would then pass from the mattress to the next uninfected patient through the moist dressing to the burn surface.

The water-proof nylon-coated mattress cover was mainly damaged by the silver nitrate solution, but previous unpublished studies have shown that phenolic disinfectants also reduce the water-proofing of the cover. Topical chemoprophylaxis with various preparations of silver nitrate has been important in reducing *Ps aeruginosa* colonisation and infection in patients with burns.⁵ It is therefore desirable to continue this type of treatment in the burns unit. It is necessary to observe the condition of mattress covers and withdraw from use damaged ones that have lost their water-proofing. It is also advisable to restrict the use of phenolic disinfectants and to use only detergents to clean the covers when possible.

Gentamicin-resistant strains of *Ps aeruginosa* are a particular hazard in the burns unit because the range of possible treatments

becomes considerably restricted. After the damaged mattresses were removed and the use of gentamicin was restricted there were no further outbreaks with resistant pseudomonas in the unit (figure).

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Reading for Pleasure

The snail, the thief, and the dipper

BRENDAN JACOBS

To be a slow reader is to suffer a most aggravating disability. It is agonising to think of those piles of books on shelves, tables, and chairs still waiting to be read, and yet there is a pleasure in all this. It must be something akin to that felt by J L Garvin, who, when asked if he had read all the books open and unopen in his study, replied: "No, but they're radioactive dear boy, radioactive." I quote (or steal) from an article on the buying of books written some years ago by Paul Jennings. To quote a quote is possibly not quite done, somewhere between borrowing and stealing.

In *The Winter's Tale* (IV, ii) Autolycus is described as a rogue: he was "littered under Mercury"; he carried on his rogue's business as a rascally pedlar, "a snapper up of unconsidered trifles." Mercury was not only god of science and commerce, but he was also patron of travellers, rogues, vagabonds, and thieves. That is a quotation from *Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*, my favourite dipping book and a joy for the easily distracted reader. It is odd and a little unsettling to think of Mercury as one who looked after the interests of such a motley bunch. He must have had a twinkle in his eye. Did not Cocteau in *Amphitryon 38* have him "floating gently down to earth from Olympus holding aloft his umbrella as parachute"? For a brief biography of Amphitryon see Lemprière's *Classical Dictionary*, another essential for the unrepentant dipper.

Not having total recall, much is forgotten. The "forgettery" is another disability, so a random and idiosyncratic "common place book" has its personal advantages. Before looking again at *The Winter's Tale* and *Brewer* I thought that my collection of snippets taken from umpteen sources consisted chiefly of "unconsidered trifles," and was perhaps a mere self-indulgence. Not a bit of it. I now confess to being a rogue, a minor pilferer,

a collector of other people's work, even though my sources are written down in the common place book. Paul Jennings himself took Garvin's remark from Douglas Woodruff, ex-editor of the *Tablet*, so my quote is thrice removed from the original.

D McCracken's "Known by your bookshelves" in these columns on 3 January appeals to me. The reader's interests are in situ for all to see and there should be no need for the furtive look. In Thea Thompson's *Edwardian Childhoods*, published this year, Annie Wilson of Nottingham, who is one of those whose memories are recorded, said: "I read a lot of books on the sly, I did. . . . Books had to be hidden because you see reading was a vice. 'You've got something better to do than put your nose in a book.' That was the expression you see." The only visible book in her parents' house was the Bible, and one paper—"Home Companion or something, or *Sunday Circle*." Among some bookless homes that I visit, one fooled me completely. The owner is an Irish bus conductor with wide literary tastes; he keeps the whole of his large collection of historical books in packing cases. He told me that his wife "could not bear the things cluttering up the place."

Unconventional writings

Among the oddities on my shelves is an early booklet of Robert Graves with the ear-tickling title of *Lars Porsena or The Future of Swearing and Improper Language* published in 1927. The matter in this book is good for a chuckle in these times and well worth reading as an example of early Gravesiana. "There has been a noticeable decline of swearing and foul language in England, and this except at centres of industrial depression, shows every sign of continuing until a new shock to our national nervous system, a European war on a huge scale or widespread revolutionary disturbances at home may (or may not) revive the habit of swearing simultaneously with praying." He went on to elaborate on the nature and necessity for such language. A

companion to this is that real distractor, Eric Partridge's *Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English*. The *Penguin Dictionary of Historical Slang* is the abridged edition of this great work.

W N P Barbellion's *Journal of a Disappointed Man*, to which H G Wells wrote the introduction, is one that I often take from my shelves as I used to do when it was in my father's collection. I read it often to remind myself of how he observed in detail, and with a fine economy of words, both natural history and himself. For long he knew that he was a dying man, and shortly after he died in 1919 at the age of 30 his abridged journal was published. The original journal went to over 20 volumes in manuscript. A lesser known collection of essays from these manuscripts called *Enjoying Life and Other Literary Remains* was published posthumously in 1919. Many of the essays are worth reading for examples of the strange information that he enthusiastically gathered in his short life. The last essay in this collection is on Oliver Goldsmith's eight-volume curiosity, *Animated Nature*. Had this been Goldsmith's only work he would be quite unknown now. "The whole of the eight volumes," said Barbellion, "are interspersed with many absurd stories about beasts and birds which his innate simplicity led him half to believe"—for instance, "He said that a squirrel when he wants to cross a river finds a piece of bark, sets it afloat and goes aboard; reaching the other side by using its tail like a fan or windmill! Imagine this timid unobtrusive creature with the cunning of a monkey, watching its anchored bark as it waits for

a float or a favourable wind!" Did Beatrix Potter read this volume before writing *Squirrel Nutkin*? More detail about the author of *She Stoops to Conquer*, who was often in penury, will be found in *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*.

What would we do without the Penguin classics? *The Selected Letters of Aretino*, the great friend of Titian and one of the earliest journalists and gossip column writers, is light reading. There are only 95 letters in this selection from his huge output. He chose and published 2000 letters in the period 1537 to 1557. He did not have many good words for doctors and would probably be a critic of deputising services today. Referring to night calls, he said: "It is preferable to eat mushrooms only in the morning for fear of poisoning, which it would be difficult to cure at night, when all our wonderful doctors are snoring flat on their backs."

Another who, amidst his serious criticism, laughed at human foibles, including his own, was Desiderius Erasmus in *Praise of Folly*. Living at about the same time as Aretino, this long essay was written in a week for his friend Thomas More (I have stolen this information from the blurb). He ends by saying "I can see you are all waiting for a peroration but it is silly of you to suppose I can remember what I've said when I have been spouting such a hotchpotch of words." Thank goodness for famous men with forgetteries. Logan Pearsall Smith in *All Trivia* shall have the last words, "Thank heavens the sun has gone in and I don't have to get out and enjoy it" with a final "give me a bed and a book and I am happy."

MATERIA NON MEDICA

Back to Greenbushes

The Western Australian countryside is dotted with mining ghost towns or ones which are alive but in greatly reduced circumstances. Crumbling foundations, an occasional dilapidated house, or mouldering heaps of rusty machinery in the low scrub are the only reminders of a more hectic and profitable era. Recently there has been a growing custom of holding a one- or two-day celebration on the old site, calling it "Back to Goldsville" or whatever, staged for any former ancients still alive and their now middle-aged children.

A couple of years ago the tin-mining town of Greenbushes held such an event. The town was again live with bonhomie and sociability, and then, suddenly, it was all over and it was back to dogs sleeping in the main street and scraps of paper blowing down the pavement. But the occasion left a legacy still to be seen and titillate the curiosity of the occasional visitor. The celebration committee had painted signs telling the names or trades of former citizens and planted them on the sites of their past glories. These remain, so as you drive by small boards announcing, "Here stood the Greenbushes Bandroom," for instance, can be seen. Behind the sign is a vacant block. On a nearby verge is written, "Here was a House Called Goat Pill Palace." There is nothing, and anyway the meaning is long lost. Across the road, however, obscurity has been lifted on a large, shuttered, and peeling building, for we know that this was the "Shamrock Coffee Palace and Boarding House, built by Mr W Waugh." Just down the road on an empty quarter-acre, chest high in Watsonia weeds, is the improbable sign, "Site of A E Golder's Pharmacy—Beecham's Pills, Doan's Backache Pills, and Golder's Cough Mixture." Opposite, where stands the current post office, is proclaimed the fact that the "Duke of York Hotel" stood there and was "built by Harry Nutt (6 ft 4½ in)." However, the most arresting notice is on the verandah of a well-preserved and still-occupied wooden house in the centre of the mainly deserted town. A sturdy Victorian dwelling, mysterious behind climbing roses, the legend reveals, "This was the Club. Built in 1894 with billiard room. Later doctors' residence—Dr Nelson, Dr Hume and Dr Benson." Its very solidarity conjures up a vision of stiff collars, watch chains, ladies retiring after dinner, while the good doctors repair to billiards and cigars. Symbolically, it, the past, is flanked on one side by a vacant block luxuriant with weeds, represent-

ing the present, while on the other side stands a link between present and past, in the shape of "The Cosy Corner Store Since 1928 Mrs E Angus." Incredibly, that same Mrs Angus still attends to the passers-by, just as she served the town's now ghostly, silent host long, long ago.—JAMES H LEAVESLEY (general practitioner, Perth, Western Australia.)

Summer in Spitzbergen

As I lay in the midst of a squalor, such as can only result from at least two days tentbound with two other wet and muddy companions, I began to wonder if we would ever return to England's "green and pleasant land." Outside the tent the rain water coursed round the edge of the sodden fly in a drainage channel dug with ice axes the "night" before when the tent started to float on a puddle of collected water. Beyond the tents, shrouded in mist, lay the peaks of the Ny-Alesund peninsula carved by glaciers to a jaggedness which is reflected in the Spitzbergen's English name—land of pointed peaks. Lying as it does between north Norway and the pole the archipelago is touched by the tail end of the Gulf Stream, which results in a warmer, wetter climate than might be expected at 80°N.

The expedition had been on the islands for over two weeks, walking and climbing in the area as well as studying the periglacial activity and flora. I had spent much of the two weeks crawling on snow slopes hunting for red snow—not quite as daft as it may sound, for an algal colonisation can form on snow producing a red colour.

About midnight (I think, for it was still broad daylight outside) the clouds lifted, revealing the peaks covered in fresh snow, outlined against a clear blue sky, a scene dramatic in contrast with that of a few hours earlier. Contrasts are a major memory of the expedition, the breathtaking changes in weather, the extremes of temperature, and the variation in the land itself from harsh ice falls to almost down-like green hills, covered with soft springy turf. Most visitors to the islands are left, as I am, with an insatiable desire to return, for the sense of isolation which is found in most of Svalbard is highly infectious, luring those who have experienced it back again.—A P NEWTON (medical student, Nottingham, and member of Svalbard Expedition 1980).