Reading for Pleasure

Home from home

J R BUTLER

British Medical Journal, 1979, 1, 1005-1006

It may seem a trifle indulgent, or possibly even perverse, to spend one's leisure reading novels about the institution in which one works, especially novels that mercilessly caricature all the foibles of one's own profession. Yet two hugely enjoyable novels about the academic lifestyle have recently passed my way that I cannot but commend to those who, like myself, seek wit, humour, and insight in their out-of-hours reading. Each novel offers an unflinchingly exaggerated (but deliciously perceptive) portrait of university teachers in the late 1960s. How closely they approximate to reality is not, of course, for me to judge.

Busy and manipulative radicals

Howard Kirk, the anti-hero of Malcolm Bradbury's *The History Man*, is a Zapata-moustached lecturer in sociology at the new University of Watermouth. He is the exemplar of the radical dissent that swept the universities of the Western world in the late 1960s, fusing righteous indignation over the oppression of the poor and the exploited with a missionary zeal to free mankind from the centuries of puritan repression that have defined the canons of social and sexual orthodoxy. Aided and abetted by his wife, Barbara, Howard Kirk stands in the vanguard of cultural change, a man in tune with the great symphonic themes of history, passionately concerned (as all good sociologists are) with humanity in the round, yet blind to the personal needs of those with whom he interacts.

The Kirks are busy, manipulative people. Their madly trendy parties attract bearded Jesus youths in combat-wear, girls in caftans and big boots, a radical vicar, an Argentinian with obscure guerrilla connections, an actor in moleskin trousers who has touched Glenda Jackson in a Ken Russell film, students fresh from months of sleeping through seminar after seminar, long-haired androgynes, bright young women with babies in harnesses on their backs, and the cast of the nude touring production of *The Importance of Being Earnest*. All this humanity is grist to the Kirks' mill, for their parties are serious affairs, stages on which the unscripted drama of human interaction unfolds. And here is Howard, the manager of this social theatre, adjusting the lights, arranging the furniture, creating possibilities, prohibiting nothing.

The sociology department at the University of Watermouth is, like Howard, passionately concerned with the dialectics of justice and freedom. Appropriate radical stances are struck. The tea ladies are democratically elected to full membership of the departmental meeting, and agitated plans are laid to sabotage the visit of one Professor Mangel—a geneticist whose work, though unfamiliar in detail to the members of the department,

is believed to have something to do with race and intelligence, and must therefore be opposed by all the weapons that readily come to the hands of those engaged in the vigilant opposition of fascism. Unfortunately, on his lone arrival at the podium on the night of the lecture, the wretched member of staff chosen to introduce Professor Mangel is swamped by the verbal abuse of those committed to the sanctity of free speech before he can relate the news of Mangel's death from a heart attack the previous evening. But this is no more than a trifling technicality: the orchestrated explosion of dissent is undoubtedly the high point of radical success in the term.

The plot quickens and thickens around George Carmody, a sincere but inadequate student, who flusteringly champions all that Howard Kirk despises and opposes. Carmody is a cultural anachronism, who has atavistically resisted the irresistible progress of history. He it is who, in the hursute and jean-clad corridors of Watermouth, defiantly wears short hair, a university blazer, pressed trousers with turn-ups, and polished shoes. It is George Carmody who calls Howard Kirk "Sir," while other students use the more familiar "How," and it is Carmody who dangerously and heretically challenges the prevailing collectivist orthodoxies by which the whole of social evolution and organisation is to be understood. In a crisis seminar Carmody is taunted, bullied, and humiliated by Howard Kirk. Swiftly he retaliates by photographing Howard's promiscuous activities with colleagues and students, and presents the results to the vice-chancellor. Momentarily, Howard's career is threatened, for, as he confesses to an attractive young lecturer in the English department shortly before seducing her, "there's a thing called gross moral turpitude. I have political enemies who'd pin anything on to me they could."

Yet Howard Kirk survives, and as the story closes the Kirks—those busy and manipulative people—are planning another madly trendy party to which will come radical vicars and actors who have touched Glenda Jackson; but not on this occasion the cast of the nude touring production of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, for they have left and been replaced at the local theatre by a pantomime season of *Puss-in-Boots*, the cast of which is not the Kirks' sort of company at all. But the Kirks do not live happily ever after, for this is a moral tale, and nemesis visits those who assume the divine right to control history. I will not tell you what happens, but the nemesis that visits the Kirks is born of Howard's incapacity to love, feel, and trust. At the end, Howard Kirk, the magician of the emotions, the man who substitutes trends for morals and commitment, the social entrepreneur for whom to know a little Marx, Freud, and social history is to understand all, falls victim to his own trap.

Euphoria-Rummidge exchange

The jacket of *The History Man* reproduces Goya's "Dog buried in Sand." It is an apt choice, this erstwhile cocky mongrel, head protruding from the sand, viewing the coming storm with consternation. By contrast, the jacket of David

Lodge's novel *Changing Places* contains nothing but the author's name and the novel's title. The story, likewise, opens in a cultural vacuum, five miles above the North Pole on 1 January 1969, as two Boeing jets meet and pass. Travelling westwards is Philip Swallow, lecturer in English at the University of Rummidge, UK. Flying eastwards is the man with whom he is exchanging for six months, Morris Zapp, professor of English literature at the University of Euphoria, USA.

Each man has been shaped in distinctive ways by his native culture. Philip, having survived the intensive rigours of the English undergraduate curriculum, eventually delivered himself of an MA thesis on the juvenilia of Jane Austen, and has since darted inconclusively from one academic project to another acquiring, nothing more profound than a respected ability to operate the marking categories of Rummidge with exquisite sensitivity. Like many Englishmen, Philip has a long-repressed appetite for sensual pleasure, which had been fleetingly fed on his honeymoon in America, 12 years earlier. He had gone as a bachelor graduate student, spent several miserable months as a non-driver in that most mobile of countries, and had eventually written to Hilary, a graduate student in Augustan pastoral poetry at Rummidge, inviting her to join him in matrimony. Hilary had promptly closed her books, bought an off-the-peg wedding dress at C and A, and within three weeks had married Philip at an Episcopal church in Boston. Their long, touring honeymoon, with Hilary driving, had been the key that unlocked the American experience for Philip, allowing him to discover his sensuality—not only in large double beds (and the backseat of the Chevrolet Impala) with Hilary, but also in the showers, cold beer, rye-bread sandwiches, heated open-air swimming pools, multi-flavoured ice-creams, and eternal summer sunshine that encapsulate the simple amenities of the American way of life.

On their return to England, Hilary had been four months pregnant. It had been raining hard when their boat docked at Southampton. They had rented a damp and draughty furnished flat in Rummidge for six months, and after the baby arrived had moved to a small, damp and draughty terraced house. Three years later, with a second child and another on the way, they had moved again to a large, damp and draughty Victorian villa. Now, 12 years after their rapturous honeymoon, Philip and Hilary have stumbled into an acceptably tedious rut. Hilary accepts his marital embraces with the same calm, slightly preoccupied amiability with which she prepares his breakfast and irons his shirts; and Philip consoles himself that this is all quite natural, and that it is as late to persuade her to experiment with new sexual postures as it is to comb his hair forward or wear Paisley shirts. So it is that Philip, feeling somewhat guilty at leaving Hilary and the children in Rummidge, now senses a stirring of the old Adam, a reawakening of memories long forgotten, the pleasurable anticipation of sharpened appetites.

Travelling eastwards, Professor Morris Zapp feels nothing but gloom at the prospect of six dreary, rain-sodden months in the stagnant backwaters of the English department at Rummidge. His depression is deepened by his discovery that, in buying his ticket for the charter flight from one of his female students, he has become the only man among a party of American women bound for their abortions in the liberal climate of post-1967 Britain. At 40, Morris Zapp possesses much of what Philip Swallow lacks: an abundantly cocky self-assurance, an international reputation for his work on Jane Austen, a bawdiness born of extensive experience, and the kind of flamboyance that is to convey him around Rummidge at high speed in an orange Lotus Europa.

Zapp is not participating in the Euphoria-Rummidge exchange out of love for the country whose literature he professes, for it is his boast to have acquired his reputation as a world authority on Jane Austen because of (rather than in spite of) never before having set foot in England. Nor is Rummidge the only foreign location available for sabbatical leave, for a scholar of Zapp's repute can pick the jewels of the world's universities. No, Morris is bound for Rummidge as part of a complicated

compromise with his wife, Desirée, in which she has agreed to delay divorce proceedings if he quits the family home for six months. In a moment of desperate bravado, Morris casually announced to Desirée that he had been invited to Europe (for many years he had tenaciously resisted Desirée's pleadings for the grand European tour); and, being a man of considerable pride, he was obliged to accept the only European exchange available at the time. Which was Rummidge. He does not feel guilt at leaving Desirée in Euphoria.

The story unfolds in an ingeniously symmetrical pattern as each man shapes personality to culture. Both are transformed. Philip's pleasures are realised as rapidly as Morris's apprehensions are melted. Both men become indispensable to their host institutions; both become central actors in the political confrontations of Euphoria and Rummidge. Their experiences in these affairs would undoubtedly have interested Howard Kirk (who, for all we know, may well have encountered Morris Zapp at some academic jamboree). Hilary and Desirée become central actresses in the plot, as the novel's title has forewarned us. At the conclusion of the allotted six months, it seems as unnatural to them to un-exchange places as it had originally been to exchange them. A summit conference is called in a New York hotel at which, for the first time, Morris meets Philip and Hilary meets Desirée. Impressions are confirmed and confounded; a crucial decision has to be made. I will not tell you what happens, but the novel ends in as stunningly ingenious a way as it has been told.

These two books are probably the funniest novels about university life since *Lucky Jim*. They doubtless tell us no more about academics and academic institutions in the 1960s than *Madame Bovary* tells us about doctors and medicine in France in the 1850s. They will never achieve the classic stature of a *Madame Bovary*. But I hope I have conveyed enough of their flavour to persuade you that part of your reading for pleasure might be directed towards them.

STRANGE ENCOUNTERS

Rabies

"What's behind the fuss over rabies, doctor?" asked a neighbour, a successful and much-travelled businessman. I could not understand why he asked, for it seemed clear from his further remarks that he had the sort of knowledge about the disease that might be expected of a well-read, intelligent layman in the British Isles today. "Haven't you answered your own question, when just now you described rabies as a fatal infection acquired from animals?" I asked. "I'm sorry," he replied, "I can't have made myself clear. What puzzles me is why the authorities don't just make enough vaccine to immunise all the immigrants and other coloured people in the country against rabies, as then everybody at risk from the disease would have been protected and there'd be no need for quarantine of animals, and no need to be so bothered about dogs and cats being brought in."

He had seen a documentary film about rabies on television. All the patients shown in the film, which had been made in Africa, were black. He did not realise the provenance of the clinical scenes and he had assumed that they were photographed in England. Perhaps it was because he watched it while at dinner with his family that he had remembered so little of the programme accurately, but it had struck him that the patients were black; this, and something of the horror of the disease, had stayed in his mind. His eventual assumption was that rabies is a disease that affects only coloured people, "like Burkitt's lymphoma and sleeping sickness, tsetse fly disease," he said.

My neighbour is a man of good standing and some influence in the community. He was shocked by the truth about rabies, and glad to have been corrected. His initial misunderstanding and the ignorance that it reflected took me by surprise. Perhaps other educated laymen share his misunderstanding and ignorance and other doctors my surprise.

A question comes to my mind. Must we film a white man—or a Briton of no matter what colour—in Britain dying of rabies, and show the agony unmitigated on television, before British people understand why they, and our visitors from abroad, must not let this thing loose among us?—WILL MACREDIE.