

transatlantic

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REPORT



Harkness Fellows Association

The newsletter of the
Harkness Fellows Association
and Atlantic Fellows

ISSUE 14, AUTUMN 2009

Fellows News

Publications etc

The premiere of **Sir Harrison Birtwistle's** (HF 1966-68) new single-movement string quartet, *The Tree of Strings*, was given at the 2008 Aldeburgh Festival. The 2009 festival opened with his "music theatre" double bill which includes a re-telling of the Orpheus myth (*The Corridor*), and a collection of variations on themes by John Dowland (*Semper Dowland, Semper Dolens*).

An anthology of articles by the late **Alan Coren** (HF 1961-63) was published in June 2009 (*Chocolate and Cuckoo Clocks: the Essential Alan Coren*, Giles and Victoria Coren (eds), Canongate £8.99). It was described by one reviewer as "a fitting testament to a man who gave millions joy".

Richard Crichton (HF 1967-69) had a "survey exhibition" of his paintings 1955-1975 in the spring of 2009 at a gallery in Melbourne, Australia.

Malcolm Dean (HF 1966-68) has just co-edited, with Paul Cann (policy director, Help the Aged) called *Unequal Ageing - the untold story of exclusion in old age* with chapters by at least one other Harkness Fellow, Julia Neuberger (Policypress October 2009). It was commissioned by Paul Cann, policy-director of Help the Aged, to coincide with the merger of Help the Aged and Age Concern. The remit was to see how far Britain has become a fairer society for older people and how much further we still have to go. The book looks at income, employment, health, social care, housing, neighbourhood, quality of life, identity and ageism. It acknowledges that there have been large advances in the standard of living of many pensioners, but concludes that for a shockingly high number of retired people growing older is a journey of loss: loss of work, income, health, well-being, status, social networks and companions.

Ada Donati (HF 1964-65) has retired from her post as teacher of English and American literature in a Rome Liceo. She has since translated, edited and published six selections of poems by Joe Rosenblatt (*From Subliminal to Sublime*), Joe Rosenblatt/Catherine Owen (*Caneide*), Genni Gunn (*Mating in Captivity*), Susan McMaster (*Dark Matter*), Ron Smith (*Arabesque*) and Keiki Nakada (*Verses for a Multiverse*). She has also contributed critical introductions to several art catalogues.

Alexander Faris (CFF 1956-57) published his autobiography *Da Capo al Fine* in June 2009 (Matador £16.99)

Stanley Johnson (HF 1963-64) published his autobiography *Stanley I Presume* in March 2009 (Fourth Estate, £18.99). This records, among many other recollections, the origins of the unusual first name of his son, Boris, in recognition of the kindness of a Russian émigré of that name to Stanley and his wife while they were visiting Mexico during Stanley's fellowship.

Piers Mackesy (CFF 1953-54) was "stunned" but delighted to find an extremely warm reference given by an American journalist, the senior military correspondent of the *Washington Post*, to the book on which he had started work during his fellowship at Harvard. *The War for America 1775-1783* was first published in 1964 and is still in print. Thomas E Ricks described it as a brilliant, classic history of the American Revolution, which tells a story with some extremely disquieting parallels with the (then continuing) war in Iraq – as an account of the no-man's-land between a diplomatic history of a war and a narrative history of its battles "the single best such work that I ever have encountered."

The cycle of ten Naxos string quartets by **Sir Peter Maxwell Davies** (HF 1962-64) was completed with the publication of number 10 in summer 2008.

Appointments, Awards etc

Sir Patrick Bateson (HF 1963-65) was appointed to chair an independent enquiry into dog breeding in February 2009. Its terms of reference were "to consider whether the health and welfare of dogs, and particularly pedigree dogs, is affected by and/or can be improved by reference to the registration, breeding and showing of dogs."

Richard Bolsin (HF 1990), General Secretary of the Workers Educational Association, was awarded the MBE in the Queen's Birthday Honours 2009, for services to adult education.

Pippo Ranci Ortigosa (HF 1965-66) was the first president of the Italian Regulatory Authority for electricity and gas, 1996-2003. He set up and directed the Florence School of Regulation at the European University Institute (EUI) in Florence, 2002-2008. Though now retired, he still teaches at the Università Cattolica, Milano, and is an adviser to the Robert Schuman Centre at the EUI.

John Roberts (HF 1980-82) now splits his time between London and Sydney, being Professor of Marketing at the London Business School and Scientia Professor of the University of New South Wales – spending summer in both places.

Michael Ryder (HF 1977-79) was Deputy Secretary, Butler Review of Intelligence on Weapons of Mass Destruction, 2004; Minister and Deputy Head of Mission, British Embassy Kabul 2006-07; UK Senior Representative, Helmand Province, Afghanistan 2008; UK Special Envoy to Republic of Mali, 2009. He was awarded the CMG in the New Year Honours 2008.

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In Memoriam

Dr Eustace Fox (CFF 1934-36) died in February 2008, aged 99. His fellowship was held at the University of Michigan. He worked initially at the Building Research Station at Garston, but was seconded during the war to the Admiralty, where he worked on the effects of explosions on buildings and other structures. In 1946 he joined the Cambridge University Engineering Department and became a Fellow of Trinity College. The college's obituary notice noted that in research he "had immense mathematical power, and great range over practical problems in structural and mechanical engineering." He enjoyed problem-solving, and many sports and games – including Trinity's own unique form of "curly" bowls for which he had his own set made. He was said to be "particularly lethal with the large almost-straight-running wood called Capstick, kept in reserve and frequently deployed to great effect to destroy the opponents' position."

David Medd OBE (CFF 1958-59) died in April 2009, aged 91. An architect, he joined Hertfordshire County Council after spending the war years working on light weight kit-based camouflaged buildings. He spent his fellowship at Harvard. At HCC he and his wife Mary were instrumental in developing modern designs for school buildings which, making much use of prefabrication, were light, colourful and aimed at producing an environment which was actually attractive for those who studied there. The Medds later joined a new team at the Ministry of Education whose task was to develop a range of prototype schools.

Sir Edwin Nixon (UK Awards Committee member, 1976-82) died in August 2008, aged 83. He was managing director of IBM (UK) from 1965 until he retired in 1990.

Louis Sherwood (HF 1963-65) died in March 2009, aged 67. For his fellowship he attended Stanford Business School. He worked for Morgan Grenfell and, in the United States, for the Grand Union Group of which he became president in 1985. Returning to the UK he moved to Bristol. He was subsequently chairman and chief executive of Gateway Foods, once one of the largest supermarkets in the UK but which was the subject of a notorious corporate takeover in 1990. More happily, he was chairman of the regional broadcast company HTV and a non-executive director of several companies. He became Master of Bristol's Society of Merchant Venturers in 2003. He was a generous supporter of the Harkness Fellows Association.

Rev John McMurdo Sweet (CFF 1954-55) died in July 2009, aged 82. He had been a Fellow at Yale, and at Selwyn College, Cambridge since 1958. He was the author of the *Pelican Commentary on St John* (1979, 1990)

Sir David Williams (HF 1956-58) died in September 2009, aged 78. He was the first full-time vice-chancellor of Cambridge University (1989-96), and a leading scholar whose writing on civil liberties, administrative and environmental law was both ground-breaking and accessible to the general reader. Many working in the field will remember his first book *Not in the Public Interest: the problem of secrecy in democracy* (1965). His Harkness fellowship was spent at UC Berkeley and Harvard. He taught at Nottingham University, at Keble College, Oxford and at Emmanuel College Cambridge. In 1989 he was elected President of Wolfson College, Oxford. He was appointed the first Chancellor of Swansea University in 2007.

BBC Values

Sir John Tusa spoke to an evening meeting of the Harkness Fellows Association in March 2009. He kindly agreed that we might print the text of his remarks, which follows.

As a non-Harkness fellow, it is a special privilege to be invited to talk to you this evening and to lead a discussion on a subject of my choice. Having worked for the BBC since 1960, the subject of "BBC Values" sprang rather naturally to mind. True, I stopped working regularly for the BBC 17 years ago, but as one of those generations that were put – as a former colleague described it recently – through the "sheep dip of Reithian values", you never get rid of the dye. To mix the metaphor, people like me have "public service" values in our bone marrow. Watching the BBC in its recent travails has been a deeply distressing experience. When it bleeds, we bleed; when it is confused, we share in that confusion; when it struggles to find a way out of its dilemmas, we have views about the wisdom of the path chosen. People like me – and we are many – may be onlookers but we are never spectators; we may criticise, but we never undermine; we may regret but we never gloat. It's tough running the BBC; sometimes it's tougher watching it make mistakes.

First, to remind you – if reminder is needed – of the string of recent crises that have dragged the BBC onto the front pages of the news bulletins in the most undesirable way. There have been three in very short order - the Brand/Ross Affair; the refusal to broadcast on BBC tv the Disasters Emergency Committee appeal for relief aid to the Palestinians in Gaza; and the near farcical decision to sack Carole Thatcher from reporting on the "One Show" because she made offensive racial remarks not on the BBC airwaves but in the programme's Green Room. Now, with the most recent decision over the "University Challenge" affair, the number of crises has risen to four.

Before making some observations on each of these different issues, let me try to make sense of them by drawing the bigger picture. I believe it explains a lot. In doing so, I try to answer the heart felt cry of a close friend and member of the BBC Trust who said to me recently: "Why do they – BBC management - make so many mistakes?" To which I add another thought, the old saw: "Three times is a lot". These three cases may be, are, very different; each is a special case, it might be argued; but they are connected. Taken together, as they should be, they are symptomatic. The explanation for why there have been four in a row so rapidly may lie – does lie, I believe – in the profound confusion that now reigns over BBC Values. Allow a certain weight for media malice towards the BBC for sure, but the sad fact is the BBC's own unforced errors came first.

I suggest that the BBC has lived with and by four major eras of values; the first, from the foundation in 1932 to 1992 was the era of Reithianism, of an originally unchallenged, but later weakened, commitment to the values of public service; the second from 1992 to 1997(?), was the Birtian era, when values were managerialised, though whether values and managerialism can cohabit was the issue of the time; the Greg Dyke era that followed was characterised by the commercial drive; the fourth era – today's – is a confused and contradictory melange of the previous three. No wonder that mistakes are made and BBC producers don't know where they stand, or the values by which they work. In fact, values have been supplanted by guidelines, though few understand which are the key guidelines they are supposed to follow. All the recent causes celebres can be traced directly to this confusion about values and guidelines.

You may, incidentally, object that neither “managerialism” nor “commercialism” are values in the proper sense. I would agree. That is part of the problem. But during these crucial recent years, the BBC has been led by nostrums that pretended to be values but were, rather, techniques of management and organisation. What true values underlay these organisational techniques?

So what is Reithianism, and why does it still hold such a lien on current debate about the organisation and the values of broadcasting today? It goes without saying that no-one who aspires to street-cred in the contemporary media world would choose – dare – to call themselves a Reithian. Reith was, in any case, too remote, too elitist, too exclusive, too paternalistic, too narrow for such a Homeric epithet to be usefully used or owned up to in present day circumstances. It was of its time and its time is not now.

Yet anyone who discusses the importance of “public service broadcasting” – and everyone does today – might occasionally pause to reflect that the very idea of broadcasting in a “non-commercial” way is intimately rooted to the vision and views and practice of John Reith. Just because he was a cussed bugger doesn’t mean that he can be written out of British broadcasting history.

And public service broadcasting is in the DNA of the BBC. What does it mean? In my book, it carries with it fundamental notions that broadcasting has a value and a responsibility to the public as a whole; in fact, it has a value because it carries responsibilities. Those responsibilities include the classic trinity of “to inform, educate and entertain”. Public service has always juggled with the balance between these three key purposes. There is nothing new about this. Contained within these imperatives are the notions that:

“Informing” should be done without patronage or presumption, but equally should not shirk the difficult or obscure just because not everyone can master everything, immediately, or at the time;

“Education” carries with it a strong social purpose, namely that without education – coupled with information – society, politics and the economy, come to that, cannot function effectively or efficiently;

and “Entertainment” – well Maria says it in “Twelfth Night” to Malvolio: “Does thou think that because thou art virtuous, there shall be no more cakes and ale?” The “cakes and ale” side of public service broadcasting is often overlooked or down played; it should not be. Public service broadcasting is balanced, though over time the equilibrium between the elements alters.

Such an approach carried with it a strong sense of things that “psb” should do; things it ought to do; things it might do; and things it would not do. For instance, while audience ratings were important – even essential given the existence of the universal licence fee – chasing ratings was neither the be-all, and certainly not the end-all, of programme making. Subject matter should be treated for what it was worth not for what the largest audience might expect or demand.

At a recent memorial service for the former MD of BBC TV, Sir Bill Cotton, Sir David Attenborough gave this succinct definition of public service broadcasting values:

“It is broadcasting that is both serious and light hearted, that respects the truth and spurns the meretricious, that can hold the attention of the majority at the best of times and is turned to, overwhelmingly at the worst of times; that is sober when necessary – but can also be wonderfully, overwhelmingly and hilariously entertaining”. That’s good enough for most of us.

Then there came a radical change. In 1992, John Birt became Director General. He brought with him a settled view that the BBC was inefficient at best, profligate at worst; that it lacked modern managerial skills; that modern systems for running complex organisations had to be introduced; that what the BBC saw as “audiences” were really “customers”; that what the BBC

persisted as regarding as “programmes” – the end result of individual crafts, skills, knowledge and beliefs – were in reality “product”, which had to be seen as the “final output” of a given, measurable and measured “quantity of resource”; that appeals to so-called “BBC values” were really self indulgent special pleading to justify behaviours that were selfish, self-regarding, and indifferent to the needs of the audience – sorry, customers; and that an internal market for resources, sparking off internal competition for their allocation, was the only way for the BBC to win government support for its continued existence and a continued licence fee.

On one occasion, John Birt asked the Director of the Proms, the late Sir John Drummond, to explain why the BBC needed a classical music library? Couldn’t these scores just be hired? Drummond explained why they could not. Birt pondered: “I see, it’s a fixed cost for a variable resource!”

And this managerial upheaval – driven through by externally contracted management consultants – had as its concomitant a profound antipathy to what were seen as the existing “public service broadcasting values”. Indeed, managerialism, the belief that unless activity was driven by system, that unless the process was correct, the result could not be; that activities which could not be measured did not deserve to be valued, challenged the prevailing, deeply entrenched value system. Since values were of their nature unquantifiable – there were no available metrics for them – they had no place in the new “managerialist” sun.

Of course, the old “BBC values” did not vanish, they were not eradicated, they may have been undermined but they were not destroyed. They just went “underground”, into “internal exile”. They did so for two reasons.

First, most BBC staff did not accept that being managerial and efficient was at the heart of what the BBC was about. It was not a set of values, just a series of processes and systems. Second, if the new managerialism could not bother even to attempt to align itself with the deeper values of the institution, staff could not bother to attempt to believe in it. They had to work with the imposed systems, some more enthusiastically than others. But these systems never acquired legitimacy. It was a classic case of a “top-down” imposition of a hierarchy of processes that flew in the face of everything that had made the BBC the institution that it was for the first 60 years.

John Birt also made his contempt for the “old guard” at the BBC utterly clear. It was summed up in one of his most famous phrases, that too many of those who disagreed with him were “tainted by experience”. Organisations must be loved – and respected – if they are to be changed. They deserve no less. They also need a sense of history and continuity. Only the reckless believe such an approach is irrelevant and that those who embody the knowledge of the past can be dispensed with.

The Birt years left the BBC internally riven, psychologically confused, with old certainties and beliefs tattered and weakened. (I was asked recently who was responsible for John Birt’s appointment as BBC Director-General? The answer is simple; no one was. You may search in vain to find anybody who might have made the decision who now owns up to it. Indeed key Governors go out of their way to say it was the worst decision they made! It is, after all, only success that has a thousand fathers!)

John Birt was followed by Greg Dyke, someone with his entire background from commercial television. His message to battered BBC staff was simple. “It’s time to enjoy ourselves”. Instead of interminable meetings spent on methods, process and systems, Greg Dyke encouraged everyone to protest at such behaviour whenever they encountered it, and if necessary they should demand “Cut the Crap”.

Beyond that, Dyke’s message to programme makers and channel controllers was simple: “Get popular! Where are the ratings! Beat ITV into the ground not just by a bit but as much as you can! How

will the BBC survive - by being popular!" To the objection that popularity by itself was an insufficient goal for a publicly funded broadcaster, Dyke implied that that was a lesser order problem. Increasingly though, as the programmes became less and less distinguishable from ITV 1, the audience protested: "We don't need to pay the BBC to do that! That's what ITV is here for!"

Dyke's very success in pursuing and delivering popularity and mass audiences drove him and the BBC into a dead end. Popularity and audience ratings were not enough to justify the BBC's continued existence funded by licence fee. Programmes had to be popular, universal and inclusive some of the time; a lot of the time they had to be different, distinctive, difficult, and particular to the BBC.

Such a dilemma was not new to the Dyke years. His pursuit of one of the elements in the BBC's compact with its viewers and listeners at the expense of the others demonstrated that unless you can ride a bicycle on a tightrope, you should not aspire to be Director General.

Make no mistake. Greg Dyke was massively popular with BBC staff. But he ended up confusing them about why they were there, why the BBC was there, why the licence fee was there. Because when the pursuit of ratings was elevated to the rank of the supreme good, viewer and staff instinctively reacted against it. High ratings for some of the programmes most of the time; this had to be matched with low ratings for a few of the programmes some of the time. And then, perhaps most importantly, a raft of programmes where ratings were not the issue. Quality, curiosity, innovation, experimentation, oddness ought to be the criteria. Public service broadcasting is made up of such a rich, sometimes contradictory, sometimes confusing mix. The Dyke years never cottoned on to the sheer complexity of the public service compact.

Quotes from two of Greg Dyke's tv controllers accurately reflect the massive shift of policy and attitudes that occurred under his D-Gship. One came from Jane Root, Controller of BBC 2, supposedly the "alternative" channel. For a generation, every tv controller has had as their reference bible a massive market research book telling them what is the best possible audience that they can aim for at any time of day or night. She was asked once, when faced with the choice of commissioning either an arts programme or a quiz show for transmission, knowing each would get the same size of audience, which would she choose? Unhesitatingly, she choose the quiz show.

On another occasion, the Controller of BBC 1, Lorraine Heggessey, was asked about her approach to competing with ITV. Was it not enough to beat ITV in the competition for ratings some of the time? "No" she replied, "I want to beat them the whole of the time" and commissioned programmes with that end in view.

No wonder BBC staff became confused. And remember, that not so deep down, most staff clung and cling to an instinctive belief that a publicly funded public service broadcaster has to work to a wider sense of responsibilities than a broadcaster merely with commercial obligations.

So how has this deep confusion about values led to such operational panic in a series of mini-issues that were inflated into crises by the nature of the BBC reaction?

Well, common sense has been conspicuous by its absence; common sense and good judgement, the pillars of sound editorial practice. Take the most recent issue, over "University Challenge". Sure, one of the triumphant Corpus Christi, Oxford team had become ineligible to compete because he had grown up. He was no longer a student but had been when the whole series began. Should the final be re-run? The defeated finalists, Manchester University, said "No, thanks. It was a great occasion. Better team won. We're fine". Wonderful, graceful, generous, common sense, decent.

Scarcely bothering to take the Manchester statement into account, the BBC stripped Corpus of their title! Why did the BBC ignore the obvious, commonsensical way out which Manchester had given

them?? Because they undoubtedly read their rule books, laboriously drawn up after earlier allegations of cheating the public over phone-in competitions. Undoubtedly these said the BBC must retain trust from the public by never lying or cheating. If such an incident should occur - the guidelines will say - the BBC must correct it at once. That's the rule book, the BBC's own rules. The BBC followed it. The wrong decision.

Similar processes occurred, I believe, in the other recent scandals that became crises. Why could not the BBC repond to the images of human misery in Gaza by saying that, of course, they had to show the DEC Appeal to alleviate the misery? Because, undoubtedly, BBC guidelines on editorial impartiality had scrutinised theoretical situations where the use of BBC news footage outside a BBC environment might, just might, lead to confusion about the BBC's own involvement. But by the time guide lines have micro-analysed hypothetical situations to the death, no room is left for judgement. After all, they are your guidelines, how dare you break them?

Similarly, who dreamed up the metaphysical notion that nothing offensive can be said not only on the air - unless, of course, it is "edgy" - but, hang onto this, "in BBC space". You would think that all BBC premises were blanketed with sanctity as if they were holy ground! Carole Thatcher was offensive and stupid not to apologise. Suspension, yes. Removal from the show, especially when there are well attested cases of on air prejudice by radio chat show hosts which go unpunished, no.

And Brand/Ross - an area where the programme-making is overlaid with a carpet of compliance and regulations and staffed with people to implement them. What price the rule book, what price compliance, what purpose compliance editors when that happens? The Compliance Editor in the Brand/Ross affair knew what his responsibilities were. He did not realise that this also involved actually listening to the programme to see if it did comply. Yet now a Compliance Editor has to watch every edition of "Tele-Tubbies" to see that they comply.

In the absence of agreed, shared values - and the best ones are often the unspoken values - there is no choice but to resort to the rule book, rule books, fresh volumes spawned by each fresh crisis. Each such generates a fresh tranche of compliance procedures. Editors no longer have the freedom - and responsibility - to edit. They must make sure they comply too, creating a two headed pushme-pullyu of an editorial structure- editorial and compliance - with predictable confusion and unpredictable results.

They do not prevent misjudgement; they cause it because intelligent thought is undermined by management-speak and legalistic regulation. I know common sense is a distressingly un-managerial notion, but given the damage that rigid, formulaic prescriptions have done to the BBC's policy making processes, no doubt in the name of accountability, openness, clarity, obligation to stakeholders and such like, then perhaps it is time for a revival.

Recently, the "Today" programme's John Humphreys asked the Chairman of the BBC Trust, Sir Michael Lyons, if the result of the Brand/Ross Affair would be "more compliance procedures". A revival of common sense would be wise; and a re-statement of values.

This week, Andrew Billen wrote devastatingly in "The Times" of the vacuity that underlay most management theory. He dreamed of a BBC where "managers were chosen not for their ability to bandy jargon with their superiors but for their empathy, pragmatism, experience and decisiveness with their staff. They would be drawn from among the people who do the work. Once chosen, they would be allowed to do the job or be replaced. This brave new world would cease to be managed. It would begin to be led". Leadership involves articulating values not policing compliance procedures.

Unless it follows such a path, I fear the BBC will continue making mistakes. Which none of us want?

Reality v Imagination in the Literature of Place

The 2008 Annual Lecture was given by **Jan Morris**, travel writer and Commonwealth Fund Fellow 1953., in November 2008. She has kindly agreed that we might reproduce her text in this edition of our newsletter.

Contemplating the distinguished roster of people who've given the Harkness Lecture before me, I thought I should at least give my talk here a properly scholastic sort of title. And it's not a bad one, is it? "*Reality versus imagination in the literature of place*". It does slightly lack the authority of one of those thesis titles with a colon in the middle - like, well, you know, "*Northern Harmonies: Climactic influences on the Norwegian liturgical tradition*". You know the ones, I'm sure. The first half of the title is generally soothing: "*Northern Harmonies*" sounds peaceful and reassuring, doesn't it, but the crunch comes in the second half, after the colon: "*Climactic influences on the Norwegian liturgical tradition.*" That's there to wake you up! But there we are. I can't match that. *Reality v Imagination* is what it's going to be, and in my context what that really means is this: How much is fact, and how much is fiction in travel literature — how much is true, how much is just made up, and does it matter either way?

Though I say it myself I am well qualified to speak on the subject, as I've spent much of my life writing what are generally called travel books. As a matter of fact the very first one I ever wrote I wrote for the Commonwealth Fund, sort of. I went to America in 1953 on a Commonwealth Fund Fellowship, and it was the rule in those days that one must spend some time at an American University, and some time travelling. Well, I checked in at Chicago University and found a return to academia not at all to my taste, so I decided to skip the university bit and spent the whole year travelling around America. At the end one had to submit a report to the Commonwealth Fund people and what I did was write a book about my journey, and hand that in as my report. They didn't mind a bit! So not only was that fellowship one of the very best presents I ever had in my life, it really started me off as a writer of books.

And that first book, which I called *Coast to Coast*, really was a travel book, a book about a journey. Long ago, though, I came to detest the classification of travel book, and now I don't actually believe in the genre of travel writing. And I know from my own work how often reality and imagination, fact and fancy, get blurred in a writer's mind. Sometimes it happens despite oneself, willy nilly. Years ago I wrote an evocative piece about sitting on a slope above Sydney harbour, drinking white wine with an old friend and eating crab sandwiches in good crisp bread. When much later I came to write a retrospective essay about the experience I remembered every aspect of it absolutely - the sensual way in which my friend slurped the wine and crunched the bread, the tang of the crab, the great blue bowl of the Australian sky above us, and to cap it all the white wings of Sydney Opera House, like a huge seabird beside the water, like a benediction. I remembered it all with absolute clarity, not just the sensations of it, but the look of it too, exactly: and it was only long, long afterwards, when I came to re-read the essay, that I realized Sydney Opera House hadn't been built then.

That was an unconscious fusion of real and make-believe, and of course in one degree or another any factual writing about place is bound to reflect the ingrained attitudes, memories and insights of the writer — even the most prosaic of travelogues (awful word!), even many guide books. I can think of at least two proper guide-books, E. M. Forster's *Guide to Alexandria* and Richard Ford's *Handbook to Spain*, which because of their authors' genius are also works of literature. And the very best of travel books, too, books about journeys, I mean, as against

books simply about place — the best of them too, as given us by a Patrick Leigh Fermor or a Cohn Thubron or a Jonathan Raban, can be great works of creative art. For the serious, dedicated writer about travel is bound to see a place through his own individual eyes, not through the responses of his predecessors or contemporaries, or the putative responses of his readers, and successors, but relying entirely on his own sensibility. (I have to say, here, by the way, in brackets, so to speak, that nothing annoys me more than to be told, by a reader of one of my own books about place, that the place I have evoked isn't at all like the place he knows: well of course it isn't. I'm looking at it, not him! I'm not trying to reflect or influence anyone else's responses, I am only writing about mine, the effect of the place upon my own personal sensibility! There we are — end of bracket!)

My own practice anyway is always to travel, if possible, by myself, alone with my own thoughts and my own perceptions, however naive, misleading or bigoted. As a result I am generally an un-convivial, unsociable sort of traveller, and people sometimes take me to be lonely in my calling. Not long ago I was in the Isle of Man, for the first time in my life, preparing an essay about it. I had bought myself a book about Manx folklore, and found an agreeable cafe by the sea, and was drinking Guinness and eating prawns, and reading about the island goblins with a map on the table beside me, and was altogether in a kind of gentle ecstasy. As I sat there basking in it all a lady handed me a pamphlet. "That's very kind of you", said I, hastily swallowing a fork-full of prawns, "that's very kind of you, what's it about?", "Oh my dear", she replied, "it is only to reassure you that God is always with the lonely".

The most innocent sort of deception in travel memoirs is this unpremeditated sort. When we came home from the 1953 Everest expedition, the first to get to the top of the mountain, we were invited to a celebratory banquet by the British Government, at Lancaster House. I happened to sit next to the elderly swell, whose name I forget, who was so to speak the major-domo of the occasion, and opposite me sat Tenzing Norgay, the magnificent Sherpa who had reached the summit with Edmund Hillary, and who had never in his life been out of Asia before. Well, early in the meal the old boy on my right said to me that he hoped I would enjoy the claret, which he said was probably the last crate of that particular vintage in the cellars of Lancaster House, and perhaps the last anywhere. I was naturally impressed, and I looked across the table to Tenzing, who was most certainly enjoying the claret. It was perhaps the first grape wine he'd ever tasted in his life, and he was radiant with pride and pleasure — he was a truly princely figure, and the lackeys respectfully filled and re-filled his glass. Presently my neighbour turned to me again and said in his silvery Edwardian English "Oh, how good it is to see that Mr Tenzing knows a decent claret when he has one".

I must have written and told that tale a thousand times over the years - when I first went to America I told it in New York, and when I got to San Francisco somebody told it to me. Since then I've spread it all over the world, but the other day I happened to find a menu of that Lancaster House occasion, with the food listed on one side and the wine on the other. And do you know something? There hadn't been any claret! But was I actually wrong in my account? Doesn't the very sound of the word "claret" truly sum up the flavour of that moment, better than the name of any other wine? Aesthetically, historically perhaps, certainly lyrically, it was a claret moment, not a burgundy or a Rioja, let alone a Chilean Merlot moment that we experienced at the dinner table that night.

A very different category of false reportage is the deliberate kind - what has come to be called *faction*.. This is often fact masquerading as fiction, or embedded in it. A famous example is the classic book about the island of Capri between the two world wars, an evocation of life on that island then, in all its jumble of colour, scandal, absurdity, beauty and pathos. The classic work about it is not ostensibly a factual work at all. Its author Norman Douglas, in the novel *South Wind*, decided not to call the island Capri, but *Nepenthe*, and he peopled it with characters who were not actually real characters, but were generically so, as it were. Douglas himself said that before a human character became material for fiction it must be "licked into shape", and he did just that when he turned Capri into *Nepenthe*.

Much of the very best writing about real places is written as fiction. The Russians used to be adept at this hybrid art, sometimes by setting their stories against genuine backgrounds, complete with actual street names, sometimes just by magical topographical evocations. You know the sort of thing: "On a hot July morning in the year 1866, in a village in the district of X., in the province of T., a young man was standing listlessly at a window when a dilapidated, springless carriage, the sort used in Russia now only by cattle-dealers and poor priests, rumbled and squeaked by on the road to the neighbouring market town of W" — and instantly, by the end of the first paragraph, we have somehow got the hang of the setting. The impression is heightened in my own case, as a matter of fact, because so many of my Russian classics are in the old Foreign Language Publishing House translations, printed in Moscow long ago and still fragrant with the rather sickly printers' ink they used in Stalin's time.

Nobody has ever captured the city of Alexandria better than Laurence Durrell in his *Alexandria Quartet*, and that's because his fictional prose, so ripe, so steamy, so suggestive, represents the character of the place much more exactly than any so called travel writing could. Charles Dickens wrote a famous essay about a city which was more than half fancy, but was nevertheless profoundly true. He wrote seven closely-printed pages without mentioning the name of the place, and takes his readers through a magically suggestive and mysterious water-city, veiled in poetic suggestion, until at last, in the very final paragraph of the essay, he gives the game away by saying: "I have, many and many a time thought since of this strange Dream upon the water: half wondering if it lie there yet, and if its name be VENICE" I

Modern Americans have been specialists in this sort of thing too, and John Cheever's vast body of fiction, for example, illustrates so exactly the look, feel and moods of post-war American suburbia that in the future it will surely be compulsory reading not just for lovers of literature, but for sociologists too. And in Wales of course, my own country, where reality is never more than a sort of movable feast anyway, even the old fairy tales are travel books too. They are set in real places, meticulously named, so that you can go even now to the actual pub in Llanidloes where Dick the Fiddler spent his fairy money, or the very place where the foolish farmer of Dyffryn Gwyn captured the elfin cow. The greatest modern Welsh novel, Caradoc Prichard's *Un Nos Lleuad — One Moonlit Night* — almost creepily describes, by means purely of plot and dialogue, the plan of an Edwardian north Wales mining village.

Occasionally people think, actually, that the plot of a novel interferes unnecessarily with its topographical bits. Lots of Thomas Hardy enthusiasts read him more for the Dorset countryside than for the stories. When *Lady Chatterley's Lover* came out in 1932, a reviewer in the magazine *Horse and Hound* said that although the book contained excellent descriptions of the English landscape, it was spoiled by "certain sentimental or erotic digressions"! On the other hand some

travel books are novels almost despite themselves. The Trieste writer Claudio Magris wrote a marvellous travel book about the Danube, tracing the course of the river from source to mouth, and he defined this masterpiece of travel literature as "a drowned novel". And a well-known American novelist told me that he liked writing travel books because he didn't have to make up a plot - the travel did it for him.

Then an opposite category of *faction* writing presents totally fictional places as non-fiction. Many writers have chosen, for one reason and another, to write travel books about places that exist only in their own minds — except of course, that everyone's mind is stacked with the memories and impressions of a lifetime. Alberto Manguel once compiled a dictionary of imaginary places, and a great big book it is. I keep it on my reference shelves, along with the encyclopedias, although there is not a place in its 450 pages that you can find in an atlas. I suppose the original archetype of this art-form was Thomas More's *Utopia*, which he wrote in 1516, and whose title was to go into languages around the world. It was a fundamentally political work, about the search for an ideal form of government, but it was also an elaborately worked-out gazetteer of an entirely fanciful island, rich in detail, including the widths of streets, the architecture of churches and the exact geographical situation (15 miles off the coast of South America).

Hundreds of authors have followed More's example, down to Orwell, Huxley, Anthony Powell and the creator of *Oz*, by way of Francis Bacon, Jonathan Swift, Samuel Butler and a host of others. Some of them are even more detailed than *Utopia*. In 1978, for instance, the novelist Brigid Brophy devised the Balkan kingdom of *Evarchia*, and equipped it with a native fauna, an architectural style, a language, a literature and even a destiny — it was taken over by a Communist military Government in the year of its creation. Manguel lists literally hundreds more, in his book of 500-odd pages, and as it happens on page 433 he records a place I invented myself.

And that book should be an object lesson for writers like me who monkey about with fact and fantasy.

I published *Last Letters from Hav*, in 1985, about an obviously and totally imaginary city-State somewhere on the coast of Turkey. But because I was known, God help me, as a travel writer, instantly the book was placed on the travel writing shelves of bookshops. No matter that the geographical and political situation of *Hav* was obviously nonsensical, that nobody had ever heard of such a place, that extremely improbable things happened there and the place was finally obliterated by a foreign intervention that nobody had ever read about in any newspaper — no matter that the whole thing was a load of balls, it was written by a so-called travel writer, and so it went on the bookshop travel writing shelves.

Scores of people wrote to me to ask if you needed a visa to go to *Hav*. Several said they seemed to remember stopping off there on a cruise. Even the librarian of the Royal Geographical Society asked me for more exact identification. Only one single reader, an octogenarian lady in Iowa, recognized the book for what it was meant to be — a historical allegory. It was only when I supplemented it a couple of years ago with a second volume, bringing the history of the place bang up to date, that *Hav* finally found its proper place on the fiction shelves (where, I have to add, precious few people seem to have noticed it, let alone bought it...).

Of course writers can hardly help telescoping or combining some of their memories and experiences, which is a sort of falsification, I suppose, just as memory itself, after all, often plays us false. I was asked once to write a short piece, for a literary symposium, about my worst travel moment, and I put together a kind of hypothetical awful experience — everything

in it had really happened to me, but not all at the same time. This is how it goes. It is to have been robbed of my passport and plane ticket, my baggage having already been lost in flight, while suffering from extreme diarrhea during a high summer heat-wave and a severe water-shortage, at a moment when the local electricity supplies and telephone services have been shut off because of political disturbances, with nothing to read but a John Grisham thriller which I'm almost sure, though I can't be certain, that I've read before, expecting a visit from the security police in a hotel room without a washbasin overlooking a railway freight yard on a national holiday in the Egyptian town of Zagazig.

But there we are, it might have been raining in Zagazig, mightn't it — and how evocative it, wasn't it, to hear those steam trains shunting just outside my window all through the night! And I suppose it was misleading, in a way, because on the whole, or rather on average, I have had an extraordinarily uneventful time travelling. When I was in newspapers in fact I used to be very envious of my colleagues, who were always being arrested as spies and causing diplomatic incidents! Nothing ever happened to me. Perhaps it was because I took the advice of a Minister of National Guidance in the Sudan, years and years ago. He was later executed, I believe, for misguiding the nation, but he had time to tell me that my duty as a foreign correspondent was to report "thrilling, attractive and good news, coinciding wherever possible with the truth". I followed his advice ever after, wherever I travelled.

"Coinciding wherever possible with the truth". I don't blush to repeat it, because like every other writer about place who ever lived, I have just occasionally tampered with the gospel truth. At least as long ago as the 13th century travellers were suspected of doing this. They called old Marco Polo a liar when he came home from the East to Venice; I think he was tacitly admitting as much when he protested that, in his words, "the reader must be prepared to believe everything in this book". But the sort of thing we do, Marco Polo and I, is not actually lying. It's a sort of instinctive deception. I was not lying when I told that story about Tenzing and the claret. I honestly don't remember, after all these years, if I thought it really had been claret but I'm not at all ashamed if I deliberately invented the wine, because it fitted the ambiance and the music of the tale. I was faithfully recording my own responses to the occasion - even if those responses did not, as the Minister of National Guidance would prefer, correspond exactly with the truth.

Fifty-something years ago I was wandering in the eastern Himalaya, at about 19,000 feet, on an entirely empty snow plateau stretching away to Tibet. There was no human habitation anywhere near, and I was all alone. I was actually fondly hoping to see an Abominable Snowman, but instead I presently saw a solitary man, approaching me across that white wilderness. I plunged through the loose snow to meet him, and he seemed to find nothing strange about my presence there. He wore a yellow hood, a yellow cloak and hide boots, and from his waist there hung a spoon and a satchel. He carried nothing else, and he wore no gloves. He was entirely silent. He stood there slightly smiling, as though he was in a trance, and presently without a word he set off across the illimitable snowy wasteland towards Tibet. He seemed to me without means of survival, and he moved with a proud gliding movement that looked inexorable. He did not appear to move fast, but in a few moments, or so it seemed to me, he had almost disappeared, and was no more than a small black speck, inexplicably moving over the snows.

Well, did I really see him? Was he true? I swear to you that he was, but sometimes, I admit, I do wonder. Was he a high-altitude illusion of some kind? Was I half-tranced myself, or dizzy with strange tales of Tibet? I really don't know the objective truth about the encounter, the strangest of my life, but

I know that subjectively my account of it was dead accurate.. And often, I think, in writings about place, subjective truth is perfectly justifiable. The best travel writing doesn't set out to tell readers what they are going to see, or feel, but what the writer has seen — just as a painter's view of something is probably not ours, may well be incomprehensible to us, but is none the less genuine for that.

Take a writer like Norman Lewis. He wrote one of the best books ever about place in his *Naples 44*. It was about the city under Allied occupation during the Italian campaigns of World War II, and it was an astonishing survey of a place addled by corruption, defeat, superstition and hunger, but at the same time indomitably high-spirited, and through all its troubles still uniquely itself. Lewis' narrative is full of scandalous anecdotes, puzzles, cross-currents of Mafia and black market, pervaded always by the smells and depressions of war. It's a wonderful book, universally admired, but I myself take many of its more piquant or appalling moments with a grain of salt. I don't believe it all happened to him as he says it did - and remember he was not, as Douglas was at Lepenthe, licking a subject into the fictional shape he wanted. He was describing his responses to a real city at a real moment of history. But was he actually lying, in formulating this masterpiece? I think not. He was evoking a wider truth, describing Naples in 1944 not simply as he saw it, but as he knew it was, and so far as I know nobody has ever said that it really wasn't like that. If it wasn't strictly true, every word of it, Lewis made it true, by the depth of his insight and the breadth of his view.

Since the beginning of literature, since Homer himself, writers have resorted to duplicity or impressionism to reveal truths. But there is yet another, profounder kind of deception in travel writing, which is not really deception at all. It is the usage of allegory, the literary practice of seeing multiple meanings in everything. Detecting allegories in things, or making allegories of them, has not always been admired. Medieval theologians, for instance, accused heretics of allegorizing holy scripture, and modern scholars still upset religious fundamentalists by interpreting most of the Bible as allegory. For that matter allegory itself has its opponents, especially as a literary instrument. The Oxford Dictionary defines it dispassionately as "the description of a subject under the guise of some other subject of aptly suggestive resemblance", but it is easy to claim half-knowledge as allegory, or muddy thinking, or just lack of inspiration. Robert Musil once defined writers with a weakness for the form as people who "suppose everything to mean more than it has any honest claim to mean".

That's me. I am one of them. I long ago came to think that my life itself was one long allegory, and the older I get, the more my conviction grows. I did not, however, deliberately foster the device. It just crept up on me. Some of the literary subjects of my old age have been half allegorical from the start — America, for example, and railway trains. Some are subtly tinged with allegory. Some reveal themselves as allegory as I think about them. Some, I admit, I have supposed to mean more than they have any honest claim to mean, and some are really more analogous than allegorical. But I see now that in almost all of them, allegory in one kind or another, the belief that most things in life possess multiple meanings, has subtly affected my perceptions and broadened my vision.

One of the Spanish philosophers, whose name I won't mention because I don't know how to pronounce it - one of those savants once suggested that we all carry upon our backs the legacy of our whole lives, like a curled up roll of film. He lived before the digital age. My experience has been that, as I entered my eighties, I began to begin to review that long exposure with new interest: and so I came to detect, especially in later years of the film, that the meanings of almost everything in life are flexible. Meanings might be apparent to one reader and not to

another, be true in different ways, be meanings of reality or meanings of the imagination.

And as the taste for allegory grew upon me, so did a conviction about its ultimate importance. Like most of us as we grow old, I have tinkered with theories about the Meaning of Life, religion and all that, and have reached the conclusion that it is all entirely beyond our reach. We cannot, and never can, know the truth about the great imponderables of life and death. Except that ... Just as some Christian scholars explain the Bible and its miracles as being purely metaphorical, so perhaps the whole conundrum of existence, all the mysteries of creation, the Milky Way and the armadillo, art and mathematics, even love and hate and sorrow — perhaps the whole damned caboodle is itself no more than some kind of majestically impenetrable allegory.

A running theme of my own work has been an enigmatic preoccupation with the city of Trieste, which culminated a few years back in a book. I have known the place for sixty years, and while it hasn't changed all that much, my visions of it have, because I came to see it over the years more and more through eyes of allegory. When I first knew Trieste, at the very end of world war 2, I saw it, and described it, as an archetypal European city. It had survived the war largely unscathed, and it seemed to me to be a summation of everything I thought of as European. Its architecture, its purposes, its history, its populace, its culture - all were, as I saw it then, figures of Europeaness, and seemed to speak of me of da Vinci, Bach, Bonaparte, Shakespeare, Einstein and all the other names which spelled out for me, aged 19 and never out of Britain before, the immemorial meaning of our continent. I sat on a bollard by the waterfront one evening and wrote an essay along these lines — and I still have it, somewhere under the stairs at home. Such was my first allegory of Trieste.

The second was less reassuring. Later, for many years, the world squabbled over the possession of the city - Italians, Yugoslavs, as they then were, Americans, British, even Russians, at a distance. Then I began to see the city as something less coherent, ethnically mixed, politically confused and confusing: the sort of place that people in general are not quite sure about - where it is, what country it's in, who lives there, what language it speaks. I began to think of it as a figure of the world's contradictions and anomalies, always searching for its own meanings, never satisfied.

I kept going there, on and off, over the years, and as the political confusion of it gradually subsided, I began to perceive through the substance of the city the presence of a lost authority, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, which had ruled its multi-ethnic populace until the first world war, and was still visible in its structures, and almost tangible in its atmosphere. This was my third allegory of the city — a place where civilized order was at least possible, whatever the circumstances, among people of many races. It seemed to me that the Empire of the Habsburgs had almost succeeded in making a grand unity of its subject peoples — though never, of course, quite pulling it off, the very principle of Empire having a fatal moral flaw at its heart. I wrote several essays then, not a bit like the other ones,

expressing not so much the existence of that spectral order, as the lingering shade of it - for you see, imagination was impinging upon reality, and allegory was taking over.

Finally, not so long ago, at last I wrote a book about Trieste — my final book and in my own view the best. It was ostensibly a book about the city, but it was really my fourth allegory of Trieste, in an extreme sense. Having thought about the place for so long and with such varying susceptibility, I had now come to feel that in a sort of way I was Trieste. Its muddles of identity mirrored my own life. Its solitary posture reminded me of my own. I called the book *Trieste and the Meaning of Nowhere*, because it was a city, as I had come to see it, always alone, on a fold in the map, neither altogether this nor altogether that. And in this too I thought I could detect my own situation in life.

The book ends with an image of nightingales swarming out of a castle on the shore of Trieste, and one of the book's editors queried the passage with the words "Do nightingales swarm?" Well of course they don't, but does that mean I was lying about them? Not exactly. Should the book have been called fiction? Well, that would have been misleading, because it was a portrait of a real city. Was it actually non-fiction, then? Not absolutely, because so much of it came out of my own dreaming. The book is a little exemplar of the conflict that seems to exist between Imagination and Reality, but which so often turns out to be, in my mind anyway, not a conflict at all, but an alliance — not only in books, but perhaps in all our lives too.

For the two of them, reality and imagination are often united to magical effect. The imagination of children, especially, often creates imaginary friends — as real to them as actual children, to be conversed with, and played with, even quarrelled with - inhabitants of a world unknown unimagined, by the grown-ups all around. And when imagination summons faith, too, into the alliance with reality, then the result can be profound: for many a true Christian, I believe, even among the most sophisticated of them, knows, really knows, that the wafer he is given at Mass genuinely is the body of Christ. His imagination has created a reality, just as people's belief that a place is holy really makes it holy.

Anyway, even all the allegories of Trieste are less vivid in my mind than a make-believe village that was imagined first in medieval times, and is still perfectly real to me. It is the idea of a perfect Wales, a dream, where everything most lovely about our little country governs the daily life of the people, where nothing cruel or humourless is tolerated, and everything kind, beautiful and fun is cherished by one and all. This delightful figment of literary fancy was known to the old poets as Abercuawg, "where the cuckoos sing". At moments of extreme patriotism, inspiration and perhaps intoxication, I really I feel I live there still, and I often write about it; but contemporary critics, knowing my addiction to the place, and my senile conviction that reality and imagination can truly be one and the same thing - dullard critics inevitably accuse me of living — where else? - in cloud cuckoo land.

Perhaps I am. And why not?