Reading for Pleasure

Pantisocracy and small aliquots

J M S PEARCE

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To read about the art and practice of writing is both easy and pleasurable; but to write about reading is an altogether more onerous task. Reading is so very personal in selection, personal in the choice of the right surroundings, and must be personal in matching the book to the mood of the moment. My father would not let us pass by a secondhand bookshop, and following his example I leave uninspected no scruffy bundle of dusty books on trolley or in crate in a village market; many a crusty gem has been prised from such an unlikely source.

There is satisfaction, almost a sense of rescue, in handling discarded old books. There is a sense of adventure in opening the class prize at a grammar school of half a century ago, and in speculating on the fate of the proud owner in later years. This childish sense of wonder is enlivened by dark probing in some hidden pile of books in a corner, by musing over the surprise object brought to light by the last fumbling from a shelf which at first seemed likely to be unrewarding. There is, too, a physical, a sensuous quality in the bindings of cloth—or, better still, old crinkly leather—and the richness of discovery is enhanced by the gilt edging of the shallow leaves which were so commonplace when we were young, but which now are almost priceless.

Essays and anthologies

Horae Subsecivae, the three volumes of John Brown, MD, was the discovery made on my honeymoon when, no doubt, my thoughts should have been on more ethereal things. These essays remain a favourite diversion, and I often return to the yarn of *Rab and His Friends*, *A Recital by Halle*, *A Jacobite Family*, and Brown's splendid appreciation of Locke and Sydenham.

Much leisure reading is in bed, and here such essays as Brown's—anthologies, or short stories—are the rule. Here, I first met the prose of Hazlitt's *Winterslow*, a fine volume of essays written in, and named after, his native village sited between Salisbury and Andover, not far from Stonehenge. The Hazlitt house was visited by Charles and Mary Lamb, and by S T Coleridge. This he writes of in "My first-acquaintance with poets." When he first sees STC in the Unitarian pulpit: "his voice rose like a steam of rich distilled perfumes." The youthful Hazlitt's excitement is contagious: "And for myself I could not have been more delighted if I had heard the music of the spheres. Poetry and Philosophy had met together. Truth and Genius had embraced. . . ." His essays are rich in metaphor and they wield a curious brand of individual wisdom. He tells of the feelings of immortality in youth, of mind and motive, of matter and manner. His pen portraits of Burke, Fox, and Lord

Chatham are as enthralling as his style and self-evident intellect are superb models for later essayists.

Having whetted my appetite for Coleridge, I much enjoyed the recent book *Samuel Taylor Coleridge: A bondage of opium* by Professor Keith Simpson's private secretary, Molly Lefebure. STC described his addiction as drug-slavery, but Mrs Lefebure calls him a junkie and then rightly commends his eventual success in breaking his bondage. In this, he was much helped by James Gillman, a surgeon of Highgate, who took the celebrated stranger into his home as a friend in April 1816 and there cared for him until his death from cardiac failure due to rheumatic heart disease in 1834. STC's earlier life makes an intriguing story, with his addiction to laudanum, the notorious Kendal black drop, and his associations and letters with Southey and the Wordsworths.

The modern dropout has nothing to add to Coleridge's pantisocracy, a movement "aimed to desert prevailing society which is rotten, worthless, ruled by avarice and self-interest, riddled with hypocrisy. Twelve gentlemen of good education and liberal principles were to embark with twelve ladies to an experimental community in Susquehannah, where personal property was to be abandoned in favour of a participatory government, by all, for all." If this rings bells that are painful, readers will be reassured that like its modern counterparts—and for similar reasons—the venture failed.

Glittering prose and enticing tales

For reading in trains or by the fireside I am prepared to forfeit the 1000-page epic of well-researched tedium in favour of the romantic novel, adventure, or biography. I have recently enjoyed the tales of David Grayson. Such was his popularity before the war that my pocket edition of *Adventures in Contentment* was the eighteenth in sixteen years. Grayson left a city life in America to rent a farm which he soon came to own. His theme, now popular again, is his joy in abandoning the strain of town life and in his discovery of his true self in a rural setting. He writes with impressive simplicity, but his prose glitters with life and adds much to his natural gift as a storyteller: "I came here like one sore-wounded creeping from the field of battle. I remember walking in the sunshine, weak yet, but curiously satisfied. . . ." Not very original, but the tale is enticing, related by an incurable romantic who has the knack of transmuting the commonplace into a minor mystery. I enjoyed his other collections *The Friendly Road* and *Great Possessions* just as much as the first, but Grayson must be taken in small aliquots if he is not to cloy or spoil the palate.

Then, in different vein, is the frustrated schoolmaster who became a lecturer in, of all things, political science at McGill University. *Literary Lapses* was his best known work and, having lapped this up as a boy, I was delighted to find Stephen Leacock again in his *Arcadian Adventures with the Idle Rich*. Here his genius for minute observation turned into sharp but gentle humour is at its best. His names for characters and places are great fun: who could resist "A little dinner with Lucullus Fyshe," the sight of Tomlinson from Tomlinson's creek being

called by a pageboy in the Grand Palaver Hotel, or an encounter (it could scarcely be an ordinary meeting) with Dulpheia Rasselyer-Brown of the Yahi-Bahi Society?

Finally, to those who like writing, books about writing are irresistible. Leacock's *How to Write* is a splendid small book, written in his own practical style, his Puckish wit never far beneath the surface. He ranges from the "Art of Narration" to

"How *not* to Write Poetry," just the sort of stuff to hand to your son or daughter labouring under Quiller Couch, C E M Joad, or whoever has replaced these former taskmasters. But perhaps they have not been replaced after all, any more than our old BBC favourite who no longer exists (occupancy situation unfilled, basically): I refer of course to the man with the grandiose handle, "the Director of the Spoken Word."

MATERIA NON MEDICA

Biblicomedical similitude

On 12 January, I listened to the radio programme, "Quote-Unquote." Each member of the panel game was asked to mention a passage from the Bible which intrigued them. Such was the laughter occasioned by one answer that I failed to grasp it wholly, and I put it out of my mind. That night in bed I opened my Bible as usual to read a chapter, which the book-marker indicated was to be the 10th in the book of Deuteronomy. Arriving at the 16th verse, I recognised it instantly as that which had caused so much merriment in the panel game. The verse reads: "Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no more stiff-necked." The words were spoken by Moses to the Israelites before entering the promised land.

The significance of this curiously framed verse in relation to the heart was not immediately clear, for it had a lone setting and it derived no meaningful explanation from the verses that preceded or followed it. Its anatomical connotation, of course, is correct, for the skin that covers the heart is the pericardium. Since the verse alludes to treatment, and to surgical treatment at that, it stamps constrictive pericarditis as the clinical state to which it relates.

In former years, when discussing with my colleagues Tudor Edwards, Donald Barlow, and Vernon Thompson the most effective ways of dealing with constrictive pericarditis in the light of experience gained from sixty patients, expressions like "cardiac decompression," "cardiac release," "denuding the heart," "decortication of the heart," and "pericardial stripping or paring" were paraded to emphasise the need to free the heart's action through removing completely any adhesive material which impeded it. Of paramount importance was to attend to the atrioventricular groove around both ventricles. It can be held with justification that the singular term "circumcision" (circumcidere, to cut round about) embraces all the above requirements.

The rather odd term "stiff-necked" has even greater significance in relation to the symptoms of constrictive pericarditis. In 1951 we pointed out that the common complaint of breathlessness on movement in this condition was not the dyspnoea found in heart failure and that it was not accompanied by radiological evidence of pulmonary congestion. In many of our patients there was also a feeling of tightness of the neck (not of the throat). We sought a suitable phrase for these collected symptoms, and decided on "restricted ambulation," which hardly pleased us at the time, and which we are now willing to surrender to the more suitable term "stiff-necked."

These facts reveal that the reliant surgical treatment of constrictive pericarditis was succinctly and clearly outlined in Mosaic Law. Couched in unfamiliar terminology it has remained concealed for more than two thousand years until presently uncovered through the agency of a parlour game.

This citation provides a sample of C H Chambers's "long arm of coincidence," along with a remarkable instance of Biblicomedical similitude.—WILLIAM EVANS (retired consultant physician, Tregaron, Cardiganshire).

Out of the frying pan

Talking of bears (16 September 1978, p 807), there was this headman of a village close to us who had committed some felony, and he heard that the police were on their way to arrest him. The thought came to him, not unnaturally, that this was a good day to take a walk on the mountains, so he set off up the hillside above his village. The day was hot and the view superb. After a couple of thousand feet, which was nothing to him but too much for a policeman, he lay down and eventually dozed off.

How long he lay there no one knows, but he awoke to feel himself being gently rocked from side to side. As he struggled back to consciousness his first thought was that he must have underestimated the capacity for ascent possessed by the local police. The gentle shaking continued, and he opened one eye cautiously. He saw, bending over him, not an officious policeman, but a half-grown and very inquisitive bear. All might have been well had he lain still, but, alas, his cool left him and he sat up. The bear took fright and punctured him in several places before making off up the hillside while the headman made his way to the hospital to get himself stitched up. Which all goes to show that the arm of the Law is longer than we think.—T PETER SNELL (general practitioner, Chester-le-Street).

The Heavyweight Walk

Perhaps fathers-in-law aren't like their traditional spouses. This one anyway readily agreed to a few days' walk in the Central Highlands. After all, a graduate of a Malaysian jungle survival course and the Lightweight Walk couldn't resist showing the younger generation that he was not yet past his prime.

Tasmania, the size of Ireland, physically and mentally isolated from the world (one of the biggest barriers being the expensive 100 mile gap of Bass Strait) and possessing less than half a million inhabitants, is still a land where one may find wilderness. Where you can still walk on land untrodden before by man and have spectacular views of landscapes that could put you in Norway, Canada, Scotland, or Greece, depending on the weather. And a lot depends on the weather: we walked in 40°C one day and hail another.

Not having time to make an expedition into true wilderness—which needs two days' walking before you start—we decided to walk the track from Lake St Clair to Cradle Mountain. Leaving the festivities of the Sydney-Hobart race at the New Year and the noisy jet-boat that skimmed us past a day's lakeside walk in 20 minutes, we set off in dense beech forest through which we could catch occasional glimpses of the perpendicular walls of the glacial valleys. Initial great speed and mastery of walking technique faltered predictably with the first hill of tangled roots, and Camp-fire Creek arrived none too soon at dusk. Steak skewered on a coat-hanger over a smoky fire tastes better than Tournedos at the Elizabeth, let no one deny it.

Descending again next morning, we came to a fork in the track. "Careful of the tiger snake," I said as nonchalantly as I could to my nimble relative. Instant freezing and pallor. The 4ft 6in oft-fatal black serpent slid lazily into an old stump, persuaded by a branch lobbed from afar. Out came the ancient snakebite kit—a bit of parachute string and a rusty blade for the cruciate incision—and a 15ft sapling was hurriedly recruited as a "walking aid." Fortunately this slowed him down a bit for the next few hours.

Later we broke into open ground and were rewarded for incredibly hard and parched climbs by long views of mountains with walls like massed cathedral organ pipes and hills with strange volcanic top knots. The only relief for my peeling nose was frequent showering from a hat filled with ice-cold creek water. The track was good and easily followed—only once did we disappear up to our knees in smelly mud. The camp sites were peaceful and so pleasant that we never did manage to be off by 7.30.

We finished by scrambling up Cradle Mountain for an 80-mile view of much of Tasmania's threatened remoteness and descended in driving hail to sign out of the National Park at the Ranger's house before seeking a welcoming log fire.

What was it like compared to the Lightweight Walk, a similar distance? It was great.—ROGER BODLEY (general practitioner, Wynyard, Tasmania).