

# Materia Non Medica

## Dreams of a white winter

Névé snow, enough to smooth out the heathery bumps, with a coating of powder snow to cushion the falls and stretching over thousands of Highland acres, while the low setting of the winter sun brings out the finest of detail by its deft shadowing—alas, Scotland's winter is seldom so. The natural history is each year the same; heavy snowfalls for several days when blizzards forbid intimate contact with the hills, quickly followed by balmy thaws so that the snow is gone to fill the rivers before the townsman has had his chance to perform his mountain art, whether this means forcing a route up an ice-plastered cliff or just watching such happenings from the plateau.

But if conditions are good, the downhill skiers flock to the slopes of Cairngorm, Glen Shee, and Glencoe. There they join thousands of their kind. Queues, noise, diesel fumes, car parks, and moorland eroded into muddy bogs await them as well as the speedy exhilaration of slalom skiing. Give me instead a friend or two and a pair of cross-country skis and we will choose our own route and find new downhill runs to practise our snow-ploughs and stem turns. Who needs chairlifts or tows when your skis allow you to ski uphill with little more effort than walking? And because of the looseness of our bindings we can perform multiple and varied falls all day long with little risk of the classic tib and fib fracture to which our downhill cousins are so prone. Our sport is a marriage of mountaineering and skiing, where map and compass are always more important than the skis, and clothing reflects regard for hypothermia rather than fashion. While we may not become very fast, and I doubt if we have any technical proficiency, we do have the freedom of all the Highlands.

All we need now is some snow!—  
KENNETH F MCLEAN (Aberdeen).

## Sahara crossing

When I was working in Nigeria a friend invited me to travel home on leave with him in his car. We planned to cross the Sahara by the Hoggar mountains and Tamanrasset but unfortunately this route was still closed after the rainy season, so we had to take the more westerly route across the Tanezrouft or "sand sea." We had been travelling for three or four days in this flat sandy wilderness, and had stopped to make camp—a simple affair which only entailed erecting a camp bed and chair at the side of the car—when we saw a small sand cloud appear on the horizon. This gradually grew larger and eventually out of it emerged an ancient Mercedes which slowed down and parked about a hundred yards from us. The sole occupant was a rather plump middle-aged man and, after allowing him time to erect his camp bed and chair, we went over to him, introduced ourselves, and invited him over for coffee. Our fellow traveller was a Belgian and it transpired that he had crossed the Sahara many times on business trips. He appeared to be an expert in desert travel and, from then on, he travelled ahead of us and we found that we were able to elude the patches of soft sand that previously had trapped us for hours at a time. During the day we had no contact with each other but at nightfall, when the sun slipped down over the horizon and the silent blackness

engulfed us, we would meet and while away the hours drinking coffee. In Reggan, at the northern end of the desert, we said farewell to our companion and never saw him again. On reflection, it does seem strange that, although we spent many hours with him, we never discovered what business took him to and fro across the desert and, indeed, we learnt very little at all about him. One piece of information, however, which we did learn from him on our last night was that there was really nothing which he disliked quite so much as coffee—J R G WATTER (general practitioner, Ullapool).

## The wit of Oliver Gogarty

One of the most pleasant things about Dublin is its good conversation. This national characteristic has seen better days; it suffered greatly from television but is now recovering. Before television, one of my pleasures was to nestle in a corner of a quayside or Liberties pub and there to let the sweet music of conversation soothe a restless mind.

The best conversations that I have overheard or participated in have had a raconteur—a rare bird—with the ability to reminisce accurately on something worth recalling, the sensitivity to capture the ambience of the distant occasion, a facility with language to appreciate nuances of expression, and the wit to know when to shut up. Happily, I know one who fulfils these criteria and more—Niall Sheridan (Brinsley, in Flann O'Brien's *At Swim—Two Birds*), and with characteristic generosity he has allowed me to recount the following tale.

Dublin's skyline in the thirties was marred by only two large electrical signs: one for BOVRIL in College Green cast its iridescent message towards Westmoreland and O'Connell Street and the other, for OXO, commanded the attention of the denizen of Nassau Street. The latter celestial sign was situated on a tall building beside Fanning's Pub—now the Lincoln Inn, but then owned by Senator Fanning. One day the first O in oxo failed to light, and an electrician named Joe, known not only for his professional prowess but also well liked for his wit and geniality was summoned to rectify the fault. But having, perhaps, dallied a little too long in the convivial bar of Fanning's, he slipped from the rooftop and was killed. That evening there was a general air of gloom in Fanning's, where Brinsley MacNamara, Austin Clarke, Fred Higgins, and Seamus O'Sullivan were among the gathering. Oliver St John Gogarty joined the company and the bartending senator—to mark the sad occasion—stood a free drink on the house. Raising his glass to the proprietor, Gogarty bowed and, adroitly misquoting Milton, intoned: "They also stand who only serve and wait." Sheridan and the others then suggested that he should write an epitaph for the late electrician. The senator provided a pencil and a brown paper bag—of the type designed to carry half-a-dozen Guinness—and after some thought Gogarty wrote:

*Here is my tribute to engineer Joe,  
Who fell to his death through the O in OXO,  
He's gone to a land which is far far better,  
And he went, as he came, through a hole in a letter.*

—EOIN T O'BRIEN (consultant physician, Dublin).