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SOME THOUGHTS OF

An Amateur Archivist

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Members of Old Boys' Books Clubs are aware that, generally speaking, when the Radio or T. V. , or, with exceptions, the Press take notice of our interests they usually treat them in a casual, light-hearted manner. They seem to find it amusing that "Comics," their all embracing name for the variety of books, papers and magazines in which we are interested, should attract the attention of adults, and find it inconceivable there should be anything of value in the study of these; they usually turn a condescending eye on what they seem to regard as a childish pastime.

Let us be serious for a moment and consider the reply we should make to these criticisms.

What motives bring together members of Clubs such as ours? For some it is a nostalgic interest in the books and papers we read in our, in some cases far distant, youth. I suppose, indeed, nostalgia plays a part in all of us. But it is not nostalgia that causes a man to be interested in periods before his own youth, say the Victorian age. Again it may be the collecting urge; the desire to have that complete set of "Magnets," of No. 1's, or Sexton Blake Libraries, or the "jackdaw" instinct to hoard odd collections. Or, instead, it may be the researcher's spirit, the desire to know about the publishers, writers and artists engaged in these books, about the economics of the business, or about the readers themselves: who were they? what effect had these books on them? what was the object of the publishers, to entertain, to influence, or merely to make money?

Once we pass beyond nostalgia, and the purely acquisitive instinct, we are entering the realm of the archivist.

The function of the archivist is to search for, assemble, read, index and collate documents and records, and to make them available for the historian and sociologist. And this is very much what many members of our hobby are doing. Archives are in many forms, from the clay tablets in the library of an Assyrian King of 3,000 years ago to last night's Cambridge News.

It is easy to forget that the archivist is concerned not only with ancient manuscripts or medieval documents, Chronicles, Charters, Court Rolls, etc. , but also with ephemera, notes, novels, accounts, newspapers and suchlike things.

Consider for a moment the Greek Testament. When after the Renaissance and the Reformation the Greek New Testament became more freely available, the classical scholars of the 18th and early 19th Century became aware of a great difference in style between the Greek of classical literature and the Greek of the New Testament. They produced various theories to account for this, the favourites being either the fundamentalist belief that the New Testament was written in a special, sacred Greek dictated, or at least inspired by the Holy Ghost, or else that it was written by Jews who did not properly understand the Language they were using.

The world of the New Testament time used two writing materials: the permanent parchment, made from the skins of animals, and papyrus, made from the fibres of the papyrus reed. Parchment was long lasting, papyrus easily destroyed by damp, insects and decay. The durable parchment was used for important documents, and survived to become the material available to the classical scholar. Then, towards the end of the 19th Century archaeologists found in the hot, dry sands of Egypt hoards of papyrus documents preserved by the favourable climate. These were not literary texts or religious works, but rather the equivalent of the contents of the modern waste paper basket; bills, letters, school exercises, notes, certificates, etc. The scholars found, to their surprise, that these documents were written in the same style of Greek as the New Testament, and realised that, far from being written in some sacred language the New Testament was written in the ordinary, common, everyday Greek spoken and written all round the Mediterranean world of the Roman Empire. That Roman world was tri-lingual; this everyday Greek was the lingua franca of trade and commerce, the common tongue, the "Koine. " In addition men knew Latin, the official language of the State, and also the language of their country or province; for example the Jews of Palestine spoke Aramaic. So the contents of Egyptian rubbish heaps changed the picture of the New Testament world and the language in which it was written.

The Paleographer, the Historian, the Sociologist studying Medieval or 17th or 18th Century documents and archives has mainly official documents or the letters of the relatively few literate people to work on. With the growth of literacy in the 19th and 20th Centuries there came a flood of material intended for the working man, and because of economic conditions these had to be cheap and aim at a popular market.

Now I suggest that this affects our hobby, because the books and papers in which we are interested reflect the opinions of the men and boys who read them, the propaganda to which they were exposed, and the general contemporary thought of the day and age in which they were written. What, asks the Social Historian, looking at these papers, did the readers think, and what did the publishers want them to think?

Colin Watson, in his book on the detective story, "Snobbery with Violence, " says that history's most frustrating pages are the many left empty of record of the thoughts and beliefs of ordinary men and women. Evidence of what had common currency at this or that moment in the past is among the hardest to adduce. He goes on to say what a pity it is from the Social Historian's point of view there was no Ronald Knox in the Monastery of the Venerable Bede or Dorothy Sayers looking over Holinshed's shoulder as he whitewashed the Tudors. Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, writing of popular fiction of the 18th century, says "Perhaps you will say that I should not take my ideas of the manner of the times from such authors - but it is more truly to be found among them than from any Historian".

Dr. Walker in his recent history of the Royal Aircraft Establishment at Farnborough, refers to contemporary newspapers and illustrated magazines, saying "it is perhaps not generally recognised how valuable these sources of information may be - dates are automatically preserved and the reaction to the news is usually spontaneous. " A remark that applies equally to the books and papers in which we are interested. These books and papers both served to frame and reflect what was contemporary opinion. For, to steal a phrase from a recent sermon in a Cambridge church, "Popular imagination is a fruit and mirror of national character and of the times. "

The more literate the community becomes, the more important it is for the social historian to study in width as well as in depth all the variety of writings available, and it is as important in compiling a complete picture of the period he is studying to use the "comic" and the newspaper as the Parliamentary Report or the Learned History.

What can he find?

Let him look first at the list of titles in the Sexton Blake Catalogue for the period before 1914. There he will find:

Sexton Blake, Aeronaut, recalling the balloon racing craze of the early 1900's.

The Detective Airman, recalling the round Britain air race.

Sexton Blake, Territorial and Under Canvas, the formation of the Territorial Army.

In the Shadow of the Plague, the epidemic of Bubonic Plague in Manchuria in the first decade of this century.

The Problem of the Pageant and The Slate Club Swindle recall popular activities of the pre-1914 era.

The Old Age Pension Mystery reminds us of Lloyd George's introduction of social benefits; the harbinger of the Welfare State.

Arms for Ulster, the early stirrings of a problem very much before us today.

The Cattle Mystery recalls the outbreaks of cattle maiming and the Edjali case, in which Conan Doyle himself played Sherlock Holmes.

Let him turn next to all those war stories. Many of these were written for adults, by military men and others, who felt the nations defences were being neglected; books like Chesney's "Battle of Dorking," written in 1871, or William Le Quex's "Invasion of 1910," written for the Daily Mail in 1906. They fell into two categories, those prophesying disaster and those that foretold ultimate victory. It was scarcely to be wondered at that Lord Northcliff, who had parliamentary ambitions, jumped on the band wagon, taking up Lord Robert's campaign for national service, and supporting the cadet and scout movements. Naturally this interest was reflected in his boys' papers, where, equally naturally "we" always won in the end, in spite of being treacherously invaded. Serials were printed and reprinted in "Boy's Friend," "Boy's Journal," "Boy's Herald," "Gem," "Marvel," "Pluck" and the "Boy's Friend Library." Hamilton Edwards, writing early in the century, saw the enemy as France or Russia. But the expansion of the German Navy turned our fears in another direction, and after the entente cordiale it was Germany that became the bogey. "John Tregellis" began to write his series "Britain Invaded," "Britain at Bay" and its sequels, with their cadet corps heroes, worthy of G. A. Henty, and then the "Kaiser or King" series with its boy scout heroes. "Chums" and the "Captain" too, had their war stories, writings which not only reflected, but also served to increase fear and hatred of potential enemies; and the historian should not neglect to study also the inter-war years, with Biggles and many other heroes.

Then there are the sporting stories: football, cricket, boxing, etc., with the emphasis on sportsmanship and "playing the game" - the spirit illustrated by E. H. D. Sewell, writing in "The Captain," stressing that it is the game and not winning the game that matters.

Consider Jack, Sam and Pete - in their heyday among the most popular characters. Brave, loyal, chivalrous, rich, generous, always ready to risk their lives to save people in danger, always ready to help the needy and deserving with money, or to get them up in business; no one resents this help, all are duly grateful. The good must be rewarded, the bad punished: but society remains unchanged. See how the atmosphere of the stories changes with the years. Clarke Hook was already an established writer when he wrote for No. 1 of the "Halfpenny Marvel." There is still a "blood and thunder" air about his early Jack, Sam and Pete tales in the Half penny Marvel. J. S. and P. will bet, drink whisky, shoot to kill. It is instructive to see how these tales have been toned down when they were reprinted some twelve years later in the "Penny Popular." By then in the "Marvel" J. S. and P. never drink or gamble, and Sam shoots only to wound. Notice, too, how these tales reflect contemporary happenings in the balloon, submarine and aeroplane series, and, after Scott's last expedition, Antarctic exploration.

"Frank Richard's" schoolboys (the "goodies") are good sportsmen, they never tell lies, tell tales, smoke or gamble. They are meant to be our examples, and, in fact, to many young people they were, even if we today tend to find the "baddies" (or the "goodies" when, like Wharton, on occasion, they kick over the traces) more interesting as character studies. Charles Hamilton's schoolboy world was a fantasy one, far removed from real public school life, but there is nevertheless much truth in the claim made by the author of "The Classic Slum" for

the influence for good of Hamilton's stories on the boys of the period. Here we see, in Roberts' book, a good example of a social historian using boys' stories and finding them significant for his researches.

Another important item of interest to the social historian is the illustrations, whether they be the plain illustrations of the stories or the caricatures of the true "comic." As a reflection of social conditions note in the latter the emphasis on food and money. (Incidentally, note also references to "tuck" and remittances in Hamilton's school stories; not only in the case of Bunter.) The story illustration is invaluable as showing contemporary scenery, costume, transport, etc. Even if the artist did not always possess photographic accuracy he still often captured the spirit of the age.

Equally we should not forget the advertisements, which throw a good deal of light on the times to which they relate.

And it is not only historical accuracy that helps the historian. He may know that the picture of Robin Hood, from "Ivanhoe" to the "Aldine Robin Hood Library," as the master archer, and the good outlaw, robbing the rich to help the poor, is quite impossibly untrue, and nothing like the real medieval outlaw, but he learns from these tales that the common man, feeling oppressed and exploited, found in the Robin Hood legend an expression of his longing for freedom and social justice.

To conclude; Archives:

Such are the Cartulary of the Hospital of St. John in the Muniment Room of St. John's College or the papers of Archbishop Parker in Corpus College Library. Such is the College Rental of 1638 in which I traced the change of name of the old Bird Bolt Hotel, or the 17th and 18th century Leases and Title Deeds on which I have recently worked, but such, too, are "Union Jacks" and "Marvels" like:

Sexton Blake, Scoutmaster, recalling the early days of the Scout Movement.

Sexton Blake in Zululand, recalling the rising of 1906.

Tom Sayers' Record, with its illustration of motor racing at Brooklands, and

Lost in the Antarctic, a J. S. & P. tale recalling Scott's expedition.

Ephemera, yes, but, as Jack says, "don't forget the dustbin."

A royal letter from Philip and Mary or from Elizabeth I is a valuable source of information, but so too, is a private letter of 1644 from a son to his father, which suggests as you read it that there is after all something to be said for the National Health Service. And so, too, are the papers we collect.

Not only have we an absorbing hobby, but by collecting, recording and researching these papers and their writers, we are making available to future historians material of great value. It should be our object to keep our papers and record our researches so that when we pass on they are not lost, but made available not only for collectors, but also for the social historian who in twenty, thirty, fifty or a hundred years time will scan them with a scholarly eye, and perhaps spare a grateful thought for us who have saved them for him. #