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Two books, some weed identification charts, and a little Horace

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At many of the crossroads in my life I have been shown the way by a book; sometimes several books have put their heads together and conspired to make their advice irresistible.

In answer to the simple question: "Which book have I loved above all others, and which has had the greatest influence on my life?" It would have to be Laurie Lee's 'As I Walked Out One Midsummer Morning', or 'Una Mañana en 1934' in Spanish. I was twenty one, and working with sheep and pigs and potatoes on a small farm in the folds of the Surrey Hills in the south of England. I was aching with youthful melancholy, having been abandoned by my girlfriend, but at the same time excited by my newly discovered love for farming. At night I would sit before the lonely fire and sip the cocoa brought to me by Mrs Stunt, the pigman's widow, in whose cottage I lived, and who looked after me like a mother. My nightly homework was the study of weed identification charts and tractor maintenance manuals. When I had made a respectable showing at these agricultural studies, I would sink gratefully into the waiting arms of 'As I Walked Out...' (A friend tells me that for her, starting a new book is like falling into the arms of a lover).

Now I am far from being alone in my passion for Laurie Lee's book; it was published in 1969 and immediately became a best-seller, driving countless thousands of young Englishmen from the comfort of their homes and all thoughts of a conventional existence, and setting their feet on the roads to poetry, romance, Bohemia, and, in my case, Spain.

I keep the book ever by my side, and I still weep with pleasure every time I read it. I earned twelve pounds a week for five and a half days of heavy labouring on the farm. On Saturday afternoon I hitchhiked to Guildford, the local town. In Castle Street was an

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antiquarian bookseller. Traylens was not like today's booksellers, eagerly inviting your entry with cheap and gaudy blandishments: the door was firmly closed; you had to ring the bell. The only indication that here was a bookseller was a small window onto the street, where a book was displayed.

In the window on that Saturday afternoon was a huge leather bound book spread wide at a double page pen and ink drawing. I passed by, glimpsed the drawing from the corner of my eye, stopped and turned back. I was spellbound, unable to take my eyes off it. The drawing showed a palace, a creation of such dramatic and arresting beauty that it was hard to imagine such a place existing outside the imagination of the weavers of fairy tales. It was, of course, the Alhambra.

Bewitched still, I rang the bell. An incredibly agèd man in a dusty suit answered the door, peering at me unenthusiastically through small round spectacles. I looked like what

I was: a farm labourer.

"Yes?" he asked.

"I'd like to have a look at the book in the window, please".

He let me in and vanished into a back room, returning with a large wooden box. From the drawer in a desk he took a screwdriver and unscrewed the eight screws that secured the lid. Beneath were layers of tissue paper, a portfolio containing two dry-point etchings by the artist, and finally the book.

"It is 'Old Spain'", he intoned, "by Muirhead and Gertrude Bone. It is a limited edition of 250 copies, each one numbered and signed by the authors. These are the only two that remain unsold."

I was leafing through the book; the text was terrible, but the drawings were like nothing I had ever seen – the Mezquita of Córdoba, the hanging houses of Cuenca, the bridge at Ronda, the aqueduct at Segovia... So this was Spain; it was a country I had thought little about before then, a land that I believed (rightly) to be strangled by a dismal dictatorship and the illiberal grip of the church. (This was 1970) I resolved first to buy the book, and then, as soon as possible, to go and see Spain.

"How much is it?" I asked a little nervously.

The bookseller looked at me in a superior sort of a way, as if to say, "Far too much for you, sonny", but restrained himself. "One hundred and twenty pounds". Now a hundred and twenty pounds was nearly three months wages for me, a colossal sum of money... but then I didn't smoke, I didn't drink, and I didn't have an expensive girlfriend... I didn't even have a car; I was a rich man.

"I'll take it," I said. "Here's twelve pounds. I'll be back in ten weeks with the rest of the money."

I still have that book today, in the library of my home in Spain. The hundred and twenty pounds it cost me, and the three and six (old money) that I would have paid for Laurie Lee's book, were perhaps the best investment I have ever made.

Now this article is supposed to be about reading, but I will forgive myself for taking the liberty of talking about books. It's a discursive piece, after all; that's what I do.

I have not always been a reader though; there were very few books in my family home.

My parents were not great readers: my mother listened to classical music, while my father gambled away the family fortune... probably a good thing, as I am convinced that too much money does not do you any good. My grandfather, a careful man who borrowed books from the library, would admonish me, saying: "You should always be reading a book". I did not agree. Much of his advice came in the form of platitudes: "If a job's worth doing, it's worth doing well," for example, which I considered meaningless, and infuriated him by suggesting that if a job was worth doing, it was worth doing badly. "A bad workman always blames his tools." One cannot possibly do a good job with bad tools. I wasn't too sure either about his recommendation of always having a book on the go. I had a cousin who began to lose herself in books at about the age of ten, and she never came out. She became so obsessed with reading – and I cannot even say that they were good books she read – that she never learned how to socialise. Still now, forty years later, her nose is always buried in a book and she doesn't have a word to say to anybody. It has to be admitted, though, that this is a very unusual little tragedy.

Then there is the case of JJB. This is a man with a fascinating tale to tell: he used to be a nuclear physicist, but, for some reason to do with a woman, I think, he gave it all up to travel the world and play guitar on street corners. It's a great story and he writes and writes about it, and sends me the manuscripts to read. It seems little short

of a miracle to me that someone can make a thing so utterly banal and boring out of such promising material... but JJB achieves this. It is, quite simply, the worst writing I have ever read.

One day I asked him what he was reading.

"Reading? Waddya mean, man, reading?"

"You know, books... for pleasure."

"Oh that; I don't do that. I used to read scientific stuff, but I never read a book for pleasure."

Thus the unmitigated awfulness of JJB's writing explained.

I fall somewhere between my unfortunate cousin, and JJB; at times in my life I have been a voracious reader; at other times I have read nothing at all. I would say, rather spuriously, that there is a time for reading and a time for doing. But I know now that you can read at the same time – more or less – as you do. These days I am always in the middle of at least four books. Now this is a bad practice and one to be strongly discouraged, but with the things I have to read, the things I ought to read and the things I want to read, it just turns out that way.

So that's me and my reading, but to round off this article I want to tell a story about reading. It's not my story; it's Paddy Leigh Fermor's story. Patrick Leigh Fermor was one of the great British writers of the XX Century, and he died at the age of ninety six on the day that I wrote this article.

During the Second World War he fought the Germans with the Cretan Resistance, living in Crete for years disguised as a shepherd, and running the constant risk of capture, torture and death at the hands of the German occupation forces. His most spectacular exploit was to capture the German officer in command of the occupation, General Kreipe.

This is a story of such heroism, boldness and subtlety that it defies belief. (For a full account read 'Ill Met by Moonlight' by Bill Stanley Moss or see the film of the same name with Dirk Bogarde as Paddy Leigh Fermor.) For weeks they moved the general about in the mountains, living in caves, huts and sheepfolds, and never two nights in the same place.

Relations were, as you may imagine, far from easy for these men incongruously thrown together by the fortunes of war. Here is Paddy's description of what, to me, is one of the great moments of modern history.

"Two days later, through lack of covering, Billy, the General and I ended up, not for the last time, all three sleeping under the same blanket, with Manoli and George on either side, nursing their Marlin guns and taking it in turns to sleep.

We woke up among the rocks, just as a brilliant dawn was breaking over the crest of Mount.

Ida which we had been struggling across for two days. We were all three lying smoking in silence, when the General, half to himself, slowly said:

Vides ut alta stet nive candidum

Socrate...

I was in luck. It is the opening line of one of the few odes of Horace I know by heart (Ad Thaliarchum 1 .ix) I went on reciting where he had broken off:

...Nec iam sustineant onus
Silvae laborantes, geluque
Flumina constiterint acuto

and so on, through the remaining five stanzas to the end.

The General's blue eyes swivelled away from the mountain-top to mine – and when I'd finished, after a long silence, he said: 'Ach so, Herr Major!' It was very strange. 'Ja, Herr General.' As though for a long moment, the war had ceased to exist. We had both drunk at the same fountains long before; and things were different between us for the rest of our time together."

A fine lesson in reading and doing; and if this article has served no purpose other than to introduce the reader to the wonderful writing of Paddy Leigh Fermor, then my modest effort has not been in vain.

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