Let Us Praise Ordinary Men

by Theodore Dalrymple (May 2015)

Our town has a lovely cemetery. Victorian furnishings may have been abominable, but the Victorians did the dead proud: we cannot come near them in funerary taste. Modern burials seem designed to make cremation attractive, at least aesthetically-speaking.

The cemetery was established in the early 1850s because the churchyards were full to bursting and the Victorians fretted about the unsanitary nature of burial in the middle of towns and cities, as we fret over the deleterious effects of pesticides. It retains its character, with a gothic entrance and two gothic chapels, and a winding path between the hills, consecrated and unconsecrated, the slopes of which are sown with sandstone or granite tombstones.

Whenever I take a walk in the cemetery, I visit the grave of William Fletcher. He was not a famous man and is entirely forgotten, as most of us will be. According to the carved inscription on his tomb, still legible despite the softness of the red stone, he died 'June IIIrd MDCCCLIX and LIII years.' The inscription continues:

Also of John and William sons of the above

John died

March Ist MDCCCLXI

Aged XXVII years

William died

And was buried at a few feet distance from this stone

July XXIXth MDCCCLXIII Aged XXIII years

All three died of tuberculosis and the older Williams, at least, was described

as ‘looking for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come.’

William senior was for twenty-three years a lay Methodist preacher and latterly a paid Priest of the Catholic Apostolic Church, a somewhat unusual Cristian sect that had built-in obsolescence in so far as no priest could be ordained except by the original twelve ‘apostles’ of the church who founded it in the 1830s. When the ‘apostles’ died, as did the last of them in 1901, no further priests or bishops (the latter known in the church as ‘Angels’) could be ordained; and when the last ordained priest died, the church died with him. One might have expected in these circumstances some constitutional amendment to allow the church continued existence – by then it owned valuable property in many cities – but no, it remained true to its theological principles and died out. It had always been ecumenical and its congregations easily found solace elsewhere.

It is Williams junior, however, who attracts me to the place. Between 1858 and 1860 he kept a diary which was published in 2009 under the title of *Talking with Past Hours*, edited by Jane Killick. The title is taken from an article in *Cassell’s Illustrated Family Paper* that recommended to its readers the keeping of a diary:

> He [the keeper] is old now; it may be that his locks are grey, but he is young as he reads… he talks with his past hours.

No one would call the diary a literary masterpiece, and yet its immediacy, its recording of day-to-day life, its sometimes painful honesty, and its record of the developing disease that would soon kill the writer at a tragically early age, are deeply moving.

William Fletcher was a good, but thankfully not perfect, young man. He was pious, but not in a priggish way that young piety often takes. The worst sin that he commits is a certain uncharitableness towards others (including his older brother, whom he suspects of not really being ill, though he is soon to die), but he records no very bad act on his part, not (I think) because of any self-censorship, but because he committed none.

His piety did not preclude pleasure. He was not a puritan; he was sociable and liked a drink. More than once he woke slightly the worse for wear, and on one occasion admitted that he could hardly hold his pen for shaking (he normally wrote in an elegant copperplate). He did not disguise from himself the cause of

his unsteadiness. I was also surprised to read that, quite often, he started the day with a glass of milk and rum, an unpleasant concoction, but not as the hair of the dog. For him it was perfectly normal – as perhaps it was in general – rather than as a sign of addiction to alcohol, as it would now almost certainly be considered.

He worked as a clerk in a local bank, founded in the first third of the 19th century, in a building that is still occupied by a bank, a branch of one of the largest banks in the world. One can trace the apostolic succession, as it were, of the local bank to its present incarnation: there is a rumour, alas, that the branch will been closed soon for reasons of cost-cutting, bringing two centuries of history to a close. Moving as we are to a cashless society, in which every transaction (other than barter) will leave an electronic trace for tax authorities to pore over, physical bank branches – except headquarters, which could be anywhere – will become redundant; but however much one complains about banks, or welcomes efficiency, one cannot help but lament a little the passing of William Fletchers metier, his meticulous balancing by hand of books in so elegant a hand. It was slow, of course, and inefficient by our standards, but there are human advantages as well as disadvantages to human slowness and inefficiency. William Fletcher probably thought he understood his world better than we understand ours.

He had often to walk eight miles through beautiful countryside to the other branch of the bank in a nearby and very charming town, and back again on the same day, in order to balance its books as well. It was healthy exercise, no doubt, but it was no match for the mycobacterium that was rotting his lungs.

His father died when he was 19. He was grief-stricken but full of genuine admiration for his father's resignation in the face of suffering and death, made possible by his faith, and which he hoped to emulate. William asked his father on his deathbed, on the evening of his death, whether he might have his book of sermons. 'Yes, my dear boy,' he replied, 'and God bless them unto you. You'll find many important truths in that book.'

This was not the unctuous, hypocritical, exploitative religiosity that Dickens satirised about the same time in the character of Mr Chadband in *Bleak House*, but the real thing that consoled for the losses that were so much more frequent a feature of life in the mid-nineteenth century. Death in those days was not

mainly for the old, as in ours.

But life had to go on, and a large part of William Fletcher's diary records an attempted love affair with Mary Anne Jones, also known as Marianne, who lived in a street and house well-known to me (the pleasure of the diary, for me at least, being much in the streets and houses that remain unchanged).

The affair was carried out with what would now be regarded as comical decorum and circumspection. William disclosed his love in a letter dated 14 September, 1858, when he was still only 18. He copied it into his diary:

> Dear Miss Mary Anne Jones,
>
> Pardon this liberty – I hope you won't be angry if I express to you my feelings, and I am inclined to think your sweet temper will not allow of your being angry exactly.
>
> You know, as I observed the other day, that I was fearful lest my visits were under the circumstances too frequent – more than strictly in accordance with etiquette. But one cannot help being attracted to your admirable disposition, by your graceful and becoming mien. And I think you cannot have failed to notice that I take much pleasure in your society – that something more than respect characterised my actions. And I may be allowed to say that it increases. In short that I am attached to you in no slight degree – which attachment I hope is reciprocal.
>
> I thought it better that you should be sensible of these facts, and that you are uppermost in my estimation I need hardly say.
>
> I trust that what I have said will not disconcert or annoy you, for believe me it is furthest from my thoughts that it should be the cause of anything approaching either. I am sincerely hoping soon to receive a reply from one whose purity and virtue form prominent features in her every-day life and whose example is worthy of emulation.
>
> Again apologising
>
> I remain dear Miss Marianne,
>
> Yours sincerely,

Alas, Miss Mary Anne Jones did not altogether reciprocate his feelings:

> Dear Sir,
>
> In reply to your letter, I thank you for the high opinion you profess to entertain of me but I am not deserving of it,
>
> And remain
>
> Yours respectfully,
>
> Marianne Jones

With the optimism of youth, William Fetcher managed to turn this not very warm reply into encouragement: ‘On first reading this,’ he wrote in his diary, ‘I thought it an unfavourable answer, but on reading it over again arrived at the conclusion that it was not so and wrote again.’

Subsequently, Miss Jones led him on, never saying yes, but never quite saying no either. It was a doomed affair, however, and petered out with some bitterness on William’s part as to Miss Jones’ character, and he asked her to return his letters – which she did, in part. Later in life – after William’s death – she married a Thomas Titterton in Port Elizabeth, South Africa, about whom I found the following note on the internet:

> He is said to have been killed on the Port Elizabeth race course. [He] was a steward of the race course. While riding up to the start at a race meeting, a woman suddenly opened her umbrella and his horse bolted and killed him. He fell and broke his neck. His family are said to have refused ever to go to a race meeting again.

In the light of his early death, William Fletcher’s affair with Miss Jones has a tragic quality. He was destined never to be successful in love and one cannot help but feel that this earnest yet jolly young man would have made a good husband and father.

He stopped writing his diary two years before he died. The local newspaper carried a notice of his death:

> It is our painful duty to record the death of Mr William Fletcher of this town, under the most melancholy circumstances. The deceased has been suffering for some years under the lingering hand of consumption. On Wednesday afternoon last, he left his residence… apparently as well as usual. He called at Mr Hooper's [a photographer], and asked to see a Stereoscopic view of the Cemetery, and was just pointing out his father's grave, when it is supposed that agitation of feeling brought to an instantaneous close to 'life's struggle' in a manner so usual in like diseases.

The manner, haemorrhage of the lungs, was not quite instantaneous; apparently he survived fifteen minutes after it started and managed to call for his younger brother who was with him when he died. He retained his faith to the end.

William Fletcher was always a self-improver. He read books about banking and mathematics, and he taught himself German. He attended lectures religious and secular, and went to the annual fete of the local literary society (as did a fifth of the population of the town, the other four-fifth presumably being in the twenty-one pubs that lined one of the town's main thoroughfares). Though he attended only the local school, which he left when seventeen, he wrote better English than most postgraduates could manage now. He was a provincial with a quiet but earnest aspiration to culture and virtue which would now raise a condescending smile in many of us.

He was not extraordinary in any way and made no claims for himself. It is his decent ordinariness, in fact, that draws me back to his grave or rather to his tombstone, for his actual place of burial is unknown. Let us praise famous men, certainly, but let us not altogether forget the ordinary ones. I think of Antonio Machado's poem:

> Son buenas gentes que viven,
>
> laboran, pasan y sueñan,
>
> y en un día como tantos,
>
> descansan bajo la tierra.

They are good people who live,

work, go by and dream,

and one day like so many others

rest under the earth.

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