oxford Companion to Film* I looked up some of the film stars of my youth, and I must say found Kenneth More a curious omission. He may not have added a new dimension to films but he certainly gave me much pleasure many years ago.

The Oxford Press last month issued the revised volume 2 of the concise *Dictionary of National Biography* now including people dying between 1901 and 1970 (instead of 1950). I have bought it even at £17.50 and did not have to hesitate more than a few hours after first seeing it. I do not possess the earlier edition and have often felt the need for it. The *Penguin Chronology of the Modern World* lists the events of each year from 1763 to 1965. On the left-hand pages these are listed chronologically for the year and on the right-hand side under various headings like politics, science, art, music, etc for the same year. This is a fascinating book for browsing and for putting things into context. It is also a great source of information for interesting additions to speeches—“Mr Chairman, the year in which this society was instituted was also the year in which . . . was discovered and . . . painted.” There are many surprises in its pages. I am writing this in April 1982 and in April 1882 the Prussian Legation at the Vatican was restored. Also in 1882 Brahms wrote his second piano concerto, Wagner “Parsifal,” and Sullivan “Iolanthe.” It was a surprise to me that “Parsifal” and “Iolanthe” are the same age—subconsciously “Iolanthe” is to me much more modern than “Parsifal.”

Eric Partridge in his *Dictionary of Slang* is said to have “assembled a striking collection of the rough words of past

centuries and showed a remarkable knowledge of their use and origin . . .” and the *Penguin Dictionary of Slang* based on it is more than comprehensive enough for most people. Did you know that “with a belly full of marrow pudding” or “in the pudding club” means pregnant?

I possess no large encyclopaedia and have no desire to possess one. I feel they date so quickly (of necessity) and individual small reference books are of much more use. I inherited a *Chambers's Encyclopaedia* in many volumes from my father and soon dispelled it from my shelves to make room for more worthy books. I have not mentioned many of the reference books I enjoy (from Mrs Beeton to Culpeper) but cannot forbear to finish without urging you on no account to omit a small gem called *An Exaltation of Larks or the Venereal Game* by James Lipton. Despite the subtitle the book leads, as the author says, “not to Gomorrah but Acedeme.” The book is a collection of collective nouns mainly evolving in the Middle Ages, with modern ones invented by the author and others. You all know a pride of lions and a gaggle of geese but how many of you know a skulk of foxes, a knot of toads, a cete of badgers? Readers of Conan Doyle do—from “Sir Nigel.” They also will learn many new ones in this book, however. The illustrations are superb. Lipton coins “a wince of dentists” and gives a “doctrine of doctors” from the book of St Alban (1486) a book which includes 164 terms of venery. Can I suggest my own alternative?—“a cure of doctors” would please me better.

(Accepted 23 April 1982)

MATERIA NON MEDICA

The camel race

After a while it became obvious why the chairs had been so uncomfortable to sit on: they were meant for standing on. Everybody in the European enclosure was doing it—that is, those who didn't fall off. They were folding chairs. It would seem more logical for everybody to sit down, but everybody else was standing on the chairs, so why not join them? Over on the left was a black-veiled figure who looked like the lady Peta had just taken tea with. It was impossible to be sure—Arab ladies, black-veiled from head to foot, look so similar. They had been very kind to Peta as we went by. She was beckoned to sit down on a rug between two trucks with five ladies and eight children, one of whom rapidly made itself comfortable on her lap. The ladies and Peta drank hot, sweet tea and the older children drank Pepsi.

They are off—the camels, that is! A roar comes from the crowd. The annual camel race, a sort of Arabian Ascot, has begun. Dignitaries looking dignified, Arabs in their red headdresses, Europeans with cameras a foot long, jump up and down and get excited. They're running in the wrong direction. Chaos. Round them all up and start again. Jeeps with flashing lights are everywhere, up goes a helicopter, an ambulance joins in the fun. How do you round up 4000 camels running in the wrong direction? Eventually, after an hour, they do—an hour of standing on a folding chair.

Off they go in the right direction. The camels and riders run round the five-mile course three times—apart from the one who sat down and decided to go to sleep. The king drives round the course in his luxury coach. It is difficult to decide if the king's coach is trying to keep up with the camels or if the camels are trying not to overtake the king. Every time the king passes the chair-standing crowds in the enclosure he gets a bigger round of applause than the camels, and a few people fall off—there is no doubt who is the favourite. Eventually they come to the end. Police cars drive up and down, soldiers march up and down, spectators jump up and down, and the winner wins. Great fun, and a great sense of joining in and fellowship.

We all drive home in the big yellow hospital bus. A father and his son stand beside their car in the desert facing Mecca, bow and say the timeless prayers of Islam. A lasting image of piety. Suddenly the fact that the bus driver has got fed up with the traffic doesn't really matter. His liberal curses and explanation of the family trees of all the other drivers just seem part of an overall picture of dust, colour, friendship, and piety.—EDWIN MARTIN, consultant primary care physician, Saudi Arabia.