

# Medicine and Books

## Reading for pleasure

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From his pleasant vantage point in the reading room of the British Museum Isaac d'Israeli once wrote an essay expounding the advantages of saturating oneself with the thoughts of one particular author. He thought that a predilection for some great author would refine one's taste, sharpen one's skills, and make one into a formidable antagonist, like someone sleeping in armour, always ready to strike at a moment's notice. He reminded us that the Romans had a proverb, "beware of the man of one book"; that both Pliny and Seneca advised that *one should read much, but not many books*; and that a long succession of illustrious persons spent their lives delighting in works of a particular author. To this list of men of one book we may add Sir Winston Churchill, who steeped himself in the works of the historian of "the awful spectacle" of the *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*.

### Imperial ghosts

This awful spectacle has been for many years the main object of my reading for pleasure; and I have spent many enthralling hours in the company of the crafty Augustus; of the mild-mannered Marcus and his debauched son Commodus—who attained the summit of vice and infamy; of the dissolute Caracalla—who trampled down the last enclosure of the Roman constitution; of the stern Severus—who had seen everything but all to no avail; of the martial Trajan and the dark and sanguinary Maximin; and of the corrupt praetorian guards, who "with bloody hands, savage manners, and desperate resolutions, sometimes guarded, but much oftener subverted, the throne of the emperors." Till at last, some two centuries later, the Salarian gate was secretly opened at midnight, the populace was awakened by the tremendous sound of the Gothic trumpet, and "Rome, the imperial city which had civilised so considerable a part of mankind, was delivered to the licentious fury of the barbarians of Germany and Scythia."

The work abounds with memorable figures: Julian the Apostate, a lover of his country, who deserved the empire of the world; Diocletian, dramatically resigning the purple at the height of his power; Constantine, whose figure was tall and majestic; and the proud Constantius, riding in his golden car, neither waving nor looking at his loyal subject during his triumphal entry into Rome. There were great barbarians: Atila, dying on his wedding night from a large vessel bursting in his body; Alaric, whose grave lies hidden at the bottom of a river; and Totila, the Goth, pierced by the lances of the implacable Gepidae while a loyal voice cried out "spare the king of Italy." There were strong and artful women: Scream, Eudoxia, Placidia, and Pulcheria, and the harlot-empress Theodora—who became a mother despite taking "the most detestable precautions." There was the ambitious Bajazet, the Lightning, defeated at Angora and exhibited in an iron cage; and the victorious Mahomet II, praying in St Sophia, and testing his strength against the monsters at the hippodrome in Constantinople.

These memorable passages and many others I have read over and over again. Later I also discovered Edward Gibbon's

*Autobiography*. "I saw and loved" as the great historian "sighed as a lover but obeyed as a son"; told about the fat slumbers of the church; avoided as indelicate all references to the pains and pleasures of the body; expatiated on the loss of his literary maidenhead; confessed that he was never less alone than when alone; and described the moment of conception of his work, "as he sat musing amid the ruins of the Capitol, while the barefooted friars were singing vespers in the temple of Jupiter." Who can forget that memorable night of 27 June 1787, when he wrote the last lines of the last page in a summerhouse in his garden, when he took everlasting leave of an old and agreeable companion, but when his mind was soon humbled by the melancholy thought that, whatever the future fate of his *History*, the life of the historian must be short and precarious. And who can forget the majesty of the closing paragraph, the long expectations of youth, based on ignorance but gradually damped by time and disappointment; and the consolations of those who begin new lives in their children, sing hallelujahs above the clouds, or presume the immortality of their name and writings.

In his autobiography Gibbon clearly subscribes to the view that one should "read one book many times rather than many books once." But lest one take his advice too literally, his works are best placed with a few other books in a special desert island set. In my personal set I include the writings of Macaulay, particularly the *State of England in 1685*, and the essays on Clive, Addison, and Dr Johnson—not so much, perhaps for what he says as for how he says it. Unlike Gertrude Stein I have not read every word of Carlyle's *Frederick the Great*; but I enjoy reading about the troubles of young Fritz with his father, his disputes with Voltaire, his battles with the Austrians, and the two conflicting versions of the young but sad pragmatic empress, infant in arms, pleading for help, and the Magyar magnates rising to a man with their drawn swords and shouting "Let us die for our *king*, Maria Theresa."

### Travels without a donkey

I also like to read about Carlyle's poor Louis XVI, the son of 60 kings, dying on the scaffold by form of Law in the Place de la Revolution. Sometimes I enjoy Sir Thomas Browne's fierce blazing pyres of Saradanapalus, and the dead bones quietly resting under the drums and trappings of three conquests. With Stevenson's Modestine tripping under the weight of her awkward green pack I travel from Monastier to Alais. In the Luxembourg gardens I look for Lambert Strether, the mysterious *Ambassador* from Wollett, or long for conversation with the elegant Madame de Vionnet. Sometimes I grieve for Madame de Bellegarde, who forever hid behind the walls of a convent rather than marry the *American*. I also revisit the Misses Bennet and Woodhouse, and even those other young ladies who had less sense than sensibility. More romantic, though, are Dr Quincey's Ladies of Sorrow: the elder Madonna, the Lady of Tears, whose eyes are sweet and subtle, wild and sleepy, by turns; the humble Lady of Sighs, who never clamours, never defies, never rebels; and the Mater Tenebrarum,

the Lady of Darkness, defier of God, mother of lunatics, and suggestress of suicides. And then there is Rachel, dying of typhoid on Virginia Woolf's imaginary island; and also the faithful companions, the *First* and *Second Common Readers*. Finally, there is another man of few books, M de Montaigne, who at 38 retired into his library in one of the towers of his country house; who cared little for long and useless discussions; whose purpose was to pass the remainder of his life pleasantly and not laboriously; who, in books, looked only for honest entertainment; and who, if he condescended to study, looked only for that which taught him to know himself, to live well, and to die well.