

3rd July 2021

Books

“No furniture as charming as books.”

Sydney Smith, Lady Holland, 'Memoir' (1855)

Continuing my reflections from yesterday's "Thought for the Day", my mind turns to the importance of books. There is no doubt that the order of a library – such as we would see, for example, in a castle or a grand country house – with the leather-bound books arranged in sets, is a thing of beauty. Gold lettering on the spines; row upon row of books of the same design, thickness and height; volume after volume of the collected works of Thackeray, Scott or Tennyson; decades worth of reports from this society or that ... Yes indeed, Sydney Smith could be right. In libraries such as this, there is "no furniture as charming as books."

But, as an author, it's not enough that books look good or are offered as charming furniture. Of course, the cover-design of a book is important. It has to be interesting enough to attract those who browse in book shops or peruse catalogues. Design, cover-photographs, back-cover blurb all matter. But what good is an attractive book if its contents have nothing worthwhile to say? And, indeed, what good is a *worthwhile* book if it's simply designed to be decorative in your bookcase?

In his essay on "The Hero as a Man of Letters" in *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic*, Thomas Carlyle, the Scottish historian and philosopher from the nineteenth century, affirms that "The true University of these days is a collection of books", and goes on to suggest:

In books lies the soul of the whole of Past Time; the articulate audible voice of the Past, when the body of material substance of it has altogether vanished like a dream.

Books matter. They offer us the collected wisdom of generations past, and, yes, of heroes, who've been prepared to commit their ideas to print. So, as you look on your bookshelves today, and when you return to your best-loved books that will be like meeting again with good friends, be grateful for the heroes who put them there. Don't see your books merely as charming furniture, but as audible voices that can still offer you what's truly important before "material substance" vanishes like a dream.

A prayer for today

Speak to me, Lord, of your wisdom, through the books your people have written. Amen.

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