Reading for Pleasure

Postoperation diet

J M DUNLOP

Fifteen years ago emergency major surgery enforced me to take three months' sick leave with no prior arrangements. Just over a year ago, when faced with elective surgery, I vowed it would be different. Six months were necessary to reduce family and other commitments, but at last the plethora of medicopolitical reports and documents (which leave little time for literature) began to dry up.

An excellent anodyne

An understanding surgeon allowed arrival at the Royal Infirmary at 0930 for our afternoon appointment. The latest Frederick Forsyth thriller *The Devil's Alternative* proved an excellent anodyne. I had never read any of his books before, but I am now a confirmed addict. The novel deals with the appalling choices facing the leaders of East and West as global war appears imminent. It moves at a very fast pace and obviously was scrupulously researched for background detail. So engrossing was it that I barely noticed the anaesthetist examining my chest, the ward clerk's routine questions, being shaved from nipples to knees (all before cholecystectomy/laparotomy to see how the 1966 large bowel anastomosis was faring as symptoms had recurred), and I almost refused the premedication to allow me to stay awake long enough to finish the novel. Next day my secretary was despatched to the nearest bookshop to obtain Forsyth's *The Odessa File*, which too was devoured avidly in under 24 hours. It documents the hunt for a Nazi war criminal against a background of rockets loaded with nuclear waste and bubonic plague. As in his other books, the action moves at a breathtaking pace with little extraneous descriptive matter. By the end of the book, one is tempted to wonder whether it might possibly be based on fact, and it certainly makes one pause and think.

My wife had been instructed that something light and not too intellectually tiring should be brought in during the immediate postoperative period, and Gerald Durrell's *Birds, Beasts, and Relatives*, *My Family and Other Animals*, and *Beasts in my Belfry* fitted the bill admirably. They are amusing, light, and for the most part true accounts of his unconventional upbringing in Corfu before the second world war and then working at Whipsnade Zoo immediately after the war. The chuckles they gave rise to caused no pain over the incision but frankly, at that stage of the proceedings, the last thing one wanted was a good belly laugh despite the ministrations of the physiotherapist or "physical terrorist." A fit of sneezing was unadulterated agony.

When stockpiling my reading matter before the operation I noticed on a railway bookstall Forbes Bramble's book *The Strange Case of Deacon Brodie*. This is a fictionalised biography

of the well-known Edinburgh character who was taken as the basis of *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* by Robert Louis Stevenson. I read Bramble's book first and having lived in Edinburgh for five years I know most of the places mentioned in it. Even without knowing the city the book is a good read, and the author gives many fascinating details of the life of both the gentry and the masses of the people in the 1780s, but I think a map of Edinburgh of the relevant time would have been a useful addition. The Folio edition of *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* that I acquired this year is, like all Folio books, excellently produced. Though raised as a boy on Stevenson's books I had never read it. At school, while we were allowed to read his rather frightening short story *Thrawn Janet*, we were actively discouraged from *Dr Jekyll*—probably because we might have been tempted to experiment in the science laboratories with disastrous results. Modern youth, weaned on Dr Who, takes Dr Jekyll in its stride and thoroughly enjoys reading the book.

Mysterious happenings and artefacts

One thing the editors of the *Readers' Digest* do well is to make scientific subjects easily understandable. Their glossy, well-researched, and illustrated publication *The World's Last Mysteries* ranges from the search for Atlantis to postulating that a miniature black hole hit Siberia in 1908. This book makes the mysterious happenings and artefacts of the past—Stonehenge, the pyramids, Eldorado, Easter Island statues, to name but a few—come alive in the light of modern scientific knowledge. The book appeals on several levels: firstly, to basic human instincts. Most people like to be mystified and puzzled, yet at the same time to be given a probable explanation; secondly, as knowledge for its own sake—that pursuit of truth which is the key thing that the university of life can teach all of us; while, thirdly, the book may be savoured a chapter at a time with as long or as short an interval between reading as desired. A favourite television programme several years ago was "Animal, Vegetable, Mineral?" which popularised archaeology in the same way as "Chronicle" does today. If you enjoy those programmes then this is the book for you, and it now rests on my bookshelf between the encyclopaedias of archaeology and mythology.

Erich Von Daniken's *Miracles of the Gods* I found disturbing. Though not a Von Daniken fan, I have read all his books dealing as they do with his theories of spacemen colonising the earth before the dawn of recorded history. The BBC did an excellent programme some time ago debunking his research and questioning his authenticity. Von Daniken in this book takes a look at visions and miracles and is even more iconoclastic than usual in his characteristic controversial manner. Whether it is my Calvinistic upbringing, I do not know, but in this book, by asserting that because Christ was illegitimate his mother Mary had him brought up by the Essenes (of Dead Sea Scroll fame), Von Daniken has gone too far. Nevertheless, in this it is up to each and every reader to make up his or her own mind.

Unashamedly I confess to being an ardent fan of Dr Immanuel Velikovsky, whose unorthodox theories of cosmic evolution, published in 1950 as *Worlds in Collision* outraged scientists with his theory about "The day the sun stood still." In September I ordered his latest book—volume 4 of *Ages in Chaos*, entitled *Peoples of the Sea*, which covers the centuries before the third century BC, in Egypt and the Middle East. (It was annoying that during the ten-week delay between ordering and receiving the book the price rose from £5.95 to £7.95. (Volume 1 of *Ages in Chaos* dealing with a reconstruction of ancient history from the Exodus to King Akhnaton cost 21 shillings in 1952. Nevertheless, it will have an honoured place on my bookshelf beside all my other Velikovsky writings.) In *Oedipus and Akhnaton* Velikovsky postulates that Akhnaton was the original Oedipus as he murdered his father, married his mother, and Tutankhamen was the result of their union. Throughout his books Velikovsky maintains that the generally accepted chronology is wrong and that several centuries are misplaced or even non-existent. His evidence is presented in a scholarly manner, though I realise that the majority of experts on the various periods BC dispute his theories.

My final book was *The Turin Shroud* by Ian Wilson. I had hoped that Wilson would come down definitely on one side of the fence or the other but he leaves the reader to make up his own mind as to the shroud's authenticity, though giving strong evidence that it is Christ's burial shroud. I was surprised that

in the two Chronicle programmes on BBC 2 television by Henry Lincoln during November 1979, about the Knights Templar and the Priory of Sion, never once did he mention the shroud, though he occasionally mentioned the knights and monks worshipping a "sacred head." Wilson's book indicates that in 1204 during the Fourth Crusade at the sacking of Constantinople the Knights Templar probably acquired the shroud folded in four so that only the "head" part was visible. This could be the Templar's "idol" of a man's head, which they worshipped until their arrest for heresy in 1307 by King Philip of France. I look forward to reading Henry Lincoln's book, which I believe is to be published in the next year, concerning his researches into the parish priest who lived like a millionaire, the Knights Templar, the Rosicrucians, and the ancient Priory of Sion. In *The Turin Shroud* there is posed the fascinating conundrum—was "The Holy Grail" of Arthurian legend the shroud? Seldom have I enjoyed a book as much as this one, which has been meticulously researched and written in a scholarly but very readable manner.

In the event, the sick leave required was only five weeks, so several books which had been earmarked were not read. These, together with further books by some of the authors listed, will be kept for a future occasion such as a summer holiday. Alternatively, they will have to wait until I retire.

(Accepted 22 July 1981)

MATERIA NON MEDICA

Mightier than the sword

As my father had been in the pen-repair business for many years it was inevitable that I learnt the trade, if only to do something in the long school holidays. The beginnings of writing take us to the dawn of history.¹ The Mesopotamians used a triangular reed to write on clay; the ancient Egyptians wrote on papyrus, also with a reed, and used an ivory stylus to scratch messages on their tablets of wax. The Greeks used similar materials. The first reference to a quill pen occurs in the seventh century AD by St Isadore of Seville. Usually goose feathers were used, but the swan, turkey, and crow have all donated feathers for this purpose. The Romans made bronze nibs and some are still extant in museums, but the manufacture of metal nibs started in earnest in the nineteenth century, when the quill finally gave way to its hardier successor. The first machine-made pens appeared in 1822, introduced by one John Mitchell. Diamond nibs have been made, and rubies and gold as well as lesser metals have all been used. Modern techniques use rolled sheets of these substances. Modern pens are of two main types, those with a nib which has a slit down the middle through which ink flows, and those with a ball at the end of a reservoir, ink being deposited as the ball rotates. The former, the so-called "fountain pen," usually contains a sac that fills with ink, whereas the latter use a cartridge.

I remember customers coming in very hurt that their "Parker 51," purchased at a bargain price abroad, had ceased to function. On careful examination the pen had "PARKER" stamped on it, and was one of the many cheap forgeries that had flooded the market at that time.

It was the ballpoint pen, however, that was my father's bête-noire. When I was a lad they had only just been invented and were somewhat crude. It was not uncommon to have gentlemen race into the shop, their suits having been ruined by a massive leakage from these new-fangled implements. "An invention of the devil," was how my father referred to this latest craze. He would pick up the ink-soaked pen from the angry customer's hand with a long pair of forceps and ceremoniously deposit it in a large bin, kept for this very purpose. The customer usually left with a modern fountain pen of trusted efficacy. After he repaired a pen, moulding it lovingly over his bunsen flame, my father would then admire the effortless flow of the now perfectly fitting gold nib. He would often exclaim that the ballpoint pen was only a fad and would never last. How wrong he was, for as this

improved and became cheap to buy it appeared everywhere, and it was my father's pen business rather than the Biro that went the way of all flesh.—R E GOODMAN (general practitioner, Northenden, Manchester).

¹ Fairbank A. *The story of handwriting: origins and development*. London: Faber and Faber, 1970.

Salerno a Sorrento via Amalfi

I have never been asked to describe my 10 most interesting journeys, but if I had, the scenic route between Salerno and Sorrento would figure prominently on my list. To travel this busy highway, particularly in the local overcrowded bus, is a unique experience. It is not for those who suffer from vertigo, travel sickness, or faintness of heart. The road hugs the Amalfi coastline, running alongside the edge of the cliffs, and is narrow to the point of near impassibility when two vehicles meet. Twisting and turning, swooping and climbing, like a convulsing snake, it has hairpin bends, double S bends, gut-twisting blind corners, and gravity-defying sloping curves.

Mostly it runs in the heights, with the bus poised on the brink of breath-taking drops with only a few bricks between it and the impossibly green of the Mediterranean hundreds of feet below. It suddenly corkscrews down to sea level to pause for passengers in the piazza of a picturesque fishing village before rapidly climbing back through groves of oranges and lemons to its place in the sky. And on it winds to its eventual destination with the double-noted cacophany of the driver's horn constantly sounding a warning to oncoming traffic.

The road was the brainchild of Charles III, Bourbon King of Naples. The story goes that he thought it would be a good idea to link the isolated villages of the Amalfi coast by one good highway. Accordingly, he commissioned an architect to undertake the project. Some 10 years later it was completed and, as the originator of the scheme, it was to King Charles that the honour of undertaking the first complete journey fell. He set out from Salerno in his coach one fine morning and, in time, finally reached Sorrento. The first thing he did on arrival was to summon the architect to his presence. He had him beheaded.—WILLIAM THOMSON (chief administrative medical officer, Lanarkshire).