Reading for Pleasure

Ali Baba's cave

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I am an addict of the printed word, hooked and incurable. My idea of hell is to have to wait for all eternity in an airport lounge with nothing to read. As a child the main source of reading matter was the public library. The bookcase at home contained *Nicholas Nickleby*, Ibsen's *Ghosts*, Henderson's *Case for Socialism*, George A Birmingham's *Spanish Gold*, George Eliot's *The Mill on The Floss*, and a tattered *Nuttall's Standard Dictionary*, the last of which was accorded in our household the respect that in other families was reserved only for the Bible. It was consulted with similar frequency.

My father was a slow reader with an incredible memory. He never asked me to read anything, but tantalised me by quoting at length from Dickens and H G Wells. His favourites were *David Copperfield* and *Great Expectations*, *Kipps*, and *Bealby*. Later on he led me to Bernard Shaw, Jerome K Jerome, and Anatole France.

Three weeks' pocket money could buy a book at Woolworth's (red cardboard covers embossed in gold)—and indeed *A Tale of Two Cities*, Victor Hugo's *Toilers of the Sea*, and Kingsley's *The Water Babies* were acquired in this way—but this was slow literary starvation. As soon as I was allowed to go there on my own, however, the public lending library supplied my wants. I read all they had of Henty, Jules Verne, Fennimore Cooper, and, let me confess it, Angela Brazil. Before I was 12 I had read the entire works of Dickens, much frustrated by the incomplete *Edwin Drood*. (Since writing this I have read Alistair Cooke's *Six Men* and he claims that he had read all Dickens, plus all the biographies and memoirs, by the age of 12.)

The junior library, to which the under 14s were limited, did not permit borrowers to inspect the books. Titles were chosen from the catalogue, asked for across the counter, and a tab from the book inserted into the borrower's ticket. Filing did not take place until the library closed. This had the disadvantage that the book could not be changed until the next day, a fact of little consequence in term time, but disastrous in the holidays. Imagine the volume picked from the fast diminishing choice left, started shortly after 9 in the morning and completed by midday and no hope of further reading until the next morning. On many occasions I returned in the afternoon and tried to cajole, wheedle, or bully another book out of the librarian, but always in vain.

Tickets to adulthood

One day in my thirteenth year, the purple date stamp in the book didn't come through very clearly. A little work with a

copying ink pencil made it look two days earlier and, hopefully if stupidly, I presented this in the afternoon. The forgery was, of course, at once detected and I was taken to the office of the head librarian. He had, he said, received many complaints about me and his patience was now exhausted. Close to tears, I saw my library ticket being torn in two. Then he wrote on two pieces of card and handed me a fiction and a non-fiction ticket for the adult section of the library. He pointed out that I could change the books as often in the day as I liked and spend as much of the day among the shelves as I liked, as long as I kept out of his sight. Ali Baba's cave had opened.

I like to think that there is a quiet corner of paradise where the climate is more equable than in the rest of that establishment and the armchairs even more comfortable. Beautiful hours stand by at all times to fetch in a microsecond any volume at all from the libraries of the British Museum or the American Congress. Surely, if there is ultimate justice, that is where my chief librarian now resides.

Translations of the classics fascinated me. The *Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, Aristophanes and Euripides, and, a little later, the *Aenid*. *Penguin Island* by Anatole France and *King Goshawk and the Birds* by Seán O'Faoláin were my first taste of satire and, not entirely comprehending, I went on to Voltaire and Rabelais. I tried Thackeray but was not attracted; perhaps he lacked the sentimentality and social commitment that endeared Dickens to me. I read the war literature—Richard Aldington, Henry Barbusse, Robert Graves, and then Bebel. It was the last that led me to the Russians. I thoroughly disliked Tolstoy (not only because of the unattractive aspects of his character), but I took at once to Dostoevsky, and, above all, to Maxim Gorky. Turgenev failed to hold me. I tried and did not greatly enjoy Chesterton's *Father Brown* books, but fortunately came across *The Flying Inn*, which led me to his poetry. I used to recite the "Song of the Wheels," "Ballad of Suicide," "The Forgotten People," and "Ballad of the Creche" by heart and at parties I still sometimes produce "The Rolling English Road" and "Wine and Water." I have always considered "The Ballad of the White Horse" to be one of the greatest of epics, and I still shout aloud verses from it when driving on my own. It is perhaps Chesterton's *Variations on an Air*, in which he parodied Old King Cole as it might have been written by Swinburne, which led me to Swinburne and to an unending delight in his sensuous cadences.

As I have indicated, fortune smiled on me as a youngster, and I had not long taken up my semi-permanent abode in the senior library than there was a further manifestation of divine favour. A doctor had his surgery next door to our home. One day I spotted his copy of the *London Mercury* on top of the dustbin. From then on with the connivance of his sister, who kept house for him, I got the journal each month as he finished it. Book reviews (I think I remember some by Osbert Burdett) were now relevant to my reading. I can remember the review of J C Powys's *Wolf Solent*; from then on I read all I could of the Powys brothers, revelling in their sultry mysticism. Probably without his knowledge, the good doctor helped me in other ways,

and I read his copy of H G Wells's *Outline of History* in two volumes before he got his hands on it.

At 16 I decided to try for a university scholarship and made the greatest possible sacrifice on the altar of ambition. I gave up reading for pleasure entirely for two years. Well, almost two years: for before the exams broke on me I became acquainted with the household of Havelock Ellis and hence his library. I completed my reading of Aldous Huxley and all that was being translated of the Scandinavians. Luck was with me again, for when I appeared for the final interview at University College for my scholarship, the man at the head of the table talked about the modern novel. I advised him to read Gunnar Gunnarsson, Knut Hamsun, and Sigrid Undset. Only later, much later, did I learn that the provost was professor of Scandinavian literature.

Looking back

Now in retirement, I look at my bookshelves and note what I have kept to reread or bought to read in the leisure that I mistakenly imagined retirement would bring. On my holidays this year, I reread H A L Fisher's *A History of Europe*, still stirring in its breadth of vision but perhaps less compelling than when I read it on a troopship during the war. Among the history books I prize Churchill's *A History of the English-Speaking Peoples* (one discovers more in it at each reading, particularly the first volume) and Toynbee's *Hellenism. Mankind and Mother Earth* awaits another lazy holiday.

Zoe Oldenberg's historical novels are all the better history for being freed from mere facts. No history book could convey the atmosphere of mediaeval France better than does *The Cornerstone* or *The World is not Enough*. It is, however, her books about the Albigenses that horrified and fascinated me. It led me to Stephen Runciman's *Mediaeval Manichee* and, as a result, the three volumes of his *History of the Crusades* lie on the shelf, two read and one to go. Volume one verified the historical accuracy of Zoe Oldenberg's novel of the first crusade, *The Heirs of the Kingdom*, which, like *The Cornerstone*, conveys the feeling, taste, and smell of its period.

For straight history, C V Wedgwood's *The Thirty Years War* takes its place alongside Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* and next to this an authoritative work on the fourteenth century, Barbara Tuchman's *A Distant Mirror*, which I have just read for the second time. The same events are covered more dramatically in Maurice Druon's six volumes of *The Accursed Kings*, which were the basis of an exceptional French television series that actually justified one's licence fee. Further along the shelf I find the novels of Mary Renault. Her *Last of the Wine* made clear to me for the first time why a fundamentally sound state like Athens had to have Socrates killed, but she never surpassed *The King Must Die*, which is, I think, undoubtedly her best novel.

The three volumes of Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* bring back the memory of one of my worst reading binges. Truly a lost weekend. At the end of a Friday afternoon's operating list before a bank holiday weekend, my anaesthetist told me she had just read a three-volume new work and had brought volume one along for me to read over the weekend. I had to work much of Saturday, but I finally got down to it in the afternoon in a deck-chair in the garden. I am told I was led in to eat at some time, but I remember nothing but the book until I finished it at about 4 am. I could scarcely sleep for fear that my anaesthetist had gone away for the weekend, but on telephoning at the earliest decent hour I found her home and drove the 20 miles to collect volumes two and three. I finished on Monday afternoon. The book, of course, went on my next birthday list and has been reread many times; but, alas, the *The Silmarillion* by the same author disappointed me sadly. *Letters from Father Christmas* made up for this, however. Undoubtedly Tolkien owes something to James Branch Cabell whose three volumes, *Figures of Earth*, *The Silver Stallion*, and *Jurgen* are much neglected masterpieces.

Lewis Carroll is best known for his Alice books, but there is much else to delight one in my volume of his complete works. For the beginner I would recommend *Phantasmagoria*. Much of science fiction does not stay long on the shelf. They are aeroplane books to help pass boring journeys. Asimov is different and the foundation series has a permanent place. He has, however, not confined himself to science fiction, or fiction at all, and his two volumes on *Guide to Science* present the best summary of modern current scientific knowledge in a form intelligible to a layman that I know, and I have kept them for rereading. Agnar Mykle's *Lasso round the Moon* should be kept if only for his description of what a cheese sandwich should really look like.

I seem to collect mainly novels by women. Iris Murdoch, Margaret Drabble, Mary Stewart, and Pamela Hansford Johnson, but Morris West and John Fowles also find a place. I used to read Gore Vidal, but a volume of his literary essays led to such a violent aversion to the man that he has been banished. I no longer have *Nuttall* but the shorter *Oxford English Dictionary* in two volumes is an endless source of serendipitous delight.

What of medicine? I now keep books only of personal or sentimental interest. Foremost of these is Osler's *The Principles and Practice of Medicine*, second edition, dated 1895. It was Wilfred Trotter's copy and I read it for the notes of his student lectures that he wrote in its margins. High on the list of books waiting to be read is Williams Evans's *Diary of a Welsh Swagman*, his edition of his grandfather's diaries during his picaresque adventures in Australia in the later years of the nineteenth century. Apart from Antonia Fraser's *Cromwell*, the other "books in waiting" seem to be history or archaeology. I could get through much more of my bookcase if it were not for the public lending library. Once a fortnight its van stops in the village nearby and on almost every visit the librarian brings most, if not all, of the books that I mentioned to him on the previous visit: of course they have to be read before he comes again. My life has gone full circle.

Does polyuria inevitably accompany renal tubular acidosis?

Renal tubular acidosis is a syndrome of varied aetiology, and the incidence of polyuria varies with the primary disease—prominent in analgesic nephropathy, inconspicuous in autoimmune diseases. Genetically determined (primary) renal tubular acidosis has long been divided into two types and is now split into four¹ in the two commoner types. A few patients complain of polyuria, but a concentrating defect can be found in most if it is looked for by appropriate tests.

¹ Morris RC Jr. Renal tubular acidosis. *N Engl J Med* 1981;304:418-9.

Patients with glandular fever who are given ampicillin may develop a pronounced erythematous rash. Does this phenomenon occur with oral penicillin?

It seems to, but to a lesser extent. Some 7% of patients will develop a rash if given ampicillin,¹ and this proportion rises to nearly 100% in those with glandular fever. When this first became clear, several papers were published analysing the incidence of rashes seen in patients with glandular fever given various treatments. Weary *et al*² brought together figures from three of the largest of these series, totalling 372 patients, and showing that 84% of those who had been treated with ampicillin alone had developed rashes. Of those who had been treated with penicillin or tetracycline, 28% had skin eruptions, in contrast to the 14% of those who had not been given antibiotics. Their own experience with a further 150 patients confirmed this and supported an earlier finding³ that penicillin caused a higher incidence of rashes than tetracycline.

¹ Collaborative Study Group. Prospective study of ampicillin rash. *Br Med J* 1973; 1:7-9.

² Weary PE, Cole JW, Higkam JS. Eruptions from ampicillin in patients with infectious mononucleosis. *Arch Dermatol* 1970;101:86-91.

³ Pullen H, Wright N, Murdoch JM. Hypersensitivity reactions to antibacterial drugs in infectious mononucleosis. *Lancet* 1967;iii:1176-8.