

9th April

Today, two very different pieces from members of the Library

1. *Two books have kept me sane. House of Glass by Hadley Freeman. I was the first person to take this out from the library and it's a WONDERFUL book. I think she's great. I read her in the Saturday Guardian. And secondly, The Hockneys by John Hockney. Very easy to read. I enjoyed it because I know exactly where they all come from. I spent about 6 years in this part of Yorkshire and I love the Dales /Bolton Abbey/Armscliff Crag and I can almost smell the fish and chips!!*

2. **How to slay the dragon virus**

There are no doubt theses and possibly books (?) on the subject of the rhetoric and propaganda surrounding major plagues. Personally, I am not familiar with them but while Europe was Christian a plague was presented by the all-powerful Church as a manifestation of "the wrath of God." Despite the secularising influence of the encyclopedistes, the Lisbon earthquake of 1755 was still being presented in Europe's pulpits in precisely these terms.

When, then, did the rhetoric and propaganda around plagues become secularised? Was God still being invoked at the time of the Spanish flu pandemic and, while on the subject of this particular pandemic, a prize for anyone who knows why the 1918-19 deadly flu was labelled "Spanish," without having to go online first!

Now in 2020 the rhetoric is clear and all too predictable. World War II is being invoked as we (supposedly) cower in our shelters, walk through bomb-cratered streets, contemplate skeletal buildings and queue for hours for unappetising basics. The Blitz is recalled, although more time is given to "the Dunkirk spirit" and "the little boats" being sent out to gather such equipment as they may find to protect those "in the front line." In the meanwhile, there is Vera Lynn in the background singing "We'll meet again," a wartime favourite invoked by our queen who at least has the excuse of having been there at the time! In New York comparisons are made with the Iraq war. It is "a full-out war against the virus" and there are references to "battlefield triage."

But if the language of conflict is inappropriate in the context of a pandemic (the virus, after all, is only doing its own stuff), what kind of language should replace it?

8th April

From our Science Group:

A review of one of the books on your latest list – Black Sun by Owen Matthews, a "whodunit" detective story set around true events in 1961 when the USSR decided to build and test a 50Mton hydrogen bomb.

In the book the hero, Major Vasin, is sent by Moscow to the closed city where the bomb is being designed and built in order to investigate the supposed suicide of a young physicist. Unsurprisingly, the local military authorities don't welcome Vasin with open arms, and a lot of the tension in the book comes from the conflict of authority between the local commanders and the Moscow investigator. To start with the commanding general denies Vasin permission to interview the chief scientist – a fictional version of Andrei Sakharov. The young physicist, however, was related to a Politburo member, and Vasin can call on powerful allies. The plot then centres on the risks

associated with the detonation of this size of weapon. In military terms, the bomb has little conceivable value. When a hydrogen bomb is detonated, a plug of the Earth's atmosphere is projected into space. With a bomb of this size, a lot of the energy goes into projecting the plug at a higher speed. The curvature of the Earth minimises the resultant damage on the ground. It transpires though that a feature of the design of the Soviet weapon could conceivably have serious consequences for all life on the planet. The physicists are split over the issue with some of them accusing others of dangerous irresponsibility. At the same time, various subplots confuse the issues and make Vasin's task that much harder. Like all good whodunits, the novel comes to an exciting – and just about credible – conclusion. A very good read.

7th April

On this day, 250 years ago, William Wordsworth was born in Cockermouth. His collaboration with Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads*, published in 1798, was poorly received at the time but is now considered as the beginning of the Romantic Period.

A contribution from one of our Library Committee:

I, like many readers at the HLSI, have quite a few books I have been meaning to read and with the current restrictions a window of opportunity has opened. I am one of those people who have several books on the go simultaneously and these can include fiction and non-fiction.

I am currently reading the biography of Thomas Cromwell by Diarmaid MacCulloch. The biography is well written and although scholarly is very well researched with interesting snippets of minor players within the Tudor Court and society. Another biography of Thomas Cromwell I read a few years ago was by Tracy Borman (not as detailed as MacCulloch's).

I decided to read this before embarking on the last volume of the trilogy by Hilary Mantel, *The Mirror and the Light*. I am also enjoying listening to Anton Lesser reading her latest book on Radio 4.

If this inspires you, try some of these related titles from our collection:

Derek A. Wilson *In the lion's court: power, ambition, and sudden death in the reign of Henry VIII*

David Starkey – *Henry: virtuous prince*

Henry's letters

Biographies by Alison Weir and Antonia Fraser

On our fiction shelves, apart from Hilary Mantel, we have C.J. Sansom's *Shardlake* series and Philippa Gregory's historical novels set during the reign of Henry VIII.

3rd and 4th April

On this day ... in 1687 James II (VII of Scotland) signed a declaration of indulgence allowing non-conformist worship – this was reversed in 1688 after the Glorious Revolution when Catholic James was replaced by Protestant Mary II and William of Orange ... in 1968 Martin Luther King was assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee

[source: *The Times* (2018) *On this day*]

Quiz (answers below)

Which classic novels begin with these lines? They are 19th and early 20th century works.

1. 1801.- I have just returned from a visit to my landlord- the solitary neighbour that I will be troubled with.
2. Under certain circumstances there are few hours in life more agreeable than the hour dedicated to the ceremony known as afternoon tea.

3. *I returned from the City about three o'clock on that May afternoon pretty well disgusted with life.*
4. *One may as well begin with Helen's letters to her sister.*
5. *An ancient English Cathedral Tower? How can the ancient English Cathedral Tower be here!*

ANSWERS

1. *Wuthering Heights* Emily Bronte
2. *The Portrait of a Lady* Henry James
3. *The Thirty-nine Steps* John Buchan
4. *Howards End* E.M. Forster
5. *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* Charles Dickens

2nd April

On this day ... The Panda crossing was introduced in London (later abandoned and replaced by the Pelican Crossing).

"One old lady, who was one of the first pedestrians to use the new crossing in York Road, was not impressed.

She said: "That man Marples is up to too many tricks. It's a hairbrained (sic) scheme and most dangerous."

[from the BBC website

http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/april/2/newsid_2840000/2840919.stm]

I haven't found any books in our collection about Panda Crossings so, as we can't go far at the moment, here are some suggestions for armchair travel:

Bill Bryson – *almost any of his books. The first one I read was Notes from a small island, a hilarious and all too recognisable picture of Britain, about his first visit to the UK. Recently revisited in The road to Little Dribbling*

William Dalrymple (another writer who has lectured at HLSI) – *start reading his earlier books about his travels in Asia*

Patrick Leigh Fermor – *shockingly to modern helicopter parents, he set off across Europe alone at the age of 18, completely confident in and reliant on the kindness of strangers, related in A time of gifts. His adventurous spirit continued throughout his life.*

Martha Gellhorn – *war correspondent and travel writer. Try Travels with myself and another (subtitled Five journeys from Hell) for her energetic accounts of her experiences.*

Mary Kingsley – *our Kingsley collection will provide you with all you might want to know about this Victorian traveller and explorer, raised in Highgate. Start with Travels in West Africa (1897)*

Beryl Markham – *raised in colonial Africa, was the first woman to fly across the Atlantic east to west, as described in West with the night, allegedly a memoir but possibly written by one of her husbands*

Dervla Murphy *has travelled widely, first alone by bicycle and later with a young daughter, preserved by an intrepid approach to all eventualities and still travelling and writing in her eighties.*

Bruce Chatwin, Robert Louis Stevenson, Wilfred Thesiger, Fanny Trollope, Michael Palin ... there are so many more, and our library has a particularly good selection. Until we re-open, check the catalogue and create your own wish-list.

1st April

This began as a look at diarists in times of crisis, but has wandered ... more diarists (in different crises) will follow.

Contemporaries Samuel Pepys and John Evelyn left diaries covering the period of the Great Plague of 1665-66. Pepys, whose diaries are probably better known now, recorded his impressions through his own experiences and encounters; Evelyn was much less personal, often writing retrospectively and, as a known writer himself, with readers in mind. Margaret Willes's book, The curious world of Samuel Pepys and John Evelyn, is moving to the top of my reading list. Known as a garden historian (she lectured at HLSI in 2015 on The gardens of the British Working Class) she may have been attracted to Evelyn by his passion for gardens and then to his relationship with Pepys and their shared interests. I look forward to learning more.

Daniel Defoe's Diary of the plague year was written some time later, and is thought to be based on the diaries of Defoe's uncle – Defoe himself was a young child in 1665. It might now be called 'faction', but is agreed to be sufficiently accurate in much of its description of events to give a good account of the time.

The experience of the inhabitants of the Derbyshire village of Eyam, almost all of whom agreed to shut themselves off from the outside world after the Plague arrived in a bale of cloth, has been fictionalised at various times but most recently in Year of wonders by Geraldine Brooks, told from the point of view of one young woman, which has been popular in the library since it was published in 2001.

Moving away from London and a few decades earlier, one of our members has contributed:

One non-fiction work I am reading is by Professor John Henderson, Florence under siege: surviving plague in an early modern city. It was published a few months ago and examines how the Plague in 17th century Florence was handled. (Reviewed in the current issue of the London Review of Books). Some aspects like communal kitchens to provide meals to all those in lock down in their houses were innovative.

31st March

Today's entry comes from one of our members. If you'd like to contribute, please see below.

I, like many others I'm sure, have a shelf full of books that are waiting to be read and in these difficult times it looks as though I will be able to start on it. I have 2 sources for my reading: the HLSI library and the Harington shop where I look after the book section with another volunteer. Each time I go to either place I can't resist borrowing or buying at least one book. This means that the books in situ on my shelves don't get read! I've just finished a James Patterson, Along Came a Spider, which I couldn't put down. I'd never read one of his before but if you like thrillers it is very absorbing. Two friends have highly recommended Where the Crawdads Sing by Delia Owens so I have downloaded it to my Kindle.

It's interesting that Margaret said that before the library closed there was a demand for books from the reserve stock, a sort of 'comfort reading' of the old classics. A fellow member recommended reading Rosamunde Pilcher so I'm going to try one of hers. I do have the complete works of Dickens as well so they should keep me going for the duration!

I hope HLSI fellow members are keeping well and managing the self-isolation. Luckily there is a lot of support from local communities but it's nice to have this blog to keep people in touch

as well.

27th March

Friday quiz – answers below. Without checking online, can you say who wrote:

1. *Fair daffadils, we weep to see
You haste away so soone;
As yet the early-rising sun
Has not attained its noone.*
2. *Daffodils,
That come before the swallow dares, and take
The winds of March with beauty.*
3. *Once in a golden hour
I cast to earth a seed.
Up there came a flower,
The people said, a weed. To and fro they went
Thro' my garden bower,
And muttering discontent
Cursed me and my flower. Then it grew so tall
It wore a crown of light,
But thieves from o'er the wall
Stole the seed by night. Sow'd it far and wide
By every town and tower,
Till all the people cried,
'Splendid is the flower! '...*
4. *Jet-black and shining, from the dripping hedge
Slow peeps the fearful snail
And from each tiny bent
Withdraws his timid horn*

Answers

1. Robert Herrick
2. Shakespeare *Winter's Tale*
3. Alfred, Lord Tennyson
4. John Clare *Summer images*

26th March

Now is the time to investigate online resources, if you don't already use them. Radio 4 book programme websites – *Open Book*, *A Good Read* and *Book Club* – offer inspiration. As well as the back catalogue of programmes, the websites feature useful information. *Open Book* has a weekly list of all titles mentioned in each edition.

Podcasts on every imaginable subject can be found online – try the BBC to begin with.

Explore YouTube and Facebook for free online broadcasts from the Royal Opera House, Sadlers Wells, Glyndebourne, the National Theatre and others. Many major museums and galleries offer virtual tours of their collections.

25th March

In the days before we closed, our Reserve Stock came into its own. Our readers turned to the likes of Trollope, Galsworthy, Mrs Gaskell and George Eliot. Among more recent writers in demand were (local) Stella Gibbons, Evelyn Waugh Somerset Maugham and, interestingly, Nigel Tranter. Crime fiction remained popular, together with biographies, diaries and personal accounts of travels.