

THE NEW GLADSTONE REVIEW

Issue No. 4

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a quarterly e-journal

*Informal commentary, opinions, reviews, news, illustrations and poetry
for bookish people of philanthropic inclination*

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1. Editorial

This issue is the last to be published this year in the format introduced when I moved the 'shop' back to Lincoln. It covers a period when access has been free, via the website, rather than only sent to subscribers who paid a small annual fee for what was then a monthly publication. But, again, I would welcome submission of articles that might appear in future issues; and would also appreciate some feedback on the nature and content of the shop and/or this e-journal, whether positive or negative in tone. Comments can also be posted on the independent Book Guide website:

<https://www.inprint.co.uk/thebookguide/shops/multi.php?id=2297>

Most of the articles in this issue need no introduction. As is customary, I have aimed to present an eclectic mixture of book reviews, literary speculations, comments on notable writers with local associations, an enigmatic poem and concerns of global significance. And I am most grateful to Stephen Rogers for his reflections on pleasures derived from some authors' inspiring styles of writing.

But I cannot avoid referring to my son David's untimely, recent death. Some people known to me personally who learned of this have sent their condolences, which are much appreciated. I believe I have responded to most, but if I have overlooked anybody who reads this, please accept my sincere thanks. Article 5 reproduces parts of the statement he wrote close to the end of his life, which were read out at his humanist funeral service – an event that was both moving and heartening. At the end of the article, there are website links to two national newspaper obituaries (in *The Guardian* and *The Independent*), which indicate the high esteem in which he was held.

At present, there seems little to be cheerful about - at global, national or personal levels. To the Aristotelian virtues, Paul in the King James version of the Bible added '*faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity.*' Theology aside, in that spirit I wish all my readers

A Charitable and Convivial Christmas holiday

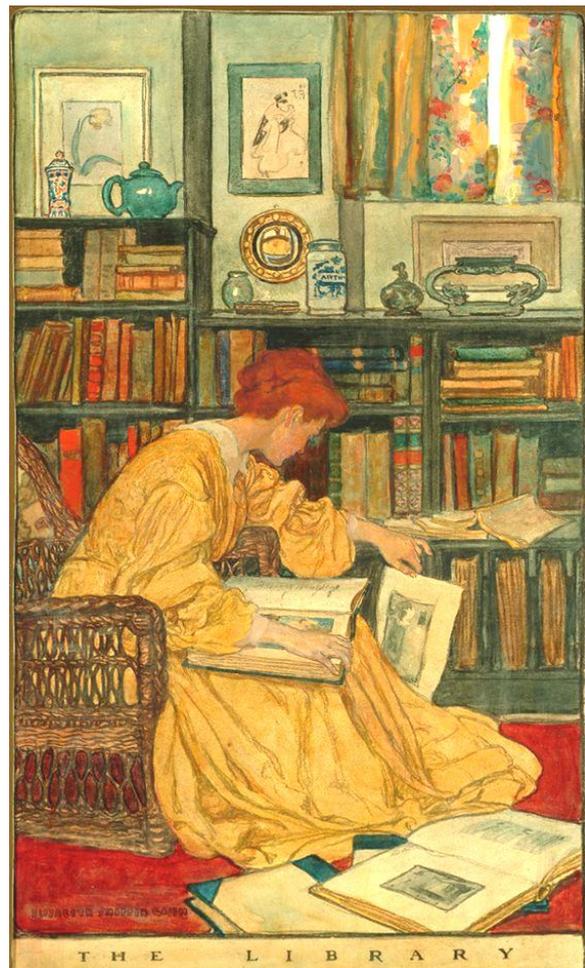
2. The significance of book illustrations in enhancing mental reflection: *an opinion*

I suspect that many people consider book illustrations to be very poor substitutes for digital forms of depiction - which on the illuminated screen can be so much brighter, crisper and accessible than those reproduced on paper that seem unwieldy by comparison. For it is arguable that, on the evidence of the widespread activity of staring at hand-held iPads/iPods in any circumstances that physically permit it (e.g. on public transport, doctors' waiting rooms, cafés, the chamber of the House of Commons etc, etc), such forms of portrayal, with their constantly moving (often *live*) images, provide instant gratification - satisfying a hunger for news, entertainment and catharsis, in the absence of which many people's lives might feel *empty*.

But it's worth questioning whether the technology used by such a large proportion of humanity (across all hitherto largely impermeable divides - age, race, social status, financial wealth, cultural norms etc) provides solutions to previously unmet needs or desires, or whether it has *created* them. And, indeed, whether having whet the appetite it serves up *haute cuisine* or just tasteless pabulum.

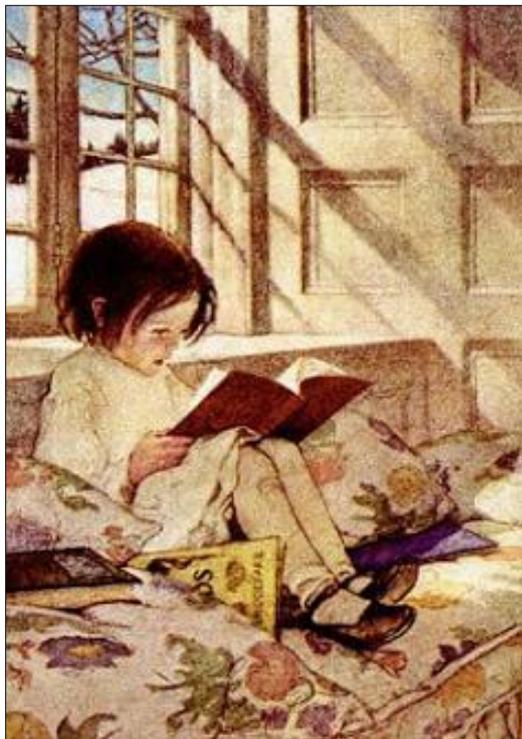
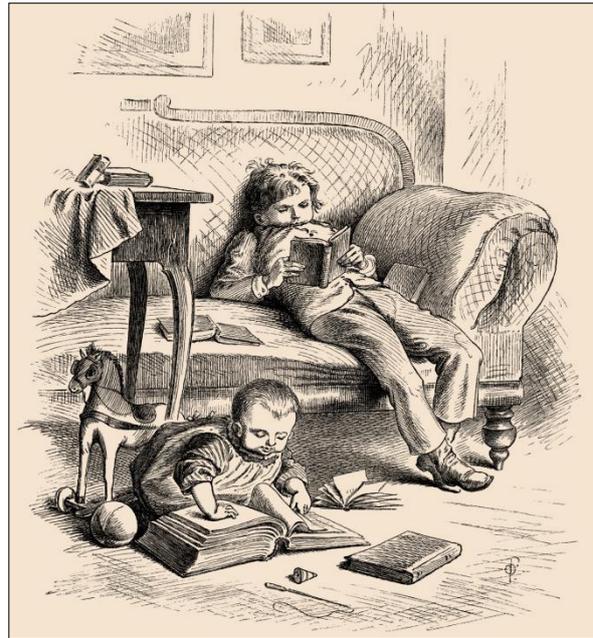
Of course, electronic means of communication have their uses; and can play vital roles in certain circumstances. But like all powerful technologies they can also have adverse effects on human nature, which were, almost inevitably, unforeseen by their inventors. Use by terrorists, bullying and sexting are obvious examples, but the sort of insult and smear issued, especially by leading politicians who tweet without scruples, might have much more widespread adverse effects.

In general, the extreme ease with which almost anyone, anywhere and often anonymously, can broadcast offensive, scurrilous or inflammatory messages and images must be a cause for universal concern, which suggests the need for much tighter controls to protect innocent people from harm. It's notable that the inventor of the World Wide Web (www), Sir Tim Berners-Lee is apparently now attempting to address this problem; but the difficulties of doing so effectively are sure to be a major challenge.



But, apart from such overt abuses, over which there is probably little disagreement, I would argue that electronic means of communication are liable to have less-obvious, but often quite insidious, effects on those who use them routinely. There are several ways such effects are exerted. For example, the ease with which images can be viewed and then discarded with but momentary visual impact undermines the reflective aspects of consciousness that are essential to any sort of mental engagement. Like the adverts that appear on commercial TV channels, the transient images seem designed to induce a sort of hypnotic state, with carefully crafted subliminal images.

(Unfortunately, the BBC now apes this approach, so that advertisements of future programmes on the same or other channels are repeatedly inserted between the scheduled programmes.)



Moreover, as argued by the leading brain scientist Professor Susan Greenfield, former Director of the Royal Institution, a major consequence of excessive exposure to electronic stimuli is that the structure of the brain, and hence its mental capabilities, becomes adversely altered. Affecting the same parts of the brain that enable London ‘black cab’ taxi drivers to remember the routes through the City (for proof of which they have to pass the stringent *Knowledge* test), and that in people who read books and do cross-words into old age has been shown to result in longer, healthier lives - the excessive exposure of young brains to stimuli from *iPads* often has detrimental effects.

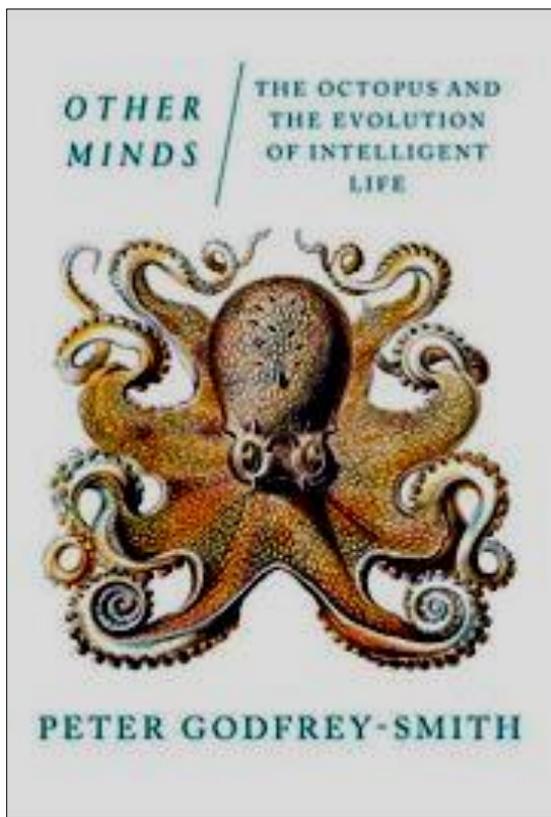
The evidence is now persuasive that what prepares young people for adult life is the ability to pay attention for extended periods of time, possess self-control, and think in deep and meaningful ways about issues – apparently the exact opposite of the *surfing* and *tweeting* mentality. In books, the appropriate use of evocative illustrations is often, I believe, a valuable adjunct to the written word in encouraging fuller appreciation of the ideas being conveyed, And in some cases the illustrations are works of art in themselves, embellishing and enhancing the content of the text.

3. The Octopus and the Evolution of Intelligent Life: a review

by Peter Godfrey-Smith. (William Collins, 2018. pb)

One of my pleasures in old age (albeit, quite rare) is discovering the enthusiasm of youngsters in telling me of things of mutual interest that I didn't know. A prime example is the excited account that Hannah, my 13 year-old granddaughter, gave me of a book she'd been reading about recent discoveries concerning the intelligence of cephalopods – perhaps the most well-known of which are the octopus and cuttlefish. On her recommendation, I promptly bought my own copy!

Based on recent research, the octopus is now reckoned to demonstrate a level of intelligence far higher than previously thought. This notable discovery is apparently related to the fact that, in contrast to the situation in vertebrates, in the octopus the association of nerve cells in each of the separate limbs possesses a degree of freedom of action from the control exerted



by the central brain. That is to say, in a manner akin to human responses to *seeing* objects, the eight limbs apparently react in a largely independent way to stimuli in the surrounding environment. It seems that evolution has decentralised the animal's awareness – and perhaps produced a form of consciousness which, although probably quite different from ours, seems equivalent in its mental capacities to that shown by young children or dogs.

Discussion of consciousness clearly involves delving into intellectual territory with profound philosophical implications; while considering the capacities of the nervous system entails detailed knowledge of recent research in neurophysiology: a combination too daunting for most such specialists of either type. So it is not surprising that it is a rare person who has addressed such matters, and probably an even rarer one who could write such a clear and

engaging account as this book provides.

In my view, the author, Australian academic Peter Godfrey-Smith, amply demonstrates such eclectic talents. For in addition to being a professor of the history and philosophy of science at Sydney University, he is a skilled scuba diver who has spent many hours observing cephalopods in a nearby small bay that has been designated a 'marine sanctuary,'

But if we deduce that cephalopods are so smart, what kind of intelligence seems to be at work? Godfrey-Smith presents his original theory in a series of chapters given invitingly enigmatic titles that are often based on his submarine encounters with them. Thus in *Mischief*

and Craft he illustrates the playful behaviour of the octopus towards humans. In *From White Noise to Consciousness*, he suggests that although the central brain acts as an orchestral conductor, the nervous activities of the separate limbs are like ‘jazz players, inclined to improvisation, who will only accept so much direction.’

But throughout he subscribes to the Darwinian theory that the distinct trajectories of evolution demonstrated by different species are a consequence of the survival strategies demanded by the interaction of their biology and the environment they inhabit. One of the crucial facts he discovered, first through personally encountering the same cephalopods over time when diving, and then by detailed reading about the species, was that they live very short lives – typically only one or two years in the case of the octopus’

This posed some puzzling questions. ‘*What is the point of building a large nervous system if your life is over in a year or two. The machinery of intelligence is expensive. .What is the point of learning about the world if there’s no time to put it into practice?* In fact, he notes, ‘*Cephalopods are evolution’s only experiment in large brains outside of the vertebrates*’ The answer is not simple, but according to Godfrey-Smith the short lives of cephalopods might have stemmed from the abandonment of the hard protective shell of their evolutionary ancestors. ‘*This set them on a path of mobility, dexterity and nervous complexity*’ – but also to vulnerability to ‘*the sharp-toothed predators surrounding them.*’ In the words of the title of the chapter discussing this theory, *Experience Compressed*, the emergence of the behavioural responses that depended on ‘intelligence’ provided an effective solution to the problem largely encountered by the loss of the shell.

In *Other Minds*, Peter Godfrey-Smith provides a riveting account of how subjective experience might have emerged: that is to say, how *nature* first became *aware* of itself. Very probably, it was a process that largely occurred in the oceans, where animals first appeared. On this assumption, the author speculates on how clumps of seaborne cells formed symbiotic associations that became capable of sensing, acting, and signaling. And as the constituent cells of these primitive *organisms* became more interdependent, they grew more complicated.

The first nervous systems probably evolved in distant relatives of jellyfish. Later, the cephalopods, originally inconspicuous molluscs, lost their shells and left the ocean floor in their search for prey nearer the surface. And it was here that acquiring increased ‘intelligence’ proved to be a vital strategy. But it is evident that the emergence of intelligence in mammals and birds began later, and followed an independent evolutionary route.

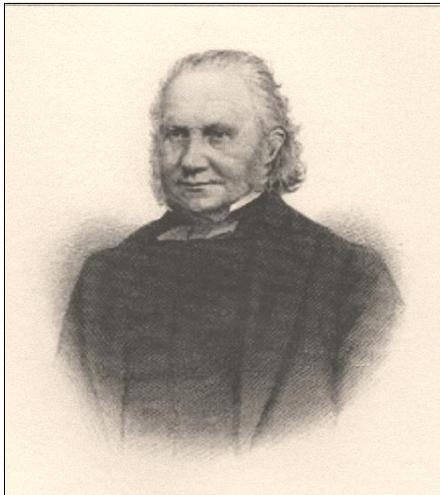
This is an enjoyable book, though perhaps one easier to appreciate by those having some acquaintance with evolutionary ideas. But I am delighted that it was brought to my attention by a bright member of the younger generation, my granddaughter Hannah, who clearly also found it to be as engaging to read as it was informative.

4. Two notable Victorians from Gainsborough: Thomas Cooper and Thomas Miller

Some years ago I was given a pile of damaged books that, I was told, would otherwise have been consigned to the dustbin. Most were beyond repair, but I was so impressed by the wood cuts in one, *English Country Life* by Thomas Miller (1861) that I had it rebound with gilt titling on the spine. I had never heard of the author but confess to finding his writing (consisting of, as declared by the book's subtitle, *descriptions of rural habits, country scenery and the seasons* and embellished with lines of poems, including some of his own) nostalgically evocative of earlier, gentler times – though realising that life for many then was probably much harsher.

Much later, I came across *The Life of Thomas Cooper*, the autobiography of a prominent Victorian non-conformist preacher, active Chartist¹ and poet, who in writing of his childhood told of his close friendship with Thomas Miller, who lived in the 'same square of small dwellings, called Sailors' Alley' in Gainsborough. The coincidence was so striking that I resolved to research their lives more fully, and the following is a brief summary of my findings.

Thomas Cooper was born in Leicester in 1805, but he moved with his widowed mother to Gainsborough when he was four. After basic schooling he was at first apprenticed to a shoemaker, but by self-education he became a school master at age 23, and then after working as a journalist in



Lincoln and London, joined the staff of the *Leicestershire Mercury* in 1840. He combined journalism with spirited preaching, first as a fundamentalist Methodist and later as a Baptist.

It was in Leicester that his, frequently fiery, political passions were aroused, and soon, under his leadership, the town became a Chartist stronghold, publishing its own journals and running an adult school. But his impulsive character often led to violent disturbances, which in 1842 resulted in imprisonment in Stafford Goal for two years for his role in inciting riots that took place in the Potteries. While incarcerated, he wrote *Purgatory of Suicides*, a poem of 944 stanzas, that was subsequently described as a 'political epic'

On leaving prison he became less radical in his approach, although still championing the Chartist cause. And he moved in literary circles, for example encountering Benjamin Disraeli in seeking a publisher for his poetry, and Charles Kingsley - who apparently encouraged him to return to Christian beliefs from which he had lapsed. It is believed that Kingsley based his novel *Alton Locke* on Cooper's experiences as a Chartist.

For the last 30 years of his life Cooper became what might called an 'old-fashioned radical' – lecturing (mostly attacking Darwin's theory of evolution), and writing fiction, political tracts and much poetry². His autobiography, now regarded as a minor Victorian classic, is certainly a fascinating read, especially for those living in his local area of Lincolnshire, and is written in a genteel style that belies his rather tempestuous reputation. He died in 1892 and is buried in Lincoln.

¹ Chartism was the working class movement for political reform that was prominent in the mid-19th century

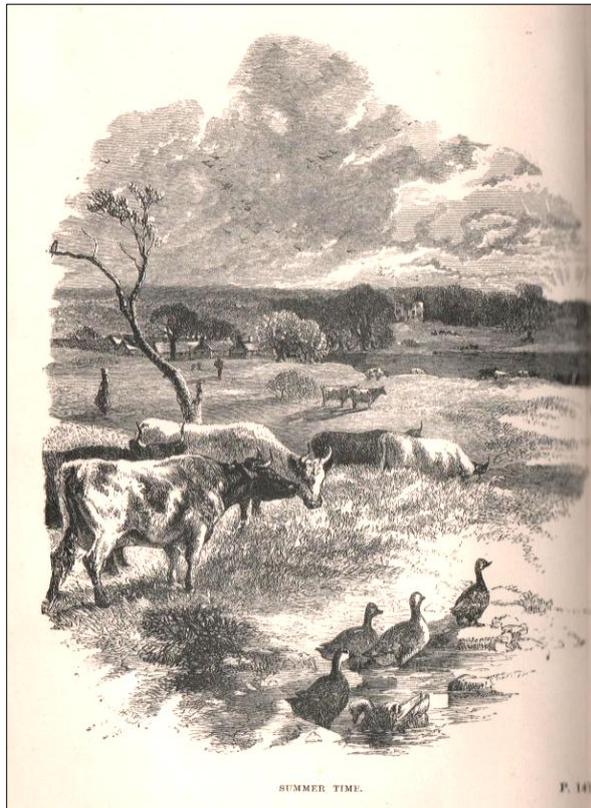
²His *Collected Poetical Works* were published in 1877.

Thomas Miller was born in Gainsborough in 1807, the son of George Miller, an unsuccessful wharfinger and ship-owner who deserted his wife and two sons in 1810. Just like his close friend and neighbour he was raised by his mother in highly disadvantaged circumstances. Cooper's biography makes several references to their shared activities, although they attended different charity schools, in Cooper's case the Blue Coat and in Miller's the White Hart. Miller left school at 9 years and, like Cooper later, became apprenticed to a shoemaker.

But the paucity of formal education did not curb his literary interests, for he became a voracious reader, and in 1832, having moved to London and working briefly as a bookseller, he published his own first writings *Songs of the Sea Nymphs*, which he dedicated to Lady Blessington. Doubtless the association was important in Miller's subsequent literary success, as she was described both as a woman of *rare beauty, charm and wit* and as an Irish *novelist, journalist, and literary hostess*. She was also a friend of Byron, who dedicated one of his poems to her.



Subsequently he devoted himself exclusively to writing, and produced over 45 volumes, including novels, in which he gave detailed descriptions of rural characters and scenes. But although Miller attracted some patronage and some support from the Royal Literary Fund, he was often in financial need and appealed for support directly (but unsuccessfully) to Charles Dickens, among others.



The wood cut shown here is one of the many in the book *English Country Life*, which was my introduction to this author.

It's an interesting question as to why these two disadvantaged lads, with very little formal education became such important literary figures. A clue may lie in the introduction to Cooper's biography (by John Saville, 1971) which describes Victorian Gainsborough as a *lively, bustling community which provided the colour and variety of experience that an imaginative child could be expected to respond to with excitement and enthusiasm*.

And again, *Trentside* was always fascinating. On market days, among others, there were *dozens of tradesmen to be watched at their work: blacksmiths, coopers, harness-makers, ropers, shipyard workers, and at that time, a quota of sailor and soldiers*. Perhaps experiencing such variety, and possessing sharp minds, is all they needed for their literary success.

5. David Mepham (1967- 2018)

*His farewell words read out at the funeral service**

Dear Friends

I know that it is rather unusual for the deceased to speak at his own funeral. Let's just say I am a bit of a control freak, or that I like to have the last word!

[Personal comments concerning the family]

I also want to say something about what I believe in. I have always been a very political person and I have spent most of my adult life doing jobs in politics, government and in NGOs, where I sought, in my own small way, to make the world a less cruel and unjust place. I am proud of this work and I'm proud of the values that I have stood for and fought for.



I am sorry to leave the world at a time when xenophobic nationalism, racism and misogyny are on the rise in far too many places. But I am also encouraged that so many people, especially young people, are taking on these forces of reaction and hate and standing up for justice, decency, kindness and liberal values.

If we have learned one thing in recent years, it is that nothing is inevitable – in life or in politics. The demagogues, the bigots and the authoritarians can and must be defeated; but there is no guarantee of success and it won't happen without effort.

More than ever before, therefore, we need decent people to step up, come together, and help build support for a better future. A future in which human rights and fundamental freedoms are safeguarded and realised for all, the environment is protected, current grotesque levels of inequality are reduced, and where there is an end to extreme poverty and avoidable suffering.

.....
Lastly, I want to say something about death and what it can perhaps teach us about life. At first glance, there's very little that is positive about being told that you have cancer; still less, about learning that the cancer is terminal. There have been some dark days as I have contemplated my death and all that I will miss out on in the years to come.

But the imminence of death can also intensify the importance and value of life. It forces you to think deeply about who you are and what gives your life meaning. Although I die much younger than I would have hoped or expected, I recognise that I have much to be grateful for.

[Personal comments concerning family, friends, travel, food, wine, books, music, the natural world]

And for most of my life, I have been fit and healthy. So yes, I have much to be grateful for. As my situation shows, life can change so quickly and so unexpectedly. The lessons that I draw from this are:

- to make the most of life's opportunities
- to ignore the trivial and unimportant
- to be kinder
- to live life with real purpose, and,
- above all, to love and cherish those closest to us.

These are my final words and my final thoughts. Take very good care of yourselves. Thank you for your love, kindness and friendship. They have meant so much to me.

David

Obituaries on *The Independent* and *Guardian* newspaper (17.11.18) and websites

<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/obituaries/david-mepham-died-director-of-human-rights-watch-labour-party-end-torture-a8601806.html>

<https://www.theguardian.com/law/2018/nov/07/david-mepham-obituary>

*David's balance of subjective and objective declarations, when facing his impending death, strike me as such a dignified statement – that I felt it might be an inspiration to others when meeting this last hurdle.

BM

6. An archaeological 'find': the delights of browsing.

Stephen Rogers

One of the joys of retirement is to pursue interests that have lain dormant and find new passions and fulfilment through them; in my case, archaeology and oil painting. This also gives book browsing a new focus, so I was delighted to come across a first edition of Bernard Rackham's 1948 "*Medieval English Pottery*". I think about it now for two reasons: one, the manner in which sentences are carefully and vividly constructed throughout, and secondly, because it was, for a long while, one of the only books on the subject. Rackham hoped that the work would be developed and completed, and the field has now produced a number of expert scholars. Michael McCarthy and Catherine Brooks acknowledge the debt to Rackham in their 1988 publication: "*Medieval Pottery in Britain AD 900-1600*" - another book that repays browsing in second-hand bookshops and brings the student and scholar of the subject right into the heart of the subject.

Unlike modern counterparts, Rackham's writing imparts a sense of judgement and 'colour' that is perhaps at odds with the post-modern sensibility. For example in the following passage:

"Everywhere are tokens of a busy human mind at work, and fingers itching to impress themselves on the plastic material. The effects of this seething vitality are not invariably happy. Here and there a noble form has been in some measure degraded by an excess of ornament, impressed or applied; the fingers seem to have cast off all control and run away in a riot of plastic extravagance" (page 28).



Certainly it lacks some modern conventions, such as scaled illustrations and section drawings, but for a story that brings these long forgotten potters back to life, this is writing to enjoy. Perhaps it is simply nostalgia and self-indulgence, but this is the sort of serendipitous find in a bookshop that compels one to sit and read, to absorb the rhythms and vividness of its subject in a way that opens a whole new intellectual journey.

Dr Stephen Rogers had a teaching career that took in all sectors of the education system – and most recently at Manchester University. His doctoral research studied the branch of ethics described as 'virtue theory' (as e.g. described by Alasdair MacIntyre) in its relation to public policy. He now runs the Southwell U3A philosophy group.

7. Environmentally sustainable food supplies: Veganism or Flexitarianism?

A recent report of the World Wildlife Fund (WWF, 2018), called *Appetite for Destruction*, looked at the impacts our widespread appetite for animal protein has had on the environmental sustainability of our planet. The focus was on the production of soy as feed for chicken, pork and fish and the consequences this has for the environment. The report claims that although many people are aware of the impact a meat-based diet has on water, land and wildlife habitats, and the implications of its associated greenhouse gas emissions, few knew that the largest adverse impact is a due to the crop-based feed the animals eat.

It is argued that in a world where more and more people adopt a Western diet – high in meat, dairy and processed food – producing crops to feed our livestock is putting an enormous strain on our natural resources and is a driving force behind wide-scale biodiversity loss. The UK food supply alone is directly linked to the extinction of an estimated 33 species at home and abroad. WWF's vision of a future where people and nature thrive is threatened by this current food system. Moreover, the report links the increased use of feed to the reduced nutritional value of these animal products.

Farming animals for meat and dairy requires space and huge inputs of water and feed. Today, one of the biggest causes of forest loss is the expansion of agricultural land for animal feed production, such as soy. And producing meat creates vastly more greenhouse gases than plants such as vegetables, grains and legumes. So the report *recommends* eating more plants, to “*enjoy other sources of proteins such as peas, beans and nuts*” rather than meat, and to waste less food.

The WWF report has been interpreted as a call for universal veganism. But there are alternative approaches to a healthy and sustainable food supply which, although also agreeing that the amount of human food from animals needs to be markedly reduced, consider that animals can still provide important ingredients to our diet. Sharing this assessment, I was a signatory to the letter below – in the science journal *Nature* on 15 Nov, 2018.

NB. *Flexitarian* describes a mostly vegetarian diet, but which occasionally includes meat and dairy products. There is no standard definition, but appreciating the problem would surely be an important motive for reducing consumption of animal products by socially-aware people – particularly when supported by a global agreement.

Promote flexitarian diets worldwide

Marco Springmann and colleagues warn that we must shift to more plant-based flexitarian diets if we are to reduce the food system's projected greenhouse-gas emissions and meet the targets of the 2015 Paris Agreement (Nature 562, 519–525; 2018). We urge countries to work with the United Nations towards a global agreement on food and agriculture that promotes the adoption of such diets, which are more sustainable than meat-based diets and are backed by evidence on healthy eating.

Such an agreement would be in line with findings by focus groups in the United States, China, Brazil and the United Kingdom, which indicate that governments should urgently address unsustainable meat consumption (see go.nature.com/2asd1ag). In industrial agriculture, cereals that are edible to humans are fed to animals for conversion into meat and milk. This undermines our food security: rearing livestock is efficient only if the animals convert materials we cannot consume into food we can eat. That means raising them on extensive grasslands, rotating

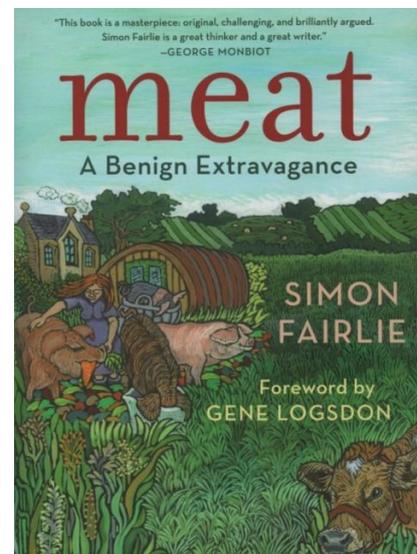
integrated crop-livestock systems and using by-products, unavoidable food waste and crop residues as feed.

Feeding animals exclusively on such materials would greatly reduce the availability and hence the consumption of meat and dairy products, and the use of water, energy and pesticides - so cutting greenhouse-gas emissions. [My emphases: BM] Signed by:

Philip Lymbery, University of Winchester, UK ; **Jane Goodall** Bournemouth, UK; **Barry Popkin** University of North Carolina, USA.; **Richard Templer** Imperial College London, UK.; **Martin Kemp** Oxford University, UK.; **Clive Phillips** University of Queensland, Australia.; **M. S. Swaminathan** Chennai, India; **Raj Patel** Rhodes University, South Africa.; **Marc Bekoff** University of Colorado, USA.; **Paul Cliteur** University of Leiden, the Netherlands.; **Mark Eisler** University of Bristol, UK.; **David Clough** University of Chester, UK.; **Neil Messer** University of Winchester, UK.; and **Ben Mephram** University of Nottingham, UK.. **Plus 45 other (mostly academic) co-signatories from a total of 13 countries** (see go.nature.com/2z32kkn)

A fuller case for the flexitarian approach is advanced by the detailed analysis provided by Simon Fairlie, former co-editor of *The Ecologist* and *The Land* magazines, in *Meat: a benign extravagance* (Chelsea Green Publishing, 2010). For, although for many people in developed countries, meat might generally be regarded as a luxury, when the food system is considered as a whole – taking into account the social, economic and nutritional dimensions of the food system, as well as its ecological implications – he argues that farmed animals can provide crucial contributions to holistic systems of agriculture as well as important components of nutritious diets. And of course, the latter include milk and the various dairy products in the forms of butter, cheeses and yogurts, that are essential ingredients of many food cultures.

Although in recent years vegetarians may have sought to claim the ‘high moral ground,’ it is certainly arguable that Fairlie’s meticulous ‘ethical accounting’ leads to the conclusion that small-scale, holistic, integrated farming systems, which include free-range livestock, are even more sustainable.



Of course, substantiating that claim requires presentation of more evidence than is possible in a short article. But it’s relevant to point out that Fairlie’s research is based on deep *permacultural* theory i.e. a system of agricultural and social design principles based on simulating or directly utilizing the patterns and features observed in natural ecosystems. In essence, he suggests that society needs to re-orientate itself back to the land, both physically and spiritually. For example, every agricultural system produces a surplus of waste and biomass, that is utilized by feeding it to livestock.

Among the most sustainable types of meat to eat is that from pigs fed food waste, whey and other forms of agricultural waste. Similarly dairy cows that are eating grass and clover as part of mixed-arable rotation have very little negative effect on the environment and are, on balance, benign. Fairlie argues that adoption of organic farming is crucial. This would entail cutting meat consumption by half, but our dairy intake (in the various forms described above) would be about the same.

BM

8. A New Year Greeting

W H Auden

This is a bit early – but the next issue of the Review is not due until March, 2019

W H Auden (1907 – 1973) was born in England, but later became an American citizen. He is regarded by many as one of the greatest writers in English of the 20th century. The main themes of his poetry were love, politics and citizenship, religion, morals, and the relationship between unique human beings and the anonymous, impersonal world of nature. He was often given to chastening irony, as in this poem, which was apparently written after reading an article in the *Scientific American* reporting that our skin is host to vast colonies of micro-organisms.

BM

On this day tradition allots
to taking stock of our lives,
my greetings to all of you, Yeasts
Bacteria, Viruses
Aerobics and Anaerobics
To whom my ectoderm
is as Middle Earth to me.

For creatures of your size I offer
a free choice of habitat,
so settle yourselves in the zone
that suits you best, in the pools
of my pores or the tropical
forests of my arm-pit and crotch
in the deserts of my forearms,
or the cool woods of my scalp.

Build colonies; I will supply
adequate warmth and moisture,
the sebum and liquids you need,
on condition you never
do me annoy with your presence,
but behave as good guests should,
not rioting into acne
or athlete's foot or a boil.

Does my inner weather affect
the surfaces where you live?
Do unpredictable changes
record my rocketing plunge
from fairs when the mind is in tift
and relevant thoughts occur
to fouts when nothing will happen
and no one calls and it rains.

I should like to think that I make
a not impossible world
but an Eden it cannot be:
my games, my purposive acts,
may turn to catastrophes there.
If you were religious folk
how would your dramas justify
unmerited suffering?

By what myths would your priests account
For the hurricanes that come
twice every twenty-four hours,
each time I dress or undress,
when, clinging to keratin rafts,
whole cities are swept away
to perish in space, or the Flood
that scalds to death when I bathe?

Then, sooner or later, will dawn
a Day of Apocalypse.
when my mantle suddenly turns
too cold, too rancid, for you,
appetising to predators,
of a fiercer sort, and I
am stripped of excuse and nimbus
a Past , subject to Judgement

May, 1969

