

debt not to the milkman or grocer or landlord but to the still more fearsome duns of the Inland Revenue, rates, Value Added Tax and National Insurance.

With regard to sexual morality, Dickens was somewhat equivocal, perhaps because of his own unhappy marriage and adultery. But he did believe in the institution of marriage, so that David's long postponed wedding to Agnes brings the book to its natural end. Marriage, to Dickens, was important not so much as a source of happiness between men and women, as a pre-condition of happiness for the children, whose plight is the main theme not only of *David Copperfield* but *Oliver Twist*, *Nicholas Nickleby*, *Hard Times*, *Great Expectations*, *A Christmas Carol* and others. The care and protection of children was first and paramount of 'Dickensian' and indeed of Victorian values.

It is possible to present David's stepfather Mr Murdstone, and his spiteful sister, as representatives of Victorian Christianity, but joylessness is only one of their odious qualities. The Murdstones batten upon the widowed Mrs Copperfield, as later they batten upon another young woman, in expectation of her inheritance. Their cruelty is subordinate to their avarice, and for this reason they cheat young David out of his money and send him to work at the age of 11 to Murdstone and Grinby's warehouse in London. Avarice was their motive but it is not that which makes them abhorrent in David's and Dickens's view. Their crime is having deprived a child of affection, of education, the comradeship of other children, in short of childhood. Little David's only friends in London, Mr and Mrs Micawber, seem to regard him as an adult, they confide in him about their 'pecuniary embarrassments', and get him to pop their goods at the pawnbrokers.

Even Salem House school was better than no school at all, since David at least had the friendship of Steerforth and Traddles, and a sense of being a boy among boys. Even Mr Creakle's cane was not more harsh than the turning of little children into adults; and in this respect we may be even worse than the Creakles. At Salem House school the boys suffered during the day from sums, spelling and Latin and French irregular verbs but at night in the dormitory they regaled each other with tales of imagination. This was perhaps a better education than filling the children's heads with adult notions on politics, race, sociology and sex, as is the modern wont. I was tempted to say that only Dickens could truly portray a modern 'educationist', but he did, in the person of Mr Gradgrind in *Hard Times*:

"And what," asked Mr Gradgrind, in a still lower voice, "did you read to your father, Jupe?"

"About the Fairies, Sir, and the Dwarf, and the Hunchback, and the Genies", she sobbed out; "and about..."

"Hush!" said Mr Gradgrind "that is enough. Never breathe a word of such destructive nonsense, any more. Bounded by, this is a case for rigid training..."

Not long ago, I read in the *Sunday Times* that two Australian sociologists had conducted a survey of schools in the *Hard Times* county of Lancashire to find what the eight-year-olds knew about birth control, a subject that would have appealed to Mr Gradgrind. The sociologists and the *Sunday Times* were shocked to discover that whereas in Sweden, eight-year-old children could name as many as five kinds of contraceptive device, some of the Lancashire children could not name any.

The childhood of David Copperfield was made miserable by the remarriage of his mother to a harsh and unfeeling man. Nowadays, parents are less likely to die

before their children have reached maturity, but they are very likely to get divorced and perhaps remarry. Few modern step-parents would prove as cruel as the Murdstones; probably few were, even in Dickens's time. But coldness and neglect may possibly be as hurtful as beatings and compulsory church. Modern divorced parents deny this; but what do the children really feel? It was Dickens's greatest achievement that in *David Copperfield* he reminded grown ups of how they had felt as children, and taught them to look on their own children with greater love and consideration. That was the true Dickensian, Victorian value.

More White mischief

James Fox

Sam White's Paris: The Collected Despatches of a Newspaper Legend (New English Library £9.95)

When Beaverbrook picked out Sam White's unusual talents in 1946, White was already a myth-making Australian left-winger, a fighting, drinking Ozzie with the glamour of a Mel Gibson. Two months after his installation in Paris, White, lonely and confused, admitted to Beaverbrook that he couldn't speak French. This Beaverbrook treated as a huge joke. At last, he said, with his usual disregard for the truth, the British point of view would come across. White's frankness endeared him to Beaverbrook whose patronage never wavered, but the copy turned out differently, notably in White's inspired, and sometimes almost prescient understanding of de Gaulle, which put him ahead of the game from 1958 onwards.

Those despatches still make exhilarating reading although they form only a small part of this fascinating collection — a 37-year sweep through French politics and high-level gossip sharply and stylishly reported by a journalistic legend of our times.

As White's knowledge of his beat deepened, his French *accent* remained nonexistent. In the Travellers' Club recently — where White had made his new headquarters among the *ducs ruinés* — he was discussing Mitterand's foreign policy with a fellow member who described it as '*somptueux*'.

'Weeee' boomed White. 'Say net'. He paused, glowering across the Edwardian gloom. 'Say clare.' He paused again. 'And, aaarm, say made in Washington.' That was part of the legend, as was White's structural relationship, as he called it, with the Crillon bar which ended in 1970 when an apologetic

Rome Found

Rome, the name excites me. Never have I known such concentrated happiness Before or since. Nature flung wide her arms And art became another form of love. In Rome I found the majesty of peace, Christ everywhere, in church or catacombs.

And I was christened once again, I knew Relief of penance. All the childhood fears Vanished in a city where men know They will find Christ and understand him too In art, in trees, in gardens, fountains. Tears Are shed here out of happiness. The glow

Of Christ triumphant glories in this place, This home, this womb, this consecrated ground. Here Peter died a martyr, old ones pray And I learnt from them. Everywhere was grace, And sometimes in the night I heard a sound Of murmuring whispers like the stars at play.

Elizabeth Jennings



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and grateful management hacked off a corner of it and sent it round to his flat. It was legend too that White netted his scoops at the Crillon, pulling in his vast range of sources and friends, without abandoning his stool. Legend, but to my certain knowledge, fact as well. Despite the comfort that his despatches must have given de Gaulle, White's refusal to pay court at the Quai d'Orsay cost him his Legion d'Honneur and he must make do with his MBE.

It is touching (or is it a mistake, for it appears in the index, too?) that his editor has left uncorrected a reference from an early piece (1947) to 'the famous Alsatian restaurant "Lips"' in the Boulevard St Germain. It indicates the shaky start to White's formidable career in the deprived world of postwar Paris of the Fourth Republic when political reporting — with the farcical collapses of successive governments — was a non-starter. Gossip and the revival of the image of Gay Paree was the story, and White plunged into the *mondain* world with unmixed enthusiasm and considerable success.

White gained the reputation of being tough on his enemies and loyal to his friends and he made many of both, including, in the second category, Jimmy Goldsmith, although he writes objectively about Goldsmith — his habit of chewing his handkerchief when excited, for example, and Oswald Mosley's great admiration for him. Nancy Mitford early on, and above all Duff Cooper, were pet hates. It is typical of the mock seriousness and wit of White's gossip stories that he pretends his greatest scoop was not a political one (and there were many of those) but his discovery that Lady Jebb had declared war on the bidet and was having hers uprooted and cast out of the Paris Embassy. Picasso was White's favourite subject — until de Gaulle.

White saw with total clarity what de Gaulle was up to from the very beginning of the intrigues and preparations for his return to power in 1958. He never had access to the General but he did have a kind of mystic communion with him which gives a startling assurance to these pieces, and provides a wonderful example of a reporter outguessing Foreign Office and State Department. It took courage too. Predicting that de Gaulle would give independence to Algeria risked the charge of insanity from his colleagues, as did his suggestion at the time of the EEC vetoes, that the fault was on Britain's side.

He saw de Gaulle's 'repulsive' side as well, but he was impressed, perhaps obsessed, with the quality of his decision-making — in recognising China, denouncing the Vietnam war, pioneering detente. While the Left saw him as a blustering fascist, and others saw only peevishness and guile for its own sake in his actions, White saw him as a rare political giant and a progressive, whose intentions were always clear and resolutely followed up. 'De Gaulle,' he wrote, 'sees himself as a revolutionary who, as a nationalist accomplishes the very reforms the Left have been clamouring for ...'

One can see why de Gaulle appealed to

Give an Oxford Book

White, a childhood Jewish refugee from Russia who joined the Australian CP when Hitler appeared, and trustingly looked to the Soviet Union for protection. His subsequent disillusionment and extrication was painful and absolute. It left him with a horror of ideologies and of systems that he saw as natural breeding grounds for tyrants. He saw the Right in France as a spent force, emasculated by de Gaulle. But he is hard on his fallen giants of the Left like Sartre who fell 'for all the great ideological swindles of our time.'

The *Spectator*, from 1976, gave White the space to reap, at greater length, the harvest of a long and deadly accurate memory, to expose hypocrisy and posturing with a gloating irony, from Marchais's faked wartime record, to Mitterand's promises of 'moral restraints on the arms trade' to the humiliating blowback for France for its harbouring of the Ayatollah with whom the Quai d'Orsay were 'quite intoxicated.'

It is an indication of White's remarkable talent for professional survival that some of his best work is his most recent — although Mitterand is undoubtedly a White godsend — all of it produced since his retirement under the reduced conditions of a struggling freelance, a dire contrast to the days of pink gins, chauffeur-secretary, office and car. What is missing, inevitably, from this collection are the stories behind the stories, but to hear those a structural relationship would be needed with what remains of the Crillon bar.

Laugh a line

Jeffrey Bernard

Sweet and Sour

An Anthology of Comic Verse

Edited by Christopher Logue

Illustrations by John Glashan

(Batsford £6.95)

The Penguin Book of Limericks

Compiled and edited by E. O. Parrott

Illustrations by Robin Jacques

(Allen Lane £7.95)

As the dust jacket of *Sweet and Sour* says, comic verse is funny if you think it is. Quite so. But the dust jacket of the *Penguin Book of Limericks* quotes Robert Conquest who has said, 'our existence would be that much grimmer except for the solace of limericks.' I can only hope that he meant that the solace comes in the *writing* of limericks. I can do without them in spite of the excellence of a very few. If you like contrived humour, a real effort at humour, then I suppose you like being told jokes by travelling salesmen or being buttonholed by the did you hear the one about . . . man. For my money this book is the ideal Christmas present to be bought by a person who has run out of ideas of what to give for

Christmas, to be presented to any anal obsessive who keeps books in the lavatory. But take no notice of me. Far better men have contributed to this anthology. There are three W. H. Auden limericks, two Betjemans, a Burgess, a James Joyce, and a Dylan Thomas. More to the point, my point anyway, is that there are five from Martin Fagg and 12 from the editor. Anyone, then, who likes literary competitions in up market journals such as this one is going to love it. I'm surprised that our own Jaspistos hasn't made a contribution but he's made an excellent one in *Sweet and Sour*. What doesn't surprise me is that far and away the best author in limericks for the loo is that elusive fellow Anon.

On the chest of a barmaid in Sale
Were tattooed the prices of ale,
And on her behind,
For the sake of the blind,
Was the same information in Braille.

At least he scores points for consistency even though he's not as clever as Auden whose best offering is nicely bitchy.

As the poets have mournfully sung,
Death takes the innocent young,
The rolling-in-money,
The screamingly funny,
And those who are very well hung.

Also, beyond the comprehension of the pub joke teller, is a nice one from Roger Woddis.

There was an Old Man with a Beard,
Who said: 'I demand to be feared.
Address Me as God,
And love Me, you sod!
And Man did just that, which is weird.

The editor of *Sweet and Sour* modestly includes only three of his own verses, and one of them merely a two-liner, and a nicely depressing piece of advice which I suspect is directed at authors.

When all else fails,
try Wales.

It would be good if he extended that one day although brevity is a virtue in comic verse, to wit a verse by Jacob Bronowski — a surprising appearance — called 'Method'.

O Cuckoo! shall I call thee Bird
Or but a wandering voice?
State the alternative preferred
With reasons for your choice.

The only longish poem, three pages of it, which doesn't become a grind to read, as a shaggy dog story becomes hard work to listen to, is James Michie's 'Dooley is a Traitor'. This is indeed clever stuff but I'm not sure that it's all *that* comic. About the trial of a conscientious objector, I didn't know whether to laugh at the wit or reach for the Kleenex. Sad, it is. And, speaking of sadness, I was surprised to see an entry from Malcolm Lowry but not of course four from that old favourite and other lush, Dorothy Parker. (What a tiresome woman she must really have been with her depressions lacking brevity). The ladies do very well in this anthology: nice one Logue.

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