

Materia Non Medica

Singing at the Maltings

On a June Sunday seven years ago, our third child waiting to be born, I stood on the river bank at Snape, gazing unbelievably at long low brick walls. An acrid smell drifted across the water from all that was left of the Maltings: the huge slate roof and white towers had vanished into a gaping expanse of sky. The sense of acute personal loss was universal; the intrinsic magic of this incredible building brought the rebuilding money streaming in. Now, thank God, it is as it was before.

Sublime and sometimes hilarious are the occasions the singers will remember. It is exhilarating to sit high at the back of the chorus, as we three bass doctors do, feeling the orchestra and choir from inside. So glittering were the fanfares at the royal concerts that we reeled with the beauty and tension of it all: when Mr Britten was conducting, invisible wires linked his eyes to every singer so that cohesion was near-perfect. The hall's soft brick and delicately-shaded wood are striking in repose, yet in performances they become so self-effacing that the simplest music or a spoken word seems at that moment the only thing of any importance in the world.

Once, a conductor's wife, awake all the previous night with their new baby, forgot to pack her husband's braces; a frantic scurry backstage, and a luckless bass sang that concert clutching his trousers lest they fell. After one dress rehearsal a student, leaping in ecstasy down the bank outside the restaurant, broke her ankle; another was bitten by a dog; someone else fell off the quay into, luckily, the squelchy mud of the ebbing tidal river. We at the back will toss for who goes down if a soloist should faint on top of us, though that hasn't happened yet.

Snape can spring other surprises. One evening, after a concert, a low sun burst through the dark clouds: in a flash the reed-beds and horizon trees blazed into flickering blood-red fire. Everyone ran outside, stood, and gasped at what seemed a vision of the end of the world. Fanciful, perhaps, but we all agreed that such things seem only to happen there. A colleague from Oxford, when asked why she practises in darkest Suffolk, simply says, "Because I'm near Snape and the festival." There's no answer, as they say, to that—WILFRID J WREN (general practitioner, Oulton Broad).

Elvering in the Severn

The high spring tides spill over Maisemore weir at Gloucester, and the upstream stretch of the River Severn to Upper Lode at Tewkesbury becomes tidal for a few days. This seasonal surge carries millions of elvers up into the freshwater reaches of the river, where they will grow and mature into eels. This is the final stage of a 3000-mile journey, which started in the weed beds of the Sargasso sea, where the eel larvae hatch, continued for two years as a drift across the North Atlantic in the Gulf Stream to arrive at Europe's Western seaboard. As the tide ebbs the elvers continue to swim upstream in the slack water along the banks, where they may end up trapped in the fine muslin of a Gloucestershire elver net.

Elvering is a popular pastime at this time of year. When the tide is right fishermen converge on the river in the evening gloom, great elver nets strapped to car roofs, and stake their claims to a favoured "tump" on the bank. Here a fire is lit to keep out the cold, and, soon, other winking lights up and down both banks of the silent river indicate fires cheering the long vigil of the elvermen. The turn of the tide, marked by a miniature bore, is

greeted by a cry from downstream "Tide up," and is echoed in relay away upstream into the dark night. Soon the river starts flowing upstream, and the waters rise four or five feet. About 1½ hours later the stream turns again to flow back towards the sea, and by the light of a shaded torch the elvers, 3-inch transparent creatures with black eyes and looking like overgrown spirochaetes, can be seen battling upstream. Then the elvering begins.

The French trawled 149 tons of elvers in the Channel last year and shipped them to Japan. Most elvermen catch 5 lb to 10 lb a night and are quite satisfied. There is an annual elver supper at Apperley, on the banks of the Severn, where elvers are fried in whipped egg with snippets of bacon and served hot on bread. They are rather tasteless but are considered a great delicacy, and go down well with a pint. In the elver-eating competition this year a local farmer won a silver cup by swallowing ½ lb of elvers in 34 seconds amid much hilarity. Seems a sad way to end a two-year 3000-mile journey!—ANDREW CROWTHER (general practitioner, Tewkesbury).

Sligo's greatest son

"Piffle versus waffle at Council meeting." *The Sligo Champion's* recent headline would have made Sligo's greatest son, W B Yeats, feel quite at home. My admiration for Yeats approaches idolatry, and on a recent trip to Ireland I tried to see as many places associated with him as possible. Yeats loved Sligo for its quiet; and the quays where his grandfather, William Pollexfen, tied up his ships are still there—as is the Isle of Innisfree, unspoilt by its notoriety. Its museum has an enviable collection of Yeats's books, letters, and manuscripts, as well as many paintings by brother Jack. Five miles away, not far from Yeats's grave in Drumcliff churchyard, is the archetype of the Irish great house—Lissadell House, still lived in by the Gore-Booths, who will show you round. The poet often stayed here, writing of the two sisters, Constance and Eva, "two girls in silk kimonos, both beautiful, one a gazelle." As Countess Markievicz, the gazelle was later to play an important part in the Easter Rising, having her headquarters in the College of Surgeons on St Stephen's Green, in Dublin.

Ireland was probably the last country to have literary salons, and since rivals can never leave each other alone they moved around together to the great houses. One of these, Renvyle House, once owned by Oliver St John Gogarty (another polymath—ENT surgeon, senator, poet, and aviator), is now a hotel and in the *Good Food Guide*. Set on the coast of Connemara, ringed by great mountains, it makes a convenient break between Sligo and Gort, required visiting for the remains of Lady Gregory's Coole Park and Yeats's tower, Thor Ballylee. Nothing is left of the house itself but Coole lake remains, with its wild swans, and the autograph copper beech, with the still-discernible initials carved by GBS (the largest, of course), Yeats, O'Casey, Augustus John, and AE. But to find the essence of Yeats you have to go to Thor Ballylee. He restored this Norman tower, living in it intermittently in the '20s, and its outline and reflection in the millstream were used by Sturge Moore to design a green and gold cover for the mid-period book of poems, *The Tower*. Here you find the qualities of Sligo's greatest son: the foremost poet of our time; senator, hard-headed manager of the Abbey Theatre, and Nobel prize-winner; and the endearing dottiness of his devotion to the stars and the gyres—STEPHEN LOCK (London).