

Reading for Pleasure

The author in person

J SHAFAR

Napoleon remarked of a colleague: "He lies too much, it is well to lie sometimes, *mais toujours c'est trop*"; Winston Churchill, when he left the Liberal Party in 1924 to return to the Conservatives, declared: "Anyone can rat, but it takes a certain amount of ingenuity to re-rat"; and Groucho Marx said of a safari in Africa: "We shot two bucks, but that was all the money we had." The distinctive identity and qualities of the individual initiating the message evoke a mental image with a pattern of association that arouses corresponding expectation. In like manner, the growth of biographical writings to a recognised literary species in recent decades reflects the public's appetite for personal record. The brief snatches I present here reflect but the merest glimmer from the Aladdin's cave of biography, which overflows with the riches of incident and the contending interpretations of the subject's inner self.

Literary giants

In part, Thomas Carlyle's lack of gratitude, jealousies, and trenchant criticisms may be attributed to his ailments. Insomnia, fits of depression, and life-long dyspepsia were his lot. Self-centred, intolerant of his wife's ill health, he grumbled incessantly, full of self-pity yet possessed of a constitution of the strongest, permitting his survival to the age of 86. In discussion he rarely argued, he harangued. He dominated the times and imposed the role of the expert on the reading public and the prophet on society, a self-proclaimed Moses, who, says Clough, "led us into the wilderness and left us there." Excessive Teutonism and a biblical upbringing moulded his approach, as shown in *Sartor Resartus* (the tailor repatched) which includes autobiographical aspects of the Calvinistic severity and grinding poverty of early industrial Scotland as well as of his own spiritual crises. Yet he could inspire great friendships and display nobility of character. John Stuart Mill, to whom he had loaned the manuscript of his first volume of *The French Revolution*, passed it on to Mrs Taylor without consent; a servant used it to light the fire. Carlyle's forbearance was remarkable, especially as his original notes had been disposed of and he was faced with the immense task afresh. Contrasted with the elegant and artificial prose of former historical presentations, his vivid, dramatic, picturesque writing and his depiction of the central characters in the manner of the novelist established his fame. He upheld the precept that "man was born to work" and could pronounce that "to condemn slavery was mere sentimental tosh." *On Heroes, Hero Worship and the Heroic in History* presents his doctrine of the superman, later the gospel of Nietzsche and forerunner of modern dictatorship—the antithesis of democracy. Misfortune came from his friendship

with John Anthony Froude, his literary executive, who published Carlyle's *Reminiscences*; these contained harsh and unwarranted judgments on some contemporaries, and Carlyle's reputation suffered serious blemish. Froude transgressed further: his publication of the letters of Mrs Carlyle was viewed as a distasteful impropriety, exposing as it did the intimacies of the Carlyles' private life.

Samuel Johnson's aspect was far from prepossessing: a huge ungainly body, face scarred with scrofula, partially blind and deaf but of sonorous voice, slovenly in habit, mumbling away to himself, of rough and domineering manner, and with a lowness of spirits at times bordering on melancholia. He exhibited constant involuntary movements of the face and limbs, and when walking down a street he would touch each post that lined the footway. That a society of such intellectuals as Fox, Burke, and Gibbon remained relatively silent during Johnson's expositions may have been occasioned by his unique power to bully and deride any disputant, allied to a super-human memory. His formidable presence would silence a room as he entered. His ascendancy reflects in the identification of the mid-eighteenth century as the *Age of Johnson*; common sense, courage, and honesty characterised him, but he was prejudiced, largely devoid of imagination and sagacity, opposed to liberal thought and reform—"no man of such narrow views ever had broader sympathies." Belittlement of the great narrows the gap from lesser mortals and may in some measure have inspired such caustic assessments of Johnson, that he had "all the gigantic littleness of a country schoolmaster."

For nine years he slaved at his *Dictionary of the English Language*, producing a work of literature remarkable for the wealth of illustrative quotations and unlike the mere vocabularies of earlier works. At the request of a group of booksellers Johnson wrote *The Lives of the Poets*, his best and enduring work. The prose is magnificent and the presentations lively and penetrating, but inaccuracies and prejudice appear. Augustine Birrell pronounced that: "The poorer the poet the kindlier is the treatment he receives. Johnson kept all his rough words for Shakespeare, Milton and Gray." The approaching publication of James Boswell's biography of Johnson alarmed not a few, fearful of personal disclosures. The grace of reticence did not reside within him and Bishop Percy's indictment finds an echo in some present-day publications—the violation of the primary law of civil society in publishing a man's unreserved correspondence and unguarded conversation. In a note Boswell had indicated his desire that nothing be concealed of himself, and his unrestrained exposures contrast with those of Pepys, who wrote in cypher. In the course of three decades of perpetual dissipation the *Life* might never have been written, had he not been sustained by Edward Malone. As Lord Macaulay expressed it: "Many of the greatest men that ever lived have written biography. Boswell was one of the smallest men that ever lived and he has beaten them all."

John Ruskin, deeply influenced by Carlyle, also donned the mantle of the prophet. Divorced from his pronouncements and declarations, so many of which were to founder, the

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exquisite artistry of his poetic prose shines through. His unhappy state with its mysterious sense of guilt and the pathetic discordance of his relations with women—the unconsummated marriage with Effie Gray and the compelling agonisings he inflicted on Rose La Touche—have been well recounted. He could glorify Turner and his passion for landscape in *Modern Painters*, defend the Gothic as the noblest style in *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* and *The Stones of Venice*, extol the virtues of the Middle Ages and the Italian masters, and champion and patronise the Pre-Raphaelite movement—yet adopt an unyielding, defamatory approach to some contemporary innovations in art. “Dim-eyed and confused” at the time that he reviewed *Nocturne in Blue and Gold*, his condemnation pronounced the artist a coxcomb who demanded 200 guineas for throwing a pot of paint in the public’s face. The consequence was the celebrated libel case instituted by James McNeill Whistler. At the trial—Ruskin’s mind now too deranged to allow him to appear—a farthing damages was awarded to Whistler, each to meet his own costs. Over the years Ruskin had generously disbursed his inheritance of £157 000, but his friends met his expenses, whereas bankruptcy faced Whistler. The defects of Whistler’s behaviour distort and obscure his achievements. He delighted in the outrageous, with such comments as: “It takes a long time for a man to look like his portrait.” When Wyke Bayliss received a knighthood for his services to the *British Artists*, 25 members resigned in protest, to provoke the Whistlerian assessment: “The artists have come out and the British remain.” He collected his experiences within *The Gentle Art of Making Enemies*, wherein he warns of the ease whereby exasperation may engender “unseemliness and indiscretion.”

In the preparation of the *Letters and Literary Remains of Edward Fitzgerald*, Aldis Wright obliterated potentially offending passages, but a private item written in 1861 escaped his vigilance: “Mrs Browning’s death is rather a relief to me. No more *Aurora Leighs*, thank God.” It came to Robert Browning’s notice while casually leafing through the volume lying on the desk of a friend. The Browning’s marriage had been one of great happiness during its 16 years—indeed for two years after her death he had retired to the deepest seclusion and written nothing. Browning, now 77, reacted with burning indignation by composing a savage sonnet containing such lines as:

Kicking you seems the lot of common curs—
While more appropriate greeting lends you grace:
Surely to spit there glorifies your face—
Spitting—from lips once sanctified by Hers.

Realising he had humiliated himself, and thereby Elizabeth, Browning vainly attempted retraction by telegram but it was published in the *Athenaeum*. Fitzgerald’s repeatedly declared dislike of Browning and his poetry may have fuelled the reaction, but it is ironic that previously in 1851 he had asserted that he was “a greater poet than Tennyson.”

Gentle folk

Of ample means, Fitzgerald chose to live in rustic semi-solitude, a vegetarian, existing in Tennyson’s words, on “milk and meal and grass.” His letters form an important contribution, for he inspired life-long friendships with celebrated literary personages. When asked which of his old friends he loved best, Thackeray responded: “Why dear old Fitz to be sure.” His immortality essentially rests on the *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám*. On this he expended years of application and, when it was eventually submitted, 12 months elapsed before he received notice of its rejection. He printed the poem at his own expense in 1859. No copies being sold, he bestowed the compilations on Bernard Quaritch, a bookseller. Progressive price reduction

from five shillings to one penny failed to promote any sale and the volumes were consigned to a bargain box placed outside the shop door. A copy fell into the hands of Dante Rossetti, whose enthusiastic reception spread to evoke public acclaim. The anonymity of the earlier editions corresponds with the pronouncement of a friend—that he took more pains to avoid fame than others do to seek it.

Christina Georgina, the youngest of the remarkable Rossetti family, was an intensely devout member of the Church of England. Religious zeal dominated her existence and constricted her outlook and writings, so that latterly she adopted the veil “in every way except the outward act.” It formed the basis of the wreckage of her two affairs of the heart. Engaged in early life to James Collinson, a minor figure on the Pre-Raphaelite scene, who had reversed his former conversion to the Roman Church to win her consent, she immediately revoked the engagement when, a few years later, he again reverted. This induced no lasting hurt as did the loss of Charles Bagot Caley, translator and scholar, for whom her love was extreme and enduring but even so could not withstand the insurmountable barrier of his lack of religious conviction. One surmise invoked her fear of the responsibilities and sexual implications of marriage. Although she continued to write to the end, devotional prose comprises the bulk and while her poetic legacy is correspondingly slender its quality places her within the highest ranks. For me, her poem *Up-hill* makes a special appeal:

“Does the road wind up-hill all the way?
Yes, to the very end.
Will the day’s journey take the whole long day?
From morn to night my friend.

Affected with chronic ill health, tortured with feelings of unworthiness, obsession with death monopolising her thoughts, talk, and literary output, hers was an unhappy estate; as with Cowper she was racked with the conviction of being damned.

The joyous verve and gusto of *John Gilpin* never falters. By no means does it reflect the character of its author, William Cowper. “A defeatist, hating decisions, frightened of the unknown, the creature not the creator of his destiny; liking someone or something on which to lean,” as David Cecil describes him in his biography *The Stricken Deer*:

I was a stricken deer that left the herd
Long since; with many an arrow infixt.

To his abnormal and eternal attachment to the memory of his mother, who died when he was 6, was later added dependency on Mrs Mary Unwin. Lady Austin, a widow, arrived in Olney and a memorable friendship grew between her and Cowper, later to be disturbed, presumably by jealousy, by Mrs Unwin. Once, in an attempt to divert him from melancholy, Lady Austin narrated the story of John Gilpin and succeeded so well that by the end of the tale he was in peals of laughter. He lay awake that night, converting the story to verse. Published as a broadsheet within a few days, it offered, as it still does, an unremitting source of merriment.

It was but a minor altercation with a little apprentice girl working in the sitting room, yet Mary Lamb snatched up a knife and her mother, interposing on the girl’s behalf, received a fatal wound. At the inquest Charles accepted responsibility for her future care, which was to extend over 38 years. Conditions of poverty, exacerbations requiring her periodic removal to an asylum, enforced frequent change of lodgings, himself in fear of the hereditary mental affliction, Lamb’s loyalty and devotion never abated. No man’s personality is better known, no man more loved, as we witness the agony of his stutter, his eccentricities, his unswerving loyalty to friends—regardless of his exploitation, and the unique attachment and relationship to his sister. Poor, dear Lamb, whose one frailty was alcohol, whereby he could submerge his fears and anxieties, but only a

small quantity sufficed to throw his mind off balance. His health and spirits had been in decline when in 1834 he sustained a trivial facial injury from a fall; the erysipelas which ensued proved fatal. Mary was to survive him by 13 years. Lamb's writings were many and varied. *Tales from Shakespeare*, which he wrote with his sister, retains popularity with younger readers. The *Essays from Elia* (a pseudonym, the name of an Italian clerk) are largely autobiographical, disclosing his joys and sorrows, his views of mankind through his own experiences. Written with humour and pathos, in his own unmistakable, inimitable style, his essays lose nothing of their freshness.

Dr John Brown has been described as "a sort of Scottish Charles Lamb." Few can escape censure more than he, with his kindness and concern and humanity, and no one can fail to register pleasure on reading *Rab and his Friends* and *Marjorie Fleming*. A pupil and apprentice to the great Syme, his Edinburgh practice remained small because of his many other interests. Distrust of his own ability resulted in small output, resisting, as he did, the pressure of publishers. Dogs, children, old-world folks and landscapes were his particular loves. The surpassing charm of his style and sentiment renders his *Letter* on his father the supreme commendation of a son. The simplicity and quietness of his existence became increasingly clouded in later years by fits of depression, and finally he withdrew from society.

Tall, slight, dark complexioned, of animated bearing, Leigh Hunt displayed a genial, effusive, cheerful disposition. His stammer, unlike that of Lamb, resolved in adult life. A vigorous denunciation of the Prince Regent—"half a century without one single claim on the gratitude of the country"—rebounded in a two-year prison sentence, but even in such circumstances his blithe philosophy prevailed, for he so adorned his accommodation that Charles Lamb could declare there was no other such room except in a fairy tale. His financial thoughtlessness necessitated leaving for Italy accompanied by his dipsomaniac wife and seven children, there to join Lord Byron as his guest and collaborator in a new quarterly, *The Liberal*. Shortly after their arrival Shelley, who had come to greet them, departed from Leghorn in an open boat, accompanied by two others, his voyage earlier than planned in consequence of the receipt of a despondent letter from his wife. A violent storm arose but a week was to pass before the worst was realised, when Shelley's body was washed ashore. His heart, unconsumed by the funeral pyre, was buried in the English cemetery at Rome, where, in his own words, "it might make one in love with death, to think one should be buried in so sweet a place." *The Liberal* proved a monetary failure and by now relationships with Byron were strained by Hunt's recurrent pecuniary embarrassments and demands. Abandoning the Hunts without money, Byron left for Greece, his over-lived life ending that April of 1823 at Missolonghi; Walter Scott likened his passing to the sun going down at noonday. Publication of *Lord Byron and his Contemporaries* proved the greatest misfortune of Leigh's life, for which he suffered public opprobrium and much self-reproach. That uncharacteristic effusion of ingratitude contrasts strongly with the cheerfulness of his many other writings. Dickens was to depict him as Skimpole in *Bleak House*—"the light externals of character" reflecting his vagueness and irresponsibility. Eternal gratitude is owed him as the earliest champion and publicist of Shelley and Keats, and later of Tennyson and the Brownings.

Romantic Associations

The beauty and glorious red hair of a girl at work in a milliner's shop so attracted a member of the Pre-Raphaelite group that he persuaded her to act as their model. Elizabeth Eleanor Siddal later became the wife of Dante Gabriel Rossetti. The love resembled that described in mediaeval books—sorrowful, remote, unworldly, and of mystical passion. Tuberculous, after a miscarriage, she became fretful and

nervous, resorting to considerable quantities of laudanum to offset her insomnia and malaise. She died of an overdose, aged but 29; the motivation for her self-destruction still remains conjectural. Rossetti, beset with a sense of guilt and troubled in conscience, placed the only manuscript of his first book of poems between her hair and cheek in the open coffin. Some years later he agreed to the retrieval of the volume. Its publication, perhaps helped by the romantic circumstances, proved highly successful, but two years later suffered a considerable setback when Robert Buchanan, the poet and novelist, launched a savage attack, somewhat misdirected, on the *Fleshly School of Poetry*, in which Rossetti was the main target. Much distressed thereby and in great remorse for the exhumation, Rossetti's health, undermined with chloral and alcohol, steadily disintegrated. The painter overshadows the poet, but the merits of his verse come out in such poems as *The Blessed Damozel* and *Rose Mary*.

In a memorable passage Virginia Woolf describes Laurence Sterne's thinking: "The flight of his erratic mind is as zig-zag as a dragon-fly's but it has all the dragon-fly's brilliance and diaphanous charm." Of all the strange events of his life none surpasses those surrounding his end. Influenza and pleurisy had followed an episode of his recurrent haemoptysis. His London lodgings, normally thronged with visitors, were on this day in March 1768 empty but for his hired nurse. John Crauford, his friend, had dispatched his footman to inquire of his state, and the footman witnessed the final act, when Sterne raised his arm as if to ward off a blow, exclaimed, "Now it is come," and expired. Only three mourners attended the burial of one so celebrated, and his brother-in-law, the Reverend John Botham, took upon himself the destruction of all such papers as he deemed improper. The body was disinterred, presumably for gain—since it appeared in the anatomy department of Cambridge, where, during its dissection by Professor Collignon, an onlooker perceived its identity. After the horrible revelation the remains were returned to the original burial site. A decision to build on the area determined the Laurence Sterne Trust to conduct an exploration in 1969, and of the skulls uncovered, the crown of one had been sawn off. The rarity of post-mortem examinations in the eighteenth century suggested its possible identity—supported by the matching of its measurements with those of the famous bust by Nollekins.

Handsome, impressive, hair magnificent, speech musical with a touch of melancholy, Ireland's greatest poet and probably the foremost love poet of the century, William Butler Yeats raised the suspicion of a studied pose in his formal, dignified, somewhat aloof and remote bearing. His prose is as outstanding as his verse and he has been thought the only poet in history whose last works proved to be his best. Four women influenced his life. He was "changed, utterly changed" from the moment he first encountered Maud Gonne in 1889, with her combination of beauty and a heroic, passionate, reckless devotion to the Irish national cause. His love, adoration, and slavish dedication were not reciprocated and she directed his suffering emotions to her service, caring only for that element in his poetry which promoted her cause. In 1903 she married John MacBride, an Irish revolutionary as active and violent as herself, but the marriage foundered after a few years. After the Easter insurrection of 1916 MacBride was executed. Yeats finally accepted Maud's repeated refusal of marriage, as well as that of her adopted daughter, Iseult, and he married Georgie Hyde-Lees, whom he had known for some years; with her his life was to stretch out "serene and full of order." Essentially Yeats's own leanings were towards mysticism and the ancient myths and legends. In the founding of the Irish literary movement and theatre great support came from Lady Gregory of Coole Park, Co Galway, where he spent many a visit, allowing the restoration of energy and tranquillity. The stage was the passion also of Anne Elizabeth Horniman, his secretary for five years; her first venture in London had incurred heavy financial loss 10 years previously, and she now acquired the old theatre of the Mechanics' Institute in Abbey Street,

Dublin, to subsidise the Irish National Theatre by rent-free occupancy. But for Lady Gregory's unfaltering efforts the theatre would not have survived its early struggles.

Frank Harris's pronouncement, "Oscar Wilde's greatest play was his own life," mirrors his own, that he had put his genius into his living and merely his talent into his work; another assessed him as "the sketch of a great man." Wilde's flamboyant, unconventional style, his posturings and showmanship invited resentment and censure. Many stories of his eccentricities and excesses were distortions or fabrications but these he deliberately refrained from refuting. His melodious voice enhanced his brilliant conversation and, as with his writing, he exploited the arresting, amusing, and exasperating—"the truth is never pure and rarely simple," "a little sincerity is a dangerous thing and a great deal is fatal." His communication represents the "froth of thought," effective rather than reflective, but never vulgar. The ill-advised, disastrous action for libel he brought against the Marquess of Queensberry (the compiler of the Queensberry rules of boxing) overshadows all and persists as a potent determinant of his public image. Two years' imprisonment with hard labour seems savagely excessive. The *Ballad of Reading Gaol* and *De Profundis* bear testament to his prison experience. Dependent on a small annuity purchased by friends he established his headquarters in Paris, where he died in 1900 of meningitis. In the terminal stages his devoted friend Robert Ross was serving him champagne, to provoke the whimsicality: "I am dying beyond my means"; likewise the bitter irony: "If I were to survive into the twentieth century it would be more than the English people could bear."

William Rothenstein's drawings and Max Beerbohm's caricatures have immortalised Aubrey Vincent Beardsley's appearance—an emaciated figure, pale hatchet face, a mop of fine brown hair tumbling over his green eyes. When his illustrations for *Morte d'Arthur* received laudatory notice in *The Studio* he gave up his employment in an insurance office to be appointed art editor of the *Yellow Book*, his drawings in the first four volumes and for *Salome* establishing his reputation. Even so, in the wake of the downfall of Oscar Wilde he was forced to resign. His art displays qualities of decadence, vice, and erotic sensuality. *Punch* dubbed him Mr Danby Weirdsley. His alleged strong link with Wilde conflicts with the little love between them, Beardsley smarting under the insinuation that *Salome* had created its illustrator and resentful of belittling condescensions: "Dear Aubrey, he knows France well—he has been to Dieppe, once." His innate tendency to seclusion served his design for an air of mystery, but isolation increased as the public turned its back on him and as his tuberculous disease advanced. In the last year of his life he underwent a profound religious experience and adopted the Catholic faith. He was 25 when he died.

Poverty and religion

The brilliance of George Gissing at Owens College, Manchester, augured future fame, to be shattered when he was discovered in the act of stealing. The proceeds were intended for the rehabilitation of a young prostitute with whom he had fallen in love. During the next nine years, which were spent largely in America as a penniless rover, he endured great hardship. On his return to England he sought out the girl and married her. The union proved disastrous; when funds were not available for her drinking habits she reverted to the streets, her health became increasingly undermined, and finally she died insane. He manifested a singular inability to manage his affairs and, preoccupied with poverty, cultivated the role of the social outlaw, unable to contend with the day-to-day conflicts of social intercourse. His first novel *Workers in the Dawn* appeared only through the investment of all his available resources, its failure once more rendering him destitute. Frederic Harrison, appreciating its worth, came forward with friendship and employed him as tutor to his sons. The same

squalid pattern was to be repeated in his second marriage—almost a sought desire for self-wounding. The sordid pessimism and gloom of his novels contrast with his travel book on Greece and his excellent analysis of Dickens, whom he idolised. H G Wells and George Meredith were his close friends; with the former he visited Italy for the second time. He moved to the south of France because of tuberculosis, where he died in 1903 aged 44.

Francis Thompson expressed a similar propensity. The son of a doctor, deemed unsuitable for training for the priesthood, he arrived in Manchester to study medicine, there to absent himself from lectures, and spent seven years trudging the streets and reading poetry in the public libraries. When his behaviour became known at home he fled from the recriminations to London, a copy of Aeschylus in one pocket and of Blake in the other. Menial tasks, penury, exposure—often sleeping in the open—and opium consorted with his tuberculosis to destroy his health. In February 1887 some of his writings—on dirty scraps of paper—arrived at the office of *Merry England* with a postscript: "Kindly address your rejection to Charing Cross Post Office." The unappealing bundle had been relegated to a pigeonhole and months elapsed before Wilfred Meynell's perusal, by which time Thompson had forgone the fruitless visits to the post office. Meynell arranged publication hoping thereby to trace him; when he did appear it was "with no shirt beneath his coat and bare feet in broken shoes." The first volume of his poems came out five years after his rescue; this included his most appreciated piece, *The Hound of Heaven*, and was widely acclaimed. The poem describes his flight from God, the pursuit, and the overtaking. The Meynell household always offered support and protection, but Thompson's later life is a mixed picture of personal neglect, unkempt ragged dress, spells in hospital, hopeless arrears of literary commitments, repeated changes of lodgings, and retreats to monasteries. His prose writings continued but the poetic impulse waned (his later poems seem unintelligible), to end 10 years before his death in 1907. To the end he remained deeply religious. Some view him as the greatest of the minor English poets.

In 1875, in a snowstorm, the *Deutschland*, carrying many refugees from religious persecution, ran aground at the mouth of the Thames. Among those who perished were five Franciscan nuns. The news greatly distressed Gerard Manley Hopkins, and when the rector of St Bruno's—where he was studying theology—suggested a commemorative poem, he eagerly accepted the opportunity. Moreover, the *Wreck of the Deutschland* afforded him the opportunity for the exposition of his personal trials and difficulties, his conversion, and God's kindness through cruelty. *The Times* and the German Reichstag might rail against the captain's competence, and the delay of rescue attempts for 30 minutes, but Hopkins envisaged God extracting good from suffering and cruelty, the victims' noble deaths a prelude to Heaven. He was proficient in drawing and musical invention, and regarded the aesthetic movement at Oxford as incomplete if motivated merely against Victorian materialism and ugliness; he thought that religious purpose must be an integral component. Still an undergraduate of 22, after much heart searching and mental turmoil, he entered the Roman Church and later joined the Society of Jesus. When he left Oxford in 1868 he destroyed his poems, because he viewed the writing of poetry as inconsistent with his calling; yet the poetic impulse could not be suppressed and his poems were contained in his letters to Robert Bridges, medical practitioner and later Poet Laureate. When Hopkins died in 1889, only 45 years of age, the obituary notices made no allusion to the poet. Bridges, who had carefully conserved the poetry, did not publish his collection until 1918 and was to receive more condemnation than approbation. The long delay and Bridges's criticism of "faults in style" and "oddity and obscurity," must be set against what would have been almost inevitable rejection by Victorian critics and Bridges's supreme status in English poetry at the time. In the event the sales were minimal but the second edition in 1930, under Charles Williams, met with a greatly improved reception,

the poetry being appreciated as the forerunner of the modern movement.

Charles Kingsley, in a book review, alleged a disregard for truth on the part of John Henry Newman and the Roman clergy. A lengthy exchange of letters culminated in a published apology. Not completely satisfied Newman proceeded to publish the private correspondence, and added his own pungent comments. Kingsley countered with a pamphlet in which he reiterated the original stricture which he had professed to have abandoned. A squabble between two churchmen, even of such eminence, would have been of little importance, but it induced Newman to write his *Apologia pro Vita Sua*. With great candour and moving sincerity, in a style of limpid clearness, he expounded his religious inner self that had occasioned his adoption of the Catholic faith. The impact of that event had been such that Disraeli declared, Anglicanism "reeled under the shock." The book re-established Newman, was held in great veneration by all religious opinions, and took its place among the major works of the nineteenth century. Newman did not escape all censure, with the implication of his overreaction and undue prolongation of the controversy, directed to elevate his own standing, then undermined by a series of frustrations and a breach with Manning. Kingsley had fared very badly, "utterly and profoundly confounded." One of the most prominent men of the era, and regius professor of history at Cambridge, his present fame rests largely on one children's book, *The Water Babies*. Further to the onslaught of time, letters and erotic drawings now available add an unexpected dimension and expose him as a man of strong sensuous passions and frustrations, as reflected in the title of Susan Chutty's recent biography, *The Beast and the Monk*.

A note on biography

The earliest biographies were inspired by a moral desire to uphold the virtues of illustrious persons for public example. Reaction against the subsequent formal official *Life*—"honey suckle lives" in Johnson's styling, culminated in Lytton Strachey's approach; he has been criticised for alleged lack of reticence and reverence, and indeed a balance has to be attained between the modern tendency to debase or debunk and between uncritical adulation. The transformation of information into illumination requires an understanding of the motivations and personality of the subject, an evaluation of his works, and an absence of bias or prejudice—a mere recounting of facts and events is a failure of art. The shape and meaning of an existence, enlarged by prevailing psychological interpretative thinking, are placed within the framework of historical research, literary criticism, and social study. Authenticity, a prime responsibility of the biographer, need not conflict with imaginative ordering of the materials. Difficulties arise from unreliability of papers, letters, and memorabilia—editorial interference was common before the present century, and the principal himself may have effected revisions in his personal writings with an eye to posterity.

Purposeful destruction of material judged injurious to character by relatives and friends and fear of libel action afford further handicaps. That there has been such outstanding growth in biographical writings in Britain and in the States since the first world war accords with A L Rowse's pronouncement that there is no greater diversion, variety, and subtlety than in the lives of individual men and women, particularly those who left a mark on their time.

Home choice, 1980

We asked some members of the BMJ staff to tell us which articles and books they most enjoyed during 1980.

Linda Beecham When Elspeth Huxley left home in Kenya her mother remained, farming valiantly and corresponding prolifically. The results are collected in *Nellie: Letters from Africa*,

(staff editor) throughout which I shared the dangers and delights of this continent. Crop failures, financial disasters, two world wars, middle-aged widowhood, and the Mau Mau uprising failed to subdue this irrepressible woman, who survived to leave Africa with the single trunk she had arrived with.

Bernard Levin and I have one common passion: the belief that "all human life is a progress towards Mozart." But was Mozart a genius? Or was he, as Salieri, his jealous court rival claims in Shaffer's disturbing play *Amadeus*, merely "a conduit through which the music flowed from God to stave"? In a two-part *Times* article (30 April and 1 May 1980), using *The Magic Flute* and *Amadeus* as his score, Levin plays provocative variations on Salieri's theme. A sparkling Levin composition that enhanced my love of Mozart—mortal warts, divine genius, and all.

Elizabeth Bond Anyone who considers that Victorian women in India were pampered and delicate should read Pat Barr's *The Mem Sahibs*. Much of the book is based on diaries and letters, especially those of Emily Eden, sister of Lord Auckland (Governor-General 1836-42), who had to accompany her brother on a "progress" lasting three years while all she wanted was to return to her small Greenwich home. Her descriptions are vivid and absorbing. Except for a section

on the horrors undergone by some during the Mutiny Pat Barr describes the everyday life of the "ordinary" wife trying to cope with the strange life in India.

Also, I much enjoyed reading about a non-event—the British Swiss Legion raised to fight in the Crimea (*Blackwoods*, August 1980). Despite the incredible inefficiency of the British and the touchiness of the Swiss the legion eventually reached Smyrna, still 600 miles from the front, but too late—the Treaty of Paris had already been signed.

Sue Burkhart Kenneth Tynan made a pilgrimage to find silent screen actress Louise Brooks, the star of (staff editor) *Pandora's Box* and other films. I accompanied him through the pages (pages and pages) of an old *New Yorker*, and we found her in Rochester, New York—living in a tiny apartment, arthritic, solitary except for stacks of books at her bedside, and cheerful. A visit to Amsterdam recently where they were performing Berg's opera *Lulu* (all three acts) reminded me of Tynan's rather romantic and nostalgic journey (published with Tynan's *New Yorker* pieces in *Show People* by Weidenfeld and Nicolson) because the story of *Lulu* was taken in part from *Pandora's Box*.

Another long journey through recent (second world war) and future (nuclear war) history ended when I read the final page of Doris Lessing's *The Four-Gated City*. It seems that the children of violence are powerless against the perpetrators.

Daphne Gloag To mean a lot to me a book must have more than one level, set off resonances. Doris (staff editor) Lessing's *The Memoirs of a Survivor* is a novel of sorts and also a fable with elements of magic. Set in the future, it tells with much emotional subtlety