



‘Their birthplaces can be turned into shrines, their elderly nephews tracked down in Birmingham, Alabama, and invited to be patrons of the society’

the wings, the society folds. It is as simple as that.

What keeps the show on the road is not the author's books, but the envelope-stuffers at the grass roots. Christopher Dean, the energetic secretary of the Dorothy L. Sayers Society, is a case in point. There would be a Dorothy Sayers Society without Dorothy Sayers: without Christopher Dean, it would be impossible. A

schoolmaster at Hurstpierpoint when he is not running the society, he is the *ne plus ultra* of envelope-stuffers.

Like the Sherlock Holmes Society, the society relies on the notion that Sayers's fictional detective, Lord Peter Wimsey, was a real person. Conferences are organised on this basis, visits to France undertaken, scholarly articles circulated. When I

caught up with the society, it was having lunch in the Randolph Hotel, Oxford, to mark the 55th anniversary of Lord Peter's engagement to Harriet Vane. All very odd.

This sort of *jeu d'esprit* is notoriously hazardous. It is like wearing paper hats at a Christmas party: everyone can suddenly come to their senses with a jolt and feel the sadness of the world wash over them. What you must have is someone who puts on his hat first and, by force of personality, sustains the general levity. In this rôle, Christopher Dean was consummate.

He led the make-believe about Wimsey and the rest followed like lambs. I could see the guest of honour, the Master of Balliol, looking about him with a bemused air; but everyone else revelled in that gently eccentric world which is the Englishman's second home.

It had nothing to do with literature, of course — until one remembered that Sayers was a translator of Dante and a writer of religious books as well as the creator of Wimsey, and noticed that those more serious works had not been altogether forgotten. There was an elderly Swiss woman at my table who had learnt English entirely through reading Dorothy Sayers; another, younger woman who thought her the very model of a modern feminist.

The presence of such diverse human types under the same umbrella was indicative of another quintessentially English characteristic on which literary societies thrive: the reliance upon institutional frameworks for social contact. We are a nation of joiners, paradoxically, because we are a nation of deaf-mutes.

Imagine an Italian with a passion for the poems of Aretino. He would talk openly about this to his neighbour Giuseppe. Giuseppe would tell his brother-in-law Marco. Marco would tell his cousin Maria. Maria would say, *che miracolo*, I have a friend who likes Aretino, let's get them together.

Now imagine an Englishman with a similar enthusiasm for Gerard Manley Hopkins. Does he tell his friends? Of course not. Does he confide in his neighbours? Not on your life. He consummates his passion at dead of night under a 40-watt bedside lamp, and only when he reads about the Gerard Manley Hopkins Society in a newspaper does he start to share it.

Once he has crossed that Rubicon, though, a whole world opens up to him. The range of activities offered by literary societies is considerable: everything from laying a wreath with the George Eliot Fellowship to trekking around Jordan on a camel with the T. E. Lawrence Society.

He can join members of the Lewis Carroll Society for a talk on ‘The Cheshire Cat and the Stabilised Reti-

given to understand I would not be welcome.

To make any sort of generalisation about what are essentially cottage industries is probably foolhardy. But one or two common denominators can be discerned.

In the first place, today's literary society is more society than literary. It brings like-minded middle-brows together rather than acting as a magnet for scholars of the first rank. Members join to learn more about an author who interests them: their knowledge is not encyclopaedic.

A scholarly veneer does attach to some of the societies. Learned articles are circulated, learned talks delivered. But a close examination of these reveals them to be mainly serendipitous. ‘Wilkie Collins — Narrative Strategy and Psychological Paradigm’, ‘John Buchan, the Black Stone and the University of Glasgow’, and so on.

The profounder sort of literary criticism which winnows out the wheat from the chaff, and dictates for future generations which writers are seen as ephemeral and which as important, remains the province of the universities and the professional critics.

This does not mean, of course, that those who join literary societies are either unintelligent or insincere. They probably have a better nose for a good book than most academics. And they are standing up and being counted in a way that is profoundly in tune with the spirit of the age.

As green issues rise to the top of the political agenda, literary societies are a natural growth area. They have their roots in the feeling — practically universal among a certain class and generation of society — that the books people read 30 years ago were *better* books, just as the air they breathed was cleaner and the food fresher. It is no coincidence that many of the societies seek to commemorate, not just authors' books, but the houses in which they lived. The dilapidated birthplace of an obscure 19th-century novelist can be a rallying point for conservation on a wider scale.

I dined recently with the John Buchan Society, and this nostalgia for a better past was very evident. I talked to a Glasgow schoolteacher who said he could not find modern books which were suitable vehicles for teaching English. He blamed declining literacy in schools on declining standards among writers.

Another man introduced himself as an ‘ordinary bone-doctor’ from Maple Glen, Pennsylvania. He had made the 3,000-mile trip to the John Buchan weekend with his wife and four daughters. It did not sound like the behaviour of an ordinary bone-doctor to me, so I submitted him to a stiff cross-examination; but the worst that could be proved against him was that he thought English novelists wrote better than American ones. He asked for similar offences to be taken into account in respect of C. P. Snow and Somerset Maugham. I had infiltrated the Buchan Society in the vague hope of finding the Celtic fringe at its most lunatic. All I saw were civilised men and women sharing a congenial meal followed by a wee dram. Their desire to conserve the past probably went hand in hand with an inability to confront the present. It often does.

Literature is a living organism. The reissued editions of Trollope could take shelf-space from masterpieces written in 1990. We could cling on to Jerome K. Jerome and lose David Lodge down the plug-hole. But are our modern writers so good that we can leave the survival of their predecessors to the publishing market-place? Or should that sol-

SOME USEFUL ADDRESSES

Jane Austen Society, Yield House, Overton, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG25 3HJ

Dickens Fellowship, 48 Doughty Street, London WC1N 2LF

Incorporated Brontë Society, Brontë Parsonage Museum, Haworth, Keighley, West Yorkshire BD22 8DR

John Buchan Society, 16 Ranfurly Road, Bridge of Weir, Strathclyde PA11 3EL

Randolph Caldecott Society, Clatterwick Hall, Little Leigh, Northwich, Cheshire CW8 4RJ

Lewis Carroll Society, 24 Warren Road, Wanstead, London E11 2NA

Wilkie Collins Society, 3 Merton House, 36 Belsize Park, London NW3 4EA

George Eliot Fellowship, 71 Stepping Stones Road, Coventry CV5 8JT

Thomas Hardy Society, Park Farm, Tolpuddle, Dorchester DT2 7HG

Henty Society, Fox Hall, Kelshall, Royston, Herts SG8 9SE

Sherlock Holmes Society of London, 3 Outram Road, Southsea, Hants PO5 1QP

W. W. Jacobs Appreciation Society, 3 Roman Road, Southwick, West Sussex BN42 4TP

Johnson Society, Johnson Birthplace Museum, Breadmarket Street, Lichfield, Staffordshire WS13 6LG

Jerome K. Jerome Society, (Mr Anthony Gray, c/o Fraser, Wood, Mayo & Pinson), 15 Lichfield Street, Walsall, W. Midlands WS1 1TS

T. E. Lawrence Society, 75 Teevan Road, Addiscombe, Croydon, Surrey CR0 6RQ

Dorothy L. Sayers Society, Rose Cottage, Malthouse Lane, Hurstpierpoint, West Sussex

R. S. Surtees Society, Rockfield House, Nunney, nr Frome, Somerset

The World of E. V. Thompson Club, 57 Eastbourne Road, St Austell, Cornwall PL25 4SU

Angela Thirkell Society, 14a Stanhope Avenue, Horsforth, Leeds LS18 5AR

Trollope Society, 9a North Street, London SW4 0HN

Henry Williamson Society, Oxford Grange, Marsh Lane, Barrow Haven, Barrow-upon-Humber DN19 7ER

P. G. Wodehouse Society, 538 San Lorenzo Avenue, Selton, California 95018, USA

Tolkien Society, Flat 5, 357 High Street, Cheltenham, Gloucestershire GL50 3HT

Jules Verne Circle, 125 Markuata Road, Dagenham, Essex RM9