Reading for Pleasure

A practical bent

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However attractive the Reading for Pleasure feature may be it can cause spasms of conscience in those of us who are largely addicted to professional and non-fictional reading—even if we are supported by the cynic who described fictional reading as enjoying emotions at secondhand. In a way this is understandable—particularly by those who have been in practice for a long time, and who have ceased to be surprised by the life events of the people who have seen us grow grey over the years. Even so, I admit to a sense of surprise and what seems to be a need for education when I read the question and answer column in the women's popular magazines—which are commonly found in the nurses' rest rooms where I am occasionally invited. Being mechanically minded, I understandably qualified in dentistry before medicine, and my teenage reading was mainly the *Model Engineer* which is still going strong as the flagship of a technical publishing group. The grubbiness of the pages in my collection shows my close study of the text as the project therein described progressed. I still read this and similar papers regularly, and as a spin-off have learnt to speak engineering language fluently and can contribute with profit to such journals.

The lure of our own times

The pressure of the passing years, however, has not dampened my interest in current affairs and I have long been mystified by the razzamatazz and general goings-on in the American primary and presidential elections. Happily, I chanced on *All Things to All Men* by Godfrey Hodgson, which shows a marvellous insight into the constraints and difficulties under which any American president has to work, the whole being a thoughtful story but with little comfort to the present incumbent—or so it seemed to me. If nothing else the book highlighted my almost total ignorance of the working of American politics so that *The American System of Government* by E S Griffiths proved valuable, being good enough to run through four editions. It is a touch dull, but its description of the workings of our own political system as a basis for comparison is rewarding because we take ours so much for granted; it should be available in any public library.

My appetite whetted, I secured another of Godfrey Hodgson's books, *In Our Time*, which covers the years from 1945 to the run-up to Watergate, and, chapter by chapter, was entranced to trace the faltering march of the American people: the Marshall Plan, and the world being taught the mechanics of productivity only to be overtaken by European and Eastern countries who learnt the lesson only too well. Many aspects of American lifestyle seem to have overtones of classic Greek tragedy, all too manifest in the continuing press of racial problems and the delusions of

the liberal consensus that are destined to failure because of mistaken policies undertaken with the best of intentions. This is a long book that is deeply researched and scrupulously documented, of easy writing style, and with the occasional perfect gem of a throwaway line. Some of its overtones are spine-chilling: the concealment from the people of the progress and inevitable outcome of the Vietnam war, and the paradox of the black population—one part of which has climbed to parity with the whites, but a larger portion of which has fallen further backward than before with all the ingredients for disaster still ahead. The final chapter, an epilogue almost, gives some measure of hope and shows that, although there are frequent falls, there is the power to rise again, and indicates how this rise may be brought about. A further useful feature is a précis of each chapter just before the index.

Chance next brought into my hands *Farnborough: the Story of the RAE* by Turnill and Reed, recommendable to lay and technically minded readers alike, being the story of the concentration of boffins at Farnborough from before the first war until today—but now with an international reputation. We read of the boffins' attack on every conceivable sort of problem, initially on first principles with confirmatory experiments with crude devices moving on to the most advanced, which in many cases concerned the ultimate gamble with life itself; many brave men died but none in vain. Some problems were intensely human, a certain aeroplane design allowed ejection of the pilots but not of the crewmen, and this dire combination occurred when such a plane, while returning from a successful world test flight, crashed on landing in sight of the press and reception body gathered to meet it. A certain lady, later to become an established officer, who features in the book, was reputed not only to be as handy with a blowpipe as any aircraft fitter but, in the best boffin tradition, also invented a device to prevent fuel starvation in increasing acceleration conditions in aerial combat—a disagreeable deficiency when pursued by an enemy fighter with a fuel injected engine. No less distinguished were those working in the Department of Aviation Medicine which became more and more necessary as demands on the human frame increased. Many doctors flew side by side with pilots for the special tests and some were pilots themselves.

A partner of mine served his war years at Farnborough and, although immensely successful in practice afterwards, I always had a suspicion that his time with the RAE was as happy a period as any in his life. In air matters the years have not dealt with us too kindly, and technical failures culminating in the Comet disasters led to a loss of confidence. Until then Britain had been leading the world, a lead never to be regained.

It is said that by glancing along bookshelves one can guess the character and tastes of their owner. From such books as these on my shelves (my *Model Engineers* are bound in respectable covers to justify their place) it might well be held that their owner was of little culture, inquisitive of men and matters, and withal of practical bent, and I suppose I could hardly quarrel with that.