Reading for Pleasure

In quest of the best

R W PORTAL

For the reader for pleasure, the true amateur reader, it is the question of choice that must prove most perplexing. Delights lie in profusion in easy reach all round us, and never will there be time to sample all. Unlike many recreations reading is free, for our public libraries make expense of no account. Then why not feast ourselves on the very best? Do we choose beefburgers when fillet steak is at hand, or fish fingers instead of turbot au gratin, or vin ordinaire when Nuits St Georges '73 stands on the shelf and costs no more? Then surely, I tell myself, the principle must be to read the best and avoid the ephemeral; to dwell on works which stand the test of time and on which great minds have laboured lovingly; to go for what has substance and dabble only lightly in the trivial. Copious newspaper, magazine, and journal reading is for most of us an unprofitable habit, for the memory thrives best on long preoccupation with a single theme and retains little of what is fleetingly presented to it; the rapid changes of topic in the pages of a newspaper are therefore a recipe for quick forgetting. Why, too, spend time futilely reading "prophetic" matter—the endless columns of speculation on such events as election results, the budget, and sporting events, when the inexorable passage of time decrees that in a few days or weeks the outcome will be *known*? We are fortunate in that the minds of former generations have filtered out for posterity what we call the classics, and their judgment is generally sound. "No-one," wrote George Sampson in his preface to *The Concise Cambridge History of English Literature*, "is required to accept without question the general consensus of opinion—indeed, every book must be interpreted by ourselves for ourselves; but if we are unable to accept the common view we should consider whether the fault is in the general opinion or in ourselves." As to the mass of modern publications, it is not too difficult to pick out with the aid of the critics the works that are likely to endure, and the best of those of admittedly passing interest.

Holidays act as a spur

I pretend to no systematic approach to reading but keep broadly to the main highways of our splendid literature, deviating, like a terrier following scents, to one side or the other when something attractive is borne on the wind. I recall that reviews by Bernard Levin led me to two works of recent research, both fascinating and both eminently satisfying because each seems to be both the first and the last word on its subject. The *Treasure of Auchinleck* by David Buchanan is an account of the labours of the American collector, Colonel Ralph Isham, to acquire the hoards of Boswell papers which successively came to light at Malahide Castle in Ireland and Fettercairn House in Scotland. This must indeed be one of the most remarkable tales of literary discovery ever told. The second was *A Hidden Life* by Hugh Trevor Roper, an intriguing account of the life of the eccentric scholar, forger, and hoaxer, Sir Edmund Backhouse. *The Lyttelton Hart-Davis Letters* (three volumes now published), that engaging colloquy between retired Eton schoolmaster and

busy author and publisher, twice praised highly a book called *Earlham* by Percy Lubbock. It is indeed an exquisite work—a description of Earlham Manor near Norwich at the turn of the century in the form of childhood memories of his grandparents' residence. There is no story, no excitement; merely the gradual etching, by forays backwards and forwards in time and laterally in space, of the house and garden, the occupants, the guests, the river Yare, all elusive yet poignant, in prose gentle and flowing, with all the time the sense of the warm August sun—a summer such as it should be—and an atmosphere strikingly similar to that portrayed in L P Hartley's novel *The Go-Between*, but fortunately without the horrific ending.

Holidays often provide a spur. Standing, for example, on the southern slopes of the Cuillin hills in Skye we looked down on the flat island of Soay some three miles wide, sleeping in the Highland haze. It was here that Gavin Maxwell, that fine but melancholy writer, before he achieved fame with *Ring of Bright Water*, started a factory for processing the flesh of basking sharks. The fishing enterprise, eventually unsuccessful, is described in *Harpoon at a Venture*, a nice example of how to raise a commercial undertaking to the level of good literature, at once informative and entertaining, and evocative—almost painfully so for those addicted to the Highlands—of hill and water, of mist and rock and heather.

On another occasion a visit to the Massif Central prompted a reading of Stevenson's *Travels with a Donkey in the Cévennes*. This charming book, published in 1879, remains as fresh as ever and apart from the absence of things mechanical could almost have been penned today. Stevenson stands on Mt Lozère, looking southwards towards the Mediterranean across an "indecipherable labyrinth of hills," contemplating the persecution of the Camisards, those few thousand Protestant mountaineers, by the Grand Monarch 180 years previously; and then he begins the descent: "I followed the track with precipitation; the steepness of the slope, the continual agile turning of the line of the descent, and the old unwearied hope of finding something new in a new country all conspired to lend me wings." This is now a well-engineered road, but it is not hard to see it as a hot stony track, with the young Stevenson, lightfooted and exhilarated, half running down the slope to the village of Pont de Montvert on the Tarn, and at last extracting a spritely pace from his lazy quadruped companion, Modestine.

Of all books to take on a Lakeland holiday there can be few for those interested in its literary history to beat De Quincey's *Recollections of the Lakes and the Lake Poets*. This collection of essays appeared in Tait's *Edinburgh Magazine* between 1834 and 1840. The reminiscences roll from the pen, discursive, chatty, ironical, a mixture of comment and information on Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Southey and their circle, with the lakes and hills as the backdrop. We have De Quincey's first meeting with Coleridge in Bridgewater, quickly followed by the great moment in October 1807 when De Quincey, having escorted Coleridge's wife and children north, ran down the hill ahead of the chaise to Wordsworth's small white dwelling at Grasmere, knowing "that this little cottage was tenanted by that man whom, of all the men from the beginning of time, I most fervently desired to see; that, in less than a minute, I should meet Wordsworth face to face." There is the story of the death in the snow of George

and Sarah Green, probably one of the earliest accounts of loss of life by bad weather in the hills; delightful accounts of Wordsworth's habits with books (cutting the pages with a buttery knife) and, delivered wistfully, for De Quincey himself was not seldom in debt, of his pecuniary good fortune; and the priceless story of Coleridge's absentminded father at a dinner party stuffing his lady neighbour's gown into his trousers under the impression that he was stowing away his escaping shirt-tail.

Author of Waverley

A fortnight's sojourn in the Border country on the banks of the Yarrow and almost in sight of Newark's Tower could hardly fail to turn my mind to Scott. Hesketh Pearson's biography served as an introduction and told enough to make the inevitable visit to Abbotsford a moving experience, for the house, a hundred yards from the swelling Tweed, filled with Scott's relics, still breathes a spirit of intellectual splendour and material achievement, mingled with the sadness of great days past. After two or three of Scott's novels Lockhart's *Life of Sir Walter Scott* beckoned irresistibly, the more so because it stands perhaps second in line to Boswell in the hierarchy of great English biographies. The work as first published in seven volumes must daunt most modern readers, but fortunately Lockhart abridged it himself and the shorter two volume version appeared ten years later in 1848, and is now enshrined as a single volume in the Everyman edition. It is indeed a lovely book: despite the curtailment the well-known story is given full scope with first the author's rise to fame on poems and novels, and Abbotsford as the material evidence of success, and then the financial disaster, and finally the moving account of Scott's death and funeral. The portraits of the Ballantyne brothers and of Archibald Constable are sympathetic and make Scott's reliance on them perhaps not surprising. It gives me pleasure to have on my shelf a copy of *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* from the Ballantyne press, dated 1808, this being already the ninth edition in the three years since the poem was first published. Lockhart's prose rolls and billows through 650 pages, charming and deeply satisfying to those like myself, whose ear is better attuned to the long dignified periods of 150 years ago than to the jerky cadences of today. One could of course state bluntly that Scott was a rotten man of business; but how much more art there is in Lockhart's delicate comment: "We should try to picture to ourselves what the actual intellectual life must have been of the author of such a series of romances. We should ask ourselves whether, filling and discharging so soberly and gracefully as he did the common functions of social man, it was not, nevertheless, impossible but that he must pass most of his life in other worlds than ours; and we ought hardly to think it a grievous circumstance that their bright visions should have left a dazzle sometimes on the eyes which he so gently reopened upon our prosaic realities."

Literary biography

If I have a current penchant it is for literary biography. By virtue of their calling one would expect that authors would provide a liberal supply of self-revealing material, and this usually proves the case. The blossoming of modern biography has been interestingly summarised in Robert Gittings's short volume, *The Nature of Biography*, which is a splendid introduction to the art and provides a pile of tempting titles waiting under cover until there is time, if ever, to take them out. From his own pen we have his Keats and Hardy, and others I have enjoyed include Michael Holroyd's Lytton Strachey, Richard Holmes's Shelley, John Wain's and Walter Bates's Samuel Johnson, Lord Birkenhead's Kipling, P N Furbank's E M Forster, Quentin Bell's Virginia Woolf, and Jocelyn Baines's Joseph Conrad. The biographies themselves guide one to the subjects' own works, and sometimes here the Casebook Series can prove illuminating. Each of these nicely produced white paperbacks consists of a collection of comment and criticism, old and modern, on a particular work—for example, Shakespeare's

Sonnets, Jane Austen's *Emma*, or Forster's *A Passage to India*.

Is it with a sense of envy that we reflect that our modern English scholars are actually paid for studying these works which ordinary folk like us read purely for pleasure? Or is it rather a matter for pity that their careers must depend on the churning out of criticism, just as those in academic medicine feel impelled to swamp their readers with papers? Indeed, I have no doubt that literary criticism is a great river bearing comparison with the inundation generated by our medical press: a self-sustaining and self-perpetuating organism, often turbid and running uselessly to waste in the sands, but occasionally pellucid, bringing new life to a dry and dusty region.

A touch of philosophy

Since some personal disclosure adds spice to this column I will confess that by some quirk of methodicalness I have noted down the title of every book I have read in the past 32 years. I read slowly and lovingly, relishing my author and paying him the compliment of careful attention, and in this stately fashion I find I have averaged about a volume a fortnight, ranging in length from a work such as *War and Peace* to a small gem like *The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám*. We cannot complacently go through life without trying to widen our horizon, and of the methods available books still take the lead. Travelling is not open to all, and often the traveller is blind or a bore; conversation rests on the fortunes of chance meetings, and as for radio and television, their nature is evanescent and their reception too passive. But a book read is an earned possession, which you may hold in your hand or place on your shelf as a trophy or conquest. C S Lewis writes of "the enormous extension of our being which we owe to our authors"; and Ford Madox Ford asserts that "the only human activity that has always been of supreme importance to the world is imaginative literature. It is of supreme importance because it is the only means by which humanity can express both emotions and ideas." Reading must to a greater or lesser extent widen our perspective, mature our judgment, encourage tolerance, inculcate humility, and discourage pettiness. There can hardly be a work worth reading that does not contain a source of consolation, open a vista, evoke a sense of admiration, or encourage a humorous acceptance of our fate: in other words help fashion our philosophy of life. Last year, I reread *The Pickwick Papers*, and was amazed at this extraordinary jeu d'esprit of the 24-year-old Dickens. What could be more sagacious than this passage taken almost at random from these pages brimming with fun and enthusiasm for life, in which Pickwick remarks to his servant, "You are quite a philosopher, Sam." "It runs in the family, I believe, Sir," replied Mr Weller. "My father's very much in that line, now. If my mother-in-law blows him up, he whistles. She flies in a passion, and breaks his pipe; he steps out, and gets another. Then she screams very loud, and falls into 'sterics: and he smokes very comfortably 'till she comes to again. That's philosophy, sir, a'nt it?"

Or, finally, a memorable scene from a book I chanced to see highly praised in a review, *The Snow Leopard* by Peter Mathiesson. This is an account of an expedition on foot into the Tibetan mountains to study the rutting habits of the Himalayan blue sheep or bharal. The author's mission is half zoological and half a pilgrimage. He finally reaches his goal, the Crystal Monastery at Shey Gumpa, where he visits the lama. The man is crippled and seems immobilised. The author finally asks him through his interpreter whether he regrets his isolation. "And this holy man of great directness and simplicity, big white teeth shining, laughs out loud in an infectious way at Jang-bu's question. Indicating his twisted legs without a trace of self-pity or bitterness, as if they belonged to all of us, he casts his arms wide to the sky and the snow mountains, the high sun and the dancing sheep, and cries, 'Of course I am happy here! It's wonderful! Especially when I have no choice!'"

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