Reading for Pleasure

Centenaries, exhibitions, and cool old friends

H I WINNER

Centenaries are useful because they remind us to do things that we would not otherwise do. A visit to the bicentenary exhibition on Captain Cook at the Museum of Mankind led me to read his biography by J C Beaglehole. Once started, I could not put it aside. It is a long account of Cook's life and voyages, based largely on his diaries and those of Joseph Banks and others. What a wonderful man he was. The book brings home, amid so much else, the loneliness and deprivation of those voyages of discovery which lasted for three or four years with no news of wife and family, who, in their turn, lived full of anxiety for the absent sailor. Cook was killed tragically and unnecessarily at the age of 51, after spending years on long voyages away from his home and family.

Modern scholarship produces fine biographies, many by women—think of Lady Longford, for example, and her eldest daughter, Cecil Woodham Smith and Carola Oman. Other biographies I have enjoyed recently are one of *Disraeli* by Lord Blake and, surprisingly, George Eliot by Haight. Surprisingly, because I find her novels difficult, except for *Middlemarch* and *Adam Bede*. The Haight book brings her to life. I did not realise what a high pedestal she occupied among the intellectual figures of the period. I am now determined to read some of the other rather forbidding novels.

Blake's *Disraeli* takes a well-worn subject and presents it afresh. It shows us the excitement of Victorian political life, or rather the excitement that could be imparted to it by a figure with the swagger and panache of the great Benjamin. Of course there are colourful figures in politics today. The difficult thing with today's great men and women is to recognise them while they (and we) are still alive. After reading his life, I decided to try Disraeli's novels again.

Also among the greatest glories of English literature are the diaries. Pepys's, of course, is supreme, and there is no version within leagues of the great new complete edition in nine volumes—still, after several years, awaiting the two reference volumes. This edition carries its scholarship lightly. I am reading it continuously, one or two volumes a year, and I am now almost through the second round. Another great diary is that of Parson Woodforde, again in the complete version of five volumes. It begins when he was a curate in Somerset in the eighteenth century. Most of it, however, is concerned with his rectorship in Weston, Norfolk. His book, full of the everyday happenings of the time, gives the best insight I know into English rural life in the eighteenth century. Like Jane Austen's novels, it is an insular account, almost completely shielded from international events. Woodforde's diaries deal with the routine of the parish round and the preoccupations of a kindly, conscientious, and increasingly lonely bachelor who yet retained a joyous gusto in his friendships, his food, and his drink. I also recently finished reading Kilvert. He was an attractive figure, but he bore his

Victorian oddities rather less comfortably than some others, such as Lewis Carroll. Perhaps the best known of Carroll's oddities was his obsessive affection for little girls. We should today regard this as pathological, but on the whole it was accepted by the Victorians with equanimity. Nevertheless, Carroll seems to have overcome this obsession as he aged. Certainly in the second volume of his letters there is much less about it than in the first. The letters give a vivid picture of Oxford life a hundred years ago, and of country and provincial life in general.

Boswell's *Johnson* is another book to reread, as are Boswell's other diaries. Full of wisdom and body, these great books have their pathetic side. The sturdy polymath, Johnson, personally as eccentric as can be, and the younger weaker sycophant, each with a curious temperamental dependence on the other, as they grope their way through life in London and embark on that complicated, and surely hideously uncomfortable, tour of Scotland and the Isles.

Readable diaries are still appearing. Three modern ones I have enjoyed dipping into and must try again, more systematically, are Waugh, Nicolson, and Crossman. The funniest books I know are all "diaries"—*Nobody*, *The Provincial Lady*, and *Beachcomber*. I shall always remember one of Beachcomber's contributions to British inventiveness as described in *The Times* many years ago—"A collapsable boot-rack constructed entirely of grains of polished rice."

Novels—I have run out of new Trollopes after reading about 35. What a tremendous output, and the level is generally high. I am now well into the second round. Some, such as *Barchester Towers* and *Framley Parsonage*, I have read so often I have lost count. I started reading Trollope on long jet flights and lonely academic visits overseas for which they are ideal, especially if you can find them in the old small World's Classic series which are so handy for travellers. Several of the least-known books are among the best. Everyone has heard of the Barchester and Palliser cycles but *Cousin Ralph*, *The Bertrams*, and *Lady Anna* are gems—if you can get hold of them.

Among the reasons I like Trollope is, as someone—Henry James, I think—has written, because he is harsh, cool, and just, unlike Dickens who is none of these things, though always supremely readable in a different way. There is no need for me to add my puny praise to the torrents that have been written about Dickens. I find that some of the joys are small things, such as his wonderful surnames—Pinch, Pecksniff, Sweedlepipe, Spottletoe, Moddle, Betsy Prig, and, indeed, Chuzzlewit himself from whose chronicle all these are taken. But Dickens is full of surprises. I was astonished at how good a book was *The Old Curiosity Shop*—essentially, surely, a picaresque novel like so much of Dickens. His letters, too, are a joy of gusto and observation and the new Pilgrim edition volumes are splendid, both for their scholarship and for their beauty.

Although Trollope is usually cool, he too can be critical and damning enough by implication. *The Way We Live Now*, one of his greatest novels, is a devastating attack on dissipation in private and corruption in public life.

"It is well to have as many holds upon happiness as possible," wrote Jane Austen. She is another whose books I read con-

tinuously in cycles over the years. I suppose I must have read all her novels eight or ten times.

Among the moderns, as an old India hand I found that Paul Scott's *Raj Quartet* gave a superb picture of life in that sub-continent, such an intense, poetic, and tragic place which has inspired, and still does, much splendid writing. Scott's books are very rewarding; the last, *Staying On*, is an excellent and entertaining lighter introduction to the more serious earlier books. It well deserved the Booker prize awarded just before Scott's sad early death.

When the last instalment of *Dance to the Music of Time* was published a few years ago, I decided, after years of resistance, to try the complete work and, once started, I could not stop until I had finished it. A host of credible and live characters, and their complex interactions over a period of 50 years or so, all treated with affectionate and sardonic coolness and attention to detail. I am just wondering when to start reading them all again.

I find it a good rule to try to discover a new author every year—new to me, that is. One of my latest discoveries was J I M Stewart's cycle of novels about contemporary life at Oxford. Amusing, wry, packed with incident and, again, cool. He certainly knows his academic community. The finest academic writer today is, of course, C P Snow—are there any academics who would not recognise the infighting of *The Masters*?

I find I am using the word "cool" a lot. Is this a characteristic of English writers, with, of course, the massive exception of Dickens? I find this quality refreshing and restful as I get older. The British writers have it, but not, for example, many of the greatest Russians. Surely Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, and Chekhov are writers for young people; certainly I found them so, and don't think I could read them today. Some French authors, such as Stendhal, are cool; others, like Balzac and Zola, are painfully hot.

Visits to the superb exhibition of Post-Impressionism at the Royal Academy led me to read John Rewald's *History of Impressionism and Post-Impressionism*. Again, it was impossible to put down either of these books which are both splendidly illustrated with a huge gallery of colourful characters, vivid in every sense. The writing is vigorous and spirited and I do not know of any more enticing art history. Drama, too, in the passionate and tragic relationships between Vincent and Theo Van Gogh and Gauguin, with the lesser-known figures of Bernard and Serusier in the wings—tragedy accentuated by poverty. Today it is ironic and tragic that a single canvas by an impressionist master may change hands for several times more money than the painter earned in his lifetime.

Last thing at night I always read poetry, mostly nineteenth and twentieth century: "When the Present has latched its postern behind my tremulous stay. . . ."

MATERIA NON MEDICA

The rock at Chaleux

The route from Celles to Chaleux changes from a natural road, to a single lane, to a track, and finally ends in the river Lesse. Farsighted government planning has prevented development of this picturesque part of the Condroz region of Belgium, which is just north of the Ardennes.

A single farm stands in splendid isolation at Chaleux with the solitary company of the river, and the rock. The rock, known simply as the Aiguilles de Chaleux, stands cathedral-like on the opposite bank. It rises 120 metres out of the river, which has partly undercut the rock. In length it measures about 60 metres. Even the uninitiated can appreciate the rock's potential, and those totally unskilled in the art of rock-climbing could hardly fail to recognise the huge cleft at the top of the rock. The cleft represents the longest rock-chimney in Belgium. Chaleux is therefore something of a Mecca.

The rock may be approached from the left as you face it. The climb begins with the river literally washing your feet. The start is a 20 metre pitch of 3— (difficult) standard followed by a traverse of about 30 metres of 2+. This movement is carried out over water because of the undercutting by the river, and this gives added interest (especially to rock-climbing fishermen) to the traverse. A second pitch of 3 follows, and then there is a long abseil back down to the river. Obviously net vertical progress has been nil, but one is half-way across the face. A long pitch of 2 and a short pitch of the same standard brings one to a good stance against the rock face which eventually forms the right hand of the chimney. The view along the heavily wooded valley of the Lesse is impressive. Progress up an angled ledge ends vertically beneath the chimney. The three-step move into it is awkward, especially on the left where the rock is smooth, but once into the metre-wide crack security is gained from back and feet in opposition. By steady, if somewhat strenuous, movement of alternately back and feet, height is gained. It would be too easy for the 25-metre chimney, which is graded 3+, to yield in this fashion. A gaint chock-stone blocks the exit. This precipitates a series of interesting manoeuvres, from back to feet opposition, to a straddle position, to a move entirely on to the right-hand wall. The final 5 metres yield to conventional techniques. A rope of three will need about two and a half hours for the climb. The scenery throughout is superb. The river setting, the heavily wooded banks, plus the grandeur of the climb make Chaleux an interesting outing.

During the year we have met several English parties at the more well known climbing grounds at Freyr. It would be worth the effort to seek out Chaleux, which is only 7 kilometres away. It will not

disappoint; and if a reader should scale the rock, spare a glance for the pinnacle to the right. The ascent of this (3), and the abseil descent, turn an interesting outing into a memorable one.—G CALVIN (toxicologist, Everberg, Belgium).

Collared doves

I confess that I have a liking for collared doves, those sandy-grey birds which have spread over much of Britain since they first nested in Norfolk in 1955. I admire the appearance of the dove with its white-rimmed eye and deep red iris; the legs are red also and the tough plumage is delicately coloured with a pale vinous tinge to the breast and dark shading of the points of the powerful wings. The black half-collar is distinctive and is made conspicuous by the white line immediately above it.

Some of my neighbours dislike the birds as they maintain that they strip their brassica plants but I think the culprits here are really the voracious woodpigeons. I welcome collared doves should they choose to nest in my garden; anyway, I believe that most nesting birds follow the commandment: "Thou shalt not plunder thy host's garden." Many people find the dove's three-syllable call monotonous and others confuse it, surprisingly, with that of the cuckoo. But each individual has variations to its call and it also utters short, shrill whines of excitement, often given during flight.

However, it is the bird's behaviour which interests me most. Recently, I watched a pair aggressively chasing two magpies which had intruded into their territory; one dove flew at and buffeted one of the magpies on several occasions before the two crows finally flew off. Conversely, collared doves, which vaguely resemble small hawks, will cower if, as sometimes happens, they are mobbed by other birds. Then a courting pair, perched close on a branch, show amazing agility at turning and twisting the neck and nibbling at and caressing the head of the mate. The young, which hatch from the two white eggs which are laid on a nest composed of a scanty but strong lattice of twigs, are fed on their parents' regurgitated milk; yes, pigeon's milk does exist and is really a secretion from the crop. Occasionally, two juvenile collared dove bills are inserted simultaneously into a parental mouth, giving the appearance of a man smoking two pipes at once.

Almost unknown in remote or dense woodland, collared doves frequent man's gardens and farms; they are truly colonising birds in Britain, and at a time when so many bird species are being reduced in numbers. They feed on grain, seeds, and berries and will breed, unlike most British birds, in any month of the year. Of course, human beings also breed in every month and both populations are increasing; is there a parallel here?—PHILIP RADFORD (general practitioner, Brentley, Bristol).