

At Home

B. Bryson

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Our everyday life is usually so trivial that we fail to take much notice of it. In short we take it and the comforts it provides for granted. A history of the small things in life is hence very interesting not to say fascinating yet it nevertheless runs the risk of being tedious, the reader simply being overwhelmed by all there is to say on the subject. A pitfall that Bryson is not altogether able to avoid, even if his style and presentation is lively and at times even conceptual rather than systematic. What you want to avoid at all costs are mere lists, but such are hard to evade altogether.

Bryson has a clever way of presenting it all, namely to take at his point of departure an old curate in the middle of Norfolk, a huge 19th century mansion built for the benefit of a clergyman by name of Marshton, who never made a name for himself during his life, but whom a best-selling author has propelled to ephemeral fame. The old house has a lot of rooms, and each room provides a title and an excuse to explore one part of our quotidian life, be it our eating habits, fashion of dress, disposal of waste and garbage, sexual mores and medical practices, social hierarchies and general education, electrical lightening and indoor heating in addition to obvious schemes such as building mores and architecture. This constitutes of course a mishmash of disparate topics, each of which may fascinate but as already observed together may be too much of a good thing.

What emerges are some general facts. Life in the past was not that idyllic. It was for most people an ordeal of unmitigated misery. There was a degree of material deprivation, which we nowadays only see in the Third World (if even there). People literally starved to death en masse, and if not starved they were hit by disease and exhaustion. Medical services were spotty and when available often fatal. Hygiene was dismal, waste disposal unknown. In short the kind of comforts we now assume are indispensable were unheard of for most people. But was it always like that? The idea of a human Eden in the past is an idea that has had hard time going away, each generation projects their own myths. Nowadays we put the Golden years to the period before the invention of agriculture, when humans roamed around in small social groups hunting and gathering and doing what they were biologically evolved to do. With agriculture came not only civilization and its concomitant accumulation of knowledge and skill, but also towering social hierarchies and power structures which made for the enslavement of large portions of the population, and maybe even more significantly overcrowding and disease. One thing is clear, people were not biologically adapted to live in large anonymous communities, and the problem of statehood and society has been an enduring one up to the very present and continues so to be. In the modern period three movements are singled out. The first is the Renaissance of course, which is depicted as a reconnection with antiquity and a concomitant appreciation of pagan modes of thought. It is depicted as extroverted not to say exultant and led to a vast geographical expansion of the physical world. The curiosity (and the greed for profit) was turned to science and led in the 17th century to the Scientific Revolution, with Isaac

Newton as the undisputed figure-head. The grand extension of knowledge, outdoing the mere geographical expansion, further corroborated the self-confidence that had spurred the Renaissance and ushered us into the so called Age of Enlightenment in which we are still dwelling. It is as easy as it is seductive to paint the large themes of history, as if they would provide not only explanation but give it purpose as well. However startling those developments were they affected only a small section of the population, an elite admission to which was only possible either through accidental birth or fortuitous recognition of inherent talent¹. With the 19th century it all changed. The 19th century is of course the century of world-wide industrialization, and Bryson reports insightfully that it was the generation born in the early part of that century that experienced the most dramatic changes in everyday life. Almost everything that characterizes life of the 20th century, which we see as the modern one, had its counterparts in the previous. Railways are of course a 19th century invention, but it still played a very important part in the 20th, more or less unchanged, and may very well have a renaissance in the 21st. True, apart from the exotic hot-air balloon, the skies were a 20th century conquest, but a very costly one, and hardly a sustainable one. But instant communication across vast distances were already available at the last third of the 19th century due to the telegraph (first via cables and then due to Marconi through the wireless). Technologies such as the phone was already installed by the 1890's and the technology of the TV-set was not far off at the time. What the 20th century did was to improve and successfully market what the 19th century had already conceived. The result has of course been an exponential growth not only in population but more significantly in consumption, in particular energy consumption which is the most reliable indicator of consumption of resources. But of course with a finite earth this is not sustainable in the long run, as correctly noted by the much derogated Malthus². This is the note on which Bryson ends his book. Our unbridled consumerism, to which his book in a sense is a tribute, cannot continue indefinitely, in fact may have to discontinue rather soon in view of the climate crisis (which truly is just an easily formulated symptom of a malaise that penetrates deeper) that has replaced the worry of a nuclear winter in the public consciousness.

But of course all of this is not the main stated theme of the book, which instead provides a wealth of historical vignettes and rediscovery of once famed personalities. 1851 is the key year, when the Crystal Palace was built, quickly, daringly and cheaply, by the incredible Joseph Paxton, a poor farm-boy made good. The Crystal Palace was a wonder, to many of its contemporaries it must have felt like a divine visitation, providing

¹ The latter is interesting. Is talent always recognized? of course not, but that does not prevent it from being the rule rather than the exception. Most scientists that have ever lived are alive today, but what about the truly great? Who is the Newton of today? There are many contenders of course, but after the death of Einstein no obvious candidate. True, it certainly helps being born early, on the other hand we tend to underestimate the difficulties encountered and hence the achievements of the pioneers, who made it all in retrospect appear so easy.

² The author cannot resist joining in the fun of picking at the man. Malthus may have been a very unsympathetic personality, but that does not detract from the truths of his prophecies. And of course true prophecies tend to be formulated and propagated by unsympathetic characters. Sympathetic characters tend to engage themselves in more congenial matters.

a glorious vision of the future, a symbol if anything of the unsullied optimism of progress that characterized the latter Victorian Era. Here was at display all the incipiences of domestic comfort that would eventually conquer the world. And over and over again the author returns to that crucial year - 1851, to which so much in his narrative intentionally or fortuitously returns. But the charm (as well as tedium) of the book are of course the vignettes, of which you partake so lustily in the beginning, turning the pages with such delightful anticipation. To systematically comment on them would not only take too long but become even more tedious than the original presentation eventually turned out to be. Most of them you will forget, even if I may never forget the previously to me unknown character Paxton, but some of them I will retain, such as Jeffersons propensity of writing lists of all and sundry, especially keeping copies of all the letters he wrote, and listing them all in a 650 page thick manuscript³. I am also amazed at his ability as well as that of his predecessor - George Washington, of architectural innovation. His Monticello remained a construction site for over thirty years, due to his unfettered ambition and shortage of matching funds. Remarkable is also the persistence of the architectural styles stemming from Antiquity and revived by the Renaissance⁴. As Bryson notes, their influence on public buildings of importance, museums, educational establishments, bank palaces, libraries, railway stations, are still very much in evidence.

And as to the curator and his house with which the book commenced? In the late half of the 19th century landowners were heavily taxed, especially during the process of transfer to the next generation. It spelled their ruin. The once so leisurely comfortable needed to sell off and liquidate their prized possessions, much to the delight of overseas collectors. American businessmen married their daughters to impoverished gentry, to the benefit of both parties. But in the long run such stratagems could not stem the tide, and as a consequence many thousands of beautiful and stately homes all over England were razed to the ground. The clergymen, whose profession had provided a sinecure to the lazy and enterprising alike, became collateral damage. Their sources of income were dried up, and the subsequent depopulation of the countryside did little to ameliorate their inevitable marginalization. The clergy had constituted an intellectual elite a repository for the younger off-springs of the gentry as well as an opportunity for the gifted commoner. Many of the scientific breakthroughs in natural history were brought about by leisured clergymen, and thus it is unfair to depict, as is of the case, the clergy as the stalwart opponents to Darwin, in fact many of them were instrumental in bringing about the revolution they are collectively seen as opposing.

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³ His total epistolary output measured less than 20'000 letters in a life spanning over eighty years. Barring bad luck I should in a few years be able to double that output, but of course Jefferson had to write his letters painstakingly by hand and pay for stamps and envelopes, while I nowadays can dispense with such matters altogether.

⁴ In Science the modern age pretty quickly outclassed the classics, but not in the humanities, where they still to a large extent provides exemplars to emulate.