

## AT HOME WITH BILL BRYSON

by Edwin D. Reilly, Jr.

for the Sunday Gazette

“When Jefferson’s father died in 1757, he left a library of 42 books, and that was regarded as pretty impressive. A library of 400 books—the number that John Harvard left at his death—was considered so colossal that they named a college after him. Over the course of his life, Harvard had acquired books at the rate of about twelve a year. Jefferson, over the course of *his* life, bought books at the rate of about twelve a month, accumulating a thousand books every decade on average. Without his books, Thomas Jefferson could not have been Thomas Jefferson.”

— *At Home*, by Bill Bryson

Well, I did it—I succumbed and bought a Color Nook a week or so before Christmas. Jefferson would not have approved. Even if one had been available in his day, he would not have stooped to such a dastardly deed. But though I will continue to buy real books at my own more moderate rate of four or five a month, I had my reasons.

A few months ago, Jean said that if I cleared the books off the floor of my lair—its bookshelves having long been filled—I could buy an iPad. But after great effort, moving many books to who-knows-where-now and stuffing more bags destined for the library’s loading dock, she and I had accomplished only half the challenge. So I bought the smaller of the two color E-readers because it cost only about half as much. Fair is fair.

The two real books I had purchased and read just prior to acquisition of the Nook were the “At Home” of the opening quote, and “Saul Bellow: Letters.” The subject matter of the first deals with how things used to be millennia or centuries ago and, for the most part, improved enormously over the ages. The other exemplifies a great branch of literature, the letters of talented people who led interesting lives whether or not they were published authors in their own right. Saul Bellow, of course, was an author, one of my favorites, and a Nobel Prize winning one at that.

Books of the latter genre, collected letters, are now doomed of course; technology has attended to their demise. Very few write actual letters and mail them anymore. It is unlikely that the “Collected E-mail of Mike Huckabee,” though he is reputedly an accomplished author, will have much literary merit.

I found several lists of the “10 best books of 2010” on the Web. I was pleased to see that the Bellow letters made several but surprised that “At Home” made only one. ‘tis a pity. Like all of his many books, Bryson’s latest is very informative and reads so smoothly that, as many reviewers like to say, “I couldn’t put it down” until I reached its disappointingly blank page 500.

William McGuire Bryson Jr., 59, was born in Iowa but has lived in England in two stretches that bracket one return home. Currently he and his family live in a Victorian parsonage in a part of England where, according to the colorful book jacket, “nothing of any great significance has happened since the Romans decamped.” And the jacket continued: “His wit and sheer prose fluency make “At Home” one of the most entertaining books about private life ever written.” Though this sounds typically hyperbolic, I believe it to be true.

Bryson is fascinated by the history of the vicar who once owned his home, and of many others. He describes the mathematical accomplishment of the Reverend Thomas Bayes (1702-1761), and even displays his famous equation, a milestone of computational statistical analysis whose utility was not recognized for two hundred years (because it had none before the advent of digital computers). But more often, Bryson says, it was the children of clergymen who became famous, citing John Dryden, Christopher Wren, Robert Hooke, Thomas Hobbes, Oliver

Goldsmith, Jane Austen, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Horatio Nelson, the Brontë sisters, Alfred Lloyd Tennyson, Cecil Rhodes (quite a scholar), and Charles Lutwidge Dodgson (a.k.a. Lewis Carroll), who was himself ordained.

Bryson has chosen to make the rooms and appurtenances of his former parsonage, used as chapter titles, the basis for describing how human civilization has developed over many thousands of years. As you would expect, there are chapters entitled Hall, Kitchen, Dining Room, Cellar, Bedroom, Bathroom, and Attic. But two you would probably not expect are named Stairs and Fuse Box.

The chapters on Kitchen and Dining Room provide the entre to the history of agriculture. I was surprised to find that many of the staples common to modern European and Asian cuisines were first cultivated in the New World and only later brought to the Old. "Imagine," Bryson writes, "Italian food without tomatoes, Greek food without eggplant, Thai and Indonesian food without peanut sauce, curries without chilies..." and, though he didn't say so, Irish meals without potatoes. But elsewhere in the book he describes the tragedy of the loss of 1.5 million Irish when the potato crop failed in the consecutive years 1845-1846. The Scots, who had not become addicted, survived. But Ireland, which produced plenty of other foods that could have sustained their starving citizens, chose to continue their lucrative export trade throughout the potato famine rather than feed their starving citizens. (Some, my paternal great grandparents among them, escaped to America, enabling me to be here at the keyboard.)

Another staggering mortality statistic cited by Bryson is that over the 350-year history of maritime commerce before which it became clear that scurvy was caused by a dietary deficiency, two million sailors died at sea. Fully fifty percent of those who set sail, on average, never returned home.

Bryson's description of the evolution of stairs is particularly interesting. Go back far enough in time and there was no need for stairs; buildings, such as they were, had only one floor. Within them was an open hearth whose smoke was allowed to rise up through a hole in the roof. Only when good chimneys were invented was it possible to build a home with multiple stories and connect them with a new-fangled invention called "stairs."

For a long but uncertain length of time after necessity gave birth to the invention of stairs, people had no way, in English at least, to describe where they were going when they went up or down their stairs. The first recorded use of "upstairs" as a word was in the 1842 novel "Handy Andy" by Samuel Lover, and that of "downstairs" occurred in a letter written by Jane Carlyle, of whom much is said in "At Home."

Stairs, Bryson tells us, are the most dangerous objects in any household. Statistics are hard to come by, but he cites a book by John A. Templer of M.I.T. as saying that "stairs rank as the second most common cause of accidental death, well behind car accidents, but far ahead of drowning, burns, and other similarly grim misfortunes," and "Eighty-four percent of people who die in stair falls at home are 65 or older."

Though hardly a textbook, "At Home" does contain two related formulas that are now embodied in many building codes. One lets one compute the optimum height  $R$  (for "Riser," and I knew what that was) after you choose a value for  $G$  (the "Going," a term I did not know), which is essentially the depth of a stair tread, and the other lets you compute the optimum going if you first choose a value for the risers. Bryson tells us that in modern times, the person who expended the most effort on stair optimization was Frederick Law Olmsted, a person of great repute, but that the formulas that captured his recommendations were concocted by the mathematician Ernest Irving Freese, hardly a household name.

I love the way that Bryson typically gives all three names, when they have such, for people like Olmsted and Freese and many others. In the chapter called "The Study," the author cites James Henry Atkinson, a young ironmonger from Leeds, who invented the mousetrap called the Little Nipper in 1897. His patent drawing of 1899, shown on page 239, looks identical to the traps on sale at supermarkets to this day; unlike the case with most

technology, no one has invented a better mousetrap in 113 years (assuming you can abide capital punishment for mice).

Bryson's humor is subtle but enjoyable. One slightly macabre passage I liked is "Casual humiliation was a regular feature of life in [English] service. Servants were sometimes required to adopt a new name, so that the second footman in a household would always be called "Johnson, say, thus sparing the family the tedium of having to learn a new name each time a footman retired or fell under the wheels of a carriage."

As I began this piece I wanted to find and quote a passage in "At Home" about the tomato, one duly quoted earlier. But the word was not in the book's 18-page index (even though "corn" and many other foods were). So, even though I already owned the hardcover book, I splurged and bought the e-book too. Using the Nook's search-in-the-book feature, I quickly found the desired passage. Kindles, I believe, can do that too.

Can iPads? How about them Apples?

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