Members' Talks about Books

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Frank Cruikshank

"Para Handy" Neil Munro

The theme of the talks today is to describe a book that had an impact on your life. Now "Impact" sounds rather violent and my choice of book is anything but violent. Quite the opposite.

It's often said, in the field of science, that once something appears in a text book, it's out of date. However, text books are essential for someone breaking into a new field of study. They give a useful summary of the field of study, bringing one up to date quickly.

In my Chemistry career I have touched on a few different fields, the last of these being Non-Linear Optics of Crystals. Many textbooks helped me to get up to speed in this field and one such is shown here.

I bought this book new, and though I take great care of my books, it has been much used. If we open it at the section dealing with second order non-linear susceptibility, we see that the text is well laid out and the description very clear. It is a good textbook.

Now, you will be glad to hear that this book is NOT my topic for today. As well as coffee, it is essential to have a break from such books and find a relaxing text that takes you into another world, far less demanding. A world where problems are simple and the text is easily digested. Preferably something with a bit of good humour. My choice of such a book is "Para Handy" by Neil Munro. Para Handy (a corruption of the Gaelic for Peter, Son of Sandy) was skipper of a Puffer and tales of his life were written by Neil Munro (under the pen name of Hugh Foulis) in the Glasgow Evening News, from 16th January, 1905. In parallel with Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Neil wished to be known for his more serious work, generally about the decline of the old order in the highlands. However, the popularity of his short stories remains high to this day, just as for Sherlock Holmes.

Before the arrival of the Puffer steamers, goods were often carried by Gabbarts, small sailing vessels often mentioned in the stories of Para Handy. In these stories, we are led into the world of Glasgow and the western isles around 1900 – 1920 with some 99 short stories of the "High Jinks" of the crew of the puffer,

"Vital Spark". This era is presented as a gentle period in history, largely ignoring the hardships and privations of the populations of Glasgow and the western isles.

One merit of this book is that the 99 stories are short, typically 3 – 5 pages, so that you can dip into it and read for long or short times without breaking any continuing narrative. There does not have to be any chronological order to the stories.

In many cases the stories are almost the Skipper's monologue and their charm lies in the banter between crew members, their chaffing of each other and the misquotations from the bible with references to the schism in the kirk (1843) which was still burned into the minds of the western isles population.

The Crew of the Vital Spark:-

Skipper	Para Handy (Peter MacFarlane)
	(A short, thick set man with a red beard, a hard round felt hat, seaman's jersey and blue pilot jacket and trousers)
Engineer	Dan Macphail
Mate	Dougie Cameron (Campbell?)
Deckhand	The Tar (Colin Turner)
& Cook	Sunny Jim (Davie Green, cousin of the Tar)

Para Handy likes to compare the Vital Spark with the larger, much more luxurious, Clyde steamers. In fact, of course the Puffers were essentially sea-going "lorries", carrying all kinds of cargo from stone, coal and grain, to furniture and agricultural machinery.

Passengers were not usually carried.

The stories expose a way of life of the Firth of Clyde, Arran, Loch Fyne and Mull, where comradeship was more important than wealth.

I recommend this book to you as a relaxing read.

Ken Muir

"The History of England from the accession of James II" Thomas Babington Macaulay

Macaulay takes 2,500 pages to cover the seventeen years from 1685 to 1702. This is thus a very detailed history but it deals with an important period in the development of the British state. To be fair, though the book is described as an English history, the related events in Scotland and Ireland are also given extensive coverage.

The book was a best seller. In Britain 130,000 copies were sold in the first 25 years after publication. In the USA, where it was immensely popular, it was out-sold only by the Bible.

Macaulay holds the narrative together by linking many subsidiary details to two over-arching themes. One is the story of how James II in a few years turned loyal supporters into enemies who invited his son-in-law William of Orange to invade. William and Mary, James' daughter, took his place as joint sovereigns. The second major theme is the life-long struggle of William of Orange against the attempts of Louis XIV to destroy or least weaken the Dutch Republic. For William it was a major risk to transfer the Dutch Army to England but his gamble succeeded: he thereafter could add England to the coalition he led against France.

A full list of all the topics covered by Macaulay is beyond the scope of this revue but the Siege of Londonderry and the Battle of the Boyne, the Battle of Killiekrankie and the Massacre of Glencoe deserve special mention. Economic affairs – the formation of the Bank of England, the National Debt and the reform of the silver coinage are still of interest today. The book also has more about pirates than one might expect.

Surprisingly perhaps, there is some local interest. The author's grandfather, Rev. John Macaulay, a Gaelic speaker, was Church of Scotland Minister of Cardross from 1774 to 1789. His son Zachary left Cardross aged 16 for a Jamaican sugar plantation. He returned five years later a bitter enemy of the slave trade. He was a prominent leader in the campaign which led to its abolition in 1807. His son, the author Thomas Babington Macaulay, was a child prodigy. He entered Parliament aged thirty and then moved to India where he made important reforms in law and education. He was a cabinet minister in the early years of Victoria. His History of England began to appear in 1848 and a year later the students of Glasgow University elected him their Rector.

Macaulay is still admired, though nowadays possibly more for the clarity and elegance of his prose than for his technical ability as a historian. He had enemies: Karl Marx and Winston Churchill rarely agreed on anything but they were as one in labelling Macaulay a liar. More moderate critics point out that by the standards of modern historical scholarship Macaulay is a primitive; methods of writing history have advanced since his day. He also is fairly brutal in dismissing anything which is not consistent with the standards of Victorian Britain. It is also true that he takes a cheerful view of the development of British history as a straightforward process of inevitable improvement. Contemporary views are more gloomy.

Still worth a try. He was a best-seller and he may surprise you.

Ken Muir, April, 2024

Mel Burt

"Gulliver's Travels"

Jonathan Swift

I'm going to talk about a book which, at an early age, made me more willing to explore a wider range of literature; not life-changing but it certainly had a significant effect on my views and how I approached life.

You could say it was my first "adult" book but not in a prurient way, it just moved me on from a steady diet of childish adventure stories to a more thoughtful interest in how people and societies interacted.

At the age of 10 or11 my grandfather gave me a copy of the full version of Gulliver's Travels by Jonathan Swift, the 18th century satirist. My grandfather, a lovely man, was a miner and soldier with little formal schooling but the book obviously was important to him and he wanted to share it with me.

I ploughed my way through it, largely ignoring the various criticisms of the 18th century Whig and Tory political parties but revelling in how Swift used the various societies Gulliver met to show the futility of petty struggles and obsessions whether with size, perceived status or the excessive pursuit of science or pointless academic research.

Swift's satirical wit criticized the moral righteousness behind war and religious ritual and drew comparisons with many England – France conflicts at that time.

The book was much more than a colourful description of a giant's adventures among Lilliputians but rather a scathing description of societies going to war over trivial opinions about which end of an egg should be cut first or despising another group with near-identical aims.

The same rich vein of satire runs through several present-day comedies such as the "Life of Brian" film by Monty Python where the Judean People's Front opposed their Roman masters but reserved their strongest hatred for the near-identical People's Front of Judea.

Gulliver subsequently met the giant Brobdingnagians, the flying Laputians with their pointless Science obsession and the horse-like Houyhnhnms with their legal and literary fixation and ill-treatment of the human-shaped Yahoos.

In each voyage his experiences showed the foolishness of excessive concentration on only a few areas to the detriment of society overall.

He highlighted the fact that countries still go to war for trivial reasons such as a Leader's wish just to impress their parent (e.g. Kaiser Wilhelm, George W Bush) or over which branch of a religion is the "true" one.

So, how did it change me?

It gave me a taste for Science Fiction and some types of Fantasy.

Also a liking for satirical publications such as "Mad Magazine", "Private Eye" or the French "Le Canard Enchaine" and a healthy scepticism of my fellow man and people's foibles.

For better or worse, it changed me, which is a significant impact for any book to have.

Mel Burt March 2024

Rob Littlejohn

"Five go down to the Sea"

Enid Blyton

I chose this book because it is the first one I remember reading for myself, and gave me my first taste of the pleasures to be had from reading. It recounts the adventures of two brothers, Julian and Dick, their sister, Anne, cousin Georgina and – in a phrase which recurs – 'not forgetting Timmy the dog'. As a tale, it is now very dated and Enid Blyton's books are considered to be 'not PC'. But, the attraction at the time was that the tales were about children of around my own age, and I subsequently read all the other books in the 'Famous Five' series.

Next for me came the 'Biggles' books which are even less PC by today's standards. However, I had a good English teacher at school who widened our horizons. He introduced us to such authors as Graham Greene, Iris Murdoch and Kingsley Amis.

It is possible that my early experience helped me later to digest text books as part of my studies, but reading for me has always been more for enjoyment.

One of my idiosyncrasies has been keeping logs of my interests and I have a record of all the books I have read over the past 50+ years. There is a heavy emphasis on fiction and Scottish writers, including John Buchan, Ian Rankin, Karen Campbell and two who I now know have been Probus speakers in the past – Jack Webster and Denise Mina.

If, in Desert Island Discs style, I had to select just one author for my future reading, it would be Charles Dickens

Stephen Rodgers

"The Limits to Growth" D Meadows et al

In 1968 a group of 30 scientists, economists, industrialists, civil servants and others gathered informally at the instigation of a prominent Italian. From this developed The Club of Rome that sought to take a long term look at trends in society – the "Project on the Predicament of Mankind". The study was undertaken at MIT and "The Limits to Growth" was the report on the study written for the layman.

There was particular concern then at the exponential growth of the global population, and the consequent demand for, and the pressure on the earth's resources such as minerals, agricultural land, forests and oceans. The relationships between the various factors were complex, so the MIT team developed a global economic model. The model considered just the physical factors required for growth but not other, less tangible, factors such as social stability and potential technical progress. This early example of complex computer modelling enabled conclusions to be drawn on what would happen IF current trends continued. They were projections, not forecasts of what would happen. Though deemed imperfect, oversimplified, and unfinished, the model was useful in demonstrating that there could indeed be limits to growth economic to be reached within the next 100 years.

Why did I feature this book in my talk? In 1972 when it was published, I was at university. Economics was part of my course, so the book was of considerable interest. More pertinently the major part of the course was marketing, or how to provide consumers with goods and services that gave long term satisfaction. While seeking provide what people needed, marketing often extended to persuading them to want more products. Though good for business and for promoting economic/GDP growth, this consumerism placed extra demand for the earth's resources. How could this continue.

Half a century on there have been enormous changes, not least in technology. Many more resources can now be exploited. For example, new discoveries and methods of extraction have increased fossil fuel resources. However new potential limitations have arisen. Pollution was one of the factors considered in the model and has now become of grave concern. Climate change is happening and is being largely brought about by human activity. A book over 50 years old was prescient in its main conclusion.

Michael Hitchman

"The Poetry Pharmacy"

William Sieghart

"Friends, Scots, countrymen, and William, lend me your ears;
I come not to bury poetry, but to praise it."

Not Shakespeare, though, but the Poetry Pharmacy

The compiler, William Sieghhart, was eight years old when he was first sent to boarding school and he was desperately unhappy. At a time when friends were in short supply, he found that poetry became his friend. From then on, he always believed in the power of poetry to explain people to themselves. The Pharmacy proper, though, did not begin until much later when he was being interviewed at a literary festival in Cornwall. The organisers had the idea of allowing him to prescribe poems from his book to audience members. They set him up in a tent with two armchairs and a prescription pad. It turned out to be all he needed. However, the hour they had originally planned came and went until many hours later there was still a queue of people waiting for their appointments.

He realised that he was onto something in that suffering is the access point to poetry for a lot of people: that's when they open their ears, hearts, and minds. Being there with the right words for someone in that moment when something's happened, whenever there's a need, is a great comfort.

I discovered the Poetry Pharmacy a few years ago and since then it has been a loyal and generous companion to me, even in the most difficult times. Again and again, in my loneliest hours and my most tumultuous periods I have discovered the greatest solace in finding and reading a perfect poem for the moment.

Above all, when I find myself struggling to understand what I'm feeling, to find the right poem at that moment, one capable of expressing my situation with considerably more elegance than I could achieve, I have discovered a powerful and precious realisation that I am not the only one who feels that way.

The idea, that there can be a therapeutic power to a poem is at the heart of the Poetry Pharmacy. The book aims to help by gathering poems, some 56 of them, which from experience have been shown to help people through the most conceivable difficulties of daily life, through the various facets and frustrations of

love, grief, work and all the other concerns that dominate their thoughts. I want to try to illustrate how the Pharmacy can help in different situations.

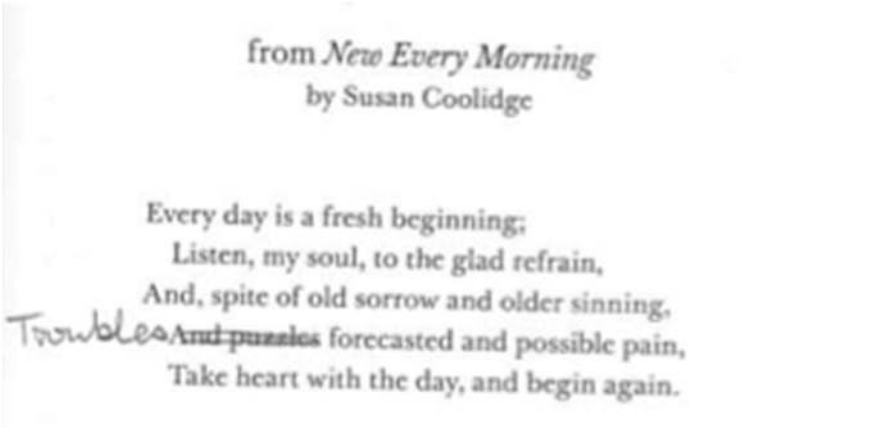
First, I consider the condition of loneliness. Poets have been describing the malaise of the way we live now, the dehumanising isolation of city living, for centuries. Hafez, the most famous Persian poet, wrote these four extraordinary lines 700 years ago.

Some may say that is not a poem as it does not rhyme. A Sanskrit poem from nearly two millennia ago reminds us of what poetry is about:

Of what use is the poet's poem,
Of what use is the bowman's dart,
Unless another's senses reel
When it sticks quivering in the heart?

A poem, whatever form it takes, lifts the mind and stirs the soul.

My second reading Is for those who are having trouble coping, when they often feel that their minds are no longer entirely their own. This poem, written by Susan Coolidge, who produced the Katy books. urges us to appreciate the fresh beginnings that every day brings.



from *New Every Morning*
by Susan Coolidge

Every day is a fresh beginning;
Listen, my soul, to the glad refrain,
And, spite of old sorrow and older sinning,
Troubles ~~And puzzles~~ forecasted and possible pain,
Take heart with the day, and begin again.

This poem is often displayed in hospices.

Most of us feel as though we are damaged in one way or another: that there is something within us which is broken beyond repair. Perhaps we only have a small crack. Perhaps there is a chasm within us. Either way, Japanese Izumi Shikibu's poem from about a 1000 years ago, wonderfully shows us that we should appreciate ourselves, flaws and all. Although we may find that our vulnerabilities, like a gap in the roof of a ruined house, leave us prone to being tossed about by

the wind and rain of an uncaring world, it might also be that, without them, we would be missing out on the transcendent view of the moon.

'Although the wind'
by Izumi Shikibu
translated by Jane Hirshfield
with Mariko Aratani

Although the wind
blows terribly here,
the moonlight also leaks
between the roof planks
of this ruined house.

Yesterday was the anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998. This poem became popular after it was read on BBC Radio by the father of a soldier killed during the troubles. Mary Elizabeth Frye wrote it many years ago on a paper shopping bag.

Do Not Stand at My Grave and Weep
by Mary Elizabeth Frye

Do not stand at my grave and weep,
I am not there; I do not sleep.
I am a thousand winds that blow,
I am the diamond glints on snow,
I am the sun on ripened grain,
I am the gentle autumn rain.
When you awaken in the morning's hush
I am the swift uplifting rush
Of quiet birds in circling flight.
I am the soft starlight at night.
Do not stand at my grave and cry,
I am not there; I did not die.

Jim Wilson passed away recently. His friendly banter will be missed. He may not be physically present with us, but his memory and his voice will remain with us, scattered among all the beautiful things on earth.

Finally, a poem from Siegfried Sassoon, a World War 1 poet.

The difficulty with depression is that it can make you believe illogical things. Once it has its hooks in you, you can end up feeling like you're never pull yourself free without unravelling completely. There's no escape you tell yourself. This is just who you are now; this is how you're going to be for the rest of your life. Of course, nothing could be further from the truth.

This is my Mahler poem. His Second Symphony, a choral symphony, climaxes in an unfurling of possibility and excitement. In a flash, happiness is not only imaginable but is rushing out of you, out of everyone like a flock of birds in flight.

Everyone Sang
by Siegfried Sassoon

Everyone suddenly burst out singing;
And I was filled with such delight
As prisoned birds must find in freedom,
Winging wildly across the white
Orchards and dark-green fields; on – on – and out of sight.

Everyone's voice was suddenly lifted;
And beauty came like the setting sun:
My heart was shaken with tears; and horror
Drifted away . . . O, but Everyone
Was a bird; and the song was wordless; the singing will
never be done.