Reading for Pleasure

Book collecting

M G JACOBY

My books are my old friends. They sit in my living room waiting for me. They never complain if I ignore them, but when I want them they are always there, always happy to oblige, never resentful of being left. After five or even 10 years of neglect, they welcome me with open arms whenever I approach them, never taking umbrage for the times when I have passed them over in favour of others.

When I was a student in Newcastle, before and during the second world war, there were plenty of secondhand bookshops to browse in and plenty of bargains to pick up. One shop even offered a free cup of coffee for the specially privileged, among whom I was happy to be numbered, along with a literary discussion with the proprietor. Even now, I spend occasional afternoons going to old bookshops and secondhand bookshops which often have a few shelves of books at the rear of the store.

Whenever I visit a new town I look up the secondhand book stores in the telephone directory and visit as many as possible. When I went to Washington DC a few years ago, I found an entry "Old Hickory Bookshop," giving a telephone number and street address but no town name. I phoned for more information and was thoroughly cross-examined about who I was and what my interests were before I was grudgingly given travel directions. It was over 30 miles from Washington—half way to Baltimore. With great difficulty, I eventually found it—an old house at the back of a large field off a side road in the back of beyond. Going up the steps, the mat warned "Keep Out." Inside the door was an old Parisian sign "Sage Femme," and the largest collection of old medical books in the United States.

Perhaps because of the plethora of new publications, many of our best books are forgotten. Thucydides' *The Peloponnesian War* is the story of the war fought between Athens and Sparta from 431 to 404 BC. Thucydides was an Athenian general until his exile in 424 BC for failing to carry out an assignment properly. His comment was that he was now in a better position to obtain information from both sides—the invasions and the counter-invasions, the alliances made and broken, the victories and defeats along with their immediate and more remote consequences. His characters are alive and their behaviour shows both the predictability and the capriciousness of men. The funeral oration delivered by Pericles over the bodies of the dead Athenian soldiers, returned to their home soil for burial, is one of the outstanding speeches of all time:

Our belief in the courage and manliness of so many should not be hazarded in the goodness or badness of one man's speech. . . . Our constitution is called a democracy because power is in the hands of the whole people. . . . Everyone is equal before the law. . . . No one is kept in political obscurity because of poverty. . . . We obey the law ourselves. . . . No

one need be ashamed to admit poverty. The real shame is not to take measures to escape from it. . . . A man who takes no interest in politics has no business here. . . . Famous men have the whole Earth as their memorial. . . . They won praises that never grow old. . . . Happiness depends on being free and freedom depends on being courageous. . . . For the time being our offerings to the dead have been made and for the future their children will be supported at the public expense by the city until they come of age. . . . Where the rewards of valour are the greatest, there you will find also the best and the bravest spirits among the people. . . . And now, when you have mourned for your dear ones, you must depart.

The breakdown of law and order at the time of the plague of Athens in 430 BC is graphically described in a literary portrayal of an epidemic repeated 2000 years later in Pepys's description of the plague of London. It is amazing that in 415 BC a small city state such as Athens could muster a force of 100 triremes for the invasion of Sicily. It must have been a highly complex organisation to have mounted such an expedition.

A peep at Pepys and Dickens

The latest edition of *The Diary of Samuel Pepys* (1661-1669) has been transcribed anew from the original shorthand. The nine volumes of the 11-volume set so far available are beautifully printed, and the editing is outstanding. As a diarist, Pepys was supreme; he knew everyone who mattered and his descriptions are so topical that they might have been written yesterday. He missed nothing and painted a perfect picture of everyday life in London in the mid-1600s—people, food, clothes, shops, the whole experience of living in the Restoration period. We sit next to him in his office, and at lunch in the ordinary (an eating place serving fixed-price meals). We are the invisible third person in his home, observing his domestic triumphs and problems—all at first hand. We are also given the opportunity to see the inside workings of the Government, to realise that bureaucracy is not the creation of the twentieth century, but even then was a necessity for the efficient functioning of the country.

My father had an 18-volume set of Dickens. He bought it for 5/- a month in 1918 (before I was born), and read it through again and again at breakfast every day. After he died, my sister inherited the books. Every time I visited her I would look at them longingly but to no avail; two years ago, however, my brother-in-law located an identical set for me. It is illustrated by Harry Furness, whose cartoons appeared in *Punch* for many years. His pen and ink drawings are even better than those of Phiz, the original illustrator of most of Dickens's works. Who else can sketch in black and white and yet make the eyes of the murderer in the condemned cell look bloodshot? Now I am following in my father's footsteps—*Pickwick*, *Dombey and Son*, *The Seven Poor Travellers*, and *Hard Times*—with its remarkable description of the baldness of the head of Mr Grad-

grind, the proprietor of the local school, so reminiscent of the headmaster of the school I attended when I was 8.

Two books that I use constantly are Bartlett's *Familiar Quotations* and the *Oxford Companion to English Literature*—both dangerous in that, instead of being used solely as books of reference, they usurp the reading on hand for five or 10 minutes at a time as my eyes wander from page to page. For the same reason I sometimes feel that my two-volume reduced-type edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary* should be included in the index of prohibited books.

Deep freeze

When I went to Newfoundland in 1948 I bought two of Robert Service's book of poems—*Songs of Sourdough* and *Ballads of a Cheechako*. In the frozen isolation of the Newfoundland coast of those days the stories came to life. Nowhere else has the penetration of the intense cold and the sense of solitude been told better than in "The Cremation of Sam McGee."

Yet 'taint being dead, it's the awful dread of the icy
grave that pains;
So I want you to swear that, foul or fair, you'll cremate
my last remains.

His friend was horrified but "a promise made is a debt unpaid" so he must make good his pledge. He went for days with the loathsome corpse lashed to his sleigh. Finally, just as his food was giving out, he came to the marge of Lake Lebarge and saw a derelict jammed in the ice. He looked at it and he thought a bit, and he looked at his frozen chum; then "Here," he said with a sudden cry, "is my cre-ma-tor-eum."

Some planks he tore from the cabin floor, and he lit the boiler fire. Then he burrowed a hole in the glowing coal and he stuffed in Sam McGee:

And there sat Sam, looking cool and calm, in the heart of
the furnace roar;
And he wore a smile you could see a mile, and he said:
"Please shut that door.
It's fine in here, but I greatly fear you'll let in the cold
and storm—
Since I left Plumtree, down in Tennessee, it's the first time
I've been warm."

I was delighted when, several years ago, the Canadian Government issued a commemorative postage stamp showing Sam McGee sitting in the furnace, wearing his parka, beaming out with unshaven face and looking as happy as a king.

I'm dying to tell you

Another collection of poems which occupies space on my shelves is Edgar Lee Masters's classic *Spoon River Anthology*, originally published in 1915. I keep several paperback copies on hand to give to visitors who have not had the pleasure of Masters's acquaintance. Spoon River is a typical small American town in Illinois with its banker, doctors, ministers, judges, drunkards, prostitutes, and its common people. The anthology tells the stories of 244 former inhabitants as described on their tombstones—those who won the struggle for success, and those who suffered at law for the sins of others. The judges support the status quo, which means the banker, the store owner, the industrialist, the winning politicians.

Editor Whedon perverted the truth to please the town leaders in his eight-page local paper. He scratched dirt over scandal for money and then exhumed it to the winds for revenge or to sell newspapers. Daisy Fraser complained that the editor, the judges, the banker and the industrialist never gave anything to the community but that she, a prostitute, was constantly being

hauled before Judge Arnett and having to contribute \$10 and costs to the school fund for Spoon River. In the same cemetery lies Deacon Thomas Rhodes, who ran the church, the store, and the bank—the whole community. Condemned through the mouths of a dozen victims, this small-town plutocrat is defiant to the end.

Lois Spears, née Fluke, suffered from congenital blindness but had two healthy children. Willard Fluke had broken his marriage vows—as did all his friends—with the woman men styled Cleopatra. Death claimed them all in some hideous form but he felt that God's grace was him. Then he realised why she had been born blind.

Mrs Bliss blamed Reverend Wiley and Judge Somers for forcing her to stay with her husband. Two children sided with him and two sided with her. They hated each other and they were all ruined. And so on—the good, the bad, the great, the humble, the winners, the losers, the small town gossip, the skeletons in the closet, the 244 former inhabitants of Spoon River.

Books that I enjoyed when I was small which have also been enjoyed by my children are A A Milne's *When We Were Very Young* and *Now We are Six*. "James James Robinson Robinson," "King John who was not a good man," "Lines and Squares," and "Christopher Robin" are all part of our heritage. Just recently we were visiting friends and my wife felt uncomfortable in her chair. She put her hand under the cushion and pulled out a copy of *The Wind And The Willows*, whereupon our hostess came out with "I left it there so that Josiah would find it." How better to interest an 8-year-old in reading?

CHANCE, COINCIDENCE, SERENDIPITY

A clairvoyant practises her cult

When Goldblatt in America discovered that deliberate narrowing of the artery to one kidney raised the blood pressure in the dog, it was natural to consider whether narrowing by disease could do the same thing in man. I therefore investigated the function of the kidneys by radioarteriography in a series of patients with hypertension to ascertain whether any might show a fault in either kidney. One-sided impedance was present in five patients, and it seemed important to know whether removal of the offending kidney would lower the raised blood pressure—as had happened to the dog in the experiment.

One such patient under my care was aged 54 and a professed clairvoyant. I explained to her what I had in mind. When she understood that removal of her faulty kidney would do no harm, and that it might reduce her high blood-pressure, she invited me to arrange that it should be done, but on the understanding that she was to have no further tests that included insertion of needles. She was assured of this. I asked a surgical colleague to remove her right kidney, and he was specially told to refrain from preliminary testing of the left kidney because this was known to be functioning normally. He understood, but he omitted to inform his young house surgeon of this arrangement, so when the patient noticed the approach of the white-coated young doctor equipped with needles, syringes, and test tubes to conduct the customary preoperative laboratory tests, she protested loudly about the broken pledge and refused to co-operate. At my next visit she poured scorn on me for breaking my part of the bargain, and said that so great had been her annoyance on the previous evening that she had willed that I should have a pain in my neck. My house physician told me that while she was informing me of the spell she had cast over me the colour died from my cheeks. I turned away from her bed and cancelled the planned operation, for it so happened that precisely at the time she had proclaimed the curse I had been seized with a violent attack of torticollis which had lasted well into the night.

Was the sting in my neck a coincidence, or was it proof of the existence of telepathic transmission? Anyhow, for some little time after the event I harboured a lurking respect for the cult of clairvoyancy, and remained half-convinced of the veiled power which appeared to be in the possession of one of its members.—WILLIAM EVANS.