Reading for Pleasure

To acquire facts, to be held in suspense . . .

A J FERRIS

Long before I first enjoyed the pleasure of reading there was the joy of listening to a story. My early childhood was punctuated by the usual share of infectious illness, and I can recall the delight of being tucked up warm in bed on a winter's evening, with the gas mantle glowing white on its wall bracket, listening to a well loved tale. More often than not it was my aunt who read to me. She was one of our household as far back as I can remember, and suffered severely from asthma. She had little breath to spare for reading aloud, but she compensated for this by uttering as many words as possible at a prodigious pace between breaths. The result was something like machine gun fire—rapid bursts of activity alternating with periods of silence—and her style seemed to enhance the excitement of a tale of suspense. Another occasional reader was my grandmother. She had a fine sense of drama and made a tale come alive. *The Secret Garden* by Frances Hodgson Burnett was a special favourite of hers, and I can still recommend this story as bedtime reading for a 10 year old. It concerns the family in a Yorkshire manor house, and how Colin, who had been hidden away in his room as an invalid, was returned to health through the influence of a country boy, Dickon, and by the beauty of a secret, walled garden.

My childhood home was liberally furnished with books; indeed, had they all been removed some rooms would have been practically bare. My father, a clergyman, had a tiny study literally lined from floor to ceiling with books, mostly theological tomes except for a small collection of "yellow perils" for light relief. Everyone had a bookcase in his or her bedroom, reflecting hobbies and interests. My own particular pride was a succession of handsomely bound volumes from Odham's Privilege Price Book Club. The most expensive of these cost five shillings, a good many weeks' pocket money. The books still make fascinating reading, dealing as they do with *Britain's Wonderful Fighting Forces* and *Ourselves in Wartime* from the days of the 1939-45 war.

Perhaps it was the need to digest dull reading matter thoroughly as a medical student that developed my peculiar mode of reading for pleasure. I always have at least half a dozen books in the process of being read, and find no difficulty in switching from one to the other according to mood.

A goodly footage of Buchan

Every so often my especial love of biography necessitates a digression. John Buchan's *Men and Deeds* consists of a collection of biographical studies, of which that on Gordon of Khartoum has recently made a deep impression on me. Buchan, having studied a host of contemporary and later writings, steers a steady course between the uncritical eulogy and the destructive dia-

tribe. He creates a marvellous sense of steadily increasing hopelessness and lethargy, in all but Gordon, as the small garrison waits in the relentless desert for the relief that came too late to save it. Buchan occupies a goodly footage on my shelves, and I am happy to know that there are tales of his that I have still not read.

Another book that I have enjoyed reading is *A Question of Balance* by HRH the Duke of Edinburgh. In a slim volume of essays Prince Philip gives his views on various subjects including "The individual and the community," "Satisfaction and contentment," and "Community health"—the last dealing, unexpectedly, not with medical but with penal and ethical problems.

Poetry reading has filled many spare moments of my time and has also produced a problem that I have not yet solved satisfactorily—whether to read from anthologies or from complete works. Several poems have so impressed me that I have eventually, after much searching of secondhand shops, acquired a complete edition of the poet's works. Two such come to mind, both women. One is Christina Rossetti, the other Alice Meynell. In spite of the charm of some of Christina Rossetti's shorter poems I found her complete works full of tedious repetition and a great disappointment. Alice Meynell's much shorter collection is pure gold. It would seem that the quality of a poet's work is in inverse proportion to the volume of output. Two outstanding collections of modern poetry, which I found in the gift shop of a National Trust stately home, have broadened my horizons. They are *A Choice of Poets* and *A Further Choice of Poets*, chosen and edited by R P Hewett. Though designed for schools, these collections with their superb explanatory notes have much to offer an adult reader. They include such poets as Edward Thomas, R S Thomas, and Philip Larkin as well as the more familiar William Blake, Wordsworth, and Keats, and I am hoping that a third collection will follow.

History has long been a subject that holds a fascination for me especially when it is presented as attractively as in the four volume illustrated edition of G M Trevelyan's *English Social History*, in which contemporary prints and portraits bring to life the everyday events of ordinary people through the ages. I have recently enjoyed a compact and inexpensive volume entitled *Kings and Queens of England and Great Britain* by Eric R Delderfield, which gives much fascinating and unsuspected information about what is sometimes wrongly considered the duller aspect of history—the lives of our rulers.

The right age and the right translation

It is a mistake to read some books at too young an age, for the mental indigestion that results may lead to a life long aversion to tasting again. Similarly, finding the right translation of a classic work may determine whether it stays on the bedside table for life or remains as a prop for the end of the row. The Bible is an obvious example here, as is Thomas à Kempis's *The Imitation of Christ*, of which the free translation by Ronald Knox is outstanding and compares with J B Phillips's treatment of the New Testament epistles in his *Letters to Young Churches*.

Chard, Somerset

A J FERRIS, BM, DOBSTRCOG, general practitioner

Correspondence to: Watersmeet, Chaffcombe, Chard, Somerset TA20 4AP.

When the life of a famous person has been treated by many authors it is disappointing to wade through an inferior biography only to find that the writer's view has been demolished by a more accurate pen. One of the greatest men of this century, Albert Schweitzer, has been the subject of much written comment, and I was glad to read what I believe to be a deeply considered and sound judgment by George Seaver in his *Albert Schweitzer, the Man and his Mind*. Seaver combines a moving account of Schweitzer's life both before and during his medical career with a careful assessment of the doctor's theological, medical, musical, and ethical ideals. It is encouraging to know that the hospital at Lambarene still flourishes; though many of the buildings are new, the Schweitzer philosophy still permeates the community.

Malcolm Muggeridge and Alec Vidler in their *Paul, Envoy Extraordinary* have brought alive for me the remarkable life of the great evangelist. The book is particularly attractive since the two authors, who personally followed in the footsteps of St Paul, relate their tale in the form of a pithy dialogue, accompanied by superb photographs of the terrain that they covered.

Does anyone still read books on natural history, seeing that there are so many excellent wild life programmes on television, and numerous splendidly illustrated wild life magazines? I believe there is still much pleasure to be derived from classics such as the writings of Richard Jefferies, but supreme among authors of this genus is the Canadian Ernest Thompson Seton. His character studies of birds and animals in Manitoba at the turn of the century are to be found in his *Wild Animals I have Known* and *Lives of the Hunted*. Each tale is a faithful and poignant account of creatures in the wild.

Antiques of the future

What does the future hold for books? Is it true that the micro-chip will virtually take over, and that books will no longer be produced? I think the answer can be found from history. Consider the invention of the internal combustion engine and the advent of the motor car at the end of the Victorian era. Many wise heads must have been shaken sadly and have prophesied the end of the horse, and yet, 80 years later, horses are as popular as ever, not often for work, but for pleasure. The same will hold good of books. While huge amounts of dull information will be consigned to the chip in future—to the relief of our forests and our wastepaper baskets—there is no doubt that readers, as distinct from listeners or viewers, will continue to demand books of the kind that give lasting pleasure. As with all demands commercial instincts will not be lacking to satisfy them. Incidentally, the secondhand book trade will become elevated to the level of the antique business, in the same way as the little regarded toys of our youth are now collectors' items. I shall not throw away any paperbacks from now on; they are the antiques of the future.

"Iron sharpeneth iron, so a man . . . his friend" runs a verse from Proverbs. To acquire facts, to travel in space and time, to be intrigued, to be held in suspense, these are some of the pleasures of reading. But perhaps the greatest pleasure and privilege of all is to be enabled to enter into the mind of another, to communicate across the years with a fellow human being, and to share in the living experience of the writer.

(Accepted 21 April 1983)

MATERIA NON MEDICA

Dolphins at Monkey Mia

Dolphins have always intrigued mankind. Many stories of their friendliness to man have been handed down from Greek and Roman times, including their willingness to take riders on their backs, either to save life or to give pleasure. The younger Pliny described such a case at Hippo in North Africa in or about 109 AD but he was admittedly not a direct observer of this event. Such traditions of a "boy on a dolphin" were often represented in graphic form on ancient coins and ceramics, and in sculpture, but were regarded as legends until 1955. In that year, for several months a female bottlenosed dolphin (*Tursiops aduncus*) enchanted thousands of visitors to Opononi, a little township at the mouth of a harbour near the top end of the North Island of New Zealand. She visited the shore every day to play games with people (including tossing a ball or an empty beer bottle), and on some occasions she would swim between the legs of a favourite girl to give her short rides. Before this event it was known that dolphins often swam like escorts or pilots around the bows of ships, and even apparently herded schools of fish to help men catch them; but in 1955 the old legends of the Mediterranean "came alive" in the southern hemisphere.

I was reminded of all this recently while on a botanical tour of Western Australia, when our wanderings took us to Shark Bay, a large inlet on the Indian Ocean coast of that vast state, some 800 kilometres north of Perth. A long thin tongue of land, the Peron Peninsula, juts into the bay from the south, dividing it into two halves, and on the eastern shore of this peninsula there is a little fishing settlement with the odd name of Monkey Mia—*mia* is an aboriginal word for *home*, and *Monkey* was apparently the name of a survey ship that used the place as a base once upon a time. For many years a school of bottlenosed dolphins, living free in the sea, have been in the habit of coming in to shore at this place to be hand fed and petted by people every day. It is a privileged experience to stand in shin deep water with trusting wild creatures snuffling around you out of their blowholes, inviting caresses and fish. I even saw a small child bend down and kiss one on the snout as it lifted its head out of the water to look at her. How it all started nobody knows, but presumably one bold dolphin found a friendly fisherman in that

fairly remote spot, and gradually spread the word around his family or school. Dolphins, of course, have been taught all sorts of tricks in various marineland circuses around the world in recent times, and scientists have studied their intelligence, family life, use of echo location, communication skills, and so on; but to me the most exciting aspect of the Shark Bay experience was the feeling that I was witnessing something which had been seen (and equally often disbelieved) for thousands of years. It gave me a sense of timelessness, and a curious delight.—ERIC SIMS, paediatrician, Adelaide.

Is anything known about the physical causes and bodily changes that result from emotional reactions? Among these are the electric shock that people feel in contact with those with whom they are in love, the sensation of warmth in the chest when they are very happy, and the sensation of tightness in the chest, even pain, prompted by unhappiness.

These sensations are caused mainly by hyperventilation, muscular tension, and arousal of the autonomic nervous system,¹ acting alone or in combination. All three mechanisms seem to be manifestations of a primitive "fight or flight" response that has been changed by civilisation into a seemingly counterproductive reaction to stress. Emotional reactions may cause various other symptoms—particularly in patients with depression²—and are thought to play a part in the aetiology of many physical diseases, particularly gastrointestinal conditions. The sciences of psychophysiology³ and psychosomatic medicine⁴ have studied such phenomena ever since the first diagnosis of lovesickness was made by Erasistratos⁵ in the third century BC, but the fine details of the nervous pathways and hormonal mechanisms causing these symptoms remain obscure.—JAMES OWEN DRIFE, senior lecturer in obstetrics and gynaecology, Leicester.

¹ Hill OW. Psychosomatic symptoms. *Br J Hosp Med* 1982;27:122-8.

² Mathew RJ, Weinman ML, Mirabi M. Physical symptoms of depression. *Br J Psychiatry* 1981;139:293-6.

³ Cacioppo JT. Social psychophysiology: a classic perspective and contemporary approach. *Psychophysiology* 1982;19:241-51.

⁴ Ackerknecht EH. The history of psychosomatic medicine. *Psychol Med* 1982;12:17-24.