

‘Beware of the Scribes’

*In an address to the Society for Italic Handwriting in London
the author describes his inherited affliction with Italic Fever —
his pursuit of the proper equipment,
his flaunting of his expertise,
and his concern for the perpetuation of a humanistic hand.*

It all started on one particular day in 1936 when we found my father trying to saw through the thick hide of a twelve-bore shotgun cartridge with a pen-knife. We had absolutely no warning. There had been no history of that sort of thing in the family . . . well, there *was* great-uncle Albert who might be called eccentric, but he suffered from no more than an excess of natural curiosity, which led him, when he first travelled on a newfangled ‘moving staircase’ in the London Underground, to see if he could stop the thing by clasping one of the lamp-standards alongside the escalator and hanging on to it for dear life. He couldn’t, and had to be rescued by the maintenance staff, an episode that was all the more spectacular since he was a bishop fully attired in apron and gaiters. But oddities such as this are far removed from the sinister tinkering with gunpowder and shot in which my father was discovered.

Of course, the truth eventually came out. He was suffering from a disease variously known as Johnston’s Disease, Cockerell’s Complaint or Italic Fever. In lay terms, he was in the early but already incurable stages of Good Handwriting. It can’t be said that there was much history of *that* in the family. From the odd letters that hung about tables and desks in our house when I was a child, I gleaned that my male forbears corresponded in a spindly code consisting largely of wavy lines of varying length which offered a rough indication of the shapes which the words would have formed had there been any actual letters to form them.

By contrast, the females tended to write, as they spoke, in an extravagant Edwardian style full of explosive stresses and ejaculations, like the barking of large, friendly dogs. ‘*Beloved* Hermione — I am *simply devastated* to learn of your *Quite Ghastly* motoring accident — *too awful*, and what a *Perfect Swine* of a man to suggest that it was *your fault!* You are to *drop everything* and come and stay *at once*, you *Poor Darling* etc etc . . .” It’s not difficult to visualise the resulting page in which ascenders, descenders, cross-strokes, commas and thick underlinings overlapped each other in an orgy of angular confusion, like the twigs, boughs and trunks of a storm-stricken forest.

It was as a contributor to this cheerful cacographic anarchy that my father suddenly decided to do something about it. Up to that point — I was about fifteen years old — I don’t think I had been aware of the existence of italic handwriting. Indeed, the first inkling that I had of loftier realms beyond the simple requirements of legible, ‘joined-up’ writing was at my private school where, for offences which didn’t call for violent reprisals, we had to copy out repetitive precepts from a copperplate copybook: ‘Work hard, play hard’, ‘Xenophon was a Greek’, ‘use your toothbrush daily’, ‘hack no furniture’. I suppose I should have suspected, from the irrelevant intrusion of Xenophon the Greek with his awkward capitals and profusion of *o*’s and *e*’s, that I was being got at beyond the call of mere house-training and oral hygiene. But this was a time of innocence.

Under the influence of my father’s new-found enthusiasm, that innocence soon disappeared. A strange assortment of impedimenta invaded the house, including a small, round glass pot full of the buckshot so hazardously acquired, in which he used to agitate his Mitchell nibs in order to clean them. He went off and joined this Society of fellow-sufferers, whose *Bulletins* plopped through the letter-box with a certain regularity. This was unusual for him since he was not a particularly gregarious or ‘clubbable’ man. When he died, I appropriated from his desk most of the equipment which he had amassed — including the pot of pellets, plus a now much-valued copy of Edward Johnston’s *Writing & Illuminating, & Lettering* and a great stack of the earliest journals of the Society. Within weeks I had gone down with an even more virulent strain of the affliction. But it is a big step from becoming an enthusiastic fan to addressing a gathering of experts.

However, I have since gained some experience from a career as a jazz musician, on which I now propose to draw. As you know, the

technique of jazz involves variation on a theme, going by way of improvisation whether the thought takes you. Only by this method, I thought, would it be possible for me, perhaps by accident, to hit a note or strike a chord which is not over-familiar to you. Alongside my work in music I have also dabbled in journalism, enough to know just what to do when a theme or a title is required. The index of the *Oxford Book of Quotations* was discouraging about the word 'pen', which occurs almost exclusively in a figurative or literary sense. 'Ink' was even less promising, and with 'nib' I drew a blank.

But a glance at the first entry under 'scribe' and my troubles seemed to be over, temporarily at least. 'Beware of the scribes . . .' I was as elated as my father must have been when, as a schoolboy, he was similarly studying the index of a school hymnal, when he discovered the hymn 'My God, what boots it to repent?' listed as 'My God, what boots'. *Beware of the scribes!* Debarred by sheer ignorance and a just humility from adopting a didactic or informative line, I would be provocative instead.

It was a grave mistake. When I began to pursue the idea of going forward from those words into a little benign questioning of the role of the scribe in the modern world, I found my notes gradually changing from detached observation into what can only be described as a confessional. I started by following up the quotation, which occurs in St. Mark, 'Beware of the scribes, which love to go in long clothing, and love salutations in the market-place, and the chief seats in the synagogue, and the uppermost rooms at feasts; which devour widows' houses and for a pretence make long prayers'. A nasty, priggish lot, to be sure, but worse is to come from St. Matthew a few entries on. 'Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For ye pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have omitted the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy and faith: ye blind guides, which strain at a gnat, and swallow a camel'. Good heavens, I thought, what sort of company is this into which I have strayed? And this led me on to some stringent searching into my own character since *Italic Fever* struck.

If scripture classes fifty years ago ever explained to me the close historical connection between the scribes and Pharisees, the knowledge has since escaped me. But the message comes down that the former shared with the latter the grateful conviction that they were not 'as other men are'. It would not require a hypersensitive observer of human behaviour to realize that those words are certainly true in modern times. A quick riffle through the Society's JOURNALS over the

years reveals eccentricities that make my father's hazardous interference with the twelve-bore cartridges seem positively mundane. 'This letter', wrote a correspondent in 1956, 'is being written with a converted Osmiroid pen fitted with a nib consisting of a piece of polythene from a cycle feeding-bottle tube, a section of an old table-tennis ball and half a paper-clip'. A year or two later, another philanthropist is sharing with the world the discovery that stationers' ink can be improved by the addition of sugar, one quarter of a tea-spoon to one elevenpenny bottle, to be stirred with anything suitable that comes to hand — perhaps what remains of the cycle feeding-bottle tube. Immediately, an even better recipe arrives from across the Atlantic: washing ammonia and a few drops of detergent diluted in a wine-glass of water and added in minute quantities to Higgins' 'Eternal' or Pelikan 'Fount' ink. Many years later we — for by then I had joined the ranks — are still at it, subverting the efforts of Messrs Platignum and Osmiroid with scissors and oil-stone, and neglecting all else — the oil crisis, racial problems, pollution — in the continuing pursuit of a free-flowing, non-smelling, pure black ink.

But it can hardly have been mild and rather amiable peculiarities such as these that put the scribes of old so firmly beyond the reach of the Kingdom of Heaven. I began, in a spirit of curiosity not altogether untainted by smug confidence, to examine my own motives and activities since I began taking my writing in hand. My earliest findings were not altogether displeasing. Having never been greatly excited by technological change, I had become in the area of epistolatory communication a positive Luddite, leaving my typewriter to atrophy in its case while I chipped away at quills and garden cane and performed delicate surgical operations on my Osmiroids. If occasionally I made a fool of myself, it was in a good cause. I am thinking particularly of the time that I asked my local butcher if he could supply me with turkey feathers. 'Oh no, Sir,' he said, 'we never see them — they're bundled up and sold off at the factory'. Imagine that, I thought, looking around at the thirty or forty unclad turkey carcasses that festooned the shop and visualizing the massive, clandestine calligraphic activity that must be going on unknown to us. Then he added "Toothpicks, I think".

Pursuing the process of self-analysis, I was by no means upset to realize that calligraphy had turned me into a trouble-maker, a flouter of authority, if not an actual law-breaker. Indeed, I am prepared to incite those of you who do not already subscribe to the practice to

reject, with the anger and contempt which it deserves, the imputation of illegibility contained in the words 'Enter in BLOCK CAPITALS'. Who do they think we are? I resolutely ignore the instruction and write name, address and nationality in my normal cursive longhand. And I am here to tell you that they haven't caught up with me yet! Ah, they know what I'm up to all right! You may have noticed lately that they have begun to print a row of little horse-boxes on the forms, one for each capital, to put a stop to my joined-up writing. I am making at the moment a study of decorative Gothic capitals, those ornate monuments to illegibility inside which, as Cyril Connolly almost said, a lithe and functional Roman capital is screaming to be let out. That'll fix them!

By the same token, I ignore the demands of prescribed business practice and write all my business letters by hand. For no more than the cost of about 60 boxes of carbon-paper one can now buy a desk-copier that solves the problem of filing and back reference and, in the process, preserves facsimiles of one's masterpieces for posterity. There are sound commercial justifications for this practice, too. I have been told, for instance, that my envelopes directed to the B.B.C. reach their destination more quickly through being instantly recognisable amongst the identical type-written rectangles that go through the postal pool. It's nice to know that all the expenditure of time and materials has a practical effect, for I am now in the mood to confess that it still takes me five minutes or more and no less than six envelopes to return a single contract to the Corporation.

You are, I can sense it, beginning to realize that all is not well. For the last two paragraphs have revealed symptoms more disturbing than a mere robust independence of spirit. Arrogance, self-satisfaction, vanity, exhibitionism, megalomania, paranoia — they are all there, either emergent or rampant, to suggest that embracing Rome, in the calligraphic sense, did not automatically make me a better person. Indeed, it was at this point in my soul-searching that I began to suspect that it was Dr Jekyll who, true to the tradition of his calling, wrote in a spidery, formless and illegible scrawl, while the elegant, cultured and insidious Italic belonged to Mr Hyde. My unease grew when I came to consider that item which has been, these last few years, the hub of what, until now, I have always thought to be a harmless hobby — my Handwriting Collection.

The word 'collection' itself has certain unsettling implications. For is not the whole point of a collection that the objects collected, be they

stamps, oil-paintings or bus-tickets, should have a rarity value, either now or in the future. What would be the point of putting together examples of fine handwriting if one did not secretly believe that the art is moribund if not virtually extinct? And yet such a defeatist attitude is surely enough to have one drummed out of the S.I.H. for desertion.

I can wriggle out of that charge by pleading that my collection is no mere gathering up of dead leaves but a living thing that grows year by year as I add new entries. But this takes us into still deeper waters, since it involves the wider principle of communication and personal relationships. I believe strongly in the virtues of letter-writing as the ideal medium of substantial communication. To me, one of the most dreadful deathbed utterances — and I use the word ‘dreadful’ in its literal sense — is Dr Samuel Johnson’s ‘An odd thought strikes me — we shall receive no letters in the grave.’ On paper, the most profound ideas and sentiments can be set down and then fashioned, honed and polished so as to avert shock, embarrassment or misunderstanding. Likewise, intemperate outbursts scribbled in haste remain for a time at least in a state of suspension, susceptible to amelioration or retraction before any harm is done.

But what role does calligraphy play in all this? That is a question which was put to me, with an expression of some amusement, by an Iraqi civil servant working for the British Council in Kuwait when he overheard me discussing my hobby at an embassy party. To help me understand his bewilderment at my carrying round several favourite square-edge-nibbed fountain pens in my breast pocket for everyday use — and, further than that, actually belonging to a society to encourage me in learning how to use them properly — he got me some books of instruction on Arabic writing. I even fashioned a reed pen when I got home with the appropriate slope so that I could learn the rudiments. As a corrective to those defects of character which I listed earlier, trying to learn Arabic beats sackcloth and ashes all ends up.

We in the western world, and especially the English-speaking world, may consider ourselves blessed or cursed, depending on one’s point of view, with a language the writing of which in the most informal circumstances is susceptible to style and beauty. But how far should this go? Clearly, it starts with the basic need for legibility. One would have considerable difficulty in getting across to a visitor from Mars that there are people in our civilization — and often people of high education — who, in the practice of a skill devised solely for the

transmission of intelligence, produce with hand and pen and ink a writing which is indecipherable not only to others but all too often to themselves. In this context, there is an apposite passage in the exchange of letters between my father and Rupert Hart-Davis in the late Fifties which are currently being published. My father opened the topic in a letter which began 'In a world where nearly all is dark, as Bishop Gore used to say, two things are luminously clear: viz that your letters are of first-class interest and quality, and that your handwriting is perfectly legible and, in fact, very pleasant to look on'. (There speaks the retired schoolmaster to the former pupil!) 'And the second is very important. Did you ever get a letter from Monty James? I once had a note from him inviting us to dinner. We *guessed* that the time was 8 and not 3, as it appeared to be, but all that we could tell about the day was that it was not Wednesday.' To this, Rupert Hart-Davis replied 'I never saw Monty James's writing, but doubt whether he could have been more illegible than Lady Colefax: the only hope of deciphering *her* invitations, someone said, was to pin them up on the wall and *run* past them.'

Legibility itself makes small demands. I receive frequent letters from musician friends in America which are written in capital letters throughout. They are perfectly legible and convey the required thoughts. Why should we demand more? 'Good handwriting is no more nor less than good manners' was a view put forward more than once by Sir Sidney Cockerell in early issues of the JOURNAL. I would neither wish nor dare to disagree with that. But against it I would put the doubts that I sometimes feel when practising my hobby too diligently at the expense of some long-suffering correspondent. I confess to a twinge of concern sometimes when I look at the allegedly cursive and informal winning entries in the annual handwriting competition. If indeed this is the style in which the writers carry on their everyday correspondence — and I admit that I often aspire to it myself — might not that in itself constitute a breach of good manners, like attending someone's wine and cheese party in white tie and tails? I suppose there may be other perfectly good reasons why certain people with whom I have attempted to establish a regular correspondence have shown reluctance to go along with the idea. But I have a nasty feeling that they may be of like mind with those acquaintances who, when a few years ago I wrote a column about eating out, gave up asking me out to dinner because, as some of them admitted afterwards, they thought that, privately if not out loud, I might criticize their food.

I would like to cite two admirable correctives to the tendency to over-indulge in 'fine writing' at inappropriate times. One can be found in the collected works of that great cartoonist, Saul Steinberg, who wielded a lethal pen at the expense of pretentiousness in man's creation, be that in ornate buildings, extravagant fashion or fussy decorative art. He often liked to produce a succession of variations on a theme, and once drew a series of splendid-looking documents complete with elaborate decoration, distinguished calligraphy and, to set them off, some impressive seals and ribbons. They represented caricatures of the sort of style, lay-out and, let's face it, pomposity to which we all occasionally aspire. And they contained not one word of intelligible language between them, demonstrating that if calligraphy or its appearance can be achieved without legibility, the reverse must also be true.

My second corrective is more down to earth, arising from an incident outside a theatre at which I had been playing. There were some people outside asking for autographs. I was in the phase when I deigned to carry about my person nothing less than a tried and tested fountain pen with italic nib. At that stage I seized upon every opportunity to practice my hand and, yes, show off a little in the process. As the modest queue came to an end, I noticed one small girl who had been through earlier still hovering nearby, autograph book in hand. 'Hullo,' I said, 'I've done your book, haven't I?' 'Yes,' chipped in her mother, 'but she'd rather have a signature.'

Of course, it is absolutely right and salutary that my efforts at calligraphy should be thus brought down to earth. I remember reading somewhere that the desirable outcome of establishing a disciplined italic style is that the hand is then so trained that even the proverbial scribbled note on the kitchen table 'Gone to the pictures — your dinner's in the oven' will have legibility and a sort of attractiveness. In my ruthless efforts to expand my father's handwriting collection, I am in the fortunate position of presenting a regular programme on the B.B.C. which attracts more letters per week than a private person might reasonably expect. It doesn't disappoint me that there is little material in them which can stand up to close proximity to the samples of Irene Wellington, Wilfrid Blunt, Aubrey West or those fellow-members and officers of the S.I.H. on whose writing I have pounced like a bird of prey. Indeed, I have been pleasantly surprised that, once in a while, some query about Louis Armstrong or Jelly Roll Morton has been couched in a really superb hand. But what I *have* missed are

those handwritings, 'perfectly legible and pleasant to look on', to use my father's words to Rupert Hart-Davis, which show no direct or obvious signs of Italic origin. And I wonder whether it could be that the protagonists of the Italic or Humanistic hand have unwittingly helped to create a gap between that which is manifestly excellent and highly-skilled on the one hand and sloppy, awkward, mean or immature on the other. In this, I am not, I hasten to say, aligning myself with a so-called graphologist with whom I recently shared a dressing-room in a T.V. studio and who, on asking to see an example of my handwriting, handed it back with the words 'Oh yes, this is semi-calligraphy — you've spoiled it.' It's not the alleged 'absence of character' that I grieve over — my collection is too full of varied, positive and extrovert italic samples for that. But I do sometimes feel the loss of those cheerful free-flowing, good-looking handwritings that seem to have gone to ground nowadays.

Am I saying that the humanistic hand sometimes lacks, not character, but humanity? Well, there was certainly, in the chaotic writing of my aunts and great-aunts which I described at the beginning, a certain zest, impetuosity, humour and *immediacy* which few of the careful, 'fine' handwritings possess.

In allowing myself to follow the path along which my thoughts have led me, I am encouraged by a letter which I found in an issue of the *S.I.H. Bulletin* in the early Sixties. In it, a correspondent wrote 'I have the impression that we would do well to give the word calligraphy a holiday. For the same reason, I have long thought that we over-emphasize the word Italic. I would even prefer our Society to be called the Good Handwriting Society . . .' The writer was A. S. Osley, whose contribution to the *JOURNAL* 20 years ago was less heroic than it is today.

So all these matters that I have touched on — I hope lightly — have been raised and argued over many times before, and will continue to provoke lively discussion. But now, as I approach the end, a strange thought strikes me. It is inspired by an article in a newspaper some days ago which described the equipment which the Post Office is currently developing to bring the whole matter of person-to-person communication into the new electronic age. I believe the headline ran 'Goodbye, Mr Postman'. The equipment in question will be an extension of the small home computer which, the ad-boys are telling us, has already become an indispensable adjunct to every well-ordered household. This is the machine that will stand in the corner of the

living-room next to, or perhaps incorporated in, the television set, and through which, without moving more than a finger, we shall be able to do our household accounts, operate the Hoover, order the groceries, walk the dog, clean the car, write novels — and communicate with distant friends and relations who are similarly endowed. There we'll be in front of the set, our little atrophied legs dangling over the edge of the sofa, while intimate messages from nearest and dearest or bank-manager flash on to the screen or are showered all over the carpets in 'print outs'.

Oh well, you may say, once we get used to it, it'll be no worse than the typewriter or news-type. Oh, but it will! Have you ever seen a computer's writing? I can tell you that it attacks the very heart of our written language, the Roman alphabet. The reason is that, at present, the computer cannot produce a curved line. Its letters and figures are based on the square, to the exclusion of the circle. The result is a writing which, without putting too fine a point on it, is arid, hideous and far from easy to read. As the newspaper said in announcing this great new leap forward, the only people who will not benefit from it are postmen and those who stubbornly cling to pen and paper as a method of communicating with their fellow men.

So the thought I leave you with is this. Sooner than we think, all the argument about writing systems, about ball-point versus straight-edge, copperplate versus Italic, swagger versus restraint, will indeed be so much straining at a gnat. Then will be the time for the scribes to redeem themselves, and for all who care for the feel of a pen between their fingers to write under the banner of the Society for . . . Handwriting.

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