



# THE ROYAL BANK OF CANADA

## MONTHLY LETTER

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### *Adventuring into Old Books*

SOME PEOPLE READ to get away from life; others read to get into life, to experience it more abundantly.

There are virtues in both purposes. For escape from the vexation of events, we may immerse ourselves in books of our choice; we may read for information, to stimulate thought, to help our personal development, or because we enjoy reading.

No purpose requires us to analyze and parse the prose and poetry and tear it to pieces in search of hidden meanings. We profit most when we read with enjoyment, just as we look at the soft beauty of a flower without putting it under a microscope.

Our approach to books can be influenced by this undoubted truth: books are the sole means of communication with great minds of the past, and the only means most of us have to commune with the first-rate minds of our own day. In our books are recorded all the thoughts, feelings, passions, visions and dreams that have stirred the human mind.

Books are not inanimate masses of wood pulp with black marks on them; they are dynamic, vital things, capable of informing and enlivening our minds. This *Letter* is about books which have enriched human life over the centuries.

#### *Children's books*

The obvious place to start a discussion is in the happy realm of children's books, not only because that is where we start in real life but because most of us like to go back to them in later years. Just as many a man buys an electric train for his son so that he himself may live or relive the joy of playing with it, so many a woman reads the old stories to her children or grandchildren with a sense of renewed youth and enjoyment.

Note, first, that children's books remain international in their appeal, so that we are one with all the world while we read them. The Frenchman Perrault, the German Grimm Brothers, the Dane Andersen, the United States Mark Twain, the Italian Collodi, the Swede Selma Lagerlöf, the Englishmen Lewis

Carroll and Kipling: these have become the common property of children all over the world.

In the second place, note that these children's books are well done. Children accept their style as a matter of course, so easily do the stories move along and so quietly does the picture take shape before their eyes. Look at the first page of Andersen's "The Ugly Duckling": "The country was very lovely just then — it was summer. The wheat was golden and the oats still green. The hay was stacked in the rich low meadows, where the stork marched about on his long red legs, chattering in Egyptian, the language his mother had taught him." Here is no striving for effect or pretentiousness, just a wealth of soft colour.

Books are, apart from the work and influence of the teacher, the chief instruments in education. It is principally through books that a child explores the richness of human experience and knowledge. Every child born in Canada is born into a democracy which stands committed to a high responsibility at home and internationally. How is he to learn the basis of that way of life except by reading?

The most important room in any school is the library, and the most important mind-forming aid in any home is the selection of books it makes available to its children.

#### *Novels*

Many novels are merely costume pieces that entertain us at the time we read them, but there are thousands of novels that have flesh and blood inside their costumes. Samuel Johnson once asked: "Was there ever yet anything written by mere man that was wished longer by its readers, excepting 'Don Quixote', 'Robinson Crusoe' and 'The Pilgrim's Progress'?"

What is the basis of our love for romance except this: that everybody is romantic who admires a fine thing or does one. Merely to copy life, as some novelists do today, is to produce nonsense, something utterly useless. They give us a mass of detail of trivial happenings, or witless cruelty, stupid evil, blind fate.

Go to a well written novel and see the difference. What is the argument, for example, pertinent to our times to be extracted from Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* published a hundred years ago? Hugo's impeachment is not of men but of man-administered institutions which, he suggests, have become a source of fearful peril by weakening the individual's sense of responsibility.

Or take the more personal narratives which put on record the struggles of men within themselves: Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, whose inward turmoil lasted for two and a half months; Henry Faust, for whom the ordeal stretched over fifty years; and Robinson Crusoe. As J. O'D. Bennett says about Crusoe in *Much Loved Books*, (a Premier book published in 1959): "we are on the Island of Despair . . . for eight and twenty years. It is an epic of competent man, refusing to go mad, refusing to lose the power of speech; ever patient, ingenious, hoping on and on, not for rescue merely, but for the best as God shall order it, be it rescue or endless waiting, and at the last finding his own soul."

John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, published in 1678, ran into eleven editions and many pirated issues in ten years. It has spread to the remotest corners of the earth. It is not only a guide to a way of life — much sought after in these days — but a gripping novel full of dramatic incidents. As for *Don Quixote*, published in 1605, it can be read as a tale of adventure but it is also a manual of tolerance and indulgent pity.

*The Swiss Family Robinson* has an average of three things happening on every one of its 500 pages (Everyman edition). The happenings have to do with life as it must be lived if a man is to get through it with decency, comfort, usefulness, and a fair degree of distinction.

All of these books display the individuals in courageous roles. We might sum them up in the sentence used by young Jim Hawkins in *Treasure Island*: "I began to be horribly frightened, but I kept my head, for all that."

## Poetry

Poetry is not to be neglected, whatever our purpose in reading may be. The poets saw things through the centuries in perfect clarity. No man can have any just conception of the greatness, the fullness and the possibilities of life who has not read some of the great poetry.

We sang and chanted long before we reasoned and persuaded, and poetry expresses ideas and emotions that run true to the common experience of humanity. It was said of Keats that his spirit "went flaming through the cluttered world for a few brief years, leaving a cleared path for men's souls to walk in."

A book of poetry is not a collection of flowery and vague words put together in an undisturbing way. The

value of a poem lies in the intensity with which the writer has encountered an experience and the accuracy with which its consequences have been recognized and expressed.

This criterion is substantiated by a poll designed to find the most popular poet of the United States. The leading three were: Longfellow, "A Psalm of Life"; Foss, "The House by the Side of the Road"; and Bryant, "Thanatopsis". No one can read these without feeling his horizon widened, his spirit broadened, and his mind stirred.

## Plays

Some people look upon plays as something to be seen on the stage, and not read, but they are missing one of the great pleasures of reading.

That there are many more people with different views is indicated by the fact that the greatest single author to spin money for publishers, booksellers and other authors all over the world has been William Shakespeare.

His plays continue to be best sellers because of the intensity of the life in them and because of their inexhaustible wealth of perception of how people talk and act and think. We quote his lines, read him for pleasure, and study him for ideas applicable to our time.

And so with Molière, Marlowe, Shaw, and Ibsen: they mirrored their times and scrutinized the spirits of men and women as truthfully as did Aristophanes, Euripides, Aeschylus and Sophocles. Re-reading them in the light of life experience, one comes upon flashes of inspiration that make one want to squeeze the very type for pleasure.

## History and biography

It may seem strange to put forward as a recommendation for reading history that it destroys the urgency of such words as "now, today, this year". It does so by widening our horizon and increasing our sense of perspective. It makes us part of the thousands of years past and to come.

In our histories lies the soul of past time. The material substance of nations, cities and people may have vanished, but here is their audible voice. In reading Toynbee's *A Study of History* it is as if Time had rebuilt his ruins and were re-enacting the lost scenes of existence.

Some historians write for historians, but those who have written for the man in the street have shown the possibility of making the facts of life clear. Macaulay's *History of England* outsold the best-selling novel of its day.

The history of the world is the biography of great men. This is the literature of superiority, just as surely as journalism is the literature of mediocrity.

It is necessary for us to read great lives, because in every one of them there is something to learn. Collectively, they give a measure of what human life may become.

In reading biography we come upon some depressing pages. An epigram of Wilde's ran to the effect that all great men have their disciples but sometimes it is Judas who writes the biography.

There is a phase in biography writing during which it is the style to prove that great men are small. The writer brings his subject down to his own level, shifting the lens from the vital to the trivial. He dwells upon Shakespeare's bequeathing his second-best bed to his wife, and George Washington's well restrained interest in Mrs. Sally Fairfax. The vital thing is that Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet* and *King Lear*, and that Washington established the American Republic.

One great biographer, Plutarch, spoke out against writing irrelevant detail about a man "lest, by trifling away time in the lesser moments we should be driven to omit those greater actions and fortunes which best illustrate his character."

### *Philosophy*

Reading philosophy, like reading biography and history, helps to give us a sense of proportion. To the old-time Greek the unforgivable sin, whether in art or in morals, was the violation of proportion. An overbearing man, a man who was presumptuous, or vain-glorious: these men were brassy offenders.

Philosophy, besides keeping us in our place, broadens our taste and makes us more ready to recognize that even our favourite beliefs may have flaws. It deals in principles, the most hardy, convertible and portable of all literary property.

Consider *The Prince*. It cannot be dissociated from the period in which Niccolo Machiavelli wrote it, and yet it contains lessons for all times. And what of Machiavelli himself? He wrote in a letter: "I go to my study; I pass into the ancient courts of the men of old where, being lovingly received by them, I am fed with that food which is mine alone; where I do not hesitate to speak with them, and to ask for the reason of their actions, and they in their benignity answer me."

One may go to the philosophers for answers to questions, or for thoughts that are pertinent to the pressures of life, or merely to enjoy being with men of stature who took the trouble to write down their thoughts for us.

### *Myths*

At one time every myth was a valid truth, the most accurate statement possible on the basis of the facts then known. Mythology is an intuitive way of apprehending and expressing universal truths. It is a dramatic representation of the inward or outward ex-

perience of the men who fashioned it. The great feature about reading a myth is not what wild hunter dreamed the story, or what childish race first dreaded it, but what strong people first lived by it and what wise man first perfectly told it.

A myth perceives, however darkly, things which are for all ages true, and we understand and enjoy it only in so far as we have some perception of the same truth.

That truth illuminated the human mind when there was no other light. It set man upon his feet and taught him to walk by himself. It enticed man forward out of his brutishness, breaking down to a useful current the terrible high tension he feared in life all around him. It spoke persuasively to men and women about good and evil, cultivating their humanity foot by foot.

Some of the myths are dead because they have performed their evolutionary task and are needed no more, but others still provide answers to the riddles of life.

### *Variety in reading*

Part of the splendour of our literature lies in its infinite variety.

A person who wishes to read profitably, and to avoid becoming a one-subject or one-author bore, might make a schedule whereby he read a book of philosophy, then a novel, followed in succession by history, biography, drama, sociology, religion, fine arts and science. He might like to reserve poetry and the great Victorian essayists for bedtime reading. Both poetry and essays delight us with quick turns of speech or the use of an old word in a new and exactly fitting sense that gives a thrill of pleasure.

Or, if a person does not wish to make up his own list, he may join one of the groups reading Great Books.

The great books deal with the knowledge of all time and with problems which are problems for everybody today. They provide bridges by which their readers may communicate agreeably across the barriers of specialization with other men and women who are looking for the same opportunity.

These books are not too hard to read. They were not too difficult for the school children of former ages or for the people who are leaders today. They are, in fact, so truly basic that no deep or specialized knowledge is needed in order to understand them.

No one who reads the great books will find in them the way to make or ban the bomb, but he will find an explanation of the thought processes which make bombers or banners. The root problems of good and evil, of love and hate, of happiness and misery, and of life and death, have not changed very much. By learning about these things one approaches in some measure the knowledge of the common heritage that underlies the one world men and women dream about.

## The classics

Some of the great books are classics, a term which frightens some people. "Classic" is not a word for something that is dry with age, but for something that has worn well.

When we read a classic we are likely to be surprised by learning that truths that we think modern have been glimpsed by the ancients, and sometimes grasped firmly and examined on all sides.

Classics are not dull. The *Agamemnon* of Aeschylus is twenty-four centuries old, but it opens with excitement that is unsurpassed in modern writing: the troops are coming home from the Trojan war . . . along the Grecian coast from peak to peak the fire signals fly, giving news of victory and home-coming on their wings . . . it is the wireless of Homer's men.

Read about Alexander the Great in Plutarch's *Lives*. When his officers brought him a very precious casket seized among other booty from the defeated King Darius, he asked those about him what they thought fittest to be laid up in it. When they had delivered their various opinions, he told them he should keep Homer's *Iliad* in it.

And what is the *Iliad*? It and the *Odyssey* are ancient Greek narrative poems, the first as well as the greatest epics of our civilization, and two exciting stories. Every time we refer to a siren or to Achilles' heel or compare a lovely woman to Helen of Troy we are borrowing from these poems of three thousand years ago.

There is, in the classics, none of the morbid, diseased and maudlin we come upon in much of today's literature, called by Joseph Wood Krutch, writer and professor of dramatic literature, "among the most unhappy which the whole art of imaginative writing has ever produced." The bookstands carry books in which pathology has usurped the place of art, and the writer has become a specialist in diseases of the nerves, filling his pages with people who are unhappy, blundering and defeated.

## Why we read

After reading a good book we feel well above our normal best. Lifted on the shoulders of great writers, we catch a glimpse of new worlds which are within reach of the human spirit. A luminous hole has been knocked in the dusk of our knowledge, and we rise from the book with wider horizons, broader sympathies and greater comprehension.

To learn from a book one does not have to agree with the author's judgments and valuations, but it is interesting and useful to know what they are and that such opinions are held. The book has enabled us to identify and nurture our individual thoughts; it has enlarged our stock of ideas; we have caught some of the magic, the power and the glory attached to study.

It is sometimes said by business men that life is so full of many things to do that there is no time for reading. But the business mind that lays plans for building, buying, selling and distributing goods and performing services needs all the creative talents of philosopher, poet, historian and novelist. Books throw new light on old problems and give insight into values. They make the difference between becoming an expert and remaining a tyro. They provide the antidote of panic and over-confidence.

Sometimes the statement that a man has no time to read sounds like a boast. Its maker means to say that he is too important and too occupied with big affairs to fritter away time in reading. But reading is a legitimate business activity, designed to provide the mental food which maintains the intellectual life so greatly needed in business.

Reading is one of the true pleasures of life. In our age of mass culture, when so much that we encounter is abridged, adapted, adulterated, shredded and boiled down, and commercialism's loud speakers are incessantly braying, it is mind-easing and mind-inspiring to sit down privately with a congenial book.

## The great debate

Reading is not a passive experience, but one of life's most lively pleasures. It has been said that the great books constitute a transcript of a great conversation across the ages, and we share the thoughts, emotions and observations of the writers as if we were sitting with them around the fire.

Here are friends whose society is delightful. They are persons of all countries and of all ages, distinguished in war, government and letters, easy to live with, never out of humour, answering all questions with readiness. We can invite to sit with us the ablest and sprightliest of all times, the most learned philosophers, the wisest counsellors. All we need do is give them a chance to tell us what they have of value to say, and then meet their ideas with ideas of our own.

We may, if we wish, take issue with Sophocles about Oedipus and Electra and the complexes named after them; split hairs with Plato over his proposed republic; quarrel with Lord Bacon, called by Pope "the wisest, brightest, meanest of mankind"; be instructed by Leonardo, that remarkable painter, sculptor and inventor, and perhaps form an opinion about the smile he gave Mona Lisa; and smoke a pipe with Sir Walter Raleigh over his histories and poems, his adventures at sea and his quarrels with the first Queen Elizabeth.

There is another point about sitting down in this circle of an evening. What these men say may be provocative, discussing as they do the persistently nagging problems of men and bringing forward many conflicting thoughts concerning their solution. But the conversation will be clear, deep and diverse. And it will, in times of crisis, conflict and confusion, serve our nostalgic yearning for the old civilities.