Without frontiers

MAUREEN ANSCOMBE

To go on a journey with congenial companions and to be greeted at the welcoming door of a house at the other end must be the height of clubability.

For the past 18 years, as wife of a member of the Moynihan Chirurgical Club of Great Britain, I have been able to visit a foreign city every spring and a home city every autumn. Such a chunk out of our life must end up by being autobiographical, but in the diaries that I have kept I have written down observations only, rather as in our student days some of us were keen clinical observers without having a clue to the diagnosis.

Lord Moynihan of Leeds founded his club in 1909 for surgeons outside London, hand picked by him to meet and air ideas; no one had thought of doing so before. At the age of 44, with his *Abdominal Operations* already published, and a friend of Will and Charles Mayo (like them born at the right time after Lister), he took British surgery to the fore in Europe and America. It was written of him that his golden presence and silver tongued oratory cast a spell on all who knew him. His practice was immense; he had a glittering London practice and another in the north. It was said that he later became arrogant, but when he died in 1936 the people of Leeds lined the streets for the funeral and messages came in every language and from every country.

The agony of packing for a foreign visit can reach insurmountable proportions. You may arrive in the hotel to find invitations stating "casual dress" when the case will hardly close for a bulky dinner suit, long dresses in wads of tissue paper, evening bags and shoes. Old troopers learn to do with much less. It was not always like that. Before the club began to travel by air—about 1957—there was strict formality in dress: for the ladies a hat for going out and long gloves for evening wear, a handbag and gloves to match each outfit, and for the men stiff white shirts and sometimes white tie and medals. These were fashion relics of the railway age when older members told tales of catching the Orient Express to Vienna with a travelling trunk and numerous pieces of leather hand luggage, which conjured up for us moments of excitement befalling Marlene Dietrich and Anna Karenina on other trains.

When we joined the club in 1960 it was still incorrigibly rigid and a pecking order of seating obtained at the banquets, new members being strictly at the bottom of the table. To young wives the Moynihan Club was rather un enfant formidable. These bad old days thankfully passed and wives started to turn up in trouser suits, banquet tables were round with no top and no bottom, and soft evening shirts were worn. The top table is still squared off and contains the VIPs from both sides, and at our banquet the British ambassador usually honours our guests.

Switzerland 1962

My first foreign visit with the Moynihan Club was in 1962. I had been unable to attend in the two previous years because of young children at home. W C Wilson, professor of surgery at Aberdeen, was the president at the joint meeting in Basle and Zürich. He was accompanied by his wife Marian, whose task was to juggle with the

The first meeting of the Moynihan Club outside Berkeley Moynihan's clinic in Leeds in 1909. Front row: Mr Willis, Mr Jalland, Mr Harold Stiles, Mr W B Coley, Mr B G A Moynihan, Mr Rutherford Morison, Mr Alexis Thomson, and Mr Robert Jones. Second row: Mr Henry Gray, Mr J F Dobson, Professor J K Jamieson, Mr T Thomas, Mr L R Braithwaite, and Mr S Bishop. Third row: Mr Grey Turner, Mr Hogarth Pringle, Mr Walter Thompson, and Dr T Wardrop Griffith. Back row: Mr Burgess, Mr F Macrea, and Mr Bond.

wine glasses—a duty allotted to a wife whose husband has to make an after dinner speech. In all, he made four speeches, two in English and two in immaculate German, a compliment to his hosts, pointing out with his charming, crooked smile that he had not forgotten to put the verb at the end. Downstairs afterwards it was recorded, "Bill Wilson always manages to pull something out of the hat." My last meeting with him had been in the finals, when he had failed me disastrously in surgery; many years later I was to rise to the dizzy heights of calling my professor of surgery Bill.

Norway 1968

In the spring we travelled to Norway, where we were put up in a log cabin 1000 feet up the ski slopes. The Norwegian wives who took us to the sauna house and to the museums and art galleries were just waking up from their winter sleep. By the end of the visit, what with the social whirl, they suddenly became very beautiful. We went by mailboat to the north cape in and out of the fiords. At a small town inside the Arctic circle a retired surgeon general practitioner and his wife met us at the boat and took us home for an hour or two. Their house was covered, floor and walls, with rugs that they had woven during the winter. We could see that their gums and lips were quite blue and thought that it must be due to the lack of fresh vegetables and fruit during their lengthy twilight. Yet as a special treat they gave us an apple on a plate with a silver knife. I was struck with the similarity of the coastline and the arrangement of the houses to that of Aberdeen. Images of Girdleness lighthouse and the

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great boulders that rock in their beds on the sea edge of Nigg Bay, Aberdeen harbour with its monosyllabic fishermen, who also fish in dangerous waters, and the salty smell of drying fish carcasses precipitated a sense of belonging to this place and of seeing Aberdeen for the first time.

Marseilles and Montpellier 1970

After breakfast of croissants and hot brioches we tied headscarves tightly around our heads and braved the strong wind that hustled us down the fashionable Canebière to the harbour, where we embarked—our intrepid hostess making light of the choppy seas—for the Chateau d'If. From this island prison Marseilles looked alarmingly distant and safe.

... and Anna Karenina on other trains. (From the film *Anna Karenina* with Vivien Leigh. Reproduced by permission of the National Film Archive.)

En route for Montpellier, our coach stopped at Arles. Here, a couple, husband and wife, in dusty peasant black accosted us hesitantly, speaking an unintelligible Algerian French. She carried a basket containing a French loaf and a bottle of wine; he wore a medallion of St Christopher on a chain round his neck. He produced a piece of paper that read "Père mort," and underneath someone had written, "These travellers wish to proceed to Toulouse; they should change at Narbonne." They must have landed at Marseilles and become lost. Our coach driver directed them, and as we left we saw them standing and waiting, in elemental patience, to cross the busy road, the bread and wine protruding from the basket. I hoped that St Christopher, the patron saint of all travellers, would look after his own.

Drying fish carcasses at Bodø, Norway.

Helsinki 1974

We flew into Helsinki airport over pine forests and lakes and myriads of small islands with summer houses on them. It was April, but as we drove to our hotel snow still lay in heaps and the Finns wore garments of animal fur and reindeer hide. We got ready at once to attend a reception given by the Helsinki surgeons and their wives, a typical smörgåsbord with a special delicacy, a white fish found only in the White Lake nearby—so named for its crystal clarity—which they later took us to see.

Although our hosts spoke to us in excellent English, little English was spoken in the town and, pronunciation being so difficult, we realised what we were missing. Francis Bacon contends that without language, "... young men go hooded, and look abroad little." That indomitable traveller Freya Stark supposes that 2000 words of the country's language should be learnt so as not to offend local prejudices, but she quite frequently penetrated jungles where there was the risk of being eaten by cannibals. It has been suggested, more prosaically, that a second language be introduced into the medical course displacing a subject that has become out of date. One member of the club, who has visited numerous centres abroad, thinks that 500 words on the "lingua" tape may suffice, and he took the chance to try out his Finnish vocabulary on our charming hostess, much fun and laughter resulting. Of course, no language is more international than laughter, nor for that matter than music and dance, as we discovered the following evening when we visited the opera house to see the ballet of *The Tempest* danced to the music of Sibelius.

To witness such a spectacle is to understand Spain.

Spain 1976

When we arrived in Madrid everyone had gone to the bullfight, including the professor who was surgeon to the bullfighters and carried out his repairs in a small, well appointed operating theatre at the back of the ring, flanked by a fine bust of Pasteur. It was the second week in May, the Feast of San Isidro. "In this week," declaimed an excitable Spaniard on my right, "you will see in Madrid the best matadors and the best bulls in all Spain. You must always watch the most courageous matadors fight the most courageous bulls." To experience such a spectacle, says Hemingway, is to understand Spain. To see a second rate bullfight, as we did elsewhere, is to witness cruelty and depravity.

Our host came from the plains of Castile, from a poor family. "With these hands," he said, like a sad, proud matador, "I have made myself what I am." Sipping a glass of heavy Spanish sherry, we walked down to the rose garden, which was dimly lit and surrounded by a high wall. We wandered round smelling the delicious scent of the roses, which were all of one variety, bred by our host and named after him. On our return we discovered that they are grown in this country.

The appellation "professor" in Europe is given to any academic—that is, one who publicly professes his own knowledge. The most all embracing title might be that of the famous painting by Holbein in the Royal College of Surgeons in London—"The Masters," which depicts the barber surgeons being granted their charter by Henry VIII. By the same token, "Madame" to a married woman steers clear of all the pitfalls of address. My husband has found a watertight method of overcoming language difficulties with foreign ladies. He stands murmuring "Madame" in tones of understanding, commiseration, or surprise, as the speaker's demeanour suggests, on the premise, which every medical practitioner knows, that all that people really want is to be listened to.

Travel is an emotive affair: objects, words, concepts that have become too well known are in danger of passing unnoticed; but go away for a few days to another country, with other customs, and what is familiar at home is seen in a fresh light. Perhaps it is worth looking again at our own familiar world of the healing arts. To us is given the privilege—given to no other—to pass without let or hindrance through doors and across frontiers, not least into the human condition. Death and illness, like sauna baths, are great levellers, and so, too, in every country, the sun rises in the morning.

In a small boat round the world

SALLY N DAVIES

A hungry shark beat us to it. We had just caught a fish, but when we pulled it in only the head was left. My husband Nicholas and I are sailing from Bali to Cocos Keeling Islands and on across the Indian Ocean. A mere dot on most atlases, the Cocos atoll is an important milestone, as after there we should be safely out of this area with its rapidly approaching hurricane season. The sun glares down from directly overhead and the trade winds push us westwards through the lazy ocean swell.

In 1979 we left England in *Liamba*, our 35 foot yacht, to cross the Atlantic and sail via the Panama Canal to California where Nick had arranged a research post. As our time in San Diego drew to a close we considered sailing across the Pacific. Who could resist the lure of the south seas when poised on the brink? Not us, so we duly set off to navigate that magnificent ocean and to reach Australia, half way round the world. So now we are bringing our stalwart little boat home, our goal, to sail her back up the River Lynton whence she came.

As doctors in the close knit circle of "yachties" that we were to meet on our travels we were inevitably asked for medical advice. Much of our time was in the tropics and in regions with unfamiliar and dangerous creatures, so we had to be ready to tackle such problems as stinging coral, sea snake bites, and poisonous fish. A common condition was the indolent tropical ulcer, that festering sore that starts from the most minor trauma. Occupational hazards of sailing were another aspect: burns from the endless battle with the galley stove when the sea and sky are constantly changing places, mangled fingers that got trapped between rope and winch when the strain took up suddenly in a squall, the ubiquitous fungal infestation that loves salty skin (fresh water is a precious commodity for long distance sailors).

There were a few more memorable events when our skills were

Rough weather crossing the Caribbean.

needed. While sailing up the lonely Mexican coast, we met a young American with abdominal pain. The only doctor in the isolated fishing village nearby had seen, but not examined him, prescribed antacids and chloramphenicol, charged \$100, and sent him back to his home built trimaran. By the time that we saw him he was most unwell with generalised peritonitis and from the history we diagnosed a ruptured appendix. Luckily, another boat had a radio and we were able to contact a flying ambulance in San Diego. A small plane flew the 1500 miles to land in a field hastily cleared of scraggy cows by the locals. On arrival in the States, the leaking appendix was removed and he made a good recovery.

While navigating a tricky reef passage, an orthopaedic surgeon friend of ours hooked a four foot barracuda. All other eyes were on the jagged coral heads just below the surface, so he tried to land it alone. The angry fish voiced its objections by sinking vicious teeth