Reading for Pleasure

Autumn words

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Your invitation to contribute a second time to this series arrived on the fortieth anniversary weekend of the outbreak of the second world war. A week before, misled by its title, I had purchased Deighton's *Declarations of War*, to find that it consisted of 13 short stories, not about the actual beginnings of wars—but of incidents during them. In the past week five of them were read late at night on television. As you would expect, the RFC and the RAF are there, but so also are tales of the American civil war, a South American revolution, and the Vietnam war. There is a chilling account of the journey of a British firing squad in India in 1920 to an appointment with a sentenced private in another regiment. In all, there is a winning economy of words, with sharply evoked scenes, surprising turns, while time and place are sometimes revealed only in the last lines. In one tale, for example, about a mountain patrol, the former cannot be identified until the last line, when in a high pass the leading soldiers are suddenly confronted with elephants—Hannibal's. In another there is a late-night conversation in a university between a distinguished MP and war veteran—the evening's guest of honour—and a young don named Chris. The latter is charmed and inspired by the brilliance of the handsome visitor and promises to help him in his political aims. As the guest leaves, the young man says "Goodnight, Captain Goering. Thank you for coming." (I don't know who Chris may have been, but I suppose a club-footed Josef would have been just as appropriate.)

All this reminds me that last spring I had need to rearrange my study. I now have a "war corner" and a "travel corner," in which I have passed some hours. The editorial request asked about enjoyable non-medical and medical reading in the past six months. If I exclude journals I find that I can remember only one medical book—*Ever Since Darwin*, by S J Gould. But in it I learned that it was von Haller (1708-77) who coined the term evolution (from the Latin *evolvere*, to unroll) when he was describing his theory that embryos grew from preformed homunculi enclosed in the egg or sperm; the tiny homunculus simply unfolded. And it was Herbert Spencer (1820-1903) who gave us the phrase "the survival of the fittest." So much for the medical corner.

The war corner

I have reread Tuchman's two books, *August 1914* and *The Proud Tower*, examples of readable historical scholarship which

I admire. In the latter, dealing with the years 1890-1914, there is an interesting account of the rise of European socialism—the colourful leaders, the early congresses, and the high hopes. The leaders came from all walks of life and many were exceptionally intelligent. Bebel, for example, was thought to have a brain large enough, that if it was divided among a dozen Junkers from east of the Elbe each of them would have had enough to shine among his peers. The founder of the Austrian party was a doctor from a wealthy family (Victor Adler) who had been examining the conditions and ailments of the labouring classes for years. In 1914, a few days before war began, many of them met in Brussels to see whether some way could be devised, by rousing the working classes, to halt the drift into catastrophe. Poor Jaures, the French leader, was assassinated when he returned to Paris on 31 July. Years ago, coming out of a museum in Castres, in the south of France, where we had been looking at some Goyas, we came across a statue of Jaures in an adjacent square. He was born there.

In the current number of *Folio*, the quarterly magazine of the Folio Society, there is a photograph of wounded soldiers in the American civil war, in an article about Walt Whitman's *Specimen Days*, which I have not yet read. But I know the photograph well: it is of union soldiers after the battle of Fredericksburg. It was taken by Mathew Brady, *Mr. Lincoln's Camera Man*, so named in R Meredith's book of that name. In it, and in his other book of that war, *Mr Lincoln's Contemporaries*, one sees the faces of the men and their officers and generals and politicians, and the desolation of the battlefields, and the ordnance pieces of the day. As an historical record, these grim photographs rank with *Russell's Dispatches from the Crimea 1854-1856*—only that Russell's lines were seminal and Brady's plates were long neglected.

I am sometimes asked by a young adult to recommend a book which gives a general picture of the last world war. For a serious student, *The War 1939-1945*, edited by D Flower and J Reeves, a documentary conspectus of some 1100 pages, is a splendid source book of extracts. It is a fascinating record of the words and actions of the high and the low, of both sides, and provided with a consecutive narrative: the genuine stuff. *The People's War* by A Calder will tell the reader about the effect of the war on civilian life in Britain, while Herman Wouk's two-volume novel—*The Winds of War* and *War and Remembrance*—will entertain as well as inform. It is American and no doubt some will sniff. I read the first volume again before beginning the second, enjoying both, and lending them to my children. And, for a sign of the times, let me add that the first cost £2.50 and the second £8.50. The magic mind of A J P Taylor is at work in the *Second World War: an illustrated history*, probably the most original of the books about the world issues. Deighton considered it a "masterpiece."

In *Rebecca West: a celebration selected from her writings* there are selections from war themes—her first novel, *The Return of the Soldier* (1918), the trials at Nuremberg and of William Joyce (Lord Haw-Haw), and the assassinations at Sarajevo in 1914.

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Describing the sentencing at Nuremberg, she wrote that, "It must be recorded that there was not a coward among them . . . but we had no idea why they had done what they did . . . we learned nothing about them we did not know before, except that they were capable of heroism to which they had no moral right, and that there was nothing in the legend that a bully was always a coward." "Sanity," she thought, "is to some extent a matter of choice." William Joyce was "a tiny little creature" of quite insignificant appearance, but whose "voice had suggested a large and fleshy handsomeness." She asked a question which is relevant today: "Why is it so important to them that they should stand on the political platform, hold office, give commands with their own voices, and be personally feared?"

Crime and punishment are some of Rebecca West's other themes. Her ideas about the forces of good and evil are recounted with acerbity and wit, while her insights are keen. Referring to a letter Kafka wrote to his father, she said, "It is an early example of the painful truth that Freud gave sadists a new weapon by enabling them to disguise themselves as hurt children."

The travel corner

My most prized recent acquisition here is Patrick Leigh Fermor's book of travel-autobiography—*A Time of Gifts*. To me he has always been a mysterious figure: one hears so little about him; in some thirty years he has written only five books, all of which I cherish. In the first, *The Traveller's Tree*, the mood and tempo of the Caribbean archipelago are captured in unforgettable prose, full of history and strange events. Then, in 1953, came *The Violins of Saint-Jacques*, a tale of the Antilles, a romantic novella about the extinction by volcano of a remote island with its antiquated French aristocracy. Quite unique—and not long ago produced as an opera at Sadlers Wells. Two years later we discover, in his translation from the Greek of *The Cretan Runner*, that he was a hero of the Cretan resistance and had organised the kidnapping of the German General Kreipe (this classic has been reissued in paper-back). In the next book, *A Time to Keep Silence*, the man of action becomes a contemplative—with monastic sojourns in Normandy, Maine (the French one), and Cappadocia. This aesthetic experience is recounted in a slim delightful volume. Two splendid books of Greek travel, *Mani* and *Roumeli*, are perhaps his best known works—journeys in the Peloponnese and in northern Greece. He has promised further books on Greece, but *Mani*—with its blood feuds, dirges, and rocky strongholds in the wars with the Turks—provided the opportunity to indulge his gifts of narrative and imagination, and in the mountains, taverns, and waterfronts of *Roumeli* we hear the scholar of Byzantium reminding us that there is another Greece besides the classical one.

And now, in *Time of Gifts*, we learn something of the writer himself, or at least of his youth, when in December 1933 aged 18, after an eccentric education in England, he set off alone on foot to Constantinople. Across the Low Countries, up the Rhine, to Munich, the Danube, and Vienna, into the Slav lands, Prague, Slovakia, and Hungary—all on a pound a week sent ahead poste restante. The book ends with our hero on the middle of a bridge over a river on the Czech-Hungarian border, en route to Budapest.

What a zestful, romantic young scholar he must have been. He sizzled with life. A natural linguist, he could spout doggerel or recite poetry in four languages. On a Swabian highway, passers-by smiled when he sang, glanced inquiringly when he was talking to himself, but he found sometimes that he had to suddenly mask his gesticulations, sheath his sword, and hush his commands when confronted with a terrified peasant on a lonely path. One night would find him sharing a swineherd's icy shelter, and the next in a baroque schloss, savouring the baron's wine, examining his library, and soaking up the regional history. Every page is interesting and there are diversions galore. "We

shall never get to Constantinople like this," he exclaims.

The reader can participate in his good fortune in meeting the two German students, Lise and Annie; his stay in the Red Ox at Heidelberg; and is shattered at the loss of his rucksack, passport, and money. In Munich, "where the Nazi salute flickered about the pavement like a tic douloureux," a Breughel-like picture is painted for us of feasting burghers "wide as casks . . . with spreading buttocks . . . shaven knobbly scalps . . . hands like bundles of sausages . . . packing in forkload on forkload of ham, salami, frankfurter, krenwurst and blutwurst and stone tankards lifted for long swallows of liquid which sprang out again instantaneously on cheek and brow." A marvellous volume. I envy anyone who has yet to read it. Surely, nothing will prevent the appearance of its promised successor.

Macaulay said that the pleasure of history was "analogous in many respects to that produced by foreign travel. The student, like the tourist, is transported into a new society." And so there are a few history books, too, in this corner. James Morris's third book on the history of the British Empire, *Farewell the Trumpets* was promised and delivered. The trilogy (the first being *Heaven's Command* and the second *Pax Britannica*) was a courageous enterprise, but by an exceptionally talented journalist-traveller-scholar whose books have been steadily appearing since Everest 1953. His *Coast to Coast* is the book I usually suggest to anyone visiting the USA for the first time. (I also have an American corner and have been known to puff myself up by mentioning that, like me, James Morris and Alistair Cooke are former Commonwealth Fund Fellows.) I suppose that I have read every book they have written, and own the majority. Fermor, Morris, and Cooke seem to have been a part of me for a long time. My own coast to coast in 1938 was by car—12 000 miles in fourteen weeks—and I still have the cine-film (camera £10 in Macy's; Kodak colour). My two years in the USA brought forth, for the only period in my life, a diary—a typed page of foolscap each night—now rarely looked at because I usually find something in it I dislike or which makes me feel ashamed. Friends console me that it was written by another person. I hope so.

Three last mentions

The Boat and The Town by G Moorhouse is a splendid description of the lives of New England deep-sea fishermen. The author, a former chief features writer of the *Guardian*, spent a year with them; the town is not identified, but might be Hyannis, "tucked into the underside of the Cape" (?Cod), and the characters are composite—life-like, and attractive and tough. This is the first of Moorhouse's books I have read but I note that a reviewer of a previous one—*The Fearful Void*—thought that it was not just a book of the year, but of a lifetime. Discovering an author is like taking your first sip from a glass of champagne, and learning it is vintage stuff, with more to come.

Then Martha Gellhorn's *Travels with Myself and Another*. A doctor's daughter, one of Hemingway's wives, she recalls some of the worst journeys she has undertaken. In China in the late nineteen-thirties; across Africa from west to east; in the Caribbean before it was vulgarised; and, lastly, to Moscow—there, in midwinter, just to see an old lady whom she had never known who used to write to her about her books (she took presents—and love). In Martha Gellhorn Bryn Mawr has a choice alumnus.

Finally, there is the poet-traveller Laurie Lee in *I can't stay long*. Like the Audens and the Sitwells of this world, the eye of a poet is exceptional. Here you can linger with him in places you may or may not have visited. But seen through his eyes you know you have really been there.

Looking up from my desk I see that September waves are already moving in long, white, gentle lines across our bay. Up in Blackpool, I hear, other lines are being drawn—rather dark and grim. During the winter storms, good readers, I shall be thinking of you.