THE ULTIMATE BIRTHDAY BOOK

COMPILED
BY
J. L. HERRERA

DEDICATED TO THE MEMORY OF:

Madge Portwin
doyenne of the warm heart

and the shared bookshelf …

AND WITH SPECIAL THANKS TO:

Sheila Given, Margaret Clarke, Gail Vardy, Barbara Andreas,
Ken Herrera, Rose Brown, Marilu Hobman, Tom Errey, Isla MacGregor,
Ken Clarke, Ro Allington-Maguire, Cheryl Perriman, Grant Finlay, Eve Masterman,
and several Readers Advisers at several libraries.

INTRODUCTION

This book is a little different to my previous writers' calendars. I set myself two tasks: firstly, to write something, however short, for every day of the year; and secondly, to write about people and books who were not an obvious part of my everyday reading. None of my old favourites, no writers whose lives are very familiar to me, no books which sit on my shelves and get re-read regularly.

Sometimes books and writers swam easily into view as I stood on that unexplored shore. At other times I found myself standing admiring the view but devoid of any ideas.

Still, it *was* a pleasant view. Un-peopled, yes, but with the foam of the waves and the cry of the seagulls and the odd little marks and breathing holes and nameless debris upon the smoothed-out sand as its own particular pleasure.

So even if I haven't quite lived up to my 'charter' I hope you will enjoy this walk with me …

J. L. Herrera

Hobart
2012

I also, after some pondering, decided to dedicate a few birthdates to Anon. After all, every Anon, he or she, was born, lived, wrote and died. Anon is as deserving of a birthday as anyone else. I was thinking of Anon one day when a friend asked 'Who wrote Chopsticks?' It was the piece that kids, musical or not, could bash out on a piano with a friend when I was young. And it had the curious sense of just being there. No one wrote it. It was just a part of life. I am not sure if this is the wonder of Anon or not. The creator might've wished for some recognition. Then again the creator might've gloried in that anonymity. And think of all those overheard discussions … for better or for worse …

THE ULTIMATE BIRTHDAY BOOK

January 1: Joe Orton

*

Thomas Mallon wrote in *A Book of One's Own*, "That diaries should incriminate and exculpate seems likely enough, but the murder victim who writes a confession for his own killer is sufficiently uncommon. The recent history of the British theater, however, supplies us with such a rarity in the case of Joe Orton. In 1951 he and Kenneth Halliwell, both students at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art, became lovers. Orton was eighteen and delighted to be escaping from his grim working-class background in Leicester." His diary records both his excitement about his new career, about being in love, and about the first hints that their affair was not going to be plain sailing.

But neither of them gained the success they hoped for in their teens. "He and Halliwell lived a life of defeat in an English bedsitter, failing at writing novels, failing at playwriting, and failing at a life of petty, if ingenious, crime: they spent six months in jail for wittily defacing the jackets of public library books with fake blurbs and obscenely incongruous photographs. Desperate for attention and success, they could find none — until the mid-sixties, when Orton at last began to make his name with plays like *Entertaining Mr. Sloane*, *Loot*, and *Crimes of Passion*. He and Halliwell continued to live together, but by 1967 Orton was writing a screenplay for the Beatles and Halliwell was unraveling. Having been the dominant partner in their years of obscurity, Halliwell was seen by Orton's flashy new friends as the playwright's pathetic appendage."

Their relationship is dismal, Halliwell is deeply depressed, Orton starts keeping a diary again in which he records their day to day miseries:

18 March: Exhausting wrangles over trivia. … Soothed down the situation only to have it break out later. "You're quite a different person, you know, since you had your success."

23 April: Dreary day. Kenneth in an ugly mood. …

He also recorded his various one-night-stands and his expanding career. "Orton is playing to all of "swinging London," but Halliwell's lines just dissolve in the bedsitter's walls." And then: "The neighbors didn't even hear him on August 9, 1967, when he delivered nine hammer blows to Orton's head. After the murder, determined to do away with himself as well, he seems to have decided that Orton's diary could provide the world with a fuller explanation than he has time to write. So he leaves a note on top of it:

> If you read his diary all will be explained.
> K.H.
> P.S. Especially the latter part

"The "latter part" Halliwell accomplished by taking twenty-two Nembutals with a glass of grapefruit juice; the coroner would later determine that he actually expired before Orton. Thoroughly eclipsed by his lover and victim, Halliwell even let him do the posthumous talking to the police. Instead of destroying Orton's humiliating version of their rotting partnership, he called attention to it."

I wonder if the police did in fact read Joe Orton's diary?

*

January 2: Susan Wittig Albert

*

Sometimes, when I am at a kind of standstill, trying to decide what I want to read, (you know what they say about too much choice) I use my 'Ten Books Along' method. I just count along a shelf till I come to the tenth book. Sometimes it is something I have read already or just can't face but other times it brings an interesting new book my way. For instance I enjoyed Marie Honey's *Yes, Father* about a convent schoolgirl in Hobart; I felt she didn't quite know what to do with her schoolgirl once she'd left school but the home and school scenes were very readable. And the other day I came home with Albert's book *Dead Man's Bones* …

There was a time when every second new mystery seemed to have recipes in it. Of course whodunits have always had *food* … sometimes the meal is even a vital clue. But recipes did not

seem to quite fit the genre I felt; as though they were trivialising something which is inevitably sad, no matter how clever the solution to the crime or how much black humour the detectives indulge in along the way. Albert is guilty of this too but I like her books for their quiet down-homey feel and for the intriguing little bits of medicinal and herbal lore she slips in …

In fact I am always on the lookout for little snippets of plant lore and plant healing. I found this one in *A Bunyip Close Behind Me* by Eugénie Crawford: 'When Mother was in her fifties she contracted diabetes. This was many years before the discovery of insulin: the disease was fatal for young people and there was little a specialist could advise an adult to do except diet strictly. We remembered Mignonne and went out to the property where only two chimneys and the old swing remained after the fire and the Algerian fig hedge was still growing.

Whenever Mother would get dangerously sleepy — and I've seen a specimen so clogged with sugar that the Fehling solution would turn bright red — she'd chop up a leaf, pour over a little boiling water and next morning drink the green slimy juice it exuded, sweetened with saccharine. Twenty-four hours after drinking her private swig, her sugar level would be normal. No doctor has ever taken this seriously and I've been made to feel extremely foolish a number of times for mentioning it. Most of the great life-giving drugs of the world have been extracted from plants and the fact remains that Mother lived until she was ninety without any other treatment.' (Algerian figs = *ficus indicus*.)

And this one from *Spontaneous Healing* by Andrew Weil: 'Some years ago I got a letter from a man in California describing remarkable experiences with a preparation of an herb called bloodroot, which he said miraculously dissolved moles and other growths on the skin, including, in at least one case he had witnessed, a malignant melanoma. He urged me to order the product from an old man in Utah who prepared it, and to experiment with it. I did order it (it was quite inexpensive), and shortly afterward a container of oily blood-red paste arrived in the mail with no instructions.' Bloodroot is a herb, *Sanguinaria Canadensis*, which grows in the woodlands of North America. It is inadvisable to take it internally but safe on the skin. Even so, he was cautious, trying it out first on a small tumour on his dog.

'On the fourth day, when I called Coca over for the treatment, I was alarmed to see blood running down her side. The tumour had turned grayish and seemed to be separating from the skin, leaving a gaping wound underneath. I stopped applying bloodroot, cleaned the area with hydrogen peroxide, and resolved to keep an eye on the area. Two days later, the whole tumour, then whitish gray, fell off, leaving a raw, circular area that quickly healed over.' He then began using it on people. 'The most recent was a young woman with a large mole at the collar line at the base of the neck. A dermatologist wanted to take it off, but his description of the size of the incision he would have to make put her off, and she knew that healing would be difficult because of the location. She asked me if I knew any alternative to surgery. Bloodroot solved her problem. "It got pretty scary-looking on the third day," she told me afterward, "but I remembered your description of what would happen, and I tried not to worry. Now the mole is gone completely, and I think it's a much better job than the dermatologist could have done. I'm amazed." '

And an even stranger one from Dr A. Vogel in *The Nature Doctor*: "There is a treatment for polio which sounds curious, but has achieved remarkable results and should for this reason alone be considered. Ask your butcher for a *bull's testicle*, transform it into a paste and rub this into the *spine*, several times a day. This external application of fresh hormones has yielded satisfactory results even in advanced stages of the disease. I myself have seen it work in patients who had already become paralysed."

And a friend told me she dissolved gallstones by eating parsley and lovage …

So what does Albert offer? I liked this little bit of advice about a readily-available source of help. "Pumpkins aren't just for Halloween jack-o-lanterns or pumpkin pie. In central America, the seeds (*pepitas*) of this native American herb were used to cool fevers, treat kidney and bladder ailments, and purge intestinal parasites. And recently, scientists have begun to investigate the use of pumpkin seed oil as a treatment for osteoarthritis, or degenerative joint disease. In osteoarthritis, the

cartilage breaks down, causing the bones to rub together. Animal studies suggest that adding pumpkin seed to the diet may be as effective in reducing joint inflammation as the use of nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs."

*

January 3: Warren Fahey

*

As a child I remember we had a version of the old American ballad 'On Top of Old Smoky' (which as you know starts out: 'On top of old Smokey/All covered with snow/I lost my true lover/By courtin' too slow'). Our version began 'On top of spaghetti/All covered with cheese/I lost my poor meatball/When somebody sneezed.' It's a funny thing but once a song or poem has been parodied once it seems to become fair game. I came upon a political parody of that song in Warren Fahey's *Ratbags and Rabblerousers* … Fahey being a well-known writer and collector of ballads, historical trivia, cultural tidbits, and other interesting ephemera …

ON TOP OF NO SMOKING

On top of no smoking
Because of the cost,
They're taxing our drinking,
Our pleasures are lost.

For drinking's a pleasure
And thirsting's a grief,
And old Artie Fadden
Is worse than a thief.

A thief will just rob you
And turn you to dust
Not one boss in a hundred
A worker can trust.

They'll hug you and kiss you
And tell you all lies —
But we don't believe them,
Because we've got wise.

We've had Artie Fadden,
We've had Menzies too.
With all dinkum Aussies,
They're just about through.

So come all you fellows,
And young maidens too.
We'll tell Bob and Artie
Just what they can do.

Let's throw out their budget.
High prices will cease.
Then we'll get a Government
To lead us to peace.

Funny, isn't it—because if those 'young maidens' had actually turned up at the pub wanting to join in the roistering and cheering and drinking they would

very quickly have found themselves shunted off into the Ladies Lounge—if not out on to the street and told to go home and put the dinner on … As Jonathan King put it in *Waltzing Materialism*, "Despite the relaxed social mores the pub is no place for a woman. The long puritanical tradition of early closing also remains in the minds of many who cannot shake off the mentality of the six o'clock swill. Others with respect due to the long established tradition itself take their drinking very seriously and know to the last man the set of rules concerning 'shouts', and the sin of 'dragging the chain'. The pub is the product and expression of the mythical mateship that binds all male Australians together. The obese flabby arms that lift an incessant stream of glasses to ever moist lips are joined in a legendary friendship that was welded over the bar.

"Concessions may exist on the statute book but women are not wanted in Australian public bars. My wife was forcibly removed from a pub in the main street of Beechworth in 1975 while hostile stares await most female visitors to any urban public bar. For it is only by drinking that you can prove your manhood in Australia. There is no place for a woman beside a man who is proving his maturity and bravery until he is paralytic or by demonstrating that he can stand up long after others have fallen to the floor. If you are not man enough to drink with the boys until you are drunk then in Australian terms you are probably a 'bloody poofta'. As Donald Horne observed once: "Men stand around bars asserting their masculinity with such intensity that you half expect them to unzip their flies."

"Drinking is something that must be done away from the opposite sex, something in fact that has to be done before Australian men can confront 'their' women. They seldom drink at home around the table with 'the wife' and kids but invariably frequent the local for a few quiet drinks with their mates.

"The men could be running away. Mateship may be little more than companionship on a common escape route. Australians find it difficult to forge and maintain real friendships between men, and between men and women and so instead they sidestep the challenge by fleeing to the pub where after a few quickies anyone can relate on the level of the beery bar. As Ronald Conway says: "Alcohol helps inflate the sexually inadequate male and brings out sadistic behaviour commonly latent in men who must indulge in fantasies of violence to cover up for their limited affection and potency." "

Very likely those 'young maidens' were barmaids. For as Fahey says in *When Mabel Laid the Table*, "The Australian barmaid is an important part of our drinking history. I have always thought it odd that hotels employed women to tend the bars in hotel saloon bars, but there they are right in the middle of 'no women allowed' territory. This 'no women' rule was a reality until the late 1960s when women began to break down all manner of doors, including those of the local pub. (I would wager that they are still not welcome in these bars, even though the barmaid is now more often likely to be a barman.) The Australian barmaid had to be tough, many a sharp-tongued woman has reduced a grown man to tears or stopped a punch-up with a glare. They were the mother confessors, too, and men would tell them things that they would never tell other women, especially their wives!"

Though whether they *wanted* to be the recipient of mawkish drink-sodden confessions is quite another matter.

*

January 4: Albert Camus (d)

*

"While the bells rang out, Albert Camus, in the offices of the Resistance newspaper *Combat*, surrounded by 'enormous disorder and enormous gaiety', worked on an editorial which became famous: 'The greatness of man,' he wrote, 'lies in his decision to be stronger than his condition.' "

Antony Beevor & Artemis Cooper in *Paris, After the Liberation 1944 – 1949*.

'Our task as men
is to find
the few principles

that will calm
the infinite anguish
of free souls. We must mend
what has been
torn apart,
make justice
imaginable again
in a world
so obviously unjust,
give happiness a
meaning once more
to peoples poisoned
by the misery of
the century.' (Camus quoted in *All Life is Holy All Life is One*)

Camus was on my mind because I heard that the French Government wanted to move his body from a little village graveyard in Lourmarin to Paris and his family was against this. So am I, in principle, because I think communities deserve to keep their illustrious sons and daughters along with their less illustrious sons and daughters; just as little country museums deserve to keep their better exhibits not have them ransacked for national collections … and so on …

Nobel Laureate Albert Camus died in a car accident in 1960.

*

January 5: Ngugi wa Thiong'o

*

I was vaguely under the impression that Kenyan writer Ngugi was a poet. But when I finally thought to track him down I found poetry was a very minor part of his life. Novels, essays, plays, children's books, even a prison diary, but very few poems. He was a leading member of the post-colonial movement, changing his name from James Ngugi, writing in Gikuyu rather than English, insisting that university courses should be called Literature not English Literature—and struggling with the authoritarian nature of the regime of Daniel Moi.

It has its funny side. Moi did not like the attitudes of one of the characters in Ngugi's novel *Matigari*, published in 1986, and ordered the man to be arrested. When he was told the character was fiction he ordered the book to be arrested! But with his work unable to be sold in Kenya or used in schools there Ngugi finally accepted he had no future as a writer in Kenya and went into exile. He now lives in California.

I did come across the information that his favourite poem was Eliot's 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' but I thought perhaps I should be looking instead for one of his novels or perhaps his views on post-colonial writing … And I doubt if Mr Moi would have approved of the attitudes of Mr Prufrock either …

*

January 6: Percivall Pott

*

I came upon Dr Pott years ago as a mention in something about chimney sweeps. The little boys were sent naked up the dark dirty sooty chimneys and some developed a particularly unpleasant form of cancer, scrotal cancer. Percy Pott (1714 – 1788) was an interesting man. The son of a London scrivener he trained as what was then a barber-surgeon; though the connection was broken in his lifetime. He was an innovator in medical treatments and was 'proverbial' for his kindness. He broke his ankle but managed to stop bystanders on the street from picking him up and carting him casually off to the nearest bonesetter; instead urging them to find two long poles and to take a door off its hinges. This much gentler way of treating people with broken bones gradually became accepted practice. But while he was laid up with his ankle he began writing medical

treatises. His interests were varied—ruptures, cataracts, the spinal condition now known as Pott's disease after him, hydroceles—and " 'A Short Treatise of the Chimney Sweeper's Cancer,' which was reprinted in 1810, with additional notes by Sir James Earle, F.R.S. although this work only consists of five octavo pages, it is still quoted for the accuracy of its clinical details, and it has led to the production of much good work in the fields of pathology and surgery." (DNB) It has also led to him being regarded as one of the 'fathers' of occupational diseases, their causes and cures. Different trades throw up different diseases. In this case there is the deep relief that no little boys need ever see the inside of a chimney again …

But it was a different man who actually got the boys out of the chimneys: the Earl of Shaftesbury. Rodney Legg in *Dorset Families* summed up his career: "Moral outrage was left to a descendant to articulate. The lasting fame of the family from St Giles House is safe in the shape of a neat and handsome Christian aristocrat whose mind was fixed upon the tortured lives and landscapes that are usually unimaginable in the deep-green Tory splendour of inherited wealth and privilege. Antony Ashley Cooper, 7th Earl of Shaftesbury (1801-85) took on the mantle of his father's estate and title in 1851. He had entered Parliament as Lord Ashley in 1825, as the member for Woodstock, and set to work reforming the Lunacy Acts. From 1830 to 1846 he sat in the House of Commons for Dorchester and then the Dorset county constituency.

"He threw his considerable energies into what became the most successful one-man philanthropic crusade in English history. Yet this was no single-issue fanaticism; his was an obsessive force for good on a wide range of fronts.

"He expanded the Factory Acts into new industries and removed numerous abuses of women and children in the mines. Boys as young as four were being harnessed in chains and used for shifts of up to 18 hours shuffling on all fours as they dragged trucks along coal seams. By 1842 he secured the ban on women of any age and boys under thirteen years of age being employed underground.

"The scandal of the 'climbing boys' was then remedied – preventing the use of small children as human chimney-sweeps – and from 1847, now sitting for Bath, Lord Ashley championed the education of Midland and northern slum children in the Ragged Schools. Shaftesbury, as he became on entering the House of Lords, after his father's death, put the amelioration of social wrongs above party politics and indeed had no conception of the sea-change he was causing in working-class expectations and power. Though he never saw it as such, he had blurred the divisions between rich and poor, and in restoring some dignity and hope in the latter he defused the chances of a revolution in England, which might have come to pass during what was only the 'Red Mirage' of 1919. Lower-class aspirations were met by the Victorians by democratic change with legislation conceded on their behalf by the ruling classes. Worker power was therefore set to find its twentieth-century expression inside rather than outside the political system."

*

January 7: Zora Neale Hurston

*

The other day I was reading Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Hurston was not from a poverty-stricken sharecropping background like other well-known Afro-American writers. Her father was a tradesman and lay preacher, her mother a schoolteacher, and she received a good education for the times, going on to university. I suspect this was part of the criticism of her writing, that it wasn't social protest, that it didn't drip with anger and dreadful scenes of discrimination; as she said, her writing was "not a treatise on sociology". And so her work, after its initial popularity with ordinary black readers, was gradually dismissed and forgotten.

Henry Louis Gates wrote "How could the recipient of two Guggenheims and the author of four novels, a dozen short stories, two musicals, two books on black mythology, dozens of essays, and a prizewinning autobiography virtually "disappear" from her readership for three full decades? There are no easy answers to this quandary, despite the concerted attempts of scholars to resolve it. It is clear, however, that the loving, diverse, and enthusiastic responses that Hurston's work

engenders today were not shared by several of her influential black male contemporaries. The reasons for this are complex and stem largely from what we might think of as their "racial ideologies." "

It was Alice Walker who was instrumental in bringing Hurston 'back' when she first went looking for Hurston's unmarked grave. But much as I can see the value and the desire to re-position her work in the feminist tradition I'm not sure that this really does justice to Hurston as a writer of people and places and times. She wasn't writing of women's lives as she would like them to be or to express the hard times many black women struggled through. There is inequality and ignorance and injustice there but it is more subtle than anything Richard Wright wrote.

It is true that the heroine Janie's grandmother has an uncompromising view of the world. "Honey, de white man is de ruler of everything as fur as Ah been able tuh find out. Maybe it's some place way off in de ocean where de black man is in power, but we don't know nothin' but what we see. So de white man throw down de load and tell de nigger man tuh pick it up. He pick it up because he have to, but he don't tote it. He hand it to his womenfolks. De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see. Ah been prayin' fuh it tuh be different wid you." But Janie, hoping to drift happily through life using her prettiness, goes through two marriages with men who see no way out of poverty and hard times except by hard work and they expect her to be that mule. Needless to say she is rarely happy. Then her second husband dies and leaves her comfortably off with a little general store and various men are suddenly interested. She chooses a man called Tea Cake and goes off for a roller-coaster ride with a man she loves but who is a gambler and a dreamer. He is bitten by a mad dog and faced with a rabid man threatening her she shoots Tea Cake and ends up in court where she is acquitted.

The complaints about her, that she doesn't make a powerful statement to the court for instance, is to misjudge the book. It isn't a court room drama and no one offers her a chance to say anything anyway. She is the defendant and the victim, not an Atticus Finch. It isn't really a love story although that description comes closest, nor a novel about growing up and growing wise. It is debateable if Janie does grow very much as a woman. She has always hoped that other people will support her and like her and stand up for her. It is rather a dream of a life which will somehow grow in beauty and happiness by itself. The book ends, "The day of the gun, and the bloody body, and the court-house came and commenced to sing a sobbing sigh out of every corner in the room; out of each and every chair and thing. Commenced to sing, commenced to sob and sigh, singing and sobbing. Then Tea Cake came prancing around her where she was and the song of the sigh flew out of the window and lit in the top of the pine trees. Tea Cake, with the sun for a shawl. Of course he wasn't dead. He could never be dead until she herself had finished feeling and thinking. The kiss of his memory made pictures of love and light against the wall. Here was peace. She pulled in her horizon like a great fish-net. Pulled it from around the waist of the world and draped it over her shoulder. So much of life in its meshes! She called in her soul to come and see."

Janie will go on dreaming and wishing but perhaps at the end her dreams are a comfort rather than a danger to her. It doesn't matter all that much because she doesn't engage the reader's sympathy very strongly. But the book itself is a delight for the lively vivid colourful language in which Hurston paints her little world.

*

January 8: Job

*

We don't know who wrote the Book of Job or exactly when. It is thought to be a post-Exile story, possibly written in the 4th century BC and it has been compared to Greek tragedy which may have been an influence. We also do not know exactly where the Land of Uz was but it is thought to have been near modern-day Lebanon.

It is also significant for a reason I had never noticed until I came across Cynthia Ozick's essay 'The Impious Impatience of Job' in *Quarrel & Quandary*. She wrote, "But how arresting to learn that Satan appears in the story of Job not as that demonic figure of later traditions whom we meet in

our translation, but as *ha-Satan*, with the definite article attached, meaning "the Adversary"—the counter-arguer among the angels, who is himself one of "the sons of God." Satan's arrival in the tale helps date its composition. It is under Persian influence that he turns up—via Zoroastrian duality which pits, as equal contenders, a supernatural power for Good against a supernatural power for Evil. In the Book of Job, the scholars tell us, Satan enters Scripture for the first time as a distinct personality and as an emblem of destructive forces. But note: when the tale moves out of the prose of its fablelike frame into the sovereign grandeur of its poetry, Satan evaporates." Poetry—a force for Good? I think so.

But we do know who did some of the translations of it. For instance, Alister McGrath does an interesting overview of the history leading up to the translation we call the King James Bible in *In the Beginning: The Story of the King James Bible*, including the need to believe in English as a vehicle capable of expressing the most important and sublime ideas. Adam Nicolson in *God's Secretaries* focuses more particularly on the men who did the translations and made the final decisions. We know that Job was given to a group of scholars from Cambridge University to render into suitable English. They were lead by Edward Lively and the group was made up of Roger Andrewes, Andrew Bing, Laurence Chaderton, Thomas Harrison, John Richardson, Francis Dillingham and Robert Spaulding.

The reason why Job was on my mind is that I have just been listening to readings from it and I couldn't help thinking that regardless of what you might think of a God who casually wipes out a man's family to see if he will remain good and faithful it contains some of the most magnificent poetry you will ever find and phrases that have severed their moorings and become part of our heritage.

From the *King James Bible*:

Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind, and said,
Who *is* this that darkeneth counsel by words without knowledge?
Gird up now thy loins like a man; for I will demand of thee, and answer thou me.
Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth? declare, if thou hast understanding.
Who hath laid the measures thereof, if thou knowest? or who hath stretched the line upon it?
Whereupon are the foundations thereof fastened? or who laid the corner stone thereof;
When the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy?
Or *who* shut up the sea with doors, when it brake forth, *as if* it had issued out of the womb?
When I made the cloud the garment thereof, and thick darkness a swaddlingband for it,
And brake up for it my decreed *place*, and set bars and doors,
And said, Hitherto shalt thou come, but no further: and here shall thy proud waves be stayed?

Job. Chapter 38, verses 1 to 11.

But the thing which also struck me is that no matter how poor, how illiterate, how limited the lives of many of the people who sat listening Sunday by Sunday (or in the case of Jewish listeners Saturday by Saturday) they took away mental sustenance which is rarely on offer now. Even if people still read or listen to Job the newer translations have sometimes removed the sonorous grandeur of the older versions. Simple peasants, beggars, children, people with little but hard work and limited opportunities in their lives still received a form of mental sustenance …

'When the morning stars sang together' has lifted the spirits of countless people down the ages …

*

January 9: Simone de Beauvoir

*

I remember reading Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* when I was in my late teens and finding it impossibly remote in its sense of time and place. The one thing I remember clearly which appalled me was the French habit of bringing out the sheets from the bridal night to prove to the relatives including the mother-in-law that the bride had been a virgin. This struck me as the most

horrible sort of invasion of someone's privacy. Beauvoir saw it, understandably, as a form of hypocrisy; men's virginity was irrelevant, but women would be punished for its lack. Now, when I look back, my first reaction seems very naïve. But perhaps symbolic. I still feel that the invasion of someone's private and personal life leaves a nasty taste …

These thoughts recently came back to me as I have been reading *Simone de Beauvoir: A Critical Reader*, a collection of essays edited by Elizabeth Fallaize. Beauvoir was a prolific writer, novels, letters, essays, articles, autobiography, but unsurprisingly the book's main focus is on *The Second Sex* (*Le Deuxième Sexe*). The essays look at the way she had to move away from Jean-Paul Sartre's influence to actually write the book (left-wing philosophers, surprise, surprise, were not very interested in the status of women); the way she extrapolated from her own experience to general statements about women; the way this attempt to provide an historical overview of the oppression of women was taken up by later feminists including our own Germaine Greer; the way she attempted to broaden the French experience to include women in a wide variety of societies (not always convincingly); and the essays also look at the responses to the book when it first came out (including claims that it was pornographic) and in the decades after.

It is clear that that one book overwhelmed her reputation, perhaps to its detriment, and that she saw other aspects of her writing as equally important, including the complex human dilemmas she tried to explore in her novels such as *The Mandarins* and *She Came to Stay*.

But one thing in there went almost unnoticed, just a throwaway line from Elizabeth Fallaize: "For some readers she nevertheless spoke too frankly — Nelson Algren never forgave her for describing their relationship in vivid detail." Simone de Beauvoir was undoubtedly good for French women … but she did nothing to uphold the right of the citizen, female or male, to respect for their privacy in an increasingly invasive world.

*

January 10: Carl Linnaeus (d)

*

By the time Linnaeus died he had been accorded many honours and had lived to see his naming system for the world's flora accepted. His famous books, *Systema Naturae*, *Bibliotheca Botanica*, *Genera Plantarum*, *Materia Medica*, *Species Plantarum*, *Systema Vegetabilium* and more, were praised and used in universities and botanical gardens. But as I read Wilfrid Blunt's book *Linnaeus The Compleat Naturalist* I found that he was also an energetic travel writer (his first and perhaps most interesting trip being his journey through Lapland as a young man) and a man of ideas and wide enthusiasms. He was interested in the idea it might be possible to use tree-rings for dating. He promoted the idea of creating artificial pearls (an idea bought and developed by the Swedish government). He found that wild strawberries helped cure what was called sciatic gout. He wrote vigorously on aspects of diet, some of his aphorisms being 'All excess is harmful', 'Take gentle exercise for upwards of a third of the day', 'Eat to keep up your strength, not to stuff your belly', and 'Smoking, tobacco-chewing and snuff-taking are poison' although it did not stop him smoking; his explanation being that it helped in expectorating. But for all that Wilfrid (brother of spy Anthony Blunt) produced an interesting book to remind me that Linnaeus lived a useful and worthwhile life in many ways I never found myself warming to him particularly. Does that matter? Not really.

And after he died in 1778 what happened to the wonderful collection of plants, insects, shells, corals, and other items of natural history as well as books he had collected?

Blunt writes, "Whether or not Linnaeus had been just in accusing his son of never helping him in his botanical work, it is hard to say with any certainty; there can, however, be no doubt that Carl now did all in his power to save the collections, which had already suffered from moth, vermin and damp, from further deterioration. He removed them from the museum at Hammarby to the Uppsala house, where he worked on their preservation with such energy that each night he went to bed 'as tired as a common labourer'. He also rejected what he called a 'cruel' offer of £1,100 or £1,200 made for them by Sir Joseph Banks, thus saving them for the time being from leaving the country."

But then Carl the Younger also died and his mother asked a friend called J. G. Acrel to sell them. Banks asked a young naturalist, James Edward Smith, to acquire them. For 1,000 guineas Smith got a treasure trove including 3,000 books and all of Linnaeus's correspondence. "From the students at Uppsala came a cry that the collections should at all costs remain in Sweden, and Carl's successor, Thunberg, felt the same. The Secretary of State proposed that the King should step in and acquire them; but Gustaf was in Italy, and before he could take any action Smith had approved the inventory and clinched the deal. On 17 September 1784 the libraries and collections left Stockholm in an English brig, the *Appearance*, and within a few weeks they were safely in England."

The puzzle in there was why Linnaeus's widow saw his life's work only in terms of money. She wasn't left well off but the offer of a comfortable pension would probably have been sufficient to keep the collection together and safe. "The sale of the Linnaean collection to a foreigner, a calamity comparable to that of the sale of the Elgin marbles a few years later, has remained a matter of regret, even of shame, to the Swedish people" and the fact that most, but not all, of the collection is in London and accessible to scholars from all over the world is probably only partial consolation. The regret is understandable. Sweden made Linnaeus the 'Father of Botany', his family, his training, his early travels, his friendships and life experiences were all intimately connected to Sweden, so it is a pity that man and collection could not remain linked in perpetuity.

*

January 11: William James

*

Robert Masters wrote a book in the 1950s he called *The Varieties of Psychedelic Experience*, taking the idea and the title from William James's classic *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. I had never read anything by or about William James, other than that he was Henry's brother, and it made me wonder if he was prepared to look at the fringes of religious experience and what he made of trances, visions, prophecies, moments of ecstasy, and other not-neatly-pigeonholeable phenomena. After all, though the Bible comes down hard on witches, it has absolutely no problem with dreams and prophecies and mysterious lights above people's heads … not to mention angels and demons … and voices coming out of burning bushes …

The book is actually the series of lectures James presented in Edinburgh in 1901-2 and I can imagine him as a calm sensible unhistrionic New England Protestant appealing to an Edinburgh audience. The book is not about dogma or belief-systems but rather about the impact of religious experience on the individual. He writes, "The ecclesiastical spirit in general is the sum of these two spirits of dominion; and I beseech you never to confound the phenomena of mere tribal or corporate psychology which it presents with those manifestations of the purely interior life which are the exclusive object of our study. The baiting of Jews, the hunting of Albigenses and Waldenses, the stoning of Quakers and ducking of Methodists, the murdering of Mormons and the massacring of Armenians, express much rather that aboriginal human neophobia, that pugnacity of which we all share the vestiges, and that inborn hatred of the alien, than they express the positive piety of the various perpetrators. Piety is the mask, the inner force is tribal instinct."

Even when he appears to be talking more generally he soon brings it back to the individual. "If you ask for a concrete example, there can be no better one than is furnished by the person of George Fox. The Quaker religion which he founded is something which it is impossible to overpraise. In a day of shams, it was a religion of veracity rooted in spiritual inwardness, and a return to something more like the original gospel truth than men had ever known in England. So far as our Christian sects today are evolving into liberality, they are simply reverting in essence to the position which Fox and the early Quakers so long ago assumed. No one can pretend for a moment that in point of spiritual sagacity and capacity, Fox's mind was unsound. Everyone who confronted him personally, from Oliver Cromwell down to county magistrates and jailers, seems to have acknowledged his superior power. Yet from the point of view of his nervous constitution, Fox was a psychopath or *détraqué* of the deepest dye."

This is the point which runs through all the lectures. James as a psychologist was interested in the way that trances, visions, times of religious melancholia and religious ecstasy, insights and conversion worked themselves out in human lives and what was their longer-term impact. Things which were once seen as religious experiences would often now be seen as manifestations of mental illness.

The long periods of melancholia and 'lostness' which many people underwent before a sudden moment of blinding insight and change would now be treated, most likely, with Prozac or lithium … and perhaps the opportunity for a life-changing experience of religious ecstasy has now been medicated out of existence …

Though dense and wordy the book is still well worth reading.

*

January 12: Jack London

*

"I have just been reading Jack London's *Michael, Brother of Jerry*, and I am full of righteous rage. What a picture! It is the story of how performing animals are trained, and before I had read half the book I made a vow that never again will I sit through a performance of animals.

The tale of Ben Bolt the tiger, if known by the masses, would kill every animal turn on the stage. Ben Bolt, fresh from the jungle, is broken by the trainers. The method is unspeakable; he is lashed with iron bars, and stabbed with forks until in agony he falls senseless in the arena. This treatment goes on for weeks …. And in the end many good, kindly people see Ben Bolt, a miserable, broken animal, sit up in a chair like a human. And they laugh. My God!

Then there is Barney the good-natured mule that was once a family pet. Later he becomes the celebrated bucking mule, and a prize is offered to anyone who will keep on his back for one minute. Audiences go into fits of laughter at his antics. But the audiences do not know that Barney was trained with a spiked saddle, and that for months life was one long agony of pain.

Is my anger due to the cruelty I am repressing in myself? I don't care whether it is sadism or the spark of the divine in me. All I care about is that this inferno of pain must cease.

Never has any book affected me as this one has done. By word of mouth and by my pen I shall try to send dear old Jack London's message round the world. Public opinion is the only thing that can stop the misery of these broken creatures, and I suggest that the anti-vivisectionists turn to this infinitiely worse evil. The vivisectionists, at any rate, are working for humanity, but the brutes who break performing animals are merely amusing crowds of good people who know nothing about what goes on behind the scenes."

A. S. Neill in *A Dominie in Doubt.*

I had never heard of this book and I wondered why not—if it was capable of sparking such a response. Was it because the only Jack London books which get reprinted are his animal books like *White Fang* which have been re-positioned as children's books even though he didn't see himself as writing for children—and this book is not perhaps what parents would give to their children? Or is it because circuses and animal shows have come under much closer scrutiny with the training and welfare of the animals checked—and the book is therefore seen as out-of-date? Is it because London wrote many books, over fifty, as well as newspaper articles and short stories, and the majority of them were written quickly and not very stylishly? I don't know. So far I haven't been able to track down a copy to judge the book for myself …

London was born John Griffith Chaney and lived a knockabout life, largely self-educated as both a man and a writer, but going to many of the places, such as the Klondike Gold Rush, which later inspired his popular stories. He tossed off books at a great rate to fund an increasingly lavish lifestyle which included a yacht but in the end the books couldn't keep pace with his debts …

*

January 13: Anne Bradstreet

*

"If we had no winter, the spring would not be so pleasant. If we did not sometimes taste the adversity, prosperity would not be so welcome." Anne Bradstreet has as her claim to fame that she was the first person in the fledgling United States of America to publish a book. *The New Oxford Book of American Verse*, compiled by Richard Ellman, says of her, "If memorialists were scarce, it is salutary to recognize, in an age of chairpersons, that the first American poet of consequence was a woman. Anne Bradstreet, born before Shakespeare died, belonged to a pious and workaday world as unlike his as possible." Ellman said she was modest about her poems but that "friends who were proud of her talent had her poems published in 1650 under the title, *The Tenth Muse Lately Sprung Up in America*". It suggests she was fortunate in her friends and that she was a woman who inspired friendship and although not deathless verse her work has a gentle charm to it. Yet my image of her, writing sentimentally of love, and children, and spring flowers (for instance her poem 'To My Dear and Loving Husband'), is not the full story. I also came upon this little mention of her in Pat Pinsent's article 'Christian Feminism in the Seventeenth Century' in the *Feminist Theology* magazine:

"I am obnoxious to each carping tongue
Who says my hand a needle better fits,
A poet's pen all scorn I should thus wrong,
For such despite they cast on female wits:
If what I do prove well, it won't advance,
They'll say it's stol'n or else it was by chance.

The Tenth Muse (1650)

"Thus Anne Bradstreet, the earliest American poet and one of the first women to have her poetry published in England, laments the dilemma which women writers of all periods have experienced. If what they write is good, people think that they probably got their ideas from a man; in any case whether they should be wasting time on writing at all is very questionable. The needle is always used as the image of what they should have in their hands instead of the pen!"

*

January 14: Yukio Mishima

*

I remember coming on Yukio Mishima's *Thirst for Love* in the Déjà Vu Bookshop and thinking 'that's what I've been looking for' but when I got home with it I couldn't remember what it was which had led me to it. Names do settle themselves in my mind so that certain titles leap out at me. (It's a pity that the names I really need to remember don't seem to do that.) I think I am drawn to Japanese books both because I like their relative spareness in style and a vague sense that I will come to understand Japanese society better. In most cases that doesn't happen; not least, I think, because the Japanese writers who get translated into English already tend to be fairly westernised.

But such books, almost invariably, come with an odd little bonus: a sense of landscape which I find attractive. "Etsuko was particularly fond of the breadth of the sky above the cemetery and the stillness of the broad path that ran through it. This white, bracing tranquility, mixed with the scent of shrubbery and tender tree shoots, made her feel as at no other time that her spirit was unclothed.

"It was the time for gathering herbs. Etsuko walked along the creek collecting horsetail and starwort in her sleeve. In one place the creek water had run over the bank. There was parsley there."

Other writers don't think to mention grass or fireflies or parsley or moths. The Japanese nearly always do. I like that.

It comes, then, as a surprise to learn that Yukio Mishima committed hara-kiri on 25 November 1970 and a friend then beheaded him. Michael Macintyre in *The Shogun Inheritance* says of him, "In passionately rejecting modern materialism, Mishima had turned increasingly to the past for his inspiration and spiritual identity, and had come to see himself as a latter-day samurai. Mishima was a compulsive reader but there was one book in particular which influenced him profoundly, and ultimately contributed to his death: this was *Hagakure*.

"Literally translated 'Hidden Among Leaves', *Hagakure* contains the teachings of Yamamoto Jocho, a samurai of the late seventeenth century who had been denied by new legislation the traditional privilege of ritual suicide after the death of his lord, and had become a priest recluse."

Among other exhortations on behaviour and personal appearance Jocho said 'It is wrong to have strong personal convictions.'

It is a pity, perhaps, that Jocho did not instead exhort his followers: 'Eat parsley every day' …

*

January 15: T. Crofton Croker

*

Croker was an Irishman who collected folk lore and folk songs in the early to mid-nineteenth century and was friends with people like Thomas Moore. Sir Walter Scott described him as "little as a dwarf, keen-eyed as a hawk, and of easy prepossessing manners". His best known work was probably *Fairy Legends and Traditions of the South of Ireland* which was translated into German by the Brothers Grimm but he also wrote some rather bizarre and faintly macabre stories himself. I have just been reading his story 'The Soul Cages' in which a man takes a trip down to the bottom of the sea with a merrow (a merman) and finds he is keeping the souls of drowned sailors in lobster pots. He goes to great lengths to free these invisible souls but it is never possible to know whether the merrow is taking him for a ride. Jack Dogherty has his home right on the spot where wrecked ships come ashore, keeping him in supplies; 'and then the fine bales of cotton and tobacco, and such like things, and the pipes of wine, and the puncheons of rum, and the casks of brandy, and the kegs of Hollands that used to come ashore! Dunbeg Bay was just like a little estate to the Doghertys."

The story has those characteristics that mark out nineteenth-century Irish writing. The hard-headedness of the poor (nothing is going to go to waste even if it requires wading through the bodies and the belongings of the dead), the garrulousness, the piety, the moments of sentimentality, the sense of the absurd, (these are not the beautiful mer-folk of Hans Christian Andersen but have "long green teeth, a red nose, and pig's eyes" and carry a cocked hat under one finny arm), and that unexpected insertion of laconic wit. Jack remembers a little of the merrow's song: "It was the chorus to one of them; and, to say the truth, nobody that I know has ever been able to pick any particular meaning out of it; but that, to be sure, is the case with many a song nowadays."

Or as he writes in 'The Confessions of Tom Bourke': "If you want to make a bargain with Tom Bourke you must act as if you were a general besieging a town, and make your advances a long time before you can hope to obtain possession. If you march up boldly, and tell him at once your object, you are for the most part sure to have the gates closed in your teeth. Tom does not wish to part with what you wish to obtain; or another person has been speaking to him for the whole of the last week. Or, it may be, your proposal seems to meet the most favourable reception. 'Very well, sir'; 'That's true, sir'; 'I'm very thankful to your honour,' and other expressions of kindness and confidence greet you in reply to every sentence; and you part from him wondering how he can have obtained the character which he universally bears, of being a man whom no one can make anything of in a bargain. But when you next meet him the illusion is dissolved; you find you are a great deal further from your object than you were when you thought you had almost succeeded; his eye and his tongue express a total forgetfulness of what the mind within never lost sight of for an instant; and you have to begin operations afresh, with the disadvantage of having put your adversary completely upon his guard."

It struck me as I was reading him that it was a forerunner of the style which writers like Sheridan Le Fanu, Fitzjames O'Brien, and Bram Stoker took to gothic heights later in the nineteenth century. It also struck me that despite the many aspects of the Australian character which have at times been traced back to an Irish origin—there is a curious lack of these qualities in nineteenth century Australian storytelling and folk lore. I pondered on this now and then without coming to any major conclusions. Perhaps the focus on bush ballads and bush yarns required a different mindset …

But when I came to think back over the Irish gothic I realised they almost invariably have these dry and laconic little asides which tend to get overlooked because of the greater impact of the macabre or the frightening. Perhaps that much-vaunted dry humour did not grow out of the Australian experience but was imported in a healthy state and proved itself able and willing to put down new roots? …

*

January 16: Edward Gibbon (d)

*

Gibbon (1737 – 1794) was an English gentleman of independent means and *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* his life's defining achievement. But it wasn't easy. He shared some of his private agonising in his autobiography. "*The Decline and Fall of Rome* I still contemplated at an awful distance … In the fifteen years between my *Essay on the Study of Literature* and the first volume of the *Decline and Fall* (1761 – 76), this criticism on Warburton, and some articles in the Journal, were my sole publications … No sooner was I settled in my house and library, than I undertook the composition of the first volume of my *History*. At the outset all was dark and doubtful; even the title of the work, the true era of the *Decline and Fall of the Empire*, the limits of the introduction, the division of the chapters, and the order of the narrative; and I was often tempted to cast away the labour of seven years. The style of an author should be the image of his mind, but the choice and command of language is the fruit of exercise. Many experiments were made before I could hit the middle tone between a dull chronicle and a rhetorical declamation: three times did I compose the first chapter, and twice the second and third, before I was tolerably satisfied with their effect. In the remainder of the way I advanced with a more equal and easy pace; but the fifteenth and sixteenth chapters have been reduced by three successive revisals from a large volume to their present size; and they might still be compressed, without any loss of facts or sentiments … So moderate were our hopes, that the original impression had been stinted to five hundred, till the number was doubled by the prophetic taste of Mr Strahan. … I am at a loss to describe the success of the work, without betraying the vanity of the writer. The first impression was exhausted in a few days; a second and third edition were scarcely adequate to the demand; and the bookseller's property was twice invaded by the pirates of Dublin."

Research, archeology, new tools, new insights, have changed some aspects of the way we view his subject. But it was still a very impressive project and I cannot help but admire his commitment …

And people still debate the nature of that decline and fall. The invaders from the north are seen as the *coup de grâce* but all kinds of things are presented as part of the decline—soil exhaustion, the exhaustion of silver supplies and consequent inflation, climate change, malaria, other plagues, inbreeding—but I have just been reading *Rome's Ruin by Lead Poison* by S. Colum Gilfillan. He says it was the ruling elite who were devastated by lead. And lead was everywhere. Because it was easy to work it was used in nearly everything—pipes, cisterns, tanks, taps, utensils, medical instruments, toys, lead sheeting, lead glaze, as part of silver, bronze and pewter vessels, coins, medals, writing instruments, tickets, ornaments, as white face powder and red lip colour; it contaminated the wine the upper classes drank at every meal and it was deliberately added to sweeten sour wine—and it caused chronic illnesses, headaches, colics, muscle pain, blindness, convulsions, infertility, abortion, mental retardation, anaemia, and as a result of mental disturbance—"violence, aggressiveness, impulsiveness, hyperactivity and insanity." A number of emperors, the best known being Nero and Caligula, went insane. It was the invisible scourge which was destroying the wealthy, the powerful, the rulers, the decision-makers—whereas poor people, other than the slaves in the lead mines, used plain clay or wooden pots and couldn't afford those dangerous lead artifacts …

*

January 17: Harry Price

*

Harry Price wrote popular books like *Confessions of a Ghost Hunter*, *Fifty Years of Psychical Research*, *The Most Haunted House in England – Ten Years' Investigation of Borley Rectory* and *Search for Truth*. His reputation though has been on a slow but irreversible slide. Even while he was still alive people expressed serious doubts about his integrity, his honesty, and his decency. Richard Morris in his book *Harry Price, The Psychic Detective* has probably put the final nails into the coffin.

Price was good at exposing fraudulent mediums and claimants of psychic abilities simply because he had faked everything from ancient Roman artifacts to psychic phenomena himself. His over-riding need was not to seek out answers to the most perplexing of life's riddles, including the one that obsessed psychics in the 1920s and 30s—life after death—but rather to bring fame and fortune to Harry Price. He never let the truth stand in the way of a sensational story if that story would give him publicity and raise his profile. Undoubtedly some of the people he investigated had mediumistic abilities, undoubtedly some of the phenomena he looked at did not offer up simple explanations but because of his way of going about his investigations, the waters are hopelessly muddied. He got the answers he wanted. If ghosts and hauntings would help him he got them. If a much-publicised debunking was in his current best interests then that is what he got. Morris, for instance, says of his most famous case, Borley Rectory, "Whether Borley was ever haunted was impossible to determine by the time the report came out because there was a taint of corruption in everything Harry Price had touched."

He was in constant spats with other researchers, many of the quarrels distinctly unedifying, and most to the detriment of psychic research. Morris writes, "The implication never far from the surface of Price's writing was that he alone was the pioneer trying to push psychical research into serious study: and it was this conceit that kept respectable scientists from having anything to do with him. There had been a long history of bringing scientific interest to the occult, and throughout their history the SPR had attracted the best scientific brains in Europe to the cause, most of whom were now keeping their distance from Price."

There is perhaps a degree of class conflict in there. Harry Price was a paper bag salesman. Some of his noise and bumptiousness probably came from an inferiority complex when he dealt with people like Sir Oliver Lodge and Sir Charles Hope. But that doesn't excuse his serial infidelities. And although he had collected up many rare and arcane writings on the occult he placed so many conditions on sharing them that they did little to heighten his reputation or help other researchers.

Morris sums him up: "So how should we remember Harry Price? He should be thought of as a supreme bluffer, a hedonistic con man, a terrific raconteur, a great conjuror, a gifted writer and a wonderful eccentric. It is with these last four attributes, if one can call them that, that the 'father of modern ghost hunting' should be laid to rest."

*

January 18: A. A. Milne

*

I remember coming upon the A. A. Milne poem 'The King's Breakfast' when I was I'm not sure what age, eight or nine perhaps. 'The King asked/The Queen, and/The Queen asked/The Dairymaid:/ 'Could we have some butter for/The Royal slice of bread?'/The Queen asked/The Dairymaid,/The Dairymaid/Said, 'Certainly,/I'll go and tell/The cow' … And a bit further along the Dairymaid went and told 'The Alderney'. Clearly an Alderney was a cow but I had never come across this type of cow so I assumed it was either the name of that particular cow or a special type of cow kept at Buckingham Palace. Much later someone was kind enough to point out that the Channel Islands each had their own kind of cow, a Jersey cow, a Guernsey cow, an Alderney cow … I was glad to have the mystery explained, even if no one in Australia kept Alderneys, but then I found out, I don't remember how, that there was a fourth island called Sark and therefore there must be a fourth kind of cow called a Sark cow. It didn't seem a particularly attractive name for a cow so that was possibly why no one mentioned them.

I was thinking back to this confusion when a friend lent me *The Guernsey Literary & Potato Peel Pie Society* by Mary Ann Shaffer. Though I found it rather hard to get into, I couldn't get very interested in Juliet Ashton's personal life, the letters she receives from the island of Guernsey telling her stories from the years of the German Occupation are fascinating—and readable in a way that a lot of wartime memoirs are not. Little insights into the slave labour men, the privations, the children exiled to England, people's feelings about food, about collaboration and curfews and the Germans themselves … though almost nothing about cows. Yet, oddly, the book left a faintly disturbing after-taste. Perhaps because Ashton only really wants the experiences and memories of people she finds friendly and sympathetic. Yet Occupation falls on the likeable and unlikeable equally. The experiences of the rigid, the intolerant, the unfriendly, the cowardly, the mean, under times of privation, fear, and trauma are equally illuminating. It made me wonder if factual books, histories, oral accounts, memoirs, like this novel are also subtly geared to the experiences and memories of the people the researcher felt most comfortable with …

The takeover of dairy farms by Friesian cows gradually pushed Guernseys to the brink and Jerseys only hold on because of the butter industry, Friesian milk being low in butterfat, though I'm sure geneticists are working to change that and the beautiful cows of the Channel Islands will soon disappear except in the few herds of Rare Breeds …

But before they disappear what of the Alderney? Valerie Porter in *Cattle: A Handbook to the Breeds of the World* says, "In general it would seem that the now-extinct Alderney was fairly similar to today's Guernsey but smaller (in 1800 bulls stood at 119 cm, cows 112 cm and oxen 140 cm) and with short, 'crumpled' (curled) horns, fine bones, a long, thin neck and protruding, raised hips. Its coat was light red or dun mottled with white. No doubt the Alderney and the Guernsey had a shared ancestry: both islands were colonised by Normandy monks in the eleventh century." She goes on to say, "There is a rare Brittany breed which is very similar to the Guernsey and probably formed the ancestral stock." This was the Froment De Léon which is a curious name for a cow. But what of the Alderney providing butter in Milne's poem? "The northernmost of the islands is Alderney and in times past it was common to describe all Channel Island cattle as being of the Alderney breed, even when they were clearly Jersey, Guernsey or small French dairy types."

*

January 19: Anna Leonowens (d)

*

In *A Bridge for Passing* Pearl Buck writes about her husband Richard Walsh, "He was a great editor. I have seen him take a muddle of a manuscript and make it a unified whole. He was a genius in coaxing books out of writers who did not know they were writers. A short manuscript came to him one day from an Englishwoman in Siam. He was then the editor and owner of *Asia* magazine. The article was entitled "The King's English," and the king was the king of Siam. He saw in the article more than a light little essay, and he invited the woman to write more about this king. At last, after his encouragement, a book-length manuscript arrived. He set to work to create a book out of the material he found there and to demand what was not there. The result eventually was the fascinating *Anna and the King of Siam*, the book that later became a fabulous Rodgers and Hammerstein musical, *The King and I*."

This confused me a little as I originally assumed that this was the book written by Anna Leonowens about her time as a governess to the King's children. But when I looked her up I realised it couldn't be as she died in 1914. Her two books of her experiences were *The English Governess at the Siamese Court* (1870) and *The Romance of the Harem* (1872). The book that Richard Walsh pulled into shape was written by Margaret Landon; *Anna and the King of Siam* came out in 1944 and was based on Anna Leonowens' story …

*

January 20: Ernesto Cardenal

*

Politician, Catholic priest, and poet. It does not surprise me to read that Cardenal saw his poetry as another way to help the indigenous poor of Nicaragua. But it also interested me to learn that while he was a trenchant critic of American policies in Latin America two of the most profound influences on him were also American: Ezra Pound on his poetry and Thomas Merton on his religion.

So just a taste of his thinking and his style. Here is his poem 'Zero Hour'.

Central America: tropical nights,
volcanoes and lagoons beneath the moon
and lights in presidential palaces;
barracks, and sad bugle-calls at dusk.
'I frequently decide the death of a man
while smoking a cigarette'
says Ubico, smoking a cigarette …
In his palace, which is like a pink-iced cake,
Ubico has a cold. The crowd outside
has been dispersed with tear-gas bombs.
San Salvador, at night: distrust and spying,
muttering in the homes and small hotels,
and screams in police stations.
The crowd stoned the palace of Carías,
breaking just one window of his office,
but the police opened fire on the crowd.
And Managua: covered by deployed machine-guns
from its palace, which is like a chocolate cake:
steel helmets out patrolling in the streets.
Watchman, what of the night?
Watchman, what of the night?

*

January 21: Richard Palmer Blackmur

*

English short story writer and critic V. S. (Victor) Pritchett became the Gauss lecturer in 1953 at Princeton University in the United States. Jeremy Treglown in *V. S. Pritchett: A Working Life* says of his experiences: "The Graduate College at Princeton was in those days still an all-male institution, a 'rather raucous monastery occupied by young bullocks getting their Ph.Ds'. Victor's situation there struck him as like having to live at school with Oliver (Pritchett's son). His first encounters with American food were discouraging: clams seemed to him like 'snot on shells'. Nor were his first impressions of his new colleagues much more appealing. After taking tea with the Dean, he wrote, 'The Princeton voice I can only describe as the low, polite gurgle of an in-growing toe-nail if it could talk.' Then there were the onslaughts of 'a drunken professor called Blackmur' — the eminent poet and 'New Critic', R. P. Blackmur. Later, having spent some enjoyable evenings with him over dinner at Lahière's in Witherspoon Street, Pritchett acknowledged that the 'pungent & fervent & knowledgeable' Blackmur had his good points. But for the most part he seemed 'a terrible embarrassment' … 'bitter, petulant, defensive and difficult', not least when he stood up during one of Pritchett's lectures and for no apparent reason, bellowed, 'VSP is like me: he's a Tory Anarchist'."

A poet is a poet (I suppose) but what is a 'New Critic'? I found the School of New Criticism described as 'a school of criticism that revolutionized the teaching of literature in American universities by directing the students' attention to a close analysis of the language of literary works.' Blackmur persuaded the Dean, Christian Gauss, to set up the lectures and invite writers who had been critics and reviewers as well as creative writers. Blackmur also taught creative writing himself,

something which has spread like wildfire since. To pick up an American writing magazine now is to see the extent to which it has become an industry: workshops, lectures, camps, courses …

So it comes as a surprise to learn that Blackmur was not a graduate himself. Perhaps that was why he was 'defensive and difficult'. He had gained his place in American university life, in the world of letters, by bluff, luck, effrontery, and new ideas. And he probably knew a day would come when students would get tired of a 'close analysis of the language of literary works'. New Critics would become Tired Old Critics and the baton would pass—

*

January 22: Robert Cotton

*

At various times I have come upon a footnote to something with the mysterious words 'Cottonian mss' or something similar. After many years of leaving the mystery to bide in peace I finally got round to asking just what this meant. Cotton refers to a famous book collector and antiquarian, Robert Cotton, (1571 – 1631) who grew up in a landed gentry family, had the usual education and settled in London in Westminster, part of his home there now being covered by the House of Lords. "Cotton's passion as a collector of manuscripts, coins, and all other kinds of antiquities, soon manifested itself here. With conspicuous success he engaged in this pursuit throughout his life, and the library of Cotton House became the meeting-place of all the scholars of the country." (DNB)

This had its problems as well as its pleasures; those same scholars borrowed things and didn't necessarily return them, Elizabeth I and her successors used his erudition when it came to precedence and the curious question of how previous monarchs had tried to resolve issues, particularly economic issues, but they also queried Cotton's right to such a library, Charles I going so far as to confiscate it briefly. Cotton also sometimes made unwise friendships or ruffled feathers with his blunt manner. But his willingness to go anywhere and talk to anyone if it might bring more ancient manuscripts and documents into safe keeping was proverbial.

His son Thomas inherited the library and left it in turn to his son John who, as he was dying aged 81 in 1702 was negotiating for it to be passed to the state. Unfortunately, before this happened, the library went through a number of serious vicissitudes. As Cotton House had been allowed to fall into disrepair the library was moved to Ashburnham House where it was damaged by fire in 1731. It was then moved to another lodging in Bloomsbury and eventually in the nineteenth century the damaged manuscripts were repaired and finally housed in the British Museum and in the words of John Kenyon in *The History Men* "his library still forms the core of the British Museum's medieval collections".

It isn't clear what sparked Cotton's passion or whether he grew up in a family where such things were treasured. But he undoubtedly saved many tattered old things which might otherwise have been thrown away or used to light the kitchen fire and he seems to have been generous and open-handed in making his library accessible to all who wanted to study the past. So next time you see a little footnote referring to 'Cottonian' as the source of something—spare a thought for Robert Cotton.

*

January 23: John Cleland (d)

*

John Cleland believed in a universal language. "He thought Ancient Celtic would do the trick, for he was convinced that it was the basis of all European language and he proceeded to argue his case in books and pamphlets of high falutin pedantry the savour of which can easily be derived from the title alone: *The Way to Things by Words, and to Words by Things; being a sketch of an Attempt at the Retrieval of the Ancient Celtic or primitive language of Europe, to which is added a succinct account of Sanscrit, or the learned language of the Bramins: also two essays, the origin of the Musical Waits at Christmas, the other on the real secret of the Freemasons*."

John Cleland is remembered for his bawdy effusion *Fanny Hill* which he wrote to keep body and soul together and sold for twenty guineas. It was treated as an obscene publication but he was not prosecuted simply because he was seen as too poor to pay a fine. He appears to have been a feckless man and a drifter. But curiously he then had a piece of luck. Lord Granville believed he had undeveloped talents and arranged for him to receive a pension so he could write without needing to 'prostitute his talent'. He then wrote non-pornographic articles and essays—and his many pamphlets on his beliefs about a 'mother' language …

*

January 24: Keith Douglas

*

Keith Douglas was only 24 when he died in WWII in 1944. He had been in North Africa and wrote his account, *Alamein to Zem Zem*, as well as poetry. He has recently been resurrected and almost everything he wrote in his short life has been published. I have mixed feelings about this kind of 'rapaciousness'. Would he really want all his letters, his childish notes to his grandparents, his letters letting off steam about people, complaining about aspects of army life, published? Would he have come back to many of his poems and thought they simply weren't good enough? His interest probably to readers now is the speculation on how he might have developed as a poet—and perhaps too because WWII did not throw up the numbers of poets the First World War made memorable.

Many of his poems were published by a mysterious editor called M. J. Tambimuttu. Desmond Graham writes, "Tambimuttu had vanished from London by 1948" and I wondered what 'vanished' meant. In a letter Douglas wrote he said, "Geoff is a life-long friend of Jon [*sic*] Hall's and also writes for Tambimuttu - who, it appears is Senegalese and a complete shit." He complains in some letters about Tambimuttu getting some of his words wrong when he printed the poems back in London but in other letters Douglas says his writing may be hard to read. A brief bio of Tambimuttu says he was in fact Singhalese and came to London in 1938 and started the magazine *Poetry*; he was a poet himself and also edited 'Editions Poetry' for Nicholson and Watson. He returned to Sri Lanka in the late forties and died there in 1983. Whether he was a 'complete shit' or not he helped to make Douglas's name as a poet. So here are two of Keith Douglas's poems from 1940 as a taste …

'Russians'
How silly that soldier is pointing his gun at the wood:
he doesn't know it isn't any good.
You see, the cold and cruel northern wind
has frozen the whole battalion where they stand.

That's never a corporal: even now he's frozen
you can see he's only a commercial artist
whom they took and put those clothes on,
and told him he was one of the smartest.

Even now they're in ice it's easy to know
what a shock it's been, a long shock,
coming home to them wherever they go
with their mazed minds taking stock.

Walk among the innocuous parade
and touch them if you like, they're properly stayed:
keep out of their line of sight and they won't look.
Think of them as waxworks, or think they're struck

with a dumb immobile spell
to wake in a hundred years with the merry force
of spring upon them in the harmless world. Well,
at least don't think what happens when it thaws.

and 'Villanelle of Spring Bells'

Bells in the town alight with spring
converse, with a concordance of new airs
make clear the fresh and ancient sound they sing.

People emerge from winter to hear them ring,
children glitter with mischief and the blind man hears
bells in the town alight with spring.

Even he on his eyes feels the caressing
finger of Persephone, and her voice escaped from tears
make clear the fresh and ancient sound they sing.

Bird feels the enchantment of his wing
and in ten fine notes dispels twenty cares.
Bells in the town alight with spring

warble the praise of Time, for he can bring
this season: chimes the merry heaven bears
make clear the fresh and ancient sound they sing.

All evil men intent on evil thing
falter, for in their cold unready ears
bells in the town alight with spring
make clear the fresh and ancient sound they sing.

*

January 25: Robert Burns

*

Alistair MacLean wrote, "it will equally have been observed that wherever two or three Scots are gathered together, be it in Surrey or Tierra del Fuego, they will immediately set about forming a St Andrew's Society and, inevitably, a Burns Society.

"The ostensible purpose of the former is to sustain and strengthen the cultural links with Scotia stern and wild by singing a very limited selection of purely Lowland songs – not Highland, for the odds are heavy that none of those present speaks Gaelic – filling a confined space with the hideous banshee wailing of the bagpipes, dancing the Highland Fling in calf-length kilts and in general making themselves ridiculous. The Burns' Societies' dinners, allegedly dedicated to the preservation and honouring of the memory of the immortal bard, should, on the face of it, be even more cultural occasions were it not for the fact that for the majority of people at the majority of such gatherings, Burns is synonymous not with poetry but with haggis and an endless river of Scotch: it is compulsory, nay, it is a sacred duty, to drink to the poet's memory and hopeful health in the hereafter: no such ludicrous degree of obligation attaches to the actual reading of his poetry."

(as quoted in *Alistair MacLean: A Life* by Jack Webster.)

*

January 26: 1788

*

"At the time of the British invasion, Aboriginal Australians spoke about two hundred distinct languages. Within these languages were many dialects, so that there were about five hundred different ways of speaking in Aboriginal Australia in 1788. Many if not all Aboriginal people were multilingual, speaking two or more languages fluently and understanding several more. After the invasion and the massive social changes that followed, many of these languages were lost. Some were lost because all the people who spoke them had died, or the survivors were so few that they joined other communities and their children grew up speaking the language of those communities. Sometimes the older speakers of a language did not hand on their knowledge to the younger generation, possibly because they felt that the society their children now had to inhabit was so inimical to Aboriginal culture that such knowledge would only be to their disadvantage. In many places, speakers of different languages came to live together in government settlements and town camps, either through forcible removal from their countries by the authorities or through voluntary relocation. In such places one Aboriginal language, or a form of English, became the lingua franca, and other languages ceased to be spoken. Well into the middle of this century, government authorities actively prevented the handing on of languages to Aboriginal children through different forms of institutionalisation. In southern Australia especially, there were great assimilationist pressures placed on people not to speak their own language. Aboriginal languages are still subject to the pressures placed upon all minority languages around the world, where the activities of the controlling society, employment, education and the media are predominantly the domain of the majority language. So of the two hundred Aboriginal languages of 1788, only about eighty are still spoken today by older people and even fewer by whole communities."

Jay Arthur in *Aboriginal English*. 1996.

*

January 27: Mordecai Richler

*

I have read several of Richler's novels such as *St. Urbain's Horseman* and *Barney's Version* without particularly being attracted. He has the occasional witty line or question which stays in the mind such as this "We have all read too much in literary journals about the unjustly neglected novelist, but seldom a word about the justly neglected". Yet I find his Jewish men, his male characters are almost always Jewish men in Canada, so unlikeable that I found myself wondering if people preferred to hide behind the catch-all of anti-semitism rather than say plainly they did not want such men invading their personal and social spaces. The curious thing about this is that Richler deliberately chose in his writing to make "a persistent attempt to make a case for the ostensibly unsympathetic man". I have no problem with this but I think unsympathetic is to put it mildly. And I find myself wondering *why* he made that particular choice.

Years ago, I came upon his book *Oh Canada! Oh Quebec!* and was intrigued by what he had to say about the separatist movement in Quebec. It eventually came to a referendum and the separatists lost by a small margin. At the time it struck me forcefully: if Canada can deal with the issue in a democratic manner why can't other nations? Why doesn't Spain offer the Basques the chance to vote on their future? Why was Indonesia so desperate to grab West Papua that it rigged the vote? (Strictly speaking 'rigging' is too mild a term. Why did it kill, imprison, threaten and generally behave like a nation run by monsters?) Why is China determined not to allow the Tibetans any opportunity to voice their wishes? By contrast it made Canada stand out as a remarkably generous and democratic nation. After all, it had quite a lot to lose if a majority of Quebecois *had* voted to leave …

Richler was interested in but not sympathetic to the separatist movement. *The Oxford Companion to Canadian Literature* (Benson and Toye) says, "In the 1990s Richler increasingly assumed the role of public intellectual by becoming the most prominent defender of the rights of Quebec's Anglophones. Richler's opening sally was in what has become a highly visible and protracted controversy over a 1991 article published in *The New Yorker*, which depicted the folly of Quebec's language laws prohibiting or limiting the use of English on signs. It provoked hostile

responses and vicious personal attacks in the Quebec francophone press. Enjoying his role as gadfly, Richler expanded his polemics into a book-length diatribe, *Oh Canada! Oh Quebec! Requiem for a divided country* (1992), in which he further disturbed Québécois nationalists by also pointing to French Quebec's history of anti-Semitism. He has continued his mordant critique of separatist politics and policies in his subsequent journalism."

I found myself wondering how widely French is used on signs in the English-speaking provinces and how sympathetic such provinces are to its use. And Richler as a supporter of, and visitor to, Israel didn't see any need to press for all signs in Israel to be available in Arabic as well as Hebrew. But my own impression of the book and of his reputation in general was that he enjoyed being seen as a fly in that particular ointment, a kind of *enfant terrible* … and that he certainly achieved …

And thinking all that, I wondered about the situation now. Mordecai Richler died in 2001. But what of Quebec in 2012? Does a desire for independence still simmer along or has it faded as an issue?

*

January 28: David Lodge

*

David Lodge wrote in *Changing Places*, 'There was always his research, of course, but some of the zest had gone out of that since it ceased to be a means to an end. He couldn't enhance his reputation, he could only damage it, by adding further items to his bibliography, and the realization slowed him down, made him cautious. Some years ago he had embarked with great enthusiasm on an ambitious critical project: a series of commentaries on Jane Austen which would work through the whole canon, one novel at a time, saying absolutely everything that could possibly be said about them. The idea was to be utterly exhaustive, to examine the novels from every conceivable angle, historical, biographical, rhetorical, mythical, Freudian, Jungian, existentialist, Marxist, structuralist, Christian—allegorical, ethical, exponential, linguistic, phenomenological, archetypal, you name it; so that when each commentary was written there would be simply *nothing further to say* about the novel in question. The object of the exercise, as he had often to explain with as much patience as he could muster, was not to enhance others' enjoyment and understanding of Jane Austen, still less to honour the novelist herself, but to put a definitive stop to the production of any further garbage on the subject. The commentaries would not be designed for the general reader but for the specialist, who, looking up Zapp, would find that the book, article or thesis he had been planning had already been anticipated and, more likely than not, invalidated. After Zapp, the rest would be silence. The thought gave him deep satisfaction. In Faustian moments he dreamed of going on, after fixing Jane Austen, to do the same job on the other major English novelists, then the poets and dramatists, perhaps using computers and teams of trained graduate students, inexorably reducing the area of English literature available for free comment, spreading dismay through the whole industry, rendering scores of his colleagues redundant: periodicals would fall silent, famous English Departments be left deserted like ghost towns … '

*

January 29: Thomas Paine

*

Tom Paine was a corset-maker. He also wrote these immortal words: "He that would make his own liberty secure must guard even his enemy from oppression, for if he violates this duty he establishes a precedent that will reach himself." I wonder if he ever found corsets oppressive?

Mike Jay in *The Unfortunate Colonel Despard* says of Paine and his famous book, "If the mass of the British people were to be consulted about the nation's political future, what might their answer be?" and he goes on, "In January 1792, such an answer appeared, elegantly formed, passionately argued and expressed in the plain, simple language most political philosophy up to this point had deliberately avoided. Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man* was a fundamental attack on the British political system: the monarchy, the hereditary principle, the restriction of voting rights to the

propertied classes, the right of any government to tax or wage war without the explicit consent of the majority of its population. It drove these arguments too, far beyond the usual scope of politics, exposing the stifling effects of submission to unjust authority on society in general, and even family life in the home. Published in two parts, it was made available in cheap sixpenny editions that sold out immediately, and was republished in edition after edition as fast as the presses could turn it out. It was clear within weeks that there was no precedent for the number of people who were buying and reading it, which far exceeded what had been considered up to that point as the entire book-buying public. All across Britain, people reported that it was becoming impossible to find a shopkeeper, a craftsman, a manual labourer who had not heard of it; it was even on sale in the Outer Hebrides. Within two years it had sold an estimated two hundred thousand copies in a total population of ten million, and these two hundred thousand had been lent, passed on and read aloud to countless more."

*

January 30: *The Lone Ranger*

*

I don't know that I ever wondered, as a child, who actually wrote the serials and characters and stories which were a sort of common ground for children. But I just came across the creators of 'The Lone Ranger' while I was looking for something else. George W. Trendle and Fran Striker created it as a radio serial and it first aired on this date in 1933 on Radio WXYZ in Detroit. Soon Bizet's William Tell Overture became immediately recognisable to millions of children and little boys went galloping round on real and toy horses yelling "Hi Yo Silver!"

Truman Capote puts this in the mouth of Holly Golightly in his 1958 novel *Breakfast at Tiffany's*: 'Incidentally,' she said, 'do you happen to *know* any nice lesbians? I'm looking for a room-mate. Well, don't laugh. I'm so disorganized, I simply can't afford a maid; and really, dykes are wonderful homemakers, they love to do all the work, you never have to bother about brooms and defrosting and sending out the laundry. I had a room-mate in Hollywood, she played in Westerns, they called her the Lone Ranger; but I'll say this for her, she was better than a man around the house. Of course people couldn't help but think I must be a bit of a dyke myself. And of course I am. Everyone is: a bit. So what? That never discouraged a man yet, in fact it seems to goad them on. Look at the Lone Ranger, married twice. Usually dykes only get married once, just for the name. It seems to carry such a cachet later on to be called Mrs Something Another.'

Of course the Lone Ranger was immediately recognisable to Capote's readers; perhaps he still is. But we were all delightfully innocent. We never speculated on the relationships between characters. The Lone Ranger and Tonto were friends. Biggles and Algy and Ginger and Bertie were friends. Ginger Meggs and his pals were friends. That later generations might speculate, even read something unhealthy into it, would have struck us as bizarre.

The radio serial turned into movies and created stars. But the series was later accused of being racist; certainly the Lone Ranger got the bulk of the action and it could be argued that having Tonto use such a limited vocabulary was demeaning. It was also said that Tonto which in Spanish means silly was unsuitable as a name. (Of course we don't know what Tonto means in Apache or Sioux.) But as a child I always assumed it was a sort of circusy name; children's stories often had characters called Bimbo and Tonto and Barney and Bobby and Sambo which were simple, catchy, and easy to remember. Whether they had been chosen with an ulterior motive is harder to say. Probably not. Certainly I liked Tonto better than the Lone Ranger, he seemed less stagy, more natural, and his taciturnity and reserve I thought was the way he should be, never standing round wasting words but simply getting on with the job. He was an impressive character and I thought he was very handsome.

In a world of Cowboys-and-Indians in which the cowboys were heroes and the Indians usually the villains *The Lone Ranger* provided children with an interesting alternative. The Lone Ranger was claimed at the beginning of the series to be John Reid, the sole survivor of a posse of

Texas Rangers wiped out by outlaws. He survives because Tonto finds him and saves him. And naturally they then dedicate themselves to bringing truth and justice to the rangelands. As children's serials go it wasn't a bad effort—and infinitely better than some of the programs I see served up to children now …

*

January 31: John Galsworthy (d)

*

Move over Alain de Botton. If anyone understood 'status anxiety' then it was surely the master. John Galsworthy. It underpins his best known books, the Forsyte chronicles, and finds its place in his short stories and plays. In the words of his biographer Sanford Sternlicht, "Galsworthy set out to satirize, but twelve years and a terrible war intervened, and he ended by sympathizing."

I didn't actually know that Galsworthy wrote plays—'Where have you been all these years, my dear?'—until I was in the Tip Shop one day and came across a copy of *The Plays of John Galsworthy*. Although I hadn't heard of any of these plays they were all performed in London with varying degrees of success. And some, such as *The Mob*, are powerful plays. But what struck me most strongly is that they almost invariably deal with the anguishes and guilts of a middle class dependent on income either from investments or from businesses; sometimes they are professional people but more often they are worried about their declining returns on their investments; money put out to garner interest. It is almost as though Galsworthy is putting this level of society, what you might call the upper middle class, on trial and they almost invariably fail the test. Alain de Botton is a novice when it comes to understanding 'status anxiety'. These people express doubts and regrets when it comes to comparing their lives with those much further down the ladder but they rarely do more than make token statements. As the Depression began to bite I can imagine that they had many thousands of real life counterparts who said 'Well of course I am sorry for my charlady but I can't *do* anything for her. My income from my government bonds has halved in the last couple of years—'; 'Well of course I am sorry for my workers but prices for coal are down sixty per cent so they can whistle in the wind if they want a pay rise—' And so on.

If you want to understand 'status anxiety' go and read Galsworthy. Even if you don't want to understand 'status anxiety', and I can't say it's a question which has ever troubled me, the plays are still well worth reading for the ways in which he captures an era and the ambivalences and hypocrasies and fears of its people.

And I didn't know until I read Sternlicht's *John Galsworthy* that he cared deeply for many social causes including many to do with animals. Among the causes he listed as issues he had worked on were 'Ponies in Mines', 'Docking of Horses' Tails', 'Slaughterhouse Reform', 'Caging of Wild Birds', 'Vivisection of Dogs', 'Performing Animals', 'Pigeon Shooting' and 'Worn-out Horse Traffic'.

*

February 1: Langston Hughes

*

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up
like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore —
And then run?
Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over —
like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags

like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?

'Harlem' by Langston Hughes.

Hughes was an interesting and immensely prolific writer. He lived and wrote as part of the Harlem Renaissance but because he was partly white he is sometimes left off lists of Black writers. Yet he probably did more than anyone to bring the realities of ghetto life to the public. He wrote short stories, poetry, novels, stories for children, memoirs, biographies, even translations. He seemed to live for his writing. Other poets are remembered for their drinking, their bar room brawls, their various marriages or other personal foibles. Hughes lived alone, never marrying, and simply wrote. He comes across as a man who felt he had so much to say about Afro-American life in all its troubles and variaties that there was no time for anything else. And his work has a rhythm and a power I find attractive. Take the beginning of 'The Weary Blues'—

Droning a drowsy syncopated tune,
Rocking back and forth to a mellow croon,
I heard a Negro play.
Down on Lenox Avenue the other night
By the pale dull pallor of an old gas light
He did a lazy sway….
He did a lazy sway….
To the tune o' those Weary Blues.
With his ebony hands on each ivory-key
He made that poor piano moan with melody.
O Blues!

The other day I came across a book called *Poetry Speaks* which included the poet reading a couple of his own poems. There was a curious 'ordinariness' about his way of reading, underlain by a faint hint of sadness, and I felt he wasn't performing, as many other poets were, but simply presenting an essential part of his life. I liked that.

And Lorraine Hansberry took that vivid line 'like a raisin in the sun' and used it as a title for a play. Elaine T. Partnow in *The Female Dramatist* says of her, "Lorraine Hansberry's classic play *A Raisin in the Sun* marked a watershed in black American theater history. According to theater historian Mary Remnant, "The play did its part in helping to fuel the civil rights struggle, and opened up the world of black drama in the USA, stimulating the development of new writing for the theater as well as creating a new black audience." And, "Hansberry herself sees the play as a depiction of what happens to people when they endure "a dream deferred" a direct reference to the Langston Hughes poem "Montage of a Dream Deferred," which is printed with the published version of *Raisin*."

*****

February 2: Amanda M'Kittrick Ross

*

I found this in *Ireland, The Rough Guide*: "In contrast to Larne's lack of vigour is the work of the town's best-known author. Amanda Malvina Fitzalan Anna Margaret McLelland M'Kittrick Ros – her signature gives some indication of the embroidery of her prose style – has gone down in history as the world's worst novelist. Born in 1860 in Ballynahinch, twenty miles south of Belfast, she was a true child of the Victorian era. She came to Larne as a schoolteacher and married the station master, Andrew Ros. On their tenth wedding anniversary he gave her a present that generations of fans must be grateful for – the publication of her first fantastical alliterative work,

Irene Iddlesleigh – and a stream of feverish hyperbole followed. Take, for instance, a passage from *Helen Huddleston* about her heroine:

She had a swell staff of sweet-faced helpers, swathed in stratagem, whose members and garments glowed with the lust of the loose, sparked with the tears of the tortured, shone with the sunlight of bribery, dimpled with the diamonds of distrust, slashed with sapphires of scandal and rubies wrested from the dainty persons of the pure…

Mark Twain and Aldous Huxley swooped on her work with delight and formed appreciative societies, reading circles and dining clubs dedicated to her "unintentional enormities". She became a cult figure, never, it seems, realizing what inspired such devotion. "My works", she said, "are all expressly my own – pleasingly peculiar – not a borrowed stroke in one of them." Quite. She also wrote excruciating verse."

Of course a turgid style was not confined to Mrs M'Kittrick Ross; I was recently reading a little bit about Anaïs Nin in Claudia Roth Pierpont's *Passionate Minds* and it almost sounds like Mrs Ross reincarnated. "Having passed through barrier after barrier, Anaïs Nin finally, with the publication of *Incest*, passed beyond even parody, although the reader cannot entirely reject the suspicion that this is Gore Vidal's brashest and funniest *coup de plume*. The volume includes twelve "ensorcelled"s or "ensorcellment"s—after three appear in the first pages, one can't help keeping track—and, more broadly, a multitude of passages such as the following, in which the author appears to be contemplating a globe: "When the earth turns, my legs open to the lava outpouring and my brain freezes in the arctic—or vice versa—but I must turn, and my legs will always open, even in the region of the midnight sun, for I do not wait for the night—I cannot wait for the night—I do not want to miss a single rhythm of its course, a single beat of its rhythm." "

The difference of course being that Mrs Ross was a very chaste lady and Nin was not.

*

February 3: Gertrude Stein

*

I had heard her famous bit of 'wisdom', 'Rose is a rose is a rose is a rose', I knew she and Alice B. Toklas were part of the American expatriate community in Paris for many decades, I knew Toklas had written a cookbook—but I had never really gone beyond that. What did Stein actually write?

She had great trouble getting her early works published. In her book *Two: Gertrude Stein and Her Brother* she wrote, "She was thinking in being one who was a different one in being one than he was in being one. Sound was coming out of her and she was knowing this thing. Sound had been coming out of him and she had been knowing this thing. She was thinking in being a different one than he was in having sound come out of her than came out of him. She was thinking in being a different one. She was thinking about being a different one. She was thinking about that thing" and on and on, causing a publisher to write back "I am only one, only one, only one. Only one being, one at the same time. Not two, not three, only one. Only one life to live, only sixty minutes in one hour. Only one pair of eyes. Only one brain. Only one being. Being only one, having only one pair of eyes, having only one time, having only one life, I cannot read your MS three or four times. Not even one time. Only one look, only one look is enough. Hardly one copy would sell here. Hardly one. Hardly one. Many thanks. I am returning the MS by registered post. Only one MS by one post."

I certainly don't mind people experimenting with different ways of writing, of using punctuation, of expressing themselves. She said of her style, "I have destroyed sentences and rhythms and literary overtones and all the rest of that nonsense, to get to the very core of this problem of the communication of intuition. If the communication is perfect the words have life, and that is all there is to good writing, putting down on the paper words which dance and weep and

make love and fight and kiss and perform miracles". But I am glad I didn't have to read all her output. Alice did that, in fact Alice did everything, from cooking and cleaning to typing and organising. She and Stein were both from European Jewish families but there isn't an obvious Jewish component to their lifestyle or to their writing. Gertrude had what many writers have longed for: the freedom to write without having to concern herself with other details of life, not money, not housework, not children or cooking or elderly relatives. Yet I couldn't help thinking that except for leaving the literary world with a style which is indubitably hers, she didn't make all that much from the freedom her family and Alice gave her. And her most popular book *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933) was also her most conventional. If she is remembered I think it is often because she is seen as a 'character' and an 'eccentric' in the romantic years of bohemian Paris …

*

February 4: Dietrich Bonhoeffer

*

Eric Reitan wrote *Is God a Delusion?* in response to the spate of books saying God *is* a Delusion. In one respect, of course, we don't need any such books pro or con—because when we die we will have our answers. In another respect, I only have to lift my eyes from the page, regardless of the content of the book, to be aware of the miracle of life all around me. Even the fact of my book and my reading is a small miracle when I consider it …

But it is the fact of evil which provides the strongest ammunition for the atheists. Would a good God allow evil? Yet I think this is the weakest argument in their armoury. Reitan brings a number of arguments forward, and his book is well worth reading, but not the one which constantly absorbs me. Atoms, molecules, the physical and chemical building blocks and organisation of the universe, the force of gravity, our movement around the Sun, these physical facts are not distinguished by being either good or evil. We do not think of algae, flies, ants, even horses, as intrinsically good or evil. We may define them as pests or vermin if they annoy us. If they just go quietly about their business without impinging on us we may give them qualities of beauty, of usefulness, of a vital part in ecology, but not good or evil. These are transcendent qualities of behaviour not intrinsic qualities of the organism. And if we possess transcendent qualities then it points to a transcendent aspect to life …

Would we *choose* to go back to the simple ordered life of an ant if we could?

But I did find myself with a lingering query: is there a particular reason why so many books promoting an atheistic view are now being published?

Reitan says, "At one point in his recent book, *The God Delusion*, Richard Dawkins expresses astonishment that "any circles worthy of the name sophisticated remain within the Church." He calls it "a mystery at least as deep as those that theologians enjoy" (2006, p. 60). His astonishment is occasioned by the Roman Catholic procedure for investigating candidates for sainthood, a procedure that he thinks can only be an embarrassment to more sophisticated Catholics. But his views here express a broader perplexity – a perplexity shared by other atheists – over why any morally sensitive and intellectually responsible adults would believe in God.

"Dawkins' perplexity seems to be widely shared these days. The last few years have seen a flurry of books, both popular and academic, attacking religion in general and theistic religion in particular. In fact, a recent *Time Magazine* article declared that "Dawkins is riding the crest of an atheist literary wave" (Van Biema 2006, p. 50)." Among the other books he mentions are Sam Harris's *The End of Faith* and *Letter to a Christian Nation*, Daniel Dennett's *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*, Victor Stenger's *God: The Failed Hypothesis*, and "for the most angry and rhetorically charged attack, we have Christopher Hitchins' recent screed, *god is not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (2007). This pugilistic manifesto digs through the annals of religious history and doctrine to uncover the very worst that religion has to offer – and then holds up these disturbing phenomena as representative of the very essence of religion (while doing some furious rhetorical hand-waving to conclude that heroic figures such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Martin Luther King, Jr., were not really religious at all)."

The question might be: why now? Is it in response to discoveries in science, 9/11, the strength of Young Earth Creationism in the USA, because publishers are looking for such books—and readers are buying them? Or is it that more general millennium sense? The end of an era. The fear that there may be no more human eras? Or does it have more to do with the power and popularity of Dawkins and Hitchins as writers and popularisers?

I have just been reading the collection of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Letters and Papers from Prison*, (edited by his friend Eberhard Bethge), and to try and claim he was not religious seems a hard ask. He studied theology, he became a pastor in Germany's Confessing Church, he trained other pastors, but more than that his writings breathe his faith. It is not the self-conscious spirituality of someone who has suddenly found that more worldly props have been snatched away. "Today is Ascension Day, and that means that it is a day of great joy for all who can believe that Christ rules the world and our lives." "From the Christian point of view there is no special problem about Christmas in a prison cell. For many people in this building it will probably be a more sincere and genuine occasion than in places where nothing but the name is kept." "I believe that we ought so to love and trust God in our *lives*, and in all the good things he sends us, that when the time comes (but not before) we may go to him with love, trust, and joy."

It is always there, simply and naturally, even in his darkest times, to uphold and support him. But he also poses many questions about faith. "What do a church, a community, a sermon, a liturgy, a Christian life mean in a religionless world?" "Here again, God is no stop-gap; he must be recognised at the centre of life, not when we are at the end of our resources; it is his will to be recognised in life, and not only when death comes; in health and vigour, and not only in suffering; in our activities, and not only in sin. The ground for this lies in the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. He is the centre of life, and he certainly didn't 'come' to answer our unsolved problems." "God would have us know that we must live as men who manage our lives without him. The God who is with us is the God who forsakes us (Mark 15.34). The God who lets us live in the world without the working hypothesis of God is the God before whom we stand continually. Before God and with God we live without God. God lets himself be pushed out of the world on to the cross. He is weak and powerless in the world, and that is precisely the way, the only way, in which he is with us and helps us. Matt. 8.17 makes it quite clear that Christ helps us, not in virtue of his omnipotence, but by virtue of his weakness and suffering." And in his last (known) letter four months before his execution: "It is as though in solitude the soul develops senses which we hardly know in everyday life. … It is a great invisible sphere in which one lives and in whose reality there is no doubt."

*

February 5: Susan Hill

*

I am not sure why I have an affection for the books of Susan Hill. They are often rather bleak. People whose lives are never going to be very satisfying. Yet I think they have an atmosphere about them—such as her sequel to Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca* called *Mrs de Winter*—which intrigues me, not least for the ways in which she achieves her sense of place and time. The other day I noticed she had ventured into the crime novel genre. The book *The Pure in Heart* features a detective Simon Serrailer but it doesn't really fit the genre. It is about people caught up in crime rather than in the struggle to solve the crime itself. I think it is a valid point. A lot of crime novels are very clever and I enjoy the forensic detail but the victim and the victim's friends and relations are often left virtually off-stage. Yet I don't think she quite pulled it off. The characters were not interesting enough to offset the lack of a resolution to the crime. And, curiously, for a Susan Hill story, it lacked atmosphere …

*

February 6: Rudolf Eric von Raspe

*

Strangely enough we don't know exactly when von Raspe was born nor when he died; we do however remember him for *The Travels of Baron Munchausen*. So he seems to deserve a date of his own. We know he was born in Hanover in Germany in 1737. We know he died in Donegal sometime in 1794. Or do we? The master liar just may have faked … something. He is believed to have based his story around a real baron, Hieronymis von Munchausen, who was said to have "formed a habit of narrating alleged sporting adventures of farcical extravagance, with the dry precision of a man speaking the exact truth".

He was at the university in Göttingen but while cataloguing an ancient coin collection there he gave in to temptation. The description of the wanted man was "a long-faced man, with small eyes, crooked nose, red hair under his stumpy periwig, and a jerky gait". He would seem to be fairly easy to spot but after being captured he escaped and fled to Berlin, then to Italy, and eventually came to London, where again he turned to any kind of writing which might pay his way but he was arrested by his tailor for not paying his bill; again he managed to leave his troubles behind, going to Cornwall to write about the mining industry, then to Edinburgh where he got into more trouble.

In the hope of paying some of his bills he wrote a small chapbook of forty-nine pages which he titled *Baron Munchausen's Narrative of his marvelous Travels and Campaigns in Russia*. The first edition was not a success and no copy is believed to have survived. He persuaded his bookseller Mr Smith to do a second edition in 1786 but again it failed to sell. Smith sold the copyright to another bookseller, a Mr Kearsley, who got one of his regular hacks to do an introductory chapter and add another 14 chapters to Raspe's original five. Kearsley's anonymous hack put in topical issues and events of interest to the English reading public—and the book was immediately popular! Kearsley had another chapter written and added in 1793.

Raspe's book is seen as having real literary merit but it was the hack-written additions which saved it from becoming yet another lost work. The DNB says "The bantering comments on passing events, with which the booksellers' hacks animated their continuations, seems largely responsible for the volume's immediate success." This would seem to be a curious variation on that idea that publishers must produce best-selling popular fiction so as to pay for their less popular literary fiction or poetry.

Raspe, faced with exposure after another of his rather pathetic scams, fled to Ireland and died from scarlet fever. His own travels would seem to be as interesting and varied as the Baron's yet it is hard to get a real sense of him as a person, to know how much of himself he put into his writings, to what extent his peccadilloes were driven by poverty, and whether he was capable of producing other stories of quality if he had been fortunate enough to find a patron or a readership …

*

February 7: Charles Dickens

*

"This charming tale of author Charles Dickens and his candle-snuffing cat gives a clear picture of just how quickly cats can train their owners.

"Dickens was writing by candlelight while his pet cat sat nearby on the table. Suddenly the candle flickered out. Dickens put down his pen, paused to pet the cat, relit the candle and then continued writing his manuscript.

"A few moments later, the candle flickered out again. Again Dickens put down his pen, petted the cat and relit the candle. Dickens had barely written another sentence when the candle sputtered out for the third time. By now, Dickens was on automatic pilot, and repeated the process once more. Pet the cat, relight the candle.

"Believe it or not, it took a few more rounds of this routine before it finally occurred to Dickens that it was the cat who was snuffing out the flame. You see, the cat had quickly learned (probably way back in round one) that if he snuffed out the candle, Dickens would make a fuss over him."

from *The Secret Life of Cats* by Arline Bleecker.

But I have one question: how does a cat snuff a candle?

*

February 8: Jules Verne

*

Jules Verne, did you know, had a lost novel? Not lost precisely but put away and long forgotten. Eugene Weber, introducing the novel *Paris in the Twentieth Century*, says Verne's great-grandson found it in 1989 "when the sale of a family home forced him to dispense with a great bronze safe long believed to be empty. The keys to the safe had been lost; it had to be opened with a blow-torch.

"Temporarily tucked under a pile of linen, the pages discovered in 1989 were examined later, authenticated, and identified as a text that Hetzel had rejected late in 1863: "It's a hundred feet below *Five Weeks in a Balloon* … Your Michel is a real goose with his verses. Can't he carry parcels and remain a poet?" And the clincher: "no one today will believe your prophecy." Verne appears to have accepted Hetzel's verdict."

Yet it is hard to believe that disbelief was the reason behind the rejection. Verne's readers *expected* to suspend their sense of disbelief when they read of submarine voyages or satellites to the Moon. The real problem is the hero Michel Dufrénoy. He is, quite simply, boring. The Paris of 1960 is an inspired extrapolation of new inventions of the late nineteenth century. People live in 'all electric' homes. Horseless carriages are powered by hydrogen gas. Trains are powered by compressed air though curiously they run on elevated tracks rather than underground. People wear clothes of spun metal (rather than the spun oil of our nylons) and wear spectacles with aluminium frames. Paper is made from "alfa, aloes, Jerusalem artichoke, lupine, and twenty other cheaply cultivated plants" including timber.

Britain is buying up French land everywhere and the English have France fighting for its existence. War has become obsolete and it is business which 'cuts throats'. The Catholic Church appears to have retained its power. When his uncle mentions a man called Girardin Michel says "Wasn't he an atheist?" and his uncle responds "Not in the least; he believed in himself." Twentieth century doubts have not overwhelmed the faith although women, regrettably it seems, are having far fewer children.

And maybe Hetzel was right to have doubts; as more women were reading novels they needed to at least be taken into account. But Verne has a character say, "The caressing manner of the Parisienne, her alluring figure, her witty and tender glances, her affectionate smile, her firm yet precise embonpoint soon gave way to certain long, lean, skinny, arid, fleshless, emaciated forms, to a mechanical, methodical, and puritanical unconcern. The waist flattened, the glance austerified, the joints stiffened; a stiff, hard nose lowered over narrowed lips; the stride grew longer; the Angel of Geometry, formerly so lavish with its most alluring curves, delivered woman up to all the rigors of straight lines and acute angles. The Frenchwoman has become Americanized; she speaks seriously about serious matters, she takes life seriously, she rides on the rigid saddle of modern manners, dresses poorly, tastelessly, and wears corsets of galvanized tin which can resist the most powerful pressures." Clearly Verne wanted to keep women ignorant, fluffy, and pregnant. Sweet and silly like Michel's Lucy.

But the book as a little curiosity is still worth reading.

*

February 9: Brendan Behan

*

"I have a total irreverence for anything connected with society except that which makes the roads safer, the beer stronger, the food cheaper and the old men and women warmer in the winter and happier in the summer."

Brendan Behan as quoted in *Time Out's* guide to Dublin.

*

"There was a blizzard in Christmas week and on the Saturday afternoon, I was sitting in my cell after exercise trying to keep myself warm with my legs in a mailbag. They served the supper

early on Saturdays, at three-thirty sometimes, and you would be in two minds about it. It was great to get it as soon as possible because you were ravenously hungry, not to mind cold, but for that against it meant that by seven o'clock you were starving again, and by eight you were that bad that it was hard to sleep."

Brendan Behan in *Borstal Boy*.

*

February 10: Boris Pasternak

*

'I do not understand Kruschchev or our Soviet colleagues. Tolerance is the only important qualification needed to judge the merits of such a great writer as Boris Pasternak'; so said Halldór Laxness. At first glance there is much in that. But is tolerance all that is needed? After all tolerance tolerates minor writers as well as major and does not discriminate between them. But I think that sense of approaching every book with an open mind is vital—and almost impossible.

I struggled through *Dr Zhivago* and wasn't wild about the film either but then I read somewhere that Pasternak was much more highly regarded in Russia as a poet. Translated poetry is second best but it was still worth the search. Many of his poems in translation by Jon Stallworthy and Peter France attracted me but I thought I would copy this one, not least because I was drinking a cup of cocoa when I came upon it … It is called 'Mirror' but Pasternak originally titled it 'Myself' …

In the mirror is steaming a cocoa cup,
A lace curtain sways, and along
The path to the chaos of garden and steppe
The mirror runs to the swing.

There swaying pines needle the air with resin;
There, fussily bending to look
For its glasses, the garden is combing the grass;
There Shade is reading a book.

And into the background, the darkness, beyond
The gate into grasslands sweet
With drugs, down the path, between snail-trails and twigs
The quartz shimmers white in the heat.

The soul can't be mined, like a seam with saltpetre,
Or hacked out, like gems, with a pick.
The huge garden shakes in the hall, in the mirror —
But the glass does not break.

I cannot extinguish the light of my eyes
In this hypnotic domain,
As slugs in the garden will plug the eyes
Of statues after rain.

Water tickles the ear, and a siskin,
Chirping, hurdles the sticks.
You can stain their lips with bilberry juice,
You will not put an end to their tricks.

The garden raises its fist to the mirror;

The room and the garden shake.
It runs to the swing, and catches it, shakes it,
And still the glass does not break.

John Sendy wrote in *Melbourne's Radical Bookshops*: "In a sense all bookshops are radical because books can enlighten people, generate dreams, inspire actions, nourish ideals. 'A book is a cubic piece of smouldering conscience,' Boris Pasternak claimed. Dashiell Hammett emphasized the point before the Un-American Activities Committee. When Senator Joseph McCarthy asked him whether in 'our' position Hammett would have allowed certain books in libraries Hammett replied: 'If I were you, Senator, I would not allow any libraries.' "

*

February 11: Patrick Leigh Fermor

*

As at 19-year-old he set out to walk from Holland to Istanbul in 1933. It took him three books. And the books have a confusion at their heart. Was he writing a travel book. Was he writing of current history and politics. Was it an excursion into the distant past, old wars, old kinds of sorrows. Was it him remembering his youthful self who did the walking. These are very hard questions to answer. And in asking I found myself asking what I wanted, perhaps expected even, from a travel book. I think that at the heart of the book I want to *see* the places the writer is passing through; that the writer is in effect my guide and my gaze on places I will probably never visit. It was Stendhal who described a novel as a mirror passing down a highway. But perhaps it would make a more apt description of what I want from a travel book.

Yet he begins his first book *A Time of Gifts* with just such a mirror. "It was still a couple of hours till dawn when we dropped anchor in the Hook of Holland. Snow covered everything and the flakes blew in a slant across the cones of the lamps and confused the glowing discs that spaced out the untrodden quay. I hadn't known that Rotterdam was a few miles inland. I was still the only passenger in the train and this solitary entry, under cover of night and hushed by snow, completed the illusion that I was slipping into Rotterdam, and into Europe, through a secret door.

I wandered about the silent lanes in exultation. The beetling storeys were nearly joining overhead; then the eaves drew away from each other and frozen canals threaded their way through a succession of hump-backed bridges. Snow was piling up on the shoulders of a statue of Erasmus. Trees and masts were dispersed in clumps and the polygonal tiers of an enormous and elaborate gothic belfry soared above the steep roofs. As I was gazing, it slowly tolled five.

The lanes opened on the Boomjes, a long quay lined with trees and capstans, and this in its turn gave on a wide arm of the Maas and an infinity of dim ships. Gulls mewed and wheeled overhead and dipped into the lamplight, scattering their small footprints on the muffled cobblestones and settled in the rigging of the anchored boats in little explosions of snow. The cafés and seamen's taverns which lay back from the quay were all closed except one which showed a promising line of light. A shutter went up and a stout man in clogs opened a glass door, deposited a tabby on the snow and, turning back, began lighting a stove inside. The cat went in again at once; I followed it and the ensuing fried eggs and coffee, ordered by signs, were the best I had ever eaten. I made a second long entry in my journal—it was becoming a passion—and while the landlord polished his glasses and cups and arranged them in glittering ranks, dawn broke, with the snow still coming down against the lightening sky. I put on my greatcoat, slung the rucksack, grasped my stick and headed for the door. The landlord asked where I was going: I said: "Constantinople". His brows went up and he signaled to me to wait: then he set out two small glasses and filled them with transparent liquid from a long stone bottle. We clinked them; he emptied his at one gulp and I did the same. With his wishes for godspeed in my ears and an internal bonfire of Bols and a hand smarting from his valedictory shake, I set off. It was the formal start of my journey.

I hadn't gone far before the open door of the *Groote Kirk*—the cathedral attached to the enormous belfry—beckoned me inside. Filled with dim early morning light, the concavity of grey

masonry and whitewash joined in pointed arches high overhead and the floor diminished along the nave in a chessboard of black and white flagstones. So compellingly did the vision tally with a score of half-forgotten Dutch pictures that my mind's eye instantaneously furnished the void with those seventeenth-century groups which should have been sitting or strolling there; burghers with pointed corn-coloured beards—and impious spaniels that refused to stay outside—conferring gravely with their wives and their children, still as chessmen, in black broadcloth and identical honeycomb ruffs under the tremendous hatchmented pillars. Except for this church, the beautiful city was to be bombed to fragments a few years later. I would have lingered, had I known."

*

February 12: *Billy Bunter*

*

The February 1908 issue of the children's magazine *The Magnet* launched a character destined to become a household word on to a waiting juvenile readership. Billy Bunter.

Ken and Elaine Moon in *Writing Quality Fiction* say of his creator: "Very occasionally, there are authors who write splendidly first up and so never need to revise and edit. Charles Hamilton was one such; and as he probably published more fiction in English than anyone else in the history of the universe, he will have saved himself much editing! Hamilton is probably best remembered now for his schoolboy stories earlier this century, the fat Billy Bunter being his most popular character. He typed on coloured paper, which went straight into a coloured envelope and off to his (delighted) publisher."

Hamilton wrote as Frank Richards when he wrote his regular Billy Bunter stories. Victor Watson in *The Cambridge Guide to Children's Books in English* says of them, "Pace without sensationalism, conflict without violence, combined with a strict adherence to the ethic that 'cheats never prosper', earned his boy's school stories a loyal readership."

And George Orwell in an entertaing article on 'Boys' Weeklies' wrote, "Here I am only dealing with a single series of papers, the boys' twopenny weeklies, often inaccurately described as 'penny dreadfuls'. Falling strictly within this class there are at present ten papers, the *Gem*, *Magnet*, *Modern Boy*, *Triumph* and *Champion*, all owned by the Amalgamated Press, and the *Wizard*, *Rover*, *Skipper*, *Hotspur* and *Adventure*, all owned by D. C. Thomson & Co. What the circulations of these papers are, I do not know. The editors and proprietors refuse to name any figures, and in any case the circulation of a paper carrying serial stories is bound to fluctuate widely. But there is no question that the combined public of the ten papers is a very large one. … The *Gem* and *Magnet* are sister-papers (characters out of one paper frequently appear in the other), and were both started more than thirty years ago. At that time, together with *Chums* and the old *B*[*oys'*] *O*[*wn*] *P*[*aper*], they were the leading players for boys, and they remained dominant until quite recently. Each of them carries every week a fifteen- or twenty-thousand-word school story, complete in itself, but usually more or less connected with the story of the week before. The *Gem* in addition to its school story carries one or more adventure serials. Otherwise the two papers are so much alike that they can be treated as one, though the *Magnet* has always been the better known of the two, probably because it possesses a really first-rate character in the fat boy, Billy Bunter."

Bunter's school is an Eton-type institution called Greyfriars and the boys are in the fourth form. They are a kind of time capsule. They never age. They continue to have the same kind of adventures and talk the same kind of slang. Orwell goes on to say, "And not only the characters but the whole atmosphere of both the *Gem* and *Magnet* has been preserved unchanged, partly by means of very elaborate stylization. The stories in the *Magnet* are signed 'Frank Richards' and those in the *Gem* 'Martin Clifford', but a series lasting thirty years could hardly be the work of the same person every week."

But in saying this Orwell found he was mistaken. Both 'Frank Richards' and 'Martin Clifford' *were* Charles Hamilton and he turned out boys' stories for both magazines for much of his life.

The good boys "keep in hard training, wash behind their ears, never hit below the belt", the bad boys bet, smoke cigarettes and frequent public houses but never get expelled because that

would change the cast. And their offences are relatively minor. No stealing. No sex. "When the Gem and Magnet were started, it is probable that there was a deliberate intention to get away from the guilty sex-ridden atmosphere that pervaded so much of the earlier literature for boys. In the nineties *The Boys' Own Paper*, for instance, used to have its correspondence columns full of terrifying warnings against masturbation, and books like *St Winifred's* and *Tom Brown's Schooldays* were heavy with homosexual feeling, though no doubt the authors were not fully aware of it. In the *Gem* and *Magnet* sex simply does not exist as a problem. Religion is also taboo … On the other hand, there has always been a very strong 'temperance' strain. Drinking and, by association, smoking are regarded as rather disgraceful even in an adult ('shady' is the usual word), but at the same time as something irresistibly fascinating, a sort of substitute for sex. In their moral atmosphere the *Gem* and *Magnet* have a great deal in common with the Boy Scout movement, which started at about the same time."

The boys, Bunter 'the fat Owl', the bad boys led by Harry Wharton 'the Famous Five', Vernon-Smith 'the Bounder of Greyfriars' and all the rest were known to schoolboys far and wide in the early part of the 20th century and I notice that a complete set of the *Magnet* now goes for an impressive sum. But only Billy Bunter has cut loose from his origins and become shorthand for an overweight annoying noisy mischievous boy …

*

February 13: Eleanor Farjeon

*

I came upon the story of a school at Bethnal Green in London which instead of calling its 'houses' after dull but worthy benefactors had called them after writers. Their four 'houses' were named for Laurence Housman, Rudyard Kipling, Walter de la Mare and Eleanor Farjeon. Although the first three resonated I realised I knew nothing about Eleanor Farjeon.

And if an Australian school liked this idea what might I recommend in the way of names? I suppose names like Patrick White and Henry Lawson would seem a given—but actually I think I would choose less well known names so it would also be a journey of discovery for the children.

Strictly speaking, Eleanor Farjeon is no longer a household name. But she was a prolific writer for children and her poems, rhyming alphabets, fairy tales, folk lore, and adventure stories were once immensely popular.

A friend of mine has a weakness for those old green Penguin paperbacks and Collins Crime Club type of novels. The other day I saw several on a stall and bought them for her. One of them was *Seven Dead* by J. Jefferson Farjeon. He was a prolific writer of mysteries with names like *Dead Man's Heath, Murderer's Trail*, *Thirteen Guests* and *The 5.18 Mystery*. I quite enjoyed the novel, and he was a talented writer, but it suffered from a lack of focus. He tried to fit in a love interest, adventure, mystery, travel, and a conventional detective investigation. My real question, though, was whether Jefferson Farjeon was connected to Eleanor Farjeon. I had an idea she came from a 'literary family' so I went in search of them. And yes, Jefferson was her brother … and their father Benjamin was also a prolific author …

As I was pottering along the library shelves I came upon a book of poems for children, *Heroes and Heroines*, by Eleanor and Herbert Farjeon, which is full of lively rollicking poems about historical figures, and it said that Herbert was her younger brother and a well-known drama critic and book reviewer. So I think they do qualify; three popular and prolific young writers in the one family are pretty good going and I'm sure their conversations round the table were never dull.

Perhaps some of the poems would no longer be seen as politically correct in their language and others are about figures most schoolchildren would not find of much interest now. But the poems are lively, energetic, and often quite fun. I thought I would include one.

This is called 'Emmeline Pankhurst' (1858 – 1928):

Militant, vigorous,
Rampant and rigorous,
Emmeline Pankhurst cried, 'Britain! Take note!

Vote, Votes for Women! I
Won't rest, by Jiminy,
Till, like my husband, I'm given a Vote!
Are men superior?
Women inferior?
Suffragettes, come! pass your days and your nights
Hatching up critical
Crises political,
Fearlessly planned to procure us our Rights!'

Then with her following,
Hooting and hollowing,
Emmeline shouted when Ministers spoke;
Windows they battered in;
Acid they scattered in;
Pillar-posts, setting the letters a-smoke;
Next, from the putting-green
They started cutting green
Pieces of turf twice as big as your hand—
Thus her tenacity,
Backed by audacity,
Made Mrs. Pankhurst the scorn of the land.

Statesmen detested her,
Policemen arrested her,
Colonels in clubs became pink at her name,
Newspapers sneered at her,
Little boys jeered at her,
Still Mrs. Pankhurst went on with the game,
Till her ability
Vanquished hostility—
Now women vote, for a vote they have got—
And since her victory,
No contradictory
Candidate dares to suggest they should not!

Annabel Farjeon, introducing her aunt's *Invitation to a Mouse*, paints a picture of a very talented woman, rather plain and dumpy, who never married but loved the company of children. And she gives her the praise few writers get—or deserve. "Eleanor was far fuller of the milk of human kindness than anyone I have ever met."

*

February 14: Thomas Malthus

*

"I've never seen a problem that wouldn't be easier to solve with fewer people; or harder, and ultimately impossible, with more."

David Attenborough.

From the time Malthus raised the spectre of human populations outrunning their food supply to SBS running a program called 'The Future of Food' the time bomb has been ticking away. Yet, curiously, the push for larger populations is rarely debated. There is still a deeply ingrained belief that population growth is a good thing. Yet we don't apply this idea to other species. No one is out

there shouting "More elephants!" "More mosquitoes!" "More plum trees!" "More cats!" "More walruses!"

Thomas Homer-Dixon in *Environment, Scarcity, and Violence* divides economists, and by extension the wider community, into three groups: the mainstream who believe that human innovation and human technology will always keep us ahead of starvation; neo-Malthusians whose focus is on the underpinning environment and the damage being done to it; and distributionists who believe the fundamental problem is neither population nor environment but the way wealth and resources are shared and distributed—or not shared and distributed. Taking this definition then David Attenborough is clearly a neo-Malthusian.

Tim Flannery would also qualify as a neo-Malthusian. He asks in *The Future Eaters* "What then is a desirable population size for Australia?" He says Australia could probably support 20-30 million though this would reduce our food exports. And it gives us no buffer zones—to see us through drought and flood, to protect indigenous flora and fauna, to slow the rate of soil degradation and impoverishment. He says "it makes enormous good sense to observe the 'golden rule' of population. If this were done, Australians might decide upon an optimum, long-term population target of 6-12 million." And what is the 'golden rule'? He puts it at a human population not exceeding 20-30 per cent of the carrying capacity of a given area. We don't like to include ourselves in what a farmer would call the stocking capacity per acre … but we firmly belong within those parameters …

The problem is: how? Shearman and Sauer-Thompson write in *Green or Gone*, "There is no way to arrest population growth suddenly other than by the decrees of dictators, so for the moment the task is to adapt humans to care for the environment and ecology in a more populous world. The task is formidable for there may be little time left to accomplish it."

If more human beings are pleasing to most economists because they will eat more food and wear more coats and buy more plasma televisions—and form labour pools—then perhaps it is time to place David Attenborough's words everywhere. Millions of posters, flyers, email messages, engraved headings. Think of the money to be made out of spreading his simple message—

And Malthus himself was a curious mixture of beliefs. He wanted to see the world's wealth more equitably distributed. But he believed this would also compound the problem. Better fed children would be more likely to survive, to live longer, to have big healthy families themselves. They would in fact help human populations outrun their food supply. This dichotomy may be why there is a gentle melancholy note to his famous 1798 'Essay on the Principle of Population'. "It is an obvious truth, which has been taken notice of by many writers, that population must always be kept down to the levels of the means of subsistence; but no writer that the Author recollects has inquired particularly into the means by which this level is effected: and it is a view of these means which forms, to his mind, the strongest obstacle in the way to any very great future improvement of society. He hopes it will appear that, in the discussion of this interesting subject, he is actuated solely by a love of truth, and not by any prejudices against any particular set of men, or of opinions. He professes to have read some of the speculations on the future improvement of society in a temper very different from a wish to find them visionary, but he has not acquired that command over his understanding which would enable him to believe what he wishes, without evidence, or to refuse his assent to what might be unpleasing, when accompanied with evidence."

*

February 15: Bruce Dawe

*

I like Bruce Dawe for that casual, laconic, conversational tone which always contains a sharp bite. He starts 'Doctor to Patient'

Please sit down. I'm afraid I have some
rather bad news for you: you are now seventeen
and you have contracted an occupational disease called
unemployment. Like others similarly afflicted

you will experience feelings of
shock, disbelief, injustice, guilt, apathy, and aggression
(although not necessarily in that order)
and you'll no doubt be urged to try the various
recommended anodynes: editorials in newspapers,
voluntary unpaid work for local charities, booze,
other compulsive mind-destroyers, prayer, comforting
talks with increasingly less-interested friends.

I also bought a small book of his anti-war poems for the Quaker Library but the other day I was re-reading his *Towards Sunrise* and realised I had never really taken in his 'indigenous' poems.

Such as this one 'For the Other Fallen' …

You fought here for your country.
Where are your monuments?
You resisted the invader as best you knew how.
Where are your songs of those days?

When you were captured you were not prisoners-of-war.
That would have been awkward.
You had the misfortune of occupying 'unoccupied land'.
You had to correct your gross error.

There was a pioneer tradition waiting to be unfolded.
Tales resilient as ironbark.
Your share in them was minimal and negative.
You were rather slow to understand this.

The bush and the stone and the stream.
The tree. The plain.
The special green. The faded calico blue.
They were your last line of resistance.

You fought here for your country.
Where are your monuments?
The difficulties we have in belonging
—these, these are your cenotaph.

… resonated with me, not least because this is an issue White Australia is still making very heavy weather of. Thirty years after that poem was published Deborah Bird Rose could write in *Reports from a Wild Country*: 'Another moral domain concerns public remembrance and the dead. As numerous scholars have suggested, the dead are a powerful part of community. Michael Ignatieff reminds us that there is nothing inherently ethical in this relationship. The dead are recognised in community interests, and the politics of terror recognise the dead just as surely as ethics for decolonisation. Muecke contends that death 'is at the heart of the formation of the nation … States can be set up as political entities, but they only become nations through the magical or spiritual agency of death … A people recognises itself as a people, that is as a culture, through the symbolic treatment of its dead.'

'Monological definitions of the dead are thus central to monological narratives of nationhood. National histories that commemorate some deaths, but not others, rework monologue, as Tom Griffiths explains with elegance in a recent essay. Griffiths takes up the issue of white silence, contending that 'the great Australian silence was often "white noise": it sometimes consisted of an obscuring and overlapping din of history making.' The white noise of history-making concerns the dead in extremely immediate ways. Griffiths notes the paucity of public memorials to Aboriginal

people who died defending family and country, and he links debates over war memorials to the 'Us' and 'Them' exclusions of past and contemporary cultural life. Here is his discussion of responses to Ken Inglis's proposal that Indigenous-settler conflict should be included in the Australian War Memorial:

> Inglis's proposal came out of his lifelong study of the settlers' culture of commemoration and in a book steeped in intelligent sympathy for the rituals of war. It wasn't a war, wrote his critics. And even if it was a war, then it wasn't officially declared war and both sides didn't wear uniforms. And even if it still rated somehow as a real war, then Aborigines were the other side, and they were the losers, and victors don't put up monuments to the losers. Aborigines are not Us. Here speaks the real politics of separatism in Australia today.

'There is, I believe, another distinction to be made: there are the dead who are members of community (and thus those whose deaths matter), and then there are the dead who are outside the community and thus whose deaths matter to the extent that they can be excluded. The first is social and commemorative, the second harks back to the relationship between violence and progress. If progress emerges from violence, and if conquest is not complete, then deaths that are treated as if they do not matter actually still do matter. They mark progress. Nicholas Thomas contends that settler societies seek simultaneously to exterminate and exhibit Indigenous people. Arguably, Aboriginal deaths are necessary to Australian nation-making even as the dead are dishonoured through denial and through chilling debates about how much blood has been shed and whose bloodshed counts.

'Dialogue works counter to monological separatism; it requires a 'we' who share a time and space of attentiveness, and who bring our moral capabilities into the encounter. It seems we must also bring the dead into the dialogue. It is not yet possible to know, dialogically, what they may say to us.'

*

February 16: Richard Ford

*

INTERVIEWER: What kind of relationship do you have with your characters?

RICHARD FORD: Master to slave. Sometimes I hear them at night singing over in their cabins. And sometimes, I'll wake up at night and write down what I hear. Other than that, they don't have an existence that I don't confer on them. I'm kidding, of course. But they don't talk to me. They don't tell me what to do. I make them do whatever I want them to. I'm basically practical, cut-and-dry about characters. They're made of language. They're not people, and I can change them as such. I can change the color of their eyes, their genders, their races. They are totally subservient to me. Which isn't to say that I always plot out their every action. I act on a whim at times, and they have to exist upon that whim. I'm disdainful of these aesthetes who talk about, "My characters wouldn't do that," or, "I just start writing it and then my characters write the book." Horseshit, is what I say. It's a ruse to get out of taking responsibility for your mistakes. Authorship means I authorize everything.

(Quoted in *Novel Voices* by Jennifer Levasseur & Kevin Rabalais)

I don't think characters take over exactly but people you've spent days, weeks, months, even years with take on a life in your subconscious and I think it is your subconscious which intervenes at times, particularly if you ask a character to do something which seems out of character …

*

February 17: Margaret Truman

*

Margaret Truman has made her name by writing mysteries set in significant locations in Washington; *Murder at the Pentagon*, *Murder in the White House*, *Murder at the National Cathedral*, *Murder at the Library of Congress*, *Murder at the FBI* and so on. They are good solid mysteries of a conventional kind though the one I've just finished reading, *Murder at the Opera*, didn't seem to be up to her best. Perhaps she has got tired of her genre and her settings. It lectures

the reader on opera, it seems rather stagy in its landmarks, and the plotting is rather messy. Though as I just discovered that she died in 2008, in her eighties, I feel I can forgive her its failings.

But the question I have never got around to answering is: who was Margaret Truman? She was undoubtedly related to former President Truman—and her inside knowledge helps give her novels verisimilitude—but as what? Wife. Daughter. Niece. Granddaughter …

In fact she was the only child of President Harry S. Truman and as well as her Capitol Hill mysteries she wrote extensively on White House life in books like *First Ladies, Harry S. Truman, Women of Courage,* and *White House Pets* …

*

February 18: War …

*

Walter Musto writes in *The War and Uncle Walter. The Diary of an Eccentric* of London on the 18th February 1940, "A. P. Herbert [barrister and writer] on the radio last night made timely, if somewhat scathing, reference to the growing tendency of Whitehall to what in glib official language might be described as verbal circumlocution, i.e. simple statements wrapt up in high-falutin language that not only confuses and irritates plain folk but often defeats its object, wastes paper as well as words, and stamps the author as a verbal snob. If Nelson's immortal signal had been written by one of our fat word-breeders in Whitehall, Herbert said, it would probably have read, 'England anticipates that with regard to the current emergency, personnel will duly implement their obligations in accordance with the functions allocated to their respective age groups.' Mr Churchill had shown, he added, that it was unnecessary to speak of big things in 'long woolly words'."

(Quoted in *The Secret Annexe: An Anthology of War Diarists*, Irene and Alan Taylor.)

Alas! Not even the austerity of war can stop the all-conquering march of 'officialese' …

*

February 19: Kay Boyle

*

"Back in the thirties and early forties, a young American woman named Kay Boyle wanted to live a literary life. Like many people, she knew what she wanted, but she didn't know how to get it. She married a Frenchman, on the grounds that living anywhere in France is practically like living in Paris (and everyone knew that the literary and artistic life had been *cracking* there in the twenties). But it didn't work out the way she'd planned.

"Kay Boyle found herself in some dim, damp town in coastal France. Her husband was a tire salesman—a *tire* salesman! The first place they lived didn't even have windows.

"So Boyle bought some paint and painted some windows on her windowless walls with bright, great views. Then she started writing letters to everyone in Paris she'd ever wanted to know. She admired their work, and told them a little about her own; she sent stories to periodicals and letters to men and women who were living the life she so passionately craved. Her plan worked out. She literally wrote herself *out* of that windowless cave, left the Frenchman, went into the life she'd always wanted, in which she published wonderful stories and wore a velvet cloak and fell madly in love and danced, and stayed out late and produced beautiful novels and partied so hard that she finally came down with spinal meningitis.

"That—and World War II—told her it was time to settle down, so she eventually married a wonderful man, came home to America, had a flock of kids, taught writing at a respected university, wrote, and wrote some more, and in her late sixties was sighted by a reliable witness making out passionately with a man one-third her age at a writers' conference. She lived many more years after that and was loved and respected by all.

"Of course, she could have elected to do nothing and ended up the snippy, resentful wife of a tire salesman in a house without windows."

Carolyn See in *Making a Literary Life*. (Boyle died in 1992.)

And even if her marriage to that tyre salesman didn't last it had given her the theme, a naïve young American in France, for her first novels. Tyre salesmen have more uses than the obvious …

*

February 20: Joshua Slocum

*

Joshua Slocum begins his famous narrative *Sailing Alone Around the World* with these words: "In the fair land of Nova Scotia, a maritime province, there is a ridge called North Mountain, overlooking the Bay of Fundy on one side and the fertile Annapolis valley on the other. On the northern slope of the range grows the hardy spruce-tree, well adapted for ship-timbers, of which many vessels of all classes have been built. The people of this coast, hardy, robust, and strong, are disposed to compete in the world's commerce, and it is nothing against the master mariner if the birth-place mentioned on his certificate be Nova Scotia. I was born in a cold spot, on coldest North Mountain, on a cold February 20, though I am a citizen of the United States—a naturalized Yankee, if it may be said that Nova Scotians are not Yankees in the truest sense of the word. On both sides my family were sailors; and if any Slocum should be found not seafaring, he will show at least an inclination to whittle models of boats and contemplate voyages. My father was the sort of man who, if wrecked on a desolate island, would find his way home, if he had a jack-knife and could find a tree. He was a good judge of a boat, but the old clay farm which some calamity made his was an anchor to him. He was not afraid of a capful of wind, and he never took a back seat at a camp-meeting or a good, old-fashioned revival.

"As for myself, the wonderful sea charmed me from the first. At the age of eight I had already been afloat along with other boys on the bay, with chances greatly in favour of being drowned. When a lad I filled the important post of cook on a fishing-schooner; but I was not long in the galley, for the crew mutinied at the appearance of my first duff, and "chucked me out" before I had a chance to shine as a culinary artist. The next step towards the goal of happiness found me before the mast in a full-rigged ship bound on a foreign voyage. Thus I came "over the bows," and not in through the cabin windows, to the command of a ship.

"My best command was that of the magnificent ship *Northern Light*, of which I was part-owner. I had a right to be proud of her, for at that time—in the 1880's—she was the finest American sailing-vessel afloat. Afterward I owned and sailed the *Aquidneck*, a little bark which of all man's handiwork seemed to me the nearest to perfection of beauty, and which in speed, when the wind blew, asked no favours of steamers. I had been nearly twenty years a shipmaster when I quit her deck on the coast of Brazil, where she was wrecked. My home voyage to New York with my family was made in the canoe *Liberdade*, without accident."

The one thing which disfigures his famous book is his constant reference to the Fuegians as 'savages', as cruel and cowardly. These unfortunate people, beset by the encroaching settlers who didn't hesitate to shoot, by disease and despair, tried to make a living by begging from passing vessels. It was part of a long sad decline which eventually saw them disappear as a distinct people.

I had always thought of him as a 'one-book-man' but he also wrote *Voyage of the Liberdade*; his account of the voyage home with his wife and children from Brazil. He had had plenty of troubles, including a crew who turned out to be a gang of cut-throats, but he managed the long voyage from Brazil to the USA in the small vessel he describes as a canoe. With him went his wife and his sons Victor and Garfield. But I was sorry he gave them so little room in his narrative and we are never even told his wife's name. I came away from the story with the sneaking suspicion that Slocum was not unlike the men who put cars or horses or footie or work before their families; the little difference being that he put the sea and ships before them …

*

February 21: Robert Mugabe

*

Every liberation struggle throws up its strong men, and sometimes its strong women, and if new nations are very lucky they get people of the calibre of Aung San Suu Kyi or Nelson Mandela.

Zimbabwe got Robert Mugabe. Yet at the time of independence people were hopeful. He made various conciliatory noises and people who had been thinking of leaving stayed.

The major issue confronting the new government was land reform. Cecil Rhodes' 'Pioneers' in the 1890s had made one huge land grab, dispossessing hundreds of thousands of peasant farmers. After WW2 Britain used the country for a 'soldier settlement' scheme, taking huge chunks more to settle British war veterans. Yet Mugabe did little with the issue, and his few piecemeal projects were largely unsuccessful. But as his government used violence against its black opponents and investors pulled out of Zimbabwe, as his management of the economy was mainly marked by loot and pillage rather than productive policies, the economy nose-dived and inflation rose, he turned to criticising white farmers as a way to divert black anger from his mismanagement. His anti-white rhetoric rose to a fever-pitch, so-called War Veterans, many of them too young to have been in the liberation struggle, invaded white farms, wrecked equipment, destroyed production, left black farm workers destitute, and saw the price of food soar.

There were of course many Zimbabweans with legitimate anger against white people. You do not forget dispossession in a hurry. Racism, humiliation, demeaning attitudes, and the actions taken by Ian Smith's minority government followed by white South African meddling to stir trouble between the majority Shonas and the minority Ndebele peoples, in 'Operation Mute', caused great misery. So there is an irony in that Mugabe's anti-white rhetoric went up as the numbers of white people and their power and influence went down. He had found a rallying call to fit every occasion. The end result has been a wrecked country and an impoverished people.

I have just been reading two books, *Mugabe* by Martin Meredith and *Degrees in Violence* by David Blair, and they both present a picture of a tyrant who has some features seen in other dictators: a miserable childhood (in a Catholic mission), a loner, an experience of a 'dirty' war, a deep personal insecurity, a difficulty in forming stable happy relationships, and a constant need for flattery. Meredith writes, "What propelled Mugabe to use violence so readily was his obsession with power. Power for Mugabe was not a means to an end, but the end itself. His overriding ambition, he once admitted, was to achieve total control, and he pursued that objective with relentless single-mindedness, crushing opponents and critics who stood in his way."

Christopher Hope in *Brothers Under the Skin* compares Mugabe with a half-forgotten tyrant, South African prime minister Hendrik Verwoerd; "Perhaps no other leader in Africa today more closely resembles Dr Verwoerd than Robert Mugabe. It is an odd twinning you would think, but then tyrants make strange kinships; they don't plan the family resemblance, it just grows on them." David Blair compares Mugabe with Ian Smith (and says Mugabe's book *Our War of Liberation: Speeches, Articles, Interviews, 1976-1979* is banal and Smith's book *The Great Betrayal* is turgid) writing, "Between them, Mugabe and Smith have dominated their country since 1964. For 37 years these two proud, brave, stubborn, charismatic, deluded fantasists have held the reins of power. Looking at their respective records, I suggest that only one further point needs to be made. Neither should have been allowed anywhere near running a country. Smith's true station in life was, perhaps, treasurer of a provincial rugby club. Mugabe would have made an excellent junior lecturer at the Revolutionary University of Havana. It was their country's enduring tragedy that these men were given such power."

*

February 22: Edna St Vincent Millay

*

The Oxford Companion to Women's Writing in the United States edited by Davidson and Wagner-Martin says of Millay: "Although Millay received awards and honorary degrees in the twenties, thirties, and forties, her reputation was eclipsed after her death by interest in poetic modernism, which emphasized formal experimentation and innovation. Even former acolytes such as Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath, repudiated her as old-fashioned. Her work has endured, however, and has been advanced recently by critics interested in the ways traditional poetic forms such as the

sonnet, of which she was a leading exponent, may serve the needs of women poets, and in Millay's radical humanism."

I don't think Stephenie Meyer is one of those critics interested in 'traditional poetic forms' but she uses this little bit of Millay wisdom to begin one of her vampire books. I thought it was the most memorable part of the novel.

'Childhood is not from birth to a certain age and at a certain age
The child is grown, and puts away childish things.
Childhood is the kingdom where nobody dies.'

*

" 'Childhood is the kingdom where nobody dies' is a line, from the poem by Edna St Vincent Millay, that has stuck in my mind ever since I first read it, when I was in fact a child and nobody died."

Joan Didion in 'After Henry'.

*

February 23: Agnes Smedley

*

Agnes Smedley was a remarkable woman. Born in poverty in the United States in 1892 to an illiterate drunken father and a mother who died of malnutrition and overwork she was determined not to have a life like her mother's and struggled to get herself an education. Jan and Steve MacKinnon say of her "She exposed prison conditions in the United States; worked to establish birth control clinics in Germany, India, and China; raised funds and helped organize the Indian revolutionary movement against the British; defended Chinese writers against persecution by Chiang Kai-shek; became a war correspondent of international stature; raised funds for Chinese war relief; nursed wounded guerillas of the Chinese Red Army; and at the end of her life fought McCarthyism in the United States." She supported Mao but appears to have been sympathetic to Madam Chiang Kai-shek, she established the Red Cross in China, she studied prostitution, she supported the setting up of co-operatives; she has been linked to Richard Sorge's Soviet spy ring in Japan. James MacManus says "Smedley made it her life's work to offend those in power, those she worked with, and most of her friends" and Ruth Price described her as "a virago who challenged the world" and "Smedley sparked intense, divergent responses in a tremendous range of people in her lifetime" … so whether she was a person you would want as a bosom friend I'm not sure … but life in her orbit would never be dull. She died in 1950.

She was also a very readable writer. I came across her *Portraits of Chinese Women in Revolution* in an op-shop and I would like to share just one of her 'pieces':

"One night, in a little Chinese inn in the interior, a Chinese girl from Kwangtung lay on a huge carved Chinese bed and related stories of her child life. Her own name was taken from an ancient Chinese folk ballad, and this song she had known from her earliest dawn of consciousness. She sang it, her two frail white hands folded together beneath her head.

As in most folk ballads the song was simple, relating a story in many stanzas. In such folk music the weirdness of classical Chinese music vanishes, and here was a song that the most Westernized of persons could understand. The song was more that just a ballad; it was folk memory; and it was a symbol that can and does mean many things today in China. But, literally, it is the song of a sorrowing wife whose husband was killed building Chang Ch'eng, or the Great Wall, two hundred years before the beginning of the Christian Era. The song begins:

The first month is new Spring.
Red lanterns hang on every building.
Other husbands return homeward,
Only my husband is building Chang Ch'eng.

The second month, pairs of swallows

Fly to the southern wall.
They sleep on columns under the roof,
But my home is empty and austere.

The song continues thus for twelve stanzas. In the third month there are pink peach blossoms and green willows, and the families burn incense in their ancestral tombs. The fourth month is the month of roses and of mulberry leaves to feed the silk worms. The fifth month tells of yellow plums, when every family is cultivating its land and only the land of the family Wan lies idle. The lotus blossoms in the sixth month, and in the seventh month the honeysuckle flourishes luxuriantly and the women sew before the windows. In the eighth month the yellow cassia blossoms, and the messenger pigeons return home with letters from absent ones. But no letter comes for the lonely wife whose husband has died a thousand *li* away. In the ninth month the pilgrims go on journeys, and there are fine wine and gorgeous chrysanthemums. In the tenth month the *fulung* tree rises above the wall and "peasants harvest their rice to pay their taxes." With the snowfall in the eleventh month the hoarfrost glistens on every dried grass blade. And in the twelfth month the yellow wax flowers blossom, and there are preparations for new year's rejoicing. But the lonely wife whose husband has been killed building Chang Ch'eng weeps at home until her sorrow reaches the very heaven and even the great Wall listens and crumbles.

This ancient song was sung in a gentle, sweet voice. The song seems to be sung in every nook and corner of China.

One may ask why, and there are many Chinese who will tell you: it is because the building of Chang Ch'eng, or the Great Wall, touched practically every family in China at that time. Two thousand and five hundred miles of great and magnificent walls were built within twenty years and, like the Pyramids of Egypt or the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, they were built by slave labor.

It is said that three out of every ten men in the Chinese Empire were called upon to help build the great Wall, and that they were driven like beasts under the lash of cruel taskmasters. When they fell, exhausted, injured, or dying, their bodies were buried in the earthwork of the wall itself. And the tale of its building has come down the centuries, its memories lingering in this folksong, as in many others.

This one song, so universally known and sung in China, has come to be a symbol not so much of suffering at the building of the Great Wall, as of suffering in general. Today in the streets of Shanghai you can hear the coolies sing it, but in transformed version. It is now a revolutionary song, a song retaining part of the original words, as also the entire music of the original. But the rest of it is a story of the revolution which the people built but which was then betrayed by the Kuomintang.

Now, says the song, the bitter sorrow of the people reaches the very heavens until the Great Wall itself listens and crumbles. The words are partly lyrical, partly militant. But the music remains wistful, burdened with a melancholy common to almost all folk songs."

('The Song of Suffering')

*

February 24: Irène Némirovsky

*

I knew nothing of her writing until I came upon Jonathon Weiss's short introduction to her life and works. Born into a wealthy Jewish family in the Ukraine she came to France via Finland and Sweden to escape the turmoil of the Russian Revolution; in effect her family were White Russians who just happened to be Jewish. And because of their strong anti-communist beliefs Irène and her family tended to gravitate towards the right in France with its strongly anti-semitic underpinnings; it is this complexity and the irresolvable questions it raised in her life which Weiss sees as giving power and fascination to her novels and short stories but also of riddling them with unfortunate Jewish stereotypes (hooked noses, swarthy skins, a grasping for money); she wanted to be fully accepted into a comfortable upper middle class French world and she did not mind to be

critical of her own background, and certainly she was hardly Jewish in a religious or cultural sense, if that would gain her that acceptance.

Her most popular novel *David Golder* came out in 1929. "For the first time in her career as a young novelist, Irène describes the milieu of her father, that of the Jewish businessmen who had immigrated to France within the past ten years. The idea of situating a novel in this world came to her in 1927 during her vacation in Biarritz, where she beheld the spectacle of "all these idle, unhinged, vice-ridden types … this whole world of shady financiers, loose women in search of pleasure and new sensations, of gigolos and courtesans, etc." This is the milieu into which Irène places her character, David Golder, a man raised in the port cities of the Black Sea which Irène and her family knew before the Revolution. She chose the city of Simferopol, "in reality teeming with life and movement, brilliant with light," but in the novel gave it "a melancholy and funereal atmosphere," so that her protagonist would have his origins in a dark, mysterious, hostile environment. From this city in the murky confines of central Europe, David Golder first emigrates to New York, where he is a peddler, then to Paris, where, because of his intelligence and ambition, he quickly grows rich by investing in oil wells in the newly formed Soviet Union."

She wrote the book just before the Wall Street Crash and it came out just after and its popularity owed much to the public fascination with high finance, its mysteries and secrets and massive rises and falls, its seeming lack of a guiding principle other than greed. It offered a glimpse into a world which was barred to ordinary people except in the ways their lives might ultimately be touched and they read the book as an insight into a world which could seemingly make or break people overnight.

Irène could have escaped France after the Nazis arrived, she probably had the money and the connections to leave safely, but she stayed, only moving to a small village in Burgundy, perhaps because she herself saw her more than two decades in France, her success as a novelist writing for the French public, and her friendships in the French literary world, as making her more French than Jewish. But this cut no ice with the Occupation authorities and both she and her husband died in Auschwitz.

Her two daughters, though, were safely hidden and survived the war; also hidden was the novel she was working on at the time of her deportation, a novel about the impact of the Occupation on France, and although it wasn't complete it was finally published more than fifty years after her death. "Irène Némirovsky was virtually unknown in the English-speaking world until the spring of 2005, when her posthumous novel, *Suite française*, appeared in an English version." But the publication also raised some difficult questions, not least the simple one: could it have been published in post-war France? Weiss quotes one critic: "Némirovsky's magnum opus is almost certainly more acceptable now, two generations down the line, than it would have been had she been trying to place her finished book in the Fifties," wrote Jane Stevenson in *The Observer*. "The postwar French preferred to remember that they had barely tolerated the Vichy government and had resisted the Germans. Némirovsky saw something different."

It has the sense of a voice from the grave.

*

February 25: Gerald Murnane

*

Gerald Murnane in Candida Baker's *Yacker*: 'There is a discovery the boy makes in *Tamarisk Row* which is important for me. In fact I'd always *thought* it was in the book and I was talking to somebody the other day who couldn't remember it, and I've discovered it was in the half that was cut out. Anyway, the father sits down and rather reluctantly he draws a family tree—he'd been drawing family trees for his pedigree poultry—and the boy discovers, and this is true of myself, that the only part of him that is Irish is his surname and the line of males that gives him the surname. Of my eight great-grandparents, six were English, one was Scottish and one only was Irish. And the one who was Irish was the man whose name was Murnane. And yet it had seemed to me as a boy that I must be at least three-quarters Irish, so I was profoundly shocked. My mother was a non-

Catholic who became a Catholic at marriage, and when we visited her family, I have to say that I always felt they were a bit inferior to the other side, which I had thought was the pure Irish Catholic side. In a strange way *The Plains* was written to correct that.'

I couldn't get through *Tamarisk Row*, though perhaps I'll give it another try some day, yet I have read *The Plains* at least three times. Not because I knew anything about its genesis but I think because I just happen to like grass and most authors never even notice it. I also liked Murnane's childhood memories of his 'imaginary racecourses' and his 'dream horses'; as a teenager I had a whole imaginary racing stable. And he still puts down his recreation as 'horseracing'; I like that too. So many writers seem to feel they should only put down their more intellectual recreations …

But the thing which surprised me most was his great-grandparents. I had always seen him as the quintessential Irish Catholic writer, if there is such a thing in Australia, and I think up to a point there is. Of my eight great-grandparents six were born in Ireland, one in England, and one in Australia. But nobody has ever seen me as the quintessentially anything writer …

*

February 26: George Hogg

*

George Hogg might be described as an 'innocent abroad'; a well-meaning young Englishman who came to China between the wars and fell first into journalism and then into school-teaching. Along the way he adopted four Chinese boys. He wrote a book of his experiences *I See a New China* but his sequel to this was lost in the turmoil as undoubtedly were many of his letters. But enough survived for James MacManus to piece together his life in war-ravaged China. He says of his book, "It was favourably reviewed on both sides of the Atlantic, although one reviewer criticised the author's 'adolescent tone' in writing about the twists and turns and endless atrocities of the Sino-Japanese war." And he quotes from Hogg's letters, 'Yes, I like the boys. They stop me getting too cynical. Tell Dorothy (his former sister-in-law) that one has to be cynical or blind to be here just now, but that I am fully aware of the danger. I have a very strong fundamental belief in boys. You say why live in a cave? well you come and try. It's cheaper to build, stronger, cooler in summer, warmer in winter, more rat proof, and more adaptable (you can dig a shelf whenever you want, add an extra cubby-hole or cupboard etc etc) … '

But the major action of his life was the long trek he made to take the boys of his school to safety in western China. MacManus writes, "Only a few miles from their destination, the convoy passed the western end of the Great Wall. This was not the majestic stone wall that rose and fell for almost four thousand miles over the mountains of northern China. Here on the edge of the Gobi desert it was then and remains now, a humbled mud rampart thirty feet high. Sandstorms, erosion and human activity had taken their toll of a wall largely built during the Ming dynasty. (1368 – 1644).

"Disappointing though it may have been on first sight, it was the wall that told Hogg that he was close to his destination. A day later, around 10 March 1945, the headmaster and his exhausted boys reached Shandan. They drove down a main street that was caked in ice and mud, and lined by double-storeyed wooden buildings. Most of them were empty. The population had fallen by over a third, to around twenty thousand. Many had fled south to Lanzhou, to escape fighting between Mao's guerrillas and the forces of the local warlord, Ma Bufang, years earlier." They moved into a deserted Buddhist temple and turned it into a home and a school. "He had created a school from the chaos of war. He had moved it against odds to the rim of the remote Gobi desert. He had rebuilt it as a refuge and place of safety for some sixty pupils." Sadly Hogg caught tetanus and died in Shandan but beyond the inspiration of his story and the love he inspired in a group of Chinese boys there is another aspect worth remembering. Today it seems nothing can be created, whether a school or a community centre or a clinic, unless money is forthcoming to buy photocopiers and faxes and mobile phones. Yet, ultimately it is the human spirit which creates … not technology. A lifetime later, his boys, now old men, remember him with affection for the opportunities he created for them.

*

February 27: Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

*

Some of the poems I was required to read as a child, and sometimes to learn by heart, are not things I would wish to come back to. I still remember my struggles with John Masefield's 'Cargoes'; for the life of me it just *wouldn't* stay in my memory. But there are exceptions. So here is one I recently re-read with pleasure …

I shot an arrow into the air,
It fell to earth, I knew not where;
For so swiftly it flew, the sight
Could not follow it in its flight.

I breathed a song into the air,
It fell to earth, I knew not where;
For, who has sight so keen and strong
That it can follow the flight of song?

Long, long afterward, in an oak
I found the arrow, still unbroke;
And the song, from beginning to end,
I found again in the heart of a friend.

'The Arrow and the Song' by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.

*

February 28: Henry James (d)

*

"Even had fear at first been sharp in him, moreover, it would already, not a little, have dropped; so happy, all round, so propitious, he quite might have called it, had been the effect of this rapid interval."

Henry James in *The Golden Bowl*.

I am not sure that I could bring myself to put 'quite might' in a story. Someone would be sure to describe it as pretentious. But pick up any novel by Henry James, open it at random, and you will find similar sentences. I know many women claim that Virginia Woolf invented a kind of 'feminine' writing. Long sentences, sometimes lyrical, sometimes merely convoluted. But I think Virginia Woolf, more than anyone else, can be described as Henry James' true heir. James died in 1916; the short stories and novels Woolf wrote in the 1920s and 1930s owe him more than a passing nod. Just how much I will leave to those who enjoy studying such sentences in intimate detail to decide …

*

February 29: Kalevala Day

*

The Kalevala is the epic poem of Finland—and I assumed that, like epic poems in other places, it was full of battles and bits of magic. A sort of Finnish variant of Beowulf perhaps …

But Beverley Farmer in *The Seal Woman* writes, "It was like the Kalevala of Finland when Väinämöinen the hero hooks a wonderful salmon that is no more a salmon than the god Loki was. He is about to slit it open when it leaps through his fingers out of the boat, and once back in the lake flouts him and is the girl Aino who was his promised bride; who drowned herself rather than be made to marry such an old man and whose blood is this lake, its fish her flesh, the trees and reeds of the banks her ribs, her hair. Aino that he always longed for and will never see again if he drags the waters forever with his net of silk."

I don't know if this bit of magic would draw readers to the Kalevala itself … but the other day Ursula Synge's version jumped off the library shelf and into my bag. The Kalevala isn't an epic in the way the Odyssey is. Rather it is a collection. She introduces it: "At the beginning of the nineteenth century Elias Lönnrot, a Finnish poet, scholar and folklorist, traveled through Finland collecting the songs or *runot* of the Finnish people. They were short songs but many of the same characters appeared in them over and over again and Lönnrot was convinced that he had found fragments of a lost epic which he set himself to piece together, combining separate songs into a whole and filling in the gaps with other fragments until, in 1835, he had completed a poem of 32 *runot* and comprising over twelve thousand lines. He continued to work on it and by 1849 it had become almost twice as long. He preserved all his manuscript material so that later scholars might follow the path he took. Many more recent folklorists have noted down *runot* from the mouths of the singers and reciters, but no connecting links between the various songs have ever been found and no one can prove or disprove the truth of Lönnrot's conviction that he had discovered a lost epic."

*

March 1: Charles Garvice (d)

*

A. S. Neill wrote in *A Dominie Dismissed*: "I was lunching with Professor John Adams one day in London. We got on to the subject of circulations, and he said that he had just been asking the biggest bookseller in London what novel sold best.

"Have a guess," said the Professor to me.

"*David Copperfield*," I said promptly.

He laughed.

"Not bad!" he said, "you've got the author right, but the book is *A Tale of Two Cities*."

He then asked me to guess what two authors sold best among the troops at the front during the war.

"Charles Garvice and Nat Gould," I said, and the Professor thought me a wonderful fellow for I had guessed aright."

I had certainly heard of Nat Gould, I even have a couple of his books on my shelf, but Charles Garvice was a closed book. (Unless I consider the enigmatic mention of his books in Dorothy Sayers' *Whose Body?*) Gould predominantly wrote racing stories but I assumed that Garvice wrote a different kind of book on the grounds that the troops would want a bit of variety. Since then I have found his writings described as 'romances' and 'melodramas'. But my next question naturally was: is it still possible to find any of his books? The men would not have had the time or perhaps the wish to read anything 'difficult' so what was it about his books which made them so popular? And did 'troops' also include Australians or was this a very British choice? I can certainly imagine the Anzacs lapping up Nat Gould … but Charles Garvice?

My son asked me what I would like for my birthday and I wondered if it might be possible to get a Charles Garvice to try. A couple of weeks later a box with three reprints of Garvice novels turned up. *The Woman's Way*. *Adrien Leroy*. And *Nell, of Shorne Mills – or, One Heart's Burden*.

And now I understand why Garvice was so popular. The books are light and lively without any pretensions to literary quality; full of coincidences, romantic, and unashamedly sentimental. For hundreds of thousands of men away from wives and sweethearts they could read a Garvice and enjoy the vicarious presence of girls who are invariably brave, kind, and full of life. They did not need to feel embarrassed in the way they might've felt if seen reading a female author. Yet they could feel homesick and nostalgic for all kinds of aspects of the feminine. Garvice writes of female fashion, of hair styles, of female-run households and skills—as well as more generally of horses, of changing political ideas, even of 'electric broughams', 'steam phonographs' and other new inventions. And all the way through each book the men could feel sentimental about these idealised

women—even if in all honesty they knew that the women waiting for them could not compare … but for a few hours they could dream … and forget …

*

March 2: Sarojini Naidu (d)

*

Eve Curie wrote in her WW2 travel book *Journey among Warriors* of her time in India: "I unpacked my bag in a room on the first floor, took a cool bath, put on a clean dress, and came down to meet the rest of the family and the various house guests. An uninformed foreigner could safely assume that anybody strikingly good-looking was bound to be Nehru's relative. Nehru's sister, Mrs. R.S. Pandit, was beautiful. She was a graceful woman with well-groomed grey hair, who had been a Congress minister in a provincial government and was now the president of the All-India Women's Congress. Nehru's daughter, Indira, was beautiful too—in a more fragile way. She was slender and pale, with a pensive, classical face. She could well have been born in Greece.

"My host's introductions had been hasty: Nehru seemed to have taken for granted that I would gather who everybody was—which I certainly did not. With some difficulty I located Mrs. Pandit's husband and Indira's fiancée, Feroze Gandhi, a young Parsee who was no relation to the famous Gandhi. I gave up finding out to whom belonged the little children with sparkling black eyes who played around the house. And it took me quite some time to discover that an elderly woman with a broad face, amazingly intelligent and witty, was no other than Madame Sarojini Naidu, the greatest Indian modern poet after Radindranath Tagore, a former Congress president and one of the leading figures in India's national life."

I had not heard of Sarojini Naidu, nor it seemed had most books about writers or women writers, but I finally found a 1949 obituary for her which said "Governor of the United Provinces, poet, orator, feminist, a close associate of Mahatma Gandhi in working for Indian independence" which seemed to me to be a pretty impressive record for a Bengali woman, indeed for a woman anywhere in the first half of the twentieth century. And what of her poetry? "Her mastery of metrical form and of jewelled phrase might have carried her much farther in the poetry of our time if she had not been caught up in the swift current of India's renaissance." This may be a euphemistic way of calling her poetry sentimental and overblown; although it could equally be argued that *The Times*' prose was overblown.

But I like to judge for myself; not least because there has been a tendency to diminish women's poetry because of its domestic details, its focus on love, on motherhood, on beauty and sorrow. So I have been looking for some of Mrs Naidu's poetry …

And in the unexpected way of things—I came upon her book *The Golden Threshold*. An elderly man called Ken Iredale died and his books were donated to us to put on Quaker stalls. Many of the books, old, with plain dark covers, and often with missing spines, were not immediately attractive to the casual browser but he had obviously had a deep interest in India, among other things, and the boxes of books were a trove of unexpected delights to me …

The Golden Threshold is what you could call juvenilia; poems she wrote in her teens and early twenties and reading them suggested a very young Christina Rossetti transported to India. So here is a little taste, bearing in mind that she continued to develop as a poet …

Lightly, O lightly we bear her along,
She sways like a flower in the wind of our song;
She skims like a bird on the foam of a stream,
She floats like a laugh from the lips of a dream.
Gaily, O gaily we glide and we sing,
We bear her along like a pearl on a string.

Softly, O softly we bear her along,
She hangs like a star in the dew of our song;
She springs like a beam on the brow of the tide,

She falls like a tear from the eyes of a bride.
Lightly, O lightly we glide and we sing,
We bear her along like a pearl on a string. ('Palanquin-Bearers')

A kokila called from a henna-spray:
Lira! liree! Lira! liree!
Hasten, maidens, hasten away
To gather the leaves of the henna-tree.
Send your pitchers afloat on the tide,
Gather the leaves ere the dawn be old,
Grind them in mortars of amber and gold,
The fresh green leaves of the henna tree.

A kokila called from a henna-spray:
Lira! Liree! Lira! Liree!
Hasten maidens, hasten away
To gather the leaves of the henna-tree.
The *tilka's* red for the brow of a bride,
And betel-nut's red for lips that are sweet;
But, for lily-like fingers and feet,
The red, the red of the henna-tree. ('In Praise of Henna')

In tattered robes that hoard a glittering trace
Of bygone colours, broidered to the knee,
Behold her, daughter of a wandering race,
Tameless, with the bold falcon's agile grace,
And the lithe tiger's sinuous majesty.

With frugal skill her simple wants she tends,
She folds her tawny heifers and her sheep
On lonely meadows when the daylight ends,
Ere the quick night upon her flock descends
Like a black panther from the caves of sleep.

Time's river winds in foaming centuries
Its changing, swift, irrevocable course
To far off and incalculable seas;
She is twin-born with primal mysteries,
And drinks of life at Time's forgotten source. ('The Indian Gipsy')

*

March 3: John Webster (d)

*

When I first came upon the information that no one knew when John Webster, author of *The White Devil* and *The Duchess of Malfi*, was born or died, where he had lived, who his wife was or how many children he had, I was surprised. He was well-known in his time. There *must* be some records. Or so I thought. Some of those questions have now been tentatively answered. And the thing which has drawn researchers to his life has been a renewed interest in some of his plays. There is undoubtedly a moral in there. You can be left to peaceful obscurity—if your life's work has only interested a few abstruse academics.

D. C. Gunby, introducing three of Webster's plays, says, "Until recently we knew little for certain about Webster's life. Even the dates usually given for his birth and death, 1580 and 1634, represented no more than intelligent guesses. The situation has improved considerably with the discoveries of Mary Edmond" which first appeared in *The Times Literary Supplement* in 1976. He

was born in London where his father John was a coachmaker and a member of the Merchant Taylors' Company. He had a brother Edward. His first, indeed most of his plays were collaborations and he worked slowly doing many drafts; with the coachmaking business probably as a useful safety net. He married a woman called Sara and had a number of children. "We do not know when Webster died. He may have been the John Webster buried at St James's, Clerkenwell, on 3 March 1638, though the fact that in 1634 Heywood's *Hierarchy of the Blessed Angels* refers to him, as to other dramatists then dead, in the past tense, has led scholars to conclude that he died earlier than this. As with so much of his biography, we can do no more than conjecture. And tantalizing though this state of affairs is, the uncertainty is not inappropriate. Webster's hero-villains die, characteristically, 'in a mist'. The dramatist does the same."

*

March 4: Sung Tz'u

*

Jessica Snyder Sachs wrote in *Time of Death*, "Meanwhile, half a world away, a nonmedical system of death investigation had taken root in China. Bamboo slips unearthed at sites dating to the Ch'in dynasty (221—207 B.C.) detail the procedures that civil servants were required to follow when summoned to examine a corpse found under suspicious circumstances. China's state-ordered death investigations grew in sophistication during the progressive Sung dynasty (A.D. 960 to 1279), culminating in the earliest known forensic handbook by Hsi Yuan Chi Lu, *The Washing Away of Wrongs*, in 1247.

"In it, the death investigator, Sung Tz'u describes how to ascertain time of death in each of the four seasons, by assessing the extent of a corpse's decomposition. He notes, for example, that during the cool months of spring, a visible reddening of the mouth, nose, and belly indicates a postmortem interval of two to three days. "After ten days, a foul liquid issues from the nose and ears," he continues, cautioning the homicide detective to take into consideration the build and previous health of the victim. "In fat and swollen people it is like this. Those long ill and emaciated will display these symptoms only after half a month."

Sachs gives some of his other observations including the rule-of-thumb that they multiply by five days the time required for decomposition markers in winter as compared with summer and she details one particular investigation: "On a sweltering afternoon, a group of farmers returning from their fields outside a small Chinese village found the slashed and bloodied body of a neighbor by the roadside. Fearing bandits, they sent for the provincial death investigator, who arrived to convene an official inquest. "Robbers merely want men to die so that they can take their valuables," he informed the gathered crowd. "Now the personal effects are there, while the body bears many wounds. If this is not a case of being killed by a hateful enemy, then what is it?" Nonetheless, questioning the victim's wife revealed no known enemies, at worst some hard feelings with a neighbor to whom her husband owed money."

Sung Tz'u asks all the men to come and bring their sickles. With all the blades laid out in the hot sun Sung Tz'u notes that "the flies flew about and gathered on one sickle", the sickle of the man who had lent money. "According to Sung Tz'u, "the bystanders were speechless, sighing with admiration. The murderer knocked his head on the ground and confessed." Today, flies on corpses are a key forensic tool although murderers seem less willing to knock their heads on the ground and confess.

Sachs says, "Yet Sung Tz'u and his students rendered their opinions without the benefit of any medical training. Indeed, physicians played little or no role in ancient Chinese homicide investigations, a situation that Asian legal scholar Brian McKnight attributes to their low social status. In this aspect, Chinese forensics had a clear counterpart in the nonmedical coroner system that appeared in England in the tenth century. McKnight even suggests a direct influence, with information about the Chinese system passed to England by way of the well-traveled courtiers of Sicily."

The other day while I was in the library I came upon a book called *Sun Tzu's The Art of War Plus The Art of Management* by Gary Gagliardi. The book usually translated as *The Art of War* he translates as *Strategy* (bing fa) and uses its tenets as management tools, for example, Sun Tzu writes:

Make war without a standard approach.
Water has no consistent shape.
If you follow the enemy's shifts and changes, you can always find a way to win.
We call this shadowing. And for Gagliardi this becomes:
You must avoid rigid plans and procedures.
Ideas have no consistent shape.
By following the shifts and changes in the situation you can always succeed.
This is called opportunism.

Managers turn to feng shui, zen, prayer breakfasts, meditation sessions, all kinds of inspirational gurus—so why not ancient Chinese writings—but my question was a different one. Was Sung Tz'u and Sun Tzu the same person? The answer is no. Sung Tz'u is described as a Judicial Intendant and wrote *The Washing Away of Wrongs* in 1247 AD. Sun Tzu was a general who wrote *The Art of War* at some time between 476 and 221 BC. They were separated by at least 1,500 years!

*

March 5: Rosa Luxemburg

*

Although Rosa Luxemburg was born in Poland she became a leading light in the German Social Democrat Party but was never really at home with most of the party. Mary-Alice Waters says of it, "The SPD which Rosa Luxemburg joined was a powerful and impressive organization; it was *the* great party of the Second International. While the Russians and the Poles were struggling to assemble a relative handful of members and organize them into something that functioned like a party, the SPD had an enormous power and influence, which grew steadily from the time it was founded in 1875 until it committed moral suicide with the outbreak of World War I. In 1912, for example, the SPD won four and a quarter million votes, or 34.7 percent of the total, making it the largest party in the Reichstag, with 110 deputies. By the beginning of 1914, SPD membership had passed the one million mark. The party published ninety daily papers which reached 1.4 million subscribers. It also had a large women's movement, a youth section, cooperatives, sports and cultural organizations, and several million workers in social-democratic-led trade unions. The capital assets of the SPD's various branches and activities were worth 21.5 million marks and some 3,500 people were employed in the party, trade-union, and related apparatuses. … It took the shock of World War I and the SPD's support of the war plans of German imperialism to convince the left wing that the SPD leadership was unwilling and unable to act in accordance with Marxist principles."

Rosa's dismay is not hard to understand given her own view: "The contradiction that is so obvious here is all the harder to understand since the democratic forms of political life in each land, as we shall see, actually involve the most valuable and even indispensable foundations of socialist policy, whereas the famous "right of self-determination of nations" is nothing but hollow, petty bourgeois phraseology and humbug.

"Indeed, what is this right supposed to signify? It belongs to the ABC of socialist policy that socialism opposes every form of oppression, including also that of one nation by another."

She believed working people should link hands across borders, that their bonds of oppression and exploitation would be broken as they increasingly saw themselves as a powerful mass not constrained by nationalism. If the SPD had publicly opposed the Kaiser's war plans it could have prevented World War I (and probably a later war); they had the numbers. But only one deputy refused to vote for war credits, Karl Liebknecht, and although it seems likely there would have been

ways around a bloc voting against war credits it would've taken time and in that time saner views might have prevailed.

Several SPD newspapers in Germany initially spoke out vigorously against the war.

Vorwaerts 25/7/1914. "They want the war, the unscrupulous elements that influence and determine the Wiener Hofburg. They want the war – it has been ringing out the wild cries of the black-yellow press for weeks. They want the war – the Austrian ultimatum to Serbia makes it plain and clear to the world.

"Because the blood of Franz Ferdinand and his wife flowed under the shots of an insane fanatic, shall the blood of thousands of workers and farmers be shed? Shall one insane crime be purged by another even more insane? … The Austrian ultimatum may be the torch that will set Europe in flames at all four corners."

Leipziger Volkszeitung 24/7/1914. "The Austrian military party has staked everything on one card, for in no country in the world has national and military chauvinism anything to lose. In Austria chauvinistic circles are particularly bankrupt, their nationalistic howls are a frantic attempt to cover up Austria's economic ruin, the robbery and murder of war to fill its coffers … "

Dresden Volkszeitung 24/71914. "Thus far the war maniacs of the Wiener Ballplatz have failed to furnish proof that would justify Austria in the demands that it has made upon Serbia. So long as the Austrian government is not in a position to do this, it places itself, by its provocative and insulting attacks upon Serbia, in a false position before all Europe. And even if Serbia's guilt was proven, even if the assassination in Sarajevo had actually been prepared under the eyes of the Serbian government, the demands made in the note are far in excess of normal bounds. Only the most unscrupulous war lust can explain such demands upon another state."

Schleswig-Holstein Volkszeitung 24/7/1914. "Austria is provoking Serbia. Austria-Hungary wants war, and is committing a crime that may drown all Europe in blood."

Frankfurter Volksstimme 24/7/1914. "Upheld by the agitation of the clerical press, which mourns in Franz Ferdinand its best friend and demands that his death be avenged upon the Serbian people, upheld by German war patriots whose language becomes daily more contemptible and more threatening, the Austrian government has allowed itself to be driven to send an ultimatum to Serbia couched in language that for presumptuousness, leaves little to be desired; containing demands whose fulfillment by the Serbian government is manifestly impossible."

But within a month this clarity and common sense had been dumped and the papers were supporting the German war machine …

Yet there are ironies in the whole debate. Not least that the spread of imperialism spread industrialisation and created a working class where none had been. Industrialisation itself was a bourgeois creation. Without it you had farm labourers, artisans' guilds, small mills and piece-work. And it isn't surprising that Hitler incorporated 'Socialism' in his title; the SPD had shown what a well-organised party for the working man could achieve in terms of size and influence …

But self-determination has its place. Small nations, colonised peoples, oppressed minorities, persecuted ethnic and religious minorities want recognition and some control over their lives and resources. To be bundled in amongst people who take their sense of nationhood for granted and then told to believe in the greater good, the workers of the world unite, can gain them organising skills, access to influential people, a sense of solidarity, yet people understandably don't find that enough.

Luxemburg was right to see the dangers in nationalism. Yet self-determination does have a vital role to play at times. But nationalism as a belief should then decline as nationhood is achieved. Nations which maintain or increase their nationalistic fervour, their constant calls to patriotism, their jingoism, are nations with big problems at the centre of their collective psyche—and those big problems have a way of being turned outward on to other nations or inward on to powerless minorities …

*

March 6: Steve Vizard

*

Steve Vizard wrote a book *Two Weeks in Lilliput* about attending a convention on a republic for Australia, he wrote hundreds of skits and sketches and material for TV shows like *Fast Forward* and his own show *Tonight Live* but probably the most important book in his life was Steven Bedwell's *Vizard Uncut*—for its exposure of the shoddy way the Australian Securities and Investment Commission treated him in their determination to get a high-profile scalp and for its exposure of the media which having helped to build him up to celebrity status now brought him down in screaming tabloidy headlines of blatant untruth.

He was rather careless and slipshod in his duties as a company director, he tried to do too much, he didn't read the fine print, he trusted people who weren't trustworthy—but that is not insider trading, theft, dishonesty or any of the other claims the media threw at him. It is perhaps a parable for our times. The media is a fickle lover and it rarely does its homework properly. That is why it is a pleasure to sit down to a column from someone like Sue Neales who does give every indication of coming at it with deep thought and a commitment to honesty and fairness.

I was appalled by the way the media here treated Sue Neill-Fraser. Claims that were only brought forward tentatively in court, and with no supporting evidence, hardened into certainty in the hands of the media. At no time did they canvass the possibility she was innocent of murdering Bob Chappell, and I *am* convinced she is innocent, but rather it was presented as a wicked greedy woman getting her just desserts. It is frightening that that kind of power rests in a reporter's laptop or cell phone. Yes, the media *does* sometimes do excellent work in getting an innocent person out of jail. Unfortunately it is usually one dedicated person working with little support to present an alternative picture and rouse community and official concern rather than a commitment to truth and fairness intrinsic to the medium.

Curiously Steve Vizard is my fourth cousin, a relationship too remote to mean anything these days when there are no big extended clans in the one village or district (in this case Co. Roscommon in Ireland), and I have never met him. But in a way I was very grateful to Steven Bedwell for his book. I want the world to think well even of distant cousins. And I want the world to treat people *fairly*. And I have found very distant family members guilty of far worse things than minor breaches of the *Corporations Act* …

But one thing which struck me while I was reading Bedwell's book was that Vizard's brand of humour could be very effective in achieving outcomes where more serious interviews could not. To end on a lighter note: "*Tonight Live* occasionally tried to use comedy as a vehicle for social awareness. In 1992, author and holocaust denier David Irving, a man whose ideals Vizard found reprehensible, was trying to visit Australia to promote an anti-Semitic book he had written. The story was hot property at the time and Irving was booked to appear on the show via satellite. Initially, an academic was booked to debate Irving. But Irving was a slick and polished performer when it came to defending his work against critics, so Vizard decided he needed different tactics. Vizard and comedian Gerry Connolly appeared on set wearing Nazi uniforms. Instead of debating Irving, Vizard agreed with every one of Irving's ludicrous propositions, and in doing so highlighted their stupidity. The onslaught of Vizard's irony rendered Irving's theories impotent and absurd. Irving's whole persona was predicated on being attacked; he was not comfortable being greeted with a 'sympathetic' ear. The switchboard at Channel 7 ran hot as people rang to congratulate Vizard."

*

March 7: Angels …

*

The other day I heard Ramona Kovall on the Book Show on ABC Radio asking why angels are suddenly flavour-of-the-month, popping up in both fiction and faction. Her guests said angels had always been hovering around, in historical works, in paintings, in theology, in fiction, but

perhaps their current popularity had something to do with reassurance in uncertain times. Ideas and symbols …

A few days afterwards I was reading some of the *Selected Non-fictions* of Jorge Luis Borges. I knew he wrote very difficult stories and more conventional poems. But like the blurb-writer's "It will come as a surprise to many readers that the greater part of Jorge Luis Borges's extraordinary writing was not in the genres of fiction or poetry, but in various forms of non-fiction prose" I had never considered him in connection with non-fiction. In fact, in the years before he went blind, he was a prolific writer of articles, essays, op-ed pieces, film and book reviews, for newspapers and magazines in Buenos Aires.

And he turned to angels in an edition of *La Prensa*, 7th March 1926. He called it 'A History of Angels': "The angels are two days and two nights older than we: the Lord created them on the fourth day, and from their high balcony between the recently invented sun and the first moon they scanned the infant earth, barely more than a few wheatfields and some orchards beside the waters. These primitive angels were stars. For the Hebrews, the concepts of angel and star merged effortlessly: I will select, from among many, the passage of the Book of Job (38:7) in which the Lord spoke out of the whirlwind and recalled the beginning of the world, "When the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy." Quite apparently, these sons of God and singing stars are the same as angels. Isaiah, too (14:12), calls the fallen angel "the morning star," a phrase Quevedo did not forget when he called him "*lucero inobediente, ángel amotinado*" [defiant star, rebel angel]. This equivalency between stars and angels (those populators of nighttime solitudes) strikes me as beautiful; it is among the distinctions of the Hebrews that they vitalized the astral bodies with souls, exalting their brilliance into life.

From beginning to end, the Old Testament throngs with angels. Here are ambiguous angels who come along the straight paths of the plain and whose superhuman nature cannot immediately be divined; there are angels brawny as farmhands, like the one who fought with Jacob a whole night until the breaking of the day; there are regimental angels, like the captain of the Lord's host who appeared to Joshua; there are angels who threaten cities and others who are like expert guides through solitude; the angels in God's engines of war number two thousand times a thousand. The best-equipped angelary, or arsenal of angels, is the Revelation of St. John: there are the strong angels, who cast out the dragon; those who stand at the four corners of the earth so that it does not blow away; those who change a third part of the sea to blood; those who gather up the clusters of the vine of the earth and cast them into the great winepress of the wrath of God; those who are implements of wrath; those who are bound in the great river Euphrates and let loose like tempests; those who are a mixture of eagle and man.

Islam, too, knows of angels. The Muslims of Cairo live blotted out by angels, the real world virtually deluged by the angelic, for according to Edward William Lane, each follower of the Prophet is assigned two guardian angels, or five, or sixty, or one hundred sixty.

The Celestial Hierarchy, erroneously attributed to the Greek convert Dionysius and composed around the fifth century of our era, is a highly documented ranking of angelic order that distinguishes, for example, between the cherubim and the seraphim, allocating to the first the full, perfect, and overflowing vision of God and to the second an eternal ascension toward Him in a gesture both ecstatic and trembling, like a sudden blaze rushing upward. Twelve hundred years later, Alexander Pope, archetype of the learned poet, would recall this distinction when he penned his famous line: "As the rapt seraph, that adores and burns …"

Theologians, admirable in their intellectualism, did not shrink from angels and tried to penetrate this world of wings and mirages with their reasoning minds. This was no uncomplicated matter, for angels had to be defined as beings superior to man but necessarily inferior to divinity. The German speculative theologian Rothe records numerous examples of the push and pull of this dialectic. His list of angelic attributes merits consideration: those attributes include intellectual force; free will; immateriality (capable, however, of accidentally uniting itself with matter); aspatiality (neither taking up any space nor being enclosed by it); lasting duration, with a beginning

but without end; invisibility, and even immutability, an attribute that harbors them in the eternal. As for the faculties they exercise, they are granted the utmost suppleness, the power of conversing among themselves instantaneously without words or signs, and that of working wonders, but not miracles. They cannot create from nothing or raise the dead. The angelic zone that lies halfway between God and man is, it would seem, highly regulated.

The Kabbalists also made use of angels. Dr. Erich Bischoff, in his German book entitled *The Elements of the Kabbalah*, published in Berlin in 1920, enumerates the ten *sefiroth*, or eternal emanations of divinity, and makes each correspond to one of the regions of the sky, one of the names of God, one of the Ten Commandments, one part of the human body, and one class of angels. Stehelin, in his *Rabbinical Literature*, links the first ten letters of the *aleph-beth*, or alphabet of the Hebrews, to these ten lofty worlds. Thus the letter *aleph* corresponds to the brain, the First Commandment, the sky of fire, the divine name "I Am That I Am," and the seraphim known as the Sacred Beasts. Those who accuse the Kabbalists of imprecision are clearly mistaken. They were, instead, fanatics of reason, and they delineated a world of deification by installments that was nevertheless as rigorous and causal as the one we feel now….

Such a swarm of angels cannot have avoided meddling in literature. The examples are inexhaustible. In the sonnet by Juan de Jáuregui to St. Ignatius Loyola, the angel retains his biblical strength, his combative seriousness:

Ved sobre el mar, porque su golfo encienda
El angel fuerte, de pureza armado.

[Look to the sea, for its gulf is set aflame/by the strong angel, armed with purity.]

For Luis de Góngora, the angel is a valuable decorative trinket, good for gratifying ladies and children:

¿Cuándo sera aquel día que por yerro
oh, Serfin, desates, bien nacido,
Con manos de Cristal nudos de Hierro?

[When will the day be that in error/oh, Seraph, you unloose, well-born,/Knots of Iron with your Crystalline hands?]

In a sonnet by Lope de Vega, I ran across the agreeable and very twentieth-century metaphor:

Cuelgan racimos de ángeles
[Clusters of angels dangle]

And these angels, with a whiff of the countryside about them, are from Juan Ramón Jiménez:

Vagos ángeles malvas
apagaban las verdes estrellas

[Vague angels, mauve as mallows,/ were putting out the green stars]

Here we arrive at the near miracle that is the true motive for this writing: what we might call the survival of the angel. The human imagination has pictured a horde of monsters (tritons, hippogriffs, chimeras, sea serpents, unicorns, devils, dragons, werewolves, Cyclopes, fauns, basilsks, demigods, leviathans, and a legion of others) and all have disappeared, except angels. Today, what line of poetry would dare allude to the phoenix or make itself the promenade of a centaur? None; but no poetry, however modern, is unhappy to be a nest of angels and to shine brightly with them. I always imagine them at nightfall, in the dusk of a slum or a vacant lot, in that long, quiet moment when things are gradually left alone, with their backs to the sunset, and when colors are like memories or premonitions of other colors. We must not be too prodigal with our angels; they are the last divinities we harbor, and they might fly away."

More extraordinary than his choice of subject matter is, to my mind, the image of ordinary people in Buenos Aires sitting down to their breakfast paper and coffee to start the day with a slice of Borges …

*

March 8: Anon 'Frank the Poet'

*

The early balladeer known as Frank the Poet is thought to have been an Irish convict, Frank McNamara also known as Frank Goddard, who was transported for passing counterfeit notes and spent time in Port Arthur. And he is thought to be the author of a ballad called 'The Convict's Tour of Hell'—

Come all you prisoners of New South Wales,
Who frequent watch-houses and gaols;
A story unto you I'll tell,
About a convict's tour of hell.

This hero's valour had been tried,
Upon the highway before he died.
At length he fell to death a prey,
Which prov'd to him a happy day.
Downward he went, as I've been told,
Like one that's destined to Satan's fold,
Until he came to the River Styx,
When Charon's gaze was on him fixed.
'Friend!' said he, 'whence comest thou?
Thy name and business I must trow!'
'Well old Craft if you wish to know it
On earth they called me "Frank the Poet".'
'Oh well! Fivepence or sixpence I daily charge,
For a light passage in my barge,
But witty guest, I'd have you know it,
I never intend to charge a poet.'
So with a fair wind and flowing tide,
We wherry'd over to the other side,
Where leaving Charon at the ferry,
I journeyed on to Purgatory.

Here he finds the pope and sundry prelates but as he moves on to Hell itself he finds it stuffed with colonial officials, some remembered like Captain Logan and Governor Darling, some like Murray and Williams and Flood and Morrison and Clunie forgotten. Captain Cook is also there; his unforgiveable sin: finding New South Wales for King George.

And yonder see those fiery chairs?
They're fitted up for Beaks and Mayors,
And men of all judicial orders,
Traps, bankers, lawyers and recorders.'
Only one of these is given a name:
He next beheld that noted trapman
And police-runner, Israel Chapman.

But the convict is not wanted in Hell and instead finds himself let into Heaven.

'Peter,' the Son said, 'Let Frank in,
For he is truly purged from sin;'

And then he wakes and finds it was all a dream. It's rousing stuff and Frank was obviously a man of some education. But the real question in there is: what happens in the next life if we have paid, as the convicts did, or not paid in the sense of 'getting away with' everything from minor misdemeanours to major crimes. If you don't believe in the next life, an existence beyond death, you probably see the question as irrelevant. Although not believing is not the same thing as not existing in a future dimension. Do our mistakes and misbehaviours remain to haunt us? I think many convicts did find some comfort in the belief that they had paid, more than paid at times, and it

would not be them but brutal overseers and dishonest officials who were fettered at the entrance to Eternity …

*

March 9: Mickey Spillane

*

Spillane is famous for advising writers, when they get bogged down in the middle reaches of a novel, to bring on a man with a gun. This might be suitable advice for fellow writers of his kind of thriller. But when you get bogged down in your romance, your literary novel of campus life, your farce set in the theatre world—well, it would take greater skill to make your man with a gun into a realistic fit than it would be to solve your plotting problems. Though it would, of course, liven up your average romance or literary novel. It might be just the thing in a theatrical farce. Is it a prop or not?

I came upon a description of William Gay's novel *The Long Home* "Gay writes with the wisdom and patience of a man who has witnessed hard times" (*New York Times Book Review*) but is patience a quality you expect in your favourite writer? More to the point, how patient should a writer expect his readers to be? I have a simple way of dividing the sheep from the goats; the best writers carry you through the quietest times in their books by the quality of their writing, less good writers make you start thinking about putting down the book and going and making yourself a little snack …

But I was curious. Did Mickey Spillane follow his own advice—and if so does it improve the book? The other day I noticed two Mickey Spillane's in the library, *The Killing Man* and *The Goliath Bone*, and brought them home to see what he did in the middle of his own books. And the answer is …

He doesn't need to bring on a man with a gun, men and sometimes women are popping in and out with guns all the time. Guns are a preoccupation for Spillane and his hero Mike Hammer; buying them, carrying them, comparing them, thinking about them, discussing them. Guns saturate the books. The question might be: is Mickey Spillane a natural example of the American obsession with guns or did Mickey Spillane encourage American readers to be obsessed with guns?

More to the point, they just aren't very good books. As thrillers they are simplistic. As mysteries they aren't mysterious. As an emotional experience they provide no highs and lows. They reminded me a little of Perry Mason, with the angst against the District Attorney and most police, and the loyal secretary here called Velda, but Perry Mason is clever and interesting by comparison, his characters more developed, and he is never obsessed by guns. In his 1964 novel *The Case of the Deadly Toy* Erle Stanley Gardner has Perry Mason say, 'Nowadays, boys go around with their toy pistols and think nothing of pointing them at somebody and saying: "Boom! You're dead!" You can see what it's doing. Pick up the paper almost any day and you see where some child ten, twelve or fifteen years old killed off a parent because he was mad at not being allowed to go to a movie. I don't know what the world's coming to when—' Spillane's character can be compared to other heroes such as Philip Marlowe but again he comes up wanting. His books have been described as 'blue collar fiction' but that seems to demean the intelligence of blue collar readers.

In *The Goliath Bone* two youngsters have unearthed a huge thigh bone in Israel and have smuggled it out of the country. It was obviously a story to cash in on anti-Arab feeling post 9/11 but it simply doesn't work. He refers to both Iranians and Philistines as Arabs. But despite the connection of Philistine to Palestine the Philistines weren't Arabs any more than the Iranians are. They were part of the mysterious Sea People, thought to have come from Crete to the coasts of the eastern Mediterranean. Yet Osama bin Laden is portrayed as desperate to get the bone. It is never explained why a man from Saudi Arabia would see it as a must-have symbol and without believing in its importance to fanatical Muslims all the killing just seems pointless.

I think, for many reasons, I won't be going to Mickey Spillane for advice when my next book falls into the doldrums and I can't see my way out …

*

March 10: Philo of Alexandria

*

We do not know the date of his birth, we do not even know the year. The best guess is that he was born somewhere between 15 and 10 BC and died somewhere between 45 and 50 AD. Philo Judaeus, better known as Philo of Alexandria, was a Greek-speaking Jewish philosopher who lived in Alexandria on the northern coast of Egypt which was then home to a large Jewish community.

When the Dead Sea Scrolls, from caves near Qumran, burst into the archeological and religious worlds many people tried very hard to link both Jesus and John the Baptist to this ascetic, strict, rule-and-purity-obsessed, predominantly celibate mostly male monastic community. Those bold assertions seem to have faded, perhaps through lack of evidence, but I think too because of the clarity with which Philo described the Essene community nearly two thousand years ago. In *The Essene Writings from Qumran* A. Dupont-Sommer wrote, "The two earliest accounts of the Essenes are those written by Philo of Alexandria; one appears in his treatise *Quod omnis probus liber sit*, and the other in his *Apologia pro Judaeis*. This last book is now lost, but Eusebius of Caesarea quotes the passage on the Essenes in his *Praeparatio Evangelica*, Book VIII, Chapter 11. Although the exact date of these writings is unknown, Philo was born around 30 B.C. and pursued his literary activities until at least A.D. 40." His writings include:

"14. On the other hand, shrewdly providing against the sole or principal obstacle threatening to dissolve the bonds of communal life, they banned marriage at the same time as they ordered the practice of perfect continence. Indeed, no Essaean takes a woman because women are selfish, excessively jealous, skilful in ensnaring the morals of a spouse and in seducing him by endless charms.

"15. Women set out to flatter, and wear all sorts of masks, like actors on the stage; then, when they have bewitched the eye and captured the ear, when, that is to say, they have deceived the lower senses, they next lead the sovereign mind astray.

"16. On the other hand, if children are born, they then declare with audacious arrogance, and swollen with pride and effrontery, what they were formerly content to insinuate hypocritically by means of allusions, and shamelessly employ violence to commit actions all of which are contrary to the good of the common life.

"17. The husband, bound by his wife's spells, or anxious for his children from natural necessity, is no more the same towards the others, but unknown to himself he becomes a different man, a slave instead of a freeman.

"18. The life of the Essaeans is indeed so enviable that not only individuals but even great kings are seized with admiration before such men, and are glad to pay homage to their honourable character by heaping favours and honours upon them."

A few skeletons of women and children have been found in the cemetery outside Qumran but we do not know if occasionally the rule was stretched to allow a married man to enter the community or whether men were sometimes given permission to bury mothers and other female relatives in the cemetery. The numbers are too small to seriously challenge Philo's assertions.

Both Philo and the Essenes come across as thoroughly misogynistic; but although the Gospels were all filtered through patriarchal mind-sets they are *not* notable for their misogyny. They have some beautiful writings about women. The question remains, though, to what extent Essene writings and beliefs and attitudes had infiltrated the wider community. Though they were very secretive there was a constant small stream of men arriving and departing and the Essenes as a sect existed for around two centuries, though not always at Qumran, so their general ideas must have been quite well-known to the wider Jewish world …

Although Philo's descriptions don't make the Essene communities seem an attractive way of life the thing which struck me about his writing on the Essenes was its clarity and simplicity and I took a few minutes to see what else was known about his life …

And the answer is: not much. We know he had a brother Alexander Lysimachus who was counted the richest man in Alexandria. We know he was part of the large Jewish community in

Alexandria. We know he went to Rome to protest against mistreatment of the Alexandrian Jews by Caligula, who was unsympathetic, leading Philo to tell his community not to be down-hearted, Caligula's days were numbered—as indeed they were; Caligula being assassinated a few weeks later. But beyond that we have few practical details but a lot of insight into his ideas, beliefs, and attitudes, via his writings. And the twin pillars of his philosophy were religious faith and humanity, including the belief that repentance was a strength, not a weakness as many people in the ancient world (and the modern too) saw it … So if the early Christians drew on this part of his philosophy then I think they chose wisely and his writings might still have something worthwhile to say to the modern world … It is just a pity they let his obvious approval of anti-women attitudes infiltrate …

*

March 11: Douglas Adams

*

"It can hardly be a coincidence that no language on Earth has ever produced the expression "as pretty as an airport".

"Airports are ugly. Some are very ugly. Some attain a degree of ugliness that can only be the result of a special effort."

Douglas Adams in *The Long Dark Tea-Time of the Soul*.

*

March 12: Anon

*

From *Scottish Lore and Folklore* compiled by Ronald Macdonald Douglas. 'The Low Road': "An old Celtic belief—current still in Scotland, and not only in Scotland, but in Ireland, too, and in Wales and Brittany—has it that when a man meets with death in a foreign land, his spirit returns to the place of his birth by an underground fairy way—The Low Road.

"In 1745, during the retreat of the Scottish army following its invasion of England, several of the wounded had, unfortunately, to be left behind in Carlisle as they could not struggle further. Many of them fell into the hands of the English and were flung into Carlisle gaol. The song *The Bonnie Banks o' Loch Lomond*, which was undoubtedly written at the period, tells of two of the Scottish prisoners—one of whom was to be released, and who would take The High Road home to Scotland, whilst the other, who was to be executed, would take The Low Road. As the release of one and the execution of the other were timed for the same hour, the Dead, travelling by The Low Road with the speed of a spirit, would, naturally—or supernaturally—be in Scotland before the Living, who would have to tramp several weary miles of The High Road before he could hope to cross the Border.

"If this little story were better known we might have *The Bonnie Banks o' Loch Lomond* sung more in the spirit in which it should be sung, and less in the entirely wrong, but more customary, spirit of vainglorious ranting."

"I could see Linda peering into the north towards the land of her people, and watching her I could not but compare the Aboriginal's belief in reincarnation and the soul's return to the same belief once held by the ancestors of Stuart's Scottish race, a belief that gave rise to the thoughts expressed in that ballad first sung at Carlisle during the war that ended at Culloden. The song was 'Loch Lomond', the plaintive melody sung to a prisoner who was about to die, sung by his sweetheart who would be returning on the morrow as the soul of her loved one would be flying back to their cultural home."

Bill Harney in *Grief, Gaiety and Aborigines*.

*

March 13: Lady (Phyllis Dorothy) Cilento

*

Lady Cilento is remembered I suppose as the mother of Diane, as a founder of Mothercraft, as a massive popper of vitamin pills, as the brief employer of Oodgeroo Noonuccal—and my mother

had this little story of a neighbour, Margaret Baines, going to work as a very junior nurse in a Brisbane hospital in the late 1950s. Lady Cilento asked her to bring a jug of hot water. She found a tap and a jug and brought the hot water but Lady Cilento said, "No, no, dear, that's tepid. I want *hot* water." So Margaret went off, up and down long corridors, trying to find some really hot water, but without luck. She finally came back to the original tap, filled her jug and took it back in great trepidation. But when she got there Lady Cilento tested the water and said, "That's exactly what I wanted!"

Recently I came across a snippet to say Cilento's first publication was *Square Meals for the Family* which came out in 1934. In her autobiography *My Life* she says of it, "When the Great Depression hit Queensland many families were on unemployment relief. Mothers were much in need of advice and help in making ends meet and providing their children with the most nourishing food obtainable for the money. As an honorary out-patient physician at the Children's Hospital, I had reason to know this fact. I knew also that many children were suffering from malnutrition, largely owing to their mothers' ignorance of food values and economical buying and preparation.

"The (Mothercraft) Association was asked by the Home Secretary to prepare a simple booklet on how to feed the family economically. Accordingly, with the help of Mrs. Jean Lovegrove I prepared a pamphlet, *Square Meals for the Family*, which was published by the Association and distributed throughout Queensland. It proved very useful to mothers but the economy measures we suggested became a political football at the time, and the government would have no part in it." She was in Canberra when the political storm broke. "I was not there, however, to feel the impact of criticism from the newly-elected Labor Party government. I became the "Dame who wanted workers to eat bullocks 'eart and drippin'." How dare I, a "silvertail", suggest such poor food for the noble workers!" But the target readership was of course the desperate wives of men out of work. And 'bullocks 'eart' remains a cheap and nourishing food. We had it regularly as children. "Nevertheless, the book proved so useful that in 1939 a new edition was printed with Labor's blessing and a foreword by the Labor Premier, the Hon. Forgan-Smith" … the wheel turns and in the day of the takeaway meal and the fizzy drink perhaps it is time to reintroduce families to the bullock's heart …

*

March 14: Albert Einstein

*

The other day I was reading a book called *Notes from the Esplanade* by Igor Gelbach in which a Russian writer is being urged to write a novel about Albert Einstein. He has a problem though. Surely everything that can be said has already been said? How can he find a new aspect of Einstein?

When I see new biographies of the same people stream on to the market every few years, all saying pretty much the same thing, I find myself wondering if the problem is that the pool is too small, is it that publishers know that a new biography of Jane Austen will sell, that there are too many academics needing to publish … who knows? But I always picture them praying that someone will discover a totally unknown manuscript, a secret cache of letters, evidence of a mysterious affair—and even, hope against hope, a secret love child! Anything to raise their book above the pack.

Sometimes writers step out and find someone fascinating and forgotten. I was listening to an interview with a woman who had written a biography about 'Blind Tom', a blind and autistic nineteenth century slave in the USA who found fame as a pianist and composer. I had never heard of him and thought the book sounded interesting. Sometimes writers looking for another angle look at spouses and children. I have come upon biographies of the wives of Tennyson, Wilde, Joyce, Yeats, Eliot … but except in the period before their marriage these aren't really *their* biographies; rather they are the 'great man' seen, yet again, but this time through the eyes of the 'little wife' …

I like the way Janet Malcolm writes about thoroughly-written-about subjects, Chekhov, Sylvia Plath, Gertrude Stein, in that she is more interested in what the biographer does with the life, that element of digging in other lives, of using other people's material, of trying to lift out defining moments from a life, of dealing with relatives and fans. I don't always agree with her views and she, at times, generates controversy such as her book about a New York psychiatrist, Jeffrey Massouff Masson, where my sympathies were more with him. But she almost always makes a well-worked-over subject still sound interesting, more interesting than those doorstop biographies in which the minutiae of a life is set out at inordinate length yet without necessarily helping the subject to come 'alive'. Her books are a glimpse not a sentence.

I am sure the writer willing to put years into it could come up with a few new little snippets about Einstein, perhaps people who still have memories of him or overlooked articles, but the idea has an unease in it. Einstein's published work clearly is in the public domain. Anyone can write and say and think anything they like about it. But is a *life* in the public domain? And even if public figures like Einstein accept that everything they have done and said will be raked over, sometimes helping along the process by donating private papers to libraries or universities, it doesn't mean that the people around them, whose lives they have touched, have accepted this same level of intrusion. And there is something vaguely unpleasant in that image of the biographer raking over all the little mistakes and failures of a human life in the hope of finding the 'big' mistake, the 'big' failure, which will justify yet another 'big' book …

*

'The most incomprehensible thing about the universe is that it is comprehensible.'

Albert Einstein.

*

March 15: Robert Nye

*

Robert Nye:in his book of poems *The Rain and the Glass* has this piece:

Love is the name they give out in Tasmania
To Traveller's Joy, which some call Virgin's Bower.
The thing itself is sweet, though not as mania
Would have us say, nor bitter in its flower
As those made mad by it sometimes protest.
It is as good a plant as all the rest—
No less, no more. In English parts, you see,
The name for this same thing is Honesty.
Here's honesty for you. Long may it live!
I'd give you love, if I had love to give.

'A Bit of Honesty'

It reminded me of that little bit in Jean Webster's *Daddy-Long-Legs* in which the students are given a poem and asked to explain it. "In English class this afternoon we had an unexpected written lesson. This was it:

I asked no other thing,
No other was denied.
I offered Being for it ;
The mighty merchant smiled.

Brazil ? He twirled a button
Without a glance my way :

But, madam, is there nothing else
That we can show today?

That is the poem. I don't know who wrote it or what it means. It was simply printed out on the blackboard when we arrived and we were ordered to comment upon it. When I read the first verse I thought I had an idea—The Mighty Merchant was a divinity who distributes blessings in return for virtuous deeds—but when I got to the second verse and found him twirling a button, it seemed a blasphemous supposition, and I hastily changed my mind. The rest of the class was in the same predicament; and there we sat for three quarters of an hour with blank paper and equally blank minds."

I often have that blank feeling after reading a poem. It *must* have underlying meanings, otherwise it doesn't make much sense, but just what those meanings are … And Emily Dickinson's poems, like that one, are not immune from my incomprehension …

Garden Honesty, *Lunaria annua*, I have also heard called 'the Pope's Money' and it supposedly got its name from the idea of a transparent purse, with the coins inside visible, but is this what the poem is about? The symbolism of something valuable hidden yet faintly visible? Intriguing.

*

March 16: Sully Prudhomme

*

French poet Sully Prudhomme has one claim to fame. He won the first Nobel Prize for Literature. This was in 1901 and many people believed it should have gone to Tolstoy. At first glance this seems to make sense. Tolstoy was undoubtedly the greater writer. But the prize is based on a writer's current work, not on a general lifetime of achievement, and Tolstoy's most famous books like *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina* were well in his past. He hadn't written anything to really grab the literary world in his later years.

It must have been hard for Sully Prudhomme to live with the idea that he was a kind of imposter, that he had only got the prize by default. So the question might be—had he done anything worth the prize? And, more fundamentally, who was Sully Prudhomme?

He was born René François Armand Prudhomme in Paris in 1839 and trained as an engineer which led him to an interest in 'scientific poetry'. He was damaged in the Franco-Prussian War and never fully recovered, becoming a recluse in his later years. He was also an essayist, philosopher, and poet. The Nobel Committee gave as their reason for choosing him that it was "in special recognition of his poetic composition, which gives evidence of lofty idealism, artistic perfection and a rare combination of the qualities of both heart and intellect" which seems to suggest they gave him the prize because he was a nice man! But I think there is, and should always be, room to recognise the 'artist who has painted beautifully on a small canvas'. Not everyone is going to paint the Sistine Chapel ceiling. But a beautifully executed miniature also has its place. I wonder if that idea was on the Committee's collective mind?

The *Guide to French Literature* by Anthony Levi answers my question. He writes 'Edmond Gosse, writing in 1910, when Sully Prudhomme's poetic achievement was much more highly esteemed than it now is, defined the originality of his personality in terms of the combination of "a soul aspiring to what lies above and beyond science, and a conscience perpetually in agitation." ' And, perhaps more pertinently, 'Alfred Nobel, whose will established the celebrated five annual prizes, had died in 1896, and when Sully Prudhomme was awarded the prize for literature on 8 December 1901 the will's stipulation that the work should show an "idealist" tendency was interpreted more literally than it has subsequently been. Sully Prudhomme gave most of the money to found a prize for poetry to be awarded by the Société des Gens de Lettres. He strongly championed Dreyfus in the famous dispute, but after the turn of the century lived in isolation and suffered ill health. His paralysis got worse before his sudden death on 6 September 1907.'

*

March 17: Olive Pink

*

Bob Reece wrote in *Daisy Bates: Grand dame of the desert*: "Until Ernestine Hill's visit in June 1932, the only person other than Miss Ruxton who was allowed to share her accommodation (sleeping in the store tent) was Miss Olive Pink, an artist from Sydney whom Daisy treated as an apprentice fieldworker. She described Pink's visit as 'a delight', but so tiring that she had to go to bed immediately afterwards to recover. The 'jolly little artist' had 'blown in' and cooked for them both, befriending the Aborigines who called her *mallaing* (sister) and were thrilled to 'sit' for her paintings. Influenced by Daisy's methods and lifestyle, but rejecting her 'dying race' assumptions about the Aborigines, Pink's future career as a self-taught anthropologist was largely inspired by the basic instruction Daisy provided. It was also to be blighted by the same male academic anthropologists who dismissed Daisy as an amateur."

In fact Olive Pink did have training in anthropology, something some of her male critics did not. She was born in Hobart in 1884 and it was not until she was forty-five that she paid her first visit to Central Australia. Julie Marcus introducing her biography *The Indomitable Miss Pink* says, "Yet that word (anthropologist) gives no clue to the years of political agitation nor to the public and private campaigning through which Olive Pink sought to bring into existence her own vision of true equality for the tribal Aborigines of central Australia, an equality securely underpinned by full human rights and by cultural and economic independence. From the 1920s until her death in 1975, she monitored the actions of governments, civil servants, missions, academics, pastoralists, the courts and the police and wrote sharply worded criticisms to those whom she expected to remedy the defects she observed. When they failed to act, she took her concerns direct to the newspapers, to politicians, to the departmental heads of government departments, or even higher."

She did not mince her words. Assimilation was 'Camouflaged extinction'; she regarded the removal of children to missions as forced, unconscionable and utterly uncivilised. She spoke up for full wages for Aboriginal people, for their rights to pensions, for the need for support in court and interpreters, for protection for Aboriginal girls and women from white sexual predators, by insisting that secret information given to researchers should not be published, and for land rights which would give them genuine rights over minerals, waters, access, and land. Missionaries, pastoralists, miners, bureaucrats, police, politicians and other anthropologists hit back, not by dealing with the matters she raised but by criticising the woman herself. She was eccentric, mad, difficult, emotional, didn't know what she was talking about, but principally she was a woman in a man's world and therefore to be dismissed as ignorant and irrelevant. It was easier to dismiss her as a prurient old spinster than to engage with the practices which were spreading venereal diseases into remote Aboriginal communities. But most of all her constant attempts to 'think Black', to see the world through an Aboriginal perspective and through Aboriginal needs and 'best interests' threatened the whole European vision that 'we know what is best for Aboriginal people' …

She was a remarkable woman, tough, brave, dedicated, tenacious and, yes, difficult. But she succeeded in creating her arid lands garden now named for her outside of Alice Springs and many of her ideas and attitudes have come to be accepted after her death as sensible and just. So if you read only one book this year make it *The Indomitable Miss Pink* …

*

March 18: Christa Wolf

*

"In what was formerly East Germany, a Leipzig distributor responded to the arrival of the free market by burning 10 million inexpensive volumes printed under the old regime, including works by dissident literary figures such as Stefan Heym and Christa Wolf (who fled to Malibu thinking perhaps that it was better to embrace McWorld voluntarily than to be ravished by it against her will). By the lights of McWorld's videology, commercial book-burnings to raise prices (like the shredding of unsold paperbacks in the West) have nothing in common with book burnings to repress literature (such as the Nazi bonfires of the thirties); but for authors and readers the

difference may be hard to discern, and for literary culture, what happened in Leipzig in 1991 may be more fateful than what happened in Leipzig in 1934. In a typically ironic lyric in his poem "The Book Burning," Bertolt Brecht, finding that he has been left out of the bonfire, implores the incendiaries, "Burn my books too! What is wrong with my books that you are not burning them?!" But what modern author would think that his integrity depended on the demand that his works be relegated to a fire whose object was to raise book prices? In a sad postscript to the Leipzig funeral pyre, the Göttingen Literary Society awarded its "Göttingen Laurels" to the Reverend Martin Weskott for his efforts to save a half million books from "dumpsters and garbage cans" and put them to "the use for which they were intended" by selling them at charity auctions and donating the proceeds to "Bread for the World." Swords into plowshares and words into bread."

Benjamin J. Barber in *Jihad vs. McWorld*.

*

March 19: William Allingham

*

Allingham is usually described as a 'minor' Irish poet from Donegal who hovered on the outskirts of the circles which surrounded poets like Tennyson. But his poem 'The Fairies' which begins:

Up the airy mountain,
Down the rushy glen,
We daren't go a-hunting
For fear of little men;

is still often anthologised. It used to give me a lovely creepy feeling when I was young and found it in an encyclopaedia. Sad, yes, but also mysterious. There weren't a lot of airy mountains and rushy glens to hide the fairy folk on a small dairy farm on the Darling Downs. But the other day when I was browsing in Thomas Kinsella's *Irish Poetry* I came upon what you might call some politically-engaged poetry also written by Allingham. His long poem 'Laurence Bloomfield in Ireland' deals with absentee landlords and evictions. Just a taste:

The Sheriff's painful duty must be done;
He begs for quiet—and the work's begun.
The strong stand ready; now appear the rest,
Girl, matron, grandsire, baby on the breast,
And Rosy's thin face on a pallet borne;
A motley concourse, feeble and forlorn.
One old man, tears upon his wrinkled cheek,
Stands trembling on a threshold, tries to speak,
But, in defect of any word for this,
Mutely upon the doorpost prints a kiss …

And his line—As poor folk say, 'The world's divided ill'—still resonates a century and a half later.

*

March 20: David

*

George Rosie in *Curious Scotland* says, "Presbyterianism has no monopoly on dismal Godliness, and it has always had its brighter side." He goes on to say, "Proof of this comes from an unlikely source, a book called *Four Centuries of Scottish Psalmody* by Millar Patrick DD, published by the Oxford University Press in 1949. Doctor Patrick offers an intriguing account of the development of the rich musical form we call metric psalms, and an equally intriguing account of Scotland's ecclesiastical history. My favourite chapter concerns 'Practice-Verses'. For centuries Presbyterians refused to sing hymns. They were seen as quasi-secular confections, fit only for Episcopalians and suchlike folk. Only the words of the Holy Bible were good enough, so the songsters of the Kirk confined themselves to 'metric' versions of the Psalms of David set to music.

However, because the words of the psalms were drawn from the Bible they were regarded as sacred. They were to be used only in divine services, never in choir rehearsals. As a result, words had to be invented for whatever psalm tune was being rehearsed. There grew up an intriguing subculture of 'practice verses', ranging from the bland and pious to the jaunty and satirical. Many were shot through with sardonic humour common in lowland Scotland. Sometimes the practice verses incorporated the name of the tune:

The name o' this tune is called York,
The reason I don't know:
They micht as weel have called it Cork,
Carmathen or Raphoe.

Some of the practice verses had a satirical edge. If it suited the choir, the minister himself was not spared:

Keep silence, all ye sons of men,
And hear with reverence due;
The minister he's gane oot tae smoke,
But he'll be back the noo.

According to Doctor Patrick, the tune *O Mother Dear; Jerusalem* seemed to lend itself to any number of ingenious and irreverent words:

O mither dear; Tod Lowrie's lum,
Whan sweepit will it be?
For a' the soot's come tummlin' doon,
An' spilet ma grannie's tea.

I wish I were a brewer's horse
Yoked tae a cairt o' yill,
And that my heid was at my tail,
Then I could drink my fill."

And then there were the people with tin ears who bawled out the words off key and the people who resisted new tunes being added to the traditional twelve; one minister so incensed by a new tune that he knocked his innovating precentor unconscious with his pulpit Bible!

*

Philip Yancey in *The Bible Jesus Read* says of the Psalms they are "not pronouncements from on high, delivered with full apostolic authority, on matters of faith and practice. They are personal prayers in the form of poetry, written by a variety of people—peasants, kings, professional musicians, rank amateurs—in wildly fluctuating moods." And "Psalms gives examples of "ordinary" people struggling mightily to align what they believe about God with what they actually experience. Sometimes the authors are vindictive, sometimes self-righteous, sometimes paranoid, sometimes petty." And sometimes full of hope or comfort or praise or doubt …

But although we call them the Psalms of David it is not known how many, if any, of them were written by David, King of Israel. The *Britannica* suggests David died around 962 BC and St Matthew says "there were fourteen generations from Abraham to David, and fourteen from David to the exile in Babylon, and fourteen from then to the birth of the Messiah." But given that a generation is averaged at 25 years this cannot take us back to David and the time of David's life and rule can only be guessed at. Scholars do not doubt that David was a real person but the real ruler is deeply overlain by symbolism and myth. We depend on the two books of Samuel for our details of David's reign but Samuel combines oral accounts and is believed to have been written in the 8th century BC.

So is there any evidence of whether David wrote any of the Psalms? And if so—which ones?

I was browsing in *Peake's Commentary on the Bible* which says the Psalms are collections of collections and were probably written down in the 2nd century BC though they had undoubtedly circulated in oral form for far longer. Some of the psalms refer to God as Yahweh and some as

Elohim, which suggests different authors and different periods of authorship, but the real reason we still think of King David as their author comes in the Hebrew word *ledhawidh* which can mean the psalms *of* David but can also mean *by* David, or *about* David. It is further complicated by the simple fact that David was sometimes used as a generic word for a revered ruler.

But don't let any of this put you off reading the Psalms. Though some are more about vengeance and violence there are many in which the joy of life abounds or the sense of comfort is deep and profound.

*

March 21: Frank Hardy

*

I tend to think of Frank Hardy as writing about tough Aussie blokes who drift either to the extreme Left or the extreme Right. But when I came upon his book *Who Shot George Kirkland?* I wondered if it might be a slight change of pace. The simple answer is no.

In fact it isn't a novel but a chance for Hardy to revisit *Power Without Glory*; his difficulty in doing the research, his nervousness about crossing the powerful political fiefdom of John Wren, his struggle to print and distribute the book—and the two questions which came up during his research: did Mrs Wren have an affair with Bill Egan and have a child (Hardy talks of an illegitimate child but of course any child born to a married couple is not illegitimate even if it might be of dubious parentage) and did someone shoot George Kirkland. He describes himself as being obsessed by the researching and writing of *Power Without Glory* but that he depended on a man called Alan Hall for both stories and he could not decide whether to trust Hall or not. I imagine this is a problem all writers of exposés, no matter how fictionalised, come up against. Who to trust …

Hugh Buggy wrote a book he called *The Real John Wren* in which he claimed John Wren was a wonderful bloke, terribly maligned by Frank Hardy and generous to a fault. So did the truth about John Wren lie somewhere in the middle? The answer, I think, is no; John Wren *was* a thug and a crook, he also gave away a lot of money. It is a phenomenon we have seen in later tycoons and public figures: on the one hand reprehensible conduct, on the other hand, foundations set up, huge cheques handed over to hospitals, schools, sporting bodies, often with media fanfare. Is it a sign of guilt? A way to offset tax? A way to massage the public image? Possibly all that and more …

At the end of the book we still don't know if there was a real George Kirkland, whether he fell foul of John Wren—or anyone else—or whether he got shot. So might there be any answers? I went looking for a George Kirkland in Melbourne in those tumultuous years—and I found two. On Ancestry I found a George Kirkland who had a probate notice. 'George Joseph Kirkland of Burke-road East Malvern Victoria Australia died 5 March 1931. Probate Melbourne to Amy Neale Kirkland and Ida Georgina Kirkland spinsters. Effects £211 12s. 7d. in England.' And a George Kirkland appears in *The Argus* newspaper, 10th October 1923, being sent to gaol for a year for shooting at his mother-in-law Mary Whistler. The first question is: are they one and the same person? If his wife had died or left him then he may well have left his estate to his two sisters, if they were in fact sisters rather than cousins or nieces. Taking a pot-shot at your mother-in-law would not necessarily end your marriage—or not in the days when women put up with almost anything from husbands, but there is a good chance that George found himself and his goods and chattels on the wrong side of the door. And the second question is: did Frank Hardy have either this dead George Kirkland (though we don't know how he died) or the jailed George Kirkland in mind when he wrote his book? As he mentions the Mary Whistler case he obviously thought that was *his* George Kirkland and it remains a strong possibility that George Kirkland was shot in retaliation for his assault on Mrs Whistler. As Hardy tentatively links Kirkland to gangster Snoopy Tanner I think we are not dealing with 'nice blokes' …

*

March 22: Finding a Good Book to Read …

*

Sometimes I feel a bit like the people in the US who say "Fifty channels and nothing to watch on TV" as I wander round a library or bookshop. So much choice and nothing … I don't have a fail-safe way to get out of this gloomy mind-set …

Sometimes I see a writer mentioned in a newspaper or magazine or on the radio and give them a try. Although as newspapers are doing away with book reviews this is less and less an option. *The Sunday Tasmanian* went from two pages of book news to one, then a column, and finally—nothing. That doesn't make sense to me. They still have pages and pages about holidays. I can't afford holidays overseas but I *can* afford books now and then. So why not cater to my interests too? The other day I came on a mention of Nora Roberts. I had seen her name around though it hadn't led me to reach out. But now I went and borrowed two: *The Right Path* and *Black Rose*. A bit Mills & Boony but I suppose I might get one to read on a journey. It was a pity that they didn't resonate because she is said to have written more than 200 books. I could have been set up for the next year. And I recently tried Audrey Niffinegger's *The Time Traveler's Wife* for the same reason. It was an ingenious idea but the book was tiringly repetitive and dull. And Stephen Vincenczy's *In Praise of Older Women* came with pages and pages of fulsome praise but turned out to be not interesting and insightful relationships but merely tedious little adulteries with a number of married women. But I don't give up hope …

Sometimes a friend says 'Have you read so-and-so' or 'I've just been reading' and I go out and give so-and-so a try.

Sometimes someone sends me a book I'd never seen, a writer I'd never heard of, and I find something of interest.

Sometimes I want to know more about something and in the search for information I come across an unusual book. Sometimes in that search I get completely diverted and come home with something miles away from my original intention.

Sometimes I go back and re-read something I know I enjoyed first time around.

And sometimes something just sort of jumps up off a stall or from a shelf in an op-shop. It might be an intriguing title. It might be an unknown book by someone I've already read. For instance, the other day I came upon Maria Edgeworth's *The Will and Other Tales*, just after I'd been reading *Castle Rackrent*. Sometimes it is far vaguer. Sometimes I think I will just have to write something I know I will enjoy re-reading … Sometimes I think it is just as well I can't find anything, it will give my eyes a rest … And sometimes I say to myself 'What *is* the matter with you? A million books out there and you can't find anything to read? Don't make me laugh!'

What do other people do?

*

Sometimes I read what people have donated, always hoping I'll find something I want to buy and keep. The other day I was given a lovely lot of books to put on a stall and among them were a number of modern poets. I brought six home to read. *Four Lines East* by Barry Hill, *Lost in the Foreground* by Stephen Edgar, *Drumming on Water* by Geoff Page, *Black Swans* by Peter Lloyd, *In a Bigger City* by Tina Giannoukos and *Buoyancy* by Louise Oxley. After the pleasure of reading them all, and it *was* a pleasure, I decided I liked the Stephen Edgar volume best.

Was I falling into the 'The only real poetry is poetry that rhymes' syndrome, something I quite often hear older people grumbling in one version or another? Not all the Edgar poems were rhymes but they were all more structured than any of the other poets and I think structure, though it can make poetry seem a little old-fashioned, also makes for greater discipline and within that sense of discipline I often feel the language is richer and the poems more interesting. As Quentin Crisp said in *Resident Alien*, "It is my contention that artists, in whatever medium, produce flabbier work the more freedom they are given: all subtlety, all irony vanishes."

Take for instance the first verse of Edgar's 'Historians'

Here through the hotel window: hills like Hessian
Heaped over there across the river's throng
Of Chinese sparklers, a light breeze to freshen

The sky's one pastel page, then palimpsest
Rubbed back, on which the gulls, attempting song,
Fall to inscribing with a strident zest
The unimproved few notes in their possession.

Or the first verse of 'Contents Page'

The jungle, from the floor to the canopy,
Clogs and entwines
Its every rung and level with rank growth.
The python dines
Among an epiphytic gaudery
And hungry vines.
On the mizzled hair of the two-toed sloth
Moss has designs.
Yet all that climbing tonnage is content-free.
The top limbs sway as though to write in air,
But can't remember what they scribble there.

Don't they make you want to read on? Since then I have been on the lookout for more of Edgar's poems and I am now reading his *Ancient Music*.

And a little sidelight …

All six books of poetry were snapped up as soon as I put them out on a stall.

And when you've found your good book don't give in to the impulse to share it around promiscuously. It may never come back to you to be enjoyed again …

"For him that steals, or borrows and returns not, a book from its owners, let it change into a serpent in his hand and rend him. Let him be struck with palsy, and all his members bloated. Let him languish in pain, crying aloud for mercy, and let there be no surcease to his agony till he sing in dissolution. Let bookworms gnaw at his entrails in token of the worm that dieth not. And when at last he goes to his final punishment, let the flames of hell consume him forever."

An inscription in the library of the San Pedro Monastery in Barcelona.

Hardly a Christian sentiment but understandable in that moment of realisation that a precious book has gone for good. As Margaret Atwood put it in 'Atwood's Fourteenth Corollary': No books are lost by lending except those you particularly wanted to keep.

That old childhood rhyme 'If this book should ever roam,

Box its ears and send it home' might be fitting for children casually leaving books in unsuitable places. But, alas, adult books get carried away by people who have absolutely no intention of sending them home again …

*

March 23: Werner von Braun

*

For a brief space of time Werner von Braun was a hero to children. His association with rockets and space travel, with splitting the atom and creating unimagined new science, was briefly beguiling. Then the creeping contamination of the atomic revolution, its invisible sicknesses, its spoliation of such simple joys as fresh milk—as well as questions brought out into public view about his past in Nazi Germany began to tarnish the effort to keep him as a clean-cut hero.

His writings no doubt helped popularise science but they also helped to skew it away from humanity's real needs towards the bankrolled demands of the military. In the end the only people to retain him as a hero were those in the military-industrial complex with their claims of nuclear power so cheap it would hardly be worth measuring. Nevertheless the simplicity of his style probably did help to give students an insight into the world he inhabited. In his book *Space Frontier* he touches on some of the ephemeral issues of space travel. "Ingenuity will be required of designers of tableware for gracious dining under zero gravity. Dishes will need spring-loaded covers so a steak

won't float away. And, of course, the dishes themselves must somehow be anchored. Forks are fine, but spoons are useful. Knives either will use saw action to minimize cutting pressure, or will be replaced by scissors-type devices that can do without any one-sided pressure.

"Tools for use under zero gravity will have special designs, too. If a weightless astronaut tried to tighten a nut with an ordinary wrench, the effort would only spin him around. Instead, he'll use a "squeeze wrench" that does not require a firm foothold to apply a twist.

"Cleanliness is the key to good housekeeping, in space as at home. And, under zero gravity, rigorous cleanliness is even more important than at home. Once up in orbit and under zero gravity conditions, any dust or dirt in a spacecraft would not harmlessly settle under a chair or on a rug. It would float around—and could be inhaled, or short-circuit electrical terminals or be sucked into the air-conditioning system."

And the other day I came upon the interesting little sidelight that he had also written a science-fiction novel. It was called *Mars Flight* and came out in 1948. The novel has its interest in that it presents Mars and space flight in the light of knowledge sixty years ago. At times it reads like a lecture to students of physics or astronomy or engineering. None of the characters are particularly interesting. And his imagined civilisation on Mars, an underground world ruled by ten men and in which the major engineering and social problems have been solved, though reasonably realistic just doesn't grip. Werner von Braun was not a loss to the sci-fi writing community … In fact it is his vision of what the world might be like in 1980 which is about the most interesting part …

"Never before had men felt real confidence that peace was permanent.

"The fear that a diplomatic cold war might metamorphose into a hot fight, with death and destruction to soldiers and civilians alike, was gone.

"The final catastrophic conflict was over. The great Eastern Bloc, after five of the most frightful years in the history of the world, had finally succumbed to the last despairing blows of the almost exhausted Western Powers. The great Asiatic mass had become a group of smaller states, slowly digging out from under the ruins of the war. But they, too, were represented in the Congress of the World, which was in session in the great domed building overlooking Long Island Sound from the hills above Greenwich, Connecticut. They too voted Aye or Nay on the laws which were to assure the welfare and safety of all the peoples of Earth. At last the ancient prejudices and selfish insistences upon national sovereignty were no more. A brief ten years had seen the flame of war engulf anew the hopes for peace of uncounted millions, but now no votes could frustrate the decisions of the freely selected Representatives of all the People of the Earth. The President and his Cabinet faithfully carried out whatever was enacted into law by the Congress of the United States of Earth.

"And each man knew in his heart that the Government of the United States of Earth no longer lacked the military power to enforce those laws. Fatal indeed had this lack been to the United Nations.

"The Parachute police of the United States of Earth could handle any minor trouble which might boil up in any latitude or longitude. Almost within minutes from the outbreak, Parachute Police would be on the spot to awe into civilized obedience the unruly burghers of the most remote village or hamlet. Trained to a tick and composed of elements drawn from every land and clime, they had at one time been the best soldiers in the world. In the event of more serious and organized trouble, the United States of Earth could reduce to rubble any community which refused to obey the verdict of the Congress. Enormous submarine cruisers could fire long range rockets thousands of miles inland if the appearance overhead of destruction-laden bombers should have failed in its effect.

"And above it all, invisible yet omnipresent Lunetta. The man-made Moon, circled silently far above the stratosphere.

"Lunetta's acid test had taken place in the final World War. During the dread winter of 1974-75, the motorized forces of the Western allies had ground to a solid stop in the vastness of the Asian steppes. The chilling cold had numbed the blood and the courage of the most intrepid soldiers. Air

attacks on the industrial centers of Siberia had almost eased by reason of the incredible accuracy and effectiveness of the adverse anti-aircraft rockets. But these rockets could not reach Lunetta in her dizzying heights, and the courageous crew of 440 men and women who manned her directed their atom bombs by remote control at the enemy's manufacturing plants to such good effect that the scales of victory could only incline towards the Allies.

"And so Lunetta had become the Goddess of a new, strong peace, which was to deliver mankind from the morass of the foregoing century. But she was also the symbol of the final victory of man over space. She it was who was to point out the paths of the universe to the peoples of the Earth.

"History recorded the dawn of 1980."

*

March 24: Lawrence Ferlinghetti

*

Ferlinghetti was born to an immigrant Italian father in New York in 1919 and a mother descended from Sephardic Jews. He had a difficult childhood as his father died before he was born and his mother had a nervous breakdown. And curiously his father had changed his name to Ferling, something his son did not discover until he applied for his birth certificate to enlist during WW2. He changed it back to the original. In the post war period he wrote poetry, travel, prose, and drama quite successfully—his book of poems *A Coney Island of the Mind* which came out in 1958 was a best seller—but it was his establishment of a publishing company and bookstore he called City Lights which brought him a different kind of fame.

William T. Lawlor in *Beat Culture* wrote "Writer, founder of the City Lights Bookstore in San Francisco, promoter of the Beats, a publisher of some of their key books, Lawrence Ferlinghetti is a central figure in the Beat literary movement of the fifties. Not usually associated with the beginnings of the Beat Generation in New York City following World War II, he nevertheless added great force, energy, spirit, and determination to the movement as it arrived on the West Coast, and is the pivotal figure in the San Francisco Literary Renaissance. His industry as a writer, his inventiveness in combining poetry and jazz, his success in establishing the first bookstore to sell only paperbacks, and his uncompromising efforts in publishing works that tested the limits of law and social acceptance make him not only an important figure in the bohemian struggle, but also a major figure in his own right."

He began a Pocket Poets Series and accepted Allen Ginsberg's *Howl* which was deemed obscene when it was published. He successfully defended the book in court and won the case. "It is not the poet but what he observes which is revealed as obscene," Ferlinghetti said in the poem's defense. "The great obscene wastes of *Howl* are the sad wastes of the mechanized world, lost among atom bombs and insane nationalisms." *Howl* went on to prolific sales and helped define the Beat Generation.

So what of Ferlinghetti's own poetry? Despite the large numbers of *A Coney Island of the Mind* which must be washing around I have never come across a copy so here is one of its poems taken from *The Treasury of American Poetry*:

The pennycandystore beyond the El
is where I first
fell in love
with unreality
Jellybeans glowed in the semi-gloom
of that September afternoon
A cat upon the counter moved among
the licorice sticks
and tootsie rolls
and Oh Boy Gum

Outside the leaves were falling as they died

A wind had blown away the sun
A girl ran in
Her hair was rainy
Her breasts were breathless in the little room

Outside the leaves were falling
and they cried
Too soon! too soon!
'The Pennycandystore Beyond the El'

*

March 25: Sir John Mandeville

*

Margaret Wade Labarge writes in *Medieval Travellers*, "The brief and generally sober information provided by Bartholomew was exceeded in popularity among the upper classes by two books of travellers' tales, those of Marco Polo and of Sir John Mandeville – one mainly true, one mainly fabulous. Seventeen-year-old Marco Polo travelled across Asia to China in the company of his father and uncle, both Venetian merchants. His description of that trip, their long stay in China, their return journey through the China Sea and the Indian Ocean to Persia and their final return to Venice after an absence of twenty-five years has become an accepted classic. We owe its existence to the fact that Marco Polo fought with the Venetian navy against the Genoese soon after his return and was captured in the battle. While in prison in 1298 he dictated to a fellow prisoner with some reputation as a poet the tales which had beguiled their captivity. The book was a great success, being translated almost immediately into several languages and Italian dialects of which a remarkable number of manuscripts survive. Marco Polo's travels had taken him to such extraordinary places, and life at the court of Kublai Khan was so remote from that of thirteenth-century Europe, that the truth of his stories was generally doubted, though his book was widely read for its fascination. More modern explorers have demonstrated that Polo was a remarkably accurate observer with very few mentions of the purely legendary. He provided for a growing audience an entrancing picture of China just before the break up of the Mongol empire shut for further centuries the overland route between Europe and the Far East. Certainly, Polo's travels and the wonders he saw sparked great interest in the riches which might be found there and it is known that the account of his travels was one of the books read with interest and attention by Christoper Columbus."

(Doubts have been thrown upon his travels because he didn't talk about women's bound feet or drinking tea—but it must be remembered that he was at the *Mongol* court not a *Chinese* court. Did the Mongols, nomadic for centuries, bind women's feet? I don't think so. And did they drink tea rather than mare's milk and stronger beverages? Again I think the answer would be no. Or very rarely.)

"The travels of Sir John Mandeville were quite another matter. Although the author begins his book by introducing himself as an English knight, born at St Albans, who went to the Holy Land in 1322 and then travelled most of the known – and a good deal of the unknown – world, Sir John's existence as a real traveller has been proved as fabulous as some of his stories, though the actual author has never been firmly identified. The book was written in the mid-fourteenth century and is a patchwork from a wide collection of authorities, some truthful, others fictional. The compilation was written first in French, then translated into Latin and later into English and spread rapidly through western Europe. Its author was blessed with a racy style and an engaging ability to combine his various sources which, in the accepted medieval tradition, he does not acknowledge. They ranged from serious works like Vincent of Beauvais' *Speculum*, and the reports of the travels in Asia of such friars as William of Rubruck, who was sent to the Mongols by Louis IX soon after Plano Carpini's return, and Orderic of Pordenone, who traveled to China in the early fourteenth

century, to the forged letter of Prester John, that extraordinary apocryphal Christian ruler whose kingdom was gradually transferred from Asia to Africa, but was always a place of riches and power and, it was hoped, of possible help against the Saracens or the pagans. Since the Holy Land had attracted a great number of pilgrims, some of whom were serious students and others interested observers, Mandeville found a fair number of earlier descriptions of the country and the Holy Places on which to build when he came to write about Palestine. He borrowed from the histories of Jacques de Vitry, bishop of Acre at the beginning of the thirteenth century, and the Armenian historian Hayton, who died at the beginning of the fourteenth century. The author of Mandeville's *Travels* also found useful material in a report produced by William of Boldensele for Cardinal Talleyrand Perigord, a friend of Petrarch who was very curious about overseas territories. Boldensele was a Dominican from Minden in Westphalia who claimed relationship to a celebrated German noble family through his mother. His pilgrimage to the Holy Land was imposed as a penance by John XXII for some undefined 'apostasy' and took place in 1334-5. The Dominican visited Constantinople, Egypt and Syria as well as the Holy Places and the detailed report he drew up for the cardinal in 1336 was very popular. It was translated into French within fifteen years and both the original and the translations survive in many fourteenth- and fifteenth-century manuscripts, often combined with other reports less accurate than his. Boldensele had an unusually scientific spirit for his time and was capable of giving a map-like description of a country without a personal point of view or any addition of the miraculous. His sober report was a more useful source than many of the others on which the author of Mandeville drew. Not surprisingly, much of the charm of Mandeville's book for its medieval readers lay in its more fabulous portions – the miraculous stories borrowed from the *Golden Legend* and the romances of Alexander, as well as the remarkable animals whose descriptions were taken from the early bestiaries. Mandeville had something to interest everybody, and there is little doubt that he interested a great many, reinforcing their credulity with his mythical animals and human monsters. However, to make the distinction between the 'truth' of Marco Polo and the 'fiction' of Mandeville is easier done with the benefit of several centuries' hindsight. Given the inaccessibility of central Asia and China after the mid-fourteenth century and the practical impossibility of discovering the sober truth, it is not surprising that medieval visions of the Far East were a fine mix of fact and fiction uncritically accepted. The 'marvels' described by Polo and Mandeville bore for the medieval reader their original meaning of astonishment and wonder. They nourished their imagination and ultimately helped to encourage serious exploration."

So is there actually a suitable Sir John? I went to the *Dictionary of National Biography* and their entry is worth reading as a detective foray into both the sources used in the *Travels* and into the real identity of the author. The book is divided roughly into two parts, a journey to Egypt and the Holy Land which though it draws on many sources also has a degree of authenticity which suggests the author just may have made his own pilgrimage (and is a reminder that modern attempts to posit the Muslims purely as victims overlooks the fact that many Muslim merchants grew immensely wealthy off the large stream of European pilgrims traveling eastwards), but the second part moves on into Asia and reaches China becoming more and more fabulous and more and more remote from a plain traveler's tale.

The book first appeared in French in 1371, then in Latin and there are five known Latin versions, each one differeing slightly, and then into English; all of these manuscript copies. "The success of the 'Travels' was remarkable. Avowedly written for the unlearned, and combining interest of matter and a quaint simplicity of style, the book hit the popular taste, and in a marvel-loving age its most extravagant features probably had the greatest charm." The first printed version in English was brought out by Wynkyn de Worde in 1499 and reprinted in 1503.

So was the author actually a Frenchman? The DNB suggests (though it cannot prove) the real author was John de Burgoyne who was in the service of John, Baron Mowbray. They were caught up in Edward II's quarrel with the Despenser family and in 1322 Burgoyne appears to have fled to

France after his patron was executed. There he became known as Jean de Bourgogne and produced his work under the pseudonym of Sir John Mandeville. He died in Liège in 1372.

*

March 26: Tennessee Williams

*

There is an image of the artist, the writer, the poet, the playwright, as eccentric, drunken, chaotic—almost as though a wild Bohemian soul is necessary for creativity. Tennessee Williams certainly *became* that way. Alcohol and drugs increasingly wrecked his life. But what is often overlooked is that Tennessee Williams became one of the best-known playwrights of the twentieth century, with a string of famous plays, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *The Glass Menagerie*, *Sweet Bird of Youth* and many more, by his sheer hard work, imagination, constant production and determination to succeed. The hard work came first. The shambling increasingly unproductive alcoholic came much later.

William Spoto in his *The Life of Tennessee Williams* says that before Williams headed off to Hollywood for a brief and fairly unproductive trial as a scriptwriter his agent Audrey Wood made a list of his current 'folio' "so that he would always retain rights to what he had written before May 1943. The list included ten long plays, twelve "long short" plays, seventeen one-act plays, nineteen short stories and over two hundred fifty poems."

*

March 27: Holy Books

*

W. E. Sangster wrote in *Why Jesus Never Wrote a Book* "There is one world religion which is more completely linked with a book than Christianity. It is Mohammedanism, and the book is the Koran. It is said to be God's own dictation. God's authorship is proclaimed on every page. It is said to be a copy of a book written in heaven, and one of the fiercest controversies of Islam raged around the question of whether the book had existed from all eternity and was uncreated. None the less, the most progressive Moslems have surpassed the moral level of their own holy book, and are in the awkward position of being better than they need be." He was speaking about Muslims and the Koran but by extension it could be said of all Holy Books. One day someone was telling me she had recently read *The Book of Mormon* and was horrified by its level of racism. I must admit this wasn't my response to *The Book of Mormon* but rather that I found its Biblical style and Old Testament ambience with endless talk of 'smiting', 'slaughtering', 'fleeing' and 'vengeance' worrying. (A. C. Bouquet in *Sacred Books of the World* says, "There is reason to believe that Smith derived much of his material from an unpublished work of the imagination, written by a certain Solomon Spaulding, a Presbyterian minister in Western Pennsylvania, which somehow or other got into the hands of one Sidney Rigdon, a printer, who certainly played a large part in the history of the Mormons, and who was not only older, abler, and more educated than Smith, but turned preacher and became Smith's right-hand man." Yet to some extent all holy books are works of the imagination.) I suspect she was responding more to history and news reports than to the book itself. And there are things in the *Bible* which if you attempted to carry them out in your own life would see you up before a magistrate, and rightly so.

This might suggest that there is no point in having Holy Books if many people are better than the books they use to determine and judge their own conduct and the conduct of others. But I think we still need Holy Books. Quite apart from their insight into the development of faith, morals, and ideas, they contain moments of great inspiration and truth. But a key point about Holy Books is that they provide a benchmark: this is what people believed at a specific moment in human history. Our aim is surely to improve on that benchmark, not see it as a way of justifying behaviour we now see as dubious.

Although of course we do not know if Jesus ever considered writing things down all the indications are that he didn't, that he saw the men he called as disciples as living embodiments of his teaching. Each disciple as he shared the things he had heard and the messages he had taken from

Jesus's words remembered and shared in a slightly different way. And being human and therefore capable of change and development and growing wisdom, they encapsulate in both their lives and the things they chose to write down later, this process of change and development. They were flawed human beings. They grew in wisdom. In a sense they were Jesus's Holy Books. So they also act as a reminder that we all grow and change. They never saw themselves as 'set in stone', confined forever to a particular view of life, to a set of words which cannot be changed or challenged or grown out of ….

*

March 28: Robert de Boron

*

"The oldest surviving reference to the Grail as the name for the cup of Christ was by the Burgundian poet Robert de Boron, in his *Joseph d'Arimathie*, composed around the year 1200. The Bible relates how Joseph, a rich merchant of Arimathea, laid the body of Christ in the tomb after the Crucifixion. According to Robert, Joseph of Arimathea obtained the cup of the Last Supper from Pilate and used it to collect drops of blood from Jesus' crucified body. In the poem, Joseph eventually embarks on a series of adventures, leading ultimately to the Grail being brought to Britain, to the 'Vales of Avalon'.

"In the following decades, other writers composed scores of similar romances, in which the Grail was portrayed as a fabulous jeweled chalice made of gold and silver. If a cup used at an impromptu meal in first-century Palestine really had survived intact, it seems highly improbable that it would be such a spectacular artifact. More likely, it would have been a simple drinking vessel made of wood, stone or pottery. Moreover, it is difficult to equate such an opulent receptacle with Jesus, the humble carpenter who renounced material wealth."

The Search for the Grail by Dr Graham Phillips.

But, curiously, the Grail was often not a cup. It could be a cauldron, a plate, a book, in fact anything which we might call a holy relic; something which had been part of Jesus' life, something which recorded his sayings, something he had touched … The continuing controversy over the Shroud of Turin is a reminder of the power of relics … It could also be a magical vessel, a cup or platter in which the food or wine effortlessly renewed itself …

And what of Boron himself? So far I have not been able to find anything more about him. I have chosen this date for him only because it suggests coming up to Easter and spring and rebirth. He remains as mysterious as his reasons to choose a cup and make of it a Holy Grail … And Denis Hollier in *A New History of French Literature* calls him 'pseudonymous' so there may have been no such person, rather a cleric or court official masquerading as Robert. Hollier also puts Chrétien de Troyes' *Perceval, ou le conte du Graal* as being composed around 1181 so Robert was not the first but made of it the image we have come to see as being synonymous with the cup as Grail …

Since then I have found a copy of Chrétien's version and it is true that he never presents the Grail as a jeweled chalice. Ruth Harwood Cline in her introduction to her translation gives credence to the idea that Chrétien's long poem was based on an earlier Celtic tradition. He overlaid the folk lore which had probably entered France via Brittany with a Christian varnish which became stronger in succeeding versions. She says, "Other writers continued to supply background material: two books relate the history of the grail from the time of Christ to King Arthur and account for its transportation from Jerusalem to Britain. In *Joseph d'Arimathie* (circa 1200), the Burgundian poet Robert de Boron described the grail as a Christian relic: a chalice at the Last Supper which Joseph of Arimathea used afterward to collect the blood that flowed from Christ's side. Joseph took the grail when he and his family were exiled. At Joseph's instruction, his brother-in-law Hebron (Bron) used the grail placed alongside a freshly caught fish as a chastity test for their followers, and thereafter Bron was known as the Rich Fisher. In the end Joseph entrusted Bron with the grail. The *Estoire del Saint Graal* (circa 1200) repeated Robert de Boron's story in prose. As an evangelist, Joseph of Arimathea brought the grail to Britain, although the grail was once again a dish, not a chalice. Joseph of Arimathea's son Josephes became the first bishop. Eventually Joseph entrusted

the grail to his nephew, Bron's son Alain, and it passed to a succession of British kings, ending with King Pelles in King Arthur's day. The *Estoire del Saint Graal* became the first member of the French *Vulgate Cycle*, a very long and popular prose work composed between 1215 and 1230."

*

March 29: Anon

*

Every war throws up anonymous parodies, anonymous criticisms, anonymous ditties. This one, probably by a serviceman in Brisbane, 'Doug's Communique', has General Douglas MacArthur as its butt for his habit of pouring out communiqués and not, in Australian eyes, giving credit to any but his American forces.

Here, too, is the sage bold,
  of virile, deathless youth
In stories seldom tarnished with
  the plain unvarnished truth
It's quite a rag, it waves the flag
  Its motif is the fray
And modesty is plain to see in
  Doug's Communique.

'My battleships bombard the Nips from
  Maine to Singapore;
My subs have sunk a million tons;
  They'll sink a billion more
My aircraft bombed Berlin last night.'
  In Italy they say
'Our turn's tonight, because it's right in
  Doug's Communique!'

And while possibly a rumour now
  Someday will be fact
That the lord will hear, a deep voice say
  'Move over God — it's Mac'
So bet your shoes that all the news
  that last great judgment day
Will go to press in nothing less than
  DOUG'S COMMUNIQUE.

*

March 30: William Woolls

*

Although Joseph Banks fills up the foreground and Baron von Mueller the middle distance, Australia has created some fascinated and fascinating amateur botanists. I say created because it was the uniqueness of Australia's flora which turned a hobby, an interest, into an absorbing pastime.

I came upon William Woolls simply because of his surname; I had a gr-gr-gr-gr-grandmother with the unusual surname Woolls and so I was curious enough to buy M.M.H. (Max) Thompson's biography, *William Woolls: A man of Parramatta* when I came upon it in the Moonah Book Exchange. Woolls was the nineteenth child of Edward and Sarah Woolls in Winchester, England, and arrived in Sydney in 1832 aged eighteen and found work as a teacher. One of his pupils was later novelist 'Rolf Boldrewood' who said of him: "A fair-haired, ruddy-faced Kingsley-looking young Englishman was he when he first came to Sydney College. He was the ideal tutor and most popular with us all, strict in school, but full of life and gaiety when lessons were over." Woolls later

ran his own school 'Harrisford' at Parramatta and seems to have been a progressive and caring teacher. He became interested in the vegetation round Parramatta and began meeting and corresponding with other interested people. He had already written poetry (of a pious ponderous sort) and essays; his book *Miscellanies in Prose and Verse* has been described as the first book of essays published 'in the colony'; I at first thought this meant in Australia but Henry Savery's *The Hermit of Van Dieman's Land* published in 1828 has been given that honour so Woolls's book in 1838 was the first for NSW. His botany brought him a small place in the limelight, as a contributor to *Flora Australiensis*, with the conferring of an honorary doctorate by the University of Göttingen, and by his own prolific papers and articles and lectures. He eventually became an Anglican clergyman at St Peter's in Richmond. Curiously the Old Man of Richmond, William Cox, had my ancestor, Anne Woolls, as his sister-in-law, but whether he ever took any extra interest in William Woolls for that reason isn't mentioned. Woolls's personal life was sad, losing his first wife, and all his children, but he goes down to posterity in the memories of the many boys he taught and in the plants named for him. "Nearly a dozen species of plants have been named in his honour. Most of the names were conferred by Mueller, and include *Eucalyptus woollsii* F. Muell. And *Eremophila woollsii* F. Muell., and there were others such as *Tylophora woollsii* Benth. And the orchid species *Pterostylis woollsii* Fitzgerald. In 1872 Mueller had separated a species in the *Epacridaceae* and conferred upon it the distinction of generic status, with the name *Woollsia*. Each spring, throughout the bush around Sydney there appears a cone of creamish-white flowers, *Woollsia*. Perhaps that would be the memorial most treasured by the clergyman-botanist."

Another of Australia's interesting lay workers in this field was Amalie Dietrich; she was born in Germany in 1821, married an amateur naturalist Wilhelm Dietrich but left him and worked for a private collector in Hamburg, J.C. Godeffroy, who arranged for her to come to Australia in 1863. She spent ten years collecting in Queensland. Douglas Pike's *Australian Dictionary of Biography* says of her "At the Fitzroy River she dissected crocodiles twenty-two feet long; she suffered fever, lost her house by fire and was rescued by Aboriginals from a water-lily swamp." She was tough and somewhat eccentric but "Within a limited scientific circle she was highly respected as an ardent collector and accurate observer, and was honoured by the names of several plant and animal species (e.g. *Acacia dietrichiana*, *Bonamia dietrichiana*, *Nortonia amaliae* and *Odynerus dietrichianus*). For the private museum in Hamburg she collected "plants, insects, corals, shells, mammals, fish, birds and Aboriginal remains" and some of her collection was later acquired by Baron von Mueller for the Melbourne Herbarium. She sounds a very interesting woman but I didn't quite like the sound of "Aboriginal remains"; did it refer to skulls and femurs or merely artifacts?

The thing which remained in my mind about William Woolls is that he was ahead of his time in speaking out. When asked to make a speech to mark the Centennial in 1888 he said: "In conclusion, I would impress on you two suggestions by which you may further the cause of righteousness in this land, (1) by contributing, as some have already done, something to the Bishops Centennial Fund,: and (2) by doing all you can to ameliorate the condition of the aboriginal tribes yet remaining in the land … Think of the aboriginal natives, or rather the remnant of them who, by the aggression of the white man, have been deprived of their lands, and means of subsistence. We, it is true are not responsible for the deeds of the men who have gone before; but those who study the records of the past and look around for the tribes which once flourished near Sydney, Parramatta, and elsewhere, must be well aware that the blood of the black man cries for vengeance from the ground."

*

March 31: Marge Piercy

*

Marge Piercy wrote in 'Circles in the Water'

> We acquiesce at murder so long as it is slow,
> murder from asbestos dust, from tobacco,

from lead in the water, from sulphur in the air,
and fourteen years later statistics are printed
on the rise in leukemia among children.
We never see their faces. They never stand,
those poisoned children together in a courtyard,
and are gunned down by men in three-piece suits.

'The Long Death'

I had always thought of Marge Piercy as a novelist and after reading some of her poems I am not about to start thinking of her as a poet. In fact her books of poetry such as *Mars and Her Children* start to have a sameness about them which becomes a trifle tedious. It is much better to come on a poem of hers unexpectedly. But her words ring true. James Hardie Pty Ltd may have coughed up millions in compensation but none of their executives or managers have ever stood in the dock on trial for murder … In fact the simplicity of these two poems seems to give them extra power …

Now you legislate mineral rights in a woman.
You lay claim to her pastures for grazing,
fields for growing babies like iceberg lettuce.
You value children so dearly,
that none ever go hungry …
… Every noon the best
restaurants serve poor children steaks.

'Right to Life'

*

April 1: Laszlo Tokes

*

I remember writing a not very good poem about the places which have their brief moment in the news before retreating from our consciousness again—

Tim-o-shah and Cher-no-bill
Teen-an-meen and San-ta Cruise.
I know the world through
Dulcet tones declaiming
Disaster nightly in our news.

A dear friend died, unexpectedly,
Relations here from near and far.
So sad, and yet what lovely hymns
And the wreaths, so charming—
But still the earth's deep-scarred.

And what of places where there's
No respect, no time, all that tossed
Aside, that should come with love, regret?
What of mass graves, swift digging,
Piled earth—and the names are lost?

*

You-gan-dah and Kur-dis-tan
Lar-sa, Roo-wan-dah, Sarr-ah-jay-vo;
I transplant a world through
People's pain remaining
The echo in my tomorrow.

The Romanian city of Timosoara had its few brief days and I must admit I didn't give it much thought then or since. But the other day I came across the autobiography, *With God, for the People*, of Laszlo Tokes, a pastor in the Hungarian Reformed Church in the town. Timosoara was originally the Hungarian town of Temesvar and he says of it, "Built in the earliest years of the medieval Hungarian kingdom, it was for some time the capital of Hungary. Great names in our history are associated with the city: King Matthias and his father, Janos Hunyadi, whose heroism in 1456 prevented the Turks from occupying Hungary. But in 1552 Temesvar was besieged by the Turks who ruled it until 1716, when it was retaken by Habsburg-Hungarian troops. During the eighteenth century the Habsburg Catholics refused to allow Hungarian Protestants to settle in Temesvar. Not until the nineteenth century were Protestants permitted residence in the city."

Not only did Protestantism have a fairly recent history in the town but "The defeat of the Turks in 1716 involved the destruction of all the churches and of the city itself. Today you cannot find a building in Temesvar that is older than the eighteenth century." It was only in the twentieth century when borders in Europe were being redrawn that this part of Hungary was incorporated into Romania. "Temesvar is now, through the ravages of history, on the perimeter of Hungarian Transylvania. It is a predominantly Romanian city with a minority Hungarian population. When we arrived, there were only 10,000 Hungarian Protestants in a total population of 400,000."

It wasn't that Tokes was a major radical. He had clashed with the church hierarchy over small issues like creating Bible classes for young people and the need to get more Bibles and hymn books into circulation (Ceausescu had accepted a shipload of Bibles and religious literature from the West with trumpetings of Romania's 'openness' and then had them shredded and made into toilet paper); and he became increasingly dismayed at the way the bishops had become collaborators and mouthpieces for the Communist government rather than speaking out against the many abuses. But the more he tried to make avenues through church organisations and functions for his parishioners to speak openly the more aware he became of the ways in which communities and cultures were being wrecked. It brought him into conflict with his bishop. "The strategy was clear. Temesvar was a town far away from Kolozsvar and my friends. An assistant pastor could be controlled directly by the bishop. The appointment was a clever way of burying me in obscurity.

"So they sent me to Temesvar, little knowing that three years later it would become – for a few days – the most famous city in the world."

Obscurity wasn't enough. "I read again the brief note I had received in August from Laszlo Papp, Bishop of Nagyvarad. He and I had been locked in confrontation for years. My offence: complaining about a shortage of hymn-books; organising youth activities in the church; protesting against the destruction of the Romanian villages; appearing on a foreign television programme and speaking out against the brutal oppression of Ceausescu's regime." The bishop ordered him evicted. His parishioners and supporters gathered outside, the crowds grew; from being an expression of solidarity with their embattled pastor it turned into a revolution; not a complete revolution, as Tokes reminds his readers; the communism of the east has often been replaced by the materialism of the west and Romania is still not truly accepting of its ethnic, cultural, and religious diversity. But perhaps the strong religious motivation in those who came out on to the streets gave it an underlying sense of the power of non-violence and goodwill which other revolutions have lacked …

*

April 2: George MacDonald Fraser

*

I had noticed Fraser's 'Flashman' books on a library shelf and thought they looked much too violent for my taste. But I picked up his book called *The Steel Bonnets* on a stall and found it interesting. Violent certainly but as he was writing about the warring cattle-rieving clans of the Scottish Borders I suppose the violence was hard to avoid. More importantly I felt he wrote with a lively and vivid pen. (It's funny how such adjectives, or their opposite, naturally attach themselves to pens.) So the other day I said "Here goes" and borrowed *Flashman and the Tiger*. Fraser took a

character from *Tom Brown's Schooldays*, the bully and coward Harry Flashman, let him grow up and sent him out on adventures. He just happens to be 'on the scene' for many of the best-known events of the nineteenth century.

The book is quite witty and clever; "For example, when he informed me over the soup that he had only poor command of English, he managed to convey that the fault lay not only with his boyhood tutors, but with me for speaking the dam' language in the first place; even his compliment to my German sounded like a reproach. I responded with a wheeze I'd once heard (from Bismarck, as it happens) that a gift for languages was useful only to head-waiters, and Willem played up by saying he'd been told that it was a sign of low intelligence. Franz-Josef rolled a bread-pill gloomily and said that wasn't what his tutors had told him, and he had no experience of head-waiters. After this flying start we ate in silence until Franz-Josef began to question me solemnly about Indian Army camp discipline and sanitary arrangements, with particular reference to care of the feet in hot climates. I did my best, and like a fool ventured Wellington's joke when the Queen asked him what was the aroma from the ranks of the Guards, and Nosey replied: "*Esprit de corps*, ma'am." That was met with a vacant stare, so I guessed he didn't speak French too well either."

Flashman describes himself: "The trouble with a reputation like mine is that you're bound to live up to it. It's damnably unfair. Take General Binks or Colonel Snooks, true-blue military muttonheads, brave as bedamned, athirst for glory, doing their dutiful asinine bit in half a dozen campaigns, but never truly catching the public eye, and at last selling out and retiring from obscurity to Cheltenham with a couple of wounds and barely enough to pay the club subscription, foot the memsahib's whist bill, send Adolphus to a crammer 'cos the Wellington fees are beyond them, and afford a drunken loafer to neglect the garden of Ramilles or Quatre Bras or whatever they choose to call their infernal villas." Whereas—"then take Flashy, born poltroon and wastrel, pitchforked against his will into the self-same expeditions and battles, scared out of his wits but surviving by shirking, turning tail, pretence, betrayal, and hiding behind better men — and emerging at the end o' the day, by blind luck and astonishing footwork, with a V.C., a knighthood, a string of foreign decorations as long as Riley's crime sheet, a bloody fortune in the bank, and a name and fame for derring-do that's the talk of the Empire. Well now, Flash old son, says you, that's compensation surely, for all the horrors *un*manfully endured — and don't forget that along the road you've had enough assorted trollop to fill Chelsea Barracks, with an annexe at Aldershot." And so on.

The real trouble is—I couldn't bear the thought of spending any more time in his company. It isn't only his character, I gradually realised, it's a kind of tedious self-indulgence that fills up the forefront of all the stories and allows for no relief. The thought of spending another six hours in his presence …

*

April 3: Love …

*

Every so often someone brings out an anthology of love poems, such as *The Oxford Anthology of Love Poetry*, and serves up the usual suspects; a couple of Shakespearean sonnets, Andrew Marvell's 'To His Coy Mistress', you know what I mean. But the other day I came upon a book by Danielle Steel called simply *Love Poems*. Would a long time and very successful writer of romantic novels write good love poems? I was intrigued enough to want to find out.

Backing
  and sidling
hurting
  ribs
    within
      my stall,
fighting,
  fleeing,

running,
seeing,
hoping,
dying,
aching,
being,
waiting
for
the soft
ring
of your
call.

‘Waiting for Your Call’

You shout at me
and I yell
back,
you push,
I shove,
and we squabble
comfortably
over who sleeps
where,
which side,
whose spot,
you are,
I’m not,
you won’t,
I will,
you grouse
I’m shrill,
a symphony
of loving,
a song
for every day,
a way
to say
“I love you”
in our own
familiar way.

‘Comfortable’

I sat and watched
a boat
come in,
the tide
go out,
a bird
fly by,
a man
swim past,
a life
go by.
The sun
had set,

the man
had gone,
the tide
was out,
the day
was done,
the life
gone by
was mine. 'Boat Come In, Tide Go Out'

There was nothing wrong with her writing, her use of words is simple, compact, and effective. But *every* poem, for 250 pages, was in the same format and style. *Every* poem was in the first person. It wasn't long before I began to grow bored, to long for a different perspective, a different form, a different voice …

*

April 4: Isidoro of Seville

*

"Isidoro of Seville (ca. 560-636) was indisputably the most important scholar-cleric of Visigothic Iberia. As archbishop for 36 years, he squelched the Arian heresy, built schools, and composed missals and breviaries. The most famous of his many writings, the *Etymologies*, is the world's first encyclopedia, ranging over topics from grammar and rhetoric to theology, history, mathematics, medicine, botany, and general science. It still makes good reading today. Isidoro was named a Doctor of the Church in 1722."

David M. Gitlitz and Linda Kay Davidson in *The Pilgrimage Road to Santiago*.

He succeeded his brother Leander as archbishop in around 600 AD. He was canonised in 1598, I assume for his work as archbishop rather than for writing that first encyclopaedia, and given his own day in the calendar of saints, April 4th. And the schools that he set up in every diocese to teach the liberal arts, law, mathematics, medicine, Greek and Hebrew, were probably worth having. Though I don't like the sound of 'squelched'; it suggests … something nasty … but perhaps he worked by gentle persuasion?

"His reputation is due principally to his writings. Bede, at the time of his death, was working on a translation of extracts from Isidore's book *On the Wonders of Nature* (*De natura rerum*), but the *Etymologies* is his most famous work. This is a kind of encyclopedia which contains elements of grammar, rhetoric, theology, history, mathematics, and medicine, presented in the form of etymologies, which are in fact often erroneous. His *Chronica Majora*, which covers the years from the creation to 615, is an influential compilation from various other church historians, but with special information on Spanish history. Other works include biographies of famous men (completing Jerome's work), a summary of Christian doctrine, rules for monks and nuns, and the History of the Goths. From the time of Bede onwards the writings of Isidore figure in medieval library lists almost as frequently as those of Gregory the Great, with whom he shares the unofficial title of 'Schoolmaster of the Middle Ages'."

David Farmer in the *Oxford Dictionary of Saints*.

*

April 5: John Le Mesurier

*

Joan Le Mesurier wrote about her husband in *Dear John*; "When he was first approached about *Dad's Army* and read the script he found it rather dull. There was no love interest and no glamour. He held out little hope for its success and told his agent that he would only do it if Clive (Dunn) was definitely on for it too. Neither of them gave much to the chances of a pilot for a putative TV comedy series pivoting around a bunch of old men in Britain's wartime home guard.

The idea was that the platoon was based in a small south coast town during the post-Dunkirk period of the Second World War when alarmists spoke of Nazi invasion every day, Britain was

scrimping and pinching on dreadful rations and the old boys in the platoon didn't even have proper rifles with which to repel the enemy. Actually there was one young man in *Dad's Army*, Private Pike, who was too delicate to join the army proper and whose mummy (who also happened to be John's character's middle-aged popsy), always made sure he wore a woolly scarf when on parade. Clive had the same doubts and said the same thing: he would only do it if John enlisted, so to speak. So this TV classic began without a particularly confident fanfare of enthusiasm as the company gathered for the first rehearsal.

The principal, absolute and — as it has proved — enduring genius underpinning the programme was that of writers Jimmy Perry and David Croft. As well as turning very funny and neat storylines they managed to imbue all the favourite British vices and virtues in one inefficient platoon, week after week. Snobbery, deflation of pomposity, sympathy for the underdog, fear of the foreign, mistrust of authority yet a strange yielding to it, courage, cowardice, incompetence, silly vicars, muddle, fair play and getting away with a lucky break … The list could go on. The second stroke of genius lay in the inspired casting of a show which has become as much a fixture of British TV, thirty years on, as the American classic Sergeant Bilko."

So what makes a good comedy series? Good writing with good parts, well cast, obviously. *Dad's Army* had the added bonus of a cast who enjoyed working together and characters who were distinctive and quirky. But I think a good comedy also needs an underlying sense of the absurd. It can be meticulous in its recreation of a time and place, of costumes and customs, but it mustn't be a 'slice of life'.

John Le Mesurier was working on his autobiography *A Jobbing Actor* when he died.

*

April 6: 'Furnley Maurice' (Frank Wilmot)

*

I don't know if people rushed to read each new Furnley Maurice poem as it came out in *The Bulletin* but many people knew him as a person as he worked for thirty years at that Melbourne institution, Cole's Book Arcade, starting as an errand boy and ending up as manager. Edward William Cole came to Australia in 1852 as a twenty-year-old and began selling books from a barrow in 1862 before graduating to a market stall and then to a shop. It was another twenty years before he developed his Book Arcade into a huge emporium, opposite Buckley & Nunn's department store in Bourke Street, holding more than a million titles. I know many people fear that such large stores will devour small independent booksellers but, if anything, Cole had a beneficial effect on the writing, publishing, selling, and reading of books, partly because he loved books himself and didn't see them merely as 'products', 'items', or 'units', as a way only to make money, and because he was happy for people to come in and browse even if they didn't always buy. And he also developed that other institution, the *Coles Funny Picture Book* …

In fact Furnley Maurice found it hard to break into *The Bulletin* under his own name; so, believing that A.G. Stephens had a gripe against him, he sent off a poem under the pseudonym of Furnley Maurice and got it accepted. He stayed with the Book Arcade, as manager, till it closed in 1929, but he was a man of many parts; a poet certainly but also an editor, a printer, a publisher, a promoter of Australian writing, a producer of small magazines, a pacifist, a socialist, in fact a man who did a lot to encourage people to read and write about Australia and its people rather than depend on imported English books …

*

I started out seeing Wilmot as one of *The Bulletin's* stable of bush balladeers but I came upon this poem of his, 'Praise', in Jennifer Strauss's *Australian Love Poems* and it suggested something a little more thoughtful than the usual rollick …

'I will praise her sweet gentleness,' I said
And wandered out towards the approaching moon;
I wandered out remembering how red

The sunset was, how sweltering the noon.

A soft grey slip of bush track turned between
Two lonely houses and a sawyer's shed
Into a clump of beech I knew was green
And, rising, lost itself at the spurhead.

'It is her gentleness,' I said aloud—
Or thought sounds noisy in a buried day—
The groaning summer hills screened in a cloud
Of cooling showers had hidden the moon away.

Like leaves in sunlight, rustled words in thought
Trembling upon disclosure. Her sweet worth
Eluded every lead. The slow wind brought
An odour of rain that sunk in the parched earth

'Her goodness!' Why in vanity pursue
that baulk? … But I remember to this day
The thirsty ranges fading from my view
In showers and a slim track lost in grey.

*

April 7: John Smith

*

Why did middle-of-the-road Methodist minister John Smith form the Melbourne chapter of the God Squad and go forth to take Jesus to outlaw bikie gangs? Strangely, one of the reasons was Victor Hugo.

"Perhaps the most influential book of all was Victor Hugo's mammoth work *Les Miserables*. I struggled through it in answer to a challenge from my father. In many ways it's a crazily romantic tale, almost moral propaganda rather than novel. Briefly, the story hinges on the willingness of an elderly French Bishop of the eighteenth century, Monseigneur Bienvenu, to show love and trust to a complete outcast, a brutalized and embittered criminal, Jean Valjean, whose anti-social condition was the clear result of a vicious and unjust system.

"Valjean is eventually transformed by the encounter, yet his past dogs him in the shape of a legalistic and merciless policeman, Javert, whose obsession with the law blinds him to any possibility of forgiveness. *Les Miserables* sowed a number of intuitive feelings in my heart that many years later I have picked up on and which are central to my thinking.

"Firstly, it sowed a seed of dissatisfaction with social injustice; secondly, a dissatisfaction with the legal processes that are biased towards those who have power and privilege. Thirdly, it gave me a sense of the right place for a proper religious response to social problems. I felt that besides there being theological bureaucrats and obsessive legalists in the church, there could also be men and women whose graciousness reflects the goodness of Christ in the midst of a corrupt and unjust social order.

"The fourth thing Hugo taught me was that the anti-social person is not necessarily simply a sinner. It has now become a major part of my preaching to point out that, while every human being has done wrong, they are often as much sinned against as sinners. I have come to realize that unless you understand this you have an inhumane form of religion. I learned that you have to see past the ugliness of a person's behaviour and to examine the social and religious causes in their life.

"Fifthly, and lastly, *Les Miserables* revealed to me that there is an answer to the ancient question of the Bible, 'Can a leopard change its spots?' And the answer is yes. And that answer is not mere romanticism or optimism. I have an indomitable belief, first prompted by Hugo's book,

and later confirmed by experience, that when the Bible offers us hope of moral and social change, it is not offering a crude dream that can only mock us in the reality of life.

"Things *can* be changed. It took me a long time to realize that, and I had to have many struggles with my own sense of guilt and later a cold legalism which dehumanized my responses to suffering humanity. In fact the book itself foreshadowed many of those tussles I had in my teenage years."

On the Side of Angels by John Smith and Malcolm Doney.

*

April 8: Barbara Kingsolver

*

Barbara Kingsolver is known both as a novelist and a non-fiction writer. I prefer her non-fiction, such as *Small Wonder*, perhaps because it has a simplicity and straightforwardness. For instance, did you know that pet cats kill 2 million songbirds in the USA every day? You would rather not have known?

'When the widely publicized Human Genome Project completed its mapping of human chromosomes, it offered an unsettling, not-so-widely publicized conclusion: Instead of the 100,000 or more genes that had been expected, based on the number of proteins we must synthesize to be what we are, we have only about 30,000—about the same number as a mustard plant. This evidence undermined the central dogma of how genes work; that is, the assumption of a clear-cut chain of processes leading from a single gene to the appearance of the trait it controls. Instead, the mechanism of gene expression appears vastly more complicated than had been assumed since Watson and Crick discovered the structure of DNA in 1953. The expression of a gene may be altered by its context, such as the presence of other genes on the chromosome near it. Yet genetic engineering operates on assumptions based on the simpler model.'

'He asked how the pet-store owner could justify selling a bird that was in danger of being extirpated from the wild.

"We're keeping it safe," the man explained without a twinge of remorse. "Somebody will take very good care of it."

"But you've taken it from the world. It's gone from the breeding population," my husband protested.'

Her work is often powerful and thought-provoking. But I had a small quibble. She says the income from that book will go to: Physicians for Social Responsibility, Habitat for Humanity, Environmental Defense, Heifer International. Where writers put the money they make, if any, is entirely their business. I don't want to be told. Otherwise it can become a kind of emotional blackmail: buy this book rather than that book because this one will buy heifers for poor farmers …

*

April 9: Janice Bostock

*

Janice Bostock is recognised as Australia's premier haiku writer but the master is Basho, the Japanese poet of the 17th century. I remember many years ago a friend sending me a book of his haiku and I sat down and read it in a couple of sittings. Much later I discovered that *isn't* the way you read haiku. Nor is it the way you write haiku.

To mark 300 years since his death a book on his life and work, edited by Stephen Henry Gill and C. Andrew Gerstie, was brought out. Gill described haiku in these words: "The essence of haiku is that spontaneous moment of awareness in which our thought is illumined by a sense of wonder, a close identification with some apprehended feature of the natural world. A poem, such as the one above by Matsuo Basho (1644-94), haiku's patron saint, is a celebration of the commonplace, the understated, in a single-line formula that may well take three or four lines of

English to get across. The Japanese mind has been conditioned to appreciate *wabi*, humble beauty: rather the hidden weed than the showy rose. It is also finely attuned to the beauty of implication, by which the reader is asked to 'flesh out' the evoked scene and conjured emotion from the bare bones of an experience offered him by the poet."

The haiku he uses as an illustration is, in Japanese—

Yoku mireba nazuna hana kakine kana

—and in English—

Taking a close look –
In tiny white clusters,
Flowers of shepherd's purse
At the foot of the hedge.

While other poetic forms have long since cut loose from their host societies—the villanelle, the sonnet—the haiku remains firmly wedded to Japan. Even those who have played with the form, changed it, explored it, turned it on its head, feel a need to reiterate its 'ownership' …

So what of Janice Bostock's haikus? Do they fall into the traditional or exploratory forms? It perhaps didn't surprise me that traditional anthologies of Australian poets do not include haiku writers. If anything the sense that the ballad is *the* Australian form still underpins even those poems which have burst the bounds of rhyme. Yet I think this is a pity. Janice Bostock probably has a bigger international readership than more 'Australian' poets. It isn't hard to see why. She has captured the essence of haiku.

Though much of her work is in the traditional three lines I particularly liked her one liners such as:

wind blows a glimpse of duckling through reeds

fox slinks into pampas grass plume trembling

white faced heron slumps in heat of the wetlands

muzzle of the drinking cow glides across still water

Janice Bostock lives on a banana plantation near Murwillumbah.

*

April 10: A. E. (George William Russell)

*

In ancient shadows and twilights
Where childhood had strayed,
The world's great sorrows were born
And its heroes were made.
In the lost boyhood of Judas
Christ was betrayed.

A. E.

Raynor C. Johnson in *The Light and the Gate* wrote of A. E.: ' "Spirituality", he said, "is the power certain minds have of apprehending formless spiritual essences, of seeing the eternal in the transitory, of relating the particular to the universal, the type to the archetype." If it is greatness to become the embodiment of spirituality to many others, A. E. may be counted probably the greatest Irishman of his day. He moved with a natural and unaffected simplicity of spirit in the common ways of life, yet all who met him felt that he was "different" – in some way apart from them, as though he had strayed into this world from an older and wiser one with which he was more familiar.'

And perhaps in a world obsessed by what it sees as success, financial success, sporting success, career success, personal popularity, it is worth remembering his words, "a man's success or failure is always with his own soul."

*

April 11: Jean Elliot

*

James Buchan wrote in *Capital of the Mind: How Edinburgh Changed the World*: "In the matter of women's lives, eighteenth-century Edinburgh has two claims to interest. The first is the Forty-five rebellion, in which the Jacobite women played brilliant and striking roles. In the recollections of the rebellion the sexes have become oddly intertwined, switch professions and even clothes, strike chivalrous or Quixotic poses. Hospitality and fidelity, the virtues of the Scots woman, triumph over the brutal and indifferent English man. Jacobitism had a life among Scots women — not only Mr 'Evidence' Murray's 'Ladyships and green girls' — long after it had died in Scots males. This feminised Jacobitism, which gave to Scotland its great laments such as the 'Flowers of the Forest', survived as a vestige or posture among certain Scottish women well into the twentieth century."

'The Flowers of the Forest'

I've heard the liltin' at our yowe-milkin',
Lasses a-liltin' before the dawn o' day;
But now they are moanin' in ilka green loanin'—
The Flowers o' the Forest are a' wede away.

At buchts, in the mornin', nae blythe lads are scornin',
The lasses are lonely, and dowie, and wae;
Nae daffin', nae gabbin', but sighin' and sabbin',
Ilk ane lifts her leglen, and hies her away.

In hairst, at the shearin', nae youths now are jeerin',
The bandsters are lyart, and runkled, and grey;
At fair, or at preachin', nae wooin', nae fleechin'—
The Flowers o' the Forest are a' wede away.

At e'en, at the gloamin', nae swankies are roamin',
'Bout stacks wi' the lasses at bogle to play;
But ilk ane sits drearie, lamentin' her dearie—
The Flowers o' the Forest are a' wede away.

Dule and wae for the order sent our lads to the Border!
The English, for ance, by guile wan the day;
The Flowers o' the Forest, that focht aye the foremaist,
The prime o' our land, are cauld in the clay.

We'll hear nae mair liltin' at our yowe-milkin',
Women and bairns are heartless and wae;
Sighin' and moanin' on ilka green loanin'—
The Flowers o' the Forest are a' wede away.

Jean Elliot (1727 – 1805)

[Yowe = ewe. Wede = gone, marched, taken (from Irish *uidhe*). Wae = woe. Leglen = a milking stool. Ilk or ilka = each or every. Dule = sorrow.]

And the other influence?

Buchan says it was on philosophy; the need for contrasts and obverses …

*

April 12: Jack Hibberd

*

Years ago the play *Dimboola* was always on somewhere—though I never got to see it and had no idea who its author was.

Jack Hibberd studied to be a doctor and wrote poetry in his spare time—until a friend, David Kendall, told him his poems read like monologues and why didn't he try writing a play. Some people take notice of their friends, other people don't. Hibberd got to work and wrote a play he called *The Wellington Boot* and followed it up with *White with Wire Wheels*; both plays dealt with mateship and aspects of Australian life though in what might be called the conventionally absurd style. He began his association with Australia's first intimate little theatre, La Mama in Melbourne, and wrote more plays and a couple of novels. I read one of his novels but I found that bawdy soon becomes tedious. Bawdy runs through his plays as well, along with fairly clunky names like Jock Strap and Nigel New-Chump, but he made his name in Australian theatre and the only one of his plays I have seen, *A Toast to Melba*, I enjoyed.

So what of *Dimboola*? It cut new ground by being not just a play for small theatre-restaurants but one which incorporated the dining audience as well. It is about a wedding reception in a small country town; the audience gets to meet the 'bride' Maureen and the 'groom' Morrie before they sit down to eat. The priest ends up drunk under the table. It has two gatecrashers Mutton and Bayonet. In other words it is a piece which sends up those aspects of Australian humour, bawdiness, drunkenness, and aggression, which have come to be seen as typical. J. D. Hainsworth says of it "a satirical portrait, not just of a wedding reception but of the kind of community that exists in small Australian townships."

The curious thing, I came to think afterwards, is that small country townships are usually far less bawdy, drunken, and violent than big cities. It is harder to be bawdy in a community where everyone knows you and will still be bringing up your indiscretions twenty years down the track. It is harder to be legless when the police know you and can focus their breathalyzers far more specifically. And violence marks you out for life. It can have an inhibiting effect … But *Dimboola* was popular for decades not because it was a high point for social realism but simply because people saw it as light and funny … And this is true. It *is* quite funny in a boozy knockabout way. And here is the evening's menu:

SOUP
Boeuf derriere (Ox-tail)
Brodo Tomato
Mulligatawny
MAIN COURSE
Poule a la Wimmera with Sauce Mysterioso
Boeuf Arrosto Frigide with Potatoes and peas and Various Salads
DESSERT
Blanc Mange Jeparit
Trifle
Compote de Fruites mixed. Enjoy!

*

April 13: Samuel Beckett

*

One day I was in the library and I noticed a Samuel Beckett called *How It Is* which unlike *Murphy* and *Malone Dies* and *Waiting for Godot* I had never heard of. This was his last novel and,

if anything, it is stranger than all the others put together. A man is stuck in the mud. We aren't told why or how …

'the words of Pim his extorted voice he stops I step in all the needful he starts again I could listen to him for ever but mine have done with mine natural order before Pim the little I say no sound the little I see of a life I don't deny don't believe but what believe the sack perhaps the dark the mud death perhaps to wind up with after so much life there are moments'

'the tongue gets clogged with mud that can happen too only one remedy then pull it in and suck it swallow the mud or spit it out it's one or the other and question is it nourishing and vistas last a moment with that'

… and the idea that he talks in this vein between gasping breaths while stuck in the mud for more than an hour or however long it might take to read the book aloud is hard to believe; apart from the exhaustion no one would talk like that … nor would anyone merely philosophise rather than seek a way out … but if these are his disjointed thoughts then the constant gaps for breath are irrelevant; your thoughts are independent of your breathing. Then again these might be conversations with other lost souls, such as Pim, in the mud, the mud perhaps being a metaphor for death or alienation … but they are equally pointless as a conversation. I remembered there was a Quaker family called Pim in Dublin though that didn't seem a relevant connection but then again Pim might be synonymous with the longing for a drink …

'something perhaps beyond my powers assuredly not this creature is no fool one senses that'

'what is not beyond my powers known not to be beyond them song it is required therefore that I sing'

… but perhaps he is not the tormented …

'instead of ending abandoned I end as tormentor'

… and certainly the reader ends up feeling tormented; I could only hope that he would quickly disappear beneath the metaphorical mud and end it all … but the mud as literary device or as symbol, whether stuck in the mud is a metaphor for thoughts which have no direction and no staying power, is boring stuff … and I am always left with the odd question: perhaps my own thoughts which may get diverted but which always have a sense of direction and don't need to *describe* anything because they come with a constant vigorous kaleidoscope of images are not, as I like to think, the way everyone else thinks. Perhaps what goes on in our brains as we try to make sense of everything in our lives is as unique as our fingerprints or DNA or experiences of life and, ultimately, of death …

And did Beckett ever come out and say, 'yes, I was trying to drive my readers to exhaustion and madness'?

*

April 14: Bill Harney

*

Bill Harney lived a knockabout sort of life in the Inland and his writings are interesting for their history, bush lore, and knowledge of Aboriginal life. He also had a laconic sense of humour even though life had not always been kind to him. His part-Aboriginal wife Linda died of TB leaving him with two little children. They criss-crossed the Northern Territory during the Depression years in desperate search of work. Then further tragedy struck: his little daughter died from TB of the spine and his son was later drowned when he tried to help another boy. And he saw and recorded many things, major and minor, in that society that angered him and still distress the reader.

Jeff Carter in *Bush Battlers* writes, "When he was a ranger at Ayers Rock, Bill Harney often marvelled at the fact that tourists who had the energy to carry full bottles or cans to the top of the rock never had the energy to bring back the containers. Instead, empty bottles or cans fell from limp hands somewhere on Ayers Rock the moment the last drop was drained."

But his sense of humour is there in *Life Among the Aborigines*:

"I once came upon an old aborigine who had attached himself to a missionary who he thought was completely mad. They had broken down beside the road and, as is common with a lot of these people who trust in the Lord and travel from cattle station to some other destination without food supplies, they were without food when the breakdown occurred.

The aborigine had a grievance, and explained it all to me. "We break down … no tucker … and this mission man say, 'Where tucker?' … So I make spear from tree … sharpen it on stone and I go out and kill kangaroo … then this man say 'Where match?' So I make fire with stick — blackfellow way — and I took this one kangaroo and give some to them … then him talk, 'No more eat till we thank God for this one food' … him proper cranky fool."

The aggrieved black man asked me to explain why it was that after he had done everything to get the food this man had asked him to thank 'Nother one man'."

"One debate — always in the tribal language — was about the all-seeing eye of a sky-spirit called Pupinoowarri, who would rush out of the sky at night to destroy the evil-doers of the tribe, and slowly this theme turned to the God of the Christians.

Patiently the old men listened as the Father explained that God could see all things and, emboldened by the intent looks on their faces, connecting the Christian God with their own, he thrust home his main reason for the debate — adultery among the women when their husbands were away in Darwin.

"In the jungle," he told them, "God looks down as these people commit that sin …" He got no further, for an old elder interrupted. "You wrong, Father, if your God is as good as you tell us He is, He would be too ashamed to look."

"The aborigines have — for centuries — been in a backwash of time, and in it they evolved a perfect system — "the elimination of effort". They hunted their food by studying the weakness of the creatures they stalked during the hunt, and the flowering of trees and the winds told them when to hunt that prey. Their "song cycles" about their ritual centres explained to the initiated where things were to be found, and so long have these people been in this land that every natural landmark in the Northern Territory is incorporated in those "song cycles". Everything was laid out in a perfect pattern until we strangers arrived, and then it broke down."

Bill Harney died in 1962.

*

April 15: Corrie ten Boom

*

"How long I lay on my bed sobbing for the one love of my life I do not know. Later, I heard Father's footsteps coming up the stairs. For a moment I was a little girl again waiting for him to tuck the blankets tight. But this was a hurt that no blanket could shut out, and suddenly I was afraid of what Father would say. Afraid he would say, "There'll be someone else soon," and that forever afterward this untruth would lie between us. For in some deep part of me I knew already that there would not — soon or ever — be anyone else.

The sweet cigar-smell came into the room with Father. And of course he did not say the false, idle words.

"Corrie," he began instead, "do you know what hurts so very much? It's love. Love is the strongest force in the world, and when it is blocked that means pain.

"There are two things we can do when this happens. We can kill the love so that it stops hurting. But then of course part of us dies, too. Or, Corrie, we can ask God to open up another route for that love to travel.

"God loves Karel — even more than you do — and if you ask Him, He will give you His love for this man, a love nothing can prevent, nothing destroy. Whenever we cannot love in the old human way, Corrie, God can give us the perfect way."

I did not know, as I listened to Father's footsteps winding back down the stairs, that he had given me more than the key to this hard moment. I did not know that he had put into my hands the secret that would open far darker rooms than this — places where there was not, on a human level, anything to love at all.'

Corrie ten Boom in *The Hiding Place*.

*

April 16: J. M. Synge

*

At some stage of my schooling the class was required to read Synge's *Riders to the Sea*. I found it unrelievedly gloomy and was heartily glad when we moved on to something more cheerful. I was thinking back to this as I came upon Andrew McNeillie's *An Aran Keening* in which he begins by saying he went there first in 1968 seventy years after Synge; "Even in 1898 Synge found Inishmore too touched by capital, too tainted by the filthy modern tide, detecting in eye and expression "the anxiety of men who are eager for gain", and even in its children "an indefinable modern quality". He sought his romantic, unfallen vision on Inishmaan, least accessible of the three islands, in brief visits in summer and early autumn. I didn't have such qualms when I embarked on my sea-pastoral adventure. The circumstances on Inishmore were ideal enough for me. But clearly I lived in some state deeper than I knew of resistance to the modern world."

His book made me want to go back to Synge's little play. Leslie Rees says of it, "John Millington Synge (1871 – 1909) is another of the half-dozen leading dramatists of the Irish national theatre. W. B. Yeats persuaded this "drifting silent man, full of hidden passion", to go to the Aran Islands, off the west coast of Ireland, and study the simple folk who lived there. It was a primitive wind-bitten life, but in the joys and sorrows of the people Synge found a deep strain of poetry. He listened carefully to the musical speech of the islanders, then wrote this play, *Riders to the Sea* (1904). It is a tragedy of the mother who loses her menfolk one after another to the sea."

(How 'silent' was Synge? Melbourne playwright Louis Esson said of him, "He was dark, of striking appearance … He was a simple man; but there was something strange and alluring about him, an indescribable charm expressed in his voice and manner and, above all, in his curious smile that was at the same time ironic and sympathetic", so clearly the silence was relative.)

It is still a tragic play but reading it as an adult and a mother it is more than that, not least in the sympathy of those around the old woman Maurya and the way their faith provides at least a sense of acceptance.

And modernity? McNeillie's time in the 1960s was on the cusp of modernity. Thirty years later the islands had radio, telephones, power, TVs … and tours. And today the men who go to sea have life jackets, epirbs, mobile phones … Maurya's world is gone for ever …

*

April 17: Anon

*

When Herbert Kohl wrote *36 Children* about his time as a teacher in a deprived school in Harlem in the 1960s he gave his children names, Frank, Maurice, Grace, Pamela, and so on, probably their real names but not enough to truly bring them out of the shadows. He found the books and curriculum woefully irrelevant to the children's lives, children were expected to read about American prosperity and the onward march of progress but go home to filthy tenements with violence, drunkenness, junkies, and angry cops driving by, and he began to encourage them to explore and write about their own lives.

What came out, part fantasy, part wishful thinking, part reality, part imaginative reconstructions, are still well worth reading forty years later. Their spelling is sometimes wonky but always understandable. At times their embarrassment with their poor lives and unruly families is palpable. But they often show gifts in expression that I hope they found ways to nurture through their teen years and into adulthood. For instance 11 year-old Robert G. Jackson's story of a young German man taking on the Roman Empire is stirring stuff. It is also at times quite funny. "The

alligators were trined not to attack the Soldiers, but the alligators didn't eat for a year and were starving. The soldiers whipped Pathos, and roughed him up, then Pathos was still strong enough to move his feet, so he kicked the enemies into the swampy waters, and the alligators had their feast." (Gibbon seems to have left that little detail out of his monumental *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire!*) Kohl though came reluctantly to the understanding that regardless of what he did with one class in one year it was the system which wrote off poor black students which was the problem. As one of his students said to him, "Mr. Kohl, one good year isn't enough …"

Have things improved? I would like to think so …

*

April 18: Ernie Pyle (d)

*

"Ernie Pyle was by far the most widely read World War II journalist. His column appeared in seven hundred newspapers every week around the world. Pyle spent most of his war career in Europe but transferred to the Pacific theater in 1944. He introduced the Japanese enemy to his millions of readers this way: "In Europe we felt that our enemies, horrible and deadly as they were, were still people. But out here I soon gathered that the Japanese were looked upon as something subhuman and repulsive, the way some people feel about cockroaches or mice." When he saw Japanese prisoners for the first time, he told his readers, "They were wrestling and laughing and talking just like normal human beings. And yet they gave me the creeps, and I wanted a mental bath after looking at them."

"Ashihei Hino was Japan's Ernie Pyle. He called Americans "people whose arrogant nation once tried to unlawfully treat our motherland with contempt." He described American POWs on Bataan this way: "I feel like I am watching filthy water running from the sewage of a nation which derives from impure origins and has lost its pride of race. Japanese soldiers look particularly beautiful, and I feel exceedingly proud of being Japanese." "

from *Flyboys* by James Bradley.

Pyle had started out as a small-town-boy on a small newspaper but his articles and columns became popular and by the time he became a war correspondent he had a massive readership. The other day I noticed he'd had a regular column in Melbourne's *Argus* newspaper, (and I assume other Australian papers) 'Ernie Pyle's War'. His reporting won him a Pulitzer Prize in 1944 and the 1945 film *G.I. Joe* was based on his time in Italy. He was shot on the Japanese island of Ie Shima in 1945. But it was not the end of his influence. Books of his columns continued to be collected up after the war and to sell well.

Arthur Miller in his autobiography *Timebends* said of him, "The film rights to *Here Is Your War* had been sought by all the big companies, but Cowan, an independent, had won Pyle's agreement—provisional, as I soon learned—because he alone had pledged to feature not Pyle but the soldiers. Pyle had a singular position in the public mind; far more than any other correspondent, he was trustingly read each day by soldiers' families desperate for news, because he always gave the names and addresses of the men he ran into overseas. In fact, he not only shared their dangers but saw more combat than almost any soldier, moving from unit to unit to remain in battle when troops were withdrawn for recuperation.

"Pyle did not seek out colorful characters or men of great patriotic consciousness. The killing was a human catastrophe for all sides. Before the war he had toured the Midwest with his wife beside him in his little Ford, talking to Main Street people, gathering the most common stories and ordinary emotions to share with his readers. The atmosphere of his daily column was benign, warmly humorous, small-town. The war was simply Main Street with sudden death added."

And was Ashihei Hino similarly a modest 'down home' boy who tried to keep families in touch? Probably not. The war novels he wrote while a soldier in the Japanese Army, like *Fun'nyotan* (Tales of Excrement and Urine) and *Mugi to Heitai* (Wheat and Soldiers) were immensely popular, *Mugi to Heitai* eventually selling a million copies. They helped him move from

soldiering to reporting. But after the war when his jingoistic writings were seen as an embarrassment he lost popularity. In 1960 he committed suicide.

*

April 19: Benjamin Disraeli (d)

*

Benjamin Disraeli was Prime Minister of Great Britain in 1868 and again from 1874 to 1880 and I tend to think of him as the man who always agreed with Queen Victoria. He also wrote several novels. I am just reading his *Sybil* and I must admit it is hard going; although he wielded a ready pen and some of the descriptions and conversations are lively I think he wasn't clear on exactly what he wanted to write. I picture him as studying the market and deciding that a novel it must be if he is to find readers. But sometimes the novel is a polemic, sometimes it seems closer to a farce as he gives characters names like Muddlebrains and Devilsdust and Sir Litany Lax, at other times it is a disquisition on philosophy, economics, religion. In theory it is a love story but Sybil Gerard is only an occasional insert. At times it is a novel of social criticism—as when—

' "EXTRAORDINARY SPORT AT THE EARL OF MARNEY'S. On Wednesday, in a small cover called the Horns, near Marney Abbey, his grace the Duke of Fitz-Aquitaine, the Earl of Marney, Colonel Rippe and Captain Grouse, with only four hour's shooting, bagged the extraordinary number of seven hundred and thirty head of game, namely, hares three hundred and thirty-nine; pheasants two hundred and twenty-one; partridge thirty-four; rabbits eighty-seven; and the following day upwards of fifty hares, pheasants, &c. (wounded the previous day), were picked up. Out of the four hours' shooting, two of the party were absent an hour and a half, namely, the Earl of Marney and Captain Grouse, attending an agricultural meeting in the neighbourhood; the noble earl, with his usual considerate condescension, having kindly consented personally to distribute the various prizes to the labourers whose good conduct entitled them to the distinction."

'What do you think of that, Franklin?' said Morley. 'That is our worthy friend of Marney Abbey, where we first met. You do not know this part of the country, or you would smile at the considerable condescension of the worst landlord in England; and who was, it seems, thus employed the day or so after his battue, as they call it.' And Morley turning the paper read another paragraph:—

'At a Petty Sessions holden at the Green Dragon Inn, Marney, Friday, October—, 1837.

'Magistrates present: The Earl of Marney, the Rev. Felix Flimsey, and Captain Grouse.

'Information against Thomas Hind for a trespass in pursuit of game in Blackrock Wood, the property of Sir Vavasour Firebrace, Bart. The case was distinctly proved; several wires being found in the pocket of the defendant. Defendant was fined in the full penalty of forty shillings and costs twenty-seven; the Bench being of opinion there was no excuse for him, Hind being in regular employ as a farm labourer and gaining his seven shillings a week. Defendant, being unable to pay the penalty, was sent for two months to Marham jail.'

'What a pity,' said Morley, 'that Robert Hind, instead of meditating the snaring of a hare, had not been fortunate enough to pick up a maimed one crawling about the fields the day after the battue. It would certainly have been better for himself; and if he has a wife and family, better for the parish.'

The book suggests it was Disraeli the politician who would like to have the powerful, the wealthy, the aristocracy, the landed gentry, showing kindness and compassion—rather than risk social change or even, and it creeps up to the possibility in the time of the Chartists, revolution … But his chosen ones, in fiction and in fact, mostly let him down.

And I came away from it wishing that Disraeli had followed his natural bent and written a novel of political intrigue …

One day I was tidying the Meeting House library shelves and took down a large old book called *The Penn Country of Buckinghamshire* put out by The Council for the Preservation of Rural England; as I browsed through it I noticed it had a chapter on Disraeli. This begins: 'Disraeli never

tired of speaking of the history and romance of the County of Buckingham. "The County of Buckingham," he said, in a speech at Amersham at one of his early elections, "has always taken a lead in the political fortunes of this country. The parliamentary constitution of England was born in the bosom of the Chiltern Hills; as to this day our parliamentary career is terminated among its Hundreds. The parliamentary constitution of England was established when Mr. Hampden rode up to Westminster surrounded by his neighbours. Buckinghamshire did that for England. It has done more. It gave us the British Constitution in the seventeenth century, and it created the British Empire in the eighteenth century. All the great statesmen of that period were born, or bred, or lived, in this country." So when he came in 1845 to live in Hughenden it may be said that he added no little to the history and romance of the county, and to the long roll of statesmen that Buckinghamshire has produced.

'Coming from his father's home at Bradenham, some two miles distant, he came to no unknown spot, but to one endeared to him by his boyhood's friendships, and to a neighbourhood he had always loved. For thirty-six years he made this his home. Here, with his devoted wife, he lived. Here, with her, he is buried. Here it is where countless numbers, year by year, come to see and to hear the story, and drop a tribute on the grave of the illustrious great. And this Hughenden will always remain for all who love the settings where great men have lived and worked. The antiquarian may tell us that this is the manor which William the Conqueror gave to Bishop Odo, that later it passed to Richard de Montfort, then to the Black Canons of Kenilworth Priory, and later, after the Reformation, to the Stanhope family.'

And it was there that Disraeli achieved his ambitions of becoming a possessor of land, position, and a title, Lord Beaconsfield.

*

April 20: La Marseillaise

*

'Ah! But these people are always howling. Never happy otherwise.'

'Do you mean the Marseilles people?'

'I mean the French people. They're always at it. As to Marseilles, we know what Marseilles is. It sent the most insurrectionary tune into the world that was ever composed. It couldn't exist without allonging and marshinging to something or other – victory or death, or blazes, or something.'

From *Little Dorrit* by Charles Dickens.

When a Captain Claude-Joseph Rouget de Lisle wrote the words of 'The Marseillaise' (in one night) he titled it 'Chant de guerre de l'armee du Rhin' (War Song of the Army of the Rhine). But France declared war on Austria on April 20 1792 and the Mayor of Strasbourg asked the army captain, who was quartered in the town, if it could be played in public and re-named. It became so popular that three years later France adopted it as its National Anthem. This wasn't all plain sailing though. Napoleon banned it as did several later rulers. They could only take so much equality and fraternity …

And why Marseillaise when it was neither written there nor first performed there? Most of de Lisle's army colleagues, and thus the first to try it out as a song and begin to make it known and popular, were from Marseilles …

*

April 21: J. S. Manifold

*

We had two poems by John Manifold in our school poetry books, 'The Tomb of Lt. John Learmonth, A.I.F.' and 'The Bunyip and the Whistling Kettle'; the first seemed rather grim and the second too light-hearted to suggest Manifold was a 'great' poet. Not long ago I came upon his piece 'Brown, Black and White' and was not surprised it wasn't in our schoolbooks.

Observing that Kanakas pined
For native meats and native sports,
The Cardwell settlers were inclined
To grant a holiday of sorts.

So their brown slaves, in shirts and shorts
Of spotless Sunday cleanness, lined
Up after church, were told the courts
On this occasion wouldn't mind.

Each team was issued with a gun,
Powder and shot—'but don't be lax
And blaze away regardless' (not
Unbiased counsel!). Off they run
To hunt those unproductive blacks,
The genuine locals, for the pot.

Rodney Hall wrote a sympathetic biography, being a friend of Manifold's, in which he details a man belonging to the wealthy squatter clan in Victoria who went to Geelong Grammar (where one of his teachers was Kay Masterman, brother to Nan Chauncy) then to Paris and Cambridge where he shocked his family and caused a long rift by becoming a Communist. But all through his school years and later in the army he continued to write poetry and play music. By the time he left the UK after the Second World War he was becoming known as both a poet and a writer on music. Then he came home and settled in Brisbane where he and his work were unknown. He continued to play the flute, to write about music, including his important *The Music in English Drama*, to write and collect ballads, including as editor of *The Queensland Centenary Songbook* (which includes the one poem I made a point of learning by heart as a child, 'On the Queensland Railway Lines' with its immortal lines:

Iron rations come in handy
On the way to Dirranbandi;
Passengers have died of hunger
During halts at Garradunga.)

and his *Who Wrote the Ballads?* But Hall suggests that the combination of his long sojourn in Europe and his communism meant that a whole generation of Australian poets had come to maturity without knowing anything about him and now were reluctant to include him in the cannon. Added to that many of his poems were published in newspapers and magazines and have never been collected. And his strongly political poems, such as this from 'Abyssinia and Vietnam',

To get a lyric thrill from bombing black
Or brown civilians, crops or buffaloes,
One must be sure that no one can oppose
Effectual riposte to the attack.

also don't necessarily appeal to the makers of anthologies. Although I applaud the sentiments it seems to include most of the weaknesses in his work. Yet going by the variety of attractive pieces Hall quotes I cannot help but feel that Manifold is an unfairly neglected Australian poet.

*

April 22: Padmasambhava of Tibet

*

"The title *Tibetan Book of the Dead* was coined by its translator, the American scholar W. Y. Evans-Wentz, in imitation of the famous (and equally mistitled) *Egyptian Book of the Dead*. The actual name of the book is *Bardo Tödrol Chenmo*, which means "the Great Liberation through Hearing in the Bardo." Bardo teachings are extremely ancient, and found in what are called the

Dzogchen Tantras. These teachings have a lineage stretching back beyond human masters to the Primordial Buddha (called in Sanskrit Samantabhadra, and in Tibetan Kuntuzangpo), who represents the absolute, naked, sky-like primordial purity of the nature of our mind. But the *Bardo Tödrol Chenmo* itelf is part of one large cycle of teachings handed down by the master Padmasambhava and revealed in the fourteenth century by the Tibetan visionary Karma Lingpa."

So writes Sogyal Rinpoche in *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying* and he goes on to say that the *Bardo Tödrol Chenmo* "is a unique book of knowledge. It is a kind of guidebook or a travelogue of the after-death states, which is designed to be read by a master or spiritual friend to a person as the person dies, and after death."

We don't know the dates for the collation of the teachings we now know as th*e Tibetan Book of the Dead or The After-death Experiences on the Bardo Plane* but we do know much about their translator, Walter Yeeling Evans-Wentz. He was an American scholar and anthropologist (1878 – 1965) who first became interested in the beliefs of the East through the writings of Madam Blavatsky. He traveled widely, including through Egypt, India, and Sri Lanka. But he first became known through his book *The Fairy-Faith in Celtic Countries*. After that it was the East which took over and he published mainly on Tibet including *Tibet's Great Yogi Milarepa*. This is his translation of a biography of Jetsün Milarepa but it isn't what we commonly think of as a biography but rather a collection of sayings, beliefs, teachings, relations to disciples and other teachers, and magic. "In this way did Jetsün emancipate a countless number of fortunate beings. The most highly developed of them attained perfect [spiritual] development and Emancipation; those of lesser ability were set firmly upon the Path of Emancipation; the least among them had their hearts thoroughly converted and inclined towards the Noble Path of Righteousness; even those whose *karma* denied them the share of the Most Priceless Boon had an inherent and habitual love of goodness implanted in their hearts, thereby winning the blessing of celestial and human happiness for their immediate future."

It is a curious thing when I think about it: we are more likely to choose readings for friends or relatives who are dying which will take their minds *off* death. Light novels. Comic writings. Insubstantial magazine articles. Perhaps we are mistaken to do so …

*

April 23: Ngaio Marsh

*

The first public theatre in London opened in 1576. "The companies produced great actors who became the idols of the crowd: the comics, Tarleton and Will Kempe; Richard Burbage and Edward Alleyn. Edward Alleyn was made to be the personator of Marlowe's heroes and he played them all with resounding success. He was born in 1566 and started life as a strolling player. When the professional companies began to form he joined the Lord Admiral's men and in 1592 made a match which put his theatrical career on a sound financial footing, marrying the step-daughter of Philip Henslowe, a money-lender and theatrical entrepreneur. Between them they ran repertory seasons in the Rose theatre, and it was at this time that he made the stage echo to the beat of Marlowe's soaring lines. Physically he was type-cast; large of body and resonant of voice, he had the perfect equipment for Marlowe's larger-than-life-size characters. As an actor he was to be outclassed by Burbage, but by that time he had amassed a fortune and when he retired from the stage he became a public benefactor, founding a Hospital and the College of God's Gift at Dulwich. When his wife died in 1623 he married the eldest daughter of John Donne. Donne must have seen him in his heyday playing Tamburlaine, recalling the play on a sea-voyage, 'like Bajazet encag'd, the shepheards scoffe … Languish our ships' (*The Calme*, 1597), but their relationship as father- and son-in-law was not an entirely happy one. Three years later Alleyn himself died and the sound of his voice urging on the captive kings to draw him faster to Babylon gradually faded from memory."

Tatiana Wolff introducing Christopher Marlowe's *Tamburlaine the Great*.

Alleyn has another claim to fame. New Zealand writer and theatre patron Ngaio Marsh wrote in her autobiography *Black Beech and Honeydew* of her decision to try and write a mystery novel.

"It was necessary, of course, to have a detective and having invented him to give him a name. The day before I began, we had visited Dulwich College Picture Gallery, interested in it, first of all, because my father was an Old Alleynian. I remembered how he had told me about the great Elizabethan tragedian who had founded the school and, of course, at Dulwich there were many references to him. "Very well," I thought, "as a sort of compliment to Popsie I shall call him Alleyn."

So the character of Roderick Alleyn was born to live on through dozens of novels … and don't you love that image of the *grande dame* figure of Ngaio Marsh calling her dad Popsie?

But I was intrigued by the relationship of Alleyn and Donne. Was it differing views of culture, theatre, poetry, money, publicity, which soured their relationship—or much more personal differences? And had anyone ever explored their relationship? John Stubbs in his life of Donne describes Alleyn as a "deeply religious man, he also cared sincerely about the suffering of the poor, the old and the sick. His father had been the head warden of the Bedlam hospital, and the madhouse cries evidently lived with him; he was a keen observer of deprivation around London, and did what he could to alleviate it, collecting money and tithes for the needy in his local Southwark. Much of his energy in the last twenty years of his life went into building a large charitable institution, Dulwich College" which eventually housed "a chapel, a school for disadvantaged boys and twelve almshouses for homeless people". "The marriage was one of unequal convenience. Alleyn, besides getting a young woman to share his bed and take care of him, bought his way into the hard-won propriety that Donne had made for himself. As for Constance, she was evidently a realist. She now at least had the security of being a married woman. If Alleyn predeceased her, she would be fairly well provided for and could attract another partner. But there are, in fact, faint signs that the couple were quite happy — certainly Alleyn, a warm, large-hearted husband, made every effort to make her comfortable, and described her in his will as 'my loving wife Constance'."

The relationship between Edward Alleyn and his father-in-law John Donne "was detonated into open hostility, predictably enough, by an argument over money." This was over misunderstandings in regard to the marriage settlement but the two men's attitudes to money were different. Donne had gained the respectability the Anglican church provided and his legal training did not encourage the kind of casual give-and-take of the theatre world where people helped each other through the bad patches without asking for legal documents—and Donne does not seem to have been at ease in Alleyn's world not least because Alleyn was aware of Donne's rakish youth; something which Donne had gone to great lengths to leave behind, not least by suppressing some of his early poetry, and which he seems to have been afraid Alleyn would resurrect. And Donne resented Alleyn's hope that his father-in-law would pave the way towards him renting some of the property St Paul's Cathedral owned. Given that some of the Church property included brothels it is hard to draw hard-and-fast moral boundaries in the two men's ongoing differences of opinion … and among the things that Alleyn left Constance in his will were several bawdy houses. I wonder how she saw her inheritance?

*

April 24: Ken Herrera

*

Someone has to write all those manuals that come with new appliances, those blurbs on covers, that product information on cereal packets, those "glue tab A to tab D" on construction kits, those safety instructions on everything from your new electric blanket to your new welding kit, those program notes when you treat yourself to a night at the theatre …

I am biased, I am sure, but I think the program notes my son wrote for his piano concerts were very evocative. And I am not alone. Several of his friends asked him to write the notes for their concerts. So just a little taste …

—Debussy published his second collection of preludes in 1913, having worked on them intermittently for the preceding three years. As in Debussy's first book of preludes, the second is a mix of landscapes and literary evocations, drama and comedy.

The fifth piece, 'Bruyères' ('Heather'), is a landscape picture — a gentle impression of the outdoors. The prelude opens with an exposed pentatonic melody in the right hand, with the harmony stealing in a few bars later. Despite incorporating Debussy's characteristic harmonies (ninth and thirteenth chords abound), the overwhelming feeling is one of simplicity. Although delicate, the piece should not be too refined, in case the listener should miss the wind stirring the flowers on the heath.

—A crack of the whip launches the piece. As the pianist plays G major and F# major arpeggios on top of each other, the orchestra unfolds a chirpy theme that one critic suggested was based on a traditional Basque melody. A dramatic slowing of tempo announces the second theme, a stately, Spanish-tinged melody. By contrast, the third theme is pure Gershwin. A fourth follows, derived from the same material as the first, and then a fifth, a tender and heartfelt melody that will later provide the basis for the cadenza. Ravel then sets to work with these themes; twisting, combining and transforming them.

*

April 25: Torquato Tasso (d)

*

Sometimes when I am reading I am reminded of the great ocean of my ignorance. For instance, the other evening I was reading a little booklet I picked up on a stall which I thought my Polish sister-in-law might like. It was called *Warsaw The Royal Way* by Jerzy Lileyko. He wrote: "The more refined poetry written during the Polish Baroque by Jan Andrzej Morsztyn, a pupil of Torquato Tasso and Giambattista Marini, began his collection of lyrics, entitled "Lute", with a description of the street." I had never heard of Morsztyn or Marini, I didn't know Poland had a Baroque period, and I had never read anything by Torquato Tasso. But an ocean can also be an invitation to set out on a voyage of discovery. So this week I have been looking to find out a little about the poetry and life of Torquato Tasso …

Tasso (1544 – 1595) had a varied and very up-and-down life in Renaissance Italy. His 'masterpiece' was the epic poem '*Gerusalemme liberata*' (The Liberation of Jerusalem) about the First Crusade. But he kept leaving it, for all sorts of reasons including lack of confidence, to go and work on shorter pieces. He added stories of his own making into the epic so it isn't 'pure' history and he published some of these little pieces separately. But he ploughed on. Which is probably just as well as his reputation largely rests on his epic.

And in the serendipitous way of things I found the next entry in the encyclopaedia was for a man, equally unknown to me, called Allessandro Tassoni, born on this day in 1565, whose masterpiece was a "mock heroic satiric poem" called '*La secchia rapita*' (The Rape of a Bucket) which suggested that 16th century Italians had some very odd proclivities. But no, the *Britannica* says of it, "Tassoni's best-known work, *La secchia rapita* (1622), is based on the early 14th-century warfare between the Italian cities of Bologna and Modena, during which the Modeneses captured the bucket from Bologna's town well as a trophy. (The bucket is on display in Modena's Palazzo Comunale, or city hall.) In Tassoni's poem the Bolognese offer entire towns and groups of hostages for their bucket, and every episode, beginning seriously, ends in some hilarious absurdity."

*

April 26: David Hume

*

I am always disinclined to read books which have had rave reviews. They very rarely live up to their reviews and I always suspect friends of the writers to have written those raves. But I *am* willing to read books which have been damned; sometimes out of a kind of sympathy with the writer and with the thought 'surely it couldn't have been *that* bad' and sometimes to make my own assessment. The other day I noticed a little bit in *The Sunday Tasmanian* (7/6/09) where they ask someone what they've been reading and what they like and dislike. This time it was someone called Sooz Lomas who was asked: 'What book left you cold?' To which Sooz replied: 'I don't understand

the acclaim heaped upon *The Unknown Terrorist*, by Richard Flanagan. I found it pretentious, predictable and poorly written.'

So this week I have been reading *The Unknown Terrorist* to see if I would find it 'pretentious, predictable and poorly written'—or not. Yes, it is mildly predictable. Yes, it is mildly pretentious. But this links into that question of whether it is well-written or not. It is a 'message' book, which I certainly don't see as a problem, I like 'message' books, in this case the legislation and hype and anti-Islamic rhetoric which flooded Australia in the Howard years and which are still alive and well, but I think the book suffers from being classified as a thriller. It is not nearly fast-paced enough. Yet its mostly laconic style with the occasional sidestep into a more literary and philosophical vein makes its classification problematical. At times it might be seen as a farce. At other times it seemed like a 21st century version of 'The Perils of Pauline'. It suffers from that old idea of 'Show, Don't Tell'; it tells too much of the story. But when I put it aside I realised I had a quite different problem with it. The hero, young Gina the pole-dancer, exists in a very intimate world; she is not shy, she has a degree of confidence in herself, she has saved $47,000, hardly chickenfeed, she is very attractive. But when it comes to the crunch she behaves like an inarticulate teenager who has no true friends because he has acne and a stammer. It just didn't seem to resonate, her complete aloneness … We, the readers, are asked to care about the person she is but nobody in the book seems to see any reason to really care and put themselves out for her …

Scottish philosopher David Hume ran into far more vitriolic abuse when he brought out his first two books as part of his planned *A Treatise of Human Nature*, being described as "callow, dogmatic, conceited, paradoxical, heathen and immoral". Strangely though it wasn't this kind of abuse which put him off writing his next two planned books in the series but simply the public's indifference. So although he is remembered as one of the greatest philosophers of the eighteenth century we don't know what else he planned to write in this area although he did give readers small glimpses in his essays—because he turned to writing history instead and brought out his opus *The History of England*.

*

April 27: J. Allen Hynek (d)

*

Hynek was regarded, by the time he died, as *the* expert on UFOs. He'd studied them officially as a government astronomer in the USA and at the request of the FBI, he had studied them unofficially in thousands of reports, meetings, and articles from people who claimed to have seen or heard or felt *something*. So his tentative conclusions, and he retained an open mind, are worth thinking about. Peter Hough and Jenny Randles have this to say about him in *Looking for the Aliens*: "Even near his death in 1986 and after a lifetime of research with fame and at least modest fortune behind him, he was asked to star in a TV commercial to promote beer. He liked the beer, but he was debating whether to do it because the script he was expected to act out presumed UFOs to be extraterrestrial. Above all else, Hynek was an honest man and he knew that the evidence may be suggestive but did not prove that to the satisfaction of a scientist.

"In 1984, having moved to the desert climes of Phoenix, Arizona, in what was as close to retirement as this great man ever came, he gave one of his last major interviews on his UFO beliefs. He told Pamela Weintraub of *Omni* magazine: 'My biggest hope is that as the research progresses, I will be able to demonstrate that the ET hypothesis is untenable, that it just doesn't wash to a scientist.'

"So what did Hynek propose in place of this popular view? Like most ufologists, he was perplexed. Wherever you looked for an answer, you ended up with a hundred new questions instead. On one of his visits to Britain, we took him out for a meal to the Wizard Inn near magic-steeped Alderley Edge in Cheshire. We went there as much to pander to his lovely sense of humour (the 'funnies' — comic strips — were always the first part of any newspaper he turned to) as for its evocative location for an evening out.

"Hynek loved this because he always likened the UFO phenomenon to the Cheshire Cat from *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. What he meant by this was that, just like Alderley Edge's wizard or that magical cat, UFOs flew through our airspace quite unlike any conventional aircraft or rocket ship. These have a specific arrival and departure point, with a pre-determined route in between — not so a UFO. This blinks into our reality, cocks a snook at a couple of witnesses as it sails by, sometimes even leaves tangible signs of its presence (such as landing traces or photographs) *en route*, then simply vanishes as if it had never been there.

"For this reason Hynek tended to favour the view that UFOs might be a manifestation of a sort of dimensional interaction. They could be the key to the nature of reality rather than the secrets of the cosmos.

"However, he was only dismissive of the idea of UFOs as spaceships in a literal nuts-and-bolts sense. He was mindful of the famous truism of science that any alien technology would be so superior it would be indistinguishable from magic. Hynek never believed that a UFO was the Alpha Centaurian equivalent of Apollo 11 piloted by little green Neil Armstrongs. Yet he also knew that any truly alien intelligence might possess a technology or communicative facility that was so incredible we could not even comprehend what it was, let alone begin to duplicate how it worked. In that sense, UFOs could be a 'holographic implant', which was the only way our minds could visualize, in comic-book imagery, some sort of long-range communicative probe from another world.

"This idea, formulated late in his life, was developed by Jenny Randles in her examination of the close encounter of the fourth kind, *Abduction*. It was dismissed then by ufology, just as it was rejected as Hynek's trail-blazing vision. However, despite the insistence of those pundits of ufology that the evidence *must* either reflect real spaceships or some wild fantasy, Hynek was aware of the major problems both these hypotheses have to face. He used to liken the UFO to the dilemma that bamboozled physicists when they came to understand the nature of light. In some experiments it behaved like solid particles and in others it had clear proof of being electromagnetic radiation. Which was it? The question bothered science for years until they stopped asking it. It was only a problem because their knowledge was not yet sufficiently advanced to accept that light was indeed a radiation field that sometimes manifested in the same way as particles within our vision.

"UFOs do exactly the same and Hynek was one of the few people who really understood this. If you are stuck with the question are they this or are they that, the reason is quite simple: it's the question that is wrong."

*

April 28: (Nelle) Harper Lee

*

"At a party, I once heard a woman say that it was "criminal" that Harper Lee had written only the one novel, *To Kill a Mockingbird*. What peculiar expectations we've developed for our writers! "Criminal?" We ought to be thankful Lee used her time to write her book as perfectly as she could, that she didn't rush a lot of half-finished books into print."

Ted Kooser in *The Poetry Home Repair Manual.*

Perhaps. But I was intrigued. *Was* there a particular reason why Harper Lee wrote only the one novel? The other day I noticed a book by Charles J. Shields called *Mockingbird: A portrait of Harper Lee*. Would this answer my query I wondered and took it down. She grew up in the Depression years in Monroeville, Alabama, where she had an unexpected next door neighbour: Truman Capote. She started out to study law but was enticed by the idea of writing and did some short stories and much of the research for Capote's famous book *In Cold Blood*—though without getting the recognition her work on the book deserved. But it was her novel based on a long-forgotten case of a Negro man there convicted of rape which provided the story which made her famous. People began to have doubts about his guilt and his death sentence was commuted but in the meantime he'd had a nervous breakdown and spent the rest of his life in an asylum.

Fame was a two-edged sword; people were keen to know what next she would write but she was asked to speak all over the country and although she mentioned at various times that she was working on another book time went by and nothing appeared. Shields writes, "Peter Griffiths, a film producer visiting Monroeville for the BBC, asked Alice Lee whatever happened to the second novel her sister was supposed to have been working on. According to Alice, just as Nelle was finishing the novel, a burglar broke into her apartment and stole the manuscript. It was something about hunting a deer, Griffiths seem(ed) to recall. Apparently, she didn't have the heart to start over. And that was the last ever said by the Lee family about a second novel by Harper Lee being almost done."

A manuscript is an odd thing to steal—if the story was true—but then Monroeville was part of the bitter battleground for civil rights and many people had not been happy about the publicity surrounding her first novel's success. The idea of a second novel may well have made many people nervous.

Jurgen Wolff wrote in *Your Writing Coach*, "Some authors only ever produce one work. The prime example is Harper Lee, with her masterpiece *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Not only has this book given pleasure to millions, it has also had an important social impact. When the civil rights lawyers who risked their lives in the 1960s and early 1970s in pursuit of equal rights for black people were asked what inspired them to do this, many of them named *To Kill a Mockingbird* as one of the influences. If you were to write only a single book but it had the power of that one, would that be so bad?"

There is an irony in that because, now, Monroeville uses her fame as a 'tourist attraction' …

*

April 29: Bernie Madoff

*

When Bernie Madoff came crashing down in the world's largest financial tumble there was a curiously muted response. People seem to find it easier to get angry about kids stealing a TV or a car. It was almost as though the scale of the theft was beyond normal indignant responses. Yet "Madoff was indeed a record holder: he had stolen more money, over a longer period of time, from more thousands of people all over the world than any thief in history." For that the 71-year-old received a 150 year sentence of which he served a year before dying.

He started out, and remained, as a straightforward share broker, innovative in his early embrace of on-line trading, but unremarkable. What people didn't know was that his financial advice business was separate to his share trading and largely secret; he called it a hedge fund, but as he wasn't registered it was in fact illegal. He started out using the support of friends and family, people who saw no reason to query him. Erin Arvedlund writes in *Madoff The Man Who Stole $65 Billion* "It was this high level of trust that led smart and savvy people—especially in the Jewish community—to invest with Madoff over the ensuing years without asking serious questions. And they were not driven by greed, as many commentators on the scandal have since implied, but rather by the desire to invest in their futures with someone they felt they could trust.

"Part of the Jewish mentality is prudence, especially financial prudence, conservatism, not taking risks," said one Madoff investor whose family made a fortune in East Coast fitness franchises. "Madoff was the opposite of risk—he was anti-risk. He would tell prospective investors flat out: 'I'm not hitting the ball out of the park every year. Not me, I'm not a hotshot. If you invest with me, you'll get consistent, less-than average returns every year—but you'll get them every year.' He played to that sense of conservatism, that he was not a get-rich-quick scam." "The trust in Madoff was so great that many men even told their wives to never sell their Madoff holdings after they died. Wanting to honor their husbands' dying wishes, many of these widows kept their money with Madoff's advisory business up until he was exposed in 2008."

This was disingenuous; he needed to pay higher-than-normal interest to his investors to keep the money rolling in—because what he was running was a classic Ponzi scam. Charles Ponzi, at the beginning of the twentieth century, ran the scam that now bears his name: he paid his first investors

from the money later investors put in. This can work—*provided* there isn't a rush of people wanting their money back, *provided* no one blows the whistle, and *provided* you can keep finding new investors. It does not of course make it legal or honest. Many of the people investing with Madoff believed it was being invested through his legitimate stockbroking business, and there were many complex interactions between the two, which had already made him a multi-millionaire. And so long as excellent dividends kept rolling in people did not ask even the most basic of questions. The old adage about it sounding too good to be true was not taken on board until it was much too late.

"But what form Madoff took didn't seem to matter to most of his investors. The fact that he called his scam a hedge fund only made the industry and regulators' nonexistent oversight look bad."

The question of who wrote the rules (and the rules had many loopholes and handy detours) paled into insignificance as it became clear that no one was making sure the existing rules were being followed. A financial analyst Harry Markopolos repeatedly warned the Securities and Exchange Commission (set up in the wake of the great stock market crash of 1929) without result. Other analysts warned clients away from Madoff for various reasons. A number of financial journalists raised queries on how his so-called hedge fund could be outperforming other legitimate funds even through downturns in the stockmarket (he paid between 10% and 20% for many years) and why he didn't publish reports and details but these articles were ignored. The problem, perhaps, was that American journalists had become too polite, too in awe of the supposed financial geniuses, too worried about their jobs. There were none of the old time muck-raking crusading writers; the ones who didn't mind to bring down establishment wrath, the ones who were prepared to be chased out of town, to be shot at and spat upon …

While I was reading Arvedlund's book I was also reading about the other end of the twentieth century, Charles Ponzi's time, in New York, in *The Life and Bad Times of Charles Becker* by Jonathon Root. The thugs and grafters who ran Tammany Hall were a small proportion of the massive influx of poor Irish; they were slowly being displaced by German, often Jewish, immigrants who provided most of the bad guys for the book: the victim, gambler Herman Rosenthal, the thugs, Bald Jack Rose (Jacob Rosenzweig), Big Jack Zelig, Louis 'Lefty Louie' Rosenberg, Jacob 'Whitey Lewis' Seidensheiner, Harry 'Gyp the Blood' Horowitz, and the corrupt police lieutenant, Charlie Becker, who ran protection rackets—but the reader is left with some doubts on whether he was guilty of ordering Rosenthal's murder. What the case did was to both show police they needed middlemen, that running protection themselves made them too vulnerable, and with the eclipse of this layer of graft and thuggery to open the way for the newly-arriving Italian immigrants to muscle in. It also, as over the next twenty to thirty years loopholes were closed and regulatory bodies strengthened, saw all kinds of discussions and experiments (and Prohibition was one of these experiments) on how to create a safer, better regulated, more law-abiding society, created an increasing sense of complacency. By the fifties the belief in the US as one of the safest best-run societies on earth also encouraged the belief that it wasn't necessary to tighten legislation—and the opposite began to occur. Free markets, rather than good governance, surely were what kept the citizens of America safe and prosperous. When Bernie Madoff set up shop on Wall Street in the 1960s the nation was starting to believe they didn't need regulators and watchdogs and their resourcing, their importance, the talent and integrity they needed … all were allowed to run down.

Modern Americans like lawyers, they appear to litigate about almost everything, but they don't like regulators and watchdogs. Yet litigating after the event seems a poor response to wrongdoing which red tape and careful oversight might have prevented …

*

April 30: Anon

*

There is nothing anonymous about Sir Cyril Burt but the many children on which he based his theories and his reputation have been, both deliberately and accidentally, rendered anonymous.

Brian J. Ford wrote in *The Cult of the Expert*, "It turns out that much of the work of the legendary Sir Cyril Burt on psychology and intellect was based on fiction … Burt's work was for decades regarded as a pinnacle of British research on educational psychology. He had spent much of the time since 1913 collecting data on twins and on the psychological development of the adult personality. With his two assistants, Miss Howard and Miss Conway, he accumulated files of data and in the 1950s and 1960s he churned out seminal research papers that were based on this immense fund of knowledge."

But after he died doubts about his research began to surface. He claimed to have 'measured' intelligence but it seemed he had only guessed or made up figures. He had created figures to fit his preconceptions. His figures gave him the same result over and over even though he was dealing with different human beings. Coincidence might occasionally give identical results but not invariably. From the material he left it became clear that he started with his desired results and worked backwards, filling in suitable but fraudulent data. And, most extraordinary of all, no one could find Miss Howard and Miss Conway. His research assistants didn't exist.

Burt wrote in a letter not long before he died " … our own studies of separated twins were accumulated bit by bit between 1913 and 1939. We began with a very elaborate scheme including temperamental as well as intellectual assessments, and first-hand notes on home conditions. As my work increased I had to give up the time-consuming visits to homes, and the job of estimating non-cognitive traits. Most of the later cases (including post-war) were simply tested at school; results checked by teachers … We did not bother with addresses."

When asked for figures after giving a lecture he avoided doing so or sent material on weeks afterwards, even though he had supposedly used those same figures in his lectures. Most of his pre-war material was destroyed in London during the Blitz. Sometimes he spoke of a 'few' post war cases, other times he mentioned his assistants still busy collecting material. He quoted from pre-war material that no longer existed.

"Sir Cyril Burt, then, was a great mind and a powerful figure. But he based his probing investigations on facts and figures which he invented himself."

Steven Rose in *Lifeline*s says, "the general consensus, despite a powerful revisionist attempt to rehabilitate Burt in the 1980s, is that, to put it politely, Burt's data cannot be relied upon". The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* is kinder: "After Burt's death in 1971, striking anomalies in some of his test data led researchers to examine his statistical test results more closely. It became clear that Burt had actually falsified or even invented those IQ-test results that most convincingly supported his theories concerning transmitted intelligence and social class. His reputation declined catastrophically, though the soundness of his earlier work justifies his reputation as the foremost pioneer of educational psychology in Britain."

But none of his earlier work can be checked adequately. The thousands of children he supposedly tested and used in support of his theories have been rendered lost and anonymous. And not said in there is that Burt seems to have been a snob. His theories couldn't be allowed to prove that better health, more money, and access to a good learning environment, rather than class, played the major role in IQ-tests.

*

May 1: May Day

*

I feel this is a day which should be devoted to writers in the Socialist Realist tradition. I know it gets a lot of flak now, perhaps it always has. Yet I have devoted my writing life, pretty much, to trying to create a sense of the real. Realism is my guiding light. The trouble begins when you put Socialist in front of it. People immediately think of factories and Five-Year-Plans. But George J. Becker in *Realism in Modern Literature* points out that Realism is about things as they are, Socialist Realism is about things the way the state hopes they will become. Seen like that Socialist Realism becomes instead a form of Romanticism.

And I don't think Becker would regard my attempts to create fictional worlds that seem real as the same thing as Realism. In fact I came away from his book with the feeling that Realism teeters into the modern world of Faction … though not necessarily the world of Factionalism. George Borrow once wrote "The way is long, and is infested by robbers and factions." I am beginning to believe he may be right.

*

May 2: Alan Marshall

*

'A Patrol Officer of the Native Affairs Branch once reported that the native women on one station he had visited were skinning buffaloes and handling hides weighing 200 pounds, without a penny wages. The women admitted they got some "tucker," but, according to witnesses, to call it food would be a libel.'

Alan Marshall in *These Were My Tribesmen*.

*

May 3: Ben Elton

*

Ben Elton wrote in *Gridlock* 'An Off-Planet Introduction': "The Brainians could see the long, thin arteries along which the humans travel. They noted that after sunrise the humans all travel one way and at sunset they all travel the other. They could see that progress was slow and congested along these arteries, that there were endless blockages, queues, bottle-necks and delays causing untold frustration and inefficiency. All this they could see quite clearly.

What was not clear to them, was why.

They knew that humanity was stupid, they had only to look at the week's top ten grossing movies to work that out, but *this* was beyond reason. If, as was obvious, space was so restricted, why was it that each single member of this strange life-form insisted on occupying perhaps fifty times its own ground surface area for the entire time it was in motion — or not in motion, as was normally the case?"

The producer objects.

" 'You're trying to tell me that they're all going in the *same* direction, travelling to much the *same* destinations and yet they're all *deliberately* impeding the progress of each other by covering six square metres of space with a large, almost completely empty tin box?'

The producer has great difficulty in believing this.

" 'You mean it's really true?' he said. 'A society sufficiently sophisticated to produce the internal combustion engine has not had the sophistication to develop cheap and efficient public transport?' "

*

May 4: Thomas Huxley

*

Rosalind Heywood wrote in *The Sixth Sense* of the 1870s, "Here were some of the best brains in Cambridge peeping at *psi* round the door. The same thing was happening at Oxford where the Phantasmological Society was formed. In the seventies, too, William Barrett, Professor of Physics at the Royal College of Science in Dublin, was forcing his scientific colleagues to take a reluctant glance at hypnotism. He submitted a paper to the British Association for the Advancement of Science on experiments in hypnosis which he had been conducting for thirteen years and in which the hypnotized subject had shown signs of *psi*. The Biology Section of the Association was thoroughly shocked at such heresy and would have nothing to do with the paper, but Alfred Russel Wallace, the biologist, who, independently of Darwin, had propounded the theory of evolution, protested with vigour against attempts to exclude from investigation occurrences reported by intelligent and disinterested observers, merely because they did not fit in with current knowledge. Eventually, by Wallace's casting vote, Barrett was allowed to read his paper to the anthropological subsection, and when he had finished he appealed to the British Association to form a committee of

investigation. But this was too much. They would not do it. They would not even publish the paper. Nevertheless, although unpublished, it caused a lot of talk.

"In 1871 interest was aroused by a statement in the quarterly *Journal of Science* by the pioneer physicist, Sir William Crookes, that he had been investigating spiritualistic phenomena. In London a group called the London Dialectical Society was formed with the object of giving a hearing to 'subjects which are ostracized elsewhere, especially those of a metaphysical, religious, social or political character'. Its members invited Thomas Huxley to join them in an investigation of spiritualistic phenomena, but he put them firmly in their place. He was no more interested in their offer, he said, than he would be to listen in to the chatter of old women and curates in a distant cathedral town. Here once again emotional fear of *psi* seems to have driven dispassion out the window, for it was Thomas Huxley who wrote in a letter to Charles Kingsley: 'Sit down before fact like a little child, be prepared to give up every preconceived notion, follow humbly to wherever and to whatever abysses nature leads or you shall learn nothing.' "

He was of course very busy urging people to take the Theory of Evolution very seriously even though there was no possibility of most of his hearers going to look personally at those Galapagos finches to see if they truly were a fact. But many scientists have understandable concerns about phenomena which can rarely be reproduced, which does not lend itself to the laboratory setting, which is more than likely to happen to 'ordinary' people rather than university-educated scientists, and for which no simple answer is available. But his choice of 'abysses' remains provocative. There are undoubtedly abysses and abysses …

*

May 5: John Flynn (d)

*

The Reverend John Flynn is remembered for his creation of the Flying Doctor Service but he was also a prolific writer. Many of his writings were ephemeral: letters, articles, reports. But in 1910 he also created a small book, an "attractive little book, pocket-sized and with a durable blue linen cover, it contained 111 pages of potential benefit to all who lived in the bush" which could be found in thousands of inland homes and bush camps. He called it *The Bushman's Companion*. The inspiration for it was, curiously, that many bushmen without access to a clergyman didn't know what to do when someone died. As Henry Lawson writes in 'The Bush Undertaker'—"Theer oughter be somethin' sed," muttered the old man; "'taint right to put 'im under like a dog. Theer oughter be some sort o' sarmin." He sighed heavily in the listening silence that followed this remark and proceeded with his work. He filled the grave to the brim this time, and fashioned the mound carefully with his spade. Once or twice he muttered the words, "I am the rassaraction." As he laid the tools quietly aside, and stood at the head of the grave, he was evidently trying to remember the something that ought to be said. He removed his hat, placed it carefully on the grass, held his hands out from his sides and a little to the front, drew a long deep breath, and said with a solemnity that greatly disturbed Five Bob: "Hashes ter hashes, dus ter dus, Brummy—an'—an' in hopes of a great an' gerlorious rassaraction!"

Flynn had been told a story by a shearer who with his mates had had to bury a man. They had sung 'Auld Lang Syne' and 'For He's A Jolly Good Fellow' but they felt uncomfortable, that it wasn't a 'proper burial', and they were sorry they didn't know what else to do. Flynn decided to put information on a simple form of burial service, as well as First Aid material, and other useful little odds and ends into a small booklet that a bushman could carry in his pocket. He printed the first 2,000 at his own expense.

Ivan Rudolph in his story of Flynn's life also says that Flynn had put his name down to go as a Presbyterian missionary to Korea. Then his life was changed by receiving a letter from a Mrs Jessie Litchfield in the Northern Territory in June 1909. She wrote to a church paper in Victoria: "I expect you will be surprised at this letter from a total stranger, but I was, before my marriage, a member of the Richmond Presbyterian Church. I am writing now some news of this lonely land.

"I am eighty miles from a town by land, twenty by sea, three miles from the nearest white woman, two miles from the nearest white man. Chinese and blacks are my nearest neighbours … There is a Catholic Priest, a Church of England clergyman, and lay preachers at the Methodist Church [all in Darwin vicinity] – There are no other ministers in the Northern Territory – just 500 000 square miles of country with 1500 whites, 2000 Chinese and 5000 blacks living there.

"Of the whites, fully 500 of the men keep lubras [black women] or use them as they want them, and nearly all have half-caste illegitimate children whose only future in life is prostitution. There are not 50 Chinese without lubras. There is no law against this evil and there are no missionaries to teach the people right from wrong … I know that drink, drugs and lubras are responsible for nine out of ten hospital cases, and also for seven deaths out of ten.

"Why cannot the Presbyterian Church send up a missionary to the Northern Territory; an earnest, enthusiastic married man (he is better married than single), give him one hundred pounds for living expenses, a certain sum for traveling expenses, and let him make his headquarters in Darwin and have regular periods for visiting the outer places of the NT? He would do good, if he were a man who put Christ first, who worked for the good of others, and spared neither time nor money nor labour in the cause of Christ.

"You may be shocked by this letter, but I have understated rather than overstated the facts."

Flynn abandoned Korea to become that earnest enthusiastic young man. His answer to the problem was not to urge that men took responsibility for their children (and indeed the government eventually stepped in and rounded up such children to put them in institutions rather than garnishee the men's wages) but to urge more white women to come to the Northern Territory.

He met Mrs Litchfield in 1912 and as well as telling him about the medical problems of the remote communities "Flynn was challenged by his informant's descriptions of widespread immorality. She outlined the sexual exploitation of Aboriginal women by lonely Outback men, resulting in children who belonged in neither community. One example involved a station which was openly "breeding" such children to work there! She also related how men in pubs would go outside and whistle for Aboriginal women to come and act as prostitutes."

It rather takes the gloss off that much-promoted glorification of our 'pioneers'. But even if Flynn saw himself as a missionary to the white community and its medical needs his creation of the Flying Doctor Service eventually came to be a comfort and support to all Territorians …

*

May 6: Rabindranath Tagore

*

Tagore won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913 but his writing does seem a little too formal and old-fashioned perhaps for modern tastes, particularly his plays, so I won't urge you to immerse yourself in Tagore. But even if you never read anything else of his do read his poem 'Stray Birds'; this might better be called a collection of aphorisms, couplets, verses, and proverbs, but it shines with a sense of his quiet wisdom and love of the natural world. Here are just a few …

O troupe of little vagrants of the world, leave your footprints in my words.' (II)

"What language is thine, O sea?"
"The language of eternal question."
What language is the answer, O sky?"
"The language of eternal silence." (XII)

The mystery of creation is like the darkness of night—it is great. Delusions of knowledge are like the fog of the morning. (XIV)

Rest belongs to the work as the eyelids to the eyes. (XXIV)

O Beauty, find thyself in love, not in the flattery of the mirror. (XXVIII)

The trees come up to my window like the yearning voice of the dumb earth. (XXXI)

God finds himself by creating. (XLVI)

Tiny grass, your steps are small, but you possess the earth under your tread. (LXV)

God grows weary of great kingdoms, but never of little flowers. (LXVII)

Every child comes with the message that God is not yet discouraged of man. (LXXVII)

The grass seeks her crowd in the earth.
The tree seeks his solitude of the sky. (LXCVIII)

He who wants to do good knocks at the gate; he who loves finds the gate open. (LXXXIII)

Power said to the world, "You are mine."
The world kept it prisoner on her throne.
Love said to the world, "I am thine."
The world gave it the freedom of her house. (XCIII)

Be still, my heart, these great trees are prayers. (XCV)

God is ashamed when the prosperous boasts of his special favour. (CVIII)

Not hammer-strokes, but dance of the water sings the pebbles into perfection. (CXXVI)

If you shut your door to all errors truth will be shut out. (CXXX)

I have dipped the vessel of my heart into this silent hour; it has filled with love. (CLXX)

I am the autumn cloud, empty of rain, see my fullness in the field of ripened rice. (CLXXXV)

Timid thoughts, do not be afraid of me.
I am a poet. (CCXXXVIII)

The stream of truth flows through its channels of mistakes. (CCXLIII)

We shall know some day that death can never rob us of that which our soul has gained, for her gains are one with herself. (CCCXII)

*

May 7: Robert Browning

*

Poetry for Dummies (The Poetry Center, John Timpane and Maureen Watts) asks "What was the *angriest* poem ever written? One contender for that dubious distinction may be "To Edward FitzGerald" by the Victorian poet Robert Browning. FitzGerald (like Browning, a fine poet) had died in 1883, and when some of his unpublished papers were published six years later, Browning read a passage in which FitzGerald spoke of the death of Browning's beloved wife, Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806-1831), as "rather a relief to me." (In fact Elizabeth died in 1861.)

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

But surely the people who chose to publish what FitzGerald had chosen to keep private are more to blame? Everyone lets off steam, in writing, in conversation, by kicking the tool shed door—and steam, though it might say something interesting about someone's likes and dislikes, should always be treated with caution.

*

May 8: Peter Benchley

*

Peter Benchley was a young journalist when he became fascinated by the idea of a large shark terrifying a popular beach resort. Out of this came his best-seller *Jaws*. But Jenny Bond and Chris Sheedy in *Behind the Bestsellers* suggest its success was almost to be expected. "Young Benchley couldn't help but create stories and scenes in his mind, just as he had little choice but to become a writer. A healthy, creative imagination and a talent for words were burned into his genes. Benchley's father was Nathaniel Benchley, a well-known and respected author of books for children and a good friend of Humphrey Bogart. Nathaniel wrote several novels, one of which, *The Off-Islanders*, was made into an Academy Award-nominated film called *The Russians are Coming, the Russians are Coming*. It was about a Soviet submarine that accidentally ran aground off the New England coast. Peter's grandfather was Robert Benchley, an extremely well-regarded humorist, writer of essays, newspaper columnist, actor, critic and editor. Robert was famously one of the founders of the Algonquin Round Table, a group of writers who gathered every day for lunch at a round table at New York City's Algonquin Hotel from 1919 to 1929."

(I have just been reading Nathaniel Benchley's *Portrait of a Scoundrel*; quite entertaining …)

Marion Meade in *The Portable Dorothy Parker* says, "The Algonquin is a venerable New York hotel located on West Forty-fourth Street. Beginning in 1919, a group of friends who worked as journalists and playwrights began meeting there for unhurried lunches. This writers clique, a dozen or so gregarious women and men including Robert Benchley, George S. Kaufman, and the mercurial Alexander Woollcott, became known as the Round Table because they gathered at a large circular table in the Rose Room, the hotel's main restaurant—still there and still dominated by a round table." They were seen as witty, sophisticated, glamorous, successful, irreverent, even outrageous. And Meade says "some of their bon mots still get laughs" such as Robert Benchley's talk of "getting out of these wet things and into a dry martini" or responding to F. Scott Fitzgerald's "drinking is a slow death" with "So who's in a hurry?"

Yet although Peter Benchley continued to write, including a sequel to *Jaws* and other thrillers like *The Island*, he never quite managed to recreate that first success.

*

May 9: Nene Gare

*

Western Australian writer Nene Gare took on the challenge of trying to write from an Aboriginal perspective in her best known book *The Fringe Dwellers* and several others like *Bend to the Wind*. In an interview with Giulia Giuffré in *The Writing Life* she says "I knew what it was like to be poor and overlooked. I always feel for the underdog. I think the privileged people make most of the wrong decisions." And when she was asked whether she tended to idealise her Aboriginals, particularly Aboriginal women, she said "I'm more inclined to idealise the older ones because I thought they were so good, the women especially, with their children. They don't mind what sacrifices they make so that their children can get education. They don't want their children to have the same sort of lives that they had."

I think this is partly why the books are so sad. There is no such thing as unalloyed success possible. If the women and teenage girls and children cling to a traditional way of life they face discrimination, dispossession, interference, and condemnation. If they seek to make a life for themselves in the white world, as the teenage girls usually do, then it is with the loss of their language and culture and the breakdown of family structures. And the knowledge that they have cut *their* children off from their past.

Randolph Stow has a sentence or two in *The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea* which I feel captures this dilemma, "On the bank overlooking the Oval grown-ups were wandering. They were talking about the champion girl athlete, who was an aboriginal called Barbara Johnson. She was a very remarkable girl, they were saying, to have got as far as fourth-year High School, and they hoped that she would make something of herself.

He watched Barbara Johnson talking to the white people, her perfect teeth flashing, and could almost feel the cynicism behind her smile. He bet that she would not make anything of herself at all, not after that kind of encouragement."

*

May 10: Basho's Contemporaries

*

When Basho is pictured he is usually alone in a landscape, a hermit figure, and it gives the impression that he was alone as a literary giant, with perhaps a few disciples, in his time. But was he? W. G. Beasley in *The Japanese Experience* writes, "Three names dominate Japanese literature in these years, those of Ihara Saikaku (1642-93), Matsuo Basho (1644-94) and Chikamatsu Monzaemon (1653-1725), respectively novelist, poet and playwright." Saikaku started as a merchant, became a poet, then a novelist. "He wrote about what he knew: the life of merchants, the making and spending of money, the 'passing world' (*ukito*) of the city pleasure quarters. His books, though presented as novels, were more like collections of short stories, centred on a single person or theme. Their prose was informed by a poet's brevity, a few vivid phrases serving as a rule in place of description and analysis. Three in particular are famous. The first, which appeared in 1682, has been translated under the title *The Life of an Amorous Man*. It told of the sexual adventures of a wealthy rake, the son of a Kyoto merchant, who in the end at the age of sixty set off to seek the fabled Island of Women. A second such book, *The Life of an Amorous Woman* (1686), purported to be the memoirs of a woman, looking back when old on a life of lovemaking, usually for pay, some of it in the pleasure houses of the city, some of it, more degradingly, outside them. It is the portrait of a human being's decline, touched with sadness. The third book is *The Japanese Family Storehouse* (1688), a collection of tales about ingenious ways of making money. The same kind of themes recur in a number of other works, including one on homosexuality, all earthy, rather than directly pornographic. Their villains almost always come to a bad end."

Chikamatsu instead was a writer for the puppet theatres which had developed from recitals with music and narrative which gradually became more dramatic with bigger puppets. "Some of his plays were historical, drawing freely on books like *Heike monogatari*. Others depicted the life of his own time, often based on real-life scandals and *causes celébrès*, of which his audiences would have been aware. Where the historical pieces (*jidaimono*) were about honour and loyalty, the contemporary ones (*sewamono*) chose themes that explored the conflict between sentiment (*ninjo*) and duty (*giri*), especially in the context of love and marriage. Love suicides were a favourite subject. To a degree, therefore, such plays provided a commentary on the ruling philosophy of the day as it impinged on different social groups, though more for the purpose of entertainment than critique. In manner they were melodramatic, usually with a touch of the supernatural." He also wrote for the developing Kabuki theatre.

But as I put this down I could see more clearly why it is that it is Basho who is known in the west. His work is not tied to a time and place. It does not require a knowledge of Japanese history or cultural norms to be appreciated. His overarching theme, the profound impact of nature on us, does

not require footnotes and melodrama. Nor do we need to know of long-forgotten scandals and dramas for an appreciation. Basho is universal.

*

May 11: Marjorie Sykes

*

I came across Marjorie Sykes years ago via her book *Quakers in India*. In it she creates an interesting microcosm of English attitudes to India. Early Quakers there saw more clearly than later arrivals the key problems with British rule; the racism, discrimination, and ignorance on one hand and the constant annexation of independent states and the centralising of power; aspects which led Quaker MP John Bright in the wake of the Indian Mutiny to urge the Government to "admit frankly that it had done wrong by its high-handed disregard of Indian custom." He also urged that the annexed territories should be *given back* to their rightful rulers. " 'Reduce the army,' he said, 'encourage local initiative, appoint *at* least two or three Indians who have the confidence of the people to the Governor's Council in every Province.' " He said "that India had the right and should have the power to rule herself in her own way." Modern India would have had both a different shape and size and a different history if he had been listened to. But there were also Quakers who got bogged down in doctrinaire debates over baptism and other aspects of missionary activities and were a divisive influence.

So I have just been reading Martha Dart's biography. Marjorie wrote the first biography of C.F. Andrews, she also wrote some of the first lives of Rabindranath Tagore and Mahatma Gandhi, as she worked for both of them, and towards the end of her life she did a translation of the writings of Vinoba Bhave. She worked on the difficult issue of Nagaland, what is now a small territory incorporated unwillingly into India but which was an independent territory when the British came along in the 19th century. She traveled widely to share the philosophies of Gandhi and Tagore. In 1992 the University at Santiniketan conferred a Doctor of Literature on her in something close to hagiography (though perhaps they did that for all their chosen Doctors): "On the occasion of this Convocation Anniverary I beg to present the name of Srimati Marjorie Sykes, a great lover of peace, a zealous educator and a writer of repute, as one richly deserving the highest honour that this University can confer.

"Hailing from a simple Yorkshire family and brought up in a village of miners, she assimilated from her father, a school teacher, the spirit of service and a reverence for life. As a student at Cambridge, she learnt to accept the precepts of the Bible, especially the ideal of non-violence. Her desire to serve brought her to India as a young woman, and she taught at various places in India. The Quaker faith helped her to combine the noble traditions of our country and the spiritual ideals of her native faith into a living unity. Soon she was inspired by Mahatma Gandhi and followed his ideals of *ahimsa* and *satya*. Invited by Rabindranath, she joined the ashram at Santiniketan in 1939 as a teacher of English. Like her famous compatriot, C. F. Andrews, whose first biography she wrote, she served as a living link between these two great personalities, Mahatma Gandhi and Gurudeva Rabindranath, striving to learn from them both equally and impart their insights to others. Srimata Marjorie Sykes learnt Bengali and translated a number of Rabindranath's writings into her mother-tongue, she also wrote a simple and moving biography of Rabindranath for her students.

"When Marjorie Sykes left Santiniketan in 1947, she joined Mahatma Gandhi at Sevagram. She has written inspiringly of the life in Santiniketan and among Gandhians, it is a testimony of her deep sincerity in the search for truth and of her committed love for our country of which she became a citizen after Independence. More recently she has spent many years experimenting with biological farming in Madhya Pradesh expressing thus her concern for ecological balance in our country.

"Travelling untiringly in India and abroad, Marjorie Sykes spread the message of peace, setting an example by her own modest and simple life-style and her unassailable optimism. She embodies what is best in our culture and in her native European tradition. Through-out her life, she

has been committed to the ideals held dear by Rabindranath, spreading them beyond the bounds of India. Summing up her life in a single sentence, we may say that she has above all been, in the best Quaker tradition, a true friend of friends.

"In accordance with the desire expressed by the teachers and workers of Visva-Bharati assembled here on the occasion of this Convocation Anniversary, I submit that in recognition of Srimati Marjorie Sykes' unflinching search for truth and her deep and committed love for India and Rabindranath, you may be pleased to confer on her, in accordance with the Statutes of Visva-Bharati, the highest honour of this University."

I am usually cynical about such eulogies but she does seem to have been an inspiring and gifted woman; though they were undoubtedly rewarding her for her life rather than more specifically her literary talents. But what I liked about her life was that our image of English people who 'stayed on' such as the rather sad couple in Paul Scott's *Staying On* is clearly only a very partial one. There were people who transcended that difficult time after Independence and were simply accepted for the persons they were and for the contribution they had made and the respect they had both given and received.

*

May 12: What We Will Never Get to Read …

*

John Wardroper in *Wicked Ernest* wrote of the fifth son of George III, Ernest, Duke of Cumberland, who fathered a son called Tom Garth on his sister Pricess Sophia: "No trace of a conclusion to Garth v Taylor can be found in the Public Record Office's Chancery files. Garth did not obtain his injunction. George IV's urgent command that the Chancellor should 'get possession of *all* that is *necessary*' is sure to have helped to open the way for Sir Herbert Taylor to go to the bank with his receipt and extract the black tin box. When? Garth, even before his arrest, was conveniently out of the way, evading bailiffs. The seizing of his copies was in July 1830, so it is safe to say that Sir Herbert already had the originals. All were certainly burnt. Caricature prints can dare to be truthtellers. 'An old SATYR in Retirement' shows a shaggy bestial Ernest crouching beside a box of Garth Papers destined for the Land of Fire.

"The blaze itself was a small one in a long series of royal burnings, heartbreaking for historians. Sir Herbert had had years of practice. After Queen Charlotte's death he burned all letters to her from George III, from her sons William and Augustus and from Princess Amelia, as well as the king's letters to Amelia. Earlier he had burned nearly all letters to the queen from Sophia and the other princesses.

"Other bonfires served George IV. When regent, he dismissed his alcoholic Privy Purse, Sir John McMahon (also known as Privy Pimp), then found that many sensitive papers chronicling his early dissipations were missing. He sent Sir William Knighton, his physician, in pursuit. 'I found him very feeble in Body, and his Head *quite* gone,' Knighton reported. His doctor had ordered 'entire absence of all Stimuli'. Knighton fed McMahon 'strong Brandy & Water' and 'his Mind, though feeble, gradually returned'. A five-hour negotiation, no doubt with further strong medication, succeeded: 'All Your Royal Highness's private Letters, early Correspondence and other Documents are now safe in my possession.' Sorting the lot, Knighton was free to learn many useful secrets. A few papers were kept, the rest he burned in the regent's presence. McMahon died within four weeks. Knighton's rise to power began. The regent rewarded him with two rich sinecures, and as king made him his Privy Purse and secretary.

"After George IV died, 'notes and letters in abundance' were burned at Windsor; also 'trinkets and trash … a prodigious quantity of hair … of all colours and *lengths* … heaps of women's gloves'. Hundreds of letters to and from George and his unlawful wife Maria Fitzherbert were gathered at her Mayfair house and expired together in a fireplace, with a pause when Wellington said, 'We'd better hold our hand for a while or we'll set the old woman's chimney on fire.'

"Much purging of the royal literary heritage remained for Sir Herbert to oversee. Most of the papers of the scandal-prone Duke of York, whom Sir Herbert had served for years as secretary, were deemed unfit even for the obscurity of the royal archive. So were most of William IV's papers. Incineration continued into the 20th century. Diaries kept by Queen Victoria during sixty years were burned by her daughter Beatrice after she had shaped a new version with continuous cosmeticizing and filleting (the emaciated version still makes 111 manuscript volumes). Nearly all Edward VII's papers, political as well as those 'of a very delicate private character', vanished in smoke. The story of later royal blazes remains to be told."

George V removed papers dealing with George IV's divorce. Undoubtedly other papers have 'disappeared' since. But which of those papers were private and what public? Private letters sent by family members to family members did not belong in the public domain—although historians are undoubtedly grateful when such letters are made available. But the public did have a right to know what Ernest was up to. After all, the public purse was providing for him to the tune of £24,000 a year. And incest was a crime …

While I was pondering on all the things, letters, documents, deeds, newspapers, books, royal and non-royal, which have gone up in smoke down the centuries I found myself with a different query. George III and Queen Charlotte are usually treated quite sympathetically, a sort of 'what did they do to deserve such a brood', as though in some way they had no responsibility for their sons invariably turning out crass, greedy, licentious, dishonest, callous, selfish, and criminal. Surely the question should be the other way around. Why were they such appallingly bad parents that their children, despite advantages unimagined by most of the populace, grew up so lacking in any of the saving graces?

*

May 13: Daphne du Maurier

*

R. E. Williams introducing *A Century of Punch* said, "George Louis Palmella Busson du Maurier joined PUNCH nine years after Keene and owed a lot to his friendship with him. Whether British womanhood changed from the rather dumpy representations of Leech to the tall, gracious women of Du Maurier in such a few years is open to doubt, but Du Maurier was the apostle of grace in PUNCH'S pages, leaving the more boisterous fun to other people. His noble creatures, male and female, had a certain lack of variety, but his pictures of the way of life of the English upper class are accepted as standard for the late Victorian era. But one is apt to overlook the incisiveness of his satires on the precious and affected types of his day. Besides the captions to his drawings he wrote novels, and his famous *Trilby* is read to this day.

"His name has been carried on in famous manner, for Sir Gerald du Maurier, the actor, was his son, and Daphne du Maurier, his granddaughter, has followed his tradition in writing best-selling novels."

Although people still toss around the name of Svengali as a symbol of sinister influence I must admit I had never asked where the character came from. George du Maurier's novel *Trilby* is set in bohemian Paris in the nineteenth century. Trilby O'Ferrall is an artist's model. Du Maurier says of her "She would have made a singularly handsome boy." And I have the feeling that he principally enjoyed writing about that world of artists and models. Judith Cook in her biography *Daphne* says that George's father wanted him to be a scientist rather than his own longing to be an artist. After his father died, "his mother let him study art in Paris where he shared a studio with three friends who called themselves 'Ye Societie of Our Ladye in the Fields' as it was situated in the rue de Notre-Dame des Champs." Trilby was probably based on an artist's model called Carrie who was a local tobacconist's daughter. In the novel the three young artists are 'Little Billee' (William Bagot), Sandy 'the Laird', and Taffy.

But he likely decided that his book needed something more than this sense of a romp through the bohemian world he had inhabited as a young artist—and so he brings in Svengali. He is

physically unprepossessing, he is German and Jewish (and in the wake of the Franco-Prussian War his Germanness would have been as problematic as his Jewishness in Paris, he is described as "always ready to vex, frighten, bully, or torment anybody or anything smaller and weaker than himself — from a woman or a child to a mouse or a fly." It is his brilliance as a musician which makes him an acceptable visitor. The three young artists enjoy Trilby's company but then 'Little Billee' asks her to marry him. His mother comes and asks her to cry off, saying she must understand she is quite unsuitable for the life he will lead back in England. Trilby goes away and is not seen by the trio again—until—a wondrous singer suddenly erupts into the headlines. They all know Trilby is tone deaf. And yet … yes, it is Trilby! But how has this amazing transformation come about?

Svengali has wrought magic. Or has he?

We don't receive an adequate explanation. But 'the Laird' long ago warned Trilby that Svengali was trying to hypnotise her and the fringe character and Svengali's hanger-on Gecko attempts to suggest how it may have been brought about. He says there were two Trilbys. "There was the Trilby you knew, who could not sing one single note in tune. She was an angel of paradise. She is now! But she had no more idea of singing than I have of winning a steeplechase at the Croix de Berny." And then there is Svengali's creation. "But all at once — pr-r-r-out! presto! *Augenblick!* … with one wave of his hand over her — with one look of his eye — with a word — Svengali could turn her into the other Trilby, *his* Trilby — and make her do whatever he liked … you might have run a red-hot needle into her and she would not have felt it …"

Judith Cook says one of those young artists in du Maurier's life was Felix Moscheles who practiced mesmerism and tried it out unsuccessfully on Carrie; possibly he didn't have Svengali's skill or the real life Carrie was less susceptible than the fictional Trilby …

Svengali destroys Trilby and dies himself. It isn't a great book and I found the style at times rather irritating but it did give us the trilby hat and the evergreen character of Svengali.

Daphne du Maurier, as well as her novels, wrote a book about her family, calling it simply *The Du Mauriers*, but in a way I was more interested in the genesis of the fictional Svengali than the life of the real life George du Maurier … and the other day I came upon this little snippet while I was reading Michael Holroyd's book about George Bernard Shaw's early life *The Search for Love*. His mother Bessie Shaw had been very much involved with a musician and singing teacher, George Vandeleur Lee, in Dublin. He claimed various backgrounds for himself and although talented comes across as something of a charlatan. When he moved to London and began giving lessons Bessie and her two daughters Agnes and Lucy also moved, to be followed later by GBS himself. Both Bessie and her daughters were talented singers and Lucy made a name for herself in light opera. Holroyd writes, "Bessie, who sang an elderly Donna Anna for him at a performance of *Don Giovanni*, assisted with a number of his soirées, and it was at one of these that the *Punch* cartoonist George du Maurier, making some sketches of the Shaws and what G.B.S. was to describe as their 'damaged Svengali', conceived his idea for *Trilby*. When, in 1895, du Maurier's novel was adapted for the stage, Shaw was to write: 'Svengali is *not* a villain, but only a poor egotistical wretch who provokes people to pull his nose … Imagine, above all, Svengali taken seriously at his own foolish valuation, blazed upon with limelights, spreading himself intolerably over the whole play with nothing fresh to add to the first five minutes of him – Svengali defying heaven, declaring that henceforth he is his own God, and then tumbling down in a paroxysm of heart disease (the blasphemer rebuked, you see), and having to be revived by draughts of brandy. I derived much cynical amusement from this most absurd scene … But surely even the public would just as soon – nay, rather – have the original Svengali, the luckless artist-cad (a very deplorable type of cad, whom Mr du Maurier has hit off to the life.') Shaw was to try his own hand at creating such a figure in *The Doctor's Dilemma*."

*

May 14: Maria Irene Fornés

*

I had thought that Fornés was an anti-Castro refugee, like the hundreds of thousands who have turned Miami into a little Cuba and a drug culture so powerful and pervasive that it often controls the police, not the other way around, but when I went looking I discovered she had come to the US much earlier on. If she and her mother were refugees from anything then it was from the corrupt dictatorship of Fulgencio Baptista. She started out as a translator but she saw Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and it inspired her to look at what was happening in experimental theatre and how she might write for it.

The second major moment in her life—well, second may be incorrect, seeing her first play staged was probably a more exciting moment—was when she moved in to share a flat with Susan Sontag. I am always tempted to see two interesting people naturally having interesting conversations about books, about relationships, about the world, about anything. But it isn't necessarily so. To be the proverbial fly on the wall and listen in to regular conversations like this:

'Damn! There's no milk in the frig!'

'Are you sure?'

'Of course I'm sure!'

'I'll get some on my way home.'

'Okay. Don't forget.'

'I'm sure there's some long-life milk on the top shelf.'

'No, I finished it last week.'

'I think we'd better start writing ourselves notes whenever we finish anything up—it would save a lot of trouble—'

Gripping stuff.

*

Susan Snntag has been desribed as a 'highly serious' writer and this seems to describe her prose as well. It has a feeling of denseness and heaviness to it and I at times, as I read *Styles of Radical Will*, found myself longing for some humour, a quote, an anecdote, which would lighten it. I was really reading to see if she might mention anything about Fornés. She doesn't. But she *does* make quite a long comparison between Vietnam and Cuba in 'Trip to Hanoi'. "But perhaps there isn't much an American radical *can* learn from the Vietnamese revolution, because the Vietnamese themselves are too alien, in contrast to the considerable amount I think one can learn from the Cuban revolution, because—especially from this perspective—the Cubans are pretty much like us. Though it's probably an error, I can't help comparing the Vietnamese with the Cuban revolution: that is, my experience of it during a three-month stay in Cuba in 1960, plus accounts of how it has developed from friends who've visited more recently. (I probably won't understand anything here until I put Cuba out of my mind. But I can't ignore an experience that seems to me comparable to this one which I felt I did understand and do have imaginative access to.) And almost all my comparisons turn out favourable to the Cubans, unfavourable to the Vietnamese—by the standard of what's useful, instructive, imitable, relevant to American radicalism.

"Take, for instance, the populist manners of the Cuban revolution. The Cubans, as I remember well, are informal, impulsive, easily intimate, and manic, even marathon talkers. These may not always be virtues, but they seem so in the context of a successful, entrenched revolutionary society. In Vietnam, everything seems formal, measured, controlled, planned. I long for someone to be indiscreet here. To talk about his personal life, his emotions. To be carried away by "feeling." Instead, everyone is exquisitely polite, yet somehow bland. It fits with the impression Vietnam gives of being an almost sexless culture, from all that I've observed, and from the evidence of the three movies I've seen so far in Hanoi this week and the novel I read last night in English translation. (Hieu confirmed, when I asked him, that there is no kissing in Vietnamese plays and films; obviously there's none in the streets or parks. I haven't seen people touching each other even in a casual way.) As Cuba has proved, a country doesn't have to adopt the puritan style when it goes Communist. And, probably, the Vietnamese attitudes toward sex and the expression of private feeling formed part of this culture long before the advent of revolutionary Marxist idealism.

Nevertheless, they do discomfort a Western neo-radical like myself for whom revolution means not only creating political and economic justice but releasing and validating personal (as well as social) energies of all kinds, including erotic ones. And this *is* what revolution has meant in Cuba—despite waves of interference mainly by old-style orthodox Communist bureaucrats, who have been contested by Fidel precisely on this point.

I can't help contrasting the casual egalitarianism I observed among Cubans, whatever their rank or degree of responsibility, with the strongly hierarchical features of this society. No one is in the least servile here, but people know their place." …

*

But what were Fornés' plays actually like? What did the critics and theatregoers say of them? Did she bring in Cuban themes or were they about aspects of American life? Elaine T. Partnow in *The Female Dramatist* says of her, "Attempting to categorize the plays of Maria Irene Fornés is an ultimately fruitless effort. As with the work of Caryl Churchill, each of Fornés's creations is a unique fusion of form and content: Some of her plays use slapstick conventions, some are interactive, some multilingual, musical, vaudevillian, some violent, and some erotic. Tish Dace summarizes what may be the common thread of Fornés's work: "the origin of evil and the site of salvation, the nature of societies, and of the individual soul." A true avant-gardist, "She wishes the audience to see and understand people and their relationships as she does."

Does that suggest answers to my questions?

*

May 15: Xavier Herbert

*

"The term *boong* is originally Malayan, meaning "brother"; but it doesn't mean anything like that in Australian usage."

Xavier Herbert in *Seven Emus* …

*

May 16: James Hardy Vaux

*

"Ron Blair's *Flash Jim Vaux* also scored considerable success and enjoyed a number of revivals around the country. It was modelled on John Gay's *Beggar's Opera*, a celebration of a notable convict rogue with new lyrics set mostly to well-known folk tunes. Terence Clark collaborated with Ron and wrote some haunting original music as well as adapting period tunes like 'Lilibulero'.

"Vaux, a dandy and con man, enjoyed the distinction of having been transported from England to Australia not just once but three times. He is chiefly remembered for his compilation of a dictionary of 'flash' or 'kiddy' language, employed by the criminal classes and still persisting today, with its rhyming slang: trouble and strife (wife), me china plate (mate) etc. John Garden played Vaux with a seedy gusto, aided by Bob Hornery, Sheila Keneally, John Wood and Terence Clark himself at the piano. Ron's love of the eccentricities of language, his thorough research and sense of history were combined with an authentic theatrical instinct."

John Bell in *The Time of My Life*; and *Flash Jim Vaux* premiered at the Nimrod Theatre.

Despite Vaux's record of transportation surprisingly little seems to be known about his life even though he wrote what were ostensibly his memoirs—so perhaps he was adept at hiding things, changing, or confusing those who wanted to know more. We know he married three times, one and possibly two of the marriages being bigamous. So perhaps he had good reason to fudge the facts of his life. We know he was baptised at East Clandon in Surrey on the 20th May 1782 so we can assume he was born several days earlier. But we don't know where or when he died. We know he was a forger and a thief. But it is less clear whether it was poverty, wild companions, some kind of kleptomania, a hatred of authority, or any other specific factor which constantly took him away from the straight-and-narrow. But as I looked for facts about his life I realised he wasn't writing a

book about slang and street language native to this young colony; rather he was writing down the flash language of London's streets; something, ironically, which was found useful by the fledgling colony's magistrates as they struggled to understand the men and women who came up before them.

*

May 17: Dennis Potter

*

Dennis Potter, playwright and TV script writer, made his name with series like *The Singing Detective* and *Pennies from Heaven*. The other day, unexpectedly, I came across a very different Dennis Potter in his book, half-lament, half chronicle, *The Changing Forest*, about the Forest of Dean. He writes, "The Forest of Dean lies in Gloucestershire, west of the Severn and east of the Wye. It has been described as 'a little country on its own'. I was born there, and so was my wife Margaret."

"Since fewer and fewer men are going to work in the local pits, there is less shift work, so that the villages seem emptier in the day. Formerly, groups of men would meet on the corner, at the pub, or go walking – dull enough, it would seem, but part of that collective exchange of gossip and opinion which plays so large a part in working-class life. Now, more often, they have been split up – the people waiting at the bus stop after tea are off to the cinema or to a dance. Local firms line up with dinner dances at places like Chepstow, and there is less and less an obvious common meeting ground – it's not at the chapel, at the rugby ground, at the band room or on the corner, and there's nowhere else where it could be at present. Increasingly, the pubs are being segregated according to comfort and the type of person likely to be there – young men in Berry Hill, for instance, will travel a long way to find the right sort of pub with the right sort of chairs and the right sort of conversations. There is a turning away, or a turning of backs.

"And at the same time, there is a turning towards something better, something we would all choose. It is only that, in the process, the possibilities and splendour always held within the older, tighter environs have been or are being denied. 'Community' will soon be a thing you plan for, as if this were a Surrey town or a place being built up from scratch."

"But the Forest of Dean is an interesting and often a beautiful part of the country, so why not go and see for yourself? You will be struck by the differences it still has from the areas surrounding it, and by the sounds of the speech there."

It has little towns like Cinderford and Coleford. Small industries like tanneries and sawmills. Some visitors. But the thing which surprised me was the importance of its coalmines in Potter's childhood. Somehow I had pictured England's coalmines as all being much further north. But its coalmines were as doomed as the much bigger and better known mines. And what about its speech? Does the distinctive local accent survive or is it now an oddity only recorded in books like *The Changing Forest?*

*

May 18: Hypatia

*

We do not know when Hypatia was born but perhaps around 380 AD. "As the fourth century was nearing its end, we come upon the astronomer-mathematician Theon, who wrote a commentary on the *Almagest* and issued a new edition of Euclid's *Elements*, and also his more distinguished daughter Hypatia, the only known woman scientist of antiquity; she wrote commentaries on the conics of Apollonius and on the algebra of Diophantus. The inspiration of original scientific work had long ago left Alexandria; and original thoughts that the school now produced were philosophical speculations of the mystical, dreamy type, and its main work was editing, commenting and re-hearsing the glories of a bygone age." *The Growth of Physical Science* by Sir James Jeans. He goes on to say that St Cyril "became jealous of the influence of Hypatia; she, a pagan, was reputed to have so profound a knowledge of all the sciences that Christianity itself was in danger. Thus when a band of Christians, mostly monks, murdered her in 415—by tearing the flesh off her bones with sharp oyster shells—Cyril was suspected of having instigated the deed."

She became head of the neo-Platonist school of philosophy but although she was the brilliant philosopher and mathematician of her time only the titles of her works have remained and her invention of a plane astrolabe. Surendra Verma says of her, "In the 20th century, the life and death of beautiful and brilliant Hypatia was romanticised by feminists and she became the poster girl of modern science." In fact we do not know if she was beautiful or not and it hardly seems relevant. But with "Hypatia's death ended the golden age of Greek science."

I wondered how St Cyril could be involved. I thought he was centuries later. But when I went looking I found there were four St Cyrils! St Cyril of Jerusalem c. 313 – 386, St Cyril of Alexandria c. 376 – 444, St Cyril who developed the Cyrillic alphabet (the one I had in mind) c. 826 – 869, and St Cyril of Turaw c. 1130 – 1182. This would seem to suggest that Cyril of Alexandria was not as saintly as his name might suggest.

*

May 19: Ogden Nash (d)

*

In our poetry books at school a very long time ago we had this little poem called 'The Lama' by Ogden Nash.

The one-l lama,
He's a priest.
The two-l llama,
He's a beast.
And I will bet
A silk pajama
There isn't any
Three-l lllama.

I liked it. Short, pithy, and I have never since then been in any danger of getting my lamas and llamas mixed up. But I knew absolutely nothing about the man behind the l's …

The other day, fifty years after my introduction to the light verse of Ogden Nash, I happened upon Douglas Parker's biography of the man he calls 'America's Laureate of Light Verse'. And that description sums up both Nash's success and his underlying regrets.

He tried to be other things. He wrote for children, he tried the theatre, he wrote articles and essays and stories and scripts, he did lecture tours. But the world, or at least *The New Yorker* and similar magazines, just wanted his witty little poems. He was a part of the 'Eastern Establishment', friends with people like Dorothy Parker and Sid Perelman and E. B. White and James Thurber but no amount of knowing the most helpful people in literature and publishing should take away from his achievement of making a living from small poems—and you can't get much smaller than the one which is probably his most famous:

Candy
Is dandy
But liquor
Is quicker.

As he grew older he found it harder to hit the right note. His clever use of misspellings and contorted grammar and reason were no longer as popular. And his views began to seem old-fashioned and conservative. And perhaps humour itself was changing. Perhaps his laconic wit found it harder to find the mark in a world which veered between slapstick and more politicised humour …

And perhaps the sixties were made for criticising the oldies; not making fun of their children …

The wise child handles father and mother
By playing one against the other.

Don't! Cries this parent to the tot;
The opposite parent asks, Why not?

Let baby listen, nothing loth,
And work impartially on both.

In clash of wills, do not give in;
Good parents are made by discipline. ('A Child's Guide to Parents')

In fact parents as parents were no longer very interesting and his collections of verse though they continued to do quite well were no longer reaching out to new generations …

'The Lama' appeared in his 1950 collection *Family Reunion*. Even families were ceasing to reunite on hallowed occasions by the mid-sixties …

*

May 20: Sigrid Undset

*

Berenice Eastman wrote in *Nan Chauncy: A Writer's Life*: 'Such experiences amplified a growing interest in things Scandinavian. Her father had given her an English translation of a Swedish story, *Gösta Berling*, written by the 1909 Nobel prizewinner Selma Lagerlöf. It had a particular bearing for Nan, as Lagerlöf's family in Sweden had been forced to sell their old farmland home of Marbacka, but the author, through her teaching and writing career, was able to buy back her family property. It is possible that Nan was inspired by this example, as she would one day find that she too could bring back her family's land when she returned to Chauncy Vale. Further evidence of a possible link with Lagerlöf's book lies in the fact that the family property in the fictional *Comfort Me with Apples* is named 'Harbeck', which may be an echo of 'Marbacka', and there is a locality named Lakeby common to both books. Nan was happy to use a Danish translation of *Gösta Berling* in her class-room in the Danish school at Fyn.

'Another Scandinavian book which came to her notice in those years in Denmark, and which was ever present on her bedside table in later life, was a famous Norwegian cycle of stories titled *Kristin Lavransdatter*. It was by Sigrid Undset, who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1928 for her portrayal of medieval Norwegian life. Undset's approach to history was to show realities of daily life in the past and evoke the spirit of the country. She depicts the life and customs of the times, details of dress, the preparation of foods and drink, as well as the sensual realization of natural scenery. Kristin's life story is presented, saga-like, in an unhurried, naturalistic prose style which has the imaginative power to make personal relationships significant. 'She had no style but merely wrote, her writing was a flowing out of thought into language: a refreshing change from so much we have to read that is all style and no content,' Nan was to remark in a later broadcast. Further, she was pleased to note, the story was narrated from a woman's viewpoint.

> My copy is battered from much reading and it sits in the most honoured place in the highest bedside class; and when at times the perplexity of modern life seems too much altogether, I just stretch out a hand and am once more amazed to discover that Kristin, daughter of Lavrans far away in Norway and long ago in the thirteenth century, she — this same Kristin — knew it all. You will find if you read: she has all the answers.

Sigrid Undset was born in Denmark but spent most of her life in Norway where her famous trilogy *Kristin Lavrandsdatter* is set in medieval times but won her the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1928.

*

May 21: Getting an Education

*

I came upon a list of regulations for schoolteachers in Tasmania in 1872 and was curious to see the following requirements:

Teachers each day will fill lamps, clean chimneys, and trim wicks.

Each teacher will bring a bucket of water and scuttle of coal for the day's sessions.

Make your pens carefully: you may whittle nibs to the individual taste of pupils.

Men teachers may take one evening each week for courting purposes, or two evenings a week if they go to church regularly.

After 10 hours in school, the teachers spend the remaining time reading the Bible or other good books.

Women teachers who marry or engage in unseemly conduct will be dismissed.

Each teacher should lay aside from each pay a goodly sum of his earnings for his benefit during his declining years so that he will not become a burden on society.

Any teacher who smokes, uses liquor in any form, frequents pool or public halls, or gets shaved in a barber shop will give good reason to suspect his worth, intentions, integrity and honesty. (Were barbers' shops seen as dens of iniquity or was this simply a sign of laziness?)

Apart from the uneasy transition from English to local conditions (a bucket of wood would be easier to procure here) the thing which struck me most strongly was that it was teachers' morals and behaviour rather than their teaching ability that mattered. It raises the interesting question: was it assumed that a teacher of unimpeachable integrity outside the schoolroom would also take great care and responsibility for the learning and behaviour of the pupils inside the schoolroom?

*

May 22: St Peter Damien

*

With the media full of talk of the proposed Royal Commission into abuse of children, sparked by the crimes of the Roman Catholic church, I noticed many people saying that cases went back 'decades', with various time frames being bandied around. But as David Yallop points out in *Beyond Belief*, it is a matter of centuries, not decades. "As early as AD 177, Bishop Athenagoras characterised adulterers and pederasts as enemies of Christianity and subjected them to excommunication, then the harshest penalty the Church could inflict. The Council of Elvira in 305 enlarged on this earlier condemnation as did the Council of Ancrya in 314.

"An invaluable source of information on the subject is the body of penitential literature dating from the seventh century. The penitential books were handbooks compiled by priests and used by them in hearing the individual confessions of members of the Church. A number of them refer to sexual crimes committed by clerics against young boys and girls. The Penitential of Bede, dating from England in the eighth century, advises that clerics who commit sodomy with children be given increasingly severe penances commensurate with their rank. Laymen who committed such crimes were excommunicated and made to fast for three years; clerics not in holy orders had the fasting period extended to five years; deacons and priests seven and ten years respectively and bishops who sexually abused children were given twelve years of penance.

"The Catholic Church during the first millennium clearly took a more severe position on sexual abuse by clerics than it has taken in more recent times. The first millennium writings make no special pleadings on the basis of ignorance, nor do they ignore the fact that paedophiles do not confine themselves to one single act of sexually abusing a child. They do not blame the lay public's lack of morals, or accuse the faithful of deliberately tempting priests. However, there is evidence to suggest that paedophile priests were quietly moved to another diocese. Most significantly the supreme head of the Church took notice when his attention was drawn to widespread sexual abuse by his priests and bishops, but then failed to act upon many of the recommendations that had been made.

"Probably the most important piece of evidence that has survived from the early Church is *Liber Gomorrhianus — the Book of Gomorrah* — composed by St Peter Damian around AD 1051.

The work denounces the widespread extent of active sodomy then being indulged in by the clergy of the day and demands that the Pope should take decisive action. Damian was a priest at the time he wrote the book. He was highly regarded by a succession of Popes and became a bishop and then a cardinal.

"The book is written with great clarity. Damian was a would-be church reformer of a wide range of practices. One of his particular preoccupations was the sexual immorality of the clergy and the tolerance of Church superiors who were either equally culpable or declined to act against the abusers. The sexual activities of priests with young boys particularly appalled him.

"He called for the exclusion of sodomites from ordination and, if already ordained, that they should be dismissed from Holy Orders. He was contemptuous of priests who 'defile men or boys who have come to them for confessions'. He castigated 'clerics who administer the sacrament of penance through confession to those they have just sodomised'. Damian assessed the damage being done to the Church by the abusers and his final chapter was an appeal to Pope Leo IX to take immediate action. Leo praised the author and independently confirmed the truth of his findings; however, his actions have a curiously contemporary ring about them.

"Damian's recommendations concerning the range of punishments were largely modified. The Pope decided to remove only those prelates who had repeatedly abused over a long period of time. Although Damian had addressed at length the damage caused by the priests upon their victims, the Pope made no mention of this and instead focused only on the sinfulness of the clerics and their need to repent. Leo's response matches that of John Paul II over the period October 1978 to April 2002. On 25 April 2002, he finally defined child abuse as a 'crime'. Previously it had merely been a 'sin'. The former can be dealt with in the secular courts; the latter is the exclusive domain of the Church."

Other books followed—and had equally little impact at the top. "Until the 1980s, John Paul II and many of his cardinals and bishops, including Cardinal Ratzinger, chose to ignore centuries of sexual abuse by priests. There is undeniably a direct unbroken line which stretches back over centuries from the present scandals of paedophile priests to the first millennium. Wherever one looks in the present furore, there are powerful echoes of the dim past."

I know many things have been blamed—celibacy, the culture of institutions, the awed respect given to the clergy, the failure of parents and carers to take children's stories seriously, the belief that any child who ends up in an institution is incorrigible and needing the toughest handling—but one other thing came to me. The question of vocations. One day in a program on the Catholic Church in Ireland I heard someone bemoaning the lack of vocations now. But if a vocation is truly from God then we cannot talk about a lack; that would imply God is suddenly being remiss. Rather hundreds of thousands of boys and young men (and young women into convents) down the centuries were pressed into the church *without* a vocation. How many of the abusers were people angry at the Church because they had been denied the chance to follow their natural inclinations and talents—or because, without a vocation, celibacy was simply too great an ask? I can only speculate.

And what of St Peter Damien? What records are there of his life?

He is known to have been born in Ravenna in Italy in 1007, to have been orphaned young, and set to work as a swineherd. I consulted four books and curiously the only one not to dwell on his role as reformer was *The Book of Saints* by a Benedictine community in England. Instead they note that he became Cardinal-bishop of Ostia and traveled widely for the Papacy and "died at Faenze worn out by his labours." *The Penguin Dictionary of Saints* says "In his ideas about monasticism St Peter Damian always looked back to the example of the early desert monks, and in some respects he was not unlike St Jerome in character, critical, impatient, very outspoken, with the moral fervour of the prophet. His onslaught on clerical misconduct is called 'The Gomorrah Book' with reason; on the other hand he rebuked one bishop merely for playing chess." (Of course we don't know if that bishop was addicted to chess and neglecting his duties!) Ronald P. McBrian's *Lives of the Saints* notes that he had first joined the hermit order founded by another monk of

Ravenna, Romuald, who "after prolonged study of the Desert Fathers, … concluded that the way of salvation was along the path of solitude." But whether Peter Damian was naturally inclined to a hermit life or was distressed by the temptations, so easily given in to of a less austere and solitary life, is hard now to unravel.

The Oxford Dictionary of Saints adds to our picture of him: "He was also a notable poet, perhaps his best-known hymn being that in honour of St. Gregory beginning 'Anglorum iam Apostolus'." But I found it rather sad that it should have been clerical abuse of children which led me to the life of this interesting man …

*

May 23: Henrik Ibsen (d)

*

Ibsen has his character Dr Stockmann say in his play *An Enemy of the People*:

"You should never wear your best trousers when you go out to fight for freedom and truth."

I have taken his advice to heart.

*

May 24: William Trevor

*

My mother used to say she much preferred her brothers' books which were usually rip-roaring boys' adventures—whereas many of the girls' books of her era (she was born in 1914) were school stories. I'm sure many girls felt the same; I certainly preferred Biggles to most 'girls' stories'. But I had never heard a boy say he liked his sister's books—until I came upon this piece by William Trevor in *Old School Ties*:

"My obsession with schools, and life at school, began with my sister's small library of yellow-backed schoolgirls' stories. *The Terrible Twins* was a marvelously good read, especially the jape of Lady Mary and the scholarship girl changing roles, having conveniently met as new girls on the train. How hugely they enjoyed themselves, at everyone's snobbish expense, and how hard the terrible two found it to forgive them! But the terrors of course managed to have the last word, what with a suspect *mademoiselle* and bearded Bolshevik spies.

There were the girls of the Chalet School—not that I was so keen on any stories which weren't set in England—and bespectacled Sophie of *Not-So-Simple-Sophie*, and Jo and Margery, and frightful Doreen. There were all the slim black legs of Angela Brazil, and a film called *Girls' Dormitory* in which Herbert Marshall played the part of a school chaplain and set many a heart a-stirring. There was fair-haired, talented Daphne who became head-girl on the last page, whose touch on the tennis court was as delicate as a flower's but whose slender frame hid the kind of hockey muscle that led St Angela's to four unforgettable victories.

The infection I appeared to have caught from the yellow-backed volumes was slow to clear up, if indeed it ever did. Many years later I found myself buying *The Girl* every Thursday, ravenous to follow the fortunes of Wendy and Jinx, and Lettice Leaf, the greenest girl in the school. It was most certainly a sign of the decadence that was to come when that excellent organ ceased publication."

You might, of course, want to read more into that than William Trevor allowed for. But I was tempted to give him three hearty cheers.

*

May 25: Ralph Waldo Emerson

*

'The power of love, as the basis of a State, has never been tried.' Ralph Waldo Emerson.

*

May 26: Alexander Pushkin

*

There is a tendency to see only women writers as humbly offering their works to the public, their 'modest effusions', 'the work of my humble pen' and a thousand other self-effacing remarks,

but men were at times modest in their claims too. Take this introduction to a translation of Pushkin's most famous work: "Eugene Onéguine, the chief poetical work of Russia's greatest poet, having been translated into all the principal languages of Europe except our own, I hope that this version may prove an acceptable contribution to literature." The writer, a Lieut-Col. Spalding, might have been quite confident in his role as a lieutenant-colonel but he clearly ventured rather nervously into academe.

His version came out in 1881. So there are two mysteries in there. Who was this Lt-Col. Spalding who was obviously a Russian speaker and reader of Russian literature—and why had no one else thought a translation from the Russian original into English would appeal to readers? H. Dupont had brought out a French prose edition in 1847; Roman Aleksandra Puszkina had brought out a Polish verse edition in 1847; an F. Bodenstedt had brought out a German verse edition in 1854; and A. Delâtre had done an Italian prose edition in 1856. So why had no Russian-speaking English writer been drawn to the poem?

After reading T. J. Binyon's doorstop biography *Pushkin* I am no further forward but he does say that Pushkin's reputation went down in the decades after his death. Possibly English publishers were slower to see that there was a renewed interest in Pushkin's work—or didn't believe that English readers wanted any Russian except Tolstoy … and people in the Victorian era were not wild about his bawdy lifestyle and probably felt quite natural doubts about his writing.

Henry Spalding was very modest in his promotion of himself but I have now found some articles about him on the Internet. "Spalding's translation of Pushkin's most famous work, *Eugene Onegin*, was the first published in English and best of all other attempts by about half a century. It's not considered a great translation but then neither are most of the others. Pushkin's poetry presents many problems for translators." As Spalding seems to have learned Russian while at the British Embassy in St Petersburg, he had been with the 104th Foot Regiment and retired in 1880 with the rank of Major, I take my hat off to him. It may not be a major translation, and his modesty is understandable, but how many people turn to learning Russian and translating Russian classics so late in life?

*

May 27: Amelia Bloomer

*

In 1848 Amelia Bloomer founded the temperance and women's rights magazine, *The Lily*, the first of its kind for American women. It came out twice weekly and was edited by Bloomer. As well as many issues of concern to women she also advocated sensible dress and she both wore and promoted comfortable loose trousers in the Turkish style. These came down to the ankles, they were hardly what we would regard as radical, and they were worn with a light overdress. Even so, many people ignored the many important issues she wrote about, preferring to focus on what they saw as her scandalous costume. In the end she got tired of people ignoring her message just to focus on what she was wearing and reverted to the conventional long skirts of the day. But she continued to be associated with the loose trousers in people's minds; so much so that they began to be called bloomers …

They aren't a fashion statement. But bloomers are comfortable, sensible, and healthy. Bless her.

*

May 28: Thomas Moore

*

I noticed a biography of Thomas Moore on a library shelf and thought 'I'll borrow that one day' but when one day arrived I couldn't find it; it had disappeared without trace, not even a trail for their computers to follow. All was not lost. I noticed it on a shelf when I was at a launch of *The Famous Reporter* magazine at the Hobart Book Shop and felt rather like Bill Barnacle and Sam Sawnoff falling on the Magic Pudding before he can run away again.

After all that comes the hope that the book will actually be worth reading. Ronan Kelly titled it *Bard of Erin* and that has been Moore's enduring fame, as a collector, populariser, and at times a bowdleriser of Irish folk songs, and in his nineteenth-century fame lay the seeds of his twentieth-century rejection.

Kelly writes, "My standing-start mix of ignorance and perversity seemed to serve me well. By fighting shy of the famous *Melodies*, my research uncovered a much more complex figure than the faint sentimentalist admired by Joyce and disliked by Yeats. The Moore I discovered was a gifted scholar, a brilliant satirist and a fairly disastrous dramatist; he was a much-loved oriental fabulist and a much-censured coy eroticist; he was a pioneering historian, a struggling journalist and a daring biographer (his lives of Lord Byron, Richard Brinsley Sheridan and Lord Edward Fitzgerald are still required reading for modern scholars), I discovered too that his life was no less diverse than his writings: he was a celebrated singer, a sometime rebel, and, by the by, quite the dandy *littérateur*; he was a duellist (over a bad review) and a sort of accidental tourist (indeed, one of the best-travelled literary men of his day). Politically, he was a committed liberal, particularly in the cause of Catholic Emancipation – but he had his backsliding moments too. For all his popularity, he was never financially secure, and at one point his debts forced him imto continental exile (a supposed retrenchment that turned into an impromptu Grand Tour). He was also a son, a brother, a husband and a father – roles and responsibilities that brought much joy, but also, by the cruellest luck, repeated hammer-blows of tragedy."

The hammer-blows were the loss of all his children. None of them surived long enough to have families of their own. But Moore himself lives on in his *Melodies* such as 'Oft in the Stilly Night', 'The Harp that once through Tara's Halls', 'Believe Me, if all those Endearing Young Charms' and 'The Minstrel Boy', his biographies, and his 'oriental fabulist' epic of Persia, *Lalla Rookh*, which curiously remains a popular name for suburban homes. And in case you're wondering what Kelly means by his coy eroticism here is his poem 'The Kiss':

Give me, my love, that billing kiss
  I taught you one delicious night,
When, turning epicures in bliss,
  We tried inventions of delight.

Come, gently steal my lips along,
  And let your lips in murmurs move, —
Ah, no! — again — that kiss was wrong, —
  How can you be so dull my love?

'Cease, cease!' the blushing girl replied —
  And in her milky arms she caught me —
'How can you thus your pupil chide;
  You know *'twas in the dark* you taught me!'

*

May 29: Louisa Molesworth

*

"Mrs Thomas Beresford replaced *The Cuckoo Clock*, by Mrs Molesworth, choosing a vacant place on the third shelf from the bottom. The Mrs Molesworths were congregated here together. Tuppence drew out *The Tapestry Room* and held it thoughtfully in her fingers. Or she might read *Four Winds Farm*. She couldn't remember *Four Winds Farm* as well as she could remember *The Cuckoo Clock* and *The Tapestry Room*. Her fingers wandered … Tommy would be back soon.

She was getting on. Yes, surely she was getting on. If only she didn't stop and pull out old favourites and read them. Very agreeable but it took a lot of time."

From *Postern of Fate* by Agatha Christie.

In this Christie was certainly expressing her own abiding affection for some of Molesworth's books. She says in her autobiography: "They lasted me for many years, and I think, on re-reading them now, that they are very good. Of course children would find them old-fashioned nowadays, but they tell a good story and there is a lot of characterization in them. There was *Carrots*, *Just a Little Boy*, and *Herr Baby* for very young children, and various fairy story tales. I can still re-read *The Cuckoo Clock* and *The Tapestry Room*. My favourite of all, *Four Winds Farm*, I find uninteresting now and wonder why I loved it so much."

A couple of weeks ago I was at All Saints' Market in South Hobart and bought a copy of Mrs. Molesworth's 1882 book *Rosy*. I assumed she wrote books about nice children with a strong clear moral. But Rosy soon put paid to that idea. Rosy isn't a very nice child. In fact she's like the little girl who when she was bad she was horrid. The book is not short on preaching but what makes Rosy memorable is that she is a complex character and is well aware of her bad behaviour but perversely enjoys her tantrums and temper. And in a roundabout way I found myself hoping Mrs Molesworth wouldn't turn her into a little Miss Prunes and Prisms by the end of the book … But, alas, the volatile Rosy is tamed and docile and *good* by the last page …

And just a little digression. Why did Christie call her book *Postern of Fate?* She begins with a quote from James Elroy Flecker's 'Gates of Damascus'—

Four great gates has the city of Damacus …
Postern of Fate, the Desert Gate, Disaster's Cavern,
  Fort of Fear …
Pass not beneath, O Caravan, or pass not singing.
  Have you heard
That silence where the birds are dead, yet something
  pipeth like a bird?

—but does it give an insight into her book or is it rather her way of saying that there won't be any more Tommy and Tuppence books … And it has a strange resonance as we see modern Syria engulfed in fear and tragedy …

Mary Louisa Stewart (1839 – 1921) was born in Rotterdam, grew up in Manchester, and married Major Molesworth. As well as children's books she wrote adult novels and ghost stories but it is her writing for children which has lasted best. If we treat best in terms of a modest best.

*

May 30: Thomas

*

We don't know exactly when or where the apostle Thomas was born or died but the legend that he reached India is a powerful one. The Portuguese when they reached India found people they called 'St Thomas Christians'. But what might an Indian view be? Romila Thapar in *A History of India* wrote:

"It was during the first century A.D. that another religion – Christianity – entered India by way of the trading ships from the West. The coming of Christianity is associated with the legend of St Thomas, who, according to the Catholic church of Edessa, came twice on missions to India. The first took him to the north-west to the Parthian King Gondophernes, but this tradition is open to doubt. The story of the second mission appears to be more credible. St Thomas is said to have arrived in Malabar in about A.D. 52. After establishing a number of Syrian churches along this coast, he travelled overland to the east coast to a place near Madras city, subsequently called Beth Thuma (House of Thomas in Hebrew) where he began to preach. But here his preaching of a new religion was strongly opposed and he was killed in A.D. 68 at Mylapore in the vicinity of Madras. The Syrian church survives in strength in the region of Malabar and may well have been founded in the first century A.D. considering the frequent communication between the Mediterranean world and south India during this century. It is not beyond belief that one of the disciples of Christ came to India to preach Christianity."

*

May 31: Anon

*

Of course 'chick lit' is not anonymous; its authors always have their names on the covers, often in brilliant pink. But I thought I would rather look at the genre than a particular author. What is chick lit? Various definitions are out there but mine is much simpler: if it has lots of pink on the cover you can be 99% sure it's chick lit. I have just been reading *Chick Lit* edited by Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young. Their Founding Mothers are Helen Fielding with *Bridget Jones's Diary* and Candace Bushnell with *Sex and the City*. Some contributors put people like Jane Austen in as founding influences, others see it as a natural progression from the traditional relationships in a Mills & Boon romance, and others see it as an attempt to reflect the lives and interests of young career women today.

It has spawned various branches; about young mothers, about teenage girls, about young career men (irreverently known as 'dick lit'), about the gradations of professional life from the career orientated woman to those in dead-end assistant positions, and, interestingly, adaptations to other cultures where young women want careers but can't afford to live alone in flats and so remain within the family home. The preoccupations of the books tend to be weight loss, shopping for clothes, make-up and things to make their lives brighter, female friends, the awful things which happen to them at work, the embarrassments that families can cause—and finding a man. But the man is often curiously forgettable. It is as though he is a plot device but other aspects of women's lives, from their drinking to what the bathroom scales say, are greater preoccupations.

The romance and the materialism are probably behind the scathing criticisms of people like Doris Lessing who regard them as trash. She may have had someone like Plum Sykes in mind. "Plum Sykes, author of chick-lit best-seller *Bergdorf Blondes*, explained the new reality, commenting disdainfully to *Guardian* journalist Hadley Freeman in 2004, "Like, you have to be brighter to write about idiotic politicians than to interview Karl Lagerfeld who's, like, beyond smart?" This new tone, instead of being looked down upon, seems to be the accepted way of talking now. Sensible people might be raising their eyebrows but sensible people aren't being offered $800,000 book deals." Shelley Gare in *The Triumph of the Airheads*.

And yet, though there are dedicated young women out there sitting on platforms fifty metres up in trees to save the forests, most young women *are* looking for the material things of life and a suitable partner. Tania Modleski in *Loving with a Vengeance: Mass-produced Fantasies for Women* says, "Will it come as a surprise to anyone that the condemners of the "damned mobs of scribbling women" (to use Nathaniel Hawthorne's notorious label) are bemoaning the success of chick lit, which seems to have taken by storm not only England and America but many other countries as well? In fact, the worldwide popularity of chick lit has led one writer to refer to the phenomenon as a "pandemic"—the avian flu, if you will, of the literary world—that is felling those portions of the female population not fortunate enough to have been immunized by adequate doses of the Great Books." But her concern is partly that by selling massive numbers of "women's books" to women readers publishers then feel they have no need to adequately represent women writers in their literary lists. They have, if you like, used up their ration books.

I don't think attempts to see them as the children of Jane Austen or Charlotte Brontë or even of Emma Darcy are really very useful. They differ from older romances in that most of the women have much more on their horizons than marriage and ten children; they differ from Mills & Boon in that they are usually set in grotty flats rather than beautiful beaches in the Caymans or Madeira and are almost always written in the first person; in fact if they have 'mothers' then it is more likely to be people like Erma Bombeck who drew humour out of the small things of life but also provided a commentary on the eras and the fashions which continue to sway women so powerfully …

*

June 1: Cats …

*

The other day I was reading a book called *Novel Writing* by Evan Marshall which tells you, predominantly, how to write a genre novel (and did you know that there are sub-genres such as 'Harsh Parody' under Science Fiction and 'Pirate Historical', 'Reincarnation', 'Vampire' and 'Viking' under Romance—call me picky but I don't find Vikings or Pirates romantic material) and in which he gives a sort of count-by-numbers approach to producing a successful genre novel. I don't have a problem with anything that helps people succeed but I had the vague feeling that I wouldn't want to live off a steady diet of such books. If not very skillfully done, after a while the feeling of being manipulated to expend false emotion is off-putting.

Marshall, as well as an agent and how-to writer, produces his own mysteries and I thought I would try one to see how he puts his advice into action. But as I was wandering along the shelves of mystery it suddenly struck me how many writers use cats in their fiction. There are writers like Lillian Jackson Braun and Rita Mae Brown and Carole Nelson Douglas who have cats as sleuths, there are writers who use cats as mysterious Eastern idols or emerald-eyed jewelry, there are writers who just have cats wandering around, eating in the kitchen, knocking over bins, drawing people to windows with their nightly carousing, snoozing on armchairs …

Horses get a birthday on August 1. Cats get nine lives but no birthday so in honour of all those feline sleuths I have given them an official birthday …

And what of Evan Marshall and his mysteries? I borrowed one called *Stabbing Stephanie*, an off-putting title, but which has as its sleuths, literary agent Jane Stuart and her cat Winky, and is quite a readable and engaging mystery but I didn't think he followed his own advice about being taut, about avoiding repetition and waffle, and he falls back on that device of having the murderer explain just why he did everything. And while I was mulling on this question of cats being the preferred animal sleuth I couldn't resist borrowing a book by Albert Cornelis Baantjer called *DeKok and the Sorrowing Tomcat*.

Excuse me now while I go and see if *my* cat might have some talents beyond eating and sleeping.

*

June 2: Vita Sackville-West (d)

*

"Truly, there is a special ambience about a garden when the owner lives there. I remembered a friend telling me once about two visits she made to Sissinghurst. The first was on a glorious June day in the mid-60s and to her astonishment the owner of Sissinghurst, by this time an old lady, was there on hands and knees, trowel in hand, weeding a border, wearing her trademark jodhpurs and knee-length riding boots. Twenty years later, after Vita had died, my friend visited Sissinghurst on another lovely June day. By this time the garden was more or less permanently open to the public. She said everything was the same, the borders maybe even more sublime, the lawns even more manicured. But there was something lacking, a feeling that the owner did not live there anymore. The garden had lost its soul."

The Great Herb Tour by Christina Hindhaugh.

Vita Sackville-West is perhaps remembered for her affairs with women like Virginia Woolf and Violet Trefusis, her marriage to Harold Nicholson, both of them gay and both of them having homosexual affairs, and yet remaining happily married, her writing of poetry, biography, novels with unusual names like *Thirty Clocks Strike the Hour* and *Devil at Westease*, and history—but it is her role as the creator and designer of the garden at Sissinghurst with her husband and the books and articles she wrote about gardening which, I think, has kept her in the memory of more people. I have just been reading *In Your Garden*, a collection of her columns from *The Observer* newspaper, in which she comes over as interesting, decisive, rather snobbish (why should it matter that an unsuccessful jobbing gardener she had was a Jehovah's Witness?), willing to assume a high level of competence in her readers, and a lover of beautiful and intriguing colour combinations. In case you, like me, do not like pruning here is a little piece of her advice for March 26, 1950. "We now approach the time of year when the thoughts of Man turn towards the pruning of his roses. Knives

and secateurs are now at their sharpest. Brandishing these objects of destruction, battalions of professional and amateur gardeners advance, prepared to do their worst, as they have immemorially been taught. The word of command has gone out: "Cut almost to the ground; cut down to the second or third bud; cut till nothing is left except a couple of inches sticking up. Be pitiless, be ruthless; prune for fine blooms, exhibition blooms, even if you don't intend to exhibit. Never mind about the appearance of your garden, or the natural alacrity of your roses. Snub them as hard as you can, even as Victorian parents snubbed their children."

"It rejoices me to see that different ideas are creeping in. The rose, even the hybrid Teas and the hybrid Perpetuals, is no longer to be regarded as a stunted dwarf, but as a wildly blossoming shrub. Let her grow up, even to three or four feet in height, and throw her head about as I believe that she was meant to. This truth first dawned upon me during the war, when as a Land Army representative I had occasion to visit many small gardens in pursuit of owners who had been called away. Their gardens were turning into a sad disorder of weeds, but the roses reared themselves up, superb and proud, just because they had not been interfered with for two, three, four, five years. Then in the well-kept garden of a friend I saw similar rose bushes which, she assured me, had scarcely been touched since she planted them thirty years ago. She had merely snipped the tips; had taken out the dead wood and the weak growth; and for the rest had left them to their will. The result was lavish and surprising."

It was Vita's son Nigel who gave the garden to the National Trust—for the unromantic reason of avoiding death duties. But soul or not it remains for millions of people to enjoy …

*

June 3: Vivian Smith

*

I have just been reading some of Vivian Smith's poems, his *An Island South* and *Collected Poems*, and they are attractive though perhaps with a dignity and restraint which makes them seem old-fashioned and a little pedantic. He was also attracted to near-rhymes such as labour/harbour and brick/accurate. I found his Tasmanian poems of greater interest than his Sydney poems. Such as:

> We leave behind the farms, the aerodrome,
> the tall unfinished bridge. Near the centre
> a rent-an-avis sign says we're home;
> the airways' office empty as we enter.
>
> Stunned in their Sunday lunar vacancy
> the streets assert that life needs style, façades.
> Shop windows like aquariums of clouds;
> and round about the hills, the dry backyards.
>
> from 'Return to Hobart'.

> the foreground nearly breaks out of its frame
> the streets end so abruptly in the water….
> But how some themes return. A whaling ship.
> The last natives. Here that silent slaughter
>
> is really not prefigured or avoided.
> One merely sees a profile, a full face,
> a body sitting stiffly in a chair:
> the soon-forgotten absence of a race….
>
> from 'At an Exhibition of Historical Paintings, Hobart'.

But I am not sure that I would have liked his Hobart of fifty years ago and I think all in all he was a better journalist and editor than poet—perhaps because he put his passion into his non-fiction

and his restraint into his poems and I think poems need passion—yet I remain grateful to him for 'saving' the otherwise 'soon-forgotten' newspaper articles and columns of writers like Nettie Palmer …

*

June 4: Hilda Anne Colgan

*

Unfortunately I don't have anything my grandmother ever wrote, though she was an industrious letter-writer and a keen reader. I have copies of some of the letters her brother sent to her from Australia when she was still a schoolgirl which are very entertaining—not least because he mentions sending her a scorpion in one of them! I wonder if the family cleared the house and stood by with a broom each time a letter arrived? When she came to Australia she brought with her a bundle of postcards, some of them written to her father, and some of them thanking him for the 'book you sent'; but the writers never happen to mention what any of the books might have been. He was a clergyman and a keen naturalist—so did he send 'improving' literature out to people or did he send books about wildflowers or pond life? It has always intrigued me …

The story goes that his family had been Catholic but the parish priest was pressuring his grandfather Joseph Colgan to call his eldest son John instead of the Joseph he wanted and he got so fed up with this meddling in what he saw as family business that he left the church. I think there was probably more to his actions than that. And I wondered if the priest was keen on John as a name because of the famous John Colgan, author of *Acta Sanctorum Hiberniae* and *Triadus Thaumaturgae* which he worked on in Louvain and which were unfinished at his death in 1645.

But I found an odd little snippet in *The Times* Digital Archives: "Dublin August 31 (1803). On Wednesday last that very active, zealous magistrate, Capt. Dawson, of Palmerstown, took into custody a man of the name of Colgan, who was daring enough to threaten the Priest of Chapelizod parish at the altar, for exhorting his congregation to live soberly, to be amenable to the law, and to give up all idea of their rebellious principles, as in the end it could tend to nothing but their disgrace and ruin. This rebellious villain had the audacity to tell the Priest not to attempt to meddle in business that did not concern him; and that if he did he would soon make him sorry for it; and followed him after the service, threatening him, should he interfere in the like manner again. He is since fully committed to the Provost Prison."

It gives rather a different take on 'meddling' … And since then I have done some research on the family and I think that there is a great deal more to the story; not least because Joseph's father-in-law, along with other relatives, were undoubtedly involved with the United Irishmen. Watch this space.

*

June 5: Ivy Compton-Burnett

*

Hilary Spurling says in her book *Ivy: The Life of I. Compton-Burnett*, "I never met her, but her public image was so intimidating that, when I started talking to her friends a year or so after her death, I found it hard at first to credit the gentle, considerate, affectionate and amusing private person many of them described. More disconcerting still was their blankness about her origins and early life. Conflict, crime and violent upheaval among the families in her books had naturally roused intense curiosity about her own home life. But the many, mostly sensational rumours which were all I had to go on at the start of this biography turned out to be as misleading as Ivy's own characteristically dismissive claim: 'I have had such an uneventful life that there is little to say.' "

The problem with her biography was both that she hadn't known Compton-Burnett and that her subject had left very little in the way of personal letters and papers. She therefore leans very heavily on Ivy's books, and reading real life people into the characters, and on people who knew Ivy. The result is a book which left me with the feeling that it circles round and round Ivy but rarely gives a real sense of her. Perhaps this is inevitable. But in the times where Ivy's life makes her come over as a rather unlikeable person there is no off-setting this feeling with Ivy's own ideas and

thoughts and responses. It is always a sense of looking in from outside and judging from that perspective.

Ivy's books almost invariably are set in large houses at the end of the nineteenth century which suggests a nostalgia for a life her family *didn't* lead but it could also suggest, as later mystery writers regardless of their backgrounds chose large country houses as settings, that in a time of rapid change in England she saw this as still the most fruitful background to explore a range of ideas and issues …

*

Although Ivy's books have been cleared off library shelves there are still plenty in the Fiction Stack so I borrowed two. *Pastors and Masters* and *Darkness and Day*. And I discovered a curious thing about her dialogue. It is rather formal but it also has an underlying sense of facetiousness. Yet it isn't that which intrigued me. Rather there is a strange sense that these are foreigners speaking English …

In *Pastors and Masters* Herrick a university don and owner of a small school for young boys is writing a book and most of the story revolves around the shenanigans to do with the genuineness of the book or otherwise. Take this conversation between several colleagues: "Well, William," said Bumpus, "I have protested that I have written a book. You must know that it is your part to seem to want to talk about it."

"If you would like to talk of it with me," said Masson. "I think that men who take only to science, cannot be on the point enough in these things to be bearable."

"I suppose you will not read it," said Bumpus. "Or if you do, will not tell me what you think of it."

"Am—am I of the sort to read it?" said Masson. "I hesitate, as I say, to inflict the alien touch."

"It is this that thirty years has brought us to," said Bumpus.

"I—I think it is a good thing to come to, to keep to," said Masson, his voice going high. "I think it is the worst thing about intimacy, that it may blunt every edge."

"Yes, yes. Edges are the only thing," said Bumpus. "It is odd about Herrick, isn't it? His writing a book."

All the conversations have this curious sense of people pondering before they speak as if they are not quite at home in the language. I turned to *Darkness and Day* which she wrote more than twenty-five years later in the hope that she had become more relaxed. She has. Marginally. The book centres on two girls who were adopted separately but find themselves together in adulthood. But it still is filled with endless detached curiously stilted conversations.

"Mother, I am the embodiment of patience."

"You mean the embodiment of the opposite. And I feel so much sympathy. No one has more experience of it."

I wanted to believe these sorts of conversations were tongue-in-cheek but I couldn't convince myself … and I am left wondering what Ivy Compton-Burnett herself was like as a conversationalist …

*

June 6: Agony Aunts

*

The English *Women's Weekly*, 6 June 1959. I came upon their column 'Mrs. Marryat Advises' which I remembered from my childhood.

My Dear Readers,—This week a reader writes:

I have been going steady with a young man for two and a half years now, and during that time we have fallen out many times; we even separated but only for a week or a fortnight, and he always came back and asked me to make it up, and I did.

But about a month ago we broke up and he hasn't approached me since.

One of his friends told me he is courting a very nice girl, but his mother, if she knows, has said nothing to me, and I do not think he has taken her to his home.

This is worrying me quite a lot, because I think I have found out that I really love him. Please give me your advice.

—Phyllis.

It sounds as if you have had rather a stormy passage with your boy friend these two and a half years, and I cannot help wondering what was the cause of all those quarrels and partings.

Perhaps you both believed the saying that "The course of true love never did run smooth," but I think that is a dangerous assumption, my dear. With a long engagement, which is always a strain on a young couple, there are sure to be tiffs now and then, yet they are fundamentally happy together.

But are you and he happy? And if so, why has he started courting another girl—if he has done that, as you were told?

He may have had enough of quarrelling and making up, and decided to start again with a girl whose nature suits him better. You tell me you think you have found out you really love him, but may not the discovery have been caused by his having broken away when you confidently expected him to come back to you?

Before you make any decision, my dear, I should find out if he really has taken up with another girl or not. It seems unlikely, after two and a half years with you, and you ought not to believe this unless you hear it from the boy himself, as he may only be trying to make you jealous.

Your sincere friend,

Mary Marryat.

The language might change but the underlying attitudes remain remarkably similar. The question I found myself asking, though, was about the origin of Agony Aunts. Certainly there were 'Aunts' advising on things as far back as the thirties but did one particular paper actually invent the idea of the Agony Aunt or did they sort of creep out from more general enquiries about housekeeping and health and into something more personal? The other question Mrs Marryat was being asked in that particular column was about the best wording for a wedding announcement—which would suggest that these columns harked back to the more general type of etiquette questions about weddings and engagements á la Emily Post …

But when I asked around about agony aunts I got a range of ideas. One friend said she thought they went back for centuries. Another said he thought they were the 'invention' of Dorothy Dix—and thus were called Dorothy Dixers. Lennie Lower in a 1933 column in *The Women's Weekly* purports to be copying out some of the 'Answers to Correspondents' from a *Girl's Own Paper* of 1890: "ANGELICA seems to be in a bad way according to her own account. She is 'dreadfully in love' with a strange young man, and when she sees him suddenly she 'trembles from head to foot, and can scarcely breathe'. Her mother does not approve of him, as she has heard 'he makes periodical visits to Paris'." Angelica wants to know how she may introduce herself to this dangerous young man, apparently busy sowing his wild oats in foreign cities. "Angelica," he writes, "is a most unbecoming name for one exhibiting such dangerous passions and total disregard for her mother's wishes." But then this is Lennie Lower and not to be taken seriously as a history of Agony Aunts. My own thought is that the columns developed in the twenties and thirties as young women gained more freedom to make their own choices, choose their own partners, earn their own money, live away from home for long periods … and thus they looked, at times, for independent advice not least because mothers back in rural villages or quiet settled communities could not so easily respond to the temptations and problems which beset their daughters as 'working girls' in the big towns …

And a curious footnote: there was Dorothea Dix (1802 – 1887) the social reformer and Dorothy Dix (1861 – 1951) the columnist; one wanted to change and improve society, the other focused on helping individuals in their lives. And it was Dorothy Dix whose real name was Elizabeth Meriwether Gilmer who gave her name to the 'Dorothy Dixer' meaning a planted question for a politician—but I wonder if they know she took the name Dix in memory of an old slave the family had owned?

*

June 7: E. W. Hornung

*

Hornung (1866 – 1921) is remembered, if at all, for his character of Raffles, a kind of gentleman burglar (if that is not an oxymoron) who made Mayfair his scene of operations. I didn't find myself attracted to his Raffles series—for the same reason that I am not attracted to The Saint or other books in that little sub-genre—but I was interested to find, in Cecil Hadgraft's *The Australian Short Story Before Lawson*, that Hornung spent several years in Australia as a young man and wrote some quite good short stories and ballads while he was here. Hadgraft says "If there is little time one must learn quickly. This is what E.W. Hornung did in the two or three years (1884-86) that he spent in Australia. After he returned to England he produced eight novels dealing wholly or partly with Australia, as well as a volume of seven stories, *Under Two Skies*, (1892), of which four are Australian. The fiction he wrote later, dealing with Raffles, a criminal in fashionable circles, is that for which he was best known." And, "About twenty of his volumes contain some Australian settings or references." His 'The Stockman's Cheque' begins:

There's a hut in Riverina where a solitary hand
May weaken on himself and all that's his;
There's a pub in Riverina where they keep a smashing brand
Of every sort of liquor short o' fizz.
And I've been an' blued another fifty-pounder at the pub —
You're very sorry for me, I'll be bound!
But when a man is fit up free with hut, an' horse, an' grub,
What the blazes does he want with fifty pound?
And he comes 'home' a sadder and wiser man:
Thank the Lord I'm back at last — though back wrecked and whisky-logged!
Yet the gates have not come open that I shut,
And I've seen no broken fences, and I've found no weak sheep bogged,
An' my little cat is purring in the hut.
There's tea, too, for the billy-can, there's water in the tanks,
The ration-bags hang heavy all around;
An' my good old bunk an' blanket beat the bare veranda planks
Of the shanty where I blued my fifty pound!

Russel Ward when including this in *The Penguin Book of Australian Ballads* says of him "Hornung is best remembered for his stories about the gentleman-burglar, Raffles. He spent only three years, from 1884 to 1886, in Australia, but most of his many novels make more or less use of his knowledge of the country. Even Raffles begins his career of crime while visiting Australia as a member of the first visiting English cricket team. The accurate knowledge of the old bushman's ritualistic method of 'lambing down' his cheque," which is at the heart of 'The Stockman's Cheque', "was probably acquired during the author's sojourn as a tutor on a station at Mossgiel in the western Riverina".

Warren Fahey says of that curious activity called 'lambing down': "Many the bush worker who had been given his season's cheque made it only to the nearest wayside shanty. He might have had good intentions of travelling down to the city to invest the money in real estate or a small business, but the lure of the booze often proved too strong. It was common for the bushmen to hand over the well earned cheque to the landlord of the pub, only to discover that four days later they had drunk their way through most of the money including 'drinks all around the bar'. Certain landlords and landladies were known for 'lambing down' the workers by extracting as much money out of them as possible in the shortest possible time."

I wonder how much Hornung managed to save and take back to England?

*

June 8: 'Quaker Fiction'

*

One day I was sitting in the Meeting House Library waiting for people to turn up to a committee meeting and I found myself looking along the small shelf designated 'Fiction'. It held collections of Quaker humour. It held well-known Quaker writers like Elfrida Vipont, Caroline Graveson, Jessamyn West, Jan de Hartog, Daisy Newman, and Elizabeth Gray Vining. But there were also books by writers I had never heard of, or who I knew were not Quakers but whose fiction had obviously appealed to past librarians, so I thought I would indulge myself with several unexpected novels this week. The four books I brought home were:

1. *Downright Dencey* by Caroline Snedeker. This is the story of a young Quaker girl in 19th century Nantucket. She joins with some other schoolchildren chasing a very ragged rude orphan boy and, carried away, she picks up a stone and throws it, hitting him. She is mortified and wants him to forgive her. He eventually says he will forgive her if she teaches him to read. It is the beginning of a complicated and difficult relationship. It is a good introduction to this interesting little community, its attractive and not so attractive side, and a world in which husbands and fathers were gone for years at a time.

2. *Route I* by Agnes Sanford. In this, Gideon an Episcopal minister in California in the Flower Power years finds himself struggling to know how to deal with his teenage children. And when he realises he might have saved a young girl's life and did nothing he spirals into depression and tries to drive off the road into a canyon. He is saved by a group of young people, what we might call 'Jesus freaks', who help him to see that he has been going through the motions without really believing, that the gift of the Holy Spirit is like a gift you have to unwrap and use, not just acknowledge that you have received it. I enjoyed the book but I felt she was a better writer of non-fiction where her books such as *The Healing Light* have a sense of warmth and immediacy. I felt all the characters in *Route I* were chosen for their role in expanding a story of Christian redemption and healing; they were never really convincing in their own right.

3. *Apprentice* by Richard E. Early. This is the novelized account of an Early ancestor, a blanket-weaver, set in the time of the English Civil War. Although he brings in George Fox and early Quakers, the life of a weaver, and the drama of the war, it is still a fairly pedantic read. I thought he could have made more of his material.

4. *David Jordan* by Ronald Kirkbride. This is a family saga, a coming-of-age story, a history of a farm co-op. The Jordan family move south from Pennsylvania so as to buy land, and find their land comes with its quota of Negro field hands. This is well after the Civil War but the Ku Klux Klan is still active and the arrival of a Quaker family is resented. But although David Jordan is pleasant, hard-working, not particularly observant, yet with his share of determination and courage, the book never really gripped me. I didn't feel he was strongly enough drawn to carry quite a big book.

Still, I'm glad I made this little foray into the Fiction shelf …

*

June 9: John Howard Payne

*

It has been said of American writer John Howard Payne, 1791 – 1852, that "Never was a dead poet so famous for a single song, or so honored".

" 'Home Sweet Home' was one of the most popular songs of the nineteenth century. Soon after its first performance in 1823, in the opera *Clari*, the song was sung in drawing-rooms and streets, in arrangements from piano and brass band to the hurdy-gurdy. It was more than sentimental nineteenth-century schmaltz extolling the virtues of domestic life. For those displaced and dispossessed by the political and economic turmoil of the nineteenth century, the song spoke directly to their memories of a 'home sweet home' irretrievably located in lost times and places. The song was well-enough known to be a musical joke. When in 1859 Jean Francois Gravelet, known as the Great Blondin, walked a tightrope across the Niagara River near the Falls, he was greeted as he reached the Canadian side by a brass band playing 'Home Sweet Home'. The song

slipped easily into the encore repertoire, often as a last song in a farewell concert, with Adelina Patti, Nellie Melba and Joan Sutherland keeping up the tradition. Adelina Patti added a few extra high notes to further please her audience. A technically brilliant remastering allows us to admire Nellie Melba's pure voice on a recording made in 1905, and now easily accessible on YouTube. Wherever and whenever audiences heard 'Home Sweet Home', it stirred memories of home and homeland and created a half-pleasurable, half-painful emotional reaction in audiences well-primed to shed their tears."

Rosaleen Love writing in Carmel Bird's *Home Truth*.

*

June 10: Maurice Sendak

*

Sendak is forever linked to his children's book *Where the Wild Things Are*. End of story. Or beginning. Because I was curious. His famous book was perhaps a way of dealing with the knowledge that many of his Polish Jewish relatives had perished in the Holocaust. But what had he written before he suddenly had a best seller?

In 1947 a children's book called *Atomics for the Millions* came out. It was co-authored by Dr Maxwell Eidenoff, who was part of the Atomic Bomb Project at Columbia University, and a teacher Hyman Ruchlis—and they wanted to find someone to illustrate it. Ruchlis had a student at Lafayette High called Maurice Sendak who was delighted by the offer of $100 and a 'passing grade' to do the artwork for the book. Whether he was struggling in other subjects and needed the offer of a 'passing grade' I do not know. But he did some very clever drawings for the book.

Did he have any doubts about the aim of the book, the promotion of a nuclear future, or was he fully in agreement? I think he, like most Western children of that era, found the whole subject exciting. I have just been reading a 1949 Australian children's book, *Wild River* by Bernard O'Reilly, set in North Queensland where the father finds a bower bird with a little lump of pitchblende in its bower and the family set out on the exciting quest for the source of this radioactive material. The book says, "This much is certain; the Commonwealth Government is offering £25,000 reward to the finder of a rich uranium strike." The family acquires their own Geiger counter and one says, "That grey stuff must be hornblende; the expert chap said I might find pitchblende associated with hornblende or feldspar or quartz, or all three." I remember my father had a book by Ion Idriess when I was young about searching for uranium with a Geiger counter which I found fascinating. Hiroshima and Nagasaki had happened before I was born and no one mentioned them in those days. Children really did believe the Atomic Age would be an age of new and amazing discoveries and opportunities—until the dark side could not be hidden from them—and I would think the young Maurice Sendak shared that sense of excitement.

Now, as dreadful stories continue to come out of Japan in the wake of the tsunami and the nuclear devastation it wrought, I cannot help reading something quite different into those words:

Where the Wild Things Are …

*

June 11: C. K. Bird (d)

*

When I was young my mother had a book called *You Have Been Warned* by Fougasse and McCullough which I enjoyed. Years later I saw one on a stall and bought it. (When I told my mother she said 'Oh, I was going to leave you my copy'.) Inside it said it had been owned by W. N. (Bill) Oats. He was author of serious books like *Choose Your Dilemma* and *Values in Education* but perhaps he enjoyed Fougasse and McCullough as light relief?

In the book was a cartoon of a man who has driven off the road, up an incline, and into a lamp post—and underneath it says 'O waly, waly, up the bank.' As a child I thought this must mean Wally. Either the man was called Wally and he was bemoaning his misfortune—or he called his

poor smashed car Wally. Much much later I found this was actually from an anonymous Scottish ballad called 'Waly, Waly' which begins:

O waly, waly up the bank!
And waly, waly, down the brae!
And waly, waly yon burn-side,
Where I and my love wont to gae!
And ends:
But I had wist, before I kiss'd,
That I love had been sae ill to win,
I'd lock'd my heart in a case of gold,
And pin'd it with a silver pin.

Oh, oh, if my young babe were born,
And set upon the nurse's knee,
And I my sell were dead and gane!
For a maid again I'll never be.

It is a lament and waly actually translates not as my childhood idea of Wally but as woefully!

Fougasse and McCullough were best known as comic artists for *Punch*; Fougasse was the artist and McCullough the writer of the clever punchlines with their poetic allusions. But that was all I knew of them. Fougasse as a name sounded mildly French but when I went looking I found that it was a pseudonym for an artist called Kenneth Bird (and fougasse *is* a French term for a land mine or grenade). I am always interested in the way partnerships work; writer and artist, two comedians, plotter and polisher, the combinations are endless. But it seems to me that some of the best partnerships have been those in the world of comedy.

Bird brought out a diary called *STOP OR GO*, described as 'A Diary which will enliven 1939 from start to finish'; he also brought out several illustrated pamphlets with Donald McCullough including *Many Happy Returns* in 1936 which was given away free to all drivers renewing their licences, "The pamphlet is devised by Messrs. Fougasse and McCullough who were responsible for "You Have Been Warned," a deservedly popular extravaganza on the lighter side of motoring. "Many Happy Returns" has a more serious purpose than its authors' previous work, but its comments on the careless driver are none the less effective for being flippantly made." And *Fancy Meeting You* in 1947 saw three million copies printed to promote careful driving.

Bird was with the Royal Engineers in WWI, invalided out with a shattered back and told he would never walk again. In fact he did and was a warden during the Blitz in London twenty years later. But there is nothing in his wry and funny cartoons to give any hint of the pain and disability he had struggled through.

*

June 12: Charles Kingsley

*

Much is made of certain writing families—Kingsley and Martin Amis, A. S. Byatt and Margaret Drabble, the Boyds and the Lindsays here—and it just occurred to me that the nineteenth century had its writing families too, chief among them the Kingsleys. Henry wrote a number of books including *The Recollections of Geoffrey Hamlyn*, considered one of Australia's first 'big' novels, alongside *Robbery Under Arms* and *For the Term of His Natural Life*. His brother George was also a writer, though less well known now; yet his rollicking story of his travels in the South Seas, *South Sea Bubbles by the Earl and the Doctor*, (not the best of titles) was a hit when it came out in 1872 and quickly went through several editions. George's daughter Mary achieved fame for

her writings about West Africa, including *Travels in West Africa* and *West African Studies*, and her courage as a woman traveling in remote places and speaking out against the abuses she saw there.

And then there was the best known of them all, Charles, with his books which still get re-printed such as *The Water Babies*, *Westward Ho!* and *Hereward the Wake*. The trouble with *The Water Babies* I thought when I was young was that I desperately wanted Tom to be saved from his dreadful life as a chimney sweep but then the book wandered off into some airy-fairy stuff that didn't seem to make much sense. So I have just been re-reading *The Water Babies* to see what I would think of it fifty years later …

And the book is still a puzzle. In it, I can see the genesis of books like *Alice in Wonderland* and *Pinocchio*, mysterious journeys that have a vague moral to them but aren't about getting somewhere for some specific reason. In it, Kingsley has fun with the smug Victorian certainties, the rise of science and discussion of evolution, the belief in class and place in the hierarchy, the belief in charity rather than reform, the hypocrises within the churches—but at no time did I see it as a book truly written for children. It is rather a book out of which an adult might like to read small segments to a child. I couldn't help wondering if Kingsley, believer in a form of Christian Socialism and evolution but also bound by ideas of class and status, wrote it out of curiosity to see how the reading public would respond and what they would choose to see as its moral …

But one curious thing I took from it was the amusing snook he cocks at the education system: "And when Tom got on shore the first thing he saw was a great pillar, on one side of which was inscribed "Playthings not allowed here"; at which he was so shocked that he would not stay to see what was written on the other side. Then he looked round for the people of the island: but instead of men, women, and children, he found nothing but turnips and radishes, beet and mangold-wurzel, without a single green leaf among them, and half of them burst and decayed, with toad-stools growing out of them. Those which were left began crying to Tom, in half a dozen different languages at once, and all of them badly spoken, "I can't learn my lesson; do come and help me!" And one cried, "Can you show me how to extract this square root?"

And another, "Can you tell me the distance between *a* Lyræ and *ß* Camelopardalis?"

And another, "What was the latitude and longitude of Snooksville, in Norman's County, Oregon, U.S.?"

And another, "What was the name of Mutius Scævola's thirteenth cousin's grandmother's maid's cat?"

And another, "How long would it take a school-inspector of average activity to tumble head over heels from London to York?"

And another, "Can you tell me the name of a place that nobody ever heard of, where nothing ever happened, in a country which has not been discovered yet?"

And another, "Can you show me how to correct this hopelessly corrupt passage of Graidiocolosyrtus Tabenniticus, on the cause why crocodiles have no tongues?"

And so on, and so on, and so on, till one would have thought they were all trying for tide-waiters' places, or cornetcies in the heavy dragoons.

"And what good on earth will it do you if I did tell you?" quoth Tom.

Well, they didn't know that: all they knew was the examiner was coming.

Then Tom stumbled on the hugest and softest nimblecomequick turnip you ever saw filling a hole in a crop of Swedes, and it cried to him, "Can you tell me anything at all about anything you like?"

"About what?" says Tom.

"About anything you like; for as fast as I learn things I forget them again. So my mamma says that my intellect is not adapted for methodic science, and says that I must go in for general information."

Tom told him that he did not know general information, nor any officers in the army; only he had a friend that once went for a drummer; but he could tell him a great many strange things which he had seen in his travels.

So he told him prettily enough, while the poor turnip listened very carefully; and the more he listened, the more he forgot, and the more water ran out of him.

Tom thought he was crying: but it was only his poor brains running away, from being worked so hard; and as Tom talked, the unhappy turnip streamed down all over with juice, and split and shrank till nothing was left of him but rind and water; whereat Tom ran away in a fright, for he thought he might be taken up for killing the turnip.

But, on the contrary, the turnip's parents were highly delighted, and considered him a saint and a martyr, and put up a long inscription over his tomb about his wonderful talents, early development, and unparalleled precocity. Were they not a foolish couple? But there was a still more foolish couple next to them, who were beating a wretched little radish, no bigger than my thumb, for sullenness and obstinacy and willful stupidity, and never knew that the reason why it couldn't learn or hardly even speak was, that there was a great worm inside it eating out all its brains. But even they are no foolisher than some hundred score of papas and mammas, who fetch the rod when they ought to fetch a new toy, and send to the dark cupboard instead of to the doctor."

Charles Kingsley was educated at grammar schools at Clifton and Helston, then at King's College, London, and Magdalene College, Oxford, and I can't help wondering if some of his masters or tutors used to deride him as 'turnip head' and ply the rod …

*

June 13: W. B. Yeats

*

Joseph O'Connor tells the fascinating story of the fortunes of an old song in *Sweet Liberty: Travels in Irish America*: "In 1811, the Irish collector Edward Bunting noted down a song called 'Rosey Connolly' from a singer in Coleraine, County Derry. It is a chilling tale about a man who murders his lover beneath a salley tree — the local name for a willow — for no stated reason, but probably because she is pregnant outside of marriage. Perhaps understandably, given its morally dubious sexual undertones and bloodthirsty subject matter, the song did not become widely popular in Ireland."

But then W. B. Yeats wrote a poem he first called 'An Old Song Resung' and then 'Down by the Salley Gardens':

Down by the salley gardens my love and I did meet;
She passed the salley gardens with little snow-white feet.
She bid me take love easy, as the leaves grow on a tree;
But I, being young and foolish, with her would not agree.

Yeats claimed it was his attempt to reconstruct an old song he'd heard from an elderly peasant woman in Ballysodare in Sligo. It had similarities to 'Rosey Connolly' although the 'she' is not named and despite disagreeing it remains a love story not a tale of murder. The National Library of Ireland contains the text of an untitled mid-19th century folk poem which goes:

Down by the Salley Gardens my own true love and I did meet
She passed the Salley Gardens, a tripping with her snow white feet,
She bid me take life easy just as leaves fall from each tree;
But I being young and foolish with my true love would not agree.

In this one the lovers part in tears and we don't know if Yeats had read this version. His poem was set to music and became immensely popular in the 1920s. It reached the USA where it gradually ceased to be linked to Yeats and was simply seen as a version of an old Irish song.

But some scholars did not accept the link to the original song 'Rosey Connolly' and believed Yeats had re-written the second verse of a later song called 'The Rambling Boys of Pleasure' which goes:

Down by yon flowery garden where me and my true love do meet
I took her in my arms and to her I give kisses sweet
She bad me take life easy just as the leaves fall from yon tree

But I being young and foolish with my true love would not agree. This song has also been widely recorded though to a quite different tune "and it retains the asymmetrical rhythms of an Irish language poetic form." And around the time it appeared in 19th century Ireland two song collectors in New Hampshire in the USA noted a song called 'Sally's Garden' which begins:

It's down in Sally's garden, oh there hang rosies three
And there I met a fair maid who told me her mind so free
She bids me take love easy as leaves they do fall from the tree
But I being young and foolish could not with her agree.

This had a different tune to the Irish versions and the salley trees had become a girl called Sally but it was obviously related … somehow … and in 1929 collectors recorded yet another version doing the rounds in Galway …

In 1992 the Irish television company RTE put together a program on old Irish folk songs they titled 'Bringing It All Back Home' and among the artists and bands invited to record and reminisce were the Everly Brothers. They had a folk song their father had played as a waltz although he couldn't tell them anything about its origins. It was called 'Rose Connolly' and began:

Down in the willow garden
Where me and my love did meet
She passed the willow garden
With little snow white feet.
I had a bottle of burgundy wine;
My love she did not know,
And I did murder that dear girl
All on the banks below.

I drew a sabre through her
It was a bloody sight;
I threw her in the river
It was a dreadful night.
My father he often told me
That money would set me free
If I did murder that dear girl
Whose name was Rose Connolly.

The song of love and misunderstanding had returned to its roots as a ballad of murder and betrayal …

*

June 14: E. L. Grant Watson

*

Grant Watson trained in England as a zoologist and an orthodox Darwinist but he came to Australia in 1910 for a few short years and became fascinated by the bush, its animals, plants, insects, and also what was left of traditional Aboriginal societies in Western Australia. And as he began to write short pieces of zoological interest, some of which Dorothy Green collected up in *Descent of Spirit*, he also began to wonder if evolution could explain everything …

Just one of his fascinating stories comes in 'Some Patterns of Adaptation' about the sand wasp *Eumenes*. "The fertilised female builds a little domed house of sand spicules on some stone or rock foundation. The foundation ring is traced in minute pebbles. On this she builds a series of concentric rings, each diminishing in circumference, so as to enclose a domed space. At the top she leaves a hole. She then begins collecting certain species of small caterpillars. She stings these into a partial paralysis, but does not kill them, for they will be needed as fresh meat for the young she will never see.

"When the wasp has collected either five or ten caterpillars, she prepares to close the dome, reducing the size of the hole. She now goes through a complicated process which would seem to indicate foresight on her part. Yet she has no foresight, only a highly developed instinct. From her

ovipositor she excretes a juicy substance, working it with her legs into a narrow, inverted cone. With a thread of the same substance, she stitches the cone to the top of her domed building. Into the inverted cone, she lays an egg. She then seals up the hole, leaving the egg safe within the cone, suspended on a thread. This done, she goes off and builds another cone to repeat the same cycle of events.

"In a short time the egg hatches into a tiny, white grub, so helpless and delicate that if placed among the still-living caterpillars on the floor of the dome, it would inevitably be injured. In its cradle it is safe. When hungry it spins a thin thread of its own, on which it descends and takes a bite of caterpillar. If the wriggling caterpillars appear threatening, it can retreat up the thread, and wait. In this way the grub spends its infancy; but, as it grows stronger, it risks a final descent, and devours, at its leisure, the still living food that mother has so satisfactorily provided.

"From the domes that contain five caterpillars male wasps emerge; from where there are ten caterpillars, the larger female wasps. This raises an interesting question: Does the amount of food determine the sex? The mother wasp, who appears throughout her lifetime as a highly nervous and brilliantly alive creature, has built just the right sort of houses for the off-spring she will never see; and has provided just the right amount of food. She is singularly well-adapted for her life; she stings the caterpillars just enough to keep them quiet, but not enough to kill them; she packs each dome with the right amount of food for male or female grub. The suspended cradle protects the tender infant from the rough reactions of the caterpillars while being eaten. Everything is in order, and as the emerging sand wasp dries her wings in the summer sunshine, she must surely feel that God is in his heaven, and all is well with the world. The caterpillars might harbour different sentiments."

Clearly she has not passed on her knowledge by training, by trial and error; yet wasp DNA, regardless of their different habits, is almost the same. So what guides her so surely?

Russian biologist Theodosius Dobzhansky in *The Biology of Ultimate Concern* also felt that there was still something missing. He wrote, "The *Weltanschauung*, some components of which are sketched in the pages that follow, was nurtured, modified, and corrected for something close to half a century. Its germs arose when the author was in his teens, and became naively enraptured with evolutionary biology. The intellectual stimulation derived from the works of Darwin and other evolutionists was pitted against that arising from reading Dostoevsky, to a lesser extent Tolstoy, and philosophers such as Soloviev and Bergson. Some sort of reconciliation or harmonization seemed necessary."

… "Dostoevsky makes his Ivan Karamazov declare: "What is strange, what is marvelous, is not that God really exists, the marvel is that such an idea, the idea of the necessity of God, could have entered the head of such a savage and vicious beast as man; so holy it is, so moving, so wise, and such a great honor it does to man."

… "Consider this miracle, which astounds nobody because it is an everyday occurrence—the coming into the world of a new human life. A human egg cell weighs about one twenty-millionth of an ounce. A grown-up is some fifty billion times heavier. Where does the material for this growth come from? It is derived obviously from the environment, from the food consumed and assimilated. Quite literally, man is a conglomeration of transformed groceries. This conglomeration is, however, alive, feels joy and suffering, possesses consciousness and self-awareness, and is capable of deeds ranging from kindness to knavery and from heroism to egoism. The idea that a conglomeration of groceries, however transformed, can do any of these things strikes some people as arrant nonsense."

We get so bombarded by Darwinism (with its belief that evolutionary theory explains everything) on the one hand and Creationism (with its belief that we only need say 'God' and everything is explained) on the other that it becomes easy to overlook this sense of wonder and to

ask why we aren't asking for a deeper understanding of the miracle of life. We are missing some fascinating link …

Grant Watson also wrote some powerful stuff about the fate of the Aborigines sent to Bernier Island off the WA coast; in his first novel *Where Bonds are Loosed* (1914) and in his article called 'Bernier Island'. "White men had brought diseases to a race with little or no resistance to infections, which were as yet unknown in this part of Australia. Syphilis, in particular, assumed surprising and dreadful forms, and in the nature of things the disease spread and came back again to the white settlers with gathered potency. The idea was to collect all possible cases, and isolate the men on Bernier Island, and the women on Dorré Island, two uninhabited islands which lay some thirty miles from the mainland in Shark's Bay. Here hospitals were built, and a doctor was appointed to travel from one island to another, and tend the patients. The method of collecting the patients was not either humane or scientific. A man unqualified except by ruthlessness and daring, helped by one or two kindred spirits, toured the countryside, raided the native camps, and there, by brute force, 'examined' the natives. Any that were obviously diseased or were suspected of disease were seized upon. These, since their hands were so small as to slip through any pair of handcuffs, were chained together by their necks, and were marched through the bush, in the further search for syphilitics. When a sufficient number were judged to have been collected, the chained prisoners were marched to the coast, and there embarked on an ancient lugger to make the last stage of their sad journey.

"These journeys, from start to finish, often took weeks; often the patients died by the way. Flies buzzed about their suppurating sores; their chains were never removed. Men, women and children were mingled indiscriminately, and it would be a wonder if not all the survivors were thoroughly infected with all possible varieties of venereal ailment by the time of their arrival at their respective destinations."

Perhaps E. L. Grant Watson was allowed to be forgotten, not because his biology was no longer orthodox, but because he was pointing the finger at aspects of Australian history we would rather forget.

June 15: Amy Clampitt

*

I don't know if you remember *The Beverly Hillbillies* but I seem to remember their name was Clampitt—which, by association, seems to have thrown an aura of hillbillyism, of simple ideas and down-home humour round the name. But Amy Clampitt when I went looking certainly wasn't a hillbilly poet. She was published in things like *The New Yorker* and reached a sophisticated audience. Though she had worked for a publisher and as a librarian she came to poetry quite late in life; her first book of poems *The Kingfisher* (1983) coming out when she was sixty-three. It was probably worth the wait. A critic, Helen Vendler, said of it, "a century from now, this volume will still offer a rare window into a rare mind".

That is a comment worth having but rare mind or not her poems are quite hard to find. This one, 'Palm Sunday' I found in *The Oxford Book of American Poetry*.

Neither the wild tulip, poignant
and sanguinary, nor the dandelion
blowsily unbuttoning, answers
the gardener's imperative, if need be,
to maim and hamper in the name of order,
or the taste for rendering adorable
the torturer's implements — never mind
what entrails, not yet trampled under
by the feet of choirboys (sing,
my tongue, the glorious battle),
mulch the olive groves, the flowering

of apple and almond, the boxwood
carried or, the churchyard yew,
the gallows tree.

And while I had Clampitts and Beverly Hillbillies on my mind I came across an old book in an op-shop, *The Beverly Hillbillies: The Saga of Wildcat Creek* by Doris Scroeder, and discovered that they spelled their name with an 'e'. Clampett. More than that I found I enjoyed jumping back 40 years to the company of Jed and Granny and Elly May and Jethro because, despite the simplicities, the silliness and the slapstick humour, it is a classic story of two very different worlds meeting and failing to mingle.

*

June 16: Philip Massinger

*

I came upon a curious little book in the library by James Phelan. Back in 1878 he had done his thesis on a barely remembered dramatist of the English stage. Philip Massinger. The dramatist was a generation after Shakespeare. We know his father Arthur worked for the Earl of Pembroke and there is the faint possibility that the earl's brother-in-law Sir Philip Sidney stood godfather to the child or at least suggested his name. We know he had three sisters. We know he went to Oxford but did not graduate, probably because the money to stay dried up. Yet much of his life is shrouded in mystery. He is believed to have been married with children but we don't know his wife's name. He is known to have written some of his plays in partnership with John Fletcher and Thomas Dekker. Even more strangely, when he died and was buried on the 18th March 1638 he shared a grave with fellow-playwright John Fletcher. In the words of Sir Aston Cockayne:

In the same Grave Fletcher was buried, here
Lies the Stage-Poet, Philip Massinger.
Playes they did write together; were great friends,
And now one grave includes them in their ends.
So whom on earth nothing did part, beneath
Here (in their Fames) they lie, in spight of death.

It may have been friendship but equally likely it had a lot to do with Massinger's poverty. He wrote more than thirty plays (the best known probably being *The Virgin Martyr*, *The Bondsman*, and *The Tyrant*); he had Queen Henrietta Marie in his audience, he achieved considerable popularity in his time, but he has virtually been forgotten now.

Why?

Phelan provides some clues. "But as Gifford remarks, we tolerate now-a-days no magic but Shakespeare's." And "Massinger was unobtrusive and retiring, only coming out of his seclusion to render thanks for assistance or to make an attempt to obtain it." Hartley Coleridge said of him, "He went his way unobserved but by the few, unobserving of the many; poverty his constant companion, genius his only solace. 'His sepulchre was like his life, obscure: like the nightingale in the fable, with his breast against a thorn." The theatre has never been particularly kind to the "unobtrusive and retiring" and it was a hard road for those who, unlike Shakespeare, depended solely on their writing for their income. Shakespeare had a comfortable home in Stratford and business interests, apart from his investment in the staging of plays. Those like Fletcher, Massinger, and Dekker, who had no money behind them often churned out forgettable plays simply to keep the pot boiling.

And posterity was not kind to Massinger. Some of his plays were revived, others were cannibalised for their plots and characters, and some were accidentally burnt by the man who acquired them after Massinger's death so that we now only know them from their entries in the Stationer's Register.

There seems to be lessons in the life of Philip Massinger. No matter how good some of his plays undoubtedly were it was not enough. Success in the theatre world of Elizabeth I and James I required a degree of self-promotion, the right patronage at the right time, and a good dollop of luck.

*

June 17: Kerry Greenwood

*

I was in the library in the days when they used to have several shelves of popular paperbacks away from the main alphabetically-listed shelves and a woman was muttering that she couldn't find anything worth reading, all their mysteries that she had read recently were 'too American'. I said 'If you get stuck there's always Agatha Christie'. She made a sort of contemptuous sound and said '*I* could write better than Agatha Christie!' I have heard other people say this and it always makes me wonder. I wish I could write even half as well as Agatha Christie. But I looked up and down the rows of paperbacks and eventually said 'You might like to try a Kerry Greenwood—' So she took the book from me and went away and I have ever since wondered what her verdict was …

I had a very odd experience with a Kerry Greenwood one day. I read this in her *Murder in the Dark*:

'Phryne! Good to see you! You haven't met our other mounts. This is Black Boy, named after King Charles,' said Jill. 'This is Rapide, and this is Ann's pony George.'

Now there is no copyright on the names you give your fictional horses but these three names are lifted straight from Ruby Ferguson's *Jill Has Two Ponies*. Jill Crewe owns Black Boy and Rapide and her friend Ann Derry owns George. Either Greenwood was paying homage to a writer she especially liked as a child—or having secret fun with her readers—or she didn't see a need to create original names for her own imaginary horses …

Ruby Ferguson was born in North Yorkshire, her father a Methodist minister, and she received a good education going on to become an M.A. She wrote detective stories for magazines as R. C. Ashby, she also wrote reviews and other short pieces. Then she had a success with her romantic novel *Lady Rose and Mrs. Memmary*. I came upon a copy of this on a stall years ago and read it and sent it up to my mother who said "Well, it's just as well she wrote the Jill books!" She began writing her pony stories in the 1950s and they were very popular. Part wish-fulfilment, part practical information, part the strongly-drawn characters of girls and ponies, leavened with humour—they were just what girls wanted. She ended her career with a fictionalised book about her childhood called *Children at the Shop*.

*

June 18: Gail Godwin

*

I remember reading somewhere that women writers take the small, the domestic, the limited, as their 'canvas', and Gail Godwin was one of the novelists mentioned as epitomising this 'fact', while men take the 'big' subjects as their own. But the domestic defines us. Writers still bring out reams of books in the struggle to decide the formative factors in Hitler's life. We are all private people, part of a domestic world, before we become public people.

The difficulty is not in discerning its importance, I don't think, but rather in making it sound as exciting, as gripping, as *important*, as the public persona we all become; and some of us more than others …

The other day I saw a Gail Godwin, *The Good Husband*, in an op-shop and as it was a long time since I had read anything of hers I thought I would test my own thinking on this as against the claim that the domestic is always *small* and therefore less interesting.

' "Which brings us to Dante and Beatrice." Magda Danvers pronounced it Bee-a-*tree*-chay. "Now, you're going to love this story. Being about unrequited love, it's more suitable for seminarians. When Dante was out walking, he saw a little Florentine girl in a crimson dress and fell in love for life. They were both nine years old. He didn't lay eyes on her again until they were both eighteen. She spoke a courteous greeting to him in passing and that was it. She died at twenty-five.

But this blazing visitation of love set fire to his poetic spirit. For him Beatrice was the Incarnation. Sometimes, suddenly loving someone can be like a flash of God…." '

Magda is a lecturer in 'Visionary Studies' and more mundane English Studies and a writer, her book being called *Book of Hell*, and has married a younger man, Francis Lake, who had been planning to become a Catholic priest when he met Magda. But Magda is dying of cancer when the book opens and Francis is her ever-patient ever-loving carer. No matter how difficult and rude Magda becomes under the ever-present pain (and possibly because she has always been a strong-minded woman who doesn't mince her words) Francis goes on caring.

Is he too good to be true or was his love like that of Dante, something beyond the everyday, and proof against the everyday awfulness of creeping death? And when Magda dies will he suddenly grasp his new freedom with both hands? Will he be so accustomed to the idea of being a house husband that he will look to remarry quickly? Or was it the kind of love in which no one will prove satisfying after his years with Magda? What kind of Good Husband was he really?

Domestic? Yes. You can't get more domestic than laundering soiled sheets. Yet Francis is always more than his domestic situation.

*

June 19: Blaise Pascal

*

Franz Kafka wrote in his *Diaries*: "Pascal arranges everything tidily before God makes his appearance, but there must be a deeper, uneasier scepticism than that of a man cutting himself to bits with — indeed — wonderful knives but still, with the calm of a butcher. Whence this calm? This confidence with which the knife is wielded? Is God a theatrical triumphal chariot that (granted the toil and despair of the stage-hands) is hauled on to the stage from afar by ropes?"

Was he referring to the French mathematician Blaise Pascal? I had no idea but I assumed so. And it is easier to think of a mathematician arranging things tidily than a novelist or poet. The Indian mathematician Srinivasa Ramanujan said "An equation for me has no meaning unless it expresses a thought of God." I knew nothing about Pascal but I thought it might be an idea he would endorse—even if modern mathematicians are less likely to put any kind of God into the equation. So this week I have been looking to see if anything about Pascal's life and work might throw light on Kafka's words.

His most famous work is *Pensées* or Thoughts which are fragments and brief notes on his ideas about religion. But his most famous writing in his time was *Les Provinciales*, translated as Provincial Letters and which he is said to have written to promote Jansenism and refute the ideas of the Jesuits.

But it was Pascal the inventor I found more interesting. Simon Critchley in *The Book of Dead Philosophers* says of him, "Pascal wrote his first, groundbreaking mathematical treatise at the age of sixteen; he invented the first calculating machine a couple of years later to help his father with his tax-collecting job; he was at the forefront of experimental and theoretical work on the nature of the vacuum which was a topic that preoccupied the great minds of the day; shortly before his death he invented a large carriage with many seats which would prove to be the world's first bus line, carrying passengers across Paris; and his posthumous glory is evinced by the computer programming language that bears his name." To his ingenuity is credited the first digital calendar, the syringe, the principle of the hydraulic press, Pascal's Law of Pressure, and to top it off he is regarded as the founder of the modern theory of probabilities. Was God one of his probabilities?

Surendra Verma in *Why Aren't They Here?* explains how he came by his theory. "Chevalier de Méré, a 17th-century high-living French nobleman and gambler, liked to bet even money that a 6 would come up in four rolls of a die. But when he started betting even money that a 6 would come up at least once in 24 rolls with two dice, his luck changed. He asked his friend, Blaise Pascal, one of the most brilliant mathematicians of his day, why he was having bad luck in his new game.

Pascal wrote to fellow mathematician Pierre de Fermat about this problem, and their correspondence on the matter led to the birth of probability theory."

*

"In the 17th century the philosopher and mathematician Blaise Pascal wrote an essay called 'A Prayer to Ask God for the Right Use of Sickness'. This sounds strange to modern ears because we habitually think of suffering and disease as evils to be eradicated. And yet the modern philosopher Timothy F. Murphy has said: "… it is also true that we do not know what our lives are worth if we do not countenance the price we would be willing to pay for them, the difference we would be willing to endure for them"." Quoted in *Goodbye Normal Gene* edited by O'Sullivan, Sharman and Short.

Pascal was only thirty-nine when he died after a lifetime of poor health—and found sewn inside the jacket he always wore was a brief record of the moment, a November night in 1654, when he felt certain he heard God speak to him.

*

June 20: C. E. (Colwyn Edward) Vulliamy

*

A question which has always engaged me is why do so many people, myself included, *like* reading stories in which some one dies, sometimes in a very horrible way. Is it some kink in our personality?

C. E. Vulliamy was predominantly a biographer and lived among the long dead; he wrote in *Down Among the Dead Men*: 'And no one deplores the vogue of the popular crime story more than I do: it is a peculiarly degrading form of entertainment, unworthy of a healthy and educated public.'

Is it? James N. Frey writes in *How to Write a Damn Good Mystery*: "Barbara Norville, in her very helpful and informative *Writing the Modern Mystery* (1986), claimed that the modern mystery story had its roots in the medieval morality play, but, she said, "today's literary culprit works in a framework of felonious assault against neighbor … rather than, as in the morality play, against the sins of pride, sloth, envy, and so on."

"While it is true that the two forms—the medieval morality play and the modern mystery—have elements in common, the modern mystery has its roots, I believe, in far older stories. The modern mystery is a version of the oldest story ever told: the mythic journey of the warrior hero."

(Like silly claims about 'the oldest profession' I don't believe the 'mythic journey of the warrior hero' is the oldest story. I think earliest human beings had stories of a far more domestic nature; stories about food and babies and animals and weather and landscape … Mythic heroes, for instance, do not feature largely in Aboriginal myths; rather there is an informed delight in the habits and antics of animals and birds and aspects of nature …)

Dorothy Sayers has Lord Peter, in *Strong Poison*, say that "in detective stories virtue is always triumphant. They're the purest literature we have". Evil, in the detective story, gets its comeuppance. It could be taken as a modern manifestation of Cain and Abel. But I think that one aspect of the enjoyment is psychological. The detective story was a relatively late arrival. And I think it reflected the increasing complexity of industrial age life in which people often felt powerless against nameless and powerful forces. But in the mystery even the rich and powerful could be seen to be brought to book and at the end of the story a kind of reintegration and sanity and justice and completion would have taken place and in this was a sense of comfort if not pleasure. Of course modern mysteries are less willing to tie all the threads up neatly and make sure the right person goes to jail. But in general the most popular mysteries remain those with a sense of restored karma. We know Humpty Dumpty is still going to be a bit of a mess but we do want the pieces all glued back together in some fashion …

*

June 21: John Agard

*

I found I had some distant ancestors by the name of Agard. They went from Foston in Derby, England, to Ireland. So when I came across a poet called John Agard I immediately wondered if there was a connection and looked to see if I could find something about his life. I was intrigued to find that he was in fact born remote from Derbyshire—in Guyana!

But even if I couldn't claim him as a very distant cousin I did enjoy his book of poems *Einstein The Girl Who Hated Maths*. It's light, it's clever, it's funny … and it might even help children with a mental block when it comes to maths. Some of the pieces are traditional enough:

Number nine said:
I'll fly with a soul in the night
and the planets wheeling their gems. (That we're down to eight planets now spoils it a bit.)

Number ten said:
I'm off to meet a dear old friend.
How I long to see zero again.

But others deal with esoteric subjects like the Ishango Bone which is a fossilised baboon bone dug up in Africa and which by its notches is thought to be an early calculator for the phases of the moon; it is also thought to be more than 8,000 years old. And there are poems which are just fun without putting children on the spot. Such as 'Not Half Scared':

If a quarter moon
is one fourth of a full moon,

and if a fifth of a star
is one twinkling point,

and if I leave my door ajar
which is to say half-open
(or should that be half-closed?)
on a Halloween night,

and if half a pumpkin
comes creeping up the stairs
would I be a fraction scared?

Not half.

*

June 22: Anne Morrow Lindbergh

*

'The church, too, has always been a great centering force for women. Through what ages women have had that quiet hour, free of interruption, to draw themselves together. No wonder woman has been the mainstay of the church. Here were the advantages of the room of her own, the time alone, the quiet, the peace, all rolled into one and sanctioned by the approval of both family and community. Here no one could intrude with a careless call, "Mother," "Wife," "Mistress." Here, finally and more deeply, woman was whole, not split into a thousand functions. She was able to give herself completely in that hour of worship, in prayer, in communion, and be completely accepted. And in that giving and acceptance she was renewed, the springs were refilled.'

Lindbergh's famous book *Gift from the Sea* continues to be reprinted more than fifty years after she wrote it during her short stay on a small island off the coast of Florida. Yet most of the stories about the Lindbergh family focus on her husband, the famous aviator Charles Lindbergh, or the kidnapping and killing of their baby son in 1932—almost as though she did not share in that tragedy and the sorrow it brought her. Nor are their other five children mentioned. Nor do the sensationalist accounts of the tragedy ever mention that she was an aviation pioneer in her own

right. Her son Reeve says of her "She was the first woman in America to earn a first-class glider pilot's license, in 1930, and the first woman ever to win the National Geographic Society's Hubbard Medal, in 1934, for her aviation and exploration adventures. She also received the National Book Award, in 1938, for *Listen! The Wind*, her novel based on those adventures, and she remained a best-selling author all her life."

So why has *Gift from the Sea* remained popular? She uses the different shells she finds on the beach as symbols for her musings as a woman, a wife, a mother, but there is nothing didactic about the book. It is more a gentle exploration. She writes 'The interrelatedness of the world links us constantly with more people than our hearts can hold. Or rather—for I believe the heart is infinite—modern communication loads us with more problems than the human frame can carry.' She provides no certain answers but she opens up possibilities and insights …

*

June 23: Alan Turing

*

"It appeared that the top cryptographers at Bletchley were nearly all recruited from Cambridge University, and that at least one, Alan Turing, who had designed the first prototype computer to perform the bewildering number of calculations needed to break through the German codes, had been homosexual. Yet for all the venom spilled in the press around the time of the Blunt affair about the links between Cambridge University, homosexuality and treason, the Bletchley scientists had achieved one of the most significant intelligence coups of all time in a spirit of total secrecy that had lasted a generation. Bowles had drawn a fat line down the margin of the page where this was pointed out, and had written three large exclamation marks beside a particularly poignant footnote. It appeared that Turing, having returned to academic life sworn to secrecy and with his wartime heroism unsung, had taken his own life in 1954 following prosecution under Britain's barbarous public decency laws for homosexual conduct with a consenting lover." …

From *The Cambridge Theorem* by Tony Cape.

Both the Turing Machine and the Turing Test are named for him. A friend was telling me about an episode in *Bewitched* where the agency proudly shows off its first computer—a huge thing which takes up half the room. Turing's machines were even larger but they helped to break the Enigma Code. Michael Smith wrote in *New Cloak, Old Dagger*, "Bletchley Park's contribution did not lie solely in codebreaking. It was perhaps inevitable that a collection of Britain's most brilliant intellects — men of the calibre of the Cambridge mathematicians Alan Turing and Gordon Welchman — would produce some remarkable achievements. Not the least was the development, by Turing, Max Newman, Donald Michie and Thomas Flowers, of Colossus, the world's first programmable electronic digital computer, built to help in deciphering 'Tunny', automatically enciphered transmissions from the German Schlüsselzusatz teleprinter. The development of the modern computer was given a massive head start by these men." And he saw in them the beginnings of an artificial intelligence which would someday be able to think independently.

"This idea of robots, one day being able to problem-solve, create, and even develop personalities past what their human designers intended is what some call "strong AI." That is, the computer might learn so much that, at a certain point, it is not just mimicking human capabilities but has finally equaled, and even surpassed, its creators' human intelligence.

"This is the essence of the so-called Turing test. Alan Turing was one of the pioneers of AI, who worked on the early computers like Colossus that helped crack the German codes during World War II. His test is now encapsulated in a real-world prize that will go to the first designer of a computer intelligent enough to trick human experts into thinking that it is human. So what is the reward for inventing what some hope will be the real-world equivalent of Data from *Star Trek*, but others worry will be Skynet from *The Terminator*? One hundred thousand dollars. It almost seems not worth the bother."

From *Wired for War* by P. W. Singer.

The Turing Machine was part machine part mathematical model and set up to look at the curious problem of 'undecidable propositions'; just as physics has its 'uncertainty principle' so too does mathematics have such mysteries. The machine would turn itself off and provide answers to some propositions; faced with others, incapable of being decided, it would effectively run for ever. In his articles this curious business was called the 'Halting Principle'. He also set up Turing's test which would try to resolve the question of whether computers were actually 'thinking', not merely imitating or parroting or reproducing the data fed into them in a slightly different form. So far, no one has claimed the ability to think for their latest computer models.

The *Britannica* says of him, "He apparently committed suicide, probably because of the depressing medical treatment that he had been forced to undergo (in lieu of prison) to "cure" him of homosexuality."

*

June 24: Thomas Phaire

*

Neil Postman wrote in *The Disappearance of Childhood* of an early 'Dr Spock': "*The Boke of Chyldren* by Thomas Phaire, published in 1544, is generally considered to be the first book on pediatrics written by an Englishman. (An Italian, Paolo Bagellardo, published an earlier one in 1498.) In his book, Phaire recommends the use of teething rings, and provides a comprehensive list of "grievous and perilous diseases" of children, including "apostume of the brayne" (probably meningitis), terrible dreams, itching, blood-shot eyes, colic and rumbling of the stomach."

So do we know anything about Thomas and his 'Boke'? He is thought to have been born around 1510 and to have been a multi-faceted man, lawyer, politician, translator, and doctor. His book is both the treatise he wrote and a translation from French of the *Regimen Sanititis Salernitonus* which is a long medical poem, written in that form (in Salerno) to make medical lore easier to memorise. The value of his book is now seen, apart from the window it opens into medicine in his time, to be his treatment of children as children. They were not small adults. Their ailments were different and needed to be treated differently. And he also took what we might now see as an holistic approach. What went on in children's minds, in their dreams, in their lives, also affected their health. He dealt with many of the common ailments like smallpox, measles, and worms, but he also looked at issues like bed-wetting and nightmares.

Whether we would really like to try some of his treatments is debatable but the American Academy of Pediatrics in a wry statement said his treatments for bed-wetting might well be as useful as some of the drugs which are now prescribed. So what did he suggest? Avoiding fatty meats and taking a powder made from the burnt and ground up windpipe of a cock or, alternatively, the burnt and ground up testicles of a hedgehog …

*

June 25: Epicurus

*

"Of all the things that wisdom provides to help one live one's entire life in happiness, the greatest by far is the possession of friendship."

Epicurus 341 BC – 270 BC.

*

June 26: Pearl S. Buck

*

I was in the Cat Centre op-shop one day and I noticed they had two selections of Pearl Buck's novels. These were Readers Digest condensations (and a cousin of mine once said 'what a pity we need our reading pre-digested') but better than nothing. And I have been enjoying the seven books condensed. Included was her famous novel of Chinese peasant life *The Good Earth*, several wartime novels, her novelised biography of the last Chinese Empress, but also her own memoir *My*

Several Worlds. To my surprise I found I liked her memoir best, perhaps because it contains in it both her inspiration for her other books, her own experiences in China as a child and young woman, a loving portrait of her parents—and she says of her father who was a Presbyterian missionary:

'The Chinese attitude toward the whole business of the missionary may best be exemplified by a little incident I once saw take place in my father's church in an interior city. He was preaching earnestly and somewhat long, and the people in the congregation were growing restless. One by one they rose and went away. There is nothing in Chinese custom that forbids a person to leave an audience: he saunters away from the temple, the public storyteller or the theater when he feels like it. My father was disturbed, however, and a kindly old lady on the front seat, seeing this, was moved to turn her head and address the people thus: "Do not offend this good foreigner! He is making a pilgrimage in our country so that he may acquire merit in heaven. Let us help him to save his soul!" This reversal so astonished my father, and yet he so perfectly understood its sincerity, that he begged the pardon of the assembly and instantly stopped his sermon."

And it also contains many little glimpses of the lives of Chinese women, some of their great generosity and courage, others a reminder that despite massive outward changes some things have not changed so much.

'Once, in a small gathering of friends, and not all of them poor or farm folk, we fell to talking of killing girl babies. There were eleven women present and all except two confessed that at least one girl child had been killed in each home. They still wept when they spoke of it, and most of them had not done the deed themselves. Indeed they declared that they could not have done it, but that their husbands or mothers-in-law had ordered the midwife to do it because there were too many girls in the family already."

How much have things changed? Adeline Yen Mah dedicates her memoir *Falling Leaves: The True Story of an Unwanted Chinese Daughter* to her Aunt Baba "whose unwavering belief in my worth had sustained me throughout my tormented childhood; to my husband Bob, without whose love and support this book could not have been written; and to all unwanted children everywhere, in the hope that they will persist to do their best in the face of hopelessness, to believe that in their end their spirit will prevail, and to nurture their childhood traumas into a source of courage, creativity and compassion".

From the time when Somerset Maugham came upon a 'tower' in a Chinese graveyard where unwanted baby girls were left to die in 1919—"I walked round and on one side saw an oblong hole, eighteen inches by eight, perhaps, from which hung a stout string. From the hole there came a very strange, nauseating odour … It was a baby tower. The baskets were the baskets in which the babies had been brought … let down gently by means of the string. The odour was the odour of putrefaction. A lively little boy came up to me while I stood there and made me understand that four babies had been brought to the tower that morning."—to the present, many girls in China continue to be denied a future in which they might win through. Not every unwanted girl in China has an Aunt Baba. Human Rights Watch in their 1996 book *Death by Default: A Policy of Fatal Neglect in China's State Orphanages* pointed out that the vast majority of abandoned children in China continue to be girls. They write of the Shanghai Children's Welfare Institute in the 1990s: "Some Western observers have charged that the phenomenally high death rates among China's abandoned children result from neglect and lack of medical training on the part of orphanage employees. Anecdotal evidence from foreign charity workers and adoptive parents has painted a grim picture of decrepit and poorly financed institutions run by demoralized and unskilled nursing staff.

"However, medical records and testimony obtained by Human Rights Watch/Asia show that deaths at the Shanghai orphanage were in many cases deliberate and cruel. Child-care workers reportedly selected unwanted infants and children for death by intentional deprivation of food and water—a process known among the workers as the "summary resolution" of children's alleged medical problems. When an orphan chosen in this manner was visibly on the point of death from starvation or medical neglect, orphanage doctors were then asked to perform medical

"consultations" which served as a ritual marking the child for subsequent termination of care, nutrition, and other life-saving intervention."

I know there is a frequent outcry that girl babies are far more likely to be aborted when a baby's sex can be known early enough. My own feeling is that I would rather have unwanted girl babies aborted than subjected to a life of abuse, starvation, neglect, exploitation, discrimination, and sometimes murder. China now has an estimated forty million more men than women. It is inevitable that attitudes towards women will change. Pearl Buck herself was undoubtedly a positive influence on the Chinese women she came in contact with—and was in turn influenced by their stoicism and courage. But ultimately scarcity is a more profound way to raise the value of baby girls. Pearl Buck won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1938. I wonder how many of her Chinese women friends knew and were inspired by that …

*

June 27: Arthur Waley (d)

*

Amid the fierce anti-Germanism of World War I the House of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha became the House of Windsor, the Battenberg family became the Mountbattens, novelist Ford Herman Hueffer became Ford Madox Ford—and Arthur Schloss became Arthur Waley.

Waley was first of all an assistant to Laurence Binyon, then in 1918 he brought out his first book *170 Poems from the Chinese*, which helped to make his reputation as an Oriental scholar. He introduced his book by saying, "Those who wish to assure themselves that they will lose nothing by ignoring Chinese literature, often ask the question: "Have the Chinese a Homer, an Aeschylus, a Shakespeare or Tolstoy?" The answer must be that China has no epic and no dramatic literature of importance. The novel exists and has merits, but seldom became the instrument of great writers.

"Her philosophic literature knows no mean between the traditionalism of Confucius and the nihilism of Chuang-tzü. In mind, as in body, the Chinese were for the most part torpid mainlanders. Their thoughts set out on no strange quests and adventures, just as their ships discovered no new continents. To most Europeans the momentary flash of Athenian questioning will seem worth more than all the centuries of Chinese assent.

"Yet we must recognize that for thousands of years the Chinese maintained a level of rationality and tolerance that the West might well envy. They had no Index, no Inquisition, no Holy Wars. Superstition had indeed played its part among them; but it has never, as in Europe, been perpetually dominant. It follows from the limitations of Chinese thought that the literature of the country should excel in reflection rather than in speculation. That this is particularly true of its poetry will be gauged from the present volume. In the poems of Po Chü-li no close reasoning or philosophic subtlety will be discovered; but a power of candid reflection and self-analysis which has not been rivalled in the West."

It is a brief overview of Chinese poetry from ancient times, around 300 BC, up to the poetry of the 1600s. Some of the poems are very attractive with their little pen portraits of Chinese nature and life, sometimes reminiscent of Japanese haikus but without their more rigid structure. And although nature and the seasons are prominent all kinds of subjects come up. For instance in a 1st century BC poem 'The Golden Palace' I came upon this:

The cups are pushed aside and we face each other at chess:
The rival pawns are marshaled rank against rank.
I had always believed chess was a later Arab invention.

And Fu Hsüan in the 3rd century AD begins his poem 'Woman':

How sad it is to be a woman!
Nothing on earth is held so cheap.
Boys stand leaning at the door
Like Gods fallen out of Heaven.
Their hearts brave the Four Oceans,
The wind and dust of a thousand miles.

No one is glad when a girl is born:
By *her* the family sets no store.

Reischauer and Fairbank write in *East Asia The Great Tradition*, "The literature of the T'ang and the Sung, like painting and scholarship, was for the most part a glorious flowering of earlier tendencies. There was an outburst of poetic production, and from the T'ang dynasty alone literally thousands of poets have left their names to posterity." The T'ang went for three centuries up till 907 AD.

"The chief poetic current during the T'ang was the continuation of the type of lyric poetry that had become popular during the Six Dynasties. This poetry was known as *shih* … The lyric poets of the T'ang were on the whole freer and less rigidly bound by form than most of their predecessors had been. There were also some innovations at this time. The seven-syllable line, for example, was developed to parallel the more standard five-syllable meter, and the *chüeh-chü* or quatrain, a very concise and highly evocative type of poetry, also became popular.

"Chinese lyric poetry perhaps reached its apogee in the eighth century at the hands of such great masters as Li Po (also known as Li T'ai-po, 701-762) and Tu Fu (712-770). Though contemporaries and actually friends, these two men represented opposite extremes in poetic personality. Li Po, perhaps the greatest name in all Chinese poetry, was a complete Taoist, wine lover and carefree libertine wanderer. … Tu Fu, though only a minor official, was idealistic and painfully conscientious. Buffeted by fate, he was deeply aware of the suffering of humanity and the injustices of life. Where Li Po was essentially the Taoist hedonist, Tu Fu was the grave Confucian moralist.

"A third great T'ang poet of somewhat later date is usually linked with Li Po and Tu Fu. This was Po Chü-i (772-846). Unlike his illustrious predecessors and most other T'ang poets, he wrote in a simple style not far removed from the vernacular, with fewer of the heavy literary allusions that characterize most Chinese poetry. Perhaps for this reason he was vastly popular in his own day, not only in China but in Korea and Japan as well."

This period also appealed to Waley as he dwelt on it at most length, though he also called it China's 'most tragic period'. A civil war, he says, caused the loss of 'thirty million men' and foreign incursions further enfeebled the dynasty and the country. And it was particularly the poetry of Po Chü-i which appealed to him. Here are a couple of his shorter poems.

Of cord and cassia-wood is the harp compounded:
Within it lie ancient melodies.
Ancient melodies—weak and savourless,
Not appealing to present men's taste.
Light and colour are faded from the jade stops:
Dust has covered the rose-red strings.
Decay and ruin came to it long ago,
But the sound that is left is still cold and clear.
I do not refuse to play it, if you want me to:
But even if I play, people will not listen.

How did it come to be neglected so?
Because of the Ch'iang flute and the Ch'in flageolet. ('The Old Harp')

Sent as a present from Annam—
A red cockatoo.
Coloured like the peach-tree blossom,
Speaking with the speech of men.
And they did to it what is always done
To the learned and eloquent.

They took a cage with stout bars
And shut it up inside. ('The Red Cockatoo')

Waley eventually became the grand old man of his chosen world, his translations of Chinese and Japanese works helping to make them familiar to a growing Western readership. He was widely quoted, widely drawn upon as arbiter, deferred to as the expert in the world of Oriental scholarship, his translations frequently anthologised and mentioned by other writers as their introduction to the fascinating world of Eastern poetry. He also wrote well-regarded histories such as his *Opium War through Chinese Eyes*. I pictured him as a literary version of the Old China Hand. Except that …

When I came upon an obituary for him in *The Times* in 1966 I discovered something astonishing.

"An orientalist who never set foot in Asia, a profound scholar who never filled a university post, a poet who was content to be the interpreter of the work of others, a linguist who penetrated the meaning of the most difficult of Chinese and Japanese classical texts, without having received formal instruction in those languages; a master of English prose and verse forms, Arthur Waley was a survivor from that most brilliant Cambridge generation of the years before the outbreak of the 1914 – 18 War."

*

June 28: Eric Ambler

*

I remember my parents had a copy of Ambler's *Epitaph for a Spy* on their bookshelf but I didn't get round to reading it till long after I'd left home and then only because I thought it was an intriguing title. I was reminded of this the other day when I saw a couple of Eric Amblers on a library shelf, reprinted as 'classics', *Uncommon Danger* and *Journey into Fear*. I am not sure that they should be called classics but Ambler is still seen as the man who took the spy story away from the swashbuckling heroes of John Buchan and William Le Queux and set the tone for the later stories of John le Carré.

This is a little misleading. His stories set just before WW2 have been described as paranoia in a paranoid time. They have a sense of overlap. Where do the 'good guys' end and the 'bad guys' begin. But I found it hard to see them as spy stories at all. They are more like man-in-jeopardy stories. A man, middleaged, rather nondescript, lacking personality and interest, suddenly finds himself in a situation of ill-defined danger. He must call upon unsuspected initiative and courage to survive.

Yet in tone they reminded me far more of an early Graham Greene, you remember those seedy London settings and characters he wrote about before he became famous with books like *Brighton Rock* and *The Heart of the Matter*? And they have their links to later Greene books like *The Quiet American* because of his habit of suddenly placing a brief espousal of a particular philosophy in a character's mouth.

In *Journey into Fear* he has Mr Haller a.k.a. Mr Moeller say to Mr Graham: 'In times of peace only the fanatical nationalist demands that a man should surrender himself body and soul to the government of the country in which he was born. Yet, in war time, when men are being killed and there is emotion in the air, even an intelligent man may be so far carried away as to talk of "duty to his country". You are fortunate because you happen to be in a business which sees these heroics for what they are: the emotional excesses of the stupid and brutish. "Love of country!" There's a curious phrase. Love of a particular patch of earth? Scarcely. Put a German down in a field in Northern France, tell him that it is Hanover, and he cannot contradict you. Love of fellow countrymen? Surely not. A man will like some of them and dislike others. Love of the country's culture? The men who know most of their countries' cultures are usually the most intelligent and the least patriotic. Love of the country's government? But governments are usually disliked by the people they govern. Love of country, we see, is merely a sloppy mysticism based on ignorance and fear. It has its uses, of course. When a ruling class wishes a people to do something which that

people does not want to do, it appeals to patriotism. And, of course, one of the things that people most dislike is allowing themselves to be killed. But I must apologize. These are old arguments, and I am sure you are familiar with them.'

The sense of enigma and ambivalence in Ambler's writings still has its attraction. Mr Haller a.k.a. Moeller almost certainly doesn't believe his own words. It is this shifting sense of loyalties which finds an echo in the modern spy story with its confused loyalties, its moles and sleepers, its sense of the wide grey land between the old-fashioned worlds of black and white …

*

June 29: 'Gangster Books'

*

I thought I would just type in a date and see what came up on the internet; all kinds of happenings on this date: the Globe Theatre burnt down in 1613, Jacques Cartier was the first European to land on Prince Edward Island in 1534, all kinds of big names, kings, governors, celebrities, were born or died. And then on the list I came upon Squizzy Taylor born on this day in 1888. I would not have thought he was important enough to be so remembered. Someone did write a book about his criminal life in Melbourne but it was hardly a gripping book probably because he was hardly a gripping character.

But it set me on to thinking about gangsters and the true crime books as well as novels which are written about them. So what is a gangster? He has to lead a gang or be a member of one. Bonnie and Clyde weren't gangsters, John Wren wasn't a gangster even if he did ask his employees to do criminal acts for him, and although we talk of the Kelly Gang they would hardly qualify as a gang in the sense of an organisation. Those who join a motorcycle gang, the kids in the gangs of *West Side Story*, the people who refer to their group of friends as 'the Gang' aren't gangsters, they're gang members. A gangster implies criminality. So the members of some bikie gangs are both gangsters and gang members, others are perfectly law-abiding gang members. We talk of CIA and KGB and other security service people who break the law as 'gangsters' and in this regard the usage is not so far-fetched even though the organisations they belong to are ostensibly required to obey their home countries' laws, if not necessarily anyone else's.

There used to be a kind of apologetic tone to books about small time gangsters like Squizzy Taylor. They had impacted on other people's lives therefore they were fit subjects to write about. They usually had less than ideal childhoods. They usually came to a less than triumphant end. But they were, when all was said and done, mean-minded, callous, spiteful, nasty, and generally uninteresting in themselves. Their wives, their mothers, their families, were equally unattractive and uninteresting—even if the reader might spare them a moment of sympathy. The George Formans, the Darcy Dugans, the Squizzy Taylors and Snoopy Tanners, the Abe Saffrons, the Painters and Dockers who behaved like gangsters, none of them inspire …

But then came Mario Puzo's *The Godfather* and suddenly gangsters were big box office. Now shows like *Underbelly* get large viewing audiences. In fact you have a better chance of getting your book or script about a real-life gangster taken up than if you'd written about someone inspiring and worthy of emulation. Is it that we now find their behaviour less distressing, less unpleasant, that we have in effect become desensitised, or have they been given a subtle makeover to suggest gangsters aren't dreary little losers but are instead exciting, glamorous, even worthy role models …

*

' "Outlaw motorcycle clubs began on the West Coast of the United States shortly after World War II. Some returning vets couldn't adjust to the social requirements of peace and took to roaming the countryside on Harley-Davidsons, harassing the citizenry and generally making themselves obnoxious. They formed loose groups with names like the Booze Fighters, the Galloping Gooses, Satan's Sinners, the Winos. Right from the start these guys weren't candidates for the College of Cardinals."

Laughter and muffled comments.

"The group to have the greatest impact was a collection of social misfits calling themselves the Pissed Off Bastards of Bloomington. The P.O.B.O.B. eventually became the Hells Angels, taking the name and the helmeted death's-head symbol from a World War II bomber squadron. From the founding chapter in San Bernardino, California—"

"Yahoo, Berdoo." A comment from the back.

"Right."

"From that chapter the Hells Angels spread across North America. Eventually other groups also went national, then international. Today the big four are the Hells Angels, the Outlaws, the Bandidos, and the Pagans. All but the Pagans have chapters outside the States, though none to the extent of the Angels."

…

"How big are we talking here?"

"Figures vary, depending on the source, but the best estimate is that the Hells Angels have over sixteen hundred members throughout Europe, Australia, and New Zealand. Most are in the United States and Canada, of course, but, as of today, they have one hundred and thirty-three chapters around the globe."

"The 1998 Criminal Intelligence Service of Canada annual report estimates the Bandidos have sisxty-seven chapters and about six hundred members worldwide. Other estimates bump it to eight hundred."

"*Sacrement!*"

"What qualifies as an outlaw motorcycle club?" This questioner looked about nineteen.

"Technically the OMC label designates those clubs not registered with the American Motorcycle Association or the Canadian Motorcycle Association, the North American affiliates of the Fédération Internationale de Motorcyclisme, now headquartered in Switzerland. According to the AMA, these nonregistered clubs account for only one percent of all motorcyclists, but it's this deviant fringe that gives biking a bad name. And it's a tag the boys have graciously accepted, by the way. I've seen the one-percenter logo tattooed on some of the ugliest shoulders in the province." '

Kathy Reichs in *Deadly Décisions*.

*

And the curious question: where did the word 'gang' come from? Strangely, it comes from the Old English word *gang* meaning a journey …

*

June 30: Rose Brown

*

I said I wouldn't write about favourite authors—but does that stop me writing about a favourite person? I don't think so. Rose is a dear friend and she has brought out two books of family history and story; *Madge's People* about her mother's life and family, and, with her sister Liz Williams, a story about her father's last years, *there's life in the old dog yet*. Her father was Tasmanian lawyer and MP Frank Edwards and she says of him, "In 1943 Dad resigned from state parliament to stand for the House of Representatives, but withdrew his nomination to allow Joe Lyons' widow, Enid, to take his place. He stood again at the next state elections but was unsuccessful. Although he was still interested in politics, his activities became limited to more local affairs, such as his longstanding involvement in the North West Tasmania Cricket Association, the Ulverstone Show Society and the Anglican Church."

One of the Runnymede guides told me that Enid Lyons regularly traveled by bus and lived in a smallish cottage. Another friend, Madge Portwin, told me that when she was young the State Treasurer, Edmund Dwyer-Gray, and his wife rented a couple of rooms in her family home, sharing a bathroom and cooking on a small stove on the upstairs verandah. Frank Edwards' life has this kind of simplicity and lack of awareness of power and greed. I know we constantly get told that we can't get good anythings, whether MPs, CEOs, department heads or anything else, unless we pay

big money. But my question would be: were Enid Lyons, Frank Edwards, and Edmund Dwyer-Gray not good people?

Certainly they had their faults and their failures and their blind spots, *there's life in the old dog yet* chronicles some of Frank Edwards' foibles, but I would unhesitatingly say that they tried to be good people doing their best for their constituents …

*

July 1: Anon

*

"Every Torres Strait schoolchild knows that history begins on 1 July 1871, with the landing of the London Missionary Society on Darnley Island. The first landing was not, as some like to imagine it, a first contact. The people of Darnley had been in intermittent contact with European vessels at least since Bligh's voyage of 1792, and they were at the time involuntary hosts to a European trepanger and a score or so of his Pacific Island workers, who made free with their gardens and their women. The landing did however inaugurate a new moral order imposed upon the *Realpolitik* of the preceding period. At first the mission also took responsibility for law and order, since the island had not yet been annexed. Although in later years Queensland would institute its own rule, driving out not only trepangers but missionaries, it would build on the foundations laid by the LMS. The society's achievement was to persuade the Islanders to accept not just the Gospel but the whole colonial experience."

Jeremy Beckett in *Torres Strait Islanders*

One day someone whose husband had spent time as a missionary was complaining that missionaries seem to be charged with most of the ills of post-colonial societies these days. It is true that there were missionaries such as the Spanish priest who destroyed every scrap of Mayan writing he could get his hands on, treating it as the work of the devil, and destroying a people's precious, beautiful, and irreplaceable past. But I think the little snippet above encapsulates the key problem with many missionary efforts no matter how caring and inspired. It isn't just the Gospels which arrive. It is a whole way of life, language, and culture—and it is rarely seen for the package deal it is, or for the damage it can cause.

"It should also be mentioned that, by some racist regulation that would be unthinkable today, Islanders were not allowed to live on Thursday Island — a rule that applied with minor exceptions until the end of World War II." Captain John C. H. Foley in *Timeless Isle, An Illustrated History of Thursday Island*. I suspect that was the Queensland Government, not the LMS, showing off its true colours.

*

July 2: Samuel Hahnemann (d)

*

After my mother died we found a little 19th century book of homoeopathic remedies among her things. She had never mentioned or used any such remedies, so far as we knew, in her life. So was the book one of the things country people bought and kept on hand in the days when getting a sick or injured person to a doctor was a major undertaking?

I was thinking back to this when I came upon a book called *"I dare!" A Biography of Kiran Bedi* by Parmesh Dangwal. Kiran Bedi was for a time in charge of Tihar Jail in Delhi which contained 8,500 inmates and she set out to help prisoners overcome their addictions to both tobacco and various kinds of drugs, apparently with considerable success. Bedi said "We lay stress on homoeopathic treatment at the centres because at "Navjyoti" I had learnt that it was very effective, low cost and reduced dependence on allopathic drugs like proxyvon that itself created dependence." And she instituted a smoking ban. "They would administer a homoeopathic drug called 'tobaccum', I told them, and that would reduce their desire for tobacco." If these homoeopathic remedies could work effectively in India, and I would have liked to know something more of these treatments, then why wouldn't they be worth trialling here, I wondered, but the answer quite possibly would be a general official resistance to anything designated homoeopathic. It is seen as fringe medicine, as

something that requires and uses a mental belief in its efficacy; in other words it is largely a waste of time.

The idea was the brainchild of a German doctor, Samuel Hahnemann, who thought his idea of 'like cures like' could change medicine. He brought out, in 1810, his *Organon der rationellen Heitkunst* and the following year *Reine Arzneimittellehre*, in both of which he presented his ideas as 'rational medicine'; needless to say this didn't make him very popular in Germany, apothecaries and doctors there resenting the suggestion that they weren't prescribing 'rationally' and no doubt believing that his tiny doses would undermine their profitability. He eventually went to Paris and was very successful as a doctor and died there in 1843.

I've never used homoeopathic remedies, preferring my simple pharmacopoeia of castor oil, vinegar, calamine, honey and lemon, bread poultices, Epsom salts, and some things from the garden, but I have a degree of sympathy simply because I have heard of such remedies helping animals where clearly no element of faith and belief is getting in the way.

So what of that little old book of my mother's? It was called *The Stepping-Stone to Homoeopathy and Health* by a Dr. E. H. Ruddock. He dwells on preventative care: regular gentle exercise, fresh air, pure water, comfortable clothing, "Thin-soled boots and shoes are destructive to health. So are stays." He advocates cold baths, "As an invaluable aid to health, every person should bathe or sponge the whole body with cold water, immediately following it by vigorous friction, and soon afterwards exercise in the open air" … To this should be added sunlight, cocoa instead of tea, not indulging in excessive passions, and "The regular habit should be formed of going to bed early, and rising early." I'm not sure what dieticians would think about his recommendation for a good dinner: "Meat, prepared for the table so as to retain all its juices, and properly cooked vegetables, varied from time to time. In addition, for ordinary diet, nothing is better than an old-fashioned light suet pudding, with gravy or preserves." And "meals should be eaten slowly, in a cheerful spirit and taken at regular intervals—usually not more than three in a day". But perhaps of most interest was what he had to say, more than a hundred years ago, about tobacco and snuff.

"Tobacco and Snuff, in every form, are highly prejudicial. Tobacco-smoking often induces thirst and vital depression, and, as it is generally accompanied by *spitting*, wastes the saliva, and leads to the worst and most obstinate forms of indigestion. The secretions of the mouth should never be expectorated, unless they are the products of disease, as in Catarrh. Tobacco-smoking, especially when the habit is acquired in early life, gives an unhealthy character to the blood, produces a sallow hue of the skin, general physical weakness, and stunted growth. And these injurious consequences do not end with the smoker, but are transmitted from parent to child, resulting often in a puny, weak, and unhealthy offspring. Smoking tends to destroy the nervous forces, depriving the individual of that vigorous energy which should distinguish both his physical and moral character. Lastly, under no circumstances should any one become a smoker till after the full development and maturity of the body, that is, from twenty-five to thirty years of age. The habitual use of tobacco at an earlier period retards, if it does not stunt, the growth of the body. Boys, and young men too, have not the excuse for smoking, which may be pleaded by older men, that it soothes the excitement of the nervous system, or gives a stimulus to thought, for they are exempt from the hard wear-and-tear of adult life."

*

July 3: Tom Stoppard

*

Writers re-write the stories of others—from *Cinderella* to *Romeo and Juliet*—and they take and use the characters of others. I was thinking about this when I saw my son had left his copy of Tom Stoppard's play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstein are Dead* behind. They are hardly memorable characters in *Hamlet* but they do have memorable names. In fact they have names which don't seem to fit. So why did Shakespeare make up those names or did he take them over wholesale when he adapted someone else's *Hamlet*? His play doesn't solve the mystery posed by their names. It might be thought that they were Jewish—except that if Shakespeare had ever met a Jew he was more

likely to have a Spanish or Portuguese name. Or it might be that Shakespeare heard those names or saw them written on a consignment of goods from Europe and was intrigued. And there was a Danish name Gyldenstjerne …

So what did Tom Stoppard do with those two enigmatic characters? How did he interpret them? In *Hamlet* they enter, they are given a task, and a little while later we hear they are dead. So was Stoppard trying to fill in this curious gap? When the play begins they are throwing a coin and Rosencrantz wins each time. Was it going to be a variation on a dicing with death theme? But no. It soon became clear that if this play had a father it was Samuel Becket and the Theatre of the Absurd—not Shakespeare.

GUIL: We're taking him to England. What's he doing?

(ROS *goes upstage and returns*.)

ROS: Talking.

GUIL: To himself.

(ROS *makes to go*, GUIL *cuts him off*.)

Is he alone?

ROS: No, he's with a soldier.

GUIL: Then he's not talking to himself, is he?

ROS: Not *by* himself. … Should we go?

GUIL: Where?

ROS: Anywhere.

GUIL: Why? Of course if they *had* taken Hamlet with them it would've saved a lot of death and destruction. Perhaps. But then there is the vexed question of their own deaths. And the play unsurprisingly fudges this key point. We are told by other characters at the end that they are dead—but this is not the same as knowing. And there is every likelihood that they have diced death away and will be free to continue their aimless but often amusing conversations for ever …

*

July 4: Stephen Collins Foster

*

Although Foster's name appears in countless songbooks I didn't know whether he wrote or simply collected his poems, whether he wrote both lyrics and music, or whether he worked with other collectors to produce his many famous pieces now usually classed as 'spirituals'. In fact Foster (1826 – 1864) usually wrote both words and music. His early pieces such as 'Oh Susanna' and 'Old Folks at Home' tended to see the slaves as happy in their servitude but the more he saw of the slaves the more he jettisoned the crude dialect words he had used and the more sympathetic he became. He wasn't in the forefront of the Abolition movement but he did help to portray a people with a sophisticated way with words and a profoundly musical ear who deserved to be treated with dignity and empathy. Not all his songs were 'spirituals' or 'Etheopian Songs' as they were then called; he also wrote popular songs like 'Jeannie with the Light Brown Hair' but his name is now inextricably linked to songs like 'My Old Kentucky Home'. William J. Collins says of him, "The strong American sense of nostalgia has thus deified him, and the mythic figure thus created has so far repelled any serious study of his considerable talents as a poet." His career becomes the more remarkable when I discovered he was only thirty-eight when he died …

*

July 5: Katherine Scholes

*

I had seen and heard Katherine Scholes at several writer's festivals but I'd never got round to actually reading any of her much-praised books. The other day I saw her *The Stone Angel* on a stall and thought 'here goes'. The central character, Stella, has an interesting career which takes her to exotic places, some of the Tasmanian scenery and sea lore is attractively written, but the book never 'came alive' for me. I didn't care about Stella more after nearly four hundred pages than I had in the

beginning. I thought perhaps it was just that particular book, that particular character, so I borrowed *The Hunter's Wife* from the library …

This was a more interesting book from the point of getting some background on Tanzania; but the central character, Mara, could be Stella put into a different job and a different relationship. Again she grew up in Tasmania and again she goes to Africa and again she has a sadness in her personal history. She too is an independent minded if rather pedantic woman. And again I felt there was a problem. She has to carry what is quite a big book and I never really felt she was fully up to the job. As I pondered on this I thought that the impersonality of a third person narration doesn't help. I know telling a story from a first person point-of-view is not a panacea for all problems. But it *can* help bring reader and character closer.

As I closed *The Hunter's Wife* I thought that Scholes reminded me of Monica McInerney; that same sense of being in a safe pair of hands. This is no bad thing but when I invest time and/or money in a 'big book' somehow I am looking for a little more. Some laughter. Some tears. A sense that my heart and my mind are both engaged. But Katherine Scholes is still a relatively young writer. I hope she will grow and develop; not be content to write books that sell but which I didn't feel were the best she could do …

*

July 6: The Dalai Lama

*

Christopher W. Gowans wrote in *Philosophy of the Buddha*, "An indication of the current interest, and part of its cause, is the prominence of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, Tibet's spiritual head and political leader-in-exile. His efforts both on behalf of Tibetan independence from China and in support of inter-religious dialogue between Buddhism and Western religious traditions have attracted much attention. The Dalai Lama's book *The Art of Happiness* was on the *New York Times* 'best sellers' list for well over a year. There is also a small movement of 'Socially Engaged Buddhists' in some Western countries led partly by Westerners with a serious commitment to Buddhism and partly by persons from traditional Buddhist countries such as Thich Nhat Hanh, the Vietnamese monk now living in France."

Thich Nhat Hanh is a prolific writer on Buddhist and spiritual things. I saw that we had several of his books in the Meeting House library so this week I have been reading his book called *The Raft Is Not the Shore*, conversations with Daniel Berrigan, in which he says of his response to an Israeli professor, "I always put peace and human life above everything. So he asked, "What if Buddhism cannot survive in Vietnam? Will you accept that in order to have peace in Vietnam?" I said, "Yes. I think if Vietnam has real peace—cooperation between North and South—and if it can ban war for a long time, I would be ready to sacrifice Buddhism." He was very shocked. But I thought it was quite plain that if you have to choose between Buddhism and peace, then you must choose peace. Because if you choose Buddhism you sacrifice peace, and Buddhism does not accept that. Furthermore, Buddhism is not a number of temples and organizations. Buddhism is in your heart. Even if you don't have any temple or any monks, you can still be a Buddhist in your heart and life,"—and we also had his book *Anger* which is subtitled 'Buddhist wisdom for cooling the flames'. It is a holistic approach. These days people go to Anger Management courses, I remember as a child we were told to count to ten if we were in danger of losing our tempers, but he is looking at more than 'managing' anger.

How you eat, for instance. It isn't hard to look around our society and see stressed frightened animals, butchered by stressed angry people, being served up by stressed harried employees, gobbled hastily by people rushing to get back to work or their next appointment. He urges a careful choice of food, eaten in serenity, chewed slowly and thoroughly enjoyed for the delight that food is.

And the way we breathe is so important. He comes back regularly to this. "Whenever anger manifests, the practitioner immediately invites the energy of mindfulness to manifest also, through the practice of mindful walking and mindful breathing. This way, another zone of energy—the energy of mindfulness—is created. It is so important to learn how to practice walking and breathing

mindfully, how to practice cleaning and working mindfully, how to practice mindfulness in our daily life. Then, every time a negative energy manifests, we will know how to generate the energy of mindfulness in order to embrace it and take care of it."

Both the Dalai Lama and Thich Nhat Hanh embrace the philosophy of 'Live Each Moment Beautifully' but it is far easier said than done. In *The Art of Happiness* the Dalai Lama and Howard C. Cutler write, "The concept of achieving true happiness has, in the West, always seemed ill defined, elusive, ungraspable. Even the word "happy" is derived from the Icelandic word *happ*, meaning luck or chance. Most of us, it seems, share this view of the mysterious nature of happiness. In those moments of joy that life brings, happiness feels like something that comes out of the blue. To my Western mind, it didn't seem the sort of thing that one could develop, and sustain, simply by "training the mind."

"When I raised that objection, the Dalai Lama was quick to explain. "When I say 'training the mind,' in this context I'm not referring to 'mind' merely as one's cognitive ability or intellect. Rather, I'm using the term in the sense of the Tibetan word *Sem*, which has a much broader meaning, closer to 'psyche' or 'spirit'; it includes intellect and feeling, heart and mind. By bringing about a certain inner discipline, we can undergo a transformation of our attitude, our entire outlook and approach to living.

"When we speak of this inner discipline, it can of course involve many things, many methods. But generally speaking, one begins by identifying those factors which lead to happiness and those factors which lead to suffering. Having done this, one then sets about gradually eliminating those factors which lead to suffering and cultivating those which lead to happiness. That is the way."

*

July 7: Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (d)

*

"Suffering from angina pectoris, he had risen from his bed on a spring day and gone for a stroll into his garden and a short while later had an angina attack. He was discovered lying on the ground, one hand clutching his heart, the other holding a single white snowdrop. He died on Monday 7 July."

Richard Morris in *Harry Price*.

Though rather touching I wondered if that could be correct. July in England is not spring but high summer and the snowdrops are long passed. But then it doesn't say that he died on the day he had his attack. He may have lingered for weeks. This seems to symbolise something of the puzzle of Doyle's last years where the arch-sceptic who wrote the Sherlock Holmes stories turned into the arch-believer of any and every story if it gave comfort to the bereaved. It is easy to be critical of credulity, though we are all credulous about *something*, and yet it also gave people comfort and hope in their most dreary and sorrowful moments. We criticise the mediums who seemed to batten on those desperate for hope but I wonder if that was any worse than the comforting but insincere platitudes that we roll out. And perhaps the real question should be—why did people turn to charlatans and fakes and dubious people in little suburban living rooms when the church had in theory believed in life after death since its beginning. Why had the church been so remiss in providing the comfort and love and hope that people so desperately needed?

"In fact, Doyle's proselytising mission, which was long in the making and which would absorb him for the rest of his life, was triggered by the respected physicist Sir Oliver Lodge, the leader of the new spiritualist revival; and the hope of life after death intensified for Doyle when his son Kingsley, his brother, his two brothers-in-law and two nephews were killed in the trenches."

*

July 8: Japan Ahoy!

*

"The hot, bright eastern day chosen for the end of Japan's two centuries of seclusion was 8 July 1853. The ships of Commodore Perry's command were black and tall; they were called the *Susquehanna* (the flagship), the *Mississippi*, the *Plymouth* and the *Saratoga*; they had come from

China and established a base at Loo-Choo (Okinawa). Their Commodore, Matthew Calbraith Perry, was a big, dark, unsmiling man with a double chin that puffed over the gold braid of his high naval collar. He came from a famous family of hard-drinking, adventure-seeking, successful naval officers. Matthew, who was born in 1794, followed in his father's and brothers' footsteps – except that he didn't much like drinking – by becoming a midshipman at the age of fifteen, getting his first taste of battle in the war of 1812 against the British and gaining experience of exotic lands and peoples during his voyages to West and South Africa, Tangiers and the Caribbean. At the age of forty-six he was made a Commodore and a commodore, wrote one of his biographers, 'was a titanic personage afloat or ashore' who occupied in solitary state the best quarters on the best ship of the squadron and who was surrounded by a retinue of secretaries, body-servants and aides. Perry was a man who gained the respect rather than the affection of those who worked under him and his most sympathetic characteristics were, perhaps, a great sense of fairness and a lively, inquiring mind which recorded all he saw and heard – stories of 'sailing fish', names (ancient and modern) of prevailing winds, fishing techniques of the Malays, colours of rock, bird and native robe. On his expedition to the Far East, Perry's full title was 'Commander in Chief U.S. Naval Forces, East India, China and Japan Seas, and Special Ambassador to Japan'. For Perry had come to demand – not, he made it very clear, 'to solicit as a favour' – that the Japanese should make some kind of trading agreement with America and open at least two of their ports to foreign ships."

Pat Barr in *The Coming of the Barbarians*.

The Japanese were variously terrified, curious, certain it would destroy the deeply embedded traditions and ways of semi-feudal Japan, yet keen to know more about the lands and products far beyond Japan's shores.

"But for first-hand accounts of these next years, one must turn to those written by other barbarians from Britain and America who came pressing, as it were, through the cracks in the tight shell of Japan which Commodore Matthew Perry and Consul Townsend Harris had made."

It wasn't enough that Westerners should see Japan; they very often felt an insatiable urge to write about the country and its people. It began quietly enough, with reports and letters and journals, but soon books were appearing and for those who spent any time there an attempt would be made at a Japanese-English dictionary or grammar or a botanical survey. A newspaper, the *Japan Herald*, was started. A bookshop was opened. In a few more years it was inspiring music and opera. And the Japanese, in their turn, made cartoons and sketches and reports on the 'hairy barbarians'.

In the wake of a bloody attack on the foreign community the English sent a regiment of soldiers, the XXth, what the Japanese called the 'red regiment' because of their bright uniforms, and one of them was my gr-grandfather's cousin. He is Richard in family records but Barr calls him Ralph. "The soldiers were not, apparently, very pleased to be there. Ralph Jephson, guardsman, horseman and huntsman, remembered his army hut as 'a spacious apartment of ten feet square, bounded by walls, whose weather-beaten and mouldy sides, the temporary owner had fondly attempted, on more than one occasion, to conceal with Japanese screen-paper'. Wind, raking the exposed cliff-top, howled through 'various well-designed chinks', rats chewed large holes through the floorboards. In the centre of the hut a low stove, 'most conveniently placed for tumbling over', emitted suffocating fumes which refused to go out of the appropriate pipe but hung heavy in air already turbid with cigar smoke.

'Home' being such a cheerless place and the demands on their martial skills being few, the men of the XXth devoted much of their energy to wasting time in the pleasantest possible manner. They drank large quantities of 'b & s', ran billiard competitions, strolled down to meet the sailors at the United Services Club on the Bund and listened to the regimental band on Sunday afternoons. But above all the soldiers practiced what Jephson calls 'that exercise in the field which gives a clear healthy tone to body and mind, and preserves the keen sense of enjoyment that English blood and breeding teaches us to find in the exciting pastime of the chase', in other words – fox-hunting."

(In fact Jephson was Anglo-Irish and his father was a magistrate on the Caribbean island of Grenada. But he had an English publisher.)

"Before the barbarians came the fox had been an animal of considerable standing in Japan. Foxes were messengers and guardians of the local Inari shrines and the fox-images that guarded the shrine-gates held keys in their mouths to symbolise their right of protection over the rice stores. Fox masks were popular at festivals and many were the legends of the fox who assumed the shape of a beautiful woman and married the man who had saved it from death while it was in its animal shape. Usually the marriage was a happy one, for the fox had a dignified and devoted spirit.

The men of the XXth bought up all the tough local ponies, which were known as 'griffins', imported a seedy pack of hounds from Shanghai (kept alive by frequent doses of sulphur and castor oil) and took to the paddy-fields. Foxes were the main quarry, though, in the earlier days before the huntsman's horn became such a familiar sound, foreigners also slaughtered deer and wild boar. There were dawn hunts, with the riders coming to an early breakfast, 'all breeched and booted with revolvers in our belts', Jephson notes, and calling for a stiff whisky with the gammon and eggs; there were afternoon hunts which often finished at a country tea-house so that the hunters, tired of their four-legged prey, could chase the pretty waitresses round the *shoji* (screens); there were 'drag-hunts by moonlight' – jovial, rollicking expeditions when the 'lads', already roaring with wine and brandy, leaped from the mess-table into the saddle and went galloping and hallooing into the night, breaking down the irrigation ditches and trampling over the rice."

They also helped to start horse races there. "The 'Equine Deity', as Jephson fondly called it, was in ascendant, and the next best status-symbol to a race-winner was to harness one's pony to a brisk bright little trap and go clipping along the new road which ran round part of Mississippi Bay."

And then the rollicking and the boister came to an abrupt end with the killing of two soldiers of the XXth. Jephson with a fellow soldier, Elmhirst, wrote of their life there in *Our Life in Japan* which came out in 1869. Far more than the carefully worded reports and official documents it pointed up the immense gulf between Japanese and Western thinking …

*

July 9: Barbara Cartland

*

Kaz Cooke wrote, "(Barbara) Cartland professed herself appalled by the very idea of feminism. But she divorced, had her own career for seventy-four years, organised charity pageants and the first women's motor race in England, campaigned for nurses and mid-wives to be paid properly, allegedly sold more than 750 million copies of her books, ran a farm, and employed staff. (And delivered mail in an aeroplane-towed glider.)'

It is an odd thing but the people speaking out against feminism and independence are never little stay-at-home mice like me. They are always strong-minded independent women out there in the public sphere either extending women's realm themselves or taking advantage of the wider opportunities other women have struggled for. So who do they think they are speaking for—or about?

*

July 10: E. C. Bentley

*

The Art of Biography
Is different from Geography.
Geography is about Maps,
But Biography is about Chaps.

So wrote Edmund Clerihew Bentley (1875 – 1956) in the odd little poetic form which now bears his name, the 'clerihew'. *The Princeton Handbook of Poetic Terms* says a clerihew "consists of two couplets of unequal length often with complex or somewhat ridiculous rhymes and presents a potted biography of a famous personage or historical character. The humor consists in concentrating on the trivial, the fantastic, or the ridiculous and presenting it with dead-

pan solemnity as the characteristic, the significant, or the essential. Actually it celebrates the triumph of the *nonsequitur* and indirectly satirizes academic pedantry as well as amateur inconsequence in biographical research." The book gives his first clerihew as:

Sir Humphrey Davy
Detested gravy.
He lived in the odium
Of having discovered sodium.

Except for his famous whodunit *Trent's Last Case* he has been overshadowed by other Golden Age mystery writers (though his books are still very readable, I am just reading and enjoying *Trent Intervenes*, but I think he suffered by having a cool, calm, clever detective with no obvious quirks and foibles; he doesn't stay in the mind), though he was friends with most of the greats of his day, particularly G. K. Chesterton, and his son Nicholas Bentley was also somewhat overlooked as a mystery writer but a good solid practitioner of the genre, a talented cartoonist, and an occasional writer on more serious subjects.

I thought that Nicholas's words in his introduction to *Russell's Dispatches from the Crimea* should be engraved on every political and military mind:

'It is probable that in the diplomatic skirmishes that preceded the war as in most negotiations that precede war, a little more forbearance and heart-searching and less greed, stiff-necked pride and patriotic hysteria would have saved the day.'

In other words—a great many politicians, generals, and media moguls would be all the better for being lampooned in a clerihew.

*

July 11: Alexander Afanas'ev

*

Victor Terras in *A History of Russian Literature* says, "The methodology of literature and folklore studies followed the development of these disciplines in the West. The mythological school of the brothers Grimm found followers in F. I. Buslaev (1818 – 97) of Moscow University and A. N. Afanasyev (1826 – 71), a private scholar." Afanasyev's *Folktales* or *Narednye russkie skazki* which he put together between 1855 and 1864 was both popular and influential. The Russian Orthodox Church had frowned on folklore with its connection to a distant pagan past but such stories infiltrated every aspect of literature, and were a major source of ideas for writers such as Pushkin and Gogol, and after *Folktales* came out writers such as Tolstoy and Marina Tsvetaeva drew more directly.

The thing though which intrigued me was the idea that there were schools of folklorists. I had vaguely pictured keen amateurs listening to old market women or bearding rough peasants in their cottages or hearing old stories at their nurse's knee—until such times as anthropology as a discipline came on the scene and keen young university students with notebooks and tape recorders went out into the wilds.

But no.

The Mythological school sought cosmic truths in their collections, eternal verities at the heart of human experience. The Historical school sought to link the growth and development of folk stories to specific historical events, war and plague and natural disasters or more modest events in the life of a village or district. The Comparative school set out to track themes and plots across the variations of languages and dialects, of regions and countries, and ultimately to what was assumed to be their source. And then the Soviet school moved collecting away from its roots in the countryside into the towns and the experiences of the proletarian storytellers and enlisted it in the service of the class struggle. The new folkstories had to uplift and inspire and to contain within them vindication of the moral uprightness and strength in adversity of the masses.

But the most influential of twentieth century Russian folklorists, Vladimir Propp (1895 – 1970), effectively took it full circle back to the enduring impact of myth and epic. Rather than

simply collecting he deconstructed the stories in his *Morphology of the Folktale* and found that they all shared, no matter what school had collected and published them, the same essential structure.

As I was thinking on Afanas'ev I came upon a book on a stall called *Words of Wisdom: Russian Folk Tales from Alexander Afanasiev's Collection*. I felt that they probably lost in atmosphere by being translated and re-written. But they contain the staples: enchanted princesses, both canny and foolish peasants, ravening wolves, lucky soldiers, magic seeds. Some of them show close affinity with Western tales (those wicked stepmothers!), others introduce a more Russian element (such as the importance of icons), while others are harder to place in the strong teaching strain of the moral precept in the tale. I think I felt a little disappointed. I wanted them to be more different, more Russian, stranger …

*

July 12: Henry David Thoreau

*

I came upon this comment on Thoreau's pond at Walden: "The first time I saw Walden Pond, I was surprised by its size. Such a great and far-reaching piece of literature was spawned by such a tiny body of water. In my Iowa high school imagination all things eastward had to be better and wetter, but when a college friend took me to Thoreau's sanctuary for the first time, I was astounded by its ordinariness. Of course, then I realized that was exactly the point." (Mary Swander in *Out of This World: A Woman's Life Among the Amish*.) But I never doubted that the pond was small. The very word implies a small circle of water, something you might incorporate in your garden. Thoreau's book of essays of contemplation, *Walden*, has been described as "one of the seminal books in American environmental literature". (Neil Astley). And in it Thoreau describes his pond: "It is a clear and deep green well, half a mile long and a mile and three quarters in circumference, and contains about sixty-one and a half acres; a perennial spring in the midst of pine and oak woods, without any visible inlet or outlet except by the clouds and evaporation." I was actually surprised by how *big* it was …

Because it is the one book that gets quoted in connection with Thoreau I was under the vague impression that it was all he wrote, apart from a few letters and articles. But not so. The other day my friend Tom Errey sent me Thoreau's *Civil Disobedience and Other Essays*.

"Let us not forget that it was Thoreau who taught us about the true meaning of civil disobedience, and his lessons were an inspiration to Gandhi. It was Thoreau who made this seminal statement: "If the machine of government is of such a nature that it requires you to be the agent of injustice to another, then, I say, break the law." When he refused to pay a tax to, or recognize the authority of the state, "which buys and sells men, women, and children, like cattle, at the door of its senate-house," he was arrested and thrown in jail. When his friend Ralph Waldo Emerson came to visit him, Emerson reportedly asked, "Henry, what are you doing in there?" to which Thoreau responded with dignified indignance, "Waldo, the question is what are you doing out there?"

from *Why the Christian Right is Wrong* by Robin Meyers.

His essays *do* revolve around slavery, the environment, and good governance but occasionally he mentions other topical issues such as the war against Mexico. "Practically speaking, the opponents to a reform in Massachusetts are not a hundred thousand politicians at the South, but a hundred thousand merchants and farmers here, who are more interested in commerce and agriculture than they are in humanity, and are not prepared to do justice to the slave and to Mexico, *cost what it may*. … There are thousands who are *in opinion* opposed to slavery and to the war, who yet in effect do nothing to put an end to them; who, esteeming themselves children of Washington and Franklin, sit down with their hands in their pockets, and say that they know not what to do, and do nothing; who even postpone the question of freedom to the question of free-trade, and quietly read the prices-current along with the latest advices from Mexico, after dinner, and, it may be, fall asleep over them both."

*

July 13: Louis Harlan

*

You haven't heard of Louis Harlan? Neither had I until very recently. And he has only one claim to literary fame. He took as his subject for his range of writings the life and work of Booker T. Washington. You haven't heard of Booker T. Washington? Louis Harlan to the rescue! He edited Booker T. Washington's Papers—in 14 volumes—he wrote books like *Booker T. Washington in Perspective* (1988), in fact he made Booker T. the centerpiece of his academic career.

As you may not want to tackle 14 volumes here is Booker T. Washington in a paragraph: He was born in a slave hut in 1856 and went at nine to work in a salt furnace, then in a coal mine, but he got work as a janitor so he could pay to get some schooling. In 1881 he was asked to run a small school for blacks at Tuskagee which had two small buildings without equipment and virtually no money. By the time he died in 1915 'his' school had a hundred well-equipped buildings, 1,500 students, and nearly two hundred teachers. But the controversy he has since aroused is to do with his belief that, more important than civil rights, was for ex-slaves and the children of slaves to gain education, skills, qualifications, and the confidence and income those skills would bring. In a way he was right; the Civil Rights Movement was led by educated men like Martin Luther King. His autobiography *Up from Slavery* came out in 1901; he might equally have called it *My Struggle* because he continued to face discrimination and racism throughout his life.

*

July 14: Woody Guthrie

*

"Late in 1968 Alice's Restaurant bookshop opened in Greville Street Prahran. Monash graduate and radical activist Jill Jolliffe ran the shop which stocked a range of literature including American New Left and Trotskyist material unavailable elsewhere. Alice's Restaurant was closely associated with the Monash Labour Club and its off-campus centre, 'The Bakery', which was situated next door. Despite Jolliffe's efforts the little shop declined and closed in January 1970." So wrote John Sendy in *Melbourne's Radical Bookshops*.

I have put virtually all my old LPs from the late 1960s and 1970s—Jimi Hendrix, Eric Burdon, The Doors, The Lovin' Spoonful, Janis Joplin, Jethro Tull and more—on stalls to help East Timor. But I have retained one. Arlo Guthrie's 'Alice's Restaurant'. I loved the song and the movie. They had a strong anti-war message but they also contained, I think, some of the gentle fun with its tinge of irony which I still associate with Flower Power and that era.

Jill Jolliffe is now indelibly associated with East Timor; for her book *East Timor: Nationalism or Colonialism*, and for her brave visit there to try and uncover the truth about Balibo and her resulting book *Cover-up*. But when I came upon that little piece about the bookshop I found myself wondering: what is Arlo Guthrie doing now?

*

Arlo had an even more famous father, novelist and song-writer Woody Guthrie author of 'The Dust Bowl Ballads' and the folk song 'This Land Is Your Land' and much else. On his guitar he had the message 'This machine kills fascists'. But Woody Guthrie suffered and died from Huntington's chorea, spending the last 15 years of his life in hospital, and his son also suffered from poor health. Was Woody a nickname, I wondered—but no, his name was Woodrow Wilson Guthrie. He was one of the 'dust bowl children', the farmers who destroyed their topsoil and moved away from Oklahoma—which seems to give an added poignancy to his songs about the land. And Arlo? He partially retired from the music world because of his health and bought a little place in Massachusetts but still does occasional recordings and benefit concerts including raising money for the sufferers of Huntington's chorea.

*

July 15: Clement Clarke Moore

*

It is not given to most of us to write a poem which gains immortality in the way that—

'Twas the night before Christmas, when all through the house

Not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse;
The stockings were hung by the chimney with care,
In hopes that St. Nicholas soon would be there;
The children were nestled all snug in their beds,
While visions of sugar-plums danced in their heads;
And mamma in her 'kerchief, and I in my cap,
Had just settled our brains for a long winter's nap—
When out on the lawn there arose such a clatter,
I sprang from my bed to see what was the matter.
Away to the window I flew like a flash,
Tore open the shutters, and threw up the sash.
The moon, on the breast of the new-fallen snow,
Gave the lustre of midday to objects below;
When, what to my wondering eyes should appear,
But a miniature sleigh and eight tiny reindeer,
With a little old driver, so lively and quick,
I knew in a moment it must be St. Nick …. Etc …

—captured the imagination of generations of children, of anthologists and Christmas card makers and illustrators—

But what else did Clement Clarke Moore write—if anything? In fact it isn't absolutely certain that he even wrote his famous 'An Account of a Visit from St Nicholas', said to have been written for his children in 1822 and published anonymously the following year. He was an American professor of Greek and Oriental studies and wrote a little poetry in his spare time. But other people who also wrote a little poetry in their spare time have been put forward as alternative authors, such as a Henry Livingston Jr. It doesn't really matter now. Yet a poem for children suggests that those Moore children would have carried it on and remembered and shared it with their children. I am quite willing to believe in his authorship.

And the poem has another connection. Mark Barber writes in *Urban Legends*, "In 1823, Clement C. Moore wrote a poem for his children titled 'A Visit From St. Nicholas'. The poem was later published, and included the now legendary picture of Santa Claus by Thomas Nast. The poem and the picture combined are probably one of the most prominent factors in forming the modern-day Santa Claus."

*

July 16: Anita Brookner

*

In 1988 when I published *The Vigil* a friend rang me to say it reminded him of a novel called *Hotel du Lac* by Anita Brookner. I had never heard of book or author but I had a horrible moment of wondering if perhaps I had unwittingly written a book which might suggest I had plagiarised someone else's work. Naturally, I went out and tracked down a copy of *Hotel du Lac*. But as I began on it I couldn't find anything similar. Story, setting, characters … everything seemed quite different. There was a sense of relief in that. But as I continued reading I realised there *was* a similarity. It was much more subtle. A tone perhaps. The kind of people I had chosen to write about. A sense of people adrift and looking for love …

I tried various other Anita Brookner's as I came upon them. But although I quite liked *Hotel du Lac* I've never read anything else of hers that I've really liked. Her style is rather prissy and pedantic. Her characters rarely interest me. She has a character say, in *Altered States*, 'I am stolid and prudent and slightly behind the times, ill-equipped for subtlety or light-heartedness, and yet I know that I am capable of passion.' It seemed to sum up so many of her characters. Perhaps it also says something about her as a person and a writer. But the awkward corollary seems to be: if her writing and my writing have similarities—does it also say something about me? And as she is published and quite successful perhaps I lack the quality in there that has raised her above the mass.

But the only quality in there that the world of readers is probably looking for is—passion. Maybe I lack a sense of simmering underground passion, the something that makes a novel more than a bald recital of facts, an enticement that keeps people reading in hopes of a surprising even heart-stopping denouement. The thought intrigues me …

*

July 17: Erle Stanley Gardner

*

Gardner, pulp fiction writer, busy lawyer, creator of Perry Mason, also surprisingly wrote travel books. And the place which fascinated him was that long slim peninsula which is and isn't part of Mexico called Baja California. I have been reading his *The Hidden Heart of Baja*. As an insight into Gardner it is interesting. As a travel book it isn't very cohesive as he flies in, here and there, and flies out again. It doesn't have a sense of going from A to B to C … but filled with little asides and moments of discovery.

— 'The weird cirio tree is indigenous to Baja California and to a very thin strip along the mainland across the Gulf. This tree looks like a huge inverted parsnip. At times it grows straight. At times it bends over like the trunk of an elephant. At times it doubles back on itself, or the top may explode into a pattern which has no rhyme or reason and seems to be the result of arboreal hysteria.'

— 'One can drink almost unlimited quantities of water and feel waterlogged but thirsty, while the liquid from a big can of tomatoes will make one feel refreshed and satisfy the craving for liquids.'

— 'It is heartbreaking to see a coyote trying to outrun an airplane, with no place to hide, running his heart out in competition with a mechanical monster that is tireless. And of course few nature lovers like to contemplate the agony of a mortally wounded or crippled animal that is left to die. Yet the "sport" continues.'

— 'If you really want to know how people are living, look at their dogs.

If the dogs are thin and hungry, apologetically slinking around, and showing signs of having been kicked and starved, you can rest assured the economy of the village is poor and the disposition of the people irritable.

When a dog seems to be assured of his position in life, regards his master with affection and respect, and sits down to size up any new situation along with his master, you can take it for granted that his master is trustworthy, good-natured, tolerant and reasonably prosperous.'

— 'What is this thing we call instinct?

In a wild, isolated country I have watched a dove flutter off her nest and move helplessly along the ground dragging one wing as though it had been broken, inviting pursuit, keeping just far enough ahead of the pursuer so that he can't quite catch up. Then, when she has lured him far from the nest, she suddenly takes off with two perfectly healthy wings.

The chances that this dove had ever seen another bird with a broken wing are negligible.

How does she know that the wing is composed of a bony structure, that this bony structure can be broken, and that when this bony structure is once broken, the wing can't be moved? How does she know enough to simulate the actions of a bird with a broken wing so perfectly, that I, who have actually seen birds with broken wings, can detect nothing wrong with the performance?

We say it is instinct, but what is instinct?'

— 'We also wanted to explore Scammon's Lagoon by helicopter and to take a swing up and down the beach on the island between Scammon's Lagoon and Black Warrior.

This is the beach I described in my book *Hovering Over Baja*. It is a catchall for all types of driftage from all over the world, a veritable dry Sargasso Sea.

It is here that a branch of one of the main ocean currents is trapped into the vast semicircular hook of land at Malarrimo. Flotsam which has been drifting for months or years is washed ashore here, and there are all sorts of objects reminiscent of various activities on the other side of the world.

Here are the glass balls used by fishermen in Russia and Japan to hold up their fish nets, balls which may have broken loose when the net was torn or destroyed and have spent months or perhaps years bobbing across the Pacific.

Here are parts of Japanese airplanes destroyed during the war and which were capable of floating. Here are unexploded sections of depth bombs which somehow came to the surface. Thousands upon thousands of burnt-out light globes which have from time to time been tossed overboard from steamships, old bottles, many of them turned to deep purple by the rays of the sun, some of them containing messages. … There are all sorts of objects in the form of driftwood, bits of wreckage, cork sandals, wood containing characters in Japanese or Chinese which has drifted over from the Orient, oars, and a surprising number of basketballs of the type used for exercise on shipboard, which have been lost overboard and in due course of time have been deposited on this beach of treasure trove.'

The two aspects of human life on Baja which seem to have interested him most were the paintings in ancient caves in the Vizcaino Desert and the evidence of historical gold mining.

— 'By word of mouth and by Indian runner, the word spread like wildfire throughout the country. Gold was the magnet that lured the Spaniards into the country. Gold was the force that caused them to make the Indians work like slaves.

The answer was simple. Get rid of the gold.

Gold was considered desirable by the Indians, but they were not greedy for it. They could very well get along without it. It had no practical use as far as they were concerned. They did very definitely want to get along without being enslaved by the Spaniards.

So all the gold the Indians had mined was gathered and secreted. All the fabulously rich mines, from which the supply of gold that poured into Mexico had been taken, were closed up so cunningly that Spaniards surveying the country would never dream there was a mine behind what apparently was the dirt face of a cliff.

This legend is so widespread, is so thoroughly logical, that it probably is founded upon truth. Yet it is surprising that only a few of these walled-up mines have been discovered, and those that have been discovered are more or less shrouded in mystery; partially perhaps because legend has it that there were tons of gold piled up behind the walled-up entrances, in addition to the fabulously rich veins of ore.'

— 'Above us was the cave, its long sloping sides covered with significant paintings — paintings far different from the conventional petroglyphs which have been chiseled into the rocks in so many Western caves. Yet these paintings were so big and on such a huge scale that it was almost impossible to photograph them from the cave itself, whereas from the hillside below, the lip of the cave shut out much of the paintings.

The cave was about two hundred yards long and stretched back under the overhang for varying distances. There were two huge main groups of paintings and in between these were other scattered groups.

Apparently the paintings had been made at different times, perhaps by many different generations.

One painting would be superimposed upon another and then still a third painting on top of the other two. The earlier ones had faded but were still visible.

The colors of black and red predominated, and the paintings had a certain dynamic virility which somehow crashed home a message, even if we couldn't decipher the mystic significance of the symbols.

What we took to be the headman wore a peculiar three-pronged headdress whenever he appeared in the paintings, and this man was always faithfully depicted with his left side in black and his right side in red.'

More intriguing than a Perry Mason mystery?

*

July 18: Gilbert White

*

Adrienne Rich wrote a long poem she called ‘Your Native Land, Your Life’ and one segment is:

XXIII
Sixteen years ago I sat in this
northeast kingdom
reading Gilbert White’s *Natural History of Selborne* thinking
I can never know this land I walk upon
as that English priest knew his
—a comparable piece of earth—
rockledge soil insect bird weed tree

I will never know it so well because …

Because you have chosen
something else: to know other things
even the cities which
create of this a myth
Because you grew up in a castle of air
disjunctured
Because without a faith
you are faithful

The Reverend Gilbert White is remembered for his book *The Natural History of Selborne* which came out in 1789; it is seen as the beginning of the popularisation of natural history. Selborne is a small town in the English county of Hampshire and White was born there, went away for his education and ordination, and came back to be a curate there for most of his life. He didn’t set out to write a book. Rather his naturalist friends found his letters with their observations and insights of the natural world around him so interesting and helpful that they were eventually put together in book form.

He was a keen observer and he spices his observations with some interesting little anecdotes, such as the cat which reared a baby hare, the friendship between a horse and a hen, the day masses of cobwebs came floating down from the sky, but the modern reader, speaking for myself, cannot help being dismayed by the level of casual destruction. Heaths are set on fire and left to burn. Rabbit populations are wiped out. Forests are cut down. And birds and mammals are constantly being shot, chased, harried, trapped. If an unusual migratory bird should happen to show up it is immediately shot. And others are mere ‘collateral damage’ “So the ravens built on, nest upon nest, in perfect security, till the fatal day arrived in which the wood was to be levelled. It was in the month of *February*, when those birds usually sit. The saw was applied to the butt, the wedges were inserted into the opening, the woods echoed to the heavy blows of the beetle or mallet, the tree nodded to its fall; but still the dam sat on. At last, when it gave way, the bird was flung from her nest; and, though her parental affection deserved a better fate, was whipped down by the twigs, which brought her dead to the ground.”

In fact he gives the larger part of his writing over to birds yet apart from his fame as an observer and chronicler his name is forever linked with the harvest mouse as he appears to have been the first person to recognise it as a separate species to the common house mouse. He writes in 1767 “I have procured some of the mice mentioned in my former letters, a young one and a female with young, both of which I have preserved in brandy. From the colour, shape, size, and manner of nesting, I make no doubt but that the species is non-descript. They are much smaller, and more slender, than the *mus domesticus medius* [common house mouse] of *Ray;* and have more of the

squirrel or dormouse colour; their belly is white; a straight line along their sides divides the shades of their back and belly. They never enter into houses; are carried into ricks and barns; with the sheaves; abound in harvest, and build their nests amidst the straws of the corn above the ground, and sometimes in thistles. They breed as many as eight at a litter, in a little round nest composed of the blades of grass or wheat.

"One of these nests I procured this autumn, most artificially platted, and composed of the blades of wheat; perfectly round, and about the size of a cricket-ball; with the aperture so ingeniously closed, that there was no discovering to what part it belonged. It was so compact and well filled, that it would roll across the table without being discomposed, though it contained eight little mice that were naked and blind. As this nest was perfectly full, how could the dam come at her litter respectively so as to administer a teat to each? perhaps she opens different places for that purpose, adjusting them again when the business is over: but she could not possibly be contained herself in the ball with her young, which moreover would be daily increasing in bulk. This wonderful procreant cradle, an elegant instance of the efforts of instinct, was found in a wheat-field suspended in the head of a thistle."

I cannot help thinking that White loved his little piece of England, that it was more than home and work. But Adrienne Rich appears to be suggesting that that kind of limited but loving attachment to a place is no longer possible. Too much pulls us away, undermines and undercuts our attachments to place. We may profess a deep love for a particular place, we may believe we have a deep spiritual link to a place, but it is rarely enough to keep us there from birth to death. Elsewhere in the poem she writes:

XV
It's an oldfashioned, an outrageous thing
to believe one has a "destiny"

—a thought often peculiar to those
who possess privilege—

but there is something else: the faith
of those despised and endangered

that these are not merely the sum
of damages done to them:

have kept beyond violence the knowledge
arranged in patterns like kente-cloth

unexpected as in batik
recurrent as bitter herbs and unleavened bread

of being a connective link
in a long continuous way

of ordering hunger, weather, death, desire
and the nearness of chaos.

*

July 19: Edgar Snow

*

James MacManus in his biography *Ocean Devil* of young English teacher and traveler and foreign correspondent in China, James Hogg, mentions Edgar Snow and his wife Peg who also wrote of Mao's China in *Inside Red China* (1939). Hogg took a group of schoolboys on a long trek

into Inner Mongolia to escape both the brutal war Japan waged over China for more than a decade, and the exactions of Chiang Kai-Shek.

"One did not have to be a communist in China in the 1930s, nor indeed to share the utopian idealism of Edgar Snow and his wife Peg, to see the appeal of the political model being developed by Mao and his party. His international image and his attraction to the foreign press had been hugely helped by the publication in 1936 of Snow's *Red Star Over China* — a book that had been pressed upon George Hogg by Agnes Smedley at their first meeting, and which was seminal in shaping American opinion about Mao and his communist guerillas, at least among the liberal intelligentsia.

"The communist leadership went to great lengths to secure the result they wanted — a book which promoted the CCP as a dynamic indigenous force, a Communist Party with austere principles and a dedication to the well-being of the broad mass of the people and to the fight against the Japanese. The series of interviews that Mao gave the Snows at Yenan was rigorously orchestrated. Questions were submitted in advance, and answers carefully prepared. Mao and his advisers demanded and were given sight of the draft text of the book, and asked for changes to which Snow readily agreed. There is no question that the communists manipulated Snow. But he submitted to the restrictions imposed upon him in order to gain unprecedented access to a man who was a mystery to the outside world. *Red Star Over China* was a propaganda triumph for Mao, but it was also the first book to illuminate the background, the personal history and the thinking of the man who would emerge as China's first modern leader."

All books, essays, interviews, contain bias. It's hard to see how it might be avoided. And provided you're given the means to understand its influence I don't really have a problem with it. The real issue is: does obvious bias make for a good book, as opposed to a useful book, and the answer is 'Rarely'. *Red Star Over China* is pretty heavy going.

The Communists were as willing to be brutal as Chiang Kai-Shek's Nationalists but were not as corrupt initially. But no amount of reading *Red Star Over China* was really going to change views where they mattered. China would have to wait till the 1970s to have a seat in the United Nations. And the question which comes to me now is: what would have happened if Chiang Kai-Shek had won out? Would he have invaded Tibet? Would it have been Mao who fled to Taiwan? Could Chiang have ever had the means or the will to suppress warlordism? Would Western businesses have rushed equally happily to do business in China despite the level of corruption? And what of the ordinary Chinese people …

*

July 20: Louisa Anne Meredith

*

My son won a night at a bed and breakfast place at Buckland as a Lucky Door Prize at a concert but couldn't take it up as he was going back to Melbourne. So I looked round for someone else who would like it. Eventually a friend's daughter and son-in-law went for the weekend and had a wonderful time and when my friend was telling me about it, the lovely dinner, the pleasant walks, she said "And they had first editions of Louisa Anne Meredith in their library". I was glad the prize had ended up with someone who would appreciate this odd little extra. Though when I came to think about, although I was familiar with Meredith as a painter and embroiderer, I realised I didn't know what those first editions could be.

So I have been browsing in *Louisa Anne Meredith: A Tigress in Exile* by Vivienne Rae Ellis. She writes, "It was here (47 Newhall Street, Birmingham) on 20 July 1812 that Louisa Anne Twamley, at the age of forty-three, presented her 55-year-old husband with their only child. To the confusion of all subsequent researchers she named the child after herself.

"Thus Louisa Anne Meredith became, on her marriage, Louisa Anne Twamley, who gave birth to a daughter, Louisa Anne Twamley, who in turn became on *her* marriage, Louisa Anne Meredith."

Mrs Twamley's brother George Meredith had emigrated to Tasmania in 1820 and asked the young Louisa to come out to work for him as the family's governess. She was starting to have some success as a writer and illustrator—"She had established herself as a competent painter of portraits in miniature and supported herself in this manner for a number of years"—so she turned down her uncle's offer. But his son Charles returned to England, fell in love with Louisa, his first cousin, and persuaded her to marry him and come to Tasmania.

"Louisa was in a way more fortunate than many of the other female passengers. She had a monumental curiosity concerning all that she saw. She had a well-developed interest in natural science, she was an acute observer of human behaviour at all levels, and she had the ability to record both literally and artistically everything she saw. From the moment she landed on Australian soil she chronicled detailed observations and so contributed a wealth of information to Australian history. This ability was a twofold blessing for it not only enabled her to continue her literary career in her new country but also allowed her to escape, to a certain extent, the overwhelming feeling of despair, loneliness and inability to come to terms with the new environment that beset so many women on their arrival in Australia."

Charles was not very successful as a sheep grazier, either on the mainland or in Tasmania, but Louisa was successful with her writing, poems, fiction, but most importantly her illustrated books of the natural world around her. Her beautiful illustrations for *Bush Friends in Tasmania* and *Some of My Bush Friends* turn up regularly as reproductions on cards. She also took an interest in the public and political life of 19th century Tasmania, founding the first local branch of what became the RSPCA. But she showed no sign of any empathy or understanding of the indigenous people, apparently seeing them only as a curiosity; "surely the very lowest creatures in human form. Their countenances as shown by the excellent photographs of the last four, made at my suggestion for the Melbourne Exhibition many years ago, bore a curiously close resemblance to pug-dogs", and no indication that she was a small part of the process of dispossession and destruction.

The delicacy of her first popular poem, 'The Blue Harebell', which begins:

Have ye ever heard, in the twilight dim,
A low, soft strain,
That ye fancied a distant vesper-hymn,
Borne o'er the plain
By the zephyrs that rise on perfumed wing,
When the sun's last glances are glimmering?

Have ye heard that music with cadence sweet,
And merry peal,
Ring out like echoes of fairy feet,
O'er flowers that steal?
And *did* ye deem that each trembling tone
Was the distant vesper-chime alone?

The source of that whispering strain I'll tell,
For I've listened oft
To the music faint of the blue Harebell,
In the gloaming soft:—
'Tis the gay fairy folk that peal who ring,
At even time for their banqueting.

The whimsy of her early writing gave way to an acerbic and down-to-earth tone in her later writing. But then I don't think Australia is very good at nurturing whimsy … and perhaps the owners of those first editions of her books with their close observations of Tasmanian flora and fauna are thankful for that …

*

July 21: Hart Crane

*

I was about to pick up a book from a stall, then thought to myself 'I don't particularly like Sylvia Townsend-Warner'—but then I realised it was by Sylvia *Ashton*-Warner … so I brought it home to read and quite liked it. (It is about a teacher in New Zealand who has a number of Maori pupils …) I do get both authors' names and book titles mixed up at times. Three which regularly confuse me are the American trio: Stephen Crane, Hart Crane, and Bret Harte.

There probably isn't a name which doesn't have a companion. There is, or was, a lecturer in Launceston by the name of Virginia Woolf. I have recently been reading American novelist Winston Churchill's novel *Richard Carvel*. I was always intrigued when I saw on the court lists young miscreants by the name of Coleridge and Wordsworth. So what of this trio?

Stephen Crane's famous novel is *The Red Badge of Courage*. The raw young recruit Henry is referred to as 'the youth' throughout the novel and R. W. Stallman wrote of it "*The Red Badge of Courage*, appearing at a time when the war was still treated primarily as a subject for romance, was the first unromantic novel of the Civil War to attain widespread popularity." The odd thing was that Crane had no experience of war when he wrote it—but after it became popular he was treated as an expert and asked to cover various other wars such as the Spanish-American War in Cuba …

Bret Harte was a popular nineteenth century writer of short stories set in the American West and the goldfields of California, sometimes mentioned alongside Mark Twain, although his stories tended to be more contrived in their plots to suit the newspapers and magazines which wanted 'a twist in the tail'.

And Hart Crane was a twentieth century poet. He lived a disorderly, dissipated, alcoholic, gay (in both senses of the word) life and committed suicide when he was only thirty-two. And, perhaps understandably, critics and readers have had mixed feelings about his poetic legacy. Was he a great poet? Was he a mediocre poet with flashes of brilliance? Was he a young poet of great potential? The jury remains out. And as he gets less and less space for his poems, for critical writings about his poems, the question may end up simply fading away. But before he disappears here is a little taste …

'To Emily Dickinson'

You who desired so much — in vain to ask —
Yet fed your hunger like an endless task,
Dared dignify the labor, bless the quest —
Achieved that stillness ultimately best,

Being of all, least sought for: Emily, hear!
O sweet, dead Silencer, most suddenly clear
When singing that Eternity possessed
And plundered momently in every breast;

— Truly no flower yet withers in your hand,
The harvest you descried and understand
Needs more than wit to gather, love to bind.
Some reconcilement of remotest mind —

Leaves Ormus rubyless, and Ophir chill.
Else tears heap all within one clay-cold hill.

*

July 22: Words and Pictures …

*

"Because the term "child pornography" is so current in American, Canadian and other court systems and in the media, it is regrettably but unavoidably used at times in this book as well. As we

shall see, many investigators in this field prefer the phrase "child abuse images" or "child exploitation material." They insist that the term "child pornography"—and the even more demeaning phrase "kiddie porn"—is a contradiction, since pornography is usually defined as sexually explicit material featuring consenting adults. But children are neither adults nor can they give legal consent. To label these pictures "pornography" is to suggest they are like "adult pornography," but with an age difference. Nothing could be further from the truth. In most adult pornography—at least in professional productions—the participants are paid, and consumers make a moral or esthetic choice to enjoy it or not. Child abuse images are the evidence of the torture and mistreatment of society's most defenceless members, and the images cannot be justified by any claim to individual preference or morality."

Julian Sher in *One Child at a Time: Inside the Fight to Rescue Children from Online Predators.*

*

July 23: Demos Shakirian (d)

*

Demos Shakirian's parents left the little village of Kara Kala near Mt Ararat to find safety in the United States and eventually prosperity there in a father and son dairy operation. At first glance he seems an unusual person to found something like the Full Gospel Business Men's Fellowship but Demos had been brought up in the Armenian Pentecostal Church and saw himself simply following a Spirit-guided journey. It is a religious world *rather* different to being a Quaker in Hobart but I found him an inspiring and at times remarkable person …

John and Elizabeth Sherrill recorded Shakirian's story in *The Happiest People on Earth* and he tells this curious little story: "It was in Cuba after Castro had come to power, and our little group was staying at the former Havana Hilton, now renamed the *Cuba Libre*. Castro had made the hotel his headquarters, and the place bristled with armed soldiers, but we never caught a glimpse of the leader himself. Then one morning around two A.M. as I was climbing into bed, I suddenly knew that if I were to get dressed and take the elevator down to the restaurant, I would come face to face with Fidel Castro. I'd had too much experience with the Spirit by now to question such inexplicable bits of knowledge, so as quietly as I could I got back into my clothes.

Rose opened her eyes. "Where are you going?"

"Downstairs to meet Castro."

Rose, too, was used to this kind of nudging from the Spirit. "That's nice," she said sleepily.

Down in the restaurant the only customers were a group of very young soldiers – fifteen- and sixteen-year-olds I guessed – sitting at the counter drinking orange juice. A few years earlier, the waiter told me, the place would have been jammed at this hour. "North Americans," he said wistfully. "From the casino." He gestured upward toward the now-deserted gambling rooms on the mezzanine. "They didn't care what they spent."

He wrote down my order for one dish of ice cream and went off to the kitchen with a sigh. When he came back with it, he lingered by the table, seeming glad of the chance to talk. Cuban Spanish was different from the Mexican variety I'd been raised on, but we had no trouble understanding each other.

"When Premier Castro comes in tonight," I said, "will you tell him I'm a dairyman from California, and I'd like to talk to him?"

"Tonight?" the waiter echoed. "He won't be here tonight? He never comes in this late."

I finished the ice cream. "Tonight he will."

The waiter stared at me. "Someone told you he was coming here?"

I thought about that a minute. "Yes," I agreed, "Someone told me."

The man shook his head. "Impossible," he said. "He never comes in after ten o'clock."

And sure enough, it began to seem that the waiter was right. Another five minutes passed. Ten. The young soldiers left. I picked up my check and went to the cash register. The cashier was counting out my change, when there was a clomping of booted feet in the corridor. Through the

door came eighteen or twenty black-bearded men in olive-green uniforms, some carrying rifles, others American-made machine guns. In the centre of the group was Fidel Castro.

Castro sat at a table and ordered a steak while the body-guard stationed themselves around the room and – having no one else to look at – looked at me. I saw the waiter bend down and speak to Castro. He, too, looked at me for a moment, then with a finger he motioned me to join him.

I sat down at his right, conscious of gun muzzles following me across the room. Castro asked a number of questions about dairying in California, and seemed disappointed when I would not let him buy me a steak. "When I come to visit you," he said, "I will drink a gallon of milk."

All over the room the bearded men burst out laughing. To my relief, the guns were lowered, several of them lit up cigarettes.

I had known the revolutionary leader only through his nonstop radio speeches; I was surprised to find him in person an attentive and careful listener. "And what brings you to Cuba?" he asked after a while.

I told him that a group of us had come here to get to know Cubans in our own fields of work, and tell them what the Holy Spirit was doing among people like themselves in other countries.

Again to my surprise, he seemed genuinely interested. He told me he'd once been in the hospital in Brownsville, Texas. "Every week there were two men on the television. One was Billy Graham and the other was Oral Roberts. I thought these were honest men and what they said were honest things."

We had talked for thirty-five minutes, when a very angry, very drunk North American appeared at the table. "Don't you people ever answer letters?" he demanded. "I've been waiting three months to hear from this so-called government!"

I couldn't follow much of what he said, but I gathered he was owner of a nightclub which had been closed by the revolutionary government. I was amazed at the man's daring in that roomful of soldiers, but he was apparently too wrapped up in his own troubles to notice them. "Your people are losing money too," he said. "Don't forget that! I was bringing good business down here!"

Castro's face had turned almost as grey-green as his uniform. "Good business?" he said. "Is that what you call it? Gambling and prostitutes? Was that all you people cared about in this country?"

I tried to catch the clubowner's eye. Surely no one could be so drunk or so self-absorbed that he could miss the cry in that question. *Did you ever care? Did you ever know us?*

But the guy was past hearing. "Don't give me the big moral line!" he said. "Cubans were making plenty off it. Why every time…."

Castro stood up, his dinner unfinished. He was halfway to the door the soldiers following him, when he turned around, came back, and held out his hand.

"I'm glad you came," he said. "I wish…."

The greyness was still in his face, and he did not complete the sentence. In a minute they had all gone, the nightclub owner following after them, still complaining, and I was alone at the table. I looked at my watch. Five past three.

I wish….

I wish more men from your country had come to Cuba to pray instead of to gamble?

What if they had, I wondered, as the elevator carried me back upstairs. What would the world be like today if the millions of travelling Americans had gone with God's love for the people they visited?

What if they went now….

From that night on this became my plea, everywhere I met with the Fellowship. Go! Tell the good news! Travel for God. Help to offset another kind of traveller the world sees too often."

*

July 24: Lord Dunsany

*

On your next trip to Ireland you may wish to visit Dunsany Castle, ancient home of the Plunkett family, and because: "The last Lord Dunsany who died in 1957 established a dual reputation as an author; he wrote witty sketches of London clubland and also bizarre dream-fantasy tales that influenced such American writers as H.P. Lovecraft."

(from *Ireland, the Rough Guide*)

He was once a staple in anthologies of Irish short stories, as well as more broadly in sporting anthologies and collections from the first half of the 20th century. But in my experience it was always the first kind of story which got anthologised. So I was curious: are any of his fantasies still around? The library came up with a lone representative, *Time amd the Gods*, which didn't particularly grip me.

But the other day a friend loaned me his novel *My Talks With Dean Spanley* as she wondered if it might be a suitable book to have in the Quaker library. The book is a delight. Dean Spanley, a rather proper and reticent clergyman, under the influence of several glasses of Imperial Tokay, appears to be remembering his first hand experiences as a dog in a past life. Is this proof of the transmigration of souls? The Dean apparently reliving his experiences as a dog is both very funny ('Traction-engines!' he said with evident loathing. 'I saw one scratching itself at the back of a haystack. I thoroughly barked at it.' And 'They can't turn round on you like rats. They are made for defence rather that for attack. Much smaller game is often more dangerous than traction-engines') and very wise ('Scent is never the same two days running. One might be able to follow after he had gone half an hour. But there is one thing that one should bear in mind, and that is that, if any of the Masters in their superb generosity should chance to give one cheese, one cannot, for some while after that, follow with any certainty.' And 'So I sniffed at the wheels to get news of what was going on in the world, and I left a message with all of them to say that I was quite well.') But can they, drinking glass for glass, push the Dean deeper into his world of dog memories? Could he explain the homing instinct? Or how dogs instinctively know when another dog has rabies? Or the deeper mysteries of scent? Or the fundamental mysteries of the soul in its travels? The Dean appears to lay bare these secrets—the only trouble is no one can remember what they were when they wake up with their hangovers. And then the Dean is promoted to Bishop and no longer drops in so regularly at the club.

"Wrather and I often dined together and, I trust, will often again. We feel like travellers who once, for a short while, have seen something very strange; and neither of us can remember what it was."

Dunsany was obviously intrigued by this idea of the transmigration of souls between animals and people because he went on to write another story using the same theme: *The Strange Journeys of Colonel Polders*. But I faced two intriguing problems: was the book a witty sketch of London clubland or a bizarre dream-fantasy tale and was it suitable for the Meeting House library? It seemed to be both; I could just *see* the Dean comfortably ensconced in his armchair with his dog collar and his glass in hand reminiscing of chasing rabbits and traction-engines and rolling in the heap beyond the stables and yet it also has a quality of otherworldliness to it … And as for the Quaker library and its fiction shelf …

Jorge Luis Borges said of Dunsany's autobiography, *Patches of Sunlight*, "In this disheveled and comfortable book, Lord Dunsany talks of watches and gazelles, swords and moons, angels and millionaires. In the whole universe there is only one thing of which he doesn't speak, and that is writers. There are two explanations for this staggering omission. The first (and the most petty) is that writers do not speak of him. The second (the more plausible) is that the writers of England may be as avoidable as those that adorn our city."

*

July 25: Keith Suter

*

Keith Suter's books are found in peace libraries, indeed in ordinary libraries, as he is seen as the moderate commentator on war—though I did hear him say once that we need people at the extremes because they challenge the complacent middle and sometimes we realise something isn't as radical as first thought might suggest. But the other day someone dropped some old peace books into me in the hope I could find uses for them. The box also contained stickers, leaflets, magazines, as well as books. And it did bring back memories.

In the box were several copies of Keith's book *The Forgotten Treaties* written with Allan McKnight. In case you are like me and immediately intrigued—what *are* these forgotten treaties?—I have been reading his book. And the title is somewhat misleading. The book looks at the various arms control agreements and treaties to try and prevent nuclear proliferation. And it brings home the message that although we have treaties to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons into space, into Antarctica, down on the seabed, tested in the atmosphere, there is an unwillingness to tackle the problem head on. The authors say (the book came out in 1983) "The world's stockpile of nuclear weapons is equivalent to 16,000 million tons of TNT. In World War II, three million tons of munitions were expended, and 40-50 million people died." We have crept forward since then but a number of countries remain outside the club with its restrictions and its inspectors, Israel, India, Pakistan, North Korea, possibly Iran and South Africa, and those within the club do not seem to know how to dismantle their ageing arsenal safely. It *does* raise questions about human intelligence.

They also say, "Disarmament negotiations are not new. In 201 BC, for example, the Roman-Carthage Treaty limited certain military forces, including the outlawing of the use of war elephants since, owing to their tendency to panic and run amok, these beasts were often more danger to the user than to the enemy. Even earlier, in 1100 BC, the Philistines forced a defeated Israel into accepting a treaty which limited Israel's use of iron-tipped spears. By contemporary standards these agreements were not 'disarmament' treaties but 'arms control' ones."

I would like to think common sense and humanity will eventually make the distinctions between controlling and disarming irrelevant. But I suspect it will be the running out of oil and the massive unpayable debts militaries run up which will do more to shape our future.

*

July 26: Aldous Huxley

*

Aldous Huxley said in his introduction to his *Stories, Essays, and Poems*: "In the present volume are assembled certain fragments of the books, the all too numerous books, which I have written because I wanted to, because the wolf was at the door and I had to, because the composition of them was a form of self-exploration and self-education, and because I had things to say which I wanted people to read. The writing of these books was a pleasant process. But when it comes to reading them, reading them, it may be five, it may be ten or even twenty years after the date of writing, the case, I find, is very different. Reading what one has written is a most melancholy business. For either one approves of what one's past self wrote; and then it is depressing to think how little progress one has made. Or else one disapproves; and then one is retrospectively ashamed at having been such a fool, so wrong-headed, so vulgar, so mean, perhaps, so complacent. What one loses on the swings one loses all over again on the roundabouts. No, decidedly, if any one is to read what an author has written, it had better not be himself."

Dorothy Sayers in *Gaudy Night* speaks of 'the day's next nuisance': "This was the revision of three of her books for a new edition. The re-reading of one's own works is usually a dismal matter; and when she had completed her task she felt thoroughly jaded and displeased with herself. The books were all right, as far as they went; as intellectual exercises, they were even brilliant. But there was something lacking about them; they read now to her as though they had been written with a mental reservation, a determination to keep her own opinions and personality out of view. She considered with distaste a clever and superficial discussion between two of the characters about married life. She could have made a much better thing of that, if she had not been afraid of giving

herself away. What hampered her was this sense of being in the middle of things, too close to things, pressed upon and bullied by reality."

I feel that re-reading things is like opening a small window on the past: what interested me in a particular moment, why did I choose particular names, what was going on in the world then. But there is also that disconcerting understanding that I can see much more clearly why publishers didn't want my books. They are adequate, they have their moments, but they lack anything which would lift them up above the pack, make them leap out of the slush pile …

And the disconcerting corollary to the me as writer is the me as reader: the vast majority of books I read are also only adequate and I find myself wondering why a publisher chose to select them from the waiting piles …

*

I had never thought of Huxley as a poet and I can see why now. If he had chosen poetry as his life work would we remember him? Probably not. Whereas *Brave New World* has become almost a cliché for a particular vision of the future. But here is the poem I liked best of his selection. See what you think.

THE CICADAS

Sightless, I breathe and touch; this night of pines
Is needly, resinous and rough with bark.
Through every crevice in the tangible dark
The moonlessness above it all but shines.

Limp hangs the leafy sky; never a breeze
Stirs, nor a foot in all this sleeping ground;
And there is silence underneath the trees—
The living silence of continuous sound.

For like inveterate remorse, like shrill
Delirium throbbing in the fevered brain,
An unseen people of cicadas fill
Night with their one harsh note, again, again.

Again, again, with what insensate zest!
What fury of persistence, hour by hour!
Filled with what devil that denies them rest,
Drunk with what source of pleasure and of power!

Life is their madness, life that all night long
Bids them to sing and sing, they know not why;
Mad cause and senseless burden of their song;
For life commands, and Life! is all their cry.

I hear them sing, who in the double night
Of clouds and branches fancied that I went
Through my own spirit's dark discouragement,
Deprived of inward as of outward sight:

Who, seeking, even as here in the wild wood,
A lamp to beckon through my tangled fate,
Found only darkness and, disconsolate,
Mourned the lost purpose and the vanished good.

Now in my empty heart the cricket's shout
Re-echoing denies and still denies
With stubborn folly all my learned doubt,
In madness more than I in reason wise.

Life, life! The word is magical. They sing,
And in my darkened soul the great sun shines;
My fancy blossoms with remembered spring,
And all my autumns ripen on the vines.

Life! and each knuckle of the fig-tree's pale
Dead skeleton breaks out with emerald fire.
Life! and the tulips blow, the nightingale
Calls back the rose, calls back the old desire:

And old desire that is for ever new,
Desire, life's earliest and latest birth,
Life's instrument to suffer and to do,
Springs with the roses from the teeming earth;

Desire that from the world's bright body strips
Deforming time and makes each kiss the first;
That gives to hearts, to satiated lips
The endless bounty of to-morrow's thirst.

Time passes, and the watery moonshine peers
Between the tree-trunks. But no outer light
Tempers the chances of our groping years,
No moon beyond our labyrinthine night.

Clueless we go; but I have heard thy voice,
Divine Unreason! harping in the leaves,
And grieve no more; for wisdom never grieves,
And thou hast taught me wisdom; I rejoice.

*

July 27: Vladimir Korolenko (I have also found him given the 27 August and the 15 July)

*

The biographical notes I have found for Korolenko present him as a short story writer, editor, journalist, a man powerfully moved by compassion for the poor and exploited (writing 'Let us never speak these words: 'Let us save ourselves and leave the weak to their destiny'), and he was working on his autobiography when he died in 1921—but not as a poet. In fact the *Reference Guide to Russian Literature*, edited by Neil Cornwell, makes no mention of his poetry. Yet this is the aspect which aroused my interest—when I came upon him in Rosa Luxemburg's writings on Russian literature.

"The great charm of Korolenko's poetic writing also constitutes its limitations. He lives wholly in the present, in the happenings, of the moment, in sensual impressions. His stories are like a bouquet of freshly gathered field flowers. But time is hard on their gay colors, their delicate fragrance. The Russia Korolenko describes no longer exists; it is the Russia of yesterday. The tender and poetic mood which envelops his land and his people is gone. A decade and a half ago it made room for the tragic and thunder-laden atmosphere of the Gorkys and their like, the screeching storm birds of the revolution. It was replaced in Korolenko himself by a new belligerency. In him,

as in Tolstoy, the social fighter triumphed in the end; the great fellow citizen succeeded the poet and dreamer. When in the eighties Tolstoy began to preach his moral gospel in a new literary form as folklore, Turgenev wrote letters imploring the wise man of Yasnaya Polyana in the name of the fatherland to turn back to the realm of pure art. The friends of Korolenko, too, grieved when he abandoned his fragrant poetry and threw himself eagerly into journalism. But the spirit of Russian literature, the feeling of social responsibility, proved to be stronger in this richly endowed poet than his love for nature, his longing for an unhampered life of wandering, and his poetic desires.

"Carried along by the rising revolutionary flood at the turn of the century, the poet in him was slowly silenced while he unsheathed his sword as a fighter for liberty, as the spiritual center of the opposition movement of the Russian intellectuals. *The History of a Contemporary*, published in his review, *The Russian Treasury*, is the last product of his genius, only half poetry but wholly the truth, like everything else in Korolenko's life."

I thought of hunting for something, anything, of his poetic writings then I thought I'd rather leave it as something mystical and mysterious, words and ideas inspired by the folklore and superstitions of his childhood, rather than something brought out into the hard critical light of day.

*

July 28: Gerard Manley Hopkins

*

CYNGHANEDD. "A scheme of sound correspondences peculiar to Welsh poetry, involving accentuation, alliteration and internal rhyme. Described by Gerard Manley Hopkins as "chimes," he admitted that they were a main influence on his own formal experiments." It sounds both complex and difficult to do. Though *The Princeton Handbook of Poetic Terms* (edited by Alex Preminger) does say "It is an art form capable of a very rich, melodious, highly wrought and subtle effect, extensively exploited by Welsh poets."

One day I noticed there was a Berlitz course available in the library for people wanting to learn Welsh. I did not rush to borrow it. Welsh seems to me to be one of the world's more difficult languages—which is probably why the English have poured scorn on it rather than struggle to learn it. The Lonely Planet Guide *Walking in Britain* says, "The language as it is spoken today, although later influenced by French and English seems to have been more or less fully developed by the 6th century, making it one of Europe's oldest languages." They go on to say, "Bishop Morgan's translation of the Bible into Welsh in 1588 is thought to have played an important part in keeping the language alive." It continued to decline right through until the twentieth century, not least because of English restrictions, but it is making a comeback. To which I can only say "Hurrah!"

Hopkins didn't write in Welsh but I like the image of Welsh exerting its influence on him. The curious thing is that although his poems such as 'Pied Beauty' continue to find a place in anthologies much of his poetry is hard-going and not very interesting. While I was staying in the house of two friends a couple of years ago I saw they had a book of Hopkins' collected poems and I looked forward to finding other little gems. To my surprise it was a struggle to get through the book. It wasn't that his style and his experiments were not worth exploring further. I just found his subject matter, or his treatment of it, rather dull. Yet when I went back to 'Pied Beauty' and 'God's Grandeur' they still wrought their magic …

*

July 29: Booth Tarkington

*

Dorothy Parker in a 1928 review of Booth Tarkington's novel *Claire Ambler* described her feelings; "It is, of course, written with finish and skill and a sense of leisured care. But its characters have extraordinarily few dimensions, even for Tarkington characters. It is the study of a girl, who wants to make men fall in love with her but doesn't want them to tell her about it, from the time she is eighteen until she reaches twenty-five. The first part of the book is perhaps the best, certainly the most amusing, for there Mr. Tarkington is dealing with adolescent love. And he has no equal at

setting down in exquisite words the comic manifestations of youthful love-agony, though never does he dare let his pen touch the agony itself. He is, I am afraid, too merciful a man for greatness."

Booth Tarkington was an extremely popular writer for young people in his day, and won the Pulitzer Prize twice, yet I have never met anyone of any age expressing a nostalgia for any of his books they may have read in adolescence. Legion are the people who mention Mark Twain, Louisa M. Alcott, L. M. Montgomery, Frances Hodgson Burnett, Norman Lindsay and more. But Booth Tarkington? An all-encompassing silence. So I have been trying to find something, anything, of his to read. And I came up with his short story 'The Terrible Shyness of Orvie Stone'.

Orvie like other small boys in stories unwittingly wreaks havoc by trying to leap from an upstairs balcony into a large punch bowl in a show of one-up-man-ship. Where the story parted company with other stories in the genre was that Orvie, his parents, and everyone else in the story seemed so unlikeable. Perhaps people felt a certain sympathy for Orvie but I find it hard to imagine them waiting eagerly for more or looking back on him with nostalgia. So it comes as a big surprise to learn that Tarkington was getting $5,000 for each Orvie story. Obviously he touched something in the American psyche …

*

July 30: Anon

*

An anonymous Irish verse, probably from the ninth century, goes:
Getting to Rome
is a great labour, little use.
The King you look for here
you won't find unless you bring Him.

This still resonates today. But it must have had a particular response in its time, played out as it was against the struggles of the Celtic churches to maintain a degree of autonomy against the power of the Roman church. From the Synod of Whitby which brought the Celtic churches into line with Rome on things like the date for Easter to the invasion of Ireland by Henry II in 1169 with the Pope's blessing the loose-knit structure of Celtic Catholicism was on the losing 'side'. It raises one of the profound 'what ifs' of history: would the history of Western Europe have been different if Rome could have countenanced a separate but friendly Celtic tradition, one more attuned to the natural world, more egalitarian, and with a federated rather than a centralised structure? Celtic Catholicism, so it seems now, is gone beyond recall. What many people in the British Isles are apparently looking for and recreating is a resurgence of pre-Christian druidism …

And there is a question beyond my question. Would Western Europe have been a less attractive and more warlike place if Christianity had never reached it?

Gerhard Szczesny wrote in *The Future of Unbelief*, "Though Christian peoples on the whole have probably been less barbarous than the peoples of non-Christian cultures, actually they are not too far behind in this respect. The total suffering inflicted by members of Western culture in their Christian capacity during the last two millennia in bloody wars and heretic persecutions very likely would not have been exceeded had Europe been non-Christian. And this is quite leaving aside crimes committed against the "heathen" throughout the world in Christianity's name. The claim that without Christianity life would have languished in moral degradation is completely lacking in conviction."

And Erasmus wrote in *The Instruction of a Christian Prince*, "If we are not moved by patriotism nor by world-calamity, at least let us respect the honour of the name Christian. What can we think the Turks and Saracens say of us, when for so many centuries they have seen no agreement between Christian Princes, no treaties capable of founding a lasting peace, no limit to blood-shed, and less tumult among the heathen than among those who, in accordance with Christ's teachings, profess perfect concord?"

*

July 31: *New Scientist*

*

Some back copies of the *New Scientist* came my way recently and I found all sorts of intriguing ideas, though many of them in esoteric areas which are not part of my little everyday concerns; but this one I'd come across in several different ways and thought it had a lot to recommend it.

"The ancient idea that fevers can be beneficial enjoyed a renaissance around a century ago, following an observation by a physician in Vienna. Julius Wagner-Jauregg noticed that some of his psychiatric patients improved after fever attacks. After failed attempts at inducing fever in patients using microbes, Wagner-Jauregg injected blood from a person with malaria into a patient with syphilis, which is caused by the bacterium *Treponema pallidum*. The patient developed a fever — and then began to recover from the syphilis. Trials with more patients showed that the technique could cure people of this potentially fatal disease if used quickly. In 1927 Wagner-Juaregg was awarded the Nobel prize for medicine.

"His success prompted further research into the benefits of artificially induced fevers. Hot baths, warm air, electric blankets and even high-frequency currents were used to raise the body temperatures to levels thought capable of killing pathogens — typically around 41°C. By the mid 1930s, doctors in the US had treated hundred(s) of patients in so-called Kettering Hypertherms — cabinets equipped with hot air blowers and temperature monitors. The results were impressive: just one 5-hour session in the devices seemed enough to bring syphilis under control, though permanent recovery typically required 50 hours or more.

"Even then, however, the potential dangers were recognised. Patients deemed unable to cope with the metabolic stress — such as those over 60, or with heart or kidney problems — were excluded. Yet with cure rates of up to 80 per cent, it is easy to see why one leading proponent of pyrotherapy in the 1930s hailed it as a "new and powerful weapon".

"Exactly how fevers helped remained a mystery. Yet by the late 1930s, the debate had been rendered academic by the emergence of wonder drugs that killed microbes directly. Those drugs were antibiotics. There was little mystery about either their action or their effectiveness, and they rapidly became the treatment of choice for infections, leaving pyrotherapy to diminish into a historical footnote."

New Scientist 31 July 2010.

As more and more bugs become resistant to drugs perhaps we can go back to cooking them instead?

*

August 1: Richard Henry Dana

*

There are roughly three kinds of sailing books. How hard it was in the old sailing ship days, climbing the rigging in howling gales and all the rest of it. Where we went on our yacht and how we nearly beat the record for … And more technical stuff such as *The Boating Bible.*

Richard Henry Dana's famous *Two Years Before the Mast* belongs in the first category. Joshua Slocum's famous *Sailing Alone Around the World* belongs in the second category. And the third is what you buy when you actually get serious about buying a yacht and sailing to Samoa …

Julie V. Watson in *Calling the Maritimes Home* had this to say about Slocum, "Joshua Slocum grew up in Westport, Brier Island, Nova Scotia, leaving home at 16 to sail on ocean-going square-riggers. Rising to captain, he survived shipwrecks, mutinies and sickness until the arrival of the steamship deprived him of a sailing command. Joshua set to work and completely rebuilt the hull of an old oyster boat to create the *Spray*. It was a large vessel for one man and possessed a legendary ability to hold a course, aided by a homemade self-steering mechanism. During his voyage, he converted it from a sloop to a yawl by adding a second mast of Nova Scotia spruce.

"On December 25, 1897, he rounded the Cape of Good Hope in the *Spray*: "I have to record that while I was at the end of the bowsprit reefing the jib, she ducked me under the water three times for Christmas."

"His solo voyage and his account of it, *Sailing Alone around the World*, brought him fame. Even today the book is considered a masterpiece in narrative prose, an enthralling read about life at sea. Published in 1899 it is still in print. Never comfortable on land, Slocum continued to live and roam on the *Spray* until 1905, when — at the age of 65 — he embarked on another voyage and was never heard from again."

Dana went to sea aboard the *Pilgrim* in the 1830s (1834 – 1836) but my image of him with a grizzled beard and salt oozing out every pore was quite misleading. His book was famous as an adventure story in his time but he became a Harvard-trained lawyer specialising in maritime law and eventually an expert in international law. It was not that life aboard ship had been easy or pleasant; the discipline, the sadism of the captain, the weather "Throughout the night the storm was very violent—rain, hail, snow, and sleet beating upon the vessel—the wind continuing ahead, and the sea running high. At daybreak (about three a.m.) the deck was covered with snow", not to mention their rations "The only time when we could be said to take any pleasure was at night and morning, when we were allowed a tin pot full of hot tea, sweetened with molasses. This, bad as it was, was still warm and comforting, and, together with our sea biscuit and cold salt beef, made quite a meal" except that they ran "the risk of losing them before we could get below" if the sea was rough. Yet I wondered if he ever had any regrets as he climbed into his suit and tie and stiff collar each workday morning …

*

"The first grown-up book I read from cover to cover was Captain Joshua Slocum's *Sailing Alone around the World*. This was followed by John C. Voss's *The Venturesome Voyages of Captain Voss*, by Melville's *Omoo* and *Typee*, then Richard Henry Dana and Jack London. Perhaps from these writers I got a taste for Yankee plain style? I never liked Jules Verne, believing that the real was always more fantastic than the fantastical."

Bruce Chatwin in *Anatomy of Restlessness: Uncollected Writings*.

*

August 2: *El Cid*

*

I remember telling my husband I had El Cid in the family tree and he said, you can't have, he didn't exist. In fact El Cid, Rodrigo de Vivar (sometimes written as Bivar) was very much a flesh-and-blood hero. We don't know exactly when he was born but it is believed to have been in the year 1043. He was knighted by Sancho, Prince and later King of Castile and Zaragoza, but then Sancho was killed, almost certainly at the behest of his brother Alfonso. Rodrigo looked elsewhere for a patron but eventually found himself with no choice but to take service with Alfonso.

We do have the date of his marriage. W. S. Merwin says of him, "On July 19, 1074, when the Cid was thirty-one years old, the King married him to Doña Jimena Diaz, the King's own niece" and we have the date of his death, 10th July 1099 when he was said to be fifty-six, a remarkable age for a man who had spent large amounts of his life fighting the petty wars which marred the Iberian peninsula, between Christian prince and Christian prince, between Christian and Muslim, and between Iberian Muslim and North African Muslim, and carried on seemingly interminably.

The cruelty and the callousness of the times are disturbing. Yet Rodrigo undoubtedly held to a code of honour. He was also a clever strategist, an inspiring leader, and a man of courage. Merwin says "His moderation, self-control, magnanimity, dignity, piety, and of course honor are emphasized by the poet." But the poems which came to be written about him after his death, and there were many, gradually created a mythic figure. It is not surprising that man and myth have become confused.

And we don't know who wrote the surviving epic *The Poem of the Cid* which has come down to us almost complete and which covers much of his later life. Or when. Though it is believed to

have been written about forty years after his death in around 1140. And it was not alone; ballads, plays, and finally, many many years later, a Hollywood epic …

So how might anyone descend from him as millions of people undoubtedly do? He had a son who was killed in battle and two daughters. Both of them married and had children, one of them, Maria, to Ramón Berenguer III, Count of Barcelona … and the rest as they say is history …

And what of the poem itself? I found a translation in *Medieval Epics* and I was interested to see that it stresses his love for his wife and daughters and gives quite a lot of space to the lengthy but largely imaginary saga of King Alfonso's determination to see the girls married to his favourites; something which they seem to have seen as a form of revenge on a man they envied. It is only when the favourites have mistreated their wives, leading to their rescue by El Cid's nephew Felix Muñoz, that El Cid insists their dowries be returned, the marriages annulled, and he will choose their husbands—king or no king—that the two young women finally have a chance of happiness. It is both a battle epic and a troubadour song.

*

August 3: P. D. James

*

'Love. Is that so very important? You were a teacher, you ought to know. Is it?'

'It's vital. If a child has it for the first ten years hardly anything else matters. If he hasn't, then nothing does.' P.D. James in *Devices and Desires.*

*

August 4: Percy Bysshe Shelley

*

Charles Morgan wrote in *Sparkenbroke*:

'To have the ladies and the house must be an interruption of your work,' Celli remarked affably; then with a deliberately provocative thrust: 'I had always understood that artists were very ruthless in that matter — your Shelley for example.'

'Shelley! Shelley was a saint. The gentlest being God ever made. The ruthless bandits who break crockery over their wives' heads are for the most part charlatans. That is the theatrical formula for an artist — used by people who imagine that art is an affair of bulging eyeballs and disordered hair. It is not a madness in that sense. It is a divine sanity. Shelley — good God! When the donkey could no longer carry him, or his baggage, Shelley carried the donkey.'

*

August 5: 'Patience Worth'

*

Although Patience Worth wrote several books—one of which was reviewed positively by no less than *The New York Times*, *The Bookman* and *The Athenaeum*—poems, stories, bon mots, she did not in fact exist. A pseudonym you might assume. But the truth was even stranger. Mrs John H. Curran was a housewife in St Louis, Missouri, who had left school at fourteen. She hadn't traveled and didn't do much reading. Rosalind Heywood wrote in *The Sixth Sense*, "One day a friend asked her to put her hand on an ouija board. At first the results were dull and Mrs Curran was bored. Then suddenly, on July 8th, 1913, an ostensible entity, called Patience Worth, turned up. Who or what Patience Worth was and still is a mystery, but she was certainly a 'character' with a gift of biting repartee and a temperament very unlike Mrs Curran's. She claimed to have lived on a Dorset farm in England in the sixteen hundreds and to have gone thence to America, where she had been killed by Indians. Whoever she was, she had a talent for writing, and she would use archaic words to which so far as Dr Prince could discover the normal Mrs Curran had no access. At enormous speed she spelled out poetry, proverbs, prayers and conversation, and also novels of surprisingly high quality, all of which were written consistently in different idioms."

Her novels were *The Sorry Tale*, which got very positive reviews, and was set in the time of Christ, *Hope Trueblood* in the nineteenth century, and *Telka* in medieval England. But was she really Mrs Curran's subconscious? Was she a kind of proof of reincarnation? Was Mrs Curran

picking something up by some form of mental telepathy? Was she a form of spirit possession? Was Mrs Curran brighter and better educated than she seemed? The jury is still out. But Mrs Curran respected the work as coming from someone else with far more intelligence and experience than she could lay claim to, yet by allowing her to 'see' the scenes as they unfolded immeasurably enriched her own fairly humdrum domestic existence.

*

August 6: Ben Jonson (d)

*

Ben Jonson (1572 – 1637) was seen as second only to Shakespeare as a playwright in the time of James I. He went briefly to the Westminster School in London, worked as a bricklayer, soldier, and actor, before making his name as a writer. But he seems always to have been conscious that he stood in Shakespeare's shadow. He criticised him as being "full of wind" but also wrote "I loved the man, and do honour his memory on this side idolatry, as much as any." He also wrote this fulsome poem about his feelings on Shakespeare …

To draw no envy (*Shakespeare*) on thy name,
Am I thus ample to thy Booke, and Fame:
While I confesse thy writings to be such,
As neither *Man*, nor *Muse*, can praise too much.
'Tis true, and all mens suffrage. But these wayes
Were not the paths I meant unto thy praise:
For seeliest Ignorance on these may light,
Which, when it sounds at best, but echo's right;
Or blinde Affection, which doth ne're advance
The truth, but gropes, and urgeth all by chance;
Or crafty Malice, might pretend this praise,
And thinke to ruine, where it seem'd to raise.
These are, as some infamous Baud, or Whore,
Should praise a Matron. What could hurt her more?
But thou art proofe against them, and indeed
Above th'ill fortune of them, or the need.
I, therefore will begin. Soule of the Age!
The applause! delight! the wonder of our Stage!
My *Shakespeare*, rise; I will not lodge thee by
Chaucer, or *Spenser*, or bid *Beaumont* lye
A little further, to make thee a roome:
Thou art a Moniment, without a tombe,
And art alive still, why thy Booke doth live,
And we have wits to read, and praise to give.
That I not mixe thee so, my braine excuses;
I meane with great, but disproportion'd *Muses*:
For, if I thought my judgement were of yeeres,
I should commit thee surely with thy peeres,
And tell, how farre thou didst our *Lily* out-shine,
Or sporting *Kid*, or *Marlowes* mighty line.
And though thou hadst small *Latine*, and lesse *Greeke*,
From thence to honour thee, I would not seeke
For names; but call forth thund'ring *Aeschilus*,
Euripides, and *Sophocles* to us,
Paccuvius, *Accius*, him of *Cordova* dead,
To life againe, to heare thy Buskin tread,

And shake a Stage: Or, when thy Sockes were on,
Leave thee alone, for the comparison
Of all, that insolent *Greece*, or haughtie *Rome*
Sent forth, or since did from their ashes come.
Triumph, my *Britaine*, thou hast one to showe,
To whom all Scenes of *Europe* homage owe.
He was not of an age, but for all time!
And all the *Muses* still were in their prime,
When like *Apollo* he came forth to warme
Our eares, or like a *Mercury* to charme!
Nature her selfe was proud of his designs,
And joy'd to weare the dressing of his lines!
Which were so richly spun, and woven so fit,
As, since, she will vouchsafe no other Wit.
The merry *Greeke*, tart *Aristophanes*,
Neat *Terence*, witty *Plautus*, now not please;
But antiquated, and deserted lye
As they were not of Natures family.
Yet must I not give Nature all: Thy Art,
My gentle *Shakespeare*, must enjoy a part.
For though the *Poets* matter, Nature be,
His Art doth give the fashion. And, that he,
Who casts to write a living line, must sweat,
(Such as thine are) and strike the second heat
Upon the *Muses* anvile: turn the same,
(And himselfe with it) that he thinkes to frame;
Or for the lawrell, he may gaine a scorne,
For a good *Poet's* made, as well as borne.
And such wert thou. Looke how the fathers face
Lives in his issue, even so, the race
Of *Shakespeare* minde, and manners brightly shines
In his well torned, and true-filed lines:
In each of which, he seemes to shake a Lance,
As brandish't at the eyes of Ignorance.
Sweet Swan of *Avon*! what a sight it were
To see thee in our waters yet appeare,
And make those flights upon the bankes of *Thames*,
That so did take *Eliza*, and our *James*!
But stay, I see thee in the *Hemisphere*
Advanc'd, and made a Constellation there!
Shine forth, thou Starre of *Poets*, and with rage,
Or influence, chide, or cheere the drooping Stage;
Which, since thy flight from hence, hath morn'f like night,
And despaires day, but for thy Volumes light.

Ben Jonson, 'To the Memory of My Beloved, the Author Mr. William Shakespeare and What He hath Left Us'.

The curious thing is that Jonson is more likely to be remembered for his witty epigrams than for his plays. Yet it was his plays which made his name. The only one which had a long life, *Volpone*, gave its name to a crafty fox-like man who became known as a volpone. But even that usage has largely been lost and forgotten. The play in printed form remains but I have never seen nor heard of a production. Now we are more likely to remember Jonson because he was a friend or

confidante to many of the 'names' of his era rather than to quote lines from his writings. When he died in 1637 a contemporary said of him, "Neglected as his later days had been, the passing of Ben was, for the entire English world of letters, the passing of its king – a king who had perhaps ceased to govern, but who still reigned."

*

August 7: Paul

*

The apostle Paul sparks a wide range of responses; a misogynist, a brave traveller, the man who took Christianity from a small sect to an international religion, the man who subverted Christ's message … The other day I was reading the biography of Bible scholar F. F. Bruce *A Life* (who, unlike the image of Bible scholars as bearded and heavy-handed Teutonic academics minutely comparing passages, was a rather dour Scot and a member of the evangelical Open Brethren) and among his many popular 20th century books and essays on the Bible were a number on Paul. He explains why he was drawn to writing about Paul. "For half a century and more I have been a student and teacher of ancient literature, and to no other writer of antiquity have I devoted so much time and attention as to Paul. Nor can I think of any other writer, ancient or modern, whose study is so richly rewarding as his. This is due to several aspects of his many-faceted character: the attractive warmth of his personality, his intellectual stature, the exhilarating release effected by his gospel of redeeming grace, the dynamism with which he propagated that gospel throughout the world, devoting himself single mindedly to fulfilling the commission entrusted to him on the Damascus road ('this one thing I do') and labouring more abundantly than all his fellow-apostles — 'yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me'." He also offers this intriguing perspective "The authentic Paul is Paul the preacher of emancipation, Paul who announced the replacement of the yoke of legal bondage by the freedom of the Spirit, Paul who proclaimed that man had come of age in Christ and refused to let religion be treated any more as a matter of rules and regulations such as befitted the apron-string stage of their spiritual development, Paul whose insistence that in Christ there is neither male nor female entitles him to be recognized as the patron-saint of women's liberation, Paul the author of that great hymn in praise of love, Paul whose 'genius for friendship' has become a proverb — almost a cliché" and "The mainstream churches of Christendom, as they inch along towards a worthier recognition of the ministry of women, have some way to go yet before they come abreast of Paul".

So how should we look at Paul? It is far more difficult now because scholars are divided on which of his Letters are actually his. Currently only eight out of thirteen Letters are regarded as his. These include Romans, Corinthians, Galatians and Philippians. I and 2 Timothy and Titus are seen as definitely later productions by followers who wanted to tone down the radicalness of his message. Then there are the 'deutero-Pauline' Letters. These include Ephesians, Colossians, and 2 Thessalonians. Here the jury is still out.

The two pieces which have irritated women—"As in all the churches of God's people, the women should keep quiet in the meetings. They are not allowed to speak; as the Jewish Law says, they must not be in charge. If they want to find out about something, they should ask their husbands at home. It is a disgraceful thing for a woman to speak in church" also "And any woman who prays or proclaims God's message in public worship with nothing on her head disgraces her husband"— both come in the First Letter to the Corinthians. Not only does this contradict the part in Acts where God 'says' "Your sons and daughters will proclaim my message; your young men will see visions, and your old men will have dreams. Yes, even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will proclaim my message," but, curiously, Paul puts no strictures on his other young churches. Yet, clearly people in Rome and Corinth were not getting together to share Paul's letters. (And in his letter to the Romans he expresses his gratitude to Priscilla who was both preacher and organiser.) So it suggests that Paul was upset by something he had found in Corinth. He urges people there to use their spiritual gifts, he says they will find themselves speaking in tongues; he does not suggest that either gifts or tongues are male only

privileges. There is a curiously contrary nature to this letter. It reaches sublime heights and it plumbs a deep pettiness. It raises puzzling questions about his time in Corinth.

And he dictated his Letters rather than writing them himself. They were probably written down by the light of a smoking tallow candle in a tent or seated on the floor in a crowded house. We cannot be certain that the scribe got every word, every emphasis, every nuance exact. So perhaps Bruce was right. We should go to Paul for inspiration but avoid going to him for rules. Inspiration is inspiration. But I don't know that I want to organise my life around a set of strictures emanating from an unknown pen.

*

August 8: Anon

*

Many limericks, polite and not-so-polite, are credited to Anon. E. O. Parrott in *Limerick Delight* says, "Although the verse form had been used by poets in various ways for hundreds of years, the first 'true' limericks seem to have appeared in a book of nonsense verse for children (*The History of Sixteen Wonderful Old Women*, published anonymously in 1820). Two years later, a second, similar book appeared (*Anecdotes and Adventures of Fifteen Gentlemen*). Both became very popular with children of the period.

"A few years later, Edward Lear imitated these verses in his *Book of Nonsense*, which he wrote for the children of his employer, the Earl of Derby." He goes on to say that we now "demand a much sharper, wittier last line; we want a surprise ending, a 'twist in the tail'." He quotes a limerick by Mark Twain, using the common usage of Co for Company:

A man from John Smith and Co
Loudly declared he would tho.
Man that he saw
Dumping dirt near his door;
The drivers, therefore, didn't do.

But Lear didn't regard himself as writing limericks, just short verses, and the word did not appear in dictionaries until 1892. Parrott says, "There are a number of different theories as to why this particular verse form should have been given the name of an Irish town. It has been pointed out that, in the eighteenth century, a group of Irish poets, meeting in taverns, wrote light-hearted verses of this type. However, the name may not have derived from the town itself, but may come from the words '*laoi meidhreach*', which is Irish for 'a merry lay' (song). Whatever the origin of the name, it is fairly certain that translations of these verses became known in England soon after Edward Lear and his anonymous predecessors began publishing their own nonsense verses in the same form, and that finally, because of their similarity, the Irish name for them became attached to both groups of verses."

It is a very flexible form; it can take topical things—

'Will you beam me up, Scotty? There's two
Space invaders preparing a stew.
They have tied me up tightly,
And salted me lightly …
Hey, Scotty! Am I getting through?' (T. L. McCarthy)

It can take traditional things—

Mother Hubbard said: 'Poor Doggy, see—
This cupboard's as bare as can be!'
Sneered the Dog: 'What a shame!
You silly old dame!
It's because I've a duplicate key!' (Frank Richards)

They can be tongue-twisters—

When they catch a chinchilla in Chile,
They cut off its beard, willy-nilly,
With a small razor blade,

Just to say that they've made
A chinchilla's chin chilly in Chile. (M. C. Chandler)
Or to sum up our materialistic age—
Dad waited while Mum bought the ham,
But when she came out, she said: 'Sam!
That one's not our baby!'
He answered: 'Well, maybe,
But look, it's a much better pram!' (Coral Copping)

Over to you …

*

August 9: P. L. Travers

*

I had seen *Mary Poppins* long before I associated an Australian writer with the film; recently I saw a documentary which suggested Pam Travers felt she hadn't had the recognition she deserved. Yet she still seemed a curiously elusive person. Why was there no knowledge of her writings here? No pride in her achievement? The other day I noticed *Out of the Sky She Came* by Valerie Lawson who had tried to rectify this lack by bringing out a biography of her.

Though Pamela Lyndon Travers was born in Australia she lived much of her life in England and the influences on her were not Australian. Her father, and she was only a girl when her father died in Allora in 1906, was steeped in the myth and legend of Ireland, perhaps because he was born in England, and her mother's family was Scottish. She began as a writer of articles, short stories, poems, film reviews, as well as some amateur acting in Sydney, before going to the U.K. Her first 'guru', and she always seemed to need someone in this role perhaps because of the early loss of her father, was the Irish poet AE (William Russell) who took his pseudonym from the first letters of AEON. Lawson says of him, "By the 1920s, Russell was seen as an intellectual colossus in Dublin. His reputation had spread as far as Washington and New York as he transformed himself from artist to visionary, poet to playwright, economist to editor, then charismatic lecturer and later an adviser to the Franklin D. Roosevelt administration." He liked the company of young women and did much to help her settle in and find outlets for her writing. But it was the creation of Mary Poppins, the mysterious Edwardian nanny, which changed her life.

Lawson says, "Who is Mary Poppins? In our mind's eye we see Julie Andrews in a pastel Edwardian dress, smiling as cheerily as the star of a toothpaste commercial, as saccharine as the spoonful of sugar that helped the medicine go down, as jolly as a jolly holiday with Bert, as cheery as 'Chim Chim, Cheree'. Such is the power of Walt Disney. The original Mary Poppins was not cheery at all. She was tart and sharp, rude, plain and vain. That was her charm; that—and her mystery." Or as Neil Barron summed it up, "Nice books, shame about the film." Except that nice doesn't seem quite the right adjective. Lawson says a major influence was Travers' great aunt 'Aunt Ellie'. "Aunt Ellie, a bulldog with a sentimental core, remained fixed in Lyndon's adult memory even more vividly than her parents. In a little book about Aunt Ellie's life, she described her as stern and tender, secret and proud, anonymous and loving. Her great aunt 'stalked with her silent feet' through the pages of Mary Poppins. Ellie lent her mannerisms to more than one woman in the Mary Poppins adventures. Not only did she live again in the starched and bustling figure of Mary Poppins herself, but she could also be found in the fearsome Miss Andrew—the nanny of Mr Banks—and in Miss Lark, the Banks's arrogant yet romantic neighbour. Miss Andrew and Miss Lark—two fictional women of a certain age, neither burdened by husbands—represented the two sides of Aunt Ellie's character, bossy and benign."

The movie made Travers rich, in a way that the eight Mary Poppins books and her handful of other titles didn't, but she never felt quite comfortable with the sentimental American portrayal of her famous character. Though she received an OBE, an honorary doctorate, translation into other languages, and died wealthy, she didn't believe she had received the recognition she felt was her

due. Perhaps her tragedy was simply that her books and her talent were not sufficient to warrant more than that.

*

August 10: Louis Esson

*

Playwright Louis Esson was in the forefront of early twentieth century theatre in Melbourne; he had innovative ideas for a genuinely Australian theatre, he wrote a number of plays which were put on successfully—but they lacked something. An energy, a verve, an excitement, an idiosyncrasy, whatever makes a play live on, revived generation after generation.

His plays such as *The Battler*, *The Drovers*, and *The Time is not yet Ripe* are largely forgotten but his attempt through the creation of the Pioneer Players to create something uniquely Australian still seems a brave if ultimately unsuccessful attempt. It was partly inspired by his time in Ireland and seeing what the Abbey Theatre was doing. Peter Kirkpatrick writes in *Pioneer Players*, "The appropriateness of the model in relation to the wider intellectual society, as in the ways to organize an anti-establishment theatre, was for Louis never really in question. There was one element of the Irish precedent which was never satisfactorily reproduced in Australia, though, and Louis seems to have failed to realize how important it was. Like most strong theatrical initiatives, the Abbey was the product of political conflict. Its plays, like the dreamy lyrics of O'Sullivan and the Celtic myths reclaimed by Yeats and Russell, had nothing to do with propaganda and might look like a rebuttal of the claims of immediate social relevance. But the visionaries inside and around the theatre had their own kind of strong political purpose, and the sense that there were battles to be fought by and for the people. That context was one which Louis, back in Melbourne, could never really approximate or imagine. He noted with approval the Abbey's avoidance of propaganda in its plays, but drew from it the lesson that a national theatre should avoid political controversy. The battles which he had in mind were real enough, but they were to be fought in spite of the people that surrounded him, for a hypothetical people yet unborn. They were always to be distinguished from the ephemeral political issues which intruded from time to time. Neither the comparability of the two cultures, nor the general principle of asserting one nation's distinctiveness by trying to recreate the experience of another, was ever an issue to him."

*

August 11: Recipes

*

"Once upon a time there were no supermarkets, no aerosol spray cans, no housing developments, no traffic jams, no launderettes; all the world worked hard and moved at horse-and-carriage pace. In the long still afternoons of summer, you heard crickets sing and the swish of wind in tall grasses. These were the centuries when candles lit the after-dark and the parlour was used only on Sunday.

"In that far-off time, the mistress of the household was doctor and nurse and obstetrician as well as cook and mother. Pharmacist and perfumer, she made all the preparations that kept a home lovely and safeguarded her family's health – soaps and candles, medicines and mouth washes, moth repellents and disinfectants, cosmetics and powders and perfumes. With fragrant petals and herbs she scented her gloves and writing paper. Inks, linens and clothes were perfumed with sweet bags, and cakes and puddings and wines were flavoured with fragrant syrups. To 'make faire' musty rooms, she strewed rushes and sprinkled sweet-smelling vinegars and filled great bowls with rose petals and potpourris.

"In Elizabethan homes, the fragrances were prepared in the 'stillroom'. It was a place where at least one small still could be kept, a warm room where flowers and herbs hung in bunches to dry, and long wooden shelves held row on row of mortars and pestles, fixatives, and exotic spices. Most of the information used in making the stillroom preparations the mistress of the household kept in her head. Some has come down to us in stillroom books where family knowledge of perfume and medicine, cooking and gardening was recorded from generation to generation.

"In 1682 Mary Doggett wrote this 'receipt' for a 'sweet bagg' in one of the best known of the stillroom books. Exquisitely sophisticated, influenced by empires long gone even in Mary's day, it draws on knowledge men and women used to care for their homes and families very long ago.

Take half a pound of Cypress Roots, a pound of Orris, ¾ lb. Rhodium [rosewood], a lb. Coriander seed, ¾ lb. of Calamus, 3 oranges stuck with cloves [and probably dried on her still], 2 oz. of Benjamin, and an oz. of storax and 4 pecks of Damask Rose leaves, a peck of dryed sweet Marjerum, a pretty stick of Juniper shaved very thin, some lemon peel dryed; let all these be powdered very grosely for the first year and immediately put into your bags; the next year pound and work it and it will be very good again.

Mary Doggett: Her Book of Recipes, 1682

"The cinnamon-scented calamus Mary used in the 1600s is the ground root of the sweet flag, *Acorus calamus*, and it was one of the ingredients used by the children of Israel to make a holy anointing oil. In the Book of Exodus (30 : 23-4), as Moses led them across the great desert to the promised land, directions for making the perfume were recorded:

Take thou also unto thee principal
spices, of pure myrrh five hundred shekels,
and of sweet cinnamon, half so much,…
and of sweet calamus, two hundred and fifty
and of cassia five hundred shekels, …
and of olive oil, an hin [about one gallon]" And as I read on I realised that this was an idealised version of the past, and it could also be asked where the Israelites in the desert came up with gallons of olive oil, and yet there is an important message in there. Today when we are overwhelmed by programs, by books, by talk and presence of food, it is easy to forget that this was not the preoccupation of housewives in centuries past. Their meals were simple. Depending on where they lived and what they could afford their families ate the same kinds of food every day: a form of porridge, plain breads, milk, butter, cheese, roasted or boiled or salted meats and fish, some fruit. They brought their knowledge and skills to medicinal herbs and syrups, to perfumes, to soaps, to ways to get rid of insects and mould …

The first herbal is thought to be that of the Greek, Dioscorides, in the first century A.D. but families everywhere collected and added to their knowledge. "In the years just before Elizabeth I came to the throne two English herbals appeared, *The Grete Herbal* in 1526, and *Banckes's Herbal* in 1525. Browsing through these old health and welfare manuals, you catch a glimpse of the world the stillroom ladies dealt with – a world where poor sanitation and the spoilage of foods were fought along with such modern ills as insomnia, depression, and falling hair." These books had recipes for remedies for everything from bad breath to head lice; now we go to the chemist or the supermarket although strangely these old remedies, such as larkspur infusions for head lice, are still used in some modern preparations.

Barbara Tuchman wrote, "Of all the characteristics in which the medieval age differs from the modern, none is so striking as the comparative absence of interest in children." But the thing that struck me as I browsed through Jacqueline Hériteau's book *Potpourris and Other Fragrant Delights* is that women in past centuries, whether wealthy and prominent or poor and illiterate, all shared a way of looking at the natural world around them which is very different to ours. They were looking at the reeds along the waterways for their readiness for basket-making, to the places where wild fennel or irises grew, to the ripening seedheads of the horehound or dill, to the right moment to collect rose petals, to their supply of ash for soap-making, for the oils rising on warm water full of wood shavings or the flowers of violets and lavender, not because they were interested in them as a craft or a hobby but because they were vital to their families' health and wellbeing. It was a world where nothing went to waste. It was at times a hard and busy world. It was a world which had its own satisfactions. But more than that it was a time in which everyone but particularly women

looked out on the world around them through eyes which both saw nature as something to be used but also something to be conserved for its future importance in daily life. That Elizabethan lady in her stillroom would find monoculture a crime and an aberration ….

*

August 12: Robert Southey

*

Robert Southey has been execrated by women for writing to Charlotte Brontë, "Literature cannot be the business of a woman's life, and it ought not to be. The more she is engaged in her proper duties, the less leisure she will have for it." Yet my sympathies are with Robert Southey. His own wife suffered terribly from what was probably severe post-natal depression, virtually leaving him to bring up their family himself; he also found himself saddled with the responsibility to care financially and emotionally for Samuel Taylor Coleridge's family after he opted out—and all this to be done on the insecure income of articles and poems; struggling, in Sir Walter Scott's words, "to feed many mouths out of one inkstand".

Georgette Heyer wrote in *The Quiet Gentleman*, "The Lakeland scenery was very fine, but Greta Hall was rather too full of Coleridges, Mrs Coleridge and her interesting offspring having apparently taken up permanent residence with the Southeys. Mrs Morville wrote that a scheme was afoot to place poor Mr Coleridge in the care of a gentleman living in Highgate. Mr Southey had disclosed that his unfortunate brother-in-law had been consuming as much as two quarts of laudanum a week over the past couple of years. He gloomily believed that the charge of the children must fall upon his shoulders. He was already paying for Hartley's University career, and had sent Derwent to a private school at Ambleside. Sara, the youngest of the trio, was precocious, Mrs Morville considered; and there was too much reason to fear that Hartley had inherited his father's instability of character. Mr Morville, wrote his wife, was grieved to discover how far Mr Southey had receded from his earlier and nobler ideals; for her part, Mrs Morville could not wonder at it: she could only marvel at his being able to continue in the profession of author in the midst of such a household." It isn't hard to see where Heyer's sympathies lay.

Southey took on the job of Poet Laureate in the hope that this degree of fame would make it easier to sell his output, and perhaps garnering him an extra guinea or two per poem. But his financial and family worries must always have hung heavily on him; and more so as he was naturally a rather shy and anxious man. And on top of everything the letters poured in from 'scribbling women' wanting help and advice, as well as from general admirers, all expecting answers. That Charlotte Brontë got an answer at all, not forgetting that it was paid for out of Southey's insecure income, is suprising really. And how many other women who had written a poem, a story, a domestic drama, also wrote in hopes that he might help them place things which quite possibly weren't worth placing? After all, he wasn't an editor or publisher. We remember his exasperated reply to Charlotte only because she persevered and had the talent and the passion to achieve something. But how many other women wrote him begging letters? And how was he to determine which ones had genuine promise and which ones didn't? To expect him to read and comment on every manuscript sent unsolicited to him seems unfair.

The Oxford Book of Literary Anecdotes has this revealing story: "In associating with Southey, not only was it necessary to salvation to refrain from touching his books, but various rites, ceremonies, and usages must be rigidly observed. At certain appointed hours only was he open to conversation; at the seasons which had been predestined from all eternity for holding intercourse with his friends. Every hour of the day had its commission—every half hour was assigned to its own peculiar, undeviating function. The indefatigable student gave a detailed account of his most painstaking life, every moment of which was fully employed and strictly pre-arranged, to a certain literary Quaker lady.

'I rise at five throughout the year; from six till eight I read Spanish; then French, for one hour; Portuguese, next, for half an hour—my watch lying on the table; I give two hours to poetry; I write

prose for two hours; I translate so long; I make extracts so long'; and so of the rest, until the poor fellow had fairly fagged himself into his bed again.

'And, pray, when dost thou think, friend?' she asked, drily, to the great discomfiture of the future Laureate."

It is an insight into a rigid, anxious, almost obsessive man, someone who would be deeply threatened by the chaos of unsolicited requests, someone who perhaps needed that kind of precisely defined routine as support and safety if he was to continue to function—not just function but to meet his many obligations …

The 'Quaker lady' was possibly the writer and poet Amelia Opie. So, clearly, he didn't impose a blanket ban on women writing. He was friendly with Wordsworth's sister Dorothy who was quite a stylish writer in her own right and he encouraged Coleridge's daughter Sara to write—and after his chronically-ill first wife Edith died he married a writer, Caroline Bowles.

*

"Caroline Bowles Southey (1786-1854), who flourished during the 1820s and 1830s, first made her name with a series of amusing prose sketches about village life, originally published in Blackwood's Magazine, called *Chapters on Churchyards* (2 volumes, 1829). She also published a considerable body of poetry which was highly regarded by a wide group of readers, including Wordsworth. He particularly admired her long autobiographical poem published in 1836 as "The Birth-day", pre-dating *The Prelude's* appearance by fourteen years. Composed in beautifully managed blank verse, which she makes seem as natural as breathing, it tells with disarming frankness her experience of a rural Hampshire childhood and the influences which turned her into a poet (the growth of a poet's mind). Her splendid *memento mori* poem "That's What We Are", also deserves our attention."

Virginia Blain in *The Space of Poetry*.

*

Southey wrote many poems which have faded with time and which were probably written to keep food on the table. But a considerable number of his poems have retained their freshness and appeal and are still well worth reading …

*

August 13: Eva B. Dykes

*

Eva Beatrice Dykes has one claim to fame: she was the first black woman in the United States to earn a PhD. This was in 1921 and it had not been an easy journey. Hard for women, especially poor women, and even harder for poor black women. But she was fortunate to be blessed with the support of her mother and her uncle, not to mention a fine brain and a high level of determination to surmount the many barriers. She went on to become a teacher, a musician, a Seventh Day Adventist, and a writer. She co-authored *The Manual of English* with Florence Winslow in which she said in her introduction, "Why should you learn writing? Out of the Elizabethan period comes Francis Bacon with an answer. 'Writing maketh an exact man.' It is as though he looked down the centuries to see this space age in which a miscalculation of a fraction of an inch could throw a missile thousands of miles off course, and who would bear the blame?

"Who, but the man whose writing was not exact. In freshman composition, aside from writing, you will also do an extensive amount of reading. Again, Francis Bacon speaks, 'Reading maketh a full man.' You students must fill yourselves with a variety of worthwhile selections, with an eye single to developing your own styles and writing.

"This does not necessarily mean that you will become a Shakespeare, but you will gain the pleasure of feeling that your writing will have lifted itself out of mediocrity. You can gain this increased skill only through contact with the greatest minds, contact gained to the greatest extent through reading."

She was not out on the Civil Rights marches but she was an inspiration to her students, not least because she was always saying it wasn't enough for black students and black colleges to lower

the bars to allow for disadvantage; her students and the colleges themselves had to be aiming for the highest standards in everything. But the thing that most intrigued me was that she wrote her own dissertation, which was 644 pages long and is now in the Eva B. Dykes Library at Oakwood College with a copy in the Harvard Archives, on the English poet Alexander Pope. DeWitt Williams in *She Fulfilled the Impossible Dream* said she explained her reasons for her choice: "I wrote on Pope. See, the title is 'Alexander Pope's influence in America from 1810 to 1850'! I discovered, by chance, that he was very interested and sympathetic towards black people." She completed it by March 21, 1921.

And was Pope genuinely sympathetic? I have just been reading Maynard Mack's large biography and Pope himself never visited America, nor did he marry or have children to go there. But he comes across as a sympathetic man who was always concerned for the individual and interpreted his Catholicism in terms of Christian ethics rather than Christian dogma. In the sense of influence, yes, his poems were popular right up until the early twentieth century and express various noble sentiments. Now they seem impossibly clogged with capitals and their declamatory style is no longer very attractive. But I am curious to know what Eva Dykes made of him …

*

August 14: Walter Besant

*

Walter Besant and James Rice in *Sir Richard Whittington* say very clearly that Whittington wasn't the penniless boy of the nursery rhyme but the youngest son of minor gentry in Pauntley in Gloucestershire. They draw on the work of Rev Samuel Lysons; "A second visit to Pauntley, in July 10th, 1860, brought to light circumstances connected with the history of the Whittington family overlooked on the occasion of the first visit, which bear peculiarly on the confirmation of the family pedigree. In the north window of the chancel still exist the remains of ancient stained glass, on which are emblazoned the arms of Whittington, with those of the Linets, Stauntons, and Peresfords, families with whom the Whittingtons intermarried; while in the west window, under the tower, are found the arms of Whittington impaling Melbourne on the right hand side, and on the left those of Whittington impaling Fitz-Warren, thus clearly identifying our hero, whose wife was Alice Fitz-Warren, with the Pauntley family beyond dispute." Besant and Rice say, "We find the name written in various ways," (including Whitington, Whytington, Whityngton, Whittington, Whyttyngton, Wityndon, Whytindon, Witinton, Wittingdon, Wittington, and Wityngton) "as happened to most names before spelling was exalted to one of the necessities of civilisation. In the matter of spelling, every man was then a law unto himself, so that those who thought an *h* would improve the look of a word put one in, and while some were pleased with the severity of an *i*, others preferred the beauty of a *y*. It would be, however, mere pedantry to spell the name of Whittington in any other way than that sanctioned by custom."

Young Dick, the youngest of the boys in the family, was sent off to London to be apprenticed to Sir John Fitz-Warren, "a Mercer and Merchant Adventurer". The interest in the book is as much the picture it paints of life in London in the 14th century as the life of Whittington. And the thing I found particularly interesting was that a theft which would see the culprit hanged in 1800 would only bring an hour in the pillory in 1400. Besant and Rice suggest as reasons both the small size of London where people knew each other and were often related, and the relative freedom London's charters had given it to stand outside the horrible punishments the King handed out. Perhaps, too, London was freer of the superstitions and fears of more remote places and its good name as a place to do business would not be improved by a reputation for burnings and hangings …

So if Dick was not the poor boy of legend—what of the cat story? Did he profit by selling a cat? The authors give credence to the story. "In the middle ages, tame cats were scarce in Europe, and highly valued. Gregory the Great, when he retired to a monastery, took with him nothing but a cat. Mohammed carried about a cat in his sleeve. And at Aix, in Provence, as late as the year 1757, the finest tom-cat that could be procured was carried in procession on *Corpus Christi* day, wrapped in swaddling clothes like a child, and exhibited to the admiration of the multitude in a magnificent

shrine. Flowers were strewn and knees were bent before him as he passed. It is said that cats were first brought into Europe from Egypt by way of Cyprus." But valuable as cats may have been it doesn't automatically link young Dick to a cat. "The Whittingtons had a house in Gloucester, which they occupied until the year 1460. Now, in the year 1862, this house, then occupied by a draper or mercer, underwent certain repairs, which necessitated excavations in the cellars. There was dug up a stone, probably part of a chimney, on which, in *basso relievo*, is represented the figure of a boy carrying in his arms a cat. The workmanship appears to be of the fifteenth century. If this is the case, we have a very remarkable proof that the family of Whittington, in his own century—he died in 1423—believed in the cat story." It is an odd thing for a medieval family to believe unless it had some substance.

Walter Besant was well-known in the late nineteenth century; articles, travel pieces, novels, biographies, all poured from his pen. But he has long been superceded in public memory by his sister-in-law Annie Besant because of the part she played in the Theosophical movement, as president of the Theosophical Society from 1907 to her death in 1933 …

*

August 15: Sir Walter Scott

*

I had an image of Scott as someone thoroughly embedded in a legal milieu, as someone whose family for generations had been embedded in just such a milieu. But I came upon a little booklet called *Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh* and it said, "Not until 1761 was real progress made in the development of the Royal Physic Garden. In that year John Hope, the son of an Edinburgh surgeon, was appointed Regius Keeper. His most notable achievement lay in uniting the Town Garden with the Royal Garden … and in transferring the combined Garden from the atmospheric pollution of the Holyrood Valley to a site of some five acres on the high road to Leith, the site on which now stands Haddington Place. Hope also succeeded in obtaining from the Crown a permanent income for the new Garden—an action which has greatly influenced botanical education in Scotland.

"Hope was succeeded in 1786 by Daniel Rutherford, the uncle of Sir Walter Scott. But Rutherford was essentially a chemist and not a botanist and no progress would have been made at the Garden had not William McNab been induced to leave the Royal Botanic Garden at Kew and come to Edinburgh, in 1810, as Principal Gardener at a salary of £50 a year. McNab was to prove to be one of the leading horticulturalists of his day."

Like most older botanical gardens this one began as a physic garden or a medicine garden, back in 1670, making it the second oldest in Britain. Doctors were botanists and botanists were, if not doctors, then knowledgeable about the healing properties of plants. So it is curious that they would have chosen a chemist. The man in his laboratory with jars of mercury and arsenic and all the mysterious compounds of 18th century experimentation does not immediately suggest pots and hoes and wheelbarrows …

And I have since found that although Scott's father was a lawyer and came from a legal family his mother's relatives were a much more mixed bag, doctors, farmers … and that chemist …

I found two old shabby tomes in the back of a cupboard in the Meeting House library called *Memorials of a Quiet Life*, *Vols I* and *II* by Augustus Hare, a comfortably-off clergyman, and I wondered if a quiet life could yield two large volumes. They came out in the 1870s and their interest is the portrayal of life then; the books read, the journeys undertaken, the language used, the impressions of public figures and events …

Curiously both Augustus and his wife-to-be Maria met Sir Walter Scott when they were young, but separately, and they both recorded their impressions:

"I left Edinburgh by way of Selkirk and Melrose, stopping by the way to see Walter Scott. He lives in a cottage transmogrified by additions into a sort of castle, on the road between these two

places. His family consists of a silly little Frenchwoman—his wife, two stout lassies of daughters under twenty, the eldest of whom is said to be a very extraordinary person, and a great favourite with her father, and an enormous staghound, with three or four other dogs of various kinds as his satellites. Walter Scott himself looks like a very stout, good-humoured shepherd; and if it be a merit in a poet not to be 'all-poet,' he possesses it in a very high degree. He kept me all day with him, and in the evening had a large party of borderers to dinner, which I regretted, as I would rather have seen him merely with his family. But in the morning he was very delightful; we walked together round his little property, and the interest he took in his plantations, fences, and crops—reaped, sowing, and to be sown—reminded me completely of Worting. At the same time he has not the affectation of dropping the author altogether, for in pointing out the various objects around to me he did not omit to mention the lands of Deloraine, 'which,' he added with a smile, 'you may perhaps have heard of.' In the same way, many of his beasts are named after persons in his works—his old mare is Sybil Grey. He talked of the tales and novels exactly as an indifferent person would have done, except that he praised them less and alluded to them more. He seemed extremely attached to Reginald Heber, and indeed to everything else except Bonaparte and a few Scotch Whigs, for never did I meet a man so overflowing with the milk of human kindness."

(Augustus Hare, 1818.)

"I have not yet told you of the pleasantest part of our tour, our visit to Walter Scott. He lives about three miles from Melrose, and our first day's journey from Edinburgh was to his house. We had a letter to him from Reginald Heber, and Mr. Scott persuaded us to stay three days with him, during which time we had full opportunity of becoming acquainted with him. We were the only strangers, and therefore had his conversation all to ourselves, and most highly were we gratified. He is un-affected and simple in his manner to the greatest degree, and at first his countenance only bespeaks good humour; but mention any subject that interests him, and he lights up in an instant into fire and animation. He is a kind of person one could not feel afraid of for a moment. What-ever subject you begin is the same to him; he has something entertaining to tell on every one, and the quickness with which he catches up everything that is passing, even at the other end of the room, is surprising. His family consists of a very insignificant little wife, a French woman, quite inferior to him, and his daughters, who are fine sensible, clever girls, quite brought up by him. The eldest sang Jacobite songs and border ballads to us with such spirit and enthusiasm, that it was delightful, and their love for Scotland makes them quite worthy of it. Their chief delight is in the Border stories and traditions, in which they are very rich. His house is built by himself, and is very odd and picturesque. There is a little armoury with painted glass windows, and the walls and chimneypiece covered with antiquities—Claverhouse's pistol, Rob Roy's gun and purse, Highland arms, targets, and claymores, quaighs, thumb-screws, trophies from Waterloo, ancient armour—in short, it is the most interesting and curious little room.

Then at every step about the house you come to some curious thing. He has got the gate of the Old Tollbooth, and the great keys which have locked up so many victims, and the real tower, removed to his house. But I have no room for more about Walter Scott now, except that we came away quite enchanted with the *poet*, and still more with the *man*."

(Maria Hare, 1819.)

*

August 16: Thomas Fuller

*

"Who hath sailed about the world of his own heart, sounded each creek, surveyed each corner, but that still there remains therein much *terra incognita* to himself?"

Thomas Fuller in *The Holy State, and the Profane State*.

*

"In one of the remaining volumes, the only one that was a box, I found an unbound pamphlet, *Jacob's Vow a Sermon* by Thomas Fuller, 1644. This I discovered later was one of the rarest of Thomas Fuller's books, only two copies being recorded in the bibliography of him; undoubtedly

Leslie had been in touch with some pretty expert thieves. The funny thing that transpired about this pamphlet was that no one claimed it and so legally it belonged to Leslie's estate. No one had the least doubt that it was a stolen book, but the only explanation that we could think of was that it had been tied up loosely in a bundle of pamphlets in some library which had not been catalogued and that someone employed there, possibly to catalogue the books, had removed it, realising its rarity."

So wrote R.T. Campbell in *Bodies in a Bookshop*, a mystery set in a fusty rather Dickensian old bookshop in London where two men are found overcame by gas. But as the bookshop and its owner are investigated it is found that the shop has been dealing in both pornographic works and sometimes stolen antiquarian items. Sometimes they are one and the same.

Fuller wrote prolifically on church history but he is remembered for his *History of the Worthies of England*, partly because of his eccentric and witty style and partly because this inspired other people to eventually create Dictionaries of Biography, including our own *Australian Dictionary of Biography* in umpteen volumes. Not all the people included were necessarily 'worthy' but they had interesting lives or dramatic deaths or did peculiar things. H. E. Bates in his autobiography about growing up in Northamptonshire wrote, "seven or eight miles away the tiny village of Aldwinkle, which has two churches and therefore two rectories, produced within five years John Dryden from one rectory and Thomas Fuller, the historian, from the other". This might explain why Fuller was attracted to the church and church history but I wonder if he was also influenced by Dryden when it came to his style of writing? Still, my question was to do with *Jacob's Vow* ... was it actually one of Fuller's books or did Campbell make it up for the purposes of his own book?

Campbell himself is an increasingly rare author. Born in Scotland in 1914 Ruthven Campbell Todd wrote poetry, art criticism, even fantasy, as well as several mystery novels, such as *Unholy Dying*, as R. T. Campbell. *Bodies in a Bookshop* wasn't remarkable but pleasantly quirky and readable and enlivened by little snippets about antiquarian books. And I did agree with his narrator's statement: "The trouble with bookshops is that they are as bad as pubs. You start with one and then you drift to another, and before you know where you are you are on a gigantic book-binge. My brief case was full to bursting and I had bundles of books under both arms. I was bowed down by the weight of them."

And to answer my question. Yes, Fuller *did* write a sermon he titled Jacob's Vow which he preached before Charles I in 1644. Clearly it wasn't sufficient to stop Charles in his rush to the brink …

*

August 17: Mae West

*

Mae West comes across as brash, lively, liberated, a woman before her time in the roles she played. But I hadn't really taken on board that she was a writer as much as she was an actor. Claudia Roth Pierpont in *Passionate Minds* says of her: "Because there were no available acting roles for a woman who drove men wild and enjoyed them in bed by the dozen and gave as good as she got and didn't want to marry and never suffered for any of it, Mae West had to become a writer before she could be a movie star." She began by writing for vaudeville but "All accounts agree that her break-through creation was the Gay Nineties saloon singer "Diamond Lil," a role that brought her to sudden and stunning respectability when her play of the same name opened on Broadway in 1928. Overnight, the woman who had been dismissed as too vulgar for big-time vaudeville and jailed for violating public morals was transformed into America's leading actress-playwright, "more admired by her public than is Jane Cowl, Lynn Fontanne, Helen Hayes or Eva Le Gallienne," according to the *Herald Tribune*. The play's Bowery-bar setting made for some thrilling intellectual slumming, and West's one-hip-at-a-time portrayal of an implacably good-natured quasi-prostitute overfond of her diamonds and her work was hailed as a theatrical archetype comparable to Harlequin or Pierrot, a portrait as grandly abstract and theatrical as Bernhardt's Tosca. We know

that West had finally found her distinctive self—as distinctive as Chaplin's Tramp or Groucho's Groucho—because Mae West imitators were already finding work."

*

August 18: Honore de Balzac (d)

*

Somewhere I came upon the description of Balzac (1799 – 1850) as the ultimate bourgeois writer. At the time I accepted the description without query. But after reading Balzac's *Droll Stories* I had the feeling there was a Rabelais or a Boccacio lurking there, just waiting the excuse or the opportunity to burst out. And Balzac can't be compared to Hercule Poirot whose bourgeois nature with its intrinsic belief in respectability, abiding by the law, being seen to do things in conformity with society's norms, a sense of complacency and acceptance, was his birthright. I do not associate that kind of complacency, that sense that a particular strata of society is the salt of the earth, with Balzac.

But while I was pondering this I wondered when the term bourgeois began to be used. It was used, and perhaps still is, by the Far Left as a derogatory term with its implications of someone saying 'I'm all right, Jack, I don't need to change, and I don't want you to change the world around me,' but that too is not an attitude I associate with Balzac.

So this week I have been doing a little research into those twin questions: what was the origin of bourgeois and why did Balzac get labeled as a bourgeois writer …

The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* says of bourgeoisie: "This term arose in medieval France, where it referred to the inhabitants of walled towns. These townspeople practiced arts and crafts and occupied an intermediate position in the economic and social scale between the rural landlords and peasantry." But by the nineteenth century this group in society had become synonymous with capitalists, small and large. They were usually employers rather than employees. In this regard Balzac who always hoped to find a way to make himself rich could be seen as part of the bourgeoisie. His vigour and industry and desire for fame might also have contributed. But they go on, "The word *bourgeois* retains its practical utility chiefly in discussions of art and manners, where it usually is used disparagingly to characterize a concern for material interests and respectability, with a tendency toward mediocrity." This would be a reasonable fit for Hercule Poirot except for the mediocrity. Those 'little grey cells' were never mediocre.

And the curious thing there was that a number of interesting people were called Bourgeois. There was León Bourgeois who won the Nobel Prize for Peace in 1920 for his role in setting up the League of Nations. There was Louise Bourgeois who was a well-known French sculptor. There was Loys Bourgeois "Huguenot composer who wrote, compiled, and edited many melodic settings of Psalms in the Geneva Psalter"; he had moved from Paris to Geneva and become a friend of John Calvin but he was sent to prison for "tampering" with the accepted Psalm tunes. "Bourgeois based his Psalm settings on French texts by the celebrated poet Clément Marot and the leading theologian Theodore Beza".

I enjoyed that little diversion into the mysteries behind a word. You might also enjoy Balzac's comment to the Countess Maffei in 1837: "I find people very impertinent when they say I am deep and then try to know me in five minutes. Between you and me, I am not deep, but very wide, and it takes time to walk around me."

Excuse me now while I try to track down a 'celebrated poet' I have never heard of and a 'leading theologian' who is equally unknown to me …

*

August 19: Edward Hincks

*

I was going to write a little piece on those anonymous people, Scribes, if not Pharisees, but then I came upon this interesting article by C. B. F. Walker writing on Cuneiform in *Reading the Past*, which is a reminder that scribes were not always anonymous: "Scribes wrote their names on tablets as early as the Fara period (*c.* 2600 BC). Most of the names have no great significance, but a

few are of particular interest. Enheduanna, the daughter of Sargon I, and high priestess of the moongod Nanna at Ur, is one of the few female scribes known from Mesopotamia, and the earliest named author in history; her composition, named after its first line, nin-me-sár-ra, 'Lady of all aspects of life', is a celebration of the goddess Inanna. The next royal scribe is Ashurbanipal, king of Assyria, over 1,600 years later. Although on the whole the literary texts do not record their authorship, a catalogue preserved at Nineveh gives us a list of the authors of some of the best known compositions such as Sin-liqi-unninni, editor of the Gilgamesh series, and Lu-nanna, author of the Etana epic. A few texts are attributed to the god Ea or the mythical sage Adapa. Later scribes give not only their own names and the names of their fathers but also the names of an earlier ancestor, the founder of the family or scribal dynasty, and many of these ancestors are identical with the scribes named in the list of authors.

"The scribes often describe themselves simply as dubsar, but sometimes give themselves other titles such as dubsar tur, 'junior scribe' (for instance Nur-Aya who copied out the Old Babylonian 'Flood story' of Atra-hasis), or *masmassu*, 'exorcist'. In a special class was the 'scribe of Enuma Anu Enlil', meaning the scribe of the astrological series entitled 'When the gods Anu and Enlil' – in effect a professional astrologer."

But then I came upon this statement—"There is no doubt that Hincks in particular made significant contributions for which he has been given little credit"—and I thought I would give him the 'honour' of a date. He was an Irish clergyman and although he seriously neglected his church in Co Down, being off exploring in the Middle East rather than at home composing sermons, he did do some memorable work in bringing ancient cuneiform tablets back from obscurity and forgottenness. Wikipedia says of him, "Hincks' greatest achievement was the decipherment of the ancient language and writing of Babylon and Assyria, Akkadian cuneiform."

Yet what we have from the past depends on what survived fire and flood, what has been dug up so far, what wasn't broken up, re-used, or dispersed before its significance was realised … As C. B. F. Walker says, "The accidents of destruction and recovery have somewhat distorted our picture of the history and development of Mesopotamia. Some periods are extremely well known. The fall of the Ur III empire as a consequence of an Elamite raid in 2004 BC resulted in the accidental burial of huge archives in the ruins of Umma, Puzrish-Dagan and Girsu; only a fraction of the tablets from these sites have been published so far. Similarly the breaking of Babylon's domination of the south by the kings of the new Sealand Dynasty in the time of Samsuiluna (1726BC) and the collapse of the First Dynasty of Babylon itself with the Hittite raid on Babylon in 1595 BC left large libraries for the archaeologist at Larsa and Sippar. Most famous of all is the library of Ashurbanipal at Nineveh, a priceless source for the reconstruction of Babylonian and Assyrian literature, which comes to us courtesy of the Babylonians and Medes who sacked Nineveh in 612 BC. On the other hand many historical developments are still quite obscure because for long periods we have no significant archives. We have the impression, for instance, that there was a low level of economic activity in Babylonia for a century or two after the end of the First Dynasty of Babylon and again after the end of the Kassite Dynasty; but does the absence of tablets really imply this, or does it only mean that the country was at peace and no one's library was being burnt down?"

*

August 20: H. P. Lovecraft

*

"In the nineteen-twenties, the horror story pendulum swung back to America again and the dominance of the Poe-like recluse, H. P. Lovecraft. He created a new style of tale with his accounts of a mythical race of beings, the Cthulu Mythos, lurking just beneath the surface of every-day life and ready to come amongst us if only a few foolhardy citizens would release them."

Peter Haining in his collection *The Hell of Mirrors*.

Lovecraft was seen in his time as a worthy successor to Edgar Alan Poe. His mysterious and macabre stories turned up regularly in pulp magazines like *Weird Tales*. It was there he published

his first Cthulhu story, 'The Call of Cthulhu', which begins, "The most merciful thing in the world, I think, is the inability of the human mind to correlate all its contents. We live on a placid island of ignorance in the midst of black seas of infinity, and it was not meant that we should voyage far. The sciences, each straining in its own direction, have hitherto harmed us little; but some day the piecing together of dissociated knowledge will open up such terrifying vistas of reality, and our frightful position therein, that we shall either go mad from the revelation or flee from the deadly light into the peace and safety of a new dark age."

To piece together these glimpses of a world in which evil was powerful in our far past and Cthulhu ruled the narrator uses those standbys, "an old newspaper item and the notes of a dead professor", but Lovecraft used, in the words of August Derleth, his own mysterious book. "To further implement the Mythos (of Cthulhu), Lovecraft wrote of and sometimes quoted from a shunned and terrible book, the *Necronomicon* of the mad Arab, Abdul Alhazred, which contained shudder-some and frightening hints of the Great Old Ones who lurk just beyond the consciousness of man and make themselves visible or manifest from time to time in their unceasing attempts to regain their sway over Earth and its races. For this book Lovecraft drew up a 'history and chronology' so convincing that many a librarian and bookdealer has been called upon to supply copies. In brief, the book, originally entitled *Al Azif* was written circa A.D. 730 at Damascus by Abdul Alhazred, 'a mad poet of Sana, in Yemen, who is said to have flourished during the period of the Ommiade Caliphs.' Thereafter, its history was as follows:

'Translated into Greek as the *Necronomicon*, A.D. 950 by Theodorus Philetas.

'Burnt by Patriarch Michael A.D. 1050 (i.e. Greek text … Arabic text now lost).

'Olaus Wormius translates Greek into Latin, A.D. 1228.

'Latin and Greek editions suppressed by Pope Gregory IX, A.D. 1232.

'Black letter edition. Germany — 1440?

'Greek text printed in Italy — 1500-1550.

'Spanish translation of Latin text — 1600?'

Lovecraft can't really be compared to Poe but I thought he understood very well how to make the unbelievable and macabre half-believable …

*

August 21: Will Ogilvie

*

Barbara Falk, writing of her Pirani ancestors in *No Other Home*, said, "The Pirani business during the period between 1859-60 was located in Main Street, and Main Street was the focus of life in Ballarat. According to their names and the evidence of tombstones, the clearly distinguishable groups in Main Street numbered a total of sixty and comprised: twenty-three Germans, eight Frenchmen, six Scandinavians, three Italians, three Spaniards, various central Europeans, and about eighteen Jews, perhaps half of whom are also listed in other groups. Many, of course, with European names may have been Americans."

When I first came upon the poem 'The Queensland Drover' with its verse—

There are men from every land, from Spain and France and Flanders,

They're a well-mixed pack, both white and black, the Queensland Overlanders.

—I thought maybe Al Grassby should've gone around quoting it as early evidence of multiculturalism. It also had Will Ogilvie as its author. But when I came upon the poem in *Bush Ballads of Australia* I see its author is given as Anon. Of course behind every Anon is a Someone and the style is similar to Ogilvie's. John Manifold had the strange experience, when he was out collecting bush ballads, to find his own poem about Ned Kelly written twenty years before given to him as being the work of Anon. But was Ogilvie ever in Queensland or likely to be writing on Queensland drovers?

His verse 'A Wildflower by the Way' has the pretty girl on the banks of the Barwon and his 'How the Fire Queen Crossed the Swamp' seems to be set in south-west Queensland but are his verses a reliable guide? Some of them such as 'The Last Muster' are very savage—

And I said, "Then has God repented because He sent no rain?
And has God looked down in His pity on the poor dumb beasts He has slain?"
But the drover turned in his saddle and answered, his eyes in mine,
"Not so, for the beasts were slaughtered by man of his greed's design:

"God gave to them feed and water and pastures so wild and wide
They had fed him a thousand million from here to the ocean side;
But man in his greed came after and fenced them on hill and plain,
And cursed the God in His heaven that would not send them His rain;

"And man's be the blame of the bleaching bone and the shame of the rotting hide,
And the pity of lorn lambs crying alone on the wind-swept mountain-side,
Of the weak horse down in his harness, of the bullock dead by the dray,
Of the moan of the thirsty cattle for ever and ever and aye!"

while others are lighter and happier …

In his time Ogilvie was spoken of in the same breath as Paterson and Lawson but they have kept their place and he has largely been forgotten. The reasons are probably instructive. Ogilvie was born in Scotland and came to Australia as a young man and worked predominantly in the outback of Queensland, NSW, and South Australia. The far inland fascinated him and he seems to have had little interest in city life. He got his work accepted by *The Bulletin* and other magazines and papers of the time but he was never one of a literary group, a *Bulletin* crowd, nor did his lifestyle demand attention. He wasn't rushing off to the Boer War or lying drunk in a Sydney street. He seems instead to have been happiest on horseback. But perhaps most damaging to his reputation as an Australian poet was the simple fact that he didn't spend long enough here. Just a few vital years. And then he went back to Scotland. We, very definitely, are not going to put the imprimatur of greatness on to a man we can't realistically claim as our own. But I think the loss is ours …

*

August 22: Dorothy Parker

*

FOR A LADY WHO MUST WRITE VERSE

Unto seventy years and seven,
  Hide your double birthright well—
You, that are the brat of Heaven
  And the pampered heir to Hell.

Let your rhymes be tinsel treasures,
  Strung and seen and thrown aside.
Drill your apt and docile measures
  Sternly as you drill your pride.

Show your quick, alarming skill in
  Tidy mockeries of art;
Never, never dip your quill in
  Ink that rushes from your heart.

When your pain must come to paper,
  See it dust, before the day;
Let your night-light curl and caper,
  Let it lick the words away.

Never print, poor child, a lay on
  Love and tears and anguishing,
Lest a cooled, benignant Phaon
  Murmur, "Silly little thing!"

Dorothy Parker

*

August 23: W. E. Henley

*

My image of William Henley was of the ultimate in Grumpy Old Men but I just came upon his verses for 'Margaritae Sorori'—

A late lark twitters from the quiet skies;
And from the west,
Where the sun, his day's work ended,
Lingers as in content,
There falls on the old grey city
An influence luminous and serene,
A shining peace.

The smoke ascends
In a rosy and golden haze. The spires
Shine, and are changed. In the valley
Shadows rise. The lark sings on. The sun,
Closing his benediction,
Sinks, and the darkening air
Thrills with a sense of the triumphing night—
Night with her train of stars
And her great gift of sleep.

So be my passing!
My task accomplished and the long day done,
My wages taken, and in my heart
Some late lark singing,
Let me be gathered to the quiet west,
The sundown splendid and serene,
Death.

—and I felt that he too had found moments of peace, within himself, with the wider world, that were worth sharing. And no one would dream of calling a male poet, no matter how many larks and sunsets they introduce, 'silly little thing'.

"Wendy. Girl's name invented by J.M. Barrie and given to a character in his play *Peter Pan* (1904). A friend of Barrie's was the poet W.E. Henley who, indeed, used to call him 'Friend'. Henley's daughter, four-year-old Margaret, echoed this but, unable to pronounce her r's, distorted it to 'Fwendy' or 'Fwendy-Wendy'. Margaret died at the age of six, but her expression lives on through the play, and the subsequent novel, and all the 'Wendy' houses that followed."

Nigel Rees in *Cassell's Dictionary of Word and Phrase Origins*.

Perhaps both the poem and his glum moods were his way of coping …

*

August 24: Sir Max Beerbohm

*

Max Beerbohm, humourist and caricaturist, wrote only one novel. *Zuleika Dobson*. It made his name as a novelist. Zuleika comes to Oxford to stay with her grandfather, the Warden of Judas

College. She gets off the train—"Ere it had yet stopped, the door of one carriage flew open, and from it, in a white travelling-dress, in a toque a-twinkle with fine diamonds, a lithe and radiant creature slipped nimbly down to the platform."

It is a farce but Zuleika and the young Duke who promises to do away with himself for love of her, are both rather tedious self-indulgent posturing characters. The attraction of the book to readers in Beerbohm's time was probably its light and witty style (it came out in 1911) but I thought its attraction might now be for the picture it paints of turn-of-the-century Oxford, of its students and dons and attitudes and quirks, and more particularly for its disquisitions on ideas about love, honour, and death. Predominantly death. As Beerbohm has the young Duke ponder, "Byron!—he would be all forgotten to-day if he had lived to be a florid old gentleman with iron-grey whiskers, writing very long, very able letters to "The Times" about the Repeal of the Corn Laws. Yes, Byron would have been that. It was indicated in him. He would have been an old gentleman exacerbated by Queen Victoria's invincible prejudice against him, her brusque refusal to "entertain" Lord John Russell's timid nomination of him for a post in the Government … Shelley would have been a poet to the last. But how dull, how very dull, would have been the poetry of his middle age!—a great unreadable mass interposed between him and us … Did Byron, mused the Duke, know what was to be at Missolonghi? Did he know that he was to die in service of the Greeks whom he despised? Byron might not have minded that. But what if the Greeks had told him, in so many words, that they despised *him*? How would he have felt then? Would he have been content with his potations of barley-water?" Having turned Oxford upside-down the book ends with Zuleika calling for her railway guide to see how to get a train to Cambridge …

"The present railway station, built in the 1860s, replaced a wooden structure which had been scheduled for demolition for nearly a century, but was immortalized by the fact that on its No. 2 Platform, on the very first page of Beerbohm's *Zuleika Dobson*, Zuleika stepped off the Paddington train to be met by the Warden of Judas."

From *Oxford* by Jan Morris.

I found myself wondering how Beerbohm *really* felt about Oxford and the groves of academia.

*

August 25: Thea Astley

*

Beachmasters and *The Long Green Shore* are novels. But they both draw attention to sidelights of the Pacific War and raise questions about the sanity of politicians and generals …

'In the weeks before the last troops pulled out as the war ended, or they said it had, some giant bomb *long wé long wé*, bringing it all to an abrupt close, he watched horrified and close to tears as Yankee bulldozers shoveled tons of food ammunition guns tractors jeeps still in their crates demountable buildings radios, oh everything, *olting*, off a southern point into the deep running tides of the Channel. The water hissed and sucked and swallowed army furniture, road-making equipment, rescue boats and generators with blue indifference. The Channel ate and ate and the trucks kept going and coming, crammed with gear and the bulldozers kept shoving until even they, and then the carrier trucks, were propelled driverless into the Pacific on a mound so high that the driving cabins of the monster waste-heap could be seen at low water.

Tommy had stood staring with a group of islanders as machines disappeared into the sea and he had run forward alongside the second last of the trucks, pleading with them not to do it.

He yelled in French, in English, in Seaspeak.

'Shift your goddam ass!' the driver had roared, revving up and preparing to jump from the cabin.

The G.I. was fed up with the place, the stinking heat, the black stupes who got in the way. He'd picked up a dose somewhere, too, and the drugs in his system were taking a goddam time about working. He swung his truck close to the yowling black and reaching down from his cabin gave him a shove. 'Haul ass!' he screamed again. Christ! The mother-fucker seemed to be crying. Christ!

Then the driver had leapt and taken Tommy down with him onto the coral. They were both skin ripped and bloody. 'Oh you stupid son of a bitch!' the G.I. said, smearing away at his own bleeding skin.

Tommy let his blood drip down his fingers, down from his knees and watched the last truck plunge into the Channel.

There was nothing anyone could do about it. The dangerous gutters along the coast were nagged by tides. The equipment could never be pulled out.

Nothing was left behind but abandoned Quonset huts, fifty miles of new road the weather would claw at and memories of insanely wasted wealth.

For a long time the island felt empty.'

Thea Astley in *Beachmasters*.

'From the last Christmas of the Second World War, until the war ended, two brigades of the Sixth Australian Infantry Division fought an obscure but at times bitter and bloody campaign along the savage north coast of New Guinea.

When the war ended, and the snakeskin drums sounded the word through the mountains, they were within sight of the deathly valley of the Sepik.

This campaign from Aitape to Wewak was an unnecessary one. The Japanese army in the area was isolated from the rest of the Pacific. They occupied no strategically important ground: they showed no aggressive intent.

This campaign was war in its classic wastefulness. It was fought for no apparent reason, other than that Australia might claim another Division in action; and, perhaps, strengthen her voice with their bodies at the Peace table.

To that end, a few hundred men died.

I know it is not such a great number in the millions of dead — but it is bitter that they might have died in a better cause.'

John Hepworth in *The Long Green Shore*.

Although I haven't thought about it very deeply I am inclined to think that Thea Astley (perhaps alongside Rodney Hall) is one of the best writers Australia has produced. True, I find many of her novels rather depressing and her characters hard to read about—yet her command of language and the sly little bits of humour and irony she slips in so cleverly and often so unexpectedly always make her worth reading.

*

August 26: Eleanor Dark

*

Eleanor Dark is remembered for her major opus, her history of Australia, *Timeless Land*, and for leaving her home in the Blue Mountains for the use of writers. But I could not have come up with anything else she wrote, not even to save my life, and I suspect most people would feel the same. Of course, being remembered for one book is better than being completely forgotten …

The other day someone donated some books to a stall and among them was her *Storm of Time*. Was this in a similar vein, I wondered, or did she write about a wide range of things? The book proved to be another historical novel—though this time playing itself out in a smaller arena, the years of Hunter, King and Bligh. And it struck me that Dark is an unfairly neglected writer. She is remembered via the Eleanor Dark centre 'Varuna' in the Blue Mountains but is she remembered for herself and her work? Her *Storm of Time* begins—"The settlement lay as if beaten down into

submission under a fierce sunlight, to which the smoke from surrounding fires lent a sullen, orange glow. Denuded of its native trees, exposed to the merciless glare of midsummer, it huddled up the slope from the water's edge, its little houses and the fences which enclosed them fired with dust, its tiny patches of garden scorched brown, its narrow, haphazard streets almost deserted. The few larger buildings — the Governor's house, the gaol, the hospital, the granary — served only to emphasise the general appearance of poverty. The arms of the windmill hung motionless, and inside its protective paling the Tank Stream, the colony's water supply, was disturbingly low. Only the harbour and the sky looked clean — two blue, brilliant, polished plates, between which the imprisoned air shimmered with heat.

After so dry a spring and summer, earlier hopes of a bountiful harvest had been disappointed. The pastures were parched, the cattle skin and bones; ponds were either dry or mere muddy shallows; great tracts of forest were blackened by fire; and still, in the outlying districts, the nights were pricked by the glow of creeping flames, and the days hazy with smoke.

Thanks to the relentless, blazing sky that spread over them day after unendurable day, the colonists knew now that the price of wheat would not be lowered after all; dysentery reduced them to a weakness from which they felt no incentive to recover; almost everyone from the Governor down to the children — restless over their pothooks in the makeshift school-room suffered from a painful inflammation of the eyes; there was never enough to eat, and what there was did not tempt the appetite in a temperature which had stood as high as 107° in the shade.

It was the 26th day of January, 1799. The little township of Sydney on the shores of Port Jackson had attained its eleventh birthday, but no celebration marked the event. Few of its inhabitants, indeed (though there were a few among them who would allow the country some virtues), regarded it as an occasion for rejoicing. It was merely another day of exile and suffering; another day to be endured.

The Governor, John Hunter, elderly and harassed, paused for a moment as he emerged from the Court House door to read the order he had issued yesterday, and which now hung on the wall facing an empty and indifferent street. He did not really want to read it, for it was the fifth that he had proclaimed upon the same subject, and in his heart he did not expect it to be more observed than the others had been. But it gave him a moment's respite between leaving the comparative cool of indoors, and facing the cruel, yellow heat, and the walk to Government House. He was sixty-two, and tired — not only with the weight of advancing years, but with the burden of responsibility for which he was beginning to admit (to himself if not to others) that he was inadequate.

From that September day in 1795 when he had returned to the colony as its second Governor, he had not known an hour's freedom from anxiety. The three years between Governor Phillip's departure and his own succession had so altered the character of the little community that each day confronted him with a fresh shock. For those years had been, under the Lieutenant-Governors Grose and Paterson, a military dictatorship; and not all the polite greetings of officers of the New South Wales Corps could for ever blind him to the fact that a dictatorship, once firmly established, does not willingly relinquish its power."

The book came out in 1948 and although an essay into the past it is at times oddly prophetic about the future. For instance as when Governor King receives a letter from the French explorer Baudin: "You will presently remain the peaceful possessors of their heritage, as the small number of those surrounding you will not long exist … " (He is of course referring to the indigenous people not the French.)

"King's frown deepened. There was something in that dispassionate and unemotional statement which shocked him. He did not like to have his mind thus thrust into the future, nor to be made to see himself as an instrument of destruction. In that prophecy, certainly, the Governor saw a solution — the grim and simple solution of gaining one's end by the quiet extermination of those who hampered it. Mr. King, however, in a distressful moment of perception, heard a warning in it, and glimpsed an accumulating burden of guilt which the next generation, and the next, and the next

must inherit, until a distant posterity should earn, perhaps by some means which he did not even try to imagine, a sad and belated absolution … ”

*

August 27: Dom Helder Camara (d)

*

Sheila Cassidy wrote in *Prayer for Pilgrims*, “In October 1975 there began the drama that was to lead to my imprisonment and subsequent expulsion from Chile. At the request of a priest friend I treated a fugitive from the secret police, and a week later was arrested and interrogated. There is no call to repeat the story of my imprisonment, which is described in *Audacity to Believe*; suffice it to say that I was tortured for a number of hours, spent three weeks in solitary confinement and five weeks in a detention camp with over a hundred other women political prisoners.”

Sometimes as the TV and the newspapers and books come at me with their load of misery I just try to turn it all off. But Sheila Cassidy has a much more sensible suggestion. “A friend of mine who had been host to the Brazilian Archbishop of Recife, Dom Helder Camara, told me that the Archbishop used the newspaper for his ‘meditation’. I found the idea fascinating and saw how easy it was:

Terrorists hi-jack plane:
Lord, forgive them … comfort the passengers …
Millionairess weds plumber:
Lord, may they be happy. Inspire her to be generous …
October Election forecast:
Lord, help us to choose wisely. Strengthen our leaders …
make us all mindful of the poorer nations …

“Used in this way, there is no headline that cannot be a springboard to prayer. We can use this technique in different ways: as a serious basis for prayer or rather in the way we would share interesting items with someone who is sitting with us while we read. What could be more logical than to refer the tragedies and joys of our world to the God who created it?”

And Chile was truly a tragedy. To usher in two decades of brutal dictatorship when the Allende government could simply have been voted out of power at the next election …

Betty Richardson Nute in a little booklet, *Helder Camara’s Latin America*, writes, “And then … Dom Helder speaks, the loud, warm impassioned voice that issues from his frail body filling all space. In a fragment of time he is one with his audience, telling them how each can work for liberation by making people aware that they can control their own lives. It is important not to rush into a decision to work for liberation in the heat of emotion, he says, but to give it careful thought. There will be a course of instruction, followed by the signing of a pact, then work in teams of five to fifteen people; the struggle calls for courage, the courage of David facing Goliath, armed only with a slingshot and five stones; faith in God, trust in faith, trust in justice, trust in the good, trust in love.

Dom Helder Camara, Archbishop of Recife and Olinda, champion of the poor, keeps presidents awake and has caused the transfer of two generals in three years. On the day of the 1964 coup he is said to have met with the outgoing President Goulart in the morning and with the head of the incoming junta, General Castelo Branco, in the afternoon, and to have been received with equal respect by both.

“So when he takes the stands he does, he can afford to do so because the powerful protect him?” people may ask. The answer is clearly No, for powerful interests, such as individual landowners in the North East, use every weapon against him they feel they can. “They” call him a communist, have murdered his secretary and several of his aides, bombed his house several times, and threaten his life sometimes nightly over the telephone. Most agree that what opens the doors of government for him is first and foremost the transcendent power of his personality, his wonderful

ease of relationship. He himself says that as a churchman he can afford to say things which it is dangerous for others, including his aides, to say.

If one had to sum up Dom Helder in one word it might well be "simplicity". A friend captures much of the essence of the man as he describes his patience, his humility, his enjoyment of the most ordinary things, his celebration of each new day as a holiday. "He combines in a unique way both intense suffering and a spirit of joyous abandon … wrapping his immense goodness and power in an impish human smile."

And what of Dom Helder's own writings? His 'meditations' were famous … and he produced them in great numbers. The other day I came across a collection published as *A Thousand Reasons for Living*. Some are little wise 'moments' …

Do people weigh you down?

Don't carry them on your shoulders.
Take them into your heart.

But what I hadn't expected was the delightful whimsy in some of his writings. One piece begins: In the full bus, packed to overflowing actually, everyone's attention was drawn to a small boy holding a scrap of wood with extreme care. One lady couldn't bear it any longer and asked him why he was being so careful about this worthless scrap of wood.

He explained, 'I am taking a little ant for a ride. She's my great friend. It's her first trip in a bus.'

*

August 28: Leo Tolstoy

*

John Ormerod Greenwood in *Quaker Encounters* gives these little sidelights on Tolstoy. "Above all, it was these two (J.J. Neave and John Bellows) who cemented Tolstoy's acquaintance with the Quakers; after lunching with him *en famille* Neave said, 'I never met anyone who seemed so deeply baptized into the wrongs and sufferings of humanity, or more intent on rectifying them'. Bellows expounded Quaker doctrine of the Universal and Saving Light, and the rejection of the letter of Scripture, with which Tolstoy eagerly agreed: 'If you go by the letter, you will end by having sects without end; but if you are led by the Spirit, it will bring you into one-ness of God. Yes, I am glad you said what you did: I feel — what do you say for it — ?' 'Unity,' I suggested. 'Yes, unity. I feel unity with you.' It was the beginning of a really intimate friendship between the novelist and the Gloucester printer; they walked about Moscow together, rode on the trams and talked of everything. When Bellows saw Tolstoy again at the end of 1899 he felt 'the same deep and precious unity of spirit with him' and Tolstoy grasping both his hands, said with emotion, 'I have great love for you'. Their correspondence continued to the end of Bellows' life.

In spite of this, Bellows was not overawed; he had not sympathy for 'Tolstoi's teaching that *all* government is abhorrent to the spirit of Christianity' nor for his attitude to money as 'inherently sinful'. 'He is narrow-minded in some directions (as we *all* are, inherently!),' Bellows wrote. But some younger Quakers eagerly agreed with Tolstoy; and we must now speak of the growing influence of his ideas.

When he met Thomas and Anne Marsh in 1887, Tolstoy had come through the spiritual crisis which in its intensity and isolation so much resembled that of George Fox; and by 1890 he had become a world prophet with converts in Austria, Holland, England, the United States and other countries as well as Russia itself: 'an unseen brotherhood reaching round the world had suddenly made itself manifest'.

Tolstoy himself recognised that his spiritual evolution had been a life-long process. He dated its origin from the vision which had come to him as a young officer in the Crimea, of a new form of Christianity freed from superstition and priestcraft. But when in the 1870's he began to be openly 'religious' he had first attempted to come to terms with the Orthodox faith, keeping the feasts and fasts of the Russian church with rigorous precision and seeking out its thinkers and saints. Then in

full reaction he set about a systematic 'Criticism of Dogmatic Theology' and an 'Examination and Harmony of the Gospels' (these works written in the 1890's were not circulated until much later, and published later still). Nor could his fables and expository works be issued except in surreptitious lithographed copies; *A Confession* (1879) and *What I believe* (1880) were published in Geneva in 1888, and the most famous, *The Kingdom of God is within you*, written between 1890 and 1893 appeared in Russian in Berlin in 1894. It had been preceded by a French version published in 1893, of which the censor said 'This is the most harmful of all books I have ever had occasion to ban'. Gandhi, the most eminent of many disciples, claimed to have read *The Kingdom of God is within you* in 1893-94."

But things weren't always straightforward. Tolstoy became involved with famine relief and later with support of an oppressed sect, the Dukhobors, who believed in pacifism and communalism, and suffered much persecution. To help them, "Tolstoy thought of the abandoned novel which lay, half-written in his desk; but there were more than artistic obstacles to completing it. He had vowed to write no more novels; if he finished it, it could not be published in Russia, and if it was published he had declared that anything he wrote henceforward should be public property (he had given the copyright of works before 1883 to his wife Sonia). What he did *not* foresee among all these difficulties was the offence which his book would cause to his Quaker allies.

In *Resurrection* Tolstoy combined a plot of Dickensian melodrama about a prostitute accused of murdering one of her clients, with autobiographical recollections of a girl whom he had seduced in his youth on his sister's estate. The whole was well larded with Tolstoyan sermons; but in Quaker eyes the sermons did not compensate for the brothel scenes or the seduction of the youthful, innocent, deep-bosomed, slightly-squinting, black-eyed Katusha, which is described with the brilliance and something of the relish of the opening of Defoe's *Moll Flanders*. When the English translation was ready, it was banned by Smith's and Mudie's circulating libraries, and was nevertheless (or therefore) enormously successful. At home, Sonia Tolstoy protested both on moral and on financial grounds; in England, the Meeting for Sufferings rang with outrage. John Bellows returned from his own pocket the contribution which Tolstoy made to Quaker funds from the royalties on the book (and the committee then insisted on reimbursing John Bellows). To the complaints of Bellows about the book's 'pernicious influence' Tolstoy replied after a long interval, on 7 December 1901: 'I can say that when I wrote the book I abhorred the lust with all my heart, and one of the chief aims of the book was to express that abhorrence … I think we shall be judged by our consciences and by God, not for the result of our deeds, but for our intentions. And I hope that my intentions were not bad.'

Probably not. He proposed that the Dukhobor sect be awarded a Nobel Prize. But despite the publicity the book is rarely read or even mentioned these days …

*

August 29: Betty Biggs

*

When I read Nan Brown's *Antarctic Housewife* more than 30 years ago it seemed impossibly remote in both time and place. She was a young Australian woman married to an English wireless operator who was stationed on the island of South Georgia in the South Atlantic. The island was still a base for whaling in the 1950s and had some pretty rough and ready characters based there. The island's policeman was Basil Biggs and he lived there with his wife Betty and their children. Nan Brown said of his wife, "Though I am basically a shy person I must have appeared rather a worldly figure to Betty who, having been born and brought up in the Falkland Islands, had seen nothing of the outside world. … Betty had arrived in South Georgia six months previously when Basil, a regular constable in the Falkland Islands Police, had accepted the position of policeman on the island. … Betty usually wore her shoulder length blonde hair out loose or coiled in braids about her head, in a style which gave her a distinct Nordic appearance. She shunned make-up, was extremely casual about her dress, and at all times had an air of motherly serenity far beyond her years which absolutely nothing could upset. Not even three lively children. … Fortunately Betty, an

avid reader and philatelist, was aware of their need; though nearly four years were to elapse between leaving Port Stanley and their eventual return to school. During this time they must surely have been the world's most isolated children, as they had no contact whatever with any other youngsters."

At the time I could not begin to envisage a time in the future when our paths might come briefly to run along the same streets. But when we got to the Falklands in 1981 Basil was at the Cape Pembroke lighthouse near the entrance to the harbour at Port Stanley and Betty worked in the Post Office. I was reminded of this the other day when a friend sent me a copy of the *Falkland Islands Newsletter* (Oct 2009) which had an obituary for Betty. Over the years that shy young woman had gained immensely in knowledge of stamps and in confidence in speaking out on public matters.

She started out working for a family for 10 shillings a month, worked at the hospital, married Basil recently returned from WW2 in India and Burma, and went to South Georgia for 16 years. She returned to Stanley and went to work in the Post Office and became an expert on the stamps of the Falklands and South Georgia. "She also built up a large collection of stamps and later of Falklands and South Georgia books." (I was told in 1981 that sales of Falkland stamps to overseas collectors brought in £62,000 a year; a nice little earner and much more now.) It was Britain's proposed 'leaseback' solution (under which they would *give* the Falklands to Argentina and lease them back) which politicised her; she went out and talked to people and found there was, quite understandably, almost unanimous dismay with the idea. "She served on the South Georgia stamp committee planning new issues and was a mine of information on South Georgia and Falklands people and events" and "She made it her business to ensure that future governors knew her views."

So Here's to Betty! … May she long be Remembered …

*

August 30: John Eldred

*

I came upon this in the non-fiction *Nathaniel's Nutmeg* by Giles Milton—"After no less than eight years of painstaking research into the spice trade, Fitch decided it was time to return home. When he finally reached London, he was surprised to discover that he had become something of a celebrity and that his journal was eagerly sought after by the bards and playwrights of London. One who was particularly interested in his story was a young writer called William Shakespeare who adapted the opening sentence of Fitch's account for his new play *Macbeth*. Fitch had written: 'I did ship myself in a ship of London, called the Tiger, wherein we went for Tripoli in Syria, and from thence we took the way for Aleppo.' In *Macbeth* this is echoed in the words: 'Her husband's to Aleppo gone, master of the *Tiger*.' "—and thought: surely the writer had the wrong play? Surely it was *The Merchant of Venice* or perhaps *Othello* … but no, Shakespeare does have one of the witches in *Macbeth* say:

"A sailor's wife had chestnuts in her lap,
And mounch'd, and mounch'd, and mounch'd:
Give me, quoth I:
Aroint thee, witch! the rump-fed ronyon cries.
Her husband's to Aleppo gone, master o' the Tiger:
But in a sieve I'll thither sail,
And like a rat without a tail,
I'll do, I'll do, and I'll do."

Seton Lloyd in *Foundations in the Dust* about archeological explorations in Mesopotamia (Iraq) wrote "An Elizabethan merchant, to be sure, such as Eldred (concerning whom it is interesting to remember that he sailed from London to Tripoli *en route* for Aleppo in a ship called the *Tiger* — perhaps the same whose master is mentioned by the witches in *Macbeth*) could be excused some ignorance in the matter. And he in fact referred to Baghdad, which he visited on several occasions, as 'New Babylon' and confused the 'Olde City' of that name with 'Aqar Qûf,

which he called 'the tower of Babel — almost as high as the stone work of Paule's steeple in London'."

Eldred wrote a book of his travels *The voyage of M. John Eldred to Trypolis in Syria by Sea, and from thence by Land and River to Babylon and Balsara. 1583.* So were John Eldred and Ralph Fitch both part of the Levant Company? Which one inspired Shakespeare? And were either of them Master of the *Tiger*? It doesn't seem very likely, not if they spent years there in their travels—and 'taking' ship implies going as a passenger. So do we actually know who was the Master all these centuries later?

In fact both Fitch and Eldred shipped out as merchants on the *Tiger* on the 12th February 1583. Both Eldred and Fitch published their accounts when they finally returned home again; Eldred writing, that 'upon Shrove Monday 1583' he 'departed out of London in the ship called the Tiger, in the company of Mr. John Newbury, Mr. Ralph Fitch, and six or seven other honest merchants'; and Fitch writing, 'I did ship myself in a ship of London, called the Tiger, wherein we went to Tripolis in Syria, and from thence we took the way for Aleppo'. Eldred went as far as Bassorah on the Persian Gulf and remained there to trade while the others went on to India and Ralph reached Burma, becoming the first Englishman to see the country. Not all the merchants reached home safely but Eldred and Fitch did; finding themselves both wealthy men and minor celebrities. Eldred built himself a large house in the country and called it 'Nutmeg House'. Fitch lived into the time of James I then disappears. I have not found births for them but Eldred lived from 1552 to 1632 …

And if Eldred confused Babylon with Baghdad then surely Shakespeare was equally confused? What was an Elizabethan merchant venture and an Elizabethan ship doing in the story of an eleventh century Scottish king? Was he poking sly fun at someone or something? Or was he, wisely, drawing attention to the success of Elizabethan adventurers like Eldred and Fitch?

*

August 31: Anon

*

Hymns are rarely anonymous, though some come under the catchall of 'Trad' but *there* is something rather anonymous about those names that sit there at the top of them. Open a hymnbook at random and see if you recognise any of the names. I came upon an interesting book called *Great Hymns and their Stories* by W. J. Limmer Sheppard and he has stories such as this one: "During the Thirty Years War (1620 to 1648) the little town of Eilenburg, in Saxony, suffered severely. The Austrians sacked it once and the Swedes twice. The overcrowding caused by the influx of refugees from the countryside produced the plague, which ravaged the city four times during the period of war. Only one minister of the town, Martin Rinkart, survived this scourge and it often fell to his lot to take as many as fifty funerals in a single day! Famine was yet another of the miseries of war which left its mark on Eilenburg, while of its thousand houses nearly eight hundred were laid in ruins.

"But at last came the great day when news arrived that the Peace of Westphalia had been signed and the war had come to an end. The Elector of Saxony at once ordered Thanksgiving Services to be held in every church, and also selected a text from which ministers were to preach, Ecclesiasticus 50: 22: "Now bless ye the God of all, who everywhere doeth great things, who exalteth our days from the womb, and dealeth with us according to His mercy. May He grant us joyful hearts, and may peace be in our days forever."

"A splendid text for the occasion, and one which so struck Martin Rinkart that, as he pondered over it, its words gradually shaped themselves into the form of a hymn, which was doubtless sung at his own Thanksgiving Service, has been translated into other languages, and is now used everywhere. Its notes of gladness are intensified when we remember the horrors of war which its author had experienced, and the close of which it first commemorated. How well Rinkart enshrined the text in the hymn can be seen from the first verse, as translated by Miss Winkworth:

Now thank we all our God

With hearts, and hands, and voices,
Who wondrous things hath done,
In Whom His world rejoices;
Who from our mothers' arms
Hath blessed us on our way
With countless gifts of love,
And still is ours to-day.

And the mention of Miss Winkworth is part of the other interest I found in the book: the number of hymns written by women, forgotten women, almost anonymous women certainly, but women whose words have been sung in countless churches and by countless worshippers, men, women, and children. Frances Ridley Havergal, Mary A. Baker, Caroline Maria Noel, Harriet Auber, Elizabeth Glyde, Mary Lee, Harriet Parr, Fanny J. Crosby, Elizabeth Clephane, Ellen H. Gates, Phoebe Brown, Charlotte Elliott and many more …

*

September 1: Edgar Rice Burroughs

*

I can only remember seeing one Tarzan film in my childhood—and the only thing I remember about it is Tarzan leaping on to the back of a giraffe and galloping off! Something which looked extraordinarily uncomfortable—and I doubt if the poor giraffe appreciated it. Tarzan was also a radio serial we could listen to of a late afternoon but I found things like 'Superman' and 'Yes What?' much more gripping. The one thing we liked was Tarzan giving his famous jungle call.

The other day I discovered that the library has a biography of Edgar Rice Burroughs, by Erling B. Holtsmark, so I have been reading it out of curiosity to see how he came to actually create and write his Tarzan books. Burroughs (1875 – 1950) was the son of a businessman and tried almost everything before finding his niche, teacher, soldier, miner, door-to-door salesman, railroad policeman, as well as working in Sears Roebuck, and trying to start his own business. Reduced to a job selling pencil-sharpeners and pawning his wife's jewelry, "he began to write a fantastic tale about a man transported to the far-off planet of Mars, the princess he meets there, and the adventures that the two of them share", no doubt with an extra-sharp pencil. In 1911 he sent it to one of the pulps, *Argosy Magazine*, and they bought it for $400. He then tried a medieval tale, *The Outlaw of Torn*, which he sold in 1912, and began on his signature story, *Tarzan of the Apes*, which he sold for $700, using the pseudonym of Norman Bean.

By his third Tarzan story, *The Beasts of Tarzan*, he was up to $2,500, and by 1921 he had made over $98,000 from his writing. Tarzan remained his staple (and he did at times get tired of him) but he continued to write his stories of John Carter on Mars as well as his Pellucidar series in a kingdom at the centre of the earth and his Venus stories such as *Lost on Venus* which came out in 1932. He also wrote some non-series books such as *The Girl from Hollywood* and *The War Chief*. Holtsmark says the Mars books were a much more fully realised milieu (and included Jeds and Jeddaks) whereas Tarzan was his most developed character.

Critics claimed he had taken Kipling's Mowgli but Burroughs, who had done Latin and classical Greek at school, pointed to the connection between animals and heroes in classical literature. Other critics have pointed to repetition, racism, sexism, poor plotting and cardboard characters; and non-Americans do not always like the underlying belief that an American republic is the best of all possible worlds and can be imposed with impunity on everyone else. But the thing which intrigued me, and which doesn't come through in the films, comics, or radio and TV serials, is that his books were steeped in classical allusions. Troy was for him a useful allegory not a forgotten part of history.

Holtsmark, a classics professor himself, writes, "Although the entire Tarzan construct is a very precise working-out of mythical and classical themes, it is equally clear that the author has drawn not only on classical antiquity for his creation of the apeman; he is also very much anchored in his own age and his own peculiarly American heritage. This latter is most intriguingly manifest in the Amerindian element that has gone into Tarzan's makeup. Burroughs had himself been part of

the Apache wars in the Arizona Territory in the late 1890s. He seems to have conceived a strong respect and empathy with the Indians, which figured prominently in his two later novels, *The War Chief* (published in 1927) and *Apache Devil* (published in 1933). Nor should one dismiss the importance of the incorporation in the composite Tarzan of such traits as were popularly attributed to Indians: stamina, resourcefulness, intimate knowledge of animals and nature, tricksterism, and much else."

*

September 2: Eugene Field

*

Field's little poem about Wynken, Blynken and Nod was in our readers when I was a child. I don't remember what I thought then but when I re-read it I felt it sums up exactly what a children's poem needs. Rhythm, rhyme, a little story, attractive and slightly quirky use of words, an underlying sense of symbols and allegories, and a feeling of safety. His children's poems are probably his best work (and I wondered if his 'Calico Cat' inspired T. S. Eliot) so I was puzzled as to why he wasn't better known.

The answer is possibly that Eugene Field, who worked as a reporter on a number of American newspapers to keep his family fed and clothed, didn't like children—other than his own eight little blessings—and also wrote pornography which enjoyed a vigorous though cautious underground existence among his friends and fellow users. The modern belief that children's writers are nice kind people like Graeme Base has also come to accept that the people we invite into our children's lives are in some way role models as well as authors. Field with his unpleasant hoaxes, his libelous verses, and his nasty secret life doesn't exactly fit the image.

*

September 3: John Le Gay Brereton

*

Many years ago I belonged to a group called the Racehorse Leasing Club of Australia and I used to help send the weekly newsletter out to members round Australia. Just one remains in my mind—a Mr Le Gay Brereton—because it was such a marvelously exotic moniker and I couldn't imagine someone saying 'I am Le Gay Brereton' every time they were asked for their name. But in fact it is a name with a long pedigree in NSW and it threw up the nineteenth-century poet John Le Gay Brereton.

Brian Mathews writes in *Storykeepers*, "On one of these occasions he (Henry Lawson) wrote a few verses entitled 'The Uncultured Rhymer to His Cultured Critics'. This outburst was probably provoked by John Le Gay Brereton – critic, academic, dedicated bookman, a good friend to Lawson and a very strong supporter of his work. Brereton incurred Lawson's displeasure with a simple and well-intended suggestion that the young poet should widen his range of literary reference by broader reading. Lawson's response was surprisingly strident, a sneer in verse:"

My cultured friends, you have come too late
  With your bypath nicely graded.
I've fought thus far on my track of Fate
  And I'll follow the rest unaided.
    The poem ends:
I'll leave you alone in your cultured halls
  To drivel and croak and cavil;
Till your voice goes further than college walls
  Keep out of the tracks we travel.

Though later "he apologised to Brereton for his intemperate rejoinder and asked him to overlook the 'uncultured rhymer' as an aberration" it is not hard to gain a picture of Brereton as a cultured, educated, comfortably-off man at home in a different milieu.

He was a minor poet, true, but an interesting man and a man who tried to be true to his own beliefs which included vegetarianism and a degree of pacifism. The *Australian Dictionary of Biography* says of him "Brereton was not a major writer, but his verse did make a distinct contribution to the development of Australian poetry, while *Landlopers* is a uniquely charming prose idyll. His academic labours place him among the leading humanist scholars of his day, he was a rare academic on familiar terms with creative writers, while his gentle, whimsical, and sometimes melancholy personality made him widely loved and respected" and he was a prolific writer of poems, essays, articles, and letters.

So what of his poems? No one is rushing to reprint his work but fifty years ago he was regularly anthologised alongside Henry Lawson and Banjo Paterson. Unfortunately modern makers of anthologies see no reason to include him and I ploughed through anthology after anthology without success before finally coming up with one poem in *The New Oxford Book of Australian Verse* (Les Murray):

O wistful eyes that haunt the gloom of sleep,
Are you my own remembered from the night
I sat before my glass in dumb affright
And saw my cowering soul afraid to weep?
Perhaps you are his, foreshadowed, when I creep
Behind him and confess the hopeless blight
That wilts the bloom of our supreme delight
—The breath of horror from the unknown deep.

Eyes that have never seen a mother's face,
Have you no mercy that you stare and stare,
Although I never felt the hope I slew?

Wide eyes, but when I kneel to God for grace,
Your steadfast pity deepens my despair;
The darkness I desire is full of you.

'Unborn'

*

September 4: François-René de Chateaubriand

*

There have been some very strange wars. 'The Pastrycooks' War' in Mexico. 'The War of Jenkins' Ear' between England and Spain. And then there was 'The War of the Spanish Succession'. And Chateaubriand, diplomat, writer, traveler, claimed it as his 'child', writing in his *Memoirs*:

"Man is as much deceived by the success of his wishes as by their disappointment: I had asked, contrary to my natural instinct, to go to the Congress of Verona; taking advantage of a prejudice of M. de Villèle's, I had induced him to force M. de Montmorency's hand. Well, the truth of the matter is that my real inclination was not for what I had obtained; I should doubtless have felt somewhat vexed if I had been compelled to stay in England; but soon the idea of going to see Lady Sutton, of making a tour of the three kingdoms, would have overcome the impulse of an artificial ambition which is not part of my nature. God ordained differently, and I left for Verona: hence the change in my life, hence my ministry, the Spanish War, my triumph, and my fall, soon followed by that of the Monarchy.

"My Spanish War, the great political event of my life, was a gigantic undertaking. For the first time the Legitimacy was going to wage war under the White Flag, to fire its first gun-shot after those gun-shots of the Empire which will be audible to the remotest posterity. To bestride Spain with a single step, to succeed on the same soil where the conqueror's arms had met defeat, to do in six months what he was unable to do in seven years, who could have hoped to accomplish

something so prodigious? Yet that is what I did; but how many curses fell upon my head at the gaming-table at which the Restoration had seated me! I had before me a France hostile to the Bourbons, and two great foreign ministers, Prince von Metternich and Mr Canning. Not a day went by but I received letters prophesying disaster, for the war with Spain was not at all popular, either in France or in Europe. Indeed, it was not long after my successes in the Peninsula that my fall occurred.

In our joy at the receipt of the telegraphic dispatch announcing the liberation of the king of Spain, we ministers hurried to the Palace. There I had a presentiment of my fall: I received a bucketful of cold water over my head which restored me to my customary humility. The King and Monsieur did not notice us. Madame la Duchesse d'Angoulême, overjoyed by her husband's triumph, had eyes for nobody. That immortal victim wrote a letter on Ferdinand's deliverance ending with this exclamation, sublime in the mouth of Louis XVI's daughter:

'So it has been proved that one can save an unfortunate king!' "

More unfortunate, surely, the ordinary people caught up in a war merely to place a Bourbon rather than a Habsburg on the Spanish throne … but Chateaubriand as French Foreign Minister in 1823 was the architect of the war to successfully support Ferdinand VII, a very expensive war, with a very limited outcome, and the French people understandably did not see why they should pay for the war, let alone die in it …

*

September 5: 'With this ring I thee wed' …

*

"We use a gold ring to symbolise the importance of marriage without ever thinking about the true cost of those 5 grams of gold. CSIRO scientist Dr Sarah Ryan did. In 2003 she crunched the numbers and found that each wedding ring contained $90 worth of gold and, if dug from the ground at Cadia, cost an average of $57 each. Her calculations at the time showed the Cadia mines had enough gold to produce 50 million wedding rings. To get each ring, the mining company has to move 10 tonnes of rock – the equivalent of 10 Ford Falcons – which is 2 million times the weight of the ring. The machinery required to dig up that rock burns through 10 litres of diesel, which is enough to fuel a four-wheel drive from Sydney to Newcastle.

"Once the ore is at the processing plant, it goes through a giant coffee grinder-like machine that is powered by a 20-megawatt electric motor – the equivalent of 150 medium car engines – and then through more mills and tanks before being pumped to the tailings dam. All of this uses the equivalent of 900 megajoules per ring – 2 per cent of the annual electricity consumption for an average Australian family. Drawing on the coal-fired electricity in New South Wales pumps 270 kilograms of carbon dioxide into the air for every ring produced – enough to fill an average living room with greenhouse gas. Cadia uses an extraction system that involves the gold attaching to very fine air bubbles in long tanks rather than cyanide or mercury. This method does not put toxic chemicals into the environment but it does require a lot of water – 8600 litres per ring. Only 15 per cent of that comes from local freshwater, the equivalent of 120 10-litre household buckets of pure water for every single ring. And for each ring, a newspaper-sized piece of land is destroyed – land that is home to rare trees, vegetation and 22 threatened species of frogs, snakes, bats, birds, mammals and butterflies.

"On the plus side, Ms Ryan has calculated that we get $18 of economic benefits, 40 minutes of employment and the pleasure of owning and wearing the ring. 'Taking a twenty year view – a thirteen year life for each mine plus time for recovery – the same area of land disturbed to mine the ring (0.25 metres) could have provided five steaks. The freshwater (1200 litres) could have irrigated grapes downstream and produced nearly two bottles of wine,' she said. Dr Ryan concluded her essay with the thought: 'You are what you eat is a common expression, I would like to say "We are what we take from our landscapes." In some intrinsic way, people have a dynamic relationship with the land; as we change the land, it changes us. We diminish ourselves if we carelessly diminish our land whether for gold, steaks or wine.' "

Matthew Benns in *Dirty Money*.

And romance writing would never be the same if the hero had to acknowledge the environmental cost as he slips the ring on the heroine's finger …

*

September 6: Elizabeth Ferrars

*

While I was pondering on writing something about mid-list mystery writers, you know those people who write capable mysteries, people like Elizabeth Ferrars, Anthea Fraser, Hazel Holt, Jill Churchill and many many more, but who seem to lack that spark, that gift for characterisation, that ability to paint in a scene with deft strokes, create an atmosphere, grip with their dialogue, puzzle and delight—their books are a handy read but don't stay in the mind—I came upon a quite different mystery. Why do people write and send viruses?

I had always assumed it was to make money in some way. Blackmail. Threats. Diverting accounts. Creating bogus entities. In some way it made them money. But a book called *Towards Zero* pointed out that it was more likely to be anger than greed … the clever writers of viruses in places like Bulgaria were playing out a deep resentment at a system which had promised them jobs and prosperity, a government supported and funded IT revolution, and delivered merely unemployment and failed companies. Viruses are like the person who lashes out wildly and indiscriminately in the real world. That they demonstrate a high degree of wizardry is perhaps their tragedy …

In a way it is a very disturbing thought. Because we cannot know how many computer geeks are out there with a grudge against society, a very large chip on the shoulder, a desire to create unfocussed mischief, a wish to sit back and watch the chaos and the financial losses while they laugh quietly and cynically. I *can* understand the people who hack for money, to prove a political point, to aid the oppressed, to draw public attention to private misbehaviour, to expose government lies. But the furtive world of the virus-maker lies beyond clear cause-and-effect. They will rarely meet their victims face-to-face. They quite often remain unidentified, and even when exposed they rarely show any kind of contrition.

It is almost a relief to come back to the quiet but capable hands of mid-list writers like Elizabeth Ferrars. Their world is explicable and justice of a sort is always done.

So what of Ms Ferrars? She was born Morna Doris MacTaggart in Rangoon in 1907 and had an interesting life of travel and her husband was Professor of Botany at Edinburgh University. I came away from a little look at her life with the curious sense that her life was more interesting than her plots. And perhaps in that diversion is a clue to those who write viruses. Their lives are less interesting than their plots.

*

September 7: Dr John Polidori

*

Peter Haining and Peter Tremayne in *The Un-Dead* write, "The prolific Dublin playwright Dion Boucicault (1820-1890), who wrote more than 140 plays, and whose successes included *The Corsican Brothers*, *The Colleen Bawn* and *The Shaughran*, wrote a play called *The Vampire*. The three-act play opened on 19 June 1852, at London's Princess' Theatre. In the play Alan Raby is the vampire who 'dies' in the period of Charles II but cannot be destroyed until Dr Rees, a student of the supernatural, shoots him with a charmed bullet.

"The play was apparently based on a story called *The Vampire*, published as 'A Tale By Lord Byron' in the 1 April 1819 issue of *The New Monthly Magazine*. In fact, the story was written by Dr John Polidori as a result of his 1816 sojourn at Byron's summer house in Geneva, the Villa Diodati, when a storm caused Byron to suggest that the assembled guests write a weird supernatural tale to help pass the time. Mary Godwin (the future wife of Shelley) began to create her novel

Frankenstein as a result. Byron had outlined the story which Polidori then worked into a novel. The vampire (Lord Ruthven) is obviously modelled on Byron himself: the handsome Ruthven has the physical deformity of a club foot and 'dead grey eyes'. When Byron broke with Polidori the true authorship of the work became known because Byron disowned it."

So why do we remember the Shelleys and Byron but overlook Polidori? "*The Vampire*, issued in volume form, was immediately translated into many languages. Cyprien Bérard wrote a sequel, *Lord Ruthven ou les Vampires*, in 1820. A stage adaptation of the story, entitled *The Vampire, or The Bride of the Isles*, opened on 9 August 1820 at the Lyceum Theatre." In other words Polidori's story made its mark at the time. So why do we forget that he was there?

Is it because his story was not seen as having the originality of *Frankenstein*? Or because of Polidori himself? Despite an Italian name he was born in London in 1795 and got his medical degree at Edinburgh University where he wrote his thesis on nightmares and somnambulism. It might be thought he was off to a good start as a potential writer of weird tales. He took on the role of Byron's doctor and went to Italy with him. The two men did not get along and Polidori wrote his story 'The Vampyre' as much to caricature Byron as make his reader's hair stand on end. Lord Ruthven in his story is an arrogant man with a club foot. It would have been hard for anyone to mistake who was meant. But in a way it backfired. Byron was a figure of scandal. People were interested in reading 'something about Byron' no matter how fictionalised. They weren't interested in the real author, an unknown doctor with an Italian name, and Polidori's eclipse did not end there. It was the figure of Ruthven/Byron who became a common stereotype in the vampire tales that followed. Polidori was in a carriage accident in 1817 and it is thought that his suicide in 1821 had more to do with the injuries he had suffered than from any public neglect of his authorship. That is—if it was suicide. Doubts remain.

I did not go out looking for a copy of Polidori's work, assuming that it was lost in the 'mists of time' except as a theme. So I was surprised to come across a copy of John William Polidori's *'The Vampyre' and other writings* in the Glenorchy Library the other day. That truly seemed like resurrection if not immortality. And I am not surprised Byron wanted nothing to do with it. The part he plays as Lord Ruthven is always disagreeable and at times evil. And in case people hadn't made the connection Polidori sends his young hero, Aubrey, to Greece where he learns about the existence of vampires and where Lord Ruthven dies. And then, to the young man's horror, Lord Ruthven turns up again in London apparently resurrected and wanting to marry Aubrey's sister.

But the importance of Polidori's work is surely that it takes the vampire out of peasant superstitions in Eastern Europe and places him firmly in Regency London with its social frivolity, its Grand Tours, and its delicately nurtured young women with their lovely white necks. And from there on it was almost *de rigueur* for the vampire to have a title. Think what Karl Marx could have made of vampires if he had turned in that direction!

And John Polidori has a different claim to fame, though it too has not resurrected his name. His sister Frances married Gabriel Rossetti and became the mother of the talented Rossetti children.

*

September 8: Michael Frayn

*

When I came upon Michael Frayn's *The Tin Men* I did find it funny and on the grounds that genuinely funny books are hard to find I kept a weather eye out for more of his writing. But although I quite enjoyed some of his other work, such as the one I've just been reading, *Spies*, I never found that sense of amusement in anything else. *Spies* in fact is full of mistakes and misconceptions and regrets and a vague sense of loss. Curiously in the same week I came across the first book John Mortimer wrote, *Charade*, which came out in 1947 when Rumpole was no more than a twinkle in his eye. And it too is full of misconceptions and regrets and a vague sense of failure.

Both *Spies* and *Charade* place youth against the backdrop of World War Two (though Frayn's protagonist is younger) and it struck me that neither book seemed the best its author could do—simply because they had relied too heavily on the drama of war to carry the book. Though the war is largely 'behind the scenes' the reader invests the story with more than is really on the page. Of course this could be said of every book. The reader comes to it, not as a blank slate but with suppositions and images and preconceptions.

But I can see more clearly now that there is a danger in this. It encourages a subtle kind of laziness. Both Frayn and Mortimer are better writers than these two books suggest …

*

September 9: Alexander Cordell

*

"On my eighth birthday my father put my name on the books of the ironmaster and took me to work at the Garndyrus furnaces. It was either the furnaces or the Abergavenny Hiring Fair, and I chose the furnaces, for some of the farmers were devils with the stick. Starting work at eight years old was late to begin a career, for some of the children in town began work at seven, or earlier. Take Sara Roberts — she was about my age but she had been chipping the rock from the iron vein since she was five, and Ieun Mathers lost one foot under a tram at five and the other when he was six."

Alexander Cordell in *Rape of the Fair Country*.

Isn't it odd that the Industrial Revolution and its products were equated with moral and intellectual superiority?

And if women were often treated as invisible when it came to any form of organising and social support then children were literally the forgotten; just a paragraph here and there in reports and articles and books such as Sally Alexander's *Becoming a Woman* and the many other books about the Rise of Labour in its many complexities. She is writing about London; "Lint scraping was also mechanized and operated by young girls who often came from the parish, and were paid 11s. to 14s. (55-70p.) a week after apprenticeship for a twelve-hour day and one and a half hours for meals. The attention of the Children's Commission was drawn to the trade by an 'opinion prevailing' that the children lost the use of their fingers and contracted consumption from the occupation." And Neil Postman wrote, "English society was particularly ferocious throughout the eighteenth and part of the nineteenth centuries in its treatment of the children of the poor, who were used to fuel the English industrial machine.

"I'm a trapper in the Gauber Pit, I have to trap without a light, and I'm scared. I go at four and sometimes half-past three in the morning and come out at five and half past. I never go to sleep. Sometimes I sing when I've light, but not in the dark: I dare not sing then." This is a description of a day in the mines by an eight-year-old girl, Sarah Gooder, in the mid-nineteenth century. Sarah's revelations and those of other children led eventually to legislation prohibiting the employment of children in mines — that is to say, children under the age of ten!"

Ah, the Good Old Days …

*

September 10: Cyril Connolly

*

Virginia Woolf famously said: "A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction."

Cyril Connolly in *Enemies of Promise* (1938) said "There is no more sombre enemy of good art than the pram in the hall."

I think the key word is 'good'. Women can and do write under the least favourable of conditions. But a large proportion of it is 'getting by' writing. Even so, I have yet to be convinced that anything but a fraction of the writing produced under the most favourable of conditions qualifies as 'good' …

I think the imagination, the style, the skill, the fascination of an idea, the ability to make the intangible live … these things always matter more than the circumstances in which people write …

*

September 11: Joanna Baillie

*

Joanna Baillie, born to a poor Scottish clergyman in 1762, is not spoken of in the same breath as Richard Brinsley Sheridan or the other luminaries of the stage in her time. Yet she overcame considerable hurdles to get sixteen of her plays staged in London, not least the most obvious one of being a woman. Her tragedies were seen as stylish, moving, and highly effective. But perhaps that was part of the problem. As the Regency theatre developed its own particular style audiences were increasingly weaned on to a diet of bawdy amusing dissipated and rather artificial characters. What little we know of Baillie (1762 – 1851) suggests a quiet grave hardworking woman with little in common with the kind of culture that was growing up in the theatres, clubs, and taverns of the capital.

Poet Anna Laetitia Barbauld wrote admiringly of her:

Then, loved Joanna, to admiring eyes
Thy storied groups in scenic pomp shall rise;
Their high-souled strains and Shakespear's noble rage
Shall with alternate passion shake the stage. ('Eighteen Hundred and Eleven: A Poem')

Baillie also had some success with her poetry.

The family cares call next upon the wife
To quit her mean but comfortable bed.
And first she stirs the fire and fans the flame,
Then from her heap of sticks for winter stored
An armful brings; loud crackling as they burn,
Thick fly the red sparks upward to the roof,
While slowly mounts the smoke in wreathy clouds.
On goes the seething pot with morning cheer,
For which some little wistful folk await,
Who, peeping from the bed-clothes, spy well pleased
The cheery light that blazes on the wall,
And bawl for leave to rise.
Their busy mother knows not where to turn,
Her morning's work comes now so thick upon her.
One she must help to tie his little coat,
Unpin another's cap, or seek his shoe
Or hosen lost, confusion soon o'er-master'd!
When all is o'er, out to the door they run
With new-comb'd sleeky hair and glistening faces,
Each with some little project in his head. (from 'A Winter's Day')

*

September 12: Louis MacNeice

*

"The dominant tendency towards documentary and reportage created a paradox that writers were aware of: they made formal use of detachment and objectivity, but they also had definite views. Louis MacNiece put it like this: writers 'have desires and hatreds of their own and further, they think some things ought to be desired and others hated'. Therefore, authors had to write as individuals but they were committed to international causes and often wished to write representatively. Their views were socio-historical ones, not personal ones, as the modernists would have known them. MacNiece's great work of the 1930s is *Autumn Journal*, a long meditation on social life written in the last months of 1938, in the shadow of the war. By interlocking his own life with that of Europe he creates a pervasive sense of loss and disappointment combined with expectation and commitment. The tone is melancholy and regretful, but there is a quiet

determination before the inevitable war, to which the previous years seem inexorably to have led. All local happenings, such as the cutting down of trees and the loss of a neighbour's dog, have wide symbolic resonances, while European events, such as the Munich conference and the Spanish war, have a deep personal significance for the 'I', 'we', and 'you' who populate the poem."

From *The Twentieth Century in Poetry* by Peter Childs.

Gerald Priestland wrote in *Something Understood*, "During the evening break (at the BBC) I would go round the corner to the Stag, the original Third Programme poets' pub and eavesdrop with wonder on the performances of Louis MacNeice and his cronies. It would be lying to pretend I was a member of the circle — the loan of a match or the helpful passing of a glass was about the nearest I ever got — but as an admirer of Louis's poetry from the moment I read *Autumn Journal* at Charterhouse, it was a rare satisfaction for me to find that the man was as glamorous as his work. He had the classical wit and polish of my idol Kenneth Knowles; something of the physical magnetism, too. His mind, as he expressed it in conversation, was fascinatingly split between romantic Irish and sardonic Scots, each half commenting on the other so that he could launch into a dazzling conversation with himself. It was this that gave him the talent of sheer fantasy that produced some of the best radio plays ever written. They were pure radio, unshackled by scenery, though they would have gained the ultimate dimension had stereo then existed. By the standards of Larkin and the like I suppose he wrote too much; but if I could keep only one out of Auden, Dylan Thomas and MacNeice, it is MacNeice that I would keep for myself."

I haven't read enough MacNeice to feel able to judge but the few pieces I have read are powerful and all with that underlying sense of bleakness and bitterness. Here is his short piece 'Autobiography':

In my childhood trees were green
And there was plenty to be seen.

Come back early or never come.

My father made the walls resound,
He wore his collar the wrong way round.

Come back early or never come.

My mother wore a yellow dress;
Gently, gently, gentleness.

Come back early or never come.

When I was five the black dreams came;
Nothing after was quite the same.

Come back early or never come.

The dark was talking to the dead;
The lamp was dark beside my bed.

Come back early or never come.

When I woke they did not care;
Nobody, nobody was there.

Come back early or never come.

When my silent terror cried,
Nobody, nobody replied.

Come back early or never come.

I got up; the chilly sun
Saw me walk away alone.

Come back early or never come.

*

September 13: Daniel Macmillan

*

You possibly have not heard of Daniel Macmillan though Macmillan may resonate as the name of a long-established publishing firm and you may remember a rather gloomy patrician prime minister in the UK who presided over the Profumo Affair and wrote his memoirs in six volumes. Daniel was the company's founder and grandfather of Harold Macmillan. But far from being the sort of blueblood that Harold Macmillan's demeanour suggested Daniel was the tenth child of a poor family of tenant farmers on Scotland's Isle of Arran. At the age of ten he was apprenticed to a bookbinder and at the end of his time there he went south to work for booksellers in London and later in Cambridge. With his brother Alexander he managed to put by a little bit of money and the Hare family loaned them £500 to start a small publishing company.

Richard Davenport-Hines in his book, *The Macmillans*, says of Daniel, "From his earliest years Daniel Macmillan was intent on self-discipline. He condemned himself for impetuosity and excessive vehemence, although others regarded him as amiable and even playful. He clung to notions of religion and rectitude in a life beset by uncertainty and temptation. He was enthusiastic, fretful and always scarred by the loneliness of his youth. Consumed from an early age by a longing for intercourse with the best minds, he had the wonderful fortune to achieve his ambition. Whereas most people of his class and background were 'condemned', in Matthew Hale White's phrase, 'to almost total absence from themselves', to unremitting work and struggle in which the roar of the world was never lulled to rest, to endure a life without peace for introspection. Daniel escaped this doom. By filling his life with books, he had calm, enriching days in which to renew himself and find wider meaning. Publishing was for him not a mercenary trick, or a sullen craft, but a life-enhancing calling for the greater glory of God."

And their choice of books to publish reflected this belief. Their first publication was *The Philosophy of Training* by A. R. Craig. His view was that teachers needed to be trained, not simply passed through the classics at Oxford or Cambridge, and it helped push the development of teacher training. Another early book was Charles Kingsley's *Cheap Clothes and Nasty* drawing attention to the conditions of sweated labour in London tailoring businesses. He told people how to find tailors who treated their apprentices well and men took their business away from the worst of the sweatshops.

The struggle of the two young men to pay their way and retain their high-minded attitude to books is at times inspiring in a world where the bottom line reigns supreme and few publishers ask what will be the impact of their publications on the moral welfare of their readers …

*

September 14: Baron Alexander von Humboldt

*

A family story was that my gr-gr-gr-grandfather Peter Moore had gone exploring with Baron von Humboldt. But when I actually went to look at this I realised it couldn't be correct. Peter was born on the Caribbean island of Saint Eustatius in 1792 and von Humboldt visited there in 1804

when Peter was only twelve. So even if 'went exploring' was poetic licence might the young lad have seen, listened to, met, or in some way become fascinated by von Humboldt's journeys?

I have just been reading *Personal Narrative of Travels to the Equinoctial Region of America during the years 1799 – 1804 by Alexander von Humboldt and Aimé Bonpland* in 3 volumes. Regardless of what Peter Moore did or didn't do it is a fascinating read. Von Humboldt was a keen observer, a careful recorder, a highly intelligent well-read man with an easy-to-read prose style which occasionally becomes quite lyrical. He and Bonpland set out across the Atlantic, spending time in the Canaries before arriving in South America (at every juncture musing on the natural world including comparing the Sargasso seaweed to the giant kelp of the Falklands which he calls *baudreux*) and spending years traveling in and around the Orinoco and Rio Negro rivers. Science has moved forward, so has medicine, and the borders and names have changed. It really needs to be read with a map at hand because it depends largely on geographical features rather than nation states and cities for guidance to the routes he took. But everything is grist to his mill. Plants, animals, insects, soils, peoples, languages. Sometimes he depends too heavily on the views and attitudes of Spanish priests (their view that the Indians were slow to learn Spanish because its structure was so different to their languages overlooks the obvious that this was the language of their conquerors and oppressors), sometimes he depends on hearsay, but his observations when it comes to botany and nature in general are interesting and authoritative.

And he clearly was dismayed by many things he saw. "The persons who came to purchase examined the teeth of these slaves, do judge of their age and health, forcing open their mouths as we do those of horses in a market. This odious custom dates from Africa, as is proved by the faithful pictures drawn by the inimitable Cervantes, who after his long captivity among the Moors, described the sale of Christian slaves at Algeirs. It is distressing to think that even at this day there exist European colonists in the West Indies who mark their slaves with a hot iron to know them again if they escape. This is the treatment bestowed on those "who save other men the labour of sowing, tilling, and reaping." And, "In both worlds Europeans have employed the same artifices, and committed the same atrocities, to maintain a trade that dishonours humanity."

But alas! His narrative doesn't include his time in Saint Eustatius. Yet it does provide a clue. He ends his introduction with this: "If then some pages of my book are snatched from oblivion, the inhabitant of the banks of the Orinoco and the Atabupo will behold with delight populous cities enriched by commerce, and fertile fields cultivated by the hands of free men, on those very spots where, at the time of my travels, I found only impenetrable forests and inundated lands." Whether Peter Moore heard Baron von Humboldt speak in person or later read his narrative it germinated a seed. Because in the 1820s Peter moved his wife and young family from Saint Eustatius to New Amsterdam in Guyana. Perhaps it offered greater opportunities but it also brought him much closer to the Orinoco.

In the 1830s he mounted an expedition to the Orinoco and on an unknown date and in an unknown place he disappeared. What happened to him remains a mystery.

*

September 15: Agatha Christie

*

I got *Agatha Christie's Secret Notebooks* by John Curran for Christmas. These are the dozens of notebooks in which she jotted story ideas, plots, clues, along with possible titles, names for characters, various endings—along with household lists and other trivia. The fascination for an Agatha Christie fan, and John Curran is one, is the insight into the genesis of many of her books. For instance she tried various endings for *Crooked House* before settling on the one it was published with, she tried out various names for characters and Salome Otterbourne in *Death on the Nile* was originally going to be Mrs Pooper (!) and Miss Sainsbury Seale started life as Miss Cobb or Miss Slob; even more surprisingly *Death on the Nile* was originally thought of as a Miss Marple rather than a Hercule Poirot; though Egypt would have been rather outside Miss Marple's 'comfort

zone'. She did have her holiday in the Caribbean—giving Christie much trouble with its spelling. Though Curran points out that she was not dyslexic as some people have suggested but merely had trouble with the occasional word. Don't we all?

"In February 1955, on the BBC radio programme *Close-up*, Agatha Christie admitted, when asked about her process of working, that 'the disappointing truth is that I haven't much method'. She typed her own drafts 'on an ancient faithful typewriter that I've had for years' but she found a Dictaphone useful for short stories. 'The real work is done in thinking out the development of your story and worrying about it until it comes right. That may take quite a while.' And this is where her Notebooks, which are not mentioned in the interview, came in. A glance at them shows that this is where she did her 'thinking and worrying'."

And the fascination for any writer is in both the genesis of a novel and in the ways she kept complex plot details sorted out and tangled only as far as she wanted them tangled. Dorothy Sayers has Harriet Vane say in *Gaudy Night*, "I've never yet succeeded in producing a plot without at least six major howlers. Fortunately, nine readers out of ten get mixed up too, so it doesn't matter. The tenth writes me a letter, and I promise to make the correction in the second edition, but I never do. After all, my books are only meant for fun; it's not like a work of scholarship." I have sometimes finished a mystery novel and thought 'Oh, but what about—' or watched a TV drama and realised something has been completely overlooked. But Agatha Christie despite her output and her sometimes rather incredible plots was remarkably free from such howlers; perhaps because she was humble about her writing and willing to take on board editorial comments, perhaps because she mostly wrote about things she knew something about, and perhaps because she kept and used those handy Notebooks.

*

September 16: Alfred Noyes

*

When I was at primary school a teacher decided we should do some verse-speaking. To my horror she told me that because I had such a deep voice I must go and stand with the boys. I had such a shy soft little voice it is doubtful anyone even heard me. I couldn't believe her and I dreaded the few times we recited a poem. One other girl was put in with the boys but she was adept enough, I don't know how, to never be there when our verse-speaking time came around. The poem the teacher had chosen was about a highwayman but I cannot remember the author or the story. The other day I was reading Alfred Noyes' famous poem 'The Highwayman' and I found myself wondering if that was it. It had been cut into different parts for the different voices but was that part of the original poem or had the teacher adapted it? I have no idea.

In fact Noyes' famous poem is lively and energetic and full of emotion and goes with a swing—

The wind was a torrent of darkness among the gusty trees,
The moon was a ghostly galleon tossed upon cloudy seas,
The road was a ribbon of moonlight over the purple moor,
And the highwayman came riding—
Riding—riding—
The highwayman came riding, up to the old inn-door.

It *would* be an ideal poem for verse-speaking—and I think that verse-speaking could help many children gain confidence in reading and speaking and expressing a variety of emotions with clear articulation—but not if it is something which embarrasses or humiliates. When I think back to that teacher, and she probably meant well, I cannot help wishing that instead of saying 'You've got a deep voice, stand over there with the boys' (or whatever exactly she said) she'd said something like 'You've got a lovely voice that might go well with the boys' deeper voices' … who knows? It might've changed my life … And do try 'The Highwayman' next time you're asked to read at something …

*

September 17: William Carlos Williams

*

"The story goes that Williams, a doctor, wrote many of his poems out in rural areas while waiting for women in labor. All he had to write on were small prescription sheets, hence the brevity of so much of his poetry."

From *Death of a Writer* by Michael Collins.

*

Williams' most famous poem is probably 'The Red Wheelbarrow' which goes:

so much depends
upon

a red wheel
barrow

glazed with rain
water

beside the white
chickens And you may be asking, as I did, why that should have made him famous. But as I read through some of his other poems I could see that they often use colour and light.

'Let it be weathered — like a farm wagon —
with gilt wheels (this could be
applied fresh at small expense) 'Tract'

'against the yellow drawn shades' 'Danse Russe'

'Each flower is a hand's span
of her whiteness' 'Queen Anne's Lace'

'Masses of flowers
load the cherry branches
and color some bushes
yellow and some red' 'The Widow's Lament in Springtime'

'under the surge of the blue
mottled clouds' 'Spring and All'

'I listen hard when the bells
in the yellow-brick tower' 'The Catholic Bells'

'All recognition lost, burnt clean
clean in the flame, the green
dispersed, a living-red,
flame red, red as blood wakes
on the ash— 'Burning the Christmas Greens'

And so it goes … And I wondered if it was that which unconsciously drew readers? Even when his subject is dark or sad it is never drab. Colour, unwittingly, holds hope.

*

September 18: Dr Samuel Johnson

*

"The freaks, and humours, and spleen, and vanity of women, as they embroil families in discord and fill houses with disquiet, do more to obstruct the happiness of life in a year than the ambition of the clergy in many centuries. It has been well observed, that the misery of man proceeds not from any single crush of overwhelming evil, but from small vexations continually repeated" or so claimed dictionary-maker Dr Johnson. But when we remember that the curmudgeonly old sod frequently took advantage of the kindness and hospitality and tolerance of Mrs Thrale I cannot help wondering if she ever thought to herself 'a little arsenic in his soup would remove one set of freaks and humours and spleen from my life'?

*

September 19: William Golding

*

"James Lovelock introduced his concept of an interlocked world in 'What is Gaia?': Most of us sense that the Earth is more than a sphere of rock with a thin layer of air, ocean and life covering the surface. We feel that we belong here as if this planet were indeed our home. Long ago the Greeks, thinking this way, gave to the Earth the name *Gaia* or, for short, *Ge*. In those days, science and theology were one and science, although less precise, had soul. …

"The new understanding has come from going forth and looking back to see the Earth from space. The vision of that splendid white-flecked blue sphere stirred us all, no matter that by now it is almost a visual cliché. It even opens the mind's eye, just as a voyage away from home enlarges the perspective of our love for those who remain there.

"The first impact of those voyages was the sense of wonder given to the astronauts and to us as we shared their experience vicariously through television, but at the same time the Earth was viewed from outside by the more objective gaze of scientific instruments. These devices were quite impervious to human emotion yet they also sent back the information that let us see the Earth as a strange and beautiful anomaly. They showed our planet is made of the same elements and in much the same proportions as are Mars and Venus, but they also revealed our sibling planets to be bare and barren and as different from the Earth as a robin from a rock.

"We now see that the air, the ocean and the soil are much more than a mere environment for life; they are a part of life itself. Thus the air is to life just as is the fur to a cat or the nest for a bird. Not living but something made by living things to protect against an otherwise hostile world. For life on Earth the air is our protection against the cold depths and fierce radiations of space.

"There is nothing unusual in the idea of life on Earth interacting with the air, sea and rocks, but it took a view from outside to glimpse the possibility that this combination might consist of a single giant living system and one with the capacity to keep the Earth always at a state most favourable for the life upon it.

"An entity comprising a whole planet and with a powerful capacity to regulate the climate needs a name to match. It was the novelist William Golding who proposed the name *Gaia*. Gladly we accepted his suggestion and Gaia is also the name of the hypothesis of science which postulates that the climate and the composition of the Earth always are close to an optimum for whatever life inhabits it.

"The evidence gathered in support of Gaia is now considerable but as is often the way of science, this is less important than is its use as a kind of looking glass for seeing the world differently, and which makes us ask new questions about the nature of Earth.

"If we are 'all creatures great and small', from bacteria to whales, part of Gaia, then we are all of us potentially important to her well-being. We knew in our hearts that the destruction of a whole range of other species was wrong but now we know why. No longer can we merely regret the passing of one of the great whales, or the blue butterfly, nor even the smallpox virus. When we eliminate one of these from Earth, we may have destroyed a part of ourselves, for we also are a part of Gaia.

"There are many possibilities for comfort as there are for dismay in contemplating the consequences of our membership in this great commonwealth of living things. It may be that one role we play is as the senses and nervous system for Gaia. Through our eyes she has for the first time seen her very fair face and in our minds become aware of herself. We do indeed belong here. The earth is more than just a home, it's a living system and we are part of it."

I suppose you could say that Golding resurrected the word Gaia rather than invented it but it *was* an inspired choice. Simple. Effective. Musical. And when I think we could have been landed with something like 'The Re-integrated Total World Model' there is no comparison …

*

September 20: Stevie Smith

*

When people talk about the distinctive voice which a writer is expected to create, if they want to be remembered down through the generations, they often point to Damon Runyon and Stevie Smith as exemplars of that hard-to-describe thing, the unique 'voice'. In a way it is true. But unique voices do not necessarily appeal to everyone and they sometimes are easier to parody than the 'voice' which simply gets on with the job.

Stevie Smith is more likely to come into modern lives through her poems which continue to be anthologised, such as her famous 'Not Waving but Drowning':

Nobody heard him, the dead man,
But still he lay moaning:
I was much further out than you thought
And not waving but drowning.

Poor chap, he always loved larking
And now he's dead
It must have been too cold for him his heart gave way,
They said.

Oh, no no no, it was too cold always
(Still the dead one lay moaning)
I was much too far out all my life
And not waving but drowning.

But her novel called memorably *Novel Written on Yellow Paper* is far more likely to be held up as an exemplar of that mysterious thing, voice, than her poetry, though her prose too has an almost poetic rhythm. She begins the novel, "Beginning this book (not as they say 'book' in our trade—they mean magazine), beginning this book, I should like if I may, I should like, if I may (that is the way Sir Phoebus writes), I should like then to say: Good-bye to all my friends, my beautiful and lovely friends."

John Braine said of it in his *Writing A Novel*, "Feminine, quirky, sardonic, knowledgeable about love and even more about death, possessed of an enormous angular, slightly spinsterish vitality, there has never been anyone quite like the owner of this voice, never a prose so dry, swift, helter-skelter and breathlessly individual." It is worth reading the novel just to see if you think this description captures something of Stevie Smith's 'voice'.

*

September 21: H. G. Wells

*

" 'We've got to bring the Home Up to Date! That's my idée, George. We got to make a civilised d'mestic machine out of these relics of barbarism. I'm going to hunt up inventors, make a corner in d'mestic idees. Everything. Balls of string that won't dissolve into a tangle, and gum that won't dry into horn. See? Then after conveniences—beauty. Beauty, George! All these new things

ought to be made fit to look at, it's your aunt's idée, that. Beautiful jam-pots! Get one of those new art chaps to design all the things they make ugly now. Patent carpet-sweepers by these greenwood chaps, housemaid's boxes it'll be a pleasure to fall over—rich coloured house-flannels. Zzzz. Pails, f'rinstance. Hang 'em up on the walls like warming-pans. All the polishes and things in such tins—you'll want to cuddle 'em, George! See the notion? 'Sted of all the silly, ugly things we got.' …

H. G. Wells in *Tono-Bungay*

I doubt if H.G. Wells bothered himself very much with the look of carpet-sweepers or the aesthetics of tins of polish but I have found that a lot of people, myself included, are attracted to books of household wisdom and practical cures for small domestic trials. Books like the 19th century's *Enquire Within Upon Everything* were turned to for advice by far more people than just housewives. Agatha Christie mentions it in *Hallowe'en Party*. 'What we need,' said Mrs Oliver, 'is something like *Enquire Within* here now. It's a lovely title, isn't it? I remember my grandmother had one. You could, you know, inquire within about everything, too. Legal information and cooking recipes and how to take ink stains out of linen. How to make home-made face powder that would not damage the complexion. Oh – and lots more. Yes, wouldn't you like to have a book like that now?'

Magazines and newspapers jumped on the bandwagon with columns of contributed Handy Hints and Useful Ideas. The Hints change over time. Who today would want to know how to refresh a horsehair mattress or make Prickly Pear Jelly? But our need for helpful little hints has never gone away.

I wasn't surprised that a book called *Spotless* became a best-seller. I'm not surprised that people still turn to Marjorie Bligh for help.

I have just been reading Danielle Wood's *Housewife Superstar*. Janette Brennan in the *Alumni News* says of it, "She is a celebrated Tasmanian author, a respected career woman — and mostly, an eccentric domestic goddess. No, we're not talking about author Dr Danielle Wood (BA Hons 1994), who indeed is a former Vogel-winning writer and a gorgeous young mum (and who is now also well-versed in the methods for treating constipated goldfish with Epsom salts). But Danielle's latest book, *Housewife Superstar: The Very Best of Marjorie Bligh*, introduces us to the life story and selected highlights of Marjorie Bligh — a true original Australian domestic goddess and an inspiration for comedian Barry Humphries' adored alter ego, Dame Edna Everage."

The book is full of handy little hints and recipes in between the chronicle of Marjorie Bligh's life and is interesting and readable. But nowhere unfortunately does she explain how to tell if your goldfish is constipated in the first place.

*

September 22: Snorri Sturluson (d)

*

He is the one author of Iceland's *Sagas* who has come down to us by name. Undoubtedly who wrote what was well-known at the time but the stories were told and re-told and gradually ceased to belong to anyone. Sturluson has two books to his credit: the *Prose Edda* which was both a collection of myths and stories and a handbook on their methods of composition and the *Heimskringla* which was a record of the reigns and stories of Norway's kings from their mythical origin from the god Odin to Sturluson's time. He was probably not immune, despite the independent and republican bent of the Icelandic clans, from a mystic belief in the power of kingship. He had helped place Iceland under the rule of King Haakon IV of Norway, something which was not universally popular in Iceland. But he had a disagreement with the king, though exactly what over is not clear, and Haakon had him murdered on this date in 1241 when he was sixty-two.

The *Britannica* says of him "His genius lay in his power to present all that he perceived critically as a historian with the immediacy of drama."

But Robert Kellogg says in *The Sagas of Icelanders*, "None of the *Íslendinga sögur* can be attributed to an author. Even when a thirteenth-century writer such as Snorri Sturluson or Sturla

Thordarson is associated with a particular text, he largely functions as a collector or reteller rather than as an inventor of the story. In fact, there is no medieval source naming Snorri Sturluson as the author of *Heimskringla*, the great collection of kings' sagas, although modern scholars follow the convention of attributing it to him. Even when we think we know an author's name, his writing persona is that of the historian, who works in a style that is essentially indistinguishable from the anonymous norm. He derives his authorial authority not from the originality of his style or story but from his fidelity to the events, or to others' accounts of them and their judgements on those who were involved – in other words, to what has been *said*. The sense of authorship, in so far as it exists in Icelandic prose, is far different from that of the great medieval poets. … The anonymity of their authors has become a feature of their style."

So he may not have written the two books attributed to him—but equally he may have written far more than those two sagas. His hand and his memory and his talents may have been at the heart of many of the best-known stories …

*

September 23: Gary Crew

*

Normally I think of reading a book *about* someone after I have read some of their work. But the other day I found myself reading *Strange Journeys: The Works of Gary Crew* by Bernard McKenna and Sharyn Pearce and wondering whether I would agree with their assessment of his books. I chose the book off a library shelf purely because of its title. Though I have noticed a curious phenomenon: Years ago children's writers didn't get written about until they were very well-known and, usually, very dead. Now books about the lives and works of J. K. Rowlings, Paul Jennings, Gary Crew and others pop up long before they even think of retiring.

Since then I have been reading *Crew's 13* and his *Strange Objects*. The first he edited but it has only one of his stories. The second I found interesting and imaginative. But I also found myself asking that question: would I have liked this book as a young reader myself and would young readers in general like it? I think the answer is probably no. Crew himself said of it, "It has been published as both an Adult novel and a Young Adult novel without one word being changed." In my view it is an adult book about childhood experiences. I don't think I would have wanted it as a child because of its deconstructed style. Children like a clear narrative. The more stories they hear or read the easier it becomes to broaden what is meant by a 'story' but this comes slowly …

*

September 24: Horace Walpole

*

When I was writing *Between the Covers* I included some obscure writers I had come across while researching family history; although they weren't famous I found them very interesting. So I thought I would return to that idea and present some more little snippets I have since come across.

1. I found myself a gr-gr-gr-gr-gr-grandfather whose brother John Dillon married a Henrietta Edgeworth; Henrietta being first cousin to Maria Edgeworth's grandfather. It was a very remote connection but I found myself wondering if the families had much to do with each other. And I thought it was possible. Perhaps more than that, John's great-niece married a clergyman and this was the strata of society which would most likely have read and enjoyed a book like *Castle Rackrent* or *The Will and Other Tales*. Large landowners might well have been offended by her critical portrayal of the Rackrent family. Poorer people could not afford books. The very poor were illiterate.

2. I found another gr-gr-gr-gr-gr-gr-grandfather called Robert Longfield and he was said to be a friend of Jonathon Swift's. Certainly the Longfield and Swift families seemed to intermarry (though not Jonathon who was content with his Vanessa and his Stella) but was the talk of friendship merely wishful thinking on someone's part? I have been reading Henry Craik's two volume biography of Swift but, alas, I am no wiser—except that Longfield was very likely a

parishioner when Swift held several 'livings' in Meath. The trouble is—Swift was often absent from his churches and I am also not sure if Swift would have been an easy friend to have …

3. I found that my gr-grandfather had a first cousin called Mary Phoebe Clifford who married a man called Stephen Aveling who lived in Rochester in Kent in the home his father had bought and where he ran a business called Aveling & Porter which made steamrollers. But the interesting part about the Avelings is that they lived in an old pile called Restoration House and Charles Dickens had taken it as the inspiration for Miss Haversham's home Satis Hall in *Great Expectations*. I immediately went away and re-read *Great Expectations* which says of it, "Within a quarter of an hour we came to Miss Havisham's house, which was of old brick, and dismal, and had a great many iron bars to it. Some of the windows had been walled up; of those that remained, all the lower were rustily barred; so, we had to wait, after ringing the bell, until some one should come to open it. While we waited at the gate, I peeped in … and saw that at the side of the house there was a large brewery. No brewing was going on in it, and none seemed to have gone on for a long long time."

Pip is told that the house's name is the Manor House and "Its other name was Satis; which is Greek, or Latin, or Hebrew, or all three—or all one to me—for enough."

"Enough House," said I; "that's a curious name, miss."

"Yes," she replied, "but it meant more than it said. It meant, when it was given, that whoever had this house, could want nothing else. They must have been easily satisfied in those days, I should think."

"I had stopped to look at the house as I passed; and its seared red brick walls, blocked windows, and strong green ivy clasping even the stacks of chimneys with its twigs and tendons, as if with sinewy old arms, had made up a rich attractive mystery, of which I was the hero."

And the notes say, "Miss Havisham's house: identified as Restoration House (still extant), so called because Charles II stayed there before the Restoration in May 1660. Another house in the neighbourhood was called Satis House, named, according to tradition, from Queen Elizabeth's reply to her host when he apologized for any shortcomings in his entertainment of her."

And did Dickens actually know the Aveling family? Possibly. But after reading what Dickens has to say about the house and comparing it with the lively family home it became with the Avelings and their children I cannot help thinking that Dickens may have seen it and its possibilities *before* the Avelings moved in. Possibly it was like many large old houses, without an estate to pay for it, and had become rundown, even derelict, for a time—and it was in this state that Dickens first saw it and felt that it was a house of disappointment and seclusion …

4. And I found another gr-gr-gr-gr-grandfather (I am so lucky to have all these great-great-and more-great-grandfathers!) had a brother Robert Jephson who wrote plays and poetry and was described as "a noted satirist and wit"; his closest friend was the Shakespeare scholar St John Malone, another friend was Horace Walpole, and James Boswell described him in his *Journal*—"I then went to Sheridan's upon an invitation to drink tea and spend the evening and hear a reading of *The Discovery*, a new comedy written by Mrs. Sheridan. He and she read alternately. I liked it much and was well entertained. Mrs. Cholmondeley was there, also a Captain (Robert) Jephson, a lively little fellow and the best mimic in the world."

Horace Walpole was a prolific writer of letters, articles, essays; he wrote about gardening, such as *The History of the Modern Taste in Gardening*, in particular the garden he created at his home Strawberry Hill, and he wrote the famous late eighteenth century melodrama of medieval horror, *The Castle of Otranto*, of which the guide to horror fiction *Hooked on Horror* (Anthony J. Fonseca and June Michele Pulliam) said, "Historically speaking, the first horror novel was published in 1764, when Horace Walpole penned the tale of a family curse, a damsel in distress, and a giant helmet that crushes humans. The popularity of *The Castle of Otranto* encouraged the publication of other gothic novels, one of which became the prototype for the erotic horror novel (M.G. Lewis's *The Monk*)." Neil Barron in *Fantasy Literature* focuses on the supernatural side of the story. "The themes of transgression, revenge and justice generate the action of the novel that began the trend for Gothic horror fiction. Manfred, having usurped the throne of Otranto, inhabits

its castle unlawfully. When his only son is killed (crushed by a giant helmet that falls from the sky) on the eve of his wedding to the beautiful Isabella, Manfred is driven by lust and family ambition to divorce his almost unbearably virtuous wife and marry Isabella; but she hides in the subterranean vaults of the castle, where she meets a handsome youth (Theodore) who turns out to be the rightful heir to the throne. A complex sequence of adventures and supernatural events ends with Theodore both restored to his throne and married to Isabella, the repentant Manfred in a monastery and the castle destroyed by the ghost of its founder. Strikingly original in conception but flawed in its execution, *The Castle of Otranto* owes its importance to what it inspired as much as to what it is."

It was a best-seller in its time, people in other people's novels could be found reading it—or being forbidden to read it—but I wondered if it was still around. So I have been out in search and found it easy to buy a reprint. I must admit I was intrigued to see how he might explain away that giant helmet!

"The first thing that struck Manfred's eyes was a group of his servants endeavouring to raise something that appeared to him a mountain of sable plumes. He gazed without believing his sight. What are ye doing? cried Manfred, wrathfully: Where is my son? A volley of voices replied, Oh, my lord! the prince! the prince! the helmet! the helmet! Shocked with these lamentable sounds, and dreading he knew not what, he advanced hastily — But what a sight for a father's eyes! — He beheld his child dashed to pieces, and almost buried under an enormous helmet, an hundred times more large that any casque ever made for human being, and shaded with a proportionable quantity of black feathers.

"The horror of the spectacle, the ignorance of all around how this misfortune had happened, and above all, the tremendous phoenomenon before him, took away the prince's speech. Yet his silence lasted longer than even grief could occasion. He fixed his eyes on what he wished in vain to believe a vision; and seemed less attentive to his loss, than buried in meditation on the stupendous object that had occasioned it. … While the ladies were conveying the wretched mother to her bed, Manfred remained in the court, gazing on the ominous casque, and regardless of the crowd which the strangeness of the event had now assembled around him. The few words he articulated tended solely to enquiries, whether any man knew from whence it could have come? Nobody could give him the least information. … During this altercation some of the vulgar spectators had run to the great church which stood near the castle, and came back open-mouthed, declaring the helmet was missing from Alfonso's statue. Manfred, at this news, grew perfectly frantic; and, as if he sought a subject on which to vent the tempest within him, he rushed again on the young peasant, crying, Villain! monster! sorcerer! 'tis thou hast slain my son! The mob, who wanted some object within the scope of their capacities on whom they might discharge their bewildered reasonings, caught the words from the mouth of their lord, and re-echoed, Ay, ay; 'tis he, 'tis he: he has stolen the helmet from good Alfonso's tomb, and dashed out the brains of our young prince with it: — never reflecting how enormous the disproportion was between the marble helmet that had been in the church, and that of steel before their eyes; nor how impossible it was for a youth, seemingly not twenty, to wield a piece of armour of so prodigious a weight."

The helmet is not the only mysterious thing in the book. A moving picture, blood from a statue, a mysterious giant hand. And none of them have any explanation. They are truly Deus ex Machina.

And what of Walpole and Jephson? Michael Gamer says of them: "Commentators on Walpole and the Gothic have often been puzzled by the seemingly inexplicable gap between the publication of *Otranto* (1764) and the later popularity of Gothic fiction and drama in the 1780s and 1790s, wondering why such an explosively popular genre should have taken nearly twenty years to gain its hold on British imaginations. Examining its publication history a final time, we see only one significant span of years (1767-81) in which no printing of *The Castle of Otranto* occurred – perhaps the only time the book might ever have been out of print. This single dry spell was ended by the stage success of Robert Jephson's *The Count of Narbonne* (1781), an adaptation of *The Castle of Otranto* to which Walpole contributed many hours of his time hoping for its success. He

was not disappointed. Performed twenty-one times during its initial run, *The Count of Narbonne* was the hit of the 1781-2 theatrical season and held the stage for the next two decades. With Jephson's success, a fresh edition of *The Castle of Otranto* was called for in 1782, and thereafter the book experienced a similar, sustained popularity: it received fourteen printings in English between 1782 and 1800; spawned numerous imitations; and acquired its status as a foundational work of Gothic fiction. Certainly the Gothic novel gave rise to the Gothic play, but the suggestion here is that Jephson's adaptation invited readers to do more than merely take up Walpole's romance again and read it alongside its theatrical representation. The sustained popularity of both points to a symbiosis between Gothic text and Gothic drama – one that anticipates the Gothic's later returns in film and digital media, and that is present since the first Gothic 'revival' of the genre Jephson and Walpole helped to construct."

"Serendipity – that beautiful word coined by Horace Walpole to describe the phenomenon of happy things happening to one when one is intent on doing something else – " Frank Muir. Perhaps Horace Walpole meeting Robert Jephson was serendipitous?

*****

September 25: William Faulkner

*

"According to somewhat kitsch literary legend, William Faulkner wrote his novel *As I Lay Dying* in the space of six weeks and in the most precarious of situations, namely, while he was working on the night shift down a mine, with the pages resting on an upturned wheelbarrow and lit only by the dim rays of the lamp affixed to his own dust-caked helmet. This said kitsch legend is a clear attempt to enlist Faulkner in the ranks of other poor, self-sacrificing, slightly proletarian writers. The bit about the six weeks is the only true part: for six weeks one summer he made the most of the long, long intervals between feeding spadefuls of coal into the boiler he had been put in charge of in an electrical power plant. According to Faulkner, no one bothered him there, the continual hum from the enormous old dynamo was "soothing," and the place itself was otherwise "warm and silent."

"There is certainly no doubting his ability to lose himself in his writing or his reading. His father had got him the position at the power station after he was dismissed from his previous job as a post office clerk at the University of Mississippi. Apparently one of the lecturers there, quite reasonably, complained: the only way he could get his letters was by rummaging around by the garbage can at the back door, where the unopened mail bags all too often ended up. Faulkner did not like having his reading interrupted, and the sale of stamps fell alarmingly: by way of explanation, Faulkner told his family that he was not prepared to keep getting up to wait on people at the window and having to be beholden to any son-of-a-bitch who had two cents to buy a stamp.

"Perhaps that is where the seeds were first sown of Faulkner's evident aversion to and scorn for letters. When he died, piles of letters, packages and manuscripts sent by admirers were found, none of which he had opened. In fact, the only letters he did open were those from publishers, and then only very cautiously: he would make a tiny slit in the envelope and then shake it to see if a cheque appeared. If it didn't, then the letter would simply join all those other things that can wait forever."

from *Written Lives* by Javier Marías.

*

September 26: Anonymous Letters

*

"An anonymous letter is, I think, the meanest and cruellest weapon there is."

From *The Murder at the Vicarage* by Agatha Christie.

Anonymous Letters are a staple in mystery fiction. They also turn up in ordinary people's lives. I have had various anonymous letters and phone calls and the thing that struck me is that they

are so often illogical. For instance I had a letter in *The Mercury* years ago urging that the Hydro remain in public ownership. Several days later I received an anonymous letter saying it was all right for wealthy people like me to make that claim but ordinary people would be better off if the Hydro was privatised. Now without going out and doing surveys I think it could be said that the strongest support for keeping government entities in public ownership comes from the poorer part of the population.

I remember I was visiting a friend Betty Nicholson many years ago and the mail came. She opened her letters and one of them was a blank piece of paper except for where someone had cut out some letters and stuck them on to make the word 'Stalinist'. She said, "That's rubbish, I'm not a Stalinist," and threw it away. She was a very sensible strong-minded woman. But I have always felt that no matter how wrong-headed and no matter how quickly you throw it away every anonymous communication leaves a nasty taste. Regardless of what it is saying someone was not prepared to put their name to it. It has that sense of something sly and deceitful. I was thinking of that when I came upon this little story in Moira Watson's memoir of growing up in Hobart, *Razzle Dazzle*:

She had her photograph taken as a child and one day she overheard her parents talking …

" 'I don't like that photograph of Moira any more,' my mother said. 'Who could possibly hate me enough to write a thing like that about a little child? An anonymous letter's such a vicious thing.'

She sounded very upset.

'Hate's too strong a word, Rita,' said my father. He sounded upset too, but he was trying to soothe my mother. 'It was probably someone who was jealous because she would have liked to have her child's photo in the *Mail*.'

That was all they said. What did it mean? What terrible thing had this person said about me? I couldn't make myself ask, and I finished putting the tiles back in the box, and crept quietly out of the room.

I felt very badly about this thing I had overheard, and I worried about it for years, then it got buried in my subconscious mind until I was grown-up. One day I happened to glance at the photograph on the mantelpiece, and I asked, at last: 'By the way, Mum, what did the anonymous letter say about me? After that photograph was published?'

'Oh, didn't I ever tell you? It was terrible,' said my mother. 'I received a letter in the post saying "You think you're so smart getting your little girl's photo in the paper, but you might notice the child's parting is crooked." '

It was such an anti-climax after all these years, that I looked blank.

'But, is that *all*?' I asked. 'I thought it was something awful.'

'But it is awful. Don't you see? It took all the joy out of a beautiful photograph. Every time I looked at it after that, all I noticed was your parting, and I remembered the horrible letter.'

All those years later, she still sounded upset. I studied the photograph. I had curly hair, but the crown of my head was smooth, so you could clearly see that careless zigzag of a parting.

I found a framed copy of that photograph in a drawer the other day, and I realised my mother had been right.

When I looked at the child in the photograph, all my eyes focused on was that small criss-cross of a parting, and all that I could feel was the pain inside my mother when she said: 'Who could possibly hate me enough to write a thing like that about a little child?' "

*

September 27: Hersilie Rouy (d)

*

Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson in *Beyond Therapy* writes, "One of the most extraordinary documents in the history of psychiatry remains almost totally unknown. It is a book published in Paris in 1883. No copy of the book is to be found in any library in the United States, and only with great difficulty was a copy found in France. Yet the book ranks, in my opinion, as the single most important document of the social history of madness in the nineteenth century.

"The book was written by Hersilie Rouy, and is entitled *Mémoires d'une aliénée* (Memoires of a Madwoman). The long book, 540 pages, is the story of Hersilie Rouy's incarceration, when she was forty, in the Salpêtrière (the famed psychiatric hospital where Jean Martin Charcot worked) in Paris and in many other French asylums over a fifteen-year period. The book, written in French, has never been translated into any other language, and has never been referred to in the history of psychiatry.

"What happened to Hersilie Rouy was to happen to countless women in France, Germany, England, the United States, and elsewhere, down to the present day. What makes her work almost entirely unique is the clarity of her vision, her ability to understand what the French psychiatrists were doing to her. She was never in any doubt as to her basic sanity, and the reader cannot help but be struck by the power and passion of her writing. The book can serve as a paradigm for all victims of psychiatry, everywhere and always. It deserves to be known."

She was the illegitimate daughter of the astronomer Henri Rouy and it is thought that her half-brother had something to do with her incarceration; as she lost all her possessions, including her jewelry, money may have played a part. She was denied her name with another name simply dumped on her, she spent five years in locked wards, she was moved from asylum to asylum, various meaningless diagnoses were put on her such as "in a state of reasoned mania", "moral insanity", "incurable pride", "a kind of incurable insanity of pride".

She refused to accept any diagnosis of insanity and continued to struggle to write about the appalling conditions she was kept in and the wrongfulness of her detention. "For fourteen years I have lived under an incarceration that cut me off from the real world, took away my civil rights, deprived me of my name, took away everything I owned, destroyed my entire existence without even being able to say why." She wrote to one of the psychiatrists: "You deny that my correspondence was intercepted and that my windows were sealed because you cannot believe that such acts are probable, or even possible. Permit me to say, Doctor, that you are like every other psychiatrist. The minute something strikes you as out of the ordinary you cry: 'Insanity!' and certify the patient without any further examination. The science of psychiatry must be clairvoyant if its practitioners are able to do this without any examination."

And she summed it up in a letter to the Minister of the Interior, "The psychiatrists were well able to avoid this inconvenience [of letting the public know] by causing me to vanish from my house as easily as a conjuror's pea. They changed my name so that nobody would know where I was. They said I was dead so that nobody would try to find out what had become of me."

Masson says of this brave and determined woman, "Another reason her account is important is that increasing attention is being paid today to the fact that women in particular are often victimized by being labeled or given a specific psychiatric diagnosis." And once labeled, even if the label is wrong, it remains very hard to get it removed …

*

September 28: 'Sapper' (Herman Cyril McNeile)

*

My mother was fond of Sapper's Bulldog Drummond books. I don't know how many she had read or what she particularly liked. Probably their cracking pace and thrilling plots. She wasn't politically sophisticated. Readers and critics are far less easily pleased now, regarding them as steeped in racism and jingoism and fascist ideology. And yet Sapper found, like other writers of his era and since, that communists do not make nearly as gripping villains as capitalists. Bad guys on the left often lack colour, excitement, and realism. When Michael Lindsay wrote in *China and The Cold War*, "Marxist theory explains war in terms of economic conflicts, especially the struggle for raw materials and markets between acquisitive capitalistic societies, and maintains that such conflicts will disappear under Communism. To people who accept this view it seems obvious that the main danger of war must come from capitalist countries. And some form of this theory is very widely accepted even by many non-Communists. For example, most of Sapper's "Bulldog Drummond" novels are violently anti-Communist but the plot of *Bulldog Drummond at Bay*

(published in 1935) depends on a crude version of this Marxian theory — unscrupulous capitalists plotting to start a war to serve their economic interests" he was giving voice to the problem which bedeviled writers like Sapper.

But I doubt if Sapper gave the issue deep thought. I'm sure he was, like many people of his time, simply expressing a gut reaction to the horrors of the Russian Revolution, the rise of Stalin, the fear of Communism spreading ...

And although there are off-putting things about Sapper's books, including his strange horror of men wearing beards or moustaches or what he called 'face fungus', they are in fact a fast-paced lively read. I picked one up at a book exchange the other day, *The Third Round*, and it is very much a Twenties' thriller but it also struck me as being very much a forerunner of James Bond, even a father if you don't mind the lack of 'gadgets' and a freelance on the loose. And it raises a dilemma which is very much a dilemma of capitalism. A Professor Goodman has found a way to make diamonds; he can make a stone worth £25,000 on the market for a mere £5. The diamond cartel is panic-stricken. Hugh 'Bulldog' Drummond is on the professor's side but he obviously hopes that the professor will give up on his work.

McNeile describes his hero thus "Hugh Drummond laid no claims to being brilliant. His brain, as he frequently remarked, was of the 'also-ran' variety. But he was undoubtedly the possessor of a very shrewd common sense, which generally enabled him to arrive at the same result as a far more brilliant man and, incidentally, by a much more direct route."

And common sense, though it might be useful in homing in on the crooks of the diamond world, also suggests that it is far better to maintain the status quo, particularly as the free world has most of the diamonds. What might be the common good doesn't come into it. As one of the characters says: who would want every scullery maid aspiring to a diamond tiara? My question would be: why not?

*

September 29: Bruce Bairnsfather (d)

*

I had not heard of Bairnsfather until I came upon that little piece in James Herriot where he says "Above the stable was a hay loft and over one of the garages a dovecot. And there was old Boardman. He, too, seemed to have been left behind from grander days, hobbling round on his lame leg, doing nothing in particular.

"He grunted good morning from his cubby hole where he kept a few tools and garden implements. Above his head his reminders of the war looked down: a row of coloured prints of Bruce Bairnsfather cartoons. He had stuck them up when he came home in 1918 and there they were still, dusty and curled at the edges but still speaking to him of Kaiser Bill and the shell holes and muddy trenches." The image was one of vague sadness and loss and it would not have surprised me to learn that Bairnsfather had died in the trenches.

In fact Bairnsfather had a long and, I hope, quite a happy life. Born in 1888 in India to a military father, he was sent back to England for his schooling, joined an engineering firm and was sent briefly to Newfoundland by his company, before going off to France with the Royal Warwickshires in 1914, where he reached the rank of Captain. Both his parents were quite talented amateur artists but he sort of fell into his role as informal war cartoonist. He enjoyed sketching and his comrades enjoyed his casual creations.

The other day I treated myself to a book about his life up to his mid-twenties called *Bairnsfather, Fragments from His Life* written by 'A Friend' and Vivian Carter, editor of *The Bystander*, the paper which first published his work. The book says, "You will also realize that it is for the soldier-man himself, the private, that Bairnsfather has all his affection, and his best pictures are those which display together the two types, Bert, the novice from home, and Bill, who has been out since Mons. Bert is clean-shaved and has a cigarette drooping from his lips and an innocent look of inquiry on his face, while Bill is broad, notable chiefly for his scrubby moustache and that 'fed-

up' look in his eyes. Though himself, in his own words, 'disguised as that screaming absurdity a captain,' it is to Bill and Bert that his heart goes out."

When *The Bystander* started to bring out his cartoons every week some of the higher-ups complained; the cartoons would be bad for morale. But there was a groundswell of support and the cartoons continued, eventually being collected up as *Fragments from France*. "The Christmas number of the *Bystander*, 1915, contained as its *pièce de resistance* the 'Fragment' which is best known to all the world. The 'Fragment' in question was that entitled 'Well, if you knows of a better 'ole, go to it.' " It may be that the higher echelons also didn't like his work because they contained no propaganda and were about ordinary men, not heroes.

He wrote his autobiography calling it *Wide Canvas* and was for a time an official war cartoonist with the US Army in WW2; he also had some success with turning his WWI characters into a play. But I think there was a secret sense of sadness and loss in his life simply because he couldn't, or the world wouldn't let him, let go of 'Old Bill' and 'Bert'; he was tied forever to an experience which he had found the strength and talent to record in blackly humorous cartoons but which had also contained much of discomfort, misery, and the terrible loss of comrades. Other men moved on. Bairnsfather was forever the man who had poked fun at trench mud and trench rats and trench horrors …

Field-Marshal Earl Wavell in his book *The Good Soldier* wrote, "That unhumorous race, the Germans, held an investigation after the late war into the causes of morale, and attributed much of the British soldier's staying power to his sense of humour. They therefore decided to instil this sense into their own soldiers, and included in their manuals an order to cultivate it. They gave as an illustration in the manual one of Bairnsfather's pictures of "Old Bill" sitting in a building with an enormous shell-hole in the wall. A new chum asks: "What made that hole?" "Mice," replied "Old Bill". In the German manual a solemn footnote of explanation is added: "It was not mice, it was a shell"."

I am quite willing to believe in an official lack of humour but it wasn't a universal German characteristic. German soldiers in the trenches at times got hold of Bairnsfather's work and appreciated his humour. One of them in a POW camp in Russia wrote to tell his editor, "Dear Sir, You will no doubt be gratified to hear that a copy of your publication, *Fragments from France*, by Captain Bairnsfather, has penetrated to the very heart of the Asiatic Continent and, chancing upon a colony of officers in somewhat doleful circumstances, occasioned a most welcome spell of hilarity there.

"It is to be feared, however, that your gratification will undergo a violent shock on the disclosure that the officers in question are German prisoners—members of that ill-favoured people which, according to the established notion among Englishmen, is totally void of humour and, to use the term of your 'Foreword,' went into the war scowling."

And German soldiers could come up with their own black humour. Antony Beevor wrote in *Stalingrad*, "Men would pass the long, dark nights thinking of home and dreaming of leave. *Samizdat* discovered by Russian soldiers on German bodies demonstrates that there were indeed cynics as well as sentimentalists. 'Christmas', ran one spoof order, 'will not take place this year for the following reasons: Joseph has been called up for the army; Mary has joined the Red Cross; Baby Jesus has been sent with other children out into the countryside [to avoid the bombing]; the Three Wise Men could not get visas because they lacked proof of Aryan origin; there will be no star because of the blackout; the shepherds have been made into sentries and the angels have become Blitzmädeln [telephone operators]. Only the donkey is left, and one can't have Christmas with just a donkey.' "

When this was translated and given to a Red Army intelligence officer he said 'I don't understand. Where does this come from?'

The book about his early life ends with these words: "Bruce Bairnsfather, in conclusion, is no exponent of the gospel of hate—no true soldier is. His hatred is for the enemy in the field, but not for his fellow man. This being the case, he values this testimony from the enemy that his humour is a 'reducer of hate.' In the distant days to come, when the world is at peace, perhaps 'Fragments' may penetrate the heart of the enemy country and do just a little to sow on the stony soil of Teutonism the seed of that humour which, had they but possessed it before, would have restrained the Germans from so terribly un-humorous an act as to plunge the whole world into war with themselves on the wrong side."

Unfortunately the 'distant days to come' brought forward that character so lacking in humour: Adolf Hitler.

*

September 30: 'Thirty Days Hath September'

*

I don't know if children still learn that handy old rhyme:
Thirty days hath September.
April, June, and November.
All the rest have thirty-one
Except February alone … etc

But early Quakers named their days and their months by number rather than use what were 'heathen' names. They weren't totally alone in this. For instance, in Portuguese the days of the week are Segunda-feira, Terça-feira, Quarta-feira, Quinta-feira etc. But calling the months by number meant that Quakers couldn't use that handy little rhyme. So they made their own.

The fourth, eleventh, ninth and sixth,
We thirty days to each affix;
All the rest have thirty-one
Except the second month alone;
To it we twenty-eight assign,
But leap-year makes it twenty-nine.

Irvin and Ruth Poley in *Friendly Anecdotes* tell the following story about this habit: "Once, at least, this Quaker practice proved useful. An acquaintance of Augustine Jones, principal of the school that is now known as Moses Brown, forged Jones's name very cleverly on a check. But the cashier noted that the date-line had the word September and not Ninth-month, as was Augustine Jones's habitual practice."

*

October 1: E. B. (Elwyn Brooks) White (d)

*

There was E. B. White who wrote the popular children's story *Charlotte's Web*. There was T. H. White who wrote a famous non-fiction account of training a hawk *The Goshawk*. There was T. H. White who wrote a number of Arthurian send-ups such as *The Sword in the Stone*. There were several prominent journalists of the name of White. There was a fore-runner to Martin Luther King called Walter White. There was our very own Patrick White …

I was pondering on whether I might choose out one to write something about when I came upon a copy of *The Sword in the Stone* on a stall and a comment on the writings of Terence Hanbury White in Neil Barron's *Fantasy Literature*—"Classic fantasy about the boyhood of Arthur"—it says of the book. In fact it is a chaotic mixture of past and present, told in a wryly humourous style, and poking fun at the traditions of chivalry and Merlynesque magic. I found myself wondering what children back in the 1930s made of his books or whether parents bought them ostensibly for their children but really so as to read the books themselves and enjoy picking up on the many allusions …

And the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* tells me White was a recluse.

But the thing which intrigued me, apart from his curious sense of humour, was that he had written some other stranger fantasies. For instance, *The Elephant and the Kangaroo*, "An English atheist visiting Ireland is witness to a visitation of the Archangel Michael bringing news of a new deluge: with the characteristic exaggerated zeal of the convert, he sets out to build an ark in spite of the procrastinations of his hosts. Amusing; one cannot help admiring the temerity of an Englishman who sets out to make fun of the Irish, given that the Irish do the job so very well themselves." And *Mistress Masham's Repose*, "On the eponymous islet a young girl discovers a colony of Lilliputians brought to England after their discovery by Gulliver; her guardians want to sell them to Hollywood, but with a little help from her friends she stoutly defends their (and her own) interests. A satire in which the bitterness characteristic of White's later work is nicely offset by the charm of the heroine."

I began to have the feeling that White's reclusivity might have been diplomatic. He didn't want children (and parents) asking him difficult questions. And he may not have wanted any Irish visitors either …

*

And when I went to check that other T. H. White I found, to my surprise, that it was the same man. He wrote *The Goshawk* and *The Sword in the Stone*. So if you want to gain an insight into the author then read *The Goshawk* with its strange and rather gloomy picture of a man alone.

*

October 2: Graham Greene

*

"It is often forgotten that, even in the case of a novel laid in England, the story, when it contains more than ten characters, would lack verisimilitude if at least one of them were not a Catholic. Ignorance of this fact of social statistics sometimes gives the English novel a provincial air."

So wrote Graham Greene in a curious attempt to turn the English novel into an essay on 'social statistics' …

"Graham Greene was a first-class writer. Until the Vatican grabbed him. After that, he never wrote anything as good as *Brighton Rock*."

Truman Capote in 'Handcarved Coffins'. Greene had in fact become a Catholic before he wrote *Brighton Rock* … but was not yet a promoter of 'social statistics' …

*

October 3: Vicki Arnold

*

In 1991 two women were found shot dead in a vehicle in bushland on the Atherton Tableland, Julie-Ann Leahy and Vicki Arnold. Police decided that it was a murder-suicide. Arnold had shot her friend then turned the gun on herself. But Robert Reid in *Third Party to Murder* raises serious doubts about that verdict. It might have saved police some hard work but the investigation, always propelled by that assumption, contains glaring gaps, inconsistencies, and unsolved mysteries. One of the things which struck me was that the police sent Vicki Arnold's diaries and poems to be psychiatrically evaluated—and Arnold was seen to be, in this material, a depressed bleak violent possibly suicidal woman. What wasn't taken into account was that it was natural for a teenager who has lost a much loved father to be depressed occasionally. Nor is adolescence a time always of sweetness and light even for the best-adjusted young person. Nor did the psychiatrists take into account that some of her poems had been worked over with her friend Neil Hawes, a Country and Western singer, in their hope that the material could be turned into songs.

I must admit I couldn't find anything suicidal in the material that was used to evaluate her state-of-mind and general personality … such as her poem 'I Saw the Moon Die' … it is about death and loss but seems far more likely to be a way of coping with her father's death than a contemplation of suicide … and legion are the C & W songs about death …

"If ever you should chance to be alone some cold and cloudy night;

Look skyward searching for the last quarter of the moon's light.
And if you should be so lucky watch it carefully for it won't
be for very
long
Please dare not look away for fear it shall be gone.
A cloud may shelter its final moments from your constant stare;
Then a gentle reflection will remind you it was there.
Don't frown for you shall see the moon again, it will brighten up the
Sky.

Or perhaps again you shall see that thin line bid good-bye.
Perhaps it will be the same when you see me go,
The moon my memorium to tell the world it was so.
On that thin line of light we travel between life and death,
Please dare not look away or memories are all you shall have left."

I couldn't help feeling that those same police psychiatrists would have a field day with some of my writings! More importantly I was left with the feeling that Vicki Arnold has been unfairly accused, denigrated, and maligned in death …

*

LATE NEWS: After spending 4 years on this book I thought I was finally finished—when I came upon a small item in *The Mercury* (2/3/13): "After more than 20 years, a botched police investigation and three coronial inquests, a Queensland man has been committed to face trial over the shooting deaths of his wife and her best friend.

"Julie-Anne Leahy and Vicki Arnold were found dead in a four-wheel drive in remote bush near Cairns in far north Queensland, on August 9, 1991.

"For more than two decades it was thought the women died in a murder-suicide pact.

"But in a sensational finding yesterday, Queensland coroner Michael Barnes committed Mrs Leahy's husband Alan to stand trial for unlawfully killing." Justice is sometimes slow but I would like to think it is sure …

*

October 4: Edward Stratemeyer

*

The name might not immediately ring a bell. But Edward Stratemeyer was the creator of that enduring character, Nancy Drew. In fact he was the creator of a number of famous children's books. He wrote the first volume of the Bobbsey Twins, under the pseudonym of Laura Lee Hope, then handed the idea over to another (male) writer and it later was taken on by a female writer. He came up with the Hardy Boys and got Canadian writer Leslie McFarlane to take on the series under the pen-name of Franklin W. Dixon. And the Girl Sleuth, Nancy Drew, was his creation—though he first thought of calling her Stella—as he could see a niche for a forward-thinking lively young female character that would appeal to girls in late primary to high school. He looked round for a suitable writer and took on Mildred Augustine, an educated energetic woman in Iowa looking for some outlet for the skills she had gained studying journalism. The book was given 'Carolyn Keene' as its dust-jacket author and the first one came out in 1930. But Stratemeyer died only months later. It was the Great Depression and no one wanted his business. Because Stratemeyer, though he was at times children's writer, editor, and publisher, was overall a book packager. He created the characters for each series, he sold the idea to a publisher, and he came up with the people to do the actual writing. Other than a small office the business was essentially the ideas and the copyrights. With no buyer his daughters Harriet and Edna took over the business, becoming in effect the businesswomen he had not wanted them to be. It was one thing for girls to be well educated, well-finished, poised, confident, it was quite another thing for them to actually have a career that would

take them out of their homes and put that education to practical use. It was, understandably, a very difficult time for them as they had to learn the business virtually from scratch.

It was a hard time for Mildred too. When they reduced her fee per book from $125 to $100 she refused to continue and they got Walter Karig to write the next three books. But Mildred, facing hard times, agreed to return to their stable of authors and wrote some of the Nancy Drew books for only $85 per manuscript. Like all the writers connected to the Stratemeyer Syndicate there were no flow-ons. They got paid on delivery of the required manuscript and that was it. But for the popular writers it was good steady work. Sometimes too steady! Melanie Rehak in *Girl Sleuth Nancy Drew and the Women Who Created Her* wrote of Mildred, "her writing was so good that Harriet and Edna decided to put her on to the Dana Girls books as well. For the next five years, she would be responsible for writing every book in the Syndicate's three biggest girls' mystery series, a staggering work-load she combined with a number of other books written under her own name." Mildred married, was widowed, and later remarried and was again widowed and she grew tired of writing the Nancy books. Harriet, familiar with Nancy and her changing readers took over the series and wrote them until her death in 1982. With no one to take over the business Edward Stratemeyer's very successful concept was finally sold to Simon & Schuster for $4,710,000. They gained "the honor and privilege of publishing, forever more, the country's most famous young detectives. They now had total control over the future of the original series and any spin-offs they could come up with."

Librarians, understandably, have always had problems with series books. Their sheer numbers. Their routine and downmarket styles. At times their ideas and attitudes. Nancy Drew was not immune from the usual criticisms. But many girls found her inspiring for the liberated and courageous things she did and because she gave them a lively fast-paced read. I remember hearing many years ago of a young girl who was abducted in Los Angeles. A keen Nancy Drew reader she did not panic but instead managed to pick out the tail light of the car in which she had been hidden. She got the boot open and escaped. Nancy Drew probably saved her life. Other girls spoke of Nancy as a character who had helped them through hard times in their lives.

Young readers at times had problems with Carolyn Keene—because she wasn't anyone. It never occurred to me as a child to think of writing to a favourite author. They seemed impossibly remote people, physically and psychologically, and I had no idea that some of them might enjoy getting letters from young fans. The many girls who wrote in about Nancy Drew received a letter concocted in the Stratemeyer office. But Carolyn Keene was not about to visit their school or appear at a launch or on TV. Did this matter? For young readers who just wanted a regular supply of the Girl Sleuth the people behind the name were probably irrelevant. But perhaps there were readers who came later to regret that in a sense they'd been 'hoaxed' … Publishing is about fantasy and perhaps it doesn't do to want fact …

*

October 5: Denis Diderot

*

I was looking on Ancestry one day while trying to find if a William Noy living in Dublin in the early 1700s was an ancestor of mine and I found him subscribing to a number of books including, in 1740, to Ephraim Chambers *Cyclopaedia*. I was curious about this. Chambers 1680 – 1740 was a trail-blazer who brought out the first edition of his *Cyclopaedia* or *An Universal Dictionary of Arts and Sciences* in 1728. Its success brought him membership of the Royal Society in London and it went into many editions. It also made a major impact in France. The *Britannica* says "In 1745 the publisher André Le Breton approached Diderot with a view to bringing out a French translation of Ephraim Chambers' *Cyclopaedia*, after two other translators had withdrawn from the project. Diderot undertook the task with the distinguished mathematician Jean Le Rond d'Alembart as coeditor but soon profoundly changed the nature of the publication, broadening its scope and turning it into an important organ of radical and revolutionary opinion." And Ruth Scurr, reviewing *Wicked Company: Freethinkers and Friendship in Pre-Revolutionary Paris*, writes, "The

Encyclopédie began modestly. Struggling to earn money, Diderot was hired to help translate Ephraim Chambers's English *Cyclopaedia* of 1728. The project grew when he decided to add commentaries to the original text, and persuaded a syndicate of three book-sellers to finance a larger collaborative work, far over-spilling the limits of Chambers's original, that would become a definitive repository of certain knowledge and sceptical thought."

Diderot started out conventionally enough as a Catholic and even considered the priesthood but gradually moved towards a more radical view and ended up as an atheist. He wrote widely, essays, plays, novels (many of them only sorted out and published by his daughter Angêlique after his death); he is seen as a proto-evolutionist, he wrote 'An Essay on Blindness' in which he advocated using touch in 1749, something developed by Louis Braille a hundred years later, 'Letters on the Deaf and Dumb', and 'Thoughts on the Interpretation of Nature' which promoted the use of experimental methods. Gordon Rattray Taylor in *The Biological Time Bomb* began it with these words 'Two hundred years ago the French Encyclopaedist Diderot, in an ironical vision of the future which he called *The Dream of d'Alembert*, described how one day human embryos would be artificially cultivated and their hereditary endowment pre-determined. His hero saw "a warm room with the floor covered with little pots, and on each of these pots a label: soldiers, magistrates, philosophers, poets, potted courtesans, potted kings …" ' which would suggest he could also be claimed as a science fiction writer.

But his *Encyclopédie* was his huge undertaking, finally finished in 1772. He then looked around for further work and became librarian to Catherine the Great. But he didn't like what he saw in Russia and returned to France where he died.

Like Samuel Johnson, and his travels and his dictionary, much has been written about Diderot. But I couldn't help hoping someone would draw Ephraim Chambers out of the shadows and the obscurity into which he has fallen. Undoubtedly there were many mistakes and infelicities in his work. But it was a brave undertaking and everyone who has come after him is in some way in his debt.

*

October 6: Elizabeth Bishop (d)

*

Elizabeth Bishop was invited to give a Phi Beta Kappa poem at Harvard. In an interview with *The Paris Review* she remembered the occasion, "I dug out "The Moose" and thought, "Maybe I can finish it," and I did. The day of the ceremony for Phi Beta Kappa (which I'd never made in college) we were all sitting on the platform at Sanders Theater. And the man who had asked me to give the poem leaned across the president and said to me whispering, "What is the name of your poem?" I said, " 'The Moose,' M-o-o-s-e," and he got up and introduced me and said, "Miss Bishop will now read a poem called 'The *Moos*.' " Well, I choked and my hat was too big. And later the newspaper account read, "Miss Bishop read a poem called 'The Moose' and the tassle of her mortarboard swung back and forth over her face like a windshield wiper"!"

After reading that I was curious. What might a poem about a moose be like? What was it about her moose she felt was particularly suited to the occasion? So I went moose-tracking …

I found a book called *Edgar Allan Poe & The Juke-Box* and put her *Collected Poems* on order. But the *Collected Poems* turned out to be out-of-print so I have been enjoying the unpublished or unfinished poems, the fragments, the ideas, the essays, which make up the Juke-Box book. No mooses.

I found a book in the library which had several of her poems and the added bonus of a CD with her reading several of her poems. But no mooses.

Alice Quinn says, introducing the Juke-Box book, "Dating drafts is challenging and sometimes impossible. Bishop famously began poems and set them aside for years. "The Moose," we know, had its origins in a bus trip the poet took in 1946, and she continued to work on the poem after reading it in June 1972 at the Phi Beta Kappa ceremony at Harvard."

Still no moose, not even half a moose …

But here is an unpublished poem from A bus trip, perhaps even THE bus trip …

‘Travelling, A Love Poem’
And here we must see:
“The Swaying Suspension Bridge,”
“The Exquisite Congregational Church”
(that’s what it says),
And “The Octagonal House.”
—None of these should tax the imagination!
Isn’t it a beautiful day? It’s a *beautiful* day.
We almost always have good weather, don’t we?
Do you remember “October’s bright blue weather?”
No. I can’t remember who wrote it.
Want some more coffee? This toast is like Kleenex.
And then there’s that fort
—you can see it out that window across the water.
They’ve left, across the hall. Let’s get going.
Look, they’ve got the same pictures
but their carpet … that *aggressive* blue … Yucky.
Why do you suppose it was so *big*?
What war was it built for?
1812? Too late for the Revolution.
Perhaps that time we almost went to war
with Canada? Well, anyway—pre-Wright-brothers.
It says to “take flashlights” and “warm sweaters”
because most of it’s underground.
Well, let’s not. I can just smell the pee-pee.
Yes, *Mechanic* Street, I wonder why
—one sees lots of Mechanic Streets.
The sidewalk looks as if it had
melted, doesn’t it, and hardened again.
My grandmother told me that kind is called “asphalt.”
Yes, it looks as if it had melted and run
around those elm-trees.
How gold everything is—it’s sort of nice.
All these towns have *some* nice old buildings.

Elizabeth Bishop died in 1979.

*

October 7: Constance Holme

*

When I was unpacking a box of donated books one day I found it had a number of novels by Constance Holme. I had never heard of her and yet the books were described as Classics. Thinking I must be missing something I set to reading them …

Margaret Crosland in *Beyond the Lighthouse* said of her, “Outside Cumbria in the north-west of Britain there are few people nowadays who know the work of Constance Holme well. Those who recognize the titles best, even if they have not read the novels themselves, are the people dealing in secondhand books, for there is a small but steady demand for these out-of-print titles. How few authors in their lifetime have seen eight books, consisting here of seven novels and one volume of stories, published in the neatly handsome dark blue format of the World’s Classics? Sir Humphrey Milford, for a long time Publisher at the Oxford Press, found these books and their author very much to his liking.

"Why did he choose the work of an undemonstrative woman from Cumbria for inclusion in the prestigious World's Classics list? Nothing she wrote about took place outside that small area between Milnthorpe (where she was born and where she died) and Morecombe Bay, where the rivers Kent and Leven join the Irish Sea."

She was the youngest of fourteen children, married at 35 to a man called Punchard, but had no children of her own. The four books I've been reading were *The Lonely Plough*, *Crump Folk Going Home*, *He Who Came?* and *The Wisdom of the Simple* and I think the interest now is partly (she was also a very capable writer) that they lie in the cusp of change. The lives of women were changing, the relationships between landlords and tenants were changing, young folk were growing restless, the relations between town and country were changing, the old certainties were disappearing.

Crosland says, "Sir Humphrey Milford was perhaps wiser than he knew to include this author in the World's Classics, her work *is* classical, and the small scale of it is deceptive. The voices and the background are Cumbrian, the deeper inference applies to the whole of humanity. As the daughter and wife of land agents Constance Holme wrote about land, property and families, but fortunately not from a financial point of view; she wrote no line or word that was not essential and described no mood or emotion unless it were essential too."

Her last work *The Jasper Sea* has never been published; perhaps it would now seem impossibly old-fashioned and yet I am glad I came upon her so unexpectedly …

*

October 8: George Turner

*

I was in the library one day and saw that Judith Raphael Buckrich had written a biography of George Turner. She says Turner is much better known overseas as a science fiction writer than in Australia. She also says that some of his writing is definitely misogynist partly because of the era and partly because he had been brought up by his mother and other women after his father went bankrupt and deserted his family. George spent much of his life missing the father he'd never had. Or missing the unreal image of the father who had packed up and gone.

I was curious to see what I thought of Turner's writing for myself—but—it doesn't jump off either the sci fi shelves or the mainstream shelves. So I can attest to the fact that he is not terribly well known in his home country. I did finally track down copies of some of his books and I have been reading *The Cupboard Under The Stairs*, *Drowning Towers* and *Beloved Son* but he is grist to the mill of those who complain that Australian writers are not well-served by reprints or long shelf life for their books. And is he misogynistic? I did not feel he liked any of his female characters, though perhaps that is something that doesn't come as a surprise given his generation. A strong misogynist thread runs through many Australian books. Women are comic, pathetic, or irritating. But to be honest I did not feel he really liked any of his characters. So what is he like as a writer? I thought his books showed both imagination and talent. But they lack something. A spark. A sense of passion. A roundedness. This is hard to pin down—but they just didn't make me care what happened. Something a bit bloodless and detached …

*

October 9: Anon

*

"How did poetry get passed along before there was writing? By the human memory and the human voice. Folklorists and anthropologists call this process *oral transmission*. Poetic history is full of incredible feats of memory. The *Mahabharata*, the sacred epic of India, is perhaps the longest poem ever, yet it was not published until the 19th century, some 3,500 years after its composition! Millions of people simply *remembered* all or parts of it. To qualify for the position of scribe to some of the potentates of India, you had to be able to recite thousands of lines from the ancient Vedas by memory. Many scholars believe that several of the world's greatest epic poems — including *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* by Homer, *The Song of Roland* (the French national epic), and

The Poem of the Cid (the Spanish national epic) — were originally orally composed and passed along.

"In the 19th century, two scholars heroically rescued orally-transmitted epics from oblivion. The Serbian epic known as *The Battle of Kosovo* memorializes a terrible battle on the Field of Blackbirds in 1389, when the Turks overwhelmed the Serbs. Thanks to Vuk Stefanovic Karadzic, who collected scraps and shards of the epic by interviewing monks, shepherds, and traditional singers known as *guslari*, the epic cycle was collected and published. The Finnish doctor and poet Elias Lönnrot roamed throughout Finland for 20 years, collecting remembered scraps of Finnish epic and lyric poetry, which he finally published as the *Kalevala* (1849).

"There's still a lot of orally transmitted poetry in Asia, Africa, and elsewhere — even though some of it is printed, rap music is essentially an oral form. (And don't forget American Cowboy poetry, much of the earliest of which was sung on the range.) In the early 20th century, scholars discovered Balkan shepherds who were able to recite thousands of lines of poetry from memory while they tended their sheep — a clue to the way *The Odyssey* and much other great poetry survived the ages."

From *Poetry for Dummies* by The Poetry Center, John Timpane and Maureen Watts.

I hope those shepherds—even though they may indulge in blood feuds and wife beating—have survived the upheavals in the Balkans and continue to recite poetry to their sheep.

*

October 10: Ken Saro-Wiwa

*

When Saro-Wiwa was executed by the Nigerian military for his support for the Ogoni people in 1995 I noticed a lot of commentators rushing to say that dictators and military juntas hate writers and that writing is a uniquely dangerous profession. Bollocks! Writing is one of the safest and most peaceful professions on earth. Send any writer out to get into cars with strangers every night for sex and you'll soon find them rushing back to their PCs. More than that it irritated me because alongside Saro-Wiwa another eight people were executed. We were never told their names or their occupations. They were treated as though their part in the protests was invisible.

Now Ken Saro-Wiwa had a much higher profile than the others *because* of his writing, not least because he created an immensely popular soap opera which ran for 5 years in Nigeria called *Basi & Co.* (about a 'bunch of feckless Lagos wide-boys who, indigent and lazy, did nothing but hatch inept schemes for becoming rich') and a well-regarded anti-war novel called *Sozaboy: A Novel in Rotten English* (soza = soldier); he was also prolific as a journalist and writer of short articles, as a poet and a writer for children. But it was his championing of his people, the Ogoni, who had seen their lands destroyed by oil-drilling—in the words of William Boyd, "In the late eighties, I remember, Ken's conversations turned more and more frequently to the topic of his tribal homeland. The Ogoni are a small tribe (there are 250 tribes in Nigeria) of about half a million people living in a small area of the fertile Niger River Delta. The Ogoni's great misfortune is that their homeland happens to lie above a significant portion of Nigeria's oil reserves. Since the mid 1950s, Ogoniland has been devastated by the industrial pollution caused by the extraction of oil. What was once a placid rural community of prosperous farmers and fishermen is now an ecological waste land reeking of sulphur, its creeks and water holes poisoned by indiscriminate oil spillage and ghoulishly lit at night by the orange flames of gas flares"—which made him a marked man. Wilfred Burchett wrote of the tragic connection of oil and blood in his *Southern Africa Stands Up*; "History has proved over and over again that oil is always mixed with blood." He was concerned about the way that Angola's oil was fuelling war but it resonates elsewhere. And Saro-Wiwa said of his homeland, "Over the past thirty-two years Ogoni has offered Nigeria an estimated US thirty billion dollars and received NOTHING in return, except a blighted countryside, an atmosphere full of carbon dioxide, carbon monoxide and hydrocarbons; a land in which wildlife is unknown, a land of polluted streams and creeks, of rivers without fish, a land which is, in every sense of the term, an ecological disaster. This is not acceptable."

His speeches, his writings, his representations to the U.N. and a range of international organisations helped to draw the world's attention, his high profile in Nigeria, his abilities as an organiser and motivator and activist, his clarity of vision in drawing up an Ogoni 'manifesto' combined to make him seem a threat to both the Nigerian government and to Shell, as well as to those who have benefited by the siphoning of oil revenues into private accounts and pet projects, which led the government to arrest him on trumped-up charges of murder.

I applaud the courage and dedication of Ken Saro-Wiwa to a vital cause. He was a lively and prolific writer. His prison diary *A Month and a Day* suggests a man who could retain his good humour and his perspective under appalling conditions. But he wasn't 'uniquely' dangerous because he was a writer … because, sadly, his death in Nigeria wasn't 'unique' …

*

October 11: Anon

*

Steve Roud wrote in *Monday's Child is Fair of Face*:

Ring a ring a roses,
A pocket full of posies,
A-tishoo! A-tishoo!
We all fall down.

Ring a Roses is nowadays one of the first singing games which parents teach their children, and in some form or other it has been popular all over the English-speaking world for about 130 years. The modern words vary little, but in the past there were considerable differences between versions which make it difficult to estimate how the words might have been in the original. One of the earliest versions noted in Britain, for example, was published in Kate Greenaway's *Mother Goose* in 1881:

Ring-a-ring-a-roses
A pocket full of posies
Hush! hush! hush! hush!
We're all tumbled down.

And two other versions from the following decade show something of the range of variability at the time:

Ring a ring o' roses
A pocket-full o' posies
One for me, one for you
And one for little Moses.
Hasher, Hasher, Hasher, all fall down.
Lincolnshire, *c.* 1894.

Ring a ring a row-o
See the children go-o
Sit below the goose-berry bush
Hark! they all cry Hush! hush! hush!
Sitty down, sit down.

Duzzy duzzy gander
Sugar, milk and candy
Hatch-u, hatch-u, all fall down together.

A comparison of all the early versions shows that it is possible that the original text did not include sneezing, but 'hushing', and that the 'falling down' was originally curtseying or bowing, rather than falling.

But some time in the middle of the twentieth century, probably in the 1940s, somebody had the bright idea that the rhyme describes the plague, and dates from the time of the Great Plague of 1666. Despite being complete nonsense, this idea, after simmering for a while, spread like wildfire in the 1960s, and it is no exaggeration to say that the vast majority of people now believe it without question. Attempts to correct people on the matter are often met with disbelief and even anger, as many people object to the destruction of romantic legend by the cold water of fact. But the plague theory rests on the flimsiest of evidence, and the case against it is very strong. The first known versions are more than two hundred years after the Great Plague; no writer at the time of the plague, or after, mentions it; earlier collectors of children's rhymes do not include it; sneezing and red patches are not symptoms of the plague, and so on. In summary, the rhyme did not exist, and the internal details which are said to corroborate the theory are completely wrong. It is almost certain that the whole idea was constructed by somebody who latched onto the 'posies' detail and extrapolated from the idea that people in the past carried nosegays to prevent infection in times of sickness."

So if not inspired by the plague was it inspired by sickness at all? And if not—what did it originally refer to? Or was it simply a nonsense rhyme? And if not written in the 1600s when and where was it written? And who was its author? Those are probably questions fated never to be answered. Iona and Peter Opie in *The Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes* wrote: "The foreign and nineteenth-century versions seem to show that the fall was originally a curtsey or other gracious bending movement of a dramatic singing-game, and the present writers have on several occasions gathered from oral tradition a sequel rhyme for the players to rise on their feet again,

The cows are in the meadow
Lying fast asleep,
A-tishoo! A-tishoo!
We all get up again."

*

October 12: Spike Mullins

*

Spike Mullins was a humourist but I went down the wrong road in the beginning because I had him muddled-up with Spike Milligan—who is also a humourist and better known. I always remember Milligan being in an ABC studio in the early 1970s waiting to be interviewed. The news on the hour came on and the newsreader read out 'It was said this morning in the South Australian parliament—' and in the background Milligan said 'but nobody was listening' and the poor newsreader just cracked up and couldn't go on for a moment.

Bad Report—Good Manners

My daddy said, 'My son, my son,
This school report is bad.'
I said, 'I did my best I did,
My dad my dad my dad.'

'Explain, my son, my son,' he said,
'Why *bottom* of the class?'
'I stood aside, my dad my dad,
To let the others pass.' Some of Milligan's work *is* very funny but at times it is rather laboured and straining for effect. So where does Mullins come in, if not on the Goon Show etc? Spike Mullins, I discovered when I was reading Ronnie Corbet's autobiography, was the writer

of those little segments for Ronnie in the Chair on *The Two Ronnies* (as well as other pieces) and which I continue to find wonderfully funny, not least because they never give the feeling of bludgeoning you with the humour. He goes off into the sort of little digressions and by-ways that people in real life so often do when they start to tell a story. And you never quite know where you're going to end up. Take this beginning for instance:

'Before I begin I'd just like to say 'Thank you' to all those viewers who sent goodwill messages when we moved into our new house recently – I have some letters here which have come from all over the place – look at the postmark on that one – I didn't know they had television in Luton. Another one here from Slough – anyone want the stamp?

I'll just say that we seem to have overcome most of our troubles.

I bought the kiddies a penguin last week. I was going to buy them a pussy cat but the living-room is still *very* damp. If I can keep them away from picture books and other children they'll never know the difference. Anyway he's doing a grand job, we haven't seen a fish since we got him.'

But just when you think it's all going to be about odd pets or shonky builders he gets on to reminiscing about parties including the long ago one where he was invited home by a young widow. 'Anyway we finished up at her place and she said to me, "Why don't you make yourself a bit more comfortable, take your clothes off."

Well, it seemed a good idea at the time, and she said, "I won't be a minute."

So I was sitting there with nothing on when she came back with her three children and said, "That's what you'll look like if you don't eat your greens." '

Is Mullins the better humourist? He is very funny on the page but I think he also benefited from the wonderful timing that Ronnie Corbett and Ronnie Barker brought to their work. Yet it is a two-way-thing. *The Two Ronnies* as a show and for the reputation of its two stars gained immensely by using some of the best humorous writing around.

*

October 13: Iona Opie

*

Iona and Peter Opie became a household word for their work on nursery rhymes, such as *The Oxford Book of Nursery Rhymes*, on children's games and riddles and poetry and play. They filled up the centre of the stage and although material continues to come to light which can change the dating and history of a nursery rhyme they are still most researchers' and curious readers' first port-of-call. After Peter died Iona continued the kind of work they'd done together for so long.

At the moment I am reading her *The People in the Playground* about the games and riddles and behaviour of English children in their playgrounds. But although she was most interested in their games the children were obviously more interested in sharing jokes and riddles. These ranged from the endless 'There was an Englishman, a Scotsman, and an Irishman' type of joke and the Knock Knock riddles to things the children made up themselves (such as 'What goes, "Peck, peck bang!"? A chicken in a minefield') to the parodies which keep turning up in new versions. She gives this example, "when I murmured that I needed something about Christmas before I left, a boy said, 'OK, here's a rhyme,' and supervised me while I wrote down:

We three kings of Leicester Square,
Selling ladies' underwear,
Not very safe to wear—

He faltered, and said uncertainly, 'No elastic in them.' Another boy said scornfully, 'It's not like that, 'e's got the words wrong. It's like this:

We three kings of Leicester Square,
Trying to sell ladies' underwear,
How fantastic, no elastic,
Trying to sell ladies' underwear.'

‘Are you sure the last line is right?’ ‘Yes, of course, but it hasn’t finished yet. There’s a chorus.

O star of wonder, star of light,
The royal knickers caught alight,
How fantastic, no elastic,
Guide me to the traffic lights.’

‘Well, thank you,’ I said, ‘I’ll have that for my Christmas present. ’Bye now, and have a happy Christmas.’ They all smiled and waved as they went into school.

Postscript. When I first heard that parody of ‘We three kings of Orient are’, in 1952, it was making fun of the ‘spivs’ who sold, at high prices, goods that were in short supply after the war. ‘We are three spivs of Trafalgar Square, Flogging nylons tuppence a pair, All fully fashioned, all off the ration, Sold in Trafalgar Square.’ ”

I found myself wondering how the children felt about Mrs Opie and how she regarded the children. I also had the feeling that her research had a hint of loneliness in it. Not a blatant sense of loss. “It was lovely to walk out of the playground slowly, in the shade, in a cotton dress; to look down at the wandering waste water from the drinking fountain, and be reminded of summers long ago.” I found myself wondering what it was like going home to an empty house when the person you had shared every aspect of your personal and professional life with was no longer there …

*

October 14: e.e. cummings

*

Sometimes ‘experimental’ literature is presented as though being called experimental is sufficient recommendation. It’s not that I am against experimentation. In a way everything you write is a voyage into the unknown. But I think the things which grow organically out of a tradition are more attractive than the things which are labeled experimental. So often they seem tedious and contrived. And what is sometimes called experimental is merely a lack of capitals and full stops. I vaguely put the American poet e.e. cummings into this category. But the other day I nipped into the Lending Library just to get something small to read on the bus and came out with his *73 Poems*, the pieces he was working on when he died. It isn’t true that he uses no capitals—but he often puts them where you’d least expect them—as in his poem ‘42’—

n
OthI
n

g can

s
urPas
s

the m

y
SteR
y

of

s (nothing can surpass the mystery of stillness)
tilLnes
s

Was it a better poem for being in that format? I much preferred poem ‘29’ which begins …

the greedy the people
(as if as can yes)
they sell and they buy
and they die for because
though the bell in the steeple
says Why and ends …

the timid the tender
(as doubt as can trust)
they work and they pray
and they bow to a must
though the earth in her splendor
says May

There is an attractive sense of suppressed energy, of rhythm, of a delight in words permeating his work. Yet I don’t really think I will rush out to see what else he wrote …

*

October 15: Tadeusz Kosciuszko (d)

*

At primary school we learnt that Mt Kosciusko is Australia’s highest mountain and we struggled with its spelling; somewhere in there, too, I gained the idea that it had something to do with Poland but no one spelled it out. What they did do, and I don’t know if we were grateful, was leave out a ‘z’ and take the accent off the ‘s’. Perhaps if we had been little schoolchildren somewhere in Eastern Europe the name of the great Polish revolutionary would immediately have resonated …

One of his contemporaries, John Keats, wrote an admiring effusion: ‘To Kosciusko’:

:

Good Koscuisko, thy great name alone
  Is a full harvest whence to reap high feeling;
  It comes upon us like the glorious pealing
Of the wide spheres — an everlasting tone.
And now it tells me, that in worlds unknown,
  The names of heroes burst from clouds concealing,
  And change to harmonies, for ever stealing
Through cloudless blue, and round each silver throne.
It tells me too, that on a happy day,
  When some good spirit walks upon the earth,
    Thy name with Alfred’s and the great of yore
  Gently commingling, gives tremendous birth
To a loud hymn, that sounds far, far away
    To where the great God lives for evermore.

But my question was a little different: if Kosciuszko didn’t come to Australia (and his struggle first in the American War of Independence and then to achieve independence for Poland against the combined forces of Russia and Prussia, something which would not happen in his lifetime, kept him preoccupied) how did his name get plonked on our highest peak? The answer is quite simple. His countryman, explorer, geologist, and writer, Paul Strzelecki, (born 1797) who has the highest peak on Flinders Island named for him, bestowed the honour in 1840, twenty-three years after Kosciuszko died.

So did Strzelecki warrant his own peak? Apart from his efforts to explore Australia's wild places Henry Reynolds in *Frontier* says of him, "The Pole Strzelecki observed in 1845 that the blacks had been 'declared by law, or by rather, sophistry of law, to be illegitimate possessors of any land which they do not cultivate … The Christianity which was offered to him was stripped of its charity, and the civilization embraced no recognition of his rights of property'." Given the way we have given mountains to villains and saints, bureaucrats and bunglers, mass murderers and morons, I am happy for Strzelecki to be remembered …

*

October 16: Sappho (!)

*

Of course we don't know the date on which Sappho was born. We don't even know the year. We don't know how old she was when she died. We do know she lived on the island of Lesbos. But we don't know for certain if she was a lesbian. She appears to have run a school or a group for young women. But that she enjoyed their presence and their company is not the same as knowing whether she ever had any kind of relationship beyond that. We don't know whether she ever married and we don't know for certain whether when she refers to a daughter she specifically means her own daughter or simply a young woman in her care.

The fragments of her poetry which have turned up in various strange ways tell us there was a rich and sensuous vein to her poems, often using the imagery of flowers and herbs, such as in:

'You culled violets and roses, bloom and stem,
Often in spring and I looked on as you
Wove a bouquet into a diadem.'

But she also wrote poems for social occasions, perhaps at the request of friends and family, such as this piece:

'Blest bridegroom, this day of matrimony,
Just as you wished it, has come true:
The bride is whom you wished for …
'You
Move gracefully; your eyes are honey;
Charm was showered on your radiant face —
Yes, Aphrodite granted you outstanding praise.'

The ambrosial mixture
Ready is the mixing bowl,
Hermes went round with a pitcher
And served the gods. When all
Had tipped their goblets and poured offerings,
They prayed that the groom suffer only the good things.'

So why have I placed Sappho on this particular date? Simply because it is the day my son got married. My 'blest bridegroom' …

*

October 17: Sir Philip Sidney (d)

*

Sidney's *Arcadia* is pretty heavy going to a modern reader reared on the fast-paced novels of today, the thrillers and mysteries, even the love stories clip along at a pace which would have left Sidney gasping. He was a contemporary of Shakespeare but the *Arcadia* is usually called a pastoral and was designed to be read not performed, though probably read aloud among his friends. Part of its interest now, I think, lies in the changing use of words, and the changing of expressions. For instance, we would say 'rule the roost' but originally it was 'rule the roast', that is the person at the head of the table who decided how much roast meat each person was allotted—and thus, by

inference, the head of the household. But it also has some attractive verse and dialogue. Here is a little piece, a dialogue between Reason and Passion:

REASON: Thou rebel vile, come, to thy master yield.

And the other that met with him answered:

PASSION: No, tyrant, no; mine, mine shall be the field.

R: Can Reason then a tyrant counted be?

P: If Reason will that Passions be not free.

R: But Reason will that Reason govern most.

P: And Passion will that Passion rule the roast.

R: Your will is will, but Reason reason is.

P: Will hath his will when Reason's will doth miss.

R: Whom Passion leads unto his death is bent.

P: And let him die, so that he die content.

R: By nature you to Reason faith have sworn.

P: Not so, but fellow-like together born.

R: Who Passion doth ensue lives in annoy.

P: Who Passion doth forsake lives void of joy.

R: Passion is blind, and treads an unknown trace.

P: Reason hath eyes to see his own ill case.

Then as they approached nearer, the two of Reason's side, as if they shot at each other, thus sang:

R: Dare Passions then abide in Reason's light?

P: And is not reason dimmed with Passion's might?

R: O foolish thing, which glory doth destroy!

P: O glorious title of a foolish toy!

R: Weakness you are, dare you with our strength fight?

P: Because our weakness weakeneth all your might.

R: O sacred Reason, help our virtuous toils.

P: O Passion, pass on feeble Reason's spoils.

R: We with ourselves abide a daily strife.

P: We gladly use the sweetness of our life.

R: But yet our strife sure peace in end doth breed.

P: We now have peace, your peace we do not need.

Then did the two square battles meet, and instead of fighting, embrace one another, singing thus:

R: We are too strong: but Reason seeks not blood.

P: Who be too weak do feign they be too good.

R: Though we cannot o'ercome, our cause is just.

P: Let us o'ercome, and let us be unjust.

R: Yet Passion, yield at length to Reason's stroke.

P: What shall we win by taking Reason's yoke?

R: The joys you have shall be made permanent.

P: But so we shall with grief learn to repent.

R: Repent indeed, but that shall be your bliss.

P: How know we that, since present joys we miss?

R: You know it not; of reason therefore know it.

P: No Reason yet had ever skill to show it.

R, P: Then let us both to heavenly rules give place,
Which Passions kill, and Reason do deface.

*

October 18: James Logan Pearsall Smith

*

I used Smith (1865 – 1946) merely as part of a dialogue of advice in *A Half-Closed Book* but the other day I came upon a short article about him in *The English Friend* (December 2008) and thought perhaps he deserved a little more. He belonged to an old Philadelphia Quaker family and found himself with enough money to live on from the family glassworks so he, like Henry James, could devote himself to writing. He wrote short stories, biographies, and books about grammar, words, and style, such as *The English Language* and *Words and Idioms*; with the poet laureate Robert Bridges he launched the Society for Pure English. He was connected by marriage to the families of Bertrand Russell, Virginia Woolf, and Lytton Strachey. The article's author Stephen Taylor says, "Although he wrote an autobiography and a scholarly study of John Milton, he is best known for three books, *Trivia*, *More Trivia* and *Afterthoughts*. All were notable for their perceptive — and sometimes waspish — opinions on a host of subjects and written in the beautifully balanced sentences that became his life's quest."

I quite enjoy putting down my waspish, though possibly not perceptive, opinions on 'a host of subjects' but I must admit 'beautifully balanced sentences' have never been a preoccupation. I'm not even sure they should be. Style is important. But content matters more …

And as Jessamyn West said of him "Logan made a career of standing aside from life. This may have helped his sentences; it harmed his life."

*

October 19: John le Carré

*

Think le Carré, think espionage. But right at the beginning of his writing career he wrote a murder mystery, a fairly traditional whodunit called *A Murder of Quality*. So I wondered if he was a loss to the mystery genre, whether it was a pity he didn't remain in that field.

The story is set in an Anglican boys' school in Dorset and class and snobbery play a major role in the way people see themselves and the murdered wife of one of the masters. It would be hard to find a more unattractive group of people. It is as though le Carré set out to highlight the most unpleasant aspects of life in an exclusive boys' school with a merciless pen. But it is the insertion of George Smiley, at the request of the editor of a small Christian newspaper, into the mix which doesn't quite work. I thought an investigation by police, interspersed with the attitudes and conversations of schoolboys, staff, and wives, would have been stronger. Making it a three-way structure diffuses any build up of tension and I sometimes had to remind myself of what Smiley was actually supposed to be doing there …

It is a very competent and readable story. But no, I don't think it is a pity he didn't persevere in the genre. And it was his next book, the spy novel *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold*, which made him famous and locked him in to a different genre.

*

October 20: Arthur Rimbaud

*

The nights, the railway-arches, the bad sky,
His horrible companions did not know it;
But in that child the rhetorician's lie
Burst like a pipe: the cold had made a poet.

Drinks bought him by his weak and lyric friend
His five wits systematically deranged,
To all accustomed nonsense put an end;
Till he from lyre and weakness was estranged.

Verse was a special illness of the ear;
Integrity was not enough; that seemed
The hell of childhood: he must try again.

Now, galloping through Africa, he dreamed
Of a new self, the son, an engineer,
His truth acceptable to lying men.

'Rimbaud' by W. H. Auden (from his *Collected Shorter Poems*).

I did not feel like enquiring into those 'horrible companions' but I *was* a little curious. Did Rimbaud live and write in Africa? The answer is yes. And the 'weak and lyric friend' was Paul Verlaine with whom he had a love affair and Verlaine ended up shooting him in the wrist and going to prison. I cannot say I particularly warmed to the Rimbaud that Jean-Luc Steinmetz presents in *Arthur Rimbaud Presence of an Enigma*. When he went to Africa in 1880 I can even imagine some people feeling relieved. He was taciturn, difficult, bored, surly, misogynist, and a constant cadger. He got work with an Aden-based trading firm and went to Ethiopia to sell everything from silks to saucepans. Here he had an affair with a woman apparently in hopes of a family. But possibly because he was syphilitic no children eventuated. Eventually he returned to France and died in 1891, only thirty-seven years of age.

I went looking in his poems in the hope that he had used Africa as an inspiration for some of his writing but curiously almost all of his work was done in France. Africa might have been an adventure, a relief from the constraints and boredoms of his life in France but it does not seem to have been an inspiration. There was no creative outpouring. Or perhaps the silks and saucepans kept him too busy.

So what of his poetry? I found some of them intriguing and attractive, such as 'Festivals of Hunger' and 'O Seasons, o chateaux', but as he wrote in rhyme I don't think reading them in translation does them justice. Take for instance this one 'Does she dance?...' which begins

Est-elle almée?... aux premières heures bleues
Se détruire-t-elle comme les fleurs feues…
Devant la splendide étendue, oú l'on sente
Souffler la ville énormément florissante! translated as

Does she dance?...in the first blue hours
Will she perish like dead flowers…
Before this stretch of splendour where we should feel
The breath of the city in bloom!

Too beautiful! Too beautiful! But needed
—For the Fishermaid and the Corsair's song
And because since the last masks still wanted
Midnight carnivals on pure seas! I'm not sure what you might read into that.

*

October 21: Katherine, Duchess of Atholl (d)

*

Katherine swam briefly into my life years ago when I came upon her book *Searchlight on Spain* dealing with the lead up to and onset of the Spanish Civil War which provided these little snippets …

—"Nearly 1,500 village libraries were set up in the first year alone (1932). They were enthusiastically welcomed by those who could read." …

—But in 1933 "Town Councils with a Left majority were dismissed and replaced by councils which too often closed the precious new libraries or starved them of support." …

—"To complete the tragedy, working-men's libraries which had been established in almost all the Asturian villages were burned by official order." …

She was known as The Red Duchess as she became a Labor MP and one of the first two women ministers in a British parliament. In fact she was a fascinating woman. I suppose she would've been called a bluestocking had she been born fifty years earlier. Born Katherine Ramsey she had a university education and married the 9th Duke of Atholl in 1899. The other day I went looking for a little more about her and found an interesting obituary in *The Times*. It said of her, "Completely sincere, grave and alert, her tiny, upright, hawk-like figure was poised with an innate dignity that was reinforced by the greatness of her moral stature."

She was involved in a range of concerns, including health and education; but her concerns for those who suffered ranged from the victims of Hitler and Franco to young girls in Africa. In the late 1920s she played a major role in "an all-party committee to prevent enforced circumcisions of Kikuyu girls, and represented them at an international conference on African children in Geneva."

She died in 1960 and although I do not usually rush to read the memoirs of political figures I thought I might make an exception and see if I could track down her 1958 book of her life and work with her husband *Working Partnership* …

*

October 22: Ivan Bunin

*

"The novel is set in rural Russia in the early twentieth century. Divided into three parts, it tells of the life of Tikhon Ilitch Krasoff and his brother, Kuzma Ilitch Grasoff, who in their opposing temperaments encompass the duality of human nature. The first section is concerned with Tikhon. He is a rough, pragmatic man who is obsessed with making money and buying land. He begins his working life as a peddler and becomes a prosperous innkeeper and landowner, although crop failures lead him to drink. In the second section, we learn about Kuzma. He is idealistic, sensitive and a poet, a wanderer and a tramp who is destined never to realize his dreams. As this section begins, Kuzma and Tikhon have quarrelled and parted ways, and we follow Kuzma on his journeys. In Part Three, Kuzma returns to the simple village, where he becomes an overseer on his brother's estate.

"The novel is noted for its straight-forward, unidealized portrait of peasant life. Their existence is depicted as a monotonous cycle of brutality and poverty, and the peasants themselves are as harsh and unchangeable as the land they inhabit. Bunin himself called the work a poem, and many critics have noticed that its three-part structure lends it the air of a triptych. The novel is essentially plotless, offering a realistic yet poetic representation of rural life."

A description of Bunin's best-known novel *The Village* in Laurie Lanzen Harris's *Characters in 20th-century Literature*. Bunin, 1870 – 1953, won the Nobel Prize in 1933; the first Russian to do so. He was a poet, a translator, a short story writer, a novelist, a biographer. In other words, a very talented man. But when I considered looking for something of his another novel of Russian peasant life, *And Quiet Flows the Don*, got in the way. Was his best-known book, I wondered, just variations on a theme?

The *Handbook of Russian Literature* (edited by Victor Terras) suggests an interesting man. "Much of Bunin's pre-Revolutionary work is a lyrical elegy over the dying countryside. Dying old peasants, and portraits of destitution and hunger are common. But underlying Bunin's regret over the decline of rural Russia is a theme that obsessed him all his life—the impenetrable isolation of men in their suffering. In the face of death—both of the individual and of the social order—nature provides solace—its beauty consoles; its eternal renewals offer an image of constancy to oppose the decay of human things."

Perhaps I will look out for *The Village* after all …

*

October 23: Ludwig Leichhardt

*

Explorers, travelers, sea-farers of the 19th century almost invariably kept diaries. They mostly didn't have cameras to record their lives and journeyings. They had hours to contemplate their

impressions and immortalise them. It was not until the 20th century that ocean liners filled up their passengers' hours with swimming and concerts, deck tennis and fancy dress parties. Travellers had long hours of an evening after they had unsaddled and fed and watered their horses. Scraps of my great-grandfather's diaries as he overlanded with cattle to the Palmer River goldfields are a little window on his life. They were a daily record but also an account book, a weather record, a jog to the memory, moments of frustration, and, importantly for inland travelers, a record of where water could be found.

Ludwig Leichhardt joined the 19th century's legions of diary writers in his teens. John Bailey in *Into the Unknown* says of him: "In solace he began writing a diary, a practice he followed for the rest of his life. Paper being expensive, he crammed his tiny, gothic script into every available space on the page. The people most mentioned were his family, fellow students and his professors. Among his first entries were observations about his mother's speech. The illiterate Sophie, from Lower Lusatia, was an ideal subject for a student of philology, so as an early Henry Higgins, he occupied his hours by filling his diary with examples and comments on his mother's contorted vernacular. Over time he widened the scope of his diary entries until they became a daily ritual of self-correction and a fragmented dialogue between Leichhardt the narrator and Leichhardt the commentator. Interspersed with literary criticisms, adolescent infatuations and confused plans for the future."

He turned his diary from his first expedition, overland from Moreton Bay to Port Essington, into a book *Journal of an Overland Expedition in Australia* and his diaries and papers are held in several libraries including the Mitchell Library in Sydney.

It is now more than 150 years since Leichhardt and his third expedition, hoping to cross Australia from east to west, disappeared. And, along with the men, Leichhardt's last diary. Over the years claims have been made for items found in western Queensland, the Northern Territory, even Western Australia—a piece of a rifle, a skull, light-skinned Aboriginal children, a mark on a tree, but nothing definitive. We still don't know how, when, or where Leichhardt and his men disappeared.

What a furore it would make if his diary from this lost expedition should turn up in the hollow of a tree or half buried beside a long-deserted campfire!

*

October 24: Steven J. Hatfill

*

When anthrax turned up in the mail system in the USA just after the attack on the Twin Towers in New York it was assumed to be more of the same. But gradually it was realised that this was home-grown terror, that the anthrax could only have come from a US laboratory, and that the culprit was most likely a disgruntled American scientist. Investigators gradually homed in, after months of confusion, poor detective work, and misleading assumptions, on a scientist called Steven J. Hatfill. He had spent time in the army, he was a doctor, he had worked and studied in Rhodesia and South Africa, he had helped with a CIA report on how anthrax could be spread by mail, he had lied about various aspects of his CV, he had worked in the laboratory where the anthrax had almost certainly originated, and most telling of all he was working on a novel about bioterrorism. Robert Graysmith in *Amerithrax: The Hunt for the Anthrax Killer*, says, "Someone leaked that he had written a novel about a bio-terrorist attack on Washington. A portion of Hatfill's manuscript was obtained by ABC affiliate WJLA in Washington. "His novel was leaked," said former FBI profiler Candice DeLong. "If that leak had anything to do with anyone who was involved with that search or if it was an official leak, that was prosecutable behavior. Someone should be in trouble for that."

"Robin Cook had had a bestseller in 1999 with his novel *Vector* in which a 'disillusioned Russian émigré' mails anthrax in envelopes. A lot of books were flirting with bioterrorism as a plot device. "As for Hatfill's novel, the idea for that had been hatched several years earlier at a dinner party. A group of journalists and former military men had been standing around and the conversation had turned to bioterrorism. Pat Clawson was there. The conservative commentator was

Hatfill's close friend. "We started kicking it around," said Clawson, "that it would be a cool novel to write. 'Let's have a bioterrorism attack on Washington and Congress.' " In the summer of 2001, Hatfill asked for Clawson's help finding an agent or publisher but nothing came of it."

The novel, titled *Emergence*, was actually about bubonic plague not anthrax and the villain was Ismail Abu Asifa, 'a Palestinian terrorist paid by Iraq to carry out a biological attack on Washington'; also he spreads it not by mail but via a 'sprayer hidden inside a wheelchair during a public tour'. The villain infects himself and eventually dies. "The hero is Steven J. Roberts, who has a background similar to Steven J. Hatfill's and who had visited the same places he had. Hatfill made on-target observations about how the country would react to a bioterror attack. "Even if only a single person died in the attack, the sensationalistic-seeking news media could be trusted to whip the American public into a state of near total hysteria."

Hatfill comes across as a rather unpleasant person; he loved guns, he exaggerated, he lied, he was clearly supportive of Ian Smith's Rhodesia (where suspicion still remains as to whether anthrax was used in bioterrorism; "Before 1976, there were 13 human cases a year in Rhodesia. From 1979 through 1980, there were 10,778 human cases a year. Of these 182 died. In the entire world, about 7,000 cases were reported annually"; (the strain responsible originated in the UK) and of apartheid South Africa. But the FBI despite losing him his job and making him Public Enemy No 1 could not link him to either anthrax or the letters. It is a reminder of how easily large public institutions can wreck private lives.

Both the USA and the USSR (and other nations) subjected their peoples, both deliberately and accidentally, to the release of bacteria and viruses. Yet, for all the hysteria it evokes, biological warfare is a haphazard and unruly way to make a point. Winds can change direction. Sunlight can weaken and kill. Bacteria and viruses constantly mutate. They can travel to unplanned places, via wind and water, via birds and insects, and turn back on their creators; they can infect soils for generations. And they are all vulnerable to *something*; if not vaccines and antibiotics, then to better public hygiene, household bleach and soap, heat, cold, or natural predators. Along with the fact that they inflict untold suffering on laboratory animals it is pertinent to be reminded that most of the chronicled deaths of human beings have been in people connected to those same laboratories. And if the USA *had* bombed, wittingly or unwittingly, biological laboratories in Iraq then they would've done exactly what they claimed they didn't want Saddam Hussein to do: spread such agents in unplanned haphazard uncontainable ways.

*

October 25: Geoffrey Chaucer (d)

*

I picked up an old (1869) book on a stall, *Chaucer's England*, by Matthew Browne but when I got it home I found it was Volume II so what gems Volume I may contain I can only guess at. Still, I found this volume interesting and Browne tackles that odd question that other people have raised: did the people of England, and indeed many European countries, traditionally sleep naked? He writes: "First, as to sleeping naked.

"One need not go beyond the pages of Chaucer himself to gather an impression that in bed Englishmen in the middle ages, even Englishmen of good position, like Chaucer who was connected with the royal family, slept with no covering but that of the bed-clothes. Several times in the course of his poems does he describe himself as naked in bed. 'As naked in my bed I lay.' If Chaucer were less accurate in his descriptions we might hesitate to infer from such perhaps that the word 'naked' was to be taken in its strongest sense—it might possibly be used laxly, as we sometimes use it ourselves. But does not Chaucer's habitual exactitude of detail take away our liberty to read him vaguely? How common the practice of wearing night-dresses was in the time of Milton, three hundred years later, I do not know; but a passage in *Paradise Lost* almost inevitably suggests to the mind that the idea of sleeping naked was familiar to his mind. In describing the withdrawal of Adam and Eve to their bower he simply uses the words:—

'. . . . . And eased the putting off

These troublesome disguises which we wear.'

It will be observed that unless the thought most familiar to the poet's mind was that of *sleeping* without 'disguise,' the contrast is here incomplete. I do not wish, however, to found anything positive on this observation. Mr. Riley, in his excellent introduction to the *Liber Albus*, has called attention to a passage in Letter Book G, which explains that a passenger arriving at St. Botolph's wharf with luggage strictly personal should be allowed to land it free of wharfage; the original, it seems, specifying that the wallet or bag must however contain only articles 'a doos et a lyt'—that is, for back and bed. This, I may observe, exactly corresponds with the regulation of the Spanish Customs as to what they call *ropa usada*. But the important point is that Mr. Riley thinks the words 'a lyt' go far towards proving that night-gowns or night-shirts were in use in those days, and that it was not by any means *universally* the fashion in the middle ages, as antiquarians have asserted, to tumble into bed in a state of nudity. 'The expression,' Mr. Riley thinks, 'can hardly be construed to mean that the passenger carried his sheets in the mall or wallet under his arm.' No doubt, however, it may be said, on the other hand, that the distinction between 'back' and 'bed' points the other way. A night-dress would be for both back and bed, and the phrase 'a lyt' would include it; so that it may be said the expression 'for back' refers to a change of wearing apparel, and for 'bed' to some sort of coverlet. Or, again, the expression for 'back and bed' may merely point to the fact that a person might cover himself at night with his ordinary wearing apparel, by way of sheets and blankets; for instance, the linen under-garment might be put next to the body, and a coat lined with fur over the linen garment by way of blanket and counterpane."

I'm not sure if this might be seen as the definitive answer …

*

October 26: Nikos Kazantzakis (d)

*

Kazantzakis (1883 – 1957) was famous for writing *Zorba the Greek* and controversial for writing *The Last Temptation*. Yet when I began on the book I could not see why it had raised hackles. Certainly Jesus is often a Greek Christ in a Greek setting and I half expected Zorba to leap on stage in a swirl of bazouki music (and his translator P. A. Bien says, "If this love of metaphor is retained in English often at the price of awkwardness, this is but a small price to pay for some feeling, however slight, of the essential Greekness of this novel, which although set in the Holy Land, is peopled by Greeks in disguise"), and sometimes he is an Old Testament prophet on a mountaintop and sometimes he is a silly blushing boy. The writing is powerful and zips with energy but Jesus is not a particularly attractive character. And Kazantzakis adapts characters and times to suit his story.

But that didn't seem enough to invite talk of controversy.

But then Jesus is on the cross and appears to be resurrected and to find sanctuary in the home of Mary and Martha where he has children with both of them and turns his back on any sense of message. The aging disciples visit him there. He justifies himself: "I too fought as well as I could, Judas, my brother. In my youth I set out, like a youth, to save the world. Afterwards, when my mind had matured, I stepped into line—the line of men. I went to work: plowed the land, dug wells, planted vines and olives. I took the body of woman into my arms and created men—I conquered death. Isn't that what I always said I would do? Well, I kept my word: I conquered death!"

Judas not surprisingly calls him a traitor and a deserter. "Your place was on the cross. That's where the God of Israel put you to fight. But you got cold feet and the moment death lifted its head, you couldn't get away fast enough! You ran and hid yourself in the skirts of Martha and Mary—coward! And you changed your face and your name, you fake Lazarus, to save yourself!"

But then we discover that this is an hallucination as Jesus hangs on the cross. He dies. And there is a sense of finality about his death. Was it this, rather than his vision of himself as husband and father, which upset people?

And his translator, Peter Bien, in a Pendle Hill booklet *Tempted by Happiness: Kazantzakis' Post-Christian Christ* offers further insights into the book: "Whenever Kazantzakis began a project, he first concluded the necessary research, amassing extensive notes and also recording ideas for the future work's structure, characterization, and theme. In this case, right at the start of the sketchbook for *The Last Temptation*, he inscribed a fourfold scheme which he eventually followed. The parts are labeled "Son of the Carpenter, Son of Man, Son of David, and Son of God."

"This is not the only scheme. Later, when he was summarizing his reading of various psychologists on the relation between religious behaviour, sexuality and the unconscious, he made himself another little chart, this time a threefold one labeled "individual unconscious (Freud), collective unconscious (Jung), universal unconscious (Christ)." This second scheme is particularly intriguing when we know that the book had originally been entitled "Jesus Has Been Cured" and was meant to satirize psychoanalysis. Some of this satire survives in *The Last Temptation* … The threefold scheme is one of the governing structures, though not so important as the fourfold scheme."

And Bien says Kazantzakis "did not believe in God and was not a Christian". Was that the real problem? That he wasn't seen as throwing new light on some aspects of the Christian story but rather that he was using Jesus for quite other reasons …

*

October 27: Theodore Roosevelt

*

Theodore Roosevelt is remembered as an American President, a writer of macho prose, a man who took pride in his hunting prowess, and in a way that seems very out of character the man who has every Teddy bear named for him. Most mentions of him now seem to dwell on the question: was he a genuine conservationist or not? But the other day I came upon the reminder that he also played a major role in a conflict far from home and in a way which changed the twentieth century for the worse … James Bradley in *Flyboys* points to Roosevelt's role in the treaty which ended the war between Russia and Japan. Japan had attacked without warning in 1904, catching Russia unprepared and ill-equipped; "Deadly torpedoes and bombs came out of nowhere, and soon the harbor was a flaming mass of sunken ships. Screaming sailors swam for their lives through fiery oil-blackened waters." But as Bradley points out Japan needed a short sharp war; "By the spring of 1905, more than a hundred thousand Japanese had died. The Japanese army was wobbling, low on supplies, bleeding men, and unable to replenish troops as fast as Russia. The Japanese now lacked the ability to deliver the coup de grâce to the Russians"; it could not face a long war of attrition against Russia which when it finally organised its manpower and its resources would have been a formidable opponent, and Roosevelt made sure that Japan got a short sharp victory and everything it had hoped to gain, except for its one demand that Russia pay a large indemnity.

Roosevelt could have ignored the war. He could have simply provided a neutral venue for talks. He could have pledged American support for Russia when it was attacked. Instead he took Japan's part. "President Roosevelt admired the sneak attack. "I was thoroughly well pleased with the Japanese victory," the president wrote his son." It sent a very clear message to Japan; not only that aggression can be made to pay but that the West would support such aggression.

It wasn't that Japan was uniquely expansionist or uniquely imperialist. But it had expanded in the early nineteenth century into the Ainu lands and islands and W.G. Beasley in *The Japanese Experience* says, "The weakness and disunity of China and Korea in the last part of the nineteenth century put temptation in the way of Japanese leaders." Japan turned first to Korea in 1894. "The conflict grew out of disputes with Korea that went back as far as 1868. For twenty years or more they had been capable of settlement by diplomacy, but in 1894 a Japan grown more selfconfident opted for hostilities. An army was landed in Korea. It achieved immediate success, not only against Korean forces, but also against those of China, acting within the framework of the ancient tribute system, sent to aid them. The Japanese navy established control of the seas. In less than a year Korea was occupied, and China sued for peace.

"The terms Japan imposed at Shomonoseki in April 1895 were harsh. China was to renounce all claims to suzerainty over Korea; to pay a large indemnity (in bullion); to cede Taiwan (which had never been involved in the fighting); to make over to Japan a lease of the Liaotung peninsula in south Manchuria (the key to the land and sea routes between Korea and Peking); and to promise a commercial treaty, putting Japan on equal footing with the western powers in China's foreign trade." Only the takeover via a lease of Liaotung peninsula failed. Japan spent China's indemnity in building up its military capabilities. In 1904 it moved through Korea and Liaotung to attack the Russian ports of Port Arthur and Vladivostok. This time, with Roosevelt's help, Japan got clear control of Liaotung, Japanese control over Korea was formally recognised, she got mining and railway concessions, and she was given part of Sakhalin.

From being called a protectorate in 1905 Japan reduced Korea to a colony in 1910 and an estimated two million Koreans were forcibly removed to Japan over the next four decades to work as slave labour. Alan Burgess in *The Small Woman* wrote, "For years they had operated their 'master' race policies in their northern colony of Korea. The Japanese were aristocrats, the Koreans serfs! No Korean was educated above an elementary level; no Korean ever held an administrative post of any importance; they were reduced to a proletarian and peasant level and kept there." And hundreds of thousands of Korean women were forced into prostitution, misleadingly called 'comfort women' …

Japan was now on a roll. J. E. Thomas in *Modern Japan* writes, "The coming of the First World War did not have the traumatic effect on Japan that it had in Europe. Japan entered the war on the British side, fulfilling her treaty obligations to do so. No troops were sent to Europe, and Japan's sole contribution was to accompany merchant ships. But the concentration of the west on the war gave Japan a marvellous opportunity for adventurism in east Asia. Before the end of 1914 Japan occupied most of the islands in the western Pacific which had been German colonies, and most important the Chinese province of Shandong, and the German leased port of Tsingtao. This was a large, rich and strategically important part of north Asia. Much encouraged, in 1915 Japan issued the notorious 'twenty-one demands' to China. These demands were grouped into five categories and notably ordered that Japan be allowed to build a railway straight through a strategically vital area of north China, to have effective control of Manchuria, and to be the sole lender to China. Furthermore, there were to be no more concessions to western powers, all areas of Chinese government were to be overseen by Japanese advisers, and half of all Chinese war material had to be bought from Japan.

"The effect would have been to turn China into a Japanese colony, and neither China nor the west, especially the Americans, were prepared to agree. Nevertheless, because of the war, substantial concessions were made, including the occupation of Shandong, and certain rights in Manchuria and Inner Mongolia." The Americans were starting to realise they had uncorked the genie. They had failed to act with principle in 1905. Now they again failed to act with principle. Japanese expansionist and oppressive policies in north Asia were left intact but the Americans brought in racist legislation to restrict Japanese immigration and rights. Again they sent the wrong message. Japanese aggression continued unchecked but it was now to be allied to anger at the United States for demeaning Japan.

With Shandong securely under its thumb Japan turned to gaining control over Manchuria. James MacManus in *Ocean Devil* put it succinctly, "On 18 September 1931, using the flimsy pretext of 'Chinese provocation' near the Manchurian town of Mukden, the Japanese began military operations to complete the conquest of Manchuria." In the words of W. G. Beasley, "they manufactured an incident on the railway outside Mukden, which provided the pretext for a movement of Japanese troops. Southern Manchuria outside the areas that Japan already controlled was quickly occupied. Despite Tokyo's efforts in the next few weeks to limit the scope of the hostilities, the occupation was steadily pushed north on grounds of 'operational necessity'; and early in 1932 there was even a clash with Chinese forces as far south as Shanghai, followed by a naval bombardment of Nanking."

Japan consolidated its control of Manchuria's rich resources (and set up its horrifying camps and medical experiments) then moved on China proper. "The Sino-Japanese war, which was to cost an estimated fifteen million Chinese lives and to last eight years, began on 7 July 1937. Under the terms of a treaty imposed on China in 1901, the Boxer Protocol, Japan had stationed troops in north China between the port of Tientsin and Beijing. That night Japanese forces claimed to have been fired on by Chinese troops, and stormed a local garrison in search of a missing soldier. The history of Japanese aggression towards China leaves little doubt that this was deliberate provocation. Within days the two nations were at war, formalising a conflict that had been intensifying since Japan occupied Manchuria in 1931." (James MacManus in *Ocean Devil*.)

But Japan, though worried about its failure to subdue China (it had claimed it could do so in a month), turned the focus of its aggression elsewhere. On the 7th December 1941 in another 'sneak attack' it bombed the American base at Pearl Harbor. President Franklin Roosevelt now found that the chickens of his uncle Theodore Roosevelt had very thoroughly come home to roost. It would take the United States billions of dollars and hundreds of thousands of lives to inform Japan that 'aggression doesn't pay' after all.

You could, of course, read books by or about Theodore Roosevelt (who was both a distant cousin and an uncle by marriage to Franklin Roosevelt) but I have a better suggestion. Linda Jaivan sets her novel *A Most Immoral Woman* against the background of the Russo-Japanese War. "The Russo-Japanese War had broken out three weeks earlier when Japan's navy staged a surprise attack on the Russian fleet at Port Arthur, the deep-water port on the tip of Manchuria's Liaotung Peninsula." If it is a subject which interests you it is as good a place to begin as any …

*

October 28: Kornei Chukovsky (d)

*

Hedrick Smith wrote in *The Russians*, "I recall another such gathering, at the home of the late Kornei Chukovsky, a brilliant and much-loved children's writer, where the level of the discourse, the spontaneous dramatic readings, the recited poetry and the ad-lib humor was refreshingly free of the cant and hypocrisy of the tortured mainstream of public culture and the rancid bitterness that is so often its private echo. There was nothing counter-revolutionary in what was said, but one sensed a pure and honest community, the Russian intelligentsia in its natural setting.

"The company itself was interesting, perhaps because Chukovsky in his lifetime had ranged so broadly. Not only had he been the genial author of wonderful children's stories, as well known to Russians as Hans Christian Andersen to the rest of the world, but early in life he had been the charming, but sharp-witted enfant terrible among the literary critics during the luminous flowering of the Silver Age of Russian culture a few years before World War I. Tolstoy, Blok, Gorky, Bunin, Chaliapin, Mayakovsky had peopled his life and scribbled whimsy and irreverences in a marvelous album he kept through his life. The censors have not yet seen fit to permit the album to be published even posthumously. Late in life, in the Khrushchev-Brezhnev years, Chukovsky defended younger, liberal writers from Aksyonov and Aleksandr Galich to Solzhenitsyn, when they had come under fire from conservatives."

Roland Chambers in his biography of Arthur Ransome, *The Last Englishman*, provides this brief glimpse: "On the morning of 9 February (1918), according to Ransome's diary, he translated three pages of *The Mouse and the Sparrow* and met with Chukovsky, the great Russian children's poet, to discuss an idea for a play based on Hans Christian Andersen to be staged at the Besarabskaya Theatre" and although nothing came of it (these were turbulent times) it gives credence to that idea of Chukovsky having a deep sympathy with Hans Christian Andersen and suggests his children's stories were fairy stories rather than juvenile versions of Socialist Realism. For the sake of Soviet children I hope this was so. And I hope that as Stalin closed up the creative space for adult writings that he left a space for whimsy for children …

*

October 29: Marie, Queen of Roumania

*

Oh, life is a glorious cycle of song,
A medley of extemporanea;
And love is a thing that can never go wrong;
And I am Marie of Roumania.

Dorothy Parker in 'Comment'.

Marie (1875 – 1938) is credited with bringing Roumania into WWI on the side of Britain and France. She is credited with being the first Royal in Europe to become interested in the Ba'hai faith. She had affairs, as did her husband, and she wrote books including *My Country* and *The Story of My Life*. I am not sure that I want to rush out and hunt them down though Virginia Woolf did give her a quite sympathetic review: "Vivid as it all is, nobody is going to claim that Queen Marie ranks with Saint Simon or Proust. Yet it would be equally absurd to deny that by virtue of her pen she has won her freedom. She is no longer a royal queen in a cage. She ranges the world, free like any other human being to laugh, to scold, to say what she likes, to be what she is. And if she has escaped, so too, thanks to her, have we. Royalty is no longer quite royal. Uncle Bertie, Onkel, Aunty, Nando and the rest are not mere effigies bowing and smiling, opening bazaars, expressing exalted sentiments, and remembering faces always with the same sweet smile. They are violent and eccentric; charming and ill-tempered; some have bloodshot eyes; others handle flowers with a peculiar tenderness. In short they are very like ourselves. They live as we do. And the effect is surprising. A month or two ago, the late Duke of Edinburgh was as dead as a dodo. Now, thanks to his daughter, we know that he liked beer; that he liked to sip it while he read his paper; that he hated music; that he loathed Roumanian melodies; and that he sat on a rock in a rage.

"But what will be the consequences if this familiarity between them and us increases? Can we go on bowing and curtseying to people who are just like ourselves? Are we not already a little ashamed of the pushing and the staring now that we know from these two stout volumes that one at least of the animals can talk? We begin to wish that the Zoo should be abolished; that the royal animals should be given the run of some wider pasturage – a royal Whipsnade. And another question suggests itself. When a gift for writing lodges in a family, it often persists and improves, and if Queen Marie's descendants improve upon her gift as much as she has improved upon Queen Victoria's is it not quite possible that a real poet will be King of England in a hundred years time? And suppose that among the autumn books of 2034 is Prometheus Unbound by George the Sixth, or Wuthering Heights, by Elizabeth the Second, what will be the effect upon their loyal subjects? Will the British Empire survive? Will Buckingham Palace look as solid then as it does now? Words are dangerous things, let us remember. A republic might be brought into being by a poem." (1934). Roumania *did* become a republic but it is debatable whether it was an improvement.

Marie, of course, is not the only royal to have launched into authorship. Queen Victoria wrote of her sojourns in Scotland in *Leaves from a Journal of our Life in the Highlands*. Some royals were indefatigible letter writers. Some had a technical bent. Some encouraged and patronised the writing and composing of others. And then there is the one I find rather sad; ' "Aloha Oe" is used in the Hawaiian Island as a greeting or farewell. This well-known song, which is played and sung for tourists arriving and leaving the islands, was composed by the last queen of the Hawaiian Islands, Lydia Kamekaha Liliuokalani, who reigned in 1891-93.' (Willard A. Palmer)

Queen Marie also wrote several children's books, *The Lost Princess* and *Peeping Pansy*, which were illustrated by Mabel Lucie Attwell. Shades of Fergie and her books about a little helicopter! And possibly they were done from similar motives: she needed the money …

*

"Queen Victoria, Queen Marie of Roumania and Queen Elizabeth of Roumania all had very interesting lives. The first two queens both wrote about meeting the third. But Marie had a skill for writing a story whereas Victoria did not. Victoria describes Elizabeth as a dear, charming woman who speaks with resignation of her trials and difficulties. There is no detail and no life. Marie writes

of a complex human being who recites poetry through a megaphone to ships at sea, a splendid and absurd woman with elegant white hands and floating veils, a fantastic, sincere woman. One portrait is alive and the other is dead. In one there is detail shrewdly observed and offered in sharp images and precise language. In the other are dreary, unmemorable platitudes. You get the sense that Marie wants to connect with you, the reader, whereas Victoria does not. A reader can assume that both writers set out to tell the truth about Elizabeth, but you get the feeling that Victoria wasn't paying attention to her subject, wasn't noticing things that were there to notice."

Carmel Bird in *Not Now Jack – I'm Writing A Novel*.

*

October 30: Anon

*

I sing of a commodity, it's one that will not fail yer,
I mean that common oddity, the mainstay of Australia;
Gold it is a precious thing, for commerce it increases,
But stringy-bark and green-hide, can beat it all to pieces.

Chorus:
Stringy-bark and green-hide, they will never fail yer!
Stringy-bark and green-hide are the mainstay of Australia!

If you travel on the road, and chance to stick in Bargo,
To avoid a bad capsize, you must unload your cargo;
For to pull your dray about, I do not see the force on,
Take a bit of green-hide, and hook another horse on.

If you chance to take a dray, and break your leader's traces,
Get a bit of green-hide, to mend your broken places;
Green-hide is a useful thing, all that you require,
But stringy-bark's another thing when you want a fire.

If you want to build a hut, to keep out wind and weather,
Stringy-bark will make it snug, and keep it well together;
Green-hide if it's used by you, will make it all the stronger,
For if you tie it with green-hide, it's sure to last the longer.

New chums to this golden land, never dream of failure,
Whilst you've got such useful things as these in fair Australia.
For stringy-bark and green-hide will never, never fail yer.
Stringy-bark and green-hide are the mainstay of Australia.

'Stringy-bark and Green-hide'

I have my favourite standbys too; bobby-pins, castor oil, milkthistles, old typewriter ribbons, baling twine, bread poultices, needle and thread, etc …

*

October 31: H. R. F. Keating

*

Someone had put some copies of *The Telegraph* on to a stall. Thinking they were one of our Telegraphs and not likely to be of much interest to anyone after their news was no longer fresh I was about to dump them into the nearest recycling bin—when I realised they were from the UK. So I had a browse before they went into the bin. And I came upon the news (April 2011) that Henry Reymond Fitzwalter Keating had just died …

The short obituary was headed 'Award-winning novelist who created Inspector Ghote despite never having set foot in India'. This is a little misleading. He did go to India—*after* Inspector Ghote had become a popular figure with Indian readers (Mike Ashley says in *Modern Crime Fiction* "The Ghote novels draw heavily on the multicultural world of India, which is all the more surprising because HRFK did not visit there until he was ten years into the series")—and was an honoured guest of police in what was then Bombay. His hosts were very kind, saying how authentic he had made his series.

The obituary says the only thing he knew about India when he began was the ability to count up to five in Hindustani. He had an energetic life, doing modern languages at Trinity College Dublin, working for the BBC, working as a sub-editor and editor, writing reviews of crime fiction, being president of the Detection Club—and bringing out regular Inspector Ghote novels from 1964 onwards.

But I couldn't help thinking that he must have had a deep interest and knowledge of India, even if it came from books and films rather than from living there. Of course an obituary isn't the place to explore this question. But I would've liked to have found even the briefest of insights into what first sparked his interest …

*

And another little mystery on that page of obituaries. It had one for Dorothy Young. The name meant nothing to me but it said of her 'Scantily clad stage assistant to Harry Houdini who took the secrets of his feats of escapology to the grave.' She was 103. In these days when very few secrets get taken to the grave, rather than burbled all over Facebook or sold for good money to the tabloids, that in itself seemed as remarkable as Keating creating and setting his novels in a country he had not visited …

*

November 1: Edward Said

*

When we were told that more than three-quarters of the men involved in the events of 9/11 in the United States were from Saudi Arabia I thought this was the most extraordinary aspect of a whole extraordinary episode. But no one was allowed to dwell on its extraordinariness. No. It was all systems go for invading *Iraq!* The idea of retaliating by invading *Saudi Arabia* was never mentioned.

I have just been reading *The Rise, Corruption and Coming Fall of The House of Saud* by Said K. Aburish which helps to make sense of some of the decision-making (as well as to point out that if you discredit secular pan-Arabism and turn conservative Islam into a stomach-churning exercise in hypocrisy—then where do people turn? The answer very often is radical Islam) not least by pointing to the ways in which Saudi Arabia has distorted, undermined, infantalised, bribed, and terrorised those best able to report on their own country and the world.

It makes grim reading: Aburish says Saudi Arabia had several newspapers when Ibn Saud, founder of the House of Saud, gained power. He first tried to control these outlets then confiscated their printing presses. By 1925 the kingdom was essentially confined to reading the *Koran* and a few approved Wahhabi texts—until Ibn Saud promoted a paper to puff the royal family. He and his successors found that money bought journalists, stifled criticism, and accustomed the nation to a constant diet of royal flattery. But the rise of Nasser in Egypt brought home the message that his power partly depended on the pan-Arab media. Saudi Arabia began to first influence, then buy. "By the time Nasser died in 1970, Saudi Arabia had replaced Egypt as the country which sponsored most of the privately owned Arab newspapers and magazines in Lebanon, Morocco, Jordan and Syria." From the smaller Arab states they moved outwards. "The sinister, mostly secret activity of trying to influence Western publications has been relatively successful and part of the reason the ugly deeds of the Saudi regime have not received the press coverage they deserve is that major news organizations do not want to alienate the Saudi Government and because some Western correspondents covering the Middle East take bribes." The influence continues to widen; they

bought the Middle East Broadcasting Corporation in London, ANA, the Arab radio station in Washington, Radio Orient in France, part of TV-AM in London, and United Press International.

Editors, journalists, and writers in Saudi Arabia such as Hamid Ghuyarfi, Zuheir Issa Safrawey, Muhammad Al Ali, Abdel Rahman Munif, Osama Abdel Rahman, Ahmad Mahmoud, Muhammad Salluheddine, Fawzia Bakr, Fatmeh Kamal Ahmad Yussuf, Ali Al Darroura, and Abdallah Ghoseim have been dismissed, imprisoned or forced into exile. Seventeen-year-old Abdel Karim Nima was tortured to death for owning a banned book. Poets need permission to write a poem. The local press, dependent on licences and subject to rigid censorship, struggles. "Journalists Suleiman Al Firzli and Farid Al Khatib, honourable men with established reputations, are blacklisted by the pro-Saudi pan-Arab press. They are having difficulty getting employment appropriate to their level of competence because there are very few independent pan-Arab journals left. The distinguished Palestinian writer Edward Said has been asked to discontinue his column in the Saudi-owned magazine *Al Majallah*. Edward Said is unreliable because he thinks for himself." Journalists can be refused visas to enter the country. Any publisher producing a book of even the faintest criticism can have all its books banned. "The issue of *Newsweek* which had a cover story on AIDS was banned; *Time* suffered the same fate for a story which mentioned the laziness of the king; *Libération* of Paris was banned for carrying an interview with Yasser Arafat; the *Economist* made the mistake of titling an article 'Arab Lost Glory'; the Saudi-owned *Al Hayat* offered an innocent coverage of the PLO; and Robert Fisk of the *Independent* committed the biggest crime of them: he wrote a detailed account of the death of the Iranian pilgrims during the Hajj in which he referred to the incompetence of the Saudi authorities." Bringing in a Bible or prayer book can bring you five years in jail. A Gulf Cooperation Council "secret document leaked to the press in London listed 48 Egyptian writers, artists and actors and actresses whose works were to be banned — at the instigation of Saudi Arabia."

It is a long grim litany in which a whole nation has been reduced to seeking knowledge and nourishment from sycophantic pap. But there is hope. "Time and technology are working against the Saudi Government's attempt to restrict the exposure of their citizens to anything except the official line of the House of Saud."

When young Saudis went out and hijacked planes and flew them into American buildings they were a generation reared on that 'official line'—and that 'official line' as well as the surviving individuals should be on trial in American courtrooms and at the bar of public opinion.

Edward Said died in 2003.

*

November 2: Odysseus Elytis

*

Every so often someone does one of those lists. You know the sort of thing. The 100 Greatest Books of the Twentieth Century. The Best Books of All Time. The Best-Selling Authors of the Twentieth Century. The Best Books of the Last Decade. Readers' 100 Favourite Books. Who Do You Think Is The World's Best Writer? And so on *ad infinitum*. They fill a page and sometimes a book. Maybe they get people thinking. But one day I was looking through the list of Nobel Laureates for Literature. The prize is sometimes controversial. But it must be a reasonable guide to the world's great writers. *And yet* … almost no one ever puts Nobel Laureates in as their Best Writer. Why not? The simple answer I expect is that most of us have read little or nothing from most of the Laureates …

This was on my mind when I came upon a little book by Greek poet Odysseus Elytis, Nobel Laureate in 1979. Even allowing for the losses in translation there were some beautiful poems in the book. But when I went to re-borrow it from the library it had disappeared without trace. In the end I bought a copy of his *Selected Poems 1940 – 1979*. He, and his translators, mention the 'shadow' that all modern Greek poetry labours under: because many readers expect it to have Homeric influences or to be peppered with Classical allusions. And, instead, modern Greek poets are likely to be influenced by the landscape, the liturgy of the Greek Orthodox Church, French Surrealism,

aspects of modern Greek life including World War II, and the more general movements and fashions in poetry.

Two of the aspects I like in his poems are the constant sense of the sea and the islands and shores—

Olive trees and vineyards far as the sea
Red fishing boats beyond, far as memory
August's golden sheaves in midday slumber
With seaweed and shells. And that green boat,
Just launched, still blessing the water's peaceful breast with "God will provide"

The years went by, leaves or pebbles,
I recall the young men, the sailors who left,
Their sails dyed the colour of their hearts
Their songs telling of the four horizons
And the north winds tattooed on their chests (from 'The Age of Blue Memory')

—as well as the many references to light and growing, to birds and goats and insects—

Ding-ding the chamomile; I'm weary of hoping
ding-ding the flower of mallow; I'm tired of worrying
ding-ding; such from the beginning
was man
and I didn't even know it!

Those footsteps on the dry leaves
the lowing of Time's ox (from 'The Drop of Water')

—and those moments where the words suddenly seem to leap upwards—

There is a silence full of destroyed shores … where the clouds still
come down to graze … shortly before darkness falls forever
(from 'What Cannot Come About')

—or—

Only in the hollow of his left ear some light fine sand, as though in a
shell. Which means that often he had walked by the sea alone
with the pain of love and the roar of the wind. (from 'The Autopsy')

Odysseus Elytis was born on Crete in 1911 and died in Athens in 1996.

*

November 3: Thomas Dekker

*

We don't know when Dekker was born or when he died. The best that anyone has come up with is that he was born around 1572 and died around 1632. He was a prolific contemporary of Shakespeare's; the general view being that his dramatic sense was deficient but his dialogue was a lively representation of London speech of the time. He was also a vigorous writer of dozens of pamphlets. I've only come upon the occasional paragraph or two of his prose, and the first one has had its spelling modernised, but he is someone I have begun to look out for …

"Do but consider what an excellent thing sleep is: it is so inestimable a jewel that, if a tyrant would give his crown for an hour's slumber, it cannot be bought: of so beautiful a shape is it, that though a man lie with an Empress, his heart cannot beat quite till he leaves her embracements to be at rest with the other: yea, so greatly indebted are we to this kinsman of death, that we owe the

better tributary, half of our life to him: and there is good cause why we should do so: for sleep is that golden chain that ties health and our bodies together. Who complains of want? of wounds? of cares? of great men's oppressions? of captivity? whilst he sleepeth? Beggars in their beds take as much pleasure as kings: can we therefore surfeit on this delicate Ambrosia? Can we drink too much of that whereof to taste too little tumbles us into a churchyard, and to use it but indifferently throws us into a Bedlam? No, no, look upon Endymion, the moon's minion, who slept three score and fifteen years, and was not a hair the worse for it."

"How happy," wrote Thomas Dekker, "were cities if they had no Suburbes, sithence they serve but as caves, where monsters are tied up to devour the Citties their-selves. Would the Divell hire a villain to spil blood? There we shall finde him. One to blaspheme? There he hath choice. A Pandar that would court a nation at her praiers? hees there … a cheater that would turne his own father a-begging? hees there too. A harlot that would murder her own new-borne Infant? She lies in there."

"Is not old wine wholesomest, old pippins toothsomest, old wood burn brightest …?"

"No sooner was I entered, but the very noyse of that place put me in mind of Hell: the beare (dragt to the stake) shewd like a black ragged soule, that was Damned, and newly committed to the infernall Churle, the Dogges like so many Divels inflicting torments upon it.

"At length a blinde Bear was tyed to the stake, and instead of baiting him with dogges, a company of creatures that had the shapes of men, and faces of Christians, (being either Colliers, Carters, or Watermen), took the office of Beadles upon them, and whipt Mounsier Hunkes, till the blood ran doune his old shoulders: it was some sport to see Innocence triump over Tyranny, by beholding those unnecessary tormentors go away with scratched hands or torne legs from a porre Beast arm'd only by nature to defend himselfe against Violence: yet methought that this whipping of the blinde Beare moved as much pittie in my breast towards him, as leading of porre starved wretches to the whipping posts in London (when they had need to be relieved with foode) ought to move the Citizens, though it be the fashion now to laugh at their punishment."

It isn't enough to judge him as a writer but those little bits intrigued me. They suggested a man of wide interests, a lively turn of phrase, careful thought, even an unexpected hint of compassion (something Elizabethan England was deficient in) and a man a little ahead of his time. After all, who else in 1600 was titling a work *The Infection of the Suburbes* as though he might already have foreseen that endless spread of brick and tile?

*

November 4: Colin Simpson

*

Colin Simpson made his name with his travel books, and also by working to get authors the Public Lending Right, and he normally gave a detailed run-down of places to see, things to eat, where to stay, even providing tips on how and where to get good photographs. But I certainly didn't see him as a mover in the Land Rights debate. Yet many of his comments were ahead-of-the-times and probably had more impact than that of academics and activists. Simpson was seen as a 'safe' guide to travel, even if you never got out of your armchair.

As well as giving support to the idea of Land Rights in his 1971 book *The New Australia* he records a conversation with Mary Durack. "They are more Christian than we are, more sincere. They really live by the rule: he who has two coats *does* give one away. I remember old Albert saying to Sister Marceline at St Anne's, 'Well, Sister, we not got the education you people got. You got everything, but one thing we can teach the white people about—love.' They see us as being so competitive, trying to gain status over each other, and they don't understand why we should want to assert ourselves so. With sport in the schools. It was found that children who could run faster than

others, didn't. They didn't want to lick the other kids, it seemed wrong to them to demonstrate their superiority. They are a very sensitive, civilized people."

He goes on to comment, "we have to stop telling the Aborigines what is good for them, and let them tell us. Naturally they are not going to speak with one voice, any more than we would. But at least the voices are theirs—though we have to listen hard and try to recognize which voices are really representative of what are probably the most egalitarian people on the face of the earth, and therefore the people least given to having leaders to speak for them.

"Agreed that their complexity of character and our lack of understanding of this, as well as the white man's inbuilt prejudice and high-and-mightiness made it difficult to give them an equitable deal. But the deal they have had has been disgraceful."

The trouble is—his strong statements are lost in the paean of praise to the new mining and industrial Australia …

*

November 5: Guy Fawkes Night

*

Do you remember the place in Agatha Christie's 1937 story *Murder in the Mews* where Hercule Poirot and Inspector Japp are out strolling and they are accosted by children? It is the fifth of November and the children are chanting the old rhyme—

Remember, remember
The fifth of November
Gunpowder treason and plot.
We see no reason
Why gunpowder treason
Should ever be forgot

—and Inspector Japp says "Don't suppose many of those kids really know who Guy Fawkes was." To which Poirot replies "And soon, doubtless, there will be confusion of thought. Is it in honour or in execration that on the fifth of November the *feu d'artifice* are set up? To blow up an English Parliament, was it a sin or a noble deed?"

*

November 6: Colley Cibber

*

Jonathon Swift in his long poem 'Verses on the Death of Dr Swift' takes a wry look at what posterity may say about him.

Some country squire to Lintot goes,
Enquires for Swift in verse and prose:
Says Lintot, 'I have heard the name:
He died a year ago.' The same.
He searcheth all his shop in vain;
'Sir you may find them in Duck Lane:
I sent them with a load of books,
Last Monday to the pastry-cooks.
To fancy they could live a year!
I find you're but a stranger here.
The Dean was famous in his time;
And had a kind of knack at rhyme:
His way of writing now is past;
The town hath got a better taste:
I keep no antiquated stuff;
But, spick and span I have enough.
Pray, do but give me leave to show 'em;
Here's Colley Cibber's Birthday Poem.

Funny. Even prescient. Today few people hope their books will still be readily available after their deaths. And if you happened to read Hilary Laurie's *Verses of The Poets Laureate* and her description of Colley Cibber—"His appointment was greeted with derision, particularly by Pope, who made Cibber the hero of his *Dunciad*. It is true that his twenty-six official odes set a new standard for banality and empty flattery: George II was not an easy king to praise. Cibber knew they were poor and met any criticism with unshakeable good humour. When his first ode was attacked, he joined in with a set of anonymous verses criticizing it. The post he had inherited from Eusden was by now regarded as something of a joke and he did nothing to improve it. He placed little importance on a job that entailed producing verses twice a year to be sung by the boys of the Chapel Royale. "I wrote more to be fed than to be famous," he said"—then Swift's poem has that extra bit of 'bite'.

*

November 7: Marie Curie (née Sklodovska)

*

I'm not sure that children should write biographies of their parents. It can sound either like a puff piece or a grouch; it can give the impression of someone determined to pull the statue down or make excuses for some woeful parenting. And quite often the writer, as in Stephen Lowe writing a biography of his father, *Arthur Lowe*, gives the impression of someone who doesn't particularly like writing but has been pushed into the job. At the end of Lowe's book I felt he didn't like either of his parents terribly much but felt they occupied an interesting little niche in British theatre history. I'm not sure if that's enough.

But I rethought my not-quite-a-ban when I came upon Eve Curie's biography of her mother Marie Curie. I felt that at times she found the writing difficult but that it was always a labour of love. She wrote, "My mother was thirty-seven years old when I was born. When I was big enough to know her well, she was already an ageing woman who had passed the summit of renown. And yet it is the celebrated scientist who is strangest to me—probably because the idea that she was a "celebrated scientist" did not occupy the mind of Marie Curie. It seems to me, rather, that I have always lived near the poor student, haunted by dreams, who was Marya Sklodovska long before I came into the world.

"And to this young girl Marie Curie still bore a resemblance on the day of her death. A hard and long and dazzling career had not succeeded in making her greater or less, in sanctifying or debasing her. She was on that last day just as gentle, stubborn, timid and curious about all things as in the days of her obscure beginnings.

"It was impossible to inflict on her, without sacrilege, the pompous obsequies which governments give their great men. In a country graveyard, among summer flowers, she had the simplest and quietest burial, as if the life just ended had been like that of a thousand others.

"I should have liked the gifts of a writer to tell of this eternal student—of whom Einstein said: "Marie Curie is, of all celebrated beings, the only one whom fame has not corrupted"—passing like a stranger across her own life, intact, natural and very nearly unaware of her astonishing destiny."

*

November 8: Ben Bova

*

Science fiction writer, thriller writer, editor, and publisher, Ben Bova, looked around for someone to write a book on the science of time travel and chose an electrical engineer and sci fi buff, Paul J. Nahin. His brief was to look at the current state of research; is time travel starting to move into the realm of the possible?

He writes "Time Travel is a literary device that suits many different agendas, a fact that goes a long way, I think, in explaining both the popularity and longevity of this subgenre of science fiction" which I think is true. Of all the possibilities in science fiction (space travel, to suspend ageing, to create new monsters or re-create the dinosaurs, etc) I think it is time travel which most grips potential readers. It is not just the science of the travel but the way people would make

decisions, the ethics involved, the fear of being marooned, and that intricate and unanswerable question: is to travel in time, whether to the past or the future, also a means to change the present?

I do not pretend to understand even a fraction of the science but I was interested to see that if time travel does become a possibility, a big if, then it is travel forwards … "The modern time-travel debate concerns travel into the *past*. As you will soon see, time travel to the future is not in question among physicists, not even those (like Stephen Hawking) who believe travel to the past would lay waste to physics as we know it." The trouble with this being—would anyone want to risk that journey into the future if they knew they would be stranded there? A journey into next year? Yes, quite possibly. Ten or twenty years? Still acceptable. But as we string it out it becomes more nerve-wracking … which may contain important insights into the way we see the world we are passing on to our children …

At the heart of the quest is the acceptance of the idea of time-space, of the fourth dimension. Nahin writes, "It wasn't until a curious letter appeared in *Nature* during 1885, however, that the concept of time as the fourth dimension was mentioned seriously in an English-language scientific journal. The author, mysteriously signing himself only as "S.", began by writing, "What is the fourth dimension" … I [propose] to consider Time as a fourth dimension. … Since this fourth dimension cannot be introduced into space, as commonly understood, we require a new kind of space for its existence, which we may call time-space." Who was this prophetic writer? Nobody knows."

Nahin, understandably, assumes 'he' as most nineteenth-century scientists were male. But one important woman struggling to be taken seriously by her male counterparts was Mary Somerville. She was used to being overlooked, of working with other scientists, of having statements made as a woman not taken seriously … Might she have been "S."? But was she still alive in 1885? I went to look and found she had died in 1872 but I think the premise remains sound. "S" was not automatically male …

Nahin says, "physicists argue that if something is impossible to detect, it is meaningless to talk about it as being part of science" which appears to make sense—except that thoughts and emotions are possible to detect only as they appear as blips on a graph of brain function (and even where the patterns appear similar or even the same it doesn't mean two people are having the same thoughts), as spoken words, as raised heart rates, as written words or symbols. But thoughts and emotions and visual imagery, though intimately connected, don't lend themselves to detection in what might be called their pure state. It has its analogies with space-time which is presented to us as either mathematical symbols or as observable effects on matter …

The other fascination of the book is the way Nahin trawls through some of the earliest sci fi stories in search of early fictional treatments of time travel and the ideas writers used to underpin such journeys. He recommends Everett F. Bleiler's *Science-Fiction, The Early Years* which looks at thousands of stories up to 1930. And it is interesting to think that at one stage the genre was known as scientifiction …!

*

November 9: 'The Lost Language of B.C.'

*

I do not rush out to buy books about language, about foreign languages, about grammar and structure, about language theories—for the simple reason that they are usually over my head. But as I browsed through some old Canadian Geographic magazines someone had put on a stall I came upon a book review in a Nov/Dec issue back in 1998 and was intrigued. And that BC, in case you are wondering, is not Before Christ but British Columbia …

The book was called *A Voice Great Within Us* by Lillard and Glavin and reviewed by an M.T. Kelly. "Chinook is a language, or jargon, that developed on the northwest coast of North America in the early 1800s to ease communication between whites and native people as well as among native peoples themselves. It was the main language of the B.C. fur trade, and because its limited vocabulary of about 300 key words has obvious borrowings from English and French —

‘Englishman’ is *Kinchotsh* (King George Man), ‘house’ is simply *house*, and *siwash* (now pejorative) means ‘native,’ from the French *sauvage* — it is often thought to have developed specifically because of the fur trade. But in *A Voice Great Within Us*, Charles Lillard and Terry Glavin effectively argue that an early form of Chinook must have emerged as a language of trade before European contact.

“Geography was an essential factor in the creation of this unique speech. The rugged and mountainous terrain of the northwest coast enclosed a multitude of different ecological and climatic zones. The authors note that a traveller going from Prince George to Vancouver will cross more language boundaries than someone going from Madrid to Moscow.

“Chinook allowed peoples living only a valley apart — but using a different linguistic family, not just language or dialect — to communicate. Some Chinook words, along with the rain forest echoes they carry, have passed into current usage, most notably *skookum* ‘strong’, *cheechako* ‘newcomer’/’tenderfoot’ and *‘chuck* ‘large body of water’ — all three of which appear in the new *Canadian Oxford Dictionary*. And there is *Chinook* itself, which refers not only to the jargon but to a separate native language and the people who speak it, as well as to the soft wind blowing over the mountains in which the language originated.

“The grammatical forms of Chinook are simple. There is no conjugation involved and stress, emphasis and intensity is expressed by stretching syllables. At one time spoken all along the coast and well into interior B.C., Washington and Oregon, as a language it is considered all but extinct today.

“*A Voice Great Within Us* is organized as a series of alternating essays by Glavin and Lillard, and includes a poem in English and Chinook by Glavin, “Rain Language.” The book also contains a lexicon, a map and a gazetteer of Chinook place names. This is an extremely accessible book that could have spiralled into many different discussions and disciplines, but it stays on a personal plane and effortlessly conveys concepts that a more scholarly approach would have made unwieldy. The authors express great depth of feeling for the place out of which Chinook sprung. A quote from Lillard, who died in 1997, expresses this beautifully: “I realized my wilderness was a kind of consciousness and what I was looking for was language.”

“Chinook supplied it beautifully.”

And even if its vocabulary was limited I cannot help but think it could’ve provided a more interesting name than British Columbia for that Canadian province …

*

November 10: Oliver Goldsmith

*

“Oliver Goldsmith, nephew of the English writer by the same name, was the first native-born English-Canadian to publish a volume of poems, *The Rising Village*. Born in St Andrews he wrote the book-length poem describing the rise of a rural village in Nova Scotia as a response to *The Deserted Village*, his English uncle’s portrayal of the decline of rural life in Europe. Goldsmith’s work was first published in Britain in 1825 and later in Canada.”

Julie V. Watson in *Calling the Maritimes Home*.

Although he lived most of his life in England, the uncle was born in Ireland in 1730 and his ‘deserted’ village was also Irish. The other day I happened upon it in *Ireland, The Rough Guide*, “Ironically enough, Glassan — identified as “Sweet Auburn”, the subject of Goldsmith’s celebrated anti-enclosure poem *The Deserted Village* and described as “the village of the roses” — owes its orderly layout of creamy-grey pebbledash cottages to enclosure: it was built by the neighboring Waterstown estate to provide accommodation for the artisans needed to tend the massive estate with its ten-acre formal garden. The estate was divided by the Land Commission in the 1920s; the house, designed by the eighteenth-century architect Richard Castle, was sold for scrap. As you head north towards Ballitore, there’s a profusion of brown “Goldsmith country” signs. Only the front and end walls of Goldsmith’s childhood home, the parsonage at Lissoy, remain, and still less of the school he attended, or of the “busy mill” that may be the one mentioned in the poem. Forgney Church,

where Goldsmith's father worked as a curate until 1730, was rebuilt in 1810 and is usually locked. Goldsmith's supposed birthplace at Pallas has a rather spooky shrine erected by members of the Oliver Goldsmith Society in 1974: a larger-than-life statue of the writer enclosed behind bars in a sort of grotto-prison, as if his poetic spirit is too dangerous to be let out into the world. One wonders what Goldsmith's mocking soul would have made of such funereal pomposity."

They go on to say, "The poem is a protest against an oppression of the rural poor all over the British Isles, and not just Ireland; whether it can really be traced to Glassan village is uncertain, but its mood of nostalgic regret for a golden childhood past undoubtedly gives it some points of contact with the local landscape. The treasure-hunt for locations mentioned in the poem, all sign-posted and almost all in ruins, can prove oddly evocative of an absent population" …

*

November 11: Kurt Vonnegut

*

Kurt Vonnegut and Lee Springer sat down to have a conversation in a Manhatten bookstore on October 1st, 1998, a conversation which was later published as *like shaking hands with god*, and Vonnegut had this to say: "Well, one nice thing about our trade, as compared with poetry or with painting, possibly with music, is we don't envy each other. James McNeil Whistler, a painter, said, "If you wish to see envy, go among the painters." Novelists do not envy each other, and if a writer succeeds, makes a lot of money, say, that makes all other writers happy.

So it's a most agreeable field we're in and I think, in a sense, we are veterans of the same battle and we know what the hell it was like. We're not like Duke Wayne, who was never in a battle. We know what that fight was like and we respect each other for making it.

And anyone who has finished a book, whether the thing has been published or not, whether the thing is any good or not, is a colleague of ours."

Might this be a statement backed up by evidence? Are novelists genuinely more open and generous towards other novelists? Or does it suggest that Kurt Vonnegut was personally a very open and generous person and that he had a high opinion of his fellow practitioners? I'm not sure that his life or writings would bear this out but he is often interesting and sometimes provocative. I am just reading his *A Man Without a Country* and here are two small bits. "First rule: Do not use semicolons. They are transvestite hermaphrodites representing absolutely nothing. All they do is show you've been to college." Actually I love semicolons and I haven't been to college. Excuse me, where did I put my tie?

And: "About Stalin's shuttered churches, and those in China today: Such suppression of religion was supposedly justified by Karl Marx's statement that "religion is the opium of the people." Marx said that back in 1844, when opium and opium derivatives were the only effective painkillers anyone could take. Marx himself had taken them. He was grateful for the temporary relief they had given him. He was simply noticing, and surely not condemning, the fact that religion could also be comforting to those in economic or social distress. It was a casual truism, not a dictum."

And why shouldn't writers be kind to one another? We do not think of dentists doing down other dentists at every turn. The problem, of course, is that there are only so many opportunities for writers to publish whereas there is no lack of bad teeth …

*

November 12: Jane 'Speranza' Wilde (m)

*

"I knew Oscar Wilde's mother was 'Speranza' of the *Nation* newspaper in 1848, the time of the Young Irelanders. We learned some of her poetry at school. I knew Oscar was sent to jail and for a long time I thought it was because he was a rebel too, and I wondered what songs they had about him. But by this time I had a kind of an idea it was about sex, for once I'd asked my mother

what he was sent to jail for and she just muttered, 'His downfall – they brought him down the same as they did Parnell.' "

Brendan Behan in *Borstal Boy*

Jane Wilde is sometimes seen as being as wild as her name. But she appears to have had a very clear idea about her own priorities and beliefs. When her article in the *Nation* urging armed rebellion against the English brought the editor Charles Gavin Duffy to trial for sedition he refused to identify 'Speranza' but she came forward and claimed the authorship. It didn't help. The *Nation* was still closed down. She stood by her husband when he was accused of sexual impropriety—and had to pay the woman in question £2,000 for defaming her, leading to her long struggle with poverty in her old age. She produced three children, William, Oscar, and Isola. She was a firm believer in women's rights and women's suffrage. She was an energetic collector of Irish folk lore. But I had never come across any of her poems so I went looking …

Her best-known poem was probably 'The Famine Years' but she wrote other powerful poems on the same subject such as 'The Exodus' which begins:

'A million a decade!' calmly and cold
  The units are read by our statesmen sage;
Little they think of a Nation old,
  Fading away from History's page;
    Outcast weeds by a desolate sea—
    Fallen leaves of Humanity.

'A million a decade!'—of human wrecks,
  Corpses lying in fever sheds—
Corpses huddled on foundering decks,
  And shroudless dead on their rocky beds;
    Nerve and muscle, and heart and brain,
    Lost to Ireland—lost in vain.

William Wilde was an oculist who at times treated the poor for free and is still seen as a pioneer in the field. Though his good reputation wasn't enough to save him when he was accused of seducing a young woman. But he does have one little sense of connection to me. He was born in the same town as my grandfather and my great-grandfather and my great-great-grandfather: the little town of Castlerea in Co Roscommon in the west of Ireland. They all attended the same little church as William's family had for several generations. They probably knew each other by sight if nothing more. But this raises the question: were people like my great-grandfather sympathetic or critical or merely uninterested when Oscar came tumbling down in a blaze of publicity?

*

November 13: Robert Louis Stevenson

*

Think Robert Louis Stevenson and you think swashbuckling adventure or travel stories. But, in fact, he began his writing career by getting his essays published in magazines like *Cornhill* and *Macmillan's*, choosing weighty subjects such as marriage and John Knox and they have what Ernest Rhys called "The charm of inexperience speaking in matters of experience" but although they are rather wordy, the subject sometimes gets lost in the writing, they do have a degree of 'charm', even humour. And they are interesting for helping to pinpoint some of the influences, such as Thoreau, Whitman, and Robbie Burns, on his style and interests.

Here is a little scrap from 'Virginibus Puerisque' on marriage:

"The question of professions, in as far as they regard marriage, was only interesting to women until of late days, but it touches all of us now. Certainly, if I could help it, I would never marry a wife who wrote. The practice of letters is miserably harassing to the mind; and after an hour or two's work, all the more human portion of the author is extinct; he will bully, backbite, and speak

daggers. Music, I hear, is not much better. But painting, on the contrary, is often highly sedative; because so much of the labour, after your picture is once begun, is almost entirely manual, and of that skilled sort of manual labour which offers a continual series of successes, and so tickles a man, through his vanity, into good humour. Alas! in letters there is nothing of this sort. You may write as beautiful a hand as you will, you have always something else to think of, and cannot pause to notice your loops and flourishes; they are beside the mark, and the first law stationer could put you to the blush. Rousseau, indeed, made some account of penmanship, even made it a source of livelihood, when he copied out the *Héloïse* for *dilettante* ladies; and therein showed that strange eccentric prudence which guided him among so many thousand follies and insanities. It would be well for all of the *genus irritable* thus to add something of skilled labour to intangible brain-work. To find the right word is so doubtful a success and lies so near to failure, that there is no satisfaction in a year of it; but we all know when we have formed a letter perfectly; and a stupid artist, right or wrong, is almost equally certain he has found a right tone or a right colour, or made a dexterous stroke with his brush. And, again, painters may work out of doors; and the fresh air, the deliberate seasons, and the "tranquillising influence" of the green earth, counterbalance the fever of thought, and keep them cool, placable, and prosaic.

"A ship captain is a good man to marry if it is a marriage of love, for absences are a good influence in love and keep it bright and delicate; but he is just the worst man if the feeling is more pedestrian, as habit is too frequently torn open and the solder has never time to set. Men who fish, botanise, work with the turning-lathe, or gather sea-weeds, will make admirable husbands; and a little amateur painting in water-colour shows the innocent and quiet mind. Those who have a few intimates are to be avoided; while those who swim loose, who have their hat in their hand all along the street, who can number an infinity of acquaintances and are not chargeable with any one friend, promise an easy disposition and no rival to the wife's influence. I will not say they are the best of men, but they are the stuff out of which adroit and capable women manufacture the best of husbands. It is to be noticed that those who have loved once or twice already are so much the better educated to a woman's hand; the bright boy of fiction is an odd and most uncomfortable mixture of shyness and coarseness, and needs a deal of civilising. Lastly (and this is, perhaps, the golden rule), no woman should marry a teetotaller, or a man who does not smoke. It is not for nothing that this "ignoble tabagie," as Michelet calls it, spreads over all the world. Michelet rails against it because it renders you happy apart from thought or work; to provident women this will seem no evil influence in married life. Whatever keeps a man in the front garden, whatever checks wandering fancy and all inordinate ambition, whatever makes for lounging and contentment, makes just so surely for domestic happiness."

I wonder if he thought back to these ideas when he finally got round to marrying …

*

November 14: Wynkyn de Worde

*

Lord Peter Wimsey says to Bunter in *Whose Body?* "I want you to attend the sale for me. Don't lose time—I don't want to miss the Folio Dante nor the de Voragine—here you are—see? 'Golden Legend'—Wynkyn de Worde, 1493—got that?—and, I say, make a special effort for the Caxton folio of the 'Four Sons of Aymon'—it's the 1489 folio and unique. Look! I've marked the lots I want, and put my outside offer against each. Do your best for me. I shall be back to dinner."

I had come upon occasional mentions of Wynkyn de Worde, pioneer printer in the late 15th century and partner to the much better known William Caxton, and I was always intrigued by his name. Where did he come from, how did he become one of the earliest printers we know of, what is known of his life and work?

The name is thought to have originally been Jan van Wynkyn and that he was born in Woerth in Alsace and came to England somewhere between 1476 and 1481 either with William Caxton or at his invitation. He married an Englishwoman called Elizabeth and probably had a son Julian. He worked as Caxton's assistant but after his death took over the business and moved it to Fleet Street,

thus starting that long association between printers and Fleet Street. He was also an innovator, buying his paper locally rather than importing it, using woodcuts as illustrations, taking on a wider range of books, and moving away from a few aristocratic patrons to thinking in terms of books for all those who could read. He wasn't particularly concerned about the literary quality of what he printed; rather he wanted to make clearer typefaces, easier to read books, and get them out to more people. "The two most important printers during the 1520s were Richard Pynson and Wynkyn de Worde, responsible for something like 70 per cent of the English book market." (Alister McGrath from *In the Beginning*.)

So each time you pick up a mass-market paperback there is a faint echo of Wynkyn de Worde in your action. His vision has come to full fruition.

*

November 15: Richmal Crompton

*

A friend mentioned that she had got a Richmal Crompton for her eight-year-old grandson to read—but that he hadn't been very interested. Crompton's naughty boy hero 'William' is lots of fun. William creates the most awful chaos at home but his motives are almost never 'bad'. He does get into trouble with his father and other adults but he always bounces back. So was William too much embedded in the childhood of young readers of fifty and sixty years ago to appeal to modern children?

I have been pondering on this question of how children's stories cross the years and the generations. I think, looking back, I preferred the livelier adventure stories like Biggles and Enid Blyton's Barney books. In a curious way I like Richmal Crompton, L. M. Montgomery, even Ethel Pedley and George McDonald more as I have come back to them as an adult. The quality of the writing, their development of landscape and background and atmosphere, the way they encapsulate their times and attitudes; all these things are there but aren't necessarily what young readers are looking for.

The other day I saw a *Ginger Meggs* on a library shelf, new stories written by James Kemsley, and it struck me that Ginger Meggs and William had something in common; and it is possible that Banks' original creation of Ginger Meggs drew some inspiration from William. They get into endless scrapes but Ginger is much more of a knockabout larrikin character. William is a nicely-brought-up middle-class child. Both small heroes have their attraction but William is better written, more complex, and funnier.

Victor Watson's *The Cambridge Guide to Children's Books in English* says of the Just William series: "Popular stories by British writer Richmal Crompton (1890 – 1969), comprising more than 40 titles. The large number of reprints are a rich testimony to the enduring quality of this very English anti-hero. In the comfortable, almost stifling atmosphere of late Edwardian England, William Brown marauds through the sensibilities and conformities of 'middle England' with a youthful zeal which has lost none of its appeal over time. William first appeared in the magazine *Home* in 1919, intended for adult readers. Crompton claimed that he was an original creation, but it has been observed that he is remarkably similar to the eponymous hero of the Penrod series, an American fictional character from the stories of Booth Tarkington, published in England in 1914." It might even be suggested that all child characters owe something to one another. It is possible, for instance, to see Tom Sawyer in later child heroes. Young characters, not defined by strong religious or political views and with their characters still relatively undeveloped, are marked out more by their milieu and where they have been situated on the spectrum between 'naughty boy' and 'little angel' …

The other day I came across Richmal Crompton's *William – The Showman* and I thoroughly enjoyed him again. But one thing which struck me, apart from the number of twists and turns in each story, was the writing itself. William was read by children in approximately the eight to twelve-years-old bracket. Just a taste—

—"Jus' fancy! Lent six weeks an' Christmas only one day. There isn't any *sense* in it."

—They'd had a good fight, and it's an expensive hatchet that can't be buried for four shillings.

—Jimmie Minster was a juvenile film star, beloved by the whole juvenile population of the civilized world. For Jimmie did not belong to the mawkish mother's darling school of child film stars. He was daring and manly and adventurous.

—"*Will* you be quiet?" snapped the young man, struggling desperately against the turgid tide of William's eloquence.

Though William can't spell he is quite articulate—but the thing which struck me was the relative sophistication of the narrative. Is Crompton's writing too eloquent and sophisticated for today's eight to twelve-year-olds—or are they eloquent and sophisticated in different ways?

*

November 16: *Psycho*

*

Robert Bloch wrote a short story 'The Shambles of Ed Gein' for *True Detective* magazine and later turned it in to the book *Psycho*. He wasn't the only writer to take his real stories for the magazine and turn them into novels.

Marc Gerald introducing some of the offerings from *True Detective* down through the years wrote, "Robert Bloch acknowledges this debt in a remarkable story entitled "The Shambles of Ed Gein," in which he tells how he based his 1959 classic novel *Psycho* on Gein, a necrophiliac with a sharp wit and an even sharper knife. In Dashiell Hammett's "Who Killed Bob Teal?" one discovers an odd plot turn he would later use to great effect in the *Maltese Falcon*. While one needn't be familiar with Jim Thompson's unforgettable novels to appreciate "The Case of The Catalogue Clue," one might recognize the chatty sheriff, the scheming bellboy, the unloved wildcatter and the once pastoral, now booming West Texas town. Each reappears some twenty years later in books like *The Killer Inside Me* and *Wild Town*. And then there's Harry Whittington, "The King of the Paperback Originals," whose practically immoral "Invaders from the Sky" may just be the perfect true crime story. He would go on to base his 1960 novel *The Devil Wears Wings* on this case about two hard-luck pilots who swoop down from the skies to rob banks and reclaim their pride."

True Detective, one of the many pulp magazines in the US dealing with true if mildly fictionalised crime, was begun in 1924 by Bernarr Macfadden who had a stable of 'True' magazines and in its heyday each issue was estimated to have at least 2 million readers. It followed a formula: the detectives always found out whodunit even if sometimes they couldn't bring the who to justice, they were always sharp-eyed and determined, never corrupt or lazy or incompetent. The stories took known facts but added in fictional conversations, moods, fears, emotions, in a fast-moving and concise mix. The stories were churned out at great speed by a number of professionals. Gerald says, "All time pulp great Jack Heise had been two-fingering ten stories a month from his mobile home in Spokane, Washington, since 1936. And Bud Ampolsk, Bill Kelly, Bill Cox, and Walter Hecox each had spent thirty-five years in the trenches. As a writer, inspiration was hard to find, especially after all those years. It was even harder when one had to write on the fly just to survive: 5,000 words fetched $250 in 1988, or $50 less than writers made during the darkest days of the depression."

Instead of going to writing classes writers learnt on the job and how well they learnt depended on talent, material, desperation, and the quality of their editors.

So what of Ed Gein who inspired both Alfred Hitchcock's film and the later *Silence of the Lambs*?

Bloch writes, "On the evening of November 16, 1957, visitors entered an ancient, lonely farmhouse—not in backwoods New England but in rural Wisconsin. Hanging in an adjacent shed was the nude, butchered body of a woman. She had been suspended by the heels and decapitated, then disemboweled like a steer. In the kitchen next to the shed, fire flickered in an old-fashioned potbellied stove. A pan set on top of it contained a human heart.

"The visitors—Sheriff Art Schley and Captain Lloyd Schoephoester—were joined by other officers. There was no electricity in the darkened house and they conducted their inspection with oil lamps, lanterns, and flashlights.

"The place was a shambles, in every sense of the word. The kitchen, shed, and bedroom were littered with old papers, books, magazines, tin cans, tools, utensils, musical instruments, wrapping paper cartoons, containers and a miscellany of junk. Another bedroom and living room beyond had been nailed off; these five rooms upstairs were nailed off and deserted.

But amidst the accumulated debris of years in the three tenanted rooms, the searchers found:

two shin bones;

a pair of human lips;

four human noses;

bracelets of human skins;

four chairs, their woven cane seats replaced by strips of human skin;

a quart can, converted into a tom-tom by skin stretched over both top and bottom;

a bowl made from the inverted half of a human skull;

a purse with a handle made of skin;"—and the list goes on including "ten female human heads, the tops of which had been sawed off above the eyebrows".

Yet Ed Gein lived and murdered and robbed graves freely in a small community of 700 people for decades, doing odd jobs, even babysitting, without arousing suspicion. Just an odd-bod, a bit of a loner …

"Edward Gein, the gray-haired, soft-voiced little man who may or may not have been a cannibal and a necrophile, was—by his own admission—a ghoul, a murderer, and a transvestite. Due process of law has also adjudged him to be criminally insane."

*

November 17: Auberon Waugh

*

"Even doctors and nurses that I know have been carried along with the assumption that the best way to prevent our children from drinking heavily – and behaving badly as a result – is to teach them to drink while they are children. This assumption has been heavily promoted by educational bodies that appear to be impartial but are, in fact, funded by the drinks industry, and are well versed in the comfy-speak of 'teaching children sensible drinking' or 'responsible drinking'.

"In England, one prep school was reported to have asked a local wine merchant in to give forty twelve-year-old pupils a class, 'Wines of the World', in which the children were invited to taste various wines. We don't recommend early, sensible dope smoking to prevent later drug abuse, early cigarette smoking to prevent later nicotine addiction or early sexual encounters to prevent unwanted pregnancy. But when it comes to our logic regarding introducing children to alcohol, we seem to be thinking under the influence of alcohol. Our complacency sees child and teenage drinking as inevitable, but it is only inevitable because we not only allow it to be, but, inadvertently, make it so.

"A new study commissioned by the Department for Children, Schools and Families cites the myth regarding the benefits of the continental approach to introducing children gradually to alcohol as a 'huge obstacle' to overcome. 'The misperceptions are firmly based on opinion rather than from health statistics about mainland Europe. Parents … are searching for any logic that helps them maintain their own drinking whilst protecting their children.' Many parents just can't say 'No', and – wrongly – feel that they can't say, 'Do as I say, not as I do.' While, in fact, one (of) the most fundamental differences between a parent and child is that a parent *can* do things that a child cannot: parent and child are *not* equal. This is further evidence of both parents and children being unable to accept the fundamental difference between the status of parent and child.

"Although parents may delude themselves into believing that they are giving their children a more responsible cosmopolitan and sophisticated approach to alcohol, it is worth noting that France's death rate from cirrhosis of the liver is actually twice that of the UK's. 'Liver cirrhosis is

caused by long-term excessive drinking by individuals, regardless of their drinking patterns.' The point being, that while 'binge drinking' may be one particularly anti-social British route to health damage, even the slow, stylish continental way will get you there. No wonder that the organisation Alcohol Concern has called for parents who give alcohol to children under fifteen to be prosecuted.

"A new paper in the *British Journal of Psychiatry* reports that 'urgent action is needed' to prevent 'an under-recognised, alcohol-related … dementia time bomb' that is facing young drinkers."

Aric Sigman in *The Spoilt Generation*.

So where does Auberon Waugh come into this debate? I remember reading a book of his on wine, giving advice on how to set up and stock your wine cellar. It wasn't that I was planning my own wine cellar but rather that he had a pleasantly acerbic wit and I was curious to know where he might fit into the famous Waugh family distinguished by Evelyn and Alec Waugh. And he looked and sounded exactly as the traditional imbiber should: pleasantly rotund and fruity, mildly bibulous but companionable, a man whose enjoyment of his wine over dinner and port afterwards was almost palpable. A man remote from the new image of the wine drinker, young, rowdy, and totally unconcerned with the qualities and differences between one wine and the next.

I always feel vaguely sorry for the people who write the wine columns in newspapers. There seem to be a limited number of adjectives, expressions, and ways of describing a wine. Do they long for the opportunity to say 'This tasted like turps on the tongue' or 'I advise eating strong cheese with it as the bouquet is definitely unfortunate'? And it is a curious question: why do we have wine columns but not rum columns or vodka columns? Still, developing a name as a connoisseur seems preferable to sloshing the stuff down regardless …

So what of Auberon Waugh? Yes, he belongs to that literary family. Arthur Waugh, writer and publisher, was his grandfather. Alec Waugh, writer, was his uncle. Evelyn Waugh, of *Brideshead Revisited* fame, was his father. And except that they were Catholic they come over as a fairly typical landowning Tory-minded English county family. But if you *had* followed Auberon's advice you would now have a wine cellar the envy of your neighbourhood.

*

November 18: Rodney Hall

*

I remember hearing Rodney Hall talking about his novel *The Day We Had Hitler Home* years ago at a Writers Festival and the other day I got round to reading it. It is 1919. Hitler blinded by gas gets into the wrong line and ends up in Australia. An intriguing idea …

Hall writes, "So, in the present case, it was Germans with dairy farms, doggedly producing Emmenthal cheese, Germans raising quarter horses, and all of them (according to that odious creep, Mr Archibald Sachs, at whose property we'd made our first stop and who'd stared at me as if inspecting a noxious specimen) could be telephoned to arrange for petrol supplies or food."

The book is a fantasy and Hall can have anyone do anything. I don't have a problem with that. But as soon as I read that sentence something went wrong with the fantasy. I grew up surrounded by German dairy farmers but I very much doubt if any of them had ever heard of Emmenthal cheese. Like everyone else they sent their milk off to the dozens of tiny cheese factories which dotted Australia then. I had never connected Germans to quarter horses and I don't think any quarter horses were imported into Australia until the 1950s and then they were still referred to as American Quarter Horses. And the country properties which were connected to the telephone in 1919, and the numbers were tiny, were inevitably on party lines. You could not pass secret messages over a party line. Or if you did you risked a nosy neighbour listening in …

From the point of the story none of this matters. But I have a secret fear of mentioning something before it officially came into use, whether a product, a phrase, a usage … and I often find myself having that same feeling of being disconcerted with other people's books. Sometimes it is someone reading a book before its author had begun to write. Sometimes it is someone going to the

fridge before people had fridges. More often though it is a change in word usage or lifestyle that makes me feel uncomfortable. Country people, when I was young, still had a hot dinner in the middle of the day. But most writers now always have them sitting down to their hot dinner at night. Doctors and nurses might speak of a pregnancy but ordinary people spoke of their animals being 'in calf' etc or used nice or less nice euphemisms when they were expecting themselves—the 'patter of little feet', 'in the family way', a 'bun in the oven' and so on—all those euphemisms being created precisely because pregnant wasn't a word to be used in ordinary conversation. And when it comes to sex it is hard now when reading modern novels set fifty or more years ago to see in them any of the agony people went through. The vast majority of women, and a great many men, were still virgins when they married. But you wouldn't know it to pick up a novel now. And birth control was still so dicey that it kept people chaste whether they wanted to be or not—and gossip filled in the gaps left by unreliable contraception. A baby arriving seven months after the wedding was a potent topic of gossip.

Does it matter if books now do not recreate the private agonies and worries of a past generation? Perhaps not. After all, very few modern novels, though they may drip with realistic sex, ever engage with the miseries of clamydia or genital warts despite the very large number of sufferers.

And don't let my quibble put you off reading Hall's novel …

*

November 19: Pot Luck

*

Word of mouth, reviews, seeing someone sitting engrossed by a book—all these are ways of finding new books, new writers, to change your life. But every so often I use a simpler tool. I simply take a book from a library shelf making sure that I know absolutely nothing about the title or the author. My recent list goes like this: 1. *The Big Break* by Louise Hide. 2. *The Road to the Island* by Tom Hazuka. 3. *Redfin* by Anthony Lynch. 4. *The Undiscovered Country* by Samantha Gillison. 5. *The Long Walk Home* by Will North. 6. *Heligoland* by Shena Mackay. 7. *Palindrome* by Stuart Woods. 8. *Seven Tales of Sex and Death* by Patricia Duncker. 9. *The Vanishing* by Tim Krabbé. 10. *This Eye That Looks at Me* by Loreina Santos-Silva.

My enduring hope is that I will come upon another 'must read' author. So far it hasn't worked like that and yet I still see it as an interesting and worthwhile exercise (and I did find Duncker's *James Miranda Barry* interesting; I might not have picked it up if I hadn't already come across her name). If you can't choose, and you know what they say about choice, try it some time … My other methods include choosing with my eyes shut, asking friends if they've read any good books lately, and another useful method is choosing out a book with an unusual title.

I just picked up one of these, an old book I saw on a stall by Julius Levine called *A Gentleman with a Duster*. It sounds like a plea for more men to do housework, doesn't it, but in fact it was a surprise in several ways. It was published by Mills & Boon in 1927 and although it has a romantic interest it is a mainstream novel and deals more with cultural conflict and expectations. The Levines are a wealthy Jewish banking family and the husband has bought a house in the English countryside so as to play at Lord of the Manor while his wife longs for the Riviera. Their agent is a man who has lost an arm in the First World War and is difficult, angry, and touchy. His wife is county and supremely sensible and practical, with a love of country life and animals. The two families are chalk and cheese and the Levine son and the Congreve daughter are caught between them. The son goes to Oxford and meets other women. He travels to India and starts to ask himself what it might mean in his life to be a Jew. I couldn't help thinking that Mills & Boon in the years since has 'dumbed down' their novels and made them supremely predictable. After all, consider this summary of a 1911 Mills & Boon title, *The Ealing Miracle* by Horace Newte: "A pious paragon of middle-class rectitude exchanges bodies (apparently at the command of Christ) with a young nurse down on her luck after bearing (and losing) an illegitimate child. She learns that her moral assumptions are ill-fitted to the world in which she now must live. The tedious sermonizing about the plight of working

girls in London is offset by the development of the woman's relationship with the girl's lover (which is put aside when the author nearly gets carried away). The ending is surprisingly ambivalent, and though the book is rather patchy, it is one of the best of its kind." I found myself wondering: did they get their own bodies back? What happens to the lover? Do any of them find love?

And the second surprise was that I had it round the wrong way. The book's title was *Julius Levine* and the author was A Gentleman with a Duster and under this pseudonym he (or perhaps she) had brought out a number of popular novels including *The Laslett Affair* and *The Other Door* as well as non-fiction such as *The Conservative Mind* and *The Mirrors of Downing Street.* I wondered if it was actually a politician hiding behind this pseudonym. So was it possible, all these years later, to discover the identity of that Gentleman with the Duster?

Indeed it was. He was a gentleman called Edward Harold Begbie (1871 – 1929) who was a prolific author under a number of pen names. Although a conservative Christian he used other names to write under because not all his views were popular including his support for Irish Home Rule and pacificism in World War One; some of his views were not acceptable to conservative Christians; some of his conservative Christian views were not acceptable to the literary establishment, particularly his concern with blasphemy and bawdiness. I felt some sympathy. But it still seems a very strange pseudonym to choose …

*

November 20: Don DeLillo

*

I think it was unfortunate that the word 'pretentious' came into my mind with thinking about Richard Flanagan's novels—and now it has lodged there and refuses to go away. For instance, I have just been reading Don DeLillo's *The Body Artist*.

'Sometimes she doesn't think of what she wants to say to him until he walks out of whatever room they're in. Then she thinks of it. Then she either calls after him or doesn't and he responds or doesn't.'

Now is that deep or is that deep?

'She threw off a grubby sweater. She raised her arm out of the sweater and struck her hand lightly on something above, wondering what it was, although this had happened before, and then she remembered the hanging lamp, metal shade wobbling, the lamp that was totally wrong for the room, and she turned toward the bed and looked, half looked, not looked in expectation but something else—a meaning so thin she could not read it.'

Or this?

' "Being here has come to me. I am with the moment, I will leave the moment. Chair, table, wall, hall, all for the moment, in the moment. It has come to me. Here and near. From the moment I am gone, am left, am leaving. I will leave the moment from the moment." '

Now is *that* deep?

'She sat there, thinking into the blankness of her decision. Then she worked herself up along the doorpost, slowly, breathing completely, her back to the fluted wood, squat-rising, drawing out the act over an extended length of time. Her mother died when she was nine. It wasn't her fault. It had nothing to do with her.'

Or this?

The blurb says "A lean, sad, beautiful novel, *The Body Artist* is a meditation on love, time and human perception from one of the great masters of modern storytelling."

I couldn't find the sadness, the beauty, or the mastery. But the novel *was* lean. All is not lost.

*

November 21: Ada Cambridge

*

I have just been reading *Rattling the Orthodoxies: A Life of Ada Cambridge* by Margaret Bradstock and Louise Wakeling. This is very interesting, not least because I didn't know very much

about Ada Cambridge. She came out to Victoria from England with her husband, the Reverend George Cross, and they had various parishes around country Victoria. She wrote because she liked writing, because she wanted to make some money to help her family, and because she felt she had something to say. She published quite prolifically, usually a novel a year, plus some occasional articles, stories, and poems.

Her novels come under the catch-all of romances but she was willing to create heroes and heroines who were not conventional—and certainly not forerunners to Mills & Boon. She brought up a range of issues—including the failings of the Anglican Church, the problems of unmarried mothers, the lack of opportunities for women, the carelessness with which nature was treated and its wildlife killed for sport—but the authors repeatedly remind the reader that Cambridge though she asked some searching questions had neither answers nor probably the personality or mindset to seek any kind of social reforming role.

Biographers naturally sift the life and writings of their subject through their own lens on the world. But the book had two disadvantages for me. It seemed to take away from Cambridge by this dwelling on what she wasn't rather than what she was. And I was left with the unanswered question: are her writings worth tracking down for their ability to tell a story, to be read for pure enjoyment, rather than for what they might tell us about nineteenth century attitudes or late colonial Australia?

And they don't mention a wry and amused undertone which lifts her writing above a kind of sober Victorianism common to late 19th century writing; she, in effect, puts her chosen characters under the microscope and notes, with judgement which is at times critical and at times sympathetic but always with a degree of understated humour, the way they wriggle to and fro across the slide …

Cambridge comes across as an interesting and unusual woman so I thought I would put in one little quote from one of her pieces, 'Nightfall', which resonates with the current euthanasia debate. "We are not allowed to quietly slip away, as, out of politeness and consideration for others, as well as in our own interests, we should often gladly do. We are compelled, by main force if necessary, to loiter about to the bitter end, cluttering up the place." Does it matter that she confined her awkward questions to her writing rather than firing off letters to the government or urging like-minded women to march on Parliament House?

*

November 22: André Gide

*

"It is easier to lead men to combat, stirring up their passion, than to restrain them and direct them toward the patient labours of peace."

André Gide.

*

November 23: Footsteps

*

That curious claim of human footprints found in the same layers as dinosaur footprints has always been pooh-poohed but I came upon a bit in a Brad Steiger book, *Mysteries of Time and Space*, in which he says hundreds of such footprints have been found and that some of them were deliberately created in the Depression years by small towns desperate to draw visitors. But others are assumed to be a freak of nature or perhaps the prints left by a creature with human-like feet. They certainly exist. They aren't the wishful thinking of Christian fundamentalists trying to 'prove' that dinosaurs and humans co-existed within a Biblical time-frame. But I had a different question: how easy is it to create footprints good enough to fool the keen observer?

R. G. B. Morrison in *A Field Guide to Tracks and Traces of Australian Animals* says, "The Australian Aborigines' skill in tracking animals and recognising their footprints is legendary. Less well known is their ability to record and reproduce various animal tracks.

"These are often painted in realistic or stylised forms, particularly by the Aborigines from central Australia. Other reproductions of tracks or footprints, often very life-like, are made in the sand with no more equipment than parts of the body, or occasionally, a twig."

And Pat Lowe in *Hunters and Trackers* writes: "Desert children used their fingers to trace out patterns and shapes. They also learnt how to represent the tracks of common animals. Adults who grew up in the desert still enjoy demonstrating this game: the footprints of toddlers can be drawn with the heel of the hand and the fingertips; an eaglehawk's claws are 'pinched' into the sand; a cat's paw is made with all the fingertips bunched together, and a dingo's pad with the flat of the finger pads. Finer marks, depicting the tracks of small birds and insects, can be drawn with a twig."

So what about the other side of the equation: dinosaur footprints? John Long in *The Dinosaur Dealers* writes "The theft of rare dinosaur footprints in late 1996 from an isolated beach near Broome, in the far north of Western Australia, sent shock waves through the peaceful world of palaeontology. The prints were thought to be the only known good trackway of a stegosaur in the world, and the only evidence for this dinosaur family having existed in Australia. The theft so infuriated the local Aboriginal peoples that the Elders threw a curse upon the perpetrators. Never before had such a site, sacred to palaentologist and Aboriginal alike, been so publicly violated. The crime made front-page news in the *Australian* newspaper on 16 October, and was reported on major news networks around the world. Although local police conducted a thorough investigation into the crime, no firm leads were established and the case was left unsolved. Then, in late 1998, another stolen fossil dinosaur footprint from Broome came into the public eye. This time the thief, a local man by the name of Michael Latham, was caught. He received two concurrent sentences of two years, for the theft of fossilised human footprints from a remote site in the Dampier Peninsula, and a single large dinosaur footprint from near Broome, in addition for seven years for drug-related charges. In pursuing their investigations, however, the police were unable to link this crime to the first theft of the rare stegosaur prints."

So whodunit and to what purpose? And those dinosaur footprints, as a massive Woodside gas plant closes in on their ancient perambulations, are under an even more extreme threat …

*

November 24: Lawrence Sterne

*

"What was it about *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* that had first captivated so many and transformed the life of Laurence Sterne in the space of a few, crowded weeks? Most simply, perhaps, it made readers laugh—often in spite of themselves. A more precise, though still very partial, answer might be that Tristram's fictional autobiography has one of the most arresting opening sentences—baffling and beguiling—in all of English literature:

> I wish either my father or my mother, or indeed both of them, as they were in duty both equally bound to it, had minded what they were about when they begot me; had they duly consider'd how much depended upon what they were then doing;—that not only the production of a rational Being was concern'd in it, but that possibly the happy formation and temperature of his body, perhaps his genius and the very cast of his mind;—and, for aught they knew to the contrary, even the fortunes of his whole house might take their turn from the humours and dispositions which were then uppermost:——Had they duly weighed and considered all this, and proceeded accordingly,——I am verily persuaded I should have made a quite different figure in the world, from that, in which the reader is likely to see me."
>
> Ian Campbell Ross in *Laurence Sterne: A Life*

*

November 25: Crescent Dragonwagon

*

You can't go past such a name, can you now? In fact she acquired the name when she married. But her husband, an archeologist, had changed *his* more prosaic name to Crispin Dragonwagon from Mark Parsons. As she was a writer of children's books, as well as cookbooks, I

wondered if her books might fly off the shelves into young and eager hands. But no. She actually published her children's books under the unexciting name of Ellen Parsons. I feel that was an opportunity lost!

*

November 26: Adam Mickiewicz (d)

*

Philip Marsden wrote in *The Bronski House*, "the story that remained sharpest concerned the unveiling of a statue of Adam Mickiewicz in Warsaw. Like Pushkin, Mickiewicz is a national poet and his statue was to be a national monument. The time of the unveiling was shortly after the Polish Uprising of 1863, and the Russian governor was nervous. He wheeled up his artillery, knocking down several rows of buildings as he did so. Tens of thousands of Poles had gathered in the square. Henrik Sienkiewicz stepped up to the podium. From his pocket he took the pages of a speech he had been forbidden to make. He waved the pages in the wind. There was silence. He unveiled the statue. Still silence. The Russians stared at the Poles and the Poles stared at the Russians. Not a sound.

"Then from the midst of the crowd was heard the noise of a woman sobbing. Then another, and another until all that could be heard in the centre of Warsaw, on the occasion of the unveiling of Mickiewicz's statue, was a low collective wailing."

Poets, novelists, essayists, dramatists—they were once seen as essential to the process of revolution. Now we put our noses in the air and say that message poetry can't be good poetry. I wonder.

But Mickiewicz (1798 – 1855) was a man of many parts; he wrote erotic and romantic poetry, he wrote history, he drew on folklore and mysticism; but he is Poland's national poet not least because he was first and foremost a nationalist before there was a nation.

*

November 27: Frank Clune

*

Clune was one of those knockabout larrikin characters Australia used to produce. A Wooloomoolooo boy he was out selling newspapers by the age of seven and a very varied career saw him spend time in the US Cavalry, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, and with the AIF at Gallipoli where he was wounded and invalided home. He worked as a mousetrap salesman, even as an accountant, but mostly as a producer of pot-boilers of Australian history. The *Australian Encyclopedia* says of him, "Although Clune gained little praise from the critics he was one of Australia's most widely read authors."

He was more interested in telling a rip-roaring yawn than a recital of facts; less serious and less careful with his material than Ion Idriess, and yet for my parents' generation he made Australian history come alive. Not for him a quarrel over the precise dating or meaning of a footnote. He had already moved on to the next in his prolific career of over sixty titles. His books have their share (perhaps more than their share) of sexism, racism, slipshod research, leaps to conclusions not supported by facts—and yet he made Australian history more than that dry stuff served up to generations of bored schoolchildren. Perhaps with care and guidance it is time to steer our children towards Frank Clune's Australia—not least because he was interested in ordinary men doing interesting things rather than Idriess's heroes and 'big men' …

*

November 28: Randolph Stow

*

When I came upon Randolph Stow's *The Girl Green as Elderflower* years ago I found it a fascinating novel. I think the mood, the atmosphere of it remained tucked away somewhere—because when I came upon his 'The Farmer's Tale' in his Selected Poems *A Counterfeit Silence* I thought 'there's something about the piece which reminds me of the novel' …

Morning by night and evening after noon,
coming from pastures burned mahogany
where death spelled out a splutter of white bones
and weeds of wool grew fungus on the tynes
of ochrous wires, he would sometimes see

the lady who a fox is, and a witch,
deep in her beating throat in charlock flowers.
And she was cruel, and cruelly would watch,
smiling fine-toothed with lemon eyes that switched
his face with memory. All fruitless hours

would be remembered in the shallow laugh
which was her iridescent yellow gaze,
all green things stillborn and all wounds of death
—cattle gone dry were taunts of her milk-sharp teeth
in the highboned other sharpness of her face.

And he, the boy too green to hate, would fly,
pressing his eyes to understand the earth
that rang like copper to the mica sky,
pressing his cloudward legs to soar away
from the vixen lady with her charlock wreath

whose taste is mockery: until it shone
September, in a cry of birds and birth,
when all things rise and quicken into flame,
and so with him; in pride and hate he came
and flailed her down the flowered earth.

His cheek dropped blood from the fury of her teeth
and drowned and scarlet grew his sight; but fallen,
his anger choked her down and bound her breath,
his kisses stilled the screaming face beneath
and all her tawny hide was gold with pollen.

My childhood was seashells and sandalwood, windmills
and yachts in the southerly, ploughshares and keels,
fostered by hills and by waves on the breakwater,
sunflowers and ant-orchids, surfboards and wheels,
gulls and green parakeets, sandhills and haystacks, and
brief subtle things that a child does not realize,
horses and porpoises, aloes and clematis—
Do I idealize?
Then—I idealize. (Juvenilia 1954-6)

I saw a cheap secondhand copy of *The Girl Green as Elderflower* and bought it to see if there really was a sense of connection. Sadly, the magic of the book had disappeared in the interim—yet, in a way, I felt the poem and the book still had a mysterious sense of connection …

*

November 29: C. S. Lewis

*

I am not a fan of C. S. Lewis. Yes, his Narnia books are far preferable to the violent rubbish often served up to children now. Yes, his science fiction stories are interesting and imaginative. Yes, he does tackle 'the big questions' in some of his books. But I always have the feeling that his conventional Christian beliefs acted like an invisible fence; as though he couldn't dig deeper in case he transgressed some boundary and got into the realm of the unknowable. A Christianity which didn't have an answer to everything was inadmissible. But to me, a key part of believing is in humble acceptance of the fact that we don't have all the answers.

Even so, I was rather stunned when I came upon a book in the library called *The C.S. Lewis Hoax*. I had never associated him with trying to fool his readers. But author Kathryn Lindskoog isn't pointing the finger at Lewis or his books, rather she is saying that some very dubious transactions have taken place since his death. These centre around the figure of an American academic Walter Hooper who has effectively become Lewis's literary executor. She points the finger at some very problematic activities. These include:

The publication of *The Dark Tower* supposedly as a Lewis 'fragment' saved from a bonfire. But the book is not written in Lewis's style, nor does it incorporate his Christian beliefs or his sense of allegory in exploring good and evil.

The way in which Hooper has lied about his own academic life and his association with Lewis. He has consistently claimed that Lewis had asked him to be his companion-secretary years before his death. But Hooper did not even meet Lewis until five months before his death and then only in the guise of a fan meeting a revered author. Hooper has expanded this role to the point where he has Lewis claiming Hooper was the son he never had, something vigorously denied by Leonard and Mollie Hooper, the couple who looked after Lewis in his last years.

(There is oblique support for Leonard and Molly Hooper's refutation in Lewis's book *Letters to an American Lady*, letters he had written to a correspondent in the United States over many years which were published not long after his death. Lewis never mentions Walter Hooper, even though it could be assumed that his correspondent would be interested to hear if he *had* taken on an American secretary, and he mentions his brother Warren over the years—"I found my brother ill when I got home and so lacked his usual secretarial help" 5/10/1955 and only months before his death he wrote that Warren is "still away so I have all the mail to do" 30/8/1963—so clearly Walter Hooper *wasn't* acting as his secretary in those last few months.)

Hooper has inserted himself into both prefaces and texts of all the reprints of Lewis's books since his death; this involves revisions and changes as well as omissions and commissions. Where people have easy access to earlier versions of the books to cross-check this isn't a problem. But for people coming newly to Lewis's work it is an issue. And invariably Hooper modestly claims to be doing what Lewis asked him to do.

Hooper effectively sidelined Lewis's brother Warren, his friends, and the people who knew him best. He challenged Warren Lewis's right to donate his brother's letters to a particular American university. He denies access to people wanting to read the original documents. Hooper by coming across as modest warm sympathetic and passionate about C. S. Lewis has effectively taken control of all aspects of the C. S. Lewis legend. So if there is a message in there for other writers I suppose it is simply this: make very clear what you want done with your literary legacy.

*

November 30: Mark Twain

*

"There is something fascinating about science. One gets such wholesale returns of conjecture out of such a trifling investment of fact."

Mark Twain in *Life on the Mississippi*.

He also wrote "A lie can go half way around the world,
before the truth even gets its boots on."

*

December 1: Rex Stout

*

Rex Stout, author of the Nero Wolfe mysteries, said: "My theory is that people who don't like mystery stories are anarchists."

*

December 2: Edmond Rostand (d)

*

John Sturrock wrote in *The French Pyrenees*, "Cambo's most illustrious resident, attracted there by its salubrity, was the playwright Edmond Rostand, a florid Marseillais who built himself an extraordinary house just outside the town to the north. This is the Villa Arnaga, open for visits from April to the end of October, and curious enough to put on your visiting list. Rostand had grown rich on the royalties from his astonishing verse drama, *Cyrano de Bergerac*, which was first performed in 1897 and so successfully that its author was reportedly made a knight of the Légion d'Honneur on the opening night in between the fourth and fifth acts. Since then *Cyrano* is estimated to have been put on more times than any other French play and to have been General de Gaulle's favourite theatrical work. The plot is the most extravagantly and sentimentally romantic it would be possible to imagine, the story of brave, generous, broken-hearted Cyrano, who loves but can never win the girl because his nose is so grotesquely large. But with his incomparable fluency, he woos her gallantly and lavishly in rhyming couplets on behalf of another. Rostand wrote other great successes also, although nothing quite on the memorable scale of *Cyrano*. Given that its hero's fatal handicap was the size of his nose, it seemed to me most tactless that there should be a 'pneumological' institute named after him in Cambo, when the last thing he can have suffered from was breathing problems."

So what is the villa like and is it worth visiting?

"The Villa Arnaga is appropriately and massively theatrical: a traditional asymmetrical Basque villa with pitched roof and balcony but inflated to several times the orthodox size for such buildings. At the back there is a long, formal garden, stretching away past ponds and flowerbeds to an ample pergola, and on the other three sides parkland, with a great many hydrangeas. The interior of the villa one can only lamely describe as southern art nouveau; there is a great deal of panelling, made out of exotic and in some cases aromatic woods, a great deal of marble, of gilt, and of inlaid flooring. There are also some, but not too many memorabilia of Rostand's life in the theatre: playbills, photographs of actors and actresses associated with his work, autograph letters. The Villa Arnaga is an eccentric, ornate memorial to the man, a rare and engaging touch of the histrionic in this otherwise sincere part of the Basque country."

*

December 3: Anon

*

Look to this day
for it is life
the very life of life
in its brief course lie all
the realities and truths of existence
the joy of growth
the splendor of action
the glory of power
for yesterday is but a memory
and tomorrow is only a vision
but today well lived
makes every yesterday a memory of happiness
and every tomorrow a vision of hope
look well, therefore, to this day!

Ancient Sanskrit poem

*

December 4: Samuel Butler

*

"So unprofessional an author was Butler that all his books published during his lifetime, except the last, *Erewhon Revisited*, were published at his own expense, and he made a financial loss on all of them except the first, *Erewhon*.

"Butler's works, however, written to please himself and unsuccessful in finding a publisher in his day, have lived on, while many contemporarily successful books in some of his departments of literature have died."

(A.J. Hoppé introducing Samuel Butler's *The Way of All Flesh*.)

In fact *Erewhon* (1872) made him the grand profit of £69 3s 10d and he was lucky to get that; people had been buying the book in the mistaken belief it was by Lord Lytton; when the truth came out sales plummeted. He made enough money to publish himself by spending some years sheepfarming in New Zealand. But I rather liked his philosophy: "I have never," he said, "written on any subject unless I believed that the authorities on it were hopelessly wrong." One of his major 'debates' in print was on evolution. H. C. O'Neill in *The Great Victorians* wrote, "As against Darwin, what he held was that by an inherent cunning the cell controls its destiny, and that useful habits, stored in unconscious memory, are transmitted." There is now the possibility that he was right. But in his time he was seen as that thing, better dismissed than taken seriously, the meddling amateur. It gave his writings something of their savour and 'bite' but it also meant he had no obvious readership. He appealed to people who liked his lively, provocative, but chaotic way of looking at the world.

Perhaps 'lived on' is now a little optimistic. Who is currently reading his works? But more than a hundred years of popularity isn't bad going for books that publishers did not want …

*

December 5: Kaz Cooke

*

Sally Loane in *Who Cares? Guilt, hope and the child-care debate* writes of the anger a Michael Leunig cartoon showing a swaddled baby and the title 'Thoughts of a Baby Lying in a Child Care Centre' aroused. " 'Thoughts of a Baby Lying in a Child Care Centre' had been published in the *Age* a few days before and Melbourne had erupted. The *Age* devoted a full page of 'Letters to the Editor' to the issue. Columnist Kaz Cooke was the first published, fury dripping from her normally whimsical pen. 'Where is the baby's father in Leunig's scenario? Too busy pursuing his own selfish goals? Shot through? Irrelevant to the child's development? In the casino? Completely unaccountable?' "

The thing which struck me as odd about this is not that Kaz Cooke would respond in those terms but that someone would describe her as whimsical. Whimsy, to me, has a delicacy and other-worldly quality which I certainly don't associate either with Cooke's drawings or writings. Yes, she can be very funny but her humour always has a bite and it often has a delight in absurdity. But no whimsy.

As it happened I was reading her book *Living with Crazy Buttocks* at the time I came upon Sally Loane's book, which is a collection of her columns—and buttocks, those things which grow larger and larger upon the populace like a particular kind of evolutionary preparation for the hard times ahead, do not associate very easily with the gossamer wings of whimsy.

She doesn't spare a whole range of public figures in her columns; from the Queen Mother to the Dalai Lama to local politicians—

—'I much prefer this email chain-letter puzzle sent to me from Queensland by my colleague Eulaliah Dumpling (Miss): 'Here's a moral question for you. This is an imaginary situation but it may be interesting deciding what you would do. You are in the outback, and there is a huge flood in progress. Many homes have been lost, water supplies compromised and infrastructure destroyed. Let's say you're a photographer out getting photographs for a news service, exploring alone,

looking for particularly poignant scenes. You stumble across John Howard, who has fallen out of a helicopter and is struggling to keep from being swept away in a raging river. You must choose between rescuing him or getting a Pulitzer-prize-winning photograph of the death of a prime minister. What shutter speed would you use?' '

—'So to be perfectly upfront, I don't believe in any all-seeing, all-dancing deity — not even Gough Whitlam. (In fact, *there's* somebody who might like to, oh, call me crazy, apologise his magisterial ARSE off for being such a bubble-headed booby about East Timor, but don't hold your breath. You'll go all mauvey cobalt and then you'll kind of die.')

—to Barbara Cartland in her 'flouncey frockery', looking like 'an especially elaborate toilet-roll dolly', and which *The Times* in Cartland's obituary described as 'exotically apparelled'. Cooke pokes fun at all kinds of columns and books, from current affairs to fashion, from self-help to gardening—

—'This is the time of year when you'll be wanting to spray your fruit trees. You don't want to get any spray on your clothes, so get up there in the nuddy and give the trees a good soaking. You'll get it all over yourself and breathe it in, but I usually find the pustules go down after a few months and it's never affected my mental small, brown dog, Queenie. Not since she's been dead, certainly.

'And don't neglect your lemon tree. Bludgeon any caterpillars, and wee on it constantly.'

You still think there might be some whimsy in there too? Don't take my word for it. Try her.

*

December 6: Evelyn Underhill

*

'Do you know, I live just down the hill from the cemetery in Hampstead where Evelyn Underhill is buried, and her tombstone says: 'Evelyn, daughter of Sir Somebody Somebody, wife of Somebody Underhill,' or whatever his name was, and I feel, good Lord, here was this woman who wrote seventy books on mysticism, who was regarded as a world leader in the field at the time, and on her tombstone she ends up as the daughter of her father and the wife of her husband. So there are undoubtedly ironies around one's death, terrible ironies.'

(Sister Lavinia Byrne in Mary Loudon's *Nuns Unveiled*.)

I knew we had several Evelyn Underhills in the Meeting House Library so I looked more closely this morning and found we had: *The Spiritual Life*, *The Golden Sequence*, *The Letters of Evelyn Underhill*, 2 copies of *The Life of the Spirit and the Life of To-Day*, and *An Anthology of the Love of God*. I borrowed the last one to begin with as it is excerpts from her other books—and also because I saw it had not been out for an airing since 1996.

—"It is the special function of prayer to turn the self away from the time-series and towards the eternal order; away from the apparent and towards the significant; away from succession and towards adoration and adherence. Prayer opens the door of the psyche to the invasion of another order, which shall at its full term transform the very quality of our existence."

—"To be unloving is to be out of touch with God. So the generous, cherishing Divine Love, the indiscriminate delight in others, just or unjust, must be our model too. To come down to brass tacks, God loves the horrid man at the fish shop, and the tiresome woman in the next flat, and the disappointing Vicar … and the contractor who has cut down the row of trees we loved, to build a row of revolting bungalows. God *loves*, not tolerates, these wayward, half-grown, self-centred spirits, and seeks without ceasing to draw them into His love. And the first-fruit of His indwelling presence, the first sign that we are on His side and He on ours, must be at least a tiny bud of this Charity breaking the hard and rigid outline of our life."

Curiously her first book was an amusing sequence of poems dealing with the law, called *A Bar-Lamb's Ballad-Book*, (both her father and her husband were barristers), but she then moved to writing on religion. I also found her *Letters* quite interesting and unexpectedly decisive, even critical at times; perhaps that label of mystic had led me to expect something vaguer and more

other-worldly. I thought I would just copy out her advice on meditation (16 January 1908): "Try this way.

1. Put yourself into some position so easy and natural to you that you don't *notice* your body: and shut your eyes.

2. Represent to your mind, some phrase, truth, dogma, event—e.g. a phrase of the Paternoster or *Anima Christi*, the Passion, the Nativity are the sort of things I use. Something that occurs naturally. Now, don't think about it, but keep it before you, turning it over as it were, as you might finger some precious possession.

3. Deliberately, and by an act of will, shut yourself off from your senses. Don't attend to touch or hearing: till the external world seems unreal and far away. Still holding on to your idea, turn your attention *inwards* (this is what Ruysbroeck means by introversion) and allow yourself to sink, as it were, downwards and downwards, into the profound silence and peace which is the essence of the meditative state. More you cannot do for yourself: if you get further, you will do so automatically as a consequence of the above practice, It is the "shutting off of the senses" and what Boehme calls the "stopping the wheel of the imagination and ceasing from self-thinking" that is hard at first. Anyhow, do not try these things when you are tired—it is useless: and do not give up the form of prayer that comes naturally to you: and do not be disheartened if it seems at first a barren and profitless performance. It is quite possible to obtain spiritual nourishment without being consciously aware of it!"

*

December 7: Noam Chomsky

*

Noam Chomsky is known for his linguistic work, how we might be biologically programmed for language, for sentences, and for that teasing possibility of a mother language, but he came into my life because of his firm support for East Timor. I have just been reading Ben Naparstek's interview with him in his book *In Conversation* and he says Chomsky's father came from the Ukraine and "was a respected Hebrew scholar and an expert on medieval grammar" and his mother came from Belarus and taught in a Hebrew school and he had a Trotskyite uncle with a newsstand in New York. It was a heady political milieu. "When Barcelona fell in 1939, the ten-year-old wrote an editorial for his school newspaper about the ascent of European fascism."

He has since been described, despite his background, as a 'self-hating Jew' for his criticisms of Israel—to which he replies, 'The first usage of the term is by King Ahab, who is the epitome of evil in the Bible. He condemned the prophet Elijah as a hater of Israel. Why? Because Elijah criticised the acts of the evil king. I'm certainly not insulted by being compared to the prophet Elijah.'

But I first 'met' him in a 1980 book called *The Washington Connection* (written with Edward S. Herman) and in the book was this small footnote "On the killing of the five journalists, see Jolliffe, pp. 234f. and 283f. The evidence appears persuasive that they were killed by the Indonesian forces, and then identified as "communists." See also *Dunn Report*, p. 77f. Also Dunn's testimony in the *March Hearings*. See also Hill … Martins' account was covered in the Australian press; see Graeme Beaton, "Timor deaths 'hidden'," *Australian* (29 April 1976) reporting from New York. Beaton reports that Martins, official spokesman on Timor affairs for the Indonesian government until his defection, arrived in Balibo two hours after the Australians were killed and conducted an on-the-spot investigation which, he claims, provides documentary evidence that the Australians were killed "in cold blood" and that Indonesian reports were a "cover-up." Martins alleged that he was required to sign fabricated reports almost under threat of death. See Joliffe, pp. 283f., for further details. Two U.S. representatives of the American Friends Service Committee, Russell and Irene Johnson, were informed by reliable sources in Jakarta that the journalists were killed by Indonesian commandos dispatched for the purpose."

I wrote to the Johnsons, a Unitarian couple who were by then back in Connecticut, and Russell wrote back, "My wife and I were in Jakarta in the summer of 1977. We were visiting with a

Dutchman who was a long-time resident there and active in human rights work. He had been in jail in 1975. He told us that several of his guards had left the prison and then returned and had said they were on a mission in Balibo and were involved in the killing of Australian journalists. This information came out quite incidentally in the course of our interview."

The Dutchman was human rights campaigner Haji Princen.

"Later that week we were visiting with the younger sister of a well-known student leader who introduced us to her. We found out she was serving as pastor of a small congregation (Methodist I believe) in the outskirts of Jakarta. She happened to mention that she had gone to the cemetery near the church where a family member was buried and had been surprised to see a recent grave with English names on the marker. She had inquired from her church members and as we remember it she had also heard from them that the Indonesian military had arranged that these journalists be killed to prevent film they had taken of the military action from leaving the country. Several of the church members had been suffering from psychiatric problems stemming from their roles in the killings. She took us to visit the cemetery."

The Johnsons, in an article they provided to 'Peacework' (the newsletter of the New England, USA, Peace Movement) December 1977 edition, wrote, "The most brutal treatment of journalists within the region of which we know is the killing of five young Australian reporters amd cameramen who in East Timor were covering the military action of the Indonesian government forces, termed volunteers, against an indigenous liberation group—Fretelin. Soldiers sent as "volunteers" had been briefed to shoot every foreigner they met. There was a special commando raid to recover any film shot, but the Australians had already sent some of theirs out of the country. The bodies of the journalists were burned, and a plastic bag with only a few bones in it was turned over by the government. These few remains have been buried in a remote cemetery in Jakarta. On a simple granite stone are inscribed the names and dates of birth and death of the five men with this additional statement: "No words can explain these senseless deaths." "

The Australian Government spent another twenty years claiming there were no Indonesians involved even though the CIA in its National Intelligence Daily for 18th October 1975 said "Indonesian troops attacking into Portuguese Timor have succeeded in occupying five border towns, but have bogged down in some areas after three days of fighting." The CIA based this on material provided by Australia's monitoring of Indonesian radio messages from a base outside Darwin.

I met Russell and Irene Johnson when they visited Hobart in 1986.

But my curiosity now was to see what Chomsky is saying about the current American political scene. "Not everyone opposes Barack Obama, of course, but Chomsky has his own view. 'He is dangerous,' he says flatly. 'He's a centre-right Democrat who insists that the United States is an outlaw state which must violate international law and resort to violence when it chooses.' What hope does his relentlessly cynical vision offer? Much, boasts Chomsky; in fact, he thinks the world is improving. 'If you look at history, you see very definite and significant progress towards a more civilised world. It's true of the last 40 years.' He finds cause for optimism in public opinion — if only we could overcome the deliberate failure of our democratic institutions.

"After September 11, Chomsky gained renewed popularity on the hard Left. He was virtually alone among commentators in protesting against the American military action in Afghanistan, which he termed 'silent genocide'. His pamphlet-size book of interviews, *September 11* (2001), sold hundreds of thousands of copies. Yet columnist Christopher Hitchens, formerly a champion of Chomsky, charged him with 'losing the qualities that made him a great moral and political tutor in the years of the Indochina war'. Hitchens, like many, was disturbed by Chomsky's suggestion that president Bill Clinton's 1998 bombing of the Al-Shifa pharmaceutical plant in Sudan was comparable to the September 11 attacks.

"Al-Qaeda was mistakenly believed to be using the factory to manufacture chemical weapons. One security guard was directly killed in Clinton's strike, but it's likely that tens of thousands of Sudanese died as a result of not having access to the factory's medicines. I ask how Clinton's

bombing, terrible though it was, can be likened to Al-Qaeda's deliberate attempt to kill thousands of people by driving planes into the World Trade Center? Chomsky corrects me: Clinton's strike was morally worse. He starts talking about ants — when we go strolling, we know we'll crush ants; but we don't mean to kill them, as they're not worthy of moral thought. Ditto with Sudan: 'We know we're going to kill lots of people, but we don't intend to kill them because they aren't even considered as individuals deserving of moral judgement. Okay, which is the lower level of morality?' "

Chomsky's writing style is a bit like a sledgehammer at times but I admire him because he is willing to speak out on anything, regardless of whether it makes him popular or brings him widespread criticism and hate mail. His courage is inspiring …

*

December 8: Padraic Colum

*

Padraic Colum probably would not want to be remembered through his little folk ballads. Yet that is how I first came upon his name—through his poem which provides the title for Elfrida Vipont's children's book *The Lark in the Morn* … I was about eleven at the time …

The lark in the morn,
She will rise up from her nest …

It has taken me nearly fifty years to get round to asking what else Colum wrote. In his own time he was seen as a playwright rather than a collector and writer of folk lore and poetry. But the pendulum swings. His plays now are largely forgotten. But some of his poems such as 'She Moved Through the Fair' are evergreen …

*

December 9: Joel Chandler Harris

*

"One of the first serious investigations into Gullah" (the Creole language spoken in the Sea Islands off Georgia and South Carolina) "was undertaken by Joel Chandler Harris, known for his Uncle Remus stories. Harris, born in 1848 in Eatonton, Georgia, was a painfully shy newspaperman with a pronounced stammer who grew up deeply ashamed that he was illegitimate. He became fascinated with the fables and language of former slaves during the period just after the Civil War, and recorded them with exacting diligence in stories that were first published in the *Atlanta Constitution* and later compiled into books that enjoyed a considerable popularity both during Harris's lifetime and after it. The formula was to present the stories as if they were being told by Uncle Remus to the small son of a plantation owner. Among the best known were *Nights With Uncle Remus* (1881), *The Tar Baby* (1904), and *Uncle Remus and Br'er Rabbit* (1906). All of these employed the patois spoken by mainland blacks. But Harris also produced a series of Gullah stories, based around a character called Daddy Jack. This was a considerably different dialect, though Harris thought it simpler and more direct. It had – and indeed still has – no gender and no plurals."

Bill Bryson in *Mother Tongue*.

At some stage of my childhood my mother was away in hospital and my great-aunt, Helen Cameron, came to look after us. She had never married or had children yet she was very kind and understanding in that situation. This was probably just as well as Harris's 'The Tar Baby' had recently entered my life and every time she offered to read me a story I asked for 'The Tar Baby'. She must have been heartily sick of Br'er Rabbit by the time she returned to Toowoomba.

Now I am not sure what its fascination was; perhaps the simple fact that the smaller and weaker creature had turned the tables on the larger fiercer one. But then that is the delight of fairy tales and folk tales. It doesn't matter if the protagonists are ugly, small, poor, overlooked, teased, mistreated—they nearly always come out on top. That is why they are tales … and I had the belief that fairy tales were not *written*, that seemed too prosaic a birth but rather that they came from some mysterious past replete with caves and campfires …

This morning I came upon *The Children's Uncle Remus*, a re-telling by F. H. Pritchard, which begins "Every now and then the little boy would leave his mother and run to the cabin, where lived an old darky named Uncle Remus. There he would sit and listen open-mouthed while Uncle Remus told him stories about all the animals" and includes several I hadn't read. As well as seeing the smaller weaker animals regularly turn the tables it also has this wisdom:

"But, Uncle Remus, Brer Possum didn't steal the butter," said the little boy, who was not at all pleased with this ending.

"That's what makes me say what I do, honey. In this world, many folks have to suffer for other folks' sins. It looks as if it is very wrong, but that is just the way things happen."

This could be seen as a philosophy developed out of the grim experience of slavery. But Joel Chandler Harris was white, not black, and I wondered if he wrote his stories or collected them from various sources. While I was pondering this I came upon two of his books and he devotes quite a lot of space to comparing folk tales in the hope of coming up with an original. Certainly he saw both his collecting and his writing and adapting as having a serious intention rather than being dismissed as light humour. He saw that for all its apparent wealth and comfort Southern white society was a fearful society. It had created a way of life which was akin to grasping the tiger's tail; all very well and quite safe—*so long as you never let go*.

American Literature to 1900 says of him, 'Harris also championed a spirit of reconciliation of North and South after the Civil War, suggested in his fiction by the fact that he more than once used the motif of a southern girl marrying a northern man who had fought against the South. These writings, along with the Uncle Remus tales, show Harris as perhaps the first writer to present a comprehensive view of the southern Negro "befo' the war, en durin' the war, en afterwards." '

And he continues to be 're-told' because modern children grow ever more remote from the dialect of the original stories … so here is a taste of the original in 'The Awful Fate of Mr. Wolf': "In jump Brer Wolf, down come the led, en inter de hasp went de hook, en dar Mr. Wolf wuz. Den Brer Rabbit went ter de lookin'-glass, he did, en wink at hisse'f, en den he draw'd de rockin'-cheer in front er de fier, he did, en tuck a big chaw terbarker."

"Tobacco, Uncle Remus?" asked the little boy, incredulously.

"Rabbit terbarker, honey. You know dis yer life ev'lastin' w'at Miss Sally puts 'mong de cloze in de trunk; well, dat's rabbit terbarker. Den Brer Rabbit sot dar long time, he did, turnin' his mine over en wukken his thinkin' masheen. Bimeby he got up, en sorter stir 'roun'." …

*

December 10: Algernon Blackwood (d)

*

One day I was at All Saints' Market and I bought a little paperback from one stall, Algernon Blackwood's *The Dance of Death & Other Stories* and, as I was walking past another stall, the man there said 'I see you like Algernon Blackwood. Would you like another one?' And he brought a large hardback out called *Tales of the Uncanny and Supernatural* … I wasn't sure that I *did* like Blackwood enough to want all this, I had only come on the occasional anthologised story of his and had not been gripped, but in the end I bought it and spent the next couple of weeks reading his stories.

And I think the thing about them is that there was no one story which stood out head-and-shoulders but read as a body they are interesting, imaginative, and usually well-written. He spent time in Canada as a young man and he sets several in the Canadian wilderness but except for a few with a European background all the rest are set in England. They differ from nineteenth century horror in that he is not so ready to pile on the adjectives (though people's blood does still turn to ice and their hair stand on end) and he differs from a lot of modern horror in that the stories are never of unrelieved evil. Even the worst people are usually given the opportunity for restoration or reparation. And the people caught up in the blackest mysteries often bring a natural kindness or commonsense to the situation.

He also sometimes creates attractive little pen-portraits—including this one of a cat:

"The cat he chose, now full grown, had lived with him since kittenhood, a kittenhood of perplexing sweetness and audacious mischief. Wayward it was and fanciful, ever playing its own mysterious games in the corners of the room, jumping at invisible nothings, leaping sideways into the air and falling with tiny moccasined feet on to another part of the carpet, yet with an air of dignified earnestness which showed that the performance was necessary to its own well-being, and not done merely to impress a stupid human audience. In the middle of elaborate washing it would look up, startled, as though to stare at the approach of some Invisible cocking its little head sideways and putting out a velvet pad to inspect cautiously. Then it would get absent-minded, and stare with equal intentness in another direction (just to confuse the onlookers) and suddenly go on furiously washing its body again, but in quite a new place. Except for a white patch on its breast it was coal black. And its name was – Smoke.

'Smoke' described its temperament as well as its appearance. Its movements, its individuality, its posing as a little furry mass of concealed mysteries, its elfin-like elusiveness, all combined to justify its name; and a subtle painter might have pictured it as a wisp of floating smoke, the fire below betraying itself at two points only – the glowing eyes.

All its forces ran to intelligence – secret intelligence, the wordless, incalculable intuition of the Cat. It was, indeed *the* cat for the business in hand." (from 'A Psychical Invasion')

*

December 11: Birago Diop

*

I remember, many years ago, coming across a poem by Birago Diop in a grab-bag anthology and it gave me an immediate sense of *frisson*. But I knew nothing about the poet nor about the influences and ideas underlying the poem.

Listen more to things
Than to words that are said.
The water's voice sings
And the flame cries
And the wind that brings
The woods to sighs
Is the breathing of the dead.

And repeats each day
The Covenant where it is said
That our fate is bound to the law,
And the fate of the dead who are not dead
To the spirits of breath who are stronger than they.
We are bound to life by this harsh law
And by this Covenant we are bound
To the deeds of the breathings that die
Along the bed and the banks of the river,
To the deeds of the breaths that quiver
In the rock that whines and the grasses that cry
To the deeds of the breathings that lie
In the shadow that lightens and grows deep
In the tree that shudders, in the woods that weep,
In the waters that flow and the waters that sleep,
To the spirits of breath which are stronger than they
That have taken the breath of the deathless dead
Of the dead who have never gone away
Of the dead who are not now under the ground.

It has taken me another fifteen years to actually go and look for him. The *Encyclopedia of African Literature* (ed. Simon Gikandi) says he was born in Dakar in Senegal in 1906 and his poem 'Souffle' ('Breath') was published in 1943; "With great economy, the poem captures the belief, common in African traditional societies, that the dead remain forever present among the living." He was part of that movement called Negritude and a friend of Leopold Senghor. I was also intrigued to learn, "Birago Diop has left a profound impact on African literature as perhaps the best author of folk tales."

I hope someone will get around to publishing more of his work in English …

*

December 12: Patrick O'Brian

*

Why would an Irish novelist write books about the British Navy in the time of Napoleon and Nelson I wondered. But that wasn't the right question.

Nicholai Tolstoy in *Patrick O'Brian* writes, "For much of his life Patrick O'Brian was widely reputed to be of Irish ancestry and brought up and educated in that country. In fact he was born and educated in England, possessed not a drop of Irish blood, did not visit Ireland before his early twenties, and assumed the surname O'Brian by deed poll in 1945. It was not until October 1998 that anyone, beyond a diminishing circle of close relatives and friends old enough to have known him before his transformation, became aware of the fact that this aspect of his persona represented a fiction as imaginative as anything found in his novels. In that year, however, his innocuous pretence was exposed to worldwide publicity and strangely ill-informed comment.

"Patrick's paternal ancestry was in reality German. His grandfather, Karl Russ, was born in 1842 at Braudis, near Leipzig in Saxony. According to family tradition the family had migrated some generations earlier from Eastern Europe, which may account for their surname. *Russe* being German for 'Russian'. For several generations the family had conducted business as furriers. Young Karl possessed an adventurous spirit, and after completing his apprenticeship travelled to Belgium and France, before eventually settling in Britain in 1862. After working for a number of City firms, he followed the family tradition by setting himself up as a furrier. His industry and enterprise made business so profitable that in 1874 he was able to buy a shop in the West End, at 70 New Bond Street, where the fine quality of his garments swiftly attracted the custom of the fashionable world. Four years later he was awarded a Gold Medal at the Paris Exhibition, and before long amassed a considerable fortune.

"In 1870 Karl had become a naturalised British subject, anglicising his name to Charles, and two years later married a charming twenty-two-year-old girl, Emily Callaway. He bought and furnished lavishly a large house in St John's Wood. And became a characteristic figure of solid Victorian prosperity and respectability. His wife fulfilled another familiar aspect of upper Victorian middle-class life, bearing him thirteen children during the fourteen years which followed their marriage, the last of whom sadly died five months after his birth.

"Two more died in tragic circumstances, while the eldest daughter Emily returned to Germany, where she married and settled down. In 1893, while his wife was staying with Emily to assist with the birth of her first child, Karl Russ died at the age of fifty-one. His health had been deteriorating for three years, and it became necessary to sell the business.

"The head of the family was now Patrick's father Charles, his father's eldest son, who was only seventeen at the time of the bereavement. In common with many of their more enterprising compatriots, the Russ family had by now become effortlessly absorbed into middle-class English society. There being nothing particularly Teutonic about 'Russ', it had not even been thought expedient (as with many other immigrant families) for Karl Russ or his sons to anglicise their surname. This attitude was confirmed by the family's immunity from the hysterical outburst of Germanophobia which erupted in Britain at the outset of the Great War, when patriotic citizens expressed defiance of the enemy by flinging stones at dachshunds in the streets. In February 1917,

as the British army prepared for its bloody assault at Arras, a schoolfriend presented Patrick's elder brother Victor with an instructive work entitled 'The History of the Hun'. Clearly it did not occur to either that a Russ could be anything but a patriotic Briton."

He wasn't changing his name because of anti-German feeling. He wasn't choosing a name which might be easier to remember or to say. Instead he was cutting himself off from his family and his early life. In effect he was re-inventing himself and he chose an Irish name simply because he always enjoyed his times in Ireland. Unlike Helen Demidenko and others who have swiftly been 'unmasked' he was allowed to live and write in relative peace for forty years before suddenly facing an outburst of claims that he was an imposter and had told lies about his family and his background. He came through successfully and went on writing. Perhaps there is a message there. In the final analysis it is the writing that a writer does which matters, not their personality or what they say about themselves, and thinking this I looked to see what the Glenorchy library could offer. They only had one of his novels, *The Catalans*, one of his earlier non-series books, and although it was praised on both covers and was well written I never managed to get very interested in it. Perhaps my image of Catalans got in the way. But I continued to keep an eye out and found his *Desolation Island* in an op-shop which I liked much better and which was obviously a milieu he felt more at home in …

Perhaps young writers considering a pseudonym might find something worth considering in all this. But the obvious implication I drew from it is: be like Patrick O'Brian and keep a low profile. Don't win prizes and swan around Writers' Festivals and go on talk shows. Keep to yourself and write good books and you will survive no matter what you have chosen to call yourself …

*

December 13: Laurens van der Post

*

It used to be that you would go into an op-shop and immediately be met by a Laurens van der Post; he was a prolific writer and if anyone had read anything about Africa then it was quite likely one of his books. But time goes on and his books have become rarer. The other day, though, I was in the library and one jumped out of the shelf and into my hand: *The Voice of the Thunder*. This is more the philosophical and spiritual beliefs underlying his life and explorations; a mixture of Christianity, Jungian ideas, African lore, Greek mythology, Bushmen life, the desire for solitude, and the three years he spent in a Japanese concentration camp.

A man from a different background, Viktor Frankl, also distilled his experiences in four German concentration camps into his form of psychoanalysis which he called Logotherapy. It differed from previous 'schools' in that his experiences had shown him how vital the future is to people. As he put it in *Man's Search for Meaning*: "It is a peculiarity of man that he can only live by looking to the future—*sub specie aeternitatis*." Regardless of whether people's lives had been happy or sad before they ended up behind electrified fences it was what they saw still waiting for them, wives, families, farms, careers, even more abstract things like a love of nature, which could give them the extra courage and determination which sometimes made the difference between living and dying.

And Corrie and Betsie ten Boom saw their imprisonment in Ravensbruck (where Betsie died) as a unique opportunity to bring faith and the love of God into broken despairing lives.

Laurens van der Post wrote, "It is only now that we have lost what I re-found in the Kalahari in the nineteen fifties when, for months on end, I moved through the country no 'sophisticated' man had ever set eyes on, that I realize in full what it meant and did for my own senses, brutalized by years of war. It was as if I had been in a great temple or cathedral and had a profound religious experience. I returned to the world knowing that, unless we recover our capacity for religious awareness, we will not be able to become fully human and find the self that the first man instinctively sought to serve and possess."

He has little philosophical and moral asides in all his books such as this in his 1952 book *Venture to the Interior*, "It has often occurred to me that the heavy burden of bearing and rearing children – and my mother reared thirteen – has, in a sense, been irrelevant to the deepest and most vital purpose of her life. I have never been able to believe that a woman's task in life is limited to her children. I can quite well conceive that in my mother, as with more and more women of our own day, there is an urge to creativeness which lies underneath and deeper, above and beyond the begetting of children. These women have a contract with life itself, which is not discharged by the mere procreation of their species. Men recognize and try to honour this contract in themselves as a matter of course. Their contributions to life vibrates with their passionate rebellion against the narrowly conceived idea that would restrict their role to that of protectors and feeders of women and children. They do not acknowledge and respect the same thing so readily in women. Perhaps until they do the world will not see the full creative relationship that life intends there should be between men and women."

But I thought I would also include a little piece that is far less solemn. "Two large groups of meerkats were spreading out from their ghetto basements along the edge of the pan. Already some of their sentinels were on point duty to the north and south, upright and alert, one on a termite mound, another on the rim itself and a third on top of a dead tree, his head still as on a statue of himself, while he watched a marshall eagle rising on a spiral of air dangerously near. I could never look at meerkats without a feeling of the sheer fun of being alive reborn in me, and the reaffirmed gift of their affection for one another and joy in each other's company that sets their little kibbutzes apart from all other animal congregations, quickening an awareness of the love involved in the act and deed of nature, however disguised in the ruthless aspects enforced by its commitment to survival. They were constantly pausing to see if their friends were near, or turning about just to touch someone special with a tender and caring paw. At intervals I could hear bursts of their sing-song little voices which chant good-morning and croon lullabies to one another at night and even maintain their musical quality when they warn one another at the top of their scale that some bateleur eagle or lamb-snatcher is moving close to strike."

Probably meerkats do not experience joy in quite the same way humans do but I do not doubt that the animal world does experience moments of the sheer joy of being alive …

J. D. F Jones in *Storyteller: The Many Lives of Laurens van der Post* throws doubts on a number of Post's stories, that fact and fiction are so intertwined it is not clear which is which at times, but his meerkats remain meerkats and a delight …

*

December 14: Antony Beevor

*

I sometimes wonder what motivates people to write and write about war. Is it the hope that we may take useful lessons from the past? Though no two situations are ever identical and we often seem to miss the moral anyway. Is it a perceived need to remind younger generations of past wars? But we are obviously selective when it comes to this, preferring those in which we can take the high moral ground or the winning side. Is it the larger-than-life sense of some of the characters? Hitler still fascinates two and three generations after his death. Is it the belief that earlier chroniclers have not done justice to a subject? But then what is 'justice' when it comes to working through mountains of documents and trying to choose out the most important?

I was musing on this as I read Antony Beevor's *Stalingrad*. He has made his name writing 'war books'. I found myself wondering if, in this case, it was tactics which drew him, how did the key figures decide what to do and why, or perhaps the courage displayed, often in pursuit of less-than-admirable aims. Of course other writers, such as thriller writers, spend a lifetime musing on horrors too. And readers read of horror with avidity. But a reader is not immersed in the way that Beevor undoubtedly was immersed for years in the horror of the German attempt to capture Stalingrad.

Some courage and compassion is virtually glossed over in the wider story but perhaps it is worth reading so as, at times, to be stopped by a moment in which the human spirit shines forth from the past …

"The medical services in the Red Army were seldom regarded as a high priority by commanders. A seriously wounded soldier was out of the battle, and senior officers were more concerned with replacing him. Yet this attitude did not deter the very bravest figures on the Stalingrad battlefield, who were the medical orderlies, mainly female students or high-school graduates with only the most basic first-aid training.

"The commander of 62nd Army's hundred-strong sanitary company, Zinaida Georgevna Gavrielova, was an eighteen-year-old medical student, who had received the job on the basis of a strong recommendation from the cavalry regiment in which she had just served. Her medical orderlies, few of them much older than herself, had to conquer their terror and crawl forward, often under heavy fire, to reach the wounded. They then dragged them out of the way, until it was safe to carry them on their backs. They had to be 'physically and spiritually strong', as their commander put it.

"There was no question of medical personnel being non-combatant. The beautiful Gulya Koroleva, a twenty-year-old from a well-known Moscow literary family, had left her baby son in the capital and volunteered as a nurse. Serving with the 214th Rifle Division in the 24th Army on the northern flank, she was credited with having 'brought over a hundred wounded soldiers back from the front line and killed fifteen fascists herself'. She was posthumously awarded the Order of the Red Banner. Natalya Kachnevskaya, a nurse with a Guards Rifle Regiment, formerly a theatrical student in Moscow, brought back twenty wounded soldiers in a single day and 'threw grenades at the Germans'. Stalingrad Front headquarters also singled out (posthumously) the bravery of another female orderly, Kochnevskaya, who had volunteered for the front, and carried more than twenty soldiers out of the firing line. Although wounded twice, she carried on bandaging and carrying officers and soldiers."

Despite all this heroism many of the men did not survive. Nor did most of the women.

*

December 15: Edna O'Brien

*

I have heard it said that Edna O'Brien has only one plot—innocent country girl comes to the city and finds there both liberation and corruption—but although I enjoyed *The Country Girls* I haven't read enough of her later novels to comment. Edna O'Brien left Ireland way back in 1954 for London and perhaps like other exiles her view of Ireland is always coloured by that history.

The other day I came upon her comments about the land and people she left behind which I found interesting, intriguing but a little sad. Brooke Allen reviewing her novel *In the Forest* in *The Atlantic Monthly* quotes her: ' "When anyone asks me about the Irish character, I say look at the trees," O'Brien once said. "Maimed, stark, and misshapen, but ferociously tenacious." She has used central symbols with great effectiveness in the past (in *Wild Decembers*, for instance, a smart new tractor brought to the village by a smart new man stood for everything the novel's stunted protagonist longed for and feared), and here, in *In the Forest*, she fashions a powerful metaphor for the character of one of Ireland's most blighted sons: a forbidding image of a forest that is as blighted as he. "Woodland straddling two counties and several townlands," reads the novel's opening sentence, "a drowsy corpus of green, broken only where the odd pine has struck up on its own, spindly, freakish, the stray twigs on either side branched, cruciform-wise." '

*

December 16: Jane Austen

*

Jane Austen wrote a letter to her nephew Edward, 9 July 1816, and said, "Mary Jane and I have been wet through once already to-day; we set off in the donkey-carriage for Farringdon, as I wanted to see the improvements Mr. Woolls is making, but we were obliged to turn back before we

got there, but not soon enough to avoid a pelter all the way home. We met Mr. Woolls. I talked of its being bad weather for the hay, and he returned me the comfort of its being much worse for the wheat" but she didn't give Mr Woolls a first name. I wondered if it might be Joseph Woolls who had a small farm near Greywell in Hampshire, not far from Jane's home in Chawton. Joseph was a brother to Ann Cox (Woolls), my gr-gr-gr-gr-grandmother. I liked the idea of the family being able to pass on the interesting little bit of news that Joseph had met Jane face-to-face and had a grizzle about the weather. But, curiously, I doubt if either Joseph or Ann would have been readers of novels. Joseph was a farmer. Ann was very involved in her husband's watch and fusee-chain-making business. Their father had been a hoop-shaver, a man who made the hoops that went around wooden barrels. They both had sizeable families. I don't think they would have had the leisure or the habit of reading fiction. And, so far, I have not been able to prove or disprove this curious little possibility of a meeting.

I came upon another interesting little sidelight upon Jane Austen's life. Wm Hugh Curtis wrote a family history he called *A Quaker Doctor and Naturalist in the 19th century* about an ancestor called William Curtis. William Curtis was Jane Austen's doctor. There were three generations of the Curtis family living in Alton when Jane lived a mile away at Chawton. Father James, son William, grandson William, (and lots of others); it was the son William who was Jane's doctor and the grandson William who made his mark as an 'ardent naturalist' eventually creating a small museum of natural history in the town. William Hugh Curtis writes, "His father, whose profession he followed and whom he afterwards joined as partner, will be remembered chiefly because Jane Austen was one of his patients and she may, when writing *Emma* at Chawton, have had him in mind when she created 'Mr Perry'." (William called a daughter Emma but it was too common a name in that era to read anything into that.) "He also was born at this small market town of Alton and, like his contemporaries, Gilbert White and William Cobbett, loved this countryside."

The book is interesting chiefly as a portrait of a way of life in a small Hampshire village in the 19th century, of a large, united, and happy family, and for their shared love of collecting and studying all sorts of things, rocks, fossils, birds, wildflowers, the habits of the local flora and fauna. Their lives are relatively undramatic, the regular excitements seem to have been overturned carriages and runaway horses, but they don't appear to have hankered for lives of greater sophistication or drama. The sadness for a modern reader is perhaps that William Curtis didn't know what was wrong with Jane, he could only use the time-honoured alleviations (and in the early 19th century this still included leeches and suchlike), and he could do nothing to prolong her life and allow her to finish *Sanditon* or any other stories she may have had in mind. Now, it is suggested that Jane Austen died from Addison's Disease (an illness not recognised then) though this is only an educated guess going by her recorded symptoms.

But William Curtis does suggest a man who would've done his very best for her. His failure had more to do with the state of medicine at the time and the lack of understanding of a potentially fatal condition. Deirdre Le Faye in *Jane Austen* writes, "One of the periods of remission occurred in the New Year of 1817 and Jane felt well enough to start *Sanditon*, but her ailment soon reappeared and a few weeks later a more severe attack of fever caused her to cease composition for ever. The local apothecary, Mr Curtis of Alton, admitted his inability to help her further, and the family decided that Jane should go to Winchester to consult the much-respected Mr Lyford of the County Hospital there."

In fact William Curtis was a doctor, not an apothecary, he had trained at Guy's and St Thomas' hospitals in London, but Quakers were then barred from university so he could not gain a degree.

"A sad little party – Cassandra and Jane, in a carriage lent by James, and with Henry and Edward's undergraduate son William riding beside – arrived at No 8 College Street, Winchester, on the rainy afternoon of 24 May. Jane wrote to James Edward in a tone of resolute and wryly humourous optimism: 'Our lodgings are very comfortable. We have a neat little Drawing room with

a Bow-window overlooking Dr Gabell's garden … Mr Lyford says he will cure me, & if he fails I shall draw up a Memorial and lay it before the Dean & Chapter, & have no doubt of redress from that Pious, Learned, and Disinterested Body'. Privately, however, Mr Lyford told the family that his patient's case was desperate and that Jane could not survive much longer. She lingered a few more weeks, cheerful to the last, but the final crisis occurred on the evening of 17 July, as Cassandra later wrote to Fanny Knight: 'She felt herself to be dying about half an hour before she became tranquil and apparently unconscious. … she said she could not tell us what she sufferd, tho' she complained of little fixed pain. When I asked her if there was any thing she wanted, her answer was she wanted nothing but death & some of her words were "God grant me patience, Pray for me oh Pray for me.'" She died peacefully in Cassandra's arms in the dawn hours of 18 July 1817."

*

December 17: Bernard Spilsbury (d)

*

'Nor is our own profession proof against the cumulative weight of doubt and pain that leads to self-murder. The renowned British forensic pathologist, Sir Bernard Spilsbury (1877 – 1947), took his own life after careful forethought. Having suffered several strokes, keenly aware that his mental acuity was impaired and that his professional usefulness was nearly at an end, Spilsbury made a significant gesture. He requisitioned only a hundred autopsy forms, instead of his usual five hundred. Day by day, the dead passed through his office, each case ticking off his self-allotted time. When the hundredth form was filled out, Spilsbury dined at his club, returned to his laboratory and gassed himself by placing his head in an oven.'

Dead Men Do Tell Tales by William R. Maples and Michael Browning.

Ewen Montagu in *The Man Who Never Was* tells of the Allied deception whereby a man supposedly from a downed aircraft would wash up on a Spanish shore with documents carefully written to mislead the Germans into believing the Allies were planning a major landing on Sardinia rather than Sicily in WW2. But first they had to get a suitable body. "My thoughts at once turned to Sir Bernard Spilsbury. No one had more experience of pathology than he had, and I felt that no better security risk existed: one could be certain that he at any rate would not gossip or even pass what I said to him on "in confidence to someone whom he could trust." In this respect, there had never been any difference between Sir Bernard and an oyster. And he had one even rarer quality: I felt sure that he would not ask any questions other than those needed for the solution of the problem put to him: *he* would just take the fact that we wanted the Germans and Spaniards to accept a floating body as that of a victim of an aircraft disaster, and would neither ask me why nor seek to find an answer elsewhere.

"So I rang up Sir Bernard and we arranged a meeting at his club, the Junior Carlton. There, over a glass of sherry, I put our problem to him. After a moment or two of thought, he gave me one of those concise, yet complete, expositions that had convinced so many juries—and even so many judges. His advice gave me hope. If the body was floating in a "Mae West" when it was recovered, we could use one of a man who had either drowned or died from any but a few of the "natural causes"; victims of an aircraft disaster at sea sometimes died from an injury received in the crash, and some died from drowning, but many died from exposure or even from shock; our field of search was less narrow than I had feared it might be.

"My opinion of Sir Bernard was fully justified; that extraordinary man listened to my questions and gave me his answers without ever for a moment giving vent to the curiosity which he must have felt. He asked me some questions which bore on the pathological problem that I was putting to him, but never once did he ask why I wanted to know or what I was proposing to do."

Browne and Tullett wrote in their biography *Bernard Spilsbury: His Life and Cases* "When, in later years, for the purposes of the text-book he was going to write, but never did, he began to summarize selected cases on filing-cards, he preserved three from these first twelve months. They

deal with a death from pulmonary embolism after an operation for acute appendicitis, and two suicides, one by poison and the second by a leap from a window after the victim had stabbed himself. If Spilsbury also preserved all his life that first notebook it was not from sentiment. He threw few of these fuller records away. In the end they contained the details of 25,000 post-mortems."

*

December 18: *The Warsaw Voice*

*

While I was clearing out some old papers I came upon a newspaper a Polish friend had sent me years ago, *The Warsaw Voice*, for 18 December 1988. I was curious to see what they had seen as news then. The earthquake in Armenia. Cocaine. Problems in the health system. A survey of attitudes on Euthanasia. 'An End to the Arms Race?' But the editorial dealt with Poland's car making industry. "As a medium-sized European country, Poland has always believed she should produce cars, and not just remain content with importing them like Hungary, Switzerland, or the Benelux countries. The traditions of car making in Poland date to the prewar period when Fiats were produced in a Polish factory. After the war, the Polish car industry had its ups and downs. The Russian Pobyeda was succeeded by its Polish offspring, the Warszawa; there was also the local speciality, the Syrena, and a droll contraption, the Mikrus. These achievements were accompanied by much greater ambitions which could have catapulted the Polish car industry into the posh European car exhibitions, but which were never realized, for various reasons. Finally, Poland again ended up with the Turin-based Fiat who sold the licence, and imbued the Poles with hopes for mass car ownership. The result fell far short of expectations: production was insufficient, spare parts were scarce, as were service and petrol stations, and petrol prices were too high, possibly among the highest in the world (a litre of unrationed petrol now costs 300 zlotys, which means an average monthly wage in the most profitable branches of economy will buy 200 litres). Despite all these miserable shadows, the Poles do not seem to crave cars less, their number on Polish roads is on the rise, and the makes one sees, when confronted with the affluence of the Polish wallet, generates the suspicion that supernatural forces are at play."

And then there was a respectable book section including this: "A true publishing sensation throughout Europe has been *Children of the Arbat* by Anatoly Rybakov. In the Soviet Union itself, the novel was received with interest, though its lack of literary values was criticized. It is more of a reporter's account of events that took place in the 1930s. The legendary *Kolyma Stories* by Varlam Shalamov, regarded as a forerunner of labour camp literature, were received with enthusiasm (although they were also published in an abridged version). Alexander Solzhenitsyn wrote in the introduction to *The Gulag Archipelago* that Shalamov was his teacher and model. Other works by Shalamov are also to be brought out."

And this to cheer you up. "The Polish condom industry, which always faithfully adhered to the policy of one size fits all, tended to have difficulties catching up with demand. A story often told by seasoned diplomats, recalls the early days of socialist integration, when in the 1950s China ordered a large shipment of condoms from Poland. However, due to one of those perennial industrial bottlenecks, the Poles couldn't deliver and instead, sent the following telegram to their China-based commercial agent: "Temporarily out of condoms. Offer them a substitute article: galoshes." "

*

December 19: John Lang

*

John Lang holds a special place in Australian literature and yet it is hard to define it. His book *The Forger's Wife* is sometimes called the first Australian novel or the first Australian mystery but as he claimed to be writing of true events it could be argued that he was the popular historian of his day. He wasn't Australia's first writer. Other men had preceded him in the keeping of diaries, the writing of letters and reports, the sending of articles to newspapers, the writing of thinly disguised

fact as fiction, the writing of plays and short stories. It might be better argued that he was a storyteller in a tradition which had existed in Australia for thousands of years but to which he brought a European attitude and a European sentimentality. His stories might, in previous generations, have been told around the fire and enjoyed for their mix of real people known to the listeners, strange events, remembered conversations, little twists and turns. It is this quality which defines Lang's writing, the sense that he had talked over the stories before trying to commit them to paper, and which finds an echo in other early Australian writing.

But *The Forger's Wife* was written after he'd left Australia for England and India. Its Australianness lies in its setting, its knowledge of Sydney and the convict system, (Lang was a second-generation Australian with convicts in his pedigree), and its use of real people and real events. Nancy Keesing and others obviously enjoy the detective game of teasing out these connections. I read it as a novel and it has its interest. But its characters, particularly Emily Orford in her willful blindness which brings her to Australia when her husband is transported and continues to trumpet his innocence no matter what he does, are rather tedious and the structure fails Lang towards the end. Perhaps because Lang is ambivalent about his characters and his own memories of Australia and the confused place he found for himself in Sydney society.

When he died in 1864 the *Madras Times* said of him, "It is sad to think of the later events of Mr John Lang's life; he fell into the worst of habits and is a melancholy example of wasted talents and degraded abilities. Humanly speaking Mr Lang might have lived many years an ornament to the society in which he might have shone as a literary man, but he chose otherwise. We have little to say of him which would adorn a tale." Perhaps Lang, that brash hard-drinking currency lad, had no real wish to be an ornament to society.

*

December 20: John Fletcher (bap)

*

John Fletcher collaborated with Shakespeare on at least one play but his more famous collaboration was with a younger playwright, Francis Beaumont. Fletcher's father was a clergyman who eventually rose through the ranks to become Bishop of London. Just how this ambitious cleric felt about his son's long involvement with the rackety world of the theatre does not seem to have been recorded. Beaumont only spent four or five years writing plays before moving on but Fletcher seems to have retained a lifelong, if rather tongue-in-cheek, love of the theatre and he stretches from the last years of the Elizabethan theatre up to the time of Cromwell. This makes him an important figure in the changing face of the theatre and he was one of those influences for change.

The most famous play he and Beaumont wrote is probably *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*, an intriguing title, but not enough to carry the play to success in its first production. It isn't hard to see why. Theatregoers had been fed a constant diet of the foibles of kings and queens, lost princes, castaway dukes, exotic continental adulteries and deaths of rich merchants—and now they were being asked to enjoy a play set in more modest surroundings in London among more modestly situated people and with a laconic everyday kind of humour. Not surprisingly their first response was disappointment.

But *The Knight of the Burning Pestle* is a very funny play and it can be seen as a forerunner of plays where the comedy is in the absurdity of the dialogue and the plot rather than the absurdity of the situation such as with Sir John Falstaff or Sir Toby Belcher. Beaumont and Fletcher set the scene immediately when there is the suggestion of calling the play "The London Merchant" or "The Grocer's Honour". The Citizen's Wife, a down-to-earth woman who has her troubles "Fie, this stinking tobacco kills me! would there were none in England!—Now, I pray, gentlemen, what good does this stinking tobacco do you? nothing, I warrant you: make chimneys o' your faces!", but she calls up to the men discussing their possible play with "Let him kill a lion with a pestle, husband! let him kill a lion with a pestle!" The trouble is—the only lion around is the Red Lion tavern and as their apprentice Ralph says he is yet to read of a "grocer-errant".

Their development of a fantastical play based on the conventions of chivalry is at times very amusing. Ralph says, "I will be the said knight.—Have you heard of any that hath wandered unfurnished of his squire and dwarf? My elder prentice Tim shall be my trusty squire, and little George my dwarf. Hence, my blue apron! Yet, in remembrance of my former trade, upon my shield shall be portrayed a Burning Pestle, and I will be called the Knight of the Burning Pestle." Women are to be called "fair lady" or "distressed damsel", forests and heaths "deserts" and horses are to become "palfreys". But no matter how farcical the situations and ideals the Wife regularly brings things back to earth, saying after kissing the little Messenger "Faith, the child hath a sweet breath, George; but I think it is troubled with the worms; carduus benedictus and mare's milk were the only thing in the world for't." And she finishes up this delightful farce by inviting everyone home for a pipe and a bottle of wine.

*

December 21: Frank Moorhouse

*

"The creation of the League of Nations, in 1919, as the first modern instrument for global mediation, could not have occurred without that aroused popular instinct for self-preservation.

"That this new challenge to governmental concepts of national power was not sufficiently resilient or sustained to achieve any proper realization of its hopes does not alter its significance. A rational collective impulse is not, in the human story, so commonplace that it can be dismissed as incidental. Much sincerity was expended in the inauguration of the League; but that sincerity did not, among the League's supporters, take dynamic or durable form; while, on the part of governments, it was never conspicuous, and soon gave way to bad faith. More fundamentally, the creation of a large organization, in seeming emulation of a parliament, was never deeply questioned as a response to the world's need. It is the impulse of our century, with its nearly religious belief in magnitude, to fling an institution into every void. But the vacuum in the management of modern nations derived, at the time of the League's founding, not from a lack of bureaucratic machinery, but from the absence of greatness, and even of judgment, in public men—whose folly had been evidenced in the relentless continuance of a calamitous and unnecessary war. Favourable change could have come about only through an infusion of intelligence, magnanimity, and active imagination into places of power, and by a demand for concentration rather than mere expansion. Instead of a vast enterprise installed in labyrinthine offices and grandiose council chambers, stifled by procedural entanglements and weighed down with numbers, there could have been proposed a smaller organism where ability, with its immeasurable powers, might be directed toward the alleviation of humanity's distress. The ponderous unwieldiness of the League contrasted tragically with the ruthless velocity of events between the wars, encouraging the moral dereliction of its member governments, the timidity of its leading officials, and the dispersal of its authority into bureaucratic gestures; and playing a capital part in the predetermined failure of this first venture into organized internationalism."

Shirley Hazzard in *Countenance of Truth*.

*

Frank Moorhouse's decision to set a series of novels in the League's 'labyrinthine offices and grandiose council chambers' in Switzerland seemed to me a brave move. After all, how many novels are set in the UN buildings? There is a feeling that earnest bureaucrats do not make good fictional characters. Yet the shenanigans at the IMF are a reminder that bureaucrats are as full of foibles as anyone else. Moorhouse sends a young Australian woman, Edith Campbell Berry, to Geneva and creates a life for her there. But his writing, to my mind, is a little too 'careful'. She and her milieu never quite seem to come alive. Yet his books in a rather sparse field are probably the best things in it if this era interests you and you want storytelling not reportage or hope …

*

"The hopes which so many men and women of good will once rested in the League of Nations have been disappointed. The failure of the League of Nations to secure the pacification of the world

is due in part to historical accident, but mainly to the fact that it was based on entirely wrong principles. The historical accident which stultified the League's ability to do good was the refusal of the Americans to join it and the exclusion for many years of the 'enemy powers' and Russia. But even if America, Germany and Russia had all been original members, it is still as certain as any contingency can be that the League would not have produced the good results expected of it. The League admits to membership any community, however small, which possesses an army of its own. No community, however large, which does not possess an army is eligible. In practice and by implication the League defines a nation as 'a society organized for war.' And effectively this is the only definition of a nation that applies to all the existing members of the class. Every other definition, in terms of race, of colour, of language, of culture and even of simple topography, is proved to be inadequate by the existence of exceptions. Formally and in fact, the League of Nations is a league of societies organized for war."

Aldous Huxley in *Ends and Means*. (1938)

*

December 22: Arthur Train (d)

*

"On June 7, 1919, a long, lean Yankee lawyer who smoked poisonous cheroots and fought his hardest battles for the clients who paid him least made his first appearance in the *Post's* pages. Twenty-five years and eighty-three "Tutt and Mr. Tutt" stories later, he reached the end of his recorded career. During that time Ephraim Tutt, Esq., was undoubtedly the best-known lawyer in America; *Who's Who* wrote to ask for his biography, and his words were quoted in courtrooms all the way up to the Supreme Court in Washington. Thousands of his admirers simply refused to believe that he did not exist; when author Train wrote a *Post* article to prove it (February 26, 1944) one indignant reader replied, "The fact is, Mr. Tutt invented Train." There was some substance to this claim. Train had some of the same characteristics as Mr. Tutt, thought like him, and to some extent lived like him. He was an assistant district attorney of New York from 1901 to 1908 and remained an active lawyer until 1923. As early as 1905 he began writing stories and articles for the *Post* and continued to do so until just before his death in 1945. Nor did he confine himself to the adventures of Mr. Tutt. In 1914 he wrote a remarkable *Post* serial (*The Man Who Rocked the Earth*) which predicted that World War I would end through the explosion of an atomic bomb. He was one war too soon with that idea."

The Saturday Evening Post Treasury.

It was only with Arthur Train's death and the sudden cessation of his stories that people had to face the simple fact that his character was *not* him but depended on him for 'life' …

*

December 23: Nina Christesen

*

Nina Christesen wrote in *The Half-Open Door* (edited by Patricia Grimshaw and Lynne Strahan): "During the Depression most immigrants fared particularly badly. I shall never forget the crowds of unemployed in front of the Trades Hall in Brisbane, waiting in the dust and the blazing sun for an official to come out of the building and cry: 'Fitter wanted in Ipswich', 'fencer for Cunnamulla', or 'carpenter for Goondiwindi'. Strange words indeed to migrants' ears! Dozens of hands would be raised but only one man would be selected — it seemed at random. There was always a waiting crowd at the wharves, too. Unprotected from sun or rain, the men would wait for hours and hours — often indeed for days, weeks, months. Only now and then would a casual wharfie be 'picked up' by a foreman.

Although the competition for jobs was fierce I do not remember any antagonisms toward unemployed migrants on such occasions, but they frequently missed chances through failing to understand the rapidly shouted calls for jobs. Antagonisms arose only out of situations where migrants unwittingly tried to cut across union barriers. Unaware of the long and painful struggles to achieve reasonable working conditions and of the necessity for collective action, many migrants did

not hesitate to offer their services for work that came under union bans. They had no idea of the emotive force behind the term 'scab', thinking it was 'just another Australian obscenity'.

Among the scandals of the Depression period were the fortunes made by certain employers of immigrant labour: employees would agree to sign receipts for full award wages when in fact they received a third or even less of the correct amount. One of our friends, a fully qualified medical practitioner, worked in a furniture factory on such terms.

What was most harrowing about looking for work in those days was the futility of the pursuit. When a vacancy was announced hundreds of people would rush to apply. Sometimes one heard a rumour that a certain person was in a position to help. You fought your way through a barrier of secretaries until you faced the man. Usually he would say that, unfortunately, they had no vacancies at all, but sometimes a kind-hearted person would invite you to call again or direct you elsewhere or even write a personal note of introduction. But it only prolonged the agony.

On the whole migrant women were more fortunate than men during the Depression in that they could always find some employment, however menial — and for wages that were, of course, smaller than men's. This situation was extremely humiliating for the men, particularly as most of them came from patriarchal rather than matriarchal cultural backgrounds. The men grew despondent and pessimistic about their future in Australia. Dreaming of the downfall of the Soviet régime, they gathered together mainly around the Russian Orthodox Church; and they also formed various political circles and clubs, growing suspicious of each other, fearing Communist infiltration, blaming each other for deviations from the true paths of political salvation."

And Wendy Lowenstein in *Weevils in the Flour: An oral record of the 1930s depression in Australia*, wrote: "Migrants were specially vulnerable. Most often they had no family or friends to call on for help, many single men had not even a place where they could receive letters. The number of British migrants on the track was very noticeable. Italians and other South Europeans were widely resented, castigated as being willing to work 'for the smell of an oily rag'."

*

December 24: Mary Higgins Clark

*

I have come upon various bits of advice when it comes to writing thrillers; no doubt very good advice. For instance Pie Corbett in *Write Your Own Thriller* says all thrillers must have one essential ingredient: a hint of violence. Jerry Palmer in *Thrillers* stresses the aloneness of both hero and villain. They are part of something bigger but essentially they are like the two gunfighters facing off. And André Jute in *Writing a Thriller* reminds writers that readers are constantly becoming more sophisticated; the kind of psychologically unrealistic enemies James Bond faced are less acceptable now. But do thriller writers follow rules and routines? The other day I was reading Mary Higgins Clark's *Second Time Around* and I found myself debating this point.

Every so often I read a thriller for the sake of the drama involved. Yet I wouldn't want a steady diet of thrillers. They have problems which despite a greater sophistication are, I think, inherent in the genre. They get straight into the story so neither the setting nor the main character has much time to come alive. The main character is more frequently now that vulnerable 'alone against the world' which can have the feeling of deliberately upping the emotional stakes. But perhaps my main problem is that feeling of manipulation. Thrillers need a cliff-hanger ending—ergo: every thriller writer gives you a cliff-hanger ending. One or two cliff-hanger endings may be exciting. An endless queue of cliff-hanger endings starts to make me feel I am being manipulated by an artificial way of looking at life. And death. I mustn't forget death. I think this is why I prefer mysteries to thrillers although I know there is quite a lot of overlap. The mystery genre has certain traditions and certain expectations—but it also provides opportunities to push the boundaries this way and that way. It can end with Hercule Poirot quietly expounding his methods or with a bomb or a high-speed car chase. It can have the police getting praised or blamed. It can even occasionally

have the malefactor seeming to get away with it. It can end with 'pistols for two in the library' or Perry Mason doing a dazzling court room saving of the innocent …

Mary Higgins Clark in her memoir, *Kitchen Privileges*, reminds readers of the perennials in successful writing: live a full life to gain lots of material to draw on (she was for a while a Pan Am stewardess); keep those key questions 'Suppose', 'What if' and 'Why', in mind; any kind of writing is good practice whether it is short stories, radio scripts, history, fillers, anything at all; and perhaps most importantly unless you are writing solely to put food on the table: write what you most enjoy reading. She puts it: "I looked at my bookshelves and realized that, from the time I was six years old, I'd loved to read suspense. The Judy Bolton and Nancy Drew series, then Agatha Christie, Josephine Tey, Ngaio Marsh, Charlotte Armstrong, Mignon G. Eberhart, Rex Stout, John D. MacDonald—the list went on and on.

"More than that, from the time I'd been little, I'd always tried to keep up with the author. Suspense writing is not unlike the Hansel and Gretel story. One of the versions of that fable is that Hansel dropped smooth stones and Gretel dropped breadcrumbs. The birds ate the breadcrumbs. The mystery/suspense writer is dropping both smooth stones and breadcrumbs. The smooth stones are ambiguous statements, never cheating the reader, but sometimes leading them astray. The breadcrumbs are the real clues to the perpetrator of the crime and the solution of the plot.

"I was good at picking up the real clues. I knew why the authors such as the ones I just listed wrote such satisfying mysteries, while other books fell flat at the end. I reasoned that I liked mystery/suspense; I understood it; the first two short stories I sold, "Stowaway" and "Milk Run," were suspense stories. I was going to give the suspense field a try."

*****

December 25: Christmas

*

Books about Christmas are everywhere. I pondered on what might best fit. Christmas recipes. Christmas traditions. Christmas carols. Christmas stories. And while I was pondering I came upon a small book of a sermon called *Let's Keep Christmas* by Peter Marshall. He is better known, second hand, through his wife's biography *A Man Called Peter*. And she introduces this little book, "Soon after Peter Marshall came to the United States, he had an experience which he never forgot. What man *can* forget the moments when life is lifted above the ordinary and the splendour of God shines into human hearts?

"It happened on Christmas Eve. New-found friends had opened their hearts and their home to the immigrant boy from Scotland. Joyously, Peter had helped decorate a fragrant spruce tree. Then he had sat on a kitchen stool and carefully cut out cookies, decorating them with cherries and nuts.

"Later there had been a family sing around the piano—"Silent Night, Holy Night," "God Rest Ye, Merry Gentlemen," "The Holly and the Ivy," and "O Little Town of Bethlehem." As they sang, into the little house there came the unmistakable feeling of a Presence. Everyone felt it. It was something more than just the spirit of Christmas, that spirit of expectancy which warms the heart and melts into nothingness the arid practicability of other days. It was as if Christ Himself had entered that home and quietly joined the family circle.

"Finally Peter said, "I must go …. I've a long drive ahead." The look on his face clearly revealed his reluctance to leave.

"If you must go," his host said, "I have just one request to make of you. Would you have a little prayer with us before you leave?"

"So, as the family stood around the open fire, the voice with the pleasant Scottish burr had crowned a perfect evening with a prayer of gratitude that the Christ child had come into the world.

"Later, as Peter drove steadily through the clear moonlight night toward Birmingham, his thoughts were with his friends in the little white house. Friendship was there—and love; joy and oneness and good will—and God. For that family the angels' prophecy had come true. For them, there was indeed "on earth peace, good will toward men."

"And for other families too, who lived along the white ribbon of a road, the prophecy had become fact. Frosty stars seemed to lean close over the rooftops of little homes. Lights streamed from the windows. Gay Christmas lights twinkled on lawns. Once, as Peter drove along, he heard children carolling. From an open doorway came snatches of laughter. These people, too, were caught up in the all-pervading spirit of Christmas.

"Suddenly, Peter was filled with a great wistfulness. It brought tears to his eyes. Even then, in other parts of the world, there was anything but music and laughter—only strikes and bread lines, hunger marches, rebellion, and bloodshed.

"The thought in Peter's mind became a prayer on his lips … "Oh, God, why can't more people, all of us, open our hearts to the wonderful spirit abroad in the world tonight—not just on Christmas, but on every day? What a happy place this old earth *could* be if—oh, God, if only we would keep Christmas the whole year through."

Many of the things he wants to keep, decorated trees, open fires, stockings hung up for Santa, snow, Christmas pudding, carols, do not seem to be vital, are impossible to acquire, or place a burden on particular people. Sometimes it conjures up a sense of comfortably off people. Not everyone can afford a piano to sing carols around. And the message of Christmas should not need any trappings at all.

Early Quakers did not celebrate Christmas or Advent or Lent or Easter or any other specific day. Their belief was that every day was a gift from God, a special day, but this always has the danger that the 'ordinariness' of the days will create a sense of loss rather of gain. No Christmas—and our Thursdays appear much like everybody else's Thursdays. To make every day special is something many of us find beyond us …

But it is an attractive little book and though first published in 1955 it still has wisdom in it.

"We all feel the pressure of approaching Christmas.
The traffic is terrible.
You can't find a parking space …
The stores are crowded …
Mob scenes make shopping a nightmare.
You are thinking about presents—wondering what in the world you can get for so-and-so.
You think of friends and loved ones who are so hard to shop for.
You can't think of anything they need (which is rather strange when you take time to think of it).
Maybe there is nothing in a store that they need.
But what about some token of love—what about love itself …
and friendship …
and understanding …
and consideration …
and a helping hand …
and a smile …
and a prayer?
You can't buy these things in any store, and these are the very things people need.
We all need them … Blessed will they be who receive them this Christmas or at any time.
Let's not permit the crowds and the rush to crowd Christmas out of our hearts …
for that is where it belongs.
Christmas is not in the stores—
but in the hearts of people."

*

December 26: Thomas Gray

*

Cornelia Otis Skinner and Emily Kimbrough wrote in *Our hearts were young and gay* of visiting the churchyard at Stoke Poges. "We visited the cemetery at Stoke Poges and took snapshots

of each other sitting with gingerly reverence on the tombstone of Thomas Gray." It *is* odd to think that one poem can bring thousands of people to an obscure country churchyard. Gray's 'Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard' is a very *quiet* poem and I very much doubt if most of us could even make a stab at more than the first two verses—

The curfew tolls the knell of parting day,
The lowing herd wind slowly o'er the lea,
The ploughman homeward plods his weary way,
And leaves the world to darkness and to me.

Now fades the glimmering landscape on the sight,
And all the air a solemn stillness holds,
Save where the beetle wheels his droning flight,
And drowsy tinklings lull the distant folds:

—yet I can see its attractions, and more so in an era where poetry contained a level of bombast which has now, thankfully, faded (it was written in 1742); to read of ordinary people doing ordinary things in a time when poets were more likely to be writing of kings and prime ministers, of wars and crusades, of armadas and wrecks, of courtiers and courtesans …

But what of the man behind the poem? Thomas Gray was buried in the churchyard at Stoke Poges but did he live and work in the village too? The answer is no. He spent much of his life in Cambridge. The only one of twelve children to survive, his mother worked as a milliner to get him an education, and he began by writing verse in Latin. In 1751 his Elegy was published and became immensely popular. He also wrote the famous line 'where ignorance is bliss, 'Tis folly to be wise' but it didn't prevent him dying in relative obscurity … perhaps not least because his personality was as quiet and retiring as his poem …

*

December 27: Johannes Kepler

*

Did you know that the astronomer Kepler, born 1571, probably wrote the world's first science fiction story? Of course many stories had been written or told before then which we would now see as fiction and which featured moon and stars. And many bits of speculation wandered around. But Kepler deliberately chose, as a young man at the University of Tübingen in Germany, to write a fantasy. He pondered it on and off for many years between more serious scientific work. The book was written in Latin and called *Somnium sive Astronomia Lunaris* (Dream or Astronomy of the Moon) in which a boy called Duracotus goes from Volva (Earth) to Lavinia (the Moon). His mother Fiolxhilda is said to be a witch who can summon up a demon to get him to the Moon. The demon puts him to sleep, puts moistened sponges in his nostrils, curls him up, pulls him too close to the Moon and lets him go. He falls gently to the surface. He gives the moon plants and animals and calls the two hemispheres Sublova and Prilova and calls the beings the boy meets Prilovians. It is only a dream the boy has but its interest, apart from its famous author, lies in the presentation of the way the Moon was then seen. The lifeless and barren place pitted with craters came much later.

And I was curious about that mother witch—because his own mother was accused of witchcraft and might have gone to a horrible death at the stake if he had not intervened.

*

December 28: St John Ervine

*

Agatha Christie in *Curtain*, *Poirot's Last Case*, has Poirot write, 'It was amazing. But it was not new. There *were* parallels. And here comes in the first of the "clues" I left you. The play of *Othello*. For there, magnificently delineated, we have the original X. Iago is the perfect murderer. The deaths of Desdemona, of Cassio — indeed of Othello himself — are all Iago's crimes, planned by him, carried out by him. And *he* remains outside the circle, untouched by suspicion — or could have done so. For your great Shakespeare, my friend, had to deal with the dilemma that his own art

had brought about. To unmask Iago he had to resort to the clumsiest of devices — the handkerchief — a piece of work not at all in keeping with Iago's general technique and a blunder of which one feels certain he would not have been guilty.

'Yes, there is there the perfection of the art of murder. Not even a word of *direct* suggestion. He is always holding back others from violence, refuting with horror suspicions that have not been entertained until he mentions them.

'And the same technique is seen in the brilliant third act of *John Fergueson*, where the "half-witted" Clutie John induces others to kill the man that he himself hates. It is a wonderful piece of psychological suggestion.'

I had not heard of this play *John Ferguson* by St John Ervine and I felt curious enough to go looking for it and its author.

Ervine was an Irish writer, manager of the Abbey Theatre in 1915-16 who wanted a broader range of plays produced, who sacked all the company, then resigned over the Easter Rising. But in that short time he produced *John Ferguson*, "probably his finest play". In it "Old John Ferguson, an invalided Ulster farmer, is deeply religious, finding consolation in the Bible when his life seems in ruins." A neighbour, Henry Witherow, wants to foreclose the mortgage on his farm. He has two ideas, send to his brother in America for money or urge his daughter Hannah to marry a well-to-do grocer James Caesar whom she finds repugnant. Hannah claims Witherow has raped her and Caesar promises revenge. "Despite Ferguson's admonitions about Christian forgiveness, Hannah's brother Andrew, aware that Caesar is too cowardly to do anything, leaves with his gun." Next day Witherow is found shot dead. Caesar has been heard to declare vengeance and is arrested. But Andrew eventually comes forward and admits that he was the one who shot Witherow.

The Oxford Dictionary of Plays by Michael Patterson sums it up, "*John Ferguson* has undeniably melodramatic moments, but its image of unmoving Presbyterian faith remains powerful."

But whatever clues the play may hold they wash over Hastings' head. "I read the third act of *John Fergueson* carefully through. A most admirable and thrilling scene where the 'wanting' Clutie John sits and talks, and which ends with the younger Fergueson going out to seek for the man who has wronged his sister. Masterly character drawing — but I could hardly think that Poirot had left them to improve my taste in literature!"

*

December 29: Thomas a'Becket (d)

*

Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury in the time of Henry II, has come down to us as a saintly figure concerned only for royal depredations on his beloved church. For instance, the other day I found a Catholic Missal on a stall and was browsing in it. It had this to say of Becket: 'St Thomas à Beckett, Archbishop of Canterbury, is the Martyr of the liberties of the Church, in the XIIth century. Henry II, king of England, wished him to sanction customs contrary to the liberties of the Church. St. Thomas knew that to make this divine society subservient to the secular power, would be to violate her very constitution, and therefore as Bishop he would willingly suffer death in defence of the Church of Christ. He was slain in his cathedral by the king's soldiers on December 29th. 1170.'

Becket was a very worldly prelate, greedy and self-indulgent, until Henry II promoted him. Henry probably thought he understood very well the man he was promoting. But Becket changed from that man who indulged himself to one who scourged himself. When he was murdered it was found he was wearing a hair shirt and drawers, all crawling with fleas; his own life had become one of dramatic simplicity and rigour. This does not seem to have endeared him to Henry; nor did it particularly endear him to the Pope. It was rather his loyalty to Rome at a time when there were two rival popes, one in Avignon and one in Rome, which mattered. When Rome was victorious in this particular struggle those who had chosen unwisely …

Mary Holtby in a tongue-in-cheek poem in E. O. Parrott's *How to Become Absurdly Well-informed about the Famous and Infamous* writes:

It seems that folk in former ages
Felt moved to go on pilgrimages;
The cured were least inclined to duck it;
Their goal – where Becket kicked the bucket.
His shrine brought spiritual profit
(And Canterbury prospered off it).
She goes on:
   But medieval thaumaturges
Are prone, like us, to natural urges,
Though these, it seems, in Thomas' case,
Were less to lust than pride of place.
French-trained in law, and then installed
Aide to Archbishop Theobald,
Who made him, though in minor orders,
His spy on clerical marauders,
He caught King Henry's notice, and
Became chief lawyer of the land.
Chuffed Chancellor and monarch wily
Together led the life of Riley,
Till, basking in this genial climate,
The hapless Henry made him Primate.

It was ordinary people who claimed him as their patron saint when miracle cures were attributed to his intercession; something which Henry tried to stymie, not wanting Becket to become a cult figure. That Henry failed can be seen by the way that Canterbury and more particularly the place that Becket died became a place of pilgrimage. Geoffrey Chaucer sent his pilgrims there in the 14th century. T. S. Eliot wrote his *Murder in the Cathedral* in the 20th century. Becket had ceased to be a mere figure in medieval history …

But the most curious thing about this ancient struggle is the ideas and beliefs of those knights who galloped off into the night after Henry's impassioned plea 'Who'll rid me of this meddling priest?' I discovered that one of those knights, Reginald FitzUrse, was an ancestor of mine and it seemed to make it a more personal tragedy. Because it undoubtedly came down to a question of loyalty for those men. To whom should their overarching loyalty go? Henry and his temporal world? Or Becket and the promise of heaven? Understandably, they chose Henry. Did they ever come to regret this? And more so when they found themselves shunned by everyone? Or did they understand martyrdom and sainthood as needing its Judas in disguise. No one can rise from the dead if they are not dead. No one can heal from beyond the grave unless they have experienced the grave. The story raises profound questions … and perhaps this is why re-tellings such as T. S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* are at some level not satisfying. They skim the surface, the conflict, the ride, the dying man in front of the altar. But I cannot help wondering how Reginald and his co-criminals felt the next time they approached an altar, the next time they watched a priest raise the Host, the next time they came to pray …

Henry refused anything to do with them, saying he only had lay jurisdiction, and sent them to Rome where the Pope sent them on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land where they were said to have died. But one of the legends about FitzUrse was that he was "said to have gone to Ireland and to have there founded the family of McMahon". This seems very unlikely. But although he divided his estate between his brother and the Knights of St John (so that he might have felt himself footloose and free to go wherever the fancy took him) that there is a legend at all suggests he came home from the Holy Land …

Patrick Leigh Fermor telling the story of Richard II in *A Time of Gifts* when Richard sought to return from his Crusade in disguise and was captured near Vienna and a huge ransom demanded

adds a little footnote: "Leopold handed Richard over to his suzerain, Henry VI Hohenstaufen, the son of Barbarossa and the father of the *Stupor Mundi*. Leopold himself belonged to the house of Babenberg. (It was still nearly a hundred years before the Habsburgs, who were great lords in Swabia, began their centuries of rule over both Austria and the Empire.) The enormous ransom demanded for King Richard was never entirely paid.

"There is a strange and perplexing coda to all this. Four knights of Richard's father had murdered Thomas à Becket two decades earlier. One was Hugo de Morville, and when the crowd from the nave had tried to come to the rescue, he had kept them at bay with his sword while Tracy, Brito and Fitzurse struck down the Archbishop in the N.W. Transept. We know the sequel; the flight to Saltwood, to Scotland, then the outcast solitude of the four murderers in Morville's Yorkshire castle; penance, rehabilitation, possibly pilgrimage to the Holy Land. According to a tradition, Morville died there in 1202 or 1204 and was buried in the porch (now indoors) of the Templar's Hostel at Jerusalem, which became the Mosque of El Aksa.

"But the poet Ulrich von Zatzikhoven says that when Leopold transferred the King to the Emperor's custody in 1193, Richard's place was taken by a hostage. This was a knight called Hugo de Morville, who lent the poet a volume containing the Legend of Lancelot in Anglo-Norman verse, from which he translated the famous *Lanzelet*, who thus followed Sir Percival and Tristan and Yseult into German mythology. Some authorities think the two Morvilles are the same. I hope they are right."

And was Henry right to see Becket as a hypocrite—or had Becket genuinely seen a new vision of heaven and earth when he was made Archbishop and tried to be true to it in defiance of his worldly past?

*

December 30: Rudyard Kipling

*

"One of the earliest 'spy' novels was Rudyard Kipling's *Kim*, the story of a child messenger used by British Intelligence, and set in India against the backdrop of the Great Game."

Lance Collins and Warren Reed in *Plunging Point: Intelligence Failures, Cover-ups and Consequences*.

Dr Brian Colless in *The Wandering Armenians* wrote, "It was an Armenian who cast the most famous cannon in Indian history, the Zamzamah. First used by Ahmad Shah Durrani, the Afghan invader of the Punjab, in the battle of Panipat in 1761. Subsequently it had a number of owners and users before coming to rest in 1870 at the Central Museum of Lahore. Rudyard Kipling (in Kim) called Zamzamah 'that fire-breathing dragon' and a long Persian inscription (on the back of the fourteen and a half foot monster itself) avers it to be 'a gun terrible as a dragon and huge as a mountain'. Its maker was one Shah Nazar Khan, an Armenian Christian who died in 1784 and was buried in the Armenian cemetery at Agra."

But as *Kim* is treated as a children's adventure now I wonder if either its background in espionage or the history of the great cannon are ever drawn to the attention of young readers? Probably not. But I have just been re-reading the book myself.

Certainly the story begins—"He sat, in defiance of municipal orders, astride the gun Zam-Zammah on her brick platform opposite the old Ajaib-Gher—the Wonder House, as the natives call the Lahore Museum. Who hold Zam-Zammah, that 'fire-breathing dragon,' hold the Punjab; for the great green-bronze piece is always first of the conqueror's loot."—but I would query whether *Kim* is either a children's story or a spy story. Yes, Kim that orphaned streetwise little imp, carries occasional messages. And later he takes pride in what he sees as his small role in the Great Game, the British efforts to confound the Russians who were looking southward in the late 19th century to Afghanistan and India, but the novel has far more to do with his relationship to the wandering Tibetan lama and the Afghan horse trader, among others. I would rather call it a coming-of-age novel. It is not the significance of the spying itself which excites Kim but rather that he sees it as an

acceptance into adulthood. He is now a man among men, after all the years of being treated as an unruly little urchin, and will now be treated as a man …

*

December 31: As We Say Goodbye …

*

And as I come to the end of another book I have something of the feeling Spenser presents: pleasures left but more adventures waiting …

There leave we them in pleasure and repast,
Spending their joyous dayes and gladfull nights,
And taking usurie of time fore-past,
With all deare delices and rare delights,
Fit for such Ladies and such lovely knights;
And turne we here to this faire furrowes end
Our wearie yokes, to gather fresher sprights,
That, when as time to Artegall shall tend,
We on his first adventure may him forward send.

End of Canto III, Book V, 'The Faery Queene' by Edmund Spenser.

THE END

Note: One day I was at an organ recital in the Hobart Town Hall and on the program was 'Chopsticks for Organ' by Roger Ampt. I was intrigued. Would it really be a version of 'Chopsticks'? It was. And very pleasant too …