

which established his reputation are quite distinct. *Stamboul Train* and *It's a Battlefield* are clad in respectable black cloth and printed on the typically thick absorbent paper which disappeared with the second world war.

Baron Corvo

I am prepared to admit, however, that the case for the first-edition reader is at its weakest with modern novelists. The case is overwhelming when we consider the multitude of books of which the first edition proves to be the last. With some, most value would be lost in a modern reprint. Corvo's *Chronicles of the House of Borgia* undoubtedly belongs to this category. Three inseparable factors make the first (and only) edition of this a fascinating document—the writer, the prose, and the book itself. The book is not a difficult one to find: the edition was large and few readers can have been tempted to subject it to the wearing and ultimately destructive process of thorough reading, so that most copies have survived. It is a thick work, elegantly bound in crimson cloth, richly illustrated, and bearing the Borgia arms in gilt on its upper cover.

In common with every other production of its author, *Chronicles* was the cause of a prolonged bitter dispute with the unfortunate publisher, who was subjected to repeated threats of litigation alternating with venomous invective. Corvo's attempts to disown the work were unsuccessful, but in any case the authorship is evident on every page. His genius for ridicule and diatribe sets him apart from the common herd of historians. To take a relatively innocuous example, he gives short shrift to Dumas's theory that the Borgias prepared poison from the saliva of a bear that had been fed arsenic. "Having caught his bear, Duke Cesare would convey him to the Vatican—a large palace truly, but rather too full of people to be desirable as a private venom factory. On a dark night in a lonely courtyard, the Pope's holiness and the Duke's excellency would administer the arsenic to the bear. The method of administration is not described, nor the slinging up of the beast prior to his convulsions, nor the picture of the aged Pontiff skipping round with the silver plate in His solicitude that no drop of the fluid should be lost, nor the solemn bottling of the vials, nor the hermetic sealing with what seal? The Ring of the Fisherman? And M Dumas carefully omits to say that the nasty mess so secretly and arduously obtained would have been far less venomous than the original dose of arsenic; which would be deprived of most if not all its venomous potency by its submission to the digestive processes of M Dumas's improbable and impossible bear."

Baron Corvo was the pseudonym of Frederick Rolfe: his claim to an Italian barony was false and, after exposure, his later books were published under his true name. Even here, the element of poseur is apparent with the ambiguous abbreviation of his Christian name—"Fr Rolfe." He was a failed priest. Rolfe's writings are the product of a man whose wayward genius was never publicly recognised in his lifetime and who could not understand that his failure was the result of his own personal shortcomings rather than the malice or stupidity of others. As a consequence, his tirades were directed at all who had dealings with him. Publishers, lawyers, priests, patrons, and former friends all suffered as more pressing and exorbitant demands were made for money, perfection, and, finally, redress for injustice. His books are an interesting testimony to the man, each work bearing the imprint of a sequence of battle-scarred publishers—Chatto and Windus, John Lane, Grant Richards, William Rider, who had to deal with threats, attempted litigation, and final disowning. His commercial failure as an author has made most of his other books scarce: they are, however, well worth seeking out since each bears some marks of his eccentricity. His best-known work *Hadrian VII*, for instance, carries on its upper cover the hero's portrait drawn by the author, traced in white on a purple background—explaining, incidentally, Rolfe's failure as an ecclesiastical artist.

Unfortunately, with the exception of *Hadrian VII* his books cannot be easily read in their entirety. Like his behaviour, his genius was too erratic and the rest of his work can be sampled only in small doses. Rolfe was fortunate in one respect only—his biographer. A simple chronicle of the repetitive sequence of disasters that characterised Rolfe's life could not have been a particularly successful work. A J Symons approaches him as a mystery—a man of genius, who ended his days as a neglected failure. *Quest for Corvo* is a record of the solution to this mystery achieved by questioning those who had dealings with Rolfe—often to their considerable cost. Ironically, Symons achieves what Rolfe never could achieve—a consistently enthralling book. Unfortunately the final mystery of this extraordinary and perplexing man cannot be resolved either by perusal of his books or his biography. How could a man of such an obviously aberrant personality exert such an impact on a succession of otherwise rational and successful human beings to the extent that he was supported by them for almost all his 53 years? What vital quality, now irrecoverable, enabled him to tap the well of human generosity in this way?

Apart from Catholicism he has little in common with Greene. I can, however, commend the books of both for the different light which they throw on human behaviour and, if possible, I would suggest the original edition.

MATERIA NON MEDICA

An echo of indigo

Until recently if I thought about indigo at all, I suppose it would be as the least exciting colour of a rainbow. I was therefore intrigued, when driving through a lovely coastal town in South Carolina, to see a large, beautiful colonial mansion which proclaimed to be the "Indigo Society" and about 200 years old. I had to find out more.

Indigo comes from plants, one species being known to the ancient Britons as the woad plant. The early colonial settlers took indigo seeds with them to the New World 350 years ago but at first failed to exploit it successfully for its purple-blue dye. In the early 1700s it was found growing wild in South Carolina, where it preferred the higher better-drained ground rather than the swampy regions which were being used for the major crop, rice. Indigo could be harvested at a different time to rice, so allowing an efficient use, of the slave labour. The vats in which the dye was extracted were kept close to the slaves' quarters and away from the graceful plantation mansion for two good reasons—firstly, because large quantities of the slaves' urine was

necessary to steep the plants and, secondly, because the process was consequently very smelly.

Until this time indigo dye came from the French West Indies, and the British Government in England, ever anxious to obtain goods from our colonies rather than the French, offered a bounty on Carolina indigo of 4 to 6 pence a pound. Exports soared and with it the prosperity of South Carolina and its ports. By 1770 over one million pounds a year were being shipped to England, for which the plantation owner received one dollar a pound. The American Revolution, a few years later, snuffed out the trade, as the British withdrew their bounty and found a cheaper product in India. Within twenty years no more indigo was being exported and the rise of the European synthetic dye industry was the final blow to natural indigo.

A reminder of this industry still lingers, not just in that fine mansion in South Carolina—but also in the blue denim jeans synonymous with American youth—originally the cloth being dyed with indigo—RICHARD WISE (consultant medical microbiologist, Birmingham).