Reading for Pleasure

Floreat bibliomania

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Alan Noel Latimer Mumby (Tim to his friends) of Quaritch's, Sotheby's, and King's, who like so many others contracted bibliomania at David's bookstall in the market-place in Cambridge, wrote: "Book-collectors are the target for a good deal of barbed wit. Their foibles, gaily satirised by Lucian as early as the second century AD, have today been mocked by Mr Harold Nicolson and condemned by Mr E M Forster. To be thought a lunatic by one's fellow men, however, is an insignificant price to pay for a lifetime's enjoyment. . . . From time to time a collector attempts an *apologia pro mania sua*, but enthusiasms seldom look their best on the dissecting table. I have been rereading some of these works lately, and they seem to err in stressing before all else the high purpose and scholarly value of the pursuit, rather in the manner of a fox-hunter who seeks to justify riding to hounds by statistics of poultry losses." So, I offer no *apologia* for a lifetime's enjoyment due, I believe, to an affair of the heart rather than to any mental derangement, though suspicion must be aroused when the disorder reaches the terminal stage of an assembly of books about books. My latest acquisition contains studies of editorial method, textual bibliography, and specialised editions written by Dr Philip Gaskell in *From Writer to Reader*.

Bibliomania can take many forms—from the relentless pursuit of rare books and the aesthetic appreciation of fine bindings, to the search for a pleasing turn of phrase, or a perfection of poetic expression with that captivating spell produced by simple words put in the right order ("Yet is their hope full of immortality," "To pluck bright honour from the pale-faced moon," "Never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few").

A secret world

I do not attach any high purpose or any great scholarly value to my library; my choice of reading is eclectic, to put too fine a word upon it, and I regard with respectful deference the wide ranging erudition of some of your contributors to this column. Nevertheless, my collection of books on Kent, both old and new, is of consequence, my Dickensiana worthy of notice, my Johnsoniana—with a leaning towards Hester Thrale—represents a brave beginning, and some of my odd and varied interests such, for example, as bookbinding, castles, Elizabethan history, perception, the philosophy of science, and trees are moderately well represented. E H Gombrich's books on art and his studies of illusion have instructed, charmed, and delighted me. The works of Arthur Koestler, a remarkable man who has maintained high quality throughout a quite astonishing range, have gathered on my shelves, though my interest has centred on his non-fiction. His hierarchical concept of biology and anticipation of General Systems Theory struck chords of response from my own ideas on the nature of cancerous reactions as

long ago as 1949 with the publication of *Insight and Outlook*. These, however, represent the grander side of what is predominantly a heterogeneous accumulation of inconsiderable trifles. So let me start again at the beginning.

Learning to read is perhaps the first great excitement in life, and I vividly remember my tentative entry into the secret world of being alone with a book. I once heard a tragic reference to someone who was said to speak of reading as though he had taken it as an extra. I was soon reading everything that came to hand; it would be difficult to overestimate the importance to children of the books which happen to be around, as against those which are thrust upon them. Fortunately, I found two shelves within my early reach containing the very different collected works of Dickens and of Whyte-Melville—the former in small print and hard to read, and the latter in a beautifully bound edition which was a joy to handle. Thus both the discovery for myself of felicities of content and the appraisal of high quality of attire in books were early delights.

At first I collected the works of favourite authors, mostly romantic, adventurous tales: John Buchan, Conan Doyle, Jeffery Farnol, A E W Mason, Henry Seton Merriman, Raphael Sabatini, "Sapper," Stanley J Weyman, and, above all, Robert Louis Stevenson. What small boy who read RLS fails to carry with him the terrible anguish on Huish's face as Attwater fires and shatters that jar of vitriol held in his hand which he was about to throw? Who remembers the "Wrong Boxers" who vied with each other in quotation about the Finsburys and their tontine? For the real addicts there is always *Weir of Hermiston*, with that special fascination of the unfinished that applies to others such as *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* and *Sanditon*. I still have them all, but a mere 29 of the vast output of P G Wodehouse and, for added laughter, many works by such authors as Anthony Armstrong, Harry Graham, A P Herbert, "Saki," and Stephen Leacock.

Stimulation and balm

With the years I have found that fiction grows less appealing and the choice and arrangement of words more fascinating. Henry Longhurst, with whom I was at Charterhouse and Clare, discovered from P G Wodehouse that to write well you did not have to write on a serious subject. Like Bernard Darwin before him, he wrote well on golf and on life with a dry humour which so clearly recalls the sound of those clipped comments which radio and television made familiar to millions. *The Best of Henry Longhurst* has just revived many pleasant memories. I have most of Max Beerbohm's works and everything I can find that has been written about him; his airy masterpieces led Shaw to call him "the incomparable Max," and David Cecil to describe him as "England's supreme parodist and caricaturist, her most exquisite master of satire and fantasy." Just short of my 90th birthday I hope to be in the reading room in the British Museum, or wherever it then is, on 3 June 1997 prepared for the ghostly visit of that sad Catholic diabolist Enoch Soames.

Many of my later favourite books have a gentle informative

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air about them such as Sheila Birkenhead's *Peace in Piccadilly*, an account of Albany and some of the people who have lived there, or Christopher Hassall's *Ambrosia and Small Beer* about Eddie Marsh, who worked on many of the proofs for Winston Churchill's books, an occupation carried out with scrupulous care and described by him as "diabolising." He gave a charming account of himself as someone who had achieved happiness by unconsciously obeying a true instinct for living with the words: "J'ai suivi mon nez, et il m'a mené dans le Paradis."

You will see that I have increasingly enjoyed the simple, the pleasant, and the humorous and tried to avoid the artificially sensational (Oh, those hysterical commentaries on that dull single-file procession of noisy racing cars—dear cricket!). I have also turned to letters, particularly the chatty ones like those of Dorothy Osborne, whose marriage to Sir William Temple brought her delightful correspondence to a close; and Jane Carlisle, so cheerful through the adversities caused by Thomas Carlisle and that procession of most difficult servants; and Stendhal, of whom Cyril Connolly wrote "The letters of Flaubert are magnificent but harrowing, the correspondence of

Baudelaire slow torture—only in the world of Stendhal do we sail away to 40 years of good humour."

A new literary adventure has come my way in retirement: when I started work on my book *Dickens's Doctors* I bought myself a new set of his collected works, in good print and handy form, because I could not mark my first editions, and, in one year, read them all in order of publication marking every medical reference. This proved to be a quite different experience from previous sporadic reading, which had favoured some and neglected others; I began for the first time to appreciate development, influence, and change. This was most rewarding, comparable in some ways to the revelation I remember at the Van Gogh exhibition from the "Potato Eaters" through Arles to those final tortured landscapes, all plough and crows. Dickens's extraordinary achievement stood out as more remarkable, even to a devotee, than it had ever done before.

Bibliomania, while doing no harm beyond its somewhat adverse effect on family finances, has provided a constant level of stimulation to the mind and balm to the spirit throughout my reading life.

MATERIA NON MEDICA

The Battle of San Romano

Paolo Uccello's painting "The Battle of San Romano" in the National Gallery depicts the victory (in 1432) of the Florentines, led by Niccolò da Tolentino, over the Siennese army. This painting, probably completed around 1450, is only one of the three parts showing scenes of this battle (one part is in the Uffizi in Florence and the other in the Louvre). A superficial look at the painting might perhaps evoke the feeling of the battlefield with the vivid impression of fighting men and horses against a hilly background. Uccello's geometrical skills are evident in the accurate perspective of lances, flags, and knights.

However, these observations would not tell us much about the relationship between the war and the environment, between Man and Nature. I cannot believe that Uccello just sat down to prepare a simple, perfect perspective representation of an event which a few years before had halted the advance of Siennese troops into Florentine territories and their consequent threat to Florence and its inhabitants.

At a closer look the boundary between the battlefield and the background appears to be a hedge of intense vegetation: orange trees with large fruits mixed with blossoming flowers and ripe pomegranates—a fantastic flora not to be found in the landscape of Tuscany. This unrealistic borderland almost folds its edges over the warriors' lances as if a large tear had been made to disclose the naturally hilly environment of the country. The straight vertical and diagonal lines of the overcrowded battle scene contrast with the gently undulating slopes of the background countryside, with a few scattered soldiers so remote from the actual fight. Hence the background stands out over the fighting men like the sudden awakening from a broken dream: a two-world picture, a clear division between the contemporary life exemplified by the background and the fantastic dimension of the battlefield. The unreal domain where the battle is fought appears static: inside it the horses occupy round volumes of space and are blocked in their movements, the flags and the warriors' helmets are fixed in position, the dead soldier lies on the ground with his feet too small for his armour as if to suggest his inability to escape. The battlefield is essentially made up by two figures, Niccolò da Tolentino and the Siennese knight, on white and grey horses—two equestrian statues that stand out against the dark colours of the other knights and animals.

But where is the vanishing point of this painting, so important in Uccello's perspective? It does not appear to be on Niccolò, the winner; it seems to be located near the intense vegetation leading to the background scene. There is even the hint of a second vanishing point near the Siennese knight on the right-hand side of the painting. So the attention of the viewer is gradually driven back, away from the unreal world where war belongs with all its attributes of bravery, patriotism, but also death. We are gently led to the natural everyday life represented by the background by those geometrical forces which start in the non-empirical dimension (as depicted by the battlescene) and eventually permeate the material world. The painting is a constant reminder of the perennial value of exact sciences such as mathematics and geometry which seem to extend beyond the realm of human experience.—ANDREA NISTRI (London).

Pieces of eight

My wife and I have often travelled the 1500 miles from Adelaide to Perth to join friends for a leisurely jaunt through the byways studying the wild flowers. A fringe benefit has been the opportunity to see the fascinating collection of relics that have recently been brought up by scuba divers from Dutch ships wrecked in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries on that inhospitable coast. The Dutch East Indiamen early learnt that their trip across the Indian Ocean from Cape Town to Batavia was hastened by sailing with the westerlies between the 35th and 40th parallels of latitude until south of the Sunda Straits and then turning sharply northwards. As the methods of calculating longitude were so primitive or tedious until more reliable chronometers were devised in the late eighteenth century, it was inevitable that some of these Dutch ships would sooner or later hit Australia. The most famous of these wrecks was that of the *Batavia* under Fransisco Pelsaert. It was wrecked in 1629 on the Abrolhos, a group of islands and reefs about 40 miles off the coast near Geraldton, a port some 300 miles north of Perth. The dramatic story of mutiny and mayhem that followed that event is well known, having been vividly described by Hugh Edwards in *Islands of Angry Ghosts*. Perhaps less well known is the wreck of the *Vergulde Draeck*—the "gilt dragon"—in 1656 on the coast further south, with only seven survivors who eventually managed to sail a small boat to Java.

After much detective work and diving, both these wrecks have been located recently and have been systematically excavated by maritime archeologists under the supervision of the Western Australian Museum, who now have on display in Fremantle and Geraldton a remarkable array of seventeenth-century Dutch artefacts. These include bronze cannons, navigational instruments (such as astrolabes), building bricks, Bellarmine jugs, clay pipes, and other domestic articles. But the most exciting things are the piles of silver pieces of eight from the *Vergulde Draeck* and several elephant tusks, which are in quite good state of preservation despite their long sojourn amongst the coral incrustation and sea swirl. The United East India Company needed ample bullion on hand at Batavia for their trade with Asia and one of the popular coins throughout the East was the eight-real piece, very roughly struck in the Spanish mints of Mexico and Peru. Needless to say, the loss of such treasure caused anguish in Java, and some of the *Batavia's* money chests (probably on that voyage containing German thalers) were actually salvaged during subsequent rescue operations; but they never found the *Vergulde Draeck* nor her castaway people, although there is evidence to suggest that some of them probably struggled to shore, then only to die of thirst. The burning question of who owns these properties now has been amicably settled between the Netherlands and Australian Governments, so we Antipodeans can continue to study them and to ponder on the different way of life that might have been ours if the Dutch had been luckier in their landfalls here 350 years ago.—ERIC SIMS (paediatrician, Adelaide).