

Current Books

Wodehouse's massive output and unforgettable characters have gotten him compared to Dickens and Shakespeare, but McCrum prefers the spirit of Jane Austen, calling P. G. a "miniaturist" whose language "danced on the page like poetry, marrying the English style of the academy with the English slang of the suburbs." Evelyn Waugh famously opined, "He will continue to release future generations from captivity that may be more irksome than our own. He has made a world for us to live in and delight in."

There are some surprises: Wodehouse disliked *South Pacific*, *My Fair Lady*, and the works of Graham Greene, yet he was a fan of the TV soap opera *Edge of Night*. His long marriage was affectionate but apparently asexual, though, unlike another glamorous Jazz Age husband, Cole Porter, he professed to dislike "homosexuality." There is also more here about publishing contracts, payments, taxes, old school rugby and cricket scores, little Pekingese dogs, and who ate what when—though to be fair, these are details that compose a real life rather than a novel—than any but a devoted Wodehouse fan would want to learn. And that, of course, will limit this biography's sales to thousands and thousands and thousands.

—MARK O'DONNELL

WHAT THE BEST COLLEGE TEACHERS DO.

By Ken Bain. Harvard Univ. Press.
207 pp. \$21.95

This school year, classes began on August 30. I hustled in from Nova Scotia at noon on the 30th and that evening taught a humdinger of a class, thoughts thrumming through my mind like the wheels of my Toyota rolling along the Mass. Pike.

What the Best College Teachers Do is sensible, literate, and well meaning. Bain notes, among many other things, that good teachers are humble, know their subjects, and believe teaching is a serious intellectual endeavor. They are also kind. Years ago, when I first started teaching, an old boy told me, "Sam, if you think the best of people, they will give you their best." The man was right. Once or twice, tricksters have asked me to throw them into briar patches, provoking

laughter rather than anger. But all in all, the kids have done well by me.

Bain's book is good. People who read it will stop and think. Perhaps some will become better teachers. Yet the book lacks poetry. Bain analyzes the mechanics of teaching well, but he doesn't probe the things that made so many of us teachers. The teaching life is wonderful for many reasons, not all of which occur in the classroom but most of which influence classes.

Bain studied 63 good teachers. Yet we know nothing about them, and, as a result, really don't care about what they do in the classroom. Did these people have pets and families? What flowers did they plant in their gardens, or did they plant only herbs? In Grace Paley's wonderful story "A Conversation with My Father," the narrator refuses to face the fact that her father is dying. The father asks her to tell him a story, and she shapes a clever tale, one so witty that it deflects attention from life as it is lived. When the narrator says that whether or not her heroine is married does not matter, the father replies in exasperation, "It is of great consequence." Life lived beyond the lecture hall is of great consequence and may influence teaching more than any pedagogical technique. A sick child, an alcoholic mother, daffodils suddenly bright in a green dell—such things determine the course of classes.

I studied *What the Best College Teachers Do* in bits and pieces, and between chapters read portions of *Prospero's Cell* (1945), by Lawrence Durrell, an account of his years in Corfu before World War II. Durrell's book raised my spirits and awakened my imagination. Quick with life, the book invigorated me, not simply perking me up enough to read more of Bain but so stirring me that I taught better the next day (of course, I teach English). Bain's book resembles a head with its chicken cut off, thoughtful but bloodless. Read Bain's study, but balance your diet by also reading *Masters: Portraits of Great Teachers* (1981), a collection of appreciative essays edited by Joseph Epstein.

When anyone writes about teaching, even when I write about teaching, my nose twitches and I become suspicious. Much of what we learn has little to do with the classroom. "Extreme busyness, whether at school or college, kirk or market," Robert Louis Stevenson wrote

in “An Apology for Idlers,” “is a symptom of deficient vitality: and a faculty for idleness implies a catholic appetite and a strong sense of personal identity.” So much is unknown about learning and teaching, even after Bain’s years of research. Does the Pentecostal, transforming teacher really exist? Or is she just one of the many platitudinous figures wandering our social minds?

Testimonials of appreciation fall into a pattern, beginning, “You may not remember me, but . . .” In the middle of the letter come accounts of life influenced and well lived, then the obligatory “I will never forget you.” After a teacher receives her first hundred of these letters, she realizes the student never knew her, and maybe didn’t know her subject either.

—SAM PICKERING

SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY

THE ESCAPE FROM HUNGER AND PREMATURE DEATH, 1700–2100:

Europe, America, and the Third World.

By Robert William Fogel. Cambridge Univ. Press. 191 pp. \$70 (hardcover), \$23.99 (paper)

From our present perch of affluence, we forget the abject misery, malnutrition, and starvation that most people endured for most of recorded history. In a fact-filled book geared toward scholars, Nobel Prize-winning economist Robert Fogel of the University of Chicago reminds us of the huge strides in conquering widespread hunger and of the immense economic and social consequences of that achievement.

It may shock modern readers to learn how poorly fed and sickly most people were until 100 or 150 years ago, even in advanced countries. In 1750, life expectancy at birth was 37 years in Britain and 26 in France. Even by 1900, life expectancy was only 48 in Britain and 46 in France. With more fertile land, the United States fared slightly better, with a life expectancy that was greater than Britain’s in 1750 (51) but identical to it in 1900 (48). Urbanization and industrialization in the 19th century actually led to setbacks. As Americans moved from place to place, they spread “cholera, typhoid, typhus . . . and other major killer diseases,” Fogel writes. Urban slums abetted sickness and poor nutrition. Fogel questions whether rising real wages in much of the 19th century signaled genuine advances in well-being. “Is it plausible,” he asks, “that the overall standard of living of workers was improving if their nutritional status and life ex-

pectancy were declining?”

By contrast, life expectancy in advanced countries is now in the high 70s (77 in the United States). Compared with those of the early 1700s, diets are 50 percent higher in calories in Britain and more than 100 percent higher in France. Summarizing his and others’ research, Fogel calls this transformation “technophysio evolution.” It has had enormous side effects.

First, we’ve gotten taller. A typical American man in his 30s now stands 5 feet 10 inches, almost five inches taller than his English counterpart in 1750. (Societies offset food scarcities in part by producing shorter people, who need less food.)

Second, we’ve gotten healthier. Although Fogel concedes that advances in public health (better water and sewage systems, for instance) and medicine (vaccines, antibiotics) have paid huge dividends, he argues that much of the gain in life expectancy stems from better nutrition. With better diets, people become more resistant to disease—their immune systems work better and their body tissue is stronger—and they have healthier babies.

Finally, better diets have made economic growth possible. An overlooked cause of the meager growth before 1800, Fogel argues, is that many people were too weak to work. In the late 1700s, a fifth of the populations of England and France were “effectively excluded from the labor force.” As people ate better and lived longer, they worked harder. Fogel attributes 30 percent of Britain’s economic growth since 1790 to better diets.

This conclusion seems glib. After all, better diets came from technology that enabled