Reading for Pleasure

Men, mountains, and the sea

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At the end of work-filled and city-bound days I need to escape for a while. Instinctively, I turn to familiar books that lead me to the hills. I have not been to Chamonix or Courmayeur, seen Mont Blanc, or tramped up the Mer de Glace and viewed the Grandes Jorasses, but many times I have been led there by the delicate precise prose of Geoffrey Winthrop Young. First published in 1928, *On High Hills* was republished as a definitive edition in 1948 and I have had my copy since then. Often not looked at for years, the beauty of his writing stays with me and I suddenly find that I must delve in once more and return to the golden age of climbing before the Great War. No doubt the hard men of today would laugh at his purple passages. Writing as well as climbing techniques have changed over the years. Modern climbing books are superbly illustrated, and Bonnington conveys the atmosphere of post-war mountaineering well in his two autobiographical books *I Chose to Climb* and *The Next Horizon*. Nevertheless, I prefer to retreat still further into the past and turn to Mummery's *My Climbs in the Alps and Caucasus*—the unabridged second edition of 1896 was reprinted in 1974. This was to be the first of a series of republications but, unfortunately, demand was apparently not great enough for the American publishers to continue the series and so Mummery stands alone—as he so often did in the past.

More recently published, though also describing a bygone age, is John Keay's *When Men and Mountains Meet*—an account of some of the extraordinary characters that struggled into and across the Himalayas in the years between 1820 and 1875. A delightful book, well served by maps that actually name the places mentioned in the text. How irritating it is to read a good tale, fact or fiction, and then find that one has lost one's way because the description omits just those essential details that the author knows so well but keeps to himself. Not so with the landscapes in *The Lord of the Rings*, which are clear because of Tolkien's eye for detail, whether it be forest, river, mountain, or sea. *The Silmarillion* followed in 1978. It is a very different work, so full of despair and gloom that halfway through—such was my depressive entanglement with Tolkien's world—I felt I had to stop and draw breath before I could continue.

House of half-read books

My home, if truth be told, is full of half-read books. Reading for pleasure needs to flow, and if the mood of the book and mine do not coincide then I am not prepared to force the issue too strongly. For the past ten months I have been struggling intermittently with Paul Scott's *The Jewel in the Crown*. I know (have I not read it often?) that it is destined to be a classic, but

I keep grinding to a halt. My personal knowledge of India is minimal—stopovers at Delhi while flying in and out of Nepal—but I find the legends of the country fascinating, owing no doubt to reading Kipling as a boy. I will have to break this mental block soon and read on because years ago I found *The Chinese Love Pavilion* a compelling account of life in Malaya during the troubles, and the imagery of that book is with me still—the people, the heat, the rain, the humidity, the villages, and the jungle-clad hills. The intensity is reinforced by my year there as a raw RAMC National Service medical officer.

There is no need to be present, however, to feel the tension and strain in the relations between the trio in *Hers*. Alvarez's start is brisk and firm and the tension persists until the book weakens towards its end, in Germany, when it lacks verisimilitude. Two other books that deal with university life have come my way recently. David Lodge's *Changing Places* describes the chaos of an interchange between two academics—one from the West Coast of the United States, and the other from somewhere in the Midlands. He points a wry finger at life on the two campuses, the academic intrigue and incompetence, the student ribaldry, politics, and domestic friction and boredom. I am glad that he omitted university physicians from his satire. Malcolm Bradbury's *The History Man* is too tight and unyielding for my taste. I found it overpowering in its descriptive passages when I first started it, and since then have read it in fits and starts between other books. It is viciously amusing and the attacks on the pretentiousness of the smart with-it intelligent intellectual radical socially aware "prof" and his wife have barbs that will strike home in some faculties of arts and social science.

I prefer the more leisurely style of John Le Carré and am at present immersed in the Whitehall infighting over status, finance, and responsibility that occurs in *The Honourable Schoolboy*. I know nothing of secret services except from my instruction in previous books, so I feel an instinctive sympathy for George Smiley and wonder if the chairmen of the BMA standing committees find this as compulsive reading as I do, and if similar events occur in Tavistock Square. The working of institutions has fascinated me ever since I felt the power of the postings officer in my first weeks in the RAMC and contrasted his sympathy and flexibility with that of the odd miserable "passed over" major or the failed staff college captain who enjoyed quoting Army regulations at us.

Norman Dixon's *On the Psychology of Military Incompetence* is an easily read book that describes in detail how some of our most famous and infamous commanders reached their pinnacle of power and then proceeded to behave in ways that led to death and destruction all round them. This is another book to dip into at irregular intervals and gain insight into the powerful and their ways, the good and the bad, the genuine and the rotten. The application of some of Dixon's hypothesis could, I feel, just as well be applied to the trade union barons as to the errant field marshals, or admirals of the fleet.

Armchair adventures

Naval fiction has always seemed a better read than fiction set in the hills. C S Forester's *Hornblower* helped fill the gaps when I was not slogging at textbooks during my student years and, more recently, Alexander Kent has produced a counterpart in *Richard Bolitho* struggling from midshipman up the ladder finally to fly his commodore's pennant. The style and presentation of each book in this series is similar, and yet the settings and the excitement of the actions are obviously addictive to others besides myself—judging by the rapidity with which the volumes vanish from the shelf in the university bookshop. Another series, sea linked and stark, is *Poldark*, with the seventh volume *The Angry Tide* following the fortunes of this North Cornish family over two more years. Winston Graham always tells a good tale, but I have grown to respect his diligent fact-finding and read about the medical problems of the time with interest, fear for the patients, and relief that I am not concerned.

For many years I was a keen dinghy sailor and had the odd sail at sea and so felt obliged to read *Yachting World*: not really to read, but to purchase, flip through, read the odd article, and

enjoy the pleasure of looking at the ocean racers creaming through the seas from an armchair. Only recently have I discovered that I can do the same with the hills. *Climber and Rambler* is published monthly, and the editor, Walter Unsworth, should be proud of his magazine. Apart from regular features on equipment and new climbs, the variety of the general articles is a constant stimulus and irritant to as restless a person as myself. Why haven't I been to Corsica, the Pyrenees, the Caucasus, Alaska, Patagonia, or even to much of the Highlands of Scotland. The journal is well indexed and offers copies of back articles on request. Last year I was able to spend three days in Connemara guided over the Bens by this admirable journal. Fortunate for me, because in hazy weather I met no one on two long horseshoe ridge walks and on a final day traversing the Mamturk Mountains in thick cloud. But if on those three days I could have chosen my companions, and if they would have accepted me, I would have slipped into the past and walked with those intrepid explorers and writers Eric Shipton and H W Tillman deep in the Himalayas. If I had been so fortunate, then maybe by now I would be able to write about gardening instead of still wistfully gazing at the sky. Somehow, though, I doubt it.

MATERIA NON MEDICA

Candle power is OK

The New York summer nights are hot and darkness comes quickly. The night of 13 July 1977 was no exception. The better-off enjoyed the noisy coolness of air conditioning indoors; the poor sat out on steps or on window sills and talked the evening quietly away in the time-honoured fashion. An air of heat-ridden tedium pervaded.

Then, lightning struck at Indian Point. This place—on the Hudson River—is the site of the central power point linking the city electricity supply to upstate New York and New England. Nature pierced the Achilles heel of the power network and plunged the metropolis into blackness. The Great Blackout of 1977 began.

I was leaving a friend's apartment when the rattle of an air conditioner coming suddenly to a powerless halt and the abrupt failure of the living room light caught us by surprise. Looking out into the street below only the lights of taxis, cars, and buses were seen illuminating the darkness. We groped for a candle and matches; in a few minutes an old-fashioned glow lit up the room.

We dived for the portable radio. As the only available means of mass communication the radio stations excelled themselves. We listened eagerly as the first news of the extent of the blackout came in: all of the great city affected, and the wide stretches of neighbouring Westchester County, too. What went wrong? How were the hospitals doing? What was the Mayor saying? The announcers and reporters in the field were excited. Not since the Orson Welles affair had the radioed word been so closely followed and influential.

But it was past midnight and time to go home. I groped my way down the 10-floor stairway and out into Manhattan's Second Avenue. Walking uptown, the night was teeming with life. Car headlights turned inwards across the pavements illuminated restaurants and bars and all-night grocery stores. Neighbours sitting out on steps called to me as I went by. Youths in jeans, shirtless and shoeless, were directing traffic by flashlight at intersections. There was the air of a midnight fiesta—unexpected, bizarre, half-real—but people were enjoying it for those very qualities—a spontaneous nocturnal Mardi Gras—live while it lasted, for tomorrow brings new challenges and difficulties.

But other city areas were far from festive. Gangs roamed the streets plundering shops of everything right down to the wall fittings.

It was over in 24 hours: the power was flowing again. Then there were stories of hardship and opportunism, of the plight of innocent shopkeepers, and of million-dollar deals transacted at Wall Street telephone booths instead of in highrise corporate boardrooms. There were charges and counter-charges as politicians and power authorities exchanged angry verbal fusillades, which reverberate to this day.

In the perspective of two years, the frailty of the great complex of people and things called a city and its existence in apparent day-to-day normality on the verge of anarchy stand out. But, there is at least one

reassuring note, even when lightning strikes and a city totters at the edge of a chasm—candle power is still OK.—CHARLES BREDIN (physician, New York).

Ornithotherapy

"As dumb as a lark in August." The harvest month is a silent one as far as birdsong is concerned; the robin is about the only bird to be heard at that time and his melancholy song depresses me because it reminds me of winter.

The sight of a blackcap in a winter garden brings thoughts of summer days and cheerfulness. Especially cheering was a blackcap which I saw on a November day in a Norwegian garden, where the short, grey days of winter are particularly depressing. Who has not been moved by the sight of the first swallow of summer or on hearing the first cuckoo? I wonder where the cuckoo obtained its reputation for stupidity because, like Alfred P Doolittle, it seems to have learnt to its advantage that "Wiv a little bit of luck someone else will do the blinkin' work." But if the cuckoo is said to be stupid, what anthropomorphic qualities has the owl that it should apparently be imbued with such wisdom? On the other hand, the magpie and jackdaw undoubtedly deserve their reputations as kleptomaniacs, as anyone who has examined their nests will confirm.

The disciples of Niko Tinbergen or Konrad Lorenz will maintain that all bird activities are instinctive responses to specific stimuli, either behavioural or environmental. However, neither the sentimentalist nor the ethologist would deny that the observation of birds has a real effect on their own emotions.

This emotional influence can be turned to good effect. What comfort the bird man of Alcatraz must have derived from his intimate relations with the feathered, but free, inmates of that desperate place. Connie Coke, that chronic depressive character so beautifully described by Norman Collins in *London Belongs to Me* was saved from suicide by devotion to her budgerigar, as numerous old ladies must have been in real life. For once she was telling the truth when she claimed before the beak that her budgie was a dependant.

But I derive even more pleasure from watching birds in the wild, because they offer so much more variety. Even in the midst of our most depressing concrete deserts, birds come to the windows and, with a little encouragement in the way of food and drink, a surprising variety will collect. To the depressive or physically housebound, the simple pleasure of watching birds can be an incalculable comfort, while a deeper study of their identification and behaviour can add a new dimension to the most despondent lives. As a tranquilliser, bird-watching may be as effective as any drug, but cheaper and safer than many.—R A F COX (medical director, London).