



The Grasshopper

Societas et Amicitia

*All books are divisible into two classes: the books of the hour, and the books of all time.
(John Ruskin)*

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College Notes

The terms of office for Professors Robin May (Physic) and Ronald Hutton (Divinity) come to an end, though that may well not be the last we see of them.

Victoria Baines is putting together a novel form of presentation for the College in the form of three televised programmes, which will explore the past, present and future of the dynamic interplay between digital technology and our societies. She will be ably assisted by Ronald Hutton, Melissa Lane, Chris Lintott, Milton Mermikides, and Leslie Thomas, amongst others.

We note with regret the death of the Right Rev. Lord Richard Harries *olim* Bishop of Oxford (1987-2006), Gresham Professor of Divinity from 2008-2012 and habitué of the Today Programme on Radio 4. (There was an excellent obituary in The Times on April 30th and he appeared in Lives Remembered on May 15th.) The Provost Jane Shaw represented Gresham College (and of course the Oxford Colleges). Our very own Wing Commander Mike Dudgeon adds bell ringing to his many talents and was indeed there tolling away at the memorial service to mark the occasion with no fewer than three bishops within earshot.

Delighted to see that Colin Pillinger is going to have his own special show. He was of course Gresham Professor of Astronomy from 1996 to 2000. He was greatly liked and respected, but was unlucky with his Beagle project, which actually sent a rover (hence the name possibly though his wife apparently named it after Charles Darwin's voyages of exploration) to Mars. It did land, but it is believed that although three of the four solar panels opened, the

transmitter unfortunately was behind the fourth. Even so, it was a failure in the best of British traditions, rather like Captain Scott or Dunkirk. Colin was a memorable speaker, with his soft West Country accent and Victorian side whiskers. A memorable character indeed.

Now this astronomical episode will be immortalised in a new TV series called Mars Express, with none other than the heroes of *Detectorists*, Mackenzie Crook and Toby Jones, taking the lead roles.

Members' Corner

Congratulations continue for the following:

- Melissa Lane, Professor of Rhetoric, on her appointment to the highly prestigious American Academy of Arts and Sciences. Splendid.
- Chris Whitty, who has become Chair of Oxford Alumni.
- Colonel Simon Duckworth who has been appointed CBE in the King's Birthday Honours.

The prizes just keep flooding in: Now Alain Griely, Professor of Geometry, has been awarded the David Creighton Medal by the London Mathematical Society and the Institute of Mathematical Applications.

And Alex Edmans has added another volume to his already ample bookshelf: "The Madness of Markets – Why Smart Investors Make Crazy Decisions, And How To Exploit Them". Attentive readers will note that it bears a cunning resemblance to Alex's 2020 Gresham series on The Psychology of Finance.



Reflections

Following on from the new Russian dictionary in G26 I bought a Russian-made camera for my 21st birthday. The instruction manual said, "It is strictly forbidden to open the camera with film inside." How they were to enforce this History does not relate...

The Day Job

It is curious to see how many famous literary figures started out in quite humble positions. For instance Walter de la Mare had trudged Bob Cratchit-like for over eighteen years as a humble clerk at the Anglo-American Oil Company, until he was rescued by none other than Sir Henry Newbolt. In 1908 Sir H arranged for him to have a Crown grant and within weeks W de la M's literary career was taking off.

[Editor's Note: Sir Henry of course is he of "Play Up, Play Up and Play The Game", "Drake's Drum" and "The Gatling's Jammed and the Colonel's Dead". Incidentally it was a Gardner machine gun and although the tribesmen did break the square at Abu Klea (Sudan 1885) it was not what Kipling would later refer to as a "Bally Run" in "The Drums of the Fore and Aft" of 1889. That would have been Maiwand (Afghanistan 1880).] [Note the punctuation.]

More on Giraffes

Following on from exotic animals and my earlier remarks about the Animal Rescue Centre at Heathrow, there is some doubt as to whether it was Pompey who first introduced a giraffe to Ancient Rome after the military campaigns in North Africa between 61 and 54BC but it may in fact have been Julius Caesar (the Roman Geezer) who brought one along with him following his triumphs in Egypt in 46 BC. Of course, the unfortunate creature ended up in the Colosseum as a bit of home cuisine for the lions so it is perhaps not surprising that giraffes avoided Rome like the plague up to the time of the Medicis, when one appeared in Florence in 1486, quite possibly a gift from none other than

Al-Ashraf Qaitbay, the Burji Sultan of Egypt (of course).

He seems to have been the only one for a few centuries but one does appear in The Adoration of the Magi, one of five famous frescoes by Domenico Ghirlandaio painted between 1485 and 1490 for the Tornabuoni chapel in the church of Santa Maria Novella in Florence. You might also spot a giraffe in The Gathering of Manna by Francesco Bachiacacca (yes, him) of 1540.

There is some speculation that the Sultan of Egypt sent a giraffe to Frederick II of the Two Sicilies (and got a white bear in return) back in 1261 but I am not sure which of the Two Sicilies it actually might have come from.

And even more on loathsome serpents

For those members of the Society who do not share my horrid fascination with slithering creatures, and who cringe while reading Rikki-Tikki-Tavi, spare a thought for the visitor to the Filipino resort of Salvador Benedicto, when a king cobra (doubtless a member of the genus *Ophifofagus* Hannah) popped its head out of the loo. The hapless tourist then tried to remove it with a stick, whereupon it wrapped itself around the wastepipe. It took some plucky member of staff to remove it – but then it was only four foot long. (They have been known to reach nineteen feet.) And strange to say, it had probably escaped from a nearby snake farm.

[Editor's note: the king cobra is to be distinguished from the hamadryad (naja naja) and the meaning of the term ophifofagus is of course "snake eater" which does not make it any less poisonous. And "hannah"? This term was confirmed by the naturalist Charles Mitchill Bogert as recently as 1945. Perhaps it was named after a lady of his acquaintance. Stranger things have been known...]

David, Goliath – and a few others

The tale of David and Goliath is one of the best-known Bible stories (1 Samuel 17 of course), but did you know that Goliath was not quite unique? If you read on to II Samuel 16 you will read of none other than Ishbi-benob, whose spear



weighed three hundred shekels of brass. But little did poor old Ishbi-benob realise that he was up against none other than Abishair the son of Zeruiah who smote him one. Not to be outdone, one Sabbechair the Hushathite (yes, him) did for Saph, who was the son of the giant. Whether dad was Ishbi-benob or Goliath himself is not quite clear. However, by the time we get to verse 19 Elhanan the son of Jaare-oreguim is out in the lead as he does for Goliath's brother - whether that was his big brother or not, history does not relate. Probably the former as his spear was like a weaver's beam. (He might have inherited that from Goliath himself as we are told the same thing in Samuel 17 v7.)

There was obviously something odd going on with Philistine genes as there was another chap (unnamed) in verse 20 but you couldn't miss him as he had six fingers on each hand and six toes on each foot. None of that helped though as he got knocked over by Jonathan – the one who was one of David's brothers, and not the son of Saul. So giant slaying seems to have run in the family.

The giants were all brothers, as we are told in verse 22 that they were the sons of the giant in Gath. But if this was all genetic, does that mean that there is anyone descended from them in the world today? David and his ilk may still need to be called upon, but then that it is proven time and again that it is the little feller that comes out best. And that is not entirely unknown in the world of politics or diplomacy.

On "The Grasshopper and Cricket" by John Keats

It is a little known fact that Keats was so moved by the cheery sound of the grasshopper that he actually wrote a poem about one, and was generous enough to put in a plug for crickets as well:

The Poetry of earth is never dead:
When all the birds are faint with the hot sun,
And hide in cooling trees, a voice will run

From hedge to hedge about the new-mown mead;

That is the Grasshopper's—he takes the lead
In summer luxury,—he has never done
With his delights; for when tired out with fun
He rests at ease beneath some pleasant weed.
The poetry of earth is ceasing never:

On a lone winter evening, when the frost
Has wrought a silence, from the stove there shrills

The Cricket's song, in warmth increasing ever,
And seems to one in drowsiness half lost,
The Grasshopper's among some grassy hills.

I'm not quite sure about that bit about the cricket shrilling from the stove – it was more likely squealing while being burnt alive. In reality, most varieties of Acridiidae die in the winter, though the eggs are left safe underground to emerge in the Spring. The Grasshopper Himself tells me that he would rather take his chances in Keats' shrilling stove...

Envoi

Father Bill Joseph SJ (head of our American Chapter) has commented warmly on my knack of "elevating trivia to humorous profundity". Qui? Moi? Elevating I have always been; humorous I would hope and trust; profundity well, yes, but not too often. But trivia? The Grasshopper Himself would take serious offence if I dared say that in his presence.

Mind you, I can never resist a challenge. Howzabout the fact that the notorious brides in the bath murderer Dr Crippen was actually Canadian and his wife was an American music hall performer who had appeared on stage with Marie Lloyd. (Not many people know that...)

Members may wish to know from whence cometh what I like to call my instant erudition. Surrey Libraries have recently informed me that in the past year I have borrowed books 73 times – and renewed them 157 times, which suggests that I am a slow reader. I am told, however, that I have saved the sum of £863.42 by not actually buying any of them. This might be generous, given that I usually browse in charity shops or order remaindered items via Postscript (which



is much to be recommended). The subject matter is eclectic, to say the least, and I do have an eye for odd points of detail, which I am happy to share with all.

And talking of which, there is a very nice piece about the College, to be found at [Gresham College: A Look At London's Oldest Higher Education Institution - Living London History](#)

Editorial

Members should have received by now further details of the proposed changes in the structure of the College. In a nutshell, we shall be moving closer to the College, with on-line support and financial oversight. The College plans to have three groups of supporters: The Society, former professors as fellows, and the Friends. This was approved at the AGM. If you would like to find out more or discuss this further, do please contact me.

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The London Museum will be re-opening on November 28th at its new site in Smithfield. See [London Museum unveils its 2026 opening date as it relocates to historic Smithfield site | The Standard](#) for more details.

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