Reading for Pleasure

Monro and Marbot

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Like most Scottish boys of my generation (I was born almost 70 years ago) I was brought up on the novels of Sir Walter Scott. These I thoroughly enjoyed. Of them all, I enjoyed *A Legend of Montrose* most and have returned to it again and again for the pleasure of renewing my acquaintance with Rittmaster Dugald Dalgetty of Drumthwacket and of the Marischal College, Aberdeen. Surely he is the best drawn of all Scott's characters; what a strange mixture of soldier, divinity student, courage, selfishness, and conceit. As a picture of a Scots soldier of fortune he stands alone.

In the edition of *Montrose* which I first read there was a preface in which Scott states that he based Dalgetty on Monro, whose *Expedition with the worthy Scots Regiment (called MacKeyes Regiment)* (London 1637) he had chanced on. I soon followed Dalgetty to Marischal College, Aberdeen—as a medical not a divinity student—but it was to be over 50 years before I found Monro.

A lifelong source of pleasure

In 1928 I came across two books that have been a lifelong source of pleasure to me. The first is *The Defence of Plevna 1877* by William von Herbert, which I rank among the finest of all military memoirs. von Herbert was of Anglo-German descent and as a young man of 18 was commissioned into the Turkish army and took part in the defence of Plevna against the Russians. Although not published until 1895 his book is based on contemporary notes made at the time of the siege and during his subsequent captivity. We therefore follow his adventures from the day he lands in Constantinople until the fall of Plevna with a breathless interest that is matched only by the vividness and excitement of his narrative. His descriptions of the Russian assaults on the Grivitza and other redoubts are superb, and he pays an eloquent tribute to the courage, stoicism, and endurance of the Turkish infantry. I have read it time and again. It never palls.

The second is Theodore Powys's *Mr Weston's Good Wine*. I cannot hope to convey the lasting impression which this book made on me, but I remember thinking when I put it down that I would sooner have written it than any other book I had ever read. Now, over 50 years and thousands of books later, my opinion is unchanged. I will not spoil the book for any reader who may be stimulated to get hold of it but will simply state that it deals with the powers of good and evil in a village; and that thanks to the work of some rather strange visitors the powers of good triumph—though not altogether in a way that the reader might wish. The evil are most satisfactorily punished. Powys handles his tale with a delicacy and tenderness of touch that adds

immeasurably to the reader's enjoyment. In short it is a masterpiece.

Another book, written in the 1860s, is Erckmann/Chatrian's *History of a Conscript of 1813* and *Waterloo* published in one volume by Dent in their Everyman series. This may be regarded as one book as both deal with the adventures of Joseph Bertha from 1813 to 1815. Our hero is a watchmaker apprenticed to Father Goulden and hitherto exempt from military service on account of a slight limp, but so pressing is the need for soldiers (after Napoleon's disastrous Moscow campaign) that he is conscripted. His subsequent adventures, sufferings, and woundings together with those of his fellow "Marie Louises"—the ironical name given to these conscripts—are described in deceptively simple prose. The Marie Louises fought splendidly but died in shoals being incapable, because of their youth, of enduring the hardships of a soldier's life. Joseph describes the military side of things and Father Goulden the political. I have read it many times and still rejoice when after all his troubles Joseph returns to marry his sweetheart Catherine. It is a beautifully written book and deserves to be much more widely known.

Mines of information

Just before the second world war I made the acquaintance of Vaughan Wilkin's *And So Victoria*. What a splendid author he was, an updated Dickens if you like, with his narrative skill, his unforgettable pictures of the appalling conditions in which young prisoners lived 100 or so years ago, and his characters so superbly drawn that they stood out as clearly defined as if etched from life. He must be the best author of the picaresque novel in the English tongue. I also enjoyed his later novels such as *Seven Tempest* etc but none so much as *And So Victoria*, which stands apart. It has stood the test of time and rereads as well as ever. During the second world war, like many another, I had perforce to read what I could get. One book in particular stands out—James Branch Cabell's *Jurgen*. It is quite impossible, for me at least, to define or classify the book. It is a glorious mixture of legend, faery, bawdiness, magic, and poesy all compounded by the author's genius. Its plot is simple—it follows the wanderings of Jurgen (a medieval pawnbroker) and tells what befell him. The plot may be simple but his adventures are not. I fancy most people will share my liking for the hero—apart from his abominable murder of Heitman Michael—but then he may be forgiven for he was under the influence of the Prince of Darkness! Why not read him and see what a pleasant place the "Garden between Dawn and Sunrise" is? You will not be disappointed.

Flora Thompson's *Lark Rise to Candleford* was published in 1945, when I first read it, and it has been at my bedside ever since. An enchanting book, it deals with the daily life of a girl in a remote Oxfordshire village in the '80s and '90s of the last century. It pictures the happiness and the hardship of rustic life nearly 100 years ago. It is written without self-consciousness or bitterness and with such skill that you share the joys and occasional sorrows with the writer. I cannot overpraise this book

—it is a thing apart. I have read it over and over again and find it as charming as when I first met it.

Another of my bedside books is *Wild Sports in the Highlands* by St John. The author, an English naturalist, lived in Morayshire 150 years ago on an estate in the valley of the Findhorn. A very shrewd observer, his book is an absolute mine of information on the wild life of the Highlands—though his descriptions of the vast numbers of eagles, otters, wild cats, martens, ospreys, etc, make one sigh for the good old days. He has long been out of print—the edition I have is an 1893 one—surely he deserves to be issued afresh?

Military memoirs

All my life I have delighted in military memoirs and history. Of the many books of memoirs that I have read, I will select one as representative—*The Memoirs of Baron De Marbot, late Lieutenant-General in the French Army*. Marbot was born in 1782 and enlisted in the 1st Regiment of Hussars in 1799. From then on he took part in practically every major battle that Napoleon engaged in. His adventures, amours, and military exploits are described with a boyish enthusiasm, which is as disarming as it is exciting, and when we come to the end (two volumes, be it noted) we look for more. Alas, although he took part in the Waterloo campaign he maintains a discreet silence for obvious political reasons. Marbot is the source from which Conan Doyle drew his *Exploits of Brigadier Gerard*. Need I say more? Marbot is in a class of his own.

I have long been retired, but two acquisitions have added immeasurably to my leisure and enjoyment. The first was *The History of the British Army* by John Fortescue in 14 volumes plus six volumes of maps for which I paid next to nothing (it was in a furniture sale). I had known the work for years and read about individual campaigns in it, but this was the first time I was able to read Fortescue from cover to cover. What a rewarding experience it was. His military knowledge is equalled only by his prose, which is superb. Furthermore, he never gives an opinion or states a fact without giving its source. The result is a treasure house of information and sources that have been plundered by historians ever since, and usually without any acknowledgment. Not that he would worry, though it exasperates me! Fortescue took 30 years to produce this masterpiece, and when you see the extent of his work you can but marvel that he took so short a time. The campaign maps are among the finest ever produced and likely to remain so for no publisher nowadays could afford to produce them. All campaigns are scrupulously dealt with. My favourite is the Peninsular War, which far surpasses that of Napier and even Oman. Higher praise I cannot give.

The second acquisition was *Monro's Expedition*, which I finally came across in an antiquarian book shop. It may be

wondered if after a 50-year search acquiring *Monro* was an anticlimax. The reverse was the case and few books have given me more pleasure. For this *Monro* is wholly responsible. Every page is crammed with adventures, anecdotes, and those moral observations so much delighted in by his fellow Scots. Furthermore, as he wrote at a time when neither the use of words nor their spelling had been standardised, there is an individuality, vividness, and freshness about this book that makes you feel that *Monro* is talking to you and that the intervening three and a half centuries do not exist. His book brings home what a murderous affair the Thirty Years War was. MacKeyes Regiment was 12 companies, and each company was roughly 200, so that the regiment must have been two and a half thousand strong. The sword and plague killed its men by the score, and it is estimated that its founder (Lord Reay) sent in all over 10 000 men to the "German wars." Few if any of the other ranks saw Scotland again. All this in the space of eight years. It is pleasant to record that MacKeyes Regiment is still with us—The First of Foot or Royal Scots. *Monro's* was the first regimental history to be written—a worthy distinction. I hope ere long to trail my pike once more in his company beneath the banners of his old commander Gustavus Adolphus, the Lion of the North and the Bulwark of the Protestant Faith!

It's far too expensive

And now to close on a more peaceful subject—book illustrations. The importance of good-quality book illustrations cannot be overemphasised. This is especially true for the young reader, who can create from the pictures quite as exciting themes as from the text, which he may not be able to read easily; if he can read, the illustrations add much to his pleasure. I know the truth of this for I was brought up on Walter Crane, Arthur Rackham, the brothers Brock, and so on. Will I ever forget the delights that Dulac gave me with his superb illustrations in *Tanglewood Tales* or alternatively the terrors I suffered when I saw a picture (by Phiz was it?) in *A Christmas Carol* of a tall cowed figure standing by a grave: the worst thing was that you could not see the figure's features but my imagination filled in the details. It was one of these illustrations that one tries to miss, but the book inevitably opens at the fatal page.

Despite the occasional moments of terror I count myself singularly lucky to have been brought up in an age when the illustrated book was still the order of the day. In the very unlikely event of some publisher seeing this may I put in a plea for a return to the practice of former years. No! Don't tell me. I can hear him say, "we'd love to, old chap, but it's far too expensive!"

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Clinical curio: Strimmers rash

With Strimmers all the rage, superseding shears, hooks, and scythes in the quest for garden tidiness and vegetation control, general practitioners and dermatologists are likely to see an efflorescence of phytophotodermatitis. The following patient illustrates the point.

A local businessman was awakened at about 2 00 am by pronounced irritation and discomfort of the hands, forearms, lower arms, face, neck, and "V" of the upper chest. His skin was blotchily erythematous with prominent oedema and vesicles. These appearances were especially striking on the hands and forearms, where the lesions were largely confluent. Large bullae appeared in both antecubital fossae. It transpired that six to nine hours previously he had been clearing vegetation in his garden with his new gadget—a Strimmer. It had been a sunny afternoon and evening. Samples of vegetation were proffered for my inspection, and it became clear that the dominant species was the ubiquitous cow parsnip (*Heracleum sphondylium*). This plant belongs to the *Umbelliferae* and is a well-established cause of phytophotodermatitis, the photosensitisation being maximal at 350 nano-

metres (UVA range) and due to furocoumarins in the leaves and stems. These compounds include 8-methoxypsoralen, which is used therapeutically with UVA in the treatment of psoriasis.

Two particular points of interest arise. The first is the pattern and intensity of the reaction. This was not the typical streaky and linear eruption described in dermatological texts but a dense papulovesicular eruption tending to confluence and associated with considerable cutaneous oedema, which was presumably the result of the force with which shredded vegetation was scattered. He was continually being struck by "jets" of plant fragments. In addition, the power of some of these machines is such that a fine cloud and possibly an aerosol is produced (the wearing of goggles is recommended by some manufacturers). Secondly, his eruption suffered a pronounced flare-up three days later after relatively minimal exposure to sun but no further contact with plant material. This presumably was due to residual furocoumarins still present in the skin.—MICHAEL DAVIES, consultant dermatologist, Devon.