Reading for Pleasure

Known by your bookshelves

D McCracken

Other people's bookshelves interest me greatly, and whenever I am left alone in a room in someone else's house where there are books I cannot help looking at the titles. I am obviously not alone in this as in my own house I often find visitors perambulating slowly past the shelves. I expect they learn as much about me as I do about others by such activities. You know a man better when you have looked at his bookshelves, and certainly you will not be short of something to talk about.

Memoirs, diaries, and letters

Memoirs, diaries, and letters I find particularly interesting, and here the pleasure lies partly in getting one facet of the writer from his own books and other facets from the memoirs and diaries of the contemporaries who knew him.

I greatly enjoyed Harold Nicolson's diaries and letters, which I purchased as they were published. Many of the questions raised in my mind then were settled many years later when his son wrote *Portrait of a Marriage*. A recent visit to Sissinghurst (the garden made by Vita Sackville-West, who was Harold Nicolson's wife) was, because of these books, even more enjoyable than most visits to gardens. Incidentally *Portrait of a Marriage* is one of the books I would recommend to anyone wanting to understand something about homosexuality. At the same time they should read Tom Driberg's autobiography and Christopher Isherwood's *Christopher and his Kind* to get quite different slants on homosexuality and the sort of people who are homosexuals. Christopher Isherwood and Vita Sackville-West both in different ways evoked in me a sympathy I found quite lacking when I read Driberg's book. These are all now available in paperback. In my younger days I preferred my books to be in hard back and preferably have elegant bindings. For reasons not only of economy but also storage I now usually get paperbacks if available, although of course there are exceptions. It still gives me almost a physical pain to see someone mishandling a book.

Some of the diarists I enjoy (Kilvert, for example) have already been mentioned in previous articles in this series. I don't think anyone has mentioned Parson Woodforde's diary (*Diary of a Country Parson*). I have a small pocket edition published by Oxford Press, and over the years (I bought it in 1956) this has probably given me more pleasure than any diary except Pepys. Woodforde writes well of mundane matters, and one shivers with him when he finds the urine frozen in the chamber pot on a cold morning. One of the great pleasures of this book is his frequent description of their menus—one has little difficulty in understanding his partiality for rhubarb as a medicament and his comment one day "Did not sleep very well last night as the pills I took last night occasioned rumblings within me" (sic). He firmly believed that the maidservant he

had to dismiss because she suffered from fits had been freed from them for some time because of the assafetida drops he had persuaded her to take.

Armstrong's *Norfolk Diary* is another parson's diary—the Rev Benjamin John Armstrong, born in 1817, was Vicar of East Dereham from 1850 to 1888. It is written rather prosaically, but this sometimes adds point to the contents—3 January 1854: "In the evening went to a party at Mr Anfrere's. Very slow—small rooms, piano out of tune, bad wine, and stupid people. Still, we think it right to go to such parties and it is a satisfaction to feel that one is giving pleasure at a moderate cost of self-denial." In 1855 he was visiting London and, "Had a luxurious bath for 6d being the charge for 'first class' at the Baths in the New Road—one of the cheap luxuries with which this age, and particularly this city, abounds." There were excitements (of a sort) even in the country, and on 19 August 1852: "On Tuesday some people applied for a marriage licence which, in order to save time, I directed the Norwich officials to send by post to Beeston where the ceremony was to take place. Unfortunately they sent it to Dereham. So, in order that the wedding might come off that day I cantered off to Beeston with the licence in my pocket. There I found that the anxious couple had gone to Dereham by train, so I galloped to Fransham station in the hope of overtaking them. Fortunately they had been just a minute too late for the train. I next advised them to go to Beeston Church as quickly as possible, while I rode round to the rectory and by the time that Mr Nelson and I had got to the church it wanted ten minutes to noon and the parties had not arrived. Moreover the clerk was absent and he had the key of the vestry containing the surplice and book. These difficulties were surmounted by my acting as clerk and the anxious bridegroom breaking open the vestry door, so that, after all, we only just managed to perform the ceremony in the canonical hours. It was a complete chapter of accidents. Dined with the Miss Bullocks of Shipdham Park." I hope the Miss Bullocks fed him well—he deserved it.

Life in a French village

This year Penguin published for the first time in paperback (and so at a price I could afford) *Montaillou*, which gives a fascinating picture of life in a French village near the Spanish border during the period 1290 to 1320. As it is based on a surviving volume of transcripts made during depositions to the Inquisition about hereticism it has all the impact that memoirs written at the time would have had. This is a book which, although intended as a piece of social history, no memoir and diary lover should miss. In it I first heard of the "Endura"—the last rites in this Cathar community were administered only when death was considered inevitable, and the ill person was then expected to fast henceforth to ensure that death did indeed take place and that he did not survive in the "hereticated" state that followed these rites.

One of my early resident jobs was at a thoracic hospital in 1942 and 1943. Most patients were tuberculous and the hospital

purpose-built on an ideal coastal site. It was not until last year, when it was reissued in Penguins, that I came across *The Rack* by A E Ellis written 20 years earlier. This novel describes some English university students sent to a Swiss sanatorium as protégés of the International Students Organisation in the early interwar years. Anyone who worked in a sanatorium in the days before antituberculous drugs will find it almost unbearably nostalgic. Ellis has captured the atmosphere exactly. It apparently got the choicest collection of British reviews achieved by any book in 1958 but somehow, despite this, it passed me by—I obviously didn't read my book reviews carefully enough.

Although our medical history books give us some idea of the effects of the plague, there are few which give us the feeling of the times. Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year* does. It was written between 1721 and 1723 and based both on his own knowledge and on other books published at the time. It takes the form of a journal purporting to be written by someone who lived through it. *The Black Death* by Johannes Nohl compiled from contemporary sources gives graphic descriptions of some horrific scenes. In a longish letter written from Naples on 10 July 1656 one, John Baptista Spinell, says among other things: "The town is now only recognisable by its edifices and magnificent houses and no longer by its teeming population, the decrease and destruction of which is constantly augmented by the piled up corpses of which 60 000 were burned, one part on Sunday morning and one part on Wednesday night. One hundred and seventy thousand have further been buried in huge trenches, the most aristocratic in the Churches," and later in the same letter: "The people are perishing, and there is such an abominable stench it alone would suffice to kill, so that everyone longs for death, to be delivered from this fearful misery. Many die in despair, believing that hell can be no worse. Multitudes of dogs and cats scamper through the streets, appealing their hunger on the corpses lying about everywhere." In a postscript he tells of 20 000 corpses being thrown into the sea as there was no one left to bury them.

The Triumph of Surgery by Jurgen Thorwald adopts the device of an eye witness as narrator—an American physician (fictitious) who tours centres of medicine and surgery in the last decades of the nineteenth century and the earlier decades of this one. It is based on historical fact and is a fascinating way of learning a lot about some of the people responsible for medical and surgical progress before and after the turn of the century. The device is so effective the narrator soon becomes a real person to whom one warms, and in whose company it is a pleasure to visit Charcot and other medical giants.

Autobiography in fiction

I am very fond of the Yorkshire coast in the region of Robin Hood's Bay and Whitby and also of the small ports in Cornwall. One of my favourite authors whom I have reread many times is Leo Walmsley, who has written about both. His books seem to be much less well known than they deserve. One should start with *Three Fevers* probably his best book and a description of the life of fishermen in Robin Hood's Bay ("Bramblewick") in the days when it was a working fishing village, albeit the end of those days. *Foreigners* is a description of his childhood in Robin Hood's Bay, where his father was a painter (of doubtful ability I guess) who painted local scenes for the visitors. Many years ago we were visiting my son at school for the day and took him out to lunch. On the wall was a small painting of a Yorkshire coble drawn up on a beach and signed Ulric B Walmsley. I am sure it was by Leo's father, and it still grieves me that I did not ask whether they would sell it. It was of no value as a painting, and I wanted it purely for sentimental reasons but thought at the time that the price would be high if I were seen to be keen, and in those days of school fees money was short. I have never seen a painting by him before or since. Although *Three Fevers* is fictional, the characters are real. *Love in the Sun* is an autobiographical book about his conversion

of derelict property near Fowey in his days of poverty. He dealt with a chandlers at Bodinnick and some years ago when there I asked a local exactly where Walmsley's house was. He called "Charlie" to a passing man, and to my amazement this was a character from the book. It added a spice to the day. *Love in the Sun* was the first of a trilogy and the third was *Happy Ending* about his occupation of Castle Druid in Wales. It was disappointing to learn that by the time this was published his wife had left him. Leo Walmsley later married the daughter of Nathaniel Gubbins, who conversed with his own Tum in a famous column in a Sunday newspaper.

I love my holidays in France and because of this a book set in parts of France I know has a headstart in my appreciation. Somerset Maugham many years ago had great success with a book called *Ten Novels and their Authors* based on a list he had once made when asked by an American editor to list the 10 best novels in the world. There are three or four I would not dispute and a couple I would have chosen myself. Otherwise my list would be quite different. It would certainly include Zola's *L'Assommoir*. The best translation of this is *The Boozier* (referring to a drinking establishment not a person), and it is one of the Rougon-Macquart series in which he deals with different branches of the same family and different aspects of nineteenth-century French life. *L'Assommoir* gives a picture of working-class life in Paris and describes how the main character Gervaise sinks slowly down the social scale. Zola uses the coarse argot of the back streets with great effect. There is a superb description of the death in delirium tremens of Gervaise's husband—much more powerful than any textbook description. The novel is set in a small circumscribed district of Paris, much of which still survives—that between the Gare du Nord, Montmartre, and the rue Marcadet. Gervaise, like Maugham's hero in *Of Human Bondage*, is lame, and her lameness is accentuated by tiredness or stress. It should enthrall any lover of Paris. So should a much more recent publication *The Streets of Paris* by Richard Cobb based on photographs by Nicholas Breach, which explores much of the old Paris arrondissement by arrondissement. The photographs are superb. George Orwell's *Down and Out* in London and Paris is another favourite. This I am afraid is one of my books that is not as pristine as most. It is the Penguin edition that I read by torchlight in our Lamont Chalet tent on the farm above Fisherman's Cove near Aberdaron on a camping holiday. Orwell worked as a plongeur in Parisian restaurants. Perhaps on second thoughts if you enjoy eating out you had better give this book a miss.

The Wind in the Willows seems to suffer no loss of popularity with the passing years. One seldom these days comes across two other great books by Kenneth Grahame—*The Golden Age* (1895) and *Dream Days* (1898)—which preceded by many years his more famous book. These are, I think, the best books I know which describe children's relationships with adults from the child's point of view. As so often with books the sequel does not quite come up to the original volume, in my view anyway.

The joys of browsing

One of the associated pleasures of reading is to browse through new and second-hand bookshops. I am not a collector of old books, although I would like to be knowledgeable enough to be one. I enjoy browsing through the books of more recent vintage that are old enough to have reached such shops—books that have been out of mind for many years and books not met before. Sometimes the inscriptions from donor to recipient dated and in an older style of handwriting conjure up wondering thoughts. Three years ago I picked up Moran's *Winston Churchill* in the second-hand bookshop in Kendal for £2, and I am still intermittently dipping into this in chronological sequence. I think it should not have been written but as it has I see no reason why I should not read it. I know it was three years ago—I always write inside the cover the date I buy a

book, where I buy it unless bought in the town I live in, and the occasion if it is noteworthy. On this occasion the book is inscribed "Visit to architect, Kendal, April 1977." The occasion was to institute additions to our cottage in the Lakes preparatory to our retirement in due course (and to provide suitable comfort for much future reading). My books now contain many inscriptions that bring back happy memories of the occasion on which I bought them—many of them on trips with relatives

or friends now dead. It is a practice I commend to you, and it does add enjoyment to your library.

My wife's choice of books is on the whole very different from mine, although there are some on which we reach unanimity. We sometimes each come to appreciate a book that the other has urged. Although your idea of what constitutes pleasurable reading may differ from mine, I hope that someone will find new friends among my old favourites.

MATERIA NON MEDICA

On the writing of poetry

If one decided to be the first to return to the new rhymed verse away from *vers libre* there is a tried and tested way to do it. How? Geographically, of course. At least three well-known poets have achieved or added to their fame through a study of their schoolboy atlases.

Rudyard Kipling had never set foot in the place when he wrote "The Road to Mandalay," but he realised the poetry in the name itself, with rhymes for the asking. And when he quite ruthlessly said "outer China 'crost the Bay," nobody dared to point out that owing to the geographical location of Mandalay, which isn't on the coast anyway, the bay must have been the Bay of Bengal to the west, so the dawn couldn't "come up like thunder" or like anything in nature. And India is really a three syllable word so since only two were demanded, China it was. And a very brilliant exercise in nostalgia resulted.

Of all John Masefield's poetry there is little doubt that the short poem "Cargoes" was his most irresistible success. Yet the first line is made from the most poetic sounding names he could find on the map, and geographically they seem to make even less sense than "Mandalay," "Quinquereme"? A Roman galley with five banks of oars. Yes, but "of Ninevah"? Ninevah was hundreds of miles east of the Mediterranean, landlocked in the middle of Asia Minor. And the cargoes were said to be "from Ophir." Ophir, the ancient site of King Solomon's mines, is in present day Zimbabwe, and thousands of miles overland to the south in the continent of Africa, so the cargoes must have travelled an astonishing distance before they reached the quinquereme.

Walter James Turner was a critic of music and the drama who achieved one entry in the *Oxford Dictionary of Quotations* by opening his own atlas at South America and selecting "Chimborazo, Cotopaxi, Popocatepetl" purely for the exotic and romantic sound of their names. He then added "They have stolen my heart away!" Which finale one would imagine Lehar or Richard Rodgers would have rejected out of hand for any of their musicals as just too utterly futile for words.

So reach for your atlas, there are plenty more names there—W S Gilbert even found romance in the word Basingstoke—and keep on sending up your poem until *some* editor prints it.

The start's the thing and if you can get that from geography you can then move on to the beauty of words other than place names, and the delight of rhyme. And if you are philosopher enough to be able to end every quatrain with a punch line you will have equalled the two best loved poems in the English language, Gray's "Elegy" and Fitzgerald's "Omar Khayyam."—N S WYLIE (Gayton, Merseyside).

Children's games

My office windows overlook a school playground and the sight of young children at play is a welcome diversion. There is a timeless quality to the scene. Indeed, some of the games are little different from those in Breughel's famous painting. Perhaps the cowboys and Indians of my own childhood have been replaced by space pirates, and laser guns are used instead of six shooters, but the fast draw and the sharp exclamation remain mandatory.

Tig is still being played and the girls have their skipping ropes—short for one person, long for three or more. One girl is bouncing two balls against a wall with amazing skill while chanting a ritual song. In my day it began "Mary Queen of Scots had her head chopped off!" Now it has to do with a pop star. Against a wall two teams are playing hunch-cuddy-hunch. This involves one group leaning against the wall like a rugby scrum, while the others leap on their backs. The object is for the first team to dislodge the second. Fodder for our casualty department.

Two boys are fighting on horseback, each "horse" is another boy. They manoeuvre for position as each rider tries to unseat the other. One succeeds and horse and rider change roles; the joust continues. In a corner some girls are playing peever. This requires an intricate pattern drawn on the ground with chalk. A round, flat tin is kicked from one area to the next while hopping. To my amazement some boys join in, a totally unheard of happening in my day. It must be this sex equality thing.

Below me a hand game is taking place. Stone sharpens knife; knife cuts paper; paper wraps stone. A friend told me he saw this played by a primitive African tribe. The chestnuts have only just ripened and there is but a single game of conkers in progress. Soon each boy will have a string of champions. Perhaps the girls too, who knows? An attempt at leap frog has had to be abandoned because of the antisocial behaviour of one very small boy. He is pursued, yelling and shouting, by the others bent on mayhem.

Soon a teacher appears and the Brownian movement of the children is transformed into bacteriological chains. A whistle blows and the playground is empty. Presidents, prime ministers, and potentates may come and go but these simple children's games seem to go on for ever.—WILLIAM THOMSON (chief administrative medical officer, Lanarkshire).

An unlikely trio

The Honours of Scotland, an ancient parish kirk, a castle steeped in bloody history. It has always surprised me how few Scots know how closely this unlikely trio is connected and how an important episode in Scottish history brought them together. Crown, sword, and sceptre. These lie safely in the Crown Chambers of Edinburgh Castle: the oldest crown jewels in Europe—dating back to Robert the Bruce—seen by thousands of visitors daily in the castle.

On the coast road to Aberdeen just north of Montrose, lies the parish of Kinneff, in an area of fertile farmland producing some of Scotland's finest arable crops. The ancient kirk of that parish provides the centre point of our story. Further north, just before the town of Stonehaven, with its safe harbour and fishing fleet, lies Dunnottar Castle. An imposing sight, this castle stands boldly on an isolated rock, facing the North Sea, often shrouded in the fog that haunts this rugged coastline. Dunnottar has seen several dark happenings in Scottish history. But this tale at least has a happy ending.

When Cromwell moved into Scotland, the Regalia were moved to Dunnottar Castle, the last stronghold to fly the Royal Flag of Scotland. In 1651, under the command of General Overton, the English troops laid siege to the castle—the main attraction being the Honours of Scotland. After eight months, the castle garrison surrendered. But the Regalia were nowhere to be found.

The story goes that a servant girl belonging to the Kinneff parish minister made daily visits to the seaward side of the castle rock to collect dulse. She became a familiar and accepted figure to the encircling troops. By clandestine means she obtained the Regalia, secreted them in her dulse laden creel and carried her prize back to the manse. The parish minister, the Reverend James Grainger, buried them under the spot of authority—his own pulpit. There they remained safe for nine years until the Monarchy was restored.

What of that trio now? The Honours are, of course, now proudly displayed and seen by thousands every year. The old parish church at Kinneff was unfortunately demolished and a new one built in 1738. This building is seldom used, but the visitors' book bears witness to the many who come to view the memorial to the Reverend James Grainger. Dunnottar Castle? The well-kept ruins stand darkly imperious high on their rock foundation overlooking magnificent cliffs and a grey North Sea.—J P COLQUHOUN (Cleveland, Queensland, Australia).