Reading for Pleasure

Hours of happy relaxation

ISABEL GARDNER

If you remember the delights of scrumping you will recognise the thrill felt by most women when they indulge themselves in illicit reading for pleasure. Most of us who spend our days fitting three jobs into the time of two are unable to gratify our personal predilections without a savouring of guilt.

A few books in everyone's life have a tangible impact. To this day I come out in a cold sweat when I think of the episode in *Treasure Island* in which Jim and his mother crouch over the dead body of the captain while the tap-tap of the blind sailor's stick circles the inn with growing menace. RLS has few rivals as a spinner of suspense.

Thirty years ago one of the rewards of childbirth was a whole month of comparative leisure during which one could read and feed the baby at the same time. None of my daughters seems to have suffered any lasting harm as the result of this divided attention. Nevertheless, their differing personalities are somehow associated with the most memorable book linked with that neonatal period.

Sadness and laughter

Cry, the Beloved Country by Alan Paton is a powerful study of interaction between races. All the sorrows of an oppressed people are there like a physical weight, and, for the only time I can remember, my tears dripped on the turning pages of the last chapter. An aged coloured Christian minister climbs high into the mountains to bear watch through the sunrise which is to be the signal for his son to be hanged in a Johannesburg gaol. His son, on being surprised in the act of burglary, had shot the son of the local white landowner. The fathers know each other well, and are both aware that the murdered man was working for the cause of negro equality. Both of them are grief-stricken. To quote, "He looked out of his clouded eyes at the faint steady lightening in the East. . . . Then he gave himself to deep and earnest prayer and after each petition he raised his eyes and looked to the East. And the East lightened and lightened till he knew that the time was not far off. . . . But when that dawn will come of our emancipation from the fear of bondage and the bondage of fear, why, that is a secret."

In complete contrast, whenever I need to laugh, I know where I can find an unfailing pick-me-up. Two extraordinary women collaborated to write *The Experiences of an Irish RM* (Resident Magistrate) and several books of the same ilk. To enjoy their style, I'm sure that one's Irish blood should not be too diluted, for surely only in the West could there be such people. I feel I know them all: our chimneysweep used to aver that he was so fond of his work he'd lie down beside it; it fell to my lot as a child to pursue his descending whin-bush from room to room while he yelled directions from the roof-top.

Edith Oenone Somerville had a cousin "Martin Ross" and,

even after Violet Martine died, Edith felt her influence so strongly that she continued to write as "Somerville & Ross." Edith was Master of the West Carberry foxhounds and mistress of the art of pen portraits which linger in the memory. Flurry Knox, who spent his energies persuading the unwary to purchase the unrideable, was summed up as "A fair, spare young man who looked like a stable-boy among gentlemen, and a gentleman among stable-boys." Flurry's aunt (and lady of the manor) is described thus, "I may summarise her attire by saying that she looked as if she had robbed a scarecrow; her face was small and incongruously refined; the skinny hand that she extended to me had the grubby tan that bespoke the professional gardener and was decorated with a magnificent diamond ring." The whole flavour of the books is neatly expressed, "In Ireland the inevitable never happens and the impossible invariably occurs."

For the Hebridean islands Lilian Beckwith performs a similar feat of bringing a totally different lifestyle within our mental grasp and blowing away the sluggish vapours of the town with a blast of salt air; start with *The Hills is Lonely*, but all her books bring an hour of happy relaxation with friends.

History and medicine

After the birth of my second child I read two books dealing with the same period of history. Arthur Bryant's *The Age of Elegance* and C S Forester's *Admiral Hornblower*. They made a fascinating mixture, and I have tried to repeat the same recipe with other authors. Sometimes when one's faith in medicine as a vocation is sorely tried, it is a refreshment of the spirit to dip into *The Quiet Art, A Doctor's Anthology* compiled by Dr Robert Coope. Hippocrates, he says, "Whoever is to acquire a competent knowledge of medicine ought to be possessed of the following advantages: a natural disposition for instruction, a favourable position for study, early tuition, love of labour, leisure." Osler, he says, "The practice of medicine is an art, not a trade; a calling, not a business; a calling in which your heart will be exercised equally with your head. . . . Courage and cheerfulness will not only carry you over the rough places of life but will enable you to bring comfort and help to the weak-hearted and will console you in the sad hours when, like Uncle Toby, you have 'to whistle that you may not weep'."

Fact and fiction

Three women have given me help and courage. Katharine Whitehorn (who seems ubiquitous) in *Only on Sundays*, Margaret Torrie in *Begin Again*, and Mary Stott with *Forgetting's no Excuse*. Margaret Torrie inspired and worked tirelessly for Cruse Clubs which help the millions, yes millions, of widows in England to carry on caring for their children and fashioning a new way of life. There is an immense amount of practical help in *Begin Again*. Mary Stott's account of the few hours after her husband's sudden death is most moving, and

many widows will see their own feelings analysed accurately. It is one of life's puzzles when people who are instantly kind to the blind treat the deaf with a mixture of embarrassment and contempt. Every woman in the same street will bake, sew, clean, meet the children, and generally rally round a widower, but if a widow dares to ask even her best friend's husband to do some carpentry job for her, it causes raised eyebrows. Nevertheless, we survive—as Margaret Torrie and Mary Stott prove so well.

More recent books include Nicholas Monsarrat's *Richer than all his Tribe*. Monsarrat now lards all his novels with enough sexual acrobatics to grease their way to the top of the bestseller lists; despite this, *Richer than all his Tribe* is a compelling account of the fate of countries where Britain has handed over power before there was anybody experienced enough to administer it. As Edmund Burke said, "The greater the power the more dangerous the abuse". David Bracken is the British official who sees his work and ideals ruined by corruption. The native chief Dinamaula is well on the way to becoming another President Amin and it is searing to realise how many good men have given their life's service so fruitlessly to that vast amorphous mass called Africa.

To finish with a good taste in the mouth let us turn to two delightful treats. The *Country Diary of an Edwardian Lady* by Edith Holden is an enchanting mixture of words and illustrations guiding us through the seasons. Prose, poetry, and

artistry weld together the beauty of the world if we have eyes to see and ears to hear. H E Bates's autobiography *The Vanished World* starts as a gentle meander through the country round Northampton—which was synonymous with the shoe trade before 1910. Bates says of his grandfather that he was proud to have made the largest and the smallest shoes in the world—the largest being those flat comic seven-league boots worn by the Victorian comedian Little Tich; the smallest, a pair of doll-like miniatures for a midget dancer. Bates learned to read at an early age and says "I began to have access to the work of Conan Doyle, Kipling, Barrie and other late Victorian and Edwardian writers. . . . Like Graham Greene, I am sure that as I devoured these writers I unconsciously assimilated something of their methods . . . all of them had no time for wasting words . . . and this was later to emerge as a guiding principle when I myself began to handle the short story"—and how delightful they subsequently were.

Poetry can suit one's every mood. Yeats summed up my personal philosophy,

For the good are always the merry
Save by an evil chance
And the merry love the fiddle
And the merry love to dance.

As long as one has sight, and access to books, it will be worth facing another day.

STRANGE ENCOUNTERS

Sanctum syndrome—the professor

Our professor used to be rather upset by people whose manners rated less than the beta-plus that he assigned to most of us. His own rating may have been among the rare alphas. But times change and our ways change, and the prof, like so many others, has yielded to the pressures that come from the discovery that time itself is a precious commodity. Manners, if they are only like a varnish, require conscious application: the thought and time expended on their projection may come to be rationed in the cause of maximum effort for achievements that seem to offer more reward to those snaking up the pyramid of ambition.

An ambitious man's affectation of courtesy toward those who dispose of jobs, funds, awards, or honours is offset by disregard for the sensitivities of associates who are without likely influence on his career. The people whose good opinion is sought with a show of charm and deference may be aware of the double standards, but oftener their contact with those ambitious to succeed them is too infrequent, and their observation too superficial and transient, for the truth to be recognised.

Successes in the search after status and esteem—successes still usually attributable more to merit than to gloss—tend to be followed by an urge to consolidate and defend, particularly when the limits of achievable ambition may seem, for the moment, to have been reached. Consolidation and defence, alas, too often entail isolation and autocracy: this outcome may seem satisfactory to its creator, but the effects on those who work with him may be frustration and discouragement.

It is sad when a colleague's professional success leads him to withdraw from the warmth of personal relationships with those who work about his hospital or college, or in his own department, and to insulate himself within a sanctum to which access is problematical to all but a tiny cohesion of "big men," usually from "other places." An early warning of this sanctum syndrome, in some cases, is the so-called come sign. Knock on the seclusive professor's door: if he calls "Come in," the state may still be reversible; if his response is "Come," the prognosis is altogether graver. The single monosyllable, sharply and curtly called, even shouted, is stigmatic of the syndrome, although not pathognomonic. In adopting it, our prof is echoing the manner, and the manners, of others who have reached a certain level of authority over their fellows without bringing to their office the basic understanding of the prerequisites and responsibility of authority.

It is the monosyllabic rudeness, the crudity, the crassness that identify the mould in which a certain style of television drama presents what it would portray as the accepted and acceptable style of business executives (as it is currently the fashion to term leaders of industry, commerce, and trade); of senior officers in Her Majesty's

services (leaders of men); of bureaucrats (leaders of state); and of politicians on the make or made (leaders, or so some say). Typified in the "Come" response to a knock on their door, the characterisation of such participants in dramatic fiction is often spoiled by the script-writer, beyond hope of re-creation, even by the unexcelled professionalism of so many contemporary actors and actresses. Off the stage "Come," in its real-life arrogance and authoritarianism, is so uncivil, so decadent, so ominous that its sound to the caller at the door is rather that of an expletive than of any invitation to enter a room and meet another person in the natural course of a day's affairs.

How nice it was to belong to a profession that easily maintained the dignity of a courteous politeness that was simple and friendly, and not just a means to a selfish end. There are such individuals still, but is there any profession that may now be described as courteous, or dignified, or friendly?

I wish the professor would realise that he is a big man himself now, in his own right, and by his own endeavour (well, as much so as any one ever is). He does not need to stand off, to shut himself in, to shout "Come" at us. We admire his work and we quite like him, so far as he makes it possible, but we have lost some of our respect for him, and he seems not to care that he has closed his door, and that we no longer care to knock. Come, come, prof! Won't you come in?

Sanctum syndrome—the bank manager

On my way to my rooms this afternoon I called on my bank manager. Although my account has been out of the red for three years now, if never more than slightly so, I still cannot look forward to these occasional discussions of my finances without experiencing again the apprehension and its adrenal accompaniments that I remember well from the days when scholastic ineptitude or misbehaviour so often led to nervous moments before pride boosted a remnant of courage enough to allow a knock on the headmaster's door. My headmaster always called "Come in," unhurriedly and without menace, and the way he spoke those two words was always reassuring. Bank managers also, in my experience, responded as reassuringly to my knock, even if the subsequent interview was as depressing as was foreknown to be inevitable.

Today, the security guard escorted me through the defences that separate the managerial suites from the customers' usual area. "I must leave you here, doctor," said the guard, "the manager's room is down there, first door on the right. Just knock on the door." I knocked. There was nothing reassuring in the shot-like quality of the response that sounded through the door: "Come." Actually, it was a pleasant interview.—WILL MACREDIE.