

Books I Remember

Dr K S Krishnan

Many of you would be familiar with the quotation “Of making many books there is no end.” It sounds like an exclamation from an exasperated modern scholar trying to cope with the overwhelming stream of new publications. On the other hand the quotation, as you know, is from Ecclesiastes, and the sentiment expressed in it might well be much older. “What one learns in a lifetime is a handful and what is left unlearned is a whole Universe” is a Tamil proverb which is nearly as old. An even earlier episode in the life of Bharadwaja with which we are all familiar, emphasises pointedly the same sentiment. What is even more significant is that the quotation from Ecclesiastes does not stop there, but adds “and much study is a weariness of the flesh” which makes the quotation much more profound. I shall have occasion to refer to it in a later part of my talk. But consistently with our taking the first half of the sentence to imply a certain exasperation at having to make an impossible choice, the second half of the sentence would vaguely suggest that the author has almost got reconciled to the inevitable. If these were the rightful feelings of scholars twenty centuries ago, how is one to describe the predicament in which we find ourselves today,” How would, for example, the author of Ecclesiastes feel if he were to find himself in our position?

A distinguished professor of English literature who taught us rhetoric many years ago had occasion once to estimate the number of plays of the Elizabethan period which he had himself read, and he found that the figure was well over a thousand.

A recent estimate by UNESCO of the total number of books published in some sixty countries comes to about 5,000 million per year, – I repeat 5,000 million annually – covering a quarter of a million of new titles, of which nearly half are first editions, which is indeed a staggering figure.

Statistics, as we are all aware, may sometimes be misleading and when such a figure is mentioned one would immediately ask the question, “How do we define a book? Do pamphlets and reports come under this category?” Unesco had naturally to face this question before making the estimate that I gave just now, and finds that the definitions adopted in different countries for purposes of preparing book-statistics differ widely. In the United Kingdom any publication priced at six pence or more is a book. Some of the

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other countries prescribe a certain minimum number of pages for a publication to satisfy the definition of a book. This number is 17 in Iceland, 64 in Hungary, 100 in Ireland and in Italy. Many countries do not discriminate between books and pamphlets. They are both regarded as books. In USA, pamphlets and government publications are excluded, unless they are sold commercially. On the other hand UNESCO would define a book as a non-periodic publication containing 49 or more pages and would include map pamphlets in this definition, and Government publications too if they are sold commercially. The UNESCO estimate of more than a hundred thousand first editions every year, to which I referred just now, is on this basis. This does not include the periodicals; and if the periodicals are also included the number of new volumes published annually would be of the order of a quarter million. Whether we accept the figure of 1,00,000 or a quarter million is not material for the argument.

Future of the Earth

An incident that occurred at the end of a lecture by Sir Oliver Lodge comes to my mind in this connection. He had been estimating the probable future of the earth, particularly how long the climatic conditions would remain suitable for sustaining life on earth. At the end of the lecture, one of the members of the audience, who felt greatly concerned about the future of the earth, asked the lecturer pointedly the question "How long did you say the earth would last?" "10,000 million years" was the reply. "Thank God," exclaimed the questioner with obvious relief, "I thought you said 1,000 million years." Unlike this questioner I would be quite content with any low estimate that one is likely to make on the total number of new books that are published every year. It would be large enough to stagger any serious scholar interested in books, which is the main point that I intended to make with the help of this digression on numbers. It would make even the most voracious reader, who is conscious of his voraciousness, fight genuinely shy of talking about the books that he had read.

In practice, however, this feeling that what one can possibly read is a small part of what is available for reading, may not be such a great disability after all. Obviously one has to be very discriminating in what he reads, in any case. The bulk of reading in any generation would be confined mainly to what may be described in a general way as classic books, i.e. those that have stood the test of time, and which have a certain perennial human interest which ensures their remaining fresh. Such books, fortunately for us, are rare. Secondly it may not even be desirable to read all the good books one can read. When the author of Ecclesiastes opines that much study is a weariness of the flesh, he might be having this in view. Many original thinkers have since warned us against too much reading lest it might



lead to vicarious thinking just as too frequent visits to the theatre might lead to vicarious living. In accepting this warning I hope that we are not trying to make a virtue of necessity.

Personally I have been fortunate in having acquired fairly early in my life a certain weakness for reading, almost amounting to a passion, which has survived many a handicap. Sometimes I wonder which is the real handicap, what stands in the way of my indulging in my weakness for reading, or this very weakness itself. Anyway, to be able to get to bed with a good book, or to spend an odd hour browsing in a library is a pleasure which I would not lightly forego.

The First Book

Using the word “book” very comprehensively, the earliest that has lingered in my memory is a palm leaf manuscript which we used in the first standard. The teacher was an elderly scholar of the old school who was unique in many ways. Two or three leaves were written every day to keep pace with the progress in our lessons, until at the end of the year we found that it had grown into a good sized manuscript. The many odd things that went into this manuscript had an amazing variety, ranging from numerous slokas in Nitisara with translations in Tamil to elements of Indian astronomy which included among other things formulae for identifying the constellations in the night sky from Aswini to Revati, and mnemonics for determining time from the position of the constellation nearest the zenith. This was not merely book knowledge but was followed by actual observation on the night sky. I still wonder how the teacher managed to get all this information across to us during one year. The other day when one of our great scholars posed the question why in some counts of the constellations we start with Aswini, and in others with Srona, I could give him a convincing answer from what I could remember from this palm leaf manuscript.

Euclid's Elements

I should mention in particular two other books which had a great hold on me. One was Euclid's Elements, which exercised over me a particular fascination. This was not our text book, and the sequence of propositions we studied in our class was very different from that of Euclid. Even so, Euclid's influence over me was so strong that I preferred to go the lone way.

We do not know how much of the geometry that is contained in Euclid is his own, and how much of it is an incorporation of knowledge available at the time. But starting with certain axioms to develop geometry as a series of propositions that follow as a logical sequence, is

definitely Euclid's own. It was Fontenelle who compared mathematicians to lovers. Grant a mathematician the least principle, and he will draw from it a consequence which you must also grant him, and from this consequence another, until you find that you have yielded him all the thirteen books of Euclid. No wonder the book exercised over me such fascination.

The other book – it was an advanced book of arithmetic by Radhakrishna Iyer. For sheer variety and ingenuity of the exercises, I do not know of any rival. It provoked a certain challenge, which resulted in working out every one of the numerous exercises contained in the book.

Walter Scott, Dickens, Thackeray, Stevenson, Cervantes, Dumas, Victor Hugo and Conan Doyle linger in my memory as my favourite authors at this time, Plato and Aristotle in translations, Shakespeare, Milton and Shelley, Swift, Addison, Boswell, Newman, Mathew Arnold, Walter Pater and Charles Lamb at a later age and Tolstoy, Ibsen and Bernard Shaw still later. Some of them naturally stand out much more prominently than others in my memory. Among them I should specially mention Don Quixote, Pickwick papers, Vanity Fair and Book of Snobs, Essays of Elia, Essays and Discourses of Stuart Mill, some of the prose writings of Swift and Whitehead, Alice in Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass, most of which I have re-read later.

Among the popular scientific books that made a great impression on me, I should specially mention Tyndall's *Fragmentz*, *Microbe Hunters* by Paul de Kruif, *Men of Mathematics* by Eric Bell, *A Mathematician's Apology* by Hardy, and the biographies of Kelvin, Helmholtz, Lord Rayleigh, Maxwell and Tait.

Among the serious scientific writings, the collected papers of Lord Rayleigh have been my constant companion for nearly 38 years and I cannot think of a better model for a research worker. One of the research papers of Einstein I have read off and on during the same period, and everytime I read it I get something new out of it. Some of the papers of Niels Bohr had over me even more profound influence. Among the more orthodox books I should specially mention Thomson and Tai *Treatise on Natural Philosophy*, Maxwell's *Electricity and Magnetism* and Lord Rayleigh's *Theory of Sound*.

The Upanishads, Valmiki, Parasara and Vyasa and some of the Tamil classics like Kural, the Vaishnavite Songs and Kamba Ramayana have probably been a part of me for many years. But what I cherish most are some of the medieval Tamil commentaries, particularly of Nambillai and Periavachan Pillai, which give me aesthetic and intellectual pleasure as no other literary work does.

