Medicine and Books

Reading for pleasure

EOIN O'BRIEN

Some time ago I remarked to a friend that reading no longer gave me my usual pleasure. My appetite had gone; I nibbled everything, but savoured little; many books were started but few were finished—a literary climateric, I reckoned. A few days later my faithful mentor presented me with a book, saying: "This is what you need. Read it. You will find it interesting." Thus did I discover *Nine Rivers from Jordan, The Chronicle of a Journey and a Search* by Denis Johnston. Having re-read the book—fearful on the one hand of shattering the magic of the first reading, but anxious to prove that its power was not illusory—I unhesitatingly rank *Nine Rivers from Jordan* as one of the most remarkable books of our time.

Search for truth in global war

Denis Johnston is less well known than he deserves. Dublin, in characteristic fashion, is showing signs of belated appreciation, an occurrence which Mr Johnston may view with some scepticism. Born in 1900 and educated in Dublin and Edinburgh, Christ's College, Cambridge, and the Harvard Law School, he promptly abandoned the Bar for the theatre, having his first success in 1929 with *The Old Lady says No.* (The title, incidentally, is a reference to Lady Gregory's refusal to stage the play at the Abbey and has nothing whatever to do with its content.) In 1931 *The Moon in the Yellow River*—possibly his best theatrical work—was produced at the Abbey. After this came many more plays (recently republished by Colin Smythe in two volumes), and an iconoclastic work on Swift which baffled and irritated the scholars. In 1942 he joined the BBC as a war correspondent, and *Nine Rivers from Jordan* is a chronicle of this period. He has called it a war autobiography, but it is very much more than that—it is the odyssey of a man in search of self and truth amid the chaos and horror, the humour and sorrow, of a global war. "In the beginning is the Myth, and the Myth is Now and this Now is an illusion."

How readily we take for granted the technology of modern communication. It was very different in the early 'forties: cheating red tape and fellow correspondents to a scoop; cutting a disc in what seemed impossible circumstances, with relatively primitive and cumbersome equipment. Then the vagaries of transport to the ever-vigilant and ruthless censor before the final broadcast from London—this was the stuff of wartime communication. The truth, then as now, was just as illusory, and unacceptable—"Our reporter, speaking from the Alamein Box quotes General Pienaar as stating that the line cannot possibly be held and that the Prime Minister in Washington is talking balls." A German woman with a tender voice lulls two armies to sleep under a romantic desert sky with, "Die einst Lilli Marlene"—a poignant vignette? The censor does not think so—"I thought you were supposed to be on our side." The frustrations of these early days were considerable, and at times there was the temptation to send a cryptic UPSHOVE JOB ARSEWARDS to London. "All that I have to do is to give the world the facts. But the trouble is, there are no facts." The facts are whatever one wants them to be, and at times it is necessary to create them—Johnston's account of the Battle of Matratin was largely his own invention but, none the less, became the official version. The opportunity to do a first recording of a bombing raid gives Johnston the chance of a world scoop. The tedium, the terror, and the awesome beauty of the 12-hour dummy run from Palestine to Benghazi makes the author seek solace in his paperback copy of Dante's *Inferno*:

> "Over the desert in a stately shower
> Like snow upon the windless mountain
> Great flakes of fire are raining down."

Finally, there comes the great moment. The first-ever recording of a bombing raid (over the Tunisian seaport of Susse) becomes even more memorable for the remark, "Here comes the F- shit," as the flak begins to come up. There are other scoops—interviews with Monty and the Old War Horse, but none greater than the perilous trip from Italy to interview the partisans on the transadriatic foothold of the Allies—the island of Vis.

Historic discs are dispatched to London, including one of the Yugoslav partisans singing "Tipperary" (in the mistaken belief that it was the British national anthem). From London come the compliments—". . . they (the BBC) broke off the 1 o'clock bulletin for a special announcement. . . . Two BBC war correspondents had taken recording gear behind the German lines in Yugoslavia and made some outstanding recordings." But, from an anxious Betty in Dublin comes an abusive letter enclosing a cutting from an English newspaper: "BBC men risk lives for a song." The greatest scoop lay further into Yugoslavia. Johnston was offered an interview with Tito, and one suspects that he never forgave the authorities for not authorising it, and himself for not ignoring the red tape.

Lighter moments

Cheated by a few hours of being the first correspondent into Rome, there is consolation in the humour of Delia, the handsome wife of the Irish Minister, whose first realisation that she had been liberated was when a resting solider whom she presumed to be German said, "Say, sister. Come and park your arse beside me."

There is much humour in *Nine Rivers*. People in strange circumstances are often downrightly funny, and war is the strangest circumstance of all. There is, too, the sadness and loneliness of bewildered soldiers. There are the colourful characters; Frank Thornton-Bassett thundering on Christianity from the hills of Jordan: "It's a doctrine taught by a bunch of wild men who came up from that valley there, in order to denounce both church and state, and to proclaim something that they called the Kingdom of God." Perhaps the most colourful of all is Wynford Vaughan-Thomas, alias Young Bullivant, "with a bright red face and a ridiculous beret, a dirty waterproof, and a wild zest for life dancing in his eyes." A blasphemous pair, this Irishman and his Welsh confrère, dancing on the steps of the Basilica in Rome while singing the *Old Orange Flute* "for the delectation of the Roman populace"

after the Pope's thanksgiving speech for the deliverance of Rome from war.

Men without women

In spite of Johnston's regret that "there are not enough women in this book . . . too many in my life, and too few on my arm," love and women glide through the pages. There is the loneliness of men separated from their loved ones (the homosexuals, at least in war, having the last laugh), the women of Paris, Rome, and vanquished Germany, Anneliese and the Pieta, and the hilarious fantasia at Madame Blanche's:

> "The lovely little creature in the cage kicks up a dainty foot and a small silver slipper comes curling downwards through the scent-laden air. With blazing eyes I catch it, and filling it to the brim with the bubbling, icy Bollinger '28, I drink a toast to her loveliness in one long passionate draught."

What matter if the reality is only myth? In the background there is a very real love story subtly narrated, in fact scarcely narrated at all, and all the better for this. Who is Betty, and why has he left her in Dublin? An odyssey in search of self we said earlier, a selfish odyssey as all such must be. Meanwhile, a divorce proceeds tortuously—"if a few solicitors can make complete strangers out of two people who once loved each other, what chance in hell has an Englishman of understanding a German?" Johnston reports a world war in Europe, but what turmoil has he left at home? A brief interlude takes us to tranquil Dublin, to the poignant reunion with Betty in the Gaiety Theatre (where, as Desdemona, she is about to be murdered in her bed), and then to Belfast, by command of General Eisenhower, for marriage to his beloved.

Buchenwald

What is it that guides our destinies? Is it the supernatural in the guise of a god, or are we at the mercy of the unpredictable winds of chance? How does a trivial event of today become the crucial influence of tomorrow? Or is it merely retrospective analysis that permits the irrelevancy to become the starting point of a revelation? In *Nine Rivers* certain occurrences lead inevitably, it seems, to the climax by way of a complex web of preordination: love letters from an unknown German soldier to his girlfriend Anneliese in the Thuringian village of Eckartsberga are found in an abandoned German staff car in the desert; a dragoman reading Johnston's palm by moonlight at the base of the Great Pyramid presages the crossing of the nine rivers; his pact with himself not to carry arms in return for safe passage. These early events blur almost to insignificance in the advance on Mittel-Europa. But then suddenly he is in Eckartsberga, "like some prophecy fulfilled, in spite of oneself," looking for Anneliese, but finding instead an American officer who directs him to—*Buchenwald*—the truth at last, the horrible truth. "Oh Christ, we are betrayed. I have done my best to keep sane but there is no answer to this, except bloody murder."

> "I went in. At one end lay a heap of smoking clothes among which a few ghouls picked and searched for what, God only knows. . . . And as we came in, those with the strength to do so turned their heads and gazed at us; and from their lips came that thin, unearthy noise. Then I realised what it was. It was meant to be cheering. They were cheering the uniform that I wore."

He emerges a changed man, a man who up to this point believed that the jerry was just another soldier doing his job. He had gone through the war without bearing malice to anyone (except possibly the censors), but now, blinded by this outrage to humanity, he violates his vow and pushes a souvenir—a Luger—into his pocket. Death is not too far off on the Brenner Pass. Was it to be a spiritual metamorphosis rather than a physical demise? "When you know how to suffer, you will be able not to suffer. Who I am, you shall not know until I go."

The post-war generation of readers may have difficulty in following Mr Johnston's peregrinations, but he does excuse himself—"I feel a little guilty . . . in not trying to write history. Yet there are plenty of people who will do that, but not so many who will put on paper what it was really like." Denis Johnston has succeeded in this ambition. Not only has he described war from an unusual vantage point; he has done so by bringing to his work the same innovative flair that made him a master of theatre. The prose is unconventional, occasionally a little uneven, but never dull. There are two intermezzos—an examination of conscience according to the Catechism and a "critical exagamen" of his literary ability in which Joyce, Beckett, and O'Brien are parodied with effect and an old score with Yeats is settled. The Bible, the Tain, and Faust are introduced in ways not expected by their authors. Unfortunately the book is out of print at present, but it is available in most libraries. Aware to the dangers of adapting one form to another, I cannot, however, banish the notion, which perhaps more than any other describes my feelings on *Nine Rivers From Jordan*—it would make a bloody marvellous film. I trust that compliment will not be regarded as an insult.

Hens, horses, monkeys, and men

Animals for Medical Research: Models for the Study of Human Disease. Brij M Mitruka, Howard M Rawnsley, and Dharam V Vadehra. (Pp 591; £24·05.) John Wiley and Sons. 1976.

No one should assume that a model exists for every human disease. In the first place, evolution through natural selection relies not on similarities but on how different species survive in various circumstances. If all species were similarly susceptible to all diseases, man could not have evolved. Secondly, some of the commonest diseases of man are due to his success as a species. In this category fall atherosclerosis and heart disease, all manner of occupational diseases, diseases associated with alcohol and tobacco, and iatrogenic disease. Furthermore, preventing early death from infectious diseases has made the degenerative diseases associated with old age increasingly prominent. Finally, by establishing an environment in which men and women have time and energy for pursuits other than those essential for survival, man has created for himself a whole range of problems—both physical and psychological—for which no useful animal model may reasonably be expected to exist. On the other hand, clearly many anatomical and physiological similarities are shared by different animals and it is therefore reasonable to expect that carefully designed studies on animals might in some cases throw useful light on the pathogenesis of human diseases.

The preface to the present book claims that it provides "valuable information in selecting and using suitable animal species for research . . . relevant to human disease," but the reader soon has cause to doubt this claim, and this doubt is sustained as he reads on. The introductory chapter consists of a series of statements of the obvious, such as, "The animals should be ordered from the appropriate sources with detailed specifications . . ." and "Dogs and cats are common laboratory animals frequently used for experimental purposes." No mention is made of the importance of using specified pathogen free (SPF) animals for virtually all purposes where rats or mice are indicated; how to maintain them; the use of caesarean section in the genesis of SPF animals; or the unique value of gnotobiotic animals as models for certain kinds of research. The difficulty of determining suitable diets for laboratory rodents is dismissed in chapter 2 with merely a formula for "a practical diet" for rats