Reading for Pleasure

New horizons

E M R CRITCHLEY

Most contributors to *Reading for Pleasure* appear to have searched their own biological clocks in pursuit of discernible patterns of reading. One approach that has given me great satisfaction, as well as giving a logical gloss to what is otherwise a miscellaneous and untidy reading habit, has so far escaped mention. It is to build up from fact to fiction a feel for any new terrain, and if, for example, after reading a book that uses one locale as a background to the plot, one becomes intrigued by the style and skill of the author, then new horizons are presented in the full range of his work. Let me illustrate this approach from the more exotic opportunities which have been opened to me.

Early days abroad

For several years my parents worked and lived in Iraq. These were my student days and I spent several holidays there. I recall the fascination of Stephen Longrigg's *Iraq*, Lawrence's *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, Lawrence—by his Friends, Thesinger's and later Maxwell's books on the Marsh Arabs, the writings of Glubb Pasha, and the travelogues of Freya Stark. These books were brought alive by meeting people who stepped from their pages; by waking one morning in Saladin (surely a name to conjure with in history) to see the Iraqi cabinet, in night attire, conferring over the garden walls of their mountain retreat; and to learn later that a colonel, introduced by some neighbours at my 21st, had become dictator of that country. Truth was almost stranger than fiction, but one work of fiction left a distinct impression—J J Morier's classic, *The Adventures of Haji Baba*. There was a competition organised by David Niven, our headmaster informed us, with rewards for schoolboys who suggested future successful Hollywood films. At the same time, in the inimitable way of headmasters, he indicated that he had fulfilled an obligation but surely it was below the dignity of his boys to participate. I failed to pluck up courage to suggest "Haji Baba of Ispahan" but noted that soon afterwards a film spectacular of that name was produced.

National Service was a time for reading. In Malaya, with travel to Saigon, Manila, Hongkong and Japan, there was every incentive to read such excellent writers as Han Suyin, Helen MacInnes, but particularly, since we belonged to the 17 Gurkha Division, John Masters. As a bestselling writer, along with Morris West, Arthur Hailey, Ian Fleming, and John Le Carré, his books are packed with fascinating detail. The behaviour of the Gurkhas became real and understandable. At times John Masters is guilty of lapses into the worst excesses of formula writing—extensions of the "Oh God, I'm pregnant, Who dunnit?" theme—but his great skill, exemplified especially

in *Bhowani Junction*, is the portrayal of the varied panorama of personalities from the Indian subcontinent.

Two years in the USA was an enthralling experience. Many have lost out now that "Been To America" is no longer a necessary part of a successful curriculum vitae. One of my tasks was setting up regional neurological clinics in the inbred, and genetically intriguing, poor white communities of Kentucky's Appalachia. Since then the energy crisis has altered the lot of the hill-billies, and reliance on welfare has been replaced by affluence. I became enraptured by their feuds, primitive lifestyle, ballads to the accompaniment of a plucked dulcimer, and, as with the Nigerian who succeeded me, I earned the departmental nickname of Dr Happy Pappy. Some aspects of their life may be gleaned from books with such fascinating titles as *South of Hell Fer Sartin*, *Stinking Creek*, *Yesterday's People*, and *Night Comes to the Cumberlands*, but further study has unexpected rewards. Their religious practices make strange reading. I waited in vain during the last few weeks of my stay for a promised rendezvous to attend a snake handling service—"Don't the Lord say in Luke 16" (some versions) "Thou shalt take up Serpents?" Just as the old Welsh preachers used to go into the hwyll, revivalist meetings of talking in unknown tongues are held throughout Appalachia. There are extensive and carefully researched publications on the subject as exemplified by a slim volume by the Reverend Ira J Martin 3rd, entitled *Glossolalia in the Apostolic Church*. Dialect studies can be absorbing—not the artificial sounds of country music and the Grand Ole Opry, but the deep dialects of the Ozarks of Kansas, and of Smith and Tangier Islands in Chesapeake Bay. One excellent Kentucky writer, Jesse Stuart, who deserves to be far better known than he is, uses the Appalachian speech with the intensity and feel for nature of a Thomas Hardy. From the harvest of his works I have several favourites: *Man with a Bull-Tongue Plow*, *Head O'W-Hollow*, and *God's Oddling*.

History and myth

This pattern of reading does not depend on the unusual. As a newcomer to Lancashire, I have found the industrial archaeology of the region absorbing, and historical novels—for example, based on the legends of the Pendle witches—have led me to appreciate the diverse and highly successful writings of Robert Neill, such as *Mist over Pendle* and *Lillibullero*. Many of his novels concern the Cromwellian era. The attraction of families divided by political events and religious beliefs has always appealed to historical novelists and their readers and has helped to overturn the rigid gravitas of historical textbooks. Alas, in Northern Ireland, where few families were divided in their loyalties, this has not proved possible and the harm done by historical orthodoxy lingers, perpetuated in mass hysteria. I relish the recent historical biographies such as those by the Longford family: one learns, as in the American Civil War, how chancy was the original line-up of opposing factions and wishes

as is the present policy of the Daughters of the American Revolution that equal status is given to those whose relatives lived at the time—irrespective of allegiance.

The perpetuation of myths, both scientific and historical, through the prejudice of textbooks deserves a study in itself—perhaps by psychiatrists. The repercussions of these myths can make fascinating reading. Until 1841, when Thomas Carlyle published an essay on Cromwell and Napoleon, it was necessary to go to France and such authors as Bousset and Voltaire for a proper assessment of the esteem of the Protector. There are still important figures in history in need of total reappraisal. Until I read in *History Today* an essay by Ivan Roots on "The Short and Troublesome Reign of Richard IV," I firmly believed from my schooldays that Richard Cromwell was a suitable study for a consultant in mental subnormality. This is far from the case: Voltaire declared "Richard Cromwell est mon homme," and spoke of "This village Cromwell guiltless of his country's blood." Surrounded by an aged politburo, a young revolutionary council, an obstructive parliament, and

people with personal grudges against his father, he preached patience, unity, and brotherhood, and when this failed he quietly and intelligently stepped down from office, ruefully referring, as he relinquished the chancellorship of Oxford University, to the many late "examples of the instability and revolutions of human affairs." As Ivan Roots remarks, alone of the four Richards he did not die a traumatic and tragic death but eventually settled back into the quiet life of a Hampshire gentleman.

Historical biographies are indeed a favourite form of reading to be set alongside other more miscellaneous heavies that I enjoy on long rail journeys: Meic Stephens, *Linguistic Minorities of Europe*; Paul Johnson, *A History of Christianity*; D R Morris, *The Washing of the Spears*; Gore Vidal, *Burr*; *The Collected Works of Walter Bagehot*, edited by Norman St John Stevas; *The Collected Stories of Bertrand Russell*, edited by Barry Feinberg; and, as a leavening, Leo Rostens books, *The Joys of Yiddish*, *The Education of Hyman Kaplan*, and *Captain Newman MD*.

MATERIA NON MEDICA

Gliding

It all started one Sunday morning over a year ago. The whole family were watching the local enthusiasts fly their radio-controlled gliders. These graceful birds seemingly motionless so high above fired the imagination of each one of us.

"Why don't you get one, Dad?" questioned my youngest son.

"Oh, I don't know," I replied nonchalantly "I'll think about it."

The thought became a total obsession as I convinced myself that building a glider was the occupational therapy I required during my overseas posting. So it was not surprising that I turned up at Heathrow with a long unwieldy parcel under my arm. The despairing hostess on the jumbo suggested I prop it up at the rear against one of the toilets.

It took months to build, but it was satisfying work and there was no hurry. Even after completion a special box had to be constructed into which the model was carefully packed. The box looked like a dachshund's coffin. The rest of the year passed with the glider safely interred in its container, while I read all I could on the technique of flying. For the journey home the box, now marked "fragile" and "handle with care," went into the hold. After arrival it was still in perfect condition. I took the precaution of contacting the local model club to ask one of their experts to pilot the first flight. I was advised to call round any weekend when there was a suitable wind, which was anything other than an easterly, the local plateau being admirable for flying from in all other conditions.

"Which way is the wind blowing?" repeated various members of the family each weekend as a persistent east wind swept the country. Frustration built to a dangerous degree, until one day the wind shifted slightly.

"Let's go!" shouted the family, and I nervously and reluctantly agreed. As it was not a weekend the local experts would be at work, so we went along hoping there would be no witnesses to laugh at our madness. We reached the top of the plateau, unpacked the box, and assembled the glider. A radio check proved all controls working. Nervously I balanced the model in my hand. The book said throw it nose downwards into the wind, which now seemed to be coming ominously from the east. "Come on, Dad, what are you waiting for?" shouted my eldest impatiently. With fearful trepidation I threw the plane into the wind and grabbed the controls. It rose slowly up and up until it seemed to stand on its tail, then swept high overhead upside down before charging towards the earth. At the last moment it surged skywards again, repeating the loop before crashing with a sickening thud into the long grass halfway down the slope. We all ran down to administer first aid. The wings had mercifully been thrown off and were undamaged, but there was a compound fracture of the fuselage just in front of the tail.

The rest of our leave was taken up with the repair. The wind changed to the west and the local enthusiasts came out in droves. I was too ashamed to meet them. The repair was completed the day

before departure, and the model carefully packed in its box and left behind. The fun had really been in the building.—DONALD G DAWSON (medical director, Balikpapan, Indonesia).

"Peristaltic persuader"

William Kitchiner (1775?-1827) is described as "a miscellaneous writer" in the *Dictionary of National Biography*. He was educated at Eton and obtained the degree of MD Glasgow, though he was unable to practise medicine in this country at that time with such a degree. He devoted himself to science and writing, and presumably had private means. He wrote on music and on optics and the use of telescopes; and in 1817 he published *Apicius Redivivus* or *The Cook's Oracle* (7th edition, 1827) as a result of his experiments in cooking, especially English cooking, of which he was particularly fond. Perhaps his footnotes are of more interest than his recipes, but "An Englishman's head may be as full of gravy as a Frenchman's." His somewhat eccentric figure has been said to be the original of the Rev Doctor Folliott in Peacock's satirical novel *Crotchet Castle*.

His "Wow-Wow Sauce" for boiled beef and boiled bacon is made as follows: "Chop some parsley very fine. Quarter two or three pickled walnuts and divide them into small squares and set them by ready. Put into a saucepan a bit of butter as big as an egg, when it has melted stir into it a tablespoon of flour and about half a pint of the broth in which the beef was boiled. Add a tablespoon of vinegar, the like quantity of mushrooms, catchup or port wine, or both, and a teaspoon of mustard. Let it simmer together until it is as thick as you want. Put in the parsley and the pickle to warm, and pour it over the beef, or rather send it up in a sauce tureen. If you think the above not especially piquant add to it some capers or a minced eschalot, or one or two teaspoonfuls of essence of anchovy or basil vinegar, or horse-radish vinegar."

Another book, in two volumes, appeared posthumously in 1827 called *The Traveller's Oracle*, in which advice is given to travellers with such details as how much to tip a coachman, or how to judge a horse before buying it. There are some songs composed by Kitchiner, and of most interest advice for travelling abroad. After admitting that a medicine chest with many items in it was of no better advantage than a more limited one, he gave his shortlist of what was essential for the traveller to take with him. The requirements for travel were relatively few, with first, and perhaps most important, the need to take peristaltic persuaders such as salts and rhubarb. Sal volatile and sticking plaster were useful, and strong peppermint lozenges were recommended as stomach warmers and to stop sea sickness, as well as carbonate of soda to correct stale beer. A 6-oz pocket bottle, the equivalent of three glasses of wine, 8 oz of brandy, portable soup, biscuits, and a supply of loose cash were also on the list. Perhaps the most surprising comment at that date is that a lancet for bleeding should be taken to avoid infection from any previous use in others, and a razor for the same reason. The list was indeed not long.—MILO KEYNES (anatomist, University of Cambridge).