



# THE ROYAL BANK OF CANADA MONTHLY LETTER

VOL. 51, No. 9

HEAD OFFICE: MONTREAL, SEPTEMBER 1970

## *Culture from Reading*

EVERY MAN is worth just so much as the things are worth about which he busies himself, and culture is the most important fact about human beings. It makes the difference between brutish behaviour and that of a wise man.

Man shares with all animals the first two stages of animal development: sensation and perception. It is the third stage, conception, that makes him human. To sense a thing and perceive it is commonplace: to read, witness or hear something and to come up with a conception is an accomplishment that belongs to man alone.

Nothing more terrible confronts western man today than that he should allow his essential human culture to be smothered under mechanical things and methods.

Everyone values books as sources of information on every known subject. But the forward-looking person does not stop there. He sees the possibilities in books of deepening his culture, and of learning to use his life in such a way as to increase his possibility of attaining happiness and fulfilment.

Culture was described by the late Dean Joseph French Johnson, founder of the Alexander Hamilton Institute, as "a by-product of reading, of study, and of fine associations."

Culture is not merely for people of leisure but also for the busiest of people. No matter how well air-conditioned his office may be, the business man should keep a window open on the world.

Some people, of course, may feel that the cultural subjects are unsuitable for workers, but to hold that view is to accept the most ruthless of class systems. It asserts that the majority of people are incapable of studies which will give them an intelligent idea of the universe and the greatness of the human spirit. In short, people who reject culture deprive themselves of knowledge of what life holds and of what they are capable of becoming.

Self-culture requires intercourse with superior minds. A man who is never brought into contact with minds more advanced than his own will probably run the same dull round of thought and action to the end of his days.

In books are to be found the ideas, beliefs, deeds, visions and passions of men of all human history laid out for the calm consideration of studious and reflective persons.

### *The time to start*

When a person passes into his thirties he is entering upon a momentous period of experience. Life has hitherto been fettered by personal and emotional relationships, the normal passion and pressure of youth. But now there is a new play opening. He can set apart some time in which to observe life, to think about things, to discover something about other people and the truth about himself. Life becomes significant. He sees it as a whole.

What is it that compensates for the loss of youth's freedom and emancipates you from the limitations and constricted views of childhood and makes you fit to develop status and wisdom? Learning. You have an opportunity to break out of the net in which events and aimlessness have enmeshed you, and delight yourself in self-renewal. You will experience the thrill of learning something, of obtaining a wider view, and of understanding happenings and trends. That is culture.

Achievement does not necessarily mean some kind of intense and vivid ecstasy. It is awareness of being fully alive. It is finding the answers to significant questions. The child asks "Where did I come from?" The youth asks "What shall I do?" Maturity asks "What shall I become?"

In his book *The Outsider*, Colin Wilson, a young man of 24, puts a question so bluntly as to shock us into awareness that it must be answered: "How must I live my life so as not to have to consider myself a failure?"

Attaining culture does not mean solving the great, burning questions of society and politics which seem to bear with them the bigoted alternatives "either — or" excluding all other shapes and shades of opinion and belief. It does help you to view them as from a distance so that you see the middle as well as the extremes.

## What is culture ?

Because of the many shades of meaning given the word "culture" it is as well to determine what sort of culture is being discussed in this *Letter*. Culture is not a dress or a suit you buy off the rack. It is made to measure. Culture is not manifested in a fastidious and patrician search for strange refinement, or the jealous cultivation of a rank or caste as something making us different from common men. It is not merely behaviour, but is also a set of thoughts and beliefs, a builder of anticipations and expectations.

Culture is that intelligence and sensibility which distinguish civility from barbarism. As a great 19th century essayist and scientist, T. H. Huxley, said: "Perfect culture should supply a complete theory of life, based upon a clear knowledge alike of its possibilities and of its limitations."

The culture that can be acquired by mature people through reading is an habitual way of thinking, feeling and acting, chosen out of an infinite number and variety of potential ways of living, so as to be happy, progressive and productive. It means being able to discriminate the qualities of thoughts and events, not merely their quantity.

Such culture is the fruit of a balanced development. One man may feel too much, another may think too much, a third may act too much. Feeling is like mercury: in skilful hands it is one of the most powerful and excellent elements in the world, but in unskilful hands it can be the most mischievous. Thinking, too, is to be governed so that it does not dominate life. Clear thinking is needed by anyone who seeks to be successful, but thinking alone achieves nothing. Willing and acting are the evidences of vitality as opposed to stagnation. Reading widely will provide the essential base of a balanced life in which feeling enlivens interest, thinking provides direction, and action completes the synthesis which is culture.

A person's culture is satisfactory to him if it is evolved within himself by directed effort leading to a desired harmony with life.

Countless people besides Willie Loman (in *Death of a Salesman*) feel that they no longer exist as individuals. Through reading directed toward culture they can become self-renewing men, touching life at many points, enlarging themselves into the full measure of humanity, and attaining some magnificence of mind.

When a person reads thoughtfully, he is by some degree more than he was before. One or two happy finds, one or two heroic examples, one or two flashes of insight, one or two instances of inspiration to new thought: these experiences in reading will take a man out of the crowd and make him an individual.

It is not necessary to read all books: to contemplate that task would dishearten anyone. It is not necessary to read all of any book ravenously. A man who was Lord Chancellor of England in 1618 wrote: "Some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested."

It is not necessary to read a book at one sitting: you can read two acts of *Hamlet* or twenty pages of Churchill's *A History of the English-Speaking Peoples* on the morning or evening train or bus.

## Reading for knowledge

Reading for culture has many roles to play in enabling people to cope with life. It is a way of preparing to do one's job. More vitally, it provides the material upon which to base sensible decisions. When people around you say of something you have done "What luck!" you know that what you did was made possible by your good judgment based upon the wealth of knowledge stored in your mind.

To know more about anything means being better able to distinguish the better from the worse, and this is the basis of all reasoning. "I am what I know," said Alan W. Watts in *The Wisdom of Insecurity*. This does not mean merely knowing for the sake of being able to answer questions, but knowing for the sheer pleasure of knowing.

Few of us are so hardy as to be able to digest all the fruits of the tree of knowledge, but we can taste and appreciate many sorts. The British Museum, the single most important library in the world, the richest repository of Eastern and Western culture on the planet, is constantly besieged by seekers after knowledge. It wrote asking scholars at 162 leading world universities to stay away this summer, because the reading rooms are swamped, and the staff of 400 cannot cope.

How fortunate is the family that is building its own private library! Every home should have a place filled with books, whether it be a small bookcase or a shelf-lined wall. Edmund Waller, who knew of his own experience what he was saying — he was a politician, a poet and a revolutionary in the days of Cromwell — wrote: "In my study I am sure to converse with none but wise men; but abroad it is impossible for me to avoid the society of fools."

When you have a small collection of books, and sit down beside them, you are in noble company. You can turn to them for comfort, amusement and illumination. They speak to you, or answer when you ask questions.

Your widening interests will create ever new demands to be met out of bookstands, bookstores, and second-hand stores. Before long you will be assured of having always at hand a book that fits your humour or your need.

## What sort of books ?

A bookman will have nothing to do with books that are fancied up on the outside for purposes of interior decoration of a room. What is important is what is inside the books.

Make sure that the author has done his homework; that he has researched his subject. Skim through the pages of the book before buying it: does the author's

manner give you confidence, does he show that he has walked around the subject so as to see its "cons" as well as its "pros"? Some modern authors fit the description of Hugh Kelly by Dr. Samuel Johnson: a man who has written more than he has read.

Consider the circumstances under which the book was written. *The Prince*, which has given rise to use of the name of its writer as a synonym for cunning and crafty action, was written by Machiavelli for the sole purpose of enlisting a strong man to rescue the Italian people from foreign aggression and political corruption. Machiavelli wrote in a letter that he spent four hours a day in his library, the "ancient courts of the men of old", where, being lovingly received, he did not hesitate to speak with the authors and to ask the reasons of their actions. He added: "I have noted down what I have gained from their conversation."

Books have been written by men and women who believed that they had something of value to pass along as the result of their experiences in life. They should not be ignored in the building of a home library, because they present techniques which have been found by someone at some time to be successful in meeting situations and solving problems that are in essence very like our own.

As a sampling, consider these: Samuel Smiles wrote *Self-help* in 1859, and it is still readable; *Acres of Diamonds*, a lecture by Dr. Russell H. Conwell, founder of Temple University, first given in 1870, was repeated more than 6,000 times to millions of people, made into a book (John C. Winston Company printed a *de luxe* edition in 1959) and put on a record produced by the Success Motivation Institute, Inc. in 1962; as recently as 1965 there was published a book called *Here's How by Who's Who*, in which Jesse Grover Bell collected 56 inspirational messages from men prominent in business, education, politics and the church.

It would be ridiculous to suppose that one can take any of these writers and apply his lessons indiscriminately to the circumstances of every individual in business and society today. But the alert and intelligent reader will glean from them thoughts and principles to help him in drawing up his own plans.

Books of collected essays provide stimulating reading. You may pick up a volume and read one essay, complete in itself, in fifteen or twenty minutes. The essayist does not attempt completeness, but touches upon various aspects of his topic as they have appealed to his mind. If he succeeds in rousing an interest which stimulates the reader to seek more information; if he provides a sentence which helps a reader to solve a problem or surmount a difficulty, then he has succeeded in what he set out to do.

Some books of essays, like Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus* and Ruskin's *Sesame and Lilies*, may appear obscure or too scholarly, but they repay in depth and quantity of usable philosophy anyone who wishes to give them attention. Their refined and cultured use of language makes them enjoyable to read.

## *Judging books and authors*

Do not judge all books by the same standard. Books are like horses entered in entirely different races. Get them in the right stables so that you do not chastise a perfectly sound trotter for not galloping with the style of a Queen's Plate winner. Survey the table of contents or the chapter headings to make sure that you are at the right track.

Authors are to be judged by what they write, not by their personal idiosyncrasies. Balzac had his seemingly frantic methods, justified by, for example, the superb crescendo of *Le Père Goriot*. He spent days and nights in concentrated effort in a darkened room, drinking coffee incessantly. G. B. Shaw had a retired spot at the end of a garden path. It was a microscopic room, crammed with books, a desk and a heavy fur covering for his feet. Stephen Leacock liked to do his writing in a little loft over the boats in his boat-house.

The important thing about a writer is not his personal appearance or his habits, but that he is a good writer. Few authors are equal to their books. All the best products of their mental activity go into their writing where their thoughts arrive after being filtered and separated from the mass of inferior products with which they are mingled in daily life. It is unfair to expect that the man who compiles a concordance of a poet shall be lyrical or that a war historian shall be a great general.

## *Best books*

Every reader will compile his own list of books, choosing for himself those that are "best" or "great".

As a general guide, consider what Theodore Roosevelt wrote: the great books are those "that the general agreement of cultivated and sound-thinking persons has placed among the classics." A great book is not one that calls forth your admiration but one that rouses your mind and your spirits and gives you inspiration.

In 1887 Sir John Lubbock, who was head of the banking house of Robarts, Lubbock & Co., a member of parliament, and a pioneer in the study of the life histories of insects, wrote an interesting little book called *The Pleasures of Life* in which he listed "100 Best Books."

Dr. Will Durant, a United States educationalist and lecturer, author of *The Story of Philosophy* and many other widely read books, made a list of "One Hundred Best Books for an Education."

It is interesting to note the 35 books which appeared on both lists, 45 years apart. The authors are: Aeschylus, Aristotle, Bacon, Boswell, Byron, Chaucer, Cervantes, Carlyle, Dante, Dickens, Darwin, Emerson, Euripides, Gibbon, Goethe, Herodotus, Homer, Milton, Marcus Aurelius, Montaigne, Molière, Plutarch, Plato, Sophocles, Shakespeare, Spinoza, Swift, Adam Smith, Thucydides, Thackeray, Virgil, and Voltaire.

The *Bible* is, of course, listed by both Lubbock and Durant.

It is possible to be made fearful of tackling a book because of its title or its subject. Take metaphysics as an example. The word means "after physics" — a subject incapable of being dealt with by physical science. Alfred North Whitehead, mathematician and philosopher, wrote in *Adventures of Ideas*: "Apart from metaphysical presupposition there can be no civilization."

Metaphysics has no terror when you realize that its three aspects of "being" are: the True, the Beautiful and the Good. In a mechanized world we need more than ever something to believe in, and even though there remains a mystery about the heart of things we can make some part of life intelligible. You will find many a book illuminating depths within you that you were not conscious of.

### *A reading plan*

There are so many things in which it is desirable to be interested that you may be puzzled about where to start.

You may begin reading anywhere, like sailing out on exploration from a point midway in space, but from there on it is useful to navigate so as to touch at the right ports or planets.

No one can prescribe a course of reading for another. You cannot tell what a given book may be worth to a given man in an unknown mood at a certain time. But any plan of reading for culture should have these two imperatives: read to get wide views, and avoid becoming a one-author or one-topic reader. Princess Victoria wrote to the King of the Belgians: "I like reading different authors, of different opinions, by which means I learn not to lean on one particular side."

Here is a plan of cultural reading devised by a 35-year-old man who had no formal education beyond public school. He wished to get an over-all view of life, the sort that is at the command of a university scholar. But what plan could be of service to a man who had no curriculum and whose only reading time was on the bus, at the lunch table, and in evenings at home? The Dewey Decimal Classification, which is used by most libraries in Canada to shelve books so that they can be readily found, offered him a system.

This arrangement divides all knowledge into ten classes: (0) General Works, such as encyclopedias and collected essays; (1) Philosophy, which includes psychology, metaphysics, logic and ethics; (2) Religion, covering doctrines, history, and the sacred writings of all faiths; (3) Social Sciences, made up of politics, economics, law, welfare, education and commerce; (4) Philology, with a division for every language; (5) Pure Science, with a wide scope including mathematics, astronomy, physics, chemistry, biology, botany, and zoology; (6) Applied Science, which has within its field medicine, engineering, agriculture, business,

and the mechanic trades; (7) Arts and Recreation, covering landscape and civic art, architecture, sculpture, painting and music; (8) Literature, divided by national boundaries; (9) History, including geography, travel, biography, ancient, modern and world history.

The plan is to read consecutively a book in each class, so that having passed through the list once the reader has a conspectus, or comprehensive survey, of all the field of knowledge and belief. This becomes widened and deepened by every succeeding passage through the list.

To keep no track of what one learns from reading is as wasteful as to till and seed one's land with great effort and make no plans for reaping the harvest. It is necessary to develop a paper memory, to make notes in margins, and to jot down points, phrases and passages. Making notes on small cards has the big advantage that you are putting the thoughts of writers and your own thoughts into a file where you can get at them readily.

### *On reaching excellence*

Culture can be attained by the acquisition of appropriate knowledge, but this requires appropriate application. John Ruskin, who had preached with golden words the theory that art had something to do with daily life, was accepted as the authority in all questions concerning culture. But the people were confused when he linked culture with work.

The reader must not sit back and expect the writer to do all of the work. To read with enjoyment and profit makes necessary the reader's use of his powers of concentration, sensibility and sympathy.

Archdeacon Hare, a nineteenth century author, remarked: "Every writer is entitled to demand a certain amount of knowledge in those for whom he writes, and a certain degree of dexterity in using the implements of thought." And Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch, professor of English Literature at Cambridge, approved this thought: if a person would really master the ninth book of Milton's *Paradise Lost* (the story of the temptation and fall of man) so as to rise to the height of its great argument and incorporate all its beauties in himself, he would at one blow, by virtue of that alone, become a highly cultivated man.

Reading makes a person complete. It helps him to become all that he can become. It provides a step toward excellence. It gives him delight in his search for culture.

Why should we be content to live in a workaday world, bare of the charm of good language, fine thoughts, and any meaning beyond that of immediate needs and their fulfilment by mechanic aids? The world of books is one where a man's mind is free to expand along lines he himself decides.

Who knows? You may be one of the fortunate readers who strike profound spiritual depths, reach the real poetry of things, and touch the fringe of an ultimate and fundamental reality.