Reading for Pleasure

Congenital irresponsible escapism

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Whenever I browse through this section of the journal I am appalled by the Catholic erudition of my colleagues. Bob Nevin once said to me that the only time he got a chance to read the newspapers was in bed at night, and at the time I thought he was rather overstating the case. Quite often, however, this seems to be true. Little of what appears in the newspapers these days could be classified as pleasurable reading, but book reviews and the critics on stage, film, and television are always welcome. But it is idle to pretend that in the bird-brained life that I lead there is no time for reading. Indeed, to a congenital irresponsible escapist, such as myself, a diversion into the printed word represents much the easiest method of getting away from it all; more satisfactory than the goggle-box in that one is in charge of one's own destiny once the book has been opened; less messy than covering the house in oil paint and all that goes with it; more immediately available and sybaritic than struggling into one's waders or climbing boots.

Art and anniversaries

If ever there was a winter of discontent this has been it, and Hugh Falkus's *Nature Detective*, with its exquisite production and beautiful photographs of bird and animal footprints in the snow and sand dunes of Cumbria, highlights the assertion that every prospect can indeed please, and that only man is vile. His stories of animal instinct and cunning give charming continuity to what might otherwise be fragmentary descriptions.

From nature it is an easy side-step to Cézanne, and Frank Elgar's comprehensive yet economic account of his life goes a long way towards doing justice to the painter who has done more than any other to influence the direction of twentieth-century art. None of us who dabble, however rarely, can escape his influence, and the book shows this clearly with a large selection of illustrations, many of them in colour, to emphasise how firmly Cézanne's, and indeed any true art, is rooted in good drawing and observation. The more recent diversion into abstract art is a logical development from his obsession with geometry and good composition. To explore at leisure a concentrated study of a painter in this form makes the occasional sortie into an art gallery much more worth while, and I had an unusually enjoyable hour in the Courtauld Institute in London in February as a result.

Perhaps the only attraction of living in an ex-Colonial power which has made cheerful war on all and sundry for a thousand years is the amazing number of anniversaries, centenaries, and

so forth that need to be remembered or celebrated. It was the call to revaccinate ex-members of the 24th Regiment en route to the centenary of Rorke's Drift which led me once more into Donald Morris's *The Washing of the Spears*. It may need an American's detachment from the immediate issues to produce such an objective account, sympathetic to the aspirations of both sides in the Zulu War. Certainly, he conveys poignantly the inexorable development of a conflict whose echoes stubbornly rumble around a hundred years later. The collision of alien peoples in large continents which should have been big enough to let them all live happily in symbiosis is a theme common to the fate of the American Indians and Zulus alike. Isandhlwana and the Little Big Horn were setbacks that no modern civilisation could endure unavenged, but Donald Morris's most effective tribute, in a work of great scholarship, is to the founders of the Zulu nation itself.

Bravery and endurance

Whether the battle that was fought at that tortured and courageous town of Arnhem in 1944 will have as long an innings in the history books as Thermopylae must remain to be seen. Unhappily, the qualities of the soldier and scholar do not often meet in one person, and so General Sir John Hackett's *I Was a Stranger* is doubly welcome as one of the more enduring books to emerge on the subject. No one can write with more authority on the details of the battle itself, but here he is primarily concerned with describing his own recovery from wounds and subsequent escape. The perspective of time enables him to view philosophically his own and his helpers' reactions, and he pays heartfelt tribute to the bravery and endurance of the innumerable Dutch people who helped and sheltered him for several months in the certain knowledge that their discovery would mean death. Perhaps this is no less than one would expect from a soldier who, while recovering from major abdominal surgery, was to be found secretly sending back laboriously pencilled sheets of paper describing the actions of members of his brigade whom he considered merited decoration.

The anonymous glider-pilot author of *Arnhem Lift* recorded hearing hardly an oath from his comrades for a week, and the established fact that humanity appears to approach any sort of ideal behaviour only under conditions of relative or absolute hardship has been a central tenet of Church teaching through the years. In William Purcell's *A Time to Die* he attempts to reconcile our current obsession with the standard of living with the facts of death as they appear to a Christian. The result is a short and most readable book which becomes more compelling as it continues. While making it absolutely clear where his own commitment lies, his writing will be easily absorbed by believers and non-believers of every hue, and at the end of the book is an excellent chapter on the practicalities of death in Britain. Since at present this is one of the most mismanaged facets of medicine, I highly recommend it.

Style, and the use of words, are what writing is all about. One

of the greatest pleasures—for even the most dilettante of writers—is to see how the other chap does it, and, by inference, to pinch his ideas whenever they seem worth while. The only words we know are ones we have been taught or have stolen from someone else and it was a long overdue reading of *Jane Eyre* that set me to thinking with admiration, not to say envy, of that strange intense family of Brontës incarcerated on their Yorkshire moors, borrowing words and almost all experience from what they had read themselves. What marvellous use they made of it and would that we could do the same.

Journals can absorb a great proliferation of styles, and a regular source of enjoyment (I hardly dare admit it here) is the old *BMJ* itself. For very little of it is *work* as such: in the leading articles, papers, and originals (though much of it is irrelevant to a GP) there is usually something to stir the passions of controversy. The avenues of Medical Practice give insights of colleagues at work and play, and the correspondence columns keep us in tenuous contact with old friends and acquaintances. All of which, I suppose, is a reflection of our good luck in doing a job which basically, for all its frustrations, is fun.

MATERIA NON MEDICA

Difficulties of being Friends

We Friends want to make a lot of money for our hospital, which is, of course, a superb but poor hospital in an ever-demanding, deprived district of London. A lottery seemed such a good idea in 1978, and the enthusiasm of our committee and most of the staff was enormous: 8500 tickets at 25p and £1000 in prizes every fortnight.

Lots of eager people were willing to sell tickets, and smart booths sprang up in the hospital to sell them in. Local shopkeepers, factories, and pubs were also eager and helpful. At first our sales were high, but soon the outsiders—shops, etc.—dropped off unless they had sold a winner. They all said that the instant lotteries run by the gambling organisations were better. "Please," we begged, "We can't afford that kind of administration and the odds on this lottery are better and our running costs are minimal." No matter. Inside the hospital the sales went on and did well but we really need greater outside support to reach our targets, which are urgent and expensive. For example, a day room will cost £10 000, a (secondhand) interhospital ambulance £12 000, and beds for totally helpless patients £3000 each.

Our profit so far is about £5000. Since Christmas, the winter of discontent has made it difficult for some of our elderly sellers to get into the hospital and a day's lost selling is a lot of lost money because, regardless of the number of tickets sold, the prizes go on. We are still making a profit, but a small one. To fulfil all our projects we need to make a lot of money. At the moment we are refreshing our publicity and hoping that, along with the spring, we too shall have a new awakening.—JOAN COTTON (Chairman, League of Friends, King's College Hospital, London).

Lost Lemon mine

If you want to get rich quick go next summer to the Rocky Mountains of Canada's southern Alberta. With a bit of luck you might find gold. All you have to do is sort out the fact from the fiction in the multitude of legends relating to the lost Lemon mine.

To begin at the beginning two characters, one named Blackjack and the other Lemon, left Tobacco Plains in Montana in the spring of 1870. Both had previously had some lucky strikes in British Columbia, but they headed north to prospect the North Saskatchewan river. The further north they went the greater their disappointment: the "showings" of gold became poorer and poorer. So they returned south using a different route, one which took them across a tributary of the Highwood river. In this stream they found very rich deposits of gold. Near the source of the stream they discovered and dug into a seam of solid gold.

As they made camp for the night a bitter argument developed over reregistering the claim. Eventually they settled down, but in the dark of the night Lemon murdered his friend with one crushing blow of the pick axe.

Unknown to Lemon the discovery of the gold and Blackjack's murder had been witnessed by two Stoney Indians. Serve Lemon right that these two braves had macabre senses of humour; they spent the rest of the night making ghostly grunts and groans. Morning saw Lemon in a state of agitation. He never regained his sanity. Lemon returned to Tobacco Plains with his gold. He confessed his crime to a priest, who instructed a man called McDougall to seek Blackjack's body and bury it. This he did, marking the spot with a mound of stones.

Meanwhile the two braves had returned to their chief, who, on hearing the tale, swore them to secrecy lest a gold rush spoil the rich game and fishing of the area. The braves were ordered to return to the site and destroy all traces of the find. This they did, including McDougall's mound of stones.

After the initial discovery many expeditions, some in the company of Lemon, explored the presumed region of the mine but never with any success. The present day chief of the Stoney Indians claims to know the location of the mine, but the Stoney tribe are reluctant to talk of the mine because of the fate of one of the two original braves. This unfortunate fellow was bribed into leading a party to the site of the mine. Within one day's ride to the mine the brave fell ill and died overnight. When his body was returned to the tribe his son also became ill and died. These events effectively silenced the tongues of the whole Stoney tribe.

Skeleton hands clutching bags of gold; wolf-gnawed human remains; the stories are endless. Some believe that Blackjack and Lemon came by the gold by robbery and hid their loot in the mountains so that later on they could fake a find and so legitimise their ill-gotten wealth. When you listen to the enthusiasm of the present-day prospectors it is difficult to avoid investing in a pan, a mule, and a rifle yourself.—A G JARRETT (Usk, Gwent).

Toheroa fever

In 1769 James Cook described this stretch of the New Zealand coastline as the "desert coast." Today, the reason is still obvious—endless beaches backed by high cliffs of sand. Bayly's Beach by Dargaville near the tip of the North Island is considered by most Kiwis to be the back of beyond. But it is not so regarded during the Toheroa season.

The Toheroa is a large, succulent shellfish, much sought after by the locals. It is protected, and open season is just two weeks in mid-September. Before announcing the season, inspectors estimate the Toheroa population on various beaches and allow gathering only if numbers are sufficient. During a recent season, Bayly's, with an estimated seven million Toheroas, was a mecca.

The beach is normally near-deserted except for the hardy surf-casters, netters, flounders, Toheroa poachers, hang-gliders, and surfers braving the Tasman breakers, treacherous sweeps, and rogue waves. But when the season opens Dargaville and the beach are hit by waves of diggers. On the first morning 200 locals were out gathering in the hour between 7 00 am and high tide. The sea and wind were dangerous, and of two cars trapped in the waves one was a complete wreck.

The beaches here are public highways, normally safe and exhilarating, but with the weekend on us hordes of Toheroa hunters were in town and the beach was awash with cars, tractors, bikes, and people on their hands and knees scrabbling in the wet sand for the elusive Toheroa. Elastoplast was selling cut price in the chemists, and a certain Pommie doctor (now practising close to Hadrian's Wall) was doing a marvellous trade in sewing up the lacerated tips of right middle fingers.

Toheroa fever: Well, what does it taste like? Fried, minced, in butter, in batter, or raw, it is very strong and definitely an acquired taste.

When next in New Zealand, I think I will stick to oysters.—PHILIP R EVANS (Bury St Edmunds).