

# Reading for Pleasure

## Pantisocracy and small aliquots

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To read about the art and practice of writing is both easy and pleasurable; but to write about reading is an altogether more onerous task. Reading is so very personal in selection, personal in the choice of the right surroundings, and must be personal in matching the book to the mood of the moment. My father would not let us pass by a secondhand bookshop, and following his example I leave uninspected no scruffy bundle of dusty books on trolley or in crate in a village market; many a crusty gem has been prised from such an unlikely source.

There is satisfaction, almost a sense of rescue, in handling discarded old books. There is a sense of adventure in opening the class prize at a grammar school of half a century ago, and in speculating on the fate of the proud owner in later years. This childish sense of wonder is enlivened by dark probing in some hidden pile of books in a corner, by musing over the surprise object brought to light by the last fumbling from a shelf which at first seemed likely to be unrewarding. There is, too, a physical, a sensuous quality in the bindings of cloth—or, better still, old crinkly leather—and the richness of discovery is enhanced by the gilt edging of the sallow leaves which were so commonplace when we were young, but which now are almost priceless.

### Essays and anthologies

*Horae Subsecivae*, the three volumes of John Brown, MD, was the discovery made on my honeymoon when, no doubt, my thoughts should have been on more ethereal things. These essays remain a favourite diversion, and I often return to the yarn of *Rab and His Friends*, *A Recital by Halle*, *A Jacobite Family*, and Brown's splendid appreciation of Locke and Sydenham.

Much leisure reading is in bed, and here such essays as Brown's—anthologies, or short stories—are the rule. Here, I first met the prose of Hazlitt's *Winterslow*, a fine volume of essays written in, and named after, his native village sited between Salisbury and Andover, not far from Stonehenge. The Hazlitt house was visited by Charles and Mary Lamb, and by S T Coleridge. This he writes of in "My first-acquaintance with poets." When he first sees STC in the Unitarian pulpit: "his voice rose like a steam of rich distilled perfumes." The youthful Hazlitt's excitement is contagious: "And for myself I could not have been more delighted if I had heard the music of the spheres. Poetry and Philosophy had met together. Truth and Genius had embraced. . . ." His essays are rich in metaphor and they wield a curious brand of individual wisdom. He tells of the feelings of immortality in youth, of mind and motive, of matter and manner. His pen portraits of Burke, Fox, and Lord

Chatham are as enthralling as his style and self-evident intellect are superb models for later essayists.

Having whetted my appetite for Coleridge, I much enjoyed the recent book *Samuel Taylor Coleridge: A bondage of opium* by Professor Keith Simpson's private secretary, Molly Lefebure. STC described his addiction as drug-slavery, but Mrs Lefebure calls him a junkie and then rightly commends his eventual success in breaking his bondage. In this, he was much helped by James Gillman, a surgeon of Highgate, who took the celebrated stranger into his home as a friend in April 1816 and there cared for him until his death from cardiac failure due to rheumatic heart disease in 1834. STC's earlier life makes an intriguing story, with his addiction to laudanum, the notorious Kendal black drop, and his associations and letters with Southey and the Wordsworths.

The modern dropout has nothing to add to Coleridge's pantisocracy, a movement "aimed to desert prevailing society which is rotten, worthless, ruled by avarice and self-interest, riddled with hypocrisy. Twelve gentlemen of good education and liberal principles were to embark with twelve ladies to an experimental community in Susquehannah, where personal property was to be abandoned in favour of a participatory government, by all, for all." If this rings bells that are painful, readers will be reassured that like its modern counterparts—and for similar reasons—the venture failed.

### Glittering prose and enticing tales

For reading in trains or by the fireside I am prepared to forfeit the 1000-page epic of well-researched tedium in favour of the romantic novel, adventure, or biography. I have recently enjoyed the tales of David Grayson. Such was his popularity before the war that my pocket edition of *Adventures in Contentment* was the eighteenth in sixteen years. Grayson left a city life in America to rent a farm which he soon came to own. His theme, now popular again, is his joy in abandoning the strain of town life and in his discovery of his true self in a rural setting. He writes with impressive simplicity, but his prose glitters with life and adds much to his natural gift as a storyteller: "I came here like one sore-wounded creeping from the field of battle. I remember walking in the sunshine, weak yet, but curiously satisfied. . . ." Not very original, but the tale is enticing, related by an incurable romantic who has the knack of transmuting the commonplace into a minor mystery. I enjoyed his other collections *The Friendly Road* and *Great Possessions* just as much as the first, but Grayson must be taken in small aliquots if he is not to cloy or spoil the palate.

Then, in different vein, is the frustrated schoolmaster who became a lecturer in, of all things, political science at McGill University. *Literary Lapses* was his best known work and, having lapped this up as a boy, I was delighted to find Stephen Leacock again in his *Arcadian Adventures with the Idle Rich*. Here his genius for minute observation turned into sharp but gentle humour is at its best. His names for characters and places are great fun: who could resist "A little dinner with Lucullus Fyshe," the sight of Tomlinson from Tomlinson's creek being

called by a pageboy in the Grand Palaver Hotel, or an encounter (it could scarcely be an ordinary meeting) with Dulphemia Rasselyer-Brown of the Yahi-Bahi Society?

Finally, to those who like writing, books about writing are irresistible. Leacock's *How to Write* is a splendid small book, written in his own practical style, his Puckish wit never far beneath the surface. He ranges from the "Art of Narration" to

"How *not* to Write Poetry;" just the sort of stuff to hand to your son or daughter labouring under Quiller Couch, C E M Joad, or whoever has replaced these former taskmasters. But perhaps they have not been replaced after all, any more than our old BBC favourite who no longer exists (occupancy situation unfilled, basically): I refer of course to the man with the grandiose handle, "the Director of the Spoken Word."