

From the Back Verandah

What I relished in the movie *Shakespeare in Love* were the in-jokes and literary allusions. Like the boy with the rats who complains to Will Shakespeare about the shortage of gore and death in his plays. That boy, John Webster (1580?-1625?), grew up to write his own blood-thirsty play, *The Duchess of Malfi*, a tragedy of revenge that ends in virtually universal carnage.

The movie touches on Will's rivalry with fellow playwright Christopher Marlowe too, and the self-importance of actor Ned Alleyn. Likewise the dual careers of actor/theatre owner Richard Burbage.

Although short and heavily built, on stage Burbage (1567?-1619) cut an impressive figure and was highly regarded as tragedian. He was the first actor to play characters such as Hamlet, Henry V,

Lear, Macbeth, Othello, Richard III and Romeo.

Theatrical rivalry? What about a notorious anecdote about Burbage and Shakespeare as sexual competitors? (It began in 1602 as a diary entry by lawyer John Manningham.)

During a performance of Richard III, Burbage is informed that a lady in the audience wants him to visit her at home that night. He is to announce himself as Richard III. Shakespeare overhears the message and makes sure he gets there first. While she is entertaining Shakespeare, Burbage arrives, introducing himself in the agreed manner. When the maid relays the news to her mistress, Shakespeare sends down word to him that "William the Conqueror was before Richard III."

— Fizzgig

BIKWIL

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Surely Not Another Great Leap Forward?

Phew! *Bikwil* has at last made it on to the Internet. (The address is given below — why not visit?)

Equally important is the news that this month *Bikwil* celebrates its third birthday. So it's fitting to thank again, not only the many who have provided words of encouragement, but in particular those who have transmitted articles, poetry, illustrations, or letters and cards with corrections or jottings, or phone calls and email with useful suggestions.

Even though some names won't be recognisable since *noms de plume* are quite the rage, let

me specifically acknowledge the following contributors: Allan, Avon, Barry, Bruce, Bryan, Clare, Dierck, Irene, Joan, John D., John E., Naomi, Nick, Peter, Rex, Rick and Therese.

An individual word of appreciation is due to Bet Briggs, who has been offering her writing, research and support since before our very first issue in May 1997.

So onward to year four, during which we anticipate featuring in our new formats many additional pseudonymous *Bikwil* essayists, versifiers and artists.

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Back Issues Are Still Available

Bearded Man Reclining



— Therese Kenyon

Ernest at the MIT Laboratory for Computer Science. This is a collection of online media watch resources with a special emphasis on articles that critically analyse the inaccuracies and biases of the mainstream media. In addition, many organizations are listed which regularly offer media criticism, including some in Europe.

Newseum is the product of The Freedom Forum. Chiefly devoted to preserving the USA First Amendment, *Newseum* boasts an advisory committee that includes veteran reporters Walter Cronkite and Robert MacNeil. Many provocative articles on the media's effect on society are readily available. One appealing regular feature is their Outrage of the Week.

The Poynter Institute, a school for journalists, has a site called *Poynter Online*. It appears to be updated weekly, and apart from its unhidden self-advertising intentions, contains a number of

commentaries on the ethical and other challenges confronting the journalist of tomorrow.

For consumers rather than professionals is the Center for Media and Public Affairs' *NewsWatch*, a daily media criticism Web Site. Formed in 1985, the Center's goal is "to provide an empirical basis for ongoing debates over media fairness and impact", claiming that what sets it apart from other media watchdog groups is its scientific approach. As with other sites I mention here, *NewsWatch* can be had in a fuller printed version via subscription.

Incidentally, *Media Watch* — the Aussie TV show where the "Cash for Comment" matter was first made public — has its own Web presence. It resides at the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's site, and transcripts of recent programmes are obtainable there.

— TR

Internet sites referred to above:

<http://www.mcs.mq.edu.au/Staff/mwark/warchive/warch-aa.html>
<http://www.aber.ac.uk/~dgc/home.html>
<http://interact.uoregon.edu/MediaLit/HomePage>
<http://theory.lcs.mit.edu/~mernst/media/>
<http://www.freedomforum.org/>
<http://www.poynter.org/index.htm>
<http://www.cmpa.com/>
<http://www.abc.net.au/mediawatch/>

The So-Called American Spelling

I was amused to read in the Brisbane *Courier-Mail* ("Yankee slang rocks into 'Strine' via Internet", 22/12/99) suggestions that American spellings are invading Australia via the Internet and American computer spell checks. More than a century ago the villain was Webster's *Dictionary*.

Soon after the publication in 1828 of Noah Webster's *American Dictionary of the English Language* in an edition of 2500 copies, an English edition of 3000 copies followed. Webster (1758-1843) sent a copy of the second American edition (1841) to Queen Victoria, with a message that "our common language is one of the ties that binds the two nations together".

G. & C. Merriam and Co., publishers in Springfield, Massachusetts who bought the copyright to Webster's from his heirs, won an award at Melbourne's International Exhibition in 1880 and a diploma and medal at the Adelaide Jubilee International Exhibition of 1887 for their Webster's *Dictionary*. Reference books owned by a Moama (Victoria) blacksmith and coachbuilder included an 1880s

edition of Webster's, according to his grandson, educationalist John McLaren. This presumably would have been the fourth edition (first published in 1864), known by its users as the *Unabridged*.

E. J. Forbes was Merriam's local manager, with rooms at 8 Spring Street, Sydney. It is interesting to note that in 1903 the Public School Teachers' Association of New South Wales had an office there.

In a pamphlet entitled *The So-Called "American Spelling." Its Consistency Examined.*, undated but published before Federation, Forbes discussed the trend in Australia to adopt American spellings.

Examples in a "Word Wars" list published in the *Courier-Mail* article include "colour/color". A hundred years ago Forbes argued "that there is no valid etymological reason for the preservation of the u in such words as *honor, labor, etc.*"

He pointed out that (at the time he was writing) "The tendency of people in Australasia is to excise the *u*, and one of the Sydney morning papers habitually does this, while the other generally follows the older form."

Other publications then excising the “u” included the Sydney *Evening News*, the weekly *Town and Country Journal*, and the Melbourne *Age*.

In this and in other examples, such as “centre/center”, Forbes argued, the American spelling is “the original and purer English — the English of Shakespeare, which has been preserved in the form in which the Pilgrim fathers took it away with them.”

Writing on linguistics in the *Bulletin* (13 July 1982) Australian publisher Max Harris once posed the question: “which is the Americanism, ‘ax’ or ‘axe’?”

“Answer: neither. Tricked you. Ax was the preferred Oxford spelling in the late 19th century. The Brits switched to axe. The Americans stayed traditional.”

The editors of *Webster's International Dictionary* noted:

This word was originally spelt withe, axe, and so also was nearly every corresponding word of one syllable, as flaxe, waxe, sixe, mixe, pixe, oxe, fluxe, etc. This superfluous e is now dropped, so that, in more than a hundred words ending in x, no one thinks of retaining the e except in axe. Analogy requires its exclusion here.

The Oxford English Dictionary, as Harlish Goop writes in *Bikwil* (July 1998), was published in parts from 1884 until completed in 1928. It later restored the “e” to axe, even though Oxford editor James

Murray himself believed that “The spelling *ax* is better on every ground, of etymology, phonology, and analogy, than *axe*, which has of late become prevalent.” However, to this day for “criticise/criticize” (and for that matter, “Americanise/Americanize”, “authorise/authorize”, and many of the words with these endings) Oxford dictionaries favour “ize” and describe “ise” as a variant.

In 1898 Merriam and Co. published *A Dictionary of Australasian Words* compiled by Joshua Lake of St John's College, Cambridge, under the supervision of Professor G. L. Kittredge of Harvard University.

First published in 1890 and the fifth edition, by 1900 *Webster's International Dictionary* had an Australasian edition. Bound in at the end of my 1908 Australasian edition is a 288-page Supplement with “A Vocabulary of 25,000 additional words, phrases, and definitions, especially full in Australasian terms”, incorporating Lake's work. As well, there is “An Australasian Gazetteer”, “An Australasian Biographical Dictionary”, and an “Australasian Chronological Annals”.

In my 1910 Australasian edition, now *Webster's New International Dictionary* and in fact the sixth edition, the “Vocabulary” has been

Web

Not so long ago, Australians were treated to what became known as the “Cash for Comment” affair. At its centre was an inquiry by the Australian Broadcasting Authority into undisclosed contracts with various sponsors secured by prominent Sydney talkback radio hosts in return for making positive comments about those sponsors.

The great publicity the issue attracted led me to wonder what the Net has to offer on media influence, media abuse and the legislative, independent-watchdog- and self-control thereof. Today's column presents a short digest of what I found when I went browsing.

Not surprisingly, there's plenty of stuff on the media as a subject for study, with many such Web sites emanating from academic institutions, where media courses are becoming more popular. For instance, a well-known media commentator at Macquarie University in Sydney, McKenzie Wark, has made available on the Internet in his *Warchive* a selection of his essays on media, culture, technology and education, notably the sections *Australian Media Politics*,



Line

American Media Politics and Global Media Issues.

Over in Wales, the Uni at Aberystwyth site includes the *Media and Communication Studies*

Site run by Dr Daniel Chandler, a lecturer in media theory. While concerned mainly with curriculum matters, he does give useful summaries of all his courses, plus copious reading lists.

Prominent in Canada, at the University of Oregon, is the *Media Literacy Online Project*. The aim here is “to provide a support service for teachers . . . concerned with the influence of media in the lives of children and youth”. By Media Literacy is meant “informed and critical understanding of the nature of the mass media, the techniques used by them, and the impact of these techniques”. Among its many features is a comprehensive collection of articles on media literacy and education topics, plus links to other on-line information.

South of the Canadian border there is no shortage of material to be had. Let's start with *Media Watchdog*, maintained by Michael

You and I are exceptions to the laws of nature; you have risen by your gravity, and I have sunk by my levity.

Rev. Sydney Smith

I've made so many movies playing a booker that they don't pay me in the regular way anymore. They leave it on the dresser.

Shirley MacLaine

Quintessential Quirky Quotes

There's no such thing as a tough child. If you parboil them first for seven hours, they always come out tender.

W. C. Fields

One of his hobbies was to wait for the American Shakespeare — a hobby more patient than angling.

G. K. Chesterton

Ernest Hemmingway is always willing to lend a hand to the one above him.

F. Scott Fitzgerald

incorporated in the main body of the dictionary, with the gazetteer, biographical dictionary, and annals at the end. In this edition “program”, also in the *Courier-Mail's* “Word Wars” list, has become the preferred spelling, whereas in 1908 “programme” was favoured. In the computer world “program” has long been restored to use in Britain (and I think in Australia).

Webster's was not alone in collecting Australasian words. *A Standard Dictionary of the English Language* published in New York by Funk and Wagnalls included Australasian words. Some were provided by Professor Edward E. Morris of the University of Melbourne whose dictionary of Australasian words, *Austral English*, was published in London in 1898.

Both Morris and Lake once taught at Melbourne Grammar, and Morris in his acknowledgements names Lake as “the friend who has given me most help of all”.

Morris complained about the accuracy of some inclusions in Funk and Wagnalls. For instance, a swagman was said to be “a dealer in cheap trinkets, etc.” Webster's correctly describes a swagman as “A bushman carrying a swag and travelling on foot”.

The compilations by both Morris and Webster's Lake are considered by W. S. Ramson, author of *Australian English* (1966), to be “indispensable to the historical study of Australian English”.

The 1908 Australasian edition of *Webster's International Dictionary* includes at the end testimonials from Australasian educators, among others, approving it for use in state schools. For instance, Frank Tate, Director of Education in Victoria, said, “I have no hesitation in recommending Victorian teachers to use this excellent work.”

In her autobiography *Time Without Clocks* (1962) Joan Lindsay recalls that when moving to their house “Mulberry Hill” at Baxter (Victoria) she and her husband, the artist Daryl Lindsay, stowed into their old Buick, among other things, “Webster's unabridged *Dictionary* weighing at least twenty pounds”. In 1934 her mother married the classical scholar T. G. Tucker (1859-1946), once professor of classical philology at the University of Melbourne. On his visits, Joan Lindsay wrote, he was satisfied with “simple well-cooked food, in practically any weather a blazing fire, and *Webster's Dictionary* within easy reach”.

Foolishness Unbridled

The Story of Stupidity, by James F. Welles, Ph.D. — A History of Western Idiocy from the Days of Greece to the Moment You Saw this Book (self-published, 1988).

What are we to make of a book with a title like that? Well, I for one ploughed through it and lived to tell the tale. I choose the word “ploughed” advisedly, because it is a densely and intensely written monograph of 270 pages, difficult at times, which occasionally caused me to mutter in language that you can readily imagine if you’re agriculturally minded.

As to whether *The Story of Stupidity* is really b. s., you’ll have to decide for yourself. No doubt it can be accused of following the Whig historian’s approach. That is, instead of taking past people and events in their own social and cultural terms, it smugly evaluates them as Just-So stories against a modern set of ideas and values.

Even so, let’s get one thing straight. Regular *Bikwil* readers will have already gathered that I just love crank books. Even if they are wildly wrong scientifically or full of distortions, as long as they are a good plausible read, I can sit back and enjoy them immensely. Not, perhaps, as their

authors intended, but that’s their problem.

Welles’ subject is what he sees as our flawed intellectual tradition. *Greek Stupidity, Roman Stupidity, Medieval Stupidity, Stupidity Reborn, Stupidity Reformed, Reasonable Stupidity, Enlightened Stupidity, Industrial Stupidity, The Age of Arrogance* — these are the chapter headings. Drawing heavily on Bertrand Russell’s *A History of Western Philosophy* and H.G. Wells’ *The Outline of History*, plus data derived from over a hundred other cited sources, James Welles ponders the many “mistakes” made in philosophy, religion, science and politics over a period of approximately three thousand years, which errors according to him were all caused by maladaptive thinking.

So what is maladaptive thinking? In ordinary speech we use words like “preconception” and “prejudice” for it, or metaphors like “tunnel vision” and “blind spot”. In psychology there are several specialised words and phrases used for this, but to save bogging down in a welter of terminology, let us concentrate on the fundamental word “schema”. This is the word Welles uses.

raw ginger . . . to make the horse livelier”, usually when selling the animal. Livelier, indeed.

jarkman:

A jarkman was a 16th century “vagabond who used his literary talents underhandedly”. Able to read and write, some even knowing Latin, such educated beggars roamed the countryside selling counterfeit passes, licences and other certificates with official-looking seals appended. The word was still in use in the 1830s.

scuttlebutt:

Again, what’s forgotten here is the word’s original meaning (in the 18th century) of the barrel (*butt*) on a ship from which drinking water could be scooped (*scuttled*); thus more generally “a place for informal conversation”, then later “gossip”.

But for sheer irresistible appeal, both in its resonance and in its meaning, what can compare with the noun *prick-me-dainty*? To paraphrase the words of another reviewer, “how ever did we allow a word like that to escape?”

A *prick-me-dainty* was a 16th century “man-about town who coifed himself in an overly careful manner, frequently seeking the services of his barber, and who was . . . ridiculously exact in dress or carriage”. A dandy, in other words. What Kacirk doesn’t explain, but our ever reliable *OED* does, is how the individual parts of the word contributed to its meaning.

First, *prick*. One of this verb’s meanings, from the 16th to 19th centuries, was “to attire . . . with clothes and ornaments fastened by pins, bodkins, etc.; to attire elaborately”. In this sense, *prick* is found today only in dialects. As for *dainty*, this adjective was used, in the same period, to refer to persons “possessing or displaying delicate taste, perception, or sensibility; nice, fastidious, particular; sometimes, over-nice.”

By the 19th century the word *prick-me-dainty* had acquired a natural adjectival meaning of “excessively of affectedly precise in personal adornment”, but the *OED* has no citations for its use after 1897.

Start using it, Bikwilians. Spread the word.

— Harlish Goop

A Word in Your Pink Shell-like

At last I have got my eager logophile's hands on Jeffrey Kacirk's *Forgotten English* (1997, ISBN 0 688 16636 9), and an extraordinarily absorbing book it is too.

While some people might think that the disappearance of words from the English language is a pitiful sign of its relentless decay, Kacirk certainly does not:

The English language, like any other living thing, is continually in a state of flux. Just as cells in our bodies die each day and are replaced with new ones, an almost imperceptible attrition in vocabulary regularly takes place, balancing the hundreds of fledgling terms that make their way into our conversations and dictionaries each year . . .

Change is true of all languages, which grow and decline as result of societal needs and artistic creation, but it is particularly prevalent in English, the most dynamic of tongues.

In fact, the richness and maturity of a language may be gauged by the volume and quality of words it can afford to lose. In this regard, English has had no equal in the sheer volume of expressions it has shed over the centuries. These lost words, memorials of a language's earlier stages, form the basis of *Forgotten English*.

In other words, the book is a survey of some words from the past which, as one reviewer put it, "never quite made it into Modern English".

Another wrote:

The wonderful sounds these forgotten words make — *nimgimmer*, *tup-running*, *mocteroof*, *frubbish*, *grog-blossom*, *wayzgoose*, *galligaskin*, *sockdolager* — are half the fun. Their fabulous meanings, particularly those that seem inevitable once you learn them, make up the rest.

Of the hundreds of attention-grabbing words Kacirk systematically examines in obviously fond detail here are four that took my own fancy:

balderdash:

What's forgotten about this word is its 16th century meaning which was "an odd or inappropriate combination of two or more liquors, such as ale and wine" (or even beer and butter-milk).

feague:

In the 18th century this meant "to administer to a horse a suppository made of

Schemas are what psychology calls the abstractions our minds derive from prior experience, related events and expectations. Such abstractions are essential for human survival — we couldn't function without them. Even when they are mental maps of the physical world, schemas always carry emotional overtones. A trivial example is the concept of "armchair": hear the word, and you conjure up mind pictures not only of an item of furniture for sitting in, but also of comfort, reading, music, television, conversation, knitting.

Indeed, the more something conforms to an established schema, the more sense we will make of it. By the same token, if an idea does not belong to our mental image of the world, we may not even notice it, or worse we may reject it as invalid. Hence Welles' thesis:

Schemas are good, if they are appropriate and adequate, or bad, if they are inappropriate or inadequate for the situations and problems at hand. Stupidity is a matter of unnecessarily modifying a good schema to its detriment or unnecessarily adhering to a bad one to one's own detriment. We commonly do both, since we are all emotionally involved with our schemas to the extent that we identify with them.

For me, the most appealing feature of *The Story of Stupidity* is its mordant writing style, which Welles uses to great effect when

venturing from his besieged 20th century garrison on his sneaky sorties against the enemies out there. So, depending on your own schemas, you may find that some of the following snide quotations assail your own treasured biases, while others triumphantly confirm them. Be warned.

Let's start with Welles on Plato, who preferred theorising to empirical testing:

. . . he allowed his schema to be shaped by his subconscious desire for an orderly [nation] state into an array of absurd fantasies . . . he became an ideal airhead in that most of his ideas had little to do with reality.

Next, medieval knights, who (contrary to legend) were as much caught up in the semi-barbarism of the Middle Ages as anyone:

. . . the greatest tribute to both medieval piety and stupidity was that regardless of what clergymen did and said, their unworthiness and corruptibility never compromised the sanctity of the Church. . . People in the Middle Ages . . . were happily adapted to the "Sin now, repent later" policy . . .

On a good day for a knight, he might hear Mass in the morning and rob a church in the afternoon. In the evening, he would beat the wife he had sworn to cherish and then drink himself into debauchery. Subsequent ages would somehow idealize such behavior and chivalry into romantic myths, but knights of old were about as noble as members of our modern motorcycle gangs.

On the 13th century monk, philosopher and scientist Roger Bacon, imprisoned for denouncing those schemas of the Church which prevented it from recognising the value of mathematical proof and experimental methods, we read:

He made a career of attacking clerical ignorance and for some reason was never very popular among the clergy.

On 16th century Protestant reformers attempting to replace the authority of the Catholic Church with the authority of the Bible:

Unfortunately, as recorded in the Bible, the voice of God often rambles incoherently like that of a slightly schizoid manic-depressive with delusions of grandeur.

Here's a good peach, ripe for Welles' plucking. Witchhunts.

. . . the more witches were hunted, the more there apparently were. Actually, the efforts to root out this crime seemed to increase it because, although the officials could not see it at the time, the methods of investigation were designed to produce confessions, if not witches . . . When the ashes finally settled, it became clear that not only witches but facts had been tortured so that people could create and support a belief they wished to hold. The more people thought about witchcraft, the more they believed in it, and as the resultant positive feedback system went to excess, the mania went to madness. In the American colonies, the insanity reached the point that a dog was tried and executed.

Notice the important phrase "positive feedback". Welles here gives an apt and precise metaphorical use of a term originally used in electronics. For example in analog music synthesizers, voltage-controlled filters regularly have what is known as a resonance control, which uses positive feedback and which when increased to its maximum level causes the filter to go into oscillation. The human analogy is of the witchhunt mania going into paroxysms of insanity.

Later in the book, Welles will again raise the dangers of positive feedback, when denouncing modern America's dysfunctional response to Vietnam, where

. . . America was fighting Communism, while the Vietnamese were fighting colonialism.

Science has had many heroic figures over the past four centuries, but Welles does not spare even our most revered investigators, as the following piece of criticism shows:

Although Galileo is well remembered for his battles against the stupidity of those who believed in the Aristotelian/Ptolemaic universe, he was not immune to the malady . . . For Galileo, natural "Inertial" motion was movement that neither rose nor fell: it was always equidistant from the centre of the earth and therefore circular. As incredible as it seems, even though he had Kepler's work on elliptical orbits at hand and admired it, he paid no attention to it.

Brought the Good News from Ghent to Aix has an entry to itself. Two points: one, that it was published in Browning's *Dramatic Romances and Lyrics* in 1845, and two, that it was favourite of anthologists (which I already knew) were superfluous to my enquiry.

Two other points were crucial. Imagine, though, my punctured ego when I read: "Despite appearances the narrative does not refer to any historical event". Browning's version, moreover, of what he was trying to achieve was "that he simply wanted to evoke the rhythm of horses galloping". Double checking as I usually do, I found both these bald statements were confirmed by a succinct entry in Benet's *The Reader's Encyclopedia*, again under the poem's title: "Noted for its onomatopoeic effects it describes a purely imaginary incident."

Well, to find out after a week of painstaking, page-turning, midnight-oil-burning research that Browning's "Good News" is no news and all onomatopoeic effect and rhythm of horses galloping was, as I said, deflating. But not for long. I still wonder what sparked the narrative.

Browning, according to one biographer, was an avid reader and had ample resources. His father, a bibliophile and scholar had a library of 6000 volumes in several languages and it became the source of young Robert's education. It's not unreasonable to speculate that among those vast resources he read something which inspired the ideas for his poem. Whatever the case, his imaginative power and skill to create the dramatic incident which seems like a real event, is admirable, the mark of a fine poet.

On reflection I regard my enquiry with optimism and gratitude. Not for the first time in my career of literary sleuthing have I ridden Fizzler, the wrong horse on the wrong trail. For a while I've galloped! Now I'm back at the hitching post, reined in but not hobbled. I'll be up and galloping again.

Thanks to my friend and Robert Browning the results of my investigation have not been negative: even if "Good News" is no news, no matter. This week has been my good news week.

— Bet Briggs

“I”, casting loose his buffcoat, holsters, jackboots and belt, coaxed and encouraged his “horse without peer” all the way, “Till at length into Aix Roland galloped and stood”. All “I” remembered was “friends flocking round” as he sat with Roland’s head between his knees to give him their

. . . last measure of wine,
Which (the burgesses voted by
common consent)
Was no more than his due who
brought good news from Ghent.

Breathless myself after all that galloping, so vividly depicted, I paused to reassess. While I was in doubt as to *how* the good news was brought I was no wiser as to the *what!* No closer to knowing the nature of the good news which compelled Joris and Dirck and “I” to ride so urgently from one side of Belgium to the other with such dire consequences: two horses dead, two men stranded or worse and, now, one sleuth non-plussed.

But, like “I” the last rider, I had to keep going. Besides, I had one other clue: that tantalising half-date! Spurred on again I began to pick a trail through 17th century history via encyclopaedias and history books. Some

references to Ghent and Aix revealed links with Louis XIV (1638-1715) King of France, “The Sun King”, an absolute monarch, ambitious and territorial. Of many wars he fought where he secured victories, two seemed relevant to my enquiry. The War of Devolution in 1668 in which Louis attempted to seize the Spanish Netherlands ended with a treaty drawn up at Aix-la-Chapelle. During the Franco-Dutch War (1672-78) he strengthened French frontiers by a series of strategic gains and captured Ghent and Ypres in 1678.

These intriguing snippets, however, just tantalised me more than ever and still I had no answer to the original question “What was the good news?” I was back where I started. Frustrating but instructive for me. Rather than admit defeat and file my notes under Unfinished Cases I worried away at the question, or more to the point, it nagged me. So I started my enquiry again right from scratch.

At home in my own library I consulted a recent acquisition *The Wordsworth Companion to Literature in English*. There to my astonishment *How They*

Had he dwelt on [ellipses], he might have overcome his love affair with the circle and realized that without gravity, rectilinear motion would carry objects off the face of the earth in straight lines to infinity.

The failure is all the more surprising because he well knew that forces act independently upon a body— i.e. that horizontal and vertical forces, for example, can be treated as vector quantities which do not modify each other. Despite this knowledge, which implied an object moving along the earth’s surface would take off on a tangent into space, Galileo rejected straight lines because they would disrupt the beautiful order of things, which to him meant circles. Perhaps he took gravity for granted, but because he ignored Kepler’s work, he left the unification of the universe to Newton.

Nor can even the illustrious Isaac Newton escape scrutiny. For example, a fact conveniently forgotten these days is that Newton wrote extensively on matters religious as well as subjects scientific:

Newton’s writings in theology exceed his scientific works in bulk but not in brilliance, as he misapplied mathematics to theology. Certainly reason can be applied in theological and philosophical arguments, but neither theology nor metaphysics can be quantified and analyzed mathematically. Nevertheless, as an orthodox, fundamentalist mystic, Newton attempted to prove the date of the Second Coming mathematically and tried to determine the ratio between the highest attainable earthly happiness and a believer’s reward of bliss in Paradise.

Equally ignored today is the maladaptive way Newton treated other scientists while he was president of the Royal Society:

As leader of the first scientific “Establishment”, he set the regrettable precedent of blocking the development of any advances in math or science which might have undermined his position of authority or diminished his prestige. For example, he maliciously deprived astronomer John Flamsteed of the satisfaction of having his works published in his lifetime. Sadder still was the monumental pettiness he exhibited in his dispute with Leibnitz over credit for inventing the calculus: in a shocking display of academic overkill, he continued his unprincipled campaign in a one-sided battle well after the death of his opponent.

And on through history Welles scoots, in his own one-sided skirmishes with Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Hegel, Darwin, Marx, the English in India, Bismarck, groupthink in WWI, the Depression, Hitler, the Cold War, Watergate, Challenger and Chernobyl.

Finally, here is what he has to say on the eternal dilemma of democracy, whose intelligent adherents, despite their suspicions, don’t dare show a trace of elitism:

The modern liberal . . . trusts the judgment of the man in the street although knowing that most people have mean tastes, are superstitious and are incapable of any kind of complex thinking.

My Good News Week

Not since my schooldays have I read Robert Browning's poem *How They Brought the Good News from Ghent to Aix*. Recently a friend asked me, "What was the good news?" — a simple question easily answered, I thought. I had no ready answer, however, but my curiosity was stirred and out of long habit out popped my catchphrase: "I'll look that up!"

My friend's question was timely for I had been feeling dispirited and directionless. So I was pleased to go into action: to don specs, take up my old sleuthing weapons of pen and paper and magnifying glass for the fine print and begin to investigate.

I began, of course, with the poem. It must have some clues and by careful reading surely I would detect one. At once I spotted under the title two figures in brackets thus: [16—]. "Ah!" I pounced. "A date. A reference to an historical event perhaps."

Immediately, like the poem's character Joris and Dirck and "I" (the narrator) who "sprang to the stirrup" and "galloped all

three", I, too, was on my high horse galloping hopefully to discovery. At the same time I was mindful of the need to maintain a certain control and detachment — the coolness and focus of the lone sleuth — and not become a Charley Farley or one of the cops or law and order boys.

Before examining that half-date and horsing through the maze of 17th century history, I checked the poem for other possible clues. I noted all the places that "I" and Joris and Dirck (Dutch for George and Derrick) galloped by: from Ghent past Lokeren, Boom, Düffeld, Mecheln, Aershot, Hasselt, Looz, Tongres, Dalhem to journey's end at Aix.

True to my words I looked them up: in a gazetteer. All of them, save for Dalhem and Aix, were communes in various provinces of Belgium and easy to find on my map. Dalhem proved difficult to locate. The only reference I could find was to a town of that name far to the north of Belgium on Gotland Island in the Baltic Sea! As for Aix, there were several, but the one that

made sense in the context of the poem was Aix-la-Chapelle, better known as Aachen in North-Rhine Westphalia on the Belgian border.

About both place and time the narrative of the poem is specific. So I was able, with my list of geographical detail, my map and the poem in front of me, to trace the progression of that extraordinary gallop of Joris and Dirck and "I" across Belgium from west to east, or south-east to be precise.

"At moonset" the three riders left Ghent, the capital of East Flanders province in north-west Belgium and "galloped abreast" in silence "into the midnight". As they passed Lokeren "the cocks crew and twilight dawned clear". At Boom in Antwerp province "a great yellow star came out to see", and soon after "At Düffeld 'twas morning as plain as could be", and "from Mecheln church steeple" they "heard the half-chime".

That prompted Joris to break their silence and say, "Yet there is time!", a remark I thought could mean, though they still had far to go, time was on their side. They kept galloping:

across Brabant province where "At Aershot, up leaped of a sudden the sun", then they crossed into the province of Limburg.

"By Hasselt", the capital, suddenly Dirck's horse collapsed. So Joris and "I" galloped on "Past Looz" (now Boorgloon) and past Tongres (or Tongeren) where

... no cloud in the sky;
The broad sun above laughed a pitiless laugh.

Next they approached Dalhem, the one I couldn't find, and it was obviously close to Aix, for, as we are told:

... over by Dalhem a domespire
sprang white,
And "Gallop", gasped Joris, "for
Aix is in sight".

There was anticipation in the next remark: "How they'll greet us!" Joris, however, would not be greeted, for

... all in a moment his roan,
Rolled neck and croup over, lay
dead as a stone.

So it was left to "I" and his Roland

... to bear the whole weight
Of the news which alone could
save Aix from her fate.